CHAPTER III

MALGUDI'S MEN AND WOMEN

An analysis of Narayan's characters would reveal a
definite journey of the self from innocence to experience
and then to wisdom. There is a movement towards 'ripeness'
and when this stage is reached, the truth is realized and
life again gets reunited to its moorings. Swami matures from
the sensuous delight of his childhood years to a sort of
metaphysical awareness in The English Teacher, as much as
Raju matures from his adolescent recklessness to a transcen-
dental existence. The illusions are abandoned in course of
time in favour of some 'stabilizing factor of life' (p.133,
Mr.Sampath). Narayan's characters are like caravans journeying
along life's varied experiences. Diverse facets of human
nature are presented. At times the social order is threatened.
But the Comic always presupposes some stable social values
against which the instincts and aberrations of the individuals
are focused in their awkward postures. In spite of their
frailties, there is an elemental simplicity about them;
There is a sure human feel in the virtues as well in the
vices of all the Malgudians.

What John Palmer says of Shakespeare's comic plays
seems to hold good for Narayan too:

The appeal of his comic characters, even as we laugh
at them, is to the touch of nature which makes the
whole world kin. A delicate balance is constantly sustained in the person of the play between the folly which makes them laughable and the simplicity which makes them lovable, between the frailties or faults which lay them open to rebuke and a common humanity which calls for charity, and secures for them an immediate understanding.

All the human follies and idiosyncrasies are the visible manifestations of life, however absurd or odd these might appear. Nataraj with his "original Heidelberg," Vasu with his pythons and carcasses, Mali with his story-producing machine, the cousin with his listening capacity, the monosyllabic poet with his epic "Radhakalyan," Sampoo with his film "Burning of kama," Ravi with his vision of beauty, Jagon with his philosophy and many other strange creatures crowd the stage of Malgudi. The countless frailties and fantasies of their existence are juxtaposed against one another to project a sense of comic incongruity. They act and react as a result of which the harmony in which the various components of the society exist gets disturbed. Of course, the comic vision ensures an ultimate return of the erring individuals to the fold of the society. But in all their attempts, however, irrational these may be, there is an intense throb of life which binds them to us in a shared human fate. This understanding of the human situation enables us to accept them not with hatred, but with affection and sympathy.
Narayan's moral stance makes his characters discard their jaundiced visions and realize the reality of things. Through frequent rise and fall, they move until their experiences culminate in wisdom. After many adventures and misadventures in life the characters return to the all-pervasive reality of Mauri sadar and saner. And during this journey, Narayan observes the vast spectrum of life. Suffering and wisdom make a man humble and endow him with a halo of martyrdom.

Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts, and The English Teacher appear to constitute a trilogy that envisages the journey of life from the tender, innocent existence of a child to the transcendental awareness of the Beyond. In successive stages of this journey Narayan brings his hero closer and closer to the point of maturity. The childhood pleasures in Swami and Friends and the adolescent emotions of The Bachelor of Arts are effectively caught with numerous comic details. But these are also punctuated with episodes of parting and loss, of trials and tribulations of life. All these experiences, through a process of encounter, interaction and mutual absorption lead to the final moment of the journey, a moment that discloses eternity when, as Krishnan in The English Teacher declares, "the past, present and the future welded into one." (p.212).
Swami and Friends presents not only an idyllic Malgudi and the fun and play of its little inhabitants like Swami, Hujum, Mani and Samuel, but also a picture of a child gradually getting groomed to the complex ways of life. Stage by stage Swami gets acquainted not only with different schools, but with cricket and even politics. The flirtations of Swami and his friends with politics and the exploits in cricket, their innumerable adventures are rendered in vivid comic details. The children's world of innocence in Swami and Friends stands as contrast to the adults' world of wiles which has been more pointedly presented in Narayan's later novels. Here we can see the various activities and feel the innocent minds of children. The comic vision is reflected in the children's simple ways of interaction with a world that is of far serious dimensions. The children's participation in the Freedom movement without any mature understanding of the problem is manifested in the burning of clothes and breaking of glass panes in the schools. The incongruity ensues from an interaction between the real world of serious business and the children's world of unadulterated pleasures. For a moment the gravity of the freedom struggle gives place to the play of children's impulses. Similarly the endless debate over the formation of a cricket club, the M.C.C. (Malgudi Cricket Club) with an implicit reference to the world famous Marylebone Cricket Club, the letter to Messrs Binns and many such episodes
speak of the children's innocent attempts to enact roles of
an adult world. In all their activities and adventures, Swami
and his friends quite unwittingly make a parody of the adult
world.

But Narayan's intention is to bring Swami, through
various stages of experience, to terms with reality. The
fantasies of the earlier days gradually recede into the past
and Swami moves to experience the first shock of reality in
the parting of Rajam, his dearest friend. Swami already has
had the full experiences of his childhood, its wonders and
excitements. Now when he steps from childhood to adulthood,
he needs to be first initiated into the workings of the world;
he needs the first feel of 'some natural sorrow, loss or
pain.' In the pangs of separation from his friend Rajam,
Swami moves away from the simple pleasures of his childhood
years and comes one step closer to maturity.

Swami and Friends ends with this parting between
friends, marking the culmination of innocence reflected in
children's lives. Logically enough, in the next novel,
Narayan leads us along the corridor of time, to the years of
in the next move Swami becomes Chandran, the adolescent youth
youth of the college days. The first part of The Bachelor of
Arts provides a vivid account of the happy college life,
just as the previous novel catalogued the sweet reminiscences
of the school life. Here the character is blissfully ignorant
of the various constrictions and compulsions of reality.
Narayan's task is to shift his character from the plane of innocence and ignorance to that of experience and knowledge. That is why in Swami and Friends the character is made to suffer the first shock of the world in the experience of parting with his intimate friend. In The Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher, he is to be exposed to further shocks. Accordingly, at the end of Part One of The Bachelor of Arts Chandran bids farewell not only to one friend, but to all his college friends. A chapter of life is turned over and he has to enter the portals of the wide world. Whereas Swami is aware of it only in simple, emotional terms, Chandran realizes it not only with an intensity of feeling, but also with a factual understanding of the ways of the world:

...Chandran was aware that he had passed the very last moments in his college life, which had filled the major portion of his waking hours for the last four years. There would be no more college for him from tomorrow. He would return to it a fortnight hence for the examination and ( hoping for the best ) pass it, and pass out into the world, forever out of Albert College. He felt very tender and depressed. ( p.51 )

From this moment Chandran moves through a series of experiences till he gets finally reconciled to Malgudi. Out of the conservative background of Malgudi, and the assured comforts of home, Chandran makes forays into the outside world. He passes through infatuation and frustration, and comes to know the confusing ways of the world outside. His
mind, nurtured by the moral values of an orthodox society, refuses to accept drinks and prostitutes in the metropolitan city of Madras. "This was the first time he had been so close to a man in drink; this was the first time he had stood at the portals of a prostitute's house. He was thoroughly terrified." (p.101) His contact with the outside world reveals to him the sham of things. Also no less sham is his brief spell of sanyasihood. Chandran's bewilderment in these encounters speaks of a sensitive heart's predicament in a world of strange forces. But in the comic design such predicament is viewed with fun and sympathy. Chandran returns to Malgudi discarding the illusions of his earlier days, because he realizes that for him his home and Malgudi are the inescapable realities which can comfort and caress.

And once these illusions of earlier days are abandoned, Chandran seriously decides to take up a vocation. In the struggle for existence he realizes that dreams and fantasies have no place in this world of hard, down-to-earth facts. Subsequently a proposal for a trip to England is dropped, because it is nothing more than an usual 'vague desire' (p.53) of an adolescent who has just passed his B.A. Stage after stage Chandran gets tuned to the ways of the world and learns to shoulder the responsibilities of life. The carefree life of his college days is a contrast to his mature business man's attitude when he takes up the agency of the 'Daily Messenger.'
His plan for the circulation of the paper seemed almost like a military combing of the town with sharp precision. Soon after he is soundly established in his business, he is taken to marry and build his own home. Before he is made a full-fledged man of the world, he undergoes the various experiences of pleasures and partings, of agony and ecstasy. Before plunging into the network of human relationships in the real world, he realizes the temporality of all these, perhaps as a prelude to the spiritual lessons of his life.

Chandran rose from the gallery and stood looking at some group photos hanging on the wall. All your interests, joys, sorrows, hopes, contacts, and experience boiled down to group photos, Chandran thought. You lived in the college, thinking that you were the first and the last of your kind the college would ever see, and you ended as a group photo; the laughing, giggling fellows one saw about the Union now little knew that they would shortly be frozen into group photos. (p.144)

This recognition of the transitoriness of things finds a more serious treatment in The English Teacher, where the character moves out of the bounds of a temporal existence in order to build a bridge with the life beyond, in the plane of the Eternal. At the end of The Bachelor of Arts the character is led to the threshold of the domestic life. But in The English Teacher, he intimately experiences it. In the journey of life another stage is reached.

In The English Teacher, Krishnan is none other than Chandran of The Bachelor of Arts. He is just like his other
friends who are lost in this wide world, entrapped by their own problems of existence. Chandran reflects nostalgically:

He met so few of his classmates, though they had been two hundred strong for four years. Where were they? Scattered like spray. They were probably merchants, advocates, murderers, Police Inspectors, clerks, officers, and what not. Some must have gone to England, some married and had children, some turned agriculturists, dead and starving and unemployed, all at grips with life, like a buffalo caught in the coils of a python.... ( p.145 ).

In The English Teacher, Krishnan obtains this same awareness. He is entangled in the vicious 'grip with life' till he comes to the realm of spiritual experiences.

The English Teacher does not correspond to Narayan's comic design. The action is frequently confined to the domestic scene or more properly, to the husband-wife relationship.

In Swami and Friends and in The Bachelor of Arts opportunities exist for the interaction of various discordant forces, for the display of the incongruity which is at the heart of the Comic. But in The English Teacher, the harmonious relationship between characters are perceived as existing not only in life, but also in death, or life after death.

Krishnan's ordeal of suffering brings him to the realization of the fundamental reality about existence. He reflects,

Wife, child, brothers, parents, friends .... We come together only to go apart again. It is one continuous movement. They move away from us as we move away from them. The law of life can't be avoided. The law comes into operation the moment we detach
ourselves from our mother's womb. All struggle and misery in life is due to our attempt to arrest this law or get away from it or in allowing ourselves to be hurt by it. This fact must be recognized. A profound unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life. All else is false. (p.203)

It sounds almost like the soliloquy of a tragic hero. Krishnan, after enacting his assigned role in the mundane plane of existence feels the striving within:

I was in search of a harmonious existence and everything that disturbed that harmony was to be rigorously excluded, even my college work. (p.205)

and he feels, "I find I can't attain it unless I withdraw from the adult world and adult work into the world of children." (p.211)

The seriousness and the apparent efficacy of the adult world appear futile in the face of the void of temporal human existence. The bliss of life can perhaps be attained only in the innocence of children. In moving into the children's world, Krishnan completes a full circle. While Raju has to go the hard way for his salvation, for Krishnan, it seems an easier process, for he chooses an esoteric path—the typical Indian way of occult. For Krishnan, it is more a readymade solution than the hard way of suffering and self-sacrifice. The episodes of the headmaster and his wife, and the small school of children are beautifully woven into this main plot.

As the novel advances, not only does Krishnan mature to a
metaphysical awakening, but also the headmaster. Simultaneously
the wife of the headmaster, who is little short of a shrew,
has also been metamorphosed to "a greatly chastened person."
(p. 284)

From Swami and Friends to The English Teacher, there
is a distinct pattern of development as far as the central
character is concerned. In spite of the variation in names
from novel to novel, one can clearly perceive a chronological
account of experiences of an individual beginning from the
innocent funs of childhood to the sorrow and wisdom of adult
life. Thus Swami, Chandran and Krishnan are the three successive
phases of an individual's life — childhood, adolescence and
adulthood respectively. Further, there is a significant movement
from the atmosphere of humour and fun towards a sense of
pathos and redemption achieved through experiences that are
apparently ridiculous and incongruous. It is a pattern that
characterizes Narayan's fictional world in novels like The
Guide or The Financial Expert. It is in this sense that the
three novels, Swami and Friends, Bachelor of Arts and The
English Teacher may be considered as forming a triology.

In Mr. Sampath, the spiritual guest of Srinivas is
almost identical with Krishnan's. In the early part of the
novel, we find him preoccupied with the metaphysical problems:
Life and the world and all this is passing—why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother? (p.30)

To attain the state of knowledge or equilibrium that can sustain his existence, Srinivas undergoes various experiences of events as in a phantasmagoria. He not only experiences events that happen to himself, but also all the events that happen to all others in the small town of Malgudi. During his travel he comes across many men and women who in unknown ways contribute to his understanding of the mystery as well as the reality of this world.

The problem of communication between the individual and the community is a major concern with Narayan. 'The Banner', which has stopped its publication, resumes once again because it serves as a viable medium of communication. 'The Banner' becomes a forum for calm contemplation for realizing experiences objectively in their real perspectives, when Srinivas is away from Sampath and his sorts. He realizes that the individual and the community, as much as man's within and without, are in eternal conflict.

The Banner has nothing special to note about any war, past of future. It is only concerned with the war that is always going on between man's inside and outside. Till the forces are equalised the struggle will always go on. (p.6)
Till the point of ripeness, when the passions will have been spent or the ego and the eccentricities will have reached their climactic stages, human life must take its chalked-out course. At the point of ripeness, the erratic forces will be brought to a halt, the equilibrium will be restored and "the forces are equalised." Srinivas, whose life has been a meeting-ground of all sorts of experiences not only of himself but also of others, gains most from it. For him it has been more of an intellectual progress than a spiritual one.²

Srinivas in Mr. Sampath and Nataraj in *The Maneater of Malgudi* serve as springboards for the various forces to act and react. Left to themselves, they are passive, peace-loving citizens who seem to have no difficulty in getting integrated with the community. As Raju, Sampath, Margayya and other heroes of Narayan's novels grow into ripeness, so also do these humbler characters like Srinivas, Nataraj, Sastri and Velan. Srinivas partakes the experiences of Sampath, Ravi, Shohanlal and De Mello as much as Nataraj partakes those of Vasu. For Nataraj, Vasu represents no more than the force of Evil that is inherent in the world of reality. The first chapter of *The Maneater of Malgudi*, builds a picture of peace and stability in the everyday existence of Nataraj as well as that of Malgudi. But the smooth sailing of life is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of Vasu.
Malgudi is gripped by a fear psychosis, and the free spirit, the community feeling and the normal business of this small town remain under temporary suspension. Implicit in this design is a motive to break the complacent attitude of the Malgudians and reawaken their dormant inner spirit to fight against the force of evil. The festival offers such an opportunity when the community is to be reintegrated and the enemy of the community is to be contained. With Vasu’s death, the elephant does not face any more danger nor does the festival, and the people’s faith in their religious roots is asserted. Natraj feels confident that

God Krishna was really an incarnation of Vishnu, who had saved Sajendra; he would again come to the rescue of the same animal.... (pp.182-33)

Sastri interprets Vasu’s death along the Shasmasura myth who was ‘unconquerable’ and ‘who scorched everything he touched, and finally reduced himself to ashes by placing the tips of his fingers on his own head.’ (p.242). For the Malgudians the nightmarish presence of Vasu is a necessity for the reassertion of their community spirit. For Velan and his fellow villagers of Mangal, Raju’s ordeal is not something outside themselves; it also becomes their own spiritual experience. They also take up fast in sympathy with Raju’s suffering.

In Vasu’s case it is a blast of his tremendous ego. He terrifies everybody. His attic is full of stuffed animals, and
his vocation turns him into a symbol of death. He goes on harassing individuals like Nataraj, the monosyllabic poet and Mr. Sen, the journalist. He even defies and assaults the police inspector. But his ego swells to its saturation point when he defies the entire community by planning to injure the temple elephant. Vasu’s ego is taken to the height of absurdity and correspondingly his fall becomes absurd and comic.

In the school of life, Narayan’s characters learn to discover their own follies and discard their illusions and pseudo-values. The compulsions of reality weigh heavy on the characters; ego is trimmed and man matures into a blissful state of knowledge. Margayya, Raju and Jagon, Narayan’s three prominent comic heroes demonstrate this process in their respective lives. All of them, through sheer wit and efforts, attain commendable material heights; but in the long run they are made to witness their own monuments crumble and life for them begins anew with a different set of values. Once the fever and the frenzy of the material world are over, the individual’s vision of existence gets tuned to the expectations of the world of reality. Both Margayya and Jagon undergo the same painful experience of a spoilt son. Both of them in their own ways pursue the materialistic ends of life. Margayya climbs the social ladder by dubious means such as the publication of the book ‘Domestic Harmony’ and the dishonest banking business. Dr. Pal, who is Margayya’s adviser
becomes the evil genius for Balu. Margayya's passionate desire to become rich, reflected in such events as his forty days' ritual, leads him to a state of hysteria. His meteoric rise calls for our admiration as well as censure. He shapes things to suit his own interests and a time comes when he is no more able to extricate himself from the things he has been associated with. Dr. Pal, with all his vulgar obsessions of sex and money moves from being Margayya's successful attempt to rise from the docility of his insignificant conservative background to a celebrity in the modern society by all sorts of indigenous ways remind us at once of the wit and cunning of Aristophanes' comic heroes. Till Margayya reaches the summit of his success, no morality, no social custom is allowed to come in the way of his ambitions and achievements. His observance of the religious rituals, the publication of 'Domestic Harmony' and his material cravings provide a picture of a funny medley. In him the value-oriented past and the money-oriented present simultaneously exist and for a time the illusion of success blinds him to the absurdity implicit in the relationship between these two opposing forces. This illusion is nursed and carried to a point when no longer can it sustain itself and a split soon occurs making Margayya aware of the truth of things. The course of his life moves through two stages. He defies all orthodox values and all norms of decency to attain his materialistic aspirations.
It is the struggle of a comic hero striving to assert his individuality in the face of all the odds of the world. But in the next phase of his life, it becomes almost a pathetic preoccupation of a father to contain his spoilt child. The comic hero who can defy the limitations of reality and have his own ways and terms becomes a helpless victim of his own misfortunes, being no longer able to shape things to his desired mould. His humble desire to lift himself out of dire poverty to a position of comfortable means gradually becomes an intense passion for 'wealth' (p.159). This frenzy not only swallows his mental existence, but also 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: there were currency bundles stacked up a foot high all over the floor.

( pp.163-64 )

Right after this Salu comes and demands his share of the property. Margayya also learns of Salu's degeneration—his drinking habits and his flirting with women. As he learns all this, he suffers from a sense of pathetic indecisiveness, because all these things have been, in a way, his own doing. Quite logically the bang comes razing Margayya's entire fortune to the ground. But simultaneously it restores to him the harmony of life, the inner peace which Margayya has, for quite a long period, deprived himself of. He is united to his brother
and son. It seems like a family reunion, made possible through sorrow and an understanding born of it. Suffering brings Margayya to a state of wisdom and he is now able to see through the veil of illusions. He is prepared to go to the banyan tree in front of the co-operative bank once again, with his 'old knobby trunk' (p.173) and start life afresh. He has not forgotten, and now realizes it with a renewed understanding, that the banyan tree, the 'old knobby trunk' with its pen and ink bottle are the realities to which he is basically ordained. He realizes the vanity of this gross materialistic world. Like Krishnan and the headmaster in The English Teacher, Margayya seeks an emotional refuge in the innocent world of children. He had neglected this joyous aspect of existence, being blinded by the glitter of money; but now he earnestly asks,

Now get the youngster here. I will play with him.
Life has been too dull without him in this house.
(p.173)

In this state of knowledge when the sham of life has been exposed and abandoned after immense suffering, Margayya is able to build a bridge with the world of innocence.

While for Margayya it is a home-coming, a return to humility, for Jegen it is a spiritual journey. Jegen is a vendor of sweets, a self-proclaimed Gandhian and a curious amalgamation of hypocrisy and sincerity. He has in him an
elemental innocence which evokes sympathy in spite of his follies and fail. He is deeply involved in his own worldly affairs in spite of his frequent pious statements on Gandhi, the Gita and the Upanishads. Yet, Jagon is set for a spiritual destination in the journey of a lifetime’s experiences. When he feels utterly shocked at the shattering of illusions that he has all along so lovingly nursed, he feels he has already ‘outlived’ (p.132) himself in this mundane world. He must now detach himself from all the routine drudgeries of life and have a ‘new jama’ (p.132). He reduces the price of sweets just out of sympathy for poor people and children, just at a time when his fond hopes about his own son have been betrayed. To a question by the cousin about the reduction of prices, Jagon replies, “I’ve had enough” (p.93). The reduction in prices leads to the meeting with the white bearded man and consequently to Jagon’s final retreat to the deity. The contact with this man suddenly transforms him, and opens before him hitherto unknown vistas of experiences.

Ecstatic visions of the entire cosmos flash before him:

He went on talking and Jagon listened agape as if a new world had flashed into view. He suddenly realized how narrow his whole existence had been—between the Lawley statue and the frying shop: Gall’s antics seemed to matter nought. “Am I on the verge of a new jama?” He wondered. (pp.119-20)

*But Jagon does not instantly get transformed into a sanyasi who renounces the world in search of higher truths of life.*
With Jagon it is a gradual process involving pain and conflict. Once his spirit reaches the threshold of the Spiritual, he no more feels crushed by the weight of this world. Eternity begins to unfold before him:

Sweetmeat vending, money and his son's problems seemed remote and unrelated to him. The edge of reality itself was beginning to blur....\(^{(P.118)}\)

Jagon renounces the world, but does not forget to take the bank book. He also writes down a cheque for the lawyer's fees and is prepared to arrange a ticket for Grace, if she desires to go back. It seems as if Narayan does not allow his comedy to lose its foothold from the earth, even though the realm of the Spiritual has already extended its invitation. Or perhaps, Jagon has been able to establish the desirable balance of which Srinivas speaks of in \textit{Mr. Sampath}, among various roles as father, father-in-law, shopkeeper and even a sanyasi. As far as Jagon's spiritual transformation coupled with his possession of the bank book is concerned, one would tend to agree with K.R.S. Iyengar that "...the demon has been worsted; but the Deity hasn't arisen yet."\(^{7}\) In the first phase of awareness, Jagon realizes,

An internal transformation had taken place; although he still cared for the shop and house, this latest contact had affected him profoundly. \((p.127-23)\)

As this ecstatic spell continues, he triumphantly declares, "I am a free man." \((p.191)\) From the tame docility of his earlier life and from the bondage of his shop and son, he moves
to metaphysical experiences. From that height of blissful freedom, he looks upon Mali, Grace and others with sympathy, who are lost in the quagmire of worldly attachments; and dutifully enough, Jagon makes provisions for them.

Jagon knows too well that suffering would bring Mali back to sense. He wisely comments, "A dose of prison life is not a bad thing. It may be just what he needs now." (pp.191-92) Mali's perversion leads him to a height of buffoonery when he tries to manufacture stories by machines. The arrogance in his behaviour with his father, his contemptuous defiance of the sacred traditions drag him to a point where he outgrows himself. Soon the punishment follows to shock him back to sense. Jagon knows the course of things to come when he advises the cousin,

Open the shop at the usual hour and run it. Mali will take charge of it eventually. (p.191)

Jagon has learnt to discard his weaknesses arising out of his worldly involvements. For his spoilt son Mali, he believes in the efficacy of punishment, or, in other words, of suffering. And as far as Jagon himself is concerned, even though he has not been able to leave this world of attachments completely, he is already bound towards the Spiritual.

Among all the characters of Narayan, Raju's character is most completely and clearly drawn. From the innocent days of childhood to the days of his ordeal he undergoes innumerable experiences related mainly to an instinctual way of living.
without any respect for social ethics. In a long series of
unscrupulous acts he cuckold a husband, drives out his
mother, forces Rosie's signature and at last plays on the
beliefs of innocent villagers. His entire career becomes
one of deception and he is gradually led to its height where
he must meet the inevitable fate of being doomed or being
resurrected as it was with the bandit Ratnaker in the Indian
mythology. It is because of the inherent goodness in him
and the unique compulsion of his mask that Raju is metamor-
phosed from an imposter to a martyr. His life takes a dramatic
turn when he meets Rosie and after this incident, he is
engaged in perpetual conflict with the society or the world
outside. For the satisfaction of his libidinal instincts he
offends not only Marco, but also his mother, uncle and Gaffur,
and the whole Indian tradition. A small jail sentence for
just an ordinary offence does not seem adequate for his
expiation. His salvation is to be worked out on a far greater
scale and he must be led to a further height of sins—of
exploiting the innocent faith of the villagers—where his
suffering in the process towards redemption will also be
correspondingly more intense. And since the transformation is
on a spiritual plane, what is warranted is not a decree of
jail sentence but a willing acceptance of suffering. To
borrow the words of T.S. Eliot,

What we have written is not a story of detection
Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.

_The Family Reunion_,
Part II, Sc.II.
In his eventful career, Raju assumes various roles. When one role proves insufficient for him he immediately discards it and takes up a new one until the options are exhausted, and a new possibility begins to offer itself on another plane. With a determined effort, Raju rejects his role of the fake Swami and volunteers to martyr himself for the sake of others:

For the first time in his life he was making an earnest effort, for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested. (p.213)

Here the comic hero ceases to be himself and enters the arena of the Sublime. He transcends his ego, forsakes the physical pleasures of life and from a fake Swami emerges as a saint.

Waiting for the Mahatma with its predominant political theme does not explore the potentialities of the individual's character. The narrative centres round the general theme of Gandhi's movement keeping the individual, the workings of his mind and the gradual development of his character subservient to the compulsion of that theme. That is why the growth of the character is not conspicuously evident in this novel. In spite of so many experiences of the freedom struggle, one still wonders if Sirram has grown from his adolescence. Of course, his marriage with Bharati gets postponed from time to time till he passes the test of service and sacrifice and gets the blessings of Gandhi for the marriage. In The Dark Room
The comic pattern is very faintly perceived because all attention is focused on Savitri whose pathetic predicament evokes a kind of gloom and seriousness. Her feminine helplessness has been presented in poignant terms and it pervades the entire story.

The Painter of Signs is marked by a difference in the treatment of the comic theme. The intensity of feelings and emotions, of the deep vibrations of life, that underlie the process of transformation of a character are noticeably absent in this novel. The plot is based on an unusual relationship between Daisy, a family-planning zealot with her fanatic idealism, and Ram, a painter of signs still roving in adolescent recklessness. The relationship which begins with a business transaction temporarily moves to an intimate bond. The claims of the 'ideals' gradually disrupt this intimacy and the relationship meets a premature end. From Daisy's idealistic standpoint, this relationship helps her to be wise and humble. She realises with repentance the betrayal of her emotions and instincts.

At some moments, and moods, we say and do things—like talking in sleep, but when you awake, you realize your folly.... (p.130)

This repentance makes her humble: "First time in her life she was humbling herself." (p.130) And now with this rare humility that comes out of repentance, she can probably devote herself to family planning work with greater dedication. Even though it is not going to be a spiritual experience for her,
it is bound to strengthen her idealistic commitments. What happens afterwards is beyond the scope of this novel.

For Ilaman, there is no spiritual progress and hence the reigning that is felt in various trials and tribulations of life in the career of Ilaman or Raja is missed here. Compared to theirs, Ilaman's experience is of minor significance affecting only some adolescent dreams. After undergoing this experience, he discards his earlier sentimental self.

If our considers Ilaman's act of throwing the key, which Daisy wants to be handed over to the watchman, as an 'act of existential defiance of the universe,' he further adds,

one of the movements of the novel seems to be towards a greater degree of self-realization by Ilaman. He is now less a sentimentalist, and his earlier rationalism partially and temporarily belied by his falling in love with a girl like Daisy, is now developing into a sort of rebelliousness against the Unknown.

The intense realization of Ilaman or Raja during their final hours of trial and suffering is absent in Ilaman's life and he does not return to the humility that accompanies such realization. He only returns to the carefree days of his past, shedding his earlier sentimentalism:

He 'looked at the key in his hand. "To hell with it," he said, and slung it into the dry fountain—an act which somehow produced the great satisfaction of having his own way at last. He mounted his cycle and turned towards The Board lost—that solid, real world of sublime souls who minded their own business. ( p.195 )

The illusions over, he returns to the reality of Alquudi,

'that solid real world' of The Boardless. And he even can
take pride in having 'his own way at last' by throwing the key to the gutter. But this gesture of Raman in declaring his freedom to have 'his own way' appears childish before the triumphant declaration of Jagan, "I am a free man."

Raman's experiences have been far less intense than those of Raju or Jagan or Nargyaya and hence his realization is not deep and intimate enough to be able to lift the Comic to the sublime height of human possibilities.

An overall analysis of Narayan's fiction makes it clear that in his comic vision, comedy transcends itself, as ignorance leads to knowledge, and the temporal yields to the EternaL In the richness of events folly is discarded, illusion is abandoned and knowledge reigns, humility returns. This new awareness born out of suffering brings calm and repose. The gravity and calm that descend into the depths of existence wash out all the claptrap of the comic hero. The spirit of the Comic, in a benign sweep over individuals and the community, assures life once again. Herein lies the triumph of the comic vision.

Narayan's fictional world is circumscribed by a traditional Hindu society where men rather than women hold a superior position. In his novels, Narayan's immediate concern is with the oddities and eccentricities of men. Women are generally confined to the home and hearth, and all sorts of taboos and traditions are clamped on them. But as the milieu
gradually changes from a strictly orthodox one to that of
progress and liberation which comes in the wake of modern
civilization, women slowly and subtly begin to assert their
independence in the society. Caught between the crosscurrents of
the Old and the lure of the New, a few women do venture to
realize their potential only to face hostility and end up in
failure. Narayan is quite aware of the position of women in
the society. He says in My Days,

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman
as opposed to "man," her constant oppressor. This must
have been an early testament of the "Women's Lib"
movement. She assigned her a secondary place and kept
her there with such subtlety and cunning that she
herself began to lose all notion of her independence,
her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in
an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal
victim of such circumstances.\textsuperscript{5}

Yet, as one notices in The Dark Grave, Narayan does not advance
his theme of "Women's Lib" to a decisive resolution, as Ibsen
does in A Doll's House, as A.M. Koul comments:

The point here, however, is not that, unlike Ibsen's
heroine, Narayan doesn't bang the door but has it
banged on her and that in the end, her dream of
feminine independence and dignity ever, she returns
submissively to the house never again to stray in
thought or deed.\textsuperscript{6}

Her revolt and her quick retreat are the alternate facets of
the predicament that the adventurous Indian woman faces in a
society where the orthodox traditions still have considerable
influence. This predicament reverberates in Narayan's novels
in different degrees. It seems worthwhile to see how far this
plight of women contributes to the comic design of Narayan's novels.

Narayan is not preoccupied with romantic love as a theme in his novels. He says in *My Days*:

I wished to attack the tyranny of love and see if life could offer other values than the inevitable man-woman relationship to a writer.

Narayan's major concern is to bring out the elemental humanness in men and women out of their various relations and reactions and to that end the man-woman relationship has figured in Narayan's fiction. But, *The Dark Room* is an exception in so far as it concentrates only on the plight of woman locked up within the confines of an orthodox society. This society has nothing to offer her except material refuge. The peace of Savitri's family life gets disturbed when the glamorous Mrs. Shantabai arrives at Malgudi. She proudly declares, "If I had a family to hinder me I shouldn't have come here with my application." (p. 46) Shantabai comes as an intruder defying and despising the traditional values. She dreams of owning a Baby Austin and dismisses films like 'The Ramayan' as sheer mythological nonsense. She flirts with Ramani to promote her selfish interests. She combines her feminine independence with a shrewd opportunism that characteristically belongs to the New civilization. Ramani's romance with her and his willing servility to become a toy in her hands only makes him look ridiculous. To an equal extent, Shantabai evokes our derision.
She abandons her drunkard husband and her family and successfully crushes the walls of the doll's house. But she carries her newfound feminine liberty to a perverted height, quite unlike Nora who makes a revolutionary attempt to realize the essential human being in her suppressed self. Shantabai appears comically odd in Calcutta where traditional values govern human relationships. But as P.S. Sundaram suggests:

Refusing to be a discarded drudge, Savitri goes out of the house, not dramatically banging the door like Nora, but fleeing like a hunted animal... Freedom is a fine concept but creatures like Savitri can do only one thing with it—commit suicide.

Narayan does not make Savitri a martyr like Antigone nor a crusader like Nora. She moves from the darkness of her house to the darkness of the temple, both the house and the temple being considered as sacred social institutions, in spite of the oppression they inflict. But parallel to the husband-wife relationship of Savitri and Ramani, there is another relationship between Mari and his wife, Pocni. Mari is a blacksmith-cum-burglar, who maintains a strange but sweet relationship with his dominating wife. Their peculiar world seems to be a pleasing liberation from the oppressive inhibitions and the accompanying hypocisies of the middle class society. The Dark Room of course does not present any particular creed about women. It rather presents the novelist’s aesthetic realization of the predicament of women in a particular social context.

In different forms and degrees it has figured in Narayan’s
other novels. But because of a society that respects woman, Narayan does not make his women characters and their mistakes and moral lapses explicit targets of ridicule.

Discarding the austere life of a widow and leaving her son to the care of strangers, Shanti in Mr. Sampath accepts a life of easy morals in the tinsel, celluloid world and thus moves to one extreme of permissiveness. But her return to the fold of the society is equally dramatic. In rejecting the jaundiced vision of her earlier film life, she now prepares herself to move to another extreme of religious austerity:

I am sick of this kind of life and marriage frightens me. I want to go and look after my son, who is growing up with strangers. Please leave me alone and don’t look for me. I want to change my ways of living. You will not find me. If I find you pursuing me, I will shave off my head and fling away my jewellery and wear a white saree. You and people like you will run away at the sight of me. I am, after all, a widow and can shave my head and disfigure myself. (p.219)

Her arrival in the Sunrise Studio creates sensation as well as complications. She becomes a mistress of Sampath who is also a house-holder and coincidentally she also turns to be Ravi’s lost vision of beauty. Shanti soon becomes the centre of the plot and various human drives and deeds related to her create an atmosphere of incongruity, which is represented in concrete physical terms in the scene of kidnapping. But in the midst of all these confusions, Shanti, quite like a typical Indian woman, lets herself carried on by the events. She flirts with Sampath and moves with a handbag made of the hood of a cobra.
She becomes a glamorous film actress, but stupidly sells herself. Yet underneath all her immoral acts there lurks a certain naivety which draws sympathy rather than harsh judgement.

This attitude is evident in the character of Rosie in The Guide. Opposing compulsions weigh heavily on her life, propelling her along a path usually unchartered for women in an Indian society. Having been born into a family of temple dancers who "are viewed as public women" (p.75), she has no option but to seize any opportunity of marriage. Her marriage is quite unconventional and funny. Rosie recollects,

I had myself photographed clutching the scroll of the University citation in one hand, and sent it to the advertiser. Well, we met, he examined me and my certificate, we went to a registrar and got married. (p.75)

She marries an archaeologist husband with no human warmth:

Dead and decaying things seemed to unlock his tongue and fire his imagination, rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs. (p.72)

Confined to a mechanical existence, Rosie's instincts for dance cannot find fulfilment till she finds a patron in Raju and moves out of the walls of the family. Marco's apathy and indifference towards her feelings and desires take such a cruel form that Rosie readily receives the reader's sympathy.

As events proceed, she gradually rises to fame. But, all through, her passion for dance has been so intense and her devotion has been so sincere that her aberrations are viewed with kind understanding. Time and again her repentant self is
brought to the forefront of the narrative through her repeated brooding over her husband. G.D.Narasinhaiah remarks in this context:

"... especially in the way he takes care to preserve Rosie from inner taint. Narayan seems to be affirming what has been hailed in the Indian tradition as the Feminine Principle in life."

During all her unethical transactions she remains the figure of a docile, innocent Indian woman and her inner self seems not to have been stained by what she does on the surface. After Raju's imprisonment she becomes a completely pathetic figure, being virtually alone in the world. She tries her best to save Raju, which she considers as an obligation and duty. Her sins, if not from an ethical, yet from an existential standpoint, are vindicated and her suffering combined with her moral lapses makes her strikingly different from other women characters in Narayan's novels. Her predicament verges almost on the tragic.

Bharati, the young heroine of *Waiting for the Mahatma*, comes full way out of the traditional inhibitions and chooses a public life dedicating herself to the service of Gandhi. It is a conscious attempt made by an inspired girl and even though in pre-independence India the orthodox taboos still hold good, Bharati is never made the butt of ridicule. Rather her sacrifice, purity and humility bestow on her character a certain dignity in spite of her sharp divergence from the common code.
As Malgudi registers changes in urbanization and material advancement, a liberated atmosphere begins to prevail. The age has its own slogans and shibboleths and family planning is one of them. The spirit of liberations has been manifested in the character of Daisy, whose dynamism controls all the events in *The Painter of Signs*. Whereas Rosie has the traditional woman in herself in her dependence on the men folk (first on Marco, then on Raju), Daisy is strikingly modern in her spirit of independence. Even in the Malgudi of the 70's Daisy appears absolutely unconventional and she shatters all our routine impressions of woman. She has a "sort of unmitigated antagonism to conception". (p.87) that flagrantly violates the traditional Indian notion that a woman's glory lies in giving birth to a large number of children. Ironically, this family-planning zealot is always alienated from the institution of family in some way or other. She gets suffocated in a joint family into which she is born and feels that her individuality is strangulated.

Right from the age of thirteen, when the prospective bridegroom visits her, she becomes conscious of her humiliating status as a doll:

> And then they seated me like a doll, and I had to wait for the arrival of the eminent personage with his parents. (p.131)

At this very moment, she decides to break the walls of the doll's house. She offends the groom in his face and thus also
offends a whole orthodox tradition. In her early years she flees her family and in later years, unable to rid herself of the feelings of guilt, she fails at translating her court¬ship into marriage. Somehow or other she cannot get reconciled to the idea of a family. In the familiar background of Malvudi, she is a bizarre figure. "She had no taboos of any kind" (p.37) and "the only topics she could appreciate are birth control, population and allied subject" (p.34). She roams the country¬side in her mission of family planning:

If she found an upturned packing case or a stone-slab, she sat on it, cross-legged and never stirred until the bus came, without saying a word or noticing the people who stared at her. In order to be unnoticeable, she wore a saree of the drabbest shade, never used any powder or make-up, and did her hair up indiffer¬ently, and if it was ruffled in the wind, she smoothed it out with her palm. (p.60)

She is the 'New Woman,' on whom no social inhibitions are clamped. With rare exception to her emotionalism at times, Daisy can be said to be nearer to the female version of Marco. Both of them are clearly not cut out for a married life; both of them are heart and soul dedicated to their projects—one to the archaeological survey in the Hempi hills; the other to the cause of family planning. In Daisy, the cold professionalism of Marco and the revolutionary zeal of Bharati exist together. If Savitri and Rosie revolt against their doll's houses, Daisy seems to carry this revolt farther, even to a historical height. If The Dark Room is 'an early
testament of the Women's Lib movement. The Painter of
Siams is its more pronounced representation.

William Walsh thinks that in Narayan's novels,

... the women rather than the old represent "Custom
and Reason" and know "what is and what is not proper."11

The sweet old world of Malgudi is sustained by grandmothers
and aunts and by their innumerable superstitions. The wives
of Srinivasa, Sampath and Nataraj, the very pictures of
docility, are still devoted to their domestic drudgeries.

Into such a pattern of traditional life the adventures, or
perhaps the misadventures, of women like Shanti, Rosie and
Daisy, do not instantly fit in and hence they evoke varied
responses from the readers—wonder and sympathy, doubt and
disapproval and at times mild ridicule. They are not rebels as
Nora is. They merely escape the suffocation of an orthodox
society and hence they do not have any definite mission and
their movements are haphazard. Daisy, who carves out her
life with a singular determination reminds us of the uncompromis-
ing idealism of Alceste in Moliere's The Misanthrope.

But in her iconoclastic views and rigid unconventional habits,
in the particular social context of Malgudi, she is a travesty
of womanhood.

In spite of their lapses and violations of social
norms, Narayan's women characters evoke a sympathetic response.
The contribution of these characters to the comic design of
the novels, though small, is significant. Like their male
counterparts, they also return to the fold of the society, a little sadder and wiser. Savitri returns to her children and husband and for the time being at least it is a happy family again. Shanti, once her illusions are over, returns to take care of her son. Experience chastens Rosie to accept a life of calm resignation.

The Malgudi drama possibly would not have been complete without these women characters, since they constitute an inalienable part of the society and thus are subject to the influences and pressures of the changing times. Narayan is hesitant to extract the comic potentials out of her women characters to the extent he does it out of his men. The barriers of orthodoxy and social conventions forbid a woman to choose her own way to realize her individuality. Those who have crossed their domestic frontiers even for reasons which can be defended or excused are easily derided by the tradition-ridden society. The helplessness of their plight and the traditional concept of dignity in women have obstructed them to rise to the heights of the comic; yet they have been instrumental in exploiting the comic tension in the novels and also in affecting at times a desired balance between the serious and the comic which is typical of Narayan's narrative technique.

In Narayan's novels, the characters—the men folk to a greater extent and the women folk to a lesser extent—
from the normal path. The men characters move along erroneous paths to realize their ambitions and instincts. On the other hand the women characters move along unchartered ways, as far as the orthodox Indian tradition is concerned, in quest of some relief from the suffocation or oppression of domestic life. As they move, they clash with the established codes of a traditional society and thus appear funny, pathetic and absurd. They are ultimately led to a point where their whims and fancies can no more sustain them. When the stage of ripeness is reached, their illusions crumble and normal reality is restored. Narayan's comic vision ensures normalcy and harmony as his men and women ultimately and inevitably mature into wisdom.
NOTES


2. Srinivas questions himself in Chap. II, "Life and the world and all this is passing—why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother?" (p.30) Shirley Chew comments on the process of realization in Srinivas' character: "This impression of the resilience of life produces a sense of elation in Srinivas.... A properly understood detachment which is both a defence and an assertion and yet not so detached as to forget the calls of humanity—this is the answer Srinivas has been given to the question he raised in chap. Two.... Perhaps Srinivas apprehended as nearly as possible the poise and rhythm shadowed forth by the little figure of Natgraaja before whom he prays every morning." Shirley Chew, "A Proper Detachment: The Novels of R.K.Narayan," Readings in Commonwealth Literature, ed. William Walsh (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p.72.


7. My Days, p.95.


