

THE PRINTER OF MALGUDI

R. K. Narayan

Mr Sampath, The Printer of Malgudi (Narayan, 1949)

Reading : <http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/136130/7/ch3.pdf>

Story

This novel, the fifth in Narayan's prolific writing career, tells the story of three men: Srinivasan, a kindly writer/editor, Sampath, an egotistical printer, and Ravi, a slightly mad illustrator who works in a bank. As with many of Narayan's novels, the plot is thin and is only a string of episodes that serve to reveal the comic-tragic nature of people's lives, their fantasies, obsessions and deep confusion about what they are doing.

The three lives in this novel intersect when Srinivasan leaves his family village and moves to the market town of Malgudi. Once there, he establishes *The Banner*, which he thinks will be a new kind of newspaper, with a moral message. He struggles, however, to find a printer, until he meets Mr Sampath, the proprietor of Truth Printing. These two form a close bond that is at the heart of the story. The schedule of writing, editing and printing *The Banner* every Friday, which is described in some detail, is burdensome to Srinivasan. Then his wife and son come to live with him and life becomes more difficult, trying to meet all his responsibilities.

Then, Srinivasan meets Ravi, the bank clerk/illustrator, who lives as his neighbour. Ravi has fallen in love with a woman whose picture he has drawn, having seen her once in a temple. The printing business then closes due to a labour strike, but Srinivasan and Sampath put their creative energies into the film business. When Ravi joins the film shooting, he thinks the lead actress (Shanthi) is the woman in his picture and becomes jealous of Mr Sampath, who is playing the role of the film's hero. Ravi goes crazy and smashes up the film set and equipment. Mr Sampath runs away with Shanthi but is later dumped by her. Meanwhile, Ravi is arrested and put in jail, while Srinivasan is disgusted with the whole business and revives his publication of *The Banner*. In the end, Mr Sampath is hounded by creditors and is forced to leave Malgudi, while Srinivasan muses philosophically about change and eternity.

Themes

Interconnectedness Although this novel is full of deception, deceptive appearances, false promises and unfulfilled desires, it has a central theme of the interconnectedness of human beings. This most explicit example of this symbiosis is the pairing of Mr Sampath and Srinivasan, who appear to be opposites but who rely on each other for the essential quality that he lacks and the other possesses. The writer and the printer: the man of ideas and the man of business skill: the philosopher and the politician. Another more physical representation of this theme is the building in which Srinivasan lives in Malgudi. It is owned by an old man, who has become an ascetic, living on very little and eating very little. He has partitioned the building into four parts, each inhabited by a different family, who end up living as one large communal group. They share cooking and washing facilities, they give each other essentials, such as sugar or soap, they exchange gossip and learn little tips from one another. A third example is the effectiveness of personal networks that help people out of difficult, usually financial, situations. When Srinivasan has lost the newspaper, Mr Sampath recommends him as a script-writer to a film producer. Then, Srinivasan follows suit and recommends Ravi as a set-designer.

Flux and eternity Beneath all the comings and goings in this novel, beyond the laughable lives of the three main characters and the tender relationships between the four families in the communal house, there is a deeper theme of . The characters' ups and downs, their successes and misfortunes, kind and unkind acts, are only ripples in the great ocean of time and existence. As in some of his other novels, Narayan digs into people's lives and finds comedy, confusion and absurdity. And in the end,

he comes back to a concept of Hindu philosophy: that human existence is insignificant, a mere flux, in the great turning wheel of eternity. This complicated idea is presented in the scene, when Ravi smashes up the film set and he is set upon: 'Ravi winced under the repeated blows. Srinivas felt an impulse to cry out: "Stop it! It is absurd and cruel." But he found himself incapable of any effort. The recent vision had given him a view in which it seemed to him all the same whether they thwacked Ravi with a cane or whether they left him alone, whether he was mad or sane – all seemed unimportant and not worth bothering about. The whole of eternity stretched ahead of one; there was plenty of time to shake off all follies. Madness or sanity, suffering or happiness seemed all the same... It didn't make the slightest difference in the long run –in the rush of eternity nothing mattered.'

Characters

Srinivasan Srinivasan comes from an educated, professional family of lawyers, although the ancestral home is in a village. After failing to establish himself in various jobs (banking, agriculture, teaching) and under pressure from his family, he moves to the market town of Malgudi, where he becomes the editor and chief writer of a newspaper. His wife and son soon join him, though he neglects them by focusing on his newspaper. Srinivasan shows kindness to others, reads Hindi scriptures and worries 'deep problems' such as the existential passage of time.

Mr Sampath Mr Sampath is the printer of the novel's title but not its main character. Instead, he is the foil to Srinivasan, the writer and editor. Where Srinivasan is a reflective, kind person, Sampath is egotistical and bombastic. However, the two men form a close relationship, perhaps to illustrate the interdependence between reflection (Srinivasan) and ambition (Sampath). Like Srinivasan, Mr Sampath shows concern for others, especially for Srinivasan, whom he treats like an honoured guest.

Ravi Ravi, the final member of this trio, is not as central as the other two, although he also seems to represent an essential element of life: the imagination. The problem is that, in Ravi, imagination borders on and spills over into fantasy and madness. Ravi works in a bank but is obsessed with drawing. When he makes a portrait of a woman he once saw, he falls in love with her—or is it the image of her? This love-madness lands him in prison.

Shanti Shanti is a beautiful actress who resembles the woman Ravi is in love with. She runs off with Mr Sampath for a brief time but then tires of his vanity and leaves him. She represents the male fantasy, both for Ravi, who thinks she is the woman he saw in the temple (which cannot be true because Shanti had never before been in Malgudi until the movie), and for Mr Sampath, who is dazzled by her beauty. Only later do we learn that she has already been married, has a son, was divorced and is now a widow. She decides to leave Mr Sampath because she wants to bring up her son in dignity.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

SRINIVASAN

Character Srinivasan is a kind, well-intentioned man, who is also somewhat vain, unreliable and selfish at times. He is from an educated, professional family but finds himself obsessed with writing. Having failed at several jobs, he decides to leave his wife and son in the ancestral village and set up a weekly newspaper in the town of Malgudi. Although unable to solve his own personal problems—he wastes time, gets caught up in trivia—he is keen to offer solutions for the moral problems of the age. Despite this shortcoming, he shows compassion to several characters in the story, especially to an old man, his landlord, who has been cruelly abandoned by his materialistic children. He also befriends Ravi, the slightly mad illustrator. Srinivasan is the moral core of the novel. We see the action through him, we follow his (often misguided) understanding of events and his (imperfect) judgement of people. And, in the end, he is the character to whom Narayan gives the gift of philosophical insight.

Activities In the first section of the novel, we see Srinivasan lounging around in his village house, reading Hindu religious texts, while his brother-in-law manages the family farm business. Then, we observe him hunting for a printer in Malgudi, scouring the town for someone willing to take this financial risk. Later, after he has found a printer, he spends all day in his office, preparing the paper for its weekly printing on Friday. He is inundated with letters to the editor, with writing his editorials and with writing the general news items. Then, when the printing business fails and he becomes involved with film-making, he spends his day trying to write a film-script.

Illustrative moments

Philosophical In his very first editorial in *The Banner*, Srinivasan sets out his philosophical perspective on life. It was the year 1938, when the world was on the edge of another war. Srinivasan wrote: '*The Banner* has nothing special to note about war—any war, past or future. It is only concerned with the war that is always going on—between man's inside and outside.' Here we get an early glimpse of Srinivasan's (and Narayan's) contemplative nature, the focus on the eternal rather than the temporary. It is the struggle between human desires and external realities (the inside and the outside) that interests the character and his creator.

Kind Despite this somewhat otherworldly contemplations, Srinivasan is basically a kind person, who reacts with compassion to the suffering of others. This is demonstrated very early in the book, when he encounters an old man being taunted in the street by a crowd. The old man had usurped the communal tap and was bathing himself clad only in a loin cloth. The crowd abused him because he wouldn't allow them to use the tap for a long time while he bathed. Srinivasan, however, sides with the old man, explaining that he had no other place to bathe. Later on in the story, Srinivasan shows a similar sympathy to Ravi, the love-forlorn illustrator who loses his job with a bank. While others look down on the eccentric artist, Srinivasan brings him into his (somewhat shabby) rented rooms and looks after him. Eventually, Srinivasan acts as a go-between to arrange a marriage (which doesn't take place) between Ravi and a granddaughter of the old man.

MR. SAMPATH

Character Although Mr Sampath is named in the title, he has second billing in the story (behind Srinivasan). Indeed, it is revealing that his character is not named until almost one-third of the story has been told. He has a wife and five children, and many talents. He is a successful businessman (owner of Truth Printing), with important contacts in Malgudi, but he has also been in the film industry, both as an actor and a director. He is also musical and can play the harmonium. Despite these admirable qualities, he sometimes makes false promises and appears to put material gain above human relations. His greatest failing is toward his family, when he runs off with the movie star and leaves them to fend for themselves.

Activities Mr Sampath is a many-talented person. In the novel, he is a printer and we watch him supervise the various stages of printing a newspaper: using a composing stick, he lays out the type, inks it and then works the treadle machine. He is also a generous host, who invites Srinivasan to his house on several occasions. In other scenes, he see Mr Sampath spreading his largesse about town, greasing the hands of associates, wheeling and dealing in various offices and departments of the local government. He is rarely at rest.

Illustrative moments

Mysterious One interesting element of Mr Sampath's character is its ambiguity. The reader never quite feels he has a 'reading' of this printer of Malgudi. We know little of his background, although he has many talents. The mystery of his personality is illustrated in a key scene when Srinivasan first meets him in a coffee-house. Learning that Srinivasan is looking for a printer, Mr Sampath invites him to take coffee with him in a private room. Then he ordered sweets and cigarettes and told the waiter to leave. Leaning back in his chair, he said, 'Well, sir, I am at your service. What can I do for you?' Srinivasan is confused by this hospitality from a stranger and asks why he is so generous to him. Mr Sampath replies (referring to himself in the third person), 'There are no strangers to Sampath. He is known to everyone, everyone to him.'

Helpful Mr Sampath is a very good friend to Srinivasan. Not only does he agree to print his newspaper (a dubious financial proposition), he then comes to Srinivasan's rescue during the strike. Knowing that if the paper is not printed and distributed, Srinivasan will lose subscribers and income, Sampath single-handedly prints the paper. He stays in the print room all night and in the early morning takes the bundles to the railway station, where he wakes up the station master and pleads with him to send the papers by the next train, free of charge. Later, again with Srinivasan in financial straits, Mr Sampath recommends him as a script-writer to the producers of a film.

Self-important Part of Mr Sampath's generosity seems to stem from his own self-image as a benefactor of mankind. This vanity is illustrated in a scene involving a local politician, who has come to the printer's office to collect the printed pages for a speech he is to give at the opening of a bridge. When the politician gets angry because the speech has not yet been printed, and the opening is only

days away, Mr Sampath tells him to relax. 'Your speech has already been written,' he informs the astonished politician. 'By my good self. Let me read it to you.' The speech is full of platitudes, promises, quotations from famous speeches, phrases lifted from government manuals and mythological references to rivers. The politician beams with satisfaction and tells Mr Sampath that he is a genius.

RAVI (Obsessed)

Character Ravi comes from a family that was once very rich, lived in a big house and supported poor people in their village. Now, having moved to the town, the family has lost status and income, and they depend upon Ravi for support. He works as a minor clerk in an English-owned bank, where he feels terrorised by his 'beefy' English boss. His first love is art, and he becomes bewitched by a drawing he makes of a woman he once saw and fell in love with. He appears to have little grip on his life. He is fired from his job because of a misunderstanding, he searches for but cannot find the woman whose picture he has drawn and he later goes berserk with jealousy, destroys property and lands himself in jail. If one wanted to caricature Ravi, one could say he was the typical, neurotic, frustrated, lonely artist. At the very least, he appears to attract misfortune.

Activities Although Ravi is an artist, we mostly see him engaged in mundane activities. He works as a clerk in a bank, where he somehow manages to displease his boss. He is the nominal head of a large family—brothers, sisters, mother—and is often shown trying, unsuccessfully, to manage the family. He interacts a lot with Srinivasan, who is his neighbour and benefactor. Later, Ravi is involved with the making of a film (along with the other characters). He goes to jail for a jealousy-fuelled rampage, but is released when Srinivasan gets the complainant to withdraw charges.

Illustrative moments

Obsessed Ravi's chief preoccupation is to find a girl he once knew but later disappeared. This obsession is explained the very first time that Ravi is introduced to the reader. He wanders into Srinivasan's office at The Banner and says that he is looking for someone, a young woman he saw at a temple. He went back many times, they exchanged glances but never spoke. Then one day, she was gone, so he drew her picture. Now he has brought that picture to show Srinivasan and says, 'If you see her, somewhere in town, you must tell me.' Srinivasan says he will and then Ravi grabs his arm and says, 'You must tell me. You must. Everything depends on it.'

Frustrated Ravi seems to live in perpetual frustration. He can't make ends meet, he does not get on with his boss, he can't (of course) find the girl of his dreams. His frustration is shown in an early scene, after he has been asked by Mr Sampath to draw a picture of Mr Sampath's youngest son. But, no matter how hard he tries, he cannot draw the child. 'His lines are all wrong,' he explains to Srinivasan one day. Ravi realises that he cannot tell a parent that his child's head is malformed, but neither can he finish the picture. He is caught between artistic truth and human reality.

Mad The obsessed, frustrated artist offers a dramatic ending to the story when his jealousy turns into a mad frenzy, during which he destroys the film set. His short-fuse is lit when he thinks that Mr Sampath, in the role of the lead actor, is making advances to the actress, who resembles the girl he has been searching for throughout the novel. Unable to control himself, he tries to snatch the actress, but only succeeds in knocking out the lights. Then mayhem ensues, as Ravi runs amok, into the storeroom, breaking bottles of chemicals and ruining the film already shot and stored there. The film is a financial disaster and the shooting is halted, while Ravi is taken off to jail.