



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. V, Issue No. IX,
January-2013, ISSN 2230-
7540*

**R. K. NARAYAN'S NOVELS DEALING WITH
MODERNITY AND MARGINALITY**

AN
INTERNATIONALLY
INDEXED PEER
REVIEWED &
REFEREED JOURNAL

R. K. Narayan's Novels Dealing with Modernity and Marginality

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Abstract – R. K. Narayan is narrowed down to the south, then a tiny village-like town but now a major area, Malgudi. The city now stands halfway between various ancient and superstitious beliefs and culture on the one side and glamour and appeal of the new beliefs and living standards on the other. The present essay discusses the topics of modernity and marginality, the endless tension between the traditional and the new, the ancient and contemporary spirit, and the orthodox and liberal approaches to social lives and problems in Malgudi, based on the novels by Narayan. His novels portray an Indian macrocosm of religions, values and society.

Key Words – Ancient, Modern, Malgudi, Hinduism. Christianity, Muslim Religion, Orthodoxy, Religion, Beliefs, Culture

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INTRODUCTION

The most prevalent type of confrontation is between custom and modernity in the fictional world of Narayan. This is a recurring feature, and the powers of the modern civilization are constantly nibbling with existing ideals and ways of existence. Yet it's the old culture in this fight that takes the edge on modernity. The new touches the very edge of culture and does not reach any of the inner circles. The world of Malgudi is in constant danger of multiple contradictions owing to old traditions, superstitions and ancient culture of one side and the glamour and beauty of modern life style and culture. On one point, Narayan is explicit that the sensibilities of the Indian are distinct from the sensitivities of the West; hence his novels have to represent a rather different mindset, feeling and answer. The Malgudians are devout, godly and orthodox in thinking and behavior. What C.D. Narasimhaiah speaks of an average Hindu man is true of an average Malgudian too: "The Hindu man drinks religiously, sleeps religiously, walks religiously, marries religiously and robs religiously. 1 Faith is strongly ingrained in Malgudian people which are in the majority of instances, Hindus. Indians believe weddings in heaven and solemnity on earth and the encounter between a bride and bridegroom happens more through a destiny declaration than through coincidence or preparation. Courtship is totally unknown since the establishment and matching of horoscopes in the historically ridden Hindu is an important requirement for solemnising the Hindu union. The boy and the girl should only meet after and not before marriage. In this connection, the following

contention is highly remarkable: "We, however, seek excitement in our system of living, known as the joint family in which several members of a family live under the same roof. The pressures and stresses of this form of person's life, the general framework of culture arising from it and the dynamics of the caste system are never-ending topics for us. And it is important that the grip of faith and creation intrinsic in us find a place in all portrayals of life. Nor should we neglect rural life and its issues; 85 out of 100 Indians are village folk."

The Malgudi culture is focused on faith, that sometimes even eccentricism borders on orthodoxy. Modernity and marginality are typical culture in Clash Narayan's novels spanning from "Swami and Mates" to A tiger for Malgudi." It is witnessing tangible adjustments owing to the incursions of modernity. There is a perceptible tension everywhere a relentless dispute between the old and the new, the ancient and the progressive spirit and the orthodox and liberal response to social issues. Malgudi is making strides in the light of an evolving Indian community. This progress has a geographical, social and cultural influence on the place. Experience substitutes purity and Malgudi is able to adopt the new spirit. The dramatic developments are impacting orthodox Indian culture with all its old convictions and superstitions. The inconsistencies and incongruities emerge from the tension between the ancient conventions and the human spirit. Graham Greene appropriately remarks: "..... Malgudi's life, never rubbed up in politics, moves the same direction it has been through for decades, in

the juxtaposition of an old convention, and the new character offers much humour. "3The nature of Malgudi is bi-polar, one focused on ancient ideals and values; the other on a Westernized way of living and on economic development. Grandmothers, uncles and aunts are compared to a community of younger generations in their traditional moral values and caste limits. The entrance of modern culture into an orthodox town of South Indian life is manifested in several ways: "The modern civilization comes to this tiny town of South India with its orthodox Indian ideals and is fluttering here and there, disturbing the quiet waters of Malgudi life."4 Malgudi, during the 1930s, is a small town with an officers' club, two schools, a Municipal Board and a Town Hall. Its changes, are quick and rapid enough to envelope it in a thin veil of modernity. Nallappa's mango grove and Mempi forests still indicate the presence of conventional sports and frolic resorts but incorporate fresh extensions, cricket clubs and other features of contemporary society. The connections between Malgudi and old practises are solid, but not so resilient as to face the compulsions of external changes. The spatial shifts are evident. The presence of a train station contributes to the place's tourist draw. Malgudi's life has been brought more directly by the British Insurance Firm, Truth Printing Works, The Regal Hair Cutting Saloon, Anand Bhavan, the Central Cooperative Land Mortgage Bank, the Sunrise Workshop, the Lawley Extension and various other organisations. K.R.S. Iyengar remarks accurately: "There are extensions to Malgudi with its cross-roads and trim homes, too. Lawley Extension is named after Sir Frederick Lawley but later called 'Gandhi Nagara.'5When Swami and Friends' have an entertaining car trip to the club, Ramani has a chevrolet in The Dark Room,' where he takes Shanta Bai away for his Saryu rides: 'We learn about motor cars in 'Swami and Friends' also and Swami has a thrilling carriage trip from his dad to the club. In The Dark Room, the hero (Ramani), has his own chevrolet with his hooligan hoot, and it's useful when he brings his owner, Shanta, out on the banks of the Saryu for moonlight drives.

In Malgudi, on Kabir Path, Vinayaka Mudali Street, Ellamman Street, Anderson Lane and many more with their prevailing western culture overtones came up in large numbers. The guide and the painter of signs, which reflect all the distinctive features of the city of Malgudi, displays Gaffur as a taxi driver. Mempi Forests provide everything that is required for modern living teas, bamboos, medicinal plants, teak wood furniture and rosetop wood for the painting of sign boards to the Malgudians. In Malgudi, visible undercurrents of modernity appear. As it opens the gate to the outer world, the western culture is underwater. The basic economy of Malgudi is substituted by a dynamic one. Any kind of confrontation is seen in reality, particularly in household life, love relations, customs vs. modernity, beliefs and motives, East vs. West, old vs. New. There is a contrast between all sets of ideals and styles invariably in the whole: "Domestics versus passion, scholars versus sadhus, obligation versus creative

arguments, an easy-going fighting culture versus a cold yet right individualism, custom versus modernity-regardless of how we articulate the numerous paradoxes and contradictions of attitude and motivation in the book, In this respect, O.P. Mathur appropriately observes that in various Narayan novels such as The Guide, The Man Eater of Malgudi, Mr. Sampath and The Seller of Sweets, modernisation and characters were targets of irony. But in The Painter of Signs they are viewed with marked approval."8This 'marked approval' never comes to the fore but the old and the new exist together in an incongruous relationship with each other against a background which is essentially traditional. In Narayan's novel, the Malgudians find themselves trapped in a mess created by the conflict between ancient and modern society. Their lives are interspersed with culture and modernity. They experience circumstances that are incongruous and often ridiculous. Human desires and a desire towards personal adventurism are closely related to industrial society - the inevitable result of Western schooling, the introduction of new forms of living and massive developments in materialism. Individualism under modern circumstances becomes a well-founded ideal. But the old Indian culture, already occupying influence and asserting itself more in group life than in private endeavours, is hindering these doggedly. The old order shifts and the war between the two lasts indefinitely. The middle class that occurs as a consequence of modern education and industrialisation and Narayan's key concern is put in the materialistic realm. The middle class that arises from the modern school reform is in desperate danger. The claim is quite noteworthy in this regard: "The nature of the middle class differs between the old and the modern, determination and modesty, morality and hypocrisy. This misery of him of course, did not expect any great tragedy. He cannot be either a king or a commoner because of his traditional middle class character. His difficulties and sufferings, misunderstandings and misadventures are, eventually, washed away by the solidarity of the community."9You have to have origins in faith and the culture, to be a successful writer anywhere, 10 R. k. Narayan said to Ved Mehta in an interview. Narayan has both faith and family origins. As with a typical Hindu family, Brahmin has to his advantage all the religious characteristics credited to him in his writings.

His characters are both Hindus, guiding Brahmins. They are Hindu religious views as found today in South India. Any of the smaller attributes are Christians or Mohammedans. Professor Brown in "Swami & Friends" and The Bachelor of Arts," Mr. Ebenezer, the master of scripture in "Swami and Friends" and in "Waiting for the Mahatma" by Mathieson, and Grace in "Sweets seller," are Christian characters. They belong to a subset of small characters who are barely deserving of consideration. The traditional city of Malgudi, which is mostly populated by Hindus, Christians, English Indians or Muslims, forms microscopic parts of the primarily Hindu community. The region is cleared of some form of religious or other antagonism. Conversion of

Christianity in this field is the root cause of bad. Constant indoctrination in schools leads the students to infer that Hindu religion is irrational and devoid of scientific temper and that of all the religions in the world, Christianity is the best. Ebenezer, the scripture master, sarcastically preaches: "Why do you worship, dirty, lifeless, wooden idols and stone images? Can they talk? No, can they see? No, can they bless you? No, can they take you to heaven? No. Why? Because they have no life. What did your gods do when Mohammed Ghazani smashed them to pieces, trod upon them, constructed out of them steps for his lavatory? If those idols and images had life why did they not parry Mohammad's sloughs."11 Swaminathan's blood burns with resentment while Ebenezer, the Christian fanatic tears his left ear off in disgust. Narayan himself recounts his personal experiences: "The Scripture classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu gods and violent abuses were heaped on idol worshippers as a prelude to glorifying Jesus."12 The missionary preachers incite the listeners to embrace Christianity for receiving God's benedictions by hurling abuses on Hindu religion and its ideologies and in turn receive grass, mud and water: "What I suffered in the class as a non-Christian" Says Narayan, "Was nothing compared to what a Christian missionary suffered when he came to preach at our street corner."13 The conflict surfaces with Hindu boys suffering in Christian schools and Christian missionaries meeting the same treatment in streets. This leads to religious animosities between the two sects-the Hindus and Christians who had lived together in close harmony until the war of words started by the latter over the former gripped them. The Christians too fail to digest criticism of their faith. Swaminathan calls to question the godliness of Christ only for His non-vegetarianism: "If he was a God, why did he eat flesh and fish and drink wine." Being a Brahmin boy, it is unthinkable for him that God should ever be a non-vegetarian. Ebenezer puffs and fumes with anger and advances menacingly towards Swaminathan to "wrench his left ear off."14 The antagonistic attitudes expose clash of convictions and collision of feelings for which neither of the two is prepared to relent. Raju's father entertains similar notions about Albert Mission School. In this connection, Raju's recollection at a later stage is remarkable - "I'd have felt proud to call myself an Albert Mission boy. But often I heard my father declare „I don't want to send my boy there; it seems they want to convert our boys into Christians and are all the time insulting our gods."15

The Hindu religious cannons scarcely admit of any sort of communion with Christians. Even those with liberal and modern views fail to muster enough courage either to sit or eat with Christian counter parts. Even Jagan-a true follower of Gandhi and a non-believer in caste-system, declines to accept food prepared by Grace. A Christian girl in a Hindu household is a taboo. Jagan's sister even feels ashamed of referring to him as her brother because he has in his house: "a beef eating Christian girl for a daughter-in-

law."16 Raman's aunt in „The Painter of Signs" gets prepared to leave for Varanasi as she comes to know of his intention of marrying Daisy whose very name smacks of Christianity.

CONCLUSION:

The Indian microcosm, Malgudi, is a sample or a model, representing the Indian culture in minutia scale, showing the differences among people, their beliefs and culture, but yet living in peace and harmony. All the details discussed above unfold the conflicting trends in Malgudi that Hindus, Christians and Muslims may live together but with no willingness to merge with each other socially or culturally.

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