

Middle Class Milieu in R. K. Narayan's Novel

"The Financial Expert"

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Abstract

Literature happens only in a milieu determined largely by societal forces, culture and social ideologies, though we cannot ignore the fact that the most immediate setting of a work of literature" is its linguistic and literary tradition , and this tradition in turn is encompassed by a general cultural climate." The milieu of a work of art, novel in particular, focusses attention not only on its social determinates but also on the artistic method by which it is conceived. In a work of fiction, milieu has a role to play, most commonly, a reflective or supporting role. It enhances the nature of the action and the qualities of the characters. Sometimes it may be a means of placing a charater in a society. It may generate a climate which plays a significant function in the plot.

R.K. Narayan's characters have been created by his fertile imagination and minute observation of life. Characters are placed in the context of their social milieu, they can't be viewed in isolation. The middle class society in Narayan's novel, "**The Financial Expert**" gets reduced to individuals as individual in the real world is the end – product of the society. Keywords : milieu, cultural climate, middle class, social milieu.

Milieu, in fact, has paramount importance in a novel or a story. In R. K. Narayan's novels, this milieu is determined by the geographical locale and the inner milieu of the character's mind. In his novels, milieu is composed generally of middle-class people. The milieu in the congested localities of Malgudi has a definite impact on the mental make-up of the middle class individuals like, Margayya, the protagonist of the novel, "**The Financial Expert.**"

The internal milieu in Narayan's novels is composed of the typical middle class ideology which is reflected in and by the actions of the imaginary characters. The ideology contains craze for pelf, power and status in the society, moral duplicity, social respectability and self-consciousness Margayya, the self – centered hero, has lofty ambitions &

materialistic outlook. In order to realize the goals of becoming rich and possessing status and power, he discards the cherished values and norms of the middle class to which he belongs.

Milieu in R.K. Narayan's novel is essential to the presentation and understanding of the characters because there is a close correlation between life and art. The Writer's fictional world is based upon a single small growing town named Malgudi in the south. It is largely made up of the middle class and its norms and values.

The middle class milieu provided consciously by the writer remains in the background but it is significant in illuminating the characters and defining their actions. The middle class enjoys a modicum of economic independence, security and status. But beset with the problems of growing self consciousness, rising expectations and insatiable longing, they find themselves in perpetual struggle to rise higher in the social hierarchy.

The typical middle class milieu consists of craze for pelf, power and position, a hypocritical attitude towards love and sex, a strong urge for domestic peace and harmony and a superficial faith in religious dogmas and rituals. It also lies in maintaining social respectability and honour, personal or familial, by all means. Margayya, in the novel, "**The Financial Expert**", stands for all the persons of the middle class who in his personal endeavour to a rapid social ascent alienates himself, and suffers in the process and becomes miserable and pitiable creature. This simple yet clever man has an inborn faculty for making money multiply. To him, it is money only that matters in his life.

Margayya's journey from rags to riches is the journey of any typical ambitious middle class man, "Every Rupee, Margayya felt, contained in it seed of another rupees and that seed in it another seed and so on and on to infinity" (p. 94) The business of this "Financial Mystic" (p. 102) gets collapsed within a few days and he has to declare himself insolvent. The "Financial Wizard" (p.7) again becomes a petty money-lender. This fortune wheel moves from the ordinary to the extra-ordinary and to the ordinary again which, in Narayan's fictional world, is a typical middle-class phenomenon. His heroes, push themselves irresistibly towards their motto of social status, wealth, name, fame and power, love and social security and soon and so forth.

The middle class society in Magludi, as we see in the novel, **“The Financial Expert”** is torn between two worlds : One is essentially traditional and the other is relatively modern. The true nature of the relationship of Margayya with his brother is summed up in these lines :

“It was a relationship essentially thriving on a crisis. The moment that the crisis was over, the two families fell apart.” (p. 143)

The relationship between Margayya’s family and that of his brother’s throws light on the fast changing values and norms of the society. Margayya avoids his brother fearing that they may depend on him or demand anything from him.

The relationship of Margayya and his son is also a sort of love hate relationship which also emphasizes on the milieu of middle class. The clash shown between the father and the son is the clash between the old and the new values of the middle class society.

Women characters in **“The Financial Expert”** like other novels of R.K. Narayan, are traditional and fully domesticized. “They uphold the middle class tradition of loyalty and duty to husband and caring for their children.” (p. 14). whereas Margayya ignores Meenakshi, his wife and scolds her also over petty issues. Middle class women, despite being neglected and exploited, remain docile and submissive. His son Balu’s wife, Brinda also shows extreme self-control and reticence over her husband’s infidelity.

In the novel, Malgudi is a microcosm of the middle class Indian milieu in turmoil and transition. It presents a world still clings to the old crumbling traditions ; comparison of horoscopes, joint families, parents settled marriages and the propitiation of gods and goddesses. The simple and placid life of an average individual in a middle class family has begun to feel the tremors of the new waves. The western style of living, the opening of co-operative and other banks, the Lawley Extension with its huge bungalows, interest in pornography, intoxicants and women are the stark realities of the town.

In the fast growing materialistic world, non materialistic things lose charm & sanctity. The traditions in the middle class families have begun to be performed as mere formalities. Horoscope matching has proved a hollow convention in the novel. Margayya performs rituals as formalities and sometimes out of fear-another characteristic of the people of middle class.

In the middle class milieu of Narayan’s novel, love and romance are pursued just for social upliftment- a means to rise to some extra ordinary position in the society.

In **“The Financial Expert”**, R.K. Narayan has used the language of the middle class people to heighten the effect of the middle class milieu. As he deals with the people of middle class, so he uses plain English. He lends depth and interest even to the bland expressions. His English is austere and pretends no sophistication.

Milieu in Narayan's novels can be the result of a linguistic manipulation. In the first part, the tempo of the narrative is slow. It is as slow as Margayya's financial progress. It gathers momentum after he becomes a financial wizard.

The middle class people are very cautious about the opinions of others. “What will people say?” “What others think?” When Margayya's son Balu fails in S.S.L.C., Examination, he feels ashamed : “How am I to hold up my head in public? What will they think of me? What will they say of my son?” (p. 113) when Margayya has to revert to his petty money lending business, he asks Balu, his son to sit in front of the cooperative Bank under the banyan tree. But Balu replies : “How can I go and sit there? What will people think?” (p. 178) This aspect indicates towards the middle class milieu in the novel. There is no dichotomy between the real middle milieu and the imaginary middle class milieu of Narayan's novel.

The conflict in the milieu remains at the individual level. The ultimate hall-mark of his writing is that the routine of middle-class existence becomes a value system rather than a drab monotony. Novy Kapadia rightly remarks that “The universal and widespread appeal of R.K. Narayan is due to the predominant middle class milieu in all his novels.”² But it can be said that he has pressed highly upon the inner milieu rather than the outer milieu or the physical world, the Malgudi world. The inner milieu has its correlate in the outer milieu in the form of middle class tendencies as they shape the destinies of the individuals moving from experience to experience. To quote William Walsh : “Narayan writes chiefly about the Indian middle class because he is a member of it, and it is the class he understands best.”³ His characters display independent attitudes and critical existence but there is always an intrinsic tension between this and all pervading shackles of tradition and custom.

References

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