CHAPTER V
THE IRONIC PERSPECTIVE

In Narayan's fiction the comic vision operates in a framework of irony. It embraces not only the particular social context in which Narayan's men and women have their various transactions, but also focuses on an existential reality based on their particular experiences. Behind the narrative facade of his novels, Narayan attempts at a vision of life—a life of opposing dualities, of appearance and reality, beliefs and betrayals. This vision reflects an attitude of irony, which as Friedrich Schlegel says, calls for the recognition of the fact that "the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality." Since such is the nature of human fate, any attempt at encompassing a complete human situation warrants an ironic treatment. In a review of an anthology of French poetry in *The Times Literary Supplement*, a critic comments:

There is no true realism without irony, because irony is the power to penetrate the reality of things. It is a detachment, but it is not an indifference, and that is why it is compatible with intense personal feeling. It is knowing the truth about one's emotions and experience. It is one of several forms of transcendence.

Narayan's comic design is informed by this kind of an ironic vision of life.
The ordinary man's response to the Indian milieu of the transition period becomes naturally ambivalent as he gropes his way between the old tradition and the new civilization. The Indian is tossed between tradition and modernity and hence presents himself as a comic figure. No big promise is held out for him and hence no big disillusionment.

Individual aspirations and the urge for personal heroics are prompted by the New Civilization that comes with western education, life style and rapid material advancement. Individualism becomes the new found ideal. But these are betrayed successively by the old Indian ethos, which still asserts its immense force and influence and which believes more in community existence than in individual achievements.

The old tradition apparently gives way to the modern; the community temporarily yields place to the individual. But in the course of events the process reverses itself, lending an ironic dimension to the entire perspective. The middle class that emerges with the new education and industrialization suffers from a peculiar predicament. The middle class character oscillates between the old and the new, ambition and humility, between morality and hypocrisy. This plight of his, of course, does not forebode any great disaster. Because of his typical middle class character he can neither be a king nor a commoner. His troubles and sufferings, his misunderstandings and misadventures are in the end washed out by the
cohesion of the community. An optimism, springing from this cohesive spirit of the community or the traditions, embraces all the ups and downs of life and with this optimism in background all the ambitious plans and plights of the individual appear comic. It is only an objective but sensitive artist who can penetrate into the reality of things and irony is his chief tool with which he can focus on the peculiarity of the human situation without betraying his personal emotions. In the particular social context of India, Narayan remains equidistant from the Old and the New, and this position offers him a vantage ground to view reality objectively. Thus Narayan sets himself as a pioneer in the tradition of ironic realism in Indo-Anglian fiction. In his novels, irony is not only ingrained in occasional episodes of the narrative, but is a built-in phenomenon in plot, character and style.

Swami and Friends is a plain story about the experiences and exploits of children, placed in the larger perspective of an adult world. Their frequent quarrels and conciliations, the burning of caps and the breaking of glass panes of schools as a patriotic ritual of the freedom movement, the big launching of the M.C.C., their crazy efforts to create a bigger world by naively imitating a perverted one of the adults, constitute a saga of innocence and fun. As C.D. Narasimhaiah aptly remarks,
What interests Narayan is the brave talk of the youngsters who collected in street corners and echoed the high sounding words of their elders, most of whom could not have been any more effective than the school boys who employed nationalistic postures to no purpose. It is these that brought forth Narayan's comic genius in fiction.3

The transactions of the adult world in their professed seriousness and in their hypocrisy look ridiculous before a joyous world of innocent children. The Swami and Friends stands in ironic contrast to all other novels of Narayan that embody such adult preoccupations.

The plots of Narayan's novels follow the usual pattern of irony—order, disorder, order. From the saga of innocence in Swami and Friends one moves to a realm of adolescent romanticism and recklessness in The Bachelor of Arts. It is only in the dreams and foolishness of an adolescent where irony finds itself quite swift to operate, because the adolescent stands in a peculiar position between ignorance and innocence of the child and maturity of the adult. With the unusual topic for the college union debate, 'Historians should be slaughtered first,' irony unfolds itself with a hint at the shape of things to come. The tinge of extremity as suggested by the word 'slaughtered' is ridiculously heroic in this improbable concept and it is ironic that Chandran, a student of History and later the first Secretary of the History Association, is its prime mover. From a
sentimental lover to a world-renouncing Sanyasi donning an ochre robe and then again to a devoted husband—these are the successive somersaults of the comic hero.

The counterfeit Sanyasi which illustrates the hide-and-sook phenomenon of appearance and reality in one single role, is a favourite theme with Narayan. Traces of this phenomenon are found in the character of Jagen and in some other minor characters like the old landlord in _Mr. Samnath_. But it finds its artistic culmination in Raju's role of a saint on which the edifice of the ironic vision of the novel is built. In _Bachelor of Arts_, Chandran becomes a sanyasi not out of any genuine spiritual realization, but out of frustration:

He was different from the usual sanyasi. Others may renounce with a spiritual motive or purpose. Renunciation may be to them a means to attain peace or may be peace itself. They are perhaps dead in time, but they do live in eternity. But Chandran's renunciation was not of that kind. It was an alternative to suicide. Suicide he would have committed but for its social stigma. Perhaps he lacked the barest physical courage that was necessary for it. He was a sanyasi because it pleased him to mortify his flesh. His renunciation was a revenge on society, circumstances, and perhaps, too, on destiny. (p.109).

This authorial intrusion is perhaps not warranted from the point of view of an ironic style since in such a style motives are never made explicit and the events speak for themselves. Narayan, however, succeeds in building up the image of a saint during Chandran's encounter with the
villagers. In the background of the reality of Chandran's character, the reverential response of the villagers to the sanyasi and the innocent interpretations of his silence create a comic situation.

In the course of events Chandran falls in love with Susila as instantly as he fell in love with Malathi. After his frustration in the Malathi affair he opens out his painful heart to the barber, Ragavan:

Ragavan, help me. You will gain my eternal gratitude. You will also profit yourself. My heart is dead.

Ragavan, I have lost everybody I love in this world.

Ragavan. (p.105)

These are the agonized words of one crossed in love and for whom the world seems to have lost all meaning. But this statement sounds ironically ridiculous in the face of what succeeds it:

Susila, Susila, Susila. Her name, music, figure, face and everything about her was divine—Susila, Susila—Malathi, not a spot beside Susila. (p.162)

These two statements show the volatile nature of human feelings and emotions. Against the background of this fact any supposedly serious attempt or any emotional outburst of the individual anticipates ironic turns.

Such ironic turns also happen to stray episodes that are woven to the main plot. The thief catching episode in which the father, Chandran and his small brother get up at 4 O'clock in the night and comb the garden from all sides...
to catch the thief is a clear example. The reference to
chivalry in such words as 'Panther-like steps,' 'Command,' 'War
cries' speak of almost a military operation. But when the
thief is caught after all these huge preparations, his
appearance betrays all expectations for he is found to be
"a middle aged man, bare bodied, with matted hair, wearing
only a loin cloth" (p.43), a sanyasi. Narayan's ironic
technique is to pack contradictory dualities in one single
color—either the sanyasi in the role of a thief or the
thief in the role of a sanyasi.

With small modifications here and there this technique
has been applied in all his novels. Ramani in The Dark Room
combines in himself the roles of a faithful husband, a
father and something of a philanderer. Srinivas, with the
metaphysical disposition of his character, also shares to
some extent the adventurism of Sampath. In the characters of
Nargayya and Jagon, the orthodox tradition and the modern
materialism simultaneously operate, effecting a series of
conflicts. Nargayya, who sincerely believes in all traditional
rituals, falls to a craze for money, a feature of the modern
civilization that goes against traditional ethics and humility.
He reconciles these two contradictions initially for sometime
to suit to his own interests, but is unable to carry it on.
The pharisaical sweet-vendor, preaching the sermon of
non-attachment—"Conquer taste, and you will have conquered"
the self" (p.13)—is thickly engrossed in his worldly attachments, in the fondness for his son and in his 'free-cash' (p.20). Daljeet suffers from a conflict of instincts and ideals, and the queer course of her life and her relationship with Raman reflect this conflict. Raman moves from a carefree businessman to a sentimental lover and then finally to a reckless realist. But among all the characters of Narayan, the character of Raju in The Guide offers the supreme level of Narayan's ironic stance. Here is the thief in the role of a sanyasi, accepted and revered by the innocent villagers and the Government of India as well as by Velan, who knows his true identity. The contradictions involved in this situational irony are soon resolved when the appearance and reality merge together to form a distinct identity—the thief becomes the sanyasi. This pattern is also repeated in the character of Jagan when he renounces this world, true to the spirit of the sermons that he has been hypocritically professing all along.

The plot of Mr. Sampath is full with episodes that have little relationship with one another as far as the centrality of theme is concerned, as a result of which no distinct ironic treatment is noticeable. But, in contrast, all the events gyrate round the character of Raju, in its various stages of development. Mr. Sampath is to be read either as a story about the adventures of Sampath or about
Srinivas' journey to equilibrium and wisdom; it may also be analyzed from the point of view of the relation and interaction between these two aspects. Srinivas shares and participates in Sampath's adventures till he achieves his equanimity. At the same time Srinivas' metaphysical questionings, his occasional philosophic nihilism ironically match with the gross material involvements. After all the storms are laid to rest, Srinivas fortunately finds a patron to resume the publication of 'The Banner' wherein an editorial 'Nonsense—an adult preoccupation,' he, with the knowledge of hindsight makes an appraisal of all the earlier events and concludes,

Adulthood was just a mask that people wore, the mask made up of a thick jowl and double chin and diamond ear-rings, or a green shirt, but within it a man kept up the nonsense of his infancy, worse now for being without the innocence and the pure joy. Only the values of commerce gave this state a gloss of importance and urgency. (p.200)

Adult occupations and its apparent seriousness are nothing but futile exercises in nonsense, even more so than the play of children. In this ironic perspective, the hubbub as well as the hubris noticeably present in the Malgudi life only amount to much 'sound and fury signifying nothing.' Srinivas has been searching for the significance of life; and experiences finally teach him about the absolute reality of things. 'Even madness passes. Only existence asserts itself.' (p.209)

Against this fact of life, the adventures of Sampath or Ravi's
vision of beauty or for that matter, all the aspirations and actions of men appear illusory.

The ironic process starts right from the moment Srinivas offers himself completely to the care of Sampath and the latter not only takes charge of his paper 'The Banner,' but also of all his personal affairs. And the relationship becomes so compelling in nature that Srinivas cannot easily extricate himself from it. The relationship moves through a zigzag process. Sampath obliges a helpless Srinivas by undertaking the publication of 'The Banner,' handles the court formalities in quite a professional way; helps him get all the necessary amenities like water taps through the greedy relatives of the dead landlord and in fact does a lot of things for Srinivas. But at the same time he shocks and surprises Srinivas by inserting a green slip inside the pages of 'The Banner,' which announces the temporary suspension of its publication. He involves Srinivas in the film making project, and Srinivas, because of the extrovert nature which he shares with Sampath, gets involved in all the surrounding human activities. Careless of his own affairs, he plays a major role in Ravi's personal life and at times also intrudes into the private affairs of Sampath. But in due course he deems it wise to maintain a safe distance from Sampath, his one time friend and guide; he learns to realise the vagueness of all these adult activities. But yet these
experiences have provided him with better philosophic insight to realize life and things. The ironic stance of the narrator makes it possible to involve Srinivas in all these events only to make him realize at last their meaninglessness. Srinivas confesses this in one of his editorials entitled "Nonsense—an adult preoccupation."

The ironic nature of human transactions can be noticed in the queer relationship between different characters of this novel. Sampath being in the centre of such relationships most of the time. He voluntarily offers himself to be the spiritual disciple of the miser landlord, hears from him with rapt attention the discourse on the Gita and the Veda and at last very subtly robs him of his money. He makes the relatives of the old man, who vie with one another for the latter's property, complete stupids. He becomes a mentor of Somu and Sohanlal; but after the shooting of the film faces disaster midway Sampath hides himself from them. He can become the god Shiva wrestling the title from V.I.P. only to be out done by Raji in the next moment. He also wins over Shanti and possesses her till the time he gets completely outwitted by her. The peculiar manner of Shanti's departure leaving the sleeping Sampath in utter humiliation at the Koppal station becomes a sort of comic anti-climax to their flirtation:
The bus had put us down at Koppal at six in the evening and we had nearly twelve hours before us for the train. We ate our food and then sat up, intending to talk all night till the arrival of the train. But really there was so little to talk about. Having done nothing but that for five days continuously, I think both of us had exhausted all available subjects. And a passing thought occurred to me that we might have to spend the rest of our lives in silence after we were married. This problem was unexpectedly simplified for me. I must have fallen asleep on my stool. When the train arrived and I woke up, her chair was empty. The train halts there for four minutes or so, and we had to hurry up. The station master said, "She left by the eleven down. I gave her a ticket for Madras." (p.217)

SamPATH accepts the ironic reversal of situations in the true spirit of a comic hero. Caught in the ironic process of human actions and its unexpected consequences, SamPATH works out endless possibilities one after another and hence the world does not close for him.

In other characters also Narayan has attempted to show the built-in irony in human nature. Irony helps unfold the ludicrous beneath the apparent grandeur, the stupidity and weakness beneath apparent cleverness and strength. The shrewd landlord who exploits his tenants, professes himself to be a yogi and zealously observes all orthodox rituals. Any ordinary instance can reveal the true nature of his identity:

'I'm a sanyasi, my dear young man—and no true sanyasi should eat more than once a day,' he said pompously. He ate the cakes with great relish. When a tumbler of coffee was placed beside him he looked lovingly at it and said: "As a sanyasi
In him the two contradictory traits coexist as the two souls of his character—a shrewd custodian of his financial wealth and a zealous guardian of the Vedas and the Upanishads and all the ancient culture of India. Sampath takes advantage of both the weaknesses of this old man when he introduces himself as the latter's spiritual disciple and then as a promoter of his financial interests by persuading him to advance a loan. The shrewd landlord who till then has been making his tenants and borrowers fools is subtly bamboozled by Sampath. Srinivas' casual suggestion of the children's tennis ball hitting the old man to death only highlights the point of ludicrousness in the latter's character. The one-time district board president Somu, Sohanlal and even the district judge who comes to preside over 'the opening ceremony' are all shallow, superficial blockheads beneath their grandiose social designations and positions. De Mello with his technical jargons and Hollywood nostalgia is quite close to a caricature. The film, after elaborate preparations and enough fanfare ends in a fiasco. In fact the film 'The Burning of Kama' is, in an ironic way, the celebration of the beginning of 'kama.'

In 'The Financial Expert' the ironic treatment embraces the rise and fall of Sajayya's fortunes. As far as the
Indian milieu is concerned, the superstitious spirit of the traditional on the threshold of the modern, appear Familiar anachronistic. The astrological wrangles over the horoscope and tricky manoeuvres of Dr. Pal in order to bring a match of the horoscopes illustrate the peculiarity of the transition period. The liberated Modern and the orthodox Traditional stand in an ironic relationship with each other. Many of Margayya's predicaments start as he is tossed between these two sides. The fundamental innocence in his character, which Graham Greene observes in his introduction to The Financial Expert, responds in strange ways to the various forces in the society. Margayya's ambition which in fact leads to the series of events involving his checkered life springs from his particular socio-economic status:

Margayya felt that the world treated him with contempt because he had no money. People thought they could order him about. He said to Arul Doss: "Arul Doss, I don't know about you; you can speak for yourself. But you need not speak for me. You may not see a hundred rupees even after a hundred years of service, but I think I shall do very soon—and who knows, if your secretary seeks any improvement of his position, he can come to me." (p.11)

Margayya has in him the innocence of the ordinary folk which comes out of the humble status of his life, and the fanatical ambitions that issue from his humiliation and inferiority complex. In Margayya, dream and reality operate together in a network of strange and unpredictable relationships. Margayya earns the sympathy of the readers because of his
basic simplicity and the humiliation he faces because of his socio-economic condition. There is an elemental sadness about him throughout and even in his moments of supreme success, he betrays a pathetic helplessness of a bewildered father. Margayya's faults and foolishness are treated by Harayan's ironic technique not from the standpoint of strict moral judgement, but with an affectionate understanding of life's predicament. As a consequence, the bitter bite of irony yields place to a mild disapproval or a tender stroke of the tragicomic.

Apart from Margayya's eventful life the novel abounds with ironic suggestions of different nature. With reference to his own life, Margayya's name itself is ironic. 'Margayya' means "one who showed the way. He showed the way out to those in financial trouble." (p.1) While managing others' financial affairs, he is unable to manage his own, much in the same way as Raju who guides others, but fails to guide himself properly till the final moments of his conversion. Dr. Pal, the guide and confidant of Margayya, is the sole cause of all of the latter's doings and ultimate undoings. The peculiar first meeting between Margayya and Dr. Pal in the lonely, abandoned pond is not only a travesty of the usual, the commonplace, but also faintly indicates the queer nature of events to come as a result of their relationship.
He arrived at the pond... He tucked up his dhoti and looked round in order to make sure. 'If a man lives here, he will not need a square inch of cloth,' he reflected. Far in a corner of the little mantap on the other bank he saw some one stirring. He felt a slight shiver of fear passing through him as he peered closer. 'Is it a ghost or a maniac?' He withdrew a couple of steps and shouted 'Hey, who are you?' Vaguely remembering that if it were a ghost it would run away on hearing such a challenge. But the answer came back. 'I'm Dr. Pal, a journalist, correspondent and author.' (p.50-51)

This meeting with Dr. Pal, which proves to be the key to the financial success of Margayya, happens, even though in an indirect way, as a result of the forty days' ritual. Hereafter events move in rapid succession and Margayya has no time to look back till the point when he finds that his gains are ironically accompanied by more than equal losses.

Dr. Pal, who in one of his first meetings with Margayya speaks of his plan "to start a sociology clinic where people's troubles are set right." (p.69) is himself a pervert and ruins the domestic happiness of Margayya's family. Dr. Pal, who professes himself to be an academician is in fact a gross travesty of it. The book 'Domestic Harmony' of which Margayya is the publisher and which promises happiness for the people becomes the main breeder of domestic disharmony in his own family.

Like Narayan's other heroes, Margayya faces the crucial challenge of his own creation. He is a poor, ambitious
man whose desperate craze for money gets fulfilled and he successfully lifts himself out of his humiliating status. But the wealth, which he makes for his own comfort, turns upon him, literally swallowing up his very physical existence.

In his home the large safe was filled up, and its door had to be forced in, and then the cupboards, the benches and tables, the space under the cot, and the corners. His wife could hardly pass into the small room to pick up a saree or towel. (p.163)

His tremendous complacency and the consequent hateful attitude towards Balu's teachers coupled with his extreme affection for the son, only blinds him from correct judgement and undermines his own interests. This helps spoil his son in whom he has pinned great hopes. The relationship between the pupil (Balu) and the home tutor, Mr. Kuri, a teacher in the school of which Margayya is the secretary, turns to be a mockery of the sacred teacher-taught relationship. What one notices is a sort of commercial transaction:

The teacher and the pupil were like old partners, now seasoned partners who knew each other's strong points and weak points. (p.39)

Margayya learns the art of cunning through the guileful guidance of Dr. Pal, by which he manages to swindle others and climb the social hierarchy. The fateful moment comes when Balu, his eye's apple confronts him and demands his share of the property. Discovering Balu in Dr. Pal's evil company, Margayya finds to his grief that he
has been caught in his own cunning. Unable to control his
anger and excitement, he hits Dr. Pal with one of his sandals.
It is Dr. Pal who had offered the red lotus to Margayya for
the worship of goddess Laxmi. Immediately after, Margayya's
illusory fort crumbles and once again he is reduced to his
original status. His life thus completes a full circle.

During the course of these incredible fluctuations of
fortune, illusions are dispelled and the individual is
chastened. Irony leads to the realization of things not in
their illusory glitter, but in their essential reality.
This fact is evident in the final scene of the novel:

Balu approached him and sat beside him Margayya
put his arm round him: 'You see that box there.
I have managed to get it out again.' He pointed
to a corner where his old knobby trunk was kept. 'It's
content are intact as I left them years ago—a pen
and an ink bottle. You asked for my property. There
it is, take it; have an early meal tomorrow and go
to the banyan tree in front of the co-operative bank
... 'Very well then, if you are not going, I am
going on with it, as soon as I am able to leave
this bad,' said Margayya. 'Now get the younger
here. I will play with him. Life has been too dull
without him in this house,' (p.173)

These are no doubt words of sorrow and suffering; yet these
are also the words of wisdom and an intense realization of
the facts of life. His wealth, for which he madly craved,
alienates him from his family, and now wealth being no more
there, it is a happy family reunion. In Narayan's fiction
the ironic stance leads to the attainment of wisdom, that
helps man to reject the illusions and unites him to his roots—either in his own self or in his family or community.

The Guide, as far as the ironic perspective is concerned, achieves the supreme concentration of purpose. No episode is superfluous or unrelated to the others and all contribute to the singular theme of Raju’s spiritual odyssey. The sequence of events that encompasses the innocent pleasures of Raju’s childhood days, his romantic adventures or misadventures of later years, his brilliant showmanship as a saint and his ultimate ordeal, are set to an ironic rhythm of life. Raju’s life is cast in a criss-cross of fortunes. He undergoes a process of gradual degradation from an illicit lover to a liar forging the document and then to a fake swami swindling the entire community. But this process is suddenly reversed and Raju by an extraordinary feat of suffering and sacrifice becomes the true saint redeeming his earlier life. Narayan’s theme here is “the irony of life and human nature” which he communicates not only through the simple, unpretentious language of a storyteller, but also by the help of his great technical innovation of telescoping the past and the present into one another. It helps to trace the genesis and growth of the present in the past in a very subtle, but compelling way.

Irony spans the entire life of Raju, right from his childhood days to the final moments. The childhood days form
an indispensable factor of the total ironic vision of the novel. It not only serves as a backdrop of idyllic innocence to all the events that happen afterwards, but also establishes an intimate kinship with the decisive moments of his life as the Swami. As the Swami he narrates the story of penance to the villagers, unaware of its ironic turns whereby he will be called upon to perform the penance.

He remembered that not long ago he had spoken to then of such a penance, its value and technique. He had described partly out of his head and partly out of traditional accounts he heard his mother narrate. (pp.95-96)

By telling the story, which he had heard from his mother in his childhood, and by undertaking the penance, he enacts the story in his own life and in a symbolic way gets united with his mother whom he had driven away earlier. After this tremendous spiritual ordeal he regains the innocence of his childhood which is suggested through the symbol of a physical situation—"They held him as if he were a baby." (p.221).

Beneath this fact of the physical condition of Raju, the fact of Raju's new birth into spirituality is subtly hinted at by the use of the image of 'baby.' This spiritual birth is signalled by Raju's realization at the end of his ordeal.

"Veilam, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs." (p.221)

Various other events of the past also return to him, but in a strange, alien relationship. One such is the small
railway station at Malgudi. It is at the railway track that he learnt his first bad words. The railway station which grew before his eyes and where he played as a child and also from where he was physically thrown out one day, now takes its own bit of role in the drama of Raju's life:

The railways were first to feel the pressure. They had to run special trains for the crowds that were going to Malgudi. People travelled on foot boards and on the roofs of coaches. The little Malgudi station was choked with passengers. (p.214)

His successive rise and fall in fortune are curiously associated with the railways. So also is Gaffur with his taxi. Gaffur's taxi has been a witness to many a romantic moment of Raju-Rosie relationship, a relationship which Gaffur himself did not approve of. And now, absolutely in a different context, "Gaffur's taxi drove up and down dozen times a day," (p.214) though Gaffur hardly knows that it is Raju in whose service he is engaged. The same old world returns to him, ironically at a time when the external world has lost all significance for him and he has made an intense journey from without to within.

Of Raju's chequered career, C.D. Narasimhaiah comments:

Raju, a loafer getting education from old scraps, guiding tourists, himself illiterate falling in love with a highly educated married Indian woman without outraging Indian sentiment, taking charge of her, talking to judges and civilians, going to jail and becoming a sanyasi recognised by the villagers and even by the Government of India—Narayan has done the most incongruous things and made them credible in terms of high art.
But even in his mistakes and sins Raju has a debonair appeal of personality that endears him to the readers. His meetings with Rosie and Velan turnout to be decisive factors respectively in the sensuous and spiritual chapters of his life. He wins over Rosie by fanning and satisfying her instincts for dance and makes Marco a cuckold. But as William Walsh has commented,

As Rosie succeeds, as her gift gains recognition, Raju’s status changes. He is less the lover and more the manager, trainer and agent.6

Their public successes are ironically accompanied by the failure in their private relationships. As A.N. Kaul observes: "...the moments of their greatest public successes are also the moments of their greatest isolation."7 The denouement starts soon and a small blunder of Raju wrecks the entire understanding delicately built between them. Hiding Marco’s book from Rosie and forging her signature are pardonable offences on the part of a jealous lover, because Raju apprehends that Rosie may get enamoured of her husband’s achievements. But this triggers off a whole series of fateful events for Raju as on the other side of the scene Marco, the zealous guardian of rules operates in his usual non-chalant manner. The star lawyer who fights the case for Raju, whose presentation of the case appears like a three-act comedy, proves to be a hoax who fails to save Raju from imprisonment in spite of his bragadocio.
Raju’s ego, which in all occasions determines his fate, calls upon him to be the master of any situation—whether it is in his vocation as a guide or in his relationship with Rosie, whether as a convict or as the Swami. His extraordinary sense of self-directed humour as is witnessed in his conversation with the barber or in his ruminations about the jail life extolling its merits, enables him to come through the many crises of his life. This practice of humour at one’s own cost transforms itself to the sublime spirit of self-sacrifice when the situation warrants. And during this process of transformation the comic gradually yields place to the serious, as happens in the last scene of this novel.

Once Raju’s spiritual journey starts, Rosie, Marco and all others, who were once important in his life, are rendered unnecessary and hence are removed from the scene, for such a journey must be taken alone. The religious conversion in Raju comes through his communion with the innocent villagers of Mangal. Earlier he concealed facts about Marco and his book from Rosie and this act of his undid him. He conceals his true identity from the villagers, successfully presents himself as the great man and this also undoes him. But when he no more conceals and unfolds his true identity before Velan, the curtain has already been raised in his spiritual life. The reality of his identity
bows to the falsehood he professed, because in that falsehood the
traditional beliefs and the intense feelings of the
community are contained. And these have the power, by virtue
of its innocent sincerity, to transform any falsehood into
truth, as it ultimately happens to Raju who from the counter-
feit becomes the real.

On the other hand, as C.D.Narasiah says, "Roeie
is completely free from Narayan’s ironic handling." Of
course the marriage interview of Roeie resembles any interview
for employment, a parody of the traditional marriage negotia-
tions. Both Marco and Raju serve as ironic foils to each
other—the former with his extreme cold, mechanical approach
to life, the latter with his warmth of personality and
particularly his instinctual way of living. On her side, Roeie
breaks the walls of the doll’s house and takes extreme
swings that should warrant censure from the orthodox Indian
society.

The ironic vision in the novel emanates from the
astounding transformation of personality in Raju’s life.
After returning from the prison he becomes Swami, or more
pointedly speaking the mantle of swamihood falls on him.
Ordinary, everyday accidents play a significant role in
shaping the destiny of his life. But an overall analysis of
his life would reveal an implicit design in all these accidents
which lead him step by step to his ultimate salvation. This
design is governed by his dynamic spirit, his indomitable ego that can rise to any occasion and meet successfully any challenge. It is a pure coincidence that he, just after his release from the prison, should be discovered by Velan who has been burdened with the domestic problem of a disobedient sister. And fortunately the girl gets cured and this confirms the villagers' belief in Raju's spiritual powers. Thus the village life flows on with Raju in their midst as the spiritual guide, Raju by virtue of his various manoeuvres lends credence to this new image of his. He accepts this role because it is the only comfortable occupation for him under the circumstances of his stigmatized life. And once the image has been built on the rockbed of the innocent beliefs of villagers, Raju finds it cruel to break their illusion. In his first meeting with Velan this has been made clear:

But he hesitated, wondering how he should say it. It looked as though he would be hurting the other's deepest sentiment if he so much whispered the word 'jail.' (p.3)

Raju is aware of this tendency in him to try to appease others and never to frustrate them—a tendency without which he would have been one among the countless commoners of the world.

I suppose, if I had the inclination to say 'I don't know what you are talking about,' my life would have taken a different turn. (p.49)
As the villagers' beliefs get crystallized in Raju to make him their spiritual anchor, he makes his hypocrisy appear more and more sacrosanct. He grows a beard; tells them episodes from the lives of great men; narrates to them stories from mythology and in his words and silence maintains the dignity expected of a spiritual figure. To this deception he brings perfection partly by his cunning and more by the fact of the villagers sincerely accepting him with their typical rustic simplicity. But this brings a curious development in him. He not only deceives the villagers, but soon starts deceiving his own self. He thinks of counting the stars with the illicit motive of being considered as a night guide:

People will say, 'Here is the man who knows the exact number of stars in the sky. If you have any trouble on that account, you had better consult him. He will be your night guide for the skies.' (p.15)

For a moment he begins to believe in his own cunning and in fact attempts counting the stars:

He told himself, 'The thing to do is to start from a corner and go on patch by patch. Never work from the top to the horizon, but always the other way.' He started the count from above a fringe of palmyra trees on his left hand side.... (p.15)

Such is the compulsion of his make-up that he attempts to live quite close to it, an attempt which takes a serious dimension afterwards.

He gets bewitched by his own make-up, which blinds him to the limitations of the man hiding inside the great
mask of a saint.

He was hypnotized by his own voice; he felt himself growing in stature as he saw the upturned faces of the children shining in the half light when he spoke. No one was more impressed with the grandeur of the whole thing than Raju himself. (p.42)

His mask sits so much embedded on him that an ordinary happening brings in the inevitable predicament of identity and illusion. The casual and thoughtless misreporting by Velan's brother before the villagers that the Swami shall not take food unless it rains ironically conforms to the image that he has been steadily building for himself. Sacrifices are now demanded of him in the very manner in which they were demanded from others in the stories that he had narrated to the villagers. The mask has outgrown the man:

He had told them, 'When the time comes, everything will be all right. Even the man who would bring the rain will appear all of a sudden.' They interpreted his words and applied them now to the present situation. He felt that he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out.... He now saw the enormity of his own creation. He had created a giant with his puny self, a throne of authority with that slab of stone. (p.96)

Such is the nature of his mask that it stifles the man within; but also such is the nature of the man (Raju) that it can raise itself from the quagmire of deception to get itself merged in the mask.

In Raju the swindler, there is also an inherent goodness, a streak of the saint. In an elemental humane way he responds to Velan's feelings:
The earnestness with which he spoke brought the tears to Raju's eyes. (p.95)

This feeling for others, now awakened in him, takes the shape of a firm resolution in the following days:

With a sort of vindictive resolution, he told himself, 'I'll chase away all thought of food. For the next ten days I shall eradicate all thoughts of tongue and stomach from my mind.'

This resolution gave him a peculiar strength.... He felt suddenly so enthusiastic that it gave him a new strength to go through with the ordeal. (p.213)

With this ordeal comes Raju's supreme realization. Whether the rains actually come or not, is left ambiguous; yet for Raju, in the individual plane of his existence, the rains of grace have already come:

Veilam, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet. (p.221)

What one witnesses in the last pages of the novel is almost akin to a baptism—a sinner metamorphosed into a saint. This at once reminds us of the Satnaker-Jalmiki myth. Such transformations are not incredible in India where feeling is considered more important than knowledge; where Marco, with his scholarship remains only emotionally frigid; Vasu with his M.A. degree remains a man eater; and Raju with no academic qualification to boast of, but only with warm feelings of life supplemented by the innocent beliefs of villagers, attains the spiritual height.
The ironic vision in the novel lets us notice the immense possibilities in the life of a wayward young man, doing bits of jobs in the small railway station of Malgudi, who in course of events emerges as the benefactor of humanity. Accidents build the edifice of his life and his efforts lie in submitting to them and mastering them ultimately. A casual analysis of Raju's life makes it abundantly clear that a hideous sense of humour is deeply embedded in the pattern of our existence:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport. (King Lear, IV.1.36)

Some way or other men are dragged from the height of their successes to the abyss of their misfortunes. Raju's herculean efforts in winning Rosia are pathetically undone by a trivial occurrence of forging a not-so-important document. His comfortable stage-show of the saint faces a serious crisis from the thoughtless reporting by a village boy, Vasu, the moderator of immense strength is ironically killed for an equally trivial cause of the mosquitoes.

When Raju undertakes the task, "he is pitted, not against a vindictive husband, but against the vengeful nature of an image he has so stupidly built up himself, and those who will hasten his doom are in fact his most dedicated supporters." If this happens, in keeping to the logic of irony, Raju also has got the propensity to fulfil the
expectations demanded of him and in a heroic feat he wipes out the difference between the man and the mask. This process has been presented by an ironic externalization which is couched not in words but in a symbol—the crocodile which infests the river by the side of Raju's sanctuary. The crocodile, an archetypal symbol of hypocrisy provides an apt parallel for the false saint. Appropriately enough, no one in the village seems to have actually seen the crocodile, though they all know it is there—it is a myth, which even like Raju's sainthood, becomes a reality only in death, for it is seen for the first time when the drought, which is to kill Raju, also kills it.10

Raju, during his days as the counterfeit Swami says to the village school teacher, "What can a crocodile do to you if your mind is clear and your conscience is untroubled?" (p.41) The words return to him to be applied in his own case.

Raju's beginning of the ordeal with a clear mind and an untroubled conscience occurs almost simultaneously with the death of the crocodile.

Raju attains his fame not by banking upon Rosic's talent, but by his own efforts of sacrifice. As A.M.Kaul comments, he gets more fame and newspaper coverage than Rosic and Marco and irony lies in his remaining anonymous in this role.11 His anonymous status suggests in a subtle way his state of non-attachment, the prelude to any spiritual realization. In the final pages of the novel, Narayan describes Raju simultaneously by his proper name *Raju* and by his spiritual titles, *Swami* and *Sage,* which helps to bring
an ironic juxtaposition between identity and illusion and keeps the reader in perpetual awareness of Raju's spiritual conversion. In the dualities of Raju's life the ironic attitude of Narayan is inherent. He describes the complex psychic process at work in Raju's inner self; and at the same time focuses on the world of traditional values emerging triumphantly from the materialistic blandishments of the modern. Narayan's irony highlights the values that sustain the sweet old world of Malgudi or of India and at the same time affectionately exposes the small vices and illusions of man. As V.V. Kantak rightly feels:

His irony here becomes something like a new perspective because his sympathies are as deeply engaged by the genuine component of that prototype as his decision is aroused by the imposture often foisted upon it."

Here, as also elsewhere in Narayan's fictional world, the motive of irony is never to castigate, but to understand life's pleasure and pain, its sins and hypocrisies as well as its innocence and tenderness. But in all these, whether in their virtues or in their vices, there is the intense feel of life which contributes to the unique poetry of the Malgudi existence. In the ironic framework of Narayan's novels, one notices a thousand small revolts and reverses of life; the amazing transformation of a wayward boy and later a swindler into a martyr if not a saviour. In any
case," as William Walsh remarks, "his attitude is too nimble with irony for one or the other. And that irony, it should be noted, is an irony of recognition, not an irony of correction."

Narayan's irony recognizes the queer and complex workings within the individual, as well as his relation to the world without. Raju's ordeal during his final role, amidst a motley crowd of pilgrims, T.V. producer, gamblers, peddlers selling balloons, reed-whistles and sweets, men from Health Department showing films about 'mosquitoes, malaria, plague and tuberculosis and B.C.G. vaccination' and above all curious onlookers, suggests the utter loneliness of a man who is on the verge of a spiritual awakening. This is the loneliness of all great men, who choose to be different from others, yet cast their lot for the sake of others, for humanity in general. As William Walsh puts it,

For Narayan, then the very conditions of human growth are individual discrepancy and communal collaboration. It is this double insight which the career of Raju embodies and justifies. His lone, serious ordeal gives rise to a village carnival and he, though in the centre of it, is ironically, aloof from all these. Narayan, here, focuses on the aspect of man's loneliness in his relationship with others:

...at every stage of his life, the isolated individual faces the enormous, fundamentally indifferent crowd.
Closely surrounded by a crowd who watch his movements each minute, Raju, if not physically, yet mentally and spiritually, is far distanced from them for he is the only one who is called upon to perform this task. He is one who cannot share his agony, his fortunes with others; not even with Velan who hears the entire story of his life. Raju is doomed to isolation. Raju’s ordeal, over which hangs the question of his life and death, for sometime is pushed to the background in the hubbub of loud-speakers, film shows, merry-go-round and all other items of the fair. The superficialities of the modern, commercial civilization is brought close, during the narration, to a serious quest for salvation quite in the spirit of ancient traditions. Swami ascent of casual questions to the Swami meant for commercial T.V. shows, questions that range from Raju’s physical condition and fast to irrelevant issues of caste system in India. Government’s absurd telegraphic message to the doctors to “persuade Swami resume fast later” (p.221) and many such things appear childishly funny before Raju’s intense spiritual groping. This is subtly suggested by Raju’s smile:

They sat beside the Swami and read to him the message. He smiled at it. (p.221)

The shallow modern civilization becomes the butt of the ironic treatment in the background of the sacred traditions
and the innocent feelings and superstitions of the rustic villagers.

From the childhood innocence of Malgudi to a flamboyant and yet professional involvement with dance and then back to the rustic innocence of Mangal—the ironic pattern becomes complete as the circle closes where it has begun. The logic of irony leads him to the threshold of a spiritual realm and once Raju steps in, the focus of irony shifts from Raju to the flippant crowd of peddlers, gamblers, and onlookers, the men from the Health Department and the T.V. producer from California. After Raju resolves to continue the fast with sincerity rising above all selfish considerations and uniting himself with the community, the narrative no more deals with the conflicts and the complex workings within his psyche. The comic irony which has moulded the career and character of Raju now reaches its culminating point. We are carried beyond the boundaries of a comic world to a solemn religious occasion, to the sombreness of a sort of crucifixion. Raju rises above the ordinary human level by virtue of his spiritual steadfastness and accordingly the ironic perspective shifts from him to the convivial crowd enjoying the fair. Now, the latter, in relation to Raju are exposed in their frailties and flippancy. Raju transcends the ironic predicament as his drama begins on another plane of existence. It is a sort of 'die into life'
'with fierce convulse,' very much in the manner of young Apollo in Hypnerion.

The theme of The Vendor of Sweets has close resemblances with that of The Guide. The 'die into life' theme is in a way manifested in Jagen's wish, "At sixty one is reborn" and in his apparent renunciation of the world to see a deity emerge from stone. In the ironic design a sinner is lifted to the sublime spiritual height in The Guide and likewise the hypocritical sweet-vendor is brought to the shores of spiritual experience. But unlike Raju, Jagen is unable to take a plunge and there, between the borders of the physical and the metaphysical, he stands with his failings and predicaments exposed. The built-in contradictions in Jagen's character inevitably put him in the centre of the ironic perspective of the novel. He is a puritan taking salt-free and sugar-free diet. He preaches to conquer taste, yet sells all sorts of delicious sweets. He reads the Bhagavad Gita to himself and to his workers, but at the same time manages to smuggle the 'free-cash.' He combines a shrewd sense of business with sayings and 'slokas' from the Vedas and the Upanishads, his hobbyhorse to which he turns frequently. In his role as a moral man, he looks sad and tender. These two aspects contribute to the unique appeal of his personality.
Yet in his adherence to Gandhian principles or to the doctrines prescribed by our ancient scriptures, there is a strange innocence, a kind of sentimental belongingness to his ideals of Gandhi or of the ancient traditions. What is exposed is not his villainy, but his naive, When asked by the cousin about the need for conquering the self, Jagen can merely reply, "I do not know, but all our sages advise us so." (p.113) And at times he nostalgically reflects, ...how Mahatma Gandhi used to address huge assemblies on the sands of the river and how he himself, a minute speck in such a crowd, had felt his whole life change when he heard that voice. (p.112)

His loyalty to Gandhi is the only motto in his life which guides him through every stage.

If Gandhi had said somewhere, "Pay your sales tax uncomplainingly," he would have followed his advice, but Gandhi had made no reference to the sales tax anywhere to Jagen's knowledge. (p.117)

But the ironic treatment of Jagen's character attributes a subtle motive to his innocence or fanaticism.

Jagen's fanaticism results in an arduous quest for the leather of dead animals, or in his taking twenty drops of honey in warm water as a substitute for sugar and in many such fads which appear comically out-of-date. On the other hand Nalli's ultramodern innovation, the story manufacturing machine in the India of grandmothers who are repositories of ancient stories, appears a gross perversion. Jagen for
sometime shares the fancies of Mali, leaving his own emotional meanings. "Gradually his reading of the Bhagavad Gita was replaced by the blue air mail letters." (p.61) And this starts undoing him, landing him in more and more difficulties till he once again asserts his self of traditional beliefs and values. He says to the cousin with a firmness, hitherto unnoticed in his tender heart of the father:

If what you say is true, well truth will win.
If it is not true, there is nothing I can do.

(p.150)

His shrewd business sense and his small corruptions of 'free-cash' and the like, which do not conform to the sacred principles he professes are understandable and excusable human flaws. He always propagates that attachment is a delusion which man must be rid of; yet he indulges in attachments—one of money, the other of his son—which ultimately ruin his happiness. Jagon wipes out this weakness in him by a final decisive act of renunciation. But it is not also without Narayan's characteristic tinge of irony. Even on the verge of his spiritual birth he does not fail to carry his bank book with himself. Here, as also elsewhere, irony leaves bare a cluster of ambivalences. In this context it is worthwhile to refer to V.V.Kantak's analysis of Naipul's criticism against Narayan.16 Without looking into the ironic motive of Narayan, Naipul has criticised him for indicating Jagon's corruptions and hypocrisy, his 'bewilderment,' as
a fact of Hinduism. What Naimul misses in his criticism is the ironic banter of Narayan's treatment. Jagon, unlike Raju in the earlier novel, is unable to take the final leap and remains only in the twilight region of spiritual realization. Jagon's attempt at renunciation appears ridiculous as much as his earlier life of high sermons and low scruples. As Prof. Kantak suggests, Narayan's irony vindicates the traditional values.

This 'bewilderment' can be attributed to a typical functioning of the human psyche. The bearded man arrives just at a time when Jagon is completely tired of Mali. Failure at the worldly plane of life compels him to escape to the spiritual plane, whereas the irony inherent in his carrying the bank book puts his sincerity in question.

K.R.S. Iyerpar explains this behaviour in Jagon:

But not until Jagon sees the Goddess in the stone, or at least sees her come out of the stone, will he acquire the ultimate courage to give up even his present discreet reliance on his cheque-book. In this novel, as in its immediate predecessors, faith is arrested at the brink and like Narayan's heroes we too are left in ambiguities and uncertainties. But at least the demon has been worsted, though the Deity hasn't arisen yet.17

There is also another side to Jagon's behaviour. Renunciation does not justify any action leading to leaving one's family in the lurch. Jagon feels morally responsible towards all his domestic obligations even though his stay
in this plane of life is shortlived. Probably this is the consideration for which he carries his bank-book which can enable him to meet the expenses of Mali's trial and Grace's fare to her country. To add to this, Jagon may have realized that keeping all his savings with Mali would only further spoil him. He is aware of it while speculating about his new venture: "Run after white hair on a large scale, earn more money and ruin 'all further?'" (p.123) Also as we learn afterwards, Jagon gives a cheque to the cousin to meet the lawyer's charges; advises him to run the shop, "keep Sivaraman and the rest happy." (p.191) If needs be, the cousin can always come and consult Jagon at the latter’s retreat.

For Jagon, quite in the Hindu way, spiritualism does not mean a denial of worldly duties; rather it means fulfilling them and ultimately transcending them. In a sense Jagon has been cleansed of his weaknesses. After his final decision he continues to remain attached to others. But this sense of attachment no more binds or oppresses his spirit. He gains the freedom of spirit and it keeps him untainted in spite of his attachments. Rightly therefore he declares, "I am a free man."

_The Vendor of Sweets_ is the story of a father betrayed by his only son, the only hope and solace in his lonely widower's life. Here the father's familiar world of marriage
and morals collapses by the licentiousness of the modern civilization. Keeping to the logic of irony, such betrayal or shock is necessary for Jagon to lift him not only out of an extremely fond attachment, but also out of the small hypocrisies of his life. On the intellectual as well as the emotional plane, Jagon has been aware of a higher mission in life and the time has come to realize it in the plane of actions. He is, of course, aware of his own failings:

We are blinded by our attachments. Every attachment creates a delusion and we are carried away by it. (p.144)

He wishfully longs for a state of equanimity:

That is what I am seeking but never attain. (p.144)

And once he attains this, he is able to see things in their clear perspectives, devoid of any sentiments clouding his vision. Now he can recommend a dose of prison for his son for whose comforts he had the greatest worries and anxieties.

The long flashback in which Jagon nostalgically ruminates over his past helps to build up a framework in which Jagon's past and present stand in ironic contrast, and the father-son relationship is presented in shifting perspectives of irony. Jagon's anxieties and his fond dreams, the traditional rituals and the euphoria in the entire household when Mali was born are pathetically embarrassed and undone by the absurdly crazy son with his unconventional
social behaviour, his new-fangled ideas about manufacturing stories. In this connection one is inclined to disagree with T.C. Chai who believes that Jagon's brooding over his past in twentyseven pages is unnecessary since this has no connection with the story. It, as Chai comments,

has such an independent existence that it could have been added to almost any of Narayan's novels—Swami's father, Srinivas... Margayya... or Nataraj could have narrated the same story of his marriage and pilgrimage to Tirupati.19

The long flash back brings into contrast two different generations with their respective values and institutions, and thus helps us to see the complete panorama of Jagon's life. Jagon's marriage with Ambika—an event of thrill and sensation, of elaborate rituals and gala celebrations in the entire family—is presented in the narrative with loving nostalgia before which the Grace-Mali affair pales into insignificance. The very name, Grace, happens to have ironic significance as Grace turns out to be a disgrace to the sacred traditions of the family. Jagon looks at his home and sadly reflects,

... but it has unhappy look; it will never get back the light and laughter of other days....
They are not the sort to make a home bright, unlike my mother or even when she was well. (p.181)

At the heart of Narayan's irony lies the comic incongruity. He makes ludicrous things take serious significance, and often brings delightfully unexpected turns of
events. Jagon's salvation lies through the hair-dyer, who is having a white beard himself but blackens all others' hairs and whose parentage is not known. Hair dying is a profession, grossly commercial in itself and it is naturally incredible that a hair dyer should serve as a sort of priest to baptize Jagon into a spiritual life. But in Narayan's ironic scheme of things, the trivial and the serious exchange places. A mere 'half a bottle of some alcoholic drink' (p.187) is cause enough to seize Mali's car and arrest him just as a couple of mosquitoes happen to serve as the agent of the maneater's death in The Maneater of Malvadi. The irony in both these instances suggests a deeply planted motive in the nature of things. Pride and arrogance, apparently invincible, are ultimately and unceremoniously undone by the smallest of objects.

The Vendor of Sweets is the drama of an ungrateful son and an extremely fond father. At the back of Jagon's comicality one can perceive the injured and bewildered feelings of a father. He flaunts Mali's letters with the pride of a father even though he disapproves of his doings in America and feels extremely broken for it in his inmost heart. There is a deep awareness of the tragic behind the veil of the comic. This underlying sense of sadness can be noticed in some of Tagore's short stories like 'The Babus of Nayanjore' and in most of the stories of Manoj Das. It is characteristic of the writer whose vision of the universe or more specifically of human life is
Ironic, for an ironic vision unfolds depths of reality. It reveals to us that underneath the gales of laughter there are also stifled cries of pain.

As it happens in *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets*, Narayan's ironic device concerns itself with the religious or spiritual, even though in an allegorical way, in *The Manseater of Malgudi*. To the decile, religious minded Malgudians, Vasu is a 'demon' and his arrival at once brings in its wake all sorts of chaos. Vasu possesses tremendous physical strength; his arguments have strange logic that sound novel and notorious; he is unpredictable and dynamic. He is an extreme individualist and he seems to believe in the superiority of strength as the key to existence. He is not bound to the society by any ethics save his own interests. In a way, he remains in the awesome isolation of a demon and Narayan carves out the peculiar reactions of the timid Malgudians to him in terms of high comedy. Stage by stage Narayan builds up the aggressive personality of Vasu only to humiliate his strength at the end through an apt anti-climax. Vasu breaks the laws during the Civil Disobedience movement, hits and injures his 'phaalwan' master, breaks the arm of the Police Inspector, kills tigers and other jungle animals, terrorizes people and even challenges God's creation; but ultimately he is undone by a couple of mere mosquitoes. He laughs at Nataraj:
'So you are taken in! You poor fool! These eyes were given it by me, not by God.' (p.63)

'We have constantly to be rivalling Nature at her own game. Posture, look, the total personality, everything has to be created.' This man had set himself as a rival to Nature and was carrying on a relentless fight. (p.64)

He mocks at the poet who writes an epic on Krishna's life in monosyllabic verse and jeers at everybody, even at the village festival, very contemptuously. Ironically, it is the poet's epic that leads to the festival and events happen fortuitously in which Vasu meets his death. That an insignificant creature like the mosquito will be the instrument of Vasu's death, underscores the irony involved not only in this particular context, but also in a symbolic way in the entire scheme of things. Sastri explains this in the novel:

Every demon appears in the world with a special born of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the rakshasas that were ever born. Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self-destruction, and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise, what is to happen to humanity? (p.242)

Neither Nataraj nor the other Malgudians have any role in Vasu's death except that they are participants in a religious festival. The irony embedded in Vasu's death once again vindicates the sacred traditions. When humanity is threatened, the grace of God, which comes in mysterious ways, destroys the wicked and saves others. What saves the
Nalandi community from Vasu is not an accident, but, as William Walsh suggests, "the blessings of the gods or just the stubbornness of life itself." The hypothesis of "the blessings of the gods" cannot be easily rejected in an Indian context. With Vasu's death, peace and order are once again restored to the society. Nataraj is roused from his complacency and this brief disorder, if not to any one else, at least to Nataraj and Gastro alone, brings renewed faith in God's subtle ways of saving humanity.

In a way, Vasu faces the enormity of his own creation. He becomes a victim of his own strength. In Narayan's ironic scheme, his heroes face the challenge from their own creations— Margayya and Jagen from their sons; Raju from the image he creates; and Vasu from his immense physical strength. He has broken his cotframe to display his strength as a result of which he sleeps in his easy chair on the fateful day instead of sleeping on the cot provided by a mosquito-net. It becomes evident that an extreme arrogant individualism, however, powerful it may be, carries the potential of its own doom. In the irony of his death, Narayan has aptly suggested his disapproval of Vasu's evil strength and genius.

It is strange that a man who has taken his Master's degree in History, Economics and Literature should choose no other profession but killing and stuffing animals. Vasu's unnatural death is a fitting finale to his strange life.
His arrival throws into disarray the apparent stability and the comfortable illusions of Nataraj and his society. As N. New William puts it,

> The print-shop is only an arena where the pretense is consciously cultivated. Nataraj must seem to be busy, Sastri must seem to have a full staff etc. The flamboyance of the mask and the naïveté that underlies it is evident leading to a happy acceptance of face values and the willing inference of more than the eye comprehends.28

Even though there are some genuine flashes of irony here and there in his latest novel The Painter of Signs, yet unlike the earlier novels, there is no definite ironic pattern in which the characters gradually mature into realization and knowledge. Of course, Raman emerges from his sentimental relationship a bit more realistic; but irony which triumphantly upholds the traditions and lifts the individual to a sublime height is conspicuously absent here. The prolonged love-hate relationship between Daisy and Raman, the decision and drama of marriage, end ultimately in a fiasco. There are a number of anecdotes in the novel that are informed by an ironic stance. The lawyer, whose profession makes it imperative to practice the art of reasoning, depends on astrology to hang his signboard. Daisy is a woman, who has "a sort of unmitigated antagonism to conception" and who confesses, "Married life is not for me. I have though it over. It frightens me. I am not cut out for the life you
imagine. I can’t live except alone. It won’t work.” (p.173-79)
In the context of Indian traditions where it is unusual for a woman to stay alone and where her chief desire is to get married and make her household joyous with children, Daisy is an iconoclast and she stands in a sharp ironic contrast with the traditional Indian womanhood.

The Dark Room, The English Teacher and Waiting for Mahatma move away from the usual ironic pattern of Narayan’s novels. K.R.S.Iyengar says,

Waiting for Mahatma is an ambitious effort and an impressive feat; but one also feels that Narayan’s art now denied the security of Malgudi and catapulted into Gandhian or terrorist political action—betrays unsuredness and perplexity.

Attention continuously and confusedly shifts from the political theme of the novel to the romantic theme and vice versa. Sriman’s political hoknebing in Gandhi’s movement to win Bharati’s love carries an ironic tinge as much as Bharati’s consent for marriage as conditional on Gandhi’s sanction does. Sriman’s conversion from a Gandhian worker to a terrorist, his sentimentalism, and Bharati’s fanatic devotion to Gandhi that reminds us of Daisy, the family planning zealot in The Painter of Signs, are all affectionately drawn with delicate irony. To miss the duality of the theme—the political and the romantic, is to miss the subtle irony in the treatment of the characters. The
superstitious Indian milieu occasionally comes to the fore-
front of the narrative revealing Narayan's characteristic
good-humoured irony. One such is the priest's refusal to
bring Sriman's aunt from the funeral pyre even after it is
revealed that she is alive. The crowd's endorsement of the
priest's view that she cannot be carried back to the town
because 'no one who has been carried here can ever step
into the town bounds again' (p.124) lest the whole town should
be 'wiped out by fire or plague.' (p.124) focuses on the
naïveté of the Indian masses. The irony here not only confines
itself to stray religious episodes, but also it embraces the
political side. It is an indirect reference to the people
who superstitiously join Gandhi's movement or who shrewdly
profess Gandhian ideals for their own interests, as does
the Municipal chairman.

In The Dark Room, the attention is focused on Savitri's
misfortunes and the plot is not congenial enough for the
comic irony to operate. Of course, Shantada's shrewd
concoctry comes for Narayan's ironic banter as much as Romani's
foolishness and frailties. Yet, on the whole The Dark Room
remains a domestic drama like The English Teacher where the
narrative moves from the physical aspect of existence to the
metaphysical. In both these novels, the small Malgudi town
of various forces—of unbridled aspirations and instincts as well
as of taboos and traditions—has been tapered to the narrow
confines of husband-wife relationship. In other novels, the human fate or the world plays a perpetual hide and seek with man's emotions and ambitions; and the Don Quixotes fall to the ground time and again to shed their illusions ultimately. In the framework of the comic irony the individual rises to fall and falls to be restored to his roots; and in the process the comic incongruity is focused. Follies are discarded and it is once again a happy reconciliation.

In Narayan's fictional world there is no agonizing sense of waste and void as in the great tragedies of Shakespeare, no utter helplessness as in some of the dramas of Ibsen, no deep pathos as in Hardy's novels, not even the gruelling sense of suffering as in the novels of "ulk Raj Anand; but there is an amusing sense of life's small dreams and defeats. There is always the sure presence of life throbbing in its virtues as well as in its vices. Against the fixed background of the age-old traditions and a strong community life of Malgudi, the individual's frenzy, fads or fetish operate, from time to time towards bringing temporary disorders. But throughout the narrative, in an implicit or subtle way, the ultimate victory of the traditions and the society is assured. As Srinivas puts it, "Even madness passes. Only existence asserts itself." (p.209)

Narayan, with a humanist's vision notes the follies and angularities, the revolts and retreats of the Malgudi
folk. He finds them wallowing in their favourite illusions, 
wooing their ladies, worshipping their gods, running after 
wealth, making films, dancing, gossipping, and doing a hundred 
other things. But also, along with these, there are the 
jolts in life that awaken man from his dreams. It is a 
built-in ironic device in the nature of things that an 
universal harmony is there among all individuals and the 
society, for whose preservation, individual instincts and 
ambitions often have to be trimmed.

In Narayan's fiction irony underscores a fundamental 
fact of human existence: that our instincts and aspirations 
are subject to the tantalizing nature of the society or the 
external world; that we are more or less Don Quixotes living 
with our Lady Dulcineas or fighting with windmills. The 
compelling presence of the traditions brings, of course, the 
prodigal sons back to the fold of society. The reader feels 
relieved and gratified, for all's well that ends well. And 
this can well be said to be the achievement of comic irony.
Notes


2. A critic quoted in Beaver Harald, A Figure In the Carpet: Irony and the American Novel, "Essays and Studies, 1962, pp.103-104.


12. V.V.Kantak, "Indo-English Fiction and the New Morality," Indian Literature, p.42.


15. Ibid., p.16.


