



Malgudi Days: R. K. Narayan's Erudite Representation of Storied Matter

Maryyam, Shamza¹

Waqar, Hadia²

¹English, Faculty of Language and Literature, International Islamic University, H10 Islamabad. *Pakistan*

²English, Faculty of Language and Literature, International Islamic University Islamabad, *Pakistan*

Corresponding Author: Maryyam, Shamza

Phone: 03101574441

e-mail: shamzmaryyam23@gmail.com

Article citation: Maryyam, S (2024). Malgudi Days: R. K. Narayan's Erudite Representation of Storied Matter, Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies, 5(4): 39-46.

Received Date: January 25, 2024

Accepted Date: April 30, 2024

Online Date: December 19, 2024

Publisher: Kare Publishing

© 2024 Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies

E-ISSN: 2501-1183

ABSTRACT

Human beings have been greatly observed as the principal narrators of nature for centuries. As a result, the role of matter has almost always been widely ignored as a potential storyteller. Where man has always been considered the narrator of universal phenomena, matter's capacity for narration and semiotic interconnections has always been disregarded. However, when authors provide matter the platform to participate actively in their plots, they subvert these notions of matter's stillness. We argue that by integrating the town of Malgudi into his stories as a foundational plot device, R. K. Narayan foregrounds the narrative agency of Malgudi, and this semiotic power establishes Malgudi as a hyperobject. In his stories, the town of Malgudi is not only taken as the setting, but it acts as an active participant within the stories. Its entire presence can be observed by closely examining the streets, buildings, and characters that exist within the setting. For our support, we have chosen two main concepts: Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's concept of "Storied Matter" and Timothy Morton's conceptualization of "Hyperobjects." We utilize these concepts to establish the town of Malgudi as a storied hyperobject, and by doing so we highlight the amount of significance matter has in shaping narratives.

Keywords: Hyperobjects; Malgudi; Material Narrativity; Semiotics; Storied Matter.

In almost all discourses, man has always been considered the sole narrator of history and action. Ecocriticism, however, attempts to disavow these claims. Man is not the only storyteller in this universe, matter itself has the semiotic capacity to narrate stories as well. These stories can be of the matter itself or the stories of human action. The nonhuman environment can produce significant narratives and articulate histories beyond human comprehension. A great example of this material narrativity is when authors utilize ecology as a crucial character in their worldbuilding: authors such as R. K. Narayan.

In our paper, we argue that by integrating the town of Malgudi into his stories as a foundational plot device, R. K. Narayan foregrounds the narrative agency of Malgudi, and this semiotic power establishes Malgudi as a hyperobject. The theory of Material Narrativity suggests that matter is always kinetic, not still as it is generally assumed. This kinesis presents the nonhuman environment as "Storied Matter": matter capable of telling stories. Sometimes, this matter continues telling these stories forever and

becomes a hyperobject. As a hyperobject, this matter operates beyond spatiotemporal localities, just as the town of Malgudi and its constituent materials do in *Malgudi Days*.

For our support, we have chosen three theorists and their respective concepts; Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's concept of "Storied Matter," and Timothy Morton's conceptualization of "Hyperobjects." Furthermore, theorists like Jeffery Jerome Cohen, Donna Haraway, etc. shall assist us as sub-theorists in our argument to categorize Malgudi as a storied hyperobject. However, before we jump into the establishment of the material narrativity and the hyper-objectivity of Malgudi, we must first discuss our author briefly.

About The Author

Born Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami in 1906, in Chennai, India, R. K. Narayan had twenty-nine books under his belt. He was a widely rewarded and critically acclaimed author. Some of his prestigious awards include; the *AC Benson medal* from the Royal Society of Literature, the *Padma Bhushan*, and the *Padma Vibhushan*, which are considered to be the third and second of India's highest civilian awards, as well as the nomination for *Rajya Sabha*, India's upper house of Parliament. He was also nominated for the *Nobel Prize* in Literature many times. He was brought up in Madras by his grandmother who taught him Sanskrit and told him about Indian epics and myths, which became a source of inspiration later in his career. Later, he moved to Mysore, where he got inspired by the man-made beauty of his environment and tried his hand at poetry. Thus, we can understand that the subtle connections of matter and history, and the ordinary stories have always been a focal point for him.

He attended Lutheran Missionary School and Christian college and in 1930 received his B.A. from Maharaja's College all from South Asia. However, Narayan claimed not to be interested in academic work. Although his mother tongue was Tamil and he spoke his regional language Kannada in Mysore, he wrote his fiction solely in English which gave him fame in the literary field. Other sources of inspiration for his work were Narayan's supportive wife, his experience as a member of a middle-class traditional family, and his experience as a reporter for *The Madras Journal*, through which he interacted with people of all kinds. He passed away in India in 200.

In his work, Narayan focuses mostly on social realism, which has been heavily suggested through the sources of his inspiration. Narayan has always been interested in mundane stories. He projects the feelings and emotions of normal people that get swept under the rug by many others in the literary field. For Narayan, the periphery becomes the center: those avoided by most get pulled into the spotlight by his storytelling. It is no surprise that his storytelling allowed matter to shine as a crucial storyteller connecting the human world to the nonhuman world.

According to author M. K. Bhatnagar, "Narayan depicts a kind of realism which is something more than reportage," (2002). Other major components of his fiction included; reincarnation, Karma, gender-based issues, and marriage, along with juxtapositions between tradition and modernity, as well as an amalgamation of spiritual and secular ideas. Many authors, such as Naipul, regard him as a "comic realist," (*Cronin Imagining India*) who cleverly integrates irony and humour in his depiction of reality and human pathos. This human pathos, however, is never depicted in overly exaggerated ways. His storytelling is easily digestible and relatable to the common man. Narayan's trait of discussing the marginalized does not end with human characters. This sympathy also extends to matter: the heavily marginalized plot device in literature. Narayan's creative craftsmanship converts the discarded nonhuman environment into storied matter capable of expression. Now, the question that arises is: what do we mean by the term 'Storied Matter'?

'Storied Matter' and What It Implies

The theory of material narrativity suggests that although matter may be mute, that does not mean matter can not articulate stories (Opperman 2013). Storied matter implies that matter operates through intricate relationality by forming connections between the human and the nonhuman entities of the world. This establishes a platform of mutual articulation for humans and matter, knotting them in discursive syntaxes that subvert the standard notions of what matter is

and what it contains the potential to do. In its simplest form, storied matter means matter that can tell stories. It suggests that matter is lively, not stagnant, it is agentic, not passive, and that it has the power to generate and narrate stories.

Matter is an excellent storyteller, an author that transcends human articulation and intelligence. According to Iovino and Opperman, "...all matter, ... is a "storied matter." it is a material "mesh" of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces," (2014). That is to say, humanity and matter are interlocked in a semiosis, whether articulated orally or through symbolism. Matter produces narrative signification just as much as human beings. The only difference is that matter needs to be interpreted while humans can orally articulate stories easily.

The planet and its materials always seep into the human domains and influence human connections. These connections help us understand the densely infused ontology of a world that continues to evolve with time. The universe has always told stories through matter such as biomes, fossils, chemical reactions, literature, cultural spaces, etc. That is to say, material semiosis is not a new invention or a cultural construct. It has existed before man and shall transcend man. It has remained and shall remain, in the human domain through processes of inter-relational enmeshments in which objects exceed human knowledge and supplement human stories. It is only a matter of human focus and interpretation for them to be foregrounded as matter lacks the power of verbal communication. Then, how do these objects transcend spatiotemporal boundaries and become hyperobjects? We shall discuss this process of matter becoming a hyperobject next.

How Do Objects Become Hyperobjects?

In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Timothy Morton describes hyperobjects as "real entities whose primordial reality is withdrawn from humans," (15). Hyperobjects are nonhuman entities distributed across and within spatiotemporal boundaries transcending the capacity of human knowledge and understanding. Their impact does not circle within man-set boundaries. Instead, it continues to perforate our space-time continuum as we know it. These objects can be manmade, such as plastic, styrofoam, etc, or a creation of nature's talent, e.g. the black hole, DNA/RNA, etc. In simpler words, any object that transcends the human paradigms of death is considered a hyperobject.

Hyperobjects exist intersubjectively; they exist relative to human phenomena and actively participate in and influence them. These are objects that transcend human framing. Regarding the qualities of hyperobjects, Morton elucidates,

Hyperobjects, then, are "hyper" in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not. Hyperobjects have numerous properties in common. They are viscous, which means that they "stick" to beings that are involved with them. They are nonlocal; in other words, any "local manifestation" of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to. (2013)

Throughout the entire book, Morton revisits the quality of hyperobjects being interrelated and viscous, and their ability to be the products of a cosmic phenomenon or man's intervention. These hyperobjects exist in such relativity to man that the entire process of life becomes impersonal. In other words, there remain no fixed boundaries of the external versus internal. Everything comes together to create assemblages based on interactivity. These assemblages live through the human cycle of life and exist beyond that cycle, continuing to affect and interact with phenomena as they come into being. Simply: hyperobjects existed before human cognition and shall exist beyond its life. Now, we must explain why we consider the town of Malgudi a hyperobject, and how that hyperobject has material expressions to narrate.

Malgudi as a Storied Hyperobjects

In *Malgudi Days*, the town of Malgudi is just as important for the progression of the plot as the other elements of the story such as the characters, the dialogue, etc. This undeniably crucial role of

Malgudi itself reminds us of a tenet of Material Narrativity that states, "matter and meaning merge together to present a picture of shared worldly experiences and sites of narrativity (Oppermann, 2016). Similarly, the lives of the characters written by Narayan and the town of Malgudi are interconnected. The characters merge with the town in such a way that they both observe each other and the changes that they experience as well as affecting each other in unimaginable ways.

The town was ever present, observing the day-to-day matters of the people it inhabited. When Ayah woke up for the day to care for the little girl, when she played with her, when she left for home, and when she came back telling her employer that her husband came back and finally, her departure from the house forever ("A Willing Slave"), everything was observed by Malgudi. Malgudi was also the silent audience when many businessmen and food stall owners lost their businesses such as Rama Rao losing his gramophone business in "Out Of Business", the food vendor losing his business spot, and the gradual decline of his business in "The Martyr's Corner."

In "The Martyr's Corner," Malgudi experiences the peak of a food vendor's business as well as his retirement. He is said to sell food from between eight in the morning to ten at night. His stall is visible to anyone who may pass by which helps his business flourish. Narayan writes, "When he set up his tray with the little lamp illuminating his display, even a confirmed dyspeptic could not pass by without throwing a look at it," (92). Malgudi perceived the constant liveliness and hustle at his food stall every day between eight and ten. Then, Malgudi also experienced his turmoil when a fight broke out at his usual place of work, injuring several people and giving rise to a political upheaval. Ultimately, the vendor is forced to assemble his business at another spot: one that unfortunately does not help his business.

In the place where he previously worked, a statue was erected in honour of the murdered party leader. The vendor narrates to the audience,

Very soon this spot was cordoned off, with some congregation or the other always there. Money-boxes jingled for collections and people dropped coins. Rama knew better than anyone else how good the place was for attracting money. They collected enough to set up a memorial stone and, with an ornamental fencing and flower pots, entirely transformed the spot. (95)

The spot where the cinemagoers could get the cheapest dosai, tea, duck eggs, etc became a memorial place. This entire transition was engraved within the history of Malgudi. The memorial site contained within itself the history of a food vendor it displaced to be established, and the events that led to its establishment. Simultaneously, Malgudi observes the food vendor in his new spot scrambling to make even a quarter of the earnings he made in his old spot. His everyday routine, his displacement, and his replacement, all incidents were recorded by the town of Malgudi. This record shall also outlive the people. Malgudi's narrative capacity shall remain even when human verbal history narrations end. The vendor's story becomes another item in Malgudi's treasury of stories; Malgudi acts as the vessel of material expressions.

In "Mother and Son," Malgudi experiences how a mother and son deal with their grief of their lost husband and father and their eventual emotional breakdown once they go watch his movie in the cinema together. Malgudi is also an observer when the fraud astrologer comes face to face with a man whom he thought he killed ("An Astrologer's Day") and while the doctor interacts with his patients ("The Doctor's Word"). Additionally, Malgudi is the first-hand audience of the sculptor and his determination and focus on creating the perfect art, ("Such Perfection"). In short, Malgudi is an active observer and inscriber of its people's history and daily problems.

The town of Malgudi stands alert as people interact with one another as well as Malgudi. The town is a silent watcher of all the babble of the marketplaces, the voices speaking greetings and haggling with the shop owners, the bible-preachers screaming their messages for those who listen, and the health guides in their vans amplifying advertisements for defence against various diseases, ("Trail Of The Green Blazer"). Malgudi stood there in all its glory, taking in the everlasting giving and receiving of the people it has been home to for generations. Malgudi acts as a non-human manifestation of a court stenographer; typing the people's stories on itself as they occur so the traces shall exist even if the actors dissipate or die. For example, in "The Martyr's Corner," the author

writes, “Rama watched the unfolding of contemporary history through the shoes of newsboys,” (95). Just like Rama, Malgudi also serves the role of the audience watching history unfold through its figurative eyes that one can not see but can not deny its existence. It has eyes that can see, ears that can hear, and a mouth that narrates the people’s stories even without a voice.

M. Parvathi, explaining the power of the landmarks in Malgudi writes that the notable landmarks of Malgudi “make it a story of social framework,” (122). Malgudi and its people do not exist in isolation from one another. The town of Malgudi is a book that articulates the stories of its people and operates as the writer of this book as well. Whilst the characters act as the authors of these stories. Malgudi is an active performer, one that influences the stories of these characters and preserves them for those who may desire to read and understand these stories. Parvathi goes on to explain the intimate and active role of Malgudi in the stories of these characters:

Malgudi is an intense, emotional curiosity of R. K. Narayan. It is not merely a background of his novels-but ‘a leading, real hero’ which is present in one way or other in most of his works. In it one can visualize and realize such a locale which is a form; of personification of a vivid character. Malgudi is a fictional town imagined in the mind of R.K. Narayan, where his literary works take origin. It’s like a landscape as alive and active as a personified character. The fictitious region is woven in such a smooth thread that it, creates a fine fabric of inseparable part of Narayan’s realistic art. (124)

Malgudi is indeed a leading protagonist in the novel. Its environment is an assemblage created through mutual articulation between the object and the subject, an enmeshment of intimate relationality between human participation and non-human articulation. The biosphere of Malgudi and the actions of its people are inseparable. Malgudi is a dynamic space creating material expressions. It works alongside the people to articulate their stories. It is in constant kinesis, creating semiotic interactions with its inhabitants. Malgudi is an indicator as well as a container of the ontology of those who call it home. It reads, writes, and preserves the changes and the emotions they go through. It is a collector of their action, pathos, and logos, all while being a refuge for them. Its history tells the evolution of its people: an evolution of interdependence, co-existence, interdependence, survival, and extinctions, (Iovino and Oppermann).

It would not be wrong to term the town as an archive of “processual enmeshment” (Cohen 2015), as character histories have been embedded in its geological structure, readily available for interested readers. Malgudi is a record of anthologies initiated and acted by its inhabitants. It is an agentic part of the book that is a device of conveyance for humanity. It intertwines the human with the non-human; no boundary separates it. It actively intervenes in the human phenomenon, subverting the assumption that non-human environments are passive entities. It predates its characters, exists in the ‘now,’ and is set to exceed the human frame of life and death to articulate histories. This eternal quality is what makes Malgudi a hyperobject.

This disruption of boundaries as expressed through the town of Malgudi is a major indicator of hyperobjects. According to Morton,

No longer are my intimate impressions “personal” in the sense that they are “merely mine” or “subjective only”: they are footprints of hyperobjects, distorted as they always must be by the entity in which they make their mark—that is, me. I become (and so do you) a litmus test of the time of hyperobjects. I am scooped out from the inside. My situatedness and the rhetoric of situatedness in this case is not a place of defensive self-certainty but precisely its opposite. (5)

That is to say, there are no fixed boundaries of outside or inside when it comes to hyperobjects. There is a profound interconnectedness that leaves no personal space. The external and the internal are not segmented places. Instead, they remain joined to each other, woven within each other like the threads of a fine-silk tapestry. There is no binary or separate situatedness: only a single enmeshed assemblage that works relative to each other as the people of Malgudi and the town itself operate.

Although much of Malgudi’s interference with the characters’ stories is left for the readers’ inference and interpretation, in some of the stories, the characters and the author directly recount

Malgudi's active participation in the story-making and its eternal life as well. In the story "Lawley Road," the narrator states Malgudi's role as a history writer and consequently, as a hyperobject. Telling the readers about the changes made to Malgudi in celebration of Independence Day in the past, the narrator not only speaks about the changes made in the past whose reasons were lost with time, but he also tells the audience of the changes being made to the town in present-time that shall remain there until they are changed again and share the fate of their predecessors. He says,

They made a start with the park at the Market Square. It used to be called the Coronation Park—whose coronation God alone knew; it might have been the coronation of Victoria or of Asoka. No one bothered about it. Now the old board was uprooted and lay on the lawn, and a brand-new sign stood in its place declaring it henceforth to be Hamara Hindustan Park. (83)

This simple articulation reminds us that Malgudi existed before the narrator himself. It has remained there recording historical and mundane changes. Malgudi has been inscribing history upon its soil and its constituent items for as long as it has existed. Furthermore, it is in the continual process of inscribing more stories upon itself, telling those presently living in it the stories of those that roamed its streets in the past, and absorbing new stories to narrate for those that shall roam it in the future. Malgudi shall outlive its inhabitants while continuing the process of retaining stories like a humble co-narrator. It has the elevated status of a hyperobject that shall survive human life and outlive human death.

Another example that we may interpret regarding the eternal life and narrative capabilities of Malgudi is, again, in "Lawley Road." The point of concern here is the displacement of the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley. His statue was taken down through much effort and moved to Lawley Road. The decision to do so proves costly both financially and image-wise due to their miscalculation. The statue remains an indicator of history in its place of origin, yet the people's hubris does not let them brush up on their history lessons. They think they know more about the statue, its purpose, and its indications than the actual place it resides in. However, they soon come to realize that the statue of someone they thought was "a combination of Attila, the Scourge of Europe, and Nadir Shah, with the craftiness of a Machiavelli," (86) was the statue of a generous governor who fought for India's independence, and was a big hand in creating the town of Malgudi. Additionally, they find out he was the first Englishman to advise the British Parliament to involve more Indians in all Indian affairs as well as advising them to leave India for their good (87).

A singular political miscalculation caused them great trouble. Simultaneously, the statue's history seamlessly transitioned from one telling a story of valour and amicable relations to that of explosions created to make the statue fall, the hacking marks on the statue's platform symbolizing the hubris of political misjudgments, the downfall of the narrator's image in the eyes of the people, a history of protests and community demands, as well as a history narrating the blindspots of political authorities. In essence, the space where the statue once used to stand and its new place of residence become spaces where traces of human participation are left for those who may come to read them in the future.

Conclusion

In the words of Donna Haraway, "The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read," (1988). The non-human environment may be mute, yet, but it is not silent. It is constantly in the process of recording and articulating stories of human and cosmic phenomena. One of the points of humanity's hubris has been its assumption that man is the sole articulator of existence. In our paper, we reject this assumption by highlighting Malgudi's capacity for material expression and establish this eternal narrative quality as the indicator of its nature as a hyperobject. Malgudi is the main character in the compilation of short stories called *Malgudi Days* penned by the famous author R. K. Narayan. By foregrounding its semiotic ability, Narayan integrates Malgudi so intimately with its inhabitants that there remains no space for boundaries or segmentation. This integration allows Malgudi the space to operate as a story writer, interpreter, and articulate when it comes to

the lives of its people. Then, as Malgudi will never die, neither will the stories of the people. Malgudi shall remain in place, telling stories of those that once came to those that shall come in the future. The predecessors shall remain connected with the successors through the storied hyperobject that is the town of Malgudi.

Works Cited

- Cronin, Richard. "The Politics of R.K. Narayan." In: *Imagining India*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20337-6_6
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt155jmth>.
- Haraway, Donna. (1988). "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, 3: 593.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Oppermann, Serpil. "Material Ecocriticism and the Creativity of Storied Matter." *Journal of Literary Studies*, 2013, 26, pp. 55-69.
- Oppermann, Serpil, and Serenella Iovino, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Parvathi, M. "R. K. NARAYAN'S MALGUDI-AN IMAGINATIVE AND ALIVE LANDSCAPE." *American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 15(2), 2016, pp. 122-125.
- Ramanan, Mohan G. "Introduction." In: *R. K. Narayan: An Introduction*. Foundation, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9789382993834.002>

References

- <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/web-stories/interesting-facts-about-rk-narayan/photostory/94764949.cms?from=mdr> n/