CHAPTER - 4

TRADITIONS TROUNCED

In the novels examined in the two previous chapters, a variety of feminine temperaments have been encountered, exhibiting weakness, malleability, economic backwardness and subordination to men. We have also seen in chapter 3 the slow appearance of the dawn of women’s awakening. We now enter a period, which in Narayan’s novels begins with his *The Guide* (1958), during which women’s emancipation starts taking a definite shape. This period is divisible, as already mentioned earlier, in two parts, which I propose to discuss in two different sections of this chapter.

**Section-I – Career Oriented Women**

In the four novels to be examined in this Section, namely, *The Guide* (1958), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1977) and *Talkative Man* (1983), Narayan has taken a long stride, presenting newer role models in Rosie, Grace, Daisy and Roja, who trounce all traditions, which inspire much in the reader to ponder about.

It is to be noted that in order to preserve, as it were, the traditional character of Malgudi town, and thereby perhaps also to indicate his bias towards traditionalism, Narayan has chosen none of these four major women characters of these four novels as indigenous to Malgudi, but ‘imported’ from outside, one of them right from out of India.
Though Narayan is not generally known to project his women characters into prominence in his novels, two of these novels of his can definitely be treated as heroine oriented. Take out Rosie from The Guide, and the novel will crumble to pieces. Similarly Daisy is so domineeringly spread out in the entire novel that The Painter of Signs would fall flat without her.

**The Guide**

Rosie’s story, in her own words, is:

I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers; ... We are viewed as public women. ... A different life was planned for me by my mother. ... I took my master’s degree in economics. ... One day I saw ... an advertisement ... : “Wanted: an educated good-looking girl to marry a rich bachelor of academic interests. No caste restrictions; good looks and university degree essential.” ... we met, ... and got married. ... all the women in my family were impressed, ... and it was decided that if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice. ¹

She soon, however, finds life with her husband Marco boring, and her passion for dancing re-emerges when she meets Raju, the guide, who encourages her to resume dancing. Marco, however, prefers dead art to a living exponent of art and totally fails to appreciate her art. Dancing had penetrated so much in her blood that she succumbs to Raju’s manipulations, who discovers that the clue to her affection was her love for dancing. She was obviously unprepared to give it up for the sake of a dull, dry husband. Raju gets a niche in Rosie’s heart simply because he appreciates her art. When Marco learns of her affair with Raju, he abandons her; she goes to Raju who helps her to become a successful professional dancer. When Raju in his anxiety to keep her away from her husband, forges her signature on a document sent by Marco, he is imprisoned for the crime, and goes out of her life. Rosie continues her career...
as a dancer. We are here not concerned with what happens to Raju thereafter, neither is Rosie apparently.

Narayan shows his best in the genre of pensive comedy and in depicting the ironies of modern Indian life in *The Guide*. The novel is one of his most innovative, complex and advanced work, both in conception and construction. It has been universally acclaimed as one of the best novels not only of Narayan but also of the entire Indo-English literature. That it won the Sahitya Akademi Award, 1961, as mentioned in the book itself, is proof in itself. Several critics have highly appreciated the novel. William Walsh, for example, says:

*The Guide* (1958) is a remarkable example of the especially difficult genre to which most of Narayan’s work belongs, the serious comedy. ...

*The Guide* exhibits both this unity of vision and tranquillity of temperament. Its tone is pitched at that middle level on which we live, the staple of our lives. ... (Walsh, 114).

“Modern Indian Literature” comments:

*The Guide* is a high watermark of Narayan’s subtle fictional technique. The narrative alternates between the past and the present, blends the autobiographical and omniscient style of narration, raising the philosophical questions of appearance and reality, ends and means, and man and the mask.²

In *The Guide*, Narayan creates one of his most complex women characters, Rosie alias Nalini:

She was not very glamorous, ... but she did have a figure, a slight and slender one, beautifully fashioned, eyes that sparkled, a complexion not white, but dusky, which made her only half visible – as if you saw her through a film of tender coconut juice (G,65).

This description of her by Raju when he first saw her at Malgudi Railway station indicates that he fell for her at first sight.
A mostly unnoticed trait of Narayan, who writes mainly on Indian culture and tradition, is here betrayed, when he writes (in 1958) of Raju’s attraction for a married woman, so easily and in a way which would not arouse any adverse feeling in the reader.

As mentioned earlier, Rosie belonged to the class of dancing girls and has an inherent interest in dancing, which is apparent from her own statement that even as a young girl she danced in the village temple. This interest she stifles for the sake of respectability when she marries Marco. Apparently she and all the women in her family had reconciled themselves to the fact at the time of marriage “that if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice” (G,85). This shows that when Rosie married she knew that she would have to give up dancing. When Marco provides for her social status and security, knowing fully well her class which is viewed, in her own words, as “public women” (G,84), it is indeed a praiseworthy revolutionary step on his part, even in modern Indian conditions, much more so in the period to which the characters belong. In the same spirit of ‘let go’, one would expect Rosie to stick to her decision to abandon the art. Herein she falls widely short of the mark. Much of Marco’s callous behaviour towards Rosie arises out of her excessive love for dancing.

Right up to her entry into Malgudi, this love for dancing is lying dormant in Rosie, or at least is suppressed by her because she knows that Marco hates dancing. No sooner does she enter Malgudi, however, influenced by the town’s landscape and intoxicated by Raju’s flattery, than her love for dancing surfaces, which leads her on to breaking all codes one by one – social, marital and also moral. Everything, including marriage, love, money or fame, becomes subservient to her dedication to the art of dancing. She asks Raju “the moment she set foot in Malgudi, ‘Can you show me a cobra – a king cobra it must be – which can dance to the music of a flute?’ ” (G,64). And she gets her first rebuff at Malgudi from her husband there and then: “... I can’t stand the sight of a snake; your interests are morbid” (G,64).
Nevertheless she does go with Raju to see a cobra dance. She also likes to loaf in the market, eat in a crowded hotel, wander about, see a cinema, etc. When Raju asks her: “What is your interest?”, she replies: “Anything except cold, old stone walls” (G,83). What is implied in her reply is that the interests of her husband and herself are poles apart, because he has only academic interest in ancient sculpture.

Rosie’s marriage with Marco is on a wrong footing ab initio. Her only considerations for marrying him are that he is a rich man with a big bungalow and a car and that he is prepared to keep aside caste stigma. Her total dissatisfaction with her husband is reflected clearly in her remarks to Raju: “I’d have preferred any kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one real, live husband” (G,85). Marco, on the other hand, marries her on the basis of her educational certificate and good looks. It is indeed a marriage of convenience for both. There is neither love nor meticulous choice on either side. Added to this initial disharmony between the couple is Marco’s positive antipathy towards dancing which he calls street acrobatics and compares a dancer to a performing monkey.

Rosie, despite the deception her name makes, is an Indian woman and has naturally imbibed Indian culture and traditions. So even though there is no love lost between her and Marco, and in spite of Marco’s indifferent behaviour and hatred for her art, she is very conscious about her duties and responsibilities as a wife. This consciousness persists even when she slips into adultery with Raju, which is clear through her several utterances: “After all, he is my husband. I have to respect him. I cannot leave him there [on the hill]” (G,119); also:

... he [Marco] has been so good to me, given me comfort and freedom. What husband in the world would let his wife go and live in a hotel room by herself, a hundred miles away? ... is it not a wife’s duty to guard and help her husband, whatever the way in which he deals with her? (G,120).
Despite her wifely conscience, her primary obsession with dance coupled with Marco’s constant disregard of her interests and likings, makes Rosie an easy prey to Raju’s manoeuvres to win her over. Raju, as mentioned earlier, is immensely attracted to her right on the Malgudi Railway platform where he first encounters her, which is obvious from his describing her as a divine creature. From that moment on Raju’s advances to her begin and soon he finds out her natural love for dance, and manipulates her through it:

I found out the clue to her affection and utilized it to the utmost. Her art and her husband could not find a place in her thoughts at the same time: one drove the other out. ... I took care to maintain the emphasis on my passion for the art. It gave us a fresh intimacy – This common interest brought us close together (G,122-124).

It is, however, not merely Raju’s manipulations that induce Rosie’s fall. There is inherent in her an inclination for the common pleasures of life for which she is starving, and when Raju satisfies this hunger, in her madness of ecstasy she surrenders to Raju:

“Shall I go away?” I asked in a whisper.
“Yes, good night,” she said feebly.
“May I not come in?” I asked, trying to look my saddest.
“No, no. Go away,” she said. But on an impulse I gently pushed her out of the way, and stepped in and locked the door on the world (G,89).

Here Rosie exhibits a trait of moral laxity totally unconnected with her love or need for dance. So the only other need which pulls against her role as a wife, in this incident, is her need for passion. Critics no doubt have defended Rosie’s infidelity on the ground that her attempt to contain this need within marriage ends hopelessly. R. S. Singh has gone to the length of saying:

It is surprising how, himself a believer in conjugal loyalty, he [Narayan] painted with sympathy the tainted character of Rosie. She committed adultery with Raju, but her soul remained pure.
Despite her romance with Raju and physical separation from Marco she was spiritually devoted to her husband and always wished if she could be accepted back by him (Singh, 64).

But keeping in view cultural and social values, both of the East and of the West, adultery is indefensible under any circumstances, and Narayan has certainly not shown any tangible sympathy toward Rosie’s fall, though at the same time he has not condemned it either, specifically; but that is because Narayan’s attitude is not didactic, as mentioned by Singh himself (Singh, 63). Surely Rosie’s circumstances are not too compelling to make her action justifiable. When she belongs to the Devdasi class and is fully aware of the social stigma attached to that class, which once makes her exclaim: “We are not considered respectable; we are not considered civilized” (G, 84), it is all the more curious and regrettable that having attained respectability and having entered the civilized world as Marco’s wife, she should indulge in an act considered universally disreputable. It may be true, as Singh says, that Rosie was spiritually devoted to her husband and always wished if she could be accepted back by him; but what the author says in the novel is, “Nalini [that is Rosie] had cleared out of the town [Malgudi], bag and baggage. She had settled down at Madras and was looking after herself quite well” (G, 230). Even when she has an opportunity to meet Marco at the court, she makes no use of it, and as Mani describes: “After the case, she got into the car and went home, and he [Marco] got into his and went to the railway station: they didn’t meet” (G, 230). It is quite obvious that Rosie realizes that she is not at all acceptable to Marco now, after her life with Raju, even if she leaves dancing.

A still stranger trait of Rosie emerges when she allows Raju to make love to her, of course, but she was also beginning to show excessive consideration for her husband on the hill. In the midst of my [Raju’s] caresses, she would suddenly free herself and say, “Tell Gaffur to bring the car. I want to go and see him [Marco]” (G, 119).
When Marco learns of Rosie's affair with Raju, he decides to leave her. Ironically, at this very time, Rosie is in a repentant and retreating mood: "Somehow I [Rosie] began to like him [Marco] very much. It seemed enough if he forgave me and took me back..." (G,151-152). But Marco is relentless and tells her: "... you are not my wife. You are a woman who will go to bed with anyone that flatters your antics" (G,152). What greater insult to a woman can there be? And yet Rosie bears it with equanimity. And the same woman who is disowned as wife by her husband goes on saying: "After all, after all, he is my husband" (G,201). And that too, when she is in bed with Raju (G,200).

And years after Marco has left her and she has been staying with Raju, her strangeness becomes more strange, when she learns about the publication of a book by Marco, through an article in the Illustrated Weekly of Bombay. She is all excitement on reading the article and bursts out: "This is really great. ... I want so much to see the book!" (G,199). Later she also cuts out Marco's photo from the magazine and places it on her dressing mirror. When she comes to know that Raju has already received the book but has concealed it from her, she has a quarrel with him during which she inter alia says: "... anything happening to him [Marco] is bound to interest me. I'm pleased he has made a name now, ... After all, after all, he is my husband" (G,201). When Raju says: "Very well. Nothing has happened to make you cry. You should feel pleased with his reputation.", she replies: "I am," and when Raju adds: "Then stop crying and go to sleep.", she has the effrontery to ask him: "Why does it irritate you when I speak of him?" Even to Raju's reply: "Do you ask why? Don't you remember when and how he left you?", her response is: "I do, and I deserved nothing less. Any other husband would have throttled me then and there: He tolerated my company for nearly a month, even after knowing what I have done" (G,201). She also adds: "... I may be mistaken in my own judgement of him. After all, he had been kind to me" (G,202). All these remarks of hers clearly indicate that she still has a soft corner in her heart for Marco. Viewed in this context, it is a difficult
conundrum to visualize the problematic attitude of Rosie which permits her to have an adulterous relationship with Raju. One is apt to conclude with the Shakespearean adage “Frailty, thy name is woman!”

Yet an important laudable facet of Rosie’s character is her devotion to her art. Dancing is in her blood and everything else is subordinate to this need. Even her passion for physical love diminishes as her attention focuses on the development of her art. She is even able to influence a man like Raju, who is ‘an ignoramus’ so far as the dancing art is concerned, so much so that it makes him free from all sensual thoughts:

I [Raju] felt moved by the movements, rhythm, and time, although I did not quite follow the meaning of the words. ... She held the performance for nearly an hour; it filled me with the greatest pleasure on earth. I could honestly declare that, while I watched her perform, my mind was free, for once, from all carnal thoughts; I viewed her as a pure abstraction. She could make me forget my surroundings. I sat with open-mouthed wonder watching her (G,125).

In her devotion to art there is an undercurrent of sincerity and perseverance which is obvious from the fact that she does not perform merely for the highest bidders. She is selective in choosing her patrons. She resents the commercialization of her art by Raju, is very unhappy about it, and in fact is emotionally alienated from him on this account. This resentment is mirrored in her outbursts: “Do you know the bulls yoked to an oil-crusher – they keep going round and round and round, in a circle, without a beginning or an end?” (G,202), and “I feel like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs, or a performing monkey, as he [Marco] used to say...” (G,203). Despite such handicaps, her absorption in the art is so deep that even Raju thinks: “…in spite of her protestations to the contrary, she would never stop dancing. She would not be able to stop. She would go from strength to strength” (G,222). Raju is vindicated when he learns through newspapers in the prison
about Rosie’s continued progress in her career, climbing the ladder of fame step by step.

Rosie is a woman with exceptional individualistic traits. In the novel, she emerges not primarily as the wife of Marco or the beloved of Raju, but as an individual with her own ambitions, aspirations and goals which bring her into conflict with reality. As Shantha Krishnaswamy points out:

Narayan sees the perplexing, disturbing effects of the modern assertive feminine in Rosie. ... When she introduces an element of volition, of choice in her life, thought, sex and imagination, she had to confront the male-oriented cultural milieu which looks askance at woman’s independence (Krishnaswamy, 128-129).

Ego-centricity is another prominent facet of Rosie’s character. To her other people serve merely as instruments in achieving her ends. She catches hold of Marco by way of marriage just because she wanted to get rid of the caste-stigma and to gain respectability and stability. Having acquired these and realizing that Marco can give her nothing more, she turns to Raju who, she thinks, can help her in building up her dancing career. Even Raju is used by her as a ladder to climb to success and fame. Raju too realizes this trait of Rosie when he narrates:

I knew, looking at the way she was going about her business, that she would manage – whether I was inside the bars or outside, whether her husband approved of it or not. Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, ... (G, 222-223).

Looking to these facets of Rosie’s character, Shantha Krishnaswamy has very aptly commented:

The emergence of the resilient Rosie means the disappearance of the good things associated with the old definition of the female: the tenderness, the caring, the emphasis on personal relationships and courtesy and decorum (Krishnaswamy, 133).

What is Narayan’s overall achievement in the characterization of Rosie? It would seem that he has succeeded in presenting the complexities
which colour the character of a woman who breaks away from tradition and chooses to make a life of her own, with or without the help or sympathy of any male.

Viewed from the angle of traditions, it can be seen that Rosie and her mother first break with tradition, when they decide that Rosie should marry. Devdasis or temple dancers are assumed to be devoted to the temple and the god in the temple to which each is attached and are expected to spend their lives in the service of the temple and are not permitted to marry. But Rosie marries with a view to settle down to a socially respectable family life. Her love for the art of dancing, however, proves an Achilles’ heel in her purpose, coupled with and aggravated by her husband’s natural aversion to that art.

Then she revolts against another strong tradition – conjugal loyalty. A vital question here is, however, whether her love for dancing is the sole cause of such revolt; because apart from that love and quite independent of it she entertains a craving for the ordinary pleasures of life, which Marco is unable or unwilling to provide. When Raju, as guide, takes her round to show the town, Raju, no wonder, is enthusiastic, but so is she:

I engaged Gaffur for my own rounds that day. I was a true guide. Never had I shown anyone the town with greater zest. I took Rosie all over the place, showed her the town hall tower; showed her Sarayu, and we sat on the sands and munched a large packet of salted nuts. She behaved like a baby – excited, thrilled, appreciative of everything. I took her through the Suburban Stores and told her to buy anything she liked. This was probably the first time that she was seeing the world. She was in ecstasies. … She had picked up a silver brooch, painted over and patterned like a peacock. I paid for it and pinned it on her sari. We dined on the terrace of the Taj, … We laughed. We were getting into a state of perpetual giggling.
She liked to loaf in the market, eat in a crowded hotel, 
wander about, see a cinema – these common pleasures seemed to 
have been beyond her reach all these days (G,87-88).

It is obvious from the above that the seed of infidelity has been sown in her, 
even before a dancing career takes any concrete shape in her mind. Her love 
for the art does not, therefore, provide any adequate defence to her breaking 
the sacred bond of marriage. She is as guilty as Anna of Tolstoy’s “Anna 
Karenina”. She is rather more blameworthy than Anna, because she loves 
neither Marco nor Raju and is also not loyal to either, while Anna completely 
hates her husband Karenin and vehemently loves Vronsky, with whom she 
first establishes liaison, and then goes to live with him, without marriage, 
leaving Karenin, and does not leave him till her death. Anna Karenina surely 
exhibits that intensity of love which one discovers in both the hero and the 
heroine of “Wuthering Heights”, Heathcliff and Catherine.

But while Rosie is on the whole a tradition-breaker, it has to be 
recognized as yet another peculiar trait of her character that germs of 
traditionalism still lurk in her blood. That is a factor which disturbs her life 
with Raju, often reminding her of Marco, with perhaps a tinge of repentance. 
This trait becomes more apparent, the more she advances in her career as a 
dancer. One can say that she dares to have liaison with Raju by breaking with 
the traditional concept of conjugal fidelity, but she breaks with him under 
pressure of traditions. She demands her freedom from him: “...leave me once 
and for all; that’s all I ask. Forget me. Leave me to live or die, as I choose; 
that’s all” (G,222). Lakshmi Holmstrom hits the nail on the head when she 
says: “Paradoxically, the more she is outside ordinary social rules, the more 
traditional her values become.” 3

Vandana Singh also comments in this regard:

Time and again her repentant self is brought to the forefront of 
the narrative through her repeated brooding over her husband.

C.D. Narsimhaiah remarks in this context:
... especially in the way he takes care to preserve Rosie from inner taint Narayan seems to be affirming what has been hailed in the Indian tradition as the Feminine Principle in life. 4

The culmination of this trait is reached in her total surrender to the theory of Karma (G,216). One notes with regret, however, that she applies the theory to Raju's actions and not to any of her own, because she tells him: "I felt all along you were not doing right things. This is Karma. What can we do?" (G,216). The reader is not informed of the ultimate fate of Rosie, because the author's aim is to tell the story of Raju, the Guide, and the novel ends with Raju's end. The question whether Rosie lived peacefully as a great professional dancer till her end is left to the reader to surmise.

It is rather sad and shocking that several critics have almost condoned Rosie's liaison with Raju, viewing it as her silent revolt against the social oppressions on women. Women no doubt have to fight the outdated social mores or morals or laws or customs, and to work ceaselessly towards their abolition or suitable changes therein. But one wonders whether individual disregard or break with them can have any justification or would be effective.

Raju's mother is the only other woman character in The Guide, minor and yet not quite unimportant. She is a nagging wife, apathetic to her husband's plans for economic progress. She becomes a widow in early life, but has her own son to hang on, and also a brother who later arrives as her protector from Raju and Rosie. A widow who has looked after and fed her son from his early age is naturally very fond of him, and yet Raju's mother has to take the ultimate step of separating from him and going to her brother's house to live because of Raju's adamant refusal to leave Rosie in the lurch after she comes under his shelter.

When Rosie, deserted by Marco, comes to Raju's home the mother's protests begin:
You can’t have a dancing-girl in your house. Every morning with all that dancing and everything going on! What is the home coming to? ... What will people say? (G,153).

She cannot accommodate the idea of living with ‘a tainted woman’. She desires Raju to drive away Rosie, ‘a real snake-woman’, from home: “Why can’t she go to her husband and fall at his feet? You know, living with a husband is no joke as these modern girls imagine” (G,154). What she holds as a wife’s sacred duty is revealed in the anecdotes she tells Rosie about husbands:

- good husbands,
- mad husbands,
- reasonable husbands,
- unreasonable ones, savage ones, slightly deranged ones, moody ones and so on and so forth; but it was always the wife, by her doggedness, perseverance, and patience, that brought him round (G,155),

and the numerous mythological stories she quotes ‘of Savitri, Seetha, and all the well-known heroines’. The curious part of her character is that “in spite of all her prejudice, she liked the girl [Rosie] really and could not help treating her kindly” (G,158), for which she gets a rebuke from her brother: “This is your mistake, Sister. ... Why should you have been so good to her [Rosie]? You should have told her at the beginning what was what” (G,170). It is her scheme to invite her brother to her rescue which brings him into the picture. This, however, does not help. Instead, a quarrel ensues between the uncle and nephew, which provokes her to pour out all her bottled up feelings against Rosie:

Are you now satisfied with your handiwork, you she-devil, you demon. Where have you dropped on us from? Everything was so good and quiet – until you came; you came in like a viper. Bah! I have never seen anyone work such havoc on a young fool! What a fine boy he used to be! The moment he set his eyes on you, he was gone. On the very day I heard him mention the ‘serpent girl’
my heart sank. I knew nothing good could come out of it (G,170).

Years later, the mother, who comes to the court on the last day of the hearing of the case against Raju, is met by Rosie, who approaches her to say a few words. She tells Rosie: “Now are you satisfied with what you have done to him?” (G,231).

These lamentations, though genuine and justified, show her in a poor light.

Later in this chapter, after having discussed the character of Raman’s aunt of The Painter of Signs, I shall have occasion to compare her character with that of Raju’s mother.

The Vendor of Sweets

*The Vendor of Sweets* is the story of an unscrupulous, insensitive, ineffectual son on whom the father wastes his love and adoration. As stated by Shiv K. Gilra:

... *The Vendor of Sweets* ... harks back to the more limited area of family-relationships ... Narayan, in the novel, seems to curb his hilarity of *The Man-Eater*. His comic inventiveness is subdued, and so the Malgudi world in *The Vendor of Sweets*, though as true and authentic as ever, is comparatively less rich and varied. 5

Jagannath alias Jagan, who is a vendor of sweets in the small town of Malgudi, is an honest, hard-working man who believes in simple living and high thinking. His life has been coloured by Gandhian principles. He has participated in the freedom struggle and has undergone imprisonment as a result. He has a son, Mali, who has inherited none of the virtues of his father. As the son grows into adulthood the simplicity of Jagan’s life gets disturbed and he gets entangled into complexity merely out of paternal love. The story which starts on a note of absurdity develops into a tragic tale of a disillusioned and disheartened father. The agony of Jagan of having an unworthy son is all
the more acute because he has nourished him so fondly after the death of his mother and has showered all his love on the child, fulfilling all his desires, reasonable as well unreasonable. As succinctly stated by H. M. Williams: "Jagan's complex, not altogether pleasant character, is an epitome of Narayan's vision of India". Shiv K. Gilra's comment on Jagan is also pertinent:

The character of Jagan projects the theme of conflict between tradition and modernity even more sharply. He represents the timeless and unchanging values of the Hindu way of life, as well as its obscurantism and irrationality. Much of Jagan's pietism is humbug. ...

This apparently hollow man has, however, an unsuspected reservoir of strength in his character. It is the strength of a tradition with a hoary past. The strength is released when it comes into clash with a grossly materialistic get-rich-quick mentality.

Uma Parameswaran's comments on this novel are very striking:

*The Sweet Vendor* is worth a comprehensive study for its literary and thematic values. What follows is not a study of the novel as an entity but of a theme that runs through Narayan's work and culminates in *The Sweet Vendor*. In this novel Narayan shows the point at which fatherly love needs must stop if father and son are to ascend to a higher plane of fulfilment.

Paternal love is one of the more significant refrains in Narayan's fiction. (Parameswaran, 74).

And she gives several examples from Narayan's novels and stories, in support of her dictum, which I need not repeat here.

Within this general framework of the story the author has deftly interwoven a non-Indian female character, namely, of Grace who, though not as idealistic as Jagan, is not as unscrupulous as Mali either. Also, though she is a non-Indian, she seems nearer to Indian culture than Mali, an Indian. By
juxtaposing two diametrically opposite characters of Jagan and Mali, Narayan has brought into sharp focus the contrast in their way of life. The contrast is all the more glaring because it is between a man and his own son. While the man leads a dedicated, purposeful life and is firm in his ideological convictions, his son is simply a self-seeker, who cares neither for his father nor for Grace who has come to India trusting him.

So the heroine of the novel is Grace. This is the only novel of Narayan where a non-Indian is presented as a main female character. In several of his novels the heroines do not belong to Malgudi — Rosie of The Guide, Daisy of The Painter of Signs and Bharati of Waiting for the Mahatma. But here Narayan imports his heroine from right across the seas. We learn that she comes to India with Mali when the latter returns from America. Jagan takes her to be a Chinese or a Japanese when Mali introduces her to him at Malgudi Railway Station. But by the time the son returns to India, the gulf between him and Jagan has so widened that Jagan has no courage to inquire into her nationality or any other details, even though Mali announces that Grace is his wife.

Grace, of course, voluntarily discloses to Jagan later, after many weeks of their staying together, that she is the daughter of an American soldier and a Korean mother, born in New Jersey. Her father died in service while she was still unborn. Grace studied domestic science at Michigan and met Mo (that is, Mali) when he went there for his creative writing course. But on her arrival to India, Grace is unaware of the abnormal relationship between the father and the son. She is visiting India for the first time and like many foreigners is enchanted. She “gazed with fascination at the streets and bazaars and cooed, ‘Oh, charming! Charming! Charming!’” 8 On reaching home, when Jagan offers her a chair and inquires what she would like to have, she is “genuinely pleased with his attention”, and says: “Oh, how kind of you!”; and drawing a chair for him adds: “Please be seated yourself; you must be tired” (VS,59). She is polite and armed with Western etiquette.
Jagan divides the house into two sections obviously for Mali’s convenience, one for himself and the other for Mali and Grace, and the father and son start living almost as strangers under the same roof. It is Grace who takes initiative to get closer to Jagan:

One morning Grace parted the mustard-coloured curtain which divided the house into two sections, came into Jagan’s quarters, and tidied them up. ... She washed the vessels in his kitchen and arranged them neatly on a shelf. His protests were unheeded. She clutched the broom and raked every corner of the floor, saying, “Father, you think I mind it? I don’t. I must not forget that I’m an Indian daughter-in-law.” Jagan did not know what to say in reply and mumbled, “That’s true indeed.” She was stooping and scrubbing the ancient granite sink in the kitchen at floor level, tucking up her sari (which she had learnt to wear), and exposing her ivory-hued kneecap (VS,61-62).

Among several of his objections to her doing these chores, when Jagan mentions: “Mali may not like it.”, she resolutely replies: “It’s not his business anyway. He is writing letters and I’m doing the house, that’s all.” She does these chores so regularly thereafter that Jagan “was getting used to the extreme air of orderliness that the feminine touch imparted to one’s surroundings” (VS,62). It may also incidentally be noted that while Grace, an American, thus tries to be as much Indian as she is capable of being, Mali, an Indian himself, is very anti-Indian, especially after his stay in America, which is apparent from his utterances, such as, “What a lot of time is wasted here! I have never seen a more wasteful country than ours” (VS,76), “Now we are a little backward. Except Ramayana and Mahabharata, those old stories, there is no modern writing, ...” (VS,77), “She is a free person, not like the daughters-in-law in our miserable country” (VS,127), and “Don’t you know what a psychiatrist is? What a backwood this is, where nothing is known” (VS,146).

Grace also starts wearing a purely Indian dress, namely, a sari, perhaps to please Jagan only. She even praises Jagan’s house in the
superlative, for the same purpose. “This is the loveliest house I have ever seen in my life. ... I’ve always dreamt of living in a house like this” (VS,62). Her second major attempt to win over Jagan, however, does not succeed. When she offers to cook for him: “I wish you would let me cook for you” (VS,62), Jagan very firmly rejects her request on the ground that he eats to live only on what he can cook with his own hands. To Jagan’s surprise, this explanation is received by Grace with: “Oh, you sound thrilling!”, and encouraged by someone saying, for the first time, a good word about his habits, Jagan tells Grace about his proposed book on Nature Cure and Natural Diet. She ecstatically says: “I’m sure it’s going to be a best seller” (VS,63).

What is Grace’s purpose in coming to India? Surely she does not come as Mrs. Mali because she and Mali are not yet married, though Mali introduces her as his wife to bluff his father. But it seems she comes with a sincere desire to marry and settle down in India as Mrs. Mali, because she tells Jagan of her fears about the caste-system in India, etc. She tells him:

I had heard so much about the caste system in this country. I was afraid to come here, and when I first saw you all at the railway station I shook with fear. I thought I might not be accepted. Mo [Mali] has really been wonderful, you know. It was very courageous of him to bring me here. (VS,66).

So, if it is love which draws her to India, she beats Mali even there, because she trusts him so much, she forsakes her steady job in America and brings with her all her savings of about two thousand dollars, while Mali spends away these savings, does not keep the promise of marrying her and leaves her in the lurch. In fact, he wants her to go back to America and neither she nor he has money enough to buy her air ticket. She tells all this to Jagan only when she becomes completely helpless, and yet she tries to maintain a matter-of-fact attitude, simply saying: “Father, Mo wants me to go back.” When he asks: “Why?”, she hesitates and he fears she may cry, but she says very calmly, “It’s all over, that’s all.” She does not reply to his query, “What’s over?”, but when he asks, “It is his idea or yours?” she repeats, “He wants me to go back.
He says he can’t afford to keep me here any more. ... I used to work. I had two thousand dollars when I came here. All that’s gone.” Her next utterance is still more pathetic: “Mo has no more use for me.” To this Jagan cannot help retorting: “Use or no use, my wife – well, you know, I looked after her all her life.” The only answer Grace has is to say shyly, “The only good part of it is, there is no child.” Jagan does not make much of this remark, which seems to him irrelevant and obscure. So he adds: “If you read our Puranas, you will find that the wife’s place is beside her husband whatever may happen.” And then he receives the bombshell from Grace as reply: “But we are not married. He promised he’d marry me in the Indian way, because I liked it, and brought me here.” Naturally Jagan inquires: “And the marriage didn’t take place, after coming here?” but she simply says: “Wouldn’t you have known it if it had?” (VS,134-135). Earlier, when Jagan puts the same idea before Mali, telling him: “But a wife must be with her husband, whatever happens.”, Mali, without revealing the fact that she is not his wife, just tells his father: “That was in your day” (VS,127).

This slow, gradual, step by step unfolding of his son’s sin of living with a woman without lawful marriage and of violating the purity of his house, should have generated disgust for his son, but the partiality of paternal love in Jagan makes him transfer most of this disgust to Grace whom otherwise he considers a good girl. So when Grace offers to explain in detail, He stood looking at the girl. She looked so good and virtuous; he had relied on her so much, and yet here she was living in sin and talking casually about it all. What breed of creatures were these? he wondered. They had tainted his ancient home. He had borne much from them. (VS,135).

So he refuses to go in as requested by Grace and goes back to his shop. This same man, when he was ignorant of Grace’s unmarried status, could not bear her absence from his house. “He liked her presence in the house, which filled a serious lacuna” (VS,127).
It is to the credit of Grace that she does not have a row over such a serious matter with either Jagan or Mali or both, whom she can legitimately consider responsible for ruining her. Jagan clearly does her a great injustice when he finds fault with her for the entire episode rather than blaming it solely on his own son. No doubt, he mends matters later, but his immediate reaction of refusing to listen to Grace’s story must have been a harsh blow to the girl, who had been virtually abandoned by the only man on whose trust she had come to India and so she must have looked upon Jagan as her last hope. This partiality of Jagan is exposed when he has a talk with his cousin in this matter. The cousin tries to give him a practical advice, and so asks, “Why do you let this affect you so much? It is, after all, their [Mali’s and Grace’s] business.” Jagan’s reply is revealing: “But I feel it is my home that is being dirtied. Mali is my son. Grace is not my daughter-in-law” (VS,138). He justifies the maxim “Blood is thicker than water.” The cousin whose “role was to help Jagan crystallize his attitudes in a crisis”, points out, “Oh, that is a very wrong, selfish view to take.” Admitting his weakness Jagan mumbles, “We are blinded by our attachments. Every attachment creates a delusion and we are carried away by it. …” (VS,138). But the cousin is not a mere criticizer. He offers Jagan a very practical advice also: “Get through their marriage very quickly in the hill temple. It can be arranged within a few hours.” To this, however, Jagan’s response is very orthodox and unbecoming of his claims of being a Gandhian. He says: “Alas, I don’t know what her caste is; so how can I?” The cousin has a solution to this silly problem also. He says, “Oh, she can be converted. I know some persons who will do it” (VS,139).

When Jagan puts the idea before Mali, the latter’s response is a jolt to him. Mali tells him, “You have been listening to nonsense. I never knew you could listen to such gossip.” And when Jagan retorts, “Does Grace gossip about herself? …” Mali replies, “Grace has been getting funny notions, that’s why I told you to pack her off, but you grudged the expenditure. She is not in her right mind; she must go to a psychiatrist” (VS,146). It is clear Mali has no intention to marry Grace. He has completely betrayed her. As Jagan reflects,
after deciding to go away from home forever, about Mali’s and Grace’s mutual relationship, it comes to “Nothing, no bonds or links or responsibility. Come together, live together, and kick each other away when it suited them. Whoever kicked harder got away first” (VS, 175).

It is not that Grace’s character is all white and there are no black patches on it. Right from the time she lands on Indian soil, she is an associate in Mali’s bluff that she is his wife. Not only does she give her silent consent to being so introduced – otherwise she would have revealed the truth there and then – but she also gives her positive contribution to the lie, by starting to address Jagan as “Father” and making the statement, “I must not forget that I’m an Indian daughter-in-law.” In a later incident, she sticks a flower in her bobbed hair, and tells Jagan: “As it’s a Friday, I have remembered my duties as a Hindu wife. I have also washed the doorsteps and decorated the threshold with white flour. ... Don’t you believe now that I could have been a Hindu in my last life? ...” (VS, 87). Her attempts to please Jagan can also be viewed with doubt as just part of a scheme to extract money from him for Mali’s business. When Mali first starts discussing business with his father, he invites Grace to join them. But Jagan sees from the deliberate manner in which Grace keeps herself in the background that she must have been responsible for arranging this meeting. Of course we can assume mitigating factors in her favour. In her country it would not be considered any great blemish for a boy and a girl to live together without marriage, and she must have consented to pretend that they were married presumably on Mali’s persuasion that in India they can’t live under the same roof, except as spouses, without inviting social ostracism. Viewed from a reverse angle, it seems Grace does try to live as Mali’s wife and Jagan’s daughter-in-law as wives and daughters-in-law in a traditional Hindu family would normally live, though aware that she is a fake. If one takes her statement that she liked to be married in the Indian way as genuine, one can also attribute to her a genuine desire to live in the Indian way, and then whatever she does in Jagan’s house is not merely a drama to impress him but also an honest sincere try at fulfilment of her desire.
As regards the scheme of inducing Jagan to part with his money for Mali's business, Jagan himself suffers from "occasional misgiving", namely, "might not Grace's interest, friendliness, and attentiveness be a calculated effort to win his dollars?" (VS,83). But one has to remember that Grace comes to India to settle down, not to go back - in fact, she is genuinely sad when Mali wants her to return to her country - and her settling down depends on Mali's establishing himself. So it seems quite natural for her to be anxious and eager to play her role in helping Mali in his task. Viewed a bit more generously, even Mali's banking on his father's dollars for his business is not so unethical as Jagan seems to think. Then Grace's attempt to make his task easy by pleasing Jagan is even less so.

Even adopting Jagan's line of thinking about his son's and Grace's life, namely, "Come together, live together, and kick each other away when it suited them. Whoever kicked harder got away first", one may well wonder: does Grace have at all any chance to kick, leave alone kicking harder?

Shiv K. Gilra pays a proper tribute to Grace when he notes: "Grace with all her exoticism, is a graceful and likable cameo." He also records:

His [Jagan's] last thought is for Grace ... This 'outlandish' girl, wronged by the man [Mali] for whose sake she left her country, gave him [Jagan] the only moments of happiness, understanding and regard he could gather in a strange and bewildering world.  

Ambika is not a living character of the novel. She is mostly portrayed in flashbacks of Jagan's reminiscences, wherein he relives his youth with nostalgia. Her presence in the story seems mainly to present the contrast between the indigenous Indian traditional culture and the imported modern Western culture and to highlight the futility of the average Indian couple's craving for an heir.

Ambika dies young of brain tumour when Mali is still a schoolboy and it falls to Jagan's lot to bring the boy up. He does the job magnificently in his own view, but somehow there develops a lack of warmth and even of understanding between him and Mali. The latter slowly drifts away from all
that his father holds dear and valuable, and ultimately grows into almost an
exact opposite of what his father is, both in thought and action. Perhaps
Narayan here emphasizes a mother’s place in a child’s growth, and points out
the inadequacy of a father’s care, howsoever loving, tender and considerate.

Ambika is not a meek obedient, sulking wife like Savitri of The
Dark Room, though both fall under the category of traditional Hindu wives.
Ambika has her vital disagreements with Jagan. She does not like his
Gandhian fads like tanning in the house to get “non-violent” leather for his
footwear. She also refuses to associate herself with any of his health-giving
activities. “She hated his theories and lived her own life” (VS,21). They also
clash when Jagan forbids her to swallow aspirin for relief from headache. But
their love gets the better of their differences at such times. Jagan’s comment is
significant: “You may do what you like. Only don’t suffer” (VS,21). And he
personally brings the aspirin from the cupboard for her. This tolerance in
relationship is completely lacking in Mali-Grace relations, which is what
Jagan is unable to comprehend.

Perhaps Ambika’s open antagonism to Jagan’s views and
ideologies, witnessed by Mali while he was growing up, is responsible at least
partly for Mali’s own contravention of them. Perhaps in acting contrary to
Jagan’s expectations Mali sees his mother’s vindication. Viewed thus
Ambika’s blind opposition to her husband’s views and actions becomes
doubly blameworthy. At the same time, it is too much to expect in Ambika
such deep knowledge of the impact of her behaviour with her husband on her
son. On the other hand, Jagan’s own stretching too far his views to the extent
they become his idiosyncrasies also leave their mark on Mali. When Ambika
is dying of cancer, and Jagan suggests Nature Cure and refers to the book he is
going to publish, even the doctor attending her becomes impatient and says:
“Go back, go back to your wife for the few hours left. Your son is watching
us. Protect him.” When Mali asks: “What did the doctor say?” Jagan breaks
into a wail holding his son, but Mali shakes himself off and watches “his
father from a distance with a look of dismay and puzzlement” (VS,37).
Jagan stretches his memory to the time when he had travelled to Kuppam “to take a look at the bride proposed for him by the elders of the family” (VS,148). What he learns about Ambika at his first visit to his future in-laws is that she is “not short nor tall, nor fat nor puny...” (VS,154), that she has “a slightly masculine voice” (VS,153). The description of this entire episode of the meeting seems similar, except for verbal changes and differences in minor details, with the meeting of Chandran with Susila in The Bachelor of Arts. Narayan is, no doubt, a traditionalist and advocates in his novels the happiness achieved through traditional marriages arranged by elders for the boys and girls of their families. But these descriptions also contain an ironical humour at the Indian youth who, with their half-baked Western culture acquired through modern education, still succumb to the age-old methods imposed by their elders for selecting their life-partners.

An elaborate description of Jagan’s marriage – right from the process of selection of the bride up to the consummation of the marriage under the protective and patronizing yet restrictive supervision of the elders – through various rituals and functions for solemnization seem also to aim at highlighting the importance of all these factors in Jagan’s view for the union of a man and a woman in wedlock before they can start their life together. By so doing the author seems, by contrast, to indicate how highly debasing Jagan must have considered Mali-Grace life together in his own house, and what sharp pangs he must have felt on that account. Narayan has also deftly contrasted the moral support behind the romantic fervour of young Jagan and Ambika and the lack of it in the relationship of Mali and Grace. He tactfully points out that there is legal and religious sanction behind Jagan’s attachment to Ambika, though frowned upon by his elders because it interferes with his studies. Jagan’s wrath against Mali and Grace is solely on account of the absence of such sanction behind their relations which, therefore, become highly immoral.

The novel narrates how Jagan’s mother is constantly obsessed with the gold waist-belt which the bride should have brought as part of the dowry
but didn’t. Narayan does not miss an opportunity to hint at the evil of the dowry system in this novel too as he does in *The Bachelor of Arts*. Where giving a half-torn banana leaf, to dine on, to a person who holds “the highest precedence in the family hierarchy” can “threaten to develop into a first-class crisis”, omission of the gold waist-belt from the jewellery provided to the bride can surely go to the extent of stopping the marriage. It is to be noted that it is the womenfolk of the bridegroom’s party that get upset, and they are not satisfied when a piece of jewellery is delivered, because it was not made “of one gold sheet but of a number of little gold bars intertwined with silk cords.” They feel that “this was downright cheating.” It is only Jagan’s intervention which prevents the breakdown of the marriage, but the womenfolk do not fail to brand him as hen-packed (VS,161-162). The mother never forgets this incident and leaves no opportunity to taunt her daughter-in-law.

Even a small mistake of over-salting the sauce by Ambika who is not aware that salt has already been added by the mother is taken as an excuse by her to cry out: “… we are not destined to enjoy the spectacle of a gold waist-band, like hundreds of others, but one wants at least a sensible…” (VS,171). Of course, Ambika does not take all this lying down and retorts back: “Why are you so obsessed with the gold belt? What has it to do with salt or sugar? Have you never seen a gold belt in your life?” Thereafter the mother becomes “very sparing in her remarks, particularly with reference to the gold belt” (VS,171). But even then, that she does not relent is evident from the fact that even after ten years she is found muttering, as Ambika is childless all these years, “All one asks of a girl is that she at least bring some children into a house as a normal person should; no one is asking for gold and silver; one may get cheated with regard to a gold belt even. Why can’t a girl bear children as a million others in the world do?” (VS,164). The mother’s prejudice against Ambika reflects on Jagan also and she often comments: “A son is a son until the wife comes” (VS,163).

What Ambika tells her mother-in-law about the waist-belt speaks volumes. It is a revolt of a daughter-in-law against the verbal tyrannies of the
mother-in-law, unexpected in an average Indian traditional family. As Narayan puts it: "They had all along underestimated Ambika’s temper" (VS, 171). Even in regard to her being childless, Ambika tells Jagan: "As far as our family is concerned, all my sisters have many children, and your mother’s insinuation that I am infertile … We have a group photo in our house with our grandmother; do you know how many children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren there are? … One hundred and three; … we are not an impotent family" (VS, 165). There is thus a spark of revolt in her otherwise traditional submissive front; a boldness to challenge her husband about sterility, a haughtiness to rebuff her mother-in-law’s greed for a gold waistband. And she also possesses an unpredictable temperament:

After all these years of married life, he [Jagan] could not really anticipate her reactions. Sometimes she took things easily, with the greatest cheer; sometimes she stung him and glared at him for the same remark. She was a model of goodness, courtesy, and cheerfulness generally, but she could lash with her tongue when her temper was roused (VS, 170).

A peculiar facet of the gold-belt incident is: Woman’s enemy number one is woman, not man. Man generally loves and protects a woman. It is the mother and other womenfolk who make an issue of first the absence and then the low quality of the gold-belt. It is Jagan who saves the situation by explaining to his mother: “This is the latest fashion; nowadays the girls do not want to be weighed down with all that massive gold.” When his brother says: “Don’t make a fool of yourself so soon. Why don’t you leave these problems for womenfolk to discuss in the way they want?”, Jagan has the audacity to counter: “It is because they are criticizing my wife, poor girl!” (VS, 162). Even in regard to Jagan’s flunking the B.A. examination often, his mother blames Ambika more than Jagan himself, which makes Ambika remark: “Why don’t you pick up your books and go away to a hostel? Your mother seems to think I am always lying on your lap, preventing you from touching your books. … Your mother remarked that, being uneducated myself, I want to drag you
down to my own level" (VS, 167). Jagan begins to study with a determined mind, more to remove this slur on his wife than to pass his B.A.

Jagan’s reminiscences of the past serve not only to evolve the character of Ambika, they also highlight the tragedy of the troubles undergone by the entire family to get a son for him and ultimately getting Mali, who utterly disappoints him and makes him extremely unhappy. The entire episode of the visit to the temple “Santana Krishna” on Badri Hill, as a remedy for Ambika’s barrenness, demonstrates on the one hand the craving of Jagan’s parents, their impatience (they are not prepared to wait till Jagan’s examinations are over as suggested by him – “We have waited long enough” (VS, 168)) to be blessed with a grandson, and on the other the unflinching faith of the teeming Indians in the effectiveness of prayers and propitiations of gods. It is a great stigma on an Indian woman if she does not bear a child soon after marriage. The stigma still remains to a lesser degree if she gives births to daughters only. The temple is reputed with the myth of bestowing sons only. “No one who prays at that temple is ever disappointed with a daughter” (VS, 172). By a mere coincidence Mali is born after the visit to this temple, and both Jagan and Ambika receive the blessings of elders, when “A look of triumph glowed on Jagan’s face” and Ambika “held herself up proudly, having now attained the proper status in the family” (VS, 173).

On an overall view, Narayan’s portrayal of Ambika is in keeping with the author’s belief in marital bliss flowing from marriages arranged under traditional system. Despite the problems faced by her regarding dowry and alleged barrenness for a decade, she and Jagan make a happy couple. Shantha Krishnaswamy, while referring to Jagan’s nostalgic reminiscence of his past with Ambika, has therefore appropriately commented: “Together these vignettes present the old world picture of marriage and domestic felicity under the traditional set up” (Krishnaswamy, 126-127).

In evolving the characters of Ambika and Grace, Narayan has no doubt intended to present a contrast between the East and the West, but he seems to have also taken care not to make this contrast disproportionately
sharp. He has exaggerated neither the orthodoxy of the East nor the permissiveness of the West. In the traditional outlook of Ambika an element of modernity is discernible. Similarly, Grace’s modern attitudes are not all devoid of traditional values. In fact, at some points she exhibits qualities of heart which show her in a better light than her Indian counterparts. Even Jagan admits more than once that she is a good girl, and it is on that consideration that he ultimately recommends to his cousin: “If you meet her, tell her that if she ever wants to go back to her country, I will buy her a ticket. It’s a duty we owe her. She was a good girl” (VS, 185). The use of “was” instead of “is” in “she was a good girl” shows Jagan’s firm determination to treat her only as a nightmare of the past.

Shantha Krishnaswamy, in comparing Grace with Ambika, has the following comment:

Grace provides a foil to Ambika, the traditional Indian wife. Intimate relationships, human understanding and shared interests together with the leisure and privacy to pursue them, present in Grace’s life are absent to an appalling degree in Ambika’s life. Yet the latter’s marriage is more durable. ... Grace on the other hand has an unstable relationship with Mali (Krishnaswamy, 127).

It is rather strange that Narayan portrays his Gandhian disciple, Jagan, as thinking of Grace as “of outlandish origin”. The Mahatma never considered birth to determine a person’s being high or low, etc., which was the main reason for his preaching eradication of “untouchability”. Similarly it seems unfair that Shantha Krishnaswamy describes Grace as “the half caste Korean American girl” (Krishnaswamy, 124).

Narayan hardly ever discusses or even touches upon sex in depicting the man-woman or husband-wife relationships. But it seems that in The Vendor of Sweets, he has to shy away from this reservation by the compulsion of narrating the childlessness of Ambika and the concomitant social problems. For example, “when his wife failed to have a baby and there
were whispers and rumours, Jagan told his wife, ‘I wish people could see us now on this side of the door, and then they would stop talking. …’” (VS, 163-164). And again:

He hardly noticed her mood and went out and slept. This had become a more or less permanent arrangement except when she returned, after a long absence, from her father’s house, when he would give her passionate attention for a week running, hardly worrying about whether he was adequate; it was a question that he never at any time asked himself or his wife. He felt fatigued by all the apparatus of sex, its promises and its futility, the sadness and the sweat at the end of it all, and he assumed that his wife shared his outlook. Moreover, he had read in a book that Nature had never meant sex to be anything more than a means of propagation of the species, … (VS, 166).

Also:

When she taunted him further, he would put out the light, and pull her to the bed, and roll about, imagining himself to be the Sheik in the Hollywood film in which Rudolph Valentino demonstrated the art of ravishing women (VS, 166).

All the hydra-headed realities of Indian life are packed to the brim by Narayan in The Vendor of Sweets – traditionalism, lack of education among women, dowry system, blind beliefs in supernatural powers of gods of particular places, cravings for sons, plight of barren women, etc., together with a sprinkling of Gandhian ideals. In the words of Shantha Krishnaswamy: “The story is also a study in contrasts – between father and son, between the Hindu daughter-in-law and the Western common law partner, between the old and the young, between Gandhism and materialism” (Krishnaswamy, 124).

Grace in the novel is a tradition-breaker inasmuch as she breaks one of the most sacred Indian traditions, of not permitting a man and a woman to live together without first being united by the bond of marriage. It may be true that she does not do so of her own volition. But she is a silent approver of
and then a wilful collaborator in Mali's scheme to that effect. Of course, she is not a bold and wilful bohemian because she, along with Mali, pretends to be married and lacks courage to declare, right on reaching India, their real marital status. It is only a sort of a compulsion of circumstances which makes her reveal to Jagan, long after her arrival, that they are not yet married. Viewed thus, she does not stand comparison with Rosie of *The Guide* or Daisy of *The Painter of Signs*, both of whom are open tradition-breakers.

Also, she is a career-oriented woman; she had a job in the USA and, in India, she has planned to be a partner in Mali's proposed enterprise for manufacturing story-producing machines. Both these considerations, taken together have prompted me to include this novel in this Section of this Chapter.

I may end discussion of this novel with the remarks of William Walsh:

*The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Sweet-Vendor* (1967), and *The Painter of Signs* (1976) makes a group of novels which show Narayan at the pitch of his powers. In each he shows that peculiar discernment of the novelist which can fix the authentic individuality of a character and simultaneously establish it solidly in a social world (Walsh, 134).

**The Painter of Signs**

Narayan has selected for *The Painter of Signs* a most topical and contemporary theme, namely, the population problem of India, and has woven round it a mature novel, which can be treated as a front-ranker among his creative writings. As already mentioned earlier, William Walsh has considered Narayan to be at the pitch of his powers in this and two other novels. (Walsh, 134). And he also adds:

... *The Painter of Signs* ... is both slim and packed. It is not much longer than a *nouvelle* and yet by the end of it a character
has been evolved, a predicament analysed, a world constructed, a point of view defined (Walsh, 153).

With commendable detachment Narayan has embodied in this novel all the absurdities and incongruities in human nature, making light of the otherwise tragic drama. He mocks at similar absurdities and incongruities in social environment, tradition and the material progress of the modern world too. As S. P. Bhardwaj points out the novel also highlights the change in human outlook with regard to some of the cherished ideals, established institutions and accepted values.  

The hero of the story, Raman, is a painter of signboards, who considers himself a rationalist and has remained unmarried as he considers any thoughts of sex as ‘unholy’: “he wanted to get away from sex thoughts, minimize their importance, just as he wished to reduce the importance of money. Money and sex, he reflected, obsessive thoughts, too much everywhere …” He wanted to discipline his ‘mind against sex – obsessive sex’ (PS,16). But from the moment Raman sees, for the first time, Daisy, the Family Planning Advisor posted at Malgudi, his thoughts start crowding around her. She appears to him ‘so very Indian, traditional, and gentle!’ (PS,31). He is commissioned by her first to paint a signboard for her office and later to accompany her on her tours to spread the message of family planning in villages where he is to paint the message at vantage-points. In the first part of the novel all Raman’s attempts to get closer to Daisy are discouraged by her.

In the second part of the novel, Raman’s passion for Daisy rises to the point where he has salacious thoughts of molesting her and, getting an opportunity, tries it under the mistaken notion that ‘women liked an aggressive lover’ (PS,92). The attempt is no doubt foiled by Daisy who is irate and Raman fears to find himself in police custody, when they part.

The third part of the novel finds Raman full of depression, but it is Daisy herself who breaks the impasse by coming to see him. Their relationship takes a new and intimate turn. Part four of the novel starts on a
note of unrestrained and uninhibited romance between them. At this stage, protest against their extra-marital relationship and Raman's proclaimed desire to marry Daisy is raised by his aunt who is steeped in tradition. The aunt ultimately decides to leave Raman, on finding her protests of no avail. Raman finalizes all arrangements with Daisy for their marriage, but receives a great jolt on the day before the date of marriage when Daisy changes her intention and tells him: "Married life is not for me. ... I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live except alone. It won't work" (PS,178-179). And she leaves not only him but Malgudi too, to pursue her cherished ideal of family planning propaganda. Raman is left musing: "May be we will live together in our next Janma. At least then she will leave people alone, I hope" (PS,183).

Daisy is an extraordinary woman right from her early childhood. The novel gives only a sketchy description of her past, through her own narration to Raman, so far as facts are concerned, but she throws enough light on her character therein to give us a complete picture of her personality. She is born and brought up in a crowded joint family. "It was a madhouse. Somehow everything there repelled me. ... I did not like so much common living" (PS,128). But she denies any connection between this and her craze for family planning, because she says: "It would not have made any difference to my future, even if I had been the only child at home" (PS,129). She studies in a convent school but finds her studies dull and lifeless.

I was always obsessed with the thought that I ought to be doing something better, something more useful than this routine life; that I was in a vast meaningless organization from which there seemed to be no escape. ... All individuality was lost in this mass existence" (PS,129-130).

When she is only thirteen, the family has a marriage proposal for her. It is then that Daisy's revolutionary spirit comes to the surface for the first time, and she tells her people that she would not allow anyone to inspect her as a bride and that she would rather do the inspection of the groom. When asked why she wanted to spoil her chance of settling down in life, she
explains that that was not her aim in life and that she would like to work, rather than be a wife (PS,130). When she is ' decked in all the jewellery' she "felt sick and felt that I [Daisy] was losing my identity. ... Although I was only thirteen, I had my own notions of what was good for me and what I should do in life" (PS,131). She accordingly behaves 'irresponsibly' at her interview by her would-be in-laws and damages 'the family reputation'. (PS,132-133).

She leaves home with only the clothes she wore, hitch-hikes, travels without tickets and reaches Madras; studies with the help of a missionary organization and is trained to live with fishermen in their huts and helps and educates them. She refuses baptism but changes her name to Daisy and takes up social work, and when she comes to Malgudi she is already an active dedicated family planning propagandist (PS,155).

When Narayan first introduces Daisy to the reader, it is through Raman's eyes, who sees her as 'a slender girl in a sari ... who looked so very Indian, traditional and gentle!' When Raman cannot refrain from visiting her at her home, he finds her cold and detached.

He found her reserved and not very communicative. ... There was a firmness, a calculated coldness in her look, which came through her elegance and femininity and discouraged one from taking chances with her (PS,37).

In the initial stages of her contacts with Raman, Daisy is thus purely professional, totally unaffected by Raman's advances, which indicates her strength of character. Certainly, Daisy is not so naïve as not to understand Raman's intentions. But her relationship with him gets tinged with emotion slowly and imperceptibly. When part one of the novel ends, the seed of tender feeling is already sown in Daisy's heart.

This tenderness is at once manifest, when in the beginning of part two of the novel Daisy on her own visits Raman's home to his utter surprise, apparently to invite him to join her in a campaign in rural areas. They spend more than three weeks on the tour. Daisy is here discovered as a 'zealot on the
population question' (PS,56), taking her work with missionary zeal, not bothering about comforts, conveniences. “She accepted any hospitality, even in the lowliest hut, and proved extremely undemanding” (PS,57). In her own words:

Let us live at least for a while as millions of our population live; otherwise we will never understand our own people. Living in a city is not the real life. … Ultimately I’ll select the tiniest hamlet and live in a hut. … I like to serve the people in what seems to me the best way, that’s all” (PS,57-58).

And also:

She did not mind the long waits for a bus under a wayside tree or even in the sun. … In order to be unnoticeable, she wore a sari of the drabbest shade, never used any powder or make-up, and did her hair up indifferently, … (PS,60).

This reveals her as a positive-minded woman with strong convictions, indomitable will and staunch determination. To desire to be unnoticeable is a quality rarely noticed in any young girl. Daisy is bold enough to pull the sunglasses off Raman’s nose, and to advise him to throw them away as she finds the lenses uneven and full of errors. Her manner even during her mission is domineering. “The teacher looked intimidated by Daisy’s manner. She spoke as if he’d be held responsible for any birth occurring in the village” (PS,80).

To Raman her manner seems imperious which both charms and frightens him, and he thinks: “In her previous incarnation, she must have been Queen Victoria, or in a still earlier incarnation Rani Jhansi, the warrior queen of Indian history” (PS,80).

Daisy exhibits uninhibited ease and boldness in her family planning propaganda too, whereat she indulges in plain speaking without any qualms. She

explained physiology, anatomy, and sexual intercourse, with charts or, if a blackboard was available, with sketches in chalk.

She never felt shy or hesitant, but sounded casual. Sometimes the
Long ago I broke away from the routine of a woman’s life. There are millions of women who go through it happily. I am not one of them. I have planned for myself a different kind of life. I have a well-defined purpose from which I will not swerve (PS, 158-159).

Raman is so puzzled by Daisy’s personality, he thinks of her variously as a hypnotizer, a siren, a woman with pornographer’s philosophy of life, a mad woman, a born mentor, the tight-lipped monomaniac, Mohini – “She should rename herself Hecuba instead of Daisy – one who could behave so undaisy-like. More like emery paper” (PS, 134).

Having set the story in 1972, and having shown that Malgudi had with the passage of time undergone changes in almost every walk of life, and was still changing, Narayan pinpoints in The Painter of Signs the changes in the outlook on the institution of marriage. Several of the cherished ideals and accepted values with regard to marriage are thrown to winds by both Raman and Daisy, especially the latter. As mentioned earlier, Daisy wants to inspect the would-be bridegroom rather than be inspected by him. She loathes being presented before the prospective in-laws as a decorated doll. In fact she does not desire to marry and runs away as in her own home she feels like a fish out of water. Even when she consents to Raman’s proposal for marriage she is lukewarm about it, though she has already established extra-marital physical union with him. Both she and Raman

had resolved to do without any formality. ... they had come to the conclusion that the system called Gandharva was the most suitable one for them; ... When two souls met in harmony the marriage was consummated perfectly, and no further rite or ceremony was called for. Daisy said that although she had no faith in any ancient customs, she would accept it, since it seemed to her a sensible thing. ... “we will begin to live under the same roof on any day we decide” Daisy said. “And you can call yourself Mrs. So-and-so?” “No,” she had said. “I won’t change
my name.” Rather a jolt for Raman, but he did not debate it, and accepted her decision silently (PS, 158).

Home and housekeeping are secondary to Daisy to whom the primary thing is work. “A home, in Daisy’s view was only a retreat from sun and rain, and for sleeping, washing, and depositing one’s trunk” (PS, 167). She tells Raman: “You will be as much a housekeeper as I’ll be. What does that term mean anyway? It makes no sense to me. I don’t like all this obsession with a house and the keeping of it” (PS, 167).

The motif of using some ancient Hindu legend in the modern context presented by Narayan in some of his novels is seen in The Painter of Signs too. Ganga, before marrying king Santhanu in The Mahabhrata, lays down the condition that the king should not question any of her actions. She drowns seven children born to them and the king, bound by the condition, cannot do anything about it. But when their eighth child is born and Ganga tries to drown him too, the king can no longer control himself and raises protest. The condition having been breached, Ganga leaves him. Raman himself mentions king Santhanu to Daisy and tells her his story when Daisy lays down two conditions before accepting Raman’s proposal for marriage. One, that they should have no children, and two, if by mischance one was born she would give the child away and keep herself free to pursue her social work. She tells him: “If you want to marry me, you must leave me to my own plans even when I am a wife. On any day you question why or how, I will leave you” (PS, 159). Santhanu does not know the real identity of Ganga till she reveals it while leaving him. Raman does never know Daisy’s real identity till the end.

Apart from her off-beat attitude toward marriage and married life, Daisy’s view on love between a man and a woman itself is rather startling. She elucidates before Raman:

‘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).

So the physical intimacy she develops with Raman is not out of love or because she likes him, according to her own philosophy, but due to a woman’s primal need, her ‘moments of weakening’ as confessed by her later (PS,179). She adds: “At some moments, and moods, we say and do things – like talking in sleep, but when you awake, you realize your folly ...” (PS,180). Shantha Krishnaswamy pertinently points out: “One is reminded of La Rochefoucald’s maxim that many people would never fall in love if they had not read about it somewhere” (Krishnaswamy,145).

But still the reversal of her decision to marry Raman is not without a shade of remorse and a tinge of feeling for him:

“... The gods, if they are there, will look into my mind and judge whether I am choosing the right path or not; if I am wrong let them strike me dead. I am prepared for it. ... You [Raman] will be happy married to someone very different. Seek a proper partner for yourself ... you can, any girl will accept you – no, adore you. You are everything a girl dreams of.” For the first time she was sounding so emotional and personal (PS,179-180).

Also, when she is ready to depart, and hands over the key, after locking the office, to Raman, “she gave a warm grip to his hand and took it to her lips, then, dodging him, raced down the stairs” (PS,183).

Raman’s reaction to such tender parting love, from the one whom he professed so long to love ardently, is un-lover-like. He throws away the key, which she has requested him to give to the watchman, into the dry fountain, uttering “To hell with it.” – an act which somehow produced the great satisfaction of having his own way at last. He mounted his cycle and turned towards The Boardless – that solid, real world of sublime souls who minded their own business (PS,183).
Surely, he betrays the trust Daisy puts in him, and proves the dictum: Out of sight is out of mind.

Viewed in total perspective Daisy is an outstanding model of a modern Indian woman for whom life within the confines of 'home' is suffocating, who wants to play and is capable of playing a substantive and vital role in the world outside those confines, and who has moulded her outlook – religious, moral, social – to suit her purpose. She is so dedicated to her mission, a quality generally lacking in an average Indian, man or woman – one finds around one a host of unwilling and inefficient workers, – that

There was no use talking to her about weather, political crises, or economic theories. She just turned a deaf ear to all other themes! No use involving her in a conversation even about music, or culture, or philosophy. She either did not care for such things, or deliberately hardened herself against them, in order, probably, not to lose her concentration. She was like a yogi with his eyes fixed on the centre of his nose, seeing nothing else in life (PS, 84-85).

Shantha Krishnaswamy’s following remarks render very appropriate appreciation of Daisy:

Daisy is not a mere femme fatale. To be free completely, to equip herself to battle against male power hypocrisies, she tries to eliminate emotions altogether from her life (Krishnaswamy, 135).

William Walsh has correctly judged Daisy in the following words:

Life with a husband in a home is for her, she realises, wholly incompatible with the main drive of her existence. In fact, Daisy is a peculiarly modern young woman for whom the cult of independent individuality is the supreme value in life. Working for family planning is simply the best means to hand to help her shape her life according to this value (Walsh, 161).
In a way, Daisy is far superior to Raman in stature, and though they come together by a freak of fate, they are not meant for each other. In fact Daisy makes it clear that she is not meant for anyone when she says: “Married life is not for me. ... I can’t live except alone” (PS, 178-179).

The character of Daisy as it emerges on a complete reading of the novel is of a transparent personality, though Raman, always viewing her through the coloured glass of passionate love, fails to understand her till the end: “Sometimes he paused to wonder how he was going to carry on with her a whole lifetime, without any knowledge or understanding of her at all” (PS, 169). She has definite views about how she wants to lead her life: “I sometimes wished I could be alone; there was no time or place to consider what one should do or think” (PS, 128). She is specific to Raman:

Long ago I broke away from the routine of a woman’s life. There are millions of women who go through it happily. I am not one of them. I have planned for myself a different kind of life. I have a well-defined purpose from which I will not swerve. I gave my word to the Reverend that I would not change my ideas (PS, 158-159).

On marriage too she has her own views. A dull home-life of running the kitchen and raising children is not for her. “Making food and eating seemed to her worthless occupations” (PS, 172). She does not believe in any rituals for marriage. She thinks: “When two souls met in harmony the marriage was consummated perfectly, and no further rite or ceremony was called for” (PS, 158). Also, she dislikes the term housekeeping. She tells Raman: “You will be as much a housekeeper as I’ll be. ... I don’t like all this obsession with a house and the keeping of it” (PS, 167). Her choice is to live in a hut in a remote village. She does not hide any of her views and ideals from Raman. She is indeed a unique type of a revolutionary modern woman, and Narayan deserves kudos for having created such a character, all the more so when his personal philosophy is all otherwise.
As one goes through Narayan’s novels chronologically, one can visualize the heroines therein grow with the times, assuming lesser dependence on men and gaining greater individuality. Daisy is indeed a far cry from Savitri of *The Dark Room*, but she is also much ahead of Bharati of *Waiting for the Mahatma* and even Rosie of *The Guide*. As explained by Narayan himself in an interview with S. Krishnan:

In *The Dark Room* I was concerned with showing the utter dependence of woman on man in our society. I suppose I have moved along with the times. This girl [Daisy] in my new novel is quite different. 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. ... I am calling her simply Daisy. She is a very strong character. All the same, when you read the novel you will find she is very feminine also. There is a conflict. That is the whole point. ¹²

Both Rosie and Daisy have some elements in common. While Daisy is a voluntary fugitive from parental home, Rosie is thrown out of marital shelter. Both are thus deprived of the stability of family life. Both are extremely devoted to their careers. Rosie to her dancing and Daisy to her vocation of population control. But here perhaps the analogy ends, and vital differences appear. While Rosie’s career is entirely for self-gratification, Daisy’s is for an extremely good cause, fulfilling a social need – it is almost a religious mission for her, a selfless service. Rosie uses two men as ladders to reach her goals. First Marco whom she marries merely to get a cosy reputable roof, and then Raju who, she realizes, can be of great use in achieving her ambition of a dancing career. Her relationship with Raju, even while her marriage is unbroken – she makes no attempt to get divorce from Marco – is, to put it bluntly, nothing but adultery, considered illegal, immoral and anti-social even in the modern world. Daisy’s relation with Raman has no shade of immorality, being one
between two unmarried persons with honest intentions (permanent for Raman though momentary for Daisy) to unite in wedlock. Rosie is faithful neither to Marco nor to Raju. Daisy, in order to avoid her inability to tend to Raman and his home later, backs out from their prospective marriage in time, giving Raman a free choice to choose a better partner. Evidently Daisy is on a higher pedestal of human values than is Rosie.

Of all the women characters created by Narayan in the novels examined so far, Daisy’s stands out unique with its wide spectrum and fragrance. Taking a lopsided narrow view, one may be inclined to blame only her for ruining the life of Raman who, poor fellow, suffers his loving aunt to leave him and home for ever, in the hope of establishing a ‘home’ with Daisy. No doubt, in spite of all the defence available for Daisy’s deserting Raman, one cannot but concede that it puts a slight dark patch on the portrait of Daisy’s otherwise crystal-clear character. But is not Raman too responsible for his own undoing, by failing to recognize the inherent incompatibility between them? In the words of Shantha Krishnaswamy:

Daisy is an extraordinary being with a psychological and sexual sophistication that leaves her predecessors far behind; we come to admire and fear her boundless energy. Through her, Narayan shows the power of the female intellect and vitality which shapes an altogether new balance between the sexes. ... Daisy is a phenomenon by herself. She provides a new pattern of behaviour. She points to such complex modalities of change in the Indian woman that we could keep cutting into her as “into the rich density of wedding cake” (Krishnaswamy,135,153).

The only other woman character in The Painter of Signs is Raman’s aunt who is more like his mother. This character remains subdued and in the background in the major part of the novel, but acquires a significant role when Raman declares to her his decision to wed Daisy.

She is an orthodox, religious lady, as old women usually are, believes in astrology and so goes on advising Raman “to do this or that
according to the stars”, and even reads horoscopes and makes prophesies for her afternoon visitors. She is versatile, and can advise others on domestic matters, give discourse on the gods and even provide herbal remedies. “Everyone who came across her was wonder-struck at the variety of her accomplishments” (PS, 18). She is the daughter of a priest, marries a head constable whose untimely death leaves her barren and widowed.

She goes on toiling for Raman day in, day out, and though Raman is generally indifferent to her, he at times feels a stab of sympathy for her:

Morning till night, planning something for his delectation – for years, unwavering attention to his needs. She rarely asked him for anything in return, no demands whatever, …” (PS, 27).

And he reflects: “She thinks I starve all day, fears I shall fall down in a faint unless she nourishes – food is her fixation” (Ps, 29). In fact, Raman himself is her fixation. Raman’s rude behaviour or evasive replies to her questions do not affect her. She accepts with equal composure both good and bad treatments. But the moment she starts suspecting Raman’s behaviour on hearing rumours about him, she questions him and, on learning Raman’s decision to marry, is bewildered: “That girl! What is her caste? Who is she? … A Christian! How can you bring in a Christian …” (PS, 146-147). And for the first time she sulks and sounds like an alien to Raman. He is so much disturbed by his aunt’s reaction that at one stage he says with desperation, “I won’t marry now, if that is what is driving you away” (PS, 152), because she has decided to go on a pilgrimage with the neighbours with no intention to return. Ultimately, Raman’s love for Daisy proving more intense than that for his aunt, and the aunt’s faith in her religion and concept of values proving more powerful than her self-abnegating affection for him, she leaves him apparently permanently. As succinctly put by the aunt’s friend admonishing Raman: “You think you can do what you like and command her to stay and look on. No, my boy, you are mistaken if you think that we will be slaves of the family all our lifetime. No, no, there is a limit to forbearance” (PS, 162).

So here is a worthy example of an old conservative woman rising in revolt.
against what she considers wrong, and asserting her own individuality in the most adverse conditions, losing the only support she had throughout her widowed life. Whether she does it for a right cause or not becomes a secondary question, almost irrelevant. Narayan has indeed handled this poignant episode of the aunt’s exit from Raman’s life, which is full of pathos, with utmost delicacy, without making it melodramatic. Through her, Narayan has painted a most lovable picture of old age.

The character of Raju’s mother in *The Guide* is akin to that of Raman’s aunt in several respects. Both are archetypes of old Hindu ladies steeped in traditions with cramped ideologies about castes and creeds and moral codes. Both are widowed at an early age and, therefore, both naturally shower their love, one on her son and the other on her nephew, without restraint till the entry of an unacceptable woman in the life of either of these two beloved ones. Rosie no doubt is more unacceptable to Raju’s mother and justifiably so, as Rosie is a married woman and also a dancer. For Daisy’s unacceptability to Raman’s aunt there is no justification with her except her own orthodoxy against Daisy being a Christian, which she is not as she had refused Baptism, and being a run-away girl from home. Daisy is otherwise in fact a respectable woman with a laudable activity. Both the old ladies are also alike in their revolt against their grown-up wards. Their revolts are not to enforce their rights against, or to impose their views on, their wards. They prefer rather to withdraw themselves away relinquishing, as it were, their rights in favour of their beloved ones. But while Raman’s aunt has a grandeur of her own in speech and action, Raju’s mother betrays a lack of it.

As already mentioned earlier, the lamentations of Raju’s mother against Rosie in *The Guide* show her in a poor light. In contrast, Raman’s aunt does not utter a word against Daisy on her face, let alone abuse her in any manner. The mother’s and her brother’s combined efforts having failed to shear Raju’s protective shield over Rosie and drive her out, the inevitable alternative is the mother’s exit. Not to a pilgrim place as does Raman’s aunt, but to her brother’s house. That she is forced to leave her home is as tragic as
in the case of Raman’s aunt, but her tragedy seems to miss the magnificence of that of the latter.

\textit{T}alkative Man

\textit{Talkative Man} is Narayan’s novelette telling, in his own words, “only the story of the wife’s attempt to reclaim her erratic, elusive husband who is a wanderer, a philanderer on a global scale, abandoning women right and left.” 13 Though Narayan planned it as a full-length novel, it did not grow because the “\textit{Talkative Man}, the narrator, had nothing more to say”, and “it just came to a halt, like a motor car run out of petrol” (TM,120). Though Narayan likes to describe it as the story of a wife’s attempt, etc., yet it is not so much the wife’s story as of the erratic husband who occupies more pages of the little novel than the wife, as is usual in many of Narayan's other novels, wherein the women characters but play only a secondary role. The Talkative Man himself hardly plays any significant role in the life of either the husband or the wife. Nevertheless he gets vitally involved in both lives and becomes instrumental in shaping their destinies for a while.

The novel is written in an autobiographical style, wherein the Talkative Man is supposed to be telling his own story, but instead he assumes the role of a narrator only, to tell us the story of Dr. Ram and Roja.

The main character of the story, Dr. Rann alias Rangan – we cannot call him the hero of the story, because he is in fact villainous – is a puzzling personality, who is very evasive about himself, and what we learn about his background is mostly through his wife’s narration to Madhu, the Talkative Man, affectionately called TM. We never learn how this “delivery boy for a circulating library” (TM,57) became “Dr. Rann”, where, when and in what subject he acquired his doctorate, etc. but Narayan is an adept artist in vagueness, though he claims that he dislikes “to inflate my [his] stories with laboured detail and description of dress, ... While writing, I prefer to keep such details to a minimum...” (TM,121-122), and whatever details he cares to
furnish, he scatters them here and there for the reader to find them out with a magnifying glass.

Roja lived at Madras with her parents in a side lane near St. Evans in Egmore where she was reading. Her father had a furniture and carpentry shop and Rangan would often come there on a bicycle to deliver and collect magazines for a circulating library. He was a student at Loyola College and worked as delivery boy for the library to supplement his income. At first, he merely recommended certain good articles in some magazines for Roja to read, then he himself started reading out of a journal “something that he felt I [Roja] should know and understand” (TM,58). It is “inevitable” that they fall in love. So Rangan “used to waylay me [Roja] on my way to or from school” (TM,60), and she began missing her classes and spending time with him in a coffee house or ice-cream parlour. “I [Roja] was charmed with his talk on all sorts of subjects. … I liked his voice and felt thrilled to be told about … it held me, his voice lulled my senses. … this boy was opening my eyes to the wide world” (TM,60-61). Their clandestine rendezvous could not escape her parents’ notice for long, and the ultimate inevitable happens. Roja runs away from home and marries Rangan when she is not yet eighteen.

The events following the elopement — her father’s complaint to Police, Rangan’s arrest for abducting and kidnapping a minor, the legal wrangles by lawyers of both sides — have been well utilized by Narayan to provide good humour. Rangan of course is found innocent and the marriage legally valid, and even Roja’s parents are reconciled to the inevitable. They “become friendly, perhaps taking a realistic view that they had acquired a son-in-law without spending money on dowry, feasts or celebrations” (TM,66). But the entire episode leaves its scar on Rangan who cannot accept the compromise, refuses to visit his in-laws, though not preventing Roja from doing so. According to Roja:

It was not the trial and prosecution but my sworn statement read out at court that seemed to have shattered his [Rangan’s] faith. I could never forget the expression in his face when the lawyer
read it out and I had to confirm it in public. Our wedded life had now acquired the dull routine of a fifty-year-old couple (TM,71).

The tragic end of their marriage is described by her in a very pithy matter-of-fact manner: “He didn’t come home one evening – that was the end” (TM,71). And she adds, as if as a postscript. “I seem to have lost him forever” (TM,72).

It can be seen that there is in her narration a touch of remorse, an acceptance of her share of the blame for the breakdown of the marriage.

It is a peculiar trait of several of Narayan's novels that the heroine of the novel is not a native of Malgudi. Rosie of The Guide, Bharati of Waiting for the Mahatma, Daisy of The Painter of Signs and Grace of The Vendor of Sweets, all come to this small quiet, remote, sequestered town to disturb its tranquillity and stir up activity therein in a variety of ways, like a pebble thrown in still water creating ripples. But while the heroines are all outsiders, one of them even non-Indian, the heroes of these novels are all locals – Raju, the Guide, Sriram of Waiting for the Mahatma, Raman, the Painter, and Mali, son of the sweet-vendor. In Talkative Man, however, we have both the male and female main characters imported into Malgudi and the locals of the town are mostly mere spectators of the drama, though what they witness are unusual spectacles for the tranquil traditional Malgudians.

Roja arrives on the scene in search of Rangan alias Dr. Rann, her husband, when she learns of Dr. Rann's presence in Malgudi, through an article in the “Telegraph” published by Madhu. We learn that she is “a six-foot woman..., dark-complexioned, cropped head, and in jeans and a T-shirt with bulging breasts, the first of her kind in the Malgudi area” (TM,39). Her manner is queenly and menacing and Madhu, the station master and the porter are all properly intimidated and behave sheepishly before her – Madhu feels even “uncomfortable in her presence with a constant dread lest I should betray myself” (TM,42). Later, talking to Dr. Rann, Madhu describes her as “an impressive personality – slightly dark, but a commanding personality, ...” (TM,49).
It is an irony of fate that Rann himself stays at the railway station waiting room for about a month before shifting to the hospitality of Madhu and Roja then alights at this very station, stays in the same waiting room, and thus misses to capture him there by a few days. It seems very curious that none of the three – Madhu, station master, and porter, – reveal to her the fact that Rann is at Madhu’s house, and Narayan offers no explanation or clue for their strange behaviour. Madhu in fact has already acted abnormally when he lodges Dr. Rann in his house. In his own words: “In my own house he was a visitor to whom I’d offered asylum for no clear reason. It had just been an impulse to help him, nothing more, and to rescue him from bed-bugs flourishing in the railway station waiting room” (TM,42). He even allows Rann to use his furniture “out of idiotic kindness” (TM,43). His attempt to protect Rann from his own wife is still more abnormal and without any explanation. He simply narrates: “I decided to protect him from wifely intrusions” (TM,51).

The long interval between Rangan’s escape from wedlock and his appearance at Malgudi as Dr. Rann is shrouded in mystery. Of course, Rann makes some vague references about his coming from Timbuctoo, his job on a United Nations project, etc., but these are quite vague and insufficient to provide enlightenment about Rann’s profile. He however seems serious about his book because he tells Madhu:

I need a lot of mental peace at least till I complete my work. … I must have no sort of distraction till I complete the writing of my nook. … To me nothing is more important than the book. It’s going to be a sensation when it comes out. It will shake up the philosophers of today, the outlook will have to change. It’s in this respect that I value your hospitality and shelter. When I publish I’ll acknowledge your help surely” (TM,50).

In the game of hide and seek played between Rann and Roja, Madhu performing the role of helpmate of Rann, Roja reaches Madhu’s house at one stage, but, with luck, Madhu outmanoeuvres her as Rann is not at home.
when she comes. Roja leaves Malgudi a few days later disappointed. It is yet another irony of fate, however, that the same Madhu becomes instrumental in inviting Roja back to Malgudi and in scheming to hand her over possession of Dr. Rann. The reason for Madhu’s decision “to puncture this pompous fellow” (TM,77) is the entry into the novel of the second major woman character, Girija, granddaughter of the old librarian, on whom Dr. Rann casts his covetous net and manoeuvres to elope with her, behind Madhu’s back. What Madhu feels is:

The old librarian must be protected from shock or a stroke, Girija from a public scandal and an eventual desertion in some far-off place and all the frustration and tragedy that befall every woman captivated by Rann’s charms. ... While the other women in Rann’s life were perhaps hardy and sophisticated, capable of withstanding the tragedy, this girl [Girija] was innocent, her mind in a nascent state, unless already complicated and corrupted by association with Rann” (TM,97).

Girija is born and brought up in a village, but the librarian, her mother’s father, brings her away to Malgudi when she is ten so that she can have her education. She is about seventeen and in the last year of College when she falls a prey to the charms of Dr. Rann. She is tall, “and though not a beauty, radiated the charm of her years” (TM,78). She has become so used to town life that she cannot now stand the village life when she goes to her parents for the holidays. For a seasoned artist in enticing women that Dr. Rann is, -- Roja says he is a regular lady-killer (TM,55) -- it is the easiest play to ensnare this innocent, immature girl, when he meets her at the library. According to Madhu, Rann tries his art right from the start, because he says: “He greeted the girl with an effusive, ceremonious bow, and put on an act of the most winsome manner” (TM,79). The girl seems already impressed as she describes him as “an interesting gentleman from Timbuctoo”. Again, in the simple act of Rann explaining to Girija where Timbuctoo is, by drawing a map on a sheet of paper, Madhu sees sinister designs, because he says:
the girl brought her face close to his. I’m sure he was casting a spell at that moment, for it seemed to me that the girl was relishing the smell of the after-shave lotion and hair-cream, which, I suspected, made him irresistible to women. He knew it and turned it on fully. ... I feared that he was going too far, rather too close to her, ...” (TM,79-80).

But then Madhu’s fears seem slowly to materialize into fact as he starts getting reports from his different friends that they have seen Dr. Rann at different places, including the Royal Theatre, with a girl at his side. Madhu gets corroboration from the grandfather of the girl himself who tells him: “I see very little of Baby [Girija] nowadays. She used to bring my tiffin, but I walk home for my tiffin nowadays, ... But Baby never comes home before eight nowadays ...” (TM,83).

Here it seems necessary to have a small sketch of Dr. Rann in order better to understand and appreciate his past, present and even future acts. As is made clear from the start of the novel, he is “a pure Indian from a southernmost village named Maniyur, ...”, a typical Indian village “so commonplace that it escapes the notice of map-makers and chroniclers” (TM,2&3). Next we learn about him, he is at Madras “a student at Loyola College, supplementing his income through his job, which he seemed to enjoy, as it suited his wandering temperament” (TM,57). The job is of “a delivery boy for a circulating library, delivering and collecting magazines.” We can imagine the boy’s craving for education despite his poverty, for which he takes a jump from remote nondescript village to a big city. It must have demanded from him a lot of courage, hard work and patience. Then, of course, his affair and marriage with Roja.

From Madhu’s spying and rummaging through Rann’s briefcase and portfolio of letters we find that Rann has gone under several names in different countries and towns and has established relationships with women everywhere. His collection of letters is “all from women: imploring, appealing, and accusing and attacking in a forthright manner; ... There was a
common feature in every letter: the cry of desertion" (TM,85). What is Dr. Rann’s opinion of women? He has chronicled it in his journal thus: “No woman supposes that a man has any better business than cuddling and love talk” (TM,86-87). Why does he run away from women after ensnaring them? Perhaps this entry in the journal clarifies it:

My project is all important to me. I am prepared to abandon everything and run away if it is interrupted. Again and again I seem to fall into the same trap like a brainless rat. It is difficult at this stage to make others see the importance of my book – which has to go side by side with the project even if it is only an offshoot. The world will be shaken when the book is out. The highest award in the world may not be beyond my dream (TM,87).

Meanwhile, at some stage, he changes himself from Rangan to Rann, acquires the doctorate and becomes Dr. Rann before coming to Malgudi. Assuming his claims about his project and his book to be no bluffs, he is a great research scholar employed by the UN.

For Rann’s “blonde hair, a touch of greenish-blue in his eyes, and borderline complexion – unusual for an Indian of these parts”, Madhu makes a “naughty” conjecture, which he calls “an historic possibility”, namely, that Rann is a product of some British, French or Portuguese soldier’s philandering with a local woman (TM,3). Perhaps the author himself tries to hint at Rann’s philandering nature to be hereditary. It is, however, a moot point whether Rann is a philanderer from the beginning or develops that trait later in life due to the breakdown of his marriage with Roja, for which he is hardly at fault. Even during their courting period, when Roja’s mother drives Rangan out of her house in an insulting manner and Roja becomes a virtual prisoner in the house, according to her own admission, Rangan “was bewildered by all the rudeness he was encountering in the world” (TM,62). One has to admit that his marriage with Roja proved a bitter experience for him for which not only Roja’s parents but Roja herself also was responsible. Possibly Rann is hurt
much more seriously than the others might have anticipated and becomes a misogynist and starts playing with women’s sentiments. Be that as it may, it provides no justification for ruining the lives of so many innocent women.

But, in short, Dr. Rann is a man of great scholarship on the one hand and a mean, despicable philanderer on the other. It would be surprising if he makes an exception of Malgudi and lies low without any philandering activity. So he tries his art on Girija who falls a very easy prey. It is the usual story as with Roja whom he had impressed with his superior knowledge. He tries the same trick on Girija and even gets entry into her home winning confidence of her grandparents. That they hold him in very high esteem is clear when the grandmother tells Madhu: “You are really fortunate to have a guest of such distinction. Good guests really bring us honour” (TM,90). The librarian says: “Girija is lucky. That man [Rann] has agreed to coach her through. He seems to be an expert in certain subjects” (TM,88).

Dr. Rann’s own, real or ostensible, opinion about the girl is expressed to Madhu, when the latter innocently asks him: “What do you think of that girl?”, in these words:

“... she is quite smart, and will go far with proper training. But this place is no good for her. She must get out of this backwood, ... for a young mind starting in life, a more modern, urban, cultural feedback will help. ... she shouldn’t grow with her grandfather. A hostel would be preferable – where she can compare and compete with her age-group. Anyway after her final exam in March, she should decide her future. ... A girl can be married and still pursue intellectual and social values. But the important thing is she should get out of this – ” (TM,87-88).

It is obvious from this what dreams and prospects of her future development Girija must have been made drunk with by Dr. Rann, and he must have convinced her that for this purpose it was most essential to leave home and the shelter of her grandparents. From the report of Gaffur, whose taxi Rann and Girija have been using everyday for their rendezvous, Madhu
learns that Rann has promised to marry Girija and take her to America (TM,96). It is a pity the girl believes all this and is prepared to run away with him. But what else can be expected from a girl who “…worshipped him as a god who could do no wrong”? (TM,110).

For Girija who is waiting at the school verandah for her god it is a great shock to learn from Gaffur that he will not come because he has been carried away by his wife. She refuses to believe anything and tells Madhu:

I don’t believe you people. You are all against him. He was so good, oh, he was kind and generous and loving. You don’t understand him, nobody understands him. Take me to him, wherever he may be, let me know the truth from his own lips. …” (TM,110).

She goes on “ranting and lamenting”; her face is “disfigured with tears and her words, mostly panegyrics of her god, gushed forth in a torrent” (TM,110).

It is, however, a great credit to her that she regains her composure soon, and when brought back to her home she just says: “Don’t wake up my grandfather. I’ll find my way in.”, comes through her escapade unscathed and resumes her study seriously. Gaffur, however, leaving her at her door and driving off gloomily, cannot help remarking: “She used to be such a sweet creature!” (TM,111).

Madhu succeeds in handing over Dr. Rann to Roja alias Commandant Sarasa (TM,98), and in her “thank-you note” postcard to him she promises: “I am sure he is going to be happy hereafter. I won’t let him out of sight again” (TM,109). But Dr. Rann proves too elusive for her to keep for long and within six months elopes with a nurse, Komal, from Matilda’s (TM,118). That Roja is a victim of her credulity and trust, and Rann’s expertise in duplicity is obvious from her narration to Madhu:

These few months have been our happiest ones. It seemed a revival of our far-off days in Madras – he [Rann] managed to convey the same charm and warmth. … Such revived moments made one forget the present conditions. The joy in each other’s
company and the sense of fulfilment were complete and indescribable. At such moments I thought of you with profound gratitude. But alas, I could not give him enough time. [She is almost poetic in this part of her narration] ... He appreciated my work and was full of praise and encouragement, ... sought no society-life or diversion, being completely absorbed in his writing and studies. ... regretted that he should have missed this wonderful life with me. ... I left him absolutely alone, respected his desire for privacy. ... he was a man to be loved, respected and above all trusted. ... All wrong ideas and misleading notions. I tell you he had unsuspected depths of duplicity (TM,116 to 118).

It has to be remembered that Roja is not an immature girl, but a mature woman, holding a responsible position in the Delhi Home Guards Organization, when she is gulled by Rann a second time. She is so bitter about this second blow that she describes Rann as “an expert in the art of deception” (TM,118-119), and prays to God that “some day he may be caught at least for his passport frauds and made to spend the rest of his life in some hellish prison” and adds: “I’ve no hope of seeing him again” (TM,119). In her repentant mood she feels she would have been far happier if she had never seen the news item, which brought her to Malgudi and became the cause of her second spell of life with Rann, or it would have been best if she had avoided him from the beginning as advised by her father. Her plight indeed is very tragic which makes Madhu’s eyes wet too, and he remarks: “It was distressing to see a mighty personality, generally self-possessed, crumbling down” (TM,119). One cannot but view with nausea the callousness of Rann who shows the temerity to leave this note while deserting Roja again: “Goodbye dearest. I have to be off again. It was lovely while it lasted – thanks!” (TM,118).

There is a Sanskrit adage, which means that even gods fail to fathom the character of women. Narayan seems to hold some such view. It is
difficult otherwise to explain how Roja can say “Sometimes I have felt like wringing his [Rann’s] neck but on the whole I’m very very fond of him, although I am not sure what I’ll do if I set eyes on him. ... Though I loathe him, I like to hear about him” (TM,53-54). And also: “I have done nothing but gaze on his wonderful countenance for months and years out of count ...” (TM,56). She says so about the man who has betrayed her love and has deserted her for years. The same trait of love-hate duel is seen in Rosie in The Guide for her husband Marco. Or perhaps Narayan too, falling in line with scores of writers of fiction, not only in English but in other languages as well, wants to convey that for a woman the first man who enters her heart is all important and makes an everlasting impression, and she will always have a soft feeling for him, whatever magnitude of bitterness their relationship may acquire in future. Roja’s very act of rushing to Malgudi in search of Rann after years of separation, as soon as she gets news that he may be there, is proof enough of her persistent infatuation for him. She turns into a sadder but wiser woman only after suffering a second betrayal.

An interesting facet of Roja’s character is preservation of her womanliness despite her training as an officer of the Home Guards and despite her carrying a licensed pistol. She is still afraid to sleep under the tree on the railway platform at night, though the waiting room is full of bugs and she thinks that it “must have been a dungeon at one time where prisoners were cooped up” (TM,59). She says: “This tree is my shelter all through the day. I watch the travellers come and go and would willingly sleep under it during the night, but for my sex – still the world is not an easy or safe place for us” (TM,59). Further evidence of this trait is her weeping while narrating her story to Madhu, first when she comes in search of Rann and again when she comes after she lost him a second time. It is this trait which perhaps wins for her the sympathy of the station master so much so that he has tears in his eyes when she leaves Malgudi after failing to find Rann, and he remarks: “Great woman! She was welcome to stay any length of time – even if the inspector came. I’d
have managed without disturbing her" (TM,72). Even Madhu’s eyes are wet when he hears from her of a second betrayal and sees her sobbing (TM,119).

A very minor character in Talkative Man is of Thayi, the old maid servant of Roja’s house, whom her mother employs to escort Roja to and from school under strict surveillance, when the mother begins suspecting Roja (TM,62). But this same woman chaperoning her is used by her and Rangan to exchange “little notes or bits of paper.” When the parents are away to Avadi, fifty miles from Madras, they entrust the guarding of Roja “from intruders” to the maid. But Roja bribes her to guard the house and slips away to meet Rangan! The maid shows utmost sympathy and cooperation to Roja and seems “to get a vicarious thrill out of my [Roja’s] romance” (TM,64). When Roja leaves home to marry Rangan “the old woman shed tears at the parting. In a voice shaking with emotion, she placed her hands on my [Roja’s] shoulder and said, ‘May God bless you with many children!’ the only blessed state that she could ever imagine” (TM,65). The same woman, however, does not hesitate to make up a story of abduction in order to defend herself, when Roja’s father finds Roja missing. She is later made by Roja’s parents to put her thumb impression on a document, which Roja is coerced into signing, as a witness to her kidnapping. Servants do play sometimes an unexpectedly important role in one’s life to change its course. Luckily though Thayi’s role did not help proving Roja’s marriage illegal. It would be unfair to condemn the whole class of maids because Thayi betrays Roja. In fact, Thayi first betrays the parents for the sake of Roja. When it comes to saving one’s own skin, every one generally behaves as Thayi does and her action therefore does not reflect adversely on her love or goodwill for Roja.

The little episode of the capture of the couple by the Police after their marriage, arrest of Rangan and handing over of Roja to her parents – “the worst kind of homecoming for anyone” (TM,68) – and the later legal wrangle of lawyers, throws ample light on the conditions still obtaining in India – Narayan wrote the novel in 1983 – hostile to our youngsters, especially girls, who desire marriage of their choice. Parents and lawyers join
hands to discourage the young and to make a mockery of the legal protection available to them. The climate in India is yet far from healthy for love or choice marriages. “Coercing, bullying, brow beating” are not an exception in Roja’s case. They are a general rule in thousands of families, shattering the dreams of their youngsters for freedom of choice of their life-partners.

Husband-hunting is a topic in both Talkative Man and Grandmother’s Tale, but in the former it is for the sake of love, while in the latter it is mainly to re-establish the wife’s social status. One is a story of a modern, educated woman who has married of her own volition, against her parents’ initial protests, and the other of an illiterate, orthodox, nineteenth century woman, married at the age of seven, when she knew the meaning of neither love nor marriage. And yet both go after their men, after years of losing them, and both succeed in regaining them, but the modern one only temporarily — for about six months. In Talkative Man the husband, Dr. Rann, is not a “married man” when Roja, his wife, finds him out. He is just preparing to elope with another girl. But he has meanwhile had several affairs with women. In Grandmother’s Tale Viswa, the husband, is well settled with Surma as his wife for years, before Bala, his childhood wife, finds him. While Rann is a philanderer and loves no woman, Viswa is a man of character, loving Surma sincerely, very reluctant to betray her for Bala’s sake, whom he had left in childhood only. In the case of Viswa, therefore, it is abandoning love for the sake of a marriage solemnized in childhood’s ignorance, and yet Bala succeeds in her mission, brings him back and spends the rest of her life with him happily. For Dr. Rann it is going back to a woman whom he had loved and married, in maturity, and yet Roja fails to prolong their reunion beyond a short spell.

Roja breaks with tradition first when she falls in love, because that is considered an unusual step for an Indian girl. Even today at the dawn of the twentyfirst century very few girls of this country enjoy this privilege. Roja then runs away and marries Rann against the will of her parents, which is her second revolt against tradition. Millions of girls marry meekly the persons
chosen by their parents to be their husbands. Also, there is no dearth of abandoned wives in India, who, poor women, quietly lead their lonely lives of miserable existence, without the courage to raise a voice against those who leave them in the lurch — not so Roja. She vehemently and vigorously pursues Dr. Rann and succeeds in taking him away to Delhi from Malgudi. And she has acquired a career as a Home Guard Commandant. This novel, with such woman protagonist, therefore, needs to be included in this Section.

In all the four novels discussed in this Section, the author has shifted his emphasis, in man-woman relationship, from traditional marriage to love and marriage. Rosie-Raju, Grace-Mali, Daisy-Raman and Roja-Rann form couples for whom ties of love have a greater importance than ties of marriage. In the case of Rosie-Raju, Rosie breaks the marriage-tie in living with Raju and Raju does not consider marriage essential in his life with Rosie. He also does not care that a tie of marriage still exists between Rosie and Marco, when he joins his life with Rosie’s. Grace comes to India from far-off America, drawn by her love for Mali. She obviously does not consider marriage essential before doing so. Mali is of course a rascal for whom neither love nor marriage matters and to whom Grace only comes in handy as a woman whom, by fluke, he befriends and who has two thousand dollars into the bargain. For Daisy and Raman both the driving force is love, though Raman’s love is laden with passion; and though for Daisy it is a matter of her “moments of weakness”, she does have a soft spot for Raman. Both think of marriage, which fails to materialize as Daisy backs out. Roja and Rann have both love and marriage and, but for interference of Roja’s parents, they would in all probability have lived happily ever after.

All the four examples also pinpoint general Indian disapproval of unrestricted love. Raju’s mother protests because Rosie is a married woman — although already deserted by the husband — and is a dancer. Jagan’s objection first is about Mali’s and Grace’s living together without marriage, but later when his cousin suggests arranging a marriage, Jagan objects to Grace’s
“caste”. Roja’s parents too move heaven and earth to get her marriage annulled, to what purpose, one wonders.

At the same time, all the four different episodes in the four different novels have a common undercurrent of the author’s inclination to allude to the belief that such relationships based on love do not herald lasting happiness. None of the four heroines of these four novels achieves ultimate happiness in her relations with her male counterpart, for a variety of reasons, different in each case. Narayan also wants to hint at a lesson to be drawn from these four novels, namely, that the concept of “Women’s Lib”, if taken too far, may lead only to a total destruction of marital relationship on which, in fact, social stability and continuity depend and may, therefore, be socially harmful.

*The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs* strike us with two major departures from the other novels of Narayan. It is in these two that the author bids a farewell to woman as a mere object of delight of man, and establishes her independent individuality — to a comparatively smaller degree in *The Guide* but to the maximum in the other. Both Rosie and Daisy show the path to freedom from male domination and exemplify the will and the power to meet effectively the challenge of social pressures which demand conformity with traditions and which generally make women cower.

Secondly, both novels have a generous sprinkling of the sexual aspects of man-woman relationship. Between the two novels *The Painter of Signs* is more ‘sexed’ than the other. Narayan is generally restrained and rather reticent in using sex as a theme or an episodic pivot, but these two novels reveal that he can not only deal with sex with candour but can also depict with decency and humour the romantic ardour of love. The episode between Raman and Daisy at the beginning of Part Four of *The Painter of Signs* eavesdropped by “an urchin who had brought her dinner from a near-by restaurant” (PS, 143) is an excellent example of this.

Also, Narayan’s portrayals in these two novels, whether painted on a large canvas or a small one, are brought to life with an effortless
craftsmanship, which unfold his wonderful genius to delineate a wide range of characters. The woman emerges as an independent individual devoted to making her own life meaningful and purposeful by pursuing her own aims in life. Narayan, without professing to be an advocate of feminism, portrays the modern Indian woman with a will of her own and a determination and a capacity to fulfil it, and shows that for this purpose she is prepared to trounce all traditions.

The women protagonists in the other two novels, Grace and Roja, though spirited and emancipated to a degree, do not stand comparison with Rosie and Daisy, as both of them are unable to achieve complete psychological freedom from the need of male presence in their lives. Grace, though an American, seems to allow herself to be guided by Mali's decisions for her; Roja feels, even at a very ripe age, lonely without Rann.

**Section-II – Housewives**

In this Section I have included three novels wherein the main women protagonists are tradition-breakers, but they are content to be enlightened housewives enjoying their legitimate rights and privileges. These novels are *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1986), *The World of Nagaraj* (1990), and *Grandmother's Tale* (1992).

**A Tiger for Malgudi**

*A Tiger for Malgudi* is a grand departure from all other novels of R. K. Narayan in several respects. First of all, it is more in the nature of a fable than of a novel, being a tale of a tiger told mostly through the tiger's mouth. Secondly, Narayan who is generally reticent in scattering his views in his novels as obiter dicta or even through the characters of the novels, has made
an exception in *A Tiger for Malgudi* and has freely voiced his views on religion, philosophy, human nature, etc. Much of this loud thinking is surprisingly done for him by none other than the tiger. The rest of it is achieved through the saint whom the tiger introduces to us as “My Master”. Thirdly, the basic theme of the novel is the Hindu beliefs in pre-birth, re-birth, immortality of the soul and the theory of *Karma*. The Captain puts the tiger in a cage and starves him, and thus makes the tiger suffer loneliness, immobility and hunger. When the tiger later describes this stage of his life to his master, the latter explains: “You [the tiger] probably in a previous life enjoyed putting your fellow-beings behind bars. One has to face the reaction of every act, if not in the same life, at least in another life or a series of lives. There can be no escape from it. …” ¹⁴ Such is the law of *Karma* operating universally and binding every being.

The story of the novel in short is about a tiger’s jungle life, then his straying into human habitation and getting caught, which begins his circus life. When the tiger finds the circus boss’s tyranny too much to bear he kills him and escapes, only to be caught again but this time by a saint to the tiger’s great benefit because the saint helps the tiger to have wonderful revelations, a glimpse of which we find in the novel itself. When the tiger gets too old to support himself, the saint hands him over to a zoo.

It can at once be seen that there is very little scope in the scheme of the novel for women characters to flourish; and yet Narayan has undoubtedly shown his deftness in including a few women characters therein without letting the flow of the story get either weakened or diverted.

The first such character is the Captain’s wife, Rita, who herself is a trapeze artist in the captain’s circus. Though outwardly she is a nagging wife, always bickering with her husband to such an extent that he is made to mutter: “Women are impossible. Worse than twenty untamed jungle creatures on one’s hand at a time…” (TG,38), in reality her love and devotion for him are so great that when the Captain dies she commits suicide. As the tiger describes: “They were a peculiar couple, devoted to each other but not
betraying their feelings in speech” (TG,68-69). The Captain too loves his wife so much that at the time of his death, which was sudden -- brought about by the tiger’s unexpected attack -- “with the last flicker of consciousness he worried about his wife and how she was going to manage without him” (TG,69). When Rita comes to the dead body of her husband, she stands there without a word or a tear and when others try to comfort her she asks them to leave her alone, and then she goes back to the circus tent, climbs to a swing, takes a full swing taking it to the ceiling and lets go her hold. That is how she ends her life in a very tragic manner, within minutes of her husband’s death. It is indeed a rare type of example of man-woman love, though there may be critics to condemn her sacrifice of life as futile or senseless sentimentalism. It is interesting to note the philosophical viewpoint of the saint on human ties, which he expresses to the tiger when the latter mentions the puzzling relationship of the Captain and Rita to him:

Human ties cannot be defined in just black-and-white terms. There can be no such thing as unmitigated hatred or unmitigated love. Those who are deeply attached sometimes deliberately present a rough exterior to each other and that is also one way of enjoying the married state. Some wives in this world show their deepest love only by nagging, and the husbands also enjoy putting on an air of being victims. You must not forget that everyone is acting a part all the time, knowingly or unknowingly. But God who sees everything must be aware of their thoughts and the secret ecstasies of companionship of even that Captain and his wife ... So don’t make the mistake of thinking that they were not properly matched, judging merely from conversation overheard (TG,69).

Despite her usual nagging and bickering and sarcasm in her conversation with her husband, Rita is extremely anxious for his safety and well-being. This paradoxical attitude is revealed when the Captain tells her about the proposal to use the tiger for a film, and she says: “I’ve always hated
that brute ... seems undependable ... I feel uneasy whenever you are out with him" (TG,78-79). And when the Captain laughs at her fears, they start arguing, which ends in her crying: "I don’t know if you will ever listen to me.", and his replying: “All the time I do nothing but listen. ...” (TG,79).

We find that the saint, the tiger’s master, with all his miraculous achievements as a saint which enables him to control this most ferocious animal of the jungle as if it is his pet dog, is also a fugitive from marital life. After many years of suffering the misery of desertion, the wife discovers her missing husband in the saint, when he and the tiger are residing in a remote part of the jungle in the Mempi Hills range. When she meets him she is already over fifty years old. In passing through the forest to reach him, she has already been robbed of her money and jewellery and even the bundle of her clothes. She, however, describes the robbers as “Good men, they only robbed, which seems to me less heinous than deserting one’s family and home for no reason” (TG,168). This is obviously aimed at the saint himself as a bitter sarcasm, because she has already recognized him as her husband even before reaching there and seeing him personally.

When she addresses the saint as husband, and he requests: “Don’t say ‘husband’, it is a wrong word...”, she emphatically says: “Husband, husband, husband, I’ll repeat it a thousand times and won’t be stopped. I know to whom I’m talking. Don’t deceive me or cheat me.” And continuing, she makes a very serious complaint against him:

Others may take you for a hermit, but I know you intimately. I have borne your vagaries patiently for a lifetime; your inordinate demands of food and my perpetual anxiety to see you satisfied, and my total surrender night or day when passion seized you and you displayed the indifference of a savage, never caring for my health or inclination, and with your crude jocularities even before the children, I shudder! (TG,170-171).

It is pathetic that with all the mistreatment she has received at his hands, and after she has lost him and lived without him for years and years –
she is over fifty now – she still feels such dire need for him that she roams through the jungle to find him. It was neither economic need nor lasciviousness which drives her to run after him. She is already past fifty and must be past carnal desires. And as clarified by the husband himself, he has left all his accumulated wealth behind for her and her children to have a secured comfortable life. So the only urge that goads her on is the religious and social fetters with which every woman always psychologically feels tied down to her husband for life. But this tie is so strongly embedded in her mental get-up that when the saint refuses to go back with her, she shows a preparedness to stay with him in the jungle or even in the nearby village only to have the pleasure of being near him. All her entreaties having fallen on deaf ears, she returns and her brief entry into the novel ends.

The character of the saint’s wife is similar in some respects to that of Bala of Grandmother’s Tale. Or, as Bala is a real life character, if we regard Grandmother’s Tale as a biography, we can assume that the character of the saint’s wife in A Tiger for Malgudi is inspired by Bala’s character. Bala too has been deserted by her husband, though in her case the desertion takes place at a very early age, when Bala has not begun married life. The saint of A Tiger for Malgudi has enjoyed sansara fully and has begotten children before he leaves his wife in the lurch to tend for herself and the family single-handed. Bala leaves home in search of her husband, finds him and succeeds in bringing him back. The saint’s wife too searches for her husband, and when she gets a hint that the sadhu who had come to take away the tiger from the school might be him, goes after him, finds him, but fails to bring him back. In Bala’s case the success can be attributed to the fact that she has only to snatch away her husband from another woman’s clutches. The saint’s wife fails probably because her task is to lure back into the temptations of material life a person who has attained high spiritual advancement. Though one succeeds and another fails, that is no reflection on their devotion to their husbands which is equal in both cases. Perhaps the devotion of the saint’s wife is greater than Bala’s, because Bala is guided more by the aim of avoiding the stigma of
widowhood that she would have to bear had she not succeeded in finding her husband alive, than by sheer devotion. Also, when she starts for the search, she has a long life ahead still to pass, and the dread of passing it without the husband’s protective umbrella must have been one more consideration making it imperative for her to find him. In the case of the saint’s wife, who is past fifty, when she finds the husband, wifehood or widowhood would have made little difference at that age, even assuming that society would still attach that stigma of widowhood on a woman who has had marital life and has children before her husband deserted her. In all probability she would be free from the fear of such a stigma and the novel too makes no mention of it.

And lastly, when Narayan starts telling the story of a tiger, how can he forget the tigress? And when we are discussing female characters of Narayan’s novel, how can we also disregard her? Narayan has therefore included the female too of the hero’s species in this novel, and has given her a space enough to prove a few things. First, God’s device to maintain procreation without His active intervention functions effectively not only in the human race, but also in most other species of living beings as well – most and not all because there are a few species like the amoeba which are asexual. Second, these violent carnivorous beings too are capable of love – it is not a monopoly of humans. And they can also raise and care for their families.

Incidentally, Narayan has beautifully exhibited his comic vision and sense of humour in this brief episode of the meeting of the tiger and tigress and subsequent events up to the death of the tigress and the cubs. At his first encounter with her, the tiger roars: “Get out of my way and go back where you belong” (TG,18). The tigress just takes it as a joke and shows no response except a slight wave of her tail. Naturally a very violent fight ensues in which both sides are wounded pretty seriously, but the tiger realizes for the first time that he has met more than a match for him in the jungle. It is the jackal’s advice which makes them aware of their folly in fighting:

May I know why you have been fighting and brought on yourselves this misery? If you can show even half of half a
reason, I shall be satisfied. ...If you cannot discover a reason to be enemies, why don’t you consider to be friends? How grand you could make it if you joined forces – ... (TG,20).

Narayan’s humour is generally tinged with pathos, and this little episode is no exception. Their friendship converted into family and resulting in cubs has a sad end when hunters kill the tigress and the cubs and take away their dead bodies to the nearby village. The description of the anguished and desperate tiger following the procession carrying these bodies in a cart, his later attempts at avenging their untimely, unnatural deaths, etc., is capable of arousing the same pensive mood as a human tragedy would do.

It may appear that the Captain’s wife, Rita, is a career-oriented woman because she is a trapeze artiste in the Captain’s circus. But in the entire novel her role as Captain’s wife only is highlighted, and the fact of her being a trapeze artiste is given very little importance, except when she uses this very art to end her life. It is on this consideration that I have placed this novel under Section-II and not in Section-I.

Even the saint’s wife is or becomes a tradition-breaker, when she follows the sadhu suspected to be her husband, makes certain he is no doubt her husband and then tries to induce him to return home. Her character also thus makes the novel a legitimate part of Section-II.

The World of Nagaraj

R. K. Narayan has come a long way in 1990, in which year he published The World of Nagaraj, from 1938 when he had written The Dark Room, and from a domineering husband and cowed down wife of 1938, we are presented in 1990 with almost the reverse – a domineering wife and a meek, if not cowed down, husband. It appears to be a rambling story of a man of no consequence, and it is difficult to decipher any special aim or objective of the author in making a novel of it.
Nagaraj is, in his father’s estimation itself, a “wishy-washy and
dreamy” person, past fifty when the novel starts, and still attended to by his
mother as if he is a child. “Nagu! Nagu! ... The water is getting cold, come
for your bath”, to which Nagaraj reflects: “She still thinks I am ten years
old,...” (WN,6). He has an inappreciable school and college education, passes
his B.A. exam and falls into the rut of married life, after approving Sita as his
bride. His own qualification is “not his personality but his family – that was
his Kabir Street home and background, people who were considered
aristocratic inheritors of vast rice fields in the village” (WN,25). And he does
nothing for a living.

Even his elder brother, Gopu, bosses over him right from his
childhood. Though both go to the same primary school, Gopu “maintained
himself aloof as a superior person and never encouraged Nagaraj to walk
beside him to school, preferring the company of boys of the same height”
(WN,15). In the house, they share the same room, but Nagaraj is forbidden to
enter it when Gopu has friends there. After his graduation Gopu “spurns”
Nagaraj and “orders him about”. But even this is borne by Nagaraj
ungrudgingly like “a devoted younger brother”. His father used to remark
sometimes: “You [Nagaraj] are like Lakshmana in the Ramayana, who stood
behind Rama, his elder brother, all the time without a murmur or doubt”
(WN,27). When Gopu marries, he just says: “Boy, leave my room” (WN,28),
and Nagaraj has to shift, with his books and other possessions, to a corner in
the hall.

But Nagaraj loved his mother. In his younger days he “loved her
company and followed her around as she busied herself in the kitchen and the
other parts of the vast house” (WN,17).

One is simply baffled, to say the least, by the character of Nagaraj.
The one question which constantly haunts the reader, as he goes through the
novel, is whether such a character as Nagaraj’s can really exist anywhere in
this world, even as a rarity?
It is one of the characteristics of Narayan not to give names to the minor characters in his novel, and they are known throughout the novel only as some major character’s father or mother or brother or sister or friend, and so on. In this novel too, we know Nagaraj’s mother as such without a name. She is a religious woman as old women in several of his other novels are. Here is a stereotyped character and there is nothing striking about her temperament or behaviour by which one can distinguish her from an average old mother in any family. Of course, being wedded in an aristocratic Kabir Street family of Malgudi, she has had a taste of affluence, and “when her husband was living she used to be radiant with diamonds and clad in gold-laced saris, never going below a certain standard of dress and decoration, so that the neighbours always remarked, ‘She’s like Goddess Lakshmi and rules the family like a queen!’ ” (WN,32).

But after her husband’s death, her ‘decline’ starts, especially because, immediately on completion of the mourning period her two sons partition the assets of their father, and the elder son, Gopu, goes to live in the village, not caring to respond to his mother’s tearful query: “Was this all necessary?” (WN,34).

Even the neighbours’ estimate that she ruled the family like a queen proves faulty with the entry of the first daughter-in-law in the family, namely Gopu’s wife, Charu. Charu is the daughter of a ‘sub-registrar’, who is wealthy and influential and corrupt. No sooner she joins her in-laws at Kabir Street, she takes full control of Gopu, who rejects his father’s offer to find a job for him, and shows “no inclination to go out of the house or seek work” but “shuts himself away with his wife” (WN,28). Charu sets up a little kitchen within the general kitchen of the family, with the help of the stove and vessels brought from her parent’s house, makes her own purchases from ‘Chettiar’s shop’, and prepares special dishes for Gopu and herself only, much to the annoyance of both the mother and Nagaraj. Mother remarks: “Never heard of any young woman going out to a shop by herself” (WN,29). It is indeed very
strange how Nagaraj’s father, the head of the family, permits this “state within the state” (WN,30) under his very nose.

Narayan seems to have fallen into inconsistency in painting the mother’s character, because at one stage in the story he mentions that she “had governed the family with a firm hand” and had made Sita ‘abandon’ the use of harmonium on the ground that “in a crowded family it was unseemly for a girl to isolate herself and practise music” (WN,143). It is rather unbelievable that the same woman cannot earlier stop her first daughter-in-law, Chara, from running a parallel kitchen. One may grant such a relaxation in firmness happening later, on the excuse that the woman goes soft with age, but here the case is otherwise. Also, the lady of the house would, in Indian conditions, be expected to be less powerful in her widowhood than when she has still her husband’s support and backing. Actually, Narayan too has expressed the same truth when he records: “Mother’s decline started with Father’s death” (WN,32).

Narayan has otherwise deftly described some historic social life style in India through penning the mother in his simplistic narration. For instance:

His mother slept on the floor, while Father occupied the teakwood four-poster which filled the space in the room. When the son came up to the college level, Mother preferred to go out and sleep in the second courtyard in summer. In the cooler season she slept in the hall (WN,27).

Also, a mother-in-law’s favourable bias towards the daughter-in-law who bears a child, as against the other who is barren, is reflected in: “Her [Charu’s] mother-in-law never ordered her or commented on her activities, as she felt slightly awed in her presence and also grateful to her for bearing a child, unlike Sita” (WN,46). Moreover, in a very pithy statement, namely, “Mother’s decline started with Father’s death” (WN,32), Narayan has thrown abundant light on an average Indian woman’s position in a family as a mere shadow of her husband. She has no individuality of her own, which she can assert or
exhibit in her husband’s absence. The result is that she is unable to prevent the splitting up of the family within a month of her husband’s death, and has no part to play in the partition, except to utter the poignant words at the end: “Was this all necessary?” and to shed tears.

Another aspect of the social neglect of a woman is also presented to the reader by the author without a single word, when he mentions the will made by Narayan’s father. Narayan naively says: “He had left a will, which simply declared, ‘Everything I have to be divided equally between my two sons unless they come to some agreement suitable to their needs’” (WN,33). Narayan makes no remark on the omission in the will for any provision for the mother of the two sons. She is left to survive at the mercy of one or both of her sons. One cannot, therefore, be surprised at her decline in her widowhood. She is completely neglected by her elder son, Gopu, who goes to live in the village, leaving her to the care of the younger son, Nagaraj, at Malgudi. She is a psychological wreck, left “in that vast household which stretched from Kabir Street to the river” and who “hobbled about like a frail ghost asking inane questions of the two [Nagaraj and Sita] left at home” (WN,31). She “perambulated about the house unnecessarily, ... with weak legs and minimal energy, and she would not rest, although provided with a fan and a cot in the hall” (WN,31-32). Narayan has sketched here a true-to-life picture of a broken-hearted old widow of an Indian family.

Generally merits get recognised after death, and the mother is no exception. Nagaraj experiences that “Without his mother’s presence, which seemed to have had the effect, unnoticed all these years, of filling all space, the house seemed to have become suddenly vast and cavernous” (WN,50). He becomes a mother-worshipper by placing prominently in the hall his mother’s enlarged photograph and festooning it with flowers every morning.

The mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relations in this novel are not as bad as in the proverbial Indian family, though the mother “felt slightly awed” in the presence of Charu, the elder son’s wife, who starts her kitchen within the kitchen for her husband and herself in defiance of her parents-in-
law, and who is the inspiration behind Gopu’s decision to go to the village after the father’s death. Nagaraj is convinced “that Gopu’s wife was the prompter behind the scene, planning to get away from the mother-in-law” (WN,34).

Charu is no doubt very “imperious and self-assured as the senior daughter-in-law of the family” (WN,44), during the joint-family days. Looked at in the role of a wife, Charu, is a self-assertive and domineering woman, who, immediately on joining the in-laws’ family after marriage, takes control of her husband, Gopu, who, though a “first-class B.A.” and “a studious fellow” (WN,49), never shows any “inclination to go out of the house or seek work” but “shut himself away with his wife” (WN,28), fancying “himself a sultan in his palace chamber, pampered by his wife” (WN,29). Gopu also starts taking his meals in his own room and rarely joins the family for the purpose, except when Charu fetches him when her mood is right. In short, she makes Gopu live like a separate family in the house of the joint family, so that the parents are unable to raise any serious objections.

The most important woman character in the novel is of Sita, as complicated as that of Nagaraj, her husband, but more mysterious than his, and it takes Nagaraj himself almost a life time to “discover” her (WN,179).

Sita is only fourteen when Nagaraj approves her as his bride, and is “a timid little creature ... so small and helpless” (WN,24). She “meekly accepted the role of a lackey at home, forever at the beck and call of her mother-in-law” (WN,25). Nagaraj accepts Sita’s bashfulness, as it is not in his nature to “make any demand on her or anyone” (WN,26).

A crack in the relations of the mother and Sita develops when the mother craves for Sita bearing a child, and forces her to take “various measures to cure barrenness”, like “chewing of neem leaves every morning” (WN,46). Sita revolts naturally, refuses “to eat any more neem leaves, declaring that she preferred to remain childless” (WN,47), and patiently bears the taunts inflicted by the mother-in-law. In this simple narration, Narayan has undoubtedly mirrored the craze of Indian families for fertility in women under
a mistaken notion of the necessity of unbroken perpetuation of progeny. But more important is his bold presentation of a revolt against such craze from an average character in the story. Sita’s firm declaration to prefer to remain childless indeed smacks of an involuntary and unconscious ‘woman’s liberation movement’ on her part. One cannot, of course, read too much in this declaration, because Sita too, like most women, must have wished to be a mother as is evident, when she takes charge of Tim, Charu’s son, right from the time he is a three-month-old baby, “and showered on him all the maternal love bottled up within her, being childless” (WN,46).

In a way, the character of Sita is almost as complicated as of Nagaraj, but while the latter has always his thoughts in the air, Sita has her feet always on the ground. She plays a pivotal role throughout the novel and yet mostly dons a garb of nonentity so much so that one wonders whether any of the episodes bears any imprint of hers at all. Nevertheless Narayan has presented in her a wife who, without any art or artifice, safeguards her dreamy husband from any worldly harm.

First, as a dutiful daughter-in-law following her mother-in-law around in the house to be at her bidding, she curbs Nagaraj from his attempts to be more romantic than would be permissible in a traditional household, and prevents him thus from following in the footsteps of his elder brother. She also thus assures Nagaraj, by deed rather than by words, when the two brothers separate, that mother shall undoubtedly be happier with Nagaraj and mother never talks nor thinks of going to the village to stay or to visit her elder son.

Second, she takes control of the partitioned household, realizing her husband’s limitations and her mother-in-law’s old age and weakness and feeling of loneliness, and accepting them without a grudge. Of course, she does get exasperated at times at mother-in-law’s restlessness, and “when the mood was dark” complains to Nagaraj: “that she had become a prisoner in the house owing to the old lady’s restlessness” (WN,14). But after the mother-in-
law's death, Sita also suffers "occasional stabs of regret at the memories of her rudeness to the old lady in recent times" (WN,50).

No wonder, therefore, that right from the first page of the novel the reader is made aware that Nagaraj is completely dominated by his wife, even to the extent of determining for him when he should rise from his bed in the morning. But the domineering is never direct or coercive. It has somehow the same effect over Nagaraj as Lady Macbeth has over Macbeth in Shakespeare's drama, and we find Nagaraj himself in several episodes comparing Sita with Lady Macbeth. The first time such comparison strikes Nagaraj is when Sita goads him on to inquire of Tim why he comes home very late everyday, but is herself not prepared to help him in the inquiry. The author has described Nagaraj's thoughts in brilliant humour:

...she had taken refuge in the kitchen in a cowardly manner after handing him the dagger. From some unplumbed depths of memory he thought of the dagger scene from "Macbeth", which he had studied for his B.A. examination, in a previous incarnation as it seemed. Lady Macbeth, egging her husband on to stab the sleeping king... Macbeth had a less difficult job, as he had only to tackle a sleeping king, not a moving target like Tim (WN,66-67).

Again, when Tim's coming home late, smelling of liquor, continues unabated, Sita can no longer endure Nagaraj's indifference and decides to take the matter in her own hand if he does nothing. So she first suggests: "Tomorrow you must take the first bus to the village and tell your brother. It's your duty." But when Nagaraj equivocates, she says: "...Are you going to talk to your brother or not?", and "She looked so firm and determined that he felt crying out, 'Oh, Lady Macbeth again!' ... She added 'if you are not going, I'll myself go, first thing in the morning,' 'Oh! Macbeth!' He felt like crying out..." (WN,82).

There are three distinct stages in Sita's married life. First, the initial stage in joint family wherein with two other dominating senior females
in the house – mother-in-law, and her elder sister-in-law, Charu, - her own personality gets no chance to show. Second, when the family splits and she is left to manage only her husband and his mother, during which period too she has no extraordinary exposure to challenges; and when life flows like a quiet stream personality lies dormant. But when Gopu’s son Tim runs away from the village with the clear intention of staying permanently with Nagaraj, the third and crucial stage of Sita’s life begins. She is childless, and has looked upon Tim with motherly love right from Tim’s arrival with Charu as a three-month old. Now that Tim has left his parents, Sita feels doubly responsible for his welfare. Unfortunately, Tim is already a spoilt child when he re-enters Sita’s life thus, and, Nagaraj being what he is, the burden of anxiety and misery on Tim’s account falls mainly on her. But Sita, as much as Nagaraj, suffers from an inherent incapacity to influence Tim, who goes from bad to worse, and even his marriage fails to have any effect on his character. All Sita can do under the circumstances is to bestow affection on Tim’s wife, Saroja, but Nagaraj is unable to do even that, Saroja’s harmonium-playing being a constant source of annoyance to him. In fact, this annoyance takes matters to such climax that Tim leaves the house with Saroja. Gopu on hearing the news rushes to Malgudi and insists on Nagaraj accompanying him to search for Tim. Sita too says: “Go and help your brother to bring him [Tim] home” (WN,155). Nagaraj, who desires to avoid the unpleasant task, expects Sita to help him out but receives negative response and thinks: “Lady Macbeth! You want your husband to be damned. But Shakespeare has nowhere indicated that Macbeth had to go to a tavern...” (WN,155-156).

Nagaraj has entertained only one ambition in life – to write about Narada. He has clung almost maniacally to this desire for years, without doing anything concrete towards its fulfilment. When Sita advises him: “...I don’t understand your preoccupation with Narada... You will be happier if you overcome it. It’s only a notion which somehow got nailed in your brain. Pluck out the nail. Nothing more; get rid of it” (WN,179-180). Nagaraj once again is reminded of Lady Macbeth, this time echoing her lines:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

And he thinks:

Sita’s words sounded similar and had a flint-like sharpness, an
inescapable logic and unambiguity, very much like Lady
Macbeth’s advice. She wants to remove Narada from the scene of
action in a very Lady-Macbeth-like manner (WN,180).

His oft-repeated comparison of Sita with Lady Macbeth is an
indirect admission on his part that Sita is the only driving-force in whatever
little he is made to do, from an otherwise totally indolent Nagaraj.

Perhaps the greatest compliment Nagaraj pays to Sita comes when
he tells her: “I can’t deceive you. Your eyes pierce through me and see my
soul. If I ever wanted to deceive you I had so many occasions, but I never
tried it. You are a great wife for a man” (WN,176).

Incidentally, the novel is full of mute soliloquies by Nagaraj
wherein he indulges in opinions on women in general or on his mother or Sita
in particular, which deserve mention here:

Can’t say it to my wife, she will take it as a comment on her
cooking… Have to be careful and diplomatic all the time, the
tightrope walking called domestic harmony. Nowadays she is too
ready to take offence (WN,4).

My old mother should have her freedom to hobble up and down
unrestricted, and my wife must have freedom to talk, comment,
argue and shout uninhibited, without any tenant watching – after
all, it is her privilege and I do not have to listen to her full
speech; I can move away to the pyol (WN,4-5).

Ninety-nine percent of husbands must be practising diplomacy
for survival since wives were all alike, thoughtless and
commanding. If men weren’t crafty, family structure would have
crumbled long ago. The greatness of our society lies in its stability, unlike the West, where one reads of divorces ... (WN,68).

What are women coming to these days, ordering men about! (WN,82).

... Is this how marriages are mismanaged in heaven? (WN,90).

Likes to tease me, that's all, an old wife's privilege after decades of married life! (WN,121).

After so many years, I'm discovering her [Sita]. I have been doing her an injustice, thinking of her only as companion to feed me and look after my comforts (WN,126).

Bad woman, unhelpful... No, I should not think of her [Sita] thus. All day she slogs for my comforts... (Wn,141).

She [Sita] is still joking, will not take me seriously. First daughter-in-law and now the adopted mother-in-law! Women are an impediment. Ah, how could I say so? The deity of learning is Saraswathi, the goddess with a veena in one hand, and the book and other things in her four arms. I am condemning the whole race of women. Wrong, I think I am losing my head (WN,178).

Difficult, women, difficult to understand... You must never listen to women. They will not let you do anything worthwhile, nothing more important than buying brinjals and cucumber, and mustard and rice, and caressing whenever a chance occurred. One who is out to make a mark in any walk of life will have no chance...

What about my mother? Who knows how she must have nagged and reduced my father to what he became: just a grabber of village produce, bullying the cultivators who brought grains in cartloads. Even otherwise what would he have done, produced more than two brothers, perhaps? Ha! Ha! Wonderful brothers. A sister between us would have made some difference; she would have acted as a buffer. But poor Father had no time, having to
brow-beat peasants from the village all the time and squeezing out their cash, while Mother kept providing him food hour by hour to satisfy his gluttony during the day and at night perhaps his carnal desires … (WN, 181-182).

It is a moot point whether the author desires to pen some of his own ideas on the subject through the medium of Nagaraj. Any attempt however to delve into this question would be futile because Narayan has the reputation of avoiding any direct introduction of his views on any subject in any of his fictions.

The last woman character in the novel is of Saroja, Tim’s wife. We don’t find her playing a vital role, and yet she becomes the cause of important events affecting vitally the lives of other characters in the novel.

Nagaraj thinks that Gopu’s main consideration for selecting Saroja as his daughter-in-law is the “ten thousand rupees dowry, and silver, etc” (WN, 85). When he sees Saroja first, he comments to himself:

Whatever she may be, the ten-thousand dowry is the real attraction for Gopu. He doesn't seem to care how Tim is going to spend the rest of his life with a companion possessing the sort of face I used to see in geographical magazines at the Town Hall reading room (Wn, 90).

Also when Saroja starts singing with the accompaniment of harmonium, “Nagaraj didn’t like the cheap coarse liit of the tune. He shut his eyes, unable to stand the spectacle of the girl opening and closing her lips, exposing her teeth while singing” (Wn, 91).

Thus Nagaraj is highly prejudiced against Saroja, right from the start, regarding both her appearance and her singing and playing harmonium. But “Gopu and Tim were properly impressed. … actually Tim was not only impressed but overwhelmed” (WN, 91).

Narayan has here hinted not merely at the dowry system but at its intensity also, otherwise how a more educated, more accomplished girl,
brought up at Delhi, would firstly be offered at all to a worthless boy like Tim, and with, in addition, a handsome dowry.

But Saroja’s harmonium breaks up the peace of Nagaraj’s house and raises a storm in the family. As Sita puts it: “Saroja has to get on with her music. What else can she do? She doesn’t know what to do in the kitchen, she has nothing to do all the day.” And when Nagaraj suggests: “Why don’t you train her in household work?”, Sita’s reply is: “It’s not her line. Anyway, let her actual mother-in-law give her the training. Why should I? However, if she shows any interest, I am ready!” (WN,137). Very revealing indeed. A correct estimate of Saroja’s inaptitude for household work, a tinge of displeasure at Charu, the real mother-in-law escaping from her responsibility to train the daughter-in-law, and also a tinge of sorrow at not being Saroja’s real mother-in-law to be able to order her with authority to take the training.

It shows that there is one thing common among the characters of this novel, which are otherwise quite diverse, namely, that they all, at one time or another, act in ways which seem not only against the social laws, but also against the standards of intelligence or common sense.

The novel has several characters, four males and four females. The father, the mother, their two sons Gopu and Nagaraj, Gopu’s wife Charu, Nagaraj’s wife Sita, Gopu’s son Tim and his wife Saroja. As the title of the novel suggests the main male protagonist is Nagaraj, but he is an anti-hero, not a hero. Not only does he do nothing heroic, he in fact does almost nothing, except day-dreaming and indulging in a vain project of writing a book on Devarshi Narada, which does not materialize till the end.

As in some other novels, in this novel also, the fathers are painted weak. Gopu can say “Not necessary” to his father when the latter suggests helping him to find a job. Nagaraj suffers several injustices at the hands of his elder brother Gopu, but the father is not shown to have protected him or to have curbed Gopu. On the contrary, he advises Nagaraj: “You are like Lakshmana in the Ramayana, who stood behind Rama, his elder brother, all the time without a murmur or doubt”. He also seems to have paid no special
attention to Nagaraj, though he is convinced that Nagaraj is “wishy-washy and
dreamy”. So also is Gopu as a father, who fails to bring up his son Tim
properly. The same paternal weakness is shown by Narayan in *The Vendor of
Sweets* and *The Financial Expert*, though in these two novels the fathers –
Jagan and Margayya – take troubles and spend money to get their sons
educated. That they fail is another matter. But Gopu of *The World of Nagaraj*,
though a first class B.A. himself, fails to pay attention to Tim’s education.

The mother is an orthodox lady, whose authority in the family is
shadowy and ends as soon as she becomes a widow. She is not objective in
her dealings with her two daughters-in-law, showing a favourable bias
towards Charu and prejudice against Sita, but it is the former who plans to get
away from the mother-in-law by prompting Gopu to opt for the village
property, and, therefore, it falls to the lot of Sita to tend her mother-in-law in
her old age, which she willingly and dutifully does. Thus Charu proves to be a
selfish, self-centred character. She does not care much even for her son, whom
she leaves to the care of Sita, right from infancy. She thus fails as a mother
too. It is Gopu’s obstinacy which separates Sita and child Tim, when Gopu
goes to the village with his family, taking Tim also, despite entreaties of
Nagaraj: “Leave Tim behind, not too late even now. St. Stephen’s is a good
school. I’ll look after him – ”(WN,34). Gopu’s reply: “No, he will be with
me.”, leaves Nagaraj “heartbroken”.

No wonder, Tim is unable to adjust himself with such parents, and
when Gopu calls him a donkey and gives him a slap, because Tim hesitates to
go to the fields as directed by Gopu, Tim’s endurance ends. He had his valid
reason of catching his bus for the school for his reluctance to obey his father.
So he “packed up trunk and left” (WN,38). No doubt Charu tries to stop him
without success, and according to Gopu’s later account to Nagaraj Charu
misses Tim “and is crying all the time” (WN,42). But Gopu’s coming to
Malgudi to persuade Tim to return has no effect on Tim. “Nothing moved
Tim. He was adamant. He just kept saying, ‘I’ll come later and see mother. I
want to be here’ ” (WN,44). Excessive strictness of his father first in the
village and over-indulgence of his uncle later in Malgudi, completely ruin Tim. Otherwise, Tim “was fond of his grandmother and was seen now and then sitting on her bed chatting”, and when she was bedridden and dying, Tim nursed her “without leaving her side even for a moment” (WN,50) – hopeful signs of the boy’s inherent potential to grow, if properly looked after and trained. The author has tried here to draw attention to how lack of proper understanding by elders of child and adolescent psychology spoil the young generation. The women – Charu, the mother, and Sita, the loving aunt – fail to exercise any beneficial influence on their ward, Tim, due partly to such lack, but mainly due to their inability to be effective under a male dominated social structure. Of the two, Charu seems more helpless against her assertive and obstinate husband, while Sita does put on a bold front against Nagaraj, whose nature does not permit him to “make any demand on her or anyone”.

Daughters-in-law of modern generation are painted by Narayan as no good for household work. Sita’s cutting remark to Nagaraj’s: “But I have to get on with my writing.” is quite revealing: “And Saroja has to get on with her music. What else can she do? She doesn’t know what to do in the kitchen, she has nothing to do all day” (WN,137). This short conversation also brings out Sita’s view that both Nagaraj’s writing and Saroja’s music are equally worthless. In *The Financial Expert* also, Meenakshi’s comments to her husband, Margayya, about their son Balu and daughter-in-law Brinda are very similar:

The girl hardly comes out of her room all day. I have to call her a dozen times before she will come downstairs for her meal. I hardly see anything of Balu either. He doesn’t speak much. I’m probably not good enough for a modern girl like her. ... They hardly know how to boil water or even to light an oven (FE,190).

Thus, though Narayan says he has moved along with the times, he seems to have a bias against modern daughters-in-law who, he believes, do not attend to household work and especially who cannot run the kitchen.
The only character that shines in this novel is Sita, though she is “a timid little creature” at fourteen when she marries, and “in the early days” Nagaraj found her “too timid and bashful” (WN,24-25). She “accepts the role of a lackey at home, forever at the beck and call of her mother-in-law” and Mother is “pleased at the dutifulness of her daughter-in-law” (WN,26). And she keeps under control Nagaraj’s romantic overtures during the early period of their married life, and goads him to action whenever necessary in later life. She can win appreciation even from the hard nut, Gopu, for her perfect behaviour with him. “Whatever might be his attitude to his brother, he was always gentle with Sita” (WN,41). She tends her nephew, Tim, with love, right from his infancy, and also when he comes to stay at Malgudi, running away from his village home. Even with Saroja she maintains good relations. To Nagaraj’s persistent demand that she should ask Saroja not to play her harmonium, Sita firmly replies: “I have got on with her well, so far. I don’t want to spoil it” (WN,132).

It is this character of Sita, who is an emancipated, yet self-restrained housewife, that provides, to my mind, justification for inclusion of this novel in this Section.

**Grandmother’s Tale**

*Grandmother’s Tale* is in reality the tale of the great-grandmother as narrated by the grandmother to the author. It is doubtful whether it should be treated as a novel and should find its place in this dissertation, because it is more a biography than a novel. As Narayan himself has clarified in the “Explanation” preceding the book “The composition grew as I wrote it from my grandmother’s narration, in daily instalments, of her mother’s search for her errant husband, …”. As one goes through the book one experiences that if one tries to look at it as a novel, it seems more like a biography, but if one tries to treat it as a biography, it assumes the fantasy of a fiction. Here again, Narayan’s own opinion is worth quoting from his “Explanation”:
The borderline between fact and fiction, between biography and tale wears thin and ultimately vanishes in the following chronicle. Readers are bound to question how much of it is history and how much is fiction. I do not know the answer myself (GT, n. pag.).

Coming down from mouth to mouth, from the great-grandmother to the grandmother and then from the latter, from the vague memory after she heard the tale years ago, to the writer, the story must no doubt have been embellished with several spices to make it authentic and tenable. Of course, we have Narayan's assurance that he has "managed to keep her [the grandmother's] own words here and there"; at the same time, however, he hastens to add "but this is mainly a story-writer's version of a hearsay biography of a great-grandmother" (GT,8). Keeping all these facts in mind, an attempt is being made here to treat it as a novel for the present purpose of evaluating the women characters who figure in *Grandmother's Tale*.

The grandmother herself, as a character, assumes little importance in the novel except as the narrator of the adventures of her mother Bala. The grandmother nonetheless reveals certain noteworthy traits which needs specific mention. First of all, one has to credit her with enough intelligence and imagination to weave the tale into a presentable whole, even if Narayan's art as a story-teller is deemed to have played its part in bringing it out ultimately in the form in which it is before us.

If we take into consideration Narayan's year of birth, namely 1906, and on that basis surmise about the grandmother's period, we may be inclined to assume that she must have been an illiterate woman steeped in tradition. Such an assumption is, however, belied by her description. That she was literate is clear when the writer says that she taught him songs, prayers, numbers, and the alphabet (GT,1). She also counselled neighbours and the tenants living in the rear portion of the vast house, settled disputes, studied horoscopes and arranged matrimonial alliances — activities, which an old orthodox Hindu widow would hardly have the will or capacity to undertake.
Incidentally, some of these characteristics of his grandmother are borrowed by Narayan for the character of Raman's aunt in *The Painter of Signs*. Witness the following passage:

... 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 prophecies from a horoscope (PS, 18).

It is rather surprising that the grandmother, who, though devoid of formal education, did possess wit, could be ignorant of how her husband, who was a sub-magistrate, amassed wealth disproportionate to his pay. To the author's query: “You said he was started on less than fifty rupees. How did you manage to buy so many houses and lands?” she replies: “We did not actually have to depend upon his pay.” And when Narayan comments: “Oh, I understand. I will not question you further”, she says: “Even if you asked, I wouldn’t be able to explain how a magistrate earned – money just poured in, I think. We had a brougham and horse, a coachman and so much of everything” (GT, 78).

Those were days of the British rule in India and apparently corruption in Government quarters was not looked upon as a major or vital socio-economic problem, as it is today. But to narrate it in 1992 in a matter-of-fact manner, as Narayan has done here in respect of his own grandmother, needs mettle. The grandmother herself was not perhaps quite happy about her husband’s wealth, as would seem from her statement:

I always felt that the kind of wealth your grandfather amassed was illusory, because within six months of your grandfather’s death, ... all his property was lost ... Even this house was nearly gone but for the help of a neighbour, who loaned us five thousand rupees to redeem it at the last moment (GT, 78-79).

One very significant aspect of grandmother Ammani’s views is her concept of a perfect woman which she borrows from a Sanskrit lyric, and
which she makes the child Narayan recite on certain days of the week. The lyric says: "the perfect woman must work like a slave, advise like a Mantri (Minister), look like Goddess Lakshmi, be patient like Mother Earth and courtesan-like in the bed chamber" (GT,5). Though Narayan says that it was the "most unnecessary lesson however, in my memory as I realize it now," it must be said that what the lyric prescribes is an ideal which was cherished by millions of Indian wives in the olden days, and naturally came down as a cultural heritage up to the grandmother’s time.

The other ideal held high by Ammani is the supreme devotion of a woman to her husband. To quote her own words:

To a woman, her husband is everything. She can't lose him. ... Did not Savitri conquer Yama himself, and trap him into promising her a boon? And the boon she asked for was to beget children and he had to give her his blessing that she should have children. After accepting the boon, she asked how it would be possible when he as the God of Death was carrying away her husband’s life, leaving his inert body in the forest – and then Yama had to yield back Satyavan’s life. You could not imagine a greater woman than Savitri for austerity and purity of mind (GT,65-66).

The motif of using some ancient Hindu legends in the modern context has been usefully employed by Narayan in some of his novels, for example, in *The Painter of Signs*, wherein he refers to the mythology of Ganga and Shanthanu. Here in *Grandmother’s Tale* the author employs the legend of Satyavan-Savitri to justify the means employed by Bala to get back her husband.

On the whole, Ammani presents a pleasant picture of an “active” “although aging” woman who “concerned herself with other people’s affairs” when her “domestic drudgery was mitigated by the presence of two daughters-in-law in the house”, and who cherishes some nineteenth century notions as most women of her period did.
The story of the heroine of the novel, Bala, Ammani's mother, begins with her marriage at the age of seven with a boy, Viswanath, ten years old. To fix the period of this event Narayan says: "It is not possible for me to fix the historical background by any clue or internal evidence. ... One has to assume an arbitrary period – that is the later period of the East India Company, before the Sepoy Mutiny" (GT,8).

Incidentally this event described as "Sepoy Mutiny" is a vestige of Indian history as written and taught by the Britishers. The modern view of historians of independent India is that this so called "Sepoy Mutiny" of 1857 was in fact the first organized attempt by India to free India from the British Rule, that is, it was the beginning of India's freedom struggle, which the Britishers have tried to belittle and degrade by calling it "Sepoy Mutiny". Used by a writer of Narayan's repute, in a novel written by him in 1992, these words hurt one's sense of national pride.

As Narayan puts it: "Those were days of child marriages, generally speaking. Only widowers re-married late in life" (GT,8). If Bala married at the age of seven, Ammani too married at the age of eleven only. Child marriages are undoubtedly a social evil and India has tried to fight it by legislation as well as educational progress and social awakening. But it cannot be said that the evil has been completely eradicated even today.

When Bala tries to object to her marriage before her mother on the ground that her friends are making fun of her, her mother puts forth an argument which would sound funny in the present day, namely, that Bala was old enough to marry, something that could not be avoided by any human being. It is not made clear whether marriage itself could not be avoided or being old enough to marry could not be avoided. But in either case, the argument betrays utter ignorance and antiquated views of the women of that age. But then why blame the women alone? Look at the defence of child marriage advanced by Viswa's teacher, a pedagogue, when Viswa's classmates ragged him for getting married, and cried, "Shame, Shame". He says:
Why shame? I was married when I was like Viswa. I have four sons and two daughters and grandchildren. My wife looks after those at home still, and runs the family; and they will all marry soon. There is no shame in marriage. It's all arranged by the God in that temple. Who are we to say anything against His will? My wife was also small when we married... (GT,14).

When teachers themselves would be holding such views, and women's education level was naught, one can well imagine the plight of women regarding marital freedom and choice in those dark days of Indian social history.

A touch of satire and humour by Narayan converts this otherwise gloomy and depressing description of child marriage episode into a light, comic narration. Witness the following excerpts:

My mother told me that she was playing in the street with her friends one evening when her father came up and said, “You are going to be married today next week.”

“Why?” she asked and did not get an answer (GT,9).

Also:

At the auspicious hour the piper, drummer and the chanting priests combined to create the maximum din as Viswa approached the girl, seated on her father's lap, and tied the yellow thread around her neck - and they became man and wife from that moment (GT,13).

An outstanding quality of Bala is her extreme boldness, which she reveals in its full play after she grows up. But a glimpse of this boldness can be discerned in the question she puts to her father in her childlike innocence at the age of seven. When her father breaks the news to her by saying: “You are going to be married today next week”, her immediate reaction is not of shock or of being cowed down to meek obedience, but of asking a straight pointed question: “Why?” And it is no wonder that she does not get any answer to it.
One cannot brush this “Why?” aside, as a child’s purposeless query, when one keeps in view its socio-historical perspective.

Be it as it may, and this seed of boldness apart, Bala was after all just a girl of seven and so must, like thousands of girls of her times, suffer the consequences of early marriage. She is not allowed to go out freely. In fact, it is impossible for her to go out, “unless chaperoned by an elder of the family” (GT,15). Joining her friends in the streets to play is out of the question. She is not permitted to meet her own husband, except on occasions such as the New Year and that too for a little time only. And during one such short meeting, it is again the girl and not the boy who makes bold to take the initiative to experience “their first touch”. Bala touches Viswa’s face with her forefinger.

Of course, social conditions permit her to show this boldness within the four comers of her home only, and it is Viswa who takes the initiative to meet his wife secretly, when she washes clothes at the well at the backyard of her home. But this is a short phase of their lives as, when she is ten years old, Viswa takes into his head to run away from home, for no apparent reason, joining some pilgrims going to Pandaripura. For some very strange purpose, he confides in Bala only about his leaving home, so no one else knows where and why he has gone away. In fact even his parents did not realize for about ten days that he had disappeared.

Time passes and Bala, “the little girl in a pig-tail”, reaches maturity with “the natural charm of full-blown womanhood”, and people start “staring at her and whispering comments behind her back” (GT,28) whenever she goes out. She is pestered by friends of the family by questions regarding her husband’s whereabouts. She invents stories but soon gets tired of constant questioning and confines herself at home except to go to the temple on Tuesdays and Fridays. But the women of the town visiting the temple are critical of her and complain to the priest of the temple. The women presume Bala’s husband is no more but she is hiding the fact and thus pretends to be a sumangali. According to them “A widow who pretends to be otherwise pollutes the temple precinct and its holiness is lost. She should be prohibited
from entering the temple unless she shaves her head and observes the rules” (GT,29-30). Those women severely criticize even Bala’s mother and call her “brazen” for allowing her to visit the temple. How deep-rooted was the influence of unreasonable dogmas among the Hindus, especially their womenfolk, of that period is abundantly evident by this episode. The priest of the temple has no alternative, when under such pressure, but to advise Bala’s mother not to send Bala to the temple, till she gets some proof to say that Viswa is living. He says: “Its [the temple’s] sanctity must be preserved, which is my duty; otherwise as a priest of the temple, my family will face God’s wrath” (GT,30). The comments of the priest, which Bala overhears, prove to be a breaking point for her patience and endurance, her rebellious spirit is roused and she leaves her home in search of her husband with a challenge thrown at the priest: “You people think I am a widow? I am not. He is alive like you. I’ll not rest until I come back with him some day and shame you all” (GT,30-33). These simple words of hers also reveal her inherent faith in God on the one hand and the strength of her indomitable determination on the other.

One fact which comes out in sharp focus before us in this episode is that, in that period, not only a girl had no voice in respect of her own marriage – in fact she was married away at such a tender age when she could be in no position to express her voice in the matter – but the marriage tie so imposed upon her was unbreakable also. Women were taught, right from childhood, that marriage was a life-time bond for them, tying them down to one man, alive or dead. If her husband were dead a woman had to live strictly as a widow, for the rest of her life, with shaven head and wearing only white clothes.

What happens to Bala after she leaves home till she reaches Poona about a year later is kept by the novelist – whether deliberately as his own style of narration or out of compulsion for lack of information of a period of a biography, one can only surmise. It may also be due to Narayan’s desire to avoid any discussion or even mention of the socio-political history of those
times, because any detailed description of Bala's travel from her village up to Poona, taking one long year, would necessarily involve its mention. Whatever it may be, one can well imagine the extreme hardship and vicissitudes Bala must have faced all along the journey, taking into account her illiteracy, her tender age, her lack of knowledge of any other language except her mother tongue and, above all, the general political instability and prevailing law and order situation of those days. No doubt she is clever enough to have packed a small bag with a change of clothes though she leaves home in a hurry and also in a huff. She also does not forget to take "some money she had saved out of her birthday and other gifts, a few gold ornaments, and above all knife in case she had to protect her honour and end her life" (GT,34). An indirect hint, from Bala's own mouth, about her adventurous spirit can, however, be gathered from the following excerpt from the grandmother's narration:

Whenever my mother felt like it, she would gather us around and tell her story – so that we might realize how strong and bold she was at one time. She would boast, "You only see me as a cook at home, feeding you and pampering your father's whims and moods but at one time I could do other things which you, petted and spoilt children, could never even imagine" (GT,35).

At the same time it has also to be borne in mind that it is this very inculcation of an unflinching devotion to one man into a young woman's heart that becomes the driving force for Bala in bearing all the adversities which she faces during her search of her husband. Her words at one of her prayers at the temple before she departs from the town are ample evidence of this attitude: "Oh, Lord. I don't even know whether my husband is alive. If he is alive, help me reach him. If he is dead, please let me die of cholera quickly" (GT,29).

What happens in Poona and how she reaches her husband there and recognizes him is more like a fantasy than a real life story or even a realistic novel. We have to take it just as a piece of luck for Bala or a sheer accident of life which rarely happens. Otherwise, what Bala had learnt from Viswa himself was that he was going to Pandaripura and here we find Bala
reaching Poona and not Pandaripura and finding him there! But of course one cannot also forget the dictum that fact is sometimes stranger than friction.

Bala has exhausted all her wealth in reaching Poona and there she survives on charity in a public rest house where she stays for days before she is noticed by a woman who expresses sympathy and makes enquiry about her. Bala does not understand her Marathi but feels that she is sympathetic and goes with her to her home. The people there do not understand either her woeful story but someone recognizes that she is a “Madrasī”, and arranges to take her to a person “who came here many years ago. He may understand you” (GT,37). This is how she reaches Viswa’s place. But Viswa refuses to recognize her. It is his wife Surma who gives Bala shelter in the house and from her Bala learns that Viswa had come there when Surma was over eighteen years. Surma’s father takes a fancy to the young man – “a village boy from far off south” ... who “had the courage to go out as far as Delhi (which was beyond father’s dream) and survive...” (GT,49). Clearly Viswa fascinates the daughter also because Surma marries him much against her father’s will. They elope to Nasik, and marry in the temple of Triambaka.

A very important facet of Bala’s character is revealed when she refuses Viswa’s proposal, which he makes when he realizes that there is no escape from admitting his identity, namely: “I’ll tell her [Surma] the truth and you [Bala] may continue here as my wife, and not as a domestic” (GT,55). When Viswa later agrees to go back with Bala, cowed by her threat of suicide if he does not, Bala also refuses his other proposal to allow Surma also to come with them. His pleadings, that he can’t live without Surma and that Bala should show some consideration for his feelings also, fail to arouse her sympathy.

The behaviour of Bala towards Surma is unbecoming. She forgets Surma’s benevolence toward her. When Viswa not only refuses to recognize and accept her but also tries to drive her out of the house with the help of “Kotwals”, it is Surma who gives her shelter, treats her well like a friend, puts trust in her and opens up her heart to her by telling her about Viswa and
herself. Such good deeds of Surma are paid back by Bala in very detestable manner, by taking her right up to Bangalore with Viswa under pretext of bringing about the latter’s health to normal, and then forcing Viswa to compel Surma to return to Poona so that Viswa and herself can go back to their village without her. She practically coerces both Viswa and Surma into surrendering to her wish by threatening to drown herself. The writer himself has expressed this view succinctly:

Ammani, I can’t find any excuse for the way your mother [Bala] manoeuvred to get rid of the other woman [Surma]. Your mother was too deep and devious for the poor lady, who had shown so much trust in her, whom she had sheltered and nourished when she was in desperate straits, not to mention the years she cared for and protected Viswa who had after all strayed his way to Poona and was literally a tramp at the start … (GT,65).

Of course, Ammani, the grandmother defends the action of her mother. Her argument, put tersely, is that everything is fair in trying to get back one’s husband – just as everything is fair in love and war.

Surma’s character in this entire episode shines out, on the other hand, as very noble. Viswa’s and Surma’s mutual relations are full of love and admiration. Surma makes no secret of her feelings for Viswa before Bala; on the contrary, she “constantly expressed her admiration and love for Viswanath” (GT,50). Viswa too does the same as a pleading. When he is first compelled to admit his identity, he pleads: “Be patient for some more time. Be as you are, Surma is a rare creature. We must not upset her” (GT,55). At one stage he says: “I can’t live without Surma”, and at another: “I can’t survive without Surma, she must also come with us” (GT,55-56).

Bala’s strategy is to keep Surma in the dark till the last moment. So even when Bala enters the water of the tank to play her climactic role of coercing Viswa into submission by threat of drowning herself, Surma, in her ignorance, cries out in alarm: “Oh, God, she has stepped into the water. Oh,
stop!”, full of worry about Bala’s well-being. Such a lofty feeling toward her is responded to by Bala by a cruel demand on Viswa, who requests her to come out of water: “I won’t come up until you turn Surma back to Poona”. And at that moment she reveals to Surma that she is Viswa’s wife, but at the same time says curtly: “He is my husband, I can’t share him with you.” Even in her shock on hearing this, Surma’s reaction is striking. She says to Bala: “We were such good friends! Let me also drown with you.” Viswa naturally holds her back firmly, but he is helpless against Bala’s ultimatum:

Viswa, take her with you and leave me alone. I am already shivering and will die of cold – if you don’t make up your mind quickly whether you want me or Surma. Send her back honourably home. Let the palanquins be turned around with her, if you want to save me” (GT,62).

And thus Surma disappears from the life of Viswa forever, and we do not learn anything about what happens to her thereafter.

Viswa proves to be a very weak character vis-à-vis Bala’s. He abandons Surma without any fault of hers just at Bala’s bidding. Surma without whom, he said, he could not survive. Surma, who had been instrumental in his rise to so much wealth and position.

Bala, in spite of her brave attempt and success in searching out her husband and then winning him back from Surma, shows herself in poor light in the manner and method she adopts to attain victory, and especially in her treatment of Surma and partly even her husband, as already narrated earlier. Against the background of the moral stature demonstrated by Surma, the immorality of Bala’s behaviour assumes a more sinister colour. Though her ends are worthy, the means adopted by her to achieve the ends are improper, to say the least. The only redeeming factors one can enumerate in her favour are, firstly, her acceptance of Surma’s generosity toward her in eloquent manner; because when she demands Surma’s returning to Poona, and Surma asks: “What! What have I done to you that you should say this?” She replies: “You have been like a Goddess to me, but I can’t go home with you...”
Secondly, while rejecting Viswa’s last appeal to let Surma come with them to visit the temples and then go back, she firmly tells Surma; “No, it won’t be possible. In our place we will be hounded out. I’ll advise Viswa to go with you, anywhere, back to Poona or forward. Only leave me alone. You have got to choose” (GT,68-69). And then she puts her arms around Surma, rests her head on her shoulder and sobbing, bows down and prostrates at her feet, gets up and moves away from her towards the tank again, leaving no alternative to Surma but to cry out desperately: “Don’t! Don’t! I am leaving. May God bless you both” (GT,69). Redeeming features though these are, they fail to ennoble Bala’s character, nor do they provide any justification for her actions. In fact it can be added as a point against Bala that it was not very unusual in those days for two women to live under the same roof as the wives of the same man. Bigamy was, for a man, not only not a legal offence then, but it was also not so rare either. So Bala’s argument that “in our place we will be hounded out” sounds very hollow, and her threat to Viswa that she would die of cold “if you don’t make up your mind quickly whether you want Surma or me. Send her back honourably home”, is not in keeping with the reality of the times.

In contrast, Surma exhibits the height of her nobility, when she entreats Bala in all humility:

Let me only go with you. I have surrendered Viswa to you, only let me be near you. I have loved you as a friend. I’ll come with you and promise to return to Poona after visiting the temples. Please show me this consideration. I accept with all my heart that he is your husband. I’ll never talk to him again or look at him even. But let me be with you … Viswa, talk to her please” (GT,68).

One has to realize how difficult and grievous it must have been for Surma to be so humble, who had been “always so assured, positive and a leader”, before a woman who had at one time come to her as a destitute
seeking shelter and who later had been a servant in her house before Surma herself elevated her to the position of a friend.

It is unbelievable that a woman of such high calibre would spend fifteen years with a man as wife without formal marriage. According to Surma’s own version she and Viswa “eloped to Nasik and were married in the temple of Triambaka – a sort of marriage, quiet and private. Eventually, father reconciled himself to the situation” (GT,49-50). There is nothing to disbelieve her story, especially when her rigid father, who had vehemently opposed their marriage at first, gets reconciled and also, when he dies, leaves the gem business and the house to Surma. However, the words “a sort of marriage, quiet and private” are significant and throw some doubt about the sanctity or validity of whatever marriage rites they might have performed. Even then this hardly can be said to tarnish the image of her status as Viswa’s wife which she apparently has enjoyed openly in society with the full approval of her father for fifteen years. Viewed in this light it ill behoves Bala to dispute Viswa’s statement that Surma is his wife and to assert: “I know she is not. I know in this country it is not so easy. You have kept her, or rather she has kept you” (GT,56).

If we examine the emotional ties among the three persons – one man, Viswa, and two women, Bala and Surma, we at once notice a striking difference between Bala-Viswa relationship and Surma-Viswa relationship. We notice that Bala is tied down to Viswa by the bond of marriage when she is just a child incapable of realizing the man-woman relationship involved. For her it is just the socio-religious bond which draws her to Viswa – not as an individual but as her husband. It is the social stigma attached to a widow which is the compelling reason for her to strive to prove that she is not a widow. In short, it is not her love for the man – Viswa – but the loyalty and devotion of a wife toward her husband imposed and inculcated by social and religious teaching, which urge Bala on in her search for and then attempt to win over her husband. This is also evident from Bala’s life subsequent to her return to her village with Viswa. Witness the following excerpt:

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Bala turned out to be a model wife in the orthodox sense, all trace of her adventurous spirit or independence completely suppressed. One could hardly connect her with the young woman who had tramped all alone across hundreds of miles in search of her husband and succeeded in bringing him back home - dominating, devious and aggressive, till she attained her object. Now she was docile and never spoke to her husband in the presence of others. Her tone was gentle and subdued. It was a transformation (GT, 75-76).

In fact, it was not a transformation but a return to her original nature and style of living, which she had temporarily to shed in order to attain the goal.

Viswa, too, is not at all emotionally attached to Bala. He practically vanishes from her life when she is ten years old. There is no evidence that he ever remembers her during all his years of absence. Actually, when he faces Bala after several years, he refuses to recognize her and even after recognizing her tries to get rid of her. He has settled down in life with Surma and is quite happy without Bala. In fact, he loves Surma, announces it to Bala too by declaring that he can't live or survive without Surma. His love for Surma is amply evidenced in some episodes also, apart from his utterances quoted earlier. For instance, when Surma offers to drown herself along with Bala, Viswa instinctively holds her back firmly. Also, when Surma starts returning to Poona in the palanquin, "Viswa would have frantically raced behind the palanquins but for the check of Bala's stare in silence" (GT, 69). If, therefore, Viswa ultimately returns with Bala it is obvious that it is with utmost reluctance, under extreme threats of Bala to end her life, and even then it is a bit mysterious why at all he cowers and surrenders to Bala's bluster.

Surma's love for Viswa is, from the start, instinctive. It is almost love at first sight. To quote herself:

My first glimpse of Bhatji [Viswa] was when he came into our shop one morning long ago ... There was something about
his person that touched my heart. He was lanky and looked famished. My first impulse was to rush to his help in some way, but I held myself back. I was a young woman of over eighteen years, he might be older. Somehow I felt attracted to this lean boy with hair falling on his nape untended, covering his forehead and unshaven face (GT,45-46).

She cares for Viswa’s health and happiness above her own. When she notices Viswa to be tired and pale, after his excited discussion with Bala, about which of course she is ignorant, she gets agitated. She calls a physician despite Viswa’s objection, and when the physician advises rest for Viswa she puts him to bed and stays by his side for a whole week leaving all household work to Bala. She refuses to leave him alone when, after the week, Bala suggests that she should go out and get refreshed. Four more days later she reluctantly agrees and goes to the lake with Bala. But while Bala is able to enjoy the scene, Surma says:

I wish I could enjoy the scene and the breeze but my mind is troubled. How I wish Bhatji were well ... his normal self, riding his horse, sitting in the shop with his diamonds and customers; then I could sit here and watch the lake with a free mind (GT,59).

Apart from exhibiting Surma’s immense love for Viswa, this utterance also reveals that her love for him is not possessive. She does not want him always by her side. She would feel nearness with him if only she is sure of his well-being wherever he is. In short, Surma acquits herself quite honourably in the entire chain of events from Bala’s entry into her life to her own disappearance from the lives of Bala and Viswa. It is Surma’s character which shines out luminously in the entire novel and which wins the reader’s sympathy.

There is also a great element of self-sacrifice in Surma’s love. We notice it in her surrender of her own husband to another woman whom she has befriended, just because she claims to be his wife. Surma could, if she so wished, have resisted all Bala’s attempts to win over Viswanath, and successfully too. While parting also, she bears no ill-will towards either him
or her. On the contrary she says: “May God bless you both”, and totally disappears from their lives. Such pathetic end of hers reflects very adversely on both Viswa and Bala, especially on the former.

And look at the perversity of life! The same Viswa who had deserted Bala in childhood, who had refused to recognize her when she searched him after long years of suffering, who had most reluctantly returned with her to his village, and whose heart had bled in parting with Surma, lives happily with Bala for years, begets several children, and when she dies he feels lonely without her. “In spite of all the comfort and security, he missed Bala and felt a vacuity at times. ‘No one can take her place’, he often told himself.” His love for Surma, which was so intense that he had thought he would not survive without her, has completely faded, if not died all together, and we are told: “Sometimes he thought of Surma too but the intensity of feeling was gone; it was just a faded memory revived with effort, without any pangs of recollection” (GT,84).

The fickleness of man-woman love, or rather of all human relationship is further demonstrated by Viswa when, at the age of seventy-five he marries a girl of seventeen. The episode introduces in the novel two minor women characters – the girl of seventeen, who is just a nonentity, and her mother, at whose tunes she dances, and who is a very scheming, mischievous, vile woman bent on usurping Viswa’s property through this totally improper, if not immoral, marriage. Surma or Bala could not stir Viswa’s memory enough to deter him from taking a third wife at the terminal stage of his life! He does not marry either for love or for comfort, but because he is “convinced that it would be the best way to shock and spite his family, all of whom seemed hostile to him” (GT,91). A very strange reason indeed, for a man with one foot in the grave, to marry.

The woman, who thus becomes Viswa’s mother-in-law, gets her entry in the family as a cook when Bala is still alive but has become infirm. She brings with her a twelve year old daughter. She slowly gets hold of the management of the house. When Bala dies and Viswa moves to Kolar with his
son, this woman is retained as a care-taker of the house at Kumbakonam. She lies low for about five years, not revealing her real character, till Viswa returns to the house estranged with his son and daughter-in-law at Kolar. The daughter-in-law, Lakshmi, is an insignificant character in the novel and we do not learn much about her except that though she is reserved and formal she looks after Viswa’s comforts and needs hour-to-hour. Of course, in the background of this fact, Viswa’s estrangement seems more despicable.

The care-taker and her daughter enter Viswa’s heart through his belly by satisfying his gluttony, and otherwise also treating him like a prince, and the result is as can be expected, or rather more correct to say, is most unexpected, namely, Viswa marries the daughter. Having thus raised their status from mere caretakers to a wife and mother-in-law, they lose no time in planning to become owners of his property. And when Viswa dodges, the shrewd woman suspects he might slip away and so poisons him which brings a tragic end to the hero of the novel and with him to the novel itself.

We come across in the novel three wives of Viswa, the first two of whom can be divided clearly into one traditional, namely, Bala, and one non-traditional, namely, Surma. Of course in her adventure of searching and bringing back her husband, Bala too crosses all bounds of tradition. But it is difficult to include the third under any such classification. She is in fact a blot on the institution of wives. It is true that she is not much to be blamed, being only seventeen when she marries and perhaps is too young fully to grasp the evil designs of her mother in sacrificing her youth at the alter of marriage with an old infirm man. Also her mother uses her as a mere tool or a doll in her designs, without any indication that she has any feelings for her daughter or any remorse for her game of duplicity for gain at the cost of the marital happiness of her own flesh and blood.

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Notes

1 R. K. Narayan, The Guide 1st Indian ed. (1958; Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1958) 84-85. (All subsequent references are to this edition.) Henceforth abbreviated as G and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text itself.


7 Gilra, Narayan's World of Values, 41.

8 R. K. Narayan, The Vendor of Sweets 1st Indian ed. (1967; Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1967) 58. (All subsequent references are to this edition.) Henceforth abbreviated as VS and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text itself.

9 Gilra, Narayan's World of Values, 71.


Henceforth abbreviated as PS and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text itself.

12 Quoted by Bhardwaj, “The Painter of Signs – An Analysis”, 171.

13 R. K. Narayan, Talkative Man 1st Indian ed. (1983; Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1983) 120. (All subsequent references are to this edition.) Henceforth abbreviated as TM and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text itself.

14 R. K. Narayan, A Tiger for Malgudi 1st Indian ed. (1986; Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1986) 48. (All subsequent references are to this edition.) Henceforth abbreviated as TG and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text itself.

15 R. K. Narayan, The World of Nagaraj 2nd Indian ed. (1990; Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1993) 25. (All subsequent references are to this edition.) Henceforth abbreviated as WN and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text itself.


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