

Joseph Campbell's Monomyth and the Evolution of the Protagonist in R.**K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*****Dr. Prashant Luthra**

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan's fascination for mythology is evident from the way he has gelled myth with contemporary subjects. Narayan's preoccupation with mythology led him to re-tell epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and intersperse the stories of gods and demons in his novels and short stories to reach out to his audience at a deeper level. The paper attempts to trace the shades of monomyth in R. K. Narayan's novel *The Bachelor of Arts*. Monomyth is a term coined by Joseph Campbell in his book "*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*" in which he delineates the archetypal journey of the heroic protagonist. He finds this journey common in the myths and stories across cultures and eras. This article explores the monomyth journey of Chandran, the central character in Narayan's novel, discussing each stage of the hero's journey and elucidating on the protagonist's transformation.

Keywords: Monomyth, Mythology, Fiction, Myth, Hero, Self-transformation

Introduction:

Joseph Campbell intricately outlines the odyssey of a heroic protagonist; whose transformative journey culminates in a return home. He delineates distinct stages in this expedition, which he finds in myths, legends, and works of literature across various cultures and times. According to him, the journey begins with the story of birth and childhood which decides the nature of the hero's monomyth cycle. Then some events and circumstances lead the hero to undertake an adventure either out of will or reluctantly. Eventually, the hero gets help or protection from a father figure, a wizard, a wise old man, a dwarf, a godmother, etc. These helping hands provide the hero with the required talisman or weapon for his protection. The hero must follow an ordeal to transition from the familiar world to that of adventure and eventually pass through a series of tests including violent encounters with ferocious entities like monsters, warriors, sorcerers, etc. He may be accompanied by a loyal companion who

can be a supernatural helper. The final battle in that adventure results in the culmination of the journey. Then the return begins either in the form of a hasty flight to avoid retaliation from the angered enemy or a peaceful one if there is no violent reaction. The return happens in the form of awakening, resurrection, or rebirth, and finally, the fruit of that adventure is enjoyed in the real world which can be an object, knowledge, or blessing. The hero bestows the gains of his adventure to his fellow beings.

Narayan's preoccupation with myths is primarily to explore the illustrated moral and spiritual truths. Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* asserts, "Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind... Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth." (3) In his *God, Demons and others* Narayan seems to endorse Campbell's views and says, "Everything is interrelated. Stories, scriptures, ethics, philosophy, grammar, astrology, astronomy, semantics, mysticism, and moral codes-- each forms part and parcel of a total life and is indispensable for the attainment of a four-square understanding of existence. Literature is not a branch of study to be placed in a separate compartment, for the edification only of scholars, but a comprehensive and artistic medium of expression to benefit the literate and the illiterate alike." (4) The mythological influence subtly permeates Narayan's novels, adding depth and richness to his storytelling. In certain novels, Narayan's protagonists embark on transformative journeys, returning imbued with wisdom and sagacity. These journeys reveal shades of Campbell's monomythic pattern. Chandran, the main protagonist from R. K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*, journeys from an innocent, carefree young man to a responsible and mature adult. The novel, set in the British Era, highlights the challenges and aspirations of the Indian youth. If we consider Narayan's total body of work we can find a journey of the protagonist from childhood as in *Swami and Friends*, youth in *The Bachelor of Arts*, and an adult in the subsequent novels like *The English Teacher*, etc. Susan and N Ram observe a, "...moving on from *Swami's* evocation of childhood to the world of undergraduates and young adulthood." (187) However, the intent of this article is to study only *The Bachelor of Arts*.

The Evolutionary Journey of the Protagonist

The world conceived by Narayan is a world of ordinariness where life exists in its true nature devoid of any fantastic details. His characters are mere humans just like us which can easily be identified with by his readers and they grow emotionally and spiritually following a destined course of life.

Chandran too resonates with ordinary individuals in terms of his experiences, aspirations, and struggles. Like any other young man of his age, he too aspires for a good education and a secure job for a better future. Typical of a young man, Chandran carries a wavering mind having a lack of concentration and a disciplined approach to life. In many ways, he cannot be called an ideal youth as he exemplifies the distorted values of growing up. His opinionated and rebellious disposition prompts him to disobey his parents marking the beginning of his fall. His initial struggle with academics, relationships, and societal pressures in the form of expectations is typically faced by common young men of the age.

Chandran's infatuation for Malathi marks an important milestone in his life. This one-sided love eventually drives him to be more responsible for his studies and profession. His romantic inclinations and passion-driven pursuit of Malathi leading to heartbreak are typical of an ordinary young man's romantic fantasies. He, like many other typical Indian males, struggles with societal norms and expectations. He feels pressure to fit in both in his academic endeavours and in his personal life. The restrictions placed on him, which are identical to those faced by ordinary individuals, highlight the conflict between his own objectives and social expectations.

The call to adventure comes to Chandran in the form of his continual disappointments in the fields of academics and love life. As Biswal observes, "In the first pages of this novel it is all happy, smooth going life for Chandran. But afterwards the world becomes increasingly hostile to him. His adolescent yearnings for Malathi and his emotional outbursts are dismissed by a reticent, realistic world." (61) Chandran's growing dissatisfaction with the materialistic pursuits of life and his failed pursuit of Malathi led to his disillusionment. The aftermath of the broken relationship resulted in emotional turmoil and a belief in the transient nature of human relationships.

This may not be a typical monomythical reason to take up a heroic adventure, however, it definitely marked a transition in Chandran's approach toward life as Campbell puts it "This first stage of the mythological journey—which we have designated the "call to adventure"—signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown." (53) In other words, it can be said that the disillusionment led him to take a flight from the realities of life into an unfamiliar world of wanderings.

Although he did not consciously refuse this call for the adventure, however, his undisciplined ways and wrong influences were unconsciously stopping him from taking up any adventure for transformation as it demanded stepping out of his comfort zone to overcome the confusion and disorder of his life. M. K. Naik comments, "Chandran's capacity for self-deception matches his self-centredness... he wakes up to the fact that he has already wasted half of the college year without studying much and suddenly makes pious resolutions..." (12) Campbell explains, "Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture," the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved." (54) Chandran's initial Western influence, the association with Ramu, adopting shortcuts for achievement, ignoring his parent's advice, shirking from obligations, temperament issues, and insincerities for positive resolutions have been the primary hurdles in taking the self-transformational journey.

The archetypal hero once accepts the call, meets the guardian angels who provide him with the necessary guidance and protection. As Campbell mentions, "For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass." (63) Chandran too gets directions from the wise old men or better souls. The initial guidance comes from his father in the form of criticism and cautions which were ruthlessly ignored and bypassed owing to the dictates of the mind and external influences. His father and his teachers constantly show their concern for Chandran. His parent's love and guidance have an embalming effect on Chandran's disappointments in life. Uma Parameswaran states, "Chandran's father in *The Bachelor of Arts* belongs to an earlier and more undemonstrative generation; he says nothing very effusive when Chandran returns

just as he said nothing when Chandran ran away, but he ages in those eight months.” (75) Like other Narayan’s devoted fathers His father remarks when Chandran comes home late, “‘Your plan of study not come into force yet?’ That question hurt Chandran’s conscience” (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 30) These factors prompted him to discipline his life. “This was a sop to his clamouring conscience. He thought now he would be able to get up a four-thirty on the following morning and begin his whirlwind program of study. But man can only propose. He was destined to throw away two more mornings.” (39) His father teaches him a lesson on patience. He says, “Look here, you will never be qualified to many unless you cultivate a lot of patience. It is the only power that you will be allowed to exercise when you are married.” (80) In this manner, the mentoring does take place encouraging Chandran to reorganise his life. Driesen, commenting on Chandran’s father, says, “He presents in his restraint, tact, and cautiousness, a study in maturity that offers a marked and effective contrast to the youthful impatience and impetuosity of his son.” (20) This description matches that of Campbell’s delineation of the wise old man who comes to the rescue of the Hero in times of imperilment.

Chandran steps out of home, his comfort zone, when he insists on being sent to Madras for a change. Thus crossing the threshold, he was ready to face the heat of the world set to impart its harsh lessons to him.

Chandran, under educational pressure and societal expectancies, battles to pass his exams, a metaphorical exam representing the societal norms and expectations suppressing the modern youth. This task tests his resilience and strength to set the stage for his personal transformation. His inability to understand the difference between love and infatuation leads to heartbreak and disillusionment. This emotional turmoil becomes an essential test of his maturity and ability to handle complicated human emotions.

In the course of Chandran’s journey, he receives constant reminders from his parents about his responsibilities and a disciplined way of life. Mohan, the poet and a good friend, on the other hand, is more focused and mature in comparison to Chandran. His imperfections dissuade him from emulating the people who could be his role models.

Chandran comes across people like Ramu and Kailas in the novel, who attempt to deviate him from the right path, however, his strong family values save him from the mental slavery of Kailas. “He had escaped from Kailas. This was the first time he had been so close to a man in drink; this was the first time he had stood at the portals of a prostitute’s house. He was thoroughly terrified.” (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 101) Thus these distractions have been the metaphorical enemies in the life of Chandran, unlike the enemies of a mythological hero.

Chandrans short stint as a sanyasi takes him on an unknown journey where he has no clues of the dangers or gains involved. Like Swaminathan, Chandran too steps out of his personal space entering into a realm of wilderness into the unknown territories which finally could possibly lead to some kind of emotional churning hinting at some bigger ordeals to come.

The Supreme Ordeal can be a dangerous physical test or a deep internal crisis that a hero has to face in his journey of life. For Chandran, the sanyasi episode is more a psychological ordeal than a physical one, which, for him, is “The only thing possible; short of committing suicide.” (102) As per monomyth only by some kind of “death”—a metaphorical resurrection—can the Hero be reborn giving him the added power or insight he requires to accomplish his objectives or reach the end of his journey. Chandran tells Raghvan, the barber, ‘My heart is dead, Raghvan. I have lost everybody I love in this world, Raghvan’.

(105) At this point, Chandran completely renounces the world of material comfort and all that he risks everything he values in life. Venkatachari observes, “What follows such a critical event is the ordeal of consciousness on gradual awakening on the part of the protagonist to the need for acceptance of the life in spite of all its trials and tribulations...” (76) Thus, the odyssey for a life free from illusions finally ends up as a return to reality.

In this stage, the Hero’s journey and all its allied challenges transform him into a better human being, and is rewarded with this fruit after overcoming all his adversaries in the course of his journey. The newly gained clarity helps Chandran fight his inner enemies such as his insecurities, false ego, impractical desires, and other inner demons that cloud his judgment. “With an iron will he chased away distracting illusions, and conscientiously avoided hysterics, with the care of one walking on a tightrope. He decided not to give his mind a moment of freedom. All the mischief started there.” (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 123) Thus his journey symbolizes an archetypal battle between darkness and light.

In Campbell’s theory, the reward comes in the form of power, greater knowledge and insight, or even peace with a close friend. After earning these rewards, he must undertake his return journey. However, in the case of Chandran, the reward comes in the form of the realization of his mistakes, maturity, and worldly wisdom. On the contrary, Critics like M. K. Naik call it a mere shift from one form of self-deception to another. He remarks, “In his newly compiled grammar of cynicism, friendship becomes a meaningless expression.” (13) He further says, “The bubble of this short-lived cynicism is rather too easily pricked the moment Chandran sets his eyes on young Susila.”(13) Even if we consider it as a shift as observed by Naik, it undeniably represents a positive and encouraging pursuit for change.

After defeating his inner enemies and finally overcoming his inner challenges in the form of illusions, Chandran finds “his new philosophy, which followed the devastating discovery that Love and Friendship were the veriest illusions. He explained that people married because their sexual appetite had to be satisfied and there must be somebody to manage the house. There is nothing deeper than that in any man and woman relationship.” (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 123)

Maturity dawns upon him and “Chandran settled down to a life of quiet and sobriety. He felt that his greatest striving ought to be for a life freed from distracting illusions and hysterics.” (123) Chandran after returning back from his expedition, starts realizing that he has wasted his time and at that, his father assures him saying, “It is no waste... You have been reading and getting to know people and life and so on. Don’t worry.” (125) Chandran starts realising the value of parents’ support and guidance. He asserts, “ I have no business to hustle and harass my father. He has every right to wait and delay. If I am destined to get the agency, I shall get it; if not, I shall get it for all the hustling.” (129) This is indeed a new Chandran looking at his parents with a fresh and enlightened perspective.

The elixir comes in the form of worldly wisdom as he realizes “...going to England will only mean a lot of expense...Chandran went on developing exquisitely the theme of *The Messenger* agency. He saw in it a beautiful vision of an independent life full of profit and leisure.” (127) Creativity comes with clarity of mind and discipline. This is what happens to Chandran the way he conceives and executes his business ideas.

Conclusion

Unlike the monomythical rewards in the form of power, a key to a conundrum, an insight, or even reconciliation with an ally, *The Bachelor of Arts* offers rewards in the form of Chandran's transformation into a wiser and responsible adult from a young man who lacked maturity and responsibility. Ranga Rao aptly captures the essence of the Hindu way of life and comments, "While the end of the existential cycle is Self-realization, the Hindu believes that...Life is a worthy end: the journey has equal importance." (37) He further says, "Life is a preparation, a progressive passage, a graduation, starting with the very first stage, to attain the ultimate goal of complete human experience, of Self-realization." (38) Chandran's personality changes significantly. He develops emotional maturity and an understanding of the complexities of human relationships and life. The story follows his development as he overcomes a variety of challenges and picks up important life lessons in the process.

On further exploration, we may find that a similar study can also be attempted on other characters of Narayan like in *Swami and Friends*, Swaminathan's adventures and experiences that lead him to self-realization, albeit in a more innocent and youthful manner. Raju in *The Guide*, starts as a tour guide and through a series of events, embarks on a spiritual and self-realization journey. Maragayya, in *The Financial Expert*, obsessed with money, explores the consequences of his obsession and leads him to a deeper understanding of life and happiness. Srinivas in *The World of Nagraj* undergoes a transformation as he navigates the complexities of life, ultimately leading him to self-discovery. Velan, in *The Vendor of Sweets*, experiences a transformation as he re-evaluates his life and priorities, leading to a realization of his own identity and purpose. Finally, R. K. Narayan himself in his autobiographical work, *My Days* explores his own journey of personal loss and struggles including the moments of self-realisation and personal growth as a writer and a human being. While the characters' journey in Narayan's novels may not precisely echo Campbell's mythical odyssey outlined in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, it can be explored with subtlety and nuance, offering opportunities for creative and imaginative study.

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