Narayan's greatness as a writer of fiction lies as much as in his ability to successfully fuse fantasy and fiction, as in his presentation of the life of the common man, in its varied hues and his story-telling gift. This fictional aspect of his work has sadly been neglected so far, though a few critics have dealt with it, in their work, occasionally. It is, in fact, an essential part of his development as a novelist. Narayan as a mastercraftsman knows that art should be pleasing before it is realistic. He has proved that in spite of its insistence on verisimilitude, fiction remains larger than life. His stories though based on realities of life are essentially delightful. He has realized the fact that any successful fiction is impossible without story-telling of some kind. Therefore, his novels though based on realities of life are basically delightful stories.

Like Namby, his character in a short story, he is an inexhaustible story-teller. He considers himself as centrally a story-teller. It is in this special gift he differs from the other two major Indian writers of fiction in English, namely Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. In contrast to the commitments that shape the novels of Anand and Raja Rao,
Narayan remains a natural story-teller.

Anand is more concerned with the medium to register his protest against the social injustice meted out to the down-trodden. He declares: "I want to emphasize the revolutionary aspect of art." As a result of this, the artist in him suffers, at times. Premila Paul remarks that, "Anand's over enthusiasm to ram his message down the throats of his readers at times results in the neglect of artistic values." Raja Rao, on the other hand, confesses that he is interested in the puranic concept. He says: "I like the Puranic conception. That is the only conception of novel for me." He does not write on the common people's day to day problems because, according to him, the ultimate aim of man is spiritual. Speaking on the metaphysical quality of art in him Srivastava says:

Equipped with the mental endowments of a philosopher and a realist, Raja Rao has been able to apply his metaphysical erudition and mystical insights to the interpretation of reality of life in his art.

If Anand remains a novelist of 'protest' and Raja Rao a novelist of 'prophesy', Narayan remains an artist who is solely interested in recording the comic ways of life. His novels record the life, hopes, ambitions, successes, failures, frustrations and foibles of the ordinary people. As an artist interested in delighting his readers, Narayan presents his stories in his unique way. Commenting on the artist in him K.R. Sreenivasa Iyengar says:

He is a master of comedy, who is not unaware of the tragedy of human situation; he is neither an intolerant critic of Indian ways and modes nor their fanatic defender; he is, on the whole, content to snap Malgudi life's little ironies, knots of satiric circumstance, and tragi-comedies of mischance and misdirection. At his best, Narayan can present, 'the smiles and tears together, smiling through the tears in things and glimpsing the rainbow magnificence of life.'

Narayan gets his materials for his stories both from the contemporary Indian scenes - he admits his inability to treat the scenes pertaining to other countries - and the ancient myths and legends of India. His book Gods, Demons and Others is a carefully grouped collection of ancient tales taken from the mythology of India. Speaking about his method

5. Indian Writing in English, p.384.
6. Ibid., p.384.
of rendering them, Narayan says:

My method has been to allow the original episode to make their impact on my mind, as a writer, and rewrite them in my own terms, from recollection just as I would write any of my other stories normally out of the impact of life and persons around me.  

Even his autobiography My Days compares itself favourably with his novels, in its narration. His intense interest in the epics of India has made him to render them in prose. The Mahabharata interests him because of its story-value. He says: "Although the epic is a treasure-house of varied interests my own preference is the story." According to him The Ramayana interests us because of its story-content. He says that, "Everyone knows the story but loves to listen to it again." 'Story' is then the primary interest of Narayan and 'story' is his forte. Practically no story of his remains dull, because of his use of fictional realism.

Like any other novelist of our time Narayan remains a realist. In fact, in his early novels, there is more stress on realism for they are all written on experiences drawn from his life. His The English Teacher, the most autobiographical

novel, is greatly realistic even though readers still entertain a doubt regarding the psychic section of the novel.

But Narayan knows that mere facts will not make good fiction and to write a well-made story a novelist must mix fact and fiction. He knows that when a novelist, 'begins to ask himself how an improbable story can be made to seem as real as everyday life, he has started in the path of the well-made novel.' Accordingly, he mixes fantasy and fact in a greater proportion in his mature novels, such as Mr. Sampath, The Financial Expert, and The Guide. They are, in fact, the representative pieces as far as his use of fictional realism is concerned. The Financial Expert is the best example of a well-made novel and in it Narayan exploits the technique of fictional realism to its best. It is written in joy and hopefulness and as he himself stresses it is 'a work of fiction not a treatise or a document.' Fact and fantasy are so well blended in it that it remains as the best representative of fictional realism.

In the next group of novels such as The Man-Eater of Malgudi and The Vendor of Sweets Narayan reveals his inclination for fabular aspect. They remain, therefore, as fables based on contemporary settings. They can be called

modern fables. This desire for fabulation increases so much in the novelist that he relegates realities to the background and writes his *A Tiger for Malgudi* more as a fantasy. The other novels such as *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Painter of Signs* are more or less his lone experiments in the fields such as politics and sociology and they are not representative at all as far as fictional realism is concerned.

So, it can be said that from realism to a harmonious blend of realism and fantasy, and finally to more of fabulation is the pattern of the development of fictional realism in Narayan's novels. In the words of David McCutchion, Narayan's novels, "begin credibly enough, but rapidly become fantastic."¹² Like his novels, many of his short stories make use of fictional realism in an appealing way.

Just as Narayan's themes and characters are built on a mixture of fact and fantasy, his Malgudi - the locale of all his novels and many of his short stories - is a mixture of both. Critics have been making their attempts in identifying it with Mysore, the place where Narayan lives, with Coimbatore with which he is associated both through his wife and daughter and with even Lalgudi, for it sounds as Malgudi. Some of the enthusiastic Narayanites have even tried their best to get the truth out from him, either directly or indirectly, in their interviews. Narayan narrates one such incident:

Malgudi has been only a concept but has proved good enough for my purposes. I can't make it more concrete however much I might be interrogated. When an enthusiastic television producer in London asked me recently if I would cooperate by showing him around Malgudi and introducing him to the characters in my novels for the purpose of producing an hour-long feature, I felt shaken for a moment...  

Yet, in another recent interview when Narayan was asked the question of Malgudi was a geographic entity he has this to answer: 'It is not a geography, but a notion. which has the characteristics of any group of persons living in any society...'  

The world of this fictitious town is so realistically depicted that critics are worried over its exact location. However, it must be admitted that Malgudi has been only a concept that has proved good enough for his purpose. George Woodcock commenting on the fictitious and realistic aspects of Malgudi writes thus:

One can step imaginatively into the microcosmic realm of R.K. Narayan's Malgudi and feel more easily at home than in such a disconcerting fictional world as Faulkner's Mississippi.

Malgudi is a compound of the realistic and the fantastical elements. Its intricate lanes and by-lanes, its schools and Albert Mission College, its banks and its extensions are as much a common feature as that of any town. In fact, a physical map of Malgudi has been drawn as it has been done in the case of Hardy’s Wessex or Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha. Malgudi resembles not only any town in India, but also any town in any country. Narayan says: 'I can detect Malgudi characters even in New York.' He goes to the extent of saying that it is not only in New York he can detect Malgudi characters, but also in any place, London or even in Finland. Malgudi is realistic as far as the characters and their actions are concerned. Like any real town, Malgudi has its growth too. The Malgudi of Chandran and Swami is a town with schools and a college. But, when we come to The Guide we notice an improvement. Malgudi gets its railway lines and a station. In The Man-Eater of Malgudi, the modern occupation of taxidermy finds its place in it. And Malgudi sends her people to America as it happens with Mall of The Vendor of Sweets. Malgudi catches up the progress and changes accordingly. A Family Planning Centre also starts its activities in it. Unlike Hardy’s Wessex which is static, Malgudi grows with the advent of time.

It is a fictional concept, too. There are many instances in the novels that bring out the fictional aspects

of Malgudi. For example, Srinivas in Mr. Sampath falls into a 'reverie, and Narayan through him gives a fictional Malgudi:

The present Market Road was an avenue of wild trees, a narrow footpath winding its way through the long grass. Presently appeared on this path Sri Rama, the hero of Ramayana. He was a perfect man, this incarnation of Vishnu. Over his shoulder was slung his famous bow which none could even lift. He was followed by his devoted brother Laxman and Hanuman, the monkey-god. Rama was on his way to Lanka (Ceylon) to battle with evil there, in the shape of Ravana who abducted Sita. The enemy was a perfection of evil with all its apparent strength and invincibility. Rama had to redeem righteousness. He was on his way to a holy war, which would wipe out wrong and establish on earth truth, beauty and goodness. He rested on a sandy stretch in a grove, and looked about for a little water for making a paste for his forehead-marking. There was no water. He pulled an arrow from his quiver and scratched a line on the sand, and water instantly appeared. Thus was born the river Sarayu.

The river flowed on. On its banks sprang up the thatched roofs of a hamlet - a pastoral community who grazed their cattle in the jungles, and brought them home before nightfall and securely shut themselves and their animals in from prowling tigers and jackals. The jungle, with its sky-touching trees, gradually receded further and further, and cornfields appeared in its place. 17

17. R.K. Narayan, Mr. Sampath, pp.206-207.
This then, according to Srinivas, is the birth of Malgudi. In his reverie, he sees the picture of Malgudi down the ages, thus:

When the Buddha came this way, preaching his gospel of compassion, centuries later, he passed along the main street of a prosperous village. Men, women and children gathered around him. He saw a woman weeping. She had recently lost her child and seemed disconsolate. He told her he would give her consolation if she could bring a handful of mustard from any house where death was unknown. She went from door to door and turned away from every one of them. Amongst all those hundreds of houses she could not find one where death was a stranger. She understood the lesson... A little crumbling masonry and a couple of stone pillars, beyond Lawley Extension, now marked the spot where the Buddha had held his congregation....

The great Shankara appeared during the next millennium. He saw on the river-bank a cobra spreading its hood and shielding a spawning frog from the rigour of the midday sun. He remarked: 'Here the extremes meet. The cobra, which is the natural enemy of the frog, gives it succour. This is where I must build my temple.'...

And then the Christian missionary with his Bible. In his wake the merchant and the soldier - people who paved the way for Edward Snelling and his Englandia Bank.

Dynasties rose and fell. Palaces and mansions appeared and disappeared. The entire country went down under the fire and sword of the invader, and was washed clean when Sarayu overflowed its bounds. 

18. Ibid., p.207.
The entire thing is a fictitious conception of Malgudi. It is significant to note that Malgudi stands for India.

This Malgudi of fabular creation does not lack in fictional characters. The hermit, in The Painter of Signs, is a good specimen of one such character. He boasts of fantastic feats done by him:

"Once I found a tiger hiding himself in these thickets. He licked his tongue when he heard a human being approaching, but when he saw who it was, he knew he had lost the game. I addressed the Universal Soul directly: 'O Soul, take that clumsy tiger body of yours off and don't come and trouble the people anymore,' and the tiger bolted away in shame. At another time I told the wild elephant who was ransacking the gardens and fields, 'Hey, Gaja! Get away, otherwise I will bring down on you the chastisement of Gajendra, the Lord of all Elephants in the Heaven. I can argue cobras out of my way...!'"\(^{19}\)

Malgudi has a specimen of a cobra who listens to human appeal. When the musician appeals to the cobra not to kill him it disappears. This is told in the story 'The Snake-Song'. In the story 'Naga', we have yet another specimen of a cobra, who refuses to be free after a long stay in captivity and it slithers back into its basked, "as if coming home after a strenuous public performance."\(^{20}\)

\(^{19}\) R.K. Narayan, The Painter of Signs, p.76.
Malgudi has a tiger possessing a human soul. Raja, the hero of A Tiger for Malgudi, is a tiger who is endowed with saintly qualities. He is godly and so sheds his beastly qualities to grow into a saint. Such a tiger fills the author with hope when real people around him and his so-called realistic characters destroy it by their actions. Though occasionally the author enters into the realm of fantasy, as he does in his earlier novels and more often in his major novels, he is still dissatisfied. Real people with their realistic actions do not answer him the question 'who am I?'. He therefore resorts to the fantastic, namely, a tiger possessing a soul, to tackle that question. Though a fable, A Tiger for Malgudi remains serious in its content. It at least restores hope while it has been destroyed by almost all his other characters. Rajam destroys Swami's hope in Swami and His Friends; Chandran for sometimes destroys the peace of his home, by his letter just before taking up Sanyasa for a short time; Raman, in The Dark Room destroys domestic harmony; Sampath and Margayya aim at the highest and so violate all norms. Margayya even publishes an obscene book. Raju, a great deceiver, defiles the Sanyasa system itself. Daisy of The Painter of Signs destroys the institution of marriage. All these characters, cause more pain than happiness. So, it is left to the tiger only to restore happiness. 'Men, women and children, particularly children, hundreds of them will come to see you. You will make them
happy,""21 tells the Master to Raja. That is precisely Narayan's assurance to his readers; that fantasy when properly used, will offer happiness to them. Malgudi, the place that abounds in characters who are real and fictional, is therefore fictionally realistic.

Narayan, among the major Indian writers of English fiction knows very well to exploit the technique of fictional realism to serve his end, namely to keep his readers happy. But, he never degenerates into escapist fantasist to delight his readers. He knows the art of blending the serious and the entertaining. Where others might have produced either serious or entertaining novels, Narayan mixes both of them and makes his readers delightfully serious. This he achieves by fictional realism. Through this technique he bridges the gap between entertainment and serious art form. In fact, he has made it so unique for himself that a proper appreciation of Narayan is well nigh impossible without an awareness of the technique of fictional realism in him.