

R.K. Narayan's Place in Indian English Fiction

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Introduction - The year 1935 was perhaps the most momentous in the History of Indian-English fiction, for it marked the beginning of R.K Narayan, needs no introduction to an average reader. Through his Literary works, he certainly proves himself to be the biggest of "The big Three" (R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao) Being born and brought up in South India Narayan in his novel hold a universe appeal and evoke such emotions, which knows no geographical boundaries but is common to each human being.

Narayan makes no pretension of his art as a novelist Except that he enjoys writing. He writes primarily for himself or, "he Would have no peace of mind"¹⁴ Writing is not merely a passion for Narayan; it is the essence of his life. He lives, writes, and stands by His conviction "Every writer", he says "has his own theory, method And practice of developing his art just like every doctor has a different Way of arriving at a diagnosis., It is the academics who tend to Generalize, professors who think that literature must be carefully Boxed and labeled"¹⁵

Narayan has a remarkable gift for telling stories, for Portraying memorably people of small oddities and eccentricities. Haydn Moore William makes the following interesting observation on Narayan "R.K.Narayan always has a good story to tell, like the Bazaar story-teller of immemorial tradition"¹⁶ George Steiner, writing on the decline of story telling in the modern novel, says that few of our modern idols.....could have kept a railway carriage entertained on a long journey. Narayan certainly could. Uma Parmeswaran is also not far from the truth in her assessment of Narayan when she says, "Narayan is a story-tellernothing less and Seldom more".¹⁷

Unlike two of his contemporaries Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rako Narayan has undeniable a strong penchant for story telling "I'd be quite happiest" maintains Narayan. "If no more is claimed from me being just a story teller, if reader's read more significance in my stories than was meant originally then that's readers understanding of things. But if story is in tune completely with the truth of life, truth as I perceive it then it will be automatically significant".¹⁸ In

his novels, Narayan seem to present himself as a copy-book example of a story Teller. The overall structure of his novels unmistakably shows his Adherence to the oral tradition in its content and form. The pattern of His themes seems to have moral undertones although subtle and Unobtrusive and the novels have easily noticeable episodic structure.

One of the most apparent qualities of Narayan's art is his Artlessness "the most striking quality about both Narayan's work and Narayan himself",Writes Uma Ima Parameswaran,"is unpretentiousness"¹⁹ Narayan treats his story and work as a two in one and not as two Separate things. "The actual writing of a book", he says, may not Take much time, but its scope and subject takes time to grow and settle In"²⁰ Talking about Salman Rushdie's. "Midnight Children, Narayan Says, "Personally I am put off by a book that long. I would neither like To read or inflict such a long novel on anyone. I stick to my 200 odd Pages"²¹ Prof. P.P. Mehta calls Narayan, "The father of the regional Novel in India"²² Besides the novels of R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao's Kanthapura has a regional setting. Kanthapura is a typical Indian Village in the state of Karnataka. The novels of MuKulk Raj Anand deals With life in Punjab and the North West Frontier province but he does not carve out a fictional locale like raja Rao and R.K Narayan. Narayan certainly excels the first two of the "big three" in his Mastery of place in fiction. All his novels have Malgudi as the scene Of action and Malgudi Moulds Narayan's characters.

Narayan readers are not only acquainted with main road Principal streets and buildings and landmarks of it, but also with the Men and women who walk the street, inhabit the buildings, and look Admirably upon the landmark. As Narayan recalls;

"I wanted to be able to put in whatever I liked, and wherever I liked, a little street or school or a temple or even a slum, a railway line at any spot, a minor despot in a little world. I began to like my role, and I began to be fascinated by it possibilities, its rivers, market-places and far-off mountains, roads and forests acquired a concrete quality, and have imprisoned me within their boundaries, with the

result that I am unable to escape from Malgudi, even if I wished to...²³

Through the accumulation of carefully chosen details. Narayan achieves the life like quality in his novels. "In fact", says Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Some of the best work in Indo-Anglian Fiction deals with non-metropolitan situations. Nothing could be more Provincial and localized than the life of Malgudi town. Yet R.K. Narayan successfully achieves a universal vision through it".²⁴ Malgudi is the central theme, the soul and as K.R. Srinivasan says. "The real hero of Narayan's novels"²⁵ "Malgudi" observes Prof. C. D. Narasimiah, "is the microcosm of traditional Indian society"²⁶ In the words of Prof. Lyenger, "Malgudi is Narayan's 'Caster bridge', but the inhabitants of Malgudi although they have their recognizable local trappings are essentially human and hence, have their kinship with all humanity. In this sense, Malgudi is everywhere"²⁷ In fact, Malgudi is India, not merely a fictional and fictitious south Indian small town but living India, for what happens in Malgudi happens all over India. School children and college boys with their likes and dislikes and sincerity and insincerity in friendship, marital harmony and disharmony, love in and out of marriage, love without marriage, Love before and after marriage, Love triangles, seduction, promiscuity, matching of horoscopes prior to marriage and marriages possibly within the caste, anti-social elements and social menaces, bribe and adulteration, elaborate religious rites and rituals, fake Sashes and genuine Sanayas, quarrels between brothers protective paternal love, human relationships and encounter between East and West are the common re-current features of Indian social scene.

Thus a simple inference can be drawn that Malgudi is everywhere in India in every sense. The underlying situation is real to all Indians and lies very close to their immediate experiences. The Indianness and Indian sensibility pervades the whole place. Narayan's Malgudi is a microcosm of India. It grows and develops and expands and changes, and is full of humanity. It has a deep Indian and local flavour, and its rich variety simultaneously creates the sense of wider human relevance.

Referring to the conception of place, Narayan is reported to have said, "I remember waking up with the name Malgudi on Vijayadasami, the day on which initiation of learning is celebrated"²⁸ It was in September 1930, he said, that the name of the town had been vouchsafed to him by the divine patron 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 a two trains a day. One coming and one going. On Vijayadasmi I sat down and wrote the first sentence about my town. The train had just arrived at Malgudi Station."²⁹

With the passage of time Malgudi also passes through a sea of change but at the same time it retains its traditional values, impact of the West, industrialization and modern ideas is inevitably seen in the life-style of Malgudians; hence Malgudi of "*Swami And Friends*" differs very much from that of "*Painter of Signs*", "*A Tiger for Malgudi*" "*Talkative Man*" and "*The World of Nagaraj*". The transformation is there but underneath it all remains essentially the same and we may say that, "Malgudi is the real hero of the novels and many short stories and that underneath the seeming change and the human drama there is something - the soul of the place that defies or embraces, all change and is triumphantly and unalterably itself".³⁰

Narayan with his keen observation and deep insight penetrates into the core of Indian life and captures the very essence of it. His chosen protagonists are ordinary men and women. They are anything but outstanding.

Malgudi is people by average and ordinary men and women who generally belong to middle and lower middle classes of South-Indian society. Of these he has first hand knowledge. In fact he himself happens to be a product of the middle class, therefore, he can give authentic and convincing account of them as H.M. Williams has noted, "Private life, families, the ambitions, success and frustration of simple Indian's usually of lower middle class. These have provided Narayan with a plethora of subject matter"³¹

Moreover as Rajeev Taranath observes, he, "Cherishes and explores the unnoticed, subtle possibilities of the average and unremarkable"³² It is important to note that Narayan does not idealize or glorify them but with remarkable truthfulness compassion and authorial detachment he portrays them as they are caught in net of illusions, deceptions and self deceptions and achievements.

The novel, as Lionel Trilling puts it, is a perpetual quest for reality"³³ Narayan's novels thus we find are more realistic and less idealistic. He engages himself in "a search for the essence of human living"³⁴ Narayan has persistently dealt with this very important aspect of human predicament. His protagonists constantly search for identity and belonging and disintegrate and decay when they fail to achieve their identity. Narayan's novels do not attempt a philosophical exposition of Indian way of life but his involvement with Indian values and norms is undeniable. His novels imbibe the spirit of his culture. His indomitable faith in the eternal spirit of India. His firm belief in the **Pre-ordained and karma-operated** world. His high regard for the ancient Shastras and his philosophy of acceptance and quietism clearly reflect the sacrosanct tradition he belongs to.

The most important aspect of Narayan's fiction is his preoccupation with human character. In fact it is one of the basic and the necessary element of all fiction at all times. It is only through character and conflict that a novelist explores his chosen theme or themes, David Madden and Virgil Scott points out. "The element of conflict and character are as important as that of theme, and the writer who fails to handle

these elements skillfully will have written a poor story regardless of his profound or significant meaning.³⁵ Therefore Narayan's preoccupation is with, as M.K.Naik puts it, "what man can make of himself and of the entire business of living"³⁶

On more than one occasion Narayan has said "I value human relationship very much, very intensely. It makes ones existence worthwhile. Human relationship in any and every form, whether at home or outside."³⁷ On another occasion in an interview, he is reported to have said:

"The main concern is with human character a central character from whose point of view the world is seen and who tries to get over a difficult situation or succumbs to it or fights in his setting".³⁸ Narayan himself puts it, "my focus is all on character. If his personality comes alive the rest is easy for me".³⁹

Narayan's success lies basically in his treatment of theme. He is able to achieve what he aims at to present his view of the world and vision of life through comic. He treats even most pathetic and serious with the subtle undercurrent of comic. This mode of treatment seems to suit Narayan's purpose admirably that of presenting joys and sorrows, pains and pleasure, smiles and tears through laughter.

Narayan is a master of comedy but at the same time he reflects upon the tragedy of human situation. He is neither an intolerant critic of Indian ways and modes nor their fanatic upholder and defender. He is on the whole content to snap Malgudi life's, little ironies, knots of satiric circumstance and tragi-comedies of mischance and misdirection's.

"At his best he can present smiles and tears together smiling through the tears in glimpse and glimpse and glimpsing the rainbow magnificence of life",⁴⁰

Gifted with unique zest for life, he chooses for his fictional contemplation, ordinary men and women, "like Chekhov, he has produced from their inadequacies, from their weaknesses and shallow pretensions a combination of sadness and comedy that is irresistibly appealing".⁴¹

The present study seeks to examine Narayans fictional world and its people with the centrality of human relationships. Most of the critical writings on Narayan are eulogistic and introductory in nature, they merely highlight the Indianness of his fiction, his plots, characters, themes, irony, humour and philosophy of life but none so far has highlighted the centrality of human relationship without which the human existence and human-drama is incomplete. We find that even his most rebellious protagonist ultimately returns to the society to be an integral part of it rather than be isolated or prefers to stay within the warm security of the family even with all their strife and struggles.

The present inquiry seeks to highlight the range of familial relations as vividly portrayed by Narayan in a dozen of his novels. The family forms the basic unit for any society. Narayan presents his protagonist against this background

of their families and familial relations. He painstakingly draws even the minutest details of their families. Many of them are seen as rooted in tradition, customs, beliefs and superstitions of their families.

To explore the various shades of these human relationships, it will not be out of the place to highlight the thematic patterns and techniques designed to thrive these relationships.

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