

“*The Magic Idyll of Antiquated India*”:
Patriarchal Nationalism in
R. K. Narayan’s Fiction

HARVEEN MANN

IN HIS 1988 collection of essays entitled *A Writer’s Nightmare*, R. K. Narayan speaks out against a politically aware, historically rooted, and culturally pertinent critique of literature, indicating his preference for an aesthetic, universalist appreciation of literary works:

The man who really puts me off is the academician who cannot read a book for the pleasure (if any) or the pain (in which case he is free to throw it out of the window). But this man will not read a book without an air of biting into it. I prefer a reader who picks up a book casually. I write a story or a sketch primarily because it is my habit and profession and I enjoy doing it. I’m not out to enlighten the world or improve it. But the academic man views a book only as raw material for a thesis or seminar paper, hunts for hidden meanings, social implications, “commitments” and “concerns,” of the “Nation’s ethos.” (“The Writerly Life” 200)

In another collection of essays, entitled *A Story-Teller’s World* (1989), Narayan underlines his antipathy to what he describes as “polemics and tract-writing” rather than “story-telling.” In contrast to what he deems to be politicized writing, he affirms his own commitment to reproducing in his works the India of cultural and also narrative tradition, and to following in the line of “all imaginative writing in India,” which, he claims, “has had its origin in the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the ten-thousand-year-old epics of India” (“The Problem of the Indian Writer” 14-15).

Cognizant of the slippage between Narayan’s two sets of comments above, between his claims of writing an apolitical fiction based upon a classical and purportedly idealist aestheticism,¹ and his subscription to a masculinist, brahminic world view and

narrative universe, I confessedly adopt the persona of the “academic man,” reading chiefly for “the pain,” to analyze two of his novels, *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and *The Painter of Signs* (1976). I not only view his books as “raw material for a . . . seminar paper” — or rather, in this instance, for a scholarly article — but, more to the point, I deliberately “hunt for [and uncover] hidden meanings, social implications, ‘commitments’ and ‘concerns,’ of the ‘Nation’s ethos.’” Such an approach, in turn, establishes the novels as engaged statements on modern Indian nationalism, particularly as it is underwritten by patriarchal religious and cultural beliefs that marginalize women. I regard the novels as products of their own historical moments of composition: *Waiting for the Mahatma*, for example, seems to me to emerge from the surviving Gandhianism and post-Independence optimism of the early- to mid-1950s, while *The Painter of Signs* emerges from the ideological disenchantment and inflexibility of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency in the mid-1970s. The novels thus represent the tensions between the differently articulated and focused nationalisms and feminisms of the two decades.² But, insofar as they also reflect Narayan’s own abiding sympathies — middle-class, Hindu upper-caste, androcentric, conservative — they end up rehearsing the dominant, gendered narrative of the Indian nation, particularly as it devolves upon the bodies and voices of the two leading female characters, Bharati in *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* respectively.³

The stories of the two novels are easily summarized. *Waiting for the Mahatma* is set during the Quit India Movement of the 1940s. Sriram, the protagonist, is drawn into the movement through his attraction to Bharati, a devotee of Mohandas Gandhi. He leaves his home, the fictional community of Malgudi, to participate in the Gandhian nationalist struggle as a sign-painter, painting the slogan “Quit India” across the countryside. But, following this period of non-violent resistance, and separated from Bharati when she courts arrest at Gandhi’s urging, he falls in with Jagadish, a follower of the more radical and militaristic leader Subhas Chandra Bose.⁴ Seduced for a time by the subversive political undertakings of Bose’s Indian National Army,

Sriram derails trains and plants bombs until he is imprisoned for his "terrorist" activities. Upon his release from prison following India's Independence, he returns to Bharati and to Gandhi's non-violent fold. Although Gandhi dies at the end of the novel, the narrative expectation is that the soon-to-be-married Sriram and Bharati and their thirty adopted children, orphans of the Partition riots, will carry on his work of reconciliation and healing in the nascent nation.

The Painter of Signs, published twenty-one years after *Waiting for the Mahatma*, moves the temporal axis to its contemporary historical moment, the mid-1970s India of Indira Gandhi's repressive political Emergency. Now, Raman, another sign-painter, pursues Daisy, a follower of Sanjay (not Mohandas) Gandhi who works to advance the latter's propagandistic and coercive national birth control movement. "We are two; let ours be two" is the slogan of this new, and less ideal(istic) India. And even though Daisy is given more narrative space in *The Painter of Signs* than is Bharati in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the novel ends with her expulsion from the scene. Unable to commit to traditionally sanctioned marriage, she chooses to pursue her career as a social worker, while Raman returns, somewhat embittered, to his pre-Daisy life in Malgudi.

As in several other of Narayan's works, the primary narratives in *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Painter of Signs* are told in the voice of a third-person narrator and focalized in the main through the perspectives of the male protagonists, Sriram and Raman. Regarded uncritically, with little attention to the structural-semiotic and rhetorical characteristics of the narratives, or to their ideological underpinnings, both texts could be used to support the critical opinion, common among both western and Indian scholars, that Narayan writes deeply traditional novels which are apolitical, universalist-humanist, and yet representatively "Indian" in their spirituality. For example, William Walsh contends that Malgudi is a metaphor not only of India, but of "everywhere": "against the background of a single place . . . the single individual engages with the one, universal problem: the effort not just to be, but to become, human" (6). As if echoing Walsh, Michael Pousse claims that "Malgudi is India and India

is the world. . . . This universal appeal comes from the author's humanism" (xiii). Syd Harrex, in his Introduction to Narayan's *A Story-Teller's World*, calls the writer's stories "Hindu in context . . . while also presenting a parable of general relevance which transcends cultural boundaries" (xi). Similarly, P.S.Sundaram notes that "the value of [Narayan's] books is more than merely sociological. The scene is Malgudi, but the play is a human not merely an Indian drama" (16). V.S.Naipaul contends that Narayan "had never been a 'political' writer, not even in the explosive 1930's," choosing instead to write about his "delight in human oddity," even though he eventually concludes that "Narayan's novels are less . . . purely social comedies . . . than religious books, at times religious fables, and intensely Hindu" (10, 13). And while some contemporary critics like Homi Bhabha, Gita Rajan, and Sadhana Puranik are increasingly given to reading Narayan not as quintessentially "Indian" but rather as an ambivalent, postcolonial writer, one who, caught between western and Indian cultures, stands, like his protagonist Raman in *The Painter of Signs*, "between myth and modernity" (Bhabha, "Brahmin" 421), they do not focus on the issue of gender as it functions in Narayan's in-between, borderline location.⁵

By problematizing Narayan's recreation of what the first group of critics quoted above regard as a transparent, liberal-humanist, "Indian" narrative, and by analyzing his dominant-nationalist perspective, I establish both *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Painter of Signs* as ideological fictions. Furthermore, by foregrounding the secondary and submerged narratives of women, which remain largely unexamined even by the second group of critics, I establish Narayan as an androcentric, brahminic writer, at the same time that I question the nationalist construction of modern India as the iconic mother, Bharat Mata. As I thus demonstrate Narayan's subscription to what Bhabha terms the "national objects of knowledge — Tradition, People, the Reason of State, High culture . . . represent[ed] . . . within a . . . narrative of historical continuity" ("Introduction" 3), I mean to point by indirection as well to those "recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies

of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge," whether they be women, ethnic minorities, popular culture, the present, or separatist movements. In other words, I mean to shift the focus of the discussion of Indian nationalist discourse generally, and of Narayan's narratives particularly, to what Bhabha describes as "the politics of difference" ("Introduction" 3).⁶

In a 1989 essay entitled "Indian Fiction Today," writer Anita Desai similarly and astutely points to the disjunction between the seamless, orthodox discourse of the realist novel in India and contemporary national instabilities, between a "narrative of historical continuity" and "the politics of difference":

That magic idyll [of antiquated India] is surely torn to shreds by today's strife, riots, and commotion. . . . The bedrock is no longer made up of the old orthodoxies of religion, caste, and family; everywhere are fissures, explosions, shatterings. . . . [But] we do not find all that many exceptions [in fiction]. . . . In . . . countless [Indian] novels . . . women perform their womanly duties (which are those of the female deities) . . . and the savior comes to earth in the form of Brahma, Siva, or Mahatma Gandhi. (208, 209)

Elsewhere, in a direct commentary on Narayan's fiction, Desai rues his tendency to create "the essential . . . India" in his writings, pointing to his neglect of the very "fissures, explosions, shatterings" that she highlights above, saying,

[I]n the 50 years that Narayan has been writing his tranquil fiction, his "rootedness" has become as unique in India as it is in the West, the traditional structure of rural existence that he celebrates having given way and collapsed irrevocably. . . . There are many of Narayan's readers who feel that his fiction does not reflect the chaos, the drift, the angst that characterizes a society in transition and that his "rootedness" is a relic of another, pastoral era now shaken and threatened beyond recovery. ("R. K. Narayan" 3)

I. Nationalist Fathers and "Dutiful" Daughters/Wives/Mothers

In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, revealingly subtitled "A Novel of Gandhi," the figure of Gandhi functions both as the "saviour" and as the chief spokesman for and embodiment of the "rootedness" that Desai articulates above. Countering William

Walsh's view that Narayan's Gandhi is a "God" apart from politics (15, 16), Richard Cronin's opinion that *Waiting for the Mahatma* depicts Gandhi as a "saint" rather than a statesman (63, 65), and also Uma Parameswaran's assertion that the novel is a failure because Narayan fails to create Gandhi as a "superman" (66), I contend that Narayan's Gandhi emerges simultaneously as the Hindu spiritual father, Bapu, and as the politicized male nationalist icon, Mahatma, especially as revealed through the secondary-level story of Bharati. Characterized by androcentric religious fables, traditional symbolism, and detached reflection generally focalized through Sriram, the narrative constructs the ideal Indian woman, in the middle-class nationalist-ideological image, as self-sacrificing, dutiful, and chaste, in order to facilitate the master discourse of Hindu, Gandhian India.

First introduced in the frame narrative on the Hindu New Year's Eve, collecting funds for Gandhi's Malgudi visit, Bharati appears even initially in the role of a potential wife for Sriram. "Pretty," "slender and young," with "steps like a dancer," she immediately attracts Sriram, who wants to ask her questions rooted in orthodox Hindu notions of caste and gender: "How old are you? What caste are you? Where is your horoscope? Are you free to marry me?" (22, 23). Soon, in response to Sriram's more mundane question, "What is your name?" (56), the reader learns Bharati's history: that her father died during Gandhi's first nationwide *satyagraha* campaign in 1920;⁷ that Gandhi, literally donning the role of Bapu (meaning "father"), appointed himself her godfather and named — or renamed — her Bharati; that she was brought up by Gandhi's local service organization, the Sevak Sangh, after her mother died; and that she has spent her early adult years attending to Gandhi's "needs," teaching people spinning, and preaching his message of nonviolent agitation against the British colonizers (58-59).⁸

Whereas the main narrative moves briskly along to tell of Sriram's discomfiture at having to meet Gandhi at Bharati's urging, it is critical for us to pause, fill in the gaps, and articulate the silences in Bharati's story. Her given name, Bharati, which means "the daughter of India," indicates not merely her gendered and hence circumscribed position as a nationalist

female offspring, but also her consanguineous relation with a Hindu "father," Bharata, the Vedic, Kshatriya prince after whom India was given its official Sanskrit name when it became an independent republic in 1950.⁹ Conversely, but in an equally regressive fashion, Bharati is represented also as the incarnation of the modern, feminized Indian nation. Repeatedly viewed as a mother-figure, whether by Sriram or Gandhi, she enacts the gendered, circumscribed script of women within Indian nationalism that critics such as Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, and Ketu Katrak have theorized so persuasively.¹⁰ On the one hand, Sriram manipulates Bharati's motherly emotions with a view to marriage: "She became tender when she found that she was talking to someone without a mother, and Sriram noticing this felt it was worthwhile being motherless and grandmother-tended" (57). On the other hand, Gandhi appoints her the mother of the orphans in his entourage. However, whereas the distance between the narrator's perspective and that of Sriram mildly ironizes Sriram's pursuit of Bharati-as-mother, Gandhi's actions are presented uncritically and transparently, with no distance between the narrator's and Narayan's own views. In subscribing to the Gandhian ideal of womanhood, then, the narrative confirms what Chatterjee describes as "the inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes" in the era of nationalism: "the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother," which, even as it freed women from the physical bounds of the home, confined them to public lives as self-sacrificing, benevolent, religious, and asexual beings (130-31).

Furthermore, as Sujata Patel points out, Gandhi, who believed that men and women have distinct qualities rooted in biological differences, not only defined the public as the male sphere and the domestic as the female sphere, but also articulated separate roles for women in the political arena: they were to be mothers, instilling national consciousness in the children; they were also to participate in special women's programs, teaching spinning during the Non-Cooperation Movement, and picketing liquor and foreign cloth shops during the Civil Disobedience Movement (378). As Ketu Katrak asserts, Gandhi's mobilization of women in his *satyagraha* movement, on

the grounds that they possessed an innate sacrificial nature and an ability to suffer silently, in fact “extended their roles as wives and mothers” and thus proved to be detrimental to the women’s struggle, particularly when it came to female sexuality, the control of women’s bodies as well as minds, and the sexual division of labor (403, 397). Thus Bharati, as mother to the orphaned children, as Sriram’s spinning teacher, and as Gandhi’s protégée, spreading his message and courting arrest, enacts a gendered role as (re)constructed by Gandhian nationalist ideology.

Moreover, as a dutiful Hindu and nationalist daughter, Bharati refuses to marry Sriram until Bapu gives his consent, choosing instead to spend several years in jail, years marked by her narrative absence in Parts III and IV of *Waiting for the Mahatma*. When she reappears in Part V, she, who had been Sriram’s “guru” in his early days in the *satyagraha* movement (93), is represented as the traditional Hindu bride — demure, obedient, dependent. Relinquishing her prerogative as Gandhi’s goddaughter, she turns in “silent appeal” to Sriram to ask for Gandhi’s permission for them to marry. “Saying nothing” herself, she stands with “bowed” head and “flushe[s] and fidget[s],” to which Gandhi responds, “Ah, that is the sign of a dutiful bride . . . Does this silence mean yes? . . . She’d be a very unbecoming bride, who spoke her mind aloud! Good, good, God bless you” (252-53). Thus does Narayan semiotically and rhetorically contain Bharati’s threat as a single, independent woman through her marriage to Sriram, even as he casts Sriram as Bharati’s intellectual and moral inferior. In addition, by embedding Bharati’s narrative within the larger frame given over primarily to Sriram’s story, and by describing her as merely instrumental in the progress of Sriram’s narrative as bildungsroman — which, in turn, parallels the narrative history of India’s coming into independence — Narayan replicates the chief contours of dominant nationalist ideology in its construction of women.

Although the narrative sometimes ironizes Sriram, chiefly by exposing the gap between what Sriram-as-focalizer sees and experiences and what the third-person narrator as narrating

subject conveys to the reader, it does so primarily to create what has come to be celebrated as a particularly Narayanesque humor and not necessarily to criticize Sriram's stance toward women. When, for example, Gandhi tells the men in his audience to abandon lustful thoughts and regard all women as their sisters and mothers, Sriram tells himself, "so many sisters and mothers. I wish they would let me speak to them. Of course I have no evil thoughts in my mind at the moment" (29-30). When Gandhi, speaking of the British, exhorts his listeners to have "love and not bitterness in their hearts," Sriram, we are told, looking at Bharati, thinks, "have no doubt that my heart is pure and without bitterness. How can I have any bitterness in my heart for a creature who looks so divine?" (32)

Even Gandhi and his preachings are sometimes questioned, but benignly, through the perspectives of other, more orthodox characters. As counters to Sriram's more naive comments quoted above, his Granny, the Municipal Chairman, a shopkeeper, and a teacher, among others, voice a more conservative resistance to Gandhi and his cause. The Chairman, for example, regrets not only that Gandhi chooses to stay in an untouchable's hut rather than at his own "Buckingham Palace"-style house, but also that Gandhi seats an urchin on the Chairman's divan: "Oh, Lord, all the world's gutters are on this boy, and he is going to leave a permanent stain on that Kashmir counterpane" (48). For Granny, Gandhi is one who "preached dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples, and who involved people in difficulties with the police" (62). The teacher believes that Indians are not ready to rule themselves as Gandhi claims (104); and the shopkeeper is devastated when he has to stop selling imported foodstuff in keeping with the teachings of the *swadeshi* movement (116-27).¹¹ But even as Gandhi's egalitarian threat (with respect to caste but not gender, it must be pointed out) to the upper-caste, middle- and upper-class segment of the population is voiced through a host of minor characters — characters that, in fact, Richard Cronin sees Narayan ideologically aligned with (65) — his position as Mahatma and "father of the nation" is maintained intact in the narrative that casts Bharati as the ideal Indian nationalist woman.

II. Negative Motherliness and the “Phallic” Woman

If *The Painter of Signs*, as Cronin points out, is a “re-writing” — both a rehearsing and a modifying — of the political narrative of *Waiting for the Mahatma* (61),¹² then it is a rewriting that effects only a negative change in its representation of the modern Indian woman. Daisy, whose very un-Indian name is bestowed upon her not by Gandhi but by a Christian missionary, is a contrast to Bharati in other ways as well. Unlike Bharati, who makes her home with other Gandhian followers, who lacks formal schooling and has been trained only in Gandhian principles, and who welcomes marriage to Sriram, Daisy, who is raised in a rural, extended family, seeks an “individuality [that] was lost in this mass existence.” Daisy leaves home because she is afraid of “losing her identity” in an arranged marriage (102), acquires a university education with the help of a missionary, and trains to be a social worker. Whereas Bharati is cast as a national mother, Daisy not only lacks motherly traits, she also actively works, in her position as a family planning official, to prevent other women from becoming mothers.

The narrative, once more focalized primarily through the leading male character, repeatedly foregrounds Daisy’s “zealotry,” “despotism,” “intensity,” “anger,” “grimness,” and unbending sense of “her mission” (47-49), as well as her negative motherliness. According to the narrator, Daisy “never patted a child or tried any baby talk. She looked at them as if to say, You had no business to arrive — you lengthen the queues, that’s all” (49); furthermore, she “was a born mentor, could not leave others alone, children had better not be born, but if born, must take their thumbs out of their mouths and avoid slouching” (64). Working for the unpopular and coercive birth control and sterilization programs spearheaded by Sanjay Gandhi as leader of the Youth Congress, Daisy shatters the stereotype of the passive, religious, traditional Indian woman-as-mother. Similar in many ways to Indira Gandhi, who emerged after the 1970s Emergency to champion, in the words of her party’s slogans, “hard work, clear vision, iron will, and strictest discipline” (Wolpert 400), Daisy is represented as rigid, authoritarian, masculinized, and unnatural. As Ashis Nandy has explained,

any Indian "woman in power" is likely to be "judged as 'castrating' and 'phallic'" (42),¹³ and this is Daisy's lot as well as Indira Gandhi's. Raman tries to defend Daisy to his aunt, the spokesperson for the orthodox, religious point of view, by describing her as "a rare type of girl, devoted to the service of people, and that is all her religion. . . . She cares not for wealth or luxury or title. . . . She is a good girl" (120). His aunt, however, disapproves of Daisy by appealing to values that Narayan reveres as well: "What is her caste? What is her history? She ran away from home! Don't you know all that?" In addition, Daisy "finds her parents intolerable! Those who are orphaned pray for parents, while this girl — "(120, 121).¹⁴ "Some maya is screening your understanding," concludes Raman's aunt, and she is correct in light of the narrative's logic, for not only is Raman in love with Daisy (rarely depicted as a positive emotion in Narayan's work), but he has also learned something of her disrespect for established practices: he has, in the words of the narrator, "caught the mannerism of Daisy herself" (120).

While the mythic references in the novel — especially those passages that refer to Krishna, the most masculinist of Hindu gods, consorting with the Gopis or milkmaids, marrying Rukmini, and addressing Arjuna (86, 128, 34, 105) — articulate the patriarchal sub-structure of the narrative, they also place Daisy outside the referential frame in that she disavows her gendered positionality in Hindu culture generally. She disrupts, therefore, not only the mythical image of the idealized woman as the self-sacrificing and loyal Sita,¹⁵ but also the modern nationalist construction of the woman as home-bound, stoic, chaste, and traditional. Ever the iconoclast, Daisy rejects the Hindu gods; subscribes to no taboos, whether dietary or sexual; and is "logical" to a fault, even in Raman's eyes (49).

It is, however, in her attitude toward marriage, that most sacrosanct of Hindu institutions, that Daisy's threat to the dominant Indian sociality and to the very foundation of Indian society is epitomized. Daisy rejects the conventional, *prajapata* marriage common even in modern India, which the father arranges, which involves a dowry, and which is performed according to brahmin rituals. Instead, she and Raman enter into a

gandharva marriage, which is usually based not upon parental consent but upon mutual agreement and love between the man and woman, does not include a dowry, and is not one of the higher forms of marriage acknowledged in the *Dharma Shastras*, the sacred Hindu lawbooks. Raman proposes the *gandharva* style of marriage, sometime after Daisy and he have become lovers, because he assumes it will suit the unorthodox Daisy. Indeed he is correct: at the extra-diegetic, frame narrative level we are told that Daisy has said that although she has “no faith in any ancient customs, she would accept [a *gandharva* marriage], since it seemed to her a sensible thing” (124).

Even so, Daisy lays down yet more conditions before accepting Raman’s proposal, conditions that link her, but only ironically, to Ganga, the wife of King Santhanu in the Mahabharata.¹⁶ Whereas Ganga tests her husband’s pledge not to displease or question her by throwing seven of her children into a river, Daisy takes a vow to remain childless. As she explains in direct discourse:

Long ago I broke away from the routine of a woman’s life. . . . I have planned for myself a different kind of life. I have a well-defined purpose from which I will not swerve. . . . 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. (124)

In response, the narrator — whose point of view here appears conterminous with Narayan’s¹⁷ — notes the “mad glint in her eyes,” which Raman, “intoxicated by her personality,” fails to mark (124-25).

Unable to contain Daisy’s sexual and social threat within the confines of traditional marriage and its conservative ideology, having created a character in excess of the Malgudian, brahminic, middle-class context, Narayan is forced finally to evict her from his narrative: before she even has time to move into Raman’s house, Daisy decides to annul the *gandharva* marriage, for she knows now that she must go to a distant village to continue her work in population control, and that she may afterwards go “elsewhere — even to Africa” (139), outside the national-cultural bounds of India itself. Consoling Raman with the thought that he “will be happy married to someone very

different . . . a proper partner" (140), she leaves him free to return to a socially sanctioned existence, for Daisy and he are unlikely to "live together in [this] Janma [or life]" (143).

As we compare Daisy to Bharati, it becomes clear that, by offering a critique of her independence, her unorthodoxy, and her feminist views, the narrative of *The Painter of Signs* does not merely rehearse so much as intensify the patriarchal nationalism underwriting the earlier novel. Whereas Bharati, the daughter of India, honors all filial pieties at the novel's end, Daisy is placed outside the sanctioned social sphere. Even though she is the symbolical offspring of an authoritarian, militant Indira Gandhi, Daisy, who is named after a non-indigenous flower, is in fact a figure foreign to the India of tradition. Moreover, by subscribing to an earlier, nationalist model of womanhood as sanctified in the image of Mother India, Narayan paradoxically proves proleptic of the equally orthodox 1980s cultural construction of the "new Indian woman." As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes in regard to the "interpellation and projection" of femaleness in contemporary Indian cultural discourse generally and in televisual discourse specifically,

the conceptual and political space occupied by women . . . is identical to that of religion, and hence representations of women and religion frequently coincide. The relationship between the two is not only homologous, but also metonymic — hence the significance of the two television serials of the epics, the Ramayana, followed by the Mahabharata, whose central female figures became symbols of "our" "national" culture. State-sponsored television, with its dual obligations in its representation of women and religion — on the one hand to acknowledging the state's constitutional commitment to equal rights (in the case of women) and to secularism (in the case of religion), and on the other hand to developing a new idiom of "nationalism," equated with a valorization of the traditional (which is preserved, precisely, in and by women and religion) — redefines the two terms flexibly. The traditional is represented as the timeless, and hence inclusive of the modern, while the modern is viewed merely as a transitional phase which disguises the permanent "essence" of timeless tradition. (134)

Insofar as Narayan's two female characters trace, either positively, in Bharati's case, or negatively, in Daisy's case, the single

trajectory of traditional-modern Indian nationalism as defined above, both characters fail, in the final analysis, to articulate a politics of resistance at the narrative level, or to enact a desirable feminist intervention at the cultural level. However, by reading against the grain to give voice to the silenced female narratives in *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Painter of Signs*, one can, to quote from Gayatri Spivak's analysis of Narayan's *The Guide* (1958), "put into the field of vision the fault lines in the self-representation of the nation, precisely in terms of the woman as object seen" ("How to Read" 145). By probing the submerged interiority of his women characters, the reader can uncover Narayan's androcentric cultural ethno-nationalism, and thereby underscore the fissures in the hegemonic nationalist text of modern India.

NOTES

- 1 Linking the emergence of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact to the "construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society," Eagleton points out that the claim of an ideal aestheticism such as Narayan's is that it attempts, in a "privileged disconnection from material determinacy," to "sever the bond between use and pleasure, necessity and desire." "The utility of objects," including literary texts, concludes Eagleton, "is the ground, not the antithesis, of our appreciation of them" (205).
- 2 For example, the immediate nation-based concerns of the 1950s included the rehabilitation of Partition refugees, the drawing up of the Indian constitution, and the development of economic five-year plans. In these and other moves toward greater consolidation, centralization, and bureaucratization of the government, women's issues were neglected to such an extent that by 1974, the authors of *Toward Equality*, the landmark report on the post-independence status of women, concluded that as a result of "disabilities and constraints on women, which stem from socio-cultural institutions . . . the majority of women are still very far from enjoying the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them by the Constitution" (359).
- 3 Reading Narayan's 1938 novel *The Dark Room* as both a national allegory in its indirect criticism of British rule and a religious ideological fiction, George notes that in the novel the author's Hindu nationalism "never solidifies into conscious intent. An exclusionary brahmin nationalism is perceived only when one reads against the grain of the narrative. Up front we have the semblance of a pure, orderly community where even Graham Greene feels at home" (128). Like George, I too "read against the grain" of Narayan's ostensibly apolitical narratives in an attempt to re-open dominant critical views of the author to a new debate focused on the issue of nationalism and feminism.
- 4 Although Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945) was initially drawn to Gandhi's nationalist struggle and served as a leader of India's youth and peasant societies (*kisan sabhas*) and president of the Congress party, he split from the Congress and formed the Forward Bloc Party in Bengal in 1938 to dedicate himself to a

more militaristic struggle for freedom. In World War II, Bose brought in his Indian National Army, made up primarily of Indian prisoners of war in South-east Asia, on the side of the Japanese and Germans, whom he deemed to be India's allies against the British. Defeated by the British in 1945, he died in an airplane crash as he was attempting to escape to Japan.

- 5 See Puranik, and Gita Rajan, "Colonial Literature."
- 6 While Partha Chatterjee establishes the exclusion of minorities as "an index of the failure of the Indian nation to effectively include within its body the whole of the demographic mass that it claims to represent" (134), Anne McClintock clearly articulates the linkage between feminist and other resistance movements, noting that "[t]he singular contribution" of Third World feminism has been "its insistence on relating feminist struggles to other liberation movements" (77).
- 7 The word *satyagraha* literally means "holding fast to the truth," but the term, as used by Gandhi, quickly came to be identified with his nonviolent, noncooperation and civil disobedience movement against British rule in India.
- 8 The sexuality underlying Gandhi's relationship with young women like Bharati, glossed over by Narayan, remains the subject of much discussion in Indian feminist and cultural studies; see, for example, Kakar.
- 9 Bharata is the name both of the Kshatriya prince, son of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, and of the ruling clan, as well as their territory.
- 10 Remarking upon the gendered circumscription of women within Indian nationalism, Spivak asserts that "the ideological construct 'India' is too deeply informed by the goddess-infested reverse sexism of the Hindu majority. As long as there is this hegemonic cultural self-representation of India as a goddess-mother (dissimulating the possibility that this mother is a slave), she will collapse under the burden of the immense expectations that such a self-representation permits" (*In Other Worlds* 244). Partha Chatterjee points out that "the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother . . . is wholly and undeniably a product of the development of a dominant middle-class culture coeval with the era of nationalism. It served to emphasize with all the force of mythological inspiration what had in any case become a dominant characteristic of femininity in the new construct of 'woman' standing as a sign for 'nation,' namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on. . . . In [addition], the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home" (130-31). See also Katrak's essay.
- 11 The word *swadeshi*, meaning "of our own country" and referring to Indian-made goods, came to describe the early twentieth-century boycott movement against British imports, particularly cotton cloth but also including sugar, matches, glass objects, shoes, and metal goods. Later, the movement was extended to boycott British academic, legal, and governmental institutions (Wolpert 274-77).
- 12 As Cronin remarks, "Bharati becomes Daisy, Sriram becomes his near namesake Raman, and the place of Gandhi is taken by" Sanjay Gandhi, Indira Gandhi's son (66). Whereas *Waiting for the Mahatma* is "at once a comic *bildungsroman* and a religious fable of national origin," *The Painter of Signs* is a "novel about a love affair that goes wrong, and a fable about Sanjayism" (62, 71).
- 13 However, while Narayan portrays Daisy in the image of the despotic Indira Gandhi of the 1970s, he neglects to examine the paradoxical position of a powerful female in a country that marginalizes and disenfranchizes its women in uncountable ways. For an incisive reading of Mrs. Gandhi's manipulation of gender categories, see Gita Rajan, "Subversive Subaltern."

- ¹⁴ In an oft-quoted interview with Ved Mehta, Narayan claims that “[t]o be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots — both in religion and in family . . . I have these things.” He further reveals his androcentrism when he says that he “can’t write a novel without Krishna, Ganesa, Hanuman, astrologers, pundits, temples, and [in the only female referent here] devadasis, or temple prostitutes” (148, 141).
- ¹⁵ Sita, the heroine of *The Ramayana*, who accompanied her husband, Rama, to the forest during his fourteen-year exile and underwent a test by fire to prove her loyalty to him following her abduction by Ravana, is the arch feminine ideal in India even in contemporary times. In “A Secret Connivance,” Desai argues that this archetype underwrites the tropological discourse of the nation as a chaste and family-bound woman.
- ¹⁶ *The Painter of Signs* itself suggests this mythic parallel (125).
- ¹⁷ Puranik remarks that “Narayan obviously shares Raman’s view of Daisy as an over-zealous missionary” (128).

WORKS CITED

- Bhabha, Homi K. “A Brahmin in the Bazaar.” Rev. of *The Painter of Signs*. *Times Literary Supplement* 8 Apr. 1977: 421.
- . “Introduction.” *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 1-7.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.
- Cronin, Richard. *Imagining India*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1989.
- Desai, Anita. “A Secret Connivance.” *Times Literary Supplement* 14-20 Sept. 1990: 972-76.
- . “Indian Fiction Today.” *Daedalus* 118 (Fall 1989): 207-31.
- . “R. K. Narayan and the Grand Malgudi Circus.” *The Washington Post Book World* 4 Sept. 1983: 3, 9.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- George, Rosemary. *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocation and Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Harrex, Syd. Introduction. Narayan, *A Story-Teller’s World* i-xii.
- Kain, Geoffrey, ed. *R. K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1993.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Katrak, Ketu. “Indian Nationalism, Gandhian ‘Satyagraha,’ and Representation of Female Sexuality.” *Nationalisms and Sexualities*. Ed. Andrew Parker et al. New York: Routledge, 1992. 395-406.
- McClintock, Anne. “Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family.” *Feminist Review* 44 (1993): 61-80.
- Mehta, Ved. “The Train Had Just Arrived at Malgudi Station.” *John is Easy to Please*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1971. 133-71.
- Naipaul, V. S. *India: A Wounded Civilization*. New York: Vintage, 1977.
- Nandy, Ashis. *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture*. 1980. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1990.

- Narayan, R. K. *The Painter of Signs*. 1976. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.
- . *A Story-Teller's World*. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- . *Waiting for the Mahatma*. 1955. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.
- . *A Writer's Nightmare*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- Parameswaran, Uma. *A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1976.
- Patel, Sujata. "Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20 Feb. 1988: 377-87.
- Pousse, Michael. *R. K. Narayan: A Painter of Modern India*. New York: Peter Lang, 1995.
- Puranik, Sadhana Allison. "The Painter of Signs: Breaking the Frontier." *Kain* 125-39.
- Rajan, Gita. "Colonial Literature as Oppositional: R. K. Narayan's Unconscious Specular Register." *Kain* 25-36.
- . "Subversive Subaltern Identity: Indira Gandhi as the Speaking Subject." *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender of Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992. 196-222.
- Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "How to Read a 'Culturally Different' Book." *Colonial Discourse/ Postcolonial Theory*. Ed. Francis Barker *et al.* Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994. 126-50.
- . *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1987.
- Sundaram, P. S. *R. K. Narayan*. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1973.
- Toward Equality*. Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India. New Delhi: Government of India Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1974.
- Walsh, William. *R. K. Narayan*. London: Longman, 1971.
- Wolpert, Stanley. *A New History of India*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.