

Breaking Patriarchal Norms: A Feminist Reading of Daisy in 'The Painter of Signs'

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Abstract

This paper makes an analysis of the character Daisy in R.K. Narayan's novel "The Painter of Signs" through which it examines how Daisy challenges and overthrows the patriarchal norms of the Indian society. The paper illustrates that Daisy represents feminist consciousness to bring to the fore the traditional gender roles and expectations. Her pursuit of education, career ambitions, advocacy for family planning, and rejection of conventional marriage norms position her as a unique feminist figure who asserts a voice of independence. By contrasting Daisy with other female characters and analyzing her interactions with male characters, particularly the protagonist Raman, the paper demonstrates how Narayan uses Daisy to interrogate and destabilize the patriarchal set up. The research contributes to feminist readings of Narayan's work to reveal the desire to resist the social system haunting feminist dignity.

Keywords: feminism, patriarchy, gender, social norms, dignity

1. Introduction

R.K. Narayan's novel "The Painter of Signs" is set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi and revolves around the romance between Raman, a sign painter, and Daisy, a family planning advocate. The novel is set against the backdrop of India's family planning initiatives in the 1970s, a period of social change and modernization. Daisy, as a passionate advocate for family planning and women's reproductive rights, embodies this spirit of progress and reform. However, her character goes beyond just her professional role to question fundamental assumptions about women's place in society.

This paper will examine how Daisy breaks patriarchal norms through her pursuit of education and career, her views on marriage and relationships, her assertive personality, and her dedication to her work. It will analyze her interactions with other characters, particularly Raman, to demonstrate how she resists being confined to conventional female roles. By focusing on Daisy, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Narayan's engagement with gender issues and social reform in his works.

2. Literature Review

This analysis is based on feminist literary theory, which examines literature from the perspective of women's experiences and patriarchal assumptions and power structures.

Specifically, it draws on postcolonial feminist approaches that consider the intersections of gender, race, and colonialism in literature from formerly colonized nations (Mohanty, 2003). The paper employs the concept of female agency, which refers to women's capacity to make independent choices and act autonomously despite societal constraints (McNay, 2000). It also utilizes the idea of subversion of patriarchal norms, analyzing how female characters resist or undermine established gender roles and expectations (Butler, 1990). The critics like Nabar (1995) and Shirwadkar (1998) have examined how Indian women writers depict female characters who challenge patriarchal structures. The literary framework also incorporates concepts from postcolonial theory, particularly the idea of hybridity and the negotiation of traditional and modern values in postcolonial societies (Bhabha, 1994). This aspect poses Daisy's character within the context of a changing India grappling with questions of modernization and cultural identity.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, text-based approach, conducting a close reading and critical analysis of "The Painter of Signs" with a focus on the character of Daisy. The primary method is textual analysis, examining the novel's language, characterization, dialogue, and narrative structure to interpret Daisy's actions, thoughts, and interactions with other characters.

The analysis is supplemented by a review of secondary literature, including critical essays and scholarly articles on Narayan's work, feminist readings of Indian literature, and broader feminist and postcolonial theory. The paper also employs a comparative approach, contrasting Daisy with other female characters in the novel. This helps highlight the distinctive aspects of Daisy's characterization and her role in challenging patriarchal norms.

4. Daisy's Education and Career: Challenging Traditional Roles

One of the most significant ways in which Daisy breaks patriarchal norms is through her pursuit of education and a professional career. In 1970s India, while women's education was increasingly accepted, there were still strong social expectations for women to prioritize marriage and family over career ambitions. Daisy's dedication to her studies and her chosen field of family planning advocacy represents a departure from these traditional expectations. Narayan provides glimpses of Daisy's educational background, revealing that she has pursued higher studies and professional training. Daisy has received specialized training in family planning and public health, equipping her with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

Daisy's choice of career is particularly significant. As a family planning advocate, she works in a field that directly challenges patriarchal control over women's bodies and reproductive choices. Her work involves educating women about contraception and encouraging smaller families, ideas that were often met with resistance in traditional Indian society. In this role, Daisy is an agent of social change, working to empower other women and challenge established cultural norms.

Moreover, Daisy's dedication to her career is an instance of her uncommon attribute that contradicts the usual domestic responsibilities of a woman in general. She travels extensively for her work, often to remote villages, demonstrating a level of independence and mobility

unusual for women of her time. When Raman expresses concern about her strenuous work and offers to help she says ‘ Well, Well, I can manage it; I have always managed these things myself.’ (Narayan, 1977,p.90) . This confidence and self-reliance further exhibits her break from traditional female roles.

Daisy's career also gives her financial independence, another key aspect of her autonomy. Unlike many women of her generation who were economically dependent on male family members, Daisy earns her own living and manages her own finances. This economic self-sufficiency is crucial to her ability to make independent choices and resist societal pressures. Through Daisy's educational and professional achievements, Narayan presents a character who finds fulfillment and purpose in her work, challenging the notion that a woman's primary role should be as a wife and mother. Daisy's career is not portrayed as a temporary phase before marriage, but as a central part of her identity and a lifelong commitment.

However, it's important to note that Narayan doesn't present Daisy's choice as without challenges. She faces skepticism and resistance from conservative elements in society, particularly when promoting family planning in rural areas. These obstacles highlight the force of the long standing patriarchal norms and the difficulty of effecting social change. Yet Daisy's persistence in the face of these challenges further emphasizes her strength and commitment to her principles.

5. Daisy's Views on Marriage and Relationships

Daisy's approach to marriage and romantic relationships represents another significant way in which she challenges patriarchal norms. In a society where arranged marriages were still the norm and women were expected to emphasize marriage and family, Daisy's views are strikingly unconventional.

When Raman takes an effort to have physical touch with Daisy , he is severely humiliated as evident in these lines –

‘ He plucked up enough courage to stretch his hand and pat her comfortably. But the moment such a contact was established, she pushed off his hand unceremoniously.

‘ She glared at him for a second hissing, ‘Taking advantage ! You will learn your lesson like others who have learnt their lessons . I’ll see that you go to jail for this. I’ll tell the police the first thing.’ (Narayan, 1977,p.101)

Even in her early days Daisy is abhorrent to the conventional idea of marriage and when there is a marriage proposal she gives a rash reply saying ‘ I’d not allow anyone to inspect me as a bride and that I’d rather do the inspection of the groom.’ (Narayan, 1977,p.130). As a family planning advocate, she is a strong proponent of small families and even considers the idea of remaining childless. This stance directly contradicts the cultural emphasis on motherhood as a woman's primary role and duty. It is also evident when the principle of daisy is reflected in these lines -

‘Daisy had laid down two conditions before accepting his proposal. 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.

Furthermore, Daisy's approach to her relationship with Raman challenges traditional gender dynamics. She is often the one who takes initiative and makes decisions, rather than

passively following Raman's lead. For instance, it is Daisy who imposes her will upon Raman without meekly following him and such attitude apparent in her view – 'Long ago I broke away from the routine of a woman's life. There are millions of women who go through it happily. I am not one of them. I have planned for myself a different kind of life. I have a well-defined purpose from which I will not swerve. I gave my word to the Reverend that I would not change my ideas. 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 ...' (Narayan, 1976,p.158).

Daisy's insistence on equality and partnership in her relationship with Raman is another way she breaks from traditional norms. She expects Raman to respect her work and her need for independence, and she's not afraid to assert herself when she feels he's overstepping. When Raman becomes possessive or tries to dictate her actions, Daisy firmly puts him in his place, reminding him that she is her own person with her own goals and desires.

Through Daisy's unconventional views on marriage and relationships, Narayan evaluates the patriarchal structures that limit women's choices and autonomy within marriage. He presents a character who demands equality and partnership, challenging the notion of male dominance in relationships. Daisy's stance on marriage serves as a commentary on broader social issues, particularly the need for family planning in a rapidly growing population.

However, it's worth noting that Daisy's views are not presented without complexity. Her staunch independence sometimes creates tension in her relationship with Raman, and there are moments when she struggles with balancing her personal desires with societal expectations. This uncommon portrayal adds depth to her character and highlights the challenges faced by women who choose to defy conventional norms.

6. Daisy's Assertive Personality and Independence

Daisy's assertive personality and fierce independence are central to her character and play a crucial role in her rebellion against patriarchal norms. In a society where women were often expected to be submissive and dependent on men, Daisy stands out as a strong-willed and self-reliant individual.

From her first appearance in the novel, Daisy is portrayed as confident and articulate. When she enters Raman's shop to commission a sign, she speaks with authority and clarity about her requirements. This initial impression sets the tone for Daisy's character throughout the novel.

Daisy's assertiveness is particularly evident in her professional life. She navigates male-dominated spaces with confidence, whether dealing with government officials or addressing village gatherings.

This courage and determination in the face of opposition challenge the stereotype of the passive, acquiescent Indian woman.

Moreover, Daisy's independence is a key aspect of her character that defies patriarchal expectations. She lives alone, manages her own finances, and makes her own decisions without seeking approval from male authority figures. This level of autonomy was unusual for women in 1970s India, particularly in smaller towns like the fictional Malgudi. Daisy's

independence extends to her personal life as well. She is not swayed by societal pressure to get married or have children, instead choosing to focus on her career and personal growth. Daisy's assertiveness and independence are also evident in her interactions with Raman. She consistently asserts her boundaries and expectations in their relationship, refusing to conform to traditional gender roles. When Raman attempts to be protective or possessive, Daisy firmly reminds him of her autonomy. For instance, when he expresses concern about her traveling alone for work, she responds, "I've managed all these years. I can take care of myself" (Narayan, 1976, p. 79).

Furthermore, Daisy's decision-making process throughout the novel demonstrates her independent thinking. She carefully considers her options and makes choices based on her own judgment, rather than deferring to others' opinions or societal expectations. This is particularly evident in her approach to her relationship with Raman. She enters into the relationship on her own terms and is not afraid to set conditions that suit her needs and priorities.

Narayan's portrayal of Daisy's assertiveness and independence serves as a critique of patriarchal norms that limit women's agency. Through Daisy, he presents a model of female empowerment that challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. Her character suggests that women are capable of living fulfilling lives outside the confines of marriage and domesticity, and that they can be active agents in shaping their own destinies.

However, it's important to note that Daisy's assertiveness and independence are not without consequences. She faces skepticism and sometimes hostility from more conservative elements of society. Even Raman, despite his attraction to her, sometimes struggles to fully accept her unconventional nature. These reactions highlight the deeply ingrained nature of patriarchal norms and the challenges faced by women who choose to defy them.

7. Daisy's Dedication to Her Work: Challenging the Domestic Ideal

Daisy's commitment to her work as a family planning advocate represents a significant challenge to the patriarchal ideal of women as primarily wives and mothers. In the novel, her career is not merely a job, but a vocation that gives her life meaning and purpose. This dedication to professional pursuits, often at the expense of personal relationships questions traditional expectations for women in Indian society.

Narayan portrays Daisy's work as central to her identity. She approaches her role with passion and conviction, viewing it as a mission to improve women's lives and address broader social issues. When describing her work she says, 'That's is the reason I feel strongly that sex-education must be given from the kindergarten stage. Otherwise so much ignorance and taboo –it's led to the present state of affairs. I hope you at least know that it's the easiest thing to produce a baby –'(Narayan,1977,p.86)

Daisy's dedication is evident in her willingness to travel to remote villages, often in challenging conditions, to spread her message of family planning. She shows remarkable resilience and determination in the face of resistance from conservative elements in these communities.

Moreover, Daisy's prioritization of her work over personal relationships challenges the societal expectation that women should prioritize family and domestic responsibilities. She repeatedly emphasizes that her work comes first, even as her relationship with Raman develops.

This dedication to her career also manifests in Daisy's living arrangements. She chooses to maintain her own living space, separate from Raman, to ensure she can focus on her work without distractions. This insistence on personal space and independence challenges the traditional expectation that women should merge their lives completely with their partners upon entering a relationship.

Narayan through Daisy, presents an alternative model of female fulfillment – one that derives meaning and satisfaction from professional achievement and social contribution rather than solely from marriage and motherhood.

However, Narayan also explores the tensions that arise from Daisy's prioritization of her work. Her dedication sometimes creates conflict in her relationship with Raman, who struggles to understand her level of commitment. This tension highlights the challenges faced by women who choose to prioritize their careers in a society that still largely expects women to put family first.

Furthermore, Daisy's work itself – promoting family planning and women's reproductive rights – is inherently challenging to patriarchal norms. By advocating for women's control over their own bodies and reproductive choices, Daisy is directly confronting deep-seated cultural beliefs about women's roles and the importance of large families. Her work thus becomes a form of feminist activism, seeking to empower women and challenge traditional power structures.

8. Daisy's Interactions with Male Characters: Subverting Gender Dynamics

Daisy's interactions with male characters, particularly Raman, provide a rich ground for analyzing how she subverts traditional gender dynamics. Throughout the novel, Daisy consistently challenges male authority and expectations, asserting her independence and equal status in both professional and personal contexts.

In her professional interactions, Daisy demonstrates a confidence and assertiveness that defies traditional gender roles. When dealing with people in the society, she speaks with authority and doesn't hesitate to stand her ground.

Daisy's relationship with Raman provides the most detailed exploration of her subversion of gender dynamics. From their first meeting, Daisy establishes herself as an equal, if not dominant, partner in their interactions. She is direct in her communication, clearly stating her needs and expectations. When Raman attempts to take control or make decisions for her, Daisy quickly asserts her autonomy.

Moreover, Daisy refuses to conform to the expectation that she should prioritize Raman's needs and desires over her own. She maintains her independence, continuing her work and travel even when Raman expresses discomfort. Daisy also subverts gender dynamics in her interactions with other male characters. She demonstrates authority and confidence, challenging their preconceptions about women's roles and capabilities.

Through these interactions, Narayan has an eye upon the traditional gender hierarchies and presents a model of more equal relationships. Daisy's behavior suggests that women can be equal, if not leading, partners in both professional and personal contexts. Her refusal to conform to expected female behaviors – being submissive, prioritizing a man's needs, seeking male protection – serves as a powerful challenge to patriarchal norms.

However, it's important to note that Daisy's subversion of gender dynamics is not without consequences. Her assertiveness sometimes creates tension and conflict, particularly with Raman, who struggles to fully accept her unconventional approach to their relationship. This tension highlights the deeply ingrained nature of traditional gender roles and the challenges faced by those who seek to change them.

9. Contrasting Daisy with Other Female Characters

To fully appreciate how Daisy breaks patriarchal norms, it is inevitable to contrast her with other female characters in the novel. Through these comparisons, Narayan highlights the unconventional nature of Daisy's character and the extent to which she deviates from traditional female roles in Indian society.

The most significant contrast is between Daisy and Raman's grandmother. The grandmother represents traditional Indian womanhood – she is devoted to her family, deeply religious, and largely confined to the domestic sphere. Her life revolves around household duties and religious observances. In contrast, Daisy's life is focused on her career and social mission. While the grandmother's world is limited to the home and temple, Daisy travels widely and engages with a broad cross-section of society.

The novel also presents brief glimpses of other women in Malgudi – neighbors, relatives, and women Daisy encounters in her work. Many of these women are portrayed as being bound by traditional expectations, focused on marriage and family, and often lacking education or independence. Daisy stands out among them as educated, career-oriented, and fiercely independent.

Even in her professional context, Daisy is contrasted with other women working in family planning. While these women are also challenging norms by working outside the home, Daisy's level of dedication and her radical views on marriage and childbearing set her apart. She is described as being more passionate and committed than her colleagues, willing to go to greater lengths to achieve her goals.

Through these contrasts, Narayan emphasizes Daisy's unique position as a woman breaking free from patriarchal constraints. She represents a new kind of Indian woman – educated, career-driven, and unwilling to be limited by traditional gender roles. By juxtaposing Daisy with more conventional female characters, Narayan highlights both the progress that has been made in women's rights and the challenges that remain. However, it's important to note that Narayan doesn't present this contrast as a simple dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'modern' women.

10. Daisy as a Symbol of Social Change

Beyond her individual characterization, Daisy serves as a powerful symbol of social change in the novel. Through her, Narayan explores the broader shifts occurring in Indian society in the post-independence era, particularly regarding women's roles and rights.

Daisy's work in family planning is itself symbolic of a changing India. The novel is set against the backdrop of India's efforts to control its rapidly growing population, a key concern in the country's modernization efforts. By making Daisy a passionate advocate for family planning, Narayan positions her at the forefront of social reform. Her work represents a challenge to traditional views on family size and women's reproductive rights, symbolizing a move towards a more modern, scientifically-informed approach to these issues.

Moreover, Daisy's education and career symbolize the increasing opportunities becoming available to women in post-independence India. Her character reflects the gradual opening up of public and professional spaces to women, challenging the traditional confinement of women to domestic roles. As Daisy moves confidently through various social contexts – from government offices to village gatherings – she represents the expanding horizons for women in Indian society.

Daisy's views on marriage and relationships also symbolize changing attitudes towards these institutions. Her insistence on equality in her relationship with Raman and her consideration of remaining unmarried or childless represent a challenge to traditional notions of marriage and family. Furthermore, Daisy's character symbolizes the clash between tradition and modernity that characterized much of Indian society in the post-independence period. Her confident embrace of modern ideas and lifestyle choices often comes into conflict with more traditional elements of society, represented by characters like Raman's grandmother or conservative villagers. This conflict embodies the broader societal struggles as India sought to modernize while maintaining its cultural identity.

Daisy's impact on other characters, particularly Raman, also symbolizes the transformative potential of these social changes. Raman's evolving views on women's roles and his gradual acceptance of Daisy's unconventional lifestyle represent the slow but significant shifts occurring in societal attitudes.

However, the challenges Daisy faces – from community resistance to her family planning message to Raman's struggles to fully accept her independence – symbolize the obstacles to social change. Through these conflicts, Narayan acknowledges that progress is not a careless attempt rather a complex process involving negotiation and sometimes confrontation.

By presenting Daisy as a symbol of social change, Narayan goes beyond individual characterization to comment on broader societal shifts. He uses her character to explore the complexities of modernization in post-independence India, particularly as they relate to women's rights and roles. Daisy becomes an embodiment of the potential for change, while also highlighting the challenges inherent in breaking long-standing societal norms.

William Welsh rightly observes 'Daisy is a peculiarly modern young woman for whom the cult of independent individuality is the supreme value in life. (Welsh, p.161)

11. Conclusion

Through the character of Daisy in "The Painter of Signs," R.K. Narayan presents a powerful force of patriarchal norms in Indian society. Daisy emerges to the forefront to challenges

traditional expectations for women through her education, career choices, views on marriage and relationships, assertive personality, and dedication to her work.

Daisy's pursuit of higher education and her commitment to a professional career in family planning advocacy represent a significant departure from traditional roles that limited women to the domestic sphere. Her choice to prioritize her work over marriage and family directly confronts societal expectations about women's primary roles as wives and mothers.

Daisy's assertive personality and fierce independence further underscore her break from patriarchal norms. She navigates male-dominated spaces with confidence, makes decisions autonomously, and refuses to be limited by societal expectations of female behaviour.

Through contrasts with other female characters and her symbolic role as an agent of social change, Daisy's character serves to highlight both the progress and the ongoing challenges in women's rights and roles in post-independence India. She represents the possibilities opening up for women in education and professional life, while also embodying the tensions between tradition and modernity that characterized this period of Indian history.

Narayan's portrayal of Daisy, including the challenges she faces and the complexities of her character, prevents her from becoming a one-dimensional symbol of female empowerment. Instead, she emerges as a complex, realistic character navigating the difficulties of breaking societal norms.

This analysis contributes to feminist readings of Narayan's work, highlighting his engagement with issues of gender and social reform.. By creating a character like Daisy, Narayan demonstrates the potential for male authors to construct empowered female characters that challenge patriarchal structures.

Future research could further explore how Daisy's character fits into the broader context of feminist figures in Indian literature, both by male and female authors. Additionally, comparative studies examining Daisy alongside female characters in Narayan's other works could provide insights into the evolution of his portrayal of women throughout his career.

In conclusion, through the character of Daisy in "The Painter of Signs," Narayan offers a compelling exploration of how individuals can challenge and subvert the humiliating patriarchal norms. Daisy stands as a powerful example of female agency and independence, embodying the potential for social change while also highlighting the ongoing struggles in achieving gender equality.

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