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**Timeless and (Un)original : the Role of Gossip in
R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and *The Painter of Signs***

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Our postman, Thanappa, whom we had known as children, old enough to have retired twice over but somehow still in service, was my first visitor for the day...

He was a timeless being. At his favourite corners, he spread out his letters and bags and packets and sat down to a full discussion of family and social matters; he served as a live link between several families, carrying information from house to house... Only before leaving would he remember to give me the letter or book-packet.

(The Man-Eater of Malgudi 158)

In this extract, a supposed agent of dissemination of the written word chooses to prioritise the oral, in the form of neighbourhood gossip. Tropes of gossip underline much of R.K. Narayan's work and they assume particular significance, I shall argue, in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961) and *The Painter of Signs* (1977), in which they interleave with, and describe an oppositional paradigm to, the processes of printing and sign writing.

Thanappa, the postman, exemplifies key constitutive elements of gossip. It has an intersubjective function, binding individuals and kinship groups together centripetally around shared narratives, and is more immediately "a social situation" than the written text (see Ashcroft 1989). Moreover, these narratives are constantly in flux, disallowing the attribution of a stable origin and, as we shall see, freeing them from external policing or the imposition of other fixed narratives. Although, as Patricia Meyer Spacks asserts, rumour-mongering has traditionally been associated with "an ugly kind of collusion" and "hidden purposes of aggression" (and these aspects frequently do occur in Narayan's novels, for example after Vasu's death [*Man-Eater* 166]), she believes that it should also be viewed as unifying and enabling, as attesting to "a desire for alliance and for moral exploration" within a society

(Spacks 575). Moreover, Spacks states that to “transmit narratives about other people briefly controls their lives by the power of story” (Spacks 563) which implies that, in addition to being intrinsically linked to questions of power and surveillance, the gossip of Thanappa and his Malgudi companions enacts the novelist’s process of storytelling itself. Indeed, by rooting his tales in one town which “impresses the reader with its coherence” (Walsh 73), Narayan persuades us to perceive the novels themselves as extended pieces of local gossip. This is especially true of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, whose first-person narrative positions itself between the literary and the anecdotal, assuming a certain solicitousness on the part of the reader.

The Painter of Signs lacks the formal indivisibility of author and narrator, but nonetheless, in one profoundly resonant scene it locates the reader as eavesdropper, listening in on a confidential dialogue between two characters who are reduced to disembodied voices:

And then one heard a scuffle and a struggle to reach the switch, feet and hands reaching for the switch, and a click of the switch, off. The eavesdropper applying his eye to the keyhole at this point would see nothing. A stillness followed before the light went up again, the female voice saying, “If you must stay, please bring your bicycle in.”(*Painter* 113)

Narrative revelation is here co-extensive with our ability to glean snippets of gossip from clandestine conversations. Eavesdropping is gossip’s co-conspirator, and by thus locating us within the community of Malgudi, Narayan is not, as Steve Carter suggests, *defamiliarising* the protagonists through “changes in focalisation” (Carter 115), but rather is acknowledging gossip’s function in the writing process as both diegetic and rhetorical, “organising relations between the text and the readers” (Buckridge 440).

Gossip therefore connects to geography. It is as if to answer David Punter’s question, “Would it be possible, one might wonder, ever to remember a postcolonial map properly, ever to put together a coherent account of a world where histories are mysteriously overlaid?” (Punter 30), Narayan is positing a shifting yet recognisable topography of recurring elements, palimpsestically inscribed with names from both pre-colonial and colonial histories (Nallappa’s Grove, Lawley Extension). Here an incidental character like Thanappa’s very *timelessness* transcends those various histories and continually testifies to the primacy and continuity of place through gossiped narratives.

The effectiveness of gossip depends, as *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* illustrates, on endless repetition and the creation and promulgation of stereotypes. Through its familiarity, gossip attains an “aspect of ritualization ... combining surprise over content with recognition of formal pattern” (Spacks 575). The inevitable alterations and embellishments in each repetition, though the basic content remains the same, condemn any notion of individual originality to continual recession. In so doing, they represent a *shared* currency in which the casting of stereotypical roles demarcates a space where socio-ethical issues can be discussed. For example, Sastri views Rangī, a frequent visitor to the man-eater Vasu’s room above the printing press, as the epitome of fallen womanhood, symbolising the “disreputable people” (*Man-Eater* 81) who have started congregating around the premises. That Rangī is the product of a long chain of municipal signification with seemingly no fixed beginning or end is indicated when Nataraj presses for more information:

His deep and comprehensive knowledge of the dancer’s family was disconcerting. I had to ask him to explain how he managed to acquire so much information. He felt a little shy at first and then explained, “You see my house is in Abu lane, and so we know what goes on ...” She was a subject of constant reference in Abu Lane, and was responsible for a great deal of the politics there. (*Man-Eater* 81)

Homi Bhabha, whose essay “The Other Question” has informed much of my thinking on the role of stereotypes in Narayan’s work, argues that “a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes” (47) is required to valorise a particular stereotype. Such a multiplication of stereotypes betrays anxiety, of course, on the part of the one who attempts to fix signification—the colonial power, in Bhabha’s essay. Yet as we shall see, the “multiple belief” (Bhabha 47) inherent in stereotypes allows in Narayan’s work their deployment against a stand-in for colonising power.

Nataraj’s subsequent lust for this “perfect female animal” (*Man-Eater* 82) deconstructs her status as fetish by revealing her to be the repository of displaced and transferred fears and desires and, therefore, seems to correspond to Bhabha’s declaration that the fetishistic stereotype represents a substitution for a lack and a concomitant desire for lost origins (Bhabha 44). However, the gossip-stereotype *repudiates* the discovery of its origin by the very organic, communal and therefore elusive means of its production. Oral rumour evolves from a liminal point between

individuals and is endlessly repeated, and consequently virtually impossible to control.

Gossip, then, refuses a rigid binary opposition between private and public, by introducing private information into a public context and subjecting it to re-negotiation. It has, as Patrick Buckridge comments, an inherent potential for reconciling or destabilising antinomies such as private/public and part/whole (Buckridge 445) and even, by virtue of its only *partially* fixed elements, between fixity and unfixity themselves. (Such a paradox underpins Bhabha's thinking, as we shall see: in order that a signification appear always-already "in place" [37] it must be endlessly re-articulated and therefore open to destabilisation.)

Nataraj's emotional evolution is arguably slight, but he does at least learn to appreciate the value of renouncing solipsism and confronting the malevolent other (Vasu) by embracing society through gossip. Immediately after Vasu lodges a complaint against him as a landlord, Nataraj, in a moment of self-pitying despair, asseverates, "it was futile to speak about any matter to anyone. People went about with fixed notions and seldom listened to anything I said" (*Man-Eater* 66) but soon afterwards, cheered by Muthu the tea vendor's growing hostility towards the taxidermist, he declares "My enemy should be the enemy of other people too, according to age-old practice" (*Man-Eater* 85). As I shall discuss in more detail, the passing reference here to ancient custom is noteworthy, in that such practices permit the protagonists to bond through recourse to discourses which pre-date the invasion of the aggressor Vasu (and by analogy, it can surely be argued, the imperial colonisers).

Participation in the public world of gossip and judgmental moral debate liberates Nataraj from his damaging dependence on the "perfect enemy" Vasu (*Man-Eater* 70). Tabish Khair notes that "the protagonist in Narayan's novels is almost always Other-defined" (Khair 230): Nataraj is, initially at least, defined almost exclusively in polar opposition to Vasu, just as Raman exists vicariously through his object of infatuation, Daisy, in *The Painter of Signs*. The desultory individual's reliance on the zealot inevitably leads, Khair argues, to a "vein of (self) estrangement" (Khair 229), an existential inauthenticity in which the nebulous individual is subsumed in the strongly oriented other and alienated from itself. Just as Vasu virtually kidnaps Nataraj and drives him away from Malgudi, so he is the agent of the printer's psychological distancing from familiar things:

Get back! The very phrase sounded remote and improbable! The town, the fountain and my home in Kabir Street seemed a faraway dream, which I had deserted years ago... (*Man-Eater* 39)

Nataraj's decision finally to disclose to his friends Vasu's plans to shoot Kumar, the temple elephant, denotes both an awareness that he is woefully unequal to the task of confronting Vasu alone, and that his identity is rapidly being effaced by his proximity to, and antithetical identification with, his tormentor. As Khair says, "We can say that more and more individuals aspire to become the public because it is a ready way of dealing with their Angst" (Khair 230). Thus the opening up of a problem into the precincts of gossip can unchain the subject from definitions monolithically linked to the oppressor. Moreover, it re-establishes a sense of identity by as it were pluralising that identity and its narratives, making them common property.

Vasu as an aggressive, excessive outside influence can usefully be identified as a metaphor for colonialism, for a modernising project taken beyond the pale. His American style of speaking, "from crime books and films" (*Man-Eater* 31); his singular contempt or indifference for sacred symbols and traditions, notably the elephant; and his dismissal of Nataraj as "unscientific" (*Man-Eater* 127), mark him out as a warped product of Western-style rationality. His is, literally, a colonial gaze of death: far from "rivalling Nature at her own game" (*Man-Eater* 50) which suggests a truly creative impulse, his look, his very existence, is tantamount to an attempt to fix identity, origin or essence through petrification. Vasu as a taxidermist revels in the construction of fetishes, in exercising dominion over nature and the wilderness, in superseding the mysterious mythical past symbolised by the tiger cub¹ (*Man-Eater* 122-23). Preserving the cub renders it unthreatening, merely an aestheticised museum piece to be gazed at "for study and research" (*Man-Eater* 49). Describing the process to a bewildered Nataraj, Vasu stipulates that the animals' eyes must be removed first, thus denying the possibility (and simultaneously betraying the fear) of their gazing back (*Man-Eater* 50). This is "the threatened return of the look" Bhabha speaks of (50). In a sense, then, Vasu participates in the production of his own stereotypes, and in his immoderate zeal for the job betrays the disquiet that inheres in "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (Bhabha 37). The need to fix, to fossilise reveals the fear of that which is origin-less, timeless.

Interestingly, Vasu is associated with the printing process, by virtue of his baleful presence above the press in the room where he squats; the fact that Nataraj accuses him of having “violated the sacred traditions of my press” (*Man-Eater* 15) when he throws open the curtain and, most importantly, the centrality of repetition and stereotypy to both taxidermy and printing. (Indeed, as Rey Chow comments, the term “stereotype” derives from eighteenth-century mechanical printing processes [Chow 52]). In fact, if we include orality-as-gossip, there are three modes of repetitive production at work in the novel.

Despite Nataraj and Sastri’s ostensible control of the signifying process encapsulated in the image of the press, much of the book’s comedy derives from the portrayal of the limitations, absurdities and ephemerality of print culture and the written word. For instance, Sen’s abortive attempt to start a local newspaper neatly exemplifies print’s protracted and problematic entanglement with capital (*Man-Eater* 87), a subject I shall return to in my discussion of *The Painter of Signs*. Additionally, the poet’s efforts to write the life of Krishna monosyllabically are patently ridiculous, especially as he is forced to manipulate and divide any polysyllabic words to adhere to his self-imposed constraints (*Man-Eater* 7). Nataraj, who observes that the poet’s work assumes the “mysterious quality of a private code” (*Man-Eater* 7) has an unflinching admiration for things arcane and literary, failing to see the wilful, meaningless arbitrariness of the venture. It is at such times that Narayan’s irony operates most successfully. When it comes to the actual reproduction of the epic poem, the inadequacy of print culture in accurately signifying anything, least of all this “new syntax” (*Man-Eater* 111), is comically exposed:

The poet had used too many K’s and R’s in his composition, and the available poundage of K and R in our type-board was consumed within the first twenty lines; I had to ask him whether he could not use some other letters in order to facilitate our work. (*Man-Eater* 112)

Sastri and Nataraj ultimately resort to using stars instead, enigmatic signs open to interpretation, symbols of an astrological, mystical code older than mechanical modernity.²

If the written word is portrayed as ineffectual, then surely Narayan’s own text is destabilised. However, as many critics have argued (Sankaran 1991, Walder 1998, Fraser 2000), his novels are informed and enriched by typologies and myths borrowed from ancient Vedic, Sanskrit texts (notably Book VI of the *Mahabharata*). These, as

Fraser in particular asserts, rather teleologically, tend to counter the individualistic trajectory typified by much Western novelistic fiction (concerned, millennially, with origins and ends) and stipulate a rejection of transient materiality (Fraser 144). I would argue, in relation to *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, that such mythical narratives endure not simply as stable *written* texts, but as paradigmatic constituents of the *oral* culture of the community and, therefore, as participating elements in the shared culture of gossip. Like gossip, myths are effectively origin-less, “inherited stories of anonymous authorship” (Fraser 164), and incessantly repeatable through generations and kinship groups. They produce the archetypes (for instance, the character of the “trickster-sage” [Sankaran 133]) from which gossip-stereotypes emerge. Sastri, the “orthodox-minded Sanskrit semi-scholar” (*Man-Eater* 72), a distinctly philosophical gossip, announces that Vasu is a contemporary *rakshasa*, “a demoniac creature” with enormous powers (*Man-Eater* 72) who nonetheless carries the seeds of his own destruction. Vasu’s demise (*Man-Eater* 173), despite its humorous bathos, advocates the power of the *rakshasa* myth, its innate ability to transcend the mercuriality of modernity and assert antique values. Narayan, aware that the “categories for gossip ... derive from cultural history” (Spacks 563), imbues his text with durable autochthonous Indian myth through gossip in order to transcend the ambivalences of the colonial text and incessantly re-introduce the pre-colonial into a post-colonial context. It is as if, in the character of Sastri in particular, he is demonstrating that, to quote Raja Rao, “the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright” (Rao v).

Just as Nataraj recognises that a signboard can be “aggressive” (*Man-Eater* 61), *The Painter of Signs* explicitly tackles the written sign (in this instance shop signs) as a contested site of slippery meaning. In a key passage, gossip is depicted as both contiguous to, but in a practical sense antonymous with, sign-writing, as Raman ruminates on his career:

He speculated sometimes what he would do for a living if everyone adopted the boardless notion. They might engage him to inscribe gossip or blackmail on public walls; do it on the command of one and rub it off on the command of another. Sivanand, the municipal chairman, would provide enough material for all the blank walls of the city... You could have a new item each day about this or that man, the renting of market stalls, the contract for that piece of

roadmending, change of name in order to immortalize a visiting minister and gain his favour; and a thousand other sins. (*Painter 14*)

Clearly wall space could be paid for, the material means of its production controlled by the influence of capital in modern society. Consequently, in a competitive “money-mad world” (*Painter 14*), such transcribed gossip would be subject to an endless cycle of writing and erasure dependent on questions of ownership. Additionally, this passage intimates that gossip includes scandal and secrets at both regional and national level, such as “that wholesale grain-merchant who cornered all the rationed articles and ran the co-operative stores meant for the poor” (*Painter 14*). But Raman’s faith at this early stage in the novel in the monolithic power of the written word prevents him from acknowledging that tenure is an inescapable factor: the word can be bought and sold, and thus there is no guarantee that the potential for disclosure of post-colonial India’s scandals will not be rapidly attended by willed effacement from interested parties. In contrast, the entrepreneurial Gupta appreciates the transient nature of the scripted sign:

Establishing a new enterprise meant only blacking out an old sign and writing a new one in its place, and he paid down five rupees per letter without a word. (*Painter 16*)

He is thus able to profit from it.

Throughout *The Painter of Signs* we witness debate over signs and representation, invariably linked to cash. The lawyer, perturbingly for Raman the “rationalist” (*Painter 8*), requests left-slanting letters for his first sign, following the advice of his astrologer who believes it will ensure an auspicious start for the business (*Painter 7-9*), further evidence of older, nebulous codes having ascendancy over the modern. The bangle-seller refuses the bright red “flaming injunction to pay cash” (*Painter 22*) in favour of a blue board. Undoubtedly the most evocative argument occurs in the village where Daisy and Raman encounter the priest. Daisy, with her anglicised name, her BOAC bag (*Painter 130*) and her dealings with a “missionary gentleman” (*Painter 51*) is a rather more sympathetic version of the outsider figure, and represents the aggressive modernisation, including sterilisation programmes, which was being pressed upon India in the early 1970s. Her desire to spread the word and scrawl contraception notices on the temple walls is hotly contested by the priest, to the extent that even the driven Daisy is forced to concede, “I don’t think he’ll let us use his wall” (*Painter 59*). Persuasive enough to influence Raman the rationalist

into praying to the temple goddess (*Painter* 63), the priest articulates an ancient spiritual discourse, couched in the oral tradition, which Daisy's progressive graffiti cannot hope to displace. Like the Town Hall Professor with his little slips of paper, he realises that "*This will pass*" (*Painter* 25) but the old traditions will not.

Narayan's subtle irony operates on Raman who, despite his belief that "[b]ut for sign-boards, people would wallow in isolation" (*Painter* 29) and "[a] sign board pinned things down to a sort of permanency" (*Painter* 36), can only find any degree of continuity in life at "The Boardless," the hotel without a sign. Here, he finds solace in the admittedly rather conservative, male gossip environment, where he can chat "licentiously" (*Painter* 41) and avoid being drowned in "Daisy-ism" (*Painter* 107) (even if he disingenuously declares that people "minded their own business" there [*Painter* 143]). Indeed, after his brief and unsuccessful slogan-writing odyssey with Daisy, he is overcome by "a morbid desire to chase rumours and verify them" (*Painter* 91), and it is no coincidence that after Daisy's departure and the breakdown of their bizarre romance, it is to "The Boardless" he goes.

Whether we perceive this ending as regressive and conservative, a nostalgic return to a pre-Daisy stasis, it is apparent that the oral culture, structured around gossip and pre-colonial typologies, will persist long after Daisy's, Vasu's and (the fundamental irony of Narayan's work) the author's own words. Indeed, I would insist that it can be viewed less as "pre-colonial cultural recuperation" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 30) than as an affirmation of a "cultural situation ... which includes, amongst other histories, the colonizing history" (Walder 96). Gossip precipitates a subsumption of the discourses of modernity into older discourses whose origins remain forever elusive, leading to a kind of unbalanced hybridity where gossip narratives still retain more authority by way of their adaptability.

I would argue, by way of conclusion, that Narayan is evidently not alone in positing gossip as a generative post-colonial discourse. For example, in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* nature itself appears to partake of the processes of gossip and eavesdropping (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 106), and Daniel Cosway's letter to Rochester effectively highlights the appropriation of written forms to disseminate gossip (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 79-82). In Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Beach at Falesa* the incoming westerner is subject to the paradoxical influences of gossip and taboo – malevolent gossip reduces individuals to the status of that which *cannot* or *should not* be spoken about, or indeed spoken to. This paradox further explains why gossip is at once so

ambiguous and so powerful: like Raman, it can in a sense communicate “audibly and inaudibly at the same time” (*Painter* 11). It can construct, with the aid of ancient myth, *unspeakable* stereotypes such as the *rakshasa* Vasu, yet needs to repeat interminably those types to avoid fading into silence and to evade control. Most of all, it underpins, as we have seen, a potent feeling of self within a community by virtue of its most compelling paradox: lacking a recoverable origin, it ensures difference each time a story is retold while attesting to the eternal truth that each tale is generated in the relational spaces between people. As such, gossip cannot be owned.

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¹ A detailed discussion of the symbolic significance of animals in Indian culture is beyond the scope of this paper. See Chapple, Christopher Key. "Imitation of Animals in Yoga Tradition: Taming the Sacred Wild" at <http://cla.calpoly.edu/~jlynch/Chapple.html> 25 May 2005.

² It is worth remembering the importance Benedict Anderson attributes to the advent of printing in the development of nationalism in his book *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991). Narayan seems to be suggesting that through ancient myth and orality, there is a national identity which precedes mechanised printing.