

THE WORLD OF NAGARAJ

R. K. Narayan

(1990)

Story

This is final novel in R K Narayan's seventy-year career as a writer. While some critics have said that it reflects a diminution of his creativity, others have hailed it as quintessentially 'Narayan-esque,' a pure distillation of the great man's literary talents. What is undeniable is that it contains very little 'action,' only a series of vignettes strung together that make up 'the world of Nagaraj.'

Nagaraj comes from a family with dubious links to India's old ruling elites, the now deposed rajas in south India. Nagaraj himself has come down in the world and lives in Kabir Street, a solid middle-class neighbourhood, surviving mainly off the income of his deceased father's estate. He failed his BA examinations at the first attempt and ended up just scraping through on a subsequent attempt. His family consists of his wife, Sita, and his mother; they have no children. There is also Nagaraj's older brother, Gopu, and his wife, Charu, and his son, 'Tim.' Gopu and his family used to live with Nagaraj in Kabir Street, but tensions between Charu and her mother-in-law forced Gopu to move his family back to the ancestral village. When their father died, Gopu cheated Nagaraj out of his share of the family assets and kept the most profitable plots of land for himself. Now Gopu is intent on making as much profit as possible by using modern agricultural technology and building a factory that will produce gas from cow dung. By contrast, Nagaraj does very little except drink coffee, write letters and dream of writing a book about the legendary Hindu sage, Narada.

This serene world is disturbed when Tim runs away from his obnoxious parents and comes to live with Nagaraj and Sita. He brings a 'modern' outlook, wears western style clothes and begins to teach his uncle and aunt new things, such as how to drink coffee black. Then Nagaraj's mother dies, and he has further setbacks when he is unable to find the books he needs at the library. In desperation, Nagaraj consults a scholar, who refuses to help him because he (Nagaraj) doesn't know Sanskrit. In the end, he gives up on his book project. A small compensation is his relationship with Tim, who takes the place of the son he never had. The old pattern of life is further disrupted when Tim marries Saroja, who sings loudly and plays the harmonium, making it impossible for Nagaraj to concentrate on his research. The tension increases when Nagaraj receives a letter from Gopu, who claims that Nagaraj has lured his son, Tim, away from him because he has no children.

Not wanting to cause embarrassment for his uncle, Tim and Saroja move out and begin to live at the Kismet bar, where Saroja sings and plays for the customers. In the end, Tim and Saroja return to Kabir Street, just as they had left, without any explanation. Later it transpires that Tim had had an argument with the manager of the Kismet concerning a new 'leg harmonium' that Saroja began to play. It caused too much noise, and the members complained that it disrupted their card-playing. When Nagaraj hears this story, he decides that he must invest in a lot of cotton wool to put in his ears, lest he get in a fight with Tim about the loud music at home. This is a non-ending, which is appropriate for the story of a man who is unable to finish his writing and who digs deeper and deeper in the endlessly recycled stories of Hindu mythology.

Themes

Search for meaning Nagaraj's search for meaning is at the centre of this desultory novel, with its meanderings, pauses and repetitions. Through his weak-willed but likable character, R K Narayan appears to be, once again, exploring the point of our existence. The opening passage is significant: 'Nagaraj fancied himself a man with a mission. If you asked what is your mission? He would look away and pretend not to have heard your query. He was not quite clear in his mind about his mission

but always felt he must be up and doing.' His 'mission', it transpires, is to write a biography of a legendary sage (Narada), a scholar, musician, poet, storyteller and philosopher, who also became a saint in meditation in the serenity of a pine forest. Nagaraj feels that he might discover some meaning if he could understand this man's life, but there are many obstacles in his way. The library does not have the kind of source materials that Nagaraj needs. A local Sanskrit scholar (pundit) is unwilling to teach him because he doesn't know Sanskrit. And he himself is an idler, given to dreaming more than executing. He waits for 'an auspicious moment to chose an auspicious moment to begin' his writing, but the empty pages of his notebooks, bought with such enthusiasm, stand as symbols of his futility and disappointment. Like most of us, Nagaraj wants to 'do something' to raise himself above the grinding mediocrity of life, and his grandiloquent 'mission' to write about the Hindu sage satisfies his need for that 'something.' Being an ordinary person, he finds excuse after excuse to explain why he does not write his grand book. As the novel meanders along, he begins to take on the outward appearance of a saint himself, dressing in saffron robes and silently watching life from his veranda. So, perhaps, this is the author's underlying message. It is only by not doing something, that is, by ceasing to strive, that we can find meaning. This is certainly what the sage Narada believed.

Change and stability The flux of life that Nagaraj observes from his sedentary position contains another one of the book's themes: change and stability. Nagaraj and his wife, Sita, represent continuity, the carrying on of old traditions and attitudes from the past. Nagaraj is interested in mythology, performs rituals every morning, prays to gods and observes the rules that govern the life of a Hindu man. Sita is similarly traditional, especially in her attempts to cure her apparent infertility. She goes to temples, undertakes long pilgrimages and makes offerings to numerous deities. Eventually, she comes to believe what an astrologer has told her: that she is cursed because one of her ancestors killed a snake (sacred to Visnu). Their world of stability is then disturbed by the entry of Tim, who wears western clothes and stays out late. 'Nothing wrong in that,' the detached Nagaraj thinks, wanting at all costs to avoid confrontation. When Tim becomes more rebellious, not showing up for meals, coming home drunk and eventually dropping out of school, Sita urges Nagaraj to discipline him. He, of course, does nothing but continue to observe his behaviour. Then Tim comes back with a wife, Saroja, who plays a new kind of harmonium and reads cinema magazines. The ultimate symbol of the new culture is the Kismet, a bar and café in town where young people 'hang out,' and where Tim and Saroja take refuge when they leave Nagaraj and Sita's house. This is also where they learn to drink coffee the 'American way,' without milk or sugar. 'They call it black,' Tim explains proudly to his aunt and uncle. The novel is composed of these kinds of minor incidents, some of which show stability and some of which represent change. This is the ebb and flow of life that Nagaraj observes and that R K Narayan presents to us as readers. We need both stability and change, the author seems to tell us, in order to be happy. Too much stability and we become stale. Too much change and we are unhinged. The problem for all of us, for readers and for the novelist, is how to weave these shifting currents into a meaningful pattern.

Myth A subtle theme of this book is its affinity with Hindu myth. On one level, of course, this is an overt theme since Nagaraj is engaged in a project to write a biography of a mythic Hindu sage, Narada. The choice of Narada is itself revealing because while he is (in the texts) a great scholar, musician and devotee of Visnu, he is also a great ascetic who meditates in the forest. In short, he is a perfect model of Nagaraj's own preferred life of detachment. But beyond this level of plot, the story is suffused with mythic content and form. Names are always significant in Narayan's fiction, and the choice of 'Nagaraj' and 'Sita' are no exception. In Hindu mythology, 'Nagaraj' is one of the many names for Visnu, one of whose avatars is Rama, who is married to Sita. In addition, there is a similarity between the storytelling technique of this novel, with its numerous flashbacks and zigzagging between scenes, and the cyclical structure of Hindu myths. Also, the novel actually includes a certain amount of the retelling of a myth, in the form of Nagaraj's notes on a book about his subject, Narada. The myth, which he copied down from the book, is one of the many Hindu creation myths. This particular myth, in which the world emerges from an egg as well as the ocean, is a classic example of the mythic imagination that defies logic, linearity and narrative cohesion. Nagaraj works hard to decode the message, but he is left befuddled and frustrated. As the author puts it, 'He read over his notes, but had no objective view of what it said...the story went on and on, spinning in the dark, with the tremendous Egg still intact, wafting somewhere in the ocean.' This could also be a description of Nagaraj's attempt to write his own book and, indeed, of his whole life. Near the end of this story without an end, Nagaraj admits to himself that his search for the life of the sage Narada 'seemed to be an endless quest.'

Characters

Nagaraj Nagaraj is the central character of this novel, as the title itself announces. He is a dreamy, detached man, not unkind and often generous, but (like most of Narayan's 'heroes') he is also a disappointed person.

Sita Sita is his wife. She comes from a family of roughly equal status with that of Nagaraj (her father is a retired government official), and so their marriage is smoothly arranged. She is not a typical docile wife, however, and often shows greater understanding of situations than does her husband. She sometimes gets upset because her aging and mentally frail mother-in-law nags her.

Gopu Gopu is Nagaraj's older brother, who provides a sharp contrast with him. Gopu is an avaricious, deceptive person, who cheats his brother out of his share of the family fortune after their father's death.

Charu Charu is Gopu's wife. She is a proud person and resents the authority that her mother-in-law assumes in the household. She is not unkind or spiteful, but she struggles to maintain her self-respect in the joint-family household and eventually convinces her husband to move them back to the village.

Tim Charu's and Gopu's only child is Tim, so-called because as a baby he kept making a noise that sounded like 'tim, tim.' Tim represents the new, post-Gandhi, post-Independence generation, who are more open to western ideas and behaviours. He is not openly in revolt against the traditions of his uncle and father, but he does express 'modern' ideas and behaves in ways that surprise his elders.

Saroja Saroja is Tim's wife, who is a professional singer and harmonium player. She is a more modern woman than Sita and asserts herself in conversations with her husband and his uncle.

Nagaraj (Detached)

Character Nagaraj is a typical Narayan protagonist. He is a middle-class, Hindu man (and probably a Brahmin, though this is not stated), about 50 years old and married, who struggles to match his ambitions with his capabilities. One difference is that, unlike most of the author's fictional heroes, Nagaraj has an aristocratic background, or so he believes, which has bequeathed him a sizable inheritance. He, therefore, has no need of income from a job, even after he is cheated out of the best share of that inheritance by his crafty older brother, Gopu. Nagaraj has a philosophical outlook on life, in part derived from his reading of Hindu mythology, and he spends most of his day watching the world go by. He has committed himself to a grand project, to write the biography of a legendary Hindu sage (Narada), but that enterprise goes down a number of rabbit holes and fizzles out in the end. He is a mild-mannered man, kind to his wife, helpful to his few friends and affectionate toward his nephew, perhaps because he himself has no children. In family matters, which mount up because of tensions between him and his brother, and also with his nephew, Nagaraj proves himself hopelessly indecisive, relying on the wise counsel of his wife, Sita. Throughout the novel, as he attempts to write his own book flounder, his frustrations rise, but he finds peace in sitting on his veranda and studying, for example, the crows. Like the sage whose life he is pursuing in his research, Nagaraj remains detached.

Activities Nagaraj follows a leisurely course of life. In the morning, he takes a bath and spends an hour in his special *puja* (ritual) room, in prayer and meditation. Not needing to work, Nagaraj fills his days by drinking coffee, writing letters, reading books and taking notes for this biography of a Hindu sage. He also sometimes helps out at a friend's company by doing a little bookkeeping. He goes to the library, too, but doesn't spend long there because the librarian does not like to stock the 'old Sanskrit tomes' that he wants to read. He will sometimes visit a stationer's shop to buy notebooks and have a chat with the owner. Otherwise, you'll find him relaxing on his veranda, watching the comings and goings on his street.

Illustrative moments

Detached Nagaraj has made detachment an art, from his morning prayers to his afternoon coffee, when he muses about his 'grand project.' He spends the day like a *sannyasi* (ascetic), philosophising about what he sees around him. A pure moment of his detachment occurs after a confrontation with his brother, Gopu, who has come to claim back his son. The son, Tim, had arrived at Nagaraj's house with his trunk, saying he left his parents and wants to stay with him. Nagaraj was confused but let the young man settle in the house, until Tim's father arrived and demanded that Tim come back with him. In the ensuing argument, Nagaraj didn't tell him about the plans that Sita, the aunt, has for Tim because (as Sita warned him), 'Your brother might not like that.' Now, after reaching an agreement with his brother, Nagaraj thinks, 'She was right. She has such foresight. Better to leave everything to her, all management and all decisions.' Now, it is dusk and Nagaraj sits down, cross-legged, on the veranda to watch the street life and the stars. 'Nagaraj was looking, as usual, at the coconut trees with crows retiring for the night...the crows argued a lot among themselves and hopped and shifted about before dispersing. Nagaraj always felt a fascination for this evening activity of the crows, and wishes he knew their language...they probably have a leader who allots them treetops for the night, he thought, and they argue and debate about it before coming to a decision...' Nagaraj has withdrawn from real-life decisions, such as what to do about his nephew, and become lost in the movements and language of crows. It is noteworthy, too, that his musings include the process of conflict-resolution among the black birds, the role of a leader and decision-making, for all these things are alien to his nature.

Affectionate For all his exasperating dreaminess, Nagaraj is a very affectionate man. He is kind to his wife, his neighbours and, with some effort, even to his mean-spirited brother. But the truest expression of his kindness is toward Tim, his nephew, especially when the boy was a young lad. Nagaraj momentarily abandons his detachment and becomes attached to him, perhaps because he and his wife have no children. A good illustration of his affection occurs when the philosophical Nagaraj becomes uncharacteristically decisive over Tim's education and plans to enrol him in St Stephens, the best school in Malgudi. He even goes so far as to plan a grand procession, led by a piper and drummer, but then decided against it since 'a Christian school might refuse admission to a child arriving in a noisy procession led by a Hindu priest.' Instead, Nagaraj arranges for a private ritual in the house, to bless Tim's educational future. Then he escorts the boy to school, as proud as if he were his father. He doesn't push the boy—that would be too unlike the complacent Nagaraj—but rather lets him stop and look at the flowers, crumbling walls and animals on the street. Narayan describes the scene like this: 'Tim spotted a donkey and let out a whoop of astonishment and stood gazing on it. Nagaraj also stood in wonderment...and enjoyed fully every moment with Tim, and through Tim.' The affectionate bond that Nagaraj forms with little Tim appears to run counter to his normal lack of involvement with people, but we can also see that it is consistent with that attitude since Nagaraj does not feel constrained by the relationship. Instead, he is able to enter into the child's freely wandering wonderment concerning the world around him. It is a human bond that liberates rather than binds.

Defeatist In the very beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Nagaraj as a man with a 'mission.' True, he is unable to say exactly what that mission is, but it appears to involve writing a book about a Hindu sage, called Narada. Although he devotes himself to that project, Nagaraj has a defeatist attitude toward his 'mission,' toward himself and toward life in general. This attitude has its most explicit expression at the very end of the book, when his nephew, Tim, and Tim's wife, Saroja, have moved back into the house where Nagaraj lives with his wife, Sita. When Nagaraj shows Tim the room where he will stay, Tim notices the books lying piled up on a table, where Nagaraj has been attempting to write his biography. Noticing Tim's gaze, Nagaraj says that he hasn't been able to write much lately, and Tim says, 'Been busy?' Nagaraj then answers, 'Not exactly...' and changes the topic. We know that Nagaraj has given up on his project and has actually tried to burn his books but that Sita had saved them, saying, 'Well, they might come in handy, you know, some day.' But Nagaraj has been defeated by the maddening illogicality of the myths he studies and by his own lack of grip on life. Now comes the final blow: Saroja has brought a harmonium into the house, an instrument that can be very loud. As he watches her carry into a front room, Nagaraj is filled with despair. 'I wish I could call the police and have them seize the harmonium. I know that tomorrow morning it will start blaring. I can have no hope of writing anymore. I'll take my notes to the back room where at least the white ants might enjoy my notes.' The final sentence of the book reads: 'I will get a lot of cotton wool and put it in my ears, so that even a thunderclap may sound like a whisper.' It

is a despondent note on which to conclude a novel, not to mention a man's writing career. And yet, knowing R K Narayan's philosophical outlook on transient things such as success, we can also imagine that Nagaraj, and his author, will enjoy some peace of mind.

Sita (Wise)

Character As the author describes her, 'Sita was a timid little creature when Nagaraj married her...When he went to approve his bride at their house in Sullivan Street twenty years ago, she looked so small and helpless. At first, he felt discouraged. He was nineteen and she was fourteen, and looked as if she had just come out of nursery school.' At first, this meek young bride obeyed her mother-in-law, 'trailing behind her all the time,' like a servant. Slowly, Sita's husband encourages her to spend more time with him and to develop their relationship. However, if he as much as held her hand, she would withdraw in shyness. She wouldn't even sit down beside him in public, because the neighbours might gossip that she was lazy. Over time, however, Sita grows up and becomes a person in her own right, offering wise counsel to her husband and opposing him in crucial situations. Realising that her husband, though kind, is incapable of taking decisions, she begins to take control of the partitioned household after Gopu, her brother-in-law, sets up a separate household within the house. She even speaks out against her mother-in-law, something she regrets after the old lady's death. By the end of this novel of domestic turbulence, Sita emerges as the force of sanity and stability.

Activities Sita is at the beck and call of Nagaraj's mother. From early morning, when she is deputed to make the coffee for everyone, to the evening, when she is summoned to massage the older women's legs, she is under orders, with hardly a moment to herself. She also takes on the role of a mother when Tim, Nagaraj's nephew, comes to live with them at a young age. She usually leaves the house in the late morning to shop in the open market for the ingredients for the meal she will cook, alongside her mother-in-law. She spends most of the day in the kitchen, with only a few minutes of relaxation on the veranda in the evening.

Illustrative moments

Meek Sita is described by her husband as a 'timid little creature,' and this does not seem anything other than accurate for a girl of fourteen who is suddenly thrust into a family as a man's wife and an older woman's daughter-in-law. Sita (who bears the name of the most famous meek female in Hindu mythology) plays the role of servile wife and dutiful daughter-in-law, especially in her early years in the family. A clear illustration of her position and attitude is given in the first chapter when Nagaraj wants to have a private talk with his wife. He comes into the room and shuts the door, but Sita opens it again, saying, 'Mother may not like it. She may want to call me.' Then Nagaraj persuades her to come outside to the veranda, where he tries to hold her hand. But she pushes it away for fear that the neighbours might talk. He sits down, but she remains standing, again afraid that they might be seen to be too close together in public. As the author comments, 'She fidgeted around, allowing enough space between them to make onlookers think that the couple were semi-strangers.' A second later, Sita hears her mother-in-law's voice and skips away to grate more coconut for chutney. Sita submits to the conventions that define her role, for to do otherwise would only cause her trouble. But another element of submission is patience, which over time can evolve into something more self-assertive.

Strong Although Sita begins the novel as a meek daughter-in-law, that quality is later overlaid with more confidence and maturity. By the middle of the story, we see that Sita has hidden reserves of strength, which she does not flaunt but uses when the time is right. The boldest expression of her strength comes when she decides to accept that she is a 'barren woman.' Sita's childlessness is one of the major sources of friction with her mother-in-law, and for years she took traditional medicines to 'cure' her (no one, of course, would assume that her husband, Nagaraj, was the infertile one). Every morning Sita chewed a paste made of special (*neem*) leaves, which indeed have medicinal properties, but they did not reverse childlessness. She was taunted by her mother-in-law with an old proverb, 'What can the hand that lifts the plough achieve, if the hand that lifts the rice pot is unhealthy?' She even undertook pilgrimages to far away temples with goddesses famed for curing infertility. Then, one day, Sita decides to stop these 'cures', to halt her anxiety and to no longer feel humiliated by her mother-in-law. The reason for her decision is not a lack of the maternal instinct—she had displays plenty of that when raising nephew Tim almost from the crib. Rather, it is the culmination of her own maturation process. She was married at fourteen and came to the family as the wife of a younger son, which is always the most put-upon role in a joint-family. But now, having

gained confidence from arranging affairs between Nagaraj and his brother, and having become a 'mother' to Tim, Sita is able to accept that she will not have children of her own. The childless wife is only second to the widow in the hierarchy of despised women in traditional Indian society, but Sita has decided that she is not to blame for the condition. It is a brave decision, indeed.

Wise Over time, Sita shows her innate wisdom in understanding the complex relationships within the house, especially the tensions between her husband and his older brother, Gopu. While never assertive, she learns to guide Nagaraj with quiet words at the appropriate time. An excellent display of her helpful advice occurs when Nagaraj becomes anxious about his nephew, Tim's, behaviour. Since Tim left his father, Gopu, to live with Nagaraj and Sita, Nagaraj has, in effect, become Tim's guardian, and now the young man is staying out late, coming back with alcohol on his breath and showing other signs of rebellion. When Nagaraj admits that he can't understand what is going on, Sita begins to work on him with her gentle persuasion. 'Why not just ask him straight out?' she says. When Nagaraj complains that he can't pin Tim down for a talk, Sita asks him if he has really tried. 'You are his uncle, remember, and now his guardian,' she reminds him. 'And you don't want to anger your brother, now, do you?' Again, Nagaraj prevaricates—he doesn't really know what to say, how to find time, etc—and Sita offers more practical advice about what to say and when to say it. Nagaraj insists that she be with him when he speaks to Tim, knowing that her presence will strengthen his wavering will. Then Sita sets out the plan, how to detain Tim with some special snacks that he likes in order to get him to sit down for a talk. With Sita's advice, the trap is set. All Nagaraj has to do is find the words, but, despite all Sita's counselling and coaching, he fails. Even his failure does not discourage Sita, who renews her campaign and eventually does force her weak-willed husband to confront the wayward teenager. Sita's wisdom, patient and gentle, triumphs in the end.

Gopu (Self-centred)

Character Gopu is Nagaraj's older brother, a fact he never lets his younger sibling forget. Gopu is also a 'graduate', that is, he has a BA, which again, he parades like a gold ring. But Gopu shows little interest in securing a good job, preferring instead to take up most of the rooms in the family house and be served, 'like a sultan,' by his wife, Charu. He even has a separate stove installed in a corner of the kitchen, where Charu prepares his food, of which only a morsel or two is ever distributed to the other members of the household. The only activity for which he showed any enthusiasm was drawing up a list of the family's assets after their father's death. After surreptitiously securing the greater share of those assets for himself, Gopu left the town of Malgudi and resettled in their ancestral village to manage the land he now owned in his own name. Next, in order to increase the profit from the land, he became resourceful and entrepreneurial, employing new technology and planning to build a gas plant, powered by cow dung. Gopu is the active one, with ambitions and a need to assert himself in the public eye. Even his father described him as 'the commander-in-chief,' especially as compared to Nagaraj, who is 'wishy-washy.' Throughout the novel, the extroverted Gopu is self-centred and judgemental, rarely showing any concern for others. Even when he appears to care about his son, Tim, there is a streak of possessiveness at work.

Activities While living in the family home in Malgudi, Gopu keeps to himself, setting up a home within a home, making sure that his wife only cooks food for him. Once he manipulates his father's will and takes over the valuable land in the village, he moves there and begins to show his entrepreneurial ambitions by employing new techniques to increase the crop yields. He also plans to build a factory that will produce gas from cow dung. We also see him active in arranging for his son's marriage and, later, in trying to retrieve his son from his brother's house.

Illustrative Moments

Self-centred Gopu is self-centred, always trying to turn a situation to his personal advantage. He sets up, in effect, his own private kitchen in the family's communal kitchen, eats special meals and doesn't share any food with the others. The crowning example of his disregard for others, and indeed his deceit, comes when he manipulates the family inheritance to favour him and disadvantage Nagaraj. Their father left a will that stated 'all my possessions to be divided equally between my two sons, unless they come to some other mutually agreeable arrangement.' Gopu ignores the spirit of the first clause and focused on the opportunity latent in the second clause. After compiling an exhaustive list of every single item in the family's possession, 'even two broomsticks,' including the valuable land held in a village, Gopu sets off to the office of the family lawyer. With a hint of bribery, Gopu persuades the lawyer to draw up a deed of partition, which allocates all the land and village assets to himself and the less valuable items held in town to Nagaraj. Without shedding a tear, Gopu

loads up a van and separates himself from his mother and brother by moving out to the village. Even Nagaraj's nephew, Tim, is taken away. In India, this division, not only of the assets but also of the family, is considered a tragedy. Indian society and literature, from the great epics to modern novels, view family cohesion as the most important thing in life. It is the insurance policy against bad times: by pooling your resources you can weather most financial storms. In the case of this novel, it is true that Nagaraj is himself somewhat responsible for the tragedy—he is passive and unconcerned with 'worldly affairs,' allowing his older brother to, in effect, swindle him. But that weakness does not excuse the naked ambition and deception of Gopu.

Possessive Gopu is a demanding man, a person who does not like to be refused anything. Sometimes his possessiveness is obvious, as in the example of his manipulation of his father's will (described above), but at other times it operates in the realm of emotions. A good illustration of this is a scene, toward the end of the book, in which he tries to reclaim 'possession' of his son. Tim, the son, has fled from his father and mother, gone to stay with Nagaraj (his uncle) for a while and then moved out to stay in a sort of bar-cum-café. All of this is demeaning to Gopu's idea of his status in the 'community,' and he comes into town to bring Tim back. Speaking to the manager of the bar, Gopu demands that he hand over his son. When the manager points out that Tim is twenty-one years old and legally entitled to make his own decisions, Gopu begins to shout and threaten the man. A bouncer is summoned, and Gopu fights with him. Then there is a stalemate, but Gopu keeps shouting, 'Give me back my son!' In the end, realising that his behaviour is more injurious to his reputation than the fact that Tim lives in a bar, Gopu leaves. Narrated with typical Narayan-esque humour and satire, this is a curious scene. Normally, we would sympathise with a father who wishes to be with his son, but in this instance, we see that Gopu is chiefly interested in 'reclaiming' Tim, almost as if he were one of his assets.

Judgemental Gopu has a high opinion of himself, with the result that he judges others very harshly. The chief recipient of his criticism is, of course, his younger brother, Nagaraj. A clear example of Gopu's censorious nature is given in a scene when he arrives at Nagaraj's door, coming unexpectedly from his village home. His barrage of criticism begins when he berates Nagaraj for overpaying the man who has driven him there in a *jutka*, a horse-drawn cart. 'Why did you pay him that much?' he shouts at Nagaraj, within ear-shot of the driver. 'Are you trying to imply that I can't afford it?' Nagaraj mumbles something, and Gopu goes on the offensive again, saying, 'You need to teach these blackguards a lesson.' When Nagaraj says, a little flippantly, 'Life's too short for lessons,' Gopu explodes. 'You and your philosophy!' he screams. 'Look where it's gotten you! Nowhere! Absolutely nowhere. Can't even finish that rotten book of yours. Not to mention, keep that wife of yours in tow.' When the two brothers move inside, Gopu asks about his son (who is staying with Nagaraj), but Nagaraj only says that he doesn't know where he is, that he comes and goes as he pleases. 'That's right. "As he pleases." Just like you. You have no idea what to do, where or when. You laze around all day, like a cow chewing its cud.' His string of abuse continues for the full duration of Gopu's visit. This relationship between the two brothers, the abuser and the victim, began in childhood, when their father favoured the active Gopu over the introverted Nagaraj. And nothing that Nagaraj has done as an adult life has served to undo that unequal dynamic—indeed, his philosophising about life has only reinforced it—but Gopu's judgements remain cruel and undeserved.