

MALGUDI: A HALLMARK OF NARAYAN'S FICTION

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Abstract

Malgudi, now legendary, exists nowhere. It was the result of Narayan's imagination. However, his powerful description and impressive presentation made Malgudi, as good, as a real life town. The a small town created by Narayan himself, had an imprint of traditional society. Narayan was no original thinker, nor he was interested in propagating any new idea. He largely subscribed to Hindu myths and legends. In this traditional setup, we come across clerks, doctors, tutors, school and college students, shopkeepers, house wives, film actors, artists, sculptors, journalists, astrologers, printers, etc. Rich people and beggars and even untouchables are no doubt present, but they are pushed in the background, leaving them to their fate. Narayan's chief concern is with middle class common man, with a marked potential for the uncommon, trying to win attention for himself. They struggle towards maturity, within the accepted religious and social framework. The major characters, we come across in Malgudi, belong to the middle and upper-middle strata of society, which Narayan is intimately familiar with. Most of them are basically innocent. They are traditional and superstitious, by nature. They believe that everything in the universe is pre-ordained and that no amount of human efforts, can ease the situation; they are helpless creatures, tossed this way and that way, by the caprice of fartune. In "The Bachelor of Arts", Chandran, who is intensely in love with Malthi cannot marry her, because their horoscopes do not tally. He leaves home and becomes a Sanyasi. In "Mr. Sampath", Narayan sees the world, as being controlled by a power behind and some unpredictable forces. Sampath, who dominates the story, is also forced by the circumstances to leave Malgudi forever.

Keywords: Malgudi, paradoxes, imaginary, parodic, Indian mythic tradition

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Introduction

In Malgudi, the Narayan's world, there is a constant reversal of roles and shifting of power, which is brought about, with the change of places and circumstances or with respect to various levels of special relations. A face that is lighted from below, seems terrible, but again, when the light falls on it from above, as if from heaven, it looks calm and blessed. Narayan is conscious how truth can be perspectival, and so, with his natural sense of humour, he plays a light and shade game. The transient play of light and shade, turns Narayan's world, into a world of carnivalesque impulse, where masks are worn and exchanged, and thus it is difficult to trap a character, with any single ideology or principle. Transience, here becomes the theme of 'being' or 'living', establishing the link of the micro-life of the individual to the macro-life of society. The individual lives in the illusion of his soul's absolutism and immortality, but is seen in a certain relation to society. The individual looks transient, a moving dot in the vast landscape of life.

In Malgudi, we find characters, who wear a mask over their face, as a second identity. The mask defies our normal paradigm of the human face. The usual idea and expectation of the face asks for symmetrical beauty, where beauty aspires beyond the biological reality of the body, into an idea that satisfies the aesthetic sensibilities. But, the mask with its grotesque protrusion and abnormal opening of the orifices, like eyes, ears, nose and mouth, reveals the grotesque aspect of humanity.

The English teacher, an inhabitant of Malgudi, after the death of his wife finds solace in the world of spirits and Raju the guide, dies a ruined man, not because, he wants to die, but circumstances so conspire that the only alternative before him is to become an unwilling martyr. In nutshell, the heroes of Narayan's fiction depend upon a chance or luck for their happiness. If things go contrary, they run away from reality. Largely, they accept defeat and find happiness in submission to the traditional forces of society. Sampath starts as a printer, becomes producer-actor, finds disaster overtaking his film company and ends up in a forlorn man, whose real job is to be a printer parents. In "The Dark Room", the movement from the normal to the abnormal and back. Chandran in, "The Bachelor of Arts", gets frustrated, tries sanyas for a short time and settles down, looking forward to his marriage with Susila, as per the wishes of his to normal is

seen both in Ramani and his wife Savitri.

There is generally a flight, an uprooting, a disturbance of order, followed by the return and the restoration of normalcy. Swami, Chandran, Savitri, Margayya's son Balu, all run away, but later come to the terms with hard realities of life, in the traditional society. Srinavas returns to his paper, Margayya to his knobby trunk, Savitri to her unrepentant husband, Natraj to the restored peace of his house, Srinavas and Bharti are back in Malgudi and Susila herself, defying death, is with Krishna again. Even Rosie, the dancer of great repute, who has earned name and fame, longs in the end to breath her last on the threshold of her husband's house.

Basing his stories in Malgudi, Narayan delineates his characters, quite interestingly, in the small imaginary town of South India, and we always appreciate the activity, distance, detachment and as well as discipline, which are required for an ironic treatment of his experiences. This enables him to bring out, in his works various paradoxes of life, like appearance and reality, free will and determinism, individual and society, virtue and vice, reason and passion, beauty and ugliness, hope and despair, tears and smiles.

In the backdrop of Malgudi, these paradoxes are beautifully and inseparably interwoven. Though, his earlier novels, Swami and Friend, "The Bachelor of Arts", and "The English Teacher" are auto-biographical in nature, but from "Mr. Sampath" onwards, Narayan seems to depend more on invention. It seems, that the starting point is not a plot, but a character. Sampath, Margayya, Raju, Vasu, Jagan, each of them is odd, but not eccentric. In Narayan's view, myth substitutes a communal realism, against an intruder (outsiders to Magudi, being the domestic variegated version of the "Inlechcha" in Vaden by Raja Rao) and his or her demonic behaviour. As a rhetorical and discursive tool, which blunts the edge off to contradictions and operates mainly, through the reactive attitude, which intervenes when human intentions and acts are staidly, doomed to bitter failure. In the novel, "The Men Eater of Malgudi", Narayan's textual strategy, with respect to the use of myth is enclosed by two Sanskrit terms 'Matra' which roughly means the notion of overflowing our natural boundaries, and 'Ati' an equivalent of the Greek 'Nemesis'.

In Malgudi, everyone tends to return to type, either as an infringing dropout from some Puranic text or as a cranky dodger, from an idealised way of life. Where, in fact, Kanthapura is depicted by Raja Rao in the terms of a militant battle field, against adharmic foes, which includes both casteism and the English influence.

Malgudi is substantially the parodic capital city of a fallen Hindu microcosm, a Puranic place, sprawling leisurely, along the river Suraya, the same mythical stream, on whose banks Valmiki lay Ayodya and in which the hero-god Rama drowned himself. His consciousness is stretched to embrace this mythical reality and may not be subjected to the later's condition of plausibility or verisimilitude. What is remarkable is the prefect case, with which he bridges the two world realities. It is an excellent and sometimes hilarious reenacting of an age-old Indian myth, in the modern Indian context that accounts for the special flavour of much of R.K. Narayan's writing, in "The Man Eater of Malgudi". Parody also plays an intrinsic role in this re-creation in "The Man Eater of Malgudi", and the novel demands that the reader should also have a degree of awareness so that he or she can catch the parodic overtones. The narration

continually switches, between the serious and the parodic, as Narayan goes on inter-stitching myths with his humour, irony, hilarious laughter, fun and comicality, a practice that can be compared to Robert Kroetsch's parodic use of myth.

Through, the series of Malgudi novels, Narayan faithfully presents the social values, norms, and mores, which have been in existence and still continue to play a major role in shaping the lives of Hindus in this country. Now, that the Indian society has undergone a considerable change, under the impact of western civilization; the change have been vividly noticed amongst the people. O.P. Mathur rightly observes; "Narayan does assert the validity of traditional Indian values, but the wind from the West has changed much of the panorma". Malgudi is seen steeped in tradition and its inhabitants are men and women, with their roots in family and religion. Even today, they cherish a heritage of faith and values, customs and vidual, and even dogmas and superstitions.

In Malgudi, the traditional Hindu family, as the nucleus of social structure, has zealously followed its old norms, morals and values. Its sanctity is inviolabe and its violation is nothing short of a sacrilege. It causes disruption and unhappiness. Fidelity, the most precious of the Indian values, is the theme of "The Dark Room". Savitri, the traditional Hindu wife, can put up with insult and maltreatment, but her husband's infidelity is the last straw. She bursts out, "Don't touch me,... you are dirty, you are impure. Even if I burn my skin I won't clean myself of the impurity of your touch". Similarly Sampath gets the hardest pick from life, when he gets emotionally involved with Shanti, the film actress. When he tries to pursue her, she leaves him with a note of warning "If I find you pursuing me. I will shave off my head and fling away my jewellery and wear a white sari. You and people like you, will run away at the sight of me. I am after all, a widow..."

The imaginary, but representative South Indian town, Malgudi, serves Narayan's purpose, remarkably well, as the locale of his fiction. Being imaginary and a mere creation, it does not require Narayan's creative faculty to be fettered by the facts like the topography and geography of the place. He can alter the city, according to his convenience and hence, his novels and short stories are full of contradictory details.

The creation of Malgudi, even before he had written a single sentence as a novelist, was almost a 'divine' gift. In September, on Vijaydashami, "The day on which the initiation of learning is celebrated", the town "all ready made" swam into his view. It was an earth shaking discovery for him as he had "no mind for facts and things like that, which would be necessary in writing, about Malgudi or any real place".

Malgudi serves as a perfect background for the narratives by Narayan and allows him to project, not only his conception of contemporary life, but also its historical development and transformation. Narayan, as a fiction writer, is interested, basically in telling the story, in an interesting and readable form. His interest in language and technique goes only as far as they serve as a medium and method of communicating the story.

In "The Man Eater of Malgudi", Natraj, a genial printer narrates his experience, during his association, with an egoistic and aggressive giant of a man, Vasu. Passive and unothrusive, Natraj comes of a well-to-do family and leads a leisurely life, and is not unduly anxious or bothered about anything. "The Man Eater of Malgudi" opens with on intoductory chapter about

the narrator's sphere of work, habits, daily schedule, family history and problems. His routine is disturbed, when Vasu, the 'outsider' comes to meet him in connection with printing of visiting cards. Vasu begins his destructive activities symbolically, by breaking the conventional privacy of the inner room of Natraj's press.

Self-centred and clever man that Vasu is, he becomes friendly, with the printer and takes possession of the office above the press, even without asking for his permission. He converts it into his living room. Being a taxidermist, he starts shooting all sorts of animals. He treats all those skins in the office itself, causing a lot of foul smell, creating sanitation problems and mental tension to his non-violent Brahmin host. In this way, he becomes a public nuisance and a threat to the reputation of the mild and helpless Natraj. The printer politely urges Vasu to vacate the office, but the ungrateful bully retorts by filing a complaint against Natraj for harassing a 'tenant'. He also stops talking to his frightened 'land lord' and behaves like 'a perfect enemy'.

Though, troubled by many problems created by Vasu, Natraj misses his company and wishes to be friendly with him. However, the man eater of Malgudi is not a legend retold with Vasu at the centre. Rather, it is a narrative about Natraj and his experiences, in facing the threat of Vasu, representing violent and destructive forces. The threat of Vasu to Natraj and society is full of potential for an intensely dramatic and tense novel, which would involve the readers deeply with the story and would almost make it a thriller. But in Narayan's hands, the sequence of events is so structured that the tone and movement of the story, the attitude of the readers and the degree of their emotional involvement in it, are controlled to make it a leisurely paced and not a serious narrative.

It all happens in Malgudi, this is done to a certain extent, by keeping focus on Natraj and by bringing in descriptions and scenes, related to Natraj and not having any significant bearing in the development of action as far as Vasu is concerned. Two prominent examples of such structural organisation are in the fourth and fifth chapter. Vasu drives Natraj in his jeep, without telling him, where and why to go and, then unceremoniously leaves him sixty miles away from the city, without a shirt on his person or a penny in his pocket. After the presentation of this callous act of indifference of Vasu, there is a light and comic description of affairs of Mathu, a tea shop owner, the long bus journey and printer's encounter with a customer, the adjournment lawyer.

These events in Malgudi are neither directly related to the main sequence of events, nor do they project the real implications of Vasu's behaviour. Similarly, after Natraj gets summons from the Rent Controller on Vasu's complaint, being frightened out of this, there is a long description of his meeting with the adjournment lawyer, which considerably decreases the tension and precludes the fast movement of the story.

Malgudi is everywhere, not only in Narayan's novels, but also in short stories. The main incident in 'Lawley Road' is connected with the fate of a statue of an Englishman, whose identity is mistaken. The Municipal Committee of Malgudi, in its enthusiasm, at the time of nation's independence to do away with everything that was British, decides to remove the statue of Sir Lawley, who is seen by some as autocratic bureaucrat. The narrator buys the statue and with great difficulty and heavy expenses, is able to take it off from its pedestal and to cart it to

his house. By this time, it is found that the statue is actually of a great friend of Indians. It is a historical asset. A vehement public demand is made for the reinstalment of the statue, which the narrator does not want to part with, after spending time and money on it. To get out of the faux pas, the chairman decides to buy the narrator's house, along with the statue to install it there only, as it is impossible to cart it back to the square, where it originally stood. The sequences of events in these stories are caused by coincidences and human misjudgement.

Belief in myths and rituals, is a part of the common people's, life in R.K. Narayan's Malgudi, which is a replica of any small Indian town. Though, the setting of the novel is in post-fifties India yet, the age-old myths are still quite alive in the thoughts and ways of the people, as these are incorporated in their real life. Thus, Natraj reminds the reader at the beginning: "I hung up (in the small press) a framed picture of goddess Laxmi, poised on her lotus. Holding aloft the bounties of earth in her four hands, and through her grace, I did not do too badly". Each morning after taking his dip in the river, Natraj sits on the sand, reciting a prayer to the Sun to illumine his mind. Mathu, the tea-shop owner by the Mempi forest has the firm conviction that 'because the goddess protects us', there has not been a single accident on the narrow twisting road to the mountain: the goddess is supposed to have her abode in the shrine at the confluence of the mountain and the plains. The portrait of Vasu may be seen and understood in relation to this frame.

The equation is established in the story too which, follows a preordained course, by which the Asura, after his temporary triumph, will be eventually destroyed. By his appearance, behaviour, attitude, ways and lifestyle, Vasu may be clearly recognised as a descendant of the illustrious line of Indian demons. Though, at one point in the story, Vasu has been linked by some people with the Rakshasas, Vasu's portrait is generally drawn on a large scale, befitting an Asura.

In Narayan's novels, set in Malgudi, the response of the narrator, and as also of the author, seems to have been marked by a similar ambivalence. They are simultaneously attracted and annoyed, terrified and fascinated by the black grandeur of this man, a response that perfectly tallies with the Indian mythic tradition, which holds demons, in fearful mistrust and as well as a degree of fascination and varying admiration.

Typically set in Malgudi, Narayan, in his fiction, sees a divine order, operating in the world, which is beyond human comprehension. Both the evil and the good are parts of the world. The gods are just and do not allow evil and destructive forces to disturb the life for long. Life survives all attempts to destroy it. A human being has an immortal spirit in his mortal body and his life extends from the time, well before birth to a long time after death. So death is not the end of life and should not be given any undue importance. There is a divine predetermination and the nature of worldly life of an individual is determined by his good or bad deeds in previous lives. Every action of man gets the reward or punishment, it deserves in this life or another. So, there is no need to attempt to change one's material conditions. One should accept life, as it is, without being unduly involved with it. In a few instances, some of these beliefs are explicitly stated also, but these are implicit in the design and organisation in all his narratives. These background assumptions determine the perspective reach of the narratives, Narayan presents. The element of fiction, like basic situations, events and characters, their arrangements and presentation, narrative

stance, irony, humour etc., have to be understood in terms of these ideological positions only.

Benefiting from the scene in Malgudi, Narayan largely subscribes to Hindu ideals, enshrined in the ancient Hindu scriptures, what makes him original in his down to earth interpretation of Indian ideals; 'Varnashran Dharma' or a man's role and duties, according to his place in a scheme of castes and also according to his stage of life; karma or the principle of deeds and their consequences, which are worked out both in this life and in successive births, until the ultimate release, moksha; a hierarchy of values, generally classified as Dharma or the right action, Artha or worldly interest, and Karma or human love, and a cyclically ordered time and, universe encompassing these values. Not all Hindus would hold these beliefs in their scriptural form to the same extent, nor would they apply them to all situations, yet they are constantly referred to and they are taken for granted in many Hindu institutions and rituals. A product of a Hindu high-caste family, Narayan shares the beliefs, superstitions, traditions, customs and rituals of Indian Life. He admitted to Ved Mehta, about his inability to write novels, without Krishna, Ganesh, Hanuman, astrologers, Pundits and devadasis or temples and prostitutes, and explained his point of view by adding to his characteristic humble way that in any case has turned out to be Indian. It is, therefore, little surprising that Hindu myths and ideals have gripped Narayan's mind so much that he naturally takes them up for themes in most of his novels, present a traditional society, admitting and absorbing all changes. The huge mass of myths and legends that we have accumulated through centuries, has become the common repository of the people of land.

Malgudi is a showcase, where these myths and legends and our religious and cultural heritage have shaped human mind and imagination, behavioural pattern and general attitude to life. This influence is so deeply engraved that it finds unconscious expression in all aspects of his novels. William Walsh is worth quoting, when he says: "The religious sense of Indian myth is part of Narayan's grip of reality, of his particular view of human life and his individual way of placing and ordering human feeling and experience.

Malgudi is deeply traditional and caste ridden. Here arranged marriage is a common phenomenon and horoscopes are often compared. As described elsewhere, this happened in Narayan's own life. Narayan married Rajam, in spite of the fact that their horoscopes did not correspond. The astrologer of the girl's side had predicted that Narayan would become a widower, but he was defeated by Narayan's own pundit, who for the sake of money was all praise for Narayan's horoscope. Narayan lost his wife only after five years, and this confirmed Narayan's belief in horoscopes all the more. Chandran in "The Bachelor of Arts" can not marry the girl, he loves, because the horoscopes do not tally. This problem crops up in "The Financial Expert", as well. The astrologer, who thinks that the horoscopes of Balu and Brindu do not match, is dismissed with a fee of Rupee one, where as the one, who testifies that the horoscopes match perfectly, is rewarded with a fee of Rs. Seventy-five, Varna Vyavastha that has come down to us from generations together has not freed the Hindu mind and that is realistically portrayed by Narayan in many of his novels. Raju's mother in "The Guide", is first sympathetic towards Rosie, but she changes her attitude completely, when she learns that Rosie belongs to the dancing girls' class. Shrinava's wife in "Mr. Sampath" does not take food, cooked by a non-Brahmin. But the religious onslaught caused by English education is the worst. All the English-medium schools and also the Albert Mission College, in Malgudi are run by Christian

Missionaries. Historically, the sole purpose of the Christian Missionaries was to import education to India, was for proselytising them.

In the context of Malgudi, it is to be noted that R.K. Narayan finds Indian reality, reflected well in a small town or a village, but he himself would like to be a city-dweller:

“I can not stay in a village. I like to watch villages, while I am passing by in a car or train. But I would not like to live there”.

In the backdrop of Malgudi, Narayan, with his characteristic irony, humour and sophistication, keeps the village at a distance in his fiction. Narayan’s novels also present Nehru’s view point. In “The Bachelor of Arts”, Chandran’s uncle, who lives in Madras, tells Chandran that staying at a small place (Malgudi) would not lead him anywhere. He further advises Chandran “to go to a big city and see people”. Besides, “The Bachelor of Arts” juxtaposes Gandhiji’s response to villagers, with that of Nehru, “They were innocent and unsophisticated in most matters (excepting their factions and fights) and took an ascetics make-up at its face value” thus, the violent tendency in the villagers also referred to in Malgudi, a place, which has become legendary, through Narayan’s fiction

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