CHAPTER IV

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R.K. Narayan is pre-eminently a story-teller. His stories are not only interesting in themselves but are very suggestive, in the sense that they are a creative comment on contemporary reality. But, given the Indian context, it is not a simple affair to decide what is contemporary and what is perennial. In *Reluctant Guru*, Narayan says, "a novel is about an individual living his life in a world imagined by the author, performing a set of actions (upto a limit) contrived by the author. But to take a work of fiction as a sociological study or a social document could be very misleading. My novel *The Guide* was not about the saints or the pseudo-saints of India, but about a particular person."

Here Narayan suggests how his fictions have to be construed and evaluated. The emphasis is on the individual (character) and action. Character and action are meaningful within the framework (plot) the author creates. A cursory glance at the captions of his fictions re-inforces the point. *Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts, The English Teacher, Mr. Sampath*,

The Financial Expert, The Guide, The Vendor of Sweets, and The Painter of Signs do suggest that Narayan envisions a character and gives him a name and a local habitation. His protagonists perform functions which have social and individual significance. In the following pages, the critical focus is on the way in which his protagonists fulfil their obligations to themselves and to others. The process of realizing one's self through a network of socio-cultural institutions is the staple reality we notice in the fictions of Narayan.

In this context, we have to be cautious in applying the canons of Western realism in determining and evaluating the contours and the significance of Narayan's fictions. The Western view of realism and realistic literature is very cogently described by J.P. Stern:

The riches of the represented world; its weightiness and resistance to ideals; its consequential logic and circumstantiality—these I take to be among the attributes one would expect to find in realistic literature.²

Narayan's views on reality and realism are not entirely different from those of Stern. But he has made realism pretty Indian by making it more inclusive and

²J.P. Stern, On Realism, p. 28.
thoroughly traditional, as the following passage amply demonstrates:

Even the legends and myths, as contained in the puranas, of which there are eighteen major ones, are mere illustrations of the moral and spiritual truths enunciated in the Vedas. "No one can understand the significance of any story in our mythology unless he is deeply versed in the Vedas," the story teller often declares. Everything is interrelated. Stories, scriptures, ethics, philosophy, grammar, astrology, astronomy, semantics, mysticism, and moral codes—each forms part and parcel of a total life and is indispensable for the attainment of a four-square understanding of existence. Literature is not a branch of study to be placed in a separate compartment, for the edification only of scholars, but a comprehensive and artistic medium of expression to benefit the literate and the illiterate alike. A true literary composition should appeal in an infinite variety of ways; any set of stanzas of the Ramayana could be set to music and sung, narrated with dialogue and action and treated as the finest drama, studied analytically for an understanding of the subtleties of language and grammar, or distilled finely to yield esoteric truths.  

The centrality of the above citation in making sense of Narayan's stories need not be exaggerated. In Narayan's realism, everything is interrelated. The world of Narayan the story-teller is not a series of scenes and characters but a composite and organic whole in which "each forms part and parcel of a total life and is indispensable for the attainment of a four-square understanding of existence."

"The attainment of a four-square understanding of existence" doesn't mean that Narayan is an existentialist. Like Raja Rao, he draws his creative sustenance from his cultural past and a very steady and subtle awareness of the present.

The above prefatory remarks may be illustrated by analysing any text of Narayan. For the sake of expository convenience, let us consider The Financial Expert. The narrative proceeds from a single point of view, that of Margayya. The following passage is a good illustration of the way in which Margayya's mind works towards a goal which he postulates for himself:

Margayya's blood was completely the city man's and rivelled in crowds, noise and bustle; the moment he looked out and saw the stream of people and traffic flowing up and down the road, he felt that he was in the right place. A poet would perhaps have felt exasperated by the continuous din, but to
Margayya it was like a background music to his own thoughts. There was a row of offices and shops opposite, insurance agencies, local representatives of newspapers, hair-cutting saloons, some film distributors, a lawyer's chamber, and hardware shop, into which hundreds of people were going every day. Margayya calculated that if he could at least filter twenty out of that number for his own purposes, he would be more than well off. In about a year he could pass on to the grade of people who were wealthy and not merely rich. He drew a lot of distinction between the two. A rich man, according to his view, was just one caste below the man of wealth. Riches any hard-working fool could attain by some watchfulness, while acquiring wealth was an extraordinarily specialized job. It came to persons who had on them the grace of the Goddess fully and who could use their wits. He was a specialist in money and his mind always ran on lines of scientific enquiry whenever money came in question. He differentiated with great subtlety between money, riches, wealth, and fortune. It was most important people should not mistake one for the other.

The above crucial passage brings out Margayya's shrewdness and his capacity to think ahead of the situation

in which he is involved. Margayya is a man of the city, and a city is the place where one can make a fortune. For him, reality consists in offices, shops, insurance agencies, newspaper agencies, lawyers' chambers and hair-cutting saloons, to which hundreds of people come and go every day. The distinction he makes between riches and wealth brings to the fore a kind of caste system which streamlines the narrative. Any fool can become rich if he is watchful and hard-working. But acquiring wealth is "an extraordinarily specialized job." Apart from "the grace of the Goddess," one has to use one's "wits" to acquire wealth. The nice distinction he makes between money, riches, wealth, and fortune suggests that he makes a good use of his wits. But it also suggests that the goddess of wealth is a very vacillating one, and Margayya, in spite of his wits, miscalculates "the grace of the Goddess." If the reader watches the curve of Margayya's development from money to riches, and from riches to wealth, he can anticipate the end. The ending of the narrative ironically places Margayya in the beginning, so that one may say that the end is embryonically contained in the beginning. In talking about the beginnings and the endings of narratives, we have to be careful and should not associate them with Eliot's well-known lines in Four Quartets.5

What we have been trying to suggest is the fluctuation of fortune we notice in Narayan's stories. The ironic perspective in Narayan's stories, or the ironic vision of Narayan, is meaningful only in terms of character in action, which has reference to the plot of the story, in the sense that a story is sequential whereas a plot is both sequential and consequential. In *The Financial Expert*, Margayya's action is tenaciously oriented to the acquisition of money, which would make him rich and later place him in the caste of the wealthy. But, curiously enough, the fluctuating fortune plays its crucial role and drives home the point that the goddess of wealth is a very vacillating one. It is in this sense that Narayan's narratives are generically comic. The essence of comedy consists in progressing from an obsessive illusion to an equally debilitating disillusion, which would land one on the sober strand of truth. We shall elaborately discuss this point when we sum up the significance of the self, the family, and society in Narayan.

The narrative opens with a semantic exploration of the protagonist's name, Margayya: "Marga" means the way and "Ayya" is an honorific suffix. The narrator tells us that Margayya means one who shows the way. Margayya shows the way out to those in financial trouble. Margayya uses his wit to
undermine the foundations of the co-operative movement; he shows the peasants an easy way to draw unlimited loans from the co-operative bank, without committing themselves to repay the loans. When the authorities of the bank object to his nefarious activities, he turns his mind to various other ways of earning money. The word "money" runs through the narrative like a refrain. For example, Margayya tells his wife, "Even you will learn to behave with me when I have money." The narrator tells us, "As he went through the town that day he was obsessed with thoughts of money. His mind rang with the words he had said to the villagers: 'I am only trying to help you to get out of your money worries.' He began to believe it himself." Margayya tells the priest in the temple, "I want to acquire wealth. Can you show me a way? I will do anything you suggest." He thinks that "there is a lot of money" in manufacturing soaps. After the successful publication and sale of the copies of Domestic Harmony (or Bed Life), the narrator comments: "The business always seemed to him an alien one. The only interesting thing about it seemed to be the money that was coming in. 'But money is

7 Ibid., p. 21.
8 Ibid., p. 29.
9 Ibid., p. 68.
not everything,' he told himself one day. It was a very strange statement to come from a person like Margayya. But if he had been asked to explain or expand it further he would have said: 'Money is very good no doubt, but the whole thing seems to be in a wrong setting.' (emphasis added). Illustrations can be multiplied, but the point to be noted is Margayya's scruples. In his anxiety to place money in a right setting, he sells his share in Domestic Harmony to the printer, Mr. Lal. He tells his wife, "Did you ever notice how I have managed not to bring a single copy into this house? I don't want our Balu even to know that there is such a book." In the same breath, he also tells her, "I don't want people to say that Balu enjoys all the money earned through Domestic Harmony. I would do anything to avoid it." It is precisely here that a calculating person like Margayya miscalculates the significance of Domestic Harmony. When Balu and his wife shift to their new house, Dr Pal, the author of Domestic Harmony, visits them frequently. Under the expert supervision of Dr Pal, Balu puts the aesthetic of Domestic Harmony into practice. Margayya loses his temper and beats Dr Pal for

10 The Financial Expert, pp. 94-95.
11 Ibid., p. 95.
12 Ibid., p. 95.
corrupting his son. In order to wreak vengeance on Margayya, Dr Pal encourages and incites Margayya's clients to withdraw their deposits along with interest from Margayya's bank, which makes Margayya ultimately insolvent.

Margayya, the financial expert, acquires money, riches, and wealth through the good offices of Dr Pal, the author of *Domestic Harmony*. Since fortune, in principle, constantly fluctuates, we find Margayya's rise and fall caused by a reversal, which can be located in the plot of *The Financial Expert*. *Domestic Harmony*, paradoxically enough, brings domestic disharmony into Margayya's household. It creates a cleavage between the father and the son, between the wife and the husband, between the self and society. Margayya's hasty and miscalculated assault on Dr Pal acts as a reverse gear and takes Margayya back to the banyan tree in front of the co-operative bank. Margayya's rise and fall do not make him a cynic. On the other hand, they make him perhaps more sober than we see him earlier. Expressing his eagerness to have his grandson with him, he says, "I will play with him. Life has been too dull without him in this house." Margayya's last words have a casual tone and a relaxed ring, which are the essence of domestic harmony, which heals the breach between the self and society.

The Vendor of Sweets and The Financial Expert have a similar structural pattern, more or less. In both, narration proceeds from a single point of view. Both Jagan and Margayya are worshippers of the goddess Lakshmi. Margayya's orientation towards the problems of the self is largely mundane. Jagan is an improvement over Margayya, in the sense that he appears to be very cultivated, has faith and sympathy, and maintains happy relationship with his servants, businessmen, and friends. Margayya's one problem is his son Balu. He takes all the necessary care to educate his son. In a room specially arranged for Balu's studies, Margayya keeps a framed picture of the goddess Saraswati, so that his son may have the blessings of the goddess in his pursuit of academic ambitions. Jagan keeps a framed picture of the goddess Lakshmi and starts his business day by placing a string of jasmine on the top of the frame. But he seems to have no special reverence for the goddess of learning. His son Mali, like Margayya's son, Balu, becomes a thorn in his flesh. The plot of both the texts is built with the father-son relationship as the corner stone—in such a way that when the relationship reaches a crisis, there is a sudden fluctuation in the fortunes of the protagonists. It is here that one notices the comic structuration that is built into the text. As a theorist on
the comic mode in fiction says, "Repetition is comic; an unexpected break in that repetition is more so; and best of all is recognition of a pattern that comprehends them both. The theory of incongruity goes far toward explaining comedy but stops short of the best sort, in which the incongruous is finally seen to be congruent to a larger pattern than that which was originally perceived."\(^{14}\) The incongruity we notice in Margayya's propitiation of the goddess of learning and the goddess of wealth becomes a more inclusive pattern in Jagan, who repeatedly talks about the Gandhian ethic and the Gita, and says, "Money is an evil" and "We should be happier without it,"\(^{15}\) and at the same time hoards currency in an attic and very meticulously counts cash in the sweet-shop.

Jagan, whom we see as a complacent and self-satisfied owner of the sweet-shop, seems to lose his sense of sweetness and light when Mali tells him, "I can't study any more."\(^{16}\) The narrator tells us that "He was a cowardly father and felt afraid to mention class or college. The boy might scream at


\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 29.
their mention or kick away his breakfast." Although he retains "a vestige of conscience from his days of public service," he often grumbles to distribute sweets to the school children that pass by his shop. At the same time he feels very apologetic to sit in the shop, collecting the cash. It is his inability to face his own problems squarely that lands him sometimes in comic and some times in serious situations. When his cousin tells him that Mali wants to be a writer, he feels uneasy, because in his dictionary "writer" means "clerk." As he gets more information regarding his son's ambitions and activities, he thinks that his son wants to be a Shakespeare or a Kalidasa. He tells his cousin, "College or no college, I know Kalidasa was a village idiot and a shepherd until the goddess Saraswati made a scratch on his tongue and then he burst into that song *Syamala-dandakam*, and wrote *Sakuntala* and so on. I know the story. I have heard it often enough." Though he knows the story of Kalidasa, he doesn't bestow much faith on its message. His fondness for his son and the strong mental image of his dead

17 *The Vendor of Sweets*, p. 30.
18 Ibid., p. 31.
19 Ibid., p. 38.
wife make all sweetness evaporate from the life of the vendor of sweets. No doubt, he tries to make it up with his son by avoiding words like college, classes, and education, but strong doubts oppress his mind, and in spite of his best efforts, he cannot completely identify himself with his son's fantasies. Some time later, when his cousin tells him that Mali wants to go to America to learn the art of story-writing, he feels unnerved, and says, "Did Valmiki go to America or Germany in order to learn to write his Ramayana?" He refuses to finance his son's visit to America. But Mali knows the place where Jagan keeps his cash. He takes ten thousand rupees from the hoarded bundles of currency and leaves for America. Compelled by circumstances and the pain of separation, Jagan looks forward to Mali's return from America. But Mali's return creates more problems for Jagan than he ever anticipated, because Mali brings from America a young woman about whose bona fides Jagan has innumerable doubts. He introduces her to his father, saying, "This is Grace. We are married. Grace, my dad." This brief introduction creates complete confusion in Jagan's mind. The uncertainty becomes more acute when Mali tells him that he is interested in fabricating a story-writing
machine, which requires large capital, about fifty thousand dollars. The following passages amply demonstrate the comic mode and the emerging irony of situation, which is a plot element in most fictions of Narayan:

Fifty thousand dollars! Whatever its equivalent might be, it was a staggering sum. 'I am a poor man,' Jagan wailed, and immediately noticed the shock on Mali's face and the embarrassment he had created in the presence of Grace. It was as if he had uttered a bad word. Seeing this, Jagan said, 'Gandhi always advocated poverty and not riches.'

'And yet you earn your thousand rupees a day,' said Mali with a vicious smile.

'If you feel you can take up the business and run it, do so; it is yours if you want it.'

'You expect me to do that? I have better plans than to be a vendor of sweetmeats.'

The recollection of the scene, he felt, would overwhelm him; he might break down and it would be silly to be seen in tears while he was occupying the throne. He had a mental picture of himself standing like a ragged petitioner in the presence of Mali and the Chinese girl, being sneered at for his business of a lifetime, a business that had provided the money for Mali to

22The Vendor of Sweets, pp. 95-96.
fly to America and do all sorts of things there.
'Vendor of sweetmeats', indeed! 23

The preceding passages very well exemplify the narrative mode Narayan usually employs. The confrontation between the father and the son reminds us of the confrontation in The Financial Expert, in which Balu demands a share in Margayya's property. Margayya's toughness as a man of the world helps him negotiate with the situation. But Jagan doesn't have Margayya's strength and tenacity, maybe owing to his lifelong association with the Gandhian ethic. While toughness makes Margayya talk and behave like a character in a novel by Meredith, Jagan's behaviour as an embodiment of passive resistance makes him no less comic. He seems to drown all his agannies in his shop, which is like a class-room, in which all his servants are his pupils, hearing his exposition on the Bhagavat Gita. It is in one of these mixed moods that he agrees to accompany the hair-blackener to Nallappa's Grove, where he is shown a marvellous sculpture of the goddess Gayatri in an unfinished state. The narrator comments that "Watching him (the hair-blackener) in this setting, it was difficult for Jagan, as he mutely followed him, to believe that he was in the

23The Vendor of Sweets, p. 98.
twentieth century. Sweetmeat vending, money and his son's problems seemed remote and unrelated to him. The edge of reality itself was beginning to blur; this man from the previous millenium seemed to be the only object worth notice; he looked like one possessed." But the problems—sweetmeat vending, money, and his son—did not vanish. While Margayya tries to face his domestic problems squarely, Jagan tries to escape from them, always keeping in his pocket his cheque book. He tries to console himself by saying, "At sixty, one is reborn and enters a new janma." His troubles come to an end when the police arrest Mali for keeping a bottle of alcohol in his car. When his cousin meets him in his retreat across the river, Jagan tells him, "A dose of prison life is not a bad thing. It may be just what he needs now." Though he doesn't worry about his son's disgrace, he is anxious to provide money for Grace to buy a ticket to America. He thinks that it is a duty he owes to her.

The above critique of The Vendor of Sweets helps us in seeing how Narayan transmutes the story of Jagan, a sweetmeat vendor, into a comedy of the self. Though he tries to escape from the problems that arise out of the familial and the

24 The Vendor of Sweets, p. 118.
25 Ibid., p. 182.
26 Ibid., pp. 191-192.
social relations, he has the kind of awareness that, at least some times, clarifies his obligations towards the self, towards others, and towards society at large. The following passage very well exemplifies the observations we have just made:

Jagan counted the cash and made the entries, but his mind worked on one theme only: the puzzle created by Mali. At every encounter he displayed a new facet, which might or might not have relevance to the previous one. Jagan was reminded of the concept of Viswarupa that he had read about in the Bhagavat Gita. When the warrior Arjuna hesitated to perform his duty on the battlefield, God came to him in guise of his charioteer and revealed Himself in all His immensity. On one side he was thousand-faced. 'I behold You, infinite in forms on all sides, with countless arms, stomachs, mouths and eyes; neither your end nor middle nor beginning do I see ...' quoted Jagan inwardly, at the same time remaining rational enough to realise the irreverence of the comparison.

In the above citation, the crucial concept appears to be Viswarupa. In the sacred text, it symbolizes the material and the spiritual aspects of reality, which is endless and timeless. In a way, it is co-terminus with the beginning

27 The Vendor of Sweets, p. 153.
and the end of life. At a lower level, it represents the world in which innumerable creatures, including man, are born and die, sometimes reaching the destined goal and sometimes falling like leaves from a tree in autumn. Whether Jagan is aware of the inclusive specificities of the sacred concept we may not be able to say; but his creator seems to be aware of this.

The world in which we live and its immense variety and multiplicity cannot be visualized and represented in a single creative moment. The Painter of Signs seems to suggest that even a signboard-painter who tries to present something in bold colours cannot trust the colours, because of the innumerable colour combinations that are available to him. In short, colours of reality often defy careful selection. The specifications of those who want signboards differ from the theoretical specifications of a signboard-painter. Raman, the signboard-painter, wants to establish the age of reason in the world. He declares his faith, saying, "I want a rational explanation for everything .... Otherwise my mind refuses to accept any statement.... I am a rationalist, and I don't do anything unless I see some logic in it."28 If

we look at the context in which Raman declares his faith, it becomes clear that logic is not a monolithic entity but a flexible tool that serves any number of minds to establish the rationality of their schemes and plans. The lawyer who orders a signboard wants Raman to employ slanting letters in writing the signboard. Raman tells him that "Slanting letters are suitable only for oil-merchants and soap-sellers," and adds that "The letters on a lawyer's board must always stand up proudly." He thinks that logic justifies his assertion. The lawyer tells him, "What more logic do you want than that I am paying for it? And I want it that way and the slanting letters to be shaded; that's all there is to it." The logic of the lawyer and that of the painter of signs are a part of Viswarupa, which doesn't exclude anything under the sun. But it takes more time for the protagonist of The Painter of Signs to realize it. Significantly enough, the painter of signs frequents The Boardless Hotel. In a town in which all thriving hotels have boards, even The Boardless Hotel has a roaring business. This suggests that reality, though people label it in different ways, doesn't need a

29 The Painter of Signs, p. 5.

30 Ibid., p. 5.
label. Raman passes through a number of dramatic and funny situations before he can realize the significance of reality in his routine life. Like Margayya's world, Raman's world is that of hotel managers, businessmen, bangle sellers, lawyers, doctors, and others, whose minds are always preoccupied with cash. He is aware of the corrupt practices of his patrons. In The Boardless he meets his friend Gupta, who has a constant grouse against the government. But he doesn't contradict him because "Gupta gave him much work, as he started a new business under a new name each year in order to confound the sales tax, income tax, and all other governmental tax-devisers. Establishing a new enterprise meant only blacking out an old sign and writing a new one in its place, and he paid down five rupees per letter without a word. And he appreciated any one who refrained from contradicting his political views."\(^{31}\) Raman has sufficient knack to negotiate with the Guptas of the world. But he also seems to suffer from distracting thoughts. The narrator tells us that "He wanted to get away from sex thoughts, minimize their importance, just as he wished to reduce the importance of money. Money and sex, he reflected, obsessive thoughts, too much everywhere—literature, magazines, drama, or cinema deal with nothing but

\(^{31}\) The Painter of Signs, p. 15.
sex all the time, but the female figure, water-soaked, is enchanting. 

The comic turn in the narrative takes the form of a female figure, Daisy, who commissions Raman to paint a signboard for the Family Planning Centre in Malgudi. His relationship with Daisy involves him in the problematic of sex, which he has been trying to ignore and avoid.

If we analyse the Raman-Daisy relationship, we may be in a better position to spotlight and clarify the kind of comedy we have in *The Painter of Signs*. Daisy appears to Raman like "a minor dancer." He has an urge to call on her and know from her why she calls herself Daisy. But his habitual self-criticism intervenes, and he feels that "To pursue a female after seeing only the upper half, above the desk—she might be one-legged, after all. But this is not sex which is driving me, but a normal curiosity about another person, that's all." Even to satisfy his normal curiosity he feels shy, and thinks of the various ways in which he can introduce himself to Daisy. But his visit to Daisy makes him realize that "She seemed to know her mind and its limits." But the

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33 Ibid., p. 31.
34 Ibid., p. 33.
35 Ibid., p. 35.
poor fellow has prepared himself for this visit with the utmost care. The narrator tells us that he "kept awake himself the night thinking of it; roused himself from dreams relevant and irrelevant to his mood, and dressed himself with care—a light yellow bush-coat and white trousers with the creases in perfect shape; shaved his chin to a gloss; combed his hair back, applying brilliantine." The verbs in the preceding passage—"roused," "dressed," "shaved," and "combed"—chisel the figure of Raman in such a way that the image of Raman is always there not as a passionate lover but as one who is playing with the preliminaries of courtship. After satisfying his curiosity, he tries to parade his theoretical knowledge about signboard-painting, so that it may fuse with Daisy's preoccupation with family planning. When he goes to her office to fix the signboard he has painted for the Family Planning Centre, mere curiosity is replaced by a dim hope that he may be able to cajole and persuade her to take more interest in him. She appears to be more reciprocative in the office than at her home. But he is, at the same time, restless as he always thought that a man has more important things to do in life. He feels that "Mind conditioned by story-writers, poets, and dramatists from time immemorial who had

36The Painter of Signs, p. 35.
no other theme than love—easiest subject to deal with. This philosophy had been my armour and made me unique all these years. Now am I on the verge of defeat?" The theme of love becomes so obsessive that he accepts defeat, in other words, he gives up the armour of a bachelor and puts on the armour of a lover. But he does not realize that Daisy has committed herself to a cause and her response to his shy and tacit looks is not love but sheer goodwill. Her dedication to the task of spreading the message of family planning, though seems to be complete, has a certain amount of exaggeration in it. She tells Raman repeatedly that the growth of population in India is India's greatest enemy, and he feels irksome. To cope with her zeal, "He realized he had been mistaken in taking her to be just a suave beaurocrat who got sign-boards written and files completed and properly knotted with red-tape while within she seemed to carry a furnace of conviction."\(^3\)

Raman tours a number of villages along with Daisy to paint family planning signs and symbols on walls, if it is necessary. Wherever she goes, she meets resistance from the villagers, who are indifferent to the entire idea of family planning. But this does not in any way affect Daisy's zeal

\(^{37}\)The Painter of Signs, p. 45.

\(^{38}\)Ibid., p. 57.
to propogate the message. In one of the villages Raman comes across a Brahmin priest who tells him that he can tame and subdue a man-eater. In fact, he did it once, when the villagers were shivering with fear as an old tiger was roaming round the village. Of course, one may see here the seed of a later fiction of Narayan, A Tiger for Malgudi. But Raman is not interested in the charming power of the old man. Forgetting his aim to establish the age of reason, he prostrates before the image of the goddess the old man worships, and mumbles, "May Daisy be mine without further delay. I can't live without her." But the goddess seems to have other thoughts. She probably knows that Raman and Daisy cannot pull together. On their return journey to Malgudi, they travel in a bullock cart. The cartman thinks that they are wife and husband. Raman keeps quiet while Daisy says, "Make no mistake. We are not married." When they meet again, Daisy tells him her own story: She comes from a joint family. The household is like a hostel, consisting of innumerable children and adults. When a prospective bridegroom came to see her, she refused to appear before him. Though she yielded

39 The Painter of Signs, p. 77.

40 Ibid., p. 99.
to the pressures of her family, she behaved in an erratic fashion before the groom. When the members of her family scolded her for her behaviour, she escaped from the village.

At no point in their relationship does Daisy allow Raman to take liberties with her. He feels that he is overburdened by and drowned in "Daisy-ism." But the relationship doesn't end there. He still entertains hopes of marrying Daisy. When his aunt, before leaving for Benares, asks him when and how he is getting married to Daisy, he tells her that it will be a very simple ceremony. But this simple ceremony doesn't take place. Daisy always puts off the day, and she leaves Malgudi. Just before her departure, when Raman asks her, "you have shown a tremendous storehouse of the love, you can give a fellow new life; why do you want to kill that great gift within you?" she tells him, "Because I have a different life chalked out."41 When Daisy is about to leave Malgudi in Gaffur's taxi, the following dialogue ensues between Raman and Gaffur:

"Take the ladies safely. Just a moment, Gaffur, you know what I feel like doing now?"

"Yes, Ram, good to see you. What do you want to do?"
"Drive a nail into your tire."
"Always boyish! Why?"

"I don't know. Don't ask for reasons. Goodbye, ladies," he cried, as Gaffur's ancient Chevrolet roared and belched smoke and jerked forward.  

Raman's words in the above dialogue, though have a touch of resentment, are on the whole humorous. Though a rationalist, curiously enough, now he refuses to rationalize. The narrator tells us, "He mounted his cycle and turned towards The Boardless—that solid, real world of sublime souls who minded their own business." Raman several times offers to write a signboard for The Boardless Hotel, but the proprietor resists the offer. The Boardless, according to the narrator, is the solid and real world, which suggests that reality is without a label; it is the self that is eager to paint a signboard for reality. It is in this process of naming, the self realizes, that naming has limited scope and narrow significance. Most values are only within and seldom find their appropriate objective correlatives. To come to a case in point is to see Raman getting involved in "Daisyism," for which Daisy is not the objective correlative. Sometimes illusion may take the form of a staple object for which there

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42 The Painter of Signs, p. 183.

43 Ibid., p. 183.
may be a signboard. But signboards are not signifying or
of what is real. What is real is not easy to define or
explicate; it is boardless. In this context, the sublime
ting virtue consists in one minding one's own business. It is
this that Raju in *The Guide* fails to do. This point becomes
clear if we compare Rosie with Daisy. Both of them dedicate
themselves to a value that is impersonal. Just as to Daisy
spreading the message of family planning among people who are
indifferent to it is a means and not an end in itself, to
Rosie dancing is only a means to achieve the poise of the
self rather than an end in itself. Just as Raman fails to
understand the nature of Daisy, Raju misinterprets the charac-
ter of Rosie and what she wants in life, in spite of many
hints and suggestions she frequently gives. Daisy tells Raman,
just before her departure, "At some moments, and moods, we
say and do things—like talking in sleep, but when you awake,
you realize your folly. ... Oh, forgive me for misleading
you." In *The Guide*, Rosie tells Raju, when he proposes a
brief holiday, "I don't think it's going to be possible until
I fall sick or break my thigh bone .... Do you know the
bulls yoked to an oil-crusher—they keep going round and

round and round, in a circle, without a beginning or an end?" A few moments later Raja, trying to dispel her doubts, tells her, "As far as I can see, there is nothing for you to be sorry about—you are famous, you have made money, you do what you like. You wanted to dance; you have done it." But Rosie's reply contains her ironic assessment of herself: "Till the thought of it makes me sick .... I feel like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village-fairs, or a performing monkey, as he used to say." Ultimately, when the superintendent arrests Raju, he requests him to give him some time so that he can inform Rosie. He expects and thinks that his arrest would make her sob, but she merely tells him, "I felt all along you were not doing right things. This is karma. What can we do?" The preceding citation reminds us of Daisy's words to Raman: "I have a different life chalked out .... Do me this great favour—don't again talk of the past or think of it. I am wiping it out from my mind. I can ...."


46 Ibid., p. 181

47 Ibid., p. 181

48 Ibid., p. 193

49 *The Painter of Signs*, p. 181.
The foregoing citations from *The Painter of Signs* and *The Guide* bracket together Rosie and Daisy. The comedy in these two texts issues from the incongruity the protagonists and the reader notice in the codes that propel their behaviour. Unnerved by Rosie's fluctuating moods of self-pity and submissiveness, Raju feels that "I couldn't understand her. I had an appalling thought that for months and months I had eaten, slept, and lived with her, without in the least understanding her mind. What were her moods? Was she sane or insane? Was she a liar? Did she bring all these charges against her husband at our first meeting just to seduce me? Would she be levelling various charges against me now that she seemed to be tiring of me—even to the extent of saying that I was a moron and an imbecile? I felt bewildered and unhappy. I didn't understand her sudden affection for her husband. What was this sudden mood that was coming over her? I did my best for her. Her career was at its nadir. What was it that still troubled her? Could I get at it and find a remedy? I had been taking too much for granted in our hectic professional existence."\(^{50}\) Maybe in their hectic professional existence Raju fails to interpret

rightly her self-pity, her renewed admiration for her husband, and the import of the images like "the bulls yoked to an oil-crusher," "one of those parrots in a cage," and "a performing monkey."

From the above analysis, we are not wrong in inferring that like Raman, the painter of signs, Raju is a poor guide of his self, though he may be an enthusiastic tourist guide to people like Rosie and Marco. As the fame and name of Rosie spread far and wide, and her talent finds good market, Raju feels that he has acquired some status in society. Apart from this illusion he entertains, he says, "I resented any one wanting to make a direct approach to her. She was my property. This idea was beginning to take root in my mind."Coupled with this passion to possess everything, he seems to suffer from an inexplicable over-confidence in his capacity to guide others. Moreover, as the narrator says, "It was in his nature to get involved in other people's interests and activities." Raju himself confesses and often reflects: "Otherwise ... I should have grown up like a thousand other normal persons, without worries in life." The preceding citations from the text require some clarification. The narration in The

52Ibid., p. 8.
53Ibid., p. 8.
Guide proceeds at two levels. Raju narrates the story of his life to Velan. When his disciples, the village folk, prevail on him to face the ordeal of standing knee-deep in water without food for propitiating the god of rain, Raju confesses to Velan by narrating his story. This we notice in Section Six of the text. Sections Seven, Eight, Nine, and Ten constitute Raju's free and frank confession of his past experiences and lapses. The concluding section dramatizes Raju's efforts to live up to the expectations of the image of himself he has raised in the minds of the village folk. In the first six sections, we have the narrator and Raju alternately narrating, so that the narrative voice may be taken as a chorus that enlarges and specifies the scope and the significance of what Raju has to say about himself and his activities. The narrative begins as follows:

Raju welcomed the intrusion—something to relieve the loneliness of the place. The man stood gazing reverentially on his face. Raju felt amused and embarrassed. 'Sit down if you like,' Raju said, to break the spell. The other accepted the suggestion with a grateful nod and went down the river steps to wash his feet and face, came up wiping himself dry with the end of a chequered yellow towel on his shoulder and took his seat two steps below the granite slab on which Raju was sitting cross-legged as if it
The above passage conveys the feel and the spirit of the rest of the narrative. The granite slab on which Raju sits assumes the position of a throne, suggesting that to the villagers he will be like a Maharaja, because sometimes the rural folk address a saint as Maharaja. The man who intrudes gazes at Raju's face "reverentially." Whether his face really inspires reverence in the onlooker or not need not trouble us. But the point to be noted is that it amuses and embarrasses Raju. The words "spell" and "shrine," while suggesting the man's veneration for what is sacred, make the reader ponder and feel uncertain when the narrator says, "the villager resumed the study of his face with intense respect. And Raju stroked his chin thoughtfully to make sure that an apostolic beard had not suddenly grown there. It was still smooth. He had had his last shave only two days before and paid for it with the hard-earned coins of his jail life." The narrator doesn't leave the reader in any doubt whatsoever regarding Raju's bona fides. But he does suggest that Raju's face has a certain bewitching charm that accounts for some of his

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55 Ibid., p. 6.
troubles. This impression is reinforced by the words of the barber who gives a shave to Raju after his release from jail: "you look like a maharaja now."\(^{56}\) It may not be a far-fetched inference to see an ironic link between Raju and Maharaja because the story of Raju's past, narrated as a flash-back, confirms the pattern that the narrator's remarks quoted earlier suggest. The problem that Velan tries to place before Raju for his consideration and guidance (advice) makes Raju think of his own problems.

All his problems and troubles generate from his first acquaintance with Rosie. Raju wonders why she calls herself Rosie. She is not a foreigner but an Indian in Indian dress. Raju has enough shrewdness to tickle her vanity by saying that as an orthodox dancer she fosters the Indian cultural tradition. Not only does he assess the weakness in Rosie's character, but sees through the vulnerable personality of her husband, whom he calls Marco, without bothering to know his name. The shape of the narrative in *The Guide* is such that before we hear the protagonist's confession, we are given a brief but incisive sketch of the three significant characters who constitute a kind of triangle (not the kind of love triangle we usually come across in Hardy's novels), and the contours of the plot. The plot of *The Guide* is more complex than the plot of any

other tale of Narayan. It presents the formation and the break-down of a man-woman relationship and the way in which the characters involved in the relationship try to seek self-realization in the traditional Indian sense. Rosie's husband is a permanent tourist obsessed with the history of cave paintings. He comes to Malgudi to study the Mempi cave paintings. His wife doesn't share his interests. On the other hand, she likes dancing as she comes from a family traditionally dedicated to the Hindu temples as dancers. These temple dancers are viewed as public women. In this context, one is reminded of Rangi in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. Rosie's mother looks after her education. After obtaining a master's degree in Economics, she finds it difficult to decide as to the next step in her career. It is through a matrimonial advertisement that she comes into contact with Marco, and marries him, because of family pressure. This inter-caste marriage goes wrong from the start, because the husband is absorbed in the study of painting and art, and he seems to treat his wife not cruelly but indifferently. It never crosses his mind that his wife is educated and has tastes and aspirations of her own. Having noticed the rift between the wife and the husband and bewitched by the beauty of the wife, Raju exploits the situation and establishes a rapport with the wife. He takes her round Malgudi and always tries to impress on her
his responsibility as the guide. He himself explains the situation as follows:

I was accepted by Marco as a member of the family. From guiding tourists I seemed to have come to a sort of concentrated guiding of a single family. Marco was just unpractical, an absolutely helpless man. All that he could do was to copy ancient things and write about them. His mind was completely in it. All practical affairs of life seemed impossible to him; such a simple matter as finding food or shelter or buying a railway ticket seemed to him a monumental job. Perhaps he married out of a desire to have someone care for his practical life, but unfortunately his choice was wrong--this girl herself was a dreamer if ever there was one. She would have greatly benefited by a husband who could care for her career; it was here that a handy man like me proved invaluable. I gave up nearly all my routine jobs in order to be of service to them. 

The above passage brings to a central focus the preoccupations of the characters and the socio-cultural framework in which they operate. Entertaining Rosie becomes the guide's sole professional activity. As he says, "The only reality in my life and consciousness was Rosie. All my mental powers were now turned to keep her within my reach, and keep her

smiling all the time." But he finds it difficult to understand the girl. He says, "She allowed me to make love to her, of course, but she was also beginning to show excessive consideration for her husband on the hill. In the midst of my caresses she would suddenly free herself and say, 'Tell Gaffur to bring the car. I want to go and see him.' Later he finds the reason for her melancholy and vacillation: her losing all hope to activate her talent as a dancer. The following dialogue unmistakably suggests the truth of the above observation:

She asked me one evening, point blank, 'Are you also like him?'
'In what way?'
'Do you also hate to see me dance?'
'Not at all. What makes you think so?'
'At one time you spoke like a big lover of art, but now you never give it a thought.' It was true. I said something in excuse, clasped her hands in mine and swore earnestly, 'I will do anything for you. I will give my life to see you dance. Tell me what to do. I will do it for you.'

59 Ibid., p. 105.
60 Ibid., p. 107.
Raju utilizes to the utmost her passion for dancing to alienate her from her husband. Having heard the whole story from Rosie, Marco takes a stubborn step and refuses to acknowledge her as his wife. He tells her, "you are here because I am not a ruffian. But you are not my wife. You are a woman who will go to bed with anyone that flatters your antics. That's all. I don't want to hear, but if you are going to be here, don't talk. That is all." It is because her husband refuses to take her along with him that Rosie comes to Raju. Their intimacy and freedom irritates Raju's mother, who leaves him to his fate. Living like a married couple to all appearances, they manage to organize dance programmes in and outside Malgudi, which bring fame and fortune to Rosie, who rechristens herself Nalini.

As it always happens in Narayan's fictions, there is a sudden fluctuation in the fortunes of Raju. This happens as an unobtrusive plot device. Marco's photograph appears in the *Illustrated Weekly of Bombay*, which Nalini reads regularly. Along with the photograph, she sees a review of his book, which is extolled as "An epoch-making discovery in Indian cultural history." She immediately draws the

62 Ibid., p. 117.
attention of Raju to it and orders his secretary to immediately place an order for the book. This makes Raju realize that he has made a mistake all through their relationship in ignoring the existence of Marco, who, in fact, sends Raju a copy of his book, *The Cultural History of South India*, in which he acknowledges his indebtedness to Raju for helping him in Malgudi. Having learnt this from Mani, Rosie demands from Raju the reason for concealing the book from her. When Raju tells her that the book was sent to him and not to her and that she is showing unexpected and unanticipated interest in her husband's work, she tells him, crying, "After all, after all, he is my husband." When Raju tells her that she has forgotten when and how he left her, she says, "I do, and I deserve nothing less. Any other husband would have throttled me then and there. He tolerated my company for nearly a month, even after knowing what I had done." The preceding statement of Rosie suggests that her awareness of herself and her lack of judgment in assessing the true nature of a wife-husband relationship become increasingly acute and make Raju physically uncomfortable and mentally uneasy. While in prison, he thinks that Marco deliberately lodged a complaint with the

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64 Ibid., p. 179.
police that he was guilty of forgery. Even in prison he entertains a fond hope that Rosie would wait till he comes out of prison. But she tells him that she may go back to her husband, and feels confident that he would accept her if she stops dancing.

Raju's life after his release from prison involves him in a trap, largely because of his innate incapacity to avoid interference in the affairs of others. In the narrative sequences that dramatize Raju as a sadhu, we are constantly reminded that he is aware of the new role he is playing. His transformation from a tourist guide to a spiritual guide is saturated with unobtrusive but subtle irony. His cryptic statements suggest that he is playing the role of a pontiff. He feels that "he was attaining the stature of a saint."65 The words "grand," "grandeur," and their analogues are often used to suggest the kind of illusion in which he is engrossed. It assumes a concrete texture and shape when we learn that "He was hypnotized by his own voice."66 But the reader is always kept aware of this illusion by the narrator. The villagers call him "Swamiji" and

66 Ibid., p. 42.
compare him to Mahatma Gandhi. In spite of his eagerness not to betray himself, he loses his nerve to act as a saint and do penance to please the god of rain. When an American correspondent interviews him, he tells him, "I am only doing what I have to do; that's all. My likes and dislikes do not count." This suggests that Raju realizes that his role-playing makes him commit himself to a course of action not because he wants it but because of the structural compulsions that govern the role-playing.

From the foregoing analysis, we can see The Guide as a text with a complex of meanings. The most significant of this complex of meanings is the self and the roles it can play. Raju, the tourist guide, plays the role of a guide to a particular family. He helps Marco complete a scholarly work. He helps Rosie actualize her potentiality as an artist. He plays the role of a spiritual guide to a village community. We may say that he does not achieve any realization of the self in the various roles in which he appears. But we can't ignore the fact that his confession to Velan is more sincere than the roles in which we see him. One may here reverse the famous phrase of Mark Schorer, "technique as discovery," to "discovery as technique." In the narrative of The Guide,
we find that Rosie, at various stages, narrates her story Raju. This helps her clarify to the self what it is and what it seeks. She realizes that acquiring name, fame, and wealth as an artist is not an end in itself. The self has not only aspirations but duties as well. It is in the process of actualizing her aspirations as an artist that she discovers her obligations and duties. Raju helps her master the illusion, and, in the course of mastering it, discover the self. Raju himself, one may hazard a comment, discovers the self by passing through the illusion that he is serving in the first instance a family and in the last instance society at large. Commenting on the end of The Guide, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes: "Does it really rain, or is it only Raju's optical delusion? Does he really die, or merely sink down in exhaustion? Has the lie really become the truth, or has it been merely exposed? We are free to conclude as we like; Narayan might say in Pirandellian fashion: 'Right you are, if you think so!'" But in The Guide the movie, the audience behold not just signs of rain but a sharp shower, authenticating the villagers' implicit faith in Raju the saint. When Narayan narrated to Graham Greene the story of The Guide, and was not able to decide for himself "whether to leave my hero

alive or dead at the end of the story, Graham was definite that he should die. The main issue appears to be whether a narrative should have a formal closure or an open ending. Narayan is not interested in giving a formal closure, which would have made Raju a scape-goat, if not a martyr. True to the Indian tradition, his tales do not end with a catastrophic close. On the other hand, they end with the protagonist's realization that he or she is involved in an illusion and that that illusion is slowly but steadily yielding place to the staple truth, that is, life in its normal flux. This appears to be in harmony with the critical thinking on the crucial question of the ending in the modern novel. Unlike the ending in a Victorian novel, which concludes with a death or a marriage, most modern novels end inconclusively. As Malcolm Bradbury points out, "in a great novel an extended human experience works itself out in all its complexity. In the entire activity, then, there resides a decided openness and a spirit of humanism, which have come to see part of the form." If Bradbury's observation is applied to the text under review, we can see that The Guide unfolds a very complex


kind of human experience which hardly finds a definite and predetermined end. It is pre-eminently a comedy of the self, in the sense that the self has to pass through a process of learning and unlearning, and self-evaluation has its own pain and its own sweetness and light. Perhaps it is this quality in Narayan's fictions that makes them perennially significant without any loss of their contemporaneity.

The Man-eater of Malgudi and Mr. Sampath have thematic and structural similarities. They dramatize the nature and the significance of evil, which Narayan states as follows:

The strong man of evil continues to be reckless until he is destroyed by the tempo of his own misdeeds. Evil has in it, buried subtly, the infallible seeds of its own destruction. And however frightening a demon might seem, his doom is implied in his own evil propensities—a profoundly happy and sustaining philosophy which unfailingly appeals to our people, who never question, "How long, oh, how long, must we wait to see the downfall of evil?"  

The profoundly happy and sustaining philosophy which unfailingly appeals to our people is given a creative rendering in the two texts—The Man-eater of Malgudi and Mr. Sampath. Most critics of Narayan have elaborately discussed

71 Gods, Demons, and Others, p. 5.
the mythic scaffolding in the texts. But what is more significant than the mythic scaffolding is the realistic context and the swift action that characterize the texts. Moreover, they are good illustrations of the comic sense of life that inheres in Narayan's fictions. The protagonists of both the tales—Nataraj and Srinivas—come from families which we may call traditional. Each in his own way practises the ethic of altruism that any householder has to preach and practise. Nataraj has a press, but he appears to be indifferent to the financial aspects of his trade. A poet and a journalist are his close friends, and every evening they indulge in gossip of all kinds. It is this circle of ineffective but harmless and well-meaning men that Vasu enters. By profession a taxi­dermist, Vasu comes to Malgudi to improve his trade and busi­ness by killing animals in the Mempi forest. Vasu seems to have a good academic background; and like many enthusiastic young men, he takes an active part in the civil disobedience movement against British rule and courts arrest and imprison­ment. Without imbibing social and ethical values that parti­cipation in a great struggle like the civil disobedience movement ought to generate in a person with a good academic background, Vasu becomes the disciple of a phaelwan, who makes him physically strong and teaches him the art of twisting
and smashing stones. He becomes very popular among the crowds for his physical feats, but his master takes the money without sharing it with him. This makes Vasu lose his temper and turn against his master. When he tells his story to Nataraj, Nataraj realizes that Vasu would always be ungrateful to people for the help he receives from them. Expounding his philosophy of human conduct, Vasu tells Nataraj, "Life is too short to have a word with everyone in this land of three hundred odd millions. One has to ignore most people." When Vasu starts bullying his friends, Nataraj feels, "If I had cared for a peaceful existence, I should have rejected Vasu on the first day. Now it was like having a middle-aged man-eater in your office and home, with the same uncertainties, possibilities, and potentialities" (emphasis added). When Nataraj compares Vasu to a middle-aged man-eater, he seems to be aware of an exaggeration which is not devoid of truth. Nataraj is prepared to give the man-eater his due. Vasu takes him in his jeep to the Mempi forest but leaves him near a teastall when somebody brings the news that a tiger is roaming nearby. The teastall owner, Muthu, helps Nataraj reach


73 Ibid., p. 30.
Malgudi. Muthu tells Nataraj that Vasu is sometimes strict. Though he tells Muthu that Vasu is "A fearless man" only in order to please him, he is aware that Vasu is really courageous. But the problem that Nataraj faces is to contain this fearless man, so that he may not be a menace to him and to society. Vasu not only abuses the hospitality of Nataraj but slowly transforms himself into a threat to entire society. For example, he needlessly shoots the pet dog of a neighbouring family, which makes an old man of the family and his grandson tremble with fear and agony. Nataraj realizes that the comparison he made between a man-eater and Vasu is not just a metaphor but an actuality. Vasu's taxidermy is no doubt creative, but Vasu is utterly diabolic. When Vasu pushes a stuffed eagle to the gaze of Nataraj, Nataraj is bewildered. He tells Vasu that an eagle is garuda, the vehicle and the messenger of the god Vishnu. Vasu immediately catches the idea and says:

'I think there is a good business proposition here. I can supply them stuffed eagles at about fifty rupees each. Everyone can keep a sacred garuda in the puja and I'll guarantee that it won't fly off. Thus they can save their eyes from glare. I want to be of service to our religious folk in my own way.'

74 The Man-eater of Malgudi, p. 45.

75 Ibid., p. 64.
It is not Vasu's activities but the way he looks, talks, and thinks that make Sastri call him a rakshasa. He mentions the names of various rakshasas like Ravana, Mahisha and Bhasmasura, who destroyed themselves in pursuit of their own destructive aims. But Nataraj tries to give a social and secular interpretation to the Vasu-phenomenon. Totally agreeing with Sastri's interpretation, Nataraj tells him, "Sastri, you know the old proverb, that when your cloth is caught in the thorns of a bush, you have to extricate yourself gently and little by little, otherwise you will never take the cloth whole?" 76

The significance of this action-packed tale is to be explored not by giving unnecessary importance to Vasu, a social evil which can be religiously explained, but the panic, hesitation, and resistance he generates in Malgudi, maybe in society at large. The destruction of this social evil, which is otherwise labelled asura, or rakshasa, takes the form of a high comedy in which a disreputable woman, Rangi, a temple elephant called Kumar, and, curiously enough, a mosquito play a crucial role. But there is subtle irony here. Though a disreputable woman, Rangi is a temple dancer. She can't stomach the idea of killing an elephant that does service to God. She has the courage to reveal to Nataraj the secret

76 The Man-eater of Malgudi, p. 95.
plan of Vasu to shoot the elephant when it leads the procession which is a part of the temple festival. Vasu, though a giant, is afraid of a mosquito. Very early in the narrative, when Sastri removes all the waste-paper from the attic in the press, Vasu tells Nataraj, "That fellow has done you a service in carrying away all that waste paper, but he has dehoused a thousand mosquitoes—one thing I can't stand," and adds, "Night or day, I run when a mosquito is mentioned." When the procession led by Kumar, the elephant, is on its way from the temple, Vasu prepares himself to shoot the elephant. When the police disturb him for interrogation, he loses his temper and breaks his cot-frame to exhibit his strength. Since the cot is damaged, he sits in a chair instead of sleeping on his cot protected by a mosquito-net. Though Rangi fans him to keep the mosquitoes away, she cannot do it for long. When she falls asleep with fatigue, the mosquitoes return. Vasu wakes up from his doze, and while boxing a mosquito on his forehead, he gives himself a fatal blow.

The Man-eater of Malgudi may be taken as a fable, just as Golding's Lord of the Flies is considered a fable. Golding insulates his boys in order to dramatize their response to one of the greatest temptations, power. In The Man-eater of

Malqudi, Narayan places Vasu, the mythic rakshasa, in a realistic context. Vasus are not aliens in society; they are very much a part of it. Nataraj and his friends are placed in a serious situation by the presence of Vasu. He not only destroys life, but defiles society and subverts religion by making a pretence of doing religious service. While the problem is serious, the efforts of Nataraj and his friends to contain and eliminate Vasu appear comic. The narrative is a significant and relevant comment on the anti-social forces that operate within society, but the mode of narration is comic and entertaining.

The novel that resembles The Man-eater of Malgudi in the Narayan canon is Mr. Sampath (The Printer of Malgudi). The key episode in Mr. Sampath is the crazy act of Ravi, who knocks down Sampath, who plays the key role of Siva in the film "The Burning of Kama." The crazy behaviour of Ravi, an amateur painter and the protegé of Srinivas, is the result of his obsession that Shanti, who plays the role of Parvathi in the film, is the girl who haunts his dreams and makes him sleepless. The plot of Mr. Sampath is complex. Srinivas, the protagonist of Mr. Sampath, starts his career as the editor of The Banner with the help and goodwill of Sampath, the proprietor of the Truth Printing Works. Yielding to the flattery of Samoath, Srinivas neglects his editorial work and writes the
script for the film "The Burning of Kama." While writing the script, Srinivas is aware of the moral and the spiritual signification of the myth. When Rati, Manmata's wife, weeps and prays to Lord Siva to restore her husband to her, he tells her, "He is not lost, he is bodyless, that is all; his grossness has been burnt up, but he lives in essence. I grant that his activities may continue, though unseen, and I also grant that he may stay about my presence, along with my other unseen, invisible attendants." Srinivas's advice to Ravi, whose infatuation for his dream girl goes crazy, almost echoes Siva's words to Rati. Srinivas tells Ravi, "Like Shiva, open your third eye and burn up Love, so that all its grossness and contrary elements are cleared away and only its essence remains: that is the way to attain peace, my boy." As Srinivas explicates it, the myth signifies the burning of desire, so that it becomes love. In other words, sex is not an end in itself but the means to an end. The secularization of the myth consists in transforming lust into love. Except Srinivas, all the other characters connected with the making of the film reveal and bring to the fore various kinds and degrees of lust.

78 Gods, Demons, and Others, p. 93.

79 R. K. Narayan, Mr. Sampath (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1973), p. 103. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
Mr. Sampath closes his press and tries to acquire money in various unapproved ways to finance the project. He takes money from Srinivas's landlord, telling him that he would secure a good alliance for his granddaughter. To satisfy Srinivas, he employs Ravi to paint a few pieces of scenery. He brings Shanti and tells Srinivas that she is distantly related to him. When the actor playing the role of Siva refuses to co-operate with them, Sampath himself plays the role. Srinivas later realizes that Sampath doesn't go home after the work is over, that he has been neglecting his wife and children, and also that Shanti is not his cousin, and they belong to different castes. When he draws Sampath's attention to the misery and unhappiness of his wife, he says, "Some people say that every sane man needs two wives—a perfect one for the house and a perfect one outside for social life... I have the one. Why not the other? I have confidence that I will keep both of them happy and if necessary in separate houses. Is a man's heart so narrow that it cannot accommodate more than one? I have married according to Vedic rites: let me have one according to the civil marriage law." Sampath's reply to Srinivas unmistakably suggests the comic tone and the tempo of the narrative. As in the other novels of Narayan,
in *Mr. Sampath* also, when the plot reaches its climax, there is a sudden twist, a shattering reversal, caused by Ravi's assault on Sampath when the shooting of a love scene between Siva and Parvathi is in progress. It is as though Siva opened his third eye and burnt all lust. Shanti swoons and Sampath stands dazed. The whole set goes ablaze, because of short circuit in the electric installation. Police arrive and normality is restored. Sampath brings home Ravi from police custody. Sampath leaves Malgudi and Srinivas returns to continue his work as the editor of *The Banner*. Some time later Sampath meets Srinivas, narrates his experiences with Shanti and assures him that he is still a monogamist, for the simple reason that Shanti left him when both of them were sleeping at the Koppal railway station waiting for the train bound for Madras. The comic implications of the narrative appear clear in the reply of Sampath to Srinivas's question "What is to happen to the film?" Sampath says, "It must be dropped. We've been abandoned by both Shiva and Parvathi. And only Kama, the God of Love, is left in the studio." 

*Mr. Sampath*, while exploiting the religious significance of the myth, tells a secular tale. Like Nataraj divising ways

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\*81* Mr. Sampath, p. 218.

\*82* Ibid., p. 218.
and means to contain Vasu, we find Srinivas struggling to harmonize diverse men and attitudes and canalize them into a creative and civilized achievement. Sampath and Ravi are the two characters who show, by their thought and action, the subversive and self-alienating compulsions associated with lust in its unabashed manifestation. The entire orientation of Srinivas, on the other hand, is towards the effacement of ego and lust, so that peace may prevail both at home and outside. One may wonder why the novel is called Mr. Sampath, if Srinivas is the central consciousness. The answer appears to be that Srinivas is meaningful not by himself but because of his association with Mr. Sampath, the owner of the Truth Printing Works. Ironically enough, the Truth Printing Works is far removed from the truth, which is the foundation of the policy of the editor of The Banner. The Banner is revived and continued; the Truth Printing Works remains closed. Sampaths are transitory. They are the eruptions of a decomposing social malaise.

Generically speaking, it is difficult to place Narayan's comedy in any one of the well known categories like the comedy of manners, the problem comedy, the dark comedy, or the farcial and the satirical. In most fictions of Narayan, all these comic strains are noticeable, but none of them constitute the dominant mode. Because of the inadequacy of any
genre to describe the inclusive and the vital quality of Narayan's fiction, it may not be inappropriate to call it the comedy of the self. As we have discussed earlier, Narayan's fiction is so inclusive that no aspect of life is excluded from it. A doting father, a shopkeeper, a sign-board-painter, an ardent feminist, a dedicated family-planning enthusiast, a dancer, a player who finds himself at home in the varied roles demanded by social exigencies, a teacher who establishes visual and spiritual communion with his dead wife, and a tiger and a sanyasi who guides him and gives him spiritual orientation have a place in Narayan's comic world. Malgudi is not a place in which virtue is rewarded and vice is punished. On the other hand, it is a world in which individuals alienate themselves from their families (and sometimes reunions take place), vice and virtue co-exist, and everything is possible, sometimes because of divine dispensation and sometimes because of intense human struggle. *A Tiger for Malgudi* dramatizes the harmony that is possible and the self-awareness that could be visualized when the human and the animal worlds are viewed as a simultaneous order. In his Introduction to *A Tiger for Malgudi*, Narayan says,

Man in his smugness never imagines for a moment that other creatures may also possess ego, values, outlook, and the ability to communicate, though
they may be incapable of audible speech. 83

The above passage suggests man's very narrow and
limited view of the self, which needs reorientation towards
a larger world view. *A Tiger for Malgudi* precisely achieves
this by bringing into play a unique kind of sensibility in
which fact and fiction are subtly fused. The tiger narrates
his own story. One may wonder whether a tiger can narrate
anything at all. As a fictional character, the tiger makes
his consciousness so transparent that the reader not only sees
the working of his consciousness, but participates in the wor­
ing of that consciousness. These observations may be clari­
fied by scrutinizing the following passage:

They have shown me special consideration,
by the grace of my Master, whom I may not see again.
All the same, lying here on the cool floor, I madly
hope that my Master might suddenly appear out of a
crowd, open the door of my cage, and command, "Come
out, let us go." Such is my dream. I keep scruti­
nizing faces, but all faces look dull and monoto­
nous, none radiant like my Master's. Men, women,
and children peer through the bars, and sometimes
cry aloud, "Ah, see this tiger. What a ferocious
beast!" and make crude noises to rouse me, fling a
stone if the keeper is not looking, and move on to

Thought Publications, 1983), pp. 7-8. All subsequent page
references are to this edition.
apreciate similarly the occupant of the next cage. You are not likely to understand that I am different from the tiger next door, that I possess a soul within this forbidding exterior. I think, analyse, judge, remember and do everything that you do, perhaps with greater subtlety and sense. I lack only the faculty of speech.

But if you could read my thoughts, you would be welcome to come in and listen to the story of my life. At least, you could slip your arm through the bars and touch me and I will hold out my forepaw to greet you, after retracting my claws, of course. You are carried away by appearances—my claws and fangs and the glowing eyes frighten you no doubt. I don't blame you. I don't know why God has chosen to give us this fierce make-up, the same God who has created the parrot, the peacock, and the deer, which inspire poets and painters. I would not blame you for keeping your distance— I myself shuddered at my own reflection on the still surface of a pond while crouching for a drink of water, not when I was really a wild beast, but after I came under the influence of my Master and learnt to question, "Who am I?" Don't laugh within yourself to hear me speak thus. I'll tell you about my Master presently.84

84A Tiger for Malgudi, pp. 11-12.
In the passage under review, the narrative self seems to converge on the second person. The first sentence of the second paragraph amply demonstrates the point. The second person is invited by the narrative voice to read his thoughts to listen to the story of his life. But the narrative voice is very much aware that it is unlikely to happen. He says, "I don't blame you. I don't know why God has chosen to give us this fierce make-up." The narrative voice becomes lucid and inviting when he repeats "I would not blame you for keeping your distance— I myself shuddered at my own reflection on the still surface of a pond while crouching for a drink of water, not when I was really a wild beast but after I came under the influence of my Master and learnt to question, 'who am I?' Don't laugh within yourself to hear me speak thus. I'll tell you about my Master presently." The image of the tiger reflected on the surface of a pond horrifies him because the Master has generated within him that kind of transformation which we may, for lack of a precise term, call awakening. It may not be impossible to notice a slight allegory in the predicament of the tiger. If the self could behold an image of itself even without experiencing the kind of awakening that a Master can generate, the image might be as horrifying as the image of a tiger. When the Master intervenes and guides the self, the self realizes how ugly and incredible it appears.
The foregoing discussion helps us clarify a simple point: the narrative voice and the second person become the inside and the outside of the fictional scene, so that they together explore the nature and the quality of "the Master's grace." The narrative voice says, "Every creature in the jungle trembled when it sensed my approach. 'Let them tremble and understand who is the Master, Lord of this world,' I thought with pride."\(^{85}\) The word "Master" not only acquires multiple significance as the narrative proceeds, but creates a thematic base which steadily evolves into an articulation of the voice of the Master. When the weaker sections of the animal world show their humility before the tiger, crying, "Here comes our Lord and Master. Keep his path clear,"\(^{86}\) it pleases him, but the second person, ironically enough, is very much aware that the path is not clear. This inference is corroborated when the narrative voice says, "Among our jungle community, we had an understanding, which was an acknowledgement of my superiority, unquestioned, undisputed. My Master, when I mentioned it, explained that it was also true of human beings in various degrees and versions."\(^{87}\) This suggests that

\(^{85}\) A Tiger for Malgudi, p.13.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 14.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. 14.
after all the jungle community is not entirely different from
the human community. When the narrative voice, reminiscing
his life in the forest, feels guilty for his lack of restraint,
the Master, who reads his mind, says that "there is nothing
wrong in it, and advises me not to curb it -- it being also a
part of my own life, indispensable and unshakable although
I have come a long way from it." The words "explain,"
"read," "advise," and their analogues that punctuate the
narrative indicate the various ways in which a Master can
guide the self through the vicissitudes of life. The jungle
and the world are given metaphoric orientation, in the sense
that they symbolize unobtrusively the various ordeals that the
self may face before it earns an awareness of itself. When
the narrative voice recollects, in a flash-back, the way in
which it was trapped in the jungle, he also remembers the way
the Master interpreted it. He says, "My Master, later in my
life, has mentioned hell, describing the conditions that would
give one a feel of it. Now, recollecting the day of my tra-
poing and the journey onward, I realize its meaning" (emphasis
added). The career of the tiger as a circus animal and the
various ways in which it receives training from Captain cons-
titute the comedy which we usually come across in Narayan.

88 A Tiger for Malgudi, p. 15.
89 Ibid., p. 43.
Captain, who captures the tiger, calls his circus "Creative Circus." The relationship between Captain and his wife, Rita, develops into a familial crisis. She usually does the trapeze. Her husband, while trying to introduce a few innovations into the item, creates a problem for her, and she refuses to do the act as he wants it. This is paralleled by another item in which the tiger, christened Raja, participates. He is made to share a cup of milk with a goat. One day, when Raja is going through the item, the gluttonous goat, lapoing up the milk, appears so lovely that Raja is tempted to put his teeth to it. As the impulse and the temptation grow stronger, in a flash Raja nips off the goat's head, creating confusion and commotion in the auditorium. Thinking that it is not safe to exhibit him in the circus, Captain tries to use the animal in the film-world. Curiously enough, the tiger, Raja, attains the status of a film-artist. But inside him there is the inherent and characteristic stubbornness and ferocity of a tiger. When he is performing a film item, he suddenly gives a stunning blow to Captain and attains freedom from her circus master. He roams in Malgudi without any restraint and enters a school building to have a sound nap. When he wakes up, he realizes the situation. The efforts of the citizens of Malgudi to evacuate the tiger from the school
remind us of the efforts of Nataraj and his friends to evacuate Vasu from Malgudi. It is at this juncture that the tiger meets the Swamiji, his Master. The Master is also a Malgudi citizen. A photographer of Malgudi, who has the talent of not forgetting a face which he looks at through his lense, remembers that the Swamiji participated in the Quit India movement, after Independence lived with his family in affluent circumstances, and one day, without telling anybody, vanished from Malgudi, abandoning his wife and children. The Swamiji takes the tiger to a sequestered place at the foot of the Mempi range and gives him the kind of knowledge that is necessary for achieving selfhood. The tiger witnesses the Swamiji's activities. He receives many visitors, who place their innumerable problems before him. His wife also pays a visit to him and tries to re-establish her relationship with him as his wife. He tells his wife, "I have forgotten the meaning of many words. Please do not force me to talk so much about myself. Because of my sympathies and a real desire to help you, I have spoken. Otherwise I never revive the identity of the past in thought or word; it's dead and buried." By burying his past, the Master achieves a complete anonymity.

90 A Tiger for Malgudi, p. 172.
When his wife pleads that he has to return home, he tells her, "Listen attentively: My past does not exist for me, nor a future. I live for the moment, and that awareness is enough for me. To attain this state, I have gone through much hardship. I don't have to explain all that now. I have erased from my mind my name and identity and all that it implies. ... I wish I could help you, as I managed to help Raja and calm his turbulent soul." 91 The Master not only achieves peace—awareness of the moment—but helps the tiger calm his turbulent soul. When the Master realizes that the time for attaining his samadhi is near at hand, he makes suitable arrangements for Raja's stay in a zoo, and tells him, "No relationship, human or other, or association of any kind could last forever. Separation is the law of life right from the mother's womb. One has to accept it if one has to live in God's plans." 92 The Swamiji's advice to Raja is a lucid thematic statement of the comedy of the self we have analysed in the foregoing pages. An earlier version of this we have in The English Teacher, Narayan's controversial novel. Just as what is ferocious and turbulent cannot be tamed and creatively harnessed by mechanical and rigid exercises, what is agonizing and heart-rending

91 A Tiger for Malgudi, pp. 171-172.
92 Ibid., p. 174.
cannot be mitigated by self-pity. As the Swamiji says, "Separation is the law of life right from the mother's womb." Loss of the near and dear, and the consequent sadness need not be taken as articulations of the tragic. Krishnan in The English Teacher tries to overcome the grief caused by his wife's death not by succumbing to it but by living with it. He reflects:

"Wife, child, brothers, parents, friends.... We come together only to go apart again. It is one continuous movement. They move away from us as we move away from them. The law of life can't be avoided. The law comes into operation the moment we detach ourselves from our mother's womb. All struggle and misery in life is due to our attempt to arrest this law or get away from it or in allowing ourselves to be hurt by it. The fact must be recognized. A profound unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life. All else is false. My mother got away from her parents, my sisters from our house, I and my brother away from each other, my wife was torn away from me, my daughter is going away with my mother, my father has gone away from his father, my earliest friends--where are they? They scatter apart like the drop-lets of a waterspray. The law of life. No sense in battling against it ..." 93

As William Walsh succinctly puts it, "The second part of The English Teacher knits smoothly together Krishnan's devotion to his young daughter and— it is hard to put it down in plain language— his efforts to recover his connection with his dead wife." The persistent and pressing memories of their familial life pursue Krishnan and act like an auto-suggestion. They evoke the image of Susila, and make Krishnan say repeatedly, "Susila" and "my wife," which act like a hypnotic melody. In a trance he beholds his wife and feels intensely that "The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy— a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death." Although he establishes a direct and immediate personal contact with his dead wife through a medium, he seems to dispense with the medium ultimately, for the simple reason that Susila becomes an inseparable element of his consciousness. Moreover, a close scrutiny of the text seems to suggest that there is a doubling of consciousness in such a way that the consciousness of Susila and the consciousness of Krishnan can enter into a dialogue


95 The English Teacher, p. 213.
without impairing the unity of the narrative discourse. For all practical purposes, the agony created by physical separation does not disturb the familial harmony of Krishnan's household. The self doesn't withdraw from the network of socio-familial obligations. On the other hand, the self operates in such a way that it keeps its relationship with the family and society in tact, and at the same time achieves moments of rare and immutable joy.

In Narayan's comedy of the self, the self doesn't suffer from any kind of alienation from the family and society. The family, sometimes the joint family, is the basic unit of Narayan's Malgudi tales. Most of the protagonists achieve not philosophical wisdom but the sovereign principle of flexibility by passing through the common experiences of life, which constitute the very stuff of comedy.