

# The Use of Mythology in Novels of R. K. Narayan



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## Abstract

Mythology is the study or science of myths. A body or collection of myths is also known as mythology. Myths are essentially stories. They originated in ancient times and deal with ideas or beliefs about the early history of a race. They give explanations of many natural events, such as the seasons. The myths are mostly imaginary, fictitious or impossible. The myths describe gods, creation, ancestral heroes and events which do not possess historical authenticity but are handed down from generation to generation, carrying with them some vital truths of the culture. Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan Ayyar needs no introduction in Indian literary circles. His every book is thought provoking and a voyage of self-discovery, disclosure of pitfalls of society, sustained narrative, arresting style, technique - a juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. He has Indianized Indian English novel.

**Keywords:** Mythology, Fictitious, Indian myths, Ramayan, Religious, Narration.

## Introduction

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan Ayyar needs no introduction in Indian literary circles. His every book is thought provoking and a voyage of self-discovery, disclosure of pitfalls of society, sustained narrative, arresting style, technique - a juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. He has Indianized Indian English novel. This combination of contemporaneity and antiquity reveals the truth of India with complete objectivity and detachment. We witness the traumas of wives, the felicities of conjugality, the jostling of scholars and scamps, the yearnings and inside pinnings of youth, the domineering wickedness of demoniac men and the silent suffering of the innocent submissive people, the lure of money, the rumination and reminiscences of youthful love, the pangs of separation from the beloved wife etc. There is no repetitiveness rather breeze of refreshing air. There are no pejorative implications, rather a detached viewing. Literature is man's never-ending attempt to shape human destiny and R. K. Narayan's perception of truth and human destiny accommodates both empirical reality and mythical or primal reality. Bridging the two is his remarkable achievement and we have a re-enactment of age-old Indian myths in the modern Indian context and this makes R.K. Narayan a Medium of stirring thoughts about deeper truths of life. His world-view encompasses past and present and reveals truths, which are eternal.

Mythology is the study or science of myths. A body or collection of myths is also known as mythology. Myths are essentially stories. They originated in ancient times and deal with ideas or beliefs about the early history of a race. They give explanations of many natural events, such as the seasons. The myths are mostly imaginary, fictitious or impossible. However, they underlie a given culture and provide symbolic interpretation of its various aspects. The myths describe gods, creation, ancestral heroes and events which do not possess historical authenticity but are handed down from generation to generation, carrying with them some vital truths of the culture.

Myth comes from Greek Mythos meaning a verbal tale. Mark Schorer calls myth the representation of the deepest instinctive life and symbol of deepest wisdom of man, of the urges of man. Myth is man's effort at solving the problems of basic physical needs, religious wants and adjustment with the hostile milieu.<sup>2</sup>

Myth makes us aware of the transcendental forces, brings the ultimate reality closer to terrestrial reality. Writers use myths as an aesthetic channel to ventilate, to explore and recreate experience, to transport us from chronological time to primordial time. Eric Gould calls

myth a synthesis of values and a preservative of tradition, the embodiment of world-view, elaborate constructs, not an idle rhapsody, not vain imagination but a communication system, a union of monotheism of reason and pantheism of imagination.

Aristotle's mythos means plot or narrative so myth belongs to the world of art and assimilates nature to human form through analogy and identity. In its story, the central characters are gods and spirits wielding enormous power over nature. Richard Chase defines it as an art and product of aesthetic activity of mind in his *Quest for Myth*, "Myth is literature and must be considered an aesthetic creation of the human imagination."<sup>3</sup>

Various myths used by R.K. Narayan in his novels and how myths have become an integral part of the thematic pattern. The use of myths imparts an additional dimension to his novels and contributes to a significant whole. Myths in him are not merely illustrative of abstract ideologies but the final vision of the present reality, a means of reinforcement and enhancement of appeal. Myth does not obscure the real life; rather the myth-motif lends an aura of timelessness and perpetuity. The mythical characters are essentially prototypes and moulds of humanity, valid for all times.

Myths here are not isolated and unassimilated as charged by some critics but are integrated in the fictional structure. Through *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, he has recreated the Bhasmasur myth in modern times. We find here a perfect fusion and imaginative balancing of the ancient and the modern, showing how an ancient fable can have an immediacy and relevance to the present age. The extent of the use of myth, however, differs in his various novels. *Swami and Friends* (1935) which launched Narayan into the world of novelists, is mainly a record of the life of teachers and students. There is obviously no mythical dimension in this novel except the use of certain beliefs and folklores. The creation of the fictional Malgudi as a typical South Indian town in this novel is a new myth created by R.K. Narayan. It is a recurring feature in his subsequent novels. It gradually develops and extends its topography in his later novels. *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) does not refer to any traditional myth but uses Ashrams as central motif. *The Dark Room* (1938) seems to refer to Ramayana as Savitri here parallels Kaikayee and the dark room parallels mythical Kumbhawan. *The Dark Room* deals with the myth realistically in modern setting.

*The English Teacher* (1945), uses the myth of Savitri and Satyavan. Then, in *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967). Narayan diverts from traditional myths. He uses the newly created myth of Gandhi in these novels. *The Guide* (1958), which won him the Sahitya Academy award, echoes the Valmiki Myth. *The Man Eater of Malgudi* (1962) uses the myth of Bhasmasura and *The Painter of Signs* (1976) parallels the myth of Shantanu and Ganga. In *The Financial Expert* (1952), the myth of the rivalry of Goddesses Laxmi and Saraswati is employed. Even in his last novel *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) he makes use of the myth of Narada. Thus, almost all his novels are imbued in mythological hues, in the sincere following of his uncle's advice to study the old epics to profit by them and to lend seriousness and weight to his writing.

Narayan's plots develop on idea or character. Incidents and characters act and react on each other. Comedy, irony, mythology, psychology all are fused and integrated in a harmonious artistic vision. His depth in the study of Hinduism is additional feature. Hinduism gives emphasis on self-discipline, renunciation, karma and rebirth. Various fables, folklores and myths make the novels at once local, regional and universal.

According to Northrop Frye, myths illustrate essential principles of storytelling. Literature becomes meaningful by shared human experience and Indian myths permeate the collective unconscious of India. The mythical is still alive in the age of science, as Reason alone does not suffice. Mythology makes him an objective observer of human character. His books are a journey from innocence to experience and the unique blend of mythology will definitely win appreciation of the critical world in times to come. A novel is both a mythology of common validity told to a community across time. It is also a unique idiosyncratic empirical narrative of contemporary life. All classical literature is informed by myth. Whole romantic literature is a search for myth while classical literature is embodiment of myth. When myth ceases to have any meaning altogether, when people are no longer inspired by common values and aspirations, when people's moral and metaphysical attitude is no longer unified, then there is erosion of life and a fall from sacred plane to animal plane. Loss of myth is the loss of the worldview. Western scholars shredded the seamless web of human affairs into numerous morsels and examined them as if each morsel was a self-contained universe and not an inseparable part of a larger whole. Life is a unity. Languages, literature, arts, religion, politics are not separate subjects insulated from each other in thought tight compartments. They are all facets of a unitary way of life. So a writer needs to have a worldview. "Literature is not merely an activity of human entertainment. If it is entertainment, it is so for superior people who believe in the world view. Real literature is ipso facto elevating... Myths provide certain aesthetic and moral standards which for the sake of an orderly development of society, future generations might do well to study."<sup>4</sup>

Myth infuses life in creative writing. To those with a worldview of their own, every human activity fits into a pattern-divinely ordained or humanly constructed. The artist dissolves his private agonies in the framework of accepted myth. Then, he achieves the artistic overreaching i.e. universality. That is why Epics, Upanishads, Vedas have universal appeal. In Sankhya philosophy we find an elaboration of mother archetype with three fundamental attributes - Sattava, Rajas, Tamas i.e. goodness, passion and darkness, the essential aspects of the mother. Her cherishing and nourishing goodness, her orgiastic emotionality, and her stygian depths. The philosophical myth of Prakriti dancing before Purush to remind him of discriminating knowledge. "Christ on the Cross, Buddha under a tree represents man's central position between matter and spirit in the world conceived as a tree." "Land represents consciousness in all mythologies and the sea is the clear image of subconscious mind." How cleverly and clearly old myths explain shades of human nature through a chart of four quarters of moon. Each quarter is equated with Earth, Water, Air and Fire which

correspond to body, heart, mind and soul, which again are equated to instinctive, emotional, intellectual and moral will; which again is equated to sentimentality, brutality, hatred and insensitiveness.

Myths provided answer to many of man's puzzling questions and became an obsessive defense mechanism for his survival. Through myths he derived meaning in a world which appeared to be devoid of any significance. He extracted meaning from the areas beyond his control but affecting his destiny and welfare. "Myth supports the existing values and explication of the universe, and represents man's encounter or response to certain mysterious powers beyond himself." Ancient myths dealing with divine beings still affect and govern man and his activities and the old Gods are still powerful conditioning our individual and collective attitudes and behavior. The reason for their survival in the present age can be attributed to man's need to comprehend the inscrutable forces of nature and the mysterious universe. Myths apparently derive their universal import from the way in which they try to reconstitute an original event or explain some fact about human nature and its worldly or cosmic context. "The ancient myths survive in the modern times with all their problematic intensity as they, deal with the numinous and the sacred." Thus myths are the mirrors that reflect man's inner self thereby, discovering the depths of the unconscious. Product of creative fantasy, they interpret human life in the modern context and make us aware of our existence.

The Indian English Novelists have nourished their moorings on their own Indian past. They have dovetailed their mythic experience with the immediate experience of the present. The ancient culture of India has provided the mythic backdrop to their literary explorations and discoveries. They have harked back to the mythology of their own culture to carve out significant patterns of fiction.

Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, "The Indian people are still closer to their mythology than the modern Irish or British are to the Celtic folklore of Greek legends."<sup>5</sup> The people in India still listen to the Ramayana and other recitals with zeal and eagerness. The Indian psyche is moulded and transformed by Indian mythological and legendary tales. It is conditioned by the stories from the Panchatantra, the Ramayan and the Mahabharat. Pandit Nehru aptly observed, "I do not know of any books anywhere which have exercised such a continuous and pervasive influence on the minds as Ramayana or Mahabharat. They are still a living force in the life of the Indian people."<sup>6</sup> Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes, "Who can recite even in these days of sophistication the Ramayana, the Mahabharat or the Iliad? The banishment of Rama on the very day fixed for his coronation, the outrage of Draupadi in the Kuru Court, the vengeful Bhima slaking his thirst in the blood of Dushasana, the killing of the sleeping warriors by Aswathama, these are among the archetypes of human agony and superhuman endurance that take us back to the dawn of civilization, the ultimate springs of the Jungian 'collective unconscious.'"<sup>7</sup>

The inexhaustible vitality of our classical mythology has helped the Indian novelists to delve deep into our past experience and discover a link between it and our contemporary existence. This has also made

the delineation of the contemporary reality/absurdity more lucid and more meaningful. Most of the Puranic myths pertain to the binary opposition of the good and the evil symbolized through the characters of Rama and Ravan. This Ram-Ravan myth appears to be the central thematic motif in Kanthapura of Raja Rao. A mythic atmosphere has been created through description of rites and rituals, which though, do not form part of myth but provide a frame of reference (Meenakshi Mukherjee). They help in the digressional use of myth. Myth meanders through the fabric of the fictional canvas and exposes contemporaneity. Though, apparently a novel of political resurgence, Kanthapura is strewn with many myths, which have been deftly woven to dramatise selfless action as expounded in the Bhagwadgita. Kenchamma setting in Kanthapura finds a mythical parallel in Ganga Purana. Himavathy is none other than Ganga Maiya. The freedom movement is equated with Mahabharat yudh. The Serpent and the Rope is a search for metaphysical truth of life. The Cat and Shakespeare searches salvation. It is written in the manner of a religious parable. The novel is an interesting specimen of extended symbolism. Thus, we see that myths and symbols are ready instruments in the hands of a creative artist who charges them with special significance and utilizes them for the interpretation of the situation in which the characters are placed. While an acquainted reader enjoys every bit of it, the common reader is left guessing. The use of myth by Indian English novelists is a kind of liberation from the Victorian conception of a well-made novel and gives it the status of a truly Indian genre. The tale or oral story is the crude yet vigorous stem of R.K. Narayan's fiction, which combines traditional forms with local and folklore materials. Most of the incidents are vibrant with meaning. Narayan has fascination with myth and its potential to reconfigure the world. He loves telling old stories in new manners. The generative possibilities of myths become an artistic compulsion for him. They help in re-imagining the world in today's context. His artistic vision reshapes, remolds and retells them. Most of his novels are evidence of it. In Mr. Sampath we have burning of Kama, in The Guide we have propitiation of Gods through fasts, in The Man Eater we have the myth of Bhasmasur, in The Painter of Sings, we have the myth of Ganga and Dushyant, in The world of Nagaraj, we have the myth of Narad, in the Vendor of Sweets, we have the pattern of renunciation and non-attachment as prescribed in the Shashtras, in Tiger for Malgudi, we have the myth of cycle of births and release from the bond of Kama, in Dark Room, we have the myth of Kekeyi sulking, in the Financial Advisor we have the myth of eternal rivalry of Laxmi and Saraswati. Thus the religious sense of myth is part of Narayan's grip of reality, his view of human life and ordering and placing human experience.

The conscious use of myth is a literary device and part of the modern trend. This is the device used by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, by James Joyce in *Ulysses*, by Forster in *A Passage to India*, by O'Neill in *The Mourning Becomes Electra*. Methods may be diverse but one element is common - the use of classical situations or characters in modern context, thereby seeking to illumine the predicament of modern man, viewing him in the larger perspective of time.

We must study the conscious use of myths, local legends, folklores, rituals for rain, for harvest, for fertility, in order to add to the novel a special Indianness or mythic colouring to the work because myths, legends, rituals are part of our cultural pattern and are our ideals of aspiration. The question why writers are attracted towards myth can be answered by this that (1) the element of timelessness and antiquity draws them. Distance lends enchantment and so myths by their distance charm modern readers. Besides Indian myths have an undying significance and so writers recreate them through exploration of their potentialities. (2) Myths, legends, folklores etc. provide an abstract story pattern; they illustrate essential principles of storytelling (3) myths are literatures in themselves. They are ethical, philosophical, and cultural and religious (4) myths are part of life in India. Thus they embody the nature, the spirit and the culture of Indian literature. Hence, writers are attracted towards them.

In India, we are conscious of our rich past and a child grows with the absorbing of it. Myths are recited from childhood and become part of his sensibility. The influence of epics on our national life is so dominating and far-reaching that if a worldview is required to make literature meaningful, then the use of epics is worthwhile as they are the embodiments of a world view so essential for good literature. Epics and Purans constitute an all-India frame of experience.

The imaginative reaction of mythological incidents and situations in Narayan is discernible in almost all his novels and short stories. His characters as well as his Malgudi have a kind of timelessness. Everywhere is evident R.K. Narayan's actual observation of Indian Life and his delving into the archetypal myths and characters of Indian epics. Malgudi's Existence is traced to the Puranic times by Srinavas in Mr. Sampath. It is said that Rama passed through the village on his way to Lanka. He made the Sarayu River flow by pulling an arrow from his quiver. Buddha came this way preaching the gospel of compassion. Even Sankara installed his goddess here and preached the gospel of Vedanta. It is also said that Goddess Parvati jumped into fire and produced the river of Malgudi (The Guide).

Malgudi, thus, becomes the microcosm of Hindu India: "Like Shiva, open your third eye and burn up love." It is an allusion to the mythic Shiva, "Symbolic meaning in this representation of the power of love, its equipment, its limitations, and burning of Kama, standing for an act of sublimation are only too obvious to be overlooked." Krishnan's efforts in The English Teacher resemble Savitri's efforts to win back Satyavan from the Yama. Savitri in the Dark Room bears the echoes of Sakuntala in her assertion of the right to live and die under the sky. The Financial Expert is a moral fable. We see the contest of Lakshmi and Saraswati through Margyya and Dr. Pal. Money can't buy everything. Money can't be panacea for all fulfilments. Money is not for mere accumulation but also for spending Money's injudicious craze is fraught with great perils. The Man-Eater of Malgudi has a definite sustained mythical structure. It is the recreation of old Hindu Myth of Bhasmasur in modern form. Raju's decision to sacrifice him self for the benefit of others is based on the untapped sources of the stories of good men that

sacrificed themselves for others. His strength comes from general faith and faith can transform even the hard-hearted guide. Raju rises above himself for others' sake and in this feature lies the fusion, and amalgam of the local, regional and the universal. It attempts to enliven the classical Hindu Mythology, legends and folklores.

We have traced the meaning, implication and employment of the myths in novels of R.K. Narayan viz; The Man-Eater of Malgudi, Mr. Sampath, The Dark Room, The Financial Expert and The Guide to discover how myths form an integral part of the thematic pattern in these novels.

#### **The Man-Eater of Malgudi**

It is the Most Classical of Narayan's novels - a jubilee book of Satan's defeat and death to bring universal relief. Satan alive is a source both of shock and delight and Satan dead is evocative of both nostalgia and euphoria. According to Balram Mishra, "In hands less mature than Narayan's, the novel would have become a dry dogmatic text of nemesis and poetic justice but Narayan performs the miracle of satisfying both the sense of justice and the sense of wonder."

#### **Mr. Sampath**

"Like Shiva open your third eye and burn up love so that all its grossness and contrary elements are cleared away and only its essence remains, that is the way to attain peace, my boy."<sup>8</sup>

Indian mythology tells that Kama inspired Shiva with amorous thoughts of Parvati while he was engaged in penitential devotion and his "third eye puffed up with rage. Ignited by the state of the three-eyed God, the resplendent Maiden began to go up in flames. Thus was Kama with his bow and arrow incinerated by Sambhu" R.K. Narayan himself observes, "The legends and myths as contained in the Puranas are mere illustrations of the moral and spiritual truths."

Mr. Sampath (1957) was published in America under the title The Printer of Malgudi and was appreciated, on one hand, for its detachment, compassion and humour; but on the other hand, was called having a hump back shape and berserk design: Dr. B. Mishra Calls it octagonal in its crowded interests. New York Herald Tribune found it resembling works of Tchekhov. It reveals Malgudi society in its essence and demonstrates that sex and money are the two magnetic forces that motivate all human actions. The novel portrays the complex web of human relationships, which are either monetary or personal. Characters are driven to act by economic necessity. Srinivas says, "Man has no significance as a wage earner as an economic unit, as a receptacle of responsibilities." To shoulder his responsibilities, Srinivas leaves home to come to Malgudi. "Am I guilty of the charges of neglect? Family duties come before any other duty." He finds a printer in Mr. Sampath who acts on the dictum that 'fortune favours the brave'. A bond of affectionate understanding is developed but financial exigencies compel Mr. Sampath to abandon printing work and launch upon film production. Sampath becomes director and Srinivas, the scriptwriter. Ravi and Shanti, the heroine also joins. The film is named the burning of the Kama. Compromise is the first requirement of survival in this world. Srinivas has to make many compromises with censure of his work. Ravi gets infatuated with Shanti. There is a criss-cross of motives and a hilarious comedy is produced.

Shiva the hero is thrown out on the higher demand of money. Now Sampath plays Shiva. When Shiva moves to embrace Parvati, Ravi in a frenzy rushes to knock Shiva aside and tries to kiss Parvati and carries her off; lights go off and there is total confusion. Panicky situation and topsy-turvy rules. Sampath plans to marry Shanti but is ditched. Ravi ends up as a victim of mental ailment. Thus, a conglomeration of compassion, pathos, humours and force is produced.

The book deals with the rise and fall of Margayya's fortunes. Margayya is pander between the bank and villagers. Krishna is called Margayya i.e. one who show way. He gets a manuscript from Dr. Pal and prints it as Domestic Harmony (the real name is Bed Life). He becomes the richest man of the town. His troubles begin with his switching over of allegiance from Goddess Sarswati to Lakshmi. He is ultimately ruined through his son Balu. "Dr. Pal engineers Margayya's aspirations for easy wealth. He is at the back of Margayya's rapid ascent from rags to riches just as his son Balu is responsible for his descent from riches to rags." Thus, the theme of trade and commerce is developed. It is fate that lifts up the hero to unexpected affluence and fate that kicks him back to the old place. Money makes him think that he is all-powerful and can make the career of his son but it is the same money, which becomes the instrument of the spoilage of his son and Margayya's ultimate doom. We have a full philosophy on money e.g. (A) Money is one's greatest need (B) Money has power and dynamism (C) Money enables one to do great deeds. It buys respect (D) Money is open sesame to power and a panacea for all aspirations (E) Money is something to accumulate and not to spend. (F) Every rupee contains seed of another rupee and so on to infinity ... and endless firmament. Thus Margayya resembles Volpone by Ben Jonson.

#### **The Dark Room**

The Dark Room is a heart-rending story of a neglected wife and a bullying husband. Prof. A.N. Kaul calls it a weak novel but Harimohan Prasad finds in it "in nebulous form the novelist's potency for maturity. It reflects like a prism the protean shades of Narayan's distinctive world and art." The novel deals with the domestic world of Ramani and Savitri - one is callous, adulterous and domineering; the other is submissive loyal and an ungrudging sufferer of the petty tyrannies of the selfish self-opinionated husband. Her sulking withdrawal into the dark room falls flat on a nonchalant husband. The volcano of long tolerance erupts when she hears of husbands philandering and we see in her the new woman of Shaw and Ibsen and the free woman of Nayantara Sehgal: "I am a human being. You men will never grant that. For you, we are playthings... Don't think you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose"... "Things? I don't possess anything. What possession can a woman have excepted her body?" This Eruption of frustration makes her seek shelter in the arms of suicide but is saved only to discover a couple who is exactly opposite to her - dominate wife and submissive husband. Her picaresque confronts her with various experiences and she is seized with nostalgia for children, home and accustomed comforts. She returns. Her surrender sounds as an anticlimax but hers is surrender not to the husband but to her obligations. She may have failed on earthly plane but triumphed on

spiritual plane. Through the cubit of domestic disharmony, the novelist has shown a deft understanding of human relationship and an awareness of Indian culture and tradition.

#### **The Guide**

The theme of The Guide is rooted in the traditional Indian belief, not confined to India alone that prayer can move gods to bring about rain to drought-stricken land for the relief of the suffering multitudes. It also has the theme of enforced sainthood. Perhaps no other novel of Narayan has evoked so much critical diversity of opinion as this. O.P. Mathur calls it a study in cultural ambivalence. William Walsh states that the complex association of sincerity and self-deception is its organising theme. Uma Parmeshwaran calls it a compound of realism and fantasy presented with a literary device of ambiguity. If Professor Narsimhaiah is all praise for Raju, the Guide, for his protection and promotion of Rosie at the cost of his own family and business, Professor Balram Gupta calls him a sinner who will always remain a sinner. "Raju is a classic example of a counterfeit guru, a hypocrite masquerading as saint, a sinner in saffron."

The novel begins in the middle of the chronological order of the events of the story and the hero released from jail is taken for a saint as "the essence of sainthood lies in one's ability to utter mystifying statements" (P.52). All the past activities of Raju are gradually revealed through sustaining suspense Raju has three roles - as a guide, lover and saint. The interesting situation is created when we see that Rosie has a husband with whom she does not bed and a lover with whom she cannot wed. Balram Gupta holds Raju responsible for indulgence in prevarications, offer of explanations, which can't bring exoneration. Raju makes capital out of the loveless relationship of Rosie and Marco. For him, Rosie is not a woman but a goldmine. His foxy brain is never chary of ideas. Rosie feels like a parrot in the cage. Raju later becomes jealous of Rosie's self-reliance and calls her a snake woman (P.222). His vacuous platitudes spellbind the naive villagers. His decision to go on a long fast for public welfare is eyewash as his fast is an enforced one. So the novel is a delightful exposure of the ignorance-ridden Indian rural society and pseudo-saints.

Thus, we see that the use of myth in R.K. Narayan is not arbitrary but done with a purpose of delimiting his total scope and imposing a deeper concern on the literal level of narration. Narayan represents what C.D. Narsimhaiah has defined as 'the traditional Novelist', a man who writes 'not merely with an intense social awareness of his own age but with the past of India in his bones.'<sup>9</sup> The religious and philosophical beliefs based on the great Indian epics, legends and folk tales implicitly affirm certain values of Indian traditional life and undeniably confer on his novels artistic uniqueness.

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