CHAPTER-III
LIFE AND WORKS OF R. K. NARAYAN

Birth and Education:

Rashipuram Krisnaswami Iyer Narayana Swami (popularly known as R. K. Narayan) is widely regarded as the greatest Indian writer in English of the 20th century. He is the contemporary of Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. He is a master story teller and his literary canvas teems with common people of all time and places. He takes immense pain in bringing Indian literature to the rest of the world.

R. K. Narayan was born on October 10, 1906 in Madras (Chennai). He was the third child of Rasipuram Venkatarama Krisnaswami Iyer. His father was a head master in a school. Narayan was taken care by his maternal grandmother, Parvati as his mother became ill after his birth. He spent a part of his childhood with her. Parvati gave Narayan the nickname of Kunjappa and in the whole family he was known by this name. He learned Classical Indian Music, Sanskrit, Mythology and Arithmetic from his grandmother. Narayan studied at different schools in Madras, including the Luthern Mission School in Purasawalkam, Christian College High School, and C. R. C. High School. He was a voracious reader. In his early stage, he read the literary
works of Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Wodehouse and Arthur Conan Doyle. In school, Narayan was shy, reserve and introvert.

When Narayan’s father was transferred to the Maharajah’s Collegiate High School, he came to Mysore to live with his family. Library always attracted Narayan and whenever he got the opportunity, he spent time in libraries. After the completion of high school, unfortunately Narayan failed the University entrance examination. So, he spent the year at home by reading the classic of English literature. He also started writing during this period. In the next year, he passed the examination and joined Maharajah College of Mysore in 1926. After obtaining his Bachelor’s degree, Narayan joined as a school teacher at a school. But he quit the job as the headmaster of the school asked him to substitute for the physical training master. It was the incident that made Narayan realized that writing was the only career for him. So, he decided to devote his time in writing.

**Literary Career:**

The first published work of R.K. Narayan was a book review of *Development of Maritime Laws of 17th Century England*. The thought of seeing his own words in print for the first time delighted Narayan. Later, he started writing stories for newspaper and magazines. *A Night of Cyclone* is the first short story written by R. K. Narayan. He continued to write short stories
till the end of his career. He loved to write short stories. Out of fascination, he started his career as a short story writer. In his initial period, he even earned his livelihood by writing short stories. During this period, Narayan wrote stories very recklessly. The reason behind it is that he has to produce one short story without fail by Thursday every week, in order to publish the same on the following Sunday. But, Narayan was not happy to write a story under compulsion. He wanted to write for pleasure. So, he wanted freedom to write and this wish of Narayan fulfilled in his later period when his novels became successful. In his literary journey, Narayan got support from his family, friends and well wishers.

In 1930, Narayan wrote his first novel, *Swami and Friends*, where he created his famous town Malgudi and sent it to the publishers in England named Allen and Unwin. But unfortunately it was rejected and then he sent it to two more publishers. Narayan had become accustomed to getting back his manuscript from the publishers. But at last, his friend Purna, who had always encouraged Narayan’s writing, managed to approach Graham Greene. Greene, at once, recommended the novel to Mr. Hamish Hamilton who immediately accepted it. And in October 1935, *Swami and Friends* was finally published in England. There were a few good reviews but the novel had no sales.

While spending holidays at his sister’s house in 1933 in Coimbatore, Narayan met Rajam, a 15-year-old girl. He fell in love with her and decided to
marry her. Rajam’s father at first did not agree as the horoscopes of Narayan and Rajam did not match. Moreover, the financial condition of Narayan at that time was not sound. But at last, he managed somehow and convinced Rajam’s father and married her. After his marriage, to support his family, he worked for sometime as a reporter in a Madras based newspaper called The Justice. As a writer, Narayan’s popularity came slowly. His second novel The Bachelor of Arts was again published at the recommendation of Graham Greene. But this time, the publisher was a different one. The incident and experiences of Narayan at college were included in this novel. The theme of this novel is of a rebellion adolescent changing to a well-adjusted adult. His third novel, The Dark Room again recommended by Graham Greene was published by yet another publisher, McMillan in 1938. The theme of the novel is domestic disharmony. Here, the male character is showed as the oppressor and the female one is the victim. Narayan thought deeply and wrote:

“I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the “woman’s lib” movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself begins to lose all notions of her independence, individuality, stature and
strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel dealt with her, with this philosophy broadly in the background.”¹

In February 1937, Narayan’s father expired. After his father’s demise, the family had to run on the family pension. Except this, they had no financial support as Narayan’s father did not believe in savings. Gradually, the economic condition of the family deteriorates. Therefore, Narayan’s elder brother had opened a small shop on an experimental basis. His younger brother had a government job and moved to Bangalore. Narayan also decided not to give up the reporting job. In the meantime, his short stories were also well received in India and abroad. During this period, Graham Greene extended his helping hand towards him.

The socially accepted practices sometimes create problems in the society and this thing is highlighted by Narayan in his first three books. In his first book, he focuses on the plight of student, punishment in the class room, and the associated shame thereafter. The concept of horoscope-matching in Hindu Marriages and the emotional tool it levies on the bride and groom is covered in the second book. In the third book, Narayan addresses the concept of a wife putting up with her husband’s antics and attitudes.²

² Amar Nath Prasad, Critical Response to R.K. Narayan, pp. 50, 85
In 1939, unfortunately, Narayan’s wife expired of typhoid. This incident brought a complete change in his life. During this period, Narayan was under the grip of darkness and he did not write any novel. He had to shoulder the responsibility of their three-year-old daughter single-handedly. Narayan was bold enough and gradually he overcame this phase of stressful life. His writing career was deeply influenced by the experiences inherited during this period. His fourth novel, *The English Teacher* was published in 1945. This novel is entirely an autobiography. Narayan explains that the emotion detailed in the book reflected his own at the time of Rajam’s death.³ Narayan rejected the idea of remarriage and brought up his daughter single-handedly.

*Malgudi Days* is Narayan’s first collection of short stories. It was published in November 1943. As Narayan got cut off from England due to the war, he started his own publishing company naming it *Indian Thought Publications*. This publishing company was a successful one and is still active. It is now managed by his grand daughter.⁴ Gradually, his books started selling well in different countries all over the world.

After *The English Teacher*, Narayan’s writing became more imaginative than autobiographical. *Mr. Sampath* which was published in 1949

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is an example of this new style. However, some of his own experiences, particularly the aspect of starting his own journal, can be seen in this book. After this, he published *The Financial Expert* in 1951 which is considered to be his masterpiece and hailed as one of the most original works of fiction.\(^5\) A true story about a financial genius, Margayya was the inspiration for this novel. Margayya is often acclaimed by critics as Narayan’s most memorable character.

The novels of R.K. Narayan are set in the colonial and post-colonial periods of India. His novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* begins in latter part of the colonial era, in 1940s, when the Quit India movement was taking place. Mahatma Gandhi’s fictional visit to the imaginary town of Malgudi is the theme of this novel. It deals with the protagonist’s romantic feelings for a woman when he attends the discourses of the visiting Mahatma. The woman, named Bharti, is a loose parody of Bharati, the personification of India and the focus of Gandhi’s discourses. There is a significant reference to the Indian independence movement in the novel and it focuses the life of the ordinary individual, narrated with Narayan’s usual dose of irony.\(^6\)

Narayan always followed tradition. In his daughter’s wedding, he followed all the orthodox Hindu rituals\(^7\). After his daughter’s wedding,

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\(^7\) S. S. Ramtake: Op. cit., p. 128
Narayan became free and he started travelling. In 1953, Michigan State University published *The English Teacher* under the title *Grateful to Life and Death* along with his other novel, *The Financial Expert*. These two novels were his first work to be published in the United States. In 1956, Narayan was selected for a travel grant by the Rockefeller Foundation and he went to the United States. This was his first travel to abroad. During his stay in the US, Narayan visited New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington and other places. His memorable travelogue *My Dateless Diary* is the culmination of his experiences during his American tour. He also wrote his next novel, *The Guide*. The novel deals with a tourist guide who seduces a client’s wife, becomes wealthy and finally lands in jail. The novel won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1960. The story has been filmed and also adapted for the Broadway Stage in 1968.

R. K. Narayan tried his hand in essay writing also. He wrote essays in order to put his thoughts. *Next Sunday* is a collection of such essays which was published in 1960. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is his next novel which was published in 1961. After the publication of this book, Narayan once again visited United States and Australia. In Adelaide, Sydney, and Melbourne, he spent three weeks and there he delivered lectures on Indian literature. The trip was funded by a fellowship from the Australian Writers Group\(^8\). Narayan achieved significant success by this time. Financially, he became sound and

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literally he got great success. As Narayan got success in India as well as abroad, he even became a columnist. He started writing columns for magazines and newspapers including *The Hindu* and *The Atlantic*.

R. K. Narayan’s mythological work *Gods, Demons, and Others* was published in 1964. In it, he included all the short stories which were translated from Hindu epics. Like many of his other works, this book was illustrated by his younger brother, R. K. Lakshman. The stories included in this book were a selective list, chosen on the basis of powerful protagonists so that the impact would be lasting, irrespective of the reader’s contextual knowledge. After the publication of this work, Narayan again went to abroad. In an essay, Narayan himself had written about the wanting of the Americans to understand spirituality from him during this visit. Despite his denial of any knowledge of spirituality, a Swedish-American actress, Greta Garbo accosted him on the topic.

R. K. Narayan is a remarkable writer known for his unpretentious down-to-earth style. In his writing, there is a unique flavour which touches the heart of the readers. His next novel, *The Vendor of Sweets* was published in 1967. The novel portrays many cultural differences and partially it was inspired by his American visits. The novel revolves around the issues arising

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from the generation gap between father and son. In this year, Narayan received his first honorary doctorate from the University of Leeds in England\textsuperscript{11}. His next publication was a collection of short stories, \textit{A Horse and Two Goats}. In the meantime, he also translated the \textit{Kamba Ramayananam} to English. In fact, it was a fulfillment of his promise made to his dying uncle in 1938. This translated work \textit{The Ramayana} was published in 1973. After this, Narayan worked on condensed translation of the epic, \textit{The Mahabharata}. During his translation of \textit{The Mahabharata}, Narayan published another book, \textit{The Painter of Signs} in 1976. In this novel, Narayan presented the funny side of India’s family planning system and the problems of liberated womanhood. His translated work \textit{The Mahabharata} was published in 1978.

The government of Karnataka commissioned Narayan to write a book through which tourism can be promoted in the state. The book \textit{The Emerald Route} was published in the late 1970s. Narayan’s personal perspective on the local history and heritage is included in the book. In the year 1980, Narayan was elected as an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He also won the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature\textsuperscript{12}. For the first time, Narayan’s works were translated to Chinese in the year 1980\textsuperscript{13}.

\textsuperscript{11} R. K. Badal (1976), \textit{R. K. Narayan: A Study}, p. 3
Narayan’s next novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* was published in 1983. The novel portrays the relationship between a tiger and human being. Through the novel, Narayan presents an insight into the animal world. Narayan’s choice for the most powerful animal from the animal kingdom as the chief protagonist in the novel is full of inferences and hidden meaning. Narayan is, in fact, exploring as well as exposing human weaknesses, follies and foibles in both man and beast. The life of the tiger, Raja, offers a close parallel to the circle of human engagement in Sansara. Both man and beast require the guidance of a worthy Guru to attain liberation from Sansara. The Indian philosophy, culture, tradition and ethics are beautifully portrayed in Narayan’s works. Narayan asserts the fact that an individual can transcend the boundaries of Karma, fate and the cycle of life and death if he observes the dictates and dictum of Indian shashtras.

*Talkative Man* is Narayan’s next novel which was published in 1986. This novel is about an aspiring journalist from Malgudi. Narayan published two collections of short stories during this period one is *Malgudi Days* (1982), a revised edition including the original book and some other stories, and another one is *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*, a new collection. His another collection of essays, *A Writer’s Nightmare* was published in 1987. The topics in this collection of essays are caste system, love, Nobel Prize winners etc.
R. K. Narayan had an interest in agriculture also. When he lived alone in Mysore, he bought a plot of agricultural land and tried his hand at farming\textsuperscript{14}. Narayan had a habit of walking to the market every afternoon. He went to the market not because of buying things but to interact and converse with people. He conversed with the shopkeepers and other fellows in the street. His intention behind this conversation was to gather material for his next book\textsuperscript{15}.

In 1986, Narayan was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of Indian Parliament, for his contributions to literature. Narayan was a thought provoking person. He always thought for the plight of different section of society. He even focused on the plight of the school children, their heavy loads of school books and the negative effect of the system on a child’s creativity. He highlighted all these issues in his novel \textit{Swami and Friends}. In 1990, \textit{The World of Nagaraj}, another novel by R. K. Narayan was published. Soon after he finished the novel, he fell ill and went to his daughter’s family. In 1994, another misfortune happened in his life. His daughter, Hema died of cancer. Later his granddaughter, Bhuvaneswari started taking care of him. She also helped Narayan in managing his publication house—\textit{Indian Thought Publications}\textsuperscript{16}. Narayan then published his final book \textit{Grandmother’s Tale}. The book is an autobiographical novella about his great grandmother who

\textsuperscript{14} Ranga Rao, \textit{R. K. Narayan}, p. 24
travelled far and wide to find her husband, who ran away shortly after their marriage. The story was narrated to him by his grandmother when he was a child.

Narayan was ever fond of conversations. During his final year, he spent almost every evening with N. Ram, the publisher of The Hindu. They drank coffee and talked on various topics until well past midnight. Though Narayan loved to meet people and talk to them, he stopped giving interviews. Narayan was also planning to write a novel about a grandfather but in May 2001, he became ill and was hospitalized. The planning of writing a new novel would not fulfill as this great writer died on May 13, 2001. After getting enormous success, popularity and fame, this prolific writer breathed his last in Chennai at the age of 94.

Awards and Honours:

R. K. Narayan has contributed a lot to the Indian literature. In his literary career, he has won numerous awards. He won the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for The Guide in 1960. He was honoured with the Padmabhusan, a coveted Indian award, for distinguish service to literature in 1964. He was awarded the AC Benson Medal by the (British) Royal Society of Literature in 1980. He was also elected an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1982 and nominated to
the Rajya Sabha—the upper house of the Parliament of India in 1986. Moreover, the University of Mysore, Delhi University and University of Leeds conferred honorary doctorate on him. He was awarded Padma Vibhushan, India’s second highest civilian honour in 2000. Narayan was also shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in literature several times but never won.

**Writing Style of R. K. Narayan:**

R. K. Narayan is one of the most delicate, sensitive and capable novelists of India. His writing style is very simple. There is a natural element of humour about it\(^\text{17}\). The setting in his stories is a realistic one. In his stories, he portrays the everyday happenings of Indian society. His characters are drawn from all the classes of society. R. K. Narayan particularly deals with the middle class which he knows very intimately. He never attempts to present Indian in an exotic light for the sake of foreign readers. Many critics have considered Narayan to be the Indian Chekhov, due to the similarities in their writings, the simplicity and the gentle beauty and humour in tragic situations\(^\text{18}\). Graham Greene considered Narayan to be more similar to Chekhov than any Indian writers\(^\text{19}\).

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\(^{17}\) *Remembering the man who brought Malgudi alive.* The Indian Express. October 10, 2006. Retrieved 2009-08-24


R. K. Narayan is a successful artist of language. He always maintains privacy. He never likes to comment in print or his writing or intentions and issues he deals within his novels. In his works, Narayan depicts a realistic picture of day-to-day life with an air of authenticity. His settings are also realistic. In his works, there is a minute detail of the situation. Narayan says:

“English has proved that if a language has flexibility and experience can be communicated through it, even if it has to be paraphrased sometimes rather than conveyed, and even if the factual detail is partially understood.....We are still experimentalists. It may straight way explain what we do not attempt to do. We are not attempting to write Anglo-Saxon English. The English language, through cheer residence and mobility, is now undergoing a process of Indianisation in the same manner as it adapted. All that I am able to confirm, after nearly thirty years of writing, is that it has served my purpose admirably, of conveying unambiguous by the thoughts and acts of a set of personalities who flourish in a small town located in a corner of South India”

Simplicity and clarity are the key-notes of R. K. Narayan’s style.

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21 R. K. Narayan: English in India, p. 123
About his language, V. Y. Kantak says that his language is a casual, convincing, objective, modest but ‘closest to the language of the newspaper and the Sunday Weekly’

In handling the English language, Narayan’s narrators maintain credibility. When he chooses for a first person’s point of view, he gives his narrator a style which is humorous, self-deprecating, and usually calm and stoical. Narayan’s wit and irony are very much amazing for all and they attract the readers, but some critics do not usually acknowledge him as a serious artist. One of his critics, H. H. Gowda views him as a “genial story teller, without much purpose,” which voices a common objection. He raises no fundamental values: The Mystery of existence is outside his scope.

The characters of R. K. Narayan are wonderful. They have a peculiar innocence. In treating his subject-matter, Narayan is very objective. His use of English Language is very clean and vivid. The feelings of the South Indian town, Malgudi, are portrayed by his characters and themes. Narayan’s language is remarkable for its economy of expression. It is easy, graceful, and straightforward. In it, there is no obscure word or phrase. In his works, the underlying irony is also gentle and smooth. In order to laugh at the laughable foibles of human nature, he blends satire with humour.
Apart from humour and irony, Narayan’s short stories have element of humanity at large. He has produced irony in his stories in order to show the flaws of human beings. That is why he is called the reformer of the society and philosopher of life. Narayan likes to pick up his themes from the life of the common man, from the middle and lower strata of the society. In the article, Views of an Indian Novelist published in Indian Foreign Review (1969), he says:

I get all influence from life, from the surroundings, a little bus stop or a street shop

The reflection of day-to-day situations in the short stories of R. K. Narayan made them unique across the world. The realities of life of the common people, the hurdles they confront in day-to-day life, their responses in joyous and sorrowful moment, the never ending troubles they face, etc., are all reflected in Narayan’s stories. His short stories are the authentic projection of the society. A wide variety of characters and their behavior are very truthfully portrayed in his stories. His short stories are very true to life and they convey some messages.

R. K. Narayan always picks up the subject matter for his stories from his surroundings. He lives in South India and travels across the world and his

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experiences and practical observation of life around help him in shaping his characters and moulding his stories. He himself says that Malgudi is an imaginary town, but the characters therein can be found everywhere in the world.  

The characters in Narayan’s novels are from the South India. His characters are drawn from all the strata of society. They are—peasants, teachers, clerks, shopkeepers, aristocrats, etc. In his novels or stories, there is a perennial appeal to his readers. To this aspect of Narayan, Venugopal rightly points out:

“He has no purpose but to delight, but to help the overworked and the tired to while away a few moments with a wise delight. He does not get involved with the characters nor is he interested in any deep psychological analysis. He looks at life with a detachment, ignores its darker aspects and seems to enjoy every moment of its apparently lighter side. Above all, he has the gift of the ideal humorist—he can laugh at himself.”

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In the conversation of Narayan’s characters, one can see a great naturalness and ease. For example, in *Swami and Friends* the relation between the generations is always implicit:

“*His father stood behind him with the baby in his arms. He asked ‘what are you lecturing about, young man:*

*C’ome on, let me know it too.’*

*‘It is nothing. Granny wanted to know something about cricketer. I was explaining it to her.’*

*‘Indeed: I never knew that mother was a sports-woman.*

*Mother, I hope Swami has filled up with Cricket wisdom.*

*Granny said, ‘do not tease the boy.’*

*The child is so fond of me. Poor thing:*

*of things. You are not in the habit of*

*explaining things to me. You are big men*.27

Narayan’s use of language is simple and lucid and his command over English language is remarkable. Narayan’s style is similar to Tamil usage and there is also spontaneous use of Indian English idioms. His Tamil usage is obvious in the use of verbs. It is common that the interrogative ‘have’ is often used without ‘got’ as in “how many sons and daughters have you?28 Again use

27 R. K. Narayan: *Swami and Friends*
28 R. K. Narayan: *Mr. Sampath*. p. 55
of the imperative ‘let’ at the beginning of a sentence is another common construction of Narayan, “let him demand then immediately if he wants betel leaves also”\textsuperscript{29} and “let her not worry, but just look into a mirror and satisfy herself.”\textsuperscript{30}

R. K. Narayan’s stories are based on plots. In his stories, the incidents and characters are given less emphasis than the happenings of day-to-day life. Though ordinary incidents are taken as his subject matter for his stories, yet they have depth in creating effectiveness.

Narayan writes his novels and short stories as a true artist. He is different from his contemporaries—Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Through his writings, he tries to give his writers the joy of a purely creative artist. Though he loves humanity, he never takes sides. No didacticism, no philosophy, no propaganda can be seen in his novels. His interpretation of the Indian life is unprejudiced. Narayan has sympathy for his characters. His characters whether wicked or virtuous, are drawn with extraordinary delicacy and tenderness. They become interesting and amazing figures in the compassionate hands of Narayan. He always tells his story clearly and in a straightforward simple manner. His novels transport readers into a different world. It was into this uncomplicated, almost casual atmosphere of simplicity

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 160
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 161
that Malgudi was born. The greatness of R. K. Narayan lies in his presentation of psychological behavior of his characters with minute details. K. R. S. Iyengar explains how Narayan’s artistic excellence is maintained under a limitation:

“He is one of the few writers in India who takes their craft seriously, constantly striving to improve the instrument, pursuing it with a sense of dedication what may often seen to be the mirage of technical perfections. There is a norm of excellence below which Narayan cannot possibly lower himself.”31

R. K. Narayan is much interested in the presentation of the inner happenings in the minds and in the hearts of his characters. He also successfully presents the conflict between the Western and the Eastern sensibilities in front of his readers. He does it because of his deep insight. Ramesh Srivastava rightly remarks:

“Narayan has a photographic eye for an object. He looks at it as if through a magnifying glass and catches it in its various hues. In recording his objects, he is like the

oscillating movie camera, which catches and videotapes all that goes through its eye.\textsuperscript{32}

R. K. Narayan is a true artist. With dedication and seriousness, he has pursued the art of story telling. Narayan is a skillful writer who narrates real and factual events very effectively. His description of everything is in a simple and direct manner. Narayan himself is a simple man. K. Natwar Singh marks his simplicity in his personal life. Natwar Singh’s experience is mentioned here:

\begin{quote}
I walked up the steps and met by a small man in a shirt and lungi—no shoes. Excuse me, but can you tell me if Mr. R. K. Narayan lives here? Yes, he does, replies the bare-footed man. I asked if I could see him. You are doing so right now—I am R. K. Narayan.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

R. K. Narayan has been regarded as one of India’s greatest writers of the twentieth century. However, he has also come in for criticism from later writers, particularly of Indian origin, who have classed his writings as having a pedestrian style with a shallow vocabulary and a narrow vision\textsuperscript{34}. Shashi

\begin{footnotes}
\item Ramesh Srivastava: \textit{What is so great in Narayan,} \textit{Perspectives in R. K. Narayan,} ed. Atmaram, p. 204
\item \textit{Reluctant Centenarian}. The Hindu. October 8, 2006. Retrieved 2009-08-23
\end{footnotes}
Deshpande characterizes Narayan’s writings as pedestrian and naive because of the simplicity of his language and diction, combined with the lack of any complexity in the emotions and behaviours of his characters\(^{35}\). In the West, however, Narayan’s simplicity of writing is well received. Noted writer, Anita Desai classes his writings as “compassionate realism” where the cardinal sins are unkindness and immodesty\(^{36}\).

**Narayan’s Malgudi:**

R. K. Narayan’s Malgudi is an imaginary town where different kinds of people live. Here, both ordinary and extraordinary people live with their different views. Malgudi is the backbone of his novels and short stories without which his works are incomplete. The time of creation of this town is also very significant. It is created in September 1930 on Vijaya Dashami, an auspicious day\(^{37}\). Narayan never provides strict constraints for the town, he allows it to form shape with events in the various stories, becoming a reference point for the future.

Geographically, Malgudi is a small town somewhere in South India, a few hours journey from Madras (Chennai). It is located on the shore of the river Sarayu. Mempi Forest is nearby. The exact location is, however, a

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\(^{36}\) Jaina C. Sanga (2003), *South Asian novelists in English: an A-to-Z guide*, p. 198

matter of speculation. Narayan himself says:

“I am often asked, “Where is Malgudi?” All I can say is that it is imaginary and not to be found on any map (although the University of Chicago Press has published a literary Atlas with a map of India indicating the location of Malgudi). If I explain that Malgudi is a small town in South India, I shall only be expressing a half-truth, for the characteristics of Malgudi seem to me universal.”

Many readers of Narayan believe that Malgudi represents India or at least South India and its culture and tradition. It is a place where modernity is far far away, where simplicity exists, where Indianness can be seen. Though the readers of Narayan know that Malgudi is a place of fantasy, yet Narayan’s strong narration and description of each and every incident and character make them believe that Malgudi really exists.

Though Malgudi is an imaginary town in South India yet in the larger context it represents the whole of India. William Walsh says that the fictional town Malgudi is essentially Indian with a unique identity:

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38 R. K. Narayan, Malgudi Days, Author’s Introduction.
“After having read only a few of his books, it is difficult to shake off the feeling that you have vicariously lived in this town. Malgudi is perhaps the single most endearing ‘character’ R. K. Narayan has ever created.”

Though a kind of local habitation and a name, Malgudi has a ring of the universal around it. “What happens in India happens in Malgudi and whatever happens in Malgudi happens everywhere,” said William Walsh. Various critics compare Narayan’s Malgudi with Thomas Hardy’s Wessex or William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha. It is a town which is created from his own experience, his childhood, his upbringing. The people he meets everyday are the people in it. Thus, he creates a place which every Indian can relate to.

Regarding Malgudi Town, Nadan Dutta says:

Malgudi is a land of fantasy, not as in a dream, coloured and brilliant, but the reverie of relaxed awakening, a contemplation of commonness. Life there is reduced, or elevated, to the lowest common denominator of living, which remains the same in merely all places and times. Small men, smaller means, touch at times by the cares of a larger world, but unruffled, still moving on. The characters yearn for fame

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39 R. K. Narayan: A Fan’s Adulation, Anoop@line.cis.upenn.edu
and money and virtue and those “real” things, but their longings stand tempered by a subtle sense of limitation, almost comic.  

For R. K. Narayan, death is not a full stop. In The English Teacher, he states that it is more of a comma, with each hiatus leading to the birth of a new identity which replaces the previous one. Those who tried to find existentialism, nihilism, magic realism and all other kinds of ‘ism’ in Narayan’s works will be disappointed, since western concepts have little to do with his vision of life. His fiction rarely addresses political issues or high philosophy. He is a classic teller of tales; an enduring appeal springs from his canvas where common man and women of all times and places are joined in their commonality.

Narayan weaved a world existing nowhere, but striking a cord of perfect reality with readers across the English reading people. His books appeal in a quite, reassuring way and have remained popular over many decades. Some of his works are included in the syllabus of different Universities in India. His writing is also part of literature course work in some American Universities. He has also evoked a diction of unusual freshness and rare ingenuity with the English Literary idiom.

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41 Ibid.
R. K. Narayan dreams of transformation in the field of education as he feels “Educational Theories have become progressively high sounding sophisticated and jargon-ridden but in practice the process of learning remains primitive.” According to Narayan every educated person should adopt a little group of children and impart them whatever knowledge he or she possesses. Through his essays and stories, he has also thrown light on the corruption and malpractices in the country. The growing environmental pollution is also a matter of his concern. He suggests that to overcome the environmental pollution, more trees should be planted.

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