

CHAPTER - IV

Realism Comic Vision and Irony in the Themes

A civilized society assures a happy balance between man's elemental nature and his conduct as a social being. Human nature aspires towards the gratification of impulses and instincts which, in reality, are always thwarted. Celebration of the primary impulses is the chief concern of the Comic. As Robert M. Torrance observes, he is:

Comic not primarily because he is laughed at  
but because -- in the root sense of komos - he  
celebrates life, of body and mind. (1)

The comic hero has his own option of find ways for such celebration, independent of any rational or moral consideration. This obviously warrants an encounter with the world or the external reality.

The comic fiction shows the pathetic plight of man who has been put in a system that demands a massive instinctual sacrifice. This sadistic principle is so much entrenched in the fabric of social reality that man with an untameable nature cannot easily reconcile himself to it. To quote Richard Wollheim in this context, "he is placed in the world in such a way that he can experience pain very readily". (2) This fundamental disorder is built into the very pattern of the universe creating a hiatus between the ideal and the actual, between individual and society. The comic hero attempts, to an extent that makes him seem pathetic, to work out his life in a strange, hostile environment, led by unknown, uncontrollable drives

of the self.

There being a fundamental incongruity in the scheme of things, man's existential encounter with reality appears comic. The conventions and customs of a mighty social order are threatened by the fond dreams of the comic hero. In the novels of R. K. Narayan, the accent is always on the ordinary man, with his small ambitions and passions alternating between the constrictions of an orthodox tradition into which he is born and the carnivals of a free world to which he is driven by his primal instincts and urges. Narayan's comic hero embodies a paradox; he has been reared by the religious rituals and beliefs of an age-old tradition, and on the other hand, he has been moulded by the drives of his elemental self. As a result of this paradox the harmony of form in Narayan's novels emerges from an orchestration of two levels of reality -- the social and the individual. The details of nature, of environment, of customs, superstitions and costumes are juxtaposed against the details of the various states of mind -- in varying moods of uncertainty, nostalgia, indignation and self-satisfaction. The individual reality and the social reality interact to form the comic pattern. Dream and fact are set against each other with no intention to proclaim the supremacy of either, but to present a whole picture of life where the validity of each is recognized. The orchestration of realities which forms the comic pattern is embedded in the very process of living. The people in Narayan's world represent varieties of life in all its manner and proportion, facts and fantasies.

From Swami and Friends, to The Painter of Signs, his

latest novel, Narayan depicts life in terms of innumerable aspirations and frustrations, successes and failures, and oddities and idiosyncrasies. He does not exclude any particular age group, and within the bounds of the Comic, every stage of life has got its own chalked out place, reacting to the world outside in its own typical way. All the peculiarities, vagaries and villainies, however, irrational or unwise they may be, are the projections of the inner urges of life and are sincere human attempts to realize life in terms of full pleasures of body and mind which are the basic objectives of the comic.

The Swami and Friends clearly illustrates the boundaries of the comic in Narayan's world of fiction. Swami and his friends in their innocence, transform reality of this world to conform to their childlike fancies and successfully live in their own world of make-believe, much as Don Quizote does. Their participation in the National Movement by burning caps and by breaking glass panes of their schools, their M.C.C. and their serious business letter to Messrs Binns -- all these and many more done in simple earnestness and in obstinate defiance, project an attitude that is essentially comic. Childhood impulses and instincts are juxtaposed in a spirit of Jubilant conciliation against the world of grave business, the spectre of which hangs large in Narayan's other novels. Blissfully oblivious, the innocent children alter the reality of a complex world into their own simple and peculiar terms and strive for a full celebration of their urges.

As the scene changes from an unpretentious childhood to

a shrewd and calculative adulthood, the comic perspective also changes from conciliation to confrontation. The Bachelor of Arts successfully presents this aspect of changing perspectives. In the first pages of this novel it is all happy, smooth going life for Chandran. But afterwards the world becomes increasingly hostile to him. His adolescent yearnings for Malathi and his emotional outbursts are dismissed by a reticent, realistic world. The events reach a point of fantastic absurdity when Chandran dons the garb of a sanyasi, not out of genuine realization, but out of some fits of frustration -- a situation typical of Narayan's comic ingenuity. But events move and change very fast offering ample scope in the comic hero to display the various facets and possibilities of his character in response to the demands of living. Chandran takes up the agency of 'The Daily Messenger', marries Susila and becomes a man of the world as easily and quickly as he had renounced this world earlier. It is a crisscross of relationships between the individual and the world, sometimes opposing each other and sometimes coming to terms.

In Mr. Sampath one finds a rendezvous of all comic forces. Sampath, Srinivas, Somu, De Mello, Shanti, Ravi and many others are frantically involved with one another in bizzare relationships. The characters of Narayan's novels cannot exist independently. All their pranks and idiosyncrasies fit amazingly into one another's to form a total comic pattern. What John Killham says in connection with Dickens' Pickwick Papers <sup>seems</sup> true of Narayan's novels too:

The important thing to note is that the characters are only made possible by the story. Jingle cannot exist independently of Dr. Slammer and the widow, of Rachael Wardle and the White Hart. (3)

The characters in Mr. Sampath are at once contrary and complementary to one another. Srinivas' metaphysical concerns are inextricably linked with the frenzied material involvements of Sampath, Somu and De Mello, Srinivas, in spite of the philosophical disposition of his character unwittingly gets involved in the comic world of gross, mundane things. He hovers between the world of serious philosophic speculations and the world of philistine pleasures, being uncertain of the value of either. Ravi's impossible vision of beauty along with the concomitant frenzy sets the comic process in motion until the plot is carried to the point of resolution. In the grand portrait gallery of Mr. Sampath also exist numerous other comic characters, like the miser landlord who "collected the rent on the second of each month, took away the entire amount and placed it in Sarayu Street post office bank"

and at the same time professed himself to be a sanyasi who "bathed at the street tap and fed himself on cooked rice which was distributed as charity in a nearby temple" . In the character of this greedy, pharisaical old man the comic incongruity is self-evident.

Among all the comic heroes of Narayan, Sampath displays his existential potential to the full and till the end he remains a comic hero, unbeaten and untiring in spite of the hostility of all

the world around him. Other characters in this novel like Somu, De Mellow simply vanish; Srinivas is restored back to 'The Banner'. Narayan's comic heroes elsewhere fail to maintain their defiant spirit till the last against the scheme of things. Being battered in the process they switch over their allegiance from an imaginative world of unbridled freedom to the servile codes of a regimentative society, and some like Raju attain a sublime transformation. But Sampath alone remains, to the last, true to the comic credo. Through-out the novel the show is at his command. He can persuade people around him to his own way of thinking. He successfully dictates his own terms and demolishes the conditions of a moral world. The docile citizen in Srinivas becomes dumbfounded in his first meeting with Sampath :

They came to a costly furnished room upstairs -- a very special room as a board hung outside it said : "for ladies and families only", Srinivas halted before it, finding another excuse : "We are neither ladies nor families. How can we go in" ? "These rules are not for me", the other said .

For Sampath no rules exist. Even when he suffers a setback towards the end of the novel, his spirit is not defeated and probably a new venture awaits him at the railway station. To a question of Srinivas, Sampath replies. "Thanks, I'm going to the railway station. I'll manage there" . He takes up different roles in quick succession --- printer, film producer and actor. His spirit cannot be confined to any particular role or framework and

the options do not end for him. He challenges and jeers at all sorts of social institutions. He can crack and munch groundnuts in the court of a magistrate in a gesture of defiance at the judiciary, the most respectable institution of the society; he can ignore his family and flirt with the actress Shanti.

Sampath cherishes an independence of spirit and in such cherishing lies his conflict with the external reality. The encounter exposes the comic incongruity; but every conflict has its inherent pathos. One does not miss the subtle undertone of pathos in the characters of Sampath, Raju, Margayya and Jagon. Various emotions and aspirations of the individual respond to the compulsions of the world in diverse ways. Against the desire of Ravi's innermost self, against his intense aesthetic longings stand a host of forces of the commercial world represented by Sampath and his colleagues. This unequal relationship drags itself to a point where it is no more possible to maintain the apparent equilibrium and consequently the comedy of it springs to the surface in clear, visual details. Ravi's mad act of snatching Shanti away from the amorous Shiva (Sampath) in the most romantic scene of the film 'The Burning of Kama', his rampage through the entire studio virtually creating total chaos are gestures of comic challenge at a world that has strangled his inner urges. His frenzied hide and seek with Sampath, Somu, De Mello and all the other film folk during this episode of kidnapping subtly suggests the eternal hide-and-seek game that the individual and the world play between themselves. In Ravi's case it is the comedy of an individual's unrealised dreams and his desperate attempt to exist meaningfully, a comedy of human helplessness in the face of a cold, objective

world.

Against the odds of life the comic hero proudly proclaims his belligerent selfhood. The heroes in Narayan's novels suffer from a sort of ego-crisis and all their entanglements are the resultant effects of this crisis. Margayya's poverty and his inferior social status have made him challenge his fate. With wounded pride he snubs Arul Doss:

Arul Doss, I don't know about you, you can speak for yourself. But you need not speak for me. You may not see a hundred rupees even after a hundred years of service, but I think I shall do so very soon -- and who knows, if your secretary seeks any improvement of his position, he can come to me\*.

In Margayya's case money at first becomes an essential fact of existence; then it becomes an obsession and perversion. Successes boost his ego to a point when he considers nothing impossible for him :

He has immense confidence in himself now. He could undertake any plan with ease; he could shape his son's future as if it were just as much clay in his hand .

His burgeoning ego not only takes possession of his own self, but also of his own son and blinds him to reason and reality, thus destroying all of them in the process. He dwells simultaneously on two opposing planes -- the traditional and the modern. In the

first pages of the novel, Margayya's poverty, his dreams and aspirations are pitted against a rich society for which he madly craves. In the latter part, his ethical degeneration born of his own inflated ego leads not only to the corruption of his son but also to the collapse of his business empire. In the first part it is the comic challenge of a poor, aspiring man at his fate; in the second, it is a moral suicide of an apparently invincible hero that evokes a sense of both the ridiculus and the pathetic. In Margayya, the ancient and the modern simultaneously exist effecting perpetual comic tension. "The juxtaposition of the age-old convention and the modern character", Graham Greene rightly suggests, "provides much of the comedy".<sup>(4)</sup> The orthodox ritual of forty days, the publication of the book "Domestic Harmony", the cunning banking business through the succession of these events Margayya gradually moves away from innocence to a shrewd sense of material success. Ironically Margayya is caught in the coil of his own creations and is at last betrayed by them.

But all these events mirror his earlier deprivations and dreams. He successfully manoeuvres things to suit his own interests. His fall is hastened by Balu's modern way of living which his orthodox mind cannot endorse, but quite innocently he has long since accepted the values of the modern, materialistic civilization for the promotion of his own career. The comic incongruity can be perceived in terms of the two phases of Margayya's career -- his struggle against the society that loathes him for being poor; and his struggle against his son -- who is his

own replaced self -- which has nursed and nurtured the modern mode of living in violation of all traditional Hindu ethics that he has always held dear. With the denouement he moves a full circle and is back at his original position, chastened by his experience, wisdom and humility. It is in this sense that Graham Green speaks of Margayya as possessing "the hidden poetry and the unrecognised pathos we so often find in Tchekhov's characters who on the last page vanish into life." (5)

The poignancy of the tragi-comic clash of generations is more acutely felt in The Vendor of Sweets. The aged sweetvendor Jagon is a bundle of contradictions, who skil-fully combines his business profits with exalted Gandhian principles. The comic incongruity is apparent in the unique blend of hypocrisy and sincerity in his character. The various urges in his character that are often mutually contradictory, find their own ways of fulfilment; and conflicting though they may be between themselves, they exist in apparently wonderful harmony. He advises everybody to conquer taste in order to conquer the self, spins for an hour everyday and wears sandals made out of the leather of an animal which dies of old age because "he does not like to think that a living creature should have its throat cut for the comfort of my feet." He has completely simplified his life, has discontinued sugar, and takes twenty drops of honey in hot water everyday instead. He has also given up rice and lives on "a little stone-ground wheat with honey and greens". He is capable of simultaneously managing both his spiritual and worldly affairs.

As long as the frying and sizzling noise in the kitchen continued and the trays passed, Jagon noticed nothing, his gaze unflinchingly fixed on the Sanskrit lines in a red bound copy of the Bhagavad Gita, but if there was the slightest pause in the sizzling, he cried out, without lifting his eyes from the sacred text, 'What is happening' ?

He surreptitiously counts the 'free cash' which "is entitled to survive without reference to any tax." Jagon's idealistic ritual is nicely woven into the shrewd pragmatism of a business man to form a unique comic personality. When Jagon is betrayed by his own fond dreams for his son the comic hero just becomes a pathetic stump of life. Before Mali's story producing machine, his half American, half Korean wife Grace, and his friends and foreign transactions, Jagon's cherished notions of marriage and morals crumble. With the approach of the Modern, his apparently religious stance is reduced to a ruin.

Through long flashbacks the sweet past of his adolescent and marriage days is brought to the forefront of the narration offering immediate contrast to the long days of his widower's life. Jagon's dreams and ideals are pitted against a hostile world of fleeting time and of fast changing values. The long nostalgic recollections convey in poignant terms life's inherent sadness of time passing away and one's dear world gradually receding with it. His sadness, his existential agony, in a way, becomes the lot of the

entire human kind. That is why the reader is able to build an emotional rapport with Jagon in a common understanding of life.

In The Guide such understanding is made possible by allowing the reader a glimpse into life's mysteries and myriad colours, into its depths and possibilities. Raju, the reckless and the romantic hero is poised against a whole set of hard realities represented in the forms of Marco, Velan, his mother, Gaffur and many others. He graduates from a small boy helping his father at the shop to the owner of a railway stall and then successively to a guide, a romantic lover, a fake swami and ultimately a martyr. In Raju's character, the ego-crisis is sensitively fendered. On this aspect of Raju's character William Walsh comments,

"... the events in the novel also have a thematic significance in that they suggest the apparently hopeless struggle of Raju's submerged individuality to achieve an independent identity. This is why we are aware so often of a rather frantic quality in Raju's actions and meditations, for all that he keeps up throughout his off hand, youthfully cheerful manner". (6)

The innate urge of man to find a meaning of life, to assert his identity in an imperious world, takes up an urgency in the character of the comic hero and the greater the urgency, the greater is the dynamism of his actions and reactions. He can defy the ethical injunctions of the society to satisfy his existen-

tial needs. This comic clash with the external reality presents life's depths and colours in a kaleidoscopic pattern.

Raju, in quite the characteristic way of a comic hero, becomes the architect of his own fate defying the compulsions of the traditions or of society, the forces outside and alien to his instincts and urges. He is an ever-aspiring young man, and his ambitions make him abandon his father's humble shop, the railway stall and the vocation as a guide. His romantic yearnings, which one fails to rationalize from the standpoint of social morality, are set against the cold reality of a social existence represented by the apparently invincible characters like his mother, uncle, Marco and his trusted friend Gaffur. Raju, Rosie and Marco have all broken away from a normal way of living all of them are involved in a curious triangular relationship. Dream and fact, within and without, are entangled with one another in an existential equation. The comic hero marches over reason and rationality in a defiant spirit of adventure to have a grand gala of an unrestrained life. Raju creates a world of his own where he can nurse his desires for this he cuts himself off from his family; he even robs Nalini and her husband of their original identities with whom he is engaged in immediate relationship. Nalini becomes Rosie and for her husband, Raju invents the name of Marco. His inner urges and the corresponding actions are set against a host of forces -- against the cold professionalism of Marco, against the orthodox morality of his mother and the aggressiveness of his uncle, against an unpredictable Rosie and at last against an alien and indifferent crowd during his spiritual ordeal at the riverside. Raju gets

entangled with the world on a multi-dimensional plane, and on each plane his actions are aimed at *subverting* an orthodox and rational world that puts bridles on human instincts and impulses. The reader feels a compelling sense of admiration for Raju for the independence of his spirit and the tenacity of his actions, in spite of all its implications of social impropriety.

The tragi-comedy of the individual's helplessness in the face of an awful external reality becomes abundantly clear when Velan, even after bearing the entire history of Raju's life, accepts him as 'Swami'. What makes Velan behave so is left ambiguous. But in the figure of Velan, all the weights of the world come to crush Raju and force him to maintain an utterly inconvenient mask. On the first day of his fast, quite in the guileful way of a comic hero, he secretly eats some stale rice. But on the second day, he searches for food in the aluminium vessel in vain. His indomitable ego, which hitherto has been responsible for all his crises, once again comes to assert itself as a challenge to the pressure of the world :

"He felt enraged at the persistence of food thoughts. With a sort of vendictive resolution, he told himself, "I'll chase away all thought of food. For the next ten days I shall eradicate all thoughts of tongue and stomach from my mind."

With this resolution of Raju, in forsaking a hedonistic life and in accepting martyrdom, the narrative moves out of the bounds of

the comedy and enters the portals of a religious drama; but the comic incongruity persists, though now outside the character of Raju. Raju's lone, rigorous penance and the loony crowd around him are in ironic proximity to each other. They are, in effect, an encounter between an extremely private self and an indifferent world lying outside :

"... each day the crowd increased. In a week there was a permanent hum pervading the place. Children shouted and played about, women came carrying baskets filled with pots, fire wood and foodstuffs, and cooked the food for their men and children. There were small circles of smoke going up all along the river bank, on the opposite slope, and on this bank also. It was studded with picnic groups, with the women's bright coloured sarees shining in the sun; men too had festive dress. Bullocks unyoked from their carts jingled their belts as they ate the straw under the trees. People swarmed around little water-holes."

Raju undertaking the penance in order to eradicate the drought and thus mitigate the sufferings of the people, becomes a part of the people in a spiritual sense. Yet, he remains his solitary self amidst all these merry-makings and religious festivities. The objective world looms large with the special trains carrying passengers. Gaffur's taxi, the big tea stall erected by the Tea

Propaganda Board, the khaki-clad inspectors of the Health Department and the D.D.T., the film shows about Malaria, Plague and B.C.G vaccination, the swarming press reporters and the American film producers, the gambling booth and peddlers and onlookers. A serious religious mission generating such propaganda and festivities that belong absolutely to a commercial world is, of course, a comic spectacle.

While the commercial world goes on exhibiting itself, Raju shrinks inward :

'The hum of humanity around was increasing. His awareness of his surroundings was gradually lessening in a sort of inverse proportion'

What seems to be a funny collaboration between innocent village folk and an imposter working for an impossible end takes on serious dimensions. Against the trepidations in the inner depths of existence of a sinner experiencing the metamorphosis into a saint through self-mortification, the flirtations and flippancy of the curious crowd, of the vast network of commercial and governmental activities are juxtaposed. The Government's silly telegraphic advice to persuade Swami to resume fast later comes as a comic relief at the height of a tense situation. Beneath the comedy of the entire scene, an awful anxiety lurks about Raju, who faces the most crucial tryst with his destiny. Narayan, here, not only depicts the state of Indian society in a period of transition; on the existential plane, he seems to suggest the bewildering relationship

between the individual and the world.

The human situation is portrayed in a sort of uncanny atmosphere in The Maneater of Malgudi, Vasu, the arrogant taxidermist lives a gross philistine existence. His highly inflated ego does not brook and challenge, and the humble society of Malgudi can only build a relationship of tame submissiveness with him. He virtually creates a parallel world where he reigns supreme. He has his own ideas and logic that confound our moral sense and the time-honoured social values. He considers marriage to be an unnecessary social institution. For him 'melas' (Fairs) are arranged in our country so that thousands can die in Cholera or Smallpox or just get trampled as a result of which the population of the country can be kept in 'manageable limits' and shooting is not at all terrible and it is just a 'give and take' between the shooter and the object who receive the bullet. His immense physical strength, his fantastic logic and way of life and the very nature of his profession set him in immediate contrast with the docile folk of Malgudi. He becomes a menace to the smooth flow of life and has his own will and terms. The spirit of independence has taken an exaggerated form in him and he brooks no moral or social barrier while celebrating the urges of his self. Eventhough Nataraj is embarrassed and overawed by Vasu he feels "a sneaking attraction"<sup>(7)</sup> for the latter's spirit of independence and his manly defiance, Nataraj's predicament springs from his transactions with the fantastic Vasu. From the Vasu-Nataraj relationship the scene moves to the sphere of the community when Vasu decides to shoot at the temple elephant. The

comedy of Vasu's relationship with the people of Malgudi is sustained with continuing anxiety till the man-eater is undone by the mere mosquitoes. Vasu revolts against all routine habits of mind, against all accepted beliefs and patterns of human behaviour. With such an attitude his transactions with a normal world produce a bizarre spectacle.

Vasu jeers at all sorts of social institutions. He belittles the world that does not allow the individual full sovereignty. He breaks the arm of the Police Inspector, flirts with any woman he likes without caring least for the public opinion and shoots according to his whims. In all his actions he brings down the world around him to its knees. But in spite of all his apparent successes, he remains a solitary, mysterious figure. A proper study of his character and his strange relationship with the world, is not possible unless the workings in the inner depths of his existence are probed.

K.R.S. Iyengar thinks that Vasu is the symbol of "anti-life".<sup>(8)</sup> But on the individual plane, Vasu lives his life to the full, even to an enviable extent, whereas Nataraj and his sort are just ordinary people living a life of bridled aspirations and instincts. Vasu just can't be dismissed as inimical to the spirit of living, once the darker recesses of his unconscious are understood. Vasu is a forlorn figure having no kith and kin -- for reasons unknown to us -- and is divorced from the mainstream of life. Possibly the monstrous actions of Vasu that we witness are the results

of his injured ego, the inevitable consequence of some deprivations in the earlier part of his life. Behind the violent facet, he still nurtures some of the dreams of life. His possessive affection for Rangî and his desire to build a cosy home with her provide a glimpse into one part of his inner self that is tender, that cares for the simple, elemental values of life. In his young days, inspired by patriotism, "he had joined the civil Disobedience Movement against the British rule, broken the laws, marched, demonstrated and ended up in jail".

It bears ample testimony to the man that lies concealed beneath the surface monstrosities. In his violent actions, he tries possibly to compensate what he has lost, what he has been deprived of. Here is a grotesque figure driven by violent impulses of his own character, and in the end when these forces reach their ultimate point, he meets his doom.

This is, of course, depending too much on psycho-analysis. But Vasu's conduct and character cannot be explained without it, as very little is known about him. As Erich Fromm observes:

"... the human passions (such as striving for love, tenderness, freedom as well as the lust for destruction, sadism, masochism, the craving for power and property) are answers to 'existential needs' which in turn are rooted in the very condition of human existence."<sup>(9)</sup>

The characters of Raju, Sampath and Margayya can be looked at with sympathy when viewed from this angle. And Vasu, failing to find

satisfaction in the higher levels of life "creates for himself the drama of destruction", (10) Sastri's mythological interpretation of Vasu's death -- "Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self-destruction, and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment" -- closely corresponds to this line of analysis of human character. From <sup>my</sup> has summed up this paradoxical phenomenon thus ; "... life turning against itself in the striving to make sense of it." (11)

Vasu's response to this world takes up a terrifying form. The awesome personality of Vasu, the docility of the Malgudi folk and a revered Indian tradition facing an apparent threat -- all act and react with one another to form a comedy of the grotesque. Various existential problems are posed and not only Vasu, but also Nataraj, the mono-syllabic poet, and others meet these problems in their own ways. Nataraj shares Vasu's libidinal instincts to some extent. He reflects in comic bewilderment on the temptations of Rangî's body :

When I tiptoed back to my place beside the grille,  
there she was, ready as it seemed to swallow me up  
wholesale, to dissolve within the embrace of her  
mighty arms all the monogamous chastity I had practi-  
sed a whole lifetime

Against Vasu's defiant manner of living a life of instincts,  
Nataraj, the orthodox moralist looks ridiculous.

In the drama of Malgudi we find life in all its totality,

where man tries to assert his status and lives by various designs, however, puny and evil these may be. To quote Erich Fromm again;

The truth is that all human passions, both the 'good' and the 'evil' can be understood only as a person's attempt to make sense of his life, and transcend banal, merely life sustaining existence ... Even the most sadistic and destructive man is human, as human as the saint. He can be called a warped and sickman who has failed to achieve a better answer to the challenge of having been born human, and this is true, he can also be called a man who took the wrong way in search of his salvation. (12)

Thus Sampath is basically no different from Srinivas; Raju is very much like us; and Vasu also is like Nataraj or the monosyllabic poet is so far as basic human aspects are concerned.

The focus shifts from the bellicose egoism of Vasu to a sort of baffling individualism of Daisy, an inspired family planning worker in The Painter of Signs. This novel is a comedy of adolescent visions of romantic love and of fanatical idealism. Apart from Raman and Daisy, the various pranks and idiosyncrasies of Roman's customers, the superstitious beliefs of the village folk, the lawyer who wants a left **slant** in the letters in his signboard, the bangle seller who massages soft feminine hands, the town hall professor who sells profound messages for only five

paise each, the old priest of the temple who can read one's past from a number of a colour and numerous others with their individual peculiarities exist in Malgudi making it almost a human zoo. The Painter of Signs follows the characteristic comic pattern that one finds in the other novels of Narayan. Roman's romantic yearnings not only face an opposition from her aged aunt, the repository of all the traditional values, but he has also to encounter the uncertain responses from Daisy. Daisy remains an enigma for him. He, with his most private longings builds a queer relationship with Daisy who ultimately proves to be an embodiment of indifference for him. On the other hand, Daisy alternately responds to and rejects her own instincts. For her Raman represents the emotional aspect of life that hardly agrees with her strong individualistic temperament. Daisy's abandonment of the proposed marriage in preference to the family planning campaign in some distant hilly village is as sudden and absurd as Raman's quick acceptance of this reversal with a desire to drive a nail into the tire of Daisy's vehicle and with the carefree act of throwing the key into the dry fountain. Daisy's unrealized instincts and her fanatical idealism make her character an entity of incongruities. With the gradual unfolding of the Raman-Daisy relationship, the contours of the comedy become clearer and clearer as the incongruity of the situation gets exposed. The suffocations of a crowded joint family have heavily weighed upon Daisy's childhood which has resulted in the built-in aversion in her character for any sort of private relationship. Raman, on the other hand, tries to weave his life into that of Daisy, who is

utterly incapable of any emotional relationship. The individual's instincts and aspirations confront an inhospitable reality of things.

Narayan's protagonists are out of assert their identities in the face of a cruel world that never comes upto an individual's expectations. Margayya knows that he has been thrown into a world that "seemed to be a very risky place to live in, peopled by creatures with dark powers", a world that "treated him with contempt because he had no money" . It is not only Margayya who has to face the odds of the world, it is also Raju with his instinctual yearnings for Rosie, Sampath with his ambitious projects, Ravi with his impossible vision of beauty and Raman dreaming to marry a woman who pathetically confesses, "Married life is not for me. I have thought it over. It frightens me. I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live except alone".

K.R.S. Iyengar surveys the scene from a social context and finds Malgudi "a field of unpredictable forces, a theatre where forces and tragi-comedies are played without end", "the net result being the enthronement of the Absurd."<sup>(13)</sup> This 'Absurd' is not only the outcome of "war and the post-war years of hectic striving, chronic uncertainty, expense of spirit and lust in action,"<sup>(14)</sup> it is there entrenched in man's fundamental existence right from the time of Dr. Faustus, Don Quixote and many others, right from the time of man's birth into this universe with his instincts and yearnings, wishes and dreams.

The comedy in Narayan's novels carries a subtle sense of pathos. Both the socio-economic conditions as well as questions

pertaining to man's very existence haunt him -- questions such as the silent process of ageing, the temporality of our existence and the futile search for some stabilizing factor in life. For Margayya, the illusion of marriage days no more sustains him.

He had thought that <sup>that</sup> world continue for ever.  
What a total false view of life one acquired  
on one's wedding day.

And for Jagon the charm of married life is also long since lost giving place to the forlorn days of a widower. The old miserly landlord in Mr. Sampath dies with his dream of seeing his granddaughter's marriage unrealized. Man by his puny efforts tries to create impressions of permanence in a transitory existence. The dreams fall flat to the ground and there comes the shock of recognition, the pathetic awareness of the fragility of an impermanent universe.

Narayan's protagonists, who are ordinary man and women, move out of their ordinariness in their quest to make life more pleasurable or meaningful. They passionately cling to a life that time and again betrays and batters them. Thus his novels are tiny worlds where the lilliputian man with his dreams and sufferings is celebrated; where one finds man untiringly limping across the boundaries of life with the beauty and bruises of existence.

A comic vision embraces the multifarious facets of human life. Narayan operates in a framework of traditions and social morality which is much bigger than the individual, his ego and

oddities. Sooner or later, normal reality takes hold of the situation including the aspiring and erring individuals. Hence man's encounter with the world appears ludicrous. The comic vision always offers the consolation of a reconciliation. Man's small villainies, his innumerable temptations and tragedies and the frequent abysses and heights in his life -- all these that form the totality of life are affectionately treated by Narayan with a humane understanding of life's complexities. Raman in The Painter of Signs declares that "people are moved by strange, inexplicable drives ..." a statement that serves as a key to Narayan's comedy in The Painter of Signs as also in his other novels. He explores subtly the psychic depths of man, brings him close to a world outside himself, and from this orchestration of realities, carves out a human comedy.

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In Narayan's fiction the comic vision operates in a framework of irony. It embraces not only the particular social context in which Narayan's men and women have their various transactions, but also focuses on an existential reality based on their particular experiences. Behind the narrative facade of his novels, Narayan attempts at a vision of life - a life of opposing dualities, of appearance and reality, beliefs and betrayals.

The ordinary man's response to the Indian milieu of the transition period becomes naturally ambivalent as he gropes his way between the old tradition and the new civilization. The Indian

is tossed between tradition and modernity and hence presents himself as a comic figure. No big promise is held out for him and hence no big disillusionment. Individual aspirations and the urge for personal heroics are prompted by the new civilization that comes with western education, life style and rapid material advancement. Individualism becomes the new-found ideal. But these are betrayed successively by the old India ethos, which still asserts its immense force and influence and which believes more in community existence than in individual achievements. The old tradition apparently gives way to the modern; the community temporarily yields place to the individual. But in the course of events the process reverses itself, lending an ironic dimension to the entire perspective. The middle class that emerges with the new education and industrialization suffers from a peculiar predicament. The middle class character oscillates between the old and the new, ambition and humility, between morality and hypocrisy. This plight of his, of course, does not forebode any great disaster. Because of his typical middle class character he can neither be a king nor a commoner. His troubles and sufferings, his misunderstandings and misadventures are in the end washed out by the cohesion of the community. An optimism, springing from this cohesive spirit of the community or the traditions, embraces all the ups and downs of life and with the optimism in background all the ambitious plans and plights of the individual appear comic. It is only an objective but sensitive artist who can penetrate into the reality of things and irony is his chief tool with which he can focus on the peculiarity of the human situation

without betraying his personal emotions. In the particular social context of India, Narayan remains equidistant from the Old and the New, and this position offers him a vantage ground to view reality objectively. Thus Narayan sets himself as a pioneer in the tradition of ironic realism in Indo-Anglian fiction. In his novels, irony is not only <sup>in</sup>grained in occasional episodes of the narrative, but is a built-in phenomenon in plot, character and style.

Swami and Friends is a plain story about the experiences and exploits of children, placed in the larger perspective of an adult world. Their frequent quarrels and conciliations, the burning of caps and the breaking of glass panes of schools as a patriotic ritual of the Freedom Movement, the big launching of the M.C.C., their crazy efforts to create a bigger world by naively imitating a perverted one of the adults, constitute a saga of innocence and fun. As C.D. Narasimhaiah aptly remarks :

"What interests Narayan is the brave talk of the youngsters who collected in street corners and echoed the high sounding words of their elders, most of whom could not have been any more effective than the school boys who employed nationalistic postures to no purpose. It is these that brought forth Narayan's comic genius in fiction." (15)

The transactions of the adult world in their professed seriousness and in their hypocrisy look ridiculous before a joyous world of innocent children. Swami and Friends stands

in ironic contrast to all other novels of Narayan that embody such adult preoccupations.

The plots of Narayan's novels follow the usual pattern of irony - order, disorder, order. From the saga of innocence in Swami and Friends one moves to a realm of adolescent romanticism and recklessness in The Bachelor of Arts. It is only in the dreams and foolishness of an adolescent where irony finds itself quite swift to operate because the adolescent stands in a peculiar position between ignorance and innocence of the child and maturity of the adult. With the unusual topic for the college union debate, 'Historians should be slaughtered first', irony unfolds itself with a hint at the shape of things to come. The tinge of extremity as suggested by the word 'slaughtered' is ridiculously heroic in this improbably concept and it is ironic that Chandran, a student of History and later the first Secretary of the History Association, is its prime mover. From a sentimental lover to a world renouncing Sanyasi donning an ochre robe and then again to a devoted husband - these are the successive somersaults of the comic hero.

The counterfeit Sanyasi which illustrates the hide and seek phenomenon of appearance and reality in one single role, is a favourite theme with Narayan. Traces of this phenomenon are found in the character of Jagon and in some other minor characters like the old landlord in Mr. Sampath. But it finds its artistic culmination in Raju's role of a saint on which the edifice of the ironic vision of the novel is built. In The Bachelor of Arts, Chandran becomes a 'sanyasi' not out of any genuine spiritual realization, but

out of frustration:

"He was different from the usual sanyasi. Others may renounce with a spiritual motive or purpose. Renunciation may be to them a means to attain peace or may be peace itself. They are perhaps dead in time, but they do live in eternity. But Chandran's renunciation was not of that kind. It was an alternative to suicide. Suicide he would have committed but for its social stigma. Perhaps he lacked the barest physical courage that was necessary for it. He was a sanyasi because it pleased him to mortify his flesh. His renunciation was a revenge on society, circumstances, and perhaps, too, on destiny"

This authorial intrusion is perhaps not warranted from the point of view of an ironic style since in such a style motives are never made explicit and the events speak for themselves. Narayan, however, succeeds in building up the image of a saint during Chandran's encounter with the villagers. In the background of the reality of Chandran's character, the reverential response of the villagers to the sanyasi and the innocent interpretations of his silence create a comic situation.

In the course of events Chandran falls in love with Susila as instantly as he fell in love with Malathi. After his frustration in the Malathi affair he opens out his painful heart

to the barber, Ragavan:

'Ragavan, help me. You will gain my eternal gratitude. You will also profit yourself. My heart is dead, Ragavan. I have lost everybody I love in this world, Ragavan'.

These are the agonized words of one crossed in love and for whom the world seems to have lost all meaning. But this statement sounds ironically ridiculous in the face of what succeeds it:

'Susila, Susila, Susila. Her name, music, figure, face and everything about her was divine - Susila, Susila -- Malathi, not a spot beside Susila'

These two statements show the volatile nature of human feelings and emotions. Against the background of this fact any supposedly serious attempt or any emotional outburst of the individual anticipates ironic turns.

Such ironic turns also happen to stray episodes that are woven into the main plot. The thief catching episode in which the father, Chandran and his small brother get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and comb the garden from all sides to catch the thief is a clear example. Words such as 'Panther-like steps', 'Command', 'War cries' speak of almost a military operation. But when the thief is caught after all these huge preparations, his appearance betrays all expectations for he is found to be a middle aged man, bare bodied, with matted hair, wearing only a loin cloth, a

'sanyasi', Narayan's ironic technique is to pack contradictory dualities in one single character -- either the sanyasi in the role of a thief or thief in the role of a sanyasi.

With small modifications here and there this technique has been applied in all his novels. Ramani in The Dark Room combines in himself the roles of a faithful husband, a father and something of a philanderer. Srinivas, with the metaphysical disposition of his character, also shares to some extent the adventurism of Sampath. In the characters of Margayya and Jagon, the orthodox tradition and the modern materialism simultaneously operate, effecting a series of conflicts. Margayya, who sincerely believes in all traditional rituals, falls to a craze for money, a feature of the modern civilization that goes against traditional ethics and humility. He reconciles these two contradictions initially for something to suit his own interests, but is unable to carry it on. The pharisaical sweet-vendor preaching the sermon of non-attachment -- "Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self"

-- is thickly engrossed in his worldly attachments, in the fondness for his son and in his 'free-cash'. Daisy suffers from a conflict of instincts and ideals, and the queer course of her life and her relationship with Raman reflects this conflict. Raman moves from a carefree businessman to a sentimental lover and then finally to a reckless realist. But among all the characters of Narayan, the character of Raju in The Guide offers the supreme level of Narayan's ironic stance. Here is the thief in the role

of a sanyasi, accepted and recovered by the innocent villagers and the Government of India as well as by Velan who knows his true identity. The contradictions involved in this situational irony are soon resolved when the appearance and reality merge together to form a distinct identity -- the thief becomes the sanyasi. This pattern is also repeated in the character of Jagon when he renounces this world, true to the spirit of the sermons that he has been hypocritically professing all along.

The plot of Mr. Sampath is full with episodes that have little relationship with one another as far as the centrality of theme is concerned, as a result of which no distinct ironic treatment is noticeable. But, in contrast, all the events gyrate round the character of Raju, in its various stages of development. Mr. Sampath is to be read either as a story about the adventures of Sampath or about Srinivas journey to equilibrium and wisdom; it may also be analysed from the point of view of the relation and interaction between these two aspects. Srinivas shares and participates in Sampath's adventures till he achieves his equanimity. At the same time Srinivas' metaphysical questionings, his occasional philosophic nihilism ironically match with the gross material involvements. After all the storms are laid to rest, Srinivas fortunately finds a patron to resume the publication of 'The Banner' where in an editorial 'Non-sense-an adult pre-occupation', he with the knowledge of hindsight makes an appraisal of all the earlier events and concludes.

Adulthood was just a mask that people wore, the mask made up of a thick jowl and double chin and diamond earrings, or a green shirt, but within it a man kept up the nonsense of his infancy, worse now for being without the innocence and the pure joy. Only the values of commerce gave this state a gloss of importance and urgency .

Adult occupations and its apparent seriousness are nothing but futile exercises in nonsense, even more so than the play of children. In this ironic perspective, the hubbub as well as the hubris noticeably present in the Malgudi life only amount to much 'sound and fury signifying nothing'. Srinivas has been searching for the significance of life; and experiences finally teach him about the absolute reality of things : "Even madness passes. Only existence asserts itself" . Against this fact of life, the adventures of Sampath or Ravi's vision of beauty or for that matter all the aspirations and actions of men appear illusory.

The ironic process starts right from the moment Srinivas offers himself completely to the care of Sampath and the latter not only takes charge of his paper, 'The Banner', but also of all his personal affairs. And the relationship becomes so compelling in nature that Srinivas cannot easily extricate himself from it. The relationship moves through a zigzag process. Sampath obliges a helpless Srinivas by undertaking the publication of 'The Banner'; handles the court formalities in quite a professional way; helps him get all the necessary amenities like water taps through the greedy

relatives of the dead landlord and in fact does a lot of things for Srinivas. But at the same time he shocks and surprises Srinivas by inserting a green slip inside the pages of 'The Banner' which announces the temporary suspension of its publication. He involves Srinivas in the film making project, and Srinivas, because of the extrovert nature which he shares with Sampath, gets involved in all the surrounding human activities. Careless of his own affairs, he plays a major role in Ravi's personal life and at times also intrudes into the private affairs of Sampath. But in due course he deems it wise to maintain a safe distance from Sampath, his one time friend and guide. He learns to realise the vagueness of all these adult activities. But yet these experiences have provided him with better philosophic insight to realize life and things. The ironic stance of the narrator makes it possible to involve Srinivas in all these events only to make him realize at last their meaninglessness. Srinivas confesses this in one of his editorials entitled "Nonsense -- an adult pre-occupation".

The ironic nature of human transactions can be noticed in the queer relationship between different characters of this novel, Sampath being in the centre of such relationships most of the time. He voluntarily offers himself to be the spiritual disciple of the miser landlord, hears from him with rapt attention the discourse on the Gita and the Vedas and at last very subtly robs him of his money. He makes the relatives of the old man, who live with one another for the latter's property, <sup>Complete idiots.</sup> He becomes a mentor of Somu and Sohanlal; but after the shooting of the film faces disaster midway.

Sampath hides himself from them. He can become the God Shiva wresting the title from V.L.G. only to be outdone by Ravi in the next moment. He also wins over Shanti and possesses her till the time he gets completely outwitted by her. The peculiar manner of Shanti's departure leaving the sleeping Sampath in utter humiliation at the Koppal station becomes a sort of comic anti-climax to their flirtation:

The bus had put us down at Koppal at six in the evening and we had nearly twelve hours before us for the train. We ate our food and then sat up, intending to talk all night till the arrival of the train. But really there was so little to talk about. Having done nothing but that for five days continuously. I think both of us had exhausted all available subjects. And a passing thought occurred to me that we might have to spend the rest of our lives in silence after we were married. This problem was unexpectedly simplified for me. I must have fallen asleep on my stool. When the train arrived and I woke up, her chair was empty. The train halts there for four minutes or so, and we had to hurry up. The station master said, "She left by the eleven down. I gave her a ticket for Madras"

Sampath accepts the ironic reversal of situations in the true spirit of a comic hero. Caught in the ironic process of human actions and its unexpected consequences, Sampath works out endless possibilities one after another and hence the world does not close for him.

In other characters also Narayan has attempted to show the built-in irony in human nature. Irony helps unfold the ludicrous beneath the apparent grandeur, the stupidity and weakness beneath apparent cleverness and strength. The shrewd landlord who exploits his tenants, professes himself to be a 'yogi' and zealously observes all orthodox rituals. Any ordinary instance can reveal the true nature of his identity:

'I'm a sanyasi, my dear young man -- and no true sanyasi should eat more than once a day', he said pompously. He ate the cakes with great relish. When a tumbler of coffee was placed beside him he looked lovingly at it and said : 'As a sanyasi I have given up coffee completely, but it is a sin not to accept something offered', he said.

In him the two contradictory traits coexist as the two selves of his character -- a shrewd custodian of his financial wealth and a zealous guardian of the 'Vedas' and the 'Upanishads' and all the ancient culture of India. Sampath takes advantage of both the weaknesses of this old man when he introduces himself as the latter's spiritual disciple and then as a promoter of his financial interests by persuading him to advance a loan. The shrewd landlord who till then has been making his tenants and borrowers fools is subtly bamboozled by Sampath, Srinivas' casual suggestion of the children's tennis ball hitting the old man to death only highlights the point of ludicrousness in the latter's character. The one-time district board president Somu, Sohanlal and even the district judge who comes to preside

over 'the opening ceremony', are all shallow, superficial block-heads beneath their grandiose social designations and positions. De Mellow with his technical jargon and Hollywood nostalgia is quite close to a caricature. The film, after elaborate preparations and enough fanfare ends in a fiasco. In fact the film 'The Burning of Kama' is, in an ironic way, the celebration of the beginning of 'kama'.

In 'The Financial Expert' the ironic treatment embraces the rise and fall of Margayya's fortunes. As far as the Indian milieu is concerned, the superstitious spirit of the Traditional on the threshold of the Modern, appear funnily anachronistic. The astrological wrangles over the horoscope and tricky manoeuvres of Dr. Pal in order to bring a match of the horoscopes illustrate the peculiarity of the transition period. The liberated Modern and the orthodox Traditional stand in an ironic relationship with each other. Many of Margayya's predicaments start as he is tossed between these two sides. The fundamental innocence in his character, which Graham Greene observes in his introduction to The Financial Expert, responds in strange ways to the various forces in the society. Margayya's ambition which in fact leads to the series of events involving his checkered life springs from his particular socio-economic status:

"Margayya felt that the world treated him with contempt because he had no money. People thought they could order him about. He said to Arul Doss: 'Arul Doss, I don't know about you; you can speak

for yourself. But you need not speak for me. You may not see a hundred rupees even after a hundred years of service, but I think I shall do very soon -- and who knows, if you<sup>r</sup> secretary seeks any improvement of his position, he can come to me "

Margayya has in him the innocence of the ordinary folk which comes out of the humble status of his life, and the fanatical ambitions that issue from his humiliation and inferiority complex. In Margayya, dream and reality operate together in network of strange and unpredictable relationships. Margayya earns the sympathy of the readers because of his basic simplicity and the humiliation he faces because of his socio-economic condition. There is an elemental sadness about him throughout and even in his moments of supreme success, he betrays the pathetic helplessness of a bewildered father. Margayya's faults and foolishness are treated by Narayan's ironic technique not from the standpoint of strict moral judgement, but with an affectionate understanding of life's predicament. As a consequence, the bitter bite of irony yields place to a mild disapproval or a tender stroke of the tragi-comic.

Apart from Margayya's eventful life the novel abounds with ironic suggestions of different nature. With reference to his own life, Margayya's name itself is ironic. 'Margayya' means "one who showed the way. He showed the way out to those in financial trouble " . While managing others' financial affairs,

he is unable to manage his own, much in the same way as Raju who guides others, but fails to guide himself properly till the final moments of his conversion. Dr. Pal, the guide and confident of Margayya, is the sole cause of all of the latter's doings and ultimate undoings. The peculiar first meeting between Margayya and Dr. Pal in the lonely, abandoned pond is not only a travesty of the usual, the commonplace, but also faintly indicates the queer nature of events to come as a result of their relationship:

"He arrived at the pond .... He tucked up his dhoti and looked round in order to make sure. 'If a man lives here, he will not need a square inch of cloth', he reflected. Far in a corner of the little mantap on the other bank he saw some one stirring. He felt a slight shiver of fear passing through him as he peered closer. 'Is it a ghost or a maniac' ? He withdrew a couple of steps and shouted 'Hey, who are you' ? Vaguely remembering that if it were a ghost it would run away on hearing such a challenge. But the answer came back. 'I'm Dr. Pal, a journalist, correspondent and author'

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This meeting with Dr. Pal, which proves to be the key to the financial success of Margayya, happens, even though in an indirect way, as a result of the forty days' ritual. Hereafter events move in rapid succession and Margayya has no time to look back till the point when he finds that his gains are ironically accompanied by more than equal losses. Dr. Pal, who in one of his first meetings with Margayya speaks of his plan "to start a sociology clinic

where people's troubles are set right", is himself a pervert and ruins the domestic happiness of Margayya's family. Dr. Pal, who professes himself to be an academician is in fact a gross travesty of it. The book 'Domestic Harmony' of which Margayya is the publisher and which promises happiness for the people becomes the main breeder of domestic disharmony in his own family.

Like Narayan's other heroes, Margayya faces the crucial challenge of his own creation. He is a poor, ambitious man whose desperate craze for money gets fulfilled and he successfully lifts himself out of his humiliating status. But the wealth, which he makes for his own comforts, turns upon him, literally swallowing up his very physical existence.

'In his home the large safe was filled up, and its door had to be forced in, and then the cup boards, the benches and tables, the space under the cot, and the corners. His wife could hardly pass into the small room to pick up a saree or towel'

His tremendous complacency and the consequent hateful attitude towards Balu's teachers coupled with his extreme affection for the son, only blinds him to correct judgement and undermines his own interests. This helps spoil his son in whom he has pinned great hopes. The relationship between the pupil (Balu) and the home tutor, Mr. Murti, a teacher in the school of which Margayya is the secretary, turns to be a mockery of the sacred teacher-taught relationship. What one notices is a sort of commercial transaction:

'The teacher and the pupil were like old partners, now seasoned partners who knew each other's strong points and weak points'

Margayya learns the art of cunning through the guileful guidance of Dr. Pal, by which he manages to swindle others and climb the social hierarchy. The fateful moment comes when Balu, his eye's apple confronts him and demands his share of the property. Discovering Balu in Dr. Pal's evil company, Margayya finds to his grief that he has been caught in his own cunning. Unable to control his anger and excitement, he hits Dr. Pal with one of his sandals. It is Dr. Pal who had offered the red lotus to Margayya for the worship of goddess Laxmi. Immediately after, Margayya's illusory fort crumbles and once again he is reduced to his original status. His life thus completes a full circle.

During the course of these incredible fluctuation of fortune, illusions are dispelled and the individual is chastened. Irony leads to the realization of things not in their illusory glitter, but in their essential reality. This fact is evident in the final scene of the novel:

'Balu approached him and sat beside him. Margayya put the arm round him : 'You see that box there. I have managed to get it out again.' He pointed to a corner where his old knobby trunk was kept, 'It's contents are intact as I left them years ago -- a pen and an ink bottle You asked for my poperty. There it is, take it; have an early meal tomorrow and go

to the Banyan tree in front of the co-operative bank ... 'Very well then, if you are not going, I am going on with it, as soon as I am able to leave this bed,' said Margay, a. 'Now get the youngster here. I will play with him. Life has been too dull without him in this house.'

These are no doubt words of sorrow and suffering; yet these are also the words of wisdom and an intense realization of the facts of life. His wealth, for which he madly craved, alienates him from his family and now wealth being no more there, it is a happy family reunion. In Narayan's fiction the ironic stance leads to the attainment of wisdom, that helps man to reject the illusions and unites him to his roots -- either in his own self or in his family or community.

The Guide, as far as the ironic perspective is concerned, achieves the supreme concentration of purpose. No episode is superfluous or unrelated to the others and all contribute to the singular theme of Raju's spiritual odyssey. The sequence of events that encompasses the innocent pleasures of Raju's childhood days, his romantic adventures or misadventures of later years, his brilliant showmanship as a saint and his ultimate ordeal, are set to an ironic rhythm of life. Raju's life is cast in a criss cross of fortunes. He undergoes a process of gradual degradation from an illicit lover to a liar forging the document and then to a fake swami swindling the entire community. But this process is suddenly reversed and Raju by an extraordinary feat of suffering and

sacrifice becomes the true saint redeeming his earlier life. Narayan's theme here is "the irony of life and human nature"<sup>(16)</sup> which he communicates not only through the simple, unpretentious language of a story teller, but also by the help of his great technical innovation of telescoping the past and the present into one another. It helps to trace the genesis and growth of the present in the past in a very subtle, but compelling way.

Irony spans the entire life of Raju, right from his childhood days to the final moments. The childhood days form an indispensable factor of the total ironic vision of the novel. It not only serves as a backdrop of idyllic innocence to all the events that happen afterwards, but also establishes an intimate kinship with the decisive moments of his life as the Swami. As the Swami he narrates the story of penance to the villagers, unaware of its ironic turns whereby he will be called upon to perform the penance.

"He remembered that not long ago he had spoken to them of such a penance, its value and technique. He had described it partly out of his head and partly out of traditional accounts he heard his mother narrate"

By telling the story, which he had heard from his mother in his childhood, and by undertaking the penance, he enacts the story in his own life and in a symbolic way gets united with his mother whom he had driven away earlier. After this tremendous spiritual ordeal he regains the innocence of his childhood which is suggested through the symbol of a physical situation -- "They held

him as if he were a baby". Beneath this fact of the physical condition of Raju, the fact of Raju's new birth into spirituality is subtly hinted at by the use of the image of 'baby'. This spiritual birth is signalled by Raju's realization at the end of his ordeal.

"Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs . . .

Various other events of the past also return to him, but in a strange, alien relationship. Once such is the small railway station at Malgudi. It is at the railway track that he learnt his first bad words. The railway station which goes before his eyes and where he played as a child and also from where he was physically thrown out one day, now takes its own bit of role in the drama of Raju's life :

"The railways were first to feel the pressure. They had to run special trains for the crowds that were going to Malgudi. People travelled on foot boards and on the roofs of coaches. The little Malgudi station was choked with passengers".

His successive rise and fall in fortune are curiously associated with the railways. So also is Gaffur with his taxi, Gaffur's taxi has been a witness to many a romantic moment of Raju Rosie relationship, a relationship which Gaffur himself did not approve of. And now, absolutely in a different context, "Gaffur's

taxi derive up and down dozen times a day", though Gaffur hardly knows that it is Raju in whose service he is engaged. The same old world returns to him, ironically at a time when the external world has lost all significance for him and he has made an intense journey from without to within.

Of Raju's chequered career, C.D. Narasimhaiah comments,

Raju, a loafer getting education from old scraps, guiding tourists, himself illiterate falling in love with a highly educated married Indian woman without outraging Indian sentiment, taking charge of her, talking to judges and civilians, going to jail and becoming a 'sanyasi' recognised by the villagers and even by the Government of India --Narayan has done the most incongruous things and made them credible in terms of high art. (17)

But even in his mistakes and sins Raju has a debonair appeal of personality that endears him to the readers. His meetings with Rosie and Velan turn out to be decisive factors respectively in the sensuous and spiritual chapters of his life. He wins over Rosie by fanning and satisfying her instincts for dance and makes Marco cuckold. But as William Walsh has commented,

As Rosie succeeds, as her gift gains recognition, Raju's status changes. He is less the lover and more the manager, trainer and agent. (18)

Their public successes are ironically accompanied by the failure in their private relationships. As A. N. Kaul observes, "...

the moments of their greatest public successes are also the moments of their greatest isolation". (19) The denouement starts soon and a small blunder of Raju wrecks the entire understanding delicately built between them. Hiding Marco's book from Rosie and forging her signature are pardonable offences on the part of a jealous lover, because Raju apprehends that Rosie may get enamoured of her husband's achievements. But this triggers off a whole series of fateful events for Raju as on the other side of the scene Marco, the zealous guardian of rules operates in his usual non-chalant manner. The star lawyer who fights the case for Raju, whose presentation of the case appears like a three-act comedy, proves to a hoax who fails to save Raju from imprisonment in spite of his braggadocio.

Raju's ego, which in all occasions determines his fate, calls upon him to be the master of any situation --- whether it is in his vocation as a guide or in his relationship with Rosie, whether as a convict or as the Swami. His extraordinary sense of self-directed humour as is witnessed in his conversation with the barber or in his ruminations about the jail life extolling its merits, enables him to come through the many crisis of his life. This practice of humour at one's own cost transforms itself to the sublime spirit of self-sacrifice when the situation warrants. And during this process of transformation the comic gradually yields place to the serious, as happens in the last scene of this novel.

Once Raju's spiritual journey starts. Rosie, Marco and all others, who were once important in his life, are rendered unnecessary and hence are removed from the scene, for such a

journey must be taken alone. The religious conversion in Raju comes through his communion with the innocent villagers of Mangal. Earl conceals facts about Marco and his book from Rosie and this act of his undid him. He conceals his true identity from the villagers successfully presents himself as the great man and this also undoes him. But when he no more conceals and unfolds his true identity before Velan, the curtain has already been raised in his spiritual life. The reality of his identity bows to the falsehood he professed, because in that falsehood the traditional beliefs and the intense feelings of the community are contained. And these have the power, by virtue of its innocent sincerity, to transform any falsehood into truth, as it ultimately happens to Raju who from the counterfeit becomes the real.

On the other hand, as C.D. Narasimhalah says, "Rosie is completely free from Marayan's ironic handling." (20) Of course the marriage interview of Rosie resembles any interview for employment, a parody of the traditional marriage negotiations. Both Marco and Raju serve as ironic foils to each other -- the former with his extreme cold, mechanical approach to life, the latter with his warmth of personality and particularly his instinctual way of living. On her side, Rosie breaks the walls of the doll's house and takes extreme swings that should warrant censure from the orthodox Indian society.

The ironic vision in the novel emanates from the astounding transformation of personality in Raju's life. After returning from the prison he becomes Swami, or more pointedly speaking the

mantle of swamihood falls on him. Ordinarily, everyday accidents play a significant role in shaping the destiny of his life. But an overall analysis of his life would reveal an implicit design in all these accidents which lead him step by step to his ultimate salvation. This design is governed by his dynamic spirit, his indomitable ego that can rise to any occasion and meet successfully any challenge. It is a pure coincidence that he, just after his release from the prison, should be discovered by Velan who has been burdened with the domestic problem of a disobedient sister. And fortunately the girl gets cured and this confirms the villagers' belief in Raju's spiritual powers. Thus the village life flows on with Raju in their midst as the spiritual guide. Raju by virtue of his various manoeuvres lends credence to this new image of his. He accepts this role because it is the only comfortable occupation for him under the circumstances of his stigmatized life. And once the image has been built on the rocks of the innocent beliefs of villagers, Raju finds it cruel to break their illusion. In his first meeting with Velan this has been made clear :

But he hesitated, wondering how he should say it. It looked as though he would be hurting the other's deepest sentiment if he so much whispered the word 'jail'

Raju is aware of this tendency in him to try to appease others and never to frustrate them --- a tendency without which he would have been one among the countless commoners of the world :

I suppose, if I had the inclination to say 'I don't know what you are talking about', my life would have taken a different turn"

As the villagers' beliefs get crystallized in Raju to make him their spiritual anchor, he makes his hypocrisy appear more and more sacrosanct. He grows a beard; tells them episodes from the lives of great men; narrates to them stories from mythology and in his words and silence maintains the dignity expected of spiritual figure. To this deception he brings perfection partly by his cunning and more by the fact of the villagers sincerely accepting him with their typical rustic simplicity. But this brings a curious development in him. He not only deceives the villagers, but soon starts deceiving his own self. He thinks of counting the stars with the illicit motive of being considered as a night guide :

"People will say, "Here is the man who knows the exact number of stars in the sky. If you have any trouble on that account, you had better consult him. He will be your night-guide for the skies " .

For a moment he begins to believe in his own cunning and in fact attempts counting the stars :

"He told himself, 'The thing to do is to start from a corner and go on patch by patch. Never work from the top to the horizon, but always the other way" . He started the count from above a figure of palmyra trees on his left hand side ... .

Such is the compulsion of his make-up that he attempts to live quite close to it, an attempt which takes serious dimension afterwards.

He gets bewitched by his own make-up, which blinds him to the limitations of the man hiding inside the great mark of a saint.

"He was hypnotized by his own voice; he felt himself growing in stature as he saw the upturned faces of the children shining in the half light when he spoke. No one was more impressed with the grandeur of the whole thing than Raju himself" .

His mask sits so much embedded on him that an ordinary happening brings in the inevitable predicament of identity and illusion. The casual and thoughtless misreporting by Velan's brother before the villagers that the Swami shall not take food unless it rains ironically conforms to the image that he has been steadily building for himself. Sacrifices are now demanded of him in the very manner in which they were demanded from others in the stories that he had narrated to the villagers. The mask has outgrown the man;

He had told them, "When the time comes, everything will be all right. Even the man who would bring the rain will appear all of a sudden'. They interpreted his words and applied them now to the present situation. He felt that he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out .... He now saw the enormity of his own creation. He had created a

giant with his puny self, a throne of authority  
with that slab of stone .

Such is the nature of his mask that it stifles the man  
within; but also such is the nature of the man (Raju) that it can  
raise itself from the quagmire of deception to get itself merged in  
the mask.

What one witnesses in the last pages of the novel is almost  
akin to a baptism -- a sinner metamorphosed into a saint. This  
at once reminds us of the 'Ratnakar Valmiki' myth. Such transforma-  
tions are not incredible in India where feeling is considered more  
important than knowledge; where Marco with his scholarship remains  
only emotionally frigid; Vasu with his M.A. degree remains a  
maneater; and Raju with no academic qualification to boast of, but  
only with warm feelings of life supplemented by the innocent be-  
liefs of villagers, attains the spiritual height.

The ironic vision in the novel lets us notice the immense  
possibilities in the life of a wayward young man, doing bits of  
jobs in the small railway station of Malgudi who in course of events  
emerges as the benefactor of humanity. Accidents build the edifice  
of his life and his efforts lie in submitting to them and mastering  
them ultimately. A casual analysis of Raju's life makes it abun-  
dantly clear that a hideous sense of humour is deeply embedded in  
the pattern of our existence :

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They  
kill us for their sport (King Lear IV. 1.36).

Some way or other men are dragged from the height of their successes to the abyss of their misfortunes. Raju's herculean efforts in winning Rosie are pathetically undone by a trivial occurrence of forging a not -so-important document. His comfortable stage-show of the saint faces a serious crisis from the thoughtless reporting by a village boy. Vasu, the man eater of immense strength is ironically killed for an equally trivial cause of the mosquitoes.

When Raju undertakes the fast, "he is pitted, not against a vindictive husband, but against the vengeful nature of an image he has so stupidly built up himself, and those who will hasten his doom are in fact his most dedicated supporters".<sup>(21)</sup> If this happens, in keeping to the logic of irony, Raju also has got the propensity to fulfil the expectations demanded of him and in a heroic feat he wipes out the difference between the man and the mask. This process has been presented by an ironic externalization which is

couched not in words but in a symbol -- the crocodile which infests the river by the side of Raju's sanctuary. The crocodile, an archetypal symbol of hypocrisy provides an apt parallel for the fake saint. Appropriately enough, no one in the village seems to have actually seen the crocodile, though they all know it is there - it is a myth, which even like Raju's sainthood, becomes a reality only in death, for it is seen for the first time when the drought, which is to kill Raju, also kills it.<sup>(22)</sup>

Raju, during his days as the counterfeit Swami says to the village school teacher, "What can a crocodile do to you if your mind is clear and your conscience is untroubled"? The words return to him to be applied in his own case. Raju's beginning of the ordeal with a clear mind and an untroubled conscience occurs almost simultaneously with the death of the crocodile.

Raju attains his fame not by banking upon Rosie's talent but by his own efforts of sacrifice. As A. N. Kaul comments, he gets more fame and newspaper coverage than Rosie and Marco and irony lies in his remaining anonymous in this role.<sup>(23)</sup> His anonymous status suggests in a subtle way his state of non-attachment, the prelude to any spiritual realization. In the final pages of the novel, Narayan describes Raju simulatneously by his proper name 'Raju' and by his spiritual title, 'Swami' and 'Sage', which helps to bring an ironic juxtaposition btween identity and illusion and keeps the reader in perpetual awareness of Raju's spiritual conversion. In the dualities of Raju's life the ironic attitude of Narayan is inherent. He describes the complex psychic process at work in Raju's inner self; and at the same time focuses on the world of traditional values emerging triumphantly from the materialistic blandishments of the Modern. Narayan's irony highlights the values that sustain the sweet old world of Malgudi or of India and at the same time affectionately exposes the small vices and illusions of man. As V.Y. Kantak rightly feels:

His irony here becomes something like a new perspective because his sympathies are as

deeply engaged by the genuine component of that prototype as his decision is aroused by the imposture often foisted upon it. (24)

Here, as also elsewhere in Narayan's fictional world, the motive of irony is never to castigate, but to understand life's pleasure and pain, its sins and hypocrisies as well as its innocence and tenderness. But in all these, whether in their virtues or in their vices, there is the intense feel of life which contributes to the unique poetry of the Malgudi existence. In the ironic framework of Narayan's novels, one notices a thousand small revolts and reverses of life; the amazing transformation of a wayward boy and later a swindler into a martyr is not a saviour. "In any case", as William Walsh remarks, "his attitude is too nimble with irony for one or the other. And that irony, it should be noted, is an irony of recognition, not an irony of correction." (25)

Narayan's irony recognizes the queer and complex workings within the individual, as well as his relation to the world without, Raju's ~~ordal~~ during his final role, amidst a motley crowd of pilgrime, T.V. Producer, gemblers, peddlers selling ballons, reed-whistle and sweets, men from Health Department showing films about 'mosquitoes, malaria, plague and tuberculosis and B.C.G. vaccination' and above all curious onlookers, suggests the utter loneliness of a man who is on the verge of a spiritual awakening. This is the loneliness of all great men, who choose to be different from others, yet cast their lot for the sake of others, for humanity in general. As William Walsh puts it.

For Narayan, then the very conditions of human growth are individual discrepancy and communal collaboration. It is this double insight which the career of Raju embodies and justifies. (26)

His lone, serious ordeal gives rise to a village carnival and he, though in the centre of it, is ironically, aloof from all these. Narayan, here, focuses on the aspect of man's loneliness in his relationship with others :

... at every stage of his life, the isolated individual faces the enormous, fundamentally indifferent crowd. (27)

Closely surrounded by a crowd who watch his movements each minuce, Raju, if no physically, yet mentally and spiritually, is far distanced from them for he is the only one who is called upon to perform this task. He is one who cannot share his agony, his fortunes with others; not even with Velan who hears the entire story of his life. Raju is doomed to isolation. Raju's ordeal, over which hangs the question of his life and death, for sometime is pushed to the background, in the hubbub of loud-speakers, film shows, merry-go-round and all other items of the fair. The superficialities of the modern, commercial civilization is brought close, during the narration, to a serious quest for salvation quite in the spirit of ancient traditions. Malone's casual questions to the Swami meant for commercial T.V. shows, questions that range from Raju's physical condition and fast to irrelevant issues of caste system in India; Government's absurd telegraphic message to the doctors to "persuade

'Swami' resume fast later" and many such things appear childishly funny before Raju's intense spiritual groping. This is subtly suggested by Raju's smile:

The shallow modern civilization becomes the butt of the ironic treatment in the background of the sacred traditions and the innocent feelings and superstitions of rustic villagers.

From the childhood innocence of Malgudi to a flamboyant and yet professional involvement with dance and then back to the rustic innocence of Mangal -- the ironic pattern becomes complete as the circle closes where it has begun. The logic of irony leads him to the threshold of a spiritual realm and once Raju steps in, the focus of irony shifts from Raju to the flippant crowd of peddlers, gamblers and onlookers, the men from the Health Department and the T.V. Producer from California. After Raju resolves to continue the fast with sincerity rising above all selfish considerations and uniting himself with the community, the narrative no more deals with the conflicts and the complex workings within his psyche. The comic irony which has moulded the career and character of Raju now reaches its culminating point. We are carried beyond the boundaries of a comic world to a solemn religious occasion, to the soberness of a sort of crucifixion. Raju rises above the ordinary human level by virtue of his spiritual steadfastness and accordingly the ironic perspective shifts from him to the convivial crowd enjoying the fair. Now, the latter, in relation to Raju are exposed in their frailties and flippancy. Raju transcends the ironic predicament as his drama begins on another plane of existence. It

is a sort of 'die into life' with fierce convulse', very much in the manner of young Appollo in Hyperion.

The theme of The Vendor of Sweets has close resemblances with that of The Guide. The 'die into life' theme is in a way manifested in Jagon's wish, "At sixtyone is reborn" and in his apparent renunciation of the world to see a deity emerge from stone. In the ironic design a sinner is lifted to the sublime spiritual height in The Guide and likewise the hypocritical sweet-vendor is brought to the shores of spiritual experience. But unlike Raju, Jagon is unable to take a plunge and there, between the borders of the physical and the metaphysical, he stands with his failings and predicaments exposed. The built-in contradiction in Jagon's character inevitably put him in the centre of the ironic perspective of the novel. He is a puritan taking salt-free and sugar-free diet. He preaches to conquer taste, yet sells all sorts of delicious sweets. He reads the Bhagavad Gita to himself and to his workers, but at the same time manages to smuggle the 'free-cash'. He combines a shrewd sense of business with sayings and 'slokas' from the Vedas and the Upanishads, his hobbyhorse to which he turns frequently. In his role as a moral man he looks sad and tender. These two aspects contribute to the unique appeal of his personality.

Yet in his adherence to Gandhian principles or to the doctrines prescribed by our ancient scriptures, there is a strange innocence, a kind of sentimental belongingness to his ideals of Gandhi or of the ancient traditions. What is exposed is not his villainy, but his naivete. When asked by the cousin about the need

for conquering the self, Jagon can merely reply, "I do not know, but all our sages advice us so." And at time he nostalgically reflects.

... how Mahatma Gandhi used to address huge assemblies on the sands of the river and how he himself, a minute speak in such a crowd, had felt his whole life change when he heard that voice.

His loyalty to Gandhi is the only motto in his life which guides him through every state :

If Gandhi had said somewhere, "Pay your sales tax uncomplainingly", he would have followed his advice, but Gandhi had made no reference to the sales tax anywhere to Jagon's knowledge.

But the ironic treatment of Jagon's character attributes a subtle motive to his innocence or fanaticism.

Jagon's fanaticism results in arduous quest for the leather of dead animals, or in his taking twenty drops of honey in warm water as a substitute for sugar and in many such fads which appear comically out of date. On the other hand Mali's ultra-modern innovation, the story manufacturing machine in the India of grandmothers who are repositories of ancient stories, appear a gross perversion. Jagon for sometime shares the fancies of Mali, leaving his own emotional moorings. "Gradually his reading of the

Bhagavad Gita was replaced by the blue air mail letters" .  
And this starts undoing him, landing him in more and more difficulties till he once again asserts the his self of traditional beliefs and values. He says to the cousin with a firmness, hitherto unnoticed in his tender heart of the father.

If what you say is true, well truth will win.

If it is not true, there is nothing I can do .

His shrewd business sense and his small corruptions of free-cash' and the like, which do not conform to the sacred principles he professes are understandable and excusable human flaws. He always propagates that attachment is a delusion which man must be rid of; yet he indulges in attachments -- one of money, the other of his son -- which ultimately ruin his happiness. Jagon wipes out this weakness in him by a final decisive act of renunciation. But it is not also without Narayan's characteristic tinge of irony. Even on the verge of his spiritual birth he does not fail to carry his bank book with himself. Here, as also elsewhere, irony leaves bare a cluster of ambiguities. In this context it is worthwhile to refer to V.Y. Kantak's analysis of Naipaul's criticism against Narayan.<sup>(28)</sup> Without looking into the ironic motive of Narayan, Naipaul has criticised him for indicating Jagon's corruptions and hypocrisy, his 'bewilderment', as a fact of Hinduism. What Naipaul misses in his criticism is the ironic banter of Narayan's treatment. Jagon, unlike Raju in the earlier novel, is unable to take the final leap and remains only in the twilight region of spiritual realization. Jagon's

attempt at renunciation appears ridiculous as much as his earlier life of high sermons and low scruples. As Prof. Kantak suggests, Narayan's irony vindicates the traditional values.

At the heart of Narayan's irony lies the comic incongruity. He makes ludicrous things take serious significance, and often brings delightfully unexpected turns of events. Jagon's salvation lies through the hair-dyer, who is having a white beard himself but blackens all other's hair and whose percentage is not known. Hair dying is a profession, grossly commercial in itself and it is naturally incredible that a hair dyer should serve as a sort of priest to baptize Jagon into a spiritual life. But in Narayan's ironic scheme of things, the trivial and the serious exchange places. A mere 'half a bottle of some alcoholic drink' is cause enough to seize Mali's car and arrest him just as a couple of mosquitoes happen to serve as the agent of the man-eater's death in The Man-eater of Malgudi. The irony in both these instances suggests a deeply planted motive in the nature of things. Pride and arrogance, apparently invisible, are ultimately and unceremoniously undone by the smallest of objects.

The Vendor of Sweets is the drama of an ungrateful son and an extremely fond father. At the back of Jagon's commicality one can perceive the injured and bewildered feelings of a father. He flaunts Mali's letters with the pride of a father even though he disapproves of his doings in America and feels extremely broken for it in his inmost heart. There is a deep awareness of the tragic behind the veil of the comic. It is characteristic of the writer whose vision of

the universe or more specially of human life is ironic vision unfolds depths of reality. It reveals to us that underneath the gales of laughter there are also stifled cries of pain.

As it happens in The Guide and The Vendor of Sweets, Narayan's ironic device concerns itself with the religious or spiritual, and in an allegorical way, in The Man-eater of Malgudi. To the docile, religious-minded Malgudians, Vasu is a 'demon' and his arrival at once brings in its wake all sorts of chaos. Vasu possesses tremendous physical strength, his arguments have strange logic that sound novel and notorious; he is unpredictable and dynamic. He is an extreme individualist and he seems to believe in the superiority of strength as the key to existence. He is not bound to the society by any ethics save his own interests. In a way, he remains in the awesome isolation of a demon and Narayan carves out the peculiar reactions of the timid Malgudians to him in terms of high comedy. Stage by stage Narayan builds up the aggressive personality of Vasu only to humiliate his strength at the end through an apt anti-climax. Vasu breaks the laws during the Civil Disobedience Movement, hits and injures his 'pahelwan' master, breaks the arm of the Police Inspector, kills tigers and other jungle animals, terrorizes people and even challenges God's creation; but ultimately he is undone by a couple of mere mosquitoes. He laughs of Nataraj ;

'So you are taken in ! You poor fool ! These eyes were given it by me, not by God' .

'We have constantly to be rivalling Nature at

her own game. Posture, Look, the total personality, everything has to be created'. This man had set himself as a rival to Nature and was carrying on a relentless fight .

He mocks at the poet who writes an epic on Krishna's life in monosyllabic verse and jeers at everybody, even at the village festival, very contemptuously Ironically, it is the poet's epic that leads to the festival and events happen fortuitously in which Vasu meets his death. That an insignificant creature like the mosquito will be the instrument of Vasu's death, underscores the irony involved not only in this particular context, but also in a symbolic way in the entire scheme of things. Sastri explains this in the novel :

Every demon appears in the world with a special boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the rakshasas that were ever born. Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self-destruction, and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise, what is to happen to humanity ?

Neither Nataraj nor the other Malgudians have any role in Vasu's death except that they are participants in a religious festival. The irony embedded in Vasu's death once again vindicates the sacred traditions. When humanity is threatened, the grace of God, which comes in mysterious ways, destroys the wicked and saves others.

What saves the Malgudi community from Vasu is not an accident but, as William Walsh suggests, 'the blessings of the gods or just the stubbornness of life itself.'<sup>(29)</sup> The hypothesis of 'the blessings of the gods' cannot be easily rejected in an Indian context. With Vasu's death, peace and order are once again restored to the society. Nataraj is roused from his complacency and this brief disorder, if not to any one else, at least to Nataraj and sastri alone, brings renewed faith in God's subtle ways of saving humanity.

In a way, Vasu faces the enormity of his own creation. He becomes a victim of his own strength. In Narayan's ironic scheme, his heroes face the challenge from their own creations -- Margayya and Jagon from their sons; Raju from the image he creates; and Vasu from his immense physical strength. He has broken his cot-frame to display his strength as a result of which he sleeps in his easy chair on the fateful day instead of sleeping on the cot provided by a mosquito net. It becomes evident that an extreme arrogant individualism, however, powerful it may be carries the potential of its own doom. In the irony of his death, Narayan has amply suggested his disapproval of Vasu's evil strength and genius.

It is strange that a man who has taken his Master's degree in History, Economics and Literature should choose no other profession but killing and stuffing animals. Vasu's unnatural death is fitting finale to his strange life. His arrival throws into disarray the apparent stability and the comfortable illusions of Nataraj and his society. As H. New William puts it.

"The print shop is only an arena where the pretence is consciously cultivated. Nataraj must seem to be busy, Sastri must seem to have full staff etc. The flamboyance of the mask and the naivete that underlies it is evident leading to a happy acceptance of face values and the willing inference of more than the eye comprehends.<sup>(30)</sup>

Even though there are some genuine flashes of irony here and there in his latest novel The Painter of Signs, yet unlike the earlier novels, there is no definite ironic pattern in which the characters gradually mature into realization and knowledge. Of course, Raman emerges from his sentimental relationship a bit more realistic; but irony which triumphantly upholds the traditions and lifts the individual to a sublime height is conspicuously absent here. The prolonged love-hate relationship between Daisy and Raman, the decision and dreams of marriage, and ultimately in a fiasco. There is a number of anecdotes in the novel that are informed by an ironic stance. The lawyer, whose profession makes it imperative to practise the art of reasoning, depends on astrology to hang his signboard. Daisy is a woman, who has 'sort of unmitigated antagonism to conception' and who confesses. "Married life is jot for me. I have thought it over. It frightens me. I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live except alone. It won't work" . In the context of Indian traditions where it is unusual for a woman to stay alone and where her chief desire is to get married and make her household joyous with children, Daisy is an iconoclast and she stands

in a sharp ironic contrast with the traditional Indian woman-hood.

The Dark Room, The English Teacher and Waiting for Mahatma move away from the usual ironic pattern of Narayan's novels. K.R.S. Iyengar says,

"Waiting for Mahatma is an ambitious effort and an impressive feat; but one also feels that Narayan's art now denied the security of Malgudi and catapulted into Gandhian or terrorist political action - betrays unsureness and perplexity." (31)

Attention continuously and confusedly shifts from the political theme of the novel to the romantic theme and vice versa. Sriram's political hobnobbing in Gandhi's movement to win Bharati's love carries an ironic tinge as much as Bharati's consent for marriage as conditional on Gandhi's sanction does. Sriram's conversion from a Gandhian worker to a terrorist, his sentimentalism, and Bharati's fanatic devotion to Gandhi that reminds us of Daisy, the family planning zealot in The Painter of Signs, are all affectionately drawn with delicate irony. To miss the duality of the theme -- the political and the romantic, is to miss the subtle irony in the treatment of the characters. The superstitious Indian milieu occasionally comes to the forefront of the narrative revealing Narayan's characteristic good-humoured irony. One such is the priest's refusal to bring Sriram's aunt from the funeral pyre even after it is revealed that she is alive. The crowd's endorsement of the priest's view that she cannot be carried back to the town because 'no one who has been carried here can ever step into the town bounds

again lest the whole town should be 'wiped out by fire or plague', focuses on the naivete of the Indian masses. The irony here not only confines itself to stray religious episodes but also it embraces the political side. It is an indirect reference to the people who supersititously join Gandhi's movement or who shrewdly profess Gandhian ideals for their own interests, as does the Municipal chairman.

In The Dark Room the attention is focused on Savitri's misfortunes and the plot is not congenial enough for the comic irony to operate. Of course, Shantabai's shrewd conquery comes for Narayan's ironic banter as much as Ramani's foolishness and frailties. Yet, on the whole The Dark Room remains a domestic drama like The English Teacher where the narrative moves from the physical aspect of existence to the metaphysical. In both these novels, the small Malgudi town of various forces -- of unbridled aspirations and instincts as well as of taboos and traditions -- has been tapered to the narrow confines of husband wife relationship. In other novels, the human fate or the world plays a perpetual hide and seek with man's emotions and ambitions; and the Don Quixotes fall to the ground time and again to shed their illusions ultimately. In the framework of the comic irony the individual rises to fall and falls to be restored to his roots; and in the process the comic incongruity is focused. Follies are discarded and it is once again a happy reconciliation.

In Narayan's fictional world there is no agonizing sense of waste and void as in the great tragedies of Shakespeare, no utter

helplessness as in some of the dramas of Ibsen, no deep pathos as in Hardy's novels, not even the gruelling sense of suffering as in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand; but there is an amusing sense of life's small dreams and defeats. There is always the sure presence of life throbbing in its virtues as well as in its vices. Against the fixed background of the age-old traditions and a strong community life of Malgudi, the individual's frenzy, feds or fetish operate, from time to time towards bringing temporary disorders. But throughout the narrative, in an implicit or subtle way, the ultimate victory of the traditions and the society is assured. As Srinivas puts it, "Even madness passes. Only existence asserts itself" .

Narayan, with a humanist's vision notes the follies and angularities, the revolts and retreats of the Malgudi folk. He finds them wallowing in their favourite illusions, wooing their ladies, worshipping their gods, running after wealth, making films, dancing, gossiping and doing a hundred other things. But also, along with these, there are the jolts in life that awaken man from his dreams. It is a built-in ironic device in the nature of things that an universal harmony is there among all individuals and the society, for whose preservation, individual instincts and ambitions often have to be trimmed.

In Narayan's fiction irony underscores a fundamental fact of human existence; that our instincts and aspirations are subject to the tantalizing nature of the society or the external world; that we are more or less Don Quixotes living with our Lady Dulciness or fighting with wind mills. The compelling presence of the tradition

brings, of course, the prodigal sons back to the fold of society. The reader feels relieved and gratified, for 'all's well that ends well'. And this can well be said to be the achievement of comic irony.

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