



International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 08, August 2026)

Malgudi from the Margins: A Subaltern Reading of R.K. Narayan's Fiction

Dr Rippy Bawa

Assistant Professor, PSPS GCW Gandhi Nagar Jammu

Abstract— R.K. Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi is widely celebrated as an idyllic microcosm of middle-class South Indian life. However, traditional critical readings often obscure the underlying class, caste, gender, and spatial hierarchies that maintain this perceived social equilibrium. Drawing upon Subaltern Studies—specifically the theoretical frameworks of Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ranajit Guha—this paper interrogates Malgudi from its geographical, economic, and social margins. By analyzing texts such as *Swami and Friends*, *The Dark Room*, *The Guide*, and *The Financial Expert*, this study demonstrates how Narayan's narrative apparatus repeatedly silences, peripheralizes, or instrumentalizes lower-caste laborers, gendered subalterns, and non-hegemonised subjects to preserve middle-class, upper-caste (Brahminical) harmony.

Keywords— R.K. Narayan, Malgudi, Subaltern Studies, Spivak, Postcolonial Criticism, Spatial Hegemony, Caste, Gendered Subalternity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Myth of the Homogeneous Town:

For decades, literary scholarship positioned Malgudi as a gentle, ironical portrait of Indian modernity adjusting to tradition. Critic Graham Greene famously likened Malgudi to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, while early Indian English criticism emphasized Narayan's "unbiased objectivity" and "detached observation". However, a critical subaltern reading reveals that Malgudi's warmth is sustained by the structural invisibility of its subaltern population. The town's recognizable landmarks—Market Road, Lawley Extension, Albert Mission College, and the Sarayu River—are dominated by upper-caste, English-educated, or petit-bourgeois men. Beneath this bourgeois surface lies an underclass of porters, sweepers, peasants, marginalized women, and out-caste laborers whose labor enables the central characters' existential crises, yet whose agency remains systematically muted.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE SUBALTERN IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

To read Malgudi from the margins requires applying Ranajit Guha's definition of the "subaltern" as the "demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite.'" In postcolonial literary criticism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal inquiry, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", highlights how elite historiography and literary representations reduce subaltern subjects to silent background conditions or objects of elite intervention. While contemporaries like Mulk Raj Anand explicitly brought lower-caste characters to the foreground (e.g., Bakha in *Untouchable*), Narayan's realism operates through containment. Subaltern figures in Narayan's prose are rarely permitted interiority; they exist primarily as functionaries who restore or disrupt upper-caste stability.

III. SPATIAL HEGEMONY: GEOGRAPHIES OF EXCLUSION

Malgudi's physical geography maps its socio-caste hierarchies. Lawley Extension and Kabir Street represent upper-caste residential areas, civic administration, and institutional power. So it's the Elite core. Market Road serves as the space of petty-bourgeois transaction and social mobility. The Peripheral Margins include the slums along the Sarayu riverbanks, the Mempi Forest outskirts, and the untouchable hamlets remain unmapped or treated as spaces of wilderness, crime, or exile.

When characters from the center venture to the margins (such as Raju in *The Guide* retreating to the ruined temple in Mangala, or Vasu in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* hunting in Mempi Forest), the peripheral space is coded as an exotic, passive backdrop for the elite subject's transformation or downfall.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: SUBALTERN AGENCY AND SILENCE

Swami and Friends (1935): Unseen Labor and Class Divisions:

Applying a subaltern lens to R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935) reveals how a text famous for its gentle, nostalgic portrayal of boyhood is quietly undergirded by class, caste, and institutional hierarchies. The primary subaltern figures in the novel do not occupy the foreground; rather, they populate the background as working-class functionaries, disenfranchised youths, and low-caste laborers. Their agency is systematically contained, silenced, or criminalized to maintain the bourgeois, upper-caste domestic harmony of the protagonist, Swaminathan.

While the novel centers on Swaminathan's childhood anxieties within a Brahmin household, lower-class characters—such as the cart-drivers, the school peon, and the coachman's son—are framed through fear, trickery, or criminalization. The episode with the coachman and his son serves as the primary conflict involving working-class subalterns in the novel. Desperate for a wheel hoop, Swami turns to a local coachman who promises to turn a copper coin into a silver rupee using "magic". When the coachman dupes Swami, he exploits the upper-caste child's economic ignorance. Narayan never explores why the coachman cheats Swami—the material realities of his poverty are left unexamined. Instead, the coachman is cast purely as a dishonest, minor antagonist. When the coachman's son taunts Swami on the street, Swami, Mani, and Rajam conspire to kidnap and intimidate the boy. The subaltern child's defiance threatens the elite boys' sense of social control. Rather than turning to legal or social redress, Rajam—using his status as the Police Superintendent's son—employs feudal, vigilante authority to put the working-class boy back in his place. The coachman's son, who tricks Swami out of a copper coin, is never granted a voice to articulate his economic desperation; he exists solely as a threat to Swami's domestic security.

The school peon (custodian) at the Albert Mission School represents the institutional subaltern—a laborer whose presence is vital to the elite educational ecosystem, yet who lacks any individual identity or voice. During Swami's school exams, the peon is viewed purely as a temporal tool—the person who rings the bell or hands out extra ink sheets. When rumors spread that the peon knows the secret contents of the final examination papers, Swami tries to bribe and flatter him. The peon gives vague, misleading answers to guard his job.

The narrative treats his cautious behavior as slyness rather than a survival mechanism of an underpaid worker guarding himself against elite schoolboys.

One of the clearest demonstrations of subaltern silencing occurs in the casual harassment of daily-wage laborers by Swami and his friends. In a moment of boredom, Rajam, Mani, and Swami stop a bullock cart driven by a poor laborer named Karrupan. They taunt, threaten, and assault him, asserting their class dominance simply because they can. Karrupan's anger and distress are rendered as comedic or trivial. Because Swami and Rajam are protected by their high social standing (and Rajam's father's police badge), the subaltern victim has no recourse and must accept the abuse.

While subalternity is often viewed through class and caste, Gayatri Spivak's emphasis on gendered subalternity applies to the domestic spaces of Malgudi. Swami's paternal grandmother (Granny) lives in a cramped, dark hallway between the front room and the kitchen—a physical reflection of her spatial marginalization within the household. Granny represents traditional, pre-colonial oral memory. She frequently tells stories of Swami's grandfather's bravery. However, Swami routinely interrupts her, dismisses her stories as boring, or demands that she listen to his elite accomplishments (like Rajam's wealth or cricket scores). Her voice is tolerated only as a comfort mechanism when Swami needs a place to sleep, but her subjective history is discarded as irrelevant.

The Dark Room (1938): Gendered Subalternity:

In R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* (1938), the concept of gendered subalternity finds its most explicit and poignant expression. Writing long before Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak formulated her seminal thesis "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Narayan created a stark portrait of how patriarchal structures—intersecting with economic dependency, social caste, and domestic spatiality—strip women of agency and reduce them to silent, subordinate subjects. Unlike his other novels where domestic tensions are resolved with gentle irony, *The Dark Room* offers an uncharacteristically bleak critique of the middle-class Hindu household, demonstrating how the subalternity of women is structurally enforced.

The central metaphor of the novel—the dark room—serves as the physical and psychological geography of female disenfranchisement. Within Ramani's household, the living areas and front verandah are spaces of male authority, intellect, and civic presence. The dark room is a dingy, windowless store-chamber where Savitri retreats whenever she is humiliated or abused. It represents the only space allocated to female emotion, but it is a space defined by confinement and darkness.



International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 08, August 2026)

It acts as a physical manifestation of her inability to speak or act within the legitimate spaces of the household. Savitri's subalternity is cemented by her total financial reliance on her husband, Ramani, a middle-class manager at the Englandia Insurance Company. When Ramani begins an open affair with his colleague, Shanta Bai, Savitri reaches her breaking point. Yet, when she attempts to assert her dignity, she realizes she owns nothing—not even the clothes on her back or the children she bore. As she bitterly notes:

"Things? I don't own anything in this house... What have I created except the children?"

Cultural conditioning frames a wife's absolute devotion to her husband (pativrata) as a spiritual virtue. This ideology operates as a Gramscian "hegemonic consensus," tricking women into accepting their own subjugation under the guise of duty, honor, and religious tradition.

In *The Dark Room*, Savitri's escape from her abusive husband Ramani highlights gendered oppression within the patriarchal middle-class family. However, when Savitri flees to the margins and attempts to live independently by working at a temple, her structural dependency on elite protection forces her back into marital servitude. Her brief encounter with Mari the blacksmith and his wife Ponni underscores a class contrast: lower-caste working women possess economic mobility that upper-caste women lack, yet both remain constrained by patriarchal structures. When Savitri flees her home and attempts suicide in the Sarayu River, it is Mari and Ponni who rescue her. Ponni represents a different form of womanhood—one where physical labor and lower economic status ironically grant her a level of domestic vocalness that the "privileged" Brahminical wife, Savitri, is denied. The tragedy of *The Dark Room* lies in the failure of Savitri's rebellion, illustrating Spivak's core assertion that the subaltern cannot speak effectively within the existing socio-political system.

In *The Dark Room*, Narayan presents gendered subalternity not merely as physical abuse, but as an inevitable structural trapping. Savitri's voice is silenced twice over: first by the loud patriarchal arrogance of Ramani, and second by the economic and social structures that render a woman's independence outside marriage virtually impossible. Her story concludes not with liberation, but with the quiet re-entry of the subaltern into her designated room of silence.

The Guide (1958): Exploitation of the Rural Peasantry:

The rural poor in *The Guide* are not merely a peaceful background setting; they represent an exploited subaltern populace whose labor, credulity, and suffering are instrumentalized first by Raju, then by elite urban structures, and ultimately by the machinery of postcolonial statecraft. In R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958), the rural peasantry of Mangala occupies a central yet structurally exploited position. While critical analyses often focus on the spiritual trajectory of Raju—the opportunistic tour guide turned reluctant Mahatma—a subaltern reading reveals how the text builds its narrative resolution upon the material, ideological, and psychological exploitation of the agrarian class.

In *The Guide*, the villagers of Mangala represent the subaltern masses who project their spiritual needs onto Raju. Raju's rise as a swami depends on the rural poor's perceived ignorance and credulity. Although Raju eventually succumbs to his role during the drought fast, the narrative lens remains locked on his internal conflict, reducing the starving peasants to a collective, voiceless chorus. The dynamic between Raju and the villagers of Mangala begins as a classic performance of ideological exploitation. When Raju takes shelter in the ruined temple on the banks of the Sarayu, his survival depends entirely on the villagers' unquestioning reverence for traditional religious authority. Velan, the first villager Raju meets, approaches him with deep deference. Raju quickly realizes that by assuming the posture of a wise, ascetic holy man, he can secure a steady supply of food—milk, bananas, rice, and sweets—without offering any real labor in return. Raju's "spiritual guidance" consists of ambiguous proverbs, elementary morality tales, and recycled platitudes. He exploits the villagers' lack of formal literacy to establish an asymmetrical power dynamic where the peasant gives material wealth in exchange for meaningless spiritual performance.

The exploitation deepens during the devastating drought that strikes Mangala. The drought exposes the extreme vulnerability of the agrarian peasantry, who have no institutional safety net, irrigation infrastructure, or state relief. When a misunderstanding occurs—Raju sends a message through Velan's mentally disabled brother that he will not eat until the villagers stop fighting, which the villagers misinterpret as a vow to fast until it rains—Raju finds himself trapped by his own deception.

The villagers do not look to scientific, economic, or political solutions because they have been conditioned to rely on divine intervention. Raju's position of authority thrives precisely because the peasants are denied structural education and modern developmental resources.

In *The Guide*, the rural peasantry operates as a voiceless collective actor. Their faith is exploited by Raju for personal comfort, their ignorance is maintained by a lack of institutional development, and their life-and-death crisis is reduced to a public spectacle. Even as Raju stands in the river at the end of the novel—declaring that it is raining in the hills—the narrative lens remains fixed on his potential martyrdom, leaving the long-term material fate of the peasants of Mangala entirely unresolved.

V. DE-CENTERING MALGUDI: KEY THEORETICAL TAKEAWAYS

To de-center Malgudi is to dismantle the long-standing critical myth that R.K. Narayan's fictional town is an innocent, idyllic microcosm of "universal India." For decades, mainstream postcolonial and liberal humanist criticism framed Malgudi as a gentle, harmonious space where tradition and modernity peacefully negotiate. However, a subaltern, Marxist, and feminist critique exposes this harmony as an illusion—one achieved by placing the Brahminical, middle-class, English-educated male at the absolute center, while actively pushing class, caste, gender, and spatial margins to the periphery. De-centering Malgudi requires shifting our analytical lens away from figures like Swami, Chandran, Margayya, or Raju, and re-reading the text from its suppressed, silent margins.

Narayan's realism operates by presenting middle-class Brahminical values and lifestyle as the default "norm" of Indian existence. We can witness the invisibility of Manual Labor.

The town functions smoothly because of an invisible underclass—porters, cart-drivers, sweepers, temple laborers, and municipal workers. Yet, these figures rarely receive names, backstories, or interiority. There is also a portrayal of criminalization of the Subaltern. In *Swami and Friends*, working-class youths (like the coachman's son) or laborers (like the cart-driver Karrupan) are framed either as sly tricksters or as targets for the casual aggression of elite schoolboys. The narrative never interrogates the material poverty driving their actions. Narayan's famous "gentle irony" acts as a conservative ideological tool. Systemic poverty, caste oppression, and institutional failure are diffused into lighthearted misunderstandings or accepted as unchangeable "fate."

De-centering Malgudi does not mean discarding Narayan's literary achievement; rather, it forces us to read his fiction against the grain. By shifting our focus from the comfortable center to the silenced margins, we see Malgudi not as a peaceful timeless paradise, but as an active site of class containment, caste privilege, spatial segregation, and patriarchal control.

REFERENCES

- [1] Guha, Ranajit. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- [2] Narayan, R.K. *Swami and Friends*. Indian Thought Publications, 1935.
- [3] Narayan, R.K. *The Dark Room*. Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1938.
- [4] Narayan, R.K. *The Guide*. Viking Press, 1958.
- [5] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- [6] Walsh, William. *R.K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation*. Allied Publishers, 1983.