

**FROM MAIGANIA TO MALGUDI**  
**REVIEW OF MOHAN G. RAMANAN, *RK NARAYAN - AN INTRODUCTION***

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‘India will go on’. This is what the Indian novelist RK Narayan said to me in London in 1961, before I had ever been to India.

V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977: 2)

That Naipaulian epigraph contains so much. Just like the first sentence of his classic novel, *A House for Mr Biswas*: Ten weeks before he died, Mr Mohun Biswas, a journalist of Sikkim Street, St James, Port of Spain, was sacked.

This is a sentence of history. In any index of authors you’ll find Naipaul is closely followed by Narayan. In between, occasionally my name also appears, a small writer from a very small village, Maigania, in Fiji. But the year 1961 has a special personal resonance for me. I’d just completed the BA English Hons degree from the University of Delhi: three delightful years, eight papers in English—from William Shakespeare to Lord Tennyson, three in History, one in Philosophy. But no Indian writer was ever mentioned by my Professors, especially those teaching English, at the college; once or twice Rabindranath Tagore’s name and reputation was dropped by a Bengali lecturer, Mr Mitra. It was ten years later at the University of Leeds, in 1971, that I first began reading a course in Indian Writing in English. Leeds led in several pioneering areas - it had the first Professor of American Literature in the UK; the first Professor in Commonwealth Literature in the world; it changed the direction of English teaching in many university departments all over the world. The course was taught by the redoubtable Professor CD Narasimhaiah. CDN, as we fondly called him, was moulded in the Great Tradition of F R Leavis. In his company some of us also met Dr Leavis, his teacher at Cambridge. CDN began

with the epics and introduced us to Indian Writers in English. However, there were few takers for the course. Two of us - Mark Mcwatt from the Caribbean and Satendra Nandan from the Pacific - became CDN's devoted students.

It was in this course I discovered that in the early 1960s Nirad C Chaudhuri, not a writer CDN admired, had lived at Kashmiri Gate a few miles away from my college when I studied in Delhi. Kashmiri Gate was famous for a couple of restaurants and a tailoring shop owned by a Mr Khanna who knew, with uncanny precision, when a foreign student arrived in a local hostel: later I realized he could have been a character from the pages of a Narayan novel. But by then I'd returned to Fiji without any acquaintance with RK Narayan's fiction. No-one, not even Mr Khanna, ever mentioned a writer living in that area, although I'd seen a copy of *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* in a local bookshop. It remained unsold and unread. Years later, Mr Chaudhuri visited the University of Leeds - I spent an afternoon listening to him but couldn't tell him I had studied close to his home in Old Delhi. Mr Chaudhuri wouldn't let anyone else talk, and he was quite petty, I felt, to Indian students studying English literature in England.

At Delhi University the only living writers who visited our college were Dom Moraes and Ved Mehta from Oxford, on a visit to India under the auspices of the British Council. We hadn't read anything by them either. Decades later, I read two remarkable pieces of autobiographical writings by Dom Moraes and his collections of poems and travelogues. Ved Mehta's books on India I enjoyed immensely: the portrait of his family members; and *Portrait of India*. Ved Mehta's delightful essay on meeting RK Narayan in New York remains in my mind. The article was written for the *New Yorker* and published in his selections, *John Is Easy to Please: Encounters with the Written and the Spoken Word* (1971). Reading it one didn't realize Ved Mehta had lost his sight in his childhood. The portrait of Narayan is titled "The Train Had Just Arrived at Malgudi Station". It is a subtle introduction of a writer's personality, mind and art, in which the *New Yorker* often excels. Narayan's train has not stopped moving since and in Malgudi he created a world very much his own. It's full of characters in a small town with large ambitions. However, it's not a microcosm of India: one aspect of India, yes; but "the vast, metamorphic, continent-sized culture that feels, to Indians and visitors alike, like a non-stop

assault on the senses, the emotions, the imagination and the spirit” remains elusive. No single writer can do that.

RK Narayan’s world of Malgudi, though, is more real in literature than many a small town that litter the landscape of this loved and lived land, often the birthplace of bitter harvest of communal hatred; and at times showing a light to the world. The story of India is particularly meaningful in 2014 as we commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. Europe had become the very heart of darkness as India was seeking freedom from the imprisoning British imperial chain. In a sense this is the extraordinary achievement of Indian writers using the English language as a weapon of deepest creative endeavours, especially the generation from Nehru to Narayan. Parliamentary democracy and the English language remain two of the most enduring gifts of England to a brutally divided British India. The teaching and writing of literature, too, is part of that unique encounter between two civilizations.

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The story of Narayan’s evolution as an imaginative writer in English is the most fascinating of all. So much of his writing is autobiographical like Vidia Naipaul’s. Naipaul writes about Narayan, a favourite of his father’s Seepersad Naipaul who is Vidia’s one unforgettable inspiration:

The novel, which is a form of social inquiry, and as such outside Indian tradition, had come to India with the British. By the late nineteenth century it had become established in Bengal, and had then spread. But it was only towards the end of the British period, in the 1930s, that serious novelists appeared who wrote in English, for first publication in London. Narayan was one of the earliest and best of these. He had never been a ‘political’ writer, not even in the explosive 1930s; and he was unlike many of the writers after independence who seemed to regard the novel, and all writing, as an opportunity for autobiography and boasting (Naipaul, 1977:18-19)

Naipaul’s *India: A Wounded Civilization* was published in 1977. His *An Area of Darkness: An Experience of India*, was published in 1964. Both books are important for a reader to understand Indian Writing in English mainly because they’re written by an outsider-insider whose grandparents had been taken to Trinidad as indentured labourers in the 1840s. They carried India in their gathries, hold-alls. Even Gandhi spent his most formative years in England and South Africa and acquired a knowledge of British subjection of the subcontinent as only an outsider could. Both loved India - Naipaul as a writer, Gandhi as a political activist. Literature and

politics have a lot in common. Ultimately their concern is freedom of the imagination and what it means to be a human being, so messy and multitudinous, so noble in reason, and yet a mere quintessence of dust. India is full of deceptive angels and dusty devils. With his gentle genius, Narayan imagined this community.

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The volume, *R.K Narayan: An Introduction*, by Mohan C Ramanan is a lucidly written critical introduction to the whole oeuvre of Narayan's more than six decades of writing. Narayan wrote prolifically - over 30 works, from *Swami and Friends* (1935) to *The Grandmother's Tale* (1994), steeped in the stories of the great epics and the life that grew in the heat and dust under his bare soles. The most creative ground is under one's feet - and one's destiny may be written on one's dusty soles rather than on the stretched palms of one's hand.

RK Narayan was born in 1906 and lived almost until hundred. He died in 2001 - missing a century by a few runs as a cricket-obsessed Indian might say. Cricket, too, is a colonial gift in which the Indians have produced more individual geniuses than most others. Narayan's writing contemporaries were Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao - they formed the trinity of Indian novelists in English. All three lived for almost a century; and yet in Delhi I'd neither heard nor read any of these marvellous story tellers.

Today, of course, Indian Writing in English is an industry: from Amitav Ghosh to Vikram Seth, Anita Desai to Arundhati Roy - a rich harvest of Indian writers who have opened the Indian realities to the English-speaking world as only writers can do, "a body of literature unsurpassed in its sustained imagination". Salman Rushdie, born in India, is an exceptional phenomenon - I wonder why he hasn't yet been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. 2013 would have been a significant year as Tagore was awarded it in 1913. No writer from the subcontinent has been awarded that prize since. Not that the Nobel - despite its acknowledged prestige - is the ultimate recognition - Gandhi never got it for Peace; Kissinger did, and Jean Paul Sartre declined it.

Professor Ramanan's book is a timely one and the publishers deserve our thanks: the blurb puts it thus:

Contemporary Indian Writers in English (CIWE) is a series that presents critical commentaries of the best-known names in the genre....The CIWE texts cater to a wide audience - from the student seeking information and critical material on particular works to the general...Cast in a user-friendly format and written with a high degree of critical and theoretical rigour...CIWE, we hope, will further strengthen the interest and readership of one of the most significant components of world literatures in English.

Mohan Ramanan's introduction is "eminently readable". Ramanan is both a creative writer and a critic of distinction. He's a Professor in the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad in India. The volume has nine sections: Introduction; Essays; Memoirs and Travelogues; Short Fiction; Longer Fiction; Thematic Concerns; Caste Class and Gender; Form and Value; and finally, Conclusion. Interestingly there are "Topics for Discussion": clearly the volume is aimed at students and teachers in the colleges and universities. A select bibliography is judiciously chosen. Each section critically introduces the many genres that make up Narayan's stupendous output in English.

Ramanan writes with clarity of style and a deep knowledge of the ethos and environment which produced both Narayan and his writings and he has read Narayan's work with empathy and insight that are integral to Narayan's own writing. The critic's observations generally reveal the nature of Narayan's many compositions, and not obfuscate his interpretation of life. Sensibly he avoids the pomposity of postcolonial theoretical prose, although several critics are mentioned throughout the book and their work for scholars to pursue further afield. The emphasis is very much on Narayan's writing and its interest for the reader. Narayan "is a good combination of the Tamil-Hindu sensibility, married to a progressive Gandhian dream and a bridge between indigenous and European traditions. This was an enabling fusion" (Ramanan, 2013: 9). Ramanan's critical interpretation is particularly salient when he shows the creative connection between the writer's life and his writing. In Indian writing one cannot escape the overwhelming shadows of the two Indian epics.

Indeed this is where the critical issues emerge for writings in English in India. When does one begin to decolonize the traditions which use a genre that is not indigenous? Narayan, of course, created a whole world in Malgudi, an integral part of the subcontinent, that is more real than a

million other villages and small towns, touched and explored by a non-indigenous language. And yet, it is a deeply limiting world, like great Gandhi's vision of Ram Rajya for a modern India. When Rushdie and his close companion, Elizabeth West, edited the *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing in English, 1947-1997*, a paragraph in their introduction seemed to have upset many critics and readers in India:

the prose writing - both fiction and non-fiction - created in this period by Indian writers working in English, is proving to be stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in 16 'official languages' of India, the so-called 'vernacular languages', during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, 'Indo-Anglian' literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books (1997: x)

This is a bold claim but then Rushdie is a daring and dazzling author - *Anton Joseph, A Memoir* (2012) tells the story of his survival, courage, and creative strength. At the celebration of India's fiftieth anniversary of independence another splendid volume was published: Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* (1997). Both these volumes in English captured the intellectual attention of readers who read mainly in English. Both give the reader an idea of India that has a lot to do with the one great encounter of the Indian sub-continent with the world's supreme maritime colonial power. This 'brief encounter' changed India more dramatically than 5000 years of Indian history and mythology. I think this is important: the great Indian epics are situated in the sub-continent, including Sri Lanka. The modern Indian diaspora which began with European colonization of the past 500 years affected India most radically. While the British colonized the subcontinent most ruthlessly, as if the bee had found the very source of abundant nectar, it also cross-fertilized the flower to produce fruits of many kinds.

The art of story-telling is an ancient Indian art - one can scarcely escape the vital influence of the two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Politicians and pundits are defined by these two encompassing epic narratives. Homer's epics do not suffuse western civilization with the same depth or diversity and contemporary echoes. In Indian writing, hardly any writer is able to ignore the myth-making imagination of the Aryan mindset. One could say that the Aryan colonization was complete and the effects of the caste-system in the South more devastating and permanent. Its political implications are immense - even Gandhi couldn't escape the impact. The more he talked of Ram Rajya, the more Pakistan became a possibility. And yet the great text of India is not the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*: it's really English colonization and that greatest

of imperial crimes: the partition of India in 1947. The more you read about it the more history hurts in the guts of Mother India.

No epic work of fiction has, so far, come out of that unwritten, unimagined tragedy. As if of what we cannot speak, we must forever remain silent. Even *Midnight's Children* (1981) doesn't quite confront that overwhelming reality. I went to India to study during my teens, a dozen years after that cataclysmic event in 1947. Now looking back after more than 50 years, I'm amazed that no-one talked about it in the class of '61-62 in the national capital's university. It was, as if, a deliberate veil of historical amnesia had been dropped as a curtain of silence.

Human beings cannot bear too much reality. And T S Eliot was a popular poet at my college - every magazine, published at exam time in April, began with 'April is the cruellest month....' The waste land was in Europe, not in India. And yet millions of lives were displaced, killed. The brutality that the British practised and perpetrated on the sub-continent was lost in the lessons of English Literature. No-one made the connections between the triumphal tragedy of the European conquest of more than the sub-continent. And few escaped its lasting impact. That a *Mahabharata* had taken place on real Indian soil was hardly recognized in the Indian imagination wrapped up in myths and legends. RK Narayan's writings do not delve in these profoundly political-human questions. The reader doesn't get any idea of the dereliction and distress that was India. After all, Ram Rajya is a kind of royal tyranny, no matter how noble the king's ideals expressed by a bandit poet.

A classmate of mine in Delhi, Ramesh Rao, saw Rama's exile not as a filial obligation sacrificing his throne, but Sita's escape from no fewer than three mothers-in-law. Indian movies, which I saw in Fiji, were full of the mistreatment of daughters-in-law by terrible mothers-in-law. And my class mate Ramesh Rao, the brightest student in my class, had little sympathy for King Dashrath who dies grieving for Rama's exile from the kingdom for fourteen years: what do you expect when you have three wives at the same time? Even Henry VIII was more careful, if ruthless, according to Rao, whose father was a Professor of Psychology at the university.

Professor Ramanan comments:

There is in Narayan's essays the thoughtfulness of the citizen, the satirical eye of a compassionate observer of the world, the humorous flights of imagination and above all the shrewd appraisal of men and matters. In his novels Narayan creates a recognisable Indian community, peopled by

various human types - astrologers, clerks, criminals, charlatans, spiritual guides, painters, dancers, hoteliers, pretenders, mystic masseurs, members of joint family, caste characters and mahatmas, among others (Ramanan, 2013: 67)

This of course is the Dickensian achievement, but unlike Charles Dickens who was really a reformer of the ills of his society, Narayan accepts the quietism inherent in Indian culture: all is acceptance - even this shall pass away. It's really not the Gandhian non-violence which was an active and demanding philosophy of courage and change and immense compassion and legislative creativity. It was a revolutionary idea for India when used politically and socially. No wonder then the mahatma was assassinated by a high-caste Brahmin, a crime for which there's no parallel in history or myth. The three bullets were real killers.

Narayan's world is both limiting and limited. Admittedly, no writer can capture a country or society in its entirety. What one needed was *Ulysses* from an Indian writer or a book like *The Satanic Verses* from one of a Hindu sensibility: if in English in the first half of the last century James Joyce's *Ulysses* is the great novel; in the second half it's really Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. An Indian writer, one day, may deconstruct and dismantle the protean hold the Indian epics have had on the Indian psyche for millennia. The newly elected government's agenda of *Hindutva* as a definition of *Bharat Mata* seems to lead the nation towards another inner partition, far more terrible, I think, than that unnecessary vivisection in 1947. This time the Indians won't have others to blame. Democracy and the idea of a secular nation are two of the most powerful modern political ideas to penetrate the Indian subcontinent. Both, I think, are gifts of the 'other' world. Indian democracy, the largest but not the oldest, is one great hope of the world. Its pluralistic, secular vision is important not only in India, with a population of 1.3 billion but also in places like Fiji, with scarcely a million inhabitants, made up of indigenous and immigrant people. If a multicultural polity of freedom fails in India, it could have devastating tsunami-like effects beyond the Indian Ocean.

In this huge enterprise writers and artists are as important as politicians and business men and women. RK Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao gave us visions of at least three Indias. A chapter in this book on placing Narayan with his contemporaries would have added more substance to the critical work but perhaps that was beyond the scope of the volume. The volume is for the new reader who likes both clarity of thought and style. Ramanan excels in both.



Occasionally, though, even Ramanan lapses:

Narayan modulates from chorology, that is, the science of space, to chronology, that is, the sense of time. In other words, we have the Bhaktinian chronotope and Foucaultian heterotopia, the time-space-matrix (Ramanan, 2013: 80)

Sentences such as this detract from the critical insights that Ramanan gives with the intimate and intense authority of a reader who has read the Narayan oeuvre with deep interest and literary understanding. He is most satisfying to a reader-writer when he relates Narayan's writings with his long journeys of personal life. It was a long, productive life for which a more comprehensive book is overdue.

*RK Narayan, An Introduction* is a valuable work of literary interpretation. Professor Mohan Ramanan's book may inspire others to attempt a definitive work on this remarkable man and novelist. My loss is that I never read him when I studied English Literature in India in the 1960s. Mohan C Ramanan's *Introduction* will make me read the works of a fabulous writer of India, writing in English.

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