

Indian Ethos and Human Relationships in R.K. Narayan's Malgudi Days

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Abstract - R. K. Narayan's Malgudi Days is an anthology of short stories, which deals with the mundane and commonplace life of the people residing at Malgudi. These stories are the fine blend of characterization and construction of plots and themes. These short and simple stories are different from one another. But all these stories lay bare Indian ethos in a very distinct manner. There we can find the conflict between human relationships. This paper makes an attempt to trace conflicts in different stories of Malgudi Days.

Index Terms - Malgudi, portrayal, relations, conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The stories in Malgudi Days are very sentimental tales. These stories are different in every aspect like plots and characters. These stories are all made to impress the reader and "the consumption of one lead to a strong craving for more" (Smith, Alexander McCall). They are purely based on Indian milieu and culture, and each story is different from the other, as Jhumpa Lahiri finds out, for "gobbling up one tale after the next" (Narayan, Malgudi Days, p.vii). The greatness of Narayan not only lies in the characterization and plot construction but also in the setting of the theme. Narayan's Malgudi: "is an imaginary place and not to be found on any map" (Narayan, Malgudi Days, p.2). Narayan himself says, "If I explain that Malgudi is a small town in South India I shall only be expressing a half-truth, for the characteristics seem to me universal" (Narayan, Malgudi Days, p.2)

Narayan is a great storyteller who writes about Indian people, life, culture, and tradition. There he presents Social customs, terms, relationships, the differences of human nature are presented in his stories. "An indefatigable walker" (Satyan, T.S.), Narayan used to stroll down the streets of Mysore and observed the people and their ways with pleasure. He was not a commentator, but a storyteller. His stories are the depiction of human life and activities. The local

people, passersby, vendors, clerks, salesmen, professors, and students are the characters of his stories. "These real-life people became characters in his hands, and he fitted them into Malgudi" (Satyan, T.S.).

Apparently, it seems to us that Narayan's Malgudi Days is a gloomy portrayal of Indian middle-class social life, but he actually portrays the conflict between human relationships and money. All stories in Malgudi Days are short, simple, "intensely brief and full" (Narayan, Malgudi Days, p. vii). We find many kinds of relationships in them, such as, relationship between friends, man to his self, master and servant, worker and boss, husband, and wife etc. Through the Malgudi tales Narayan shows the development and changes in these relationships for economic issues.

Money controls a great part of human relationships. The relationship between two friends in the story The Doctor's Word faces a barrier for economic difference. Gopal, the dearest friend of Dr. Raman hesitated to visit the latter as Raman was a famous doctor. This hesitation was about to close Gopal's life, but Raman saved him ultimately.

One of the important relationships in Narayan's Malgudi Days is the relationship between a man to his self. It is believed that a man never cheats himself. But in Malgudi Days Narayan shows that money can make everything. Money makes a man to cheat himself, go against his wish, breaks his trustworthiness and lastly money makes a man a villain of his own self. In the story Forty-five a Month Venkat Rao, an office clerk, broke his promise to his daughter, Shanta, to take her to the cinema for his office duty. He felt that he was not taking proper care of his child and wife. "He reproached himself for neglecting his wife and child – even the wife could have her own circle of friends and so on: she was after all a grown-up, but what about the child? What a drab, colorless existence was hers! Every day they kept him at the office till seven or eight

in the evening, and when he came home the child was asleep. Even on Sundays they wanted him at the office. Why did they think he had no personal life, a life of his own?" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p. 88). He took the decision to quit the job. He felt that he "was not a slave who had sold himself for forty rupees outright" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p. 89). But he at once threw this decision away from his mind when he received the news of five rupees increment in his salary from his boss. Thus, money controls the decision of a person to go against his wish. Venkat Rao knew that his wife and child needed his attention towards them, but for him earning money is more important as it is the fuel of life. Though his heart bled for his child, he had no other option. Before money people are helpless. The temptation of money makes people thoughtless. People forget the difference between right and wrong. Thus, in the story *Wife's Holiday* we find Kannan, a coconut cleaner who is left alone in the house as his wife and child have gone outside. He needs money for gambling. Finding it nowhere in the house, he at first secretly unlocks his wife's tin trunk, "the most substantial possession of that household" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.131), but finding nothing there, he breaks his child's treasure, "the red cigarette tin" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.132) for money. Before breaking, he hesitated for a moment: "Kannan paused to ask himself 'Am I right in taking my youngster's money?' 'Why not?' whispered a voice within seductively. Son and father are the same" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.132). Thus, the greed for money kills the power of judgment and makes Kannan a thief to his wife and son and breaks his trustworthiness to them. Money's act of making a man dishonest is again found in *The Martyr's Corner* where Rama sells bondas, chappatis, dosais and endangers the lives of his customers from food poisoning as his shop is unhygienic and situated behind a gutter, on the road side, under blowing wind curtain less. Though the health officer gave him alert to put all the edibles under a glass lid otherwise he would destroy the shop, Rama did not care. Even "he (Rama) gave an occasional packet of his stuff to the traffic constable going off duty or to the health -department menial who might pass that way"(Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.126) to avoid their raids on his shop. And thus, continues money making without caring the lives of his customers. Thus, it is obvious that in the world of money making there is no place of emotion, trust, and

honesty. Man binds, cheats, and pollutes his self as well as others for the sake of money.

People's social behavior, nature and understanding are also controlled by money. In the story *Gateman's Gift*, the aristocrat General Manager of Engladia Company intentionally avoids the gate man, Govind Singh who has spent twenty-five years of service there. The General Manager even does not know the name of the gate keeper, though on everyday morning he receives salutes from Govind Singh. In *Leela's Friend* Mr. Sivsankar and his wife send Sidda to jail giving an allegation of theft though Sidda was not guilty, which was identified later. And in *A Willing Slave* we see that when Ayah goes to Saidpur and does not return Radha's mother and others grow furious and say, "I will dismiss her for this. No one is indispensable. These old servants take too much for granted, they must be taught a lesson" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.144). They forget that she has been working in their house for more than past seventeen years. She has brought up six children, and "no one in the house knows her name; no one for a moment thought that she had any other name than Ayah" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.140). The Same thing happens in the story *The Axe*. Here we find a family calls Velan, a very old gardener, who has spent most of his life taking care of the house and garden, and warns him saying, "Don't be up to any tricks. We know the sort you are. We will sack you if you don't behave yourself" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.105). Thus, through the above observations it is clear money creates a great impact on the relationships of people. A person is measured according to her or his economic standard and the poor are generally insulted.

The distinct relationship can be seen between husband and wife. In the story *Out of Business* we find that the relationship between Rama Rao and his wife is shaken by economic crisis. We see here Rama Rao's wife plays the role of a financial minister of her house. When her husband had a job, they lived in a bungalow. But when he lost his job, she "sent away the cook and the servant; withdrew the children from fashionable nursery school and sent them to a free primary school" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.91-92). They left the bungalow and moved to a small house. She saves money and seriously uses pie to pie to continue her household. This conjugal dependable relationship is stirred when Rama Rao began to quarrel with his wife when she refused to give money for the 'cross-word

puzzles' as "five rupees were nearly a week's food for the family" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.94). In *Wife's Holiday* we also find that the conjugal relationship between Kannan and his wife also affected by economic problem. Thus, it is clear that money plays a key role in the development of human relationships. So, we find that in Narayan's *Malgudi Days* money affects the human relationships greatly. It shakes the relationships but fails to break them. Their relationships endure everything. Narayan's stories do not have any conclusion, as they are the description of reality. The people of Malgudi are the middle-class people of India. They do not take part in politics, nor do they want to become famous stars. They only want to spend their days with the members of their family and friends happily. As M.K. Naik observes, "he (Narayan) has no great heroes and heroines - only local nobodies and local eccentrics, and his style habitually wears a deliberately drab air so that the thrusts of his insistent irony are felt all the more sharply"(Naik, p. 174). His portrayal of human life is correct to realities. He reliably portrays the life of Indian common people as he finds himself among them. As Graham Greene says, "he has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian"(The Occasional Review).

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