

## Social Picture of Malgudi/Regional Features/Local Colour/Narayan's India in *The Guide*

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To read R.K. Narayan is to know India, and its greatest testimony is found in Graham Greene's remark that he 'could never have known what it is like to be an Indian' had he not read Narayan. In fact, Narayan has never faced the problem of the diaspora and portrayed India as he saw it. Narayan's India is his small South Indian imaginary town **Malgudi** and its surroundings. His pointed observations of the features and good-humoured criticism of the oddities and foibles of this small town have earned for him the title of a social and regional novelist. *The Guide* (1958) offers a more comprehensive picture of the region and its society than Narayan's other works, since it shifts frequently between Malgudi and Mangal. These Malgudi and Mangal, with the other big cities where Rosie is invited to dance, are microcosm of India. Through the social and regional picture of these locales, Narayan has succeeded in presenting the larger picture of India.

Malgudi is represented as a nondescript town located between the river Sarayu and the Mempi Hills. During Raju's childhood, the town is old-fashioned-just a collection of hut-shops and alleyways and small houses with external decks or *pyols*. Here is a true homogenous community where corporate living is possible round the *peepul* tree: the

spacious brick platform round it; the stone figures anointed with oil and worshipped by women and children chasing each other and the dogs slumbering round the platform. At the *pyol* school an old headmaster makes the boys recite their lessons loudly in unison and flicks them with cane on a mistake. Such type of picture finds an echo in every adult bosom of rural India. However, this town comes to life artistically by the novelist's capacity to seize a minute, odd but significant detail: an eccentric cockerel in the neighbourhood letting out a shattering cry to announce the daybreak.

With his shrewd observation and the incisive detail that penetrates below the surface, Narayan has exposed the hollowness of many of our conventional pieties. The traditional Malgudi society, as represented by Raju's parents and uncle, is litigious, caste-ridden and narrow-minded. Rosie, despite being educated and a talented dancer, is rejected by her patriarchal society for being illegitimate and of low caste. Even Marco affirms patriarchal norms by insisting on a submissive and homebound wife. His marriage with Rosie, too, is a typical modern urban Indian phenomenon, a marriage negotiated through newspaper advertisement. To marry Marco, 'a man of high social standing...no family at all,' Rosie's relatives find it 'worth with sacrifice' to give up their traditional art of dancing. Narayan satirised the customary Indian conception of a 'good' marriage by linking it to the emotionally unsatisfactory match between Rosie and Marco.

The coming of railways to Malgudi is symbolic of the impact of an industrial and urban society on a predominantly simple, agricultural community with its new problems, which would mean undoing of the old ways of living and values. The tamarind tree suddenly becomes full of lorries packed under it. The lifestyle, too, undergoes a change. Within a few years, the town grows in size with the addition of sophisticated suburbs, worlds away from Raju's decent home. Even the modern Malgudi society that Raju embraces during his days of

prosperity is hardly any better, either from the point of view of morality or humanity. Narayan draws a ruthlessly uncompromising picture of the official and social corruption in the 'permit raj' decades immediately after the Independence. Liquor, gambling, and manipulation of rules permeate the society. Raju's moral lapse in bending the law to gain a personal advantage is symptomatic of the morally lax society.

The pictures of Mempi Hills and Malgal, too, are authentic. At the time when the story is set, human habitation has obviously not encroached on the pristine natural surroundings of the Mempi Hills. The caves that Marco explores are fusty and ill maintained, and this, too, is commonplace of many of the archaeological and historical sites that dot the Indian countryside. Mangal is equally typical of the rural India-thatched huts, muddy lanes, fatalistic villages, the temple beside the river, and the assembly around the *sadhu*. The small agricultural community here has suffered from time immemorial, and the novelist brings this wasteland myth in telling lines such as: "Cattle were unable to yield milk...The wells in the villages were drying up. Huge concourses of women with pitchers arrived at the river..." Finally, the scene leading to Raju's martyrdom brings to focus the traditional mass-hysterical beliefs of the multitudes of rural India. Narayan here also mocks the national predilection for inflating every possible situation into a quasi-religious ritual.

Thus, *The Guide* deals with the distinctive culture and features of a specific part of India. Yet, this canvas is too extensive to dismiss the novel as merely regional or social; it is typically Indian.