CHAPTER IV

LEVELS OF REALITY

A civilized society assures a happy balance between man's elemental nature and his conduct as a social being. Human nature aspires towards the gratification of impulses and instincts which, in reality, is always thwarted. Celebration of the primary impulses is the chief concern of the Comic. As Robert M. Torrance observes, it is

Comic not primarily because he is laughed at but because—in the root sense of home—he celebrates life, of body and mind. The comic hero has his own option of finding for such celebration, independent of any rational or moral consideration. This obviously warrants an encounter with the world or the external reality. Torrance has aptly suggested that satire and celebration are the two features of the Comic that exist symbiotically:

...the two conceptions of comedy, as satire and celebration, though opposite, are by no means exclusive: reviling and reveling have always been closely akin. In his contest with a relentlessly hostile world the comic hero's affirmation of a subversive (and even anarchical) sense of life necessarily makes him ridiculous and contemptible in the eyes of much of that world. In this existential encounter, individual reality is juxtaposed against social reality; the within against the without. The elemental urges and various instinctual compulsions, for their celebration, take recourse to ways that often do not get
rational approval, so that they become the objects of satire. The comic hero is free to choose his way, for he asserts his independence. His existence is not bound by any social taboos or conventions. He enjoys a free will that the ordinary men of the society seldom enjoy, though they cherish it in their subconscious or unconscious. Thus the struggle of the comic hero elicits two dissimilar responses in us simultaneously—our rational self satirizes the attempts and ambitions of the comic hero; and our prissorial self identifies itself with the comic hero in the celebration of the orgiastic impulses.

The comic fiction shows the pathetic plight of man who has been put in a system that demands a massive instinctual sacrifice. This sadistic principle is so much entrenched in the fabric of social reality that man with an untassable nature cannot easily reconcile to it. To quote Richard Wollheim in this context, "he is placed in the world in such a way that he can experience pain very readily." 3 This fundamental disorder is built into the very pattern of the universe creating a hiatus between the ideal and the actual, between individual and society. The comic hero attempts, to an extent that makes him seem pathetic, to work out his life in a strange, hostile environment, led by unknown, uncontrollable drives of the self.
There being a fundamental incongruity in the scheme of things, man's existential encounter with reality appears comic. The conventions and customs of a mighty social order are threatened by the fond dreams of the comic hero. In the novels of R.K. Narayan, the ascent is always on the ordinary man, with his small ambitions and passions alternating between the constrictions of an orthodox tradition into which he is born and the carnivals of a free world to which he is driven by his primal instincts and urges. Narayan's comic hero embodies a paradox: he has been reared by the religious rituals and beliefs of an age old tradition, and on the other hand, he has been moulded by the drives of his elemental self. As a result of this paradox the harmony of form in Narayan's novels emerges from an orchestration of two levels of reality—the social and the individual. The details of nature, of environment, of customs, superstitions and costumes are juxtaposed against the details of the various states of mind—in varying moods of uncertainty, nostalgia, indignation and self satisfaction. The individual reality and the social reality interact to form the comic pattern. Dream and fact are set against each other with no intention to proclaim the supremacy of either, but to present a whole picture of life where the validity of each is recognized. The orchestration of realities which forms the comic pattern is embedded in the very process of living. The people in Narayan's world represent varieties of life in all
its manner and proportion, facts and fantasies.

From Swami and Friends, to The Painter of Signs, his latest novel, Narayan depicts life in terms of innumerable aspirations and frustrations, successes and failures, and oddities and indiscretions. He does not exclude any particular age group, and within the bounds of the Comic, every stage of life has got its own chalked-out place, reacting to the world outside in its own typical way. All the peculiarities, vagaries and villainies, however irrational or unwise they may be, are the projections of the inner urges of life and are sincere human attempts to realize life in terms of full pleasures of body and mind which are the basic objectives of the Comic.

The Swami and Friends clearly illustrates the boundaries of the Comic in Narayan's world of fiction. Swami and his friends, in their innocence, transform the external reality to conform to their childlike fancies and successfully live in their own world of make-believe, much as Don Quixote does. Their participation in the National movement by burning caps and by breaking glass panes of their schools, their M.C.C. and their serious business letter to Messrs Dinns—all these and many more done in simple earnestness and in obstinate defiance, project an attitude that is essentially comic. Childhood impulses and instincts are juxtaposed in a spirit of jubilant conciliation against the world of grave business.
the spectre of which hangs large in Narayan's other novels. Blissfully oblivious, the innocent children alter the reality of a complex world into their own simple and peculiar terms and strive for a full celebration of their urges.

As the scene changes from an unpretentious childhood to a shrewd and calculative adulthood, the comic perspective also changes from conciliation to confrontation. The Bachelor of Arts successfully presents this aspect of changing perspectives. In the first pages of this novel it is all happy, smooth going life for Chandran. But afterwards the world becomes increasingly hostile to him. His adolescent yearnings for Malathi and his emotional outbursts are piqued by a reticent, realistic world. The events reach a point of fantastic absurdity when Chandran dons the garb of a sanyasi, not out of genuine realization but out of some fits of frustration—a situation typical of Narayan's comic ingenuity. But the events move and change very fast offering ample scope to the comic hero to display the various facets and possibilities of his character in response to the demands of living. Chandran takes up the agency of 'The Daily Messenger,' marries Susila and can become a man of the world as easily and quickly as he had renounced this world earlier. It is a crisscross of relationships between the individual and the
world, sometimes opposing each other and sometimes coming to terms.

In Mr. Sammath one finds a rendezvous of all comic forces. Sampath, Srinivas, Soau, De Sello, Shanti, Ravi and many others are frantically involved with one another in bizarre relationships. The characters of Narayan's novels cannot exist independently. All their pranks and idiosyncrasies fit amazingly into one another's to form a total comic pattern. That John Kilham says in connection with Dickens' Pickwick Papers seems true of Narayan's novels too:

The important thing to note is that the characters are only made possible by the story. Jingle cannot exist independently of Dr. Slammer and the Widow, of Rachael Wardle and the White Hart.

The characters in Mr. Sammath are at once contrary and complementary to one another. Srinivas' metaphysical concerns are inextricably linked with the frenzied material involvements of Sampath, Soau and De Sello. Srinivas, in spite of the philosophical disposition of his character unwittingly gets involved in the comic world of gross, mundane things. He hovers between the world of serious philosophic speculations and the world of philistine pleasures, being uncertain of the value of either. Ravi's impossible vision of beauty along with the concomitant frenzy sets the comic process in motion until the plot is carried to the point of resolution.

In the grand portrait gallery of Mr. Sammath also exist numerous other comic characters, like the miser landlord who
"collected the rent on the second of each month, took away the entire amount and placed it in Sarayu Street post office bank" (pp. 7-9) and at the same time professing himself to be a sanyasi who "bathed at the street tap and fed himself on cooked rice which was distributed as charity in a nearby temple." (p. 7) In the character of this greedy, pharisaical old man the comic incongruity is self-evident.

Among all the comic heroes of Narayan, Sampath displays his existential potential to the full and till the end he remains a comic hero, unbeaten and untiring in spite of the hostility of all the world around him. Other characters in this novel like Soma, De Hello simply vanish; Srinivas is restored back to 'The Sanner,' Narayan's comic heroes elsewhere fail to maintain their defiant spirit till the last against the scheme of things. Being battered in the process they switch over their allegiance from an imaginative world of unbridled freedom to the servile codes of a regimentative society, and some like Raju attain a sublime transformation. But Sampath alone remains, to the last, true to the comic credo. Throughout the novel the show is at his command. He can baptize people around him to his own way of thinking. He successfully dictates his own terms and demolishes the conditions of a moral world. The docile citizen in Srinivas becomes dumbfounded in his first meeting with Sampath.
They came to a costly furnished room upstairs—a very special room as a board hung outside it said: "For ladies and families only." Srinivas halted before it, finding another excuse: "We are neither ladies nor families. How can we go in?"
"These rules are not for me," the other said.

( p.67 )

For Sampath no rules exist. Even when he suffers a setback towards the end of the novel, his spirit is not defeated and probably a new venture awaits him at the railway station. To a question of Srinivas, Sampath replies, "Thanks, I'm going to the railway station. I'll manage there." ( p.219 )

He takes up different roles in quick succession—printer, film producer and actor. His spirit cannot be confined to any particular role or framework and the options do not end for him. He challenges and jeers at all sorts of social institutions. He can crack and munch groundnuts in the court of a magistrate in a gesture of defiance at the judiciary, the most respectable institution of the society; he can ignore his family and flirt with the actress Shanti.

Sampath cherishes an independence of spirit and in such cherishing lies his conflict with the external reality. The encounter exposes the comic incongruity; but every conflict has its inherent pathos. One does not miss the subtle undertone of pathos in the characters of Sampath, Raju, Margooya and Jayan. Various emotions and aspirations of the individual respond to the compulsions of the world in diverse ways. Against the desire of Ravi's innermost self —
against his intense aesthetic longings stand a host of forces of the commercial world represented by Sampath and his colleagues. This unequal relationship drags itself to a point where it is no more possible to maintain the apparent equilibrium and consequently the comedy of it springs to the surface in clear, visual details. Ravi's mad act of snatching Shanti away from the amorous Shiva (Sampath) in the most romantic scene of the film 'The Burning of Kama,' his rampage through the entire studio virtually creating total chaos are gestures of comic challenge at a world that has strangulated his inner urges. His frenzied hide and seek with Sampath, Somu, De Mello and all the other film folk during this episode of kidnapping subtly suggests the eternal hide-and-seek game that the individual and the world play between themselves. In Ravi's case it is the comedy of an individual's unrealized dreams and his desperate attempt to exist meaningfully, a comedy of human helplessness in the face of a cold, objective world.

Against the odds of life the comic hero proudly proclaims his belligerent selfhood. The heroes in Narayan's novels suffer from a sort of ego-crisis and all their entanglements are the resultant effects of this crisis. Margayya's poverty and his inferior social status have made him challenge his fate. With wounded pride he snubs 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 so very soon—and who knows, if your secretary seeks any improvement of his position, he can come to me. (p.11)

In Margayya's case money at first becomes an essential fact of existence; then it becomes an obsession and perversion. Successive successes boost his ego to a point when he considers nothing impossible for him:

He has immense confidence in himself now. He could undertake any plan with ease; he could shape his son's future as if it were just as much clay in his land. (p.37)

His burgeoning ego not only takes possession of his own self, but also of his own son and blinds him to reason and reality, thus destroying all of them in the process. He dwells simultaneously on two opposing planes—the traditional and the modern. In the first pages of the novel, Margayya's poverty, his dreams and aspirations are pitted against a rich society for which he madly craves. In the latter part, his ethical degeneration born out of his own inflated ego leads not only to the corruption of his son but also to the collapse of his business empire. In the first part it is the comic challenge of a poor, aspiring man at his fate; in the second, it is a moral suicide of an apparently invincible hero that evokes a sense of both the ridiculous and the pathetic. In Margayya, the ancient and the modern simultaneously exist effecting perpetual comic tension.
juxtaposition of the age-old convention and the modern character," Graham Greene rightly suggests, "provides much of the comedy." The orthodox ritual of forty days, the publication of the book 'Domestic Harmony,' the cunning banking business—through the succession of these events Hariyaya gradually moves away from innocence to a shrewd sense of material success. Ironically Hariyaya is caught in the coil of his own creations and is at least betrayed by them.

But all these events mirror his earlier deprivations and dreams. He successfully manoeuvres things to suit to his own interests. His fall is hastened by Balu's modern way of living which his orthodox mind cannot endorse; but quite innocently he has long since accepted the values of the modern, materialistic civilization for the promotion of his own career. The comic incongruity can be perceived in terms of the two phases of Hariyaya's career—his struggle against the society that loathes him for being poor; and his struggle against his son—who is his own replaced self—which has nursed and nurtured the modern mode of living in violation of all traditional Hindu ethics that he has always held dear. With the denouement he moves a full circle and is back at his original position, chastened by his experience, wisdom and humility. It is in this sense that Graham Greene speaks of Hariyaya as possessing "the hidden
poetry and the unrecognized pathos we so often find in Tchechov's characters who on the last page vanish into life.

The poignancy of the tragicomic clash of generations is more acutely felt in The Vendor of Sweetmeats. The aged sweet-vendor Jagni is a bundle of contradictions, who skillfully combines his business profits with exalted Gandhian principles. The comic incongruity is apparent in the unique blend of hypocrisy and sincerity in his character. The various urges in his character, that are often mutually contradictory, find their own ways of fulfillment; and conflicting though they may be between themselves, they exist in apparently wonderful harmony. He advises everybody to conquer taste in order to conquer the self, soins for an hour every day and wears thick sandals made out of the leather of an animal which dies of old age because "he does not like to think that a living creature should have its throat cut for the comfort of my feet." (p.15) He has completely simplified his life, has discontinued sugar, and takes twenty drops of honey in hot water every day instead. He has also given up rice and lives on "a little stone-ground wheat with honey and greens." (p.16) He is capable of simultaneously managing both his spiritual and worldly affairs.
As long as the frying and sizzling noise in the kitchen continued and the trays passed, Jagen noticed nothing, his gaze unflinchingly fixed on the Sanskrit lines in a red bound copy of the Bhagavad Gita, but if there was the slightest pause in the sizzling, he cried out, without lifting his eyes from the sacred text, "What is happening?" (p.18)

He surreptitiously counts the 'free cash' which "is entitled to survive without reference to any tax." (p.20) Jagen's idealistic ritual is nicely woven into the shrewd pragmatism of a business man to form a unique comic personality. When Jagen is betrayed by his own fond dreams for his son the comic hero just becomes a pathetic stump of life. Before Mali's story producing machine, his half American, half Korean wife Grace, and his friends and foreign transactions, Jagen's cherished notions of marriage and morals crumble.

With the approach of the modern, his apparently religious stance is reduced to a ruin.

Through long flashbacks the sweet past of his adolescent and marriage days is brought to the forefront of the narration offering immediate contrast to the lone days of his widower's life. Jagen's dreams and ideals are pitted against a hostile world of fleeting time and of fast changing values. The long nostalgic recollections convey in poignant terms life's inherent sadness of time passing away and one's dear world gradually receding with it. His sadness, his existential agony, in a way, becomes the lot of the entire human kind.
That is why the reader is able to build an emotional rapport with Jagon in a common understanding of life.

In The Guide such understanding is made possible by allowing the reader a glimpse into life's mysteries and myriad colours, into its depths and possibilities. Raju, the reckless and the romantic hero is poised against a whole set of hard realities represented in the form of Marco, Velan, his mother, Gaffur and many others. He graduates from a small boy helping his father at the shop to the owner of a railway stall and then successively to a guide, a romantic lover, a fake swami and ultimately to a martyr. In Raju's character, the ego-crisis is sensitively rendered.

On this aspect of Raju's character William Walsh comments,

...the events in the novel also have a thematic significance in that they suggest the apparently hopeless struggle of Raju's submerged individuality to achieve an independent identity. This is why we are aware so often of a rather frantic quality in Raju's actions and meditations, for all that he keeps up throughout his off-hand, youthfully cheerful manner. 7

The innate urge of man to find a meaning of life, to assert his identity in an imperious world, takes up an urgency in the character of the comic hero and the greater the urgency, the greater is the dynamism of his actions and reactions. He can defy the ethical injunctions of the society to satisfy his existential needs. This comic clash with the external reality presents life's depths and colours in a kaleidoscopic pattern.
Raju, in quite the characteristic way of a comic hero, becomes the architect of his own fate defying the compulsions of the traditions or of society, the forces outside and alien to his instincts and urges. He is an over aspiring young man, and his ambitions make him abandon his father's humble shop, the railway stall and the vocation as a guide. His romantic yearnings, which one fails to rationalize from a standpoint of social morality, are set against the cold reality of a social existence represented by the apparently invincible characters like his mother, uncle, Marco and his trusted friend Gaffur. Raju, Rosie and Marco have all broken away from a normal way of living and all of them are involved in a curious triangular relationship. Dream and fact, within and without, are entangled with one another in an existential equation. The comic hero marches over reason and rationality in a defiant spirit of adventure to have a grand gala of an unrestrained life. Raju creates a world of his own where he can nurse his desires. For this he cuts himself off from his family; he even robs Nalini and her husband of their original identities with whom he is engaged in immediate relationship. Nalini becomes Rosie and for her husband, Raju invents the name of Marco. His inner urges and the corresponding actions are set against a host of forces—against the cold professionalism of Marco, against the orthodox morality of his mother and the...
aggressiveness of his uncle, against an unpredictable Rosie and at last against an alien and indifferent crowd during his spiritual ordeal at the riverside. Raju gets entangled with the world in a multi-dimensional plane, and in each plane his actions are aimed at subverting an orthodox and rational world that putsbridles on human instincts and impulses. The reader feels a compelling sense of admiration for Raju for the independence of his spirit and the tenacity of his actions, in spite of all its implications of social impropriety.

The tragi-comedy of the individual's helplessness in the face of an awful external reality becomes abundantly clear when Velan, even after hearing the entire history of Raju's life, accepts him as "Swami." What makes Velan behave so is left ambiguous. But in the figure of Velan, all the weights of the world come to crush Raju and force him to maintain an utterly inconvenient mask. On the first day of his fast, quite in the guileful way of a comic hero, he secretly eats some stale rice. But on the second day, he searches for food in the aluminium vessel in vain. His indomitable ego, which hitherto has been responsible for all his crises, once again comes to assert itself as a challenge to the pressure of the world:
He felt enraged at the persistence of food thoughts. 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." (p.213)

With this resolution of Raju, in forsaking a hedonistic life and in accepting martyrdom, the narrative moves out of the bounds of the comedy and enters the portals of a religious drama; but the comic incongruity persists, though now outside the character of Raju. Raju's lone, rigorous penance and the loony crowd around him are in ironic proximity with each other. They are, in effect, an encounter between an extremely private self and an indifferent world lying outside:

...each day the crowd increased! In a week there was a permanent hum pervading the place. Children shouted and played about, women came carrying baskets filled with pots, fire wood and food stuffs, and cooked the food for their men and children. There were small circles of smoke going up all along the river bank, on the opposite slope, and on this bank also. It was studded with picnic groups, with the women's bright coloured sarees shining in the sun; men too had festive dress. Bullocks unhitched from their carts jingled their bells as they ate the straw under the trees. People swarmed around little water-holes. (p.210)

Raju undertaking the penance in order to eradicate the drought and thus mitigate the sufferings of the people, becomes a part of the people in a spiritual sense. Yet, he remains his solitary self amidst all these merry-makings and religious festivities. The objective world looms large with the special trains carrying passengers, Gaffur's taxi, the
big tea stall erected by the Tea Propaganda Board, the khaki-
clad inspectors of the Health department and the D.D.T.,
the film shows about Malaria, Plague and B.C.G. vaccination,
the swarming press reporters and the American film producer,
the gambling booth and paddlers and enforcers. A serious
religious mission generating such propaganda and festivities
that belong absolutely to a commercial world is, of course,
a comic spectacle.

While the commercial world goes on exhibiting itself,
Raju shrinks inward:

The hum of humanity around was increasing. His
awareness of his surroundings was gradually
lessening in a sort of inverse proportion. (p.214)

What seems to be a funny collaboration between innocent
village folk and an imposter working for an impossible end,
takes on serious dimensions. Against the trepidations in the
inner depths of existence of a sinner experiencing the
metamorphosis into a saint through self mortification, the
flirtations and flippancy of the curious crowd, of the vast
network of commercial and governmental activities are juxta-
posed. The Government’s silly telegraphic advice to persuade
Swami to resume fast later comes as a comic relief at the
height of a tense situation. Beneath the comedy of the entire
scene, an awful anxiety lurks about Raju, who faces the most
crucial tryst with his destiny. Narayan, here, not only depicts
the state of Indian society in a period of transition; on
the existential plane, he seems to suggest the bewildering relationship between the individual and the world.

The human situation is portrayed in a sort of uncanny atmosphere in *The Maneater of Malgudi*. Vasu, the arrogant taxidermist lives a gross philistine existence. His highly inflated ego does not brook any challenge, and the humble society of Malgudi can only build a relationship of tame subservience with him. He virtually creates a parallel world where he reigns supreme. He has his own ideas and logic that confound our moral sense and the time-honoured social values. He considers marriage to be an unnecessary social institution, for him 'melas' are arranged in our country so that thousands can die in Cholera or Small-pox or just get trampled as a result of which the population of the country can be kept in 'manageable limits,' (p.195) and shooting is not at all terrible and it is just a 'give and take' (p.176) between the shooter and the object who receives the bullet. His immense physical strength, his fantastic logic and way of life and the very nature of his profession set him in immediate contrast with the docile folk of Malgudi. He becomes a menace to the smooth flow of life and has his own will and terms. The spirit of independence has taken an exaggerated form in him and he brooks no moral or social barrier while celebrating the urges of his self. Even though Nataraj is embarrassed and overawed by Vasu he
feels "a sneaking attraction" for the latter's spirit of independence and his manly defiance. Nataraj's predicament springs from his transactions with the fantastic Vasu. From the Vasu-Nataraj relationship, the scene moves to the sphere of the community when Vasu decides to shoot at the temple elephant. The comedy of Vasu's relationship with the people of Malgudi is sustained with continuing anxiety till the manoeater is undone by the mere mosquitoes. Vasu revolts against all routine habits of mind, against all accepted beliefs and patterns of human behaviour. With such an attitude his transactions with a normal world produce a bizarre spectacle.

Vasu jeers at all sorts of social institutions. He belittles the world that does not allow the individual full sovereignty. He breaks the arm of the Police Inspector, flirts with any woman he likes without caring least for the public opinion and shoots according to his whims. In all his actions he brings down the world around him to its knees. But in spite of all his apparent successes, he remains a solitary, mysterious figure. A proper study of his character and his strange relationship with the world, is not possible unless the workings in the inner depths of his existence are probed.

K.R.S. Iyengar thinks that Vasu is the symbol of "anti-life." But in the individual plane, Vasu lives his life to the full, even to an enviable extent, whereas Nataraj and his sort are just ordinary people living a life of bridled
aspirations and instincts. Vasu just can't be dismissed as
inimical to the spirit of living, once the darker recesses
of his unconscious are understood. Vasu is a forlorn figure
having no kith and kin—for reasons unknown to us—and is
divorced from the mainstream of life. Possibly the monstrous
actions of Vasu that we witness are the results of his
injured ego, the inevitable consequence of some deprivations
in the earlier part of his life. Behind the violent facet, he
still nurtures some of the dreams of life. His possessive
affection for Rangi and his desire to build a cozy home with
her provide a glimpse into one part of his inner self that is
tender, that cares for the simple, elemental values of life.
In his young days, inspired by patriotism, he had joined the
Civil Disobedience movement against the British rule, broken
the laws, marched, demonstrated and ended up in jail.* (p.16)
It bears ample testimony to the man that lies concealed
beneath the surface monstrosities. In his violent actions, he
tries possibly to compensate what he has lost, what he has
been deprived of. Here is a grotesque figure driven by violent
impulses of his own character, and in the end when these
forces reach their ultimate point, he meets his doom.

This is, of course, depending too much on psycho-
analysis. But Vasu's conduct and character cannot be explained
without it, as very little is known about him. As Erich
Fromm observes:
...the human passions (such as striving for love, tenderness, freedom as well as the lust for destruction, sadism, masochism, the craving for power and property) are answers to 'existential needs' which in turn are rooted in the very condition of human existence.\textsuperscript{10}

The characters of Raju, Sempath and Margayya can be looked at with sympathy when viewed from this angle. And Vasu, failing to find satisfaction in the higher levels of life, "creates for himself the drama of destruction."\textsuperscript{11} Sastri's mythological interpretation of Vasu's death—"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." (p.242) —closely corresponds to this line of analysis of human character. From her summed up this paradoxical phenomenon thus:"...life turning against itself in the striving to make sense of it.\textsuperscript{12}

Vasu's response to this world takes up a terrifying form. The awesome personality of Vasu, the docility of the Malgudi folk and a revered Indian tradition facing an apparent threat—all act and react with one another to form a comedy of the grotesque. Various existential problems are posed and not only Vasu, but also Nataraj, the mono-syllabic poet, and others meet these problems in their own ways. Nataraj shares Vasu's libidinal instincts to some extent. He reflects in comic bewilderment on the temptations of Rangi's body:
When I tiptoed back to my place beside the grill, there she was, ready as it seemed to swallow me up whole sale, to dissolve within the embrace of her mighty arms all the monstrous chastity I had practised a whole life time. (p.159)

Against Vasu's defiant manner of living a life of instincts, Nataraj, the orthodox moralist looks ridiculous.

In the drama of Malgudi we find life in all its totality, where man tries to assert his status and lives by various designs, however puny and evil these may be. To quote Erich Fromm again,

The truth is that all human passions, both the 'good' and the 'evil' can be understood only as a person's attempt to make sense of his life, and transcend banal, merely life sustaining existence .... Even the most sadistic and destructive man is human, as human as the saint. He can be called a warped and sick man who has failed to achieve a better answer to the challenge of having been born human, and this is true, he can also be called a man who took the wrong way in search of his salvation.13

Thus Sampath is basically no different from Srinivas; Baju is very much like us; and Vasu also is like Nataraj or the monosyllabic poet in so far as basic human aspects are concerned.

The focus shifts from the bellicose egoism of Vasu to a sort of baffling individualism of Daisy, an inspired family-planning worker in The Painter of Siam. This novel is a comedy of adolescent visions of romantic love and of fanatical idealism. Apart from Raman and Daisy, the various pranks and idiosyncrasies of Raman's customers, the superstitious
beliefs of the village folk, the lawyer who wants a left slant in the letters in his sign board, the bangle seller who massages soft feminine hands, the town hall professor who sells profound messages for only five paisa each, the old priest of the temple who can read one's past from a number of a colour and numerous others with their individual peculiarities exist in Malgudi making it almost a human zoo. The Painter of Signs follows the characteristic comic pattern that one finds in the other novels of Narayan. Raman's romantic yearnings not only face an opposition from her aged aunt, the repository of all the traditional values, but he has also to encounter the uncertain responses from Daisy. Daisy remains an enigma for him. He, with his most private longings, builds a queer relationship with Daisy who ultimately proves to be an embodiment of indifference for him. On the other hand, Daisy alternately responds to and rejects her own instincts. For her, Raman represents the emotional aspect of life that hardly agrees with her strong individualistic temperament. Daisy's abandonment of the proposed marriage in preference to the family planning campaign in some distant hilly village is as sudden and absurd as Raman's quick acceptance of this reversal with a desire to drive a nail into the tire of Daisy's vehicle and with the carefree act of throwing the key into the dry fountain. Daisy's unrealized instincts and her fanatical idealism make her character an
entity of incongruities. With the gradual unfolding of the Raman-Daisy relationship, the contours of the comedy become clearer and clearer as the incongruity of the situation gets exposed. The suffocations of a crowded joint family have heavily weighed upon Daisy's childhood which has resulted in the built-in aversion in her character for any sort of private relationship. Raman, on the other hand, tries to weave his life into that of Daisy, who is utterly incapable of any emotional relationship. The individual's instincts and aspirations confront an inhospitable reality of things.

M. S. Narayan's protagonists are out to assert their identities in the face of a cruel world that never comes up to an individual's expectations. Narayya knows that he has been thrown into a world that "seemed to be a very risky place to live in, peopled by creatures with dark powers" (p.39), a world that "treated him with contempt because he had no money." (p.11) It is not only Narayya who has to face the odds of the world, it is also Raju with his instinctual yearnings for Rosia, Sampath with his ambitious projects, Ravi with his impossible vision of beauty and Raman dreaming to marry a woman who pathetically confesses, "Married life is not for me. I have thought it over. It frightens me. I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live except alone." (pp.178-79)
K.R.S. Iyengar surveys the scene from a social context and finds Maqoudi "as a field of unpredictable forces, a theatre where forces and tragicomedies are played without end," "the net result being the enthronement of the Absurd."\(^{*14}\) This 'Absurd' is not only the outcome of 'war and the post war years of hectic striving, chronic uncertainty, expense of spirit and lust in action;\(^{*15}\) it is there entrenched in man's fundamental existence right from the time of Dr. Faustus, Don Quixote and many others, right from the time of man's birth into this universe with his instincts and yearnings, wishes and dreams.

The comedy in Narayan's novels carries a subtle sense of pathos. Both the socio-economic conditions as well as questions pertaining to man's very existence haunt him — questions such as the silent process of ageing, the temporality of our existence and the futile search for some stabilizing factor in life. For Nargyeya, the illusion of marriage days no more sustains him.

He had thought that that world would continue forever. That a total false view of life one acquired on one's wedding day. (p.13)

And for Jagan the charm of married life is also long since lost giving place to the forlorn days of a widower. The old miserly landlord in Dr. Saneath dies with his dream of seeing his granddaughter's marriage unrealized. Man by his puny
efforts tries to create impressions of permanence in a
transitory existence. The dreams fall flat to the ground and
there comes the shock of recognition, the pathetic awareness
of the fragility of an impermanent universe.

Narayan's protagonists, who are ordinary men and women,
move out of their ordinariness in their quest to make life
more pleasurable or meaningful. They passionately cling to
a life that time and again betrays and batters them. Thus his
novels are tiny worlds where the Lilliputian man with his
dresses and sufferings is celebrated; where one finds man
untiringly limping across the boundaries of life with the
beauty and bruises of existence.

A comic vision embraces the multifarious facets of
human life. Narayan operates in a framework of traditions
and social morality which is much bigger than the individual,
his ego and addictions. Sooner or later, normal reality takes
hold of the situation including the aspiring and erring
individuals. Hence man's encounter with the world appears
ludicrous. The comic vision always offers the consolation of
a reconciliation. Man's small villainies, his innumerable
temptations and tragedies and the frequent abysses and
heights in his life—all these that form the totality of
life are affectionately treated by Narayan with a humane
understanding of life's complexities. Raman in The Painter
of Siams declares that "people are moved by strange,
inexplicable drives..." (p.64) -- a statement that serves as a key to Narayan's comedy in *The Painter of Signs* as also in his other novels. He explores subtly the psychic depths of man, brings him close to a world outside himself, and from this orchestration of realities, carves out a human comedy.
NOTES


2. Ibid., p. 11.


5. Graham Greene, Int. to The Financial Expert, p. VII.

6. Ibid., p. VIII.


11. Ibid., p. 30.

12. Ibid., p. 32.

13. Ibid. pp. 31-32.


15. Ibid., p. 373.