Conclusion
CONCLUSION

In the 1940s, when R.K. Narayan undertook the editorship of the quarterly journal *Indian Thought*, he had the following literary ambition as he reminisces in his autobiography *My Days*: "I packed into the manifesto all my ambition: to phrase our culture properly; to utilize the English language as a medium for presenting our cultural heritage – Indian classics and philosophy from Sanskrit and a score of other regional languages [...] and to encourage original English writing of the highest quality" (153).

It is significant that protagonists in Narayan's fiction also, in an overt or oblique way, feel an urge -- to 'phrase' their 'culture' properly, and this seems to be compatible with their creator's editorial ambition. Incidentally, Narayan's novels turn out to be distinctive culture-texts where the search for identity in the principal characters shows a journey through certain modes of experiences characterised by a tension between the stronghold of tradition and the impacts of modernity. The critical focus of this dissertation is specifically on four major novels of Narayan where the search for identity in the characters emerges to be the most prominent and decisive one in their cultural re-making of the 'self'.

The present dissertation has sought to contextualise the central problematic of roots and identity in relation to Narayan's presentation of characters. In R.K. Narayan's novels, Malgudi and *men* offer a fictional universe where individuals are seen to negotiate a co-existence of native and Western cultural principles and attitudes. The protagonists' search for identity through native cultural roots reflects a problematisation of space as well as an alterity in subject-position that responds much to the postcolonial search for self-definition or a discourse of a search for identity. In this way, the major characters in Narayan's fiction face not always a binary, but a complementary interaction of two sets of reality – the influence of tradition on the one hand and the modernist affinity on the other; it is this sense of coalescing that finally
shapes their social identity. Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* (1935), Krishnan in *The English Teacher* (1945), Raju in *The Guide* (1958) and Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) – all are seen engaged in diagnosing the depth of their existence in native roots before they attain their distinctive social identity and they are found to be substantiating an authenticity of selfhood in Malgudi, another problematising space in Narayan's fiction which responds in spirit both to tradition and modernity. Thus a constant tension between commitment to tradition on the one hand, and a Westernised craze for individuality on the other, marks the construction of identity in every major character of Narayan.

In this way, a basic East-West binary more or less characterises the journey of the protagonists in Narayan's novels; but the range of their experiences admits a negotiation between two different spaces of culture – the Indian and the Western. An ingrained influence of the indigenous tradition on individuals and the cultural hybridity of their actually lived existence, project Narayan's Malgudi characters as the denizens of an interactive space between tradition and modernity.

The present dissertation is practically a humble effort to retrieve R.K. Narayan's fictional art from the dominant tendencies of traditional criticism which in a majority of cases, seems to be content in valorising R.K. Narayan's art of creating Malgudi as a space of an unproblematised stasis that can at best, be the quality of a naïve writer. It is true that a majority of critics has traced in Narayan an unequivocal bias for an unproblematised, nativist celebration of indigenous tradition in the search for self-definition in his characters.

In Chapter One, it was my effort to touch the dominant trends of the existent *gharanas* of criticism applied to the novels of Narayan with a consequent assertion that his novels have often been unduly criticised as merely entertaining stuff, since Narayan's novels are not altogether devoid of problems and interests that are seen to engage many present-day literary critics and scholars.
The study of four individual works of Narayan in the four succeeding chapters of the thesis, has been directed to trace the pattern of search in the typical Narayan characters who re-invent the surviving aspects of tradition - not by a schizophrenic or recessive rejection of modernity or change envisaged by the Western culture, but by a deliberate attempt at appropriating it and then coming to a position where they finally find the ideal meaning of their existence. All of Narayan's characters in his major novels, particularly in those produced in the colonial epoch, start as 'alienated' beings seeking anchorage primarily to some viable social entity endorsed by their native cultural roots.

Chandran's travails in *The Bachelor of Arts* in Chapter Two, can be problematised in the context of an adolescent's quest for identity in the world of mature adults. His sudden renunciation, an off-shoot of his craze for an individual self-hood in protest against the tyranny of the adult world (symbolised by his parents for not allowing him to marry a girl of his own choice), is but an act of aberration from the existing norms of behaviour which assures return of an erring personality to the familial/societal folds, sooner or later. Only after he has recognised the value and significance of family and the re-location of 'self' in society, that he can aspire for a life of freedom 'from distracting illusions and hysterics' and proceed towards his goal by adjusting himself to a life that combines familial sensibility as well as social affiliations.

In *The English Teacher* in Chapter Three, Krishnan's frustration issues from the academic celebration of the West in the colonial system of education. His self-pity ('I was doing the wrong work') leads him to a search for an independent identity (an essentially Western phenomenon) and he finally finds his moorings through a peculiar change in circumstances (involving the death of his wife, his psychic communication with her in telepathic messages under the auspices of a spirit-medium and his revelation of the ideal system of education envisioned by the eccentric and visionary headmaster of his daughter's school) that reshapes his identity leading him to recognise the surviving aspects of
his own tradition and culture that can resist the cultural invasion of the West. Krishnan's resignation from his college and his decision to teach in an indigenous school indicate that, it is as it were, through a cultural odyssey that Krishnan is finally able to re-locate himself in terms of the indigenous culture and principles of education that help him to discover the abiding 'Law of life'.

But in the process of a quest for self-definition, Narayan's protagonists in his novels written in the postcolonial period in particular, specially those who show the mettle of actively articulating a distinctive space for their 'being', often re-discover a space which conforms to a system of values that looks forward to a different plane of reality, a possibility of transcendence from an existence strictly confined to the community-life in society. In fact, such a space objectifies a different mode of realism – the experienced 'realism' of myth, which forms a part of Indian history and culture, its philosophy and celebrated spiritual tradition. The search for identity as in the cases of Raju and Jagan, no matter whether Raju's end bears ambiguity or Jagan's retirement to a life of seclusion with his pass-book subverts the ideal of 'ashramadharma', thematically projects Narayan's treatment of a teleologic prospect of India's tradition and culture. The predicaments of Raju and Jagan ideologically present an initiative on the part of characters to authenticate a space for belonging, the 'truth' in one's identity in 'one's own setting', through the roots of India's spiritual tradition and culture. Such an identity testifies to the 'inner strength' of Indian life, as Narayan has explained in his essay "India and America": 'It is through subtle, inexplicable influences, through religion, family ties and human relationships in general let us call them – psychological "inputs", to use a modern term – which cumulatively sustain and lend variety and richness to existence' (239).

Chapter Four deals with The Guide in which, Raju's guiding skill, his adoption of the role of an impressario with 'a water-diviner's instinct', his progress towards a position of a con-man in the postcolonial Indian society, is a typical
phenomenon of the West that in his case, leads to self-deception in so far as Raju consciously dissociates himself from his native cultural roots in his penchant for appearance rather than reality. But in the last part of the novel, there is a teleological progression in the character of Raju in terms of the values of his spiritual tradition. Raju's end unmistakably substantiates a denial of self ('for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested') with an urge to merge with an ultimate spiritual reality. In Raju's end, we find a new beginning, the emergence of a transcendent reality characteristic of Indian culture where the illusion merges with reality, the vesture becomes the essence, thereby justifying the Indian spiritual goal of nonduality in existence.

In *The Vendor of Sweets* in Chapter Five, Jagan's experiences show an arduous progress of realisation through the mazes of cultural conflict between tradition and modernity. Jagan's Gandhism serves to posit his character within the stronghold of tradition/ideology whereas Mali, his son, is an instance of extreme individualism which is a pronounced Western trait. Mali's ways of life have only a shattering effect on Jagan who, notwithstanding his lack of critical and intellectual awareness of self and the Gandhian ideology, has lived so long with an unswerving commitment to tradition. The Mali-Grace episode with their practice of living-together, seems to be a sacrilegious intrusion into Jagan's household (that entails a 'sanctity of usage' over generations) and his personal life that has been a happy continuity with the past. Jagan's retirement to Nallappa's grove, which Afzal Khan thinks to be symbolic of India's 'mythical and mystical retreat', parallels India's tradition of the 'Vanaprastha' stage of *Ashramadharma* that recommends withdrawal from worldly/familial obligations as preparatory to *Sannyas* at an advanced stage of life. The quest for 'truth' that has so long remained unrealised to a superficial Gandhian like Jagan, now seems to appear in its real form to the awakened soul, the rejuvenated *sattva* of Jagan who has now found out an ideal space to authenticate his existence.
The same problematic of roots and identity also characterises Narayan's technique as an Indian English writer. True to his tradition and culture, Narayan prefers 'religion' and 'family' as automatic sources of authentic identity for an Indian writer and this points to his conscious effort at indigenising the English novel which is a distinctively Western form of literary art.

This dissertation containing an evaluation of Narayan's protagonists, seeks to trace in the fiction of R.K.Narayan, a deliberate craftsmanship in the writer's treatment of characters. This study finds it essential to recognise an element of resilience in Narayan's major characters (who remain grafted to their indigenous tradition with its social as well as philosophical dimensions) in relation to a cultural frame of reference that admits an equal share to the Indian as well as the Western parameters of analysis. The present analysis seeks to question the mode of conventional criticism of Narayan's fiction that prefers a sort of 'critical pigeon-holding' in the assessment of Narayan's Malgudi as the miracle of a naïve genius, an enriched chronicler of [South] Indian life and culture, a timeless space that is impervious to change and complexities of the modern world. The characters of Malgudi also are accordingly cast into a sort of predictable typology that reflects an over-simplification of problems, a homogenisation of interests as one finds in S.R.Ramteke's analysis: "Whether it is Raju of The Guide, Swami of Swami and Friends, Nataraj of Man-eater of Malgudi or Savitri of The Dark Room, all of them share the same qualities, have the same approach to life"(16).

The present study seeks to disprove such analyses that fail to note the central problematic of roots and identity characterising the sense of search in the protagonists of Narayan. It is true that Narayan's characters finally define their identity, in an overt or oblique way, within the matrix of their own tradition, but they re-discover tradition only after a fair measure of cultural appropriation
of the West; and their predicaments always testify to a constant negotiation between two different patterns of cultural reality. Again, one may not find in Narayan's fiction the urgent socio-political concern of Mulk Raj Anand, the poetic treatment and imaginative depth of Raja Rao's philosophical vision, or the elaborate treatment of love and sex in an age where, as M.K.Naik observes, "the 'thigh' is not 'the limit'." But it must be admitted that each writer has the right to choose a specific agenda of his or her own to address the world of readers. Narayan's Malgudi remains a credible, literary world with people who, with a distinctive semblance to their real-life counterparts, engage in the business of living as a sacrosanct onus, a dharma, with the courage to negotiate changes in the world around them.

The span of time from 1906 to 2001 proves a fairly long career of a writer by any standard. Even though Indian English Writing as a genre has flourished far beyond its humble colonial genesis with a steady flow of new writers and newer experimentations and ideas, R.K.Narayan's works stand as a Titanic presence in this literary world speaking for a writer who, as one of the veritable pantheons, contributed substantially to the global popularity of Indian English Fiction. Narayan's Malgudi lives on with her unique men and milieu that have prototypes in every form of human society cutting across the barriers of time and topography.

This dissertation attempts to be a humble contribution to the new world of Narayan criticism that, emerging in the wake of the birth centenary of R.K.Narayan, seeks to revisit his Malgudi with a new look and re-situate his fictional world into perspectives yet unexplored.
NOTES

1. See, M.K.Naik, *The Ironic Vision*, p.148. Narayan writes in the essay "Love and Lovers" on his attitude to the treatment of love and sex in his novel. In response to a certain professor's query- "Aren't you prudish when it comes to sex?", Narayan replies,"Not exactly prudish, only I take the hint. When a couple, even if they happen to be characters in my own novel, want privacy, I leave the room; surely you would not expect one, at such moments, to sit on the edge of their bed and take notes?"(175). About an elaborate treatment of love/sex, the writer says: "Is there any need for elaboration? [...]. I am confident that at a certain point I can safely leave it to the reader's imagination without fettering it with wordy descriptions. Particulrly after D.H.Lawrence, no writer can have anything original or fresh to say about lovers"(175-76). In fact Narayan's original and [un]conventional treatment of the theme testifies to a postcolonial resistance to the open treatment of sex in Twentieth Century European literature as he writes on his priorities as a writer in his autobiography *My Days*: "I wished to attack the tyranny of Love and see if Life could offer other values than the inevitable Man-Woman relationship to a writer"(95).

2. Narayan's observation of his own characters jestures at the rooted identity of his characters that is capable to negotiate change. Krishna Sen Writes: "... Narayan says of his own creations - 'My characters were simple enough ...they had definite outlines – not blurred by urban speed, size and tempo' "(148).
WORKS CITED


