



## CHARACTERIZATION IN R. K. NARAYAN'S *THE PAINTER OF SIGNS*

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**Abstract:** Narayan's portrayal of Daisy is a radical departure from those of other heroines who cannot fully and permanently free themselves from the strangle-hold of patriarchal system. They, for instance, Savitri and Rosie, return or wish to return to it swallowing their pride. But Daisy quits the house for good and never feels sorry for it. Raman's ruminations on Daisy's conduct and remarks bring out the distinct features of her character and her ideals. Daisy is a striking contrast to Raman as a woman in love. Raman's love is marked by emotionalism, irrepressible ebullience, romantic exuberance and vibrancy. Daisy loves to be dominating and dictating terms to Raman who is bent upon of marrying her even if it means loss of self-respect, dignity and total surrender to her. Narayan introduces the Santhanu-Ganga myth which may provide enough scope to her to retain her dominant position, preserve her independence from being corroded by domestic compulsions, and effectively neutralize or nip in the bud any future attempt of Raman to control her. She consents to marry him in the Gandharva style on her own terms. She is firm, determined, inflexible and unyielding, as she unfolds her terms and conditions.

**Keywords:** R.K.Narayan, *The Painter Of Signs*, Male Dominted Social System.

In *The Painter of Signs*, Daisy's character and roles are unfolded by Narayan in his description of her early life and her deep involvement in the family planning campaign and her romantic association with Raman. Daisy epitomizes a woman's irresistible urge of unclogged freedom from male dominated social system and her craving or her soul's cry for the right to chart and chalk out her future in consonance with her deepest convictions without any external or extraneous pressure from any quarter-parents or relatives. Jayant K.Biswal remarks, "She is the 'New Woman', on whom no social inhibitions are clamped" (55).

Daisy was born in a joint family with its overwhelming and oppressive numeric strength. There is Narayan's delightful ironic thrust when Daisy observes with a suggestive hint at her future grappling with the population problem: "Of this population fifteen were children" (PS 128). There was practically no privacy. Silence was a rare commodity. The household looked like a "madhouse" (PS 128) with waves of noises crashing on her ears. She "did not like so much communion

living" (PS 128). No other heroine of Narayan's has this much intense longing for aloneness. In fact, Savitri is terrified by her solitariness in the temple (DR 145). Here is the picture of a heroine who has developed, even as a girl of thirteen, a strong aversion for the atmosphere and surroundings of which she happens to be an integral part. Her alienation is a similar version of the 'caged-bird' existence of Rosie in *Guide*. Both Rosie and Daisy find it difficult to adjust themselves to the situations to which they are unfortunately bound.

Daisy not only epitomizes the very spirit of selfless service which has the inherent power to elevate a human soul to a higher and nobler plane but also adopts an unflinchingly rational approach to the unvarying social customs and mental-blocks that stay any kind of progression. Before her undiluted rationality Raman's self-proclaimed rationality pales into insignificance. In a way, one may say, Raman's rationality is mostly thought-oriented while Daisy's is action-oriented. Daisy is Narayan's most vocal and vociferous rebel against all social rituals and practices that tend to denigrate human dignity and look upon

or look down upon women as mere uncritical, unthinking, active promoters of male supremacy, ironically, over themselves. In other words, they suppress female individuality and identity and perpetuate female inferiority and subservience. Daisy fought against this gender-bias with an unbelievable and astonishing courage-unbelievable and astonishing because she was, then, only a thirteen year old girl. In this respect, Daisy is the very antithesis of the fear-obsessed Savitri of Room as may be evidenced in her conduct and role during the important bride-inspection ceremony which decides the future of a girl vis-à-vis her marriage.

Narayan, through Daisy, describes elaborately the intricacies of this ceremony with his characteristic stamp of ironic humour. During this function the roles were reversed. Daisy converted it into bridegroom inspection. She administered a shock to her parents and others with her insistence that she would not allow anyone to inspect her but “rather do the inspection of the groom” (PS 130). Instead of pacing coyly and reverentially before the visitors, Daisy “just strode up like a soldier” (PS 132) and refused to make obeisance and prostrate herself before the bridegroom and his parents. Because she hated “the very notion of one human being prostrating at the feet of another” (PS 132). Daisy, here, reflects Narayan’s aversion for this odious practice (My Days 38).

Daisy, in fact, had already stunned her father’s younger brother with her remark that ‘settling down in life’ was not her aim in life. She expresses her ideas to her parents, ‘I have other aims, I said that I would like to work, rather than to be a wife’<sup>23</sup> She had other aims. She “would like to work, rather than be a wife’ (PS 130). It is relevant to state here that a traditional woman’s exciting and ultimate goal is to get married and settle down in life with supreme happiness and contentment. Her vision is not ‘far-sighted’ and does not reach and extend beyond the horizon of home and hearth. To stand and serve as a sacrificing wife (like Savitri of Room) and mother the children is all she needs to know and nothing more. Her only work is to work for her

husband and children alone, not for others. Daisy cannot subscribe to this restrained, restricted and narrow view of the aim and work of a woman. And her observation is an unthinkable and intolerable transgression of traditional ethos and thought. Hers is a bold, symbolic attempt to bring the much harassed, mutely suffering woman out of the stuffy, suffocating, and conventional atmosphere of home into the open to breathe free, fresh air of freedom, and rewrite her own destiny in modern term Daisy’s conduct, though believed to be extremely indecorous and unbecoming of a girl, is, in reality, a spontaneous reaction to an orthodox social system and structure that provide no space for feminine individuality and rationality and demand unquestioning and absolute submission and subordination from women. She never likes any male support in her life. S.P.Bharadwaj observes:

‘A girl’s running away from the family, her bringing up and education at a missionary organization, her acceptance of social work and her living, all by herself without male supervision and support, are some of those phenomena which would not be tolerated in an orthodox Hindu family, nor a girl of such family would have ventured thus.’<sup>24</sup>

Narayan’s portrayal of Daisy is a radical departure from those of other heroines who cannot fully and permanently free themselves from the strangle-hold of patriarchal system. They, for instance, Savitri and Rosie, return or wish to return to it swallowing their pride. But Daisy quits the house for good and never feels sorry for it.

Raman, a painter-“a lettering artist” (PS 34), as he wishes to call himself-undertakes a professional visit to Daisy who is in charge of the family planning centre at Malgudi. She has commissioned him to paint a board for her clinic and write thereon: ‘Family Planning Centre. Free Advice’ (PS 30). He quickly falls into the quick sand of love. He is sucked into it. It is love at first sight which soon develops into all absorbing passion. One cannot miss the intended irony of Narayan in that Raman who pompously and proudly claims to be a “rationalist” and will not do anything unless he sees “some logic

in it" (PS 5), and is determined "to establish the Age of Reason" (PS 5) should fall head long over heels into love. "An edifice of self-discipline laboriously raised" (PS 45) by Raman crumbles down in the presence of Daisy.

Narayan, in his characteristic fashion, lets his hero resort to the funny strategy of blaming the woman to cover his 'abject surrender'. Raman ingenuously associates Daisy with the mythical temptresses-Demoness Soorpanaka of The Ramayana and Siren of the Greek mythology (PS 43). These mythical references imply the physical charm of Daisy. Raman in his attempt to 'mythicize' Daisy's character may rightly remind the reader of Raju's mother who indignantly denounces Rosie as "you she-devil, you demon" (TG 151). Raman also indulges in sexual fantasies. He derives a perverse pleasure from fancying Daisy to be without clothes. Narayan is reluctant to permit any other hero to enjoy this much 'sexual' freedom which may, indirectly' reflect upon the purity of his heroine's character. As far as Daisy is concerned, she may fret and fume at this liberty, but she will not make an issue of it as she is made of sterner stuff.

Raman's ruminations on Daisy's conduct and remarks bring out the distinct features of her character and her ideals. Daisy is a striking contrast to Raman as a woman in love. Raman's love is marked by emotionalism, irrepressible ebullience, romantic exuberance and vibrancy. He agrees with Daisy's view with a disarming candidness: "Yes, you are right; I am an incurable romantic" (PS 127). Daisy's love is characterized by matter-of factness, woodenness, "a calculated coldness" (PS 37), lack of elation and excitement; it is utterly devoid of romantic thrill. Daisy does not believe in love-making or wooing. One cannot find in her 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' of romantic love. She is astonishingly unemotional and down-to-earth practical and does not pine for Raman as he does for her. She is impervious and dominant in love and deals with Raman not as a lady laden with the load of sweetly oppressive emotions of love but as a highbrow superior lady lecturing an inferior

lowborn on 'Love: Theory and Practice'. This supercilious aspect of her character is brought out in her rejection of the customary, platitudinous romantic statements. Daisy loathes Raman's statement 'I like you'.

Daisy is "a peculiarly modern young woman for whom the cult of independent individuality is the supreme value in life".<sup>25</sup> Daisy does not attach any importance to the sanctity of marriage. Nothing extraordinary for a man and a woman beginning to live under the same roof (PS 168), as she would say. Bhardwaj remarks, "She approves of the relationship between a man and a woman on equal footing, but not the imperatives, liabilities and inter-dependence customarily attached to Hindu marriage" (170). Shantha Krishnaswamy comments, "Daisy is an extraordinary being with a psychological and sexual sophistication" (135). It is relevant to recall Vasu's contemptuous comment on marriage in Man "Only fools marry [...] I really do not know why people marry at all. If you like a woman, have her by all means. You don't have to own a coffee estate because you like a cup of coffee [...]" (33-34). Both Daisy and Vasu have no respect for the sanctity of marriage and little regard for any restraint in sexual passion. Daisy and Raman agree to unite themselves in a "Gandharva- style marriage as easily snapped as made" (PS 169). The Gandharva marriage is free from all rites: "When two souls met in harmony the marriage was consummated perfectly, and no further rite or ceremony was called for" (PS 158). Only this type of marriage, Narayan implies, can suit the ritual-allergic Daisy who can never consent to compromise her independence in the name of marriage. She has no faith in "the codes of the chaste marriage" (Nazar Singh Sidhu 97).

Daisy loves to be dominating and dictating terms to Raman who is bent upon of marrying her even if it means loss of self-respect, dignity and total surrender to her. Narayan introduces the Santhanu-Ganga myth which may provide enough scope to her to retain her dominant position, preserve her independence from being corroded by domestic compulsions, and effectively neutralize or nip in the

but any future attempt of Raman to control her. She consents to marry him in the Gandharva style on her own terms. She is firm, determined, inflexible and unyielding, as she unfolds her terms and conditions. Raman comments, "There was a mad glint in her eyes when she spoke thus" (PS 159). It is not Daisy, the woman in love but Daisy, the fanatically devoted social activist who forcefully formulates formidable terms and frightful penalties. Her conditions are: One, that they should have no children, and two, if by mischance one was born she would give the child away and keep herself free to pursue her social work. Raman was not to object or modify this in any manner. She warns, "If you want to marry me, you must leave me to my own plans even when I am a wife. On any day you question why or how, I will leave you. It will be an unhappy thing for me, but I will leave you" (PS 158-159). Syed Harrex's comment on the implications of this sort of 'mythic marriage' proposed by the iconoclastic Daisy is relevant: "[...the old myths of arranged marriage, wifehood and love symbolized by Sita and Radha are opposed by the new ways of modern marriage and the independent woman" ("R.K.Narayan: Painter of Signs" 75).

Daisy's love of service links her with Bharati of Mahatma. In this respect, as Bhardwaj points out, Daisy is "the replica of Bharati" (170). While Daisy perseveres in her mission with great enthusiasm, Bharati vigorously participates in the national struggle for freedom as a dedicated disciple of Gandhiji. Both have a unique place among the heroines of Narayan with their philosophy of simple life and adaptability. They make more or less identical statements expressing their willingness to lead and live a simple and humble life like a majority of the people who are destined to live such a life. Bharati says, "I can sleep in any hut. I can live where others are living. I don't think I shall demand many luxuries" (WM 90). Daisy expresses a similar sentiment: "Ultimately I'll select the tiniest hamlet and live in a hut. I'll not want anything more than what a majority of our population have" (PS 58).

Daisy is stiff, stern, cold, reticent, and unemotional in love and does not exhibit any particular liking for marriage. On the other hand, Bharati is gentle and soft-hearted, and her love for Sriram is sincere and true though she keeps her emotions within bounds, and she is genuinely interested in marrying, of course with the permission and blessings of her guru, Gandhiji. While Daisy has no fondness for children, Bharati loves orphaned children and attends on them with affection and care.

Another dissimilarity may be noted in *Mahatma* Bharati and Sriram's grandmother, symbolizing contradictory and irreconcilable attitudes never meet each other. Narayan adopts a different method in Signs. He brings face to face Daisy and Raman's aunt Lakshmi who represent two opposing worlds respectively-the world of 'virile' modernism and the world of stubborn traditionalism. It is a cordial and friendly encounter in which each sticks to her guns, surprisingly, without acrimony. Reacting to Daisy's account of her duties, Raman's aunt wonders whether it is not by God's will that children are born. Daisy's scientific spirit is, here, questioned; her rational theory is challenged. The aunt's view is an expression of the traditional attitude to the birth of children reiterated, later, by the villagers.

Daisy is one who will not like to lose her freedom and will not like others to lose theirs either. Her comment on the aunt's firm decision to spend the last days of her life in Kasi indicates her true, liberal spirit and unbiased nature. She argues that it is meaningless on the part of Raman to get upset over his aunt's act: "She has her faith, call it superstition if we must, but let her go" (PS 155). She has every right to choose "such a life and such an end" (PS 155).

"Let her seek her life's pattern as she likes", (PS 156) she tells Raman with a disarming frankness, stressing, thereby, the importance of individual freedom -the freedom to chisel one's own destiny one likes. This is, no doubt, 'a Daisy-feature' that is revealed in her choice of her life's pattern. A.Hariprasanna comments, "As an individual jealously guarding her own beliefs and convictions,

Daisy can appreciate Raman's aunt's desire to go to Benares to live the rest of her life there" (85).

Though Daisy is liberal-minded and sympathetic in defending and endorsing the decision of Raman's aunt, she is unknowingly responsible for the domestic crisis that results in separating Raman from his aunt. Raman's romantic affair with Daisy and his firm refusal to budge from his intention to wed Daisy—a woman whose antecedents regarding her religion and caste are not known—drive a wedge between her aunt and Raman. Bharati and Rosie play a similar unpleasant role in creating a chasm between the heroes and their blood-relations. The irony of the situation, as implied by Narayan, is that Daisy forms an unintentional and invisible bond with his aunt in deserting Raman who finds no viable option but to resume his old, routine life and take refuge in the Boardless "that solid, real world of sublime souls who minded their own business" (PS 183).

The question that naturally arises from the foregoing analysis of the character and roles of the female protagonists is whether Narayan's "psychic and literary identity" (Shantha Krishnaswamy 134) is one of a feminist or not. Pier Paola Piciucco argues that Narayan is not a committed feminist and "chooses a sort of neutral position, neither in favour of male chauvinism nor in defence of feminism" ("Femininity in the Fiction of R.K.Narayan" 179) and refuses to consider Daisy, as Shantha Krishnaswamy does, "a positive feminist model" (178) because "her true ideological position betrays inconsistency and a series of contradictions [...] (178). But it is irrefutable that Narayan's major women characters, and, particularly, Daisy, in a conspicuous, convincing and authoritative manner, do exhibit features and perspectives of feminism. It may be admitted that Narayan is neither a fierce foe of tradition nor a ferocious feminist screaming against psychological, physical and sexual

exploitation and harassment. His feminism, one may say, is a modified version of "womanism"—an alternative term used by Alice Walker, the Black American novelist for black feminism (*In Search of our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*), (xi-xii)—in the sense Narayan unhesitatingly fictionalizes women's woes and issues, subordination, subjugation and oppression, constant struggle to free themselves from the shackles of male chauvinism and the existing cultural absolutes, and their deepest urge for individualism, self-identity and empowerment. Their defeat or success, inconsistencies and contradictions, hesitations and inhibitions are immaterial. What matters is their effort and fight. Narayan succeeds gloriously in capturing and encapsulating in his fiction this fighting spirit of his spirited young heroines.

Savitri, of all the major women characters of Narayan, is the first to script in the strongest and unambiguous terms the oppressed woman's-wife's-emotional protest against the repressive system of patriarchy represented in her husband. But she returns home defeated as a traditional mother. Bharati is cast in the mould of a liberated woman free to be a freedom fighter, contrary to the customary constrictive role of a homemaker. She distinguishes herself as the faithful disciple of Gandhi, Guru and dominating lover. Rosie breaks the much respected code of marital fidelity, consumed by the fire of passion for dance. Daisy is the most daring, radical woman, choosing an 'outrageous career' as a family-planning activist with scant regard for sexual morality, sacred institutions of marriage and home-life, child-bearing and other customary practices. All these women symbolize the spirit of modernism in one way or the other in opposition to traditionalism espoused by old ladies and certain other minor women characters with shades of difference in their comparable and contrastive attitudes and with one exception in Shanta Bai.

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