

Mohan G. Ramanan. 2013. *R.K. Narayan: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Cambridge UP India. xii + 201 pp. ISBN: 978-93-82993-53-7.

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As is clearly stated in the series editor's preface, *Contemporary Indian Writers in English* (CIWE) offers critical commentaries on some of the most internationally acclaimed figures in this field. The ever-growing importance and visibility that Indian writing in English is acquiring in contemporary academic and readers circles of all kinds demands that comprehensible yet rigorous introductions to many of these authors should be released. R.K. Narayan (1906-2001), a prolific novelist and essayist was, together with Raja Rao (1908-2006) and Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), one of the writers who mostly contributed to the development of Indian writing in English. Although some monographs and collections of critical essays have been written on Narayan—for instance by, among others, Walsh (1982), Sundaram (1973, 1988), Kain (1993), McLeod (1994), Pousse (1995), Ram (1996), Ramtane (1998), Rao (2004) and Thieme (2007)—it is also true that there are very few recent assessments of this outstanding Indian author, which consequently endows this timely book with special interest. Moreover, the CIWE titles aim to provide as complete and balanced a survey of an author's *oeuvre* as possible. In order to do so, this collection addresses the form and function of the authors' texts, while also focusing on their most recurrent elements and themes. In other words, this collection strives to strike a balance between providing an introductory study on the one hand with a critical appraisal of the writers' work on the other, such that both non-specialist and academic readers will find its volumes useful.

Mohan G. Ramanan's study of Narayan's *oeuvre* meets the expectations of both types of reader: it provides biographical information, close textual analysis, a survey of Narayan's main thematic concerns, bibliographic information for those who want to carry out further research, and a comprehensive list of topics for discussion. Ramanan's life-long interest in Narayan's life and writings allows him to bring this pioneer in Indian writing in English closer to the general reading public, and to show the tiny world of Malgudi, about which Narayan writes, as a microcosm that wonderfully bears witness to the many caste, class and gender complications that have shaped Indian society for so long.

Ramanan's analysis begins by offering a thorough but concise introduction to Narayan's life, to the undeniable autobiographical element in his works, and to the universal dimensions of Malgudi, Narayan's southern Indian fictional town, before delivering what he terms a genealogical perspective on Narayan's themes and concerns by locating these in their proper intellectual contexts. Among other things, Ramanan tackles the role and implications of English in Narayan's Indian writings. He insists that Narayan mainly writes what S. Krishnan labels as "factions" (1999, vii), that is, texts that skilfully combine fact and fiction. Chapter two strives to show Narayan as a thoughtful citizen by paying attention to the numerous essays that he wrote throughout his life. As Ramanan argues, Narayan made a distinction between the personal essay and the objective essay. The latter is the result of scholarship, though the former is the kind that Narayan himself preferred and wrote, which clearly underscores their deeply autobiographical strain. The topics he wrote about are multifarious: Sundays, crowds, dress habits in India, noise, food and drink—especially coffee, Narayan's favourite beverage—pet animals, elephants, tigers, allergies, headaches, doctors, gardening, the waste-paper basket, umbrellas, beauty pageants, the question of English (Bharat English), the critical faculty, his love of books, houses and their effect on people, postcards, the caste system, taxation, marriage receptions, elections, street names, the black market in films, photographs, the subject of America, teachers and the examination system, the child in relation to educational authority, history and the travails of the historian, old age, pickpockets, television serials, censorship, and the list goes on. The consideration of all these disparate essays reveals, in Ramanan's view, "the thoughtfulness of the citizen, the satirical eye of a compassionate observer of the world, the humorous flights of imagination and above all a shrewd appraisal of men and matters" (67). Narayan's essays feed into his fiction, and his fiction in turn illuminates the essays. Chapter three offers a survey of Narayan's non-fictional narratives, namely, his memoirs, travelogues and guidebooks. These works are analysed as being as much about writing as about the self in the act of writing. In them, the personal and the public conflate, which allows for a better understanding of Narayan's Brahminical views and his relation to the world around him. Of special interest is Ramanan's study of *My Dateless Diary* (1960), the book which gives unforgettable vignettes of American life and Narayan's experience and personal impressions of America, thus bringing to the fore the unbridgeable cultural clash between his homeland and the West.

The main aim of chapter four is to highlight Narayan's talent as a short story writer for, as Ramanan puts it, "if Narayan had written only short stories his reputation would have been secure" (92). Narayan wrote around two hundred short stories, which are an integral part of his Malgudian world. Although written in a mode essentially comic, these stories also contain characters belonging to the poorer and lower castes of society, many of whom have tragic lives. Taking Maupassant, O'Henry, Chekhov and a number of contemporary English storytellers as his models, in his short stories Narayan adopted themes and characters which, as Ranga Rao argues, "are normally peripheral to his

novels” and can thus be regarded as Narayan’s “constructive division of labour” (2004, 50). Ramanan’s subsequent discussion of a selection of Narayan’s stories relies on Rao’s division of them into three groups: the preliminary sketches, stories about children and innocent animals, and stories about the disadvantaged and the underdogs of society. Ramanan adds the more autobiographical stories, which he labels “the talkative Man stories” (100). Ramanan concludes his analysis by sharing Sundaram’s opinion that the effect of Narayan’s stories depends to a large extent, not on surprise, but rather on recognition (Sundaram 1973, 116), and by affirming that these well-crafted stories facilitate the reader’s entry into the pluralistic Malgudi world, which is once again deployed as a synecdoche for Narayan’s India.

In chapter five, a concise but informative survey of the fifteen novels written by Narayan is carried out. In order to make the novels accessible to readers who are not familiar with Narayan’s longer fiction, Ramanan briefly outlines their plots: he foregrounds Narayan’s recurrent Brahminical concerns, while also considering the personal, social and political issues that each novel tackles and elaborates upon. Although Narayan’s realism is highlighted, it is also explained that this does not prevent him from conjuring up transcendence and relying on the fantastic and emblematic. The analysis of all of these novels leads Ramanan to draw a conclusion similar to that reached in previous chapters, namely, that Narayan’s longer fiction also “performs a citizenly function because Narayan is deeply social and involved with the business of living” (110). The last three chapters of the book are of a rather more general and all-embracing nature, which sometimes leads to the inclusion of unnecessary repetitions. Chapter six is devoted to enumerating and briefly describing the main recurrent themes in Narayan’s *oeuvre*: the treatment of family and religion; children/childhood; friendship; love and marriage; filial relations; citizenly concerns like the relation of the individual to society; the East-West encounter; the transcendental ideal of *Dharma* (good pious life); and finally, Narayan’s omnipresent concern, the importance of education to undergo the four main *Ashtams* or stages in life according to Hinduism so that wisdom and virtue can be finally attained. Chapter seven focuses on Narayan’s engagement with caste, class and gender issues in his works, which yet again illustrates how intensely the Brahminical worldview pervades Narayan’s writings. As Ramanan repeatedly states, Narayan’s works teem with implicit references to Brahminical values, and Narayan is unapologetic about this, because it is this cosmovision that he best understands and what ultimately gives his writings solidity of specification. Chapter eight is, in my opinion, the one that western readers unfamiliar with Indian culture may find particularly illuminating, since it is here that some of the most important Hindu concepts and beliefs as reflected in Narayan’s works are explained: the world as a site for God’s play or *Leela*; the world as a transcendent reality which in turn is expressed through the principles of the good life, the *Purusharthas*: *Dharma* (righteousness, moral values), *Artha* (prosperity, economic values), *Kama* (pleasure, love, psychological values) and *Moksha* (liberation, spiritual values), with *Dharma* as an overarching principle; the four

Asbrams or stages in life: *Brahmacharya* (student), *Grahasta* (householder), *Vanaprasta* (retired) and *Sanyasa* (renunciation); the *Gunas*, the three major fundamental operating principles or tendencies of universal nature, *sattva* (creation), *rajas* (preservation) and *tamas* (destruction-transformation); the conflation reality-history-myth as articulated in Hindu ideology; the omnipresence and implications of Gandhian ideology and style; the *Upanyasa* storytelling tradition as embodied in Narayan's retellings of myth; the world as illusion or *Maya*; and the minimalist style of Narayan as a reflection of the four stages of speech, which correspond to the four stages of consciousness in the Sanskrit philosophy: *Para* (transcendental consciousness), *Pasyanti* (intellectual consciousness), *Madhyama* (mental consciousness) and *Vaikhari* (physical consciousness), among others. Ramanan's book closes with a short and all-embracing conclusion, which basically reiterates the main ideas put forward in the previous chapters. Narayan is, Ramanan concludes, together with Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, one of the main figures of Indian writing in English. However, Ramanan makes it clear that Narayan clearly differs from the other two: unlike Rao, whose metaphysical tendency stands out in his writings and whose style is poetic and evocative, Narayan is the master of suggestive simplicity and Gandhian plain style; unlike Anand, who is socially conscious and makes no effort to hide his political purpose, Narayan is not overtly political, although the historical and the political are by no means absent from his work.

To conclude, I think that Ramanan's book manages to explore the world of Narayan in a language that would appeal to the non-specialist reader and the Narayan scholar alike. Although the latter may find some sections (especially in chapters six and seven) a bit too repetitive, the former will benefit from the book's didactic aim and structure. In tune with the master's own style, Ramanan has accomplished an informative, enlightening, and above all reader-friendly analysis of Narayan's *oeuvre*. In addition to offering useful insights into this well-known Indian author's life and works and guiding the reader by focusing on some important ideas whenever he considers it to be necessary, Ramanan provides the non-Indian reading public with invaluable knowledge to better understand the Indian literary tradition and culture out of which Narayan emerged, and without which his works can in no way be fully appreciated.

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