R. K Narayan’s outlook is primarily comic. It is comic in a broad philosophic sense, which enables him to weave all the bizarre events into a beautify vision of life; in which every small event, small acquaintance, however, insignificant and absurd it might seem, turns out to have a meaningful role in the eternal scheme of things.

Narayan’s vision is shaped by a strong Indian sensibility that precludes any possibility of tragedy. Because man here is safely placed in a cosmic hierarchy with relation extending not only to his fellow men but also to Nature and God, not only in time and space but also beyond time and space. In the scheme of things man is responsible to God as much as God is responsible to man. In hours of human helplessness God’s grace comes to help; as it is symbolically affirmed in The man Eater of Malqudi. In such a universe man is never driven to the ‘boundary situations’ I so as to feel completely abandoned. The Indian world view holds that the world and the various human attachments are ‘Maya’, and failure on the mundane level does not necessarily bring
any awful sense of tragedy. For the Indian, man is finally, not alienated from but united with the universe or with the source of all creation. With the cycle of cause and effect (‘karma’) operating from birth to rebirth, and man assured of the ultimate spiritual reunion, no final pessimism is possible. Moreover, the Indian traditional society by means of its rigid social and moral codes maintains a keen sense of social cohesion thus making any alienation or disintegration impossible.

Malgudi comedy underlines this traditional Indian belief in the ultimate integration. This also corroborates the views of critics like Potts and Northrop Frye with regard to the comic. Potts believes that there is in man’s character a compelling tendency which seeks integration with the lile of his society, to merge with others and to be a part of something greater than the individual self.

The conviction that the individual is unimportant except as a part of something wider; the impulse to mix, and to seek common ground with the rest of one’s kind….2

Potts calls this, ‘social sense’3 which forms the basic of comedy.
This social is the dominant motif in Narayan’s novels. In them “the social and moral world are contiguous” and “the social world is properly conceived a moral worlds ……….” The emphasis is not so much on puritan moral values as it on a social consciousness rooted in traditional morality that nevertheless allows concessions to human frailties. To quote Northrop Frye.

Comedy usually moves towards a happy ending, and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is ‘this should be’. which sounds like a moral in the restricted sense, but social. Its opposite is not the villainous but the absurd. Characters like Sampath and Vasu are dismissed because they become absurd in the Malgudi setting. At the heart of Narayan’s comedy there is an awareness of absurdity. Even though in his novels there is a perceptible moral bias, “one feels that the social judgment against the absurd is closer to the comic norm than the moral judgment against the wicked”. In his comic world the characters are purged of their absurdities and are integrated with the society.

But through these absurd characters—printer poet, man eater, guide, financial expert, sweets vendor——Narayan weaves his Malgudi comedy that follows the traditional comic pattern of order-
disorder-order. Narayan’s heroes, notwithstanding their stupidity, rebel against all social constrictions which thwart their freedom. Their actions embody their existential defiance against a hostile universe. But in the process they fall into incongruous and absurd situations in relation to their society. They overstep chair limits and forfeit the reality of their stations like the pretty wire of the shoemaker in Lorca’s The shop maker’s Prodigious Knife, or take to a hedonistic credo of living like Falstaff or like Don Quixote fighting imaginary battles. The characters work out their various schemes, pursue their grandiose ambition in the orthodox, tradition-bound society of Malgudi. All these take place in a special world where the established roles of the society are in temporary suspension, up to the final comic resolution when various human forces are brought to the orbit of social equilibrium. The Malgudi society has tremendous resilience to withstand all these pressures because there is a built-in restorative mechanism in it that at the opportune moment gears itself back to order.

If the ‘disorder’ is due to man against his society, the ultimate order in the comic framework is due to man wedded to his society. In Narayan’s fiction man and society are symbiotically related and the bliss that comes at the end is the outcome of this relationship. Not only man alone emerges chastened; the society also gets affected in the
sublimation process. Narayan’s comedies register this movement “from illusion to reality,” 7 and in the process characters as well as the society are born into a sort of new life. This is a form of the comic are hyper type of death-resurrection. Frye’s comment on this ritual pattern in comedy is relevant in this context:

The ritual pattern behind the catharsis, of comedy is the resurrection that follows the death, the epiphany or manifestation of the risen hero. In Aristophanes the hero who often goes through a point of ritual death, is treated as a risen god, hailed as a new Zeus, or given the quasi-divine honours of the Olympic victor. In New comedy the new human body is both a hero and a social group. 8

Narayan’s novels can be said to be in the pattern of the New comedy. The individual traverses along a path of follies and misadventures seemingly throwing the social stability into peril, and at last expiating for his blunders, returns to the fold of the society. In view of the assured security of the Malgudi society, the apparent disasters resulting from the unbridled impulses and instincts of the comic hero only serve to build up the comic tension. The narrative implies this sense of this sense of social security, and in the context of this
awareness the erratic acts and adventures of characters in Narayan’s fiction arouse laughter.

In all the chaos and confusion, in all the disorderliness that we perceive in his fictional world, Narayan systematically shapes the emotional response of his readers towards the final end. He, by means of clever contrivance, weaves the disorderly episodes into a significant pattern within a framework of moral or aesthetic awareness. This pattern may suggest either a reintegrated society or a repentant individual. The individual’s acts and aberrations are judged against certain pre-existing values implied in the narrative. The narrative shapes the reader’s response or attitude, for it contains, as Bradury suggests, ‘a running act of persuasion’. Bradury says:

Our means of engagement with that world is through a running act of persuasion which may be stabilized as a ‘tone’, a rhetorical wholeness or narrative posture devoted not only to convincing us that there is here a whole world operational and worth attention but that if is assessable and comprehensible only if a certain attitude is exam to it.9

This ‘narrative posture’ in Narayan implies an awareness of moral norms of social manners. And because of the subtle assurance of the
narrative posture, the reader is able to laugh at the eccentricities and absurdities of the characters. It is worthwhile to quote Maynard Mack in this context:

Even a rabbit, were it suddenly to materialize before us without complicity, could be a terrifying event. What makes us laugh is out secure consciousness of the magician and his hat.10

Natayan’s comic vision, like the magician, gives us the assurance that all shall be well despite all the follies and misadventures of his heroes.

Narayan uses irony as a rhetorical weapon to wake his characters out of their dreams and thus to bring them back to the fold of the society. Narayan does this by an affectionate understanding of the various existential compulsions which confront his characters. It “accepts lire and human nature.”11 and in that sense it is different from satire. Satire “does not accept; it rejects and aims ac destruction.12 Whereas Narayan’s comedy aims at correction and integration as it evokes ridicule and laughter.

There is a distinct low mimetic basis in Narayan’s comedy. It operates within a definite social framework with roots in traditional and
moral values. The historical and geographical details of its people convey a vivid impression of Malgudi’s small, deciles society. The reader can feel immediately its ‘weighty ecology’ 13 so that the human comedy that he witness here becomes a part of his intense, intimate and flaws. Margayya, Raju, Jagon, Vasu and many others bound to their obsessions and thus exist in states of ‘ritual bondage’. 14

These obsessions relate to either money or son or other common human aspirations. Because of these shared premises between the characters in the novel and the readers in terms of the ordinary human loggings, Narayan’s comedy is rendered affectionate and intimate. Rather than bear of fielding and Wodehouse, the moral awareness of Jane Austen and the humor and pathos or Chekov.

Narayan’s comedy does not, of course, ignore the sad things of life which are at the very root of human existence. But these are woven into the very soul of comedy. It admits the painful fact of man’s living in an ironical universe. Whether if is the painful process of ageing, or the death of a grand-mother, whether it is the sad disintegration of Jagon’s dreams and ideals or the compelling ordeal of Raju-----all these are woven into the fabric of comedy and as inevitable facts of life, these are accepted not with bitterness but with humility. The comic always ensures a triumph of life over death, separation, over all that
negates life in a social context. The sorrows make the comic spirit reveals. With this humility and wisdom, it becomes again a family or social reunion or at times, s with Raju, a final transcendence.
1. Karl Jaspers quoted in The Vision of Tragedy, p.5. Richard B. Sewall in his book The Vision of Tragedy. (New Haven: Yale Univ. press. 1959) explains ‘boundary-situations’ as “man at the limits of his sovereignty—-Job on the ash-heap. Prometheus on the crag, Oedipus in his moment of self-discovery. Lear on the health, Ahab on his lonely quarter-deck. Here, with all the protective covering stripped off, the hero faces as it no man had ever faced it before the existential question-Jobs’s question. ‘what is man?’ Or Lear’s Is man no more than this?’ p.5.


3. Ibid.


6. Ibid., p.168.

7. Ibid., p.169.

8. Ibid., p.215.


12. Ibid.
