



UNIVERSIDAD DE GRANADA

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

(Re)constructing an Imagined Indian Community:

Myth, Tradition and Subversions in R. K. Narayan's Short Fiction.

A Postcolonial Reading

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Departamento de Filologías Inglesa y Alemana

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Granada, a 25 octubre de 2015.

Director de la Tesis,

Fdo.: Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde.

Doctoranda,

Fdo.: Cruz María López Bonilla.

*For my grandmother,
Piedad Ortega*

Contents

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
CHRONOLOGY	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1 THE GRANDMOTHER'S TALE	17
INTRODUCTION	17
THE NOVELLA	19
ORIGINS OF THE MYTH	20
HISTORICAL SPACE	37
STRUGGLES FOR INDEPENDENCE	43
THE POSTCOLONIAL EXPERIENCE	49
CONCLUSIONS	62
CHAPTER 2 ON SECULARITY AND SECULAR EDUCATION	67
INTRODUCTION	67
"ISWARAN"	79
"CRIME AND PUNISHMENT"	94
"UNDER THE BANYAN TREE"	105
CONCLUSIONS	115
CHAPTER 3 COMMUNAL IDENTITIES: REASONS FOR VIOLENCE	119
INTRODUCTION	119
"ANOTHER COMMUNITY"	124
THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SOCIAL ENMITY	125
"ANOTHER COMMUNITY"	131
THE PRINCELY STATE OF KASHMIR	138
THE ENEMY'S COMMUNITY	141
A GOTHIC BACKDROP	149
VOTES, ELECTIONS AND COMMUNAL VIOLENCE	158
THE DENOUEMENT	163
CONCLUSIONS	170
CHAPTER 4 ANNAMALAI OR A LIFE IN A POSTCOLONIAL GARDEN	175
INTRODUCTION	175
"ANNAMALAI"	179
PART ONE	
PARTICULARITIES ON THE NAME ANNAMALAI	179
THE STORY OF ANNAMALAI: HIS SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION	183
THE SPACE OF THE UNKNOWN	188

PART TWO	
THE COLONIAL (MIS)APPROPRIATION	193
FROM RURAL VILLAGES TO MONOPOLISTIC PLANTATIONS: THE INDIAN GARDEN	204
INSIGHTS INTO THE EXPERIENCE OF AN INDIAN GARDENER	214
PART THREE	
TABOOS AND PREJUDICES OF ANNAMALAI’S ETHOS	222
THE TRIBAL VILLAGE	229
THE METALITERARY SPACE	241
CONCLUSIONS	246
CHAPTER 5 THE INDIAN WOMAN OF R. K. NARAYAN	251
INTRODUCTION	251
THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	254
NARAYAN’S FICTIONAL WOMAN	260
THE GANDHIAN REVIVAL	274
THE PRACTICAL EXPRESSION OF TRADITION IN R. K. NARAYAN’S WOMEN	297
I. <i>THE DARK ROOM</i> (1938)	297
II. <i>MR SAMPATH, THE PRINTER OF MALGUDI</i> (1949)	306
III. <i>THE WORLD OF NAGARAJ</i> (1990)	308
IV. “A WILLING SLAVE” (1967)	310
THE GRANDMOTHERS OR THE (IR)RELEVANCE OF FEMALE OLD AGE	315
CONCLUSIONS	324
CONCLUSIONS	331
APPENDIX	343
WORKS CITED	345

Abstract

Traditional culture and subverted myths are subjects that characterise Narayan's vast literary production. His subtle humour and a westernised education acquired under British colonial rule pervade Narayan's literary style, denoting a clearly recognisable Hindu personality. The most outstanding peculiarity of Narayan's works, however, is the construction of a credible world of his own, Malgudi. This Indian town offers an excellent tool by which we might study his views of the Indian identity and his construction of an imagined community: such studies enable us to apprehend better what *Indianness* means from a western perspective.

This dissertation examines a number of short stories by Narayan, focusing on five ways in which they reflect the creation and development of an ideal Indian nation. The first chapter describes the complex caste situation of a symbolic colonial family that evolves from an ancestral rural community to an urban middle-class postcoloniality. The members of this Indian family try to counterbalance the corrosive effects of modernity with the transmission through storytelling of the family's memory and its signs of identity.

Certainly, the British Empire brought important reforms into a system of education that was based on caste divisions. However, these reforms were also intended to facilitate British control over the Asian subcontinent. Many corrupted structures of feudal origin were therefore left untouched. In time, secularism and secular education were attacked by the most traditional wings of different religious groups, while emergent secularist currents struggled to create a national identity that could blend old traditions and modern traits. The second and third chapters deal with the singularity of an India that has never been free from communal conflicts, conflicts that, from time to time, have led

to violent outbursts. Narayan's artistic impression of the way in which communal violence only impairs conflict resolution explains the focus of my analysis on this subject.

Although the occurrence of violence blights urban and rural societies equally, the village communities in Narayan's short fiction face the additional consequences of industrialisation and agrarian reform. The population exodus from rural communities for economic reasons is one of the themes scrutinised in the fourth chapter, along with mythic and ethnic atavisms that are characteristic of these communities. As this grand flux of people generates frictional movements on the basic structures of society, these structures inevitably modify and social behaviours are seen to change in response. Among these changes, some of the most relevant to this study are the incorporation of the Dalit population and the Indian woman into modern/urban postcolonial society, a shift which challenged the patriarchal dictums of the traditional joint family system.

Overall, this study considers Narayan's use of humour and irony in his short stories, the ends to which these techniques are deployed, and the postcolonial perspective expressed in the stories, when taken together. It also explains how Narayan constructs an imaginary Indian nation-ness, one that is distorted and frayed at the seams as a direct consequence of the author's evolution towards mature consciousness of the realities of India. In short, this dissertation contests some of the archetypical generalisations about this popular Indian writer while, to my mind, casts a renewing light on his otherwise amusing oeuvre.

Acknowledgements

This has been a tough journey dearly longed for that has finally reached an end. An end which is the beginning of a different vital stage and I want to pay tribute to those who have been with me or in the back of my mind all these years, during this long and lonely journey.

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And last but not least, to my brother's companion, Prof. Ana Carpio, for loving Luís and looking after him. Thank you!

Chronology

- 1906 Born 10 October, in Madras (Chennai).
- 1921 Moves to Mysore, where he lives for seven decades.
- 1924 Begins writing.
- 1930 Begins writing *Swami and Friends*.
- 1933 Takes a job as Mysore correspondent for *The Justice*, a Madras newspaper.
- 1934 Marries Rajam. His friend Kittu Purna who lives in Oxford shows Graham Greene a selection of Narayan's short Stories.
- 1935 Begins life-long correspondence with Greene. *Publishes Swami and Friends*.
Gives up his job on *The Justice*.
- 1936 Birth of his daughter, Hemavati.
- 1937 *The Bachelor of Arts*.
- 1938 *The Dark Room*.
- 1939 Begins a regular Sunday column for The Hindu. Rajam dies of Typhoid.
Publishes *Mysore*.
- 1941 Edits his own quarterly journal, *Indian Thought*.
- 1943 *Malgudi Days*, first Short Story collection. Follows *Dodu and Other Stories*.
- 1945 *The English Teacher*. Follows *Cyclone and Other Stories*.
- 1947 *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories*.
- 1949 *Mr Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi*.
- 1952 *The Financial Expert*.
- 1955 *Waiting for the Mahatma*.
- 1956 Visits USA as the recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship. Publishes *Lawley Road and Other Stories* and *Next Sunday: Sketches and Essays*.

viii | Chronology

- 1958 *The Guide*.
- 1960 Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Guide*.
- 1961 *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.
- 1964 *My dateless Diary: An American Journey. Gods, Demons, and Others*. Padma Bhushan Award.
- 1965 Opening of *Survival*, the film based on *The Guide*.
- 1967 *The Vendor of Sweets*.
- 1969 Writer-in-residence at the University of Missouri, Kansas City.
- 1970 *A Horse and Two Goats*.
- 1972 *The Ramayana*.
- 1974 *My Days: A Memoir. Reluctant Guru* (essays).
- 1976 *The Painter of Signs*.
- 1977 *The Emerald Route* (travel book).
- 1978 *The Mahabharata*.
- 1980 Becomes an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
Receives the A. C. Benson Medal from the UK's Royal Society of Literature.
- 1982 *Malgudy Days* (short stories).
- 1983 *A Tiger for Malgudi*.
- 1985 *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*. Nominated to the Rajya Sabha, India's upper house of parliament.
- 1986 *Talkative Man*.
- 1987 Receives the Soviet Land Nehru Award.
- 1988 *A Writer's Nightmare: Selected Essays 1958-1988*.
- 1989 *A Story-Teller's World* (essays).
- 1990 Settles in Madras with his daughter. *The World of Nagaraj*.

- 1992 *Malgudi Landscapes: The Best of R. K. Narayan.*
- 1993 *The Grandmother's Tale, and The Grandmother's Tale: Three Novellas. Salt and Sawdust: Stories and Tabletalk.*
- 1994 Death of his daughter.
- 1995 *The Indian Epics Retold.*
- 1996 *Tales from Malgudi.* Appointed as a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi.
- 2000 Padma Vibhushan Award.
- 2001 Death in Chennai on 13 of May.

Introduction

This doctoral dissertation explores central aspects of R. K. Narayan's prolific literary career through a postcolonial reading. My aim is to provide a careful examination of his short fiction in order to show the author's idea of Indianness, i.e. his commitment to the creation of an "imagined" Indian nation. Needless to say, I use "imagined" here in the sense that Benedict Anderson (1983) coined the word in relation to the political community of a nation. "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Anderson's definition of the nation as a community that is perceived as "a deep, horizontal comradeship" or fraternity, regardless of its hierarchical social system based upon inequality and exploitation, will be of paramount importance for my reading of Narayan's continuously renewed creation of an imagined Indian nation.

Mostly labelled as a realist writer whose craft is characterised by a dexterous use of humour and irony, Narayan's contribution to the ideological construction of nationness has often been understated, if not totally overlooked. My major contention is, however, to show, through a careful selection of texts, that Narayan's writing is driven by a lifelong involvement in the creation of a national identity that merges ethnic, cultural, linguistic and social differences into a unified, homogeneous representation of India. I argue that this commitment existed from the very beginning of his career in 1935 when the first collection of stories, *Swami and Friends*, was published in what was still a colonial possession of the British Empire, and that continued to be held, albeit rife with changes and contradictions, throughout his writing career.

2 | Introduction

One of the questions I will address involves the distinctive features of Narayan's writing style, which proves to be very different from that of the language employed by the other two canonical Indo-Anglian authors, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. It is true that each of them invariably uses the English language as a tool which allows them to adjust the distinctive foreign values of the West to fit their own culture in such a way that English ultimately becomes an element which agglutinates a disparity of linguistic identities. However, entirely unlike the harsh and conflicted social conditions depicted by his fellow writers, Narayan's texts are often viewed as light-hearted tales deeply conditioned by the author's Brahmin ideology and free from any kind of complexity, either social or linguistic. Surprisingly enough, little has been said about Narayan's contribution to the construction of a national identity that connects characters from all castes and social classes into the tension-free, unified community of his imagined, ethereal Malgudi. "A certain English professor has managed", Narayan confesses in "The Writerly Life",

to draw an intricate map of Malgudi with its landmarks laboriously culled out of the pages of all my novels. To see an *imaginary* [emphasis added] place so solidly presented with its streets and rivers and temples, did not appeal to me; it seemed to me rather a petrification or fossilization of *light wish-like things* [emphasis added] floating across one's vision while one is writing. (*A Writer's Nightmare* 201)

Very early I became intrigued by the widespread critical evaluation that labelled Narayan as a middle-class Brahmin writer who reproduced in his work old Indian flaws such as resignation or aimlessness. In this sense, V. S. Naipaul's evaluation of Narayan's attitude as negative because it seemed to favour "that older India which was incapable of

self-assessment” (*An Area of Darkness* 232) struck me as an affirmation which gainsaid my early impression of Narayan as a profoundly political writer preoccupied with the construction – in progress or inevitably unfinished- of the young Indian nation.

In many respects, the *raison d'être* of this dissertation is to contest the widely preferred description of Narayan's short fiction as one mostly devoted to its form but largely irrelevant in its purpose. His stories have been generally regarded as little more than expanded anecdotes, vignettes which are strongly Indian in flavour but lacking any other intellectual intention. The author himself describes how from the very beginning of his career he was seriously questioned by his contemporary readers: “Most of them would say, ‘What’s there in that story? There’s something interesting you’ve written, but there’s no ending, there is no powerful climax or anything. What are you driving at?’” (Ram and Ram 114). Partly as a response to this initial curiosity expressed by his readers, I will attempt to disclose some of the narrative strategies which best show how Narayan's project of building up a communitarian Indian identity remained one of the core tenets of his short story collections. In my selection of the texts analysed in the following pages I will not only try to demonstrate that Narayan's paradoxical simplicity is a linguistic strategy deliberately chosen to map out a very specific idea of Indianness, but also to acknowledge that the emergent national landscape drawn in his blueprints of Malgudi is not free of contradictions, loopholes and inconsistencies. Narayan's particular vision of the Indian nation, characterised by a dynamic plurality of languages, states and caste/social affiliations, cannot remain a solid, unchangeable, timeless construct. On the contrary, any nation is defined by a non-stop fluidity, and impermanence is something too elusive to be nailed down to a single centre or essence. In this regard, I will adopt Bhabha's argument that a nation is nothing but a narration, i.e. a reality which is “neither unified or unitary” but internally marked by “the heterogeneous histories of contending

4 | Introduction

peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference” (*The Location of Culture* 148). One of the earliest stumbling blocks in delving into Narayan’s narrative artefacts is going beyond the two basic ingredients of his craft, namely humour and local colour, which is how Spivak describes certain patterns in his writing (“How to Teach a ‘Culturally Different’ Book” 242). Thus, beginning with seminal works on the uses, meanings, intentions and consequences of Narayan’s texts (Iyengar 1962; Walsh 1982; Naik 1983) and following more recently in the tradition of Postcolonial Studies (Kain 1993; Olinder 2000; Kanaganayakam 2002; Thieme 2007), multiple analyses have explored Narayan’s construction of Malgudi and the effects of irony on the verisimilitude of the characters’ choices. Such is the view of John Thieme, one of the most important Narayan scholars, who describes his mode of writing as “his mock-obituary”. To put it more simply, in Thieme’s opinion, Narayan’s indeterminacy abandons “his characters in mid-air” and his use of irony prevents “unitary interpretations” (“The Cultural Geography of Malgudi” 115). This view is complemented by novelist Sashi Deshpande, who writes that “Narayan presents things so factually, bluntly and simply, that it is only irony that saves his writing from being pedestrian” (“R. K. Narayan: A Personal View” 70). For the purposes of my analysis, I will not lean so much on the plot construction and its hilarious contradictions but on the cultural alterities and fractures that challenge both the construction of the new nation-state and Narayan’s own reflections upon and beliefs in the new Indian society. At this point, it is useful to quote Narayan’s own recollections of the creative process which led to Malgudi, as cited in Susan Ram and N. Ram’s biography: “I wanted to be able to put in whatever I liked, and wherever I liked”. Narayan is thus fully conscious that his highly selective purposes were similar to those of “a minor despot in a little world”, a world which he manipulated at will to the extent that soon enough he became “fascinated by its [boundless] possibilities, with the result that [he

was] unable to escape from” it (106). Malgudi is therefore the site of Narayan’s ideological representations of his imagined nation, a heterotopian space. As Foucault explains, a heterotopia is more of an idea, an epistemological concept, than any real space, although unlike utopia it does exist. Heterotopias function as a mirror, both real and unreal. The beholder contemplates her/his image over there and discovers her/his absence from the real space where (s)he stands. “The mirror is real, the reflection is not”, but in creating a projected image of the national identity the subject “can construct an illusory enclave” (Aguilera Linde 157) that resolves tensions and alleviates frictions. In other words, Malgudi is Narayan’s frustrated attempt to solve what Chatterjee interprets as the perennial conflict between the “nation and its fragments” in Indian history (1993). Even in 1947, there existed such incompatible views about how the state’s process-formation should be conformed that the construction of the Indian nation became an unfinished project for, as Gorringer writes, “much of the population had no conception of what it meant to be ‘Indian’, stressing regional, linguistic or caste affiliations instead” (127).

Rather than join what Ranajit Guha defines as “*the failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation*” (*Dominance without Hegemony* xii, Guha’s emphasis) Narayan tries, over and over again, to define and narrow the boundaries of the nation within a timeless space and to discover, through his exploration of the classical texts, an available historical narrative of the nation that can fill out the cultural void. The project, however, will prove to be utterly impossible, for the myth of timelessness and atavistic traditionalism can hardly be made compatible with the emergence of the “irredeemably plural modern space” of contemporary India (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 149). But not in vain, Narayan speaks of the nation blending the real with the fictional in such a way that it is often difficult to discern the language of metaphor from

6 | Introduction

the language of historicity. He places the narratorial emphasis on Indian culture and the community within the liminal boundaries of a disrupting modernity which threatens to dissipate any essential given identity. Very often this modernity is expressed in abstract terms: the changing present is viewed as a transition period located upon the faultlines of a timeless national Indian past. To understand this view more properly, we must bear in mind that the very term “India” is a by-product of the colonial historiography, a term which “brings with it a politically coloured self-image and the suggestion of cultural amnesia” (G. N. Devy, “After Amnesia” 3). This is a political label invented by the architects of the empire but “hopelessly inadequate and simplistic” (3) for it homogenises differences and merges into a unified whole a vast array of cultural and linguistic identities. In the “Misguided Guide”, Narayan recalls that, when one of the film directors of *The Guide* chose Northern India (Jaipur and Udaipur in picturesque, post-card-like Rajasthan) as the ideal location for exterior shooting, he felt bewildered by the total incomprehension of what Malgudi was: “It is South India in costume, tone and contents”, he remonstrated in vain, for the American director, totally unmoved by the writer’s plea, finally concluded: “Malgudi will be where we place it, in Kashmir, Rajasthan, Bombay, Delhi, even Ceylon” (*A Writer’s Nightmare* 210). In other words, Malgudi has finally become the universal India, a non-space lacking a specific geographical reference, yet capable, however, of condensing what the nation (a whole subcontinent) is. In a way, despite the incongruity of the setting, props and costumes, Malgudi was finally seen as the index of Indian history in capital letters, a success which Narayan could not (or at least was reluctant to) discard, despite his complaints.

My central claim is that Narayan mimics the dominant discourse of Indian nationalism, since he is part of the bourgeois consciousness that exposes the results of (post)colonial contradictions. Nationalism, colonialism and even anti-colonialism carried

ideological components inspired by Western theories and historicity that the middle-class elites blended together for their own interest as “a set of modular forms” (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 5). This set bore the ideological purpose of constructing an apparent nationalist cohesion, based on those modular forms that did not try to define an imagined Indian identity but to manoeuvre the masses according to their national difference from the rest of the modern world. In short, the nationalist movement “operated in accordance with a template derived from colonial powers rather than indigenous models of community or government” (Gorringe 126). Narayan, however, seems to remain detached from the contemporary political affairs depicted in the short stories. Influenced by his Western education, this narrative artefact conveys a literary ambiguity that, according to José Luís Caramés and Carmen Escobedo, inherits the Brahmin traditions from the *sastris*, *pandits* and *gurus* who were socially supported so that they could discover, explore and contemplate the universe (Caramés and Escobedo 136). As a result, Narayan’s nationalistic representations appear as alternative or rather different from those of the Western societies. Although the anticolonial nationalism of his early novels remains present more or less throughout his oeuvre, his narrative evolves to take on a much more qualified resistance to the dominant discourse of power – namely corporate capitalism – expressed through his marginal characters or in the frustration of his middle-class protagonists.

From my perspective, the fractured protagonists, immersed in what Ananthamurthy calls an “inimitable low mimetic mode” (qtd. in Devy, “Of Many Heroes” 131), unconsciously move through the domain of the spiritual. This bifocal strategy, the internal schism between tradition and modernity, identifies the core of Narayan’s nationalism, so problematic for many critics. The major characteristic of the spiritual domain, as Chatterjee’s *The Nation and Its Fragments* reminds us, is that it

resists external, alien, material influences and in particular the structural changes brought about by the disruption of colonialism, while it declares a cultural modernity based on a return to Hindu traditions: it is neither an orthodox representation of the Vedic and Puranic literatures nor a case of fully the westernised post-Enlightenment social thought (11). My research focuses on Narayan's representation of the 'inner' domain of the national culture, considering this culture an essential aspect of the wide space that exists between the communitarian or social body (always intangible) and the private realm of the family living quarters. Both extremes are sovereign within the elusive construct of the Indian nation.

Having established these parameters, it is important to underline a major characteristic of Indo-Anglian literature, which, as Chatterjee observes, is the need to develop a modern artistic expression that is at the same time recognisably Indian (8). In order to accomplish this enterprise, the ideological superstructures based on the discourse of Hindu patriarchy must be transformed through a new nationalist discourse that simultaneously (and paradoxically) reflects modernity and traditional values. I suggest that Narayan approaches this task by reinterpreting or re-negotiating the language of myth and a symbolic representation of tradition without overlooking the inevitable changes that the encounter with modernity entails. This new, "reworked" tradition is often inspired by the bhakti literature or some of the classical texts such as *The Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* or the *Bhagavad-Gita*, as his retelling of these epics demonstrates. In isolating certain cultural paradigms of Indian history, Narayan is presenting his idea of Indianness as opposed to colonialism. However, as P.P. Raveendran rightly points out, nationalists were "building up their nation on the very same sites from where the Orientalists had unearthed the replica of a glorious Indian classical past" (40). The result is often a discursive elision that homogenises India's socio-economic complexities and therefore ignores the plurality

of indigenous cultural identities, the so-called fragments of heterogeneous, composite Indian culture.

In order to show some of the faultlines which characterise Narayan's unfinished project of mapping Indianness in his imagined Malgudi, I have selected key issues with a view to exposing how the liberatory promise of an emergent nation-state became, in Ranajit Guha's words, a complete failure due to "the bourgeoisie's 'interested' refusal to recognize the importance of, or to ally themselves with," the low social strata (*Selected Subaltern Studies* 5). The themes that I have singled out are: (i) Narayan's imperious necessity to build up a historical narration providing a common history for the nation (Chapter I), a project which, in Nigam's view, is a pipe dream, given the enormous cultural plurality of India (176). What Narayan does, as might be expected, is to hark back to colonial days, thus making the association of colonialism with nationalism evident once more; (ii) Narayan's views on education and communalism (secular or religious, Chapters II and III), as fundamental values in the construction of a nation that aspires to "a deep, horizontal comradeship", free of any hierarchy (Anderson 7). This project is frustrated by a communal violence that serves solely jingoistic purposes in the national construction; (iii) Narayan's views on Dalits, one of the most problematic pieces in the national puzzle (Chapter 4). Not in vain, to Ambedkar the nation, which consciously excluded the subalterns, "an artificial chopping off the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy" ("Castes in India" 7), was a thoroughly fictive project; and finally, (iv) women, one of the fundamental participants in the transformation of Indian history, and also the repository of myth (Chapter V).

The first chapter of my dissertation follows, in detail, the testimony of Narayan's grandmother. In *The Grandmother's Tale*, Ammani, an elderly woman and the repository of the family tradition, describes an itinerary that transcends the level of the family unit in order to become the epic of a nation. The text symbolises India's journey from the colonial to the postcolonial through the intense dialogical tension between the oral discourse (the grandmother's tale itself) and written discourse (the grandchild's frustrated attempts to comprehend the heroine's psychological motivations and to reduce the imprecise contours and misty gap of years implicit in the storytelling in order to build up a cause-and-effect, linear and chronologically ordered story). The story not only follows the protagonists from childhood to adulthood but also takes the two narrators and their storytelling, the orality of Ammani and the written transcription of her grandchild, from the British colonial rule to a modern postcolonial India: it constitutes an oral record of the Raj period, the mutinies and mass subversions of caste and the religious values inspired after the colonial encounter, and the integration of the material theories in a globalised Indian society. This is the background against which the text conveys an imagined transposition of ideological values prior to the renovation of the family within the modern Indian community. These ideological transformations play a role that Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne define as a "textual double absence": the fictional narration takes the place of historicity that is, in turn, disguised in the ancient language of myth (*Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* 303).

The language of myth inevitably conveys religious associations that are an almost an essential ingredient of current political debates. These debates have taken place in India between religious activists and secular groups ever since the Indian Parliament constitutionally ratified the promotion of a secular state. Secularisation, the main theme studied in the second chapter, "Secularity and Secular Education: Three Short Stories", is

also considered a myth in a society such as the Indian by some nativist critics. It would seem obvious that a modern state is obliged to keep open a space for debate that guarantees both the secular and the religious choices of its citizens and to provide an unobtrusive legal framework that avoids the supremacy of one over the other. The analysis of the three selected short stories describes three different approaches that exist within the Indian education system: “Iswaran” represents the mixture of Hindu traditions that constitute the backbone of the joint family system with a westernised education derived from the British colonial rule, which is focused on the creation of a mass of docile Indian subjects. The protagonist Iswaran is torn between his underdeveloped maleness and his untamed Shakti, the feminine side of “the One Force”. The absence of opportunities forces his subjective abandonment to a superstitious fatality. If, as Fawzal-Khan holds, Narayan bases his writings on a strategic mythopoesis, this cannot be more evident than in this tormented teenager’s case. In fact, Iswaran crosses into the territory of myth, which is present in his evocation of the rivers, Krishna’s games, and the *ashvamedha*, the ritualistic sacrifice of a stallion following victory in a great battle. Submitted to contradictory pressures and torn apart by them, Iswaran finally comes down in favour of religion, which he recognises as central to the community’s politics, and he embraces his self-immolation in order to join those mythic fields of Hinduism.

My analysis compensates the pessimistic overtones of “Iswaran” with the light-hearted short story “Crime and Punishment”, an example which illustrates the evolution from the Brahmin system of private tuition established for the social elite to a western influenced methodology that accentuates the importance of an individualised education for more efficient results. I have chosen this short story to demonstrate that behind an apparently nonchalant narrative, lies Narayan’s critique of the past and present Indian systems of education. The practice of old-fashioned techniques based on memory,

repetition and physical punishment is now seriously questioned and challenged by new pedagogical methods based on the induction into learning through games and playful practices, especially at the early stages of education where the child's psyche can be moulded according to exercises designed to foster self-discipline instead of blind obedience to the teacher. The intention is not so much to obtain a docile subject but a healthy professional integrated into an assertive society that better serves the nation's modern challenges. This evolution implies a profound change in the conception of the traditional joint family system. The main child character in the short story epitomises the potential of the mind that is harnessed and shaped in order to fulfil the projects of the new Indian family.

The last of the three short stories, "Under the Banyan Tree" sums up the author's image of the potentially pernicious effects of an education anchored in an oral tradition through an allegorical representation of ancestral life in an Indian village. In Narayan's rural village, the unique source of education and information is the gifted storyteller, Nambi. People live an isolated existence, surrounded by forests and wilderness. Institutions are unheard of, and needs in health, education, sanitation or any alternative means of production must be met by the community alone. This village represents the ancestral India: the illiterate, exploited, stagnated rural population that receives its education from oral transmission or *suta* literature and, as G. N. Devy points out, constructs its idea of the nation through the legends of wars and heroes. In 1948, B. R. Ambedkar, in a speech addressed to the Indian Parliament, described these villages as the ruin of India and the source of every kind of social illness (*Constituent Assembly Debates* VII, II). For him, they reflected the negative effects of communalism on the individuals and on the nation as a whole. Gandhi, however, saw them as the alternative to industrialisation, a bulwark against the depersonalised metropolis. Many modern critics

see these villages as a source of anthropological diversity that must be defended against the secularisation and homogenisation of the Indian population, insisting upon the importance of the ethnic minorities within the nation. In Narayan's story, the passing of time deteriorates the original sense of words and the ancient memory of the community soon grows weak and out of tune with reality. Initially favoured by the Goddess, the storyteller, Nambi, has grown old and scatter-brained. I will suggest that for these rural communities, history is now being told in an incomprehensible language that obliterates symbolic meanings of the past, thus running the risk of being absorbed and manipulated in order to flog a communal hostility against other communities. Metaphorically, the story reflects the negative effects of self-absorption and communalism on individuals and on the nation as a whole.

The noxious effects of communalism will be analysed more in detail in the third chapter. "Communal Identities: The Reasons for Violence" examines the only short story by Narayan that addresses the communal violence that took place after India's independence. In "Another Community", Narayan presents three outstanding features that define communal violence and fundamentalism: (i) it is circumscribed to a territory; (ii) it is based on ethnic peculiarities that have conditioned the social development of the community; (iii) it is ultimately dependent on the complex relations of power pertaining to the country or the regional government. "Another Community" is Narayan's description of a society at war, a society he fictionalises in an attempt to conjure up its damaging effects on the people's unconscious. This short story creates what Peter Van der Veer calls a "hyphenated-identity" ("Transnational Religion" 7): it is the perception of a nameless protagonist who lives between two distinct spheres, the communal and the secular. The communal tradition comes from the joint family system and the secular world is represented by a westernised job in an insurance company. His emotional chaos

and the unstable political situation around him undermine his rational side. Tabish Khair points out that the construction of the colonised subject was made precisely on the basis of the dark other and the dangerous native, suggesting that Gothic fiction became the ideal vehicle to “writing of Otherness” (*The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness* 6). The fear of being polluted with secular politics is considered a threat against the communities’ ideological purity but the protagonist only dares to utter this fear after his death, which is recounted by the omniscient narrator.

In chapter four, “Annamalai”, I analyse some of the dilemmas confronted by the atavistic cultures that enrich the kaleidoscopic portrait of India. Annamalai is a symbolic name which allows us to anticipate some of the overtones contained in the short story. In “Annamalai”, Narayan constructs the complex evolution of a postcolonial Indian society from its primitive rural communities. In the unbridgeable gap between master and servant, Narayan reproduces the tension inherent in colonial discourse: the narrator, the urbanite educated in a westernised fashion that adopts a rational, pragmatic view of things, signifies the Self confronting the Other, the illiterate peasant whose code of behaviour, superstitions and laconic answers demonstrate his inability to tend the narrator’s garden in a perfect, ordered way. It therefore looks wilder and wilder as time goes by, becoming an uncanny object of both fascination and hatred, desire and repulsion. I will closely follow Bhabha here and interpret this encounter as essentially liminal: the narrator –initially secure in his advantageous position and adamant of his sense of superiority – gradually feels that the inscription of his identity (linguistic, ethnic, educational, etc.) begins to lose its moorings through his continuous interaction with Annamalai’s instinctual knowledge and apparently meaningless patterns of behaviour and ritualistic formulas. The subaltern has managed to destabilise the sense of security his master draws from the allegedly homogeneous *heim* of the post-independence, free

nation. In addition to pointing out how Annamalai's working experiences reflect some of the dark aspects of indenture, I will also interpret Annamalai's depiction through the master's gaze as essentially androgynous: strongly masculine and aggressive (some of the costumes he wears hints at the possibility that he may have been a dacoit or a thug) and female and protective in his relationship with his brother Amavasai, a combination of opposites which recalls the *harihara* union, the androgyne combination of Vishnu/Shiva (O'Flaherty 334), the creative and generative forces that rule the world of the rural family.

This dissertation cannot possibly ignore the ubiquitous presence and importance that women occupy in Narayan's fictional world. I will analyse a good number of them from a postcolonial interpretation of the traditional female archetypes. Narayan's women dwell behind a symbolic verandah, the *ghar*, the inner side of the text, and when they emerge from the narration, readers only see what that verandah allows them to see. The public sphere, the *bāhir*, is reserved for the male (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 120). My analysis will highlight the importance of *dvaita* in Hindu philosophy, the separation between the *I* and the *thou* that accomplishes the duality of inner and outer worlds and that is transformed by the nationalist discourse. Once again, Narayan's style calls on the language of Hindu tradition, which is loaded with multiple patriarchal definitions of women, and moves towards a hybridised discourse which reinterprets ancient signs with a view to accommodating women's roles in the modern Indian nation. Narayan does not hesitate to depict these women as capable of shaking the foundations of a stagnant society. In short, I contend that more than any other signifier, Narayan's female characters reflect the inevitable social evolution of Malgudi. They are situated on a faultline marked by their displacement between traditional roles and fulfilling discontinuous modern functions. Theirs is a transitional space determined by the

particularities of a traditional joint family system that has imposed referential female models – Sati, Sita and Savitri, to mention just a very few – that are no longer valid in the modern world, as Spivak argues in “Moving Devi” (132).

The order of the chapters and the selection of texts illustrate not only Narayan’s ambitious scope and the seriousness of his commitment towards the construction of a cohesive national identity throughout his long career, but also how futile his efforts to endow his imagined community with a stable, homogeneous, tension-free identity ultimately prove to be.

The Grandmother's Tale

Introduction

The first seeds of *The Grandmother's Tale* (1993) appeared as a secondary plot in *The Painter of Signs*¹ (1976) before Narayan decided to turn into a family epic. In the interval between the two versions of the story, the author changed his discourse on India's socio-political reality, especially the way he addressed female independence and his own idealised family origins. The novella fuses periods of British colonial rule with personal memories of the postcolonial writer. It is a "cultural [re]appropriation" of certain structural and thematic characteristics of classic Indian epics that are identified with "the cultural history and the identity of India as an imagined community" (A. B. Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* 175).² Such epics include the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and its "philosophical poem", *The Bhagavad-Gita*, "Song of the Lord" (Miller 1). These works are moral guides, "applicable for all time and for all conditions of life" (Narayan, *The Ramayana* 22)³ and they convey the vastness of Indian heritage.

The purpose of this analysis is to disclose the *in-betweenness* of the novella's discursive structures and Indian literary traditions. In my analysis, I have concluded that the four historical stages of *The Grandmother's Tale*⁴ are a representation of India's historical evolution and that the text is closely attached to the discursive concept of Indianness. My references to *The Painter* are mostly secondary and I have used them to illustrate the works' thematic and ideological progress. Primarily, the short novel has a

¹ From now on *The Painter*.

² Henceforth *Theatres of Independence*.

³ Hereafter *Ramayana*.

⁴ From now on *The Grandmother's*.

twofold discursive structure: Oral Tradition, *suta*, and textual discourse, or *akshara*. The former is based on hearsay from a remote past. The second is the fictional reinscription of that past in which R. K. Narayan becomes an active storyteller who is rewriting his personal life story so as to make it part of the family's epic adventure. At times, it forms an analeptic recollection of his own personal life and his biographical beginnings as a writer. The author has divided the historical space into two levels of abstraction: the subjective, which is infused in the narration, and the objective, which is absent. The temporal span of the novella goes from British colonial rule in the early decades of the nineteenth century to India's postcolonial era. However, the story can also be divided into three spheres: Private, Public and Mythic. None of these are clearly differentiated, univocal or isolated. On the contrary, they all interact with one another and have multifarious connections that keep changing according to the dialogic nature of the text and the temporal evolution of the plot lines. The work thus reflects the multifaceted and heteroglossic richness of Indian society. The characters transcend their fictional role and can be seen to represent the Indian symbolic order. Still, the novella maintains its integrity as a work of fiction, especially for those who are not familiar with R. K. Narayan's figurative language.

This paper is organised into five sections, beginning with the *Origins of the Myth*, where I discuss Indian colonialism, the memory of the family and the construction of the text. The section entitled *Historical Space* considers the relationship between the work of fiction and reality and how these blend together with classic Indian literature. *Struggles for Independence* studies how the short story transcends the nature of a subaltern romance passage to describe the work's postcolonial condition. *The Postcolonial Experience* sheds some light on Narayan's work and biographical evolution together with tradition and

modernity from a theoretical perspective. The last section contains my conclusions and certain defining characteristics of R. K. Narayan's work.

The Novella

R. K. Narayan (1906-2001) developed his writer's identity through revisiting and reformulating the ideas and topics contained in his novels and collections over the course of nearly six decades. Every so often, an essay or a short story has preceded one of his novelistic adventures. This thematic reiteration is what William Walsh defines as "the circularity and repetitiveness of human experience [...] made up of incessant tradition" (*R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation* 98). Walsh points to "a degree of deliberate and critical artistic testing and re-testing of the possibilities of a fictional idea" in Narayan's writings (98), an observation which is true of this work's construction: a novel's subsidiary plot, dealing with a marginal character, crystallises, years later, into a complex text in the form of a novella. For John Thieme, the term *novella* suggests "that the 'real-life' story is fiction" (179). Thus, *The Painter* contains a secondary character, the maternal aunt of the main character, Raman, who introduces the family's epic quest that is later reported in *The Grandmother's*. The Aunt, Laxmi, descends from a different daughter of the same family: she is the grandmother Ammani's niece and her perspective is slightly different from that of Ammani's. The Aunt has lived through the oral memory of the family epic that has provided her with the symbolic female value acquired by the primeval woman, who transferred it to her descendants in a matrilineal oral tradition. The first approach to the novella shows two distinct perspectives and discourses. Firstly, the discourse of the grandmother embodies both Indian memory and colonial rule, the "collective inheritance" (Devy, "Of Many Heroes" 32). Secondly, the narrator's discourse – that of a young Narayan in search of both a story and the family's oral memory in order

to record it in written form – is a personal quest set against the backdrop of national history, with its backward steps, its developments and its achievements.

Origins of the Myth

The story takes place “anywhere in the Southern Peninsula” (*The Grandmother's* 8), and although Narayan’s biographical portrait begins before independence, the narrative structure, account and discursive artefacts correspond to those of Indian postcolonial discourse. The timeline goes back and forth with deliberate ambiguity, parsing the oral memory into broken incisions of dialogue between the two narrators, bringing the fiction back to reality. The authorial voice merges at times with the storyteller’s, lending a sense of truth to the construction of an oral epic text:

As far as possible, I have tried to retain the flavour of her [Narayan’s Grandmother] speech, though the manner of her narrative could not be reproduced as it proceeded in several directions back and forth and got mixed up with asides and irrelevancies. (7)

In Britta Olinder’s opinion, Narayan’s storyteller “acts as an intermediary between writer and reader [...]. He creates a certain distance from the action while at the same time being involved in it. He has the double role of observer and actor” (337). Lending credence to some aspects of these statements, the grandmother as a storyteller overlooks the historical role of cultural and ideological transmission embedded in the artistic act of storytelling. The storyteller fulfils a social function whereas the writer translates the oral text to the reader by putting it down in a written discourse. In this case, he is translating from Tamil oral tradition into English. Hence, Narayan pays tribute to those storytellers, particularly, to South Indian grandmothers, who are responsible for transmitting, almost

unchanged, the millenary Indian oral culture. Thus, in my opinion, the intermediary of the discourse is the 'story-writer' and not the storyteller [the grandmother].

Olinder goes on to argue that “[m]odern experimentation and new techniques in writing seem to have very little appeal for Narayan. [...] The sheer enjoyment in the telling of stories is his aim and his driving force” (340). Modern criticism has analysed the apparent absence of intentionality in the authorial voice and this, in Olinder’s opinion, seems to be applicable in Narayan’s case. However, Olinder seems unaware that most of the time, Narayan’s characters are ambiguous and the structure of the text is open-ended, which implies that the readers are free to reinterpret Narayan’s work and find alternative meanings according to their own interpretive capacities. In Thieme’s view, for example, the manner in which *The Grandmother's* “is told throws up a range of questions about narration, making it another metaliterary text” (185).

According to Roland Barthes, the writer “is born simultaneously with the text” (“The Death of the Author” 145), and, seen in this light, R. K. Narayan comes into existence through his translation of the Tamil oral text. The moment of enunciation of a written text corresponds to the very act of reading it, and therefore, in an oral transmission, there is a successive performative act of enunciation that “has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered”. The reason of being is born from “language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins” (146). By leaving an open-ended structure, Narayan upgrades the importance of the contextual frame and enhances the relativity of signifieds which make them, all at once, dependent on historicity and the hegemonic superstructures of power. From Thieme’s perspective, “the story is a process of layered accretion and this destroys any illusion of definitive narrative authority” (184).

The *novella* proceeds as follows: a young Narayan is trying to make a living as a writer. He still lives in the family house in Madras. His grandmother represents his motherly figure; his uncles are Narayan's guides in the adult world of jobs and businesses. Narayan's biographical narration ends up with Ammani's tale, an oral memory brought up from her childhood: "this is mainly a story-writer's version of a hearsay biography of a great-grandmother" (8). From this moment on, the narration takes on a dialogic form moving from reality to fiction, from an epic past to the construction of a text. These dialogic structures are displayed at different strata of conscience and different historical and temporal spaces. The *suta* (oral) character of the transmission finds the particularities of "historical moments of origin and individual authorships" irrelevant. Its goal is to represent history creating a "'presence of the past' but not 'the pastness of the past'" (Devy, "Of Many Heroes" 32-34): "One has to assume an arbitrary period – that is the later period of the East India Company, before the Sepoy Mutiny" (*The Grandmother's* 8), or in other words, the end of the Raj period or the Princely States, and the beginning of the British Raj or British colonial rule in India.

The main characters of the grandmother's story, her parents Bala[mbal] and Viswa[nath], are the protagonists of an epic quest towards success: they were married when they were still children through a family arrangement. Viswa leaves the village and his wife because of poverty and absence of opportunities. He finds prosperity in a remote city, changes his name and marries another woman, Surma. Bala leaves the village eventually, finds and recognises Viswa and manages to recover him by breaking his fifteen-year marriage with Surma (36). Bala consummates the relationship and brings Viswa back to live with her somewhere else.

The Tamil Nadu region is rich in folk and epic tales transmitted by professional storytellers who “seek to combine myth and history” (Devy, “Of Many Heroes” 35). For example, one epic story in circulation from the fifteenth-century tells of a grandfather, *Anṇaṇmār*,⁵ who leaves his family and poverty-stricken village in search of a job, wins the favour of a king and thus brings wealth to his family, but also fights for the riches with his relatives. Meanwhile, the *suta* tradition says that the sage Valmiki took the inspiration of *Ramayana* from the pain of a “dying bird”, a crane, and its widow. It was a marital departure from life (Narayan, *Gods, Demons and Others* 136). The storyline of the classic text is the battle between the forces of Good and Evil. Rama is the perfect prince and “a model of social perfection” (Kinsley 68), who is married to Sita, the perfect Hindu wife and a “victim of injustices [that] remains loyal and steadfast to her husband” (Kinsley 65). His loyal devotee Hanuman, a member of the “monkey race”, helps him (*Ramayana* 106). Rama is also an incarnation of Vishnu who, “with human limitations of understanding” (*Ramayana* 106), descends to destroy the rakshasa⁶ Ravana who abducted Sita and threatened the world’s order. Afterwards, Rama becomes the guarantee for “an idealized reign in which harmony, longevity, order, fruitful crops, and all social, political, and economic virtues dominate society to the exclusion of all ills” (Kinsley 68). This myth is part of the Hindu philosophy. Narayan’s fictional tale of Bala and Viswa thus has its roots in the ancient Indian tradition whereby Gods are active agents that play an important role, that descend from the transcendental to the human dimension in such a way that they lose their mythic features and become ordinary human beings. Narayan’s introductory words to his *Ramayana* read: “[E]ven in the humblest social unit or family, we can detect a Rama striving to establish peace and justice in conflict with a Ravana” (*Ramayana* 22). His novella offers additional insight into the time in his childhood when

⁵ Anṇaṇmār. A Dictionary of Asian Mythology.

⁶ Demon.

he “had to recite Sanskrit verse and slokas in praise of Goddess Saraswathi” (*The Grandmother's* 4), in keeping with his grandmother's instructions. Accordingly, God is the all-knowing Self that holds memory and amnesia and represents the totality of things. He is the cosmic *purusha* and “*a priori* reality,” a “contingent ego” that “must learn as a child about its father” (Coomaraswamy qtd. in Devy, “After Amnesia” 55). He is Ranganatha (*The Grandmother's* 9, 51), the Tamil Nadu version of Lord Narayana⁷, “the essence of the individual”; “the unifying being” and symbolically, the author of the novella. Though he is not the father of his text, he must learn about it from his grandmother. As Barthes puts it in “From Work to Text”, the author's “life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work” (161).

Thus, the “omniscient Self” of the Creator descends into the narration as the storyteller. Unaware of his own nature, he symbolises the blind king Dhritarashtra who is granted a boon from sage Vyasa, traditionally considered the author of the *Mahabharata*. The king is told that, when the battle at Kurukshetra breaks out, “[h]e will be able to hear an account of the battle from Sage Sanyaja” (Miller 5), and the boon consists in hearing the description of “everything taking place during day or night, in public or in secret” (Miller 5) from Sanyaja who will see “with his mind” whatever the king wishes to know of the battle. Thus, there is an explicit similitude between the young Narayan as author and Dhritarashtra as privileged participant in the battle. Meanwhile, the battlefield of Kurukshetra “is not only a physical place” but “a state of mind”, a spiritual mood that reveals inner conflicts between *dharma* on the one hand (“sacred duty” and moral order) and *adharma* on the other (lawlessness, amorality and chaos). These religious concepts are “codes of conduct” applicable to all groups “in the hierarchically ordered Hindu society” (Miller 3). In this paper, they signify the emergent self-fighting to create its

⁷ Narayana. A Dictionary of Hinduism.

private space in opposition to others' spaces, which may imply questioning one's own learnings from "kinsmen and teachers" (Miller 1).

Additional points regarding the importance of the *Purana* texts in Narayan's works are that the *Mahabharata* is an epic poem and represents the Indian national saga. It belongs to the *smriti*⁸ literature of the *Puranas* and enjoys a "cultural centrality" that keeps it present in "the collective consciousness" (Devy, "Of Many Heroes" 33). "The nucleus of the story" is the conflict between the two branches of a ruling family of *kshatriyas*⁹: the five sons of Pandu, the Pandavas, and the one hundred sons of Dhritarashtra, the Kauravas. Originally, it was called *Jaya* (triumph or victory) or *Itihasa*. The myth says that the sage Vyasa had the inspiration from Brahma. Shiva's son, Ganesha, the god with an elephant head, acted as amanuensis, and "accepted the assignment with the condition that there should be no pause in the dictation". Vyasa's condition was that "Ganesha realised and understood the meaning of every word before putting it down in writing". When his stylus failed due to the sage's dictation speed, "he broke one of his tusks and continued the writing" (Narayan, *The Mahabharata* vii). The text was extended and added to with verses from several sources until it reached its present size. It constitutes a supreme appeal to the national conscience of every generation of Indians. It is also centred on the moral principles of Dharma.

Four key-questions present in *The Grandmother's* are also to be found in the general explanation of the Purana texts included above: 1) a moral and family conflict; 2) the oral transmission of memory; 3) the interpretation, translation and writing down of the oral discourse, and 4) the identitarian concept of Indianness. Thus, the "Indian social practice" of using epics as deposits of idealisations and moral lessons allows the myth to

⁸ It is the literature of seers. It is interpreted or deducted, and not a revealed literature (*shruti*).

⁹ Warriors.

pervade the textual fiction of the novella (Devy, "Of Many Heroes" 179). Consequently, Narayan's character Ammani is now the sage Sanyaja, and Vyasa, the *Mahabharata's* author, transcends the fictional space to become Narayan who reinvents it all anew. Due to the transference of information between the two narrators, both simultaneously possess "the divine inner eye" of the sage Sanyaja and the blindness of king Dhritarashtra. Furthermore, the context of the epic is symbolically reconstructed through a sequential distribution of India's history throughout the text, the Raj period, British colonial rule, and India's pre-independence period. This sequential distribution is supported by the dialogic nature of the text, with its twofold narrative structure and the three well-differentiated spheres: the private, public and mythic. The female Oral Tradition represents historical memory, the reproduction of what has been learned and repeated across generations, along with doses of amnesia, which have also been transmitted with memory, be it deliberately or simply through gaps in knowledge. However, the epic narrative itself is a thematic device that has grown larger with the families of *The Painter* and *The Grandmother's*, helping to stitch together both oral discourse and female identity. The predictable reactions and the thematic recollections are constraints that help to stabilise the family tradition (Rubin 18), and the disruption of the oral memory breaks the act of recall. As with the dictation of the *Mahabharata* to Ganesha, Ammani cannot be interrupted; otherwise, she says, "I forget where I was, I am only telling you what I know!" (36).

The females enact their symbolic discourse of power through the sequential recollection of what was transmitted to them when they were very young. This transmission includes the metaphoric act of closing their mind [eyes] to knowledge, just as Ambika, Dhritarashtra's mother, did when she was fertilised by the sage Vyasa: she closed her eyes after seeing the terrifying aspect of the sage, and caused her son's

blindness. In *The Painter*, Raman “had heard the [family’s] story piecemeal again and again” as his Aunt kept telling him whenever “his mood was tranquil and receptive” (31). Thus, the blind king [the storyteller] needs the sage [Ammani/the Aunt], who can see the past and the future, to report the battle that was supposed to restore the moral order of *dharma*. Conscious of their transcendental importance, the Aunt had already demanded the transcription of her memories, albeit without success: “If you write my story, you [Raman] will make more money than you do now writing signboards for all the merchants of the town” (*The Painter* 18).

Additionally, the oral narrative is ruled by subjectivity, imprecisions and inaccuracies. “My grandmother’s account had many gaps,” says the narrator of *The Grandmother’s*: “I can only tell you what I have heard from my mother [...] You can’t expect me to know everything. If you want all sorts of useless information about the past I cannot help you.” (24-25). This highlights the fact that the oral transmission was linear, with stories passed from mother to children, though Narayan’s mother only remembered being at the funeral of the “Poona Grandee”, “a hazy recollection of being carried on the arms of her mother [Ammani] at Kumbakonam [...] following a funeral” (66). Therefore, the historical memory is constructed from those subjective and objective elements that Bala had transmitted to her children, and the narrative absences, the empty spaces of her narration that she never wanted to let them know, have to be guessed or imagined in a site that pertains to the fictional realm of historicity. She, like “Rama who has been borne to restore righteousness and virtue to mankind and eliminate evil” and who also restored the order of *Dharma* on earth, cannot let her “heart be burdened with what is past and gone” (*Ramayana* 44). References to Bala’s death are sparse and fleeting, as if she had shed her human skin and entered the world of heroes and immortality: “when the obsequies were over, my brother and sisters returned to their respective places” (58). “The good lady bore

him several sons and daughters and died when her husband was seventy-five years old” (*The Painter* 32).

These narrative spaces are indicative of small-scale communication where the private and public realms have porous borders. In *The Painter*, the Aunt is a versatile communicator, “hardly noticed” by Raman. Her visitors “dropped in to seek her advice on some domestic matters, listen to her discourse on the gods, swallow some herbal remedy, or listen to her prophecies from a horoscope” (*The Painter* 18). These interactions display an important degree of family behaviour, and represent the Indian social tradition of villages and local places. They are replicated in *The Grandmother's*: “Ammani was a busy person. [...] counselling neighbours and the tenants living in the rear portion of the vast house [...] settling disputes, studying horoscopes and arranging matrimonial alliances” (3). The microcosm is constrained by both the structure of the text and the self-centred family tradition¹⁰. This particular space is characterised by a minimal level of abstraction. People’s attention is focused on their primary necessities and concerns, such as family and work. In an interview related to *The Painter* for the *British Sunday Times*, Narayan said:

There is a gap, which I make use of, between the larger events and the individual lives of people. A man in a village will be preoccupied with the rains, the monsoon, his neighbours and the cattle, though he will be aware of the important things from outside that affect his life. (Thieme 136)

For Ammani, the storyteller’s interruptions and inquiries about a remote past annoy her to the extent that she deflects his questions by claiming ignorance:

¹⁰ I will dwell on the subjects of self-centredness and social status later on.

Did Surma Bai have no children? I don't care if she had or had not or where they were, how is it our concern? [...] Anyway it is none of our business. My mother mentioned Surma, and only Surma and not a word about anyone else. (36)

Here Ammani mimics the final state of renunciation, the *sanyasa*, where one's past is no longer relevant. She behaves like the famous sage Viswamitra who was a king before becoming a *sanyasa* and was "rather irked" when he was reminded of it: "what has that to do with us now? (*Ramayana* 32).

A more political perspective is offered by Thieme, who agrees with John Hawley's critical opinion that "the grandmother's exasperation at being questioned can be related to Narayan's resistance to those who wished to direct his writing in another direction, towards questions he chose not to address" (183). He even suggests that "the story is about narrative transmission and ownership with its meaning" coming out of "the interplay between its two main voices" (183). However, this opinion implies an unlikely Narayan trying to own the interpretation of the meanings of his work.

The second structural difference is found in the design and articulation of the text. This place is occupied by the storyteller's male voice. Using his reporting narration, he inscribes historicity in Ammani's story and fabricates an in-betweenness that contains the macro-space of the historical discourse. His aim is to preserve memory within a diachronic perspective and, simultaneously, to give voice to those petty affairs usually overlooked in the general account of a historical period. He keeps a critical distance from events while the subjective narration becomes the object of his textual construction, where an alternative space is erected in the absence of history. This is a formal device that produces the result of "decentering" the narration from the action "toward a wider

political intention” (Jameson 45). His account goes through the historical periods of India’s foreign rule, leaving a gap open for their discursive insertion in the manner of unanswered questions: When “Viswa’s father and Bala’s asked simultaneously, ‘Where is Viswa?’” (19), they realise that nobody has seen him for ten days: “I saw him with a group crossing the river...” says “a little fellow in the crowd” but the boy does not know when. “He said he was going to Delhi” is his answer, which nobody takes seriously because of the vastness of Indian geography and the task undertaken by the thirteen-year-old adventurer. These comments locate the story around the year 1857 when the Sepoy Mutiny began: “Delhi is thousands of miles away...”, says a “[w]ell-wisher of the family”. “I hear sepoys are killing white officers”, exclaimed another. The subjective sphere brings the historical events down to the well-trodden path ignoring broader political implications. A concerned witness states, “Who cares who kills whom while we are bothered about Viswa?” (19-20).

The recorded discourse also elaborates a heteroglossic space that constitutes a place of displacement where the ideological discourse of power is enacted. The textual fictions abandon their abstract subjectivity and become a corporeal and geographical reality. The discourse on “territoriality” is synonymous of hegemonic power, insurrection, struggle and counter-discourse practices (Ranjit Guha, *Elementary Aspects*¹¹ 278). When Viswa goes to Delhi, in the Haryana region, he moves from the south, Kumbakoram, in the Tamil Nadu region, to the north. These regions have different languages and different cultural and political inscriptions. His displacement is geographical but also constitutes a psychological displacement from childhood to maturity, from impositions to individual choices: Viswanath goes from the village to the metropolis in a personal quest towards the North, which for him represents the land of opportunities. “[A] village boy from far

¹¹ Original title, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*.

off south should have had the courage to go out as far as Delhi” (34). He accomplishes a centripetal movement towards the centre of power. He is attracted by those social forces coming from rural areas which gather around merchants and the means of production, favoured by political liaisons established between the Princely States and the East Indian Company. On his way to success, he learns to articulate language, dressing and manners; when Viswa providentially asked for a job to his future father-in-law, he demanded an explanation of his past: “How did you learn our language?” [Marathi]. “I was in Bombay and learnt it” (34), was Viswa’s answer. He suffers the forces of erosion that polish and transform him into a different being who has already envisioned power and has decided to re-create himself mimicking these expressions of power. He becomes a gem carved out of a raw stone. When he finds his mentor in Poona, he follows a “strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power.” (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” 126).¹² He is immersed in the colonial discourse of mimicry, he learns a profession and involves himself in the activities of the Other, reflecting the Other’s qualities: “Father was impressed with the boy’s intelligence and the ease with which he could be trained” (34). Viswanath impersonates and absorbs the appearance of the powerful. In the symbolic order, he is re-born as a “Shiva” with a third eye of glass, adorned with “an elegant little tuft on his top” (34). “[Surma] induced him to grow whiskers so that he might have a weighty appearance” (35). The power of his eyeglass could assess value as well as prevent flaws and dubious business: “he examined the stone and gave his verdict” (53). In the Tamil Nadu region, the protagonist of the quest might symbolise Viswanath¹³, the “Lord of all, a byname of Shiva”, served by Adi Laskshmi [Surma], the goddess of plenty who “constantly expressed her admiration and love for Viswanath” (35). To complete the symbolic order, “Bala” is what Parvathi,

¹² Full title, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”.

¹³ Viswanath. A Dictionary of First Names.

Shiva's wife, was called when she was young.¹⁴ In addition, Viswanath keeps his gems and "wares in a small bureau" that becomes the heirloom of the young writer who uses it to put his "school books and odds and ends" in it (52). The child also wrote on the top panel his full name and his imagined persona, "B.A.B.L. Engine Driver" (52). Narayan thus mixes a piece of furniture from his own childhood with the fictional character to bring reality into the narration. William Walsh points out that in Narayan's works "[o]bjects become hallowed with more than their own nature and invested with singular and lasting importance" in such a way that they impede "the lightness and fluency of a manner" of writing to "be too evasive, too spiritual" (*Indian Literature in English* 78). Taking this statement as a starting point, it is worth noting that this textual artefact, a flavour of childhood, works as cultural translation into English of certain aspects of Indianness and thus provides Narayan with an anchor in his Indian roots without which the narration is dissolved in transient reality and an uncertain future. In Walsh's words, it "help[s] to enclose the souls of these people in flesh, pitted, worn and ordinary flesh" (*Indian Literature in English* 78). Thus, metaphorically, the imagined great-grandfather transmits to the storyteller the symbolic container of the family's wealth and success.¹⁵ In this particular case, the epic myth is inscribed in narrative through a realistic biographical account, without the petrifying effects of Indian historical tradition.

The short story describes the "new man", seen through Bala's eyes as "a man of these parts", riding on his horse instead of a bull as Shiva does, "dressed in breeches and embroidered vest and crowned with a turban" (28). Viswa is a grand Marathi merchant, although Bala's impression is that he is "rather lean and of medium height", unlike "the man from the Tamil Land" (28). Apparel and dressing are also "ambivalent spaces" for

¹⁴ http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Bala_Mukthavali_Stotram.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that in his autobiography *My Days, A Memoir*, Narayan writes that his great-grandfather was "the dewan at Arcot" from whom he received "a fine pair of pearls", ear-rings "set in gold", when he was a child. He lost one of them which upset Ammani (19).

disguise and the “double inscriptions” of an enacting power that needs “the repetition of discriminatory identity effects” to become an iconic authority (Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders”¹⁶ 154). When later on, Bala sees Viswa “lounging in a couch”, a divan, dispossessed of his turban, bald on the top of his head with his face “behind a wilderness of hair” (50) formed by the “whiskers reaching up to his earlobes”, she feels that she is in front of somebody in disguise, a carnivalesque figure, “a ghoul” (49). She identifies those mimetic devices of colonial power and decides to subvert them by forcing the “recognition” of her own insurgent authority. Thus, she wants to pull his whiskers to verify the existence of a birthmark under his left ear.

Body marks are also considered “lucky signs” (12) according to Indian traditions. Asita, the “teacher and later chaplain to the Buddha’s father [...] made a prophecy about the child’s destiny based on the auspicious marks on its body”. This knowledge and the “art of prediction based on bodily movements” is called *Āṅgavidyā*¹⁷, or the “science of limbs”. Viswanath bears the marks of a *Mahapurusa* except that in his case the birthmark is placed on his left side, which is a symptom of a blind impulse, the unconscious side of a *Vaishvanara*, the universal man. The author plays with the etymology and phonetics of this word, which is close to the character’s name. The genitive case is *Vishvanara*: “Vishva”¹⁸ means the universe as a physical phenomenon, or the macrocosm; and “nara” means man, male of the specie. Viswa is marked symbolically in the same way as the first man of creation but he is flawed with some imperfection. An “expert appraiser” of men, like an “appraiser of gems”, would surely have advised against Viswa before he “w[as] handed over to the goldsmith” for his gold “setting” (53), just as Surma’s father does when he threatens “to throw him out not only from our shop but from this country itself”

¹⁶ Original title, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817”.

¹⁷ *Āṅgavidyā*, A Dictionary of Hinduism.

¹⁸ Vishva, nara. *Arvind Lexicon*

(35) after discovering Viswa and Surma's love affair. Bala thus comes to suppose that the whole compound of the man is a pose, a rich merchant's mask. As Tiffin and Lawson conclude in *De-Scribing Empire*: "The colonial dress [is] a place of ambiguity and ambivalence" (231). That dress is the external sign which shows Viswa's prosperity and new re-constructed persona.

Furthermore, Viswa's success is based on his ability to forget his own past. His "double vision" enables him to acquire those tools which he did not find in the "natural" space of his origin and, simultaneously, create a space of negation of that origin, forced by the necessity of his integration into this realm of security and prosperity. In his essay "Of Mimicry and Man"¹⁹, Bhabha explains that there are "two attitudes towards external reality [...] one takes reality into consideration while the other disavows it and replaces it by a product of desire that repeats, rearticulates "reality" as mimicry" (132). Thus, when Bala finds Viswa "reclining on a comfortable couch" (36), the weight of myth penetrates her being. She becomes like Hanuman "on the soil of Lanka" [...] "filled with pain and anger" because she is "undergoing such suffering in [her] quest for [her husband]" (*Ramayana* 134) while her husband remains unconcerned about her struggles. Bala travels along the transcendental space of the narration and plays the role of an active hero, whereas Viswa is placed in a fictional reality and represents a passive subject.²⁰ Both are two sides of the same Dependent Origination, *pratītya-samutpāda*,²¹ or of Indian tradition as a whole. Unlike Sita crying, "O Rama! Have you forgotten me?" (*Ramayana* 135), Viswa denies his own past and language in order to fulfil the "Indian dream" of

¹⁹ "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", full title.

²⁰ In Indian tradition, Rama and male characters in general are proactive heroes while Sita, Savitri and other female subjects represent passiveness, resignation and self-effacement. They are not active heroines but symbolic archetypes of the perfect wife. Nevertheless, there are also strong archetypical heroines, such as Kunthi, Draupadi and Shakuntala that appear in the *Mahabharata* (*Encyclopedia for Epics of Ancient India*).

²¹ The Buddhist concept of cause and effect. Arising phenomena are linked to "causes and conditions" and "lack intrinsic being". They do not happen on their own (*A Dictionary of Buddhism*). The concept is also related to fatality or destiny.

integrating himself in a richer, more advanced society. It is reported that, when Bala finds him at his house in Poona and asks him if he speaks Tamil, expecting some kind of help from the stranger, “this man [shows] no sign of understanding Tamil in which she [is] addressing him” (30). It seems that just like a soul who drinks from the river of eternity, Viswa forgets his old life to begin his “next jamna”(48).²² Nevertheless, whilst Viswa remains within the colonial space, he himself being a colonised subject, Bala rebels against the submissive obedience imposed by tradition and moves out of the stereotype, thus transcending her gender role. This inversion of gender roles in *The Grandmother's*, with respect to those found in the *Ramayana*, goes so far as to situate Viswa living “in luxury now” and “yielding [himself] to Ravana” (*Ramayana* 134) while Bala becomes more like Hanuman who “explain[s] all that ha[s] happened these many months” and “establishe[s] [her] identity” (135). In the *Ramayana*, Hanuman “show[s] Rama’s ring” (135) to Sita to prove the truth of his agency. In *The Grandmother's*, Bala “fingered her *thali*” to remind Viswa of their reciprocal bondage: “I have waited long enough”. She sees Viswa’s birthmark and exclaims: “The black is still there, which proved correct my guess” (*The Grandmother's* 37). Bala recognises Viswanath in the same way that Hanuman intuitively identifies Rama: “Though he has not revealed his true self yet, I sense his identity [...] he has the marks of the Conch and the Disc on his palm” (*Ramayana* 110). Moreover, the mutual bondage between the mythic heroes was created “[w]hen [Hanuman] was young, [and his] father [...] commanded [him], “You shall dedicate your life to the service of Vishnu.”” (*Ramayana* 110). In Bala’s case, it was also “[her] father [who] came up and said, “You are going to be married next week”” (9). Therefore, as a double [im]-migrant subject, Viswanath travels within India to find his prosperity in a strange, language-differentiated territory and also, moves from his old self

²² Next birth.

to another self which is dictated and defined by the authority values that are present in the colonial state of Maharashtra when struggles against colonial rule have already begun. When Bala finds him, “he [has become] an expert in judging diamonds and all gems. His advice and appraisal is sought by everyone in this city” (32). Nonetheless, his desire to remain the object of colonial mimicry is shaken and destroyed by his *Ālaya-vijñāna*,²³ the private and public spheres that make imperative his duties and bondages to the Indian tradition and his own past.

The symbolic value of the *thali* knotted around Bala’s neck when she is seven years old is the force of absolute power invoked as an icon and as a noose that carries a complex hermeneutic system.²⁴ “This can’t lie. You knotted it in the presence of God” (37). In Linda Hutcheon’s words: “Religion and other systems of belief have been called into question as essentializing totalizations which create power relations” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 209). Bala, the ritual wife, opens a breach and creates a new space of translation where traditional signs have the same interpretation as family bonds, an honourable name or the importance of forms: these synonyms are contained within the hegemonic discourse of power in which Viswa is socially ambivalent and is subjected to “the court and high places for consultations and supply of gems” (35). Therefore, the same hermeneutics imposed by traditional India become a weapon in the hands of “an insurgent counter-appeal” (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” 131) that challenges those colonial values of mimicry and enforces the transcendental space of memory. This is evident when Bala demands her place as the official wife: “After all these years! I can’t.

²³ Receptacle-consciousness or the “subjective consciousness underlying cognition and personal experience through time” (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*).

²⁴ The *thali* also carries personal significance for Narayan, highlighting the contrast between his wedding day when he tied the *thali* around Rajam’s neck and her funeral day, when “[j]ust before her body was put on the pyre, the very last thing I had to do was to untie her *thali*, remove something or other, and tie it again, loosely and indifferently”. On both occasions, the social rituals revolve around the symbolic *thali*, but for Narayan an unbridgeable distance exists between “a hollow, illusory joke”, which it seems to be in Viswa’s case, and an “eternal value”, which is what it represents for Bala (Ram and Ram 283).

I can't leave my trade!' 'You may take your share and continue the business anywhere', she said calmly" (38). Bala is demanding from Viswa a return to his origins. She wants him to moult his skin and to change his appearance according to her "orthodox" traditional Indianness (53). Inspired by the *Ramayana*, she transcends herself, becoming a new version of Kaikeyi, the queen who demands the fulfilment of the promises made to her by king Dasaratha when she saved his life. Queen Kaikeyi is the mother of Bharata whose loyalty to his elders is symbolically identified with India and its condition of mother nation.

Historical Space

The Grandmother's major characteristic is the in-betweenness involved in the transmission, translation and reinterpretation of the story that crosses the boundaries of its objective representation, with the hermeneutics of the sign, the text and the historical past inscribed in the textual imagery in the form of a town. The action moves to Poona and the narrator asks his grandmother for Bala's means of travel and reasons for going to this place: "Why she went to Poona to search for her husband? What were the steps that led her steps to Poona?" (25). The key question is the heroine's account of relevant information which she has not mentioned to her siblings, and the answers must be sought in the textual discourse of historicity and its relationship with the territoriality present in the *novella*, bearing in mind that these kinds of omissions respond to ideological reasons. The storyteller is aware of the importance of establishing a contextual framework to improve the reliability of his transcription. The insistence with which he sometimes exasperates his grandmother reflects the need for carving out a space that shapes the "historic concreteness" of Bala's rebellion. He is trying to associate the subjective private space with a particular diachronic moment of Indian historicity. This is significant

because at that time, geography and consequently territoriality implied different legal frameworks. With Viswanath absent for many years, Bala has become a widow in the eyes of the priest and the village people. Her insistence on being a “Sumangali”, a married woman, “pollutes the temple precinct and its holiness is lost” (22). She loses her status and is alienated in her community, and the momentum of her rebellion is provoked by gossip: she is accused of the symbolic desecration of the temple in her occasional visits to pray. According to Indian tradition, the public sphere must be clearly differentiated from the private one. Otherwise, it brings about a state of *adharma*. In Narayan’s *Ramayana*, the *asura*²⁵ Mareecha warns his nephew Ravana against public opinion: “You should not become a subject of gossip in this or other worlds” (96).

History is enunciated through dialogic “distortions”. It is not present in the text but in disguised form. This is what Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne call a “double absence” (303). In this blurred space, Narayan has constructed a fictional story out of a few facts relating to a historical period, thereby creating an “imagined transposition” whereby fiction enters the space of the “real”; a translation which obliges the reader to bear in mind that historicity is inevitably a narration and therefore an ideological construction. Seen in this light, Bala’s role as an Indian woman is that of “*Terra Nullius*”, whereby she does not own herself but rather must be owned, if her life is to contain any sense. Left on its own, it is simply an infertile land. As a woman, she is “naturally” born as a colonised subject. In these circumstances, her name’s meanings – strength, power, capacity and force – transcend the subject after her “drinking” the poisonous gossip that she is subjected to because of Viswanath. She reacts “like a storm” and promises: “I’ll not rest until I come back with him some day, and shame you all” (23). She becomes Kali, and “her mind harp[s] on a single word: ‘Pandaripur’” (24). “‘Bala! You look like Kali ...

²⁵ Asura: a demon.

what is the matter?” says her mother-in-law (23). She leaves the village and finally, she “reache[s] Poona about a year later” (24).

Taking the *Ramayana* as a textual reference, *The Grandmother's* inverts geographical addresses and gender roles: where it reads South in the *Ramayana*, it must be read North in *The Grandmother's*; where it reads the male hero Rama in the first case, it must be seen the family heroine Bala in the second. Soon enough, Bala immerses herself in a “desperate quest” for Viswa and she must carry out her sacred duty. In her journeying northwards, instead of being “an incarnation of Vishnu, the Supreme God, in human form” [Rama] who “follow[s] [Viswanath's] trail by hearsay and hints” (*Ramayana* 106), she incarnates the Goddess Kali²⁶ in her attitude of putting “the order of dharma in perspective”, an order which implies that she must be with Viswanath, even if she subverts traditional ways. Just like Kali, she teaches her people “that certain aspects of reality are untameable, unpurifiable, unpredictable” and that life itself can be an expression of disorder (Kinsley 129).

Moreover, the fictional narrative can also be associated with historical facts to confer upon it “a pluralist view of historiography”, based on records and official documents which are “the textualized remains of the past” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 96). They tell us that those years were years of rebellion and rural uprisings against a feudal regime, usury from moneylenders and religious conflicts between Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Most of the mass mobilisations involved spontaneous convulsions in multiple places across the country, triggered by unchecked rumours of news that rapidly spread all over the country. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, rumour is one of “the series of intermediate forms” that serve “the transition from symbol to meaning, from magical to normal, from supernatural to social” (Lévi-Strauss

²⁶ The Oxford Companion to World Mythology.

262), which, simultaneously, fulfils the function of revealing and hiding evidences, being uncontrollable in magnitude and in accuracy. As a solitary woman, Bala has to travel with pilgrims from temple to temple, “steps that [lead] her steps”, towards Pandaripur. She must combine her challenge and search with the places where God’s assistance may be sought and where most people gather to find information. In other words, she goes to both temples and bazaars following the rumours about a man from the Tamil Nadu region:

[P]laces where people assemble in large numbers [...] *en masse* for trade and certain forms of folk entertainment, the socializing process of rumour too tends to operate most actively there. (Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects* 258)

Thus, it is unlikely that Bala misses all those struggles and tumultuous contingencies that were shaking India at the time that the story takes place. She simply edits her recollections to avoid mentioning her direct involvement in politics: “The bazaars were attractive and she passed her time looking at the display of goods” (26). She names only select events and positions herself ideologically in the narrative as a model Indian housewife. Therefore, the “discursive inscription” of the events has to be found through “their traces in the present” or through the grandmother’s oral transmission to her grandchild and those remnants of the past that are still left behind and recognised as an essential part of the family history. The historical moment of existence cannot be chosen: the person is trapped in it. Therefore, Ammani’s and the narrator’s mind sets are shaped by those previous lives from which they descend and that conform to the family’s epic quest and represent India’s historical evolution.

With the absence of a narrative thread that deals explicitly with politics, *The Grandmother’s* glides over one of the most conflicting periods in Indian history. The

plotline scarcely mentions the colonial phase throughout Bala's individual quest. A couple of examples related to the historical period of the novella will reveal the backstage complexity that has moulded the idiosyncrasy of the characters in the text. This historical framework was a time rife with news and unchecked rumours. Ranajit Guha draws from Kaye, a "historian of the Sepoy war", on the importance of rumours on people's motivations for mobilisation and rebellion and on how:

'a certain description of news, which travels in India, from one station to another, with a rapidity almost electric' and which, dismissed lightly by the English officers 'had travelled another hundred miles whilst the white gentlemen, with bland scepticism, were shaking their heads over the lies of the Bazaar'. (*Elementary Aspects* 258)

We are also apprised of the fact that "the news of the anti-usury riots in Poona district in September 1875 were known to have triggered off similar disturbances in almost no time" (*Elementary Aspects* 257). Accordingly, Poona is not a city arbitrarily chosen by Narayan, but a site of significance at an essential moment in India's history. The First Anglo-Maratha War took place in Poona in 1775 and led to the Maratha empire standing "as a national force on the ruins of the Mughal empire" (J. Mehta 39) until it eventually faded away under pressure of the British colonial rule. Its earlier founder and leader had been Shivaji Bhosale (1627-1680), an innovator in war tactics and administrative organisation. He had governed the territory with eight ministers, the *Ashta Pradhan*, the most senior member of which was the prime minister, or *Peshwa*. According to Jaswant Lal Mehta, "the creation of the office of Peshwa was, therefore, a great semi-democratic contribution made by Shivaji to the Maratha polity" (65). The grandchild of Shivaji Bhosale, Shahu, named Balaji Vishwanath as his *Peshwa*. This man

proved to be one of the most capable and intelligent Maratha ministers, overseeing the expansion of the empire and its emergence “as a national power in the eighteenth century”. He established his “office at Poona” and “brought about a revolutionary change in the system of Maratha government and politics” (J. Mehta 63). The names of territories and characters in texts such as *The Grandmother's* are therefore a deliberate construction with nationalistic tinges that disguise myth, politics and colonial empire through the deconstruction of its historic parsing and diachronic order. In the nineteenth century, Poona was also a place for entrepreneurs like the character Viswa, and for wealthy merchants and a rising bourgeoisie who acted as traders and moneylenders under the umbrella of the colonial power. Sometime afterwards, they consolidated a system of usurious practices that led to violent clashes even beyond its geographical limits. Ranajit Guha lists some of these events:

[T]he Chota Nagpur uprisings of 1801 and 1817 [...] the Barasat bidroha of 1831 [also] served as point of reference [...] [t]he Santal hool of 1855 [...] [was considered] as historic parallel to the subject of investigation [of the Deccan Riots Commission] - the Kunbi uprising of 1875 in Poona and Ahmadnagar districts. (*Elementary Aspects* 2-3)

Based on subsequent historical events, we may therefore reasonably imagine that Viswa would have been one of those speculators that triggered the anti-usury riots, had Bala, perhaps inspired by Kali's positive intervention, not prevented him from staying in Poona. Also, in the twentieth century, Poona became the emblem of pre-independence Gandhian resistance with the imprisonment and house arrest of Mohandas Gandhi at the Aga Khan Palace, between 1942 and 1944, when he was accused of launching “the mass civil-disobedience campaign, demanding that the British ‘quit India’” (V. Mehta 153). It

therefore seems evident that Narayan chooses Poona as a symbol of Indian resoluteness and national self-realisation, knitting together pre-colonial and colonial historical figures with his postcolonial fictional reality and the upsurge of Hindu nationalism.

Struggles for Independence

The symbolic space that expresses the opposition to the usurper, the colonial hegemony, in *The Grandmother's* is opened by Ammani's defence of her mother's strategy to recover her husband from Surma and the storyteller's sharp comments about Bala's cunning ploys. The narrative enters the subordinate intrigue-space of the "romance-format", a direct-speech dialogue between the two narrators. Indian traditions suffered a steady process of hybridisation that transformed society and culture during different periods of colonial rule. The mixture continued until the British colonial period was over and, consequently, "syncretic" forms are now defined as genuinely Indian. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out, "it is impossible to return to an idealized pure pre-colonial cultural condition" (108). The general aim heads towards the revitalisation of classical forms that can establish a link between "precolonial and premodern" traditions and the postcolonial reality. Narayan's work embodies this Indian revival, inspired in the aforementioned *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In A. B. Dharwadker's words, "[c]lassical and medieval forms acquire a new national cultural significance in India only when the modern nation becomes available as a referent" (145). At this stage, Narayan's national referents join up with the specificity of the *Bhagavad-Gita*,²⁷ placed "within the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*" (Miller 2). The larger text provides a context for the moral conflict of the Pandava warrior Arjuna against the background of a fratricidal war. The author creates two well-differentiated spans of ethical and moral lessons at a different

²⁷ Hereafter, *Gita*.

range of subjectivity based on the classical works. In the words of “the tenth century poet-critic” Rajashekhara: “[h]istory is of two types [...] of a single hero, and of many heroes” (Devy, “Of Many Heroes” 18).

The *Ramayana* explains the primordial sense of the family epic’s beginning, the “*purvapurushas*”²⁸ Bala and Viswa, while the *Mahabharata* serves as a referent for the whole saga, including the fictional and biographical histories of the different branches of the family, which is linked to Narayan’s idealised Indian past. It acts as a superordinate text that contains close and distant relatives and their struggles to survive. Consequently, the epic texts constitute a traditional framework that reveals the postcolonial nature of Narayan’s works. These works apprehend the classic linguistic forms and displace their meanings in order to produce “a site of struggle for linguistic control” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 114) that enacts power through a discursive appropriation. According to Narayan, “the characters in the epics are prototypes and moulds in which humanity is cast, and remain valid for all time” (*Gods, Demons, and Others* 4). The historiography of storytelling and traditional epics prevails over time due to their hermetic nature. They neither explain nor unravel themselves before the listeners. The “historyteller” does not clarify the characters’ reasons or motives to act the way they do. Ammani’s comments are self-explanatory and open to any interpretation: “You cannot manipulate people in real life as you do in a story” (*The Grandmother’s* 47). What is unquestionable is that there is a battle that takes place between the two branches of the primeval family created by Viswa’s double marriage. Bala represents queen Kaikeyi’s adamant threat to king Dasaratha when she demands Rama’s exile in order to secure her future and her son, Bharata: “I want to be dead. That’s all” (*Ramayana* 63). The discussion between Bala and

²⁸ Forebears. i.e.: ancestors.

Viswa runs as follows: “You don’t know [Surma’s] nature. She will commit suicide”; [Bala]: “I will commit suicide if you are not coming away. Which of us shall it be?” (40).

Linked to *The Gita* as a reference but embedded in a wider context, gender inversion also affects Ammani’s parallels with tradition, since she embodies Arjuna’s charioteer, Krishna, lecturing her pupil about moral prowess. The storyteller’s dejection comes from his censure of the methods used in the battle by Bala to obtain her goal. He feels pity over Surma’s loss (Miller 6): “Your mother was too deep and devious for the poor lady [...] she had sheltered and nourished [Bala] when she was in desperate straits” (45). Nonetheless Ammani insists that the narrator’s “pity is really weakness” and that the way to fulfil one’s duty comes from detachment and not from passion (Miller 8). She teaches him the need for a balance between duty (*dharma*) and action (*karma*) to be in tune with the universal order:

“He was not a tramp but a respected merchant and official at the Peshwa’s court” [...] “And mainly through Surma’s support [...]” “What else could a poor woman like her do to recover her husband? [...] Everything is justified, all means are justified in her case”. (46)

Surma’s attitude also corresponds to that of Kausalya’s, the first wife of king Darasatha and Rama’s mother. She holds on to rights, duty and vows: the king must accomplish his promise: “If you do not maintain the integrity and truth of your own words [...] the world will not accept it.” (*Ramayana* 69). Surma’s dialogue reads: “I have surrendered Viswa to you [...] I accept with all my heart that he is your husband” (48). Ignoring the classical romance structure, the narrators’ discussion symbolically expounds formal complaints against those innovations and changes that came from foreigners, that made people dependent on them and impoverished the rural population. The new means

of production, their forced displacement, the struggles and loss of identity are reasons that justified, from the perspective of Indian tradition, whichever action that contributed to the recovery of their dominions, land ownership and the “symbolic capital” of Indian society. They learnt from the hegemonic power its customs, manners and language. They displayed perfect subservient manners which in time helped them to subvert the established order from inside the colonial power. In Ranajit Guha’s words:

The hitherto discrete powers of the landlord, the moneylender and the official [*sarkari, sahkari and zamindari*] came to form, under colonial rule, a composite apparatus of dominance over the peasant [...] the element of coercion was so explicit and so ubiquitous [...] that he could hardly look upon his relationship with them as anything but political.
(*Elementary Aspects* 8)

In the historical discourse, the author uses the language of the coloniser and, simultaneously, subverts its representation as a counter-reaction to those artefacts of dominance. Thus, the triumvirate, Surma, Viswa, and Bala, cunningly led by Bala, finally decides to go south for Viswa’s sake. They receive the Peshwa’s support “to protect and help the party” and “two palanquins and a retinue of bearers [...] many torch-bearers and lance men to protect them from robbers and wild animals ” (43). This means of transport is a complex index of colonial representation because it was “identified with rank in many feudal societies” (Ranjit Guha, *Elementary Aspects* 66), and its use was forbidden for natives. Surma’s people had provided a royal transport that was associated with “conquerors”. For many years, natives were not allowed to travel “in a palanquin except with the Viceroy’s permission”, and later on, only the very wealthy and the native elite were allowed to travel this way. Therefore, this transport became a symbol of power in

India that would have had to be subverted and brought down in rank for the use of those who were meant to be inferiors, peasants and rebels (*Elementary Aspects* 67). And this is exactly what Bala does. She brings Surma to Bangalore, using Surma's power, influence and confidence to arrive safely. She plays the role of a friend and confidant on the way to her territory. The trio enjoy their three-day stay in "the Sampangi, today [...] the Nehru Stadium" (43), a geographical space that comes to symbolise the battlefield of Kurukshetra, enacting the conflict between the higher and lower Indian selves, the morality of *dharma* and its absence, *adharmā*. Each of the characters conveys "the three fundamental qualities (*guṇa*)" that explain the "material nature (*prakṛti*)" of Krishna's teachings to Arjuna, implying an ethic taxonomy: Surma possesses lucidity (*sattva*), Bala craves passionately (*rajas*) and Viswa embodies delusion and dark inertia (*tamas*). These diverse qualities contain the "metaphysics, morality and religious tradition" of classical India (Miller 12).²⁹ Hence, a whole mechanism of symbols is triggered precisely "[o]n the fourth day". This is the time of *Kaliyuga*, the fourth period: a time of wars and violent clashes. It is a period of moral and social degradation when the selfish, blind and egotistic elements of society conquer daylight and *dharma*. Bala is Goddess Kali finally revealed to Surma. In southern India, Kali is associated with Viswanath, another name for God Shiva who is also called Balaji. Kali incites Shiva/Viswanath "to take part in dangerous, destructive behaviour that threatens the stability of the cosmos" and the established order (Kinsley 23). Bala wants both her prey and her price; otherwise, she will die by drowning herself in the tank: a sacrificial exposure of the abuse suffered by one whose life is simply unbearable under these oppressive circumstances. In the same line as Spivak's *Can the*

²⁹ In *The Eighteenth Teaching: The Wondrous Dialogue Concludes*, Krishna defines these moral qualities: *Sattva* means tranquillity, control, penance, purity, patience and honesty. Its subjects are Brahmans who possess knowledge, judgment and piety. *Rajas* holds to heroism, energy, resolution, refusal to retreat in battle, charity and majesty. Its exponents are Kshatriyas, who are subjected to excitement and grief. *Tamas* is dark inertia, indiscipline, vulgarity, stubbornness, fraud, laziness and depression. Two social classes are associated with it: the Vayshyas and Shudras, since it accompanies the intrinsic actions of a commoner and is the essence of providing service (135-46).

Subaltern Speak? Bala has a subaltern's life which is not worth living. She is in *agony* and there is *no other way out* of that *silenced situation*³⁰ than death (36). The high degree of scepticism and irony in the narrator's response shows his dislike of the emotional blackmail and the carefully premeditated scheme which Bala devises. "Surma was shocked. 'We were such good friends! Let me also drown with you'" (44). His grandmother's opinion expresses, however, Krishna's ethical relativism: "only a woman can understand it" (46). As if inspired by Valmiki's "grand vision" of *Ramayana*, Bala arranges the stage for letting her pain "[well] up from the depth of [her] soul, possessing a jewel-like perfection of form although expressing grief and resentment" (Narayan, *Gods, Demons, and Others* 136). The passage reads as follows:

'She is stepping down into the water' [...] she heard Bala's scream: 'I'm drowning' [...] 'Don't stand in the water. Come up and speak'. 'I won't come up until you turn Surma back to Poona'. [...] '[I] will die of cold if you don't make up your mind quickly whether you want me or Surma'.
(44-5)

Just like Rama, Bala is seeking the restoration of the established order of *dharma*. She is intent upon her power of destruction/renewal. It is at dawn when Bala reveals the deadly power of her subverting activities. Surma's will cannot go against a previous marriage vow. She has fulfilled her share in the story and by extension, in the space of Indian colonial history. From that point on she becomes a textual construction.

The multiple mythic overtones that I have so far stressed seem to contradict Thieme's affirmation that the novella:

³⁰ Words in italics as well as the translation from the Spanish edition of Spivak's work are mine.

[is] more personal – mythic reference-points are few, though at one point the grandmother does invoke one of [Narayan's] favourite archetypes, Savitri, as an exemplum of the wifely devotion and strength displayed by his great grandmother [...] it serves to preserve an extraordinary episode in his family history. (182)

Thieme also fails to note the importance which Poona had on the protagonists' fate. Taking into account the text's epic nature, the characters descend on the narrative in a god-like manner and disappear, becoming the "mythic reference-points" necessary for the unravelling of the story. However, later on the narration glosses over how Viswa got his education and wealth and subsequently, how the family moving back to the south reached their social relevance.

Viswanath is ritually tonsured, as are all widows after the passing of their husbands. "[A]fter the shave [Bala] observed 'Now I can recognize you better' (49) [...] I am doubly assured now" (50). In Walsh's opinion, Narayan has a "comic talent" in which "[t]he serious and the comic flow in and out of one another throughout in an intricate, inseparable alliance" (*Indian Literature in English* 77). The shaving of Viswanath's "wilderness of hair" shows two paradoxical aspects: a wife demanding to remove the only visible hair that he has got left – he is bald at the top – and the traumatic break with his past that he no longer can mention to anybody.

The Postcolonial Experience

In contemporary criticism and specifically in literary theories of post-structuralism, temporal dislocations are evidence of the plurality of the text; meanings are intertwined with and conditioned by the temporal structures that do not provide a single interpretation but a whole collection of them. They explode and disseminate across the

text producing an effect on the reader of “a disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives” (Barthes, “From Work to Text” 159). These temporal and structural disruptions are closely linked with the discourses of power and knowledge, “the relation between the past and our writing of it, be it in fiction or historiography” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 96). From an Indian critical perspective, the relevance of these disorders rests on the difference between *vidya* and *avidya* – knowledge and ignorance – and how the text succeeds in transporting the individual from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge (Narasimhaiah 1385).

Once again, the narrative of *The Grandmother's* goes back to the beginning with the narrator's recording of the grandmother's memories but now from a new level of conscience. In this transition, the two narrators' voices are blended. The language reproduces the colonial experience but its meaning is not quite the same as it used to be since it has been relocated to a new contemporary reality. The *Purana* texts help to convey the mythic inspiration of the author's idealised Indian past, *itihasa*³¹ (Devy, “Of Many Heroes” 19). The narrators explain how the married couple return to a village that is “deserted by all the old families” (51). They find aridity and estrangement instead of the milieu of their childhood; there is nobody who can attest to Bala's righteousness. Bala achieves her appeasement after accomplishing a visit to “the temple and offer[ing] Pooja to Ranganatha” (51). In her traditional thinking, this ritual action represents sage Viswamithra soothing the “bewilderment and distress” of the “young men”, Rama and Laskshmana, when they were crossing a desert. He “transmitted to them mentally” the force of the mantras Bala and Adi-Bala that transform aridity and dryness into “a cool stream with a southern summer breeze blowing in their faces” (*Ramayana* 34), so that they could go ahead with their quest and definitively leave behind their past, converting

³¹ Tradition recognised as a proof [...] the source of legitimation of new experiences.

them into migrant subjects, without a group, a family or a community that could acknowledge them as peers. The territory is no longer significant. Instead, economy and culture become the relevant elements that mediate their lives. An identical fate befalls Viswa and Bala. They move to another town. Viswa purchases the family house and continues with his gem business. Bala loses her “adventurous spirit” and becomes “a model wife in the orthodox sense” (53). The middle-class housewife has replaced her aggressive attitude for “an eighteen cubit length of silk saree”. Now she wears “diamond ear rings and deck[s] herself in heavy gold necklace and bangles” (53). The trace of subversion and rebellion disappears forever.

The oral transmission returns, mixing up fictional and real spaces and blending memory and objective history. Both narratives enhance the textual sense of in-betweenness that crosses between and tries to explain subjective and objective historicity. The symbolic sphere is again distilled into a realistic narrative that underlines the author’s intention of idealising Indian history. Narayan uses ordinary elements to fabricate the text’s sense of truth: the couple has a predictable life, split up between work and family. They have three daughters –Ammani being the youngest – and one boy, Swaminathan, who “was in the first batch of Indians to qualify for the medical profession” (54). In fact, the first batch of “indigenous practitioners” came from Calcutta’s Native Medical Institution in 1824 because of the East India Company’s imperative need for “Indian subordinates to perform routine duties” (Arnold 62) but it is certainly true that “after the creation of Calcutta University in 1857, [they began], in small numbers at first, to receive MD degrees” (Arnold 64). It was in this year that the Sepoy Mutiny took place and, according to the text, it is also the time around which Viswanath begins his epic quest. The historical events unravel alongside the family’s evolution and the two are intimately connected. Ammani, for example, marries a sub-magistrate in the context of what were

economically difficult times: “Even if you asked, I wouldn’t be able to explain how a magistrate earned – money just poured in I think” (55). Her husband amasses a great fortune and loses it in an equally unclear way; his partner “fled to Pondicherry [...] properties were attached and auctioned to make good a bank loan; something to do with the notorious Arbuthnot Bank crash” (55). All of this takes place in 1906 against the background of the economic crisis, another consequence of the “real” colonial cannibalism that remains under surface, relegated to the absent space of historicity encapsulated in the novella. At the micro level, the bank crash takes away Ammani’s family resources and causes the premature birth of the storyteller. But seen in the light of India’s macroscopic development, it transforms the reality of thousands of Indian people and provokes far-reaching changes in Indian banking policies. Rangaswami Srinivasan writes that the national newspaper *The Hindu* reported “the news on the first days of the crash”:

At the time *The Hindu* thundered, “For a dozen years now, the business of Messrs. Arbuthnot & Co. has been a swindle of the vilest description. The firm has kept on a banking business under false pretences, decoying innumerable innocent men and women into investing in its rapacious maw all their hard earned savings and earnings, money which the members of the firm could have had no reasonable prospect of repaying in full. How many widows, orphans, old pensioners, Government officials and others have been lured into the net of the pretended pompousness of this firm to deposit their moneys in, not knowing that Messrs. Arbuthnot & Co. was but a white sepulchre?” (“The Crash of Arbuthnot & Co.,” *Hindu*)

This strategy of cohesion adopted by the author, with the narrator's complicity, is upheld with an insertion that relies on Narayan's biography and on that of a contemporary friend, N. Ram, who worked in *The Hindu* years after the crash. Narayan reinforces the sense of historical truth with a reference to *My Days* and his return to the womb-like house at "Vellala Street in Puraswalkam, where all of us were born in one particular room" (56). The house is demolished and only "the old massive main-door lying with 'One' still etched on it" remains, as if this were the lasting testimony to the writer's past. The Rams' biography quotes Narayan's dispassionate comments during his visit to "the ruins of his boyhood home": "you see ruins like this all over Delhi". When the writer was later on informed about the construction of "a striking four-storeyed salmon pink edifice" in the place of his "old home", "the writer reacted with a chuckle" (XXVI). Thus, Narayan uses the construction of "an air-conditioned multi-storeyed hotel" (56) as a symbol of impermanence, *anicca*. The author's irony illustrates the intimate change in India's society that leaves nothing but debris from an epic past and substitutes modern technology for mental prowess.

Discourse analysis informs readers of the underlying ideology of discursive structures that make reference to past events in order to designate facts as mere devices for interpretation and evaluation. These events are reinscribed in this "realist fiction". This is what Barthes called an "illusionary elision" of the signified "to provide that the signifier of history writing is in a direct relation with the referent" ("Le Discours de l'Histoire" qtd. in Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 149). Thus, the novella simultaneously contextualises the historical past, the moment of transmission of Ammani's oral memory and the author's own memory of his personal experience. The composite reproduces an impression of time that is compatible with the classical pattern of Sanskrit epics. According to Madhav Deshpande, the past is handled in such a way that

it attributes quality and credibility to present works, and its imagined representation constitutes an “essential part of the Indian epistemology of time”. This work reproduces what is common in Indian tradition: the creation of an “imaginary past” “to justify a concrete present” (qtd. in Devy, “After Amnesia” 30). In her role mirroring that of Rama, Bala has forced “the exclusion of all ills” (Kinsley 68), but after her death, the divine protection is over. The narrative moves in a circle towards a different rebellion, another beginning of Viswa’s life that is described as “his rage against his son” (63). Viswa has remained passive within the realm of *tamas*, the *guna* Dark Inertia: the self-satisfaction and self-centredness that neglect the subject’s intelligence affecting not only his family relations but also the public and political spheres in which he develops his activities. The discourse seems to imply that time has an erosive effect on subjects, things and politics. It brings a sort of abandonment and amnesia, a desertion of discipline that has tragic consequences for those who ignore its symptoms. It also shows the effects of colonisation on Viswa’s Indian self, his *Atman*. He abandons traditions, caste obligations and rituals directed towards salvation – *moksha* –and substitutes them for a swollen self that pursues freedom from duties and from links with the past.

The last part of the story depicts a voluntarily acquired neo-colonisation that embodies a syncretic relationship between eastern and western values, between tradition and modernity. The author seems to be implying that *Atman* and *Dharma* are symbolically polluted due to India’s reckless acceptance of foreign traits and her inability to overcome the old and new flaws that undermine her Indianness. In these final pages, the elderly writer of *The Grandmother's* dwells on the decade of the world’s “*financiarisation*” and the explosion of neo-capitalism in India, which began in the eighties. His characters lack the earlier *sattvic* manners and instead they are passionate, egotistic and obsessed with their own desires. Once Viswa frees himself from his duties,

he refuses to follow tradition so he marries a young servant, crossing the boundaries of caste: “[t]he best way to shock and spite his family” (63). Nor is he influenced any longer by the means of production that define the characters’ roles and mediate their decisions. As a vaishya,³² the “Poona Grandee” (*The Painter* 32) has conquered “the power of controlling society” and is “made rich through the carrying on of commerce” (Devy, *Between Tradition and Modernity* 63). This is the mark left behind on the *Mahapurusa* by the British Empire. Through ambiguity, the short story *The Grandmother's* uses the double inscription of the language of postcolonial critical discourse. In Viswa’s case, patriarchy does not reward his investments in his children; he is unable to use them as human forces of production: none of them continues with the family business. Thus, the son is now the *paterfamilias* and his father is the one who has to be looked after as “an orphan depending on their favours” (61). Viswa feels displaced after his children leave the house and settle down somewhere else. The family suffers an atomisation of its members, who are now engulfed by a sense of incompleteness. In its metonymic evolution, the family-continent explodes into an archipelago of different family-isles, which are closed enough to each other but isolated by several trends and currents. Now, India has its own rules and governments, her chosen families and businesses, but the imagined concept of *Indianness*, the primeval joint family, seems to have faded away.

The narrative also introduces the theme of medicine to illustrate the decadence brought about by the social inertia bred after India’s independence. Symbolically, Viswa’s illness is his age: “This is the curse of old age” (61). He broods over issues, and “magnifie[s] the situation and impart[s] an undue significance to it” (60). Consequently, he becomes resentful due to his *tamas*: a “knowledge that clings to a single thing as if it were the whole, limited, lacking a sense of reality” (Miller 138). His physical

³² Merchant.

dysfunctions and his “bodily decay” are allegorical references to disordered appetites produced by capitalist consumerism and a corrupted sense of identity (M. Keown 29). Meanwhile, Viswa’s son, Dr Swaminathan, is a *kshatriya*³³ who tries to prevent physical illnesses and to cure any health disorder. His weapons are modern technology and a rigorous diet. He is passionate about his work, “anxious to gain the fruit of action” (Miller 139) but he does not spare any time for his father. As the only son, he does not perform the old rituals of *dharma* for his parent’s sake: “the last three days Swami never spoke to me more than three sentences” (61). The doctor has already failed to attend his father’s anxious call to help his dying mother: “official work kept Swaminathan busy” (58). He is a slave to his work. In 1896, Swami Vivekananda had already criticised “the horrible idea of competition” of the West, feeding “material wants and desires” and emphasised that “Ancient India showed how a man could be the master, not the slave, of science” through “the cultivation of the higher science of the spirit’ over the ‘lower science’ of material objects” (qtd. in Arnold 170-1). Swaminathan has to overcome fierce competition for medical success within an awakening Indian nation-state and, in keeping with the rising nationalistic discourse, he has fallen into a dichotomy whereby a material domain, coming from elsewhere, is positioned against a far superior spiritual realm that constitutes the essential Hindu self.

In *The Grandmother's*, Narayan symbolically represents ancient India in the figure of a “wiseacre” who tries to cure Viswa’s detachment from his new wife with “magic, black or white, the exorcising of spirits, and making potions and amulets” (64). He links ancient tradition to modernity through transitional characters: the servants. Viswa only has the two female servants for company. He has grown whimsical and does not think about the costs of marrying a young Kaikeyi. Among servants, Viswa indulges

³³ Warrior, wrestler.

himself, ignoring any caste-related limitation: “the caretaker and her daughter were not the kind he should have associated with” (62), the grandmother confesses. Not in vain, the employees disrupt the orthodox living of the family, opening a breach that pollutes its social body and that brings in poison and eventually death. Ammani realizes that “they had their eyes on his stock of precious stones” (64). Thus, her discourse spells “out the distance between subordinate and superordinate” (Gates 6). Also, it serves to speak of class prejudice and violence, especially when there are reasons for “economic competition and material interest” (Wilkinson 26).

In the historical evolution, there are problems that Indian society has been unable to resolve. One of these problems is the role of women and their place in Indian society after independence. In her work *Violent Belongings*³⁴ (2008), Kavita Daiya writes that modern scholarship, especially postcolonial and gender studies, describes “how women are constructed as signs and symbols of the nation or ethnic/cultural community in nationalist discourses” (41). In this episode there emerges another India that “ha[s] been destitute” (57). It has lost its roots, its language, its name and now lives as a stranger in a borrowed place provided by her own countrymen. Narayan brings her in like an encroaching usurper and a destroyer of peace. As a wealthy merchant’s wife, a *bhadramahila*,³⁵ Bala hires the services of a caretaker and her twelve-year-old daughter. The caretaker is from another village whose people are regarded as “evil-minded, [...] notorious for its evil practices such as fostering family intrigue, creating mischief and practising black magic” (62). This description of a whole village shares a racist, prejudicial discourse based on territory, caste and above all, economic asymmetry. In Bhabha’s words, “a discrimination between mother culture and alien cultures [that are

³⁴ Original title, *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and Postcolonial Nationalism in India*.

³⁵ The good middle class-Hindu wife and mother.

produced] through the strategy of disavowal” where the subject is split and reproduced as something different (“Signs Taken for Wonders” 153). In this case, the removal of caste boundaries has produced a gendered social “darkness” within mother India that comes from Indian outcasts and displaced or emigrant women that destroy the purity of traditional caste and communal divisions through “inter-ethnic coupledoms” (Daiya 67). From a nationalist perspective, they represent a new “ethnic citizenship” associated with communal politics which became “popular tropes for figuring national secularism in South Asian literature and cinema” after India’s partition and the following decades (Daiya 66). Postcolonial nationalism in India translates, in many ways, into a hymn to Hindu culture and to communal differentiation.

To return to *The Grandmother's*, the reader finds that wealth has brought “devotion in self-gratification” (Devy, *Between Tradition and Modernity* 68). Viswa is blinded by some kind of “maya”, disconnected from knowledge and wisdom. He is in search of ephemeral pleasures that die out immediately after they are satisfied. Food is used as a sensual metaphor of power and status: “They consulted him on what he liked to eat, and cooked and fried things, and bought choice vegetables and fruits to feed him” (62). Much as Krishna teaches in *The Gita*: “gluttons have no discipline” (Miller 67):

My son and wife treated me like a tramp and hanger-on, not a day did anyone ask what I liked. They always restricted my eating with [an] excuse. [...] They denied me all delicacies, whereas this woman and her daughter know what I want. (62)

Viswa is alone and, from this isolation, the subject is torn apart “between the “superstructures” of psychological or lived experience and the “infrastructures” of juridical relations and production process” (Jameson 140). Thus, Viswa “married the

caretaker's daughter in a quiet, simple ceremony conducted by the woman" and "a priest from her village". This marriage is a symbolic representation of the "inclusiveness of Indian tradition" that deflects or avoids the other's culture and "tends to bypass it, as it were, by 'including' it in a lower 'stage' in its own system" (Devy, *Between Tradition and Modernity* 336). They make a profitable agreement: "He was seventy-five and the girl was seventeen" (63). Thus, Viswa makes lethal choices within this neo-capitalist environment that drive him to his end. He is the victim of another kind of mimicry: after independence, the once desired and "imagined community" is now symbolically ruled by the merchant, "the destitute" woman and her progeny. The woman exhibits two figurative aspects: the "poor-wretched", the "poor-thing", "being induced to be pitied and patronized" by the earlier nationalist movements (Devy, *Between Tradition and Modernity* 238), and the mythic characteristics of Gods and Asuras often associated with Indian people and Westerners. In this example, the foreign asura, the neo-colonialist, rises from inside India: she sees an economic opening that provides her with a chance of climbing the social ladder. Viswa is perceived as a wealth-giver and, with her "demonic traits", she "ha[s] aimed high" (64). The origin of this dysfunctional behaviour has to be sought in the *Poona Pack*. This Pack was promoted by the British colonial government during the years 1930 to 1932 to create a separate electorate comprised of the *depressed classes*, the Untouchables, popularly known as Dalits, later called the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Act of 1935, and recognised by the Indian constitution in 1950. As Butalia writes, "they were part of the broader nationalist effort in Indian politics" (239) an effort made to integrate that marginal but numerous population within the Hindu community before their electoral power could favour any other group. However, not everybody agreed with the integration of Dalits into Indian society: Gandhi brought strong opposition since he saw it as a threat to India's social stability. The Dalits

were given a separate status “under the term General” by the Cabinet Mission, the other two communities being the Muslims and Sikhs. Certainly, the “[Dalits] did not fit any of the definitions that enabled displaced people to seek help” (Butalia 239). Their bodies represented the place of inscription for national democratic pride or communal offence, especially the females. They were treated as goods and most of them had only their work to offer, which was considered of residual value. Thus, Narayan cleverly introduces the Poona Pack’s reservations for “scheduled caste refugees” in this part of his novella, also associated to the “Poona Grandee” – Viswanath. Dalits were just workers, “tillers of the land, so they could make no legitimate claim to getting compensatory land” (Butalia 240) in spite of their support for the nationalist struggles for independence. The episode shows the frustration of those who were Indian but of such a borderline condition that they were forced to commit a crime against those who had given them a chance to improve their socio-economic situation. The main reasons lie in the denial of opportunities for their full integration into India’s postcolonial reality on equal terms. The recognition of their socio-economic significance and the analogous prospects regarding property and ownership were unacceptable conditions for the new nation-state. Hence, the caretaker holds another opinion: she has an assistant, subaltern role and so far she has lived in the master’s house. Once she enters the family, she transforms her “struggles” into “demands” “by coercively introducing an alien value structure in the existing [one]” (Devy, “After Amnesia” 53). The mother-in-law demands her and her daughter’s promotion by means of the daughter’s newly acquired marital status. Ammani points out that “the young wife and her mother should be made owners of the house through a deed of transfer” (63). Patriarchy allows the use of the female body as a possession. Thus, the caretaker transfers her daughter to Viswa in order to obtain her goal, and Viswa devotes himself to living a false reality of renewal through a late marriage with a youngster. In “After Amnesia”, Devy describes

the process as a “[projection of] static images of the past [...] and non-productive affinities with remote but idealised traditions” (53). Viswa’s family regards his marriage as a great mistake; they resemble the lamenting crowd in Rama’s exile: “Kaikeyi –the red-lipped prostitute–they said [...] using her flesh to bate a senile male” (*Ramayana* 70).

In *The Grandmother's*, the “Poona Grandee” is finished off after a sumptuous feast and two furtive pills slipped into his drink. According to the wiseacre’s “ancient tradition”, the tablets were supposed to annihilate his will and to be the remedy for the women’s economic troubles, but instead of acting as a cure, the administration of the *pharmakon* by the caretaker acts as a lethal poison, killing the host: “That was the end [...] Viswa’s end had come suddenly. I have nothing more to add. Don’t ask questions” (66), concludes Ammani.

Ammani’s family belong to a social stratum that has profited both during and after the colonial rule. “What happened to that woman and your very young step-mother?” asks the narrator. “I don’t know, I have no idea”, answers Ammani (66). They all seemed to have agreed that the rebellious grandfather has received his punishment for rejecting his family and that the two women have been punished too for having aspired to a superior status through dubious means. They also appear to be relieved of the burden of the grandfather’s existence.

Finally, a few aspects of *The Painter* indicate an evolution in *The Grandmother's*. The novel presents the same detachment from history but the source is now Ammani’s niece. Still, the treatment of Viswa’s second and third wives is derogatory: Surma is portrayed as someone supported by Viswanath: “he was living with his concubine in Poona, in grand style. [...] he had brought his concubine along also but only up to Bangalore [...] [Bala] threatened to drown unless the concubine was abandoned” (31-32).

Raman, meanwhile, evokes his Aunt's memories of Viswa's third wife with contempt and social prejudice: "he married again [...], a girl of seventeen, whose parents were after his wealth and ultimately poisoned him" (32). Narayan conceals a whole ideological catalogue of social and gender prejudices behind his Aunt's speech. Surma is taken for a loose woman, and her relationship with Viswanath is considered an offence that smears the morality of traditional Brahmin families. Paradoxically, the Aunt rejects the *Gandharva* marriage where "two souls met in harmony", that appears in "classical literature" (124): "When two persons meet and inwardly have attained union, there is no need for elders to take any formal part in such a marriage. It's sanctioned under Gandharva rites" (*Ramayana* 83). This contradiction of points of view reflects an ideological difference between the discourses present in *The Grandmother's* and in *The Painter*. *The Grandmother's* is somehow more respectful to female choices and apparently, more politically conscious than the earlier novel, which can be interpreted as representing a stage in Narayan's evolution towards a more ethically correct gender discourse and a greater acceptance of individual free choices within India's society.

Conclusions

The most remarkable features of *The Grandmother's* are the dialogues and sequences of the oral and textual discourses that help to define historicity as a textual construction. Its development as a discursive artefact depends on ideological interests and political descriptions. None of these makes an empirical science or an infallible source of knowledge of historicity, and they require different methods of transmission to fulfil their aims. The oral discourse and its multiple memory gaps evoke, in principle, an epic account of a long journey to find a subjective space in the future. The complexity of the Indian concept of time is disguised among the textual structures and the referential points

of signifieds, providing a sense of being immersed in different stages of history and social conscience. In this way, the narration of the story flows across the four historical periods of India's last two hundred years through the account of the transformation of a family, from a traditional rural life to a metropolitan one. Although the narrator has adopted a westernised model of storytelling, the ideological structures of the stories retain a profound Indian pathos: the attachment to family and tradition; the massive movements of people; the Indian capacity to adapt to and integrate with the unknown; the talent for self-reinvention; and the permeability of history into private and social spheres. R. K. Narayan blends his real life with his fiction, perhaps in an attempt to stress the inseparability of these two aspects of being, which together form the unique being that constitutes his writer's persona. From his days "sitting beside [his] grandmother," he certainly "produced [...] a variety of imaginary stories centering around matrimonial life" (*My Days, A Memoir* 95). *The Grandmother's* is a homage to his grandmother's memory and the Oral Tradition transmitted by Indian grandmothers, which also serves to convey a plurality of moral lessons. Paralleling Benjamin's discourse about the need for storytelling and fairy tales, which that critic describes as the "first tutor of mankind" (Benjamin 101), Narayan enumerates the reasons it is worth getting up and fighting for one's goals, in the figure of a young woman's quest to recover her husband. In the figure of a wiseacre – another holder of myth – the novella also shows the danger of the caretaker's cunningness disguised as a "simple-minded" remedy for a family issue. Narayan uses Viswa as a metonymy of the body-politic's illness, an illness that derives from leisure and self-satisfaction. Bala is the self-confident woman that fights for her identity, even at the price of becoming an outcast. Hers is a positive achievement that avoids petrification whilst the caretaker is her opposite, the karmic essence of destitute and

dubious ways that end in disgrace: her path therefore represents a step backwards in female progress.

Narayan embeds Indian history in this epic quest. He combines classic works of literature with pieces of history constrained in the absent space of slight narrative hints, such as the references to the Sepoy wars, the case of the Arbuthnot Bank crash and the symbolic Sampangi or Nehru Stadium, representing India's independence, or the violence of Partition, which made obvious to many the need of constructing a secular state. He also invokes the social evolution of India, which saw a move from the orthodox praxis of a religion that neglected a great proportion of the Indian population to a new conception of spiritual beliefs that renewed ancient traditions and political ideologies through the utterance of a new language, the language of the Bhashas. This change represented the end of the hermeneutic practices of exclusion of the hegemonic Sanskrit texts, whose interpretation was controlled by the Brahmin caste, and introduced alternative interpretations of the sacred texts through the Bhakti literary movement, which permitted the revision and re-examination of traditional values. Each of the examples constitutes by itself an enormous field of study that goes beyond the scope of a simple fictional novel whose main goal is, according to its author, to produce an amenable reading of an essentialist concept of Indianness. Narayan also creates a story that transmits reassurance and identity beyond its subjects in such a way as to transcend specific human representation and move towards Indian symbolism. They are neither gods nor demons but human beings who ascend to the category of primeval ancestors that try to teach future generations endurance, courage and choice.

Finally, the narration is open-ended. Narayan's plot ends with a characteristic unfinished conclusion, to be continued at some future time. The senior writer takes the

novella's plot to a closed ending: colonial rule has ended and the old traits have been symbolically blown off by an emergent social fabric. Now it becomes necessary to establish an identity upon solid foundations that simultaneously embed those assertive elements from the past – represented by Ammani – and those newly discovered subjects who are needed for a national evolution, which the narrator represents. Narayan looks at India from his aged perspective and, paradoxically, he describes a circular movement that goes to a new beginning, starting from the young storyteller's narration. The seed of change is placed in the story's conception, in the storyteller's curiosity and ambition, and in Narayan's own symbolic memory of an imagined order, among many, for an Indian society that is affected by her own flaws and deterrents. He has created what his friend Graham Greene said of him, that "[a] writer in some strange way knows his own future – his end is in his beginning" (qtd. in Thieme 187). In his *Mahabharata*, Narayan writes: "One suddenly realises that the last line is only the beginning of a new phase of the narrative, of fresh thoughts and experiences. [...] Nothing is ever really conclusive" (177).

And taking this inconclusive story as a lead, I will go on to explore the themes of secularism and communal riots that appear in some of Narayan's short stories to illustrate the extent to which Narayan supported Nehru's ideas of a secular state and an inclusive system of tolerant communalism.

On Secularity and Secular Education: Three Short Stories

Introduction

The heterogeneity of India's colonial and postcolonial education policies pervades R. K. Narayan's prolific career. His characters remain trapped in the narrow space between their past and a constantly shifting reality that provides a controversial definition of modern education, religious tradition and formal organisation in which these contradictory models are often hard to disentangle. Narayan also lets his own personal experiences seep back into the discursive structure and characterization of his stories.

Focusing on different types of education, the following chapter analyses three short stories: "Iswaran", first published in *The Hindu* on July 27, 1941 (Ram and Ram 313) and later collected in *Cyclone and Other Stories* (1944), ponders the consequences of success or failure at school and the lack of social support. "Crime and Punishment" first appeared in *The Merry Magazine* on July 20, 1935. It comically portrays the shortcomings and the struggles of an emergent modern education in a traditional social context. Finally, "Under the Banyan Tree", included in the collection *Malgudi Days*, (1942), points to the contradictions of the timeless Indian oral tradition and a fast-moving society that cannot remain passive any longer. These three titles are also included in the collection *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947). Narayan's own imprint, Indian Thought Publications, released the three collections of short stories in a publishing adventure that began in the early 1940s and that "was to have a long term significance for his reaching out to an Indian reading public" (Ram and Ram 314).

The British colonial encroachment on Indian society is a historical fact that eventually transformed India into a western-influenced power at the turn of the twentieth

century. Before independence, the Indian National Congress Party with Gandhi and Nehru as their leaders feared a western capitalist-imperialist system absorbing native traditions. Thus, they advocated an “independent, non-aligned, democratic nation-state” (Devy, *Between Tradition and Modernity* 230) whose constitution included most social aspects, like education, castes, languages or religious minorities, and made particular mention of the socialist secularity of India that the updated December 2011 Constitution had recently amended. The concepts of secular, secularism and secularist are loaded with multiple connotations that are context-and-culture dependant. Ashis Nandy has pointed out that secularism does not imply the same in a “modern and semi-modern India and, for that matter, in the whole of this subcontinent” (*Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion* 67).³⁶ Imported from the West, the idea of secularism means the exclusion of religion from “public life” (68). According to Nandy, a westernised Indian sees religion as “a potential threat for any modern polity”, while a non-westernised Indian feels “equal respect for all religions” and the need to “have space for a continuous dialogue among religious traditions and between the religious and the secular” (68). Nandy also explains that “non-modern Indians” have adopted an “accommodative” acceptance of religious plurality, while Indian “westernised intellectuals” have banished religion “from the public sphere” (69). Although it is obvious that the essence of secularism widely differs from East to West, it is no less true that these societies, as far as the historical foundations of their beliefs and their institutional creeds are concerned, are hardly comparable. Therefore, the question of what secularism is cannot be given a single answer that may be appropriate for the two worlds, which seems to be the gist of Nandy’s analysis. Since Independence, Indian people have freely chosen their ideological position. A great number have acquired western models and have made them their own. To see

³⁶ *Time Warps* from this time forward.

Indians as westernised or non-westernised, therefore, is to remain anchored to a paternalistic conception of one's society that reproduces colonial traits and that places the Indian nation far from an adult postcolonial society. It appears that for Nandy, Indian choices are still mediated by and dependant on western models, while at the same time, India is denied the capacity to develop her own ideological construction out of the inevitable hybridised model.

Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor define secularism as “complex because it is made up of a set of moral aims and institutional arrangements” (*Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* 3). Unlike Nandy, they distinguish between private codes of conduct and the fabric of a state apparatus that shelters the diversity of values and beliefs that characterise modern societies. For them, there are two classes of secularisation: when the state pursues a political secularisation it “affirms its independence from religion” and from this derive “positive law and public policies”. On the other hand, when the state promotes social secularisation, it erodes “the influence of religion in social practices and in the conduct of individual lives”, thus promulgating a “sociological phenomenon” (16). As a result, whether the state supports the profession of religion or officially removes any religious culture from public life, those who do not share the state's policy necessarily become second-class citizens. A democratic state has the obligation to provide equal treatment for every individual, independently of their ideology or “religion, race, caste, sex [or] place of birth” (Constitution of India, Art. 15.1), a positioning which necessarily leads to “secular” or “public” activity. Maclure and Taylor call this state decision-making “minimal political morality” through which, supposedly, everyone is included (*Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* 21).

The theoretical concept of a secular society had its expansion during the Enlightenment, when it applied to Eurocentric homogeneous societies where religious diversity was scarce in comparison with the heterogeneity of Eastern societies. However, in Nandy's analysis, most of the westernised middle-class Indians support a rational and a scientific approach to secularism and consider the "accommodative" perception of the majority of Indians a kind of adulterated secularism that "compromis[es] true secularism" (*Time Warps* 69). Nandy seems to overlook the relationship that exists between a state's neutrality in guaranteeing religious freedom, on the one hand, and its intervention and religious dogmatism, on the other. In opposition to Nandy's negative opinion of Indian secularism – Nandy calls himself "an anti-secularist" (67) – Maclure and Taylor's discourse on "freedom of conscience and expression" involves accepting other people's "beliefs and practices" even if those appear "false, ridiculous, or hurtful" (*Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* 109), an acceptance which is an important part of a secular conception of the state. Nandy distinguishes between "the declared ideology of the modern Indian nation-state and the secularism that fears religion and ethnicity" (*Time Warps* 69). Perhaps what he fails to see is that the desirable "political stability and social cohesion" carry some specific characteristics of India's vital economic and historical aspects that involve what Maclure and Taylor call "an ethics of concern for the other" (*Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* 109). He does, however, recognise that the westernised middle-class Indians, usually better off than the majority of Indian people, are the supporters of alternative modern ways of life beyond traditional religious practices, which does not mean that "a secular outlook is inevitably incomplete or corrupt" (Maclure and Taylor 110).

While Nandy's critical perspective does not share the non-judgemental approach of Narayan's works, his analysis does fit the theoretical division that defines both

Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi: he subscribes to the Mahatma's claim about the religious inseparability from politics and the assertion that those who denied this fact "understood neither religion nor politics" (Nandy, *Time Warps* 69). Moreover, the two leaders had different perspectives on education and minority religious communities. Gandhi, who defined India as a global village, aimed for *swadeshi* or economic self-reliance, and *swaraj* or self-rule, in order to stir up Indian consciousness and individual assertiveness. He was conscious of the necessity to command India's destiny through the will of its people as a whole. In R. K. Srinivasa Iyengar's interpretation of the Gandhian doctrine, "[s]elf-rule, self-mastery and self-realization come first" (*Indian Writing in English* 255). Gandhi's nationalistic approach was sustained by an unshakable faith in God and "soul-force", its by-product, which is a commanding "moral action" or *Satyagraha* that will reduce obstacles to the condition of ghosts. Iyengar's work illustrates the Gandhian theory of *Satyagraha* that explains how by setting "my Soul-force against your physical force. I will wear you down by goodwill" (256). Gandhi's pedagogic proposal aimed for an inclusive education of all communities and individual manual work in order to fight illiteracy, idleness and poverty. He specifically considered the last two concepts as evils that added up to "the foreign rule" that "held sway over the Indian people" (258). Gandhi also proposed the equitable distribution of resources and "limiting population growth through moral restraint or *brahmacharya*" (258). He saw religion as an indivisible part of Indian cultural identity (Jasen and Nayar 6). For Gandhi there was no separation between the person and his/her social and spiritual facets. His ideas about a simple and an ornament-free life are widely traceable in Narayan's literature and style.

For Nehru, on the other hand, religious orthodoxy was not only responsible for India's stunted development but it posed a threat for public services that should be

preserved from “the virus of communal politics” (qtd. in Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi* 369). He concurred with many of Gandhi’s proposals. In his letter “India and Gandhi” collected in his work *Glimpses of World History*, Nehru held the opinion that *Satyagraha* “was an effective way of getting the masses to function, and it seemed to fit in with the peculiar genius of the Indian people” (255). However, his idea of India rested on the principles of rationality, systematic industrial development (implemented in the so-called Nehru-Mahalanobis Five-Year Plan), secular education built on western modernity, free competition, and a profound social reform that affected all the minority groups and their pluralistic representation. He favoured an industrial revolution and “mass production” that could transform the Indian population into effective consumers, reasoning that “if the masses are too poor or are unemployed, then they cannot buy these goods” (Nehru 281). Hence, according to Nehru, the radical transformation of the environment and social circumstances in order to obtain “greater production” for “higher standards of living for everyone” in fact resulted “in poverty and terrible suffering”, a problem of which the international community was fully aware. Nehru pointed out that the “national rivalries” were part of this problem; therefore, the international community was required to find an “international solution” (281). Before Independence, Nehru was fully aware of the importance and potential of the development of science and the negative effects that totalitarian governments brought about by the wrong use of this development: “they can tyrannize over people without, as a rule, any fear of consequences” (282). Notwithstanding, he went ahead with utilitarian arguments once his party ruled the country, allowing the partition of India, forcing mass displacements, suppressing cultural links and supporting the continuity of a qualified and western-influenced education, only affordable for privileged groups and that limited the use of vernaculars and cultural advancement.

In the short stories I intend to examine, the comic irony cannot gloss over the dramatic changes endured by the Indian students who live under colonial rule. Natives play with appearances and mimic imported behaviours in order to find their niche in a rigidly stratified society. R. K. Narayan's pre-Independence fictional work displays both a commitment to secular education and an insistence on making modern India compatible with a revived tradition. Apropos of R. K. Narayan's early works, Thieme points out that "his accounts of colonial school and college life are shot through with the ambivalence of his particular colonial situation" (33). Indeed, there exists an underlying current of rebellion in the sole fact of his becoming a professional writer in English, a rebellion that partly conceals the complexity of his targets. Thieme argues that Narayan's early fictional world of Malgudi is more concerned with "place and space" through the attention paid to the "interiors, domestic and otherwise" (115). The analysis holds as long as it is applied at a superficial level to the narrative of the three short stories examined here. Yet if we delve into the symbolic abstraction of the national discourse or the realm of nation-building, then the critical perspective widens and easily yields to an interpretation of Indian internal affairs which accounts for the writer's nationalistic sentiment and not only the tale of relatively humorous family issues. In his controversial description of India and Narayan's role as writer included in *An Area of Darkness*, V. S. Naipaul argued that the author's virtues were "Indian failings magically transmuted" so that he "seem[ed] forever headed for that *aimlessness* of Indian fiction that comes from a profound doubt about the purpose and value of fiction" (232). For Naipaul, "India's strength, her ability to endure, came from the negative principle, her unexamined sense of continuity" (233). However, Naipaul seems to overlook the subversive approach that lies behind his interpretation of Narayan's "attitude of total acceptance" (232). Narayan wrote about this locus in his journal on April 11, 1941:

It came to me irresistibly that the pathway to peace lay in becoming a spectator of life, men, events, of even one's own careers. Here is an attitude which removes all strife and conflict. One gets past the stage of judging and decreeing. You accept everything, without being touched by anything. (Ram and Ram 360)

He puts his imagination at the service of his readership without interfering in the fictional works; avoiding a judgemental discourse, he embraces the timeless role of the storyteller (Benjamin 91).

In 1936, there rose an auspicious literary mood propitiated by the All India Progressive Writers' Association [AIPWA], which represented the "single most important events in the history of modern Indian letters" (Joshi 209). AIPWA's aim was "the vital need to connect literature with everyday life in order to transform some of the "vitiated tendencies" of an "outmoded past" into a new and more equitable social order. Literature had to be rescued from the elites" (208). Despite the fact that Narayan was among the first Indo-English writers and "had close personal and literary associations with the movement" (210), he did not belong to the association but was definitely influenced by its spirit "of using a language the masses understood" (209). Narayan's texts are an example of Indian common life; using a simple syntax that brings the narration down to the streets of a Southern Indian town. He does not step in the political footprint that was expected of Indian intellectuals in those revolutionary years, a reason which has brought him countless criticisms: "R. K. Narayan's prolific novels and stories are realist portraits of the imaginary rural town of Malgudi, arguably containing little demonstrated sensibility to wide-scale reform" (Joshi 210). During those years, literature played a fundamental role: it had to forge the idea of an independent nation, denouncing

colonial excesses and Indian shortcomings, as well as fabricating an Indian dreamland for the masses. In the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee, “there was an urgency to foreground the idea of a composite nation” (174). At that crucial time, Narayan was not an overtly political writer as other coeval writers were. In fact, he exhibited the writerly trait described by Edward Said as a necessary condition for an intellectual: “the search for relative independence from [institutional] pressures” (xvi). This does not mean that Narayan’s texts are not committed to India’s democratic improvement or do not include any critical reflection on his surroundings. On the contrary, because they are a realist fictional undertaking, they convey not only contemporaneous history but they delve into the past and, simultaneously, project their shadows into the future. My analysis aims at the disclosure of these premises, showing that Narayan’s texts are indeed socially and politically engaged.

Narayan’s work contains myriad contradictions that make a discourse based upon money-or-success-driven competition consistent with a discourse emanating from myth. The coherence of his narrative holds firm while he crosses over from a competitive, westernised system to a non-rational mode of thought that is imbued with the ancient culture of the primordial Indian community. His non-assertive characters exemplify those petrifying aspects of Indian culture that become socially accepted through custom and tradition, and highlight the need to find alternatives that provoke a change. They remain transitional or basically undetermined because of Narayan’s pervasive intention of imbuing his writings with an educational code and of having them remain largely inconclusive. Susan and N. Ram’s biography of Narayan outlines the writer’s philosophy, which sheds some light on his preference for open-ended stories. He endured a collection of circumstances that led him to live through “a set of experiences, each of which had

brought out ‘a particular power and faculty, lying hidden till we serve a particular purpose of the divine’” (Ram and Ram 364). The reader may feel inclined to look for links that connect the narrative with the author’s life experiences or clues that those experiences motivated his texts; indeed, there are multiple real events that have inspired Narayan’s fiction and that are immersed in the artist’s imaginary world. The Rams have also recognised that

such are the tricks [Narayan’s] art contrives that the biographer’s connecting line tends to get reversed and the ‘facts’ of the writer’s external world are sought to be derived from the internal world of his fiction, or semi-fictionalized memoirs. (XXXIV)

Narayan’s style leaves a narrational gap that can be filled in according to the reader’s capacity of interpretation, translation and understanding of India’s society. The author himself argues in *A Writer’s Nightmare*: “I feel that the entire organization, system, outlook and aims of education are hopelessly wrong from beginning to end, from primary first year to Ph.D., it is just a continuation of an original mistake” (106). He also declares in *My Days*: “Next to religion, education was the most compulsive force in a family like ours”. Although he “instinctively reject[s] both education and examinations” (51), he is fully aware of the importance and inevitability of the modern education system. He comically censures his father’s obsessive upkeep of the student attendance register and the detriment it causes to his English prose class (*My Days* 51). Imbued with this spirit, when his “daughter in exasperation threw up her studies, crying, ‘Why should I bother about arithmetic?’”, Narayan’s reaction stood on the side of a passive response, “let[ting] her drop out without a word” (53).

Not surprisingly, for Narayan, fiction has greater importance than mathematics. He seems to have anticipated Spivak's discourse about the importance of literature for "the training in ethics in the humanities" ("Terror: A Speech After 9-11" 96) and the necessity to develop "cultural instruction in the exercise of the imagination" (94) so that humanities students eventually learn to "figure the other as imaginative actant (94)". In Narayan's opinion, secular education has its own space like everything else in his imaginary town, Malgudi, the sociological laboratory where he can approach specific aspects of Indianness from a literary perspective. Situated somewhere near Tamil Nadu and other parts of South India, "Malgudi emerges as a liminal location because of the seemingly discrepant admixture of genres" (Thieme 4). Narayan creates a gallery of characters from every Indian caste that evolve from colonial subservient subjects to free independent citizens. This openly contradicts Mukherjee's view of Malgudi as "Hindu upper-caste pan-India, resistant to change, eternal and immutable" (*The Perishable Empire* 170). However, Mukherjee's affirmation that "Malgudi had a metonymic relationship with India as a whole" (174) revalidates Narayan's view that Malgudi is not only "a small town in South India" but a place with universal aspirations (*Malgudi Days* viii).

As if it attempted to foreshadow subsequent events and ideas, Narayan's writing technique is characterised by largely inconclusive plots and vaguely defined characters, allowing a reading that seems to echo Gandhi's defence of merging secular education with religious traditions. It is an approach that refutes his detractors' opinions about his alleged Hindu-centred immutability. However, his resistance to becoming an overtly political writer has often been an obstacle to his being considered a defender of either Gandhi or Nehru's ideas. Yet, he does not hesitate to lay bare his apprehension of fanaticism, fundamentalism and the destructive effects these have on people's lives.

Indeed, his stories usually portray a deficient reality that is open to change, or the story's plot fails to narrate in which way the change happens, leaving it up to the reader both to ask questions and provide answers. As Said wrote, "politics is everywhere; there can be no escape into the realms of pure art and thought, or for that matter, into the realm of disinterested objectivity or transcendental theory" (*Representations of the Intellectual* 21).

In the light of the ideas of Michael Foucault, Malgudi can be viewed as a heterotopian space that serves Narayan's intuitive purposes of demonstration, denunciation and experimentation on the subject of Indianness. His characters face reality from a virtual position. The narrator never attempts to define past or present Indian history, but only the characters' ordinary activities, adopting a filtered realistic standpoint that avoids definitions of authenticity or purity. Limited descriptions combined with his carefully chosen subjects make for different layers of perception that are subject to different kinds of pressures and thereby elude an ideological petrification. Narayan's proactive narrative thus resists a twenty-first century postcolonial interpretation that would include present-day forms of colonisation, forms that point to the economic priorities underlying the contemporary means of exploiting resources and leading to a propagation of extremist, communal hostilities and the detriment of secularism and religious tolerance. In K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's words, "the thoughts and feelings, the stirrings of the soul, the wayward movements of the consciousness [found in Malgudi], are all of the soil of India, recognizably autochthonous" (*Indian Writing in English* 359). However, Narayan's prose, with its deceptively simple syntax and tragicomic vision, conceals more than it reveals of the multifarious reality of India.

This paper is divided into three sections. Each of them traces the underlying message concerning education in the story at hand. The impossibility of overcoming stagnation and a God-given life are depicted in Iswaran's short existence. In "Crime and Punishment", there emerges a rational young India open to a transformation that shakes off the burden of tradition and resignation but carries the seeds of arbitrariness and lack of control. Finally, as an overarching symbol of the Indian village's oral tradition, "Under the Banyan Tree" spreads its branches across the past, present and future of a fast-developing country.

"Iswaran"

In 1939, Narayan suffered the loss of his wife, which affected him deeply and changed the course of his life. As a Hindu practitioner, he believed that "there was a motive behind all personal losses and tragedies: it was to make a person 'more fully aware of the eternal verities of life, reality according to God, not according to man'" (Ram and Ram 360). His God-inclined vision also implied a relaxed attitude towards official studies. Besides, the main source of earnings in Narayan's family was education, which was greatly valued: learning languages and literature were important concerns while official education and particularly "examinations, were downgraded" (69). Narayan was not particularly successful as a student and certain parts of Iswaran's story coincide with Narayan's own experience, as described in the biography by the Rams, who state: "[Narayan] was not destined for academic pursuits or a career reliant on success in competitive examinations" (53). Furthermore, "Iswaran" seems to convey the depressive drive in which Narayan was immersed until "the end of 1945" when he got out of his personal "darkness" (410) and those were years of mourning, a fact that could mislead readers into thinking that Iswaran's gloomy state of mind is related to Narayan's personal

matters. In the introduction to *Malgudi Days*, Narayan explains that the inspiration for a “short story can be brought into existence through a mere suggestion of detail, the focus being kept on a central idea or climax” (vii) and that in his case, he “discover[s] a story when a personality passes through a crisis of spirit or circumstances” (viii). Consequently, those painful years resulted in a fruitful production of fictional work that expresses the writer’s imagination and his own reality without disclosing his personal opinions. As a matter of fact, Narayan is not a confessional writer; he hides meaning and intentions underneath the narrator’s voice and the discursive structures. He is as introverted as his young character was the day that the “Intermediate Examination results” were going to be published, when, as the story tells us, “Iswaran went about his business, looking very unconcerned and detached” (“Iswaran” 82).

“Iswaran” is the story of a young man frustrated with his own underdeveloped self, his *atman*. The name comes from *Īsvara*, the omnipotent God Almighty. It contains the Gandhian principle of one God, and is synonymous with Allah or Jehovah. Symbolically, it carries the seed and the theoretical formulation of a single nation, capable of embracing a tolerant secularism that produces a space for everybody’s beliefs – whether they are religious, secularist, agnostic, rationalist or utilitarian – a sense that can be described as “a democratic state of diversity” (Taylor 25). In the nineteenth century, when Baptists, evangelists, rationalist religious orders and social reformers intended a systematic Christianisation of the Indian subcontinent, they felt that the real problem was “idolatry and the rather poor personal quality of its gods and goddesses” (Nandy, *Time Warps* 132). They projected a secularised, rational and scientific world where Indians would reject their “superfluous deities” and practise a regular monotheistic faith (132). Paradoxically, this seems to be the case with the protagonist, who puts all his

beliefs in the single idea that dispels everything else and comes to form an obsession: university studies. His parents, who usually belittle him, make ceaseless attempts to put him off: “Why don’t you discontinue your studies, and try to do something useful?” He always pleads in return, “Let me have this one last chance” (82). Iswaran is powerless; he lacks self-confidence and self-control – *satyagraha*, the Gandhian postulate of soul-force – which is one of the side effects of a traditional family education that diffuses male duties among its numerous members, especially the younger ones (Viridi 91) and is already affected by imported traits. Traditionally, the joint family system controlled their members by imposing a solid discipline based on hierarchical authority. This authority was bolstered by “religio[us] and ethic[al]” practices in the family group to which all pertained, providing a certain degree of “social security” and self-image for its members. However, English education and rapid industrial and urban development post-independence undermined the “coherent fabric” of the tissue of Indian society in a relatively short period of time, producing generations of “divid[ed] and isolate[d]” beings (Iyengar 326). This is the Hindu society in which Iswaran, a fallen god, is immersed. To compound problems, his parents renounce their son’s potential achievements before he has a chance to shine: “When [the parents] heard their neighbours discussing their son’s possible future results, they remarked with a sigh: “No such worry for Iswaran. His results are famous and known to everyone in advance” (83).

Despite the fact that “Iswaran” is a fictional work, the story does convey a certain amount of autobiographical features. Narayan failed the university entrance examination, a stumble which, “far from triggering anger, was treated matter-of-factly, and with a certain sympathy” (Ram and Ram 69). Unlike Iswaran, he found ample support from his family and friends, in spite of his father’s comment “on his stupidity” for having failed

the English exam, a language in which he was fluent (77). During that year he tasted the artist's life: he walked everyday to his favourite Mysorean spots where he read, wrote, meditated, exchanged literary opinions with his supportive friends and worked very hard on the subjects he most enjoyed. This time proved decisive for his future choices and for his writerly persona. In the story's undercurrent, Narayan puts forward a twofold question: firstly, there is the transformation of a negative result into profitable knowledge that ends up changing the course of a life or providing an alternative to a failed one, as occurred with Narayan himself. This experience is described in *My Days, A Memoir*, when Narayan recalls his feelings upon failing his exams: "My failure at the examination, and seeing my classmates marching ahead, induced a mood of pessimism and martyrdom which, in some strange manner, seemed to have deepened my sensibilities" (56). The second aspect points to the support from family and friends in difficult times making the difference between success or total collapse. Narayan was surrounded by caring people who also helped to inspire latter works. His hard toil earned him their respect and admiration. In Iswaran's case, the lack of sympathy from his family, the absence of friends and his undetermined self make him prey to apathy, disenchantment and sterile dreams acquired and reaffirmed by watching films at the cinema, where his time is consumed irremediably:

The first time when he failed, his parents sympathized with him, the second time also he managed to get their sympathies, and subsequently they grew more critical and unsparing, and after repeated failures they lost all interest in his examination. (82)

The character is portrayed as the frozen negative of a transparency. Everything related to "Iswaran" shows its inverted reflection, turning into a contrary force that acts

destructively against an objectified person who is a mere string-puppet: “I have, perhaps, passed this time, father, who knows? I did study quite hard” (83). Each feeble initiative is undermined with jokes, disbeliefs or contemptuous remarks, his environment lacking any positive energy that would allow him to grow out of stagnation: “You are the greatest optimist in India at the moment; but for this obstinate hope you would never have appeared for the same examination every year”, is his father’s answer (83).

Symbolically, Iswaran lives a double border condition. On the one hand, he re-enacts the Gandhian prototype that “goes after European modernity” (Kaviraj 197) which is portrayed as obnoxious by his traditional family, who fails to recognise it as the drive that pushes him on towards westernised integration: his “Shakti”, the feminine side, is stronger than the male, and although he is respectful and obedient, he can exhibit “brutal and callous behaviour” (Devy, *Between Tradition and Modernity* 189), which they see as a travesty of manliness. His physical appearance is also out of place, and even if he represents young Indians’ modernity and their new consumption habits, the position he occupies in the classroom is retarded, delayed; the narrator describes Iswaran as “tanned and leathery” (82), depicted as someone who seems to fulfil the Gandhian tenet of manual work. On the other hand, Iswaran’s hybrid condition as a middle-class Brahmin also brings together the Nehruvian characteristics of rational expression and a nationalistic approach – “the scientific principles of politics” – in such a way that his adulthood establishes a contradictory position of ascendancy over “the boys”, “claim[ed] by its superior command over the principles of modern knowledge” (Chatterjee, *Texts of Power*³⁷ 96), and this masks Iswaran’s real undermined self. Then, he announces: “Don’t expect me for dinner tonight. I will eat something in a hotel and sit through both the shows at the Palace Talkies” (“Iswaran” 84). The youngsters have neither his purchasing

³⁷ Full title *Texts of Power: Emerging Discipline in Colonial Bengal*.

power nor are they treated by their families “as a sort of thick-skinned idiot” (84). Inwardly, he is a “desperado” that “brag[s] and shout[s], and [goes] to a cinema” (84) where he feels “an utter distaste for himself” (85).

Chatterjee’s *Texts of Power* analyses the work of a nineteenth-century writer, Anandachandra Mitra (1854-1903), who graduated from the University of Calcutta and whose book, *Byyahār Darśan*, (1878) became the first “introduction to the science of politics” published in India, a field that “had barely emerged at the time in Britain” (96). Chatterjee’s analysis, focused on nationalist Indian theory, thus helps to place Iswaran’s ideological background in perspective. According to Chatterjee, Anandachandra pointed to three beneficial consequences that arise from an understanding of “the scientific principles of politics”: “unity, self-discipline and toleration” (107). The three issues appear distorted and misplaced in “Iswaran” given the reversed nature of the short story, despite the fact that they are, even nowadays, essential pillars for the construction of a healthy civil society. Unity is posited as a personality that is shared between the individual and the society whose genuineness depends on loyalty. This unity should go beyond a temporal association against any external or foreign threat, and be based on the reciprocal need for collaboration with each other. Otherwise, once the threat is gone and the pressure released, unity will fade away. “It cannot be merely accidental or contingent” (Chatterjee, *Texts of Power* 108). In Iswaran’s case, there is no unity with society. His relationship is incidental, unbalanced and lacks any permanence; likewise, the places where he meets other people are not ideal for establishing solid bonds: “Someone asked: ‘Iswaran, coming up to see the results?’ ‘Yes, yes, presently. But now I have to be going on an urgent business.’ ‘Where?’ ‘Palace Talkies.’ At this all the boys laughed” (84). His social links are not adequate for his overwrought situation. He has unconsciously stepped out of a communal society and moved into an individualistic, self-governed one

for which nobody has prepared him. In the first case, the commanding rule is *artha*, interest, whereas in the second it is *svārtha*, self-interest. Both are legitimate human aspirations according to the *Dharmaśāstra* literature, despite their “doctrinal subordination” to *dharma* (Chatterjee, *Texts of Power* 111). These moral divisions are present in Iswaran’s Hindu education and “in the context of the duties of rulers”, who are also affected by *artha* insofar as it is “synonym[ous] with the principles of *daṇḍa* (punishment)”. The double reading opens a space for ambiguity and discussion about *artha*’s “single-minded pursuit” and moral drives or the fairness of results (111), as is often the case in the *Mahabharata*. Thus, Iswaran clings “to university education with a ferocious devotion” (“Iswaran” 82), and after failing his examination nine times in a row, he falls on the destructive side of the irrational, “desperately longing and praying for success” (84).

Moreover, the cinema, the Palace Talkies, encapsulates a whole hermeneutic system. It symbolises technology and modern India. It is a place where Iswaran is in company of people who do not abuse him, although he feels “very unhappy to be the only student in the whole theatre” (84). However, at the cinema, Iswaran’s alternative border condition manifests itself unrestrained. The picture brings in his desired unity with the well-known Tamil traditions where “[h]e soon lost himself in the politics and struggles of gods and goddesses” (85). His “vision of a heavenly world” displayed on a “white screen beyond the pall of tobacco smoke” (85) is his delusional escape from reality into myth, and Narayan’s “space of emplacement”. The Foucauldian heterotopian mirror, the white screen and the site, is the imagined place where the divine and the real are symbiotically united (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces. Heterotopias”, n.p.),³⁸ thereby exposing the fault lines that show the author’s ideological purposes. Here, “the five little streams” imagined

³⁸ <<http://foucault.info/documents/articles.html>>.

by Anandachandra give course to the symbolic unity “to form a huge river” (Chatterjee, *Texts of Power* 108):

The continuous babble on and off the screen, music and shouting, the cry of pedlars selling soda, the unrestrained comments of the spectators – all this din and commotion helped Iswaran to forget the senate house and student life for a few hours. (85)

Incidentally, it must be pointed out that in the 1940s, Narayan was invited to collaborate in the “Story Department of Gemini Studios” with Vasan, the “mogul of South India film studios”. He did not fully engage himself with the Studios because “[he] wanted to have the freedom to arrive and depart whenever [he] liked” (Ram and Ram 320). Vasan’s idea of cinema was based not on educational or artistic purposes but on “cinematic extravaganza and spectacle never before attempted in India”, including “a mythological, a stunt film full of magic; and a romance or two” which, according to the Rams, seemed to be charged with too much sensuality in comparison with other South Indian productions (320). These films were very successful because they used the language of the majority, Hindi. Iswaran is one of the millions of Indians who consumed these Tamil film productions.

Iswaran’s utopia also reconciles two opposite concepts: the powerful mythological forces of the *Mahabharata* and the preoccupations of a nondescript B.A. student: the moral dictums of the *suta*³⁹ text are ambiguously balanced with the single-minded pursuit of self-interest, *svārtha*. Nonetheless, the first element entails a forced shift into stagnation and a damaging isolation from a reality that needs purification; it is also Iswaran’s punishment.

³⁹ *Suta*: oral literature. It conveys the presence of the past, the place of history, *Itihasa*, within the text (Devy “Of Many Heroes” 34).

From the Vedas onwards, water has been granted an essential meaning of existence that transcends the physical element. According to Zimmer, “water has been regarded in India as a tangible manifestation of the divine essence” (*Myth and Symbols* 34).⁴⁰ Thus, Iswaran dreams of “the waters of some distant heaven” (86) that bring him peace and social integration. As Fawzal-Khan correctly observes, Narayan needs the strategy of mythopoesis, or myth-making, because “it is through the use of Indian myth that some measure of an authentic Indian past can be recreated”. She points out that “the petrifying effects of myth are not always offset by the balancing effects of realism” (*Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* 28), as this short story illustrates. It is evident in the story’s powerful undercurrents, which point to the twentieth-century’s emerging nationalistic forces before independence, where the traditional discourse of *dharma* was in direct competition with the state’s rationalistic design. Religion is an essential force “but excess of religion leads to fanaticism and bigotry”, and therefore, it must be channelled through “a scientific practice of politics” (Chatterjee, *Texts of Power* 110) or a secular organisation that simultaneously “would temper the excesses of the other” (115). The question of control and “subtle coercion” on active bodies’ politics is amply treated in Foucault’s work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*⁴¹ (137), which introduces reflections on the above-mentioned beneficial consequences of self-discipline and tolerance. Ideally, self-discipline should “come from a sense of responsibility toward society”, and should be devoid of any “selfish interest” in order to improve communal wealth (Chatterjee, *Texts of Power* 109). Iswaran is “the active body” and through “efficiency of movements”, “coercions upon the body” and upon “the object of control”, he should have developed a personal “formula of domination” on the socio-political surroundings that turned his difficulties into “aptitude”, “capacity” and

⁴⁰ Original title, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*.

⁴¹ Henceforth *Discipline and Punish*.

responsible command of his own volition, in such a way that the conveyance of his previously dispersed energy comes to constitute a productive strength without his falling into the trap of religious domination (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 138). Tolerance should smooth the relationships between self-interest, self-sufficiency and “the mechanics of power” that entail a whole codified system subjected to rules, technologies, skills, production and workforce.

Iswaran’s mental emasculation is manifest in his virtual rejection of the film’s heroine and his preference for the male character’s actions, thereby crossing the border between the rational and the irrational. When the lady starts singing, he directly appeals to her: “Don’t add to my troubles, please move on” (85). Actually, Iswaran is an adolescent who identifies himself with the film’s heroes. He occupies a place between two ideological dominions. For Hindus, whether they are Brahminic or non-Brahminic, gods and goddesses are part of their daily life. These deities are “beyond and above humans” but they move around them, they “empathise with them”, share their adventures and their emotions; they are within “human fraternity” and exist close enough so as not to be “frightening or incomprehensible” (Nandy, *Time Warps* 131). It is all ordinary knowledge for Indian people. For youngsters like Iswaran, gods are not very different from film stars and their episodes become adventures suitable for teenagers’ tastes. Their presence is simultaneously embedded in tradition and a westernised modernity, and therein lies Iswaran’s confusion. When he sees on the screen some lads of his age sporting in the waters of some celestial kingdom, he cannot avoid moaning: ““Well might you do it, boys. I suppose, you have no examination *where you are*”.”⁴² And he was seized with a longing to belong to that world” (86).

⁴² In the text collected in *Cyclone and Other Stories*, the original version reads: “in your world...” (22) instead of “where you are”. Narayan is then a critical reviewer of his original publications.

Besides the mythological forces of the *Mahabharata*, the second utopian concept is a “virtual space that opens up behind” the examination procedure (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, n.p.). This implies a translation from the utopian myth to a heterotopian perception that is close to attainable but that must undergo transformation through a university technical specialisation. Both concepts are located under a false perception – the Hindu notion of *maya* –, which is inspired by a superstructure of broader knowledge that is beyond Iswaran’s reach. This superstructure serves as an ideological discursive tool for mass control that re-enacts the “superiority of [the] enlightenment ideal” derived from imported models of capitalism (Kaviraj 196).

The origin of this “tragedy” rises from the British colonial system of education. The British empire planned a society made up of subjects, *babus*, that remained essentially British despite their Indian appearance and that could act as interpreters for the empire, as Macaulay’s *Minute* strongly recommended in 1835: “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (*Minute* page). It is clear that Iswaran utterly fails to learn the logic that might help him to mould his brain according to his contemporary society. As a result, he remains trapped between two minds, understanding neither of them. It is a reflection of “the conflict between India of the past and India of the present (Devy, “Of Many Heroes” 132). Even with his eventual exam success, at the “tenth attempt” (88), he lacks the stamina to reject his illogicality and to recover his active male drive of perseverance in his project. Also, he has lost interest in a B.A. that at best, will only take him into the Indian Civil Service. When he is asked in the restaurant, “What are you going to do next?”, his answer is clear enough: “I will go to a higher class, that is all” (86). He therefore obsessively concludes that another kind of water, “the bottom of Sarayu” (91), is the only kingdom left for him, where “young men free from examination [sport] in lotus pools” (87). His fantasy of

living in a fool's paradise is a sterile path that takes leads to his death. Even if religious beliefs can be of great help in difficult times, Narayan's sad story leaves no doubt about the destructive effects of religious obsessions and radical orthodoxies. However, "Iswaran" also casts serious doubts on the effectiveness of a modern secular education, based on the sheer contest for grades that it instils, and the pathological aspects that can emanate from this neurotic competition. In a wide sense, the concept of nation is associated with community, and within this modernised community, Iswaran embodies the prototype of the failed student. He is just a number, and he is expendable.

In the cinema's warmth and darkness, Iswaran discovers the primeval womb of acceptance that provides him with anonymity. It is the only place in town where he can be an "atomistic individual" in a controlled community (Kaviraj 198). Also, it is an "enclosure", but, unlike the Foucauldian description of a disciplinary place that "is "protective" and provides a "disciplinary monotony" for learning, this one promotes Iswaran's dissipation and the avoidance of an "educational regime" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 141). The paternal shadow of the "Senate House wall" (87) where the results of the exams hang under a burning "large bulb" (88) competes with the heavenly cinema screen and his own desire to disappear. Both the Senate House and the cinema are dark frames illuminated just by a single point of light, which in both cases inform a deceptive view. Iswaran reveals that his educational principles are unfocused and do not serve any of his modern or traditional needs. The Foucauldian analysis of the procedures used to transform a human body into an "object and target of power" (*Discipline and Punish* 136), and of how those methods construct what he calls "Docile Bodies" can provide a glimpse of the kind of discipline that Iswaran has learned through the "control of activity" he has experienced during his school years. Such activity exercises a constant pressure on the body's forces to obtain "a relation of docility-utility" (*Discipline and Punish* 137) but

Iswaran's long-practised disciplines explode at the discovery of his second-class promotion (149). Like every other student, Iswaran's life has been mediated by the school's fixed timetables and the ringing of bells to signal the beginning and end of classes (150). Here, the narrator indicates that there is a parallel temporal parsing, "[s]omewhere a time gong has struck twelve" ("Iswaran" 88), which reveals that Iswaran is running out of time. "The temporal elaboration of the act" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 150), "midnight" ("Iswaran" 88), and Iswaran's finding of his number in the Second-class list magically transmute the protagonist into "the sole occupant of the world and its overlord" (90): the shock changes his steps, his gestures and his physical bearing so as to fit this new successful "temporal imperatives" where "[y]ears of strain and suspense were suddenly relaxed; and he could hardly bear the force of this release" (90). He is now the "free rider", the symbolic king of a nation-state that has achieved its independence through "collective action" (Kaviraj 198): "I will flay alive anyone who calls me a fool hereafter" (90). His academic and moral success pumps up his soul-force with a wild, marching "rhythm": "Blood raced along his veins and heaved and knocked under his skull" (90). As Foucault points out, there is a succession of linked gestures mediated by a measured action that unravel all at once. Consequently "the act is broken down into its elements" (*Discipline and Punish* 152): voice, limbs, movements, timing, all have been waiting for this moment to show "the meticulous controls of power" acquired through Iswaran's effort. "Hence the correlation of the body and the gesture" (152) discloses a peerless *kshatriya*⁴³, where Iswaran is "stroking an imaginary moustache arrogantly" and "thr[owing] a supercilious side glance at the notice-board and strut[ing] out like a king" ("Iswaran" 90). He has achieved this victory with no other help than his will alone. There is desolation around him and after the battle nobody can stand

⁴³ Kshatriya: warrior. Also, counsellor.

next to him. At this stage, the body fuses into the object that serves as the sign of royal power (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 152), addressing an imaginary groom: “Fool, bring the horse nearer [...] He made a movement as if mounting and whipped his horse into a fury” (“Iswaran” 90). Now, he gorges himself on Hindu tradition; it transforms him into the charioteer of Kurukshetra riding amidst ruins, an image that Sri Aurobindo described as Karmayoga: “for the body is the chariot and the senses are horses of the driving and it is through the blood-stained and mire-sunk ways of the world that Sri Krishna pilots the soul of man to Vaikuntha” (Sri Aurobindo qtd. in Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 257). At last, Iswaran recovers his eternal condition as Lord.

The unexpected twist in his ethical stance and Iswaran’s newly acquired self-mastery challenge the rationality that lies behind numbers and a university prospect made up of contests. Iswaran thus decides to run alone, crossing boundaries with his imagined forces: “five hundred and one horses”. The number that has “stuck in his mind” (“Iswaran” 90) triggers an association with the Vedic religious rite of “Ashvamedha”, the horse sacrifice: a stallion, representing the glory of a victory and a paramount royal power, is left to roam freely for a year followed by the royal army. When the stallion crosses into a foreign country, people must either fight or give in to the invaders that arrive in its wake. Upon its return, the “conqueror” horse is slaughtered on the banks of a river, following a purification ritual that provides the king and his people with wealth and fertility. The “Pandavas” warriors accomplished this ritual once their cousins, the “Kauravas”, were defeated, as described in the *Mahabharata*’s fourteenth book. Here, Iswaran leaps into the realm of the *Mahabharata* and transfers his feminine *shakti* into male power as represented by the symbol of his imaginary horse. It is the sort of transformation that Foucault calls “body-object articulation” (*Discipline and Punish* 152). When Iswaran feels that it is high time to validate his success with the horse sacrifice, he

orders his horse to leap into the river (91). In the suicide note addressed to his father, Iswaran confesses the irrelevance of his life and reminds his progenitor that he has other sons. Here again, there is a cultural misappropriation related to act of killing oneself. In rational terms and for non-believers, either easterners or westerners, to commit suicide is a personal choice that finishes off one's own life. However, while it has negative connotations in western societies and is interpreted as a sin against God for which the believer is condemned to eternal unrest, in eastern societies, it conveys a whole hermeneutic system.

In ancient India, the object of war was to win favour from *dharma* and achieve a sublimated union with God. This union comes after the faithful, *bhakta*, has followed a “single bhakti path” – “the *īśvara* or *Iṣṭadevatā*”⁴⁴ – a path of an ideological submission to a higher will. On the faithful one's death, God “transports him or her to permanent and blissful residence in a particular heaven or paradise”, which is *moksa*⁴⁵, also “a permanent state of liberation” without any specific location. From this perspective, therefore, Iswaran does not die, but rather sheds his human skin and goes to heaven, *svarga*, the home from which he descended to live a human life. He has this privilege because he is a *kshatriya* and the objective of his war transcended the western-oriented utilitarianism, or *mangal*, of his studies. He sought to be imbued with *Dharma*: ““Oh, God”, he muttered with folded hands, looking up at his stars. “If I can't pass an examination even with a tenth attempt, what is the use of my living and disgracing the world?”” (88). He questions the sense of his existence and when he discovers that he has won the war, he feels in debt to his *bhakti*, his “personal god”, and he seeks through a sacrifice, or *digvijaya*, “the celebration of dharma” (Chatterjee, *Texts of Power* 113). By conquering *dharma*, he

⁴⁴ *īśvara* A Dictionary of Asian Mythology.

⁴⁵ *Moksha*, A Dictionary of Hinduism.

achieves the release, or *mukti*, from *samsara*⁴⁶. But although Iswaran’s intention holds to an eastern concept of immolation for a cause, he also stands for the western idea of utility: there are not tests in heaven. Narayan has subliminally reproduced a space of ambiguity where the concepts western, secular and utilitarian merge with eastern, traditional and religious. They cannot be isolated from each other: Iswaran resolves into religion practiced as identifiable communal politics according to his idea of interest, *artha*, to avoid *samsara*; his self-interest, *svārtha*, is not being questioned, so paradoxically, he embraces the transcendence of *dharma* for utilitarian purposes, and by transforming its essence into a rational cause, he brings *dharma*, religion, to the arena of politics, the modern communal nationalism. In Chatterjee’s words, “the familiar counterposition of *dharma* and *svārtha*, religion and self-interest, *dharma* itself can become a matter of *svārtha*” which “can also mobilize for its purpose all of the modern disciplinary institutions” (*Texts of Power* 116). Narayan’s nationalistic approach fuses the two polarities into something else that belongs to a different temporal dimension, which he leaves in the hands of the “other sons” (91) of India.

“Crime and Punishment”

In contrast to “Iswaran”, “Crime and Punishment”, also included in *An Astrologer’s Day and Other Stories* (1947), narrates the comic story of a child and his private tutor, a poor schoolteacher who has to prepare the child for “double-promotion to the first form” (216).⁴⁷ The story conveys Narayan’s subtle irony on the subject of modern, western-oriented education as defended by the Indian elite that “adopted secular

⁴⁶ Samsara, “the never-ending cycle of life or of rebirths” (*The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*) is a place where “the occupants will ultimately be reborn” (*A Dictionary of Hinduism*).

⁴⁷ The title ironically alludes to Dostoevski’s celebrated novel published in 1866. Whereas in the Russian novel it is the student Raskolnikov that must abandon his studies because of his impoverished social condition (he does not have the money to pay the college fees), in Narayan’s story it is the teacher that desperately needs his job for survival whereas the child, brought up in the bosom of an upper-middle class, lives a life of comfort and luxury.

politics under Nehru's tutelage as a 'common sense' measure, and as an aspect of 'hegemonic style'" (Kesavan qtd. in Morey and Tickell xvi). The story also narrates the new Indian backdrop against which the child is brought to the fore with "distinctive attributes" that highlight the transformation of the family's internal dispositions. In twentieth century India, teaching and the formation of character required from the parents a commitment to "the child's character-building" (Bose, "Sons of the Nation: Child Rearing in the New Family" 118),⁴⁸ which ended up transforming family relations themselves. Due to external pressures from modern life, Indian families became more compact, and parents and children grew closer to each other in an "affective and sentimental unit", which weakened family ties with more distant relatives, but furthered a special dedication and brought the kind of "social prestige" that was sought "for being a good parent" (119). In "Crime and Punishment", the child's father highlights the parents' involvement in their son's education: "It no doubt requires a lot of discipline on our part, but it is worth it" ("Crime and Punishment" 217). Thus, Narayan highlights the social change that implies the use of education as an ideological tool that serves modern politics: "[The boy] was their only child, they had abundant affection and ample money" (217). However, the child is being pressured according to increasing social demands "on discipline and reason", which are also those that have forced a new psychological strategy in education (Bose, "Sons of the Nation" 119) and consequently, the parents hold a double authority over the boy: on the one hand there is the natural ascendancy of the parental figures and the hierarchical family structure of a parent-child relationship; and on the other hand, the scientific approach to infancy studies: "The father had written a thesis on infant psychology for his M.A., and the lady had studied a great deal of it for her B.A." ("Crime and Punishment" 217).

⁴⁸ From now on "Sons of the Nation".

The boy's parents are apostles of imported "child-psychology theories", and they believe they must "never set up any sort of contrariness or repression in the child's mind" because then they'll "damage him for life" (217). Part of their criteria responds to the socio-political constructions based on "self-image and self-identity" brought about by the wider hybridised perspectives, which were originally necessary for economic development and the entry of India into the United Nations. The parents are embedded not only in a westernised education but in a cultural style that identifies them with prosperous minority groups as well. Bhabha defines this belonging to such groups as "a temporality of social construction" (*The Location of Culture* 230) that permeates traditionally established societies, transforming them from the inside with insurgent currents that question the concept of modern development and cross-examine the adequacy of different models of education. In Indian nationalist discourse, the family is the centre from which educational responsibility emanates. It is in charge of applying a "system of control" that impacts the family's sense of privacy, and education becomes "an instrument of political training" (Ranjit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony* 81), inspired by western ideologies but administered by Indian nationalism, which reminds us that not everything is western-inclined. In 1912, Satischandra Chakravarti wrote a very popular manual for education and character formation amongst children called *Santāner caritra gaṭhan* (SCG),⁴⁹ which had several reprintings, the last one appearing in 1989, "on the occasion of the International Children's Year" (Bose, "Sons of the Nation" 120). Although this manual promotes "a normative discourse on the family" in Bengal, it served as a guide to general conditions in Indian education. This context is applicable to "Crime and Punishment" as some of its clues are visible in Narayan's comic portrayal of the child's education. The child is seen as a miniature of an adult: he must behave

⁴⁹ The author of the Essay's Note: "All the translations from Bengali sources are [Bose's]" ("Sons of the Nation" 142).

responsibly, control his actions, his time and his desires, He is also placed in an enclosure devised by the parents especially for “disciplinary exercise” in order to train an “obedient subject” in the most efficient way (Bose, “Sons of the Nation” 128):

They built up a nursery, bought him expensive toys, fitted up miniature furniture sets, gave him a small pedal motor-car to go about in all over the garden. They filled up his cupboard with all kinds of sweets and biscuits, and left it to his good sense to devour them moderately. (“Crime and Punishment” 217)

Childhood is seen as a transitional state that must be corrected by setting up a complex code of behaviour and results. The Indian family, a nuclear unit like the dominant mode in the West and no longer the traditional joint institution, has now become the most significant element in the appropriate education of children, which will affect the country’s future advancements. The child is considered a “sweet, endearing, tender, impulsive being” that needs surveillance and constant direction because he is imperfect, “vulnerable, unreliable and wilful” (Bose, “Sons of the Nation” 120), as Narayan’s story proves. Education develops a code of behaviour that moves along parameters of “persuasion” and coercion, “designed to harness the native mind to the new state apparatus” (Ranjit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony* 167), and it is put into practice especially by the middle class. Thus, the permanent pressure put on the boy in the story makes him relentless and playful, which the tutor interprets as the unequivocal symptom of the child’s lack of respect, seeing only “a wicked smile on his lips” (“Crime and Punishment” 216). The unrestrained child manages to exasperate his tutor, “trying to fool him [by] going contrary purpose”. Narayan manages to subvert, through humour, this modern approach to education by confronting it with the traditional methodology of

India's school system. The teacher "deliver[s] a wholesome slap on the youngster's cheek" (216) in tune with his old method of education, according to which the boy needs "an anna worth of cane". The boy, unaccustomed to physical violence, "gaze[s] at him for a moment and then burst[s] into tears" (216). The teacher panics as the boy cries and threatens to tell his parents, not least because of the context in which the precarious conditions of the Indian education system forces teachers with large families to hunt alternative incomes. He faces the loss of this job and the thirty rupees a month when the parents discover that their child, who is "made of thin glass", has been treated as "a little gorilla" (217). The situation echoes some episodes in Narayan's childhood, such as his first frightening impression of the Mission School where an old man wore "a short cane permanently tucked under his arm" (Narayan, *My Days* 8).

The targets of criticism are the adults' views on education. In both systems the goal is identical, "to bring up a healthy citizen" ("Crime and Punishment" 217) but they follow opposite methods. The parents perceive the child as an opportunity to put into practice their own theories on education, which in this case require imposing "discipline on [their] part" and not on the child, who must attend to his own deficiencies with adult-like behaviour: these parents stand for the enlightened modernity imported from the west whereby both parties see themselves from each other's perspective in such a way that the parents try to infer the child's needs from his viewpoint and the child must behave as if he were his parents. The "ideological force" behind it all is the conception of a nation where the male child is going "to play a crucial role in the construction of the future national culture and identity" (Bose, "Sons of the Nation" 124). Meanwhile, the frazzled teacher sees another average boy and a practical arrangement for earning some extra money: he stands for tradition and drab work. Narayan's argument is that the boy's desires naturally head towards the playground.

By breaking the employer's rules, the teacher has incurred a fault that overturns the situation, thereby undermining his authority and status. Suddenly, he sees himself from the parents' standpoint: a worn-down schoolteacher who uses physical violence against a defenceless, innocent child who does not deserve such treatment. Unlike Iswaran, the boy has the positive male agency, and the idea of failure does not enter his mind. Therefore, when the teacher's bewilderment generates a subliminal desire to purify and remove the traces of his offense with water ("wash your face", he tells the child) the child refuses because he feels he now dominates the situation due to the punishment meted out by him: "Close the lessons today" ("Crime and Punishment" 218) is the pupil's command to his teacher. "You are the Station Master" (218), he insists, starting a game. Inventing a role play gives the child the opportunity to punish the criminal subaltern for having crossed an imaginary caste line, albeit with the difference based not so much on caste as on an inferior socioeconomic divide, that of the employer and the employee. He now devises a "counterattack", imposing a game with his toys. Narayan addresses questions concerning the abuse of power and the rigid educational model that forms intolerant beings endowed with a coercive and vindictive mentality, and who are closer to stereotyped radical nationalists whose notion of reality seems to move only in one direction.

Paradoxically, the historical context of the short story also contains the reverse image: there was a significant number of "idealistic ventures" related to education "set up in Mysore in the late 1930s and early 1940s" and "run by reform-minded educationists" who rejected both established systems of education: the "cramming and rote methods" and the "sternness and burdensome nature of formal schooling" represented by the boy's parents and the tutor. Actually, Narayan had a friend, Dr N. V. Gopaldaswamy, who was a professor of Psychology at Mysore university and who developed "a model of how the

‘game-way’ in studies could be put into practice” for teaching and learning purposes (Ram and Ram 392). The game episode in the story’s plot alludes to these advanced methods of education, Indian railway history and part of Narayan’s early biography.

Indian Railways (hereafter IR) is a powerful thematic index in Narayan’s works. It is a topic that is central in some of his novels and tangentially related to the stories in other texts, including this one. Boehmer writes that Narayan “accepts [it] as central to Indian life” (*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature. Migrant Metaphors* 168). In his early years as a student at the Christian High College School, the railways meant he was suddenly “let loose into a larger world” and on his daily return from college, Purasawalkam, the place where he lived, seemed to him “a backwood” (Narayan, *My Days* 47). This sensation of opening to a wider outside world is one of IR’s literary underpinnings. Hence, the boy’s demand that the teacher become a Station Master contains a batch of hidden symbols that cannot be overlooked. “You want me to be a Station Master? What shall I have to do?” (219). Originally, IR was seen as a colonial instrument of power and exploitation. Indeed, the empire was initially thinking of its commercial, civilising and security necessities when it constructed the official propaganda that introduced it as “an emerging modernity and the technological driving force of developmental change” (Kerr 302). However, the British immediately realised that the number of Indian users made the railways a profitable business. Simultaneously, the nationalist parties saw them as an opportunity to spread the nineteenth-century phenomena and create a mass movement, a progressive “nation-building” force (307). Ironically, Gandhi, although he recognised their importance in *Hind Swaraj*, was not in favour of railways. He perceived them as an evil force that would degrade Indian customs, promoting foreign vices: “but for the railways, the English could not have such a hold on India as they have” (Gandhi 24). Nonetheless, they were so relevant for

economic and socio-political development that they became a “nationalist project [that] had to be Indianized” (Kerr 308). During the independence struggles, an anticolonial act was to travel ticketless: people filled up the trains without paying the fares and the railways’ reaction, besides declaring them “anti-social law breakers” (310), was to decide against stopping in those stations for which they had not sold tickets. Narayan’s text alludes to this historical civil disobedience through the boy’s commands to the chastised teacher: “When the train comes to your station, you must blow the whistle and cry ‘Engine Driver, stop the train. There are a lot of people today who have bought tickets’. The teacher hunched up in a corner and obeyed” (219).⁵⁰ Once again, Narayan depicts a subversive Indian strategy deployed against colonial policy, and with apparently harmless humour draws attention to conspicuous poverty.

A train travels in two directions. Figuratively, passengers from the city “get off at a small station looking for an authentic India” (Aguiar 107) while passengers from rural India travel to the metropolis seeking development and modernity. In “Crime and Punishment”, the child and the train symbolise the eminent transformation of India, “a subjectivity of traffic” that puts these parallel realities in contact. Narayan transmits his concept of the change that took place “during this period of nation-building” (107) through a suggested artificial space that gathers strangers together in a site of emplacement and that seems static while the world outside moves along the window. The movement, the unknown company and the symbolic horsepower traction create the perfect space for storytelling and narratives that cross between real and fictional worlds. Modern ways imply a utilitarian approach that guarantees “a stable political order” (Kaviraj 195). The adult employee has to serve as a stationmaster under the command of

⁵⁰ This comic situation has also biographical references evoked in *My Days*. Narayan used to save “one-way tram-fare” on his journey from college by jumping off at “the station nearest [his] home”; when he crowed about it in front of his uncle Seshachalam, he was “severely reprimanded” because he could be sent to “jail for this adventure” (48).

a capricious stage director. Like the boy's parents, the tutor has learned the foreign theory but he fails to put it into practice, as modern technology comes from abroad. In this part of the story, there is a concealed argument against the British colonial rule, which thoroughly destroyed India's highly qualified craftsmanship and the works attached to it through a systematic starvation of Indian people and heavy imports of qualified experts and foreign goods. Education as well as the caste system played an essential role in discouraging middle-class students from manual work; feeling these were inferior, they grew up ignoring the country's realities and rejecting any activity associated with "a basic craft", which was precisely one of Gandhi's "schemes" to restore Indian pride (Iyengar 260). The teacher embodies a non-technological tradition and a regressive teaching methodology that dismisses manual work: "He was absolutely non-mechanical", the narrator informs us (219). In the meantime, the child has already adopted the master's ways and is the result, in practical terms, of the parent's policy in modern education and his Brahmin upbringing: "The boy stamped his foot impatiently and waited like a tyrant" ("Crime and Punishment" 219). The choice is either the defence of the teacher's physical violence or the complete change of his outdated didactic methods. Narayan's ironic approach puts the reader face to face with the Gandhian objective of involving the child in the activities of the community in order to "cultivate self-reliance and develop a sense of responsibility" for everybody's improvement (Iyengar 260). This was to be achieved through a political insurgency and, paradoxically, through the parents' modern treatise of education, which, theoretically, pursues the same goal. Culture plays a commanding role in society through language, and especially the mother tongue. In order to get the child's attention, for example, it is necessary that the use of different linguistic forms should be direct and simple, while at a societal level, the Gandhian proposals were addressed to the population in apparently elementary, plain terms. The ideological undercurrent at the time

held the idea that in order to encourage the use of discursive narratives that promoted nationalistic values, the narratives should be charming, inviting and challenging “even to a child” if they were to be applied (Iyengar 260).

The story suffers another focal dislocation enabling it to fit Narayan’s argument about Indian society, when the arithmetic teacher, “tired of the position and the game”, is blackmailed again because of “the displeasure of his pupil” (“Crime and Punishment” 219), and is forced to call on literature for his mocking audience: “Tell me a story” (219), the child pleads. The teacher is to become a storyteller and delight the child’s ears with engaging stories. This is an activity related to alternative teaching methodologies and the teacher’s tales of both Hindu and Muslim origins abolish any infatuation with an ideological and cultural Indian purity. He tells the boy the stories of a bison and a tiger, the symbolic fight between Good and Evil, and evokes the lavishness of the Arabian Nights: they are merchant and sailor stories with a refined narration of “tricks” that motivate the listener’s imagination and whose goal is not simply didactic but to engage the listeners’ attention. They are not told in vain, since “the boy listen[s] rapt” (“Crime and Punishment” 220). Narayan’s irony reveals itself by introducing modern pedagogical methods of early stage multidisciplinary education but through a traditional teacher. The purpose is to instil in the child an abstract imaginative thinking, a type of heterodox thinking that would affect his adult life by promoting a hybridised citizen tolerant of communal differences.

In the aftermath of the Indian Constitution and its asymmetrical design, which was supposed to favour the coexistence of different religious communities, the problems of secular education revealed their deadly price when Hindu majorities began to perceive that the others had a better deal. “Crime and Punishment” anticipates those communal

struggles, which were related to numbers and the Indian Constitution, and advocates that literature might be the meeting place for understanding one another. Not surprisingly, Narayan argues in his essay entitled “Higher Mathematics” that “Mathematics is a matter of constitution” (*A Writer’s Nightmare* 11), thereby hinting that the matter of numbers was one of the practical reasons underlying the violence of communal riots and potential neighbouring wars. The mixture of foreign rationalism with Gandhian “national and cultural identity” (Jasen and Nayar 7) resulted in an explosion of xenophobia, intolerance and tribalism that, unfortunately, has swept across India on more than one occasion. Meanwhile, Narayan’s humour in “Crime and Punishment” reveals the miscellaneous nature of children’s education in India. He dwells on this multicultural education before focusing on the alternative clear-cut communal system that segregated students from an early stage, as was the case in his own personal experience. The child in the story eventually decides to run away from his teacher and out of his enclosure. He picks up his pedal motorcar and “wheel[s] about madly”, the teacher running after him and trying to prevent the boy from meeting his parents and reporting his abuse. Narayan’s comic setup is an allegory for an underdeveloped modern India who has acquired precious capitalist tools but who still moves herself along by pedal power, while a gasping traditional India runs far behind in a dishevelled manner until it “[sinks] down on the portico step” (“Crime and Punishment” 220). Soon after, the subrogated institutional authority represented by the boy’s parents brings about the incantatory word, “test”, which has the power of breaking any delusion. And here Narayan touches on one of his personal hang-ups, the ferocious competition of India’s education system. The boy now needs the tutor’s support to escape his parents’ questions and he gains it by negotiating with his “pathetic and desperate” looks (221). The story ends up with the tutor’s paternalistic complicity restoring the child’s trust in him and his tutorial authority and with modernity once again

under control. Curiously enough, the story's closure echoes Narayan's conversation with V. S. Naipaul in the early 1960s, when he affirmed: "Whatever happen[s], India w[ill] go on" (Naipaul 232). Almost thirty years earlier, Narayan had put into a poor private teacher's words the same confident report on a figurative growing India: "He is all right. He will pull through" ("Crime and Punishment" 221). In both cases, Narayan appears as the wellwisher with an unshakable faith in his country and its people.

"Under the Banyan Tree"

Embracing the previous stories as a sheltering canvas, there stands India's storytelling tradition of popular education mirrored in "Under the Banyan Tree" (1947), a story also included in the collection *An Astrologer's Day*. Graham Greene, in his personal correspondence with the author, defined it as "the story of all of us story-tellers" (Ram and Ram XXX). Greene attaches the writer's role to oral tradition in general and to Indian lore in particular, confirming what G. N. Devy describes as the "composition of texts, documents, or what one describes as 'manuscripts'" ("The Being of Bhasha" 9) that share a common space between written and oral forms or that "[co-exist] in an inter-dependent manner" (10). Narayan himself, like many Indian citizens, embodies a mixture of languages and cultures: brought up in Madras (Chennai), his mother tongue was Tamil, although the medium of instruction was English, his second best language. He spent most of his adult life in Mysore, however, where he spoke Kannada "quite fluently, [although] he found reading and writing it difficult" (Ram and Ram 93).

In this short story, Nambi is the village's "enchanter" ("Under the Banyan Tree" 222). He has an undefined age and his personal origins are lost in India's colonial history. The village, Somal, is located somewhere in the wilderness of Mempi forest, where "the nearest bus-stop [is] ten miles away" (222). Its name derives from *soma*: God's drink,

which implies *amrita*, a Sanskrit word meaning ambrosia, elixir of life or nectar. It is also related to *chandrama* and *chandrama devata*, which denotes the crescent moon seen as the Goddess *Shakti*⁵¹, and it is on account of *Shakti's* intervention that the whole village lives permanently under a magic spell. Caught in her *maya*, they fail to notice their entrapment in a web. A “subtle fabric” has been knitted around their existence which seems “utterly real” while they suffer “an endless ordeal of blandishment, desire and death” (Zimmer, *Myth and Symbols* 26): it is, as the narrator appraises, “a village to make the heart of a rural reformer sink [...] it bred malaria, typhoid, and heaven knew what else” (“Under the Banyan Tree” 222).

Nambi provides spiritual nourishment for the village, and this derives directly from the temple's Goddess. The Goddess stands for the conceptual ambiguity and the philosophical complexity of the Maya-Shakti-Devi's representation (Zimmer, *Myth and Symbols* 26): they “lived on the whole in an exalted plane of their own, though their life in all other respects was hard and drab” (225). Nambi provides them with “words of wisdom” (225) and knowledge from distant cultures. He is the village's father and tutor, the primeval educator that the system fails to provide. His resources come from the literature and the history transmitted by generations of storytellers who constructed an orality “on an epic scale” (225), which was later transcribed into a written form. For G. N. Devy, storytelling was a necessary tool for the institutionalization of new states and was based upon the “fascination for violence”. They express the memory of wars, victories and silences: “Language, assisted by memory and imagination and the desire for transcending the otherness, creates stories and scripts, and states throw out the stories” (“The Being of Bhasha” 23). That fascination is visible in the orality of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* or the *Bhagavata*, stories of bloody conflicts that constitute the spiritual

⁵¹ Shakti. Def. Cf. *Arvind Lexicon*.

being of Indian culture. If this particular literary tradition is misused and manipulated, it can also become a source of illiteracy, superstition and fundamentalism, blind to the stagnant water and the illnesses that it carries within it, and forgetful of its own history. Indeed, B. R. Ambedkar, during a parliamentary debate on the Draft Constitution, held that the “village republics have been the ruination of India”. At the same time, he blamed them for being “a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism” (*Constituent Assembly Debates* VII, II).⁵² Ambedkar sympathised with the constitutional terms that ranked the individual as a unit before the designation of the village as the constitutional guarantee of individual rights. He stood against communal politics and village republics, defining them as the historical cause of colonial exploitation. Ambedkar pointed out that, while several revolutions were taking place and foreign forces conquered the subcontinent, these communities closed themselves off and continued their self-sufficient way of life, thus conditioning “the affairs and the destiny of the country” (*Constituent Assembly Debates*). This traditional passivity is metaphorically illustrated in Narayan’s short story as the cause of a bewitched stagnation that produces a false sense of existential fulfilment. There is a ritualistic enchantment in the daily act of purification triggered by the gathering around Nambi under the banyan tree and in the general communion with his tales.

Paradoxically, this short story also discusses the core of rural India, the “village republic”, in Gandhian terms. Gandhi saw a “form of exploitation” in the destruction of the environment and the massive displacement of people to the industrial centres (Iyengar 259) that would result in a loss of identity and a moral misery. He therefore aimed for “village industries” that would prevent the disappearance of family bonds, language and culture. These village industries would provide economic sustenance for their members

⁵² *Proceedings*. Constituent Assembly of India. <<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm>>.

once inserted in a productive system; in other words, the Gandhian proposal defended, with some alterations, the continuity of the traditional economic model sanctioned by the caste system's divisions of labour. Modern commentators also perceive these "local and fragmentary" rural communities as the alternative to "secular nationalism" and "the intolerant power-drives of the homogenizing modern nation-state" which they see as the enemy of diversity (Morey and Tickell xix). For them, the Indian constitution and its values of secularism constitute a "myth", largely "inappropriate" for modern times (xviii). "Secular statecraft" is seen as an intolerant political drive, coming from Hindu nationalists, that expects from other religious faiths a "spirit of tolerance" that is not fomented from either side. Precisely these stances contradict the original Gandhian idea on communal tolerance (Nandy, *Time Warps* 87). Nevertheless, it would be naïve to ignore the interest and support that these modern-thinking leaderships invested in communal politics, since the rise of communalism and the politico-economic importance of ethnic minorities condition the nature of partisan campaigns while, simultaneously, communalism constitutes a substantial source of votes and of local power. Besides, Nandy explains that there are people who feel an "awareness of another world that refuses to die" (*Time Warps* 2). This world manifests itself in the communion with tradition: local folklore, dialects and even "deviant theories of ethnic or communal violence" (2). These global villagers find in their past and cultural roots, "the pathway to the future". They perceive this essential being as less corrupted or less affected by a socialisation that has taken away important aspects of Indianness or, as Nandy puts it, their "less-colonised selves" (*Time Warps* 2). When, in Narayan's short story, the text reads as: "As the moon crept up behind the hillock, men, women and children, gathered under the banyan tree" ("Under the Banyan Tree" 224), the reader can see the community act as generations have performed it from time immemorial.

Storytelling tradition stands up in Narayan's works as a sign of an Indian identity that carries many elements along. It conveys an ethical and a moral sense that is compatible with other religious beliefs: "Since didacticism was never shunned, every story has implicit in it a moral value, likened to the fragrance of a well-shaped flower" (Narayan, *A Story-Teller's World* 9). His Indian revival invokes other spaces of historical colonialism that have left an indelible cultural trace in the collective memory, like the Aryans, the Mughal empire or the Marathas' confederacy, and many unanswered questions dealt with in modern postcolonial criticism. In a way the writer acts in the same way as Nambi who "open[s] the story with a question [...], a stone's throw in that direction, what do you think there was?" (224). In Zimmer's view, it is the "supra-individual" reality, the symbolic space of *Maya*, that best reveals the ephemeral and evanescent Indian concept of existence. It aims to "cut through into a reality outside and beneath the emotional and intellectual convulsions that enrapt our conscious being" (*Myth and Symbols* 26). Hence, Nambi's discourse continues unwrapping an alternative reality focused beyond their imagination: "It was not the weed-covered waste it is now, for donkeys to roll in. It was not the ash-pit it is now. It was the capital of the king..." ("Under the Banyan Tree" 224).

Nambi is a dyadic being. On the one hand, he symbolises impermanence, *anicca*; he is fallible, fragile and submitted to changes. He has been gifted with the orality of the storytellers and their mutability: "Nambi's voice rose and fell in an exquisite rhythm, and the moonlight and the hour completed the magic" (225). On the other hand, he is eternal, he is *akshar*⁵³, the perennial character, the sign that derives from Indian Sanskritic mythology, "the indestructible substance" from which the sound of creation is made

⁵³ *Akṣara*: phoneme or syllable, as it migrated from Sanskrit to Kannada (tadbhava or derived form, akkara); etymologically means "that which does not decay" (Pollock 307). *Akkaṛ*- Kannada's root.

(Devy, “The Being of Bhasha” 12). The “characters are nomadic and migratory” (12) and, like Nambi’s stories, the signs convey the Sanskritic essence of linguistic evolution with the “eternal and uncreated” nature of language (Pollock 307). The linguistic symbols come from timeless waves of languages: in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Sri Krishna asserts his greatness exclaiming: “Among words I am the single *akṣara* (10.25)” (Pollock 307). Krishna stands for the “irreducible and eternal core of language” (Pollock 308). Thus, when the *akshars* form “lexical units”, these are sedentary and attached to rules, just as Nambi’s natural place remains “[in] the sanctum” (228). These units possess “a fixed location and a definition”, submitted to a time-bound interpretation within a contextual frame. That is “why a limited number of *akshars* can create many words or a language” (Devy, “The Being of Bhasha” 12). In the tenth century, in Karnataka, oral tradition and vernacularisation suffered a transformation that gave way to literacy: the term *akṣara* came to “signify written letters, the knowledge of writing, and literacy-based knowledge in general” (Pollock 308). The men who knew how to interpret oral and written signs were called *akkarigavṛtti*, grammarians, for whom the study of the origins of words and texts was important. They “made their living by reason of their command of literacy” (308). This was a historical turning point because from *vāgmin*, “master of speech” derived the seme “man of letters” – *vidvāna* (Pollock 308). The storyteller – *bhaṣadhikari* – and the writer – *akṣarajivi* – now emerged: from an orthodox linguistic perspective, and as the propagators of vernaculars, they were considered responsible for the corruption of language. For Sanskrit theorists, the *bhashas*⁵⁴ were not only the product of the speakers’ incompetence but their incapacity to encode real knowledge (Pollock 308). Ironically, those Vedic literatures that aimed for the *bhasha*’s orthodoxy and were treated almost as

⁵⁴ Bhashas: New languages that emerged from the third to the tenth centuries as a reaction against the hegemony of Sanskrit and its culture *Sanskriti*. (Devy, “After Amnesia” 6). Vernaculars, dialects from different Indian regions (Cf. Arvind Lexicon).

if they were of divine and not human origin disappeared from “the historical sphere altogether” (Devy, “Of Many Heroes” 35). The cause of their demise was the “editorial precision” and the inflexible reproduction that “permitted not the slightest linguistic freedom to the individual involved in the process” (Devy, “Of Many Heroes” 36). Storytellers use language representation to act as teachers and to transmit information to their audience and mould their minds. Nambi in “Under the Banyan Tree” is a good example:

The villagers laughed with Nambi, they wept with him, they adored the heroes, cursed the villains, groaned when the conspirator had his initial success, and they sent up to the gods a heartfelt prayer for a happy ending. (“Under the Banyan Tree” 225)

In Narayan’s story, the English language acts like the banyan tree’s shadow by overreaching cultures and languages that are interpreted and translated before they are written down, as is the case with the Tamil, Sanskrit or Hindi contained in Narayan’s textual structures. Narayan believes that “in our dislike of Imperialism we made the mistake of identifying the language with the Imperialist”, as education is often muddled with indoctrination. For Narayan, “language itself has an independent colonizing habit: it goes ‘native’, and becomes so rooted in the soil that it cannot be uprooted” (*A Story-Teller’s World* 86). The encroachment of the English language in Indian society had the side-effect of “ending the insularity and the streaming in of Western thought-currents” for those who first received an English education (Iyengar 519). English education is a gifted storyteller that has brought news from other parts of the world, other cultures and other frames of mind. The privileged elites were the depositaries of this knowledge and it

elevated them above their region, language, “religion and caste barriers, and [they] th[ought] in terms of one India, a self-governing India, and a democratic India” (519).

As if inspired by a superior restless being, the short story points out that “brick by brick the palace of the king was raised” (“Under the Banyan Tree” 224). It was only a question of time before these first transmuted improvers would give way to subsequent generations of Indian reformers, who are subliminally described in the short story as “a hundred of vassal kings, ministers, and subjects” (224), and who reveal to others their own “indigenous languages” in the new light of revived tradition and Indian cultural treasures: “he described in detail the pictures and trophies that hung on the walls of the palace” (225). The colonial sediments on Indian soil fructified and emerged as an imagined ideology of nationalism, in the same way that modern post-colonial nation-states in general tend to reproduce “upon themselves the same civilising mission that colonial states had once taken upon themselves” (Nandy, *Time Warps* 64). Narayan continues to provide a parallel in “Under the Banyan Tree” when, one day, Nambi, the *alma mater* of the village, falters as he tries to tell the story. Time has passed, and he has inevitably grown old. The ways of hero-worship, the Indian *Bhakti*, are over. The parishioners worship a Goddess. This path of spiritual salvation is not translatable to politics where, according to Ambedkar’s speech in the Indian Parliament, *Bhakti* becomes “a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship”, since it demands a blind obedience to a leader invested with enough power that can “subvert the institutions” (*Constituent Assembly Debates XI*)⁵⁵. Memory “is disobedient and treacherous” (“Under the Banyan Tree” 227). Thus, the divine space gives way to the human space. Nambi becomes unable to make some sense out of the remains of the village’s past when it loses the Goddess’ grace: “I can’t understand what has happened?” (226). Time has proved a

⁵⁵ <<http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm>>.

dangerous weapon with two cutting edges. On the one hand, English acts as a universal language that allows the communication between Indian people who speak different *bhashas*. It also has conquered its own place within the Indian constitution, which is symbolically evoked in the sentence: “Kings and heroes, villains and fairy-like women, gods in human forms, saints and assassins, jostled each other in that world which was created under the banyan tree” (“Under the Banyan Tree” 225). On the other hand, allied with Hindi, these hegemonic languages have become a “twin threat to the healthy linguistic diversity” of Indian vernaculars (Satpathy, *Hindu*)⁵⁶, which the short story describes as “ha[ving] gone on for years and years” (“Under the Banyan Tree” 226). The less favoured and the middle-class people think that an English-medium education will lead them to better opportunities than a local Indian school that offers “the local language as the medium of instruction” (Satpathy, *Hindu*). The symbolic representation of the short story explains that “[t]hose who sat in the outer edge of the crowd silently slipped away” (“Under the Banyan Tree” 226).

Devy defines the term *Adivasi* as “the speech communities of [those] ‘other’ languages” which mostly “do not have their own scripts” and which, therefore, are not included “in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution” even if they have a rich “body of documents, which were not written by hand but conveyed by tongue” (“The Being of Bhasha” 11). These languages are doubly neglected: since they are entirely oral, they are not officially protected by a written medium and insofar as they do not possess an acknowledged linguistic identity, the *bhashas* therefore suffer an “imposed aphasia”⁵⁷, which, in a symbolic sense, means that the idea, the discourse is short-circuited and is rendered speechless. Devy argues that “vast populations of Indian languages and the

⁵⁶ <Thehindu.com>.

⁵⁷ Aphasia: a physical and a psychological linguistic disorder that is manifest in the incapacity to produce a linguistic message, where the person loses the ability to link word with sense (Devy, “The Being of Bhasha” 12).

‘unscheduled’ tribal languages” are not allowed to speak (“The Being of Bhasha” 12). In “Under the Banyan Tree”, Nambi declares his frustration for having lost the narrative thread: “I know the story. I had the whole of it a moment ago. What was it about? I can’t understand what has happened?” (“Under the Banyan Tree” 226). He expresses his impotence and his rage, as he is no longer the master of speech: “Mother, why have you struck me dumb?” (“Under the Banyan Tree” 227).

The banyan tree gathers under its shade the symbolism of myth and India’s history. Both co-exist with the significant disintegration of Sanskrit itself: historically, the external pressures of hundreds of *bhashas* acting together brought about its collapse. The symbolic Superior Being representing Mother India has provided the inspiration, the protection and the time to develop a social expression that has given birth to a polyphony of languages and a multicultural identity. However, this Superior Being has decided which of the branches are to be favoured and nourished and which ones are to be neglected or cut off. The medium is silence, a symbolic gesture for Indian tradition whose roots lie as far back as the *Upanishads* and “passes all understanding” (Devy, “The Being of Bhasha” 18).

It is the mother who gives the gifts; and it is She who takes away the gifts.

Nambi is a dotard. He speaks when the Mother has anything to say. He is struck dumb when She has nothing to say”. (228)

The short story communicates the socio-economic reality that the Indian *bhashas* faced: “What is the lamp for when all the oil is gone?” (“Under the Banyan Tree” 228). Nambi is the light that illuminates the village with his worldly knowledge. He holds the plural force of the *bhashas*, the oil of the lamp; once his mental capacities are dried and his educative role cannot be fulfilled, the linguistic richness that represented the allegory

of Indian cultures is lost forever. Dispossessed of his voice, Nambi is no longer the ideological instrument of popular education but a testimonial, silent holder of history. His presence indicates an empty space that once occupied the centre of village life: his waning presence walks “into any cottage and silently [sits] down for food, and [walks] away the moment he [has] eaten” (229). The emergent society must now fill that space with new voices.

Conclusions

The three short stories above describe transitional characters that go through changes propelled by inward and outward pressures. Following Foucault’s ideas, I have tried to locate a heterotopia that “juxtapose[s] in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, n.p.). The real place is the India depicted in Narayan’s *Malgudi*, which illustrates the several spaces and sites of alternative realities set together, sometimes in conflict with each other, sometimes combining each other’s qualities, as the three texts show. In addition to education and secularity, the short stories contemplate a symbolic water force that purifies evil and nourishes all beings in that it serves the social purpose of communication but it can also breed infections and death if it becomes stagnant. The short stories create a three-fold perspective on India’s education: in the first place, the petrifying effects of religious orthodoxy and the education system relying upon fierce competition, a clear residue of colonial times, must be overcome. Pressed by his parents to pass the national university entrance examination, Iswaran loses nine precious years comparing himself to other people’s progress. When everything seems to fail, he decides to seek refuge in the comfort provided by the illusory world of films. In the second place, an outdated secular education system which solely pursues to satisfy the student’s psychological needs and

motivation, while ignoring those of the teacher, also proves to be wrong. The story, however, solves the tension by suggesting the power of storytelling in its denouement: the tales that the teacher chooses to engage the child's attention become not only the necessary meeting point, the bridge that gaps the distance between the teacher and his young disciple, but also the rearticulation of a collective, cultural memory that may be lost for the coming generations. Finally, the everlasting Indian village, Somal, and its mythic richness inspire the concept of national unity but the tradition has become a dead thing of the past and it cannot be resurrected for it has lost its original voice. The question is to find a cultural leader, an enchanter who revives a language capable of guiding the village out of its stagnancy and bigotry.

Exclusions and communal radicalism create deep-rooted resentments and the perilous desire to gain an absolute power wiping out differences, something that has consistently proved to be of fatal consequence in recent Indian history. Perhaps it is possible to bring to practical and secular terms a fragment from the *Gita* of Krishna's words that resume the essences of the three short stories: the indomitable horse, the sign and the banyan tree:

I am Bhrigu, priest of the great seers;
 Of words, I am the eternal syllable OM,
 The prayer of sacrifices;
 I am Himalaya, the measure of what endures. (10, 25)
 Among trees, I am the sacred fig-tree;
 I am chief of the divine sages,
 Leader of the celestial musicians,
 The recluse philosopher among saints. (10, 26)

Among horses, know me as the immortal stallion

Born from the sea of elixir;

Among elephants, the divine king's mount;

among men, the king. (10, 27) (Miller 94)

Communal Identities: Reasons for Violence

Introduction

Education, secularism and religious traditions necessarily arouse the question of *communalism*, which is a specifically Indian issue intimately connected to ethnic groups and political opportunism, and which has a ripple effect and reverberates all over the world. It is also a permanent source of heavy-handed conflicts and brutal violence. “Another Community” appeared in the collection *Lawley Road and Other Stories* published in 1956. It is one of the very few stories in which Narayan addresses an all-pervading, contemporary Indian conflict, *communal violence*. Narratively speaking, Narayan seems to glide over the major crisis of the 1947 Partition of India. However, a close analysis of the short story will leave no doubt about the trauma that this event inflicted on the author’s intellect, and the critical attitude he takes towards violence.

A careful examination of India’s modern history allows the reader to identify in Narayan’s narrative a profound knowledge of the past and a deep attachment to his country, along with clear allusions to Gandhi, linguistically condensed in the narrator’s words when, for example, he states that “a good action in a far off place did not find a corresponding echo, but an evil one did possess that power” (Narayan, “Another Community” 150). This is relevant to an understanding of Narayan’s work because it repackages Gandhi’s concept of passive resistance as Dharma: the duty to exercise nationalist opposition against colonialism and foreign influences accentuated the divide in “the body politic” (Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony* 36). The holistic interpretation of the Hindu Dharma differed from one social group to another, and this acted as a disintegrative agent, enhancing caste and religious divisions, thus “ranging the

rural gentry against the peasantry, upper castes against Namasudras, and above all Hindus and Muslims against each other” (36). This sensitive issue that the Hindu Dharma presents forces the moral interrogation on the modern intellectual stance, which is influenced by religious beliefs as in Narayan’s case. Treading carefully on contemporary politics, the author’s self-effacing voice resembles the Gandhian soul-force – *Satyagraha* – in a piece of writing that is inspired by communal riots. Narayan manipulates contexts and words in such a way that the reader’s perception is led to a linguistic domain where a cross-examination of essential questions seems to be absent, and where the text thus avoids making a conspicuous political judgment. Roger Fowler describes the situation present in this text as “a *practice*” of language (*Linguistic Criticism* 54), whereby language itself becomes the place for debate and negotiation. The analysis in this case uncovers the “artificiality” of Narayan’s discourse and the ideological encoding that lies beneath. A closer study of his texts is therefore necessary in order to uncover his role as a “creative thinker” acting as a “critic” who exposes, in Fowler’s words, “a problem which s/he declines to solve, demystifying perception without offering the potentially illusory closure of a replacement theory” (55). Thus, at the beginning of the story, Narayan’s narrator advances the following information: “I am not going to mention caste or community in this story” (“Another Community” 150) and it is precisely in denying these conflictive categories that the author establishes the scope and parameters of the thematic structure of his narrative. Fowler calls this process one of “*uncoding* – disestablishing the received tie between a sign and a cultural unit” (*Linguistic Criticism* 55) and it is relevant here because using the device allows Narayan simultaneously to set the tone of a deceptively apolitical short story, which is suitable for a wide audience of the most diverse ideologies without falling into an unreliable thematic narrative; and also to handle, almost incidentally, an Indian conflict of primary importance which remains

unsolved and which in fact seems to grow worse rather than better. In order to disclose the intricate mechanisms that might help us to interpret the text and reflect on modern contexts and theories of communal violence, a critical reading of the short story's language will be instrumental. It will allow us to reveal the encoded message, "a whole area of knowledge" in Fowler's words (55), which, from a Hinduist observer's perspective, touches on India's history and communalism without making any specific reference to political opportunism. As hard as the narrator tries to claim his political views, Narayan conceals his critical approach to communal violence in the cultural space provided by the translation in-between English, Tamil, Kannada and even Hindi, a conflict that was pretty much absent in the more religiously/culturally homogeneous Western societies at the time Narayan was writing the story.⁵⁸

The analysis of this short story will show three essential aspects which cannot be glossed over: first, it will be clear that the perception of communalism and communal violence depends on the area or geographical region involved and its diachronic development; second, communalism affects the social conditions of people, which manifest themselves differently in rural and urban societies; third, communalism presents a complex social fabric that cannot simply be rationalised from the perspective of a religious community or as a modern social phenomenon. Following Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*,⁵⁹ the central argument of the analysis is that Narayan's choice of a nameless Indian town as the setting of the story must be understood as a narrative strategy with universal implications: the place operates as embodying a "coextensive" geography, which ultimately represents the "generic sovereignty of the country". Thus, this generic, nondescript town becomes the

⁵⁸ The postcolonial diasporas have resulted into a new national identity in most European countries which is no longer homogeneous but made of a diversity of minorities. Unfortunately, violent riots and terrorist attacks have also sprung up in different parts of Europe.

⁵⁹ From now on, *The Nation and Its Fragments*.

representation of other towns and states with similar communal terms and specific communal interests (95). Logically, Chatterjee's reasoning leads to a conclusion that may well throw light on part of Narayan's fictional plot: if the state-formation revolves around this coextensive epicentre, any local crisis might provoke a "sudden" spread of violence without any "apparent reason" that will lead to a centrifugal movement, causing a domino effect throughout the entire region and, eventually, the whole country. This is precisely what happens in Narayan's short story. However, this apparent lack of motivation for a violent outbreak derives from the Hindu tradition of *Bhakti*: the same submissive obedience that Ranajit Guha links to "an inert mass of feudal culture" and understands as "loyalism". It is the practical translation of casteism to social affiliations that Guha expresses in terms of ideological "power relation[s]" between politics and religion syncretised by the ur-text the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and whose effects have been "justif[ied] and propagate[d] by an array of cults, precepts, institutions, and codes" (*Dominance Without Hegemony* 47). There are different modalities of *Bhakti*, known as *rasas*, that determine the subject's social relation to power, the essential one being *dāsya*, "the quality of being a servant, slave or bondsman" (47), which is in itself the condition of servitude. Nevertheless, the protagonist of the text is bound to another *rasa*, the one that derives from "a willing servitude" attached to a filial hierarchy, *vātsalya*, and which is "of the same order as a child's to its parent" (48): the child instinctively trusts and obeys its parents, especially at an early age. The protagonist naturally bears this submissive condition to his community as a cultural distinction. These traditional differentiations destroy any illusion of an apolitical text given that there exists a hegemonic ideology prior to the character's ambiguous stance that exposes him and his milieu as fastened to a cultural niche behind which lies a network of socio-political interests.

The short story narrates the last days of a man's ordinary, uneventful life, his thoughts and feelings shaken by the communal violence that exploded in the aftermath of India's Independence and Partition. The omniscient narrator describes him as a propitious sacrificial victim subdued both by his community and by his own fears that exercise a petrifying effect on him. Unable to overcome his automaton behaviour, this paralysis signals him as a perfect recipient of the mob's violence. Unwittingly, he lets himself be killed, and his death ignites the town's communal uprisings. Meanwhile, the history of India is far from being paralysed. In fact, the narration serves to depict a backdrop to a crucial moment in the country's collective memory after Partition: India takes over the princely states of Jammu and Kashmir, once they had been invaded by Muslim raiders, *Pathans*, and prevents their annexation to Pakistan at a very high price, the outbreak of the first Indo-Pakistani war in 1947.

I will begin my analysis with the historical construction of the communal identity. Communal violence existed prior to English colonial rule, notwithstanding the fact that the colonial legal reform contributed to the creation of differentiated legal frames for each of the communities, something that inevitably triggered multiple revolts and accounted for the social construction of enmity between these communities. The separation of groups along ethnic and cultural lines paved the way for the segregation of communities. Behind the short story's title "Another Community", Narayan also uses a precise moment in Indian history: the invasion of Kashmir by Muslim raiders that affected the communal relations within India and Pakistan, and the author thus establishes a deliberate geographical differentiation with the Tamil Nadu region. It is as if the author's subliminal intention were the exclusion of this violence from the South Indian cultural past. Massacres and massive displacements nourished communal violence across the newly constructed states: now, *the other* represents the enemy's community. Narayan makes use

of rhetorical tropes from Gothic literature to portray the people's anguishes, fears and oppression and show how they are easily controlled by communal violence and opportunistic politicians who take advantage of the chaotic situation to maximize their profits and occasionally instigate the riots. Consequently, the Indian secular state moves along according to communal barriers, and following on from this, we can perhaps easily foreshadow the story's denouement. Narayan's discourse constructs a space for debate and scepticism, however, that questions the reasons for violence, while symbolically exposing its religious origin. He instils a permanent doubt in his narrative structure that leads to a multiplicity of interpretations according to the communal reading. The conclusion is that evidences and testimonies are subject to ideological translations that heavily rely on, and emanate from, the victorious party and whose judgements can vary due to their relative and contradictory natures. As the losses and the brutal violence caused such traumatic wounds, it seems a tough road to hope for an effective and long lasting healing.

“Another Community”

Narayan's detachment from political issues is an aspect that has often been criticised. Chhote Lal Khatri, for example, notes that “[Narayan] steers himself clear of all political prejudices and ‘isms’ and records his observations with an artistic detachment” (*R. K. Narayan: Reflections and Re-evaluation* 15). This criticism conveys several commonplaces about Narayan's ideological position, which need to be revised if we aim to comprehend the complexities of his literary production. To begin with, “Another Community” easily shrugs off Khatri's description of “an attitude that focuses on the beatific side of human life” (19). Khatri implies that Narayan does not involve himself enough in the “social significance of literature”, for he “has a comic view of life

and his humor is mild, refined, and genial” (15). Khatri attributes Narayan’s simplicity to his “commitment to art, that is, his aesthetic delight and entertainment”. From his perspective, Narayan is “a realist taking a comedian’s look at the panorama of life” (16). Although there is some truth in Khatri’s criticism about Narayan’s style of writing “as a dispassionate observer” (19), his narrative provides multiple sources of information that contradict Khatri’s accusation of naivety and political detachment. As this analysis will later show, he is a well-informed writer who succeeds in providing an observation of reality in its true hues, but who, in so doing, converts it into an effective allegorical discourse.

The Construction of the Social Enmity

This analysis does not attempt to explain in detail the complexities of communal violence in the Asian subcontinent, but some previous qualifications are nevertheless necessary in order to understand the subtle intricacies of Narayan’s short fiction. Communal violence is a political reality made of myriad cases, each with very specific conditions related to geographical space, socio-economic factors, ideological approaches and, ultimately, constitutional design. However, in most cases there exists common ground and precedents that allow us to establish a general interpretation of the upsurge of religious violence. A common denominator is the “politicization of religion” (Sen, *Identity and Violence* 71): the individual’s private practice loses its spiritual meaning and is absorbed by the religious community, which transforms its devotees into a political weapon used for the acquisition of power. A glimpse at Indian history shows that violence between Hindus and other religious communities is not by any means a recent conflict. It has appeared sporadically throughout Indian history interspersed with long periods of peace, tolerance and development, promoted by emperors like Akbar who

insisted “in the 1590s on the need for open dialogue and free choice” between the different ethnic and religious groups (64). C. A. Bayly holds that “Hindu-Muslim symbiosis” during these early times, prior to colonialism, “did not totally exclude the possibility of riot and disturbance along communal lines” (“The Pre-History of ‘Communalism’?”⁶⁰ 180). It is clear that religious conflicts existed in pre-colonial times, and this should warn us against the belief in the ideal of a harmonious communal past. According to Amartia Sen, one of the social simulacra lies in the reduction of identity to a religious or a political affiliation, i.e. “the presumption that people can be uniquely categorised based on religion or culture” (*Identity and Violence* xv). The person is metonymically associated with the group that monopolises any individual value or personal choice and shapes the minds of its members in tune with the collective ideology. Thus, the group steps into the place of the individual, who in turn suffers a holistic misrepresentation from rival affiliations. For Sen, the process historically meant that “many person’s identities as Indians, as subcontinentals, as Asians, or as members of the human race, seemed to give way – quite suddenly – to sectarian identification with Hindu, Muslim or Sikh communities” (9-10). However, these programmatic associations experienced a dramatic inflection after the 1857 revolts when the British government assumed control over the colonial territory. They no longer intervened in religious matters, as the English raj had done before, by substituting Indian rulers’ essential commitments. Instead, they chose to “reinforce the idea [of] religious neutrality [as] essential to colonial rule” (Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* 48)⁶¹. Consequently, in 1858 they opened a space for individual representation when they legislated in favour of “equality before the law by enacting uniform codes of civil and criminal law” (Chatterjee, “Secularism and Toleration” 1,769).

⁶⁰ Original title, “The Pre-History of ‘Communalism’? Religious Conflict in India 1700-1860”.

⁶¹ *Imperial Encounters* from this time forward.

Nevertheless, they left out of the governmental ruling those “personal laws” that remained within the “religious laws as recognised and interpreted by the [Indian] courts” (1,769). In fact, they constructed and favoured the legal ground for communal differentiation: the responsibility of the state for controlling religious doctrine and practices was handed over the “local trusts and committees” (1,769), something that became harmful for those non-affiliated members of the society. The ruling agency was transferred to “the moral authority of the (national) community” (1,770), thus giving institutional support to a national figuration of India from a communal perspective.

Some have called this the politics of “divide and rule”: departing from a supposedly homogeneous, communal distribution, it raises an ideological construction of “communal antagonism” which opens up spaces for political and religious contestations (Daiya 33). This is the expression of a break-up of the “civilizational unity” that begins with a discourse of anticolonial nationalism and ends up destroying the “civic ethos” that holds any plural community together (Ahmad 119). These phenomena give way to radical expressions of nationalism and internal struggles among different social strata that, in India’s case, have remained unsolved and, at times, even worsened after independence. They also constitute one of the major problems faced by the modern Indian state: religious minorities deny the right of the government “to interfere in their religious affairs”, arguing that it is against the “freedom of religion” principle. Accordingly, the Indian constitution effectively fails to provide “a uniform civil code for all citizens” (Chatterjee, “Secularism and Toleration” 1,772). It delivers an asymmetric representation of the minorities’ electoral power that breaks the principle of equality and means that a relatively small number of citizens hold greater and more decisive sway over the local or state government – through “reserved quotas in employment and education or of reserved

seats in the representative bodies” (1,771) – than the majority of the electorate in question, all of which results in a powerful source of enmity and ultimately of communal violence. In modern politics, the syncretic origin of “the idea of India” is a relevant element since it has been challenged by the power of religious electorates which, according to A. B. Dharwadker, “have tended to deconstruct the nation back into its principal ethnoreligious components, represented most strongly by Hindu, Muslim and Sikh fundamentalism” (*Theatres of Independence* 170). These groups have learned to play with electoral constituencies and political associations to maintain their influence over the greatest number of people, using communalism as their strongest weapon.

In the nineteenth century, colonial policies on education further favoured an Indian revivalism that was constructed from the double nature of “European orientalist and Indian nationalists”. In A. B. Dharwadker’s view, “European scholars gave a ‘scientific’ basis and definition to the qualities that informed nationalist rhetoric about a resurgent ‘Indian civilization’” (171). For Hindu nationalists, once the Sanskrit literature was dug out of its priestly brahminic shroud and made accessible to another kind of readership, it became the centre of a “Hinduized mainstream nationalism” around which they forged the idea of a modern secularised nation-state (Daiya 33). Simultaneously, and due to legal reforms on land ownership and tenure rights, Muslim organisations saw their own pan-Islamic revivalism “as popular discourses for mobilizing Indians along ethnic lines” (33). Under the auspices of the British government, Muslims grew in strength and by 1906 they had founded the Indian Muslim League (IML) “to represent Muslim interests, which they claimed were different from and opposed to Hindu interests” (33). In 1909, with the Indian Council Act, the British consolidated the segregation of Hindus and Muslims with a “separate electorate” drawn along “communal

lines”: “eight out of twenty-seven elected seats were reserved for the Muslims” (34). As Kavita Daiya notes, “separate electorates encouraged the growth of communal organizations and discourses which mobilized members around religious, regional and caste difference” (34). When the enemy was an outsider, they could join forces in “communal solidarity”, the *swadeshi* movement, and fight it off. But if they were divided, the colonial government could effectively debilitate the advance of an emergent Asian power and place it under control. The idea of a homogeneous Indian nation-state was therefore constructed around the axis of religion. For Peter van der Veer, religion is a “conceptual category” that displays comprehensibly certain “social practices”, equivalent to other discursive constructions such as “culture and ritual” and “society”, which already belong to the public sphere. In his opinion, the novelty of the 19th century’s religious practices is their departure from the *Sancta Santorum* and their amalgamation with political populism: “[a]s a modern category [religion] emerges together with nationalism as an ideology in discourses that oppose the ‘modern’ to the ‘traditional’” (Veer, “Transnational Religion”⁶² 4). These religious practices also engendered militant contestations, which took on nationalistic forms, in order to vindicate an anticolonial space. India’s religious diversity and economic asymmetries, however, made the idea of a secular, unitary and uniform country that was respectful to traditions a pipe dream.

The politics of discord continued steadily and systematically. Political and social agents constructed the notion of a “Two-Nation” society through a well-planned system of communal violence. They succeeded in creating a public discourse of an “unfamiliar” India that had departed from her own history and could no longer live in peace without communal segregation. Muslim elites also feared the rising power of the Indian National Congress Party (INCP) as a majoritarian Hindu force and they therefore proposed

⁶² Original title, “Transnational Religion; Hindu and Muslim Movements”.

separated territories following a communal criterion. In the 1940s, their leader, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, now a declared separatist, “presented Partition as the logical and inevitable outcome of the irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims” (P. Kumar, *Limiting Secularism* xvi). The terrible riots of August and November 1946 and March 1947, with thousands of victims and crippling losses that deepened the economic crisis, destroyed the prospect of a single independent country. India and Pakistan built up their national identities on hate, fear, and revenge against each other. Partition was, in Priya Kumar’s words, “a communal holocaust of terrifying proportions, setting off one of the largest mass migrations of people in history” (xvi). Another critic, Aamir R. Mufti, holds the opinion that Partition has to be read as a “necessary development for the discourse of nationhood itself”. Muslims represented an obstacle for the project of a secular nation, and in this critic’s view, the nation was structured around “a gesture of letting go” for those who were against secular politics (Mufti 86). Although P. Kumar and Mufti argue about the same issue from two different perspectives, the humanitarian and the rationalist, those who suffered most the traumatic experience of migration and the consequences of violence were never asked about Partition. Nobody sought out a previous opinion about personal or economic losses that affected millions of people and generations to come. Their voices were ignored and their cries silenced. As Christiane R. Hartnack contends, “the Partition of British India was externally imposed and internally sanctioned” (245). Opportunistic politics and a significant amount of improvisation had built up “the assumption of a deeply rooted animosity between Muslims and Hindus”. The British were already involved in the aftermath of the World War Two and their “precipitous and poorly planned disengagement from India” was used by the two major Indian parties, the IML and INCP, and their leaders, Mohammed Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru, “to implement state-building activities” (245) along religious lines that

involved separation and included “different economic, political and military agendas” (246).

“Another Community”

Against this background, Narayan writes this short story from a temporal detachment. His words open a narrative space that allows him to revisit past and present history: the country has been partitioned and the notion of the “stranger” has been bounced from the English colonialists to the Muslims, who now embody *the other*, who are the enemy subjects according to a racial divide. Narratively speaking, Narayan constructs a syntagmatic duality that defamiliarises the historical background of the Independence and the Partition periods for the reader. The public sphere is controlled by the commanding leadership of the media as the narrator informs the readers: “The newspapers of recent months have given us a tip which is handy – namely the designation: ‘One Community’ and ‘Another Community’” (“Another Community” 150). Narayan’s hero has no name but the narrator invites the reader to participate in the reconstruction of the experience of his last days. The omniscient narrator uses a literary strategy that gives the reader an active role while he structures the “writing of Otherness” directly addressing the reader: “I want you to find out, if you like, to what community or section he belonged” (150); accordingly, he forces the reader to participate in an unconscious dynamic of identifying the *I* with the rational, and the *Other* with the irrational madness of communal violence. This typical postcolonial description of the other as an alien subject that brings anxiety to the group contrasts with Narayan’s hero, who presents certain Hindu characteristics of the *satvic* type; he is righteous in his own way and has “a peaceful, happy life” (150). The author has quietly affiliated him with an ethnic group defined by Max Weber as the “chosen people”, implying that there exist

people who can compare to him on equal terms according to an established “differentiation translated into the plane of horizontal co-existence” (*Economy and Society*⁶³ 391). This theoretical frame runs in parallel with the definition of two of the modalities of *Bhakti* that imply collaboration: the previously explained *vātsalya* that relates to a “filial mode” of subordination and “*sakhya*, the mode of friendship” that conveys an asymmetrical “status between subaltern and superordinate”, invoking the “relation among equals” of Krishna as “*primus inter pares*” (Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony* 48). Conversely, these classifications entail the existence of another group that compares to him through an asymmetrical cultural status of differentiation. Nevertheless, the protagonist’s condition of communal subordinate requires a certain passivity that shares its symbolic space with an aesthetic of feminine spirituality: he is not a thoroughbred male type. The hero possesses what Peter van der Veer calls a “hyphenated identity”, which is also a composite made of *tamasic* characteristics: he carries within him the passive, neglected self of a communal member who is submitted to the dictates of his group’s ideology. As a whole, the group deals with the consequences of Partition which, according to Aijaz Ahmad, is “possibly the most miserable migration in human history” (*In Theory* 118). The critic defines it as “the gigantic fratricide” whose effects transformed part of the Indian population into the immigrated *Other*: the communal re-location of human contingents that come from abroad, and the negotiation of their “religious politics” widen a space for representation and jurisdiction that forces the removal of alien elements that live nearby (Veer, “Transnational Religion” 7). “Now when he heard his men talk menacingly, he visualized his post office friend being hacked in the street”, the narrator informs us (“Another Community” 151).

⁶³ Full title, *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*.

According to Kapileswar Parija, “Narayan’s deep humanism permeates even the most frustrating and unsettling of these real-life experiences” (11). He comments that “Another Community” is “a moving story of a martyr at the blood altar of communal blood-bath, one of the rare stories of Narayan with a topical theme” (12) though he fails to explain what, in his opinion, is meant by a “topical theme”. Is it topical because communal violence happens with some frequency in India and remains unsolved?, or is it because Partition and gang crimes are historical and endemic Indian topics which Indian people have grown used to suffering? It may also be a topical theme because of the superabundance of literary and artistic expressions on communal violence? In fact, art has proved its influence as a healer in traumatic experiences: in the first stages, there is a peremptory necessity to forget and release the social memory from its burden. Then, as time acts with curative efficiency, there grows the necessity to understand and question the reasons why it all happened. It is at this point that the necessity for a fictionalised narrative emerges: one which first of all expresses an emotional correspondence with the reader, and simultaneously provides other horizons that widen the traumatic experience, diluting its negative effects through a process of re-interpreting the other. This analysis will try to answer these questions, firstly by questioning the story’s “topical” nature and secondly by describing communal violence as a paramount problem which threatens India’s development and which modern politics have failed to resolve.

In Parija’s words, “Narayan’s stories are distinguished by the extreme simplicity and purity of diction” (13). Furthermore, he explains that “[he] is an artist pure and simple and interprets Indian life aesthetically with unprejudiced objectivity” (14). Although “pure and simple” are two subjective labels that this critic graciously applies to

Narayan, echoing Iyengar's famous remarks,⁶⁴ in the present case, they have a belittling effect on Narayan's work, inviting the reader to remain on the story's surface. They induce the reader to follow the plot and infer that the text only conveys a light-hearted argument. In "Death of the Author", Roland Barthes writes that some critics seem to seek "[t]he explanation of a work" with reference to the author who wrote it. Indeed, Narayan belongs to what Barthes calls an

ethnographic society [where] the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose performance – the mastery of the narrative code – may possibly be admired but never his 'genius'". (142)

Narayan's style is imbued with a modern literary perspective that creates contextual structures that attend to a need to convey meanings for *different* cultural backgrounds, but it is also filled with techniques derived from the oral and storytelling traditions that require some cultural translations before they are written down and these transformations do not always succeed in breaching this specific cultural gap. In Barthes' words, "the whole of enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors" ("Death of the Author" 145). An authorial ideology and its intentionality lie within every short fictional narrative whose translation *differs* – it may be *differing* or distinct – from English to Indian readers; thus, rather than accept the "pure and simple" semantic analysis and "objectivity" that Parija attributes to Narayan, I contend therefore that Narayan's writings are prejudiced, which does not necessarily imply a negative assessment, but simply that they are *marked* by the author's cultural consciousness. He diminishes his authorial

⁶⁴ K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's *Indian Writing in English* describes Narayan as "that rare thing in India today, a man of letters pure and simple (358).

presence by using an ethnographic storytelling device that delivers a double textual intention: the reproduction of a “universal” Indian flavour, familiar to everybody, and the absence of the author at any of the story’s levels (“Death of the Author” 142). Since the author is liberated from his own representation, “he is born simultaneously with the text”, a feature which is not only postmodern but which clearly pertains to the oral tradition where every retelling reproduces the previous telling and yet is together new; it “is eternally written *here and now*” (145). The narrator acts as a storyteller, his testimony is documented but there is nothing out of “a new context” that can be added to the older one; hence, whatever the narrator does not say the reader can but imagine. The “biases or style” of the second interpretation will be added to the narration but the untold information will be lost (Rubin 130). This process of construction of a cultural memory forms part of a wider collective knowledge, in which its thematic approach serves to stabilise tradition and revitalise its practice. Accordingly, Narayan’s hearsay style initially continues with a story formula that is typically Indian, as confirmed by an opening that makes the communal conflict conspicuous precisely because the narrator denies any allusion to “caste or community” (“Another Community” 150). Perhaps Parija would describe it as “pure and simple” but there is an ironic declaration of national pride inserted in the sentence that fixes the “transmission between people and memory within people” (Rubin 130) of the Indian nation-building procedure. The narrator states: “I’m sure you will not be able to guess it any more than you will be able to say what make of vest he wore under his shirt” (“Another Community” 150). If the reader is acquainted with Narayan’s work, s/he will find behind the syntactic structures and their literal meaning the projection of Gandhi’s nationalist enterprise in defence of rural communities and Indian manufacturing, which constituted his campaign to protect Indian textiles against Lancashire and Manchester cloth, for example, as narrated in *Swami and Friends*

(R. K. Narayan 76), or his campaign for salvation “from ruin”, getting “the English out of India”, which is described in *Waiting for the Mahatma* (465). In the last example, the author makes “Gandhiji” explain to the protagonist that a spinning wheel “is the key to [his] future” (521). Therefore, more than ever at this precise historical moment, one should know “what make of vest” everyone wears because of the national mood and the hostility that existed between communities. Narayan’s ironic view thus pays tribute to India’s recent past, to its communal memory of collective struggle and to storytelling tradition in a manner that Ahmad describes as “a nationalism of mourning, a form of valediction” (119) that definitively changes the subcontinent’s boundaries.

The reference to the nationalistic pro-Independence struggle, inserted in the text as an offhand remark, now proves “immaterial to our purpose”, says the narrator (“Another Community” 150). It no longer fulfils an educational purpose that shapes the mind and the cognitive processes involved in learning, since it fails to train the subject in desirable social behaviours (Assmann and Czaplicka 132). Symbolically, the whole statement condenses the *swadeshi* movement, the Indian fight for independence and the author’s religious observations: the reference to a symbolic inner garment suggests, employing linguistic terms from the traditional textile industry, an ever-turning “spinning wheel” of life, *bhavacakra*, of a temporal fate in which everybody is wrapped up and whose fabrics comprise a life rolled by the hands of destiny, which may end up being the person’s shroud, as happens in the present case.

However, this shared identity made of “texts, images and rituals” embedded in the collective/cultural memory, is no longer useful for the national-identity building process (Assmann and Czaplicka 132). As the story develops, the main character is depicted as a white-collar worker, a *babu*. The description corresponds to someone who in principle

would not favour any kind of revolt, change or act of violence, but who would take no action to prevent these from happening either. He also works in a secure and steady job: “He worked in an office which was concerned with insurance business” (“Another Community” 150). Narayan’s description of the character is compatible with a modern, English-educated, middle-class Indian citizen. He belongs to the social tissue that supported Nehru’s project of a rational and secular nation-state, and that was woven together in the colonial education system. In opposition to this society, the author reflects on another societal force that, in Urvashi Butalia’s opinion, “ha[s] fought for a communal state”, Pakistan, and which is seen [by the Hindus] as “uncivilized” and “therefore communal by nature” (140). The writer constructs a specific historical backdrop that has a relevant role even in contemporary India, due to its remarkable consequences that did not manifest:

till the October 1947, when he found that the people around had begun to speak and act like savages. Someone or a body of men killed a body of men a thousand miles away and the result was that they repeated the evil here and wreaked their vengeance on those around. (“Another Community” 150)

Narayan’s paragraph opens up two self-evident questions: why did he choose October 1947 and not the communal riots prior to Independence? And why did the violence reach areas that had remained in peace until then? In fact, the answers lie in the Partition agreement and the distribution of contingents of people and goods, which did not respond to any reasons other than geographic ones and/or the political designs of Great Britain, India and Pakistan’s leaders. Also, the paragraph lays the emphasis on the viral spread of violence. Some previous explanations are therefore needed in order to

examine why Narayan's short story is set in the ominous month of October 1947, the month that saw the beginning of the first Indo-Pakistani war.

The Princely State of Kashmir

Partition affected the entire subcontinent and especially the northern princely states that had to ratify their accession either to India or to the newly created Muslim state of Pakistan. According to historian Alastair Lamb, "the British fail[ed] to find a satisfactory method for the integration of the princely states into the independent India and Pakistan that succeeded the British Raj" (3). This, in turn, precipitated Kashmir's secessionist problem. After maintaining an adamant defence of his autocratic rule and, following several internal revolts, the Kashmiri maharaja Hari Sign was forced in 1932 to constitute a Commission of Enquiry that proposed several measures and constitutional amendments, trying to satisfy the demands of nationalist leaders on both sides: Sheikh Abdullah, close to the INCP and its leader Nehru; and Gulam Abbas who was more inclined towards the IML and its leader Jinnah (Sundararajan, *Kashmir Crisis. Unholy Anglo-Pak Nexus* 55). The maharaja satisfied neither of them, though, and was strongly resisted by Kashmiri nationalists whose pro-autonomy and communal positions had become more radical by the time running up to Indian Independence. The situation grew worse after the Kashmiri soldiers returned from the Second World War campaign and had to confront an unfavourable situation compared to the soldiers from Punjab. Hari Sign "failed to realise the implications of these developments" (57). The President of the National Conference, Sheik Abdullah, inspired by Gandhi's "Quit India Movement" of 1942, "launched the "Quit Kashmir Movement" against the maharaja", taking advantage of the general discontent. The Sheikh's proposal "demanded that the people of the state should be allowed to decide their future by themselves" (57). He was imprisoned, along

with the Muslim Conference leaders who pleaded for the Sheikh's release with the veiled intention of integrating the state into Pakistan. By the time of India's Independence, 15 August 1947, Kashmir leaders of both political parties were confined in prison (57), while the maharaja held to the idea that the Kashmir people should have an independent territory against British advice. They wanted him "to decide on the accession of Kashmir to India or Pakistan" for reasons of "defence, communications and foreign affairs" (58): India would not object to the entrance of Kashmir into Pakistan's dominion, and Pakistan, being non-existent before Independence, could not stand against the accession. Whichever way, Hari Sign remained undecided for sixty-eight days after Independence. According to Saroya Sundararajan, "it had the most damaging impact on the sub-continent" (59), and its effects are still visible in the subcontinent's contemporaneous politics.

With the subcontinent unequally divided, Independence and Partition brought havoc to millions of Indian people: it was an unprecedented disruption of the established order, which was dismissed and swept aside by those who made the decisions. All kind of horrors and a violent hatred between communities consolidated the basic foundations of the newly constituted states. Kashmir was one of the 562 princely states that had not signed the Instrument of Accession at the time of Independence, and therefore, on 22 October 1947, Pakistan invaded Kashmir from the North West frontier with different kinds of tribal raiders deployed to carry out looting, murder, vengeance, and to seizure the power from the princely government. Proportionally, the Kashmiri massacres were more lethal than any others at the time, especially if they are compared with those in the Punjab region that were the worst in India during the process of its Independence. The greatest number of casualties in the first Indo-Pakistani war occurred among the Kashmiri

Muslims who, ironically, had shown a certain secular tolerance towards the nation-building process of India and Pakistan. India failed to foresee the extent of the damage that could be caused in just a few days by an invasion of Jammu and Kashmir from tribal encroachment under the command of “high Pakistani officials” (90). They found support from Muslim Kashmiris, who were discontented with a discriminating policy of taxation under the maharaja. The news of massive slaughters and generalised destruction in northwestern Kashmir reached India on 24 October. Nehru’s government proceeded to send Indian troops two days after the maharaja’s appeal for help, which required the maharaja to sign a Document of Accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India. This first signed document incorporated the commitment to celebrate a referendum on accession when the geopolitical situation eased and allowed a consultation process, which would be “decided in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir”. Meanwhile, they left the Kashmiri government in the hands of Nehru’s ally, Sheikh Abdullah (92). However, the region’s instability has prevented any regional survey on this matter up to the present day, proving once more how communal confrontations continue to thwart the tension-free development in the area. Unquestionably, the communal horrors caused “a wave of anti-Muslim feelings throughout India” (95), which magnified a suspicious perception of the other, “the “stranger” in our midst, who is not quite a friend or an external enemy” (P. Kumar xvi), but is in fact somebody who is Indian and lives next door. An upsurge of distrust and waves of terror place the enemy either in “terms of absolute and absolutely Otherness (“evil”) or in terms of an essential sameness” (Khair 4) that need to find the cure for the other’s *difference*. Although the other becomes part of the same body, the difference seems indelible. This communal situation and the already constructed *Other* serve as the backdrop for this short story.

The Enemy's Community

Countless rumours about the “tribal invasion of Kashmir” by Muslim raiders and the savagery practiced on Hindu and Sikh people started to run across the country (Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi* 94). Nehru's government was too closely involved in the messy transition of power and the withdrawal of the British forces from India to prevent effectively the humanitarian drama of massive forced displacements and the retaliatory communal violence that accompanied these displacements throughout the process. Hindu majority districts organised parties to punish those Muslims who remained in India and were now considered enemies, but the savagery was reciprocal; it happened with identical ferocity in the Muslim districts. Narayan's short story describes both the beginning of the “collective persecutions” that made “the loss of social order” evident, and the proliferation of chaos brought about “by the disappearance of the rules” (Girard 12): “Our friend saw the tempers of his neighbours rising as they read the newspaper each day”, writes the narrator early in the story (“Another Community” 151). Violence escalates fast as a means of securing the bonds of national belonging. The abusive behaviour becomes a uniform reality, or what René Girard calls a “negative reciprocity”. The destructive (re)actions share the same patterns of aggression with the opposite party (Girard 13). There is a desire for violence and pride whose expression revolves around ideas of patriotism and nationhood: “‘We must smash them who are here—,’ he heard people say” (151). Butalia describes this process in the following terms: “People watched, in horror and often helplessly, as the fabric of Indian society began to shred on lines of ethnic and religious identity” (276). The colonial liberalism had drawn an invisible boundary around race, and the purpose of this boundary was the creation of a shape for the “unfamiliar” in order to favour the recognition and acknowledgement of its

opposite, the “familiar” group. According to Uday Singh Mehta, the imperial design forged a discursive alterity behind racial terms in which “the mention of race [was] conspicuous in its absence” (15). Race was treated as “politically irrelevant or at any rate a ‘suspect’ category” (15). The educated middle class reproduced the colonial perception of an Indian dark side through expressions of race, caste and religion that exacerbated the same national feelings that caused the outsiders or non-participants to suffer violent exclusion from the group, an exclusion imposed through sheer force. In Weber’s opinion, a “racial identity” with a number of inherited features and a shared history is necessary to create a racial group with any identifiable characteristic that is “subjectively perceived as a common trait” (385). When this cultural identification happens, those perceived as “racially different” and who share the same geographical space become the target “of joint (mostly political) action”; likewise, when members of the same race suffer “common experiences” that predispose them against the members of an antagonistic group, the result is a negative social action towards “those who are obviously different. [They] are avoided and despised or, conversely, viewed with superstitious awe” (Weber 385). In this sense, Narayan’s narrator uses a synecdochical device that attributes human qualities to natural elements, highlighting the uncontrollable nature of the social unconscious and the dangers that this carries within, while avoiding full revelation of the terrible substance of communal violence: “the air was surcharged with fear and suspicion” (“Another Community” 152).

It is also important to remember that India was imagined in feminine terms: she was the Mother Land, the holy space of ancestors and sacred shrines, and like the mythic Sita, India was dismembered, cut into pieces and left destitute. Some Indian people therefore felt that they had been equally dismembered, their land violated and their honour destroyed. Hence, the partisans on the Indian side had to take revenge on enemy

territory too. An example of this community versus another community dialectic is visible in the invasion of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir by tribal and mercenary troops from Pakistan. This encroachment entered into a territory which was renamed Azad Kashmir, the *free* Kashmir, and came to comprise essentially Muslim Kashmiris who sought refuge there from violent Hindu retribution, until they could celebrate the promised elections. The news of the territorial seizure by the mercenary troops shattered the Kashmiri nationalists from the National Conference. India, and Nehru in particular, who was a Kashmiri himself, feared that the princely states could be bargained with the foreign capital, that had so far supported the creation of Pakistan's dominion and military force, to adhere to the wealthy and strategic territories of Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan. The ethnic purging began immediately after the partial annexation of Kashmir: the 1941 Census states that, "63,576 Hindus lived in Mirpur District, large parts of which became Azad Kashmir". In the 1951 Census, declared as 'Secret', the total number of non-Muslims left in Azad Kashmir was 790 (Snedden 126), a figure which shows the magnitude of the well-organised ethnic removal that occurred, a far cry from the one that took place in Punjab. In Butalia's words:

it was all right to kill if the person you were killing was the 'other' but in order to obliterate the aggressor in yourself, you have to cast yourself as victim, and so, often you had to live a lie, a pretense that you had not killed. (285)

Narayan's story, "Another Community", describes how the protagonist mentally struggles with the idea of a communal war and organised violence among people who were Indians until the Partition. He is conscious of the mental artifice created by these opportunistic persecutors who have fabricated a "type of illusion" triggered by violent

actions where the commanding event is the persecution itself (Girard 11). Nevertheless, he fails to move beyond thought itself and take action, which confirms his subaltern condition inside the group; he only manages to express his emotions in a conventional way “by telling his fellowmen: You see... but such things will not happen here. But he knew it was a wishful thinking. He knew his men were collecting knives and sticks” (“Another Community” 151). Essentially, he belongs to a community; he receives support and security from the communal group, but in return he must completely submit to the group’s strategies. For reasons mentioned above, the persecutors find causes that barely need to be imagined to justify their violence, they also elevate themselves to the category of judges who are in need of “guilty victims”. According to Girard, the persecutors’ “certainty of being right encourages them to hide nothing of their massacres” (6). Hence, the most brutal violence is unleashed on women who become the site of struggle for nationalistic purposes. It is highly significant that women are responsible for the family and the community’s honour, and they therefore receive, together with the children, the worst treatment of all from both communities. They share a “common ethnicity” delimited by their “social circles” and even if they deny a racial or ethnic proximity, women and children transmit the subjective “belief in [their] specific “honor” that made the core of the communal group’s “sense of “ethnic honor” (Weber 391). The narrator describes the socio-political situation through the comments overheard by the protagonist:

‘They don’t spare even women and children!’ he heard them cry. ‘All right, we will teach those fellows a lesson. We will do the same thing for them here – that is the language they will understand –’. (“Another Community” 151)

Almost unnoticed, violence in Narayan's story has become inevitable and highly contagious; it infects everything and everyone as the narration explains that "[the protagonist] had not bothered about such a question all these days: they were just friends – people who smiled, obliged, and spoke agreeably" ("Another Community" 151). Virulence aims at producing a primitive fear that grants power to those who wield it, and here the protagonist develops a paranoid pattern of thought, encouraged by his surroundings that demonstrates his susceptibility to that fear. The narrator notices that "[e]veryone seemed to him a potential assassin. People looked at each other as cannibals would at their prey" (151-152). The notion of danger is perceived first in the people's language, and secondly in the individual mind, now poisoned by frenzied rumours: "But now he saw them in a new light: they were of another community" (151). These people are newly associated with an act of war that has taken place somewhere else but that is carried forward and reproduced in every locality with communal representations. As Butalia rightly observes: "[v]ictims became aggressors, aggressors turned into victims, and people began Partition in their minds" (285). Narayan portrays his character's internal hell through his traumatic visions. Ideas and images are superimposed on the ordinary, phenomenal reality, such as that of a nice and innocent "little girl" from the other community who symbolises a promising future of purity and dreams. The girl could be anybody's daughter, and the harm meted out on this symbolic child strikes the protagonist as an original sin that falls on everybody's head, like a curse:

he visualized her being chased by the hooligans of his own community as she was going to her school carrying a soap-carton full of pencils and rubber! This picture was too much for him and he whispered under his breath constantly, 'God forbid!'. (151)

International celebrations and official discourses hid the failure of the two patriarchal nation-states in providing security for their people, especially the most vulnerable, during the processes of Independence and Partition. Partition and “the nation’s normative patriarchal family” (Daiya 32) became the central gathering point for an organised retaliatory violence as a political weapon. “Fire, sword and loot, and all the ruffians [who were in favour of communal violence] gathered for instructions and payment at his uncle’s house”, states the narrator of the short story (“Another Community” 151) in a scene where the objectification of the communal violence implies the subjects’ invisibility and a language of force: “[w]e will speak to them in the only language they will understand” (151). Rites and sites for religious practices in Narayan’s story also grow into emblematic possessions that must be defended and avenged in the local streets that have become communal targets: whoever occupies the streets holds the power. “Someone or other constantly reported: ‘You know what happened? A cyclist was stabbed in — street last evening’” (152). Subtly, Narayan dwells on the general disgrace of the recently created state, a downfall that is magnified by the absence of “law and order” and the unreliability of the police forces who are supposed to protect the citizens, as the short story portrays through the people’s gossips: “Of course the police are hushing up the whole business” (152). No longer were they the neutral forces which could be counted on for protection. The division had also split them up into communal factions. According to Butalia, “Partition shattered the myth of the neutrality and objectivity of such arms of the State conclusively” (62). A statistical analysis provided by Steven I. Wilkinson shows that the provinces worst affected by Partition massacres within India – Bengal, Punjab and Bihar – had local governments controlled by “the majority ethnic group” which “made it plain at various times that they would not intervene against ‘their’ community to protect the ethnic minority from attack” (Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*.

Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India 5).⁶⁵ As a result, separate contingents only felt safe if they were shielded by their own community's armies and in case of doubt, they trusted no one. The narrator continues depicting the protagonist's experiences:

Or he heard someone say: 'A woman was assaulted today' or 'Do you know they rushed into the girls' school and four girls are missing. The police are useless; we must deal with these matters ourselves'. ('Another Community' 152)

As a consequence of this failure of the state to provide protection, political agitators pour out of the patriarchal family as the only remedy against aggression. Family ties are very demanding; they are prior to the subject's insertion in community relationships. V. S. Naipaul writes in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) that "cruelty" is in "the nature of Indian family" and that family conveys the sense of "a little state" that works as "the clan"; there the first encounter with "politics" takes place, along with internal "hatreds and changing alliances and moral denunciations". It is the first advance into "the ways of the world, and to the nature of cruelty" (178). In the protagonist's family in Narayan's story, there exists a false sense of security that cancels out any pretension of innocence and makes the protagonist's wife exclaim when asked about the mobs: "No one is afraid. As long as your uncle is near at hand, we have no fear—" ("Another Community" 153). If India had hitherto seen herself from the Gandhian perspective of a non-violent and tolerant state that was committed to ensuring the "protection of minorities" under the rule of a secular "state policy" (P. Kumar xvii), and Nehru was on principle against any violence or communal bias (Sundararajan 106), then

⁶⁵ Votes and Violence from now on.

the present discourse of violence that now propitiated the killing on behalf of “our people” denied all the essential nationalist principles of the modern nation-state. In relation to communal violence, Sen defines all of the above mental processes taken together as a “vicious mode of thinking” which “managed to persuade many otherwise peaceable people of both communities to turn into dedicated thugs” (172). His opinion is that the problem lies in the perception of a “sectarian singularity” of the person’s identity linked to a “religious ethnicity” that ends up affecting non-practitioner people (172) who cannot escape from the phenomenon of violence. Indeed, the nature of communal violence obliterates non-communal or secular ideologies, which are seen as part of the enemy’s polluted being and as threats against the group’s ideological purity.

Literary styles serve as a medium for reflecting on a composite reality such as this, where the author chooses the importance of details, the thematic elements and the level of symbolic representation to create an “illusion of reality” called “verisimilitude” which is “connected with another aspect of realism” named “credibility” (Leech and Short 127). Narayan’s viewpoint is that of the spectator; as a Southern Indian writer he hardly experienced the Northerners’ sufferings. However, he is part of the artistic and intellectual community that felt the ethical necessity of providing a narration of the Post-Partition atrocities that was consistent with historical and contemporaneous facts. Narayan himself feels Indian with all that that brings, as he explains in “India and America”, an essay included in *A Writer’s Nightmare*:

Despite all the deficiencies, irritations, lack of material comforts and amenities, and general confusions, Indian life builds inner strength. It is through subtle, inexplicable influences, through religion, family ties and human relationships in general – let us call them psychological “inputs”, to

use a modern term – which cumulatively sustain and lend variety and richness to existence. (239)

This short story reflects Narayan's particular conception of *Otherness* as a secondary issue "waiting to be assimilated" by the Indian society (Khair 4) under the symbolic aesthetic of the Gothic literary tradition that derives from the combination of Narayan's individual experience which enjoyed the complete support from his family, his spiritual disposition, his westernised education, and the turmoil of India's political conflicts that distressed the whole country. The narrative depicts communal violence as surreal and seemingly unrelated to the Indian subcontinent. The Gothic story epitomises the opposition to rationality, normalcy and security. It compresses past and future as well as old and new traits. The terror of communal violence colonises the Gothic aesthetic, which becomes the most suitable genre to depict irrationality and a monstrous *Otherness* made up of armed gangs ready for individual skirmishes. The genre also lends its literary symbols of a colonial past to a postcolonial reality, reproducing the power struggles, excesses and political ambiguity of Gothic literature in the context of war between rival communities. Narayan simultaneously elicits a response to his rhetorical questions essentially preserving the text's local colour without apparently straying from his non-political stance.

A Gothic Backdrop

"Another Community" builds up a hellish setting made up of anguish, anxiety, "terrified screams" and "abnormal sound[s]" in the middle of the night. The Gothic elements display a "troubled relationship" with a normative reality (Khair 38) that Narayan uses to construct his rhetoric of excess in order to bridge the "restrictive and potentially blind" realist narrative and introduce the reader to a creepy fiction of

alternative sensitivities (38). Narayan has two goals: firstly, he employs discursive indexes recognisable as Gothic symbols, such as the protagonist's house threatened by a probable mob attack, or the family's women and children in distress, both distinctive literary artefacts which approximate a specific Indian communal violence to a western readership, in order to make the evil nature of violence conspicuous and recognisable independently of its origin. Through the second goal, Narayan renders a postcolonial leitmotif which depicts the *Other* as a usurper and potentially destructive of the world known as democratic India. This negative *Other* represents religious superstition and the irrational fear of being contaminated by its forceful proximity, even if, ironically enough, the rejection of this evil *Other* generates the same violent dialectic in every party involved. Consequently, these maddening surroundings immerse Narayan's protagonist in a spiral of violence, persuading him of the necessity to arm himself in order "to defend his home":

The howling of a distant dog seemed to him so much like the mob-sound that a couple of times he got up and went up to the window to peep out, to see if any flames appeared over the skies far off. ("Another Community" 152)

Under these circumstances, the atmosphere of paranoia of the short story becomes so stifling as the ones described in Butalia's analysis of the partition's side-effects: the "experience of dislocation and trauma shaped [these people's] lives" (7). As if the town were populated by the living dead instead of human beings, the story alludes to night terrors and a fear of the unknown that is deeply immersed in the people's unconscious. Narayan's protagonist "spent almost every night in this anxious, agitated manner and felt relieved when day came" ("Another Community" 152). Indeed, the story's basic purpose

is to decry the lack of individual choice and the seeming inevitability of developing events. The narrative's undercurrent reveals an oppressive political system that seizes upon any alternative within civil society, making it difficult for them to extricate themselves from their racial or cultural background, unless they simply run away, which is not a safe alternative either. Socio-economic limitations also strongly determine an almost inevitable condition of victimhood: the poorest members of society lived in houses described by Sen as "shelters that can be easily penetrated and ravaged by gangs" (173). This reality is fictionalised in Narayan's story. Taking the edge off the analysis' account and omitting the fact that there is nothing this family can effectively do to defend themselves if they are assaulted, the narrator also suggests a feeble defence, when the protagonist "secretly resolve[s] that he'd fetch the wood-chopper from the fuel room and keep it near at hand in case he had to defend his home" ("Another Community" 152). Narayan's fictional world seems to comply with Sen's theory of an existing "tyranny of conformism that may make it difficult for members of a community to opt for other styles of living" (117). This conformism affects the whole community as well as the individual. Actually, the protagonist is unable to break with his daily routine even before the obvious threat to his life that the explosive situation presents. He has acquired something like what Ashis Nandy defines as a "feminine passive-aggression [that] was the attribute of the effete nationalists and fake sahibs or babus" (*The Intimate Enemy* 38). The protagonist behaves like an automaton, devoid of any will; he moves among the multifarious comments of the people around him, feeling helpless and lost. The narrative reveals that he has acquired his routines early in his life, that "his passage from youth to middle age was, more or less, at the same seat in his office" ("Another Community" 150) and that, essentially, this is where he remains petrified. As such, he represents Narayan's prototype of a passive, negative – *tamasic* – character, in contrast with his uncle, who is a

sanguineous, belligerent – *rajasic* – type. The sinister context needs both of these archetypal characters if it is to succeed in releasing a convincing frightful atmosphere. The protagonist’s “feminine” aspects are reflected in his dependant wife and his four children and in his thinking about his family: “Oh, innocent ones, what perils await you in the hands of what bully! God knows” (“Another Community” 152). His stance differs from the “hypermasculinity” of his uncle who remains surrounded by his men all day. Chatterjee describes these facts, as does Nandy’s reference in *The Intimate Enemy*, as a product of the imperialist ideology that “made the figure of the weak, irresolute, effeminate *babu* a special target of contempt and ridicule” (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 69). Narayan portrays, with a subtle irony tinged with sadness, how the primary character’s viewpoint mirrors the other community’s posture, since both adopt the same discourses of victimhood versus retaliation. The distressed main character suffers the proactive charisma of his uncle and his crew who have named a critical date, “the coming Wednesday, the 29th of the month”, to display “a complete show-down” and put an end to “this tension once for all” (“Another Community” 153). It is not enough that the others integrate in the surrounds of the community; their “irreducible presence of otherness” must be removed because their alterity is recognised as an independent agency which is “potentially, terrifying” (Khair 173). Thus, the uncle and his men decide to “clean up th[e] town” from “those [who] hold secret assemblies almost every night” (“Another Community” 153). This communal stance attributes the “cause of terror” to the *Others* who organise themselves, in the same way they do, and yet are beyond their control; hence, they seek the physical elimination of these others, thus fulfilling the typical characteristic from a “colonial Gothic/ised text” (Khair 173) of fear of the unknown that is in every narrative space.

However, Narayan's postcolonial slant is blended with his Hindu perception of Indian communalism. Tabish Khair's analysis applied to Narayan's "postcolonial Gothic/ised text" would suggest that the short story not only reflects the literary desire of eliminating *Otherness* blamed as the cause of terror, but also shows a modern consciousness of the completeness of the Self, which under these circumstances, can only be attained through the acceptance of "an ethical relation" with the irreducible Other" (173), as I will demonstrate later on.

As a general rule, Narayan's style mixes up elements of reality with purely fictive ingredients. As Chelva Kanaganayakam rightly puts it, the "combination of the fictive and the referential" defines his work as that of a "counterrealist writer" (*Counterrealism and Indo-Anglian Fiction* 32). Kanaganayakam insists on criticising Narayan's rare allusions "to the well-documented political changes that were taking place in a country that was conscious of moving towards independence" (40). He accuses the author of not having foregrounded "the politics of decolonization" in his work, going as far as stating that "social realism is not his forte" and that, therefore, "one can hardly expect in his work the sensibility that informs the work of [other] didactic writers" (40). Narayan, however, defends himself from what he calls "the academic man" in "The Writerly Life" by saying that the "academician" "views a book only as raw material for a thesis or seminar paper, hunts for hidden meanings, social implications, 'commitments' and 'concerns', or the 'Nation's ethos'". From Narayan's point of view, "[he is] not out to enlighten the world or improve it" (*A Writer's Nightmare* 200), a comment which is typical of Narayan's unpretentious style and self-effacing manner. As explained earlier, the recreation of a terrifying scenario in this text, bringing in certain characteristics of the colonial Gothic literature, is an example of Narayan's versatility and ability to blend western literary patterns with the Indian tradition in such a way that both references share

grounds of “artifice” and “reality” without either one trampling upon the other’s idiosyncrasies. Obviously, the result can be interpreted as “an allegorical form” that serves the writer’s “purpose of resistance, of turning away from contemporary realities to a world he is comfortable with” (Kanaganayakam, *Counterrealism and Indo-Anglian Fiction* 32) perhaps, aiming at satisfying the demands of an international readership instead of a regional, local one. It is also a sign of the writer’s lack of interest in literary or thematic fashions for opportunistic consumption. For Kanaganayakam, “Narayan [gives] his readers what they want to see, together with the sense that what they [are] offered [is] realist”, and this means that his “counterrealism challenges the boundaries of mimesis by turning the focus on fiction itself” (35). Yet this criticism seems to overlook the necessity to provide a careful elaboration of a contextual framework, one that would require an awareness of the author’s heteroglossic style and playful writing. The linguistic translation must go beyond the symbolic order of signs, the conventional understanding of signifiers, and enter into the universal representations of oral tradition, which naturally moves within the semiotic sphere “of a proposition or judgment” that necessarily includes the imagined. It is a proposal made of mutable linguistic values that arouse public controversy and discussion. This reflective process involved in creating a credible contextual framework needs a secondary dissociation of its constituents in order to achieve what Julia Kristeva describes as a situation where “the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects” (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 2077) in order to play with meanings and ideological positions. Narayan does indeed open up a space to inscribe the symbolic back onto enunciative propositions that belong to the semiotic order and, in doing so, he succeeds in a double sense. Firstly, he destroys the contextual familiarity of his readership by fabricating an ambivalent representation of the postcolonial critical discourse of mimicry, refuting what

Kanaganayakam defines as Narayan's reactionary "ideological stance". Kanaganayakam remarks that Narayan "offers through his fiction a vision of stasis, a stratified, caste-oriented India, struggling against the encroaching values of modernism" ("Indian Writing in English: Counterrealism as Alternative Literary History" 683).⁶⁶ Narayan's construction of the communal violence seems real because language builds up a credible discourse endowed with a recognisable, if extraordinary, context. Actually, there is "a difference that is almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" 130) that denies the text's status as a pure work of fiction and that turns it into a hybridised narrative typical of postcolonial literature. This major difference is the historical genocide of Partition. To refer to terms proposed by Weber's perspective, Narayan creates a "cultural trait" that serves as a point of departure "for the familiar tendency to monopolistic closure", growing in time with "cultivated and intensified" differences (386). Thus, the month provided by the text is October 1947 and the chosen day is the 29th. However, the historiographical sources attest that on October 27th India dispatched its troops onto Kashmiri territory and forced the Muslim raiders to retreat so that there would be no doubt left about Kashmir's accession to India. After the newspapers confirmed Indo-Pakistani warfare, the reprisals against Muslims on Indian territory – Muslims who were now officially converted into the *Others* – began immediately. According to Homi Bhabha, these differences in the textual representation, which are the dates mentioned in "Another Community", create a "crisis for the cultural priority given to the *metaphoric*": on the macro-level, the dates correspond to those of the war, but the textual interpretation has to negotiate its "difference between paradigmatic systems and classifications" ("Of Mimicry and Man" 130). Thus, the fictional mimicry brings the text to a nameless town that is equally affected by the recent news of war: the town and its

⁶⁶ "Indian Writing in English" from now on.

civil society become the metonymic site of struggle around which the communal violence spins, acquiring a holistic projection of history that transcends the text, chronologically and geographically. Therefore, Narayan is able to separate his narrative subject from the textual object and its image through a dislocated representation of history, not always free from fictional accounts. The narrative devices that spread the violent infection are precisely those that belong to oral tradition: rumours, gossip, half-veiled hints, hearsay, vague assumptions, suggestions and remarks taken at face value. “He often wondered amidst the general misery of all this speculation how will they set off the spark”, informs the narrator (“Another Community” 153). Narayan’s involvement in the media world as an active collaborator – e.g. in *The Hindu* – also made him familiar with the politics of the Cold War Era, the sort of language used by the contending countries and the threat represented by an atomic blast. It is no coincidence that the character feels that the aggression “will work like a push-button arrangement” (153).

Secondly, the narrator creates a contextual estrangement from any accurate historical reference, thereby minimizing crucial events while simultaneously disconnecting the textual construction from mimicry: he does not reproduce language or forms to counter-appeal domination with an insurgent discourse (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” 131), which is precisely what Kanaganayakam fails to notice in the text, the absence of an appealing mimicry against domination. On the contrary, Narayan chooses a historical moment of a general crisis – from the East to the West – to portray, as Bhabha writes, “the subject’s lack of priority (castration)” (131), which the writer considers a genuine and active menace to individual and social freedom. This way, Narayan causes his narration to deviate “from the expected cultural context” (Fowler 115) – represented by the communal violence which spreads as a side effect of the first Indo-Pakistani war – not so much as to question the subject or the system’s responsibility in general, but as to

recreate a closer illustration of Indian sociology in particular: the helplessness and fallibility of individuals connected by a cultural historicity that reproduces the “[c]ommon language and the ritual regulation of life” associated with an “ethnic affinity” (Weber 390). This process is described by Kanaganayakam as “a careful structuring in Narayan’s fiction that distances it from referential writing” (“Indian Writing in English” 683), an affirmation that once again overlooks Narayan’s heteroglossic writing whose connotations not only refer to different vernaculars, *bhashas*, but to several fields of knowledge which are structurally embedded in his texts. Narayan is constantly recoding the arbitrary use of language where “symbols are transparent, automatic, simplified” and forcing a sceptical reading from a broad perspective in order to achieve a “successful technique of defamiliarization” (Fowler 57) that provokes a textual sense of intrigue based on apparently inconsistent discursive gaps, and that preserves narrative and characters from petrification. According to Fowler, “[t]he purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (56). “Ethnic affinities” or close relationships manifest themselves in manners and external appearances as well as in language, food or ethical principles. Weber describes the process as “one’s conception of what is correct and proper and, above all, of what affects the individual’s sense of honor and dignity” (391). For instance, the narrator announces the protagonist’s disbelief after hearing from his uncle of the ethnic cleansing that will take place at “Zero hour”, yet a doubt arises in the character’s mind that belittles the gravity of the pronouncement: what will be the excuse to exterminate the members of the other community? “Suppose nothing happens?” he asks, and his uncle’s reply is none other than ““How can nothing happen?”” (“Another Community” 153). These utterances enclose the complexity of India’s ethnography, worsened by the constitutional and legal asymmetry that keeps propitiating periodic social unrest for communal reasons even

today. Here, the narrative lays the responsibility for an unresolved problem on the communal assembly whose rights are constitutionally protected, as the “Right to Freedom: Protection of certain rights regarding freedom of speech, etc.” (Constitution of India, Art. 19.1.b.). As the uncle puts it: “They hold secret assemblies almost every night. Why should they meet at midnight?” “They may not be able to gather everyone except at that hour,” [the protagonist] replied. “We don’t want people to meet at that hour” is the uncle’s final word (“Another Community” 153). Once again, the text points at the importance of numbers. According to Mufti, the removal of “two-thirds of Muslims of India”, Muslims who were suddenly made “non-Indian” citizens, succeeded in transforming the remaining Muslim community into a minority group, so that the Muslim demands as a group could be restrained and negotiated since, in Mufti’s opinion, the intention behind Partition was the construction of “the discourse of nationhood”. Therefore, “the remaining one-third [of Muslims could] be successfully cast in the role of national minority” (87). The uncle argues that “after all they form only a lakh-and-a-half of the town population, while we ...’ He went into dizzying statistics” (“Another Community” 153).

At this point, it becomes necessary to explain certain peculiarities of the Indian constitutional system. It is important to understand the relevance of what is known as the communal vote given that the primary responsibility for “Law and Order”, by design, lies in the 28 states and not in local or national governments.

Votes, Elections and Communal Violence

Following Wilkinson’s studies on the relationship between communal violence and votes, it seems that behind communal violence prevailed a well-orchestrated political incentive towards a “necessary” social unrest which, if it was felt, might bring electoral

advantages, since the results varied according to the representative minorities from the local communal groups.

In this short story, Narayan anticipates Wilkinson's conclusions: the protagonist's "peaceful, happy life" is gone, now that he has reached his "middle-age" ("Another Community" 150). As is the case elsewhere, this town has not experienced any nationalist or communal riots during the first decades of the twentieth century: there has prevailed a more or less harmonious relationship between the varying religious and ethnic groups up to a point in time when violence seems to spread rapidly. Wilkinson's analysis in *Votes and Violence* questions why politicians who were able to prevent ethnic violence did exactly the opposite, and why within the same state "violence br[oke] out in some towns and regions and not in others" (3). It seems that "political incentives" had a direct relationship with the presence or absence of communal violence because there existed a political benefit "from the outbreaks (3).

Not in vain, the town in Narayan's story knows the meaning of "political competition" because ethnic differentiation occupies a place of importance in its daily activities. Wilkinson holds that the "intra-Hindu party political competition emerged much earlier (1920s-1930s) in the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala than in Northern India" because of the incentives given to "backward-caste" movements under the British colonial rule. Muslim votes were also significant for these governments, and they made a serious effort in "preventing and stopping Hindu-Muslim riots" (18). The narrative structure of Narayan's short story shows a subliminal connection between three elements which are apparently unrelated and which are not explicitly accounted for in the text: the first Hindu-Pakistani war; the spurious interests and objective causes that facilitated the thorough spread of violence across the subcontinent and, the author's

personal background as reflected in the text. Narayan was a southerner; he spent his life between Madras (Tamil Nadu) and Mysore (Kerala) where communal struggles were an insignificant issue precisely at this time.

Wilkinson uses two data sets on Hindu-Muslim riots for his analysis: one taking place in the years 1900-1949, and the other in 1950-1995 (10). He finds that the low level of violence in these regions suggests that, if some prevention against Hindu-Muslim riots had occurred in the northern states, the “lower- and middle- caste parties” growing in strength would have forced the formation of alliances with the major parties that would have necessarily averted any violence directed against their allies (“Electoral Competition, the State, and Communal Violence: A Replay” 94).⁶⁷ Applying this analysis to Narayan’s fiction, I may assert that his text denounces the absence of incentives awarded to the local government to encourage the prevention of communal riots and reinforce the minority group’s security, since in Narayan’s story, it finds it more profitable to stimulate communal antagonism, not least because of the utter deficiency in political alternatives. According to Wilkinson, there was an absence of a “multi-polar political competition for minority votes” (“Electoral Competition” 94). Hence, on the signalled day in “Another Community”, “the shops were closed for precaution. Children stayed away from school” (“Another Community” 153). Ramachandra Guha argues in *India after Gandhi* that, after Independence and Partition, the moderates from Nehru’s INCP became highly concerned about the advancement of communal fanaticism (19). Guha notes that “in Delhi, especially, the Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan were baying for blood” (19). They lent strong support to the orthodox Hindu party, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) with M. S. Golwalkar at its head, and ever since, this party has posed a serious obstacle to a secular state “that would not discriminate on

⁶⁷ Hereafter, “Electoral Competition”.

the basis of religion” (19). Not surprisingly, Nehru’s inclination towards tolerance and the promotion of “one’s faith in the humanist and the civilised intellect” was heavily contested by those who were in favour of the “Two Nation theory” (20). Ramachandra Guha quotes Nehru’s correspondence of September 1947, in which the INCP leader made explicit his concern about the support that “public opinion” gave to those “fanatics” who, in his view, “functioned as pure terrorists” (“Nehru to Patel, 30 September 1947” qtd. in Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi* 19).

Narayan’s short story also deals with the political situation by deploying another discourse that came into play around that time: it reproduces the language of the Cold War Era, if on this occasion enacted by Indian communal parties. Both conflicts were engaged in an “Arms Race”, although not the nuclear one that would soon begin between India and Pakistan. In “Another Community”, the more primitive nature of the weapons in store contrasts with the dialogues that express the sophistication of the new ways of war. The Cold War period was responsible for the classification of weapons at two levels: conventional and atomic weaponry, and in Narayan’s short story, the atomic threat is suggested by expressions such as “[i]t will be only a matter of a few hours; it will work like a push-button arrangement” (“Another Community” 153) or “I won’t say the word that will start all the trouble, that will press the button, so to say” (155); whereas, in secondary terms, the more basic, homemade arsenal actually used includes the “knives and sticks” of the uncle’s men (151) or the savage mob that “hemmed [the protagonist] in on all sides; [where] the congestion was intolerable: everyone in that rabble seemed to put his weight on him and claw at some portion of his body” (155). The fight is also announced as if it were a schoolchild’s well-learned lesson, such is the familiarity of children with communal riots: “the coolness and detachment with which his children referred to the fight made our friend envy them” (153). According to Wilkinson, when an

election is close by, “politicians will use polarizing events and language to try to increase the salience of Muslim-Hindu divides” (“Electoral Competition” 98). Indeed, M. S. Golwalkar’s *We or Our Nationhood Defined* warned Hindu society against the “apathy towards our real nationality” (129). In 1949, the fundamentalist politician spoke in terms of the “ugly progeny of the day’s queer “National” work” (129) in reference to Gandhi’s swaraj movement. The political intention of dividing Indian society is explicit when he critically speaks of “hugging to our bosom our most inveterate enemies and thus endangering our very existence” (129). Although there is no trace of an ethical relationship with Otherness in this speech or a consciousness of the necessity to approximate positions once India became independent, the capacity of these types of discourses to generate terror is evidence of their continuity with the nature of the colonial Gothic/ised texts. Indeed, it was a member of Golwalkar’s party, the RSS, who murdered Gandhi, even though Golwalkar denied any ideological responsibility for the terrorist act. In general, this type of politician practices a discursive strategy of defamiliarisation from historical memory that pursues a split view on common experiences of suffering, conversion and the transformation of a colonial civil society into a coherent heterogeneous postcolonial nation. Communal campaigning is a well-organised “new mode of realpolitik” (Wilkinson, “Electoral Competition” 98) that is highly successful nowadays, even if, paradoxically, such popular mobilizations are confronted with a democratic Indian state that conforms “to the principles of a secular” state, and is thus in conflict with traditional Hindu orthodoxy and communal politics (Kaviraj 33).

In Narayan’s text, the protagonist and the uncle embody the two political stances: the moderate democratic discourse of secularism, on the one hand, and the exalted populist discourse of orthodox Hindu nationalism, on the other. The protagonist talks

about “the idiocy of the whole relationship”, while his uncle’s preferred course of action is to “cut each other’s throats” (“Another Community” 155).

Western influences and Cold War tropes aside, Narayan’s short story shows that its roots are deeply embedded in common Indian traits. Its foundations are linked to the illusion of a common identity that excludes the rest, a singular identity or false uniqueness that is exploited by communal leaders and shaped according to the group’s necessity to “eclipse the relevance of other associations and affiliations through selective emphasis and incitement” (Sen 175). This short story illustrates the confrontation of two world views with their respective complexities, finding its climax in the last page: the announced outbreak of communal violence.

The Denouement

On the one hand, the literary approach serves Narayan to imagine a testimonial experience of communal violence after India’s Partition. On the other hand, he depicts the worst of India’s petrification as a consequence of religious fanaticism and populist communal politics. In this story, Narayan interweaves two spheres of a very different nature, the real and the mythical. The former obeys universal theories such as war, violence, Independence, Partition or statistics. The latter is a genuine Hindu notion and belongs to the Indian mythic tradition that is also influenced by other religious currents. So far, the author has constructed a fossilised character who is a by-product of colonialism immersed in a colonial Gothic/ised plot. His false sense of security comes from his feeling that he belongs to a communal group and his job in an insurance company. His attachment to normalcy is a result of stagnation rather than patience or prudence, although in other people’s opinion he is a well-to-do man. On the ominous day of his murder and the subsequent outbreak of the announced communal violence, he goes

to work against his wife's wishes. "Why should you go?" she asks ("Another Community" 153). The hidden reason is that he finds "at the office" a place where he will not "waste" his time as his colleagues do, "discussing the frightful possibilities of the day" (154). He needs the "deadening effect [of figures] on his mind" to escape from hatred and the sound of it that comes from his communal surroundings. He lives the Gandhian ideal of non-violence and "fe[els] all right as long as it last[s]", but as soon as he sets foot on the street, the peaceful mirage vanishes from sight, and "a feverish anxiety about reaching home" (154) preys on his mind. Suddenly, he feels that the limits between his positive Self and the negative Other have disappeared and the theoretical menace has grown into a dreadful certainty. Now, Narayan throws the character into the worse consequence of his dual narrative: the universals of violence and religious tradition. Derrida's argument in *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* posits that literature allows the writer to fabricate a testimony that seems to be real but in fact contains some elements of "fiction, simulation or simulacra" that confer a testimonial condition on the character that is similar to that of an authentic witness (29). The confluence of two different narrative devices allows Narayan to construct a credible atmosphere of total insanity: on the one hand, the Hindu imagery serves to explain the irrationality of communal violence that derives from an intangible world that articulates and justifies all kind of excesses from both sides. On the other hand, the measurable facts describe the causes and the players behind the communal chaos within a rational and realistic discourse.

The Hindu tradition is blended therefore with Gothic reverberations that mark a build-up of the short story's transcendental moment as the time of *kaliyuga*. It is a time when the world is ruled by evil, and demons – *rakshasas* – reign in heaven and occupy "the seats of the gods". In *Gods, Demons, and Others* (1964), Narayan defines them

through Vishnu's words: the *asuras*⁶⁸ "are strong-minded, intelligent, and capable of offering arguments to establish that they are righteous, and all others are evil-minded" (53), exactly as the communal people claim to be when they justify their violence against each other. Symbolically, the short story shows violence spreading like venom, even polluting the very taste of food when the protagonist has "a sickening feeling at his throat" ("Another Community" 152). This is a figurative sentence that invokes the idea of Shiva being strangled by Parvati after he drank the demons' poison, *halahala*, so that the world could be saved from the poisonous spill. Once the poison was safely stored in Shiva's throat, Parvati drinks it and transforms herself into the terrible Kali, the violent power needed to destroy the demon Daruka. She also conveys the agentive condition of the males. Kali becomes so intoxicated with the blood of her victims that she loses control and threatens to destroy the world with her cruelty (Kinsley 118). The protagonist of Narayan's story is similarly intoxicated by the poisonous "food tasting bitter on his tongue" ("Another Community" 152), so highly contagious that nobody is safe from it. Such violence makes Lord Shiva, the Destroyer, dance excitedly with the excesses committed across the subcontinent by his wife, Kali, who in worshiping practices, "receives blood offerings" (Kinsley 116). In Kali's time, "death, destruction, fear, terror, the all-consuming aspects of reality" (124), madden people because of her violence. The religious overtones continue with the turmoil created by Shiva's furious dance, *tandava*, whose movement threatens the world with complete destruction. Lord Shiva can only be appeased by his *Shakti*, Parvati, but at this early stage, she and her kindness are still absent. Although their presence is not explicit in Narayan's story, these cultural underpinnings pervade the mental frame of the protagonist who loses all sense of self-preservation out of sheer fright. The plot also reproduces Gothic indexes as well as the

⁶⁸ Asura: another name for demon, *rakshasa*.

panicked unconscious of the Indian subjects threatened by this communal frenzy. Thus, the protagonist's "fevered mind" thinks of hardly any place other than the one where he feels secure: the realm of his joint family. After the deadening effects of numbers on his brain evaporate, he is terrified and, borrowing Khair's description of Gothic symbolism, everything that was "disowned, exorcised, banished, exiled, prevented entry [and] crashes the barriers", returning him to the reality of the streets (70). Since his single desire is "to reach home in the shortest time possible" ("Another Community" 154), he blindly chooses a short cut that "under normal circumstances, he [would have] avoided for its narrowness, gutters and mongrels" (154). This track goes across the Others' communal ground, and the hero thus symbolically enters the forbidden limit of the devil Other. Time now gains an abnormal importance, as daylight is about to disappear. The Gothic elements invade the narration now that "it [is] past seven thirty" and he imagines his family "feel[ing] anxious" because of his delay (154). Nevertheless, the announced explosion on "Wednesday, the 29th of the month" (153) has not taken place yet. As if conducted by an invisible bloodthirsty hand, the protagonist comes across a cyclist in the dark path, the two passers-by misjudging "each other's moves". He loses his nerve when the cyclist accidentally runs "his wheel between our friend's legs and [falls] off the saddle, and both [find] themselves on the road-dust" (154), and at this moment, he stops being just a witness to become the crucial agent of a fictionalised history: he is now a testimonial piece of the exposure to violence, and the two men resort to a fight where they hit and kick at each other, blindly possessed by a desire of blood.

As mentioned before, there are practical mechanisms that trigger violent outbursts, which are usually encouraged by another type of subjects, the political instigators, and these are not entirely absent here: they are in charge of creating the grounds for indiscriminate violence. Wilkinson explains that there existed a network of

subjects, groups with clear political interests that specialise in organising riots, and Wilkinson calls these, after Paul Brass, an “institutionalized riot system”. This network has “[r]iots specialists – agents *provocateurs* – [who] specialize in inflaming emotions and identifying individual events as part of a wider “Hindu-Muslim conflict” and at times they deliberately incite violence” (52). Once more, Narayan’s narrative anticipates Wilkinson’s analysis, where it describes a gathering crowd surrounding the fighters, among which are some of these professional instigators, shouting: “He dares to attack us in our own place! Must teach these fellows a lesson. Do you think we are afraid?” (“Another Community” 155). Indeed, these words mark the protagonist’s physical end: “[o]ur friend felt his end had come” (155) without any possible escape. In Wilkinson’s opinion, there was a “complicity of the state in failing to prevent violence” (*Votes and Violence* 52) that, in the present story, is publicly anticipated and desired by the communities.

Despite the violence, however, Narayan’s story finds the transcendental path of a “unique identity” and expresses it from opposite sides: on the one hand, the communal groups “and [the protagonist’s] uncle and other uncles [that] did press the button” (“Another Community” 155) move according to a retaliatory defence of their members against members of the other group. Once local violence has set in, the fear of not making a “defensive” attack against the others to assert the group’s communal identity rises “to a point where violence becomes self-perpetuating” (*Votes and Violence* 36). Narayan’s text identifies this inevitable reality and advocates against it through the protagonist’s mental testimony: “That’ll finish up everybody, you and me together” (“Another Community” 155). On the other hand, the symbolic sphere of the myth also presents a parallel subjective transmutation in which the “[p]antomimic dance [of Shiva] is intended to transmute the dancer into whatever demon, god, or earthly existence” (Zimmer, *Myth and*

Symbols 151). Hence, the protagonist transmutes into a hero through his martyrdom and Shiva's intervention. Touched by the hand of God, his thinking adopts Gandhian echoes of communal reconciliation: "What is it all worth? There is no such thing as your community or mine. We are all of this country" ("Another Community" 155). Although such Hindu thinking transcends the narrative, there is also a Self that has become conscious of the need for an "encounter with Otherness" (Khair 87) and to find a place for a communal dialogue, and this denotes the short story's postcolonial nature. The temporal sequence moves across different arenas: the most obvious ones are the individual and the communal, but there also exists a testimonial moment and the moment of its perception that entails a delayed understanding projected in two separate directions: inwardly, to those textual characters that eventually will know "we must not" (155), and outwardly, to those constituting the readership who may know the denouement in advance. Essentially, the hero's testimony conveys two well-differentiated features: the first one is constituted by the literary fiction and the performative function of language expressed by his talk of social reconciliation and the healing politics favoured by Nehru against communal encroachment (Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi* 129). According to Derrida, a pure testimony is that which remains secret inside the experiencer. The hero's is a secret testimony whereby "no one can, in [his] place testify what [he] do[es]" because he is attesting to his own and the other's pain from his unique point of view. "It remains reserved for [him]. [He] must be able to keep secret precisely what [he] testif[ies] to" (*Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* 30). At the moment that the character's experience is voiced "within a couple hours all over the city" ("Another Community" 155), he stops providing testimony and becomes a certainty, a piece of physical evidence confirmed by an "empirical proof", his corpse abandoned in a gutter. He is the "sacrificeable" victim that triggers the communal desire for blood and racial

cleansing. The second feature of his testimony, then, is his standing as a public statement in front of an audience. His body avows, or “renders public”, his condition as victim. Derrida describes “the value of publicity” as intimately connected to the practice of “testimony” (*Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* 30) and in Narayan’s story these two apparently contradictory features are essential to perfecting the enunciative function of attesting suffering and victimhood. As Priya Kumar affirms, the “act of ‘making public’ is central to the task of acknowledging and recognizing survivors’ experiences of brutality and violence” (*Limiting Secularism* 130), experiences victims usually stay silent about in response to cultural pressure. Butalia’s work on Partition’s experiences is a further reminder of the massive violence involved during the nation-building’s period where “virtually every family had a history of being both victims and aggressors in the violence” (9), as the short story emphasises.

Narayan continues with this macabre ambiguity by placing a semiotic element in the hero’s “breast pocket”: the card that identifies him, “the kerosene ration coupon” (“Another Community” 155). But how does the card identify him? From a contextual discourse, he is a dubious, “impure” hero with a paradigmatic translation; to his community, he is the excuse for retaliation and an unquestionable martyr, savagely murdered by the community of the others. He does not represent a single casualty but six: the members of a family that simultaneously suffer another kind of martyrdom altogether. Nevertheless, for the community of the others, the “kerosene ration coupon” lays the suspicion on the victim himself because of the reciprocal phenomenon of distrust; consequently, they view him as “a potential assassin” (150). Not surprisingly, Sundararajan writes in reference to *The New York Times* of 29 January 1948, that although gasoline was insufficient and a “strictly rationed commodity” after Partition, Pakistan “supplied [it] plentifully to the raiders” (89). It is reasonable to suppose that on

the Hindu side something similar might have happened when many were burned alive in numerous places, even in their houses, for months. Once the main character is dead and no one can reveal his intentions, who might prove what his purpose was when he went across the enemy's alley at dusk? The omniscient narrator ironically adds that "[h]ad he been able to speak again, our friend would have spoken a lie and saved the city, but unfortunately this saving lie was not uttered" ("Another Community" 155). It seems that not even the author can save the failed hero; indeed, he treats him as a *fake* hero. His narrative concludes that, if he had been radically opposed to violence and in favour of people's equality and a peaceful country, he would have acted accordingly when he was given a chance. Why did he remain passive and communalist? If he knew the lies that could have saved the city, why did he remain silent? It appears that Narayan's critique is also directed against this character, both a victim and an anti-hero whose example should not be followed.

Conclusions

The abundance of literary and artistic expressions on communal violence is so great that some have called it a "topical theme". "Another Community" is an open canvas where the narrator produces contradictory portrayals of nationalism, communal bias and Indian traditions. However, the text lacks the quintessential Narayanesque humour and simplicity. This story records a desire for vengeance, murderous instincts and organised violence in a world where anybody can become a victim/aggressor at any given moment. The individual loses his autonomy in favour of the communal group, which in turn becomes both the provider of security and the decision maker, assuming full responsibility among its members, and diluting any personal liability. As personal details fade away, the communal identity aspires to infinity. "Another Community" describes a

middle-class citizen who remains unnamed and unidentified until his body is found in a gutter. Like thousands of others, he is an ordinary victim of populist communal politics. His death serves as an excuse for the town's subsequent communal killings. Nevertheless, the author avoids believing in pipe dreams. He prefers to tread on solid ground, illustrating the human condition with its flaws and its unceasing aspiration for the absolute, a longing in which violence plays a relevant role. The text points to politics as a causal factor in hostilities, violent riots and communal revivalism. Politicians have constructed the necessity of discord, separation and ethnic cleansing in order to accomplish the postcolonial nation-building process on the basis of the "Two Nations" theory. This is a time of complete chaos: colonial rule has ended, the country has been partitioned, and civil society has been reordered according to new political designs that break with traditions and the former status quo. The nationalist revival is fighting for the return to Hindu traditions while the secular project wants to break with religious superstition and communal differentiation. There is also the outbreak of the first war, between the newly emergent nations, over the Jammu and Kashmir region. India has failed to find a path that short-circuits Kashmiri desires for a referendum on independence, and Pakistan uses this as an excuse for external aggression against her neighbour, thus keeping the attention off unresolved internal problems. Here is the venom held in Shiva's throat, always ready to be expelled and to intoxicate the world.

Narayan's narrative adapts stereotyped indexes from colonial and postcolonial Gothic literature that approximate communal violence to a western literary representation. The increasingly terrified protagonist crosses the safe limits of a normal existence and enters the territory of the unknown Otherness. His house is under threat as well as his neighbourhood, and the night brings creepy images and hideous screams. The evil *Other* cannot be assimilated into the group. Nor can its alterity be accepted: according to the

communal leadership, it must be destroyed to do away with the source of terror. The protagonist in his hybridised condition, of course, sees it differently, revealing a postcolonial characteristic of the new conscious Self. He wishes to bridge the limits of otherness in order to reduce its menacing effects, while he would like to integrate, or at least minimise the irreducible alterity that separates the two communities. What he fails to understand, however, is the true nature of communal violence and the artifices that sustain it, which are basically the struggles against the assimilation of the other into one single national body and the realisation of a unique communion.

Unable to react to the social turmoil, and subdued by his communal surroundings, the so-called hero remains passive, void of individual agency. His desires are never expressed as side effects of the hierarchical joint family system where even his wife depends on the uncle's guidance. Now the leader of the family safeguards the communal integrity and instigates retaliation in the face of any external threat. Each person plays out his/her role in a stagnant society until a new crisis triggers the disclosure of their true opposed natures: the passive-aggressive, effete nationalist, who is a *tamasic* type, and the violent, hypermasculine politician, who is a *rajasic* type. Unable to shake off his inertia, the protagonist involuntarily becomes an instrument in the hands of others, whose docility contrasts with the generalised social disorder. The narrator, in fact, avoids dwelling upon the depiction of the appalling cruelty of the slaughter and, instead of choosing it for the climax of the story, he moves on to a discursive reflection on the futility of an ordinary man's death. His belated clairvoyance, which will be of no avail, transfigures the protagonist into a useless martyr for no good cause, and simultaneously, converts the story into a parable for the absurdity of violence. He becomes another mute victim, a voiceless testimony, a corpse adding to the numbers of human casualties; his body will

become the empty sign which each of the communities will fill in with a different political message, either a sacrificial victim whose death must be avenged or another war trophy of an endless rivalry. The text does not side with either of these interpretations and simply uses this nameless character's tragedy as a case in point of pointless communal violence.

“Annamalai”, or A Life in a Postcolonial Garden

Introduction

As previously discussed, R. K. Narayan’s narrative style has often been seriously questioned because of its apparently insufficient commitment to providing a critical stance on India’s socio-political realities. “There is so little on which to expatiate intellectually, analyse, expound, fathom the depth of... (...) Narayan seems to succeed by what I may call a process or exclusion—by being able to say ‘NO’ to inviting possibilities” (V.Y. Katak qtd. in M.K. Naik 147). “Annamalai” (1970) demonstrates that these statements cannot be taken at face value for the short story openly contradicts the general view of the writer as a facile ironist. It depicts the hardships of an agrarian community in an openly ironic tone that partially succeeds in masking the cruel reality of survival of the lower classes of India. Linked with “Another Community” through the portrait of an anti-hero prototype whose strong attachment to his family determines his life, Annamalai’s loyalty to his community does not prevent him from developing a working-class profile. Narayan employs the discourse of postcolonial mimicry to frame the narration in the context of domesticity. The apparent submission to poverty is mixed up with Annamalai’s eager desire to succeed and his resourcefulness in finding solutions to continually arising problems, which are sometimes questioned by culturally alien observers. By taking on a parodic stance, the text breaks the continuous line of predictability, leaving open Narayan’s characteristic spaces for personal interpretation.

The short story in question describes an Indian labourer – a coolie – who struggles against his entrapment in a web of passivity and resignation, a situation that is the result of a decaying system based on the traditional caste system. The man and his family

remain loyal to their ancestral culture even though it is detrimental to their socioeconomic interests. This deeply-rooted attachment provides a sense of social lethargy at odds with the restless tempo of the ever-growing Indian nation, which imposes unwanted changes on their simple lives, as, for example, the transformation of the local rural economy into one of industrialised exploitation and monoculture farming. The narrative structure also seems to revalidate the previous analyses of Narayan’s short fiction in that the narrator makes a survey of the social fabric of India but he carefully sidesteps direct involvement with any political critique. Nevertheless, I will later show how the narration does introduce some veiled criticism through names and linguistic variations.

According to Kirpal Singh, “the average and the ordinary become the butts of relentless ridicule” in Narayan’s satires. This critic “detects an extreme mistrust of life” in Narayan’s “comic vision” and sees in Narayan’s humour a desire “to prevent the average and the ordinary from triumphing” so as to satisfy “the vicarious sense of superiority that every satirist cherishes” (82). In Singh’s opinion, Narayan “can only expose human vanity and folly, [and his ironies can] not offer a wholesome insight into human nature”. While Singh concludes that the author “does not allow the average and the ordinary a chance to transcend their situations” (83), however, I will attempt to prove that this short story’s metanarrative structure reveals hidden semantic fields that, far from being secondary, open up vast areas of anthropological importance in Eastern societies. It is certainly true that Narayan disguises his meaning through comedy, by playing with language and linguistic devices such as polysemy, South Indian vernaculars and obscure idiolects. In fact, “Annamalai” contains a great number of postcolonial signifiers encapsulated in a modern discourse, which reveals its subversive nature by making an appropriation of the foreigners’ language and forms.

The peculiarity of “Annamalai” consists in its construction of a colonial discourse from the perspective of a middle-class Indian subject who has become unfamiliar with the traditions of the Southern Indian rural communities, and who voices the coloniser’s moral and political values. Narayan’s artefact reproduces certain small biographical details that serve to build up a fictional world, a hybrid product that combines real geographical spaces and his Malgudian laboratory. The short story addresses an international readership and the narrative therefore shows commonplaces of translation. However, the social chasm between the protagonists (the urban Brahmin and the poor villager) allows for an analysis that remains culturally and linguistically Indian. The result is a text that encompasses multiple openings for contextual and discursive interpretations, and consequently, it is necessary to search for those clues scattered throughout the text and relocate them in a Southern Indian context. The analysis will also reveal the ideological implications of the plot based on an apparently ordinary employer-employee relationship between a narrativised Narayan and his old gardener, which convincingly moves between spaces bound to reality and the freedom provided by a fictional voice. Narayan’s metanarrative discourse deserves an analysis of its parts in order to examine a twofold area: firstly, its significance as a hermeneutic system that portrays the author’s reflections on writing and literature which can be traced back to a colonial description of India and, secondly, its postcolonial criticism of a Tamil fictional story translated into English.

In *The Inoperative Community* (1991), Jean-Luc Nancy provides some dialectic definitions of singularity and finitude that do not apply to Annamalai’s primordial community and his conception of a “singular being”; nevertheless, they conform to the narrator’s idea of communication and the community, lending a westernised sophistication to the character. The analysis explains some particular characteristics of a rural community, the Indian gardens and the narrativisation of the social exclusion of the

Other, contextually presented as a thug or *dacoit*, and it accounts for the short story's hybridised nature and some of its internal ideological keys that include certain androgynous peculiarities taken from the Hindu cosmogony. Besides, the circularity of the plot provides a textual movement that marks the metafictional beginning and end, splitting the short story into a threefold structure: introduction, middle part and conclusion. The narration is skilfully divided into seemingly private and public spheres that will be shown to represent internal and external socioeconomic power relations affecting Indian interests.

The present analysis is divided into three sections, classified according to thematic areas. “Part One” describes the short story's cultural background including some particularities of Hindu names and their ethnic connotations, which situate the text within a geography of Hindu and non-Hindu traditions. Concepts such as agency or the ideological bias derived from the specificities of the Indian caste system constitute a significant provision of the narrative's internal signifiers, revealing their ancient cultural origins and their embedding in modern Indian society. The discourses on the Orient and Narayan's postcolonial mimicry introduce “Part Two”. The analysis proves that Hindu mythology is blended into the colonial literary discourse that defined legal, political and economic power relations and that continues to constitute a distinctive aspect of monopolistic agrarian practices that affect the particular social niche in which Annamalai is included. This section shows how Narayan portrays the class and caste differences encoded in the specific linguistic paradigms that distinguish local languages as well as discourses on criminal tribes and domesticity. “Part Three” is concerned with the postcolonial garden constructed by the narrator's interpretations and translations of Annamalai's vicissitudes and ethos: his atavistic fears, his caste origins and the village's politico-ideological articulations to which Annamalai remains irredeemably an alien. In

this section, I will prove how the story contains a political rejection of a humiliating caste system. The examples I provide of Narayan’s metafictional intentions demonstrate his compromise with the literary world and his suspicions about what being a professional writer means. In the “Conclusion”, I will emphasise the text’s purpose partly generated by the symbiotic association between the narrator and his servant or, as the text’s symbolic representation implies, between modern India and its cultural traditions.

“Annamalai”

Part One

Particularities on the Name Annamalai

“Annamalai” was first published in *Encounter* in February 1970 and it was collected later that year in *A Horse and Two Goats*. The title of the short story is related to a complex system of Hindu symbolism that tinges the characters and the plot with physical, psychological and historical relevance. For the Hindus, there is only an “ultimate Godhead, called Narayan, Iswara, or Mahashakti” but for different reasons, “this Timeless Being” takes “the form of a trinity of Gods”: “Brahma is the Creator, Vishnu is the Protector, and Shiva is the Destroyer” (Narayan, *Gods, Demons and Others* 6). Each of these is fused with a female partner who carries out an essential symbolism: Saraswati represents Learning, Laskhmi means Prosperity and Parvati, who is also associated with Sati, is “the complementary world to the ascetic” Shiva. She is his *Shakti*: “the creative force of the Cosmos and the underlying potency of things” (Kinsley 35). Parvati is usually represented as the left half of an androgynous fusion with the god. Her human condition contrasts with her husband’s godly one, denoting their asymmetrical union, but creation is closely linked to destruction in an endless flux of life and death, and

therefore this female power, *Shakti*, transmutes into the goddess Kali⁶⁹, “the feminine form of the word *Kala*”, meaning Time, “the ever-devouring principle” of all things. These explanations portray basic aspects of Hinduism which will prove to be of paramount importance for the comprehension of the story’s underpinnings.

Annamalai is also the name of a sacred hill located in the state of Tamil Nadu; Sanskrit gives the name to the extinct volcano, Arunachala, “red mountain”, which from time immemorial has been one of the five shaivite places in South India. It is also known as Tiruannamalai, traditionally interpreted as the “Great inaccessible mountain”; derived from the seme “thiru”, signifying greatness. According to a Tamil Nadu tradition, also recorded in the Vedas, Annal⁷⁰ is a special name for the god Shiva “who took the form of fire to become inaccessible to Vishnu” in one of their heavenly disputes for power while Malai means hill or mountain, and following the Puranas, this site is not just another representation of Lord Shiva, but of the god himself in the shape of a Linga: “a cosmic pillar of light” whose “red hue” cast “at dawn” is highly admired by saints and pilgrims that have lived near the mountain where they have practiced oration, meditation and penance for centuries. The name also alludes to the myth of the “lingodbhava”, which describes Shiva’s emergence from “the flame pillar in the middle of the ocean” (O’Flaherty 318). Eventually “Annal Malai was contracted to Annamalai”. In view of all of these meanings contained in the title, Narayan’s short story blends in Annamalai’s name his mountainous origins with his overseas travels. The symbolic Shiva, “Annal”, would also “force the gods to witness the power of the phallus and establish its worship in the three worlds of creation, preservation, and destruction” (Kanhai-Brunton 159), which point at the metaphoric evolution of the character’s life in Narayan’s story. Because of the

⁶⁹ Kali. A Dictionary of Asian Mythology.

⁷⁰ Annal. The Concise Dictionary of World-Place Names.

sacred character of the area, Tiruannamalai, Tiru⁷¹ also means “holy” in Tamil. Such is the desirability of the place that currently there is an initiative to support its declaration as “Holy Hill” from the UNESCO World Heritage Site programme⁷², which seeks to protect places of “special cultural, physical, or religious significance”. The initiative’s argument emphasises that, owing to the fact that “Arunachala attracts millions of devotees during the most ancient festival in South India, called Karthagai Deepam”, it inevitably suffers the consequences of uncontrolled human development. Obviously, Tiruannamalai has been a significant source of economic resources that has greatly benefited the whole region. For that reason, it can be said that the dormant volcano, symbol of an ancient Hindu tradition, is a blessing for those who live under its shelter. The same feeling of protection that the mountain offers continues to be radiated from Narayan’s homonym central character, as this study will endeavour to show.

From a linguistic point of view, “the lord of the mountains”, the “knowledgeable” Shiva, Annamalai, can be split into different semantic components, an undertaking that will help to analyse its lexeme. The exercise also sheds some light on the patterns of the short story’s hidden depths, as the syllabic division reveals some of the ideological slants subliminally attributed to the character by the author. Thus, according to the *Arvind lexicon online dictionary*, *anna-* means “food” or “grain”, and also, “cereal”; in Kannada, it signifies “meal”, “cooked rice”, or “fare”. In essence, the term refers to the basic nourishment of Indian rural people while it also addresses concepts such as soil and fertility. From another etymological source, *anna-*⁷³ means “former”, “old”, as well as “maternal”, “older brother” and “food, in a mystical sense”. Therefore, it implies protection and ancestry: the leading protagonist in Narayan’s short story, Annamalai,

⁷¹ Tiru. The Concise Dictionary of World-Place Names.

⁷² Arunachala World Heritage Site Initiative. <<http://arunachalawhs.com>>.

⁷³ *anna-*. Etymological Dictionary of the Hittite Inherited Lexicon.

represents the Vedic symbol of the sacred cow “who is milked of all that one desires” and who also creates without a male subject (O’Flaherty 43). Moreover, in the *Arvind lexicon*, *ana-* is “obstinacy”, “resolution”; an “oath” or a “promise”: a definition related to psychological rather than physical features, which is phonetically closed to the original stem, and which suggests bondage and emotional dependence.

On the other hand, *-amalai* is a performative verb that translates as “execute”, “take care of”, “perform” or “get done”, all meanings that involve some kind of wilful action that relates to third parties. *-Nama-* in its substantive form means “name”, “appellation”, “honour” (*pratishtha*), “prestige”, “pride” and “title”, while its opposite *pratishthita* translates as “prestigeless”, “nondescript”, “ordinary”, “nameless”, all subjective properties associated with groups or societies where the praise for the individual is defined and given according to the community’s set of moral values, revealing the hybrid nature of the creative process and its male substrata: the nurturing seed, the semen associated with the milk during the epic process of churning the ocean to obtain Soma⁷⁴, comes from the male alone or the symbolic bull (O’Flaherty 28). Additionally, the adjectival aspect of this term *-nama-* means “damp”, “moist”, “humid”, or “stuffy”, all of which inspire ideas of discomfort, forests and wilderness that fall into the trope of Indian rural life, permanently conditioned by the monsoon periods.

All of these etymological stems of the name Annamalai explain the historical and psychosocial foundations of the main character. They define him as an atavistic subject who is attached to his family, the land and Indian traditions, and who, despite being submitted to their rules, possesses a significant level of resourcefulness and a passionate

⁷⁴ The Soma is a juice obtained after churning the ocean of milk; it is the essence of creation, the nourishment of the gods and also an androgynous deity usually represented as a bull whose seed is made of a milk that conveys existential binaries: the male and the female; fire and water; butter and blood; Heaven and Earth. This androgynous condition helps to give life in absence of an alien *other*; the being is complete in itself as it is composed of complementary opposites (O’Flaherty 24-6).

and volatile strength. His personality stands out in spite of his subservient role. Annamalai has the characteristics of an immanent force that provides security, shelter and nourishment to those who depend on him, carrying within himself the two essential creative fluids according to the Vedic texts: milk and semen are the substances that invoke the generative power of the “ancient Indian androgynes” (O’Flaherty 28). Annamalai is a multi-layered character endowed with paradigmatic contradictions that may not be easy to appreciate at the first reading.

The short story describes an Indian Brahmin who is aloof from subaltern classes, although the terms bourgeoisie or middle-class seem to be closer to this Indian reality than the traditional caste terminology used in the short story, enhancing once more the author’s humorous mimicry and softening of the reality of hierarchical divisions of labour described by B. R. Ambedkar as situations where the “labourers are graded one above the other” (“The Revolution against Caste” 213).

The Story of Annamalai: His Symbolic Representation

“Annamalai” is ascribed to Narayan’s “middle-period” writings, a term that John Thieme used when the author was already a consolidated writer with an international reputation. His stay as “Visiting Professor at the University of Missouri in Kansas City” in 1969 (100) undoubtedly influenced the way Narayan constructed his persona for a non-Indian readership, but he always expressed his concern about the representation of India and “*what kind of* discourse [might be] appropriate for the task” (15). The American experience and his own personal development with “a partial reinvention of his persona as a writer” (101) exercised a pressure on his narrative style, which was affected by “the Orientalist vogue” that ran throughout Western societies during that period. For Narayan, this trend transmitted a renewed inspiration in “Hindu elements”, and this meant the

adoption of a distinct postcolonial discourse which is clearly reflected in this short story. According to Thieme, Narayan fused the postcolonial and the Hindu, the “two discursive strands in a range of unresolved and indeterminate relationships, while sometimes appearing to suggest that their infrastructure is Hindu” (102). Although it is true that the end of the short story is left inconclusive, a more attentive reading shows that the narrative’s plot is already finished: it begins with the reception of a postcard and ends when the postcard is read. The rest of the story is left to the narrator’s evocation of his life with Annamalai, which belongs to a remote past that he invokes whenever he wishes. These remembrances describe the narrator as a job provider for a stranger in distress; therefore, his final decision about the postcard’s request, absent from the story, can easily be guessed. The plot always reverts to the same starting point, as if to convey the essential Hindu myth of the Eternal Return but on a parodic level. The short story is condensed in the space of “a postcard, with the message in Tamil crammed on the back of it in minute calligraphy” (“Annamalai” 71) and the address written in English. While the story undoubtedly contains Hindu elements, the internal structure is based on an examination of the colonial discourse already absorbed by the Indian society, which represents a hegemonic cultural levy for the colonising power. Narayan adopts a postcolonial discourse that pays tribute to those “literary inheritances” that set foot on Indian soil and that defined India and the Orient on a global scale from a western perspective. Narayan transforms those discourses into a “metafictive” language that becomes his own literary voice, developed after years of study, observation and writing evolution (Thieme 16). The postcolonial criticism lies beneath the contextual edifice of the argument but, as Narayan’s recurrent style clearly demonstrates, it can be disguised as linguistic incompetence and cultural stereotypes whose peculiarities underscore the importance of language itself. Narayan is therefore able to play with archetypal subjects

immersed in ridiculous situations that seem to be utterly irrelevant and this allows him to subvert the transcendental halo of self-importance carried by some postcolonial discourses so intellectually elevated that they ignore those ones who they supposedly mean to represent and lend a critical voice.

Annamalai is one of these subjects: he is traditionally silenced, socially insignificant, and individually expendable. These aspects of his experience are heightened by the short story's structure: it repeatedly introduces one external element after the other, interpreting Annamalai's will or knowledge, as it is the case of the narrator when he translates his Tamil experience and his intercourses with Annamalai into English. From this perspective, Annamalai is a mediated character whose illiteracy does not entail the absence of a coherent discourse but the existence of another kind of language with a different set of “rules, codes, emphases, and ironies” (Kaviraj 19). Hence, the narration begins with a postcard addressed to a homodiegetic narrator – a fictionalised Narayan – by a professional writer on Annamalai's behalf. According to William Walsh, this late stage of Narayan's career, experience and life, enters “the universe of fiction, which now encloses some reality, some truth, possibly harder to get at but quite certainly more obviously there than commonplace reality itself” (106). Walsh seems to imply that Narayan has abandoned the writer's literary detachment in order to build up a metafictional reality which fits into a literary world he imagines himself orchestrating. Nonetheless, Walsh appears to give more importance to the narrator's voice, which impersonates Narayan, than to the fact that it is a discursive fabrication, a persona serving the author's ideological purposes. In this sense, Narayan manages to construct a realistic narrator who provides the text with contextual verisimilitude: Annamalai is an old illiterate worker who moved during his infancy from a rural community to an indenture system of plantation where he went through different stages of workforce exploitation,

including the category of migrant “unfree” labourer. In the last stage of his working life, he offers his services to the narrator as a “free” native worker doing the combined duties of a gardener, a guardian and a housekeeper.

Every aspect of Annamalai’s labour can be politically reinterpreted as a (post)colonial metaphor: India becomes the imagined garden of the colonial discourse that defines, teaches and penalises her existence; she needs to be imagined “in a particular way” in order to keep the wholeness of the national community, otherwise, it “might rapidly decline and dissolve” into its dissimilar factions (Kaviraj 19). From the point of view of the British Empire, India remained one of the wealthier overseas possessions and undoubtedly the biggest challenge in terms of geography, culture, history and ethnicity. It was not an unexplored continent but the site of ancient civilisations that left their indelible marks on her body. These civilisations are reflected on and touched upon the narrator’s cultural expressions of Indianness. Meanwhile, Annamalai symbolises the Other, the one who needs to be interpreted, the object of study which arouses admiration and bafflement; he is reduced and tamed, enclosed in a place where he can be observed, scrutinised and reported to a large, undefined audience. Nevertheless, the narrator fails to comprehend Annamalai’s origins, which he aims to describe from the hybridised perspective of an Indian writer who writes in English about illiterate southern Indians and who can barely understand their linguistic inferences, even though he tries to grasp as much as he can. The narrator enumerates certain characteristics of these “fuzzy communities” who are forced to adapt to modern “abstract threats” (18), but, ultimately, his interactions with Annamalai result in an unbridgeable gap that ends up breaking their relationship at its weakest point. The metanarrative space allows for reflection on those remaining flaws that a modern westernised Indian writer has failed to overcome even from his advantageous social position. The metafiction of the text also dwells on the

means of communication used in the story, displaying Narayan’s subtle humour: these means are the postcards which lack the discursive relevance of letters and express a minimalistic approach to the English literary tradition, thus underlining their farcical stance against western epistolary literature. Narayan, therefore, plays with the idea that the British had of the Indian literature. The literary conventions and codes of politeness of the English middle class, so ostentatious in Victorian literature, are targeted here with ironic mimicry. They are resumed in formalistic greetings and a “ceremonial flourish” (71) that define the letter-writer’s style, even though they seem to be of no use for the client’s purposes.

During the process of the text’s translation, the reader is gradually introduced to Annamalai’s working experiences, his family business, his social relations and his cunning dealings, all of which are spiced with Narayan’s characteristic irony. The narration seeks the reader’s complicity and active involvement in the plot’s turns, which Linda Hutcheon defines as an “attributed or inferred operative motivation” in dealing with irony in general (*Irony’s Edge* 43). Bearing in mind that the writer’s main intention is to amuse his audience through apparently comic situations that make symbolic references to a recent Indian past, the reader has to decode these signs if s/he wants to delve beneath the short story’s surface. In Hutcheon’s words, doing this is “a matter of interpretation and attribution” (43) that necessarily shares with the text some of the ideological slants that remove the seriousness or the precariousness from, in this case, what is a contextually mediated discourse of the Indian working class. Irony and humour become the vehicle for arousing a sympathetic response to the exploited, ill-treated servant. For instance, the “ten closely packed lines” (72) that serve as the postcard’s introduction contain the scribe’s description of his professional talent in delivering “a

formality, following a polite code of epistle-writing” (72), a device aimed at creating a receptive mood before the real purpose of the letter is put forward to the addressee:

By your grace and the grace of gods in the firmament above, I am in excellent health and spirits, and my kith and kin, namely, my younger brother Amavasai and my daughter, son-in-law, and the two grandchildren and my sister who lives four doors from me, and my maternal uncle and his children, who tend the coconut grove, are all well. This year the gods have been kind and have sent us the rains to nourish our lands and gardens and orchards. Our tanks have been full, and we work hard... (72)

Narayan uses the contextual framework of epistolary discourses, developed through immemorial communications mediated by professional scribes. The polite forms used reflect an ornamental literary tradition, which is probably more significant for the hired writers than for the addressees, since it consumes such a large part of the limited space of the postcard. The fusion of oral and textual patterns maintains a discursive coherence, moulded into a space reserved for the style of the scribes, who acquire authorial relevance on the means and purposes of communication among illiterate people. Once the narrator asks Annamalai the reasons why his postal address precedes his message, the answer he receives is of a simple logic: “so that I may be sure that the fellow who writes for me does not write to his own relations on my card” (76).

The Space of The Unknown

“Annamalai” begins with the irruption of the unknown in the narrator’s “property at the New Extension” (71): “[t]he mail brought me only a postcard” (71). These first lines succeed in mixing up Narayan’s real experience as a professional writer who daily received numerous letters and had “plenty of letter-writing to known and unknown

persons alike” (Narayan, *My Days, A Memoir* 178), and his imagined geography of Malgudi where there is a New Extension for the town’s wealthiest people or the better-off middle class society. The hyperbolic tone of the postcard’s introduction, humorously reproduced by the narrator, suggests some scepticism regarding subservient relationships, the social manners and the paying of respect that have characterised the low self-esteem of Indian peasants for centuries: “At the Divine Presence of my old master” (71). These fictional lines establish the narrator’s social distance from the sender of the postcard, who is certainly inspired by Narayan’s experiences of Narayan, which he describes in his late memoirs. As part of his “non-literary interests”, the author lived a life devoted to “following absolutely the plan and rhythm of Nature” inspired by the reading of Indian newspapers and Thoreau’s *Walden*, and the appearance of “a practical horticulturist” who happened to instruct him about agricultural issues (*My Days, A Memoir* 171). It is then that he became the owner of “an acre of land in Bangalore” (171) upon which he envisioned the construction of “a split-level cottage with a wide veranda” (172), and hired the services of “an agricultural expert [...] to clear the land of stones and weeds and make it fit for cultivation” (173). This man is described in Narayan’s memoirs as “a practical man, who knew all about soils and seeds and seasons” (173). The author’s wit is evident when he judges the meagre results of their professional relationship: for some years, Narayan has paid large quantities of money to this man for his work but the gains have never matched his investments. His opinion is that “agricultural operations have to be conducted in a spirit of give-and-take, in the teeth of hostile forces engendered by men” (174), which explains part of the work’s ideological overtones about horticulturists, the so called *malis*. Furthermore, Narayan writes in the Introduction to *Under the Banyan Tree* that ““Annamalai” is almost a documentary of a strange personality who served as a

watchman in [his] bungalow for fifteen years” (viii) and who is unrelated to the aforementioned horticulturist.

In spite of Narayan’s frustrating experience with his real gardener, Annamalai, a fictional character, is treated in a distinctive and respectful way. To begin with, there is an unbridgeable social distance, which does not mean that Annamalai lacks personal authority. On the contrary, employer and employee occupy their respective social slots in which each of them behaves authoritatively according to his role. In a way, Annamalai’s mentality is far from being a colonised: “How could I or anyone order Annamalai? It was unthinkable” (84), explains the narrator. Annamalai has a large joint family to sustain; he is ill and is urgently in need of money “for food and medicine” (72). He therefore resolves to ask his former employer for monetary support, leaving to that man’s “good sense” whatever amount he wishes to send him. However, the reader soon learns about the narrator’s distrust of what is written in the postcard and, especially, who has written it, i.e. who has given the order to send the letter. He does not only ask: “But how could I be sure that [Annamalai] had written the letter?” (72). He also goes as far as to suspect Annamalai’s death: “How could I make sure that Annamalai was still alive?” (73). In the former sentence, the narrator hesitates over the letter’s authorship, knowing that as an illiterate peasant, Annamalai could only dictate the letter to somebody who could write anything he pleased without Annamalai’s being aware. In the last sentence, the narrator goes a step further, asking himself how he could find out the real intention behind what is written. Both questions show not only distrust of the servant’s request but of his dependent family’s real intentions. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan* discusses the concept of “agency” and the culturally marked space of the scribe, who, in Annamalai’s case, has a decisive position of power since “the agency of the letter is the authority of the letter”. This agency

determines the “decision-making power and its authority” (22), which, again in this case, are held by the narrator’s final decision. The ethical dilemma brings back the narrator’s memories of Annamalai’s domestic service. The narrator’s qualms demand a kind of certainty from the letter that permits him to extricate his servant’s well-known “singularity of being” from the community in which he is immersed and that exposes him as a finite individual in comparison to other members of the same community, who at the same time, reveal themselves as “singular being[s]” within that community. This required singularity is what Nancy, in *The Inoperative Community*, calls, “the areality that above all extroverts it in its very being – whatever the degree or the desire of its “egoism” – and that makes it exist only by exposing it to an outside” (29). It is “areal” because it demands the existence of an external world based on a relation of reciprocity. This recognition of individual finitude elicits an external communication that is “prior to any address in language” (29). There is a hypothetical bond between the narrator and his servant that makes the former explain: “I should certainly have been glad to send a pension, not once but regularly, in return for all his years of service” (72). For the realisation of this moral attachment, the narrator has to differentiate between the worker’s individuality or finitude standing next to his own, in a clear association for mutual benefit – the reason Annamalai deserves a pension – and the social subject that belongs to a community that subsumes his individual identity, and towards whom, in case of his death, the narrator has no obligations at all. In this ideological concept lies a profound difference between Nancy’s definition of community, coming as it does from a western perspective, and the actual foundations of an Indian community that has been the object of multiple colonisations through centuries. In a modern western community, the subject stands as a “singularity” next to other subjects equally singular in their external manifestations; their “singularity is exposed to the outside”, their finitude “co-appears” next to the others’ finitudes during

the process of “being-in-common”; otherwise, finitude would not be possible because it is defined by the presence of others. Consequently, the “communitarian” space is simultaneously constituted by the “differentiation” and “detachment” of its members. Nancy defines community as “the presentation of the detachment (or retrenchment) of this distinction that is not individuation, but finitude compearing” (*The Inoperative Community* 29). Meanwhile, in Annamalai’s community, individuality gives way to communal and atavistic hierarchical relations of power that illustrate the peculiarities of casteism and the joint family system.

This eventual communication with an external community – who and how many are behind the letter? – forces the narrator to search for commonplaces of knowledge and understanding, established previously between employer and employee. Sparsely and precariously, the narrator and his employee have communicated in Tamil, although Annamalai’s linguistic limitations and peculiar idiolect together with the narrator’s paternalistic condescension towards Annamalai’s sociocultural shortcomings bring into their dialogues constant misinterpretations and mutual incomprehension that reproduce colonial stereotyped discourses on Indian issues. Narayan introduces a narrator that reflects the culturally dependent Indian subject relying on encroaching Western manners. This narrator is also a mock representation of Narayan himself, using his Indian servant’s experiences as a source of inspiration for his English writings based on the translation of a received description of a primitive rural society, which shows the narrator’s limited understandings of these fuzzy communities and their sociolects. Sukrita Paul Kumar writes that this is the “[a]ppropriation of the “local” or the culturally specific, reflect[ing] itself back to the dependant culture as the “original” through English translations” (*Narrating Partition* 148). The result is a contemporaneous artifice that exposes the breach between the real and the culturally manipulated, which is also addressed to an

international audience that, in principle, has a preconceived idea of the Orient. Following S. Kumar’s analysis, the narrator fabricates an “alien self-perception” that runs parallel to Annamalai’s circumstances and that assumes a ready-made “orientalist paradigm”. The device enables Narayan to explore the metanarrative aspects of a colonial discourse that enunciates a controlled site of emplacement, the Indian garden, an already embedded concept in the unconscious of Indian society. According to S. Kumar, “the white man’s burden gets carried by the brown writer through “translation” as refraction” (148). In the present case, this colour differentiation dwells on light and dark-skinned characters, which also subtly introduces the text’s mythic Hindu resonance: it echoes the marital conflict between Shiva and Parvati, a conflict whose source was aesthetic.⁷⁵ This cultural translation is twisted around, and both narrator and protagonist are fictionalised in hierarchical arrangement where the authorial voice lends the narrator a patronising western tone that reproduces imperial discourses on India. Indeed, as with the short story itself, the text in discussion is a small object, a postcard, just as the site of emplacement is also reduced to a quarter acre garden mimicking the Orient. The reduction in size metaphorically represents the Westernised conception of traditional Indian letters and socioeconomic power relationships in a narrative that combines postcolonial criticism with irony.

Part Two

The Colonial (Mis)Appropriation

Narayan transforms endemic deficiencies associated with Southern Indian institutions into a colonial discourse. The degenerate perceptions of the native constructed

⁷⁵ On certain occasion, Shiva made fun of Parvati’s dark skin, which the latter took as a personal offence – Parvati is the peaceful manifestation of the deadly, “man-eater Kali”. In response to the outrage, she performed her yogi skills to slough off her “dark persona”, after which she became known as “Gauri, the Golden Girl”, seemingly, a more suitable wife for “her light-skinned husband” (O’Flaherty 93).

by the coloniser’s discourse, which “justify conquest” and removal of those natives in order to “establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha, “The Other Question”⁷⁶ 70), now re-emerge as an internal criticism of the poor services that seem to define India, far from any colonial rule. The narrator receives the postcard and “look[s] at the postmark to make sure that at least the card had originated correctly. But the post-office seal was just a dark smudge as usual” (73). Suddenly, the anonymous, humble Brahmin amanuenses who control the private dealings of illiterate rural people are compared to the narrator’s pan-Indian literary career. Their worlds seem to coexist in different temporal slots, across a gap that is magnified by well-differentiated geographical locations. In Thieme’s words, literary topographies “are brought into being through acts of composition and can never offer unmediated access to an external social reality” (15). This mediated reality escapes the narrator’s sense of cultural belonging, so he “was never sure at any time of the name of his [Annamalai’s] village, although as I have already said I had written the address for him scores of times in a decade and a half” (73). The narrator reveals his metropolitan cultural background acquired from a global reading of Indian society. As an “elite artist”, the idea of “cultural belonging” seems unreal and restrictive, thus fulfilling what Aijaz Ahmad calls an “antiquated false consciousness” inherited from “High Modernism” and a mythic conception of social origins (129). Ahmad sustains that by “occupying a multiplicity of subject positions and an excess of belonging”, the writer is able to possess multiple resources “for consumption” without belonging to any one position (130). Ironically, his lack of belonging to a specific place compares to the early communities represented by Annamalai’s mysterious village, where the natives are unable to set the precise limits of their community. These fuzzy boundaries are determined by caste, religion, name or even, a collective identity, “but hardly ever [by

⁷⁶ Full title, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism”.

their] linguistic group” since their members are not associated to a geographical place (Kaviraj 193) and language is not a defining principle. Nevertheless, Narayan’s theoretical conception of art at work “since the 1960s” (Ahmad 129) stresses the importance of regional nationalisms in the composition of his texts. This principle is compatible with a conception of a pan-Indian narrative and a modern characteristic of nationhood, which knit together the two dissimilar characters in the short story under the abstract concept of Indianness.

Krishna Ramanujan’s “Language and Social Change: The Tamil Example”⁷⁷ explains how Tamil plays with sound “devices like alliteration and allusion” to bring about a “consciousness” of “language and literary heritage” and to “emphasise the variety of speech forms from the archaic or literary to the colloquial, folksy and spicy” (99). According to Ramanujan, these particular “metalinguistic devices” fortify the sense of belonging to a linguistic community and strengthen the “phatic communion” among its members (99). Moreover, Narayan applies this linguistic abstraction constructed with dialectical differences translated into English that simultaneously play with phonetics and meanings, working as an authorial insertion of Southern Indian humour. As Ramanujan further clarifies, Tamil’s versatility conjugates a “formal high style and an informal colloquial style”, with the former reserved for public reading and the latter for “oral exposition[s]” (“Language and Social Change” 109). Indeed, this particular “diglossia” is hidden in Narayan’s text: ““Paerumai Nallur” means either “town of pride and goodness” or, with a change of the stress on the syllables, “town of fatness and goodness” (73-74). The narrator never gets Annamalai’s address right because of his accent, thus revealing another characteristic of their caste division: the colloquial address reproduces an “analogical levelling” that usually denotes a less complicated “paradigm” in “non-

⁷⁷ “Language and Social Change” from now on.

brahman dialects” (“Language and Social Change” 109). Every time Annamalai repeats the words, the pronunciation becomes different: “something that sounded like “Mara Konam”, which always puzzled me”, confesses the narrator (73). He wants to apprehend the semantics of the imagined topographical place which “depend on whether you stressed the first word or the second of that phonetic assemblage” (73); nevertheless, Annamalai withstands the urge to ascribe himself to a particular “village”, though he feels “a glow of pride” when he “utter[s] slowly and deliberately the name” (73). He lives in the real while his master lives in-between two worlds: his own reality and his fictional interpretation of Annamalai’s community. Therefore, Annamalai resists his master’s desire to narrate him. If I follow Frederic Jameson’s assessment, Annamalai’s passive resistance is “the bedrock against which the desiring subject knows the breaking up of hope and can finally measure everything that refuses its fulfilment” (170), then I can state that Annamalai matches the profile perfectly: he passively resists being defined and classified by omitting specific information about his birthplace, which is a subversive attitude against what Pramod K. Nayar describes as “a careful assertion of control over colonial space” (117). For the narrator’s desire for a “scientific exotic” classification of his servant’s place of birth, there is

no scope for an interpretation however differently you tried to distribute the syllables and stresses or whether you attempted a translation or speculated on its meaning in Tamil, Telegu, Kannada, or any of the fourteen languages listed in the Indian Constitution. (“Annamalai” 74)

The discourse of “control and dominance” seeks a “systematic study of Indian difference” that can be reviewed and constrained on a map for the “itemization” of

cultural and ethnographic varieties of natives and their languages (Nayar 80). The result will always be the objectification of the individuals for a manageable taxonomy.

There are other aspects that cannot be overlooked in relation to the colonial subjects in India. They did learn to live with foreign institutions and enjoyed the improvements on infrastructure that the process of colonisation gave rise to the subcontinent. Although English is the vehicle that bridges linguistic differences in India, it is also the language of the ruling class and somehow this predominance is naturalised by the population. In Ramanujan’s opinion, the “low rate of literacy and the presence of English” is perceived “as a privileged alternative” for a few fortunate ones (“Language and Social Change” 111). Thus, the inherited Indian Post Service selecting English-speaking officials ensures the arrival of the mail on the condition that the addresses are written in English, which may be considered reasonable in a vast country like India with such language diversity. Consequently, there occurs a gradual process of “Indianization of idioms” that is culturally marked by “class formation and social privilege” (Ahmad 77). Nevertheless, this language appropriation serves to occupy “state administration” jobs that “are considered national, in higher institutions of education and research” (77), which widens the differential breach between urban and rural societies. This is the symbolic space that the postman occupies, one which suggests an efficient system inherited from British colonial rule and that echoes the memory of the bygone days of Rudyard Kipling’s “The Overland Mail (foot-service to the hills)” quoted in McLeod’s appendix to *Beginning Postcolonialism*: “We exiles are waiting for letters from Home” (Kipling 259). As will be explained at length later on, Annamalai is the exile that has to ask his master “to write the address” in English because “[l]etters will not reach in Tamil; what our schoolmaster has often told us” (74). Once again, the narrator’s polyglot superiority shines, elevating him above Tamil and the average “chap who writes the card”

for Annamalai (74), marking a “hierarchical divide” between languages that Ahmad expresses as “the national functions of the intelligentsia, which [are] carried out in English, and the regional functions, which [are] carried out in the indigenous languages” (76).

Other emblematic institutions inherited from the empire for “domestication of the land and its people” and the strategic displacement of troops and workforces were railways and roads (Nayar 106). Their implementation meant a change of mentality and the acceptance of a technological revolution; they signify “a *cultural conquest* [sic] over the laboring bodies and work attitudes of the natives” (108). Annamalai’s journey back home is an adventure that takes him almost three days, during which he has to use trains, buses, carts and also walk “on foot”. “[I]f [the train] gets late bandits may waylay and beat us” (76). The journey also gives the reader an approximate idea of India’s geographical vastness. The idea of the superiority of the mail service over Annamalai’s means of transport is also revalidated by his comment on the small price to be paid for sending a card: “But a card reaches there for just nine paise, isn’t it wonderful?” (76). The rugged mountain landscape, a different vernacular, a rural community and alternative social traits also mark the anxiety of the colonial discourse, which Nayar describes as “the rhetoric of danger”. This critic remarks on the importance of “the discovery of magnitude, frightening profusion, unnavigable spaces, and incomprehensible numbers”, all of which constructs the discourse of the white man as the hero of a quest (40). In this short story’s mimicry, the unknown danger comes from “the impenetrable culture” of Annamalai. The narrator fails to understand his origins, his offering of help or his request for a small advance of money. As a result, his suspicions constantly remain unchanged, albeit relegated in the background: “I went back to my desk, cursing my suspiciousness. Here was one who had volunteered to help and I had shown so little grace” (83). These

suspicions are related to the theme of marginalised identities that emerged during the colonial period, favoured by the colonisers’ deficient, mystified knowledge of the country and popularised in certain travel literature. Narayan brings in an oblique reference to ancient clans of bandits or “vagrant plunderers” (Hutton 6), the so-called Thugs and Dacoits. The theme that seems to inspire Annamalai’s portrayal expresses a veiled irony that conveys the colonial exaggerated representation of the Indian natives as barbaric and treacherous people ready to perform any crime against a civilised society. These colonial clichés are also highlighted by the protagonist’s name, which for an English readership suggests the wilderness and irrationality (animality) of the beasts, a semantic example of how Narayan plays with the complicity of non-Indian readers.

According to Ranajit Guha, the “semi-feudal” productive system that had dominated Indian peasantry for centuries triggered the youth emigration from “desolated villages and starvation” to an enrolment in an “outlaw’s career”: “dacoity as a profession”. These people were classified as “criminal tribes” by the “colonial legislation” which remained in place until 1952, when the stigma was “nominally removed” from law but not from “social practice[s]” (*Elementary Aspects* 84). The Thugs had historically plagued roads and commercial routes, especially in the wake of the social disorder created by the arrival of the East Indian Company, and for centuries, their cruelty upset many powerful lords. Once they were overcome, the lords felt “emancipated from the fear of the Thugs”, despite the latter’s standing up against the colonial rule (Hutton 93). Their modus operandi consisted in befriending travellers on their journey, appearing to be supportive in order to gain confidence, and then murdering everyone in a ritualised corpse offering to the goddess Kali, who also carried some obscure likeness to Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter: their patroness represented “an amalgamation of the two religions” (Hutton 10). It is worth noting that orthodox Muslims heavily contested

this crossover. In an interview, Narayan said: “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” (Lowe 183). Hence, Kali’s representation contains the Tripura’s characteristics of creation, protection and destruction, which here combines with the structure of the short story and the author’s Hindu ethos. Kali is depicted as an androgynous character from a double perspective: from that of the Puranic and Vedic literatures that fuse her to Shiva, and from that of Narayan’s text, which fuses her to Annamalai. This is the reason that the narrator, later on, is “touched by [Annamalai’s] solicitude” (80), despite his former suspicions. According to myth, Kali “bestowed upon [the thugs] one of her teeth for a pick-axe, a rib for a knife, and the hem of her garment for a noose” (Hutton 15), which was yellow and white, her representative colours. The murderers’ ritual consisted in strangling their victims from behind and digging holes to bury them after they had opened their bellies to prevent them from swelling due to the accumulation of gases. “The murder of human beings in *thuggee* (by strangulation) was, according to myth, enjoined by divine authority” (S. Shankar 102). And just as the thugs dug holes, Narayan’s narrator describes Annamalai’s performance in “[d]igging the garden [where] he was at his best. We carried on some of our choicest dialogues when his hands were wielding the pickaxe” (77). Subtly, the author’s narrative of ambiguity plays with an implicit literary colonial discourse whose distorted evaluations of the subcontinent created a particular image of peoples and landscapes. Heroes and villains rise to the category of demigods and devils, *asuras*, and Narayan finds inspiration in using some misleading but specific features from those nomadic gangs who were dreaded by many and admired by some, but who were nonetheless subdued by the colonial troops, despite many difficulties. According to James Hutton, “the task of [their] suppression” started in 1829-30 (92) until the abandonment of their criminal practices, but their traits

remain fixed in the literary imagination of the Indian people. Indeed, Annamalai looks similar to them but he is not quite the same, which contributes to the construction of a stereotype of a suspicious, almost criminal figure with a double personality. Although Annamalai’s life is far from being regarded idle, his early journeys and his sporadic residence in his village present certain discursive patterns of a vagrant life. Hutton defines the Thug as “a deceiver; they were likewise *Phanseegars*, from the *Hindustanee* word *Phansee*, ‘a handkerchief’” (41) and the handkerchief was a fundamental tool used systematically to strangle their victims:

the handkerchief was, rather, a turban unfolded, or the long narrow cloth, or sash, worn round the waist. It was doubled to the length of about thirty inches, with a knot formed at the doubled extremity, and about eighteen inches from that a slip knot. (46)

Not in vain, the short story reads in slightly mocking terms: “[w]hile at work [Annamalai] always tied a red bandanna over his head, knotted above his ear in pirate fashion” (77). Likewise, another custom among the thugs was the eating of *gur*, which is a kind of jiggery made with coarse sugar. Hutton’s description continues: “They also carried a knapsack on their back, a light cane in their hand, and generally a small bag of *betel* nut and *paun*”⁷⁸ (7). The whole description of Annamalai’s appearance is a mixture of anthropological primitivism, physical strength and resilience at work:

He was a thick-set, heavy-jowled man with a clean-shaven head covered with a turban, a pair of khaki shorts over heavy bow legs, and long arms reaching down to his knees; he had thick fingers, a broad nose, and enormous teeth stained red with betel juice and tobacco permanently

⁷⁸ Betel leaves and *paan* is a preparation made with betel and other ingredients.

pouched in at his cheek. There was something fierce as well as soft about him at the same time. (80)

This “racialized” description is largely in keeping with the widely held opinion in the nineteenth century that Indian subjects had to be civilised by the English. James Welsh’s *Military Reminiscences* argued that Indians were a “race of beings seemingly intended by nature to complete the link between man, the images of his Maker, and the tribe of apes and monkeys” (2). This is just one example of the negative undertones that lie behind the ironic depiction of Annamalai’s physical appearance in Narayan’s short story, and it illustrates how Narayan mimics the dominant Victorian discourse. For Kirpal Singh, it simply condenses “Narayan’s ironic vision of life”, an irony “almost always tinged with comedy” which “can only expose human vanity and folly, not offer a wholesome insight into human nature” (83). Yet the text releases a crucial effect described by Hutcheon as “the assailing function of irony”, which specifies situations where irony may also be used for an “aggressive putdown”, a demolishing attack on what is written. The negative aspects conveyed in Annamalai’s archetypal description, bitterly expressed, destroy any appearance of complacency on Narayan’s side, however qualified, with any foreign definition that “may suggest no desire to correct but simply a need to register contempt and scorn” (Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge* 51).

Hutton depicts “[the thugs’] leaders or *jemadars*” often assuming “the garb and bearing of wealthy merchants” (7). And just as these criminals behaved in this way, Narayan’s narrator describes Annamalai, as he is about to return to his village, “[wearing] a dark coat which he had preserved for occasions, a white dhoti, and a neat turban on his head. He was nearly unrecognizable in this garb” (196). Narayan transposes both external appearances and literature that seem to imply that, in this type of life narrative, those

inherited cultural features remain under the skin but they are diluted by the loss of nomadic habits and agrarian integration that accompanied the construction of a nation-state concept “marked by the recovery and resilience of indigenous societies” (Sethi 31) and that followed British colonial rule. It is worth noting what Rumina Sethi points out in this regard, namely that the concept of nation-state “is in a state of obsolescence with the surge of global capitalism in the world” (31), and, even if there is a global phenomenon of economic homogeneity derived from an accentuated capitalist market, there is also a shifting social reaction against this homogenisation translated as emergent regional nationalisms. Narayan’s text, however, advocates a social model that goes beyond the centre-periphery binaries of postcolonial criticism and that integrates universal and local signifiers into the description of a heterogeneous rural India. The symbolic Other depicted through Annamalai’s resemblance of a thug – the residual nomadic people that made a living out of criminal activities – also serves to illustrate S. Shankar’s affirmation about *thuggee*, “the ritualized murder of travellers”. He asserts that these ghoulish rituals are “presented as a religious murder” to get the protection of “Kali, tutelary deity of the thugs” (102). Symbolically, the victims are sacrificial scapegoats whose death is meant to obtain the goddess’ favours. The victims are the means to obtain money and power, while the thugs’ apparently conventional family relations usually remained ignorant of their criminal activities. They used to spend long periods of time on their plundering expeditions, after which they returned to a secure area, divided their “spoils” and then parted. “[T]he individual thugs [therefore] disappeared into their villages to resume the[ir] alternative lives” as “farmers, craftsmen” or other conventional labourers (S. Shankar 103).

In this sense, there is a strange element introduced following Annamalai’s experience: when he was ten-year-old, his “father said: ‘You are a thief....’” (95). The

narration does not provide any basis for this accusation but Annamalai cannot tolerate the offence, then, the narrator announces that Annamalai “[t]hat night slipped out of the house and walked.... [he] sat in a train going towards Madras” (95). He stays away for some years and only returns home to get “rid of the shivering fever” (95). Just as the goddess Kali resumes her positive maternal aspects as the care-provider Parvati, “[Annamalai] gave [his] father a hundred rupees and told him that a thief would not bring him a hundred rupees” (95). For S. Shankar, the modern “postcolonial state’s experiment with democracy” has sustained the reproduction of “prejudices and stereotypes regarding the criminality of social groups that it regards as a threat to its authority” (114). These stereotypes are bolstered by opinions such as that of Kirpal Singh who defines Narayan as a satirist who uses irony to impress ambiguity upon the readers (83). Although the setting is deliberately equivocal and contains physical absences and objects, Narayan twists the historical discourse of a criminal life into the appalling reality of the *coolies*, the destitute Indian working class that legitimately aspires to a better life and whose main patroness is Kali, the goddess of the marginal castes. In spite of his dubious appearance, Annamalai is not a criminal but an exploited, almost enslaved peasant that has gone through several working stages that need to be considered at length.

From Rural Villages to Monopolistic Plantations: The Indian Garden

The text informs that the young Annamalai “hated [his] village, with all those ignorant folk” (95). In his father’s eyes, he embodies *evil*, that Other one which, in Fredric Jameson’s words, is “radically different from me”. He is rejected because he *differs* from his father’s ways in the Derridean double sense of disagreeing with and of being different from the social group. Annamalai occupies a social niche derived from his

family, and if the family rejects him, then he is evaluated as a flawed member that threatens the social structure. His “difference seems to constitute a real and urgent threat to [his] own existence” (Jameson 101). Once expelled from the family, he is no longer a member of the community but a stranger, the *Other*. Unlike Viswanath in *The Grandmother’s*, Annamalai neither changes his identity nor renounces his origins, but he carries imprinted upon him the outcast’s mark that will follow him the rest of his life. As an expatriate, he goes to the nearest metropolis to live the life of an adult, and the narrator tells us that there, he “worked as a coolie and lived in the verandahs of big buildings” (95). The no-longer child has entered the system of supply and demand, where the verandahs are symbolic of the inherited colonial system of human exposure and exploitation, which is visible beneath the imperial magnificence. The process of migration from a rural to an urban environment brings about “an abolition of Nature (as some ultimate term of Otherness or difference)” (Jameson 101) that is not (re)covered until he (re)enters the realm of domesticity at the narrator’s service. Annamalai’s disagreement with what he considers a negative society forces a transition that goes from the dispossession of his peasant characteristics to the acquisition of some proletarian qualities in the purest sense: he sells his unique market value, his ability to work, for a salary; hence, he becomes part of the capitalist mode of production. According to Daniel, Bernstein and Brass, “[d]ispossession is the condition of the formation of a class of free wage labour”, which they call “the moment of proletarianisation”. They also remark that “not all social subjects in all pre-capitalist formations necessarily had property or usufruct rights in land and/or means of production”, but that what is necessary is the will to exchange individual activities for “a class of capitalist wage labour” (Daniel, Bernstein and Brass 6). There are two main issues affecting Annamalai’s socio-historical moment that produce a conscious change: his volition and his determination, which together

provoke a liminal state where it is not “only the setting of limits; it is also the exertion of pressures” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 87). The colonial exploitation of resources changed the traditional self-subsistent agriculture, to which Annamalai’s family belongs, into a “massive expansion of existing plantations areas”: the industrial plantations needed enormous contingents of workforce to supply the demands of Asian products to the Western world. Indeed, modern industrial plantations are defined as the representation of “a new form of capitalism” (Daniel, Bernstein and Brass 4). It is important, here, to differentiate between “finance capital”, which aims to generate a monopolistic economy to maximise profits, and human capital, which is submitted to more heterogeneous pressures. In times of shortage, as this short story illustrates, there is a crucial difference between “free wage labour” and “unfree wage labour”, and this determines the power relationship that exists between capital “financialisation” and the workforce. Daniel, Bernstein and Brass define as a feature of capitalism “the ability of workers to enter and withdraw from particular labour markets and labour processes” (6). However, there is a debatable issue behind this affirmation: does a free workforce really exist? Is it not a reality that a worker is obliged to find a job wherever it exists and not where they would like to? And if this is the case, can s/he be defined as free wage labour and able to “enter or withdraw” labour markets whenever s/he wants to? These critics attribute a freedom to the workers, which, in Amarjit Kaur’s opinion, is in fact the colonial or subservient authority’s perception of workers as “sojourners, to be repatriated when the demand for their services no longer existed” (427), a description which perhaps is closer to reality than the idea of workers’ free choice. Indeed, there exists a kind of indenture service that permits a limited freedom of movement, which will always be determined by market fluctuations and the workforce’s specialisation, influenced by its capacity to adapt its skills to these variations of the market. Nevertheless, these market laws create a false

sense of free labour choice, with the exception of the highly specialised professionals that cannot be easily substituted and who are truly free wage labour. Modern capitalism is synonymous with market financialisation and speculative activities and, using Daniel, Bernstein and Brass’s terminology, as well as speaking from a general perspective, labour force is almost irrelevant due to its super-abundance: its traditional representative importance has been substituted by an ideological discourse based on the post-world war theories of “workers’ class struggle against capital”, theories that sustain an imagined “freedom to dispose their own labour-power” (7), a freedom which in any case is conditioned by geopolitical strategies, as the present world-wide crisis shows.

Much of this is apparent in the background of Narayan’s short story, since Annamalai’s first approach to work transforms his workforce category from a “depeasantation” to a “proletarianisation” promoted by the “agroindustrial” condition of plantation exploitations (Gupta, “Plantation Labour in Colonial India” 173). The complex nature of this profound transformation implies Annamalai’s detachment from his ancestral means of production and his cession of “control over [his] labour-power” to a “large-scale export-oriented” plantation (Daniel, Bernstein and Brass 13). The mutation process takes time and, although the main agrarian occupation does not differ from that of his peasant background, his situation is conditioned by contractual “wage-earning labour” that is similar to that of the “factory and mine labour force” (Gupta, “From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers” 2),⁷⁹ which, theoretically, is why he comes to join the “free choice” proletarian workforce. Nevertheless, the shortage of opportunities forces Annamalai to abandon his village later again in search of economic independence. In general, migratory contingents were “uncontrolled”; they relied on two types of

⁷⁹ Original title “From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers: Colonial Capitalism, Reproduction of Labour Power and Proletarianisation in North East India, 1850s to 1947”.

intermediaries: the recruiters and the labour contractors who received a percentage for each worker they brought in. Workers were administered under “draconian labor legislation” usually agreed with local governments, ruled by “physical force” and provided with “nutritionally deficient” diets (Peebles 71), and it is largely in these circumstances that Annamalai is caught by a recruiter: “One day someone called me and put me on the deck of a steamer and sent me to a tea garden in Ceylon where I was until the fever got me” he explains (95). In Asian exploitations, the trade in human labour customarily implied a lack of responsibility “for the welfare or protection of the immigrants” (Kaur 434) who arrived already indebted to the recruiter. And the colonial language frequently used, as in many other cases, is not representative of reality in the colony. These “tea gardens”, for example, were far from the pleasant spaces of controlled nature that the word “garden” inspires. On the contrary, they were vast monoculture plantation sites developed in “sparsely populated” areas, usually on the site of cleared primeval forests, which provided rather unhealthy environments and poor or non-existent sanitary conditions. These plantation organisations created “a low wage economy” with the participation of the colonial or subservient state, based on the “use of a migrant and/or immigrant labour system” and “the control of direct producers through economic and extraeconomic coercive methods” (Gupta, “Plantation Labour in Colonial India” 173). Thus, the whole economic system constructs a labour entrapment that comes about prior to the proper acquisition of a proletarian mentality, whose development is then favoured by “the rural and peasant like characteristics” of the permanent settlement. Gupta defines this labour force as “semi-proletarianised – essentially half peasant, half industrial worker” (“From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers” 9). It must be underlined that the almost inevitable process of “coming to consciousness of a new class” also implies the emergence of “a new cultural formation” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

124), which definitely transforms Annamalai’s behaviour and his relationship with the “locally residual” patterns existing in his family and his rural community (125). His “social being” and his new “consciousness” exclude him from the general “perceptions of others, in immediate relationships”, perceptions that also affect his sense of the “material world” (126). Consequently, to avoid his “run[ning] away once again”, his father decides to marry him “to a girl” in order to root him once again to the land. He and his brother Amavasai work in the fields for a subsistence economy until, as the text enunciates, “his daughter appeared [and Annamalai] left home and went away to Penang.⁸⁰ [He] worked in the rubber states, earned money, and sent money home” (95). The family finds this income very useful while Annamalai develops the proletarian condition that had formerly emerged with his first employment. Now, he adapts himself to the plantation’s lifestyle and relates to other workers “on the basis of a purely rational calculation of advantages” (Kaviraj 199): “That is all they care for at home –as long as you send money they don’t care where you are or what you do” (“Annamalai” 95). He becomes what is called, in Marxist terms, a semi-proletarian: on the one hand, he offers his workforce as a “free wage labourer” and on the other hand, he is an owner that possesses some “land for subsistence cultivation” (Daniel, Bernstein and Brass 14), which means that he remains subject to those means of production. Annamalai is “happy in the rubber plantations” (95) and is prepared to continue there, until the Japanese invade Malaysia during World War II and “cut off everybody’s head or [break] their skulls with their guns” (95). Once again, the narration brings in the ritual of “dig[ging] pits to bury the dead and also ourselves in the end” (95). The chaos produced after the war changes market laws and Annamalai’s labour status. Unemployment swells everywhere, including on the Indian subcontinent, which will also be affected by internecine warfare and its subsequent Partition.

⁸⁰ Island off the shore of the Malaysian peninsula, invaded by the British in 1786.

The androgynous profile of Annamalai expresses conflicting opposites that must be analysed, since they serve to explain his decisions, bearing in mind that “androgynes are primarily male”, especially when there exists a subjective visualisation of “one’s relationship with god” (O’Flaherty 89). On the one hand, he inherits the family’s property after his father’s demise and he thus comes to wield the traditional phallic power of patriarchy as represented by Lord Shiva.⁸¹ Once the paternal rivalry has disappeared, Annamalai becomes the family’s male authority while his brother obeys the tradition that dictates that he must be the worshiper of that male power. As Annamalai has no longer to compete as the family’s “sexual creator” (323), he leaves that role to his brother, Amavasai, who then comes to stand in for Annamalai’s female procreative side. On the other hand, Annamalai’s acre of land cannot sustain his large family and, although his brother is symbolically the female half of Annamalai’s androgynous being, in economic terms, he is unproductive: he represents the castrated male who becomes a eunuch in order to serve Annamalai’s desires and imitate his traits. As O’Flaherty remarks, the worshiper “must become female to unite with the male god” and to avoid a violent emasculation (89). Amavasai’s peculiar family, therefore, has to be supported, a situation which sees the articulation of the “conflict and aggression, tension and disequilibrium” between the male and the female sides of this paradoxical character of Annamalai (334), who now concentrates all his male energy on finding a job in India. Simultaneously, Annamalai is dispossessed of his capacity to negotiate the price of his labour, being disempowered by the politico-economic situation. This steady process is called “deproletarianisation”: his land and his earnings have changed their condition, and are no longer subsistence producers but are now consumers of India’s internal production. Until

⁸¹ Androgyny is a characteristic of Hindu myths. According to the *Linga Purana*, Shiva burnt Brahma up, then, his androgynous self created Vishnu and Brahma from his female half. Once his creation power was secured, he returned to his practice of yoga and left Vishnu engaged with the creation (O’Flaherty 323). As explained earlier, Annamalai’s name is connected to Shiva and the power of the Linga.

now, they have been setting the price and conditions for “the means of commodifying labour power”, entering the market and the production process when they chose because of Annamalai’s constant supply of money to his family. Now, the capitalist crisis removes this freedom and imposes its own rules, specifically regarding the ways in which the workforce is recruited, usually under usurious conditions that ratify Ernest Gellner’s analysis on industrial workers who are “forced to be mobile and rootless” (*Thought and Change* 148). Therefore, workers are no longer able to “withdraw” or to negotiate their labouring conditions in this market’s frame (Daniel, Bernstein and Brass 7). This situation benefits the upsurge of the *kanganis*: these were local recruiters in the Tamil Nadu region who knew the nearby village people’s situation. Fundamentally, they gave “optimistic impressions about plantation life” (Baak 135) or working conditions to eager workers like Annamalai, who explains: “I was sitting in a train going somewhere to seek a job. I didn’t have a ticket. A fellow got in and demanded, ‘Where is your ticket?’” (82). Annamalai here is carrying a “bundle of cloths” and no money at all. His situation is so desperate that when the man asks him “Do you want to earn one rupee and eight annas a day?”, the narrator tells us that he “begged him to give [him] work” (82). These *kanganis* negotiated directly with investors, “landlords and moneylenders” and had to find the necessary workforce, usually “structured by deception”, abusing the worker’s ignorance (Daniel, Bernstein and Brass 12), a situation also reflected in the experience of Narayan’s main character: “He had signed a contract to collect manure from those forests, and wanted someone to stay there, dig the manure, and heap it in the lorries” (“Annamalai” 81). They acted as intermediaries between the workers who “were enslaved by their new employers” (Baak 136). “He carried me one day in a lorry to a forest on the hill and would never let me get away from there” (“Annamalai” 81). The workers even accepted that they had to pay for the journey and “particularly the food”. The *kanganis* used to

advance some “small cash” to the illiterate workers and “a weekly food issue on credit” in such a way that the workers remained permanently indebted to them (Baak 136). Thus, Annamalai is also indebted before he even reaches the hill from where the contractor “sold [the manure] to the coffee states and made his money” (“Annamalai” 82). The exploitative system they have established “would not let [Annamalai]” (...) “come home”, even when he “was down with the shivering fever” (82). The *kanganis* forced the workers to stay and work more hours and under conditions other than those that were agreed, as is the case in Narayan’s story: Annamalai describes this *kangani* to his master, saying: “That lorry keeper is a rascal, Sir” (81). The “lorry man” actually “holds [his] wages and asserts that he has given it all as rice and potato all these months” (83). These agents are the backbone of the caste system: sub-castes that serve to articulate a factional division of labour where workers are deprived of choice for reasons that they have not the power to influence. According to B R. Ambedkar, these latter individuals were immersed in a system “based on the dogma of predestination”, which was largely responsible for the absence of practical skills and endemic unemployment grounded on caste prejudices (“The Revolution against Caste” 214). Unfortunately, their situation has not improved since Ambedkar’s work.⁸²

As explained before, Narayan’s Hinduism permeates, once again, this short story. When Narayan writes in *My Days, A Memoir*, “Our normal view is limited to a physical perception in a condition restricted in time, like the flashing of a torchlight on a spot, the rest of the area being in darkness” (142), he is fulfilling the subliminal meanings of the name Annamalai. Annamalai’s frightening experiences of complete loss and loneliness reinforce the textual sense of fatality, even if he has not chosen his solitude. Now, his

⁸²Much on the contrary, Narayan’s fiction reflects the present-day reality in India, which has the world’s largest estimation of people who are trapped “in modern slavery” (as of 2013). The number lies between 13.300.000 and 14.700.000 and is the consequence of “debt bondage and bonded labour” (“The Global Slavery Index 2013. Overview”).

primitive sense comes to rescue him with “ready-made ritual acts and beliefs” that “serve [him] to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation” (Malinowski 83). In Malinowski’s opinion, “the strongest religious moments come in solitude, in turning away from the world, in concentration and in mental detachment” (54). This is how Annamalai feels atop the mountain: he is a single spot of light in the night’s immensity and, symbolically, the goddess Kali is not far from him. Indeed, she seems to conduct his avatar as she would do with a thug who has obtained her favour: “at the railway station” he is given “a spade and pickaxe” to dig up the dung left by elephants and tigers (“Annamalai” 82) and at night, he lights a fire and starts to chant “aloud wise sayings and philosophies until [the wild animals] withdrew” (82). Although the goddess Kali is also represented among the fires of the cremation grounds, moving among the dead and scaring the living, it seems that her fiery dance helps Annamalai to deal with the wilderness, “leaving a lot of dung around” (82), so Annamalai can feed the *kangani*’s hunger for profit with it.

The *kangani* system was, however, “formally abolished in September 1962” (Baak 153) but before it had finished, Annamalai, once again, becomes a displaced worker as he escapes from the forest barely alive: he is now neither a peasant nor a proletarian. His brother exploits the family’s land and Annamalai is not ascribed to any specific working class. Nevertheless, he has acquired a consciousness of personal efficiency that allows him to aspire to develop his own career as a free labourer, and when he helps the narrator to move to “a small cottage with a room on top and two rooms downstairs” (“Annamalai” 79), he seizes the opportunity of becoming his domestic servant, a role he sees fits this “new civilized means of life” (Kaviraj 195): he remains there after his companions leave, and when the narrator asks “[h]ow will you go back?” “Why should I?” is Annamalai’s laconic answer. “Your things are all scattered in a

jumble here, and they don't have the sense to stop and help" (80). At this point, Annamalai enters the most settled period of his working life, which is centred on the discourse of domesticity.

This domestic role rewrites a postcolonial discourse of power: on the one hand, it is based upon the relationship between an apparent effete *babu* and his hypermasculine servant who have inherited “a stable political order” from the previous system (Kaviraj 195); on the other hand, the story deals with the servant's own domestic ties, attached to his rural community, which is interpreted not by an androgynous being but by a hybridised subject. These dualities comprise Annamalai's genuine public sphere, which inevitably describes India's own modern socioeconomic history through the eyes of a detached observer.

Insights into the Experience of An Indian Gardener

Annamalai's long journey towards domesticity and the narrator's unkempt garden seem to have been made for each other. As well as being inscribed within the imperial discourse of domestication of the land and its inhabitants, these private spaces reproduce the same “power relations between servants and masters”. Additionally, the “bungalow, the club and the garden” represent those sites where English sovereignty has aesthetically transformed the otherwise “alien landscape” and improved the social status of westernised Indians (Nayar 116), a status embodied by the narrator's profession. The artificial, trimmed settings of the garden display the control and dominance of a lavish nature, “a visible sign of inscribing English authority over the Indian landscape” (Nayar 117). But all the skills contained in specialised texts on “gardening in India” are turned inside out by the illiterate Annamalai, who is nevertheless able to impose an Indian wilderness on the narrator's garden:

he created a generous, massive vegetation as a setting for my home. We had many rose plants whose nomenclature we never learnt, which had developed into leafy menacing entanglements, clawing passers-by; canna grew to gigantic heights, jasmine into wild undergrowth with the blooms maliciously out of reach although they threw their scent into the night. (86)

Nayar holds that, in postcolonial India, the control and instruction of servants generated a prolific literature on how to establish civilised behaviour among “recalcitrant native gardeners and laborers” (117). Moreover, Nayar points out the general distrust in the *mali*, the official horticulturist, who is seen as another “lazy native”, requiring a “constant supervision” (117). This suspicion is reproduced in Narayan’s story by the narrator, who tries in vain to keep Annamalai from coming to his house and who asks, “Why do you have to go and bother [the mali] about our problems now” (“Annamalai” 84), suspecting that it is time wasted on “gossip and loaf” (84). Nevertheless, Annamalai shows better knowledge of the ground and a more practical sense for using public resources than the narrator. In this case, he resorts “not to magic, but to work, guided by knowledge and reason” (Malinowski 30) and Annamalai’s opinion is that “[t]hey pay him a hundred rupees a month not for nothing”; obviously, he is not just obtaining saplings and seeds but horticultural instruction: “Only if we go and ask will people give us plants; otherwise why should they be interested?” (84). Although the narrator’s tone is ironic and his performance does not really betray a colonial mentality, still he demands new forms of quantification and control of his estate, finding himself at a loss with Annamalai: “He made his own additions to the garden each day, planting wherever he fancied, and soon I found that I could have no say in the matter” (86). Even though the narrator cannot escape from the need to classify and enumerate his new possessions, he finds in Annamalai a useless collaborator in terms of his command of the lexis: “If I asked, “What is this?” –

“This?” he said, stooping close to it, “this is a *poon chedi* (flowering plant),” and after a second look at it declared what I myself was able to observe, “Yellow flowers.”” (80-81). The new Indian “national state”, as depicted in Narayan’s short story, demands modern forms of language and a change in social perception and these are frustrated by Annamalai’s “extremely simple” classifications (81). The middle-class narrator observes Annamalai’s refractory nature preventing the transformation of his natural “language of possession” from a conversion to a more sophisticated linguistic representation of the “problematic individuality of the nation” (Kaviraj 199). His pedagogic attempts to improve the servant’s essential qualities clash with Annamalai’s atavistic behaviour. The liminal space between the two ideological conceptions of the “Territory”, the modern nation-state and the traditional country, has displaced the narrator to an outer boundary from which he has to recodify the “inward” concept of a modern nation irredeemably passing through an assimilation of Annamalai’s genuine “time of Tradition” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 149). He realises that modern India encapsulates its pre and postcolonial history through an ambivalent relationship of love and hate. This liminal space cannot be bridged by a simple discursive adjustment but it can serve as a site of emplacement for “the minority, the marginal and the emergent” (149). Actually, Annamalai’s world belongs to a primitive society that has been externally modified by economic power relations but that essentially remains frozen in the past, expressing an alterity the narrator must confront:

If he liked the plant he called it “*poon chedi*” and allowed it to flourish. If it appeared suspicious, thorny, or awry in any manner he just declared, “This is a *poondu* (weed),” and before I had a chance to observe, would pull it off and throw it over the wall with a curse. (81)

The colonial discourse also tends to describe Nature as overwhelming and over-abundant in “plants, animals and human life”, all of which contributes to the creation of a pernicious “indolent” oriental character (Nayar 73). Natives obtain fruits and crops without exertion because of the climatic generosity, something that seems to derive from “the excess of water” that makes agricultural production thrive; it also contributes to a certain effeminate character that derives into laziness and reluctance to change; hence, from the colonial point of view they live in “a flawed moral state of civilization” (Nayar 74). This moral reading of Nature (and Race) constructs a projection of a national identity “on to the Other or the Outside” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 149) that denies any native agency, and in Narayan’s story, it is ironically attributed to Annamalai’s anarchical gardening practises:

Our plants grew anyhow and anywhere and generally prospered although the only attention that Annamalai gave them was an ungrudging supply of water out of a hundred-foot hose-pipe, which he turned on every leaf of every plant until it was doused and drowned. He also flung at their roots from time to time every kind of garbage and litter and called it manuring. (86)

Actually, Annamalai’s hard times have not created a self-destructive “slave mentality” of submission towards his “Hindu master” (Ambedkar, “Why the Untouchables Distrust Gandhi” 224), a feature suggested by the symbolism of his name, and consequently, the attempt to educate and tame Annamalai proves to be useless: the enjoyable “profusion” of vegetation becomes a “horror of excess” (Nayar 40), as when the narrator remarks that the “Tacoma hedges bordering the compound developed into green ramparts” (“Annamalai” 86) that Annamalai cuts whenever he wishes to and never

when the house owner says it is high time for it: “[a]s soon as we have the rains” (86) is the lame excuse he makes up before his master. The standard colonial discourse always underlined the need to watch and control the servants because the assumption was that they would invariably try to cheat the master but, this being a tiresome activity, it became acceptable to tolerate “certain margin, for the sake of peace and quietness” (Nayar 118). Not surprisingly, in Annamalai’s case, the master decides that, “[t]o improve or enlighten him would only exhaust the reformer and disrupt nature’s design” (“Annamalai” 91). The garden becomes a place for the “commercial”, as well as for the “aesthetic” and, ironically enough, the servant who is depicted as indolent and ignorant has in fact implemented the successful utilitarian management of the site, maximising its production. Once again, Annamalai rationalises space, the means of production and production itself for his own benefit and the narrator’s aesthetic pleasure: he pays off the penman’s services with “the clippings” obtained after his “depredation” “of all the plants”, so his “letter-writer” friend can “[allow] his cows to feed” (87). His transactions also include “flowers for worship” with passers-by: if Annamalai sees the master around, noticing the transaction, “he would shout in rage, “Go away. What do you think you are? Do flowers come up by themselves?” (93), but whenever he feels there is nobody watching him, he will “give a handful of flowers to the person at the gate” (93) and according to a “lady living next door”, he must “earn money by selling [the narrator’s] flowers” (93).

If the reader ponders over Max Weber’s concept of “social order”, s/he may understand why Annamalai feels doubly secure in this enclosure: on the one hand, he rules the garden and “the virtue of the sacredness tradition” or “traditional law” provides him with moral superiority and godly protection in trading the garden’s products before the neighbour’s evil eye, the one who says, “You are trusting that fellow too much” (93); and on the other hand, he protects the compound at all times, and is thus invested with the

owner’s legitimacy conferred by rational values or “natural law”, even though he belongs to an inferior subcaste or a “minority” (Weber 37) that does not practise brahminic vegetarianism. Although his primitive behaviour clashes with the superior caste of the lady next door, she has to acquiesce to Annamalai’s aggressive hunt of her invasive “poultry” when her fowls enter “the compound through a gap” (93). Readers learn that “Annamalai dazed [them] by throwing a wet towel over [their] heads”, wrung their “neck[s]” and shared the dead birds with his acquaintances “at the level crossing” (94). Weber signals that this type of minority imposes its supposedly legitimate order “by force or by the use of more ruthless and far-sighted methods” on those who represent “the majority rule” (37), or, as this story shows, on caste and gender differentiations: “A crisis of the first order developed once when she charged him with the theft of her fowls” (93). In order to survive “within compulsory systems” of cultural fabrication (Butler 139), the lady asks another male character to intimidate Annamalai, thereby creating a “parodic displacement” of the action that has initially hidden a contextual unbalance of “implacable” enmity (“Annamalai” 93) between both castes and genders. According to Judith Butler, “words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect on an internal core or substance” but these performative acts aim at expressing a contrived discourse “*on the surface* of the body” that essentially provides a “primary and stable identity” to “gendered subjects” (136). In this way, the misogynist cultural component of Annamalai’s conduct clashes with the woman’s caste superiority and reveals the woman’s subordinate gender role. It is for this reason, and because she is aware of this dynamic, that she sends “a watchman of the municipal sewage farm who wore a khaki coat and pretended to be a policeman” (“Annamalai” 94). His mere appearance reminds Annamalai of his caste inferiority, his subaltern role – he “was duly frightened and upset” (94) – and the endemic police corruption that existed in India at the time, and that surfaces in the story when

Annamalai explains that “They come to us for baksheesh in our village” (94). With the mock uniform and gender differences, this whole episode only confirms what Butler indicates when she affirms, “cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium” (130); a medium that serves as the canvas for a “sublimated” history. Although Annamalai carries on his body the traces of a coolie, India’s patriarchal society considers his gender superior; therefore his “inner and outer psychic space” (Butler 137) dwells in permanent conflict with the secondary female gender, now identified as the *Other*. He shouts into the air and the sky, addressing the neighbour, “If I am a fowl-thief, what are those that call me so? Anyway, what do you think you are? Whom do you dare to talk to?” (94). Narayan’s humour exaggerates the cultural bias that now favours Annamalai by situating the servant “on a foot-high block of stone” and theatrically “haranguing” the woman “next door” (94).

Despite his questionable affairs, Annamalai’s practical sense shines through in his botanical choices, which serve his own culinary preferences as well as his medical needs: “He boiled water and cooked rice, dhall, onion, tomato, and a variety of greens picked from the garden” (92). The narrator is not insensible to Annamalai’s abilities and does not hesitate to praise his unbeatable skills as a cook: he “created a stew whose fragrance rose heavenward and in its passage enticed me to peep over the terrace and imbibe it” (92). Furthermore, Hinduism permeates the text in the physical description of Annamalai that sharply recalls the omnipotent Vishnu as he reclines on the coils of Ananta, the cosmic serpent that serves him as bed and floats on the universal water. It is a description that consolidates Annamalai’s androgynous representation since the androgyne defines the intimate union between Vishnu and Shiva known as “*Hari-Hara*”: the two creators are united and worshiped in one single form, and both simultaneously possess male and female bodies (O’Flaherty 323). Heinrich R. Zimmer describes, in *Myths and Symbols*,

the meaning of the “anthropomorphic figure”, the “serpent coils” and the water as “triune manifestations of the single divine, imperishable, cosmic substance, the energy underlying and inhabiting all the forms of life” (61). Therefore, Narayan’s sense of humour in likening Annamalai to the gods brings an elevated Hindu mysticism down to the level of magical lore. Annamalai’s essential tool at work is the “rubber hose”, which gives him work and reputation: “This is my very life; otherwise how can an old fellow feed his plants and earn a good name?”, he concludes (88), and the narrator, after seeing him “laboriously coil [it] up”, imagines him “sle[eping] in its coils as an added safety” (88).

Yet the attribution of divine characteristics implies a far more complex system. Each character in the story constitutes the personal construction of “a [given] cultural mode” defined by “fixed and explicit” social experiences and transformed by their “present and moving” individual discourse (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 128). Consequently, the Indian narrator reproduces Western discursive stereotypes on “prejudices, beliefs, and myths” about his countrymen (Nayar 3), which are reinterpreted from his own ideological perspective. He seems to live in-between two worlds of “phobia and fetish” (Bhabha, “The Other Question” 72): his Indian condition and his hybridised fictional writings target a readership that has already constructed an imagined stereotypical colonial subject. This readership elaborates an unconscious interpretation of the text following “metaphoric and metonymic strategies” of displacement, which detaches them from the Indian subjects’ reality and leads them to adopt discriminatory discourses of racism (81), aided by the narrator’s crafty storytelling. But the text actually reveals the narrator to be an off-centre subject, and Narayan thus interrogates this colonialist discourse from a safe distance: the narrator lacks Annamalai’s attachment to a group, which places him on a level with those rootless industrial workers, short of “local

associations, let alone loyalties” (Gellner, *Thought and Change* 148): “unnoticed, I had become the sole representative of our clan in [Vinayak] street, especially after the death of my uncle” he says (“Annamalai” 79). Conspicuously, in contrast, the group provides for Annamalai an anchor in the past and racial particularities mostly transmitted by language. Therefore, language becomes the vehicle that inscribes complex anthropological connotations on Annamalai’s psyche and fears. Lacking any spare time, coolies usually do not indulge in reflective religious practices, which leave them vulnerable to unconscious adoption of these connotations, and make them easy targets for superstitions conveyed through cultural and linguistic taboos.

Part Three

Taboos and Prejudices of Annamalai’s Ethos

For Bronislaw Malinowski, a primitive subject “perpetually lives in a world of mysticism and ritualism” (26). A wide variety of rituals are embedded in the Hindu tradition. One of them is the act of naming a person, a symbolic action closely related to the family’s origins, caste and social status. This tradition has recently changed, or has been utterly abandoned, especially in urban areas. For A. K. Ramanujan, “[n]ames are ceasing to be expressive of a caste and beginning to indicate ideology”. In Ramanujan’s opinion, “[n]ames identify people not only as individuals but as members of a class or caste, or as hailing from a certain region; they are referential” (“Language and Social Change” 100). Still, in Southern India, the first name designates “the town or village” of the father’s origin, which in Narayan’s case is Rasipuram, and the second designates the father’s own name, (Krishnaswami, for Narayan). Therefore, the incapacity of the British to reproduce Indian names, an omission which was evident in their reduction of names to initials, a more than welcome simplification for the British, for whom Indian names was

“a mystery to be fathomed” (Ram and Ram 12). Ironically, this mystery is mimicked by the narrator’s own perplexity before Annamalai’s reluctance to utter proper names. “What a different world was his where a name was to be concealed rather than blazoned forth in print, ether waves, and celluloid!” (77). Such is the social meaning carried by Asian names in general and Hindu tradition in particular that “names are considered sacred”. In some areas, they are not directly uttered in the direction of the person named unless there is “an intimate relationship” or a close friendship (“Names and Name Giving”). Cultural superstitions create a hermeneutic system by means of which some words are loaded with such private information, as family origins, that if they are publicly spoken, they can bring “evil consequences, such as exasperate demons and the like” (Jespersen 239). This phenomenon is known as a “verbal taboo” and, following Otto Jespersen’s definition, such “forbidden words” have to be avoided or alternatively disguised as “innocent” words that the community can differentiate into “figurative paraphrase[s]” (239). According to James G. Frazer, “to enquire, “What is your name?” is a very delicate question in native societies” (223b) because they can reveal personal information to “sorcerers” who can “injur[e] the owner of the name” (225b). Although the narrator does not describe it as such, Annamalai reveals with this concealment a personal sense of identity that equally affects people’s, plants’ or villages’ names: “Name was a matter of delicacy, something not to be bandied about unnecessarily”, he contends (76). It would seem that names carry part of the soul of the named, which is a vital consideration that also applies to things commonly used. Not surprisingly, then, Annamalai speaks freely about his brother Amavasai, whom he hates and identifies with a limitless source of troubles, saying “he is a lout” (90).

Likewise, he reinterprets modern means of communication such as the telephone as “his urban triumph” and he feels boastful of his superior abilities over his agrarian

family: “Do you think my brother could talk to a telephone?” he says (91), even if he in fact fails to understand the purpose of this instrument, its discursive importance related to time and space and its communicative function. Such functionality in the context of textual communication is what Gellner calls “the semantic nature of work” (*Nationalism* 28) and it is precisely this functionality that is involved in the narrator’s profession. The narrator’s “superior status” needs a “level of literacy and sophistication” that implies an invisible communication with others and “the manipulation of messages” which are addressed to an abstract and “anonymous” public. Annamalai’s atavistic mind cannot imagine a person at the end of the line; he does not have a referential context from which he can derive a meaning or put a face to the addresser. When asked, “Who was it?”, he replies, “Who? How could I know? He didn’t show his face!” (91). This answer demonstrates the possessive quality that characterises Annamalai’s conception of proper names: “Didn’t you ask his name?”, inquired Annamalai’s master. “No, what should I do with his name?” (91). In Gellner’s view, for “agrarian sub-communities” context is “the principal phoneme”: Annamalai’s world is one where “tone, expression, body-posture” are semantic indexes but needs a tangible context to comprehend his surroundings. Thus, the master’s “context-free communication” lacks the solidness of mail (Gellner, *Nationalism* 29), and explains why “at five o’clock there was a telepoon” and why, when Annamalai asks who is speaking and the other voice says “Trunk, trunk”, Annamalai perceives an unwanted request and says, “go away, don’t trouble us. No trunk or baggage here. Master is sleeping” (91). When the misunderstanding is explained, he is still unable to comprehend that “a trunk call” is a “long-distance call” or a mediated communication, and not a piece of furniture. Unfortunately, matters are made worse because the master fails to grasp the reasons for Annamalai’s limited capacity of abstraction, which is the

lack of “schooling, prolonged schooling”, the product of a social “low culture” (Gellner, *Nationalism* 29) that has been going on for generations.

It is not only names that are believed to bring damage upon their owners, who will therefore avoid uttering them: food is another source of taboos and problems. Ramanujan’s translation of the *Taittiriya Upanisad* (“Some Thoughts on “Non-Western” Classics: with Indian Examples” 120) shows how Sanskrit literature defines food as “a god that circulates through us and the universe of living and non-living things”:

From food all beings
come to be.
By food
they grow.
Into food
they pass.
And what eats is eaten.
And what’s eaten, eats
in turn.⁸³

Annamalai will not hear of cooking with charcoal, “Impossible! Food cooked with charcoal shortens one’s life, sir” (92). The text explains that he would “shield his aluminium plate from any Evil Eye that might happen to peep in at his door” (92). Primitive societies found a connection between the food “a man has in his stomach and the refuse of it”, which, if it is “left untouched”, can be damaged and “injure the eater” who has turned it down (Frazer 184a). His social status is manifest through his *habitus*, the particular manners and customs that differentiate him from others. He eats at night and “preserve[s] the remnant” (92) probably due to his having previously suffered prolonged periods of hunger and the severe scarcity of food. Paradoxically, the necessity of survival has broken a taboo that would otherwise imply harm to the worker’s life:

⁸³ “Food Chain, Sanskrit Style”. *Taittiriya Upanisad*. valli 2, anuvāka 2. Translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

Annamalai “on the following day from time to time quietly dip[s] his fingers in the pot and [eats] a mouthful” (92). It is not only language, then, but individual behaviours that constitute an index that reflects “caste differences”, through, for example, the formal use of names and pronouns.⁸⁴

As well as implying sensitivity in relation to food and the names of people and objects, Annamalai’s experience comes from a profound knowledge of “the weather”, “the plants” and their adaptation to “the soil” through a system of “trial and error” (Malinowski 30). He knows the importance of rationality and hard work but he also recognises the existence of imponderable forces that may ruin his work. These eventualities are dealt with through magic acts that aim at repealing “the Evil Eye that scorches our plants” (85). Hence, Malinowski can speak of how “work and magic run side by side without ever mixing” (31). In the context of sub-agrarian societies, certain “word-pictures” are used to try to heal any magic spell that damages “health and bodily strength” (Malinowski 70). It is in this spirit that Annamalai “dip[s] his finger in a solution of white lime and dr[aws] grotesque and strange emblems on a broken mud pot” (85). His “primitive mentality” also attributes to plants the same good and evil effects that belong to proper names. If the plant is a *poondu*, “invisible forces” gravitate on it making it “an evil plant” (81). Since there is hidden “a perpetual possibility of sorcery” (Lévy-Bruhl 68), a ritual has to be performed that exorcises its wicked nature, its “spell”, so there are not “little children” having “stomach ache” and it will not “send out its poison on the air” (81). When Annamalai throws the weed “over the wall with a curse” (81), he is acting with a “clear, straightforward and definite” purpose that is meant to remove the real possibility of injury (Malinowski 38). He is invoking magical forces that can

⁸⁴It is worth noting, in conclusion, though, that at present, and at least according to Ramanujan, “name-taboos have definitively relaxed” (“Language and Social Change” 113).

counteract any witchcraft which he cannot possibly control with his toiling, because magic power resides exclusively in mankind, “conveyed by the casting forth of the rite” (Malinowski 71).

This primitive mentality is connected to a specific geographical area, clearly delimited by linguistic families. Annamalai belongs to the *Malayalis* community who live in an area known as the Kalvarayan Hills, a series of uplands that range throughout “Athur taluk in the Salem District, Chengam taluk in the Thiruvanamalai District and Sankarapuram taluk in the Villupuram District” (Doss 299). The Malayalam language is “a South Dravinian branch” that is close to Tamil because it “emerged from [the] Proto-Tamil-Malayalam” family⁸⁵. As demonstrated earlier, the metonymic use of language transfers to the topographical characteristics that surround the speakers of that language. “*Mala*” in Tamil means “mountain” and “*elam*” means “region”. Consequently, *Malayala* addresses the people of that mountain region. Today, these tribal people prefer to be called “*Malayala Goundars*” (Doss 299). The relevant issue for the present analysis is the traditional isolation of this tribe from urban centres due to the area’s particular orography. According to Mohan Doss, they are “the largest tribal group” in the Tamil Nadu region, “constituting nearly half (48.4%) of the state Scheduled Tribes (ST) population” (299). This particular circumstance is one explaining factor behind the fact that the tribe’s conversion to practising monogamy is relatively recent. As is the case with Amavasai, who is the “father of nine and husband of two” (72), polygamy was a common trait among *Malayalis*, as long as the first wife gave her consent to a second marriage. In case she disagreed, “she could divorce her husband and marry another man” (Doss 320). For these highlanders, women had to be married and after their husband’s death, they had to marry again (Doss 321). Obviously, the socio-cultural practices of the Malayalis in the

⁸⁵ Malayalam, Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics.

Kalvarayan Hills differed from those of their counterparts of the lowlands due to approximately 400 years of isolation; a time during which they were “under the control of the local rulers, namely Jagirdars” (300). It was only in 1976 that the government took control of the area, revealing the complexity of the power relations within the pervasive caste system.

Nevertheless, references to casteism entrenched in Narayan’s short story are subtle and, in D. A. Shankar’s opinion, “[c]aste, in fact, has no little or no bearing on the psyche of Narayan’s characters” (51). The critic comments that the sense of caste fades away in Narayan’s works and that it is only “vaguely” suggested. In his view, the reader has simply to infer that, unlike other Narayan’s characters, Annamalai does not “belong to an upper caste”. D. A. Shankar points out that “vagueness” and generalisations serve the author “to subserve authenticity of realization” (51). However, he overlooks the fact that Narayan’s characters in general and Annamalai in particular are profoundly attached to their families or communal groups, a circumstance that provides them with a structural and “political order” as well as the material associations that define their social status. If they are alone it is because they belong to a marginal group of mendicants, or they are Scheduled caste workers, or have chosen an alternative vital stage or *ashrama*, such as the *Sanyasa*, which was “prescribed in the Manusmriti (laws of Manu)” (Thieme 12). These conditionings still imply an adscription to a social tissue, however invisible, and the present case thus raises the question of polygamy, which used to be a common feature among the Scheduled Tribes.⁸⁶ The above analysis, therefore, demonstrates that caste is conveniently disguised within the threads of the narrative. However, the social or human side of Narayan’s characters precludes a conspicuous thematic approach on “caste status”

⁸⁶ The *Kōṇār* or the *Nāyakkar* peasants, for example, could also marry two wives, if they could afford it, and this gave them “respected positions in the village” (Gough 254). In this respect, Kumar S. Singh writes that “there are large number of tribes practicing sororal polygyny and nonsororal polygyny” (K. S. Singh qtd. in “The Contemporary Indian Family” 22).

which could deviate an understanding of the narrative towards clearer political arguments. D. A. Shankar continues saying that “subcaste” more than “caste” defines a man’s status and “moulds his attitudes, his social biases, in fact, his being itself” (52). According to him, Narayan “leaves out all the little details” that define “an individual’s actual living which is co-extensive with this subcaste status”, which causes his “thin-looking social reality” to lose “variety and richness” (52). Although it is true that Narayan’s writings do not provide many descriptions of fictional environments and social profiles, his narrative shows a careful choice of arrangements that partially mirror a South Indian reality that is far from lacking “complexity” or “resulting in a corresponding thinness of texture” (D. A. Shankar 52). “Annamalai” contextualises a social realism that is difficult to disentangle because it mixes multiple categories which are diverse in nature. Indeed, it would be unrealistic even to attempt to narrate the complex social fabric of South India. Focusing on a single “social content” of “Indian writing in English” would inevitably obscure the rest, unless, as D. A. Shankar points out, it is representative of the “regional writing” that remains in “direct living touch with the subcastes” (52). Annamalai’s tribal village is just an example of socially intricate relationships that do not embrace the “particular code of subcaste which governs them” (D. A. Shankar 52). Nevertheless, social status and economic differentiations are conspicuous in the text, without falling into regional or local taxonomies or particular nationalisms.

The Tribal Village

The internal structure of “Annamalai” and its historical backdrop make necessary a previous explanation if we are to understand the regulations of its rural edifice. The village’s affairs describe a part of India’s rural history that is intricately associated with the modern, globally connected economy of the subcontinent. Although the agrarian

reform resulted in a reorganisation of land ownership in the nineteenth century, colonial rule kept the semi-feudal system of land tenure and land revenue in place, favouring the growth of the already parasitic structure of intermediaries and tax collectors. In South India, the government of Madras Presidency developed a system of “individual settlements” known as “*raiyatwaris*”, which “lasted up to 1855” (D. Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India* 83). These micro-settlements anchored the tribal castes to the land so there was a permanent contingent of agrarian labourers that could increase the empire’s exportations, pay taxes and clear the “immemorial waste lands”. Of the “three superior landholders”, the “*janmi*” belonged to the Malabar region, the “*mulawargadar*” to South Canara and the “*mirasdar*” to the Tamil region. Consequently, the *mirasdars*’ relevant position in the area allowed them “to sell and to mortgage” the land, “as long as the transaction was registered”. Also, they “were supposed to pay for communal services and charities” (*Land and Caste in South India* 85) although they “enjoyed certain allowances (*merais*) in return” (86). According to Dharma Kumar, “the fellow villagers” were dependant on these *mirasdars*, especially for credits. Although they “acted collectively” for the community’s affairs, the cultivation of their land was “almost always individually organized” (D. Kumar and Meghnad, “South India” 211). As the British revenue administration drained the landholders and tenants of their resources, and the subsistence crops they grew were not sufficient to pay the government’s taxes, they had to sell their labour to large farms and turn their fields “into a frontier of commercial agriculture” becoming, effectively, “perpetual debtor[s]” (Ranajit Guha, *Elementary aspects* 8). Ranajit Guha defines this procedure as the “fusi[on of] landlordism and usury in India” and contends that it was so efficiently established that it “impede[d] the development of capitalism both in agriculture and in industry” (8). Although various pieces of legislation modified the land ownership and the taxation system, the situation continued unchanged

even after India’s Independence. There is a “politico-ideological” reasoning behind it that favours a subsistence economy and high interest rates, forcing permanent indebtedness not only onto workers but onto peasant owners who have to enter the productive system as unfree workforce. This system guarantees the constant supply of labour for the purposes of agro-industrial exploitation while it prevents the proletarianisation of the peasants. As Daniel, Bernstein and Brass hold, “market forces or political consciousness” allow free workers to negotiate their working conditions, while, in sharp contrast, deproletarianisation restructures the unfree workforce, thus averting any possibility of negotiation. Accordingly, employers can “lower the cost of local workers” by importing “cheaper” external labour whose wages can then be further lowered once the “local wage differential” has disappeared (17).

Narayan’s fiction blends much of this historical Indian context, but his satirical intention reduces the socioeconomic effects to a much smaller scale. Annamalai, as the oldest son, inherits “an acre of land in the village” (“Annamalai” 94), which is presided over by rural autocracy. His family works on the fields and their subsistence income is improved by Annamalai’s regular remittances. However, this transaction is mediated by the *mirasdars*’ traditional ascendancy in relation to moneylending and social responsibilities: as Annamalai’s family is seen as well-to-do, he is expected to provide small loans for anyone who needs one, like the shepherd to whom he lends ten rupees and who leaves him a “sheep as a pledge” (97). The problem comes when “the black sheep deliver[s] a lamb, which is also black”. Narayan’s humour hides complex economic power relations in a small society, relationships that create enormous resentment between families: here, the debt bondage remains in place while Annamalai’s family possesses an extra bonus, the new lamb, which is “born under [Annamalai’s] roof” and which the shepherd thus sees as usury (97). This is why language is seemingly loaded once again

with a supernatural power, in the face of “unusual events”. According to Lévy-Bruhl, a primitive mind dwells on emotional representations of the world, depending on “primary fact[s]” that merge sense and reality, and consequently, unexpected events are “perceived as the manifestation of an invisible force” (61). Annamalai’s brother reports that “[the shepherd] stands in the street and abuses us every day, and curses our family; such curses are not good for us” (“Annamalai” 96). Amavasai’s feminine and acquiescent nature here demands from his brother a commanding assessment of the situation. Additionally, Narayan’s postcolonial perspective cannot help but associate this social primitivism with Christian symbols for humour’s sake: the black lamb (much unlike its white counterpart) does not bring peace or salvation to the village but discord among clans. It is the dispute between the shepherd, *Abel*, and the farmer, *Cain* that also conveys the miracle of “a unique kind of mortgage which multiplie[s] in custody” (97). If we take the analysis of Lévy-Bruhl into account once more, we may surmise that Annamalai’s “primitive thought” stands for wonders and “unseen world[s]” before reflective thinking and “objective” data (61), except for his argument that “the sheep was barren until it came to our house” (“Annamalai” 98) and his denial of the possibility that the “shepherd boy” actually “pledge[d] a pregnant sheep” (98). Obviously, as Malinowski pointed out, Annamalai’s “limited” knowledge is neither unsound nor mystical but consciously inclined towards socioeconomic improvement (30): he wants his ten rupees back and he views the lamb as well-earned interest.

Narayan’s syncretic perception of religion as a boundless interactive flux also converts the Christian and Muslim sacrifice of the lamb, “the black sheep being driven off by the butcher” (“Annamalai” 97), into a more harmonious, bloodless Hindu vegetarianism: “they waylaid him and carried [the sheep] back to the bleating lamb at home” (97). Comically, the homestead becomes the *shrine* for mother and son, the sheep

and the lamb, who are safely guarded from butchers by the holy family that “sle[eps] outside on the pyol of the house” (97). The Vedic texts explain that androgyny derives from a primeval *Purusha*, who is simultuaneously a man and a woman. There is no procreation until they separate, since “the androgyne itself is barren” (O’Flaherty 313), and therefore, inspired by the traditional importance of cattle and derivative products, Narayan’s humour depicts Annamalai’s family as the motherly and protective female side of a splitting androgyne who has procreated as the consequence of being separated from her male half (O’Flaherty 311).

As explained earlier, this symbolic Indian site, the pyol or the verandah, serves to convey a further paradoxical rural situation connected to local socioeconomic power relations in Narayan’s story. The verandah is the visible part of a household, while the private life that occurs behind it remains hidden from outside. The protagonists’ association end with the “tailor incident” (“Annamalai” 98), which triggers the short story’s climax and denouement, and which also takes place in the verandah. The *mirasdar*’s tradition embedded in the village’s collective memory sets the trap for Annamalai. The narrative informs the reader that there is a “worthless fellow” in Annamalai’s village that “got kicked out everywhere” (98) and whose profession is tailoring. As with his brother Amavasai and those he dislikes, Annamalai has no qualms about mentioning the man’s name: “A fellow called Ranga” (98). Once again, Narayan is playing with the polysemy, since *ranga*⁸⁷ in Hindi means: 1) colour, *kalara*, which is related to the profession of the man who can “stitch kerchief, drawers, banian, and even women’s jackets” (99); 2) intoxication and dopiness associated with hemp, *cannabis* or *bhang*, which might explain why in this story “[p]eople didn’t like him” and “none of his relations would help him” to buy a machine: “[N]o one would lend him money”, repeats

⁸⁷ Cf. Arvind Lexicon.

Annamalai (99). Although everybody dislikes “the fellow”, his profession is badly needed in the village, and it is admitted that “he was a good tailor” (99). Consequently, when Annamalai receives “a money order from Ceylon one day for a hundred rupees—some money [he] had left behind” (99), and the tailor asks him for a loan to “buy a machine” (99), Annamalai’s aggressive refusal leads to a gathering of all the “village elders” who “order that [he] should lend [his] hundred rupees to [Ranga]” (99) who would also pay him a rent for living and working in Annamalai’s *pyol*. This particular “cabinet of justice”, the so-called panchayat decides to bestow Annamalai’s capital on Ranga. Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* suggests that the “literacy” in the script is the “bond on government paper with stamp” (“Annamalai” 99) and here Annamalai is forced to sign to meet collective needs before his private interests. This apparently “reasonable permanent and standardized script” in reality marks the difference between “the ruling stratum” (Gellner 10) – the Brahmans along with “the man who sold the paper” and received “two rupees for writing the document” (“Annamalai” 99) – and the illiterate “sub-strata” which unwillingly pays for sustaining the “cultural cleavage” of differentiation “endow[ed] with authority and permanence” (*Nations and Nationalism* 10). Gellner concludes that these “small peasant communities” like Annamalai’s are made of “inward-turned” existences and closed in on themselves, which prevents any profound transformation. Although Annamalai is reluctantly “tied to the locality”, he plays the essential role in the Indian tradition of *paterfamilias*, which is not a “political” but a cultural “prescription” (*Nations and Nationalism* 10) that anchors him to the village’s social consciousness. He is fastened to his family’s “economic need[s]” just as he was during the plantation period when he was tied for survival to “the village and [his] kin group defined in terms of community and language” (Bagchi 11). Annamalai accepts the present agreement because it appeals fundamentally to his primitive sense of

communitarian solidarity: “That is how we do it, when the elders assemble and order us”, concludes Annamalai (99).

Nevertheless, even if he capitulates, Annamalai fails to understand the rational approach to capital investment. Annually, the bond is dutifully renewed, the tailor “pa[ys] the interest regularly and also a daily rent for occupying the pyol” (100). The agreement represents Annamalai’s “gold-edged security” (100); it is his “caste and class” conscience, which has developed over the course of a hard working life, his entire capital and his pride: “I must renew the bond now, if it is delayed, I will lose everything, and the people in my village will laugh at me” (103). However, the supposedly “hereditary bondage” (Bagchi 7) that derives from pre-capitalist practices of communal solidarity that enforced tribal continuity and that is seen as “a newly applied” obligation of acceptance by Annamalai is utterly ignored by the new tailor, who introduces a “particular code of subcaste” associated with his craftsmanship that breaks any link with previous debts. Setting himself against Narayan’s “Indian writing in English” and referring instead to the Indian “regional novel”, D. A. Shankar praises the “power of subcaste structures” to transcend themselves at critical moments and become the “shaping spirits of new-value based society” (52). It is precisely this subcaste system, D. A. Shankar argues, that is absent from Narayan’s works, and yet the new tailor reveals a clearly consolidated process of transition between caste, class and property, as Narayan’s short story effectively shows: on the one hand, the public benefit is guaranteed; after all, Ranga proves that he is truly unreliable as he assumes false ownership of the means of production – the machine and the pyol – and sells them to a stranger, “[who pays] all the rent to the first tailor [Ranga] along with the price of the machine” (100). On the other hand, the bondage no longer serves to protect Annamalai’s interests as the tribal rules have changed and the tailor does not voluntarily subscribe to his obligations, which the

commercial transaction has cancelled anyway, Annamalai feels that “now the entire basis of their financial relationship [is] shaken” (100). For Weber, the “arbitrary patriarchal discretion[ality]” of “settling disputes” serves its purpose but fails to guarantee individual and private “rights”, which can only be protected by the “adherence to objective norms” (846). In his opinion, “Oriental, like Indian, justice, in so far as it is not theocratic, is essential patriarchal” (845). Thus, its rule does not derive from common rights and it defies the bourgeois demand for an “unambiguous and clear legal system”, free of “irrational administrative arbitrariness as well as of irrational disturbance by concrete privileges” (847). On this occasion, the new tailor’s family challenges and establishes the ruthless and far-sighted privilege inherent in that arbitrary system: “I think he is the son of our wrestler,” Annamalai tells the narrator (101), as he comes to experience the treatment typically meted out to secondary gendered subjects. There is “an appropriation of rights” by the strongest party that now uses its force to “monopolize” Annamalai’s property and the “particular business opportunity” that it offers (Weber 45). Amavasai’s effeminate and non-assertive nature is parodied and harshly criticised by Annamalai: “my brother is made of straw although he has produced nine children” (101). Again, his misogynist ideology pervades the narrative, recontextualising those fictitious identities that exist in the absence of legal support or a commanding affiliation. Amavasai’s social closure and “imitative practices” have provoked a situation in which there is no place for him and his family, for they constantly live under the threat of the other hypermasculine characters, the shepherd and the wrestler: since it is no longer their house but a shrine where, comically, “the sheep and the lamb are locked” (101). Amavasai’s peculiar behaviour generates disrespect, as he tells his brother: “My wives threaten to go away to their parents’ houses. I am sleeping with all the children in the street” (101). From “a personal/cultural history of received meanings” (Butler 138), the two brothers have

constructed an imaginary gendered division of roles in such a way that Annamalai’s masculinity marks him out as “the elder of [the] family” (191) and despite being “so far away from [his] kith and kin” (101), he must “tell [them] where [they] should sleep” (101). Butler defines this kind of affairs as “the loss of the sense of “the normal”” which produces “laughter” (138), even though, they “suffer” a situation of socioeconomic uncertainty which belittles their prestige and may thwart future “opportunities to enjoy honor” (Weber 46).

By losing control of the machine, they have also lost the monopolistic means of production and “self-subsistence” in favour of an “individual mobility [that] provide[s] both problems and opportunities” for the contending parties (Williams, *Writing in Society* 237). For many years, passivity and stagnation have created in Ranga a false sense of entitlement to property, a kind of “hereditary basis” for ownership that was never contradicted by Annamalai’s behaviour. On the contrary, Annamalai has annually ratified Ranga’s ascendancy to his capital and his space, failing to define himself as a true financier against communal tradition. This paradoxical situation implies that as long as the tailor “is not thrown out, the machine is also there” but none of them has realised that the physical “order” has been encroached upon already and, ironically, this “territorial organization” is the only “hold” they possess which allows them to guarantee their investment (“Annamalai” 101). It is that which Weber calls “territorial validity” (50). Annamalai’s existence between two worlds has constructed a hybridised composite that resists integration or assimilation in either one. He originally accepts a traditional order “imposed” by the fictitious “legitimacy of majority rule” (Weber 51), a legitimacy that has degenerated into the effective imposition of a minority’s lucrative interests over the control of resources and means of production, a working model of the capitalist order. According to Gellner, though this process of “binding things together, traditional visions

[and prejudgments] perpetuate themselves” (*Nations and Nationalism* 22). Indeed, the narrator’s discernment and genuine dissociation proves that Annamalai’s “own idiom and logic” is ruinous, “not subsumable under a single overall orderliness” (*Nations and Nationalism* 23). The narrator emphasises what Gellner asserts in his analysis, “nothing but evidence would decide how things [are]” (*Nations and Nationalism* 22). At this point the narrator asks Annamalai: “Where is any mention of your tailor or his machine?” As the bond was written by a particular subject in stress, “there is no mention of a tailor. For all it says, Ranga could be a scavenger” (104). Unfortunately, Annamalai confuses an “administrative” communal order or “public law” that basically rules the internal “organization” of the “social action” with a “regulative order” that is constituted by legislation, tribunals and “police authorities”, and that represents “private law” (Weber 52). His no-win situation “brushe[s] aside [the narrator’s] economic arguments” (104): “I can always go to a court as long as the bond is there” to which the “desolate” narrator replies: “And involve yourself in further expenses? It will be cheaper to burn that bond of yours” (105). If Annamalai had had a purely mercantile approach, he might have accepted the offer of money from the narrator, who tells him “[take] a hundred rupees and don’t bother about the bond” (104). The narrator points out to him that the machine is already amortised and, in “going [to the village] for years now [...] you have already spent more than the principal in railway fare alone to get the bond renewed” (104). The narrator’s offer represents an opportunity for Annamalai to recover the initial capital and to invest it again if he wants. However, the text effectively depicts the socioeconomic evolution of India transplanted onto the political reality of the short story and this helps us to understand Annamalai’s choice: he has developed a “self-reliant and independent” persona that no longer accepts any kind of “charity” from his Hindu master; he demands from society what he considers his “right” (Ambedkar, “Why the Untouchables Distrust

Gandhi” 225). Meanwhile, the “being” and “negation” mechanisms that construct the internal structures of the textual parody are erected along the lines of a patriarchal symbolic order. Thus, Annamalai is the “being” of the *Linga*, which embodies the “pre-ontological” signifier of Law and which assumes an “intelligible” space of “a masculine self-elaboration” that is unquestionably accepted in his society (Butler 44). In tune with Lévy-Bruhl’s arguments, Narayan succeeds in representing a primitive mentality that cannot be “submitted to the law of contradiction”, since it lacks the perception of “definite” realities. For Annamalai, the narrator’s “conceptual thought” cannot grasp his “elementary concrete, emotional and vital” perceptions of “ordinary” knowledge where his incapacity to comprehend an institutional or practical logic dwells (Lévy-Bruhl 447). The narrator is left to surmise that “[h]e gave me up as a dense, impossible man whose economic notions were too elementary” (105). Annamalai’s experience of “solid, foursquare realities of the earth” (105), on the other, has made him realise that he is dealing with “an uncomprehending fool” (105). In his phenomenological mind, the whole collection of misfortunes reveal two sources of “evil influence”: his brother Amavasai’s party, made of “a set of senseless dummies managing my affairs” (97) and the narrator’s “obsession with flimsy, impalpable things” like “visit[ing] Rameswaram on a pilgrimage” (102). According to Lévy-Bruhl, no matter how “serious” the adversity, for this type of mind, every hardship “is regarded and interpreted as a harbinger of other accidents and misfortunes”. Consequently, Annamalai feels that he must remove the “evil influence that causes them” (Lévy-Bruhl 140). The anthropologist further explains that “the primitive idea of time, which is above all qualitative, remains vague” (445), and this is why Annamalai is seen to be “sulking” (105), unable to change the situation that is causing his mishaps.

Nayar speaks of “the rhetoric of ruin in the discourse of difference” and this is something that is absorbed into Narayan’s postcolonial discourse evoking feelings of loss and melancholia. “The destruction of cultivated lands, the decay of buildings, and the slow degradation of Indian civilisation” serve the colonial discourse to emphasise the difference between India and a western society (Nayar 65). Therefore, when the master exercises his superiority by denying a permit to Annamalai for temporary leave, the servant can only beg for pity. The master’s conduct produce a physical transformation in Annamalai’s behaviour when he tells him: ““I cannot let you go now”, in a tone of extreme firmness, at which he came nearer and pleaded with his palms pressed together” (103). Annamalai suffers a humiliation that changes his mood and his looks from that point on, as he begins to wear “an old blanket over his head” instead of his “red bandanna”; he no longer “water[s] the plants”, which used to be his chief source of pride and he ends his quarrels with “the lady next door” (105). His social life also dies. The sensation of looming disaster is so strong that he stops cooking “in the shade of the pomegranate shrub” (105) and remains “in a corner of the basement room, in a state of mourning” (105) because he is anticipating “a future event” that is inevitable, namely, his death. Lévy-Bruhl affirms that when the primitive mind feels that an event “is certain to happen and if provocative of great emotion, [it] is felt to be already present” (445). Annamalai has loyally served his master for “fifteen years” but he has never felt his support; there is an unbridgeable gap that neither of them is likely to cross because it implies giving up his stand to subscribe to the other’s point of view. “It seemed as if he had propped himself up with an effort all these years but now was suddenly falling to pieces” (106). Annamalai senses that he is about to die and that nobody will enact the Hindu rituals over his corpse. On the contrary, during the master’s long absence, he “will rot there till the municipal scavengers cart [him] away with the garbage heap” (106).

Ultimately, Annamalai chooses to “go home and die” in order to “not [to] bring this house an evil reputation” (106).

The Metaliterary Space

At this point, the story goes back to the events at the beginning, creating a narrative loop characteristic of an open-ended, cyclical story: the past recovers its place in a present that is literally constructed with the debris from that past, imitating the endless cycles of life and death embedded in the Hindu tradition. Although this space belongs to the narrator’s culturally oriented rhetoric, Narayan’s concern for the situation of Indian professional scribes transcends the text. Despite the fact that the precarious alternatives to professional writing humorously portray, in Narayan’s short story, a network of penmanship, the reality is far from amusing. As Thieme writes, the representation of “scribal professions” in Narayan’s fiction is synonymous with a “Brahmin life, adapted to the print culture that had taken hold in South India in the late nineteenth century” (14). While Thieme’s comment refers to Narayan’s “scribal” characters, in this particular short story dwells a combination of different literary genres, each endowed with its own specific circumstances. As described earlier, the penmen used by Annamalai and his family are impoverished teachers and local amanuensis who employ local language, in terms of style and lore. However, Narayan introduces another branch of written culture, one of his recurrent themes: local newspapers and the freelance reporter. He launches this trope during Annamalai’s “off hour, when he visited the gate shop at the level crossing in order to replenish his stock of tobacco and gossip with friends seated on a teak log” (88). Oral tradition and gossip are tools used in the construction of an “objective reality” in which the “active subject” can be “replaced by the neutral observer” and/or be constituted by “inter-subjective relations” that serve to transmit “information or a ‘message’”

realising a conscious “active practice of language” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 32). This language experience is always behind the idea of the community, whose differentiation is established by the “specialization” of the information which relates “the material social process to labour” (*Marxism and Literature* 33). Labour becomes constricted as it gets more specific or scientifically described. As Jean-Luc Nancy states, “the community cannot arise from the domain of work”. Community has to be “experience[d] or [be] constituted by it as the experience of finitude” (*The Inoperative Community* 31). Annamalai finds in his relationships to the other subjects the material complement that he cannot find in his work alone, “the sharing of singularities” (*The Inoperative Community* 28) under friendly conditions of social equality. His association with “the railway gatekeeper” is a source of information which also enables his “participat[ion] in contemporary history” (“Annamalai” 88). It is also a symbolic place for temporal meetings that will sooner or later come to an end, leaving behind a mundane space of trivial experiences.

The joint activities increase the capacity of Annamalai’s group of friends to deal with particular problems. Among these activities is “read[ing] out a summary of the day’s news to this gathering out of a local news sheet” (88). However, in Narayan’s miniature version of society, these literary encounters appear as diametrically opposed to “the highly developed methods of Indic grammatical scholars, with their alternative body of ‘classical’ texts” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 25) which, in turn, represent the narrator’s domain: the place of the divine is taken by the logos or, as Raymond Williams puts it, “the radical distinction between language and reality” (22). Annamalai’s “village centers” serve to disseminate news and also to discuss and debate “relevant issues” that “circulated to others by word of mouth”. Aware of the importance of “the oral culture”,

the local newsheets eventually collect and publish these rumours “along with the daily news” (Chaturvedi 92).

Narayan also comically returns to a familiar material that he has dealt with in previous works with his inclusion of “the man who owned the Truth Printing Press and who reduced the day’s radio broadcasts and the contents of other newspapers into tiny paragraphs on a single sheet of paper, infringing every form of copyright” (88). The character in question first appeared in one of Narayan’s novels, *Mr Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi* (1949) where he was “the editor of the Truth Printing Works” (67). This intertextual reference takes on a deeper meaning when connected with the whole mechanism of printing, edition and distribution, together with the character’s questionable professional practices just mentioned.⁸⁸ Notwithstanding the condensation of news in the media, Annamalai, who listens to the readings of the gatekeeper, represents a fount of information for his master. “That was how I first heard of John Kennedy’s assassination” (“Annamalai” 89), writes the narrator. Following the Truth Printing Press method, Narayan compresses into a paragraph a complex socio-political hermeneutics: on the one hand, he depicts Annamalai’s local lore and reluctance to recognise that he spends time commenting on all sort of news, including international stories, with “his cronies” who, despite the precarious setting, are consciously in touch with the most relevant moments of history. “News? I don’t go hunting for it, but I overheard that the chief ruler of America was killed today” (89). On the other, he shows that Annamalai is able to make a foreign reality his own after filtering it through the Indian lens. Nancy describes the process as meaning that “[a] like-being resembles me in that I myself “resemble” him”

⁸⁸ Although this is not the only reference to the dubious practices of news editors, this metaliterary space invokes Narayan’s own experience as a “newspaper reporter”. Pressed by his family duties, he decided to work for a Madras newspaper called *The Justice* (Narayan, *My Days, A Memoir* 106) where he spent the day hunting all over town for news which was mailed “before the postal clearance” (107) but “thanks to the news-editor’s talent for abridgement, [he] had to crawl up each day by fractions of an inch” (109). As the amount of text that was accepted by the editor invariably frustrated the young journalist, it seems that this subject (one of his most recurrent) becomes the perfect arena to carry out a comic retaliation against news-editors.

(*The Inoperative Community* 33). For this philosopher, the “origin of identity” is “the sharing of singularities” constrained along the boundaries of the community represented by its visible “singular beings” (*The Inoperative Community* 33). Therefore, the assassination of the President of the USA is at once apprehended and translated into a native Indian discourse. “Look, was it Kennedy?” “No, they said Kannady” (“Annamalai” 89). The politician’s name acquires the signifier’s quality of Indian names that, due to the phonetic transcription of an American accent, immediately attains their prejudices. Thus the word is phonetically translated as it sounds to the local people, i.e. as *Kannady*, which is the Tamil word for glass (89). Ironically, this translation into Tamil leads the group to assume an ironic flaw in the politician’s condition: the fragile nature of “glass” is utterly inappropriate for a chief of state who is supposed to embody power and strength: “could any man give himself such a name?” (89) utters Annamalai in distaste, even though he goes on to inscribe Kennedy’s death into the Hindu rituals. Even though Annamalai repeats, “someone shot him with a gun and killed him, and probably they have already cremated him” (89), for him these are only “gossips” that “approach [his] ears”, as he is not interested in “names”, much unlike the others who spend their days sitting and talking, “having nothing else to do” (89).

Although the narrative approaches the trope of death, the text omits the narrator’s final decision as to whether he will or not help the servant in his trials with the people from his village. Consequently, the story’s return to the beginning – to the narrator’s reading of the postcard – intensifies the narrator’s feeling of frustration about Annamalai’s fate. The postcard, condensed and to a large extent anonymous for it does not bear any mark of authorship, raises more questions than answers. Both Annamalai and the narrator are the result of a cultural paradigm constructed during the colonial period that left imprinted on the ideas of the people of India a socio-political legacy that

Pavan K. Varma defines as the “unfinished business of the aftermath of the Empire” (ix): Annamalai comes from a rural peasantry that has evolved towards a social mixture of proletariat and small ownership, whereas the narrator has continued enjoying his middle-class Brahmin condition. Due to the particularities of the Indian caste system, these characters are worlds apart, regardless of the effects of colonial rule upon them. This residual idiosyncrasy is difficult to apprehend from the point of view of a westernised observer who is not familiar with Indian cultural diversity. Such an observer might very well describe the narrator as “another professional scribe out of touch with the reality” of the South rural communities and, indeed, there is some truth in this supposition. It is also equally true that an urban society evolves at a different pace than these small groups, since the commerce of the latter, with imported technologies, exposes such groups to globalisation. Logically, the cultural gap widens according to political design and area of influences, favouring the permanence of these communities in a well-known colonial frame of mind that makes them as vulnerable to modern exploitation as they were in the past to colonial oppression.

Nevertheless, Narayan’s short story folds a message of concern into the narrator’s descriptions of Annamalai’s world, a rural enclave which reveals his concept of primeval innocence and Indian authenticity. Although the style uses humour to disguise the cultural gaps and the narrator’s own admiration for Annamalai’s strength, resistance and adaptability to changes, the narrator is also a proud observer of the nationalist expression of Indianness in which he sees a mirror of his own social evolution and cultural richness as a westernised Indian writer. Once again, Narayan’s writing style points to the core of the text: the narrator and readers can “sit and talk” about the short story’s conclusion or, like Annamalai, take a stance in relation to unfolding events and actively deal with the unknown.

Conclusions

The previous analysis demonstrates that Narayan’s humorous short story is neither simple nor innocent but a deep reflection on the shortcomings that condition India’s present-day development. Notwithstanding class differences being embedded in the nation’s social fabric, the historical residues of the Hindu caste system are still visible in the short story’s exposition. The context provides enough evidence for us to question effectively the responsibility of Indian writers to harmonise traditional culture with modernisation, and to interrogate the ways in which postcoloniality serves either to articulate India’s present or to reproduce the inherited ethos for international demand for trade based on the construction of standardised consumers.

The very title of the short story, “Annamalai”, which translates as a Hindu hermeneutic system, reminds Indians of the importance of their past. As a result of insufficient investment in education, the breach between rural and metropolitan populations has put in evidence mutual and ever-growing distrust between these groups, which threatens the social cohesion of the country. It is against this background that the story stresses the importance of communication and empathy to rescue from disaster those who do not receive support from the establishment. The short story presents the narrator’s initial lack of sensitivity towards the rural people’s mindset. His aloofness clearly evinces his rational side and his cold approach to Annamalai’s concerns. Also, this patronising attitude of his reveals a sense of superiority that manifests itself through subtle supervision of his servant’s tasks, regardless of the long absences during which Annamalai faithfully runs his state. Unlike Annamalai, who is constantly defined as a social being tied to his community, despite being geographically far from it, the writer remains detached, isolated and unable to share, let alone support, the community ties. The

employee remains, however, a member of a community perpetually bound to a debt system, which can be traced back to the pre-colonial machinery of moneylending, and pinned to a stagnant social organisation he is unable to challenge. Although the narrator is depicted as a cosmopolitan citizen brought up in the urban tradition, a westernised writer inspired by the local lore, ironically, he is unable to bridge the gap that separates him from the segment of the Indian population, despite his assistance as an occasional penman and his attempt to understand the gardener's motivations and perplexing behaviour. Paradoxically, the narrator's comic depiction of Annamalai's behaviour stands at odds with the historical factors restricting his employee's personal choices. Unwittingly, however, he gradually constructs a liminal space, an “unhomely” moment where he (westernised, educated, rational and free of caste rules and superstitions) encounters a pre-colonial India still immersed in a complex web of caste and joint family affiliations he endeavours to comprehend. The narrator's ambivalent portrait of Annamalai results in the creation of an uncanny Other, a perpetual source of admiration and fear, attraction and hate. He embodies both primitive (savage, animalistic) features as well as god-like, divine attributes. He is simultaneously an inferior creature but his seemingly illogical actions and commitment to his ancestral community convert him into a superior being. His presence reveals the “unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 18). Without Annamalai, the writer's narration ceases to be. Without him, a representative of the silenced masses of subaltern population, the narrator's attempt to understand India comes to an indefinite halt.

Annamalai's primordial culture is based on instinct and a trial-and-error system that is simultaneously aided by superstition and magic rituals as a means of alleviating the fear of the unknown future; his life is characterised by the nomadic habits enforced on him by economic and political limitations. These features attribute to Annamalai a

symbolic order of religious signs conveyed by the hermeneutics of his name. His very existence constitutes a representation of Hindu androgyny that can both create chaos and restore the order from chaos. Annamalai and Amavasai's mutual dependence syncretises two opposites: the god Shiva and his female counterpart. The short story contains a humorous conflict between Annamalai's hypermasculine drive and Amavasai's feminine-like passivity, even if, as male and female androgynes, they long for each other, despite their non-stop arguments.

The narrator describes how the image of the suspicious “other” is established when Annamalai decides to emigrate for economic reasons. I have proved that this narration generates a negative gap built on the depiction of a primitive India as the site of ancestral superstitions through the lens of an Indian, yet alien, observer. Annamalai becomes an errant labourer. Now he is called the “thief”, the nomadic stranger that cannot integrate into the tribal community. The character abandons village life as a child. From the narrator's viewpoint, he enters the realm of *Thugs* and *Dacoits*. The child embodies an undesirable Indian alterity from birth: in the beginning he is rejected by his father, becoming the family's outcast, and later, once he has assumed his condition as a stranger, he goes farther and becomes a castaway. My analysis shows how Narayan describes the process of becoming a social untouchable from a particular rural space: Annamalai is needed for exploitative jobs but his life necessarily dwells beyond an invisible social barrier. Also, the rural and the communal are fictionalised as the insalubrious unknown: a retarded and impoverished India largely remains a lethargic burden impeding socioeconomic progress. Notwithstanding the fact that emigration is merely a temporary solution, Annamalai changes from being a peasant to one of the countless ill-treated rural proletarians. Yet neither he nor his family make the significant changes that would allow them to get rid of their impoverishment or to improve their social condition. On the

contrary, they remain trapped between the bonds of a community that favours the traditional abuses from opportunists with family ascendancy.

My approach has suggested that Narayan’s mimicry constructs a consciously colonial discourse that criticises those states of negligence and complacency that are widespread in India and that are reflected in the shepherd and the tailor’s affairs. Thus, the narration discerns two spheres: the socio-political, where Annamalai proves useless to the system and where even the phonetics of his name (from a western perspective) seem to hint at his wild nature as an untouchable; and the individual, where Annamalai carries the supportive role of *paterfamilias* and his will is his family’s law. His volition and determination stand against an encroaching capitalism that is designed to maintain a low wage labour system based on the peasants’ permanent indebtedness and their submission to a regressive culture of caste discrimination.

Monoculture plantations and indenture systems exhaust not only human but also environmental resources. The result is Annamalai’s evolution from a peasant who is initially enslaved by the *kangani* system of recruitment to a semi-proletarian worker who finally attains some control over his own worth as a worker, so he can offer himself to the narrator as an unbounded labourer who has acquired some professional self-esteem. Annamalai asserts his autonomy and – what seems even more important from the author’s intimations – breaks free from his family’s slave mentality. If this petrified state is to be changed, Annamalai is the engine that will bring about the transformation, and this will occur with the narrator’s support. Nevertheless, the text leaves no doubts about the characters’ complete lack of communication: their ties remain impersonal, limited to the reading and writing of postcards. Yet, through Annamalai’s sparse discourses, Narayan

obliquely discloses volumes of information about the exploitative system of labour of colonial India and its continuity after independence.

In the short story, the real opportunity for Annamalai comes from the narrator's symbolic garden, which represents Annamalai's return to his peasant origins and enjoyment of a freedom never experienced before. However, his primitive attachment to ancient superstitions and his family ties define him as an androgynous subject that finds no place in either of the two worlds. This enclosure blends several colonial discourses and class prejudices that together constitute a postcolonial critique of India's historicity. Thus, the English suspicions about the *mali* are temporarily cancelled out when the narrator observes the beneficial effects of the servant's horticultural knowledge on his garden and sees him practise his legitimate Hindu tradition-sanctioned trade using the garden produce. As Shiva's protégée, Annamalai proves that his possession of *vidya*, the genuine knowledge that runs from his *atman* to his senses, acts as a positive force that restores the reputation of the *mali*, which was damaged by inherited prejudices and dubious talks, many of which derive from caste and communal hostilities. Furthermore, his regular interactions with his railway acquaintances prove positive and enriching as they provide information that comes from the modern media, that is also a source of benefit to the narrator. Metaphorically, then, Annamalai is able to heal and to connect damaged or non-existent social relationships.

The Indian Woman of R. K. Narayan

Introduction

The language of myth is so firmly rooted in the Indian oral and written traditions that it has been conveniently used as the ideal vehicle to convey India's history from time immemorial. Myth is the single phoneme, the Sanskrit sign, *ashkara*, spoken of in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and Krishna's teachings to Arjuna, who states: "Of words, I am the eternal syllable OM" (Miller 94). For centuries only the initiated Brahmans could decode the hermeneutics of the Hindu culture, and Indian history is thus marked by obscure interpretations and great lacunas, which have created fertile grounds for artistic manifestations of myth. Narayan's approach makes conspicuous this mixture of symbolism and reality, which derives from the storytelling tradition, along with a selective education in eastern and western literatures, particularly in its representation of the Indian Woman. Not without purpose, Narayan constructs a symbolic gendered narrative imbued with mythic qualities where socio-economic issues are subtly expressed in nationalistic terms.

In the following pages, I aim to analyse how his female characters are inspired by the Hindu philosophy of *dvaita*, the subject/object duality of the *I/Thou* relationship between the devotee and God, where *I* denotes the subjective space and *Thou* the social one. The prevalence of *dvaita* also applies to every small deity who can transmute, when activated, into the Great Goddess, *Shakti*, "the One Force" (Zimmer, *Myth and Symbols* 191) and Narayan's women characters possess this double quality parallel to that of the deities: they are both common characters and vessels for an idealised Indian Woman, a symbol of national identity. My intention is to prove how Narayan's works, inspired by

the revival of the precolonial artistic expressions of tradition, explore the following patterns: i) traditional situations of neglect and repression of women stimulated by the language of Hindu mythology; ii) female archetypes as the expression of a nationalistic conscience; and iii) use of female models to narrate the Indian socio-political transformation and the evolution of the Indian family. My concern with Narayan's female representation derives from the relevance of signifiers and how these translate into facts that do not cause the empowerment of women but, on the contrary, contribute to their objectification and effacement through the fabrication of an iconic identity that does not overcome atavistic customs of denial and female segregation, especially in the lowest social strata.

In order to provide an analysis of Narayan's female archetypes based on Hindu tradition, I will draw many of my arguments from the symbolic constructions of power relations found in Indian postcolonial criticism and western discourses with a view to exposing certain traps that lie behind the attribution of presumed godly-like qualities to female prototypes. Although Narayan's oeuvre provides plenty of fictional material that illustrates the Indian female duality between the Self and the Other, thereby epitomising a singularity derived from postcolonial ideological definitions of Indianness, I will focus on the most symbolic and recurrent female archetypes of his works, especially those closely connected to Southern Indian women. Art, tradition, political changes and social transformations are also represented through a female Indian agency which is manifested through the characters of Saraswathi, Savitri, Sati, Mohini and Kali, all of whom gradually learn to reveal themselves as autonomous beings, constituting an undeniable Indian experience. My primary goal is to disclose how fiction and myth work together as mirrors of a reality which is disguised in allegorical forms and which inspires modern definitions of the nation-state. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the gallery of women

found in Narayan's narrative is so vast that it precludes any comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of myth and gender in his work.

This analysis begins with a number of definitions of myth and its socially inscribed nature based on Western and Indian theories. Narayan's female stereotypes are embedded in a counter-canon of the Indian tradition – which considers tradition as the prescriber of the norm. First, those women characters in Narayan's fiction whose occupations have some connection with art (music and dance) and enjoy certain popularity embody cultural paradigms that are in conflict with their traditional place in society. Secondly, Narayan's ironic narrative focuses its attention on active female political involvement in the Gandhian Movement and Indian society's perception of women taking part at that time as family destroyers. The traditional women and their limited social roles suffer the same transformative effects as the rest of the society, having to adapt their lifestyle to modern requirements and new economic demands. They are forced to deal with roles imposed on them externally and internally, which, paradoxically, empower and silence them at the same time. Narayan depicts these wasted and often marginalised mothers, aunts and widows, whose place in society is far from secure.

It could be argued that Narayan's women find personal reward in enacting the mythic archetypes created by the Hindu community and in the social identity they manage to create within these parameters. They find in traditional archetypes a common language that serves a double purpose: first, it provides a basic recognition of their genuine Indianness; and secondly, it opens a space for criticism and comparison that fulfils cultural and (re)educational purposes. However, the mythic dimension of the stories is also a dynamic discourse embedded in the fictional Malgudi, which is permanently negotiating its space within the context of modern Indian history.

The Theoretical Background

Analysis of the allegorical image of womanhood contextually constrained in the world of Malgudi requires previous theoretical specifications in order to position the arguments correctly as well as provide the linguistic codes through which Narayan's Indian Woman occasionally becomes representative of the Indian Mother Nation.

Aparna B. Dharwadker helps us understand Narayan's penchant for oral tradition and storytelling as an instrument to "invoke the nation's ancient, premodern, and precolonial past" (165). In many ways, this past is expressed not only through history but also through myth and the "powerful qualities" embedded in cultural narratives that are recorded "over a period of time" in Indian history. Narayan's artistic expressions are a multifaceted reflection of the Indian heritage carried by oral and written forms, which are particularly conspicuous in relation to his heroic, almost divine portrayal of women. Dharwadker's argument concerning the symbolic discourse of "the Indian past" posits that the nation-state placed myths and history at the core of debates on modernity and India's "remote past", which was absorbed by a gradual improved understanding of Indian cultural narratives. This understanding not only comes from traditional cultural sources such as theatre, dance and music but through modern instruments of mass communication such as cinema, radio programmes or publicity. In Dharwadker's description of postcolonial culture, Narayan comes "to terms with the past before turning to the historical present" which for him possesses the same symbolic value as traditional representations (171). Narayan's women are immersed in these cultural narratives since they express subjective values that aspire to agglutinate those traditionally female roles with the modern traits associated with nationalism and cultural evolution that rather engender a new discourse on women. Narayan incorporates new technologies in his

writings often as a humorous trope that draws the reader's attention to those contradictions that are typical in modern societies.

Meanwhile, Partha Chatterjee sees in the discourse of nationalism a transformation of the colonial narrative where the traditionally oppressed female subject, which he sees as “a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature” of India (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 118) is recodified and such cultural traditions come to express Indianness. Arguing for the female's participation in the construction of the nation-state becomes essential in developing a nationalist symbolic representation of women in opposition to the materialistic western discourse dominated by “the construct of women as sex objects in Western patriarchy”, a portrayal that is especially conspicuous in the “commercial media of film, advertisement and fashion” (132). Women become attached to definitions made by a new patriarchal Indian system that upholds spirituality as its major cultural distinction in opposition to western traits, and we shall soon see that Narayan's women are constructed with these nationalistic aims in mind. Their spiritual beings, at times translated as ideological female involvement in politics, transcend their private sphere and acquire a symbolic dimension in the parochial world of Malgudi. Mothers and aunts are symbolic of the nurturing earth and the protective nation-state. They are treated not as sexual objects but as earthly impersonations of the divine. Therefore, they belong to the inner space, *ghar*, which is the spiritual realm, also identified as the site of domesticity, away from external space, *bāhir*, which is the material world. Whereas the first category is inherently attributed to women, the latter seems to define the natural space of men (120).

Another critic, Ashis Nandy, in *The Intimate Enemy* describes the traditional belief in womanliness as a relationship between “power, activism and femininity”,

naritva, rather than “power, activism and masculinity”, *purusatva* (53). Nandy’s criticism addresses the colonial perception of Indian natives as effeminate subjects. He invokes Indian tradition to support this paradigm whereby “the feminine principle is a more powerful, dangerous and uncontrollable principle in the cosmos than the male principle” (53-54), an idea which derives from the mythic concept of “*ardhanarisvara*, a god half-man, half-woman” (54). This duality is a relevant characteristic of the Hindu tradition that appeals to the magical and the symbolic embodied by an androgynous being superior to “womanliness and manliness”, which are regarded as equal values⁸⁹, as long as they are not transcended by godly and saintly ideals. The conflation of the two alterities into a single being is almost a “saintly quality” that characterises Gandhian discourse (53), a discourse which remains latent beneath many of Narayan’s characters, as this analysis will show later on. In addition, when there exists a female superiority is not evinced through the sexual objective of “conjugalitv” but through the expression of “motherliness and *caritas*” (54). Accordingly, the fusion of political activism and female courage is perfectly compatible with maternity and respect for traditions from a Gandhian perspective. These traditions are founded upon myth and since myths are a fantastic fabric that “archaic societies” remember and “re-enact” as part of their history (58), they become “the essence of a culture, history being at best superfluous and at worst misleading” (59). Nandy’s scepticism of a materialistic secular society makes “myths” the key cultural issue able to open up imaginary mental frames that resist “co-optation by the uniformizing world view of modern science” (59), and it is within this imaginary mental frame that Narayan’s women of Malgudi grow as individuals playing out their role in their community and in India’s contemporary history. Consequently, there is some logic in the Gandhian definition of myth as a part of the “public consciousness” (57),

⁸⁹ The concept of Hindu androgyny has been introduced in the previous chapter.

since its presence keeps finding new socio-economic articulations as long as it belongs to and comes from the community's (un)consciousness.

Jean-Luc Nancy is another critic who shares this conceptual association of myth with the community, a community which is simultaneously defined by that myth, since it constructs the symbolic language of the community. Nancy situates myth at the "origin" of the community's "foundation" where it is tightly embedded in the people's self and "narrative", constituting a collective "consciousness" that is a self-referring expression of "a mythic" formation. "Myth is, above all, full, original speech, at times revealing, at times founding the intimate being of a community" (*The Inoperative Community* 48). The *logos* or discourse is behind every conceptual articulation or definition of any community; it defines men and women as well as "gods and beasts" (44). The *logos* is the tool that tries to expound the idea, setting the scene or the frame for its representation but failing to express its abstract subtleties in their entirety. Nancy argues that truth and narration are separated from the divine body, the *logos*. The narrative act indicates, therefore, the separation of truth from the very beginning of the narration and the existence of a condensed space left behind by the absence of the divine body, since the narration itself fails to fully embrace the vision of the imagined. Both function and form run in parallel displaying an essential separation between the divine or the imagined and the real or the narrated (*La Partición de las Artes* 47).

Applying this theoretical frame to Narayan's world, India is simultaneously present and absent, saturated and empty, in Maguldi's imaginary space; she is represented through Narayan's (un)narrated community, and consequently, India declares its allegorical or mythological enunciation as part of her social reality. Narayan's architecture combines imported signifiers or linguistic borrowings enfolding signifying

tropes with “strategies of diversion”. In combining the borrowed signifiers with the narrational approaches, these strategies sustain a plurality of references throughout. The writer mimics inherited cultural traditions, assuming that there exists “a conceptual unity or feature” implicit in his system of pan-Indian representation. However, the meanings derived from that conceptual unity are not only translated features into English but the outcome of a strategy of diversion that creates an intermediate space, which, simultaneously, preserves a plurality of meanings and a referential transition that works as an impure contextual (dis)location. This impurity allows Narayan to insert these borrowed signifiers “without working [them]—in order to make [his narrative strategy] serve other ends” (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan* 89). As a result, Narayan’s narratorial construction fits into Nancy’s description of combined strategies in the composition of a text. His referential diversion validates what Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe define as “a connotative sliding” (89), where its borrowed origins or cultural connotations are maintained but the referred signifiers are newly interpreted in an alternative space, characterised by an asynchronous discourse.

Regarding signifiers, Roland Barthes places language and myth beyond the community from which they derive and makes them “an object of study” that transcends people’s socio-ideological history. He argues that “as a type of speech” – considering it a cultural or historical construct – contemporary myth has two basic semantic components: “a connoted system whose signified is ideological” (consequently, it aims for power and domination) and a denoted system “whose function is to naturalize the class proposition” in such a way that the “literalness” of the narrated object is enfolded in “innocent” linguistic stereotypes such as “millennial, maternal, scholastic, etc.” (“Change the Object Itself” 166). These “two semantic systems” reproduced in Narayan’s ideological architecture illustrate the way in which Indian women are constructed in keeping with

sociological stereotypes. The semiotic analysis of the contextual discourse formulates a “science of the signifier” to decode the symbolic language of the texts since the sociolects have already substituted the place value of myth or the imagined object with a contemporary encryption of meanings. For Barthes, socio-linguistic contexts challenge textual readings that have already exchanged “mythologies” for an idiolectology “whose operational concepts would no longer be sign, signifier, signified and connotation but citation, reference [and] stereotype” (168). Narayan’s women characters have to be decoded by this double system of signifiers, which is also divided in two sub-categories: firstly, they represent the Hindu cultural tradition and its archetypal description of female roles rooted in the languages of caste and patriarchy; secondly, the texts are inscribed into pan-Indian literary currents that have changed throughout the course of this prolific author’s life. Therefore, their interpretation forces a pluralistic analysis of combined meanings, which are not purely Indian or Western-oriented but a combination of these two.

For these reasons, it is most convenient to refer to the analytical frame provided by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, which describes myth as the expression of the unconscious, “the structural whole of the Imaginary and the Symbolic” (83), the Imaginary here being a representation that “ceases to be objective” in order to become “subjective infinite”. Its consistency is supported “by a structure that determines the place and the function of the subject of representation”: this structure is the Symbolic which describes the patterns of a “subjective representation, pure signifiers, pure nonrepresented representatives whence the subjects, the objects, and their relationships all derive” (306). This structural composition serves to shelter “the unconscious”, the role of characters in theatre, the imagination and artistic expressions. Narayan plays with commonplaces of knowledge and understanding made up of objective memories and

myths, all derived from history, *itihasa*, and Hindu traditions, *Purana(s)*⁹⁰, respectively. He uses compositional elements from these “objective representations” and sets them to work on his “intimate familial theater” (Deleuze and Guattari 305), in such a way that the characters become a revamped version of the mythic heroes in the shape of ordinary people, while the collective unconscious bridges the absent structure of the narrations through images and symbolic language.

By delving into these theories this analysis structurally deconstructs Narayan’s Indian women from ideological, cultural and psychological perspectives, all of which transcend a description of the Indian Woman merely as a gendered narrative, disclosing the subtle variations that exist behind a cultural stereotypical discourse addressed to a wide audience.

Narayan’s Fictional Woman

The previous definitions throw some light on the basic qualities of Narayan’s female characters, whom I interpret as artistic allegories with an ideological function, which entails their eventual degeneration into subjective and objective forms of slavery or subservient citizenship. In keeping with what Nancy’s definition of myth would suggest, this study shows that Narayan’s characters are profoundly attached to their community and heavily conditioned by the family’s social status. *The Guide* (1958) and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*⁹¹ (1961) provide the first set of female characters for my discursive analysis. The symbolic language enacted by the temple dancers, the *devadasis*, reveals a cultural crack in the foundations of the traditional representation of these women. Traditionally offered to the temple’s deity from childhood, in keeping with tradition,

⁹⁰ *Itihasa*: “tradition recognised as a proof” (Devy, “Of Many Heroes” 18). *Purana(s)*: Myth, compilations of ancient texts derived from Hindu oral traditions (*Dictionary of Hinduism*).

⁹¹ Hereafter, *The Man-Eater*.

Rosie and Rangī belong to a type regarded as “public women”; for the community, they are simply a caste of sinners. The narratives show how social repudiation operates in Indian society against the children of unmarried mothers, despite the fact that the Indian constitution bans any form of ostracism. Nevertheless, Rosie portrays an ambitious character that challenges her own social status: she takes a master’s degree in political science which allows her to marry above her family’s possibilities, giving her the opportunity to discover other branches of Indian culture. However, her archaeologist husband’s passion for hidden Indian treasures suffocates her. M. K. Naik points out that Marco is “a slave to his self-chosen professional role as a scholar”, which prevents him from fulfilling his “role as a good husband” (Naik 59). However, I contend that Marco’s interest in seeking a wife is only the result of his need to shed the imposed role of an elderly bachelor linked to the second *asrama*, *grihastya*. This is the reason he publishes an advert looking for a presentable girl with superior education: it is in order to get closer to the third *asrama*, the “*vanaprastha* (the ‘shadowy’ third stage in which the householder becomes a forest-dweller or hermit prior to the final renunciation)” (Thieme 13). Indeed, Marco buys a pretty wife, academically certified, that can deal with simple tasks like “finding food or shelter or buying a railway ticket” (*The Guide* 99). He seems not to be concerned with the expenses as long as he gets the vouchers. As the tourist guide, Raju, who latter becomes Rosie’s lover, misinterprets Marco’s requests for bills as a “symptom of miserliness” (64), he fails to recognise the importance of the performative function of an official document. Raju denies both the existence of practical features in the scholarly mind and the utilitarian qualities of signed documents. This is precisely the reason why he ends up in prison: forging Rosie’s signature in an application form sent by Marco’s lawyers is, obviously, a criminal action (185). Naik sees this incident as “a fine specimen of the ironic shadow that falls between intention and upshot” (59). In accusing

Rosie of spelling out Raju's ruin (63), Naik seems to overlook Raju's responsibility in his misfortunes and his self-centred, egotistic abuse of Rosie. It is on the talented dancer's performances that Raju constructs his public persona. His decision to maximise Rosie's exploitation as an artist will get their lives involved in a social whirl: "My philosophy [Raju affirms] was that while it lasted the maximum money had to be squeezed out" (173).

As much as Rosie tries to comply with her husband and Raju's appetites, she is constantly belittled by the men's individual activities. Marco rejects the possibility of a connection between his passion for paleography and a modern reinterpretation of ancient arts, such as his wife's craving for classical dance, in particular, for *Bharata natyam*⁹², which she revives and improves with her studies of the *Natyashastra*⁹³. Yet when his work on South India's cultural history is eventually published and begins to be highly regarded by the media, he creates a bond between "the classical past" of ancient cave pictures and the ephemeral "present-day experience" of visual arts (Thieme 112). The underlying social unconscious of this novel thus establishes a liaison between an obliterated Indian history, almost unknown to the greater public, with a modern revival of the classics now clad in nationalistic colours. As Thieme contends, Narayan's fiction draws a connection between "ancient myths and beliefs" (111) and a particular narrativisation inspired by current events. Ironically, the dark caves where these cultural riches are to be found become the metaphoric representation of Rosie's femininity and natural talent for dance, which are buried, belittled and forgotten. In fact, Hindu mythology associates the *devadasis* with the family of the Nāgas, which are "genii

⁹² *Bharata natyam* is a form of classical dance originally performed in the temples by the *devadasis*. It is inspired by the dance of Nataraja, another name for Lord Shiva, and by his condition of Supreme Yogi.

⁹³ *Natyashastra* is the Indian dramatic mode of classical Sanskrit aesthetics (Devy, "After Amnesia" 21). Its origin dates to around the 2nd century AD and it is "the longest, most comprehensive poetics of drama and performance in antiquity" (Dharwadker 130). It is also an essential guide to classical dramaturgical principles.

superior to man” (Zimmer 63) and which inhabit subterranean and magical spaces, being the guardians and “the keepers of the life-energy” (63). They dwell among myriad treasures from earth, rivers and oceans. These small deities are descendants of the cosmic serpent Ananta and the serpent princesses, *nāginīs*, are generally praised for “their cleverness and charm” (63). However, snakes, often symbolising women in Hindu tradition, can also perform an enchantment, which transmutes milk into poison (O’Flaherty 54). Thus, when the gods and the *rakshasas* churn the ocean of milk in order to obtain Soma, *Amrita*⁹⁴, the combined action also draws poison out of it. Not surprisingly, Rosie evokes this ancient world of incantation and sacredness through the phonetics of her artistic name, Nalini, and her intimate self, both carved out of her family past and her westernised education. Symbolically, the drink of the Gods, *Amrita*, already mixed with poison, is contained in Rosie’s body which is described, in its sensuous movement as she vibrates with the rhythm of the song, as a cobra, a naga, which stops being “an underground reptile” in order to transform itself into “a creature of grace and divinity and an ornament of the gods” (*The Guide* 188). The imagery here suggests Rosie’s upward mobility while it invokes the myth of *Muchalinda*, the Naga-king⁹⁵. Consequently, Narayan is describing Rosie’s performance as a holy dance executed in the name of God for a secular audience. She is the vehicle that provisionally unites the transcendental with the emotional for the purpose of a Hindu revival.

Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak holds that “Rosie/Nalini is merely instrumental” because the novel’s focus is on the male character, Raju. Spivak argues that Narayan’s representation of “folk-ethnicity” exposes “the vulgarization of culture in the interest of

⁹⁴ *Amrita*, the divine elixir, gathers the universal water that descends on the earth as dew and rain; then it becomes the vegetable sap that enters the cow, producing the milk that is converted into blood. These are the differing states of the same substance that represent the transition from the divine to the earthly (Zimmer, *Myth and Symbols* 60).

⁹⁵ *Muchalinda* is the King of the Serpents who sheltered Buddha under his giant snake-hood for seven days during an “unseasonable storm”. The exceptional union represents the forces of life and birth embracing the forces that conquer and sever “the bonds of birth”, which conduct the believer towards “the imperishable Transcendent” (Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols* 67-8).

class mobility” (“How to Teach a “Culturally Different” Book” 244). Notwithstanding Rosie’s condition as a secondary character and, as Spivak affirms, “absent at the actual transformation, the present of the frame-narrative” (244), however, she is essential to the entire story. Her conversion into a successful artist comes immediately after she gives herself to her inherited polluted origin: the *devadasis* were usually the lovers or protégées of wealthy men. Thus, she moves from the cosy existence of an object-like, middle-class wife to the life of a creative subjectified dancer who, nevertheless, remains anchored to her previous condition of female subalternity. In other words, she transmutes her symbolic female condition as a sacred cow into the poisonous erotic dancer who is often viewed as responsible for endangering the universe in the ancient texts (O’Flaherty 133). Indeed, her “sinful” behaviour scandalises Raju’s mother and forces her to run away from her house and her only son. Rosie’s talent produces the economic change that elevates a lower caste lover from anonymity to a dazzling professional success as Miss Nalini’s manager: Raju reveals his natural talents for supervision to the extent that he forgets who the money-making star really is; consequently, he ends up treating her like “a performing monkey” (*The Guide* 180). The result is a gender-related asymmetry: Rosie becomes an iconic figure for devoted multitudes ready to pay high prices to admire her shows, while her lover demeans the cultural depth behind her dance, disregarding her persona and her needs. As a matter of fact, Rosie’s academic education facilitates her interpretation of Puranic and Vedic texts. This increases the symbolic signifiers of her performances, which now reach wider and wealthier audiences. She personifies the diachronic evolution of India’s history, ranging from a colonial possession – her colonised *I* is formally and culturally prepared for devotion to a husband – to a theoretically casteless democratic society – her public *Thou* is part of a social fabric in which she is a productive member who “pa[ys] an enormous amount of income tax” (172). Rosie’s condition as an outcast

allows her to open up a space that exists between the traditional *I* and *Thou* worlds. Her *Thou* dwells on the site of a conspicuous pan-Indian cultural and economic reality that necessarily implies an ideological detachment from regionalisms. However, socially she belongs to an ancient cultural past, which was traditionally reserved for members of the superior caste. Consequently, her *I* carries the secretive nature of the symbolic. Nevertheless, Rosie is the alien *Other* who inhabits nobody's land as she is defined and commodified according to her gender and her commercial condition. Meanwhile, Raju becomes her counterpart representing a classist return to superstition and caste prejudices – the ritualistic *Thou* – with a predominant inclination towards a selfish patriarchy and corrupted behaviour – his agent *I* is characterised by his socially dominant male ambitions: “I treated those that came to ask for a show as supplicants” (171).

Furthermore, Spivak remarks that Rosie is absent in “the last phase of the book: the phase of ethnicity over culture” (“How to Teach a ‘Culturally Different’ Book” 255); at that stage of the novel Rosie is no longer a woman but a marketable phenomenon. She is Miss Nalini and Raju cannot but “grow jealous of her self-reliance” (*The Guide* 198). Rosie is the tool that transforms a locally successful tourist guide into a wealthy impresario who crosses the line of lawfulness for his own sake. She also pays for the most expensive lawyer from Madras “to save [Raju] from jail” (197). Metaphorically, Rosie now represents the Great Serpent, Naga, releasing the coils of destiny on which Vishnu rests, while Raju, who is suddenly dependent like Vishnu, drowns in his own fatal apathy. Although Spivak explains that Rosie is part of Raju's Indian “folk kitsch”, in reality Rosie is the juxtaposition of the modern nationalist revival and the world of mass communication: at the beginning of her career the mass media ties the couple together as the perfect team, only dealing with them separately at the end of the novel when they are no longer related to one another. Indeed, it is Raju's plight here, finally cut off from

Rosie's success, that "create[s] an extra interest" for Rosie's show (197-8) and leads to his imprisonment and Rosie's liberation. Narayan underlines India's renovation and the irreversibility of the social changes through this allegory, which also reveals his humour. His criticism of Raju's mother's contempt and misunderstanding of Rosie is bitter: "A serpent girl! Be careful!" she says (*The Guide* 188). Narayan remarks upon the egotistical side of material success and the denial of support to those relatives who made this success possible in the first place. While Raju addresses Rosie as Nalini after her artistic birth and success, Raju's betrayal of family responsibilities – he completely neglects his mother and ignores the mortgage on the family's house– is the outcome of his decisions: "[Rosie] was deeply attached to the house, the place which first gave her asylum" (164), reminds Raju. Narayan lays bare Rosie's transformation from a self-effacing character burdened with guilt to a resolute subject able to shed her self-destructive skin and become an unrelenting individual whose life "had its own sustaining vitality [...] which she herself had underestimated all along" (198).

Contradicting Spivak's affirmation, the final part of the novel reveals Rosie's presence between the structures of the nonrepresented subject. She is the central object of Raju's confidences to Velan, the deceived villager who takes Raju for a holy man, failing to see that Raju is a sham. Rosie is also the cause and effect of Raju's ambiguous behaviour with the villagers. During his recollections, Raju confesses that had developed a "habit of affording guidance to others" (*The Guide* 6). This is how he originally gets involved with Marco and Rosie's affairs and how, later on, his nonchalant comments, acquired through repetition, are taken as spiritual guidance by the villagers, in their elementary judgements. The profound impact of Rosie's public persona and her final departure upon Raju's personality is manifest in his drift towards self-effacement as punishment: he feels that "for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not

personally interested” (212), while the impact upon Rosie, equally far-reaching, sees her develop a taste for multitudes. In command of herself, she shrugs off her wounded domestic self in order to become an “expanding” empire beyond Indian borders, while a dejected Raju swallows his “gall” and abandons himself to a swarming crowd in the guise of a Swamiji⁹⁶. Narayan seems to mock his hero’s fate, here. He is forced into starvation through his own conceit and disbelief, while the female character finally achieves mature independence through the unification of her formerly split identity and through utter belief in herself: “She would go from strength to strength” (198), confides Raju to his devoted Velan. Rosie’s determination paves the way for Raju’s final development as a character. In looking back on her, Raju discovers Rosie in a new light that also helps him to learn who he has come to be. Objectively, Rosie stands alone as a professional conditioned by the market’s law of supply and demand. Subjectively, she has undergone through work a personal realisation that goes beyond the need for any male figure. She thus sets an example that helps Raju to finally ascertain “the thrill of full application, outside money and love” (212). In the end, Raju is able to apprehend Rosie’s artistic abstraction, which resembles a state of spiritual elevation and abandonment and needs no practical justifications for its existence.

Although there is a qualitative difference between the characters in *The Guide* and Narayan’s later novel *The Man-Eater*, Rangi, the heroine of the latter, undergoes a similar transformation to Rosie. Her physical appearance is different, since Rosie’s complexion is “dusky” (*The Guide* 56) while Rangi’s is “black as cinders” (*The Man-Eater* 271). And although she is a public woman, Rangi is also “a woman of the temple” (271) who follows her “*dharma*” (272), and “the most indifferent dancer in India” (273). Her name derives from Ranganatha, which is another appellation for Vishnu. She is bereft of

⁹⁶ Affectionate name for a spiritual leader, *Swami*.

intellectual wit and deprived of a solid education, but those deficiencies are nevertheless overcome by her generous love for a noble symbol, the temple's elephant, Kumar. There are motherly overtones to Rangi's attitude and devotion, in line with the symbolic idea of Indian womanhood as a "positive signifier of nationalist modernity" (Donner 48) and this empowers her despite her subordinate function as a *devadasi*. In relation to caste, Rangi has the condition of the untouchable; she is a *dalit*, a noun whose Sanskrit root "dal-, means broken, ground-down, downtrodden, or oppressed" (NCDHR)⁹⁷, and a group of people who are "born with the stigma of 'untouchability' because of the extreme impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations" (NCDHR). Her marginal profession forces her to choose her company among other outcasts like the frightening man-eater Vasu, the protagonist of the novel. Nandy points out that the traditional Hindu idea of manliness, *Purusatva*, is seen as superior to womanliness, *Naritva*, while Rangi's particular kind of womanliness is nevertheless "superior to femininity in man", *Klibatva*, (*The Intimate Enemy* 52), which in the novel is attributed to the humble protagonist, Nataraj. The man-eater, Vasu, embodies the hypermasculine type constructed according to an image of the rakshasa Bhasmasura⁹⁸. Vasu falls on the untouchable side of Brahmin society because his occupation is taxidermy and he kills animals and manipulates their hides and internal organs. As was the case with Rosie in *The Guide*, Rangi is key to the plot with respect to Vasu and she triggers the novel's denouement: she indirectly causes the death of Vasu who had planned the murder of the temple elephant while a procession was taking place. When she learns how he is going to kill the animal, she tries to stop it by providing him with his favourite food, which is drugged. She is acting as the symbolic

⁹⁷ NCDHR. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights.

⁹⁸ Bhasmasura, the unconquerable, scorched everything he touched. The universe thus threatened, the gods devised a special trick for the indestructible asura: Vishnu transformed himself into Mohini, the seductive enchantress, who challenged the demon to imitate every movement of her dance if he were to possess her. When the demon was completely lost in the excitement of the dance, she placed her fingers on her head, a movement immediately imitated by the rakshasa who reduced himself to ashes (Narayan, *The Man-Eater* 341). Again, Hindu mythology uses sex change and androgyny as a tool capable of achieving what a simple male-female division of gender cannot (O'Flaherty 320).

mare, appearing as a nourishing mother. Vasu declines the food but her courageous gesture, even if it fails, prevents destruction and chaos during the community's multitudinous gathering. Narayan's humour shines through in this passage: Vasu asks Rangi to fan him while he dozes before shooting the elephant. She duly repels his hated mosquitoes but is unable to overcome her own fatigue and in fact falls fast asleep just as the hideous insects start to attack Vasu. In his desperate reaction to kill the bugs, he hits his forehead with such inordinate strength that he kills three mosquitoes and himself. The ritual celebration of a religious festival, elephant included, underscores the national symbols of the Hindu community. The sacred principle of myth that interrelates different elements of life "as an eternal all-pervading reality" (Sharma 57), will be destroyed by a foreign materialistic taxidermist who, despite "join[ing] the civil disobedience movement against British rule" (*The Man-Eater* 155) thinks of Hindu traditions as a sheer nonsense that halts the modernisation of the country.

Notwithstanding her condition as a *devadasi*, Rangi is an outspoken woman that will let no one "dictate to [her] what [she] should do" (273) even if that means confronting her lover. Although she challenges the Western description of Indian women as "silent, or with a subdued and submissive voice" (Sharma 57), she does not hesitate to defend her strong attachment to the temple's duties and symbols beyond her own profit or safety, thereby defining her Hindu idiosyncrasy as a devotee: unlike Rosie, her *I* stands in obedience to the temple's symbolic authority, which is the *Thou* that rules her truly subservient self; while in Rosie's case, devotion, or her *I*, is diverted away from a patriarchal figure and inwardly towards classical dance for which she receives treatment as a Devi, the *Thou*, from her public. She cherishes every garland presented to her "at the end of a performance", however, which for Rosie represents "the only worth-while part of our whole activity" (*The Guide* 172). The abstract nature of her dedication to Hindu

tradition is more mystical than Rangi's even when the latter is professionally and emotionally attached to the temple.

Following Deleuze and Guattari, it is worth noting the manner in which such temporal anachronisms nourish the subjective representation of an unconscious in such a way that the theatrical patterns of the texts are able to integrate into a space of modern objectification of the cultural past. The sociological elements in the text are converted into an object for analytical debate. These sociological elements are inspired by a narrative of the absolute that is inherent to their mythological origins, and which, in Rosie's case, articulates the idea of an essential Hindu identity that is transcended by an abstract concept of art kindled by God. In Rangi's case, however, the symbolic praise of the divine power is blended with the silenced reality of a foisted prostitution that has deprived her of any social respect but which attaches her to her mother's experience as a *devadasi*. Nevertheless, Rangi is an untouchable that holds the position in the community of the repudiated *Other*: the novel's narrator, Nataraj, describes her as "the awful fleshy creature" that his orthodox employee, Sastri, "considered it a sin to look at" (*The Man-Eater* 270). This is true even if Rangi belongs to the community as the dissimilar member; she inscribes the abject into the community as a useful tool that enhances the sameness or uniformity that characterises the community's identity. Rosie and Rangi convey a double representation of the self: the artistic performances are dedicated to a public tradition that describes them as tantalising dancers, while they remain aware of their residual self-polluted identities. Rosie overcomes this vestigial identity with the study of traditional dance, and Rangi with an almost heroic defence of the temple's elephant and her own pride of her *devadasi* origin. The subjective bonds are strengthened by the ideological implications underlying stereotyped representations of absolute values that have colonised their minds: Rosie is confined in her role as a (dis)loyal wife until she

breaks free from her past relationships, and Rangi is held hostage by the temple's priorities instilled in her by her mother, Padma, before her eventual retirement as a *devadasi* through the help of a supportive client. Rangi is proud of "having remained true to the Dharma of her profession" (Thieme 123), keeping a qualified distance from Rosie's absolute colonised values. Rosie recoils in disgust from her mother's profession and feels guilty for having betrayed Marco, her husband, in order to embrace traditional dance with passion and delight, but the renewing cultural force nevertheless provides her with self-confidence, while Rangi stands up as her opposite: she follows her mother's public traits and neglects the artistic and devotional aspects of the temple dancers, thus remaining trapped within the reactionary forces of cultural traditions. Although Narayan suggests some circumstantial reasons for the characters' individual choices, he subtly remarks that caste and class underpin these women's inherited differences: Rosie is portrayed as a growing professional committed to an Indian cultural revival, while Rangi remains frozen in her karmic beliefs on predestination.

The novels project a specific postcolonial narrativisation, which Aijaz Ahmad calls the "counter-canon of Third World Literature", whose purpose is the construction of a "myth of the nation" or mythical cultural origin (142) that secures a stable representation of the Indian subject. Ahmad is pointing at a kind of political construction of history which is closer to literary fabrication than to real facts (142). The space of history is taken by a "storying" narrative that is made of "conventional standards of truth-establishing", usually imposed by the dominant group (Spivak, "Bonding in Difference"⁹⁹ 16). Women's history is a storying of their symbolic assimilation as the community-nation's metaphor. Depending on the ascendancy of nationalisms, this image can be transient or short-lived compared to others, unless it is sustained by an ideological

⁹⁹ Full title, "Bonding in Difference. Interview with Alfred Arteaga".

structure that secures this nationalist subjectivity to a taxonomy of functions and relationships between the subjects and the signifieds of the objects that represent them. Accordingly, modern representations of Hindu women can narrate their figurative values from an imagined identity that fails to provide a reassuring transmission of symbolic thought as the hegemonic Puranic and Vedic literatures did with the propagation of patriarchal values. These literatures conform a solid, long-standing structure that lasted for centuries and from which the present Indian nationalisms have ideologically evolved, for females were symbolically “empowered” in these narratives but the agency was still male (Spivak, “Moving Devi” 132). The key value for their success is related to linguistic codes of representation. They use the primeval language of myth that combines visual artefacts with moral symbolism to construct a hegemonic ideology that creates a specific female distinction within male fields of knowledge. The analysis of these two novels’ female characters shows that the women are individually empowered in a patriarchal domain, but that their subjective spaces lie beyond their particular communities – the heterotopian realities of the Malgudian worlds in which they live – since their atypical professions detach them from traditional female roles and the joint-family system. Although they are basically alone in their distinctive spaces while the male figures are absorbed into their professional circles, Narayan restores their female agency by (re)creating a symbolic female ground, using the well-trodden language of myth, and positing them as the determinant elements that change the course of the narrations.

The re-enacted language of Hindu culture associates female identity with a referential idiolectology that opens a thematic site of struggle between the *I* and the *Other*, which is at the “basis for agency” (Spivak, “Bonding in Difference” 26). These women are simultaneously subjects and objects of an allegorical representation of Indian historicity. Their narrativisation calls for an analysis of structural patterns, which Barthes

describes as the “science of the signifier”. This analysis applies to the women’s heavy-duty agency, which is discursively reduced to their female condition by a regressive ideological model that disempowers them. In fact, there is an androgynous signifier in the Hindu myth that shares male and female grounds simultaneously: the anthropological images amalgamate male and female energies, the sacred and the profane, symbolically represented by Shiva and Sakti. Yet these forces are neither equal nor do they remain in equilibrium. On the contrary, in fact, they are constantly engaged in a struggle in a liminal space that surpasses gender divisions. While the male energy epitomises agency, creation and power, or the divine essence, the female’s energy conveys two aspects: the self-representation of an earthly Woman – receptor of the generative male power – and the energy itself, *Shakta* or *Śakta*, which is the dynamic force that provokes a change in the immobile – the permanent or the stagnated – producing positive effects in the devotee’s spiritual transformation (Kinsley 122). *Shakta* is also the symbolic union of all goddesses in one philosophical absolute (41) that also contains the essential aspects of masculinity. This symbiotic mixture of contrary forces reveals the path towards spiritual and physical fulfilment, embracing a balanced state of continuous creation through opposites, which constitutes “the Divine Action (*śakti*) in Nature” (Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* 577). The Hindu philosophy serves to unite antagonists: the divine and the godly are linked to “the desacralized and the ungodly” demons, exemplified by Aditi, the cosmic origin of space and the mother of the gods whose sister is Diti, the mother of the demons (Nandy, “A Report”¹⁰⁰ 135). Thus, their intimate relationship is also an intricate network of political agreements and strategic equilibriums that deny any natural composition.

¹⁰⁰ Original title, “A Report on the Present State of Health of the Gods and Goddesses in South Asia”.

Although Narayan's characters aspire to the spiritual union of mind and body, they often fall either on the side of *maya*, a delusive perception of reality that frustrates their agency, or on the passive side of the observers, whose lack of assertiveness thwarts any improvement of their particular circumstances. However, neither of these outcomes is the case for Rosie and Rangi who represent the unfavourable quality of the female androgyne: a figurative mare. This mare implies a negative union with any male since she stands as a phallic entity: she is "the dangerous erotic woman" that produces impotence in her partner; instead of being "the positive instance of the deity", these women represent the feared demonic androgyne (O'Flaherty 334), an artefact that dispenses with the traditional roles attributed to a gender division. The godly/demonic duality permeates Narayan's characters who embody these characteristic Hindu struggles for power enacted in a liminal space, which is an indivisible part of his textual constructions.

The Gandhian Revival

For these reasons, the transitional character Selvi – "a rare, ethereal entity" (Narayan, "Selvi" 155) – remains half way between a living Saraswathi and a selfless Gandhian-type singer dwelling in a cloistered universe of her own. Selvi is a natural talent hallowed by myth: disconnected from the real world, she makes her concerts a unique offering to her audience. Like a devi, she is divested of her human condition in order to incarnate a revered object of devotion. Unlike the previous performers, Selvi is indifferent to real life, and especially to her husband's dominion over her: We learn that Mohan, a Malgudi photographer, "discovered" her when she was teenager and, after marrying her, "kept [her] in a fortress of invisible walls" ("Selvi" 156). Alessandro Vescovi points out that Narayan describes her environment, her "art and public look, but not her private soul" and remarks that the reader is thus deprived of agency and reduced

to the role of a “sympathetic witness” (“R. K. Narayan’s “Selvi” as a Reflection upon the Feminine Self” 232)¹⁰¹. My contention, however, is that Selvi’s private soul is indeed conveyed in the empty narrative space of an absence that is constructed by what Vescovi defines as “a semi-omniscient narrator” (234). Narayan’s subtle strategy disguises the traditional Hindu purdah through narrative elisions. Selvi’s being is displayed as one of Mohan’s film negatives, for example, and Narayan thus avoids mentioning this obscure private reality. He simply narrates, so to speak, the social realities of a *public* purdah: Selvi is exhibited as a wonder but the subject is left behind the verandah, locked in the most private part of the house, in the goddess shrine. In Rosie’s case, Mohan’s management transforms her into a rare object, only apt for the consumption of wealthy audiences and she becomes “The Goddess of Melody” (“Selvi” 157). However, Selvi’s case differs from Rosie’s in the sense that her husband deliberately isolates her from the rest of the world, especially from her beloved mother – a local singer who is Selvi’s guru – her brother and sister. She is both abducted and annihilated as a human being while she is enslaved to her husband’s growing demands. In her complete solitude, she reflects painfully on her miserable life with a sparse language that also expresses her total impotence: “If my own mother can’t see me” (162). The narrator cannot describe what he cannot possibly know since Selvi’s soul dwells in an imaginary world that she has never learned to express, other than with the passion that she puts in her songs. Vescovi writes that Rosie and Selvi “have no narrating agency”, as the narrator describes the males’ thoughts but he “never intrudes into the women’s self” (233) and that the result is a misleading narration based on purely external descriptions of the construction of a female artist. Actually, there are two reasons why the narrator cannot penetrate these women’s spheres: firstly, Narayan devises a narrative technique to describe the textual

¹⁰¹ From now on “R. K. Narayan’s Selvi”.

circumstances of the women using the narrator's male discourse, which can only guess at these women's thoughts from his particular gaze. He is placed at the other side of the reflection, on a different plane, and since these women cannot address men as they address other women, the narrator is not invited to share in their confidences. Therefore, his narration may distort the women's particular agencies. Generally, these women live in an environment ruled by compulsory linguistic codes appropriate to address the world of men. Secondly, especially in Selvi's case, she lives as a recluse and has done so since her teens while her previous experience is limited to her family. Her linguistic capacities are focused on her folk songs, which have shaped her mind, as she has not enjoyed the opportunity of studying as Rosie has. Consequently, she represents a female domain where words have no place, and these women's lives are thus made of silences. There is a history of hushed voices and sacrifices dictated by illiteracy. As these women do not rebel but reproduce the traditional female submissive attitude, it is not surprising that Selvi never allows herself to disclose the universe in which she feels confident, a world she only shared with her mother. Only the decease of the latter causes her to break down and precipitates her flight.

Ironically enough, Narayan introduces a male type which embodies all the social flaws described by Gandhi as sins: Mohan, a former Gandhian fighter who wears only homespun clothes, avoids luxury and lacks any generosity; he is selfish, avaricious and violent, a despicable financial expert who accepts only cash for expenses in order to avoid paying taxes. Selvi, for her part, behaves as "an automaton", a well-trained pet that conceals her anguish for her mother's health and effaces herself to the point of disappearing as a subject. This abused character has buried within herself the only kind world she ever knew, which is founded on her idealised mother, while accepting her husband's exploitation of her as a precious mythic object that generates "exorbitant

fee[s]” (157). She is engaged in train carriages and hotel rooms, cubicles that resemble the images of a transient reality caught in frozen pictures from the past or, as Naik puts it, that convey Narayan’s “persistent juxtaposition of the present and the past” (Naik 64). Even her true social origins, her casteless condition, conspicuously reflected in her skin colour, are completely effaced: soon enough, Mohan discovers, through a fan living in Singapore, a cosmetic cream that makes her face radiant when she appears on stage. Selvi becomes the signifier which can be emptied out of its past and social origins and redone so as to fit into a commodified, godlike creature at the service of the public’s aesthetic appetite. In fact, Selvi embodies the traditional mythic Indian Woman who, according to Manu’s *Dharmashatra*, “does not deserve freedom” (Ramanujan 271). Selvi remains “unaffected by the profane activities of the material world”, typically, a male domain (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 120). She is “undemanding, unenquiring, uncomplaining” (“Selvi” 159) to the extent of becoming a saint; a woman that has given her life over to God ever since she was a child. Thus, she seizes the first opportunity – her mother’s death – to “get rid of her husband” and dedicate her life to her true idealised love, Indian music and an unrestricted audience (Ramanujan 274). Additionally, Vescovi argues that “Selvi’s real look is unknown to anyone but her husband” and that the reader is not privy to “any reasons for her behaviour” (233). Vescovi fails, however, to read behind the narrator’s omissions and simultaneously overlooks the fault lines reflected on the surface of a commercial product. Starting from her very own name, which is rife with symbolic echoes (*selvi* is a Tamil word meaning an unmarried, and therefore virginal, woman), she becomes the incarnation of an innocent, undefiled Devi. To notable effect, the narrative combines fictional aspects with the symbolic overtones of a Hindu myth in order to build up a character that, as Vescovi notes, “triggers the reader’s interest” (234). However, the narrator is unable to peer through the artistic veil that covers her, so he tries

to describe her through Mohan and Varma's impressions. This attempt proves fruitless since Mohan is primarily unconcerned about Selvi's real self, as she is only regarded as a vehicle to his economic success, and Varma is simply another devoted fan, and, therefore, he only identifies himself with the market product, the Devi, and the gossips "[a]t the Boardless" (158). Not only do their descriptions of Selvi reflect her objectified existence but a cultural background that articulates modern forms of nationalism as well. Vescovi holds that "perhaps, the only person who ever saw Selvi as a human being was her mother, but we are never given a glimpse of their relationship" (234). However, there are two aspects of Vescovi's argument that can be related to the Indian revival of cultural traditions and that gainsay his assertion. Firstly, modern nationalisms made ethnic folklore the cornerstone of the nation-state as a uniform community that went beyond India's conspicuous heterogeneity. In Chatterjee's words, "this inner domain of culture is declared the sovereign territory of the nation" while the outer space remains under an intruder's control (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 237). Selvi's relationship with her mother describes the evolution of a naturally talented singer, an undeniably iconic Indian figure, mentored by a local guru and unrelated to academic learning. Secondly, the reader is given a glimpse of Selvi's psychological profile and her relationship with her family when the family first see Lawley Terrace, a house bought by Mohan with the money earned with Selvi's performance in a film. Selvi's mother, brother and sister are delighted with "the dimension of the house", ignoring the fact that it represents the "hauntings" of a major colonial symbol, The East Indian Company, while for the closeted Selvi, "it looks big" (159). It is important to remark that Selvi's husband Mohan, to whom she was married while still an adolescent, is not a partner but a fatherly figure; theirs is an incestuous relationship and she feels too scared to utter a word against her symbolic father, although her mother does not hesitate to welcome their marriage. According to

Hindu tradition, the result of father-daughter incest is the father's beheading and the brother and the sister's (self)castration through asceticism. O'Flaherty explains that through this asceticism they reflect "their staunch disapproval of their father's incestuous overtures to their sister by withdrawing from sexual creation altogether" (110). Selvi has been encroached by an overwhelming patriarchal system, so her family is punished for the agreement. The girl's reaction against the unnatural enslavement is barrenness and a Gandhian passive resistance. Indeed, she reaches an alternative state of her own during the transformative process and, once her mother dies, she resolves into a new nationalist expression of female freedom or, as Chatterjee writes, "a substantialization of cultural differences" (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 238) that emerges as an example of mutual generosity, emulating the Gandhian prototype that Mohan never was. She eventually abandons the British colonial mansion, refuses to be another ghostly apparition that haunts its confines, and thwarts her husband's desire to keep her away from the "contamination of Vinayak Mudali Street" (161).

Selvi symbolises Gandhi's predicament of *Hind Swaraj* or *Indian Home Rule*, through which the Mahatma expounded that the Indian Ancient Civilisation is the Kingdom of God, which is the Kingdom of Love, and that modern Indian people should revert to "their own glorious civilisation" away from foreign influences (Gandhi 5). Selvi returns to her origins, and escapes from her publicly constructed persona, one that forces her to pose as a marketed commodity along with international celebrities in the countless photographs with which Mohan has decorated his house ("Selvi" 158).

Paradoxically enough, Gandhi encouraged women's resistance against male abuses and exploitation while preaching their submission and obedience to caste and class divisions on a religious basis. By supporting the "divine authority of the *Shastras*",

Gandhi accepted the segregationist principles of the *Varnas*¹⁰², which implied a factual differentiation of people according to caste divisions. In Ambedkar's view, far from rejecting the abuses of the caste system, Gandhi preached "the pursuit of ancestral calling irrespective of natural aptitude" (Ambedkar, "A Reply to the Mahatma by Dr B. R. Ambedkar"¹⁰³). Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) amply demonstrates that the Gandhian discourse posed some evident contradictions when confronted with real situations and caste divisions, especially in terms of acquiring knowledge, work and defence opportunities ("A Reply"). For Gandhi, a saintly woman combines her duties to her family with her duties to herself and to God. Furthermore, these activities are blended with the metaphorical fulfilment of her obligations towards the country. This nationalistic portrayal of Indian women elevates their condition from that of simple mothers to a position that, if necessary, pushes them to martyrdom on behalf of national ideals. Ironically, while the Gandhian ideology liberates women from their ancestral perception of themselves as gendered subjects whose fundamental role is breeding and the doing of domestic chores, it enslaves them to a political mission for the progress of the country while they remain anchored in the inner space of the community, the *ghar*, which theoretically provides them with every social satisfaction they could expect. Indeed, this ideology removes from them the specific articulation of a particular subjectivity outside the group. According to Chatterjee, this Gandhian rhetoric is "antimodernist, antiindividualist, even anticapitalist" (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 237). Applying Ramanujan's depiction of a saintly woman to the text of my analysis, I might go as far as to claim that Selvi's rejection of her husband and complete acceptance of her selfless vocation "defies social norms and taboos" ("On Women Saints" 274), since she reveals

¹⁰² Varna is "the pursuit of a calling, which is appropriate to one's natural aptitude" (Ambedkar, "A Reply to the Mahatma by Dr B. R. Ambedkar" n.pag).

¹⁰³ Henceforth, "A Reply".

herself as an independent singer, able to subvert the caste system by doing her singing for any contribution, even for free. In her return to Vinayak Mudali Street¹⁰⁴, Selvi's highly praised singing talent is offered to whoever reaches her family house, challenging the dharmic system of obedience to tradition. As her mother is no longer alive, Selvi orders her husband to leave her and repudiates her status as his wife, abandoning his social and material world, the realm of *bāhir*. Like "an untouchable and a low-caste saint" (Ramanujan 275) she then begins a life of poverty dedicated to her art and her inner world, the spirituality of *ghar* that is now fully compatible with her life in purdah and her self-imposed asceticism. She has escaped her symbolic father to be reborn as a chaste folk singer (O'Flaherty 111) and she empowers herself by becoming a national symbol from a revolutionary female perspective (which nevertheless remains genuinely Indian), but she also presents an ideological challenge both to tradition and modernity, because of her astonishing talent and her refusal to play the market's games: her art is "a rare luxury for most, the citadel having been impregnable all these years; she had been only a hearsay and a myth to most people" ("Selvi" 163-4). Meanwhile, Mohan holds both the traditional and the emerging middle-class opinion that dismisses Selvi as a fool who is "ruining her life" ("Selvi" 164). Indeed, Selvi's selflessness follows the classic female patterns of abandonment and sacrifice described above: she accomplishes what Nancy calls "the community commune" (*The Inoperative Community* 51): by transforming herself into a heroine, Selvi serves as a mediating vehicle between the sublime with which she has spiritual communion and the experience of this sublime by her audience. She represents an essential innovation for the language of myth (51), a new female mode of speech that talks about selflessness, inclusion and plain generosity that does not discriminate between

¹⁰⁴ Although poverty-stricken and mosquito-infested, the street where Selvi's family lives in Malgudi bears a name that reveals its ancient origins. Mudali, a Tamil term, was a title bestowed upon top-ranking officials and army officers in medieval India. See Thieme, 80-1.

people on the basis of caste or class: “what was good for [my mother] is good for me too” (163), she retorts to Mohan.

Narayan’s humour depicts Mohan, the follower of Gandhi, as utterly out of his wits. Mohan accuses Selvi of being “truculent or voluble” after so many years of behaving according to “what she was taught” (“Selvi” 163) and of “frittering away her art” (164). He holds that Selvi’s prominence derives from her obligation to her husband, as Hindu tradition also dictates. Paradoxically, her innovative traits come not from traditional female renunciation or any return to origins but from another existential dimension: she is newly born into a myth – her *I* – that operates as a public service for the well-being of others – the *Thou*, which invokes her mother’s selfless teachings of folk music and the altruistic performance of a classless nationalism. Selvi epitomises an essentialist representation of Hindu folk music and female spirituality that renews Malgudian society on the grounds of ancient myths and female assertiveness (Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 51).

Accordingly, the three women whose lives are dedicated to an artistic career or to public performances find their liberation, renewal and empowerment after allaying the intimate fears instilled in them by their male “oppressors” and after shedding their object-like existences. They embody public symbols – the *Thou* – that unite and totalise traditional discourses once their subjectivity (their condition as singular beings) has achieved effective detachment from the public space – their *I*. This public sphere, a traditionally agentive male space, is transformed by this new female condition and the nationalist inventions applied to the discourse of myth. The New Woman, the *Naba Nari*, has gained social status and carved out a niche within a petrified social space that has

benefited only the traditional respectable woman, the *bhadramahila*¹⁰⁵, who now can openly claim for herself the enjoyment and practice of dance and singing without carrying the old stigmas. This new woman has access to education and is conscious of her cultural background. However, she remains attached to a traditional discourse that must also be passed on to “a new race of human beings” who can break the chains of a slave mentality (Lakshmi 198).

Narayan’s works abound with committed Gandhian women of this type: they are ready to give up on the roles of mothers and wives in order to succeed in a political fight that bridges the gap between traditional Indian society and contemporary women’s personal development. As explained earlier, the Hindu concept *dvaita* lies behind the notion of the deity which retains both genders that operate independently, and in this case, the new ideologeme¹⁰⁶ – the space between the original writings and their subsequent interpreters – unites myth and the modern discourse of nationalism, a discourse that envisions a new society based on reinterpretation of the myths, whereby the alienated female subject changes into “an autonomous subject” (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 128), and the ideal of spiritual achievement is promoted through its association with Indian nationalism. Heroes and heroines are compared in equal terms with the old deities. The gap between the *I* and the *Thou* is textually bridged and their spaces overlap. The divine gender duality is thus transferred to this new Indian nation that must now improve its people’s education and show that individuals can “use for themselves the benefits of formal learning” (128). This achievement specifically addresses women who, from now on, associate their own educational improvement with

¹⁰⁵ *Bhadramahila*: The upper or middle-class Hindu educated women who traditionally were Brahman women. The present analysis underlines the importance of their status not so much from the caste perspective but from their formal education. (*Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*).

¹⁰⁶ Ideologeme defined as “the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes” (Jameson 61).

the attainment of personal freedom. The concept of the *I* inspired by a self that is not female but male produces a purely symbolic female subject who is now able to act on her own and the resulting *I* is in fact displaced to the womanly Other, the traditional *Thou* or the divine space. The figurative meaning of the sign is fractured in order to reveal its primeval symbolism: the place of the divinity, *Shākta*, the female power and its representative goddess, Durga, who embodies the perfect energy and an ideological purity, are reinterpreted either as a manifestation of *Māya*, a delusive and unreachable but unified being, or as a double expression of the destructive/creative female Other embodied by the goddess Kali. As C. S. Lakshmi asserts, the Hindu mother goddess is not the representation of a motherly deity but “an independent entity standing by herself. She has both benign as well as fearsome aspects” (3). Thus, Narayan’s women desert their subjective condition as traditional females in order to inhabit a liminal space that opens a debate on their symbolic objectification and social roles.

Narayan’s postcolonial representation of the female subject blends characteristic Gandhian qualities with this gender alterity. The outcome is a paradoxical woman who confronts her caste affiliation and an emergent social personality that is not compatible with her traditional womanliness but, on the contrary, shows a strong determination that is more typically ascribable to maleness. Bharati, the central character in *Waiting for the Mahatma*¹⁰⁷ (1955) and Daisy, the protagonist in *The Painter of Signs* (1976) are examples of these socio-political transformations, both located in Malgudi.

These two young women have in common an obscure background in terms of caste and alternative education provided by emergent ideological groups, which are in theory alien to their family’s origins, such as the *Sevak Sangh*, a Gandhian foundation for the eradication of untouchability, in Bharati’s case (*Waiting* 488) or the “missionary

¹⁰⁷ Henceforth, *Waiting*.

organization” that provided shelter and education for Daisy after she ran away from a child marriage (*The Painter* 121). In *Waiting*, the Mahatma has adopted Bharati¹⁰⁸ after her parents’ death. She calls him *Bapuji* and blindly follows his recommendations. The organisation of the Gandhian camp obeys the norms of a military site: there is a body of guards, the *Chalaks*, who must be asked for permission to move around the encampment after certain hours. “There is such a thing as discipline in every camp” (486). Bharati is the female manifestation of a political project that reproduces a hierarchical order based on a blind faith in the teachings of the Mahatma, who has now been lifted to the position of “the Great Presence” (492). She unquestionably submits her decisions to the Mahatma’s judgement and the *Sevak Sangh* group’s rule: “I do whatever I am asked to do” (488). Actually, Bharati belongs to the Gandhian Swaraj movement, just as before she could have belonged to a husband and his joint family. Accordingly, her will is bound to the Mahatma’s as is her intellect, her clothes, and her diet; there is no freedom in her choices but a radical ideology that occupies the space of a potential individual agency. She is another colonised subject, this time colonised by the nationalist discourse. Thus, when the Mahatma asks her to go to prison, she joyfully embraces the idea: “How can we do anything other than what Bapuji asks us to do?” (557). Narayan depicts this young daughter of India as completely surrendered to this nationalist construction, having sacrificed the possibility of her individuality, her self-questioning *I*, to the supposedly unassailable political project, which in turn takes the place of the revered Superior Being, the *Thou*, in a process that reproduces what Chatterjee describes as the “women of the lower classes who were culturally incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom” (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 129) and who eventually got involved in politics. According to Chatterjee, the new nationalistic responsibilities given to women followed a modern

¹⁰⁸ The name translates as “the daughter of India”.

patriarchal model that without breaking any law submitted them to a “coercive authority” exercised through “the subtle force of persuasion” (130). It is a father-state / daughter-servant relationship of power in which there is no possibility of equality.

It is precisely this quasi-religious militancy that persuades Narayan’s female characters, elevating them above the average illiterate Indian woman while giving them a meaningful purpose in life: people now have to be enlightened about their true dharma. This new woman must learn about her patriotic duties towards the nation and she embodies a female army that has the mission of spreading this new language amongst the rest. Bharati is not a revolutionary female but an obedient soldier. She is enrolled in the *swadeshi* – self-sufficiency – and the “Quit India” movements while she takes care of thirty orphan children for whom she is the only mother figure. For five years she has been engaged to Sriram who has blindly followed her as “a political worker”, even in prison, in the hope of marrying her. Regarding Bharati and Sriram as a couple, Naik comments that “perhaps Freudianism alone can explain why the intelligent, able and domineering Bharati (who evidently has an outsize maternal complex) should at all feel drawn to this totally unheroic hero” (42). I argue that Bharati’s maternal drive, her essential condition that fits the symbol of the nourishing cow, finds in Sriram – a completely inexperienced orphan – the perfect son to raise according to the teachings of Gandhism. She feeds him with the experiences of her socio-political Indian world while she shapes his male identity in reference to her commanding persona as a wife-to-be. Thus, after obtaining Gandhi’s “blessed permission to marry” him (655), and released from any doubt, Bharati “bowed her head and flushed and fidgeted” in such a way that the Mahatma exclaimed: “Ah, that is a sign of a dutiful bride” (656). This private scene between the Mahatma and the couple takes place just before Gandhi is killed “on the prayer ground” (655). The image describes Bharati as an idealised Indian woman who has perfected herself through foster

motherhood, renunciation and sacrifice. She now embodies a project that unifies the Mahatma's colonial past and India's postcolonial future, only made possible because she is outside traditional Indian society and is able to experience other alternatives through her political commitment. Narayan intimates that the attachment to Gandhian ideology has allowed Bharati to develop an affective relationship with her future husband that would have been unthinkable in a traditional Indian family that did not allow personal choices. Bharati's maternal identity is pre-formed on a nationalist key while Sriram's personal and professional future is still uncertain. This archetypal new woman is educated and able to fulfil the roles assigned to her, especially child rearing and service to her husband, while the male is expected to construct his reality, being in possession of his alternatives, which is where Bharati and Sriram do not conform, since his path is not secure. Following Ahmad's ideas, Bharati is sufficiently free to make fundamental choices for [herself], provoking a change in a stagnant Indian mentality that can only understand that this liberty comes from those who "have no 'proper' place in that society" (117). Indeed, she has been brought up as a true pariah: she has nothing of her own, everything she collects is for the Gandhian cause and her future appears to be sealed by the *Swaraj* movement. Nevertheless, Narayan humorously subverts this apparent freedom of choice with the Mahatma's final words to the couple, words that decide their future: "Anyway you are not to put off your marriage for any reason, remember" (*Waiting* 657). Gandhi enacts a patriarchal authority that leaves no doubts about his superior, almost sacred command, which lingers on the youths' minds long after his death. By opening a space for love and marriage, or, in other words, for the subjective and the symbolic, Narayan breaks the totalitarian obedience to a political cause, however idealistic this might be, and allows the entrance of the unconscious into the untold narrative, in the form of a historical assassination that changed the course of India's politics.

In some ways, Bharati is the predecessor of Daisy, the social worker from the Family Planning Association who serves on a national programme of sterilisation and birth control deployed by Indira Gandhi's government and overseen by Indira Gandhi's son, Sanjay Gandhi, in 1976. Sanjay Gandhi maintained that half of the problems of India might be solved if the population number was controlled. The programme used, among other means, local teachers to survey the territory and spot the families that most likely fit into the programme's aims by "collect[ing] data and statistics" from the registers. However, not all teachers approved of the sterilisation campaign, and there were voices which challenged the government's orders (Guha, *India After Gandhi* 516). In *The Painter*, we find a village teacher arguing against Daisy's zeal for birth control: "I agree that some control over population is necessary, but I feel its evil is exaggerated" (55). This novel by Narayan suggests that there was overwhelming opposition from traditional communities to letting governmental policy rule over family matters, even if those policies formed part of the government's health programmes. Daisy has developed a more elaborate ideology than Bharati since she is committed to working daily in the field of family planning and the socioeconomic problems that were revealed after independence. Daisy is one of the thousands of young volunteers that spread Indira Gandhi's populist slogan *Garibi Hatao*, "Remove Poverty", around the countryside during the 1971 electoral campaign. This slogan was addressed to the "landless and low castes [who] voted en masse for the Congress (R), as did the Muslims" (TNN, *Times of India*). The "mother of the nation", Indira Gandhi had a victory even bigger than that of her father, Nehru, so she maintained and improved his initial programmes on family planning. She won the opportunity to fully implement those economic reforms, which were focused on poor rural and urban contingents. As a symbolic motherly government, the programmes' intentions were to improve education, sanitation and health care and to teach basic skills

in areas including mother and child welfare skills which theoretically would enable those contingents to grow out of poverty. Although these are Daisy's socio-political concerns, she is not a politician but a government technician. Her mindset is that of an educated middle-class woman committed to a social project and concerned with the country's socio-economic struggles. Daisy chooses a professional career that allows her to act against those "biases in education development" that have traditionally favoured the housewife and child-bearer roles for women rather than viewing Indian girls as potential "wage-earners" (Guha, *India After Gandhi* 515). This explains why a priest from a tiny village rebukes Daisy for "propagating sinful practices", stating that "Our Shastras say that the more children in a home the more blessed it becomes. Do you want to dispute it?" (*The Painter* 58).

Despite the fact that the popular *Garibi Hatao* campaign succeeded in providing Gandhi's government with a sound parliamentary victory, it eventually failed in the fulfilment of its objectives, especially in the reducing of "class antagonisms in India". Indira Gandhi "resorted to deficit financing, much of it made possible through an expansion of money supply" that indebted the country to foreign capital without improving the masses' deprived situation (Kumara and Jones, *WSWS*)¹⁰⁹. The novel depicts how different parties are unable to comprehend Daisy: on the one hand, the caste system speaks through a village priest ("a mistress who wishes to remain barren and preach the same philosophy to the whole world", *The Painter* 61) and on the other hand, the misogynistic fiancé who interprets her as a kind of castrating mare,¹¹⁰ "devoid of

¹⁰⁹ The number of suicides in the rural areas has kept growing as a consequence of a substantial indebtedness, loss of the villages' specific agricultural relevance, lack of opportunities for economic development and effective policies for agrarian diversification. If India's rural population lives in some 638,000 villages and constitutes 72.2% of the total amount of people, the problem of demography remains a serious touchstone of any governments' policies as it has a direct impact on literacy rates and effective employment ("Population of India 2015").

¹¹⁰ The late Vedas elaborated another female model. Now the woman constitutes a "complex of dualities" derived from her blood, which "produces female seed and milk". A woman is simultaneously erotic, symbolising "the mare, whose power is centred upon the vagina", and procreative, the cow whose power resides in her breast (O'Flaherty 33).

erotic feelings” towards him and unenthusiastic about his pretension to marry her (O’Flaherty 83). Raman fails to understand Daisy’s fight on behalf of birth control; he wonders “what freakish experience or trauma might be responsible for this sort of unmitigated antagonism to conception” (70). The critic Shantha Krishnaswamy largely concurs with this view, describing Daisy as “a dangerous, disruptive, and fanatical nun wedded to her goal” (“Daisy Paints Her Signs Otherwise” 115) even though, despite her indefatigable militancy, she is receptive to Raman’s amorous approaches and more friendly and supportive to Raman’s aunt, Laxmi, than to her own nephew, respecting and accepting the aunt’s traditional values and recognising her right to ownership, something that Raman stubbornly denies. In Daisy’s case, self-regard is simply out of question: “I cannot afford to have a personal life” (*The Painter* 139). Hers is a life devoted to a social cause, whether in India or elsewhere, reproducing some characteristics of the lives of saintly women and the martial life of a soldier. Bharati shares with Daisy this Vedic definition of a woman. They are both obedient to a superior cause, and therefore symbolically obliged to submit to a patriarchal design even if this design results in a travestied mother figure: Bharati nourishes her foster children while she looks forward to creating a family with Sriram, where, as O’Flaherty puts it, her blood will become milk and her womb the basin for the golden ghee transferred to her through her husband’s blood-seed (O’Flaherty 33). Thus, she represents the motherly sacred cow duly tamed by the power of the bull. Daisy, on the other hand, fights for her sexual independence and for the preservation of her ideology against Raman’s traditional thinking. She is the feared *vagina dentata* that devours male fluids and exchanges them for “nonsexual blood” (33). In opposition to the sacred cow, Daisy symbolises the profane mare that “eats her child (and her husband)” and whose eroticism is infertile and poisonous (247), negative

Accordingly, the mare often represents negative aspects of femininity, such as sexual aggression, the fearful capability to devour, passion or internal fire. The mare is also the proto-Indo-European representation of a powerful Goddess (79).

connotations that also arose in the previous analysis of Narayan's female characters, Rosie and Rangī. The critic S. R. Ramtāke refers to these female characters and concludes that Narayan's weakness is his lack of conviction, a failing that he projects onto his characters: "Narayan shies away from the world which by its portrayal might arouse controversy or antagonism" (100). Ramtāke underlines Daisy as a representative of "the women's lib-movement", one who tries to improve women's realities with her "cherished ideals, established institutions and accepted values". Ramtāke asserts that Daisy "would have been the most memorable woman in the modernized town of Malgudi had Narayan not twisted her character and mixed it with some old mythological story" (102). However, the problem is that Ramtāke seems to have read the novel as if the narrator were Narayan and not Raman, whose misogynistic values seep into his descriptions of Daisy's social activities. It is Raman who brings into the novel his mythic conception of society, which lies behind his apparent rational thinking. Indeed, Raman reflects on Daisy: "Thank God, she is only concerned with births and not death. Otherwise she'll be pestering Yama¹¹¹ to take away more people each day" (*The Painter* 57). Like the goddess Devi (also Durga), Daisy behaves like a man disguised in the shape of a woman in order to achieve an objective typically pursued by men, which in Devi's case is to kill the demon Mahisha¹¹² (O'Flaherty 71) and in this case is an uncontrolled birth rate that undermines any government's attempt to alleviate the rural communities' poverty. Although Narayan uses the male characters to comically expose the harsh critical resistance that met these women's social activities, he also mocks certain radical features behind Indira Gandhi's governments. As *bhadramahilas*, women must step forward to conquer the outer world,

¹¹¹ Yama is the master of the kingdom of Death.

¹¹² The gods granted Mahisha immunity from everyone, becoming invincible at once, but he forgot to include in his request the god's protection from women. Therefore, when he became a threat to the universe, the gods united their male fluids to create Devi in order to kill the asura, who was beheaded by the goddess, which is an act of symbolic castration (O'Flaherty 207).

the *bāhir*, and fight men's prejudices with the aid of what seems to be a typically masculine attitude: "the precise business-like automaton, functioning within an iron frame of logicity – cold and aloof like an eagle circling high up in the skies" (*The Painter* 137). Ramtake argues that, although Daisy is a young modern woman that values above all her "independent individuality", Narayan has failed "to understand the rationale behind modernity in women" (102). I am nevertheless convinced, however, that Narayan in fact uses the symbolic language of myth to ridicule Raman's stagnated mentality and non-committal attitude, an attitude that is typical of the male world Narayan so vividly depicts, a society detached from Daisy's practical involvement in India's real problems: Raman speaks, for example of "The Boardless – that solid, real world of sublime souls who minded their own business" (*The Painter* 143) in contrast with Daisy's committed one. According to Ramtake, such ridicule is included because the author wishes to detach himself from the narration, "possibly because Narayan does not like to disturb the old cherished ideals of the Hindu society" (103). The present analysis, however, shows that Narayan's style is far from obvious and that his "extreme mistrust of life", as Ramtake puts it, his alleged reluctance to create a "face saving device" for his average and his ordinary characters, his need "to prevent the average and the ordinary from triumphing" (104), all reproduce Kirpal Signs' arguments explored in the previous chapter. In fact, I would argue that Narayan's writings elevate his characters to a level of perception that enables them to acknowledge their personal flaws from a perspective that is hardly imaginable in "the average and the ordinary" subjects. In short, they are treated as godly beings who possess a transient human existence for the time being, before they return to heaven.

In this case, the narratives' imagery reproduces language that is mythical in origin and through which women become essential objects of devotion. The *Shakta* transmutes

itself into an agentive power exercised by women, a female essence that is invested with Durga's qualities and that finds a new purpose: the symbolic destruction of Mahishasura, which here is interpreted as a traditional social evil directed against women. This fight against misogynistic attitudes grants women's activities a privileged position in the national project while it safeguards their iconic representation as mothers and housewives at the centre of the joint-family system. Although these women perceive their transformations as individuals and as citizens, they also realise that the nation in general and their society in particular are not ready to give them a "place of respectability" within a shifting society defined by the dynamics of the new global economy (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 153). They learn to distrust the masculine nationalist discourse that opportunistically uses them to speed up the shift from British colonial rule to democracy, and in response, they construct a female space that keeps a prudential distance from the male *Other*, the outer social space that remains fundamentally masculine and that sees them as sexualised objects interfering with their goals. In fact, the nationalist discourse deliberately revives these mythic alterities, which retain the Hindu "spiritual distinctiveness", as the expression of "true identity" (120). The critic Krishnaswamy explains that Daisy, for example, could represent any traditional woman given that "the Indian woman acquires identity through repression", and that Daisy objects to an imposed marriage due to "the conjunction of her identity with her [female] anatomy" ("Daisy Paints Her Signs Otherwise" 117). She reluctantly marches "like a soldier" in front of the bridegroom "to be inspected" by his family, but when her mother orders her to make obeisance and "prostrate [herself] on the ground", she refuses doing it simply because she has "always hated the notion of a human being prostrating at the feet of another" (*The Painter* 103-4). Daisy mixes up masculine features with a gentle rationality that prevents her from betraying Raman's proposals: "Married life is not for

me. I have thought it over. It frightens me. I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live except alone. It won't work" (139). The character exhibits a mythic trait that is not only Hindu but a hybridised fictional amalgamation from eastern and western literatures. She acts like the Goddess Ganga, making an unnegotiable demand while producing a cooling effect on Raman's desires: "If you want to marry me, you must leave me to my own plans even when I am a wife" (124). In principle, she obtains Raman's explicit acceptance, who compares their relationship with this mythological ideologue, in an exchange which Ramtake misinterprets as Narayan's unfortunate mixture of the female character with the mythic origins of the *Mahabharata* (102). Indeed, Raman consciously alludes to the *Bhakti* literature with its ironic reference to childbirth and family planning: "whatever you say, I will never interfere. I won't question you. I will be like the ancient king Santhanu"¹¹³ (125). Here, Narayan's novel operates on a new dimension, one inspired by the *Bhakti* literature and that renews the commonplace language of myth while it adapts it to contemporary circumstances. Raman's sly reference to the mythological character of Ganga shows however his limited understanding of the myth and his fiancé's motivations: Ganga acts in solidarity with the *vasus*, avoiding them the suffering of a human existence, while Narayan sublimates this divine female stance into Daisy's cooperative quest in favour of women's welfare. Contrary to Ramtake's opinion, Narayan's allusion to myth, it seems to me, a humorous attribution to the goddess Ganga of some feminist foray into birth control. Above all, Daisy is selflessly working for the education of women and families, so they can better shape children's

¹¹³ King Santhanu was the head of the Mahabharata's epic dynasties. He married a maiden on the condition that she should be "absolutely free to do what [she] like[s]. At no stage should you ever question my action" (Narayan, *Mahabharata* 1). Immediately after the birth of their sons, she drowned the babies one after another, until totally bewildered, the king condemned his wife's "monstrous habit". This rebuke saved the life of the eighth child, at which point the mother calmly revealed her divine origin: "know me as Ganga, the deity of this river". She departed with the child until he was a youth and upon his return, he entered the world of men. The children were eight *vasus*, Indra's attendants, who were condemned for their sins to be born as human. Ganga saved them at birth and all returned to heaven except the last one, who lived a life of celibacy on earth (2).

minds according to nationalist designs; like Ganga, she is doing them a favour, so they might have alternatives to the curse of a life of poverty and hard toil. Raman, however, resists “intervention in the reproductive lives of the poor” (Donner 33), simply because he follows the official discourse and fails to see high birth rates as a useful source of cheap labour for the maintenance of the status quo. For him, women and their sexual relations should not be the object of inquiry or debate, since their *raison d’être* is providing assistance to their husband and perpetuating their families.

Alongside the eastern cultural allusions that are active here, Narayan looks to the west. He plays with Daisy’s name, which for the Aunt it is meaningless and foreign and for Raman is simply “the name of a flower” (115), which he has never seen and cannot envisage. The word “daisy” is a cultural index in western literature, however, and its presence can be traced back to Old English (“daeges ege”, “day’s eye”), where it is a symbol of virginity and chastity, identified by Geoffrey Chaucer with Alcestis, the most faithful of women who renounced her young life in order to save her husband’s (*The Legend of Good Women* 4). Paradoxically, the daisy has also been interpreted as a symbol of the transient, inconsistent nature of womanly love and it is against this background that different characters express distrust about the character who bears the name. As Pier Paolo Piciuccio rightly points out, Narayan’s Daisy conveys three contradictory aspects that expose her hybrid nature: “myth, political situation (Indira Gandhi) and social changes (the fight for women’s emancipation)” (174). The critic notices that Daisy is not “a recommendable example” from a traditional perspective. Narayan has consciously introduced a conflicting subject to arouse a gender debate that necessarily ends up with the separation of those who could never have been united, as Raman and Daisy finally separate.

For Krishnaswami, Daisy and Raman's relationship impoverishes them because they fail to bridge the gulf between "female sexuality and identity" and "their equivalence in the other sex" (121). However, this critic fails to notice that in Daisy's case there is a careful evaluation of her fiancé's support towards her quest while Raman only thinks of bringing her down to his masculine world. She is bullied and almost raped before she accepts Raman as her *Gandharva* husband (*The Painter* 124). Still, she decides to give him a chance while Raman ignores her professional drive, and just pursues his ideal of a married life. Certainly, the denouement is positive since the two characters discover who they really are through their unlikely relationship: Daisy ratifies her social commitment with a growing ambition that demands full-time participation in real economic policies, while Raman asserts his traditional masculinity beyond his feelings towards a modern woman. Selfishly enough, he does not choose a life of commitment to his country, as Sriram does for Bharati in *Waiting*, but instead resumes his life as an accommodated bachelor. This novel presents two characters better defined by experience with a more mature perception of the social niche they inhabit, especially Daisy, who clings fast to her active role of feminine accomplishment. There is an evolution towards consciousness and free choice that liberates them from their past. Daisy is able to reconcile her masculine and feminine sides into an androgynous subject that typifies both possibilities at once; she has reshaped the concept of the Indian family, making it more functional for every party. She thus begins ratifying her future at the particular historical moment she is living, a point in time which Nandy defines as the "shifting point of crisis and the time for choice" (*The Intimate Enemy* 62). Narayan's Gandhian women exhibit a profile of womanly assertiveness that meets strong opposition from the very society they attempt to improve, a society that places them on the fringes. They move between a subjective social commitment and a marginal class, ready to disappear.

The erosion of Indian identity caused by a material approach to modernity is also counteracted by the personification of the nation in the body of a symbolic Indian Woman. In mythological terms, this symbolic woman is now Sati, the epitome of “womanly virtues” (Spivak, “Moving Devi” 138) and the perfect sacrificial offering. Shiva’s wife is the mythic component of Indian identity that addresses women’s subjective organisation and objective classification within the nationalist context. Sati is an archetype that retains, through her status as daughter of the Earth, a female will which is exclusively her own. Her devotion towards her husband, Shiva, is such that her father’s insulting of Shiva gives her cause to commit suicide. Killing herself does not improve her relationship with Shiva of course, but, on the contrary, definitively breaks her marriage with him (Kinsley 41). Therefore, Sati ceases to be a devoted wife and becomes an ideal prototype that lies beneath the patriarchal definition of women according to Hindu tradition.

The Practical Expression of Traditions in R. K. Narayan’s Women:

I. *The Dark Room (1938)*

The women characters created by Narayan that I have analysed so far have been devoted to social activities at the expense of their private relationships. Despite the fact that they are essentially public women standing for successful artistry, residual enslavement and political involvement, their daily lives are invariably divided into “*ghar* and *bāhir*”, the inner and outer spaces that depict “the spiritual” and “the material” (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 120). As *ghar* and *bāhir* are essential and idiosyncratically Indian cultural concepts, they are also noticeable in the female archetypes found in *The Dark Room* (1938): the dutiful mother, Savitri and the

seductress, Shanta Bai, who are duly objectified by their male central axis, Ramani. Essentially, Savitri is the traditional illiterate submissive woman, full of fears and regrets, whereas Shanta Bai is a college-educated worker burdened with a traumatic past. The polarisation of these female types accounts for each of the discursive patterns: these women simultaneously embody affirmation and negation, generosity and selfishness. Moreover, from a mythic conception of society, the patriarchal family is unquestionably behind these female characters. Savitri and Shanta Bai are two sides of the same coin, who, as John Thieme writes, both negotiate “the middle ground between myth and modernity” (51). Both are economically dependent on Ramani who symbolically represents the protective/oppressive patriarchal state that is gradually waking up to modern economic theories of social development and gender equality. These women’s responsibilities remain anchored to Ramani’s decisions and both are ultimately subservient to his will. Although their education is completely different, they have similar backgrounds in other respects. Both were married to the wrong man when they were still children. Savitri has given birth to three children and fulfils her motherly role impeccably, yet provokes her husband’s deprecation: Ramani considers her a lousy housewife and rationalises his disloyalty to her and the children based on the assumption that his economic support justifies the asymmetrical relationship of power. Savitri and the children are symbolic, since their economic dependence places them in a nondescript position of dutiful representation, and since the narrative delves into traditional female controversies, showing the traditional limited capacity of women to change their individual situations. Narayan depicts a changing India that cannot provide women with economic alternatives.

A westernised Shanta Bai thinks that education is “a nonsense” since “it leaves [the women] as badly unemployed as the men” (*The Dark Room* 334). However, Narayan

ironically reflects a global reality that Shanta Bai reduces to her particular historical moment. Accordingly, the two women, from opposite perspectives, see economic independence in a male-centred world as something unachievable. Like the rest of characters, they are socially bound to the archetype imposed upon them. Economic pressures force a social change that results from the transformation of a primitive production-oriented society into an industrially competitive one. Women are also required to join this new society and some of the traditional patriarchal barriers are thus dissolved in order to give room to a new female type: a family-detached worker whose salary benefits the family. In a sarcastic vein, Narayan's narrative reveals the material flaws of patriarchal ideology through Ramani's discourse on Indian women. Ramani compares the "spiritual eminence" of traditional women, "who mustn't attempt to ape the Western women" (*The Dark Room* 378), with the chaos in which modern women live because "a woman's primary duty (also a divine privilege) [is] being a wife and a mother" (378). In this case, Savitri exemplifies the symbolic middle-class housewife's ideology. Socially suppressed and personally negligible, her behaviour complies with the male's ideation of female perfection. Her subjective value resides outside herself; it comes from an objectified evaluation of her routines made by others; consequently, if she fails to reproduce the roles she has been assigned – mother and housewife – with cheerfulness and self-sacrifice, she loses her objectified importance as a married woman and becomes a shameful burden for her group as well. In *My Days*, Narayan writes about the opposite roles of Woman and Man:

Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature, and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. (114)

Narayan's analysis is significant for two reasons: firstly, it describes his personal concern for the gender struggle from the beginning of his career. He shows his awareness about the particular situation of Indian women and the way men have manipulated their social value. Secondly, it explains in a way why the novel is "the most surprising, though by no means the most accomplished", in Thieme's opinion (43). The *Dark Room* exemplifies Narayan's distinctive style of portraying undecided or spineless characters that in Ramtane's view "run away only to return home thoroughly chastened accepting defeat in life" (96), which is one way of seeing a psychological maturation into a tough reality. From a modern perspective, the novel's feminism is clearly insufficient and in this sense the text is marked by time. However, the characters' ambiguity comes from Narayan's treatment of the language of myth. He twists the traditional interpretation of the *Bhakti* literature, which in this case makes reference to the *Mahabharata*, resolving the plot in the only plausible way to attain a discursive verisimilitude that can represent Indian women's reality. Savitri falls somewhere between two female choices that exist within the *bhadramahila's* sphere: the choices represented by her female friends Gangu and Janamma, whose paths reflect modernity and tradition respectively. This is an important aspect that Naik's definition of the storyline as a "little storm in a colourless domestic cup more than slightly cracked" (23) seems to miss: Savitri is neither one nor the other, while the paths are clear for reasons related to the husband's ideology in Gangu's case and for reasons of age in Janamma's. Gangu's husband supports his wife's working initiatives while Ramani's abusive mentality conceives of Savitri only as a mother and housewife, and Janamma, for her part, preaches the traditional discourse in favour of women's enslavement to family and husband.

The novel moves along two fundamental axes of Indian society: gender roles and motherhood. Savitri cannot satisfy the social strictures imposed on her, especially given

her husband's maltreatment of her, which reaches its climax when he has a love affair with Shanta Bai. Indeed, Savitri is overwhelmed by sadness and her desire to drown herself in the river answers her aesthetic need to embody the mythic ideal of a perfect Indian housewife: her immolation is her means of earning some social respect. Since she is unable to do severe penances for her husband's sake, as the idealised tragic heroines never failed to do, and since she cannot exert self-control over her emotions as her divine counterpart invariably did, ideologically, Savitri turns into a flawed subject and, in social terms, becomes redundant. Although Ramani's actions are wrong, the moral debt is borne by Savitri: she feels responsible for her husband's extramarital adventure. To break this vicious circle she needs courage and physical endurance, but this she clearly lacks and it is not surprising that she accepts her condition as a conformist, a valueless possession, which is precisely what is expected from her. Ironically, Savitri's social redundancy reinforces her self-perception as a mother and housewife who belongs to the modern category of *bhadramahilas*. These middle-class women are considered "natural, unproblematic and apolitical sites of privilege" (Donner 34) in comparison to other types of women from lower classes who can subvert the gender order: after Ponni's husband, Mari, rescues Savitri from drowning in the Sarayu and Ponni gives Savitri shelter in their hovel in Sukkur, the Untouchables' town made of "a hundred houses and six streets" (385), Ponni offers Savitri what little she has, feeling honoured to have such an important lady in their hut. For Ponni, Savitri is a purifying blessing cast on the marginal milieu of the Untouchables. In Thieme's view, this couple "are sentimentalised to a point where the text's apparent attempt at a progressive portrayal of lower-caste life falls as flat as the putative feminism" (51). Actually, after hearing Savitri's rosary of sorrows, Ponni gives her some sound advice about how to treat men, which could certainly be read as maudlin, but contrary to Thieme's analysis, I hold that the sub-plot does not attempt a reflection on

feminism or female sisterhood at all and does it attempt a progressive portrayal of working class life: the text rather displays a parodic inversion of genders based on the couple's names (the man is called Mari, which sounds female, and the woman Ponni, which sounds as the name of a little horse), while hinting, once more, at the symbol of the binary castrating mare versus the motherly cow described in the Vedic literature, since Ponni is barren after twenty years of marriage (387); she has prayed to every deity, personifying the tragic folk songs in Tamil that compare these women "to barren trees, dry rivers, and unfertile soil" (Laskmi 187).

The desire for procreation is deeply rooted in the ancient Hindu culture, as is the symbol of the mare whose devouring fire is quenched by cows (O'Flaherty 233). In the *Ritusamhara* and Kalidasa's early work "Malavika and Agnimitra", the poet invokes the famous reputation of the Ashoka tree against sterility – the tree's name means the one that takes away all sorrows. The poem is set in the palace garden of king Agnimitra. Two maidens are talking about how "a favourite Ashoka tree is in late blossoming" (Ryder, *Kalidasa. Translations of Shakuntala, and Other Works* 112). It seems that this tree "can be induced to put forth blossoms if touched by the foot of a beautiful woman in splendid garments". The king's favourite kicks the tree instead of the Queen and it finally blossoms (Ryder 112). According to tradition, the tree symbolises Kama, the God of Love; it is related to the *Ramayana* and Sita's longings for her husband, Rama, in the Ashoka grove where Hanuman finds her. It is also believed that Buddha was born under the shelter of an Ashoka tree and the tree is therefore involved in rituals for female fertility: if it is gently kicked by the foot dyed red and "clad in clinking anklets" of a beautiful woman, "the lust for procreation rushes through the Ashoka tree", so she eventually satisfies her "longing to conceive" (Dwivedi 251).

Figuratively, the Dalit Ponni's burning desire connotes the traditionally negative traits in a woman: belligerence, resoluteness and female cunning, all of which recalls the Southern Indian myth of Renuka¹¹⁴, the goddess of the fallen: Ponni symbolises a chaste mind in the polluted body of an Untouchable (O'Flaherty 236) and her repressed passion denotes the "destructive force of rigid chastity breaking out in lust and hatred" (234). The myth would suggest that she should be released from this state, what in the language of myth is her condition as a mare, if she turns into a fertile cow by having a male son, which would be the fitting response to Shiva's anger for the immolation of Sita in the pyre: the mare-fire is the basis of Shiva's *viraha*, which derives from a mixture of a suppressed passion and an excess of asceticism, that eventually ends up in the fusion of husband and wife into one single space, the androgyne (234). In Ponni and Mari's case, the passion and the excess of asceticism are substituted by abject poverty.

Although this sub-plot challenges Ramtake's affirmation that being from "a conservative Hindu family, Narayan could not help portraying characters of the same class and caste of which he is a member" (96), it certainly shows the influence of Narayan's Hindu background on the hidden structures of the text. Ponni firmly defends Savitri from herself and from Ponni's wretched surroundings, creating a current of inter-caste female affection that subverts tradition, in tune with two different social ideas: on the one hand, there exists the possibility of a female solidarity that goes beyond old concepts such as caste and pollution, if the upper class woman wants to overcome her caste prejudices; and, on the other hand, Ponni seems to be acting as a faithful devotee that wants to obtain the boon of fertility from this goddess-like woman: "I will remember

¹¹⁴ Renuka was a chaste and devoted wife but once she had a lustful thought. Her ascetic husband, a sage called Jamadagni, who had the power to burn anyone to ashes, condemned her. He also burned the four sons who refused to behead their mother, sparing only the fifth, who beheaded her, for which his father gave him a boon. He asked for the lives of his mother and brothers to be brought back. Miraculously, Renuka returned but as a hybrid goddess, "half Untouchable, half high-caste woman" as punishment for her sin (O'Flaherty 218).

all my life your affection and help”, says Savitri to Ponni, adding “[God] bless you with a child soon!” (406), which is reminiscent of the myth of Renuka and her repressed desire. Nevertheless, Savitri fails to truly value Ponni’s favours and wise advice: she is too immersed in her own particular anguish. She is also oblivious to Ponni’s efforts on her behalf, even though they mean days of heavy toiling. When she is back in her house convinced that her true Dharma is to remain a submissive housewife, she has the opportunity of returning the favours that she has received. However, she fails to demonstrate a generous disposition towards the untouchables, refusing to recognise their kind sacrifice with any form of repayment. Once again, Savitri is unlike the mythic heroine, as she transforms herself into a possession of her husband, ignoring Ponni’s good advice on men: “men are good creatures, but you must never give way to them. Be firm and they will behave” (407). Through these internal discourses, this text reveals Narayan’s disappointment with this stereotypical self-inflicted female victimhood and declares his respect for those who overcome their negative circumstances.

Meanwhile, Savitri’s opponent, a young, middle-class, divorced woman, tries to secure her economic independence after breaking away from a debased family life with a drunkard husband. Adding to her troubles, she has been rejected by her own family who accuse her of having brought shame on all of them. Although Shanta Bai seems to represent modernity and is introduced as an assertive, educated woman chasing a job, she still typifies a stereotyped female role: that of an outstanding beauty who uses her intellect to gain working advantages from an intellectually limited boss or, as Thieme puts it, who achieves her aims mostly “through feminine wiles rather than feminist self-sufficiency” (45). Symbolically, she is strong enough to shed her child-marriage yoke, destroying her bondage with her past and, simultaneously, opening a space for her new autonomous being. In mythological terms, Shanta Bai here invokes Kali’s image, the

mutable symbol of destruction and creation that is necessary for renewal, thus living out the early stages of feminist emancipation emerging with a spectacular *mise-en-scène* of a pretty woman in distress. However, once she becomes a free worker applying for a job, she emulates the seducer Mohini, flattering her boss with her liberated self. Instead of exploring a stronger, defiant agency more in tune with a modern, “westernised” performance, she fits into a timeless and universal stereotype: she becomes a married man’s mistress. Indeed, Shanta Bai reflects the negative aspects of the myth: selfishness, falsehood and materialistic drives, providing a poor illustration of genuine female freedom.

In this novel, the cinema serves as the artistic counterpoint to myth and modernity: while Savitri identifies with the film’s long-suffering traditional Indian wife, Shanta Bai complains about watching yet another film version of the *Ramayana*, when she would have preferred a Hollywood movie. Narayan juxtaposes the two influential cultural forces here – the national and the foreign – that share a unique technological space – the cinema – but that differ in their purposes. In Narayan’s novel, the transmission of the Indian epic genre is consolidated through the oral tradition and strengthened by “a contemporary mass audience” in which Savitri feels included (Dharwadker 180). Simultaneously, western films gain a similar level of popular favour and allure masses of Indian people like Shanta Bai. Both women aim for the visual clichés they find in the films in order to reaffirm their individual choices and help them to sublimate their own frustrated emotions through identification with the films’ heroines.

Narayan’s representation of Indian womanhood illustrates the imprecise definition of the social status of women within the nation. His narrative comprises a gallery of hybridised subjects: emerging from an “original speech” of pure symbols that represent

the nation's primeval mythology uttered from a postcolonial reinterpretation of its ancient past, his women characters make partial, incomplete references to both their Hindu, caste-divided society and their incipient, worldly "modernity". In this sense, Spivak describes the early Hindu-English writers as novelists who narrated the nation "as local color, the nostalgic rather than the hyperreal" ("How to Teach a "Culturally Different" Book" 251). Although Narayan portrays traditional women strongly attached to the joint-family system within a nationalist discourse, his characters already incarnate these Indian archetypes with a sense of reluctance to continue representing the artificiality of a female tradition that can hardly follow India's development.

II. *Mr Sampath, The Printer of Malgudi (1949)*

The Dark Room provides an early example of Narayan's paradoxical characters as Mr Sampath, also the protagonist of *Mr Sampath, The Printer of Malgudi*¹¹⁵ (1949), abandons Kamala, his wife, with her five children – "all daughters, ranging from nine to three" and a son "under two years" old – for a younger actress, Shanti, to whom he proposes to be a second wife (*Mr Sampath* 84). In contrast to Shanta Bai, Shanti works professionally and strenuously at her artistic vocation. Unfortunately, when a mad admirer, Ravi, wreaks havoc in the studio during the filming of a sequence, trying to kiss her, Shanti, utterly traumatised and not finding correct her relationship with Sampath, returns to Madras and resumes her role as the widowed mother of a son. The novel also describes another neglected woman, Srinivas' wife, who tries to cope with her husband's modern behaviour while she stubbornly keeps the orthodox Hindu manners of a devoted, enslaved spouse. Srinivas finds his domestic life an unbearable burden since his wife is anchored to Hindu traditions that demand a strong male in command of the household.

¹¹⁵ *Mr Sampath* from this time forward.

She has deprived herself of an individual identity, embodying the kind of mother-metaphor that erases the female subject and gathers women together “as the mother-community with motherhood as their natural vocation” (Lakshmi 193). Although Srinivas tries in vain to reform her mentality and habits, which are shaped by a “rigorous upbringing, fear of pollution of touch by another caste, orthodox idiocies – all the rigorous compartmenting of human beings” (*Mr Sampath* 32), she is overwhelmed by her solitude and the absence of the family group that previously provided her with her social niche and self-respect. A male must escort her when she needs to do some shopping, for example, or she will not go out for fear of public opinion. P. S. Sundaram argues that Narayan’s depiction of such characters rests on an understanding of “the status of women [which is] no longer true in large towns and sophisticated circles, due to economic reasons” (145). However, this is not the case with Srinivas’ wife and most of the women analysed in this chapter, who live according to the rules dictated by purdah, especially applied to the majority of housewives and non-working women from small towns and rural areas. Narayan’s subtle irony depicts these women’s insufficient or delayed adaptation to historical changes: these women must be dragged out of an inexistent past that for them is nevertheless still real, in which they hold a caste superiority that shapes their perceptions of social interconnections and makes them feel lost with the modern design of family relationships. Narayan’s *Mr Sampath* depicts the ridiculous position of a woman who fears the opinion of the anonymous public in a town where nobody knows her, and the story thus highlights the importance of a broadminded education beyond any historical moment, which is a problem that affects all genders. Srinivas keeps encouraging his wife to make independent decisions in relation to their domestic life but his suggestions receive a contemptuous response, revealing a cultural gap that goes

beyond education and shows the ideological struggle between tradition and modernity in relation to a gender-based division of labour.

III. *The World of Nagaraj (1990)*

Something similar happens in *The World of Nagaraj* (1990). In this case, an embittered Sita feels that her husband's lack of masculinity is a severe flaw, although she willingly "accept[s] the role of a lackey at home" (686) from the beginning of their arranged marriage. Their married life was decided and permanently conditioned by Nagaraj's mother, who "in those days was like a commander-in-chief" (686) and who blames Sita for being barren and claims that there is no deficiency on their side: "what can the hand that holds the plough achieve, if the hand that lifts the rice pot is unlucky?" (709). However, Sita also blames her husband's pusillanimous character for not having fought for the custody of their beloved nephew, Tim, towards whom she feels like a mother. These descriptions show the two well-known aspects of the domestic female roles that define their *ghar's* sphere: the very young, almost child-like, fragile spouse whose main objectified function in the joint-family system is childbearing and obedience to the household's women but who fails to satisfy this role and becomes a mother substitute for somebody else's children. After the consolidation of her motherly status, the wife is expected to reproduce the same commanding role as her ancestors did in the past. As Maithreyi Krishnaraj notices, "motherhood invites glorification [of the Indian woman] but not empowerment" (6).

Narayan displays through irony three different examples of housewives empowered against their will by their domestically absent husbands: the married couple is politically pressed to reproduce the traditional gender functions, but the husbands fail to fulfil their roles. As Lakshmi explains, "[f]or the man, self-respect was for relating to the

world whereas for the woman, self-respect was for relating to the family” (203). Consequently, these males create a situation where their wives live in a no man’s land while society does not offer them a suitable alternative that does not imply a break with the traditional formulations of the Indian family. Although the narratives usually depict a domestic world, and are close to an Indian comedy of manners, they also show us a restricted female space that is no longer acceptable in society, either because these women suffer abuses and violence from their partners or because the dynamics of modern Indian society demand an alternative female subject with a more independent mentality. Traditionally, working women who had a public life outside the family were considered less respectable than those who exclusively played “the roles of daughter-in-law, wife and mother” (Donner 3). Narayan severely criticises the traditional system of female education, which directly depends on the joint-family system and which still seems immune to modern traits of education. His position is related to the nation’s need to transform the female population into a rational competitive force more adequate for life in the present day. Motherhood is an instrument that shapes female roles in society, serving to influence women’s choices either through their determination to bear and raise children or through their total objection to them. In some cases, being a childless wife becomes one of the worst fates that a woman must endure. While in *Waiting* Bharati takes on the responsibility of looking after over thirty orphan children, Daisy, in *The Painter*, fights against uncontrolled and unwanted procreation. Both Raman’s aunt and Nagaraj’s wife, Sita, illustrate the deep frustration of being childless women. They are intelligent women who see themselves as impaired subjects since they are unable to comply with what is seen as a woman’s natural purpose in life. The empowerment provided by maternity and the productive force that it implies are ruled out for these women. Progeny represents social status and family wealth, so there is a practical interest behind fertility, which is

socially accepted as an essential “concept and/or representation” of femininity, acquiring the symbolic connotations of a “commodity-fetish” (Nancy, *The Creation* 38). Lack of fertility means, however, a strong family dependence, a key factor that weakens their possibilities of individuality and self-sufficiency (37). Barrenness forces these women to build up their lives and identities around nephews and married sisters, who effectively retain “the value behind the phenomenon” of maternity that is symbolically transferred to these caregivers (38). This symbolic value is socially instrumentalised to describe the effects of its real power on women – superabundance or infertility – “through spiritual or monetary capitalization” (39). Therefore, motherhood is treasured as their most distinctive female condition. The fact that they cannot become mothers weighs the female characters down with guilt. In *Mr Sampath*, the protective joint-family is the only emotional support for Srinivas’ wife and her son who is forced to mature early and who has to play the role of a father. Such paternal carelessness also determines the fate of a betrayed Kamala, Sampath’s wife, who, due to an orthodox education that favours the practice of purdah and women’s illiteracy, does not have any options outside the joint-family system.

IV. “A Willing Slave” (1967)

Motherhood is also strongly conditioned by economic factors. Narayan portrays two different motherly situations in “A Willing Slave”, which was first published in the collection *Lawley Road and Other Stories* (1967): there is the middle-class housewife and her primitive, illiterate servant, Ayah. This short story depicts the conventional life of a well-off Indian family and their six children who are brought up by a somewhat peculiar servant. Ayah serves the family in general in ways that make her “fairly unpopular in the servants’ quarters” (84). She is the “time-keeper” for the workers, who are often fined

due to her “self-imposed task” of demanding an explanation for their running late. She also considers the private tutor a suspicious enemy ready to torture the children. She believes it is “a cruel perversity” to send the children to those “prison houses” named schools (85). She pesters anyone who fails to serve her masters as she imagines they should be served, acting as the house’ watchman when the family is out. For those jobs and for working “over twelve hours in the day”, she receives “two meals a day, fifteen rupees a month and three saris a year” (85), which explains the short story’s title. For seventeen years, Ayah has slaved away for the family with delight. To submit the children to her will, she tells the story of a terrible man, “the Old Fellow”, a story which works wonders on the children’s behaviour and keeps them under control, and whose title alludes to her husband, a man who migrated to the Ceylon tea gardens “many years ago” (89) and to whom she refers “in scathing language” (88). Unlike Annamalai, Ayah’s husband has completely abandoned his family, which accounts for the way that poverty has deprived these people of social sensibilities. When he finally returns from Ceylon, Ayah informs her mistress: “How could anyone know he was coming? The *circar*¹¹⁶ sent him back” (89). We learn that he was no longer a profitable worker, although the text does not provide information about who Ayah’s husband’s employer was. Narayan’s discourse is polysemous and his descriptions ambiguous once again: it could have been the regional government or the owner of the tea garden who dismissed him. But either way, old workers do not seem to have support other than that which their families offer. And that is why the husband now claims Ayah is his undeniable property. Ayah is also the mother of two rowdy-looking sons who appear “at the beginning of every month” and grab most of her meagre salary. Every three months she goes to her home in Saidapet to

¹¹⁶ *Circar*: “Corruption of Persian *sarkār* ‘head of work, administrator, government, province’”. It also makes reference to a province or a revenue division. Additionally, the name means a “house-steward” and “ [a] native writer or accountant; a clerk employed in a merchant’s office for making purchases, etc.” (OED Online).

visit her family and returns late in the evening, until one day, when she disappears and it takes her three days to return home. Her mistress and the others feel furious as the little child, Radha, keeps weeping and asking for her Ayah. By the third day, the lady of the house is ready to dismiss her, as she remarks to other family members: “No one is indispensable. These old servants take too much for granted, they must be taught a lesson” (89). Suddenly, Ayah appears as a resurrected creature on the doorstep and the child runs and hugs her tightly. Questioned about her absence, “she laughs uncontrollably” and declares that the Old Fellow has unexpectedly come back to carry her off (90). When the dreadful name is mentioned, Radha runs in fright, shutting herself in the kitchen and refusing to come out until the Old Fellow is gone. Ian Almond comments that in this kind of story, Narayan’s world is safe, ordered and its “appearance is perfectly synonymous with reality, routines, habits and rhythms” (109). He criticises what he describes as the “striking absence of characterisation”, a remark which is coincidental with Naik’s description of what he defines as Narayan’s “stories of character”: the psychology of the protagonist is the commanding point, Naik argues, and yet in “A Willing Slave” “the author does not appear to exploit fully the opportunities offered by his subject” (96), remaining “at the anecdotal stage only” (97). Although the two critics are correct in their analysis of the short story’s characters, they overlook the fact that *Thayi*, which is Ayah’s real name, is not a character but a commodity that is used and exploited by everyone, even her very old husband who comes back after many years of working as an exploited farmhand on Sri Lanka’s tea plantation. Narayan emphasises through Ayah the injustices of the Indian cheap labour system, which imposes conditions on workers that dehumanise them. She is first used by the employer’s family and then by her husband who is equally devoid of feelings and who claims what he believes is rightfully his: “I want *Thayi*. She is to cook for me. She must go with me’, [the husband]

said sullenly” (89). Ayah’s objectified condition reflects her masters’ identity, which she defends as a faithful watchdog. Although Almond describes her as the clearest example of “the innocent never show[ing] any sign of developing guile” (109), she disobeys her masters by bringing “secret gifts” for the children that are considered “unclean sweets” by her parents. She also enjoys trespassing the borderlines of caste and class and keeps for herself as much power as she can: being a low servant without any pedagogical insight, she mistreats those who are from a superior caste, in the case of the children, for example, who can be terrified by the superstitious idea of a raving mad fellow locked in a dog’s cage; or the “home-tutor” who is suspected of tormenting the children with indescribable pains. The other servants are also targets as she attributes to herself the master’s authority, enjoying every occasion on which they are punished. Nevertheless, the most outstanding of her features, besides her lack of empathy with the adults, is the limitless care and affection given to the master’s children and the absence of approval she affords her own family, her own grandchildren included, to whom she refers as “[t]hose Saidapet robbers” (88). As an unconditional slave, Ayah identifies herself with the dominant characters around her, while despising those as humble as herself. She is conscious that working for the middle-class family is her best choice in terms of stability and payment, and yet she willingly chooses to slave for her old husband and her family for no salary at all and what is more important, she loses her subjective power over those superior to her in caste but who hold a modest place in the social hierarchy.

Narayan’s irony is also evident where the author introduces Gandhi’s ideas on slavery and the history of the *harijans*¹¹⁷ long-standing exploitation. As a matter of fact, Gandhi denounced in *Hind Swaraj* that “[t]hrough our slavery the nation has been

¹¹⁷ *Harijan* or the Children of God is the Hindi term used by Gandhi to refer to the *dalits*. The term *dalit* exists on the fringes of the Sudra caste, a caste that also makes reference to servants or handworkers.

enslaved” (90). As an embittered and submissive married woman whose husband is absent, Ayah holds no social value at all, which is also reflected in the treatment her sons give her. Her mistress is equally objectified, as the narrative shows that her main role is breeding children and running the household while the master takes the important decisions. She remains nameless, and her ignorance of the tricks Ayah uses to control her children reveal her lack of knowledge of essential pedagogical approaches, as if the money spent on ayahs and private teachers might be sufficient guarantee of a good education. There are two major characteristics in this short story that reflect particular Indian female conditions: women are considered merely instrumental, and real solidarity or empathy among the females of different castes does not exist, which contributes further to their isolation and socio-political submission.

However, a complete submission to *purdah* and traditional female education are not golden rules in Narayan’s portrayal of Indian women, as is shown in *The Grandmother’s Tale*, whose main female character, Bala, mirrors the grandmother’s story narrated by Rama’s aunt in *The Painter*. Bala’s arduous quest, already analysed in the first chapter of this doctoral dissertation, becomes the heroic deed in that family’s history due to her adamant defence of traditional patriarchy, which she understands as her *dharma*, even while she vehemently rejects the widow’s role imposed on her by her husband’s absence. The paradoxical effects of Bala’s determination to recover her now rich husband, thereby becoming a *bhadramahila* during the process of her social ascension, reveal the fuzzy borders of the caste system, which are not completely impermeable. In the short story, Bala’s descendants enjoy the economic resources that have allowed the family to climb from status as a lower caste utterly impoverished rural family to a superior urban Brahmin caste in just one generation by learning the Brahmin “customs, rights and beliefs” through daily practices such as vegetarianism (Yadav 43)

and by improving their skills in their professional activities following economic success. Although theoretically forbidden, this process known as Sanskritisation¹¹⁸ is frequent and runs parallel to the Brahmins' dalliance with western manners, which were considered a sign of cultural superiority during the colonial period. Consequently, this social mobility not only implies an imitation or adoption of Brahmin customs and behaviour but also an integration of foreign practices into the caste and class system of India, determined by an economic, political and educational process that in principle broadens "the gulf between upper and lower castes" (43). Although Bala's family constitutes a "referential group" for the other members of the community who will naturally imitate the "status symbols" of their customs and lifestyle, they are also responsible as a group for the secularisation and democratisation of a stagnant caste system, proving that it is possible to shake off the old fetters, the religious and caste prejudices, from their minds in the inevitable first step in climbing the social ladder. While the first part of the short story shows a young woman fighting to recover a husband bestowed upon her through a child marriage, thus reinforcing the idea of complete submission to patriarchal values, as the story unfolds, she demonstrates a resilience that is compatible with an ideal mythic woman, Savitri¹¹⁹. By resisting abandonment and social death as a Hindu widow, Bala grows into a nationalist who breaks the caste limits imposed on her by tradition, and who, ironically, embodies the imported ideological values of equality and free choice.

The Great Mothers or The (Ir)relevance of Female Old Age

Narayan creates a narrative space for those women who have fulfilled their duties as mothers and housekeepers and now face the final *asrama* or fourth stage of their lives,

¹¹⁸ Coined by M. S. Srinivas, Sanskritisation is the process through which people of lower castes adopt upper caste practices and beliefs prior to upward mobility in the social hierarchy (Talawar and Kumar 285).

¹¹⁹ Savitri argued with Yama, the Lord of Death, until she liberated her husband from his deadly grip.

the *sanyasi* or the renunciation period. They are the grandmothers, widows and aunts who play a fundamental role in Indian society: in short, they are the supporting pillars of the joint family. Given the fundamental importance of motherhood, childless aunts quell their frustration through the love, support and care of nephews and nieces. More than any others, these old women embody the real essence of the *communitas*, the experience of being expropriated of all personal identity, of having an existence outside oneself as they have been dialectically and functionally exposed by the community in their roles of nurturers and carers (Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 26), holding the family together through the transmission of ethical values and cultural memories to their younger generations. As explained in the previous chapter, Nancy defines this community as “the community of finite beings” (26), as the members are revealed through their “existence outside [themselves]” (26), that is, through the subject’s outer boundaries exposed by and through the language of the community. However, unlike the situation with Annamalai, this “community of finitude” behaves differently in relation to women. Women are not differentiated and detached members of the communitarian space in opposition to other finite individualities; instead, they are subsidiary constituents of the men’s agentic involvement in the community-nation domain. As C. S. Lakshmi notes, these women represent “a metaphor of exclusion” since they have neglected the construction of a personal identity on behalf of the all-pervading “mother-metaphor”. Women receive their value and protection from their men and kin in exchange for their aid, assistance, support and perpetration of the men’s activities. Also, women are part of the men’s agency as they are described according to the men’s language of possession within the nation’s discourse. Whether they are volunteers or not, these women are deprived of any transformative power since they represent “the mother-community” that defines motherhood as a woman’s “natural vocation” (193). Any changing process necessarily

comes from within the dual nature of the public/private sphere of the community through the invocation of the mother-metaphor. This received female identity is magnified with the obligation to give in exchange for having been provided with the mother-community identity. Obligation and the public/private fields complete the meaning of *communitas* within an alternative signified: *munus*, which according to Roberto Esposito “is the obligation that is contracted with respect to the other and that invites a suitable release from the obligation” (5). This release comes with the return of the favour or the obligation that has created a feeling of gratitude towards the community. In this sense, *munus* is a significant concept here: every member has the obligation to give goods and services but there is no reciprocal obligation to receive any compensation in return for those issues. Mandatory and unidirectional, the *munus* is the perpetual gift being donated as the basic condition upon which the bonds of the community (being-in-common) are established, regarding, simultaneously, the subject’s external boundary defined by the group and the internal space defined in relation to the status in the group. Inside the community, women have the duty to give, which lies at the basis of the communal bonding, strengthened by the possibility of accomplishing the symbolic condition of mother-metaphor, the motherly cow of the ancient literature. As Esposito explains, care rather than interest (“caring-in-common”) determines the community “insofar as care is itself determined by the community” (96); and women, better than any other family member, fulfil this obligation of perpetual indebtedness.

In Narayan’s works, many of these old women end their days in a widows’ ghetto, masked under the guise of a sacred Hindu journey to attain *moksha*¹²⁰. Their communal family, particularly restrictive for women, is, however, dissolved by the modern ways of life. Narayan describes the corrosive effect of time on the large ancestral houses inhabited

¹²⁰ *Moksha* is the liberation from the circles of death and rebirth or *samsara*.

“by just a couple of members”. As Thieme observes, Narayan’s texts illustrate “the decadence of the family system as a trope that affects mostly urban and middle class families” (121). However, Thieme overlooks the seams of Narayan’s texts where a humbler society suffers, to a major degree, not only the dissolution of their families, but the destruction of their environment and their traditional means of production, having no other choice but to leave and have their members form a diaspora for economic reasons. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the most vulnerable members of the community, old women, become redundant and no longer useful members but reminders of the family’s decline and the community’s finitude; their distinct individuality is “closed off from all community” and externally regulated by the law of the community (Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 27). These women have worked “like slaves of the family all [their] lifetime” (Narayan, *The Painter* 127). The auspicious *sumangali*¹²¹ exists as long as her marriage lasts, “she is incorporated into her husband” and she keeps her breeding capacity. The presence of “the husband (who makes her complete) is imperative” (Chakravarti 2249) in the brahmanic spheres, while in the lower classes this absence occurs for reasons of labour production. The tyrannical conditions imposed upon married women by tradition have disappeared from Narayan’s Malgudi. The chaste womanly archetype – Sati – who used to neglect her body and her mind to guard her husband’s absence has evolved towards a dutiful widow who worships her husband’s memory while she brings up her offspring and remains socially active. When their children grow old and get married, especially if they dislike their wives, as happens with Raju’s mother in *The Guide*, they realise that the joint family system no longer provides any refuge. Reality has rapidly changed the ancient grips of Dharma: now the filial care comes from an older brother or another male relative who decides to look after these

¹²¹ Sumangali: A respectable married woman.

women, and prevent them from having to go in search of a new community with similar members. As Chakravarti points out, “the widow is not an ascetic” (2251) who lives retired dedicated to study or contemplation but a competitor for the family’s resources. There is nothing positive in traditional Brahmin widowhood, whose two commanding female archetypes are Sati’s immolation embracing the pyre and Sati’s sacrifice mortifying her body (2251). Although Narayan’s females dialectically mention these models in melodramatic excesses, Narayan’s texts are far from reproducing, let alone supporting, these traditional female ill views of older women. Narayan’s portrait offers mostly a hybrid image that lays bare the cultural weight carried by the Hindu iconography in postcolonial, westernised India. When these lonely women feel that “there is a limit to forbearance”, and decide that it is high time for them to give way to younger generations (Narayan, *The Painter* 127), they accept their new fate as their dharma: they leave their homeland and family ties behind in the quest for a place in Varanasi close “to the banks of the great Ganges, awaiting their end” (Narayan, *Waiting* 614). As widows, they must go to these symbolic places simply because they feel redundant and to a large extent disposable in a modern world which they cannot understand, while the sacred sites offer them the promise of eternal peace and the chance of securing a better future in their next *janma*. Narayan’s irony transcends the texts precisely at this important stage of the Hindu tradition, since widows are made responsible for their husbands’ deaths and according to brahmana codes must be “subjected to infinite misery” (Chakravarti 2253). The *sanyasa* period described in the laws of Manu, the *Manusmriti*, is the vital stage of renunciation before death. Thieme holds that “particular *asramas* are omnipresent in Narayan” (13) but that there is hardly any “progression from one stage to the next”, as in Thieme’s opinion, the characters usually remain in the same *asrama*; for Thieme the characters do not “inhabit any of the four stages in a settled and uncomplicated way” (13). Although his

analysis may account for the male characters, it is not so clear in the women's case since their lives are invariably defined by permanent servitude and lack of choice so that their vital transitions are inevitably fixed. It is not only that women become melancholic and aim for retirement and death, melancholy here understood in the sense described by Esposito as "asociality, isolation, and the refusal of collective life" (27). It is mainly their exclusion from a particular community and their "therapeutic inclusion" (27) in a new depersonalised society, whose main goal is reaching the *sanyasa* stage (detachment from material life) that triggers Narayan's sarcasm on about the characters' worries over the journey's costs and the monthly payment for their lodging in the holy place. In some cases their exclusion is compulsively demanded by the very caste system that imagines all sort of polluting threats coming from these widows and that attributes their status entirely to "purva karma" (original, previous actions), i.e., the inevitable punishment for a sinful existence in the past (Chakravarti 2250)¹²².

The cultural burden alluded to here is subtly replicated by Narayan's character, the caretaker, portrayed in the final pages of the *The Grandmother's Tale*. This destitute woman evokes multiple connotations considered prejudicial or destructive for a traditional community. She epitomises the concept of the destructive female *Other*: she is from another village, she is both a *sudra* and a widow with a daughter who needs to be married but no dowry. Finally she cooks and adds poison to a meal for Viswa that kills him instead of surrendering his will, which was her chief intention. The caretaker, therefore, represents an evil ideology founded on a pernicious hybridisation that threatens the purity of casteism: the servant aspires to occupy the master's status by levelling their

¹²² Chakravarti quotes an example from the Malnad area of South India where Havik women are especially feared and submitted to male authority. The Havik brahmanas attribute to widows an infinite "desire for revenge", which comes from their suppressed anger at being widows. They believe that widows "poison others at random with a substance obtained secretly by them from a strange reptile", which causes an "incurable stomach ailment leading to a distended stomach" (2253).

class differentiations through an unbalanced marriage between the master and her daughter. She wants the patriarchal system to discriminate positively and in her favour, based on her demoted condition, in such a way that she can naturally acquire social power and bequeath it to her descendants. She awakens Viswa's sensual appetite, which has a deadly effect on him and on his relationship with his family. According to the remaining family, the three characters are punished for having ignored the traditional preventions designed to maintain the caste system. However, the humour reflected on the surface of the plot, already analysed in the first chapter, covers the real drama for a youngster who is married out of poverty with an old man and who knows that, in the best of all cases, she is a widow-to-be and her future, therefore, is sealed.

Another good example is the case of Sriram's grandmother who, after being declared dead by the doctor, is taken to the cremation ground to be burned, but who, surprisingly enough, comes back to life seconds before the fire is lit. This unexpected twist of fate is received by the orthodox people as an ill omen for the city and, accordingly, they hasten to proclaim her exclusion from the community. They banish her from the town, leaving her no other choice but to retire to Varanasi to wait for her death among the other "old persons" who also await "the final fire and the final ablution in the sacred Ganges" (*Waiting* 614). Naik argues that at this point the novel changes into a collection of "narrative developments spectacular in themselves but without much relevance to the main theme, except that this is a convenient way of ensuring Sriram's return and capture by the police" (41). Although the plot contains several elements that can be said to bestow local colour, my view is that the novel's narrative design illustrates an important ideological clash between the residual traditional and the emergent Indian society. In any case, the result is that the Indian woman is, again, eloquently silenced and disposed of by the community. As widows are by definition ill-fated, Sriram's

grandmother's return from death revalidates the people's ancestral fear of widows "as a potent source of pollution" (Chakravarti 2253). The doctor who represents the medical scientific authority is disregarded as incompetent in the matter of resurrections and miracles, thus ruling out the possibility of an empirical study of what has occurred. When the doctor explains to the multitude, who have gathered around Sriram's grandmother after hearing the news of her revival, that he "had read about a similar thing in a medical journal years ago" (*Waiting* 596), the people express suspicion about the doctor's ability "to say whether a person is dead or alive" (595), and Gandhi-inspired nationalism once again gives way to caste system beliefs and to religious orthodoxy. Sriram accepts the priest's judgement of the extraordinary event as an inauspicious sign and agrees to carry his grandmother to an abandoned "toll-gate station" (596). In this novel, Narayan transmits a sceptical image of the paradoxical Indian reality that simultaneously condemns the older and the younger middle-class people for religious and political reasons. However, his humoristic approach shines through the lines of the dialogue between "some close relatives of Granny" who have come after hearing about her near-death experience: "Oh, sister, how good to see you. No one sent word to us that you were dead", says one of them. Then another replies: "Word was not sent because there was nothing to send", so the former retorts: "But when a close relation is dead, is it not ...?" (597). "But she was not dead, so why send word?", answers back his interlocutor. The dialogue provides a glimpse into the senselessness of public opinion: its contradictory and tendentious nature that, nevertheless, does not imply any rupture with orthodoxy and cultural stagnation. On the contrary, the novel portrays every character waiting for one thing or another, while time seems to have frozen the picture of an imagined Indian society which crumbles following Gandhi's assassination, leaving everything in the hands of fate.

These characters also tell us something about Narayan's personal experience and his own ideological involvement. Strongly attached to his family until his last days, Narayan expresses his conviction that there is a sense of family desertion behind this Hindu practice of social retirement, which derives from a utilitarian mentality that segregates those individuals, especially old women, who are no longer useful for the family's improvement. Nevertheless, the *mater familia* is a key symbol in Narayan's world. These Indian women have a powerful identity and draw to themselves not only their family members but other people from outside. Their houses become a meeting point that favours a cultural exchange. This is the case with Narayan's grandmother, Ammani, an archetype of the Indian grandmother who embodies the mythic attributes of Kunthi, also a widow and the mother of the Pandavas, the founders of the *Mahabharata*'s mythic lineage of heroes and warriors. Ammani's condition is close to Savitri's except for the fact that widowhood is such a dreadful female state for Savitri that she fights against the Lord of Death, Yama, and challenges her doomed destiny, obtaining her husband's salvation and giving birth to a hundred sons. Ammani is also a symbolic primeval woman who is pivotal in the transmission and teaching of Hindu oral traditions and storytelling. Becoming the repository of the family's memories, she functions as the sage Narada, an essential messenger of news, stories and legends, a female archetype who appears in Narayan's first novel *Swami and Friends* (1935), where a child Swaminathan nestles his head on his Granny's lap and, close to her, feels "very snug and safe in the faint atmosphere of cardamom and cloves" (19). Ammani is the oral narrator in *The Grandmother's Tale*, a woman who, engaged in a conversation with a young Narayan, discloses the ancestral past of the family. She is the "key figure in the lives of many" (Narayan, *My Days, A Memoir* 28), a strong female character who is instrumental in the arrangement of marriages and family celebrations. She takes control of the household

chores and decides on domestic matters, especially the younger females' education: "she pored over horoscopes and gave advice and used her influence to get marriages settled" (28). Narayan's biography throws light on the importance of the many strong women without whom he would not have succeeded as a writer or a father. They are his sisters and his brothers' wives who "practically adopted" his orphan daughter (*My Days* 144). Narayan's treatment of women is therefore particularly respectful, affording them a halo of admiration and mysticism.

Conclusions

Narayan's novels illustrate the paradigmatic inclusion and exclusion of subjects according to the symbolic archetypes of myth and the transformation of these subjects into objects based upon a gendered ideology which depends on socio-political contexts. The metaphorical language used reflects a reality conditioned by the ethics and aesthetics of Hindu traditions, which particularly affect Narayan's women. In the first place, the three artist women, Rosie, Rangi and Selvi, who have iconic profiles connected to Hindu traditions, enjoy an economic independence which is nevertheless administered by patriarchal figures including the temple and their partners, a fact which accounts for the symbolic reduction of these women's singularities to an objectified subjectivity. Their performances are socially appreciated but their individual agency is excluded from the community. The system's structure is designed to exploit their talents while it precludes their social assimilation. Despite their caste differences, the three artists are socially owned and colonised by an abstraction: their audience/clientele. They are possessed by and ensnared in their artistic masks and glamour; even in Rangi's case, her condition as Temple Dancer (*devadasi*) marks the difference between her and other sex workers. Thus,

the personal price they pay is at least partly compensated by the public recognition of their status.

However, there is a gap between their successful public activities, the material world that they help to improve with their symbolic cultural values, the *Thou*, and the particular realities which see them remain subordinated to a patriarchal ideology that demands the revitalisation of these cultural traditions, achieved through folkloric manifestations of individual nationalism, the *I*. The three women are ideologically flawed characters: unfaithful to her husband, Rosie lives with her lover-manager who belongs to a lower social class. Rangi is a *dalit* and a sex worker, embodying two unmistakable signs of marginalisation. Finally, Selvi abandons her husband, who along with Selvi's dwelling in a socially excluded world, has caused her family's decline. Accordingly, the roles assigned to women by the hegemonic gender ideology – mothers, wives, sisters and daughters – make these characters aliens to the system. A more objective evaluation of their accomplishments is short-circuited by the biased cultural view of their subjective behaviour.

Narayan draws a line between their nondescript everyday lives confined in the domestic setting, however, and their performances before a devoted audience for whom it is still possible to give life to old mythic figures. Their artistic accomplishments can be traced back to the Puranas and Vedic texts: they are consciously enacting an anachronism that provides them with social recognition, even though their professional careers enslave them to a ghettoised existence. Nevertheless, the language associated with this revival of Indian traditions works in favour of wiping out caste and class prejudices. As a result, theatrical performances and dances are reinterpreted as cultural signs free of their traditionally negative connotations.

Narayan's characters also show that there no longer exists a flawless, dedicated Indian woman but an externally influenced individual that needs to be under a permanent surveillance because of her dangerous and uncontrollable feminine essence, the so-called *Shakta*, which is now mixed up with the symbolic male agentive power derived from the education system. The establishment expects this woman to be the repository of "the inner spirituality of indigenous social life" (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 126), spiritually at the antipodes of a westernised culture. Nevertheless, the recodification of the modern female role implies a change in her powerless subjected position in the domain of the *bāhir* (the *Thou*, i.e. the role attributed to women by the social *others*) and her objectified consideration in the *ghar* (the *I*, or the women's status within the private realm of her family). New economic and legal conditions have somehow contributed to the inversion of these traditional gender divisions: on the one hand, the outer space constructs an iconic model embedded in timeless signifiers that simplify and achieve a two-fold target: the creation of a ready-made image that suits a global audience and the consumption of these stereotyped signifiers by the Indian market. On the other hand, and due to this external simplification, the inner space subjectifies the female who now chooses how to embody and represent the Indian archetype. Paradoxically, in the process of homogenising a new Indian woman that simultaneously stands for the past tradition and contemporary history, women have developed a genuine voice related to female oppression that questions those mythic standards without following Western feminist canons. The Gandhian women, Bharati and Daisy, follow the paths opened by their fictional predecessors: the selfless, ethereal, Devi-like Selvi, and the ambitious, Kali-like Shanta Bai. They cling to a social cause deeply rooted in the Indian female tradition, which is already mediated by caste prejudices and modern politics. These committed women have a dual profile, the double condition of *Shakta*: on the one hand, they possess

an idealistic missionary zeal proper to saintly women whose efforts aspire toward the betterment of the living conditions of people, and which has been kindled in them by a quasi-divine power, their political ideology. On the other hand, this commitment isolates them from the ordinary society afflicted with preoccupations which have little to do with the dissolution of traditional caste and class barriers. All of this transforms these women into destructive forces from the point of view of traditional values, pariahs at the service of shifting ideological models. Their presence is especially dangerous for the preservation of the domestic sphere where only a proper marriage can be the vehicle of a woman's change of status. In general, these middle-class women fall prey to the delusion of an independent female existence, which they never fully achieve. Simultaneously, they embody the duality of the goddess Kali: the destructive/creative cycle which affects every human being.

The isolation of these political activists who conquer the male realm of *bāhir* contrasts with the self-inflicted social exclusion of traditional women who remain within the typically female sphere, the *ghar*, epitomised by the symbolic purdah. The resolution among the former group to undermine the foundations of a petrified society contrasts with the attitudes of the Indian housewives who are brought up in the hegemonic patriarchal tradition and are reluctant to welcome any change in the social order. With the exception of Bharati, the rest of them (Daisy, Shanta Bai, Savitri, Ponni, Sita, Kumala, Srinivas' wife, Ayah and Ayah's mistress) have been educated according to a model that imposes the practice of child marriage and rules out any personal or professional opportunity other than that of becoming mothers and housewives. Motherhood is the indispensable and essential condition of femininity, and womanhood is not fully accomplished without offspring. In other words, a woman is a reproductive being rather than labour force. If she were the latter, she might entail unwanted competition for the male workers in the labour

market. It is for this reason that Shanta Bai, who suffers the same unemployment as the men, is nevertheless alienated in a male world. Tradition demands fulfilment of the perfect womanly archetypes, with the exception of Sudras and Dalits who are considered part of the workforce regardless of gender.

However, there are also disruptive forces that may break the illusion of female and domestic perfection. Such is the case with marital unfaithfulness on the husband's part, which Narayan describes as another burden that women must endure. In addition to the husband, the triangle involves two female characters: the submissive wife and mother, economically and emotionally dependent on her spouse, and the freelance worker whose interests are mainly focused on her career, using her body as much as her talent to gain every working opportunity at hand. Narayan's narration points to the joint-family system as the emotional support for these disheartened housewives. Nevertheless, behind these women's decisions there are class and caste divisions, along with economic and cultural factors that must be shaken as a prior condition to achieving independence with all that this entails. In Bala's case, her determination to recover her status as *bhadramahila* carries her away from an ostracised life in her village in order to find her missing husband through an epic quest. This leads to her reaching a superior social status provided by her husband's business; in addition to her social ascension, the memory of the epic journey becomes the family's pride, especially for the women. Yet Bala's decision breaks her away from her ancestors and she becomes the founder of a new dynasty. Hers is another example of a strong spiritual and emotional *ghar* growing out of itself by suffocation and finding a new outlet of expression in the manly, material sphere of the *bāhir*: born as a cow, she has to metamorphose into a mare so as to achieve her essential condition of motherhood.

I would suggest that the disruption of the traditional joint family and its symbolic iconography found in the texts analysed above, far from accommodating a Western feminist perspective alone, or even at all, can be accounted for as the result of the need to satisfy a pan-Indian readership. Narayan's narrative expresses what Partha Chatterjee calls "a necessary biculturalism", defined as a cultural hybridisation that is able "to see through the shams and hypocrisy of today's myths of global cooperation", while still remaining a popular product for the Indian market (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 156). Controversial issues such as maternity, birth control or infertility are ideologically manipulated to represent a cultural past that is reinterpreted according to modern signifiers. These signifiers convey different meanings according to caste and class affiliations so they can never be interpreted as universal concepts. The specificity of the issues needs a thorough analysis that takes into account socio-economic reasons, which is something hidden or directly absent in Narayan's texts.

An important aspect of the Indian cultural past is embodied by the symbolic figure of grandmothers. They are the backbone of oral traditions and communicative memory. Narayan's texts dedicate a special place to these often forgotten women who have given their lives to serving the community. According to Narayan's view of the family-support system, grandmothers are as important as aunts and widows for the protection of the progeny and their education in cultural values. However, their existence outside themselves on behalf of the community is not always sufficiently rewarded, which is one reason many decide to extend that social exclusion to their last days, retiring as pilgrims to a holy place to acquire *moksha* and to experience, along with others, the final *asrama* of renunciation, the *sanyasa*. Widows can suffer the community's rejection as the direct consequences of the male's fear of female empowerment: procreation and rights to ownership are at stake here. In the lower classes, their family structures are determined by

the productive forces of capitalism, while in the middle-class family the ideological grip on women determines the role they play in society, given the possibility of competing for the family's property with new descendants against other male relatives who may claim ancestral rights based on their gender. Being-in-common constitutes the essence of the community. This is achieved through a permanent act of generosity towards the other members of the community, which is expected, often demanded, from women as they carry the symbolic representation of the *communitas*' identity as procreators, feeders and carers that serve the symbolic purpose of representing the mother nation. In this sense, Narayan's women are partially described by male narrators that fail to utter the language of women, a problem that is worsened by the social and linguistic barriers between the two sexes. These women remain partially veiled and hidden behind the verandah. Although their voices are muted, they do not seem perturbed about it and for some, the desire for independence may feel quite alien. Narayan's women seem to find a gratifying space in the middle-class family, which is admired and worshipped by those socially inferior women who cannot enjoy its protective advantages. However, Narayan leaves no doubt about their readiness to come out of their reclusion if the circumstances (be it the nation or the family) requires, as they enact the Shakti, the One Force that represents the wholeness of Mother India.

Conclusions

Edgar Allan Poe's classical rules of the short story (a few central characters and a unique spatio-temporal level fitting a plot constructed with the precision of a mathematical problem and converging into single effect) are a far cry from the texts I have chosen for this dissertation. I am fully aware of the limitations imposed by the corpus. However, my selection has been conditioned by the premise that Narayan's short fiction can be read as a blueprint of Indian nation-ness, roughly sketched before the Independence, and largely modified later on, in the following attempts to revamp the original Malgudi envisioned in 1935.

While each of the chapters provides a careful reading of the complexities raised by each of the short stories, my major aim has been to weave them into a composite picture which could reveal something about R.K. Narayan's imagined Indian community. Obviously enough, the writer's desire to provide the emergent postcolonial nation with a solid foundation on which to erect a collective identity that could be embraced by the stunning diversity of Indian subjects belonging to a welter of social, ethnic and linguistic groups is an ambitious project which raises more questions than it solves. Narayan's attempt to construct a national fraternity involves, as Benedict Anderson suggests, the choice of an arbitrary signifier, a language which wipes out regional and cultural differences and diverse histories in order to emphasise the imaginary or mythical nature of the nation. In choosing English to inscribe the nation's existence, Narayan is appealing to what Anderson calls a process of unisonance which does not reflect the synchronic "meanwhile" (the here and now) but which aims to resort to a "horizonless past" (*Imagined Communities* 144).

This desire to restore a fractured postcolonial identity involves a conscious re-articulation of the classical texts of Hinduism in the maelstrom of contemporary history with a view to expressing “the way of life of the group of people with whose psychology and background he is most familiar” in the hope that “it will not only appeal to his own circle but also to a larger audience outside” (*A Story-Teller’s World* 15). In his opinion, “the short story is the best-suited medium for the variegated material available” (15). However, in selecting the materials which must be used to represent the pan-Indian national discourse through the painting of his miniature India in Malgudi, the writer hails and buttonholes some values while muffling or silencing others. As Bhabha puts it in “Dissemination” (158), the nation’s writ demands a syntax of forgetting of the history of the nation’s past: it is through the exclusion of entire chapters and people’s existence that the nation’s narrative can be built up in “a homogeneous empty time” (using Walter Benjamin’s well-known expression) which Narayan places in the iterative rewriting of the ancient myths in his contemporary stories.

Needless to say, this universal approach to Indianness creates narratorial absences that I have constantly highlighted in the reading of the short stories examined in the previous chapters. Behind them, there lies a constant preoccupation to grasp what defines Narayan’s ever-changing notion of Indianness, a goal which has proved to be as elusive in my case as it was for the writer. Since Narayan’s prolific career covers up six decades of the twentieth century (from *Swami and Friends* published 1935 to *The Grandmother’s Tale* released in 1993), the narration of the nation has not been always identical, let alone stable. In fact, it has gone through substantial and to a large extent paradoxical modifications. The world of Malgudi of the mid-1930s has little to do with the one depicted in the 1980s: the initial hope in the Gandhian communal project has given place to a globalised country where large corporations define an atomistic society which is

placed at the antipodes of the ideal Indian village which Gandhi saw as the repository of the true Indian spirit. I am also fully aware that Narayan's world is too complex to be nailed down to a single essence or centre.

In Malgudi, Narayan initially constructed a heterotopian metaphor that he intended to operate as a difference-levelling mirror of the multifaceted Indian reality. Anderson underlined this perspective by remarking that the perception of a unique sacredness of the community's language entitles its people to hold preconceived "ideas about admission of membership" (Anderson 13). It is logical then that education, an imported Western institution conducted in English, plays an important role in the fabrication of a uniform national community tied up by strong bonds of belonging. Under this light, the transference of the empire's metaphors to the construction of India seemed inevitable, especially when the colonial education system served as a vehicle for this transference. Marked by a hybridised education as he himself acknowledges, Narayan plays with these culturally embedded signifiers in order to imagine the language of a subcontinent which is inevitably heir to different colonial discourses but which must remain, in an undecipherable paradox, discernible as genuinely Indian. Since culture and education are constructed as commodities, and these commodities have been unevenly attained through the transmission "of empire's organizing metaphors" (Boehmer 49), Narayan must address the role of education as one of the fundamental cultural artefacts that allows social cohesion, a principle which is integral to any idea of nation-ness. I argue that, by embracing western habits and cultural traits, Narayan's characters voice, through the shortcomings and contradictions of their behaviour, a far more effective critique of the Indian postcolonial society than by openly rejecting them. The example of "Iswaran" shows that the Foucauldian theory about discipline and punishment serves to disclose the ideological structure of control and reward underlying official institutions

and the education system. The religious traditions function as an additional system of dominance and power that foments a submissive mentality, while it favours the creation and growth of docile bodies. The abstract anxiety before the unknown is inserted into the subject who harbours an overwhelming fear of failure. “Iswaran” is therefore not so much a story about the resistance to a colonial policy of education as the tragedy of an individual who fails to find a meaningful social niche for him as long as he is excluded from the privileges of a superior education. Likewise, “Crime and Punishment” points to structural problems of the Indian middle-class education system that must be modified – such as students’ physical punishment or teachers’ insufficient economic resources – if the country is to develop a more cohesive identity.

However, Narayan’s highly selective screening method in his Malgudi cosmos cannot preclude catching glimpses of alien elements that contradict the narrator’s seemingly homogenous Indian nation-state. Far from building up a seamless, pan-Indian construct, Narayan’s attempt to re-inscribe the narration of the nation in the language of the classical Hindu texts is doomed to failure from the very beginning. As Bhabha reminds, any effort to rewrite a master narrative cannot result but in a doubleness of language: the ambivalent splitting of the pedagogical (the timelessness of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the Indian epics in general) and the performative (the “meanwhile” of the present-day India) marked by an inevitable plurality which jeopardises any totalising project. As Aguilera Linde argues in his “Introduction” to *J.P. Das Selected Stories*, the corollary to this is not so much “an interrogation of the democratic institutions of India” as “a critique of the erosion of the allegedly immovable cultural traits of an ancient civilization” (7).

In other words, Narayan's ambitious effort to endow the postcolonial country with a stable, uniform image through the comings and goings of Malgudi's people cannot, however, withhold the disturbing inclusion of cultural differences whose sole existence grind up any fabrication of national cohesion. "[L]aboriously, bit by bit, like a jigsaw puzzle" (*A Story-Teller's World* 31), the narrator inserts, into his untroubled region of the world, elements of resistance to an ideal of national uniformity and the normalising discourse of power. This resistance comes from Narayan's characters who dwell beyond the spatial boundaries initially marked as the limits of representation of India: minorities, traditionally silenced subalterns, returnees from migrant labour, the struggles for power of contending parties and the permanent friction between religious groups. Simply put, Dalits, women, the widening gap between the different communities and the subsequent growth of communalism muddle what was initially a transparent picture of harmonious India. In short, what these groups bring to the fore is the erosion of the foundational institutions of the Indian nation. Division and not agglutination, centrifugal forces rather than centripetal ones now dominate the Malgudian landscape.

Seemingly unchanged for centuries, Malgudi is wounded by the symbolic wheel of life, the *bhavacakra*. One of its biggest strongholds, the rule of Dharma or moral virtue, has been displaced by the language of Hindu nationalism which acts as a disintegrative agent since its goal is to enhance caste and religious divisions against the consensus of a secular nation respectful of a religious plurality. Since the ultimate goal of Hindu nationalism is the categorical assertion of its ideological superiority in comparison to other alien, foreign-based ideas, the language of Dharma served as the perfect nationalist tool to identify this subject with the new nation-state. This emergent nation is then narrated as a liminal space that needs the existence of the Other in order to reinforce "the authenticating "inward" time of Tradition" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 149).

“Another Community” illustrates Narayan’s comprehension of one of the faultlines of his brittle idea of nation-ness: the birth of communal identities (Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus...) that favour ethnic or religious affiliation over any other category of membership, i.e. that propitiate the dangerous reduction of personal identity to the question of one’s belonging to a particular religion. Rather than the depiction of all-inclusive, secular, pan-Indian reality, “Another Community” crystallises the negation of the existence of a modern nation-state since it has been split up into a number of opposing, fratricidal forces. Echoing Derrida’s and Girard’s ideas, I conclude that Narayan condemns his nameless protagonist to symbolise a crime that replicates thousands of equally nameless victims all over the country, a sacrificial scapegoat of communal violence which reaches its climax after the Partition. It is highly significant in this regard that women are seen as responsible both for the family and the community’s honour, and that they receive, together with children, the worst treatment of all from both communities. Because men and women are perceived as an indivisible whole, the Indian woman is defined as a portion of the man and his family. This patriarchal organisation explains why men and women possess “*different already* constituted categories of experience, cognition, and interests as *groups*” that transmit “a simplistic dichotomy” of the whole population (Mohanty et al. 70). Carrying the figurative value of the community’s honour in a male-dominant world, the abuses suffered by women and girls during these outbreaks of violence imply not only the trauma of their experiences but also their social exclusion. They are marked as the Other, the polluted soil, which then becomes the fertile ground for violent retaliations (S. P. Kumar 77). This ideological venom wipes out rational views about the unfamiliar and transforms wariness and fear into hatred and certainties. As a result, the *other* becomes the enemy who lives next door. In “Another Community”, Narayan creates a nondescript, submissive citizen who, despite

combining the learnings of ancient dharmic philosophy and the rationalities of western Enlightenment, remains too passive before the virulence of violence and becomes the next victim.

For very different reasons, “Annamalai” also proves to be a very interesting case in point. The construction of an imagined political community that is “limited and sovereign” (Anderson 6) gets suspended in time through the depiction of an illiterate dalit, the destitute dark *other* whose biography condenses volumes of Indian pre-colonial and colonial history. Annamalai incarnates the *unheimlich* of Indian history: the mass migration and forced exploitation imposed by the British Governors at the request of the pioneering planters in Ceylon as early as in 1827. Instrumental in the establishment of tea, coffee and rubber plantations, these dispossessed Hill Country Tamils embody everything that has been silenced, repressed or forgotten in the making of the nation. Annamalai, a coolie transplanted from his rural community to a no man’s land, is portrayed through the eyes of an aloof, detached, allegedly superior observer (the narrator) who has been educated through Western (rational) standards and has inevitably adopted a Westernised lifestyle. Annamalai’s reluctance to literacy and his very suspicion of the letter, his senseless garden practices, his even more illogical loyalty to his joint family and his duty to their constant money demands both fascinate and repel the narrator. His life-story becomes one of Narayan’s most conscious attempts to bring to surface the silenced history of the excluded subalterns. By giving voice to Annamalai’s incomprehensible reasons, which may account for his decisions about his domestic affairs, Narayan is building up a liminal space whereby the narrator’s firm beliefs, solid convictions and intellectual coldness begin to melt in the air.

The relationship between the middle-class writer and the gardener (*mali*) echoes the colonial relationship between the Sahib master (the representative of the British rule) and the wild, savage, undisciplined *other* (Annamalai). Boehmer (2005) explains that the garden becomes a recurrent metaphor of the colonial possession that has been put under control; an ordered, carefully mapped-out territory which obediently gives its wealth to the superior colonial owner, the garden designer. However, Annamalai is unable to obey his master's orders, the way he manages the garden is definitely chaotic: plants grow everywhere out of control, untrimmed hedges reach such a height that they block the view in every direction, dahlias become giant-sized, bloom and wilt as nature dictates. The result is closer to wilderness, and Annamalai emerges as the symbol of an unregenerate, primitive India, capable of withstanding any suffering and loss, and resilient to any colonial power. Not in vain, as I have proved in my analysis, the narrator portrays Annamalai using certain characteristics suggested by the so-called "Criminal Tribes", the Thugs and Dacoits, who, in Narayan's opinion, were "freedom-fighters—guerrilla-fighters of those days" (*A Writer's Nightmare* 183) but also bloodthirsty bandits, outlaws who terrorised the travellers during their long journeys. Hofmeyr (2009) explains that most of the returnees from the colonial plantations overseas, the repatriated indentured labourers, became "mutinous workers, feckless castaways, drunken vagabonds" often compared to the "criminal and wandering tribes" and irremediably caught up in "the predicaments of mobility" ("Indian Ocean Testimonies" 59).

Unpredictable in his responses and behaviour, insensitive to logic and prey to superstitions and strange rituals to cast off the evil eye, Annamalai arouses awe. As the etymology of the name shows, he is a god-like creature, indomitable, tough and impervious to any change. However, from a Western point of view, the phonetics of his name also evokes an animalistic nature, unbridled, fearsome and irremediably wild. Yet

“Annamalai” does not yield a discourse of rendition; on the contrary, he stands out as an example of a non-stop, sturdy fight against adversity and fate. If the encounter with these liminal (casteless, homeless, de-villagised, and in some cases deprived of family and language) figures may short-circuit the categories upon which the nation seems to be constructed and reveal the limits of nationalism, Narayan, in tune with Gandhi’s ideas, opts for a revaluation of the returnee as embodying the genuine spirit of India.

No study of Narayan’s fiction could be complete without a chapter devoted to his complex portraits of women. Obviously, women have played an important role in the making of the nation, and their participation in the growth of Indian nationalism has been amply acknowledged. If the assertion of the national culture depended on the critique of colonialism, the Indian Womanhood Question was the inevitable corollary of the national project, as Chaudhury rightly argues (113-14).

Drawing on Chatterjee’s ideas, I have attempted to analyse how female characters are inspired by the Hindu philosophy of *dvaita*, the subject/object duality of the *I/Thou* relationship between the devotee and God, where *I* denotes the subjective space and *Thou* the social one. This double quality present in the deities also characterise women who are now to be interpreted as both ordinary characters occupying the domestic realm and vessels for a heroic Indian Woman, an unquestionable symbol of the emergent national identity. Chatterjee explains that the project of nationalism involved a watertight separation of the colonial, material, public world from the indigenous, spiritual, private sphere. Women, obviously, belong to the second space, and it is therefore logical that they are seen as embodying the spiritual dimension (i.e. the least polluted by external influences) of the nation. Not in vain, the modern discourse of nationalism stems from a new vision of society based on a reinterpretation of the myths, whereby the alienated

female individual changes into “an autonomous subject” (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 128), whose spiritual achievement is perfected through its association with Indian nationalism. Women’s history becomes therefore a storying of their symbolic assimilation as the community-nation’s metaphor. Needless to say, the mythic representation of women evolved from the hegemonic Puranic and Vedic literatures, a fact which contributed to the propagation of patriarchal values, since females were symbolically “empowered” but their agency remained still male (Spivak, “Moving Devi” 132).

Undoubtedly, Narayan depicts the female condition from the outer boundaries of his ubiquitous male narrative voice. In my view, his narratorial voice does not penetrate the female world, as he portrays their sphere from a respectful, detached distance. Yet their existence is conspicuous in the texts, albeit in a paradoxical way: they belong to the non-represented spaces. In other words, the reader finds them in the narrative gaps, always behind the male characters, acting through their supportive presence at home, veiled and secluded. In short, theirs is the place of absence. In my opinion, Narayan’s women live the literary reality of public purdah. The female subject is left behind the verandah, waiting for her husband and performing the role of domesticity. She can only be imagined, her life is veiled or guessed, as Vescovi notes in “Selvi”. Occasionally a window is opened up for a brief spell and the reader catches a glimpse of what their objective reality is like.

In fulfilling the role of the mother-nation in tune with the mythical archetypes inherited from tradition (Sita/Sati), women must also carry out radical transformations which allow them, surprisingly enough, to overcome the oppressive bonds which keep them tied up to patriarchal structures. Chaudhury summarises this conflict as the result of

the crucible of the colonial encounter: women must either be independent workers or remain dependent housewives. Thus, in Narayan's fiction, women usually are the ones who dare to challenge the limits of casteism and patriarchy, exposing themselves to ostracism. They embody, in C. S. Lakshmi's words, "a metaphor of exclusion". Bharati, the female character in *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and Daisy, the family planning programme's militant in *The Painter of Signs* (1976), do not have any qualms to change their lives according to new social demands. However, in choosing to live the role of "mother-metaphors", they inevitably sacrifice their self-fulfilment.

Often women remain nameless to enhance their objectified condition. When they do not fulfil the prescribed role of wives and mothers, there only remains the mythic role of the untamed mare, the unstable, disturbing female agent, subtly depicted as an incarnation of the destructive *naga*, the persecutor of all creatures, capable of converting the cow's milk into poison (O'Flaherty 54). Modern working girl, Shanta Bai (*The Dark Room*), childless, political Daisy (*The Painter of Signs*), or even sensuous, marriage-breaking Rosie (*The Guide*) fit this symbolic role. This means that Narayan's woman occupies the place of public representation as a symbol and not as a subject. Even his most conspicuous protagonists (Bala, Ammani, Rosie, Selvi or Bharati) are closer to female archetypes than flesh-and-blood characters. To empower these repudiated women, Narayan (re)interprets and (re)creates the mythical figure of Kali and Mohini, empowering them in the unfolding of the plot. Narayan's texts convey a rejection of female self-inflicted victimisation, while he gives support to the ones that grow out of adversity, such as Ponni or Rangi. The narrator shows a feeling of sympathy towards those characters that fight back male impositions, subverting the traditional gender status quo and breaking away from the protection of the joint family system. This is the case of

Rosie, Selvi and Rangi.¹²³ They belong to the community of artists – Rosie and Rangi are *devadasis*, the servants of God – and despite being sexually or commercially exploited by male agents or husbands, they manage to gain full control of their lives, away from the male presence.

I conclude my study as I started it, with the ubiquitous figure of grandmothers in Narayan's fiction. Expropriated from any subjective identity, they embody better than anybody else the essence of *communitas* in the sense explained by Esposito. They are devoted mothers whose lives remain at the service of the joint family, they thus become the repository of the communicative and cultural memories¹²⁴ of Malgudi, a fundamental legacy that the storyteller must preserve if the construction of India is to be continued. For as long as the memory of the emblematic Nambi is kept alive, the act of imagi(nation) will be perpetually renovated.

¹²³ Rangi appears in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.

¹²⁴ I am using here the terms coined by Jann Assmann (1995).

Appendix

Although this list of historical events associated to *The Grandmother's Tale* (1992) is my calculation of the *novella's* chronological time, it serves to illustrate how Narayan constructed his text according to a formal Indian historicity.

<i>The Grandmother's Tale</i>	Historical Space
1801 / 1817	Chota Nagpur and Barasat <i>bidroha</i> .
1831-32	Kol insurrection.
1854 Bala (7) and Viswa (10) are married	
1857 Viswa goes to Pandaripur and Delhi	Sepoy Mutiny.
1862 Viswa meets Surma at Poona	The Calcutta High Court is established.
1875 Bala goes in search of Viswa	Kunbi uprising in Poona and Ahmadnagar districts.
1876-78 Bala finds Viswa at Poona	Great Famine. Victoria became "Empress of India" by the Royal Titles Act.
1878 Bala breaks Viswa and Surma's marriage. They settle their home at Kumbakonam.	Indian Arms Act, it restricted Indian access to firearms.
1906 Arbuthnot Crash. Ammani's husband loses his wealth.	R. K. Narayan's birth.
1932	Poona Pack.
1942	Quit India Movement. Gandhi is imprisoned at Poona.
1947	India's Independence and Partition.

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---. “Kauravas.” Def.

---. “Moksa.” Def.

---. “Nāmdev.” Def.

---. “Narayana.” Def.

---. “Nirguna.” Def.

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