

THE BACHELOR OF ARTS

R. K. Narayan

(1937)

Story

The story of his novel follows the ups and downs of Chandran, in his final year of a BA in History and son of a retired judge. It might be considered a bildungsroman, or 'education novel', except that with Narayan's light touch, it becomes more comic.

The drama begins when Chandran is asked to speak on a difficult topic—'historians must be killed'—at the college debating union. Chandran makes a persuasive case and the motion is overwhelmingly passed. After this humorous opening, Chandran celebrates by going to the cinema with his friend, Ramu. Soon, Chandran establishes a History Association at the college, although his studies suffer as a result of all this extra activity. After some shenanigans with a flower-thief in his father's garden, Chandran passes his exams and receives his bachelor of arts degree.

Next stop: England, where Chandran plans to go for higher education but he falls in love with Malathi. At first, he knows nothing about her, but with the help of his friend, Mohan, a poet, he learns that she, too, is a Brahmin. So far, so good. But, alas, the horoscopes don't match and, after several attempts to circumvent the problem, the potential alliance is called off. This angers Chandran, who vents his displeasure in long tirades against the traditional Hindu system of marriage as backward and mercenary.

Chandran then discovers that Malathi is being married to another man, and he falls into a long illness. His father packs him off to Madras, to stay with his (Chandran's) uncle, but Chandran goes to stay in a lodge instead, where he meets the low-lifer, Kailas. Kailas introduces him briefly to the world of liquor and prostitutes, but Chandran escapes and later, with the encouragement of a barber who shaves his head, he becomes a long-bearded holy man at a temple. Before long, however, Chandran realises that his ascetic image is just a pretence, and he returns to his parents in Malgudi, where his father gets him a job as a newspaper reporter. There, with the help of his friend Mohan (the poet), Chandran increases the circulation of the paper and then accepts a proposal of marriage for a girl named Susila. Now, he forgets his earlier arguments against dowry and horoscopes; he marries and settles down into a quiet, middle-class family life.

Themes

Cultural identity One of the main themes of the novel is the protagonist's struggle to find his cultural identity. Chandran is similar to other central characters in a Narayan novel in that he (like Narayan himself and much of India at the time) is caught between his traditional Indian/Hindu background and the modernity of colonial culture. Chandran graduates from a missionary college and his father is a lawyer in the colonial court system. As a 'bachelor of arts', Chandran is himself a product of the colonial education system, in which he has learned to debate ridiculous questions ('all historians should be slaughtered') because it is the method and not the content that matters in English law. Chandran is painfully aware of the different cultural norms between India and Britain regarding romance and love. After seeing his professor with a young woman (maybe or maybe not his wife) in the cinema, he says, 'White fellows are born to enjoy life. Our people don't really know how to live. If a person is seen with a girl by his side, a hundred eyes stare at them and a hundred tongues comment.' Later, Chandran's happiness is destroyed the traditional Hindu system of horoscopes and he tries to escape in the colonial metropolis of Madras. He takes on the role of a holy man, becomes disgusted with the sham of it and returns home to marry and settled down. This string of incidents is

a personalised microcosm of the larger cultural assimilation and rejection that took place during colonialism.

Family A related theme is the importance of family, especially the figure of the mother, who are considered the symbolic core of Indian culture. The role of the 'mother' is dramatised in a scene that occurs after Chandran has left Malgudi and gone to Madras, where he falls in with the debauched Kailas. Kailas tries to introduce the ingenue to the delights of the big city, especially drinking and whoring. But Chandran rejects the whiskey, saying, 'Excuse me, but I made a vow before my mother never to touch alcohol.' His answer affects Kailas deeply and he says, 'then don't touch it. Mother is a sacred object. It is something we don't value as long as it is with us. If I had had a mother, I would have become a respectable person.' Here the novel illustrates the so-called 'outer-inner dynamic' that many scholars argue describes colonialism. Indian men, scholars say, assimilated English values and behaviour on the outside (language, dress, professions, etc) while preserving their Indian identity in the inner world of the home, symbolised by the mother.

Characters

Chandran The central character of the novel is Chandran, who comes from a professional family and is studying history at the local college. On the verge of becoming a man, he is romantic, impulsive and impressionable. He falls in love with someone he has only seen from a distance, undergoes a 'growing up' process in the big city and returns home to marry and settle down.

Mohan Mohan is one of Chandran's fellow college students, but unlike them, he is a poet and a fellow romantic and quasi-rebel. As a poet, Mohan is also an outsider, for which Chandran respects him. Mohan later helps Chandran find out the identity of the mystery girl he has fallen in love with, consoles him when he loses her and later, when Chandran has returned to Malgudi, becomes his closest ally in his job as a newspaper agent.

Father Chandran's father is a retired judge, who spends most of his time looking after the flowers in his garden. In contrast to many father figures in Indian novels, he is not the domineering type. Although he maintains discipline in the household and upholds strict standards of behaviour and speech, he is kind-hearted and lenient. The exception is Chandran's possible marriage partners, about which he is very strict.

Ramu A minor character, Ramu is one of Chandran's fellow students with whom he spends time. Ramu is less critical of the college, and life in general, and presents a kind of side-kick for the protagonist. In particular, he has a mischievous side, a good sense of humour and sometimes convinces Chandran to ignore his studies and go to the cinema.

Mr Brown Another minor character, Mr Brown is the Principal of the college, who is fair-minded and respected by most of the students. For Chandran, however, he represents the 'pink-faced Englishman who would rather be at his tennis club than teaching brown-faced boys.'

Professor Ragavachar A third minor character, Professor Ragavachar is Chandran's history professor, a very strict and intimidating man inside and outside the classroom. Despite this stern attitude, he does encourage Chandran in his studies and in establishing a History Association at the college.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

CHANDRAN (Impulsive)

Character The central character of the novel is Chandran, who comes from a professional family and is studying at the local college. As a young man, he is prone to all sorts of emotional and hormonal forces. He knows he should rebel against his family and become independent, but he is very attached to his mother. He can be critical of his professors at college, especially the British ones, but he respects them nevertheless. He is open-hearted and impulsive, easily affected by what he sees and hears, and falls in love with a girl he doesn't know. He has backbone, too, though, and runs off to the big city to experiment with life, taking on various guises and roles. In the end, he is too honest with himself, sees through his pretences and returns home to accept his (pre-determined?) role as a husband, father and wage-earner in the town where he was born and grew up.

Activities At first, we see Chandran at college, interacting with fellow students and lecturers, especially in the debating union and in setting up a History Association. He also goes to the cinema and studies at home, takes long walks along the river bank and smokes cigarettes. Later, after he graduates, he spends time in the library, dreams about going to England and falls hopelessly in love. Then he has various adventures in Madras, works on a newspaper back in Malgudi, gets married and spends time with his life-long friend, the poet, Mohan.

Illustrative moments

Uncertain As a young man, on the cusp of manhood, Chandran is at a crossroads, not knowing what will happen, or how he should act or what others think of him. In a word, he is uncertain. A good example of this confusion occurs early on in the novel, when Chandran comes home from a major debate at the college, in which he (apparently) acquitted himself very well indeed. But he is late in coming home for dinner and sees his father waiting for him, anxiously pacing up and down on the veranda. Normally, Chandran would noiselessly slip through the wooden gate and enter the house through the kitchen door at the back. 'But now he had a surge of self-respect,' Narayan tells us. 'What he usually did was a piece of evasive cowardice worthy of an adolescent. He was not eighteen, but twenty-one. At twenty-one to be afraid of one's parents! He would be a graduate soon and was already a remarkable orator!'

Impulsive Chandran has a somewhat volatile temperament, reacting to people and situations quickly and radically. A good example of this is the sudden decision he makes when he goes to Madras. His father has sent him there, to stay with his uncle, for a welcome change after his marriage plans fall apart. When Chandran arrives in the station, he sees his cousin waiting for him, but slips away unnoticed and gets into a jutka (one-horse open carriage). 'To the hotel,' he tells the driver. 'Which hotel?' the man, understandably, asks. 'Any hotel,' says Chandran. Within seconds, Chandran has shifted the course of his life, for now he will dip into 'modern' things that men do in the big city.

Romantic Perhaps the most endearing of Chandran's characteristics is his romanticism. As a young man, he could be obsessed with cricket or trains, but instead he loves the cinema and soaks up the romantic images it projects. This quality is skilfully demonstrated in an early scene, when Chandran and his friend, Ramu, go to the cinema to celebrate Chandran's success in the college debate. Narayan describes how, for Chandran, the cinema was 'an aesthetic experience that had to be prepared for.' Chandran had to 'chew betel nuts, smoke cigarettes and drink strong coffee in order to get in the right, receptive state of mind.' Then he watches in total darkness and with breathless suspense as love, villainy, betrayal, revenge and joy flicker across the big screen in front of him. If only, he thinks, his own life could be as exciting.

MOHAN (Loyal)

Character In some respects, Mohan is a more complex, and therefore interesting, character than Chandran, the obvious hero of the novel. Whereas Chandran is a history student, Mohan is a poet with revolutionary ideas. He fits into no category at the college. On the one hand, the college Historical Association, with which Chandran and others are deeply involved, will not permit poems to be read at their meetings. On the other hand, the professor in charge of the English Literary Association is jealous of Mohan's originality and will not allow his poems to be presented there. In the course of the novel, Mohan goes through a character change. In the beginning, he is critical (like Chandran) of the Hindu marriage system, and he writes a poem called 'Money Love' in response to Chandran's parents' opposition to his declared love for a girl. This critical view of conventional life undergoes a change by the end, when this same Mohan advises Chandran to accept the girl his parents want him to marry. Later, he also helps him in his job running a newspaper agency.

Activities Mohan is a college student in the beginning, and so we see him interacting with other students and lecturers. He also spends time with Chandran in the latter's house, where Mohan brings his poetry so that he can read them aloud to his friend and elicit reactions. At every step of Chandran's life, Mohan has a key role. He plays the part of a sleuth in order to discover the identity of Malathi, the girl whom Chandran has fallen in love with. He is charged by Chandran with the crucial task of delivering a letter to Malathi (which he fails to do). And, finally, he is the one who convinces Chandran to accept his parents' choice of a bride.

Illustrative moments

Loyal Mohan is a loyal friend of Chandran. This quality is displayed when Chandran first presents him with his dilemma that he has fallen in love but doesn't know who the girl is. Although Mohan is deep in poetic contemplation when he hears this, he immediately drops his poetry-writing and proposes to follow the girl and discover who she is. Despite, his own desire to write poetry and his need to attend classes and study, Mohan takes time out to help Chandran in this quest. After several days of hard sleuthing, Mohan's persistence pays off and he informs Chandran that the object of his love is Malathi.

Radical poet Another aspect of Mohan's character is revealed in the scene that follows his discovery of Malathi. As a poet and an outsider at the college, Mohan is critical of convention, especially anything to do with money-making. As soon as he learns that Malathi's family is lower down in the social hierarchy, he says that he understands why Chandran's parents oppose the marriage. 'If the girl's father was someone better than a clerk with a better salary', he says to Chandran, 'I bet your parents would move heaven and earth to secure this alliance.' In other words, Chandran's parents could demand a substantial dowry. On the spur of the moment, Mohan composes a poem called 'Money Love' and recites it for Chandran: 'The parents love you, you thought / No, no, my dear. They fed you and petted you and pampered you / Because they hope some day you will bring them money [dowry]'.

Practical By the end of the novel, however, the radical poet who sneers at traditional marriage and the dowry system has become a practical man. At least, he gives Chandran the advice that he 'must face reality' and accept the bride that his parents have chosen for him. When Chandran comes to him with the news that his parents are pressuring him to marry and have chosen a girl, Mohan says quickly, 'If you marry, you should do it for love—if such a thing exists—or at least for the money and comforts.' Then he describes the benefits of married life: 'You'll get a fat three thousand [rupees, as dowry], a nice-looking companion, who will mend your clothes and dust your furniture.' This down-to-earth erstwhile poet then says, 'While you are working hard, it is nice to have someone bring you a coffee.' Narayan manages to suggest that this shift in character, which in other novels might be presented as 'selling out' or 'caving in', is part of the gentle flow of life.

FATHER (Kind)

Character Chandran's father is given a name, but only once. This is significant, as the 'father' is more a category than a personality in this novel of a young man's progress through life. However, the father is an important figure in Chandran's growing up process. We know that he is a retired judge, a Brahmin, a man of science and well-respected, with a loving wife and two sons. Unlike many 'fathers' in Indian literature, he is not authoritarian, though he is disciplined and firmly opposes his son's initial choice of a girl to marry. On the other hand, he is generous, and often sends money to Chandran, without any clear knowledge what the money is for. Kind-hearted, he is more likely to make a suggestion than to lay down a rule. When Chandran explains that he wants to see a late film at the cinema, his father merely remarks that 'late shows are not a good habit. Not good for one's health.' Like most of the characters in this novel, the father undergoes a slight change of character toward the end of the novel. After Chandran returns home, an older and wiser person, the father is more gentle with him, and when his son turns down his suggestion for a bride, he does not pressure him. The father has accepted that his son is more independent now and that he must not try to control him.

Activities As a retired judge, Chandran's father spends a lot of time in his garden, early morning and evening, tending his precious plants. He is also seen sitting on the veranda reading the daily newspaper or talking with his wife and two sons. He sometimes takes a walk about the town, but mostly remains at home, supervising domestic affairs.

Illustrative moments

Kind The father is never anything less than kind, in all his interactions, with his family, friends and even strangers. A clear illustration of this essential gentility comes when he discovers who has been stealing flowers from his beloved garden. Those flowers are all-important to the father, and he violently jumps on the man when he catches him late one night. It turns out, however, that the thief is an old man, a holy man, who is only taking the flowers for his ritual practices at a nearby temple. Moved by this man's plight and purpose, the father agrees to let him 'borrow' a few flowers every

night. His kindness is in sharp contrast with Chandran, who is angered by the intruder's actions ('Holy man or not, he is a thief!') and shocked at his father's leniency. His father tells his son to open the gate so that the old man can leave, without the indignity of having to climb over the fence. Chandran obliges, but only grudgingly.

Non-assertive Although the father exercises authority over the family, and runs 'a tight ship,' he is mid-mannered and lenient. A good illustration of his non-assertiveness occurs in the first half of the novel, when Chandran has reached a critical point in preparing for his exams. When his son asks him for his advice on his proposed plan of study, his father takes a look at the plan ('which appeared to him to resemble a complicated train time-table') and says simply, 'You know best.' Chandran presses him, wanting to be guided by his father, whom he respects, but the father only offers a meaningless comment: 'Well, it's best not to take risks.' When he wanders back out to his garden, we understand that he is more concerned with flowers than examinations.

Principled At the same time, and despite his apparent nonchalant attitude, the father adheres to principles. One is that his sons should come home before sunset, a rule he enforces by patrolling the house veranda when the offending hour approaches. But a more dramatic example of his firm adherence to principle occurs when Chandran wishes to marry Malathi, a girl from a family unknown to Chandran's family. The father demands that the intended couple exchange horoscopes, and when the astrologer says that the two charts are not matched, he calls off the arrangement. Chandran is furious and tries to get another astrologer to give 'a second opinion,' but his father is adamant: 'the stars has spoken and that is final.'