Chapter Three

Religion versus Rationality

As part of the East-West conflict one can find conflict between religion and rationality in several novels of R. K. Narayan. Some of his characters show influences of the modern education, and they are rational in their thoughts. Others continue to be preys of superstitious practices attributed to the orthodox Hindu religion. Narayan exposes this conflict through the characters of his novels. He is not a social reformer in the strict sense. Instead, he portrays in a humorous way the religious weakness, superstitious beliefs and wrong practices of his people. Though Narayan is a supporter of modernity and rationality, he does not condemn Hindu ethos. He only tells his readers what his fellow men are and how they behave.

The conflict between religion and rationality is found throughout the novel *The Guide*. Velan, a villager who comes to the river steps of a temple, finds some divinity in Raju, who is sitting on one of the steps after being released from the prison. Raju has no idea as to where to go and how to lead his future life. Velan has come there to tell some one the problem which he confronts and he has found Raju as a man who can solve his problems. Hence he confides how his sister, whom he loves and cares much after their father’s death, is disobeying him. Using the commonsense and rationality Raju guesses what she disobeyed and tells Velan what was in his mind. Velan takes Raju as a saint or sanyasi with prophetic power. As requested by Raju, Velan brings his sister to Raju and he advises her and sends them back. After a few days Velan comes to Raju and announces to him the good news that his sister has consented to marry her cousin. So he has made arrangements for her marriage. He tells Raju:
‘... I will call the pipers and drummers tomorrow morning and get through it all quickly. I have consulted the astrologer already, and he says that this is an auspicious time. I do not want to delay even for a second the happy event.’

‘For fear that she may change her mind once again?’ Raju asked.

He knew why Velan was rushing it through at this pace. It was easy to guess why. But the remark threw the other into a fit of admiration, and he asked, ‘How did you know what I had in mind sir?’

... He [Raju] told Velan sharply, ‘There is nothing extraordinary in any guess,’ and promptly came the reply, ‘Not for you to say that, sir. Things may look easy enough for a giant, but ordinary poor mortals like us can never know what goes on in other people’s minds.’ (G 29-30)

Mangal was under drought and consequently cattle started to die. There was shortage of food. When the shop keeper hoarded rice and did not supply it to the customers there started feud between the customers and the shop keeper’s men. Many were injured. Velan’s brother reported this to Raju. He had no faith in Raju, the fake sanyasi. In order to stop the fight between the two parties Raju told Velan’s brother to tell Velan:

‘Say that I’ll not eat. Don’t ask what. I’ll not eat till they are good’ (G 100). Velan’s brother came back to the quarrelling group and reported to them in a different way when he was compelled to say what Raju had said. To quote from the text:

Then he remembered the message he had been entrusted with, and thought it safer to say something about it, otherwise the great man might come to
know of it and lay a curse on him. . . . The boy deliberated for a moment and said, ‘Tell your brother not to bring me any more food. I won’t eat. If I don’t eat, it’ll be all right; and then everything will be all right’ (*G* 102)

Then one of them compared Raju to Mahatma Gandhi and declared that, “If he fasts, there will be rain. Out of his love for us he is undertaking it. This will surely bring rain and help us. Once upon a time a man fasted for twenty-one days and brought down the deluge” (*G*102). Thereupon others were delighted. The news of Raju’s fasting for the rain spread everywhere and village was astir. Thus the superstitious belief of fasting and such rituals for the rain trapped the reasonable Raju to do the fasting for the people.

Velan gave a very clear account of what Raju was expected to do:

‘Stand in knee-deep water. Look to the skies, and utter the prayer lines for two weeks, completely fasting during the period—and lo, the rains would come down, provided the man who performed it was a pure soul, was a great soul. The whole countryside was not in a happy fervent, because a great soul had agreed to go through the trial.’ (*G* 109)

Raju blamed himself for giving such a thought to the people. In order to divert his audience’s mind from the drought he told them, “‘When the time comes, everything will be all right. Even the man who would bring you the rain will appear, all of a sudden.’ They interpreted his words and applied them to the present situation. He felt that he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out” (*G* 109). Raju tried his best to save himself from the fatal fast. He told Velan that he was not a saint. ‘‘I’m prepared to fast for the sake of you people and do anything if I can help this country—but it is to be done only by a saint. I am no saint.’ Velan uttered many sounds of protest. Raju
felt really sorry to be shattering his faith; but it was the only way in which he could hope to escape the ordeal” (G 112).

Raju with an intention of avoiding his fatal fast narrated his whole past life to Velan. The narration continued throughout the night:

The village had not yet wakened to life. Velan yielded himself to a big yawn, and remained silent. Raju had mentioned without a single omission every detail from his birth to his emergence from the gates of prison. He imagined that Velan would rise with disgust and swear, ‘And we took you for such a noble soul all along! If one like you does penance, it’ll drive off even the little rain that we may hope for. Begone, you, before we feel tempted you out. You have fooled us.’ (G 232)

The rationality of Raju made him think that Velan would respond so. But Velan was overwhelmed by the superstitious, irrational religious faith. Raju, after his long confession of his past life, asked Velan what he thought about his life. “Velan looked quite pained at having to answer such a question. ‘I don’t know why you tell me this, swami. It’s very kind of you to address such length to your humble servant. . . . I’ll go back to the village to do my morning duties. I will come back later. And I’ll never speak a word of what I have heard to any one’” (G 232-233). Velan represents the vast majority of the Hindu people who attribute great faith in the powers of religion. They believe that religious rites can bring wonders. Raju knew this weakness of the people and under the guise of the Sanyasi he led a very luxurious life and thus exploited the faith of the people. It may be only a poetic justice that he has to do penance for it by sacrificing his own life.
In the afternoon on the tenth day of Raju’s fast an American film producer named James J. Malone visits the place to shoot the proceedings for a film. Raju’s fast for rain arouses curiosity in his rational mind. Doubtful of the outcome of the fast and the rites, he makes an interview with the weak Raju. “‘When will you break your fast?’ ‘Twelfth day.’ ‘Do you expect to have the rains by then?’ ‘Why not?’ ‘Can fasting abolish all wars and bring world peace?’ ‘Yes’” (G 243). Both James and Raju are modern men and educated. They are sceptic and do not give much importance to such religious rites and ceremonies. Raju exploited the ignorance of the people for his comfortable life. Similarly James exploits the superstitious beliefs and rites of the Eastern people to sell them to the West to amass money. Narayan evidently mocks at the superstitious beliefs of his own people through James. Similarly he attacks the Western tendency of exploiting the East even marketing its ethos.

Towards the end of the novel a million dollar question is raised in the void, whether Raju’s fasting is going to prove to be instrumental to bring down the rains or not. Gajendra Kumar in his essay, “R. K. Narayan’s ‘The Guide’: The Vision of Indian Values” opines:

In the conflict between science and superstition, it is difficult to say whether science is won or superstition is lost but there is no doubt to argue that a triumph of art is there. . . . As a visionary, Narayan captures and commands the Indian psyche which is bristling over with its superstitious comprehension, gullibility, an admiration of pseudo-scientific objects and a kind of lucidity which is warp and woof of our day to day life.” (179)
The advent of rain which Raju feels is only a hallucination. The reason behind this conclusion is that there aren’t any symptoms of rain on the hills as the sun shines brightly there. Bhagwat S. Goyal writes:

It is natural for him to feel the cold water of the river rushing under his feet making his legs numb. The rains, of course, have not come and even Raju’s sagging down doesn’t indicate that he dies. The fact is that Narayan leaves his ending deliberately open. The coming of the rains would have meant triumph of superstition over reason, while Raju’s death would have reduced his entire penance to a glorious absurdity. What is really important at the end is neither the rains nor the question whether Raju lives or dies, but that Raju has achieved salvation and real human status through his integration with the life of the community. (155)

The ambiguity at the end of the novel is clearly intended by the author himself and it is borne out by the very narrative techniques employed in the novel. The flash-forward method of the narration gives the reader a feeling of ambivalence. K. Venkata Reddy in his essay “Guide or Guru: An Approach to Raju in The Guide” writes:

The various points of view employed—the omniscient author who is skeptical, the autobiographical narrator, Raju, who comes out with his own explanation of his acts, and the faithful followers who accept his sainthood—project a version each of its own, and the reader is to form his own impression of Raju out of the conflicting views, while the narrative devices seem to be complex in an analysis, they never cause any confusion
to the reader in his understanding of the truth about the character of Raju.

(45)

All Indian literature, and Narayan’s own novels in particular, grows out of the ancient oral tradition of the epic and the puranas. The Guide has all the features of the archetypal story—the cool grove in which an enquiring mind (Velan) approaches the enlightened one (Raju). The only significant difference here in the novel is that the exemplary story of the antiquity which always bears a moral, has been ironically inverted. Narayan brings out the ancient paradigm in the modern postcolonial India of today, with all its corruption, flamboyance, prejudice and superstition. “Raju is a complex amalgam who unites into himself the archetypes of the straying king, the demon, the evil man who covets wealth, as well as the ‘idealistic’ or sage—demonstrating in the process the intricately tangled psychological motivation of human beings in the modern world” (Sen 27).

The strongest instinct in Raju’s nature which propels him to activity is his self-preservation instinct. He is full of self-interest and self-love which prevents his maturation. The end of the novel is not open to any delusion about Raju’s maturation, his ‘sainthood,’ his illusion has determined the end. The hallucination is clearly a fact about what is going on in Raju’s mind. It once and for all tells us that Raju has not accomplished the creative transformation of his inner person. In the words of Ujwala Hiremath:

The repentant Raju ought to have been more conscious of his unholiness. In this consciousness the most appropriate hallucination would have been a vision of his defeat, in which he would see no rain, and would say to
Velan, “I told you I am not a saviour!” ’Sanctity is thrust upon him but it does not stick! At best it is a counterfeit sainthood, which is no sainthood at all. He is a saint because he dies! (111-112)

*The Vendor of Sweets*

East-West conflict is clearly visible in *The Vendor of Sweets*. When the people of the East are more religious-minded and thus superstitious, the people of the West are more rational and less religious. Mali, the son of Jagan, who returns from America after his three years of education there, has totally changed from an Indian to a Western. Grace, the companion of Mali from America, is undoubtedly modern and rational.

The opening paragraph of the novel is highly comic, especially to the western ears. To quote form the text, “Conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self,” said Jagan to his listener, who asked, “Why conquer the self?” Jagan said, “I do not know, but all our sages advise us so.” (VS 7) The listener’s question and Jagan’s answer to it represent western and eastern thinking respectively. The western rational mind always thinks logically. It never surrenders to blind faiths. Jagan has sold his reasoning power to the sages. What they say is wisdom to him and he never dares or tries to find out the truth in their statements. That is the way many of the religious leaders and the clergy exploit the common people in the East. Barry Argyle comments on the conversation thus:

To the western ear this is hugely comic because the idea of doing anything without being able to produce a reason stronger than tradition runs counter to our notions of our selves. Those who do, we tend to think foolish. Even when demonstrably false, our reasons have to sound at least reasonable. Our ‘listener’s question, ‘Why?’ is the foundation of modern western
civilization; and to know that an Indian will also ask the question confirms us in our rightness. (15)

Jagan faces a real conflict between religion and rationality in his mind. He is a professed Gandhian and wants to lead a religious life according to the Gita. He claims that his thinking has been shaped by the great sages of India. He wears clothes made of self-spun yarn and uses foot-wear made from the leather of an animal which had a natural death. He eats only what he cooks with his own hands. He is the author of a book Nature Cure and Natural Diet. He is opposed to the use of tooth brush. But this Gandhian maintains two cash books in his sweet shop to evade sales tax. To quote Nanda:

In more serious and more compromising ways, Jagan’s life oscillates between the extremes of the ideals of the scriptures and the imperfect life he must live. Thus his ideals of charity for the poor are in comic juxtaposition to his “free-cash,” “a sort of immaculate conception, self-generated, arising out of itself and entitled to survive without reference to any tax” (89)

With all his short comings, Jagan is basically sincere, though humorously misguided.

The Vendor of Sweets repeatedly refers to the traditional Hindu society based on religion. The Gita and the Puranas are always referred to as guides to action. Temples and sacrifices, traditional rites of marriage, birth and death give order and a collective sense to the life in Malgudi. The gods in Hindu pantheon are consulted for guidance in behaviour or for curing barrenness, as in the case of Jagan. “Jagan often has gone against tradition and orthodox family shuns him for it. His loyalty to Gandhi made him rebel against many of the caste laws; he sometimes found it difficult to observe the rites of
society. He does not visit temples as he ought; he does not always practice charity which the *Gita* prescribes” (Nanda 90). But in spite of all these shortcomings he leads a traditional life and finds inspiration in the scriptures.

Grace, Mali’s proclaimed wife, had much apprehension when she landed in Mali’s house. Since she was born and brought up in a modern society she was much worried about her future in the caste-ridden Indian society. This is evident from her conversation with her father-in-law Jagan. “‘You are happy, aren’t you?’ she asked suddenly. Jagan nodded. She said, “I had heard so much about the caste system in this country. I was afraid to come here, and when I first saw you all at the railway station I shook with fear. I thought I might not be accepted. Mo has really been wonderful, you know. It was very courageous of him to bring me here’” (VS 66). Grace’s anxiety and fear is not unnatural because she expected an angry father-in-law as well as his companions waiting for her at the railway station. In the place of Jagan, a great majority of Indian fathers-in-law would have reacted angrily and they would not have welcomed Grace as their daughter-in-law. Caste and religious feelings are very deep rooted in the Indian mind. Many Hindus believe that caste system is divine and preordained. The religious leaders and priests teach the illiterate masses quoting the scripture about the necessity of caste system. The gullible masses do not understand that these sacred books have been written by the high caste clergies to exploit them. The reason why Jagan did not react might be this: first of all he is educated; but most probably he did not want to disappoint and dishearten his only son who returned home after three years. He loved his son more than anything in the world.
The last but one chapter describes Jagan’s childhood, education and marriage. It tell in detail about Jagan’s marriage, the life his wife Ambika had in the joint family, the visit to the temple of Santana Krishna, the happiness at the birth of Mali etc. In the words of Sundaram:

It provides a contrast between East and West, the values cherished in an orthodox Hindu home and what appeals to a modern Westernized young man. Is romance not possible in the so-called arranged marriage? Are such bonds as bound Jagan and Ambika to each other, and both of them to their parents and parents-in-law, a tyrannical imposition . . . ? (“The Vendor of Sweets” 94-95)

Through Jagan, Narayan tells the world that arranged marriages have advantages over love marriages. Though the couples, especially the bride, have to face scolding, nagging, humiliation, lack of privacy, and constant interference by the elders, there is also a sense of belonging, a concern for each other. Sorrow and joy are for the whole family to share, not to be hugged by the husband and wife alone.

Jagan had been married to Ambika for ten years, but no child was born to them. The main reason was that Jagan had been studying in college for intermediate and degree courses. He was not a bright student and as a result he was failing examination one after the other. Moreover his love and care for his wife distracted his studies. Ambika was held responsible for Jagan’s failure in BA examination. They complained that she was not allowing Jagan to read late into night. In order to avoid their scolding and to pass BA, Jagan decided to commit himself wholly to studies. Thus he neglected his responsibilities to his wife. The parents believed that Ambika had no fecundity and indirectly tortured her
with scathing words. Jagan’s parents decided to make offering to the god of Santana Krishna Temple to secure her of the problem of infertility. As the text says, “His father suddenly said one morning, “Next Tuesday we are going to the temple on Badri Hill. You had better apply for two days’ leave from your college. Your wife will also come” (VS 166-167). Jagan could not guess the purpose of the visit to the temple. He understood that his father was very serious and determined. To quote from the novel:

Still, Jagan had the hardihood to ask, “Why are we going to that temple?”

His father said, “The temple is known as Santana Krishna; a visit to it is the only known remedy for barrenness in women.”

Jagan blushed and wanted to assure his father of his wife’s fecundity and described to him the group photo in their house with her grandmother and the one hundred and three others, but he felt tongue-tied . . . (VS 167)

Jagan was confident that Ambika was fertile because she came from a family line of one hundred and three members. Even though Jagan was educated, it seemed that he was not aware of the fact that both man and woman should be fertile to give birth to a child. Or he might have taken for granted like most of his country men that the problem of infertility is only with women, and that men have no problem at all. The real problem, as one finds in the novel, was the lack of sufficient husband-wife relation in bed. Whenever the results came out and Jagan had failed, Ambika had to hear the taunting remarks of her mother-in-law. So when Jagan came to sleep after his studies she would say, ““Why don’t you pick up your books and go away to a hostel? Your mother seems to think I am always lying on your lap, preventing you from touching your books”” (VS 167) Jagan’s
parents had no doubt about their son’s potency and fecundity, and their needle of suspicion turned to Ambika. Since Jagan was educated and rational he was not convinced that infertility could be solved by prayer and offerings. As he could not disobey his parents, he accompanied them along with his wife to temple.

The people of India believed that many things impossible to men could be wrought by appeasing gods through prayer and offerings. Thus in the novel Jagan’s parents offered many valuable things—gold, silver etc., equivalent of the weight of the child which may have been born to their son and the daughter-in-law. Several months after the visit to Santana Krishna temple, Ambika gave birth to Mali. To quote from the text, “The very minute he was delivered (in the village home of his mother) he was weighed on a scale pan, even before the midwife could clean him up properly—and an equivalent weight in gold, silver, and corn was made up to be delivered to the God on Badri Hill, according to the solemn vow made during their visit” (VS 172). Such firm belief in miracles by gods is a chief characteristic of the Indian society even at present. The blind faith in religions and their teachings, many of them based on faith and, therefore contradictory to rationality are found to be rare in the West. Although blind faith and superstitions give much happiness and peace of mind to the people, it annihilates man’s quest for free reason and free thinking. Compared to the West the exploitation done in the name of religion in the East is more than what one imagines. A microscopic minority has been taking undue advantage of the ignorance of the masses.

Three months after Mali’s birth Ambika returned with the child to Mali’s house. Ambika’s parents sent with her an enormous load of gifts, as prescribed in the social code, for the first-born, and a huge feast was held to which a hundred guests had been
invited. The two grand-parents retired to a corner for a moment and involved in private conversation. To quote from the text, “I was dreading Jagan would be without issue,” said Jagan’s father.

“But I was in no doubt at any time. Barrenness is unknown in our house” (VS 173).

Jagan’s father hinted indirectly at the fertility of Ambika, and Ambika’s father guessed it right and gave the reply. It is evident from their conversation that the people of India believed that the child is mainly the responsibility of wife than husband. Whether the husband is potent or not does not matter. If a wife can not give birth to a child she is looked down upon. Narayan wants to attack this tendency of the people. The husbands were never subjected to clinical examination, and their potency was never doubted. This legacy of still exists in the Indian society.

Ambika was greatly relieved of the taunts of her in-laws when Mali was born to her. She has been undergoing assort of identity crisis for the past ten years. Her womanhood was questioned and she was in agony. But the husband who was responsible for her childlessness was not taunted or tormented. Finally when she returned with the child she was brimming with pride and self-esteem. The novel says:

A look of triumph glowed on Jagan’s face as he went from guest to guest, prostrated at their feet, and received blessings. Ambika followed him, prostrated at the feet of the guests, and was also blessed by everyone. She held herself up proudly, having now attained the proper status in the family. She looked especially gratified that she had enabled them to add, if
it could somehow be done, one more figure to the group photographs hanging in the walls of both the houses. (VS 173)

To seek the blessings of the elders is typical of the Indian ethos. Touching the feet of the elders for their blessings is unimaginable to the Western mind. The number of members in a family was a matter of pride and respect in the Indian families. Group photographs of the joint families hung on the walls of the visiting rooms. The guests were shown and introduced to the members in the photographs and thus the pride of the family was expressed.

_The Vendor of Sweets_ is a novel of quest in which the hero, Jagan, nearing sixty, is searching for the feminine. Jagan was always attracted by the female. One can find his strong “relationship with different aspect of the feminine: the feminine as daughter-in-law, wife, as mother, and finally as the archetype of the cosmic, eternal goddess, the creator, the preserver, the destroyer, the initiatress who takes man from the limited ego-world to the wider spaces in the domains of cosmic consciousness” (Sharma, Som 161). In psychological terms, Jagan has been awakened to the world of the eternal feminine which, in the words of Goethe, leads a man on. He is depicted as a traditional Indian in his relationship with women. Indian society always respected women. Women were treated as equal to gods. This spiritual relationship is found in his relation to his mother, wife, daughter-in-law and finally to the goddess of Chinna Dorai’s garden where he is going to spend his coming days.

The conflict between religion and rationality is very little in _Waiting for the Mahatma_. As the novel deals mainly with the theme of love between Sriram and Bharati in the background of India’s freedom struggle the clash between rationality and religious
or superstitious beliefs of the people is not dealt with much in the novel. The few instances where the conflict is found in the novel are detailed as below:

When Sriram asked Kanni the shop man if he would sell the portrait of the queen for a price he replied that he would not part with it. “I know you can buy up the queen herself, master zamindar. But I won’t part with it. It has brought me luck. Ever since I hung the picture there, my business has multiplied tenfold” (WM 7). The use of talisman for luck is a common feature even now in India.

Sriram was brought up by his Granny. She used to tell him about his grandfather and he very much looked like him. “And your grandfather, you know how clever he was! They say that the grandfather’s reincarnation is in his grandson. You have the same shaped nose as he had and the same eyebrows. His fingers were also long just like yours. But there it stops. I very much wish you had not inherited any of it, but only his brain” (WM 8). The belief in reincarnation is one of the Hindu ethos. Educated Hindus refuse to believe it.

When Sriram cleared the debt, real or unreal, which his grandfather owed to Kanni’s shop, Kanni replied, “That’s worthy grandson . . . Now the old man’s soul will rest in peace.’

‘But where will the soul be waiting? Don’t you think he will have been re-born somewhere?’ said Sriram” (WM 18). The belief in Karma is another ethos prevalent among Hindus even in modern India. Parents’ good or bad actions will be reflected in the children’s fate and conversely if the children do penance for the parents’ lapses and evil acts the souls of the dead parents will rest in peace or get rid of rebirth. Sriram has no belief in such ethos and that is why he asks Kanni sarcastically where the soul would be.
Sriram bought a canvas folding chair with the cash he withdrew first from his account. He set the canvas chair right in the middle of the hall and said that it was a present to his Granny. Then she replied, “It’s no use for me. This is some kind of leather, probably cow-hide, and I can’t pollute myself by sitting on it. I wish you had told me before going out to buy” (WM 20). In Hindu ethos cow is an animal which is honoured and worshipped. It is a sacrilege to kill cows for flesh or leather.

Since Sriram spent the evening and early night with the Mahatma he could not go to his house before night. His granny had gone to Kanni’s shop five times during the evening to enquire if any one had seen Sriram. To quote from the text:

At last the school master who lived up the street told her as he passed his house, ‘Your pet is in Mahatma’s camp, I saw him.’

‘Ah! What was he doing there?’ asked Granny alarmed. For her the Mahatma was one who preached dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples, and who involved people in difficulties with the police. She didn’t like the idea. (WM 62)

Untouchability prevailed in the Hindu society. Low caste people were not allowed to visit temples. Gandhi fought against this evil practice. As Granny was an illiterate Brahmin woman her apprehensions were genuine.

Sriram started satyagraha before a shop lying on the ground since the shopkeeper was unwilling to destroy foreign biscuits. Then a boy dashed past Sriram to the shop and held out his coin. The shop man snatched the coin from his hand in the twinkling of an eye. Sriram asked the boy not to buy anything from that shop. There was a crowd there watching all these proceedings. They pulled the boy away and asked him obey Sriram
instead of asking him reasons for not buying anything from that shop. To quote from the text:

The child cried, “He has taken my money. My money, my money.’

People shouted angrily at the shop man, ‘Give the boy his money.’

The shop man cried: ‘How can I? This is a Friday, and would it not be inauspicious to give back a coin? I’ll be ruined for the rest of my life. I am prepared to give him what he wants for the coin, even a little more if he wants; but no, I can’t give back the cash. Have pity on me, friends. I am a man with seven children. (WM 121-122)

Another superstition which prevailed in the Indian society is depicted here. Even educated Sriram became helpless before it. The child was not given the coin back, nor the people assembled there compelled the shop man to do it.

When the funeral of Sriram’s Granny was going on, the priest asked Sriram for two rupees in coins. To quote from the text:

Kanni asked the priest wrathfully, ‘Why do you ask that? Haven’t we agreed on a lump sum for everything?’

The priest who was squatting beside the body turned said, ‘Whoever said the lump sum included this? This can never go into that. This is a separate account. Our elders have decreed that the Dear Departed should have two silver coins one on his or her chest from the hand of the nearest and dearest. It is said to smooth out the passage of the soul into farther regions. I am only repeating what the shastras say. Our ancestors know what was best for us, I am merely a mouthpiece.’ (WM 179)
The priest is administering another superstitious practice which prevailed in the Hindu society.

Sriram was asked by the priest to shave off his moustache and head and then bathe and come. Then only the funeral rites can start. To quote from the text:

‘... You will have to shave off your moustache and to of your head. Otherwise it would be very irregular. The shastras say . . .’

‘I will not shave my moustache not my head,’ said Sriram emphatically.

‘All right,’ said the priest. ‘It’s my duty to suggest what the shastras say, and it is left to you to follow it or modify it in any manner. Of course modern life makes it difficult to follow all the rules, and people have to adjust themselves . . .’ (WM 180)

Yet another superstitious ritual and the modern response to it is revealed in the conversation.

When the fire was lit to the pyre of Granny, she showed signs of life. A doctor was called upon and he confirmed that she was alive. He recommended that she needed some recuperation and she should be taken back to her house in the doctor’s car. Then the priest interrupted. To quote from the text:

‘How can you suggest such a thing? No one who has been carried here can ever step into the town bounds again. Don’t you know that is will . . . it will. . .’

‘What will happen?’
‘Happen! The whole town will be wiped out by fire or plague. It is very inauspicious. Do anything you like, but she can’t come back into the town.’ (WM 184)

This point of view gathered a lot of support. People began to rush to the cremation ground. She was kept at the toll office and nursed by the doctor. Even the doctor, whom the people love and honour, is helpless before the superstitious beliefs.

In Waiting for the Mahatma Gandhi taught the people by his own exemplary action that untouchability is irrational and unjust. To quote C. V. Driesen, “His singling out of the sweeper’s boy for special attention and his choice of dwelling in the sweeper’s village are calculated gestures designed to have the maximum possible effect in protesting discrimination against this oppressed section of the Indian community” (365).

Conflict between religion and rationality as part of the East-West conflict is found aplenty in The Painter of Signs. In the novel all the characters except the protagonists, Raman and Daisy, are orthodox Hindus bound by superstitious beliefs and practices. Their actions and interactions with the protagonists are in conflict with rational thinking.

The omniscient narrator narrates the earlier life of Raman, the hero. Raman is a painter of sign boards. He had been button-holed by the lawyer at the market place. The lawyer wanted to get his name board painted on the following Thursday. To quote from the text, “I must have the board absolutely on Thursday before eleven. I should not miss that time.”

“Why not?” Raman asked.

“My astrologer says so. Please you must . . .” (PS 4)
The lawyer was adamant that the letter of his name board should be slanted to the left. Raman’s curiosity got the better of him, as he asked:

“What make you so firm?”

“It’s my astrologer again, who believes that a left slant is auspicious of my ruling star, which is Saturn.”

Raman was upset. All day long he was engaged in arguing with his old aunt who advised him to do this or that according to the stars. He was determined to establish the Age of Reason in the world. “I want a rational explanation for everything,” he cried. “Otherwise my mind refuses to accept any statement.” He was bursting with self-declarations. “I’m a rationalist, and I don’t do anything unless I see some logic in it.” (PS 5)

Raman came to terms with the lawyer with regard to the painting of the name board. Before they parted at the junction of Kabir Street, Raman asked again:

“So you don’t mind the old-monger style?”

“I go by what my astrologer says,” said the lawyer. “Saves a lot of trouble that way.”

“I prefer to think for myself,” Raman said before turning his cycle round homeward. “All our great minds, from Valluvar down to Bernard Shaw and Einstein, say . . .” (PS 6)

Thus Raman reveals his rationality. The lawyer is more educated than Raman but he is a prey to the superstitious beliefs and practices which are characteristic features of the East. In India even highly educated people firmly hold such unreasonable beliefs.
Raman came with the sign board to the lawyer’s house at the correct time. He pointed triumphantly at the hand of his wrist watch. To quote from the text:

“Ten-thirty means ten-thirty in my dictionary.”

“I was anxious whether it’d come in time, if it had been late . . .”

A tufted priest came up to remark, “The essence lies in correct timing, a minute this way or that can make all the difference between a millionaire and a mendicant.”

“Be scientific, please, scientific,” Raman tried to say, but felt distracted when several hands reached for the board. *(PS 7)*

The sign board was nailed at the outer wall of the lawyer’s house. “The priest stretched a jasmine garland across the board, touched it with sandal paste, recited something aloud, commanding the layer to repeat after him, circled a camphor, and sounded a bell at once” *(PS 9).*

The priest may not be scientific by Raman’s standards, but he is an astute professional. In the words of Som Prakash, “Being the glorified mendicant that he traditionally is, the priest knows his very livelihood depends on uttering such statements for the benefit of his gullible folk. Raman privately dismisses such priestly sentiments; but he enjoys the attention he gets, proudly displaying his philosophy by the bust of Gandhi on his shoulder bag, if not insisting on personally hanging the board” *(157).*

It is mainly the clergy who are responsible for germinating and spreading such unreasonable, superstitious beliefs. Taking advantage of the ignorance of the masses these priests find their livelihood as well as luxury. Poor people never understand that these priests are real parasites of the society, instead they deify them. Even the so-called
scientists fall prey to their traps. If the East is to flourish like the West, if individuality and equality are to be established in the society, the people should allow reason to get into their heads.

Raman was writing down story of his aunt’s life as requested by her. She talked about her father who was a priest. She says:

“Occasionally, he also brought in a cow, which, as you know, when gifted to a Brahmin helps a dead man’s soul to ford a difficult river in the next world.”

“How?” questioned the rationalist.

“Don’t ask me all that,” Aunt said. “That’s what shastras say, and we don’t have to question it, it is the duty of the living to help the dead with proper rituals.” Raman felt irritated at her beliefs. How could the Age of Reason be established if people were like this! Impossible. He said, “All right, go on with your story.”

“We were a well-fed lot in our home. I was especially fortunate as I had the name of the Goddess of Wealth, Laxmi, and no one dared say, ‘Go away, Laxmi, as it might be inauspicious. It was always good to say, Oh, Laxmi, welcome to our house,’ and I was invited ungrudgingly into any of the hundred houses in our village. I was pampered when I went, and grew fat.” (PS 19-20)

Daisy came to Raman’s house with the cash for sigh board. He was sleeping then. His mother engaged Daisy in her talks. Then Raman appeared in the visiting room after his bath. He told Daisy:
“Ah! What an unexpected pleasure and privilege. Sorry, I was asleep.”

Daisy turned round and said, “Your aunt has kept me engaged. I didn’t notice the time passing.”

Aunt came out of the kitchen saying, “She has told me all about her duties. Isn’t it by God’s will that children are born?”

“But our government does not agree with God,” Raman said. (PS 54-55)

The rationality behind birth control is beyond the reach of the orthodox, religious-minded aunt. Even Raman is not convinced about it. As all religions are against artificial birth control it is natural for the people with religious bent to reject the policy.

Daisy was speaking to the villagers assembled about the need to control population. She concluded the speech by telling that their village would have no more than seven hundred people at the same time next year. Then some elders of the village asked, “God gives us children. How can we reject His gift.” She did not contradict the thesis outright, but gently presented a scientific, rational point of view” (PS 68). . . . But when the chief man said, “There is an old shrine in a cave over there where barren women can go and pray and bear children. How would you explain it?” Daisy simply answered, “You should ask the priest of that temple,” and Raman admired the courage and subtlety of her reply” (PS 68). Daisy who is educated and rational cannot conceive of the conception of barren women as a wonder except as the result of the act of the priest. And it is well known that there are many fake priests and doctors in India who impregnate childless wives.

Daisy and Raman wanted to paint birth control messages on the wall of a shrine in the village. An old man who was the priest and the owner of the shrine appeared there.
He said that he had built the temple and installed the goddess of plenty there long ago. He continued, “‘Barren women come and pray here for three days, and conceive within thirty days.’

Daisy looked shocked. This was going to prove the antithesis of all her mission, defeat her entire business of life” (PS 70).

Raman returned from the shrine to join Daisy. They were getting ready to leave the place. To quote from the novel:

The hermit’s attack still rankled in her mind. “I fear we have to contend against that man’s propaganda.”

“Let’s not talk about him. He understands what goes on everywhere. . . . I am telling you that he knows all that is said and done anywhere. Note necessary to go and speak to him again.”

“Oh master, you must rise above all such superstitious fears.”

(PS 79)

Though Raman is equally educated as Daisy he still has some grip of religion on him. He is not as rational as Daisy. Even today there are a good number of educated Indians who believe in the supernatural powers of such fake sanyasis.

Raman wanted to get his aunt’s permission to marry Daisy before she went to Banaras. But his aunt had a poor opinion about Daisy as she had heard about her running away from home. Moreover she belonged to another religion and caste. Then justifying Daisy Raman said:

“She is a rare type of girl, devoted to the service of people, and that is all her religion. I don’t know if she cares for any other god or religion, and I
haven’t asked. Her worship takes the form of service to the poor and the ignorant and helping them live a decent life. She cares not for wealth or luxury or titles. She can live without food, and sleep on the floor.”

(PS 153)

The statement reveals his character and convictions. He gives least importance to religion or caste.

Raman and Daisy had agreed to have their marriage in a very simple manner. Of the five kinds of marriage, they had chosen the simplest one.

They had come to the conclusion that the system called Gandharva was the most suitable one for them; that was the type of marriage one read about in classical literature. When two souls met in harmony the marriage was consummated perfectly, and no further rite or ceremony was called for. Daisy said that although she had no faith in any ancient customs, she would accept it, since it seemed to her a sensible thing. (PS 158)

The agreement between Raman and Daisy proclaims that they are very rational even in the conduct of a very serious and consequential ritual of their life. Such couples are very rare.

Raman’s aunt was about to leave to Banaras. She was giving elaborate instructions to him as to how to manage things in the house in her absence. She told him, “You see, on Fridays, I usually drop a ten-paisa coin into the money-chest kept at the temple. Never failed even once these thirty years since I came to this house to look after you. That god protects us, remember. You may put the coin in whenever you pass that way; otherwise, you may tell our neighbour to do it for you” (PS 166). There are millions
of Indians like Raman’s aunt who believe that gods could be pleased, appeased and favours won through the offerings, especially money. As already stated it is the clergy who injects such irrational and superstitious beliefs into the minds of ignorant people.

After the aunt had gone to Banares, Raman changed aunt’s *puja room* into Daisy’s bed room. He took the idols of the gods and kept them in a cupboard. Then one day Daisy visited him and he showed her the room meant for her. To quote from the text:

When they peeped into the *puja* room he had said, “This will be your bed room, you can put up the table and chair.” She looked in and remarked, “I remember seeing your aunt’s gods on the stand here. Where are they?”

“Safe in that cupboard there,” he said.

“Is it safe?” she exclaimed in a mock fright. “Will the gods not smite us for this effrontery?” Raman laughed at the notion, rather loudly and artificially. Following this they engaged themselves in theological jocularities.

“Can you lock up a god?” she asked.

“Why not?” Raman said, falling into the mood.

“What locksmith can produce a lock strong enough? While human safe-breakers work their way through the strongest lock, can’t a god do as much?” she seemed to be in an extraordinarily frivolous mood now.

“Why, would you be afraid to stay alone in the room? I’ll transfer them to another cupboard in the hall. . . . Any way, my aunt has complete trust in the gods and possesses greater serenity than anyone else I have known.”
If so, why move the gods? Leave them undisturbed in their old place,” she said lightheartedly. (PS 170-171)

It is obvious that though Raman and Daisy are rational they are not atheists. They may be agnostics. What they attack and object to is the superstitions. Hence they don’t believe in rituals and ceremonies in the name of religion. Though they don’t worship gods they never challenge them.

Raman wants a rational explanation for everything he does. He will not do anything unless he sees some logic in it. Syd Harrex writes:

The insecurity of his Age of Reason is thus intimated and becomes the mainstay of the ironic comedy throughout the narrative and he finds himself sandwiched between Malgudi’s convention and the Outsider’s iconoclasm, between the philosophies of the Traditional Woman (his aunt) and the New Woman (Daisy). Juxtaposed between their worlds, Raman is an amusing, sorry study of male definition and identity confusion. (76)

The novel highlighted the change in human outlook with regard to some of the cherished ideals, established institutions and accepted values. The general trend of the time is to be scientific and rational. Bhardwaj opines:

The ideals of family obedience and reverence to elders in the family are gradually dropped for the sake of keeping one’s individuality intact. Daisy refuses to pay obeisance to her would-be-in-laws, and Raman considers it odious to fall at anybody’s feet. Daisy rebels against her parents’ wishes and domestic orthodoxies. Raman can impertinently dispense with his aunt to achieve his romantic freedom. The institution of marriage is gradually
losing its traditional form. In Daisy’s view if a man and woman are willing to live together, they are as good as married. (174)

*The English Teacher* is Narayan’s third novel which was published in 1945. The conflict between religion and rationality is a major theme of this novel. Krishnan, the hero of the novel, is a teacher of English in a college. The main part of the novel centres round the love between Krishnan and his wife Sushila. They were living a very happy life when suddenly Sushila died of typhoid. After her death Krishnan concentrated himself on bringing up his daughter Leela. Then the novel takes a mystic turn. Krishnan started receiving messages from his wife through a medium—a cheerful gentleman of philosophic outlook. Every week he used to go to the medium for a sitting and he received minute instructions about the things of his house, which convinced him that they could only come form his wife’s spirit. Krishnan put up his daughter at a school run by a devoted master. The master’s unhappy life and his devotion to the school form a minor sub plot of the novel. In the end Krishnan resigns his job and joins the primitive school so that he can talk directly to his departed wife, who, he believes, is a spirit.

*The English Teacher* is a song of love in marriage. It is a psychic, mystic and spiritual study of some part of Indianness. The novel which starts as an interesting story of domestic fidelity gets bogged in spiritual things and philosophic discussions which many a time tax the patience of the readers. As a work of art this novel could have been much better with less spiritualism. The characters are well worked out. Even the school master inspires dignity, fills the readers with a sort of reverence. But in spite of artistic style, subtle humour and irony, the novel suffers from a lack of interest.
*The English Teacher* tells a tragic love story of the divine separation of two souls, with an alterior motif of satirizing the fault in existing education system which makes Indians morons, cultural morons, but efficient clerks for the government business and administrative offices.

The theme of the novel is obviously the ‘death’ of Susila in the first half and her ‘resurrection’ in the second half: Paradise Lost being followed by Paradise Regained. The novel is also autobiographical. Narayan wrote the novel immediately after the death of his wife, and the character of Susila has affinity to the dear departed. The novel also uses the ancient myth of Savitri and Satyvan.

The major theme of the novel is Krishnan’s progress from predictability to unpredictability, from the academic world to the real world of life and death, from adulthood to childhood and from Western mentality to Eastern mentality. Thus one finds a redress from modernity to tradition, from rationality to religion or superstition, from materialism to spirituality.

Krishnan repeatedly find himself being drawn out of situations which ought to have been predictable and ordered by events which are spontaneous and unpredictable, and it is clear that he finds spontaneity and unpredictability to be stimulating and life-enhancing, while predictability and order, although providing a cushion of comfort and security, is ultimately stifling and deadening.

Susila, brings unpredictability into Krishnan’s life at every turn. For example, when they go to look at a house she wants to make a long diversion to walk by the river and bathe her feet, where the rational orderly Krishnan would have naturally taken the
most direct route, and it is clear that he finds her unpredictable behaviour a source of
delight and inspiration.

The futility of clinging to the belief that life can be orderly, predictable, and
knowable is shown in two central and symmetrical predictions which occupy a prominent
place in the novel. The first is the doctor’s assertion that typhoid, which Susila has
contracted, is the one fever which goes strictly by its own rules. It follows a timetable and
that Susila will be well in a few weeks. The other prominent demonstration of the futility
of believing that life can be knowable and predictable is seen in the headmaster’s belief
in a prediction made by the astrologer, who can see past, present and future as one, and
give everything its true value that he will die on a given date. But although the
headmaster has found that his life has gone precisely as he predicted, the headmaster
lives.

Both these episodes show the limitations of man’s ability to know and predict the
world. The truth is that one can not know and predict any view of life, whether deriving
from modern western science, or ancient eastern mysticism, which disregards the
unknowable and sees only what is supposedly known, and supposedly predictable.

In coming to terms with the death of his wife, literature, philosophy, and
rationalism are no use to Krishnan. They are all illusions, and the journey he is on
involves leaving illusions behind. The truth Krishnan wants to discover can not be found
in Shakespeare, Carlyle, or Plato, it is found only among real people leading real lives, it
is the law of life.

Another component of Krishnan’s journey is that he encounters the co-existence
of western and native cultural attitudes, which also represent the attitudes of Indians of a
newer and older generation. For example, when Susila is ill she is treated both by a
doctor who practices western scientific medicine, and by a Swamiji who uses mythical
methods of healing. The Swamiji is summoned by Susila’s mother, representing an older
generation than Krishnan himself, who believes that ‘evil eye’ has fallen on her daughter,
and it is notable that Krishnan feels ‘ashamed’ that the doctor find the Swamiji in the
house, showing that he is alienated from, and embarrassed by, the culture of the older
generation of his own country.

The final stage of Krishnan’s journey takes him further from the western
intellectual frame of mind, inherited from the British, in which he was embedded at the
opening of the novel, and further towards native Indian spiritual practices. To reach his
goal of a harmonious existence he take up his deceased wife’s psychically-communicated
challenge, which he receives initially through a medium, to develop his mind sufficiently
to communicate with her psychically himself, and bridge the gap between life and life-
after-death. Although initially he had been bemused by his wife’s devotional practices,
mocking her with ‘Oh! Becoming a yogi!’ he now relies on her to guide him, from
beyond the grave, in his self-development.

In the final chapter the issues of the novel come to head with Krishnan’s
resignation from his post as English teacher and his psychic reunion with his wife. In his
attack on the system he is rebelling against, he criticizes not English literature itself ‘for
who could be insensible to Shakespeare’s sonnets, or “Ode to the West Wind”’ but
India’s adherence to an educational system which trifles the spirit of its students and
alienates them from their native culture.