Chapter Six

Conclusion

The conflict between the West and the East or between Innovation and Tradition is a perennial theme in Indo-Anglian fiction and several Indian English novelists have created notable works in this theme. R. K. Narayan in some of his novels depicts the clash of deep-rooted values of Indian culture, characterized by Hindu culture, with those of the modern West. This thesis, though titled “East-West Conflict”, is indeed an attempt to bring out the influence of the Western values on the East and conversely the Eastern values on the West. The conflict of values may not be found everywhere. There are several instances in the novels where the values are accepted and absorbed without much conflict.

Four selected novels of R. K. Narayan, namely, *The Vendor of Sweets, Waiting for the Mahatma, The Painter of Signs* and *The Guide* have been analysed in this thesis and four aspects of East-West conflict are studied with sufficient evidences. A few other novels of Narayan are also discussed bringing out these aspects in them.

The theme of East-West conflict or encounter may sound irrelevant and inconsequential in the present world. But that was not the case of India as depicted by R. K. Narayan in his fictional world of Malgudi from the nineteen thirties to seventies. Most of the novels of R. K. Narayan were written when India was under British colonialism and characters in the novels bear the imprint of the colonized people.

The West was propped up by its innovativeness, advancement, adulthood and scientific temper. East has acquired connotations of imitativeness, sluggishness, childhood and sorcery. The West is the centre to the rest of the world because the belief
systems it engendered during the Enlightenment phase created permanent divisions between the West and the rest.

The British people tried to make Indians cultured and civilized through their language, English and thereby creating a power structure with English and English speaking people at the top and all others marginalized. Hence there is a dichotomy between the savage East and the civilized West. Repeated attacks on the native language reduced the native’s sense of self and as a result the colonized began to imitate the colonizer. The colonization of the country is followed by the colonialization of the subject population, and this invariably colonializes the culture also. The worship of everything British was built into the psyche of the educated Indians, who were happy to be willing slaves under the foreign masters.

Orientalism has become a style of thought and a large number of writers have accepted the basic distinction between East and West which they elaborated in theories, novels, social descriptions and political accounts. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, domination and varying degrees of complex hegemony. A distinct sensuality, tendency to despotism, aberrant mentality, habits of inaccuracy, backwardness etc. are the characteristic features of the Orient which makes it separate from the Occident. In short, Orientalism is based on the superiority complex of the Occident.

The Indo-Anglian novelists write their novels with the hope of presenting them before the Western readers. Hence they select subject-matter which fascinates the Westerners. Thus one finds Sadhus, Fakirs, Caves, Temples, Vedanta, Gandhi, Rajahs, Nababs etc. in their works. At the same time there are elements of Indianness—
Nationalism and Patriotism, Glorification of India’s past, and sympathy for the millions of fellowmen.

Narayan was born in an upper middle class Brahmin family of Madras. He found South India as a fundamentally conservative Hindu society which he realistically presented in most of his novels and stories with the lower middle class common man as his base. Narayan is not a social critic and he is not interested in propagating any idea. Narayan in his novels subscribes to the Hindu ideals enshrined in the ancient Hindu scriptures. What makes him original is his truthful interpretation of Hindu ideals. He deals with the Hindu ethos in all his novels. Hinduism stands for the civilization of Hindus. Hinduism consists of complex aspects of religion, society, economics, literature and art. As a religion it comprises many doctrines, cults and ways of life. A product of Hindu high caste family, Narayan shares his beliefs, superstitions, traditions, customs and rituals in Indian life. Malgudi, Narayan’s fictional world, is deeply traditional and caste-ridden. Varna Vyavastha which has come down to the present Indian society through several generations has not freed Indian mind, and it is realistically portrayed in Narayan’s novels. Most of the characters in Narayan’s novels are innocent people and they are pitted against unsympathetic environment. They are orthodox and superstitious. The characters believe that everything on earth is preordained. Thus the heroes of his novels do not control the events but events control them.

The British rule in India for more than two centuries made tremendous influence on the thoughts, ideas and ways of life of the Indian people. The establishment of schools and colleges and the social work by the Western missionaries in India propagated Western ideologies and thoughts in the Indian minds. There have been conflicts between
the Eastern and Western philosophies. But these conflicts proved to be beneficial to the Indians. This is not to say that some of the Western philosophies made evil influence on the Indian minds. The major modern Western philosophies which influenced the Indian people are the following: materialism, rationalism, utilitarianism, Marxism, atheism, existentialism, fatalism, pragmatism, empiricism, skepticism and agnosticism. The influences of these philosophies are visible in many of the characters of Narayan’s novels.

Materialism is the oldest philosophy in the Western civilization. Materialism is a philosophy which is very prevalent in the Western society today. Materialism can refer either to the simple preoccupation with the material world, as opposed to intellectual or spiritual concepts. Materialism can also refer to a doctrine that material success and progress are the highest values in life. The practical materialism, to which scientific materialism gave birth, prevails in the lives of the entire world’s people, whether they are Muslims, Christians, Jews or atheists. For most people mean economic development, the betterment of worldly life, when development is talked about, and give precedence to worldly life in their considerations. Materialism is contrary to the spirit of both Indian and traditional Chinese philosophy. The goals of materialism are: acquisition of material goods, self interests, accumulation, and avoiding faith and spiritual deity. The resultant evils or effects are: lust, envy, false comfort, idolatry, selfishness, lack of compassion, greed, denial of eternal soul and the Creator, lack of morals, preoccupation to money, jealousy, theft, hopelessness, unrepentant sin, despair and eternal death.

Colonialism itself was the product of materialism. It is only profit motive which prompted the individuals as well as the nations to colonize the third world countries.
Though missionary work is said to be one of the causes of colonization, its impact was very negligible when compared to the material exploitation done on the colonized. This materialistic and anti-spiritualistic thought and philosophy was the legacy which the colonizer left to the future generations of the colonized and thus the conflict between the western values and the eastern values continue to prevail in these countries. Many of the protagonists of Narayan’s novels are products of materialism. Raju and Marco of *The Guide*, Jagan, Mali and Grace of *The Vendor of Sweets*, Sriram of *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Raman of *The Painter of Signs* are materialists one way or other.

Rationalism in its broadest sense is any view appealing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification. Rationalism is the philosophical view that regards reason as the chief source and test of knowledge. Rationalism is opposite to Indian spirituality. As the global community becomes increasingly capitalistic, the quest for spirituality grows in urgency. India, its people, its infrastructure, and indeed its very soil, encourage and breed spiritualism, allowing religions to thrive, flourish and prosper. Raju, Marco, Mali, Grace, Raman and Daisy are influenced by rationalism and their words and action sometimes reveal that influence.

Utilitarian philosophy is one which states that an action is right if it tends to promote happiness—not just the happiness of the performer of the action but that of everyone affected by it. Such a theory is in opposition to egoism, the view that a man should pursue his own self-interest, even at the expense of others.

Existentialism is a style of philosophizing that emphasized the existence, freedom and choice of a person. According to the philosophy, the universe has no intrinsic
meaning or purpose. It requires people to take responsibility for their own actions and shape their own destinies.

Fatalism is the philosophy assuming that all events occur according to a fixed and inevitable destiny and individual can neither control nor affect them. Pragmatism calls for ideas and theories to be tested in practice, by assessing whether acting upon the idea or theory produces desirable or undesirable results. According to pragmatists, all claims about truth, knowledge, morality, and politics must be tested in this way.

Empiricism is the doctrine that affirms that all knowledge is based on experience, and denies the possibility of spontaneous ideas or a priori thought. Skepticism is that doctrine that denies the possibility of attaining knowledge of reality as it is in itself, apart from human perception. By gradual extension of its meaning, the word skepticism has also come to signify doubt about what is generally accepted as true. Agnosticism is the philosophy that states that the existence of God and other spiritual beings is neither certain nor impossible. The influence of these various western philosophies is discernible in various major characters of Narayan.

Since R. K. Narayan is a postcolonial writer elements of postcolonialism is evident in many of his works. Postcolonial writings are attempts at reviving the ethnic cultures, traditions, beliefs, languages etc. The postcolonial literature inculcated pride in one’s own ancient culture and traditions. It abounds in patriotic feelings. Postcolonialism aims at developing the national identity in the wake of colonial rule.

R. K. Narayan's novels are characterised by Chekhovian simplicity and gentle humour. He wrote about simple people trying to live their simple lives in a changing world. His characters are very ordinary down-to-earth Indians trying to blend tradition
with modernity often resulting in tragi-comic situations. His writing style is simple, unpretentious and witty, with a unique flavour as if he were writing in the native language.

The locale of Narayan’s novel is an imaginary town called Malgudi. It is like Hardy’s Wessex, Wordsworth’s Lake District and Arnold Bennet’s Pottery Towns. Narayan’s India is symbolised by Malgudi.

The basic theme of Narayan’s novels is the place of man in this universe and his predicament. According to him the necessary ingredients in fiction are: the mood of comedy, the sensitivity to atmosphere, the probing of psychological factors, and the crisis in the individual soul and its resolution. Life, in his opinion, is illogical and man is always trying to translate his fantasies into reality. So through the reversal of fortune, Narayan completes the story of man’s rise and fall, and this presents a total view of life.

The chief beauty of Narayan’s novels lies in the characterization. Like the characters of Jane Austin, his range is limited. The people of Malgudi are lower middle class Brahmins, to which Narayan belonged. He has portrayed a wide range of characters like—students, teachers, parents, grand parents, journalists, artists, financiers, speculators, film-makers, adventurers, eccentrics, cranks, movie stars, sanyasis, and women—pious and suffering, coquettish and seductive. Narayan’s most memorable characters are his great comic eccentrics like Sampath, Raju, Margayya and Jagan. They are ordinary men caught in a web of illusions—money, success, love and happiness. His characters are fatalists and they resign to the will of God. Fatalism is a major aspect of the Hindu ethos.
Humour and irony co-exist in most of his novels. Narayan’s humour is the direct outcome of his intellectual analysis of the contradictions in human experience. The incongruous mixture of tragedy and irony creates bitter humour in his novels. Tears and laughter go together on many occasions. His novels are indeed pensive comedies. Although concerned about the place of man in this universe and his predicament, Narayan is a comic writer. He is a comedian of the sublime and the ridiculous. Narayan uses not only ironies of character, situation and fate but also a total ironic view of life. The whole existence from birth to death, according to him, is a ridiculous phenomenon.

After the impact of imperialism a new kind of subjectivity and society emerged in India. Indian modernity was not just a copy of western modernity. The components of Indian modernity included enlightenment, rationality, science and western knowledge. Narayan’s novels help define what is especially different about Indian modernity. His books not only reflect the course of India’s recent social and cultural evolution, but actively articulate and arbitrate its various attitudes and stances. Narayan gives us the feel of life itself which is neither all white nor all black but the grey, twilight world of contemporary life quivering hesitatingly between tradition and modernity, East and West, inextricably mixed up in the minds of individuals. Narayan seems to ridicule the exclusive orthodoxy of Indian conservatism and is clearly sympathetic towards modernity. His ironical attitude itself is largely western; it has few parallels in Pre-modern Indian authors. The instances of the conflict between tradition and modernity found in these novels in particular, as well as those in other novels are delineated in this chapter.
As part of the East-West conflict one can find conflict between religion and rationality in several novels of R. K. Narayan. Though the characters of his novels are all Indians, some show influences of the modern education and of the West and they are rational in their thoughts, while others continue to be preys of superstitions and practices wrongly attributed to the orthodox Hindu religion. Narayan exposes this conflict between the people of India 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.

Conflict between spirituality and materialism is another aspect of East-West conflict and one can notice it in all the novels of R. K. Narayan. Due to the colonial rule and western education, modern materialism got into Indian minds. Spirituality, the hallmark of the Indians, started to ebb from people’s way of life. Thus there appeared open conflict between the elder, uneducated Indians and the younger, educated ones. Conflict is also visible within the minds of the younger generations—between their inherited spiritual self and the acquired material self. The characters in Narayan’s novels can be divided into two categories: spiritualists and materialists. Raju and Marco of The Guide, Mali and Grace of The Vendor of Sweets, Raman of The Painter of Signs and Sriram of Waiting for the Mahatama are materialists by disposition. Rosie, Raju’s mother, Velan—leading characters of The Guide, Jagan, hero of The Vendor of Sweets, Daisy, heroine of The Painter of Signs, and Mahatma, Bharati and Granny of Waiting for the Mahatma are spiritualists.
Though in a less degree, the conflict between despotism and democracy is found in some of Narayan’s novels. The despotic nature of some characters is confronted with democratic values in other characters. One of the greatest contributions of the West to the world is democracy. The highest human values of equality, fraternity and liberty were introduced to nations and thereby to the people by the French Revolution. Tyranny that existed in the countries, societies and families gradually gave way to democratic ideas. Still, different forms of tyranny are found in different degrees in all societies including families, religious and political communities and nations. Sexism, racism, casteism, communalism, fundamentalism, regionalism etc. are all offshoots of tyranny. R. K. Narayan, through his novels fights against these tyrannies of his country men.