



The Sunlit World of Mariposa and Malgudi : A Comparative Study of Stephen Leacock and R.K. Narayan

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Received on : 06/11/2024
Revised on : 06/01/2025
Accepted on : 15/01/2025
Overall Similarity : 04% on 07/01/2025



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ABSTRACT

The Present research paper aims at highlighting the fictional places of both the writers Stephen Leacock and R.K. Narayan's Mariposa and Malgudi. These are the fictional places which depict the novelist's real insight vision what they thought and did to give proper shape and size to the novels of these novelists on one side Stephen Leacock has made famous the fictional place Mariposa in his novels which is situated in Canada, on the other side R.K. Narayan, an Indian chose Malgudi, a fictional place Tamil Nadu in India. Through these fictional places, one is in Canada and the other in India, the various aspects, similarity and dissimilarity will be searched out. It is worth mention here that like Malgudi, the Mariposa is also situated near railway station in Canada. Both the novelists have made wonder by their beautiful description and tried much to highlight these fictional places.

KEY WORDS

Cosmopolitan, Hinterland, Transcontinental, Topographic Maps, Maritime Express.

Diamotephen Leacock's Mariposa and R.K. Narayan's Malgudi are two fictional towns which literary cartographers have anxiously scurried around to locate on two continental landmasses across the world. While many small towns in South India such as Yadavagiri and Nanjangud in historic Mysore, Malgudi on the fringes of the river Kaveri, or even an early Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu lay claim to being the birthplace of Malgudi, Narayan's multi-tempoed town, Leacock's imaginative construct Mariposa, has been absorbed with pinpoint precision into the latitudinal and longitudinal contours of Orillia, Ontario, Canada (50'N & 79'W). Here Leacock built his

home “The old Brewery Bay” to which he escaped from his professional duties at McGill University for four months each summer, and to which he finally retired for the last eight years of his life.

Leacock was inordinately proud of his retreat and of its appellation – (the name he said, “made people thirsty by correspondence as far away as Nevada”). He even judged people by their response to such a name. If they liked the name “The Old Brewery Bay” they were alright, (and) could have anything on the place, but many who couldn’t appreciate it were outlawed, such as the “lady” who became “that woman” for presuming to suggest that Leacock change the name.

Both Mariposa and Malgudi are small satellite townships with in a three-hundred-mile orbit of two larger, real, life metropolis Montreal on the North American continent and Madras (Chennai) in the South of the Indian continent. Topographically, both little towns are located on hillsides at whose feet lie large expanses of water, in one case the river Sarayu, hoary with the mythic time deposits of India, and on the other lake Wissanotti, letting off Amerindian smoke signals. Strangely, both are creators of writers who themselves straddled two flourishing bi-lingual cultures, French and English in the case of Leacock and Tamil and Kannada in the case of R.K. Narayan. Mariposans and Malgudians both gravitated to these larger cities in search of richer economic and educational pastures, returning now and again to their resting ground for emotional sustenance, in fact or fantasy. In the warm sun of nostalgia both townships exude a colonial and more specifically Victorian atmosphere encrusted on the semi-agricultural base of their native lands. A sun-drenched humor-filled air accosts travellers to both Leacock’s Mariposa and Narayan’s Malgudi, as palpably as its typical small-town appearance.

“I don’t know whether you know Mariposa” wrote Leacock, “If not, it is of no consequence, for if you know Canada at all you are probably well acquainted with a dozen towns just like it.” Similarly, Narayan’s Malgudi is a small town in south India writes C.D. Narasimhaiah. “But it is every Indian town, and we have known so much about them from his successive novels.” (Naik, 176)

While information about Mariposa comes to the reader through a dozen sketches (fifteen to forty pages long), of one book namely *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and a few brief wartime vignettes titled *Mariposa Moves On* appended to his *Happy Stories* as a postscript, Malgudi is discovered through narratives spread over eleven novels and eighty short stories, making it more of a backbone than a backdrop to the writer’s literary oeuvre. It is therefore to Leacock’s greater credit that Mariposa is as credibly and powerfully portrayed as Malgudi whose birthday has been inscribed with equal accuracy by the writer himself.

“On a certain day in September, selected by my grandmother for its auspiciousness, I bought an exercise book and wrote the first line of a novel as I sat in a room nibbling my pen and wondering what to write. Malgudi with its Railway Station swam into view all ready made, with a character called Swaminathan running down the platform peering into the faces of passengers, and grimacing at a bearded face – I remember waking up with the name Malgudi. (106)”

Narayan first pictured Malgudi, he says, not as a town, but just as a Railway Station consisting of a small platform with a banyan tree, a station-master and two trains a day, one coming and one going (ibidem). Out of this grew a complex and busy hinterland that has become one of the great fictional creations of our time. Malgudi’s phantasmagoric train took its young hopefuls to Madras and beyond – an escape route to some and a magic carpet to many Whittingtons in search of gilded sidewalks. Malgudi was often a harbor and a “home” to prodigal sons – “home” being as Robert Frost says in “The Death of the Hired Man” – a place where “when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

Mariposans too were just as spiritually attached to their Railway connection. They loved to hear the long-muffled road of the whistle of the Transcontinental, “thundering and pounding towards the north, with hemlock sparks pouring out into the darkness from the funnel of it,” without stopping mostly at night. They felt that just being on the transcontinental route was as great a triumph as that of the European Maritime Express

that travelled six hundred miles from Paris to Marseille — both trains representative of the historic Empress! They loved the Transcontinental not only because it touched Mariposa – “the little town in the sunshine” but were beholden to it for the “cosmopolitan atmosphere of through traffic and the larger life.” Only the Mariposa local actually stopped here but to the community it was the other whizzing past at breakneck speed of twenty-five miles an hour that gave them a standing among neighboring places. Many a Mariposan migrant to the city would wander down on a Friday evening to watch it puff out of the city station. To most such bystanders even the price of a ticket was out of reach, but that could not stop them from wishing they were on it!

They could dream of again being amongst the spruce thickets, shooting partridge, or seeing the black ducks in the rice marsh along the lake Ossawippi or fishing for green bass as it lazed in the shadows beside Indian’s island. The train carried homewards both the fashionably dressed golfers who would disembark a few stations away, and the lucky tribe of Mariposans who were actually deposited at home. The stuffed red plush seats and the wooden stove at one end of the box car was indeed a part of the fantasy of the “fastest most reliable, the most comfortable, nay, the most luxurious train that ever turned a wheel” — offering a magic ride home that smelt of heaven.

Leacock and Narayan are both aware that the route to the universal lay through the particular, and both are careful to give concrete details of street and place names to their respective townships, so that Mariposa and Malgudi are firmly embedded in one’s consciousness, and one can walk through them blind fold. In fact, meticulous critics and scholars have added topographic maps to their commentaries. However, Leacock writes that he must “disclaim at once all intention of trying to do anything so ridiculously easy as writing about a real place and real people.” On the contrary “Mariposa is about seventy or eighty of them (little habitations) all the way from Lake Superior to the sea with the same square streets and the same maple trees and the same churches and hotels and everywhere the sunshine of the land of hope” (Leacock, xi). The mythical town therefore is as much on the ground as it is in the mind.

Leacock is careful to tell us that there are exactly seven summer cottages along the lake, clusters of maple or pine trees, or rushes of golden rod, and such other memorable details of vegetation. Wissanoti Lake with its steamer the ‘Mariposa Belle’ tethered to a wharf, shines bright and lucid in the morning sunlight. “Don’t talk to me of the Italian lakes or the Tyrol or the Swiss Alps”, says the narrator, an insider, as he pictures Mariposa’s land-locked lake. On the main Street stands the Continental Hotel (Pete Robinson’s) and the Pharmaceutical Hall, (Eliot’s Drug Store). Two other concrete brick and mortar structures vying with each other for prominence along with other proud establishments are Smith’s Hostelry and Mariposa House. The Exchange Bank and the Commercial Bank, as in any small town, are traditional business through the financial jugglery and managerial wizardry of two well-rounded, smooth shaven and stockily built, social pillars named Henry Mullins and George Duff.

We are also proudly informed that McCarthy’s Block came into being in 1878, and that Netley’s Butcher shop has been faithfully serving its customers since 1882. Where a cross street intersects Missinaba (or main) Street, fluttering “Old Glory” on its top most mast, stands the Post Office, the Fire Hall and the YMCA. Leacock’s device of comparing Missinaba Street with Piccadilly or Thread-Needle Street in London or wall Street and Broadway of New York adds a touch of humor and authenticity to such allusions. It also surfaces Leacock’s own ambivalence and conflicting loyalty to monarchical England – the land of his birth – and to America, Canada’s youthful neighbor whose democratic ways he admired so much. The unavoidable conflicts of a circumscribing Victorian England, and the vastly progressive continental vision of Canada, are apparent as Leacock is tossed between the magnetic charm of saying “We English” or “We Americans,” making his humor, distinctly Canadian.

Narayan also provides graphic details of Malgudi. It is “horizontally” divided by the river Sarayu. Many by-lanes branch off the arterial market Road of both sides, while Kabir Street, Vinayak Mudali Street, North Street and the road that stretches into Ellaman’s, provide locations for various domestic and societal dramas.

There is pre-eminently the twenty-foot statue of Sir Fredrick Lawley, the proper administration of the region” and who on account of the many tanks and dams he constructed, was immortalized by a grateful public in the center of Malgudi. Lawley is however mostly ignored, except by the birds who find him a useful perch, and the cattle lazing on the broad steps, who find him a silent companion. In the meantime, Malgudi has grown beyond this point, into Lawley Extension where over fifty new dwellings have come to stay. Fittingly, old roads such as Adam’s Lane still shelter dilapidated septuagenarian men and houses. There is also the formidable presence of the Administration, in the shape of the Taluk Office, the Law Courts and the Municipal Chairman’s Office. The Anand Bhavan Hotel adorns the Commercial part of Malgudi, together with an incredible eighteen taverns around the four corners of the city. There is the famed Town Hall Tower, and Peak House on top of the cliff on Mempi Hills. As in any living town here is also an old Slaughter house, a Central Jail as well as a fort area all designed to make Malgudi a living experience. Above all, visitors to both Mariposa and Malgudi on a summer afternoon are unlikely to forget the picture of empty streets asleep in the sunshine of deep and unbroken, peace.

Both Leacock and Narayan are conscious of the colonial past, and its Victorian shadow on their respective townships and reference is often made to its former British associations. For instance, apart from Lawley statue, there is the Albert Mission School and college, eminently commemorative of the good Queen’s reign, and inextricably woven into the lives and careers of the Malgudians. Repeatedly mentioned is also European bric-a-brac, such as the Heidelberg Press, the Roll top table, and a Queen Anne chair strategically placed in the Truth Printing Press. An empire style seat of higher learning, namely the Presidency College at Madras is mentioned with a queer admixture of awe and disbelief. While Gaffur the taxi driver stations his 1927 model Chevrolet in the middle of town and shark-like awaits his victims, he has for narrative company the petty sanitary inspectors and other officials strutting around wearing pith helmets to protect them from the sun in the manner of the white man. The inevitable advent of the twentieth century, into the dying nineteenth, is also later announced in the changed names of its streets, in the post-Independence scenario.

Not Surprisingly David Cameron (1976) notes that Leacock’s “attitude to humor is once again rooted in Victorian England and in fact his choice of material to cite reflects an attitude to humor which has distinct parallels in such writers as Trollope and Meredith.” William Walsh (1977) too finds Malgudi a blend of the oriental and the pre- 1914 British era, and calls it an “Edwardian mixture of sweet mangoes and malt vinegar” (CLC, 28) at the same time stressing the universal quality of Malgudi saying “whatever happens in India happens Malgudi, and whatever happens in Malgudi happens everywhere” (CA, 81).

Mariposa too looks back to the traditions of both England and France. There are references to the Privy Council, the YMC, the Salvation Army, and comparisons of Missinaba Street with Picadilly and Wall Street — to the advantage of Mariposa — baring itself to the Canadian sunlight ten thousand miles away! The French connection too is artistically woven in through the appetizing fragrance of French cuisine at Smith’s “Gaff”, a North American transposition of the Parisian Cafe. The presence of Alphonse, the French Chef in an ordinary Horsy like Josh Smith’s injects rare sophistication. Alphonse’s saturnine looks are compared to no less than those of Napoleon III. As the moves about conquering palates with his French sauce’s concoctions, rumors fly that Josh’s man was actually a French Marquis.

One of the most hilarious passages in Leacock narrates how Smith’s Alphonse “queered” the recalcitrant Editor of the Newspacket with an “Omelette a la License,” how judge Peperleigh was “put to the bad” with a game pie – “pate norm and aux fines herbes” – how the arrogant Secretary of the School Board was “silenced” with a stuffed “duck a la Ossawippi” while Dean Drone was “landed” with a “fried flounder, which even the apostles would have appreciated” (Leacock, 32-33). An organization such as the Knights of Pythias with its charter of temperance and the divided politics of conservative and liberal among the Mariposans was a natural carry over of European politics, emigrating to the new continent’s colonial table, delicately and highly sauteed in the satire and irony of hybridization. Leacock takes a swipe at human pride by slipping in a jack-

in-the box outsider, to his list of genuine institutions, the “Oddfellows Association” being one such. Humorists have always maintained that you only pull the leg of something or someone you love. This purely Canadian invention certainly seems intended to upset the staid British applegart!

As an artist, David Cameron says, Stephen Leacock was an “unabashed imperialist” though he knew imperialism’s weaknesses. However, as Cameron notes “there is an imperialism of greed and conquest, exploiting for the money’s sake the weaker people of the world. Plain sense has long since learnt to hate it — but there is also the humbler imperialism – the “empire mindedness” of decent people with nothing to gain by it in money — (this) is an inspiration not a formula.” Leacock’s prose style, his felicity of word and phrase, his unparalleled sense of humor is akin to this Imperialism to which reader and writer become addicted. Leacock once said:

“There is no trouble in writing a scientific treatise on the folklore of Central China, but to write something out of one’s mind worth reading for his own sake, is an arduous contrivance. I would sooner have written Alice in Wonderland, than the whole Encyclopedia Britannica. (xi)”

I’d like to think that this statement means more than it says, the latter — the world’s greatest collation of information, and the former a pre-eminent cornucopia of laughing wisdom and Leacock’s choice is revelatory of his value system.

“In art” Leacock once said, “one must judge a man by his best, never by his worst, by his “highest reach, not by his lowest fall.” It is thus obligatory for one to gather-in the widespread laughter and sunshine both of Mariposa and Malgudi, in order to make a barometric comparison of its warm sunlight.

While Malgudi remains for the reader a living presence, (having been compared to Hardy’s Casterbridge and William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha) R.K. Narayan has more than once stressed his own preoccupation with human character.

“My main concern is with human character, a central character from whose point of view the world is seen, and who tries to get over a difficult situation, or who succumbs to it or fights it in his own setting — I value relationships very much, very intensely — I think I have expressed this philosophy in my work successfully. (Naik, 2-4)”

CONCLUSION

Leacock’s Sunshine Sketches is also memorable as a portrait gallery of lovable characters,” some irritating, some exasperating, some foolhardy, but all endearing. There is no signal plot structure here because it is not a novel at all. Events are subservient to the people he draws, and incidents are useful only in so far as they flesh out his characters, who weave in and out of these sketches in an interlocking fashion. Leacock’s is not the plot of a community. Perhaps, as Northrop Frye comments: “General Canadian humor is based on a vision of society.”

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