R.K. Narayan's Malgudi Milieu

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A Sensitive World of Grotesque Realism

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PREFACE

In my PhD thesis I engaged in interpreting the Malgudi* novels of R. K. Narayan with the help of a few ideas of the twentieth-century Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's unique use of the image of carnival in defining the novel form offers an insight into meanings not always apparent in the theme itself. The subversive forces working in the language used by authors lead one beyond the storyline to the hidden complexities of social and economic relations and the ideologies which language registers, for according to Bakhtin language is ideologically saturated. This way of interpreting the novels of Narayan leads to an extended perception by revealing meaning as unfinalizable.

After publishing my thesis as a monograph titled *A Study of R. K. Narayan's Novels: A Celebration of the Carnival*, I felt that my experience could be further fine-tuned in order to posit Narayan among those writers who could foresee India moving beyond the influence of great personalities like Gandhi and Nehru. Narayan's sensitive authorial instinct had sensed an inbuilt tendency of subversion and materialization among a newly growing class in postcolonial India. Though the poor and rural class formed the majority, this new middleclass he found to be interesting in its visibility. This is perhaps because they were, and still are, economically mobile and ideologically ambiguous. They are subversive not in the sense of what Marx had predicted about the proletariats in industrial societies, but as agents who inverted the different nationalist ideologies and traditional values which coloured colonial India. This inversion, as projected in many of the novels of Narayan, reveals a grotesque realism and a growing vulnerability to the lures of market oriented society. India had been drawn to the capitalist structuring of the world through the force of British colonialism, but Narayan was more interested in how the individuals of this particular class responded to it.

I have kept the ideas of polyphony and carnival intact but have attempted a more focussed reading of the novels. This I have done by identifying the variety of the middleclass located in the complex socio-economic process

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* A fictional town of Narayan's making, on which more later.

that India as a democracy created. I have highlighted how within the Malgudi imaginary Narayan drew realistic images of people grappling with their new-found semi-urban space, all the machineries feeding its socio-economic structure, and the new-found values and idioms. Narayan's comic mode further helps in bringing out their confusions and ambiguities. Polyphony promotes interaction and the carnival space deals with the impermanence of power and positions which are fluid and reversible. Thus, I believe, my reading will add a new dimension to the study of Narayan and his Malgudi milieu.

INTRODUCTION

By the time R. K. Narayan began writing, English in India as a language of communication – both official and literary – was well established. The European, especially British, colonialism that had affected and changed India had created new structures in the economic and social milieu. This was reflected in literature written both in regional and foreign languages. Strange hybrid characters until then unimagined emerged as harbingers of a new phenomenon – literature that was Indian but written in English. Yes, the life story of Dean Mahomet is perhaps more interesting than his venture into English travelogue writing, which became famous on the ground of its novelty and by the flick of destiny; that is, it appeared at the ripe moment when it was bound to make a mark in Indian colonial history. Bankimchandra, Michael Madhusudan and the Dutt family, including the famous Toru Dutt, explored the possibilities of writing Indian modernity through the lexicon of both Indian and European languages, especially English. The energy produced by the turn of history in India, the dilemmas and in-betweenness in the field of culture, and the newly discovered world of Western ideas, social reforms and home-grown ideologies compelled a rush for new expressions. There were, of course, initial teething problems and a groping for new styles and forms that would suit the new language and themes. When Narayan appeared on the scene he was not alone; he had already been enriched by a pantheon of Indian writers in English. Narayan is a creation of his time, which was colonial. He is a writer who is much appreciated for bringing his own brand of Indian flavour to the field of English-language writing in India, but the other side of the coin is his subtle and unobtrusive response to colonial capitalism, a Western import.

According to Aijaz Ahmed (1992) nationalism of one kind or another was the "determinate ideological imperative" in the cultural productions of the "Third World" in the era of imperialism. He identifies the epicentre of literary activities in the universities. Indian universities that had their origins in the colonial era were political constructs catering to the policy of cultural imperialism adopted by the British rulers. They were hand in glove with the British intelligentsia in their formation of power structures under the excuse of ideology. These universities depended, Aijaz points out, on their British and American counterparts, and knowledge produced

there was immediately imported to India "shaping even the way we think of ourselves" (44). This "parasitic dependence" (44) in the teaching of English was most obvious, as both Gauri Viswanathan and Aijaz Ahmed would vouch.

Today, in introduction to the study of Indian Literature in English, this aspect of the discipline is highlighted. There again, it is not wise to assume that it was a unitary movement. There were counter movements of nationalist reactionaries to subvert this Anglicization of Indian cultures. Initiatives to excavate India's pre-colonial culture, art and knowledge systems and to reconstruct India's history so as to counter colonial impositions were present too.

In India the idea of a nation state was imported along with other colonial apparatuses and nationalism was immediately adopted as an anti-colonial instrument. Indian nationalism is romantic in nature; it is oracular, inspirational and complicit with Gandhian polity. It aspired to bulldoze all social and gender inequalities on the one hand, which is a sign of adopting rationalism, but on the other it invoked the metaphysical to underscore the immortal unchanging soul of India from the time of the epics. One common Gandhian trope of nationalism was the idea of 'Ramarajya'.

Indian colonial modernity thus had different epicentres. The Anglicists conspired to create a group of elites out of the educated natives who would inseminate among the masses a pro-British ideology through institutional interpellation. This formed the core of the British policy of cultural imperialism. The Indian nationalists who fought against British rule were hardly different in the sense that they adapted Western ideas, especially those of the French Revolution. They dreamt of a free nation state and a democratic polity. However, nationalism, supposedly a unitary force, also invokes different and even contradictory practises. Some are progressive but some are reactionary or retrograde. Gandhi, the great oracular figure in Indian nationalism, is a queer combination of both these tendencies. It should be mentioned that Indian nationalism in the form of extremist activities or of that branded the INA (Indian National Army) of Subhash Chandra Bose were swept under the carpet to eulogize and prioritize Gandhian nationalism. Indian English Literature, however, had previously reflected the Gandhian form of nationalism and was characterized by it.

Much later this trend was broken by Salman Rushdie. The clichéd metaphors of nationalism were subverted in a fantastic aesthetic climate of magic realism. Rushdie went further to question Nehruvian positivism.

Midnight's Children satirizes the nationalist discourse that had influenced a huge pantheon of Indian writers.

Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* and Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* continued with Gandhian nationalism as inspiration. But R. K. Narayan, though their contemporary, attempted an escape from this overwhelming phenomenon. His constant references to Gandhism are deceptive. He uses the self-reflexivity of the comic mode of writing in order to question ideology. What are the areas important for gauging the nature of contemporary society that remain under the carpet? Is nationalism the only reality that the novel, a genre suitable for depicting colonial and post-colonial realism, could use as its area of interest? The energy of history has its own course and is not necessarily bound to the influence of the ruling ideology. And who but the petits bourgeois form the group most responsive to the whirlwind of change. Narayan addressed this centrifugal force; he envisioned the flux of history and attempted to remap its course.

According to Nirad C. Chaudhuri it is sheer hypocrisy to claim a return of the rich Indian history of pre-colonial India. He envisioned Indian history in terms of cycles, each cycle completing its own term to give way to a different cycle. Like the concept of the gyre made famous by W. B. Yeats it is a continuous distancing from the past and there is no chance of reversion. This is because each cycle creates a different milieu in terms of culture, social structure, economy and racial relations. Colonial India was just one small outcome of a world movement as history witnessed the advancement of Western imperialism. This movement is not merely based on the racist theory claiming the superiority of the Caucasian over others. Behind the excuse of such ideological rumination was the motive of commercial expansionism. From mercantile it turned colonial in nature. As Amitav Ghosh claimed in his novel *In an Antique Land* it was by nature competitive, aggressive and exclusivist and very different from the tradition of inclusive and friendly commerce that had existed among the countries around the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.

Ideals that had fed different forms of societies turned into dated fossils in the new socio-economic milieu. In fact the idea of 'Ramrajya' propagated by Gandhi exposes the oracular, sentimental nature of the Indian nationalism that ruled the roost. With the introduction of a more urban form of society there emerged characters and agents novel in Indian social history. The newly born nation state, though still basically agrarian, aspired towards an urban world view. It was a product of Western influence. Though not metropolitan as the West in nature, it was soon

experiencing a new development – the mushrooming of semi-urban towns. This was because India's destiny got connected to that of England. India's land mass and poverty ridden population contributed to the growing industrialization of England. India itself was not seeing the growth of major industrialization like England, but small industries that catered to British commerce grew here and there, though not evenly all over the country. Agriculture suffered; Indian peasants were forced to replace their traditional production of food grain with the growing of cash crops. For the movement of raw materials the railways were built. It was an uneven growth. It chanced to happen for people living in areas that would facilitate colonial capitalism. However, as a side effect grew the crowded disordered and carnivalesque towns and semi-urban spaces that housed the petits bourgeois. They were distinct from the Indian bourgeoisie who were more educated and involved in ideological pursuits. The Indian petits bourgeois were opportunists – petty commodity producers, shopkeepers, circus entertainers, printers, clerks, insurance officials, public health workers, small-scale film makers, taxidermists and so on. Even traditional occupations like money lending, pyol teaching and sweet vending did not disappear but struggled to adjust or cater to the new age. A good example is found in Narayan's novel *The Financial Expert* where the traditional money-lender Margayya develops a new cunning to attract clients and divert them from the newly introduced banking system. The railway too offered opportunities to people to venture into non-conventional occupations. Railway shops, railway food catering and book wheelers came into existence. Taxi drivers, hoteliers and tourist guides crowded the outer premises of the railway stations. Imported technologies opened up numerous means of earning, such as entertainment industries in the form of circuses, modern stage shows, films and so on. Book printing and publishing gave rise to many writing ventures, from the serious, to the popular, to pornographic booklets. Publishing's commercial viability was catching up to such an extent that it was not considered fantastic to imagine story producing machines. These petit bourgeois characters hardly cared for ideals like nationalism: rather they used such home grown ideologies to their own selfish ends. Gandhism or ideologies created by the British as well as the Indian bourgeoisie were often turned into tools of opportunism.

Narayan, as a writer of comic novels, saw this incongruous world and even perceived the dichotomy between the idealized and unitary form of Indian nationalism and the unbounded flux of the newly growing world of the petit bourgeois. Narayan abandoned the oracular form of nationalism; in fact in his novels even the main protagonists defy and subvert such a tendency.

What is Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi like? It is universal in the sense that it houses small-town middle-class people and has all the characteristics of such places that soon after British rule became common in India. Yet it also carries the flavour of what is commonly known as "South India", a fallacy committed by the people of the northern part of India who thus bulldozed all its linguistic and cultural varieties. This bisection of India into north and south is linguistic, racial and political. However, this "South India" is represented by some Indian writers who wrote in English, such as Narayan, Ramanujan and Raja Rao. It cannot be denied that the platform of Indian Writing in English offered these writers the space to uphold this part of India to India as a whole as well as to the world. It counters the Delhi and Bengal centric culture that gained more prominence due to British rule. If we study chronologically all the Malgudi novels we notice that his early novels, except for *The Darkroom*, are autobiographical in nature and definitely reflect Narayan's Tamil background. By the time he launched a more mature venture into the lives of common people Malgudi was well established as Narayan's fictional world. Here he staged all the dramas happening in the lives of middle-class people who had no chance of being glorified in the Indian nationalistic discourse. An attempt was made by Raja Rao in his novel *Kanthapura*, where he depicted the inhabitants of a particular village as important participants in an anti-British movement. But the author, using Moorthy, the protagonist, as a replica of Gandhi ultimately threw the diverse characters of a stratified society into the whirlpool of a national movement that pulled all towards a central ideology. It is a centripetal force and Raja Rao successfully showed the strength of Gandhism unifying a stratified society to overcome all the age old prejudices.

But is it that easy? Nationalism itself is an authoritarian power that demands sacrifice for the sake of one's country. How many people would give in to that demand of selflessness? Salman Rushdie, who initiated a new era in Indian post-colonial discourse, showed how instead of unifying the country, two hundred years of British rule inflicted on India a chronic disease of disintegration. India continues to crack and divide itself into minuscule particles.

Rushdie showed the absurdity of attempting to divide a country like India into states on the basis of language. Narayan does not deal with greater politics but his depiction of selfish individualism may be extended to contemporary ethnic politics where politicians demand separate states not merely for reasons of ethnic identity and acceptance by the centre but also for personal control over power and funds. Narayan captured the essence

of such selfish tendencies growing in the newly developing petit bourgeoisie. This was possible because his comic vision enabled him to break away from the paradigm of Gandhian nationalism that fed many of the important works in the field of Indian literature in English. Narayan's world is an upside-down world where the masses prevail while those who assume the role of the hero ultimately end up as clowns caught up in the motion produced by history.

It is interesting to note that both Raja Rao and Narayan attempted to draw maps of their fictitious locations, Kanthapura and Malgudi respectively. These are so detailed in description that the reader can easily draw a guide map. But the difference lies in the fact that Raja Rao's Kanthapura is a village stratified in terms of caste whereas Malgudi, a growing town, is drawn in terms of class. This phenomenon is important and should not be neglected. The motive of Raja Rao was to realize through fiction Gandhi's dream of eradicating the age old caste system with a strong dose of nationalism. But nationalism lost its grip soon after independence and India continued with the same colonial structures when it came to governance. The caste system was not eradicated; caste consciousness took a new turn with the government-imposed quota system. India also replicated England in its class stratification, with the middle class becoming prominent in terms of demography as well as agency. Narayan addressed these new and strange actors of modern Indian history.

In *Malgudi Days* Narayan introduces a fictitious nineteenth-century British architect, Sir Frederick Lawley, who combines a few villages together and creates the fictitious town of Malgudi. Interestingly, Arthur Lawley was the governor of Madras in 1905 and the derivation is quite obvious. This reminds us of the history of Calcutta, which was created out of five villages, and also of New Delhi, the creation of the British architect Edwin Lutyens.

Raja Rao's Kanthapura transforms into a utopian space of solidarity in spite of initial hiccups. But Malgudi grows not only in volume but also in its flux of multifariousness. This booming growth of Malgudi anticipates an India transforming from a rural agrarian land to a nation state built on hybrid forms of towns and villages and the people, the masses, carried away by this new-found lust for materialism. It stands in stark contrast to Gandhi's idea of asceticism and the self-purification of the people. Later, realizing the raw instinctive tendencies of the masses that often turned uncontrollable, Gandhi imagined a few 'satyagrahis' who would lead the mindless masses. But India continued with the nation state instead of the

agro-centric and self-sufficient units that Gandhi imagined would constitute India. Narayan's Malgudi carefully documents the mushrooming of commercial spaces, industries, the service sector, modern entertainment industries and class-based colonies upon the traditional structure of society and the space that was already there. Malgudi, an incongruous and hybrid space, proves to be responsible for the creation of its inhabitants and their lives.

Narayan is a realist who envisioned the future of India. British colonialism changed the face of India with its important tools of modernity. Once India was tagged to the industrial revolution in England there was no returning, at least not for the less idiosyncratic but more socio-economically mobile class of petits bourgeois. When Malgudi was designed by Lawley, a mind foreign to Indian tradition, it immediately triggered a change among the inhabitants.

What was the place like before it turned into a colonial town? We remember how the older generation, the parents of the protagonists, lived and thought. Raju of *The Guide* saw his father's little grocery shop where farmers on their way home stopped to chat about the weather and crops. It is left unsaid that it had been an agrarian society steeped in traditional culture. The mindset is revealed when it is recounted that Raju as a child went to sleep every night listening to folk tales and stories from the epics which his mother knew by heart. Later in his life we see both how Raju's mother and uncle react against Rosie's ambition to become a dancer and their disapproval of Raju's attachment to a divorcee. Again we see how Raju uses his knowledge of the epics to earn his living by hoodwinking the susceptible villagers. A line is drawn between his mother's religious attachment to the epics and Raju's scepticism when he uses them as useful commodities to earn his living.

Satya P. Mohanty in his edited volume *Colonialism, Modernity and Literature: A View from India* underscores the role of colonialism and its use in literature as a vehicle to ruminate on modern institutions and with them modern values. Once colonialism enters a country the past, though existing as a trace, ultimately becomes irretrievable in the face of modern values. Thus Malgudi and its material culture described so vividly by the author are important to our understanding the Indian colonial and postcolonial history which had definitely moved the sensitive Narayan. While going for walks and socializing with strangers in coffee shops, Narayan was moved and amused by the growing incongruity of places and people who were facing the rapid changes that colonial modernity had

brought to India. They became the most interesting material for him to explore in his writing. Modernity is a movement from a feudal system to capitalism which brings in an urban culture. Baudelaire, in "The Painter of Modern Life", used the word 'modernity' to imply the fleeting, ephemeral experience of life.

To go back to the question of the emergence of modernity in Malgudi it is to be noted that there is no reference to any large scale industrialization of the town. The Malgudi milieu is not driven by the money of capitalists and the energies of the working class proletariat. Since a river runs by the town we can very well imagine agriculture on the outskirts. Further, the population consists in large part of white collar job holders as there are schools, banks, courts etc. Apart from them there are small scale entrepreneurs and shopkeepers beside holders of the traditional caste based occupations like the scavengers, cremators, priests and pyol teachers.

Narayan's novels are polyphonic in the sense that the prime protagonist in a novel is simply a voice among other voices. If we go by Narayan's own description of his inspiration we can confidently say that it was the common people he met every day. Like his equally famous brother he was a keen observer of their peculiarities as individuals as well as their typicality as members of a particular class. Narayan dwelled in a public space that evoked a particular behaviour. Though his stories often deal with families consisting of parents, children, grandparents and spouses, he hardly touches on the private space. Even Savitri's 'darkroom' in the novel *Darkroom* is a matter of public discussion and never remains sacrosanct between husband and wife. In fact each and every novel is crowded with numerous faces and this crowded space evokes specific behaviours from the main characters. These are all middle-class people submerged in the values they assert and hypocrisies they display. Savitri's revolt proves half-baked because she is consciously middle class and incapable of doing a job that does not suit her class. Again, her habit of material comfort leads her to compromise. In fact this class consciousness prevails even in the apparently innocent *Swami and Friends* where the children sense a class division. Narayan captures the time when children from different classes entered the supposedly egalitarian space of the schools introduced by the British. Paradoxically, colonial capitalism brought in a different socio-economic environment. It erased the traditional strictures of the feudal, stratified social system and created a strong middle class with innate tendencies of social mobility and ideological fluidity. It is a politically conscious group feeding on the ideals of democracy and liberal values. Yet its material valence makes it an extremely class conscious group, and the

supposed egalitarian space provided by schools offering equal opportunity to all classes turns retrograde, though not the same in nature as the feudal system. Narayan could not overlook this important aspect and his view of children is not as romantic as is usually assumed. In *Swami and Friends* Swaminathan, the boy protagonist, has all the characteristics of his age: he hates school and is a renegade who innocently but forcefully questions the adult world. Yet class consciousness creeps into his mind when he observes, a child being a keen observer, the posh locality of Rajam's house and the dirty and uncouth people living in the dingy hovels of Keelacheri where he goes looking for the coachman's son. He also observes the mediocrity of Mani's family living in Abu Lane. The author too joins in to make the reader conscious of Malgudi's demography: he never forgets to mention street names which, for an avid reader of Narayan, are indicative of the economic status of the people of the area.

Narayan has also chosen characters from the middle class with occupations that are not always traditional: Savitri's husband is an officer in an insurance company and Raju is a tourist guide and later an event organizer. There are printers, taxidermists, archaeologists, circus-managers, script writers, petty film makers, actors and family-planning officials. These are the machineries that support the colonial modernity that was invading India. Narayan, a realist, also depicts the queer amalgamation of the traditional and the modern by introducing characters like the sweet-vendor, small shack owners like Raju's father, and the money-lenders like Margayya doing business under the banyan tree. But they are shown as grappling with difficulties with the coming of modernity, and to survive they have to adjust. This makes them confused and often weird. Interestingly most of them dream of a better future for the sake of their children. They dream of sending their children to posh schools and even abroad in order to rise in social and economic status.

Narayan's Malgudi is a town where we do not see capitalists or proletariats but the new middle class that Marx had noticed but could not categorize with a particular name. In terms of spatiality Malgudi is an urban space, physically real in Narayan's detailed description; it is also characterized by the people and their lives. Most of the Malgudi novels focus on the people and their occupations and is thus market oriented. It can be seen as Edward Soja's 'third space' which combines the real built form, which he calls 'first space', and the representational space in terms of its developmental project, which he calls 'second space'. This combination results in the production of a fully lived space, "a structured individuality and collective experience and agency" (Soja, 1996).

There are certain human trends that are universal crossing time and space, like youthful infatuation, parental love, childish innocence, marital disharmony, extramarital attractions and so on. We find all of them in Narayan's novels. But Malgudi is that third space which invests them with the characteristics of a particular time in Indian history unfolding in a particular geographical space. Both combine to create the social milieu. The inhabitants of Malgudi reciprocate this change promptly. Above all, they are the socio-economic constructs of Malgudi and Malgudi itself an outcome of colonial modernity. The town, with its river Sarayu and the Mempi hills which add not only to its scenic beauty but also attract archaeologists, becomes an important destination for visitors. Thus it gets connected to the British railways and its market develops accordingly. Materialism invades the psyche of the petit bourgeois and even emotions like love cannot rise to the expected heights of the ideal. The reader is left with doubts, as is evident in the relation of Raju and Rosie which seems like mutual exploitation, or in the 'banaprastha' of the sweet-vendor Jagan who remembers to carry his bank passbook with him when he decides to forsake all worldly cares. It is this growing colonial capitalism which is behind the mindset as well as the activities of the people of Malgudi. People in this fictitious space grow into self-centred opportunists. When they negotiate with the old values or even nationalism they become weird and confused.

R. K. Narayan had a favourite disclaimer, that he was not seriously involved with his creation. Malgudi seems to be the writer's utopia, a romantic pleasure – escapism to a different plane of reality which is insulated and compact. At least, this has been the general interpretation of critics and film-makers. It is a happy and carefree world where all quibbles and disintegrations manage to produce a sort of unified harmony, as if they leave a pleasant after-taste. Critics have placed Narayan's works in the framework of humanism and interpret his stories as the epistemological journeys of ordinary human-beings towards some slightly extraordinary goal, the mutually exclusive colours of the rainbow journeying towards the golden melting pot. It is always the noble that ultimately emerges, and it could very well be a favourite Bollywoodian composition of cellular reality. The success of the film "Guide" evidences such interpretation or depiction. On the other hand, critics on the lookout for equalities between the Malgudi stories and history come out frustrated and often angry. Narayan's creations are set straddling pre- and post-independence India. So how, these critics ask, could a writer be insensitive to the burning issues of his time like the nationalist movements and the ideological discourses? The author himself is no less responsible for creating such

extreme reactions. The reactions fall either into condescending acceptance of a mediocre talent or condemnation for a perceived callousness. All autobiographical evidence leads to the conclusion that the act of writing had been for Narayan a mode of pleasant pastime as well as a livelihood. *The English Teacher*, if considered as a novel having autobiographical parallels in the facts of the protagonist's career as a teacher, his marriage and the early death of his wife, uses a light and dismissive tone when relating the protagonist's spasmodic creative inspirations.

However, the act of writing literature is no longer considered a subjective and agential enterprise. It is a complicated act where the author turns into a tool within the more powerful and impersonal system of language. It is at this point that a work turns serious, even if the author is not consciously aware of it. The author is no author if he is devoid of any world view. The language the author uses, the images he creates, even the tiniest and non-descript events in his writings are steeped in a world view. It happens to both the author of literature and the creator of literary theories. Thus both are dialogically engaged.

Narayan was writing at a time when both the colonial masters and the bourgeois nationalists were offering their own brands of ideological hegemony. But Narayan the realist saw much more happening with people who were swept away from any hegemonic absolutism by the force of life at a particular and critical juncture of history. Many critics have categorized Narayan as a humanist, the defender of Indian values or simply a painter of the common man. Readers often see a pattern or dialectical journey of the imperfect man towards order and unity. In their search for such a definitive pattern they overlook the episodic nature of Narayan's novels that forestalls or cancels any unification but depicts human life as an amalgamation of irrational and multidirectional movements or tendencies. The authorial position in Narayan's narrative keeps on shifting, mediating among many subjective positions, while creating a polyphonic environment. This environment creates a space in his novels that is polemical.

Behind the caricature-like delineation of the common man, Narayan touches upon their history – the history of the subaltern that was imperceptibly created on the fringes of the ideological path of the Indian National History. What has the novelist to do with history within his fictional world, and is the history depicted in a novel of any serious import? It is undeniable that the novelist is a part of history and his world view can hardly remain unscathed, unmarked by history. On the other

hand a historian may give in to his own ideological bias. In fact Roland Barthes dismisses historical discourse as essentially a product of ideology, or even of the imagination, in his argument against slotting history and literature into the respective categories of factual and imaginary. Narayan takes recourse to humour to depict the India of the smaller people and their mundane history that is etched within the structure of a greater Indian history rendered bereft by the nationalistic struggle for independence. Here the novelist, perhaps unconsciously, gets caught in a dialogue with the historian. Narayan, in his delineation of the fabulous Malgudi, would never attempt to draw upon the ideological turns of official Indian history, but his characters, the common people of India, defy the novelist's purpose, if indeed he has any. The India of Narayan's time was undergoing a kind of metamorphosis. This change is reflected in the apparently innocent language of the characters, as also in their dreams and aspirations, and in their assurances and dilemmas. In their attempts to negotiate the socio-political vibrations that somehow reached even the smaller towns, they become entangled in the greater history. With their limited capacity to grasp its implications they turn it into something grotesque.

British rule in India brought an inevitable side effect in the form of a fractured sense of history. The British came to India solely to exploit and the colonial economic policy created a paradoxical situation in India. The transformation of the age-old agrarian structure of society towards a semi-capitalist form was hardly organic. The education system introduced by the British had the vested interest of creating clerks to run the governmental machinery smoothly. The introduction of the railways brought in peculiar occupations and strange people, and the Indian scenario turned bizarre, almost surrealistic, with fashionable motor-cars zipping past the obsolescent bullock carts, and the printing-presses, cinemas, banks and restaurants vying with Gandhiji's charkha and the gossamer-like existence of grandmother's tales haunting the minds of the simple people. Previously, that is, before the British came to India, the Indian mind could hardly conceive the idea of a unified nation-state and acceptance of heterogeneity was part of the Indian ethos. The Indian sense of history was created out of a wide variety of religious texts, indigenous literature, biographies, autobiographies, travelogues, inscriptions and chronicles. The sense of history was thus polyphonic and dialogic. The data-based narrative style of writing history following the Western humanist tradition entered India with the East India Company. When the British presence in India created a kind of identity crisis among the natives, the educated Indians were compelled to create a counter-measure

against British imperialism. They took recourse to India's culturally rich past. They reconstructed Oriental history and, following the Western linear style, they depicted an unbroken past which provided a parameter for Indian identity. Although this process was initiated by European orientalist scholars, it proved more beneficial to the Indians. On the other hand, the British formulated their own ideology of "the white man's burden" to provide a rationale for their rule in India. Both groups, however, formed minorities in the vast ocean of the Indian population.

The Indian masses, in the meantime, continued to live in their own spontaneous lives. It was almost like a carnival. Thrown between various contradictory ideological forces they constantly changed their masks of identity – sometimes the king, sometimes the clown. What is the truth in historical time, we may ask – the linear ideological, or the unselfconscious whirlpool of human lives thrown hither-thither in the motion of various events often incompatible in nature? Certainly, while writing his novels Narayan's project was to depict the middle-class people of India in a package of light humour. But a writer, in the course of his literary project, will often be over-powered by the internal force of his creation. Whatever his apparent intention, a writer of humour would hardly be able to stay apolitical. Thus Narayan's writings turn polemical. His fractured, grotesque world questions India's national history and its tendency to unify through ideology. If history deals with the given, it also uses imagination. If imagination be the property of both the historian and the novelist – as one pretends to depict truth and the other is occupied with truthful pretension – it will not be fallacious on the part of the seeker of truth to fall back on the novel. In fact, the reader has a tendency to look for parallels between the time depicted in the novel and the history of the same time. Narayan's accountability as an author to his time has often been questioned. This is due, especially, to his depiction of historical characters like Gandhi. Narayan's projection of Gandhi frustrates general expectations. Here one should stop and think. Narayan here comes outside the Gandhian trend in writing and introduces a polyphonic space that is more apt in depicting the lives of the common people of India. Legends like Gandhi become distorted and fractured with the puny attempts of the masses to conceive of him or his lifelong experiments with any truthfulness.

Narayan's fictitious town of Malgudi has often been described as a microcosm of India, though the fact that the place retains a South Indian flavour has not been overlooked. However, Narayan had no intention to contribute to this ever alive debate of north-south divide and linguistic

nationalisms. Being a Tamil and also connected to Mysore it was quite natural for him to create a fictitious town which had a geographical and cultural topography that he was familiar with. But critics should also be careful in dealing with Malgudi; calling it a microcosm of India is being too simplistic. Writers often take a lot of trouble to map the fictitious place in detail with a view to saying something. Even beyond the writer's project are elements that the text itself produces in the text–reader dialogism. Malgudi cannot remain a simple metaphor, a sample of stasis, a mimetic micro-world. Rather, the changing world of Malgudi motivates and creates the people who crowd its structured space. The attention paid by the writer to its gradual change dramatizes and codifies a particular history neglected by mainstream historiography. Though Naipaul critiqued Narayan's work as static, his observation that Narayan's interest lay in "the lesser life that goes on below: small men, small schemes, big talk, limited means" should be taken more seriously than Naipaul himself intended it to be. In an interview for *Sunday*, Calcutta, in 1988, Narayan's answer to Davedar's query "Would you agree with V.S. Naipaul that your novels are about 'small men, small schemes, big talk, limited means'?", Narayan was hardly helpful with his one liner "I suppose so". That his supposedly limited vision, which some praised and others criticized, is an intentional project to underscore a grey and neglected area of Indian history has not ever been spelled out by the author. He was a man of few words and perhaps believed that the aesthetics of literature constitute the only language that can bring out the complexity of the colonial modernity of India. That he was not insensitive to this economic and political fact which influenced Indians is evident in his reaction to the filmed version of his novel *The Guide*, which had fitted the story of Raju into a typical Bollywoodian ideological framework. In postcolonial India, Bollywood films thrived on the nationalist discourse of India as the land of Gandhi and Nehru where even a common man understood the political philosophy of sacrifice, a spiritual view of life and selflessness. Narayan's impatience with such a depiction speaks volumes for his views about the Indian condition. The last thing that he expected was a sentimental reading of his Malgudi novels.

Narayan's reclusive nature and casual tone when speaking of his work are often misleading. He was fond of walking around Mysore and observing the lives of common people. This leads to the often reiterated statement that he was a keen observer of the middle class. But what signifies this keen interest is not appropriately negotiated with. The middle class that Narayan deals with is historically located in a particular time of India's history and is not timeless just because the location Malgudi is fictitious.

Narayan's preference for the fictional space which he named Malgudi has not been seriously probed. He has been grouped, with a sense of satisfaction, with other great writers like Faulkner and Hardy. There are various reasons why writers choose fictional places. Real places often carry certain myths attached to them, and clichés which come in the way of the writer's project. Marquez's fictitious Macondo allowed him to employ a magic realism that could address the absurdity of Latin American politics with its mode of denial and never-ending repetition of violence. On the other hand Hardy could intensify the flavour and spirit of South-West England within the aesthetic space that he named Wessex. Hardy's depiction is not a magic realism that exaggerates to say something but is graphic in its appeal; it intensifies the real.

When it comes to Indian literature in English, where some writers have used a similar tool to depict India, one should attempt to read the motive of the writer. India, during the crucial period of transformation from a colonized entity into a free nation state, also saw the rise of the Indian English novel in a big way. Interestingly, two out of the three prominent novelists, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan, employed the literary tool of fictitious places. But though clubbed together as peers they stand poles apart in their literary projects. While *Kanthapura* is ultimately monologic in its intension, for it subsumes Gandhian ideology, Narayan aims at depicting a particular class, posited in a typical semi-urban space through the use of grotesque realism to break any unification of truth in colonial and post-colonial India.

The chapter of this book titled "Structures of the Polemic" shows through elaborate analysis of Narayan's *The English Teacher* and *Waiting for the Mahatma* how Narayan uses the fictional space to accommodate a polemic world like that of colonial India, a world which was torn between different hegemonic ideologies that were challenging each other. India as a colony had become a complex entity and any effort to bulldoze the variegated sounds vying with each other for attention is to miss out on the meaning of India as it stood during Narayan's time. Narayan not only chooses to depict protagonists representing the non-elite middle class but also accommodates with equal sincerity subordinate social voices to represent a particular group that occupied a major space in Indian democracy. India during Narayan's time was actually moving towards such democracy even before it earned freedom from the British, and this is not all about politics. Indian democracy is a cacophony of numerous voices emanating not only from different political groups but also from different registers of society. The people belonging to Malgudi are not consciously agential in their role

but are spontaneous respondents to the forces of Indian history – social, economic and cultural. He saw the scope in the novel to accommodate a dialogic worldview that gives scope to all voices without privileging any one at the cost of others.

According to Ken Hirschkop, democracy also means "education, confidence among new sectors of the population, urbanization, electronic culture, literacy, and mass mobilization" (1999: viii). This is democracy of mind and culture. Interestingly, India, even under British rule, was achieving all of these. The relation between language and democracy was there as anti-authority, subversive discourse and mass movements. The awareness of human and civil rights paradoxically fired by India's contact with the West turned into a tool against the foreign rulers. But at the same time the centripetal force of nationalism, which created its own unifying discourse, itself prompted centrifugal forces that were irreverent and disruptive of any ideological hegemony. The instinctive and materialistic force pulls down all that had been upheld as profane. This of course is the impact of colonial capitalism.

The chapter "Subversion of the Heroic" shows how Narayan's heroes are influenced by the Malgudi milieu. It is a typical sign of colonial modernity, a town which is a hodgepodge of the traditional and the modern. It is class conscious and the people are often engaged in a mad pursuit of material prosperity, but at the same time the pulls of traditional values pose disturbing questions. The heroes, in this confusion, come out as roguish anti-heroes.

Narayan is a piquant contrast to Dickens in dealing with his heroes. He never bothers to create them as ideal beings, but lets them struggle in their own ambiguities, which they adopt from the society around them. After all, they live in an anxious world pursuing its material dreams, and are torn between their inherited traditional values and their immediate provocations. How can their nature remain unscathed by the excitement constantly being created with new opportunities and lures beckoning them? But in the case of Dickens, though his heroes undergo the pressures of their social conditions, they need not be corrupted. Most of them are blessed with a fairy-tale good fortune – they always find a wealthy relative or well-wisher who awaits them at their miserable journey's end. Narayan, on the other hand, is not embarrassed by the shameless clamouring of his protagonists, and as he uses the comic mode of expression it is easier for him to speak out freely without inhibition. He creates heroes who are not heroic but very ordinary average people. He presents them without any

sentiment and leaves them to act out their own nature. They are not ashamed of recognizing money as the only means to virtue and well-being. To illustrate, the chapter elaborately discusses *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, *The Sweetvendor*, *The Maneater of Malgudi*, *The Painter of Signs* and *A Tiger for Malgudi*.

"Narayan's Open-ended Novels" analyses how, while many mainstream writers nostalgically harked back to India's past heritage, Narayan was different. He was attracted by the public square where the common people were thrown willy-nilly into the flux of history, into the tug of war between East and West, medieval orthodoxy and modernization.

Carnivalesque situations emerge in a crisis period when the status quo is threatened. It is a time when life does not remain as it used to be, a time when anyone can hold the stage. It initiates the participation of each and every member of society. Thus in such periods the boundary between stage and gallery is blurred and the drama is enacted without the footlights. These unique periods may invite unusual dangers as well as unique opportunities. In grotesque realism the previous vertical world of absolute values breaks down and a kind of existential heteroglossia occurs.

Narayan's unusual heroes move about the threshold with a sense of adventurism and self-evasion. They are part of the two contradictory historical forces – imperialism and the emerging nationalism. While the British used force to subjugate the people through the powers of the state, Indian nationalism emerged as a force of resistance combined with ideologies of self-sacrifice and bravery, while underpinning moral and cultural codes. Narayan's heroes escaped these repressions, callously offsetting the catalogue of superheroes drawn from the history of India's freedom struggle, from Rani Laxmibai, Sivaji and Tipu Sultan to Matangini Hazra and Khudiram Das. Functioning as mythic figures, these heroic names were considered examples of the Indian ethos. The singling out of people and ideals automatically created a rhetoric of the 'high' and the 'low'. In fact culture critics like Tagore believed in the elite, the selected few, who could uphold or exemplify cultural codes to counter historical anarchy. Such an age created its own norms of expressions in language, and the texts had their own architectonic inhibitions. But this is not the only face of India. According to Clark and Holquist, the carnival spirit is an automatic response against the rhetoric of high and low. They locate the peculiarity of carnival laughter in its "indissoluble and essential relation to freedom" (1984: 308). The official world is always monologic and serious. But the carnival ethos laughs at and undermines such

absolutism by creating a spirit of joyful relativity. It functions by a process of democratizing everything, including language. Narayan turned to the public square, as he did not believe the official reality to be the only face of India. Bakhtin remarked in his book on Rabelais (1968) that every historical act has been accompanied by the laughter of the chorus. It appears that Narayan listened to what the chorus said.

Narayan's first step in removing the footlights from the Indian theatre was selecting the unknown, unassuming small town named Malgudi as the locus for all his novels. Fictitious but nonetheless real, Malgudi is the amalgamation of all the factors that embed the lives of the common, ordinary middle-class people. For the readers of the Malgudi novels, Malgudi signifies streets and public squares, taxi stands, market places and cricket grounds. We are hardly given the privilege of voyeurism as bedrooms and closets do not assume central roles. There is hardly any scope for deeply intimate conversation or private introspection. Enclosed places in his novels include only dingy presses, cinema halls, shops, school buildings, the headmaster's room, courtyards or dining-halls and the like where there is no chance of isolation or any private thought or action. Even if there is an attempt at isolation, as we find in *The Dark Room*, it is shown as ineffective. In fact Narayan adopted humorous forms – open-air-spectacles, parodies of the high and official and a very common non-poetic language – in creating his world of Malgudi.

To say that Narayan chose the common people as the subversive force does not mean that Narayan became the spokesperson for the common exploited people, as Marxist writers like Mulk Raj Anand did. There is no question of the Marxist binaries of the exploiter and exploited being present in Narayan. Rather, Narayan saw through the more intricate play of power in various strata and shades of social relations, where encounters may happen between any set of characters irrespective of age, sex or status. We see frictions between fathers and sons, headmasters and students, husbands and wives, shopkeepers and customers, grandmas and grandsons, and even among strangers. Narayan joyfully exposes that the play of power is relative and not always gradient; that is, at any moment the king may be dethroned and the clown may usurp all the glory. It is a jolly world view that accepts this uncertainty as a sign of life and change. Narayan chose the common people because they are not learned in cold scholastic introspection, analysis and revaluation, and their personages are not opaque and are responsive to changes. Thus they are the most transparent participants of history. "Narayan's Open-ended Novels" closely analyses *Swami and Friends*, *The Darkroom*, *The English Teacher*

and *The Guide*. It shows how the openness of space in the novels accommodates the coming together of not only the protagonists but all the minor characters and even the faceless masses. This creates ambivalence and thus Narayan's novels remain open ended.

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NARAYAN AND THE INDIAN MIDDLE CLASSES

The term 'middle class' is protean in nature. It constantly varies contextually, depending on many categories of evaluation. There have been several attempts to arrive at a universal definition but somewhere the meaning slips away. However, at least there is a way to begin the discussion and that is from the time when Marx defined his famous economic categories of two opposite but interdependent classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It has been criticized as a reductionist view, but no critic can deny the fact that Marx helped the world to look at the human condition not as predestined but as based on the modes of production and the human equations that emerged out of it. To spell it out in bare terms the bourgeoisie are people who are urban as opposed to those of rural areas. Originally in Europe they were the merchants and craftsmen. In modern times the term refers to people with cultural and financial capital. The middle class is divided into upper, middle and petty or lower economic sections. In his *Communist Manifesto*, chapter 1, Marx discusses the bourgeoisie in the sense of the group that during the industrialization provided the means of production and were employers of waged labourers. Though this categorization is based on economic and commercial terms the class is strongly characterized by ideological overtures. The class values property and is concerned with the preservation of capital to effect the economic rise in society that will enable them to take the place of the aristocracy and steal the aura of that waning class. The class is prone to indulge in consumerism. It is often hypocritical in the sense that though strong supporters of moral values they are essentially materialists and opportunists.

However the division is not as simple as Marx would have it. Capitalism, unlike feudal society, has ingrained in it a tendency of constant rise and fall, a tendency to reshuffle and change the economic and class relations because it encourages human enterprise. Marx noticed the gradual erosion of the petit bourgeoisie – the small industry owners, merchants, artisans and peasants who sink into the group of proletariats because their small capital cannot sustain them in the face of large-scale industries and strong competition. Instead he noticed the growth of a new middle class who are salaried white-collar job holders or unproductive employees sustained by the revenues created in a capitalist society. Marx had seen a flux of

heterogeneous characters belonging to this new class and described them as "the horde of flunkeys, the soldiers, sailors, police, lower officials and so on, mistresses, grooms, clowns and jugglers" (Vidich, 1995: 20). This new class creates confusion which makes it difficult for one to hold on to a simple binary concept. Marx also saw ill paid artists, musicians, lawyers, physicians, scholars, school masters, inventors etc. This group is made up of the cultured and the educated but class wise they are not prosperous. They belong to the lower strata of the category generally known as the middle class.

Marx, in his discussion of capitalism showed some interest in Asian societies, especially India. He saw that the British industrial revolution necessitated commercial expansion. He saw that the bourgeoisie as a class arose everywhere as a result of the new economic system. Thus India too imbibed this change. Marx was convinced by the writings of utilitarian thinkers like James Mill and John Stuart Mill that British rule in India was a blessing for India. This would, he thought, eradicate India's primeval form of despotism. Interestingly, Marx, who had dismissed any form of ideology as "false consciousness", failed to perceive the deeply ideological character of this corpus of work on Asia by British and western European intellectuals. Marx had taken it for granted that British rule in India would bring momentum to the stagnant form of society of pre-British India. There is no doubt that there was enough obstruction in the movement of capital in India. According to B.B. Misra, India had its own form of industry of artisans and a class of merchants organized in the form of guilds. Though conducive to capital growth, the political and social systems were against capitalism and hindered the growth of the middle class. The people, then, were not ready to invest their money in trade because the monarchs monopolized the profits and used them to support their personal lifestyles. Therefore money was not circulated for production. The caste system prevalent in India also created obstructions to the growth of new occupations and a new class. Brahmins, who were prominent in the caste hierarchy, looked down on trade and commerce. The rural artisans worked for minimal wages and the middlemen were not interested in any growth as long as they could fleece the artisans. The caste system also prevented an equal distribution of land, which remained with the higher castes. Misra points out how, with the entry of the East India Company, custom was replaced by law because rationalism ignored the age old caste system. Western education created a new class of Indians who saw that British capital opened up possibilities for industrialization and material development. During 1833, there opened up trade, banks and

a management-agency system. Land became transferable; people invested money in land and also gave lease on behalf of the indigo planters. Thus there grew a landed middle class and opportunists shifted from villages to towns. With the introduction of Western education there arose doctors, lawyers, engineers, printers and publishers. Western education was introduced to facilitate a smooth functioning of colonial rule. For commercial and imperial interests the British changed the land and legal policies. For commerce they introduced technology, and built good roads and the railways. But this modernization of India was not equally distributed. Places that had no commercial prospects continued to remain in their ancient forms.

Here we can see how Marx, who thought British rule would bring industrial capitalism in India, failed to see capitalism as colonialism. Though India was integrated within world capitalism it was so without enjoying any of the benefits. When Britain flourished India saw opposite consequences. Though there grew a kind of prosperous middle class, in the case of industry the Indians were not allowed to invest; that privilege was for the British and other Europeans. The higher technological and administrative posts were also reserved for Europeans and Anglo Indians.

Britain's industry depended on Indian cash crops. To facilitate this, the prevailing corporate character of the villages was destroyed. Land was free for sale and the salaried employees and money lenders invested money in land. This led to a shrinking of the cultivating community. The educated middle class were typically class conscious and selfish. They opposed the growth of the peasantry and favoured trade. Indian craftsmen lost in competition with a market that sold cheap goods coming from England. Thus India was deindustrialized to facilitate colonial capitalism.

The upper middle class were the elites who actually supported British cultural imperialism. As liberals they embraced the Western knowledge system. They ultimately were the nationalists. But there was also a lower middle class who too were educated but were the dissatisfied agents of society as they belonged to the lower income group.

The classification of the Indian middle class thus was more economic than social. In spite of various reformative measures the caste system lingered and the so-called enlightenment touched very few people. Fast urbanization did not produce the urbane: a link with the villages in some form or the other continued to exist. It is not always true that only the