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Wessex and Malgudi; Regional flavours by Hardy and Narayan

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy and R.K. Narayan dab their literary masterpieces with their favorite regional flavor. If the novels of Hardy are strictly Victorian in its presentation the Narayan's novels too are draped with South Indian makeover. It is Wessex a fictitious town in Southern England through which time travels. Hardy is the most pessimist too. All the novels of Narayan are strictly rooted in the Indian soil. The Malgudi novels are beautifully set in the imaginary town of Malgudi in South India Malgudi may be described as the backbone of his novels. Hardy's sense of milieu acts as an imperative linkage between his tragic vision and his fictional art whereas in Narayan's fiction the milieu reveals his comic vision.. Wessex is not much highlighted in his novels. It is overshadowed and sometimes even ignored due to more powerful elements in Hardy's novels. Whereas Narayan projected the stories of his novels on the watercolor of Malgudi Both Hardy and Narayan manifest similar attitude towards sex that is the conventional, mid Victorian attitude. Both the literary artist highlight the respect for social values present in their major female characters. The struggle between love and characters is the common observance in the Wessex novels. Hardy and Narayan were aware of the nostalgic effect of their created milieu which was induced into their readers. The rustic and semi urban middle class atmosphere is the solid foundation of their novels.

Key Words: *Regional, Milieu, Tragic, Comic, Vision, Nostlagic, Influence*

**Wessex and Malgudi; Regional flavours
by Hardy and Narayan**

All the novels of Hardy are strictly Victorian in date his novels bring into literature a very rare combination of influence and gifts. In his novels a more than personal touch, which might easily have gone unrecorded, found expression? None of his novels with the possible exception of *The Hands of Ethelberta* is metropolitan in its settings. The major novels use a more restricted locale which is either a rural community or a small town attached with the country side. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* presents mainly the rural settings of Victorian times. In *Jude the Obscure*, Jude leaves the land after the opening section to enter the world of the urban artisan. The minor novels range widely over a variety of scenes –rural, metropolitan and continental. Hardy's *Wessex* is a witness to the unfolding of human drama in all its novels and it is *Wessex* through which time travels. The past haunts and permeates the present and both are capable of making their stamp on future. His consistencies are based on feelings, habits, a keen sense of romance and of life's little ironies, an age for details and an increasing personal discomfort



marked by a tendency to return to the same themes such as marriage or the nature of a woman.

He frequently betrays a certain amount of personal involvement or self projection in his fiction. He was not deliberating realistic but he could not help writing with rich peculiarity about the town of Dorchester. Hardy is one of the most realistic writers of the world and often the most pessimist too. He appears to be one of the most important mediators of continuity between the 19th and the 20th centuries.

All the novels of Narayan are strictly rooted in the Indian soil. His novels enrich literature by depicting rich Indian heritage, culture, values, and traditions. His personal impressions find expressions in his fictional works. His novels are related to his own class, the Indian middle class, where people are bound to their customs and values and suffer from many inhibitions. His novels are comedies with a tinge of sadness. The juxtaposition of tradition and modern in its different aspects constitutes the well defined themes of his novels. The East West encounter receives an adequate attention in Narayan's novels like *The Guide*(1958)and *Sweet Vendor*(1967).A desperate but

unsuccessful pushing back the onslaught of Western impact on one hand and a voluntary act of getting swallowed up into a whirlpool of civilization on the other are strewn on pages of Narayan's fictional work. Narayan is basically rooted in Indian soil and way of existence. His presentation of life is realistic. It is suggestive of the depths beneath. Without being didactic, he renders a profound moral vision in his novels, which has its roots in an ageless rich heritage of a never dying culture and tradition. His entire corpus of fiction is deeply colored with the spirit of place. The Malgudi novels are beautifully set in the imaginary town of Malgudi in South India which registers a sense of growth from novel to novel. Malgudi may be described as the backbone of his novels. Hardy's sense of place acts as a vital link between his tragic vision and his fictional act whereas in Narayan's fiction it (sense of place) reveals his comic vision.

Though place is significant in Hardy's Wessex but it cannot be considered as the spirit or soul of all his novels. His landscape actually dwarfs his human actors and looms large on their destiny. In case of Narayan, Malgudi is an axis on which the entire novel rotates. It is the soul of all the



novels. Narayan seems to be more interested in the human world than in the vast expanse of nature. Therefore his Malgudi is more human and intimate. It has strong sense of reality. Malgudi functions well like a character and possess a spirit. It is possibly everywhere in this huge country inside and outside Malgudi's own geographical boundaries. The readers recognize the place with its peculiar identity.

Wessex with its natural abode acts as the background for the action that he depicts. It also hovers like aspirate, watching the enactment of fate, coincidences, chance, society and human passion. In spite of a local flavor and its rich variety, both the literary artists succeed to an incredible degree to impart a sense of universality to the human drama of their fiction.

Hardy is a regional novelist. He is the creator of Wessex, a small tract of land having six counties in South England. He has made it immortal on the world's map. He gives realistic treatment to its history, geography and people.

H.C Duffin aptly remarks:

“In the world of Wessex there survives a memory of life in which nature and society are in place.” In Hardy’s novels like Tess of the D’Urbervilles we shall note that from the beginning to the end, chance dominates or guides the action. Similar conclusion can be drawn from his novels like Far from the Madding Crowd (1874) and the Mayor of Casterbridge(1886).

Far from the Madding crowd (1874) presents pastoral atmosphere and peaceful and harmonious environment of the country side far from the madding crowd of cities. Casterbridge and its environment dominate the novel. A small number of buildings, church, homesteads, barn, and malt house become focal points for most of the significant scenes. Hardy also make use of principal building and instructions of a community-manor-house, church, school farm, mill and so forth. The novels opens with Gabriel’s falling in love with Bathsheeba In the initial years he has failed to win her heart but later after a course of series of events he ultimately marries her. This is the chief plot of the novel. Other incidents contribute to the development of the main plot. Bathsheeba’s impulsive and willful nature gives rise to many

complications in the novel. In the beginning, being an inexperienced and frivolous girl Bathsheeba refuses Gabriel Oak’s love on account of her unwillingness to accept the bondage of wedlock. Later, in her mature age her sheer vanity and thoughtlessness make her send the valentine to Boldwood. This proves to be the cause of her ruin for which Bathsheeba is to be entirely blamed. Her falling in love with Troy adds more misery and complications to life.

In spite of evil traits so prominent in Troy’s character and Gabriel advise to cut off her connections with Troy, she approves of advances made by Troy. Bold wood threatens Bathsheeba of heavy consequences if Troy returns to Weather bury. In haste she goes to Bathsheeba to warn Troy against coming to Weatherbury as his life would be in danger there. But irony of fate makes her marry Troy. A minor plot too runs like an important vein in this novel. To continue the interest of the readers and for happy endings the minor plot deals with the story of Fanny Robins, since Gabriel’s love story ends after the wedding of Troy and Bathsheeba. Fanny Robins is one of the maids servant of Bathsheeba, She is already in love with Sergeant Troy. The night when Gabriel

arrives in Weatherbury, she too disappears from there. In her first meeting with Gabriel in the churchyard she did not disclose her love for Troy, but later she reveals that she is going to be married with her lover, Sergeant Troy. Due to the irony of fate, chance and coincidence she visits the wrong church and fails to marry her lover. Troy happens to come to Weatherbury, meets Bathsheba and finally marries her. This minor plot compliments the major plot. This novel of Hardy would always be regarded as one of the best and most memorable novels of the author.

Whereas *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) is a mature novel of Hardy which displays his mastery in the skill and literary art. His *Casterbridge* was the focus of the surrounding country life and the inhabitants lived by agricultural which is an indispensable part of the rural life. Henchard is the protagonist who sells his wife Susan in the state of intoxication to a sailor Newson. His life seems dominated by Fate, NATURE and CHANCE. Donald Farfrae arrives from North. Unfavorable weather results into Henchard's financial downfall. He is a man of instincts and emotions as other characters-Farfrae, Elizabeth Jane, Lucetta



play important parts. The novel depicts conflicts between man and his emotions. The father daughter relationship between Henchard and Elizabeth Jane is painted with different shades of affections.

Thus Wessex is not much highlighted in his novels. It is overshadowed and sometimes even ignored due to more powerful elements in Hardy's novels. That is perhaps the reason that minute details regarding Wessex are untraceable in his fiction though he charted out the map of Wessex in order to satisfy the curiosity of his readers and render a realistic touch to his created milieu. Whereas Narayan paints the stories of his novels on the canvas of Malgudi, elevating it from the status of a backdrop to the throbbing, pulsating living being. It is the most influential character of his novels. Any deviation from it only results in a comic scene and characters-ordinary as they are bound to come back to the fold of Malgudi.

H.M. Williams points out: "Malgudi gives Narayan the necessary fixity of background against which he can set comedy of duration and disturbance of the normal."

In the novels like *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Guide* etc Malgudi dominates from beginning to end. Hardy's Wessex lacks the human touch whereas Malgudi is a living character which changes and grows with time. In *The Dark Room* 1938 we can clearly notice the economic progress and the various expansions and advancements of Malgudi. From the quiet small town of Malgudi where *Swami and Friends* was written or where the childhood days of Raju in *The Guide* were painted, Malgudi swiftly changes into a commercial center. The novel *Mr. Sampath* 1949 witness the transformation of a semi agricultural town into semi –industrial town ,The emergence of *The Banner* and *The Sunrise Studio* and the various other things speak of an awakening in the economic sphere and footsteps of Westernization in the cultural areas of Malgudi's existence. Comparing Narayan with Hardy, M.K.Naik observes:

“In spite of these several discrepancies and many more minor ones that could be detected-it goes without saying that Malgudi does remain for the reader a living presence in the same way and to the same degree the setting of Hardy and Faulkner impinges on one's imagination.”



Both the writers were aware of the fact that the fictional location has a lot to do with the making of the characters in a novel, aware of the indivisibility of settings and characters.

Hardy has devised his own division of fiction into three unequal groups. His comments on his classification of the Wessex novels into 3 categories, defend the geographical limitations of their settings on the grounds that the characters are typical of humanity and claims that his accounts of Wessex possess historical authenticity as a fairly true record of a vanishing life. His division of fiction is as follows:

First are the novels of character and environment in which he includes: *Under the Green Wood Tree* 1872, *Far from the Madding Crowd* 1874, *The Return of the Native* 1878, *The Mayor of the Casterbridge* 1886, *The Woodlanders* 1887, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* 1891, *Jude the Obscure* 1895, *Wessex Tales* 1888 short stories and *Life's little ironies* 1894 short stories.

Then second are Romance and Fantasies which embrace *A Pair of Blue Eyes* 1873, *The Trumpet Major* 189, *Two on the*

Tower 1882, A Well beloved 1897, A group of Nobel Dames 1891, short stories.,

The third type is novels of ingenuity comprising of Desperate Remedies 1871, The Hand of Ethelberta 1876, A Loadicean 1881, A Changed Man 1913 short stories.

No such classification is there in Narayan's novels. He never categorized his novels. In fact all his novels germinated, blossomed and ripened in the soil of Malgudi only. Set in the context of intricately known regions of particular social orders, the novels of Hardy and Narayan are all to a greater or lesser degree, localized in time; they present a society structured on fairly well-defined lines and standing at a particular point in its history. If Hardy designed a Victorian rural town and named it Wessex Narayan too devised a South Indian town and christened it as Malgudi.

Hardy as well as Narayan command a wide readership and are studied as literary profiles. Hardy's novel writing career spanned a period of 25 years that is from Desperate Remedies 1871 to Jude the Obscure 1895.



Narayan literary career covers a period of more than six decades. His literary period covers a large span from Swami and Friend 1935 to Talkative Man 1986. Hardy earned a more popular reputation in his later part of life and he was honored with the order of merit and honorary fellowship of Oxford and Cambridge colleges.

Narayan's The Guide received the Sahitya Academy award for the year 1960 and was featured into a film. He was awarded the Padma bhushan award in 1984. The honorary D.Litt was also conferred by Delhi University in 1973.

Hardy attracted several eminent critics. They explored the various aspects of his work. The structure and art of his novels were studied by Lionel Johnson and John Brooke while the study on characters and the environment was taken up by F. Manning.

Hardy's pessimism was studied by David Cecil. He also concentrated on the role of fate and omnipotence in Hardy's novels. H.C. Duffin was more concerned with the topographical element and Wessex and area around it. There are many others who carried out their serious studies on different

facets of these novels. There is no dearth of erudite exegesis on both of them.

Narayan's literary genius too attracted a lot of reputed critics. His first novel which appeared in 1935 *Swami and Friends* was immediately declared as outstanding and memorable by the great literary artist of England, Graham Greene. He was interviewed on B.B.C by Mr. William Walsh.

Both Hardy and Narayan manifest similar attitude towards sex that is the conventional, mid victorian attitude. Narayan just like Hardy, rarely describes physical passion in any of his novels. Both give more value to a platonic, spiritual love which is judicious and immortal. Both of them believed that the relationship between man and woman would be more contented if the artificial standards of civilized society did not hamper free living. For Hardy, several other factors are responsible for this tragic and artificial system which causes the unhappiness of men and women. Both believed that the best in men is often distorted and disturbed by social inhibitions and the social concepts of good and evil which are insufficient to judge the value of a person. For example The Mayor of Caster bridge was judged and



hailed as the Mayor by the canons of the society. Similarly in *The Guide* sainthood was imposed upon Raju by the simple villagers of that region. Both deal with the simple, humble folks. These characters are hardworkers and down to earth people. They belong to the middle stratum of the society. In Hardy's world we often find them as farmers, hay-trussers, poultry workers, labourers, dairy farm maides, workers, and architects. Narayan too picks up the middle class characters like a school teacher, a guide, a painter, Financial Expert etc.

One more similarity in portraying their female character is this that the members of the fair sex usually come from middle class of the society not do not boast of the belonging to a rich parental heritage. Both the literary artist highlight the respect for social values present in their major female characters.

If Tess in the novel *Tess of The D'Urbervilles* displays moral courage in accepting and rearing her unwanted child named Sorrow. Sushila of the novel *English Teacher* too is well aware of her obligations as wife towards her husband Krishnan and displays her devotion and sincerity.

In Hardy's novels love is the dominating feature. Mostly it expresses itself in form of sexual infidelity. The struggle between love and characters is the common observance in the Wessex novels. Narayan's expression of love is not a rash irresistible storm or violent emotional intensity like that of Hardian expression of love. On the contrary love is expressed like the flow and waves of river Saryu, clean quiet and contented.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Henchard the Mayor is torn between his wife Susan and his beloved Lucetta in the later part of his life, whereas love triangle again exists between Donald Farfrae, Lucetta and Elizabeth Jane. If we talk about *Far from the Madding Crowd* we find two love triangles; Gabriel Oak, Bathsheba and Boldwood and the second one is that of Bathsheba, Sergeant Troy and Fancy Robbins.

One has to search for these love triangles in the novels of Narayan. *The Guide* may be cited but it has unclear vertices. The relationship that exists among Rosie, Raju and Marco cannot be called as love triangle. It is not a love triangle in the strict sense as Marco hardly ever felt jealous of Raju. In fact he is not in love with his wife Rosie and this fact only instigates Rosie to



break her ties with him. It seems as if R.K. Narayan deliberately confines his pen to go to the verge of this matter and not to explore it openly or boldly. May be his South Indian age old moral values prohibit him to frame out any love triangle based in the arms of infidelity or love affairs. His best novels are devoid of any of these whether it is *The English Teacher* or *Bachelor of Arts*.

Hardy seems to be fond of disclosing the sexual problems of his characters. He is specially concerned by the hesitation of the women. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* Bathsheba is impressed by the sexual appeal of Sergeant Troy; she neglects Gabriel as he is ruined economically and his status is reduced to that of her employees. Most of his novels deal with the complications produced by the blind passion or mismatched marriages which give rise to different kinds of love including romantic infatuation as well as lustful desires. The outcome of such love or unwise marriages is disappointment, rusted emotions, infidelity and illicit affairs. For example, in *Return of Native* Thomasin is loved by Diggory, who weds Damon Wildeville but Damon is loved by Eustacia but marries Yeobright. Nevertheless these relations lead

to dissatisfaction and conflicts. At this stage, Victorian convictions dominate Hardy. He didn't dare to explore the consequences of these affairs.

The Woodlanders has the pattern of three triangles; love affair among Grace Melbury, Giles Winterbourne and the outsider Fitzpiers. The second triangle is formed by Fitzpiers, the village girl Suke Damson and the wealthy woman Felice Charmond. Marty South, country girl, who with Giles Winterbourne and Grace Melbury forms a third triangle of love. Though Marty's love for Giles remain mute. This novel shows Hardy's courage and honesty as he rejects happy ending. Faithful Giles suffers and dies and Suke Damson emigrates and Charmond too is disposed off. Grace Melbury returns to her husband Fitzpiers and Marty South preserves the memories of Giles. Same is the case with Tess in Tess of D'Urbervilles. She is trapped between Alec and Angel.

Thus Hardy's preoccupation with the themes of love and marriage shows its impact on most of the novels, of course often leading to disillusionment and passion which is



always within the permitted limits of late Victorian fiction.

Hardy and Narayan were aware of the nostalgic effect of their created milieu which was induced into their readers. The rustic and semi urban middle class atmosphere is the solid foundation of their novels.

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