Fifth Chapter

Moral Bewilderment of Free India
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This chapter deals with three important novels of Narayan which, for various reasons, have come to be deemed as the defining works of the last stage of his career. Their selection for analysis involves a good many reasons that are difficult to explicate in simple terms. *The Vendor of Sweets*, (1967) *The Painter of Signs* (1976) and *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) are the works with which the present chapter deals with a long-anticipated hope that they will help us demystify Narayan’s vision of postcolonial India and to its social turmoil. As it is always the case we can hardly circumvent any reference to Naipaul when it comes to understanding or failing to understand India. We begin our attempt to discuss the last phase of Narayan’s literary career with *The Vendor Sweets* and Naipaul’s views about it. Before we start a discussion of Naipaul’s views about the novel here is a brief outline of the work.

Malgudi, contrary to the belief, is vulnerable on account of its fragile social structures and cultural homogeneity. Narayan keeps his world protected from the greater upheavals and bigger reforms. The corpus of his works is hardly so much about change as it is about evolving the strategies of resisting changes. Yet, the world he desperately strives to shield from the alien forces of change and sabotage is perilously exposed to the larger engines of transformation that threaten to overrun Malgudi and its pastoral environs.
There are people, more than often Brahmins, living complacently in this idyllic world with an unshakeable belief that what happens in their world is self-validating and self-validated. Jagan, the chief character of *The Vendor Sweets*, is one of such individuals caught in self-procreated illusion of the immutability of Malgudi’s social order. He shares Narayan’s faith that India will go on. And when it stoutly refuses to do so, like Narayan, he is scandalised. Jagan is a small businessman who cannot be characterised as being frightfully conscientious which allows him to indulge in petty acts of self-deceptions. However, there are things which he is incapable of thinking of doing, a trait which is meant to be understood as the governing principle of his ontological concerns. If possible and if the reader is willing, Jagan’s foibles can be allowed to pass as attempts at playing the necessary games in an irrefutably secular world. Yet, it is formidable to overlook the continuous erasure of the lines between the secular and the spiritual/religious.

Jagan’s travails at the secular plane are confined to the description of food and eating behaviour. Sitting on the flat-bottomed chair at his sweet shop he begins to throb with excitement in anticipation of the moment of counting the day’s collection. He is overwhelmed with this grand act and as it progresses, his exhilaration rises in tune with the aroma of sweets wafting over him:
Sitting there, Jagan was filled with a sense of fulfilment. On one side he could, hear, and smell whatever was happening in the kitchen, whence a constant traffic of trays laden with colourful sweetmeats passed on to the front counter. As long as the frying and sizzling noise in the kitchen continued and the trays passed, Jagan noticed nothing, his gaze unflinchingly fixed on the Sanskrit lines in a red-bound copy of the Bhagavad Gita, but if there was a slightest pause in the sizzling, he cried out, without lifting his eyes from the sacred text, “what is happening?” The head cook would give a routine reply, “Nothing,’ and that would quieten Jagan’s mind and enable it to return to the Lord’s sayings until again some slackness was noticed at the front stall and he would shout, .......(12)

This is not the kind of stuff a social comedy is supposed to be made of in Indian context. To allow this sort of worldly wisdom to pass as a piece of innocuous comedy is to willingly become a party to the social crime that undermines the Indian society. The point of contact between the secular and the religious, in case the Indian high-born, has to be centred on the material prosperity. Gita and Upanishads come handy for this grand project of clubbing accumulation material wealth with ethereal preoccupations. Gandhi is not absent in this entire endeavour to make the enterprise of living easier and lucrative. The combination of secularism and a simulated asceticism is perfectly circumscribed by Jagan’s flaunted espousal of Gandhianism. The
success of the Brahmin lies in his legendary ability to reconcile mutually warring theoretical and ideological positions to his quantifiable profit. Mali, Jagan’s motherless son, is a continuous challenge to his profiteering Gandhian father. The father is vertically torn between his spoilt son and piling up wealth. Jagan is supposedly endeavouring to make a grand entry into the third phase of vanaprastha, the stage every Hindu is required to pass through before accepting sanyasa. It is very difficult to locate the source of the ideas Jagan holds on tenaciously to.

Regularly at five in the morning Jagan got up from the bed, broke a twig from a margosa tree in the backyard, chewed its tip, and brushed his teeth. He was opposed to the use of a toothbrush. “The bristles are made of the hair from the pig’s tail,” he declared. “It’s unthinkable that anyone should bite a pig’s tail first thing in the morning.” It was impossible to disentangle the sources of his theories and say what he owed to Mahatmaji and how much he had imbibed from his father, who had also spent a life time perfecting his theories of sound living and trying them on himself, his coconut trees, his children, and wife. Even after the advent of the nylon bristles Jagan never changed his views, maintaining that nylon had an adverse effect on the enamel. (20)

Narayan dons an inscrutably complex attitude to modernity which is shared by all his protagonists. Postcolonial cultural milieu makes it an
agonising experience to be living in former colonies, a condition aggravated by one’s inability to shed one’s fascination for the former coloniser’s legacy. The West has so furtively and pervasively wormed its way into the consciousness and psyche of the former colonised that the ideas that are believed to be endemic to the Indian soil very often turn out to be treacherously European. In the context of Indian cultural and literary production the issue of modernity is inseparably bound with the notion of nation in a good number of complex ways. Jagan does not view his deep-rooted antipathy to toothbrush as being radically unconnected with his devotion to Gandhian principles. A strangely political idea of nation is always at the centre of all his long-drawn discourse. In his critique of modernity Jameson posits it as a particular mode of narrative that is centred on the illusion of origin that precedes all non-European happenings. Postcolonial theorisation has always been concerned with the pestering questions of modernity and its uneasy relation with the category of nation. *The Vendor of Sweets* may not be tenably read as merely trying to engage with different discourses of modernity, but it involves certain complex arguments and debates about the prevailing views about it. The novel is basically meant to raise certain important questions about the metanarrative of modernity, but the way and the terms by which it intends to do so are lopsidedly defective. Some theorists argue that it is undesirable to view modernity as a colonial remnant; though it is a colonial legacy shaped by a good number of
many Indian experiences, it has, in Indian context, managed to break free from all European associations.

This is what many Indian sociologists see as the strength of India: its ability to have absorbed certain aspects of modernity and to have shaped them to suit its requirements. The vigour of India, according to these sociologists, lies in turning itself into a unique form of society different from European ones, yet constantly invigorated by western influences. Narayan attempts to understand this complex issue of modernity in its intricate and multiplex form from the perspective of a high-caste Hindu who, due to certain ideological points of difference, stays safely away from Nehruvian views of Indian society. Mali is not an exact antithesis of his father, nor is he meant to be one. If Jagan represents, what Ashis Nandy calls, non-modern India Mali stands for ultra modernity of new India. Yet, the reader can always discern a distinct point of confluence of these putatively diametrically opposite worldviews. Central to this modernity, even in its eclectic Indian form, is capitalism which drives the different forces of modernity. Postcolonial condition is often seen as being meant to facilitate the advancement of the project of modernity which colonialism failed to complete in its full-fledged form. Although the characters of Jagan and Mali are designed to demonstrate the two ends of the broader Indian social spectrum, Narayan thinks, there is very little substantial content in what
drives them apart. In order to further our argument in this direction we need to quote a few lines from Arjun Appadurai’s work *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*:

One of the most problematic legacies of grand Western social science (Comte, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Toennies, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim) is that it has steadily reinforced the sense of some single moment—call it the modern moment—that by its appearance creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present. Reincarnated as the break between tradition and modernity and typologized as the difference between ostensibly traditional and modern societies, this view has been shown repeatedly to distort the meanings of change and the politics of pastness: Yet the world in which we now live—in which modernity is decisively at large, irregularly self-conscious, and unevenly experienced surely does involve a general break with all sorts of pasts. What sort of break is this, if it is not the one identified by modernization theory? (2-3)

This break, in Indian context, is theorised to be politically and ideologically divisive, involving, on the one hand, what Gandhian principles represent and, on the other, what Nehru’s legacy and the Leftist bloc stand for. Narayan is very cautious about the political and ideological line he is seen to be toeing in a post-independent Indian society which is wary of the ideological allegiance of the Brahmin intellect. This becomes evident when we
go on to find the ways in which Jagan manages to walk tightrope without being seen to be giving in to either of the forces that are believed to tear India asunder. Jagan once allowed his now dead wife to eat aspirin when she had headaches, but he stayed away from it as he considered it nothing short of a proven poison. He knows that there are people to whom this kind of poison can be of immense profit. And his reservations about modern education system apart, he wants his stubborn son to complete his graduation. However, he is proud of the fact that he had to discontinue his education because Gandhi launched the non-cooperative movement. His conviction is that his son’s reason to stop his education is not as good as the one he had had to quit. For Jagan modernity is not a really disgusting concept to be meticulously shunned; it is the name of the game of conveniently shunting the materially unprofitable out of his life.

Jagan’s attitude to the changing world is adequately demonstrated by his views about books and writing: he is exhilarated at the thought of his son choosing to become a writer, yet, cannot see why this has to stand in the way of completing his education. He is continuously disappointed by his son’s failure to betray any visible signs of becoming a writer. Writing, in spite of its pre-modern association, is posited as an act inalienably bound up with modernity that continuously inscribes and reinscribes generic narrative modes of modernity. Modernity, in its Indianised form, is shown as surviving
the tainted history resulting from its European lineage and even prospering against all odds. Jagan, who claims to be a Gandhian and hardly uses anything that is not Indian, is excited about his son’s visit to America:

He had never thought that he could feel so superior about it. Now it seemed to him worth all the money and the pangs of separation. “My son is in America,” he said to a dozen persons every day, puffing with pride on each occasion. It delayed his daily routine. On his way to the shop he had only to detect the slightest acquaintance on the road, and he would block his path, and instead of discussing weather or politics, as was his custom, would lead the talk on gently to the topic of America and of his son’s presence there.

Mali writes a countless number of letters from across the seven seas all of which are carefully preserved by his father. The father builds an archive of these precious epistles that originate from the other side of the world, which he is to discover later were written by Grace. In one of them, to the dismay of his father, he informs him that he has taken to eating beef. Jagan is outraged, but contains it, for he knows that what he always considered sacrilegious gastronomic practices are not the same once his son has started indulging in them. The arrival of Grace, his American daughter-in-law, sets in motion the process of a measured change in Jagan’s notion of purity and sacred starts undergoing. Narayan devotes a great deal of space for providing details
about the conversations centred on food. Grace offers to cook for her father-in-law. Jagan very charily dissuades her, saying that he is not allowed to eat what others cook for him. The man, who prepares sweetmeats for the entire Malgudi, finds it irreligious to eat the food cooked by an ‘outsider’.

One day grace said, “I wish you would let me cook for me.”

“Oh, that is impossible. I’m under a vow about that.” He explained how he ate to live only on what he could cook with his own hands.

Grace cried, “Oh, you sound thrilling!” This was the first time someone had had a good word to say about his habits. Encouraged by her enthusiasm he expatiated on his own creations of salt-free and sugar-free food, and concluded by saying that she should really look forward to reading his book when Truth Printing let it out of the press. (62-63)

A Brahmin’s obsession about his culinary purity is closely associated with his incontrovertible sense of superiority. The hierarchised divisions between the castes have constantly reinforced very rigid taboos about the commensality. The passing of cooked food between different castes is strictly forbidden. Here is what Louis Dumont says about the religious connotations of the passing of food in his book Homo Hierarchicus:

It is (preparation of food) not only a question of avoiding contact with polluting agents (even of the same caste) but of general precautions.
Among the Brahmins the eater must be pure (he has bathed and his torso is bare) he must be sheltered from any impure contact. He eats alone or in a small group in a pure ‘square’ in the kitchen or a nearby part of the house carefully protected from intrusion. Any unforeseen contact, not only with a low caste man (sometimes going as far as his shadow) or an animal, but even with someone from the house (woman, child, the man who is not purified for eating) would make the food unfit for consumption. It is thought that ordinary cooked food is vulnerable, and so is the eater, who, texts tell us, is in any case less pure when he finishes his meal than when he began. True, the rules are less strict for non-Brahmins. The fact remains that one can scarcely ever eat side by side with any but one’s equals ... (138-139)

The reason for this lengthy citation is self-evident; the world to which Narayan and Jagan belong is more subtly-nuanced and unpredictably-squeamish about its social and religious behaviour and practices than that of the majority of Indians. Jagan’s understanding of the world centres on the good eating and cooking habits which are seen to be responsible for everything good or bad that takes place. He very often fails to see and to explain how his incremental renunciation of all lavish and profligate food is reconciled to his profession as a sweet vendor. Gandhi is always present in all his thoughts, constantly informing of the importance of simplicity, asceticism, and abstinence. The Gita and Gandhi are the two sources of his inspiration
and motivation to lead a simple, unpretentious, and parsimonious life. His ingenuity lies in avoiding his self-declared austere simplicity from running counter to his profiteering. Yet, Jagan seems to be blissfully unaware of the discrepancy between his lifestyle and profession.

The travesty of Gandhianism runs much deeper than it is meant to be read into the actions of Jagan. Much against his better judgement, Jagan finds himself inclined to know what his son intends to do in the future. Then a barrage of demands comes: most importantly, Mali wants to set up a factory to manufacture story writing machines. It is not Jagan’s Gandhian dislike for machinery that stops him financing his son’s project; he hates every project that involves investing money. And, the present plan needs fifty-one thousand dollars, the very thought of that huge amount sends shivers through his body. As his son’s demand for money begins to get more and more vociferous, Jagan becomes increasingly detached towards not only his worldly obligations even towards his inbred irrepressible compulsion to earn more and more money. The sweets at shops are sold at incredibly low prices which the people of Malgudi swoop on the shop to grab. Once Jagan discovers that Mali and Grace are not married he decides to snap all his ties with mundane world and active life. His complete withdrawal from the world is decisive and irreversible one. He leaves everything in charge of ‘cousin’ and retreats into sanyasashram. His reading of Holy Scriptures and
his devotion to Gandhi’s philosophy of life facilitate his pronounced self-extraction from the world.

Naipaul sees the attitude expressed in *The Vendor of Sweets* as a being natural extension of the one that underlies *Mr. Sampath*. It appears to him to represent the moral bewilderment that followed the Indian independence. For him both the novels are circumscribed by the twin themes ---doing and withdrawing. *The Vendor of Sweets* is the point at which Narayan’s carefully constructed world collapses under the burden of being about a sterile civilisation.

*Narayan’s small town could not easily be insulated from the larger, restless world, could no longer be seen as finished and complete, with well-defined boundaries necessary for his kind of humour. And very soon, after the certitude of 1961, doubt seemed to have come to Narayan. As early as 1967 there appeared a novel in which his fictional world is cracked open, its fragility finally revealed, and the Hindu equilibrium – so confidently maintained in *Mr. Sampath* – collapses into something like despair.* (28)

The novel, for Naipaul, is self-admittedly about the limitations of its author’s world. There is a stage in the novel beyond which it ceases to be a comedy, for Malgudi is self-validating world which refuses to be meaningful with reference to anything outside itself. Jagan feels irredeemably defiled by a range of violations that have devastated his world. As Naipaul points out
these intrusions into Jagan’s insulted universe are also the forces that expose the emptiness of Narayan’s fictionally-constructed world. The fragility and vulnerability of Malgudi is predicated on the immense measure of violence modernity is capable of unleashing in free India.

Narayan is an instinctive, unstudied writer: the lack of balance in The Vendor of Sweets, the loss of irony, and the very crudity of satire on ‘modern’ civilisation speak of the depth of the violation Narayan feels that that civilisation-in its Indian aspect- has brought to someone like Jagan. And how fragile that Hindu world turns out to be, after all! From the outside so stable and unyielding, yet liable to crumble at the first assault from within: the self-assertion of a son to whom has come a knowledge of the larger world, another, non-Hindu idea of human possibility, and who is no longer content to be part of the flow, part of the Hindu continuity. (31-32)

Yet, Naipaul himself belongs to this tradition of the denial of one’s history and is a member of the community characterised by an increasing reluctance to be ‘part of the flow, part of the Hindu continuity’. Like Narayan, Naipaul seems to accept the possibility of violating the ‘purity’ of a civilisation. The forces of defilement may originate from within the insulated world of Malgudi. What holds India together is its sense of piety and holiness which is tremulously balanced on the illusion of its singularity. Naipaul often condemns the superficial and hollow ritualism that marks Indian culture and
civilisation. And this he does with an amazing measure of amnesia about his historic and cultural antecedents. Narayan’s world is very small; does not extend beyond Malgudi and what it stands for and no work of his is set in any other place beyond this supposedly microcosmic India. Naipaul’s world is much bigger and includes every possible locale on the earth. The problem with this cosmopolitan is it is overwhelmingly pervaded by its creator’s bizarre idea that India and the rest of the world are mutually exclusive. The corollary of this view is that there is nothing to gain on the international literary arena by associating oneself with Indian civilisation. Jagan’s withdrawal from active life is not to be mistaken as being prompted by an intense desire to renounce all the worldly tangles and possessions. His renunciation of the material world is a final desperate attempt of a father whose son has failed miserably and has proved an aggravating liability. It is unlikely that a conformist and materially successful son would have had Jagan retreating into the recesses of wilderness to watch ‘a Goddess come out of a stone’. Hence, the renunciation is neither complete nor absolute nor ultimate. There is no ruling out the possibility of Jagan’s total recall to life. But Naipaul’s view is different:

Jagan’s is the ultimate Hindu retreat, because it is a retreat from a world that is known to have broken at last. It is retreat, literally, to a wilderness where ‘the edge of reality itself was beginning to blur’: not a
return to a purer Aryan past, as Jagan might imagine, but a retreat from
civilisation and creativity, from rebirth and growth, to magic and
incantation, a retrogression to an almost African night, the enduring
primitivism of a place like the Congo, where, even after the slave-trading
Arabs an the Belgians, the past is yearned for as le bon vieux temps de
nos ancetres. It is the death of a civilisation, the final corruption of
Hinduism. (33)

Another form corruption took was an unthinking and unabashed
journey into the heart of civilisation that led people to more insidious
avenues of self-destruction and contagious hypocrisy. Sometimes it is Britain
and at times it is America to which the Naipauls of the colonised world
wormed their way with their perpetually colonisable minds. India, it
frequently beats both Narayan and Naipaul, is much bigger and more
complex than Malgudi, or infinitely more variegated and denser than
Naipaul’s constantly imploding consciousness.

The Painter of Signs, published in 1976, takes the story of Mr.Sampath a
step further, though not towards its logical conclusion unless one means by
this phrase the entry into the final stage of varnasharma. Like all his other
works this novel is about a Brahmin, who, in this particular case chases a
mirage of self-fulfilment, of course, in vain. The novel moves beyond the
boundaries of Malgudi, but its characters operate within the same parameters
shape the consciousness of the people of this imaginary small town. It is about two characters Raman and Daisy, and what happens to their relationship in pursuit of which the former traverses to distant places of India. The novel, due to the momentous time of its appearance, raises many expectations, and even allows itself to be read at the levels one normally does not bother to read works. The internal emergency Indira Gandhi imposed on the nation left no intellectual activity uninfluenced by it; if *The Painter of Signs* proves to have failed in fulfilling its political obligations for having been written at the most crucial moment in the history of Indian politics there are necessary conclusions to be drawn about Narayan as an Indian writer. There is always Daisy looming large over the entire novel, perpetually reminding the reader about the ‘force’ that drives the country around. Yet, drawing an easy and straightforward parallel between Daisy and Indira Gandhi would be to fall into the trap Narayan means to lead us into.

Raman is a painter of signs who has managed to evolve a philosophy of his own about the work he does. In the course of his doing his routine work, he is asked to paint a board for the Family Planning Centre which is headed by Daisy. She is quite impressed by his work and this sets Raman hovering over her. He is seen accompanying her on her tours to the neighbouring villages meant to drive home the message of small family among the uninformed villagers. They face the wrath of a village priest who
stops them from writing the family planning slogans on the walls of the village temple. Their journey back from this village to Malgudi is fraught with many hardships which include Raman’s futile attempt to outrage the modesty of Daisy. This results in a rift in their relationship which in due course is patched up. Raman courts Daisy with a desperate hope that their affair would fructify into marriage which is never to happen. She lays down a few conditions for their relationship to be turned into a matrimonial one, of which one is that of her decision not to have any children. By the moment Raman brings himself to accede to these conditions Daisy declares her intention to call off the relationship and to move on to some other place. And this is what the novel has in it as its theme and plot. And it has to be emphasised that the reader would not go to any work of Narayan expecting more than this: it would be unreasonable to look in Narayan for a more profoundly stylized narrative.

Different discourses of modernity inform this novel written at the juncture of political turmoil, when the theme of the futility of independence was the chief determinant of all the discursive practices. These practices are proposed to be integrated into the major thematic concerns of the novel by employing the narrative modes that outshoot the needs of the one-dimensional storyline. An attempt is made to transform Malgudi into a metropolitan centre spatial and intellectual distance from which is projected
to be the margins of civilisation; the farer one moves away from Malgudi the wilder the landscape becomes. The novel more often appears to be about the cultural irreconcilability between Malgudi and its surrounding rural space, an untameable wilderness. It is possible that at a particular plane all the works of Narayan may be read to be about the incongruousness between Malgudi the city and the world without. The forces of disruption come from without, with no perceptible origins or antecedents, and, having unsettled the moral and spiritual equilibrium of Malgudi, disappear into an infinite chaos. Daisy is one such character, who, with her strange mission against all kinds of procreation, looks an alien with that transcends all kinds of human attributes with a potentiality to seduce an innocent and pristine world of Malgudi:

*She called herself just Daisy. She was a slender girl in a sari. No one could say who was her husband or father or brother, or where she came from—a sudden descent on Malgudi. Daisy! What a name for someone who looked so very Indian, traditional, and gentle. One would expect a person on this job to be somewhat matronly, like the Mother Superior in the convent—large, broad-face, towering over others, an executive type who could with a flourish of her arms order everyone about. But this girl looked like minor dancer. He felt he ought to know more about her.* (31)

The novel is as much about the question of modernity as it is about the problems involved narrating a simple story. Raman sees his work as
constituting the primary focal point of the novel he is to play a major role in. He believes that the role he has assigned to himself is essential to keep Malgudi functioning. Daisy, on the other hand, is meant to be the cultural counterpoint of not what Raman represents but the India outside Malgudi symbolises. Modernity is problematised with the intention of providing a cultural and moral advantage to Malgudi and its ontological space. Daisy is an outsider who is joined by one of the indispensable elements of Malgudi, Raman; the outside that remains extraneous to the matrix of Malgudi is eternally alienated from the centre and is capable of worming its way into the heart of civilisation. Raman is granted a heightened perspective that enables him to stay away from the defining discourses of the novel. An observer as may appear, his involvement in the chief concern of the novel is positively marginal, a position Narayan himself wants to be seen adopting. This simulated neutrality of the protagonist and the writer, on a closer reading of the novel, betrays more unpalatable truths about both of them than the average reader may be willing to grasp.

Raman chooses to view and project himself as someone who plays a transcendental role that places him above, in a completely detached way, the phenomenal world of which he is a part, but likes to think of having wrenched himself from the grip. Raman and Daisy vie for position of the outsider, and, in a sense, neither of them is an alien in terms of their
commitment to the primary thematic preoccupation of the novel. Both of
them are ill-advisedly mistaken about the centrality and the primacy of their
position in the course of events that define the work. The Painter of Signs is
argued to be an attempt on the part of Narayan to break or, at the least, to
expand the frontiers of Malgudi. The contention of this dissertation is that the
novel is a desperate attempt to define more sharply and to reinforce the
cultural, moral and spiritual boundaries of Narayan’s inscape. Sadhana
Allison Purnik says about this aspect of the novel:

The painter of Signs demonstrates his (Narayan’s) skill as a tight-
rope walker, which is particularly evident in his adaptation of the frontier
convention. He redefines the position of marginality, creating the possibility
of a person being both marginal and central at the same time. By playing on
our knowledge of the frontier, which is so closely associated with empire, to
describe an insular local environment like Malgudi, Narayan appropriates a
convention based on British-Indian experience to frame a particular problem
of Mrs. Gandhi’s India: that is, the clash between the western notions of
individuality and the traditional modes of life. (127)

This is grossly misleading argument: India Mrs. Gandhi desired to
reign over was much more fragmented than that could be theorised
dialectically and it was the same nation that defied an outright appropriation
at the hands of the ruling order, both the cultural and otherwise. It is clearly
evident that Narayan never allows himself to run risk of placing two contrasting forces in diametrical opposition to each other. That is a too dangerous hazard to attempt at given his inclination for indulging subtle political and cultural strategies of throwing his lot with the dominant hegemonic discourses. Raman is weary of his familial—which includes an old aunt alone—and social milieu of Malgudi and its stout refusal to permit its boundaries to be pushed beyond certain limits. As Naipaul argues, *The Vendor of Sweets* may have made Narayan aware of the inherent impossibility of sustaining his fictitious creation Malgudi in its inviolable purity. With this realisation the need for redefining the spatial, cultural, and intellectual confines of Malgudi is likely to have been strongly felt which comes in the form of Daisy and her extra-Malgudi ventures assisted by Raman. Home for Raman is not a perfect place of comfort and cosiness; it is just a place he returns mechanically but unfailingly. His relationship with this place called home is strained that very often he finds himself feeling at home outside home and Malgudi. Raman’s best efforts are directed at emotionally running away from his ancestral roots and surroundings. Daisy finds every place she finds herself in, including Malgudi, fairly comfortable. Yet, both of them come back to, as one does to one’s senses after a thoughtless and reckless act, Malgudi. Their mental poise is magically restored to them on every return to this ‘hallowed’ place created by Narayan.
Modernity for Raman and daisy mean two different things; Narayan’s own stance in this regard is seemingly unambiguous but becomes lucidly clear as one delves deeper into his line of argumentation. His view and description of Daisy and her mission is not certainly positive one. For Narayan the nemesis of modernity invariably revisits in the shape of Mali, Grace or Daisy. Some feminists have been tempted to see Daisy as representing modernity in its most libratory form. She is believed to be the most emancipated woman, appearing in Narayan’s works. Shantha Krishnaswamy says how Daisy differs from all other women characters of Narayan:

**Daisy bursts into this milieu, (orthodoxy of Malgudi) daring to be somebody different. She uses her education not to further the interest of the symbolic order, the patriarchy, but subvert it and deconstruct it deliberately. She not only looks down upon the conventional choices allotted to Indian women as wives and mothers, but she also sets herself as an arch devil, proselytizing converts to her cause of birth control, with the missionary zeal of an intrepid warrior. Daisy is a dangerous, disruptive, and fanatical nun wedded to her goal, out to destroy the Malgudian order of things.** (115)

This passage is strikingly naive and perplexingly innocuous; one wishes one could read any novel or any work like this let alone Narayan. The intention of this critic is to prove that the author is capable of creating a
character that is unprecedentedly radical and surprisingly bizarre. Of course Narayan can do it only in contempt and with the objective of ridiculing it. His attitude to Daisy is not easily theorisable as it requires an extraordinary degree of insight into his psychodynamics and modes by which his works produce meanings that are seemingly simple but fraught with an amazing measure of suggestiveness. Malgudi and Daisy are at odds: the former is essentially tamed, timid, and docile; the latter is stubborn and feisty. Yet, Malgudi is characterised by a remarkable lacuna at its heart; it has always been found to be devoid of a streak of insanity and wilderness. The lurid element which makes every individual, town and a society complete is conspicuously missing from Malgudi. Narayan may have felt the need for creating such a necessary strain of recklessness in the character of Daisy. His works, characters and plots are marked by an immeasurable degree of stolidity, imperturbability and nonchalance. Like India, his world carefully avoids extremities.

Daisy seems to have descended on an unprepared Malgudi from nowhere, taking it by storm with beliefs and values. Mrs. Gandhi caught India unawares, when it was least ready for any violent jolt. The placid nature of a country was called into question and the whole nation was compelled to rethink about its foundational principles. The equation between these two women is not hard to discern. But the aspect that beats every reader is why
this parallelism is incomplete. The need for injecting an element of emergency and violence into the mode of life of Indians was seen by a few to be a desirable measure. Daisy is, like Indira Gandhi’s grand idea of imposing internal emergency, an ephemeral phenomenon, never endemic either to India or to Malgudi. She is a nameless occurrence like the hotel Raman is fond of regularly visiting. Here is the description of the unnamed hotel:

*(One had) to try a place in Ellaman Street known as The Boardless Hotel, run by a man who capitalised on the fact he had no name for his restaurant, which made it attractive to a certain type of custom. “Can I do you a ‘nameless’ board?” Raman often quipped. He speculated sometimes what he would do for a living if everyone adopted the boardless notion. (12-13)*

The unnameable and the ineffable aspect of human existence always lurk at the undefined frontiers of Malgudi, waiting for a right opportunity to sneak into the heart of civilisation. The unsignifiable element, which in Narayan goes by strange names such as Rosie or Daisy, is very often equated with the exotic, alien, and the unhomely. The conflation of modernity with the alien is the obvious theme in Narayan. Mali, on his return from America, is no longer a part of what his father represents. Mali and Daisy stand for the unrepresentable emotional and psychological wilderness, and, as such, there is nothing impregnable about Malgudi’s ontological fortress. In spite of all
efforts to be absorbed into the fold of Malgudi Daisy remains external to non-modern world of India. The novel and the novelist seem determined to prove the fundamental incompatibility and irreconcilability of Raman and Daisy. The conflict between modern and non-modern is not only irresolvable it is even conceptually non-existent. Thus, for Narayan, the theme of modernity is not what constitutes the bone of contention in the discourses about the construction of India. The two existential categories represented by Raman and daisy belong to two different self-validating worlds with the trajectories that do not meet even tangentially.

The novel is as much about the profound confusion of moral choices that the free India has before it as it is about the sense of frustration resulting from an inability to intellectually and spiritually contain it. There is very little one is allowed to read into some of the passages of the novel except the meanings that are hard-fastened to them. The conclusions about the other India are outstandingly predictable and stereotypical. Here is one such passage it is advisable to end the discussion of the novel with.

“And you call yourself Mrs. So-And-So?”

“No,” she had said. “I won’t change my name.” Rather a jolt for Raman, but he did not debate it, and accepted her decision silently. He told himself, in all matters, she will probably be the only deciding authority. Daisy had laid down two conditions before accepting proposal. One, that
they should have no children, and two, if by mischance one was born she would give the child away and keep herself free to pursue her social work. Raman was not to object to or modify this in manner. She explained, “Long ago I broke away from the routine of a woman’s life. There are millions of women who go through it happily. I am not one of them. I have planned for myself a different kind of life. I have a well-defined purpose from which I will not swerve.....” (158-159)

We come to the last extensive novel of Narayan which has attracted less attention than many of his earlier novels due to certain important factors which the dissertation intends to discuss in the following pages. The World of Nagaraj (1990) was his work that lets us know more about him than any one of his works. There is a particular reason why instead of his better acclaimed The talkative Man why this less renowned work is selected for discussion that marks the end of the dissertation. The main character of The World of Nagaraj is Nagaraj who has a strong desire to write a book on the sage Narada. He lives with his wife Sita and is content to go on living forever as he has always been doing. Nagaraj has started considering reluctantly the option to enter the third ashram of sanyasa at the casual exhortation of a sanyasi. As nephew Tim enters his life all the efforts of Nagaraj to withdraw from active life cease and he is drawn mercilessly into the mundane existence.
Nagaraj’s transformation, by the moment the novel begins, has already started with his having begun to drape himself, after his regular bath, in a piece of ochre cloth. While looking for the right way to acquire the ochre cloth that he runs into a sanyasi who gives a packet of dye that would turn his white cloths into ochre. And, the sanyasi, on handing over the dye says:

‘Wear it for an hour or lifetime, I don’t care what you do, but only remember when you are wearing this ochre your mind should be only on God, not on money or the family. Your thoughts must be away from all sensual matters, free from kama, krodha, lobha and moha. You must observe silence, become deaf to other people’s voices, never pay attention it, even if there is an urgent telegram....’

‘No one sends me a telegram.’

‘Don’t interrupt, but listen. Never hear the knock on the door. Don’t look at your wife except as a mother, and don’t let your mind dwell on your night life....’(11-12)

Immediately Nagaraj candidly declares that he has no ‘night life’ left any longer as he and his wife have been living like brother and sister. Yet, in spite of the absence ‘night life’, he leads a contented life. Interestingly, he has no desires or temptations that are sure to unsettle his equipoise signified his decision to wrap himself in the ochre cloth for thirty minutes a day as long as
he stays in the puja room. His fascination with sage Narada, the master storyteller, curiously borders on obsession. His equanimity of mind and in life is disconcerted by the entry of his nephew Tim into his household. Nagaraj and his brother, Gopu, have chosen two different ways of life: if the former lives in Malgudi the latter has selected to live in village, trying his hand at agriculture. The two brothers represent two different two different worlds, and the chasm that divides these worlds is apparently unbridgeable. This fact becomes highlighted with the entry of Tim into Nagaraj’s serene home.

Tim is far-advanced as far as his understanding is concerned and Nagaraj fails to grasp the essentials of his nephew’s life. The life of Nagaraj becomes fraught with many complexities with Tim having chosen to live with him. Nagaraj’s views about life are beguilingly simple and exaggeratedly one-dimensional. His knowledge of life and Malgudi is a little more than elementary. There are dimensions of life and parts of Malgudi which Nagaraj never knew existed. This is what his nephew Tim helps him realise: the unknown and unorthodox depths of human existence. Gopu, on his son’s refusal to go back with him to the village, accuses his brother Nagaraj of being responsible for it and calls him Narada. This gives him a brainwave and he decides to write about him:

Nagaraj was happy that Gopu had called him Narada abusively. He took it as a compliment. ‘Narada created strife, no doubt, by passing
disturbing gossip from one quarter to another, but it always proved beneficial in the long run, in an eternal perspective. Must write about him from this angle. Must write in English, of course, the book is widely read and people understand the concept of Narada. Must start writing on a good day like Vijayadasami, the day of the Goddess of Learning. (44)

Malgudi itself has come a long way since it was once inhabited by Swami and his friends. Its colonial content has been gradually emptied of all its potentiality of signification. From colonial ambience to postcolonial setting has been a journey marked by a number of significant and not so significant milestones. But the world Nagaraj is forced into realising of living in is not even postcolonial; it has a semblance of postmodernity about it. The intellectual compulsions of effecting a thorough makeover of Malgudi must have prompted Narayan to write The World of Nagaraj. Nagaraj manages to retain a sense of wonder and astonishment at the world that never ceases to change which Narayan himself shares with his protagonist.

There is always an irresistible temptation to which Narayan endlessly succumbs: Malgudi, having been ill-advisedly and superficially projected as microcosmic India, must be shown and proved to be embedded with all possible and potential elements of conceptual expansion. It is necessary to show it as having grown beyond its initial provincial frontiers to become an integral part of the much-hyped global village. Nagaraj’s world is
characterised by its inability to accommodate any transgressive patterns of physical and mental growth. Tim is a force that makes his complacently fortified world rickety, fragile and vulnerable. He looks for the ways in which he can bring out reconciliation between two dissimilar worlds. There is much more than a contradictory relationship between the Malgudi of Nagaraj’s ideals and Tim’s fantasies. The dialectical movement of the focal determinant of narration between the inconceivable world of Nagaraj and sensuously palpable world of Tim never pauses to reify notional entities. The essential indeterminacy that marks the postmodern world is carefully injected into the novel that renders Malgudi a protean quality. Malgudi of Tim is much more vibrant and real than that of Nagaraj’s. Yet, what should have been a character of rebelliousness and maverick nature turns out to be another Brahmin boy gone slightly soft in head.

The reader, by the time he comes to *The World of Nagaraj*, will have realised the nature of impossibility that stifles the fiction of Narayan. He is incapable of any kind of radicalism, either literary or epistemological. He cannot see beyond what his Brahminical legacy and ethos have invested him with. The characters of the novel lack a strong individuated personalities and their construction is unfortified. They are like the sage Narada whom Nagaraj wants to write a book about and there is hardly any material available on him. His antecedents are untraceable and his role in all the stories is luminal.
His determination to write about Sage Narada is likely to appear very perplexing for the reader. Here is what he thinks of this mythological character:

‘The problem was that there was no authoritative source. Narada’s birth was controversial. He would take him as one that just happened to be, that was all and that was sufficient. All that mattered was that he was a unique personality, the God of music. He was ever-cheerful and active, always with a song on his lips, and moved with ease among gods and demons. Blessed with extreme mobility he traversed at a thought the skies and space, through galaxies and Milky Way, and was welcome in all fourteen worlds above and below this world. Gods and demons alike were friendly to him, although he was bearer of gossip from one world to another and created strife. (44-45)

The uniqueness Nagaraj attributes to Narada is not adequately strong or good enough to inspire one into writing a book about him. As his desire or obsession about this mythological character goes on acquiring the neurotic proportions the reader finds himself less and less convinced about the sanity of such a decision. And the world Nagaraj has chosen to live in itself appears to be the main obstacle for the book’s coming into being. He tends to perceive everything that happens as a disruption to his sworn mission. Tim is the biggest hurdle that keeps Nagaraj from writing his dream book. He does not
seem to know where to start writing or how to go about it. Nagaraj, in spite of his much carefully-achieved sense of detachment, finds himself increasingly drawn into the vortex of life. Life, Nagaraj always thought, could be easily skirted around and one could walk out of it when one chose or got tired of it. He continues to believe that the active life may be drawn a curtain as easily as he obtains the ochre dye.

Narayan studies the family relations and various relationships on the sociological, political and economic levels. He shows how these social, economic and political norms, traditions and customs impose some drastic effect on the part of the individual and on the part of the relationships. He presents in the novels a strange mixture of family relationships in realistic manner. The relationships between man and woman, between the husband the wife, between the lover and the beloved, between the father and the mother, between the parents and the son, between one man and another are the most evident in almost all his novels. He deals with the social and economic impact on these relationships.

When Saroja, Tim’s wife, starts practising her harmonium at home Nagaraj realises the magnitude of the problem of writing. Besides he is not a man of strong will, has always been a sort of drifter who has very hard time knowing his mind or making it known to others. Once his brother Gopu ordered him around and at every stage of his life people have found it
tempting to override his volition. Sita finds it exciting to make him do what she wants. He cannot tell Tim to behave himself and is not even sure whether he would bother to listen to him. Saroja and her music rehearsals are the colossal impediments for his continuing his magnum opus on the sage Narada. On Tim and Saroja leaving Nagaraj’s house his problems multiply. He has to accompany his brother to look for Tim and his wife who are rumoured to be taking diggings at the outhouse of the classy and trendy bar of Malgudi, Kismet. After many pains and efforts Tim and Saroja stage a comeback at his house which compels Nagaraj to abandon the idea of writing the magnum opus on Narada. Nagaraj thinks

‘I dread that tomorrow morning it will start blaring (Saroj’s harmonium). I can have no hope of writing any more. You could as well take the notebooks back to the old room, where at least white ants may relish my notes on Narada.........And another thing: don’t be surprised is I wear the ochre robe when I am at home. It’ll force me to remain silent and not speak out and upset the children and drive them out again. I shall also acquire a lot of cotton wool and try and pack it all in my ear so that even a thunderclap may sound like a whisper.’ (184-185)

These are the musings of Nagaraj with which the novel ends, so do the hopes of the reader. Nagaraj is made to be apologetic for his inability to gel with his world and the people who inhabit it. The novel ends with a strong
sense of maladjustment that overwhelms Nagaraj who feels that he has turned out be an anomie. He blames his desire to be undisturbed by the familial obligations for being responsible for what has happened. He is made to realise that family matters take precedence over any other considerations. It is not difficult to discern the identical predicaments of Narada and Nagaraj which Narayan himself intends. There are critics who see the end as a sort of resolution, a finality wrought by Nagaraj’s decision to accept the realities of family life in its wild form. This ending is seen as a form of synthesis. Pushpa N. Parekh says in her essay:

> It is through this kind of comprehension that Nagaraj, like other Narayan heroes, achieves a morally viable synthesis of opposing forces. Even his final words in the novel, however disenchanted, ring with life-affirming values of his world: “you could as well take the notebooks back to the old room, where white ants may relish my notes on Narada ...” All obstructions, internal or external, as well as all human endeavours, active or passive, that Nagaraj has undertaken to overcome those constructions, find resolution in the final synthesis. This final synthesis is particularly relevant to Narayan as a writer; it affirms for him all the roles he plays: the doer, thinker, and dreamer. (214)

It takes a wild flight of one’s imagination to call what happens to Nagaraj at the end of the novel some kind or any kind of synthesis. There is
always a strong inclination to treat the ending of Narayan’s fiction as either being dismissive of reality or as some kind of synthesis. Critics have miserably failed to see Narayan’s works as they are and as they are meant to be read. Nagaraj’s decision to abandon writing is not supposed to be seen as failure of his plans. The secular world in Narayan is a much complex concept to being merely conceived in opposition to the spiritual. Nagaraj has not renounced the religious or the spiritual in its entirety. Despite the fact that he has decided to stop writing about Narada he assures himself that he may be found clad in the ochre robe, his ears plugged with a lot of cotton. The meaning of this partial withdrawal is not lost on the reader. There is always a stout denial of the possibility of the existence of the line that divides the secular from the spiritual, and this is always managed to be suggested to the advantage of the latter. Material and physical reality, for Narayan, is quintessentially inferior in its quality and has to be seen being secondary to the spiritual. Even when Nagaraj decides to return to an active life it is with a grudge that he does so. The world we live in is a place, like that of Nagaraj, we are constantly compelled to regret for having ever chosen to enter. Narada is inaccessible, like other mythological characters, to the common Indian, for there is very little material available on him in Indian languages. Whatever the language it is to be found is not intelligible to non-elite. The problems faced by an elitist writer are same as that of Nagaraj as he lacks a repository of intense experiences. His reality, like the world of Narayan, is seriously
crippled by his own sense of self-importance. The world beyond Malgudi does not constitute reality for either Narayan or Nagaraj. This is a classic example for the ontological and moral bewilderment that characterises Narayan’s fiction at large.
WORKS CITED


