SUMMING UP
R.K. Narayan was a writer with firm convictions. But he chose not to canvas his convictions. This applies to his ideas on writing, too. In his introduction to “Under the Banyan Tree”, written in 1984, he states very frankly a few of these ideas. One of them is that the date of a story does not matter. He does not believe that the date is important. This is one reason why Narayan is the nightmare to a system-bound researcher.

In this introduction Narayan says:

Out of the twenty-eight stories in the following pages, the first two were written this year, while the rest are—well, I won’t call them old, as the date of a story is immaterial. A writer does not germinate, grow, and decay in the manner of a piece of vegetarian. The conception seems to me irrelevant: a writer’s output over the years cannot be studied as bio-historical material. A writer’s early stories need not be worse than his later ones, and his so-called middle period may exhibit a dull competence rather than genius. I have faith in datelessness. A date-stamp may be necessary for a periodical, but not for a story (vii).

This is a bold statement, which defies all idea of a connected, continuous evolution. It is a view that cannot be fully accepted. If the detail like it might probably emerge that certain novels and short stories dovetail into one another. It is quite possible that ideas get artistically debated in stories and clues to these could be available in the chronological details. If such details are not bio-historical material they can be psychological material or psycho-historical material if such a term could be permitted that is one of the important aspects of the study of an author. Similarly such details can give the readers an insight into the history of the artist’s artistic evolution.
If the first paragraph begins with one controversial statement the second goes on to make one more. "I, for one, am prepared to assert that all theories of writing are bogus" (UBT vii). While the creative writer's impatience with counter casting of the critic or the theorist theories of writing cannot be dismissed out of hand. It is the theories that do give the systematic reader an insight into why a reader pursues a certain course in his writings. Narayan might not have cared to observe his own methods to arrive at a theory. It is not madness alone that has a method. Art also has it quite often. It is not that the poet's eyes and the madman's eyes roll in a fine frenzy to create what does not exist . It is not even that all writing is the expression of the poet's eyes rolling in the fine frenzy.

However, in the same introduction Narayan gives the reader a clue as to how a story came to be written for him. He could find his material for his stories " in the open air, market place and streets of Mysore." His own family gave him material. He acknowledges that a story may have its origin in a personal experience or a bit of observation or a conversation overheard:

"A Breath of Lucifer" was dedicated by me into a cassette when I had to spend ten days in bed with eyes bandaged following a cataract operation, and was attended on by a crazy male nurse. "Annamalai" is almost a documentary of a strange personality who served as a watchman in my bungalow for fifteen years; "A Horse and Two Goats" was suggested by an American friend's visit to my house one evening in a station wagon. Crammed with an enormous clay horse which he had picked up at a way side village. "The Shelter" developed out of a
whispered conversation between a couple, overheard during a bus journey (UBT ix).

Stories come from people he has known. Susan and Ram refer to stories which have autobiographical connections. Beyond that are the stories that are yet stories. Susan Croft notes that he admits that his character grew out of real people that never in totality. The effort to study the stories has been an interesting experience because it has shown the way in which they are connected with his novels and the way in which they can be connected with themes and visions that recur and the ways in which they are organized.

In an interview he granted to Susan E. Croft Narayan makes another controversial point. She points out that he didn’t like interviews. “I just want to be left alone!” he told her --luckily, after an hour's fruitful conversation." I don’t think you should bother very much about the writer behind the work – books are more important than writers.” He was “adamant,” she says, that the author was “not important, not at all!” A work ought stand alone, he said, apart from its author. “After each work, he writes some other work, and the previous work goes out of your mind”(25).

In the interview he tells Susan that he was not curious about other people, and felt slightly astonished that others should be curious about him as an individual. She responds: “And yet there can be few writers who persistently apply themselves to creating such dominating characters in their novels as R.K. Narayan.” She points out that his novels designate the hero in the title, either by name or by profession, and that when they are designate articles: Mr. Sampath or Swami and Friends, The English Teacher or The Guide.
Yet Narayan refused to discuss seriously the connection between himself and his stories. It seems that it is in this way that the story-teller of the traditional type become a sort of symbol for him. He talks of him in detail in one of his essays. When Susan asks him whether Krishnan of *The English Teacher* could not be identified with Narayan himself, Narayan responds that the author and his character were not necessarily in accordance:

The character could be a murderer, but that doesn’t mean that the author is also a murderer. Even if its in the first person, the author assumes the role of a character but remains personally detached (26).

*The English Teacher* presents the acute emotional condition of the protagonist after he has lost his wife. The novel was written soon after the death of the writer’s wife:

“*In The English Teacher* one senses, a certain need to exorcise or immortalize the author’s deep-felt experience. Narayan’s reluctance to corroborate the facts reveals yet again his shying away from the idea of the individual. His loss was a personal tragedy but in the universal cycle of human experience it was less than a flick of wrist in the comic dance”(26).

In another interview Narayan talks of his lack of curiosity about critics and their writings:

Earlier, I never read reviews of my books because I did not want to become self-conscious. Now, I may occasionally read them, but they do not bother me. Critics say that I don’t talk of the aspirations of the people, of the political agony that we have gone through, and of all those plans for economic growth. I am not interested in that. I am interested in human
characters and their background. That is important for me; I want a story to be entertaining, enjoyable, and illuminating in some way (Graubard 234).

Narayan talks also about his view of art:

You must have noted that much of Indian art is anonymous. Perhaps that is how it should be. I like a work of art that has a life of its own independent of its creator. When I write, I write for myself. While writing, I don’t think of readers’ reactions. A book, a piece of writing, even a paragraph has an organic life of its own, and people are free to view it any manner they like. I would like to be free of responsibility for my fictional characters (Graubard 234-235).

Narayan says that he does not read criticism because he does not want to be self-conscious. When he is writing he does not want to be influenced. But he continues to the effect that his writing is not quite conscious writing:

When I write, I don’t know what is coming next. But it grows as I write, and when I read it at night I am sometimes surprised by what I have written in the afternoon... I have a general idea of what I want to write, but the details come only when the writing is in progress. They well up from some depth within me (235).

This is something that a reader is able to intuit while reading Narayan. His stories have that spontaneity that comes from unpremeditated naturalness. Yet it cannot be denied that a certain world vision is presented in R.K.Narayan. Dr. Mobizar Rahman remarks:
R.K. Narayan, as critics always dub him, is not only a small town ironist laughing at small town eccentricities or a delightful local colorist pleased with Malgudi trivialities. Beneath all his simplicity enigmatically lies his world vision that identifies him as a true Indian (199 – 200).

The society that Narayan visualizes is a society that has its reality in his experience. But he does not talk very much about modernization or westernization. He has watched the way of tradition and modernity of India. He has also visited France, America and England as also cities in India like Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta. It has been guessed that Malgudi should lie somewhere between Bangalore and Mysore. But Narayan is not particularly interested in the exact geographical location. When Graubard asks him whether the peripatic nature of Indians is reflected in his works, Narayan says that it is not. He says that he himself goes to Europe or America for pleasure and also “to work, to see my publishers” (Graubard 235) Graubard specifically asks him whether the time he spends in New York or elsewhere become part of his imaginative life. Narayan’s reply is not direct. He makes the general comment that Indians abroad spend most of their times with their relatives or countrymen, travel 50 miles to meet other Indians and have idli or dosai and create a little India wherever they go. But he makes one point in this connection—that there are Americans who have not left New York’s twenty third street to see the West 25th street:

Life in other countries does not impress his imagination. Though he may talk casually of an American busy body trying to live-photograph, Raju’s last hours as a swamiji, are an American tourist buying a clay statue of a horse-man. He does not seriously present foreigners in touch with Indians or with Indians living in foreign
countries or Indians who visit India etc. His imagination is firmly rooted in the mysterious world between tradition and modernity embalmed in Malgudi. He tells Graubard that the background of traditional and modern India does not change. He keeps them static in his stories because he finds that more convenient to tackle. He does not give much for abstractions like Urban India and rural India. Calcutta is a city he likes, but he has a special preference for Madras for purely personal reasons. Malgudi can accommodate people who have now and then beyond the limits of Malgudi. But by and large they are people of Malgudi.

William Walsh remarks that a picture of Malgudi is a picture of India itself. Walsh emphasizes the fact that Narayan manages to present a weak, eccentric individual stand out clear and the way he is presented gives us a very clear idea of the enormous background against which he stands:

Each of the main characters in these solid pieces is in some way at odds with his world, but even if the figure stands out one is always aware of the immense ground, orthodox, irresistible, enormous, against which he is posed (Critical Appreciation 95 – 96).

This is probably why Narayan is able to strike a universal note in most of his stories. For all their Indianness, possibly many characters are just human:

The surface is comedy and tragi-comedy. Sometimes grief lies under it, but never despair. And each story deserves to be read at least twice—in an age when much contemporary fiction may not deserve to be read at once (Millar Neil 10).
One important aspect that has been emphasized in this thesis is Narayan’s presentation of woman. It might appear rather strange because Narayan does not seem to openly canvas any particular cause. He does present very sympathetically the predicament of an uneducated traditional Indian woman. But it cannot be said that he deliberately presents woman’s cause in his stories. He is interested in presenting them and the variety among them even as he is interested in presenting men in their inward, domestic and social environments. Narayan is mainly interested in the relationships and interconnections even in the midst of a degree of isolation of particular individuals. He does not think of man as man alone or woman as woman alone in society. They have different characteristics in different situations. That is why it is difficult to agree with views like M. Subba Rao’s:

Narayan has heroes; no heroines. His female characters are passive and unimpressive. Rare exceptions like Bamini Bai in “Dasi, the Bridegroom” only prove the rule. Many of his female characters are like those of Dickens. Narayan hardly cares to mention them by their names. He does not assign to them any important role. They do not have independent existence. Yet they all bear some feminine traits (165).

This passage understands a heroine as one who is the female counterpart of the hero of a story. But it cannot be taken as a definition. There are active women in Narayan but they are not “heroically” presented in the novels and short stories. A case in point in the short stories is Selvi of “Selvi” and Rosie her counterpart in The Guide. In the first phase of their lives they are passive, but eventually they become capable women. Selvi suddenly gathers the strength of personality to shake off whatever she considers irrelevant in her
life. She starts a life which is the ideal of a spiritual person and completely effaces herself. Mohan her guardian in the normal world of men and matters, finds that he has lost his meaning to her. That is why she tells him that it is wrong. She does not bother how her life is to run thereafter, that is the age-old wisdom of the race, true faith in God. Rosie suddenly finds that she has the courage to live for her art. For the sake of art she faced the dangers inherent in going to Raju when her husband turns her out. When this guide proves himself a god with feet of clay, she goes on with her career as an artist, almost giving the impression that she could even earlier have looked after herself—ably enough if not so spectacularly as Raju has looked after her, and his material interests. These two characters cannot be described as passive and unimpressive characters.

There are other women of exceptional character who cannot be called passive by any stretch of imagination. In India's traditional, social set up the woman does not normally or naturally come into common sight in all her dynamism. But in many families they play a dynamic role quietly but effectively. The grandmother of Sriram in Waiting for the Mahatma dedicates her life to bringing up her parentless grandson, very competently managing the finances and running the family in her widowed life. When at last she is told that she could not go back to her house which she has left as a dead person, and that her grandson is in jail as a freedom fighter does not get broken hearted. Without any fuss she decides to go to Kasi and live out the rest of her days there as the scriptures advise old people to do. Such asceticism comes naturally to the grandmother of Raman of The Painter of Signs. Nobody can describe Daisy of that novel as a passive character. The young wife who finds herself abandoned by her husband goes far into the unknown parts of the country and with determined resourcefulness recovers him in A
Grandmother’s Tale. There are women like the wife of Venkat Rao in “Fortyfive-a-Month” who play the role that providence has assigned them with all their mind and spirit. To face life quietly, without heroics, without any martyr complex, without tempestuous tears and sighs, demands in itself an undemonstrative heroism, Narayan’s stories have quite a number of them.

But by and large, men and women are not heroic. Narayan’s forte is the unheroic hero. The life that he presents is outwardly a placid life. The parents of Leela (in “Leela’s Friend”) are just common people. Their life can only be a life of coarse conformity.

There is no point in underscoring them as heroic or non-heroic, or active or passive, or impressive or unimpressive. Thus if there are heroes in Narayan as Subba Rao says, there are also heroines. If the women are not emphasized over much it is because in the society that Narayan presents they are not very visible as socially observable figures. In their families they are uninhibited people.

It is possibly a failure to sufficiently realize Narayan’s loyalty to such ground realities of India’s social life that makes a Professor Venugopal to pay a rather perversely belittling tribute to Narayan’s writing. He says:

... he has no purpose but to delight but to help the over worked and the tired to while away a few moments with a wise delight. He does not get involved with the characters nor is he interested in any deep psychological analysis, specially of the troubled or the miserable heart. He looks at life with detachment, ignores the darker aspect and seems to enjoy every moment of its apparently lighter side. He has a peculiar gift of turning everything light, and if he cannot do so creating innocent fuss, he does so
with a mild satire. Above all he has the gift of the ideal humorist -- he can laugh at himself (103).

Venugopal’s idea of involvement with character and deep psychological analysis of the troubled or the miserable heart seems to be unduly restricted. Narayan’s concern with the prostitute and the recluse who watches her, or with the poor widow who allows her son to go to the theatre to see his deceased father in his last film, or with the poor dog that is tied to his blind master or with the money-obsessed rice merchant -- probably all the characters of Narayan could be added to the list. Only he does not make any obvious emotional plea for anybody. He does look at life with detachment. But it cannot be said that he is devoid of feeling for them. Narayan refuses to sentimentalise anything in the name of compassion. But his characters are not presented with difference. Nor does he ignore the darker aspects of life. Narayan’s presentation of tragedy or of evil is not insignificant. His pathos and his evil are both unhysterical. That is because Narayan eschews highlighting everywhere. There is indeed no Iago or Lord Jim in Narayan’s world. But then there are so few of them in Shakespeare and in world literature. A writer need not set out to be a Dostoevsky. Narayan never turns a character like Selvi or Rosie or Iswaran or Subbiah or even a blind beggar into “light” material.

Narayan’s apparent simplicity very often persuades and misleads the readers into an assumption of his aesthetic “innocence.” Narayan is at least partly responsible for this. He does not write in an allusive style. He does not write stories with an apparent technical show. But there is in him an unsuspected depth and complexity. His notorious reputation as a humorist often blinds us to his finesse as an artist. Narayan is not just a purveyor of episodes. Everything in a short story of Narayan has its place and function.
He does not write with any obvious design on our eyes or ears and he does not want to force any sentiment. Nevertheless his artistic methods show him to be a delicate and sensitive artist. He has no partiality for very recent literature—nor much for all the modernists:

As regards English literature Narayan is fairly eclectic reader, with no particular favourites (barring Graham Greene), but he has a certain lack of enthusiasm for writing since T.S. Eliot. “Recent developments in English literature have not been very satisfactory.” I mention Joyce, so very different from Narayan.

“I must admit I’ve not been able to read Joyce. It may be unfashionable to say so, but I can’t appreciate him. I find him quite impossible to get through” (Susan E. Croft 29).

Narayan echoes attitudes and philosophies but he does it in his own way. He does not borrow any philosophy or attitude wholesale but in quite a few places his responses are in a forthright way to literary works and general ideas.

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” T.S. Eliot speaks of the conscious mind of the artist that sits at the sub-editor’s desk to give shape to all that comes from the deeper levels of the unconscious. Narayan speaks of his stories welling up from a deeper level. He says that sometimes he is surprised by what he has written. He also says that he reworks what he has written with care. This is possibly the best idea of Narayan the writer that emerges.

The introduction of this thesis begins with a short consideration of the genre of the short story and to place Narayan in the tradition of the Indian Fiction Writers in
English. It goes on to trace Narayan's background and some of its influence on his works. It also refers to some of the important aspects of his writings which have prompted this study.

Narayan, for all his reputation as a writer of light comedy, is a serious writer and depicts life from many angles. Thus a certain view of life that he expresses can be identified. That is, however, not to say that he is a systematic thinker. The second chapter, "Vision of R.K. Narayan", considers this aspect of his work.

In expressing his vision of life, Narayan presents characters of differing age, background and gender. It is interesting to study this aspect because it throws up family likenesses among some characters. The third chapter, "The Many Ages of Man" goes into this aspect of Narayan's career.

Narayan, even in his student days, seems to have been an avid reader. He seems to have exposed himself to a lot of western journals and to the 19th and 20th century writers. Narayan never wears his scholarship on his sleeves but he is obviously well read. It is not only that. In his own writings every now and then he appears to echo other writers and to reconsider their themes in the light of his own thinking. Also he reworks some of his own themes pursuing other possibilities. "Echoes and Repetitions", the fourth chapter pursues this line of thinking in relation to Narayan's works.

Finally R.K. Narayan is not an author easily labelled or summed up. He has a vision but sometimes he presents it as a vision of mystery. As an observer of life he seems to be excited by all the variety and possibilities in humanity. He does not wander far to track these characters. In the streets of his native Madras and his beloved Mysore he finds them in abundance and lovingly creates for them a town called Malgudi.
Malgudi is a veritable microcosm. There are therefore the mysteries of life teasing the characters of Malgudi and the readers of the creator of Malgudi.

Keats expressly states that the work that puts its thumbs in its breeches pockets and tries to advise us is not a really great work. The author can place his sense of mystery and his conclusions before the reader and leave him to come to his conclusions. Narayan's charm lasts because his writings force no conclusions and present no garish pictures.

The work has been most enjoyable. It has served as an appetiser, and it should be a very revealing and enjoyable experience to study his works as a whole and trace the interrelationships among them. A clear idea of the vision of R.K. Narayan has emerged from that. To place him in his context among his compatriots and then to see him in the perspective of commonwealth and modern literatures should be a rewarding undertaking. Also the works of Narayan may be considered based on the theories of psychology. Those who find the opportunity to take up such a study in the future will find it rewarding.