

Margayya (Narayan's novel *The Financial Expert*) Pecuniary

Character Like many of Narayan's central characters, Margayya is both a type and an individual. As a petty money-lender he represents the small-town middle-men who operate outside the formal banking sector but provide banking and financial services to the public, usually the poorer classes who can't get credit with a normal bank. Indeed, Margayya's uncommon name, which means 'one who shows the way,' highlights his stereotypical character. At the same time, in Narayan's hands, this character-type acquires real flesh and blood, especially through his eccentric life-choices and obvious personal limitations. Fundamentally, he is money-mad, devoted to making a profit and raise himself in the world. In this ambition, he is driven by his knowledge that his grandfather and grand uncles were members of one of the lowest of low untouchable castes: those who bear a corpse during a burial. He does rise in the restricted context of a small town, and this makes his unbearably proud and arrogant. He treats bank officials and his family as if they are inferior to him, a status that is consolidated when some of his financial deals bring him great wealth. He is, however, not without some redeeming qualities, one being his great love for his son, Mali, although even that love becomes twisted by his pecuniary aims. At various points in the story, he makes strange decisions—to buy a manuscript of a manual of erotic love, to purchase a grove where another man can complete a religious sculpture and to hire an astrologer who will tell him what he wants to hear. Underneath all these financial shenanigans, Margayya wishes to achieve the Hindu ideal of bliss through self-renunciation. Here, we see, the central conflict in his life, between his ideology of money-making and his belief in the traditional values of Hindu society.

Activities Margayya's activities change as the novel develops, although nearly all involve money-making. First, he sits under a tree and gives advice and money to villagers. Then, he makes money from selling a book on erotic love and later from a complicated Ponzi scheme. At the same time, he also devotes time to the proper conduct of Hindu rituals and worship ceremonies. When he is not involved in financial matters, he is busy controlling his wife and son, trying to mould them into the paragons of society that he is not.

Illustrative moments

Pecuniary In early scene, Margayya sits under a banyan tree dispensing financial advice to illiterate villagers. When one of his 'clients' asks a question, he replies, 'Money alone is important in this world. Everything else will come to us naturally if we have money in our purse.' He does calculate all things in terms of money because, as the author tells us, '[m]oney was man's greatest need like air or food. People went to horrifying lengths for its sake, like collecting rent on a dead body — it left him [Margayya] admiring the power and dynamism of money, its capacity to make people do strange deeds.'

Cruel He charges excessive interest rates for the illiterate peasants who come to him precisely because they do not trust the bank officials, whom they feel look down on them. Margayya knows this but continues to exploit these vulnerable people.

Cold When his wife, after watching him eat and sleep little, suggests that he should be concerned with his health, he tells her to mind her own business and leave him alone. In the same scene, he tells her that his business affairs are his alone.

Proud When a servant tells him the bank manager wants to see him, Margayya is offended that a peon has been sent to summon him and sends back a message: 'I am the true manager of the bank. He [the manager] can come to me if he has any business to transact.'

Tragic When his son asks for his share of the business, Margayya gives him a pittance. The son says he will take his father to court, a dramatic rejection of the filial piety that Indian society demands. Margayya insults the boy, who then cries. Margayya gets tears in his eyes, puts an arm around his son and says that he must be under the influence of some corrupt lawyer. This dramatizes the tragic nature of Margayya's life: he loves his son, but his materialism forces him to mistreat him.

Discussion questions

Margayya's life is told as a moral tale about the evils of materialism. What nuances does the author introduce into this seemingly clichéd message?

To what extent can we understand, and possibly sympathise, with Margayya's financial ambition?