

# The Middle Class of Malgudi

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the depiction of 'middle-class values' by the celebrated Indian writer R.K. Narayan. Malgudi, a fictional South Indian town, is a prototypical representation of typical Indian society and the literary works of Narayan vividly mirror the everyday happenings. Content analysis of selected short stories, namely, 'Forty-Five a Month,' "Iswaran" and "Sweets for Angels," reveal the peculiarity of the Indian middle class and the author's apt derision of certain lifestyle practices associated with modernity. Set in the backdrop of the 1930s, the stories capture the labyrinth of social issues and problems that plague South Asian societies. For instance, educational achievement is considered to be of utmost importance for preserving one's status and the achievement of social mobility by the middle class. Ironically, educational success is often unsuccessful in buying freedom from alienating and oppressive livelihood practices engaging the middle class. There is also an accompanying erosion of 'social capital' and the expanding "radius of distrust."*

**Keywords:** Modernity, Middle class, Malgudi

## Introduction

The present paper attempts to gain a sociological understanding of R.K. Narayan's depiction of the middle class. R.K. Narayan, the famous Indian writer, was known for his works set against the fictitious South Indian town Malgudi. Depicted as a small town on the banks of the Sarayu river, Malgudi boasts of an Officer's club, a Municipal Board, two schools, and a town hall. The town is bordered by Nallappa's mango grove on one end and Mempi forests on the other. Set in the era when the country was undergoing the struggle for independence, Malgudi presents its readers with a picture of turmoil and turbulence. The novel, for instance, mentions two thousand people assembling on the banks of the Sarayu river during the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930.

While the people of Malgudi are traditional in their outlook, yet it was fast experiencing the forces of modernization and industrialization. Accompanying such change was the percolation of elements of modernity in the form of the municipality, broad streets, banks, cinema halls, circus, shops, and restaurants. Similarly, the readers also note the rising economic inequality in Malgudi. Evidentially, the town had both the upscale neighborhoods (for example, the Lawley Extension where the government officials resided) and shanty areas like the smuggler's den. In sum, it can be said that Malgudi was experiencing change from being a Gemeinschaft community to a Gesellschaft society.

Malgudi mirrors the happenings of the larger society, and it is a macrocosm of various dialectical forces like "tradition" and "modernity" coexisting in a country like India. Narayan thus narrates the gradual transformation of the Indian society through the sleepy and reticent town of Malgudi.

As Walsh (1964) aptly puts it, “The Mysore of his personal life, the Malgudi of the novelist’s life, becomes an intense and brilliant image of India itself. What happens in India happens in Malgudi, and whatever happens in Malgudi happens everywhere.” Though the town does not exist on any country map, the people residing in the town do exist everywhere. As Misra (2002) nicely puts it, “Malgudi is not a place but an experience of soil and soul of India.” For this paper, three short stories of Narayan, *Forty-Five a Month*, *Iswaran*, and *Sweet for Angels*; are chosen to depict the author’s vivid portrayal of the middle class in India.

In the short story “*Forty-Five a Month*,” R.K. Narayan aptly portrays the daily struggle for existence in a middle-class family. The story is about a man, Venkat Rao, who struggles very hard to support his family but is paid a meager monthly wage of forty-five rupees. This low wage problem is further compounded by the fact that Rao works under an insensitive and demanding boss. Over the years, he has lived with the problem because of being skeptical about finding alternative employment, leaving the security of a salaried job. Rao is made to do overtime in his office regularly and is not even spared on Sundays and has negatively affected his personal life. His sense of frustration and helplessness is aptly reflected in his wry contemplation, “for forty-five rupees a month; they seemed to have purchased him outright.” So, on a particular day, when his daughter urges him to take her to a movie, he sympathetically feels, “here was the child growing up without having any of the amenities and the simple pleasures of life.” The consciousness of blatant exploitation in office and neglect of familial duties makes him furious. It promises (his daughter) to come back home by five in the evening to take her to the theatre. His resolution seemed unwavering, as was reflected in the following sentences, “He was going to show them that they weren’t to toy with him. Yes, he was prepared even to quarrel with the manager if necessary.”

Against this backdrop, the narration begins with Shanta, Rao’s daughter, wanting to leave school early on a particular day because her father has promised to take her to the cinema. The author, R.K. Narayan, nicely depicts the girl’s restlessness in her

class because of her apprehension that she will late in reaching home and will miss the opportunity to go to the movie with her father. Her impatience leads her to request her teacher to grant her leave from the school early. The teacher’s affirmative reply in this regard makes her extremely happy, and she hurriedly “picked up her books and dashed out of the class with a cry of joy.” Upon reaching home, she refuses any refreshment and insists on getting dressed first. The child’s eagerness for going out with her father for the movie is nicely captured by Narayan through the vivid description of her preparation in the following words: “Shanta put on her favorite green frock, braided her hair and flaunted a green ribbon on her pigtail. She powdered her face and pressed a vermilion mark on her forehead.”

In the office, Rao was busy as usual, and the flow of papers and files on and off his table was continuous. As a common practice, he was “corrected, admonished and insulted.” At 5 in the evening, he went to the manager asking for leave and was tersely refused and, on the contrary, was given the task of examining two hundred vouchers to figure out the source of a trivial error. It was already five-thirty, and Rao was furious that his condition is akin to a slave who has been bought for forty-five rupees. In sheer anger and frustration, he composed his resignation letter and took it to the manager. However, before opening the letter, the manager shared with Rao the news of the increment of his salary by five rupees. Rao was elated at this trifle recognition and gift and snatched away the resignation letter from the manager. On the inquiry of the manager, Rao guessed it to be a leave application and intended not to use it. The manager was happy and cautioned Rao in the following words: “You can’t get any leave for at least a fortnight to come.” Rao, then, willfully moves his seat and scrutinizes the vouchers for the error. He returns home at 9 o’clock to find Shanta fast asleep in her favorite frock. As Rao’s wife explained, “She wouldn’t even change her frock, thinking that any moment you might be coming and taking her out. She hardly ate any food; and wouldn’t lie down for fear of crumpling her dress....” Rao felt sorry about his daughter’s condition and lamented, “I don’t know if it is going to be possible for men to take her out at all-you see, they are giving me an increment.”

From the Marxian perspective, Rao's condition was that of the "ideological class." He was neither a bourgeois nor a proletariat and was living on the mere wage of "forty-five" a month. Additionally, Rao was very concerned about the security of a salaried job. The oppression that he faces in the hands of his insensitive boss results in negligence of familial duties. The exploitation was such that he could not find time to take his daughter to the movie theatre. Rao composed his resignation letter but did not submit it when he got the news of the increment of his salary by five rupees. He thus was grasped in the "false consciousness" that his financial fortune has improved and his labor has been rewarded. Marxists such as Erik Ohlin Wright (1979) would have described middle-class men like Rao as occupying a 'contradictory class location' in the class hierarchy. Middle managers tend to occupy the most contradictory class location between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. While Rao gained rewards from their association with capital, yet he was proletariat by selling their intellectual labor for making a living. His condition can thus be described as 'one foot in the bourgeoisie and one foot in the proletariat' (Wright, 1979).

French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre would have interpreted Rao's condition in terms of existential crisis. Because for human beings, existence precedes essence, Rao could have exercised his agency and differently shaped his life purpose. Since nothing in the world is preordained, the Indian middle class personified through Rao, have/had every opportunity to break free from the fetters of alienating jobs and confines of habitually. Thus irony is; though the middle class is "condemned to be free," yet their habitually constrains them from exercising their freedom.

The story "Iswaran" is about a boy who failed to clear his intermediate examination despite several attempts. The setting of the story was an evening in June when the entire town of Malgudi was tensed over the declaration of the result of the intermediate examination. Iswaran was, however, optimistic about his success this time in the intermediate examination. His repeated failures have often have subjected him to ridicule and derision by his parents. In the words of his father, "His results are famous

and known to everyone in advance.....You are the greatest optimist in India at the moment. Still, for this obstinate hope you would never have appeared for the Same examination every year." Iswaran was considered kind of an outcast by both his family and the town and considered to be a "thick-skinned idiot." The injustice meted out to him was not confined to scornful remarks, he was subjected to prejudice and discrimination as well. For instance, "washing, combing hair and putting on the well-ironed coat were luxuries too far above his state. He was a failure and had no right to such luxuries." Though Iswaran put on the brave mask of indifference, he was inwardly shaken and nervous on the result's day. R.K. Narayan nicely captures the situation of him in the following words, "Under it was a creature hopelessly seared by failure, desperately longing and praying for success."

He went to a cinema to avoid waiting for the results and people who were unnecessarily inquisitive about his result. This movie, however, had many students who were celebrating their success in the examination. He was certain that he would suffer ridicule by the fellow students when his presence in the hall was realized. As Iswaran contemplated, "He was certain they would all look at him with the feeling that he had no business to seek the pleasure of a picture on that day." He felt extremely disgusted with himself and left the hall, contemplating suicide. He saw it as a solution to all his difficulties. He thus imagined, "Die and go to a world where there were young men free from examination who sported in lotus pools in paradise. No bothers, no disgusting Senate House wall to gaze on hopelessly, year after year." He thus wrote a suicide note for his father and kept it in his pocket. Before committing suicide in the river Sarayu, he thought of checking his result as he had nothing to lose. To his surprise, he found that he had passed the examination with second class. He was overwhelmed with joy by thinking that he would come to B.A. class the following month. His voice shrieked through the silent Senate House, "I will flay alive anyone who calls me a fool hereafter... He felt he was the sole occupant of the world and its overlord." The sudden rush of joy denuded the holms of struggle and torment that strained him over the years. The madness of the moment cast a trance

on him and rode his imaginary horse towards river Sarayu. Next afternoon his body was discovered, and the suicide note was found in the pocket of his coat that was left on the steps. It read:

“My dear father: By the time you see this letter, I shall be at the bottom of Sarayu. I don’t want to live. Don’t worry about me. You have other sons who are not such dunces as I am.”

Iswaran’s story aptly captures one of the defining characteristics of the Indian middle class, i.e., their emphasis on educational success. Stated differently, the Indian middle class is defined as a class with a preponderance of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). As the middle-class occupations are non-manual, they require formal educational credentials. Therefore, to preserve one’s social status and attainment of upward social mobility, education is considered of utmost importance (Van Wessel, 2004). Intelligence is parochially defined in terms of success in the examination.

Iswaran was thus subjected to ridicule for not being able to qualify for an examination. Such was the level of discrimination that even combing hair and putting on an ironed coat were designated as luxuries beyond his status. This makes Iswaran ever more resolute to qualify for the examination. In the end, Iswaran qualifies for the examination, but the elation of the moment gets better of him, and he kills himself by drowning in the Sarayu river. Thus, Narayan rightly brings out the suffering of a person in an oppressive education system and the obsessiveness of the Indian middle class with educational success.

The protagonists, Rao and Iswaran, of the above-mentioned short stories exhibit behavior typical of the Indian middle class. As Herring and Agarwala (2009) aptly point out, “Class determines what people must do, what they have the freedom to do, what they cannot do. It structures the realm of choice... Defining that choice matrix reveals a structure of freedoms, capacities, and compulsions: i.e., the class structure.” The stories can also be interpreted from a dramaturgical approach as proposed by Erving Goffman. The Indian middle class can be seen as a group with a high sense of self-consciousness. They have ‘interiorized’ (to use Hacking’s (2004) term) the role of being ‘hard-working,’ ‘salaried professionals,’ and ‘decent people.’ It may be argued that the upper

and the lower class have great freedom to act and behave the way they like - the former has the power and hence the agency to behave as they wish, the latter escape public scrutiny because nobody cares how they act. The behavior of the Indian middle class remains, however, constrained. They are always supposed to act ‘right’ as exemplified by the fact that they cannot drink in public, show affection in public, join some white-collar profession, marry within the parochial confines of their caste, class, religion, etc. Stated differently, they are always under the public scanner and remain the dormant custodians of Indian morality. Maverickism, on their part, is perpetually denounced and greeted with derision and contempt. Thus, the roles that the middle-class play sometimes influence and shape them. They are aware of the critical audience around them and are busy responding to what is anticipated of them. The class as a whole is apprehensive that their performance is a “delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by minor mishaps” (Goffman, 1959:56) and very skeptical about downward mobility. The case of Rao and Iswaran represent ‘social facts’ because they are not alone in such social situations and are products of oppressive social reality. In such a society, happiness is quantified in terms of money, and success is defined in terms of marks obtained in examinations.

The story “Sweets for Angels” is about a man Kali who worked as a daily wage earner. He had two friends-Kuppan, a rickshaw puller, and Pachai, who earned his living by pretending to be a blind beggar. Kali was an orphan and being uneducated; he was fascinated by the school going children. As he admired, “He often remarked to Pachai, “How do these babies read too much! What is the use of wooden dummies like you and me! We cannot count even our own earning.” One evening he decided to purchase some sweets for the school children out of his affection. Though he was initially unable to befriend the children, soon, they crowded Kali to get sweets from him. This resulted in traffic congestion on the road, and people mistook him for a kidnapper. Kali’s filthy appearance also made the case stronger. He was chased from place to place and was badly assaulted by the crowd. Nobody listened to his explanations. After being rescued by the police, he

was admitted to the hospital. He found solace in the presence of his two friends by his side. The lesson that Kali learned from the untoward incident made him resolute, “Hereafter, I’ll turn and run as if a tiger chased me if I see the tiniest tot ahead of me in the street.”

Sociologically speaking, the story “Sweets for Angels” reflects the declining social capital<sup>1</sup> in society. All social groups entailing social capital have a ‘radius of trust,’ i.e., entailing a congregation of people, among whom co-operation and understanding are shared (Fukuyama, 2001). If the group’s social capital results in a positive social environment, it can account for the radius of trust larger than the group itself. Another possibility is, as seen in the Indian middle class, the radius of trust is smaller than the group itself, and loyalty is restricted within the narrow confines of family and friends. Therefore, strangers like Kali are treated as ‘pariah,’ and lower standards of behavior are expected. A traditional society like that of Malgudi is also affected by the absence of what Mark Granovetter (1973) terms ‘weak ties.’ The weak ties refer to those heterodox individuals who locate themselves at the outskirts of various social networks and remain mobile among various social circles with ideas and information. Malgudi, on the other hand, exemplifies a society characterized by the presence of various self-contained groups and classes, and the segmental nature of the society excludes the general possibility of the existence of weak ties among groups. The concept of declining social capital was introduced by Robert Putnam (1995), in his work “Bowling Alone.” Putnam laments the loss of community comradeship in the American society and cites the examples of declining voter turnaround, church-related activities, participation in parent-teacher associations, fraternal organizations, etc., as evidence of civic disengagement. This transition in society is better conceived if one contrasts the two-fold manifestation (Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft) of the human psyche as portrayed by Ferdinand Tönnies. While Gemeinschaft (community) is bound by the ties of kinship, resources are communally owned,

and work is because of “calling”; the Gesellschaft (society), in contrast, is marked by individualism, quantification in monetary terms, and utilitarian work. Though the Gesellschaft is characterized by the growth of education and tertiary organizations, yet the organizations of such society do not help in the building of social trust and comradeship among its members. The misrepresentation of Kali as a kidnapper and his benevolence for malice is a typical example of declining social capital. One may say that the growing individualism of modern society leads to an increasing ‘radius of distrust.’ As society becomes more utilitarian, the group tends to be smaller, and group solidarity tends to be restricted within the narrow enclosure of its boundaries. And the middle class tends to be increasingly protective towards their friends and family members. Fukuyama (2001) aptly observes, “with good behavior reserved for family and personal friends, and a decidedly lower standard of behavior in the public sphere.” In such a society, the shallow nature of group solidarity results in higher levels of hostility towards out-group members and hence wider ‘radius of distrust.’

## Conclusion

This paper discusses the vivid portrayal of the values and lifestyle practices of the Indian middle class in R.K.Narayan’s novel “Malgudi Days.” Specifically speaking, he narrates the impact of modernity on the middle-class values in the reticent town of Malgudi. For example, Narayan describes the struggle of a middle-class man in his stressful job and how a meager hike of salary makes him overlook the exploitation and abandon his decision to quit. Thus, in the modern era, a job defines the identity of a person, and contentment is quantified in terms of money. The struggle for survival hardly leaves any scope for sociability and participation in family life.

The middle class suffers from a high sense of “image consciousness,” and for them, intelligence is parochially defined in terms of educational achievements. Caught in the fetters of habitually, the middle class does not digress from the accepted standards lest they be stigmatized as deviant. Thus, their objectivity is defined by the other, and their image is shaped by external agencies. Such a dystopian life is characterized by increased competition and out-

1. Social Capital refers to the networks of relationships among people, who live and work in a particular society, enabling the society to function efficiently.



group hostility and accompanying shrinkage of the 'radius of trust.'

One may contend that 'modern values' represent a social fact, which has a constraining effect on individuals. The liberation from such a system will realize anguish that there is no necessity of the system. It may be noted that value derives its reality because it is chosen and not because it is chosen because of its value (Palmer, 2007). Therefore, echoing Sartre, I end with the optimism, "Let the middle class break free from the 'iron cage' of modernity and discover the purpose of their lives."

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