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Is It Art, Myth or Slavery? It Is R. K. Narayan's Construction of Indian Females between the Real and the Surreal

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ABSTRACT
Narayan's women characters embody situations of female repression and exploitation within a patriarchal regime that is challenged by their resourcefulness and independence, to the extent where they enact terrible myths like that of the Goddess *Kali*. The characters' symbolic primitivism is blended with western literary techniques in cases like that of "Selvi", who personifies the Divine Singer *Saraswati*; Rosie the seducer who represents the Sacred Dancer *Mohini*; or Savitri and Shanta Bai, who are opposite faces of the loyal and perfect companions *Savitri* and *Sita*.

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Introduction

The language of myth is so firmly rooted in the Indian oral and written tradition that it has been used as the ideal vehicle to convey India's history from time immemorial. Myth is the single phoneme, the Sanskritic sign, *ashkara*, speaking of the Bhagavad-Gita and Krishna's teachings: "Of words, I am the eternal syllable OM" [1]. For centuries only the initiated Brahmans could decode the hermeneutics of the Hindu culture. Thus, Indian history is marked by obscure interpretations and great lacunas, which have built fertile grounds for fiction and artistic manifestations of Myth. Narayan's texts respond to this mixture of symbolism and reality that derive from the storytelling tradition and a selective education in eastern and western literatures. The fictional approach is particularly conspicuous in his representation of the Indian Woman. Almost invariably, he constructs a symbolic gendered narrative imbued with mythic qualities that reveal socio-economic aspects subtly expressed in nationalistic terms. In the following pages, I want to analyse how Narayan has created his female characters inspired on the Hindu philosophy of *dvaita*, the subject/object duality of the I/Thou relationship between the devotee and God, where *I* represents the subjective space and *Thou* the social one. The prevalence of *dvaita* also applies to every small deity who can transmute when activated into the Great Goddess, *Shakti*, "the One Force" [2]; accordingly his fictional women suggest this double quality: they are common characters serving as vessels for an idealised Indian Woman that reflects a national idea of female identity.

My intention is to prove how Narayan's works, inspired by the revival of the precolonial artistic expressions of tradition, reproduce traditional situations of neglect and repression of women, which are stimulated by the language of Hindu mythology. My concern on Narayan's female representation derives from the relevance of signifiers and how they translate into facts that do not reflect the empowerment of women but on the contrary contribute to their objectification and their effacement through the fabrication of an iconic identity. In order to provide an analysis of myth, I will draw many of my arguments from the symbolic constructions of power relations found in Indian postcolonial criticism and western discourses with a view to exposing some traps that lie behind the assumption of godly-like qualities as a perfect prototype to represent females' values. Although Narayan's oeuvre and paradoxical characters provide plenty of fictional material that illustrates the Indian female duality between the Self and the Other, thus epitomising a singularity derived from postcolonial ideological definitions of Indianness, I have only chosen three differentiated types of symbols, very closely connected to South Indian women: art, tradition, and change or, Saraswati, Savitri and Kali, respectively. My main aim is to disclose how Fiction and Myth work together as mirrors of a reality that lies disguised in allegorical forms, trying to apprehend a homogenising discursive authenticity which inspires modern definitions of the nation-state and which sometimes brings undesirable results. However, the thematic vastness and the paper's limited format preclude any extensive analysis on Narayan's alterities of myth and gender.

This analysis begins with some definitions of myth and its socially-inscribed nature based on western and Indian theories. The three female stereotypes are embedded in a counter-canon concept of Indian tradition –considering tradition as the prescriber of a widespread validity; accordingly, the women whose performances have some connection with art and enjoy certain popularity share with the anonymous females; modern cultural paradigms that are in conflict with their traditional place and importance in society. They deal with roles imposed on them from a subjective and an objective acceptation of reality that empowers and debases them at the same time. Their personal retribution is the enactment of the mythic archetypes created by the Hindu community and their ability to construct a redefined social identity along those parameters. However, the mythic dimension of the stories is also a dynamic discourse ingrained in the fictional Malgudi that is permanently negotiating its space within the context of modern Indian history.

Art, Myth or Slavery?

Regarding the intricacies of providing a working definition of myth, it is necessary to draw upon some well-known

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scholarly approaches in order to establish the theoretical parameters and the arguments of the paper:

1) Jean-Luc Nancy associates Myth to the community which is simultaneously defined by it. He situates Myth in the "origin" of the community's "foundation" tightly embedded in the people's self and "narrative", constituting a collective "consciousness" that is a self-referring expression of "a mythic" formation. "Myth is above all full, original speech, at times revealing, at times founding the intimate being of a community" [3].

2) Roland Barthes places Myth beyond the community from which derives and makes it "an object of study" that transcends the people's socio-ideological history. He argues that at the moment we need a "science of the signifier" to decode symbolic language since "sociolects" have substituted the place value of myth. For Barthes, socio-linguistic contexts challenge textual readings that have already exchanged "mythologies" for "an idiolectology" "whose operational concepts would no longer be sign, signifier, signified and connotation but citation, reference, stereotype" [4].

3) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe myth as the expression of the unconscious, "the structural whole of the Imaginary and the Symbolic" [5], the Imaginary being a representation that "ceases to be objective" in order to become "subjective infinite". Its consistency is supported "by a structure that determines the place and the function of the subject of representation": the Symbolic describes the patterns of a "subjective representation, pure signifiers, pure nonrepresented representatives whence the subjects, the objects, and their relationships all derive" [6]. This structural composition serves to shelter "the unconscious", the theatrical parts, the imagination and the artistic expressions.

4) Ashis Nandy describes Myth as a fantastic fabric that "archaic societies" remember and "re-enact" as part of their mythic history [7]. "[M]yths are the essence of a culture, history being at best superfluous and at worst misleading" [8]. His scepticism against a materialistic secular society makes "Myths" the key cultural issue that opens imaginary mental frames that resist "co-optation by the uniformizing world view of modern science" [9].

5) Aparna B. Dharwadker attaches Myth and its "powerful qualities" to cultural narratives that are recorded "over a period of time" in Indian history. The artistic expressions, whether oral or written forms, "invoke the nation's ancient, premodern, and precolonial past" [10]. She argues that the nation-state placed myths and history at the core of the debates on modernity and India's "remote past", which in time have been absorbed by a gradual understanding of Indian cultural narratives.

These definitions help us to throw some light on the basic qualities of Narayan's female characters that I interpret as artistic allegories, and their degeneration into subjective and objective forms of slavery. As in Nancy's definition, his characters are profoundly attached to their community and heavily conditioned by the family's social status. In The Guide [11] and The Man-eater of Malgudi, [12], the symbolic language enacted by the temple dancers, devadasis, reveals a cultural crack in the foundations of the traditional representation of these women. Traditionally offered to the temple's deity when they were children, Rosie and Rangi belong to a family type regarded as "public women"; for the community, they belong to a caste of sinners. The narratives show how social repudiation operates in Indian society, despite the fact that the Indian constitution bans any form of ostracism. Following Deleuze and Guattari, these temporal anachronisms nourish the subjective representation of an unconscious that the theatrical patterns of the texts permit to integrate in a diachronic space of modern objectification of the cultural past through the conversion of their sociological elements into an object for analytical debate. These sociological elements are inspired on and composed by a narrative of the absolute inherent to their mythological origins which, in Rosie's case, articulate the idea of an essential Hindu identity transcended by an abstract concept of art enkindled by God's desire. In Rangi's case, however, the symbolic praise to the divine power is blended with the silenced reality of a foisted prostitution that has deprived her of any willpower. Both women convey a double self-representation: the artistic performances dedicated to a public tradition that describes them as tantalising dancers, and their awareness of their residual self-polluted identities, that Rosie overcomes with her talented study of traditional dance and Rangi with an almost heroic defence of the temple's elephant. The subjective bonds are strengthened by the ideological implications behind stereotyped representations of absolute values that have colonised their minds: Rosie is confined in her role of (dis)obedient wife and Rangi is held by the temple's priorities before a client decides to rescue her. The novels project a specific postcolonial narrativisation, which Aijaz Ahmad calls the "counter-canon of Third World Literature", whose purpose is the construction of a "myth of the nation" or a mythical cultural origin [13] that secures a stable representation of the Indian subject. However, this imagined identity fails to provide a reassuring transmission of the symbolic thought as the hegemonic puranic and vedic literatures did with the propagation of patriarchal values; for females were symbolically "empowered" but the agency was male [14]. Therefore, the re-enacted language of Hindu culture associates female identity with a referential idiolectology that opens a thematic site of struggle between the I and the Other, which is at the "basis for agency" [15]. The "science of the signifier" applies to the women's heavy-duty agency, which is discursively reduced to their female condition by a regressive ideological model that disempowers them: there is an androgynous signifier in the Indian Myth. The anthropological images amalgamate male and female energies, however, as the male energy epitomises agency and power, the female's has two sides: the self-representation of the Woman and the energy itself, Shakti. As explained earlier, the Hindu concept dvaita is behind the ideation of the deity, who simultaneously retains both genders that manifest independently. In this case, the I is inspired by a self that is not properly female but male as the female is purely symbolic. Therefore, the I is displaced to the womanly Other, the Thou. Shākta, the female power and its paramount representative goddess, Durga, who embodies the perfect energy and an ideological purity, are reinterpreted either as a manifestation of Māya, a delusive and unreachable but unified being, or as a double expression of the destructive/creative female Other embodied by goddess Kali; whichever way, women desert their subject condition for becoming objects of debate.

Certainly, the nationalist discourse rescues these mythic alterities that retain the Hindu "spiritual distinctiveness" as the expression of "true identity" [16]. Consequently, the erosion of the Indian identity caused by a material approach to modernity is neutralised by the personification of the nation in the body of a symbolic Indian Woman. She is Sati, the epitome of "womanly virtues" [17] and the perfect sacrificial offering. Shiva's wife is the mythic component of the Indian identity that specifically addresses women's subjective organisation and objective classification within the social context.

Despite the fact that Rosie and Rangi are essentially public women signifying the Other alterities of successful artistry and

residual enslavement respectively, their daily basis is divided into "ghar and bāhir", the inner and outer spaces that also imply "the spiritual" and "the material" [18]. Therefore, they are akin to the female archetypes of The Dark Room (1938): the dutiful mother, Savitri and the seducer, Shanta Bai; and of Malgudi Days, the transitional character "Selvi" – "a rare, ethereal entity" [19] – who remains half way between a living Saraswati, and a selfless Gandhian-type singer dwelling in a cloistered universe of her own.

Essentially, Savitri is the traditional illiterate submissive woman and Shanta Bai, an emerging college educated worker. On the contrary, Selvi is a classless natural talent hallowed by myth: disconnected from the real world, she makes of her concerts a spiritual offering to her public. Like a Devi, she is divested of her human condition in order to embody a revered object of devotion. Hence, the polarisation of female archetypes constitutes the axis of each narrative: women are simultaneously affirmation and negation, generosity and selfishness. This reveals their earthly flaws: "a woman's primary duty (also a divine privilege) [is] being a wife and a mother" [20]. Savitri exemplifies the symbol of the middle-class housewife's ideology. Socially supressed and personally negligible, her behaviour complies with the male's ideation of female perfection. Her value comes from the evaluation of her routines made by others; consequently, if she fails to represent the roles she has been assigned –mother and housewife– not only does she lose her objectified importance but she becomes a shameful burden for her group as well. Overwhelmed by sadness, her desire of drowning herself in the river answers to her aesthetic necessity of embodying the mythic ideal of a perfect Indian housewife as her only way to earn some social respect. Since she is unable to bear severe penances for her husband's sake and to exert some self-control on her emotions as her divine counterpart did, ideologically, she turns into a flawed subject. Although the husband performs the wrong deed, the moral responsibility is borne by the wife. To break this vicious circle she needs courage and a physical endurance that are unknown to her, thus she accepts her condition of a conformist, valueless possession, which is precisely what they expect from her in any case. Meanwhile, her opponent, a middle-class, young divorced woman, tries to secure an economic independence after breaking away from her family who also have rejected her for not being able to suffer a debased life with her drunkard husband. Although Shanta Bai seems a representative of modernity when she is introduced as an assertive, educated woman chasing a job, in fact, she typifies another kind of female burden: someone who uses her beauty and her intellectual varnish to gain some working advantages from her intellectually limited boss. Symbolically, she is strong enough to shed her child-marriage yoke, destroying in the process her bondage with her past and, simultaneously, opening a space for her new autonomous being. Accordingly, she acts as Kali, the mutable symbol of destruction and creation necessary for a renewal, apparently expressing an early feminist liberation. However, once she becomes a free female worker applying for a job, embodying Mohini, she uses her allegedly independent self to flatter her boss. Instead of exploring a stronger defiant agency more in tune with a modern, "westernised" performance, she becomes the mistress of a married man, which is a timeless and universal stereotype anyway. Indeed, she reflects the negative aspects of the myth: selfishness, falsehood and materialistic drives, while she provides a poor illustration of female freedom. In this novel, the cinema serves as the artistic counterpoint to myth and modernity: whilst Savitri feels identified with the film's long-suffering wife of Indian tradition, Shanta Bai complains about a Ramayana's version for she would have preferred to watch a Hollywood movie.

Narayan's characters reflect an artificial fabric of hybridised subjects: from the "original speech" of pure symbols that represent the nation's primeval mythology uttered from a postcolonial reinterpretation of its ancient past, they resemble incomplete references to both their Hindu, caste-divided society and their incipient, worldly "modernity". Also, the regressive symbolism dissolves the mythic figures into small, adulteratebeings that raise identity problems referred to in The Bhagavad-Gita's moral principles or gunas: from bottom to top, whereas Savitri is the perfect tamasic type, the reflection of tradition –invoking darkness, passivity, depression–, Shanta Bai and Savitri's husband have a rajasic profile, reflection of a materialistic modernity –they are passionate, hypocritical, selfish. Ultimately, Selvi embodies some of the sattvic moral qualities –temperance, equilibrium, spirituality– that can better serve the purposes of an imaginary modern Indian society. However, Narayan's iconic representation of the Indian Woman illustrates his imprecise definition of her social status within the nation, characterised by a tolerance that is closer to passivity than to moderation. Departing from a patriarchal model, the external pressures forced a social change that came from the economic necessity of transforming a basic production-oriented society into an industrially competitive one. Women were required to join this new society. Thus, some of the traditional barriers were dissolved in order to give room to a new kind of female: a family detached worker whose salary is invested on the family.

However, although she is no longer the flawless, dedicated housewife but an externally influenced individual that needs to be under a permanent surveillance, this woman is expected to be the repository of "the inner spirituality of indigenous social life" [21], spiritually at the antipodes of other westernised cultures. The recodification of the modern female role implies a symbolic displacement from her two distinct spheres of social articulation: the bāhir's powerless subjected position or the Thou –the role attributed to women by the social others– and the ghar's objectified consideration or the I –the women's status within the family. Consequently, economic and legal guarantees have somehow inverted these traditional gender divisions: on the one hand, the outer space constructs an iconic model embedded in timeless signifiers whose aim is its translatable simplification in order to achieve a twofold target: the creation of a ready-made product for a globalised audience and the consumption of these stereotyped signifiers by the internal Hindu market. On the other hand and due to this external simplification, the inner space has subjectified the female figure who now is able to choose how to enact the representative importance of the Indian archetype. Paradoxically, in the process of homogenising a new Indian woman that simultaneously stands for tradition and history as well as for modernity, women have developed a genuine voice related to female oppression that questions those mythic standards without following the Western canonical feminism. Thus, it depends not so much on being patronised by the West than on claiming the need to be heard and sympathised by the international community, particularly, because the oppression against women and children has brought about the violation of human rights, as the rise of fundamentalism is proving every day. Consequently, Narayan's narrative represents what Partha Chatterjee calls "a necessary biculturalism": one which is defined by a cultural hybridisation and is able "to see through the shams and hypocrisy of today's myths of global

cooperation" [22], while it remains being a popular product for the Indian market.

In terms of aesthetic construction, art is the responsible of a paradigmatic inclusion and exclusion of subjects, who are transformed into objects of a gendered ideology by political contexts. Analytically, the three women (Rosie, Rangi and Selvi), dedicated to artistic interests, are economically independent but their incomes are administered by patriarchal figures: their partners and the local temple. Their performances are socially appreciated but their individual agency is excluded from the community. The system's structure is designed for exploiting their talents while it prevents their social assimilation. The three are ideologically flawed characters: Rosie is unfaithful to her husband and lives with her lover-manager who also belongs to a lower social class. Rangi is a Dalit and a prostitute, thus she incarnates two unmistakable signs of marginalisation. Finally, Selvi goes beyond human realities, she is a ghost who has rejected her husband and ignored her family by living in an exclusionary world. Accordingly, the roles assigned to women by the hegemonic ideology –mothers, wives, sisters and daughters– signal these characters as aliens to the system. A more objective evaluation of their works is negatively assessed by the prejudiced cultural view of their subjective behaviours. However, Narayan constructs a barrier between their singular activities, oriented towards an objective approach to their private doings –their particular everyday lives– and their multitudinous popular exchanges, described by the subjective nature of public service –or the people's judgements. This public sphere is closely united to the mythic symbolism that forces them to represent a well-defined iconic figure: their artistic skills can be traced back to the Puranas and Vedic texts; thus, they are consciously giving life to an anachronism that provides them with a social acceptance at the cost of enslaving them to a professional role (with its inevitable successes and failures) and confining them in a ghettoised existence.

Moreover, from a mythic conception of society, the patriarchal family is behind the other female characters, Savitri and Shanta Bai, who are the two sides of the same coin or, as John Thieme writes: "[The Dark Room] negotiates the middle ground between myth and modernity" [23]. Savitri and Shanta Bai are economically dependent on the same man. Symbolically he represents the protective/oppressive figure of the patriarchal state that is gradually getting rid of its past through modern economic theories on social development and gender equality. Their responsibility is anchored to the man's decisions and whatever they do must fit into his discursive fabric. Although their academic curricula may be different, these women have very similar backgrounds. Both were married to the wrong men when they were still children, this being regressive practice whose consequences bear imponderable results. Out of five pregnancies, Savitri has given birth to three children, and her motherly role is unquestionable. However, according to her husband she is a lousy housewife. This is precisely the reason he delivers to justify his disloyalty to her and the children: since the mother fails to fulfil the breadwinner's dictates, he feels entitled to dishonour her and his children, denying the neglect of his duties as his economic support commands the asymmetrical relationship of power. Savitri and the children are the carriers of the Symbolic; their economic dependence places them in a nondescript position of dutiful representation. The narrative points at traditional female controversies, showing women's limited capacity to change their individual situations. Narayan describes a changing India that cannot provide women with the improvement of their basic needs. A westernised Shanta Bai thinks that education is "a nonsense" since "it leaves [the women] as badly unemployed as the men" [24]. However, Narayan's fictional irony reflects a global reality that Shanta Bai reduces to her particular historical moment. Accordingly, for the two women and from opposite perspectives, what is unreal is to be economically independent in a male-centred world. Like the other characters, these are also socially bound to the archetype imposed on them.

Now the question is what kind of retribution do they receive for incarnating these symbolic stereotypes? In principle, one might get the impression that they obtain a very poor satisfaction or not reward at all. Thus, one is lead to conclude that their lives are a meaningless literary construction. However, this perspective implies to isolate the subjects from their society and to place them in a symbolic void made of mythic clichés, simplifying the complex dynamics of power relations. There exists a common "place and function" that link the five female prototypes together: their social niche as South Indian women. Even though they all aspire to represent Mother India, there is not such a thing that can be identified as the nation. Thus, each of them is an indivisible part of it, conforming a kaleidoscope of cultures that is reflected on their ideological unconscious. Consequently, their subjective choices help to support the general objectification of their social beings and not the other way round. Despite their caste differences, the three artists are socially owned and colonised by an abstraction: their public / clientele. They are possessed and enslaved by their artistic masks; even in the case of Rangi, the devadasi, her condition of Temple Dancer marks the difference with other kind of prostitutes. Thus, the reward they received for the personal price they pay is the public recognition of their different status. The other two stereotypes complement each other: there cannot be a betrayed woman without a traitor. And there cannot be a seducer without someone willing to be seduced. In both cases the retribution comes directly from a male agent. At any rate, it will always depend on the one who makes the command and ultimately decides when to end the simulacrum. To ignore these women's politico-economic conditions it will lead to wrong assumptions. They cannot be separated from their social milieu simply because the principle that makes them archetypal is symbolically uttered by the society which has educated them. Their retribution is divided between the economic support provided by the male figure and their respective social roles as mother-housewife and independent divorced professional. Both seem to be enslaved by their self-perceptions at a synchronic moment of Indian historicity.

Conclusions

To conclude, it is possible to isolate the causes for the women's alienation and to find the ideological solutions that will transform a historical denial into a flexible acceptance of differences. At the bottom of each stereotype lies the atavistic construction of the Indian caste system based on rigid social divisions and whose components are still visible and responsible for the female submission to symbolic and factual situations of modern slavery. These mythic references still linger in the community's unconscious since they serve as an original foundation but also as a symbolic language that is handed down from generation to generation. However, these metaphors go through a reinterpretation of their archaic signifiers with each new learning process. When Narayan constructs an archetypal character he is achieving a double purpose: on the one hand, it becomes a recognisable sign of the nation's ancient culture; on the other hand, it is easily integrated into contemporary history as an active social agent and, consequently, it is susceptible to be

questioned and changed. Despite the fact that the geographical location is invariably Malgudi, the proposed societies are not identical, and each of them demands from the women in question a different response regardless of their imperfect representation of the mythic roles.

Modern Indian actresses, singers or dancers are no longer the "sinful" women specifically trained in arts for the construction of an emergent national-state based on Hindu traditional culture, but professionals who relish a social recognition. However, they serve the purpose of keeping alive the memory of their forerunners as part of India's history, embodying the favourable aspects of a cultural icon like goddess Saraswati. Similarly, housewives, educated or not, have learned that their work is both a symbol of family and motherhood, and an economic value in itself, despite the abuses and disrespects that many have to face and learn to survive daily. In this sense, they stand for the metaphoric resilience of the undeterred Savitri. Moreover, contemporary single women know that they do not have to rely on men to follow a professional career. Hence, their stance is contemplated under a double prism: firstly, the destruction of social prejudices that promotes certain kind of female independence; and secondly, the challenge to traditional values that many see as a modern symptom of women's degeneration. Simultaneously real, these perspectives are united in a prime representative: goddess Kali. Additionally, the symbolic Mohini being independent becomes somebody else who acts according to her own interests, so it is harder to question her attitude and her challenges.

Summing up, these mythic figures are ambiguous representations of present female realities conditioned by the specificity of the role assigned to them, which varies according to their own positioning within a diachronic historicity. The temporal evolution of history implies that a complete submission to archaic believes in modern times not only can have pernicious effects on the people's minds and perpetuate practices of servitude based on superstitions and class differences but, in a "mundialized" world, it can contribute to a dangerous isolation from less traditional societies that promote objective values based on legal guaranties and wide social agreements. The archetypal women displayed in Narayan's works are not simple fictional images of the Indian Woman representative of the Mother Nation but communal realities that are far from being social answers to the daily problems of vast numbers of Indian people who seek from myth the reassurances that their politico-economic reality fails to accomplish.

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