Imaging Malgudi

Imaging Malgudi:

R K Narayan's Fictive Town and its People

By

Harsharan Singh Ahluwalia

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FOREWORD

I feel privileged to introduce late Professor Harsharan Singh Ahluwalia and his work on R K Narayan. Known to me from his student days at Kurukshetra University in the early 1960's till he completed his life span in the year 2013, Professor Ahluwalia always remained a sincere scholar and a searching mind who never stopped short of the whole truth. This book on R K Narayan resulted from his years of engagement with the writer's works.

I am quite confident that whoever is curious to know about Narayan and his work would find Professor Ahluwalia's book highly rewarding. Perceptive and insightful as the book is, its chief distinction remains the illustrations of the novelist's work by his equally famous brother, R K Laxman. Meaningfully relating the art of the novel with the art of the cartoon, Professor Harsharan Singh Ahluwalia has done a remarkable job of insightful literary criticism, free from the fashionable jargons that appear and disappear periodically.

To conclude I would say that Professor Ahluwalia's book on R K Narayan is highly useful for the scholars as well as the students of Indian Literature in English. A valuable addition to the library, personal or public, this new book on one of the leading writers of his time will remain interesting to whoever cares to turn its pages to discover the author of *The Guide,* later made into a movie of international fame.

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PREFACE

> *"It's a silly thing to have to say, but in this country a name which is difficult for old ladies in libraries to remember materially affects a book's sales"*
> —Graham Greene[1]

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanswami (shortened at Graham Greene's suggestion to R K Narayan to propitiate the old ladies in the libraries and the Muses presiding over bookshops) was born in Madras (now Chennai) on October 10, 1906, in a Tamil Brahmin (Shaivite/Iyer) family. Soon after his birth, his father, Krishnaswami Iyer, got a job as a schoolmaster in Mysore. The family moved to Mysore, leaving Narayan with his grandmother in Madras. He grew up listening to mythic tales and Tamil folk stories narrated by his grandmother. In a conversation with Susan Ram, M N Srinivas gives an interesting insight into Narayan's mind. Although Narayan spent the major part of his life in Mysore and he loved the city, Srinivas thinks that he remained a Tamilian throughout his life because he spent the formative years of his life in Madras. In the words of Srinivas, "He doesn't see Kannada culture as a Kannadiga does. He is external to Karnataka." He adds that in Mysore, the characters Narayan meets are all Mysorians and they trigger myriad stories, "but I think at heart he sees it all through Tamil prism."[2] His offer to Narayan in early 1950 "'to act as an interpreter,' to provide 'a kind of cultural background' to his friend's fictional universe" did not materialise into an essay. Narayan's fiction, indeed, is so deep-rooted in the soil of his region in South India that it is difficult to capture the tone and ambience of its background. Yet he makes the common reader feel that his "Tamil prism" is programmed to portray a pan-Indian picture that is infused with universal hues.

Narayan had published most of his fiction before India started the process of reinventing itself, first imperceptibly in the 1980s, and then boldly in the 1990s, taking off on the regional and the global stage. Except for the euphoric decade or so after Independence, India during Narayan's finest creative years (1935-76) was going through a very difficult period. Political, economic, and social factors like the four wars – World War II, war with China (1962), and two with Pakistan (1965 & 1971) – food shortages, till the Green Revolution brought some respite from imports, poor economic growth of about 3-3.5%, and the death of Nehru combined to permeate an air of pessimism. Faced with poverty, hunger, disease, rapidly growing population, and linguistic divide, Indian democracy seemed to be under threat. It was indeed fashionable among Indian intellectuals to take a pessimistic view of India's future. Narayan, however, with his "indulgently comic realism,"[3] created delightful and intriguing comedy out of the daily transactions of life during this period.

Writing a book on Narayan is a difficult task. His stories are deceptively simple but he is consciously doing too many things to impart full justice to the portrayal of the economic, social, and cultural environment in which the common people lead their lives. Sometimes a phrase, a sentence, or a sketch is sufficient to capture the essentials of the lived experience of the period. The task of attempting to write on Narayan's fiction is like that of the proverbial blind men attempting to identify an elephant, each holding a different part of its body. For this very reason, he has always fascinated me. To write his magnum opus on the life of Narada, the protagonist of Narayan's last novel, *The World of Nagaraj,* went from one person to another seeking help. Like him, I also went from one friend to another, seeking suggestions to enhance the quality of my work and to boost my confidence in what I was doing. My friends were too polite to betray their boredom when the train of my thoughts would suddenly veer towards Malgudi, the only railway station real for me. Harbir, a friend in Amritsar, never lost faith that I had a book on Narayan in me. His wife, Navneet, volunteered to type what I had written. That first draft has now taken the form of a book. Harish Puri, another friend, gave valuable advice from the socio-cultural point of view. John Eliezer, who has a keen sense of language, helped me in refining the language of the chapter on gender spaces. My morning walks in Amritsar with B R Batra, and later, my evening walks in Yemen with K V Tirumalesh, were both enjoyable and fruitful in sharpening my insights into Indian mythology. Most welcome were the words of praise and suggestions from my teacher, Professor B K Kalia. He read the Introduction, "Winning over Readers" and liked it well enough to urge me to send it to a good journal for publication.

Writing is a marvellous experience. One learns and grows in the process. It is amazing how a lump of clay, which my earliest draft was, got moulded into several limbs, that I called chapters and gave them titles. I wish I could practise what I had taught in research methodology courses: planning and outlining. But how could I do it when I did not know what I was doing? When frustrated, I took consolation in Albert Einstein's words:

"If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?" I hope, however, the reader looks beyond the stitching and unstitching (to use W B Yeats' phrase) that goes into the making of a poem or a book and discovers something he can hold on to over time.

WINNING OVER READERS: AN INTRODUCTION

> *"No man except a blockhead ever wrote except for money."*
> Samuel Johnson

In the early 1930s, it was hard to imagine a middle class Indian hoping to make a living by writing fiction in English. That was the time when R K Narayan took the plunge. Looking back at the age of ninety, he admitted to his biographers, Susan and N Ram: "I wonder at my foolhardiness in deciding to become a full-time writer in 1930 . . . . In spite of your foolishness, you survive if you have to."[1] To survive as a professional writer, he had to strive very hard. To put in perspective his struggle to establish himself as a writer and to make his works acceptable to a wider audience in the English-speaking world, the reader will do well to consider the stereotypical images of India which were pervasive at the time, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. These images were formed by the periodicals and books circulating in the countries where Narayan expected to find his readers. To be successful, he had to bridge the gap between the Indian social realities as he saw them and the images of India ingrained in the minds of his potential readers. It is precisely this achievement that most of the early English and American reviewers of Narayan's fiction highlighted.

In a review published in *The Spectator* of the 1948 reprint of *The Bachelor of Arts,* Olivia Manning expressed her admiration for Narayan in these words:

> No foreign writer with so wide a gap to bridge between his world and his English readers has bridged it so successfully. From Sirajudowlla to the curious monsters of *Mother India*, the Indian male has been presented to the British female as a tyrannical horror, a nightmare in the home. Mr. Narayan has changed him for us into a human being.[2]

In a similar vein, an American author, Michael Crampton, wrote a critique of *The Financial Expert,* the first novel reprinted in America (1952), "Mr. Narayan humanizes India for us and this is something that alien writers of greater genius cannot do."[3] Another American reviewer, Christine Weston, expressed the gratitude of the reading public to Narayan for his choice of themes:

> a welcome departure from the usual run of novels about India – with miscegenation, the villainies of the British Raj, the political tract disguised as art. He is a true artist and we could use more of his detached, compassionate, and amusing spirit as an intermediary between his country and our own.[4]

Considering the vague and fanciful impressions of India in the minds of the common Americans, one realizes that Americans had little knowledge of India in the first half of the 20th century. In his book, *Scratches on Our Minds: American View of China and India* (first published in 1958), Harold Robert Isaacs has pointed out:

> India has had almost no existence at all either in our history or in the minds of most living Americans up to a few years ago.Yet in the ten years since the emergence of the independent state of India, it has required us to deal with it as a major factor in world affairs and has forced itself upon American awareness.[5]

Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1929) was the most influential book in shaping the American view of the Indians. David Higham, Narayan's agent in London, tried to get American publishers interested in his work but did not succeed. Graham Greene, his mentor and friend, informed Narayan that publishers were loath to take a risk with his books because of the imprint of Mayo's images of India on the American minds. Indeed, Narayan's words in *Dateless Diary* echo the thought, without mentioning Mayo: "For nearly twenty years I managed without an American publisher, and year after year my English agent reported that the time was not ripe yet."[6] *Mother India* was by far the most widely sold book about India in the 20th century.[7] Calling Mayo's book "a report of a drain inspector," Mahatma Gandhi criticised not her facts but her judgement about the ethos, morals, religions, and the life of Indians in general. Without taking into account the diverse and multiple layers of Indian society with varying degrees of modernisation, Mayo made sweeping judgements, as if all Indians lived in the medieval times.

Mayo's next book, *Slaves of the God* [8](published in 1929, the same year as *Mother India*) narrated twelve "real-life stories" to illustrate her thesis that the root cause of social ills in India, particularly the plight of women, was the beliefs and practices of Hindu religion. The stranglehold of orthodox religious sanctions had turned Indian males into "curious monsters," sexual maniacs, and women as victims of their "god-like husbands." Such stories filtered into the West through English doctors, missionaries, army officers and young administrators of the colonial rule. They focus on girl infanticide, young girls serving the priests as *devdasis*, child marriage, wives staying at night in a temple for the boon of a son, *sati*, and child widows. Old or middle-aged men, married to young girls, are true to the stereotypes perpetuated by Mayo's stories.[9] Her next book titled *Volume Two* reinforced the stereotype with the portrayal of the pathetic lives of women. To support her observations, she quoted Indians who were raising their voices against social evils. The monsters and victims of her stories were presented to the world as authentic images of Indians.

In England, on the other hand, most of the readers, particularly those who had returned after serving in the army and the civil services, had different pictures of India imprinted on their minds. Their monsters were not only the likes of Siraj-ud-Daulah, who they had to defeat in order to gain control over India but also the sepoys of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The novels of the trauma of 1857 and the rumoured savagery of Indian men raping hapless English women find echoes in E M Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924).[10] In addition to these typical images of Indians, there were also those born out of the nostalgic memories of their stay in India. Several English writers, now forgotten, wrote novels for the English readers to satisfy their own nostalgia for the "Raj." In his very first publication titled, "How to Write an Indian Novel" (1933), Narayan ridiculed the Anglo-Indian fiction of the times because it was out of sync with the Indian social reality. With superficial acquaintance of India and its regional diversity, these writers attempted what they called "Novels of Indian Life." They indulged their natural predilection for the aura of romance around kings, queens, courts, elephants, and tigers. If the writer belonged to the Indian Civil Services, his novels revolved around Babus, polo, big game, and club life on hill stations. If he came as a tourist to India, he wrote about the Taj, the palaces, and the princes.[11]

In his essay, "After the Raj," Narayan rues the general ignorance about India. However, with the passage of time, these perceptions changed as a result of media explosion and the Government of India sponsored Festivals of India held in various Western cities. In Narayan's words:

> At one time the simpleton's view of India persisted in England. Cobras, the rope-trick, and sadhus lying on spikes were supposed to be the normal daily conditions of our existence. At Shropshire, which I once visited, an old lady asked, 'From India, Sir? Tell me how do you carry on day to day with all those cobras around?' This was an extreme degree of ignorance but it was typical at one time. Most people in England, especially those living outside London, were unaware that India was no longer a colony.[12]

In a 1935 article in the *Punch,* Narayan challenged the images of India popularised by the Anglo-Indian fiction writers. He assured the readers that elephants and tigers do not roam the streets of Bombay (now Mumbai). He also had to educate young American students on college campuses in 1956 that all Indians were not religious bigots and fanatics:

> We aren't. We have a large background of religion and plenty of inner resources, but normally we also have to be performing ordinary tasks, such as working, earning, living, and breeding. In your view, perhaps, you think that in an Indian street, you can see bearded men floating about in a state of levitation. Far from it. We have traffic, crowds, shops, pimps, pickpockets, policemen and what not as in any other country.[13]

The English colonists chose not to interact socially with the Indians. As a consequence, they failed to understand them. Even in the best of Anglo-Indian novels, common Indians were seldom portrayed as authentic and credible individuals. They were generally shown as a mass of people, or as liveried menials, or used for comic relief. *A Passage to India* does not portray how Indians lived. Its theme is political as it traces the unbridgeable racial chasm that existed between the Indians and the English in the colonial era. Some of the popular Anglo-Indian novels traced the social complexities of romance between Englishmen and the aristocratic Indian women. Maud Diver's *Lilamani* (1911) [American title, *The Awakening*] and Graham McInnes' *Sushila* (1957) are fine examples of the genre. The former narrates the story of an Indian girl, trained as a doctor, who marries an Englishman and the latter traces the artistic career of an Indian girl born of a mixed marriage.

Narayan's search for readers abroad dictated many of his choices as a writer. On the one hand, he had to satisfy their curiosity about India and the way people lived and on the other, he had to cope with the demands of the publishers. Foreign publishers, he explains in the article "To an Enquirer," expect an Indian writer "to say something close to the image of India that they have in mind." An eminent editor of a magazine commissioned Narayan to write a "Portrait of Bombay." After spending a month in Bombay, Narayan completed the assignment. Dissatisfied with the portrait, the editor informed Narayan that it did not fully capture the colour and flavour of Bombay. So Narayan made a second draft. After reading it, the editor pointedly instructed: "Please cut out your description of Jhaveri Bazar [the jewellers' market], and add in its place the life of the East India Company Nabobs in Malabar Hill." When reminded that East India men no longer lived there, the editor was so exasperated that he paid Narayan the agreed fee of a $1000 and never published the portrait.[14]

Similar was the experience of Ved Mehta whose *Portrait of India* was turned down by four publishers because it did not match with their idea of the country. In Mehta's words: "The image of India was of a leprous beggar crawling along Calcutta streets and based on poems like Rudyard Kipling's *The City of Dreadful Night.*"[15] However despite the odds, a gifted artist like Narayan succeeds in turning the curiosity as well as the demands of the foreign audiences into an opportunity. In an essay titled "Problems of a Bengali Film Maker" that Satyajit Ray wrote in 1958, i.e., two years after *Pather Panchali* won the special award in Cannes, and one year after the Grand Prix at Venice for *Aparjito,* Ray expressed his views as follows:

> There is no reason why we should not cash in on foreigners' curiosity about the Orient. But this must not mean pandering to their love of false exotic. A great many notions about our country and our people have to be dispelled, even though it may be easier and –from a film point of view – more paying to sustain myths than to demolish them.[16]

Narayan is equally conscious that a writer who panders to the "love of false exotic" fails to achieve distinction. Narayan is aware of the Western penchant for the exotic but he questions their obsolete images of India. At times, he takes up in his short stories and in his novels, images of India popular in the West and treats them realistically, highlighting the diversity as well as the everyday reality of the common people. He portrays them leading their ordinary lives and following their traditional customs and practices. Sometimes his chosen characters are simply quaint, at other times absurd or full of contradictions. To read a fascinating story like "Naga," first published in *New York Times Magazine* in 1972, is to realise how Narayan can spin the Western stereotype of India as a land of snake charmers.

The American and the English readers may have embraced the myths that had been built around India but their desire to read and to know more about India is genuine. In India, on the other hand, there was no reading public. Roland E Wolseley of Syracuse University describes his visit in 1952 to one of the largest English-language bookstores in Bangalore, a city about 60 miles (96 km) from Mysore and with a population of 7,50,000 at that time. Not one of Narayan's six books published in England was available at the store.

> "All sold out?"
>
> "No," the manager said, "we have so few calls we do not stock his books."
>
> "But Mr. Narayan is one of India's own novelists. He lives nearby in

> Mysore City. You display all these new British and American novels, why not his new one?"
>
> The manager was indifferent. "Yes, I know, but we do not read much fiction here in India," he said.[17]

Narayan's difficulty in publishing his works throws light on his relative standing in India and the West. Graham Greene, as is well-known, admired Narayan's fiction and helped him in finding publishers. The first three novels – *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), and *The Dark Room* (1938) – were published in London by Hamish Hamilton, Nelson, and Macmillan, respectively. The reviews of the novels were flattering but the sales were disappointing. Burdened with the unsold copies, each of the publishers surrendered his right to publish the next novel. Narayan received only an advance for each of the three novels. His famous remark in *My Days* – "Good reviews, poor sales, and a family to support" – sums up his situation at the time.

Graham Greene understood Narayan's despair over the poor sale of his novels but he had faith in his friend's ultimate success. In a letter Greene encouraged Narayan: "You are too good a writer to care about the grossness of the public taste and the obtuseness of publishers."[18] But hope and faith could not solve the financial problems that Narayan faced in the early stages of his career. Narayan shared his financial concerns with Greene and urged him to facilitate a contract with an English periodical to publish his short pieces on India. In another letter, he requested Greene to "put in a word" for a similar assignment in an Indian newspaper. Greene did not succeed in either of the missions. Narayan was in search of a reading public that might in time become familiar with his name and develop a taste for his kind of writing. Several stories were sent in the 1930s but only a few were accepted in the English periodicals.[19] Narayan realised that in England, it was easier to publish novels but it was difficult to get stories published in periodicals. In India, on the other hand, there was little chance of publishing a novel but short stories could find a place in the periodicals. With the help of a pathologist uncle, Narayan successfully negotiated with *The Hindu* for a regular slot. From late 1938, his piece started appearing every fortnight on a Sunday, though there were constraints of space during the War years.

The most difficult period of Narayan's life was the first half of 1940s. He had to come to terms with the overpowering loss of his wife and to accept the impossibility of publishing in England till the War ended. He made some money by doing odd jobs like reporting for a newspaper, radio talks, film work, bringing out a journal, and trying his hand at publishing. His short story collections *Malgudi Days* (1942), *Dodu and Other Stories*

(1943) and *Cyclone and Other Stories* (1945) were published in India. He also republished an inexpensive edition of *Swami and Friends* in 1944 under the Indian Thought Publications imprint. The publication of *The English Teacher* in 1945 by Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, brought some relief to him. The reviews were favourable and the deeply touching novel that ended with the coming of age of its protagonist, Krishna, fared well in the market. In the first week, 3,000 copies of the novel were sold and another 800 were sold in the next five weeks.[20] The publisher was ecstatic. Not only did he reprint the novel twice in 1948 and 1949 but also published another novel, *The Printer of Malgudi,* in 1949. The oddities of Sampath, the printer, and his world lent a distinct quality to the novel. There was a lesson in it for Narayan that he never forgot. Narayan realised that in order to connect with the foreign readers and the publishers, he must focus on characters with passion for religious pieties and/or to highlight the quirks and oddities of human behaviour. After achieving relative success, his agent could now seek out established publishers.[21] The tide had surely turned. Narayan's next three novels – *The Financial Expert, Waiting for the Mahatma,* and *The Guide* – were published by Methuen, London, in 1952, 1955, and 1958, respectively. With the exception of *The Vendor of Sweets* which was published by Bodley Head in 1967, Heinemann of London published all the new novels – *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Painter of Signs* (1977), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), *Talkative Man* (1986), *The World of Nagaraj* (1990), and *Grandmother's tale* (1992).

In America, Narayan's novels were initially published by Michigan State College Press because no commercial publisher was willing to undertake the venture. Beginning with *The Financial Expert,* it brought out during a period of three years, from 1953 to 1955, all the six novels published till then. It also printed 2000 copies of each of the five volumes (*Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts* bound together in one volume). With Narayan's reputation firmly established, the Michigan College Press negotiated with Viking Press in New York for publication of the subsequent books. Viking published several of his novels – *The Guide* (1958), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1976), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), and *Talkative Man* (1987). When Viking was taken over by the Penguin Group, the latter published *The World of Nagaraj* (1991), and *Grandmother's tale* (1992). After 1955, Narayan's novels were published almost simultaneously in Britain and America. The absence of a market for novels in India prompted Narayan to publish some of his works with his brother R K Laxman's illustrations in periodicals before they were published in the book form. The huge gap between the first publication of his novels and its first reprint in India in the book form shows a dismal picture of his readership in India in the early decades of his career. The first three novels – *Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts,* and *The Dark Room* – were published in India after a gap of nine, twenty-eight, and twenty-two years, respectively. The gap reduced to single digits of nine, seven, and six in the next cluster of three novels – *The English Teacher, Mr. Sampath,* and *The Financial Expert.* The publication of *The Guide* was a watershed moment in his career in India. The novel was published by Higginbothams, Madras in the same year (1958) in which it appeared in London and New York. All the other novels (with the exception of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi,* which came out in India after a space of six years) were published simultaneously in England, America, and India. In India, Narayan published most of his novels himself under the imprint of Indian Thought Publications, Mysore, and later Madras. In a talk with A M Rosenthal in 1958, he explained his reasons. Had he searched for an Indian publisher, he would have got less than $100. By publishing the books himself, he could earn about $600 from an edition of 3,000 copies.[22]

The sales of Narayan's novels in India picked up in the second half of 1960s. In 1978, he responded to a question about his readership in India in these words: "At one time I used to think that the Indo-English writer has an audience only abroad. But our own reading public now is really immense."[23] The publication of *The Guide* by Indian Thought Publications in 1961 was a turning-point in winning over readers in India. The increase in the sale of this novel is generally attributed to the Sahitya Akadami Award it won in 1961 or its adaptation into a movie in 1966. Perhaps a more plausible reason about the popularity of *The Guide* is the topicality of its theme. The experience of severe droughts in India, particularly in South India, year after year, gave rise to the cult of the Swamis or Babas offering prayers for the rain. Intriguingly, there seems to be a direct link between the year(s) of the drought in Karnataka and the number of copies of *The Guide* printed. The copyright page of the reprints of *The Guide* proudly displays (which it hardly ever does in case of the reprints of his other novels) the number and the frequency of the reprints each year since 1961. The usual practice of printing 3,000 copies at one time was modified to be in sync with each drought. Initially, the number of copies of *The Guide* published by Narayan's small publishing company was modest but it burgeoned later to meet the rising demand for the novels. For example, after the failure of rains in July-November, 1962, the first 3,000 copies were reprinted in1963 but later 5,000 more were brought out the same year. Three years of consecutive droughts (1965-68), prompted Narayan to reprint the novel twice in 1966. Each time 5,000 copies were printed. Subsequently, in 1967 and 1968, the number increased to 10,000 copies each year. The failure of rains in 1971 emboldened Narayan to initially print 12,000 and later 5,000 copies of the novel. The drought in 1977 triggered the publication of another 14,000 copies. The severe droughts consecutively from 1985 to 1987 and again from 2001 to 2003, along with the increasing demand spurred by factors like the stupendous rise of the middle class in India, their greater purchasing power, and the inclusion of the novel in the academic courses in colleges and universities, resulted in several reprints of the novel. The Indian middle class in cities, it seems, started appreciating the play of humour and irony in Narayan's portrayal of Malgudi. The centenary edition of *The Guide* published by the Indian Thought Publications in 2010 was the 72nd reprint. (The copyright page of this edition, however, does not indicate the number of copies printed). However, the centenary editions published in 2004 of *The English Teacher* and *The Financial Expert,* which appealed to the Western readers far more than *The Guide*, generated only 22and 25 reprints, respectively, for the Indian readers.

With the paperback revolution, England lost its edge over America in the publication of the first editions of Narayan's fiction. The possibility of producing inexpensive paperback editions along with certain historical factors further bolstered the publication of Narayan's fiction in America. The nonconformist "silent generation" of the 1950s and the Counterculture Movement of the 1960s in America reinforced the evolving interest in India. The Michigan Press sold paperback rights of four novels: *The Financial Expert,* Noonday (six editions between 1959 and 1968) and Time (1966); *Swami and Friends,* Fawcett (two editions: 1970 and 1971); *Grateful to Life and Death,* Pyramid (1972); *The Printer of Malgudi,* Arena (1972). Several other paperback editions were reprinted in America, for example, *The Guide,* New American Library: Signet (1971); *The Vendor of Sweets,* Avon (1971). The reprints of English paperbacks are very few in number during this period: *The Man-Eater of Malgudi,* New English Library: Four Square (1965); and *The Vendor of Sweets* and *The Guide,* Bodley Head (1967 and 1970 respectively).

Lois Hartley, during a talk with Narayan in Mysore in the summer of 1965, directly asked him whether he wrote for English-speaking Indians or Westerners. Narayan's response is self-revealing:

> I don't know who reads my books. Russians and Americans seem to like my novels. Russia makes the most perceptive translations, and the reading public is wonderful in Russia. In general, the largest number of my readers are in Russia. However, my books have been translated into most

> European languages and into Hebrew. My novels are liked in Israel. They are brought out in editions of 20,000 in Israel and in editions of only 10,000 in America.[24]

Several of the novels were translated and published in European languages soon after their publication in English. For example, *The Financial Expert,* which appeared in 1952, was published at least in three languages in the same decade: German (1955), French (1958), and Dutch (1958). Narayan gave V Panduranga Rao the following sales figures of his books by the end of 1970:

> Polish: five hundred thousand; Russian: two hundred thousand; middling in Italian, French, and Dutch; Hebrew: twenty thousand an edition; U.S. paperbacks: one hundred thousand each. Indian: on an average two thousand a month; one edition of *Lawley Road* sold thirteen thousand; his own (Indian Thought Publications) edition of *The Guide* sold fifty-five thousand; and the Hindi translation of *The Guide* sold over thirty thousand.[25]

The fact that Narayan's novels have been translated into several foreign languages and published in fairly large numbers and that only three of his novels – *The Guide, Swami and Friends,* and *The Financial Expert* – have been translated into Indian languages, the first into Hindi and the last two into Kannada, and published in limited editions, indicates that Narayan appealed to a foreign reader far more than to an average Indian reader.

Unprecedented international recognition came to Narayan when the Heinemann Company in London and the University of Chicago Press started reprinting his novels. Publishing *Swami and Friends* individually, Chicago University Press reprinted the first eight novels in 1980-81 in association with Heinemann. The latter published not only the first edition of novels from *The Painter of Signs* onwards but also reprinted between1977-1979 all the earlier novels. Everyman's Library brought out in 2006 the first four novels bound together and the next three in one volume the same year. Narayan's fortunes soared further when, after Random House, the Penguin Group collectively became the largest commercial publisher in the world, with its operations in the US, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and India. The Penguin Group co-owned several publishing companies including Viking Press, New American Library, and New English Library, which had earlier published some of Narayan's works. Internet sites of new and used books reveal that Penguin Worldwide brought out many paperback editions of his works. In 2008, Penguin World Classics published in the US five titles with excellent introductions – *The Guide, The Man-Eater of Malgudi, The*

Painter of Signs, A Tiger for Malgudi, and *Malgudi Days* – the last being a collection of short stories.[26] These titles with the same introductions were made available by branches of Penguin in other countries. In addition, Penguin UK published *The Vendor of Sweets* in 1993 and *A Tiger for Malgudi* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* bound together in 2009.Viking-Penguin India published omnibus volumes of most of Narayan's works selected and introduced by S Krishnan.

It needs to be highlighted that Narayan's fiction appealed to the Western reviewers long before it won over general readers. To the Indian readers, on the other hand, its appeal grew over time but it also left some of the critics unimpressed. To the Indian critics, in general, the praise of the foreign reviewers seems too sweeping. Living in the metropolitan cities, the Indian scholars have reservations about Graham Greene's famous remark in the original "Introduction" (1937) to *The Bachelor of Arts*: Narayan "wakes in me a spring of gratitude, for he has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be an Indian." About three quarters of a century later, similar comments have been made by the English novelist, Jeffrey Archer, on his visits to India: "He [Narayan] takes me into the real India."[27] And, "He gives me the flavor of India and also gives me a story, which is hard to put down."[28] On the other hand, the Indian critics insist that Malgudi is not the real India. They also find the ordinary experiences of daily life portrayed in Malgudi fiction to be trivial and commonplace. But the foreign readers enjoy reading about the Malgudi people, the customs, and the norms of a society vastly different from their own. Greene admires the way Narayan writes "with complete objectivity and with a humour strange to English fiction, closer to Chekhov than to any English writer, with the same underlying sense of beauty and sadness." According to him, Narayan's way of writing objectively was both difficult and daring. In his words:

> this complete objectivity, this complete freedom from comment is the boldest gamble a novelist can take. If he allows himself to take sides, moralise, propaganda, he can easily achieve an extra-literary interest, but if he follows Mr. Narayan's method, he stakes all on his creative power. His characters must live, or else the book has no claim whatever on our interest.[29]

An overview of R K Narayan's literary works underpins the fact that he is one of the finest Indian writers. That accounts for the critical scrutiny his novels have invited both within and outside India. This book presents a comprehensive view of Malgudi and its people, their pieties and rituals, beliefs and superstitions, aspirations and struggles. The fictional town of

Malgudi in South India of the pre-industrial times provides the perfect setting for the human stories. Narayan invests Malgudi with such vibrant life that it assumes a degree of realism far beyond an imaginary town. The study travels from the physical landscape to the social and cultural identity of the town. The scope of inquiry covers a range of themes related to society and culture, religious practices and rituals, myths and mythology, individual and community, and gender spaces. Each theme has been discussed in the context of the major novels of Narayan. A conscious attempt has been made to move beyond the stereotypical, the comic, and the quaint. The people of Malgudi are viewed not as mere caricatures but as flesh and blood individuals who are simple, even commonplace, but unfailingly familiar and engaging. Malgudi society, at its core, is conservative and patriarchal. However, the book brings into focus a subtle and nuanced shift in the social order. The younger generation of educated professionals is ushering in influences of a progressive world beyond the fringes of their small town. Malgudi women have generally been viewed as daughters, wives, and mothers. However, a handful of urban, educated, and independent women are also navigating for a more equitable space in a society dominated by men. The exploration into the binaries of tradition and modernity, myth and reality, attempts to trace their impact on individual and collective consciousness. The focus on caste, class, and religion is also guided by the effort to study how they influence the people and their lives. The conclusion of the book highlights the limitations of the writer's craft. It also records Narayan's spirited defence of his artistic choices and his objectives as a creative writer. The raison d'être of this book is to present a balanced and objective critique of Narayan's fictive town, Malgudi and its people.

1. CRAFTING LIFE INTO FICTION

> *"A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression."*
> —Henry James (*The Art of Fiction*)

> *"He gives me the flavor of India and also gives me a story, which is hard to put down."*
> —Jeffrey Archer (*Hindustan Times*, March 12, 2011)

Realism for the great 19th century European masters in art and literature was both a method and an attitude. As a method, it aimed at accurately representing reality without excluding something for aesthetic or moral conventions, and as an attitude, it aimed at eschewing the romantic, the imaginary, and the mythic. A view of the novel which prohibits the use of mythic symbols and motifs as a method of portraying reality or ignores the mythic tales fails to do justice to the complex Indian reality. As the nature of social reality depends upon place and time, the European form underwent transmutation when it was transported to another region. Epics and mythical tales are a part of the living Indian socio-cultural tradition. To judge Indian art from the standpoint of European realistic forms is to use a very exclusive yardstick. Taking the 19th century realistic novel as a norm, critics have commonly held that India produced epics, mythic tales, and fables, but not novels, not until recently under the influence of the West. Alfred L Kroeber, a sociologist of the first half of the 20th century, pushes the argument further to Hindu imagination: "Novel may have been partly inhibited by the epic, but the larger factor is likely to have been the Hindu penchant for extravagant exaggeration which alone would have been fatal to the novel."[1]

In the 20th century Europe, the scope of reality was enormously wide and inclusive. The products of Hindu imagination may be seen in the context of this new reality. In his essay "Realism and New Reality," Elias Canetti, Swiss philosopher and Nobel Prize Winner in Literature (1981), considers the exploration of foreign cultures and investigation of still living primitive people by the anthropologists among the most significant factors in the formation of new reality. He highlights the importance of myths in the following words:

> You see, one recognizes, among other things, that everything was already invented in myths, they are very ancient notions and wishes that we nimbly realize today. But as for our ability to invent new wishes and myths, we are in a lamentable state. We reel off the old ones like noisy prayer-mills, and often we don't even know what their mechanical prayers mean. This is an experience that should give us as writers pause to think, for above all we are supposed to be inventing the new.[2]

In addition to the increase in the quotient of reality, Canetti mentions two more aspects of the change that distinguishes the 20th century's reality from that of the earlier periods: (i) the impact of science which has made reality and its portrayal more precise, and (ii) the duality of the future that has brought mankind to the brink of annihilation on the one hand, and the good life on the other. Suggesting the impossibility of capturing total reality, Canetti concludes: "Presumably one or several of the aspects of our reality, such as I have briefly described, must emerge in the novel of our times; otherwise, one could hardly call it realistic"[3]

A significant aspect of an increased awareness of Indian reality in the first half of the 20th century was the result of tireless work in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, and sociology. Scholars, particularly the Western scholars, discovered ancient Indian civilization, interpreted the classics, appreciated Indian philosophy, and studied Indian social structures. While science encouraged a rational attitude, giving rise to reform movements which expanded the horizon of reality, the Indian philosophical thought had yet to encompass the reality that the writers in the West portrayed. Despite the pain felt at the death of thousands of Indian soldiers in the Second World War, the horrors of the War were not directly experienced in India. On the other hand, the Partition of India (1947) and the massive communal violence that resulted from it, transformed the North Indian reality. In South India, the effects of the War and the Partition were felt indirectly in the form of scarcity of essential commodities, black market, and famines. Reality in a small town like Malgudi is circumscribed as compared to the expanding reality of a metropolis. In Malgudi, the focus falls on the everyday reality of people's lives – their struggles in a period of sluggish economy and deficient infrastructure, their joys and sorrows, their social structures, their creeds and rites, their myths and ideals, and their beliefs and prejudices. Slow but perceptible changes in the traditional set-up, however, have been felt as a result of English education, technology, commerce, and individualism. In a big city, there is greater diversity of people and their lifestyles. Various influences flow from all sides and mix freely but the pattern of life in a small town changes very slowly over a period of time. This was the case in the first three quarters of the 20th century. Narayan chose not to strait-jacket Indian social reality into the Western narrative forms. He recognised that he could use the framework of the Western narrative forms but the essential plot of his fiction must grow out of the lived experiences of the men and women whose stories he wanted to tell. As he pointed out in an essay, "English in India," presented at Leeds in 1964[4], for a meaningful and accurate portrayal, an Indian novelist must explore subjects and situations which are true to life.

Narayan crafts his stories by interweaving themes and characters from the world around him. The impact of caste, class, and religion on the individual and the collective consciousness is a major area of investigation in the Malgudi novels. Similarly, the focus on the individual in relation to his joint family, his community, and the larger socio-cultural world unfolds the complexities and contradictions inherent in the social structure. The hold of established customs and conventions related to marriage and death offers Narayan another subject to probe. Familiar, even ordinary situations in the lives of the common people of his selected locale catch Narayan's attention. With consistent use of irony, he turns the ordinariness of life into art. In *Times Literary Supplement,* an unnamed reviewer noted: "Mr. Narayan surprises, not by his revelation of strangeness (in what must remain in some degree a strange world), so much as by his picture of the commonplaceness of oriental life."[5] It was the unusualness of Narayan's art that the early reviewers of his works appreciated. What is remarkable is his sensitive portrayal of the ordinariness of Indian life without any didactic intent. Transforming the ordinariness of life into art with humour and empathy, in addition to crafting interesting stories, he achieved stupendous success in his career as a writer.

Mark Twain's words about a successful artist hold true about R K Narayan. Twain maintained:

> an artist must be a regional specialist who has undergone years and years of unconscious absorption; years and years of intercourse with the life concerned; of living it, indeed; sharing personally in its shames and prides, its joys and griefs, its loves and hates, its prosperities and reverses, its shows and shabbiness, its deep patriotisms, its whirlwinds of political passion, its adorations – of flag, and heroic deed, and the glory of the national name.[6]

A foreign writer, Twain believed, can describe exterior scenes and events; only the native novelist can provide an accurate representation of the nation's interior experience, "its soul, its life, its speech, its thought." Narayan had so thoroughly imbibed the small town ethos of the mid-20th century that it was not difficult for him to write *The Guide* even though he was living in a hotel in Berkeley in 1957.

Most of Narayan's novels are triggered by an ordinary, albeit odd character or situation which he recalls from his life or about which he had heard from a friend or a family member or even read in a newspaper. Sampath (M S Cheluviengar in real life) was a Mysore printer, whose true calling was acting. He published not only Narayan's journal Indian Thought Publications, but also some of his books. His positive energy and attitude, his geniality with the customers, the setting of his small printing shop, his readiness to accept all assignments and later making excuses for the delay in completing them, his cracking and eating groundnuts in the Magistrate's court, as portrayed in the novel, are true to the original. Sampath became the source of two novels, *Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi* (1949) and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1962). The starting point of *The Guide* (1958) was a real-life situation of a severe drought, and the prayers organised by a group of Brahmins to appease the rain god. Raju, the protagonist, is mistaken for a swami by the ignorant villagers. In fact, Raju has completed a jail term for fraud. The ironic gap between the public perception and the individual reality imparts to the situation intensity, depth, and ambiguity on the one hand and pathos, irony, and humour on the other. *A Tiger For Malgudi* (1983) has its origin in a newspaper report about a hermit who participated in the Kumbh Festival with an unleashed tiger as a companion. The hermit claimed that he and the tiger were brothers in their previous birth. The theme of friendship between a man and a tiger stayed in Narayan's mind till he came across a bookmark with the picture of a young tiger pleading, "I would love to get into a good book." Narayan writes: "That sounded like a hint from the muses . . . . I said to the young tiger, 'Surely you will get into my book, but the goodness of the book itself I can't guarantee'" (7). Narayan's imagination transforms the news report into a fable about self-realisation. The story of Margayya, the protagonist of *The Financial Expert* (1952), also grew out of real-life incidents. In the "Introduction" to the *Time* edition of the novel, Narayan recalls what his brother told him about a peon. There were about a hundred persons employed in his office and they invariably required money on special occasions. To help the needy employees, a sort of co-operative banking system was established. It came to light that the peon was conducting shady financial transactions in the bank. No one could get a loan without giving him a commission. This practice earned him the title of Dhur Margayya – "one who shows the way to Evil." When he was dismissed from service, he sat under a tree opposite the bank. As he knew the bylaws and could fill the forms for the illiterate lower staff, he was a great help in getting loans and so he continued to earn commission. The other incident came to Narayan’s notice when he was half-way through the novel. A financial wizard appeared to mop up the post-war reserves of money in various hands by promising fantastic rates of interest on the money entrusted to him. He was the talk of the town till his business crashed and he ended up in jail. Narayan blends these two stories to create a novel, interweaving with perfection the realistic, the fantastic, and the comic.

An artist’s imagination selects such fragments out of the chaotic reality, develops and gives them shape and form. Calling it “the actual enlivening spark of the novel,” Elizabeth Bowen, an Anglo-Irish novelist and short story writer, aptly sums up its role:

> the novelist’s imagination has a power of its own. It does not merely invent, it perceives. It intensifies, therefore, it gives power, extra importance, greater truth, and greater inner reality to what well may be ordinary and everyday things.[7]

In order to manifest the power of imagination, the novelist must give it form, i.e., unity, pattern, and harmony. His craftsmanship lies in his attempt to give a coherent and harmonious structure to chaotic and formless life. A variety of methods is employed by the novelists to give shape to life in their fiction. Fielding’s method was to present the hero as the unifying link in all the adventures he undergoes before he is united with the heroine he loves. However, the adventures seem contrived, the end of the novel is predictable, and the reader’s interest is limited to the hero and a few other characters. Using the same formula for crafting a pattern on life, Scott and Dickens created memorable characters but their novels are loosely constructed. Another novelist may choose to subordinate character to situation which takes the story forward in a series of episodes and incidents. A significant situation which develops character generates a powerful story. Striking a fine balance between character and incident, Hardy created memorable characters and crafted powerful stories. However, the intrusion of Fate and Chance into the narrative often disturbs the balance between form and life.

A more sophisticated variant is to impose a pattern through an overarching theme or idea. The novelist constructs his plot and conceives his characters in terms of the theme. Elizabeth Bowen believes that the theme originates in the mind of the author and he conceives his characters and shapes his plot in order to express it. She identifies the theme as “the kindling spark – the ignition spark – that is in his mind when he says: ‘I’ve got an idea for a story!’”[8] A novel achieves excellence when the pattern imposed on life by the situation or the story evolves organically from inside. Thackeray in *The Vanity Fair* creates such a pattern by portraying a wide range of characters that are self-deceived or are deceived by others. In the end, a moral emerges to underline the novelist's view of life. In the finest novels of E M Forster, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James, a subtle relationship among character, action, and theme is at play. Another method of constructing support to a theme or an idea is by using a mythical tale, character, or motif. The finest example of such a device in English fiction is James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Its plot traces the wanderings of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom through Dublin. Incidents, characters, and scenes in the novel have remarkable parallels with the Odyssean myth. Joyce creates the sights, sounds, and smells of Dublin to portray the memories, emotions, and desires of people in the modern world.

The perfect balance between theme and form is elusive in Narayan's fiction. Structurally, most of the novels are not well-crafted. According to his own admission, he does not conceive the whole novel in advance. The plot develops in the process of writing. When Narayan was asked in an interview how he "picked up" subjects for his novels and stories, he replied that "he waits for 'some propitious moment' – an incident, a report in the papers, or an eccentric stumbles across. Any of these becomes 'a jumping off ground for a chain of ideas.'" The story also introduces subsidiary events and episodes which are loosely connected within the overall situation. In addition to the main story, Narayan introduces short sketches, snatches of conversation, and vignettes of vivid description in order to add texture to the narrative. They reveal, shining in flashes like fireflies, a facet of character or a turn in the story. A remark about *The Painter of Signs* made in an interview highlights his method of writing fiction: "When I started the novel, I had only Raman, his business, his 'Boardless' friends, etc., in mind. But this lady, Daisy, suddenly descends on Malgudi and takes command of the action. They are independent; they dictate me and I am helpless."[9] With a thin story line, he takes off from an event in a protagonist's life to extend the focus to the larger reality of Indian life.

Narayan, it seems, was not comfortable with the wide sweep of the novel form. Robert M Farnworth, who met him in 1974 at his home in Mysore, recalls Narayan's misgivings about writing a novel. He thinks that the novel becomes anachronistic too rapidly unless it is developed according to some formula. Farnsworth adds: "But these were not the novels that he could bring himself to write. He found himself instead attracted more and more strongly to the short story or the long story." In Farnworth's words, Narayan's discomfort with the novel form is:

> rooted in his deep affection for the orally preserved stories of Vedic tradition and his continued attempt to recast these into modern idiom and a narrative form that only approximates that of the novel, or perhaps at its best helps to extend or redefine the novel.[10]

Narayan confessed to Parvathi Bhogaraju that the story form is more effective than the novel because in a short story, the focus is on the particular individual and the situation, whereas it gets diffused and multi-directional in a novel. He goes on to add, "Certain parts of my novels read like short stories. For example, the priest episode in *The Painter of Signs* and the conflict and contrast in the aims of the priest and Daisy: one boasts that he can make barren women bear children through worship; and the other feverishly works for family planning."[11] The episodes of "Catching the Flower Thief" in *The Bachelor of Arts,* the "Switching-on Ceremony" of the film in *Mr. Sampath,* Jagan's flashback of his marriage in *The Vendor of Sweets,* or Daisy's experience of bride-inspection can be read independently as short fiction.

Narayan's self-consciousness about the novel form may be appreciated from his comments about his shortest novel, *Talkative Man*. He explains in the "Postscript" that he had planned to write a full-length novel but it would not grow beyond 116 typed pages. "It came to a halt," he says, "like a motor-car run out of petrol" (1). In fact, it is too long for a short story and too short for a novel. He faced this dilemma from the inception of his career. His agent in London advised him to bear in mind that a novel should run to at least 70,000 words, which was the minimum standard for fiction in those days. "The failure of my first novel, *Swami and Friends,*" says Narayan, "was attributed to its length: 'Fifty thousand words are an awkward length for a novel,' my agent wrote. A book buyer investing Seven Shillings and Six Pence (in that Golden Age) liked to have his money's worth of reading" (2). When he sought Graham Greene's opinion, his response was: "I hope you will get a subject next time which will run to full-length book. But that's on the knees of the Gods. Only if you see a choice of subjects and lengths ahead of you, do next time go for the longer" (2). Despite his mentor's counsel, Narayan could not visualise the novel in its totality at the preliminary stage.

A great work of fiction, according to Narayan, is read and enjoyed by generations of readers even though its basic subject may no longer be relevant to the times. Narayan greatly admired Charles Dickens for portraying the society of his day with honesty and humour. He believed that the novels of Dickens had a universal appeal that transcended the barriers of time and space. For Narayan, the enduring appeal of Dickens' fiction lies in his characters, his narrative skill, and his art that "brings to life, before our eyes all the personalities and their world of those days. We do not read about them, but we see them and watch them in their full bloodedness."[12] Plurality of incidents and characters in a novel make it difficult to follow the plot of the story. A simple story, without twists and turns, develops in a smooth and flowing manner. A great novel, on the other hand, may not be easy to read. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a masterpiece but Narayan gave up after reading a hundred pages.[13] His own novels are eminently readable. They take off extremely well, capturing the reader's attention from the very first sentence. The following opening of *The Bachelor of Arts*, the first book V S Naipaul laid his hand on, thrilled him:

> Chandran was just climbing the steps of the college union when Nateson, the secretary, sprang on him and said, "You are just the person I was looking for. You remember your old promise?" "No," said Chandran promptly, to be on the safe side.

Naipaul comments: "I was immediately enchanted. I got to know that opening by heart, and for many years allowed it to play in my head when I was trying to summon up a new book, hoping that what would come to me would be as easy and direct and ironical, as visual and full of movement."[14] Even more remarkable is the opening of *The Guide* which introduces the two main characters as well as the theme of the novel:

> Raju welcomed the intrusion – something to relieve the loneliness of the place. The man stood gazing reverentially on his face. Raju felt amused and embarrassed. "Sit down if you like," Raju said, to break the spell. The other accepted the suggestion with a grateful nod and went down the river steps to wash his feet and face, came up wiping himself dry with the end of a chequered yellow towel on his shoulder and took his seat two steps below the granite slab on which Raju was sitting cross-legged as if it were a throne, beside an ancient shrine.

The keynote of the opening is the thematic irony central to the novel. The setting of an ancient shrine, Raju sitting by its side and the man (later known as Velan) respectfully standing near him are recorded in pictures. Velan's reverent gaze is discomfiting to Raju. Knowing that he is unworthy of reverence, he is both amused and embarrassed. Velan, it emerges, has mistaken Raju for the new priest of the abandoned temple. In the fashion of a true disciple, he purifies himself with water from the river flowing nearby and takes a seat lower than that of the Swami. The seed of the theme is planted in its opening.