

R. K. NARAYAN

# THE MAN FROM MALGUDI

It took me some time to discover Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan's house. Yadavagiri, the suburb of Mysore City, where Narayan stays, is an incredibly quiet area, with long, neat streets, tree-shaded bungalows lining them. It was late afternoon, and the neighborhood was just emerging from its siesta. "R. K. Narayan?" asked the passer-by I stopped, looking very ignorant. "The writer," I explained. "Ah!" my guide exclaimed. "Two furlongs further," his finger jabbed the sunlight, "and you'll come to a two-storeyed house." And he strode on, his starched white turban's zari edges glinting.

Narayan himself answered the doorbell, and, after I had introduced myself, wanted to know whether I had had any trouble locating his house. No, I said. "We Mysoreans are very pleased to help visitors," he smiled. Mysore, once the pomp-and-glitter seat of the Wadiyar kings, is today shorn of the mystique of a ruling monarchy. Yet its citizens continue their tradition of courtly behavior. As

Narayan and I settled into cane armchairs on his wide verandah, I could see the distant Chamundi Hill, one of Mysore's revered landmarks. "So I am to be written about!" Narayan said, as though such attention was strange to him.

Behind his thick glasses, clad in homespun *dhoti*, Narayan hardly looked like one of India's most-read, best-selling novelists in the English language. It was difficult to believe that he was the man who had created, out of thin air and a gentle imagination, the quintessentially Indian town of Malgudi, fictional arena in which all of Narayan's novels have been set.

Graham Greene has described Narayan as "the novelist I admire most in the English language after the death of Evelyn Waugh." Yet, face to face with his simplicity, Narayan did not exude the aura of a successful writer. He looked like any other South Indian grandfather, enjoying a quiet moment with his home, his garden, his peace.

Blessed with the ability to read drama into the plainest of events, R. K. Narayan, at age 70, is as much an inhabitant of Malgudi as his characters themselves. His novels have been said to "have a humanity with irony, a bittersweet charm", and he has been likened to a "Chekhov flavored with jasmine and betel leaf." Perhaps his winsome style has its roots in his ultra-orthodox childhood, in the people he encountered in his early years, and in the experiences he went through—all thoroughly Indian.

Mysorean Narayan's ancestors came from the deeper South—from a Tamil Nadu village called Rasipuram. Soon after his birth in 1906 in Madras, his father, Krishnaswami Iyer, migrated to Mysore in search of a better future. His mother followed with his brothers and sisters, leaving little Narayan behind to be looked after by his grandmother. "I called her Ammini," says Narayan, "literally, Madam. We grew to like each other's company so much that I stayed on at Madras even after the call from my parents came."

And so Narayan's earliest memories are of Madras, of bare-chested men with tufts of hair crowning bald pates, of holy ash smeared on brown skins. His devout grandmother symbolized father, mother, sister, brother to Narayan. "Grandmotherhood was a wrong vocation for her; she ought to have been a school inspectress," writes Narayan in his autobiography *My Days*. "She had an absolute passion to teach and mold a young mind."

When summer scorched Madras' streets, Narayan's grandmother would escort him to his father's house in Chennapatna in Mysore State, where he was the headmaster of a government high school. And on these vacation trips, Narayan found his parents unfamiliar, his brothers and sisters strange. And, he told me, he would yearn to return to Madras, to his school-friends and their dusty games.

Was his childhood responsible for the general qualities his characters possess, I asked. Very much Hindu, quite timid, hemmed in by the staid continuity of Malgudi? "My heroes are timid," he replied, "because our population is quite timid. I write about the mild Hindus, 90 per cent of whom haven't realized their aspirations." That is the characteristic present in all of Narayan's novels—the middle-class cast that is tossed around between conflicts and frustrations, the kind of ethos that every Indian is very familiar with.

Later, however, Narayan moved to Mysore, where his father was now headmaster of the Maharaja's Collegiate High School. There, he says, he discovered the advantage of studying in a school where one's father is the headmaster. He found teachers eager to help him, to win favor, to improve his performance. But Narayan did not share his family's obsessive enthusiasm for education. "I instinctively rejected both education and examinations," he recalls, "with their unwarranted seriousness and esoteric suggestions." In keeping with this distaste, Narayan failed to get through the university entrance examination after completing school, and so had a whole year to while away.



PRABHAKAR BHATTARAK



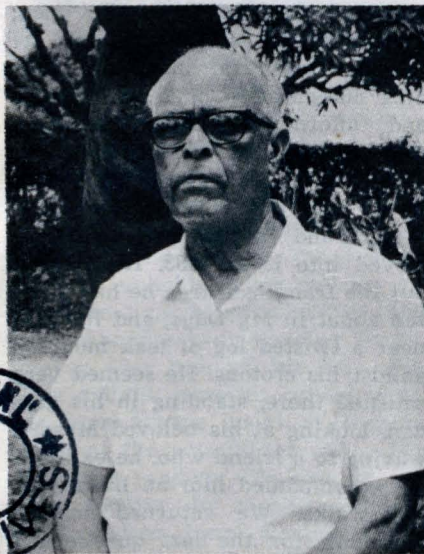


It was then that his infatuation for literature began.

Every morning, Narayan would leave home for a walk to a nearby pond, with a book in hand. During the long mornings of that year, he devoured volume after volume, and came to enjoy Palgrave, Keats, Shelley, Byron, and Browning, not to speak of Tagore. He read Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*, and developed a liking for Highland mists and Scottish romance. After Scott, he drifted on to Dickens, and then Rider Haggard, Marie Corelli, Moliere, and Pope and Marlowe and Tolstoy and Hardy.

Did this period lead on to his desire to write? "I was not really affected by the styles of all those writers," Narayan told me. "Rather, I went through the reading, driven by some force. And I enjoyed it. But the literary value in those books impressed me. I think literary value, irrespective of style, is a great unifying force. Dostoyevsky's literary value is as valuable as Dickens', although their styles are different. The core of the books I read that year may have been foreign to me, but their literary quality was universal."

These days, Narayan said, he does not read much. Particularly when he is writing, he prefers not to read



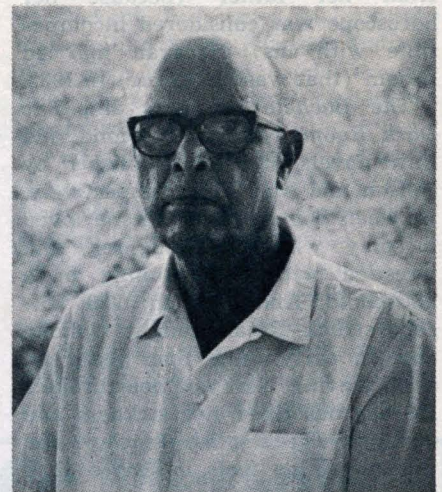
NARAYAN WITH HIS FAVORITE GARDEN POSSESSION, THE TWISTED LOG OF TEAK any other writer at all, afraid that the train of his thoughts might be interrupted. Recently, however, he told me, he had read Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* in New York. I

raised my eyebrows, surprised that Narayan could go in for such unabashed writing. "I am amused by the Westerner's pursuit of sex," Narayan laughed. "It's romance first, then love, then the brass tacks—sex. And sex is not enough by itself, it is laced with anatomy, physiology. I enjoyed Jong! And I came away with the conviction that most characters in modern novels from the West do not carry on any activity above the waist!"

Nevertheless, Narayan remains unaffected by his reading. I asked him what had made him take to writing in English. "Because English has the simplest style," he answered simply, "and because with English, I can remain quite close to the spoken language. I piece together images, talk, expressions; and there is a transparency in my style. I try to write in such a way that the reader is not conscious of my style. Style itself should have no color of its own. Many writers today do not work hard enough, and forget the necessity for simplicity. They tend to get carried away by style, and all the devices of rhetoric."

Returning to his literary sabatrical in Mysore, Narayan told me how he grew to love novels with tragic endings. The most satisfying book he came across in this category, he recalls, was H. G. Wells' *Passionate Friends*. He cannot recall, however, if the heroine's career was ended by consumption or strychnine. Narayan also read many English magazines in the school library, and encountered writers like Conan Doyle, Wodehouse, W. W. Jacobs, and Arnold Bennett. And he started writing, "mostly under the influence of events occurring around me," he says in *My Days*, "and in the style of any writer who was uppermost in my mind at the time." He read his pieces out to a few friends, bribing them with coffee that "blunted the listeners' critical faculties and made them declare my work a masterpiece."

Narayan sent those first efforts to the literary magazines he had read, and waited in a feverish anticipation for the postman. And he would be infuriated by the cold rejection slips that would accompany his manuscripts back. Even today, he habitually watches for the post-



'I HAVE NEVER DEPARTED FROM MY OWN MILIEU'

man. "It's probably a conditioned reflex, like Pavlov's salivating dog," he thinks.

In 1926, Narayan finally passed the university entrance examination, and took up studying for his B.A. degree at Mysore's Maharajah College. He went through that experience without ever liking it, and graduated in 1930, at the age of twenty-four, not sure what he would do thereafter.

A series of unsuccessful attempts to get a job plummeted Narayan into despondency. He moved off to Bangalore and rejoined his grandmother, who was recouping her health there. "On a certain day in September," he recalls, "selected by my grandmother for its auspiciousness, I bought an exercise book and wrote the first line of a novel; as I sat in a room, nibbling my pen and wondering what to write, Malgudi with its little railway station swam into view, all ready-made, with a character called Swaminathan running down the platform peering into the faces of passengers..." And thus his first novel, *Swami and Friends*, took shape. It was published in 1935, through the efforts of his friend Purna, who was in Oxford. Purna shored up Narayan's sagging morale after a succession of publishers had turned the manuscript down, and ultimately approached Graham Greene, who was then in Oxford, and gave him the manuscript. With Greene's recommendation, Hamish Hamilton agreed to publish *Swami and Friends*. Meanwhile, Narayan had fallen in love with a girl he had



seen drawing water from the street-tap close to his sister's house in Coimbatore. Against opposition from her father (because her horoscope was considered incompatible with his) Narayan married Rajam (that was her name) in 1933.

*The Bachelor of Arts* and *The Dark Room*, Narayan's second and third novels, had been published by Nelson and Macmillan respectively. Between bouts of writing, he loved to play with his daughter, and wrestled with the running of a household. And then, in 1939, tragedy struck. Rajam caught typhoid, and, in early June that year, she died, leaving Narayan heartbroken. He has described her sickness and death in *The English Teacher*, and this novel, he feels, is, more than any other book of his, autobiographical in content.

The grief that Narayan was plunged into on his wife's death made him give up writing for some time. But soon, he began to write again, with a vengeance. Novel followed novel, recognition swirled around him. But he remained unaffected by all this, his senses dulled, in a way, by the tribulations he had had to go through. Today, the bookshelf in his study is dominated by a fading photograph of Rajam. Close by hangs another framed portrait, of his daughter and granddaughter—to whose house he retreats occasionally, in Coimbatore, a day's drive away from Mysore.

Narayan's books have all exhibited a surprising empathy with their characters' minds. "I hardly went out of my own milieu," said Narayan, when I asked him why he had confined himself, all the while, to Malgudi. Was it fear that prevented him from stepping out of Malgudi's antiseptic continuum? "Fear?" he smiled. "No, not at all. I am not interested in venturing beyond Malgudi, that's all. I am quite satisfied with the atmosphere I have built up, in novel after novel. I see enough to write on in my own circle. The higher the economic and social structure, the less interesting it is for me. I do not like the affluent society, with its cocktails, its skyscrapers, its conscious conversation."

Why, I wondered aloud, is Narayan so liked in the West? Does he symbolize to his readers there (and he has a vast following abroad) the exotic species of Indo-Anglian writers? "They like my books because

of the pattern of life I portray," Narayan said. "The colors that run through my novels, how I look at my characters from inside and outside, realistically. Whatever comes out of it is inherent in the style itself. I am faithful to my social, economic, and cultural values. There is validity in my presentation of characters. I never have a thesis and then try to fit a character into it. I write fundamentally for myself."

The critiques his books have earned in the West have surprised Narayan with their insight into his style, his purpose, his philosophy and his ethics. There is no deliberation, no self-consciousness, in his Indianness, he says. The wealth of material available to him, he feels, is amazing. "We are not a standardized society, except perhaps in our upper strata, where people pay more income-tax!" This may be the reason why he appeals to the Westerner, he says, because "they are standardized on many levels, their struggles are all similar, and easily solved."

And that is the reason for his choosing Malgudi, he said. Because Malgudi is insular, what the Indians call a "mofussil place". Because, in a way, Malgudi is Utopian, as like India's hundreds of thousands of small towns as is possible, and unchanging at the same time. There is no single influence dominating



'NOTHING IS CONCLUSIVE IN THIS EXISTENCE'

Malgudi at any time, said Narayan. Why is Malgudi so static, so rooted in a fixed plane of time, I asked. Why doesn't he introduce some changes in every successive book, to indicate the change that any town goes through? "I must consider that seriously," Narayan laughed. "Perhaps in my next novel, to satisfy modern question-

ers like you, I shall put in an air-field! Perhaps I'll change my streets a bit, put in more traffic!"

We left the verandah and climbed the stairs to Narayan's well-lit study-cum-sitting-room. He opened a breath-taking walnut writing desk an admirer had sent him from Kashmir, and stooped to search for something. After a while, he raised his head, looked at his wife's picture, and said aloud: "What was I looking for?" Then he turned to me and remarked that he was growing old. "Here's a short story of mine that appeared in a recent *Playboy*," he called out. "I'll tell you the story behind the writing of it."

On a trip to Coimbatore, Narayan narrated, he had stopped by a roadside cobbler to get his sandals stitched. Behind the cobbler, as he worked, Narayan could see some film posters peeling from a dirty wall. And after he returned home, he told me, he sat down at his typewriter, and wrote the short story, *God and the Cobbler*. The hippie in the story came later, as he wrote, Narayan laughed. And he read out a portion of the story:

"No need to explain who the hippie was, the whole basis of hippie-ness being the shedding of identity and all geographical associations. He might be from Berkeley or Outer Mongolia or anywhere. If you developed an intractable hirsuteness, you acquired a successful mask; if you lived in the open, roasted by the sun all day, you attained a universal shade transcending classification or racial stamps, and affording you unquestioned movement across all frontiers."

Later, Narayan conducted me on a tour of his house and its garden. He had moved into it in 1953. He pointed out the frangipani tree he had written about in *My Days*, and lingered near a twisted log of teak mounted amidst his crotons. He seemed very satisfied there, standing in his garden, looking at his beloved Mysore, waving to a friend who, he explained, accompanied him on his morning walks. We returned to the verandah for the last questions I had.

All his novels, I remarked, ended ambiguously. Narayan interrupted. "Nothing is conclusive in this existence," he said. "My characters continue. One cannot round off everything." Why have all his books





THE NOVELIST IN 1959

been brought out by publishers abroad, I asked. "Because I get very good reviews there," Narayan said. "And the publishing industry

in India was restricted to textbooks so far. It's only now that it is developing. And the coming of Indian paperbacks, I think, is a great event. But our young writers do not try to take advantage of this facility. They are always searching for material, hardly ever writing sense. They are obsessed with subject-matter."

As we prepared to part, Narayan showed me the reviews his latest book, *The Painter of Signs*, had got in various American journals. I read Updike, Naipaul, Robb, Hirsch, all extolling Narayan's literary genius. The review I dwelt on the longest was Anthony Thwaite's, in

the *New York Times*. Thwaite wrote: "(Narayan's) is a world as richly human and volatile as that of Dickens, but never caricatured; and—unlike E. M. Forster's India—it is seen from the inside, though by a writer whose ironical detachment has no coldness."

And so I left Narayan in his arm-chair, looking every inch a man from Malgudi, and yet appearing to be just another old Indian. As I closed the plain gate, unadorned by a nameplate, I could see Narayan gazing at his frangipani tree, sunk in thought, planning, perhaps, the airfield he had promised to lay out.

CHAITANYA KALBAG

## Few Resonances Of Myth Or Metaphor

R. K. Narayan's new novel, *The Painter of Signs*, is his first major piece of fiction after a gap of nearly a decade. This novel shows that modernity is beginning to move into Malgudi, the fictional city in which all eleven of Narayan's novels are set.

Raman, a Malgudi sign painter, in his thirties, strives to live by reason, "determined to establish the Age of Reason in the world." But at the outset of the novel, Raman encounters a lawyer-client who insists on having his sign-board painted with letters slanted to the left because his astrologer has advised him that "a left slant is auspicious for my ruling star, which is Saturn." Of course, the auspicious hour of affixing the board has also been pinpointed by the astrologer and must be observed. Raman scoffs. "I want a rational explanation for everything... otherwise my mind refuses to accept any statement." Nevertheless he delivers, as business requires. Sound middle-class sense—one of the values Narayan upholds in his novels.

Raman lives alone with his aged aunt, who has been keeping house, fussing over him all his life. His great delight, since his college days, has been buying books at bargain prices at the antiquarian shop. His reading is random. To him, his resolve to live by reason requires staying aloof from women. It is not easy, with all the female attentions toward him: "The girls who ogled him when he went to college on business, and the parents of eligible girls sending him horoscopes, and all sorts of women who paused to look at him, as if ready

to follow if beckoned." But he "wished to establish that the man-woman relationship was not inevitable and that there were other more important things to do in life than marrying... If Adam had possessed a firm mind, the entire course of creation would have taken a different turn."

His resolve is put to severe strain when he meets Daisy, the director of the local population-control office, who needs signs painted. "What a name for someone who looked so very Indian, traditional, and gentle!" he muses, fascinated.

Daisy is wholly committed to her campaign for birth control: "Our work must start right away, before the monsoon begins, as it has been observed that the birth rate goes up during the monsoon months." Evidently, Indian monsoons and New York blackouts have identical results. Raman accompanies Daisy on her tours to villages, painting signs for birth-control propaganda.

Raman and Daisy are increasingly drawn together; however, she turns down his proposal for a formal marriage. "We will begin to live under the same roof on any day we decide," Daisy says. "And you will call yourself, Mrs. So and So?" "No," she says. "I won't change my name." Further she lays down two conditions before agreeing to live with him: no children, and if by mischance one is born it is to be given away so that she would remain free to pursue her social work. She's long held unconventional, independent views. Earlier she runs away from her parents' home, refusing to subject herself to the bride-inspection routine of an

arranged marriage, even though she acknowledges that the proposed bridegroom "was not bad as bridegrooms go." No doubt, women's liberation has arrived at Malgudi. About time.

Raman's ancient aunt is shocked by his involvement with "this Christian girl" and decides on a one-way pilgrimage to Badrinath to spend her remaining days by the holy Ganga.

Raman and Daisy live together only briefly. They break up when Daisy leaves for an extended birth-control campaign. Raman returns to his cronies at the Boardless Cafe—"that solid, real world of sublime souls who minded their own business." With this concluding sentence of the novel Narayan reveals his own conservative penchant for proper relationships and not meddling with other people's business. But isn't birth control everybody's business?

Narayan's writing style is objective and spare. Few resonances of myth or metaphor in his language. For this he has been at times criticised, notably by Professor V. Y. Katak in his well-known essay, "The Language of Indian Fiction in English." On the other hand, it can be cogently argued that simplicity of language and an objective third person point of view contribute to the charm of Narayan's storytelling.

In *The Painter of Signs*, Narayan presents a sharp portrait of some of the shifting values in Malgudi and in India today.

C.J.S. WALLIA

THE PAINTER OF SIGNS by R.K. NARAYAN; The Viking Press, New York, 1976