



Mr. Sampath –A Mosaic of Indianness

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Abstract

The town of Malgudi with its distinctive southern flavor forms the background of Narayan's celebrated novel Mr. Sampath- a work that like all others is deeply drenched in the aroma of Indianness. The descriptions of the Market Road, Kabir lane, Anand Bhavan restaurant and even the small town of Talpur bring to one's mind all the small towns of India bustling with an ever increasing crowd, full of commerce and fun fare, a world that has a distinct identity and its own way of life. With the expansion of business and construction activities comes the ever increasing pressure of accommodating the migrants from nearby areas and the role of municipalities is shoddy in Malgudi , a reminder of the situation anywhere else in the country. The periodical, *The Banner*, highlights the issue of unplanned expansion of the town and hence comes in direct confrontation with the municipality people. The novel deals primarily with the exploits of Mr. Sampath , a rather flamboyant printer who could not strike a balance with changing fortunes and ends up losing his reputation, his sole friendship apart from his paramour , his wealth and his press. Narayan presents some very pressing issues like the position of women –both docile and the revolutionary – vis-a- vis the social norms and male dominance. Srinivas, the editor and protagonist of the novel, remains oblivious of his duties towards his wife who is verily an embodiment of Indian woman- filled with devotion, sacrifice and adjustment. Shanti, the Rosie of Mr. Sampath is made of different yarn altogether. She ensnares our printer , makes him toe to her whims and when things go out of gyre, is the first one to call it over. Ravi's infatuation with Shanti is another dimension to the relationships quite familiar in the small town Indian milieu. Although the prime thrust of the novel remains the symbiotic friendship between Srinivas and Sampath who represent two divergent philosophies. Srinivas is a symbol of Indian thought of moderation and piety whereas Sampath , as a man of extremes , represents the epicurean thought of –eat , drink and be merry. The final verdict of course justifies Srinivas's humanity and humble conduct and the novel ends with a message of balanced living.

KEY WORDS: Indianness, southern, country, printer, women, relationships, humanity.

Mr. Sampath- The Printer of Malgudi(1949), a bitter- sweet novel about the ignominious consequences of unbridled desires, set in 1938 Malgudi, was made into the films Mr. Sampath(1952) in Hindi and then in Tamil(1972) by the same name. The impact of Gandhi's vision on contemporary literature was a foregone conclusion as Srinivasa Iyendar puts it, 'Life could not be the same as before, and every segment of our national life- politics, economics, education, religion, social life, literature and language- acquired a more or less Gandhian hue..... Gandhi exercised a potential influence on our languages and literatures, both directly through his own writings in English and Gujarati and indirectly.'

Of course Narayan's philosophy corroborates the Gandhian thought(although Gandhi himself said that there wasn't any 'ism' about his ideas) , but in a very subtle way he transmutes it and creates a mosaic of Indian sensibility fusing past with present, tradition with modernity, and literature with life as Michel Pousse says,

'Narayan penetrated the heart of Gandhi's teachings. He separated the obviously ephemeral implications of his philosophy from what was eternal in it and he gave literary existence to the latter.'

Set in the placid town of Malgudi, a brain child of Narayan and the very embodiment of Indian sensibility, the text is an intricate interplay of varied shades of human emotions and relationships where at first we are introduced to Srinivas, a man of 37, ruminating whole day about the essence of being and other related metaphysical enquiries,

'Who am I? This is a far more serious problem than any I have known before. It is a big problem and I have to face it. Till I know who I am, how can I know what I should do?'

And it is only through an unexpected interruption to his cogitations and reprimand by his lawyer brother that his worldly instincts get sparked and he sets out for Malgudi to become a bread winner though not without unconscious grudge;

'Man has no significance except as a wage earner, as an economic unit, as a receptacle of responsibilities. But what can I do? I have a different notion of human beings.'

Srinivas, a foil to Sampath, and the editor of The Banner which has two fold aims, one to attack malice and narrow mindedness wherever it is to be found and second to implore humanity to constantly strive for perfection, is a non-chalant vehicle of the 'sanyasi' motif that runs so deeply in all of the Narayan's literature, acting as a prototype for Nagraj from his later work as Rita Joshi puts it;

'Nagraj, the antihero of the novel, issueless and a younger son, placidly watches life pass by from his corner of Kabir Street. But his nephew Tim's antics disturb his calm and he is forced

to venture in the world. His dismay at Tim's activities conflict with his protective feelings, and in trying to be supportive of Tim's dropping out of school and his subsequent alcoholic escapades at Kismet, the local bar, he earns his brother Gopu's wrath.'

His accidental meeting with Sampath at Anand Bhawan restaurant triggers ripples in his lethargic existence and he starts his magazine quite oblivious of any financial hardships that were all deftly tackled by the jolly hearted printer. The avowed pacifist, Srinivas was once again basking in the sunshine of spiritual euphoria unwilling to encounter even the most pressing realizations of the time,

'In 1938 when the papers were full of anticipation of a world war, he wrote: 'the banner has nothing special to note about nay war, past or future. It is only concerned with the war that is always going on – between man's inside and outside. Till the forces are equalized, the struggle will always go on.'

The only realization he had was the financial constraints and the ever so real burden of his wife and child that made him meander philosophically as to whether a man had no relevance other than a wage earner for his family and a passive receptacle of duties. Like a naïve young Indian who is given to meditative cogitations, he finds himself lacking in techniques of surviving the matrimonial obligations. Always in a dichotomous discord between the personal space and demands of family, he is striving for harmony as his magazine keeps making wavelets in the otherwise sedate Malgudi. And yet the circulations hit a standstill and he's again left wondering about the possible shortcomings in his approach as the editor. He knew that there was something lacking in it that made it less suitable to the people it is meant for. Nevertheless all went well till the indefinite strike in the Truth Printing works that makes Sampath dispatch a note to the subscribers that *The Banner* would remain out of circulation for indefinite time.

Srinivas's relationship with his wife is again a jigsaw of kinds and yet bearable to both the parties, although quite a bit of encumbrance to the poor lady at times due to idiosyncrasies of her husband who often realizes his shortcomings in his monologues. He is aware of his inability to devote enough time and carnal affection towards her, and at the same time, is thankful to her for her unflinching devotion and surrender to the household for she's a traditional Indian woman who has never known any way of life other than that of complete oblivion of self for betterment of family.

Srinivas, in a typical *sanatan* mindset, often marvels at the wondrous balancing of things that life maintains and thinks it stupid to challenge or criticize or upset the pace of incidents that

fate unveils in front of man. He is one of Gandhian thinkers for whom the path of harmony and non-violence is the only path worth trading. Unnecessary agitations, scheming, deviations and distortions inevitably situate a man in dire troubles. Indian thought for centuries have been fatalistic, deriving passive acceptance from its adherers. Any attempt at deviation may bring havoc. In fact many a British writers of Narayan's period have beautifully depicted this strife between fate and human caprice through Indian mode of thinking. One such instance is a macabre little play 'The Monkey's Paw' by W.W.Jacobs that deals with a monkey's paw that has spell put on it by an Indian Fakir. The paw can fulfill wishes! It's a tale of how interfering with fate may have devastating consequences, a resounding reminder of the Indian fatalistic philosophy.

In the same vein, Srinivas's placid life gets adventurous, thanks to the outlandish proposals of Sampath, who single handedly piloted Srinivas into venturing into the film making business with no prior experience what so ever. Srinivas, the ever gullible philosopher, could not summon confidence enough to refuse neither could he restrain himself from putting his time and wealth into something that was not his calling. The anti-climax came soon with Ravi as an agent of catastrophe, runs amuck on the sets, ruining not just the reels of the movie but many a careers.

Ravi's obsession with Shanti although may seem strange and yet is a realistic description of one sided 'love' that remains so typical in traditional Indian setting where a boy and a girl can't even interact face to face without causing some eyebrows to raise. What ensues is not really love in true sense but a mere projection of one's own ideas and expectations on a stranger who might not even be aware of her 'beloved status'! It not only almost invariably ends in disillusionment but also sometimes could prove tragic as the person concerned might not be able to adjust to the real world afterwards as happens to Ravi who after being released from the jail loses all sense of coherence and slides into vegetative existence. Indeed one can't blame Shanti for not exhibiting the character which Ravi projected on her.

This melodramatic contriving has its own significance in the scheme of things and isn't forced upon to bring a sudden end as remains the charge on Eliot's 'The Mill on the Floss'. The absurdity creeps in through the rogue conduct of Ravi and yet there's an amiable solution wherein Srinivas exonerates Ravi of all charges through his personal clout. In this regard Natwar Singh's thoughts are in apt resonance with the treatment of the incident at hand as for him Narayan's works are singularly devoid of any violence. The Indian way of life always avoids extremes. Of course, Narayan's characters exhibit love and hatred but not out of

bounds. Moreover, Narayan's treatment of sex is never obscene or intended to add spice to the story.

'The Sampath-Shanti episode is obviously not the one of its kind in Narayan's works as, 'The darker shades of moral aberrations are first noticed in *The Dark Room*. Ramani, temperamentally a callous man, violates the traditional family morality under the influence of modernity symbolized by the coquettish Shanta Bai with her Greta Garbo manners.' Opines Shiv K Girdla. Savitri, a submissive housewife of an unscrupulous banker Mr. Ramani, who in the beginning of the novel prides himself over the 'white complexion' of his wife, is caught between the choice of self-pride or passive acceptance of her subjugated status vis-à-vis the keep of her husband. She revolts but to no avail and the novel ends with her returning back to her husband and children, completely exhausted, disillusioned and defeated. The same set of conflicts and consequences are reflected in Sampath's amorous deviation with Shanti though here the vamp makes a choice to go of her own. Shanti invariably falls in line with the emancipated flamboyant butterflies like Shanta Bai of *The Dark Room*, Rosie of *The Guide* and Daisy of *The Painter of Signs*, who simply cannot make do in a backward place like Malgudi, environs about which B . P. Singh, a noted historian once stated that India has a long cultural tradition which has thrived for more than three millennia. Successive generations have imbibed a certain set of values, a particular way of life and in spite of all foreign influences, and passage of time, we have maintained this distinctiveness that makes us Indians. And yet the times began to change with the arrival of British influence. In spite of all lip service by men on women liberation, we always remained a strongly patriarchal society with a feudal mindset where a woman's body was not her own but a symbol of family's pride. In this regard even Narayan appears to exhibit misogynist traits as in none of the above mentioned works, the female side has been given a fair chance to speak up their concerns, tribulations and resultant 'immoral' conduct. Narayan seems not to have adjusted well with the idea of a liberated woman who would make her own decisions which may well juxtapose the patriarchy.

Decades later, Khushwant Singh would present one such character in *Madam Sarojini Bhardwaj*, a Professor of English who lives with the middle aged hero Mohan for a fortnight as an escort to gain benefits in return of sexual favors. Like Shanti, Khushwant's lady is out on a trial basis, a divorcee with an eleven years old child. She is a brunette, reasonably attractive, not too beautiful but presentable! Dressed in a white saree on her first meeting, a teetotaler and vegetarian, she proves to be quite the opposite of her prudish appearances. Just

like Shanti , it was Sarojini who takes the final decision of quitting the relationship for good. And yet the reader isn't appalled or feels anything derisive about the lady. The treatments meted out to the respective characters of Shanti and Sarojini are a reflection of Narayan's and Khushwant's relative approach to the emancipated, young women of modern times.

Although Narayan portrays the plight of the weaker women - 'the docile housewives' in a more 'round' manner like Ramani's wife, Sampath's wife, who have been muted like millions of their sisters by illiteracy and consequent economic dependence on their husbands about which Gandhiji once opined that there can be no justification on part of men to deprive women of their just rights just because of latter's illiteracy. Although education for Gandhiji was prime and he wanted women to get educated to assert their rights, work for their own welfare and that of the society at large and gain true knowledge of the self in the process. Without proper education, a woman was bound to be her man's servant. An educated woman was always going to be honored in the society as manifested by Raju's mother's comments to Rosie,

'Good, good, brave girl. Then you lack nothing in the world. You are not like us uneducated women. You will get on anywhere. You can ask for your railway ticket, call a policeman if somebody worries you, and keep your money.'

So this whole plethora of relationships with a kaleidoscopic range of emotional nuisances has in itself the making of a mosaic of Indianness where the major thrust of the story is portrayal of the symbiotic relationship between Srinivas and Sampath, wherein the former, in spite of the realization that their relationship has struck a dead end and there could be no more return possible to the good old days, retains compassion and goodwill for the later. Srinivas , in the classic last scene, decides to let Sampath's vision melt in the haziness of the advancing night and takes to the road back home to start anew. Life in Malgudi would be the same, and yet the siren of change has knelled in Srinivas's heart and with a renewed belief and self assurance, he sets out for a life of equipoise in tandem with Indian philosophy of *Madhya-Marg* as propounded by sages through centuries.

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