

# THE PAINTER OF SIGNS

R. K. Narayan

(1977)

**Overview** This novel is unusual among Narayan's fiction in that it is set in a specific time-period, when the book was written and published. That historical period is the 'Emergency' (1975-1977), when the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, suspended normal political processes and ruled by decree. Citing a threat to national security, she was also able to suspend many civil liberties and imprison political opponents and journalists. One of the most controversial of her policies during the 'Emergency' was a new family planning programme ('Hum do, Hamare do', 'We are two, we have two'). This involved forced sterilisation of men and women, and increased funding for abortions, in order to bring down the birth-rate, which it was thought (or at least said) would help in the fight against poverty.

## Story

This novel comes late in the author's career but explores many of the same issues as his earlier books from the 1950s. It focuses on the young adulthood of a drifter named Raman, who lives with his aunt in Malgudi. Raman is confused by a changing society, caught between tradition and modernity, trying to make sense of the new individualism and falling desperately in love. In brief, it is a story of two lovers trying to make sense of a changing world.

The story begins when Daisy, a young social worker, arrives in Malgudi and begins to implement the government's new family planning programme. Daisy is young, attractive and determined, almost fanatical in taking up the cause. She is passionate about spreading the news, in uprooting old prejudices and teaching the illiterate villagers about the wonders of contraception and sterilisation. She also attracts the attention of the hero, Raman, who is hired to paint signs for her. As with Sriram and Bharati in Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the protagonist is mesmerised by the energy and idealism of a woman and begins to follow her around the countryside. Like Sriram, too, he paints signs, this time signs with the slogan 'Hum do, Hamare do' ('We are two, We have two'). Much of the novel then details their slow-burning love affair. At first, Daisy is too busy to even notice, and Raman is alienated by her cold efficiency. Eventually, she succumbs to his sincerity and agrees to marry Raman, or at least to live with him, but only under the condition that she doesn't cook or bear children. Raman's aunt opposes the alliance because she does not want a westernised, not to mention atheist, woman in her house. Unable to persuade her nephew, the aunt leaves Malgudi and goes to Benares, to spend her final days in the holy city. At the end, when Raman goes to bring Daisy home, she repeats her demands, Raman is dismayed and she leaves him. For all its humour, this is a deeply sad novel.

## Themes

Science v religion As a writer of realistic novels, Narayan has chosen in this instance to explore the complex dynamic of religious India confronting the science of family planning. He did not have to invent much in order to do so, as this theme was being played out in reality when he wrote the book. However, he does invent a memorable character of Daisy through whom he dramatises the conflict. She is an enthusiastic atheist who believes that contraception and sterilisation will help combat the birth-rate. But she faces fierce opposition from many quarters, in the nonchalant Raman who laughs at her zealous attitude, in the villagers she wants to persuade and in Raman's aunt who will not countenance a 'Christian' (the equivalent of an atheist to a traditional Hindu) as a daughter-in-law. When the villagers tell Daisy that 'god gives us children,' she attempts to explain the 'facts of life.' When they tell her that barren women go to a cave, pray and then conceive within thirty days, she is shocked and fears her mission will be defeated. In the end, Narayan (and Daisy) have no final

answers, although she learns to accept the villagers' customs and beliefs without condemning them as 'stupid superstitions.' Although this acceptance does not reconcile the opposed forces of science and religion, it does represent an inner truce for Daisy.

Accommodation Throughout the novel, the wider conflict between tradition and modernity in late twentieth-century India appears to achieve accommodation. Again, as is characteristic of Narayan's fiction, this reconciliation occurs simultaneously on the national level and the personal level, one being the reflection of the other. A good example of this theme is the proposed solution to the problem of Raman's and Daisy's relationship. Raman wants to marry her, but Daisy, while not immune to feelings for him, does not want to become a traditional wife and mother. They find a middle-ground, somewhat unpredictably, in the Hindu scriptures which describe five different types of marriage. One of those five (the *gandharva* marriage) is very simple and allows a man and woman to be 'married' without any ceremony. Another example occurs after this non-marriage, when Daisy visits Raman's house to see how they will live. He shows her his aunt's old prayer room (the aunt has left for Benares) and explains that it will be her (Daisy's) room. Raman has cleared out all his aunt's statues of gods and put them in a cupboard. When Daisy questions whether this is right, Raman assures her that the gods can remain safe and secure in the cupboard. The gods remain, but locked in a cupboard, which is some kind of resolution.

Irreconcilable differences Unfortunately, for the characters, these accommodations prove to be temporary and the differences that underlie them reveal themselves to be irreconcilable. This third theme is, I believe, the central point of this novel. As a society and as individuals, we may attempt to reconcile the deep divisions within us (science v religion, tradition v modernity, rationality v emotion), but in the end we revert to type. Daisy is moved by Raman's love for her and begins to loosen her rational principles, but she finally realises that she cannot marry him even in the progressive way that they agreed. The result is that she returns to her campaign. Laxmi, on the other side of the equation, contemplated living in the same house with the 'liberated' Daisy, but in the end decides it is better to take herself off to the religious city of Benares and die there. And Raman, who never had a position or a principle, beyond his romanticism and sexual desires, finds himself once again a painter of signs in dusty old Malgudi. We all think we can act independently of our background and upbringing, Narayan appears to be saying, but we cannot escape our past.

## **Characters**

Raman Raman is the central character. He is the sign-painter of the title, who lives in Malgudi with his elderly aunt. He is thirty-years old and a college graduate but has few prospects until he meets Daisy. She hires him to paint signs for her family planning campaign, and he falls in love with her. Through his own misguided actions, confused goals and ambivalent thoughts, he manages to alienate the two female characters in his life. In the end, both Daisy and his aunt leave him.

Daisy Daisy is a 'modern' woman, a resolute individual in the 'new' India. She receives a western education at a missionary school and then becomes a public health worker with a mission to decrease India's birth rate as a method of alleviating poverty. She is determined, rational and efficient, yet she is also slowly won over by Raman's declaration of love. In the end, however, she cannot reconcile her desire for freedom with the traditional concept of love and marriage.

Laxmi Laxmi is Raman's aunt, a traditional Hindu woman, who functions as a perfect contrast to Daisy. She is the third corner of this narrative triangle, the top node that balances the tension between Daisy and Raman. She is protective of Raman and opposes his proposed 'marriage' with Daisy. In the end, rather than live in the same house with a Christian 'atheist', she leaves Malgudi and goes to Benares to die.

Lawyer One among a large cast of minor character, the lawyer is particularly odious. He is young, newly qualified and extremely pompous. He hires Raman to paint his office sign and then demands that the letters 'lean to the left' because that he considers such a slant to be auspicious for him.

Priest The priest is a very strict traditional man, who confronts Daisy during one of her visits to a village. He argues with her, telling her to let people do what they want, i.e., worship the goddess if

they are barren, and have as many children as 'God wishes.' He is irascible and rude, but actually makes a prediction (in private to Raman) that Daisy will not have a happy life, which proves accurate.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

RAMAN            Conflicted

**Character** Raman, the central character, is a thirty-year-old college graduate who works as a sign painter in Malgudi, where he lives with his aunt. Like other Narayan heroes, he is not only an orphan but also confused and contradictory, a man searching for himself. He is a jobbing painter but fancies himself as an 'artist.' He is a 'painter of signs' who does not understand what his signs say. He has a lot of books, some of them intellectual, but he rarely reads. He thinks of himself as a 'rationalist', when in reality he is driven by his fantasies and his passions, including sexual ones. He tells himself that he 'is determined to establish the Age of Reason in the world,' but he is still a traditional man whose frame of reference is Hindu mythology. He is self-centred, but he is kind and loving, both toward his aunt and later toward Daisy. He appreciates Daisy's zeal, but he can't understand why she doesn't 'take it easy sometimes' and 'let her husband do all the sweaty work so she can rest at home.'

Raman's conflicted character is a reflection of the social and political situation that Narayan observed around him. In the novelist's skilful hands, Raman's own personal confusion and dilemmas become a microcosm of the same questions being asked on a national level. Like India, he is unable to reconcile the opposing forces of tradition versus modernity, and religion versus science, that create confusion society and himself. He tries various compromises, but they all fall apart. In the end, he loses both his aunt and his lover, and is back where he started when the story began: bewildered by a changing society and unable to move forward.

**Activities** In the beginning of the story, Raman spends most of his time painting signs for various clients in Malgudi. At home, he plays the role of pampered nephew, under the protective eye of his aunt. After meeting Daisy and being hired by her, he spends his days travelling with her to villages and painting signs (with the family planning slogan) on walls there. Throughout the book, he spends a lot of time thinking about his feelings, his (mostly sexual) desires and his (entirely unachievable) goals in life.

### Illustrative moments

Conflicted Raman's deep-rooted and debilitating conflicted nature is illustrated in a comic scene when he goes to Daisy's office one day. In order to distract his 'impure' thoughts about her body and to disguise his insecurity under her gaze, he buys a pair of sunglasses. Although he wears the glasses, he really wants, of course, to see her in all her beauty. But the irony is that while the glasses work, Daisy's own matter-of-fact thinking results in the glasses being discarded so that he can view her as normal. The glasses are defective and distort his vision so that Daisy 'looks terrible.' Raman thinks that this is 'even more effective than Gandhi's ideas on purity.' But Daisy, ever the rationalist, orders him to take off the glasses, examines them and declares, 'The lenses are uneven...throw them away.' Raman's attempt to fight his sexual desire backfires.

Ambivalent Raman is ambivalent about the value of religion. His education and self-image tell him that he shouldn't believe in the gods, but his aunt and his culture tell him that he should. This ambivalence is illustrated on one of his visits with Daisy to a village. When the irascible priest tells Daisy that the gods deliver children and that barren women can pray for a child, Raman is unable to fully disagree. After hearing 'this lecture on idolatry, Daisy turns to Raman, expecting him to counter the man's arguments, but Raman remains silent.' He would like to support Daisy's ideas, but there is something deep in his nature that is receptive to a belief in supernatural beings. We know that Raman is something of a fantasist, with little or no sense of his true self, and perhaps Narayan is suggesting that he compensates for this lack of awareness with a belief in higher powers.

Sexual One of the strongest forces in Raman is sexual desire. He is not just (as both he and Daisy agree) an 'incurable romantic,' he is also driven by sexual passions. The most explicit illustration of

this trait occurs in a scene when Raman and Daisy are riding back to Malgudi in a bullock cart. It is dark, although a moon shines above them as they sit side by side. Raman's desires overwhelm him and he leaps on Daisy, intending 'to break the artificial, man-made barriers between them.' Fortunately, this clumsy attempt at what we must call 'rape' has a Narayan-esque twist. When Raman leaps, he falls on the bare, hard planks of the cart. Daisy, realising what was going on in his head, has already left the cart. What is not so humorous, is that later Raman's desire prevents him from actually understanding what he has attempted to do. He tells her that he is grateful that 'she saved him from himself,' unaware that she was, in fact, saving herself.

DAISY (Courageous)

**Character** Although Raman is the central character in this novel (he is the 'painter of signs'), Daisy is a very strong second character. In fact, she is perhaps the most memorable, and certainly the most courageous and committed, of all Narayan's female characters. She bravely opposes her Christian school's efforts to convert her and she leaves home as a young teenager because she opposes child marriage. She is also dedicated to uprooting superstition, backward beliefs and unenlightened medical practices.

The key to understanding her character is provided late in the novel, when we hear about Daisy's childhood and family home. As Narayan describes it, 'There was practically no privacy. Silence was a rare commodity. The household looked like a "madhouse", with waves of noises crashing on her ears.' Daisy yearned to be on her own, to be free of a cultural tradition, including the joint family, child marriage and idealised motherhood, that she felt would crush her. She leaves her family after being put on the marriage market in a very humiliating way, almost paraded in front of her 'buyer.' She goes to a Christian college, acquires a western education and, crucially, a western outlook. She finds her purpose in life when she becomes a public health worker and, like Gandhi, visits the countryside to spread the new message of family planning. This is how she comes to Malgudi and meets Raman, whom she hires as a painter: he accompanies her on her tour of rural villages and paints the family planning slogan on village walls. Although she is a modern, rational person, she at times shows a human touch and allows herself to express feelings that have nothing to do with her social work. She is sad after she first quarrels with Raman, she eventually responds to him sexually and even temporarily agrees to marry him. But she lays down the conditions for her marriage: she will not cook, will not bear children and will put a baby in an orphanage if one comes unexpectedly. They plan a life together, on this basis, but in the end, she withdraws from the agreement and marches on alone, dedicating her life to the rural poor.

**Activities** Daisy is an industrious person, who drives herself forward, thinking, planning and acting on her self-proclaimed goal of liberating the villagers of India from the burden of unwanted births. When she arrives in Malgudi, an unpromising backwater, she sets up an office, hires an assistant (Raman) and begins to undertake long tours of the surrounding villages. First, she makes up an itinerary, has it framed and then follows it with discipline. Accompanied by Raman, she travels by public transportation, and she sleeps on a little mat that she unrolls on the ground. She bathes in a public well and eats whatever food she is offered. She meets village headmen, priests and other local leaders, whom she engages in a discussion about contraception and sterilisation. She is always dispensing advice, medical or otherwise, and not always complex advice: don't suck your thumb, don't drink rain water, wash your hands, etc.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Courageous** Daisy's outstanding characteristic is her courage. This is illustrated in a scene narrated as a flashback. When Daisy was thirteen, her parents arranged for a prospective groom to come and meet her (an encounter often called 'inspection of the bride'). She is dressed up with fine clothes and jewellery and displayed like goods in a shop window. But, when the boy and his family arrive, she reverses the conventional roles and begins to examine him, interviewing him about his schooling, his likes and dislikes. Instead of standing demurely and prostrating at his feet, 'she strode up and down like a soldier.' When she narrates this event to Raman, she justifies her extraordinary behaviour (which humiliated her parents and outraged the boy's parents) this way: 'I felt I was losing my identity...that I was in the wrong world. I was only thirteen, but I had my own notions of what was right and what was wrong.'

**Zealous** Daisy's support for family planning is not just enthusiastic, it is zealous and similar to the absolute dedication shown by the Christian missionaries who tried (and failed) to convert her. Her near-madness is revealed in one encounter with a traditional family during one of her visits to a village. She meets a teacher, who shows some sympathy for birth control, but then she hectors him with statistics. The village population, she informs him, has risen from six to seven hundred in less than a year; the population increase of India as a whole is equivalent to the total population of Peru. Then she attacks him with rhetorical questions: 'Have you increased the number of houses in the village? Have you increased the food production, schools, medical facilities?' Here, we see Daisy not as a thinking reformer, but as an automaton, programmed to trot out facts and figures that she has memorised.

**Admirable** We, as readers, may find Daisy a cold calculating character, in contrast to Raman's exuberant romanticism, but she is at least consistent in her pursuit of freedom and admirable when she wishes the same for Raman's aunt, who stands for everything she opposes. This admirable lack of egotism is illustrated at the end of the novel. When Raman's aunt, Laxmi, decides to go to Benares to live out the final years, Raman is upset and confused because he doesn't want her to leave him. Daisy, however, understands and says, 'She has her faith, call it superstition if we must, but let her go. She has every right to choose such a life and such an end.' In this instance, we see that although she is zealous in her campaign, in her heart, Daisy does not want to control others. She wants to allow them the same freedom she demands for herself.

LAXMI (Pious)

**Character** Laxmi is Raman's elderly aunt, a typical Narayan older, conservative female relative who acts as a traditional break on the ill-judged actions of her ward. Laxmi is, above all else, a pious Hindu, who guides her life by the numerous rituals of the yearly, monthly and daily calendars. While we are not given much information about her inner life, it is clear that she loves her nephew and tries to guide him according to Hindu tradition. In fact, she lives her life for him, eating only one meal a day so that he can have more. She is very sensitive to Raman's well-being. When he becomes withdrawn (after the crude 'rape' attempt of Daisy) and refuses to work, she is deeply worried. She can also be inflexible and cruel, especially in her treatment of Daisy, whom she (mistakenly) considers to be a heathen Christian. Her prejudices are sometimes comical, as when she talks to herself about Raman's love object: 'Who is this girl named Daisy?' she asks herself. 'She's an outsider. It's not even a flower that grows in India?' It is interesting to note that while Laxmi is the polar opposite of Daisy (the traditional vs the modern woman), Laxmi shares with her nemesis a dedication to a purpose and a daily discipline. And in the end, she, like Daisy, decides to leave Raman and go her own way.

**Activities** Laxmi busies herself with many domestic chores, such as cooking and cleaning, but she also goes to the local temple and listens to a local storyteller narrate tales from Hindu mythology. She prepares herbal medicine for herself, Raman and her neighbours. She studies the astrological charts ('the stars' as she euphemistically calls them) and helps to pass on advice to her lady friends about their horoscopes. She gets up at 4:30 every morning to stand by the milkman as he pours milk into a can, watching carefully to make sure he doesn't add water to dilute the milk.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Dedicated** Laxmi is dedicated to Raman and denies herself in order that he may thrive. An illustration of this quality occurs early on in the novel, when Laxmi is in the kitchen preparing food for a meal. Narayan describes in detail how she goes about all the many steps, each of them intended to give Raman the best food she can. First, she spends a full hour picking out little stones from the unhusked rice grains prior to pounding the grains in a large wooden mortar. Then she sits down again and winnows the rice to remove the husks from the grain. She is also meticulous about taking the lid off a container of cooking oil so that it does not spoil in the extreme heat. Finally, after cooking the rice and the vegetable curry to put on top, she serves it to Raman, while she herself eats nothing.

**Disciplined** Laxmi's life is guided by astrological charts, which she follows with admirable discipline. Each hour of the day has suggested activities and actions to be avoided. Her discipline is demonstrated in an early scene, when she rises, watches the milkman fill her pan and then goes back

inside. Sitting cross-legged on the bare kitchen floor she turns over a leaf on her daily astrological calendar and reads the instructions for the new day. The advice is to avoid chili and to drink *mor* (a milk product), to worship the goddess Durga and avoid walking in a westerly direction. Her day is set.

Prejudiced As a pious Hindu and caring aunt, Laxmi is a likable character. But her charming traditional nature sometimes shows its dark side as prejudice against anything outside her narrow world. This prejudice is demonstrated in its most unpleasant terms at the end of the novel when Laxmi faces the prospect of having to share a house with Daisy. 'I won't live in the same house as a heathen,' she says to herself. 'She's a Christian, with that name, no matter what Raman says.' In other words, Daisy is not just from another caste, which would be bad enough in a daughter-in-law, but from another religion. The truth that Daisy is actually an atheist would probably be beyond the old lady's comprehension.