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## Research Article



## Dynamics of Rationality and Irrationality in *The Painter of Signs*

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### Abstract

R. K. Narayan occupies a significant place in the Indian literary scene. He remains one of the most read, cherished, and appreciated novelist and is an integral part of the University curriculum. *The Painter of Signs* (1976) is a well-known novel by R.K. Narayan. The text provides a beautiful scope to unearth the intricate dynamics of rationality and irrationality distinction that in fact provides much content for the plot of the novel. The present paper makes an attempt to explore the dynamics of the conceptual framework of rationality and irrationality distinction through a scrutiny of certain instances taking place within the space of the novel. The paper also tries to illustrate that the criticism made by the main protagonists, Raman and Daisy using the conceptual framework of rationality and irrationality are targeted towards ritual

practices prevalent in Indian society. Thereby, the paper attempts to build a background to make intelligible the comments and attitude of the main characters towards the incidents taking place around them. At the same time, the paper explores the way in which the novel thus provides a significant space to examine the interplay and dynamics of the framework of rationality and irrationality and how it can impact one's experience of life.

**Keywords:** Dynamics, Rationality, Irrationality, Ritual Practices, Access, Experiences, Intelligibility, Contradiction, Limited Understanding, Descriptions

R.K. Narayan occupies a significant place in the Indian literary scene. Meenakshi Mukherjee writing about R.K. Narayan opines that R.K. Narayan's "achievement depends on his capacity to remain uninvolved" (Mukherjee 45). He is appreciated as "detached observer" who would like "to concentrate on a narrow scene, to sense the atmosphere of the place, to snap a small group of characters in their oddities and angularities: he would, if he could, explore the inner countries of the mind, heart and the soul, catch the uniqueness in the ordinary, the tragic in the prosaic" (Iyengar 360). No wonder, R.K. Narayan remains one of the most read, cherished, and appreciated novelist and is an integral part of the University curriculum.

*The Painter of Signs*, published in 1976, is a well-known novel by R.K. Narayan. The novel follows the life of Raman who paints the sign boards and leads a comfortable life in Ellaman Street with his aunt. His quiet life is disturbed with the entry of Daisy who is a family planning campaigner. Despite his efforts to avoid himself from getting drawn towards Daisy, Raman falls in love. Daisy, on the other hand, has no time for love and family life. In the novel, she is depicted as a dominating character. She has an independent spirit and prioritizes her work above anything. No doubt, Daisy reciprocates Raman's love for her but she makes it clear that her life is dedicated to social service and eventually walks out of his life.

Within this outline of the novel, the current paper explores the dynamics of two key ideas present within the novel, that is, rationality and irrationality. Raman and Daisy use the distinction of rational versus irrational to describe or comment upon the people and the incidents taking place around them. It is interesting to note that all the criticism made by Raman and Daisy in the novel using the conceptual framework of rationality and irrationality is actually targeted towards ritual practices. To illustrate this aspect, Raman's attitude towards his aunt and certain issues pertaining to customary practices in Indian society is taken up for the study in the present paper. Based on this analysis, the paper tries to demonstrate the manner in which such an attitude of Raman in fact blocks him from accessing his own experience of his aunt and other characters and incidents around him.

### **Raman's attitude towards his aunt: Rationality and Irrationality Distinction**

Throughout the novel, it becomes evident that Raman exhibits a peculiar attitude towards his aunt. Raman's aunt may appear to be a minor character but she provides enough opportunity to highlight inconsistency in Raman's personality. The novel reveals that Raman's aunt has been taking good care of him ever since the death of his parents in a rail accident when he was a small boy. She keeps the house clean, cooks for Raman, waits for him, and serves him his food so that he can be comfortable. Raman's attitude towards his aunt is filled with

indifference, irritation, amusement, and finally that of sympathy. He is sympathetic towards her as she is undemanding and pays “unwavering attention” towards him. He behaves extremely rude to her sometimes and sometimes extremely considerate (35) and the aunt seems to have accepted his behavior with “equal composure” (35). But Raman “hardly ever noticed”, “how versatile she was. Everyone who came across her was wonder - struck at the variety of her accomplishments. But Raman was indifferent, and could never get over a feeling that she was somewhat bogus” (18).

The brief description of the aunt’s activities available within the space of the novel suggests that she is leading an eventful life. The novel tells us that people from the neighborhood used to drop in the afternoons to seek aunt’s advice on some domestic matters, listen to her discourse on the gods, seek her advice about some herbal remedy, or listen to her prophecies from a horoscope (18). These descriptions pave way to certain questions - When the aunt is leading such an active life and so many people seek her advice, why does Raman consider her a bogus character? Or why do the activities of aunt look bogus to Raman? Advice on domestic matters, herbal remedy, talks on gods, horoscope etc. look like fake talks for Raman. This attitude of Raman looks strange because what does not constitute bogus according to Raman is unclear.

However, Raman’s attitude about his aunt can be understood under certain conditions - If the aunt would have delivered discourse on science, he would have probably considered her not bogus. Since, the aunt is engaged in such activities like advising on horoscope, herbal remedy, domestic matters etc. she appears bogus to him. Bogus means fake or false. Therefore, his aunt appears to be engaged in bogus activities according to him which in turn indicates that she is fake. Fake or false activities cannot be rational. Therefore, the aunt is irrational as per Raman’s understanding.

In another instance, defending his love for Daisy in front of his aunt, Raman says that Daisy “is a rare type of girl, devoted to the service of people, and that is all her religion... Her worship takes the form of service to the poor and the ignorant and helping them live a decent life... she can live with the poorest in their huts, eat their food, and sleep on the mud floor” (153). When the aunt cannot understand Raman’s explanation about his love for Daisy and her mission in life, he immediately jumps to the conclusion that there is no use explaining to her concepts like love, service etc. His reaction is described thus, “sighs at the limitations of his aunt’s understanding. There was no use explaining to her concepts which were beyond her understanding” (153). So, he simply mutters, “she is a good girl” (153).

Raman does not understand why his aunt cannot comprehend his explanation about Daisy and her mission. His aunt is unfamiliar with his idea of love for Daisy. Further, she has never come across people like Daisy. Daisy and her activities are something which does not constitute the experience of Raman’s aunt. Instead of probing the reasons for aunt’s inability to understand his explanation about Daisy, Raman pities her saying that her understanding has limitations. Added to that, instead of making her understand, he claims that she cannot understand and it would be no use making her understand the concepts like love, service etc. One can notice that Raman is making two assumptions here – the first assumption is that his aunt does not understand his concepts and second, it is useless to explain certain concepts to

her as she cannot understand them at all. Since she cannot understand his love for Daisy, Daisy's idea of service etc., Raman concludes that she is a person with "limited understanding." His aunt's inability to understand unfamiliar concepts make him transform his otherwise "versatile aunt" into a "bogus" (18), a "garrulous creature" (54) and a person with limited capacity for understanding.

The above descriptions about the aunt highlight an important observation. There are two sets of descriptions about the same person that emerges in the novel. One set of descriptions about Raman's aunt comes from her acquaintances who think that she is very "versatile." But Raman provides a contrasting picture about the same person. According to him, she is superstitious, bogus, a garrulous creature, a person with limited understanding etc. These sets of descriptions evoke an interesting question - How can the same person become "versatile" and also "bogus", "garrulous" or a person with limitations on understanding at the same time? Here lies the inconsistency. But this inconsistency can be made intelligible again under certain conditions or assumptions- if aunt had understood and appreciated Raman's love for Daisy and Daisy's mission etc., then she would not have been branded as a person with "limited understanding". Raman's problem here is not with the incomprehension of his aunt about Daisy. But his problem lies with the very idea that his aunt cannot understand abstract concepts like love, service etc. Consequently, there is an underlying assumption here that since aunt cannot understand these ideas, she becomes a person with limited understanding. One can decipher Raman's strange attitude towards his aunt in the backdrop of the discussion outlined above.

### **Raman's idea of irrationality and rationality and its expansion**

Raman's ideas about irrationality and rationality are not limited to his aunt alone. In the novel, he can also be seen expanding the conceptual framework of rationality and irrationality to Indian traditions. To Raman, irrationality refers to ritual practices. Not being ritualistic, according to him, means rational. In the name of irrationality, he is actually targeting the rituals. In fact, he sees everything through this framework of rationality and irrationality. His comments and criticism can be understood only within the distinction that he makes between these two key ideas. This claim can be explained with some more instances from the novel and his responses towards them.

In the beginning of the novel, Raman is seen getting annoyed with the Lawyer to whom he is painting the board. The lawyer wants to go according to the advice of his astrologer in fixing the day, time and the style of the letters on his board. Raman considers this as something that is illogical and irrational. Irritated at this, Raman shouts that he is a rational man who wants an explanation for everything, "I want a rational explanation for everything. Otherwise, my mind refuses to accept any statement... I am a rationalist, and I don't do anything unless I see some logic in it" (5). To Raman's statements, the lawyer replies instantly, "What more logic do you want than that I'm paying for it?... that's all there is to it. What more do you want than that?" (5).

Raman feels that the lawyer's argument is "pretty convincing". But his attitude does not change. When the lawyer insists again that he goes "by what my astrologer says" (6), Raman asserts, "I prefer to think for myself" (6). Raman thus assumes that he is a thinking man

and those who listen to astrologer simply follow what the astrologer tells them to do and they do not think at all. Further, on the day of inauguration of the lawyer's office, when the "tufted priest" stresses on the "correct timing," Raman tries to shout in vain, "Be scientific, please, scientific" (7).

Raman's notion about the lawyer consulting an astrologer can be understood again within the assumption that consulting an astrologer is irrational. And in this instance, Raman actually establishes the equation between consulting an astrologer and irrationality. It is a known fact that consulting an astrologer to do certain actions is a common ritual practice in India. While performing common rituals, people do not even ask whether it is rational or irrational. But Raman again makes the distinction between rationality and irrationality here. Without this distinction, we cannot find out why exactly Raman is irritated with the lawyer's consultation of his astrologer. Raman has certain notions of rationality and irrationality. According to him, scientific explanation and logic constitutes rationality. And anything that is not scientific and logical is irrational. For Raman, the act of consulting an astrologer is evidence for irrationality and illogic because there exists no explanation for someone consulting an astrologer for some action. Basically, Raman is equating one of the most common Indian practices of consulting an astrologer to irrationality.

Raman's equation continues further. Raman's aunt decides to go to Benares at the end of the novel, as she thinks that to be dissolved in Ganges is "as an auspicious end to one's life" (152). The aunt considers the temple and the river Ganga as the "greater shelter" (156), and a place of "peace and regularity" (156). Raman describes his aunt's decision of going to Kasi as "running away to fulfill her ambition" (154). Daisy consoles Raman saying, "She has her faith, call it superstition if we must, but let her go" (155). Daisy's notion too becomes obvious here. She considers the aunt's decision to go to Banaras as "superstition" (155). She thinks that Raman's aunt has taken a good decision to go to Benares as a freedom from "lifetime of domestic slavery" (179). The aunt's dedication to Raman and his house looks like domestic slavery to Daisy. These remarks essentially suggest something subtle. There are two-fold comments here. First, the decision to go to Benares and second, the way both Raman and Daisy perceive this action. If someone wants to spend their retired life at some place, how can that be called superstitious or running away? If a person wants to spend his last days at a resort or a hill station, that will not be called superstition. But if a person wants to spend his last days in a place like Benares, then it becomes "superstitious." We can understand this contradiction under one condition - Benares is a Hindu pilgrimage center; majority of the Hindus would like to undertake pilgrimage to Benares once in their lifetime; aged people, specifically, prefer to spend their final days in Benares. Already there is a set of beliefs about going to Benares and its promise of a good life subsequently. These beliefs are not founded upon scientific explanations. Therefore, this practice among the people of desiring to spend the last days in a holy place like Benares becomes superstitious to Daisy or running away to Raman. And as already seen, to Raman and Daisy whatever is superstitious becomes evidence for irrationality. Thus, even this practice of going to Benares is also equated with irrationality.

Raman's attitude towards other aspects of Indian tradition as presented in the novel can also be examined. Once, Raman can be seen wondering why people while narrating stories



“Always bring down the God.” He finds the whole exercise as “One such easy terms with the Almighty” (29). Raman’s problem with people bringing down the gods remains unclear. Somehow bringing down the gods looks unconvincing to him. He seems to be assuming here that people cannot have logical explanations and therefore they bring down gods while narrating stories. And as already established, anything which is illogical must be irrational. So, even this common practice of narrating stories with gods etc. look irrational to him.

Even the most usual Indian practice of prostrating at other’s feet appears to be a hateful notion, and an “odious” practice to both Raman and Daisy. Why it is an odious practice according to Raman and Daisy is unclear. Again, they see this common practice under the microscope of the framework of rationality and irrationality. In the absence of any scientific explanation for prostrating, naturally, they find it an irrational practice. And hence, it becomes a hateful action.

Daisy seems loathing everything connected to Indian tradition; like common living, prostrating at the feet of another, etc. While narrating her past, Daisy tells Raman that she did not like much “common living” (128) for she felt that “all individuality was lost in this mass existence” (130). Getting prepared for the wedding made her feel sick and lose her identity (131) for she had her own notions of what is good for her and what she should do in her life. To her, joint family means mass existence and marriage means loss of identity. In another instance, Raman explains to her the five kinds of marriage and they finally agree to go for Gandharva marriage that is much talked about in “classical literature.” Daisy immediately declares that she does not have faith in ancient customs (158). Why she does not have faith in ancient customs remains unclear unless we think that she assumes the ancient customs to be superstitious and illogical.

In another place in the novel, we have Raman’s description about his cousin- “He was an orthodox bandicoot with a tuft and caste mark” (115). In one more instance, while ridiculing the groom who had come to see Daisy, Raman says that he must have had a tuft of hair. To his surprise, Daisy replies that the groom had a clean crop. Here, Raman has an assumption that all orthodox people exhibit certain commonalities as far as their dress and food habits are concerned. It becomes difficult to understand such comments of Raman and Daisy about certain practices that are followed in Indian society. Again, without this framework of rationality and irrationality, their comments cannot be understood at all. They look like some casual remarks. However, underneath they are targeted towards ritual practices as shown in most of the instances discussed above.

### **Rationality and Irrationality Distinction versus Raman’s Experiences**

Based on the above discussion, certain incidents can be examined further to show that Raman’s way of looking at the things around does not come from his own experiences but rather they are guided by the framework of rationality and irrationality.

Much later in the novel, when Raman’s aunt is preparing to leave for Kasi, Raman wonders at his aunt’s simplicity and minimal wants. Though he is not happy with her decision in the beginning which comes as a shock to him, he thinks that he had hardly ever noticed her. He admits to himself that earlier he had never observed her so closely but now he thinks that “her way of life was a revelation to him” (165) and he has taken “her so much for granted all

these years". Raman acknowledges that "she seems to have existed only for my sake" and it "was a lifetime dedication for another being" (165). Raman's aunt has been leading an active life throughout. But, since he has always examined her through the ideas of rationality and irrationality, her actions looked bogus to him. She appeared to be a garrulous and a person with limited understanding to him despite knowing the fact that the others consider her "versatile". He did not stop even once till the end of the text to ponder why others consider her a versatile person. If he had thought about his aunt in this direction, he would have had a different understanding of her personality. Even though, at the end, Raman suddenly starts feeling that her way of life is a revelation, it should be noted that his basic attitude towards her as an irrational being does not change. He is touched by her dedication to him and is sympathetic towards her. The realization that dawns upon Raman at the end about his aunt emerges more from his sympathy and affection towards her but not from the change in his fundamental attitude towards her. There is something that intervenes between his understanding of his aunt and his conclusion about her. It is this framework of the distinction between rationality and irrationality, that intervenes between his thinking about his aunt and his experience about her. This framework thus denies him access to his own experience about his aunt.

Basically, throughout the novel Raman's comments about people and incidents happening around him do not come from his own experience. Rather they are guided by the framework of rationality and irrationality as explicated in the discussion of the instances stated above. Since he looks at the people and the incidents taking place around him with this framework, he appears to be a bundle of contradictions. The novel thus provides a significant space to explore and examine the interplay and dynamics of the framework of rationality and irrationality and how it can impact one's experience of life.

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