PART - IV

CONCLUSION
CHAPTER - 6

A TALE OF TIME-TRAVEL FROM A TRADITION-BOUND TO A TRADITIONLESS SOCIETY?!

The primitive man, leading a lonely life of his own, having only two primary needs of food and sex, which he satisfied mainly by force of physical strength, had hardly any time or inclination for forming and following any rules of conduct for himself or for any emotional attachment to any other person. Under such conditions a primitive woman had practically no choice or freedom regarding when or with whom to have carnal satisfaction. Of course, those men must have grasped the obvious fact of a woman giving birth to a child and this capacity to create a living being from within herself must have made men to regard women with some awe and to form the seed of matriarchal families after the start of group life.

Only after the necessity and utility of group life dawned on him as a means of survival and less tiresome way of satisfaction of his two needs, did he realize slowly the need for some sort of control over the conduct and behaviour of members of the group. Not having reached a stage of development when they could think of written rules, the men within the group devised oral rules to be followed by every member of the group, which eventually became traditions.

Traditions were thus, and are, introduced and followed for a smooth collective life of a social group or society. In the formative stages of societies, their traditions too cannot but be in rudimentary forms. Traditions go on emerging and growing along with the growth of society. It would be a truism to say that traditions of a primitive society cannot serve a developed society. Thus old traditions get discarded and new ones introduced in a continuous process as societies go on growing. The length of survival of any
tradition depends on its utility for and acceptability by the society it serves. But in this regard an important factor to be noticed is that a society in general is very reluctant to discard a tradition which has taken deep roots in that society. The reason is obvious. Established traditions are trusted as good and blindly followed, while new untried traditions are suspected.

It is only the enlightened who can break with traditions. And stark reality is, that a crushing majority of people fall into the other class of the non-enlightened, and they, therefore, stick to traditions as a drowning person would stick to a log of wood. This class can broadly be divided into those who impose traditions and those who are victims of such imposition. The imposers do enjoy both observing the traditions themselves and imposing them on others, because the observance has, either already lost its sting on them due to age, etc. or, been tamed and turned to their advantage. Among the women, those who have suffered the tyrannies of traditions in their youth are generally found only too willing and even delighted in their old age, to impose them on the young women of the next generation, and thus they become the cause of their perpetuation. Perhaps they feel that they render poetic justice by their action. This is how traditions, once they originate, never tend to die. It falls on the enlightened few to ring their death-knell whenever and wherever found obstructing their life’s progress and development.

But the question still haunts us as to how and why, in this process of evolution of social life and its traditions women as a separate identity got pushed to an inferior status. Expounding his views on man’s search for abstract truth, George Steiner thus touches this fact:

Why did this speculative lust originate in the Mediterranean world at the time of the pre-Socratics? ... The societies in question were male-dominated to an extreme degree. For reasons which we are only beginning to apprehend dimly, the contribution of women to pure mathematics, to metaphysical speculation and to that allegory of mathematics which is music, has been very small. It was so from the outset. And there is the
pivotal point of leisure. We are looking at a polis in which men were given time, space and authority to think abstractly, to think in defiance of utility not only by servitude of women but by that of slaves. ¹

So, this male-domination and servitude of women is pre-historic. It would require tremendous research effort to unveil the causes, but offhand one may say that the superior physical strength given to men by Nature was the only or major reason.

Born in 1906, Narayan was still alive and kicking when this thesis was started in 1998, but he passed away in 2001, after having added to the Indian English Literature a tremendous contribution of his own.

In the books which are discussed here, Narayan has undoubtedly dealt with a variety of themes and motifs. Important among them for our purpose are – woman’s position in Indian society, the status of the wife, mother and grandmother therein, the wave of reform and progress in the age of Gandhiji especially among women, the modern concept of woman’s liberation, birth-control and free love, the problems of joint family system on the one hand and the problems of divided families on the other, the tyrannies of traditions, the impact of Western culture due to British rule in India, the good and evil consequences of trouncing traditions, the theories of Karma, Maya, life after death, etc..

After examination of the women characters in these novels – daughter, wife, widow, mother or grandmother – we notice that their general behaviour and personality mainly depend on the culture of which they are the products. So whatever changes the Indian body politic has faced during the last hundred years, and they are many – educational, economic, political, etc. – these novels indicate that the Indian woman has essentially remained Indian, and that she will continue to be so despite further attacks of foreign influences.

Three of his initial novels are semi-autobiographical, covering childhood in *Swami and Friends*, adolescence in *The Bachelor of Arts* and
youth and middle age in *The English Teacher*, the last of which has a much larger portion of autobiographical element. There are no major or significant women characters in either *Swami and Friends* or *The Bachelor of Arts* comparable to the male characters therein. In these two early novels of Narayan, the world of Malgudi is a men's world, where women seem to exist solely for the male characters. Women therein are merely half comic figures, and Narayan is primarily preoccupied with the boy or the man protagonist. So obviously women do not form the focus of Narayan's vision. A contributory factor for this is that during the period of these novels women did occupy a very subordinate position in the society and the family. Contrary to the first two novels, Susila is a major character in *The English Teacher*. This is probably because she is mostly a replica of Rajam, Narayan's wife in real life, and Narayan would naturally be inclined to elaborate and expand her character fully.

There are some easily noticeable traits in Narayan's writings. One of them is that naming his minor characters is generally avoided by Narayan, or is done at a late stage in the novel. At the same time, some of the names chosen by him for his characters acquire significance; to cite, Savitri in *The Dark Room* and Bharati in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. By an excellent choice of the heroine's name, Savitri, in *The Dark Room*, Narayan has achieved a sharp satire. While Savitri of the mythology regains her husband Satyavan's life from the hand of Yama, the god of death, by her devotion to the husband, which makes her immortal in the hearts of Hindus as Sati Savitri, Savitri of *The Dark Room* runs away from her husband. Similarly, the name Bharati, of the heroine of *Waiting for the Mahatma* is also very well chosen, as she represents as ideal 'Bharatiya' (Indian) woman, without a blemish on her character.

Another such trait is regarding man-woman love leading to marriage. Love, to Narayan, seems to be anathema. In all his books examined here, he has either not mentioned love before marriage, or where mentioned he has made a mockery of it. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran is depicted as
falling in love with Malathi at first sight, but he never meets the girl face to face, leave alone talking to her or expressing his love for her in words:

It was on one of his river ramblings that he met Malathi and thought that he would not have room for anything else in his mind. No one can explain the attraction between two human beings. It happens.

One evening he came to the river, and was loafing along it, when he saw a girl, about fifteen years old, playing with her younger sister on the sands. Chandran had been in the habit of staring at every girl who sat on the sand, but he had never felt before the acute interest he felt in this girl now. He liked the way she sat; he liked the way she played with her sister; he liked the way she dug her hands into the sand and threw it in the air. He paused only for a moment to observe the girl. He would have willingly settled there and spent the rest of his life watching her dig her hands into the sand. But that could not be done. There were a lot of people about (BA,54-55).

Clearly a mocking description of Chandran’s puppy-love. It would be too much to expect Chandran, who has no courage to speak to Malathi, to approach her parents. So he leaves the negotiations for his marriage with her to his parents. The horoscopes do not match, Malathi marries her cousin, Chandran is frustrated, leaves home, becomes a sanyasi, returns home within eight months with a “new philosophy, which followed the devastating discovery that love and friendship were the veriest illusions”. He also explained that “people married because their sexual appetite had to be satisfied and there must be somebody to manage the house” (BA,123). He also reflects: “Love is only a brain affection” (BA,124). Yet he marries Susila – a marriage arranged by his mother – and even on the journey back after the mother and son interviewed Susila at her home:

... the music of the word “Susila” rang in his ears. Susila, Susila, Susila, Her name, music, figure, face, and everything
about her was divine. Susila, Susila – Malathi, not a spot beside Susila; it was a tongue-twister; he wondered why people liked that name (BA, 162).

Obviously an apt description of a flickering love, rather a show of love, by the author. And throughout the narrative there is no indication by the author of any trace of love for Chandran in either Malathi or Susila. In fact, in all his novels and stories, Narayan has hardly shown any girl to have been in, or entered the tangles or suffered the maladies of, love. A few exceptions to this will be discussed later.

In *Mr. Sampath*, Narayan narrates the mad love of Ravi for a girl he sees at a temple, even whose name he does not know never having spoken to her. When he sees Shanti, he presumes her to be the same girl, who had left Malgudi years ago; and his love acquiring sinister measure, behaves so rashly with her when she is playing Parvathi on the set that the entire proposed film has to be abandoned:

A piercing cry, indistinguishable, unworded, like an animal’s, was suddenly heard, and before they could see where it originated, Ravi was seen whizzing past the others like a bullet, knocking down the people in his way. He was next seen on the set, rushing between Shiva’s extended arms and Parvathi, and knocking Shiva aside with such violence that he fell amidst his foliage in Kailas in a most ungodly manner. Next minute they saw Parvathi struggling in the arms of Ravi, who was trying to kiss her on her lips and carry her off. ... (SPM, 189).

A very artistic twist of a tragedy into humour by Narayan. At the same time, Narayan seems to be mocking at love as leading to virtual madness. Similar madness is shown in Sampath for the same woman when he plans to marry her despite having a wife already. He too ruins himself achieving nothing in return. Shanti does not at all know Ravi and, therefore, there is no question of her loving him. According to Sampath, he and Shanti planned to marry after their journey to Mempi Hills, but at Koppal railway
station, after getting down from the hills, she goes her own way, leaving Sampath dosing and leaving a note which inter alia says: “... marriage frightens me” (SPM,218). So for Sampath too, love turns out to be as much an illusion as for Ravi, with only a passing shade of reality.

Then, no doubt, we have to take into account Bharati-Sriram relationship in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, where we do come across real love in both, though with a tinge of passion in Sriram. Minutes before he is assassinated, the Mahatma blesses their wedding, fixed for the next day. We have to treat this couple as an exception to the general trend of Narayan's writings.

In *The Guide*, we come across one marriage, of Rosie-Marco, where there is no love lost between the two, and one extra-marital affair, of Rosie-Raju, where love of neither for the other is strong enough to lead to a marriage. Between them, Raju’s is a stronger feeling for Rosie than vice versa. For Rosie it is more passion than love, and also a means to achieve her ambition. The first is not, and the other does not materialize as, a love-match. So in this novel too, the author is not an advocate of love-match.

*The Painter of Signs* is perhaps the only novel wherein Narayan nearly, and yet not fully, succeeds in bringing love to fruition, between Raman and Daisy. It is as if he swims right across the river, but misses the opposite bank and drowns. Their love having reached the decision to marry, Daisy retracts, only one day before, leaving Raman reflecting: “Maybe we will live together in our next Janma” (PS,183). Through Daisy’s mouth Narayan perhaps pronounced his own philosophy on love, when Daisy says:

‘I love you’, ‘I like you’, are words which can hardly be real. You have learnt them from novels and Hollywood films perhaps. When a man says ‘I love you’ and the woman repeats ‘I love you’ – it sounds mechanical and unconvincing. Perhaps credible in Western society, but sounds silly in ours. People really in love would be struck dumb, I imagine (PS,125-126).
In My Days Narayan himself admits:

In addition to my novel, I had on hand about twenty short stories written mainly to see if other subjects than love (which appeared to be the sole theme for every novel, short story, poem, or drama in existence) could be written about. 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. ... I found in the life around me plenty of material. ... Life offered enough material to keep me continuously busy (MD,95).

Elsewhere in the same book he writes:

For the next three days, sitting beside my grandmother, I wrote and soon produced several pages of interesting anecdotes and a variety of imaginary stories centering around matrimonial life: about wife-beaters, husband-baiters, a live-and-let-live couple who faced some calamity, young runaways, elopers and elopees, and every kind of permutation and combination of man and woman. The tone, for some reason, emphasized misery if not tragedy. It seemed so hard to find a happy couple in this world. Probably I felt that there was monotony in a contented, harmonious married life, nothing to write about (MD,99).

Moreover, in an essay published in “The Times of India” on 16 November, 1980, Narayan has declared, “Particularly after D.H. Lawrence, no writer can have anything original or fresh to say about lovers” and “When a couple, even if they are characters in my own novel, want privacy, I leave the room.”

This outlook on love was probably developed by Narayan because he was brought up “in a social condition in which, at least in those days, boys and girls were segregated and one never spoke to anyone but a sister” and as a result he “had to pass through a phase of impossible love-sickness” (MD,104). He has confessed:
The blind urge to love went to fantastic lengths – I even fell in love with a lady doctor who had come to attend my mother. … my most impossible infatuation was for a penfriend I had in England; … I kept her photo in my breast pocket … I wrote impassioned love-letters which she rejected outright; … (MD,105).

Choosing English language as medium for his creative urge by Narayan is understandable – to give his publications national, or rather international, recognition. But it is not clear why he chose his books to be first published from U.K. or U.S.A. The natural questions which arise are whether he has written mostly or primarily for the benefit of the Western readers, and whether, as a result, his writings get tainted. The second can immediately be negatived. Narayan's fiction definitely portrays only the Indian experience, quite distinct from the Western, and though full of humour and irony his writings hardly ever seem to denigrate Indian life. He perhaps expected his writings to be better received and appreciated in the Western world. Or it may be, as Atma Ram opines, “The foreign readers are particularly struck with the element of social realism in Narayan's writing”. ³ In this connection, what H.M. Williams says seems also relevant:

In spite of the charm and grace of Narayan's style, qualities that endear him to his Western readers above all, the often-cited “simplicity” is deceptive. There is something very arch and elusive about Narayan's treatment of India and Indians (Williams,15).

At the same time, viewed from a different angle, Meenakshi Mukharjee's remarks in the same matter are much to the point:

Narayan never deliberately attempts to be Indian, but because he deals with convincing human beings in authentic situations, and records their responses honestly, and because these human beings happen to be Indians, he succeeds in achieving that
difficult task: writing in a genuinely Indian way without being self-conscious about it (M. Mukharjee, 199).

Another characteristic noticeable is that Narayan leans heavily on his personal life experiences in creating his literature. Of course, several other writings must have been influenced by happenings in the lives of their authors, but in Narayan's the influence is remarkable. Firstly, out of the first four books — Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts, The Dark Room and The English Teacher -- three, barring The Dark Room, are autobiographical trilogy. In Swami and Friends, for instance, the Scripture master, Mr. Ebenezar, deprecates and derides the Hindu Gods:

Oh, wretched idiots! Why do you worship dirty, lifeless, wooden idols and stone images? ... What did your Gods do when Mohammed of Gazni smashed them to pieces, trod upon them, and constructed out of them steps for his lavatory? ... Now see our Lord Jesus. He could cure the sick, relieve the poor, and take us to Heaven. He was a real God. ... Did our Jesus go gadding about with dancing girls like your Krishna? Did our Jesus go about stealing butter like that archscoundrel Krishna? ... (SF,5-6).

This is evidently based on Narayan's own narration in My Days:

The teachers were all converts, and, towards the few non-Christian students like me, they displayed a lot of hatred. Most of the Christian students also detested us. The scripture classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu Gods, and violent abuses were heaped on idol-worshippers as a prelude to glorifying Jesus. Among the non-Christians in our class I was the only Brahmin boy, and received special attention; ... (MD,12).

Not only has Narayan based the image of Swami's granny on his own grandmother — the former uses cardamoms, cloves, and areca nut, (SF,21), the latter consumes betel-nut and leaf (MD,11) — but he has also
created the character of Raman’s aunt in *The Painter of Signs* out of her. The following two descriptions are very similar.

Before settling down, he [Raman] shut his door so that he might not be disturbed either by his aunt or her afternoon visitors, who generally dropped in to seek her advice on some domestic matters, listen to her discourse on the gods, swallow some herbal remedy, or listen to her prophesies from a horoscope (PS, 18).

And:

My grandmother’s preoccupations were several and concerned a great many others. She was a key figure in the lives of many. She was versatile and helpful. She was also a matchmaker. She pored over horoscopes and gave advice … She could carry on discussions on vital matters with her friends … Some days … someone would be brought in howling with pain from a scorpion bite. Granny … would go to the backyard and pluck the leaves of a weed … squeeze its juice on the spot where the scorpion had stung, and then make the sufferer also chew the bitter leaves. … (MD, 29-30).

In *My Days* Narayan says: “I possessed an iron hoop which I rolled about the streets, followed by my gang, …” (MD, 30). This fact he deftly turns into fiction for Swami:

Swaminathan’s one consuming passion in life now was to get a hoop. He dreamt of it day and night. He feasted on visions of an ex-cycle wheel without spokes or tyre. You had only to press a stick into the groove and thing would fly. … (SF, 67).

And lastly the autobiographical nature of *Swami and Friends* emerges from:

My grandson is eleven years old, an exact copy of Swami in *Swami and Friends*, at the same stage I was in if you turn back in this book to pages 47-48 (MD, 185).
Chandran falls in love with Malathi at first sight:

One evening ... he saw a girl, about fifteen years old ... 
Chandran had been in the habit of staring at every girl who sat on 
the sand, but he had never felt before the acute interest he felt in 
this girl now. ... He would have willingly settled there and spent 
the rest of his life watching her ... (BA,55).

So did Narayan:

One day, I saw a girl drawing water from the street-tap and 
immediately fell in love with her (MD,106).

Chandran at the relevant period was 22 (BA,64), while Narayan was 27. 
Malathi was 15 and “Rajam was less than twenty” (MD,1110). While 
Chandran reveals to his father his desire to marry Malathi, “Father, please 
don’t mistake me. I want to marry D.W. Krishna Iyer’s daughter.” (BA,68), 
Narayan makes a daring move direct to Rajam’s father: “I interrupted some 
talk we were having on political matters to make a bold, blunt announcement 
of my affection for his daughter” (MD,107). The would-be father-in-law just 
says: “If God wills it. Marriages are made in Heaven and who are we to say 
‘Yes’ or ‘No’?” (MD,107). In The Bachelor of Arts Chandran’s mother at one 
stage tells him the same philosophy in other words: “It is all a matter of fate. 
You can marry only the person whom you are destined to marry and at the 
appointed time” (BA,158). In both cases, the horoscopes of the two do not 
match, but while Narayan, in real life, is lucky enough to marry Rajam, he has 
curiously designed in the novel total failure of the proposed alliance due to 
horoscopes. The irony of fate is that what Malathi’s father said in the novel, 
namely, “I know hundreds of cases where the presence of Mars in the house 
... It kills the wife soon after the marriage”, came true in Narayan’s real life; 
Rajam passed away within six years of marriage, in June 1939 (MD,139). The 
Bachelor of Arts was published in 1937 when Narayan could not have 
foreseen Rajam’s death. Narayan himself says: “The loss of my wife was 
sudden and not even remotely anticipated by me – although my father-in-law 
had had his doubts while looking into my horoscope earlier” (MD,135).
After Rajam's death Narayan felt "a perpetual, unrelenting climate of loneliness"; and:

I never hoped that I could ever take any more interest in the business of living, much less in writing. ... There was no meaning in existence. Dismal emptiness stretched before me (MD,136).

This personal experience of loneliness outside and emptiness within, Narayan has expressed as a philosophy in *The English Teacher*: “A profound and unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life” (ET,177).

That *The English Teacher* is autobiographical is thus mentioned in *My Days*: “More than any other book, *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction” (MD,134-135). While discussing that book, this fact has already been brought out in detail. So also is *Grandmother's Tale* biographical as pointed out in the Explanation of that book.

After narrating his uncle, his mother's younger brother, Narayan mentions:

Above all, my uncle himself was an inescapable model for me ... especially his abandon to alcohol in every form all through the day. (I portrayed him as Kailas, in *The Bachelor of Arts*, and he provided all the substance whenever I had to portray a drunken character.) (MD,96).

Similarly, Narayan's experience of printing his publication “Indian Thought” has provided him good material for *Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi*, and Mr. Sampath of that novel is modelled on Narayan's real life printer:

Mr. Sampath, who was my printer (and who became a character in one novel and two film stories), ... (MD,154);

and

In a novel of mine Mr. Sampath became a film director. Today I find that the Sampath in real life too has become a very busy film personality, ... (MD,160).
There are a few more instances of a minor nature, which need not be gone into.

A prominent peculiarity of a major population of India is the craze to have a son, and not a daughter, as progeny – The great contributory factor for the craze is the problem of dowry. The evil of demanding a big dowry by the boy’s parents – in many cases beyond the capacity of the girl’s parents – is so rampant even in today’s India, that the birth of a female child, is considered a curse by millions of families. Reforms and legislation have virtually failed to eradicate this vice. Even the educated class is yet not completely free from the desire to have only a male child, and many resort to pre-determination of the sex of a child at the embryonic stage and, if found a female, to have abortion. Another reason for craving for a son is the desire for perpetuation of the family-line, because daughters become members of a different family after marriage. And there is also a religious reason involved, especially among Hindus, because it is the son only who can perform the religious rites for the departed parents, grandparents, etc. Narayan has not directly made any thematic or episodic use of this craze for a male child in his fiction, but has indirectly referred to it in *The Financial Expert* and *The Vendor of Sweets*. In the former is the following dialogue between Margayya and others:

“...Three daughters were born to my father. Five cart-loads of paddy came to us every half year, from the fields. ... but where has it all gone? To the three daughters. By the time my father found husbands for them there was nothing left for us to eat at home!”

“But is it not said that a man who begets a son is blessed in three lives, because he gives away the greatest treasure on earth?” said someone.

“And how much more blessed is he that gives away three daughters? He is blessed no doubt, but he also becomes bankrupt,” Margayya said (FE,6-7).
In the latter novel, Jagan’s father asks the coconut-selling woman: “How are you sure it’ll be a son, not a daughter?”, and she replies: “No one who prays at that temple is ever disappointed with a daughter” (VS, 172). That the birth of a daughter disappoints a family is vividly brought out. And later, when Mali is born, in the dialogue between Mali’s two grandfathers this utterance: “A new son in the house is a true treasure in this life and beyond life” (VS, 173).

Of course, Narayan has used the dowry system rather frequently in several novels and this has been reviewed at appropriate places in this thesis. Also, he has employed the connected issue, of barrenness, in detail in The Vendor of Sweets and The World of Nagaraj, wherein not bearing a child soon after marriage is viewed very hostilely, and Jagan’s wife Ambika and Nagaraj’s wife Sita both suffer taunts and maltreatments from their mothers-in-law on that account.

Such ardent wish of would-be mothers to have a son in preference to a daughter has not, it seems, been a feature unique to India; it has had adherents in other parts, proof of which is provided by “Madame Bovary” – the famous novel by Gustave Flaubert. The heroine, when she becomes pregnant, wishes for a son, albeit her reasons have some oddity too:

She hoped for a son; he would be strong and dark; she would call him George; and this idea of having a male child was like an expected revenge for all her impotence in the past. A man, at least, is free; he may travel over passions and over countries, overcome obstacles, taste of the most far-away pleasures. But a woman is always hampered. At once inert and flexible, she has against her the weakness of the flesh and legal dependence. Her will, like the veil of her bonnet, held by a string, flutters in every wind; there is always some desire that draws her, some conventionality that restrains. 4

That was the condition of women in the fifties of the nineteenth century, when this novel was published, if one takes Madame Bovary as representative, even in France where women today are among the freest women of the world.
It is creditably prudent of Narayan not to have been tempted to exploit these issues, of craze for a male child and the curse of barrenness, to more than their due dimensions. He has tried neither to minimize them nor to magnify them out of proportion.

Social mores in India have taken fast shifts after World War - II and especially after Independence. One of them is the change of outlook of women on family. Only a few decades ago, a girl, on marriage, entered a joint family not only as the wife of someone, but also as the daughter-in-law of his parents, as the sister-in-law of his brothers and sisters, etc. Growth of industrialization, urbanization and the influences from the West have broken up joint families and, along with that, revolutionized the outlook of women. The wind of change has spread from the urban and the educated to the rural and the illiterates too. Most modern women in India seem to favour a limited family as in the West – husband, wife and children (till they grow up and marry), creating problems for the aged. This aspect of social change, with consequential division of families, division of properties and concomitant bitterness has been touched upon by Narayan in *The Financial Expert* and *The World of Nagaraj*.

Present day India, viewed as a whole, is not yet moderately modern in regard to the plight of women. As recently as 1990 Elisabeth Bumiller writes: “Many of the Indian women I encountered led miserable existences, little better than those of beasts of burden” (Bumiller,5). She also points out: “There are more than 600 bride burnings, as these attempted murders for dowry are called, in New Delhi each year. Most of the women die” (Bumiller,8). One can imagine the immensity of such incidents in the entire country. No wonder people do not want a daughter, and if one is born, kill the infant before it can breathe. Bumiller describes her experience of a farm-working couple of South India: “... they had been forced to kill their day-old infant daughter because they couldn’t afford the cost of her dowry. In their part of the country, it was something that people did, although no one liked to talk about it” (Bumiller,9). The problem of women is not peculiar,
however, to India alone. Bumiller has quoted the president of World Bank who said in 1986:

Women do two-thirds of the world’s work. They produce 60 to 80 percent of Africa’s and Asia's food, 40 percent of Latin America's. Yet they earn only one-tenth of the world’s income and own less than one percent of the world’s property. They are among the poorest of the world’s poor (Bumiller, 12-13).

At the same time, it cannot be denied that a small percentage of Indian women especially among the upper and higher middle classes, have achieved sizable progress. Again we may resort to what Bumiller herself says to point to this:

In 1988 in the Indian Parliament, women accounted for 10 percent of the members, whereas in the United States Congress, women represent 5 percent of the membership of both houses. In India, women have become doctors, lawyers, judges, scientists, business executives and airline pilots. ... Indian women won the right to abortion, without a fight, in 1971, a year and a half before Roe V. Wade legalized abortion in America (Bumiller, 13-14).

We may add that in India, women have become Chief Ministers of States and even Prime Minister of the country.

So what Narayan has achieved through his time-travel in fiction from strong anti-women traditions to their collapse, slow at first but fast after the sixties, cannot be lost sight of or minimized, more so because his fiction is about the middle class of India, and not about the upper classes.

One significant contribution of Narayan’s fiction is his creation of Malgudi to give his stories a location, and he has stuck to it with such virtuous loyalty that we find it in all his novels and short stories. There are a few indications in My Days to lead one to conjecture that he borrowed his imaginary Malgudi from actual Mysore. Foremost is:
I had spent a whole day taking them round Mysore to show the riverside, forest, village, and crowds, granite steps and the crumbling walls of an ancient shrine which combined to make up the Malgudi of my story; (MD,174).

He has scattered elaborate pen-pictures of Mysore in *My Days*, and has remarked:

During my college years, I became so familiar with the scenic details and their transformations around that I could have drawn up, if need be, a time-table of the natural events. ... (MD,70).

It seems Chamundi Hill of Mysore (MD,51,58,etc.) becomes Mempi Hills near Malgudi in *Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi* (SPM,195 etc.) *Waiting for the Mahatma* (WM,94 etc.), *The Painter of Signs* (PS,62,etc.) and *A Tiger for Malgudi* (TG,156) and so on.

It would have been sad and surprising if Narayan had totally ignored Mahatma Gandhi in his writings, albeit he shuns politics, because Mahatma was not merely a politician. Narayan has, however, in his own style, portrayed him in a big way in *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Vendor of Sweets*. In the former, we see the Mahatma more as a person, a human being pure and simple, than as a leader or anything else. In that novel, Narayan has successfully and satirically highlighted the coexistence in India of the forces of reform and progress and the forces of orthodoxy and regress, where Mahatma and Bharati represent the former. The latter are shown in Sriram's grandmother and particularly by introducing the comic episode of her funeral. When she is found alive after having been laid on the pyre, she is not permitted to re-enter the town on the baseless belief that such re-entry would ruin the whole town. The same novel also highlights the fact that the Gandhi era was a golden period for the Indian women to become active participants in political and social life and to contribute to social progress.

If we accept the definition of feminism given by K. Meera Bai: “Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to women” 5, then Narayan is no feminist. He does not openly take up cudgels
for women in any of his novels. Nowhere in these novels he seems to take
sides either for or against women’s rights. He simply depicts women’s plight
as it appears to him, without indicating any emotional entanglement. As
pointed out by William Walsh, “The Dark Room ... is ... the closest Narayan
comes anywhere to arguing a case” (Walsh,43). And yet in The Dark Room
too, he has at no point conspicuously been an advocate of women, although
some acid utterances of Savitri are no doubt the author’s contribution towards
depicting women’s plight. It is, however, a universal fact that novelists scatter
their personal views in their novels through the medium of their characters,
and Narayan is no exception to this. To quote only one instance to
demonstrate this, Narayan has said in My Days:

... the notion was repulsive (as it still remains) that one should
fall at the feet of another (MD,39).

The same sentiment is repeated by Daisy in The Painter of Signs in these
words:

I have always hated the notion of one human being prostrating at
the feet of another (PS,132).

If then what his characters express is indicative of what the author himself
feels, then Narayan has given sufficient proof of being a feminist through
Savitri and Daisy. This conclusion gets support from what Narayan himself
says about Savitri in My Days:

... and spun out the fate of Savitri – the heroine of The Dark
Room. 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. Man 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. My novel dealt with her, with this philosophy
broadly in the background (MD,119).
Shantha Krishnaswami states: “Feminists more often than not do charge that no one in a male culture can objectify enough to project true womanhood”; and then she contends:

Our culture is a male dominated one. Our models are male whether in India or in Europe or in America -- and we cannot escape the fact that a female point of view has never truly existed and may not ever exist (S. Krishnaswami,18,19).

“True womanhood” is a vague undefined term, and to forecast that a female point of view may not ever exist is a pessimistic unwarranted conclusion. Placing these views vis-à-vis Narayan's fiction, one can say without hesitation that the female point of view has been presented before the forum of world's readers of fiction both in The Dark Room -- negatively -- and in The Painter of Signs -- positively. In fact, as Krishnaswami herself pronounces:

the issue of the woman, the woman torn between her career and her home, between her needs of nurturance and autonomy, between her pull towards modernity and her bias in favour of tradition and superstition -- all these are present in Narayan's fiction (S. Krishnaswami,91).

Moreover, Narayan could never have created an extraordinarily revolutionary character of Daisy unless he is a feminist at heart. To quote Narayan himself:

Not only is she not dependent on men, she actually has no use for them as an integral part of her life. To show her complete independence and ability to stand by herself, I took care not to give her a name with any kind of emotional connotation. (Bhardwaj,171).

Actually, if one gives The Dark Room the status of a feminist novel, Narayan is perhaps the earliest to take up women’s cause through Indo-English fiction. In that novel he has certainly succeeded in pinpointing women’s problem without ever naming or defining it, the problem which is beautifully presented by G.D. Barche:
The crux of the problem is that man-woman relationship has, on the whole, evolved through centuries on a set pattern i.e. man to rule and woman to obey; man, the master, and woman, the slave; man, the god, and woman, the devout; man for the field and woman for the hearth and so on.

Simultaneously, however, he seems to sound a note of caution against carrying feminism too far, by his satirical depiction of a wife writing a novel while the husband runs the kitchen in addition to working to earn, in his latest *Salt and Sawdust*.

Feminism does not mean complete isolation of woman from man as Daisy does. Man and woman are destined to live together, and they must live in harmony with enough freedom to both, with the only limitation that liberty should not turn into licence, as in Rosie’s case or, on the male side, Ramani’s and Dr. Rann’s cases. In these three characters, Narayan has very unobtrusively put his finger on the need of such limitations.

If we take a chronological survey of Narayan’s novels, the women characters who appear as wives and mothers and grandmothers in the initial novels are so unimportant in the scheme of these novels as not to deserve even a name; but they start appearing more as persons in the later ones. They gradually assume an identity of their own, their individuality independent of persons around them. Srinivas’ wife in *Mr. Sampath*, though unnamed, is not ineffective. She fulfils a leading role in the treatment of Ravi when he goes mad. So also Margayya’s wife, Meenakshi, in *The Financial Expert*, plays her part to the extent possible, sandwiched though she is between two positive-minded persons – the husband and the son – which leaves her little scope for action. Still later novels reveal Bharati, Rosie, Daisy and Commandant Sarsa in a much better frame of personality of their own. None of them feels any uneasiness about her gender identity. In fact Bharati and Daisy seem to be more at ease than their male counterparts. The inactive female, the meek housewife, like Savitri of 1938, gets totally transformed into dominant and
dynamic Daisy of 1977 and this proves how Narayan's literature has run parallel to the progress of the Indian woman.

Both categories of emancipated women, those who have the benefits of birth in advanced families, affluence, high education and enough opportunities for development, and those who acquire them by struggle, are faced with the problem of being isolated from the common stream of social relationship. The general tendency of almost every man being to have as wife, a woman with less qualifications and achievements, such women find it hard to secure marriage partnerships as they deserve and to their satisfaction. And in addition to this major hurdle, in the general social set-up they feel like aliens. Their life gets confined to a tiny group of equals and generally they suffer loneliness. The remedy to such situation is speedy social reforms. Narayan has portrayed Rosie and Daisy as emancipated women. Both have achieved their emancipation by struggle and both are destined to live a lonely life shut up in their chosen shells.

There seems to be also a hint of caution in Narayan's development of Daisy's role. Daisy's decision to sacrifice marriage in favour of her mission seems to convey a lesson. The only logical step to be taken to totally equalize man and woman in all fields, moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic and so on, is to abolish the marriage system! And it may come about in a century or two! That is why if we want to avoid such a possibility and to have stability of the existing society, we can hardly afford to have a large number of Daisys; lives would soon become barren.

Narayan's painting Rosie in bright colours may throw one in doubt whether he supports or overlooks her easy moral. That it is not so, is clear from the fact that Narayan always devises disastrous consequences for persons ensnared by such women. Raju, the guide, goes to the length of suffering separation from his mother, giving her much pain, for the sake of Rosie. Shanti lures Sampath whose family life with his wife and daughters is ruined on that account. Shantabai becomes a major cause of Savitri's sufferings by trapping Ramani. Even Balu runs after flippant girls and his wife suffers in
silence. Thus Narayan only emphasizes the evil influences of immoral women. He, however, does not condemn that class outright. He has attempted to bring out the virtuous side in such a woman also. In The Maneater of Malgudi Rangi, the temple woman, who had come to the town “after seducing all the menfolk she had set eyes on” (MM,85), is shown capable of appealing to Nataraj: “Please save the elephant” (MM,120). She is, no doubt afraid of Vasu who wants to kill the elephant, but has the courage to say: “He may kill me for speaking, but I don’t care” (MM,123). She also loves and cares for her mother: “If I don’t obey his [Vasu’s] summons he may set fire to my house, with my blind mother not knowing what is happening” (MM,156). She has also the temerity to declare frankly before Nataraj: “Sir, I am only a public woman, following what is my dharma. I may be a sinner to you, but I do nothing worse than what some of the so-called family women are doing. ...” (MM,121). Similarly, in the story “House Opposite”, the “shameless woman” occupying the house opposite that of the hermit who despises her, but cannot help thinking constantly about her, offers him fruits and flowers one day, saying: “Please accept my offering. This is a day of remembrance of my mother. On this day I pray and seek a saint’s blessing. Forgive me. ...” (UBT,13).

Rosie and Daisy are products of the period following Independence extending till the present, and they serve as models of the emerging modern Indian woman of today. Narayan has appropriately not chosen their names from any historical or mythological background or having any other symbolic significance. In Daisy’s case, as pointed out earlier, Narayan has explained why he chose that simple name. Rosie may be said to be somewhat under the influence of the ancient culture because she puts forth the principle of karma when Raju is arrested, and also because she still recognizes some rights of her husband over her, even after he has totally abandoned her, in her repeated assertion, “After all, he is my husband”. But Daisy is a pure product of the Present without the slightest taint of the Past.
In fact Narayan has portrayed Daisy as the model of women who would prosper in the country after the movement for the liberation of women and such other agitations for women’s emancipation all over the world are over. No doubt, Narayan wrote *The Painter of Signs* in 1977 when ‘Women’s Lib’ movement had already gained momentum in the world. But he wrote *The Dark Room* in 1938 when this movement had not yet been born in India. And yet Narayan presented in that novel, through Savitri’s character, ideas about women’s suffering and their attempts at redress. This indicates that Narayan is ahead of his times in his views regarding women’s liberation and equality with men. Of course, taking into account the then prevailing social conditions in India, Narayan had to foil Savitri’s attempt at revolt to make the novel realistic. Nevertheless, he has succeeded through this character to set the reader thinking about what is wrong in the Indian way of life regarding marital relationship. To emphasize the issue Narayan has painted Ramani in darker colours and has made him to represent the common Indian male attitude. Regrettably, the same attitude generally prevails in India even today despite spread of education. Savitri is a model of the suffering Indian wives in the tradition-affected society of her time. Shantha Krishnaswamy emphasizes the same fact in these words:

> While Susila serves as an agent of romantic sensibility, Savitri is the agent for the author’s quest for psychological insight and awareness of the plight of the unfortunate Indian woman who has neither the strength of will nor the economic and educational opportunities to withstand unfair male aggression (S. Krishnaswamy, 108).

When the women characters of the novels under examination, including the heroines, mothers and grandmothers and other minor characters like Janamma and Ponni, are lumped together for consideration, one is struck by the multiplicity of facets of their personalities, from the totally tradition-bound, whose life’s aim and achievement consist merely in observing some meaningless rituals and following some age-old customs, to the most modern
with whom neither traditions nor religion carries any weight, the timid and the bold, the moral, the immoral and the amoral, the meek and the arrogant, etc.

On the whole, Narayan's presentation of women in his novels is not monolithic. It provides a multi-coloured panorama of the Indian women, from the most backward to the ultra-modern. Among them the old women, whether a granny or a mother or an aunt, are all painted by Narayan in similar colours, with minor differences in shades here and there. They are usually orthodox, dogmatic, superstitious, believing in stars and horoscopes.

It is true, as R.S. Singh says:

Narayan seldom attempts a three dimensional depiction of women characters. Susila was an idealized image of womanhood … Savitri was a victim of unkind circumstances and Shanta Bai a coquette. … (Singh, 64).

But this view does not seem to hold for the characterization of Bharati, Rosie or Daisy. It is difficult to agree with R. S. Singh when he says:

… Rosie was painted in half tones being, in the words of Raju, 'a pure abstraction' (Singh, 64).

Raju does not consider her as a pure abstraction. Only he views her as such when he watches her perform a dance and when his mind is free from all carnal thoughts. The examination of these novels shows that Narayan does present a three dimensional picture of Bharati, Rosie and Daisy in the respective novels and also of Bala in *Grandmother's Tale*. Especially described in firm outlines is the character of Daisy who emerges before the reader in sharp and vivid detail. In fact, of all the women characters of Narayan's novels examined here, Daisy’s character stands out apart in conception and presentation. Being a very late creation in Narayan's line of women characters, she is also the most modern, both in thoughts and action. Obviously she is not an idealized character like Susila or Bharati, but it would also be an insult to Daisy’s character if we compare her with the character of a coquette like Shanta Bai. Of course, we can draw a parallel between Bharati
and Daisy inasmuch as both are much superior to their respective lovers and both exercise heavy influence over them by their strong personality.

As a novelist who creates his characters and who can shape and mould them as he chooses, Narayan could have shaped the character of Rosie differently to show her in a better light. Therefore it would seem that injustice has been done to Rosie's character. When we compare the characterization of Rosie with that of Daisy, the weakness of the former is at once apparent. Both of them are dissatisfied with the families in which they are born. But Daisy is bold enough to discard her family at the early age of thirteen. Rosie seeks her escape through marriage only and that too when opportunity knocks at her door in the shape of Marco's advertisement. Even the style in which each breaks her tie with her lover is so different. Daisy's leaving Raman may be harsh but is not due to lack of love. Rosie's shelter behind the theory of karma in parting with Raju seems a sham, as she is already fed up with him before the cause for parting arises. So Daisy still retains her magnanimity after leaving Raman while Rosie lowers herself in the reader's esteem even though she spares no effort in providing legal defence for Raju in the court.

Rosie and Daisy do shine out among the women characters in Narayan's novels as young radical women, who follow heterodox patterns of behaviour raising their heads against women's social exploitation. Whether they succeed or not is not relevant. What matters is their capacity and freedom to voice their protest and to act accordingly. Bharati too is a vibrant woman, though not as much as Rosie and Daisy. All the three are active women who have replaced a meek and docile character like Savitri.

So far as The Guide and The Painter of Signs are concerned, all the four women characters therein, namely, the two heroines and the two old ladies, although they portray a wide spectrum of human traits, have a few characteristics in common, which are indicative of the author's own philosophy of life. None of the four is pessimistic or cynical or morbid, and each exhibits a zest for life, to live amidst the most adverse situations, each finding her own compromise with fate.
Life from the cradle to the grave, life in a hut and in a house, life in a village and a town and a city, and also in a jungle, marital life as well as life of a widow and also of a widower, life of an idler and life of an activist, life with its humorous humdrums and life with its tragic turns, the irony of life as well as the sagacity of life, life of men and women in flesh and blood as well as life of spirits, are all evidenced in Narayan's novels and stories examined here. In the six decades of a widely acclaimed career as a novelist, Narayan has firmly established himself as the doyen of Indo-English literary world. During his life's journey he has made his readers, through his novels, to travel in time from a tradition-ridden to a tradition-breaking society.

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Notes


2 Quoted by Naik, Ironic Vision 149.


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