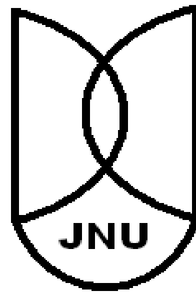
Malgudi Ethics: *Karma*, *Sannyasa* and *Lokasangraha* in R. K. Narayan's Novels

Thesis submitted to
Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Soham Pain



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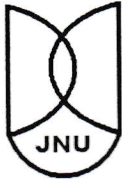
2017



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CERTIFICATE

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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This thesis titled "***Malgudi Ethics: Karma, Sannyasa and Lokasangraha in R. K. Narayan's Novels***", submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

Soham Pain

(Soham Pain)
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Dedicated to

the Loving Memory

of my late grandmother

Subarnaprabha Pain,

who has always been

my constant inspiration

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am highly delighted to see my dissertation in its final form. The most significant contribution to this project was certainly that of my supervisor Prof. G. J. V. Prasad. Without his constant prodding and timely guidance, this thesis could have never been materialized. R. K. Narayan is an overworked area with countless books and theses already available. Even then Prof. Prasad saw a new angle and a new promise in my project, and agreed to mentor me. A nod from an authority of his stature was enough to rid me of my diffidence.

No less than Prof. Prasad's was the contribution of Prof. Martha Selby, who was my supervisor for the nine months that I spent as a visiting scholar at Department of Asian Studies, University of Texas at Austin, U.S.A. It was she who taught me discipline and focus in writing. She took time out of her busy schedule and went through four chapters of dissertation minutely. It was mainly because of Prof. Selby's scanning gaze and copious comments that my chapters were relieved of further revision in the future.

Sincere gratitude is reserved for Prof. Malashri Lal, who played the role of my *de facto* mother in Delhi. Her constant interest in my project and encouragement bore fruit. She was also one of the three referees to recommend my name for Fulbright Fellowship, the other two being Prof. Prasad and Prof. Sanjukta Dasgupta, who was my teacher at University of Calcutta. My association with Prof. Lal was a turning point in my life as it opened me up to the world of national and international academia. With utmost care, she taught me the principles of academic writing and also initiated me into disciplines and areas hitherto unknown to me. I was basically into postcolonial studies but the few months of my work at the Ministry of Culture under the supervision of Prof. Lal triggered my interest in gender theory and women's studies. I might not have gained the confidence to write the one chapter in this thesis which deals with the women characters unless I had interacted with Prof. Lal.

I thank the Fulbright Commission for having considered me and my project worthy of the prestigious fellowship. Without this rare opportunity to travel to Austin and Boston and study the R. K. Narayan archives there, my thesis might have become monotonous and cliche̗d, without much to contribute to the already existing research in the field. Fulbright staff members, Ms Pratibha Nair, Dr. Sudarsan Dash, Ms Sarina Paranjape, Dr. Diya Dutt, Ms Vijee Ninan and Dr. Gayatri Singhal, merit more than just this verbal acknowledgement. The staff members of Harry Ransom Research Centre at UT, Austin, are profusely thanked for having allowed me to go through the manuscripts of

R. K. Narayan. Mr. Ryan Hendrickson, Assistant Director for Manuscripts at Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Centre, Boston University, Boston, directed me to the diaries maintained by Narayan, and also allowed me to photocopy the author's unpublished plays and a valuable exercise book which contained the first draft of his abridged English version of the *Mahabharata*. My sojourn would not have been a reality if my cousin, Mr. Ronojoy Ghosh, had not agreed to be my point of contact in U.S.A. I felt his invisible and supportive presence throughout my year-long stay in America, though I met him only once. He lent a helping hand at every step, and it was a treat to hear from his mouth his varied experiences in the Western hemisphere. Dr. Partha Chowdhury, my senior from school, was my other point of contact. He too is thanked profusely. Especially to be conjured is the name of Mr. Robey Lal, who spent hours with me sharing his experiences during his several years of sojourn in U.S.A, thereby enabling me to gain the required confidence to undertake the travel. His grooming was an essential part of my mental preparation. He also taught me with an almost paternal affection some very essential technicalities related to desktop; otherwise, I would have had to rely on others for typing out my hand-written thesis.

I have already mentioned Prof. Sanjukta Dasgupta to whom I shall always remain grateful. Two other faculty members of Department of English, University of Calcutta, whom I would like to mention, are Prof. Krishna Sen and the late Prof. Santanu Majumdar. Prof. Krishna Sen's collection of critical essays on *The Guide*, which I read as an undergraduate student, was my gateway to Narayan studies. Eventually I had the opportunity to attend her lectures on postcolonial studies and Indian writings in English while pursuing Masters in English at University of Calcutta. The interest, once kindled, was never extinguished. Prof. Majumdar's loving presence and my long hours of discussion with him on the philosophy of the *Bhagavadgita* added to my critical edge. His book, *Dazzled by a Thousand Suns*, served as an eye-opener in many respects. It is unfortunate and highly regretted that this erudite scholar and profoundly affectionate soul is no more. Apart from being a general blow to Indian academia, this catastrophe is a personal loss for me.

I would also like to thank Dr. Chandrani Biwas, Professor of English at St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. But for this alumnus of Jawaharlal Nehru University, I would have never thought of moving out of West Bengal. I had the good fortune of interacting with her very closely during her visits to University of Calcutta. As an invited faculty, she lectured on mazy and complicated areas and concepts related to postcolonial theory, which helped me to gradually come out of my comfort zone of hardcore British literature.

My basic foregrounding, however, can be traced back to my alma mater, Presidency College, Kolkata. With no particular interest in literature, I joined the honours course in English with a lot of trepidation. But what started with a lot of doubt, diffidence and hesitation, eventually turned out to be a fulfilling and memorable experience. Among the faculty members, Prof. Sanjukta Das is to be specially remembered and thanked. I can remember that in those days Indian writings in English was a relatively new paper introduced in the undergraduate syllabus, and there was a lot of skepticism and tension among both teachers and students with respect to this innovation. Prof. Das, however, proved herself to be the unquestionable master of the said area, and her deft handling of R. K. Narayan and Mahesh Dattani in the class remains engraved in my memory. She was the person who taught me to fall in love with Indian writings in English. Prof. Debalina Bandyopadhyay, Prof. Manu Auddy, Prof. Arpita Chattaraj Mukhopadhyay and Prof. Debashis Bandyopadhyay were the other teachers who initiated us into other aspects of Indian writing in English. Sincere gratitude is reserved for all of them. Prof. Samir Kumar Mukhopadhyay and Prof. Jayati Gupta had nurtured my academic interests and skills with great care in that formative phase. Prof. Sutapa Dasgupta, former Head, Department of Philosophy, Presidency College, is thanked profusely for her relevant advice and suggestions. My doctoral research was still in a formative stage when I last met her, and her enlightened instructions about the manifold aspects of Hindu ethics, served as a sound base for the future edifice.

Prof. Saugata Bhaduri and Prof. Dhananjay Singh are thanked profusely for making Centre for English Studies conducive for me. I owe it to them that I take any CES activity, academic or non-academic, like a family thing. Prof. Singh's lectures on Indian philosophy and aesthetics would always remain as memorable experience for me. I shall remember Prof. Bhaduri, apart from being an exceptionally brilliant speaker and teacher, as a moral support, who knows how humour comes in handy in moments of emotional crisis. Prof. Makarand Paranjape's valuable suggestions in the faculty meeting proved highly helpful in the long run. The non-teaching staff members of CES have also been equally helpful all through. Mr. Surendra Singh Rawat, Mrs. Bhagwati Tanwar, Mr. Yatender Singh Rawat and Ms R. Janaki have been very supportive throughout the years of my doctoral research.

Prof. Heeraman Tiwari, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Prof. Ram Nath Jha, Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies, JNU, helped me profoundly by imparting me Sanskrit lessons and explaining complex topics related to Vedanta philosophy respectively. Without their

guidance, it would have been impossible to grasp much of the content of the *Gita*. Mr. Shakti Prasad Mishra, former teacher of English at Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Purulia, remains a constant source of inspiration. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that if I ever loved the *Gita*, it was because of his inimitable style of chanting verses from the said text.Swami Suparnananda, former principal of Ramakrishna Mission Residential College, Narendrapur, blessed me with success when I embarked on this journey, and I sincerely believe in the strength of his words.

It would be very unjust if no mention is made of Prof. Patrick Olivelle, Department of Asian Studies, UT, Austin, who took a great interest in my work, and interacted with me during my stay in Austin. Informal discussions with Prof. Donald Davis during long walks, car rides and tiffin hours, were also highly illuminating. Special thanks are also due to Prof. Joel Brereton, Prof. Edeltraud Harzerclear, Prof. Afsar Mohammed, Ms Jennifer Tipton, Ms Salwa Uzri, Mr. Corbin Young, Dr. Nirmalya Guha, Prof. Samer Ali, Ms Rae Wyse, Mr. Shuan Karim, Mr. Aaron Sherraden, Ms Jamila Lehman Davey and Mr. Aniruddhan Vasudevan for making my UT experience so enriching and homely. Without such a welcoming ambience, I doubt if my labour would have fruited at all. Beyond the periphery of UT, daily life in Austin was made easy by friendly people all around. My stay in Goodall Wooten was a fulfilling one. Mr. Kevin, the manager of Goodall Wooten, and the residents, Mr. Alexander Boulgakov, Dr. Ashfaq U. Rehman, Mrs. Shughla Khan, Mr. Kavid Singh, Mr. Sean Minns, Mr. Cody Pannel, Mr. Lech Soares, Mrs. Soma Ghosh and Mr. Paul Feghali, were good company who kept my spirit high and going in an alien land.

My roommate Prof. Aniruddha Kar is thanked profusely for running on my errands and offering me, whenever necessary, a lift on his bike. He has also helped me a lot in formatting the thesis. Mr. Mantu Sarkar, my other roommate, seemed to live more for me than for himself. My unjust demands at times rose almost to the level of torture. His large-heartedness is duly acknowledged. Ms Dipannita Ghosh extended valuable support by offering to proofread two chapters. Prof. Jayanta Roy, Mr. Mrinmoy Deb and Mr. Soumya Choudhury, have occasionally helped me to keep up the pace by dictating stuff. My friends Ms Nandini Das, Ms Apurba Hazra, Ms Rupsha Chatterjee, Mr. Akarshik Banerjee, Mr. Suman Mandal and Ms Susmita Sen are especially remembered for their cooking efforts. Their labour kept me from going hungry even while I continued with my writing at a stretch. My friends Prof. Bhaskar Ray, Prof. Subhajit Pandit, Ms Sneha Roy Choudhury, Mr. Balaram Roy, Mr. Shiladitya Halder, Prof. Roshni Verma, Prof. Somrita Ganguly, Prof. Shabnam Parveen, Prof. Manoranjan Prasad Singh, Prof. Anuradha Sarkar, Prof. Deepro Chakraborty, Prof.

Shilpi Sarkar and Prof. Jyotirmoy Patowari also contributed diversely. Ms Ananya Saha must be thanked for volunteering to shoulder the lion's share of the responsibilities of the UGC-funded Special Assistance Programme, so that I could find more time to concentrate on my research.

My friends and fellow travellers, Ms Rigzin Chodon, Mrs. Kamalika Rudra, Ms Anurima Chanda, Prof. Somjyoti Mridha, Prof. Komal Agarwal, Prof. Divya N., Prof. Kimte Guite, Mr. Arshad Said Khan, Ms Vani Mecheril, Prof. Umar Nizaruddin, Prof. Arup Kumar Chatterjee, Prof. Debabrata Adhikary, Mr. Sanchit Anand and Mr. Varun Tomar, are thanked from the core of my heart. Had it not been for their loving company, I would have quit a residential campus a long time ago. I would like to voice my special gratitude towards Prof. Siddhartha Chakraborty and Mr. Zico Dasgupta, two people who welcomed me to the JNU family with open arms at a time when I knew nobody in the campus. My first two roommates in JNU, Mr. Athungo Udyou and Mr. Pratik Dutta, became good friends and great supports. Prof. Partha Sarathi Sil, Prof. Anusrita Mandal, Mr. Narayan Dutt Mishra and Mr. Harish Chandra Kukreti are four Sanskrit scholars to whom I owe a lot. The role of my friends and profound scholars Prof. Anwesha Das and Prof. Srijanee Roy must be acknowledged, especially for having saved me from getting distracted, by constant vigilance and mild chiding.

My parents, though spatially located miles apart from me, have always been connected to each of my moments of mirth and misery. More than myself, it is they who were eager and concerned about my academic efforts and doctoral research. I am fully aware that I can never repay my debt to them, but even then I take this opportunity to voice my sincere gratitude towards the two of them. Apart from my parents, the one other family member who has always shared the joy of each of my achievements is my aunt, Mrs. Ila Roy. Her silent prayers have always brought good tidings for me. My late grandmother Mrs. Subarnaprabha Pain has remained as a lasting influence on my inner being. She must have been overjoyed to see my thesis come to this final shape.

Doctoral research is a matter of several years and requires a lot of financial support, which was extended by the University Grants Commission through the Non-Net Fellowship.

The first gateway to English studies is certainly a sound mastery over correct English, and if I have ever learnt it, then the credit goes to the efforts of late Mr. Anup Biswas. The indefatigable spirit and strict disciplinarian habits of this ideal teacher propelled me to gain the required command over the English language. Also memorable were the lessons imparted by Dr. Debabrata Ghosh, Mr. Kartik Mukherjee, Mr. Swapan Bandyopadhyay and Dr. Debasis Chatterjee, all teachers of English at Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Purulia.

Last but not the least, I must also confess my indebtedness to Prof. Md Taimur Rahaman, Principal, Chopra Kamala Paul Smriti Mahavidyalaya, for having granted me the necessary leave to travel to Delhi and submit my dissertation.

Table of Contents

	Introduction	1-22
I.	**The Theory of *Karma*: Its Origin, Evolution and Standardization**	23-51
II.	***Karma* and Daily Life**	52-97
III.	***Sannyasa*: A Study of the Theme of Renunciation in R. K. Narayan's Novels**	98-131
IV.	**Women and *Karma***	132-168
V.	***Lokasangraha* and Service to the Nation: A Study of *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Vendor of Sweets***	169-188
	Conclusion	189-200
	Bibliography	201-218

Introduction

R. K. Narayan (1906-2001) is one of the most celebrated and popular Indian novelists to write in English. He has to his credit sixteen novels, an autobiography, travelogues, adaptations of the Indian epics, retellings of several Hindu myths, and numerous short stories, a few plays (of which only one is in print), and speeches and essays, many of which are yet to be published. Widely reputed for the subtle humorous touches and ironies in his style, the works of this master storyteller are delightful to read, and offer a fairly authentic picture of everyday Indian life.

Scholars of literature have dealt with Narayan's works from numerous angles. Being an author with a large oeuvre, Narayan's works lend themselves to diverse criticism and offer an ever-fertile field of research. The richness of these variegated critical viewpoints is evident from the often contradictory arguments supplied by scholars of such diverse intellectual affiliations as Ranga Rao, C. D. Narasimhaiah, Bill Ashcroft, and Gayatri Spivak.

The present research aims at a systematic study of R. K. Narayan's ethical standpoint as reflected in his novels with reference to the Hindu notion of *karma*, and two allied concepts, *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha*, as expressed in the *Bhagavadgita*.

R. K. Narayan the Author: A Brief Overview

Narayan was born in Madras, and attended Lutheran Mission School, CRC High School, and Christian College High School there. His family moved to Mysore where he had the privilege to utilize the library in Maharajah's College, his father being the headmaster of the institution. It is here that Narayan was exposed to English literary classics, and gradually made up his mind to become an author. Having graduated from Maharajah's College in 1930, Narayan took up the teaching profession for a very short time and then joined *The Justice* as a reporter in 1933, the same year in which he married Rajam.

With the publication of his first novel *Swami and Friends* in 1935, he quit *The Justice* and decided to become a full-time writer. The publication of *Swami and Friends* was possible through the endorsement of Graham Greene. With *Swami and Friends* was also created the fictitious locale, "Malgudi", where the plots of all of Narayan's succeeding novels would be set. In an interview with Susan Ram and N. Ram, Narayan had described the birth of "Malgudi" as follows:

> … I had an idea of a railway station, a very small railway station, a wayside station. You've seen the kind of thing, with a platform and trees and stationmaster… that was the original idea with which I started *Swami and Friends*.[1]

The period 1937-38 was eventful for Narayan, because it was during this time that two other novels of his, *The Bachelor of Arts* (with an introduction by Greene) and *The Dark Room* were published. He had the chance to meet Somerset Maugham who was on a visit to Mysore, and, his daughter Hema was born. However, Narayan's wife died in 1939, and this has been described by authorities as a turning point in his life. Many people believe that Narayan turned to spirituality due to this shock.

Narayan's later career marks his meteoric rise into an iconic Indian (also Asian and postcolonial) literary figure. With consecutive successful novels, short story collections and non-fiction pieces, Narayan became a world figure, known to international figures such as Greta Garbo, Aldous Huxley, Ravi Shankar, and others. Among the honours that he received during his lifetime were the National Prize of the Sahitya Akademi, the Padma Bhushan Award, and the A. C. Benson Medal of the British Royal Society of Literature, in 1960, 1964, and 1980, respectively. Narayan also represented India at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1986 and worked as a "Visiting Professor" at the University of Missouri, Kansas City in 1969, where he lectured on literature and Indian mysticism. *The Guide*, his most famous novel, published in 1958, was made into a film in 1965. *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, his other masterpiece, has also gained huge critical acclaim. His short story collection, *Malgudi Days*, remains a best-loved contribution to Indian English literature. In 1986, T. S. Narasimhan produced a television series titled *Malgudi Days*, the episodes of which were drawn from the stories in the collections, *Malgudi Days* and *A Horse and Two Goats*, and from the two novels, *Swami and Friends* and *The Vendor of Sweets*.

R. K. Narayan and the Indian Traditions: Ethical Vision

To speak of the 'ethical vision' of an author who is admittedly diverse, is debatable in the first place. One's *ethical vision*, just like other aspects, is liable to changes, especially with one's widening of perception and experience, and more so if that person lived long, which Narayan did. The greatest example of such an 'evolution' of thought and perception in Indian history is perhaps Rabindranath

[1] Quoted in Susan Ram and N. Ram, *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*, New Delhi: Viking, 1996, p. 105.

Tagore, who gradually evolved from his Victorian, orthodox ideology into a liberal cosmopolitan. On the other hand, there is not always a necessary connection between the author's personal ideological standpoint and the characterization in his/her works. To take an Indian example, we may refer to Ashapurna Devi who lived the conventional married life of a Bengali Hindu woman, but proved to be an uncompromising rebel in her fiction.

However, most critics argue that R. K. Narayan's fictional world is marked by a certain degree of changelessness and stasis. To quote C. N. Srinath:

> Malgudi has not changed much since 1935 when he wrote his first novel. It is the same pace of life, same locale, same topography, which should naturally amount to monotony.[2]

Adding to this assertion, the novelist himself says:

> Instead of listening to a temple piper, people probably have a transistor radio… But people have not changed. Human types have remained the same. So they remain, my characters. At least in Malgudi there can't be much change.[3]

But what kind of 'changelessness' is Narayan referring to? He himself notes that people *do* change, as they have switched over to new technology in the above excerpt. Such changes are noted on a large scale in *The Guide* where we see the gradual urbanization of Malgudi. Similarly, in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the national upheavals affect changes in Malgudi, as well. Such changes are not insignificant as they displace people, create turning points in their lives, and alter relationships. Therefore, when Narayan (and Srinath) speak of 'change', they are not referring to such outward changes, however strong and large-scale they may be. In such a context, the following quotation from S. B. Tiwari is possibly the best answer to our question:

> R.K. Narayan upholds the old, traditional values of life prescribed by the ancient Indian culture and embodied in Indian epics, 'Shastras', 'Puranas', myths and mythologies. Naturally he gives the

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[2]Srinath, "R.K. Narayan's Comic Vision: Possibilities and Limitations" in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 55, No. 3, Varia Issue, Summer, 1981, p. 416.

[3] Narayan quoted in "Narayan of Malgudi: 50 Years of Storytelling for the Millions", Author not mentioned, MS-2987, Box 12, *R. K. Narayan Collection* in Harry Ransom Research Center, UT, Austin. Reprinted in *Frontline*, http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2701/stories/19961018164.htm, which claims the piece as an interview with N. Ram and Susan Ram [Accessed 10/11/2014]

> philosophy of traditionalism which permeates all his novels. It is the fountainhead from which his other philosophical concepts, such as, orthodoxy, superstition and the role of fate in life flow as its inseparable channels.[4]

And it is against the backdrop of this traditional society which is steeped in an essentially Hindu ethical discourse that the characters created by Narayan undertake their individual journeys for making out their own destinies, almost inevitably to meet with disappointment as the world of conventions invariably reasserts itself. As S. R. Ramteke has put it, the characters

> …simply can't face the collective force of the traditional orthodox society… [and] return to the former position accepting defeat in life. Happiness in submission seems to be the motto with them. They do not control the events, but the events control them.[5]

R. K. Narayan himself has acknowledged his indebtedness to ancient Indian sources on a number of occasions. Going by his own testimony, in his early years he had not thought the indigenous traditions of much use for his purpose.[6] Moreover, both Krishnaswami Iyer and Gnanambal, Narayan's parents, were modern-minded so far as their religious attitudes were concerned. While Narayan recalls his father's indifference in religious matters, Narayan's biographers, Susan Ram and N. Ram, write how his mother 'laugh[ed] and praise[d] his original thinking' when Laxman, Narayan's younger brother, 'removed and threw away' the sacred thread once the official ceremony was over.[7] However, in later years, the influence is indisputable. P.S. Sundaram is of the opinion that the loss of his beloved wife accounts for the reversal in his transformation from a daring rebel to a strong believer in the ideas of *karma*, rebirth, and a certain degree of fixity of existing social structures.[8]

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[4]Tiwari, "Old Wine in New Bottles: Traditionalism in R.K. Narayan's Novels" in Chhote Lal Khatri ed. *R.K. Narayan: Reflections and Re-evaluation*, New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006, p. 26.

[5]Ramteke, *R.K. Narayan and His Social Perspective*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1998, 2008, p. 98.

[6]*My Days*, Oxford: Picador, 1974, p. 98.

[7] Ram and Ram, pp. 69-70,74.

[8]Sundaram, "The Ambivalence of R.K. Narayan" in R.K. Dhawan ed. *Explorations in Modern Indo-English Fiction*, New Delhi: Bahri Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1982, p. 153.

We shall only quote two from among the numerous statements by R. K. Narayan in which he openly acknowledges the influence of ancient Indian traditions. The first one is from a talk delivered in Austin, entitled "Asuras", and survives in manuscript. The passage is as follows:

> It is inevitable that an Indian writer should be influenced by all the mass of inherited literature. In every case, the nature of good and evil is clearly presented in the personification of the [gods and the] demons; with their inevitable collapse at the end, [the rescued] performs *pooja* with flowers and incense to the picture of some god relevant to the story, set up on a pedestal. Every story invariably brings out the triumph of virtue and goodness. The victim definitely survives the tormentor, who is generally destroyed by the tempo of his own arrogance… As I have mentioned, their relevance to contemporary life can never be over-stated. I myself based a novel on the pattern of the tale of Bhasmasura…[9]

The second quotation that we are going to look at is from *My Dateless Diary*, the book that records his American travel. While recapitulating his meeting with Greta Garbo, Narayan writes:

> The talk is all about religion, mysticism, evolution, and reincarnation. G. G. asks, 'Why have we been created, why have we been made to suffer, undergo pain…? Why?'… I can only view her problem from the point of view of *Karma* and the evolution of a being from birth to birth.[10]

On closely analyzing the above excerpts, we find that Narayan considers human action and human predicament to be in a mutual relationship. That good and bad acts yield corresponding good and evil results is an ancient Indian concept that is rooted in the Indian psyche, and Narayan seems to have imbibed this, consciously or unconsciously. In the catalogue of his personal book collection, the following titles appear alongside Pablo Neruda and Virginia Woolf: *Sankaracharya*, *South Indian Studies*, *Indian Religions*, *Hindu Sculptures*, *Myth, Rituals and Attitudes*, *Great Sanskrit Plays*, and *Varivasyarahasya*,[11] thereby testifying to the fact that he had first-hand familiarity with Sanskritic traditions.

Apart from his upbringing and self-study, it must also be noted that the idea of *karma* was very much in the air in Narayan's times. The intellectual and cultural milieu of the nineteenth and

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[9] "Asuras", Box 11, *R. K. Narayan Collection* in Harry Ransom Research Center, UT, Austin.

[10] *My Dateless Diary: An American Journey*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988, 1990 reprint, p. 175.

[11] Box 15, *R. K. Narayan Collection* in Harry Ransom Research Center, UT, Austin.

twentieth centuries had seen *The Gita*, the standard text for Hindu ethics[12], gradually become a major source of inspiration with a renewed interest for its social and political message (so far overlooked due to the fascination of the Classical commentators with the mystic and metaphysical elements in the text). In the Nationalist phase, *The Gita* becomes the major source of inspiration for freedom-fighters with nationalist re-readings of the ideal of *nishkama karma* by Tilak and Aurobindo (including others such as Vinoba Bhave). Thus, it is hardly surprising that Narayan would see the world order through the lens of *karma*. To quote S. R. Ramteke:

> The doctrine of Karma has cut its deep imprint on the thoughts and behaviour of the [Indian] people… It is, therefore, little surprising that Narayan too came under its spell.[13]

Tiwari, on the other hand, goes a step further, and categorically mentions the *Gita* ideal of *nishkama karma* as having been the guiding principle in Narayan's fiction.[14] Another critic, David Atkinson, also attempts to discern in Narayan 'fundamental ideals and values long expressed in the Hindu tradition.'[15] Even the great novelist V. S. Naipaul has remarked that Narayan's India is essentially a "Hindu" India dominated by the values of *karma* and *sannyasa*.

In this context, it would be relevant to refer to Ranga Rao's ingenious contribution to the massive corpus of Narayan criticism. Rao is of the opinion that Narayan's protagonists are endowed with features and qualities which can be categorized according to the traditional classification of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. In this context, Rao even categorically mentions *The Gita* as the origin of the

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[12] There have been much speculation and debate with respect to the status of the *Gita* in the larger context of Hindu life. While one cannot object to the fact that the text *is* sectarian in origin and character, the commentarial tradition shows that it is the most catholic of all Hindu scriptures, and its influence cuts across cults and sects. On the whole, the *Gita* is considered to be on a par with the *Upanishad*s, and is included as one of the three *prasthana*s. On the social scenario, we see that the *Gita* has remainedthe most popular source of ethics to which people refer, sometimes unknowingly. In this, the *Gita* seems to have surpassed the other manuals on ethics, e.g., the *Manusamhita*. The reason behind this popularity is obvious, given the fact that the *Gita* is included in the *Mahabharata*, and therefore has been transmitted and disseminated over the ages through oral narration, performance, and translation.

[13]Ramteke, *R. K. Narayan and His Social Perspective*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2008, p. 167.

[14]Tiwari, p. 39.

[15] Atkinson, "Spiritual Growth in the Fiction of R. K. Narayan" in *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Essays on Indian Writing in English (Summer, Fall 1987), p. 26.

*guna*theory.[16] Rao argues that the humour in Narayan is distinct from that of Dickens or Chekhov in the sense that it is roused by a quite traditional device, and therefore calls his novels "*Gunas* Comedy".[17] The term coined by Rao is evidently reminiscent of the genres called Humours Comedy and Manners Comedy in British literature, and more specifically to the former, because as we shall see that Rao argues that the predominant *guna* in a person determines the major traits of his or her character, very much like the eccentricity of characters in its British counterpart being dictated by the predominance of one of the humours. *The Gita* categorically says that any *one* of the three *guna*-s, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, dominates over the other two in every single person.[18] Following this line of argument, Rao classifies the protagonists of the first five novels of Narayan as *sattvika*, and those of the post-Independence novels as *rajasika*. The protagonists of the second group, Rao points out, are 'restless, passionate, ego-driven', while those of the former have a 'unique dignity and charm' about their predicaments.[19]

Intricately related to both *karma* and the *guna* theory is the ideal of *sannyasa* (renunciation), which also finds expression in Narayan's fiction.[20] Narayan himself writes movingly of *sannyasa* in his introduction to *A Tiger for Malgudi*. The passage is as follows:

> A *sannyasi* is one who renounces everything and undergoes a complete change of personality. Why one would become a *sannyasi* is not easily answered– a personal tragedy or frustration, a deeply compelling philosophy of life, or a flash of illumination may drive one to seek a change. Whatever the cause, when one becomes a *sannyasi*, one obliterates one's past…He has freed himself from all possessions and human ties.[21]

The question of *sannyasa* also leads us to another aspect of traditional Indian life-cycle: the *varnashrama*. John Thieme and A. Hariprasanna are of the opinion that the lives of the protagonists of Narayan's novels can be interpreted with reference to the gradual growth through the stages of *brahmacharya*, *garhasthya*, *vanaprastha*, and *sannyasa*. It has been argued that a reading of

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[16]Rao, *R.K.Narayan*, Delhi: SahityaAkademi, 2004, 2005, p. 59.

[17] Ibid. p. 58.

[18] XIV.10.

[19]Rao, p. 59,63.

[20] Naipaul discussed in John Thieme, *R. K. Narayan*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007, pp. 69-72.

[21] Narayan, *A Tiger for Malgudi* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, New York: Penguin, 2009, p. 6.

Narayan's plots prove that there is no escape from this cycle, and any attempt to skip or manipulate any of the stages through one's own will cannot be successful. Numerous examples, ranging from Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* to the Master in *A Tiger for Malgudi*, can be drawn as examples in this context.[22] However, as we shall see in the subsequent chapters, the final stage, *sannyasa*, is never actually realized by Narayan's characters, even in the course of the fourfold pattern, not to speak of those who opt for it at a premature level. His ideal of *sannyasa* is thus markedly different from both the *Upanishadic* or Buddhist ideal of *sannyasa* and the *varnashramic* definition of the term. In this context, it would possibly be relevant to quote from one of Narayan's letters addressed to Indira Gandhi:

> Your achievements are unique and historic, but you never show in your person the strain of the responsibilities you actually bear; this is true detachment indeed and therein lies your greatness.[23]

The above remark testifies to the fact that Narayan's ideal of renunciation is a renunciation *within the bounds of the world*. It is not an escapist ideal. This is very much akin to the concept of *karma-sannyasa* (or *nishkama karma*) as extolled in the *Gita*. An allied concept is *yoga*, which is also used by Narayan on at least one occasion. Ina piece published in *Frontline Magazine*, Narayan is quoted having remarked:

> You must write. It's not enough to start by thinking. You become a writer by writing. It's a *yoga*.[24]

In these lines, Narayan is undoubtedly upholding the necessity of self-discipline, and using the term *yoga* in this sense. The term *yoga*, derived from the root *yuj* (to yoke, to link together), has been taken in varied senses over the centuries, and we shall discuss its usage in the *Gita* and its relation to *karma* and *sannyasa* in a subsequent chapter. For the time being, it would suffice to say that here Narayan is echoing the *Gita* concept of *abhyasa-yoga* or *buddhiyoga*.[25] It may be argued that such a

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[22]Thieme, p. 35ff.; Hariprasanna, *the world of Malgudi: A Study of R. K. Narayan's Novels*, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994, p.106 ff.

[23] Letter dated April 8, 1972; typescript, Box 19, R. K. Narayan Collection, Harry Ransom Center, UT, Austin.

[24]*Frontline*, Vol. 27, Issue 1, Jan 2-15, 2010.

[25] The term *buddhiyoga* appears in a number of instances in the *Gita*, most prominently in 2.39 and 2.49. The term *buddhi* in this context has lent itself to diverse interpretations, and in modern times, translations, ranging from Ramanuja's 'disposition of mind' to Zaehner's 'soul'. However, Zaehner himself 'prefers' Radhakrishnan's translation of *buddhiyukta* as 'one who has yoked his intelligence' over his own. (R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavadgita*

connection is far-fetched as the *Gita* employs these terms as means to spiritual upliftment and not for mundane (intellectual) achievements. One should, however, not overlook that the entire discourse of the *Gita* is aimed at nothing else but convincing Arjuna to fight, a mundane activity in itself. We shall discuss the issue of 'practical morality' further in the second chapter.

A certain adherence to Indian traditional ethos is to be found not only in the ethical attitude and content of Narayan's fiction but in the structure of his works as well. Narayan is known for subtle and skillful employment of mythical subtexts. We have already mentioned *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, which Narayan himself acknowledges to have been inspired by the legend of Bhasmasura. Other parallels that are not so categorically mentioned by the author but are nevertheless discernible, are those between *The English Teacher* and the Savitri-Satyavan legend, *The Guide* and the myth of Bhagiratha, *The Painter of Signs* and the Shantanu-Ganga myth, and more.[26]Ganeswar Mishra argues that although the novel in its present form is a colonial import in India, most of the Indian novelists follow the structure of the traditional narratives of the *Purana*or the Hindu epics, even when the plot is set in the modern world. Mishra discusses this issue with special reference to *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and shows how closely it is modeled on the *Purana* style of narration.[27]

From the muddle of quotations and critical opinions presented above, we can come to the following conclusions:

1. Ancient Indian traditions, and especially ethical ideals, had their bearing on R. K. Narayan, and he himself acknowledges it.
2. Critics are unanimous in their opinion that Narayan accepts traditional Indian ethical ideals.
3. Narayan accepts the concepts of *karma*, *yoga*, and *sannyasa*.

with a Commentary based on the Original Sources, London: OUP, 1973, p. 147.) *Yoga* in this context, as almost throughout the *Gita*, means 'discipline ' or 'method'.

[26] For a fuller discussion, see, Hariprasanna, p.133 ff; E. J. Kalinnikova, "Indian Myths and Legends in R. K. Narayan's Novels" in Atma Ram, ed. *Perspectives on R. K. Narayan*, Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1981, pp. 17-26; Dewari, D. S. *The Use of Myth in R. K. Narayan's Novels*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001.

[27] Mishra, "The Novel as *Purana*: A Study of the Form of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and *Kanthapura*" in Geoffrey Kain, ed. *R. K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Essays*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993, pp. 9-24.

4. These terms were redefined in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and Narayan's use of these terms can be associated with the dominant meanings they acquired during the Nationalist phase.
5. Narayan's fiction often follows the pattern of Hindu myths where the conflict is between oppositional forces, the divine and the demonic.

In the subsequent chapters we are going to deal with points 2 and 3 noted above. The present writer is of the opinion that despite diverse meanings of the term *karma*, Narayan's ethical viewpoint and use of the three terms mentioned above, can be explained most satisfactorily with reference to the *Bhagavadgita* and its Nationalist interpretations. In the course of our exploration, we shall see that even point 5 is also explainable with reference to the binary characters of *daiva* and *asura* as defined in the *Gita*. However, it must also be remembered that Narayan is first and foremost a novelist, and not a metaphysician. Therefore, before moving on to examine the above question(s), we should devote some space to consider to what extent the label 'traditional' fits with Narayan.

Narayan: Tradition-Modernity Binary Resolved

To begin with, let us quote a remark by Narayan found in an article in *Town and Country* magazine:

> "I don't write politics," he says, "I write pure fiction. If politics enters into it, it's because of the character or his background."

It is not the aim of the present writer to argue that Narayan was disinterested in politics, because he was certainly not so. In fact, he did write the very political novel, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, in the background of the Nationalist movement. The novel is comparable to other political novels, such as Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* or Tagore's *Home and the World*. The purpose of the above quotation is to drive home the point that Narayan approaches his material with the eye of a creative writer. One can safely substitute 'politics' in the above quotation with 'metaphysics' or 'sociology'. From his own testimony we learn that he was initially amused and then he 'began to despair' when people in an American university associated him stereotypically with Indian mysticism. Narayan writes, quite sarcastically:

> I felt myself in the same situation as Raju, the hero of my *Guide* who was mistaken for a saint and began to wonder at some point himself if a sudden effulgence had begun to show in his face.[28]

On another occasion, Narayan confesses that he had 'never read any book with the purpose of extracting any philosophical or social meaning' before he joined the department of English at the University of Texas, Austin, as a faculty member. However, that Narayan is not adverse to such interpretations of his works, is evident from his welcoming attitude towards his students who came up with new insights during class discussions and paper submissions.[29] In this context, it would perhaps be relevant to cite his response to John Lowe with respect to a possible mythical subtext in *The Guide*:

> I see what you mean, and I suppose those characters do represent those things. But I didn't think of it at the time I was writing the novel. I am Indian; any Indian writer will be shaped and influenced by the culture that produced him, and thus to some extent will be writing allegorically.[30]

Narayan's response here may sound evasive and ambivalent, but on a closer look, it appears absolutely justified. As an author he has *unconsciously* assimilated the Indian culture and its components, and he is not always aware of its bearing on his writings. Narayan allows the critic to deduce his own conclusions, thereby acknowledging the diversity of interpretations to which every literary text, and more specifically traditional Indian texts can be subjected to. To take the most common example, the *Mahabharata* has generated innumerable responses and interpretations over the centuries, on allegorical, religious, social, and literary levels. Keeping in mind this pertinent aspect, MakarandParanjape has rightly called Narayan a '*non-assertive* traditionalist' (emphasis mine) as opposed to Raja Rao, who has explicitly used and expressed his endorsement of Hindu doctrines through his fiction. Paranjape argues that 'Naipaul exaggerates' when he describes Narayan's fictional world as "*intensely* Hindu" (emphasis mine).[31]

One more instance where we find Narayan prioritizing plot or fiction over metaphysics or philosophy is in his letter to Somerset Maugham praising the latter's *Razor's Edge*:

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[28] Narayan, "Reluctant Guru" in *A Writer's Nightmare: Selected Essays 1958-88*, pp. 104-5.

[29]Untitled Typescript, Box 16, HRC, UT, Austin.

[30] Lowe, "A Meeting in Malgudi: A Conversation with R.K. Narayan" in Kain, p.183.

[31]Paranjape, ""The Reluctant Guru": R. K. Narayan and *The Guide*", makarand.com/acad/TheReluctantGuru.htm [Accessed 05/10/2014].

> You have conveyed the essence of Vedanta philosophy in absolutely concrete practical terms without verbiage and mystification… I like this book not only for its Indian touch but also for your general method of characterization and narration which appear to me unique…[32]

In the same letter, Narayan confesses that his new novel, *The English Teacher*,'deals with psychic development, bordering on Yoga' but he simultaneously admits that Yoga in this novel is nothing more than an 'idea' and he has 'not made it very emphatic'.[33]

Now that we know that Narayan is not a 'metaphysician' and inculcation of philosophical ideas is not his primary concern, we may turn to the much-debated tradition vs. modernity binary in his fiction. In a typescript preserved in Austin, Narayan speaks of the possible dangers of emulating ancient traditions blindly. The passage runs as follows:

> Psychologically the prototypes are far removed from the characters of the present day: it'll look grotesque to have a perfect man and warrior like Rama. He must have modern sensibility for a reader. So he's to be a man who is puzzled and helpless– until driven by despair and desperation to master enough strength and support to kill his enemy– a modern Ravana, unscrupulous and egoistic and in some ways to be admired too.[34]

Thus we find that R. K. Narayan's adherence and indebtedness to traditional narrative sources and patterns are mingled with a modern sensibility, and refined not only by his reading of world literature, but also by his keen observation of modern lifestyle and changing values. There is to be found no "self-conscious nostalgia" for the past in Narayan.[35] In a scathing criticism of Gandhi's regressive ideals, Narayan says:

> I didn't much care for some of the things he preached. I didn't believe in his handspinning and anti-industrialization… Gandhi… was opposed to all modernization of the surroundings. He never believed in modern sanitary arrangements, the need for them. He said, "Poor people can't afford it."[36]

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[32] Undated Letter (12/5/45 written hazily in red ink), Typescript, Box 19, *R. K. Narayan Collection* in Harry Ransom Research Center, UT, Austin.

[33] Ibid.

[34]Untitled typescript, Box 16, Harry Ransom Center, UT, Austin.

[35] "Narayan of Malgudi: 50 Years of Storytelling for the Millions", Author unknown, MS-2987, Box 12, *R. K. Narayan Collection* in Harry Ransom Research Center, UT, Austin.

[36] Ibid.

Again, Narayan didn’t seem to care much even for historical research about ancient India. In a satirical piece entitled “The Cold Fruit”, he writes humorously that ‘Avvaiyar existed sometime within the last ten thousand years’, and warns his readers that ‘such a wilderness of research and scholarship’ is pointless and insipid. Narayan’s ‘traditonalism’, if we can use that term, is not a rigid one. He seeks to strike a balance between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’, and the two often reside together in his fiction after the initial conflict. Sometimes, the conflict is not that overt, either. For example, Chandra Chatterjee points out that in his first novel, *Swami and Friends*, though the Nationalist movement is alluded to, and the colonizer-colonized encounter comes up in a number of forms, ‘the confrontation with British rule is never allowed to assume gigantic properties’ and the ‘stress is on normalcy in daily life’.[37] Not all of Chatterjee’s observations on the East-West encounter in Narayan are tenable, and we shall discuss those later in this chapter. For the time being, it would suffice to say that Narayan’s Malgudi is a world of reconciliation. Even in *The Vendor of Sweets*,which highlights the tradition-modernity or East-West binary through a father-son conflict does not develop the issue into a full-fledged clash but resolves the conflict by Jagan’s retirement from active life, though his retention of his ‘accounts book’ is evidence enough to surmise that Jagan is not going to end his worldly ties completely, thereby throwing open the door for a future reconciliation.

Related to the question of tradition and modernity are also the issues of East-West encounter and language. The following section is reserved for them.

Tradition, Modernity, and the Postcolonial

The first problem that one faces while dealing with the East-West theme in Narayan is: Is everything ‘traditional’ a legacy of our pre-colonial past? And is everything modern necessarily a Western import? Generally there is a tendency to dub the institutions of family (with its constituent parts, e.g., marriage), religious faith, etc., as traditional, and the ideal of ‘individualism’ or ‘free will’ as Western. Postcolonial theorists, both Indian and non-Indian, have dealt with this question, and those from the earlier generation agree to this facile conclusion. One famous example is Frantz Fanon who describes ‘individualism’ as a discourse detrimental to the social fabric and predicts it as the first to

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[37]Chatterjee, *Surviving Colonialism: A Study of R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, V. S. Naipual*, New Delhi: Radha Publications, 2000, p. 65.

disappear on the wake of Nationalist consciousness.[38] However, one is left to ponder if 'individualism' had not become entrenched in Indian society way back in the ancient period when people like Buddha or Mahavira renounced the world in defiance of the *ashrama* system? Moreover, what kind of 'modern' sensibility can be expected from a character like the Christian fanatic Mr. Ebenezer mentioned in *Swami and Friends*, who routinely denigrates the Hindu god Krishna and emotionally seeks refuge in Jesus?[39] In fact, GauriViswanathan writes that in its early phase English education in India was a confused process that often went hand-in-hand with evangelical activity, with no proper guideline for purely 'literary' studies, sometimes upholding British culture and values which were given Classical prestige, coupled with a certain disdain for Indian indigenous traditions. To quote from her work:

> As late as the 1860s, the 'literary curriculum' in British educational establishments remained polarized around classical studies for the upper classes and religious studies for the lower. As for what is now known as the subject of English literature, the British educational system had no firm place for it until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the challenge posed by the middle classes to the existing structure resulted in the creation of alternative institutions devoted to 'modern' studies.[40]

Thus we know that whatever is 'British' or 'colonial' is not 'modern'. The traditional/spiritual India vs the modern/pragmatic/materialist West has its own historiography, which, however, is beyond the scope of the present work. It would suffice to say that this binary can also be traced back to an Orientalist, and therefore, colonial myth, and has no connection with the real India where tradition and modernity reside together in harmony, *without defining itself in opposition to a colonial past*. Ashish Nandy makes an important observation in his now famous book, *The Intimate Enemy*, which is worth quoting in this context:

> India is not non-West; it is India. Outside the small section of Indians who were once exposed to the full thrust of colonialism and are now heirs to the colonial memory, the ordinary Indian has no reason to see himself as a counterplayer or an antithesis of the Western man. The imposed burden to be perfectly non-Western only constricts his, the everyday Indian's cultural self… The new responsibility forces him to

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[38] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1963, p. 12.

[39] *Swami and Friends*, p. 6-7.

[40] Viswanathan, "The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India" in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, ed., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, 2003, p. 434.

stress only those parts of his culture which are recessive in the West and to underplay both those which his culture shares with the West and those which remain undefined by the West.[41]

Narayan's Malgudi, the present writer thinks, fits aptly with this idea of an India that is complete in itself. Chandra Chatterjee also claims that in Narayan's fiction 'the self sufficiency of the Indian world… need not touch upon or collide with the west at all.'[42] However, Chatterjee goes a step further and reads into the plots of Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*, a 'divide' between the colonial and the indigenous modes of being, a never-reconcilable conflict which gradually results in the effacement of the colonial and the assertion of the traditional "Hindu" view of life. Such an argument seems to be exaggerated and far-fetched, because the West is a reality which lives on in India, and therefore, in Malgudi. The gradual urbanization of Malgudi and the research interests of Marco in ancient Indian art in *The Guide*, the United Nations Project fellow Dr. Rann in *Talkative Man*, the whole endeavor behind the journal *The Banner* in *Mr. Sampath*, are also facets of colonial legacy, and they are neither necessarily negative nor too shockingly 'modern' to hurt Indian sensibilities. These 'colonial' elements seem to have been completely assimilated into Indian life. Narayan's characters come from the Indian middle class which itself is an effect of British colonialism. A. N. Kaul writes:

The mission school boys, the Bachelor of Arts, the English Teacher, the printers and editors of English weeklies, the railway stall-holder and guide, the poet who composes an epic on Lord Krishna's life in strict monosyllabic English verse…, even a comic Gandhian satyagrahi such as the aging hero of *The Vendor of Sweets*, not to mention the vast army of English-knowing clerks in the background- these would simply not have come into existence… except for the impact of the British…these [characters] are types thrown up by the mad, comic mixing of the East and the West; and the comedy lies in the mixture.[43]

But then the comedy is not caustic but sympathetic. For one moment, the readers do not feel the inner conflicts of the characters as a prominent East-West encounter. Borrowing T. Vijay Kumar's definition of the Indian postcolonial and applying it to Narayan's Malgudi, we may say that Malgudi

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[41]*The Intimate Enemy* in Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, New Delhi: OUP, 1998, 2005, p.73.

[42]Ibid, p. 88.

[43]Kaul, "R. K. Narayan and the East-West Theme" in Meenakshi Mukherjee, ed., *Considerations*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1977, p. 53.

‘incorporates the West, does not consider the cultural conflict between the East and the West as the central conflict of its life, and above all decides its own priorities and draws up its own agendas.’[44]

As Kaul hints in the above quotation, and as we too have peripherally mentioned before, the renewed interest in indigenous literatures and traditions that was felt during the nineteenth century was in itself an effect of the colonial education system. Rammohan Roy, BankimchandraChatterjee, IswarchandraVidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, and the other luminaries of the time never envisaged a blind regression to a pre-colonial past, and had a genuine space for the West in their literary, sociological, and philosophical frameworks. All the scholars, activists, reformers, and freedom fighters of the time were well versed in both Western and Eastern traditions, and looked forward to a synthesis of the two in the future of India. These ideas lived on, and the British legal system still has its bearing on the Indian constitution. The point that the present writer is trying to make here is that Indians learned to see their own traditions in a new light owing to British influence. The new reformist and Nationalist interpretations of the Hindu scriptures, and especially of the *Gita*, would not have seen the light of day, without the advent of Western scholarship. It can be argued that the early phases of Indological research were politically motivated and often mired in a racist agenda, but it must be acknowledged that it taught Indian scholars themselves to review their own repertoire. Indian scholars often followed an eclectic methodology, thereby giving the scriptures and traditions new symbolic and sometimes literal meanings, relevant for the times. The terms *yoga*, *karma*, *sannyasa*, *varna*, *dharma*, and many others found a new significance in the writings of the Indian scholars of this time. An added impetus was also to represent India before the West, as is evident from the trips of Vivekananda, Tagore, and many others to America and the rest of the world.

It is also interesting to note that many of these authors were bilingual, or even multi-lingual, and wrote excellent English. Recent compilations of Tagore’s English works by Sisir Das run a little over 4000 pages, the first works of both Bankim and MadhusudanDutt were in English, and Vivekananda delivered innumerable speeches in the language, not to speak of Gandhi and Aurobindo who had spent substantial parts of their lives in English-speaking countries and devoted much of their time to writing in English. English writing by Indians had a steady growth and its

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[44] T. Vijay Kumar, “Post-colonial or Postcolonial? Re-locating the Hyphen” in Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee, ed., *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, Shimla: IIAS, 1996, p. 199.

value is now recognized globally. Debates regarding the status of English in postcolonial discourse are rich and variegated, but it would suffice here to mention that English was assimilated into the Nationalist rhetoric and not seen as alien. On a more domestic level, it became the language of the intelligentsia, and there was never a dearth of competent authors writing in English. Thus English gained an iconic status of the language of the erudite, educated middle class. Additionally, English ensured a larger, worldwide audience and readership, and gave the opportunity to reach out to the colonizer.[45]

To go back to Narayan, the present writer feels that he, too, is a child of the nineteenth and twentieth century Indian Renaissance, and subscribes, consciously or unconsciously, to the above framework. As we have discussed above, sometimes he is quite conscious of his use of ideas, though he never prioritizes that. In the subsequent chapters we shall focus on the new interpretations of the *Gita* and especially its *karmayoga*doctrine and try to analyze Narayan's ethical position vis-à-vis the former. In the preceding pages, we summarized the life and times of Narayan, which was a necessary prelude to delve into our actual study. As regards Narayan's use of English, the present writer has to say that in Narayan's works the language sits comfortably with the Indian theme. As we shall move on with our study, we shall see that Narayan's target reader is the Western reader, he employs a calculated idiom, and is constantly experimenting with the possibilities of the language. Without any scruples or pretensions, he admits that it was a 'blessing' to have 'professors from English universities to teach literature', and also confesses rather candidly:

> I was not aware that I was writing in a foreign language. All these books… they've influenced me and they're in English. I could write more easily in English and I was fascinated with the London literary life of those days…[46]

Such frank remarks in favour of English on the part of Narayan drew strong criticisms from various quarters, most notably from the Kannada writer 'Masti' VenkateshaIyengar.[47] However, it would be

[45] This is not to say that there was *no* resistance to Englishin India. One of the most famous instances of resistance to the English language comes from none other than Gandhi, who himself had mastered the language to an extent that even Englishmen envied (Rita Kothari, *Translating India*, New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 83).

[46] Narayan quoted in "Narayan of Malgudi: 50 Years of Storytelling for the Millions", Author unknown, MS-2987, Box 12, *R. K. Narayan Collection* in Harry Ransom Research Center, UT, Austin.

[47] Susan Ram and N. Ram, *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*, New Delhi: Viking, 1996, p. 352-3.

wrong to think Narayan snobbish because from our above discussion we have seen how the East and the West were blended in his being. And it is in this context, we would like to conclude that the postcolonial framework is not a fully satisfactory or sufficient paradigm for dealing with Indian English literature, not to speak of Narayan alone. Postcolonial theory has its natural limits, just as we have seen that the East-West theme or the metaphysical ideas are not the sole elements in Narayan. I would like to wind up this section with a quotation from G. J. V. Prasad:

> Indian English writers live, as do other Indian writers, in the same continuum of pulls and pressures, of constant conflicts and temporary resolutions that have determined Indian life for ages…The fact that I write in English does not make me a product solely of the British colonial encounter, my identity cannot be read in terms of post-colonialism only.[48]

The Rediscovery of the *Gita*[49]

As we have mentioned earlier, the present work aims at reading R. K. Narayan's ethical vision in the light of the doctrine of *karma* as expressed in the *Gita*. In the previous pages, we have made an attempt to locate Narayan in the context of the nineteenth-century Indian Renaissance, and have also referred to the *Gita* and its centrality in the reformulation of Hindu ethics during the said period. However, without a few words on the rediscovery of the *Gita* during this period, our purpose would remain incomplete.

While the *Gita* was known, read, revered and commented on throughout the ages,[50] the colonial encounter gave a new impetus to the message of the text. Western interest in the *Gita* and modern scholarship around the text were sparked by Charles Wilkins's 1785 translation entitled *The Bhagavat-Geeta*. The translation garnered a slow but steady acclaim and popularity in the West, and influenced the philosophies of Romantics and Transcendentalists such as Robert Southey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Secondary translations of Wilkins's English version also appeared in German and French. Missionaries also acquired considerable familiarity with the text over the ages and employed their knowledge for evangelical work. Though early Orientalists

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[48] Prasad, "Reply-paid Post-colonialism: The Language of Indian English Fiction" in Trivedi and Mukherjee, p. 188-191

[49] In this section, I have drawn primarily on the observations of Eric J. Sharpe in *The Universal Gita*, London: Duckworth, 1985

[50] For a long list of ancient and medieval *Gita* commentaries, see Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 2, London: Cambridge University Press, 1952, p. 437 ff.

such as A. A. Macdonell made only passing references to the *Gita*, and Max Muller's preference lay explicitly with the *Veda*s and the *Upanishad*s, the text did retain its popularity, and in 1885, a century after Wilkins's appeared Sir Edwin Arnold's verse translation, *The Song Celestial*, not only the most celebrated English translation of the *Gita* in the nineteenth century, but also a version that inspired Mahatma Gandhi.

In these hundred years, however, the *Gita* did not attain the same degree of popularity in India. Being a Sanskrit text, first-hand familiarity with the text was limited to the learned few, and popular religion generally upheld the narrative portions of the *Mahabharata* and the*Purana*s. It is important to note that the devotees of Krishna, the god to whom the *Gita* is attributed, on the whole drew on the 'lover' aspect of their deity. Medieval translations and commentaries of the *Gita* do exist (the most famous are those by Dnyanesvara Maharaja in Marathi and MadhavaPanikkar in Malayalam), but are mostly condensed and composed from a sectarian point of view, thereby preventing a wider currency, which the epics andthe *Puranas*did acquire. Indians during this point of time had no English education, and therefore, the English translations were also inaccessible to them.

The first recorded use of the *karma* doctrine of the *Gita* for the purpose of social reform was made by Ram Mohun Roy in 1820 in *A Second Conference between an advocate for, and an opponent of, the practice of burning widows alive*. Roy challenged the notion that widows attain everlasting happiness in the afterlife by burning themselves alive on the pyre of their husbands, by referring to the ideal of *nishkama karma*. In the course of his argument, Roy refers to the *Gita* as 'the essence of all Shastrus" and says that the learned are not unfamiliar with either the book or its commentaries. Eric J. Sharpe points out that popular education had not begun in 1820 and Roy was *not* addressing the 'masses' but 'the Brahmins on the one hand and the British administrators on the other'.[51]

Following the introduction of English education, literacy spread among the masses, and eventually led to the nineteenth-century 'Renaissance'. Initially, English-educated Indians looked down upon Hindu beliefs and customs, but gradually the scenario changed. With the establishment of the AryaSamaj and the Theosophical Society in 1875, the 'Renaissance' proper is thought to begin.[52]

[51] Sharpe, p. 13.

[52] Ibid., p. 68.

The Theosophical Society newly upheld the Gita as the Bible of Hinduism, and since the 1880s the text steadily rose in popularity. To quote from Sharpe:

> … after 1900 with the force of an avalanche, the Gita came to occupy a position… as the undisputed statement of all that is most central and most important in the Hindu world of ideas. That this movement more or less coincided with the period during which Swami Vivekananda was acknowledged as Hinduism's major world spokesman… is not without interest. For just as Vivekananda reduced Hinduism to a set of relatively simple, though all-embracing, principles, so there emerged a Scripture which possessed those same qualities of drama, simplicity and comprehensive scope. That scripture was the Gita.[53]

Apart from Vivekananda, as we have noted before, figures who upheld the *Gita* included Bankim, Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi, and others. The interpretation of the *Gita* by these leaders was often nourished by their incisive knowledge of Western canons. Writing about Bankim, Ajit Ray argues that 'the methods of Western philosophy shaped his approach towards religion, and he tried to apply a scientific, critical, and rational method' while dealing with Hinduism.[54] Again, both Gandhi and Aurobindo were introduced to the *Gita* through English translations, and Sharpe's analysis shows that doctrines of the Theosophical society have left prominent imprints on Gandhi's own interpretation of the text.[55]Thus, the *Gita* (along with the *karma* doctrine) as it was made available to the people of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was itself, to borrow a term from post-structuralism, a 'discursive' construct. We shall have more to say about the disjunction between the canonical and the modern interpretations of the *Gita* in the next chapter; here it would suffice to say that the tradition of *Gita* interpretation of this period was also an expression of the blend between the East and the West.

The Plan of the Present Work

Now that we have fairly summed up both Narayan's ethical standpoint and the centrality of the *Gita* in the nineteenth and twentieth-century socio-political scenario, we may have a summary view of what is going to follow in the subsequent pages.

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[53] Ibid., p. 69.

[54] Ray, "Bankim Chandra Chatterji's New Hinduism and the *Bhagavadgita*" in Robert N. Minor, ed., *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986, p. 35.

[55]Sharpe, p. 68, 103 ff.

As the title of the work suggests, this is a study of Narayan’s ethical vision vis-à-vis three doctrines, all laid down in the *Gita*- *karma*, *sannyasa*, and *lokasangraha*. The first chapter, entitled “The Theory of Karma: Its Origin, Evolution, and Standardization”, delineates the diverse definitions and implications of these terms through the tangled web of different sects, doctrines, and ages. This chapter is entirely devoted to the standardization of the *karma* doctrine and the redefinition of the same in the nineteenth century. A necessary prelude to our main thesis, this chapter has very little to say specifically about R. K. Narayan, but is nevertheless indispensable.

In the second chapter, entitled “*Karma* and Daily Life”, the general human predicament of the characters of Malgudi is discussed with respect to the concept of *karma*. Reserving the *lokasangraha* and *sannyasa* aspects for subsequent chapters, this chapter focuses on the novels wherein the protagonist is not made to transgress the given precincts. Krishna in *The English Teacher*, Sampath and Srinivas in *Mr. Sampath*, Vasu and Nataraj in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, and Nagaraj of *The World of Nagaraj*, are some who simply live out their lives in their own microcosmic worlds. Our analysis shows that Krishna and Nagaraj, with all his limitations, may be called Narayan's version of the *nitya-sannyasin* who approaches his day-to-day problems with a studied nonchalance, while the others are possibly foils to the same ideal.

The prime motive of the third chapter, “Sannyasa: A Study of the Theme of Renunciation in R. K. Narayan’s Novels” is to study how close the theme of renunciation in Narayan’s fiction comes to the *Gita* ideal of *karma-sannyasa*. Narayan’s own ideal of *sannyasa* as presented in his introduction to *A Tiger for Malgudi* has been repeated as a starting point for the discussion, and attempts have been made to explore the variegated aspects of the ideal in his novels. *The Guide* and *The Bachelor of Arts* are the two other novels which are dealt with in this chapter.

If it is to be established that Narayan’s social vision is coloured by the doctrine of *karma*, then an assessment of Narayan’s female characters from this aspect becomes absolutely essential. Novels such as *The Dark Room*, *The Painter of Signs*, *Talkative Man*, and others present both traditional and rebellious or liberated female characters, but the destiny of both finally turn out to be retrogressive. Is Narayan’s attitude in this case also related to the *Gita* doctrine of *karma*? This is the question that has been explored in the fourth chapter, entitled “Women and *Karma*”. The conclusion is that while it is difficult to draw any direct connection between the two, given the fact that the *Gita* is largely silent

about women's duties, a remote connection may be thought of via the Nationalist interpretations, especially that of Gandhi.

The last chapter, "Lokasangraha and Service to the Nation", discusses the Nationalist implications of both the ideas of *karma* and *sannyasa*, and their reflections in Narayan's fiction. The Nationalist backdrop is prominent in *Waiting for the Mahatma.* This chapter focuses more on the Gandhian reading of the *Gita* and approaches *Waiting for the Mahatma* from this perspective. A section of this chapter is also reserved for a study of *The Vendor of Sweets*.

The concluding chapter serves as a defense of the approach adopted in the chapters, and takes into account a few aspects of R. K. Narayan which have not been addressed in the chapters. Simultaneously, the conclusion also offers some possible new directions which the present work could open up.

I

The Theory of *Karma*: Its Origin, Evolution and Standardization

As we have stated in the introductory chapter, our hypothesis is that Narayan's ethical standpoint is best explained with reference to the *Gita* view of *karma*. The present chapter is meant for a brief overview of the origin, evolution, and standardization of the concept with special reference to the *Bhagavadgita*. As noted in the introduction, the concept of karma has its own historiography and therefore it is very important to chalk out the exact sense in which the present writer is going to apply it. However, it would make more sense to begin with some samples from Narayan's work.

To begin with, let us remark on a "Note to a Friend Sunk in Grief After His Wife's Death." Narayan writes:

> Death is only a transition, a shedding of the physical form composed of matter of this earth. The physical body obeys the laws of this earth and functions accordingly and resolves itself into its original components; but the personality that resides in it is not to be identified with its physical vehicle. This personality has always existed, in other forms and other planes…[1]

Even a very superficial reading of the above passage would remind the sensitive reader of a few portions of the *Bhagavadgita*. Here we shall take only two that are exemplary. The first one (II.12-13) runs as follows:

> Never was there a time when I was not, nor you, nor yet these princes, nor will there be a time when we shall cease to be,- all of us hereafter. Just as in this body the embodied [self] must pass through childhood, youth, and old age, so too [at death] will it assume another body: in this a thoughtful man is not perplexed.[2]

The second one (II. 22) reads:

> As a man casts off his worn-out clothes and takes on other new ones, so does the embodied [self] cast off its worn-out bodies and enters other new ones.[3]

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[1] Typescript, Box 23, "R. K. Narayan Collection", Harry Ransom Research Center, UT, Austin.

[2] Zaehner, p. 125.

[3] Ibid., p. 133.

The doctrine of the immortality of the *atman* is expressed at the very outset of the *Bhagavadgita* and it is around this concept that the text builds on its ethical doctrine of *karma*. As we have seen in the introductory chapter, Narayan accepts the theory of *karma*, and from the passage quoted at the outset of this chapter, we know that Narayan subscribes to this particular doctrine of the immortality of the *atman*, as well.

Before moving on to a more detailed study of Narayan's ethical standpoint with reference to the *Gita*, it would be appropriate to delineate the doctrine of *karma* itself. The following pages of this chapter are devoted to that.

Origin and Evolution of "Karma"

The doctrine of *karma* as expressed in the *Gita* has its own history. In the Vedas one encounters the concept of *Rita*, etymologically 'Law' or 'Order'[4], which, according to Illa Ravi, 'stands for the unerring order found in the course of the natural phenomena… because of which gods and men live in harmony.'[5] Another allied concept is *dharma* which has been of paramount significance in Classical Hinduism. Illa Ravi classifies the usage of this term under 6 broad heads, which are as follows: (i) the law of a thing's being, (ii) moral order, (iii) scriptural duty, (iv) object of pursuit, (v) religion, and (vi) righteousness.[6]The vision of the 'world order' or 'harmony' that is embedded in the concept of *dharma* gave rise to the eschatological belief that good and bad acts are paid accordingly after death in the form of heavenly life or higher birth and punishment in hell or a lower birth respectively, thus paving the way for the doctrine of *karma*.

The term *karma* is derived from the root *kr* (to do, to act, to make, etc.) and its origin is embedded in the ancient belief that the offerings made to the gods and the service rendered by them are reciprocal. The earliest reference to the *karma* doctrine is to be found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad* (IV. 4. 5). The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (VI. 11-12) describes God as *karmadhyakshas* (the ordainer of all deeds) but one who simultaneously retains the state of inaction: *nishkriyanam*, thus paving the way for a theistic interpretation of the doctrine, and anticipating the *Gita*.

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[4] Hermann Oldenberg, *The Religion of the Veda*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993 rprnt, p. 101.

[5] Ravi, *Foundations of Indian Ethics: With Special Reference to Manu Smrti, Jaimini Sutras and Bhagavad-Gita*, New Delhi: Kaveri Books, 2002, p. 19-20.

[6] Ibid., p. 56.

We must keep in mind that neither does the term carry the same meaning for all the branches of Indian philosophy nor does the concept gain equal weight in all. For instance, in the allied systems of *Nyaya* and *Vaisesika*, the term *karma* does not have an *ethical* purport.[7] In the *Yoga* system, on the other hand, *karma* has a strong ethical purport. According to this system, *karma* is of two kinds: mental (*manasa*) and physical (*vahya*). The physical acts are again classified into *krishna* (black), *sukla* (white), *suklakrishna* (black and white) and *asuklakrishna* (neither black nor white), according to the relative proportion of merit and sin attached to each. The last of these, which are neither black nor white (i.e., generate neither merit nor sin), are actually the activities performed by 'those who have renounced everything, whose affections have been destroyed and whose present body is the last one they will have'.[8] These people are the *karma-sannyasin*s, i.e., those who have renounced action, or risen above its fruits. This concept of 'renunciation of action' is highly significant for our study as it is given a pivotal importance in the *Bhagavadgita*. The *Jaina* theory of *karma* also comes very close to *Yoga* theory, and probably had a bearing on the latter.[9]

The *Mimamsa* school classifies *karma* into *laukika* (secular) and *shastrika* (scriptural), which are of empirical and non-empirical import respectively. The *shastrika karma*s are further subdivided into *kamya* and *nityanaimittika karma*s. The former are motivated by desire to achieve a fruit, e.g., son, wealth, etc. The second type is further classified into *nitya* and *naimittika karma*s. While both are obligatory actions prescribed by the scriptures, the former is to be performed on a daily basis (e.g., daily prayer), the latter is to be performed when occasion arises (e.g., bathing in the Ganga during an eclipse).[10] Largely accepting the *Mimamsaka* classification, the Vedantists also speak of *nitya*, *naimittika*, *kamya*, *nishiddha*, *prayaschitta* (atonement for sins), and *upasana* (prayer).[11]

Manusmrti, the major manual of Hindu law, is divided into prescriptions regarding duties meant for different castes, different *ashrama*s, and for the two different genders, men and women. Apart from the caste-specific duties, which the *Gita* also upholds, another important aspect of Manu that is

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[7]*Vaisesika Sutra*s (I. 1. 4)

[8] S. N. Dasgupta, *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion*, London: Kegan Paul, 1924, p. 103.

[9]T. G. Kalghatgi, "The Doctrine of Karma in Jaina Philosophy" in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 15, No. ¾ (Jul.-Oct., 1965), p. 230, 233.

[10]Maitra, pp. 19-20.

[11]*Vedantasara*, I. 6-14.

relevant for our study is his emphasis on the relation between desire and action. To quote from the text:

> To be motivated by desire is not commended, but it is impossible here to be free from desire; for it is desire that prompts vedic study and the performance of vedic rites… Nowhere in this world do we see any activity done by a man free from desire; for whatever at all a man do, it is the work of someone who desired it. By engaging in them properly, a man attains the world of the immortals and, in this world, obtains all his desires just as he intended.[12]

Having had a brief overview of the origin of the term *karma* and its reception in different philosophical systems, we may now summarize the diverse attitudes associated with the concept under the following heads:

(i) Action bears fruit, and therefore it is the root cause of bondage.

(ii) Desire motivates us to act, but action with desire for reward is not always condonable. The *Mimamsaka*s, especially, maintain that scriptural duties should be performed not for any reward but simply *because they have been ordained by the Vedas.*

(iii) Good action leads to happiness but not liberation from bondage. Liberation can be obtained only by abstinence from action, thereby stopping the generation of its fruits. Thus, *sannyasa* or renunciation of actions is prescribed in schools like Jainism and Buddhism. In this context, mention may be made of Patanjali who knew of ascetics who decried action and wanted their followers to shun action in order to avoid sin.[13] The *Gita* itself mentions people who used to refrain from action.[14]

(iv) Apart from a few eternal virtues, action is *not* universal but differs according to one's birth, social position, gender and phase of life.

(v) There is no concept of 'social welfare' in the true sense, in the early stages of the orthodox philosophical systems. While Buddhism, Jainism and the later forms of *Nyaya-Vaisesika* and Vedanta speak a lot about social uplift, there is hardly any such concept embedded in either Manu or

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[12] Patrick Olivelle, *The Law Code of Manu*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 23.

[13] A. L. Basham, *History and Doctrines of the Ajivikas: A Vanished Indian Religion*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002 rprnt, p. 79.

[14] XVIII. 3.

the original aphorisms of the systems.[15] Apparently, it was left for the *Gita* to introduce the ideal through the concept of *lokasangraha*.

Thus we have a synoptic view of the milieu in which the *Gita* originated and reformulated the theory of *karma*. In this context, it would be interesting to take a glance at a few modern Indologists who have dealt with the nature of *Gita* ethics in relation to current philosophical ideas. Karl H. Potter advocates a fresh classification of the Indian philosophical systems on the basis of their attitude towards human life, and divides them into 'path philosophy' and 'speculative philosophy'; Potter places the *Gita* in the first category, because of its pragmatic approach towards ethical issues.[16] Second, Kalidas Bhattacharya has argued that in almost all the philosophical systems, plurality and separate status of the individual are accepted. The doctrine that one's own *karma* decides one's future is actually an acknowledgment of free will and individuality.[17] The same idea is echoed by A. R. Wadia who argues that while one's present predicament is determined by one's past *karma*, 'it is left to him to build up his new *karma* within the limits of his environment.'[18]

Lastly, the present writer would like to mention an important observation by A. K. Ramanujan in his influential essay, "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?". Borrowing a term from linguistics, Ramanujan argues that in ancient Indian culture, 'the context-sensitive kind ofrule is the preferred formulation.'[19]Ramanujan argues that ancient Indian writings always presuppose a particular context before introducing a topic, be it a fact, a story, or an injunction, and his examples range from grammar to legal works.In order to substantiate his argument, Ramanujan also cites a story from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* where the same letter 'da' uttered by Prajapati is interpreted differently by the gods, the demons, and the human beings, each interpretation fitting to the context of the

[15]See Maitra, pp. 8-9 for a discussion of this issue.

[16] Potter, "A Fresh Classification of India's Philosophical Systems" in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Nov., 1961), pp. 27-9.

[17]Bhattacharya, "The Status of the Individual in Indian Philosophy" in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Jul., 1964), pp. 131-44.

[18]Wadia, "Philosophical Implications of the Doctrine of Karma" in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Apr., 1965), pp. 151).

[19] Ramanujan, "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking" in *Contributions to Indian sociology* (n.s.) 23, 1 (1989) SAGE Publications New Delhi/Newbury Park/London, http://cis.sagepub.com [Accessed 16/09/2014].

particular nature of the set of creatures. Thus, what could have been a ‘universal’ message for all creatures in the world generates different ‘context-sensitive’ meanings. To take another example, Ramanujan draws our attention to Manu’s and Gautama’s classification of the situations under which an ‘untruth’ has been uttered, and the varying degrees of sin they have attached to each. Even the term *dharma* is not free of context, and in the *Mahabharata* it has been classified into *ashramadharma*, *svadharma*, *apaddharma*, and more, so much so that Ramanujan concludes:

> There is not much left of anabsolute or common (*sadharana*) *dharma* which the texts speak of, if at all, as a last and not as a first resort. They seem to say, if you fit no contexts or conditions, which is unlikely, fall back on the universal.

However, Ramanujan notices that a counter-move towards a ‘context-free’ worldview is also prevalent in Indian tradition from very early times. This attempt, according to Ramanujan, is especially prominent in ‘*rasa*’ in aesthetics, *moksha* in the 'aims of life', *sannyasa* in the life-stages, *sphota* in semantics, and *bhakti* in religion’. Ramanujan elaborates:

> Bhakti defies all contextual structures: every pigeonhole of caste, ritual, gender, appropriate clothing and custom, stage of life, the whole system of homo hierarchicus ('everything in its place') is the target of its irony.

The *Gita* is a product of the *bhakti* tradition and therefore it betrays an attempt to break free of context. However, it is not entirely successful in the attempt, and seeks to strike a compromise between the ‘context-specific’ and ‘context-free’. The *Gita* is syncretic in character not simply because it uses and appropriates already existing ideas current in the *Upanishads*, the *Sankhya* and *Yoga* schools (which were probably in their pre-Classical form during that period) and to some extent Buddhism (though this is open to doubt), but also owing to the fact that it has to make reservations for both the orthodox and the revolutionary. With this frame in mind, we may now turn to analyze the *karma* doctrine as found in the *Gita*.

The *Bhagavadgita* and *Karma*

The *Bhagavadgita* opens with a dramatic setting in which the warrior Arjuna is despondent at the thought of killing his kin and ready to withdraw from battle. The conversation begins when he voices his intention of abstaining from fight and his friend and charioteer Krishna urges him to reconsider his decision. In reply to Arjuna’s argument that killing one’s kin is sinful, Krishna states

the distinction between the body (*deha*) and its possessor (*dehin*), and argues that while the former is perishable the latter is eternal, and therefore, there is no cause for grief. Then he goes on to remind him of his *svadharma*, which literally means 'own duty', and has been translated by R. C. Zaehner as 'caste-duty'.[20] Finally, Krishna utters the message of 'disinterested action':

> [But] work alone is *your* proper business, never the fruits [it may produce]: let not your motive be the fruit of works nor your attachment to [mere] worklessness.[21]

However, such an assertion is immediately followed by an apparently contradictory praise of the *yoga* of "contemplation" (Zaehner's translation). This confuses the listener who asks why he should fight at all if contemplation is better than action. In reply, Krishna reveals that there are two types of paths, meant for two different kinds of aspirants:

> For men of theory the spiritual exercise of wisdom, for men of action the spiritual exercise through works.[22]

This passage is followed by a rather strong endorsement of action over inaction, and also the futility of the thought that work is avoidable. Krishna also uses sacrificial imagery as an analogy to disinterested action in order to uphold its sanctity, and refers to people like Janaka who had attained liberation through the path of action. Finally, Krishna delivers his message of human welfare or *lokasangraha*, pointing out that even after self-realization one should keep working desirelessly:

> If again you consider the welfare [and coherence] of the world, then you should work [and act]. Whatever the noblest does, that too will others do: the standard that he sets all the world will follow.[23]

He goes a step further and describes God himself as the ideal *karmayogin*:

> In the three worlds, there is nothing that I need do, nor anything unattained that I need to gain, yet [is the element] in which I move. For if I were not tirelessly to busy Myself with works, then would men

[20]II. 31; Zaehner, p. 50. We shall discuss the problem involved in translating *svadharma* as 'caste-duty' later.

[21]II. 47; Ibid. p. 51.

[22]III. 3; Ibid. p. 54.

[23]III. 20-21; Ibid. p. 55.

> everywhere follow in my footsteps. If I were not to do my work, these worlds would fall to ruin, and I should be a worker of confusion, destroying these [my] creatures.[24]

Later in the *Gita*, Krishna warns that *karma* is not easy to define, and even wise men are at times unable to distinguish between *karma* (action) and *akarma* (inaction), and says that the truly enlightened soul is the one who can see one of these two in the other.[25]Such apparently cryptic and confusing remarks perplex Arjuna further and he requests a decisive answer regarding which is better among 'action' (*yoga*) and 'renunciation' (*sannyasa*), to which Krishna replies that the two appear different only to foolish men. In reality, they lead to the same goal.[26] However, Krishna decisively replies that 'of the two to engage in works is more excellent than to renounce them.'[27] Krishna goes a step further and redefines the very concept of *sannyasa*. A man who 'hates not nor desires' is described as a *nitya-sannyasin* ('perpetual renouncer').[28] Thus, a *sannyasin* is not defined by the act of relinquishing all work, but by performance of disinterested action while not actually withdrawing from societal obligations.

It must be remembered that while prescribing the doctrine of *nishkama karma*, the *Gita* does not throw the authority of the Vedic sacrificial tradition overboard. The theory of the reciprocal relation between the gods and *yajna* is accepted tacitly, and they who do not sacrifice are labeled as wicked and selfish.[29] But then all acts of sacrifice are described as having originated from action only (*karmaja*).[30] The originality of the *Gita* lies in the fact that it widens the scope of the term "*yajna*", and includes acts of sense-restraint, breath-control, study and knowledge, and charity, among its various forms.[31] Sacrifice thus becomes the other name for *nishkama karma*, and the ideal mode of action for Arjuna:

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[24]III. 22-24; Ibid.

[25] IV. 16-18.

[26]V. 1-4;.

[27]V. 2; Ibid., p. 62.

[28] V.3.

[29] III.10-17.

[30]IV. 32.

[31] IV.24-32.

> This world is bound by bonds of work save where that work is done for sacrifice. Work to this end, then, Arjuna, from [all] attachment freed.[32]

As we noted in the introductory chapter, the *Gita* attributes the character of a person and his action to the excess of one of the three *guna*s (qualities; translated as 'constituents' by Zaehner): *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* (translated respectively as 'goodness', 'passion' and darkness' by Zaehner). The *guna*s, according to the *Gita*, are determinants of a person's food habits, methods of and motives behind acts of charity, and spiritual discipline. Krishna describes the people who are endowed with the quality of *sattva* as self-controlled and already advanced in the path of spiritual discipline, and extolls them. The *rajasika* people are described as energetic and motivated by desire. Krishna is full of contempt for those under the influence of *tamas*, and they are said to be ignorant, lethargic and sleepy. However, it must be noted that although at the initial stage a person finds his qualities given, the *Gita* throws open the path to transform oneself into a life of self-discipline, thereby transcending their influence. It is acknowledged that this may take a long time, sometimes amounting to several births.[33]

Allied to the concept of *guna* is the concept of *varna* (caste). The oft-quoted *shloka* that describes caste as a God-created and God-ordained system relates caste to *guna*:

> The four-caste system did I generate with categories of 'constituents' and works; of this I am the doer, [the agent,]- this know- [and yet I am] the Changeless One who does not do [or act].[34]

It is interesting to note that while commenting on this *shloka*, Sankara and Madhusudana Sarasvati have taken the term '*guna*' in the text to mean the three 'constituent' qualities mentioned above. They have also attributed the formation of the character of each caste to the presence, or absence, or mixture of the qualities. To quote Sankara:

> The four castes have been created by Me, Isvara, according to the distribution of energies (gunas) and of actions. The energies are Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. The actions of a brahmana (priest), in whom Sattva predominates, are serenity, self-restraint, austerity &c… The actions of a kshatriya (warrior), in whom Rajas predominates and Sattva is subordinate to Rajas, are prowess, daring, &c… The actions of a vaisya

[32] III.9.

[33] vide Chapters XIV, XVI-XVIII.

[34] IV.13.

(merchant), in whom Rajas predominates and Tamas is subordinate to Rajas, are agriculture, etc. The action of a sudra (servant) in whom Tamas predominates and Rajas is subordinate to Tamas, is only servitude. Thus have been created the four castes according to the distribution of energies and actions.[35]

The castes and their respective duties have been elucidated elsewhere in the *Gita* in greater detail,[36] but we need not go into that because they are not relevant for a study of R. K. Narayan's ethical perspective. It would suffice to say that the *Gita* with all its effort to break free of orthodoxy, made a compromise with the castesystem. To say that the *Gita* rejects the caste system is to deprive the text of one of the major components of the theory of *karma* that it formulates. The castesystem is accepted as God-ordained, natural and mandatory, though the Sudra (and the woman) is assured liberation from bondage.[37] It must also be noted that the *Gita* highlights non-discrimination on the basis of caste as a hallmark for the true *brahmana*.[38]Related to caste is also the woman question, especially because the *Gita* mentions women and Sudras in the same breath while referring to their right to liberation in the *shloka* referred to above. Yet, it must be acknowledged that the *Gita* has nothing to say separately about women and the conduct expected from them, which is absolutely justified because the context does not allow such deviations. In the nineteenth century, however, the *Gita* doctrine of *karma* came in handy for many of the leaders to mobilize women's participation in the Nationalist period. We reserve a separate chapter for a discussion of the topic.

Though not related to the concept of *guna* directly, but very close in resemblance, is the distinction made by Krishna between the 'godly' and the 'devilish' attributes/nature in the sixteenth chapter of the *Gita*. Krishna summarizes the 'godly' virtues as fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness, restraint, non-violence, truthfulness, self-content, intention on studying the holy books, patience, aversion to greed, anger, treachery, arrogance, calumny, and more. On the contrary, the 'devilish' people are characterized by pride, anger, covetousness, harshness, and ignorance.It is interesting to note that Krishna enlists among the devilish people those who take pride in their works of sacrifice

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[35]*Sankarabhashya* on IV.13; Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, *The Bhgavadgita with the Commentary of Sankaracharya*, Madras: Samata Books, pp. 125-126. Cf. Madhusudana Sarasvati's *Gudhartha-Dipika* on IV.13.

[36]XVIII.42-44.

[37]IX.32.

[38]V.18.

and charity, thus driving home the fact that these actions have no value if not performed with an accompanying detachment. With respect to this kind of people, God does not hesitate to be vindictive either, and they are cast into an unending cycle of rebirths.[39] The *Mahabharata* of which the *Gita* is a part has been summarized as the clash of these two binary forces, and indeed, such a clash forms the dominant theme of much of Indian narrative tradition (mythology, romance, folklore), both ancient and modern. We have already mentioned Narayan's novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, which draws on such a myth.

We may now return to the distinction made by Ramanujan between 'context-specific' and 'context-free'. As we have seen so far, the *Gita does* accept the 'context-specific' nature of *karma*, but at the same time upholds certain universal, 'context-free' duties. For instance, the definition of 'sacrifice' is no more limited to only Vedic rituals, and in its manifold aspect, it can be performed by anybody. Second, we have the theory of '*lokasangraha*' or human welfare. The question that arises now is, how to define *svadharma*, or one's 'own duty'? Does it mean one's 'caste duty' which is a 'given', and therefore 'natural', or a universal moral obligation for common good? Earlier we have mentioned Zaehner's translation of *svadharma* as 'caste duty', and indeed most of the scholars do define *svadharma* as synonymous to the latter. However, D. Tiwari points out that a subtle difference exists between *svadharma* and *varnadharma* (caste duty):

> The term *varnadharma* is used in the *Gita* in the sense of caste duties that are obligatory to the social order. *Svadharma* is the moral duty prescribed to all, belonging to any *varna*, any *asrama*in social or institutional life… They are based on moral virtues and hence good… *Svadharma* is the duty prescribed for all, even for those not living the life of institutions or who does not have faith in that way of life. It is prescribed even to a *sannyasin*.[40]

The above remark of Tiwari may be justly questioned, especially on the ground that none of the Classical commentators of the *Gita* subscribes to such an interpretation. Modern interpreters of the *Gita*, on the other hand, have defined *svadharma* as a moral, universal ideal, while arguing that the *Gita* does not endorse the hereditary caste system. This redefinition of the concept of *svadharma* catalyzed the popularity of the *Gita* in the nineteenth century. One important point about the *Gita*

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[39] vide Chapter XVI.

[40] D. N. Tiwari, "Ethics of *Niskama Karma*: An Appraisal" in K. C. Pandey, ed., *Ethics and Epics*, New Delhi: Readworthy Publications Ltd., 2011, pp. 8-9.

must be mentioned here. The text is silent about the *ashrama* system, and Patrick Olivelle suggests that the author did not know about it.[41]

We may now turn to yet another important term in the *Gita*. The term *yoga* is central to the text, and is used in the title of every chapter. In the body of the text, it has been used innumerable times, and bears a multitude of meanings. In the introductory chapter, we mentioned Narayan's usage of this term, and the possible connections of the connotation with its meaning in the *Gita*. We are not going to get into the details, but would simply extract a passage from the second chapter that defines *yoga*:

> Stand fast in Yoga, surrendering attachment; in success and failure be the same and then get busy with your works. Yoga means 'sameness-and-indifference'. For lower far is [the path of] active work [for its own sake] than the spirtual exercise of the soul (*buddhi-yoga*)… Whoso performs spiritual exercise with the soul (*buddhi-yukta*) discards here [and now] both good and evil works: brace yourself then for [this] Yoga; for Yoga is [also] skill in [performing] works.[42]

From the above, we can agree with the opinion of scholars such as Zaehner, W. D. P. Hill, and S. N. Dasgupta, that the dominant meaning of *yoga* in the *Gita* is 'discipline'.To quote from Dasgupta:

> The primary sense of the word *yoga* in the *Gita* is derived from the root *yujir yoge* or *yuj*, to join, with which is connected in a negative way the root yuj in the sense of controlling or restricting anything to that to which it is joined. Joining, as it means contact with something, also implies disjunction from some other thing. When a particular type of mental outlook or scheme of action is recommended, we find the word *buddhi-yoga* used, which simply means that one has intimately to associate oneself with a particular type of wisdom or mental outlook. Similarly, when the word *karma-yoga* is used, it simply means that one has to associate oneself with the obligatoriness of the performance of duties.[43]

The word is mostly used in this sense, and often used as a synonym for *karmayoga*. In the foregoing pages, we summarized the *karma* theory of the *Gita*, touching lightly upon its constituent elements. The *Gita* speaks of *bhakti* and *jnana* also, and the relative merits of the three ways should remain an open question. Robert Minor points out that, depending on the context, any one of the three paths of

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[41]Olivelle, *The Asrama System*, Oxford: OUP, 1993, p. 105.

[42] II. 48-51; Zaehner, p. 51.

[43]Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 2, p. 444.

karma, *jnana*, and *bhakti* may lead to the other two.[44] However, the concepts of *bhakti* and *jnana* are not relevant for our purpose, and therefore we are not going to deal with them. It would suffice to say that the doctrine of *karma* was indeed overshadowed by the emphasis put on one of the other two by the Classical commentators of the *Gita*, depending on their respective philosophical and/or theological affiliations. Thus, while Sankara has emphasized *jnana*, Ramanuja and Madhva have identified *bhakti* as the ultimate message of the text. However, it would be both unjust and superficial to totally ignore the opinions of the Classical commentators, and take a giant leap towards the nineteenth-century interpretations. *Gita* interpretation is a tradition and any commentary takes off from earlier standpoints on the text. Many of the arguments of the nationalist leaders like Tilak and Aurobindo make sense only in support of or opposition to those of earlier commentators. Therefore, a birds' eye view of what the doctrine of *karma* meant to the Classical commentators is being given in the next section.

Classical Commentators and the Karma Doctrine

The commentary tradition of the *Gita* is vast and diverse, and this is not the place for an exhaustive study of the same. Our selective approach will focus mainly on Sankara and Ramanuja, the two most famous commentators.

Sankara, who belonged to the Advaita Vedanta school, composed his commentary on the *Gita* in the 7th-8th century, and his is the earliest extant commentary available to us. To begin with, for the Advaitin the world is an illusion (*maya*), and therefore, action for the Advaitin is only the mere appearance of action. Accordingly, Sankara is not in favour of the doctrine of *karma*, and he places *jnana* above it. Not a sectarian theist, Sankara also gives only secondary importance to *bhakti*. Moreover, Eliot Deutsch points out that in the Advaita school, there is no endeavour to approach the issue of *karma* critically, and therefore, it is reduced to the status of 'convenient fiction'.[45]

Sankara starts dealing with the relevance of action as a path to liberation while commenting on *Gita* (II.10). According to him, the path of knowledge and the path of action are two separate paths with no possibility for conjunction. Moreover, Sankara draws our attention to Arjuna's question (III.1)

[44]Minor, "The *Gita*'s way as the only way" in *Philosophy East and West* (Vol. 30, No. 3, July, 1980), p. 347.

[45] Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1969, p. 79.

that if Krishna thinks that knowledge is better than action, then why is he asking Arjuna to perform the terrible act of war, and points out that the very question of Arjuna is evidence that the path of knowledge *is* considered to be higher than that of action in the *Gita*. Again, Sankara is of the opinion that action is meant only for the unenlightened. To quote from his commentary:

> There remains something for the unenlightenedman to do, on understanding the meaning of the injunctions regarding the Agnihotra etc. He thinks that the Agnihotra and other sacrificial rites are to be performed, and that the many necessary accessories thereto should be acquired. He thinks further, "I am the agent, this is my duty." Nothing, on the contrary, remains to be performed subsequent to the realization of truth of such teachings as are contained in ii.20 etc., regarding the real nature of the Self. .. Therefore the enlightened man who has seen the immutable Self and the man who is eager for emancipation have only to renounce all works.[46]

To this, Sankara adds that even obligatory activities (like *agnikarya*) should be shunned by the enlightened, because the question of acquiring sin due to avoidance of such acts is also rendered meaningless for him.[47] He also firmly believes that *karmayoga* is not a direct means to liberation. He writes that *karmayoga* at a certain point of time leads the aspirant to the level of *karmasannyasa*, where one is free to abandon all works.[48] He attains liberation through the following three successive stages: purity of the mind, attainment of knowledge, and devotion to knowledge.[49] It is from this point of view that Sankara explains the two types of spiritual aspirants, *arurukshu* (ascending, practising) and *yogarudha* (adept), mentioned in the *Gita* (VI.3-4). For the *arurukshu*, *karmayoga* is enjoined as the path, but the *yogarudha* is expected to shun all action.[50] In fact, for Sankara, the very distinction between *karmayoga* and *karmasannyasa*, is rendered illusory and therefore meaningless, when one realizes the Self.[51]

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[46] *Sankarabhashya* on *Gita*, II.21; Sastry, p. 45.

[47] Ibid, introduction to Chapter III of *Gita*; Sastry, p. 87.

[48] Ibid, III.3-4; Sastry, p. 93.

[49] Ibid, V. 12; Sastry, p. 166.

[50] Ibid, VI. 3-4; Sastry, p. 183-184.

[51] Ibid, introduction to Chapter V of the *Gita*.

The ignorant, however, is qualified for action only, and should not evade action under any circumstances.[52] According to Sankara, Arjuna falls into this category, and therefore, the remark that *karmayoga* is preferable to *karmasannyasa* is with respect to the unenlightened, and has nothing to do with the man of Self-realization.[53]

However, such an argument poses a problem when Krishna says (III. 20) that kings like Janaka attained liberation (*samsiddhi*) by 'action only' (*karmanaiva*). In order to avoid the problem, Sankara here argues that the kings mentioned may either have been men of right knowledge or have been those who had not attained right knowledge. In the first case, Sankara points out, they had adhered to action 'with a view to set an example in the world', while in the second case, they had first attained 'purity of mind' and then liberation.[54] Thus, the doctrine of *lokasangraha* works for Sankara as well. To quote from his *bhashya*:

> [If a] man thinks that he has achieved his ends and he has realized the Self, even he should work for the welfare of others, though for himself may have nothing to do…For Me [Krishna], or for any other person who, knowing the Self, thus seeks the welfare of the world, there is nothing to do except to be with a view to that welfare of the world at large… Himself doing diligently and well the actions which the ignorant have to do, he should make them do those actions.[55]

Sankara's arguments have their own limitations and have invited refutations, but on the whole his is a succinct approach, and has influenced later commentators like Madhusudana Sarasvati and Sridhara, who by and large follow Sankara. For instance, Madhusudana agrees with Sankara that the paths of knowledge and action are different and no combination of the two is possible. Moreover, the theory that action leads to renunciation of the same is also accepted by Madhusudana.[56] However, while discussing the question of kings like Janaka who are said to have attained liberation through

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[52]Ibid, III.6-7.

[53]Ibid, introduction to Chapter V of the *Gita*.

[54]Ibid, III.104; Sastry, p. 105.

[55] Ibid, III.25; Sastry, p. 107-8.

[56]*Gudhartha-Dipika* on III.3.

'action alone', Madhusudana brings in the issue of caste, and adds that Arjuna is not fit to shun action *because he is not a brahmana*.[57]

With this it would be appropriate to wind up our discussion of Sankara's engagement with *karma*, and turn to the other major Classical commentary on the *Gita*, composed by Ramanuja who belonged to a different school, the Visistadvaita, and had devotional leanings.To begin with, given all his difference with Sankara regarding metaphysics, nature of God, relation between God and man, the goal of human life, and the means to attain it, Ramanuja accepts that *karma* and *jnana* are two distinct ways of self-realization, and there is no question of the conjunction of the two.[58] He also agrees on two other points: first, that *karmayoga* combined with the knowledge of the *atman* leads to *jnanayoga*, and secondly, that an enlightened soul is qualified to shun *karma*.[59] However, Ramanuja strongly differs from Sankara in his argument regarding the continuing efficacy of *karmayoga* even for those who are fit for *jnanayoga*. For Ramanuja, *karmayoga* alone is sufficient to ensure liberation to an aspirant. For instance, Ramanuja takes the statement in the *Gita* (III.20) that kings like Janaka attained liberation through '*karma* alone' literally, and writes:

> Because Karma Yoga is the best means for securing the vision of the self even for a person who is qualified for Jnana Yoga, royal sages like Janaka and others, who are foremost among the Jnanins, preferred Karma Yoga as the means for attaining perfection. Thus, having first declared previously that Karma Yoga must be practised by an aspirant for release who is qualified for Karma Yoga alone, as he is unfit for Jnana Yoga, it was next stated with reasons that, even for one who is qualified for Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga is better than Jnana Yoga.[60]

Needless to say, Ramanuja emphasizes the importance of *lokasangraha.* However, Ramanuja's *bhashya* is oriented towards a glorification of Krishna's divine personality and the message of devotional surrender to God, and therefore he repeatedly harps on the point that *karma*, *jnana*, *lokasangraha*, etc., should be sanctified by *bhakti*.

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[57]Ibid. on III.20.

[58] J. A. B. Van Buitenen, *Ramanuja on the Bhagavadgita*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968, p. 65ff.

[59]Ibid, pp. 65, 70.

[60] Ramanuja's *Bhashya* on III.20; Swami Adidevananda, *Sri Ramanuja Gita Bhasya*, Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, p. 135.

The commentary tradition of the *Gita* is long and variegated, but this is not the place to get into detailed analyses. It would suffice to say that the commentators could not ignore the doctrine of *karmayoga* because of its centrality, though their emphasis lay either on *jnana* or on *bhakti*, depending on their respective doctrinal sympathies. Apart from this, Satya P. Agarwal points out that the concept of *karma* (and the allied concept of *lokasangraha*) was neglected also because the message of the *Gita* was thought to be in harmony with that of the *Upanishad*s and the *Brahmasutra*, none of which know the term '*lokasangraha*' or '*nishkama karma*'.[61] It was left for the nineteenth-century thinkers to bring the social message of the *Gita* to the fore.

Nationalist Interpretations of the Doctrine: Bankim to Gandhi

We have already seen in the previous chapter how the *Gita* gradually gained popularity in the nineteenth century. As we also noted, the first use of the *nishkama karma* doctrine of the *Gita* for sociological purpose was by Rammohan Roy. In this section, we are going to focus on the engagements of the leaders and thinkers following Roy specifically with the *karma* doctrine. The list is huge, and we need to be selective. The five exponents with whom we are going to concern ourselves here are Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda, Balgangadhar Tilak, Sri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi.

Bankim's commentary on the *Gita*, entitled *Srimadbhagavadgita*, was serialized in the Bengali journal *Prachara*, and came out in book form in 1902. The commentary runs only up to *Gita* IV.19. In the preface to this work, Bankim respectfully mentions his debt to the Classical commentators, especially Sankara and his followers, and also to already existing commentaries in Bengali, but candidly confesses that 'there is no possibility for a person acquainted with Western literature, science and philosophy to follow the ancients at all times.'[62] Thus begins a new epoch of *Gita* interpretation in India.

Without getting into a detailed analysis, we shall simply delineate Bankim's reinterpretation of the concept of *svadharma*, which sets the tone for subsequent interpretations of the *Gita*. In his lengthy commentary on the *Gita* (II.11), Bankim speaks of the problems in taking *svadharma* to mean just

[61]Agarwal, *The Social Role of the Bhagavadgita*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993, p. 262.

[62] Hans Harder, *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Srimadbhagavadgita: Translation and Analysis*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2001, p. 20.

varnashramadharma, owing to the fact that the *shudra*s have adopted agriculture instead of service. While he does not challenge the caste system, he suggests that instead of four castes, a category of six castes is more appropriate. He goes on to say that such a caste-hierarchy is natural to every society, and the only difference that the Indian version makes is by making it hereditary. Caste is thus reduced to profession. Such a reinterpretation of the *varnashramadharma* system enables Bankim to argue that the concept of *svadharma*does not apply to the Hindus only but to the whole human race at large. Thus an implicit endorsement of the caste system is discernible in Bankim. However, Bankim also says that *svadharma* is defined by 'whatever burden one chooses to carry'. The most significant point is that Bankim chooses the English word 'duty' as the exact equivalent of *svadharma*.[63] According to Hans Harder, such a position serves the twofold purpose of taking 'Krsna's teachings out of the exclusivity of traditional Hinduism', while simultaneously furnishing an implicit 'apology for the *varna* system.'[64] Bankim also comments on the situation when a conflict ensues between *dharma* (universal) and *svadharma* (one's 'professional duty'), but his arguments are ambiguous and contradictory, and they should better be avoided here.[65]

Having discussed Bankim's notion of *svadharma*, now we may turn to his idea of *karma*, or to be specific, *nishkama karma*. Nagappa Gowda K. points out that 'Bankim did not develop a systematic and coherent theory of nishkama karma as many subsequent nationalist writers…did.'[66] However, on the whole, his intention was to uphold the efficacy of the doctrine of *karma* in modern times. With this intention, while commenting on *Gita* (III.1), Bankim argues that 'nowhere in the second chapter has [Krsna] said explicitly that knowledge is better than action'.[67] However, Bankim *does* attach a lot of significance to theism and *bhakti*, without which a proper cultivation of *nishkama karma* is not possible.

For the sake of brevity, we may use Gowda K.'s beautiful summary of Bankim's theoretical standpoint with respect to *nishkama karma*. One major point that is highlighted by Gowda K. is that

[63]Ibid., p.p. 37-41.

[64]Ibid., p. 189.

[65] For a complete critique of Bankim's concept of *svadharma*, see Ibid., pp. 180-195.

[66] Gowda K., *The Bhagavadgita in the Nationalist Discourse*, New Delhi: OUP, 2011, p. 32.

[67]Harder, p. 112.

‘desirelessness’ in Bankim’s framework is not synonymous with the mortification of one’s desires. To quote from Gowda K.:

> Nishkama karma does not even insist on the elimination of all passions. In fact, it differentiates between the passions to be retained and those to be subdued. All the passions which support the unfolding of one’s faculties to the highest degree would be compatible with desirelessness… one is to hold virtuous desires in one’s action and restrain all those desires which would hinder the fulfillment of dharma.[68]

Bankim is all for violence if it’s a *dharmayuddha* (just war). According to him, the principle of non-violence is not violated in three cases: for the preservation of human life, in unavoidable circumstances, and for self-protection.[69]

We refrain from discussing Bankim’s commentary in its devotional aspect, and may now turn to Vivekananda’s exposition of the *karma* doctrine. Vivekananda’s engagement with the *Gita* is not restricted to a single volume but scattered through numerous lectures and essays. In order to grasp the purport of his opinion about the *Gita*, we may begin with his lecture entitled “Sages of India”. In this lecture, he speaks of the two types of Hindu scriptures, and the hierarchy that exists between them:

> Two ideals of truth are in our scriptures; the one is, what we call the eternal, and the other is not so authoritative, yet binding under particular circumstances, times, and places. The eternal relations which deal with the nature of the soul, and of God, and the relations between souls and God are embodied in what we call the Shrutis, the Vedas. The next set of truths is what we call the Smritis, as embodied in the words of Manu, Yâjnavalkya, and other writers and also in the Purânas, down to the Tantras. The second class of books and teachings is subordinate to the Shrutis...[70]

Starting from this premise, he writes about the *Gita*:

> Than the Gita no better commentary on the Vedas has been written or can be written. The essence of the Shrutis, or of the Upanishads, is hard to be understood, seeing that there are so many commentators, each one trying to interpret in his own way. Then the Lord Himself comes, He who is the inspirer of the

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[68] Gowda K., pp. 33-35.

[69] Ibid., p. 37.

[70] http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_3/lectures_from_colombo_to_almora/the_sages_of_india.htm [Accessed 9/12/2014]

> Shrutis, to show us the meaning of them, as the preacher of the Gita, and today India wants nothing better, the world wants nothing better than that method of interpretation.[71]

Thus, for Vivekananda, the *Gita* is in a direct line of continuity from the Vedic tradition. The *Gita* is the text par excellence for the Hindus, because of, on the one hand, it has divine sanction, and on the other, it is a 'summary' of the doctrines of the Vedas, the eternal source of wisdom. Therefore, while modern critics find in the text a reactionary element against the liberal doctrines of Buddhism and Jainism, for Vivekananda, the question does not arise at all. In a lecture entitled "Krishna", delivered in California, and three consecutive "Gita" lectures delivered in San Francisco, Vivekananda argues that Krishna's message of *karmayoga* is for the common people, and that Buddha (who according to him is posterior to the *Gita*), is the ideal, historical *karmayogin*, the archetype being Krishna himself.[72] For Vivekananda, however, the performance of *karmayoga* does not presuppose an enlightened being as the candidate. His is a doctrine for the masses, and by 'karma' or action he means service to mankind, which can be performed by anybody, the only condition being that the person should practice non-attachment. Vivekananda's interpretation of the message of *karmayoga* is contained in the "Karma Yoga" lectures in the first volume of his *Complete Works*. It is interesting to note that he uses the term 'duty' as the English equivalent of *karma*, a choice very much akin to that of Bankim.[73] He translates *nishkama karma* as 'unselfish work', and redefines the entire concept. His ideal of *nishkama karma*, as summarized by Nagappa Gowda K., implies purification of mind and heart, absence of passion, and a steady, unfaltering mind.[74] Gowda K. explains further:

> Nishkama karma does not suggest a 'purposeless act', since the individuals would serve the purpose of duty and welfare of all. Further, desireless karma would not indicate selfish or animal-like indifference. It implies an active and self-sacrificing love without the least sense of ego, consciously working for the *lokasangraha*, welfare of all, with complete knowledge of the Lord and his representation in human beings (atmic knowledge).[75]

[71]Ibid.

[72]*Complete Works*, Vol. 1, *vide*, pp. 437-480.

[73] Ibid., pp. 27-35.

[74]Gowda K., p. 100-101.

[75]Ibid., p. 112.

Though from Gowda's comment it may appear that theism is central to Vivekananda's theory of action, a reading of his entire oeuvre reveals that he places social service over theistic devotion.

Now we may turn to Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a Maharashtrian Brahmin by birth, who, unlike Bankim and Vivekananda, has left a full-fledged commentary on the *Gita*. D. Mackenzie Brown has the following to say about him:

> As a Chitpawan Brahman, Tilak inherited a tradition of activism in public affairs that dates back at least to the times of the Maratha Confederacy. Like his predecessors in Maharastra's politics, he believed in an active life for the Brahman community.[76]

His commentary, *Srimad Bhagavadgita Rahasya*,written originally in Marathi during his captivity in Mandalay jail in the winter months of 1910-11, upholds the doctrine of *karma* as the central teaching of the *Gita*. In this process, however, Tilak undermines the doctrines of *jnana* and *bhakti*. In the very 'Preface' to his work, Tilak takes Classical commentators such as Sankara to task for having allegedly distorted the central message of the *Gita*, and claims that Sankara's commentary makes implicit references to extant commentaries which, Tilak argues, upheld *karma* and not anything else.[77] Brown is of the opinion that he derives much of his anti-*sannyasa* standpoint from his reading of the medieval Marathi saint Jnanadeva's commentary of the *Gita* and the works of the mystic Tukaram.[78]

For the sake of brevity, we shall present his ideas, as beautifully summarized by Satya P. Agarwal.[79]Agarwal summarizes the message under the following four heads: (i) the concept of *dharmakshetra* (field for the battle of *dharma*), (ii) *avatara* of God to reestablish *dharma*, (iii) *nishkama karma*, and (iv) *lokasangraha*. In Tilak's interpretation, these four elements acquire specific meanings, all related to the Nationalist ideology. Thus, *dharmakshetra* becomes the whole society, and, to be specific, modern India. Similarly, the *avatara* does not refer necessarily to a physical incarnation of God, but a rejuvenation of society. According to Tilak's interpretation, the

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[76] Brown, "The Philosophy of Bal Gangadhra Tilak: Karma vs. Jnana in the Gita Rahasya" in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Feb. 1958), p. 204.

[77] B. S. Sukthankar, trans., *Srimadbhagavadgia-Rahasya*, Poona, 1965, p. xxvi.

[78] Brown, p. 203.

[79] Agarwal, pp. 114-123.

masses should take up the duty of the incarnation to rid the world of evil-doers. Tilak writes that *Nishkama karma* (and the allied concept of *svadharma*) can indeed have an interpretation according to the *varna* system, but argues that the ideal applies to all, even beyond one's caste affiliations. To quote from his commentary:

> The Gita says that whether the society is a Hindu society or a non-Hindu society… the arrangement of the four castes applies to that society, then according to that arrangement, and if it does not apply then according to any other arrangement of society which may be applicable to it, that duty which has fallen on one's shoulders or which, being possible, may have been taken up by one as a duty, of one's own choice, becomes a moral duty; and giving up these moral duties, and, on the spur of the moment, taking up that which is proper for some one else, on Morality, as also from the point of view of public good.[80]

Thus, Tilak's emphasis is on the need of the hour, and on one's own moral discretion. For Tilak, *nishkama karma* denotes the technique and *lokasangraha* denotes the goal. However, he is careful enough to point out that the ideal of *lokasangraha* should not be confused with the Western ideal of Activism. He described the latter as 'devoted merely to improving worldly existence', while the former is 'devoted to self-realization through service to mankind.'[81]*Lokasangraha*, clarifies Tilak, is the duty of householders and not *sannyasin*s. He criticizes Sankara vehemently for having given in to the ideal of renunciation, and quotes Jaimini and the story of Jaratkaru from the *Mahabharata* in order to justify himself.[82] Tilak distinguishes between the *karmayoginsthitaprajna* (steadfast) and the *jnanayogin sthitaprajna*, and argues that the *Gita* advocates the former. He adds that a *sthitaprajna* is required in an imperfect society to guide the masses, thus revealing that not everybody can reach that state.

Tilak also deals at great length with the conflict of universal and immediate duties. For example, he accepts that 'non-violence' is a universal moral principle, but points out how impossible it is to avoid violence in life, and justifies the resort to violence in order to ensure self-protection and 'general welfare'. From this very premise, he goes on to say that although the *sthitaprajna* himself has realized all creatures as the reflection of the Supreme Being, he should teach his followers the 'love for one's family, religion, village, or pride of one's own country' as a first step towards the

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[80] Sukthankar, p. 697.

[81] Brown, p. 202.

[82] Agarwal, p. 121-123.

said realization. Finally, it would only be fair to agree that Tilak did accept the paths of *jnana* and *bhakti* as valid means of self-realization, though he criticized the Classical commentators for having exaggerated their roles.[83] His was a theistic framework, and his *sthitaprajna* is one in whom all the three paths of *karma*, *bhakti*, and *jnana* are in a perfect blend. Gowda K. gives an unbiased critique of Tilak in the following lines:

> Tilak constitutes the basis of nationalism around the sthitaprajnas as its exemplars. These virtuous characters are guided by nishkama karma and are the models for the nation. The sthitaprajna may hail from the traditional elite but he can also emerge from the masses through the path of bhakti. Consequently, the national elite in Tilak's imagination can come from the traditional elite as well as the masses but to be leaders of the nation, they necessarily need to embody the ideal of the sthitaprajna. Tilak subscribes deeply to this form of moral elitism… Indian nationalism would be anchored not on constitutional democracy but on the heroic personality of the sthitaprajna who is to guide the destiny of the nation.[84]

We shall take note of two more authors before winding up this section, who raised pertinent questions with Tilak's exegesis.

Sri Aurobindo (born Aurobindo Ghosh) was educated in England, and had first-hand experience with his own literature once he returned to India in 1893 at the age of 21. He participated in the independence movement, but surprisingly enough, until his imprisonment in 1908, his writings had little to do with the *Gita*, apart from one solitary reference justifying resort to violence in the fight for liberty.[85] The gradual shift in his attitude towards the *Gita* is attributed to a set of spiritual visions and experiences in the Alipore Jail, which eventually led him to come up with a major commentary, *Essays on the Gita*, which was, however, preceded by a series of speeches, articles and pamphlets on the *Gita*.[86] To begin with, Aurobindo rejects the Nationalist interpretations of the doctrine of action:

> That which the Gita teaches is not a human, but a divine action; not the performance of social duties, but the abandonment of all other standards of duty or conduct for a selfless performance of the divine will working through our nature; not social service, but the action of the Best, the God-possessed, the Master-

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[83] Gowda K., pp. 62-73.

[84] Ibid., p. 83.

[85] Robert N. Minor, "Sri Aurobindo as a Gita-*yogin*" in Minor, p. 65.

[86] Ibid., pp. 67-70.

men done impersonally for the sake of the world and as a sacrifice to Him who stands behind man and Nature. In other words, the Gita is not a book of practical ethics, but of the spiritual life.[87]

For Aurobindo, it is not correct to single out the doctrine of action in the *Gita*, because he points out that the text gives equal weight to *karma*, *jnana* and *bhakti*. He concludes that socio-ethical interpretations of the text are not authentic since they strip the text of the spiritual message that speaks of a *brahmic consciousness*. He strongly argues that 'desirelessness is only a means to this end, not an aim in itself.'[88] The Nationalist interpretation of 'disinterested action' as social or political activism, Aurobindo argues, is misleading because instead of advocating true desirelessness, it simply supplants 'certain smaller personal interests by other larger desires.'[89] In this context, he reinterprets the term *lokasangraha* to mean 'for the sake of God.'[90] Taking the battle of Kurukshetra as an allegory (though without denying the historicity of Krishna), Aurobindo formulates a theory of personal, individual spiritual upliftment, ignoring his Nationalist precursors.

Now we may go on to have a brief overview of Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita*. Though he mostly agrees with his immediate precursors, his strong inclination for non-violence is a marked departure. However, like Aurobindo, he too accepts the *Gita* as an allegory. All scholars agree on the centrality of the *Gita* in Gandhi's life and thought. J. T. F. Jordens's significant research yields the following data: Gandhi's first meaningful encounter with the *Gita* was in 1889 while in England. Two theosophists had invited him to read the text in Sir Edwin Arnold's translation. However, he started a regular reading of the *Gita* only in 1903, this time in South Africa, but again, due to Theosophist intervention. His first political use of the *Gita* is dated on May 8, 1919, when he commanded the people observing the fast to read the text. His long tryst with the sacred book finally culminated in his Gujarati translation, *Anasaktiyoga*, written during captivity in Yeravda jail in 1929, a work that was later translated into English by Mahadev Desai.[91]

Jordens points out that Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita* hinges on two 'basic principles': "the allegorical character of the *Gita* as a whole, and the primacy of 'experience' among the

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[87]Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, New York: The Sri Aurobindo Library, 1950, p. 29.

[88]Ibid., p. 100.

[89] Aurobindo, quoted in Gowda, p. 157.

[90] Ibid., p. 159.

[91]Jordens, "Gandhi and the Bhagavadgita" in Minor, pp. 88-89.

qualifications of the interpreter."[92] Gandhi strongly disagrees with his precursors that the events narrated inthe *Mahabharata* are factual, and the 'poet has seized the occasion of the war… for drawing attention to the war going on in our bodies between the forces of Good (Pandavas) and the forces of Evil (Kauravas)…'[93] Thus Gandhi in his interpretation makes a strong case for *ahimsa* or non-violence, even while upholding the ideal of *karma*. Similarly, for him, Krishna is for him 'perfection and right knowledge personified' though he does not rule out his historicity.[94] Gandhi has also dealt at great length with the issue of *varna* in the *Gita*, but that is unnecessary for our present purpose.

Gandhi argues that the central teaching of the *Gita* is *anasakti* or 'non-attachment'. Gowda K. summarizes the theory of *anasakti* as follows:

> …the institution of anasakti in its essential character [is] in the form of unity between jnana, bhakti, and karma… anasakti is based on desireless action… An aspirant of self-realization must, therefore, cultivate a state of total desirelessness… Secondly, anasakti is based on renunciation of the fruits of action. Renunciation is not the total absence of interest or indifference to result. Gandhi quite explicitly insisted that a Karmayogi would be conscientious regarding the duties to be done, ways and means of doing them and following up the consequences of his actions….Hence, renunciation can neither be taken to mean a total indifference to the results, nor expectation of reward, but only absence of hankering after fruit. Third, anasakti is also meant dedication of all action to God… To Gandhi, anasakti… produces active but humble Karmayogi satyagrahis who would, with their unswerving ethico-moral practices and commitment, always be ready to serve the people.[95]

Thus, we find that the doctrine of *karma* was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, and much of the rediscovery itself is a response to the East-West encounter and blend. It is also important to note that even in the nineteenth century, the doctrine appealed differently to different personalities. However, these differences are minimal and all the major commentators agreed on the basic points. They agreed on the legitimacy of the *Gita* as *the* scripture for modern India, emphasized the ideals of

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[92]Ibid., p. 89.

[93]"Satyagraha Leaflet No. 18" quoted in Ibid., p. 98.

[94]Mahadev Desai, *The Gospel of Selfless Action, or the Gita according to Gandhi*, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1956, p. 128.

[95]Gowda K., pp. 179-180.

karma, *lokasangraha*, and *sthitaprajna*, interpreted them in the light of social service, and had more or less a theistic orientation. We did not study the last of these in detail, and it would suffice to mention in passing that the belief in *avatara* is crucial to all the commentators mentioned above, and most of them (Aurobindo, Gandhi, and Vivekananda) agreed that *avatara*s are but common men who have realized their innate divine nature. To quote from Gandhi:

> In Hinduism, incarnation is ascribed to one who has performed some extraordinary service of mankind… Future generations pay this homage to one who, in his own generation, has been extraordinarily religious in his conduct… he who is the most religiously behaved has most of the divine spark in him. It is in accordance with this train of thought, that Krishna enjoys, in Hinduism, the status of the most perfect incarnation.[96]

Needless to repeat, the role of the *avatara* is central to the teachings of the *Gita*, and also to the doctrine of *karma*.It may appear somewhat out of place to mention it separately because apparently Narayan's fiction does not have any connection with it, but the idea of '*avatara*hood' is implicit in Narayan's novel, *The Guide*.

***Karma*, *Sannyasa*, *Lokasangraha*: Making Way Through the Labyrinth**

Thus we find that the doctrine of *karma* has its own trajectory. In the *Gita*, the doctrine is intertwined with the concepts of *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha*. However, even the *Gita* doctrine of *karma* was overlooked until the nineteenth century when finally the Nationalist leaders took it up and hailed it as the core of the text. The emphasis on the doctrine of *karma* since then has emphasized the *lokasangraha* aspect. We have already discussed the terms *karma* and *sannyasa*, and therefore they need not be repeated here. The meaning of *Lokasangraha*, as we have seen, varies from person to person, though they all agree on 'mass upliftment' being the primary meaning. The question then arises: how to practice *lokasangraha*? Satya P. Agarwal gives a long list of possible meanings of the terms, which is as follows:

(i) Productive aspect
(ii) Protective aspect
(iii) Stability aspect
(iv) Service aspect

[96] Desai, p. 128.

(v) Self-Help aspect
(vi) Responsibility aspect
(vii) *Niskama* aspect
(viii) Ethical aspect
(ix) Cohesive aspect
(x) Educative aspect[97]

However, a closer look at the list reveals that the different aspects enumerated by Agarwal, are not mutually exclusive. For example, (ii), (iii) and (vi) are related; similarly, (iv) and (vii) are related. The first one, according to Agarwal, is a reinterpretation of the doctrine to suit modern economic reforms and developments. Again, the last two are but extensions of the 'service' aspect. Thus, (i), (ix) and (x) are largely different expressions/methods of mass upliftment. But, then, it would be wrong to conflate all the aspects entirely. For instance, the 'responsibility' aspect varies from man to man. A police officer and a mother may interpret this aspect differently. Anyway, for our purpose of applying the concept of *Lokasangraha* to Narayan's novels, we shall make the following broad classification:

(i) Protective/Responsibility aspect
(ii) Service/*Niskama* aspect

In the course of our analysis, we shall see that even these two are intricately related, and often they overlap each other. Therefore, for our convenience, we shall treat *lokasangraha* only in the 'service' aspect and reserve the use of this term as far as possible to the third chapter. The next chapter will focus on the aspect of *karma* in daily life, and the fourth chapter will focus on the *sannyasa* aspect, though the concepts *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha* are ideally related according to the *Gita*.

The *Gita* in Narayan's *Mahabharata*

Now that we have traced the origin and standardization of the *karma* doctrine, it would only be fair to return to Narayan and have a look at Narayan's encounter with the *Gita* in his own abridged translation of the *Mahabharata*. At this point, it would be correct to bear in mind that, as in all other writings of his, in his *Mahabharata* too, he is no metaphysician. Narayan is a storyteller, and at the

[97]Agarwal, pp. 336-349.

very outset, he has clarified thathis 'own preference is the story.'[98] He is candid in his confession that his target is the 'modern reader in English' and therefore, he had to 'necessarily select and condense' and tried to keep his version 'within readable limits.'[99] However, he has duly mentioned the *Gita* in the introduction:

> Another factor which swells *The Mahabharata* is philosophical discussion- discourses on life and conduct… sometimes running to several hundred lines at a time. *The Bhagavad Gita* is an instance of such a situation. When the opposing armies are ready to attack each other, Krishna reveals and elaborates (in eighteen chapters) the *Gita* philosophy.[100]

Moreover, he adds a crucial line about his selection of events in the epic:

> I have omitted none of the episodes relevant to the destinies of the chief characters.[101]

Narayan devotes less than two pages to summarize the *Gita*, but this is definitely proportionate to the entire size of his *Mahabharata*, which amounts to 179 pages. It is also important to note that the chapter is titled "Hesitant Hero", after Arjuna's dilemma, though it includes events that immediately precede or succeed the *Gita*.The above points suggest the significance Narayan attached to the *Gita* as a part of the larger epic. He could have easily dispensed with the *Gita* as it would not have hampered the narrative in any sense, especially in a condensed version aimed at satisfying the needs of the modern reader. As for the theory of *karma*, the entire message of the *Gita*, from the instructions on *nishkama karma* up to the description of the true nature of God, has been summarized in the following words:

> Again and again Krishna emphasized the importance of performing one's duty with detachment in a spirit of dedication. Arjuna listened reverently, now and then interrupting to clear a doubt or to seek an elucidation. Krishna answered all his questions with utmost grace, and finally granted him a vision of his real stature.[102]

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[98]R. K. Narayan, *The Mahabharata*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, Introduction, p. xi.

[99]Ibid., p. xii.

[100] Ibid., p. xi.

[101]Ibid.

[102]Ibid., p. 148.

The above words single out the doctrine of *nishkama karma* as the soul of the *Gita*, and therefore, echo the Nationalist exegeses of the text.

With the theory of action now fully analyzed, in the subsequent chapters, Narayan's novels are going to be taken up and the ethical vision of Narayan studied in the light of this doctrine.

II

Karma and Daily Life

As already mentioned in the introductory chapter, Ranga Rao has classified Narayan's novels under two broad heads: pre-independence novels with *sattvika* protagonists and post-independence novels with *rajasika* protagonists. In recent times, John Thieme has made what seems to be a more tenable classification: the early novels, the first phase novels of the middle career, the second phase novels of the middle career, and the late novels, each consisting of four novels.[1] The early novels are the first four beginning from *Swami and Friends* to *The English Teacher*. The first phase of the middle career includes novels from *Mr. Sampath* to *Waiting for the Mahatma*. The next phase includes the most mature of all his novels, from *The Guide* to *The Painter of Signs*. The last four novels from *A Tiger for Malgudi* to *The Grandmother's Tale* belong to the last phase. Following this classification, we are going to select one representative novel from each of these four phases for this chapter. The four novels that we are going to deal with are: *The English Teacher*, *Mr. Sampath*, *The Man-eater of Malgudi* and *The World of Nagaraj*. Relevant references to *The Financial Expert*, *The Painter of Signs* and *Talkative Man* would also be made. A better place for *The Vendor of Sweets* would perhaps be in the chapter on *lokasangaraha*. Even though Narayan's first novel, *Swami and Friends*, is certainly one of his best, and has drawn much critical attention, it was not composed under any influences from Indian ethics. Similarly, *The Grandmother's Tale*, the last in the series, is in fact a novella, and, by Narayan's own testimony, 'faction' rather than fiction. These two novels will have to be skipped. The models for Narayan in that early phase were the British and American authors, and he himself notes in his autobiography how he discarded his uncle's suggestion to read Kamban's *Ramayana*:

> I could not quite accept his advice. I was setting out to be a modern story-writer, and he tried to make me spend my time poring over tough old classics. I listened to his suggestion out of politeness but rejected it mentally.[2]

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[1] John Thieme, *R. K. Narayan*, Delhi: Viva Books, 2010.

[2] *My Days*, New York: Picador, p. 98.

The Bachelor of Arts is reserved for the chapter on *sannyasa*, and so are *The Guide* and *A Tiger for Malgudi*. *The Dark Room,* having the first female protagonist in Narayan's entire series of novels, is most suited for the chapter in which we shall study his women characters.

The English Teacher, as we noted in the Introduction, was the first conscious attempt on Narayan's part to employ materials from Indian philosophy. To reiterate his own testimony, he wrote to Somerset Maugham that *The English Teacher*, 'deals with psychic development, bordering on Yoga' but he simultaneously admits that Yoga in this novel is nothing more than an 'idea' and he has 'not made it very emphatic'.[3]

The English Teacher

The English Teacher is immediately preceded by *The Dark Room*, but the legacy that it takes up is that of *The Bachelor of Arts*. The name of the protagonist has been changed from Chandran to Krishna, but the name of Chandran's wife Susila has been retained as that of Krishna's wife. Similarly, the names of most of the faculty members at Albert Mission College have been retained verbatim. *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher* can safely be assumed to form a trilogy, with only the name of the protagonists being different in each case. All these three novels use elements from the author's own life, but *The English Teacher* stands out for being the most autobiographical, with direct, precisely identifiable, correspondences between the events narrated in the text and the events that happened in the author's own life. Collating all the data primarily from three different sources (*My Days*, the psychic journal that Narayan maintained between June 1939 and December 1944, 'the results of some twenty séances conducted by a medium who claimed to put the writer in spirit communication with his wife'[4]), Susan Ram and N. Ram have reconstructed the turbulent phase that Narayan was steering through from 1939 to 1945. Narayan's wife Rajam died of typhoid in 1939, and the Rams report how Narayan confirmed that Susila's unpleasant experience in the bathroom as described in the novel corresponds exactly with a similar experience of Rajam. According to him, 'this incident was *very real*' and 'after this Rajam would

[3] Undated Letter (12/5/45 written hazily in red ink), Typescript, Box 19, *R. K. Narayan Collection* in Harry Ransom Research Centre, UT, Austin.

[4] *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years*, p. 253.

constantly rub her lower lip to brush away the loathsome fly.'[5] There are numerous other such parallels which abound in Rams' research. However, one big difference between Krishna's and Narayan's initial responses to the whole idea of séances should not be ignored. While Krishna is initially puzzled, that very day he makes up his mind and goes to meet his supposed medium, Narayan remained skeptical about the whole exercise for a considerable period of time. The Rams write:

> Intellectually, Narayan conceded that the whole exercise might be a 'grand fraud'. He considered the possibility that the medium gained his data cunningly through prior investigation, or through 'telepathy' (the alleged transparence of thought from one mind to a percipient).[6]

Be that as it may, *The English Teacher* offers us a remarkable opportunity to study both the character and the author in one go. By analyzing Krishna's character we shall be able to delve at least partially into the author's own mental state at this phase of life, and also know how he responded to Indian ethical values when encountered with the most crucial and critical moments.

The number of critical responses to this early masterpiece has been legion, some alleging weak plot construction while others were full of praises. Be that as it may, the most important aspect from the point of view of the present research which has also been highlighted in most of the analyses is that, Krishna's final act of leaving his college job is an act of renunciation (*sannyasa*). Ramesh Dnyate writes:

> In Krishnan, Narayan presents a symbolically realized sanyasi… In the final analysis, although Krishnan does not don the ochrish robes and traditionally enter the *sanyasashrama*, he seems to imbibe the essential principles of sanyasa.[7]

It is precisely this act of renunciation-in-the-world on Krishna's part that sets him apart from Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*. Like Chandran, he is no doubt a *sattvika* character, but is much more mature. While Chandran shows a childish interest in Malathi and is shattered when the match is frustrated due to astrological issues, Krishna's love is not an infatuation. Krishna's is a mature

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[5] Ibid., p. 237.

[6] Ibid., p. 270.

[7] Ramesh Dnyate, *The Novels of R. K. Narayan: A Typological Study of Characters*, New Delhi: Prestige, 2000 rprnt, pp. 135-36.

affection of a responsible husband, and unlike Chandran, he is not prompted to renounce the world at once when Susila dies. However, despite his balanced life, he *does not* give equal weightage to all aspects of his being. To quote Ranga Rao:

> Krishna's priorities are: the self, his work, his family, *and* a prominent member of the family, his wife; chapter 1 introduces these: in this order.[8]

Moreover, the very first paragraph bears testimony to the fact that Krishna is not happy with his job:

> What was wrong with me? I couldn't say, some sort of vague disaffection, a self-rebellion I might call it. The feeling again and again came upon me that as I was nearing thirty I should cease to live like a cow… eating, working in a manner of speaking, walking, talking, etc., - all done to perfection, I was sure, but always leaving behind a sense of something missing.[9]

Thus, it is evident at the very outset that Krishna is *not* an ideal *karmayogin/karmasannyasin*. The precept of the *Gita* requires one to be completely detached from both grief and desire (*na shochati na kaankshati*). In Krishna's case it's not desire but a sense of frustration that renders his service unfulfilled in spirit. He confesses that he is haunted by the feeling that he is 'doing the wrong work' and not doing enough justice to his poetic self.

Again, we do find him trying to train and discipline himself. On a particular day he wakes up early in the morning and takes a stroll and then bathes in the river, but the readers are also made aware of the comic irony of his failure to stick to this routine in the long run:

> I felt very well satisfied indeed with my performance… this gave place to a distinct memory of half a dozen similar resolves in the past and lapses… I checked this defeatism! "Don't you see this is entirely different? I am different to-day…"[10]

Such fickle-mindedness is diametrically opposed to the precept of *abhyasa* as laid down in the *Gita*. It is also ironical that Krishna chooses to suppress the pricks of his conscience labeling them as 'defeatism', despite recounting immediately after this mental conversation the tasks that have been

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[8] Ranga Rao, *R. K. Narayan: The Novelist and His Art*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 73.

[9] *The English Teacher*, Madras: Indian thought Publications, 2015 rprnt, p. 1

[10] Ibid., p. 9.

pending for months owing solely to his lack of discipline.[11]But does that make him an escapist at the end of the novel, when he quits his job? Dnyate's argument as quoted above tends to claim so. The writer of the present work would like to argue that it is not so. The conflict is not between two *ashrama*s but at the level of ideologies. This would become clear gradually in the pages that follow.

The novel begins by introducing Krishna's life as a teacher of English in the Albert Mission College. The life of the college and the boarding is described. This is followed by the episode when Krishna receives a letter from his father urging him to quit the hostel and settle down in a house with his wife and child, as per the wish of his father-in-law. Krishna finds a home, and proceeds accordingly. Thus, this phase of the novel, as John Thieme argues, is symbolic of his complete entry into the *garhasthya ashrama*.[12]

A strong bond exists between Krishna and Susila, and Krishna is certainly infatuated to a large extent by the latter's feminine charms, as is borne out by the symbol of the jasmine. But, as Gideon Nteere M'Marete points out:

> Narayan is too much of a realist to give the reader the impression that Krishnan's relationship with his wife… is jasmine-scented all through with no ups and downs…[13]

The first time Krishna has a disagreement with Susila, is with respect to the quantity of groceries.[14] The second time they fall out is when Susila sells an old clock which was useless but Krishna's favourite and incurs her husband's wrath.[15] They even stop talking for a couple of days. It is interesting to note that under these circumstances, after the initial shock and distress, Susila is the one who keeps her calm and metes out her duties properly, while Krishna is upset and repentant.[16] However, Krishna soon gets over his anger, and the chapter ends on a happy note as the two reconcile after watching a movie show. This leads us to two conclusions: one is that Susila is far

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[11] Ibid., p. 10.

[12] Thieme, p. 57.

[13] M'Marete, "Krishnan's Jasmine-Scented Quest" in Geoffrey Kain ed., *R. K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993, p. 39.

[14]*The English Teacher*, pp. 52-55.

[15] Ibid., p. 66 ff.

[16] Ibid., pp. 70-71.

more in control of her passions and senses. Secondly, Krishna is given to occasional moments of anger but has a softer side as well. He is endowed with the quality of forgiveness, which is a necessary element for a *karmayogin*.

The story takes a new turn when Krishna's father writes to him, offering financial support to buy a house in Malgudi. Krishna is impressed by the arrangements of a house, but when Susila goes to the backyard and enters into the bathroom, a loathsome fly sits on her lips, and she is disgusted. She is momentarily bewildered and confused, and apparently fails to open the door and come out. With Krishna's assistance she does come out finally, but her unpleasant experience keeps haunting her constantly. She soon falls ill, and eventually dies. Susila's death is the turning point in the novel in the sense that it is this blow and Krishna's attempts to come to terms with this crisis that goes on to make him the ideal *karmasannyasin*. It must be noted that all his care for Susila when the latter is in what will be her death-bed, is not an example of selfless service, because it is directed towards an entity with whom Krishna is deeply and personally attached. However, this experience is a lesson for him as it puts to the test his sincerity as a husband.

In this context, we may note that the mythical subtext running through this novel is the story of Savitri. In the myth, Savitri's devotion to her husband Satyavan impresses Yama the god of death so much that he restores Satyavan to life. While Savitri is deified as an ideal wife who succeeds in bringing back her husband from the dead by the dint of her *satitva*, it is often overlooked that Savitri's conversation with Yama is replete with emotions which are personal. In William Buck's abridged English version of the *Mahabharata*, the story runs for six pages, and the boons that Savitri asks for are presented in the following sequence: restoration of her father-in-law's eyesight, restoration of his kingdom and birth of a hundred children to him. When Yama urges her to ask something for herself, she asks for a hundred children for herself, which by default means that her husband has to be restored to life, as a woman can have children only by her husband. Yama is impressed by her conjugal loyalty and releases Satyavan's deceased soul from bondage.[17] What is significant is that the first three boons that Savitri asks for are *nishkama* only from her own perspective but not so given the fact that the person to benefit from them is her father-in-law. Moreover, her decision to follow Satyavan to the abode of death is an expression of her wifely virtue. However, for a woman, tradition claims that selfless devotion to the husband (and by

[17] Buck, *Mahabharata*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004 rprnt, *Mahabharata*, pp. 182-88.

extension in-laws) is indeed the ideal *karma*. We shall discuss more about this aspect of *karma* in a later chapter, but here it would suffice to point out that the labeling of a *karma* as *nishkama* depends to a great extent on perspective and point of view. D. S. Dewari's incisive analysis of the novel with reference to its mythical subtext brings out fascinating parallels but also as many contrasts. While Dewari admits that Susila's death and Krishna's subsequent pursuit of Susila in her spiritual form parallel Satyavan's death and Savitri's pursuit of Yama, he also points out a major and certainly clever manipulation on Narayan's part. While Susila never returns in her former living self, the Headmaster, whose class is attended by Krishna's child Leela, is the one whose astrologer's prediction of imminent death is falsified. After a night of agony, he is discovered to be living by both Krishna and his own wife and children, but he refuses to be a part of his former family, thus considering his past self to be dead. While Susila continues to exist in a spiritual form, the Headmaster continues to live in the real world but as a completely changed personality. Dewari writes:

> Savitri in the myth and Krishnan in the novel wholeheartedly devote themselves to their pursuits. Savitri sees that death is only a continuation of life. Similarly, Krishnan hears from his dead wife. Besides, the death, for which the headmaster calmly waits, does not come, and the headmaster treat himself as dead and his later life as new birth. So far as death is viewed as transformation of life, Savitri of the myth diversifies into two fictional characters, Krishnan and the headmaster.[18]

While Dewari's argument is acceptable, he, however, fails to notice the significance of the crucial difference between the headmaster's return and Susila's return. Susila's return is not in a human form, and there seems to be a philosophical dimension to the entire process of Krishna's attempt to communicate with her and eventually feel her. A. V. Krishna Rao has made attempts to read into the entire thing an allegory of salvation as conceived of in the *Vishishtadvaita* doctrine.[19] Similarly, S. P. Ranchan and G. R. Kataria are inclined to look at Krishna's quest as a psycho-*tantric* journey. Ranchan and Kataria take a step further and argue:

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[18] Dewari, *The Use of Myth in R. K. Narayan's Novels*, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001, p. 36.

[19] Krishna Rao quoted in Dr. Dipika Sahai, "Marital Bliss, Desolation and Mystic Ecstasy in *The English Teacher*" in Chhote Lal Khatri ed., *R. K. Narayan: Reflections and Re-evaluation*, New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006,p. 53.

> It is more like the union envisaged in the concept of *ardhanarishwara*, where Shiva shares his body with Parvati.[20]

However, Ranchan and Kataria and Dewari, all accept that Susila's death brings about a rupture not just to the plot but to Krishna's very being. The present writer would take this as a point of departure and make an attempt to establish that Susila's transformation from the human to the spiritual heralds Krishna's own transformation into a *karmayogin*. A parallel from the *Gita* might be helpful here. It would probably not be out of place to see a connection between Krishna's loss of the human Susila and his rediscovery of Susila as an object of spiritual fervour and Arjuna's new mode of perception of Krishna not as his long-time peer but as God himself. The passage in the *Gita* where Arjuna reorients his attitude towards Krishna is as follows:

> [Arjuna says] How rashly have I called You comrade, for so I thought of You… Sometimes in jest I showed You disrespect as we played or rested or sat or ate at table… I crave your pardon…[21]

A probable parallel in the novel is the episode when in one of the sittings, Krishna asks Susila how she spends most of her time, and receives the following reply:

> "Time in your sense does not exist for us," she replied. "Our life is one of thought and experience. Thought is something which has solidarity and power, and as in all existence ours is also a life of aspiration, striving, and joy. A considerable portion of our state is taken up in meditation, and our greatest ecstasy is in feeling the Divine Light flooding us…"[22]

It must also be remembered that it is after these sittings that Krishna is able to slowly get over his dejected existence. In one such encounter, Susila admonishes Krishna for having destroyed the letters that they had written to each other and Krishna apologizes for what he had done in a fit of dejection and rage.[23] Again, in the immediate aftermath of Susila's demise, we find Krishna getting

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[20] S. P. Ranchan and G. R. Kataria, "Transformation via the Feminine in R. K. Narayan's Krishnan, Raju, and Jagan" in *Journal of South Asian Literature,* Vol. 22, No. 2, Essays on Indian Writing in English (Summer, Fall 1987), p. 8.

[21] *Gita*, XI.41-42; R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, p. 316.

[22] *The English Teacher*, p. 193.

[23] Ibid., pp. 173-4.

over-reactive and angry for trivial reasons. One such instance is when he gets angry with his students for complaining that they could not hear his lecture. He confesses his apathy towards his work:

> It was a small class and I could have easily established law and order, but I was too weary to exert myself… A terrible fatigue and inertia had come over me these days and it seemed to me all the same whether they listened or made a noise or whether they understood what I said or felt baffled, or even whether they heard it at all or not.[24]

However, after a few sittings, when finally he is able to communicate satisfactorily with Susila's spirit, he is a changed man. He seems to have found joy in his work:

> Nowadays I went about my work with a light heart. I felt as if a dead load had been lifted. The day seemed full of possibilities of surprise and joy. At home I devoted myself to my studies more energetically. The sense of futility was leaving me. I attended to my work earnestly. All morning I sat preparing my day's lectures.[25]

Again, later in the book, when Krishna's communication with the spirit world is thwarted due to several reasons for some weeks, he is gripped by an inner unrest, and rudely chides a brilliant student who had a genuine query with no intent to flaunt his intelligence.[26] It is at this point that the medium writes to him asking him to see if absent sittings work for him. The letter also contains valuable instructions regarding mind control and attempts to communicate with the other world without the aid of a mediator. Krishna's first attempt was at night and it meets with sheer failure. This is followed by an instruction from Susila's side to try it in the morning. It is only after this intervention that he enters into true *abhyasa*, which, in his case, is a desperate effort at mind-control. Susila remains the object of his concentration. At times, Susila's responses seem to be almost like the vigilance of a *guru*/deity. To quote a passage:

> I tell you I can feel your thoughts even when you are not exactly sitting for development. Even when you just think of me anywhere and everywhere, on the road, at home, or on the river-bank when a streak of

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[24] Ibid., p. 154.

[25] Ibid., p. 178.

[26] Ibid., p. 224.

moonlight lights the water surface, and you think of me, I feel it and know your thoughts, but development is necessary for the reverse process to take place, that is, for you to feel my thoughts.[27]

Thus it seems that the Krishna-Arjuna dialogue in the *Gita*, with Arjuna's initial dejection and confusions persisting throughout Krishna's discourse, up to the final enlightenment, seems to be replicated in Krishna's pursuit of Susila in the novel. The most crucial difference, however, is that while Arjuna is granted a vision of the cosmic form in the middle of the text, which leaves him considerably shaken, Krishna in the novel realizes his vision of Susila at the very end, and finds the experience blissful. Thus, it must be noted that the relation between Krishna and Susila does not correspond exactly to the Arjuna-Krishna relationship in the epic. Apart from the obvious changes in the mode of the relationship and the gender of the object of devotion, the more important innovation lies in the fact that while in the epic, Arjuna's preceptor urges him to conform to the given task, Krishna in the novel is propelled to quit his job. But does that make him an escapist? We have already quoted Dnyate's opinion regarding this. Thieme sees a 'cultural politics' involved in the plot, and finds in Krishna's act a transgression of his Tamil *Brahmin* identity. He draws a parallel between Krishna's act and the headmaster's renunciation, and finds in the latter a 'retreat' from the 'responsibility of *grihastya asrama*', empowered by a 'sentimentalization of childhood.'[28]

The present writer, however, would like to argue that while Thieme's argument may be valid in the headmaster's case, in Krishna's case, the issue is not one of retreating from one's *ashrama* or identity. Rather, the question is one of *svadharma*. What is Krishna's logic behind quitting the job, which he never liked in the first place? As the novel is in the first person, we can see how Krishna's response has changed from the first to the eighth chapter. He has finally realized that his personal dislike for his work has a deeper source, which arises from a sense of cultural anxiety. While in the earlier pages, Krishna seems to put forth personal reasons for his dislike, in the final chapter, his realization seems to be epiphanic, and has deep overtones of social critique:

I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind. This education had reduced us to a nation of

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[27] Ibid., p. 237.

[28] Thieme, p. 66.

morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage.[29]

The passage, more than a postcolonial critique of the education system, also reflects Narayan's own return to his native roots. In case of both Narayan and Krishna, the retreat is a deliberate act of returning to one's *svadharma*. Krishna's *svadharma* does not demand that he give up his love for English literature (as is evident from his conversation with Brown), just as Narayan never writes in any language other than English. It is the mode of education and the manner in which English lessons are imparted which they find problematic, and their retreat can never be dubbed as escapist. It is important to note that Krishna joins the headmaster in the latter's initiative to educate the children innovatively. Thus, Krishna is not moving into a different *ashrama* either. It is this very act which makes him an ideal *karmasannyasin* and only then does he find peace, and is granted a complete vision of Susila.

Mr. Sampath: The Printer of Malgudi

The next novel which we are going to take up is *Mr. Sampath: The Printer of Malgudi*. Even though named after Mr. Sampath, the story begins with Mr. Srinivas, and the titular character is introduced much later. A close reading of the novel would reveal the fact that it is only when Sampath meets and interacts with Srinivas that we come to know of his whereabouts and actions, and it is through Srinivas's responses and reactions that the subtleties of the latter's character are brought into light. Thus this novel has two protagonists: Srinivas and Sampath, and the plot develops through the interactions between the two. Srinivas is a *sattvika* character while Sampath is a *rajasika* character. Sampath appears to be the first *rajasika* character in Narayan's novels, and remains a trend-setter for a number of characters to come, especially Margayya in *The Financial Expert* and Raju in *The Guide*.

The novel has elicited diverse and very significant critical reviews from Narayan scholars, especially V. S. Naipaul. Naipaul sees in Srinivas a passive character given to idealism and nonchalance. For him, Srinivas is a caricature of the degenerate Gandhian for whom nonviolence is not a call to action. The passage merits full quotation:

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[29]*The English Teacher*, p. 270.

> For Srinivas nonviolence isn't a form of action, a quickener of social conscience. It is only a means of securing an undisturbed calm; it is nondoing, noninterference, social indifference. It merges with the ideal of self-realization, truth to one's identity. These modern-sounding words, which reconcile Srinivas to the art's predicament, disguise an acceptance of *karma*, the Hindu killer, the Hindu calm, which tells us that we pay in this life for what we have done in past lives: so that everything we see is just and balanced, and the distress we see is to be relished as religious theatre, a reminder of our duty to ourselves, our future lives.
>
> Srinivas's quietism- compounded of *karma*, nonviolence, and a vision of history as an extended religious fable- is in fact a form of self-cherishing in the midst of a general distress. It is parasitic. It depends on the continuing activity of others, the trains running, the presses printing, the rupees arriving from somewhere. It needs the world, but it surrenders the organization of the world to others. It is a religious response to worldly defeat.[30]

Thus, for Naipaul, *karma* itself is a limiting concept which has cast Indians into inaction, and Srinivas is the fictional epitome of this attitude. Naipaul's observation, however, has been called into question by other authorities, Ranga Rao being the most notable among them, who are willing to see in Srinivas a man of action and an ideal *karmayogin* who knows how to balance *karma* and *jnana*. Rao admits that Srinivas is self-centred at the beginning of the novel, but as the action proceeds, he is made to interact with the world around him, and thus the novel is a fable which narrates the process of perfection in *karmayoga*. In Naipaul's own words:

> The novelist engages again and again in a purposeful course-correction; he keeps his 'self'-centred hero tethered to this here and now, this world. To interpret this process as a mere comic device is to miss the fictional art. One may be preoccupied with the self in search of self-knowledge; self-realization may be a worthy aim in the Hindu way of life; all the same, one is best anchored, at a certain stage in one's life, in one's family, personal relationships, his society.[31]

Rao is of the opinion that Srinivas is the perfection of the *sattvika* hero and has his precursors in Chandran and Krishna.[32] And he concludes:

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[30] Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977, p. 25.

[31] Ranga Rao, p. 101.

[32] Ibid., p. 98.

> Narayan's thematic preoccupation with sattvic humanity is finally fulfilled with Srinivas opting self *and* society: for karma yoga, from the self-centrism he is so full of at the beginning of the novel to the social philosophy of the Gita: Service to Man is Service to God.[33]

Critics other than Ranga Rao have also made attempts at analyzing the plot and characters of the novel with reference to Hindu philosophy. For instance, Chitra Sankaran has tried to apply the pattern of the *Yogavasishtha* in order to study Srinivas's development. Sankaran classifies the development of Sankaran's character into seven stages, termed as '*bhumika*' by the *Yogavasishtha*. The first six stages are as follows: 'awareness of ignorance';[34]'genesis of distance for transitory pleasures';[35]'feeling of non-attachment to the objects of sense.[36];'positive feeling of reality within';[37]'giving up of the attachments to the objective world';[38]'a state of pure bliss- a state in which all concept of time and space seems to recede.'[39] The final stage is described by Sankaran as follows: 'this state need not necessarily be interpreted as a state beyond the earth-bound state. This perhaps enables one to conceive of a mystical state as being comprehensible in human, hence novelistic terms. The individual in the seventh stage is in the world but not *of* the world.'[40]

Having identified the parallels between these stages and the mental states of Srinivas in the course of the narrative, Sankaran also makes a crucial difference between the final stage of perfection as conceived of in the *Yogavasishtha* as opposed to its conception in the *Gita*. Sankaran writes:

> The doctrine of salvation as prescribed by *Yogavasishtha* is significantly different in one other aspect in that unlike the ideal of the perfected man in the *Bhagavad Gita* who is conceived of as one acts in a disinterested or unattached manner, here he is depicted as one who enters fully in the life of man mingling

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[33] Ibid., p. 118.

[34] Sankaran, *Myth Connections: The Use of Hindu Myths and Philosophies in R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 1995, p. 163.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., p. 165.

[37] Ibid., 166.

[38] Ibid., p. 173.

[39] Ibid., p. 175.

[40] Ibid., p. 179.

with his fellow men in joy and sorrow yet is not overcome by these experiences. In *Mr. Sampath*, we find that Narayan is trying to depict just such a man in Srinivas.[41]

This is not the place to get into a full-fledged comparative study between the *Yogavasishtha* and the *Gita*, but so far as Sankaran's argument is concerned with regard to the novel, it is untenable on two grounds. First of all, the doctrine of *nishkama karma* as described in the *Gita does not* demand the aspirant to withdraw from the joys and sorrows of life. He too 'enters fully in the life of man mingling with his fellow men in joy and sorrow yet is not overcome by these experiences.' The greatest example from within the *Mahabharata* is perhaps Arjuna himself, the recipient of the doctrine. Till the last few moments of his life he mingles with his brothers and wives and other relatives, shares their joys and sorrows, fights on Yudhishthira's behalf for the horse sacrifice, apart from acting as a guardian for the surviving Yadavas after Krishna's death. This is no different from the view upheld by the *Yogavasishtha*. Secondly, Sankaran, brilliant and exhaustive as her analysis is, undermines one major aspect of the novel: the subtext of the myth of the burning of Madana. The myth is introduced in the course of the film project in chapters five through nine. The sequence of events is as follows: As an immediate aftermath of the collapse of *The Banner*, a void engulfs Srinivas's life. Sampath assures a despondent Srinivas that *The Banner* would be resurrected once enough money is arranged while also revealing that a friend of his is about to make a film of which Sampath is also to be a part. Srinivas is roped in as the script writer, and after much debate, all agree that the plot of the film should be based on the mythological story of Shiva's burning of Kama. Srinivas starts working on his script and soon gets absorbed in his new assignment. Ravi, too, joins the studio, but in the accounts section and not in the arts section. As the recruitments for the film are on, Sampath identifies an uncanny resemblance between one of the applicants for the role of Parvati and the girl in Ravi's portrait, one who, as Ravi claims, used to live in Malgudi, and one in whom Ravi is interested. However, after the selection, Srinivas comes to know from Sampath that despite the resemblances, the aspiring actress Shanti is not the girl whom Ravi is looking for. Sampath also mentions that she has turned out to be a cousin of Sampath, and there is no possibility of her being the girl who lived in Car Street because this is her first visit to Malgudi. The renowned theater-cum-film actor V. L. G., famous for playing Shiva a number of times, is given the role of Shiva, while Shanti is assigned that of Parvati (Parvathi). A man with sunken cheeks is to be the one to play

[41] Ibid., p. 180.

Kama. Srinivas is not satisfied with the cast but prefers to maintain his silence. As the novel proceeds, Sampath shifts Ravi to the art department as per Srinivas's plea, but requests that Srinivas should ask Ravi to keep away from Shanti in return for the said favour, thus revealing his own interest in Shanti. Srinivas notices a growing closeness between Sampath and Shanti. V. L. G. quits the film midway because his demand of extra payment for more shots is rejected, and Sampath himself decides to play Shiva. He and Shanti come physically very close during one of the acts, and Ravi fails to control his rage, and bursts upon the set. He grabs Shanti and injures Sampath, and to add to the agony of the people, the lights go off at this moment. Everything around is in a state of pandemonium for a moment, with people running haphazardly to catch Ravi and rescue Shanti. Finally Shanti is spotted, and Ravi is found hiding beneath a table. Ravi is beaten senseless by De Mello and later on handed over to the police. The crucial passage in the ninth chapter is as follows:

> The camera was switched on. Each man was at his post. The music squeezed all sense out of people and only made them want to gyrate with arms around one another. Shiva went forward, step by step; Parvathi advanced, step by step: he was still in a trance with his eyes shut, but his arms were open to receive her. Shanti's brazier could be seen straining under her thin clothes. She bent back to fit herself into the other's arms… If the camera ran on for another minute the shot would be over. They wanted to cut this shot first where Shiva's arms went around the diaphanous lady's hips but it was cut even a few seconds earlier in an unexpected manner. A piercing cry, indistinguishable, unworded, like an animal's, was suddenly heard, and before they could see where it originated, Ravi was seen whizzing past the others like a bullet, knocking down the people in his way. He was next seen on the set, rushing between Shiva's extended arms and Parvathi, and knocking Shiva aside with such violence that he fell amidst his foliage in Kailas in a most ungodly manner. Next minute they saw Parvathi struggling in the arms of Ravi, who was trying to kiss her on her lips and carry her off…[42]

Sankaran *does* mention the myth of the burning of Madana but surprisingly enough refrains from elaborating on it. She sees in the film project a fictional parallel with the world of *maya* in Hindu philosophy. She then emphasizes the fact that in the description (and indeed throughout the ninth chapter), the human actors and the gods whose roles they are playing, have been identified. Thus, 'Shiva' and 'Sampath' are used interchangeably, and so are 'Parvathi' and 'Shanti'. Sankaran observes:

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[42] *Mr. Sampath*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2009 rprnt, pp. 188-89.

It seems inevitable that in the decadent society portrayed, where the mythology is perverted, the Goddess is powerless to protect herself against someone as inept as Ravi… The concluding comment on this section hints at the inadequacy of the Gods to regenerate this dying society.[43]

Other critics such as Ranga Rao, Ramesh Dnyate and Patrick Swinden have also seen in the staging scene of this myth a topsy-turvy worldview, and emphasized the aftermath of the debacle as the consequence of the failure on the part of Sampath and Ravi to burn down 'Kama'. Moreover, Sampath's failure to rise above his infatuation even when he is playing the role of Shiva, has been explained as blasphemous.[44] However, these authorities have overlooked one aspect of the myth, and that is crucial for our purpose here. While it cannot be denied that Kama represents lust, which is a degenerate form of love, represented by the subsequent bond between Shiva and Parvati after Parvati succeeds in winning Siva's heart through her austerities, such an explanation limits the nature of Kama to only one aspect. The present writer would like to argue that in the myth, Madana is performing *nishkama karma* through his act. The following few paragraphs would be devoted to an analysis of this element.

There are several versions of the myth, one of the earliest and shortest being the one available in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.[45] In this version, Kama is said to have been motivated by evil desires to aim his arrow at Siva. A later, evolved and elaborate version is to be found in Kalidasa's poem *Kumarasambhavam*, and also with some differences, in the *Siva Purana*. By Narayan's own admission, while summarizing the myth in *Gods, Demons and Others*, he resorted to the *Siva Purana* version. A close look at this version brings out several interesting points. First of all, in this version, Kama/Madana was not motivated by any evil desire to put Siva's austerity to test, but was motivated by a desire to help his master Indra. Indra had requested him to kindle in Siva a desire for Parvati so that a son is quickly born. This son was destined to be the killer of Tarakasura, the enemy of gods and humans. Thus, Kama, by his attempt to jeopardize Siva's austerity, is only performing an act which would in the long run destroy evil and be beneficial in the cosmic perspective. The

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[43] Sankaran, p. 196.

[44] Ranga Rao, p. 116; Dnyate, p. 77; Swinden, "Gods, Demons and Others" in M. K. Bhatnagar ed., New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2008, p. 64.

[45] I. 23.9-15.

interesting point in this version is that while Kama is nevertheless punished by Siva for his supposed misdeed, he is resurrected *within* Siva. To quote from the text:

> O gods, I am delighted. I shall resuscitate Kama within myself. He will be one of my Ganas and will sport about always.[46]

Thus it is evident that Kama's punishment is only superficial, and by performing the apparent mischief, Kama finally attains an identity with Siva. The fact that Siva forgives Kama is because of the absence of any vested self-interest on the latter's part in meting out his act. It is also important to note that the very same section of *Siva Purana* adds that Kama will regain his body in human form as the son of Krishna. Thus, after his original body has been burnt to ashes, Kama acquired a new bifurcated identity: identity/relation with Siva and identity/relation with Krishna/Vishnu. In either case, Kama is symbolic of the playful, Dionysiac aspect of the higher deity, while the latter represents the transcendental aspect. It is this bifurcated existence that is central to a proper understanding of the novel, in which the protagonist is divided into two separate human beings: Srinivas and Sampath. It is not Srinivas or Sampath alone who lends meaning to the plot, but it is in the interactions and encounters between the two that the nuances of the narrative are to be identified.

Critics have already suggested that Srinivas and Sampath play foils to each other, and while Srinivas remains a tranquil presence behind the stage of worldly activities, Sampath is his opposite: a man of the world, versatile and talented, a manipulator of events, and given to a preoccupation with the senses. Sampath himself admits that he can 'do every bit of work' himself, 'including gumming and pasting.'[47] But such a binary of 'inaction' and 'action' does not work, as has been noted by Rao. The present writer would like to argue that the responsibility of *nishkama karma* is equally shared by Srinivas and Sampath, though, both have their weak points, and both falter at certain points.

To begin with, within the frame of the *Bhagavadgita*/*Mahabharata*, the Srinivas-Sampath relationship can be approached with reference to two different models. The first one is that of the bond between Arjuna and Krishna. If Srinivas, the main protagonist, is symbolic of Arjuna, then Sampath is evocative of Krishna in his repeated role as the *deus ex machina*. At another level, the pair is evocative of two different aspects of Krishna alone: Srinivas of his sagacious aspect as the

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[46] J. L. Shastri ed., *The Siva Purana*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970, Vol. II, p. 548.

[47] *Mr. Sampath*, p. 21.

unfailing, unperturbed Supreme transcendental Self of the *Gita*, and Sampath of the human aspect as the earthly diplomat and manipulator of the Kurukshetra war. In this context, we may also note that both 'Srinivas' and 'Sampath' are epithets of Krishna/Vishnu. For our purpose, however, the first model, that is, the bond between Arjuna and Krishna, is of greater significance. In her exhaustive analysis of the character and role of Arjuna in the epic *Mahabharata*, Ruth Katz has argued that Arjuna's relationship with Krishna can be approached from two different angles. First and foremost, Arjuna and Krishna are friends. Secondly, Arjuna is Krishna's devotee. The first one depicts a 'mutually supportive companionship of equals',[48] while in the latter, there exists a hierarchy. Kevin McGrath has pointed out how the nature of the camaraderie between the other epic pair of friends, Duryodhana and Karna, is conditional on each other's benefits, but how the friendship between Arjuna and Krishna is unconditional.[49]

According to the present author, Sampath's role in the novel parallels that of Krishna in the *Mahabharata* in at least three ways. First of all, in the *Sabhaparvan* of the epic, Krishna appears of his own volition and befriends Arjuna. Despite the fact that Krishna and the Pandavas were cousins, their friendship begins here, and the Pandavas win an unexpected ally. In *Mr. Sampath* too, Sampath makes his appearance suddenly and almost in an unexpected way when Srinivas is facing a crisis. Narayan narrates how Srinivas had almost decided to give up all ideas of printing his work in Malgudi' after meeting with repeated refusals from printers for 'nearly a week.'[50] In a sudden positive turn of events, Srinivas spots Sampath at Bombay Anand Bhavan and is attracted to his voice and personality. Sampath is described as the cynosure of the scene and his sense of humour is stressed by the author.[51] Sampath's amiable response is all the more arresting. He declares unequivocally that there 'are no strangers for Sampath', and also emphasizes the fact that Srinivas's name and identity are not important for him, his business being 'keeping people happy', whoever they be.[52] Sampath thus appears to be a Messianic figure who believes in the altruistic ideal of *lokasangraha*. Sampath introduces Srinivas to Mr. Soma Samudram (Somu), the District Board

[48] Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna is, There is Victory*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990, p. 84.

[49] McGrath, *The Sanskrit Hero: Karna in Epic Mahabharata*, Boston: Brill, 2004,p. 113 ff.

[50]*Mr. Sampath, p. 65.*

[51] Ibid., p. 66.

[52] Ibid., p. 68.

President, who is another customer of Sampath. From the interaction between Sampath and Somu, one can guess Sampath's cleverness, dedication to work, and also his capacity for verbal artistry.[53]Notwithstanding the trickster element in his character, he remains an almost divinely ordained solution for every crisis in Srinivas's life and career. He comes forward and declares his unconditional dedication to Srinivas and his cause, which binds Srinivas with him in a bond of gratitude:

> His help was invaluable to Srinivas. He felt that he was being more and more bound to him by ties of gratitude. The printer declared: "… Well, you think, *The Banner* is yours. It isn't. I view it as my own."
>
> He acted up to this principle. In the weeks preceding the launching of *The Banner* he abandones all his normal work: he set aside a cooperative society balance-sheet, four wedding invitations, and a small volume of verse, all of which were urgent…[54]

Sampath's role as the *deus ex machina* is also evident in the support he lends in acquiring the permission for *The Banner*. His wit, verbal artistry and presence of mind are at play when the clerk asks if there were plans on the part of the editor to promote sedition and libel.[55]

Sampath's dedication towards Srinivas is also evident in the episode where Srinivas and Sampath take upon their own shoulders the task of printing the unfinished issue of *The Banner* and finally make it to the station in the dead of night, to deliver the bundles. This is an exceptionally dark phase in Srinivas's career as *The Banner* collapses. Srinivas finds that Sampath, without his consent, had put a note within each copy of the magazine mentioning the suspension of further issues. Srinivas is hurt but he silently acknowledges Sampath's presence of mind.[56]

It may be argued that in all that Sampath is doing for *The Banner*, he has his own interests as well because the collapse of *The Banner* would mean a decline in his own fortunes too. However, the interesting point here is that had Sampath been solely motivated by the desire to rectify his precarious economic condition, he would not have come forward to assist Srinivas when the claimants of Srinivas's house-owner's property started bothering the tenants for money following the

[53] Ibid., p. 69 ff.

[54] Ibid., p. 21.

[55] Ibid., p. 23.

[56] Ibid., pp. 73-77.

demise of the house-owner. Sampath takes the matter in his own hands, brings all the claimants to the old man's property together at Srinivas's office, and cleverly uses their mutual competition to the advantage of the tenants. The case ends up in court, to the relief of Srinivas, while the house is repaired and its arrangements improved by the relatives of the old man in their zeal to prove their respective worth as the rightful candidate to inherit the property.[57] Similarly, Sampath is the active agent in pursuit of a way out in the aftermath of the collapse of *The Banner*, and once he learns about the film project, he duly remembers Srinivas and ropes him in for the project as the script writer. It is important to note what he tells Srinivas while letting him know of the project:

> It's my duty to see that *The Banner* is out again. Please wait. I will see that the journal is set up on a lino machine and printed off a rotary and dispatched in truck-loads every week. For this we need a lot of money. Don't you doubt it for a moment.[58]

What is *nishkama karma* if not this? Sampath is indeed performing a selfless act here. However, the crucial difference here lies in the fact that instead of a higher spiritual goal, his motivation stems from his unwavering dedication to his friend. It is also important to note that his assurances have an implicitly divine appeal, and are at times reminiscent of the assurances given by Krishna to Arjuna in the *Gita*. Srinivas's response to Sampath also seems to occur at two different levels: friendship and admiration. What starts as gratitude for Sampath's assistance gradually develops into a full-fledged adoration of Sampath's talents. Srinivas is especially surprised at the latter's versatility when the latter volunteers to substitute the actor for the role of Siva.[59]However, it is important to note that the positive element in Sampath's character is not the only side to his being, and his erotic side has as much to do with him and Srinivas (and hence the plot). Throughout the novel, it is never made clear whether Shanti is indeed the girl who haunts Ravi's memory, and much of the decisive moments in the novel depend on the tussle between Ravi and Sampath over Shanti. Most importantly, Sampath is a married man with children, and his actions evoke suspicions in his wife's mind, who complains to Srinivas. The novel leaves us confused as to who among Ravi and Sampath parallels Siva and who parallels Kama. The present writer would, however, like to argue that eroticism is one of the defining traits of almost all major Hindu deities (barring exceptions such as

[57] Ibid., pp. 169-72.

[58] Ibid., p. 89.

[59] Ibid., p. 185.

Rama), and especially Indra, Krishna and Siva, who sometimes go to the length of wooing married women, and also end up irking their own wives due to their disloyalty. In the last chapter, Srinivas is face to face with Sampath for one last time, and Sampath initially fabricates a story of his elopement with Shanti to the Mempi Hills, and his subsequent return following the latter's panic at the chilling howls of jackals and the sight of scary eyes of predatory creatures. Upon realizing that Srinivas has understood that Sampath is not serious, the latter reveals that they did go to the Mempi Hills, but Shanti did not behave madly even though she was panic-stricken at the sight of the panther eyes. They finally got down from the hills after three or four days when it became unbearable for her to stand the predatory creatures. They had planned to catch the train to Koppal at 5 A. M. but as they sat in the platform through the night, Sampath fell asleep, and Shanti took the opportunity to book a ticket for Madras and board the 11 P. M. train.[60] A mythical parallel of Sampath's act could be found in Krishna's abduction of Rukmini. However, in Sampath's case, the event does not end in the anticipated fulfillment and reads more like a parody of the myth.

Sampath then explains that the film has to be dropped for the time being, and also hints that he is going to abscond because otherwise Mr. Somu and Sohan Lal, who hold him responsible for the loss, would take legal action against him. This act of absconding may be taken to parallel two mythical stories: first of all, the burning and subsequent invisibility of Kama; secondly, Krishna's act of retiring from the world after destroying his own relatives. In the first case, Sampath's disappearance seems to be a retirement following the fulfillment of his *karma*. If this link bears out, then the entire journey of Srinivas from the beginning of the novel seems to be a narrative of *abhyasa*. From his nonchalance towards his family and financial stability at the beginning of the novel, where he is immersed in studying the *Upanishad*s, he gradually develops as a man of the world, but in the process also grasps the true nature of *nishkama karma*. His early attempt at selfless action is evident in his political commentaries published in *The Banner*. This can be taken as an example of *lokasangraha*. The best instance of disinterested action which he performs is caring for Ravi after bringing him out of jail. He not only ensures that Ravi receives good care and attention, but also hands over money to Ravi's little sister. Again, it is he who arranges the *jutka* to facilitate Ravi's journey to the Sailam temple upon the latter's mother's request. It must be noted that he does all this despite initial protests from his wife and severe reprimands, insults and cynicism from Ravi's

[60] Ibid., pp. 212-18.

father. Despite the indictments heaped on him by the latter, he assures Ravi's mother that he will take care of the latter's food for the few days that she is staying away from home.

If, however, Sampath's disappearance is considered to be a parallel of Krishna's retirement from the world, then Srinivas seems to be evocative of Arjuna here. After Krishna's demise, the responsibility to look after and escort the former's kinsmen (and especially his wives) falls on Arjuna. Similarly, it requires no guess to assert that upon Sampath's temporary disappearance, Srinivas would be the one to shoulder the responsibility of the latter's family. He has already gone through the stage of *abhyasa*, and this impending act is going to be yet another in his series of disinterested actions. However, it would be unjust to ignore some crucial differences between Arjuna's predicament after Krishna's demise, and Srinivas's after Sampath's disappearance. First of all, Sampath's is not a case of demise but that of absconding. It is evident that this phase is going to be temporary, and Sampath is soon going to resurface with the help of his wit, and handle his family. Secondly, in the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna loses all his power once Krishna retires and it is made evident that he is nothing without Krishna. The two friends are not even granted a last meeting by the epic poet; by the time Arjuna arrives in Dwaraka, Krishna is already dead. In a sharp contrast, Srinivas and Sampath have a friendly last meeting:

> While turning down Anderson Lane he looked back for a second and saw far off the glow of a cigarette end in the square where he had left Sampath; it was like a ruby set in the night. He raised his hand, flourished a final farewell, and set his face homeward.[61]

We are left to wonder if the farewell is final after all. Sampath has disappeared but the glow of his cigarette proves his continuing existence within Srinivas, who, however, does not need Sampath's external assistance any more. His association with Sampath has left him wiser, self-reliant and more competent, unlike Arjuna who is rendered absolutely powerless following the demise of Krishna. It is here that Narayan makes a complete departure from the epic pattern, but in the process upholds the doctrine of *karma*.

The Man-eater of Malgudi

[61] Ibid., p. 219.

Between *Mr. Sampath* and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* stand three novels: *The Financial Expert*, *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Guide*. *The Financial Expert* takes the character of the trickster introduced in *Mr. Sampath* to new heights. However, Margayya remains a god-fearing man who believes in superstitions and traditional values, and the generational conflict portrayed in the novel seems to be a precursor to the conflict between Jagan and Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets*. *Waiting for the Mahatma* is the story of the supposedly Gandhian revolutionary Sriram. Therefore, an analysis of this novel is reserved for a subsequent chapter. *The Guide* is a classic picaresque novel about Raju, who is made out to be a saint. Raju, again, is a trickster in the mode of Sampath, but unlike Sampath or Margayya, his deceit is aimed at the gratification of his own self-interest, and is not beneficial for other people. We are going to look at his character in the chapter on *sannyasa*. This novel also has a strong female character, Rosie, the analysis of whose character is going to be taken up in the chapter on women. Next in the line is *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, hailed as Narayan's most mature work.

It is doubtful whether any other novel by Narayan, barring *The Guide*, has elicited as much critical attention as *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. This attention is especially accounted for by Narayan's deft use of the mythical subtext. While the identification of possible subtexts in the other novels has been largely speculative, for this novel, there is no room for any doubt as Narayan himself has openly admitted the employment of the mythical motif. The story centres round Nataraj who runs a printing house in Malgudi. In his perfectly harmonious Malgudi world, the taxidermist Vasu makes a sudden intervention and jeopardizes this harmony. Vasu is a man of massive built, and is characterized by the demonic features of pride, cruelty, lust, greed for power and money, and cynicism towards traditional values. The story is about Vasu's journey as an *asur*ic force in Malgudi and his subsequent end at his own hands. The myth that the novel is modeled upon is that of Bhasmasura, who had the power to reduce anybody to ashes by placing his hand on the latter's forehead, but who ironically brings about his own demise when he inadvertently puts his hand on his own head. Bhasmasura starts out as Siva's protégé and yet once he has the boon, threatens Siva himself. Vishnu then takes the form of Mohini ("the enchantress") and promises her own hand to Bhasmasura on the condition that the latter would dance with her, imitating her steps and moves closely. During the dance, at an ecstatic moment, Mohini places her palm on her own head, and Bhasmasura, imitating the gesture, burns himself. Thus, apart from being a story of conflict between the demonic and the divine forces, this is a story that talks about the outcome of false pride, restoration of the cosmic

order, complementarity between the different forms of divine forces, and above all, delusion and divine deceit.

It is important to note that until *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, the treacherous characters (Sampath, Margayya, Raju), even with all their penchant for subterfuge, are not outright demonic. In sharp contrast, Vasu is modeled on the typical *rakshasa*/*asura* figure that one encounters in Hindu mythology. There is no doubt that Vasu is pitted against the saintly Nataraj, one being a foil to the other. Nataraj's name also suggests his connection with the easily appeasable Siva, thus making the plot a modern version of the primeval and eternal conflict between the *deva*s and *asura*s. The bulk of the critical material available on this novel is almost solely directed at unraveling this mythical pattern, mostly with reference to plot construction and character. The views of experts are quite conflicting and it would be good to have a glimpse of the complex critical apparatus on this novel before getting into a full-fledged discussion. That would be followed by a reassessment of the *deva-asura* binary in the light of the *Bhagavadgita*. Only then would it be possible to grasp the full purport of the narrative.

To begin with, *The Man-eater of Malgudi* closely follows the structure of a *Purana*, and any conflict between the forces of good and evil has been ultimately modeled on the *deva-asura* conflict in almost all the Hindu religious classics, especially the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Commenting on the mythical subtext in the Rama-Ravana conflict that is borne out by the myths recorded in the *Uttarakanda*, Arshia Sattar writes:

> Among other things, the classical Puranas remind us that the conflict between the gods and the anti-gods… is constant and cyclical. Power shifts between the rulers of heaven and earth and the underworld… The Uttara Kanda of Valmiki's Ramayana spends its early chapters relating the history of Ravana's family to Rama… In this narrative, Vishnu has continuously fought the rakshasas led by Ravana's forebears, always coming to the rescue of the gods and humans when rakshasas threaten to gain control of the three worlds. By creating this multi-generational, multi-yuga and essentially cyclical narrative, the Uttara Kanda elevates the story of the Ramayana to the cosmic level, to the eternal struggle for power between the gods and their opponents. Rama, Vishnu's current avatara, is merely doing what Vishnu has always done. Until we encounter the Uttara Kanda, Rama and Sita's love story is unique to them… [and] Ravana's ill-advised abduction of Sita is because of his personal character and temperament. Once the Rama-Ravana conflict becomes just one more in a series of battles between the

> gods and demons of various kinds (rakshasas, daityas, danavas, asuras), we are forced to see the story as part of a cosmic cycle…[62]

Similarly, Alf Hiltebeitel, in his incisive research into the mythical structure of the *Mahabharata*, also comes to the conclusion that the Kuru-Pandava war is at one level, a replay of the eternal conflict between the *deva*s and the *asura*s, with Krishna as Vishnu siding with the Pandavas (who are collectively evocative of Indra and individually of five different deities) in order to bring about the downfall of the Kauravas (who represent evil *asur*ic forces such as the malevolent god Kali, and are said to be possessed by demons).[63]*The Man-eater of Malgudi* follows the same structural pattern. It would be relevant to point out at the very outset what Keith Garebian has to say about the plot of this novel. Garebian rightly argues that 'the entire story loses its force' owing to the incredulity of the fact that Vasu dies by smiting his head with his own fist.[64] And it is precisely this incredulity which compels us to recognize the 'the mould pre-established by mythology' working behind the plot. The story then 'shrivels to the level of a melodramatic recreation of the Bhasmasura.'[65]William Walsh, too, is of the opinion that Vasu's death holds the key to the meaning of the plot:

> All his enormities now fall into place; his absolute rejection of everything Nataraj and his friends live by now makes sense and indeed testifies to the sanity of the assumptions they had begun to doubt.[66]

Ganeswar Mishra points out that the structure of this novel is best explained with reference to the *Vishnu Purana*, considered to be the classic and ideal *Puran*ic text.[67] Mishra points out that this mythical paradigm is employed at the very outset of the novel, where Nataraj is said to have 'hung

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[62] Sattar, *Uttara: The Book of Answers*, Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2016,pp. 205-6.

[63] Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata*, Albany: State University of New York, 1990.

[64] Garebian quoted in Sankaran, p. 104.

[65] Ibid, p. 104.

[66] Walsh, "Narayan's maturity: *The Man-eater of* Malgudi, *The Sweet-Vendor* and *The Painter of Signs*" in Srinath, C. N., ed., *R. K. Narayan: An Anthology of recent Criticism*, Delhi: Pencraft International, 2005,p. 156

[67] Misra, "The Novel as Purana: A Study of the Form of *The Man-eater of Malgudi* and *Kanthapura*" in Geoffrey Cain ed., *R. K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993, pp. 9-24.

up a framed picture of Goddess Laxmi poised on her lotus, holding aloft the bounties of earth in her four hands…'[68] Mishra argues that the references to Lakshmi in the opening passage of the novel parallels the *Puran*ic mode of invoking gods and goddesses in the beginning, and Narayan's style only reinforces the link between the novel and the *Purana*.[69] Interestingly, Nataraj's wife is named Deepavali, and is apparently the human counterpart of the goddess Lakshmi, the source of Nataraj's prosperity. In conflict with this blissful marital space that Nataraj inhabits, Vasu is unmarried but a womanizer, and his relationship with partner Rangi (who is a temple dancer and hence looked down upon) is based on lust and power. Rangi, according to Rosanne Kanhai-Brunton, as opposed to Deepavali, is evocative of the dark and destructive force of the goddess Kali.[70] Kanhai-Brunton is of the opinion that over and above the *deva-asura* conflict, the novel also offers itself to be interpreted as an opposition between Vishnu and Siva, two deities who represent two different forces and worlds. According to Kanhai-Brunton, 'Nataraj comes closest to a representation of Vishnu, the Preserver', while 'the obvious parallel to Vasu is Siva.'[71] This is certainly not to ignore the *deva-asura* parallel. Kanhai-Brunton argues that despite the divine qualities, Nataraj is after all a human, and he understands his human limitations, as is evident from his plea to Vishnu to save the elephant Kumar, while Vasu being a *rakshasa*, is deprived of such enlightenment and brings about his own ruin.[72]

Kanhai-Brunton's interpretation is important for our purpose, as it brings out a curious aspect of the *deva-asura* conflict in Hindu mythology. By identifying in Vasu characteristics of both a god and a demon, Kanhai-Brunton reminds us of so many myths which often open up a mysterious ambiguity about the character of the *deva*s and the *asura*s. While it is true that the *deva*s are commonly perceived of as 'good' and the *asura*s as 'evil', such black-and-white classification does not work in a number of cases. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's exhaustive and heavily documented research on the nature of evil in Hindu mythology brings out the fact that in the ancient texts, the *deva*s are not wholly good, while *asura*s are not always evil. Exciting paradoxes such as those of the 'evil god'

[68]*The Man-eater of Malgudi*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2011 rprnt, p. 1.

[69] Mishra, p. 12.

[70] Kanhai-Brunton, "Kali as Man-eater and as Goddess: Myth-making in R. K. Narayan's *The Man-eater of Malgudi*" in Cain, pp. 158-9.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., p. 160.

and the ‘good demon’ blur the margin between binaries. Barring the fact that the *asura*s almost invariably acquire their power through the boons granted by the gods, it is also interesting to note that the *deva*s and the *asura*s are born of the same supreme being, Prajapati, and hence, are brothers. Moreover, there are *asura*s such as Prahlada, Bali and others, who are described as virtuous, upright and great sacrificers, but whose final defeat at the hands of the gods seems inevitable by definition, simply because they are *asura*s. The gods by nature are opposed to the *asura*s, and covet their defeat and destruction, and often resort to treachery to meet this end. There are said to have been *asura*s who were invincible not because of their prowess and might but because of their virtue and uprightness. In such cases, the gods (and mostly Vishnu) hatch conspiracies to beguile them and corrupt their nature so that they take to the wrong path and become vulnerable.[73]

It is especially this very structural conception that lends meaning to the difference between the divine and the demonic natures as elucidated in the sixteenth chapter of the *Bhagavadgita*. The *Gita* seems to throw the ambiguity of the character of the *asura*s overboard. It creates a clear demarcating line between the divine and the demonic qualities. Interestingly, the text starts elucidating the demonic qualities by asserting precisely that the people endowed with such traits do not know ‘creative action and its return to rest’ (*pravritti* and *nivritti*).[74]H. C. Zaehner is of the opinion that on ‘a personal level they mean activity and renunciation of activity.’[75] Thus, the demonic people are demonic particularly because they don’t realize the ideal of *karmayoga*. The verses immediately following, describe such people as atheists (*anisvaram*), perpetrators of cruel deeds (*ugra-karmanah*), full of desire (*kama*), intoxicated with pride and delusion (*dambha-mana-madanvitah*),devoid of proper resolve (*suchi-vratah*), anger (*krodha*), constantly striving to gratify their senses and hankering after wealth and worldly gains, and boastful of their achievements such as destroying their enemies, lineage and prosperity, and interestingly, also of their works of charity and performance of sacrifice. Krishna describes desire, anger and greed as the ‘triple gates of Hell.’[76] The big question here is whether it is possible that realization dawns on them, and they mend their

[73] O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988 rprnt, pp. 94-138.

[74] XVI. 7 (translation by H. C. Zaehner)

[75] Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, p. 370.

[76] XVI. 8-17; 21.

ways and convert to the right path. The unequivocal answer to this question is ‘no’. Krishna declares:

> Selfishness, force and pride, desire and anger, [these do] they rely on, envying and hating Me who dwell in their bodies as I dwell in all. Birth after birth in this revolving round, these vilest among men, strangers to [all] good, obsessed with hate and cruel, I ever hurl into devilish wombs. Caught up in devilish wombs, birth after birth deluded, they never attain to Me: and so they tread the lowest way.[77]

Such an unequivocal denial of the possibility of redemption has intrigued commentators over the ages as Hinduism does not have the concept of eternal damnation. It is interesting to note that Sankara has taken the easy path while commenting on these three verses, by simply elucidating the meaning of the terms. There is no attempt on his part to tackle the problem mentioned above. Ramanuja, however, argues that these people incur God’s wrath and thus lose the possibility of their redemption primarily because they are atheists. To quote from the *bhashya*:

> Those who hate Me in this manner, I hurl them, the cruel, inauspicious and the vilest of mankind into the cycle of births and deaths forever… The meaning is that I shall connect them to cruel minds as would impel them to actions which lead them to the attainment of cursed births.[78]

Two modern commentators, Robert Minor and H. C. Zaehner also seem to agree that these three verses do speak of eternal damnation as their innate hatred of God prevent these demonic souls from taking to the right path, and their lot is not quite similar to that of the men who are ignorant but have the possibility of reform. Minor cites Anandagiri’s opinion that ‘when men are born in demonic wombs, their case has become hopeless.’[79] Zaehner, however, qualifies the nature of the demonic men in the above verse with reference to Duryodhana from the *Mahabharata*. Duryodhana, Zaehner argues, certainly hated Krishna, but his hatred stemmed from his ignorance about Krishna’s true nature, unlike the people mentioned in the above verses, who ‘hate God because He constantly stands in the way of their own self-centredness, and of the lust, anger and greed which are the natural fruit of that self-centredness.’[80]

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[77] XVI. 18-20 (Translation by Zaehner)

[78] *Gitabhashya* on XVI. 19. (Translation by Swami Adidevananda)

[79] Minor, *Bhagavad-Gita: An Exegetical Commentary*, New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1982, p. 444.

[80] Zaehner, p. 373.

Thus, it seems that the *Gita* sees a slow and steady decline in the character of people endowed with demonic qualities, who have acquired those because of their willful violation of moral standards in their past lives. There is no ambiguity in the character of such a person who is an embodiment of pure evil. While the present writer does not reject Kanhai-Brunton's analysis altogether, he is of the opinion that more than any other text of Hindu mythology, it is this particular theorization which serves as the model for Vasu's character. While the *Purana*s abound in stories in which demons (such as Andhaka and Bali) are forgiven after repentance and accepted by God/gods as good souls and protégés, and also in which the killing of a demon by a god is only a step towards his redemption or towards a return to his original self as a divine being, it seems that the *Gita* is not open to any such possibility. An understanding of the *Gita*'s stand is also a key to the deviations from the structure of the original myth that Narayan resorts to in the context of the novel. At a superficial level, these deviations seem to be necessities from a formal perspective, but actually they are embedded in the *deva-asura* binary constructed in the *Gita*.

M. K. Naik, Syed Mujeebuddin and D. S. Dewari have already mentioned this crucial theorization while analyzing *The Man-eater of Malgudi*.[81] Naik writes:

> He (Vasu) seems to be a copy-book example of the 'demoniac lot' described in detail in the sixteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (verses 4 to 17). Among the demoniac characteristics mentioned here are overwinning pride, wrath, harshness of speech, insatiable desire, and cruelty. Such men, as the *Gita* says, 'go to the lowest state' (xvi, 20). The *rakshasa* is always pictured as a being of superhuman strength, ugly and ferocious in appearance, with cannibalistic propensities, incapable of affection, gratitude, sympathy, or regard for others, and in fact reveling in inflicting pain; a nocturnal creature, a creature of the jungle, full of mystery; dirty and unclean in habits; and a being completely amoral, obeying no laws of God or man.[82]

Naik, however, is not oblivious to Vasu's enviable past. Vasu holds a Masters degree from Presidency College in History, Economics and Literature, which is no mean achievement.[83] He also

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[81] Naik, *Twentieth Century Indian English Fiction*, Delhi: Pencraft International, 2004; Mujeebuddin, "R. K. Narayan's *The Maneater of Malgudi*: Problematising the Nation" in Bhatnagar, pp. 154-67; Dewari, pp. 51-2.

[82] Naik, p. 50.

[83] *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, p. 16.

spent years fighting the British rule. Naik is of the opinion that the learned Vasu is reminiscent of *asura*s who are gifted with intelligence and well-versed in the scriptures (Ravana being an example).[84] Added to his academic achievements, Vasu had been a freedom fighter as well. The text says:

> Then he had joined the civil disobedience movement against the British rule, broken the laws, marched, demonstrated and ended up in jail. He went repeatedly to prison and once when he was released found himself in the streets of Nagpur.[85]

Ranga Rao rightly points out that Narayan deliberately created this past for Vasu to endow him with a depth of character.[86] Vasu is the second in Narayan's 'Gandhian' characters, preceded and succeeded by Sriram and Jagan respectively, and shares with them the difficulty of coping with Gandhian ideals. However, unlike Sriram whose mentor Bharati constantly thrives to keep him on the right track, or Jagan who towards the end of the novel once again finds solace in returning to his earlier principles, for the *rakshasa* Vasu, 'there is no return to the Mahatma.'[87]How do we then cope with this decline in Vasu's character? The present writer would like to argue that this is an existential rebirth of Vasu who, as a parody of the true *karmayogin*, starts out as a man of character but afterwards realizes his innate demonic nature. However, it must also be noted that we receive this brief information about Vasu's past engagement with the Nationalist movement through Nataraj, and Nataraj relates to us what he heard from Vasu himself. Twice mediated and not verifiable, there is a possibility, however thin, that Vasu has lied about himself. Vasu is characterized by lies and deceit. When Vasu is granted a permit to shoot 'duck and deer' in the forest by the forest officer, he hints that he is going to transgress the restrictions laid down in the permit:

> "They think I want to go sightseeing in the forests and permit me to shoot duck and deer- as if I cared!" He remained in thought for a while. "Now they shall know what I can do."[88]

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[84] Naik.

[85]*The Man-eater of Malgudi*.

[86] Rao, p. 172.

[87] Ibid.

[88]*The Man-eater of Malgudi*, p. 35.

Similarly, his penchant for subterfuge is revealed when he almost abducts Nataraj and leaves him unaccompanied in front of a tea shop near the Mempi Hills, penniless and in casual attire.[89] It seems to be in his blood to play the victim whenever he is confronted. Entreated by Sen and the poet (and also by his wife) to take a strict view of the state of affairs, Nataraj confronts Vasu, but in vain. Vasu does not bother to respond to Nataraj's question, and, to the latter's surprise, files a complaint at the House Rent Controller's Office. In a letter sent from the said authority, Nataraj was accused of attempted eviction of his tenant through unlawful means. Nataraj is, however, rescued by the adjournment lawyer.[90] He is seen to be on the defensive once again when the forester questions him about his illegal activities. Vasu manhandles him, and challenges him to prove that the creatures are from his jungle itself, fully knowing that they *are*:

> “Not from your jungle. Go and look again and see if there is any trade-mark on them proving that they are from Mempi. India is a big country with many jungles and you can get everything everywhere. For your information, I’ve also some tiger-skins. Are they yours? Claim them if you can. I am hungry and am going out for breakfast. No time to waste. Don’t bother me unless you come with some more practical propositions.”[91]

Thus, Vasu’s own testimony is not completely reliable. We are left to wonder how a Gandhian can drift away from his principles to this extent. However, his hardships in jail might have had a transforming influence on him, which broke his trust in his ideals. Once out of jail, he seems to be an outright demonic figure, characterized by violence and ingratitude. By his own testimony, he overthrew his master who taught him wrestling and took care of him, and left him injured. When Nataraj tries to criticize his action, Vasu merely responds that possession of strength is the automatic justification for exerting violence:

> Why not? I was a different man now, not the boy who went to him for charity. I was stronger than he was.[92]

[89] Ibid., pp. 40-42.

[90] Ibid., pp. 72-83.

[91] Ibid., p. 101.

[92] Ibid., p. 17.

Dewari correctly claims that both Nataraj and Vasu's wrestler *guru* are evocative of the helpless Siva in the Bhasmasura myth. Both these characters, however, differ in their predicaments from their mythical counterpart. First of all, while Siva himself is Bhasmasura's creator, 'Vasu is an evil, thrust upon Nataraj.'[93]It is the wrestler in the novel who embodies this aspect of Siva. He mentors Vasu and Vasu becomes his loyal (?) disciple and servant. But while Siva finally evades being overpowered and destroyed by Bhasmasura, the wrestler fails to do so. Thus, the novel ends up deviating from the myth in a significant way. This departure is necessary because unlike in the myth where Bhasmasura is created by Siva and presumably merges into his creator after being destroyed, there is no redemption for Vasu, who has lost his virtues completely, thus epitomizing the binary world of the *Gita*.

Apart from being a man of pride, anger, violence and lust, what demarcates Vasu as an *asura* is his atheism, which is not restricted to his personal beliefs but generates an unwelcome cynicism for others who believe in religion and tradition. This is most evident when Nataraj confronts him about having killed the eagle. Nataraj points out that he should not have shot the eagle because it was Garuda, Vishnu's vehicle, but Vasu responds with his usual nonchalance and cynicism:

> I want to try and make Vishnu use his feet now and then.[94]

When pointed out that this act may hurt religious sentiments, once again his response is again mired in cynicism, and this time, accompanied with a zeal for business and money-making:

> I think there is a good business proposition here. I can supply them stuffed eagles at about fifty rupees each. Everyone can keep a sacred *garuda* in the *puja* and I'll guarantee that it won't fly off. Thus they can save their eyes from glare. I want to be of service to our religious folk in my own way.[95]

His resolve to kill the temple elephant also stems partly from his disregard for people's religious sentiments.

Vasu with his money-making zeal, self-interest, violence, and disregard for religion, emerges as an apt parody of the true *karmayogin*. If such a conclusion holds ground, the question arises as to

[93] Dewari, p. 46.

[94]*The Man-eater of Malgudi*, p. 64.

[95] Ibid.

whether the novel upholds any character who *is* a true *karmayogin*. At first glance, it is tempting to identify Nataraj himself as the intended foil to Vasu, and a follower of the right path. Indeed, he does not seem to hanker after money, and is content with his earnings. He is also nice to his customers, a believer in traditions, and dedicated to his profession. However, his character has its own flaws which make him fall short of an ideal *karmayogin*. First of all, Nataraj is characterized by a certain cowardice and inferiority complex. His inferiority complex is evident in his admission that he is drawn towards the charismatic Vasu, despite the latter being a menace to him and his close ones. His cowardice is nowhere more visible than in the episode where Vasu almost abducts him. Throughout the journey he speculates all kinds of horrible intentions on Vasu's part but lacks the courage to stand up to him. Thieme sees in him a 'spineless' man (Vasu himself cynically asserts so), but at the same time, a trickster.[96] Thieme points out that he is frequently driven by self-interest and in moments of crisis, he resorts to the cowardly tactic of surrender.[97] These are vices that the ideal *karmayogin* is expected to shun. Thieme is correct in arguing so, but he is probably mistaken when he calls him a man of inaction.[98] Nataraj *does* emerge as a man of action by the end of the novel. We should note that his initial response to the news of Vasu's resolve was to confront the latter and reason with him. Only when it did not work, did he resort to prayer, and then finally gather the courage to reveal the conspiracy to the Chairman. He is absent from the scenario where Vasu injures the policeman, not due to intimidation but owing to the fact that he was not allowed to get out of his room by his wife and child. One final flaw in Nataraj is his latent sexual urge which is revealed when he first spots Rangi at his own house. He is evidently trying to suppress his urges. Moreover, ironically enough, while admiring Rangi's careless beauty, he is also full of contempt for her, as he sees in her a public woman and a source of animal lust. His inner dialogue is as follows:

> She was dark, squat, seductive, overloaded with jewellery; the flowers in her hair were crushed, and her clothes rumpled; she had big round arms and fat legs and wore a pink sari… I felt curious to know how she would look like in the evenings- perhaps she would powder her face, the talcum floatinguneasily over

[96] Thieme, pp. 122-23.

[97] Ibid., p. 117.

[98] Ibid., p. 116.

> her ebonite skin. Anyway whatever might be the hour, every inch of her proclaimed what she was- a perfect female animal.[99]

Once again, in the ninth chapter, when Rangi meets Nataraj to reveal Vasu's resolve to kill Kumar, Nataraj recognizes that she has 'an irresistible physical charm' and suspects that he 'might succumb to her charms.'[100] A little later the urges are more vivid and Nataraj's inner dialogue more overtly sexual:

> Not bad, not bad. Her breasts are billowy, like those one sees in temple sculptures. Her hips are also classical… My blood tingled with an unholy thrill. I let my mind slide into a wild fantasy of seduction and passion. I was no longer a married man with a child and home, I was an adolescent lost in dreams over a nude photograph. I knew that I was completely sealed against any seductive invitation she might hold out for me, but, but, I hoped I would not weaken…[101]

The last sentence proves Nataraj, despite his latent desires which make their presence felt occasionally, has the potential to be a true *karmayogin* with a little *abhyasa*. However, he is not qualified to be called an ideal *karmayogin* at the current stage of his life. Ranga Rao sees in him an 'inspired morbidity.'[102]

The ideal of *karmayoga*, however, is best exemplified by another figure in the novel: Rangi. Rangi is looked down upon by society for her lowly birth and profession, but, as Ranga Rao points out, she, along with Muthu, Joshi and Nataraj's wife, collectively represent the 'civil society.'[103] Just as it is the low-born Rosie in *The Guide* who talks about *karma*, it is Rangi in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* who speaks of *dharma*. Her warning that Vasu is up for killing Kumar meets with disbelief from Nataraj's side, and the latter also cynically accuses of her being a drug-addict prone to hallucinations, Rangi's spirited defense is admirable:

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[99]*The Man-eater of Malgudi*, p. 108.

[100] Ibid., p. 154.

[101] Ibid., pp. 155-56.

[102] Rao, 190.

[103] Ibid., pp. 186-91.

> She glared at me angrily, "Sir, I am only a public woman, following what is my *dharma*. I may be a sinner to you, but I do nothing worse than what some of the so-called family women are doing. I observe your rules. Whatever I may do, I don't take opium."

She admits that she is motivated to save the elephant because she loves him but it is important to note that her love stems from her sense of duty as 'a woman of the temple.'[104]M. K. Naik draws our attention to the fact that the name 'Rangi' is reminiscent of 'Ranganath', which is an appellation of Vishnu, and Rangi in a sense parallels Mohini in the Bhasmasura myth, though as a character Rangi is a far cry from Mohini in the myth.[105] If this link bears out, then it must be acknowledged that just like Rosie in *The Guide*, Rangi's character is elevated to a different level altogether by Narayan's masterly touch. Ranga Rao observes:

> More than any other citizen of Malgudi, man or woman, it is Rangi the prostitute who offers the reader reassuring experience of the human spirit. Rangi, more than anyone else, restores our faith and confidence in humanity and democracy.[106]

Yet another character in whom certain characteristics of an ideal *karmayogin* are discernible is Sastri. Sen, the poet, Sastri and Nataraj, according to Rao, form a collective whole, 'a cast of common humanity.'[107] Sastri is a man of composure, dedicated to his work, and miraculously enough, unperturbed by the upheavals around him. Add to that the fact that he is also a scholar, and often acts as Nataraj's mentor at times of crisis. It is he who links Vasu's character to those of the mythical demons. He also knows how to strike a balance between his professional and his personal life. When he insists that he must go home early for *puja* or else his wife and children would be starving, Nataraj responds with disbelief, because, for him, Sastri is above worldly concerns, which is certainly not true.[108] But he is awed by Sastri's knowledge and personality (as he is awed by Vasu later), and prefers silence over curiosity. Sastri is pragmatic and knows his business well. Despite his sound knowledge of scriptures, he is not given to a false concept of *sannyasa*. It is this resolve which helps him steer clear of the havoc that Vasu had wreaked on Malgudi. Nataraj, who initially

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[104] Ibid., p. 155.

[105] Naik cited in Dewari, p. 62.

[106] Rao, p. 191.

[107] Ibid., pp. 178-182.

[108]*The Man-eater of Malgudi*, pp. 11-12.

apprehended a strong confrontation from Sastri over Vasu's illegal activities, observes with amazement:

> Vasu seemed to have induced in Sastri much philosophical thought… Sastri himself seemed to take a detached, synoptic view of the hyena and other creatures on the other side of the grille. He got quite busy with the admission cards…[109]

More observations on this are recorded later:

> He had resolutely kept away from contacts with Vasu. While all of us were running aroundhim, Sastri alone had maintained a haughty aloofness. No one could ever associate Vasu with Sastri.[110]

This detachment and determination are what Nataraj lacks, owing to which people like Vasu take him for granted. While Nataraj observes the demonic features in Vasu, Sastri is the one who grasps the divine design in all of it. Thus, Sastri emerges as a *sthitaprajna*, in contrast to Nataraj.

However, Narayan is always looking for an opportunity to dismantle what he had built, thereby teasing the readers and frustrating their expectations. The same happens with the character of Sastri towards the end of the novel. As the news of Vasu's death spreads and police investigations begin, Sastri informs Nataraj of a marriage in his family and asks for leave, an act which Nataraj reads as Sastri's playing himself safe:

> Sastri proved to be the shrewdest. The minute he heard of the corpse upstairs he planned his retreat… He just put his work away, wiped his hand on a rag, and took off his apron; I watched him silently. He went through his process of retreat methodically… "I have nothing to do with Vasu or the police," he said with clarity of logic rare under the stress of the present circumstances.[111]

It is never made clear, even after Sastri's return, whether he was playing it safe or he indeed had a wedding to attend. He himself reveals that he has reappeared at his workplace only after Rangi met him and revealed the truth about Vasu's death.[112] There is every possibility that he would have stayed away had he not been informed of the secret. Now that all his fears have disappeared, he

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[109] Ibid., p. 96.

[110] Ibid., p. 223.

[111] Ibid., pp. 222-23.

[112] Ibid., p. 238.

returns. We are left to ponder if such a person is indeed the philosopher whom we had encountered earlier in the novel. But then before the confusion abates, Narayan once again restores his honoured place as the philosopher-mentor of Nataraj. He not only recounts the story of Bhasmasura again, but also reminds Nataraj of the deadline for the delivery of K. J.'s labels. Nataraj, too, once again willingly resumes his subordinate position to Sastri.

Thus it appears that *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is more of a comedy borne out by the inadequacy of the characters as performers of *karmayoga*. Barring Rangi, there is absolutely no character in the story who can be called wholly to represent the ideal *karmayogin*. Nataraj and Sastri may be considered to be on the right track and require *abhyasa* to attain the heightened state, not to speak of Vasu whose progress is downwards, in opposition to the self-development of the *karmayogin*.

The demonic protagonist is brought back in two of the late novels by Narayan. In *A Tiger for Malgudi*, it is the tiger Raja who starts as a *rajasika* figure, blind with pride and wrath, but ends up becoming a *sattvika* character, finding the meaning of life in self-realization. The other character who is reminiscent of Vasu is Dr. Rann in *Talkative Man*. Unlike Raja the tiger, self-realization is not for him. Krishna Sen finds an uncanny resemblance between the characters' relationships, that is to say the Talkative Man's relationship with Dr. Rann and Nataraj's with Vasu. To quote Sen:

> Rann's frantic pursuit of "futurology" parallels Vasu's demonic experiments with taxidermy as much in its privileging of "science" over traditional knowledge as in its utter disregard for human, or humane, values. In addition, both Ranjn and Vasu are flagrant womanizers and deceivers, characteristics which lead TM to label Rann "lecherous demon" which remind us of Shastri's description of Vasu as a "rakshasa" or demon. On these terms, TM and Rann replicate the Nataraj/ Vasu binary…[113]

The character of Raja the tiger is going to be studied in the chapter on *sannyasa*. The fate of Dr. Rann is open-ended. He is born outside Malgudi, and once he leaves Malgudi after his brief stay, he plans to fly to Rome. We are not given any information by Narayan with respect to his whereabouts when the novel is about to end. As we do not know of the final outcome of his lust-driven life, we are also not qualified to comment on the efficacy of the *karma* doctrine in his case. Therefore, a study of his character is beyond the purview of this work. This brief mention is incidental and a

[113] Sen, "Will the real Dr. Rann please stand up?" in *South Asian Review,*, Vol. XXIII, 2002, pp. 24-5.

footnote to a study of *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. However, the same novel also has a strong female character: Commandant Sarasa. Her character would be dealt with in the chapter on women.

The World of Nagaraj

We are going to wind up this chapter with a brief analysis of the character of Nagaraj, the protagonist of *The World of Nagaraj*, the last full-fledged novel by Narayan. We have already mentioned *A Tiger for Malgudi* and *Talkative Man*, which are novellas at best. Two full-fledged novels that stand between *The Man-eater of Malgudi* and *The World of Nagaraj* are *The Vendor of Sweets* and *The Painter of Signs*. Jagan, the protagonist of *The Vendor of Sweets*, is a Gandhian, and would be one of the two characters to be studied in the chapter on *lokasangraha* (the other being Bharati from *Waiting for the Mahatma*). *The Painter of Signs* is the story of romance between Raman and Daisy, and Daisy's character is reserved for a subsequent chapter. Raman is a *rajasika* character in the mould of Sampath or Raju, sometimes given to uncontrollable passion and sometimes a serene reader. He, however, is not a trickster, and is often helpless at moments of crisis. His incessant obsession with Daisy parallels Sriram's blind devotion to Bharati. However, we shall have to skip his character in order to stick to the pattern that we are following for this chapter.

Unfortunately, *The World of Nagaraj* has received scant attention from critics. Scholars such as S. R. Ramteke, Ramesh Dnyate and P. K. Singh have focused on Narayan's oeuvre from *Swami and Friends* to *A Tiger for Malgudi*. Dnyate is of the opinion that 'the typological wheel turns a full circle with *A Tiger for Malgudi*.'[114]Narayan's late novels are considered to be mere appendages to an already great body of fiction which had exhausted itself. There is rarely any full-fledged study of this novel, barring one or two. By common consent, it is one of the weakest to come from Narayan's pen. S. K. Arora writes:

> Like Shakespeare who could not maintain the skill, imaginative mind and bubbling fancy and the enthusiasm of his earlier plays in his last plays, R. K. Narayan, though has attained maturity, has lost the grip over his narration. The reader misses the imaginative spirit of *The Bachelor of Arts*, the magical influence of *The Guide* in *The World of Nagaraj*.[115]

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[114] Dnyate, p. 33.

[115] Arora, "The World of Nagaraj: An Appraisal" in Khatri, Chhote La, ed., *R. K. Narayan: Reflections and Re-evaluation*, New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006, p. 190.

However, Arora highlights one talent in the novel, and describes it as though it is a consolation:

> But stream of consciousness finds fuller expression in it than in any other novel. Nagaraj, the protagonist is lost in the stream of consciousness again and again. Mental dialogues are always flowing in stream.

Taking a cue from the analogy with Shakespeare that Arora talks of, we can also say that like Shakespeare, who began with themes of romance, gradually drifted towards tragedy and again towards the end of his career found a retreat in the romantic themes of his younger days, Narayan, too, starts with *sattvika* characters, then afterwards experiments with *rajasika* ones, but once again creates a *sattvika* protagonist in his last novel. In fact, thematically at least, *The World of Nagaraj* is not very removed from its precursors. The family feud over property rights has remained a popular theme in Narayan; the headmaster in *The English Teacher* is perhaps the earliest victim of such a feud. Nataraj in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is another major figure who tries to cope with this menace in the early chapters of the novel. The second major theme which makes *The World of Nagaraj* fall into place with the other Narayan novels is that of generational conflict, a theme experimented with in *The Financial Expert* and *The Vendor of Sweets*. Tim in *The World of Nagaraj* seems to be almost a reincarnation of Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets*. However, as Thieme argues, Tim 'lacks the vitality of the other Narayan versions of this type', and the theme of generational conflict 'drifts to a lack-lustre conclusion which offers little in terms of narrative closure…'[116] A third element which the novel shares with other Narayan novels, is the use of a mythical subtext. This element is mentioned early in the novel, when Nagaraj thinks of writing a book on Narada. Narada's role in Hindu mythology is described as follows:

> The celestial sage who had a curse on his back that unless he spread a gossip a day his head would burst. The sage floated along with ease… carrying news and gossip, often causing clashes between gods and demons, demons and demons, and gods and gods, and between creatures of the earth. Ultimately, of course, such clashes and destruction proved beneficial in a cosmic perspective. Evil destroyed itself.[117]

However, unlike *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, where the mythical subtext is efficiently employed, in this novel, the connection is not developed satisfactorily. Thieme finds 'the Narada plot equally

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[116] Thieme, pp. 171-72.

[117] *The World of Nagaraj*, Madras: Indian Thought Publications, 2008 rprnt, p. 3.

inconclusive, since Nagaraj never even begins his magnum opus, let alone completes it.'[118] Nagaraj has been likened to Narada in one or two places, above others by his own brother Gopu, who accuses him of having created a rift between father and son, and wrongly puts the blame of Tim's corruption on him:

> You have spoilt him beyond repair: you are Narada, mischief-maker.[119]

> *You have misappropriated and ruined him completely… being as you are without an issue… I know how have stealthily worked to achieve this purpose all your life, plucking him away from me and Charu when he was only two months old.*[120]

While the false accusations heaped on Nagaraj do make him appear Narada-like, unlike Narada, his actions do not bring about a positive conclusion by the end of the novel. Neither he himself nor does anybody else benefit from his actions. Thus, the link is ironical at best. That the relation between this mythical reference and the plot is very superficial is also evident from the fact that at one point the Talkative Man jokingly compares himself to Narada because he has provided Nagaraj with a nugget of gossip.[121] Equally funny and inappropriate is the analogy drawn by Nagaraj between Gopu and an *asura*:

> He is like one of those asuras in the puranas, headstrong and haughty and vile. But in every case they had downfall, if not destroyed totally. Evil destroys itself, say our scriptures. How will Gopu's downfall come?[122]

The construction of the plot is undoubtedly weak, and surprisingly, nothing much happens throughout the novel. Nagaraj seems to remain as much of a daydreamer by the end of the novel as he was at the beginning; Gopu and Tim are not reconciled; Nagaraj's proposed book on Narada is never written; and Saroja returns to the household to play on her harmonium. With such a weak plot, naturally the strategy for indemnification is characterization, and hence the use of the inner dialogue, to which Nagaraj often resorts. It is important to note that unlike Krishna, Nataraj or Talkative Man,

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[118] Thieme, p. 172.

[119] *The World of Nagaraj*, p. 44.

[120] Ibid., p. 171.

[121] Ibid., p. 114.

[122] Ibid., p. 174.

Nagaraj is not given the opportunity to narrate his own story. It is the omniscient author who often takes us on a journey to Nagaraj's inner world. The entertainment, therefore, appears to involve a certain degree of voyeurism.

Nagaraj's character has been a puzzle to the critics. Ranga Rao, towards the end of his study, instead of an answer, comes up with some disturbing questions:

> Is Nagaraj an idler or a genuine seeker of self-realization, surrendering all action? Has Narayan given us finally a 'sanyasin', who has shed all purpose? A mere spectator, a witness? With his dreams of authorship is Nagaraj claiming the stillness and calm of a creative spirit at the centre of his society?[123]

It seems that these questions provide a key for the aim of the present research. Indeed, a conclusive answer to these questions would also testify to whether Narayan was still under the influence of the *karma* doctrine when he was composing his very last works.

To begin with, Nagaraj seems to be a *sattvika* figure, at least apparently. He is well-behaved and nice, not rude or violent to anybody, and is on good terms with his wife and mother. It is revealed that before the rift in the family, he was also dedicated to his elder brother Gopu, and his fraternal love won him the admiration of his father, who compared him to Lakshman in the *Ramayana*.[124]However, gradually it is revealed that his love for Tim is more like an obsession, and he is quite possessive of the child. It was he who put the latter in the Albert Mission school and later on, after the division of property, pleaded that the latter be allowed to stay back in the ancestral home with him.[125] While the first reads like the act of a responsible guardian, the latter reads like that of the possessive and desperate cry of a childless man. Thus, Nagaraj is *unconsciously* given over to his senses. Added to this, are his tremendous tendencies for indecision and serious lack of self-esteem. He does not ever seem to muster the courage to confront Tim over his alcoholic habits. He is equally dumbfounded when he feels disturbed by Saroja's music rehearsals. Twice he tries to confront Saroja, but in each case ends up bewildered and speechless for no reason. On the first occasion, he was draped in his ochre robe, and he used it as a cover to remain silent. On the second

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[123] Rao, p. 222.

[124]*The World of Nagaraj, p. 27.*

[125] Ibid., p. 48, 34.

occasion, he is at a loss when Saroja mistakes his arrival for a proof of his interest in her music, and starts entertaining him with a song. The text reads:

> The fury which drove him here from his writing room had evaporated. He did not even remember the strong words he had rehearsed in his room. All that seemed important was to get away… While the girl was still singing he slinked away, pretending to have heard a knock on the street door.[126]

On the whole, what he reads as restraint of speech is pure fear to speak out. At moments of crisis, he is seen to resort to either silence or daydreaming and imagination, sometimes bordering on falsehood. Thus, when Kuvu pundit behaves harshly with him and is cynical of his resolve to write on Narada without any knowledge of Sanskrit, he blurts out that a voice commanded him in a dream to write the book.[127] Kuvu is certainly smart enough to see through the lie and is all the more irritated. Nagaraj, however, once again reiterates this lie while talking to TM.[128] Similarly, he is fully aware that the odour coming from Tim is that of alcohol, but chooses to find solace in Tim's lie that it is eau-de-Cologne which a friend sprayed on him as a prank.[129] He is not content to believe in this lie himself, but also tells it to Gopu while defending Tim. Sometimes, he tries to shield his cowardice by deceptive means, and when the strategy works, he is filled with a false sense of victory and considers himself adept at diplomacy. This is nowhere more evident than the episode where Sita expectantly asks him about his proposed open confrontation with Tim (which, obviously never takes place), and he says: "Don't ask now, I'll tell everything later.'[130] When Sita leaves him alone, he is overjoyed and thinks:

> He felt victorious when she left him alone: he had achieved grand results this morning. He thought that he now understood the importance of tact and diplomacy in domestic life.[131]

Therefore, by all means, he is not a completely *sattvika* type. But it is also true that he does not have any *rajasika* element in him either, except his love for food and dress, which, however, is not

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[126] Ibid., p. 142.

[127] Ibid., p. 99.

[128] Ibid., p. 102.

[129] Ibid., p. 62.

[130] Ibid., p. 68.

[131] Ibid.

recurring and obsessive. We see him relishing food cooked by his wife only once in the novel and he does not crave for food, unlike Raju in *The Guide*. But what often appears as a flicker in the primarily *sattvika* nature of his character is his inaction, which, unfortunately is, worse than *rajasika*, a *tamasika* element. He spends his day mostly on the *pyol* of his house. If he goes out, he is not specific about his need to do so. He idly roams about and observes people. Thus, he notices Sambu who is a voracious reader, and finds the latter's obsession problematic.[132] Ironically, he himself does not spend his own time doing anything worthwhile. Moreover, we are time and again reminded that, as opposed to Gopu, Nagaraj was never a studious student. In the immediate aftermath of his brother's wedding, Narayan informs:

> Watching and speculating what went on behind the door was more interesting than homework. While appearing to be reading his lessons he noted from a corner of his eye his sister-in-law bearing a dish of some eatable to their room…[133]

He seems to maintain a certain disdain for books, and even when he is reported to have frequented the library in the past, his reading habits seem to have been inconsistent and superficial.[134]Sometimes he spends his time by the river but again he resorts to daydreaming. While the fact remains that he has not even started with his book on Narada, he dreams of writing more books:

> Of course, one has to accept Viswamithra's greatness, but now I am committed to writing on Narada. If I succeed, I'll write a second book on Viswamithra, and may be a whole series to be called 'Sages of India'; quite a lot of material available- there are Seven sages, who are the progenitors of mankind.[135]

Nagaraj fails to even gather the necessary patience to go through the initial chapters of the *Narad Puran* which Bari narrates to him. In Classical Indian texts, the beginning is often lengthy and several chapters serve as the necessary prelude to the main argument. The most vital reflections on morality, philosophy, and the general purpose of the book are furnished in these chapters. That Nagaraj is impatient to jump straight to the middle chapters reinforces the fact that he truly lacks

[132] Ibid., pp. 5-6.

[133] Ibid., p. 29.

[134] Ibid., p. 173.

[135] Ibid., p. 123.

both patience and a proper understanding of ancient Hindu traditions, and thus, is by no means qualified to write on the proposed topic. On top of being inactive, he is also ignorant, in the fields of both worldly and spiritual knowledge.

The most negative of all outcomes of his inaction is perhaps Tim's dropping out of school. Unbeknownst to him, Tim dropped out, and when Nagaraj finally learns about it from Jessudoss, instead of reflecting on his neglect of parental responsibilities, he wrongly holds others responsible for his predicament:

> He had always viewed Jessudoss as his best friend, never as a prosecutor. He was now displaying an aspect which was shocking. Nagaraj regretted coming out here at all, blamed his brother's postcard and Sita for his predicament, and sat wondering how to terminate the interview.[136]

All these point to the *tamasika* dimension in Nagaraj's character. The *Gita* enlists the following vices that *tamas* can instill in a man: darkness (*aprakasha*), unwillingness to act (*apravritti*), fecklessness (*pramada*) and delusion (*moha*).[137] All these vices are certainly discernible in Nagaraj, who at the end of the day, emerges as an *ajnani* without resolve. His failure to proceed with his book-writing project proves that he has no commitment towards discipline:

> I can have no hope of writing any more. You could as well take the notebooks back to the old room, where at least white ants may relish my notes on Narada…[138]

He fails in each and every resolve. Thus, while his real intention to drape himself in ochre robes was to achieve inner peace, the metaphor increasingly becomes ironical as he keeps using it as an excuse to remain silent. Initially, it seems that he was too impatient to put it off when his wife suspected that he was about to renounce the world. Narayan says:

> She was sullen. He wanted to assure her that the garb and restrictions were to last only for thirty minutes.[139]

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[136] Ibid., p. 76.

[137] XIV. 13.

[138] *The World of Nagaraj*, p. 185.

[139] Ibid., p. 13.

At this stage, he is passionate about his secular robes and looks. At the end of the novel, Nagaraj chooses to don the ochre robe for the rest of his life, but ironically, he does this to avoid conversation and confrontation with Sita, Saroja and Tim, and not because of an inner realization.[140] Thus, Nagaraj ends as a comic parody of the ideal *sannyasin*. Throughout the novel he fails to live as either a *karmayogin* or a *nityasannyasin*, and even when he finally detaches himself from his world, he does it out of disgust and fails to grasp the true nature of renunciation.

Nagaraj has some potential, but he keeps losing it due to lack of *abhyasa*. Apart from his failure to concentrate on his writing and to stick to his resolve on the proposed book, he is also described as inept at meditation. Having been refused any help by Kuvu, Nagaraj comes to the river bank, and tries to meditate:

> Nagaraj realized when he tried meditation, whatever it meant, his thoughts wandered in all directions and were in a jumble. Perhaps he should press his fingers to his nostrils; stop breathing and close his eyes. He attempted this course for one second and felt suffocated. His eyes darkened, and he was on the point of abandoning it…[141]

Thus, Nagaraj seems to epitomize a parody of the *karmasannyasin* of the *Gita*. He fails to remain true to all three of his resolves: an ideal guardian, an author and a *sannyasin* seeking inner peace. Of the other characters in the novel, his wife Sita carries a lot of traditional womanly virtue, and is reminiscent of the female characters in the first four novels of Narayan, especially Savitri in *A Dark Room*. Tim and Saroja are presented to the reader only in bits and pieces. Tim is adamant, casual and an alcoholic. Saroja seems to be an ideal wife but she remains true to her love for music. In contrast to Nagaraj, who was once a music lover but subsequently gave up this passion,[142] this young lady seems to be much more disciplined and balanced. Gopu is a *rajasika* character in all senses of the term. He is strong and energetic, and does not hesitate to speak his mind or apply violence when necessary. But at the same time, he is also a concerned father, and pursues his prodigal son to the last. While Nagaraj was the one to take the kid to school, in the subsequent years, it seems that Gopu has been the more pragmatic and responsible one. While Nagaraj remains blissfully unaware of Tim's whereabouts throughout the day, Gopu manages to arrange a bride for the latter. Thus, it

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[140] Ibid., p. 185.

[141] Ibid., p. 101.

[142] Ibid., p. 94.

seems that Gopu and Nagaraj are foils to each other. In fact, according to the present writer, they both embody *sattvaguna*, but while in the case of Nagaraj it is tinged with *tamas*, in his brother's case, *rajas* dominates the character.

To sum up, it may be said that the ideal of *karma* seems to be a pervasive influence in Narayan's character contructions throughout his career, from beginning to end. However, it must be reiterated that Narayan is primarily a storyteller, and therefore his characters are not always behaving in strict harmony with the ideal. The comedy arises from their struggles and transgressions, and often from their unwilling return to their ideals.

III

Sannyasa: A Study of the Theme of Renunciation in R. K. Narayan's Novels

In *Indianness in Major Indo-English Novels*, Samares C. Sanyal points out the following difference between the two types of characters associated with renunciation that are found in Indian English fiction. There are the laymen 'who live in this world and yet try to adhere to the ideals of non-attachment' and the 'spiritual aspirants' who have 'renounced all worldly possessions and put on coloured robe.'[1] In the previous chapter, we have studied the characters of the first type as presented in Narayan, and in this chapter, we are going to do the same with the second type.

At the very outset, it would be justified to recapitulate a few points that we made in the 'Introduction'. First of all, we had noted that '*sannyasa*' has a very different meaning with respect to the *ashrama* system. According to the *ashrama* system, human life is neatly divided into four stages, the last stage being the one in which a man renounces the world and adopts the life of a monk. This stage is, however, preceded by another one of preparation, known as *vanaprastha*, in which the aspirant is expected to practice self-control and withdrawal while still remaining within the material world. Most scholars have argued that the biographies of Narayan's characters can be read as a parallel to this four-stage life, albeit with satiric overtones. The prime examples for most critics are *The Bachelor of Arts*, which reverses the cycle, and *The Guide*, which parodies every single stage. However, the present author is of the opinion that Narayan does not subscribe to the *ashrama* system at all. This is because of the fact that none of his protagonists with the exception of Master (and Raja) in *A Tiger for Malgudi* finds fulfillment in *sannyasa*, even when the world is renounced in the last phase of life. If Chandran of *The Bachelor of Arts* has to return to a worldly life, then Raju in *The Guide* has to actively participate in human welfare to ensure his supposed redemption. This is very much in harmony with the *Gita* ideal of *lokasangraha*, which insists that a renouncer should keep himself active in human welfare, though he has shunned his worldly ties. A person whose mental states are in equilibrium and who is constantly active has been labeled as *nitya-sannyasin* by the *Gita*. Thus we can come to the conclusion that there is no apparent distinction between the householder *karmayogin* and the renouncer *karmasannyasin* according to the *Gita*. However, we also noted that given the *Gita*'s potential for multiple interpretations, commentators such as Sankara

[1] Sanyal, *Indianness in Major Indo-English Novels*, Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, p. 221.

succeeded to a great extent in shifting the emphasis of the text on the ideal of renunciation rather than on that of *karma*. However, even Sankara accepts the ideal of *lokasangraha* as valid. Thus, the question that we now face is: are the *sannyasin*s in Narayan's fiction any different from their laymen counterparts? And if they are, then, can their conduct be studied in the light of *lokasangraha*? It must, however, be noted that with Gandhi, the supreme, archetypal *sannyasin* in Narayan's entire array, the ideals of *lokasangraha* and *sannyasa* take on a nationalist meaning. Therefore, *Waiting for the Mahatma* will be treated separately in the subsequent chapter on "*Lokasangraha* and Service to the Nation". It would also be important to reiterate that the ideals of *karma*, *sannyasa*, and *lokasangraha* are often interpreted differently with respect to women, and therefore this chapter will not mention the female characters in the novels that are going to be studied.

Narayan and *Sannyasa*

Narayan's philosophy of asceticism is recorded in his own words in the introduction to the last novel, *A Tiger for Malgudi*. We had briefly mentioned it in the 'Introduction' but the entire passage deserves to be quoted here once again.

> When one is seized with a passion to understand one's self, one has to leave behind all normal life and habitual modes of thought… A *sannyasi* is one who renounces everything and undergoes a complete change of personality… when one becomes a *sannyasi*, one obliterates one's past… You can never ask a *sannyasi* about his earlier life… He assumes a new name, bearing no mark of his ancestry or class, but indicative of some general beatitude. He has freed himself from possessions and human ties.[2]

This may seem at first glance as in direct opposition to what we have so far seen and understood as the basic teaching of *The Gita* regarding *sannyasa*. However, on a closer reading it appears that here Narayan is speaking only about the inner transformation of the *sannyasin*. Here it will suffice to say that the *sannyasin* is expected in *The Gita* to be 'contented ever and on none dependent' and remain satisfied with 'what chance may bring… without envy'.[3] These lines summarize the *Gita*'s teachings on *sannyasa* sans the part of *lokasangraha*, and are not in conflict with the ideal.

Narayan, however, is not oblivious to the diversity of the causes, which lead a person to renounce the world. The three possible options, as he conjectures, are: 'a personal tragedy or frustration, a

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[2] *A Tiger for Malgudi*, Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 2010, pp. 8-9.

[3] *Gita*, IV.20, 22.

deeply compelling philosophy of life, or a flash of illumination'.[4] The fake *sannyasin*s are also grouped separately by Narayan as those 'who adopt this life for sheer vagrancy, or to exploit the public in the garb of holy men.'[5] With this frame in mind, we can now go on to deal with the *sannyasin*s in Narayan's novels.

Layman vs *Sannyasin*: An Episode in *The World of Nagaraj*

Though chronologically one of the latest among Narayan's novels (and certainly not one of his best), *The World of Nagaraj* presents an interesting encounter between a layman and a *sannyasin*, which may be helpful to distinguish the two types. We have discussed the novel and the central character with respect to the ideal of *karmasannyasa* in the previous chapter, and here we shall concentrate only on the encounter Nagaraj has with the ascetic. Though the plot is spun around a layman, the ideal the layman has for himself is Narada, an ascetic, but paradoxically, an active ascetic, the exact opposite of Nagaraj, a passive householder. This is how Nagaraj explains Narada's role in Hindu mythology:

> The sage floated along with ease from one world to another among the fourteen worlds above and below this earth, carrying news and gossip, often causing clashes between gods and demons, demons and demons, and gods and gods, and between creatures of the earth. Ultimately, of course, such clashes and destruction proved beneficial in a cosmic perspective. Evil destroyed itself. That was Nagaraj's thesis.[6]

However, Nagaraj never ends up writing the book he wanted, and he also remains a failure in his life as a householder. We are made to learn about his saintly predicament from the very beginning of the novel. Narayan says that a daily bath 'induced' in Nagaraj a 'holy mood', after which he 'always picked up an ochre drape and dhoti suspended from a nail at the door of the puja room'.[7] The ochre drape, a time-honoured symbol of renunciation in Indian culture, is thus shown as having made an inroad into the world of the householder. But is Nagaraj consistent about his adherence to *sannyasa*? That this is not the case is attested by his remark that he dons it 'only when I perform a puja'.[8] Thus

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[4] *A Tiger for Malgudi*, p. 9.

[5] Ibid.

[6] *The World of Nagaraj*, London: Heinemann, 1990, p. 3.

[7] Ibid., p. 9.

[8] Ibid., p. 11.

Nagaraj emerges as a shape-shifter between two worlds. Unlike the ideal *karmasannyasin*, he is unable to discover a proper synthesis between *karma* and *sannyasa*. With this kind of ambivalence embedded in Nagaraj's character, we are then taken a step further and made to know the history of the ochre robe. It is in this context that we find the encounter between Nagaraj and the 'Town Hall sadhu', each representing a separate world. The sadhu is described as follows:

> One day he found a bearded sadhu at the Town Hall on the lawn, who wore the ochre robe of a holy man. Nagaraj approached him timidly, the other's appearance being overwhelming, and asked with humility, 'Where can I get cloth similar to yours?'[9]

It is interesting to note that the sadhu is described almost entirely with respect to his outward appearance (beard and robe) and ironically, even given a proper location, which a sadhu is not supposed to have. However, a closer look will reveal that it is not through the author's but through Nagaraj's eyes we are seeing the sadhu, and it is the sadhu's outward appearance that grips Nagaraj. Instead of spiritual guidance, he asks for a robe. The conversation that follows is also an interesting one. Nagaraj is 'confused' when the sadhu asks why he wants an ochre robe, and he simply says, 'I like it'.[10] This proved that his understanding of the significance of the robe is superficial.

Having said this much about Nagaraj, let us turn towards the sadhu himself. He explains to Nagaraj that the 'raiment is sacred and meant for one who is a sanyasi', but gradually his questions turn towards Nagaraj's family, and to something that is most trivial: the name of Nagaraj's nephew. As the conversation proceeds, the sadhu is explicitly mentioned as being repeatedly 'flattered' by Nagaraj's remarks and responses. Gradually we also come to know that deep down the sadhu is full of contempt for ordinary people. At one point, he points to the 'crowds' and remarks: 'Do you see anyone who is not dressed like a clown in all this crowd?'[11]

When Nagaraj comes to take the ochre dye from him after two days, the sadhu hands over the required packet, and instructs him how to dye garments so that the latter 'will be ready to look like a sage.'[12] The emphasis again is on outward appearance. Then comes a series of instructions about

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[9] Ibid., p. 9.

[10] Ibid., p. 9.

[11] Ibid., p. 11.

[12] Ibid., p. 11.

spiritual exercise, in which the sadhu does all the talking and Nagaraj is time and again asked not to 'interrupt'. The hierarchy between the sadhu and the layman is nowhere more explicit in the novel. The sadhu instructs him on undivided devotion to God, control over his senses and passions, and the techniques to withdraw himself from the rest of the world while he is wearing the ochre robe.[13]

The following two passages from the *Gita* delineating the nature of a *sannyasin* may be helpful for an understanding of the character of this sadhu. The first passage goes as follows:

> In what for all [other] folk is night, therein is the man of self-restraint [wide-]awake. When all [other] folk are awake, that is night for the sage who sees. As the waters flow into the sea, full filled, whose ground remains unmoved, so too do all desires flow into [the heart of] man: and such a man wins peace,- not the desirer of desires.[14]

Here is yet another, oft-quoted passage from a different chapter:

> [These] wise ones see the self same thing in a Brahman wise and courteous as in a cow or an elephant shrink disquietened when the unpleasant comes his way: steadfast-and-still his soul, [all] unconfused, he will know Brahman, in Brahman [stilled] he'll stand.[15]

According to the present writer, these apparently contradictory passages sum up the nature of the ideal *sannyasin* in the *Gita*. In the first passage, the *sannyasin* is pitted against the worldly man. It is said that he sees differently from the worldly man, and this cryptic passage has been analyzed by commentators. Zaehner has pointed out that this vision of the wise man includes diverse but corelated elements, a primary one being the vision of the same Self/God underlying all beings. The second passage thus becomes complementary and not contradictory to this one. Thus, the *sannyasin*, though detached from the world of laymen at a spiritual and mental level, *should not* think of oneself as superior than the latter, because the same essential godhead dwells in both. However, a *sannyasin* should not be carried away by his mundane relations, and should constantly remember that the creatures around him have no existence separate from the Supreme Self.

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[13] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

[14] II. 69-70; Zaehner, p. 156.

[15] V. 18-20; Zaehner, p. 63.

Going back to Narayan's novel, we find that the sadhu in question is nowhere near the above description. We have already noted how he is dismissive of the 'crowd' around him, and even while dealing with Nagaraj, he *does not* play his part in *lokasangraha*. In his instructions, there is no message of 'duty', which is badly needed for Nagaraj who is blissfully unaware of his responsibilities towards his wife and nephew. Second, very much like Nagaraj, apparently the sadhu believes that a saintly mentality can be generated by dyeing one's robe, and therefore he relents to Nagaraj's request. Thus, the emphasis is on outward get-up and not on inward transformation. Even his teaching on the devotion to God is very limited compared to that of the *Gita*:

> … *when you are wearing this ochre* your mind should be only on God, not on money or the family. Your thoughts must be away from all sensual matters… You must observe silence, become deaf to other people's voices… Never hear the knock on the door…[16]

The instruction is nevertheless appreciable and echoes much of Krishna's teachings about *dhyana* in the sixth chapter of the *Gita* (which we did not discuss), but while the overall message of the *Gita* transcends the immediate moment of worship, the sadhu is not concerned about Nagaraj's conduct when he is *not* wearing the ascetic robe. Thus, his teaching becomes unwholesome to a large extent.

At this point, it would be wise to recapitulate a point that was made in the introduction to this work. R. K. Narayan is no metaphysician but a storyteller, and mostly a satirist. Therefore, many times his fiction upholds an ideal with the help of the strategy of introducing a character who does not adhere to an ideal but keeps violating it. It is the poetic justice that upholds the truth of the ideal. This strategy is not peculiar to Narayan, but is a familiar one in both Western and Indian traditions. The mythological stories of the *asura*s following the wrong path and getting defeated in the long run belong to this type. In the British tradition, probably the greatest example is Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*, which can be called an inverted morality play as it shows the gradual deterioration and final doom of its protagonist instead of showing the gradual upliftment and attainment of final bliss as was the convention. Therefore, the fact that the sadhu is not following the *Gita* ideal does not mean that Narayan is not in favour of the latter. Narayan may well be satirizing the sadhu, and that is mostly evident as his disciple Nagaraj eventually ends up as a failure on both fronts by the end of the novel.

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[16] *The World of Nagaraj*, pp. 11-12 (emphasis mine).

However, having said this much, it will only be fair to say that just as the *Gita* ideal is not the only one available for the *sannyasin*, similarly, the *Gita* ideal of *sannyasa* is open to multiple interpretations, some of which may endorse the sadhu's behaviour. For instance, the *Gita does* seem to endorse the interpretation that any one of the paths of *karma*, *bhakti*, and *jnana* leads to final liberation. The sadhu in question may be taken to have opted for the second or the third path. The question then arises as to whether he has played his part in *lokasangraha*. *The World of Nagaraj* does not yield a satisfactory answer to this question, because the sadhu is a minor character in this novel, and appears only at the beginning for a brief period. However, the character is interesting in the sense that he anticipates the character of the Master in the later novel, *A Tiger for Malgudi*.

The Devious *Sannyasin* in *The Bachelor of Arts*

Another novel which brings a *sannyasin* and a householder face to face is *The Bachelor of Arts*. An early novel by Narayan, it is crucial for an understanding of the theme of renunciation because its protagonist, Chandran, actually renounces the world, only to relinquish his vow after eight months. However, right now we are not concerned with Chandran but with a small episode which features another *sannyasin* who secretly steals flowers from Chandran's garden. Swinden is of the opinion that Narayan's technique here is in harmony with the Western picaresque tradition. "Never again does the *sannyasi* figure", writes Swinden, "perform anything like the functions he performs in this early novel."[17] However, the picaresque style is very much in play in *The Guide*, and hence it has possibly been wrong on Swinden's part to dub it as peculiar to this novel. Notwithstanding the claim for Narayan's indebtedness to the picaresque tradition, the theme of *sannyasa* in *The Bachelor of Arts* can be linked to the concept of *karma-sannyasa* in *The Gita*. The thief who turns out to be a *sannyasin* is also a *karma-sannyasin* who has probably interpreted his doctrine in an altogether different light. There are authentic instances within the canonized literature of the *Vaishnava* tradition where the nature of the means is generally overlooked as unnecessary when it comes to the question of accomplishing a task undertaken for some holy purpose. A typical South Indian example is that of the saint Tirumangai Alvar who, with his retinue, is said to have robbed rich men of their wealth in order to renovate the Srirangam temple, not to speak of Arjuna himself who is being

[17] Swinden, "*Gods, Demons and Others* in the Novels of R.K.Narayan" in M.K. Bhatnagar ed. *New Insights into the Novels of R.K.Narayan* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2002, 2008), p. 62.

ordered by God to undertake violent action.[18] The argument put forward by the *sannyasin* in his own defense bears a distant echo of such a tradition, which claims that any work done for God's sake is justified:

> As for stealing flowers, flowers are there, God-given. What matters it whether you throw the flowers on the gods, or I do it… You are asleep at that hour… I can't wait until you get up because my worship is over before sunrise… I had thought that here, as in many other bungalows, flowers were kept only for ornament. I am happy to hear that they are put to holy use. Hereafter I shall take only a handful and leave the rest for your worship.[19]

The few pertinent points that are apparent from this entire statement can be summarized as follows: God being the ultimate owner of everything in this world, it is unnecessary as to who makes the offerings. Second, as because God has the first claim over anything whatsoever, and because the *sannyasin* is performing his deeds for God and not for self-gratification, whatever means he adopts in order to appropriate the belongings of agnostic people is always already justified, and he does not incur sin. On the contrary, those who do not care about God and live a self-centered life are really at a vulnerable point. However, if a person is found to be pious, religious, and God-fearing, i.e., a fellow traveller on the path chosen by him, then the *sannyasin* should not compete with him for divine grace, but unselfishly make way for his salvation as well.

This passage bears a lot of *implicit* and *unconscious* echoes from *The Gita*. First of all, it is categorically stated in *The Gita* that all food (implies all enjoyable material by extension of meaning) is given by the gods, and therefore one who eats (enjoys) them without first setting apart a portion as sacrifice, is ungrateful, and therefore, the *real* thief. They are straightforwardly dubbed as 'sinners' eating (incurring) sin.[20] It is important to note that with all its catholicity, *The Gita* is *not* tolerant of non-believers, and strongly condemns them as 'doers of evil, deluded, base, who, 'their wisdom swept away', deteriorate into 'a devilish mode of existence'.[21] On the contrary, the *yogin*

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[18] Another version of the story is recorded in Nabhaji's *Bhaktamala-grantha*, where an uncle and a nephew are said to have renovated the temple by stealing the philosopher's stone (*sparsamani*) from a merchant.

[19] *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chicago: University of Chiago Press, 1980, p.77.

[20] III.12-13.

[21] VII.15; XVI.17-18.

who works ‘ascribing his works to Brahman’, is described as ‘not stained by evil as a lotus-petal [is not stained] by water.’[22] Krishna assures his disciple:

> Give up all things of law, turn to Me, your only refuge, [for] I will deliver you from all evils; have no care.[23]

It is also important to note that unlike the ascetic character we encountered in *The World of Nagaraj*, this figure is far closer to the *Gita* doctrine in his attitude towards laymen. He does not consider himself to be higher than the latter, though he is suspicious of their conduct. In this sense, he *is* to some extent on the path of *lokasangraha*, though no active participation in social welfare is visible on his part.

The English Teacher, which is in many ways a sequel to *The Bachelor of Arts*, also features a *sannyasin* figure. *Swamiji*, as he is called, comes to Krishna’s house to cure the ailing Susila.[24] The patient’s mother then pays the ascetic in both cash and kind. The fact that he accepts material rewards in lieu of his service proves that he regards it as his profession, and does not perform it with altruistic aims. He is not acting according to the ideal of *lokasangraha*, and is a foil to the ideal *karma-sannyasin*. The passage is a tiny one, and does not merit more than a passing reference.

The Three Types

From the three examples that we have studied so far, the obvious conclusion that one derives is that the *sannyasin* figure in Narayan is almost invariably imperfect, and a source of comic absurdity. Unlike the *sattvika* householders in his fiction, the ascetic figures are mostly handled satirically, and are used as foils to the ideal of *lokasangraha*, if not *sannyasa*. However, this does not mean that Narayan is prejudiced against the very concept of *sannyasa*. In the passage we quoted from *A Tiger for Malgudi* at the beginning of this chapter, Narayan has distinguished between the true and the fake *sannyasin*s, and pointed out that the true ones are motivated by ‘philosophy’ or ‘illumination’, but there *are* those who renounce the world because they are frustrated. This last group certainly does not constitute the ‘true’ *sannyasin*, but it is interesting to note that they cannot be dubbed as

[22] V.10.

[23] XVIII.66.

[24] *The English Teacher*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2008, p. 84.

‘fake’ either. Going by the teaching of the *Gita*, it is the ‘*abhyasa*’ that these ascetics are lacking. Thus, in Narayan’s fictional world, we encounter three types of *sannyasins*: the true ones, the fake ones, and those who renounce to avoid the reality of the mundane world. The first one is rare, but it can be expected that they do adhere to the doctrine of *lokasangraha*. A similar expectation is not possible with respect to the fake ones. However, can a fake *sannyasin* turn oneself into a true one by adopting the ideal of *lokasangraha*? The answer seems to be affirmitive. The *Gita* recognizes that the mind is hard to control and therefore prescribes the method of ‘practice and desirelessness’. To Arjuna’s question that logically follows Krishna’s answer, as to the future of a person who dies before attaining perfection, the reply given is that the virtue acquired by such a man is not lost but it propels him to a virtuous family in the next birth, from where he resumes his pursuit.[25] Finally, the ones who have retired from worldly life because of personal grievance, are always the target of Narayan’s ridicule, and they are not ensured redemption unless they return to their original social worlds, and accept the truth of their mundane existence.

Our examples for these three types of *sannyasin* are the Master in *A Tiger for Malgudi*, Raju in *The Guide*, and Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*, respectively. In the remainder of this chapter, we shall proceed chronologically, and see how these three characters can be studied in the light of the ideal of *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha* as presented in the *Gita*.

Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*

We have already studied the brief episode of the ascetic-householder encounter in *The Bachelor of Arts*. Now we should get back to the same and look at it from the householder’s, or more specifically, Chandran’s perspective. When Chandran and his father catch the thief, they drag him into the house and hold him down, until they realize that he is an ascetic. On realizing that he is one, Chandran’s father relaxes his hold, but Chandran angrily charges at him:

> You wear the garb of a *sanyasi*, and yet you do this sort of thing![26]

On being requested by his mother to release the ascetic, Chandran reiterates his cynicism:

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[25] VI.33ff.

[26] *The Bachelor of Arts*, p. 76.

> What, Mother, you are frightened of every long hair and ochre dress you see. If you are really a holy man, why should you do this?[27]

However, at the end of the episode, Chandran gives in to his mother's command, and releases the ascetic. Critics are unanimous in their opinion that this brief episode anticipates Chandran's own renunciation. It is ironic that Chandran who was initially suspicious and cynical of the ascetic, himself embraces a similar stance, and that too, a self-deceptive and fake one.

In order to understand Chandran's renunciation, we need to start from the beginning of the novel, and explore his character on its non-ascetic side. The novel is neatly divided into four parts. The first part deals with Chandran's last days in college, the second with his brief and unsuccessful romance with Malathi, the third with his impulsive decision to leave his home, and the fourth with his return and marriage. Most critics have tried to read into this novel a parody of the *ashrama* code. Though in the introduction we said that Narayan's fiction as a whole does not subscribe to the ideal of *ashrama*, with respect to this particular novel, such an argument seems to hold true. Indeed, for Chandran, the sequence of *garhastya* and *sannyasa* is altered. However, it must be remembered that the concept of one's adherence to one's duty predates the *ashrama* system, and there are legendary figures who are said to have renounced ascetic lives and married and settled down for the sake of their ancestors and in order to save their lineage from extinction. One such figure is Jaratkaru, who was chastized by his ancestors for his renunciatory zeal, and he married and gave birth to a son who redeemed the souls of his ancestors. It is interesting to note that Tilak has mentioned Jaratkaru as a case in point while analyzing the ideal of *karma* in *The Gita*.

The novel opens with the college union secretary Natesan urging Chandran to play advocate in a debate on whether 'historians should be slaughtered first'. Though initially reluctant, Chandran finally agrees, but feels himself to be a traitor to his own discipline. He also has dreams of attacking Raghavachar, his teacher. Thus, we find that his dilemma can be remotely connected to Arjuna's in the beginning of *The Gita*. However, unlike Arjuna, whose dilemma was overcome by the knowledge of duty and integrity, Chandran undertakes the duty because he cherishes fame and attention. This is how Narayan describes his narcissism:

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[27] Ibid.

> Chandran spent a useful half-hour gazing at the college notice board. He saw his name in a notice announcing the evening's debate.[28]

Again, during the debate, Chandran's narcissism comes out when he is described as being 'inspired by the applause with which the audience received many of his cynicisms.'[29] However, he is also given to a certain degree of jealousy, as is evident from the fact that a parallel enthusiasm on the part of the audience for his rival instills a 'slight displeasure' in him.[30] His narcissism is again at play when he feels bored when other panelists are delivering their talks:

> Now that he had delivered his speech he felt that the speeches of the others in the hall were both unnecessary and inferior. His eyes wandered about the hall.[31]

Chandran is cynical about Professor Brown and thinks that his presence in the debate was just show business, and silently dubs 'All Europeans' as extravagant people who know only money and do not render any concrete service to Indians. After the debate is over, Chandran eagerly awaits Natesan to comment on his speech, but when he does not, an impatient Chandran himself raises the issue and Natesan flatters him in response. After that we find him being cynical of Professor Gajapathi, and openly confessing to the latter's face that he did not take down the class lecture. He was initially hesitant when Professor Raghavachar offered him the post of the secretary of the History Association that was going to be started, but had to agree half-heartedly.

From all that has been stated above, we can glean a few discernible traits of Chandran's character: cynicism, jealousy, passiveness, narcissism, and occasional vibes of rebellious behaviour. However, all these elements are not in excess in Chandran, and therefore do not go on to be the source of harm for other people. Going back to Ranga Rao's distinction between *sattvika* and *rajasika* protagonists in Narayan's novels, we can say that Chandran, despite his drawbacks, is after all a *sattvika* figure. Even then, we cannot call him a *karmayogin* because his actions are oriented towards self-renown. In Chapter 5, we do find one positive trait in Chandran, that of self-discipline. Narayan describes:

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[28] Ibid., pp. 15-16.

[29] Ibid., p. 18.

[30] Ibid., p. 19.

[31] Ibid.

> November to March was a very busy period for Chandran. He got up every day at four-thirty in the morning, and did not get to bed until eleven. He practised his iron scheme of study to the letter. By the beginning of March he was well up in every subject.[32]

However, as the plot moves on to the second part, when he has secured his B. A. degree, that Chandran becomes more lax and does not have any clear-cut plan for his life. It is at this stage that he falls into the trap of *akarma*. In contrast to his friend Ramu who goes looking for jobs all around North India, he was 'enjoying a freedom he had never experienced in his life before.'[33] Following the news of Ramu having taken a job elsewhere, Chandran becomes a member of the Town Public Library, and begins to read voraciously but pointlessly. While acquiring knowledge cannot be called *akarma*, a close study of the passage will prove that he lacks discipline:

> There was no scheme or order in his study. He read books just as they came. He read a light humorist and switched on to Carlyle, and from there pounced on Shakespeare, and then wandered to Shaw and Wells. The thing that mattered most to him was that the book should be enjoyable, and he ruthlessly shut books that threatened to bore him.[34]

Chandran is thus driven by impulse. He accepts whatever appeals to him, and discards the rest. And it is this impulse which draws him towards Malathi. Much of his infatuation with Malathi is a figment of his imagination (he even imagines her name), and it is this illusory element in his mind that prompts him to openly confront his parents. His parents prioritize Chandran's feelings and arranges for the marriage but the wedding is finally abandoned due to a mismatch in the horoscopes, and Malathi is married to a different man. Following this shock, Chandran falls sick:

> Chandran had fever that night. He had a high temperature, and he raved. In about ten days, when he was well again, he insisted on being sent to Madras for a change. His father gave him fifty rupees, sent a wire to his brother at Madras to meet Chandran at the Egmore Station…[35]

Thus, we find that Chandran has absolutely no control over his senses. He gives way to both pleasure and pain. This is in direct contrast with the teachings of *The Gita* (II.56):

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[32] Ibid., p. 78.

[33] Ibid., p. 93.

[34] Ibid., p. 94.

[35] Ibid., pp. 151-152.

> Whose mind is undismayed [though beset] by many a sorrow, who for pleasures has no further longing, from whom all passion, fear, and wrath have fled, such a man is called a man of steadied thought, a silent sage.[36]

However, we find his conscience dominating his impulse, when finally he steps back from the notorious Mint Street, where his new acquaintance Kailas had taken him to introduce him to alcohol and prostitutes. But this turning back does not develop into a fruitful and logical decision. Chandran hastily decides to become a *sannyasin*, but very much like the *sannyasin* in *The World of Nagaraj*, the emphasis in Chandran's case is also on the external factors:

> He was a *sanyasi*; the simplest solution. Shave the head, dye the clothes in ochre, and you were dead for aught the world cared. The only thing possible; short of committing suicide.[37]

This was definitely an impulsive decision on the part of Chandran and he is brought back to his original social position at the end of the novel. P. Hari Padma Rani's significant work into the subject raises some pertinent problems which reveal the looseness and incredibility of the plot-construction in the novel. After a comparative analysis with *The Guide*, Rani justly points out that it is hard to believe that Chandran, who has never faced any sort of bodily hardship so far (unlike Raju who had already spent a few years in jail when the story begins), paves his way with a simple casual attitude. Moreover, Chandran's sudden rise of conscience after eight long months of ascetic life and his subsequent departure to his family appear equally unrealistic from a psychological point of view.[38] T. D. Brunton has also dubbed Chandran's asceticism as a weak element in the novel.[39] Be that as it may, the present writer personally feels that the attempted renunciation of Chandran and his subsequent retreat can be better explained with reference to Arjuna's dilemma in *The Gita*. Let us take this passage for analysis:

> 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

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[36] Zaehner, p. 52.

[37] *The Bachelor of Arts*, p. 167.

[38] Rani, "The Theme of 'Renunciation' in R.K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*" in Amar Nath Prasad ed. *Critical Response to R.K. Narayan*, New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2003, pp. 105-6.

[39] Brunton, "India in Fiction: The Heritage of Indianness" in M. K. Naik, S. K. Desai and G. S. Amur ed., *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English*, Dharwar: Karnatak University, 1972, p.208.

> time, but they do live in eternity. But Chandran's renunciation was not of that kind. It was an alternative to suicide… He was a *sanyasi* because it pleased him to mortify his flesh.[40]

It is tempting to compare Chandran's renunciation to Arjuna's initial reluctance to fight and a momentary zeal for asceticism.[41] Krishna disagrees with him in this regard and says that caste duty (described as God-ordained and *svabhaja* or 'intrinsic') should not be shunned, and therefore, being a *kshatriya*, it will be sin on the part of Arjuna to retreat from battle.[42] The influence of the *svabhava* on a person's decisions is described as ultimate. To quote from *The Gita*:

> If thou turnest to thought of I and thinkest, 'I will not fight,' vain is this thy resolve; Nature will constrain thee.[43]

Moreover, Krishna condemns the practitioners of austerities not sanctioned by the scriptures, who seek the path of mortification without restraining their senses, thereby degrading the Lord himself who resides in the body.[44]

Chandran's renunciation is, by all means, not ordained by the scriptures. He has not undertaken any measure to restrain the senses. His practice is in direct opposition to the precepts of *abhyasa* in *The Gita*. While *The Gita* asks the *sannyasin* to follow a disciplined lifestyle, he is most wanton in his habits. The following description makes it clear:

> If anybody invited him to sleep under a roof he did it; if not, he slept in the open, or in a public rest-house, where were gathered scores like him. When he was hungry and found none to feed him, he usually dragged himself about in a weak state, and enjoyed the pain of hunger.[45]

The Gita has asked the *sannyasin* to avoid both extremes, and practice meditation in a clean place and clad in clean garments.[46] Chandran does not do any of these, and his asceticism is not in any way capable of reducing his inner turmoil. It is only by a return to his *svabhavaja* role as a

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[40] *The Bachelor of Arts*, p. 108.

[41] II.5.

[42] II.33; XVIII.41 ff.

[43] XVIII.59.

[44] XVII.5-6.

[45] *The Bachelor of Arts*, pp. 107-8.

[46] VI.11-12, 16.

responsible son that he finally attains his redemption. However, at first there is an indication that Chandran has not matured. It would initially appear that the stance of *sannyasa* has not brought any inner transformation in him. But this is not the case. When he sees Susila, he momentarily gives way to romanticization once again, and reverts to his cynicism as he now finds Malathi inferior to Susila. However, he immediately tames his mind:

> No, no. He checked himself this time; he told himself that it was very unfair to compare and decry; it was a very vile thing to do. He told himself that he was doing it only out of spite… Poor Malathi! For the first time he was able to view her as a sister in a distant town. Poor girl, she had her points. Of course Susila was different.[47]

At this point, Chandran seems to have risen above his passions and given way to reason. The irony lies in the fact that Chandran masters his passions as a householder and not as an ascetic. Thus, the householder remains the ideal in Narayan's fiction.

The Bachelor of Arts is to a great extent reminiscent of Christopher Marlowe's play, *Doctor Faustus*. While Marlowe's Faustus has traditionally been hailed as a rebellious figure who epitomizes Renaissance humanism, Leo Kirschbaum's fine analysis of the play establishes the fact that far from being iconoclastic, it upholds the validity of Christian doctrines, with the exception that it reverses the accepted technique of a morality play by presenting the gradual decline of a man rather than a spiritual progress.[48] Susan Snyder shows how Marlowe cleverly subverts each and every convention of a morality play: the prologue being a parody of sainthood, Faustus's first rite being a parody of baptism, his ceremonial reception into the devil's world instead of the Church, all these culminating into the final failure of an eleventh-hour redemption.[49] Similarly, Narayan's novel is striking in its final act of upholding the notion of *karma-sannyasa* in *The Gita* by highlighting the possible repercussions of a supposed deviation from the ethic instead of monotonous dramatization of the ideal path. However, unlike Marlowe, Narayan does not cast his protagonist to unending

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[47] *The Bachelor of Arts*, p. 261.

[48] "Marlowe's Faustus: A Reconsideration" in *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 75 (Jul., 1943), pp. 225-241.

[49] "Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus" as an Inverted Saint's Life" in *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Jul., 1966), pp. 565-577.

perdition at the end. Chandran is a transformed man at the end of the story, while Faustus discards the opportunity of his last-minute redemption.

Raju in *The Guide*

Though we have mentioned Faustus, the morality play and the 'anti-saint', with respect to *The Bachelor of Arts*, the cross-references are perhaps more appropriate in the context of *The Guide*. Considered to be Narayan's masterpiece, *The Guide* has lent itself to multiple interpretations, widely different from one another. Especially enigmatic are the character of the protagonist Raju and his relation with the married woman Rosie. Critics have also been puzzled by the subtexts and narrative techniques employed in this complicated novel. Moreover, the novel was also made into a Bollywood movie by director Vijay Anand in 1965, and despite significant deviations from the novel, the film remains "Narayan's *Guide*" for a considerable number of people in India.

This variegated aspect of *The Guide* makes it a difficult job to draw any satisfactory conclusion on the text and its meaning. However, it would be beneficial to retrace the origin and history of this significant Narayan novel, in order to chart out a pathway through the labyrinth. John Thieme draws our attention to a significant passage in "Reluctant Guru" (which we already quoted in the "Introduction"), wherein Narayan compares his own situation to that of Raju:

> I felt myself in the same situation as Raju, the hero of my *Guide* who was mistaken for a saint and began to wonder at some point himself if a sudden effulgence had begun to show in his face.[50]

This is definitely a sarcastic remark on the part of Narayan, who was amused and somewhat perplexed by the Western stereotype of the 'mystic' Indian. Thieme also notices that *The Guide* is a novel that was written in America. Here is the quotation from *My Days*:

> During my travels in America, the idea crystallized in my mind. I stopped in Berkeley for three months, took a hotel room, and wrote my novel.[51]

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[50] Narayan, "Reluctant Guru" in *A Writer's Nightmare: Selected Essays 1958-88*, pp. 104-5; quoted in Thieme, p. 100.

[51] *My Days*, Chennai: Indian thought Publications, 2006, p. 189.

Drawing on these two points, Thieme argues that through *The Guide*, Narayan 'may in some way have responded to the West's fascination with Hindu mysticism.'[52] Thieme goes a step further and adds:

> … while his early English makeover resulted in a stifling of the Hindu elements in his fiction, his later American 'discovery' unleashed the possibility for according them centrality, thanks to the Orientalist vogue for Eastern spirituality… A shrewder businessman than many of the small-time entrepreneurs who are at the centre of most of his middle-period novels… Narayan saw the potential this vogue afforded…[53]

Thieme reminds his readers of the fact that it is after this period that Narayan went back to Hindu mythology, retold the epics, and came up with the collection of mythological stories, *Gods, Demons and Others*, and remarks:

> Most significantly, in his new American incarnation the 'reluctant guru' found himself able to give freer expression to the Hindu layers of his imagination in his fiction and this led to the writing of two of his best novels: *The Guide*… and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*...[54]

However, despite alleging an impulse on the part of Narayan to cater to Orientalist taste, Thieme is not oblivious to the fact that Hindu elements have always been a part of Narayan's fiction. In fact, Narayan himself recalls an actual incident he witnessed in Mysore prior to his departure that triggered his imagination, which ultimately culminated in the novel, *The Guide*. To quote from his autobiography:

> At this time I had been thinking of a subject for a novel: a novel about someone 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; Krishnaraja Sagar, an enormous reservoir feeding channels that irrigated thousands of acres, had also become dry, and its bed, a hundred and fifty feet deep, was now exposed to the sky with fissures and cracks, revealing an ancient submerged temple, coconut stumps and dehydrated crocodiles. As a desperate measure, the municipal council organized 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

[52] Thieme, p. 101.

[53] Ibid., p. 102.

[54] Ibid., pp. 102-3.

> chanted certain *mantras* continuously for eleven days. On the twelfth day it rained, and brought relief to the countryside. This was really the starting point of *The Guide*.[55]

The irony involved in the casual description of the 'water' which was arranged 'at great cost' not for quenching the thirst of the people but to help the brahmins stand in it for prayers, is available almost verbatim in the novel where the villagers are said to have 'made an artificial basin in sand and, when it didn't fill, fetched water from distant wells and filled it, so that the man [Raju] had always knee-deep water to stand in.'[56] Be that as it may, we find that Narayan himself confesses that the idea behind the novel was to write on 'enforced sainthood', which does not apparently have anything to do with the Orientalist bias which Thieme mentions. It is also important to note that Narayan's treatment of the last scene of the novel is too ambiguous to label it either as an affirmation of an inner transformation in Raju or as a description of Raju's hallucination. In the first case, it could be, as Thieme argues, Narayan's subscription to the Orientalist ideal; on the other hand, if it is not so, then Narayan remains as true to his humorist self as he has always been.

With the issue of 'sainthood' (albeit enforced) being highlighted as the major theme behind the novel by the author himself, we may now move on to see what critics have to say about it. Most critics are of the opinion that Raju's transformation at the end of the novel is *real*, and he redeems himself through his sacrifice. The authorities who adhere to this interpretation include C. D. Narasimhaiah, Ranga Rao, Viney Kirpal, Sr. Mary Beatina Rayen, and others. To quote from Narasimhaiah:

> Realization comes to him [Raju] too… He realized too that he had 'lacked ordinary character' in his dealings with Rosie. Any one who had even a streak of such rare self-knowledge must surely end up as a good man especially when circumstances favoured him. More so in India, where with all the degradation we may have suffered, the criterion of greatness is still the stature of the spirit. And the ending is smooth and inevitable. India's undying faith in God and goodness, holy men and miracles is here rendered quite credible by the novelist's art even to the sceptical and questioning eye.[57]

G. S. Balaram Gupta, on the other hand, takes a diametrically opposite view, and concludes:

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[55] *My Days*, pp. 188-9.

[56] *The Guide*, London: Penguin Books, 1958, p. 208.

[57] Narasimhaiah, "R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*" in C. N. Srinath ed., *R. K. Narayan: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000, p. 141.

> A close reading of the novel reveals that Raju is intended to be a character who is essentially a selfish swindler, an adroit actor, and a perfidious megalomaniac who meets with an appropriately ignominous end. Narayan's attack on his roguish protagonist appears less scathing and more covert… because he can laugh at human follies and absurdities without any great involvement or a well-defined commitment to human values. We have enough reasons to view *The Guide* as a delightful expose of the ignorance-ridden Indian rural society as well as of typically Indian pseudo-saints.[58]

Thus we find that Raju's sainthood is a debated affair. However, it should not be ignored that a pseudo-saint is also as much part of the authentic Indian tradition as a true saint is. There is a lot of evidence in Indian literatures of rogues (and even demons, e.g., Andhaka) turning into saints. In this context, we may also mention Chitra Sankaran's work, which focuses on the use of myth in the works of R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Sankaran writes extensively on the layered narrative technique in *The Guide*, reminiscent of the *katha* style in Sanskrit literature (which likens the novel to the *Purana*), but apart from that, she also deals in great detail with the variety of sages (*rishi*/*sadhu*) in Hindu mythology, and points out that there is no unanimity between their characters, despite the fact that all of them go by the title 'sage'. For instance, Sankaran mentions Vashishtha, Vishwamitra, and Narada, and remarks:

> Vashishtha is serene, detached and wise; Visvamitra is arrogant, quick-tempered and impulsive; Sage Narada… is gossipy, prone to creating mischief among the gods for his own amusement. These distinctly individual figures, however, share all the typical features of their kind, that is, of rishis.[59]

Sankaran also points out that there are many sages in Hindu mythology who are said to have begun as ordinary men. Her prime example is that of the sage Valmiki who is said to have been a robber in his early life. On the other hand, instances of demonic figures who undertake austerities to gain power just like the sages but then misuse them are also not infrequent in Hindu mythology.[60] Sankaran winds up her discussion by referring to the figure of the 'trickster-sage', drawing on materials from both Sanskrit and Tamil lore. She refers to Tamil temple myths which are full of such 'trickster-sages', and points out that in specific contexts, even the deities Siva and Murugan

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[58] Gupta, "A Sinner is a Sinner: A Study of Raju" in Atma Ram, ed., *Perspectives on R. K. Narayan*, Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1981, p. 135.

[59] Sankaran, *The Myth Connection*, Ahmedabad: Allied Publishers Limited, 1993, p. 222.

[60] Ibid., p. 222-223.

(Skanda) behave as such. Therefore, a 'trickster-sage' is not necessarily a negative entity, and not immune to transformation. Sankaran writes:

> In Hindu mythology, the sages and even the gods themselves are shown to be fallible, and no one is considered perfect or sunk so low as to be incapable of reaching great spiritual heights. Also, in Hindu theology, transformation in a person can occur due entirely to an outside agency without the volition of the individual. Raju would, in this light, be eminent 'sage material'.[61]

However, it is surprising that Sankaran, despite all her analysis, has not even mentioned Krishna, the archetypal 'trickster-sage' in Hindu lore. While Krishna is by birth a *kshatriya*, he can be called a 'sage' when one takes into account not only his mastery over *yoga* and his mystic utterances, but also the manner in which he enlightens Arjuna and Uddhava (in the *Bhagavata Purana*). But, it is surprising that this sage figure is also a 'devious divinity' (to borrow a term from B. K. Matilal), with a deep penchant for subterfuge, and it is he who advises the Pandavas to violate one after another martial code of conduct during the epic war. It is wrong to think that Krishna has resorted to subterfuge only for the larger good of the humanity, because there is a legend in the *Harivamsha*, where he unleashes predators from his own body in order to create panic among his people so that the community is compelled to move to a more romantic location, thus enabling him to gratify his amours more thoroughly. Later traditions keep multiplying the stories of his deceit and guile, but surprisingly enough, all these stories make him all the more charming and loveable to the faithful rather than generating disgust! To a believer, these two images of Krishna are not at all incompatible.

The above reference to Krishna is not an isolated one, but directly relevant for an understanding of Raju's character, and especially his relationship with his disciple Velan. At least one critic has made direct mention of Krishna in his capacity of Arjuna's charioteer with respect to Raju's role as a (spiritual) guide.[62] U. P. Sinha's incisive analysis of the *guru-shishya* relationship between Raju and Velan points out that it borders on parody, and the roles are indeed reversed.[63] The following paragraphs would take this cue and try to read into Raju's masquerade a parody of the Krishna-

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[61] Ibid., p. 224.

[62] U. P. Sinha, *Patterns of Myth and Reality: A Study in R. K. Narayan's Novels*, Delhi: Sandarbh Publishers, p. 75.

[63] Ibid, pp. 77 ff.

Arjuna relationship. Because this chapter is primarily devoted to the ideal of *sannyasa*, and because it is in this role that Raju gains his fulfillment, the focus of the following analysis will be the 'Mangal' phase of Raju's life, with occasional glances at his past.

To begin with, analyzing the style and technique in *The Guide* with reference to traditional Hindu religious, artistic, and philosophical ideas, is not a novelty. Raju has been described as a *rajasika* character whose gradual transformation into a *sattvika* person lends the novel its plot. In this context, Ranga Rao reads the jail as a 'natural ambience for *rajasic characters*'.[64] Again, going a step further, N. B. Routh discerns in Raju's character some *tamasika* elements as well.[65] Viney Kirpal is of the opinion that the childhood, the period of occupation as a tourist-guide (including the illicit relationship with Rosie), the term in jail and the final stage of renunciation of Raju correspond to the four *asrama*-s of Hindu life.[66] Krishna Sen is inclined to divide Raju's career according to the traditionally accepted four deadly sins of Hindu theology: lust (*kama*), anger (*krodha*), greed (*lobha*), and delusion (*moha*); the first and the last two from his acquaintance with Rosie, and the second from his resentment against Marco.[67] It must also be mentioned that the novel contains at least one direct reference to the *Gita*. In a passage that carries a direct reference to the *Gita*, the *rajasika* nature of Raju once again reiterates itself through his craving for food. The passage reads as follows:

> Raju was waiting for his usual gifts and food. He had, no doubt, fruits and other edible stuff left in his hamper, but he hoped they would bring him other fare…He wanted to try some new recipes, for a change… [He thought] if a little rice flour and chili powder could be got, along with some other things, I can do something new… He had a craving for *bonda*… It was composed of flour, potato, a slice of onion, a coriander leaf, and a green chili… While discoursing on *Bhagavad-Gita* to his audience the other evening, Raju had had a sudden craving to try [cooking] this [item] out himself.[68]

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[64] Rao, p. 78.

[65] Routh, "Conflicting Readings of R.K.Narayan's *The Guide*", *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies* (Vol.1, No. 2, Winter, July-December, 2009), p. 23.

[66] Kirpal, "Moksha for Raju: The Archetypal Four-Stage Journey" cited in Krishna Sen, *Critical Essays on R.K.Narayan's The Guide* (Kolkata: Orient Longman Pvt. Ltd, 2004), p. 30.

[67] Ibid. p. 31.

[68] *The Guide* (Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2010), p. 104

Rao, even while drawing the attention of the reader to this passage as proof of Raju's *rajasika* character, does not elaborate on the *implicit* overtones of *The Gita* that it carries, probably for the sake of brevity. However, this passage is highly reminiscent of the seventeenth chapter of the sacred poem, where Krishna distinguishes between the food habits of the three kinds of people. The *sattvika* man is said to have 'foods that are savoury, greasy, firm, and cordial' while the *rajasika* prefers 'Bitter, sour, salt, over-hot, sharp, astringent, burning' food which 'bring pain, sorrow, sickness'.[69] The fruits referred to at the beginning of this passage are symbolic of the *sattvika* type. That the *bonda* is a *rajasika* food hardly needs any conjecture, owing to the abundance of aromatic ingredients (onion, coriander leaf, chili, and ginger) used in its preparation. The facile oscillation of Raju's mind from religious discourse to his craving for food implies the inconsistency that pervades his psyche.[70]

The story opens with Raju alone at the dilapidated shrine, having been visited by the villager Velan. In the first scene, there is no indication that Velan has mistaken him for a holy man. Soon the narrative shifts to the first person, and narrates Raju's experience immediately after he was released from the jail. However, after a couple of pages, the readers are taken back to the former scene, and here we find that Velan has already presumed that Raju is a saint. He gazed at Raju's 'face with devotion', which makes Raju feel awkward, but before the latter can articulate his discomfiture, Velan mentions that he has a problem and requires a solution. Velan is worried about his sister who had refused to marry the groom chosen for her, and as he narrates the problem, Raju is seen to predict every time what he was going to say the next moment. This impresses Velan all the more, so much so that when Raju points out that these predictions do not require any 'extraordinary' genius, Velan takes this candid confession as a marker of Raju's humility. At the beginning of the conversation, Raju tactfully inserts the story of the bereaved mother from Buddhist lore, which adds to Velan's image of Raju as a man wth profound thoughts. Raju requests Velan to bring the girl to him, but ponders afterwards whether he should have asked the girl's age, because he recalled the repercussions of his affair with Rosie.[71]

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[69] XVII.8-9

[70] Raju's oscillation between religious discourse and craving for food is also reminiscent of the figure of the *vidushaka* or jester in ancient Indian drama.

[71] *The Guide*, pp. 3-4; 6-7; 11-13.

From the above details, we find that Raju is not a complete villain. While he accepts the role of the spiritual guide, there *are* attempts on his part to reveal his true identity, though such attempts are feeble and half-hearted. We also must acknowledge that he has learned from his life, and is in the process of transformation. Positive qualities in him include wit, mastery over speech, and capability of innovative ideas. The irony is that he is using this for the wrong purpose.

As the story advances, we are exposed to Raju's cynicism. Velan having gone home, Raju counts the stars in the sky and says jokingly to himself that he 'shall be rewarded for this profound service to humanity.' He also adds:

> "The thing to do is to start from a corner and go on patch by patch. Never work from the top to the top to the horizon, but always the other way."[72]

This apparently insignificant comment in the scene where Raju is seen to idle away his time seems prophetic of his ultimate destiny. The 'service to humanity' or act of '*lokasangraha*' which he is going to perform is forshadowed in this passage.

Raju's craving for food, which makes him a *rajasika* character, is revealed when he is offered food by Velan. The food is totally vegetarian, consisting of fruit and milk, and therefore *sattvika*. However, we are told that prison life has made Raju more tolerant of such food, and he accepts the offering. Again we find him enacting a fake show of devotion, when he places the food in front of the idol in the temple, and utters the supposedly profound saying: "By giving to God, do you know it multiplies, rather than divides?" However, when he tries to recall the story of Devaka in this context, he sees that he has forgotten it, but he is saved once again because Velan 'was of the stuff disciples are made of; an unfinished story or an incomplete moral never bothered him…'

Thus, we find that the Raju-Velan pair is in many senses a parody of the Krishna-Arjuna pair. Arjuna is a disciple who asks questions and interrupts his teacher whenever he has doubts. Velan, on the other hand, is a passive figure who does not even care to judge whether he has chosen the right person as his guide. It is also important to note that Krishna and Arjuna had a life-long intimacy (they were relatives and friends), and therefore, Arjuna found in Krishna a reliable counsellor. Velan had not known Raju beforehand, and he foolishly presumes the latter to be a holy man. Moreover,

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[72] Ibid, p. 13.

unlike Krishna, Raju does not give any practical solution to his disciples' problems, and mystifies their minds with enigmatic utterances. Narayan writes:

> The essence of sainthood seemed to lie in one's ability to utter mystifying statements… He was dragging those innocent men deeper and deeper into the bog of unclear thoughts.[73]

Krishna, one should note, began with practical advice, and only secondarily moved towards philosophical statements. Krishna's advice was convincing, though it occasionally seemed contradictory, and at last when Krishna gave Arjuna the liberty to choose between the two options, Arjuna chose to go by Krishna's advice. Raju, on the contrary, does the reverse with his disciples. He initially says:

> I want you all to think independently of your own accord, and not allow yourselves to be led along by the nose as if you were cattle.[74]

But the very next day, he 'provided' the assembly with a 'specific program' which amounted to nothing but hollow mimicry:

> He beat a soft rhythm with his hands and chanted a holy song with a refrain that could be repeated by his audience. The ancient ceiling echoed with voices of men, women, and children repeating sacred texts in unison.[75]

Raju is a foil to the ideal teacher-friend of the *Gita* precisely owing to his failure in meting out concrete resolutions to the practical problems of his disciples. He is utterly helpless when the drought happens and the cattle begin to die. His disciples, confused, exhausted, and bewildered, take to arms against one another for petty reasons, and Velan is injured. The news of the skirmish is taken to Raju by Velan's brother, but Raju selfishly decides not to pay a visit to Velan because he fears that then he would have to repeat the action for everybody. Unlike Krishna, who wisely counsels his friend and tactfully leads his men, Raju resorts to childish emotional tactics to dissuade the people from violence. He thinks that his decision to refrain from eating will stop the people from quarrelling among themselves, but the situation takes an entirely different turn, as the villagers infer that he is

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[73] Ibid, p. 44.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid, p. 45.

going to undertake a ritual fast to bring the rains, and compare him to Mahatma Gandhi. Unlike Krishna, Christ, or Gandhi, who knowingly and willingly undertook hardships for the larger good of mankind, Raju is reluctant to do so, but has no way out.[76]

Raju, completely bewildered, decides to open his heart to Velan. It is ironic that the person whom Velan and all the villagers had venerated, himself reveals his unadmirable past to the latter. This may also be taken as a parody of the eleventh chapter of the *Gita* where Krishna reveals his luminous, pervasive form, and Arjuna is awe-struck and driven to ask for forgiveness for having treated him as a mundane individual in the past.[77]

The crucial passage in the novel where the last possibility of Raju's retreat from his masquerade is frustrated, is *not* when Raju agrees to play the role of the savior sincerely, but when Velan, after a night-long patient hearing of Raju's past from his own mouth, reiterates his faith in the latter and vows undivided allegiance to him:

> Raju's narration concluded with the crowing of the cock… He imagined that Velan should rise in disgust and swear… Raju asked, "Now you have heard me fully?" like a lawyer who has a misgiving that the judge has been woolgathering.
>
> "Yes, Swami… I don't know why you tell me all this, Swami. It's very kind of you to address at such length your humble servant…. I'll go back to the village to do my morning duties… And I'll never speak a word of what I have heard to anyone."… With this, he [Velan] made a deep obeisance, went down the steps and across the sandy river.[78]

Raju's question as to whether Velan has paid attention is reminiscent of Krishna's in the *Gita* (18.72). Arjuna, in reply, acknowledges that his confusion is destroyed through the latter's guidance. In Velan's case, it is just the opposite. It was Raju who was confused, and revealed his true identity to Velan, but the light of truth does not dawn on Velan, and he remains as ignorant as he was, apart from the fact that the very purpose of Raju's night-long narration is defeated. However, Velan *does* play the role of the guide indirectly, because it is due to his foolishness that Raju has to stick to the decision of fasting, and emerges as a *karma-sannyasin*.

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[76] Ibid, pp. 78-98.

[77] XI.41.

[78] *The Guide*, pp. 207-8.

It may be justly questioned as to how such a swift reversal was possible. However, a little more analysis will reveal that Raju is not completely bereft of positive qualities and potential for inner transformation. From his own narration of his childhood and days of early youth, we find that he is very much driven by his impulses, which range from shirking his studies to cheating his father by swallowing peppermints meant for sale. Yet, we come to know that he did make remarkable progress in his studies after a few days in school and made it to high school. However, it must also be acknowledged that the pre-jail phase of Raju's life is mostly dominated by trickery and legacy-hunting, be it the dissemination of misinformation about historic sites or his act of cheating Rosie by copying her signature so that the jewelry box is drawn out, and all these point to an *asuri* element in Raju. When finally he reveals to Rosie what he has done, Rosie says that the police arrest was because of his *karma* and nothing can be done about it. Could Raju's jail term then be taken as an indication of his inner transformation?[79] He actually uses the word 'transmigration' to designate the nature of his jail term.[80] However, 'transmigration' is a tricky word, because it denotes a mechanical process, and it is generally believed that a soul retains its past sins even after transmigration. Raju's 'Mangala' phase proves that he has not been completely transformed after this process of 'transmigration', but it cannot be ignored that his jail term has taught him to suppress his impulses, if not control them. Raju also performs an act of *lokasangraha* by encouraging the people of the village to send their boys to school, and by requesting the master to start his classes in the hall of the shrine. We are said that he did not care whether the boys got their education or not, but it is a point to ponder why Raju would do this at all, if he was only looking for foolish disciples who would bring free food for him.

It is true that Raju never consciously wanted to pursue the path of enlightenment, but Robert Minor points out that the three ways of *jnana*, *karma*, and *bhakti* are related in *The Gita*, and any *one* of these can lead to the realization of the other two.[81] With Raju, it is *karma* which leads him to *jnana* or *sannyasa*.

This point can be proved more methodically if we pay a close attention to two verses in *The Gita*. They read as follows:

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[79] Ibid., p. 192.
[80] Ibid., p. 18.
[81] Minor, "The *Gita*'s way as the only way" in *Philosophy East and West* (Vol. 30, No. 3, July, 1980), p. 347.

Which is at first like poison, but in the end ambrosial, born of the serenity of his own reason- that pleasure is declared to be of Purity. The pleasure which arises from the union of sense with things of sense, and is at first ambrosial but in the end like poison, is said to be of Energy.[82]

The earlier, *rajasika* pleasure that Raju seeks to pursue with Rosie ends up in his imprisonment, thus endorsing the dictum of *The Gita*. The hardship that he undertakes later for the larger benefit of the villagers is the other type of pleasure, i.e., *sattvika*, which is certainly tough and deadly at the beginning. Raju tries to avoid it by opening his heart to Velan, but in vain. He even secretly holds Velan responsible for his misfortune.[83] It is important to note that even after the first few days of the fast, Raju is still not in full control of the sense of *lobha*. He resents the visitors eating good food.[84] However, Raju finally feels ashamed of his craving for food, and becomes genuinely interested in his fast:

If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom, and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly?[85]

Such a resolution actually played as a source of renewed energy in him. "Lack of food", writes Narayan, "gave him a peculiar floating feeling…"[86]

This part of the story is precisely reminiscent of the precepts of *abhyasa* in *The Gita*. The poem recognizes that the mind is hard to control and therefore prescribes the method of 'practice and desirelessness'. To Arjuna's question that logically follows Krishna's answer, as to the future of a person who dies before attaining perfection, the reply given is that the virtue acquired by such a man is not lost but it propels him to a virtuous family in the next birth, from where he resumes his pursuit.[87] Raju takes to the path of practice late in his life, and thus is certainly ensured redemption, if not immediately. His act of fasting for the larger benefit of the villagers has been read in the light

[82] XVIII.37-8.

[83] *The Guide*, p. 236.

[84] Ibid. p. 234.

[85] Ibid. p. 237-8.

[86] Ibid. p. 238.

[87] VI.33ff.

of the doctrine of *nishkama karma* by Viney Kirpal. Kirpal writes that Raju is finally redeemed through 'good action, renunciation of the self, and a return to a life governed by *dharma*.'[88]

Before winding up our analysis of *The Guide*, it would only be fair to mention its film version. *Guide* (1965), starring Dev Anand and Waheeda Rehman as Raju and Rosie respectively, was directed by Vijay Anand, and went on to win a number of awards at the national level. Despite all that, as has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, the film had marked deviations from the novel, and Narayan had thought that it did not do justice to the original. In his article, "Misguided Guide", Narayan registers his dissatisfaction with the innovations in the film, which range from shifting the venue to Rajasthan (from '"Malgudi" which is South Indian in nature) to the recasting of Rosie's archaeologist husband Marco as a drunkard and womanizer.[89] However, here we are bothered only about the last scene of the film.[90] In the film, Raju's mother and Rosie are brought back towards the end of the story, and there is a happy reunion between Raju and his close ones before Raju dies (he *does* in the film). Again, unlike the ambiguous ending of the novel, the advent of the rains is clearly shown in the film. While most critics have justifiably opined that by relinquishing the rich ambiguity of the novel, the film has completely lost the point, the present writer would like to argue that the film highlights the *lokasangraha* and *sannyasa* aspects of the story better than the novel. The ending of the story in the film version is more spiritual, with clear indication of transformation in Raju, and the latent comic overtone of the novel totally subsumed by a solemn colouring. Moreover, both Raju's mother and Rosie are shown to have forgiven Raju and they begin to admire Raju after they learn about his vow. Therefore, Raju dies a true saint at the end of the film.

The Master in *A Tiger for Malgudi*

Now we may turn to R. K. Narayan's last novel, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, which draws on the beast fable tradition in *Panchatantra*, and betrays the influence of Vedantic traditions most strongly. D.V.K. Raghavacharyulu reads the novel as 'an ascetic or hermetic comedy' enriched with

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[88] Kirpal cited in Sen, op. cit., p. 31.

[89] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Avz0kvxpp80 [Accessed 21/04/2015].

[90] Narayan, "Misguided Guide" in S. Krishnan ed., *The Writerly Life: Selected Non-Fiction*, pp. 487-499.

‘existential meaning’.[91] Pico Iyer calls this work ‘the great crowning achievement’ of Narayan’s ‘lifelong project’ that ‘rises a little bit above Malgudi to place the small town in a larger, almost cosmic perspective.’[92]

In this novel, the comic vision of Narayan is subdued to a great extent by one of genuine spirituality. Here we come across a *sannyasin* who is actually capable of working miracles publicly (the caliber of taming a tiger single-handed and unarmed, and that too, through communication, is nothing short of a miracle). This is very much different from the predicament of Raju whose success in bringing the rain is open to doubt. Moreover, the *sannyasin* here is described not in the vein of Western picaresque tradition. He is fearless (not afraid even of death), and is hard to be hindered from his path. We hear from Jayaraj that he was, unlike Chandran or Raju, a freedom-fighter. P.Rajendra Karmakar accuses the Master of ‘the lack of common or public responsibility’ because of his abrupt decision to renounce the world.[93] But a closer look will reveal that the case of the Master is not quite similar to that of Chandran. First of all, Chandran had never bothered about the deeper ethical questions of *karma* or responsibility, but the Master had been a nationalist, and he had also been a wage-earner and a supporter of a family. Second, it must not be overlooked that his life was never unhappy due to circumstances. His decision was definitely influenced by some deeper inner impulse compared to the vengeful resentment playing in Chandran. Narayan himself is apparently reluctant to make fun of the Master or describe his behavior ironically, as is evident from the reference to Siddhartha (Buddha) as the model for such renunciation. Finally, it must be pointed out that the *alleged* impulsiveness of the Master is not attested to by his firmness when he refuses to return to his family. The predicament of the wife nevertheless evokes our sympathy, but Narayan has taken great care so that this does not overshadow our respect for the Master. The Master does not misbehave with his wife, and gives her a patient hearing. He cannot be dubbed as entirely unconcerned about his family, because he has at least secured whatever he has earned and what rightfully belongs to them in his absence, for them only. The description of the Master’s behavior while at home is very

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[91] Raghavacharyulu, “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House of Fiction: R.K. Narayan’s Chronicles of Malgudi” in M.K.Naik ed. *Perspectives on Indian Fiction in English* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1985), p. 46.

[92] “Introduction” to *A Tiger for Malgudi and The Man-eater of Malgudi*, New York: Penguin, 1989, p. xviii.

[93] Karmakar, op. cit, p. 98.

much a proof of the positive transformation which his decision has brought in him. His wife describes him as a person driven by passion and instincts, but now he is much more composed. Thus, his decision has brought him inner peace without harming the lives of the wife and the children. Even the wife acknowledges this partially when she says that he has developed a 'strange way of talking now'.[94]

In order to draw the links between the Master's behaviour and the teachings of *The Gita*, we need to take a deeper look at the *guru-shishya* relationship in the novel. Unlike the Raju-Velan relationship in *The Guide*, the relationship between the Master and Raja is one of genuine trust and care, and the Master is a competent authority. By rescuing Raja from the school premises, not by forcefully subduing him but by convincing him through affection, the Master has proven his worth as a true guide. Pointing out the reference to Siddhartha that we have already mentioned, Rajesh K. Pallan has read multiple subtexts from Buddhist lore into the novel, and especially into the *guru-shishya* relationship. He not only compares the Master's renunciation as a replay of Buddha's, but also argues that the encounter between him and his wife is reminiscent of Mara's attempted temptation of Buddha.[95] Pallan finds echoes of the 'four noble truths' of Buddhism at different points in the novel.[96] Commenting on the relation between the Master and Raja, he writes:

> The Buddhistic Guru-pupil relationship has been inextricably woven in the story through the characters of the Master and Raja, the tiger… There is a perfect harmony between the two. This equilibrium could not be struck by any of the characters who meet Raja in the novel. The circus captain is too dominating. Jaggu is afraid of playing a role with the tiger. Madan, the director, is too ignorant to understand the tiger… The Master has attained a vision of oneness of all souls, human or animal, like Buddha himself.[97]

Pallan goes a step further in his analysis and discerns in the Master's act of giving the tiger over to the zoo an echo of the final separation between Siddhartha and his horse, Kanthaka.[98]

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[94] *A Tiger for Malgudi*, p. 171.

[95] *Myths and Symbols in Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan: A Select Study*, Jalandhar: ABS Publications, pp. 163-165.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid. p. 167.

[98] Ibid. p. 171.

Notwithstanding Pallan's arguments, the present writer would like to argue that the story lends itself equally to an analysis with reference to Hindu mythology, and especially to the *Gita*. Pallan himself, at a certain point in his analysis, mentions the Hindu concepts of *pravritti* and *nivritti*, but does not elaborate on the topic. The following pages will attempt at analyzing the message of the novel in the light of the *karma-sannyasa* doctrine.

The first few pages of the novel describe the early life of the tiger, unredeemed in triumphant bestiality. The present writer feels that the royal pride in Raja at this point of time, though occasionally humbled by the leopard, the porcupine, the monkey, and finally the tigress, is the state that *The Gita* describes as *asuri* (demonic). "I delivered", says Raja ruminating about his early days, "the fatal blow in any case when I wished and strode about as the King of the Forest." He acknowledges that bestial instincts of 'utter wildness, violence, and unthinking cruelty inflicted on weaker creatures' dominated his life. He is full of contempt for the lion, whom he dubs as a 'slothful creature' and revels in his victory over the latter in combat.[99] A sense of pompous complacence pervades the following lines:

> When I passed by, rabbits scurried off, and if a jackal happened to be in my path, he put his ears back, lowered his tail, rolled his eyes in humility… Occasionally I came across a recalcitrant member of our society who probably thought highly of himself… I made a mental note of such lapses of courtesy and never failed to punish him when a chance occurred.[100]

These descriptions fall almost exactly in tune with a few verses in the sixteenth chapter of *The Gita*. Here it will suffice to cite only two of them. They read:

> That enemy have I slain; and others also shall I slay; I am a lord; it is I who enjoy; perfect am I, strong, happy; Wealthy am I, high-born; what other is like to me?... Thus speak they, by ignorance deluded.[101]

Thus this novel also narrates the story of the inner progress of a *rajasika* character towards salvation. The tiger, once it meets his *guru*, gradually gives up his carnivorous habits and bestial instincts, and pursues the path ordained by his teacher. That the Master shares this *asuri* past with the tiger is revealed when his wife refers to the passion-driven phase of his life.

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[99] *A Tiger for Malgudi*, p. 13.

[100] Ibid. p. 14.

[101] XVI.15-6.

However, that he did have a *svabhaja* (innate) *daivi prakriti* (godly nature) is revealed through his participation in anti-colonial movements, and also by his small act of paying Jayaraj in advance (for which Jayaraj remembers him) for his photograph. Thus, a fellow-feeling is already at play in his early life. It can be safely assumed that he had been familiar with the nationalist interpretations of the *karma* doctrine. His first citation from *The Gita* is highly nationalist:

> I'm life and death, I'm the killer and the killed… Those enemies you see before you, O Arjuna, are already dead, whether you aim your arrows at them or not.[102]

His remark that Raja 'has only the appearance of a tiger, but he is not one- inside he is no different from you and me',[103] bears an echo of Krishna's saying that the wise man sees no difference in a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a *svapaka* (literally 'dog-eater'; refers to a specific lower caste).[104] He also refers to the cosmic form of Krishna.

Now the question that arises is whether his decisive withdrawal from the world is endorsed by *The Gita*. The present writer feels that this may not be backed by *The Gita* itself but by Sankara's commentary on *The Gita*. As we noticed in the first chapter, Sankara emphatically writes that the realized soul is exempted from *karma*, and that he *should* shun all action once enlightenment dawns on him. From this point of view, the Master in the novel can be said to have outgrown his earlier unenlightened phase. In other words, he has already played his part of *lokasangraha* as a preparatory rite for making himself suitable for the final realization. Moreover, we can say that with the achievement of Indian independence his purpose of *lokasangraha* may be said to have been served both on the public level and on the private level. Now he is no more an *aruruksha* (aspirant) but *yogarudha* (steadfast in *yoga*), and therefore qualified to shun *karma* in favour of *śama* (inaction).[105] It must also be noted that Sankara, though himself a critic of Buddhism, had assimilated many of the Buddhist doctrines (including the emphasis on renunciation), which had filtered into the Advaitist canon via Gaudapada. Therefore, the foregoing assertion does not stand in complete opposition to Pallan's thesis, which we referred to earlier.

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[102] *A Tiger for Malgudi*, p. 142.

[103] Ibid. p. 146.

[104] V.18.

[105] Ibid. on VI.3.

From the analysis of the *sannyasin* characters in the novels of Narayan, we see that it is more in tune with the *karma-sannyasa* doctrine of the *Gita* than with any other doctrine. At times, it also overlaps with the concept of *lokasangraha*, though this is not universal. However, it must also be noted that towards the end of his career, we find a shift from the comic to a more spiritual vision, and therefore, in the last novel, Narayan seems to have given up his adherence to the *karma-sannyasa* doctrine.

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IV

Women and *Karma*

This chapter is going to focus on Narayan's female characters and explore if their representation is also guided by the doctrines of *karma*, *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha.* However, given the large oeuvre of Narayan, it may be difficult to take into account all the women characters spread across the novels. Prominent female characters appear even in Narayan's earliest fiction. As regards the novels, the very first novel, *Swami and Friends*, features Swami's mother and grandmother. Swami's deep attachment to his grandmother and his conversations with her add to the emotional content of the text. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, we find three female characters: Chandran's mother, Malathi and Susila. But the plots in both these novels are woven around a male protagonist and women are minor characters who remain in the background. *The Dark Room* is the first of Narayan's novels to have a female protagonist. From *The English Teacher*, however, Narayan reverts to his male protagonists, and the trend continues until *Talkative Man*. There are, however, other novels by Narayan which feature strong female characters, such as Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* and Rosie in *The Guide*, and while they do play major roles in the plot, they are not protagonists. Hence, it would perhaps be logical to restrict the present analysis to the four major female characters in Narayan's novels: Savitri in *The Dark Room*, Rosie in *The Guide*, Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*, and Sarasa in *Talkative Man*.

Narayan, Women and Critics

R. K. Narayan's depiction of women in his works has remained a debated issue, but most critics are inclined towards dubbing him a traditionalist in this respect. Given Narayan's large oeuvre, this may to some extent be an exaggeration and certainly a homogenization, but at least one piece of evidence from Narayan's own pen bears testimony to his ambivalent ideological position regarding the woman question. Two torn diary pages (dated Jan 6 and Jan 9) contain the following passage:

> … a woman around, of whatever age, you won't starve, especially in this country where the kitchen is equipped with modern gadget, and the store is …[undecipherable] I feel a profound gratitude for this …[undecipherable] genius in most women, although the feminist resents the role, asking why men should not cultivate it, instead of depending upon woman alone, exploiting them with flattery or authority[.] I have sympathy for this view, and some men are equally good in kitchen, but not all. Some men enjoy

raving over the functions of the lady, and earn a good name for the quality of their handiwork: some are semi-good.

Women observe that man is wasteful and pulls out too many utensil[s], which would involve laborious dish-washing, or prepare the food over-spiced and under-salted. Man has to explain that he has other things to do outside the home, and lacks practice, & remind his critics that chefs of any renown anywhere in the world are men. The feminist fervor puzzles me… "Dark Room" was a product of fervour for feminism. I used to feel that woman was the better-half literally, though I suspect that the phrase was coined by the exploiting half for its own advantage. Man was physically stronger, of course, and asserted himself. It cannot be denied that he assumed the role of protector, and this developed as a racial quality and the tradition grew. So I wrote the Dark Room as a testament of womanhood, or at least I had planned it so, but turned out to be a chronicle of an arrogant, bullying husband and a meek wife, who protested at one stage, but swallowed her pride convinced, "women cannot stand, they have to have something to lean on, like a bamboo pole which cannot stand in the middle of the floor without the support of the wall- which may be in the shape of a husband, brother, or son, but never able to stand by herself.[1]

The above passage testifies to the fact that Narayan tacitly accepts the notion that the seeds of patriarchy are ultimately embedded in biology itself, which makes man the naturally stronger of the two genders. He also seems to imply that the "division of labour" is a natural development of the human society without the politics of dominance and subordination playing any role in it.

However, a closer look at the variety of female characters in Narayan's fiction proves that what may be true of *The Dark Room* is not true of many other texts. Britta Olinder classifies Narayan's women into three groups:

First, dominating, powerful women; second, powerless, frustrated, oppressed women; and third, women accepting the system- in this case, the Indian society of strong masculine dominance- but at the same time finding ways and means to informal, indirect control of their situation.[2]

Olinder's research takes into account both major and minor characters in Narayan's novels, but here we shall stick only to the major figures. Of the major female characters, Olinder places Rosie of *The*

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[1]Unpublished, incomplete essay on "Women" – caption and first page missing. Harry Ransom Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

[2] Britta Olinder, "The Power of Women in R. K. Narayan's Novels" in Mcleod, A. L., ed. *R. K. Narayan: Critical Perspectives*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1994, p. 97.

Guide, Bharati of *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Daisy of *The Painter of Signs* in the first category. Savitri of *The Dark Room*, Olinder argues, belongs to the second. Sita of *the World of Nagaraj* best exemplifies the third group. Such a classification appears too simplistic because often we find that features of one overlap with those of the other. For instance, Rosie is not docile like Savitri but is not self-assertive to Daisy's extent either. Moreover, Olinder keeps out of the purview of her article Commandant Sarasa who features as a very strong and dominating figure in *Talkative Man*.

Among other scholars who have worked on Narayan's representation of women is Lakshmi Holmstrom, who has quite pertinently brought up the question of 'methods of characterization'. Holmstrom distinguishes between two 'methods' which Narayan follows, which serve two very different purposes, and writes:

> First, the presentation of a character through different stages of closeness and distance… [is] a means by which he resolves the metaphysical problem of "knowing" another person. Second, the presentation of a character through a complex of impersonations, "roles" and "masks": this is a part of the way in which he handles the theme of women and their ambiguous social position in India; it is also perhaps a technical means of resolving the metaphysical problem of "knowing" oneself.[3]

Holmstrom shows that Narayan relinquishes the first method with *The English Teacher*, and adopts the second one from *The Dark Room* onwards.[4] (Holmstrom seems to have overlooked the fact that *The Dark Room* chronologically precedes *The English Teacher*) Thus, it is the 'internal' method and not the 'external' method of Narayan's early novels that is the present concern. This is important from a psychological point of view, and given the fact that this research deals with ethical issues, the successive stages of 'role' playing would serve as a welcome lens.

The Question of Philosophy

Going back to the original research question, we can ask: to what extent is Narayan's traditionalism with respect to the woman question inspired by the doctrines of Indian philosophy? And if Narayan has indeed been under the influence of Indian philosophy while depicting his female characters, do the prescriptions of *karma*, *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha* also play a part? The answer to the first

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[3]Holmstrom, "Women Characters in R. K. Narayan's Novels" in Ram Atma, ed. *Perspectives on R. K. Narayan*, Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1981, p. 58.

[4]Ibid., p. 70.

question has been overwhelmingly positive. Here it would suffice to mention Pier Paolo Piciucco's claim that the male-female balance in Narayan's fictional world is borne out by the *Samkhya* doctrine of *purusha* and *prakriti*. Piciucco takes the Marco-Rosie pair in *The Guide* as a case in point, and writes:

> Marco's realm is mind whereas Rosie's is body, mirroring very accurately the distinction between Purusha and Prakriti… It is well-known, in fact, that one of the classical examples and metaphors the *Samkhya*system used to explain the interaction between male and female parts made direct reference to this means: dance was instrumental to draw Purusha's attention towards Prakriti.[5]

Then he goes a step further and reads the relation between Raman and Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* as a parody of the *Samkhya* doctrine:

> Raman jumps upon Daisy… the paradox lies in the fact that instead of behaving as the sweet and romantic lover that he is, he acts as a rapist… On the other side, the girl evidences some traits which render her femininity quite strident and controversial, too. Her need for independence, to start with, hardly matches with the drive to completeness Prakriti used to seek in Purusha.[6]

In this context, we may also refer to Rosanne Kanhai-Brunton's reading of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. Transcending the obvious subtext of the Bhasmasura myth embedded in the novel, Kanhai-Brunton points out a "goddess" motif. To quote:

> By privileging oneness, Narayan affirms a cosmic system that appreciates inclusion and cyclicity. In *Man-Eater*, this representation of oneness takes the form of Kali, represented fictionally in the character of Rangi.[7]

Thus we find that concepts of Indian philosophy (and mythology) had been at play while Narayan was drawing the female characters. But this may not lead us necessarily to the second conclusion, that the tripartite *karma-sannyasa-lokasangraha* doctrine was also influential. The reason is, as

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[5]Piciucco, "Femininity in the Fiction of R. K. Narayan: A Study" in Bhatnagar, M. K., ed., *New Insights into The Novels of R. K. Narayan*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd., 2008, p. 172.

[6]Ibid., p. 175.

[7]Kanhai-Brunton, "Kali as Man-Eater and as Goddess: Myth-Making in R. K. Narayan's *Man-Eater of Malgudi*" in Kain, Geoffrey, ed., *R. K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1993,p. 156.

stated earlier, that the *Gita* is largely silent about the code women should follow. It must be noted that the epic context of the *Gita* does not allow any separate space for women. It would have been completely irrelevant to the listener Arjuna, a *kshatriya* prince at the battlefield. There are only two direct references to women in the text. The first mention is by Arjuna himself; he complains that women become corrupt (promiscuous) when large-scale massacre claims lots of male lives.[8] (In this context, Arjuna is also worried about the admixture of caste, which does have direct links with his allegation against women.) Evidently enough, the statement *does* subscribe to gross misogyny. The second reference (IX.32), however, is a curious one, and the commentators are divided with respect to its meaning. The text runs as follows:

> For those who take refuge in Me, O Partha (Arjuna), though they are lowly born, women, Vaisyas, as well as Sudras, they also attain to the highest goal.[9]

The message of the verse is simple: the *Bhagavadgita* grants the people who do not have any right to Vedic *dharma* (especially the rituals) a way to salvation through faith in God. But by doing this, the text does not challenge the social hierarchy, and only allows the dregs of the society an alternative means *within* the rigorous structure. However, at least one commentator, Bhaskara, identifies in this passage a possible threat to the social hierarchy, and distorts the meaning while interpreting it. For Bhaskara, the people mentioned in this verse are not just unfit for release through performance of Vedic rituals, but even through the teachings of the *Gita*. He strongly recommends that the teachings of the sacred book not be imparted to one of the members of the communities mentioned above.[10]Abhinavagupta, however, takes a strong objection to such a view (though he does not name Bhaskara) and takes the verse as evidence in favour of God's compassionate, all-embracing and non-discriminatory nature. He goes a step further and refuses to accept that the word *striyah* in the original means 'women', and takes it to mean 'ignorant.'[11] This is certainly far-fetched.

In either case, however, it is evident that the *Gita* refuses to give women any right to Vedic *karma*, and therefore the only means left to them is that of *bhakti*. Thus, any attempt to study Narayan's depiction of women through the lens of *karma*, would lead to a dead end in so far as the internal

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[8] I. 41.

[9] IX.31; S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*, New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009, p. 252.

[10] "Introduction" by Arvind Sharma, trans., *Gitarthasangraha*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983, p. 79.

[11] Ibid., pp. 172-73.

testimony of the *Gita* is concerned. However, as stated in the earlier chapters, the present research accepts that the *Gita* is an integral part of the epic *Mahabharata*, and also believes in a continuity of tradition right from the *Gita* up to the 19th century interpretations of the same. Therefore, before exploring the characters themselves, we need to chart out whether the doctrines of *karma*, *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha* had any meaning for women, and if they did, how was it different from the meaning that they bore while being applied in the context of men. In this context, we would also take into account the prescriptions laid down in some other texts, as and when necessary. This difference is important, because Indian ethics, as stated earlier, is context-specific, and has neatly drawn lines on the basis of gender and caste.

Women, *karma* and *sannyasa*

To begin with, it would be essential to mention that the *Mahabharata* is a text in which some of the most heterogeneous elements have been clubbed together. It originated as a *kshatriya* text but in its present form it stands mediated by the *brahmana*s. However, Kevin McGrath's incisive study of the status of women in the *Mahabharata* shows that the codes laid down in the text apply specifically to *kshatriya* women and to some extent to *brahmana* women as well.[12]Thus there *is* a certain uniformity. We may here remember that all the prominent female figures in Narayan's novels are from the upper caste (even the dancer Rosie is highly qualified and upper *class*). Even though the codes of the ancient heroic society are apparently obsolete for them, it must be remembered that even today the epic characters serve as role models for Indian women, and therefore the present analysis is not out of place. Savitri (after whom the heroine in *The Dark Room* is named) and Damayanti are two epic characters who are considered ideal wives. Again, there is the subtext of the epic myth of Shantanu-Ganga running through *The Painter of Signs*.

Secondly, attention may be drawn to the fact that the dominant philosophical undercurrent in the epic is that of *Samkhya*. This is significant, because, its philosophical formulations contributed a great deal in challenging the patriarchal values of the time. In this context, Ruth Vanita draws our attention to the debate between the nun Sulabha and the king Janaka in the *Shantiparvan* of the

[12] McGrath, *Stri: Feminine Power in the Mahabharata*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011.

Mahabharata.[13] After an incisive study of the episode, Vanita gives eight summary points of Sulabha'sarguments, of which four are important for our purposes:

1. The body is gendered but the *Atman* (universal Self/Spirit) is not gendered.

2. The *Atman* is one and the same in all beings, regardless of the body's gender.

3. Since the same *Atman* animates both women and men, women are capable of pursuing the same paths as men.

4. A truly wise person, who has realized the oneness of the *Atman*, will nottry to judge anyone, including any woman, by caste or marital status.[14]

A closer look would reveal that there is not much difference between the theological standpoint in Sulabha's arguments from that of the *Gita*. The *Gita* too speaks of the Self/Spirit as universal and unchanging, and emphasizes that the man of realization is not to distinguish between higher and lowly creatures, though it does not mention women separately while laying down the prescription. However, the *Gita* does seem to disagree with the third point made above. When Sulabha says 'the same path as men' she certainly means renunciation (*sannyasa*). We have already noted how the *Gita* is silent on women pursuing *karma*. As regards *sannyasa*, we have already discussed at length the meaning it has within the context of the *Gita*, but it remains to be seen whether women are entitled to this specific right of *karmasannyasa* or renunciation-in-action. In this context, it would perhaps be well to see what the epic at large has to say about the conduct of women.

McGrath's extensive research brings out the idea that the *Mahabharata* is highly ambivalent in its treatment of women. On the one hand, it puts a ban on women's stay away from home (*vipravasa* or renunciation), while on the other, it also calls misogyny a sin. McGrath writes:

> Women in the epic are vigorous, authoritative, and often set the trajectory in which the narrative runs.[15]

More importantly, however, McGrath argues, women in the epic embody the 'voice of the *ksatriya* tradition' because:

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[13] Ruth Vanita, "The Self is Not Gendered: Sulabha's Debate with King Janaka" in NWSA Journal, Vol. 15, No. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 76-93.

[14] Ibid., p. 88.

[15] McGrath, p. 15.

> They are *knowers* of dharma- that which is valued as appropriate- and in speech proclaim what *karma* is right at certain moments in the narrative.[16]

Thus, women as the proclaiming voice of *karma* are themselves bound by the idea itself. But what *karma* is expected of them? While women in the epic often counsel male relatives and therefore talk of *karma* in a context that is applicable to the latter, there is at least one woman-to-woman conversation in the epic which delineates in very strong terms the limits of a woman's *karma*. This is a conversation that takes place between Draupadi and Satyabhama in the *Vanaparvan* of the epic. In this interesting dialogue, Satyabhama asks how to tame Krishna, and Draupadi begins her answer by discouraging easy means such as aphrodisiacs. She points out that the husband's love can be achieved only by unfaltering dedication and service. She emphasizes that 'resting upon the husband' is 'the perpetual *dharma* of women.' She is all for the deification of the husband, and emphasizes at the end that the wife should adorn herself to remain attractive in the eyes of the husband.[17]

From the above, we may conclude that Draupadi's instructions come very close to the *Gita's* ideal of *nishkama karma*, with the exception that the context and the target audience are different. Instead of the questions of princely honour and salvation which were the dominant issues in the *Gita*, here we encounter the question of wifely virtue. But the basic message is the same: one is to perform one's action selflessly.

This would lead us to the other pole: *sannyasa*. While the selfless service dedicated to a husband can indeed be considered as a form of *karma-sannyasa*, here we may briefly take into account how renunciation on the part of a woman is viewed in general in doctrinal Hinduism. From Lynn Teskey Denton's extensive exploration into Hindu female asceticism, we learn that female ascetics are motivated by the same urges and their discipline is guided by the same codes as those that are applicable to their male counterparts. Both thrive to attain liberation from the cycle of *karma*, and Denton points out that justification for female asceticism is not scarce within the orthodox Hindu society.[18] Denton goes on and studies the diverse shades of female asceticism in India, and points out that 'worldly asceticism' is a veritable option for women. 'Worldly asceticism', as is evident from the term, the *karmasannyasa* doctrine of the *Gita*. However, Denton points out that in case of

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[16]Ibid., p. 13.

[17]Ibid., pp. 136-39.

[18] Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, pp. 58-61.

women, 'deity-centric' rather than 'wisdom-centric' version of 'worldly asceticism' comes in handy, because it allows women to conform to the dominant patriarchal hierarchy. Taking Mira Bai as an example, Denton explains:

> As has been seen, ritual marriage to a god, using his image for the ceremony, is found in female, notably Vaisnavite, ascetic orders today. It is a persistent theme and practice in both North and South India and solves the central dilemma of worldly ascetic devotionalism for a woman. She remains in the world, yet subjected only to the authority and control of a divine husband.[19]

In this context, one may also mention Sanjukta Gupta's research. Gupta distinguishes between the different types of female asceticism that Vaishnavism and Saivism uphold and points out that the Saiva/Shakta ethos allows women much more freedom to challenge the family structure and quit their defined household roles, while 'worldly asceticism' is the dominant norm so far as the Vaishnava female devotee is concerned.[20] Thus we may say that while the *Bhagavadgita* does not specifically prescribe the path of *karma-sannyasa* for women, there are enough *historical* examples of Vaishnava women following *karma-sannyasa*. The theories of *karma* and *sannyasa* as laid down in the *Gita*, therefore, apply equally to both men and women. And going by this theory, renunciation of *karma* is not welcome, and therefore, we may expect that women who renounce the worldly life in Narayan's world, are as likely to be forced back to their household life as the male characters (such as Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*).

19th Century Interpretations and Women

As we have noted in the first chapter, the institutionalization of the *karma* doctrine was a discursive process that culminated in the 19th century. Narayan's ethical standpoint makes more sense when studied with reference to the ideas floating around in the 19th century milieu. Therefore, it is necessary to assess the role of the *karma* doctrine in women's emancipation in 19th century India. At the very outset, it is important to acknowledge that the processes of women's emancipation were diverse and the ideals that drove the processes and were in turn promoted by these processes were often conflicting. It should not be overlooked that while the first steps towards women's

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[19]Ibid., pp. 151-52.

[20] Gupta, "Women in the Saiva/Sakta Ethos" in Leslie, Julia, ed., *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992, pp. 193-209.

emancipation were announced by the bid to stop the brutal custom of *sati* and the promotion of widow remarriage and women's education, most of the theorizations on gender and women's rights of the period did not question the stereotypical notions of 'womanhood' and women's traditional roles in the Hindu society.

Catherine A. Robinson's extensive research[21] into the subject brings out this dichotomy in the Indian women's movement quite succinctly. Robinson writes:

> Elite Hindu culture emphasized the feminine roles of wife, mother and mistress of the household and the feminine virtues of chastity, selflessness, piety and faithfulness. The ideology of 'women's uplift' accepted such stereotypical feminine roles and virtues. Yet while elite Hindu culture connected these feminine roles and virtues with the seclusion of women within the home, the ideology of 'women's uplift' urged that these feminine roles be extended beyond the privacy of the household to the public realm and that these feminine virtues be enlarged beyond the marriage relationship and family circle to the community and the nation.[22]

Robinson carefully points out how with all his progressive ideas, Ram Mohan Roy never meant to break away from the Hindu tradition. We have already noted in the introductory chapter Roy's justification of preventing the practice of *Sati* with reference to the doctrine of *nishkama karma* in the *Gita*. It would possibly not be irrelevant to add that Roy respectfully cites the ancient law-givers Manu and Yajnavalkya in order to substantiate his argument in favour of the abolition of *sati*.[23] Similarly, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar also resorted to the scriptural authority of the *Parasara Samhita* while seeking justification for widow remarriage.[24] Again, Behramji Merwanji Malabari, himself a Parsi, while campaigning against the custom of child marriage, could not ignore its religious aspect.[25] In the same vein, Dayananda Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda, both of whom drew their inspiration from Hindu scriptures, argued that women's upliftment was not a break from the Hindu tradition but a step towards the restoration of the glorious past of Hindu India. Dayananda

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[21]*Tradition and Liberation: The Hindu Tradition in the Indian Women's Movement*, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999.

[22]Ibid., pp. 14-15.

[23]Ibid., pp. 34-36.

[24]Ibid., pp. 37-41.

[25]Ibid., pp. 42-43.

'justified female education… by citing examples of educated women drawn from the scriptures' and argued that the benefits of female education would enhance 'the development of moral sensibility, the promotion of marital and familial harmony, the loving care of children and the efficient management of the household.'[26] It is, therefore, important to note that in Dayananda's vision, there is no necessary corollary between women's education and economic independence. Vivekananda, too, followed the same method and cited examples of emancipated women from the scriptures. However, Vivekananda was not in favour of education the way it was imparted to women in Westernized schools in his time, and wanted women's education to be grounded in religious values. Vivekananda's proposed curriculum for women students included language and literature, meditation and worship. He even nourished a vision of opening a women's monastery.[27] Among other reformers who appealed to traditional Hindu beliefs for justifying women's upliftment are Chinna-Bai, the Maharani of Baroda, Sarala Devi Choudhurani, Saroj Nalini Dutt, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu.[28] The last two of these figures tried to promote a romantic image of an ancient 'Golden Age' in Indian history which was then pitted against that of a 'degenerate modern India.'[29] Especially Sarojini Naidu emphasized the '*Devi*' aspect of Indian women, and, along with Besant, stressed the concept of 'Motherhood.'[30] Both Besant and Naidu drew their examples of emancipated women from the Hindu epics and projected them as role models for modern Indian women. Naidu refused to accept Sita as a weak symbol of pure wifely devotion but emphasized how she fearlessly and proudly stood up to being insulted and embraced the earth as a token of protest.[31] Similarly, Besant has pointed out how Kunti proved to be the 'braved adviser of her sons' and Gandhari courageously 'entered a council of warriors and chiefs to rebuke her arrogant son.'[32] However, unlike most of the other reformers, Besant also argued in favour of women's participation in the public space beyond their immediate household.[33]

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[26]Ibid., p. 50.

[27]Ibid., pp. 50-53.

[28]Ibid., pp. 55-102.

[29]Ibid., p. 79.

[30]Ibid., pp. 83-87.

[31]Ibid., p. 99.

[32]Ibid., p. 95.

[33]Ibid., p. 89.

With the only exception of Pandita Ramabai, the struggle for women's liberation in the 19th century by and large refused to seek a revolutionary break from the dominant Hindu narrative, and rather argued for a balance and reconciliation. From the summary review above, we can also glean that, barring a few exceptions, the reformers highlighted the traditional ideal of Indian womanhood, stressed the importance of women's education almost exclusively for the purpose of a better functioning of the household, and apparently had no agenda for the economic independence of women. It may be assumed that such a theoretical standpoint is motivated at least *implicitly* by a faith in the validity of the *karma* doctrine, and more specifically, by how the *karma* doctrine is interpreted with respect to women. Even though there are arguments in favour of women's right to *sannyasa*, on the whole, there is a tacit assumption that the legitimate space for women is at home. In a separate chapter, concerned solely with *Waiting for the Mahatma*, we shall take forward this discussion, and see what implications such theorizations had for the Nationalist movement, and how they were appropriated by Gandhi for mobilizing women's support in the same.

Flora Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have summarized the different ways in which the Nationalist discourse engages women under the following five heads. Women participate in the Nationalist process:

(a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
(b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
(c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
(d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences– as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;
(e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.[34]

While the research of Anthias and Yuval-Davis takes into account a range of different Nationalist voices from Asia, Australia, Africa and the Caribbean, the above summary works well for India too. A glance at the above list is enough to reveal that barring the last point, all the rest reinforce the stereotypical feminine roles. The concept of the Nation in India was built upon the strong bedrock of Hindu Nationalism, and women were indeed conceived of as the reproducers of this Nation. Their

[34]Anthias and Yuval-Davis, "Introduction" in Anthias and Yuval-Davis ed., *Woman – Nation – State*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989, p. 7.

primary role was to give birth to children, thus contributing to the growth of the Nation. This would include the upbringing of children as well, and the role of mothers in inculcating Nationalist ideas. Another allied responsibility would be to maintain the purity of blood. Thus, a great emphasis is laid on the preservation of their chastity. A renunciation in motherhood was expected of women in the Indian nationalist discourse. The complex construction of the feminine self in the Indian nationalist discourse has been fully analyzed by Chandrima Chakraborty, who studies the process with special reference to the ideas of 'masculinity' and 'asceticism.' Chakraborty points out that the Nationalist discourse aspired for a certain 'manliness' which was denied by the British stereotype of the "effeminate Indian". Drawing on the researches of Ashis Nandy, Revathi Krishnaswamy and other authorities but at the same time challenging some of their perceptions, Chakraborty writes:

> In ascetic nationalist discourse, the emphasis on celibacy and the casting of family life as an obstacle to nationalist commitments result in the marginalization of women- as forces of chaos, desire, and fear. Women figure predominantly as objects or, at most, partners who facilitate the elaboration or demonstration of proper masculine conduct… While male asceticism is encouraged, female asceticism is shunned. Female power that accumulates through sexual abstinence is taped to male advantage or projected as dangerous to men. Marriage or a heterosexual relationship is considered a given for women, and Hindu notions of wifely devotion to husbands coupled with Victorian ideals of the domesticated wife help to reinstate women in homes.[35]

Drawing on the ideals of *nishkama karma* and male asceticism as expounded in the two nationalist novels by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Anandamath* and *Devi Chaudhurani*, Chakraborty shows how in the nationalist discourse, women's roles were heavily restricted. In *Anandamath*, Shanti attempts to participate in the rebellion first by the means of transvestism, but is met with resistance from Satyananda who accuses her of trespassing and transgressing her given roles and limitations. Shanti however, defends her position by arguing that as a dedicated wife, she is only fulfilling her duty to stand by her husband in his struggle. Thus, unlike a man, who is expected to renounce his human relations to practice his vow, a woman can participate in the public sphere only *within* the given space. The same is also reinforced by the suicide of Kalyani in the course of the novel- an event which liberates her husband Mahendra from the conjugal bond so that he can devote himself wholly

[35]ChandrimaChakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present Imaginings of India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011, p. 29

to the cause of the nation. Similarly, Prafulla, the protagonist of *Devi Chaudhurani*, is made to come back to her given role of Brajeswar's wife at the end of the story. She is made to acknowledge that a woman's primary duty is towards her family. Neither Shanti nor Prafulla, Chakraborty points out, are ever described as physically fighting against the British. Their roles are limited to being inspirers and 'mother-figures' to their male counterparts.[36] In a similar vein, Chakraborty concludes that even in Tagore's novels, *Gora* and *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), the roles of the female characters, respectively Anandamoyi and Bimala, are restricted to an idealized notion of motherhood. They are not the biological mothers of the male protagonists, but, 'as surrogate mothers provide a model for non-reproductive female bodies to affectively partake of maternal love by mothering and nurturing sons (or heroes) for the nation.'[37]Chakraborty studies the entire trajectory of Bimala 'from lover to mother and penitent wife at the end of the novel', and concludes that 'motherhood as national service redeems the childless Bimala.'[38] While in the eyes of the feminist, this is yet one more restrictive tool that the Nationalist discourse imposes on women, for Chakraborty, such a 'reconfiguration of motherhood opens up the possibility of negotiating affective bonds that extend the grounds of affiliation beyond kinship.'[39] In all these cases, however, the woman is expected to relinquish either her passion, or her personal rights, desires and family ties, but at the same time, keep working selflessly towards the cause of the nation, or more specifically, towards the fulfillment of their male counterpart's commitments towards the nation. It also seems that both Bankim and Tagore see women as being a source of sinister passion which proves to be a dangerous hindrance to the cause of the nation. Hence, the emphasis is on self-control. Could it be called an echo of the *abhyasa* doctrine in the *Gita*? This is all the more evident in the case of Prafulla who is taught self-discipline over a good number of years by the ascetic-robber Bhabani Pathak. The ideal of *karma-sannyasa*, therefore, holds good.

We may sum up the main points as follows:

(i) In the nationalist discourse, women are primarily thought to contribute to the cause of the nation from *within* their given space of family and home. But there are exceptions and

[36]Ibid., pp. 68-72.

[37]Ibid., pp. 109-110.

[38]Ibid., p. 109.

[39]Ibid., p. 110.

women have indeed broken the barriers and participated with men in the struggle against imperialism. In either case, the ideal is best explained by *nishkama karma*.

(ii) If the *Gita* (and its nationalist interpretations) upholds *karmasannyasa* and discourages active renunciation with respect to men, the same also holds true for the women. Even if some women are seen to renounce the given space for the sake of the larger cause, they are made to acknowledge the superiority of the former, and are only allowed to express themselves through the given structure (as in the case of Shanti).

With the above framework in mind, we shall now proceed to analyze the female protagonists in the selected Narayan novels as mentioned above. As we did in the case of the male characters, we are going to study these characters under the three heads: *karma*, *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha*. For *sannyasa* the character would be Savitri from *The Dark Room*, while for *karma* we shall study Rosie from *The Guide* and Sarasa from *Talkative Man*. Daisy from *The Painter of Signs* would be our focus for *lokasangraha*. The Gandhian activist Bharati of *Waiting for the Mahatma* is reserved for the chapter on the nationalist interpretation of *lokasangraha*.

The Dark Room

The Dark Room is the story of the trials and tribulations of Savitri. She lives with her husband Ramani in a South Extension home, and has a son named Babu and two daughters named Sumati and Kamala. The opening chapter delineates Savitri's daily routine. Once Ramani has left, Savitri performs her daily Puja and then has her meal. Her brief conversation with the cook accompanied by a mild rebuke is also described. After the meal, she relaxes for some time, reading a Tamil magazine, until the one o'clock bell brings Sumati and Kamala home for their lunch. The girls go back to school after lunch and the cook returns at half past two. Savitri gives him instructions regarding the children's tiffin and then dresses her hair to get ready for her usual afternoon round of visits by half past three. In the second chapter, the readers are introduced to two of Savitri's friends, Gangu and Janamma, who are respectively modern and traditional in their outlook. While Gangu is aspiring for a career in the film industry, Janamma seems to be the spokesperson of the patriarchal society. Later in the novel, when Savitri is upset at the fact of Babu being slapped by Ramani, and takes refuge in the dark room (which has been compared by Sudhir Dixit to the *kopabhavana* where

Kaikeyi takes shelter in the *Ramayana*),[40]Janamma is categorical about her unwavering faith in her husband:

> You should either let your words out or feel that everything your husband does is right. As for me, I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time in life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternative, but nothing more. What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so.[41]

It is important to note that Janamma is here speaking in extremes. According to her, there is no middle path left for a wife. Savitri, unlike Janamma, does not believe in extremes. Ranga Rao too reads in Savitri's stance of maintaining a 'subtle balance' between Gangu and Janamma, an attitude which is "neither naively 'modern' nor staidly orthodox."[42] It is evident that she *does* take offense at some of the activities of Ramani but chooses not to speak out. Instead of confronting Ramani head-on, she decides to retire to the seclusion of the dark room. Her strategy, however, is a failure, as Ramani is not in the least perturbed, and orders that the household goes on about its business normally.

Secondly, it is also noteworthy that when Savitri learns from Gangu about Ramani's illicit affair with Shanta Bai, her initial reaction is one of jealousy. She assumes that she would be able to charm Ramani with the help of a little toiletries and make-up.[43] However, her labour is wasted as Ramani does not turn up throughout the night and the succeeding morning. When he does, an emotional Savitri tries to reason with him, and finally her pent-up sorrow gushes forth as she becomes stubborn and aggressive, calls Shanta Bai a 'harlot', and openly warns Ramani that he would have to choose between one of the two ladies. An angry Ramani asks her to leave the house, to which an enraged Savitri immediately agrees. She refuses to take anything from the house along with herself. Ramani adds fuel to fire by saying that her absence would not make any difference to the children, and Savitri retorts that the children too are after all Ramani's gift, and she would not take them. Savitri walks out of the home, but apparently it does not to make a difference to Ramani, as he is shown to be bolting the door and putting out the lights.

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[40] Dixit, "Ibsenite Feminism in Narayan's *The Dark Room*" in M. K. Bhatnagar ed., *New Insights into the Novels of R. K. Narayan*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2008, p. 182.

[41]*The Dark Room*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2013, p. 46.

[42]Ranga Rao, *R. K. Narayan: The Novelist and His Art,* New Delhi: OUP, 2017, p. 53.

[43]*The Dark Room*, pp. 81-82.

Sudhir Dixit is correct in pointing out that Shanta Bai's name is ironical, as she is the harbinger of disturbance in the plot.[44] Ramesh Dnyate calls Shanta Bai 'a thoroughly promiscuous woman, having dubious credentials', and 'the first other woman in Narayan's novels.'[45] He seems to find in Shanta Bai a foil to Savitri who 'wins Ramani's sympathy with her sob story and his heart by her charm.'[46] It's apparent that for Dnyate, ShantaBai's own testimony about her past and especially her brief and unhappy marriage holds little ground. Jaya Prasad, however, disagrees with such a view, and comparing Shanta Bai with Rosie of *The Guide*, writes:

> It is to be noted that these heroines never decry the institution of marriage. Rosie and Shanta, in fact, would have happily led their lives within the confines of their homes if only their respective husbands had shown even a modicum of responsibility and sensitivity towards marital ties. Their marriages failed not because they did not believe in marriage but because their husbands were indifferent and they could no longer put up with it.[47]

Having accepted Prasad's argument, it must still be admitted that even in this sense, Shanta Bai indeed emerges as a foil to Savitri. While Shanta Bai had the courage to walk out of her husband's house at the age of eighteen, when she found it impossible to change the latter's drinking habits, Savitri, for fifteen long years, doesn't show any outward sign of resentment. Again, when Shanta Bai leaves her home, she also upsets her parents, and breaks all ties with them. But instead of choosing suicide, she registers for higher studies, and aspires for jobs. Savitri, on the other hand, speculates about going to her parents (or sister) but finally chooses to drown herself. There is also another feature that distinguishes the two ladies. While Savitri is a dutiful wife and there is rarely any flaw in her action, Shanta Bai's talent lies in her charms. This is evocative of the prescription laid down in the Draupadi-Satyabhama conversation. That Shanta Bai is very bad at her work is stated unequivocally:

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[44] Dixit, p. 183.

[45]Dnyate, *The Novels of R. . Narayan: A Typological Study of Characters*, New Delhi: Prestige, 2000 rprnt, pp. 69-70.

[46]Ibid., p. 70.

[47] Jaya Prasad, "R. K. Narayan's Modern Heroines and the Dilemma of Men" in Chhote Lal Khatri, *R. K. Narayan: Reflections and Re-evaluation*, New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006, p. 80.

> Shanta Bai had been in the office now for a month and yet she exhibited no aptitude for canvassing work. The Head Office seemed to be fanatical in regard to the clause laying down the minimum of work to be done in the first two months. They had just sent a reminder. If Shanta Bai did not complete the amount in a month, she would have to be dismissed.[48]

On the other hand, Savitri's defining trait is her hard work round the clock to keep the house, which is only rarely ever appreciated. Ramani takes her for a movie show early in the novel, but it seems that he is motivated more by a sense of duty than by genuine love. It is also significant that Savitri is afraid of Ramani, and there is a clear hierarchy in their conjugal relationship:

> Savitri's throat went dry at the sight of her husband. He was pacing the front veranda; he had changed his coat and was wearing a blue blazer. He looked fixedly at her as she came up from the gate…[49]

Therefore, if Shanta Bai fails in executing the ideal of *karma*, Savitri is not an ideal *karmayogin* either. She is dominated by a sense of fear, and yet she metes out her duties towards her family with a deep sense of attachment towards her children. Her sense of duty is put to test at the very beginning of the novel when Babu feigns illness and wishes to stay away from school. Savitri, under the spell of motherly affection, fails to see through the trick, and instead of being firm, chooses to be soft. Her *abhyasa* seems to have been outwardly at best.

Narayan seems to be completely aware of the fact that the gender bias changes with caste, and lower caste women are far more liberated, both socially and economically, compared to the upper caste women. Mari's wife Ponni is representative of the lower caste women in the novel. She is caring, assertive and aggressive as and when required. She sees plainly through the power dynamics:

> Keep the men under the rod, and they will be all right. Show them that you care for them and they will tie you up and treat you like a dog.[50]

Narayan brings out Savitri's predicament with through the trope of the doll. The trope is introduced early in the novel, in the context of the Navaratri. One of the dolls, a toy elephant, falls and its trunk is lopped off, but Ranga offers to take it to his home and give it to his own child who, he says, would

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[48] *The Dark Room*, p. 66.

[49] Ibid., p. 20.

[50] Ibid., p. 105.

accept that it's a dog. Kamala, however, does not agree.[51] The implicit suggestion in this episode is the continuing usability of the doll even after it has acquired a defect. Savitri leaves her home and also associates with the lower caste couple Mari and Ponni, but at the end, she comes back and resumes her given role of an obedient housewife[52].

The economic dimension of the exploitation of women seems to dawn on Savitri only after she leaves her home. She briefly ponders going back to her parents, but realizes that she would remain economically dependent even there. She resents that she didn't pursue higher education and therefore she cannot apply for a decent job. She hopes that her daughters would not follow her example in this. She also realizes the very vital truth that marriage is after all 'private prostitution.'[53]

This realization therefore motivates her to resist further favours and she insists on paid labour when Ponni offers her food and shelter. Ponni convinces an old man to accept Savitri as a servant in the temple run by him. The succeeding day is hectic for Savitri but she is exultant that the rice she is eating is something that she has earned and not received as charity. At night, however, she is afraid of the dark, and becomes nostalgic and worried about her children. Her motherly self, thus, reasserts itself, and prompts her to return home, without even asking for the money he owes her. Once back in her home, Savitri is initially apprehensive of Ramani's reaction, but there is, surprisingly, no word of regret from the latter's part. Ramani behaves normally as Savitri serves him during the meal. The dinner that night is heightened by a joyful conversation and jokes. Ramani wants to talk to her some more but Savitri says that she is sleepy, and Ramani leaves her alone, a gesture which may be taken as an indication that Ramani recognizes her independence.

Thus, the end of the novel is ambiguous, because it is not clear as to whether there is any change in the conjugal relationship. While most critics believe that Savitri's return is a frustration of her journey as an independent woman, S. A. Majumdar seems to opine otherwise:

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[51]Ibid., pp. 29-30.

[52] For a fuller description on the trope of the doll, see Dnyate, pp. 65-70.

[53]Ibid., p. 93.

> She is not the same woman after returning to her husband's house. She seeks self-realization, cuts herself from husband and marital status, decides to live only for children and for the service of God. She is now a changed woman knowing unavoidable predicament and reality of life.[54]

By summing up the arguments above, we may say that Savitri goes through a journey similar to that of Chandran in *The Bachelors of Arts*, with the exception that Savitri ventures for *sannyasa* not before but after a few years in *grahasthyasrama*. Even then, she is without adequate preparation. Hers is not even a genuine attempt to renounce the world. She is frustrated and initially wants to end her life, and once she is saved, she is keen on economic independence, but *not* on *nishkama karma*. The scary experience at night in the small room is a moment of purging and epiphany for her. She realizes that she has no choice but to stand by what she has been ordained with, and accepts her predicament with a stoic resignation. Narayan writes:

> The futility, the frustration, and her own inescapable weakness made her cry and sob. "…This is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight. I am a bamboo pole…[55]

It seems that only after this experience, she becomes a true *karmasannyasin*, who would go ahead with her duties without any attachment. That her excitement and passions have subsided to a great extent is revealed by her act of controlling her urges when the following afternoon, Ramani returns home:

> She was about to shout to Ranga to run to the garage, fretting and fussing so that the lord's homecoming might be smooth and without annoyance… She checked herself.[56]

The same tone of reserve and calm follows throughout the section where Ramani tries to cheer her up. Narayan's Savtri, unlike her mythical namesake, fulfills her duty not by bringing her husband back from the dead, but by rejuvenating herself after a psychological death of her earlier self.

The Guide* and *Talkative Man

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[54]Mujumdar, "Implicatons and Interpretations of R. K. Narayan's Feministic Journey (from 'Savitri' to 'Rosie' and 'Daisy') in Amar Nath Prasad and S. John Peter Joseph, ed., *Indian Writing in English: Critical Ruminations*,p. 65.

[55]*The Dark Room*, p. 146.

[56]*The Dark Room*, p. 159.

We have already touched upon the character of Raju in *The Guide* while dealing with the theme of renunciation. Here we shall study the character of Rosie, the major female character in the novel. Following Rosie, we would take up the character of Commandant Sarasa from *Talkative Man* for analysis. While these two novels are distanced by eight years, both Rosie and Sarasa share lots of common traits, and therefore we would be justified in studying them together. Both Rosie and Sarasa are educated women with their own career choices and independent passions, but both are dedicated to the institution of marriage. Sarasa keeps pursuing her disloyal, womanizer husband Rann, out of genuine love, while Rosie is guilt-ridden for upsetting Marco, thereby bringing their marital life to a close.

It is important to note that unlike Savitri, Rosie is presented not through the author-narrator's eyes, but through Raju's. The first mention of Rosie is made when Raju takes up the narration and starts by holding Rosie responsible for the decline in his career and his term in jail:

> My troubles would not have started but for Rosie.[57]

Narayan/Raju is quick to emphasize Rosie's commitment to indigenous tradition:

> Don't imagine on hearing her name that she wore a short skirt or cropped her hair. She looked just the orthodox dancer that she was. She wore saris of bright hues and gold lace, had curly hair which she braided ad beflowered, wore diamond ear-rings and a heavy gold necklace.[58]

Rosie makes her appearance again in the fifth chapter. Immediately after having set her foot on the station, she expresses her wish to see a cobra, and Raju makes the necessary arrangements. Rosie is fascinated at seeing a cobra, and sways her arms in imitation of its hood as the man plays the flute, thus revealing her identity as a dancer. Having returned home, Raju reports to his mother about Rosie, but her mother initially assumes that she belongs to a community 'probably from Burma, people who worship snakes'.[59] Upon learning that she is a dancer, she is all the more displeased.

The metaphor of the 'snake-woman' continues throughout the novel, and the connection between Rosie and the snake reaches its climax in the scene where she performs the snake-dance:

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[57]*The Guide*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2010 rprnt, p. 9.

[58]Ibid., p. 9.

[59]Ibid., p. 69.

> She fanned out her fingers slowly, and the yellow spotlight, playing on her while, upturned palms, gave them the appearance of a cobra hood; she wore a diadem for this act, and it sparkled. Lights changed, she gradually sank to the floor, the music became slower and slower, the refrain urged the snake to dance- the snake that resided on the locks of Shiva himself, on the wrist of his spouse, Parvathi, and in the ever-radiant home of the gods in Kailasa. This was a song that elevated the serpent and brought out its mystic quality; the rhythm was hypnotic. It was her masterpiece. Every inch of her body from toe to head ripped and vibrated to the rhythm of the song which lifted the cobra out of its class of an underground reptile into a creature of grace and divinity and an ornament of the gods.[60]

Thus the metaphor of the snake mirrors Rosie's own upward mobility. Like the snake which is lowly to the popular eye but has an elevated status in the world of the gods, Rosie too, being born to a *devadasi*, and despite the stigma associated with the community, has managed to bag an MA in Economics, and has married Marco, an accomplished archaeologist. But it is important to note that her degree or the change in her status does not mortify her passion for dance, which she has certainly inherited from her mother. Dance is her *svadharma* in both senses of the word: inbuilt talent and caste duty. It is this *svadharma* of hers that clashes with her other *dharma*, that of a dedicated wife, when Marco refuses to allow her to dance. This clash of *dharma*s is the main decisive factor in the later developments in her life. It is precisely in this context that the precept of the *Gita* becomes relevant. Like Arjuna, who had to end his dilemma by finally prioritizing his duty as a *Kshatriya* over his human bonds, Rosie too, has to relinquish her husband for her dance. However, in case of Rosie, she does not venture to quite her husband on her own, and it is the latter that makes this choice easy by abandoning her.

But such a conclusion opens up another question: is Rosie performing her duty as a dancer in a disinterested manner? Can her relationship with her art be considered as *nishkama*? At face value, it would seem that dance is her first love, and therefore, she is not pursuing it disinterestedly. However, a closer look would reveal that *nishkama karma* demands lack of interest not for the work itself but for the fruit that it bears. Seen from this perspective, it must be accepted that Rosie is indeed performing *nishkama karma* as she is not covetous of the fame, money and network that her talent is accomplishing for her.

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[60]Ibid., p. 212.

This is most evident in the eighth and ninth chapters of the novel. In the eighth chapter, Rosie adopts the name Nalini, and Raju is able to arrange a performance at the Union in Albert Mission College. The next chapter describes Rosie's meteoric rise as a famous dancer, and Raju's parallel involvement as a busy man attending to all her requirements and supporting her. Meanwhile, it is revealed that Sait has won the case against Raju, and Raju moves to a fashionable house at New Extension, more commensurate with his newly acquired status and busy life. As Rosie (now Nalini) becomes popular, her contacts begin to grow, and she keeps getting newer and newer offers. But, significantly, this *does not* overwhelm Rosie's innate humility, simplicity and discipline. When Raju tries to flatter her by saying that people pay her visits because they are 'inferiors', Rosie is irritated. And when Raju points out that she has way too many engagements to focus on only some specific visitors, her reaction is noteworthy:

> 'That's more money,' she said. 'I don't care much for that sort of superiority.'[61]

It is important to note that it is Rosie and not Raju's orthodox mother who reminds Raju of the law of *karma*. When Raju reveals to Rosie that he is going to be taken into police custody for his act of forgery, Rosie, apparently unshaken, tells Raju that he is only paying for his own *karma*, and asks the District Superintendent if anything could be done, to which the latter explains that although no immediate way is out, an application could be submitted the succeeding morning.[62]Raju returns home after spending two days in the lock-up, and finds Rosie visibly upset and cold. Rosie decides to give up her dancing career and Raju's repeated pleas fail to change her mind. But it is important to note that she is not giving up her passion for the art form. She is particular about the fact that she is going to withdraw from the public showcasing of her talent:

> She merely ignored this legal rambling and said, 'Even if you are free, I'll not dance in public any more. I am tired of all this circus existence.'
>
> 'It was your own choice,' I said.
>
> 'Not the circus life. I visualised it as something different. It's all gone with that old home of yours.'[63].

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[61]Ibid., p. 190.

[62]Ibid., p. 216.

[63]Ibid., p. 221.

Later in the novel, Raju learns from the news reports published in the *Hindu*, that Rosie has not given up her career after all. The description is as follows:

> Now at this corner of South India, now there, next week Ceylon, and another week in Bombay or Delhi. Her empire was expanding rather than shrinking.[64]

But does this description make Rosie a liar or somebody who is given to indecision? How could she go back on her word that she would quit public performances? The answer probably lies in the fact that she has undergone a psychological purging. Indeed, Mani's description of Rosie's last days in Malgudi reads like a ritual purification. She pays Mani a hefty amount in recognition of his work, pays off all the debts and dues, and also turns over the furniture and other things in the house to an auctioneer.[65] This seems to be an act of formally winding up her association with Malgudi. Raju is seen to burn in silent rage at seeing her succeed without his support. But it is precisely Raju's absence which grants the pursuit of her post-Malgudi phase a character different from that in her Malgudi phase. Rosie, in any case, is a *sattvika* character. Her passion for simple living (she is enraged at Raju's extravagance), her disinterest in fame and money, and her regard for family values- all testify to this fact. By associating with the *rajasika* Raju, she deviates from her *svabhava* for a brief spell, but after Raju's absence, she seems to be dominated by *sattva* only. Mani's description also seems to suggest that she does not have anybody to support/guide her in her pursuit any more, and that she is going on independently.[66] Thus, Rosie seems to be pursuing her passion in a *nishkama* way, characteristic of the ideal *sattvika* person.

Rosie's commitment to the ideal of *nishkama karma* is evident also in her attitude towards her husband Marco and to Raju, with whom she *does* share a space that is akin to conjugality. Apart from her desperate attempts in the initial phase to save her marriage, she is also seen to feel ashamed that she has betrayed Marco. When she learns that Marco's book is published, she is genuinely happy, precisely because of the fact that her husband has attained fame, and she immediately orders Mani to get her a copy.[67] Later on, when Rosie learns that Raju is already in possession of a copy (sent by Marco), she demands it. This irritates Raju and an unpleasant verbal conflict follows, in

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[64]Ibid., p. 229.

[65]Ibid., p. 230.

[66]Ibid., p. 230.

[67]Ibid., p. 199.

which Rosie is revealed to be still guilt-ridden for her past deeds and nurturing a soft corner for Marco. She says:

> Any other husband would have throttled me then and there. He tolerated my company for nearly a month, even after knowing what I had done.[68]

However, when destiny brings her face to face with Marco once again, her gesture is noteworthy. Mani reports:

> After the case, she got into the car and went home, and he got into his and went to the railway station: they didn't meet.[69]

The present writer would like to argue that this is indeed an instance of *nishkama karma* on Rosie's part. She has left her husband for the sake of *svadharma*, and she stands fast in her decision. But like an ideal wife, she is happy for his success. This seems to be reminiscent of Rama's act of exiling Sita for the sake of *rajadharma*, but he expresses his commitment to Sita by erecting her statue which serves as her dummy during the *asvamedha* sacrifice.

Similarly, Rosie, even after knowing about Raju's crime, and seeing through his vile nature, assures him that she would extend him all kinds of help to fight the legal battle. To quote her words:

> If I have to pawn my last possession, I'll do it to save you from jail. But once it's over, leave me once and for all; that's all I ask.[70]

Raju describes Rosie as having been 'as good as her word.'[71] She proves true to her promise by selling her diamonds and arranging a reputed lawyer. She even goes back on her word and resumes performances only to raise the funds for the trial.[72] The case went on for several months and she 'worked harder than ever to keep the lawyer as well as our household going.'[73] But once the case came to a close, she severed all ties with Raju, thus proving her control over her passions.

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[68]Ibid., p. 201.

[69]Ibid., p. 230.

[70]Ibid., p. 221.

[71]Ibid., p. 222.

[72] Ibid.

[73]Ibid., p. 226.

Rosie/Nalini thus emerges as an ideal *karmayogin*. She does make mistakes but finally emerges as a strong and adorable character. Chitra Sankaran (and many other critics) has interpreted the appellation 'snake-woman' as an indication of her seductiveness. Sankaran writes:

> As soon as Rosie is identified in role of the '*celestial* nymph' and the *naga-kannika*, the pattern of the archetype emerges and it becomes and it becomes easier to envisage Raju in the role of the seduced sage.[74]

D. K. Chakravorty, however, voices a caution against an over-interpretation of the snake symbol, and writes:

> While the characters of the novel abuse her they only betray their blinkered vision married by petty self-consideration. A disinterested reader realizes that this description is chiefly meant to highlight the narrow vision of the people around her.[75]

Chakravorty's analysis seems to be closer to the truth, and the present writer finds an echo of his own arguments in this.

Now we may turn to Commandant Sarasa in *Talkative Man*. Compared to *The Guide*, *Talkative Man* has drawn meager critical attention, and similarly, unlike Rosie, Sarasa has not been studied much by critics. Like Rosie, Sarasa is an educated woman, but very different in character and choice of career. The first thing that distinguishes her from the other women in Narayan's world is her physique. She is described as tall, well-built, smartly dressed in Western unisex attire, and straightforward. To quote from the text:

> … a six-foot woman (as it seemed at first sight), dark-complexioned, cropped head, and in jeans and a T-shirt with bulging breasts, the first of her kind in the Malgudi area.[76]

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[74]Chitra Sankaran, *Myth Connections: The Use of Hindu Myths and Philosophies in R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 255.

[75]Chakravorty, "Was Rosie Really a Snake-Woman: An Approach to R. K. Narayan's Novel *The Guide*" in Manmohan K. Bhatnagar, ed., *Indian Writings in English*, Vol. I, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors,p. 117.

[76]*Talkative Man*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2011 rprnt, p. 39.

Her presence is intimidating for both the station master and the porter, and also to a large extent, for Madhu or Talkative Man, the narrator himself. It is important to note that unlike Rosie, who is presented to us mediated by Raju's own sensibility, the picture of Sarasa comes to us through Talkative Man's narration. This difference is crucial in the sense that while Raju had previously been in a relationship with Rosie and specifically holds Rosie responsible for his own lot, Talkative Man is largely a neutral observer, and if at all, his sympathy lies with Sarasa and not her womanizer husband Rann. He even helps Sarasa to get hold of her traitor husband.

Sarasa arrives in Malgudi when she sees the picture of Rann published with an article on his activities, titled "Timbuctoo Man" and written by TM (Talkative Man). She at once recognizes the person in the picture as Rann and comes all the way from Delhi. TM, however, evades mentioning that he is playing host to Rann, and leaves the spot.

Sarasa, however, is not a woman to give up so easily. One day Sarasa arrives unannounced at TM's Kabir Street house and narrates her own past. Once again, her appearance makes her a complete stranger to the milieu:

> She was attired like a Punjabi woman, *kurta* or *salwar kameez* or whatever they call it, which seemed to exaggerate her physical stature, which was already immense… In our street where women were used to glittering silk sarees, gold and diamonds, she looked like a visitor from another planet.[77]

Sarasa reveals how she had fallen in love with Rann in her school days, and had managed to elope with him. Her parents, however, filed a complaint. The duo was found out, Rann was charged with abduction, and Sarasa was made to give a false report against him. Finally, however, the duo won the case, because it was proven that they were legally married and that the bride was already above eighteen when the wedding took place, but the marriage turned out to be an unhappy one, as Rann became cold towards Sarasa for what he held to be a betrayal. While this is being narrated, however, TM manages to slip out under the pretext of buying food, and convinces his neighbor Sambu to have Rann cooped up in his own house until Sarasa leaves. Sarasa heads towards Delhi the succeeding day.[78]

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[77]Ibid., p. 52.

[78]Ibid., pp. 57-72.

It is significant to note how boldly and unabashedly Sarasa pours her heart out to TM. She is unequivocal about her days of romance with Rann. From her own report we learn how passionate she was about the relationship, and how she planned to elope with Rann. What is remarkable about her character is how stubborn and undaunted her will is, and how balanced her engagements are. When her affair is revealed to her mother, there is strict surveillance on her activities. She remarkably maintains a striking balance in her activities in this crucial period of her life. On the one hand, she finds a means to communicate with him through a woman in the library who would help them to exchange written messages. On the other hand, she is also particular that her studies don't suffer and her parents are not upset. She says:

> I was not going to do anything that might disrupt my studies. So I acted the model child at home, and my parents looked very happy and pleased, and plied me with their kindness and trust.[79]

But she is also conscientious in pointing out that her attempts to keep her parents happy stemmed from her intention to deceive them. She did slip out of her house and meet Rann when her parents were out of station, after coaxing the old maid-servant.[80] Thus, it seems that Sarasa, instead of developing a healthy *abhyasa*, is only up to show business. She is neither *nishkama* nor has the potential to be one, as she is *rajasika* and not *sattvika*. Surprisingly enough, it is revealed that she could prove herself true to Rann either, as she gave in to the oppression meted out to her by her father's lawyer and signed 'a document charging him with abduction.'[81] This is the *karma* for which she pays her entire life. In this context, it must be noted that Krishna Sen argues that 'there are at least three Ranns in the novel: those narrated by TM; by Commandant Sarasa in her inner narrative of Rann's earlier life; and by Rann himself, through the version he provides of himself through his conversation and journal entries.'[82] If this is true for Rann, what about Sarasa? Going by Sen's logic, we get two Sarasas then: one version is by TM, and the other by Sarasa herself. But, how much of her testimony is true? By her own admission, she cheated her parents. Therefore, when she says that she signed the document under pressure, we should not take her word for it. It is understandable that Rann is taking revenge of this betrayal not simply by betraying her but also by making love to one

[79]Ibid., p. 63.

[80] Ibid.

[81]Ibid., p. 69.

[82]Sen, cited in John Thieme, *R. K. Narayan*, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010, p. 164.

girl after another and breaking their hearts. Given Rann's attitude and commitment towards Sarasa during their childhood, is it possible that such a drastic change would come over a person if the latter had not been at fault at all? While there is every possibility that Rann is mistaken in believing that Sarasa had willfully betrayed him, we cannot rule out the fact that Rann might have had some evidence that no force was employed at all.

Sarasa is seen to use her official, detective connections to track Rann's movements:

> I've been to the capitals of the world, hunting for him with the help of Interpol and met only the poor wrecks he left behind when he vanished.[83]

By employing her official connections for her personal gains, she is violating the very important code of keeping her work and personal life separate. Thus, once again, she fails in the test of being *nishkama*, in this case, with respect to her job. It is also important to note that Sarasa is pursuing Rann for herself and is not really concerned about the women he has deceived, and who are going through the same torment as her. Her mention of the 'poor wrecks' in the above passage is only lip service. She emerges as being self-centred.

TM arranges for a talk by Rann at Town Hall, commemorating the Silver Jubilee of the Lotus Club. Rann's talk involves chilling predictions about the future of human life, which sends shivers through the audience, and the event culminates into a virtual pandemonium. Taking the opportunity, TM draws Rann out of the hall, and hands him over to Sarasa who has been waiting with her car.[84]Sarasa, however, reappears after six months, and narrates how she has been fooled once again. Rann pretended to be his old self with her, but had actually started courting Komal, a nurse from Matilda's. Taking the opportunity of Sarasa's absence, he eloped and had flown to Rome with Komal. The story ends with a dejected Sarasa breaking down in tears, completely shattered.[85]Sarasa's last words are epiphanic:

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[83]*Talkative Man*, p. 55.

[84]Ibid., pp. 100-109.

[85]Ibid., pp. 116-119.

> I should have been far happier if I had never met you or noticed your news item about the Timbuctoo man. Or it would have been best if I'd listened to my father's advice to keep away from him.[86]

In final analysis, Sarasa turns out to be a foil to Rosie. Despite being educated and economically independent, and also being born in a respectable family, she fails to win the trust of her husband. Rosie too loses her husband, but an unsaid concern on Marco's part is evident when he pursues Raju for forgery. She too cares for him, as is evident from her act of keeping his book with herself. She also shows her loyalty towards Raju by helping him through the case. In Sarasa's case, it's the opposite. Rann pretends to feel remorse but leads a secret life unbeknown to her. She too betrays him when he most needed her support.

Her words of realization towards the end of the novel (quoted above) seem to indicate that now she is going to acquire a stoic resignation and give up her futile search. Like Savitri of *The Dark Room*, it appears that Sarasa too is going to tread on the path of *karmasannyasa* henceforth. Her last experience was a lesson for her, which purges her of her earlier, misguided dreams.

The Painter of Signs

The Painter of Signs, written in the backdrop of the Emergency, is the story of the frustration of the signboard painter Raman's quest for love and his brief engagement with Daisy. Daisy is given to birth control activism. She appears after a few initial pages of the novel, and emerges as the driving force for the rest of the plot. It would probably be relevant to begin our analysis with an observation by Mujumdar. Mujumdar is of the opinion that Daisy is not 'the victim of caste and tradition like Rosie and Savitri.'[87] She continues:

> She has no chauvinistic husband or deceiving partner. She cautiously protects her feminine honour when Raman tries to assault her… She is aware thus of the possible dangers and difficulties in a woman's social and official work outside the home security. She is prepared for all such kind of things. She never pays attention to the public remarks or criticism of men and women.[88]

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[86]Ibid., p. 119.

[87]Mujumdar, p. 75.

[88] Ibid.

While Majumdar is correct in arguing that Daisy refuses to be a victim, it is not entirely true that she did not have to face resistance. Chitra Sankaran points out how the issues of caste and religion are subtly interwoven into the plot of the novel. Sankaran sees in this novel an opposition between the usual polarities of the moribund/Hindu and the progressive/Christian.[89] Daisy's act of leaving her family is, for Sankaran, not only a rebellion against patriarchy, but a conscious act on Daisy's part to shed her caste identity.[90] In fact, it is her Christian-sounding name which provokes Raman's aunt to identify her as a Christian, and her first question is:

> *That* girl! What is her caste? Who is she?[91]

We learn that Daisy proudly walked out of her home when her family was upset that she frustrated a matrimonial alliance with an influential family.[92]Later in the story it is narrated briefly how she was educated by Christian missionaries, and was trained to work among fishermen and slum-dwellers. However, it is significant to note that she refused baptism, but still, changed her name to 'some non-denominational label.'[93] Ironically, by her refusal to get baptized she technically remains a Hindu, but the fact that she has lost her caste-affiliation renders her situation paradoxical. She thus poses a puzzle not simply to Raman and his aunt, but also to critics who approach this novel.

In the beginning of this chapter, we have already mentioned Pier Paolo Piciucco's argument that the Raman-Daisy pair serves as a parody of the *purusha-prakriti* relationship in *Samkhya* philosophy. Dnyate, on the other hand, sees in Daisy a personified form of 'illusion'.[94] Even though Dnyate is not explicit about it, it is apparent that by 'illusion' he means the Vedantic concepts of *maya* and *avidya* (ignorance). Indeed, up to the point of Daisy's arrival, Raman is guided by rationality and not emotions. But upon the arrival of Daisy, Raman seems to have undergone an emotional make-over, and in the course of the novel, it is revealed that he is also falling back upon tradition. To quote from the text:

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[89]Sankaran, p. 286.

[90]Ibid., p. 296.

[91]*The Painter of Signs*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2011 rprnt, p. 146.

[92]Ibid., p. 133.

[93]Ibid., 155. Early in the novel, she herself admits: "A missionary gentleman inspired me early in life." (p. 62)

[94]Dnyate, p. 106.

> An edifice of self-discipline laboriously raised in a lifetime seemed to be crumbling down. He had chosen to be a bachelor, in spite of the several opportunities that came his way to choose a bride for himself, if not at least to flirt with… That accountant-general from Nagpur and his daughter… the man had left his daughter unchaperoned with him in their room at Anand Bhavan Hotel, but he determinedly kept his distance from her and spurned the whole proposal… He wished to establish that the man-woman relationship was not inevitable…[95]

Raman's resolution for lifelong *sannyasa*, however, is misguided. It seems to have been a youthful vow, most certainly without any proper training. However, it would be wrong to assume that Raman is given over to his senses. Even barring the passage quoted above, Raman is a person of tremendous self-discipline, who is very particular about his job, and is an avid reader.[96] Thus he is a man of *abhyasa*. But this *abhyasa* is disrupted with Daisy's arrival.

While these arguments may be considered valid up to a certain extent, this research would like to approach Daisy as a human character whose own ethical code is going to be the subject of our study. To begin with, any such analysis faces a fundamental problem. The novel is unequivocal about the fact that Daisy has been initiated into social service by Christian missionaries. Then, how far would it be correct to read into her activism any influence of the ideal of *lokasangraha*? There is no doubt from her long description of her childhood experience[97] that despite all the inculcation of traditional values, the ideal of social service was never emphasized by her elders. In reply, it would suffice to say that the message of social service as interpreted by the 19th century authorities is itself filtered through a reading of Western/Christian ethics. There is little doubt that Vivekananda was influenced by Christ and Christianity in his early youth, and that much of his call for social service is derived from his exposure to Western philosophy.[98] Gandhi, too, is open about the synthesis of the *Gita* and

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[95]Ibid., p. 45.

[96]Ibid., pp. 16-17.

[97]Ibid., pp. 127-31.

[98]Narasingha S. Sil, "Vivekānanda'sRāmakṛṣṇa: An Untold Story of Mythmaking and Propaganda" in *Numen*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Jan., 1993), pp. 46-7.

the *Sermon on the Mount* that he had sought for in his own agenda.[99] There is no way tone can dissociate a strong Christian influence from the 19th century emphasis on *lokasangraha*.

The first significant trait in Daisy's persona is revealed through her cold and business-like behavior, which makes Raman fumble and leave her after making some banal points about the utility of the signboard.[100]In the second meeting, Raman is luckier as he experiences Daisy's caring touch when she examines his eyes and advises him to change his glasses.[101]These two episodes bring out two very different features of Daisy's character: her control over emotions (and her commitment to her work), and her caring nature. She seems to be an ideal *karmayogin*/*karmasannyasin*, who neither works for one's own interest nor allows herself to give in to inaction. It is also significant to note that Daisy never resorts to easy means. Thus, when rumours spread that she is planning to gift bangles to village women if they bought her theory of birth control, and the bangle-seller requests Raman to ask her to buy all the bangles from his own shop, she finds the proposal disgusting:

> "Rubbish!" said her voice. "We don't believe in that kind of conversion. They must understand what they are doing, and not be enticed in this childish manner… This sort of thing maddens me, I tell you."[102]

Her perseverance and tenacity are revealed in her encounter with the village people and also in the hardships she faces while travelling in village areas. People also mistake her for an abortionist, but she is steadfast in her rationality. Her former experience has apparently lent her a lot of patience and composure. Her wit, strictness and control of senses are borne witness to even in her attempted molestation by Raman. As Raman and Daisy travel by cart, the bullock is injured, and the cart-man leaves them alone and takes the bullock for treatment. Night falls, the two dine, and it is decided that Raman would sleep beneath the cart while Daisy would sleep inside it. At night, as sleep eludes Raman, driven by an impulse, he moves away from beneath the cart, and tries to seize Daisy. But to his surprise he finds the cart vacant. In the morning the cart-man returns and Daisy reveals herself. She had climbed a tamarind tree to protect herself as she could sense Raman's intentions. Daisy is outraged at Raman's callous and inappropriate behavior, and the two have an unpleasant time as the

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[99] M. N. Srinivas, "Gandhi's Religion" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 25 (Jun. 24, 1995), pp. 1489-1491.

[100]*The Painter of Signs*, pp. 33-38.

[101]Ibid., p. 44.

[102]Ibid., pp. 143-44.

cart moves on. Their heated arguments are mistaken by the cart-man for a usual quarrel between spouses, and Raman adds fuel to the fire by participating with mockery and taunt. They reach their destination and Daisy boards a bus and leaves by herself, not caring for Raman's company. This entire episode proves how Daisy is smart, steadfast and strict about the question of morality, but she once again proves her maturity by refusing to file a police complaint. She divulges the unpleasant incident to nobody, possibly because she understands that the momentary impulse in Raman does not define him fully.

In the beginning of the last section of the novel, Raman is bold enough to admit his love for her, and calls himself her 'slave.' But instead of being overwhelmed by Raman's unwavering dedication, she retorts:

> "Don't you feel ashamed to say it?"[103]

Raman's candid confession of his love for Daisy and his unilateral decision to marry her, bewilders her aunt, who decides to go to Benares (and some other places) with her neighbours, and spend the rest of her life there. As her aunt packs for her journey and keeps instructing him about how to keep the house, he realizes the profundity of her affection and dedication, and also shudders at the thought of his future, because Daisy clearly is not going to pay any heed either to household activities or to Raman's day-to-day needs. Thus, Daisy emerges as a foil to Raman's aunt. Raman's aunt and foster-parent, is also a *karmasannyasin*, but in a limited sense of the term, because Raman is after all her own sister's son. Apparently her journey to Benares is the beginning of the *sannyasa* phase of her life, but a closer look reveals that she is embarking on it not because she thinks her mission as a householder is over, but simply because she is under the impression that her house is going to be defiled by the arrival of a casteless, Christian woman. She is not at all motivated by any lofty ideals of *lokasangraha*. Daisy plays out her role as a *karmasannyasin* on a larger scale, by serving people who are not related to her by family. She too walked out of her home, but that didn't prevent her from connecting to the larger world and making her existence meaningful for society. She seems to be a larger and more mature incarnation of Shanta Bai. Unlike Shanta Bai, however, her charm does not lie in her looks and her capacity to woo, but in her personality. While Shanta Bai turns out to be

[103]Ibid., p. 144.

unfit for office work, it is especially in her job that Daisy proves her worth, and moreover refuses the advances from Raman.

It is also in connection with Raman's argument with his aunt that we get to know that Daisy has refused both a formal wedding and a change in her surname. This also indicates her sense of individuality. This sense of independence is also evident when she comes to see the arrangements in the house, and Raman 'notes with slight pain that she still said "your" house, rather than "our".'[104]Daisy is satisfied with the arrangements, and her mood gradually changes from cold to frivolous. Daisy's positive attitude emboldens Raman and the two have an intimate moment when Raman touches a sleepy Daisy and a half-sleep Daisy returns the embrace. Daisy agrees to shift to Raman's house in a couple of days.[105]

The next evening Raman visits Daisy at her office. As he enters, he finds three women walking out. On inquiring, he is told by Daisy that the women are from the village of Nagari, where the birth rate has alarmingly increased by thirty percent, and now Daisy has to once again go on a tour for an indefinite period. On being asked if Raman could accompany her, Daisy plainly states that his help is not required this time, because the masses that she is going to visit are largely illiterate. Daisy adds that she may not be returning because she doesn't know how long it would take. Raman is shattered and Daisy tries to console him, and in her business-like manner, with no trace of the prior intimacy, asks him to consider the moment as the end of their relationship. Raman tries his best to dissuade her and even makes an attempt to create a scene when the three women return to take Daisy with them, but finally gives in.[106]

What can we deduce from this sudden change in Daisy? While it is understandable that she has always prioritized her social work over her personal happiness, does her action seem very insensitive to Raman's feelings. While from Raman's point of view, it is indeed very upsetting, it must be remembered that Daisy's conscience is clear. She is mature enough and realizes that once in a serious relationship with Raman, marital expectations would sooner or later develop, and then there would be no going back. Her momentary surrender to emotions on just one evening is nothing more

[104]Ibid., p. 173.

[105]Ibid., p. 174.

[106]Ibid., pp. 175-83.

than Raman's impulse to grab her during the village journey. We can no more cite that momentary behavior on Daisy's part and call her a liar than we can call Raman a rapist on the strength of his momentary behavior. The only difference is that while Daisy reveals her maturity through her forgiveness, Raman is passionate and threatens her. A performer of *lokasangraha* must be in control of her senses, and should not be undecided about his/her actions. Daisy belongs to this type. She reminds Raman, like a *guru*, about the ideal of *karma*:

> "You have your work, go on with it. You have your world, in which you have always existed happily, even before you knew me. It is always there, isn't it?"[107]

Even though she isn't spiritually inclined, Daisy remains an ideal performer of *lokasangraha* who strives to be an example to others by her action. She is financially strong and therefore would not have had trouble providing for her children, but by her act of refusing to marry and procreate, she sets an example for the poor village women who are her targets. She understands what the reality is, and is compassionate towards Raman, and for all her firmness, she *does* acknowledge that she gave in for a brief stint, and asks forgiveness for that. Simultaneously, she also wishes Raman a happy married life in the future.[108] Thus, she is truthful. Finally, it should be noted that with all her criticism of orthodox excesses, she is *not* cynical of moral values. During her visit to Raman's home, she mildly admonishes Raman for having locked the idols of the gods in the shelf, not because she herself believes in them, but because she thinks it is not right to do so with objects that were venerated by Raman's aunt. At the end of the novel, she reiterates her faith in divine justice:

> The gods, if they are there, will look into my mind and judge whether I am choosing the right path or not; if I am wrong let them strike me dead. I am prepared for it.[109]

Daisy is the only fully liberated woman in Narayan's novels, who chooses her own course of life. The nature of her *lokasangraha* is, however, different from Bharati's. They are not only occasioned by different historical situations and events, but also differ in spirit owing to the different sources of their interpretation. Moreover, while Daisy has the choice to remain single, Bharati finally gives in

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[107]Ibid., p. 178.

[108]Ibid., p. 180.

[109]Ibid., p. 179.

to the patriarchal structure and its demands. The next and the final chapter of this work will be devoted to an assessment of *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Vendor of Sweets*.

V

Lokasangraha and Service to the Nation: A Study of *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *The Vendor of Sweets*

A study of two novels, *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1983), would be attempted in this chapter. Both these novels, despite not being masterpieces, have generated a lot of critical interest. These novels are separated by 28 years, and fall into two different phases of Narayan's career. But even then these two novels can be studied together, owing to the fact that the protagonist of each is a Gandhian. But while *Waiting for the Mahatma* was produced within a decade of Gandhi's assassination and locates the protagonist, a young man, within the Gandhian movement itself, the events in *The Vendor of Sweets* take place several decades after the Indian independence, when the protagonist, the father of an adult son, has outlived the movement and its immediate aftermath, and is established as a well-to-do sweet vendor. In either case, however, the protagonist is presented with a colour of comic absurdity. In the present chapter, we shall first delineate Narayan's response to Gandhianism in general, and then first take a detailed look at *Waiting for the Mahatma*, and then move on to a brief survey of the theme of '*lokasangraha*' in *The Vendor of Sweets*.

Narayan and Gandhi: The Question of Influence

Before going into further analysis of the novel with reference to the ideals mentioned above, it would be relevant to make an assessment of the degree of Gandhian influence on Narayan. This has remained a moot point with the scholars, most of them leaning towards a conclusion that the influence varies from little to nil. In this context, we may repeat a passage already cited in the 'Introduction' to the present work. Narayan says:

> I didn't much care for some of the things he preached. I didn't believe in his handspinning and anti-industrialization… Gandhi… was opposed to all modernization of the surroundings. He never believed in modern sanitary arrangements, the need for them. He said, "Poor people can't afford it."[1]

There are more instances where Narayan has unequivocally rejected Gandhi's political ideology. Here is a passage from a conversation between V. Panduranga Rao and the author:

> Rao: 'Considering your Waiting for the Mahatma, were you greatly influenced by Gandhi?' Narayan: 'No. He was a rare man. But I don't agree with his political or economic thinking. But- Truth ... and he was absolutely transparent.'[2]

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[1] "Narayan of Malgudi: 50 Years of Storytelling for the Millions"

[2] V. Panduranga Rao, "Tea with R. K. Narayan", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, June, 1971, Vol. 6, No. 1, http://jcl.sagepub.com/content/6/1/79.full.pdf+html [Accessed 11/05/2015].

However, what is important to note is, that having begun with a clear 'no', Narayan has qualified his response towards the end, thus pointing out that while he did not buy Gandhian political thought, he *was* impressed by the man's ethical ideas. One should also not ignore the fact that though the novel has apparently nothing to do with Indian philosophy, this is the only novel where Narayan provides a glossary of Indian phrases and words, and the list includes *ahimsa*, *karma*, and *Gita*, along with other common Indian terms, e.g., *budmash* and *babu*. There has never been a dearth of Indian words in the later novels of Narayan. Then, why this innovative step? It is clear that Narayan has the Western reader at the back of his mind, but that is true of his other novels also. The most tenable answer perhaps lies in the fact that Narayan could not help providing his readers with key clues to the inner philosophical world of his novel. The glossary that precedes this novel serves pretty much the same purpose as in the case of the author's "Introduction" to *A Tiger for Malgudi*.

Critics such as Michel Pousse and Lalji Misra are of the opinion that a Gandhian consciousness pervades Narayan's entire gamut and is not limited to *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Pousse calls Narayan's protagonists 'literary incarnations of the Gandhian ideal' who 'go through an "experiment with truth."'[3] Pousse in his analysis argues that Krishnan, the protagonist of *The English Teacher*, Raja of *A Tiger for Malgudi*, and Daisy of *The Painter of Signs*, are all in quest of truth, not to speak of the overtly Gandhian character of Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets*. "In Narayan's novels," Pousse concludes, "Gandhi's preaching is echoed on every page."[4] Lalji Misra goes a step further and draws into the world of Narayan's Gandhianism a few more works of his.[5]

The most detailed analysis of Gandhian influence on Narayan's fiction is available from the research of Sudarshan Sharma, who identifies the following elements of Gandhian philosophy scattered in his works: *ahimsa*, simple living, universal love, emphasis on Indian languages instead of English, protest against untouchability, emphasis on truth, handspinning, *satyagraha*, concern about security of women and children, refusal to surrender honour and embrace death if necessary, conquest of taste, dignity of labour, the *Gita*, renunciation and self-control.[6]Of these, Sharma restricts the first eleven to *Waiting for the Mahatma*. However, a reading of *Waiting for the Mahatma* reveals that the rest of the elements, barring 'dignity of labour', are also prominent in the novel. The *Gita* is mentioned twice in the course of the novel. The first mention is made with reference to the Chairman:

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[3] Pousse, "Narayan as a Gandhian Novelist" in C. N. Srinath, ed., *R. K. Narayan: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000, p. 63.

[4] Ibid., pp. 61-68.

[5] Misra, "Gandhian Consciousness: A Study in the Novels of R. K. Narayan" in M. K. Bhatnagar, ed., *New Insights into the Novels of R. K. Narayan*, New Delhi: Atlantic, 2002, pp. 104 ff.

[6]*The Influence of Gandhian Ideology on Indo-Anglian Fiction*, New Delhi: Soni Book Agency, 1982, pp. 43-62.

> He had also discreetly managed to get a picture of Krishna discoursing to Arjuna on Bhagavad-Gita, knowing well Gandhi's bias towards Bhagavad-Gita.[7]

At a later point, Sriram is seen recalling the Mahatma's command:

> Spin and read Bhagavad Gita, and utter *Ram Nam* continuously, and then you will know what to do in life.[8]

A closer look will also reveal that the elements enumerated by Sharma are not mutually exclusive. For instance, renunciation, self-control, and conquest of taste go hand-in-hand. Again, simple living and handspinning interrelated, and the ideal of 'self-control' has a bearing on them. Similarly, *ahimsa* and protest against untouchability stem from the same root of universal love.

Thus, the elements of Gandhian philosophy that can be gleaned from the novel are basically: *ahimsa*, self-control, universal love, and *satyagraha*, the last being a combination and culmination of the rest. We have already discussed in great detail Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita*, where we found that according to him *anasakti* (non-attachment) is the central message of the book. We also noted that he took the setting and the dialogue of the holy book allegorically and not literally, and emphasized that the idea of *dharmayuddha* is an inner war, and therefore, perfectly compatible with the doctrine of *ahimsa*. While Gandhi's argument that *dharmayuddha* is compatible with *ahimsa* may be called in question, it must also be remembered that *ahimsa* does appear in *Gita* (X.5) as a virtue. Gandhi's emphasis on universal love and non-discrimination can also be traced to the *Gita* (V.18). Thus we find that Gandhi and *Gita* form a unified whole, and *Waiting for the Mahatma* can be analyzed quite well with reference to the ethical doctrines presented in the *Gita as filtered through the Gandhian interpretation*.

Waiting for the Mahatma

Very much like *The Guide*, *Waiting for the Mahatma* has drawn a wide range of diverse critical opinion, but unlike the latter, it has been almost unanimously dubbed as one of Narayan's weakest works. Even then, this novel merits separate treatment with reference to the ideals of *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha*, because it is here that they are at their best. Sarbani Putatunda writes:

> If both the novels *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The Guide* tell us the story of enforced sainthood and renunciation, then *Waiting for the Mahatma* portrays the real renunciation of a true saint Mahatma Gandhi, in its best. And this happens because in both the novels, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The Guide*, Narayan prefers delineating average and ordinary people, while in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Narayan talks about an extraordinary human being, who had actually succeeded in achieveing the ideals of renunciation. Unlike Raju and Chandran, Gandhi

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[7] *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Michigan State University Press, 1955, p. 39.

[8] Ibid., p. 89.

> has no qualms about renunciation because his aspiration is to be one with the ordinary men, remonstrating with them, and extending sympathy when required. Mahatma Gandhi, as Narayan represents him, epitomizes the actual definition of *Jivan Mukta*.[9]

However, a closer examination of the novel proves that it is too simplistic to argue that the novel is about Gandhi and his movement. Published seven years after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, it is to be distinguished from an immediate response to Gandhian politics and the nationalist movement. We should not forget that Narayan was writing at a time when not only independence had been achieved and Gandhi was dead, but also Gandhi's legacy was being questioned. Makarand Paranjape's incisive research into the last phase of Gandhi's life reveals that it was not only the Hindu right and the Hindu refugees from East and West Pakistan who had held him responsible for the plight of the masses, but there were voices of dissent evident within the Congress well in his lifetime. To quote Paranjape:

> As early as 1946, the Congress Working Committee had at his own insistence chosen to bypass him, if necessary, in the most vital of decisions pertaining to Partition and the future of India. After 15 August 1947 his irrelevance would have been all the more obvious to the Congress rank and file. That is why I would hazard to argue that… a sizeable section of the Congress party cannot be totally absolved of their liability in the crime. They may not have wanted Gandhi dead, they would certainly not have tried to murder him, but by marginalizing and bypassing Gandhi they had all but 'killed' him symbolically.[10]

It must also be remembered that Nathuram Godse was hanged in 1949, and the notorious incident of Gandhi's assassination had also become a distant memory when the novel came out, not to speak of the nationalist movement itself. This makes it different from texts such as Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (1916, composed contemporaneously with the *swadeshi* movement), Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938, contemporaneous with the Gandhian movement), or Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972, published within two years of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970).

The plot of *Waiting for the Mahatma* focuses not on the nationalist movement *per se* but on Sriram who somehow happens to get involved in the freedom movement while pursuing Bharati whom he loves. Neatly divided into five parts, the novel narrates the story of Sriram from his early twenties up to his would-be marriage. The novel opens with some information about Sriram's deceased parents, a brief note of his adolescent crush on the portrait of a charming white lady in a poster in Kanni's shop, and switches over to his grandmother's decision to celebrate his twentieth

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[9] Putatunda, "The Cultural Milieu of Malgudi: The Theme of Renunciation-'The Bachelor of Arts', 'The Guide' and 'Waiting for the Mahatma'" in Putatunda, Sarbani, ed., *R. K. Narayan: Critical Essays*, pp. 153-154.

[10] *The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi*, London, New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 6-7.

birthday. It is revealed that he is averse to socialization when he forbids his grandmother to invite anybody on his birthday. In the next chapter, his grandmother takes him to the 'Fund office' and hands over to him the ownership of all the bank balance, but prevents him from withdrawing two hundred and fifty rupees at one go. Sriram resents this interference but grudgingly accepts her command. As Sriram moves about the streets undecided about how to spend the money he has withdrawn, he chances on Bharati who is collecting donations for Gandhi's mission. Following this, Sriram starts pursuing Bharati, and lands up in Gandhi's sphere. Gandhi's visit to Malgudi and his interaction with the common people are described in great detail, and is followed by Sriram's meeting with Bharati, who introduces him to Gandhi. The chapter ends with Sriram pledging to support Gandhi's mission and his official withdrawal from the world of his grandmother. The second part of the novel describes his work as a Gandhian. This part ends with his refusal to accept Gandhi's command to hand himself over to the police. Part three shows a shift in his loyalties. Under the influence of Jagadish, he now resorts to the violent tactics of derailing trains, paralyzing work in schools, and exploding crude bombs. At the end of this part, we see him getting caught by the police. The fourth part narrates his life in incarceration and his subsequent release. The fifth and final part is the story of his reunion with Bharati. Gandhi reappears in this part and Sriram travels all the way from Malgudi to Delhi to meet him. At Delhi, he meets Bharati and Gandhi grants them the long-awaited permission to marry, assures the two of attending the wedding personally and in the capacity of a priest, and commands Bharati not to postpone the wedding even if he is absent. Before they can marry, however, Gandhi is shot dead, and the novel ends at this point, suggesting that Sriram's long wait having come to an end, the plot has exhausted itself.

The protagonist of the novel, then, is Sriram, and not Gandhi. The other major presence in the novel is that of Bharati. Gandhi is physically absent for the greater part of the novel, and the marriage of the lovers being contingent on his permission, his significance in the novel is *not* in his own capacity (as a messiah or a leader) but in relation to Sriram's quest for Bharati. Rather, it is Bharati and not Gandhi himself who takes on the role of Gandhi with respect to Sriram. It is Bharati who appears before him to collect the funds, thus propelling the narrative, and it is for her sake that he joins Gandhi. Again, it is she who introduces him to Gandhi, and Gandhi declares her as his *guru*. Since that point, Bharati guides Sriram in his work, and it is through Bharati that Gandhi sends his messages to Sriram. Once Bharati is behind bars, Sriram is clueless and shifts his loyalty. At a later point, it is Bharati who informs Sriram of his grandmother's failing health, thus driving him towards his imprisonment, and again at the end of the story, Sriram travels all the way from Malgudi to Delhi with the intention of meeting primarily Bharati and only secondarily Gandhi (to obtain his permission for marriage), and once again, Bharati acts as the mediator between him and Gandhi. With the union of Bharati and Sriram, the novel ends. On Bharati's central role in the novel, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar remarks as follows:

> It is Bharati who makes a patriot and a man of Sriram, and in marriage he is certain to finding her the saviour strength that is woman's *shakti*.[11]

According to the present writer, in this novel, Bharati and not Gandhi himself best exemplify the ideals of *sannyasa* (*karmasannyasa*) and *lokasangraha*. As already noted, there exists a *guru-shishya* relationship between Bharati and Sriram. Moreover, in many ways, Sriram can be considered to be a foil to Bharati. Therefore, this chapter will make an attempt to analyze the allied concepts of *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha*primarily with reference to these two characters. However, Sriram being the protagonist, and his association being with a large number of people, he had more than one *guru*s. Apart from Bharati, he was instructed directly by Gandhi, and Gorpad and Jagadish were two other persons from whom he learnt a lot. His education, of course, begins at home, with his grandmother, who, according to Ramesh Dnyate, epitomizes the other kind of *sannyasa* which does not draw the ideal of *lokasangraha*into its ambit:

> Besides Gandhi, there seems to be one more character to be considered under the typology of sanyasa. It's Sriram's granny… [who] seems to play a rival to Gandhi and tries, helplessly though, to win over Sriram from him. In fact, her role as a sanyasini may be regarded as the indirect outcome of Gandhi's influence on Sriram and Bharati. But apart from it, her sanyasa may be considered as an independently realized act… In the final analysis *Waiting for the Mahatma* seems to project a unique presentment of two faces of sanyasa: the symbolic and the traditional.[12]

Undoubtedly, the 'symbolic' and the 'traditional' types of *sannyasa* in the above comment are nothing but the ideals of *karmasannyasa* and the passive *sannyasa* rephrased.

Gandhi the Archetype

Gandhi, though not the protagonist, is a messianic presence in the novel, and it would not be out of place to begin with an analysis of his character. Unlike Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Gandhi in this novel is no incarnation of a deity. He is a man of the soil and an ideal leader. However, according to the present writer, the arrival of Gandhi in Malgudi and his campaigningare reminiscent of Krishna's peace mission in the *Udyogaparvan* of the epic *Mahabharata*. It is also noteworthy that Gandhi starts his lecture with: "I see before me a vast army." Then he keeps up the metaphor of the army and goes on:

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[11]*Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1984, p. 373.

[12]*The Novels of R. K. Narayan: A Typological Study of Characters*, New Delhi: Prestige, 1996, pp. 141-142.

> An army is always in training and keeps itself in good shape by regular drill and discipline. We the citizens of this country are all soldiers of a nonviolent army, but even such an army has to practice a few things daily in order to keep itself in proper condition.[13]

The metaphor of the army is reminiscent of the Kurukshetra war, and Gandhi's command of self-discipline finds its echo in the *Gita* doctrine of *abhyasa*. However, the most prominent event in the novel, which likens Gandhi to Krishna, is his refusal to stay in the Chairman's house and seeking shelter in the sweeper boy's home in the scavenger's colony.[14] This is reminiscent of Krishna's preference to stay in the low-caste Vidura's home over the grand banquet in Duryodhana's palace. The last event of Gandhi being shot dead can also be considered as a replay of Krishna's death by the hunter's arrow and Christ's crucifixion. Thus Gandhi emerges as an *avatara*-like figure, even though Narayan might not have apparently intended to impose divinity on him.

Gandhi's portrayal in *Waiting for the Mahatma* has drawn scathing criticism from Uma Parameswaran. In her own words:

> It is a regrettable weakness in Narayan that whenever he sets out to sketch a virtuous character he ends up sketching a near-moron. Sriram is, without reprieve, moronic. However, what is even more regrettable is that Narayan very nearly makes Gandhi in the same mould as Sriram. He takes certain familiar characteristics and incidents associated with Gandhi and he sticks them in haphazardly at the first opening he gets.[15]

However, such an opinion is too shallow, and critics such as S. K. Sanyal are in the opposite camp. In his analysis of Gandhi's role and character in the novel, Sanyal points out that the Mahatma's attributes have been finely drawn with emphasis on his humanity, integrity, and self-discipline.[16]Here we are concerned only on the *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha* aspects.

Gandhi is revealed as an ideal *sthitaprajna* who is not intimidated by the absence of bodily comforts and who does not hanker after them. The novel says that he had already ordered before his arrival that 'no particular trouble should be taken about his lodging…'[17] Gandhi is also seen as a *karmayogin* who is constantly performing his duties, and a person of the *sattvika* type:

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[13] Ibid., p. 24.

[14] Ibid., pp. 44-46.

[15]*A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1976, p. 66.

[16]*Indianness in Major Indo-English Novels*, Bareilly, Prakash Book Depot, 1984, pp. 130-136.

[17]*Waiting for the Mahatma*, p. 35.

> Gandhi sat on a divan and dictated to one of his secretaries… Mahatmaji performed a number of things simultaneously. He spoke to visitors. He dictated. He wrote. He prayed. He had his sparse dinner of nuts and milk, and presently he even laid himself down on the divan and went off to sleep.[18]

Gandhi's punctuality (an essential attribute of a *karmayogin*) and his unwavering faith in God are two other characteristics that are highlighted.[19] We also have a brief glimpse of his humanitarian work (*lokasangraha*) as he passes through villages and assures and comforts the poor and the needy. But amidst all of his social work, his personal life does not waver from its daily routine:

> Gandhiji's personal life went on as if he had been stationary in one place… He met the local village men and women, spoke to them about God, comforted the ailing, advised those who sought his guidance. He spoke to them about spinning, the war, Britain, and religion. He met them in their huts, spoke to them under the village banyan tree… He trudged his way through ploughed fields, he climbed hard rocky places, through mud and slush, but always with the happiest look, and no place seemed too small for his attention.[20]

Bharati: An Ideal Gandhian

Although a separate chapter has been reserved for the female characters in Narayan's works, the centrality of Bharati in *Waiting for the Mahatma* makes a treatment of her character inevitable in any discussion of *karmasannyasa* and *lokasangraha*.

In this context, Gandhi's ideal of womanhood and role of women in the Nationalist Movement merit special attention. We have already discussed in the preceding chapter the discursive process of the construction of a feminine identity in 19th century India. Here we shall be concentrating only on Gandhi's additional contribution to that process. In an incisive and thoroughly researched article, Madhu Kishwar summarizes Gandhi's vision of the feminine, and his thoughts on the question of women's emancipation and the role of women in the freedom struggle.[21] To begin with, Gandhi was unequivocal of the fact that women's empowerment is a necessary prerequisite for the freedom movement as a whole. Unlike Bankim and Tagore, Gandhi does not see in women any threat to the national cause. Instead of being a 'temptress' she is rather a 'victim' of men's sexual desire.[22] Gandhi

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[18] Ibid., p. 46.

[19] Ibid., pp. 60-61.

[20] Ibid., p. 84.

[21] Madhu Kishwar, "Gandhi and Women" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XX, No. 40, Oct. 5, 1985, 1691-1702.

[22] Chandrima Chakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present Imaginings of India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011, p. 133.

stressed on the self-assertive character of Sita and Draupadi, and wanted women to be fearless and makers of their own destiny. However, Gandhi's vision of women's independence did not throw the traditional notion of womanhood overboard. His idea to get women spin yarn was a master stroke which helped women to participate in the freedom movement without challenging the social structure. *Khadi*, Kishwar argues, also facilitated a partial break-down of the class hierarchy among women. However, with all his emphasis on women's empowerment, Gandhi appealed more to the innate 'womanly' qualities and emphasized that it is the woman who is the best person to 'make a more effective appeal to the heart'.[23] Thus, dismissing their pleas to allow them to take part in bigger and more challenging roles in the *Swadeshi* movement, Gandhi maintained that the job that was 'more suited to women's genius was the picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops.'[24] However, women did participate in large numbers during the Satyagraha, and also ended up as political prisoners. But the participation remained largely restricted to middle-class, upper caste, urban women, with only occasional participation on the part of rural women.

With all his emphasis on women's emancipation and equal rights, however, Gandhi never realized that women's oppression is grounded in economic exploitation, and his vision with respect to women's economic freedom was limited. To quote from Kishwar:

Even the fact that in rural India women among the agricultural labourers and small peasants are equally, if not more, involved in the production process could not shake Gandhi's belief that the women might 'supplement the meager resources of the family, but man remains the main bread-winner.' This he saw as 'the most natural division of spheres of work.' The duty of motherhood was seen as requiring qualities which men need not possess. 'She is passive, he is active…' In his opinion, it was 'degrading both for men and women that women should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth… Thus he saw male and female in terms of the 'active-passive' complimentary which has been an important ideological device for denying women any chance to acquire power and decision-making ability in the family and in society. The unjust domination of woman by man that Gandhi thought he op-posed is something inherent in the very role relationship that he envisaged for her—that of being a 'complement' to man.'[25]

Such a position on Gandhi's part with respect to the woman question has led Rumina Sethi to guess that perhaps 'the involvement of women in the nationalist struggle was a strategic tactic, one not intended to empower them at all.' Indeed, to conceive of woman as a paragon of wifely/motherly virtue and love, idealizing her as a symbol of suffering, and highlighting her passive aspect, all point to a rather ambivalent picture. The question remains: what exactly does Gandhi want women to contribute to the society? Drawing on Karuna Chanana Ahmad, Sethi seems to

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[23] Kishwar, p. 1696.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., pp. 1699-1700.

offer a possible solution.[26] According to Gandhi, women are largely of three different kinds, and their roles should ideally vary according to their nature. First, there were women known to Gandhi whom he asked to concentrate primarily on their domestic duties, and not to shun them for the sake of the nation. Secondly, there were other women whom he expected to voluntarily relinquish their familial pleasures, practice celibacy within the space of a married life, and work for the nation. Vijaylakshmi Pandit's is a case in point. The third group consisted of women who had committed themselves completely to the cause of the nation, and were expected to maintain strict codes of asceticism. In this context, Sethi names the Kripanis, for whom marriage was forbidden. For the first two kinds of women, therefore the lesson is one of *karmasannyasa*; for the third, it is *lokasangraha*, with complete emphasis on *sannyasa*. This is against the prescription of the *Gita*.

The analysis of Gandhi's position was motivated by the sole purpose of relocating Bharati's character in this new framework. As we can understand, she belongs somewhere between the second and the third groups.

As already stated at the outset of this chapter, Bharati is the perfect *karmasannyasin* in this novel, and the Gandhian ideals of *ahimsa*, self-control, and non-violence are best exemplified in her. Most importantly, it is because of her unwavering loyalty towards Gandhi and his movement, the entire story takes shape. Introduced initially as a beautiful girl by whom Sriram is enamoured, the reader's expectation of her being a romantic heroine is soon subverted. She turns out to be a person committed to the service of her people, and prioritizes her ideals over her personal life. Her very name 'Bharati' makes her a daughter of the entire nation (Bharat), and we are told that her father was shot dead by the British and she was taken care of by the Mahatma. Therefore, penchant for service to the nation is a *svabhavaja* quality embedded in her. She is ever cautious about all the minute details of her work, never utters a falsehood, and is straightforward while interacting with people. At one point, she even answers back to the Mahatma. The conversation is as follows:

> The Mahatma said, "Well, there will be a time soon when he will give you a hundred count. Don't be too proud, little daughter."
>
> "I'm not," Bharati said, "I'm merely mentioning the facts."[27]

When the novel begins, she is already in an advanced stage of her self-discipline. Gandhi has full faith in her capability and he considers her to be the appropriate *guru* for Sriram. She is a constant companion of Gandhi in his long tours across villages, and is ever ready to sacrifice herself at his command. The only ideal *guru-shishya* relationship in the novel is between Gandhi and Bharati, and Bharati hands herself over to the police without a

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[26] Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: Natinal Identity and Literary Representation*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 134.

[27] Ibid., p. 90.

second thought once Gandhi instructs her to do so. Even in jail, when Gandhi is not physically present before her, she remembers his lesson of abstinence for subterfuge under any circumstance, and refuses to meet Sriram who had come to meet secretly with her. However, she does not forget her responsibility towards Sriram and lets him know of his grandmother's ailment, and asks him to go and see the latter.

Unlike the revolutionary Jagadish who had stumbled on upon the Independence day celebrations and managed to take photographs of himself displaying them proudly to Sriram, Bharati, on having been released from jail, is said to have 'immediately' taken the train to Noakhali in order to be a part of Gandhi's peace mission in the riot-ridden areas.[28] This is a prime example of *nishkama karma*.

However, her role of *lokasangraha* is perhaps best played not in connection to the nationalist movement *per se*, but with respect to her role as a loving mother to the orphaned children. The true spirit of *lokasangraha* is to be found in the following words of Bharati:

> … we don't know anything about them. If their parents are alive, they will know they are here… otherwise we will bring them up. We have collected toys and clothes for them. Don't ask whether they are Muslim children or Hindu children or who they are… We have given them only the names of flowers and birds… These children must grow up only as human beings.[29]

It is clear that even after her marriage to Sriram she will perhaps not give birth to her own child, but keep looking after those whom she had already adopted. The Mahatma hints at this future when he says:

> You already have a home with thirty children. May you be their father and mother![30]

Thus Bharati is going to remain a *sannyasini* in character even after her marriage. Bharati's predicament seems to come close to that of the Master in *A Tiger for Malgudi*, with the exception that while the Master shunned his *karma* once independence was achieved and restricted his act of *lokasangraha* to the emancipation of only one creature (Raja), Bharati's *sannyasa* is more symbolic and she continues with her act of *lokasangraha*.

Sriram: A Foil

Contrary to Bharati, Sriram's activity throughout the novel proves his frivolousness and indecision. Unlike Bharati, who works for the nation out of genuine love for her countrymen, Sriram's very act of social service is motivated by a selfish desire to win over Bharati, and cannot be called *lokasangraha*. Had Bharati not forbidden him to utter

[28] Ibid., p. 219.

[29] Ibid., p. 233.

[30] Ibid., p. 240.

falsehood in front of the Mahatma, he would have veiled his real intention under the clichéd claim of service to the nation in order to impress Gandhi. However, Bharati's instruction forced him to utter the truth: "I like to be where Bharati is."[31] Again, at the end when Gandhi asks him to explain what motivated him to quit the Gandhian way and adopt the revolutionary mode of protest, Sriram's reply is naïve, which draws a sarcastic comment from the Mahatma:

> "Bharati went away to jail, and there was no one who could tell me what to do; no one who could show me the right way."
>
> "That is an excellent confession," Mahatmaji said with a smile, "Yes, the mistake was hers in leaving you behind."[32]

Sriram does not have control over his senses. He is also evasive in most matters. For instance, when the Mahatma sends him to fetch permission from his grandmother to join the movement, he goes home but his conversation with his grandmother never comes to a conclusive end. And when he finally leaves his home without Granny's consent, he is not really contented about his decision. The following passage brings out his half-heartedness:

> He suddenly felt depressed at the sight of it all. He was oppressed with the thought that he was leaving these old associations, that this was a farewell party. He was going into an unknown life right from here. God knew what was in store for him. He felt very gloomy at the thought of it all.[33]

His failure to conquer his instincts is also revealed when he forcefully embraces Bharati and tries to overwhelm her at a later point in the novel. Narayan writes that it 'was an assault conducted without any premeditation' and he held Bharati 'in an iron embrace in his madness.'[34] This is nothing but an outburst to break free from the clutches of imposed *sannyasa* on him.

Page after page in the novel testify to the fact that he is not wholeheartedly devoted to Gandhi's mission. In his brief meeting with Gorpad, the latter talks to him and tries to enlighten him about the nature of *satyagraha*, but ironically, all efforts are wasted because 'by 'diligently listening to Gorpad', Sriram ends up learning only a few 'political idioms, and felt himself equipped to walk with the Mahatma without embarrassment.'[35]

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[31] Ibid., p. 63.

[32] Ibid., p. 239.

[33] Ibid., p. 76.

[34] Ibid., pp. 122.

[35] Ibid., p. 69.

He is not even prepared to accept instruction from Bharati, whom he considers to be his equal, and therefore, not fit to be a *guru*. Narayan writes that he 'took time to digest the sentence' when Gandhi said: "Remember that she is your *guru*."[36] His romantic infatuation for Bharati intrudes on his role as a *shishya* of Bharati. Taking a step further, we may argue that Sriram's mental oppression as recorded in the passage quoted above can be thought of as a parallel to Arjuna's despondency in the *Gita*. Unfortunately, while Arjuna surmounts his mental dilemma with the help of his friend whom he now recognizes as his preceptor, Sriram's ego does not allow him to consider Bharati as superior to himself, and he remains a vain man.

Two or three events from Sriram's tenure as a Gandhian *satyagrahi* reveal how pathetic and silly he is at his work. For instance, while painting 'Quit India' on walls, he is moved by a most trivial thought that the letter 'Q' 'consumed a lot of black paint', and he 'wondered, if, for economy's sake, he could manage without drawing its tail.'[37] One of the funniest and most satirical scenes in the novel is Sriram's conversation with Mr. Mathieson (popularly called *Dorai*), which reveals the former's immaturity. When Mr. Mathieson asks him why the British should quit India, Sriram's funny reply is: "I'm not saying. I'm merely giving you the message."[38] Once again, in reply to Mr. Mathieson's question as to whether Indians have not lost the opportunity to rule their own country by having foolishly turned down Cripps's offer, Sriram can only say: "Mahatmaji does not think so." Narayan adds that the question 'seemed to him a technical point with which he was not concerned.'[39] Equally pointless was the entire act of barring customers from buying anything from a shop, which supposedly had foreign biscuits. Sriram even goes to the extent of lying down on the ground in order to prevent people from entering the shop. He realizes that he was making himself a laughing stock only at a later point when people lost interest in his actions and their attention got diverted towards a boy who was climbing a tree. The high drama exceeds twelve pages with no fruitful outcome. At one point he decides to write a letter to the Mahatma mentioning how people were not concerned with his ideals, but finally gives up the idea to write one. [40] There is no soul-searching in Sriram. Otherwise he would have realized that he had been unable to motivate and mobilize the crowd around him, because he himself was concerned with petty matters instead of larger issues.

His refusal to obey Gandhi's command of handing himself over to the police is motivated by his aversion towards the hardships in jail. He was expecting the Mahatma's permission to marry Bharati but when instead of that the message was a command to hand himself over to the police, he was heartbroken. This proves that he prioritizes his

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[36] Ibid., p. 86.

[37] Ibid., p. 95.

[38] Ibid., p. 103.

[39] Ibid., p. 76.

[40] Ibid., pp. 106-118.

own comfort over collective well-being. This is all the more prominent when he says to Bharati that he would report to the police 'readily' on condition that they would keep the two in the 'same prison, preferably in the same cell.'[41] When he learns that this is not possible, he refuses to obey, but does not have the guts to speak the truth and veils his fear under the false pretext of meeting his grandmother once before reporting to the police:

> I am only thinking of my grandmother. I want to see her before I am finally jailed… She is very old, you know. I will surrender myself after I have seen her once. I must manage to see her.[42]

However, very soon we realize that he is not the least concerned about his grandmother, and it is Bharati who informs him of her failing health, thus heightening the irony.

The conversation between Bharati and Sriram before Bharati reports to the police is full of ironies. When Sriram urges Bharati to defy the Mahatma's command, Bharati asks: "How can we do anything other than what Bapuji asks us to do?"[43] But Sriram has a different explanation:

> I have a lot of other things to do outside… Bapu has given everyone freedom to carry on the *Satyagraha* in his own manner.[44]

Gandhi's command at the beginning of Sriram's journey was clear and precise. There was a specific method to follow, the primary demand was unwavering commitment, and there was no provision for volition once one was initiated into the group. Sriram's reply proves that he is fickle-minded and unsteady.

It is understandable that after having refused to obey Gandhi's command, Sriram was experiencing a guilty conscience, from which he frees himself when he encounters the revolutionary Jagadish who says something that matches with the excuse given to Bharati:

> In this matter we all judge and act individually. Those who cannot follow Mahatmaji's orders are free to act as they think best.[45]

Narayan describes Sriram's reaction to the above statement as follows:

> "How right you are!" Sriram cried, feeling he had blundered into the right set.[46]

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[41] Ibid., p. 128.

[42] Ibid., p. 130.

[43] Ibid., p. 128.

[44] Ibid., p. 129.

[45] Ibid., p. 136.

The idol of the 'god with the eyeless sockets' inside the hut where Sriram lives, is nothing but a trope of his own inner blindness. And the ironic statement that this eyeless god 'saw a great deal of Jagadish' reveals that Sriram's admiration for Jagadish's personality is also an imperfect one. We soon read that 'Sriram felt afraid to oppose him', and he was momentarily jealous, when the completely absurd thought of a possibility of Bharati having considered to marry Jagadish, flashed upon his mind.[47] A *guru-shishya* relationship is never fruitful if it is contingent on fear and has a clash of egos involved. Moreover, at one point, Sriram resents Jagadish's dominance over him:

> He wondered, "Why should I let this fellow order me about, when he does nothing but stand around and instruct?" Probably it would have been more pleasant to have gone to jail.[48]

Moreover, Sriram's motivation for revolutionary work is not his inner conscience but some futile praises from Jagadish. Narayan writes:

> He found he had become a blind slave of Jagadish, and a word of encouragement from him pleased him to the depths of his soul. He felt proud of his position… The only reward he got was Jagadish's "Very good! Excellent job…"[49]

Soon it is revealed that even Jagadish is not the perfect revolutionary. When the radio goes awry and Sriram fails to note down the most important part of Netaji's message, Jagadish completes it with the help of his guess.[50] This proves that he is as much given to wild guesses as Sriram himself is. From the above, we can say that the relation between the two is just the opposite of that which exists between Gandhi and Bharati.

Even his term in jail apparently does not bring any transformation in him. Now he laments his decision to stay back when Bharati reported to the police not because of his conviction and faith in the Gandhian way, but because then the administration 'would probably have treated him as an honourable political prisoner.'[51] At one point, he regrets his association with Jagadish:

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., p. 137.

[48] Ibid., p. 139.

[49] Ibid., p. 139.

[50] Ibid., p. 145.

[51] Ibid., p. 181.

> But for Jagadish he would not have done things he wouldn't wish to enumerate before any decent person now. If it had not been for Jagadish he would probably have gone on living in his ruined temple until the police forgot him. And then he might have been worthy of associating with Bharati.[52]

Throughout his tenure as a prisoner, he regrets the absence of physical comfort, and the thought that is most prominent in his mind is about Bharati's whereabouts and not the lot of his countrymen. And even with respect to Bharati, his thought is a bizarre one:

> His only consoling thought, perversely enough, was that perhaps Bharati herself was languishing similarly within the bounds of the Old Slaughter house. It was not that he wanted her to suffer, but the idea of her suffering established a community of interest.[53]

Another important trait in his character is his hankering after food. Even when his grandmother is supposedly dead, he keeps saying to Kanni that he is hungry, and remains almost nonchalant about the bereavement. This makes him a *rajasika* character with some *sattvika* elements (e.g., vegetarianism). Moreover, we find that his love for his country, however insignificant compared to his self-interests, is genuine. Inside the jail, he defends the *satyagrahi*s during a heated conversation, and he was genuinely proud to hear that the British were quitting India. He fails to live up to the Mahatma's expectations, but we never see him being disrespectful towards the latter.He could have become an ideal *karmasannyasin* with a little bit of *abhyasa*, but his fickle-mindedness ruined the possibility. His apathy and indecision imply that he has a strong *tamasika* element in him as well. It seems that the *tamasika* quality finally tiumphs over the other two in his character.

V. T. Patil and H. V. Patil are of the opinion that Sriram's situation is a trope for the predicament of the entire nation. To quote:

> The age-long somnolence of Sriram is that of the country as a whole. Most of the people were too poor and illiterate to have any consciousness of political independence… they had become fatalists… They had no nationalist ideology, to which they could be loyal. Their loyalty to their kings, over-lords or even religion was often a matter of convenience and material consideration…[54]

Before winding up, we may mention in passing Gorpad, the only character in *Waiting for the Mahatma* other than Bharati, who can be called a true *satyagrahi*. His appearance in the novel is brief, but a noble one. His father was

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[52] Ibid., p. 189.

[53] Ibid., p. 196.

[54] Patil and Patil, *Gandhism and Indian English Fiction: The Sword and the Sickle, Kanthapura, and Waiting for the Mahatma*, Delhi: Devika Publications, 1997, p. 88.

shot dead by the British police, but he never thinks of any violent means to retaliate. He has no resentment in accepting physical hardships for the sake of his country. He welcomes Sriram when the latter is accommodated into his hut, does not feel disturbed, and enlightens Sriram about the nature of *satyagraha*.[55]

It would probably be appropriate to wind up this section by citing Meenakshi Mukherjee's nice comparison between *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Raja Rao's novel, *Kanthapura*. Both are novels with plots set in the background of the Gandhian movement, but they differ widely in spirit, tone and focus. Mukherjee writes:

> *Waiting for the Mahatma* is a novel about the limited individual's growth and maturity, while *Kanthapura* is the history of a revolution where the different characters are not important as individuals but as parts of a greater whole… The hope is collective while the loss has been individual [in *Kanthapura*]. On the other hand, at the end of *Waiting for the Mahatma* there is a loss at the national level in the death of Gandhi, but there is a sense of fulfillment in Sriram's personal life.[56]

The Vendor of Sweets

In comparison to *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the analysis of *The Vendor of Sweets* would be brief, owing to two reasons. First of all, the emphasis of this novel is elsewhere, in generational conflict. At one level, it is a story of a complicated father-son relationship, and at another level, it is about conflict between traditional values and modernity. At yet another level, the story is about East-West encounter. This chapter would focus only on the '*lokasangraha*' element in the novel. Secondly, this novel has only one professed Gandhian, Jagan, and he appears to be a blend of true and false shades of Gandhian ideals. He is not pitted against any 'perfect' Gandhian as was the case with Sriram in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Jagan comes into conflict with his son Mali who rebels against traditional (and Gandhian) values, e.g., vegetarianism, marriage and more, but he never encounters another Gandhian who seems to be a better follower of the Mahatma. It must also be noted that at the first glance, there is little difference in Jagan's post-independence life and Bharati's. Both Jagan and Bharati play their roles in the movement with genuine dedication, and once the movement is over, tie the marital knot. But while it is hinted that Bharati, even after her marriage with Sriram, is going to stick to celibacy, the existence of Jagan's son Mali bears testimony to Jagan's estrangement from the path.

The imperfectness in Jagan's understanding of Gandhian ideals is revealed in the very first paragraph of the novel:

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[55] Ibid., pp. 66-69.

[56] *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*, New Delhi, London: Heinemann, 1971, p. 43.

> "Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self," said Jagan to his listener, who asked, "Why conquer the self?" Jagan said, "I do not know, but all our sages advise us so.[57]

Thus, Jagan lacks a basic understanding of the purpose of the message of Gandhi/*Gita*. Jagan's dedication to the Gandhian ideals is thus flawed at its very root. Narayan describes in great detail Jagan's daily routine which is certainly governed by passionate adherence to certain Gandhian ideals, but ironically, he is seen to *unconsciously* fuse some of his superstitious and pseudo-scientific beliefs with the teachings of the Mahatma. Narayan writes:

> It was impossible to disentangle the sources of his theories and say what he owed to Mahatmaji and how much he had imbibed from his father… Even after the advent of nylon bristles Jagan never changed his views, maintaining that nylon had an adverse effect on the enamel.[58]

His conviction in his beliefs is reported to take extreme form, as he stops his wife from taking aspirin.[59] Jagan's false conviction and wanton interpretation of Gandhian ideals is most completely brought out in the passage where he draws a lot of false complacence by interpreting Mali's decision to become a writer as an expression of 'service' to people. The passage reads:

> "Instead of reading other people's books, he is providing reading for others," he often reflected with a lot of pride. "He is doing a service in his own way." When he remembered the word "service", any activity became touched with significance. "Service" intoxicated him, sent a thrill through his whole being, and explained everything. The first time he heard the word was in 1937 when Mahatma Gandhi had visited Malgudi and addressed a vast gathering on the sands of the river. He spoke of "service", explaining how every human action acquired a meaning when it was performed as a service. Inspired by this definition, Jagan joined the movement for freeing India from foreign rule, gave up his studies, home and normal life, and violated the British laws of the time. Neither the beatings from the police nor the successive periods of prison terms ever touched him when he remembered that he was performing a "service". "Everyone should be free to serve humanity in his own way", he told himself, and, "Mali is really helping mankind with his writing. /what does he really write?" he often wondered.[60]

The above passage is a splendid specimen of the stream of consciousness technique. Jagan starts by thinking about Mali's choice of career, but the word 'service' takes his thoughts back to his younger days. The readers

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[57] *The Vendor of Sweets*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2009 rprnt, p. 7.

[58] Ibid., p. 20.

[59] Ibid., p. 21.

[60] *The Vendor of Sweets*, pp. 41-2.

are briefly told about Jagan's participation in the freedom movement. Then Jagan's thoughts return to his present and primary concern, which is Mali's decision to become a writer. The funny part is that Jagan is not aware of the nature and content of Mali's writings, and therefore, his thought that Mali is doing a 'service' by writing, is pure fancy which he relishes. In fact, Jagan's thought that Mali by writing books is going to serve the nation and its people in his 'own way' seems to be a perfect echo of Sriram's words in *Waiting for the Mahatma*:

> Bapu has given everyone freedom to carry on the *Satyagraha* in his own manner.[61]

In short, Jagan is a misguided Gandhian. Jagan's thoughts and dreams are entirely focused on Mali. He is a blindly affectionate towards Mali, oblivious to the latter's faults, and also has too low a self-esteem to even stand up to Mali's wrongs. Mali exploits him for money but ironically Jagan receives a rare satisfaction from it, as he interprets Mali's actions as proof of the latter's maturity. Therefore, Jagan is certainly not an ideal *karmayogin*, and his idea of 'service' is flawed too. Towards the end of chapter three, when Jagan's unnamed cousin asks him the reason behind his making money in spite of his lip service to Gandhian ideals, his response is noteworthy. The passage reads as follows:

> "I do not accumulate it, it just grows naturally," said Jagan. "What can I do? Moreover, I work, because it's one's duty to work." He pulled the drawer, took out his Bhagavad Gita, and read from it. "You see, it's my duty to go on doing something. Moreover"- he raised his voice- "that man, and the other one, and the one here, it supports them. What would our head cook do if it weren't for this establishment?"[62]

Jagan falsely thinks that he is doing a service to his employees (and also to his customers) by running his sweetshop. He is full of pride for his achievement, and an easy prey to flattery. These are blemishes which an ideal Gandhian (or a *karmayogin*) should shun. Going by Jagan's flawed perception of himself as a follower of the ideal of '*lokasangraha*', it is no surprise that his son Mali would think that by starting his business of story-writing machines, he is doing a service to Indian literature.[63] Ironically, Jagan finds the idea absurd.

While it is true that Mali represents a Westernized, rebellious sensibility in contrast to his father and Narayan's sympathy on the whole lies with Jagan, it is important to note that Jagan is propelled to true 'service' for at least once in his life by his son Mali. His refusal to part with any money for Mali's grand scheme rivets taunts about his profession and money-making habit from the latter, and he reduces the prices of his sweets.[64] In any case, this was

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[61] *Waiting for the Mahatma*, p. 129.

[62] Ibid., p. 40.

[63] Ibid., pp. 76-8.

[64] Ibid., pp. 94 ff.

an abrupt decision. It is certainly doubtful if Jagan could have maintained this stance for a little longer. The focus shifts to his meeting with Chinna Dorai and then to his distress on knowing that Grace and Mali are not wedded to each other but in a live-in relationship. Thus, the sudden flash of the idea of true service takes an inconclusive course. The readers are not said anything about how long Jagan persisted with his decision about the prices, and whether he gave any instructions to his cousin before his final retreat, though he asks him to continue running the shop. That he does not give up his worldly ties altogether is evident from his act of carrying his cheque book with him. He fulfills his services both as a responsible father and a father-in-law respectively by extending financial support to free Mali from jail and by offering to help Grace get back to her own country. But this is certainly not '*lokasangraha*' because the very idea of '*lokasangraha*' is built on non-attachment. There have been many interpretations of Jagan's final act, but Ranga Rao's seems to be the most meaningful. Rao argues that Jagan is going to *vanaprastha* and *not sannyasa* when he is leaving for his retreat, and therefore, he is *not* expected to severe all his worldly ties at this stage.[65] Be that as it may, a close study of Jagan reveals that he is presented in a satiric light, and he too is a flawed Gandhian in many respects.

Waiting for the Mahatma is yet more evidence which testifies to Narayan's subscription to the doctrine of *Karma* and its resultant doctrines of *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha*. A fine specimen of the Gandhian interpretation of these doctrines in a nationalist context, it is a typical blend of fiction and philosophy. Very much like *A Bachelor of Arts*, this novel, too, is focused on a protagonist who is a foil to the true ideals he wants to profess. However, the difference is that here we find three characters who balance him by their own faith and commitment in the same ideals. On the other hand, *The Vendor of Sweets* presents a character who is not a simple parody of the ideal Gandhian. Jagan *is* a true Gandhian who had strayed from his path after Indian Independence to some extent, but his transformation is not as extreme as that of Vasu in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. Vasu, as discussed in the second chapter, undergoes an existential rebirth as an outright *asur*ic figure, while Jagan inwardly retains the *sattvika* and *daivi* qualities, even as he lends himself to business and moneymaking. Vasu is cruel and completely given to his senses, and goes to the length of demeaning moral values, gods and the sacred institution of marriage. In contrast, Jagan is a married man who never takes a second wife after the demise of the first, is well-disposed towards others, believes in non-violence and leads a simple life based on Gandhian ideals. His only weakness is his blind love for his son, but finally he realizes this folly, and rises above his bias, and takes a detached view.

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[65] *R. K. Narayan: The Novelist and His Art*, New Delhi: OUP, 2017, p. 203.

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages an attempt has been made to analyze Narayan's ethical vision vis-à-vis three concepts laid down in the *Gita*: *karma*, *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha*. The main focus in the foregoing pages has been on Narayan's art of characterization, though occasionally issues such as point of view and plot construction were taken into consideration. The plan was charted out in the very introductory chapter, and a separate chapter was also reserved for a survey of the evolution of the *karma* doctrine. Enough has already been argued in defense of the approach of the current research in the chapters themselves. Here it would perhaps suffice to quote a passage from Chitra Sankaran. Defending her analysis of *Mr. Sampath* with reference to the concept of *bhumika* in the *Yogavasishtha* (to which reference was made in the second chapter), Sankaran writes:

> This would not necessarily mean that we are attempting to impose the pattern of *Yogavasishtha* on the novel. It is important to realize that many of these ideas and thoughts which have been originally set down in specific texts have been absorbed by the people over the centuries so that most of them would be able to follow the stages of the spiritual odyssey without any knowledge of the textual sources. Very often in Narayan's unobtrusive art can be traced a complex spectrum of ideas difficult to isolate, for it is difficult to describe the faith of a people who live by a complex code, where the beliefs have no definitive quality. Therefore, quite often, in order to trace an idea submerged in a society, it becomes necessary to resort to some original text where the idea is clearly delineated.[1]

A similar attempt has been undertaken in the thesis. The present writer is of the opinion that the ethical worldview one encounters in Narayan's fiction is best explained with reference to the *Gita*, but *does not* rule out an alternative approach to Narayan's novels or even his ethical vision. In this context, the present writer would like to reiterate an assertion made in the introductory chapter. Citing Ashish Nandy, A. N. Kaul and T. Vijay Kumar, it was argued that Narayan's Malgudi presents a blend of East and West, and the conflict between the two is not overt and central to the plot. It was also shown that the very doctrines of *karma*, *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha* were reinterpreted under the influences of Western scholarship in the 19th century, and therefore, the meanings that they carried thenceforth, betrayed a clear blend of East and West. Thus, it is accepted at the very outset of this research that it would be wrong to dub Narayan as a pure traditionalist. In

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[1] Sankaran, *Myth Connections: The Use of Hindu Myths and Philosophies in R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 1995, p. 163.

fact, the present writer agrees with Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin that 'it is impossible to return to an idealized pure pre-colonial cultural condition' as the "reconstruction of 'pure' cultural value is always conducted within a radically altered dynamic of power relations."[2] Therefore, the present writer does not aim to throw overboard the researches which seek to approach Narayan through the lens of Western narrative theory, postcolonial criticism, deconstruction or ancient Indian aesthetics.

Similarly, the present writer is *not* oblivious of the importance of the more formal aspects of the novel. But the focus on characterization could not be helped for several reasons. To begin with, character is certainly a very significant element in fiction in general. E. M. Forster points out that while Aristotle's famous proclamation that it is action which is the main concern of drama and characters are introduced to illuminate the action holds good for drama, character has a far more important role to play in novels. Forster argues that the link that exists between the novelist and his characters is one of identity:

> Since the novelist is himself a human being, there is an affinity between him and his subject matter which is absent in many other forms of art… The novelist, unlike many of his colleagues, makes up a number of word-masses roughly describing himself, gives them names and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas, and perhaps to behave consistently… their nature is conditioned by what he guesses about other people, and about himself, and is further modified by the other aspects of his work.[3]

Forster goes on to distinguish between 'flat' and 'round' characters in a novel. By 'flat' characters, he means 'types' or 'caricatures', and refers to the 'humours' of Jacobean drama.[4] Such a character, Forster explains, is 'constructed round a single idea or quality' and 'can be expressed in one sentence'.[5] In contrast, 'round' characters are full of contradictions and surprises. Forster admits that

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[2] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, London, New York: Routledge, 2005 rprnt, pp. 108-9.

[3] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, New York: Rosettabooks LLC, 2002, pp. 33-4.

[4] Ibid., p. 48.

[5] Ibid.

‘flat people are not in themselves as big achievements as round ones,’[6] but makes a startling concession:

> The case of Dickens is significant. Dickens’ people are nearly all flat… Nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth… He is actually one of our big writers, and his immense success with types suggests that there may be more in flatness than the severer critics admit.[7]

The above take by Forster is important for any serious reader of Narayan. Narayan’s characters are mostly ‘flat’. At this point, mention may once again be made of Ranga Rao’s reading of Narayan’s novels as “Gunas Comedy”, and his classification of Narayan’s protagonists into *sattvika* and *rajasika*. In this context, one can also mention V. S. Naipaul’s opinion that Narayan’s world is Hindu and John Thieme’s thesis that what Narayan recreates is a Tamil Brahmin world. Thus, Forster’s assertion that the author is creating himself in his novels seems to be all the more true of Narayan, who is constantly creating a world of which he himself is a part, not just because he is human, but because of the fact that his characters share with him the same caste affiliation, financial affluence and social status, and often the same level of education (all are literate and mostly graduate). It is only in some rare cases that we encounter figures like Ponni, the lower caste lady in *The Dark Room*. Gaffur, the Muslim taxi driver, who appears in several novels, is a very minor figure at best.

Secondly, character becomes an important means when an author is intent on upholding a specific worldview or ideology. It is through the action, choices and dialogue of the characters that the author’s inclinations make their presence felt. Narayan is no exception, and his sympathy towards Hindu ethics is reflected through his characters. Pushp Lata identifies the following powers and weaknesses in Narayan:

> He certainly lacks the psychological richness of Tagore, imaginative and passionate profundities of Raja Rao and verbal exuberance of Mulk Raj Anand and Anita Desai. In fact like traditional writers Narayan’s works are mostly didactic and descriptive in nature [and] not analytical. He nowhere seems to be interested in exploring the deeper sensibilities and deeper possibilities of language. Words or phrases in

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[6] Ibid., p. 52.

[7] Ibid., p. 51.

his writings rarely glint with comprehension and suggested meanings. But critics often feel Narayan's weakness is perhaps the strength of his novels which makes his characters and situations interesting.[8]

It is certainly true that Narayan's focus is on the story, and he does not experiment, at least not consciously, with language or plot. Lata, however, is unjustified in two points. First of all, Narayan is *not* didactic. In the introductory chapter Makarand Paranjape's opinion of Narayan being a 'non-assertive traditionalist' was referred to. But Lata's remark can be qualified to a certain extent. She is correct in asserting that Narayan's work is reminiscent of traditional works, but while traditional works are *consciously* didactic, Narayan's are not so. It is also important to note that there is 'poetic justice' in most of Narayan's novels, barring only one or two. In the novels elucidated in the foregoing pages, perhaps it is only Sarasa in *Talkative Man* who suffers no fault of her own. But then *Talkative Man* is an incomplete work. By Narayan's own confession:

> I had planned *Talkative Man* as a full-length novel, and grandly titled it, "Novel No. 14". While it progressed satisfactorily enough, it would not grow beyond 116 typewritten sheets, where it just came to a halt, like a motor car out of petrol.[9]

Be it the demonic Vasu of *The Man-eater of Malgudi* or the trickster Raju in *The Guide* or the young lover Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* or the false Gandhian Sriram, nobody seems to undergo any 'undeserved misfortune' in the Aristotelian sense. There is no tragic character in Narayan's novels. This reinforces the claim about Narayan's belief in the doctrine of *karma*. It is especially because of the widespread belief in the doctrine of *karma* that tragedy did not flourish in ancient India as it did in Greece. To quote from George Steiner's now classic work:

> Tragedy is alien to the Judaic sense of the world… The demand for justice is the pride and burden of the Judaic tradition…Tragic drama arises out of precisely the contrary assertion: necessity is blind and man's encounter with it shall rob him of his eyes, whether it be in Thebes or in Gaza… Men's accounts with the gods do not balance.[10]

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[8] Pushp Lata, "Detachment and Objectivity in R. K. Narayan's Work" in Bhatnagar, M. K., *New Insights into the Novels of R. K. Narayan*, New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008 rprnt, p. 205.

[9] *Talkative Man*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2011 rprnt, p. 120.

[10] Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 4-6.

Steiner reads the Greek tradition of tragedy against the Judaic tradition, which is not our concern here. But what is important is that pitted against the Indian tradition, such a comparison yields some interesting results. First of all, both the Vedic and the Greek traditions are of Aryan/Indo-European origin. Yet, while Greek tradition developed a belief in fatalism, the Hindu tradition gradually evolved into a belief in the reciprocal relation between action and its fruits. This further evolved into a concept which emphasizes non-attachment in action as a key to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. This evolution of the concept is important from a literary-critical perspective too. While the Greek belief in fatalism gave rise to tragedy, the Hindu belief in *karma* gave rise to a completely different ilk of literature to which undeserved misfortune is unknown. For every case of injustice to a character in the course of a story, our ancient texts furnish a reason. The suffering is explained as a retribution for a past misdeed. Even the gods come *within* this rule. Therefore, much of our ancient literature takes a didactic turn, sometimes even against the author's intention. There seems to be an ardent responsibility on the poet's part to uphold the ideal *dharma* in front of the reader. What is important is that even the critical tradition not only endorses such moral guidance in literary texts, but emphasizes that it is one of the two main concerns of literature, the other being entertainment. In this context, mention may be made of only one of the many critical texts, Kuntaka's *Vakroktijivitam*. Kuntaka is of the opinion that a while the immediate effect of reading a literary text is entertainment, the exercise also serves as a means to acquire the four *purushartha*s beginning with *dharma* (*dharmaadisaadhanopaaya*) and as a means of practical social behavior (*vyavahaara*).[11] From this, it becomes obvious that the main concern of the text would be character. Perhaps the most important text which fully lives up to this expectation is the *Ramayana*. It is certainly a classic piece of literature, and by common consent, an ideal *kavya*, but the intention of the poet, by his own testimony, is to depict an ideal character. In the very beginning verses of the *Ramayana*, Valmiki enquires Narada of an ideal character:

> Who is there in the world to-day, endowed with excellent and heroic qualities, who is versed in all the duties of life, grateful, truthful, firm in his vows, an actor of many parts, benevolent to all beings, learned, eloquent, handsome, patient, slow to anger, one who is truly great; who is free from envy and when

[11] *Vakroktijivitam*, I. 3-4.

excited to wrath can strike terror into the hearts of celestial beings? O Sage, I would hear of such a man from thee, who art able to describe him to me.[12]

The present writer is deliberately refraining from mentioning the *Mahabharata* in this context, because though the *Mahabharata* is also highly didactic and intends to uphold the true sense of *dharma*, and also has a good many characters whose emulation it deems necessary, it describes itself not as a *kavya* but as *itihasa*, and narrates the story of a clan or a nation rather than that of a single protagonist. In contrast, the *Ramayana* is largely a one man show, and has a better unity of action. Thus, the *Ramayana* comes closer to Narayan's novels, where the concern is mostly the protagonist. Even in a novel like *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the focus is on the love story of Sriram and not on the Nationalist movement *per se*. Also, going by Forster's terminology, most of the *Mahabharata* characters are 'round' while the protagonist of the *Ramayana* is 'flat'.

Thus it can be argued that character becomes an important aspect for any study of Narayan whether he is approached from an angle of Western critical theory or from the standpoint of Indian aesthetics. However, it must also be accepted that in Narayan one encounters a certain degree of detachment on the part of the author. When the narrative in the first person, then one can sense that the point of view of the narrator is different from that of the author. This was discussed to some extent while evaluating the character of Rosie in the fourth chapter. The same applies to the three first person novels: *The English Teacher*, *The Man-eater of Malgudi* and *Talkative Man*. In each case, there are subtle ironies which the reader is made aware of, but the narrator himself does not respond to them in the same way as the reader thus. This can be elucidated with an example. The episode in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* which Vasu virtually abducts Nataraj may be taken as a case in point. In this episode, what Nataraj experiences as a sudden misfortune not apprehended by him beforehand, appears as nothing more than a repercussion of Nataraj's stupidity and spinelessness to the reader. In case of the novels where the narration is taken up by the omniscient narrator, the disjoint between the author and the character is even more pronounced. This point has already been analyzed in detail while dealing with the protagonists of the novels, but here we may cite a passage from Meenakshi Mukherjee's lovely comparison between *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*:

[12] Haraprasad Shastri, *The Ramayana of Valmiki: A Complete Modern English Translation*, London: Shanti Sadan, p. 3.

…whereas Raja Rao seems to obliterate zny implied intellectual difference between creator and created, Narayan stands apart from Sriram in mildly ironic detachment… Raja Rao's strength lies in the strength of his conviction; he aims at rendering his conviction about Gandhian ideology into art. Narayan has no such ambition; he merely studies an ordinary young man's reactions to an issue much larger than the young man's comprehension.[13]

Just like any postcolonial writer, Narayan, it may be repeated, is located neither fully in the Indian literary canon nor fully in the canon of English writings. He represents the blend of both and therefore either theoretical canon is helpful for an analysis of his works, but for a complete understanding, it is *possibly* better to identify him as being more sympathetic towards the indigenous tradition, which does not end with Narayan's favourable presentation of Indian ethics and sympathetic treatment of traditional characters in his works. Even with respect to artistic creation and expression, he seems to be on the orthodox side. In this context, we may take a brief look at his novel, *The Vendor of Sweets*. There was no scope in the fifth chapter of the present work to elaborate on the interesting debate regarding artistic expression that *The Vendor of Sweets* presents, but it can be mentioned here. Jagan and Mali represent the two sides of this debate. Mali is dissatisfied with the state of modern Indian literature and initially wants to travel to America to register for a creative writing course. Such a decision on his part irks Jagan who says:

"Going there to learn storytelling! He should rather go to a village granny,"… "Did Valmiki go to America or Germany in order to learn to write his *Ramayana*?"[14]

At a later point in the novel, when Mali returns to Malgudi and wants to start a factory of story-writing machines, this debate resurfaces but with a tinge of comic absurdity. Mali shows the machine in question to Jagan and explains how it works:

"You see these four knobs… One is for characters, one for plot situations, the other one is for climax, and the fourth is built on the basis that the story is made up of character, situations, emotion, and climax, and by the right combination…"[15]

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[13] Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*, New Delhi, London: Heinemann, 1971, p. 43.

[14] *The Vendor of Sweets*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2009 rprnt, p. 45.

[15] Ibid., p. 76.

Mali thinks that he is doing a service to India by manufacturing and selling these machines. He claims:

> Now we are a little backward. Except *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, those old stories, there is no modern writing, whereas in America alone every publishing season ten thousand books are published.

Jagan, however, protests such a scheme and reiterates the vitality of the ancient Indian canon:

> Grace, do you know that our ancestors never even wrote the epics? They composed the epics and recited them, and the great books lived thus from generation to generation in the breath of the people.[16]

Mali is dismissive of Jagan's insistence on the emulation of the ancients, but the author is certainly not being neutral here. His sympathy clearly lies with Jagan, though otherwise Jagan too is not a perfectly flawless man. Narayan certainly believes in divine inspiration and self-discipline as two necessary prerequisites for artistic creation. Mention has already been made of his comment likening writing to *Yoga* in the introduction. Another important piece which seems to bear stronger evidence in support of the assertion being made here, is the short story, "Under the Banyan Tree." In this story, the village storyteller Nambi is described as follows:

> He was illiterate, in the sense that the written word was a mystery to him; but he could make up a story, in his head, at the rate of one a month; each story took nearly ten days to narrate.[17]

Nambi attributes his strength to the goddess Shakti whose temple also serves as his residence. When all of a sudden one day he loses his creative power to compose more stories, he explains the reason to the villagers (and to himself) in the following words:

> Nambi is a dotard. He speaks when the Mother has anything to say. He is struck dumb when she has nothing to say… Goddess be thanked… These are my last words on this earth; and this is my greatest story.[18]

It hardly requires any guess that Nambi, modeled on the archetypal Indian storyteller, reflects Narayan's own point of view. Creativity, Narayan believes, is a matter of divine inspiration, and this belief places the spirit of his work firmly in line with those of the ancient Indian canonical texts.

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[16] Ibid., p. 78.

[17] *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2015 rprnt, p. 187.

[18] Ibid., p. 191.

However, the present writer would like to reiterate that this is only one aspect of Narayan's work. In his essay, "The Problem of the Indian Writer", Narayan himself has pointed out how the advent of the English language revolutionized the Indian literary scenario.[19] In the said essay, the author also discusses the practical conundrums that an Indian writer has to face, e.g., demand for books, budget management and more. Narayan was not oblivious to these socio-historical factors.

Finally, we come to one more point which has not yet been addressed so far in the previous chapters. The implicit assumption in the foregoing pages was that Narayan is an "Indian" author and a "Hindu", and inclined towards Hindu ethical doctrines. Again, in the analysis of the evolution of the doctrine of *karma*, it was shown that the *Gita* view gradually superseded others and gained popular. But what had not been taken into account was the fact that it is difficult to define "Indian" and "Hindu" and while the doctrine of *karma* is central to Hinduism, there are other aspects to it. Let us first take a look at the nomenclature "Indian" as it is used to describe "Indian Writings in English." In the classic essay, "The Anxiety of Indianness", Meenakshi Mukherjee makes an interesting observation. She writes:

> If I were to write a novel in Marathi, I would not be called an Indian writer in Marathi, but simply a Marathi novelist, the epithet Marathi referring only to the language, not conveying the larger burden of culture, tradition and civilization. No one would write a doctoral dissertation on the Indianness of my Marathi novel. But when it comes to English fiction originating in our country, not only does the issue of Indianness become a favourite essentializing obsession in academic writings and the book-review circuit, the writers themselves do not seem unaffected by it…[20]

Mukherjee goes on to argue that the urge to debate on the opposition between the 'Western' and 'Indian' as categories while speaking on Indian Writings in English arises from the deep psychological anxiety involved in the use of the English language, which was the language of the colonizer. Be that as it may, Mukherjee is of the opinion that the term 'Indian' is applied only to works written by Indian authors in English and not to those by the *bhasha* writers. In order to

[19] "The Problem of the Indian Writer" in R. K. Narayan, *The Writerly Life: Selected Non-Fiction*, ed. S. Krishnan, Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2002, pp. 457-63.

[20] "The Anxiety of Indianness" in Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 168.

substantiate her point, Mukherjee refers to the works of several major Indian English writers, and comments specifically on Narayan as follows:

> What is always emphasized is its 'Indianness', by which is meant a good-humoured inertia and a casual tolerance which almost any reader in the country is expected to recognize as familiar. Like other imaginary towns in literature we do not know the latitude and longitude of Malgudi, nor do we know its different languages, its ethnic or communal tensions. Whether a character is called Swamy or Sen, Krishnan or Pal, Daisy or Kamala, s/he belongs to a harmonious Malgudian milieu... Malgudi is Hindu upper-caste pan-India, resistant to change, eternal and immutable…[21]

Mukherjee, however, seems to be exaggerating to a certain extent. First of all, while there is no gainsaying of the fact that Malgudi is Hindu (and to a very large extent upper-caste), it is certainly not eternal and immutable. In the very introductory chapter we had referred to Narayan's own comment that outward changes do happen in Malgudi. Narayan, however, is of the opinion that while people may switch over to a 'transistor radio' from a 'temple piper', their inner qualities remain the same. After a thorough reading of the novels, we are compelled to admit, however, that the characters also change with time. To quote Krishna Sen's observation:

> But though Narayan (and Malgudi) do not welcome change for the sake of change- witness the fates of Vasu, the conscienceless votary of science in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, or Mali, the inventor of the novel-writing machine in *the Vendor of Sweets*- Malgudi does change. Indeed, it passes through very definite phases of 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow'. Along with its mythical heritage, and its association with history as indicated through the ancient sculptures that Marco of *The Guide* studies in the Mempi caves, it is emblematic also of the later history of India. This we see not only in its mix of cultures… but also in its rapidly evolving lifestyle, not always for the better… However, Malgudi experiences more than just physical change. The widespread social and political corruption that taints life in India after independence also stains a backwater like Malgudi. Margayya and Dr. Pal of *The Financial Expert* represent the lure of money and sex in contemporary Indian society… In a later novel, *The Painter of Signs*, Daisy… is single, with no plans for marriage… In advocating birth control, she subverts the traditional role of woman as mother…[22]

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[21] Ibid., pp. 170-71.

[22] Sen, "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow in the Fiction of R. K. Narayan" in Putatunda, Sarbani, ed., *R. K. Narayan: Critical Essays*, pp. 93-4.

In the current research, attempt has been made to argue that despite the ‘changes’ that Sen points out, the behavior of the characters can still be read with reference to the doctrine of *karma*. But that is not to say that Savitri of *The Dark Room* and Daisy of *The Painter of Signs* do not differ from each other. Daisy, by her refusal to marry and by her commitment towards her social cause is certainly a far cry from Savitri who is already married and who lives for her husband and children, and whose rebellion is short-lived. When Daisy refuses to marry Raman and when Savitri returns to her household, both of them are performing *karma* but the definition of *karma* is certainly different for each of these two women.

Another point where Mukherjee’s opinion seems to be a little stretched is her insistence on the ‘pan-Indian’ nature of Narayan’s Malgudi. There cannot be any debate that Malgudi bears a distinctly South Indian flavor. Narayan himself confesses this fact in his essay, “English in India”.[23] S. J. S. Xavier Alphonse’s incisive research shows that Narayan’s work is replete with references to distinctively South Indian customs and festivals, proverbs that are typical to Tamil and Kannada, and deities popular among and locally worshipped in South India.[24] In fact, Narayan himself was extremely disturbed and irked when the Bollywood film version of *The Guide* uprooted the story from its South Indian milieu and shifted it to Jaipur. Narayan ruefully registers in both his autobiography and in his essay, “Misguided ‘Guide’”, how he took this injustice personally.[25] Narayan was categorical in explaining to the filmmakers what he thought to be an indispensable feature of his work (though his words were not heeded):

> My story takes place in south India… It is south India in costume, tone and contents. Although the whole country is one, there are diversities, and one has to be faithful in delineating them. You have to stick to my geography and sociology. Although it is a world of fiction there are certain inner veracities.[26]

Thus, it seems that Narayan is as much rooted to his local milieu as to a pan-Indian heritage. Narayan strikes a fine balance not just between the West and the East and between the traditional

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[23] “English in India” in *The Writerly Life: Selected Non-Fiction*, pp. 464-68.

[24] Alphonse, *Kanthapura to Malgudi: Cultural Values and Assumptions in Selected South Indian Novelists in English*, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1997.

[25] *My Days: A Memoir*, New York: Picador, 1974, pp. 165-70; “Misguided ‘Guide’” in *The Writerly Life: Selected Non-Fiction*, pp. 487-99.

[26] “Misguided ‘Guide’” in *The Writerly Life: Selected Non-Fiction*, p. 491.

and the modern, but also between the local and the pan-Indian. By his conscious choice of the English language he is acting as a bridge between the pan-Indian reader and the Tamil life that he seeks to portray. The current research uses the doctrines of *karma*, *sannyasa* and *lokasangraha* to analyze his ethical vision, and these ideas had pan-Indian currency in the 19th and early 20th century. But this research also accepts that a dissertation that seeks to place Narayan's oeuvre within a specific Tamil canon and identify Tamil Saiva and Vaishnava doctrinal elements in it could also be equally valid. In fact, Alphonse has already identified a strong element of *bhakti* in Narayan's work.[27] Similarly, the present writer acknowledges that S. P. Ranchan and G. R. Kataria's psychoanalytic approach to man-woman relationship in Narayan's novels and their attempt to read elements of Tantrik mysticism into the texts are of immense value, though the observations of these two scholars do not have any direct relevance for the attempt undertaken in the current thesis.[28]

To sum up, it can be said that Narayan does not stand alone in his sympathy towards Hindu ethics. His work proves that he was a child of his times. The present research aims at delineating the ethical vision as can be gleaned from his novels. The only two novels which were kept out of purview are *Swami and Friends* and *The Financial Expert*. *Swami and Friends* was not taken into consideration primarily because the protagonist in this novel is a child, and also because it would possibly be too much of guesswork to identify the presence of any implicit or explicit influence of Hindu ethical ideas in this early novel, especially given Narayan's own testimony of his negligence of the indigenous tradition(s) in this early phase of his career. *The Financial Expert* was left out in order to maintain focus and balance. The present writer, however, acknowledges the importance of this novel with respect to Narayan's entire oeuvre. Margayya, the protagonist of this novel, is a blend of tradition and modernity, and is a more complex version of Sampath in *Mr. Sampath*. While he values tradition and moral values, he is also shown as a person dealing in loans, and thus transgressing the moral code required of a *brahmana*. This novel, too, closely read, upholds the efficacy of the doctrine of *karma*, as is evident from the eventual loss of his fortune by Margayya.

[27] Alphonse, pp. 166-69.

[28] P. Ranchan and G. R. Kataria, "Transformation via the Feminine in R. K. Narayan's Krishnan, Raju, and Jagan" in *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Essays on Indian Writing in English (Summer, Fall 1987), pp. 5-15.

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