PART - III

SHORT STORIES
CHAPTER - 5

TRADITIONS, TRANSITION, TRADITION-BREAKING ON SMALL CANVAS

Consideration of Narayan's stories in this dissertation creates, so to say, a disharmony in its smooth logical flow under the scheme evolved for grouping his novels, because no amount of manoeuvring would make the stories fall into one or another of the groups planned. So they have been discussed as an independent group in this Part which forms a separate Chapter. As mentioned earlier, the stories do not bear any dates, and the dates of publications of the three collections considered here are meaningless. No historical or even chronological aspect can therefore be attached to any of them. An attempt has nevertheless been made to group the stories also in the same three categories in which the novels have been divided, according to the type of the main woman character in each story, namely (1) victim of traditions, (2) neither sufferer from tradition nor tradition-breaker, and (3) tradition-breaker.

It seems Narayan's short stories have, at different times, been published in differently named collections. When it was decided to attempt this thesis, they were available in three different collections, namely, Malgudi Days, published in 1982, Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories, published in 1985, and his latest collection of Stories and Table-Talk titled Salt and Sawdust, published in 1993. These have been considered here for discussion. A good many of these stories, however, have either no woman character therein, or have very insignificant one or more women characters who have no impact on the story as women and as the purpose here is to take into account the treatment of female characters only, any temptation to consider them has been refrained from, howsoever important they may be from a literary aspect.
So also the Table-Talks included in *Salt and Sawdust* have been totally ignored as this thesis covers only novels and stories.

Accordingly, the stories in the three collections, which have been considered, have been divided as below, and considered in this chapter in this order:

(I) **Victim of Traditions**
   1. An Astrologer's Day
   2. Trail of the Green Blazer
   3. A Willing Slave
   4. Mother and Son
   5. Second Opinion
   6. The Edge
   7. A Horse and Two Goats
   8. The Watchman
   9. Old Man of the Temple
  10. Four Rupees
  11. Guru

(II) **Neither sufferer from tradition nor tradition-breaker**
   1. Out of Business
   2. Wife's Holiday
   3. A Shadow
   4. House Opposite
   5. A Hero

(III) **Tradition-breaker**
   1. Selvi
   2. Emden
   3. The Shelter
   4. Salt and Sawdust
(I) Victim of Traditions

(1) An Astrologer's Day

This story is about a villager who runs away from his village after stabbing a man under the influence of drink and gambling, and comes to Malgudi, two hundred miles away, for safety. Not knowing a word of astrology he settles down in Malgudi as a footpath astrologer, marries, and for years lives under fear as a murderer. His “great load” of the crime is suddenly gone one day when he meets the very same man whom, he thinks, he had murdered, himself unrecognized by the other. Only then he reveals to his wife: “I thought I had the blood of a man on my hands all these years. ... He is alive.”¹ His wife gasps: “You tried to kill!” and his only response is: “Yes, in our village, when I was a silly youngster. We drank, gambled and quarrelled badly one day – why think of it now? Time to sleep” (MLD,7). So the woman in the story lives for years as the wife of a “murderer” or a “person who attempted to murder”, blissfully ignorant of the ghastly fact. And when she faces the fact, she can only gasp a silly: “you tried to kill!”, and continue to live with him as if nothing affecting her has happened. Marriage is such a sacred, life-long bondage in India! And the woman in bondage can never, even in dream, raise the question: “Should I continue to live with such a person?” Her beliefs are so much rooted in destiny that she would just take solace that she is destined to live with him. She has no free will of her own.

(2) Trail of the Green Blazer

True, Raju is a pickpocket, but he has his pricks of conscience, and that ruins him.

On the day he makes a big catch, he finds that apart from money the purse he picked contains a balloon. He remembers the owner of the purse
purchasing it with the remark: “This is for a motherless boy. I have promised it him. If it bursts or gets lost before I go home, he will cry all night, and I wouldn’t like it at all” (MLD,108). This memory disturbs Raju, who “almost sobbed at the thought of the disappointed child – the motherless boy” (MLD,109). He tries to put back the purse in the pocket of the same man, gets caught and is jailed.

Valmiki, before he became a rishi and wrote Ramayana, was a dacoit till another rishi told him: “Your family gladly share your loot and survive on it, but are they prepared to share your sin?” The answer was a firm ‘no’, and it would have been the same had Raju put similar query to his wife. That is why Raju takes care to show at home that his earnings are honest. Raju’s wife, if he takes home too much cash and does not take care to hide most of it, asks “too many questions and made herself miserable. She liked to believe that he was reformed and earned the cash he showed her as commission; ...” (MLD,107). When she visits Raju in jail, she says: “You have brought shame on us” and weeps. Raju replies indignant: “Why? I was only trying to put it back” (MLD,110). The only lesson he learns after eighteen months of jail for his attempted samaritanism is: “if ever I pick up something again, I shall make sure I don’t have to put it back” (MLD,110). Valmikis do not materialize in every age! After all, Valmiki too needed meeting a rishi to show him the right path. Raju has no such luck. He has scruples and that is his undoing.

Raju’s wife here exhibits a totally orthodox puritanical attitude and condemns her husband instead of appreciating the good gesture in what he tried to do.

(3) A Willing Slave

This is a story of complete dedication of a woman to her family, stuffed with pathos. Ayah is known by no other name though she is serving the family for seventeen years. Her husband deserted her years ago, and he
works in Ceylon tea gardens. She maintains herself and her children by working in the employer’s family ‘for over twelve hours in the day’ getting ‘two meals a day, fifteen rupees a month and three saries a year’ (MLD,127). She cheerfully performs, not only her job as Ayah, but also several self-imposed tasks, like keeping an eye on the home-tutor to ensure that he does not torture the children, and keeping watch over servants for which she is quite unpopular with them. At the beginning of every month, ‘a couple of rowdy-looking men’, whom she calls “those Saidapet robbers” (MLD,130), who really are her sons, come and take away most of her month’s pay. This is the only evidence that she has her own home at Saidapet, which she no doubt visits every three months for a few days.

Though ‘a willing slave’ for her own family, for whom she toils and slogs, she sub-consciously perhaps nourishes a hatred for them all. She calls her sons ‘those Saidapet robbers’. For her husband, who has deserted her, she uses the phrase ‘The Old Fellow’ (MLD,129), with which she also keeps the employer’s children in fright to make them do her bidding, like sending them to sleep.

The mention of the Old Fellow worked wonders, and child after child was kept in terror of him. He was supposed to be locked up in a disused dog kennel in the compound. He was always shouting for the Ayah. He was ever ready to break the door open and carry her away. The Ayah always referred to him in scathing language: “I have beaten that scoundrel into pulp. Very bad fellow, disgusting monkey. ...” (MLD,129).

All this reveals her real disgust for her husband and reflects her constant anxiety that he may turn up any time and take her away from the happy and peaceful place of her employment. But when her fear materializes one day, she laughs ‘uncontrollably’ even when her employer scolds her for returning late from Saidapet; “even her dark face was flushed, and her eyes were bright” (MLD,130). She brings him with her from Saidapet to her employer, with pride: “Please, won’t you look at him?” (MLD,131) and pleads: “He wants me
to cook for him and look after him. ... He went away years ago. ... Who will take care of him now?" (MLD,130-131). And she leaves, “led by a husband proud of his slave” (MLD,131).

The story sharply focuses on the fact that a traditional Indian wife can be happy with her husband only, even if forsaken by him for a major part of her life to struggle and earn bread for herself and her family, and after knowing thoroughly well that she is wanted only to serve him in his old age, to cook and to nurse. For her husband she is only an instrument to fulfil his needs, and pathetically such is the case with her sons too. So in our lower middle class social stratum, a woman, be she a mother or a daughter or a wife, is mainly considered a slave of the family.

(4) Mother and Son

The woman in this story is a typical Indian mother who entertains one deep-rooted craving -- to see her grown up son married. Her stock argument is -- when she is no more who will cook his food and look after him? And her ‘indisputable’ one is -- ‘a man’s luck changed with marriage’ (MLD,138). However, her son, Ramu, has stronger arguments against marriage:

He could not get through his Intermediate even at the fourth attempt; he could not get a job, even at twenty rupees a month. And here was Mother worrying him to marry. Of all girls, his uncle’s! That protruding tooth alone would put off any man. ...

(MLD,139).

So it is not perhaps marriage in general so much as marriage to his uncle’s daughter that he vehemently opposes, because “He had always felt that when he married he would marry a girl like Rezia, whom he had seen in two or three Hindi films” (MLD,139).

Blinded by her desire, and enraged by Ramu’s firm refusal to submit to it, the mother is harsh with him when he comments on her food: “If
you are so fastidious, work and earn like all men. Throw down the money and demand what you want. Don’t command when you are a pauper” (MLD,139). But when the son goes out after meals and does not return till late at night, her selfless motherly love triumphs over her possessiveness and she repents, blames her ‘terrible temper and cutting tongue’ (MLD,140) for Ramu's indifference to her. In the height of remorse, “She even felt that her husband would have lived a few more years if she had spoken to him less. …” (MLD,140). She decides to cook better for her son from the next day. She spends a restless night, fears her son had been driven by her to suicide, weeps, screams, and at the first sign of morning starts for Kukanahalli Tank. When she finds Ramu sleeping on a bench, she wonders ‘if it might be his corpse’ (MLD,141). She is thus so much overwrought with fear of his death that she ‘vehemently’ refuses him to go near the water just for a wash.

The story thus highlights selfless motherly love which is the finest and most wonderful facet of a woman’s character. God has enriched women with this boon to put them on a higher emotional level than men.

The story however is also a sad reflection on Indian mothers generally who are overzealous to get their sons married at the earliest, in complete disregard of the fact that sons have not yet become economically self-supporting. The thought never occurs to them how their sons will support their wives and children. The spread of education does encourage sons to resist their mothers’ enthusiasm, but this generally leads to family disharmony as in this story.

(5) Second Opinion

It is an ordinary story of a mother and her son, each considering the other abnormal. The mother wants her son to marry and the son is an avowed worshipper of bachelorhood, who tries “to practise one’s [his] philosophy of detachment” (MLD,167). Sambu, the son, in his younger days, tries “to enlighten my [his] mother’s mind on modern ways. But she was
impervious to my theories. We were poles apart" (MLD,169). The usual generation gap. The mother also exhibits the common symptoms of a widow:

She would often complain within my [Sambu's] hearing, “When he was alive, how much service he could command within the twinkling of an eye. ... I had to breathe ever so lightly what I needed and he would accomplish it.” ... She was too restless to stay in one place, but moved about, peeping into various corners of the house (MLD,171).

The story has an undramatic, non-climactic end, as Sambu surrenders to his mother's wishes. Narayan has incidentally dwelt in the story on the old traditions in India of arranging matches of boys and girls when they are just infants only. Sambu's father betroths him to his friend's daughter on the day she is born, when Sambu himself is hardly six years old. Also, the tradition of Sati is brought in too, its advocacy voiced by the mother when she is offended by some harsh remark of Sambu:

Was it for this I have survived your father? How I wish I had mounted the funeral pyre as our ancients decreed for a widow; they knew what a widow would have to face in life, to stand abusive language from her own offspring (MLD,178-179).

Narayan also herein seems to be advocating the view that widowed mothers lead a restless life due to their inner suffering. In this story he narrates, at one stage, through the son who is the story teller: “She was too restless to stay in one place, but moved about, peeping into various corners of the house” (MLD,171). Narayan has voiced a similar view in The World of Nagaraj about Nagaraj's mother:

His mother now hobbled about like a frail ghost ... Mother perambulated about the house unnecessarily, as it seemed to Nagaraj, with weak legs, and minimal energy, and she could not rest, although provided with a fan and a cot in the hall (WN,31-32).
Ranga, an ordinary villager, who earns a living for the family by sharpening knives, etc., has had six children, who all died before they were a year old, and then he gets a daughter of whom he grows very fond to the annoyance of his wife. He is mild, not by nature but by necessity, because once, when he tried, under the influence of inebriation, to strike his wife, “she brought out the broom … and lashed him with it. She then pushed him out and shut the door on him” (MLD,206). He has vital differences with his wife over the question of educating their daughter. He sends her to school and feels proud that she is “the very first member of his family to take a step in that direction” (MLD,205). His wife, however, is “convinced that a girl was meant to make herself useful at home, marry and bear children” (MLD,205). Ranga, of course, rejects this philosophy outright, especially after the village schoolmaster says: “Your child is very intelligent. You must see that she studies well, and send her later to the Mission School at Paamban” (MLD,205). So when the girl is old enough to go to the Mission School, Ranga is faced with the problem of earning more to meet her school and bus expenses, and he shifts his profession from the village to the town of Malgudi, which to him seems like “the world of God Indra” (MLD,208).

The character of Ranga’s “rather difficult” (MLD,205) wife is that of an ordinary illiterate village woman of India, who is against female education. Having borne him six children who died in infancy, and a seventh – a daughter – and living in poverty on the meagre income of Ranga, she is a highly disgruntled woman, as such women are bound to be. And she exhausts her discontent on the only two members of her family – Ranga and the daughter. Whenever Ranga comes home drunk, he has to face her tantrums. “She would shout, rave and refuse to serve him food. Ranga could never understand why she should behave so wildly …” (MLD,206). When Ranga proposes to shift to Malgudi, she refuses to go with him, saying: “I won’t agree to lock up this house, which is our own; also, I won’t allow a growing
girl to pick up the style and fashions of the city. ...” (MLD,208). She is thus stuck to the village culture and wants her daughter to stick to it too, while Ranga entertains a wild desire to see her become a doctor. Ranga is consequently happy to shift from village to the town alone: “...God is kind, and wants me to be free and independent in the town...” (MLD,208). He regrets though the parting from his daughter.

With all this background, one would expect Ranga to be only too eager to earn the thirty rupees plus a transistor radio offered to him by the family planning programmers for undergoing vasectomy. On the contrary he flees from the operation table to escape it, screaming “No, I won't be cut up...” (MLD,214), with all the energy with which he cried “Knives and scissors sharpened” (MLD,203) in the streets of Malgudi.

Narayan has achieved in this short story several purposes. It is a good satire on the deplorable ignorance of millions of people of India who derive no benefits of the immense progress the world has made in improving life, as also the antipathy of such ignorants towards modern concepts and means of family planning and thereby of bettering their own standards of living. The story also brings out sharply that the primary enemy of woman’s progress in India is woman herself.

(7) A Horse and Two Goats

Muni, once the owner of a flock of forty sheep and goats, has now only two goats left. He lives with his wife in Kritam, one of the tiniest villages of India. Both are very old, very poor, and childless, and have to lead a hard life to maintain themselves:

His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it a handful of millet flour, added salt, and gave him his first nourishment for the day. When he started out, she would put in his hand a packed lunch, once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw
onion at midday. She was old, but he was older and needed all the attention she could give him in order to be kept alive (UBT.14-15).

There are days, however, when she has to send him out hungry without any packed lunch, because there is nothing in the house to cook and the shopkeeper would not give anything to Muni on credit. But Muni knows she would somehow conjure up some food for him in the evening. ... She was sure to go out and work – grind corn in the Big House, sweep or scrub somewhere, and earn enough to buy foodstuff and keep a dinner ready for him in the evening (UBT,17).

On the day of the story also, he has to set out hungry to graze his goats, with an admonition from his wife: “...Fast till the evening. ... Don’t come back before the sun is down” (UBT,17). Muni knows that he must not argue and irritate her. “Her temper was undependable in the morning but improved by evening time” (UBT,17). The couple had lived in each other’s company since they were children. He was told on their day of wedding that he was ten years old and she was eight. ... He had thrashed her only a few times in their career, and later she had the upper hand (UBT,18).

Though Muni shows no regard for women in his speech, as when he refers to the local postman’s wife: “... his wife ran away with someone... Women must be watched; otherwise they will sell themselves and the home” (UBT,24), he loves his wife nonetheless, and worries about her even at this age: “When he was dead what would his wife do?” (UBT,18). He regrets that they have no progeny and thinks: “Perhaps a large progeny would have brought him the blessing of the gods. Fertility brought merit. People with fourteen sons were always so prosperous and at peace with the world and themselves” (UBT,18).

When this is the general trend of Indian thought, put by Narayan in the language of a poor ignorant rustic, the likes of whom form India’s
majority, most Indian family planning programmes are naturally doomed to failure.

His usual place to rest while his two goats graze is the pedestal on which stands the statue of a clay horse, on the edge of the village. He can watch from here the highway and see the vehicles pass, “and it gave him a sense of belonging to a large world” (UBT, 18-19).

On the day in question, he meets a foreigner, an American, whose car stops near the statue, and a very funny situation arises, the American not understanding a word of Tamil and Muni not of English. The American fascinated by the statue of the horse, desires to purchase it from Muni whom he thinks its owner. Muni interpreting his words and gestures as his wish to purchase the goats for a hundred rupees, is only too glad to part with them. Knowing that the goats won’t go with the foreigner in his presence, Muni goes off with the money, and the American thinking he has purchased the horse, carries away the statue.

Contrary to Muni’s expectation his wife, who “squatted before the lit oven wondering if by a miracle food would drop from the sky”, is not happy and cries: “One hundred rupees! How did you come by it? Have you been stealing?” (UBT, 30). Muni’s explanation that he has sold the goats is unfortunately belied by the goats themselves who by then have returned to the house. His wife thereupon declares: “If you have thieved, the police will come tonight and break your bones. Don’t involve me. I will go away to my parents. …” (UBT, 30).

The wife’s threat to go away to her parents betrays the general trend of married Indian women to resort frequently to this weapon, whenever they have a quarrel with their husbands. Perhaps they do so because this is the only weapon readily available to them. What is sad and surprising in this story is that the wife uttering the threat is an old lady who lives with her husband from her age of eight. But habits die hard. She must have used this threat here the umpteenth time. And in all probability her parents may not now be
surviving or, if surviving, may themselves be too old to welcome her return to become a burden on them.

Also, this is another story, like *Trail of the Green Blazer*, wherein the family of a man is not prepared to share in his sin. The irony is that in reality, in both stories, the man concerned does not sin for which his family raps him. In this story Muni is quite innocent. He honestly believes he has received the price for his goats. In the other story, though Raju picks the purse, he is caught when he tries to put it back.

If the author wants to convey that while wives are ready to enjoy the fruits of the fortunes of their husbands, they are not prepared to participate in their misfortunes, perhaps on the other hand it is more likely that the author desires to emphasize that religious and moral codes are more deep-rooted in women than in men.

(8) The Watchman

A young girl comes to a tank to commit suicide and the watchman of the tank catches her beforehand, and persuades her to desist after hearing her tale. She has lost her mother when she was five years old, but her stepmother is very kind to her and has been looking after her ever since her father’s death. Her (the step-mother’s) problem is she has to maintain the family on the small amount of money left by her late husband, and now it is difficult for her to keep the girl in college any longer. She therefore plans to marry off the girl, while the girl’s ambition is to study and become a doctor and earn her livelihood. The girl had hoped to get a scholarship but that evening she learns that her name is not in the list of those who have been awarded scholarship. Also, someone is to come “to have a look” (UBT,41) at her next day. So in desperation she has come to the tank to end her life. The watchman, wise by experience, gives her wholesome advice to marry the man who is coming to see her and blesses her: “…may God bless you with ten children” (UBT,41). He adds:
Everyone has his own miseries. If people tried to kill themselves for each one of them, I don’t know how often they would have to drown. ... You are young and you don’t know what sorrow is. ... I prayed to all the gods in the world for a son. My wife bore me eight children. Only one daughter lives now, and none of the others saw the eleventh year. ... (UBT,41).

The girl however does not listen to his advice to go home, maintaining: “I have no home” (UBT,41). Tired by her obstinacy the watchman leaves her, but next day blames himself for so going away the previous night. “I am responsible for at least one suicide in this tank” (UBT,42), he continues thinking for months, though no dead body is found from the tank.

The pinch of the story is that after years the girl, now a rich woman, comes there in a car with her husband and three children, but when the watchman respectfully salutes her with folded hands, she refuses to recognize him: “He expected she would stop and speak to him. But she merely threw at him an indifferent glance and passed on” (UBT,42). The watchman, poor man, takes consolation in the idea: “Probably this is someone else” (UBT,42).

A noteworthy trait in Narayan's writings generally is that girls in his stories, including novels, are more studious and more inclined towards higher education than boys, and women are more accomplished than men. In the present story the girl has ambition to become a doctor. In The Edge too, the daughter of Ranga is praised for her intelligence by her teacher and Ranga is determined to make her a doctor. On the other hand Raju of Mother and Son is so careless in study he has not got through his Intermediate even at the fourth attempt. Swami of Swami and Friends is so averse to study that he can feign illness to avoid going to school. Even Chandran of The Bachelor of Arts, though he becomes a graduate, and has enjoyed college life to the utmost, he is more a romantic youth than a serious, scholarly student. In the novels Waiting for the Mahatma, The Guide and The Painter of Signs, too the
heroines are more accomplished than the heroes. In the first mentioned, both Bharati and Sriram are orphans. But while Sriram is a spoilt child brought up under the pampering of his granny, idling away most of his time, Bharati who grows up under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and his disciples, is a well disciplined, diligent woman rendering social and political chores according to Mahatma’s wishes and guidance. In *The Guide*, Raju has not completed even his school education, which is as he wished. The “business expansion in our family helped me [Raju] achieve a very desirable end – the dropping off of my school unobtrusively” (G,43). Rosie, on the other hand, “studied well” and takes her “master’s degree in economics” (G,85). Also, she has acquired skill in the art of dance. In *The Painter of Signs* also, Raman’s very profession betrays his lack of higher education, though he calls himself a rationalist (PS,5). Daisy has, however, studied in a convent school in her childhood. Though she found her studies dull and lifeless, it is only because she desires to do “something better, something more useful” (PS,129). And later she studies at Madras with the help of a missionary organization and passes her college (PS,155).

This stress on studiousness and love for learning in his female characters in several stories is indicative of Narayan's soft corner towards females in general so far as education is concerned; and, it would seem, in this way he uses the medium of his stories to indicate his ardent advocacy of women’s literacy in India.

(9) *Old Man of the Temple*

This is one of the esoteric stories of Narayan. When he desires to tell a hard to swallow tale as this, he begins: “The Talkative Man said:” etc. as here and also in *A Career* and *The Roman Image*, for example, both of which are not discussed here. And when the author thus begins, the reader has to anticipate a story against which his reason may revolt.
It is the story of Krishna Battar, a man who existed five hundred or more years ago, in the reign of a minor king, Vishnu Varma, who was perhaps only a local chief but whom Battar calls emperor of emperors. Battar “built a temple where there was only a cactus field before. I [Battar] dug the earth, burnt every brick, and put them one upon another, all single-handed” (UBT,53). Naturally, Battar gets too much attached to this temple. So much so that when he is killed by a gang of robbers, he becomes a ghost to roam about in the vicinity of it. Nobody living around has been able to find a way to get rid of this ghost.

When, however, the driver of the taxi in which the Talkative Man travels is affected because the spirit of Battar enters his body, the T.M. invents an ingenious remedy. He talks with the spirit and finds out that Battar’s wife died only four years back, that is, four years before he died because all sense of time is lost by Battar on his death. He loved his wife very much, and his wife took very good care of him. So T.M. advises the spirit to think of her, and only of her. The effect is magical. The spirit speaks through the driver: “Seetha [the wife] is coming! Am I dreaming or what? I will go with her …” (UBT,55), and the spirit leaves the driver’s body, and the people of the area are not thereafter harassed by the ghost any more.

So here is the crux of the story. Even in a soul which left its physical abode more than five hundred years ago, the love for the wife of that life so kindles itself as to overpower the very attachment for anything else, in this case the temple, for which the soul becomes a ghost. Perhaps Narayan could not have written a better story than this to pinpoint the tremendous influence a woman exercises over man.

Though a classification of this story is difficult, or rather impossible, it has got to be included in the first category as it deals with a woman of five centuries ago, at which period social life must have been traditional. She was a loving, caring, dutiful wife who could, by her virtues exercise such stronghold over her husband as to make him forget his one attachment which had forced him to become a ghost.
(10) Four Rupees

Ranga hardly earns more than enough to survive and support his wife and mother-in-law, by toiling hard from morning till evening and doing odd jobs. Today, by luck, he gets the job of taking out a brass pot from a well into which it has fallen, and though he has no experience of going down a deep well, he accepts the job, risking his life, for which he would earn four rupees. He is pleased for “He had never earned four rupees in a lump, and this was attractive. He needn’t seek any work for three days at least, and could silence for once his wife and mother-in-law. This looked like a fortune coming his way” (UBT,158-159).

When the job is finished Ranga even gets four annas more than he bargained for. But when he reaches home with his four rupees and four annas, to his utter surprise and disappointment, he faces an anti-climax. Before he gets any opportunity to speak, his wife snarls: “It is seven o’clock. When am I to buy the things and cook the food? You think I am born to slave. It will be a fine lesson if you are made to do without a meal tonight...” (UBT,160). And worse still is her reaction, when he flourishes the money earned. “Four rupees! Are you sure you didn’t steal it?” Even his narration of how he earned the money is disbelieved. “They just laughed and replied, ‘Never knew you to go near a well; more likely you have been in a scrape and pulled the money out of somebody’s pocket....’ ” (UBT,160).

The wife is an illiterate, nagging, suspicious traditional woman, and so is her mother.

(11) Guru

According to the author, the story of “Guru” is based on a miser he knows:

His devotion to Wealth and the satisfaction he got from watching the rising figures in his bank-book remained his sole joy in life
(although it isolated him from his family), and he did not mind the loneliness in a big house, as long as the interest column in his bank-book kept rising. 2

The story is thus dominated by “Guru”, its protagonist, but Narayan has ably interwoven therein a few women characters.

Gurumurthi “rose from the smallest job in the Revenue Department” (SS,43) to become tahsildar, and starts accepting “only gifts and cash given out of goodwill by those whom I have served” (SS,43). He also acts as a moneylender on the side, to the villagers approaching him for Government loans. He gets caught by the collector who allows him to seek voluntary retirement to avoid disciplinary action.

Guru’s wife Saroja, who is a schoolmaster’s daughter, “used to be a quiet-going, peace-loving sort, even-tempered and minding her business. But with years, she began to play the role of the better-half, and became questioning, righteous, and argumentative” (SS,44). When Guru taunts her: “...After all your father was only a schoolmaster” (SS,60), she has a ready repartee: “And yet you demanded a dowry from him!” (SS,60).

Narayan seems to miss no opportunity to have a dig at dowry in his novels and stories. And also he paints those who demand dowry or defend it when on the receiving side, as averse to giving it. In this story too, Guru defends by saying: “If he [the schoolmaster] hadn’t found the resources for a modest dowry, he’d have got a bankrupt son-in-law, not one who could support a family” (SS,60). The same person “prided himself secretly on managing to marry off both his daughters, without eroding his bank balance” (SS,48).

That Saroja is questioning, righteous and argumentative is Guru’s view, not a fact. When she proposes to accompany him to the Railway Station to see off Raji, their daughter, he refuses on the ground that he desires to walk back while he may have to hire a jutka if she comes. But when Saroja says: “Not at all necessary. I can also walk home”, he sternly tells her: “Don’t be argumentative” (SS,46).
Saroja has no say in her home, no independence, so much so, that she is forced to abolish coffee on the ground: “The smell of coffee is nauseating” (SS,55). She loves coffee and finds it hard to do without it, but the miser won’t allow it. Gurumurthi’s real nature is revealed when he tells his wife: “…I can do many things without waiting for your opinion…” (SS,62). His wife knows this very well:

Yes, that’s how I have lived – even our daughter’s marriages, you never waited for my opinion – you were the one who made all the decisions. … You are convinced that I don’t know how to count cash over two rupees – I don’t even know if you are rich or poor. … You are the Supreme Lord and I am only a dependent not worth talking to (SS,62).

There is a limit to one’s forbearance and endurance, and Saroja is no exception. She reaches her limit when Guru decides to adopt his brother’s son. She threatens: “…I won’t live in this house, if you bring him here —” (SS,63), and she acts accordingly after the adoption ceremony is over, in which she participates unwillingly and mechanically. She goes to her village to take care of her aged widowed mother. Her departure, though, is belated and undramatic, and totally lacks magnificence. Even Savitri’s leaving her home, in *The Dark Room* has some element of courage and bravery, as she goes out to face the world albeit for a short period. Here Saroja merely leaves her husband’s house to go to the shelter of her parent’s home. Guru’s two daughters, according to him, “seemed to have abandoned him too” (SS,41), because the first, Raji, is far away in Trichy, and the other, Kamala, though in Malgudi itself, “as far as he was concerned she might be in Mars or the Moon, displaying an indifference which was inhuman” (SS,41).

Gurumurthi considers Raji “the best of the lot, the only one in the family who was at peace with herself and with the world” (SS,44-45), perhaps because “She married a boy from a family who did not demand a dowry and were satisfied with a simple, inexpensive wedding” (SS,45). Kamala, on the other hand, leaves her parental home to join her in-laws, even before proper...
completion of the nuptial ceremony, quite dissatisfied with her father’s conduct leading to breach of promises given to her in-laws.

The irony of the story is that Guru, who is not prepared to spend anything more than the absolute minimum on himself or his wife and daughters, is prepared to adopt a son, which would no doubt involve more expenses; and he does so on the ostensible ground that as he and his wife grew old, they would need a son to look after them. But the real reason for his action is more outrageous: “When I die, I want a son to light the funeral pyre and perform the rites, otherwise…” (SS,64). His wife does counter: “Did that stamp-vendor not mention also that if a son is not available your grandchildren can perform the rites? Anyway why do you cultivate these unhappy thoughts” (SS,64). He does adopt, however, and the adopted son runs away in a short period to his real parents, obviously fed up with his miserly living. This shows a bias of men towards male issues.

All the three women characters in the story, Guru’s wife and two daughters, are traditional women, silent sufferers of male domination; the daughters’ marriages free them, but the wife has to bear with her lot for years and her only escape is her parental home.

(II) **Neither sufferer from tradition nor tradition-breaker**

(1) *Out of Business*

An otherwise ordinary tale of the ups and downs of a middle class family, it deserves a mention here for it depicts the quiet endurance of an Indian woman – a wife and mother in a family – of the vicissitudes of life, as the life partner of a man, with whose fortunes and misfortunes her own are tied up.
Rama Rao, who is in business as an agent of a gramophone company, suddenly finds himself ‘in the streets’ (MLD,80) when the company collapses. He tries to find employment to earn a living, fails, and out of desperation takes to solving crossword puzzles as a short cut to riches. His wife on whose shoulders the burden of running the house during his unemployment falls, bears the additional burden of expenditure on these puzzles, making “a slight sacrifice in household expenses.” “He [Rama Rao] quarrelled with his wife if she refused to give him his rupee a week for the puzzles. She was of a mild disposition and was incapable of a sustained quarrel, …” (MLD,82). When he demands five rupees, however, for a puzzle offering double the usual prize, “that good lady became speechless” (MLD,83). She does, however, part with the amount, which meant “nearly a week’s food for the family” (MLD,83), and yet, on the day of the result, when Rama Rao fails to get the prize, and after a futile attempt at suicide returns home, she says: “Oh, why are you so late today? I was somehow feeling very restless the whole evening. Even the children were worried. Poor creatures! …” (MLD,84). It is noteworthy how she omits the direct statement: “I was worried about you”.

So, in this shorter of the short stories, the author, without verbose wastage, has penned a brilliant picture of a wife carrying the burden of the miseries of the family without rancour, meekly suffering in addition the oddities of her husband.

(2) Wife’s Holiday

The little story sharply brings out the wholesome influence the presence of a woman exercises on the life of a man, or how her absence, even temporary, leads to man’s behaviour like an unbridled horse.

Kannan sends his wife away to her parents ‘with a quiet joy’ (MLD,118), and though this means also the absence of his little son, Kannan accepts it ‘as an inevitable price to pay for his wife’s absence’ (MLD,118).
When she is present, she forces him to toil from morning till evening to earn his ‘rupee a day’. So ‘he celebrated his wife’s absence by staying at home most of the day’ (MLD,118). But even in absentia she keeps a check over him by not allowing him to have any cash with him. How can he pursue his favourite game of dice with friends, without ‘a quarter of an anna anywhere about him?’ (MLD,118). It does not, however, goad him to work. Instead, he ransacks the hut to find some money hidden by his wife. His love for his child does not equal his passion for gambling, and he breaks open the boy’s little tin box, just to discover ‘six annas in three-pie copper coins’ (MLD,121), only to lose it all by gambling. When he returns home, he finds his wife and child at the end of the lane. He is stunned at the prospect of her finding the hut ransacked, “Her box with all its contents scattered, the god’s picture on the floor, the battered red tin” (MLD,121) of the boy, and he follows them in, “resigning himself to face an oncoming storm” (MLD,121). How calamitous a small absence of the woman can be for her man!

(3) A Shadow

It is a pathetic tale of the wife and son of an actor whose film is released in their town six months after the actor’s death. Both loved him intensely and highly cherish his memory. Paradoxically the reactions of the mother and the son to the film’s release are diametrically opposite. The boy is extremely eager to see the film as many times as possible in order to re-live the life spent with his father, by seeing him on the screen, moving, acting, talking, as he used to do with the boy. “It was six months since he had seen his father, and he missed him badly at home” (MLD,123). The wife, however, reacts entirely differently: “How could people bear to see him on the screen when they know he was no more?” (MLD,122). She however permits her son to see the film, not once but everyday. At the end of the show the boy feels as if his father had vanished into ‘the aperture in the projection room’
(MLD,124). To him ‘the world now seemed to be a poorer place without Father’ (MLD,124).

The wife has no desire to see the film. It would be beyond her capacity to bear the sight of her husband coming to life on the screen. But she succumbs to the continued insistence of her son and agrees to see the picture on the last day.

She had to muster all her courage to sit down for picture. ... When the picture began, her heart beat fast. Her husband talking to his wife on the screen, playing with his child, singing, walking, dressing; same clothes, same voice, same anger, same joy – she felt that the whole thing was a cruelty inflicted on her. She shut her eyes several times, but the picture fascinated her: it had the fascination of a thing which is painful (MLD,124-125).

And then comes a scene in which he reclines in a chair reading a newspaper, which reminds her of the incident of the day of the actual death of her husband. That day too he had sat in his chair after dinner with a newspaper, and she had lost her temper: “You and your newspaper! I could as well go and sleep off the day” (MLD,125), and had left him, only to find on return that he had died in the chair. So the scene becomes unbearable, she bursts into sobs and faints. She is taken out of the theatre, and the show goes on. Recovering from her swoon she leaves the theatre with her son, whose heart is heavy, both due to his mother’s breakdown and due to “the feeling that this was the final parting from his father” (MLD,125).

It would be a rare husband who would suffer such intense agony for his dead wife after six months, as the heroine of this story suffers. This reminds one of Lord Byron’s famous words: “Man’s love is of a man’s life a thing apart, ‘Tis woman’s whole existence.” 3 Narayan has webbed out an excellent story to highlight the truth of this aphorism.
This is a story of a hermit and a 'shameless woman' (UBT,10) living in opposite houses in a street, and how the hermit is constantly disturbed due to that woman's mere presence, though she does nothing to provoke his prejudices. "Even in the deepest state of meditation, he could not help hearing the creaking of the door across the street when a client left after a night of debauchery" (UBT,10).

One afternoon, when the woman is standing on her doorstep, the hermit notices her from his window and is unable to remove his gaze from there to the tip of his nose.

He studied her person-chiselled features, but sunk in fatty folds. She possessed, however, a seductive outline; her forearms were cushion-like and perhaps the feel of those encircling arms attracted men. ... Her hips were large, thighs stout like banana stalks, on the whole a mattress-like creature on which a patron could loll all night without a scrap of covering — "Awful monster! Personification of evil" (UBT,11).

His gaze and mind thus indulge in everything that a hermit's should not. He is terribly ruffled, "the thought of the woman never leaving his mind, during all the wretched, ill-spent night; ..." (UBT,13).

On the other hand, the woman opposite holds the hermit in high regard. When the hermit, determined to leave his house permanently as a remedy against her evil influence, steps out "in the dim hour of the dusk" he hears a plaintive cry, "Swamiji", from the same woman approaching him with a tray, heaped with fruits and flowers. She says 'in a low reverential whisper': "Please accept my offering. This is a day of remembrance of my mother. On this day I pray and seek a saint's blessing. Forgive me. ..." (UBT,13). His desire for confrontation vanishes and he feels pity. He also observes "her flabby figure, the dark rings under her eyes ... her hair was indifferently dyed and the parting in the middle widened into a bald patch ..." (UBT,13). He just
To carry a corrupt mind in an uncorrupted body is worse than its reverse. As the hermit himself remembers what his guru once told him about an ancient tale:

A harlot was sent to heaven when she died, while her detractor, a self-righteous reformer, found himself in hell. It was explained that while the harlot sinned only with her body, her detractor was corrupt mentally, as he was obsessed with the harlot and her activities, and could meditate on nothing else (UBT,13).

The story is also an indirect satire on those who lay too much emphasis on the bodily purity of women.

(5) A Hero

A triangular contest wages among the parents and granny of a child for its control and protection. Swami’s father desired him to be as brave as the boy who fought a tiger whom he encountered in the jungle, and then climbed a tree; while Swami still sleeps beside his granny, “and any change in this arrangement kept him trembling and awake all night” (UBT,56).

Father therefore decides to put Swami to test and orders him to sleep alone in his office room one night. Swami has to obey, though most unwillingly, and as chance would have it, a burglar breaks into the same room that very night. By showing the courage of a cornered cat, Swami becomes instrumental in the burglar being caught, and becomes a hero the next day. But when father returns home from the club, Swami has already gone to sleep at his usual place, with granny.

Earlier, when the father scolds Swami: “It is disgraceful sleeping beside granny or mother like a baby. You are in the second form and I don’t at all like the way you are being brought up” (UBT,57), and looks at his wife, she immediately retorts: “Why do you look at me while you say it? I hardly
know anything about the boy” (UBT,57). She is the mother of the boy and yet she disowns anything to do with his bringing up, because she wants to throw the blame on her mother-in-law for whatever defect her husband finds in the boy’s upbringing. The husband, poor fellow, absolves the wife from any blame by saying: “No, no, I don’t mean you”. But this is not enough for her as she wishes that he should tell his mother. So she says: “If you mean that your mother is spoiling him, tell her so; and don’t look at me” (UBT,57).

When, however, before the burglar incident, the father orders Swami, who pretends sleeping at his usual place beside granny’s bed, to get up and go to the office room, both granny and mother object. Granny pleads: “Why do you disturb him?” (UBT,57), and mother says: “Why do you take him to the office room? He can sleep in the hall, I think” (UBT,58).

After the incident of the burglar, the mother comes out in the open in defence of her son. When the father is displeased to find Swami already asleep when he returns home the next day, the mother tells him: “You let him sleep where he likes. You needn’t risk his life again...” (UBT,60), and father surrenders, though grudgingly: “All right, mollycoddle and spoil him as much as you like. Only don’t blame me afterwards...” (UBT,60).

In such a short story the author very subtly hits at the reality prevailing generally in Indian society that women have a subtle way of having an upper hand in bringing up their offspring than men.

So far as the two women, the mother and the grandmother of Swami, are concerned, they neither suffer from traditions nor are they tradition-breakers, and the story therefore belongs to the second category.
(III) **Tradition-breaker**

(1) **Selvi**

Narayan here exposes a so-called "follower of Mahatma Gandhi" who has "spent several years in prison" and wears "only cloth spun by hand" (MLD, 155). He, Mohan, brazenly exploits his wife, Selvi, to live in luxury on her income as singer.

Selvi has a background of poverty. She learns music from her mother, her brother and sister helping her on their instruments. Mohan has a photo studio where Selvi comes for her school magazine. Mohan is so cunning that he utilizes this one incident to get a foothold in her family, gradually to take over the management of their affairs; "...no one could relate with certainty at what point exactly he began to refer to Selvi as his wife or where, when or how they were married. ..." (MLD, 158).

To give the Devil his due, it must be recorded that Mohan takes pains to build up the reputation of Selvi as a singer, moves her from her small house to a huge building, once the residence of Sir Frederick Lawley, and makes Selvi "a national figure" "in the course of a quarter-century" (MLD, 159). When he met Selvi first, he had thought: "Not bad-looking, but needs touching up" (MLD, 155). But his efforts take her to a height where people become her worshippers, like Verma, the owner of Boardless Hotel, who feels: "Goddess Lakshmi has favoured me; I have nothing more to pray for in the line of wealth or prosperity, but I crave for the favour of the other goddess, that is Saraswathi, who is in our midst today as Selvi the divine singer; ..." (MLD, 156). Mohan never permits Selvi to meet people, keeps her "in a fortress of invisible walls. It was as if she was fated to spend her life either in solitary confinement or fettered to her gaoler in company" (MLD, 156). Selvi never objects. She is "habitually oblivious of her surroundings" (MLD, 159). "She was undemanding, unenquiring, uncomplaining. She seemed to exist without noticing anything or anyone, rapt
Selvi is not, however, devoid of feeling. She loves her mother. But Mohan prevents their meeting often under one pretext or another, and from once a week the frequency of their meetings dwindled to seldom; "...he gently, unobtrusively, began to isolate her from her mother, brother and sister ... as Selvi's public engagements increased, her mother and others were gradually allowed to fade out of her life" (MLD,161).

It is a pity that most people raise their heads against oppression only when it is too late, as Selvi does here only when her mother dies. When the news reaches her in Calcutta she compels Mohan to cancel all her engagements and rushes to Vinayak Mudali Street, Malgudi, where her mother stayed, only to learn with grief that even her brother and sister were not at their mother's side when she died. Only a neighbour attended to the final obsequies. Selvi then decided to stay there permanently. To Mohan's objection: "How can you? In this street!" (MLD,162), she says: "My mother was my guru; here she taught me music, lived and died. ... I'll also live and die here; what was good for her is good for me too..." (MLD,163). She is so firm in her determination that she refuses to attend a function to be presided over by the Prime Minister at which she is to receive an honorary degree at the Delhi University.

Mohan makes several attempts to persuade her to return, but when he feels he has failed finally, his requisite for exploiting her for years is the remark: "Ungrateful wretch..." (MLD,165).

It would be apt to attempt a comparison between the characters of Rosie of *The Guide* and Selvi in this story, though *The Guide* being a novel offered ample opportunity to the author to develop in detail Rosie's character. But despite "Selvi" being a short story, Narayan has sufficiently projected Selvi's character to enable a comparison with Rosie.

While Rosie is a dancer, Selvi is a singer and so both are artistes, but their art is exploited - Rosie's by Raju and Selvi's by Mohan. Neither
Raju nor Mohan has a real claim over the woman he exploits. In the case of Rosie, she is in fact the wife of Marco from whom she has no legal separation even while she lives with Raju, and so Raju is definitely not her husband. Mohan claims to be Selvi's husband but no one knows where, when and how they were married. One can safely assume therefore that he has usurped the position more on sufferance than by right.

There is, however, more of contrast than of similarity in the two characters. Rosie is an ambitious woman who uses both Marco and Raju as just instruments in achieving her ends. Selvi has no ambition at all of her own and even during the height of her fame she goes through "her career like an automaton, switching on and off her music as ordered" (MLD,162). On the other hand Rosie, with all the complexity of her character and individualistic traits never openly revolts, while Selvi, meek and docile though she may seem, does revolt and leaves Mohan permanently, not caring for her career or financial well-being. For Rosie, in fact, her career is all she cares for and which she continues unaffected by Raju's imprisonment. Of course Selvi's love for music survives and she continues distributing the gift of her art gratis to people who gathered to hear her sing in her house.

Selvi's revolt against Mohan, though quiet and belated, is effective and decisive.

(2) Emden

Rao, in his earlier life, had been a uniformed officer of the Excise Department. Now he is anywhere between ninety and one hundred and five. He had three wives, all dead now, had eight children by the first, four daughters by the second, and more by the third. In the group photograph of his family taken on his eightieth birthday, there were in all seventy-five heads. And yet in his heyday, he had been fond of other women, a womanizer. So much so, that according to one narration of his past: "He had great appetite for
the unattached female tribe, such as nurses and schoolmistresses, and went after them like a bull!” (MLD,238).

Rao keeps a diary regularly recording bits of daily observations or events. Thirty such diaries are preserved in his cupboard. One day he pulls out one of it out of curiosity and wonders what he did on the same date in the year to which the diary belonged. It is fifty-one years old, and he finds the entry, among others:

Too lenient with S. She deserves to be taught a lesson. ... Thrashed her soundly for her own good and left. Will not see her again. ... How can I accept responsibility? She must have had an affair – after all a D.G. (Dancing Girl). Wish I had locked her in before leaving (MLD,240).

After fifty-one years Rao feels remorse and he thinks:

He [Rao] should not have slapped her face ... he had been impetuous and cruel. He should not have acted on jealousy ... he was filled with remorse. After all, she must have shown him a great deal of kindness and given him pleasure ungrudgingly – otherwise, why would one stay until midnight? (MLD,241).

On a sudden impulse he desires to meet her and give her a present. He, however, does not remember her name at all, and only vaguely remembers her features and the place where she lived, and yet he ventures on his small expedition, with his fragile health, taking a packet of jilebi with him.

The tragi-comedy is that he is unable to find the woman or the house and the packet of jilebi which falls down from his hand is taken away by a street-mongrel; on his journey homeward he broods: “Who knows, S is perhaps in this incarnation now. ...” (MLD,244), meaning the mongrel.

This is the only story of Narayan which shows how man values sensuous pleasures derived from a woman more than anything else offered by her. The fact does not fail to strike us that Rao does not remember any of his three wives, but remembers S after fifty-one years and cherishes her memory.
so much as to desire to see her and offer her a present. That too at his age of more than ninety, with failing health, jeopardizing his own safety.

(3) The Shelter

When they unexpectedly meet under the shelter of a banyan tree on the roadside, rain pattering down, his first reaction is “to let out a loud ‘Oh’” (UBT,145) and hers to suppress a scream. The reactions would seem extraordinary in the light of the fact that they are husband and wife seeing each other “after a long separation” (UBT,145). In the opening paragraph itself, of this impressionist short story of his, Narayan has ably drawn the complexity of man-woman relationship. The husband looks “miserable and confused” on seeing his own wife, and the first thing he says to her is: “Don’t worry, I will go away” (UBT,145).

Marriages may be arranged in heaven, as Plato says, but such arrangement, it seems, provides no guarantee of happiness. The nameless couple in the story is most unhappy right from their nuptials, because they cannot see eye to eye on anything. So much is the difference in their views that even when they meet accidentally after a long time, they do nothing but quarrel. Helplessly as it were, because it seems each is eager but expects the other to initiate the move for a reconciliation. Such is their pride or egoism. Unable, therefore, to put the opportunity provided by Providence to any useful purpose, they again separate, never to meet again. The story shows the man to be in a more reconciliatory mood than the woman is. Narayan perhaps wants to convey that between sulking spouses, it is generally the wife who is more adamant and obstinate than the husband, and who shows more reluctance towards reconciliation. The rigidity of thought, of points of view, the intensity of prejudices, are so effectively exposed by Narayan in his own non-verbose style, that the reader is affected by the poignancy of the little episode.
As the author himself explains in the ‘Foreword’ to the book: The story *Salt and Sawdust* originated from an anecdote narrated by a journalist from Holland. A Dutch lady apparently wrote a laborious bulky novel and sent it to her publisher, who after glancing through it, suggested as a joke, that she would do well to pass her time writing a cookery book. She took him at his word and produced one in the course of time. It became a best-seller and continues in that rank for forty years now. (SS,viii).

Veena and her husband, Swami, are happy though childless, or are happy because they are childless, it is difficult to say, but the latter seems nearer the truth. Children or even a child would have proved more an encumbrance than a boon in the way the couple lives or is rather destined to live. First, their accommodation is a one-and-a-half room tenement, provided by Swami’s employer, and second, the more important, Veena does not know the culinary art. “Boiling, baking, spicing, salting, blending, were beyond her understanding or conception” (SS,5). So Swami gets up at five, draws water from the common well, lights the stove, prepares coffee and lunch for two, and leaves for the factory, where he is employed as a weaving supervisor, at seven-thirty a.m. while Veena is still asleep.

Veena feels she has a genius for writing novels, and she plans to write one, in which resolve she is encouraged and helped by Swami. The detailed discussions between them on how the novel should proceed provide a humour without sting, and also reveal Veena’s amateurish gropings as a budding novelist. The author also wittily demonstrates through these discussions that writing a novel is no easy task.

Ultimately, the novel is completed and – here comes the twist of the tale – of the two hundred pages of the book, Swami has contributed ten pages: description of “an elaborate feeding programme [at the dentist’s wedding] ... for a thousand guests” (SS,19). The ten pages which prove all
too important, more important than the novel itself, for the would-be publishers - Bari and Natesh - persuade them to publish that portion of the book first, “with a little elaboration” (SS,35). So what is published is: “Appetizer - A Guide to Good Eating” (SS,37), and not the novel. But the book goes through several editions, is translated into English and several Indian languages, and Veena becomes famous. “She received invitations from various organizations to lecture and demonstrate. Swami drafted her speeches on food subjects, travelled with her, and answered questions at meetings” (SS,38).

While Veena is a first class graduate in English literature, “she has not been taught to distinguish salt from sawdust” (SS,5), and Narayan has performed a marvel by placing such a character in a one-and-a-half room tenement of Grove Street of the small town of Malgudi rather than in a posh locality of a Metropolitan city of India.

Veena is lucky to have Swami as husband, who is proud of her being a novelist, and who quietly takes over the kitchen to leave “her free to write whatever she fancied” (SS,5). Veena is undoubtedly a dreamy woman, blissfully unaware of how a house is run. And so she can light-heartedly suggest, in connection with the question of publication of her book:

We may have to travel to Madras. ... Can you [Swami] take leave? If Coomar refuses to let you go, you must resign. If the novel is taken, we may not have to depend upon Coomar. If it becomes a hit, filmmakers will come after us, that’ll mean...

(SS,22).

Again later she utters the wish: “If he [Coomar] refuses, you [Swami] must resign and come out. ...” (SS,31). She little realizes that what she proposes would make Swami jobless, of course, if he succumbs to her demand. She fails to remember or to grasp “how they were dependent on Coomar for shelter and food” (SS,31).

Swami is no doubt understanding and co-operative, as Vandana R. Singh says. But it is difficult to agree with her when she adds that his
“understanding and co-operation borders on his appearing to be ‘henpecked’” (Vandana Singh,35), because despite his giving her plenty of rope, which only reveals his love for her, he also is able to make her do what he thinks desirable, by the art of persuasion, even in her monopoly field, namely, writing the novel, where, as he himself admits: “After all, I know nothing about writing novels” (SS,14-15). And Vandana Singh is positively not correct in saying: “perhaps the first Malgudi husband to fall in this category” (Vandana Singh,35), even if Swami is treated as henpecked, because Nagaraj of _The World of Nagaraj_ would then better qualify to fall in that category, if he could rise from his bed in the morning only at the time his wife desired. But there again, it is not the wife’s domination, but Nagaraj’s stoicism, his choice of the golden mean: “He could not make any demand on her or anyone. Not in his nature” (WN,26). In fact, therefore, neither Swami nor Nagaraj should be dubbed henpecked.

Veena basks under the shadow glory created for her by Swami’s conscious and laborious efforts. To a simple matter of purchase of a notebook, he adds colour: “My wife is going to write a novel. Can you give me a good notebook?” (SS,4). He thus becomes instrumental in building up her reputation even before she has written a single novel. No doubt, Veena has her flashes of intelligence and imagination revealed in utterances like: “When one writes, one gets ideas” or “God’s ways are mysterious” (SS,9), etc. Nevertheless, Swami is vitally involved in the writing of the novel. “The story was taken one step further at the next conference. They [Swami and Veena] had both got into the habit of talking about it every morning after dinner, and were becoming, unconsciously, collaborators” (SS,10). He takes pains to get the novel published as well, and when the cookery book – and not the novel – is published and Veena becomes famous and gets invitations for lectures, he drafts “her speeches on food subjects” (SS,38). Ultimately he has also to leave his job with Coomar, because “All his time was needed to look after Veena’s business interests and the swelling correspondence, …” (SS,38). It seems all too hasty a remark when Vandana Singh says: “Swami handles his wife’s
affairs a la Raju in The Guide and like Raju does not mind basking in the reflected glory of his partner” (Vandana Singh,35). Rosie of The Guide is a real artist, an accomplished dancer, and what she earns is due chiefly to her art though Raju does help in arranging her programmes and tours and thus manages her affairs. But it is quite clear that what Veena achieves is not at all due to her novel which is not yet published. It is the cookery book which makes her famous, and she does not know even the A B C of cooking. Swami prepares her speeches, he answers questions at meetings.

To say that Rosie (of The Guide) was the first to bring fame to Malgudi, as Vandana Singh has done (Vandana Singh,35), is a travesty of truth, because Rosie is not a Malgudian at all. She comes to Malgudi with her husband, Marco, who visits the place for archaeological investigations, but enraged with her conduct, he forsakes her when he leaves Malgudi on completion of his work. She then stays on with Raju in Malgudi, but continues to call herself the wife of Marco, and ultimately moves to Madras.

Narayan seems to have written the story Salt and Sawdust more as a satire on modern educated woman rather than a genuine eulogy to her.

In his stories in the three collections discussed here, Narayan has presented a panorama of subjects, as well as of multifarious women characters. The subjects range from saint, prostitute, fake astrologer, agent, pickpocket, gambler, slave of family, miser, etc., to even a ghost. And the women therein have as many facets of character as has a well-formed crystal. The most striking among them is Selvi who lives, until her mother’s demise, like a tortoise having all its limbs withdrawn within. But she shows an unparalleled streak of self-confidence and independence after she loses her mother. The person who had handled her for so long, as one handles a machine, suddenly finds that she has completely gone out of his control. She reveals a firmness, a determination, hitherto unseen and therefore presumed nonexistent by her so-called husband, akin to Nora’s in The Doll House.

Other well-developed women characters are of the willing slave, who as wife and mother slaves for her menfolk by toiling in another family;
the mother in both *Mother and Son* and *Second Opinion*, both of which stories highlight a mother’s selfless love for her son; and the estranged wife in *The Shelter* who betrays an excessive wrath towards her husband despite his almost apologetic approach.

Then there is the wife of the astrologer who has not a word of protest or regret when she learns that her husband tried to kill someone years ago; the stories *Trail of the Green Blazer, A Horse and Two Goats* and *Four Rupees* show wives, whether young or old, disowning their husband because of their suspected crimes; a wife having control of her husband in *Wife’s Holiday*; and so on.

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