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India Embedded in the Novels of R.K. Narayan

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Abstract

This paper discusses that the novels of R.K. Narayan may be described as a special kind of intervention in the ongoing problematic concept of Indian modernity. By modernity I mean the new kind of subjectivity and society that emerged in India after the impact of British imperialism. Though one component of this impact was enlightenment, rationality, science, and Western knowledge, Indian modernity was not merely a copy of Western modernity. That is because modern India emerged out of the complex struggle between colonialism and nationalism. Though influenced by the West, Indian modernity marks its own distinct path. This path consists in taking critical aspects of Western modernity and trying to combine them with India's usable past. But because both Western modernity and Indian traditions have multiple possibilities and processes, the self-constitution of India's modernity becomes a plural and diverse adventure rather than any simplistic supplanting of modernity or the revival of tradition at the expense of modernity. Indian modernity is thus neither anti-traditional nor necessarily pro-Western.

Keywords: Novels, R.K. Narayan, Western knowledge, Indian modernity

1. Introduction

In the novels of Narayan, Malgudi in the 1930s is a small town across the river Sarayu with an officers' club and two schools, a municipality and town hall. There is Nallapa's mango grove and the Mempi forest. The hold of traditional values on characters like Swami is as strong as the effect of modern civilization. Malgudi is shown as a town at the crossroads of Indian culture. It is tied to its ancient moorings, yet submits to various compulsions of change. The railway station, the England Insurance Company, the Truth Printing Works, Anand Bhavan, the central Co-operative Land Mortgage Bank, Lawley Extension and many other modern institutions go to build up Malgudi's existence. Thus Malgudi exists on two dimensions simultaneously—the age old values and beliefs that have gone deep down the Indian psyche shaping its cultural and emotional outlook and the new way of living that the Western notions of economic progress have forged. Grandmothers, uncles and aunts with their rigid caste system, their innumerable religious rituals are finely counterpoised against the new generation represented by Mali, Balu, Dr. Pal and others.

Narayan's writing spans over sixty years and we can see that he is the direct witness of the modern transition of India and his writing can be regarded as the epic of modern India because the background of nearly all his fiction is an imaginary town called Malgudi, somewhere in South India, which is actually a sample for the change of the whole country. Though his writings we can see what has been actually happening to India in these years. From his story we experience the change of their life, the change of their values and their way of looking at themselves. He faithfully reflects the change of women's social position and also the change of their role in the households. He creates a series New Women who dare to pursue their own happiness, ignoring the confinement of the tradition or the codes of religion. But to a certain degree, his writing about the modern transition of India only relates to the elites, or at the most, the middle class.

From Swami and Friends to A Tiger for Malgudi, it is a march along a historical time. With each of the novels, Malgudi unfolds new vistas of life. A simple, innocent and conservative society undergoes fast changes because of the incursions of modern civilization. From a sleepy, silent and small town atmosphere on the banks of river Sarayu to a fast developing metropolitan ethos with modern streets, banking corporations, talkies and smugglers' den and even a circus, Malgudi marks a movement in time.

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This movement not only affects the geography of the place, but also the social and cultural milieu. Innocence gradually gives way to experience and Malgudi begins to live up to the modern spirit. Like Hardy's Wessex and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha which experience the gradual decadence of the agricultural community of England and that of time experiences the swift changes, innumerable contradictions that make a mark on the orthodox Indian society with its age-old culture, beliefs and superstitions. Graham Greene in the introduction to *The Financial Expert* remarks, "...the life of Malgudi never ruffled by politics proceeds in exactly the same way as it has done for centuries, and the juxtaposition of the age-old convention and the modern character provides much of the comedy" (Greene vii)

Naryan's novels represent a section of Indian society where life is steeped in middle class consciousness. His characters portray certain characteristic features- either they are docile, timid, adhering to traditional values and pacifist by nature or they appreciate vulnerability, violence and excessive greed for money. In this context we can expound the fact that Narayan studies economic problem minutely had exquisitely and thereby frames several groups. While Marco and Rosie represent the well-to-do class, Gaffur and Joseph denote the low wage earner. In the words of Prof. Krishna Sen, "At first sight, the world of *The Guide* seems to be structured along simple binaries-Malgudi and Mangala, the town and the village, urban sophistication versus rural simplicity, modernity versus tradition, and cynicism versus faith. As with the binary that Shakespeare created in *As You Like It*, settings off the court against the Forest of Arden, but with positive and negative elements existing within each ideological space so here too Malgudi and Mangala stand for cultural locations that appear to be simple only from a distant view" (Sen 17).

His third novel, *The Dark Room*, published in 1938 tries to handle the issue of subaltern groups. In the fiction, the dark room is not only a place for the retreatment of the women when she is abused by her husband, but also a metaphor which discloses the miserable conditions of women and the oppression by men. They are often victims within a marriage. This is the first novel that casts spotlight upon women issues. *The Financial Expert*, published in 1952, is considered to be among his greatest masterpieces. When the miserable conditions of subaltern groups are talked about, this book is most likely to be mentioned as the supportive evidence to indicate that colonial institutions are the sources of the sufferings of the subaltern groups. *The Guide*, written in 1956, was cheered by many readers for the heroine's strong resistance against the deeply-rooted patriarchal culture of India. In 1961 Narayan published his next novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, which was reviewed as having a narrative that is a classical art form of comedy, with delicate control. *The Man-Eater* is also a metaphor here. In an elaborate comment on the novel, Meenakshi Mukherjee comments, "the battle between the gods and demons, the sura and the asura" happens to be a "recurrent motif in Hindu mythology." (Mukherjee152)

The Guide which won for Narayan huge accolades shows the novelist's skill in placing the orient into focus for occidental eyes. In this novel Narayan depicts a comprehensive picture of human activities, the comic and the tragic, the silly and the serious, the ridiculous and the sublime. K.R.S. Lyengar rightly holds the view: "Speaking generally, Narayan's is the art of resolved limitation and

conscientious exploration; he is content, like Jane Austen, with a 'little bit of ivory', just so many inches wide: he would like to be a detached observer, to concentrate on a narrow scene, to sense the atmosphere of the place, to snap a small group of characters in their oddities and angularities: he would, if he could, explore the inner countries of the mind, heart and soul, catch the uniqueness in the ordinary, the tragic in the prosaic" (Lyengar360)

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