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The Woman Question in Narayan's Fictional World

Md. Eftekhar Uddin*

Abstract: *This essay rereads the fictional world of R.K. Narayan with a view to encapsulating his viewpoint regarding the woman question. Women are not central to his thoughts; he does not advocate feminist politics either. Still women characters are always found in search of identity and in a quest for the definitions of the self in his novels. In "The Dark Room", one of his earlier novels, Narayan presents the suffocating existence of woman and culturally accepted beliefs about the subservient position of woman in society. Whereas in "The Painter of the Signs", one of his later novels, the characterization of woman has been completely reversed. In between these two polarized notions, "The Guide" acts as a signpost to pave the way to present the valorized female self. Our special focus is on "The Guide" and other related novels to examine the position of Narayan regarding the woman question.*

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the "Women's Lib" movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, individuality, stature, and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel [The Dark Room] dealt with her, with this philosophy broadly in the background. (**Narayan**, My Days 119)

This is what R. K. Narayan remarks about his perception of woman /wife in the context of the Indian society, which subsequently became the basis of his portrayal of Savitri in his third novel, "The Dark Room" (1938). Generally considered the most 'unNarayanian' in treatment, and dismissed by scholars for a long time after publication as an average work, the novel is now attracting critical attention as an

* Assistant Professor, ELL, IIUC

important work on the woman question. For that matter, Narayan's fiction has of late been in focus for his treatment of woman, vis-a-vis man-woman relationship. Interestingly, supposed for years to be free from historical or philosophical predilections, his works have been generating a lot of critical enthusiasm along these very lines.

A re-reading of the novels of Narayan in this perspective would reveal, first his responsive perception of the woman question, a feature very rarely found in the works of most of the Indian male novelists. Secondly, one would be pleasantly surprised to discover that his fictional world has rarely a woman who is essentially 'bad'. Thirdly, and most paradoxically, his heroes/male protagonists would appear inferior to the 'heroines', who, though seemingly placid and inactive, are full of energy and 'heroic' courage. Examining in retrospect, we would find Narayanian heroes, his male characters - individually and as a group - generally weak in character; some of them are even unscrupulous, leaving an impression of the so-called antiheroes. This premise implies that his women are apparently stronger than their male counterparts. Even though the female individuals of his fiction appear to lose - as the victims of male subjugation -'all notion of her independence, individuality, stature, and strength', in the fictional reality of Narayan's world, they emerge stronger and more dignified.

Narayan's engagement with the woman question is a very subtle affair. One finds him presenting stronger women in almost every new novel, but his narration of the empowerment of woman appears rather detached, without any indication of his complicity with the feminist politics. If "The Dark Room" marks the beginning of this fictional perception of Narayan, "The Guide" (1958) clearly takes it to the next level and in "The Painter of Signs" (1976), one of his later novels, the male-oriented role has been reversed completely.

"The Dark Room" fictionalises the grim realities of the conjugal/family life. It also narrates very disturbing issues in man-woman relationship in the context of tradition-modernity conflict, which the author is trying to negotiate in the changing social realities of Indian life. Savitri, the central figure of the novel, leaves her husband Ramani and their children in protest against his weakness for the proverbial 'Other Woman'; his colleague, Shanta Bai, a young trainee insurance agent. Incidentally, Shanta Bai herself is a victim; married to an alcoholic and gambler cousin at the age of twelve, she deserted him after six years when she found that she could neither reform him nor live with him any more. Unfortunately, she is seen as the epitome of the proverbial 'bad woman' of Narayanian novels, but her critics have overlooked her guts in asserting herself and

reconstructing her shattered life in the colonial Indian society when the position of woman was even more deplorable than now. She does not get the support of her parents after she walks out on her husband. She loses both the worlds, but does not give up. She resumes her education and manages to complete her graduation almost on her own save for the little help from her aunt, and takes odd jobs before coming to Ramani's office for an interview. She has her independent opinion on various matters of life. The challenges that she had to face in reshaping her life as a single woman have evidently made her worldly wise. She is a go-getter, a forerunner of the New Woman of the ensuing times. She is therefore ahead of her times, and in a small, sleepy town like Malgudi, she is sure to look incongruous.

Shanta's intrusion into the conjugal life of Ramani and Savitri should not be seen as an act of male-hunting by a promiscuous woman, because that is again a stereotyping which tries to rationalise that a rape victim herself is the cause of her own abuse. One must not overlook the fact that the male-dominated insurance office looked upon the women agents as Ramani's "harem" (**Narayan**, The Dark Room 44). Elsewhere Ramani rationalises his nocturnal visits to Shanta's room as fun. Ramani - like Marco in "The Guide" and Vasu in "The Maneater of' Malgudi" - metaphorises the traditional perception of man; and his relationship with Shanta Bai may be seen as a fulfillment of male ego/masculinity. He represents the traditional mind-set of men in a male-dominated social order for whom the wife alone is expected to be faithful and chaste, not the husband. He at the best allows what may be called the Victorian perception of the Perfect Lady. The following excerpt from "The Dark Room" not only shows enough of Ramani's position as a husband/man but also summarises the attitude of some of Narayan's heroes/men:

Of course, he granted, there was some sense in the women's movement; let them by all means read English novels, play tennis, have their All-India Conference and go to pictures occasionally; but that should not blind them to their primary duties of being wives and mothers! They mustn't attempt to ape the Western women, all of whom, according to Ramani's belief, lived in a chaos of promiscuity and divorce. He held that India owed its spiritual eminence to the fact that the people here realised that a woman's primary duty (also a divine privilege) was being a wife and a mother. And what woman retained the right of being called a wife who disobeyed her husband? Didn't all the ancient epics and scriptures enjoin upon woman the strictest identification with her husband? He remembered all the heroines of the epics whose one dominant quality was a blind, stubborn following of

their husbands, like the shadow following the substance. (**Narayan**, The Dark Room 92-93)

The good wife and the good mother Savitri finally comes back to the family fold like many of Narayan's women characters of later novels unsuccessfully striving to make their space in life. The return of Savitri to her husband conforming to the traditional patriarchal fold can raise many disturbing questions. There is scope in the plot to project her as a woman of the modern age trying to find her identity in the great big male world; but the novelist perhaps prefers to script a realistic conclusion. This is again seen by critics as Narayan's complicity with patriarchy. Contrary to it, Savitri (and the novelist), nevertheless, has made her point. She seems to be breaking the silence of ages when she asks, "What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else is her father's, her husband's or her son's" (**Narayan**, The Dark Room 75). The heroine's acceptance of her fate, and her husband's accepting her and giving up his extramarital relationship; both are unconvincing, yet at another level, the young novelist tries to experiment with the same theme in the relationship between Mari, a locksmith-cum-umbrella-maker-cum-occasional burglar, and his wife Pooni, a domineering but well-meaning woman. It appears that in the portrayal of Savitri, Narayan has resorted to a conciliating image of woman in the traditional society . Moreover, a fictional solution to a societal issue would take the issue nowhere near solution. Sometimes simply interrogating an issue may be a meaningful beginning.

Not only Savitri, but also Shanta in "Mr. Sampath"(1949) - a novel written eleven years after "The Dark Room" - even after her apparent professional success decides to go back to the fold of the family. Similarly, Rosie, the heroine of "The Guide" (published nearly a decade after "Mr. Sampath") returns to the point of beginning in the circle after her unrewarding tryst with freedom and vocation finishes. In fact, the paradigm, on which Narayan had started working in "The Dark Room", undergoes experimentation to many of his major novels. These three novels, written between 1938 and 1958, published roughly in gaps of a decade each, represent the ascendance of Narayan's perception of women vis-à-vis the changing social order. Interestingly, thereafter one notices a paradigmatic shift following a steep and hazardous ascendance in Daisy in "The Painter of Signs" (1977).

"Mr. Sampath", published in the US as "The Printer of Malgudi"(1955), was Narayan's first novel to come out after the Independence, and incidentally the one where he tries to address the issue at another level. After Savitri, the introduction of Shanti, a widow, who leaves her son behind, and steps out of the familial bondage and responsibility to

become an actress, is a very unconventional development. Shanti, after Shanta (The Dark Room) is the earliest of Narayan's career women, trying to do what she thinks and likes. No surprise she becomes a sensation in the sets, as well as in the sleeping town, and causes many eyebrows to rise by openly flirting with Mr. Sampath, the filmmaker. Ravi, the young hero of the film, is predictably bewitched by her beauty, but she prefers the elderly Mr. Sampath, which is an evidence of Narayan's women becoming pragmatic in their choice of men. She enjoys herself like a queen bee, getting all the attention of the world. In a way, she paves the way for the unconventional heroines of the later novels, but the novelist's hesitation in projecting her as the New Woman is quite apparent. It appears as if the novelist was experimenting with his own ideas in the character of Shanti. Notwithstanding her 'permissiveness' and 'pragmatism', she recoils to the patriarchal fold, the compulsion of motherhood being the predictable excuse. Like Savitri, and for that matter , all mothers of the world, she gives up her rebellion for the sake of her son. In fact, she uses her otherwise restricting oaths of motherhood and widowhood as the strategy to ward off the male world:

I am sick of this kind of life and marriage frightens me. I want to go and look after my son, who is growing up with strangers. Please leave me alone and don't look for me. I want to change my way of living. You will not find me. If I find you pursuing me, I will shave off my head and fling away my jewellery and wear a white saree. You and people like you will run away at the sight of me. I am, after all a widow, and can shave my head and disfigure myself. (**Narayan**, Mr. Sampath 218)

In "The Financial Expert" (1952), the comic mode of the novelist is internalised, and identifies itself with the author's way of looking at things. Involvement with moral questions transforms this mode into an ironic vision. The novelist's recognition of the irony of human existence becomes the infrastructure of his subsequent novels. In novels like "The Man-eater of Malgudi" (1961) and "A Tiger for Malgudi" (1983), even in the apparently not-so-serious "Talkative Man" (1986), although the novelist seeks to address other issues, he does not forget to give a prominence to the Woman question. For example, even in "A Tiger for Malgudi", arguably one of his 'serious' works, Narayan tries to showcase the new status of woman even in a minor character like Rita, the trapeze woman and wife of Captain. And interestingly, Narayan also portrays Master's forgiving and doting wife as a contrast. It seems that he wants to show that the two realities exist side by side in the Indian world: while we still have very traditional,

husband- following wives, we also have the likes of Rosie and Rita, who represent the new generation of working Indian women.

I have to go back to "Waiting for the Mahatma" (1955), to show how the novelist's changing perception mediates between the two signposts (The Dark Room and The Guide). Here, he tries to look at the issue from a different angle. The novel reads like a conventional story of two young lovers, Bharati and Sriram, and their search for identity, with references to Gandhi and freedom movement. Yet, the novel is more than that. The reading of the subtext brings before the reader an unconventionally conventional heroine, who conforms to the societal values, subscribes to nationalist politics, chooses to live the hard life of a political worker, but remains essentially feminine. In that, she may be Savitri's prototype. Her feminine grace can only be compared to that of Rosie/Nalini. But that is only one side of the moon. Bharati is the beginning of strong, assertive women in the novels of Narayan - something the novelist had been striving to formulate through Shanta Bai, Pooni and Shanti – and attains near perfection in Rosie. She is a strong-willed woman and a confirmed Gandhian/nationalist, whose priority in life is freedom of the country. With her, we again have a woman of vocation (a forerunner of Rosie again) who prioritises her work before personal relationship or any other external pressure. Sriram, on the contrary, is a weak young man, as he is more interested in Bharati than in hardship and renunciation that the Gandhian struggle anticipates. He is the forerunner of the 'weak heroes' of later Narayan novels. Any way. The 'heroines' progressively become so strong and self-willed that they easily outshine their 'heroes'. And surprisingly enough, male protagonists like Chandran in "The English Teacher", Srinivas in "Mr.Sampath", and Sriram in "Waiting for the Mahatma" anticipate the forthcoming Raju in "The Guide", and the pattern seems to continue with Nataraj in "The Man-eater of Malgudi" .

It may be necessary here to point out that Narayan's obsession with the occult and supernatural plays an important role in shaping the ethical position of his major male characters. Starting from Krishna, through Chandran, and Srinivas, he goes on to create his men who are, in one way or the other, challenged or motivated by situations involving moral principles. One may see Raju as the culmination of such a preoccupation. After "The Guide", his male characters are less burdened by moral compunctions or illusions of spiritual happiness. "The Guide" seems to be the novel where Narayan not only seeks solutions to his own ethical dilemmas, but also realises that women are more ethically unwavering than men. This explains why Rangi in "The Man-eater of Malgudi", a devodasi, a woman of easy virtue (making

clandestine visits to Vasu's attic, stirring sexual fantasies in an otherwise passive married man like Nataraj), dares the demon to inform Nataraj of Vasu's plan of killing Kumar, the temple elephant. Furthermore, Narayan appears to be conveying that men, owing to some mysterious reason are less capable of coping with ethical problems or spiritual quest. He even seems to be looking for the answer in his fictional world.

"The Guide" may provide the clue to understand the complexity he is out to negotiate in the novel. In "My Day" Narayan informs how he was inspired to conceive the novel:

At this time I had been thinking of a subject for a novel about some one suffering enforced sainthood. A recent situation in Mysore offered a setting for such a story. A severe drought had dried up all the rivers and tanks ... . As a desperate measure, the municipal council organised a prayer for rains. A group of Brahmins stood knee-deep in water (procured at great cost) on the dry bed of Kaveri, fasted , prayed, and chanted certain mantras continuously for eleven days. On the twelfth day it rained and brought relief in the countryside. This was really the starting point of "The Guide". (66-67)

The key phrases in this excerpt are 'a novel about some one suffering enforced sainthood', and 'On the twelfth day it rained'. The idea of 'enforced sainthood' has always been there, even before "The Guide" was composed. The act of renunciation we see in Chandran is certainly not the same as that of Master in "A Tiger of Malgudi". Yet, Railway Raju is ordained by his destiny to a life of transformation through meditation. The protagonist Raju is tailor-made to play the role. A cheerful, helpful (and charming) small-town young man, loved by many, he acts as the do-gooder to the proverbial 'damsel in distress', but the portrait soon changes, and what we see then is a timeserver, a shrewd and street-smart man after his live-in relationship with Nalini, the commercially successful dancer utilises her (Nalini) as a vehicle to materialize his lurking desire of enjoying life without having to work. Besides. there is a beautiful young woman readily available and dependent on him. He becomes greedy, selfish and reckless. He commits a penal offence, and is sentenced. But even in the prison, he becomes popular as a 'model prisoner'(**Narayan**, The Guide 226). He is back to his charm; almost enjoying his prison term. To quote him:

I felt amused at the thought of the ignorant folk who were horrified at the idea of a jail. ... I felt choked with tears when I had to go out after two years and I wished that we had not wasted all that money on our lawyer. I'd have been happy to stay in this prison permanently. (**Narayan**, The Guide 228)

All the good work of Raju in the prison, however, seems wasted, and the very intent of confinement instituted by the well ordered, civilised world as a punitive measure, an opportunity to introspect and reform from within is evidently lost. Since, he has no sense of dignity, freedom from security of the prison, which means freedom from his parasitical existence frightens him. The fundamental principle that informs freedom is moral strength and courage, and courage arises from a sense of dignity and self-esteem. To Raju, who has never known the dignity of self reliance, freedom can be embarrassing. The less responsibility the better! Raju comes out of the prison unconverted and lapses once again with the same ease into roles which prove his spiritual paralysis.

As a new version of Margaya (the hero of "The Financial Expert"), Raju enjoys guiding people, advising them what they ought or ought not to do, but he cannot find solutions to his own dilemmas. He did counselling in the jail, and then after his release, in the ruined temple, his hideout, he does it again. He offers some practical advice to Velan, little knowing that with his unshaven look in an abode in a temple, he might appear like a saint, thus creating trouble. By a master stroke of Narayanian dramatic irony, the latter 'mistakes' him a jailbird for a Swami, a saint. Raju's predicament of 'enforced sainthood' begins when Velan touches his feet in reverence. The omniscient authorial voice informs at this point that Raju 'felt he was attaining the stature of a saint'(**Narayan**, The Guide 15).

The process of self-canonisation of Raju, if I may say so, continues as the novelist suspends the disbelief of villagers as well as readers in a miracle. Interestingly, the half-sister of Velan not only gives her consent to marry the boy of her brother's choice, but also acclaims Raju as her 'saviour'. Thus, Raju begins to assume the new role in spite of himself. He grows his hair and beard long, tries hard to fit into the new role he has to play. Raju, in accepting the role of a Sadhu was truly accepting the roles of a tradesman without conscience. It is like his accepting a contract to trade in souls. He becomes a spiritual guide, without any qualification, even without the quality of ordinary goodness. He thinks nothing of the unethical compromise. We know he lacks even a primitive sense of human dignity of selflessness through self-reliance. He sells his freedom and gets a new lease to his parasitic existence:

Where could he go? He had not trained himself to make a living out of hard work. Food was coming to him unasked now. If he went away somewhere else certainly nobody was going to take the trouble to bring him food in return for just waiting for it. The only other place

about running away from the whole thing is also because "he felt moved by the recollection of the big crowd of women touching his feet" (**Narayan**, The Guide 111). This only affirms his narcissicism, for if he went, he would be "just another bearded Sadhu about, that was all" (**Narayan**, 1958 p. 111). If Raju has decided to stay on, we must be careful to note that it is only an empiric or pragmatic decision. There is no ethical basis to it.

Raju now thinks of the next best way out of the situation. He takes Velan into confidence, and makes an emotional appeal to him. "You have been a friend to me", he says, and reveals his past. This revelation coming at the time it does, is nothing more than a defense mechanism.

Velan listened to the story, and at the end of it contrary to Raju's imagination that Velan would rise with disgust and swear, "You have fooled us", he addresses Raju as 'Swami', and he also says, "I'll go back to the village to do my morning duties. I will come back later. And I'll never speak a word of what I have heard to anyone". He dramatically thumped his chest: It has gone down there and there it will remain" (**Narayan,** The Guide 111). This shows that the native Velan who had invested Raju with the role, is after all not so naive: he is shrewd enough to assure Raju that his secret would be kept.

Velan's silence and this assurance become a measure of Raju's corruption. Velan's devotion to Raju corrupts his integrity. The Midas touch has worked. Velan becomes Raju's accomplice by not revealing him to the village. Like Raju's he, in spite of his knowledge of the ethical reality of the action, refuses to acknowledge it; otherwise why would Velan say, "dramatically thumping his chest it has gone there, and there it will remain," and, we also remember that at the end of Raju's story Velan had looked "a little more serious than usual, and there were lines of care on his face" (**Narayan**, The Guide 112). Velan has unconsciously identified himself with Raju and therefore the 'monster' of Raju's creation is able to corrupt Velan's integrity.

Velan, on hearing Raju's story had a choice to make. He could choose to sacrifice Raju, or the present mood of reconciliation and the hopes of the people of Mangal. Velan's bond with the village is closer, and therefore, he promises to conceal Raju, thereby pressing the ordeal on him. It was Velan who had made a Swami out of Raju and popularized him among the villagers, and therefore, that Velan feels a certain moral obligation towards the village is understandable.

Exploitation of faith has corrupted Faith itself. It is now Velan's turn to exploit the faith of the villagers. Velan exploits both Raju and the villagers. Velan knows that it is a risk to compel the fast on Raju. Raju

where it could happen was the prison. Where could he go now? Nowhere... He realized that he had no alternative. He must play the role that Velan had given him (**Narayan**, The Guide 33)

It is clear that the author stage-manages the turn of events in such a manner that the narrative appears to turn toward a desired ending. The crucial moment comes when there occurs a drought in the locality owing to scanty rainfall. The drought destablizes relations in the village. The villagers divide themselves into rancourous rival groups, and vow to undo each other. Raju feels bothered, for the commotion, he suspects, would effect the isolation of the place and would bring police on the scene discovering him. Legal guilt and legal punishment haunt him. Hence, when he is reported to by Velan's, moronic brother about the injury and burns to Velan's skull, and about Velan's vow not to rest until he has vindicated his burns by burning the houses of the enemies. Raju worries and the worrying results in entrusting Velan's brother with a message "Tell your brother, immediately, wherever (**Narayan,** The Guide 101). The moron distorts the message and it is given out with an addition. "The swami doesn't want food any more... because it doesn't rain... and wants no food, until it is all right" (**Narayan,** The Guide 102).

Deeply affected by the Swami's decision to fast for them, the villagers forget their quarrels, and decide to go and pay their respects to "Swami our Saviour". Velan their spokesman says to Raju "Your penance is similar to Mahatma Gandhi's. He has left a disciple in you to save us (**Narayan**, The Guide 107)." Thus, his '*karma*' leads him towards 'enforced sainthood'

Raju is shocked. He now sees "the enormity of his creation. He had created a giant with his puny self, a throne of authority with that slab of stone" (**Narayan**, The Guide 109), and he regrets having given them the idea, which he had done because it had sounded picturesque. The regret is not spontaneous, it is induced by a compelling desire to escape the ordeal he has to face. It is motivated and conditioned by that impure intention. Regret and remorse which otherwise are signs of awakening, are merely romantic in Raju.

Raju considers running away:

> "It occurred to him that the best course for him would be to run away from the whole thing... But how to do it? Anyone might spot him within half an hour. It was not a practical solution"
> (**Narayan**, The Guide 111).

When Raju decides against running away he is conscious not of his moral guilt, but his legal guilt. We are told Raju's hesitation to decide

may even die. Also Velan firmly believes that it would rain, "provided the man who performed it was a pure soul, a great soul" (**Narayan**, The Guide 109). And it is Velan again, who strains himself to make the penance a success and keeps a watch on Raju day and night (**Narayan**, The Guide 237). This is exploitation.

According to William Walsh, Raju's revelation of the past is "only one more proof of Raju's goodness and humility."(**Walsh**, 131) There is no justification for this statement throughout Raju's career. If Raju has done anything that has enjoyed a look of goodness, he has done it, as a necessity, in self-interest. Raju needs to hold on to his narcissistic self-image since his worth as well as his identity is based on it. Many a time Raju has felt anger but he does not show it, and if he happens to show his anger, then he cleverly translates the statement in a way which will give an idea of his greatness. This greatness and goodness is not his achievement as a human being. For example once when Velan had come to him with a problem, Raju beset by his own problems was in no mood to solve Velan's. He therefore felt "irritated at the responsibility that Velan was thrusting on him", and said frankly, "I am not going to think of your problem Velan; not now." "May I know why?. asks Velan, and Raju with an air of finality answers him, "it is so." Velan persisted "when may I trouble you sir? and Raju replied grandly. "When tile time is ripe for it". Narayan's comment is telling. "This took the matter from the realm of time into eternity" (**Narayan**, The Guide 21) and if, a little later, having noticed the edibles brought for him, Raju speaks to Velan pacifyingly, then he is only trying to adapt himself to a mandate of reality, otherwise he cannot obtain what he requires. Raju tells Velan the story of his past in a desperate effort to escape the situation "because it was the only way in which he could hope to escape the ordeal" (**Narayan**, The Guide 112). Raju has to undertake the trial of the fast. Therefore, the fast is hardly a measure of his moral strength. He submits to external conditions to the external structure of the village, and the police! Raju is not driven by a need for virtue, and he feels no inner compulsion for spirituality.

The fast assumed great public importance. Raju finds himself turned into a 'celebrity'. Raju has pulled it off before men, but what about before God? If one regards motives then Raju is nowhere near to purifying himself through the ordeal by fast. The insincerity of Raju to undergo the ordeal continues to open up before the readers. Raju is tormented by the smell and sight of food. He is sick of the whole thing, and he wanted to shout at the people:

> Get out, all of you, and leave me alone. I am not the man to save you. No power on earth can save you if

> you are doomed. Why do you bother me with all this fasting and austerity?
> (**Narayan**, The Guide 235).

But Raju knows there was no further retreat. Realizing this pressing inevitability of the situation, afraid of freedom, self-reliance and personal responsibility, haunted by the fear of legal punishment, Raju decides to give a serious thought to his fast. Why shouldn't he try to live up gracefully to his role'? "Why not give the poor devil a chance, Raju said to himself, instead of hankering after food which one could not get anyway? (**Narayan**, The Guide 237). He also reflects on the significance of his fast. "If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly?" and we are told:

> For the first time in his life he was making a personal effort, for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested.
> (**Narayan**, The Guide 238).

But there was also another thought at the back of Raju's mind. "This enjoyment is something Velan cannot take away from me" (**Narayan**, The Guide 238). Velan ought to have known "yet the fool would not stop thinking that he was a saviour. "This man will finish me before I know were I am" (**Narayan**, The Guide 238, 232). It appears therefore that Raju has decided to enjoy, the thrill with a vengeance because the 'fool Velan' 'this man' cannot take it away from him. Velan has wounded his narcissicism and disturbed the complacency of his parasitical existence, and he cannot easily forgive Velan. Therefore, this awareness is more like a flash of inspiration, and has no moral significance, for a fleeting second only he rises "above a narrow selfish individualism."(**Goyal**, 154.) 'Velan cannot take this enjoyment away from me' is the yardstick that measures the quality of Raju's awareness. Raju has not become morally aware of the significance of the fast, hence, the flash-like quality of his awareness, which must die like the last flicker of a dying candle.

When Malone the American T. V. man, who has come to shoot the event interviews Raju, it is very clear that Raju is doing "only what he has to do; that's all", and he laments that his 'likes and dislikes' do not count. Surely, Raju has not suddenly neutralized "his likes and dislikes" and become a sage of wisdom. That Raju has not become a sage of wisdom, rather is made so, is even more clear in the answer he gives to Malone's next question:

"Will you tell us something of your early life."

"What do you want me to say'" asks Raju.

"Er-for instance, have you always been a Yogi'"? And the old habit (or his nature?) asserting makes Raju say

"Yes more or less"

The novel ends with Raju completing the last day of his fast. The hallucination is his final test. He says to Velan 'Its raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs" (**Narayan**, The Guide 247). This only proves the final triumph of his ego. Raju cannot do without this narcissistic inflation. The end is not open to any delusion about Raju's maturation, his 'sainthood'; his illusion has determined the end. The hallucination is clearly a fact about what is going on in Raju's mind. It once and for all tells us that Raju has not accomplished the creative transformation of his inner person. His outer manner, the manner acquired by him when he accepts the role of the Swami, does not become his identity. We know Raju considers himself as capable of attaining the impossible. He is confident of measuring upto the expectations of the people. We remember how Raju had started counting the stars and said to himself. "I shall be rewarded for this profound service to humanity". People will say: "Here is the man who knows the exact number of stars in the sky... He will be your night guide for skies" (**Narayan**, The Guide 16). 2Again when Velan submits god-like references to him: "He felt he was attaining the stature of a saint" (**Narayan**, The Guide 16) and we are told he can have "sudden access to pontificality (**Narayan**, The Guide 14). The repentant Raju ought to have been more conscious of his ungodliness. In this consciousness the most appropriate hallucination would have been a vision of his defeat, in which he would see no rain, and would say to Velan, "I told you I am not a saviour!" 'Sanctity is thrust upon him' (**Iyengar**, 382) but it does not stick! At best, it is a counterfeit sainthood, which is no sainthood at all. He is a saint because he dies!

Although the novelist seems to have an overt design to transform him into a Swami/Mahatma, he fails to go against the alter ego of a narrator of reality and prefers to leave the development of the character to its course. The limitations of Raju as an individual: his background, his education (or lack of it), his unscrupulous ways and finally lack of conviction in what he is doing come in conflict with attaining the enlightened stature. He cannot rise above the conflict between his two selves and thereby he proves to be very humane, and the novel is saved from being the mere handiwork of the omnipotent novelist.

It maybe necessary to elaborate the point that I am trying to make. Considering Narayan's predilections for the occult and the supernatural and his penchant for spirit call and the like, it would have been no wonder to see him transform Raju into a Swami, a saint. As an individual he might believe in the supernatural or the occult practices, but as a novelist he is expected to overcome his personal biases and present the greater realities of life. In the Indian tradition, the poet or the creative artist is the Creator of the Universe. While it implies absolute authorial power, it also implies absolute restraint. Such is the nature of creativity that the creator becomes a passive medium only to record the development of his/her story. In other words, the novel writes itself.

When we try to see the plot development from another angle, we recognise that the conflict that Raju suffers from is actually the conflict of the novelist. Narayan may have intended to make a saint out of Railway Raju, but his novel does not allow him to do so. This reminds me of a very appropriate observation made by Meenakshi Mukherjee in "The Twice Born Fiction": 'In the story of Raju what we have is the created object transcending the creator. The sainthood that Raju had created out of his deception ultimately transcends his control and obliterates his former self '(129). The failure of the character in rising to the level of human perfection or - for the matter of that - canonisation (though Raju might become sanctified in the estimation of his admirers after his death) spells the success of Narayan as novelist. Torn between two opposing worlds, Raju fails to emerge as a hero. Not only because he dies in his attempt to attain the status of the hero, but also because he does not qualify to be a *hero.* And there is no harm in it. Like most of the heroes in Narayan novels, he is 'unheroic'. He too falters, and fails. However, the character is a winner, because he looks more humane and understandable.

This leads to a logical inference: Does the novelist intend to valorize the heroine? Perhaps the answer is in the negative. It is obvious that Raju was the novelist's favourite from the very beginning. The very idea of the novel, as mentioned earlier, grew on the subject of 'enforced sainthood' which centralises the male protagonist's position in the scheme of the novel to be written. The development of Raju's character as a nice and helpful young person, and his charm over Rosie are pointers towards the author's hero-oriented agenda. Yet, as the narrative advances the character of Raju becomes increasingly complicated, and Narayan, the novelist finds him going beyond his scheme of things. Shirley Chew has rightly observed that in "The Financial Expert", "The Guide", and "The Man-eater of Malgudi" "character controls action -with an emphasis more pressing than before"(67). As it happens, towards the end, even Raju the character

fails to regulate his own thought, speech and action. Thus, the author's project of creating a hero who could be elevated to the height of sainthood meets a predictable failure. Consequently, the novel might have lost the *hero* but gained on aesthetic grounds. Raju comes out as one of the most complex characters in Narayan's fictional world. In no other novel there is any other male character or hero who can reach the complexity of Raju. He represents the most sublime predicament of the human being, eternally striving between the extremes of the beast and the saint and failing to be humane enough. Raju stands out as an example of the eternal strife, and the inevitable failure of mankind.

On the other hand, the absence of a full-fledged hero of the conventional perception, the heroine gains in stature. This is not to say that she becomes 'heroic', but she appears stronger in her conviction. As in the portrayal of Raju, so in Rosie, the novelist has to negotiate between the extremes of human condition; but her return to an accepted and conformist place in life indicates her (and the novelists) faith in the societal structure, as well as his helplessness in bringing about a tailor-made ending. Rosie's retreat to the fold of domesticity, therefore, is a demonstration of her strength as a woman of the world not a pathetic acceptance of the stereotype. She has broken the rules has seen and done all. Had she accepted her secondary, faceless position as the 'invisible' wife of Marco, she would have become a stereotyped person. Similarly, if she had continued her allegiance to Raju that would have meant that she had rationalised her unethical action. Most importantly, she proves that after all that has happened to her, she has become worldly wise. She now knows what is good for her. We do not know whether she stopped her pursuit of artistic career, and was re-domesticated after her return to Marco (just as we can't say for sure if it actually rained after Raju died). The following dialogue between Raju and Rosie taking place before his imprisonment is an indicator of her mindset about her own status:

"What do you propose to do in future?"

"Perhaps. I'll go back to him."

"Do you think he will take you back'?"

"Yes; if I stop dancing." (**Narayan**, The Guide 197)

This means that she understands her own situation quite well, and that is what matters. She has always exhibited her resilience: in spite of her deserting her husband, she still prefers to be identified as his wife. When she learns that Marco's book has been published, she is eager to procure a copy. She explains to Raju that she might not enjoy the book. 'But anything happening to him is bound to interest me. After all, after all. he is

my husband' (**Narayan**, The Guide 179). After the ordeal she has gone through, she is no more the weak, uncertain woman who had to take the help of a near stranger to seek her own space in life.

The portrayal of Rosie, alias Nalini, benefits no less by the masterly stroke of Narayan's sensitivity in handling women characters. Though she reminds the reader of Savitri in "The Dark Room", there is a great difference in the treatment of the two women. We must remember that there is a gap of two decades between these two novels. Rosie is the highly educated woman of Independent India. With her background of a *Devodasi* or temple dancer by birth and a masters in Economics, she combines both the worlds. Further, by becoming the wife of a 'respectable' Marco she has climbed upward in the social hierarchy and has apparently left behind the social stigma. Besides, she is a trained classical dancer who wants to pursue the career of a performing artist. Partly her desire for freedom and partly the apathetic attitude of Marco make her walk out on her husband, and embrace a life of unrealised ambitions. Thus, her portraiture is of the more confident woman of the changed times. This position becomes more conspicuous when she develops extramarital relationship with Raju. Her relationship with Raju may not be exactly romantic. It may rather be seen as a relationship of convenience than that of an emotional attachment. That is why Raju has to realise 'I made love to her constantly and was steeped in an all-absorbing romanticism, until woke up to the fact that she was really getting tired of it all' (**Narayan**, The Guide 155).

It may be argued that the novelist is hesitant to allow Rosie complete freedom. Since the novelist does not develop the character of Rosie as a single career woman, not returning to her husband, and pursuing a life on her own. In her situation, especially when Raju (a woman needs a 'man' to protect her- we should remember this accepted social reality) would not be there in her life, freedom would have meant social insecurity. Or, maybe the novelist feels that the tradition-bound Indian society has yet to accept the concept of a career woman, live-in relationship of an unwed couple, and the audacity of prioritizing personal ambition over conjugal/familial/ societal obligations and value system.

However. long sixteen years later, Narayan succeeds considerably in realising the conceptual New Woman in Daisy (The Painter of Signs,1976), and after many more years the woman of his changing concept in Sita (The World of Nagaraj,1990) And to both novels, there is a role reversal: the 'heroes' - Ravi and Nagaraj - are nearly marginalised by their 'heroines'. Daisy, the heroine of "The Painter Of Signs", has a Western name which she does not change to a more conventional one, unlike Rosie. Daisy is single, dedicated to her

vocation of population control and with no plans for marriage. Her aim is 'to work, rather than be a wife' (**Narayan**, The Painter Of Signs 130). In advocating birth control, she subverts the traditional role of a mother as well as the ' shastras [that]say that the more children in a home , the more blessed it becomes'(**Narayan**, The Painter Of Signs 70). She allows herself to be drawn into sexual relationship with Raman but then ends it , leaving him bereft. In other words, in every action, Daisy behaves like a man rather than a woman. And unlike Shanti and Rosie, she has no inner conflict about transgressing her socially ordained role. Narayan said of this novel :

But compare to my new novel "The painter Of Signs" with "The Dark Room", there is a contrast. The new liberated woman, and the traditional housewife completely suppressed. You see a whole social change.(**Narayan**, 1971, 16)

The heroine of "The Dark Room" Savitri tries to revolt against the norms of her society but she ultimately yields before the circumstances but Daisy successfully turns down the ridiculous norms of the milieu. The difference between Savitri and Daisy is the difference between the modern and the out-dated, and the difference of today and yesterday. And the today is definitely shaped up through the portrayal of the valorized Rosie, the heroine of "The Guide".

But Narayan's attitude to Daisy is ambivalent. He does not hold up her ideal, but neither does he condemn her. Raman's ritual- bound old aunt, a character similar to Raju's mother and the only other prominent woman character in the novel, does not (again like Raju's mother) offer a viable alternative model of womanhood.

What this survey reveals is that Narayan has given considerable thought throughout his career to the question of the woman's role in the society, to issues pertaining to her identity, self respect and self-expression. But the novelist's stand regarding woman's case is quite unique in that he chooses a sort of neutral position, neither in favour of male chauvinism nor in defence of feminism.

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