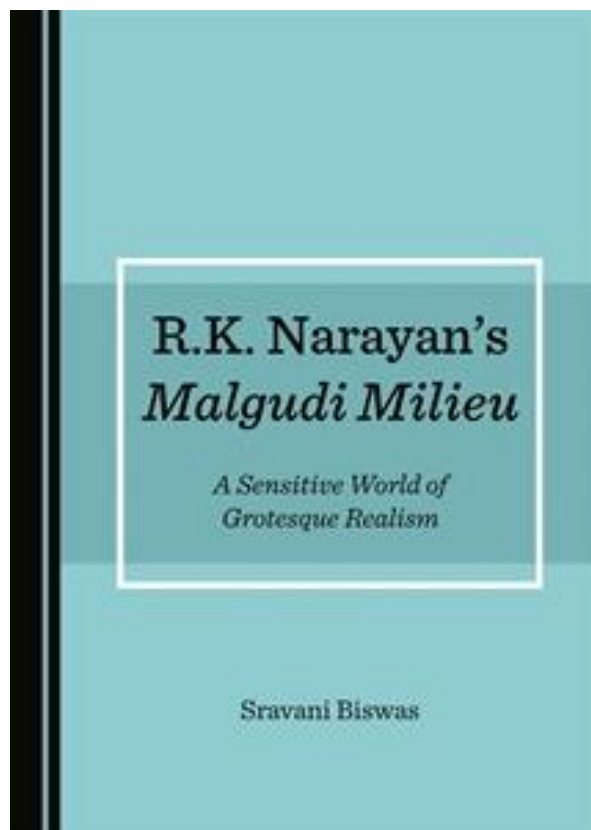


Sravani Biswas, *R.K. Narayan's Malgudi Milieu: A Sensitive World of Grotesque Realism*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018. 194 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5275-1138-5.



This book is an interesting and intriguing attempt at revisiting R.K. Narayan's Malgudi novels as it seeks to reclaim the ideological legacy of these novels from the dominant nationalist paradigm of traditional Narayan criticism, and to relocate it in an alternative, popular discursive milieu. It is intriguing because this promise of a refreshing critical-ideological departure is never quite fulfilled because of the author's strange refusal to invest the required rigour that could have made this book a pioneering critical work. There are quite a few glimpses of original insights strewn across the entire volume, which never shape up into a coherent whole, rising above the rather restless and episodic design of argumentation. It is indeed telling and serves as a warning that in a book that carries the seminal critical phrase "grotesque realism" in the title itself, and is thus

supposed to revolve around its cultural and literary ramifications, the author should drop the phrase only twice in a nineteen-page long "Introduction" – in pages 15 and 17 respectively – never bothering to explain its implications for either Mikhail Bakhtin or R.K. Narayan's Malgudi context. In fact, the reader has to wait for a very inadequate and only indirect engagement with the concept right up to the penultimate chapter of the six-chapter book (including "Introduction" and "Conclusion") where the author defines it by way of talking about "carnival laughter": "Carnival laughter in the literary mode is called 'grotesque realism'..." (122) and then goes on to briefly talk about the ideological implications of "carnival laughter," not "grotesque realism" per se. Once the reader comes to terms with this theoretical lopsidedness, it ceases to astonish him that the author should quote from *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* – one of the two volumes, along with *Rabelais and His World*, where Bakhtin explores the concept of "grotesque realism" in riveting details – only via Pam Morris's edited volume *The Bakhtin Reader* which holds only a few crucial excerpts from several Bakhtin volumes, alongside those from the work of two other philosophers. She also cites her own quotation as "quoted in Morris" (50), thus describing a long excerpt from Bakhtin anthologised in this Reader as a "quotation." Not only does she refer to Morris's introduction as 'his' (51), but also goes on to mention the book as *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin*, Medvedev and Voloshino in as many as six Works Cited and Bibliography lists (19, 37, 68, 174, 184, 188), thus continuously misspelling the name of the third author in the Reader without batting an eyelid. It is a different matter that at times she mentions the volume – like several other volumes – in these lists without at all referring to it in the chapters concerned. In fact, on one of the couple of occasions the author quotes directly from Bakhtin (69) – and not from Morris's Reader – in a book where "grotesque realism" is supposed to act as the conceptual pivot – she does so from a book called *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* (120), with the titular howler religiously maintained in the final Bibliography as well (186). One can go on and on citing examples of such curious mindlessness, vis-a-vis not only the theoretical mainstay of the volume, but also its author-subject, R.K. Narayan, and beyond.

It is never pleasant or worthwhile for a reviewer to list such superficial errors in the very introductory paragraph of a review, which customarily are few and come at the end of the exercise. However, in the present case, it is not merely a matter of simple authorial carelessness or sloppy editorial handling of the task at hand – which themselves warrant censure even in a doctoral dissertation by an academic greenhorn – but is of graver concern. The mistakes and the critical lacuna mentioned above – only a few of innumerable such – reek of the author's perfunctory and apathetic engagement with the theoretical scaffolding itself, within which she would posit and explore her subject, and which would constitute the core of her attempt to deviate from the familiar liberal humanist and nationalist approach to Narayan. The extremely promising project thus is

doomed to remain stillborn from the very beginning. It takes off from a sound proposition that Salman Rushdie was one of the first to challenge the discursive hegemony of both Gandhian nationalism and “Nehruvian positivism” in the context of Indian English literature (2-3), and before him, Narayan’s Malgudi novels, in their carnivalesque representation of the emergent colonial middle class in all its fluidity, ambiguity and heterogeneous desires, acted as a site for manifold ideologically subversive critiques of the homogenising impulse of the Gandhian, Nehruvian and other nationalist grand narratives. The author also goes on to convincingly suggest that the “new-found lust for materialism” (6) of this hybrid, shapeless petit bourgeois group (one cannot but note in dismay here the author’s own seemingly perplexed oscillation between “petit” [4, 6, 7, 10, 20, 34,74] and “petits” [3, 4, 7, 26, 38, 183] bourgeois) “stands in stark contrast to Gandhi’s idea of asceticism” (6) and moral-spiritual idealism. However, a more nuanced reading of the inherently contradictory nature of colonial modernity would demand also an appreciation of the ways in which the material “lust” was encouraged by the postcolonial Nehruvian departure from Gandhian idealism towards an embracing of the materialistic discourse of secular socialist developmental modernity. Where does Narayan’s Malgudi stand in the Indian journey from the Nehruvian materialist modernity, of which it is a product, to the apparently virtual, sceptical, solipsistic Rushdiean postmodernity that is critical of modernist authoritarianism? What kind of new exclusions does Narayan’s own “polyphonic” practice endanger in the process of “uncrowning” the grand colonial and indigenous narratives?

Addressing this aspect of Narayan’s inbetweenness – which, indeed, the author does, though somewhat inadequately, at the end of the book – would demand an understanding of Narayan in his contradictions. The space for such a nuanced understanding is cleared by the author, but never explored to the desirable degree. In the Introductory chapter, for example, Biswas charts out the class-composition of the Malgudi people, where, she rightly suggests, “we do not see capitalists or proletariats [again, one wonders what the category of “proletariats” suggests, for “proletariat” itself is a collective noun] but the new middle class” (9); a couple of pages later, she talks in a separate terminology about “Narayan the realist” interested in the “people who were swept away from any hegemonic absolutism by the force of life” (11). Does this category of “people,” then, signify only the “new middle class,” at the cost of the crucial exclusion of the peasantry and the “proletariat?” In the next paragraph, the author introduces yet another category, that of the “common man” – interestingly, both “people” and “common man” are homogeneous liberal humanist and nationalist categories, against the grain of which she initially promised to locate Narayan – and this time dubiously conflates the “common man” with the “subaltern” by claiming that “Behind the caricature-like delineation of the common man, Narayan touches upon their history – the history of the subaltern that was

imperceptibly created on the fringes of the ideological path of the Indian National History” (11). Does the author mean to argue that Narayan’s carnivalesque narrative enterprise succeeds in formulating the history of existence of the “subaltern” through his engagement with a Malgudi devoid of the “proletariat?” She seems to suggest as much in the next page by claiming that “Narayan takes recourse to humour to depict the India of the smaller people and their mundane history” (12). Who, then, are Narayan’s “smaller people” – the new middle class, whose relationship with the dominant discourses of nationalism in the early twentieth century India was far more contentious and ambivalent than a mere rejection of Gandhism or Nehruvism, or the “subaltern,” who scarcely find a place in Narayan’s creative corpus? Phrases and expressions like “the Indian masses” (13), Narayan “observing the lives of the common people” and as an “observer of the middle class” (14), “lives of the common, ordinary middleclass people” (18) and “common exploited people” (18) are bandied about with little care for their specific nuances and the layers of contradiction in the argument they inevitably lead to. The most crucial contradiction, of course, lay in Narayan’s exclusive interest in a particular upwardly mobile class, no matter how fluid and protean that class might have been in his time, leaving the fringe majority outside his arc of vision, which violates the universalist prerequisite of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin, on the other hand, suggests that carnival

does not acknowledge any distinction between the actors and spectators.... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people, they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts there is no life outside it.... It has a universalist spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of a world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of the carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. (Bakhtin 7)

Narayan’s “carnavalesque” spirit is thus only tenuous and fractured. Our author does give us one example of the subaltern “uncrowning [of] the [petit bourgeois] king” in her discussion of Raju’s predicament in *The Guide* (138), but never emphasises the fact that this is an exception rather than a norm in Narayan’s essentially exclusive middle-class universe.

The volume under discussion offers frequent promising flickers, only to recede into the dungeon of a monologic discourse on Narayan, who himself – like all other intellectuals in the age of Indian nationalisms – helplessly imbibed the ambivalent spirit of the time, more than the present author wishes to concede. To borrow a familiar Bakhtinian metaphor, her patient and indulgent reader would glean here a lot of grains for thought, it’s only that she has to cook them with a pinch of salt before consumption.

## Works Cited

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**Saurav Dasthakur**  
**Visva-Bharati University, India**  
**Email: dasthakur.s@gmail.com**