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R.K. NARAYAN'S MALGUDI AN IMAGINATIVE LOCALE

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ABSTRACT

Malgudi is a fictional, semi-urban town in southern India, conjured by Narayan. He created the town in September 1930, on Vijayadashami, an auspicious day to start new efforts and thus chosen for him by his grandmother. The town was created with an impeccable historical record, dating to the Ramayana days when it was noted that Lord Rama passed through; it was also said that the Buddha visited the town during his travels. While Narayan never provided strict physical constraints for the town, he allowed it to form shape with events in the various stories, becoming a reference point for the future.

Key Words - Fictional, Semi - urban, impeccable, constraints.

INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan as a novelist had a Prolific writing skill who could make an imaginative land a land of life. It sounds authentic when we read the novels which comprises of realistic fiction, knitted with geographical features where people live their lives with behavioral patterns. The novel has a limited circumference around which a fictional world of Malgudi exists. Many writers of South had tried to coo relate Malgudi to the existing places like Coimbatore, Mysore and other regions.

R.K. Narayan visualised Malgudi in South India and all his novels were somehow set in the same locale. It was a small town where people were happy with their simple living. Malgudi is created a self-contained town with a centrally located Market an office, a court, police station, and two schools, Many other facilities were also provided to take care of the common people. He never went away from his fictional town it looked as it he was deeply attached to the town. He has tried to immortalize Malgudi by structuring his fiction on the details of the men and manners. It is a small town in the beginning but with passage of time it changes to modern urbanized region. Different novels have different description above it.

Rasipuram Krishna Swami Iyer Narayana Swami, was an Indian writer, best known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. He is one of three leading figures of early Indian literature in English (alongside Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao), and is credited with bringing the genre to the rest of the world.

Malgudi evolved with the changing political landscape of India. In the 1980s, when the nationalistic fervor in India dictated the changing of British names of towns and localities and removal of British landmarks, Malgudi's mayor and city council removed the long-standing statue of Frederick Lawley, one of Malgudi's early residents. However, when the Historical Societies showed proof that Lawley was strong in his support of the Indian independence movement, the council was forced to undo all their earlier actions. A good comparison to

Malgudi, a place that Greene characterised as "more familiar than Battersea or Euston Road", is Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Also, like Faulkner's, when one looks at Narayan's works, the town gets a better definition through the many different novels and stories.

The setting for most of Narayan's stories is the fictional town of Malgudi, first introduced in *Swami and Friends*. His narratives highlight social context and provide a feel for his characters through everyday life. Narayan's novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, was published in 1961. The book was reviewed as having a narrative that is a classical art form of comedy, with delicate control. After the launch of this book, the restless Narayan once again took to travelling, and visited the U.S. and Australia. He spent three weeks in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne giving lectures on Indian literature. The trip was funded by a fellowship from the Australian Writers' Group. By this time Narayan had also achieved significant success, both literary and financial. He had a large house in Mysore, and wrote in a study with no fewer than eight windows; he drove a new Mercedes-Benz, a luxury in India at that time, to visit his daughter who had moved to Coimbatore after her marriage. With his success, both within India and abroad, Narayan started writing columns for magazines and newspapers including *The Hindu* and *The Atlantic*.

Narayan's next published work was the 1967 novel, *The Vendor of Sweets*. It was inspired in part by his American visits and consists of extreme characterizations of both the Indian and American stereotypes, drawing on the many cultural differences. However, while it displays his characteristic comedy and narrative, the book was reviewed as lacking in depth. This year, Narayan travelled to England, where he received the first of his honorary doctorates from the University of Leeds. The next few years were a quiet period for him. He published his next book, a collection of short stories, *A Horse and Two Goats*, in 1970. Meanwhile, Narayan remembered a promise made to his dying uncle in 1938, and started translating the Kamba Ramayanam to English. The Ramayana was published in 1973, after five years of work. Almost immediately after publishing *The Ramayana*, Narayan started working on a condensed translation of the Sanskrit epic, the Mahabharata. While he was researching and writing the epic, he also published another book, *The Painter of Signs* (1977). *The Painter of Signs* is a bit longer than a novella and makes a marked change from Narayan's other works, as he deals with hitherto unaddressed subjects such as sex, although the development of the protagonist's character is very similar to his earlier creations. *The Mahabharata* was published in 1978.

Narayan was commissioned by the government of Karnataka to write a book to promote tourism in the state. The work was published as part of a larger government publication in the late 1970s. He thought it deserved better, and republished it as *The Emerald Route* (Indian Thought Publications, 1980). The book contains his personal perspective on the local history and heritage, but being bereft of his characters and creations, it misses his enjoyable narrative. The same year, he was elected as an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and won the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature. Around the same time, Narayan's works were translated to Chinese for the first time.

In 1983, Narayan published his next novel, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, about a tiger and its relationship with humans.^[59] His next novel, *Talkative Man*, published in 1986, was the tale of an aspiring journalist from Malgudi. During this time, he also published two collections of short stories: *Malgudi Days* (1982), a revised edition including the original book and some other stories, and *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*, a new collection. In 1987, he completed *A Writer's Nightmare*, another collection of essays about topics as diverse as the caste system, Nobel prize winners, love, and monkeys. The collection included essays he had written for newspapers and magazines since 1958.

Living alone in Mysore, Narayan developed an interest in agriculture. He bought an acre of agricultural land and tried his hand at farming. He was also prone to walking to the market every afternoon, not so much for buying things, but to interact with the people. In a typical afternoon stroll, he would stop every few steps to greet and converse with shopkeepers and others, most likely gathering material for his next book.

In 1990, he published his next novel, *The World of Nagaraj*, also set in Malgudi. Narayan's age shows in this work as he appears to skip narrative details that he would have included if this were written earlier in his career. Soon after he finished the novel, Narayan fell ill and moved to Madras to be close to his daughter's family. A few years after his move, in 1994, his daughter died of cancer and his granddaughter Bhuvaneshwari

(Minnie) started taking care of him in addition to managing Indian Thought Publications. Narayan then published his final book, *Grandmother's Tale*. The book is an autobiographical novella, about his great-grandmother who travelled far and wide to find her husband, who ran away shortly after their marriage. The story was narrated to him by his grandmother, when he was a child.

Narayan's writing technique was unpretentious with a natural element of humour about it. It focused on ordinary people, reminding the reader of next-door neighbours, cousins and the like, thereby providing a greater ability to relate to the topic. Unlike his national contemporaries, he was able to write about the intricacies of Indian society without having to modify his characteristic simplicity to conform to trends and fashions in fiction writing. He also employed the use of nuanced dialogic prose with gentle Tamil overtones based on the nature of his characters. Critics have considered Narayan to be the Indian Chekhov, due to the similarities in their writings, the simplicity and the gentle beauty and humour in tragic situations. Greene considered Narayan to be more similar to Chekhov than any Indian writer. Anthony West of *The New Yorker* considered Narayan's writings to be of the realism variety of Nikolai Gogol.

Malgudi is a fictional, semi-urban town in southern India, conjured by Narayan. He created the town in September 1930, on Vijayadashami, an auspicious day to start new efforts and thus chosen for him by his grandmother. As he mentioned in a later interview to his biographers Susan and N. Ram, in his mind, he first saw a railway station, and slowly the name Malgudi came to him. The town was created with an impeccable historical record, dating to the Ramayana days when it was noted that Lord Rama passed through; it was also said that the Buddha visited the town during his travels. While Narayan never provided strict physical constraints for the town, he allowed it to form shape with events in the various stories, becoming a reference point for the future.

Having published many novels, essays and short stories, Narayan is credited with bringing Indian writing to the rest of the world. While he has been regarded as one of India's greatest writers of the twentieth century, critics have also described his writings with adjectives such as charming, harmless and benign. Narayan has also come in for criticism from later writers, particularly of Indian origin, who have classed his writings as having a pedestrian style with a shallow vocabulary and a narrow vision. According to Shashi Tharoor, Narayan's subjects are similar to those of Jane Austen as they both deal with a very small section of society. However, he adds that while Austen's prose was able to take those subjects beyond ordinariness, Narayan's was not. A similar opinion is held by Shashi Deshpande who characterizes Narayan's writings as pedestrian and naive because of the simplicity of his language and diction, combined with the lack of any complexity in the emotions and behaviours of his characters.

In the west, Narayan's simplicity of writing was well received. One of his biographers, William Walsh, wrote of his narrative as a comedic art with an inclusive vision informed by the transience and illusion of human action. Multiple Booker nominee Anita Desai classes his writings as "compassionate realism" where the cardinal sins are unkindness and immodesty. According to Wyatt Mason, in Narayan's works, the individual is not a private entity, but rather a public one and this concept is an innovation that can be called his own. In addition to his early works being among the most important English-language fiction from India, with this innovation, he provided his western readers the first works in English to be infused with an eastern and Hindu existential perspective. Mason also holds the view that Edmund Wilson's assessment of Walt Whitman, "He does not write editorials on events but describes his actual feelings", applies equally to Narayan.

"Whom next shall I meet in Malgudi? That is the thought that comes to me when I close a novel of Mr Narayan's. I do not wait for another novel. I wait to go out of my door into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and a certainty of pleasure a stranger approaching, past the bank, the cinema, the haircutting saloon, a stranger who will greet me I know with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open a door on to yet another human existence."

Narayan can be said to be a regional novelist in a higher creative sense. Narayan's stories have a functional locale Malgudi, an imaginary world. Malgudi, a small South Indian town provides the setting for almost all of Narayan's novels and short stories. Malgudi, of course, does not exist.

It is for Narayan, just as Wessex is for Thomas Hardy or Yoknapatawpha for William Faulkner, an imaginary landscape inhabited by the unique characters of his stories. It is a typical Indian town and it has been presented in his works vividly and realistically. All the novels and most of the short stories of Narayan are set in Malgudi. It frees Narayan to his humanistic enterprise.

Various critics have attempted to identify the original of this mythical town. Iyengar speculates that it might be Lalgudi on the River Cauvery or Yadavagiri in Mysore. Others of the opinion that Narayan's Malgudi is Coimbatore which has many of the landmarks a river on one side, forests on the other, the Mission School and College, and all the extensions mentioned in the novels.

However, one is not likely to arrive at any definite answer as to its geographical locations, even if one shifts all the references to the town in the novels, such specific allusions as that "Malgudi is almost a day's journey from Madras." The simple reason is that Narayan has not drawn any map of framework for his Malgudi as Faulkner for example, did for his Yoknapatawpha or Hardy had in mind for his Wessex novels.

But others have done this for Narayan. M.K. Naik has appended a map of Malgudi in book *The Ironic Vision*. But all efforts to identify Malgudi have remained futile, for it a pure "country of the mind" a dream town and not any town which exists on the map of India. It remains a dream country in which physical features of various places intimately known Narayan fuse in single detail are rearranged and magnified.

The recurrence of the same landmarks serves to put together the various novels into an organic whole. They may be rightly called Malgudi novels just as Hardy's novels are called Wessex novels. The setting or place thus constitutes the real essence of a novel being one of the most important features. The novelist creates an imaginary world which becomes the backdrop for his work and embodies his vision of life.

One can say that Narayan is not interested in the place for its own sake. His abiding interest lies in "peopled places". The "Peopled place" then is where one meets the populace of that society, "the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting ... gathering spot all that has been felt." Regional is a term applicable to a person who writes as an outsider.

But Narayan writes about Malgudi as complete insider; (he may view the Malgudians ironically but) he shares their way of life and essential mores. The place becomes the backdrop for the customs, beliefs and the way of life of a people. It reflects certain norms and moral social and ethical codes. It expresses the novelist's point of view. Thus place and people are inseparable. Narayan in an interview discusses some of the reasons why Malgudi had to be a South Indian town:

I must be absolutely certain about the psychology of the character I am writing about, and I must be equally sure of the background. I know the Tamil and Kannada speaking people most. I know their background. I know how their minds work and almost as if it is happening to me, I know exactly what will happen to them in certain circumstances. And I know how they will react.

Like Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner, Narayan is able to achieve this localization, a mastery of place, and Malgudi Narayan's imaginary place becomes a living presence. And it is everywhere in India. One can easily recognize it in his fiction and can expect at any minute to go out into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and certainty of pleasure a stranger approaching past the bank, the cinema, the haircutting saloon, a stranger who will greet us, we know, with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open a door to yet another human existence. Unlike Hardy, Narayan's Malgudi is much more human as his interest lies in human beings. Narayan explains: "I seek life wherever I go. I seek people, their interest, their aspirations and predicaments."

Narayan creates his fictional world of Malgudi as an essentially Indian society or town. The Indianness and Indian sensibility pervaded the whole place. Narayan's Malgudi is also a microcosm of India. It grows and develops and expands and changes and is full of humanity, drawing its sustenance from the human drama that is enacted in it. Like Hardy, Arnold Bennett too writes about Five Towns, also famous as fictional places. For Bennett the Five Towns were provincial. His attitude towards them is always expository in the sense that he explains and exhibits them to an outside world. But for Narayan Malgudi is anything but provincial.

Thus, Malgudi, a small South Indian town, provides the setting for all his novels. Asked about the conception of the place, Narayan is reported to have said to Ved Mehta: "I remember waking up with the name

Malgudi on Vijayadasami, the day on which initiation of learning is celebrated." It was in September 1930, he said that the name of the town had been vouched him by the divine patrons of knowledge:

Malgudi was an earth-shaking discovery for me, because I had no mind for facts and things like that, which would be necessary in writing about Lalgudi or any real place. I first pictured not my town but just the railway station, which was a small platform with a banyan tree, a station master, and two trains a day, one coming and one going. On Vijayadasami I sat down and wrote the first sentence about my town: The train had just arrived in Malgudi Station.

Narain seems to agree with Hardy's observation that "It is better for a writer to know about a little bit of the world remarkably well than to know a great part of the world remarkably little." That is why he limits himself to small fictional region Malgudi and provides all the topographical details like any other regional novelist. He deals with the physical features, way of life of the people, customs, beliefs and manners. He depicts the social-cultural milieu and the changes that occur in the place over the years. He shows how the place and the people are interlinked and interdependent and one cannot be seen without the other.

Narayan is able to capture the "spirit of the place" and makes it immortal. In fact Malgudi is Narayan's "Casterbridge" and is the centre of action of all his novels. There is a sense of communion between the character and the place. According to Uma Parameswaran, "Malgudi is the only character that grows changes, reacts to time and circumstance, has a spirit, a soul. Relatively other characters appear to be less dynamic."

Narayan sees India from the inside. Malgudi presents a vision of India in miniature. Narayan unfolds new vistas of life in Malgudi from *Swami and Friends* to *A Tiger for Malgudi*. Malgudi in his early novels is neither village nor city, but a town of modest size. It is sleepy, small and silent. With each new novel, we advance in time and Malgudi grows in importance and gains in definition. The major landmarks remain unchanged.

The River Sarayu flows by its side. A few boats drift lazily past the north side of the town, on the meandering Sarayu; the owners are satisfied when catch a single fish. Other landmarks are Nallappa mango Grove, the Mempi Forest, reached by the Grove street and Forest Road respectively; Trunk Road to Trichinopoly; Malgudi railway station from where one can board train to Madras; Albert Mission College from the roof of which a patient observer might notice a train chugging south over the line of boats; the Market Road which is the life line of Malgudi; the Racecourse Road and various streets and lanes Kabir Street and Kabir Lane, Vinayaka Mudali Street, Anderson Lane, Sarayu Street, Kulam Street, Smith Street, Abu Lane, Ellammal Street, Keelacheri etc. Malgudi gradually develops with the passage of time. It cultivates metropolitan ethos with modern streets, banking corporations, talkies and smuggler's den, and even a circus.

This movement towards change not only affects the geography of the place, but also the cultural and social milieu. Narayan minutely observes and describes vividly how a deeply traditional society gradually becomes aware of change. His novels subtly mirror the changing social, political and cultural influences animating Indian life.

In his novels, innocence gradually gives way experience and Malgudi begins to live up to the modern spirit. The various phenomena operating on the social and individual planes in transitional phases of Malgudi history contribute to the comic scenario of R.K. Narayan's word of fiction.

All this, however, was to happen much later, in the wake of independence in the late forties. But even in the early thirties, Malgudi has a municipality, a Town Hall, a Club, and two schools—the Albert Mission School and the Board High School. The school boys are cricket conscious and talk, and talk of Bradman, Hobbs and Tate.

There are the Taluk Office and the Office of the Police Superintendent. Swami's friend Rajam is the son of the S.P. who lives in the official's colony known as Lawley Extension. Malgudi is also a seat of judicial courts. In *Swamy and Friends*, Srinivas mentions lawyers and the closing of the courts in the second week of May.

The influence of the national movement for freedom is also felt in Malgudi. Malgudi is very much in the national mainstream. Malgudi has also a Central Jail, P.W.D. Office and Circuit House. Sriram in *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Raju in *the Guide* spend their term of captivity in Malgudi Central Jail. There is also a hospital because in *Swamy and Friends*, we hear of a Hospital Road. There are several industries in Magudi, Mr. Hentel

is a manager in seamy and friends. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, we hear two weaving mills and of a Mill Road. There are important provision stores—Cooperative Store and National Store. Mr. Sampath and Natraj run printing presses.

Malgudi though an imaginative town very well goes through the real heart of life where everything looks as if they are made with afterthought an imaginative land has done wonders to portrait a world which is nowhere in the global map of the world.

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