

A Critical Study of Real-Ideal Duality and Economic Discourse in Selected Works of R.K. Narayan

Author:

Mr. Kakaso Atmaram Wable

Ph. D Research Scholar

Shikshan Prasarak Sanstha's S. N Arts, D. J. Malpani Commerce B.N. Sarada Science College
(Autonomous), Sangamner.

E-mail: wableajit5@gmail.com Mob: 9011420907

Co-Author

Dr. Kamalakar Baburao Gaikwad

Assistant Professor and Associate Research Guide,
Sangamner College, Sangamner.

Head & Assistant Professor, English,

Mahatma Gandhi Vidyamandir's Arts, Science & Commerce College, Nampur, Tal-Baglan, Dist-Nashik,

Abstract

This paper explores the real-ideal duality and economic discourse in the works of R.K. Narayan, focusing on how his characters navigate between traditional values and modern economic realities. Through a close reading of *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, and *Malgudi Days*, this study examines the tension between personal ideals, such as spirituality and morality, and the economic pressures that shape the characters' lives. The paper utilizes a narrative analysis method drawn from both primary data (Narayan's texts) and secondary scholarly sources. The study applies economic and literary theory which reveals how Narayan critiques the socio-economic transformation of post-colonial India, particularly the rise of capitalism and modernity and their impact on personal identity. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of his economic themes that shed light on the moral and psychological consequences of the real-ideal conflict in a rapidly changing society.

- **Keywords:** R.K. Narayan, real-ideal duality, economic discourse, post-colonial transformation.

- **Introduction**

R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) is widely regarded as one of the most significant writers in post-colonial Indian literature. His works, known for their simplicity and deep humanism, explore the complexities of Indian life through richly drawn characters and suggestive settings. As a pioneer of Indian English literature his contributions have been foundational. They offer a nuanced view of the intersection between traditional Indian values and the encroaching forces of modernity. His literary career spanned several decades and his creation of the fictional town of Malgudi remains one of the most enduring legacies of his writing. With a remarkable ability to portray the conflicts between societal expectations and personal desires he delves into the struggles of his characters to settle their inner ideals with the harsh realities they face.

Narayan's works often focus on the tension between the real and the ideal, a duality that is evident in both the lives of his characters, the social and economic environments they inhabit. The ideal often represented by traditional values such as morality, spirituality and familial duty frequently conflicts with the real world, which is shaped by modernity, materialism, and economic survival. This tension is particularly significant in the socio-economic context of post-colonial India, where characters face the pressures of a changing society. In novels such as *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, and *Malgudi Days*, Narayan's characters struggle with the pressures of economic survival while attempting to maintain their spiritual or moral ideals. These characters are often torn between pursuing personal happiness or success and upholding traditional values. It reflects the broader conflicts within Indian society during the post-independence period.

- **Economic Discourse in R.K. Narayan's Fiction**

While much of the literary scholarship on Narayan has focused on his social and moral explorations, his engagement with economic themes is equally important, particularly in his portrayal of characters' financial struggles and aspirations. In works like *The Financial Expert*, he critiques the pursuit of wealth and its moral and psychological consequences which depicts the inner disorder of his protagonist who becomes obsessed with financial success. His exploration of the relationship between money, identity and social mobility reveals the underlying tension between the traditional ideal of asceticism and the modern capitalist reality that his characters often find themselves navigating. The role of money in shaping social dynamics and personal integrity is a recurring theme in his work, particularly as he addresses the impact of colonialism, industrialization and the rise of consumerism on Indian society.

- **R.K. Narayan and Post-Colonial Economic Themes**

Narayan's exploration of economic themes is intricately tied to the larger historical and cultural shifts occurring in post-colonial India. His writing provides a subtle yet powerful commentary on the economic changes in the country following independence where traditional agrarian economies were increasingly replaced by urban capitalism and industrialization. The characters in his novels often find themselves caught between the legacy of colonial economic policies and the new opportunities challenged by independence. In novels like *The Guide*, Narayan addresses the complexity of individual identity and social change, particularly in relation to economic independence, class mobility and the role of modern institutions. His depiction of economic themes is not merely about material wealth, but also about the psychological and emotional costs of pursuing economic success in a rapidly modernizing society.

- **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it fills an important gap in the literature surrounding R.K. Narayan's works. It focuses on the intersection of the real-ideal duality and economic discourse. While previous scholarship has examined his treatment of social structures and personal dilemmas. There has been limited exploration of how economic forces shape the characters' struggles between personal ideals and societal pressures. By analysing the economic dimensions of his fiction, this research will offer a deeper understanding of how Narayan critiques the rise of consumerism, the impact of economic modernization and the psychological conflicts faced by his characters in their pursuit of success.

- **Review of Literature**

R.K. Narayan's literary works have long been the subject of critical analysis for their nuanced portrayal of Indian society, particularly in the context of real-ideal duality. Scholars have explored how his characters navigate between traditional values and modern realities. It offers a compelling commentary on personal aspirations, social constraints and the forces of modernization (Jayanthi&Shaik, 2024). His Malgudi a fictional town in many of his stories, often serves as a microcosm of India which captures the

tension between the idyllic and traditional world. It also encroach modernity that brings about economic, social and cultural shifts. While existing research has extensively focused on the socio-cultural and moral dilemmas faced by his characters remains a need for deeper exploration of the economic undercurrents that shape these conflicts.

The economic dimension in his fiction, though explored in works like *The Financial Expert* and *The Guide*, has not been the primary focus of many studies.

‘Previous analyses have mainly concentrated on themes of personal transformation, spirituality and the clash of values in the face of economic change’¹. (Revathi, 2024)

However, works like *The Financial Expert* deal with the protagonist’s pursuit of wealth, often in opposition to his moral ideals which makes it crucial to consider the economic discourse within his framework of the real-ideal duality. This aspect of his works aligns with studies that have examined the relationship between economic realities and the idealism of his characters. For instance,

‘Studies on the portrayal of middle-class life in his *Malgudi Days* underscore the tension between aspiration and reality, highlighting how economic pressures impact personal and social values’². (Arya, 2025)

Narayan’s treatment of regional identity and economic modernity is another key area that requires attention. In his narratives, the conflict between personal ideals and the economic realities of the time often mirrors the social and economic transformations occur in post-independence India.

‘Scholars have explored how Narayan uses his characters’ struggles to critique the rise of consumerism and the commodification of culture in a rapidly modernizing society.’³ (Bala & Devi, 2023)

Narayan’s use of humour and satire, as well as his depiction of everyday characters struggle with economic aspirations. It has provided valuable insight into the cultural and economic shifts in India during the mid-20th century. However, much of the literature has not fully explored how these economic forces shape the idealized versions of selfhood and societal roles that his characters pursue. The study of the ideal-contradiction and economic discourse in his works also benefits from the growing body of work that analyses the influence of modernity and global economic systems on regional and local cultures. Recent critiques of his engagement with issues such as class, consumption and urbanization. It has provided an important context for understanding how his characters interact with modern economic practices while navigating their traditional values. These discourses, while important often neglect the specific intersection of these issues with the internal personal struggles of the characters. The lack of a focused analysis on the intersection of real-ideal conflict and economic realities in his works is obvious. This study aims to address by offering a critical examination of how economic changes inform and complicate the idealized lives of his characters.

• Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the conflict between the real and the ideal in R.K. Narayan’s selected works which focus on, how economic factors influence this tension?
2. To examine the portrayal of economic themes such as class, materialism and modernity in Narayan’s fiction and their implications on characters’ moral and spiritual dilemmas.

3. To contribute to the understanding of post-colonial economic discourse in Indian literature through a critical study of his depiction of economic change and its effects on individual and societal values.

• **Methodology**

This study employs both primary and secondary data to critically analyse the real-ideal duality and economic discourse in the selected works of R.K. Narayan. Primary data is derived from Narayan's novels such as *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, and *Malgudi Days*, focus on the characters' interactions with their economic realities and idealistic aspirations. The secondary data consists of scholarly articles, books and critical essays that provide context on the themes of modernity, economic transformation and moral dilemmas in his work. Narrative analysis is the primary research method employed, allows the study to examine the evolving conflict between traditional ideals and the economic pressures faced by the characters. The data is analysed through a thematic framework that ties together the socio-economic dynamics with the idealistic aspirations depicted in the texts, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the tensions at play.

• **Analysis of Real-Ideal Duality in Selected Works of R.K. Narayan and Economic Discourse and Post-Colonial Transformation**

In the works of R.K. Narayan, the tension between the real and the ideal is a central theme that shapes his characters' lives and narratives. This duality is explored in various ways, particularly through the moral and economic struggles of his protagonists. His characters often tackle with their ideals rooted in traditional values spirituality and personal ethics while competing with the pressures and temptations of the real world, particularly economic survival. In *The Financial Expert*, the protagonist, Margayya represents the perfect embodiment of this conflict. He is a man driven by his idealistic belief in achieving wealth to improve his family's status but finds himself increasingly consumed by the material world he once sought to control. His dialogue, "I'll make a fortune; I'll be a big man in Malgudi," summarizes his aspiration to rise above his humble beginnings, yet this idealism gradually transfers into a pursuit of money at the cost of his relationships and moral integrity. The ideal of wealth as a means to happiness collides with the economic reality of corruption and personal sacrifice leads to Margayya's downfall. Similarly, in *The Guide*, Raju's transformation from a tour guide into a self-proclaimed holy man offers another exploration of real-ideal conflict. He initially lives a life of deception and manipulation, yet his encounter with spirituality becomes his attempt to reconcile the dissonance between his self-serving reality and the ideal of spiritual enlightenment. When he states, "I am not a saint, but I feel as though I am becoming one," His internal conflict is revealed: the struggle between his real self, shaped by the pressures of modernity and materialism and the ideal self he aspires to inspire by tradition and morality. His economic struggles range from his unsuccessful business endeavours to his eventual role as a fake guru highlight how the pursuit of idealism, ungrounded in economic reality leads to moral ambiguity and personal suffering.

Narayan's works also reflect the economic transformations of post-colonial India, a nation transitioning from its colonial past to a newly independent economic future. The post-colonial setting in his fiction often serves as a backdrop for exploring how traditional values and ideals clash with the economic forces of modernization. In *Malgudi Days*, Narayan presents a microcosm of Indian society where characters like the beggar and the postman navigate the complexities of a changing economic landscape. The beggar's dialogue in *Malgudi Days*, "I have nothing but my hands, yet my spirit is rich," offers an idealistic perspective on poverty, contrasting sharply with the economic realities of his existence. The post-colonial transformation in his fiction is not merely political; it is deeply economic, reflects the shift

from agrarian economies to urban, industrialized settings that challenge traditional notions of livelihood and survival.

Narayan critiques these economic shifts in *The Financial Expert* by addressing the individual's place within the broader, often harsh, economic systems. Margayya's rise and fall are a direct commentary on the capitalist system's corrosive effects on the moral compass of individuals, particularly as India transitions from a colonial economy to a market-driven one. Through this character's experience, he explores the consequences of this shift for personal identity and societal values. Economic discourse in his work is thus not merely about material wealth. It is about the psychological and moral consequences of economic participation in a rapidly changing, post-colonial world.

The real-ideal duality in his fiction and its intersection with economic discourse are central to understand the broader social and cultural transformations occur in post-independence India. As his characters struggle to settle their ideals with the economic demands of their environment, they embody the complexities of a society caught between traditional values and the emerging forces of modernity and capitalism. The duality between real-world economic challenges and idealistic aspirations mirrors the larger conflict within Indian society during a time of intense socio-political and economic change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Narayan's exploration of real-ideal duality tangled with economic discourse offers a profound insight into the social and cultural fabric of post-colonial India. His works provide a critical reflection on the consequences of modern economic systems on individual identity, social relationships and morality. Heskilfully highlights the psychological and moral toll that the clash between idealistic aspirations and economic necessity takes on his characters, which mirrors the larger societal struggles during India's post-colonial transformation. The economic discourse in his fiction serves not only as a backdrop for personal conflict but also as a critique of the broader economic changes affects the Indian public during the transition from colonialism to independence. Through his characters' struggles, he paints a vivid picture of how economic forces shape both personal identity and social order in a rapidly modernizing society.

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