



## R. K. NARAYAN'S MALGUDI-AN IMAGINATIVE AND ALIVE LANDSCAPE

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**Abstract:** Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Narayan created Malgudi, as an imaginative locale in his novels and short stories. Malgudi forms the setting for most of his works. This paper presents, how *Malgudi*, a small town has become a perfect setting for R. K. Narayan's fiction. It is a landscape, a locale, imaginative yet alive. It represents India in a subtle, minute, microscopic form. In fact, it is a genuine hero of all his literary works. Narayan has successfully portrayed Malgudi as a microcosm of our country by viewing, what happens in Malgudi, happens all over India with regional nuances and shifts. The psychic awareness and social experience of the Malgudians reflect in his novels. Various critics have attempted to identify the originality of this mythical town is more of a mind accommodating varieties within itself.

**Keywords:** imaginative locale-microscopic- regional nuances-mythical town.

### I. Introduction

R. K. Narayan (Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Narayan, 1906-2001) belongs to the age of Indian Freedom Struggle of 20<sup>th</sup> century. R.K. Narayan created the fictitious town Malgudi and he has been called the prince of Malgudi town. All his novels except *My Grandmother's Tale* and most of his short stories are formed from that locale. He is fascinated with the lives of common people. So his characters are common men and women of Malgudi. He portrayed their joy, sorrow, problems and difficulties of life with little irony and knots of satire. His contemporaries like Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya wrote with a social purpose, but Narayan did not take any serious issue as the theme of his writings even though he was a prolific writer, and wrote for more than fifty years and published until he was eighty seven. Keeping Malgudi as the constant frame he gave continuity and connectivity to his stories. He himself likes to be known as a story teller.

William Walsh calls Malgudi an imaginative version of Narayan's beloved Mysore, and it is as familiar to his readers as their own suburbs, and infinitely more engaging. For Iyenger, it is Narayan's Caster Bridge whose inhabitants are essentially human, have their kinship with all humanity and thus Malgudi is everywhere. Malgudi is an imaginary south Indian town around which Narayan has woven the complex pattern of the lives of his characters. He takes us Malgudi to laugh, to sympathise and to share the vicissitudes of its inhabitants. Narayan has successfully portrayed Malgudi as a microcosm of our country. It is a landscape, a locale, imaginative yet alive. It represents India in a subtle, minute, microscopic form. In fact, it is a genuine hero of all the literary works of Narayan.

While describing how he conceptualize Malgudi, Narayan says,

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 Malgudi 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. I sat down and wrote the first sentence about my town: The train had just arrived in Malgudi station. (Narayan R. K. *My Days*).

### II. Malgudi-An Imaginative Locale and Alive Landscape

Narayan's first novel *Swami and Friends* introduces us to this town called Malgudi on the border of the states of Mysore and Madras. Malgudi has a municipality, a Town Hall, a club and two schools-The Albert Mission School and the Border high school. We hear of motor cars in which Swami rides to the club even in 1935. Malgudi had a theatre, 'The Palace Talkies'. The other considerable landmarks of Malgudi are Malgudi station, the central Co-operative Land Mortgage Bank, The Bombay Anand Bhavan, Kabir Street, the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley, the office of The Banner, The Saryu River, Nallappa's Groves, Mempi Hills, Hotels, Cinemas, and Colleges which make it a story of social framework.

Malgudi is located on the banks of the river Sarayu. In *Swami and Friends*, Swami, Mani and Rajam spend most of their evenings playing or chatting by the river. In the Guide, holy-man Raju fasts on the banks of the dry river Sarayu, praying for the rains to come, When Mahatma Gandhi visits Malgudi, the meetings and speeches are held right on the banks of river Sarayu.

The special feature of the fictional setting of Malgudi locale is its reluctance for gradual changes. Life here moves at slow pace. It is completely undisturbed by the outside world and its specialty remains the same. Here are the people who believed in strongly-rooted traditions and age old customs. This makes them to look upon any new idea with suspicion and distrust.

The creation of an imaginary town Malgudi is the greatest achievement in Narayan's career. When it is tried to be located, it is somewhere in south India, a few hours journey from Chennai. It is located on the shore of the fictional river Sarayu. Mempi forest is nearby. Many times Narayan himself asserted that it is an imaginary town. But this has never stopped his readers and scholars to speculate and locate Malgudi. There are land marks which often appear in his novels and short stories.

Market Street is the central street of Malgudi, the location of several big shops including Bombay Ananda Bhavan and Truth printing works. Kabir Street is the residence of the elite of Malgudi, while Lawley Extension is a new upcoming lane housing the rich and the influential. Ellemen street house of the oil' mongers is the last street and beyond it lay the river Sarayu. Other streets include Grove Street and Kalighat lane. Between Ellemen Street and the river lie Nallappa's Grove and the cremation ground. The untouchables and sweepers live on the lower banks of the river. Palace talkies were built in 1935 to replace the old variety hall. Albert Mission School- and Albert Mission College are the more popular educational institutions. There is also the Board School and the Town elementary Schools. Malgudi has a small Railway Station. Another major landmark of Malgudi is the statue of Lawley seated on a horse.

With each of the works of R.K. Narayan, Malgudi unfolds new vistas of life. A simple, innocent and conservative society undergoes fast changes because of the incursions of the modern civilization. From a sleepy, silent and small town atmosphere on the bank of river Sarayu to a fast developing metropolitan ethos with modern streets, banking corporations, talkies and smuggler's den, and even a circus, Malgudi marks a movement in time. The movement not only affects the geography of the place, but also the social and cultural milieu. Malgudi's various inhabitants contribute to the comic scenario of Narayan's world of fiction. Nandan Data remarks in California Literary Review:

Malgudi is a land of fantasy, not as in a dream, coloured and brilliant; but the reverie of relaxed awakening, a contemplation of commonness. Life there is reduced, or elevated, to the lowest common denominator of living, which remains the same in nearly all places and times. Small men, smaller means, touched at times by the cares of a larger world, but unruffled, still moving on. The characters yearn for fame and money and virtue and those "real" things, but their longings stand tempered by a subtle sense of limitation, almost comic.

India is symbolized by Narayan's Malgudi, the imaginary town and the locale of his novels and short stories. Since the early thirties the town has grown into a good city and gradually has added studios, hotels, a railway station and ultramodern flats in the extension area. It is a town of potters, printers, lawyers, teachers and small and big businessmen. It has grown from a rural looking, conservative and backward town into a town of tourists' interest. Narayan is called a regional novelist because he does not want to go outside Malgudi locale. Malgudi is his Wessex. He can be compared to Hardy in this respect. Malgudi has its own place in the contemporary culture also. Some restaurants offering South Indian fare by the name or extensions of Malgudi. The Shyam group operates Malgudi restaurants in Chennai, Bangalore and Hyderabad. A restaurant named Malgudi Junction is located in Kolkata. The world of Malgudi is a world of enchantment, and we are the luckier for being privileged to experience.

With a gentle, modest style and straightforward plotting, Narayan portrayed ordinary people struggling to make sense of their lives as Hindu tradition clashed with modernity and a promising nationalism eroded a colonial mentality. While Narayan rarely directly addressed India's tumultuous political or philosophical issues, they defined his characters' concerns. Hindu ethics and a belief in fate guided his characters. His variety of characters, energetic schoolboys, drifters, housewives, rebels, petty financiers, family planners, as they searched for authenticity despite modest means and limited worldviews. Although Narayan depicted poverty and suffering, his compassionate tales were filled with humor, subtle irony, and a deep religious sensibility. Narayan's stories are stories of characters. He gives much importance to characters than plot. Narayan's characterization is realistic and lifelike. "What gives life to his stories is his humanity, his basic affection for his characters, his strong feeling that no man is an island. Adding to these a feeling of gentle irony and an overpowering sense of humour. ..". Like Jane Austen he portrays only a limited scale of characters that are known to him. There are psychological elements in his characters. His characters have full of life and vibrancy.

He writes of the middle class, the class which he knows well. He belongs to this class and nothing is new to him there. The members of which are neither too well off not to be worried about money and position, nor dehumanized by absolute need. Narayan's heroes are common men. They do not control the events, but events control them.

His heroes are usually modest, sensitive and passionate, wry about himself and sufficiently conscious to have an active inner life and feel for the existence of the family. Many of his heroes are compelled by the force of circumstances to leave their homes. In the short story *An Astrologer's Day*, the astrologer left his home and started living in another place. In the story *In The Axe*, Velan left his house in the village and reached Malgudi, there he lived in a big bungalow called Kumar Baugh. *Out of Business* tells the story of Rama Rao, in the end he decided to go to Chennai to search for a job. Similarly in *A Career*, an important character Ramu left his home town and reached Malgudi. Narayan generally takes up his characters from the ordinary middle class and lower middle class. However, the limited range of his characters is counter balanced by the super mastery which he displays in depicting his characters. Narayan observes his characters from close quarters and describes their dresses, habits, and behaviour very minutely. His characters as well as his settings are all typically South Indian. They are common men and women of Malgudi. Narayan's Malgudi represents India, especially the customs and manners of South Indian people. Narayan is neither a social critic nor a photographic artist representing the reality. His chief interest is the study of man and his predicament in this universe.

Narayan is not a spiritualist, a social reformer or a pure writer of comedies. He is an observer of life and records life as it appears to him. It is a mixture of joy and sorrows. To Narayan life is neither purely a story of sins nor purely of virtues: it is a blend of the saintly and the sinful. His comedy is so effective and amusing. The humour is also a part of a gifted novelist's full technique for treating human reality. His comic sense enables him to weave all the peculiar events into a beautiful vision of life and meaningful. In Narayan's fiction the comic vision operates in a framework of irony. It embraces not only the peculiar social context in which Narayan's men and women have their various transactions, but also focuses on an existential reality based on their particular experiences. Narayan reveals as much of a pre occupation and concern about customs and manners of South Indian people whose actions, behaviours and responses have a distinctive Indian flavour. It is not surprising that the sincerity of Narayan's style becomes an inalienable part of his vision. It undeniably establishes a lucid compatibility between his themes and his unpretentious style, which is a part of his natural mode of perception.

There are characters that give meaning to the places of Malgudi and make them real and life-like. The sense of familiarity of the streets and lanes of Malgudi is a home-breed. It helps the readers to be intimate. It creates a deeper and better understanding of its people and places establishing a close intimacy. Malgudi is a town where castes and occupations are quite steady. Marriages are arranged. People believed in Astrology, though it is not always practiced. But the greatest charm of R. K. Narayan lies in making Malgudi and its people and their social values real for the readers. He established this intimate sense of reality through keen observation, sympathy, unflinching humour and gentle satire. The world of Malgudi is thus warm and intimate.

Malgudi has a traditional history of its own. Ram may have passed through this place on his journey to Lanka. Its street may have been touched by the feet of Lord Buddha. So its past is involved with the past of India.

Malgudi has its own Doctor who on the basis of imagination and without bothering to see the patients, finds out the disease and treats accordingly. He sees no difference between malaria and typhoid. At the time of 'Quit India Movement' Malgudi has its common tea-stall, the Muthu's tea-stall, which sell tea in unwashed tumblers. It does not refuse any of its customers. It has its own lawyer, the adjournment lawyer, who has an outstanding credit with his printer's client, Natraj, but wants his own fee in cash every time to move to the court on his client's behalf. His office has the specimen of realistic touch. In Malgudi there is the Forest Officer with his collection of golden thoughts from 'The Bhagvad Geeta'. There is a trace of breaches in the joint family system, in the social setup of Malgudi.

Malgudi is an intense, emotional curiosity of R. K. Narayan. It is not merely a background of his novels-but 'a leading, real hero' which is present in one way or other in most of his works. In it one can visualize and realize such a locale which is a form; of personification of a vivid character.

Malgudi is a fictional town imagined in the mind of R.K. Narayan, where his literary works take origin. It's like a landscape as alive and active as a personified character. The fictitious region is woven in such a smooth thread that it, creates a fine fabric of inseparable part of Narayan's realistic art. It is as remarkable a place in literature as *Border Countries* of Sir Walter Scott, *Lake District* of Wordsworth, and *The Wessex* of Thomas Hardy or *The Five Towns* of Arnold Bennet. It is a town created from Narayan's own experiences, his childhood, and his upbringing. The people in it were people he met every day. He thus created a place which every Indian could relate to. A place, where you could go "into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and a certainty of pleasure, a stranger approaching past the bank, the cinema, the hair cutting saloon, a stranger who will greet you, we know, with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open the door to yet another human existence".

### III. Conclusion

Malgudi is more than a landscape, such a miniature model where culture of real, vivid India exists. It is such a place which is personified as a character to promote the story as well as the characters.

Narayan is noted for the objectivity and detachment of his stand. He is free from desire to preach, to advise and to convert the contemporary society. His plots are built of material and incidents that are neither extraordinary nor heroic. The tone of his novels is quiet and subdued. He is a writer of social novels written in a comic vein.

Light in their approach to life, these novels do not claim to stir deep human emotions or to reach tragic heights as the novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao do. Narayan's novels keep a uniform quite tone. His backgrounds are absolutely realistic, almost philosophical in their realism.

Thus the secret of R. K. Narayan's great success and high distinction, lies in the complete aesthetic satisfaction he provides to his readers. He interprets Indian life purely from the 'art for art's sake' point of view, maintaining complete objectivity and perfect impartiality. Being an integral setting, Malgudi is so interwoven in the main thread of Narayan's fiction, that none can ever imagine the existence of Narayan's literary works in absence of it. It's more than a place, a live Character and a leading hero.

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