Suicide and the Paradox of Individuality in Select Short Stories of R.K. Narayan

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze in a literary context the paradoxical tensions between individuality, expressed in terms of personality, aspiration and agency, and suicide, the state of terminating one's individuality, examining these fraught dynamics across a selection of short stories penned by R.K. Narayan. A celebrated chronicler of the idiosyncrasies, superstitions and pressures of small-town Indian life, particularly within his constructed setting of Malgudi, Narayan's fiction traces in social realist fashion the ways in which the psychologies of his characters are shaped by their environments, circumstances and cultures, organically tracing the sum of these drives and pressures to conclusions as likely to enlighten the reader about life as they are to issue an engaging note of ambiguity. As such, his tales serve as a productive system in which to study the elements of suicide in an Indian context, insofar as they depict a host of real-world pressures that are known to induce suicidal ideation and attempts in Indian subjects, while also employing suicide in a more symbolic fashion to address deeper questions about the meaning of life, god and the purpose of the individual within society. To that end, this paper shall draw upon sociological theories of suicide, psychological findings about suicidal patterns in Indian contexts, and works of literary criticism that explore the figurative and expressive dimensions of suicide in order to interpret and contextualize the materialist and metaphysical treatment of suicide and individuality in R.K. Narayan's short fiction.

Key Words

Suicide, Individuality, Personality, Indian literature, R.K. Narayan

Introduction: The 'I' in Suicide

In an essay that critiques the traditional condemnation of suicide prevalent in both the religious and legal doctrines of Western societies at the time, the

pessimist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer states: “they make the nonsensical remark that suicide is wrong; when it is quite obvious that there is nothing in the world to which every man has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person.” ([1851] 2005, 22). This argument, which issues from the standpoint of an individualism that positions personal choices and the intimately felt reasons behind them morally above the proscriptions of cultural authorities, hits upon a paradox that is at the heart (or lack thereof) of the ethical debate around suicide. Does individualism and the validity of decisions pertaining to oneself extend even unto the act of absolute self-negation? Is suicide the logical endpoint and emotional pinnacle of individuality, insofar as it holds the moral choice made by a self above the body of all thought and experience, extending the will (a term with implications both spiritual and legal) of a person even past their death? Or is it, as the dogmas opposed by Schopenhauer maintain, a tragic and sinful practice with calamitous consequences for wider society if left unpunished?

The capacity of the sciences to answer such questions is, naturally, limited by the silence of the grave, but artists may rush in where analysts fear to tread, for the realm of literature is one where the myriad paradoxes, contradictions and hypocrisies of society are viewed not as mere obstacles to be overcome on the path to truth, but rather as spaces ripe for exploration in and of themselves. Schopenhauer himself was one among many 19th century scholars in an age of Orientalism whose “interest in India was often a result of an alienation from traditional Christianity.” (Hösle 2013, 452), hoping to discover in foreign lands with rich philosophical histories a new answer to ancient dilemmas. However, many an Indian was as tormented as any European by those same questions of individuality against community, duty against desire, and the purpose of life in the face of disappointment and failure in ruthlessly practical societies. To examine the paradox of suicide in a modern Indian context, we shall turn therefore to the short fiction of one of its most celebrated chroniclers- R.K. Narayan and his 1943 collection, *Malgudi Days*.

Described in M.K. Naik’s influential history of Indian English literature as an artist who “consistently creates a credible universe observed with an unerring but uniformly tolerant sense of human incongruity” (1982, 166), Narayan’s social realism enables him to present the organic movements of influence and reaction

in the lives of rural Indians, crafting characters that are at once deeply attuned to the material realities of windfall or catastrophe while also perceiving the world through spiritualist lenses as they question their place within it- a paradoxical tension that reaches its greatest proportions when Narayan discusses suicidal ideation, a situation where the subject is at once deeply imbricated in layers of social pressure and is driven by this very involvement toward a desperate escape, individuated unto self-destruction. This paper aims to explore Narayan's depiction of the philosophical and sociocultural issues raised by suicide via an analysis of two stories from *Malgudi Days*, namely "Iswaran", and "Such Perfection", which have been selected for their focus on suicide as a reaction to material circumstances and as an aspect of artistic passion respectively. This thematic range shall facilitate an exploration of the subject matter from perspectives diametrically opposed, enabling a broader understanding of the myriad elements involved in the artistic portrayal of suicide, which shall be contextualized through the lenses of sociological theories and psychological findings as elaborated below.

Review of Literature: Notes from Nowhere

Discussions on the problem of suicide significantly predate the existence of academia, but are nonetheless descriptive of the social structures that contemporary scientific analyses of the issue must contend with, and often reveal in their employment of lenses religious, legal and moral the ways in which suicide is seen in a culture- a view that shall then go to shape a suicidal subject's view of themselves and their approach to the future. In the case of India, we find in a Dharmasūtra attributed to the Vedic sage Vasiṣṭha the classification of suicide as an impurity-generating sin for which the family of the defiler must perform an act of penance: "A man who commits suicide becomes a heinous sinner […] relatives of his belonging to the same ancestry […] desist from performing funeral rites for him." (Olivelle 1999, 312), as well as a prescription of repentance for suicide attempts and ideation: "It is said: 'A man who survives an attempt at suicide should perform an arduous penance for twelve days; fast for three days; and, always wearing clothes smeared with ghee and controlling his breath, recite three times the Aghamarṣaṇa hymn.'" (Olivelle 312, 1999). In this treatment, we see the applications of ritual integration and excommunication alternated, insofar

as a subject who has not yet been cast into the profane category of a 'suicide' is bound to reincorporate themselves into a religio-cultural framework, which embodies the abstract metaphysical process of cleansing in a series of clear and ordered ritual practices that may be intended to ground the subject into the frameworks of the social order they have attempted to escape; conversely, if the subject is entirely lost, then a clean break is prescribed from the abject object of the suicidal body, barring it from entry into even the symbolic rite of life-passage represented by the funeral rite that is meant to overcome the trauma of death by incorporating into a social practice of mourning. While this Dharmasūtra was naturally written millennia before the work of modern Indian novelists and only represents a small segment of the vast scope of Indian religious, philosophical and legal discussions about life and death, its duality of incorporation and ejection from a sociocultural order is an element of great thematic relevance to the literary interpretation of Narayan's texts that shall follow, as is its intertwining of material and spiritual concerns along the same trajectory an approach that Narayan shall also employ in his portrayal of an Indian subject's psychology.

A more immediately and theoretically relevant work on suicide is the sociologist Émile Durkheim's *Suicide*: *A Study in Sociology*, a foundational text in the field that analyses suicide as a pattern of social behaviour, driven and defined by the individual's environment even when the two seem to be acting in opposition, a finding that leads Durkheim to conclude: "So true is it that even the feelings apparently most associated with the individual's personal temperament depend on causes greater than himself! Our very egoism is in large part a product of society." ([1897] 2002, 327). Despite the study's comparative age and numerous iterators, Tomasi notes: "One may reasonably suggest that, although later theoretical and statistical studies have helped to extend the range of Durkheim's analysis, and to clarify the more obscure aspects of its interpretation of suicide, they have not diminished the validity of the work itself" (2000, 19), hence this paper's employment of his classification of suicide into various types and focus on levels of integration as a means to analyze the suicidal behaviours of central characters in the selected stories. This theoretical framework shall be integrated with practical findings from a number of studies on suicide undertaken in India so as to position Narayan's social realism in the appropriate context, with selected studies covering a variety of fields ranging from general "historical,

epidemiological and demographic factors of suicide in India" (Radhakrishnan and Andrade 2012, 304) to more specific issues such as youth suicide in India, which is "a distinct phenomenon with various bio psycho-social determinants" (Gupta and Basera 2023, 245)- an attempt to highlight the archetypes Narayan portrays against their respective demographic and symptomatic counterparts.

Lastly, we must keep in mind that suicide in literature is by no means always a perfectly documentary portrayal of an actual event or practice, but can indeed be far more, operating on the level of a metaphor, allegory, symbol, exaggeration or any permutation of these at once, an idea that necessarily eclipses and outstretches the referents of its specificity, which is at once a tendency of all signifiers and a particularly salient feature of self-destruction, insofar as the act of destruction spreads past the self and transforms into a creative force in its own right- a tool in the artist's arsenal. To that end, it is pertinent to draw upon some works that discuss suicide from an aesthetic and literary perspective, illuminating its symbolic and expressive qualities as they manifest in art- as Alvarez remarks about the portrayal of suicide in the twentieth century: "Once suicide was accepted as a common fact of society—not as a noble Roman alternative, nor as the mortal sin it had been in the Middle Ages, nor as a special cause to be pleaded or warned against—but simply as something people did, often and without much hesitation, like committing adultery, then it automatically became a common property of art." (1972, 207). In this light, perhaps, the task of the realist writer of suicide is to make common the unthinkable, and not drive life to death, but bring death into life, presenting the ways in which individuality is both defined and dissolved by the negation of connections. If, as Brown observes in a study of suicide's depictions across history, "The picture which unfolds of the art of suicide is one of a constant overshadowing or a series of adumbrations of meaning, each casting its shadow and in turn being overshadowed." (2001, 18), then the object of this paper is to trace the thematic and structural methods by which Narayan constructs the collision of light and life to produce a zone of darkness, describing it not as a space of hollowness, but a flux of specific ideas, forces and influences amplifying and cancelling each other in dynamics that serve to form a character- both of individuals and, by extension, of the environments that directed their individuality.

Pre-Mortem: Examining the Examinee

The first narrative we shall analyze is the tragic tale of Iswaran, which masquerades at the outset as a comic portrait of an unfortunate young man whose manhood has surpassed his youth, but not the passing grade for graduation- "He had earned the reputation of having aged in the Intermediate Class." (Narayan 1943, 54). His seemingly carefree and defiant attitude to these reversals of fortune is swiftly revealed to be a front, and in the face of his latest failure, Iswaran drowns himself in the Sarayu river. Constructed with a simplicity that is chilling in its sheer forwardness, presenting the journey from hope to despair with an objectivity that marches toward the deterministic, "Iswaran" may be viewed as a portrayal of what Durkheim's theory would term an egoistic suicide- "If we agree to call this state egoism, in which the individual ego asserts itself to excess in the face of the social ego and at its expense, we may call egoistic the special type of suicide springing from excessive individualism." (Durkheim [1897] 2002, 168). Narayan maps the dominant forces and drives in this narrative onto three locations within the town- the theatre, the university house, and the river, each corresponding to the respective social phenomena of integration, individuation, and oblivion, a triangle that might also be seen as the tension between the id, superego, and ego (unto the death thereof). This spatial division enables the writer, in social realist fashion, to highlight various archetypes and lifestyles within the town that functions as a microcosm of society, moving the protagonist through institutions in a journey as philosophical as it is physical, reflecting Narayan's balancing of material and spiritual aspects of a subject's psychology, even as he traces the volatile mixtures they produce in the heart of a man who finds himself first figuratively and then disfiguringly adrift.

The film theatre is where Iswaran first embarks on what is to be his final day, and while one may interpret the cinema in an early 20th century Indian context as a symbol of modernity, it bears mentioning that the tradition of Indian theatre itself far predates the arrival of cinema in the country, and moreover that the earliest era of Indian film production was dominated by the mythological genre (Mehta 2020, 33)- a spectacle of divinity, grace and supernatural forms drawn from the ancient texts and given life for a brief scintillating dose of escapism: "He soon lost himself in the politics and struggles of gods and goddesses; he sat

rapt in the vision of a heavenly world which some film director had chosen to present." (Narayan 1943, 55). In both the consumption of a popular artform and the process of participation in a public event, Iswaran attempts to generate a sense of integration, to forget for a period his unique troubles and enter a state of shared experience whereby he feels the joys and sorrows of others, and is thus spared from the accountability of his own. Indeed, Iswaran himself is presented to the reader as a kind of actor, who must project a persona of unruffled confidence in order to shield against the hail of mockery he receives for his repeated failures, but "behaving like a desperado" (54) is in and of itself a dangerous role to play, the guise of a devil-may-care individualism that strands him outside any hope of social acceptance, and serves only to add a minor dimension of agency to his alienation- a maladjustment that shall prove ominous in the pages to come.

In sharp contrast to this room of fantasies is the Senate House, where the results of long-dreaded exams are laid out in unambiguous specificity, an absolute value that sharply divides the victorious from the defeated, a river and a canyon: "All the students of the town were near the Senate House, waiting for their results. Iswaran felt very unhappy to be the only student in the whole theatre. Somehow fate seemed to have isolated him from his fellow-beings in every respect." (55). It is the House, which records the results and numbers of every student in Albert Mission College and sorts them yearly into first, second and third class, assigning an objective social value to a proportion of their lifetimes and therefore their futures, that serves as the true symbol of modernity in this narrative, the superego that contrasts the sublime and primal joys of the theatre's glittering spectacle. At its best, this arithmetic segregation of merits represents an aspirational goal, the dream of being among the educated who are entitled not only to better jobs than the average labourer, but also then to a lifestyle of luxury and opulence, an imitative form of which Iswaran sees in the act of moviegoing, an attempt to manifest success when he is not actively ignoring its price: "He was often told by his parents, 'Why don't you discontinue your studies and try to do something useful?' […] He clung to university education with a ferocious devotion." (53). In a twist of tragic irony, his desire for individuation, for the status of someone special, is precisely what drives Iswaran's alienation, cementing his reputation as a pathological failure, a static figure entirely out of sync with the rhythms of society, neither a provider and nor a scholar, but a layabout who cannot grow up

and perform his duties- a grim realization that ultimately punctures his capacity for fantasy, as if his body too has given up on the desperate reaching of his mind: "He rose, silently edged towards the exit and was out of the theatre in a moment. He felt a loathing for himself after seeing those successful boys. 'I am not fit to live. A fellow who cannot pass an examination . . .'" (57).

Radhakrishnan and Andrade remark that, within an Indian context, "Young adults are a particularly vulnerable group and currently show the highest rates of suicide the world over." (2012, 306) and also note that a lack of educational attainment and the associated pressures are linked to increased risk of suicide (2012, 310), with Gupta and Besera's work also highlighting the impact of drifting away from support systems and social networks at school on suicidal correlation (2023, 253). Moreover, Matthew and Lukose make the argument that "aspirational mobilities become especially crystallised in and through educational projects." (2020, 692), reflecting how the institution of education serves to furnish an open and objective dream of upward mobility, but might also then catastrophically rupture it at the earliest stages should a student prove unable to meet their criteria for success, as in the case of Iswaran and his absolute abandonment of hope for any kind of success, even in sectors common across Malgudi that do not require a university education. To him, there remains no ambiguity whatsoever regarding his worth as a person, for he has seen it converted into numbers and found it sorely lacking, an unwanted individuality from which an escape into the gentle anonymity of society is no longer feasible, for it is precisely the rejection of this integrative selflessness on which he has founded his entire identity- a paradox of selfhood that is made manifest and resolved only in suicide.

While the path charted to Iswaran's death is dispassionate, the actual depiction of it is anything but, as Narayan shapes his narrative into a thematic spiral by returning to the symbol of the dramatic imaginary, but on a level elevated (and simultaneously submerged) beyond the realism of the story's opening. Driven by his active imagination to pursue the dream of higher education and then by the same imaginative fervour to deny the consequences of his failures, it is only fitting that Iswaran's demise be framed in the fantastic mode as well, uniting the twin spaces earlier explored into a surreal carnival as he moves toward the third and final zone. In a vision that may be interpreted as a manner of dying dream,

Iswaran sees himself walking into the Senate House to find his name in the exalted list of those that have passed, a classification both double-meaning and meaningless, which drives him to enact the role of a great conquering hero from the mythological films he so adores: "He thumped his chest and addressed the notice-board: 'Know who I am?' He stroked an imaginary moustache arrogantly, laughed to himself and asked, 'Is the horse ready, groom?' He threw a supercilious side glance at the notice-board and strutted out like a king." (59). At the height of his fantasies, Iswaran is not merely integrated back into a society that has left him behind, but rather mounted far above it, an egoistic vision of kingship and absolute control, perfectly blending one of the highest positions of traditional authority in India's mythology with the aspirational force granted by the prospect of graduating a class. His demise has aspects of the pathetic insofar as it is the logical conclusion of a delusive mentality, but also emanates a measure of true tragic power insofar as we see the powers of his mind at their greatest capacity, a stark contrast to the image of an incurious dullard that his fate in examinations has saddled him with.

Mediating upon the unique abilities of literature to discuss suicide, Bennett states: "the imaginative space of literature allows for the possibility of thinking the impossible, of admitting the inadmissible– of imagining the unimaginable but inevitable possibility of a world in which I am no longer present, and that I might bring that world about." (2017, 20). Viewed in this vein, Iswaran's suicide is an act as creative as it is destructive, and perhaps the only way in which he can allow himself to imagine a world in which he is valued and loved on his own terms, even and especially if this world is no world at all, and must end, just as it begins, with him. As such, the tale ends with a note found in his coat, the only piece of writing that he does in this story that is not tailored to the demands of an exam or a persona, but speaks from the heart: 'My dear father: By the time you see this letter I shall be at the bottom of Sarayu. I don't want to live. Don't worry about me. You have other sons who are not such dunces as I am—'" (60). Older by far than both the theatres and the universities, and yet infinitely kinetic through its natural rhythms, the Sarayu river serves as a potent chronotope to bridge this tale of Malgudi from the particular to the universal, symbolically bearing the alienated figure of Iswaran down the currents of history and society to render him an archetype of egoistic suicides among Indian students who

quail before the life-changing pressures of examinations yearly, tying their self-worth to success in these limited capacities. Through the deceptively simple tale of "Iswaran", Narayan thus advances a critique of individualisms that junction identity to narrow parameters and cultivate brittle and jagged selfhoods that collapse under their own weight.

Swan Songs: Suicide and the Artist

In sharp contrast to the social realism of the previous tale and the majority of Narayan's oeuvre, the next subject of our analysis, "Such Perfection", is a narrative that employs multiple dense layers of allegory and symbolism to present a meditation on the intersections of art and divinity, the tension between which defines the raptures and torments of the artist. The conflict of Soma, the central figure of this tale, is not a dearth of perfection, but an excess of it, having achieved in his sculpture of Nataraja a degree of likeness to the divine figure that paradoxically threatens to destabilize society entirely, blurring the line between idol and god to integrate the material and spiritual worlds to the point where the idyllic and ritualized flows of village life are subsumed into the cataclysmic developments of mythology- as the temple priest foresees: "'This perfection, this God, is not for mortal eyes. He will blind us. At the first chant of prayer before him, he will dance . . . and we shall be wiped out . . .'" (62). When the priest's counsel to "Take your chisel and break a little toe or some other part of the image, and it will be safe..." (62) is understandably refused by an artist incensed at the prospect of marring his masterpiece, his predictions prove to be far more than superstition, and become indeed the stuff of a miracle from a nightmare: "In the flame of the circling camphor Nataraja's eyes lit up. His limbs moved, his anklets jingled. [...] Women and children shrieked and wailed. The fires descended with a tremendous hiss as a mighty rain came down. It rained as it had never rained before." (63).

Narayan's apocalyptic spectacle may be interpreted as an inversion of the dynamics of ambiguity that surround religion, making manifest in overpowering reality the abstract cultural and philosophical principles that a religious society is oriented upon. In another striking use of paradox, this literalization of godly

power is not a jubilant validation for the pious, but rather the end of faith insofar as it becomes an intractable fact- to phrase this in terms of the theories of integration and alienation that we have used to classify suicides, it may be said that religion becoming "real" represents a level of social integration so profound that it crushes the agency of individuals and makes them powerless before the will and whims of the gods. Speculating on the implications of idol worship as a simulacrum of divinity, wherein the constructed artistic image of a socioculturally revered figure is treated not only as a synecdoche of the authentic metaphysical entity, but its very incarnation into the material world as an immanentized force, the philosopher Jean Baudrillard asks, "But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? [...] does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination-the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God?" ([1981] 1994, 4). While Baudrillard relates idolatry and icon-worship to fractures in faith, insofar as they reveal the constructed nature of divinity by giving the creators of images explicit power over the definition of god and also then over its destruction via the desceration of idols ([1981] 1994, 5), Narayan utilizes the imaginative capacities of literature to advance the same argument from a diametrically opposed direction.

In allowing the artist to literally create god, an act of will that creates the engine of the ultimate cosmic willpower that shapes reality, Narayan presents a philosophical suicide, insofar as a person *chooses* to believe in the very force that *demands* belief, devoting the resources of the self to a power that overrides all selfhood, and reversing the narrative of the divine creation of humanity at the beginning of time by letting man create god and so engineer the end of time- "The God pressed one foot on earth and raised the other in dance. He destroyed the universe under his heel, and smeared the ashes over his body, and the same God rattled the drum in his hand and by its rhythm set life in motion again" (63). Nataraja is a divine figure of particular pertinence of the question of art and divinity, insofar as his *tandava* is a dance that propels the world toward destruction, an artistic and choreographed act that subsumes all life, agency and thought into a singular rhythm, a monologic action overpowering the polyphony of the world, and a work of art that transcends the ambiguity of mortal artists to create an objective, absolute and indisputable meaning and effect upon the

world- a sublime totality eloquently described in Ananda Coomaraswamy's essay on the topic as "universal in its appeal to the philosopher, the lover, and the artist of all ages and all countries. How supremely great in power and grace this dancing image must appear to all those who have striven in plastic forms to give expression to their intuition of Life!" ([1918] 2013, 62). While divinity may be afforded the privilege of such creation, especially in a capacity that is either aetiological (we were all created by this act) or prophesied (we shall all be destroyed by this act), it can neither be allowed to be fully human nor fully contemporary, since it defeats the very purpose of art in general and especially art like Narayan's, which thrives on portraying the uncertainty, ambiguity and charming imperfections of human life with all its hopeful jostling characters.

As such, Soma's dilemma may be interpreted as the frustration of an artist who has been cursed by his magnum opus, a work so perfect that it leaves nothing at all to be improved upon, and so represents the destruction of his world- a cataclysmic artform that is then paralleled in Nataraja's apocalyptic *tandava*. The results of his creation trap him in a double-bind, since he is at once confronted with the prospect that what he has created is not a masterpiece, but a thing of blasphemy, while also facing the disturbing and unconventional idea that the destruction of a work that he initially considered to be perfect would be more pious than its preservation. An overview of perfectionism as an amplifier of suicide risk by Flett, Hewitt and Heisel notes that: "the feeling of living an inauthentic life contributes to a negative self-view and sense of despair and imposterism while also reminding the self-presenter on a continuing basis that he or she is far from perfect." (2014, 163)- an observation that is reflected in Narayan's portrayal of Soma's reaction to the dilemma of artistic paralysis: "Nataraja! I cannot mutilate your figure, but I can offer myself as a sacrifice if it will be any use . . .' He shut his eyes and decided to jump into the lake." (64). Suicide in the service of the divine seems a better option to Soma than a gesture of inauthenticity and dilution, and while there is an egoistic element in his valuation of personal principles and private passions over the norms of society, reflecting Antonin Artaud's assertion that "If I commit suicide, it will not be to destroy myself but to put myself back together again. Suicide will be for me only one means of violently reconquering myself, of brutally invading my being, of anticipating the unpredictable approaches of God." ([1924-37] 1965, 56), the use of the term 'sacrifice' by Soma to characterize

his drive toward death places this attempt firmly in the category of an altruistic suicide, defined by Durkheim as a state "where the ego is not its own property, where it is blended with something not itself, where the goal of conduct is exterior to itself, that is, in one of the groups in which it participates." ([1897] 2002, 180), with the further addition that on occasion, "the individual kills himself purely for the joy of sacrifice, because, even with no particular reason, renunciation in itself is considered praiseworthy. India is the classic soil for this sort of suicide." ([1897] 2002, 182).

Driven by an intense integration into society, altruistic suicide simultaneously negates the individual self while glorifying it through a resonance with the collective, making humanity divine in a paradox that may be compared to the metamorphosis of a person from an agent into a signifier, a symbol of devotion sewn into the tapestry of faith, and indeed perhaps an idol in their own right, both unliving and immortal. While Narayan discusses the problems raised by individualism to the point of alienation in the previous story, he is also opposed to the practice of a ritualistic suicide in service of society, not least because it casts a god who would demand such a thing of its worshippers in a macabre light. As such, the tale ends without Soma needing to throw away his life after the tumbling of a storm-tossed tree on his house leaves the sculpture "unhurt except for a little toe which was found a couple of yards off, severed by a falling splinter." (64)- *a deus ex machina* in a tale where the touch of the divine was hardly subtle, but leans in its final sign towards the side of life in all its contradictions and imperfections, letting the image of god fulfil its intended function precisely because it is not a perfect replica of the "real" referent, but rather an artistic statement that fosters the human capacity for interpretation, paying creativity back unto creativity to create a network of imaginative connections, which is a force far more appropriate in its collective multiplicity to represent the nature of the divine. In celebrating the unfinalizability and open-endedness of art, "Such Perfection" thus also exalts the enchanting unpredictability of life, with the final sentences being the literary equivalent of the sculpture's missing toe in their ambiguity: "The image was installed with due ceremonies at the temple on the next full moon. Wealth and honours were showered on Soma. He lived to be ninety-five, but he never touched his mallet and chisel again." (65). While the social realist in Narayan is dedicated to portraying the vagaries of fortune and circumstance

that drive people to despair and self-destruction, we may appreciate in this tale a touch of the allegorist in him as well, applying his trademark gentle irony to the broader question of life and asserting in his own quiet way that it is always beautiful enough to be worth living.

Conclusion: The Vertigo of Freedom

In a famous essay discussing the nature of Indian philosophy in both tradition and daily life, the poet A.K. Ramanujan classifies India as a society that constructs reality and identity through context-sensitive systems which organize all aspects of life into specific categories and protocols, such as rituals, life-stages, castes, sects and so forth, but adds to this the observation that: "In 'traditional' cultures like India, where context-sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context. So *rasa* in aesthetics, *mokṣa* in the 'aims of life', sannyāsa in the life-stages, *sphoṭa* in semantics, and *bhakti* in religion define themselves against a background of inexorable contextuality." (1989, 54). In the stories examined, we may see how R. K. Narayan, too, addresses the same paradox, portraying characters who must navigate complex and shifting systems of value, merit and worth, striving to embody desirable categories through dedicated modes of action and yet finding themselves all too often tarred with the brush of impurity and failure, stranded by the very paths that they thought would lead them to ascendancy. Faced with an identity crisis, they begin to question the bedrock on which their individuality was founded, and are confronted with the prospect that their selfhood is synonymous with alienation, defined only in the negative, either in terms of exile or sacrifice, ritual or anathema. To these characters, suspended on the edges of societies that themselves seem to churn with flux, the only way out is through, the only way in entirely without. In contemplating the implications of these stories, we may thus obtain broader perspectives on suicide and its representation in art, not because Narayan offers us sweeping answers to life's deepest questions, but because he so compellingly dramatizes the process of searching for them, of being befuddled, and of trying to put words to these paradoxical feelings, bringing them ever-so-closer to the light at the end of our tunnels.

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