In his well-known thesis on Rabelais, Bakhtin writes: “In every historical epoch there has always been a square filled with the laughter of the folk ...”. (Clark & Hoquist, 1984: 306) Bakhtin realized that specially at the threshold of history, such as during the Renaissance or the Russian Revolution, it was impossible to marginalize the common people from the drama of history. For him, the public square and the laughter of the folk which he names the ‘carnival laughter’ acquired a very meaningful significance in the understanding of the oncoming radical changes. Carnival laughter in the literary mode is called ‘grotesque realism’ that celebrates “the gaps and holes in all the mappings of the world laid out in systematic theologies, legal codes, normatic poetics and class hierarchies.” (ibid., 1984: 300) Thus carnival laughter obliquely interrogates the orthodoxies and emphasizes change. Through carnival, the folk are freed from the oppressions of
gloomy categories such as ‘eternal’, ‘immovable’, ‘absolute’, ‘unchangeable’, and “are exposed to the gay and free laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character, with the joy of change and renewal”. (*Ibid*, 1984: 301)

In the Indian context the 1930s, was a threshold period of history. Narayan’s unusually light and humorous novels are sited at the trajectory of an understanding of tradition and change, interrogation and renewal. While many mainstream writers nostalgically held back to the Indian past heritage, Narayan was attracted by the public square where the common people were thrown willy-nilly into the flux of history, into the tug of war between East and West, medieval orthodoxy and modernization.

Carnivalesque situations emerge at a crisis period when the status quo is threatened. It is a time when life does not remain as it used to be, a time when anyone can hold the stage. It initiates the participation of each and every member of society. Thus in such periods the boundary between stage and gallery is blurred and the drama is enacted without the footlights. These unique periods may invite unusual dangers as well as unique opportunities. In grotesque
realism the previous vertical world of absolute values breaks down and a kind of existential heteroglossia takes place.

Narayan’s unusual heroes move about the threshold with a sense of adventurism and self-evasion. They are part of the two contradictory historical forces — imperialist and the emerging nationalism. While the British used force to subjugate the people through the powers of the state, Indian nationalism emerged as a force of resistance combined with ideologies of self-sacrifice and bravery, while underpinning the moral and cultural codes. Narayan’s heroes escaped these repressions, callously offsetting the catalogue of superheroes drawn out from the history of India’s freedom struggle like Rani Laxmibai, Sivaji, Tipu Sultan, to Matangini Hazra and Khudiram Das. Functioning as mythic figures, these heroic names were considered examples of the Indian ethos. The singling out of people and ideals automatically created a rhetoric of the ‘high’ and the ‘low’. In fact culture critics like Tagore believed in the elite, the selected few, who could uphold or exemplify cultural codes to counter historical anarchy. Such an age created its own norms of expressions in language and the texts had their own architectonic inhibitions. But this is not the only face of India.
According to Clark and Holquist, the carnival spirit is an automatic response against the rhetorics of ‘high’ and ‘low’. They locate the peculiarity of carnival laughter in its “indissoluble and essential relation to freedom”. (Ibid, 1984: 308) The official world is always monologic and serious. But carnival ethos laughs at and undermines such absolutism by creating a spirit of joyful relativity. It functions by a process of democratizing everything, including language. Narayan turned to the public square, as he did not believe the official reality to be the only face of India. Bakhtin had remarked in his book on Rabelais that every historical act has been accompanied by the laughter of the chorus. It appears that Narayan listened to what the chorus said.

Narayan’s first step in removing the footlights from the Indian theatre was by selecting the unknown, unassuming small town named Malgudi as the locus for all his novels. Fictitious but none-the-less real, Malgudi is the amalgamation of all the factors that embed the lives of the common ordinary middleclass people. For the readers of the Malgudi novels, Malgudi signifies streets and public squares, taxi stands, market places and cricket grounds. We are hardly given the
privilege of voyeurism as bedrooms and closets do not assume central roles. There is hardly any scope for deeply intimate conversation or private introspection. Enclosed places in his novels consist of dingy presses, cinema halls, shops, school buildings, the headmaster’s room, the courtyards or dining-halls where there is no chance of isolation or any private thought and action. Even if there is an attempt at isolation, as we find in The Dark Room, it is shown as ineffective. In fact Narayan adopted all the humorous forms – the open-air-spectacles, parodies of the high and official and a very common non-poetic language to create his own world of Malgudi.

To say that Narayan chose the common people as the subversive force does not mean that Narayan became the spokesperson for the common exploited people, as Marxist writers like Mulk Raj Anand did. There is no question of Marxist binarism of the exploiter and exploited in Narayan. Rather, Narayan saw through the more intricate play of power in various strata and shades of social relations, where encounters may happen between any set of characters irrespective of age, sex or status. We see frictions between fathers and sons, headmasters and students, husbands and wives, shopkeepers and customers, grandmas
and grandsons, and even among strangers. Narayan joyfully exposes that the play of power is relative and not always gradient, that is, at any moment the king may be decrowned and the clown may usurp all the glory. It is a jolly world-view that accepted this uncertainty as a sign of life and change. Narayan chose the common people because they are not learned in cold scholastic introspection, analysis and revaluation, and their bodies are more orificed or responsive to changes. Thus they are the most transparent participants of history.

Narayan’s first novel *Swami* is apparently a humorous narrative that records the adventures of Swami and his friends. Swami and his friends constantly encounter the grown-up world that tries to curtail their cheerful riotousness. This adult world consists of parents, schoolteachers, doctors, policemen, gatekeepers and numerous other self-appointed guardians. Swami and his friends are nurtured by a colonial education-system. So the large and repressive school-building and the fastidious teachers forever preaching discipline, the examination system, the strict classification of time in periods of history, geography or moral science affect Swami and his friends in a special way. They are always short of free time and the moment they
hear the last gong, the children rush out of the school like a herd of wild deer just freed from a cage.

This tension about the shortness of free time and the yearning for each other's fellowship and the out-door life is best expressed in a passage of Chapter XIV:

At the end of this you ran home to drink coffee, throw down the books, and rush off to the cricket field, which was a long way off. You covered the distance half running, half walking, moved by the vision of a dun field sparsely covered with scorched grass, lit into a blaze by the slant rays of the evening sun, enveloped in a flimsy cloud of dust, alive with the shouts of players stamping about. What music there was in the thud of the bat hitting the ball! Just as you took the turn leading to Lawley Extension, you looked at the sun, which stood poised like a red-hot coin on the horizon. You hoped it would not sink. (Narayan, 1935: 123)

But the passage that best illustrates the carnival sense of freedom where the children are almost challenging and defying everything the school taught — discipline and etiquette, etc. is recorded in Chapter IX:

At the end of the prayer the storm burst. With the loudest, lustiest cries, the gathering flooded out of the hall in one body. All through this vigorous confusion and disorder, Swaminathan kept close to Mani. For there was a general belief in the school that enemies stabbed each other on the last day. (Narayan, 1935: 65)
The situation is a product of childish riotousness and a hint of dark instinctive evil:

Mani did some brisk work at the school gate, snatching from all sorts of people ink-bottles and pens, and destroying them. Around him was a crowd seething with excitement and joy. Ecstatic shrieks went up as each article of stationery was destroyed. One or two little boys feebly protested. But Mani wrenched the ink-bottles from their hands, tore their caps, and poured ink over their clothes. He had a small band of assistants, among whom Swaminathan was prominent. (Narayan, 1935: 66)

This carnival situation is complete with the painting of the face, turning the face both frightful and funny, and the paint acting as a mask that liberates the mask-wearer’s soul from any social compulsion of propriety:

Overcome by the mood of the hour, he had spontaneously emptied his ink-bottle over his own head and had drawn frightful dark circles under his eyes with the dripping ink. (Narayan, 1935: 66)

It should be remembered that a similar playful painting of faces by children in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* brought metamorphosis, and the children turned into creatures full of evil potentialities. However, in *Swami* the passage signifies the non-verbal expression of suppressed emotions. It indicates how in society, an enormous sphere of speech remains latent. Children, when together,
feel a sort of camaraderie which in fact ensures them freedom and fearlessness. Thus the unofficial or ethically unacceptable speech is let loose. One such example is when Mani boasts that given a chance he would have hurled on inkbottle at Ebenzer, wrung his neck and broken his back as a punishment for debasing Krishna, the Hindu God. Again, in the heat of the political agitation Swami remarks that his friend’s father – the police-superintendent is a traitor of the nation. There are bouts of rhetorical flourish as well as moments of silences that move together in a narrative flux.

Apart from the headmaster and teachers, the school has other agents of surveillance too, and the children are often brought to encounter them. The gatekeeper, the peon or the clerk are not mere meaningless ornaments in the scene of the school but are active agents who affect the children in some or the other way. With the approach of the school examinations Mani is suddenly changed from the bully of the school who was ‘afraid of no one’ to a wheedling creature who was seen dogging the steps of the school clerk. Mani had suddenly realized that the clerk was the ‘avatar of the moment, who could rescue him from his immediate calamity. So he appeared at the clerk’s place with
bribes of fresh brinjals, with the hope of flattering out of him some ‘valuable hints’ about the question papers. Mani’s unashamed flattery gives the clerk his opportunity to hold his power over Mani and he grasps the opportunity to advice him.

In Narayan’s world there is a constant reversal of roles and shifting of power. It is brought about with the change of place and circumstances or with respect to the various levels of social relations. A face that is lighted from below seems terrible, but again when the light falls on it from above, as if from heaven, it looks calm and blessed. Narayan is conscious how truth can be perspectival, and so, with his natural sense of humour, he plays a light and shade game. Swami looks up at Mani as the prototype of the unvanquishable Hercules, but when he goes to visit Mani at his own place, Mani appears in a different light. Before the big man with bushy eyebrows who was Mani’s uncle, Mani was dumb and docile. When Swami entered Mani’s room, “Mani was standing behind the door, tame and unimpressive in his domestic setting.” (Narayan, 1935: 72) Again, Swami’s open admiration for the newcomer Rajam incites jealousy among his friends Somu, Sankar and the Pea. Somu, the class captain and the ‘uncle’ of the class suddenly
sees a threat in the form of Rajam whose nonchalant behaviour, a certain air of self-confidence, fluent English, immaculate uniform etc. had the magic to overturn Somu's position. So Swami had to bear the brunt of such political jealousy — he was nicknamed the 'tail' of Rajam. Swami, for the first time in his life gets a taste of the changing faces of human relations:

The same fellows ten days ago, what they were! Now what formidable creatures they had turned out to be! Swaminathan was wonderstruck at the change. (Ibid, 1935: 34)

But this is not the only shock of confrontation in Swami's life. Swami is again faced with another antagonist, this time not from his own tribe but from a different stratum of society. When Swami is cheated by the coachman, Swami's frustration leads him to the threshold of a different class — the slum dwellers of Keelacheri. Here he confronts the coachman's son, dark and dirty, who turned into Swami's nightmare. This "little man of three feet or so, ill clad and unwashed" (Ibid., 1935: 76) exhibited such unthought-of cunning that even Mani with his club and Rajam with his halo of a Police-Superintendent father had to show
their rear side and accept defeat: “They became blind and insensible to everything except the stretch of road before them.” (Ibid., 1935: 77)

It is true that in Narayan’s world it cannot be predicted when and at which point a puny character turns into a living bomb. For example, on a fine morning the harmless school-peon turns into the instrument of Swami’s undoing. On the day of the ‘hartal’ Swami, from behind the human wall of the adult crowd had thrown a stone and broken the Headmaster’s windowpane. Swami felt quite secured in the idea that he “was an unobserved atom in the crowd.” (Ibid., 1935: 97) But when the Headmaster charged Swami, the peon appeared out of the blue as the most damaging witness to Swami’s bravado.

The transient play of light and shade turns Narayan’s world into a world of carnivalesque impulse where masks are worn and exchanged and thus it is difficult to trap a character with any single ideology or principle. Transience here becomes the theme of ‘being’ or ‘living’, establishing the link of the micro-life of the individual to the macro-life of society. The individual lives in the illusion of his soul’s absolutism and immortality, but seen in relation to society the individual looks transient, a moving dot in the flux of life. In the biography of Bakhtin,
Clark and Holquist write that the mask is the very image of ambiguity, the variety and flux of identities that otherwise, unmasked, are conceived as single and fixed.

Again, worn over the face as a second identity, the mask defies our normal paradigm of the human face. The usual idea and expectation of the face asks for symmetrical beauty, where beauty aspires beyond the biological reality of the body into an idea that satisfies the aesthetic sensibilities. But the mask with its grotesque protrusion and abnormal opening of the orifices like eyes, ears, nose and mouth reveals the grotesque aspect of humanity.

In Narayan’s carnivalesque world of masks, characters attain their freedom from the bindings of behaving ‘prim and proper’ and they unashamedly display the odd side of their nature, which is usually kept under cover or suppressed. So, without any hesitation or second thought Swami defies the Headmaster’s cane, overturning the absolute world of Dickens’ children for whom the authority of the cane is an inescapable reality. Swami, in the face of the inevitable punishment in a sudden rush of desperation leaves the Mission School never to enter it again. In fact, the little protagonists of Narayan’s first novel are
constantly rushing out of boundaries. The very first chapter is a description of Swami’s aversion for the confines of the awesome school-building or the terrorization of his teachers:

He shuddered at the very thought of school: that dismal yellow building; the fire-eyed Vedanayagam, his class teacher, and the Headmaster with his thin long cane … (*Ibid.*, 1935: 3)

From the very first page the narrative unfolds two opposite forces — one that attempts to domesticate the unruly and the other eternally protesting. When in his classroom, Swami’s soul hovers on the window-sill:

To Swaminathan existence in the classroom was possible only because he could watch the toddlers of the Infant Standard falling over one another, and through the window on the left see the 12-30 mail gliding over the embankment, booming and rattling while passing over the Sarayu Bridge. (*Ibid.*, 1935: 4)

The train for the Indian mind has always been a symbol of the boundlessness of the unknown that, while passing, conveyed to them a sense of freedom. In Bibhuti Bhusan’s *Pather Panchali* made immortal by Satyajit Ray in a film with the same title, Apu and Durga run miles through the paddy fields to have a glimpse of the train that passed by their village. Ironically, the introduction of Railways in India was
accompanied by commercialization, urbanization and the growth of a new bourgeois class. This new development had its necessary evils. This irony may be perceived in Narayan’s novels where he explores the potentials of the train — evil or benign, brazen or romantic.

In Narayan’s world nothing is uni-dimensional. From his classroom little Swami inhales his sense of freedom as the train passes by. Yet at the end of the novel this very train takes away his dearest friend Rajam forever into the vast unknown. In *The Guide* Raju’s corruption starts while loitering alone among Railway-track builders. Much to his father’s consternation he collected a rich array of abuses from them. Later he sets his stall at the Railway Station where he came to be known as ‘Railway-Raju’. His constant contact and communication with tourists led him to the realization that he was a natural rhetorician. This, along with his chance encounter with Rosie as she was coming down from a train turns out to be the tragic flaw of his life. Raju’s life turns out to be a series of misadventures.

Thus, in Narayan’s world, reality is like the train, ambiguous, strange and distant, for man’s existence is not set on a linear journey from darkness to light or from the primitive to the civilized, but
perpetually struggle in a tug-of-war among diverse forces — elemental, biological, social or mystic. Carnival is the acceptance of this reality, which means that at any moment a reversal of the civilized into the primeval may happen, totally overturning the complacent myth of man’s journey the other way. It is an uncertain world where masks and costumes are changed and interchanged, and the protagonists do not come out in any permanent light. And the best exposer of such a world are the children as they are more clear-sighted and uninhabited.

Romantics, in tune with Rousseau’s ‘primitivism’, idealized man’s childhood as a stage of pristine innocence. For Wordsworth growing up is a journey from innocence to experience. In *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* Wordsworth writes:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still in Nature’s Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

(In *Eight Poets*, 1941: 244)
But Narayan’s child characters are not burdened with any idealism. If given the chance, they can turn quite dark and violent. The most blatant example is Mani whose utterances are filled with phrases like – “break Somu’s waist”, “He will sprawl in the dust with broken bones”, “to get that Pea under my heel and press him to the earth”, “Sankar is going to hang …”. Mani reminds us of Jack in Golding’s Lord of the Flies. This implicates that Mani, if taken out of the social boundary of Narayan’s novel can very well turn out to become a savage who actualizes the hidden dark instincts, which are already there as innate. In Lord this is expressed in the chant: “Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in”. (Golding, 2000: 243) Even the tender Swami gives in to such an instinct at the heat of the moment: "

On the flash of a bright idea, he wriggled through the crowd and looked for the Infant Standards. There he found little children huddled together and shivering with fright. He charged into this crowd with such ferocity that the children scattered about, stumbling and falling. One unfortunate child who shuffled and moved awkwardly received individual attention. Swaminathan pounced upon him, pulled out his cap, threw it down and stamped on it, swearing at him all the time. He pushed him and dragged him this way and that and then gave him a blow on the head and left him to his fate. (Narayan, 1935: 99)
The picture of childhood is never complete without these merciless bullying. In *Lord*, which too is a story about children without the jolly gaiety of Narayan's carnival ethos is strewn with pictures of the 'littluns' being constantly bullied. Roger callously destroys the sandcastles of the 'littluns' and throws sand into Percival's eyes who starts crying. Percival's suffering, instead of inviting sympathy, further ignites cruelty, and now Johnny, following Roger's example, "began to fling up sand in shower, and presently Percival was crying again." (Golding, 2000: 64)

The most astounding instance of politics and power play lurking in the child's psyche is Rajam's usurping the leadership from Somu and Mani. Rajam uses all the devices of a politician with great dexterity to establish his supremacy over others. When the crude and ingenuous Mani challenges Rajam in a duel, Rajam is confident of his own cultural and economic superiority and readily accepts the challenge. His entrance into the stage is dramatic: he has certainly dressed to impress:

At the sound of the creaking of boots, they turned and found that Rajam had come. He was dressed in Khaki, and carried under his arm an air gun that was given to him a
couple of months ago on his birthday. He stood very stiff and said: “Here I am, ready.” (Narayan, 1935: 19)

His next step is equally calculating; he stuns his rivals by firing a shot into the air. Now Mani is psychologically defeated: “He stood still, his club down.” (Ibid., 1935: 19) Mani then gives vent to his annoyance: “But this is unfair. I have no gun while you have ... It was to be a hand-to-hand fight.” (Ibid., 1935: 19) But Mani’s reasoning sounds like grumbling beside the crystal-sharp logic of Rajam: “Then, why have you brought your club? You never said anything about it yesterday.” (Ibid., 1935: 19) Mani hangs his head. Finding the weak moment of his rival to be an opportunity, Rajam tries plain and direct attack: “What have I done to offend you?” (Ibid., 1935: 19) Mani is now completely disarmed, so he tries a crooked device, “You called me a sneak before someone.” (Ibid., 1935: 19) It was an obvious lie and he could not deny it. Having thus disarmed his rival step by step Rajam now can afford to be broad-minded, and his last offer is irresistible: “If this is all the cause of your anger, forget it. I won’t mind being friends.” (Ibid., 1935: 19) Rajam lowered his gun and Mani dropped his club. Rajam now throws a feast with the biscuits he had brought in his pocket in order to
celebrate this newfound friendship. Thus the political game of the moment ends properly with a feast.

However, Rajam’s ascendancy to leadership does not end here. Rajam had to exhibit his power over the grown-ups too. So he invites his new friends to his house. Swami and Mani were certainly impressed by the bungalow of the Police Superintendent with its posh surroundings, uniformed guards and a battalion of eager and amiable servants. They are impressed again when they enter Rajam’s large room: “There were chairs in it, actually chairs, and a good big table with Rajam’s books arranged neatly on it. What impressed them most was a timepiece on the table. Such a young fellow to own a timepiece!” (Ibid., 1935: 26) Rajam’s intention to impress and enthrall his friends is obvious as would be the case of an adult with similar intention: “Presently, Rajam entered. He had known that his friends were waiting for him, but he liked to keep them waiting for a few minutes, because he had seen his father doing it. So he stood for a few minutes in the adjoining room, biting his nails.” (Ibid., 1935: 26) It is a parody, which has its double-voiced effect, for it includes both adults and children in its laughter. Rajam’s aping of the adults exposes simultaneously the
frivolity of adult-politics and the unexpected artfulness of children. The artful Rajam mesmerizes his friends further when in a princely gesture he throws open his cupboard full of expensive toys for them. He orders for coffee and tiffin, instinctively aware of the cheery influence of food. He impresses his friends with the “ease and authority with which he addressed the policeman” (Ibid., 1935: 27) and with his bullying of the cook with angry rebukes like - “You rascal, you scoundrel, you talk back to me?” (Ibid., 1935: 27)

Rajam proves at last to be the only unchallenged leader when he finally wins over the rival camp consisting of Somu, Sankar and the Pea. He invites them, along with Mani and Swami, disregarding his friends’ embarrassment and irritation. Finally, he unites them with a lecture on friendship.

Rajam’s lecture is an interesting specimen of political reasoning, which is beyond the pale of rational discourse. He employs the most successful method; he instigates religious fear with a terrible description of the hell, a place, which he said, is reserved for those who do not respect friendship. He legitimizes his reasoning invoking the Hindu sacred text the Veda that cannot be challenged. Rajam is a
typical charismatic leader who binds his subjects by sheer aura. After the lecture that enthralled the audience and leaves them dumbstruck, there is the oath taking and finally, Rajam rewards each of his subjects with a precious gift of a pocketknife, a pen or a belt. Rajam is a happy amalgamation of the two rival characters of *Lord* — Jack and Ralph. He has the charisma, the promise of fairness, justice and generosity that nestled in Ralph’s nature. In *Lord* Ralph is a creature apart from the tribe. He has a stillness about him and a sort of detachment that struck as attractive and automatically persuaded everyone to vote for him as the leader. Rajam possesses some of the aura and detachment. He is able to unite the boys in the form of a cricket team while they are on the verge of being split off. His dealing with his team is fair but firm, and till the end of the novel Rajam remains almost cruelly unpardoning towards Swami’s irresponsible and impulsive behaviour. Yet Rajam is a lesser form of Ralph. Introspective and dreaming, Ralph has a poetic aura almost at one with the brooding nature that surrounds him. These tender and poetic touches do not go in the creation of Rajam. In this context he is closer to Jack who is instinctively cunning. Jack’s final triumph over Ralph in the race for leadership comes due to his
understanding of the weaknesses of human nature. Jack lured the boys with roasted pork and wild thoughtless revelry. Rajam too, uses his affluence to win over his friends; he offers them tiffins, expensive gifts and finally buys them the entire set of cricket accessories. It may be argued that the hunting of animals, the roasting of meat, the public feasts and masked dances in the Lord are also the ingredients of a carnival. However, the situation in the Lord does not have the carnival ambience being deprived of the shelter of a society.

The novels Lord and Swami show children in a different light, opening up the dark and not so innocent potentialities lurking behind their angelic exteriors. But Swami is secured within the boundaries of a society. Thus it is a carnival with all the inherent tendencies of balancing, moderating, opening up and relativizing. In Narayan’s world, no character is allowed to turn authoritarian and totalitarian. Rajam’s gradual ascension to the leadership is suddenly toned down when as the captain of the cricket team he opens the batting and is at once bowled out by no other but the little Swaminathan! Swami, who is looked down as a ‘peculiar fellow’ suddenly reveals an unexpected skill in bowling and is unanimously accepted as the ‘Tate’ of the team.
In a bat of the eyelids Swami becomes the most precious player of M.C.C. Again, Somu the monitor and the ‘uncle’ of the class had at the beginning of the novel emanated absolute confidence and calm. Narayan describes him as a person who carried himself with an easy air and was believed to be ‘chummy’ even with teachers who never reprimanded him or asked him questions. So it is a shock when we hear that Somu failed in the examination and was automatically eliminated from the group.

Narayan creates his seesaw world often with the help of parody and irony. Narayan never closes the possibilities of meaning by direct statements. In Swami hidden carnival laughter is often posed as a serious problem that disturbed Swami — thus rendering meaning as inconclusive. It is difficult to take sides or even seek the author’s guidance by following his biased steps. When Swami is forced by his father to devote his time in worthwhile enterprise like solving mathematical problems instead of roasting himself in the sun, the incongruity of their views even look absurd. We cannot decide whether to laugh at Swami’s unconventional and un-mathematical reasoning or at the inadequacy of dry-scholasticism of his father and the education
system in general, which seems absurd beside Swami’s blatantly down to earth questions.

Swami and his friends subvert the official worldview and the reasoning of the adults thereby carnivilising the whole atmosphere. Whether it was choosing a name for the cricket team or passing and failing in examinations there is an embedding of points of views that are played up in a parodic mode which add either to the open or subdued carnival spirit. Very often a narrative makes the best use of the darker side of the carnival. Golding in Lord creates a stark primeval world away from the taboos and restraint of society. It is devoid of ambivalence for the choice is strictly in terms of black and white — it is either Ralph or Jack, either reason and responsibility or carnal instinct.

As the novel proceeds the absence of the secured ambience of a society is clearly felt. The sunshine, the dreamy afternoons turn into the charring reality of forest-fire, while a group of savages are on a manhunt. At the beginning, evil was held back by the nurturing forces of society still lingering in the children’s consciousnesses. When Roger shadowed Henry like a hunter after a prey, his intentions of bullying
Henry was obvious. But when he started throwing stones at the self-absorbed Henry he did not dare to hit him:

Roger gathered a handful of stones and began to throw them. Yet there was a space round Henry, perhaps six yards in diameter, into which he dare not throw. Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of old life. Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law. Roger’s arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins. (Golding, 2000: 66)

But the moment Jack, initially for the purpose of camouflage smeared his face with colour, it acted as a mask:

He began to dance and his laughter became a bloodthirsty snarling. He capered towards Bill and the mask was a thing on its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness. (Ibid., 2000: 68)

From then on evil is set free and beyond control, leaving its marks with actual dead bodies. The unbridled savagery reaches its height when Ralph, the only holder of sanity is chased by the bloodthirsty group. The tale takes a sudden turn with the arrival of the uniformed naval-officer. It is important to note that Golding does not introduce a person; instead, he introduces all the symbols of authority and governance:

It was a white-topped cap, and above the green shade of the peak were a crown, an anchor, gold foliage. He saw white drill, epaulettes, a revolver; a row of gilt buttons down the front of a uniform. (Ibid., 2000: 228)
The magic power of relativity that arrives with the uniform and all its social connotations of restraint and discipline suddenly restore a sort of security and sanity. The savage Jack suddenly turns into the indistinct redhead little boy while the wise sensible Ralph cries like a child:

"And in the middle of them, with filthy body, matted hair, and unwiped nose, Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy." (Ibid, 2000: 230). On his return into the folds of civilization and society, Ralph at last confesses the true value of Piggy, who had been the butt of ridicule throughout.

Skeptics may point out that the carnival is the extreme licentious expression of man's 'lower-bodily life' that is promoted by Jack in the Lord. Yet it must also be remembered that Jack's world-view is devoid of the carnival laughter, which is the essential spirit of the carnival. The carnival-laughter is the healthy laughter that laughs at the official ideologies; but again it does not spare itself from ridicule. Clark and Holquist maintain:

In creating a relativity of speech practices, Rabelais relativizes world-views, all of which seek hegemony and claim unique privilege. He carnivalizes language itself
and, in so doing “discrowns” the authority that official ideologies seek to claim for themselves within the isolation of their own characteristic discourses. (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 318)

They continue to explain that “Rabelais’ importance lies not in his particular ideology but in his awareness of the limits, the incompleteness, of any ideology.” (Ibid., 1984: 318) Naturally, the carnival needs the serious official world for its purpose of relativization. The carnival comes to operation by debunking and lowering the mandated canon. Bakhtin’s representation of the church’s role in Rabelais’ achievement tells us that without the authoritarianism of the church, Rabelais would not have achieved his purpose. In the Lord it is only when the naval officer, representing the official world appears that our perception opens up to the ambivalences in Jack and Ralph. In Narayan’s Swami the looming presence of the draconian adult world lights up the children with impish qualities, which seem nonetheless innocent, and the incongruities between these two worlds offer the scope for jolly laughter. The world of the Lord, denuded of any social garb, transforms these harmless ‘impish qualities’ into dire criminal activities, the potentialities of which lurk deep in the system of mankind. But the mask that liberates Jack from any remaining social
taboos, serves differently in a carnival. The mask in the carnival liberates man from epistemological megalomania, and reveals the ebullient and variegated form of life.

In this variegated life the intercourse of different consciousnesses often prove disharmonious and create ludicrous situations. This is often perceptible when grown-ups and children try to communicate. Such funny incongruity is best illustrated in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*. In this enchanting parable the author narrates how, at the age of six, his first step in becoming an artist was nipped in the bud by adults. The six year old was inspired from his reading of the *True Stories from Nature* to draw a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. To his extreme disappointment, the adults interpreted this meaningful piece of art to be a mundane hat! So the little boy had to draw the inside of the boa constrictor, for he realized that the grown ups: “always need to have things explained.” (1974: 8) The story of the little artist abruptly ends when the grown-ups advice him to give up drawing boa constrictors, whether from the inside or outside, and devote himself instead to geography, history, arithmetic and grammar. The little boy had to give in, but not without protest. His final comment before his
departure for a different direction (he became a pilot when he grew up) is replete with cynicism: “Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.” (1974: 8)

Children are the eternal protestors against institutions and thus stand in a subversive relation to the world of the adults who represent the serious official world constituted of schoolteachers, lawmakers, priests, etc. Relatively free from the theorized world of academic institutions, children are more open to imagination as well as to the micro-world of everyday realities that cradle them. In *The Little Prince* when the pilot drew three sheep at the request of the little prince, the pilot could not satisfy the little boy because he found the sheep either too sickly or too old. When the pilot drew a box, which he said carried the sheep inside, the little prince was happy, as the box sparked his imagination and he found the perfect little sheep inside the box, just right for the small asteroid that was his home. Similarly, in Narayan’s *Swami*, what looked like a simple problem of fractions to Swami’s father, was a world of animation for Swami, and the cold names in arithmetic looked like his real-life friends. Rama, who wants to earn
fifteen annas by selling ten mangoes to Krishna sounded like Sankar, the first boy, because of his determination to sell ten mangoes for fifteen annas. Swami felt a surge of sympathy for the gullible Krishna, for he sounded like the apprehensive, weak and nervous ‘Pea’ of his class. For Swami, the question of how much Krishna will have to pay for four mangoes was irrelevant. A deep uncomfortable suspicion was rising in his mind, that Rama was trying to sell unripe mangoes to Krishna:

Swaminathan felt utterly helpless. If only father would tell him whether Rama was trying to sell ripe fruits or unripe ones! Of what avail would it be to tell him afterwards? He felt strongly that the answer to this question contained the key to the whole problem. It would be scandalous to expect fifteen annas for ten unripe mangoes. But even if he did, it wouldn’t be unlike Rama, whom Swaminathan was steadily beginning to hate and invest with the darkest qualities. (Narayan, 1935: 87)

The process of growing up indeed becomes a process of elimination of the elastic potentialities of the mind, which would have created a more dynamic world-view, a world-view that does not obliterate the spontaneous and elemental aspects of life. Thus children, fresh and uninhibited, can blurt out truths, which are carnivalesque, because carnivale is the pulling back of man to his basics. It is often the
children, one finds, who create the carnivalesque ambience. R.K. Narayan’s *Swami* is a very good example.

**II**

Apart from subverting what is serious and profane, the comic genre works as a balancing agent. Comedy enforces mankind to see its limitations and laughs down the super-ego from flying with the wings of Icarus. Although it is man’s heavenward aspiration that prods the journey towards his hope for a better civilization, it is the brakes or fuses that render the journey sound. No movement is complete without a healthy self-criticism, or having the guts to accept the weaknesses and limitations. Comedy enforces man to look away for a moment from his self-created glorification of human existence and perceive the darker underbelly. Nothing other than a doze of irony can cure human life from its megalomaniac obsessions.

Irony, as a worldview, is integrated in Narayan’s works because it is one of the techniques used to invoke laughter that destabilizes any tendency in the work towards a monologic culmination. Like other laughing forms, irony too is a participatory form, i.e. it makes meaning inter-subjective. Thus meaning is not dictated but is created in the
space between expression and understanding. According to Bakhtin, laughing forms are serious in the sense that by demotivating the tendency of the monolithic fabrication of meaning into stiff theories or humourless arrests, it sobers and humbles man into true self-recognition — to see oneself as a minor player in the world of other players. It humbles man by recognizing death on the face of the illusion of immortality and again subverts death’s autocracy by recognizing life’s vital colours. Thus between life and death or any other extremes ironic meaning is being constantly created.

Narayan introduces his story with a title that is often ironic. In the chapter on ‘polyphony’ it has already been mentioned how the title Waiting for the Mahatma deceives us in our expectation of a ‘Gandhi novel’. The Man-Eater creates a stifling situation with a cruel fanatic like Vasu terrifying the people of Malgudi by threatening to kill the innocent and most-loved temple-elephant for his own greed. Vasu’s unexpected and pathetic death at the end of the novel as the temple-elephant passes by his window with great aplomb suddenly opens our eyes to the hollowness of the title. Similarly we realize how in The Guide Raju totally misguides his own life, turning it into a series of
misadventures. In *The Financial Expert* Margaya, who is found exploiting the gullible rural people with his astonishing financial wizardry is finally brought down by the same people who had been his victims. These are the typical themes of 'uncrowning the king', about which Bakhtin discusses when he speaks of carnival ambivalence. "In such a system the king is the clown. He is elected by all the people and mocked by all the people …" (Morris, 1994: 223)

Narayan’s *The Darkroom* is another novel in which the title, with respect to the work is ironic. Savitri, with a gesture of protest, first enters the material darkroom and later her mental darkroom, but both these gestures prove ineffective. Savitri fails to create any impact of her darkrooms on the life around her, which goes on as if nothing had happened. Yet *The Darkroom* is different from the other novels that are named in this context because unlike them, *The Darkroom* refers to the psychical world of Savitri and figures out her deep mental agony. However, *The Darkroom* does not fall in the category of the 19th century psychological novel that resulted from middleclass prudence against any open celebration of the human body. *The Darkroom* in fact laughs at the tendency of the serious mainstream writing that tends to
psychologize the material body by replacing or disguising the carnal and worldly questions with inner cynicism, double-speaks, crime, corruption and sensual reflections. Despite Savitri’s deep brooding on the repression of the female in a male dominated society and her drastic step that would have been ideal in an Ibsenian manner, the novel falls back on the worldly concerns of money and physical security. When unable to die, Savitri has to face the stark questions of fending for herself and securing a shelter to protect herself from dishonour. Till now sheltered and overprotected, Savitri’s femininity is sensitive and vulnerable and smarts even at a stare. For the first time she senses this vague and unknown fear as people start flocking the temple to see “the mysterious woman’ who was engaged to work in the temple. This would not have happened if it had been a male or even a female from the lower section of society: “So many people kept staring at her that Savitri slipped out and shut herself in the shanty.” (Narayan, 1938: 187)

It is the middleclass female who carries the aura of sexual prudence that, when facing the world, turns totally defenseless. When faced with such stark and staring worldly problems, Savitri compromises her previous idealistic concerns for true love and self-respect and instead
gives into a starker reality – the craving of the body not for love but the coziness of sheer habit that, even in the absence of love, overcomes the members of a family. It is the sheer habit of staying together in a house, interacting in mundane routines and mandatory chores, the simple habit of touching each other and getting used to the security of close bodily contacts that proves irresistible and true: “And she grew homesick. A nostalgia for children, home, and accustomed comforts seized her. Lying here on the rough floor, beside the hot flickering lamp, her soul racked with fears, she couldn’t help contrasting the comfort, security and un-loneliness of her home. When she shut the door and put out the lights, how comforting the bed felt and how well one could sleep! Not this terrible state .... And then the children. What a void they created!” (Ibid., 1938: 189)

To say that it is firstly the ‘inescapable weakness’ of the ‘bamboo pole’ and not the vibrating arrow of Cupid that bind together the husbands and wives in society would be committing a sacrilege against the ideal, but can Savitri herself deny her longing for the comforts and security that her husband provides for her? Again, this argument may not follow a feminist angle because the husband too is
weak and dependent on the industry of the wife regarding household matters. Despite Ramani’s initial enthusiasm to prove himself quite comfortable in both the roles of the bread-winner and the home-maker, this is a temporary drive that would have died with time. Can Ramani deny the joy and relief that he experiences when he sees Savitri back home? “Ramani paused on the doormat and threw a genial look around – ‘How are we all today?’ he asked, and the children made some indistinct sounds in reply. ‘What does your mother say?’ he asked, and the children giggled. He went in to change.” (Narayan, 1938: 207)

According to P.S. Sundaram, *The Darkroom* “is apparently not a favourite among critics.” (Sundaram, 1973: 41) Professor Narasimhaiah writes – “One may without loss skip the intervening *Darkroom* which for all its pathos develops melo-dramatically and has a didactic ending”. (Narashimhaiah, 1969: 143) According to Prof. Narashimhaiah the ending cheaply moralizes about the place of women – which is one of submission to man.

Prof. A.N. Kaul writes it off as a badly written anti-domestic novel. According to Kaul, it is obvious that Ibsenism or the feminist
idea can inspire Narayan’s imagination as little as the political idea of Gandhism.

It may be noted that *The Darkroom* suffers the similar fate of *Waiting* which was first assumed to be a ‘Gandhi novel’ and then rejected as a failure. It is true that Savitri suffers in the hands of a husband whose character is soaked in a blind chauvinistic bias for the inherited idea of the supremacy of men over women. This naturally leads the enlightened reader towards the question Ibsen had raised in favour of women. It is again true that the question of feminism arises, but only when we take the case of Ramani and Savitri in isolation, disregarding all the other characters that surround them.

The female characters in the novel, apart from Savitri, are Savitri’s two closest friends Janamma and Gangu, Savitri’s rival Shantabai, and Ponni, the matriarchal figure who protects Savitri in her distress. Between themselves Janamma and Gangu are implacable enemies and Savitri is often caught between them trying to maintain a subtle balance. Gangu’s ambition is to become famous and without discrimination she chooses to aspire to become either a film star, a musician or a Congress leader. Narayan writes: “She prepared for her
film career by attending two Tamil pictures a week and picking up several screen songs in addition to wearing flimsy crêpe sarees and wearing her hair and flowers in a eccentric manner. She talked irresponsibly and enjoyed being unpopular in the elderly society of South Extension. She left home when she pleased and went where she liked, moved about without an escort, stared back at people, and talked loudly." (Narayan, 1938: 19) Her loud feminism is unmistakably the cause for carnival laughter that is flattering and abusive at the same time. Beside the depressing state of Savitri whose every step has to be taken according to her husband’s moods, Gangu’s presence comes as a relief like a free and fluttering butterfly. Again, her shallow feminism acts as a foil to the depth of Savitri’s soul that deeply and imperceptibly surges against her own predicament. On the other hand, Janamma is a staunch and unashamed supporter of the patriarchal system. In order to persuade the brooding Savitri out of her darkroom she argues:

You should either let your words out or feel that everything your husband does is right. As for me, I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time in my life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternative, but nothing more. What he does is right. It is a wife’s duty to feel so. (Ibid., 1938: 59)
She remembers her peers who supported her beliefs with the experiences of their lives:

her own grandmother slaved cheerfully for her husband who had three concubines at home; her aunt who was beaten everyday by her husband and had never uttered a word of protest for fifty years; another friend of her mother’s who was prepared to jump into a well if her husband so directed her.” *(Ibid., 1938: 60)*

Yet Janamma is no docile follower because her argument in support of patriarchy almost sounds condescending, as if her power lies in her ability to tolerate the atrocities of men, thus turning the whole case dialogic. The sympathizer always holds the elevated position and she is full of sympathy for men: “Men are impetuous. One moment they will be all temper and the next all kindness. Men have to bear many worries and burdens, and you must overlook it if they are sometimes unreasonable.” *(Ibid., 1938: 60)* It seems to her that men are equally burdened as women and have their own share of suffering: “If they appear sometimes harsh, you may rest assured they will suffer for it later.” *(Ibid., 1938: 60)* Janamma’s convictions act as counterpoint to Savitri’s dark moods and fatalistic introspections.

Two other women who contribute to this debate on the relation of men and women are the Cook’s wife and Ranga’s wife. Interestingly
they do not appear in person but are revealed in the conversation between their husbands. Ranga is a man who is completely terrorized by his wife. He recalls one occasion when he had tried to prove his fatherhood by punishing his wayward son and was chastened instead:

“And the wife sprang on me from somewhere and hit me on the head with a brass vessel. I have sworn to leave the children alone even if they should be going down a well. Women are terrible.” *(Ibid., 1938: 51)*

But the cook counters his argument with his own. “Only once has my wife tried to interfere, and then I nearly broke her bones. She has learnt to leave me alone now.” *(Ibid., 1938: 51)*

The cook advises Rangii: “Women must be taught their place.” *(Ibid., 1938: 51)* Like Ramani he too believes in bringing up children by the rod and without the interference of their wives, “It is no business of a wife’s to butt in when the father is dealing with his son. It is a bad habit. Only a battered son will grow into a sound man.” *(Ibid., 1938: 50)*

The village priest advises Ponni’s husband to take similar measures to domesticate his boisterous wife: “If she won’t let you rest, thrash her; that is the way to keep women sane. In these days you
fellows are impotent mugs and let your women ride you about.” (Ibid., 1938: 167) It implies a game of power play where there is a constant tension to hold the reign. One spouse’s weakness will empower the other. That Narayan is not upholding the women’s cause alone is clear from his creation of Ponni who provides a counter argument to man’s domination. When Savitri tells Ponni of her husband’s moods, she advices, “Sister, remember this. Keep the men under the rod, and they will be all right. Show them that you care for them and they will tie you up and treat you like a dog.” (Ibid., 1938: 136) Ponni has great potentiality for love and her theory on men does not imply that she is a hater of men. When Savitri asks her if she liked her husband Ponni turns into a blushing bride, but she is also very possessive and wants to control her husband. The question is not of antagonism but of management: “You see, that is the way to manage them.” (Ibid., 1938: 136) She echoes the priest’s apprehension that if let loose the spouse will usurp the upper hand: “He is a splendid boy, but sometimes he goes out with bad friends, who force him to drink, and then he will come home and try to break all the pots and beat me. But when I know that he has been drinking, the moment he comes home, I trip him up.
from behind and push him down, and sit on his back for a little while; he will wriggle a little, swear at me, and then sleep, and wake up in the morning quiet as a lamb. I can’t believe any husband is unmanageable in this universe ...” (Ibid., 1938: 136)

There are enlightened men too who need no managing as Gangu’s husband. But the author’s presentation of this broad-minded husband is as double-voiced as his depiction of his wife Gangu’s feminism: “Her husband never interfered with her but let her go her own way, and believed himself to be a champion of women’s freedom; he believed he was serving the women’s cause by constantly talking about votes and divorce.” (Ibid., 1938: 19) Evan Ramani, who is often seen as a man of villainous proportion is not totally averse to women’s liberation, that, according to him, should be limited to reading English novels, playing tennis and having their All-India-Conference. Narayan’s tongue-in-cheek rendering of views on men and women, about their tactics of harnessing each other, and totally possessing each other, dialogizes the idealistic relations and questions of true love or marriage of souls.
Thus, around the more defined figures of Savitri and Ramani the argument continues, a process of dialogizing various strands. In a carnival, there is no possibility for a character to turn totally authoritarian, backed by the author’s patronage, nor is there any chance for any ideology to grow strong and staring. There is no attempt on the part of Narayan to create Savitri as the epitome of perfection in order to sentimentalize her suffering. She is different from the female characters of Tagore who enjoy the author’s support and are blessed with more refined and elevated mental endowments. Savitri cannot rise beyond the ordinary and her suffering cannot reach the grandeur of the heroic. Savitri is lost in the blind allies of her infertile mind. She cannot imagine beyond the problem of herself becoming middle-aged and Ramani’s natural attraction for a more beautiful and younger woman: “I am middle-aged, old-fashioned, plain. How can I help it? She must be young and pretty.” (Ibid., 1938: 101) But in a way Savitri is right because she is dealing with a man who is mediocre too. Ramani finds Shantabai fascinating because she is different from the timid Savitri in her free manners, her artfulness, her eloquence. Savitri’s self-abasement, her total unconcern for her body has robbed her of her
freshness. On the other hand, the self-conscious Shantabai is fresh and glowing and she wears her saree in style: “How well a simple voile saree sat on her! Why couldn’t one’s wife dress as attractively?” (Ibid., 1938: 72) – Ramani wonders.

A hurried judgement of Ramani would find him villainous but Ramani is not so. Ramani is devoid of any cunning and not schematic and deceptive. In his first encounter with Shantabai, he is completely bowled over, which does not escape the clever lady’s notice. From then onwards, she starts exploiting his awe and admiration and literally drives him by his nose.

Critics have often looked upon Ramani as a tyrant who openly and unashamedly flirts with Shantabai and defies society, but there are certain passages which show how Ramani is often mesmerized by Shantabai’s artfulness. His helplessness to ignore Shantabai’s attractions comes out in lines like: “This was threatening to become a daily habit. It was almost impossible to go home directly from the club.” (Ibid., 1938: 87) It is like an addiction that replaces his addiction for bridge in the club. With her pathetic life-story, her soft voice and her posing as defenseless and vulnerable, Shantabai wins his
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sympathies. He is now bound to be chivalrous and act as a ‘man’. The
artless Savitri fails to do so because she tries her best to make things
smooth for her husband, trying to meet with his expectations and her
husband takes her for granted. Shantabai takes care to prevent Ramani
from taking her in his stride. On the day of Shantabai’s confirmation,
Ramani dramatically pushes the letter before her and eagerly awaits her
thanks for all his trouble. But Shantabai’s reaction – “I am rather
disappointed” (Ibid., 1938: 72) – shocks him out of his complacency.
The following passage shows how Ramani is often pushed to an
extreme irretrievable situation:

She asked suddenly, “Shall we go to a picture tonight?”
This was the first time she had suggested this, and Ramani
sat more or less stunned. “I said shall we go to a picture
tonight?” She repeated with emphasis.
“Tonight?” Ramani asked in weak apprehension.
There were already rumours abroad, and now to be seen in
public ...
“Tonight. Answer in a word, yes or no.” (Ibid.,
1938: 89)

Shantabai is confident of making him dance to her tune and does not
care to know whether he actually wanted to see a film or not. In the
cinema hall in a sudden reversal of mood she decides to quit the hall
and go to the river instead. After this she makes him sit on the
riverbank, drive around the town, again return to the river and finally stay awake beside her the whole night because she could not sleep that night. We find Ramani listening to her dictates ‘faithfully’ and like an obedient follower asking, — “What shall we do now?” (Ibid., 1938: 91)

It is interesting that Ramani here is replaying Savitri’s role. The only difference is that what seems sweet and naughty in Shantabai seems bullying in Ramani. We may recall a similar situation when Ramani dictates Savitri to accompany him for a movie without caring to know whether she liked it or not –

“It is getting late. Are you coming with me to the cinema or not?”
“Now?”
“Immediately”. (Ibid., 1938: 24)

Savitri cannot enjoy anything without including her children and she is unhappy to leave them behind, but Ramani wants his wife to come alone.

It cannot be said with conviction that Ramani has no soft feelings for his wife and only uses her as a slave. He is proud of her beauty: “He was very proud of his wife. She had a fair complexion and well proportioned features, and her sky blue saree gave her a distinguished
appearance. He surveyed her slyly, with a sense of satisfaction at possessing her.” (Ibid., 1938: 27) Staunch feminists may object to the word ‘possessing’ but aren’t there enough evidences where love has been a game of conquering and possessing? From Shakespeare and Donne to the present day love has always been disappointing in its idealized version and has strayed to the paths of possession. Narayan stays away from any attempt of idealizing love and thus bares the material and sensual aspect of love, which is unashamedly possessive. This carnivalesque rendering of love devoid of any platonic garb hurts the aesthetic sense of many readers and critics. Professor Narasimhaiah writes: “It is probably the only novel in which Narayan has also introduced sex overtly, something that would embarrass his admirers …”. (Narasimhaiah, 1969: 143) This prudence emanates from the social taboos that makes critics like Narasimhaiah conscious of various human emotions that originate from bodily dictates like desire, possessiveness, jealousy, carnality, etc. Bakhtin spoke for the ‘living actuality’ of the bodily life that links mankind to the earth and in the process frustrates man’s superciliousness. This downward movement of the comic genre saves man from the fog of deontic abstractions created
by the official world, which blurs the vision from seeing the blatant truth. After all, even one of the world’s greatest love-tragedies could not save Othello from sinking into the quagmires of the inevitable obsessive possessiveness for Desdemona.

The sensuality of love sits well in a mediocre character like Ramani who has very limited mental resources. His relation with Shantabai is just an ‘affair’, as P.S. Sundaram rightly puts it, but it is not at the cost of Savitri, for whom Ramani undoubtedly reserves a place in his mind. We cannot overlook the fact that whenever he sees Shantabai in an artistic jacket or saree he cannot help remembering Savitri and her carelessness about her appearance. He is not deriding Savitri but secretly wishing her to look prim and proper: “Why can’t they put on some decent clothes and look presentable at home instead of starting their make-up just when you are in a hurry to be off. Stacks of costly sarees, all folded and kept inside, to be worn only when going out. Only silly looking rags to gladden our sight at home.” (Narayan, 1938: 26) We cannot complain that Savitri’s husband is a miser who does not care to buy her good clothes. When Savitri leaves him he complains: “How could she forget the six-sovereign necklace he had
bought for her at the beginning of his career, when he had not a bank
account and was subsisting on insurance canvassing?" (Ibid., 1938: 141)

Ramani is not the intellectual sort and his way of showing his
love is gifting her with sarees and jewels, and as he is egocentric he
expects Savitri to understand his worldly way of lovemaking. His love
is mean and possessive: “It is only the outsider who has the privilege of
seeing a pretty dress”. (Ibid., 1938: 26) But there is no instance of his
complete rejection of Savitri. Even when he is admiring Shantabai he
feels guilty and rude and his sympathy reaches out for Savitri: “He felt
unhappy at thinking disparagingly of his wife. Poor girl, she did her
best to keep him happy and the home running. He told himself that he
was not criticizing her but only implying that with a little education she
might have been even better.” (Ibid., 1938: 89) Ramani is not a brazen
sinner and his sense of guilt is apparent in his mellowed behaviour at
the end of the novel. He stops bullying his wife, eats without criticizing
and goes about with his head hung. He even tries to flatter and please
her.
Savitri’s dark moods too are interspersed with sudden light and happy moments. Although forced to accompany her husband to the cinema, she starts enjoying it and is completely enchanted: “The whole picture swept her mind clear of mundane debris and filled it with superhuman splendours.” (Ibid., 1938: 30) Away for a while from the worries of her children, alone with her husband, her romantic feeling surges on the surface: “As she sat beside her husband, she felt grateful to him and loved him very much, with his blue coat and the faint aroma of a leather suitcase hanging about him.” (Ibid., 1938: 30) Can we blame Ramani for forcing her to leave the children to themselves for a while?

The problem in the novel is not that of chauvinistic husbands exploiting and bullying their wives. It is the problem of two human beings living under the same roof. The two characters are mediocre and uneducated. Enlightened and educated characters would have afforded to be broadminded, uninhibited and thus more elastic. But this elasticity is lacking in Savitri and Ramani who follow the dictates of society and their characters lack the space for accommodating each other. They are egocentric and do not have the imagination to understand each other’s
point of view. Ramani is not a bad father, and we often see him petting his children or sharing a joke or two. But his principle on bringing them up does not tally with that of Savitri’s. When he forces Babu to go to school he is not wrong in his presumption that Babu’s headache is a got-up excuse and Babu is exploiting his mother’s over-indulgence. When Babu confesses that his headache left him in the afternoon he says: “Certainly so that you might not miss the cricket in the evening; isn’t it so?” (Ibid., 1938: 15) He also has the sense of humour that makes him share his childhood secrets with his son: “I’ve been your age and played all these dodges in my time.” (Ibid., 1938: 15) He treats his wife in the same fashion as he treats his children: “You have to learn a lot yet. You are still a child, perhaps a precocious child, but a child all the same.” (Ibid., 1938: 15) Instead of equality and mutual respect, a kind of paternal affection and reproof sometimes constitute Ramani’s addresses to Savitri. This attitude is quite normal in India where husbands are often much older than their wives. Narayan’s treatment of Ramani as an individual subject and not as an object in any pre-conceived scheme of writing prevents the character from turning into a uni-dimensional creation. Though Ramani the mediocre man
lacks any dynamics of possibilities, he is placed between the good and the evil, never to be entrapped into definitive categories. Ramani is dialogic and the dialogue on valuational questions may never end. Savitri is a good mother and a faithful wife in the sense that each day of her life is passed in an unselfish dedication to her husband and children. Yet Savitri too has her limitations, for she looks at everything from her own point of view. This often makes her character stubborn and unbending — specially in matters, which she thinks, is her forte. In spite of her husband’s nagging, Savitri sticks to her own rule in the kitchen. It is interesting that nowhere in the novel do we find Savitri indulging in the luxury that her husband wishes and nags for: “Brinjals, cucumber, radish and greens, all the twelve months in the year and all the thirty days in the month.” (Ibid., 1938: 2) The cook has to make do with the rationed raw materials carefully allotted to him by Savitri. It is only when Savitri shuts herself up in the darkroom that he gets the opportunity to show his master his expertise: “The cook had prepared the meal very well because he had the run of the kitchen cupboard, and he had made unstinting use of rarities like pure ghee and parched coconut while Savitri would have allowed him to use only gingerly oil
and no coconut.” (Ibid., 1938: 54) So it is not merely to deride Savitri that Ramani enjoyed the food that day. Ramani likes to live in a grand style, he wants everyone to have good food, he wants his wife to wear good sarees and look beautiful, he wants his guests to be served with plenty and also wants the leftovers to be distributed among beggars: “Make it a rule everyday to give some food to the beggars.” (Ibid., 1938: 13) Ramani is reasonably well off. Savitri is helped by a servant, a maidservant and a cook. After her husband and children leave she has time to take a nap. She also has the afternoon to herself when she has no work and goes to meet her friends. So Savitri cannot be seen as a toiling slave to her family. She rules over her servants and has complete control over them. She keeps them half-starved, keeps her larders carefully under lock and key, rebukes them when they come late and keeps them busy. As Ramani bullies his wife, Savitri too bullies her servants. Unable to get back on her husband, she gets back on them instead.

*The Darkroom* is polyphonic with numerous characters contributing to the unending dialogue on the relations of men and women, husbands and wives, children and their parents, masters and
servants, bosses and employees. It is carnivalesque because it never allows any character or any group to override the others — and a constant crowning and decrowning goes on. The novel does not uphold any certain ideology, or any placard, nor is it didactic. It is a grotesque world, which avoids any high-flying tenets and keeps itself down to the mundane.

Yet The Darkroom invokes a feeling of pain and loss, and the readers would unanimously call it ‘A moving tale of tormented wife.’ In spite of numerous characters popping up around Savitri and debating on hegemonic gender norms, Savitri remains the least vocal. But a sensitive reader cannot avoid noticing that Savitri, though uneducated and homely, is neither light-hearted nor servile. Her household, which is her forte, is completely in her control and in spite of her husband’s nagging and bullying, there is no evidence of change until she leaves the house. Savitri is serious in her role of a wife and mother and seldom neglects her duties. Gangu acts as a foil who holds forth her fickle moods as a means of skipping now and then the uninspiring duty of making tiffin for the household: “I felt perfectly disgusted with the home, and so threw everything up and came out. Sometimes I do get
into such a mood, you know.” (Ibid., 1938: 98) In contrast, Savitri’s retreat to the darkroom, the only time when the household has to do without her, turns out to be a dark and serious matter. The foil characters of Savitri bring to relief the depth of Savitri’s pain and her silent resistance to what seemed to her as a breach of her right as a wife and mother. It may be argued that while Gangu’s husband is condescending, Ramani is unbending. But it may also be pointed out that Savitri has hardly made herself clear. What Janamma says about her is true — either she has to speak out, or follow her husband blindly, but Savitri can follow neither. Even her sulking in the darkroom is devoid of language and neither her family, her friends, or even the readers have access to what goes on in her suffering soul. But finally when she walks out of her house, breaking away even from the bonds of her children, her silent gesture speaks out firmly. This gesture does not fail to move Ramani: “Ramani got up from bed after a night of disturbed sleep. With all his bravado before his wife, he was very much shaken by her manner. Such a thing had never happened to him at any time for fifteen years. She had always been docile and obedient, and the fire inside her was a revelation to him now. Though he had invited her
to walk out of the house last night, he had not expected her to do it. He had expected she would go into the darkroom and sulk for a few days, a few days more than usual; then she was bound to come to her senses and accept things as they were." (Ibid., 1938: 139) Beyond the callous exterior and egocentric nature nurtured by age-old patriarchal values, Ramani is weak and loving. The important point in the novel is the inability of Ramani and others to comprehend the language of Savitri’s darkroom. When Savitri finally returns Ramani is happy and fusses over her: “Oh, I should have bought some jasmine for you,” he said, looking at her mischievously.” (Ibid., 1938: 207) He is also concerned about her health: “He watched her for a moment while she was eating ‘Oh, how poorly you eat!’ he exclaimed. ‘Have a little more ghee. Eat well, my girl, and grow fat. Don’t fear that you will make me a bankrupt by eating.’” (Ibid., 1938: 208) Pathetically, this happy Ramani is totally unaware of the great change in Savitri who now has a feeling of emptiness – she will never be able to reciprocate his amorous addresses. Trying to smile at his jokes she inwardly reflects: “A part of me is dead …” (Ibid., 1938: 208)
While Ramani fails to understand the depths of Savitri’s suffering in the darkroom, Savitri too fails to understand her husband’s character. Like a spoilt child Ramani loves to be pampered. When Savitri leaves him Ramani is thoroughly shaken and he opens up to the reader: “he expected to be coaxed and requested; he told himself that people could get anything from him if only they knew the proper way of approaching him.” (Ibid., 1938: 139) Ramani’s overbearing attitude is not only directed towards a wife: “He had never tolerated any advice from anyone – not even from his father ....” (Ibid., 1938: 140)

Ramani remains the same till the end and there is no indication of any change in the future. Though a bit mellowed at the unexpected turn of events when Savitri leaves him, it is quite probable that he will bloat up into the same Ramani the moment he gets habituated and feels secured in Savitri’s presence. His affection for his wife is as egocentric as ever and he will remain forever naïve to the change in his wife who will never be the same person again. The following interaction between husband and wife reveal a great gap of understanding that is truly tragic:
He said, “I come home early entirely for your sake, and now you won’t talk to me properly. What is the matter with you?”

“I don’t know. I am all right. I am tired and want to sleep.”

He pleaded with her, later: “Just a pretty half an hour. You can go to bed at ten-thirty. Just a little talk. I came home early for your sake.”

“I can’t even stand. I am very tired. I must sleep.”

“Please yourself,” he said, and went away to his room.

(Ibid., 1938: 208)

Savitri’s change is the result of a deep psychological schism. When she learns about her husband’s affair she enters the darkroom of her psyche, where she finds herself alone. Her previous retreat to the darkroom of her home was a physical segregation for the moment, but she carried on with the wife’s and the mother’s role. Thus a little logic on her social responsibilities brings her out of her private recluse. But now it is different, for here, alone in the darkroom of her mind she sees herself denuded of her social appendages, as the lonely woman who is out of the reach of any social buffer. Here she faces the stark reality and is thoroughly shaken when she faces the eternal questions that has haunted women throughout the history of human civilization: “What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father’s, her husband’s or her son’s.” (Ibid., 1938:
113) It is a carnivalesque question that haunts the subjugated, as it interrogates the examples of womanhood upheld by epics and myths. Her question counters her husband's ideas: "He remembered all the heroines of the epics whose one dominant quality was a blind stubborn following of their husbands, like the shadow following the substance." (Ibid., 1938: 141) The difference in perspective underlines that the heroines have glorified the 'shadow' which Savitri finds hollow and dead.

Savitri's darkrooms are attempts at individualization and segregation that suck away her jolly vitality which society had gifted her. On the verge of a tragedy, Savitri is however deprived of the tragic glory. Savitri's darkrooms prove null and void and ineffective before the staring questions that society enforces a middleclass woman to face. Savitri's is the mind with wings, struggling to be free, but as a caged bird, does not have the capacity to fly. Savitri has to return to her cage because she cannot provide for herself and protect herself from the cruel world. She remembers with longing the security of her home and the duties towards her children and finally chooses it as a better option. The most pathetic part of her return is that during her days in
introspection she has experienced a revelation that has left her hollow. It is her deep realization of her own weakness and ineptitude that is axiomatic, and her inability to accept the materiality that she discovers at the base of human bondage. She will never be the same again and from now onwards her compromises will stare at her with reinforced meaning.

III

One of the important points that should be considered in the understanding of carnival is its location. Goethe realized while witnessing a New Year Carnival in Rome, that it is not an occasion of the state, but is something the people ‘give themselves’. For this reason the carnival is held in the public square. Goethe’s eye-witness account inspired Bakhtin when he wrote *Rabelais and His World* where he underlines the significance of the thousand-year-old development of popular culture that, according to Bakhtin not only energized literature and culture in the past but continues to be a potent force even today. Gardiner writes: “‘Carnival’ is Bakhtin’s term for a bewildering constellation of rituals, games, symbols, and various carnal excesses
which together constitute an alternative ‘social space’ of freedom, abundance and equality.” (Gardiner, 1992: 45) Ken Hirsckop uses ‘democracy’ as the key term to his understanding of Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism, heteroglossia and carnival. Undoubtedly the expanse of the public square where people feel, speak and behave freely inspires the idea of a democratic culture. It is that space which, when entered into, transforms the egocentric into the historical being – the one among many. It is idealistic in the sense that it emanates from a spirit of sharing, understanding and participation. Gardiner further writes: “In one of the fragments dedicated to Goethe and the Bildungsroman Bakhtin wrote eloquently of the moment when ‘the image of the becoming person begins to overcome its private character (of course, within certain limits) and to enter a completely different spacious sphere of historical being’.” (Ibid., 1992: 45) The public square is a place where people feel free to express themselves and the collective existence frees people from fear and turns them bold.

Therefore, the public square tends to create characters who are rogues, and those who exist on the borders of social boundaries to defy the establishment or laugh at its serious strictures. The public square
swarms with fools, clowns, rogues who are free from inhibition, shame, and responsibility. However, these characters survive not as individuals but as part of the mass, for their personalities merge with the mass and are tossed and turned according to the tide of the mass consciousness. Bakhtin in his thesis on carnival elaborates how participants in a carnival are crowned and decrowned showing mankind in the ambiguous light of the king and the clown. Since these participants survive on the public square, they are rendered as superficial beings and there is no attempt to explore the depths and privacies of their personalities. For this reason these characters do not develop but evolve being caught up in the tide of the public life and metamorphose from one state to another.

R.K. Narayan’s polyphonic world is carnivalesque that brims with characters without identity who are always on the borderlines. Countering the usual trend of the 19th century European Fiction of using private closeted space and epical time-scheme that was adopted by many Indian writers, Narayan uses the public square as the location where time is not sequential but metamorphic. In Narayan’s novels the openness of the narrative space embraces courtyards, stations, taxi
stands where numerous faces appear and disappear, giving the overall impression of life as a generative process. It is not the world of the individual but of the nameless and faceless crowd, the surging humanity. This crowded existence coheres as the principle of sensual bodily unity. Consequently, this continuity underpins a much larger vision of continuity of life through mutations and its regeneration. This is a world-view rooted in all folk cultures. Narayan is inspired by this world-view full of births, marriages and deaths, without any attempt to sentimentalize them and segregate them as self-enclosed units. Here, whatever happens to the individual is not created by the individual’s own psychological complexities but by society and its governing principle of the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’. However, the characters hold dear their secret desires and on the very first opportunity they subvert the societal norms. The role of the crowd or mass is important as it has the power to crown the clown as the king and again decrown him. This spirit invades the whole space and for good or bad, power is constantly relativized.

In *The Guide* the carnival crowd turns into an overwhelming agent. Though all of Narayan’s novels swarm with both familiar and
strange faces, creating the atmosphere that we find in market places or community-halls, it would not be wrong to single out *The Guide*, where the role of the crowd is quite significant. In *The Guide* Narayan presents Raju and his world in the form of grotesque realism where the human body acquires the value of an open signifier. In this world, Raju as the hero is not an autonomous self-sufficient object, but rather a part of a collective, indivisible unity where the temporal drives supersede other boundaries and merge with the external world. The result is ambivalent, for though Raju is an active agent who interacts with the world around him, the external world too influences Raju’s life by its inexorable agency. This life of the ‘lower bodily stratum’ as Bakhtin puts it, is constituted of symbolic oppositions like praise/abuse, crowning/decrowning etc. as if in rhythm with the earth that is at once the creator and the destroyer, the womb and the grave. Unlike the image of the individual body which is closed, private, psychologized and torn away from social and cosmic life, all events that occur to the grotesque agent happens on the boundary of society. While anything that happens to the individual concerns the individual alone and takes on a single meaning, the grotesque agent is hyperbolized and his
meaning becomes transgressive. What ever happens to Raju is not autonomous, rational and self-directed, nor is it the outcome of the deep unconscious, the *a-priori* inner-structure of his psychology. Rather, Raju is a reflexive agent whose life is grounded in the collective body of the mass which retains a distinctive relation to society that is reflexive, subversive, unpredictable and heterodox. So, instead of a dialectical growth, Raju’s life unpredictably metamorphoses.

While reading the story of Raju in *The Guide*, the reader is made uncannily aware of the overwhelming presence of the mass of people as the most powerful representative. It will tolerate no individualistic existence, no romantic privacy of soul-searching. Raju’s skill of mesmerizing others with falsehood is evoked only by the audience itself, it is inspired by the presence of the faceless crowd.

It may be noticed that from his boyhood Raju is surrounded by such faceless multitudes who come to his village, stop at his father’s shop for a chat. He does not remember their faces or bother to look at them — they are the vague figures existing in the light and shade of the oil lamp. Their constant shoptalk is like a meaningless hum that he listens without understanding. Somehow they influence him and form
an important part of his boyhood consciousness. They emanate a sense of life outside Raju’s individualistic existence and forecast Raju’s future that gradually gets entangled in the consciousness of society.

When the great structure of the railway station is built the hint of another set of people, different from the rustics, pervades the scene. Although there is hardly any mention of the workers who built the railway, their existence is felt in Raju’s existence. His life changes a bit, taking on a shade slightly different from the previous one. The privacy of the tamarind-tree-shade where Raju played by himself is gone. The topography of the place changes with stranded lorries and piles of red earth creating fantastic mountains. This attracts a cowherd boy and his intrusion irritates Raju. Apart from losing his private existence Raju displays great receptivity by appropriating the vulgar slang from the faceless railway workers. It is a taste of freedom from the barriers of propriety in language, a subversion of the official world that spreads its tentacles through parental grooming. Through his transformation, in the disclosing of his rhetorical skill, Raju enters the consciousness of the subordinate mass who have their own habitual social practices that are oppositional and resistant to dominant
discourses. According to Gardiner the French social theorist Michel de Certeau (1984), considers it as the ‘oppositional practices of everyday life’.

As a punishment for his waywardness, Raju is sent to school. But the school is also chaotic, being full of indisciplined boys and an abusive teacher. Along with being disciplined, Raju tastes the thrill of breaking rules. Whenever the master’s back is turned, the children tear pages from their notebooks, and float their boats in the drain water that flows beneath the pyol. Raju’s short stay in the pyol school is spent in reflexive interaction with indistinct faces, as the writer never bothers to draw the boys out in clear outlines. It is a mass existence where no friendship is mentioned that would have given a personal touch to the scene.

The life’s journey of Raju from boyhood to youth is not shown as stages of growing up but as metamorphosed into different roles like the Railway Raju and the eloquent guide. The passage of time is indicated through the crowd that now surrounds Raju. These are the tourists curious of the little known place named Malgudi which now has its name in the map of Indian Railways. Interestingly, instead of
providing a picturesque detail of the tide of people that now populate
the newly built station of Malgudi, Narayan, is abrupt and plain in
conveying their influence on Raju’s life. It is a very successful method
of fusing Raju’s destiny to the whims of the faceless mass and
depicting their overwhelming power. Sitting in his shop it is through
conversation that Raju enters the consciousness of his customers: “I
liked to talk to people. I liked to hear people talk. I liked customers
who would not open their mouths merely to put a plantain in, and
would say something, on any subject except the state of crops, price of
commodities, and litigation.” (Narayan, 1958:43) Thus Raju exchanges
his father’s world for a new emerging world. He adopts the language of
the new set of people and his career takes different turns. It is the
dazzling art of exhibitionism that touches Raju and he in the process
projects a fantastic myth about Malgudi. This myth draws more and
more tourists towards Malgudi. “Malgudi and its surroundings were my
special show. I could let a man have a peep at it or a whole panorama.
It was adjustable. I could give them a glimpse of a few hours or soak
them in mountain and river scenery or archeology for a whole week. I
could not really decide how much to give or withhold until I knew how
much cash the man carried or, if he carried a cheque-book, how good it was.” (Ibid., 1958: 54) Raju’s power over his customers is quite apparent, but it is simultaneously perceptible how the influence of the mass drags Raju’s life towards unforeseen dangers. Raju soon lives on lies and deception.

When Rosie’s success on the stage brings name and prosperity, Raju is puffed up with self-importance and indulges in self-congratulation: “When I watched her in a large hall with a thousand eyes focused on her, I had no doubt that people were telling themselves and each other, ‘There he is, the man but for whom —’ and I imagined all this adulation lapping around my ears like wavelets.” (Ibid., 1958: 162) Raju now wears a false mantle and disguises his own identity with his artful pretentions and hoodwinks the crowd. Yet the unpredictable potential of the crowd ultimately overwhelms Raju. It is the faceless crowd that is always there pushing and prodding with garlands and money. Beside its looming power Raju’s self-importance turns comic and pathetic. He is the clown in the garb of a king and carries the false impression that this state is eternal, until the crowd decrowns him. The power of the mass becomes clear when Raju, who had previously
moved about proudly through the crowd slips away from them into the safer custody of the police-car. Though it is Marco who sends Raju to jail for forgery, Raju has to maintain his status in front of the crowd, to save himself from a volte-face. He pleadingly whispers to the Police Superintendent: "Please don't create a scene now. Wait until the end of the show, and till we are back home." (Ibid., 1958: 191)

The most compelling potency of the mass consciousness is evident in the scene where Raju turns into a Swami on the banks of Sarayu. Velan, followed by the faceless villagers and later on crowds from all over the country turn him into a saint. Paradoxically, his enforced sainthood with all accompanying adulations is a sort of decrowning, for he loses his individual will power. His attempts to regain his own private life fail. Desperately he wants to reveal his tainted past to Velan, but fails. He would rather shoulder all of Velan's hatred to regain a normal ordinary existence, but Velan remains unperturbed. Velan is merely the personification of blind faith that has infected the mass and endowed them with a strange power. Raju had once gloated in his skill of hoodwinking the mass but the mass
consciousness subverts his superego. At the brink of his life’s end Raju’s consciousness gets merged with the will of the people.

The final scene of Raju’s life is a veritable carnival. Raju’s penance and fasting is to bring rain that in turn will bring the promise of abundant harvest for the people. This is the principle of the earth and the lower bodily life of man – for life to continue sacrifice and death are required. This theme runs in all the rituals and myths of the folk culture. It is a culture that would never allow any solipsism, nor individualism. The folk consciousness is always plural, communal; it is a life-force that must continue ruthlessly on its own dead remains, for death is not an end but it is the beginning of life and hence regenerative. So, death is not an occasion for regret or melancholy; the seed of life that death promises evokes festivity. We perceive this festivity around Raju, while he lies dying. We see children playing happily or gaping at free film shows, women wearing their best sarees and jewels adding a touch of colour and life to the scene, cooking festive dishes that spread aroma all over the place, men sipping tea, watching body-builders flaunting their muscles, or gambling, and peddlers selling balloons, reed whistles and sweets. The total
incongruity of the scene subverts the heavy authoritarian impression of
death. The fear of death evaporates. It is the life of the human body,
vibrant, carnal and ruthlessly happy that pervades. In this world, Raju
does not get the chance to enclose his life into a single unity of
meaning; it remains open, unfinished, and disappears into the
continuity of a communal life.

Critics have often complained that Narayan uses a language that
is bland and lacking in richness and depth. They even go to the extent
of questioning his versatility as an author. However, if his language
sounds too plain and frugal, it has succeeded in achieving the effect of
impressing upon us the temporal and temperamental nature of human
life. The story of Raju has all the aspects to entice the audience of a
film, but the cinematized version of the novel has individualized Raju
with its monologic focus, and the looming crowd that creates a
different ambience in the novel is forgotten. It is Narayan’s language
that saves the novel from turning into a scandalous love-story. Narayan
checks any emotive tendency of a writer to explore the feelings and
emotions of his characters. Instead, we hear the voices of Raju and
Rosie, distinct but casual, as we hear the multitudinous sounds of daily
life. Some are less distinct, and still others are silent. But their presence is felt through certain abrupt hints made by the author. For example, the husband of Rosie is done in simple sketch. He is a lonely figure absorbed in his lonely passion for cave-paintings. It is not known why he marries Rosie. It is undecipherable why he marries at all. It is also not known why he hates the idea of Rosie dancing. Is it male chauvinism or is it the traditional prejudice against this art? It is not known what goes on in his heart when he hears about Rosie’s affair with Raju. He is like a solitary stranger amidst a crowd.

Another sketch in Raju’s mother — the typical middle class woman who cannot pull herself away from the pressures of society and become an individual. She sees Rosie as a guest and cannot bring herself to be rude to her and tell her on her face that she is not wanted. Rosie’s pleasing nature draws her to Rosie in spite of herself. But again her traditional prejudices make it hard for her to live under the same roof with a dancing girl who is a social outcast and looked down upon.

Gullur, the porter’s son, Joseph, Velan, the American journalist, the schoolmaster and the Police Superintendent are part of the hazy crowd drawn a little more distinctly than the rest to give the faceless
crowd a little more realism — as often done in a painting where crowds drawn are often combinations of some distinct and some hazy figures. The overall feeling captured is that of life in its dailiness, life torn with hunger, passion, awe or celebration. While Raju is dying, the crowd is celebrating around him, having picnics and film shows. It is an unsentimental, non-idealistic physical existence, callous yet forceful. The ironic mode helps the writer to achieve this end. It is downright unromantic, unlike its filmed version; it is the overturning of all ideologies we tend to weave around human existence.

**IV**

"Carnival is a gap in the fabric of society. And since the dominant ideology seeks to author the social order as a unified text, fixed, complete, and forever, carnival is a threat." (Clark & Holquist, 1984: 301) Carnival promises freedom from gloomy eternal categories — it promises change and renewal in the future and in that sense it is utopian. Such utopian dreams lurk in Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival in literature. In Narayan’s autobiographical novel *The English Teacher* this dream for man’s return to the bare basics of existence is possible
only when man’s communal empathy subverts his ego. It is the plurality of folk consciousness that Narayan exemplifies in Susila’s heavenly existence or in the little unknown school for children headed by a teacher who seems slightly odd when placed against what the ‘official world’ considers as normal. Though against any idealization, the concept of carnival has ironically — “a strong element of idealization, even utopian visionariness ...” (Ibid., 1984: 310)

Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘official world’ emanates, according to Clarke and Holquist, from his Russian experience of forced collectivization to homogenize the rural economy and ethnic diversity as well. He also saw the formation of the Writers’ Union in 1932 which succeeded in centralizing Soviet literature only at the institutional level. Thus terms like ‘unified language’, ‘centralization’, ‘official genres’ ‘canonized ideology’ are the markers of what Bakhtin meant by the ‘official’. For his sensitive soul, this totalitarian experience was suffocating, and he sought relief in the heteroglossia which work at the levels of religion, politics, society and language. Bakhtin realized that the ‘official world’ depended for its survival on the human fear of segregation and extinction. The official world projected God as totally
unsympathetic to human desires or to the language of the human body; it believed politics to be dictatorial and society authoritarian that dictated language to be prim and proper. Bakhtin, to his utter relief, finds in the folk culture a total subversion of the official fear. Bakhtin welcomes the carnival world-view that demystifies death and makes it an ordinary and natural phenomenon; it is only the other face of life.

Bakhtin is influenced and inspired by the thoughts of his teacher in the Classics Department of Petrograd University – Faddei F. Zelinsky. Zelinsky makes distinction between the official culture of a society and its more vital unofficial culture and draws Bakhtin’s appreciation. Both men believe in the potential of the folk for undermining the heaviness and dogmatism of the high culture; they also believed, say Clark and Holquist, that there should not be an absolute break between the world of the gods and that of human desires, between the divine and the human, the high and the low.

In the colonized India the intelligentsia were obsessed with the search for an Indian identity, and in the process attempted to centralize Indian ethos. There was the Brahma movement that was totally an elite endeavour to uphold the theory of the single God that hardly
synchronized with the common man’s imagination. Tagore’s romantic epiphanic religion and Gandhi’s humanitarian missionary zeal were beyond the common man’s comprehension. So they continued to live with their gods who blessed their household or intermingled with the cycles of reaping and sowing. The common people domesticated religion by depicting gods as quarrelling, loving, politicizing and behaving like themselves. Narayan as a writer is totally soaked in this sub-culture that happens at the grass-root level and chooses to write in the humorous form because it is non other than this form that can truly capture this reality. It is truly an ambivalent experience because the spirit is seen as enfleshed with all the associated symptoms of the flesh.

*The English Teacher* is a novel that is informed by the problematics of knowing oneself as a human being and as an author. In spite of Bakhtin’s propagation of Socratic dialogue, ironically Bakhtin too had no other way but to express his views in the form of linguistic philosophies and literacy theories. Theorizing is unavoidable, and the exceptionality of the homo sapiens in the animal world is his constant turning round at himself and trying to measure, evaluate and find a name for his own inspirations and endeavours. In Narayan’s case, the
shock of his wife’s death turns his lighter days into a more somber mood of introspection. According to Tagore, when death strikes, it turns into a moment of our awakening to the presence of God. Death turns Narayan’s thoughts to the problems of human bonding, the longing of the soul to communicate, to build bridges between islands of isolation.

It has already been shown how, like the rest of Narayan’s works, *The English Teacher* too uses the polyphonic technique. In fact, Narayan cannot express otherwise, but the paradox is that, he has to reveal himself as an author. The carnival spirit of challenging the sanctified official world is there, which comes out through the use of polyphony, yet one distinct voice of the author may be located, and this is what makes *The English Teacher* an exception. It is, what Bakhtin might have called the monologic authorial voice, though it may also be shown that this single distinct voice does not channelize the whole novel towards a single monologic goal. This distinct voice argues in favour of a greater freedom of expression and learning, in favour of embracing the heterogeneities of the world and criticizes the ‘official world’s careful elimination, categorization and promotion of solipsism.
In short — to speak for a heteroglotic truth in a democratized polyphonic world, Narayan has to use a monologic voice in an otherwise polyphonic structure.

It has already been shown how in *The English Teacher* the protagonist slips away from all the bondages of stipulated roles that tend to limit and entrap social man. It has also been analysed how polyphony in the novel prevents any sentimentalization of death and instead brings out surprising and unexpected reactions among its observers.

In Narayan’s work, death is not a phenomenon that individuates or segregates, but in spite of the shock and pain, it turns out to be a part of life. When Krishna’s wife dies, the concerned people, with their sympathies and suggestions do not leave him alone, and Krishna’s social responsibility as a father doubles, leaving very little time for him to cocoon himself into his suffering self. His tryst with death and afterlife is never always alone, because while communicating with his dead wife, he is assisted by a friend. And the most surprising part of it is that his dead wife’s soul is not alone, for she is surrounded by a community of dead souls who help her in every way. Instead of the
mysterious individual ‘I’ she has turned into a happy ‘we’. This rendering of death and afterlife is totally ‘unofficial’; it does not tally with the bulk of serious writing that always project death as an isolated phenomenon, a mystery. Susila’s happy soul is a stark contrast to the Gothic spirits who are lonely and haunted by darkness.

Working in this world, Narayan’s personal tragedy turns into an unsceptic dialogue with death and afterlife, as we see in *The English Teacher*, and there is no hesitation on the part of Narayan, even as an intellectual, to depict it in very ordinary terms.

Many readers, so Narayan writes, find the earlier part of *The English Teacher* interesting, and the later part displeasing or disgusting — “feeling that they have been baited with the domestic picture into tragedy, death and nebulous, impossible speculations.” (Narayan, 1974: 135)

Critics have been put off by the parapsychology and many have deplored Narayan’s taking resort in occultism. However, P.S. Sundaram, quite reasonably, finds coherence between Krishna’s character who sees the burning *ghat* as a ‘cloakroom’ and his
willingness to listen to the voices of the dead. Other critics rely on his autobiography *My Days* where Narayan writes: “More than any other book *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content ...” (Ibid., 1974: 134) or his interview with Ved Mehta where he says that everything he has set down in *The English Teacher* actually happened to him. K.K. Sharma writes: “However, I feel that it is not improbable because it is the actual record of the novelist’s own life ...”. (Ram, 1981: 100)

Instead of getting stuck on the question of its improbability why not treat it as another double-voiced mode of literary expression? Krishna’s communion with his wife not only coheres with his character, it also reveals the attitude of the genre to death which is rendered in the novel in earthly terms, with the dead mingling in the daily chores of Krishna’s life. If Krishna conceives his wife’s after-life in the light of romantic Platonism it is but natural, for he is a scholar well acquainted with Plato’s ideas. Susila’s description of her state is the ideal which the mortal strives to achieve, and the divine light is not alien or unearthly but a state of joy and fulfillment, that, as a desire, nestles close to our heart. Susila describes: “Our life is one of thought
and experience. Thought is something which has solidity and power, and as in all existence ours is also a life of aspiration, striving, and joy. A considerable portion of our state is taken up in meditation, and our greatest ecstasy is in feeling the Divine Light flooding us.” (Narayan, 1946: 130) Interestingly, this state of joy and fulfillment sometimes visits the earthly mortal. Tagore, in a poem expresses a similar state of the mind — the sudden realization of divine light and music, when one morning he feels the rays of the rising sun penetrating his soul. The description of Susila about the effects of after-life reminds us of this earth, its green pastures, and the ideal combination of leisure and music that rejoice us in our wish-fulfilment dreams: “We’ve ample leisure. We are not constrained to spend it in any particular manner. We have no need for exercise as we have no physical bodies. Music is ever with us here, and it transports us to higher planes …” (Ibid., 1946: 130) Yet all these do not sum up Krishna’s tryst with Death and afterlife or his “attempt to turn the other side of the medal of existence, which is called Death …”. (Ibid., 1946: 114) Like all the paradoxes of the common man’s religious experience, which is a confusion of the spiritual and the material Krishna’s experience too is paradoxical. There are certain lines
in the communication which, in spite of Susila’s claim of being transported to a higher plane, express her in petty material terms and show her still enveloped in earthly senses and desires. By depicting her so, Narayan very successfully demystifies death. It is a carnivalesque conception of death that does not tolerate anything mystic and vague. So there is no attempt on the part of Narayan to keep it screened behind a fog of mystery. It is an unflinching eye-to-eye contact and the conversation is as homely as any other conversation in life. Susila, like any other woman is still fond of beautiful sarees and flowers to decorate her tresses. She always takes care to describe her sarees: “I am wearing a pale orange dress with a clasp of brilliants to hold it in position.” (Ibid., 1946: 132) And again: “My dress tonight is shimmering blue interwoven with light and stars. I have done my hair parted on the left (And what a load of jasmine and other rare flowers I’ve in my hair for your sake!).” (Ibid., 1946: 132) It may be observed that the colour of her sarees change according to the light, orange in the morning and blue at night. This gives an impression of translucence. P.S. Sundaram has rightly compared her to the sylphs and gnomes of Pope’s poetry: “Those who have passed over are like Pope’s sylphs and
gnomes not very different from what they were on earth: they certainly are not omniscient or infallible.” (Sundaram, 1973: 54) Susila’s existence in the after-life is enfolded by the sensuous — the sight, the smell and the sound. Unlike the other two senses — touch and taste, these three senses are paradoxical, for they express at the same time the material as well as the spiritual. But Susila is further brought down to earth by her fallibility; she is not above material desire. We find that she is still fond of perfumes, “Do you know what a wonderful perfume I have put on!” (Narayan, 1946: 130) All these desires are materially expressed in the trunks of sarees and the loads of toilet boxes she used to cherish in her life. While rummaging through her possessions Krishna remembers her in her collection of empty scent bottles, dozens of sarees and hundreds of jackets in all shades; they reveal her feminine weakness for them. Again, her love for music in the afterlife is not any divine transition; she used to be secretly fond of it: “You might have thought I did not very much care for music when on earth, but as a matter of fact I was really intensely interested in it ...”. (Ibid., 1946: 131). Even after death, Susila is still sentimental about her letters: “‘And yet you have destroyed every one of them!’ She said. ‘You
found it possible to destroy every one of them!'" (Ibid., 1946: 117) She has carried away with her the longing for the beautiful ivory casket and wants her husband to find it. She claims it to be her own, gifted to her by her mother-in-law. However, her mother-in-law’s version is a bit different: “Susila used to be fond of it and had once or twice even made bold to ask for it. But somehow I didn’t give it to her ...”. (Ibid., 1946: 173) Even in life desiring is possessing and therefore Susila is not above such earthly longings. In the question of death and life there is a reversal of perception. Narayan in this novel describes death in ordinary terms and instead gifts life with a spiritual intensity. While Susila’s spirit is enfolded in her own earthly desires and is not above folly and mistake, Krishna’s daily ordinary chores are punctuated by moments of intense spiritual reawakening: “On my way home, through the dark night, across Nallapa’s Grove my feet felt lighter, because I knew she was accompanying me.” (Ibid., 1946: 135) Again, the aroma of jasmine turns a certain night intensely meaningful: “Their essences came forth into the dark night as I lay in bed, bringing new vigour with them. The atmosphere became surcharged with strange spiritual forces.” (Ibid., 1946: 183)
While depicting Krishna's interactions with the dead wife, the problem that comes out foremost and assumes significance is the problem of depiction and communication. Krishna's first session with his friend who acts as a medium to the spirit reveals this message: "Here we are, a band of spirits who've been working to bridge the gulf between life and after-life. We have been looking about for a medium through whom we could communicate." (Ibid., 1946: 112)

The conviction that is underpinned is communication. To the spirits it is an effort to communicate with the mortal world and the reverse is also true in case of Krishna. However, the idea of the communication can be extended to other spheres — the author trying to communicate with his readers, the teachers with his students. Communication is the key. Communication helps to negotiate between people and worlds. This very idea precisely hinges upon dialogism. The dialogic imagination bridges the gaps, concretizes communication and brings to focus the ontological boundaries — life and death — through which a fictional narrative evolves. Krishna's own reflections as an English teacher bear out the argument: "What tie was there between me and them? Did I absorb their personalities as did
the old masters and merge them in mine?” (Ibid., 1946: 12) He is quite conscious of the fact that each human being lives in different worlds of time and space and is nurtured in a different ambience, and the attempt to forcefully homogenize them through any system (here he points out at the education system) is atrocious: “Born in different households, perhaps petted, pampered, and bullied, by parents, uncles, brothers — all persons known to them and responsible for their growth and welfare. Who was I that they should obey my command?” (Ibid., 1946: 12) While trying to discipline his students he mentally names it — “The lion tamer’s touch!” (Ibid., 1946: 12)

At first Krishna’s communication with his wife’s spirit is filled with anticipated excitement yet troubled with obstacles. According to the helping soul, who initiates the conversation Susila is eager and excited and is not able to collect her thoughts easily. She gives a wrong name of her daughter when asked. This disappoints Krishna but the helping soul explains: “... but since we use the mechanism of your friend’s writing, more often than not his mind interferes, bringing up its own selections.” (Ibid., 1946: 115-16) One cannot help finding similarities in the obstacles of communication in other fields too. Later,
in a different sitting, Susila describes the ideal condition of her new world which sounds platonic: "Between thought and fulfillment there is no interval. Thought is fulfillment, motion and everything. That is the main difference between our physical state and yours. In your state a thought to be realized must always be followed by effort directed towards conquering obstructions and inertia — that is the nature of the material world." (Ibid., 1946: 131-32) To communicate with this material world the spirits need the medium of a human being. It is similar to the author’s problem, who needs the medium of language to express the abstract thought.

Language too has a life of its own, its own systems of connotations which mar and mediate in the author’s way of expression. This problem troubles the author who finds that the process of expression cannot avoid or bypass the problematics of this material world.

In The English Teacher, for the first time, Narayan is not polemical; he foregrounds the problematics toward a certain theory of creation. He shows, through Krishna’s intense struggle against his own ego how to reach that state of mind which is ideal for the realization of
another consciousness — i.e., his wife's spirit. Thus it is not only the
obstruction created by the medium's mind but also Krishna's own self
that has to be free from his own impressions about Susila, and open it
to receive Susila's personality. Susila asks her husband:

Why don't you allow yourself to move round about me? Now you just picture me in your mind and do not allow
your thoughts to move an inch this side or that. This rigid
exercise does not help our contact. By your intense and
severe thought you make almost a stone image of me in
your brain. Your thoughts must give me greater scope for
movement within an orbit of feelings. Your mind may
now be compared to the body of a yogi who sits
motionless. This is not what you seek to achieve, do you? I
want you to keep your mind at these times open for my
impression. What happens now is that your mind is full of
your thoughts of me, which are unrelaxed, and I find it
difficult to move about in your head and heart. (Ibid.,
1946: 160)

She further explains: "What is still required is that you should be able
to receive my thoughts. It can be done only if you do not make a stone
image of me. I want you to behave just as you would if I were
conversing with you. You would pay attention. Now it borders on
worship." (Ibid., 1946: 160) To worship someone is an egocentric
activity as the self indulges in creating its own idealistic impression,
which he or she endows on the object of worship. The worshipper
creates the stone image to materialize his or her feelings and give it permanency. Narayan, as we have already discussed, is against the finalization of the characters that he has created in his novels. Like Bakhtin he votes for the open and participating author who would not be absorbed in his own egocentric impressions but pay attention to the character as Susila has aptly put it – like a conversation where one listens to the other. There is a beautiful passage where Susila is telling her husband that as she is constantly feeling his thoughts there is also the need “for the reverse process to take place that is, for you to feel my thoughts.” (Ibid., 1946: 158) This reminds us of Bakhtin’s describing of Christ as a symbol of the ‘self for the other’, a kind of religiosity that should permeate the author’s world of creation. Narayan creates a beautiful passage to express how this selfless reception of the other’s consciousness often eludes us. Susila asks her husband to think of her when he sees the moonlight shining upon the water surface. Suddenly, in a passive and peaceful state of mind the meaning of her statement dawns on him:

“Weeks ago, in my period of desolation, as I sat on the sands of Sarayu, a late moon rose in the East, and the flowing water shimmered with it. It only added to my desolation. Again, it reminded me of my wife. How often
had she expressed a wish to walk along the river in moonlight, and for all the years of married life I had not been able to give her that fulfillment even once; some pointless thing postponed it every time; we never went out in moonlight at all. And this regret tormented me when I saw moonlight on water, that night ...”. (Ibid., 1946: 158)

Susila is not complete in the divination that haloes her now but in Krishna’s realizing of her petty desires for an ivory casket, flowers and perfumes, her concern for her daughter or her unquenched wish to walk on the banks of Sarayu. In her life she was not part of Krishna’s consciousness because as she was always there, there was no attempt on the part of Krishna to enlarge his mind to comprehend her. After her death, Krishna’s yearning to commune with her and realize her leads him to shed the barriers of his own ego and merge with her; this personality of Susila is not an ideal whole, but an amalgamation of little nondescript likes and dislikes, aspirations and desires. In Narayan’s world, as in Bakhtin’s, the ideal is not the truth; meaning and truth lie in every nondescript bits and pieces of life.

Krishna’s experience simulates the author’s, who, after days of intense struggle in vague confusion suddenly sees the light that could lead him to creative fulfillment. To reach this state, the author has to
readjust himself, controlling the blind rush of diverse emotions. Krishna, near the end of the novel describes this calm after a storm, which anticipates fulfillment: “It was a perpetual excitement, over promising some new riches in the realm of experience and understanding. I sat up at nights faithfully following the instructions she had given, keeping my mind open, and I was beginning to be aware of a slight improvement in my sensibilities. There was a real cheerfulness growing within me, memory hurt less, and I was more and more aware of vague perceptions, like a three-quarter deaf man catching the rustle of a dress of someone he loves ...” (Ibid., 1946: 168)

The constant harping on the idea that sorrow hinders true understanding and that the ‘necessary mental atmosphere’ is the ‘calm’ ‘unruffled’ self that helps it to be ‘passive’ and ‘receptive’ is perhaps realized from the writer’s real life experience, when, after a long interval of literary stasis he attempted to express a certain part of his life in The English Teacher. Krishna’s experience had been Narayan’s, and his happy marital life was cut-short by his young wife’s sudden demise. This shock had left him dry, and for many years his sorrow and
emotional turbulence crippled his creative life. *The English Teacher* was written seven years after his last novel *The Darkroom*. So, after this long interval when he attempted to recreate the most sensitive period of his personal life, it must have been a true struggle between Narayan the husband and father and Narayan the writer. Thus the problem of unbiased rendition and the problem of human understanding and bondage haunted him more than anything else. Through his intense labour to write, Narayan for the first time consciously attempts to trace the architectonics of his works. Here Narayan talks loudly to himself and thus experiences the formation of a philosophy that he has till now inadvertently used. What he speaks about in *The English Teacher*, we have found in the novels he had written previously. However, this self-analysis was necessary for we find that after *The English Teacher* Narayan is able to explore, perhaps more consciously, diverse other worlds of human consciousnesses that are a shade different from the worlds of Swami and Chandran. Though very successfully depicted in a polyphonic technique, Swami and Chandran are shadows of Narayan’s own past and do not reach the perfection of roguery that we find in the Rajus and Vasus of the later novels. Only Ramani of *The Darkroom*
anticipates them. Narayan’s exploration of these rogue characters reveals more truly the ambivalence and double-voicedness that is carnivalesque, and truly describes Narayan’s worldview as an author.

Narayan’s self-exploration does not end with a particular view on unbiased authorization. He is also aware of his own perspective on truth and the depiction of it. For Narayan, like Bakhtin, truth is not something unique and homogeneous. The attempt to select and eliminate in order to create the illusion of unity does not find favour with both of them. For Narayan, as he expresses through Krishna, it is a disease imported from the West. Krishna, with some irritation describes Mr. Brown thus: “I looked at him in despair; his western mind, classifying, labelling, departmentalizing ...” (Ibid., 1946: 179) Narayan conceives of truth in all its ambivalences and the world in all its homogeneity. There is hardly any novel where Narayan has not happily brought together all the incongruous images that one sees in life. It is a sort of realism that is caught in an active camera if it is left to itself in a bazaar, or a tape recorder that goes on recording all the disjuncted sounds we produce when we gather somewhere and are oblivious of the live recording. In *The Darkroom*, the children of
Savitri innocently create such a world when they decorate their toys on the eve of the ‘Navaratri’. While the children unpack the dolls, hundreds of them, the jumble looks “like the creation of an eccentric god who had not yet created a world.” (Narayan, 1938: 37) It is this chaotic state, which constantly initiates a process of becoming that fascinates Narayan’s imagination. It is a state that is still outside the strict boundaries of definitions, and children, fresh and free from any compulsion towards creating unitary meanings, create them. The ‘Navaratri’ platform decorated by the children is truly illuminating:

In an hour a fantastic world was raised: a world inhabited by all God’s creations that the human mind had counted; creatures in all gay colours and absurd proportions and grotesque companies. There were green parrots which stood taller than the elephants beside them; there were horses of yellow and white and green colours dwarfed beside painted brinjals; there was a finger-sized Turkish soldier with not a bit of equipment missing; the fat, round-bellied merchant, wearing a coat on his bare body, squatted there, a picture of contentment, gazing at his cereals before him, unmindful of the company of a curly-tailed dog of porcelain on one side and a grimacing tiger on the other .... (Ibid., 1938: 39-40)

Ignoring any classification, labelling, difference of stature and status, it is in fact, a confusion that defies and subverts the strictly organized ‘official world’ and looks like the ambience of a carnival where every
participant is relativized. Here Lord Krishna’s divinity is relativized by
the fat bear at his side and the green parrot’s stature, which is higher
than the elephant’s questions the stateliness of the elephant that we tend
to endow it with.

_The English Teacher_ depicts this world of incongruous objects
gathered together which can be perceived in the cardboard box where
Leela keeps her toys, and her rag book that illustrates incongruous
objects like a tiger, an apple, a lion and Sam which the child accepts
unquestioningly as the normal protagonists of an imaginative story.
Leela’s intense interest in the catalogue of miscellaneous articles is
shared only by the headmaster whose school is shown as the paradigm
of this world, to which Narayan, through Krishna, finally falls back on.
Before discussing the significance of the children’s school in the novel
it should first be noted that most of the images and scenes of
heterogeneity are connected with children and so we realize that what
the headmaster speaks about children is also what Narayan believes and
aspires for. Here, the headmaster becomes the author’s mouthpiece and
his school is the materialization of Krishna’s aspiration for a greater
freedom. The schoolmaster sees in the children a sense of freedom, the
elasticity to accommodate more and a greater clear-sightedness: “It is wonderful how much they can see and do!” (Narayan, 1946: 124) They are his inspiration and undoubtedly the principles that govern the children’s world were seen by Narayan as the conditions of creativity. The headmaster exclaims: “When I watch them, I get a glimpse of some purpose in existence and creation.” (Ibid., 1946: 125) The purpose of existence that the headmaster is pointing out is definitely different from the artificial purposiveness that society creates and which is exemplified in The English Teacher by the self-inflated college teachers who fall under Krishna’s constant criticism. The students in the college are methodically pruned to fit into categories. Krishna sees through the artificiality of the system and so his classes and lectures ring hollow to his own ears. In contrast the school creates a more simple, uncomplicated and natural atmosphere: “The floor was uneven and cool, and the whole place smelt of Mother Earth. It was a pleasing smell, and seemed to take us back to some primeval simplicity, intimately bound up with earth and mud and dust.” (Ibid., 1946: 134) The headmaster’s view is that this is the simplicity to which all human conduct must be reduced. He is against all formalities that
often, in extreme forms extend to hypocrisy and self-deception. The headmaster’s ‘Leave Alone System’ which he believes would make more ‘wholesome human beings’ is a faith that Narayan has persistently shown in his autobiography and other writings. The elasticity of the children’s mind refuses to follow any defined path and therefore they retain the power of imagination enabling them to see through more shades and nuances. This comes out when the headmaster tells them the story of the tiger, the bison and the bear. The story could have taken the usual format of any children’s story where the orphan tiger cub is befriended and protected by a good bison and thus creating the happy pair who would naturally attract all the sympathies because of the sentimentality that went into their creation. There is also the evil who constantly threatens this good and happy world in the form of a nasty bear. The bison, true to his heroic stature in the story kills the bear. But this format is not taken for granted by the children, and a group, led by a girl suddenly discovers that the bear too is a poor creature, thus dividing the surge of sympathy. However, these children are also aware that the official adult world follows a certain moral code and breaking that code is a sacrilege. ‘‘You should not like the bear,’’
said another girl. ‘The teacher will be angry if you like the bear …’


Narayan, at the end of the novel makes Krishna resign finally from his college and join the children’s school. It is no co-incident that this is synchronized with his realization of his wife’s spirit. These incidents together contribute to Narayan’s theory on human understanding and depiction of truth. It is the monologic part of the novel that ends here and the message rings out clear and bold. Krishna’s realization of his wife’s spirit is achieved only when he sets himself free from his egoistic misprision. It is his active receptivity of his wife’s consciousness and not his own monologic depiction of her that brings him to the truth named Susila. The mind should be pliant and receptive; it should be accommodating and empathetic. The ideal may be found in the children, who could easily understand the naughty bear’s point of view too. Perhaps this is one reason why in the beginning of his career, after many unsuccessful attempts when Narayan wrote *Swami*, a novel on children, it brought him success.
Narayan’s world-view bears upon the world inhabited by Swami and his friends.

*The English Teacher* is unique in the sense that the work combines two different structures — the monologic as well as the polyphonic. In the polyphonic structure, Krishna is elusive, who defies all categories of society, thus slipping into different roles of a teacher, a poet, a son, a husband and a father. Krishna as a teacher has always felt uncomfortable as if he had slipped into some unknown person’s apparel. Krishna’s poetic life is also not taken very seriously, as he is a harsh critic of himself and does not leave a single opportunity to make fun of the poet in him. Hardly has Krishna begun to adjust himself into the role of a husband when suddenly his wife passes away, and Krishna finds himself burdened with the role of a father and mother. Near the end of the story when Leela happily goes to stay with her grandparents Krishna feels satisfied that he has efficiently played the double-role. However, it is an illusion he has made up for himself. He has never been able to replace Leela’s mother.

The world of births, marriages and deaths that surround Krishna is also as confusing as Krishna’s own identity. The novel defies the
expected chronology or historicity in order to place the narrative in a
perspective that is both stable and unstable. Krishna’s is a broken
journey from one place to another. This journey is not engendered with
any sense of quest yet it just happens that in it Krishna moves from one
role to another, one identity to another. The method of displacement
and reversals constitute Krishna’s world. The novel ends in a placid
note when Leela is happily settled in the loving community of her
grandparents. Krishna feels free and finds the mental strength to resign
from his college and join the children’s school.

Looked at from the perspective of the whole novel in its
polyphonic form — the ending of the monologic theme does not
signify finality. Krishna’s ecstatic state of mind when he sees his wife’s
form hangs on the moment and has the illusion of a dream that might
vanish at a single inadvertent move or sound. The use of the word
‘moment’ twice and the oxymoronic combination of the words
‘moment’ and ‘immutable’ in the end is significant: “It was a moment
of rare, immutable joy — a moment for which one feels grateful to Life
and Death.” (Ibid., 1946: 184) This ‘moment’ is as ephemeral as the
image of the spirit or the light of the dawn. Soon the humdrum routine
life will envelop Krishna as it happened before. The novel has already depicted in its episodic nature the constant rise and fall, a rise onto a state of spirituality followed by a fall into the realities of life. But this is what Narayan sees life to be — not a development towards a goal but a chaotic amalgamation of the high and the low, the spiritual and the material, that continue to create the never ending dialogue on human life.

Yet there is also the word ‘immutable’ that indicates an urge for the permanent. In the polyphonic world the word ‘moment’ is important because this world believes in the flux of time and realizes truth in time’s ever-changing varieties. But it aspires for the ‘immutable’ that comes from a broader view of this flux of life, that is, life seen as a constant flow, which carries along with it all the individual lives and deaths to give it a collective meaningfulness. It welcomes the immutability of life force and criticizes the human tendency to seek permanency in stasis that ultimately mutilates and stagnates meaning. However, it comes out as an impossible task for although polyphony or the carnival subvert any monologic theorization, speaking about them itself is theorizing. The paradox is worth noting.
The vision of Susila’s spirit is momentary and ephemeral, and in the polyphonic world this unusual vision of the dawn will soon disappear into the dazzling daylight and the humdrum demands of yet another day. It is the truth of the moment which will never return, yet there is a paradox — it is the culminating scene of the monologic part of the novel where the author is trying to give permanence to his beliefs as an author through the materializing of the apparition of Susila. Ironically, the attempt to express one’s stance against the monologic tendency itself is monologic. So, apart from Krishna who acts as one of the participants in time, there is another Krishna who is haunted and invaded by the author’s own spirit. He stands apart from the involuntary corporeal life. He materializes the author’s longing to give shape to the author’s belief and imperceptively enters the work with a monologic intention of promulgating a theory. This monologic part comes in when Krishna criticizes the education system when he listens to the headmaster’s dreams and aspirations, when he describes the school in a tone of approval and admiration, and also when he, like a student to his wife’s spirit learns earnestly about the perfect ‘mental
atmosphere’, the ‘desire to commune’ — the way out of solipsism to a greater and freer understanding of truth.

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