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The Fictional Landscape as Hero: The Significance of Topography and "Local Color" in Narayan's Literary Creation

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan, one of the key writers of early Indian English fiction, is recognized for his creation of Malgudi, a fictional South Indian town which is a mirror of Indian society and culture. In this study, the social approach adopted in the literary works of Narayan is critically examined and Malgudi is discussed as a "creative locale" which reflects the experience of the common man. The study is a multi-layered analysis of significant works like Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts, and The Guide, which reveals how Narayan adeptly portrays the caste system, the power dynamics of the colonial era and the changing role of women in a man-dominated society. The paper focuses on Narayan's peculiar "unnoticed style", his prose of simplicity, purity and gentle irony, which enables the narration to show reality without any distortion. Moreover, the study of the memory and reality in the works of Narayan reveals how his native experiences in Madras and Mysore contribute to the "nutrition for imagination" that drives his fictional universe. Themes of Dharma and Karma, intertwined with Hindu traditionalism, help to bridge the gaps between the regional sensitivities of the South and the universal human issues that are addressed in this book. Finally, this study revisits Narayan's greatness as a regional novelist with a comparative analysis of his consistency in his use of the topographical system and William Faulkner, and makes Malgudi a timeless artefact recording the evolution of Indian traditions to modernisation.

Keywords: Malgudi, R.K. Narayan, Regionalism, Microcosm, Indian Society, Tradition, Modernity, Realism.

Introduction

Narayan is a regional novelist whose work can be compared to that of William Faulkner, with Malgudi being a South Indian Yoknapatawpha County. The strength of Narayan's selection is his ability to use an area not close to the corridors of power and make the topography, the

language and the customs of the region part of the study of human action. Malgudi is not just a setting; it is the "real hero" of the story; its different lives, although not always pleasant, have a sense of continuity and "local colour" because of its familiar landmarks: the Sarayu River, the Mempi Hills, and Market Road. It is a creative area which is a miniature version of India, linking ancient past and the modernity, East and West and creates a small social scene, with its own set of rules, where the human passions can be analysed deeply.

Narayan's narrative style is unique, in that the critics speak of an "unnoticed style," a style that is clear, transparent, and racy so that the idea itself is more noticeable than the language. He was aware that he was steering a course of "Indianization" of English, and eschewed "Anglo-Saxon" expressions in favor of forms that reflect the Indian temperament, the Indian way of thinking and the way Indians speak. This simplicity makes his work accessible to the world, and also the essential fragrance of "Indianness" remains. Narayan's characters are "local nobodies and local eccentrics" and he writes of them with "unbiased objectivity" and without "didacticism or propaganda. What he is known for is his comic vision which probes the little ironies of life without derisive bite, similar to the gentle beauty of Anton Chekhov.

Themes that run through Malgudi are the intricacies of Indian society: the caste system's hierarchical nature, the effects of British colonization, and the limitations placed on women in patriarchal culture. The Dark Room and The Guide are early depictions of women's struggle for independence and agency, set against the backdrop of emotional trauma. Narayan is also a master at illustrating the passage from childhood to adulthood, as he has done in his early trilogies, producing a ‘Rainbow World' of innocence and mischief. His vision is basically moral, ethical and it comes from an eternal tradition of characters who are tasked to deal with their responsibilities (Dharma) and encounter the results of their deeds (Karma).

A core element in the understanding of Narayan's fiction is the relationship between reality and memory, which is clearly described in his Memoirs, My Days. His "raw material" often came from his own experiences, recollections of his provincial headmaster father, and his traditional Brahmin family in Madras. Many of his fictional characters are modelled on real people; for example the central character of The English Teacher is based on Narayan himself, after his wife, Rajam, passed away, he was left with unmitigated loneliness. Narayan's "universal magnitude" was achieved by being "truly faithful to a specific region" –

the topographical and social specifics of a small township in Southern India could reflect the universal "spirit of humanity".

R.K Narayan's first novel is Swami and Friends, which is one of the main works of early Indian literature in English. Narayan saw a little railway station and the name Malgudi "jumped into his sight". Malgudi is described in this first novel as a "semi-agricultural town", where a conservative lifestyle prevails, but which a thriving commercial hub later in the series becomes. Malgudi is a microcosm of Indian societya fictional place, like Yoknapatawpha County in William Faulkner's novels or Wessex in Thomas Hardy's novels.

The novel is about the "Rainbow World" of the child's curiosity, wonder and mischief. Swami (Swaminathan) is the protagonist who is an "incorrigible dreamer" who opposes and speaks out against disciplinarian norms within his home and school. Swami is a typical school boy with all the attributes of a school boy; he is especially afraid of Monday morning because it means the weekend is coming to an end and back to the strict rules and regulations of school. Narayan's understanding of the psychology of children enables him to portray Swami's innocent defiance of a system that places "factual information" over the development of the mind and imagination of children. The novel's reader is given the image of just a regular boy, having a normal day-to-day life, and trying to maneuver through the elements, becoming wiser and more grown up in his attempts. Swami experiences many hardships in life which have a profound effect on his innocent mind and take him to the edge of adulthood.

There is a group of friends that constitute Swami's social world, consisting of Mani, Rajam, Somu and Sankar. Mani is the carefree boy who never cares to study and never cares to listen to his teachers, instead using his physical power to bully others. Even the teachers are said to not call or scold Mani due to his power. Rajam, however, is a very clever pupil and is "European manners and discipline". Rajam has a great influence on Swami, and their relationship is set up early in the novel with a bold challenge made by both parties. In the first line of the text, which displays Rajam's power, he challenges Mani to battle, "Meeting" him at the river, near Nallappa's grove, the following evening. These inter-personal relationships play a crucial role in shaping Swami's psychology as well as the intricate process of his development from adolescence to adulthood.

The story of the Albert Mission School sets the scene for the research and study of the effects of British Colonial Rule on the lives of Indian children. The events of the novel are about the tolerance of ordinary childhood but the personal experiences of Swami and his friends are inextricably muddled by their political situation. The school setting is used to create a conflict between tradition and modernity in the colonial setting by Narayan. The Christian preacher at the school, who pillories the Hindu gods, and who is finally "pelted with mud and stones" was a fact that was taken straight from Narayan's personal recollections at the Lutheran Mission School, in Madras. This highlights the fact that the novel is to a certain extent autobiographical, because Narayan regularly found his motive matter in association and remembrance of experiences which he had personally had. During his childhood in Madras, Narayan recounts how he lived on the streets, "I lived in the streets then, no one ever noticed". The scenes that depict these pretty days as a school-going child is the very foundation of the first novel, Swami and Friends.

Narayan's style of writing in the novel is known for its simplicity, purity and "unnoticed". The following are his own words about his prose: "Lucid, transparent, vivid and racy". He strives to do away with "cheap ornaments and rhetoric," and instead uses a "plain prose" that mirrors the natural simple and relaxed life in Malgudi. Narayan expressed his wish to make his style as unnoticed as possible: "I know this style, which is a style that eliminates style. The idea should be more noticeable than the style in which it is written... I'm aware of such a style, which is a style that eliminates style. This "Indianization" of English enables him to express Indian ideas and Indian style of speaking in a language that is readily understood by the world. Narayan succeeds in being loyal to a specific region and thereby demonstrates that a writer can attain the zenith of universal art.

The geography of Malgudi is part of the story, and becomes a character in its own right. The story is grounded in a stable geographical framework, which is provided by the key landmarks like the Sarayu river, Mempi hills and Market Road (which is described as the life-line of Malgudi). But while all these things may alter, Malgudi is the "real hero" of Narayan's work, says Professor Iyengar, and the old landmarks will not budge. The characters of these novels are adoring of Malgudi and always vowed to come back to it, if they are ever forced to go away, having a "wisdom bent on survival". Narayan's description of "local color"—the customs, fashion, superstitions and culture of the area—adds to this sense of place. The novel

is infused with the ethos of traditionalism in the Hindu culture, while also documenting the "transitional period of India" in its path towards modernization.

Swami's grandmother embodies the traditional family ties and cultural heritage that offer emotional support and guidance during a child's formative years. She represents the importance of family and the role of elders in developing a child's character and emotions. The bond between Swami and his parents is also a prominent theme; his mother is portrayed as kind and loving, but also strict, and his father is frequently depicted as a strict and unforgiving headmaster. Each of these family relationships has an important impact on Swami's development and maturing process from a naïve boy to a more sophisticated adult. The essential structure of the novel is "a flight, an uprooting, a disturbance of order and then a return, a renewal, restoration of order". This cycle highlights Swami's maturity that he will achieve after a number of experiences in his life.

The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, with Swami and Friends being selected by BBC as one of the “100 Novels That Shaped Our World” in 2019. For his observation of life, detached and impartial, and for his ability to extract "gentle beauty" from tragic circumstances, Narayan's work has been compared to that of Anton Chekhov. He paints his characters as local nobodies and local eccentrics, not great heroes, thus making them very relatable and memorable to readers all over the world. Though his works do not exhibit the political urgency seen in other contemporary writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Narayan's emphasis on humanism, human relationships and moral issues offers a subtle, humanistic vision of complexity of Indian life. His work is unique in the blending of the traditional and the modern, and in his ability to represent the "common man's predicament.

Perhaps most intriguing of all in Swami and Friends is the relationship of memory to reality. My Days by Narayan is a running commentary on the events that he immortalized in his fiction. Some parts of the autobiography are rather evocative of the novel, and it is clear that in his imagination Narayan finds nourishment in his own life experiences. In the same way, in My Days, where Narayan can mention two out of many Olympians with whom he "read, played and suffered" for eight years, the description of a school photograph captures the nostalgic and bittersweet tone of Swami's own school experiences. This interplay of memory indicates the retention of past actions and is also linked to physical, geographical and emotional spaces.

Swami and Friends is a wonderful tale of a ten year old boy in many ways, but above all, it is a deep examination of the adolescent mind, and a celebration of ordinary life. With the exact care and attention he paid to a particular area in South India, Narayan arrived at the pinnacle of universal storytelling. His legacy is undeniable as he was able to present the Indian stories to the international audience without compromising its authenticity. The continued presence of Malgudi made Narayan a great name within Indian English literature and, consequently, proved the Predicament of the common man to be a universal experience, transcending all cultural barriers. Swami and Friends will forever be a 'veritable world of fiction' and will continue to be read, loved and admired all over the world.

The Guide was inspired by a combination of real-life experiences and observations by Narayan. During a visit to Berkeley, California on a Rockefeller Foundation grant, Narayan thought of a story about "enforced sainthood". An acute drought in Mysore State's Krishna Raja Sagar reservoir also affected him, and he was moved to sing religious hymns for the rain. The novel is a masterpiece of “double narration” in which the tale is presented in two voices: one, a third person voice for the protagonist, Raju, who narrates what is happening to him in the present; and the other, a first person voice in which the protagonists, Raju and his disciple Velan, discuss Raju's past, in which Raju confesses to Velan. This method enables Narayan to stay within the realm of "detached observation" and "unbiased objectivity" which he is known for, and also gives a psychological peek into the inner turmoil of the character.

Raju starts his journey as a carefree and humorous tourist guide, popularly known as "Railway Raju". He is considered to be a successful practitioner because of his outstanding communication and customer influencing skills. Raju is an ‘anti-hero' – he is an average man with some flaws, particularly his ‘greed about money'. In this period Malgudi is shown as a commercial town and the beginning of the Railway brings with it the modernization of the village life.

Everything changes in Raju's life when he meets Marco, a cold and cruel archeologist and his beautiful wife, Rosie. Marco is the "real researcher" who is always "sunk in his study" of carved doorways and wall paintings, but never does the responsibilities of a responsible husband. Raju makes love to Rosie, who is married to another man, in the absence of Marco and thus disobeys the "conventional order" and the moral standards. It is a secret affair that comes to a bad end and Marco leaves Malgudi with Rosie behind and goes back to Madras.

Rosie's character plays a mirror role to the real condition of the Indian society in the 20th century. Rosie is one of the "Devadasis" (temple dancers) who, coming from such a family, is a woman who "fights between the traditional norms and liberation. Although she is a "dedicated dancer", her husband's lack of interest and then, Raju's management, limit her.

Rosie evolves into a highly successful professional dancer, Nalini, under Raju's opportunistic tutoring and makes national fame under the tutelage of this opportunist. But Narayan focusses on the success from a social conscience perspective and demonstrates that even as a successful woman, Rosie is looked down upon as an "object for men for satisfying their needs". Although her marriage failed and she had an complicated relationship with Raju, Rosie manages to display resilience and agency, opting to continue her career in Madras even after his departure.

The downfall of Raju is due to his moral weakness. His possessiveness becomes criminal as he becomes used to a life of luxury and indulgence in drinking and gambling with Rosie/Nalini. He blackmails Rosie for access to some valuable jewellery that Marco had left for her. This is what critics say is an attempt on the part of Raju to prove that "criminality never pays" and to this ends he is put in jail. In this part of the novel, Narayan's moral perspective is revealed, with the "non-adherence of norms" inevitably resulting in "adverse outcomes" and misery.

Raju's release from jail is a "complex transition". He takes shelter in a "deserted temple" on the banks of Sarayu river and is taken for a "Mahatma" (saint) by a simple villager, Velan. In this new environment Raju does everything to look like a saint to relieve villagers of their anxiety and takes the food and adoration they give him with "blind faith".

The conversion of a "picaroon" (rogue) to a "pilgrim" (saint) is an archetypal theme in Narayan's writing, similar to the myth of Valmiki, a bad guy who becomes a good guy through spiritual effort. When a terrible famine hits the area, Raju's "enforced sainthood" comes to pass. The villagers have entrusting faith in Raju's mysticism and believe that he can get rain by doing a twelve day fast.

The novel's "clash of Faith and Reason" is its central theme. Caught in his own net, Raju starts to question whether he is a 'saint or charlatan?'. Narayan does not give a definitive

answer, just an account of the "representative confusions of modern life", and the challenge of discerning the true from the false in Indian spirituality.

As the speed of the fast increases, Raju's inner journey toward "self-realization" continues. He finally surrenders his destiny with 'equanimity', past his selfishness to contemplate a possible sacrifice for the community. On the 12th day, very tired, Raju tells Velan that the "rain is coming" and collapses. The end of the novel is very ambiguous; whether Raju has died or simply fainted, and whether the rain has been a reality or the dying phase of his hallucination remains unclear.

Narayan employs geographical features and emblems to enhance the story of The Guide. The Sarayu River is a symbol of ‘old nature of Indian culture' and is participating in the process of spiritual purification, the Railway Station is a symbol of ‘the upcoming of new culture' and modernity. The Mempi Hills, and the abandoned temple, create a mystical "back of beyond" feel to it, contrasting with the "money sharks" of the commercial town.

The novel is "profusely suffused" with the spirit of Hindu traditionalism and is filled with teachings of Hindu philosophy (dharma and karma). Narayan portrays a society in which "man is basically a social animal" and human connections provide solidness to life. The problem of the breakdown of Marco and Rosie's marriage is explained as being due to their unconventional marriage, which is not the “ideal kind of bond” that is expected to endure by traditional society.

The Guide's prose is known for its lucid, transparent, vivid and racy style, which was praised by Narayan. He uses a "plain prose" in which he wants to make the "idea more prominent than the style," which he described as a "style which is one that abolishes style". This "unnoticed style" gives the story the opportunity to "tell itself" and with it a closer intimacy with the reader, that goes beyond all cultural barriers. His use of “Indianized” English brings to life the “Indian temper and pace of thinking” and thus makes the banal occurrences of Malgudi universally relatable.

The Guide celebrates the complexity and simplicity of everyday life. In the "lovable but flawed" Raju, Narayan discusses the universal themes of struggle and love as well as redemption. It is a novel that bears witness to Narayan's genius in capturing the particularities of South Indian life and the universal human values. In being 'truly faithful to a particular

region', Narayan got onto the summit of ‘universal art’ and created Malgudi a ‘veritable world of fiction', which continues to be cherished and appreciated by people all over the world. The tale of Raju's transformation from the materialistic desires of the town to the spiritual sacrifice of the river bank is one of the most poignant and thought-provoking stories in contemporary literature.

R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* is a multi-layered twentieth-century masterpiece that encapsulates the nature of a country in a process of decolonisation. A novel set in the "creative locale" of Malgudi and the final years of the British Raj, the book offers a vivid picture of the eruption of nationalism among ordinary people and the great man of Gandhi. Mukesh Kumar Meena writes, Malgudi is a symbol of the transitional India in this novel, and it is shedding the old traditions and charting the way towards modern India's independence.

The story is about an orphan boy named Sriram, and his personal history is a satirical representation of the casualties of colonialism. Sriram's mother passed away at his birth and his father was killed in the campaign to Mesopotamia. This depressing beginning is a commentary on the early 20th century military campaigns of this sort in which Indian soldiers were used as pawns by the British interests, causing the families of men like Sriram to endure "lifelong suffering".

Sriram's journey from being a ‘reckless youth' to a Satyagrahi is not motivated by political conviction but rather by erotic love. Sriram's life changes drastically when he meets Bharati, a true fan of Gandhi. Sriram's "expanding love for Bharati" overtakes him and he leaves his grandmother and joins the non-violent movement to fight for independence led by Mahatmaji. Like many other of Narayan's stories, his travel story is a "wisdom bent on survival," that is, a flight and an uprooting that will ultimately bring a return of normalcy.

Bharati is the moral centre of the novel and symbol of the ideal Batch of Satyagrahis who were willing to give up everything for the cause of Hind Swaraj. She believes in the principles of "Truth, Discipline, Non-violence" of Gandhiji. Bharati's dedication is absolute, unlike Sriram, whose commitment is 'uncertain and aimless'. She gives in to the police as Gandhi asks her to do in the resolution of 1942, embodying the "firmness of mind" that Gandhi was trying to impart to the Indian people.

Bharati is the vehicle through which Narayan explores the agency of women in the social reform of the age. As Jehangir Rashid and Dr. Shabina Khan point out, “Narayan's female protagonists seldom conform to stereotype; Bharati is a case in point of a woman who struggles between traditional roles and liberation to define her own existence in the patriarchal circle" of the independence movement.

Narayan's Malgudi is a setting that "aptly captures the conscience of the pre-Independent Indian society", of which the most prominent aspect is the caste system. Suvarna Shelke and Dr. Rafique Khan state that Narayan "finesely portrays the hierarchical structure and the prejudices that was prevalent within it”.

This rigid orthodoxy is epitomized in the character of Granny. She is so traditional that a canvas chair is cow-hide and she won't let a ragged scavenger" come within "ten yards" of her house. This physical and social distancing highlights the challenging and constraints faced by those outside the privileged castes".

Moreover, it is clear from the depiction of Malgudi's aristocratic chairman, who entertains Gandhi, that Narayan is an observer rather than a participant. The chairman makes a lot of changes in his house when the presence of the Mahatma is announced, but when Gandhi offers a boy, who is an 'untouchable,' to sit on his Divan, his "blood boils", fearing the boy will "leave a permanent stain" on his "expensive Kashmir counterpane". This juxtaposition shows the hypocrisy of the elites who had been promoting "nationalism" and yet still holding on to the discriminatory structures of old.

Unlike many of his peers who may have drawn inspiration from Gandhiji but treated him as a mere abstraction, Narayan puts Gandhiji as a real person in the story. Gandhi gives his speeches on the banks of the Sarayu River, which is a topographical feature of India, symbolizing the "old nature of Indian culture".

Narayan skillfully portrays the Gandhian principles, including the rejection of industrially produced goods in favour of Swadeshi movement, the principle of Force of Love in place of Force of Arms. Sriram tries to preach these missions, but often humorous clashes happen, like his battle with the shopkeeper of the village of Solur over the sale of English biscuits. Sriram makes this case, saying he is only fighting the evil in the shopkeeper, a rather childish and easy to come by understanding of non-violence.

The fourth part of the novel has a darker twist with the introduction of Jagdish, who is called a “terrorist in the name of a true nationalist.” Sriram is easily influenced by Jagdish's "violent and malicious plans" in absence of Bharati who is in prison.

Sriram takes young Jagdish to distribute pamphlets with Subhash Chandra Bose's messages for Indian soldiers in the British Army, and even has to join him in derailing a train loaded with war equipment for England. This part of the novel is a reflection of the representative confusions of modern life and the various forms of nationalisms which followed, none of which was on a Gandhi straight path of non-violence. Eventually caught by the police in Malgudi, Sri Ram is brought back to the "righteous path" - suffering and realization.

Narayan’s hallmark "gentle irony" is most prominent in the juxtaposition of the revolutionaries and the "ignorants of India". As he travels to write "Quit India" on village walls, Sri Ramanarayana Reddy comes across a school teacher, who embodies the complacency of the middle class.

The teacher tells Sriram that he should put an "e" before "t" and change the slogan to 'Quiet India programme' because he does not want the town to ‘irritate the sircar' (government). This quirky scene, with the help of onlookers who are intimidated by the police, is a “biting satire” of the fear and apathy present along with the revolutionary zeal. Venkatesh R. states that Narayan does not directly challenge the colonial system, but rather brings these twists and turns of irony to examine the “inevitable clash of both the colonial and the post-colonial”.

E.S.S. Narayana Trimurthy praises “the unique writing style of Narayan as lucid, transparent, vivid and racy, which has made *Waiting for the Mahatma* so effective”. Narayan has always developed what he called a style which is one that abolishes style, in which the idea must be more prominent than the style in which it is written.

This "plain prose" enables the story to "tell itself," and fosters an intimacy between narrator and reader. K.S. Narayana Rao describes this as an "Indianization" of English with the "Indian temper and pace of thinking" but without "Anglo-Saxon" idioms which would seem foreign to the Malgudi setting. Narayan knows his way around the language, and is able to depict "intricate social patterns of life" in a "beautiful simplicity" that renders the common man's predicament universal.

Malgudi continues to be "the real hero" of the novel, growing up with the nation. In earlier works such as Swami and Friends Malgudi was a "semi-agricultural town" having a conservative life but in Waiting for the Mahatma it was the background for awakening of the nation. The Markets Road, the life-line of the town and Mempi Hills where Sriram hides in the 'deserted shrine' are part of the study of human conduct.

Narayan fuses myth with reality to enhance the landscape; in the same way, Lord Rama is said to have caused the Sarayu to flow, so too do the feet of Gandhi in the town bring a "benign influence" that "promises 'protection to the humble'". This juxtaposition of the everyday and the extraordinary enables the characters to attain a self-realization via their sojourns in the region.

The authenticity of the novel lies in Narayan's own recollections of childhood and his observations when he was an adult during the period of independence. Madhu Bala and Suman Devi say that his "hand and mind are well coordinated and his compositions are very much rooted in his own experiences".

Narayan discusses the quiet disciplined life he lived in Mysore, which gave him the nutrition for imagination that inspired novels such as *Waiting for the Mahatma* in his memoir My Days. The level of pain and agony that his writing displays, is sometimes matched by the level of loss and suffering that he experienced in his own life, especially after the death of his wife, Rajam. The result is this involved narration, for his characters are "local nobodies," but they have a luminous core of innocence and a wisdom bent on survival.

Waiting for the Mahatma is a great "social and political satire" between tradition and modernity. Narrowed down to the particular topography and ‘local colour’ of Malgudi, Narayan reached the universal pitch. The novel shows how critical "common man's predicament" is to the grand narratives of history. The love story of Sri Ram and Bharati, which took place in the background of the "Quit India" movement, is a testament to the universal nature of man and "the spirit of humanity" is present in the tiniest of South Indian towns. R.K. Narayan is still a "literary genius" who could "hold a mirror up to nature" "unbiased objectivity" and "humane indulgence" and demonstrate the "follies, foibles, and triumphs" of a nation undergoing transformation.

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