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Malgudi: “The Heart of R. K. Narayan’s Novels”

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ABSTRACT

R. K. Narayan, one of the most dominating literary figures in the history of Indian Writing in English, is one of “the Big Three” as called by the critic William Walsh. The other two novelists are Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand who gave a new direction to Indian English Literature. Narayan is credited to have introduced the imaginary world of Malgudi to the readers in his very first novel. It came into existence with his very first novel, *Swami and Friends* published by Hamish Hamilton in Oxford University Press in 1935. Thereafter, he climbed the ladder of success and never looked back. Malgudi is the heart and soul of his novels. His popularity lies in the depiction of an imaginary South Indian town, Malgudi in most of his novels. Although it is an imaginary town not to be found anywhere on the Indian map, it seems as if it exists in the real life somewhere in India. The idea of this imaginary town came to his mind suddenly on the auspicious day of the celebration of Vijaydashmi. Many critics agree that Malgudi is the hero of his novels. He was a pure artist who aimed at delighting the readers. He believed in “Art for Art’s Sake” introducing the readers to the interesting world of Malgudi which has everything to fascinate the readers to the fullest. When it comes to Narayan’s contribution to the literary world, Malgudi is the first thing that usually comes to our minds. It is the mini-India, the secret of his success.

Keywords: *Malgudi, Mini-India, Microcosm, fictional, Wessex*

MALGUDI: “THE HEART OF R. K. NARAYAN’S NOVELS”

Introduction

R. K. Narayan is considered a first-rate novelist who dwells in the galaxy of novelists along with Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Khuswant Singh, Ruth Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Nirad Chowdhary, etc. Indian English Novel has come a long way since the publication of the very first novel *Rajmohan’s Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in 1864. It reached the apex when the trio of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan entered the literary world with their respective novels in the 1930s.

R. K. Narayan is very famous for the town of Malgudi. The credit for pioneering the regional novel in Indian English Literature goes to R. K. Narayan who opened a new and fascinating world to the readers. The critic A. V. Krishna Rao calls him “a regional novelist”. The critic P. P. Mehta says, “The regional novel finds its full expression in R. K. Narayan”. Narayan is regarded as a regional novelist because of his treatment of Malgudi in his novels. He limits himself to the world of Malgudi. He is satisfied with a little bit of “ivory – two inches wide”. The critic K. R. S. Iyengar compares him with the English novelist Jane Austen. In his book *Indian Writing in English*, Iyengar says, “...he is content like Jane Austen, with his ‘little bit of ivory’ just so many inches wide”. Even within this limitation of the region, Narayan develops his plots, characters and many more. He deals with the lives and people of Malgudi realistically and effectively. The critic M. K.

Naik compares him not with the English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner but with the English novelist Arnold Bennet in this context. Several English writers like E. M. Forster, Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham have praised him. He is labelled as “South Indian E. M. Forster” by many critics. He is also called “Indian Chekhov”.

Malgudi, an imaginary South Indian town, occupies an important place in the novels of R. K. Narayan. It came into existence with the publication of his debut novel *Swami and Friends* by Hamish Hamilton in the Oxford University Press in 1935. Malgudi is the centre of attraction in most of the novels of R. K. Narayan. It is the heart and soul of his novels. Narayan limits himself to the world of Malgudi, an imaginary South Indian town not to be found anywhere on the world map. He himself reveals the secret of the origin of Malgudi to Ved Mehta in an interview. He admits that the discovery of Malgudi was an earth-shaking discovery for him. Furthermore, he had not the least idea that this imaginary town would earn him fame and recognition in the literary world in the upcoming years. Chote Lal Khatri, in his book titled *R. K. Narayan: Reflections and Re-evaluation*, tells what Narayan says:

I remember waking up with the name Malgudi on Vijaydashmi, the day on which goddess of learning is celebrated. Malgudi was an earth-shaking discovery for me, because I had no minds 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 town with a Banyan tree, a station master, and two trains a day, one coming and one going. On Vijaydashmi, I sat down and wrote the first sentence about my town: ‘the train has just arrived at Malgudi Station.’ (Khatri: 62)

Narayan answers the question of why he has chosen Malgudi, an imaginary town instead of a real existing place when asked by his uncle. He says: “An imaginary town I like that has great possibilities. You can make anything out of it, whereas if you set your town in a real place you are bound by Geography and its existing structure. But in a place like Malgudi, though the heart of the city may be fixed, it can expand”.

In his book titled *R. K. Narayan*, P. S. Sundaran talks about the scene of Malgudi:

Narayan’s book springs from the mud and river of Malgudi, without any attempt to project a picture. Narayan takes one, in novel after novel and every short story, to the men and women. The scene is Malgudi. (Sundaran: 16)

In his book titled *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation*, the critic William Walsh says, “The majority of his novels are centred around the fictitious town of Malgudi, an amalgamation of several towns he had lived in as a child and young adult”. (William Walsh: 166-167). Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Twice Born Fiction* says, “Nothing could be more provincial and localized than the life of Malgudi town, yet R. K. Narayan successfully achieves a universal vision through it”. (Mukherjee: 25)

Malgudi occupies the same place in the novels of R. K. Narayan as the ‘Lake District’ occupies in the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth’s works, ‘Wessex’ in the novels of Thomas Hardy, ‘Waverley’ in the novels of The Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott, ‘Bihar’ in the novels of

Hindi writer Phaneeswarnath Renu, ‘Pottery towns’ in Arnold Bennet and ‘Yoknapatawpha’ of William Faulkner.

In his *The Novels of R. K. Narayan: A Critical Evaluation*, P. K. Singh says:

R. K. Narayan frames his fictional imagination within the municipal limit of Malgudi. Malgudi is his an “imaginary regional locale” like the ‘Lake District’ of Wordsworth, ‘boarder countries’ of Sir Walter, ‘the Wessex’ of Thomas Hardy or ‘the Five Towns’ of Arnold Bennet. As an imaginary town, it is situated between Madras and Tiruchirapalli. Narayan’s all characters – students, teachers, artists, sanyasis, dreamers and realists-live within its limits. (Singh: 65)

Many critics regard Malgudi as the real hero of his novels. K. R. S. Iyengar, in his book *Indian Writing in English*, writes:

Malgudi is the real ‘hero’ of the ten novels and the many short stories that underneath the seeming chance and the human drama, there is something the ‘soul’ of the place? That defies or embraces all change and is triumphantly and unalterably itself. All things pass and change, men and women try to live, and even as they are living, they are called upon to die, names change, fashions change, but the old landmarks – the Sarayu, the Hills, the Jungles, the Grove remain. The one remains, the many change and pass. (Iyengar: 12)

K. R. S. Iyengar again says:

Malgudi is Narayan’s ‘Casterbridge’ but the inhabitants of Malgudi although they may have recognizable local trappings are essentially human and hence have their kinship with all humanity. In this sense, ‘Malgudi’ is everywhere. (Iyengar: 360)

R. S. Singh in his book *Indian Novel in English* says:

Malgudi is not only the microcosm of India in its multifarious mood but it is also the real hero of his novels. Swami, Chandran, Ramani, Krishnan, Sampath, Sriram, Raju, Vasu and Mali – all these characters are typically Malgudians. (Singh: 56)

Like any real existing place, Malgudi also has many important landmarks like Sarayu River, Mempi Forest, Albert Mission School, Mempi Hill, Regal Haircutting Salon, Krishna Medical Hall, Anand Bhavan Hotel, Malgudi Municipality, Malgudi Railway Station, Variety Cinema Hall, etc. It has many streets and lanes also like Kabir Lane, Kabir Street, Ellaman Street, Abu Lane, etc. Narayan depicts Malgudi realistically and vividly. Because of its realistic depiction by him, it becomes alive. Malgudi and its people represent the typical middle-class Indian society. We can call it ‘Mini India’. It is the microcosm of India as R. S. Singh says in his book titled *Indian Novel in English*. Graham Greene comments:

From the first pages of Mr Narayan’s new novel, we are back in the town of Malgudi with which for nearly twenty years we have been as familiar as with our birthplace. We like the streets of childhood, market road, the snuff stalls, the vendors of

toothpaste, Lawley extension with its superior villas, the Regal Haircutting Salon, the river, the railway.

The readers are fascinated by the fictional world of Malgudi. They enter the world of Malgudi while reading the novels and get lost in it. Many critics have praised it. The critic Graham Greene says:

Whom next shall I meet in Malgudi? That is the thought that comes to me when I close a novel of Mr Narayan. I do not wait for another novel I wait to go out of my door into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and certainty of pleasure a stranger approaching past the bank, the cinema, the hair-cutting saloon, a stranger who will greet me I know with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open a door on to yet another human existence.

Malgudi is not a static setting. It is a fast-growing and developing town. It developed from an agricultural village to a semi-industrialized town. It changes and gets advanced with each new novel. In *Swami and Friends*, Malgudi is neither village nor city, but a town of modest size. In the novel *The Guide*, we see the Malgudi Railway Station taking shape in Malgudi. Malgudi is affected by modernity and there is a conflict between tradition and modernity. After independence, it witnessed a lot of changes and developments. Uma Parameswaran says, “Malgudi is the only character that grows, changes, reacts to time and circumstances, has a spirit, a soul”.

Like a real town, Malgudi has witnessed a lot of changes with time as geographical changes can be perceived easily. Many institutions came into existence. A new printing press was being established. The industrial and transport growth is evident as mills, roads, etc. were being constructed that make the lives of the people of Malgudi comfortable. The roads, parks and colonies were renamed after independence which can be seen in the short story titled “Lawley Road” where roads and parks were renamed after the names of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi Road, Nehru Park, etc. A park called ‘Coronation Park’ was given the desi name ‘Hamara Hindustan Park’. All these produced chaos and confusion. Many streets have the same name and because of this, the people are confused. The letters and other important documents reach other places instead of reaching the correct places. All these produce laughter and make his story interesting and realistic.

Many critics have attempted to identify Malgudi. K. R. S. Iyengar speculates that it might be Lalgudi on the River Cauvery or Yadavagiri in Mysore. Other critics opine that Narayan’s Malgudi is Coimbatore which has many landmarks – a river on one side, forests on the other, the Mission School and College, and all the extensions mentioned in the novels. M. K. Naik has appended a map of Malgudi in his book titled *The ironic Vision: A Study of the Fiction of R. K. Narayan*. But all efforts to identify Malgudi are useless because it is a country of the mind, a product of Narayan’s mind. It is completely an imaginary town, the idea of which came to him suddenly on the day of Vijaydashami.

Conclusion

Malgudi is the biggest achievement of R. K. Narayan in the literary world. It occupies a significant place in Narayan's novels with the publication of his debut novel *Swami and Friends* in 1935 leading to his popularity as the creator of Malgudi. His novels can be called 'Malgudi novels' just as Thomas Hardy's novels are known as 'Wessex novels'. Narayan has written almost fifteen novels and in most of his novels, Malgudi provides the background to them as it is present in almost all of his novels. It has contributed to the popularity of Narayan as a novelist as well as a short story writer. He has immortalised the world of Malgudi in the minds and hearts of the readers even after he died in 2001. His novels could have lost their charms without Malgudi. It proved to be a milestone in his literary career. Many critics opine that 'Malgudi' is the real hero of Narayan's novels. It gives his novels the quality of Indianness. Thus, it is an undeniable fact that Malgudi is the heart and soul of R. K. Narayan's novels. We can say:

“Malgudi is to Narayan's novels as the heart is to body”

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