

RESEARCH ARTICLE



2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

The Art of Ordinary Life: Humanism, Everydayness, and Social Transformation in R. K. Narayan's Fiction

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DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.14.3.402



Article info

Article Received: 17/08/2026
Article Accepted: 19/09/2026
Published online: 21/09/2026

Abstract

R. K. Narayan occupies a foundational position in Indian English fiction, yet his literary achievement has often been reduced to his creation of the fictional town of Malgudi and his apparently simple representation of Indian middle-class life. Such a reading, while recognizing important aspects of his fiction, risks overlooking the formal and ideological complexity through which Narayan converts everyday experience into a sustained meditation on identity, social transformation, tradition, modernity, and human agency. This paper re-examines Narayan's representation of ordinary life through a close reading of *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Guide* (1958), and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967). Drawing upon existing criticism concerning Malgudi, realism, humour, colonialism, humanism, and tradition-modernity, the study argues that Narayan's "ordinary" is not merely descriptive but constitutes a distinctive literary method. His characters inhabit a transitional social world in which inherited values encounter new institutions, technologies, aspirations, and economic structures. Malgudi consequently functions not simply as a miniature India but as a dynamic cultural space in which identities are continuously negotiated. Through irony, comic realism, narrative restraint, and morally ambiguous characterization, Narayan avoids both romanticizing tradition and celebrating modernity. Raju, Swami, Chandran, Jagan, and Mali become representative not because they are social stereotypes but because their individual anxieties dramatize larger historical changes. The paper further argues that Narayan's humanism is inseparable from his narrative technique: his refusal to impose a final moral judgment creates a space in which readers must negotiate between competing interpretations. His fiction therefore transforms the apparently insignificant events of everyday life into a sophisticated exploration of the human condition.

Keywords: R. K. Narayan, Malgudi, Indian English fiction, ordinary life, humanism, realism, tradition, modernity, humour, social transformation,

1. INTRODUCTION

R. K. Narayan (1906–2001) is one of the most influential writers associated with the development of Indian English fiction. Alongside writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, he helped establish the Indian novel in English as a major literary form. Yet Narayan's contribution differs significantly from that of writers whose fiction foregrounds political struggle, social protest, historical trauma, or explicit nationalist ideology. His literary world is populated primarily by ordinary people: schoolchildren, teachers, students, shopkeepers, guides, printers, businessmen, housewives, clerks, parents, and small-town professionals.

At first glance, this emphasis on ordinary life may seem to indicate a limited literary ambition. Narayan himself, however, repeatedly demonstrates that the apparently insignificant experiences of everyday existence can reveal fundamental truths about human nature. His fictional town of Malgudi provides the principal setting for this project. Across his fiction, Malgudi develops from a relatively small imaginary town into a complex literary geography in which colonialism, independence, urbanization, commerce, education, family relations, religion, and technological change interact.

Earlier criticism frequently emphasized Narayan's capacity to communicate an apparently authentic "Indianness" to English-speaking readers. John Thieme, however, warns against reducing Narayan's fiction to this function of cultural mediation. His study argues that Malgudi is better understood as a "fractured and transitional site," where older cultural conceptions encounter the pressures of modernity (Thieme). (OUP Academic) This insight is particularly important because it shifts critical attention from the question "How Indian

is Narayan?" to a more productive question: How does Narayan construct everyday life as a literary space in which cultural identities are negotiated and transformed?

Recent scholarship has similarly challenged the tendency to regard Narayan simply as a chronicler of Indian middle-class life. Judith Brown observes that criticism has sometimes faulted Narayan for avoiding the brutal realities of colonial rule, but argues that his fictional world can instead undermine the assumptions underlying colonial models of governance (Brown). (Cambridge University Press) Ludmila Volná's recent study likewise emphasizes humour as a potentially subversive strategy through which Narayan engages with colonial and postcolonial cultural conditions. (journals.unibuc.ro)

This paper therefore proposes that Narayan's greatest achievement lies in his transformation of ordinary life into a method of social and philosophical inquiry. His characters are ordinary, but their circumstances are not intellectually simple. Their lives reveal conflicts between inherited values and modern aspirations, individual freedom and social responsibility, appearance and reality, economic ambition and ethical restraint.

The paper focuses particularly on *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Guide*, and *The Vendor of Sweets*. These texts enable a chronological examination of Narayan's fictional world from childhood and education to adulthood, professional aspiration, family conflict, commercial modernity, and spiritual transformation.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Critical approaches to R. K. Narayan have developed considerably over the decades. Early

responses frequently concentrated on his simplicity, humour, Indian setting, and apparent ability to communicate Indian cultural experience to Western readers. Graham Greene's influential association with Narayan contributed to the perception of Narayan as a literary mediator between India and the West. Later criticism, however, has questioned the adequacy of this model.

William Walsh's critical study of Narayan emphasizes the distinctive quality of his fictional world and his capacity to transform apparently small events into meaningful narratives. M. K. Naik, in his studies of Indian English literature, similarly situates Narayan within the emergence of an Indian literary consciousness expressed through English.

Meenakshi Mukherjee's work on Indian English fiction is particularly useful for understanding the relationship between the individual and the social environment in the Indian novel. Her critical perspective helps explain why Narayan's middle-class characters should not be dismissed as merely domestic or apolitical. Their domestic conflicts are often connected to broader transformations in Indian society.

More recent scholarship has expanded this field. John Thieme's *R. K. Narayan* rejects the assumption that Malgudi is simply a transparent representation of "authentic India." Instead, he understands it as a culturally and geographically constructed space marked by transition. (OUP Academic) This approach is important for the present study because it allows Malgudi to be read as a dynamic literary structure rather than a static backdrop.

A 1995 doctoral study by Rajasverrie Naidoo examined Narayan's Malgudi novels through theme and character, emphasizing middle-class society, comic-ironic narration, the development of Malgudi, and conflicts between orthodoxy and modernity. (ResearchSpace UKZN) Such criticism establishes that

Narayan's ordinary characters can be read as indicators of broader social change.

Studies of Narayan's socio-cultural milieu have also emphasized his use of subtle irony. R. S. Baskkaran argues that Narayan's novels can be understood as a kind of socio-cultural chronicle because Malgudi provides a rich environment for the representation of middle-class life and social behaviour. (journals.eltai.in)

More recent work has concentrated on middle-class identity, tradition, modernity, and social realism. Contemporary scholarship identifies family structure, education, occupation, economic aspiration, religious practices, and generational conflict as recurring components of Narayan's fictional representation of Indian society. (IJARMT)

Another important direction concerns humanism. Recent scholarship has argued that Narayan's fiction contains a philosophical dimension extending beyond realism and humour. A 2025 study, for example, reads *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The English Teacher*, *The Financial Expert*, and *The Guide* through self-realization and Indian humanism, arguing that suffering and ordinary experience can lead Narayan's characters toward moral or spiritual awareness. (ir.vistas.ac.in)

Studies of *The Guide* have further complicated the opposition between tradition and modernity. Rather than presenting a simple binary, criticism identifies contradictions within both positions. Raju's world involves the railway, tourism, commercial entertainment, rural religious belief, and changing social structures. (the-criterion.com)

Although existing scholarship has extensively examined Malgudi, middle-class society, humour, realism, tradition and modernity, there remains a productive intersection that deserves further attention: the relationship between Narayan's representation of ordinary life and his narrative construction of social transformation.

Many studies isolate individual themes – Malgudi, humour, middle-class life, tradition versus modernity, or humanism. This paper brings these strands together. It argues that they are not separate features but interconnected components of Narayan's method.

The paper therefore asks:

How does Narayan transform ordinary everyday experience into a literary form capable of representing the cultural and psychological transformations of twentieth-century India?

The argument advanced here is that the "ordinary" in Narayan is not simply a subject matter. It is a narrative strategy. By concentrating on apparently small events, Narayan makes social change visible through personal relationships rather than political declarations.

The present study has five principal objectives:

1. To examine Narayan's representation of ordinary Indian life in selected novels.
2. To analyse Malgudi as a dynamic cultural and social space rather than merely a fictional setting.
3. To investigate the relationship between tradition and modernity in Narayan's characterization.
4. To examine humour, irony, and narrative restraint as methods of social criticism.
5. To demonstrate how Narayan's humanism emerges through his representation of morally ambiguous ordinary individuals.

4. Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. How does Narayan transform ordinary experience into a significant literary subject?
2. In what ways does Malgudi function as a space of cultural transition?

3. How do Narayan's characters negotiate inherited traditions and modern aspirations?
4. How does humour complicate rather than weaken Narayan's social criticism?
5. Can Narayan's apparent simplicity be understood as a sophisticated narrative strategy?

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and text-centred methodology. The principal method is close textual analysis of four selected novels: *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Guide*, and *The Vendor of Sweets*.

The study also employs contextual and critical reading. Secondary scholarship on Narayan's Malgudi, realism, humour, colonialism, humanism, and tradition-modernity provides the critical framework. Rather than treating the novels as sociological documents, the research pays particular attention to narrative form, characterization, irony, spatial construction, dialogue, and ambiguity.

The theoretical orientation is interdisciplinary, drawing selectively upon:

- postcolonial literary criticism,
- cultural studies,
- realism,
- narratology,
- and humanistic approaches to fiction.

The study does not claim that Narayan represents the whole of Indian society. Instead, it examines how his fictional middle-class and small-town world constructs a particular imaginative version of Indian social reality.

Ordinary Life as Literary Method

Narayan's most distinctive contribution is his transformation of the everyday into the literary. His novels rarely depend on spectacular events. Instead, their narratives

develop around examinations, friendships, marriages, businesses, family conversations, romantic disappointments, journeys, and small moral decisions.

In *Swami and Friends*, for example, the experiences of a schoolboy become a means of representing colonial educational structures. Swami does not understand colonialism theoretically. He experiences it through teachers, school rules, examinations, friendships, and parental expectations.

This is one of Narayan's important narrative achievements: **history enters the novel through ordinary experience.**

The child therefore becomes an unexpected historical observer. Political developments do not necessarily appear as formal political discourse; they enter Swami's world through disruption and confusion.

Research on *Swami and Friends* has similarly identified Malgudi's railway station and Sarayu River as symbolic connections between the fictional town and larger historical and geographical spaces. (ResearchGate)

Narayan's method consequently avoids the artificial separation of the personal and the political. The political becomes meaningful when it affects daily life.

Malgudi: Place, Identity, and Cultural Transition

Malgudi is often described as a microcosm of India, but such a description requires qualification. It is not a statistically representative model of the nation. It is an imaginative space in which Narayan repeatedly stages encounters between different cultural forces.

Shyamasri Maji observes that Malgudi has a strong relationship with its inhabitants and can operate at both the human and topographical levels. (revistes.uab.cat) This is significant because the town is not passive scenery. Its streets, railway station, river, shops,

houses, and surrounding villages participate in the construction of character and narrative.

In *The Guide*, for instance, the railway becomes associated with mobility, tourism, economic opportunity, and modernity. Raju's career is directly connected to this changing landscape. His identity as a guide exists because the social world around him is changing.

Malgudi is therefore simultaneously stable and unstable. Its recognizable streets create continuity, while new technologies and economic practices create disruption.

This duality explains why Malgudi remains useful throughout Narayan's career. It can absorb historical change without losing its imaginative identity.

Thieme's description of Malgudi as a "fractured and transitional site" is especially productive here because it captures the tension between continuity and change. (OUP Academic)

Childhood, Education, and Colonial Modernity in *Swami and Friends*

Swami and Friends presents childhood through the experiences of Swaminathan, Mani, Rajam, and their school environment. The narrative is humorous, but its educational setting reflects colonial institutional structures.

Swami's relationship with school authorities reveals the tension between individual imagination and institutional discipline. Education is not presented simply as a positive process. It is also a system of authority.

The novel's importance therefore extends beyond childhood nostalgia. It asks how an Indian child experiences a system shaped by colonial structures.

The political world enters Swami's consciousness indirectly. His understanding of events is incomplete, but that incompleteness itself is significant. Narayan does not give the child an adult political vocabulary. Instead, he

represents history through confusion, fear, friendship, and disruption.

This technique is consistent with Narayan's broader method. Rather than presenting history from above, he presents it from within ordinary life.

Chandran and the Crisis of Adulthood in *The Bachelor of Arts*

If *Swami and Friends* represent childhood, *The Bachelor of Arts* represents the uncertainty of early adulthood. Chandran is educated and ambitious, but his transition into adulthood is marked by uncertainty. Love, marriage, education, family expectations, and career choices become sources of anxiety. His romantic experience is particularly important because Narayan refuses to treat love as a purely sentimental matter. Romantic desire becomes connected to social conventions, family expectations, horoscope, class, and marriage.

Chandran's crisis therefore represents the broader problem of an educated Indian youth negotiating between individual desire and social structures. The novel also reveals Narayan's interest in the gap between education and practical life. Academic achievement does not automatically produce emotional or social maturity. The "Bachelor of Arts" is consequently not merely an educational identity; it becomes a symbolic condition. Chandran belongs to a generation caught between inherited structures and emerging individualism.

Raju and the Construction of Identity in *The Guide*

The Guide provides perhaps Narayan's most sophisticated examination of identity. Raju begins as a railway guide. His occupation depends upon interpreting a place for others. This function becomes metaphorically significant: Raju is repeatedly engaged in constructing meanings for other people. His identity changes throughout the novel. He becomes a guide, lover, entrepreneur, prisoner, and finally a holy man. The title itself is

therefore ironic. Raju is initially a literal guide, but he eventually becomes a spiritual guide without necessarily possessing spiritual authority.

As one recent scholarly discussion observes, the novel's title encompasses several versions of Raju – tourist guide, impresario, and swami. (modernlanguagesopen.org) The complexity of Raju lies in the uncertainty surrounding his transformation. Is he consciously deceiving the villagers? Does he gradually believe in the role imposed upon him? Does suffering transform him? Narayan does not answer these questions conclusively.

This ambiguity is central to his humanism. A less complex novelist might have converted Raju into either a fraud or a saint. Narayan allows him to remain both possibility and contradiction.

The Guide and the Tradition-Modernity Question

The conflict between tradition and modernity is frequently identified as a central theme in *The Guide*, but the novel complicates rather than simply reproduces this binary. Raju's world contains railways, tourists, cinema, commerce, archaeology, dance, rural belief, fasting, and religious faith. Modernity and tradition do not occupy completely separate spaces. Raju himself embodies this hybridity. His commercial success depends on modern tourism, while his later authority depends on traditional ideas of sanctity. The novel therefore exposes the instability of cultural categories.

Modernity does not necessarily produce rationality, and tradition does not necessarily produce truth. The villagers' faith in Raju is socially produced. At the same time, Raju's final suffering creates the possibility that the role he initially performed becomes ethically meaningful. The novel's ambiguity is thus more important than any simple conclusion about whether tradition or modernity is superior.

Jagan and Mali: Generational Conflict in *The Vendor of Sweets*

The Vendor of Sweets offers one of Narayan's clearest explorations of generational change. Jagan is attached to Gandhian simplicity, Hindu philosophical ideas, and traditional social values. Mali, however, returns from America with radically different attitudes toward education, business, technology, food, and family life.

The novel opens with Jagan's maxim:

"Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self" (Narayan 7).

The statement is immediately significant because it establishes the relationship between appetite, self-control, commerce, and morality. Yet Narayan's irony becomes evident because Jagan himself is a successful seller of sweets. Thus, the protagonist's philosophy and economic practice do not perfectly coincide.

This contradiction is characteristic of Narayan's characterization. Jagan is neither a perfect traditionalist nor a hypocrite. He is a human being struggling to live according to principles that are themselves difficult to apply consistently.

The novel further observes that:

"Everything in this house had the sanctity of usage, which was the reason why no improvement was possible" (Narayan 19).

The statement captures the paradox of tradition. Continuity can provide stability, but it can also prevent adaptation. Mali represents the opposite impulse. He is impatient with inherited practices and fascinated by American models of production and technology. When he proposes a machine for producing stories, he imagines a future of mass cultural production. His vision is simultaneously innovative and absurd.

The conflict therefore cannot be reduced to "good tradition versus bad modernity." Both characters are limited. Jagan's tradition can

become rigidity; Mali's modernity can become arrogance.

Language, Education, and Colonial Residues

The conflict between Jagan and Mali also reveals the continuing presence of colonial structures after independence. At one point, the novel explains the colonial meaning of the word "writer," connecting it to the clerical system associated with colonial education. Mali's ambition to become a creative writer therefore acquires a larger historical significance.

The novel suggests that independence does not automatically eliminate colonial patterns of thought. Mali's fascination with America represents a newer form of cultural influence. Colonialism may have ended politically, but cultural and economic forms of Western influence continue. This is one reason Narayan's fiction should not be treated as culturally static. His characters inhabit a postcolonial society negotiating multiple external influences.

Recent criticism similarly reads *The Vendor of Sweets* in terms of cultural nativism, colonial educational legacies, and competing models of knowledge.

Humour as Social Criticism

Narayan's humour deserves more critical attention because it is central to his representation of social reality. His humour is rarely based upon direct satire. Instead, it emerges from contradiction. Jagan preaches self-control while selling sweets. Raju becomes a holy man despite his questionable past. Swami wants independence but remains frightened of teachers and parents.

Chandran wants romantic freedom but remains deeply influenced by social conventions. These contradictions produce humour, but they also produce insight. Ludmila Volná's recent study argues that Narayan's humour can function as a form of cultural and postcolonial critique. (journals.unibuc.ro) This is an important correction to the assumption

that Narayan's humour makes his fiction politically harmless.

Humour creates distance. Because readers laugh at characters, they can also recognize themselves in them. The humour therefore becomes humanistic rather than merely comic.

Irony and the Ethics of Interpretation

Irony is closely related to Narayan's humour. His narrator frequently presents characters without providing explicit moral judgments.

This narrative restraint forces readers to interpret. Jagan's philosophy is presented sympathetically, but his behaviour complicates it. Mali's modern ambitions are mocked, but his dissatisfaction with traditional structures is not entirely irrational. Raju's deception is undeniable, yet his final transformation cannot be dismissed entirely as fraud. Such ambiguity is one of Narayan's greatest strengths.

His novels do not provide simple moral equations. Instead, they recognize that human beings often act from contradictory motives. This is where Narayan's humanism becomes a narrative practice. He does not simply state that people are complex; he constructs stories that require readers to experience that complexity.

Narayan's Humanism

Narayan's humanism emerges from his willingness to see ordinary individuals as morally significant. His characters are not heroic figures in the epic sense. Their struggles concern money, family, education, love, social respect, work, and identity. Yet these apparently small concerns are treated seriously.

In this sense, Narayan's humanism is democratic. He gives literary attention to people who might otherwise remain invisible in grand historical narratives. Recent scholarship has connected Narayan's ordinary characters with processes of self-realization and Indian philosophical humanism. (ir.vistas.ac.in)

However, Narayan's humanism is not purely philosophical. It is also structural. His narrative voice repeatedly refuses to reduce characters to categories. Raju is not simply a fraud. Jagan is not simply a traditionalist. Mali is not simply a Westernized Indian. Swami is not simply a child. Each character remains open to interpretation.

Beyond the "Chronicler of India"

The phrase "chronicler of Malgudi" is useful but insufficient. Narayan certainly records social details. His novels contain descriptions of food, clothing, occupations, education, religion, transportation, family structures, and commercial practices. But he does more than record them. He transforms these details into narrative structures through which social contradictions become visible.

For example, the railway in *The Guide* is not merely a technological detail. It changes the economic structure of the region and creates Raju's profession. Similarly, the story-writing machine in *The Vendor of Sweets* is not merely a comic invention. It represents the commercialization and mechanization of cultural production. The school in *Swami and Friends* is not merely a setting. It embodies institutional authority. Malgudi is therefore not an archive of Indian life. It is an **interpretive model of social transformation**.

The Limits of Narayan's Humanism

A research-oriented reading should also recognize the limitations of Narayan's fictional universe. His concentration on middle-class life can sometimes marginalize other social groups. Recent scholarship has raised questions concerning the representation of caste, gender, and regional diversity in his work. (chandigarhphilosophers.com)

Women, although important in several novels, are often represented within structures shaped by family, marriage, and male perception. Similarly, Malgudi's social world cannot be taken as a complete representation of

Indian society. This limitation does not invalidate Narayan's achievement. Instead, it defines the historical and social boundaries of his fictional project.

A balanced critical approach should therefore appreciate his humanism while recognizing that the "ordinary Indian" constructed by his fiction is selective.

The Significance of Narrative Simplicity

Narayan's simplicity is often mistaken for lack of complexity. His prose is accessible, but accessibility is not equivalent to artistic simplicity.

His narrative economy allows contradictions to emerge without excessive explanation. Instead of telling readers what a character represents, Narayan allows actions, dialogue, and situations to reveal character. This restraint also contributes to the longevity of his fiction. Because Narayan rarely overexplains his characters, readers from different periods can reinterpret them.

The apparent simplicity of the prose therefore performs an important function: it creates interpretive openness.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis leads to five principal findings. First, ordinary life is Narayan's principal literary method. He demonstrates that the everyday can carry historical, social, and philosophical significance. Second, Malgudi is a transitional rather than static space. It changes with technology, commerce, education, colonial influence, and postcolonial aspirations. This supports Thieme's description of Malgudi as a fractured and transitional site. (OUP Academic)

Third, Narayan does not present tradition and modernity as simple opposites. Jagan's traditionalism has both ethical strengths and restrictive tendencies. Mali's modernity contains energy but also selfishness and cultural alienation.

Fourth, humour is a mode of criticism. Narayan's humour enables him to expose contradictions without converting fiction into ideological propaganda. Fifth, humanism emerges through narrative ambiguity. Narayan's characters are neither completely condemned nor completely celebrated. Their moral uncertainty becomes the basis of the reader's engagement.

5. CONCLUSION

R. K. Narayan's importance in Indian English literature cannot be adequately explained by describing him simply as the chronicler of Malgudi or the writer of ordinary Indian life. His real achievement is more complex. He transforms the ordinary into an interpretive category through which readers encounter the historical, cultural, psychological, and moral changes of twentieth-century India.

His fictional world demonstrates that social transformation does not occur only through wars, political movements, legislation, or revolutionary events. It also occurs through families, schools, occupations, marriages, businesses, technologies, friendships, and individual ambitions.

Swami experiences the pressures of colonial education through the small world of school. Chandran experiences modernity through education, romantic desire, and uncertainty about adulthood. Raju experiences the transformation of social and economic life through railway tourism, performance, commerce, and religious belief. Jagan and Mali experience the conflict between tradition and modernity through the intimate structure of the father-son relationship.

These characters are therefore "ordinary" only in the social sense. Their experiences dramatize large questions about identity and cultural change.

Malgudi itself is similarly more than a fictional town. It is a literary laboratory in which Narayan observes the interaction between

continuity and change. Its apparent stability conceals constant transformation.

Narayan's humour and irony further complicate his representation of social reality. He does not offer a straightforward political program. Instead, he creates situations in which contradictions become visible. The traditionalist may be hypocritical; the modernist may be arrogant; the spiritual figure may have a questionable past; the educated individual may remain emotionally immature.

Such contradictions explain the enduring appeal of Narayan's fiction. His humanism lies not in idealizing humanity but in recognizing its imperfections. His characters fail, misunderstand, deceive, suffer, love, adapt, and sometimes transform themselves. The narrator does not always tell readers what these experiences mean. Instead, he creates the narrative conditions in which meaning can emerge through interpretation.

Consequently, Narayan's apparent simplicity should be understood as a sophisticated literary strategy. His prose is economical because his world does not require rhetorical excess. His humour is gentle because his characters are not objects of hatred. His irony is restrained because he recognizes that human beings are rarely consistent. His ordinary people become significant because their lives reveal the complexity of living through social change.

The enduring relevance of Narayan therefore lies in the relationship between the **ordinary and the universal**. He begins with a small town, a family, a schoolboy, a vendor, or a guide, but from these limited circumstances he develops questions that exceed their immediate context.

Narayan's fiction ultimately suggests that the drama of history is also the drama of everyday life. The transformation of a society can be observed in the changing aspirations of a son, the anxieties of a student, the ambitions of a businessman, the faith of a village, or the

moral uncertainty of an individual. In this sense, Narayan does not merely write about ordinary life. He demonstrates the extraordinary literary possibilities contained within it.

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