Sexuality and the Fiction of R. K. Narayan

Fakrul Alam*

Abstract: This essay depicts R. K. Narayan as a writer intricately and intensely involved with a changing India by looking at his treatment of sexuality in his fiction. It reveals a writer who is able to represent sexual proclivities in Malgudi subtly as well as comprehensively. The essay argues that in Narayan's fiction, women increasingly display their dissatisfaction with prevailing sexual norms and attempt to negotiate a new role for themselves where they can respond to the sexual overtures of men they like in their own terms without giving up their quest for self-fulfillment. On the other hand, it argues that Narayan sees male sexuality as insidious, disruptive and uncontrollable. In fact, the essay shows that the plots of quite a few of Narayan's novels depict male sexuality as a fundamentally unsettling phenomenon and suggests that many of his narratives are constructed to reveal it as constituting a threat to the status quo.

There are two schools in Narayan criticism. One of them is typified by V. S. Naipaul who admires the Indian writer but tends either to slight him or damn him with faint praise by assuming that he simplified reality, sanitizing it as it were, or finds him guilty of positing a static world because of a worldview that was impervious to flux. Much more critical than Naipaul, Meenakshi Mukherjee has thus taken over the Trindadian-English writer's perspective to characterize Narayan as a "chronicler of a society resistant to change, eternal and immutable" and as someone who has opted for an "even-toned minimalistic representation that will not depend too much on the intricacies and contradictions in the culture" (82). On the other hand are admirers of Narayan—M. K. Naik is an early example—who believe that he has a complex and ironic view of India and are dedicated to showing that he is able to convey the contradictions and fissures in the Indian psyche through his representation of Malgudi and its citizens. A recent representative of this group of critics could be someone like Tabish Khair who has argued in *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian Novels* that it is myopic to assume that Narayan's art "has remained relatively untouched by the tensions of socio-economic and discursive alienation" and that his characters are usually racked by doubts and tensions and show "self-estrangement" (228).

This essay aligns itself with the second school of Narayan criticism in depicting Narayan as a writer intricately and intensely involved with a changing India by looking at his treatment of sexuality in his fiction. It was sparked by the fascinating historical work, Charu Gupta's *Sexuality, Obscenity, and Community:*

* Dr Fakrul Alam, Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka

Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India. In this work, covering roughly the span of time in which Narayan grew up and the period covered in his major fiction up to *The Financial Expert*, Gupta focuses on Hindu identity formation in India and examines "anxieties about male sexuality" as evidenced in the media, popular fiction, and advertisements (19). Gupta's work provides the context for highlighting one aspect of Narayan's work that has been overlooked till now: his treatment of sexuality[1] in his fiction.

Gupta's book on how certain notions of sexuality became part of Hindu identity formation in colonial and pre-independence India is illuminating for the student of Narayan in all sorts of ways. In her second chapter, for example, she examines obscene and semi-pornographic works of the period and the impact they had on the psyche of Hindu males in North India. She notes that there was increasing and widespread sale of *ashlil* (vulgar or obscene) literature in the era and that in the printed sex manuals published then "the lines between science, erotic art and obscenity were often blurred" (53). Most of them, of course, pretended not to be *ashlil* and "most such books camouflaged themselves with the language of sexual science, claiming authenticity by highlighting the scientific 'facts' of sexual life" (54). Many of these books "claimed to be prescriptive texts essential for sexual compatibility and fulfillment. At the same time, to make the books attractive for their audience, they stressed the erotic element especially [through] the presence of color pictures" (55). Gupta notes that these books went into multiple impressions but while they filled newly emerging outlets for books everywhere their critics felt that they "were incompatible with new ideals of nationhood and civilization" (56). Gupta's conclusion to this chapter is worth reproducing in an essay that intends to focus on, among other things, Narayan's ability to represent sexual proclivities in Malgudi: she considers these books not to belong to the margins of the newly emerging print culture but "at the centre of an emerging subculture where patriarchal and moralistic notions were partly reconstructed and partly contested" (84).

Gupta's chapter on the popularity of *ashlil* literature that often masquerades as scientific publications in a contested terrain should remind admirers of Narayan's *The Financial Expert* and of its protagonist Margaya's first encounter with the devilish Dr. Pal where the latter identifies himself as a sociologist writing a book dealing with a subject neglected in vernacular literature: human sexual relations. As the fascinated Margayya examines the manuscript of the book soon after he meets Dr. Pal he finds out it has chapters titled "Philosophy and the Practice of Kissing" and "Basic Principles of Embracing" and that the book itself is titled "Bed-Life or the Science of Marital Happiness." Dr. Pal tells Margayya that he wants to have the book illustrated since he wants it to be of "practical benefit" and "serve as a guide book to married couples" (68). His wife, he declares with typical insouciance, has been unfaithful and used to "ogle every man who appeared before her" (69) although he himself is an expert on sexology! When

Margayya meets Dr. Pal next the confident man states to him that he intends to make lakhs of rupees by selling it, for though there is no market on books on poetry and philosophy his is a work everyone will devour. Typically heedless about money as well as morality, Dr. Pal sells the rights of his book to Margayya for twenty-five rupees. When Margayya brings the manuscript home later and shows it to his wife she is "both horrified and fascinated" (93) by it even as her husband presents it to her as an admirable specimen of scientific knowledge. Margayya is easily able to enter into a contract with a publisher called Madan Lal to print it. The shrewd Lal, too, is taken by the manuscript even if his attraction is for its potential as a best-seller, and even though he suggests cloaking the printed version somewhat by titling it "Domestic Harmony" instead of "Bed Life." The book, inevitably, goes into innumerable impressions and becomes the basis of Margayya's fortunes although he eventually sells his share in it to the publisher.

Clearly, Narayan is here commenting obliquely on the popularity of sex manuals dealing with "taboo subjects" and "adapting a scientific garb while offering titillation" (84). Clearly, too, he is quite sensitive to what Foucault had documented in his volumes on sexuality as the emergence of the "science of sexuality," where the eruption into print of a new structure of knowledge leads to what Arnold I. Davison has called *pace* Foucault, "a sexistence," that is the existence of people being "saturated with the promises and threats of sexuality" (xiii). His depiction of the success Margayya has through a book such as *Domestic Harmony* is a simple but telling example of the writer's ability to capture in his fiction the manner in which sexuality was being expressed in popular literature in not so covert ways subverting the guardians of morality and reveals how as India was emerging at the end of the colonial period into modernity erotic consumerism was being beginning to impact on the popular psyche. Indirectly, too, Margayya's rise through the sale of an essentially pornographic work at a time when India was emerging into modernity indicates the nexus between the surfacing of sexual literature as a consumer item in India and the rise of the bourgeoisie. After all, Margayya had been able to rise to the pinnacle of Malgudi society through *Domestic Harmony*! It is relevant at this juncture also to note that the author of the book, Dr. Pal, claims variously to be a sexologist, a scientist as well as a sociologist; it would appear that through him Narayan is satirizing purveyors of knowledge who were responsible in the sub-continent for a phenomenon that resembled what Foucault had characterized in nineteenth century Europe as "a veritable discursive explosion" which "overstimulated the population" and created a dramatic interest in sexuality (Whitebrook 333).

Another chapter of Gupta's book that can illuminate Narayan's handling of sexuality in his fiction is the one where she discusses how Hindu reformist zealots of the period attacked "the propensity" of women and lower castes "towards all forms of lewdness" (91). She points out that the very virulence of their attack on prostitutes and temple dancers reveal the nexus of "regimes of

pleasure and power" (92) in patriarchal society. She notes that prostitutes were also widely "viewed as a means of purifying towns, maintaining the moral order, and as outlets for men's sexual drive" (109). If there were bids to control them by puritans most people saw them "as part of society, of life, and [they were thus] largely accepted and tolerated by people" (109). Ultimately, the zeal of the reformers pushed the prostitutes to the peripheries but they were by no means done away with. Indeed, Gupta observes that their numbers "continued to grow," reminding her of "Foucault's analysis that power works to produce a multiplicity of female sexualities which, in turn, work insidiously to maintain the social order" (121).

Reading Gupta's observations on the role played by prostitutes in colonial and pre-independence India, one is reminded of the ubiquity of prostitutes/temple dancers in Narayan's fiction. A case in point is Narayan's little-known short story "Seventh House," published in *A Horse and Two Goats: Stories by R. K Narayan*. In this work, the central character Krishna's wife is so sick that he consults an astrologer to find out if he could find a way outside traditional medicine to cure her. The astrologer consults the star and advises him to be "disloyal or cruel" and even "unfaithful to her" since all around him he could see that "every man with a concubine has a wife who lives long" (10). This strange conclusion, no doubt a slanted comment on the ordeals of upper-class wives in traditional Indian society, drives a desperate Krishna to seek a prostitute in the streets of Malgudi. But his ignorance of the profession makes him walk up and down the streets of the town for a couple of hours until he is suddenly reminded of the temple dancer Rangi, "who danced before the god's image during the day and took lovers at night" (142). He hires a jutka, assuming that its driver will know where she could be found, but the man tells him that she is "dangerous" and would strip him of everything. Instead, he declares, he could go to others, "both experts and beginners," and claims that he had "carried hundreds" to such women and is aware of the needs of men whose wives are pregnant and away at their mother's house and that he is fully conversant with "the tricks that husbands play on their wives" (140). The jutka driver is clearly not impressed by such men and at the end of the story Krishna himself decides to abandon his quest for Rangi and returns home without encountering her.

Rangi, however, makes an appearance in Narayan's eighth novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi,* where she is a temple dancer as well as the mistress of the antagonist of the novel, Vasu the taxidermist. According to Nataraj, the protagonist-narrator of the novel and a printer of Malgudi, she is "a notorious character of the town" and the daughter of Padma, who too had been "an exemplary, dedicated woman of the temple who could sing and dance, and who also took one or two wealthy lovers" (81). Rangi, we are told, is the daughter of Damodar, the owner of a wholesale grain shop of Malgudi, even though he himself had to be convinced of his filial obligations in court after being sued by Padma. Rangi had apparently

succeeded her mother at the temple after a stint with a drama troupe in the surrounding villages. According to Nataraj's ultra-conservative and gossipy assistant Sastri, "she was the worst woman who had ever come back to Malgudi" (82). She was "a subject of constant reference" amongst the middleclass men of town who got together for company and was "responsible for a good deal of the politics there" (82). Although Nataraj is initially befriended by Vasu and drawn to this macho man who takes over his attic, they are soon at odds with each other. However, he is fascinated by Vasu's relationship with Rangi and fantasizes on "the theme of lust" and becomes obsessed with "the fleshy image of Rangi" (82)[2]. Vasu, he soon discovers, meets not only Rangi in the attic but a whole range of women. Indeed, Nataraj is soon aware of "a brisk traffic" in women going on in his house and realizes that till then "he had no notion that our town possessed such a varied supply of women" (83). At one point he even seems to have turned into a voyeur who peeps at what was going on in the attic between Vasu and his women through a pin-hole (101). When one day he sees Rangi approaching, he is for a moment overwhelmed with the thought that she was coming to seduce him, even though he is more afraid of "her irresistible physical attraction" and the possibility that he "might succumb to her charms" (114). But the fact is that Rangi is not interested in him and had come to warn him that Vasu was bent on killing the town elephant and disrupting a procession that Nataraj and his friends were arranging to commemorate the publication of an epic poem by one of his companions. While she tries to impress on Nataraj the danger the elephant was in, he is aroused by her physical presence. Or as Nataraj puts it:

> 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 a 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... (115)

But of course he does and at one moment he even "adopts the tone of a man about to succumb to seduction," sure that she would embrace him, thereby dissolving "all the monogamous chastity" he had "practiced a whole lifetime" (115). However, the fact is that she is "indifferent" (116) to him and it is his own desire that is his worst enemy!

In a thoughtful and well-researched essay, titled "Devdasi Defiance and the *Man-Eater of Malgudi,*" Teresa Hubel demonstrates how the novel is "wildly ambivalent about Rangi" and how she unsettles "the dominant, mythic, ahistorical, conservative and patriarchal flow" (16)[3] of Nataraj's narrative. Hubel points out that the passage of the "Madras Devdasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act" in 1947 meant that by the time the novel had been published in 1961 devdasis had been dispossessed and thus someone like Rangi had been pushed to

the margins of Malgudi's Hindu society. Hubel thus sees Rangi as a "liminal" (22) figure of the town, but unlike the reckless outsider Vasu she has a stake in its traditions and the future and that is why she would rather go against him than see the elephant's death at his hand. Indeed, her indifference to Nataraj's burgeoning desire for her proves that it is not she who is promiscuous but the protagonist. Characterizing Nataraj's reaction to Rangi as "sexual hysteria," Hubel notes that the problem is not her sexuality but what the scholar Surabhi D. Seth has characterized as "man's own obsession about his sexual autonomy" (Hubel 25).

It is only through his encounter with Vasu that Nataraj learns about the many different kinds of "women of pleasure" in Malgudi, but anyone who has read through Narayan's fiction will meet at least a few other such women. Thus in *The Financial Expert* Margayya discovers late in the novel from his daughter-in-law Brinda that his wayward son Balu has been enticed by Dr. Pal into frequenting the house of a man who called himself "a theatrical agent" which is full of girls where the men and women "were very free" (210). Margayya decides to intervene and accosts Balu one night as he gets down from a car packed with giggling women as well as Dr. Pal who identify themselves to him as belonging to the theatre.

In *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community* Charu Gupta comments on how "the contempt for the prostitute by the Hindu middle class encompassed singers and dancers," and one could add actresses (119). These women were seen to be disruptive of morality and yet "insidiously" (120) maintaining social order. As Gupta observes, this was because while the husband was assumed to be "aggressive, forceful and promiscuous" the wife was seen to be "nurturing and maternal" (127). Hindu patriarchal ideology was particularly wary of the emerging figure of the working woman. In the words of Gupta, "At many places—in fiction, prescriptive texts, essays, comparisons were drawn between two types of women, and at all times the educated, ideal Hindu wife emerged the winner while those educated in Western ways and via English education emerged as completely inane" (171). At the same time, we learn from Gupta, there were "subtle resistance" and "Hindu patriarchal dominance" was under threat even in the domestic domain where space was opening up for contesting the male construction of sexual roles.

Narayan represents these ambivalent responses to working women and builds on the conventional contrast between the dangers secretaries, actresses, and dancers pose on his male characters and the contrast they make with the ideal house wife or *pativrata*, if only to implicate and critique patriarchal society.[4] As proof, one can glance at Narayan's third novel, *The Dark Room,* where Shanta Bai, a woman recruited as a probationer by Ramani, the head of the Malgudi branch of the Engladia Insurance Company, is contrasted with his wife Savitri and her friends.

Even before Shanta is recruited, it is easy to see how hostile orthodox Hindu society of the novel is to the idea of women entering the workplace. Thus Kantaiengar, the accountant of the Company, wonders out loud if the administrators of Engladia were about "to covert the Company into a brothel" (63). Ramani himself, it appears from the narrative, is not excited about interviewing applicants for the position and categorizes them either as widows "or prostitutes out to take up a spare position" (64). However, he succumbs almost immediately to the charms of the frank and forward Shanta Bai who reveals that she had abandoned a drunken husband at eighteen and had opted to educate herself but found that education did not guarantee a woman job security. Ramani, seen till this time as the kind of husband who cannot have enough of his wife sexually, is immediately thrilled by Shanta's beauty and forthright manner and soon allows her to live temporarily in the office building instead of a hotel, which leads Perira, another member of his staff, to comment that it was going to be converted into "a nuptial chamber" (69). Soon Ramani's desire starts sliding and he begins visiting her at night and comparing his wife unfavorably to her. Savitri's initial response is to try to make Ramani desire her more so that he would "love her as boisterously as he had loved her in the first week of their marriage" (107), but she quickly despairs of holding on to him and makes an attempt to leave the dark room that her marriage has become, an attempt that fails. The conclusion of the novel suggests that she has been defeated completely, for it appears at the end that Ramani will keep visiting Shanta and his wife will have to accept his philandering quietly and forever.

In *My Days* Narayan reveals that he wrote *The Dark Room* to show the Indian woman as "an ideal victim" of predatory and "oppressive" males (119). He is obviously intent on demonstrating through Savitri's story the point made by Gupta in her book that the roots of the Indian woman's oppression lay in an ideology dedicated to the notion of the ideal wife or *pativrata* which in turn is premised on a "belief in the constant, natural and transcendent differences between the bodies and sexual urges of women and men" that allowed the man "to escape with many 'wrongs'" while the woman had to set limits to her desire and concentrate on nurturing the family (126). Ramani, for example, assumes that as the ideal wife Savitri should be self-effacing and solely dependent on him for whatever pleasure she wants to get out of life. However, Narayan shows that even in Savitri's circle at least one wife was breaking out of the mould of the submissive and subdued wife through the portrait of her friend Gangu, whom she finds fascinating because despite being a wife and the mother of four children she wants to leave a mark on the public world either in politics or culture and wore "flimsy crepe sarees" (19) and moved about on her own and talked boisterously. In appearing so free and in flaunting her sexuality, Gangu has the support of her husband, a school teacher who is a champion of woman's freedom. Clearly, Malgudi is changing and attitudes to female sexuality are much more diverse

than they had been in the traditional Hindu society of the south. Or as Hubel says in her concluding comments on women like Rangi, Savitri, and Rosie—who we will turn to next—"Narayan's fiction is not . . . as repressively timeless as critics tend to suggest. It is just a matter of looking for the political and historical in the right place" (26). His treatment of sexuality, one can add, is another proof of his sensitivity to an India in flux.

If Rangu fails to break out of the mould of the temple dancer despite her bid to work with a drama group or her refusal to always play the role of a temptress and if Savitri Bhai abandons her quest for independence and ends up in a position that makes her accept the role of Ramini's "kept" woman, Rosie of *The Guide* pursues a more complex path as far as her sexuality is concerned. Like Rangi, she belongs to a family of devdasis but she has a Master's degree and therefore has gone way beyond her family traditions when we first see her as the wife of the archaeologist Marco. This background makes her uninhibited in her articulation of her desires but at the same time unconventional in her attitude to dancing. Her ambivalence is clear when Raju, the protagonist of the novel, reports her reactions to watching a king cobra dance: "She watched it swaying with the raptest attention. She stretched out her arm slightly and swayed it in imitation of the movement; she swayed her body to the rhythm" (58). She is instinctively the dancer and completely devoted to it as an art form though Raju is attracted almost entirely by her sensuousness and not by her instinctive feel for dancing. She, for her part, is attracted to Raju partly because while Marco has told her not to dance any more Raju appears to be totally intent on allowing her to cultivate her love of dancing till she can express herself fully through her art and partly because Marco seems to be totally indifferent to her person. Or as Raju puts it, "this man would go on wall-gazing all his life and leave her to languish in her hotel room" (60). Later, Raju, too, makes the mistake of underestimating Rosie's dedication to her profession and of undervaluing her person. Consequently, the relationship flounders since Rosie, unlike Raju, is not in it purely because of the physical side of it.

Two other novels by R. K. Narayan also portray women who are devoted to ideals that make them more committed to their professions than to yielding to their passions at the expense of everything else, unlike the men they become intimate with. In *Waiting for the Mahatma* Bharati gives enough evidence throughout the novel that she is not indifferent to Sriram's overtures to her, but she is more focused on carrying out Gandhi's dictums and working to alleviate poverty and liberate India than to responding unreservedly to his persistent demands. She will not have him without Gandhi's blessing but is entirely sensible about the extent and intensity of his passions for her.[5] Daisy of *A Painter of Signs*, the novel that Narayan wrote two decades later as if to rewrite the pre-independence relationship he had portrayed in *Waiting for the Mahatma* in Indira Gandhi's India and where he had replaced the "Quit India" scenario with the

countrywide family planning campaign pursued so zealously in the nineteen seventies, is much more liberated than Bharati. Also, she is a lot less guarded about her sexuality. Nevertheless, she, too, will have the protagonist of the novel entirely on her own terms and not by any ways compromising her career.

Seen in context, then, Rangu, Savitri, Gangu, Shanta Bai, Rosie and Daisy reveal Narayan's evolving view of women's sexuality in twentieth-century India. The novels reflect women increasingly displaying their dissatisfaction with prevailing sexual norms and striving to express themselves and break out of the mould created for them by pursuing paths chosen by themselves, by refusing to remain within the confines of the family and by rejecting the sexual overture of men if it they are offered at the expense of their careers. It is obvious from a reading of the novels that their pursuits do create complications for family life, but Narayan rarely seems inclined to portray female sexuality in a negative way. At the most it can be said that he is ambivalent about these women. He is, in fact, more inclined to critique the notion of a *pativrata* wife, the hypocrisy involved in the projection of the concept of the ideal woman, clearly showing his dissatisfaction with the roles assigned her in the domestic domain. He is much more interested in portraying his women as people endeavoring to negotiate a new role for themselves in the public sphere where they could respond to the sexual overtures of the men they like in their own terms without giving up their quest for self-fulfillment.

Indeed, any close reading of Narayan's fiction will confirm that it is male sexuality that he sees as insidious, disruptive and uncontrollable. For many of his male characters, desire is overwhelming and destabilizing. Again and again the novels focus on protagonists whose lives are taken over by desires that they cannot control and who never seem to be in control of the force that drive them blindly forward. To put it bluntly, they seem lust-driven, aroused by the woman they have come in contact with, and who they must possess as soon and as fully as they can, despite the barriers erected in their way by society and despite the qualms they might have. They become obsessive and driven but also tense and self-centered and ultimately break with tradition. As the philosopher Simon Blackburn observes so shrewdly, people in the grip of lust want "to be swept away" but knowing that something that is "intensely desirable" may be seen by society as "intensely shameful" they experience "psychic turmoil" that unsettles and unmoors them from tradition (61, 73). In other words, the plot of not a few of Narayan's novels appears to be premised on male sexual desire as a fundamentally unsettling phenomenon and his narratives are constructed to show how it constitute a threat to the status quo.

Seen from this perspective, the plot of at least three of Narayan's major novels—*Waiting for the Mahatma, The Guide*, and *The Painter of Signs*—have male sexual desire as their motors.[6] Once stirred by the object of their desire, the

protagonists of these novels are gripped by overwhelming passions till they make a break with tradition and adopt a restless mode of existence. One is reminded here of Peter Brook's observation in *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* where he argues that in the typical modern narrative, the protagonist's desire for another body—and as he observes, "the body necessarily implies sexuality" (6)—becomes the "subtending dynamic" of "the narrative" (8), for the hero's desire for the possession of the other body will propel the narrative forward. As a result, Brooks observes, "the plot of the novel is very often the story of success or failure in gaining access to the body" (8). Or again, "the reading of plots [is] a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, throughout the text" (37). Also pertinent here is Patricia Meyer Spacks's study, *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-Century Novels*, where she argues that in the typical novel of the period "plot is a dynamic of desire" (12) where the narrative movement is geared to showing the "subtle sophistries of desire."[7]

In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, it is when the protagonist Sriram has come of age that he has a chance encounter with a woman called Bharati who is out fundraising for Mahatma Gandhi. In no time at all he feels like "taking the girl in his arms" and feels that "her proximity pricked his blood and set it coursing" (38). Soon he can think of nothing else except possessing her. It is his desire for Bharati that leads him into the movement for Indian independence led by the Mahatma. As he confesses to the great man himself, "'I like to be where Bharati is' "(46). In the process, he begins to cut himself loose from his grandmother and family traditions and ends up joining a group working to spread Gandhi's message in rural India. But he is in the "Quit India" not because of ideology but because of his uncontrollable passion for Bharati. When she insists to him that their meeting should stick to ideological business he can contain himself no longer; he then grabs her "in an iron embrace in his madness" (89). She responds to his caresses for a while but ultimately frees herself putting the cause of independence first, declaring that she will not have him without Gandhi's sanction.

When Bharati leaves him to return to the Mahatma, Sriram's desire dissipates and he drifts into violence. In other words, Narayan seems to be suggesting, desire that cannot attach itself to a body, can turn destructive and may lead to disorder. At one point of the novel when Bharati kept visiting him every now and then he was somehow persuaded to contain his passions for her and had to go along with her refusal to give into him totally. But when she is imprisoned during the "Quit India" movement he drifts into arson and anarchy and becomes part of a group that has opted for terrorist tactics until he is incarcerated. It is only as the novel comes to an end in a newly independent India where Gandhi blesses his relationship with Bharati that she has no more qualms about accepting him. The novel thus concludes in a manner suggesting that his desire has finally found its

object satisfactorily and can now be channeled to confirm to national goals, although Gandhi himself is assassinated at the end of the novel.

If *Waiting for the Mahatma* ends by depicting sexual desire close to finding a satisfactory outlet that not only conforms to societal views of acceptable relationships but also national goals, *The Guide* is a novel portraying insidious desire that traps the protagonist in a position where he has to renounce all bodily desires, including the desire for food. Raju, the protagonist of this novel, is well settled in his ways in Malgudi as a guide for tourists when he meets Rosie and Marco. But the moment he sees her dancing is decisive; he is instantly aroused and cannot leave her alone from this point onwards. He soon abandons his profession and compels his mother to leave him as he gets deeper and deeper into a relationship with her which he pursues solely out of sexual desire. The pursuit of pleasure now becomes his sole object and he turns into her manager to hold on to her as well as to secure their relationship. Narayan leaves little doubt that Raju is motivated in this part of his life by a drive that overpowers him and cuts him loose from all other bonds so that he rejects all limits imposed on it by societal convention or family obligations. As Raju himself puts it in the story he tells Velan to prove how he is a very fallible human being and not the spiritual guru that the people of the village where he has ended up in after being freed from prison takes him to be: "I was in an abnormal state of mind....I was obsessed with thoughts of Rosie. I reveled in memories of the hours I had spent with her last or in anticipation of what I'd be doing next" (101). He can remember only one occasion when he admired her dancing, "free, for once, from all carnal thoughts," when he viewed her as "a pure abstraction" (110), but on all other occasions it is her sexuality that preoccupies him. Clearly, unlike her, his lust for her expels all other interests for a while and he is so swept away that he abandons his business, his mother, and the whole way of life he had grown up in.

Ultimately, lust leads Raju to covetousness, gluttony and sloth as he takes to wining, gambling and forgery as easy ways of accessing and spending the money Rosie was earning as a successful dancer. Narayan appears to be suggesting that in the later part of Raju's life when Rosie has immersed herself completely in her art and is no longer with him only to satisfy his desire his sexual feelings are displaced into other forms of pleasure which whets his senses for a while. However, in the process he puts himself in a path that leads to prison. Once out of prison and in the village, he finds unwittingly that transcendence from desire is only possible by freeing himself from all appetites in a way that he had not anticipated. He therefore ends up fasting since this is expected of him by the villagers till he gets into a condition where he has to renounce all bodily desires. In the novel, then, his rampant desire leads to his death and perhaps Narayan has written it as a cautionary tale about the destructiveness of uncontrolled sexuality and desire's capacity to slide from one kind of lust to another. Perhaps he is also

suggesting that the one way out of a cycle of desire is to go to the other extreme and abjure the body altogether!

But while Sriram's desire finds its object and Raju ends up having to or opting to—we are never sure which route he has taken—forego all desires—it is Raman of *The Painter of Signs* who is most affected by passions that he cannot control and who at the end of his narrative is left stranded with them, as if desire in the world that he has entered is doomed to be activated but stay permanently unstable, mobile, and uncertain of its destination. Early in the novel, he falls for Daisy, and gives up almost everything in his life to be with her—the old aunt he has been looking after him selflessly all his life, his mates, his motto of "reason in everything" (5), and the reputation he as acquired as a painter of signs in Malgudi. But when the novel concludes Daisy leaves him with only the hope that they will "live together in the next Janma" (183).

The narrative, indeed, indicates to us throughout how vulnerable one is living in a world where sexual images saturate everything and where one is titillated without any assurance of gratification of one's desires. As the befuddled Raman notes at the beginning of the novel while gazing like a voyeur at women bathing in the river close to where he lived: "Money and sex, he reflected, obsessive thoughts, too much everywhere—literature, magazine, drama, or cinema deal with nothing but sex all the time, but the female figure, water-soaked, is enchanting" (14). Clearly, there is plenty to drive the male in Malgudi to distraction now and we have come a long way from the peep shows offered in the kind of book that brought Margayya his fortune in Domestic Harmony although this surfeit also means paradoxically that the extent of sexual repression for someone like Raman has actually increased since finding outlets for desire is still difficult! Clearly, too, self-knowledge is not Raman's strong point for though he admonishes himself to keep to his goal of keeping "sex in its place," almost as soon as he sees Daisy, he feels a "surging impulse" (31) in him to meet her again. He tells himself that it "is not sex which is driving me, but a normal curiosity about another person, that's all," but he reveals in the process that when it comes to sex, self-knowledge is the last thing that can be expected" (33)! Soon, however, he has to admit to himself that he is "sexobsessed" (39), even as he tries to remember the point made in the puranas he knew which are "full of instances of saints failing in the presence of beauty" (40).

Try as Raman might though, he cannot keep Daisy's body out of his mind. She comes to him even in his sleep where she beckons him to join her disrobed self till he wakes up feeling "ashamed of himself" with the realization that "an edifice of selfdiscipline laboriously raised in a lifetime seemed to be crumbling down" (43). He even tries to escape his own obsessions by blaming her "siren-like ways" for "the unfathomable psychological disturbances" she was causing him (49), although the reader can easily see that she is always professional to the

point of curtness in her dealings with him. Indeed, at one point she even gives him a very dispassionate lecture on sex education based on her expertise as a family planning worker (87). There can be little doubt that Narayan, not unlike Charlotte Lennox in *The Female Quixote*, is giving us an amused and ironic take on "the subtle sophistries of desire" in these scenes and is showing us how his protagonist is ensnared by it.

In a deliciously comic scene in the middle of the novel, Raman has had enough of forbearance and attempts to assault Daisy one night when they are stuck in a bullock cart miles from anywhere. However, he finds out to his dismay that she had eluded him totally and had left the spot on her own rather than endure his advances any more. Selfrighteously, he tells himself that he has "done nothing to feel guilty about" since he had only given in to "the normal drive of a force which kept the whole world spinning" (98). But it is obvious at all points that she resents not his overtures but his peremptoriness and presumption. It is not that she is frigid but she will yield to him only when she is ready to have him. At his insistence, she does agree to settle for a Gandharva kind of marriage, where "two souls in harmony" was all that was required to sanction consummation (158) but she is not going to compromise on her view that there was a "time and place for everything" (171), including sex. As the novel ends, therefore, she leaves him, "scared" (183) by his wild demands on her, knowing that there would be no restraining them and no holding him back without compromising her work. Obviously, the male of the species in Narayan's view of things, has little or no self-control and therefore is unable to hold on to the love of someone as focused on her work as Daisy.

In *"The Painter of Signs:* Breaking the Frontier," Sadhana Allison Puranik sees Raman's condition as evidence of "the dangerous possibilities of sexual repression engendered by the orthodox morality of the town" (134). In her reading of the novel Raman takes a position at the margins of Malgudi's moral life but she feels that at the conclusion of the novel he has not broken with convention and is still very much within the mindset of the town. For her, Daisy, on the other hand, asserts herself throughout the novel and is a truly liberated woman. It can be added that in opting for total freedom she is unlike Rosie in *The Guide* who opts to be loyal to Marco and nice to Raju till the end, preferring to be continually wife-like in her ways. Daisy, in contrast, will pursue her career single-mindedly, remaining the nonconformist in every sphere of life.

Narayan's fiction, then, explores the whole gamut of human sexual relations in Indian society in his novels, at least as far as men-women relationships is concerned. He has explored the ways in which sexuality is expressed covertly or overtly in Malgudi through his fictions and has tracked the evolution of attitudes towards sexuality in a changing India till the point when the sexually liberated woman makes an appearance in its landscape. He explores the intricate ways in

which sex is interwoven with everyday life and the nature of both male and female sexuality in novel after novel and one or two of his short stories. Instead of either taking a moralistic attitude or displaying overt enthusiasm about it, Narayan adopts an attitude towards sexuality in his fiction that can be compared to the view expressed by Brinda Bose in the introduction to her book, *Translating Desire: The Politics of Gender and Culture* in India where she notes that "sexuality in and of itself is neither 'good' or 'bad' but a specific tendency/behavior/activity, grounded in biological need but almost totally (re)constructed in social and cultural terms" (xxiv).

Narayan was perfectly aware that those of his readers who had made up their minds about him as the chronicler of a conservative world and a sanitized India would have found his views about sex prudish and would at one time or the other slight him for his neglect of human sexuality in his fiction. It is for them that Narayan seems to have written an essay titled "Love and Lovers" that he later reprinted in *A Writer's Nightmare*. In it he wants them to listen to a conversation he has with an imaginary interlocutor, representing no doubt the kind of professor that he was wary of in his lifetime. The professor presumes that literature in India is dying and one reason for its attenuated life in the country is that novelists like Narayan deal with man-woman relationship without seriousness and by scanting sexuality. The novelist replies that he "is not exactly prudish" but that he will not go beyond a point in such matters. Pursuing his quarry doggedly, the professor declares that in works such as *The Dark Room, The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs* the novelist depicts characters in scenes that rouse the reader's expectations but then disappoints him or her, leaving the characters, as it were, on the edge of the bed instead of making the reader privy to the intense moments of their passions. The novelist, however, feels that he has no need for "elaboration" of such scenes and is confident that he has done enough to bring the situation in them to a "certain point" where he can "leave it all to the reader's imagination" (175).

It is to be hoped that this essay has been able to show how comprehensively and yet subtly Narayan depicts sexuality in his fiction and how skillfully he has been chronicling the sexual mores of his Malgudians in diverse ways. It should be abundantly clear now that Narayan's interest in depicting Malgudi and its citizens as fully as he could means that he would often depict them as possessed by sexual desire and on occasions entangled in it. He is certainly a novelist who portrays repeatedly desire as something overwhelming and disruptive but also inevitable. Narayan is always the chronicler of an India in flux, and the changes in India that he depicts are not only in the public sphere but also in the realm of human sexual relations. Narayan, to conclude, is almost always a much deeper novelist than he lets out to be and his treatment of sexuality is one more example of his prescience about this as well as other aspects of Indian life.

Notes

1. The word "sexuality" is used throughout the essay in the sense defined in the OED as "recognition or preoccupation with what is sexual; allusion to sexual matters" or in *The American Heritage Dictionary* as "concern with or interest in sexual activity" and the on-line Merriam-Webster dictionary as "preoccupation with sex." I am aware that in the west the word is, as Cameron and Kulcik stress in their book *Language and Sexuality*, being increasingly associated with "sexual orientation" but I prefer to dwell throughout my essay the more universally prevalent usage of the word connoting "the socially constructed expression of erotic desire" (4).

2. For an account of *The Tiger of Malgudi* as "a narrative of identification," which reads Nataraj as obsessed with Vasu and as someone who would want to be like him see my "Plot and Character in R. K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*: A Reassessment," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 19:3, 1988: 77-92.

3. I should emphasize here that Hubel attributes "the dominant, mythic, historical, conservative and patriarchal flow" of the narrative to Narayan but I prefer to attribute it to Nataraj. Hubel, I am afraid, has not untypically confused the narrator with Narayan. Narayan, it is an article of faith with me, is a much more subtle and ambivalent writer than he may appear to be.

4. Mention can be made here of Shanti, an actress who has been recruited to play the role of Parvathi, the bride of Kama, in a film being produced by Mr. Sampath, the titular character of Narayan's fifth novel. She becomes his mistress, and he declares his intention to marry her, even though he has a wife and children. Another character of the novel called Ravi becomes obsessed with her too, indicating once again how in Narayan's novels the working woman appears to destabilize family life, not because she is the seductress but because the males who come in contact with them appear to be unable to control themselves in her presence.

5. As I have argued in "R. K. Narayan at the Indian Moment," *Waiting for the Mahatama* can be read as a national allegory where Sriram is the representative Indian who becomes infatuated with the idea of possessing India. Narayan obviously thinks that his obsession for her is enough for him to her, he must go beyond the instability of desire to be worthy of real union.

6. This is also partially true of *The Bachelor of Arts* where one-third of the way through the novel the protagonist Chandran becomes infatuated with Malathi, a girl he sees by the riverside and becomes so smitten by her and so bent on marrying her that he is unable to face rejection and leaves Malgudi for a while and becomes a wanderer out of sheer frustration. This, of course, is the title of her introductory chapter and a phrase from Charlotte Lennox's novel *The Female Quixote* which Spacks analyzes thoroughly in her study.

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