

Daisy's Quest for Self-Actualization: A Maslowian Analysis of Female Agency in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*

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Abstract : This paper examines Daisy's character in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, exploring her pursuit of self-actualization within the constraints of post-colonial Indian society. Daisy's journey, marked by her dedication to family planning and rejection of traditional gender roles, demonstrates a complex negotiation between individual agency and societal expectations. The analysis considers Daisy's complex relationships, her idealism, and the societal constraints she faces, highlighting the interplay between individual agency and cultural norms. While Daisy embodies many aspects of self-actualization, her journey is also marked by internal conflicts and the challenges of navigating a patriarchal society. Daisy's idealism and her pursuit of meaningful work, while aligning with self-actualization principles, embody the evolving role of modern Indian women, revealing both the potential for self-realization and the persistent challenges posed by patriarchal norms in a rapidly changing world. By examining Daisy's struggles and triumphs, the paper offers insights into the evolving role of women in modern India and the universal human desire for self-actualization. Through a Maslowian framework, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Narayan's portrayal of modern Indian womanhood and the universal quest for self-actualization.

Keywords: self-actualization, Hierarchy of Needs, societal expectations, societal constraints, individual agency, growth.

Introduction - Personal agency, the capacity to influence one's own life and actions, is the driving force behind self-actualization. It encompasses the ability to set goals, make choices, and take ownership of one's development. A strong sense of agency empowers individuals to pursue their aspirations, overcome obstacles, and shape their environment to align with their values and goals. An individual's quest for self-actualization, the pinnacle of human potential according to Abraham Maslow (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs), is a deeply personal journey intertwined with both their inherent agency and the constraints imposed by society. This interplay creates a dynamic tension, shaping the trajectory of self-discovery and the realisation of one's full capabilities. Societal constraints, whether in the form of cultural norms, economic limitations, or systemic inequalities, can significantly impact an individual's journey. These constraints can create barriers to accessing resources, opportunities, and even the very belief in one's potential. The interaction between agency and societal constraints is dynamic and multifaceted. Sometimes, constraints can fuel agency, sparking a desire to challenge limitations and create change. Other times, constraints can lead to feelings of powerlessness and hinder the pursuit of self-actualization. The quest for self-

actualization is a continuous process of navigating the interplay between personal agency and societal constraints. It requires individuals to develop resilience, adaptability, and a critical awareness of the forces shaping their lives. Understanding this dynamic interplay is essential for fostering environments that empower individuals to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society. The intersection of literature and psychology, particularly character development and human motivation analysis, has been a fertile area of academic inquiry. R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* has garnered significant critical attention for its portrayal of social change and individual aspirations in post-colonial India. Similarly, Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualisation has been widely applied across disciplines to understand the drive for personal growth and fulfilment.

Narayan's literary oeuvre is known for its richly textured narratives that delve into the nuances of the human condition, often with a keen eye for the subtleties of gender dynamics. In this study, we will explore the multifaceted nature of Daisy's character and how she navigates the expectations and limitations imposed upon her as a woman in a patriarchal society while striving to fulfil her desires and actualize her true potential. This paper seeks to analyse

Daisy's character through the lens of Maslow's theory, exploring how her actions, choices, and interactions reflect her journey toward self-actualization. By situating Daisy within the socio-cultural milieu of Narayan's fictional Malgudi, the study also interrogates the constraints and opportunities that shape her pursuit of autonomy and self-fulfilment. Through this analysis, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Narayan's portrayal of modern Indian womanhood and the universal human struggle for self-actualization, as articulated in Maslow's framework.

At the core of this analysis lies Abraham Maslow's seminal theory of the hierarchy of needs, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation and personal growth. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, introduced in his seminal work *Motivation and Personality* (1954), has been a foundational framework in psychology for understanding human motivation. Self-actualization, the highest level of the hierarchy, refers to the realization of one's potential and the pursuit of personal growth. In literary studies, Maslow's theory has been applied to analyse characters' psychological development and their quest for meaning. Maslow's hierarchy of needs posits that human beings are driven by a series of hierarchical needs, ranging from the most fundamental physiological requirements to the highest level of self-actualization. According to Maslow, individuals are motivated to fulfil these needs sequentially, with the lower-level needs (such as physiological and safety needs) taking precedence over the higher-level needs (such as belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization). At the base of the hierarchy are the physiological needs, such as food, water, and shelter, followed by the need for safety and security. Once these basic needs are met, individuals then strive to fulfil their need for love, belonging, and social connection. The next level in the hierarchy is the need for esteem, which encompasses both self-esteem and the esteem of others. At the apex of this hierarchy lies the need for self-actualization, which Maslow defines as the "desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming," where individuals seek to realise their fullest potential and achieve a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives.

Central to Maslow's theory is the notion that self-actualization represents the highest level of human development, where individuals transcend the limitations of their circumstances and strive to become the best version of themselves. As Maslow eloquently articulates, "What a man can be, he must be." This drive towards self-actualization is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, and it is this universal human desire that forms the backdrop for Narayan's exploration of Daisy's character. This paper adopts a qualitative, textual analysis approach, drawing on close readings of R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* and applying Abraham Maslow's theory of self-

actualization as a framework for understanding Daisy's character development. The primary analysis examines how Daisy's journey in the novel aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, exploring the fulfilment or frustration of her physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs, ultimately leading to her pursuit of self-actualization. Specific textual evidence from the novel is incorporated to support the analysis, drawing connections between Daisy's actions, beliefs, and psychological development. The study concludes by discussing the significance of this Maslowian reading of Daisy, highlighting its contributions to the understanding of female agency and individual growth in post-colonial Indian literature.

While Daisy's character has been analysed from feminist and socio-cultural perspectives, there is limited research that explicitly connects her journey to psychological theories of self-actualization. Similarly, although Maslow's theory has been applied to literary characters, its relevance to post-colonial Indian literature, particularly in understanding female agency, remains underexplored. This paper seeks to address these gaps by offering a Maslowian analysis of Daisy's character, thereby enriching the existing scholarship on Narayan's work and contributing to the broader discourse on literature and psychology.

R.K. Narayan's novel *The Painter of Signs* is a nuanced exploration of human aspirations, societal norms, and individual agency in the context of post-colonial India. It stands as a poignant exploration of the interplay between individual agency and societal expectations, particularly as it pertains to the journey of self-actualization for the female protagonist, Daisy. Daisy is a compelling figure whose pursuit of independence, professional fulfilment, and personal identity resonates with Abraham Maslow's concept of self-actualisation. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a cornerstone of humanistic psychology, posits that self-actualization represents the pinnacle of human development, where individuals strive to realise their fullest potential and achieve a sense of purpose. Daisy's character, with her unwavering commitment to social work, her defiance of traditional gender roles, and her complex relationship with the protagonist, Raman, offers fertile ground for examining how female agency intersects with the quest for self-actualization in a patriarchal society. Through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this paper seeks to analyse Daisy's quest for self-actualization and how she navigates the constraints and possibilities of her gendered existence.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Daisy's Journey : Daisy's pursuit of self-actualization in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* is a complex negotiation of individual agency and societal constraints. Her foundational needs appear met through her education and financial independence as a social worker, yet her independence challenges traditional gender roles. This tension

complicates her pursuit of love and belonging, as her dedication to her ideals and vision of self-actualization sometimes conflicts with societal expectations of marriage and domesticity. Her idealism, exemplified by her commitment to social work, aligns with Maslow's concept of self-actualization, but also isolates her from others, raising questions about the cost of personal growth for women who challenge societal norms. While Daisy embodies many aspects of self-actualization, her journey is limited by the patriarchal norms of Malgudi, evident in her interactions with Raman and the resistance she faces in her professional life. Ultimately, Daisy's character symbolises the evolving Indian woman, navigating the complexities of identity and agency in a rapidly changing society, highlighting the interplay between individual aspirations and societal expectations in post-colonial India. Her story serves as a commentary on the possibilities and limitations of female agency, reflecting the broader cultural and societal influences that shape identity and the universal human struggle for self-realization.

The Hierarchy of Human Needs theory is divided into five clusters of needs. From the lowest physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs, and the highest self-actualization needs. Maslow's hierarchy posits that individuals must satisfy basic physiological and safety needs before pursuing higher levels of growth. As a financially independent and educated woman, Daisy's character appears to have met these foundational needs. She is a bold, modern woman who confidently works in her office. Her mission is the sole purpose for which she feels secure about. In a world where the material world attracts every young girl, Daisy emerges out as an exception. Clad in a simple cotton sari, Daisy is emphatic about the woes of others. For her, love, charity, and compassion for the needy seem to take priority, and her missionary zeal makes her neglect her consciousness for temporary physical beauty. Her career as a social worker and her dedication to family planning initiatives demonstrate her economic self-sufficiency and her commitment to societal welfare.

If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, there emerge the love and affection and belonging needs, and the whole cycle already described will repeat itself with this new centre. These needs can be expressed in a variety of ways. It can be expressed through a close relationship with a friend, lover, or mate, or through a social relationship. Daisy, as reflected from her childhood, does not feel the necessity of a male in her life, whether it is a husband or a lover. She is neither fascinated by the sacredness of marriage nor the passion of love. Though she is not bereft of emotions, and as she travels and works with Raman, she too gets the feeling of attraction towards Raman. However, her independence is not without challenges. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, Daisy's professional life is marked by her struggle to assert her

authority in a male-dominated field, reflecting the societal barriers that women face even when their basic needs are met (Mukherjee 85). This tension underscores the complexity of self-actualisation in a context where gender norms continue to exert significant influence.

Maslow's theory emphasises the importance of love and belonging as a prerequisite for self-actualization. Daisy treats Raman warmly, to his great relief. He goes to her house and confesses his romantic feelings for her. She initially tries to deny her feelings for him but cannot do so. They decide to enter into a relationship. Daisy later reveals to Raman that she did run away from her family after she realised they were going to marry her off to any man they wanted to. Raman and Daisy decide to get married in the simplest fashion. Daisy's interactions with Raman, the protagonist, reveal her ambivalence toward romantic relationships.

After all the above-mentioned needs have already been fulfilled, an individual has a strong desire for a stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of himself, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others. It includes both the desire to feel confident, capable, and independent (the need for self-respect) and the desire to be respected and held in high esteem by others (the need for social approval or prestige). When people are not able to satisfy these needs, they feel inferior, weak, anxious, and worthless. Daisy's dilemma arises from this complex balancing act between her ideals, her relationships, and the societal expectations placed upon her as a woman. She has achieved a level of professional success and independence that affords her a sense of self-worth and confidence. She derives a strong sense of purpose and meaning from her work advocating for family planning and women's empowerment. However, she remains conflicted about the role of romantic relationships and marriage in her life. While she values Raman's companionship, she resists his attempts to confine her within the traditional roles of marriage and domesticity. Problems between them begin to crop up immediately, as Daisy repeatedly states that she does not want their relationship to get in the way of her work. Things deteriorate further when Daisy is supposed to move in with Raman. On the day she is scheduled to do so, she tells him she is having second thoughts about their union. She says married life is ultimately not for her, and despite how much she loves Raman, she doesn't want her work to become secondary. She decides to leave on a three-year campaign for family planning. This resistance aligns with Rosy's broader commitment to her ideals and her vision of self-actualization. As Nandini Sahu observes, Daisy's detachment from conventional relationships reflects her prioritization of personal growth over societal expectations (Sahu 112). However, her inability to fully reconcile her ideals with her emotional needs highlights the challenges of achieving self-actualization in a society that often equates female fulfilment with marital and familial roles. Daisy's

actions and decisions throughout the narrative demonstrate a clear commitment to self-actualization, as she navigates the tension between her professional aspirations, her personal relationships, and the societal expectations placed upon her as a woman. Daisy's choice to embark on a three-year campaign for family planning, despite her love for Raman, underscores her unwavering dedication to her cause and her refusal to compromise her personal and professional goals.

Daisy's Idealism and the Pursuit of Self-Actualisation:

When someone is satisfied with four levels of needs, the final level of development, which Maslow termed self-actualization, can be reached. After fulfilling four previous requirements—psychological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, and esteem needs—as human beings, Raman and Daisy require the fulfilment of higher needs, the self-actualization needs. It happens when Raman manages to accept Daisy's refusal of marriage, telling her that his house on Ellaman Street will be open for her whenever she decides to return. In Daisy's case, it happens when she changes her mind about Raman, feeling that her sense of purpose and her independent existence may be affected by married life. She decides to leave Malgudi for a three-year family planning initiative in villages all over India. Daisy, intact for quite some time, was in a dilemma and crossroads between her intellect and instinct—one pulling her towards her firm convictions against marriage and the population explosion and the other towards her satisfaction of her own natural instinct towards marriage and sex. After a struggle with her instinct, Daisy recovers her normal self with confidence and firmness. She is very different from Narayan's other heroines, Rosie and Bharati, whose self-discovery is gradual. Daisy realises the need of establishing her identity in a faster way. William Welsh rightly observes: Daisy is a peculiarly modern young woman for whom the cult of independent individuality is the Supreme value in life. Daisy's dedication to social work and her vision of a better society exemplify Maslow's concept of self-actualization, which involves the realisation of one's potential and the pursuit of meaningful goals. Her character embodies the qualities of self-actualised individuals, such as creativity, problem-solving, and a strong sense of purpose. However, her idealism also isolates her from others, as seen in her strained relationship with Raman and her detachment from her family. This isolation raises questions about the cost of self-actualization, particularly for women who challenge societal norms. As Uma Parameswaran argues, Daisy's character represents both the triumphs and the sacrifices of women who seek to redefine their identities in a conservative society (Parameswaran 74). R.K. Narayan, being very Indian at heart, brings out this modern woman to the readers, proving that the emancipation of women in India is not a myth or a utopia. She is the product of our own Indian Culture, who though is influence by the changing values of the society

but does not shed off her values. She is a bold struggler for her identity, trying to assert equality not only for herself but also for her sex. It must be noted that with this boldness she also becomes instrumental in a certain extent to empower her male counterpart. It must have been very surprising for a tradition-bound Indian society to accept such a sudden metamorphosis in women, but Narayan's character, like Daisy, has ushered a wind of positivity and boldness. Daisy's self-actualization is intertwined with her mission and ambition. Mission becomes her means of self-discovery, allowing her to explore her emotions, her desires, and her identity.

Daisy's self-actualization is a multifaceted process, involving her personal growth and her defiance of societal norms. Through her character, Narayan explores themes of self-discovery, empowerment, and the clash between individual aspirations and societal expectations. She is an activist for the cause of family planning and birth control. She is very passionate about the cause and travels across India trying to educate people. She feels strongly that overpopulation is causing irreparable damage to India's future. Daisy feels passionately about sex education because she thinks that women are often conscripted into the roles of mother and housewife without their consent. Their time and bodily autonomy are suddenly eaten up by the demands of having a family and maintaining a home. Daisy argues that this is harmful to many women, as they work constantly, repeatedly suffer the ordeal of birth, and are forced into a life dominated by household obligations. Her comments on this subject indicate how widespread this sexism is in the world of the novel and how far-reaching its impact is on the daily lives of women across her country. While Raman seems a little wary of her intense views, the reader quickly comes to see the dramatic stakes of this issue. Daisy's self-actualization culminates in her decision to leave Raman and embark on an independent path, fulfilling his mission. This act of defiance is a significant turning point in her journey, as it signifies her complete break from societal expectations and her commitment to her individuality. While Daisy's pursuit of self-actualization is at the heart of the novel, the narrative also highlights the complexities and limitations of this journey. The patriarchal structures of Malgudi society constrain Daisy's ability to fully realise her potential, as her independence and professional ambition are often met with resistance and scepticism. Narayan's portrayal of Daisy underscores the tension between individual aspirations and societal expectations, a theme that resonates deeply in the context of post-colonial India.

As the eminent psychologist Sudhir Kakar insightfully observes, the psychological dimensions of characters like Daisy reflect the broader cultural and societal influences that shape their identities and lived experiences. Daisy's pursuit of self-actualization is a profoundly personal and introspective journey, one that is indelibly marked by her

unwavering determination to discover her true self, to empower herself, and to liberate her spirit from the shackles of societal constraints.

Daisy's self-actualization is a complex journey marked by ambition, independence, and rebellion against societal constraints. Daisy seeks personal growth through artistic expression, defying traditional gender roles. Her transformation is central to the novel's exploration of self-discovery and the pursuit of individual aspirations.

While Daisy's character exemplifies many aspects of self-actualization, her journey also highlights the limitations imposed by societal structures. The patriarchal norms of Malgudi, as depicted by Narayan, constrain Daisy's ability to fully realize her potential. Her interactions with Raman, who oscillates between admiration and frustration with her independence, reflect the broader societal ambivalence toward women who defy traditional roles. This ambivalence is further evident in the resistance Daisy faces in her professional life, where her authority is often questioned because of her gender. As William Walsh observes, Narayan's portrayal of Daisy underscores the tension between individual aspirations and societal expectations, a theme that resonates deeply in the context of post-colonial India (Walsh 93). Daisy undergoes a significant transformation in her pursuit of self-actualization. Her journey is characterised by her ambition, her yearning for independence, and her rebellion against the societal constraints imposed on women in traditional Indian society. As the text suggests, Daisy's detachment from traditional feminine roles is not without its challenges: "Daisy's professional life is marked by her struggle to assert her authority in a male-dominated field, reflecting the societal barriers that women face even when their basic needs are met." (Chowdhury 2014).

Daisy's journey toward self-actualization is inextricably linked to her negotiation of the societal and cultural constraints imposed upon her as a woman. While Daisy possesses a strong sense of agency and a burning desire for independence, she is also acutely aware of the limitations placed on her by her gender and the expectations of the traditional community in which she lives. Daisy's pursuit of self-actualization begins with the fulfillment of her more basic needs. As a young, educated woman, she has already achieved a certain level of physiological and safety needs, as well as a degree of esteem through her work as a family planning activist. However, her quest for love and belonging is complicated by her rejection of traditional gender roles and her unwillingness to conform to the expectations of her community. Despite these obstacles, Daisy's determination to realise her full potential remains steadfast as she navigates the complex interplay between her own aspirations and the societal norms that would seek to confine her.

Daisy's journey reflects the broader societal changes taking place in post-colonial India. She represents a

generation of women grappling with new opportunities and challenges, seeking to define their identities within a rapidly evolving cultural landscape. Her struggles and triumphs resonate with the experiences of many women navigating the complexities of tradition and modernity. Daisy's transformation is a testament to the human spirit's remarkable capacity to overcome adversity, challenge deeply entrenched societal norms, and ultimately achieve a profound sense of personal fulfilment. Her story serves as a powerful source of inspiration, reminding us all that we, too, possess the potential to break free from the limitations imposed by our social circumstances and embrace our authentic selves.

Daisy is not a simplistic or idealised figure. She grapples with internal conflicts, doubts, and uncertainties. Her relationship with Raman is fraught with tension, reflecting her struggle to balance her personal desires with her commitment to her ideals. This complexity adds depth to her character, making her a more relatable and nuanced representation of the modern Indian woman.

Daisy stands as a complex and compelling symbol of the modern Indian woman navigating a society in transition. Her character embodies the evolving aspirations and challenges faced by women in post-colonial India, grappling with tradition, modernity, and the pursuit of self-discovery. Daisy's character can be seen as a powerful symbol of the evolving Indian woman, navigating the complex and multifaceted realities of identity, agency, and self-actualisation in a rapidly changing society. Her unwavering commitment to social work and her resolute refusal to conform to traditional gender roles align her with the highest ideals of self-actualization, as envisioned by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Yet, her transformative journey also reveals the formidable challenges and obstacles that women often face in achieving personal growth and fulfilment within the confines of a patriarchal social context. By exploring these facets of Daisy's character, Narayan offers a compelling portrayal of the modern Indian woman. Daisy's journey is not simply a personal one; it reflects the larger societal shifts and the ongoing negotiation between individual aspirations and cultural norms in a nation undergoing profound transformation. Daisy's narrative thus stands as a poignant and thought-provoking commentary on the ever-evolving possibilities and the lingering limitations of female agency within the rich tapestry of Indian literature. Her journey challenges us to confront the complexities of identity, empowerment, and self-actualization, inviting us to reflect deeply on the ongoing struggles and triumphs of women in their quest for personal and societal transformation.

Narayan presents female characters who defy societal expectations and seek autonomy and self-expression. Through their narratives, he exposes the limitations placed upon women and invites readers to question and challenge gender inequality. His exploration of gender roles and the

suppression of female ambitions contributes to broader conversations on feminism and the empowerment of women. Themes of the emancipation of women gained momentum in the early 20th century, and Daisy is R.K. Narayan's one such attempt to represent the new woman.

Conclusion: The Maslowian analysis of Daisy's character in *The Painter of Signs* offers valuable insights into the interplay between individual agency, societal constraints, and the pursuit of self-actualization. By analysing Daisy's journey through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy, we gain a deeper understanding of her motivations, her struggles, and her triumphs. Her story highlights the complexities of self-actualization, particularly for women navigating the evolving landscape of postcolonial India. Daisy's journey, viewed through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, offers a nuanced exploration of self-actualization within the context of post-colonial India. The analysis of Daisy's character in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* through the lens of Maslow's theory of self-actualization reveals a profound interplay between individual agency, societal constraints, and the pursuit of personal fulfilment. Her pursuit of personal and professional fulfilment, while navigating societal expectations and traditional gender roles, highlights the complexities faced by modern Indian women. Daisy emerges as a complex figure whose journey reflects both the possibilities and limitations of self-actualization in a patriarchal and tradition-bound society. Daisy's unwavering commitment to her ideals, despite the challenges and sacrifices she encounters, underscores the enduring human drive for self-discovery and the ongoing negotiation between individual agency and cultural norms. Her story ultimately serves as a poignant reflection on the universal quest for self-realization and the evolving landscape of identity in a rapidly changing world. Daisy's journey reflects both the potential for personal growth and the challenges of achieving fulfilment in a patriarchal society. Ultimately, Daisy's quest for self-actualization serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring relevance of both Narayan's literary vision and Maslow's psychological insights in illuminating the complexities of individual growth and agency. By situating her character within the framework of Maslow's theory, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Narayan's portrayal of modern Indian womanhood and the universal human struggle for self-actualization.

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