

CHAPTER THREE

ESSAYING THE ORDINARY:

THE FAMILIAR ESSAYS OF R. K. NARAYAN

The essayist, unlike the novelist, the poet and the playwright, must be content in his self imposed role of second-class citizen. A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other earthly triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence.

E. B White

In the foreword to the collection of his selected essays *The Writerly Life*, R. K. Narayan commented on his essays by saying: “I have written the following essays because I had to. I had to write to meet a deadline every Thursday in order to fill half a column for the Sunday issue of *The Hindu*. I had rashly undertaken this task not (to be honest) for artistic reasons, but to earn a regular income. Three of my novels had already been published but they had brought me recognition rather than income” (xii). Coming from the writer himself this clear and unhesitant denigration of one part of his own creative output appears strange and intriguing at the same time. It is as if almost unwittingly Narayan echoed E. B. White’s ironic self-deprecation of the essayist as belonging to a literary status that is permanently “second-class”. However, whereas White’s comment, coming from one of the most prominent essayists of our time, is unapologetically marked by an irony bordering on satire (particularly his reference to “sights trained on the Nobel Prize”), Narayan’s apparently offhanded comment seems to carry a sincere belief regarding the secondariness of his essays in so far as they came from a major novelist.

Taken together, however, what both the comments highlight in the long run is the image and status of the form that both the writers practiced — the familiar essay — more than anything else. Going by the verdict of the practitioners themselves, it becomes apparent that the idea of minority and secondariness associated with the form of the essay in general is most poignantly carried by this type of essay. However, as has been seen in the previous chapters, there are silent and unconventional entry points hidden under the essay's outer face of ordinaries which give access to a unique core of philosophical seriousness and ideological relevance standing as a poetics for the form. This chapter will try to locate a “poetics of the ordinary” that characterizes the familiar essay as a form and will try to see it functioning in R. K. Narayan's familiar essays in particular.

R. K. Narayan's essays, at present, are found in five volumes that have been published at different times since 1970s. They include selections of essays that Narayan wrote mostly for his weekly contribution to *The Hindu*. They are: *Next Sunday* (published by Hind Pocket Books in 1972), *Reluctant Guru* (published by Hind Pocket Books in 1974), *A Writer's Nightmare: Selected Essays 1958-1988* (published by Penguin Books India in 1988), *A Story-teller's World* (published by Penguin Books India in 1989) and *Salt and Sawdust: Stories and Table Talk* (published by Penguin Books India in 1993). There is, of course, a lot of overlapping in these collections; each book includes essays already collected in previous collections and also adds new ones. After Narayan's death in 2001, a comprehensive selection of essays, gathered from all the previous collections, was edited by S. Krishnan and was published by Penguin Books in 2002 as *The Writerly Life*. Though incorporation of Narayan's essays in anthologies have been regular and more or less sufficient, the mode of the process has been anything but satisfactory. Firstly, in none of the anthologies the essays have been accompanied by definite information regarding time and location of publication due to which it has remained a practical difficulty to locate any possible line of development or pattern. Secondly, there is an absence of any systematic or evaluative editorial commentary in the anthologies which makes it all the more difficult to form any idea about the essays as a group of work. *The Writerly Life* is the only collection where the essays have been divided into groups according to time

periods of their publication (though details of location of publication are missing even here) and this study has taken up the relevant essays for analysis from this collection.

As a body of work, Narayan's essays are primarily concerned with the material, cultural and ideological constituents of the emerging modern and urban post-independence India as they influenced the life of the common Indian. Underlying their extreme variety of thematic interests lies an easy, accessible and yet critical insight that determine the value of these texts. Some of Narayan's early essays are purely personal in nature and some later essays are primarily intellectual.¹ This study has focused mainly on those essays that fit the category of the familiar essay.

3.1 Familiarizing *the Familiar*: Locating R. K. Narayan's Essays

The difficulty that most consistently plagues an attempt at focusing on Narayan's essays is the complete identification of the writer and his creative genius with the form of the novel or, to be more specific, the Indian English novel. Narayan's career as a novelist spans almost seven decades starting from the publication of his first novel *Swami and Friends* in 1935 and running up to the publication of *The World of Nagaraj* in 1990 and includes thirteen novels (besides six collections of short stories). The prolificacy of his creative output in the favored domain of fiction and especially of the novel was such that the essays which he had been writing all through this period have been completely overshadowed. Moreover, Narayan's status as one of the legendary Indian English novelists is rounded off by some other factors which make the identification between the writer and the form complete. Firstly, Narayan's contribution to the field of the Indian English novel has unavoidable historical and developmental relevance. The appearance of Narayan along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao in the 1930s has been generally considered the beginning of the modern and mature form of the Indian English novel. Almost invariably, though in different words, these three novelists have been established as the "major trio" (Naik 155) of Indian English novel by the historians of Indian Writing in English. At the same time their fictional output is also seen as marking the beginning

of international recognition for the literature as a whole. Consequently, for any study of the Indian English novel the works of these novelists acquire a kind of paradigmatic relevance turning the writers into figures essentially and exclusively related to the identity and development of the form.

Secondly, Narayan and his novels have come to acquire a very prominent place in the already established line of criticism that focuses on the relationship between Indian Writing in English (fiction especially) and the representation of the Indian nation and culture. Narayan's *Malgudi* has generally been considered one of the most successful fictional tropes in capturing and expressing a pan Indian cultural ethos or "a site that represents quintessential Indianness" (Thieme, *R. K. Narayan* 1). In his introduction to Narayan's *Bachelor of Art*, Graham Greene famously commented about Narayan's work by saying: "Without him I could never have known what it is like to be an Indian" (qtd in Kain, "Introduction" 2) Since then it has become almost customary for historical and critical accounts of Indian Writing in English to ascribe to Narayan a "supposed grasp of essential Indianness" (Thieme, *R. K. Narayan* 1). Consequently Narayan's fictional works, especially his creation of *Malgudi*, have turned into essential reference points in studying the relationship between the form of the Indian English novel and the representation of the nation which has been an issue of primary interest for theorists of the Indian Writing in English in general. This has further strengthened Narayan's status as the quintessential Indian English novelist and as a result the academic reception of his creativity has been exclusively oriented towards his fiction leaving the essays in a near complete abyss.

Thirdly, this status of Narayan as novelist has been further elevated to an image of the "artist per se" dedicated entirely to his art (in this case fiction) sealing the connection between the persona and his fiction almost impenetrably. This has happened due to his choice of taking up writing as a full-time activity which undoubtedly had historical significance. The fact that he "devoted himself exclusively to writing" was, and still is, according to M.K. Naik, "a rare phenomenon in modern Indian Literature" (160). This choice is made all the more significant by the nature of his fiction which looks purely

creative, untouched by any ulterior or utilitarian motives. Comparing his dedication to his art with that of Mulk Raj Anand, another full-time writer of fiction and contemporary of Narayan, noted historian K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar points out Narayan's uniqueness as an artist:

Anand at least has, it would appear, some political axes to grind, though these do not offensively intrude into his creative writing. But Narayan has no axes of any kind: he is that rare thing in India today, a man of letters pure and simple. (358)

The outcome of such historical projection takes the form of a total identification of the writer with one form of creativity through a supposed relationship of essentiality so that Narayan becomes "a natural, a born teller of tales" (Kain, Introduction 1). At another level the art and the persona behind it become one so that "the modesty, candor and workmanlike air" that is considered characteristic of Narayan's art of fiction is found to be "characteristic of Narayan the man" and is then seen as "marks also of Narayan the writer" (Walsh 164). The iconic significance of his fictional output is further established by comparisons with the masters of the craft like Chekov or Jane Austen (Iyengar 360). Taken together all these instances of criticism establish the belief that Narayan "has the pure novelists' mind" (Walsh 93).

It is against such a near complete identification of Narayan's creative genius with fiction, or to be more specific the form of the novel, that the project of analyzing his essays has to be initiated. Finding a footing for such an endeavor proves extremely difficult because in contrast to the overwhelming amount of criticism on Narayan's fiction, analysis or even attention to his essays has been nearly absent. What are found instead are occasional, brief and casual references which most often are almost overtly dismissive. William Walsh for example, one of the first critics to devote a detailed book length study to Narayan's works, grouped all of Narayan's writings outside his novels in one chapter titled "Other Work" and within it summed up the essays in a single sentence by saying: "He published some general essays, but they are unremarkable" (95). Whereas traditional historians like K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar and M. K. Naik are completely silent on

Narayan's essays, contemporary critic Geoffrey Kain includes a passing remark on Narayan's practice of writing for news papers (though not the essays as such) only as the source for "a perspective on the lives of common people that continued to supply inspiration and material for his fiction for many years to come" (Kain, "R. K. Narayan" 2). There are scattered reviews and prefaces that do not offer any perspective for analyzing the essays. Some of them offer passing remarks on the subordinate nature of the essays in relation to Narayan's fiction by asserting that they form "the best introduction imaginable to the spiritual and social values of Narayan's novel" (McDowell 700) though it has to be accepted that "they are most lively and rewarding when applied fiction techniques shape the writing" (Harrex xii) and some others marginalize the essays all the more by claiming that they do not deserve of any attention at all, as in Shyamla Narayan's review of *Reluctant Guru*:

Of course, all the essays are not equally bad, and most of them would make good material for the commuter to kill time with. They do not deserve to be published in book form just because they are the work of a famous novelist; the only purpose they serve is to show the weaknesses in Narayan's writing. (855)

In other words, the perennial "second class" status of the essay – a persistent marker of the supposed minority of the form on which the previous chapters of this study tried to shed critical light—seems to be ideally and accurately represented by the case of R. K. Narayan's essays. In fact in Narayan's case this "second class" status of minority attached to the essays can be seen as a kind of double marginalization because besides bearing the mark of secondariness that is ascribed to the essay form in general on the plane of genres, Narayan's essays suffer another degree of marginalization as the insignificant minor pieces written occasionally and accidentally by a writer otherwise specialized in the major and valuable genre of the novel. However, for a project designed to analyze and defend the essays an understanding of the dynamics of this marginalization itself becomes the first requirement. A keen look will reveal that in the

case of Narayan's essays a traditionally available umbrella concept of generic minority is not the only factor creating the impression of immateriality and negligibility around the texts. Rather it seems that the texts themselves generate an image of being common and ordinary both on the level of subject matter and style. As has been described, the themes of the essays, almost exclusively, centre on ordinary and everyday issues and they are written in a friendly and accessible — in other words unspecialized — style. It implies that the essays seem to be identified as a category by the presence of an impression of ordinariness. It is here that the relevance and significance of categorizing Narayan's essays as "familiar essays" come to play and to highlight that we have to turn to the meaning and implications of the concept of the familiar.

The first mention of the concept of the "familiar" is generally attributed to William Hazlitt who included an essay titled "On Familiar Style" in the collection *Table Talk*. Hazlitt considered the familiar primarily as a stylistic or rhetorical effect created by a kind of writing modeled on what he called "common conversation" and distinguished by the avoidance of "not only all unmeaning pomp, but all low, cant phrases, and loose, unconnected, *slipshod* allusions"(338). It is not difficult to see that Hazlitt's concept of the familiar style was a part of the overall romantic reaction to the conventional and specialized standards of neo-classical prose practiced by Dr. Johnson and others.² Though Hazlitt did not develop the concept of the familiar beyond its stylistic connotations he connected it to the idea of a form of writing defined by ease and accessible communication. However, there remained the need of assessing if familiarity could also be defined in terms any subject matter preference. In the entry on familiar essay in the *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, Dan Roche signals such possibilities and identifies the form by the presence of the following traits:

The familiar essayist has commonly been characterized as curious—in constant search for the significance of the mundane. His or her subjects "spring naturally from the affairs of everyday life." Familiar essays themselves have traditionally been highly informal in tone, often humorous, valuing lightness of touch above all else. They have been filled

with intimate personal observations and reflections, and have emphasized the concrete and tangible, the sensual enjoyment of everyday pleasures. Usually brief, familiar essays have long affected a feeling of careless spontaneity so strong that perhaps no other type of essay is as dependent for its success and popularity on its ability to “present a personality. (578)

Roche’s definition points out the thematic orientation of familiar essay but it is all the more valuable because it enumerates the concept of familiarity also on philosophical, stylistic and psychological levels and thereby hints at the system through which the familiar essay works. For Roche, the philosophy of the familiar essay is to find “significance of the mundane” which leads it to be thematically oriented towards the “affairs of everyday life” and to express itself in a writing style that is “highly informal in tone” finally creating for itself an image of “careless spontaneity”. In subsequent parts of his analysis Roche broadens the concept of the familiar into a paradigmatic and defining attribute of the form of the essay in general and locates it, in different guises, in essays and essayists of different periods. In this sense the familiar becomes a continuous presence starting with Montaigne himself, who according to Roche, “produced essays considered familiar” (578) and appears in the works of essayists including Addison and Steele, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, R.L. Stevenson, G. K. Chesterton, Hilarie Belloc, Max Beerbohm, J. B. Priestly and finally E. B. White and Scott Russell Sanders (580).

Categorizing Narayan’s essays as familiar essays proves convenient and convincing because, as the general description of their nature enumerated above shows, their overall thematic and stylistic qualities match the definitional pattern laid out by Roche. But it looks all the more suitable because Narayan himself sees his essays as falling into the pattern and tradition of essayists like Charles Lamb, E. V. Lucas or Robert Lynd (“Preface” xii). In the aforementioned preface Narayan comments on the rarity and distinctiveness of this type of essay:

Unfortunately, this type of essay is not in vogue today. You see it sometimes here and there but generally it is almost extinct. Yes, we have feature writers in magazines and newspapers, astute political analysts, profound scholarly and historical writers in academic journals, earth shaking editorials in news papers, but not the discursive essayist. This is because the discursive essay can come not out of scholarship or research but only of one's personality and style. The scope for such a composition is unlimited—the mood may be somber, hilarious or satirical and the theme may range from what the author notices from his window to what he sees in his waste-paper basket, to a world cataclysm. (xii)

It is unmistakable that within definitional schemes like these, the familiar (or “discursive” as Narayan calls it) essay as a form is identified and distinguished by an overall orientation towards the mundane, the everyday, and the “ordinary”. The familiarity in the familiar essay, in other words, seems to be an effect created by a characteristic bent towards avoiding the specialized, the formal or the highbrow. (As Narayan says it “can come *not* out of scholarship or research” [emphasis added]). And herein lies the problem: how to find a formal and academic poetics for a form that proclaims its identity to be lying in the ordinary and the informal; how to demand serious attention in favor of a form that distinguishes itself, not accidentally or occasionally but characteristically, by what Roche called a “lightness of touch”.

The dilemma is further strengthened by the fact that this type of essay has endorsed and preferred the ordinary over the specialized not only in terms of its form but also in terms of its mode of appearance, its site of production and reception. Throughout its development, the familiar essay has exclusively used the space provided by the popular print media so extensively that in many cases figures of famous familiar essayists have got inseparably connected to the names of specific newspapers or magazines. If we follow Roche's list of familiar essayists, we will see such a pattern of identity between

the essayists and their favored news papers and magazines: Addison and Steele with *The Spectator*, Charles Lamb with *The London Magazine*, Max Beerbohm with *Saturday Review* and of course E. B. White with *The New Yorker*. Besides implying extreme transience and topicality this factor has pointed towards the connection that this form has with the material determinants of market, sale and commerce. It has created an image of the familiar essay as a type of writing that aims at being sold on regular basis through commercial print media and it has pushed the form further away from respectable academic acceptance, has strengthened its “second-class” status. An echo of this consciousness runs through Narayan’s assessment of his essays as well. When Narayan clarified that he wrote the essays “not for artistic reasons, but to earn a regular income” he was setting a binary between art and economy with a subdued but distinct tone of apology for his essays that he saw as belonging to the latter. In the long run then it seems as if the “second-class” citizenship or the “undisciplined existence” is really “self-imposed” in case of the familiar essay so far as being related to the unspecialized and the ordinary itself is the defining attribute of the form. Consequently, the marginalization of Narayan’s essays by critics and the author himself seems to have an explanation after all.

However, this very impression of inconsequentiality that the familiar essay creates around itself as well as the image of an essential ordinariness that it seems to flaunt start looking like possible entry points for critical interrogation when placed against the background of the essay’s general tendencies as a genre. As the previous chapters of this study has tried to point out and emphasize, in case of the essay, judgment of generic significance and value has to come in terms of understanding the function/functions that the form performs rather than simple description; it is always more fruitful to focus on what the essay does rather than what it looks like. And as has been seen, the essay’s development as an elusively flexible and apparently indefinable form has always been accompanied by a silent but strong undercurrent of subversive and critical function that had its roots in the very origins of the form in Montaigne. Within this framework of analysis hence the apparent ordinariness, the essential familiarity of the familiar essay also seems to hold possibilities of containing latent discursive functions. A strong hint of this possibility is found in Adorno’s account of essayistic subversion where the essay’s

essential smallness is considered central rather than accidental to the subversive “critique of ideology” that uniquely characterizes it as a genre. For Adorno, the form of the essay “revolts above all against the doctrine—deeply rooted since Plato—that the changing and the ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy; against the ancient injustice toward the transitory” because of which the essay stands against “the notion that the result of abstraction, the temporally invariable concept . . . deserves ontological dignity” (158). In other words, for Adorno, finding a philosophically or ontologically dignified justification for the ephemeral and the transitory — which in this context can be seen as manifested in the familiar and the ordinary — is a central component of the essay’s ideologically critical function. A distant but confident echo of this defense can be heard in none other than Montaigne himself when he declared in “Of Repentance” that he sets forth “a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter. You can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as a life of richer stuff” (611).

This frame of explanation and defense in which Montaigne and Adorno — the two most important figures in essay studies — echo each other across a gap of four centuries undoubtedly opens up ways for a poetics for the familiar essay, a poetics analyzing the familiar on its own grounds. However, there remains the need of bringing this frame down from its philosophically generalized scheme to a particular and specific historical armature to see it functioning as a discourse. Both Montaigne and Adorno were assessing the essay in response to socio-historical specifics of their times and were analyzing the essay as a genre in general. For understanding the dynamics of the familiar essay as a distinct yet typical manifestation of the essay form exploration has to be situated in that locale where familiarity was raised from being a characteristic of the essay form to being its central defining feature. It is only within such an analysis that R. K. Narayan’s familiar essays can then be situated on their own terms of being.

3.2 Towards a Poetics of the Familiar: R. K. Narayan’s Essays in Perspective

If we aim to see familiarity — the involvement with the mundane and the ordinary — as a discursive function defining the familiar essay as a form then our focus has to be turned

to the wider socio-discursive structure within which such a function operates. When Narayan made it a point to clarify the nature and status of his essays by saying that he wrote them for a newspaper to earn a “regular income” his comment seems to have hinted – may be without his awareness — at something more than what it expressed. At the individual level it pointed towards the status of the essayist as coming to belong to what can be called the literary marketplace and at the generic level it implied the form of the essay turning into a part of the wide and modern structure of the popular press and mass circulation. Consequently, and most importantly, at the level of reception it indicated the essay entering the circle of varied and contemporary interests of an urban readership. It is understandable that the character and overall orientation of Narayan’s essays were guided and decided by these determinants. What is more important to note, however, is the fact that at a deeper level the nexus of these elements also determined the distinctive form and nature of the familiar essay as a category in general. The familiar essay, in other words, indicates a specific stage in the development of essay form where the elite, exclusive and highly speculative and personal form of the essay, as conceived by Montaigne and his followers, turns to become a middlebrow and accessible form of writing overtly engaged in day to day issues of contemporary life and society. Somewhere between the philosophical justifications of the familiar and the ordinary provided by Montaigne on the one hand and Adorno on the other the familiar essay came to exhibit the actual practice and function of those very qualities at the level of discourse. And it is at this point that the poetics of this form has to be identified.

The event of turning the element of familiarity from a general essayistic attribute to a discursive essayistic function took place, as is well known, within the famous and innovative eighteenth century socio-literary project of Richard Steele and Joseph Addison: *The Spectator*. In the aforementioned definitional account on the familiar essay Dan Roche clarifies that though Montaignian essays might be “*considered familiar*” (emphasis added), it is important to note that “The first popular familiar essayists, however, appeared in the 18th century especially in Joseph Addison’s and Richard Steele’s *Spectator*” (613). Commenting on this transition and development of the genre Philip Stevick asserts that “Addisonian familiarity is immediately distinguishable from

that of, say, Montaigne, no matter how intimate and casual and informal Montaigne may be” because in the Addisonian essays “judgments and generalizations are anchored to social categories” (169). This anchorage to “social categories” accompanied by the element of popularity, as mentioned by Stevick, indicates a broad and collaborative engagement for the essay form that was not there before. These qualities mark the spatially and temporally adapted new avatar of the form of the essay as well as the initiation of a new discursive function for the genre, distinct though not separate from the one present in Montaigne.

For Scott Black in “Social and Literary Form in *The Spectator*” this new function manifested in the form of “a new use for the essay” through which it became “a mode of literary reflection for the modern city” (21). Understanding the poetics of the familiar essay means understanding “how a particular literary form, the essay, was used to organize one of the first and most influential articulations of the nascent social formation, civil society” (22). This new social and cultural function of the form operated through three channels. Firstly, it used the space provided by the emerging periodical press to both represent and reach the members of the newly emerging civil society – the educated middle class individuals. Secondly, to communicate and engage this target readership it adapted the typical essayistic rhetoric of friendship and dialogue initiated by Montaigne. Thirdly, and most importantly, to remain accessible and relevant to its readers it dealt with “the previously unremarked spaces of civil society in their own terms” (25). This focus on the “spaces” of the civil society manifested in the familiar essay in the form a preoccupation with, what Black calls, the “variety of the mundane” (26). It became a characteristic mode for this type of essay whereby “this new form redeems the occasional . . . and validates the experience of the mundane world, offering it as worthy of being noted, represented, and understood” (28). It means that in the familiar essay the representation of the mundane and the ordinary became a tool for creating an accessible yet responsible formal medium “by which the metropolitan world could become self-reflective” (38). In other words, the element of familiarity that existed in the form of a general philosophical leaning towards common themes and a friendly informal rhetoric in the otherwise reclusive and meditative mode of the elitist Montaignian essay, turned into

a mode of analytical and critical observation of the nuances in a civil society in the familiar essay at this point. It transforms the essay into a socially engaged, performative mode of writing with a material basis in print and mass readership and more importantly with a socially relevant discursive function.³

Though mentioning *The Spectator* within the explanative armature meant for R. K. Narayan's essays might look a little confusing because of the spatial and temporal distance between the two, it provides a route to locating the generic logic of the familiar essay as a form by tracing it back to its roots. It establishes causal connections amongst the form's defining quality of associating with the mundane and the ordinary, the discursive function performed by that association and the popular and commercial mode of appearance it adopts. To place R. K. Narayan's familiar essays within this explanative framework implies the application of a different perspective on the essays as well as on their value and significance. As has been seen, the main standard by which the essays have been judged minor or irrelevant is that of artistic or creative value but to judge them as discourse means judging them in terms of their discursive function. In a rare instance of positive insight H. Y. Sharada Prasad termed Narayan's essays as instances of "cultural journalism" in India (321). Though Prasad simply mentioned Narayan's essays in relation to his analysis of Indian journalism as developed through popular newspapers and magazines, his inclusion of the texts within the category of the "cultural" implied a broad and active engagement of the essays with contemporary realities which has remained unrecognized. The dynamics between this underlying core of socio-discursive function and the outward appearance of mundanity and ordinariness holds the poetics of Narayan's familiar essays.

For the need of a general starting point it can be said that in Narayan's essays use of the mundane manifests itself in a consistent concern with the lived realities of the ordinary Indian citizen against the background of a growing modern life style. Implicitly or explicitly the essays highlight, what Narayan called in another context, "the plight of the modern unknown warrior, who is the middle class common man" ("On Humour" 47). If we take an overview of the central thematic interests of the essays as presented in *The*

Writerly Life, we shall see that they engage with the daily life of the middle class individual on three levels: habits and practices, changes and challenges, and adaptation and identity. If we turn these levels into categories, the first one will contain essays like “Our Dress”, “Noise”, “Headache”, “The Vandal”, “Bridegroom Bargains”, “Beauty and the Beast”, “Castes: Old and New” etc. The second category of essays will include “Next Sunday”, “Restaurants”, “Behind One Another”, “Taxing Thoughts”, “The Election Game”, “The Unseen Shop”, “Red Taping Culture”, etc. And the third category will contain essays like “Fifteen Years”, “To a Hindi Enthusiast”, “Pride of Place” and “Table Talk” among other essays. The first category enumerates Narayan’s concern with traditional and behavioral peculiarities of the common man through which he subtly hints at underlying patterns of cultural values and standards. In the second category Narayan’s focus rests on the newly emerging patterns of work and habits, on the newly included and accepted practices in social life and most importantly on the political and economic changes and challenges affecting the common man. The essays in the third category reveal a rare involvement on Narayan’s part with cultural identity especially in terms of linguistic diversity.

These categories, it is important to note, are not exclusive of each other and the essays mingle and balance the primary patterns of interests amongst themselves. The need of categorization arises because of the apparently bewildering amount of variety in Narayan’s oeuvre of essays. In the aforementioned article, Scott Black comments that the extreme topicality and variety in the familiar essay on the thematic level comes from the form’s dependency on the need to sell to the readers who in their turn are guided by “pleasure, curiosity, the restless desire for novelty” where “The pleasures of novelty are those of the mundane world” (33). Though Black, here, is referring to this quality of the familiar essay in specific reference to *The Spectator*, it holds true for the form in general when seen as located at the nexus of a modern civil society, its common citizens and a print culture touching both. What is more important, however, is Black’s assertion that the familiar essay “offers a way to represent mundane activities without recourse to extramundane structures” (34). It means that the familiar essay as a form offers a structure through which an urban modern civil society and its common citizens can

reflect on themselves by focusing solely and exclusively on its mundane and ordinary realities. In Narayan's case this structure of reflection is erected by the almost exclusive concern of the essays with what Dan Roche termed in the already mentioned definition of the familiar essay "the concrete and the tangible", that is the material and particular units of experience as against abstract and general categories.

To make a claim that Narayan's essays, in their preoccupation with the mundane, excludes the abstract or the extramundane and also at the same time contain a core of discursive function seems contradictory, till it is realized that the potential of the form in which Narayan is writing—familiar essay—binds the interest in familiar/mundane and the typical essayistic attribute of critical reflection in a causal relation where one element explains the other. Consequently, in the essays Narayan can turn the mundane itself into the discursive tool without recourse to any axiomatic or exterior critical category. In an essay like "Our Dress", for example, the materiality of everyday clothing or dress is made to hint at cultural values and prejudices as reflected in the article of dress itself. The essay starts in a friendly tone of camaraderie set by the term "our" in the title that continues with the introductory line saying "In almost all parts of the world we hear the common complaint that men dress in a monotonously uniform manner, but ours is one of the few countries to have risen above this limitation". It is clear that Narayan has already set a broad national frame of identity around dress and habits of dressing by setting a binary between other parts of the world and our country. But it also important to notice that the mark of that identification is located in the actual physical attribute of variety in dress rather than any generalized qualitative standard of judgment. In the following lines Narayan builds upon this effect of materiality further by enlisting concrete instances of the variety peculiar to the attires of his people in terms of what he calls "wealth of pattern and colour":

Here is man wearing a long-sleeved shirt, a vest coat and a dhoti tied Bengali style; there goes another, as a contrast, wearing a natty banian, a green towel over his shoulder, and a dhoti in the straightforward Madras manner; at the bus-stand is someone in a three-piece suit, soft hat and

complete with cane. If the observer's luck is good he may even detect a couple of flowing Rajput turbans of the colour of the evening sky. (8)

The details of the individual patterns and colours of each attire that Narayan provides in the first paragraph of the essay lead to an account of various dresses in terms of utility in the second. Taken together the first two paragraphs create an impression of the essay as a clean and innocent account of dresses and dressing habits of the people with reference to familiar day do day instances. It is only in the last two paragraphs that a particular article of dress is chosen out of the rest for individual attention: the suit. On the surface level Narayan's attention to this dress rests on the same standards that he applied throughout the essay, those of appearance and utility. But in this case these very aspects are made to acquire a different shade of significance. After pointing out that "The suit, like the English language, holds a very undefined position in our country" he continues to list the supposed virtues that "champions" of this attire puts forward in its favour:

Its champions claim for it manifold virtues — varying from the purely aesthetic to the purely utilitarian; it improves a man's appearance (if he has potentialities that way); it helps a man deliver (somehow) convincing sales talk to his prospective customers; and above all it entitles a man to be treated as a gentleman by fellow beings. (9)

Because Narayan does not specify anything about who the "champions" of suit are the connotation of a general inclusive comment on the cultural values and prejudices in relation to dress automatically surfaces. The fact that a person wearing a suit is considered "gentleman by fellow beings" indicate an established cultural bias in the society where it happens, but that indication is kept rooted in the familiar and concrete article of the suit itself without being elaborated into any generalized observation.

In an essay like "Beauty and the Beast" Narayan uses the same technique of turning a familiar and material piece of reality into a channel for critical insight. Here Narayan's use of the concrete and material form of the mundane is all the more intriguing because the central concerns of these essays are the concepts of beauty and humour respectively

which are essentially abstract and subjective categories. In the first essay which deals with the concept of beauty in middle class Indian life, Narayan starts by locating beauty not in any concrete object but in two types of familiar and physical practices that try to judge or capture beauty: beauty contests and photographs. In the first two paragraphs Narayan subtly questions and also humorously reveals the inconsistencies of the two practices and asserts that whereas it is impossible to judge beauty by terms of “tape and weighing machines” as done in beauty contests, “a photo finish for deciding beauty is not feasible” as well. What Narayan drives at finally and logically is the role that the same impulse of assessing and judging beauty comes to play in deciding social relationships, especially marriage. And to make his point Narayan sketches an imaginary but representative scene of marriage negotiation in a middle class home in the last paragraph. Here, the details of an assessment of the bride’s beauty by the prospective groom is depicted where on the one hand “the girl is decked and dressed in her best. She is induced by her parents to show herself properly”, and on the other hand the whole attention of the groom is focused on the girl’s looks as “he is for the moment the beauty judge” (75). It is crucial to note that Narayan’s insight into the practice is captured not in any overt comment or generalization but description of the particulars of the event: “When the interview is over, the man is tortured with the feeling that he wasted precious moments which ought to have been spent in proper scrutiny. ‘I didn’t notice whether her nose is arched or straight” (76). What Narayan is actually doing here is concretizing social prejudices in familiar and particular details so that they become immediate and accessible for a common reader. But at the same time the terms and phrases used to achieve this concretization are made to carry implication of a latent power equation: “show herself”, “beauty judge”, “interview”, “scrutiny” etc create a sense of an unequal power distribution around the concept of marriage where the two sides are related in hierarchy rather than mutuality. The critical core of the essay is hidden and forwarded through an apparently innocent recording of mundane everyday practices.

Taken together what these essays (and they are paradigmatic of other essays that resemble them) seem to critically assess is the everyday reality of common middle class Indian individuals in terms of concrete, tangible and lived experiences. Under their

apparently disconnected variety, the themes of Narayan's essays centre on practices, articles and incidents that point towards the conditions of life and values of these people and consequently takes up pieces of mundane and ordinary experiences as vehicles of exposition. In other words, in a characteristic manner Narayan's familiar essays turn familiar and mundane experiences into tools of individual and social reflection. However, in Narayan's case such a conclusion does not solve the question of value or significance of the essays; rather it serves to further complicate the issue. It is because this kind of defense puts the essays in direct comparison with Narayan's novels which have traditionally been hailed as the best representation of the Indian life as it is really lived by the typical middle class Indian. The entire concept of focusing on the mundane and the ordinary on the one hand and on life of common people in terms of their actual lived experiences on the other is already an established point of reference used by critics in analyzing Narayan's novels. Claiming that the same principle is also the core of Narayan's essays only makes the latter's secondary status all the more palpable because it implies that the thematic concern that distinguishes Narayan's mature novels is only "discernible in embryo in his essays" (Kulkarni 91). However a series of significant but distinctly present differences appear between the treatment of the mundane and the ordinary in the novels on the one hand and the essays on the other when the focus is shifted from the treatment itself to the different structures of signification within which the treatment is located.

In Narayan's novels, the analysis of these elements exist at different levels. At the extreme stand critics like Laksmi Holmstorm for whom the centre of Narayan's novels lies in a cosmic view of human life and destiny and hence "criticism of society and the observation of the social predicament implicit in his work is only incidental" (122). However, most of the critics who have taken special note of Narayan's concern in his novels with either the common individual or the ordinary and the mundane in terms of everyday experience, have located the significance of those elements within wider structures of meaning which are generally categories implying either abstract conceptual values or traditional social conventions. Thus for Mary Beatina Rayen in "The Guide: A Study in Transcendence" the focus of analysis rests on Narayan's capacity to make the

commonplace or the mundane a vehicle for exposing the reader to what she calls “the transcendent”. For Rayen, Narayan’s distinguishing brand of realism “surpasses mere detailed presentation of the concrete and the material” and consequently “transcends and transforms the mundane . . . and leads to something beyond”. This something is what Beatina refers to as the “mundane-transcendent interaction” (55). Rayen’s concept is echoed by other critics who acknowledge the presence of the ordinary and the mundane in Narayan’s works but evaluate them only in relation to categories of some kind of abstract value (Kain 4). Tabish Khair on the other hand makes it a point to clarify that he does not see Narayan as concerned with any abstract or transcendent concept of a representative Indian life or reality so far as “his is not a textual-philosophical exploration but an actual one” and asserts that this absence distinguishes and identifies Narayan’s novels from fellow novelists like Raja Rao. However, even in Khair’s analysis, Narayan’s treatment of the “lived reality” of individuals does not stand on its own. Instead of an abstract psycho-philosophical base like Rayen’s “transcendent”, Khair’s analysis uses a conventional and traditional one that defines Narayan’s engagement with lives of common urban individuals. Consequently for Khair, “the location of the reality in Narayans novels” deals with “individuals involved in the secular business of living in a more or less urban setting.” but only “as experienced from a Brahminical/upper-caste perspective”. For Khair, Narayan has a “middle-class, (semi)urbanized and lived Brahmin social setting” (227).

As has been seen, this exploration of the lived experiences of middle-class urban individuals continues in the essays. But remarkably it never occurs within any transcendental, Brahminical or, for that matter, even traditional frame of reference. Lived reality in the essays is that of individuals situated in a civil and secular society living and negotiating with conditions of existence that are framed within an upcoming urban culture of life and work. In essays like “Next Sunday” (on the concept of a weekly holiday for an office going person), “Behind One Another” (on the practice of queuing up), “Restaurants” (on office canteens) etc. Narayan captures the nuances and intricacies of a newly developing life style that the middle class Indian struggles with on daily basis through a focus on some of its characteristic practices and establishments. Besides

maintaining the characteristic attention to the ordinary and familiar details in all their concreteness these essays also carry a rare tone of involvement and empathy for the middle class common man in his struggle for survival. In “Next Sunday”, for example, Narayan creates an undefined representative character (who is simply referred to as “the man” or “a person”) whose experiences he then follows. The body of the essay consists of a humorous account of how the person in question starts a Sunday with a lot of plans for himself and his family but cannot fulfill any of them and makes promise for next Sunday. Underneath the funny domestic details related to children, neighbors and typical household chaos the description carries a mild but unmistakable sense of loss and helplessness of an office goer for whom everything is rationed including time. Like the other essays mentioned, neither this feeling nor Narayan’s empathy is expressed in any overt or general terms but is carried by concrete material elements. On the one hand, Narayan draws attention to the reason that makes a Sunday so important for a working person who “all through the week keeps making a mental note of what he proposes to do on the Sunday” and for whom “hanging a picture, fixing a leaky tap, chocking off the squeak in the radio, or oiling the watch or the bicycle, are all jobs for a Sunday” for the simple reason that “on other days one has no time for these scrutinies and examinations” (4), and on the other hand he creates a sense of shared expectations and frustration by counting the unfulfilled tasks and responsibilities:

Sunday is the day most looked forward to by everyone. It is the one day which suddenly evaporates before you know where you are. Everyone knows the Saturday-evening feeling, with all the pleasures of expectancy, and the Sunday evening feeling already tainted by thoughts of Monday. What happens to the day? It is the day on which so many items are thrust — promises made to children for an outing, promise of a little shopping, calling on someone, and so on and so forth, all promises, promise. . . (4).

This sense of unavoidable but helpless state of existence is continued in the essay “Restaurants” where a similar form of exposition is adopted to catch the plight of the

people who are forced, by a modern work culture, to take their meals in hotels and restaurants. Though the chaos, dirt and the rush is recorded in impeccable details in terms how they are actually experienced by the common man, under the guise of humor lies the reality of people who are “miles away from their homes at tiffin time” and still “have no choice in the matter” because “this is a characteristic of urban life” (23). It is not difficult to see that in both these essays Narayan’s concern is what Khair called the “lived reality” of middle class urban Indians like in the novels. The remarkable thing is how he captures that reality in terms absolutely concrete, familiar and mundane everyday practices without using any extramundane frame of reference but at the same time manages to carry a distinct sense of understanding and empathy for the people he is describing. This continues in “Behind One Another” where Narayan tries to accept the imported modern western practice of queuing up as “a necessity, but a cruel necessity” but also acknowledges that it, after all, “is a sign of an abnormal, confused and congested existence” where the common man has to spend highest amount of his life-time “standing in various queues, at bus-stands, railway-stations, ration-depots, cloth-shops, cinema houses, and every kind of public place” (21).

This extraordinarily nuanced insight of Narayan into the mundane, material but essential constituent elements of the life of the urban middle class Indian seems to have two sources. One seems to be Narayan’s own family and his upbringing. Narayan came from a Brahmin family that was in the process of adapting its life-style, work-culture, values and preferences to a newly emerging urban middle class ethos influenced by western education and colonial economy. He grew up in the city of Madras where he could see the traditional Indian life getting confronted with and molded by the forces of modernity and saw the elders of his own family exemplifying “the various ways in which a once rural community, now cut off from its roots, responded to the new world” and becoming part of “the first administrative middle class” (Misra 194). The dynamics of criticism and empathy that we have noticed in his essays for this new lifestyle and culture seems to be a reflection of living in this time of cultural transition. The second and more important source from which he seems to have gathered his gift for details is his short but significant stint in journalism in his struggling years. In *My Days* Narayan describes how,

while working as a reporter for the Madras daily *The Justice* in 1935, he had to gather “Mysore city news” and had to go every day, what Narayan calls, “news-hunting through the bazaar and market place” for which he “hung about law courts, police stations and the municipal building” because of which he came to know “a lot of police officers, plain-clothes-men and informers apart from presidents and secretaries of various public bodies” (122-125). Apart from the “close contact with a variety of men and their activities” (126) that Narayan acknowledges to have gathered from this experience, he also seems to have formed a significant tie with public life as it actually functions through public bodies and institutions and the way it affects the life of common people. It is an important aspect to take note of because from this springs the second point distinguishing Narayan’s essays from his novels.

This distinction lies in another area of criticism that has dragged Narayan’s already acknowledged involvement, in his novels, with a transcendent, cosmic or conventional world view to its attitudinal implications. It means that whereas the already mentioned line of criticism by Beatina, Khair and others have focused on Narayan’s treatment of such concerns, the other line of criticism has tried to assess what such treatment in the long run might imply about Narayan’s attitude to his subject matter. Interestingly, the overall consensus in this regard has turned out negative for Narayan and the reason is not difficult to find. If Narayan uses concrete and mundane realities only to reach out to transcendental concerns or conventional structures then this can be seen as implying, in some form or other, a lack of involvement and a distance from such realities in terms of attitude even when they are used as subject matter. As Satyanarain Singh puts it, “Faith in the transcendental . . . without cultivating a positive stance in tackling problems caused in the main by an unjust man-made establishment is, in a sense, a turning away from life’s realities” (108). The fact that “Narayan always avoided political or social commentary in his writing” (Misra 196) is indirectly hinted at by Anita Desai’s comment about how many readers feel that Narayan’s fiction “does not reflect the chaos, the drift, the angst of a society in transition” (qtd in Kain, Introduction 4). However, no one has been more straightforward in commenting on this supposed lack than V. S. Naipaul, who comments on the gap that he experienced between his idea of India formed by his reading of

Narayan and the actual condition of the country that he confronted while visiting it. Naipaul describes how the image of India he formed on Narayan's fiction had not prepared him for the "distress in India" and though he knew that Narayan's was a "simplification of reality", he could not imagine the extent to which that reality was "cruel and overwhelming." (21) In general, then, this line of criticism seems to run contrary to the most prized traditional conception of Narayan as the writer representing the quintessential India through his fiction as declared by Greene and others.⁴

The case of the essays, however, seems to be different. The hardly noticed essays of Narayan, surprisingly enough, contain instances of rare social concerns and views of the author. Narayan of course does not lose his focus on the mundane and hence no essay is overtly framed within any direct socio-political thesis or commentary. But in terms of standpoint or allegiance they contain unambiguous expressions which are, at times, strong enough to stand on their own. These essays can be seen as functioning at three levels. At the primary level can be considered essays like "Bridegroom Bargain" and "The Unseen Shop" which deal with serious social depravities like dowry and black marketing. In these essays the otherwise present qualities like focus on mundane details, creation of representative familiar characters and scenes etc are maintained but these are accompanied by clear and unhesitant expressions of criticism. In "Bridegroom Bargains", for example, Narayan's characteristic humor and gift of familiar description is contrasted with a sharp and near bitter attack on the injustice of the practice. Narayan's core expressions in this essay that he repeatedly uses to refer to the practice as well to the attitude of the people involved are "market", "price" and "sell". The whole essay is made to reveal this crude and exploitative underbelly of the institution of marriage and Narayan is remarkably outspoken in his assessment of the situation: "Satisfaction felt by the father of a girl is in inverse ratio to that felt by the father of the one with a son. It is naturally so considering that one is a seller and the other a buyer; and matrimony today is a market" (287). Like other essays Narayan engrosses the reader with minute and material details of the negotiations but also provides significant passing remarks regarding the survival of the practice under different guises. The most remarkable part proves to be the ending where Narayan's attack comes under a garb of satire: in view of the impossibility of

stopping the practice he proposes a standardization of it with well laid out tables of qualifications and corresponding prices of the grooms. And the concluding line has the effect of an outright condemnation: “Marriages are, of course, made in heaven, but if they are a business in our part of the universe, why not run it on efficient lines?” (289).

A second manifestation of this aspect appears in essays like “Pride of Place” and “To a Hindi Enthusiast” where Narayan’s concern is the disturbing undemocratic temperament associated with regionalism and where his oppositional stance almost subdues the overall characteristic lightness of tone and expression through a strong critical voice. In “Pride of Place” Narayan starts with a typically light-hearted, friendly and personalized account of regional bias where he remembers how his friends in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi spoke against one another’s city and continues with examples of alienating sentiments between the people in places as close as Mysore and Bangalore. But in between is infused Narayan’s own voice and he unapologetically resists the very idea of regional preference: “Generalization about a whole slice of the country is a common habit Every person assumes the role of an expert sociologist who has made a scientific study of human behavior and motives and could speak with authority about others, but the data gathered is mostly uncomplimentary, always underlining craftiness, stupidity, unreliability, slothfulness and so forth” (329).

The unusual outspokenness reflected in the last line turns to a personal and defensive mode in “To a Hindi Enthusiast”, another essay on regional bias especially in relation to language politics. The difference of tone is visible on the surface itself as the essay adopts an unusual second person mode of address where Narayan conveys his opposition to the figure of a “Hindi enthusiast” whom he addresses simply as “you”. Together, the immediacy and the directness of address and Narayan’s strong and unambiguous expressions make this essay appear quite different from the usual everyday familiarity of Narayan’s essays. Narayan is reacting against the imposition of Hindi over English as an administrative or legal measure and his opposition has two targets: the idea of English as a foreign language and the concept of prescribing the use of a particular language by

order. Against both Narayan puts unhesitant opposition the force of which is carried by the incessant use of “not”:

Ripeness cannot be forced by a government order or even by the recommendations of a commission. You cannot coerce nature and growth of a language is a natural process Leave it to our good sense and pleasure and nothing will go amiss. It is not necessary to hold threats to your fellow men Do not send us stationary with Hindi inscriptions on them; at the moment it only puzzles and irritates us. (315)

“To a Hindi Enthusiast” can be seen as the first of a series of essays that Narayan wrote on his views on the place of English in India and the related issue of the Indian English writer’s status in the country which includes “The Problem of the Indian Writer” and “English in India”. The unapologetic defense of the English language that he puts forward in this essay by saying “For me, at any rate, English is an absolutely Swadeshi language It has sojourned in India longer than you or I and is entitled to be treated with respect” (317), continues in the other essays. These essays almost form a category by themselves that is distinguished by Narayan’s overt and consistent involvement in issues of wider public and national interest and consequently attract attention in view of the supposed lack of such concerns in his fiction.

It is important and also interesting to note, however, that the supposed absence of socio-political concerns or involvement in issues of public interests that has been criticized in Narayan’s novels does not reflect Narayan’s attitude to such areas as an individual in real life. In their biography on Narayan *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*, N. Ram and Susan Ram note that though Narayan had what can be called a “unromanticized view” of life, that never “prevented him from speaking up on areas where he saw deterioration” (xxvii) and this led him to get engaged from time to time, in his own way, with issues he considered important.⁵ The apparently “contrasting traits of inwardness and sociability”, it is pointed out, ultimately merged in Narayan’s “artistic and social integrity.” No one has captured this side of Narayan’s personality better than John

Updike who called him a rare specimen of “a vanishing breed – the writer as citizen” who can acquire a “wealth of material” from his deep rooted “sense of community” (qtd. In Ram xxvii).

The essays, then, seem to represent this “citizen-writer” aspect of Narayan’s creativity in their direct and simple engagement with the material and yet the most basic nuances of the lives of the other ordinary citizens in his society. Besides the unambiguous and direct expression of his social engagements, this aspect is also highlighted by another factor which, in this analysis, stands as the third element distinguishing the treatment of ordinary but lived reality in the essays from that in Narayan’s fiction. This is the realistic specificity of locale that marks Narayan’s essays—his direct references to “our country” and to “India”. Though on the surface level it might look like an obvious and insignificant detail dictated by the “non-fictional” character of the essays, its distinction surfaces when seen as the alternative of its parallel in Narayan’s fiction — *Malgudi*. The whole debate about Narayan’s fiction representing or failing to represent the Indian reality is unavoidably related to the status and meaning associated with *Malgudi*. Whereas *Malgudi* becomes the route to essential Indianness for critics like Greene who locate universal or quintessentially Indian values in Narayan’s work, for others like Naipaul it appears to be a “simplification of reality” that allowed Narayan to hide real India from his readers. If in the novels Narayan’s supposed aloofness from actual socio-political conditions is covered by the paradigmatic or representative nature of *Malgudi*, in the essays his involvement is backed by his direct concern about India in its everyday material reality.

At this point a possible question may arise regarding the root of this authenticity: is there anything in the structures of the texts themselves — essay and novel — that causes this difference of treatment? Apparently there is and the difference works at the level of reception, of intended readership. John Thieme draws attention to how Narayan’s fiction was shaped by what he called “external pressures” of foreign readership and publication. (“Double Making”, 174). Thieme is referring here to the ways in which the demand of catering to an intended Western readership remolded the frame and identity of Narayan’s

fiction during the publication of *Swami and Friends*. The publisher Hamish Hamilton changed the original title by Narayan *Swami the Tate* to *Swami and Friends* to make it similar to Kipling's *Stalky & Co* and also changed the author's full name Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan Swami to R. K. Narayan. Of course both the changes were done with a view to meet the expectations of the British readership and at this point Narayan seems to be "a novelist who was willing, at least in part, to allow his identity to be trimmed to fit perceptions about the reading public in England in 1930s" (Thieme, *R. K. Narayan* 24). It remained a known and accepted fact that "Narayan writes for an international, often Western audience" (Kain, "R. K. Narayan" 5). In direct contrast to this, the essays were published in local Indian newspapers and consequently had to meet expectations and interests of a home readership. In fact, as Susan Ram and N. Ram point out "the break given him by *The Hindu* . . . for the first time gave him access to what he badly needed, a substantial home readership of discernment and no mean quality" (225). It is important to take note of this aspect because it redeems the denigration of the essays as belonging to the sphere of commercial instead of artistic production — a view which Narayan himself held in regard to this part of his writing.

In the last analysis, then, it appears as if the essays functioned as a textual space for Narayan to engage with his knowledge and concept of a gradually evolving urban India in terms of the lived experiences of its individual members. Though the essays do not have imaginatively reconstructed versions of Indian life like *Malgudi* and hence might seem to be lacking in discursive complexity and richness, their authenticity in terms of an unwavering attention to the material particulars of life in India make up for that lack. In fact, to turn the argument the other way, if Narayan is valued because of his engagement with the Indian way of life, that engagement seems to be more direct, accessible, simple and yet spatially and temporally representative in his essays than in his fiction. This seems to be the base of the poetics that explains Narayan's familiar essays and their characteristic involvement with the mundane and the ordinary. However, the effect and function of familiarity depends as much on its rhetoric as on its thematic particulars and understanding Narayan's familiar essays naturally demands attention to this aspect. This

study shall now turn to an exploration of the contours of such a rhetoric of familiarity in Narayan's familiar essays.

3.3 Towards a Rhetoric of the Familiar:

If we look at the definitions of the familiar essay provided in the previous section we notice a persistent emphasis on a particular stylistic orientation marking the form. Whereas for Hazlitt it is "common conversation", for Roche it is the quality of being "informal in tone" and for Scott Black it is an adaptation of the Montaignian quality of "friendship". For all these critics the point of distinction for a supposed stylistic scheme of the familiar essay seems to rest on an informal aura of talk, dialogue or conversation — a "familiar style". Now, a rhetorical frame modeled on the participatory ethos of talk immediately implies a friendly, inviting and cordial tone carrying the rhythm of conversation and creating the impression of informal and friendly dialogue. More importantly, it implies the presence of a narrative persona or voice — an authorial subjectivity — communicating in that tone. It has to be noted, however, that for a style echoing the ethos of conversation or dialogue the textual voice of a narrative persona can be only one end; on the other end there has to be an evocation of a sense of participation for the reader to complete the sense of a dialogue. Such a participatory rhetorical scheme, in its turn will indicate an underlying discursive frame distinguished by mutuality instead of a single subjectivity.

As we have seen, introduced by Montaigne the personal or subjective element marked a defining ideological bent of the essay as form and since then has remained a core attribute of the genre. At the same time, it has also endowed the form with a unique flexibility and freedom making it adaptable to different ideological and discursive needs within diverse temporal and cultural specifics. The conversational and participatory rhetoric of the familiar essay can be seen as such a re-appropriation of the intimate and confessional personal element of the Montaignian essay. And this re-appropriation took place to turn the essay into a textual practice suitable for a broad and collaborative —

rather than purely personal — mode of reflection. This is a stage when the elite, solitary and meditative ethos of the genre as conceived by Montaigne gives way to the popular, middle brow and active voice of *The Spectator* marking the beginning of the familiar essay. As Stevick points out in the aforementioned article whereas the Montaignian essay poses as intimate and informal, the Addisonian familiar essay evoked a sense “of belonging. . . of membership” for its readers (169). It is easy to see that a form designed to address popular social and contemporary interests will adopt a stylistic scheme capable of invoking a sense of participation and inclusion.

In her analysis of the nuances of familiar style in Hazlitt’s essays, Nancy Enright defines it as “a perfectly accessible and fully audience-directed style.” For Enright, the familiar style is most suitable for supporting a writer’s desire “to communicate an idea to his audience in the clearest, most accessible way he can” rather than any “emotional need to ventilate” (117). The elements of accessibility and communication are most important so that even if the essayist might be expressing his/her deepest thoughts and emotions it is done only with “an awareness of the audience’s sensibilities” (119). It is not difficult to locate such an awareness in Narayan’s essays that manifests itself in recurrent tropes. Interestingly for all his claims that his are “personal” essays, most of Narayan’s essays are marked by a conspicuous absence of the narrative “I”— the most important defining stylistic element of the personal essay; instead they are mostly dominated by an inclusive and assertive “We” coupled with direct or indirect reference to “You” (both of which signal an emotional and ideological bond of shared understanding between the narrator and the reader) where the occasional and rare presence of “I” is almost always preceded and succeeded by either of these two terms. The reason is not difficult to see; if Narayan’s essays are trying to voice the common lived experiences of his readers and at the same time offer critical insight into that body of experience then they have to adopt a mode of address that can evoke a sense of inclusiveness, commonality and sharing. It remains to be seen how the use of the plural and second person pronouns help Narayan achieve that effect.

The evocation of inclusiveness through “We” seems to serve the essayist’s interests at three levels. At the simplest level, there is the creation of a sense of camaraderie through repeated and consistent use of “We” in relation to all the aspects described in the essay. To take examples from the essays already analyzed — an essay like “Our Dress” is almost exclusively written in the first person plural and the writer’s point of view develops by taking the reader into confidence at every step evoking areas of common knowledge and ideas. He starts with the general observation that though “we hear a common complaint” about men’s dress being monotonous in other parts of the world, “ours is one of the few countries” where it does not apply, shares a remembrance of the felt cap and its disappearance at the time of freedom movement “when nationalism surged up in *our* hearts”, comments on the contemporary scenario where “now and then *we* hear talk of standardizing dress in India” and asserts that “*our* present system is perhaps the most sensible” etc (8). The use of a point of view that is projected as shared and common from the very beginning implicates the writer within whatever is asserted about the readers so that the subtle criticism that Narayan finally puts forward also appears shared and consequently does not alienate the reader: “The suit . . . holds a very undefined position in *our* country. *One* can never be sure how far Quit India should apply to it?”. This sense of being on the same side is further strengthened when the “We” is made to stand aside from something/someone that is not included within its fold to create a second level of affectivity: “*We* are generally free from the tyranny of having to dress for the hour . . . here and there no doubt *we* come across persons who rigorously classify their dress . . . These are however, a select group in a rarified atmosphere . . . ” (9) (emphases added). This second level of stronger association achieved through the narrative stance of “We/Us” set against an implied “They”— a hypothetical identity from which Narayan distances himself and his addressed audience — helps him put forward his intended criticism without creating any distance.

This same strategy is adopted in “Behind One Another” where Narayan turns the practice of queuing up into an issue of cultural appropriation and the challenges involved in the equation are forwarded in the form of shared memory: “It used to be quite normal feature of *our* existence to struggle for a ticket, for any sort of ticket, whether for a journey or for

an entertainment . . . ” (20). The next stage personalizes the memory into a humorous piece about how once the writer had to use the services of a wrestler to break into a crowd and get tickets. Immediately after, he turns to the underlying cultural significance which he shares again with the reader: “*our* social conscience had not developed too much and *we* never thought there was anything wrong in it” and strengthens the sense of participation by posing this common experience against something alien: “What *they* would have done in London in similar circumstances *We* felt ashamed of our country. All our heritage seemed to mean nothing culturally; the absence of queuing system branded *us* barbarians” (21)(emphases added). Both these references — the “*select group* in rarefied atmosphere” in the previous essay and “*they* in London” in this essay — serve to forge a sense of kinship and inclusion between the narrator and the reader by posing a hypothetical distance with a group exclusive to both. This sense of kinship reaches a third level of affectivity in some other essays where Narayan’s identification with his reader rests on a sense of empathy and understanding. In “The Unseen Shop” for example, Narayan takes up the issue of black marketing, its causes and its effects on the common man. Though his aim is clearly one of criticism and not simple description, Narayan makes it a point to direct that criticism to wider socio-political evils like war and red-tapism placing his sympathy with the “common man” who, Narayan asserts, “may be forgiven if he, in his innocence, sometimes visualizes the black market as a paradise.” More importantly, he partakes of that helpless innocence:

We too should like to be told a little more about this black market. *We* should like to see what sort of super-(or sub-) men people it. It is no doubt a morbid attraction, like the instinct to peep into an operating theatre. *We* cannot help it. *Our* waking hours are full of reminders of its existence (193) (emphases added).

This familiar and participatory rhetoric is also supported by the extensive use of the second person address of “You” that Narayan incorporates in some of his essays in varying degrees to create an aura of informal talk, of conversation and of direct and

immediate communication. Whereas the use of “We/Us” mode of address implicates the author in the reader’s experiences and sensibilities, the mode of direct address as “You” serves to bring the reader into the fold of the author’s point of view. It is also important to note that generally Narayan seems to use this term of address immediately after introducing a point of view or concern in his own voice — as “I” — as if to maintain a balance in perspective. In essays like “Noise”, “The Crowd” and “Allergy”, Narayan creates scenic descriptions with elaborate details which are primarily represented through the reader’s perspective and are accompanied by occasional remarks in the author’s voice. In “The Crowd” for example, Narayan starts in his own voice jotting down his thoughts on the significance of crowds making it clear at every point that he is expressing his personal views by placing “I/Me” in almost every sentence: “Any crowd interests *me*. *I* always feel that it deserves precedence over other engagements. *I* always tell myself that an engagement can wait but not the crowd And so *I* make it a point to drift towards any gathering that *I* may see But *I* am convinced that a good crowd is worth any sacrifice Seldom have *I* been disappointed” etc (emphases added) . Interestingly this confident personal voice continues only till the middle of the opening paragraph; rest of the essay continues with “You” which Narayan uses to create an intimate visual image of crowds of people and their peculiarities as well as to summon a sense of informal conversation:

There are different types of crowds and *you* have to choose the kind most suited to *your* temperament *you* get a somewhat different pleasure out of, *say*, passing through the Flower Bazaar Road at six in the evening; or *you* may buy a platform ticket and and take *your* seat on a bench at the platform till the last train departs (6) (emphases added).

This kind of an inclusive and participatory mode of address in Narayan’s essays seems to reflect the capacity to communicate ideas with a clear perception of “audience’s sensibilities” which Enright mentioned as marking the rhetoric of a friendly yet balanced familiar style. However it remains to be asked whether the logic behind this mode is

restricted to a simple communication of general ideas and impressions or whether it aims at something more than that. As the discussion in the previous section pointed out, underlying the apparently harmless form of the familiar essay there remains a core of critical reflection which the form invests in its characteristic focus on the mundane and the ordinary. This is a natural outcome of the form's embedment in urban life and culture and its function of addressing common urban individuals. Consequently the rhetoric of the form has to balance itself between maintaining an ethos of participation with the reader and a stance of critique towards the issue at hand and consequently there arises the need of a mode that can maintain that balance.

The mode most suitable for such a balance is nothing but irony — the rhetorical weapon of critical understatement. Traditionally irony has been understood, at the most basic level, as a discrepancy or a gap between expression and meaning; between what is apparently said and what is actually meant. For D. C. Muecke, “The differences between what people say and what they mean . . . is precisely the area within which irony operates” (7). Because irony, by definition, is concerned with creating and locating difference, contradiction and gap it is essentially a critical function. For Claire Colebrook the problem of irony is “at one with the problem of politics” because even in its simplest manifestation irony is ultimately concerned with “the political problem of human meaning” which turns it into a “complex rhetorical practice” endowed with “a distancing function”. Colebrook draws from the most ancient practice of irony in Plato's *Republic* — where Socrates uses irony to “challenge” and “expose” sham and pretension — as the origin of a critical and intellectual attitude to reality that runs through the ages (1-4). The implication of this critical function is that irony is aimed at not only communication but also evaluation; irony's critical function adopts an evaluative stance towards the one it exposes, what is commonly called its “victim” (Muecke 4). However, on the other end of the axis there remains another characteristic that defines the semantic intricacy of irony: the oblique criticism, to be functional as ironic, is supposed to be shared and understood by the intended readership or audience. For Linda Hutcheon, both the “evaluative edge” and issues of “exclusion and inclusion” are central to the critical functioning of irony as a rhetorical and intellectual tool (2). It is this double edged functionality of irony —

critique and distance on the one hand and inclusion and sharing on the other — that makes it suitable for a style critical and familiar at the same time.

However, to claim that irony forms a part of an inclusive and participatory rhetoric in Narayan's essays — that irony is used as a mode of "sharing"— might look like going against what is generally thought of Narayan as a literary artist. In the body of criticism centering Narayan's fiction the use irony has been one of the most commonly discussed aspects in terms of his stylistic orientation as the use of the mundane and the ordinary has been on the level of subject matter. But interestingly irony, in these accounts, has mostly been seen as mode of non-commitment, of aloofness and distance. In an interesting and rare piece of negative criticism on Narayan, Kirpal Singh puts forward the thesis that for all the mastery of the art of fiction writing, Narayan's use of the ordinary fails to create a sense of authenticity because of Narayan's extensive use of satire and irony which only creates an effect of distance; whereas satire "finally alienates" because it represents an "extreme mistrust of life", irony increases that alienation because it unavoidably represents "a disjunction, not a conjunction, it undermines, does not create (82). It is important to note that this effect of distance is a commonly recognized aspect of irony as a mode and device in general because of which it is considered a primarily intellectual and urban mode of expression. However, the conjunction of this aspect with the other elementary aspect of sharing and inclusiveness finally creates the ironic effect and in the case of Narayan's essays the balance between ironic distance of critique is neatly balanced by his use of the conversational ethos of familiarity.

Because Narayan's essays deal with the familiar particulars of ordinary life in the conversational familiar style — have the characteristic "lightness of touch" as Roche called it — almost all of them contain instances of ironic utterances. However, noticeable use of irony as a critical yet entertaining tool is found in some essays where Narayan is directly concerned, on the thematic level, with anomalies and negativities in public life affecting the interests of the common man. In these essays he adopts different ways of exposing the discrepancies and for putting them under the ironical gaze and consequently the essays contain sustained passages with ironic description. In "On Humour", for

example, Narayan's actual target of criticism is the ridiculous gap between the pomposities of government policies and actions, and the miserable plight of the common citizen. After describing various instances of the "humourous" as seen at individual and social levels that makes up the body of the essay, at the end Narayan casually mentions that he feels distressed whenever he faces the question "Have we a sense of humour?". As a way of explaining the reason for his distress he then adds the concluding paragraph:

Our cartoonists, humourous writers and columnists are now fully alive, deriving their inspiration from the absurdities and contradictions seen in public life: in the pomposities of self-important men, the elaborate pageantry surrounding the arrival and departure of a VIP, the ridiculous fuss bureaucrats make everywhere and above all the plight of the modern unknown warrior, who is the middle class common man who is unable to bear all the improvements and benefits that his would-be champions attempt to heap on his head. It would be impossible to survive these if we did not possess a sense of humour: that itself is proof enough that we have an abundance of it (47).

The use of irony in this passage is extensive, sustained and also layered as it works at the levels of both individual sentences and the structure of the whole essay. The critical edge works, firstly, at the level of individual terms present within the text, through exposing and highlighting contradictions: "inspirations" being derived from "absurdities and contradictions", "improvements" being "heaped on the head" that the common man is "unable to bear" and "modern unknown *warrior*" who is the "middle class *common man*" etc. (emphases added). These contradictions are paralleled by the second level of implied and hinted meaning which combines the critical with the evaluative edge indirectly commenting on the state of affairs: "cartoonists are now fully alive" indicate the presence of ridiculous discrepancies in the society and "would-be champions" indicate the eternally unfulfilled responsibilities of the public servant. Most importantly, the irony

works through the positioning of the passage within the structure of the essay. It is achieved through the apparently logical conclusion of reaching a “proof” about the presence of humour where the proof and the conclusion in fact point towards a questionable state of affairs. The whole passage maintains a balance between creating a comic effect by the distancing and criticizing stance towards the anomalies and a tragic effect by the involved, sympathizing stance towards the affected common man.

Narayan’s capacity to create such complex ironic effects within the simple form of his familiar essays functions at different levels. The balance of comedy and tragedy found in “On Humour” is overpowered by a sharper critical insight in the ironic passages incorporated in some other essays. For example, “The Newspaper Habit” continues in the same unassumingly commonsensical tone commenting on general issues till the last paragraph. Here, taking the clue from a news item that supposedly reported on the government’s decision to award turbans to successful farmers, Narayan concludes the essay with a vision of what he calls “the most *pleasing* picture of the Indian peasant” wearing a “loin cloth”, bare bodied and “baking in the sun” walking with unshod feet but with a head “resplendent with a turban that was placed there by the minister with his own hands” (341) (emphasis added). Irony in cases like this not only touches the intellectual-critical-evaluative edge but also aims at creating a specific emotional response in the reader by sharing that critical insight and thereby enacts a “deliberate engaging of emotions” (Hutcheon15). Whereas irony in these two essays is restricted to one single part of the essay that creates the effect through contrast with the rest of the text — a structure also maintained in “The Election Game”— some other essays like “Taxing Thoughts” and “Castes: Old and New” spread the ironic treatment over the whole essay turning it into an organizational principle. Narayan’s irony in these essays is relentless and complete. “Taxing Thoughts” can be seen as an instance of sustained “impersonal irony” (Muecke 52) — irony where the effect of exposure is highlighted by the matter-of-fact, casual and apparently rational manner of exposition — giving the essay the structure of a detached intellectual account of problems related to tax payment whereas in reality it continuously attacks the exploitative structure of the taxing system. In “Castes: Old and New” on the other hand Narayan uses the classic ironic device of “innocence” or

“confident unawareness” (Muecke 25) whereby the ironist pretends, in a mode of innocent credulity, to be on the side of target of the irony and exposes the discrepancies in the process and presents the whole essay in the form of a series of proposals defense of the Indian caste system and its utility.

Though Narayan’s use of irony in the essays is consistent and effective in the long run the impression of a friendly “lightness of touch” overpowers the underlying mode of critique creating an aura of harmless inconsequentiality around the texts. The reason is that Narayan mixes the ironic with the humorous almost in all the essays. The ethos of sharing and inclusion which marks the familiar style and which irony serves in its own way, is also carried by humor because at the most basic level anything humorous “always supposes some piece of factual knowledge *shared* by the humorist and audience” (Nash 4) (emphasis added). Besides incorporating humor in individual observations and comments, Narayan adopts the classic expositional mode of the humorous — the anecdote and places it either before or after the passages containing irony. The narrative element present in the anecdote engages the reader’s interest by bringing the general theme or concern to familiar particularized details and the humor inherent in it balances the distancing effect created by irony.

In “Castes: Old and New”, for example, Narayan starts with highly ironic general statements about the importance of the caste system in maintaining the image of India in the minds of people from other parts of the world for whom caste system is the most distinctive and at the same time entertaining part of India’s culture. It is obvious that the Indian caste system, the idea of a traditional Indian identity and the international understanding of both — these are all targeted by Narayan’s irony at the same time. Like the concluding paragraph from “On Humour” already analyzed, this introductory passage also has complex and nuanced ironic statements and structure. However, instead of carrying on in the impersonal ironic tone Narayan, in the very next paragraph, introduces the piece of an “incident”: he describes how once a foreign researcher came all the way to India to “see” and “photograph” the caste system and was highly disappointed to know that modern India has abolished the system. After narrating the ridiculous encounter

where the guest demands to “see” the caste system in Narayan’s house and refuses to be pacified by Narayan’s proposal to show her the modern India of factories, river valley and hydroelectric projects in the absence of the caste system, Narayan uses direct speech to communicate the scholar’s point of view: “I have seen all kinds of factories and projects in all parts of the world. I don’t have to come to India to see them. I would not have taken all this trouble to come here If had known there would be no caste system” (337). This anecdote, on which Narayan does not give any direct comment, is immediately followed by the central ironical statement of the piece that appears in the guise of a logical conclusion: if absence of caste system is causing problems for tourist traffic to India then there may be created a “model caste-system village” subsidized by the tourist department. The incorporation of the anecdote between the ironic passages brings a general point to familiar and particular details and at the same time balances the sharpness of the ironic judgment with easy and accessible humor.

Narayan’s familiar style thus presents itself as a balanced rhetorical scheme that meets the demand of presenting the ordinary and the mundane in an accessible form of communication on the one hand and carrying the underlying core of critical reflection in an ironic mode of evaluation on the other. The balance also lies between expressing an intimate and informal insight on the one hand and creating an ethos of invitation and inclusion on the other and also between maintaining a “lightness of touch” and still not losing sight of “significance of the mundane”. The familiarity in Narayan’s familiar essay comes up as an effect through the combination of familiarity in theme as well as style.

The “second-class citizenship” of the familiar essayists is a long standing tradition in itself within the literary academy. And when we see R. K. Narayan marginalizing his own writing output that kept him sustained in the early years of his growth into a novelist we have to remember that he is following an extremely strong prejudice that has always affected the reception of non-fiction writing — essay and others — from renowned fiction writers. Thus Charles Dickens’ nonfiction pieces are “commonly presented as a

sort of training for writing novels” (Tulloch 59) and George Orwell himself confessed to having the wish of writing only “ornate and merely descriptive books” because he always “looked up to literature which he thought as the higher form” (Keeble 101). To assess and defend the status of essay in this concern it is important to understand the basis of such a prejudice. The most basic reason is the canonical division between what is literary and what is not literary which comes down to the more immediate division of what is fiction and what is not (or non-) fiction. This hierarchy again is based on two presuppositions: firstly that fiction is related to the higher and major realm of imagination whereas others are simply communication of information and secondly that fiction as literature and as dictated by imagination is guided by pure and aesthetic values whereas everything outside it is guided by the utilitarian concerns of market and profit. The clear distinction that Narayan made between his essays that gave him “regular income” and the novels that gave him “recognition” is a specific instance of this general prejudice. And it is easy to see that under the prevalence of such concepts the essay — which is one of the most marginalized of all non-fictional forms in general — gets automatically doubly marginalized within the oeuvre of a great fiction writer.

In an interesting analysis of the ideological frame on which literary concepts of this sort are based, Pierre Bourdieu offers, in his *Field of Cultural Production*, a scheme of analysis based on the “duality” of economic and symbolic categories that run the field of literary genres. According to the economic determinant, the system is “simple and relatively stable” where drama is at the top and poetry is at the bottom in terms of demand and economic gain. The system gets complicated when the category of the “symbolic” comes in. According to Bourdieu, genres acquire higher status on the scale of the symbolic to the degree they show a distance from the economic determinant; thus poetry becomes higher genre than drama because poetry is eclectic whereas drama is popular (75-76). Interestingly the novel and the essay finds the same position in this system of genre hierarchy as analyzed by Bourdieu: they are “mixed” or “middle” genres because they are not guided exclusively by either the economic or the symbolic elements; rather they are adaptable to the demands of different audiences depending on the creation of their own subgenres (48). Bourdieu’s analysis is significant for assessing the essay’s

potentiality and value because it places the essay at par with the novel—the major genre which has always been used to bring the essay’s minority to relief — in terms of a sociological and economic gradation and also in terms of an inherent generic peculiarity. Going by such insight it seems possible to move from a hierarchical or exclusive relation between fiction and essay to a poetics where the potentialities of both the genres might merge. It will mean moving from the idea of the essay as an insecure and secondary practice of occasional writing to highlighting the form’s potential for confident incorporation of alternative generic structures. To such an analysis this study shall now move taking up the essays of Amitav Ghosh.