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R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days*: A Saga of the Conflict of Human Relationships and Money

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Abstract:

R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* is a collection of short stories, which describes the daily life of the people of Malgudi. These stories show Narayan's mastery over characterization and construction of plots and themes. The stories are short, simple and brief. Each story is different from another in most of the aspects. But in one aspect they are same, i.e., the conflict between human relationships and money. In this article I have tried to find out this conflict in different stories of *Malgudi Days*.

Keywords: Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, Malgudi, portrayal, relationships, conflict.

The stories in *Malgudi Days* are like fairy tales. Their plots, characters, structures may be different to each other, but they are same in one aspect, i.e., they are all made to impress the reader and "the consumption of one leads to a strong craving for more" (Smith, Alexander McCall). While reading the stories a reader can easily find that they are purely based on Indian landscape and society, and each story is different from the other and has the same power to provoke him, as Jhumpa Lahiri finds out, for "gobbling up one tale after the next" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.vii). The greatness of Narayan does not lie in the characterization or in the plot construction; rather he shows his greatness in the theme of his stories. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* is a collection of short stories, based on Malgudi: "...the place is imaginary and not to be found on any map" (Narayan, *Malgudi Days*, p.2). As Narayan 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 teller of the life of Indian people. 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 story teller. 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, colourless 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 every day 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 most notable relationship, found in *Malgudi Days* is the relationship 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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