

## MALGUDI: AN IMAGE OF SOCIAL APPROACHES IN THE NOVELS OF R. K. NARAYAN

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**Abstract:**

*R.K. Narayan is one of the most popular Indian English fiction writers immensely popular not only in India but also abroad. He is known for the everlasting source of the pleasures and sorrows of the characters of the novel who feel quite secured in the environment of Malgudi, the imaginary town created by the writer. His Imaginary town is not less than any character. Like his characters, he presents the multitude sides of this imaginative location in his novels as well as stories. It becomes hard for the reader to get off the alluring and fascinating effect of this small town created in words by the writer.*

**Keywords:**

*Topographical, Imaginary town, Landmarks, Localities, Transition*

A study of the cultural ethos of a society initiates a dialogue between the people of that society and the place where the cultural ethos either originated or flourished. In R. K. Narayan's fiction, the town, Malgudi, exudes such an in-depth connection with the characters living in and around it. Though Malgudi is an imaginary town, it is not less than a real living existence. The town is operative on two levels, the first being the individual or human and the other is topographical. This article aims to probe into this the reality of the unreal town created by R. K. Narayan and how the town impacts and is impacted relatively by the contemporary society and culture co-created in his novels. The article analyses the spatial significance of 'Malgudi' in relation to the author's style of representing the Indian society and culture in the printed text.

Topographical location, Localities and Landmarks; Malgudi, the imaginary town is located in Ramanathapuram in South India in Narayans novels and stories. Though one would fail to search Malgudi on any map of India, but may resemble the town Lalgudi in Trichinopoly District, fringing the river Cavery which can be taken for the original of Malgudi. It is neither a village nor city, but a town of modest size. It exists in the imagination of the reader more distinctively

than any other region described by any Indian writer. Through his small imaginary town Narayan has tried to present an image of the Indian Town under British rule. As mentioned in The Malgudi Days it was created by Sir Fredrick Lawley, a fictional British Officer. Swami and Friends is Narayan's first novel where he used the setting of the town, Malgudi. It was created by a combination of some small villages in 19th century and its later development is seen in the 19th century in the novels of R. K. Narayan.

Market Street is the central street of Malgudi, the location of several big shops including Bombay Anand Bhavan and Truth Printing Works. The houses of the elite are situated on the Kabir Street of Malgudi. Lawley Extension is emerging as new upcoming lane where the residences of the rich and the influential are found. In the same way Ellaman Street is a home to the oil-mongers which is the last street of the town followed by the banks of the river Sarayu. The Grove Street, Kalighat Lane and Vinayak Mudali Street are other such streets of the town. The cremation ground lies between The Nallappa's Grove and the Ellaman Street and the backward class or untouchables and sweepers live on the lower banks of the river.

Malgudi has a small railway station which in many stories and novels, is central to the storyline. There is a main hospital of Malgudi, the Malgudi Medical Centre (MMC). The statue of Sir Fredrick, seated on a horse, The Boardless, a small restaurant without any board which is a centre of discussion for current events in Malgudi, form another major landmarks of the town. Mempi forest is on the other side of Sarayu river. It has many hills and ancient caves. All these landmarks don't come before the reader at once in a single novel or story but the reader explores these locations gradually when he continues reading different classic novels by the author.

Various critics compare Narayan's Malgudi with Thomas Hardy's Wessex or William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. Narayan fills this town with the sketches his own experiences, his childhood, his upbringing, the people, the places, the localities and the landmarks thus creating a place which

were very easy for every Indian to relate with. Graham Greene rightly says in the introduction to *The Financial Expert* that; A place, 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 us, we know, with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open the door to yet another human existence."

Narayan's Malgudi, is the center of an extremely engaging world. In this world of Malgudi, life goes on leisurely and peacefully, exactly in the same way as it has been going on for centuries, in spite of the new ideas encroaching upon it steadily. It seems to be in a state of slow transition like any other Indian town under British rule; changing, but undoubtedly changing quite reluctantly. It can neither reject nor accept the modern ideas. It cannot readily break the age-old traditions. This town, like its characters, witnesses a growth in itself. Malgudi passes through many changes with the passage of time. As the characters in various novels pass through various stages of development this town also develops with time. In 'Swami and Friends', Malgudi is neither a village nor a city, but a town of modest size, but in successive novels it grows in time and place. Narayan expresses the picture of this imaginary town in different novels differently: It grows from the small sized agricultural town to a semi- industrialized city. The Malgudi of *Swami and Friends* is not the same as the Malgudi of *The Vendor of Sweets*. Even in *The Guide*, we see it transit through various phases of advancement. Speaking from the topographical point of view, the Albert Mission College, headed by Principal Brown, the Central Co-operative land mortgage bank with its imposing structure, the newly-built bungalows in the Lawly Extension, Englandia Banking Corporation, The Sunrise Pictures, all are the evidence of the growth of the town.

We see that Narayan's characters are pure Malgudians; deeply rooted in their local traditions entirely belonging to Malgudi in every sagacity and facet. For his readers, Malgudi is of all absorbing interest, having a distinct individuality of its own. Elaborate and clear descriptions of the sights, sounds and smells, colours of this imaginary place with great details, accuracy and vividness make it a real world. In the novels of R. K. Narayan, Malgudi is a representation of contemporary India. The protagonists of different fictions like Swami in *The Bachelor of Arts*, Krishnan in *The English Teacher*, Margayya in

*The Financial Expert*, Raju in *The Guide* are the breathing personalities of Malgudi.

The characters like knaves, prostitutes, lechers, adulterers, money-grabbers, drunkards, sanyasi and would be gangsters co-exist with the teachers, pundits, sweet-vendors, government officers, college and school going students, loyal housewives, loving and caring mothers, wives and grannies. The place may also seem full of chaos. Husbands are betrayed by their wives. Men are captivated by the false beauty of actresses and the female sex. There are children revolting against parents and the old ways of life. There is a scene of misery and happiness in reading the novels of R. K. Narayan. There is a touch of sadness and disillusionment. The creations of R.K. Narayan compel the readers to face the tragic as well as comic views of life without any hesitations. In Malgudi people may not be heroic. In the Novels, there is no control of the characters over the events but it seems as if they control everything. They are utterly helpless creatures torn by desire. There is a divine force controlling the characters of the fictions. Chandra of *The Bachelor of Arts* at last runs away from home. Mr.Sampath is impelled by fortune and at last leaves Malgudi forever. The English Teacher finds happiness in the world of spirits after the death of his wife. *The Guide* dies as a ruined man not because he wants to conspire death. The circumstance being adverse to him he decides to be a willing martyr. Narayan's characters, The people of Malgudi are mere puppets in the hand of fate. Fate seems to be the decider for the happiness or unhappiness of the dwellers of Malgudi. The characters prefer to become sanyasi if they are defeated in life. If they realise that the circumstance is not favourable, they surrender the ultimate force of the universe. Narayan underlines the timeless quality of Malgudi in spite of disturbances and changes inside and outside.

His craftsmanship lies not only in the classical conventional life of Malgudian India, but in the loving attention he devotes to building up a real picture of Malgudi and its inhabitants. Malgudi has its greatest characters with its Mempi hills, tiger – haunted jungles, Natraj printing shop, Jagan's sweet emporium, Jonsonian human characters like Mr. Sampath. Narayan finds plenty of comedy in the normal life of Malgudi without a Vasu to complicate it. There is a mempi malgudi Bus depot. There is 'Mahaut' to persuade the elephant to walk to Malgudi. There is a poet at war with 'all disyllables..... polysyllables' in his great Krishna poem. There is peculiar comic personality of 'The

Man Eater'. Still Narayan's attitude towards Malgudi remains lovingly ambiguous. He loves to depict the traditional life of Malgudi with all its backwardness and peculiarities. But he treats it with gentle teasing and melancholy understanding. The treatment of the psychology of the characters is subtle and beautiful. The parade of amazing characters that marches through Malgudi consists of animal stuffer, crooked politicians, the adjournment lawyer, film producers, village idiots and the temple prostitutes. The reality of Malgudi is also displayed in his short stories. Malgudi is lively with its collection of printing shops, schools, temples, hotels and mampi hills. It has usual beggars, spongers, tricksters, bohemians and orthodox community. Malgudi is less liberal of the modernizers, Americanizes and Anglicizers, Government planners, men of violence, fanaticism and needless novelty. So Malgudi takes characters of its own. The themes, characters and dialogue are the mirror images of Malgudi. Narayan, a realist, gives details of life, culture and society of contemporary India. He does not do this knowingly but the realism creeps up as the selective tendency in the descriptive part of his fictional world.

It is interesting to note the significance of the river in the cultural life of the town. For the elderly citizens of Malgudi there is nothing more gratifying than a bath in the river before sunrise followed by offering water to Surya Devta (Sun God), the symbol of Agni (Fire), the sustainer of life. But the younger generation, the generation of Krishna and Chandran, does not seem to be very much interested in any such activity. A leisurely stroll in the company of "gay" friends discussing the news of the College, the discussion often interrupted by the side-glances thrown at some beautiful girl with jasmine flowers in the hair and a timid expression on the face passing is their idea of Sarayu. It is here on the bank of Sarayuth at Mani, the big bully (Swami and friends), waits for Rajam and plans to bundle him up and throw him into the river. It is here on the bank of Sarayu that Chandran steals a glance of his beloved Malathi who almost drives him mad (The Bachelor of Arts).

Another factor which makes Malgudi what it is, a slow-moving peaceful town unruffled by the outside world, is the extremely unassuming and easy pattern of the life of its people. Life in Malgudi, by all means, is easy. Swami's father and many like him, after their morning meal of rice and sambhar, chew betel leaves, go to their offices leisurely, either walking or in old-fashioned

Jutkas (horse-driven carriages). Women get up early in the morning, take their bath, do puja for a while, and then cook very spicy curry and rice. When their husbands and children leave the house at about ten, they clean the house, feed the little ones, and then go to their neighbors for a little which goes on uninterrupted till evening when they have to cook something for the husbands and children coming from offices and schools. Sometimes they may read a few pages of a short story or a novel (Srinivas's wife often did that), or knit sweaters for their husbands which they usually do not get to finish. This feminine world is extremely limited. It has very little concern for what happens outside. Marriages, the dowry that a particular bride brings, the dresses and jewelry that their mothers once had, and similar issues are infinite sources of endless talking. The parental control of children is rather strict. This is the background of the life which is pictured in the novels of R. K. Narayan which is seen in the small town of Maigudi.

There is a lack of interest toward women's education in the town and this is not very surprising. The attitude of general indifference toward women's education needs very little explanation. The reader remembers that the novelist is writing about a society in which girls are married at fourteen. An unmarried girl above this age is supposed to be a disgrace for the family concerned. The only two exceptions are Rosie (The Guide) and Shanti (The Printer of Maigudi). Rosie is a devadasi, a low-caste professional temple dancer and Shanti is a budding film star. Both of these women, however, do not belong to Maigudi and do not fit into the background of town.

Through the characters, Narayan successfully shows the contrast between the framework of old traditions and the new ways of thought and life brought in by the West. This change, although slow exerts tremendous influence on the social structure of the life as portrayed in R. K. Narayan's novels. The joint-family system is a good example. It is the most significant feature of the traditional Hindu family set-up. Narayan creates his characters in such an environment. He deals with life as it is lived in Maigudi, whether in Market Road or Anderson Lane. His novels are, however, by no means mere sociological studies. There are problems of caste, arranged marriages, family relationships, adjustment of the individual to his environment. What is remarkable about Narayan is the fact that he deals with these problems without making us aware that he is doing

so. The reader does not stop reading the story and start thinking of the problems and the ways to solve these. His characters are interesting, laughable, real human beings. This approach to characterization definitely influences the setting of his fictional world.

It would not be wrong to say that Narayan is the first and last artist who has portrayed delightfully true pictures of life in India in an unreal town, Malgudi. The Joys and sorrows, the warmth of human relationships, the hypocrisy and selfishness of human beings—all these go to make the Malgudi world a real place. Narayan is not interested in piling up details for their own sake, nor does he suffer from the passion of being always precise and accurate. His novels are not mere topographical guides. He does not start from one end of the town giving accurate description of each locality, road and building, and then end with the other side. Little off hand details thrown in here and there creates the illusion of the reality of his setting. The reader feels it, visualizes it and thinks it to be true.

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