Chapter - Four

The Institution of Marriage in Malgudi

Marriage as a social institution in India has fascinated many an Indo-Anglian novelist and Narayan is no exception. A Madras editor of the "Matrimonial Gazette" who was willing to accept Narayan as a contributor explains that marriage is the most serious situation everyone has to face sooner or later. But a few give the subject enough thought. Many are the problems that arise before, during and after the marriage.1

The theme of marriage finds a place of prominence in most of Narayan's novels. But he feels there is nothing to write about regarding a contented and harmonious married life. Literary material could be had only in a broken marriage or in one at a breaking point.2

Many of Narayan's heroes are not able to realise the significance of this man-woman relation. Vasu does not know why people marry at all when it is so troublesome.3 It was Raman's wish to establish that the man-woman relationship was not inevitable and that there were other more important things to do in life than marrying.4 The whole business of marriage looks very pathetic to Chandran.5 There would possibly be only two aims before a person to marry: doing it for love, if there is such a thing; or for money and comforts.6

Chandran's frustration tempts him further: He does not see anything deeper in man-woman relationship except

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1. cp. His, "My Days" (Serialised in the Illustrated Weekly of India) p.30 (4th August, 1974)
2. Ibid., p.31 (4th August, 1974)
3. MM - p.38
4. ES - p.47 (11 Jul 76)
5. BA - p.154
6. BA - p.155
sexual satisfaction and house-keeping. In his eyes marriage gets reduced to only a tool of material life and happiness as he has finally been able to realise the purpose of marriage: to get a fat dowry, and good-looking companion to sew husband's buttons, mend his clothes, dust his furniture and bring coffee to his room.

In contrast with this matter-of-fact view, Narayan presents the spiritual significance of the Indian system of marriage through Krishna and Susila. This appears to be Narayan's own view of marriage as Krishna of the English Teacher is said to stand for Narayan himself. A.V. Krishna Rao views the Krishna-Susila bond as not merely showing physical attachment but spiritual identification which is the ultimate end of marriage according to the time-honoured tradition of India.

The observant eyes of Narayan have caught hold of the manner in which particularly a South Indian marriage is celebrated. Says he: "Not too long ago, the South Indian marriage was a five day celebration.... It was all very well as long as there were child marriages or near child-marriages. As civilisation advanced the old type of festivity and fun became unacceptable." Narayan's Malgudians respond to this changing attitude to marriage as a celebration.

1. B.A. - p.123
2. BA - p.156
4. cp. His, "Next Sunday" - Hind Pocket Books, Delhi, 1972, p.70 (under: Reception at Six)
Harish Raizada\textsuperscript{1} values Narayan's elaborate description of Jagan's marriage as a masterpiece of the tenderly and humorously observed Indian custom.

Women have their way in the fixing of the marriage and they won't unless they are well-informed of certain essential factors: To Chandran's mother, these are: caste of the bride's family; the occupation of the head; their economic position; horoscopic suitability and, above all, proposal for marriage from the side of the bride.\textsuperscript{2} Specially the last of the above is so important that Chandran's mother prefers to drown herself in Sarayu to proposing Chandran's marriage with Malathi.\textsuperscript{3} Prior to marriage but after proposal, there is the customary showing of the girl. But disapproval of a girl is neither an evidence of bad manners nor is taken seriously. Chandran's mother had been disapproved by three or four persons before her marriage.\textsuperscript{4}

Then there is the hurdle of 'status' to be crossed: D.W. Krishnan is doubtful if Chandran's family is willing to have marriage alliance with his family owing to the differing status.\textsuperscript{5} Seeking the hand of Balu for their daughter, horoscopes came in from far and wide. But Margayya carefully scrutinised the status of those who clamoured for his alliance.\textsuperscript{6}

But 'status' has differing connotations to different people: Chandran's mother likes status not to be measured in money but in character and integrity.\textsuperscript{7}


2. B.A. - p.69
3. BA - p.73
4. BA - p.158
5. BA - p.77
6. FE - p.148
7. BA - p.77
These over, there is the problem of expenses for the actual ceremony: Margayya knows that at least five hundred rupees are required to see through the daughter's marriage, even in a village. The adjournment lawyer had to find out about ten thousand rupees for the marriage of his daughter—through savings, borrowings, loans, etc.

Education and the impact of Western life have altered this concept even in Malgudi: While Chandran's grandfather spent nearly five thousand on his daughter's wedding, it was all irrational extravagance to Chandran. He felt that in toto, marriage expenses should not exceed a hundred rupees.

Malgudi advances further in civilisation and marriage is looked upon as not only a simple affair, but also one which need to be only known to the pair: Raman and Daisy had resolved to do without any formality. He had explained to Daisy the five kinds of marriage he had read about and they had come to the conclusion that the system called 'Gandharva' was the most suitable one for them. They felt their marriage was consummated perfectly as their souls had met in harmony and no further rite or ceremony was called for. Mali does not feel it is necessary for his father to know about his bride—Grace. But Grace follows the Indian custom and tells Jagan about her Korean mother and American father. She startled Jagan still with that.

Marriage viewed so casually is not without its inherent defects: Raman sometimes wondered how he was going to carry on with Daisy a whole life time without any knowledge or understanding of her at all. He was perhaps making

1. EE - p.5
2. MM - p.77
3. BA - p.85
4. PS - p.37 (19 Sept 76)
5. VS - p.71
a fool of himself by this marriage. Through Raman, Narayan has a mild comment: It was the Gandharva-style marriage, as easily snappened as made.

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Horoscope-matching is a must in marriage. Love for a girl or respectability of the family are next: D.W. Krishnan has known from experience that the marriage of couples ill-matched in the stars often leads to misfortune and even tragedy. Hence his rejection of Chandran whose horoscope does not tally with that of Malathi. A much-feared case is the one in which the bridegroom has 'Mars' in his seventh house. Narayan himself is destined to be one such. It is the Indian convention to conceal this. But one of Narayan's heroes who has Mars in his seventh house has faith only in love-marriages. That remains only a Utopia, in the face of this unavoidable Indian custom. Chandran's mother is distressed about the publicity given to Chandran's Mars in the seventh house. She guesses that this may even end in his son's forced bachelorhood. How very authentic is Narayan!

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Narayan seems to view with amusement the established Indian convention that only the elders of families were entitled to talk about marriage proposals. He recounts his own experience: While he lived in Coimbatore with his sister, he had loved the daughter of a headmaster - a friend of his sister's family. It was impossible for him to hold back his feelings for the girl. One evening, he made a bold blunt announcement to the headmaster, of his affection for his

1. PS - p.39 (19 Sept 76)
2. BA - p.86
3. BA - p.90
daughter. But he was sure, no one in the then social condition could dare to proceed in the manner he had done. It is also true that a boy and a girl could not communicate before marriage. Chandran neither meets nor talks to Melathi. His only contact is through optical communion.

K.M. Kapadia explains why there is a barrier in the free choice of the partner: "Marriage being primarily a gift from the father it was he who decided to whom the gift should be given." No wonder, Jagan's father warns Jagan not to stare at the girl as the father knows that she is good-looking. The headmaster tells Krishna that he had been hustled into a marriage that did not interest him.

Narayan responds to the changes in the social conditions in India: Velan narrates how his cousin ran away from the marriage as she did not like the boy. Daisy describes to Raman how she had brought disgrace on her family by her unseemly behaviour at the show-ceremony which made it difficult to find another bridegroom for her any more or for the other girls in the family.

Undoubtedly times are changing in Malgudi. Marriage is not for getting some son-in-law, but one who can lead a decent life: Muthu is unhappy that his wife is scheming to marry his daughter to her own brother's son. He wants the girl to marry someone who is educated. Even a mahout narrates how he married the girl he had brought from Kerala, against the wish of his brothers raising a loan of a hundred rupees.

1. cp. His, "My Days" (Serialised in the Illustrated Weekly of India) p.38 (11th August, 1974).
2. BA - p.64
4. VS - p.154
5. ET - p.166
6. TG - p.14
7. FS - p.46 (5 Sept 75)
8. WM - p.46
9. WM - p.128
There are situations of the other extreme: Jagan is shocked that Mali has married Grace without even telling him and wonders whether Mali has not failed in his duties. Mali brought Grace to India promising her that he would marry her in Indian style. However, to the great shock of Jagan, Mali lives with Grace without marrying her at all.

Narayan is aware of the inequality which the Indian wife suffers at the hands of her husband. While the husband enjoys more freedom, the wife's only duty is to be faithful to her husband and serve him. Kapadia says: "As the husband was the centre of all her activities and interests in life there was no question of raising a word against him even when he was found to be ill-tempered, vicious, diseased or a drunkard." There goes Savitri of the Dark Room! The most perfect wife in Chandran's opinion was one who would sacrifice anything than subject her husband to gossip.

Marriage is the most important 'Sanskara', a woman goes through. But it involves sacrifices on the part of both the partners is being realised increasingly: It is the firm belief of Chandran's father that one qualifies to marry when one has cultivated a lot of patience since that would be the only power to be exercised after one is married.

Slowly, but surely, the womanhood is asserting itself in India: Chandran's mother told her father she would not marry the doctor's son whose appearance she disliked. Gangu's husband believed he was serving the women's cause by constantly talking about divorce.

1. VS - p.64
2. VS - p.141
4. BA - p.79
5. BA - p.80
6. BA - p.159
7. BA - p.159
8. HR - p.21
Finally, divorce becomes a reality with courageous women: Savitri's days are over. Shanta Bai was married when she was twelve to a cousin of hers who was a gambler and drunkard. When she was eighteen, she found he would not change and so she left him. Her parents would not tolerate her step. So she had to leave home too.¹ Shanti married a forest officer but had to separate and later she became a widow.²

Dowry or bridegroom price, despite its being frowned upon by law is the crux of the marriage negotiations in India. Every parent wishes his daughter to be married to a boy of a better status or of the same. With the increase in the demand for well-placed families, it is but natural that the bridegroom's father dictates his terms and swells up the bridegroom's price. At times, educational qualifications of the boy also play their part.

Narayan recognises the futility of law in regard to the abolition of dowry, thus: "With establishment of the Indian Republic the bad word 'Varadakshini' was avoided; instead, it was called expenses. But now....the word is coming into vogue once again. The addition of a vehicle to the cash dowry is a new trend in bargains. Some may throw in along with their other demands a refrigerator or a radio-gram.... I do not think there is going to be any effective way of abolishing dowry.... If it is made illegal, a black-market is likely to evolve from the repression. Marriages are, of course, made in heaven but they are a business in our part of the universe and why not run it on efficient lines?"³

¹. DR - p.60  
². NS - p.155  
³. cp. His, "Next Sunday" - Hind Pocket Books, Delhi, 1972, (under: Bridegroom Bargains)
The birth of a daughter begins the anxiety: Susila who is conscious of her responsibility as parent reminds her husband that they had to save for the marriage of their daughter Leela. Leela's grandfather declares his intention to make an endowment for her benefit when she comes of a marriageable age. So also does Krishna's father. The old landlord of Srinivas, notwithstanding his dislike of his daughter had set apart five thousand rupees for the marriage of his grand-daughter.

Chandran's mother has this formula of convenience: In the matter of dowry, a delicate balance between being too exacting and cheapening oneself, is to be maintained. No marriage could be consented to if it cost one's status, and prestige.

But, what is 'not too exacting' is purely subjective. Here is Narayan's comment: Chandran's mother is slightly disappointed to know that D.W. Krishnan is able to present only these: a cash dowry of rupees two thousand; silver vessels and presents up to a thousand; diamond and gold on the girl worth a thousand; and a thousand on the wedding.

To the young grooms marriage of the minds is more important than this socially accepted tax. From dislike into irritation it changes; that Jagan's father wanted a dowry of rupees five thousand from Ambika's side worried Jagan. It is Chandran's view that one will be happy through marriage with the girl one likes rather than through dowry and presents. Chandran irritates his mother saying that demanding a dowry amounted to extortion and exploitation of the anxiety of

1. ET - p.46  
2. ET - p.198  
3. ET - p.199  
4. MS - p.56  
5. BA - p.84  
6. BA - p.78  
7. VS - p.165  
8. BA - p.84
girl's parents to marry their daughter before her attaining puberty.¹

Even the villagers are concerned about dowry: Many of Margayya's clients know that some people are ruined by the dowry.²

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Caste plays a vital role in the alliance of marriage. The older generation in India is steeped in conservatism. Says G.S. Ghurye: 'When elderly persons arrange the marriages they hardly ever think of going beyond their caste.'³ K.R.S. Iyengar feels love-marriages are rare owing to rigid caste prohibitions and difficult astrological hurdles.⁴

The young are trained in these essentials of an Indian marriage: On his first sight of Bharati, Sriman becomes inquisitive about her age, caste, horoscope and willingness to marry.⁵

However, the recklessness and enthusiasm of the young appears to embolden them to transgress the bounds of castes for the purpose of marriage: Chandran feels indignant at the caste restrictions in the matter of marriages. These, he feels, are the scourge of the Indian society.⁶

Narayan is also aware that the age-old concept of caste is being replaced by class: It was Margayya's constant fear that when the time came to marry his son, people might

1. BA - p.84  2. FE - p.5
5. WM - p.13  6. BA - p.67
say, "Oh, they are after all, corpse-bearers, didn't you know?" But fortunately this fear was unfounded. At any rate, his financial reputation overshadowed anything else. Horoscopes and petitions poured in by every post.¹

It is difficult to reform the older generation even with the efforts of the younger generations. But young Indians do not give up the attempt: Hearing from Raman that he had decided to marry Daisy, Aunt dropped the vessel in her hand. But to Raman it never occurred to ask whether Daisy was a Christian. He would likewise ask Aunt not to bother about it.²

Narayan beautifully brings out how marriage in India has been slowly losing its ceremonial grandeur and is becoming very simple: Marco chose Rosie after she met him in response to an advertisement for a good-looking and educated girl without caste restrictions. The women of Rosie's family were excited at the kindness of Marco to have married so much below his class and wealth. They went to a registrar and got married.³

Most Indians like Narayan are rooted both in religion and in tradition. Naturally, such marriages are bound to fail. Narayan's realistic sense touches this too. H.H. Annaiah Gowda says: 'The Marco-Rosie relationship is a study in marital maladjustment. It was a marriage based upon an advertisement in the paper.'⁴

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1. *FE* - p.151
2. *FS* - p.41 (12th Sept 76)
3. *TG* - p.75
Narayan seems to stress the Indian outlook with regard to the age of the girl to be married. But the unbiased spectator that he is, he pictures the changing India in this respect. It would be a scandal if a Hindu girl was not married before she reached puberty. One's affluence, influence or status helped the betrothal of one's child before puberty. Time made this practice a compelling one and its violation would amount to social disapproval or even social disgrace.

Here is an amusing picture: Young fellows are always shy about marriage. The old landlord of Srinivas tried to hide himself in the paddy barn on his wedding day as he was just twelve.  

But the same person takes up the cause of early-marriages: Late marriages are the outcome of idiotic things people say about child marriages. Srinivas's landlord declares that nothing was wrong with him or his wife who were eleven and nine when they were married.  

The idea gets established in the minds of the old and the young in India: Presuming Malathi to be sixteen, Chandran's mother is certain they cannot be alright. It is impossible to keep her face in Malgudi by allowing Chandran to marry a girl who is sixteen. Ganapathi Sastrigal says people in Malgudi have been holding advanced views as marriage of a girl at fifteen has been a standard age. Chandran guesses Malathi must be married as she was supposed to be more than fifteen.  

Even in India, custom cannot be static. Narayan hints the coming of a change: Chandran makes the wishful thinking that Malathi's parents were very likely rational and
modern, people who abhorred the custom of rushing a young child into marriage.¹

Though slowly, education is helping the Indian woman to free herself from this practice: Although Daisy was only thirteen, she had her own notions of what was good for her and what she should do in life.² She liked to work rather than be a wife at that age.³

Narayan's characteristic refusal to take sides in his delineation of scenes from Indian social life makes him * to deal with varying marital rights of men vis-a-vis those of women. While the widower is free to take a second wife on the death of the first, widow remarriage is thought of bad as it is not a gift of a maiden.

Narayan himself is irritated at others' suggestion for his remarriage: A Tamil pandit of Narayan's college days urged him to marry again and not to care for Rajam who had left him without a thought.⁴ A lawyer known to Narayan had lost four wives in his matrimonial career and remarried each time but was again a widower.⁵

'More painful than the bereavement was the suggestion from well-meaning but foolish men that I should remarry, sooner or later. When someone spoke thus I spat fire at him.'⁶

But that is India and people are bound to suggest remarriage, as both in the rural and in the urban areas it is so natural for a widower to do. No wonder, the following

1. BA - p.55  
2. PS - p.45 (5 Sept 76)  
3. PS - p.45 (5 Sept 76)  
4. cp. His, "My Days" (Serialised in the Illustrated Weekly of India) p.40 (25th August, 1974)  
5. Ibid.  
6. Ibid.
image Indian life perfectly: The village woman learns that Krishna has lost his wife. In her opinion, a man must marry within fifteen days of losing his wife. She herself was the fourth wife to her husband who married within three weeks every time. All the fourteen children were happy.¹ The headmaster's father married a second time after the death of his first wife.² Velan tells that his father, in his life time, married thrice. He was the eldest son of the first wife and lived with the youngest daughter of the last wife.³

To Narayan marriage is sacred and one should not concentrate only on the physical gratification. But he is not a propagandist of his own views. Here is one, just the opposite: Expatiating on the virtues of married life the old cartman says he had never remained without a wife at any time though he lost four of them. He is sure, there is no greater joy than a wife, for a man.⁴

But that philosophy is not without its tragical consequences: The grandfather of Raman's Aunt married a girl of seventeen at seventy five. But the parents of the new bride ultimately poisoned him, as they were after his wealth.⁵

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Lastly, about the privilege of having more than one wife. The amendment to the Hindu Marriage Act, effected in 1955, made monogamy compulsory. The situation in India before this legal restriction has been brought out by Narayan in his fiction: Chandran learnt that Kailas had married two wives and loved both of them.⁶ The convict in the jail explains that just to see that his home is run in his absence he had married three wives.⁷ Sampath agrees with the view of some

1. ET - pp.110-111  2. ET - p.166
3. TG - p.14  4. PS - p.33 (1 Aug 76)
5. PS - p.43 (11 Jul 76)  6. BA - p.97
7. WM - p.142
that every sane man needs two wives - one for the house and the other for social life. Sampath wants to take shelter under the law which permits him to marry many wives.

Law has interfered with this situation and no more of such views through Narayan's later novels.

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