Introduction
INTRODUCTION

Over the years, R.K.Narayan has been regarded as a significant story-teller who, gifted with a genial comic sense, presents a calm and quiet picture of Indian life in his fictional locale ‘Malgudi’, and the quality of Malgudi life allegedly seems to be resistant to contemporary change and complexities of present-day life. Interestingly, recent literary and cultural studies have offered some complex theories and insights that help to locate certain elements of deliberate craftsmanship in Narayan’s novels. The increasing awareness of the complexities of Narayan’s fictional art is suggested by P.S. Sundaram who affirms that a novel by Narayan is ‘not done when it is done’ and that ‘the feeling (after reading a novel by Narayan) is nearly always of a puzzle that seems to admit more than one solution.’ The present work proposes to trace one of the most complex patterns of Narayan’s art of fiction: a search for roots and identity in Narayan’s presentation of most of his major characters. In fact, the treatment of an individual character, in the context of his/her development, forms the core of Narayan’s ‘writerly’ attention as he once confessed to William Walsh in a B.B.C interview in 1968:

"My main concern is with human character - a central human character from whose point of view the world is seen, and who tries to get over a difficult situation or succumbs to it or fights it in his own setting."

It is obvious that the expression ‘own setting’ refers to a specific Indian context, a cultural space symbolised by Malgudi, which not only reflects the vast, timeless continuum of Indian life, but also reserves, the potential for renewal and change. The idea of ‘roots’ or the question of a rooted identity in the sphere of Narayan’s characterisation is in turn embedded in Narayan’s world-view and this has been explained by N. Ram in “Malgudi’s Creator”:

""
The idea of being rooted in a society and civilization – in one’s own culture, traditions, values, changing local milieu, modernity and family - is important to Narayan’s development as a writer and also to his assessment of other writers.(5)

R.K.Narayan’s men and women who populate Malgudi represent the indigenous and appropriated cultures in India. Almost every major character is seen to be engaged in a quest for indigenous roots and identity and in this way, he/she discovers a distinctive space in the social milieu of Malgudi which reminds us of the Bakhtinian ‘chronotope’ with a ‘spatial and temporal connectedness’. In his “Author’s Introduction” (Sept.1981) to the splendid collection of short stories *Malgudi Days* (1982), Narayan has written about ‘inherited culture’; the richness and diversity of the multi-faceted Indian tradition that acts as an automatic matrix for a writer like him:

Within a broad climate of inherited culture there are endless variations. Every individual differs from every other individual not only economically, but in outlook, habits, and day-to-day philosophy. It is stimulating to live in a society that is not standardized or mechanized, and is free from monotony. Under such conditions the writer has only to look out of the window to pick up a character (and thereby a story).(vii-viii)

In another context, Narayan said to Ved Mehta: “Novels may bore me, but never people. All individuals are like characters in my own stories”. What I propose to establish in this dissertation is that, almost every major character in Narayan’s fiction is pre-occupied (like his or her creator) with serious thoughts of culture and identity in the colonial as well as the postcolonial era. Though ‘identity’ like an umbrella term has many connotations in postcolonial literary criticism, in R.K.Narayan’s fiction, it specifically justices to an authentic space
of a cultural re-location of the ‘self’ through one’s indigenous roots of native
culture. Almost every protagonist in Narayan’s novels seeks to re-position
himself and tries to negotiate the problematic of roots and identity in terms of
his own subject position. It therefore involves a process of critical choice
leading to an ideological progression and development.

This ideological search in his characters is necessitated by a sense of alienation,
of being uprooted from one’s own native culture which is studied against the
background of a historical reality of experiencing colonisation and
‘marginalisation’. It is a kind of disruption that results from an attempt at
appropriating the mainstream colonial culture. A sort of cultural mediation,
between native roots and foreign foliage, between tradition and modernity,
permeates the journey of the major characters in R.K.Narayan’s fiction. Most
of the prominent characters in Narayan’s fiction are seen engaged in, to borrow
a term from Elleke Boehmer, a ‘meaning-making’ venture out of the business
of living in a space where an overall bicultural hybridity prevails.

In fact, the search for ‘roots’ and ‘identity’ in the characters and its consequent
articulation in the context of the Indian social reality are evident in Narayan’s
views on English novel in his A Story-Teller’s World:

The English Language brought with it [...] a new type of
literature[...]. New forms such as the novel and short story came
to be noticed revealing not only new artistic possibilities for a
writer but also stimulating a new social awareness[...] the evils
of certain social customs such as early marriage, the dowry
system, Suttee and caste prejudices. Many of the realistic novels
of this period are in effect attacks on the orthodoxies of the
day.(14-15)
An urge for social re-orientation, an indegenisation of the form and content of
the English novel become apparent in another oft-quoted observation made by
R. K. Narayan in the essay, "English in India: A process of Transmutation":

In an English novel, for instance, the theme of romance is based
on a totally different conception of man-woman relationship from ours.
We believe the fitness of a match not to be gauged by letting them to go through a period of courtship but by a study
of their horoscopes; boy and girl meet and love rather than before. The eternal triangle, such a stand-by for a
western writer, is worthless as a theme for an Indian, our social
circumstances not providing adequate facilities for the eternal
triangle. We, however, seek excitement in our system of living
known as the "Joint family". The strains and stresses of this kind
of living on the individual, the general structure of a society
emerging from it, and the complexities of the Caste system, are
inexhaustible subjects for us.(21-22)

These two excerpts, taken together, focus on a specific critical approach of an
Indian English writer who recognises his 'roots', the self-sufficient material
(Indian life and sensibility) and also its ability to negotiate the colonial
presence with a specific measure of appropriation involving a process of a
distinctive identity-formation. As he refers to the 'Joint family', the structural
formation that it entails, the dowry system or the caste system, he seems to
affirm the Indian writer's engagement with the task of reifying the problems of
roots and identity. He therefore stands firmly against the English novelist's
agenda of presenting man-woman relationships. In other words, he tries to
contest the Western models of fictional art. His essential thesis is grounded in
the idea that social realities existing in India and those perceived in the West,
are significantly different. He suggests that an Indian writer's thematic choice
for a novel remains firmly embedded in a perception of indigenous social
realities. The task of an Indian writer is therefore, to go far deep into the roots of the complexities of Indian social existence and thereby discover the surviving aspects of tradition/indegenous culture in the modern world. This trait becomes specifically prominent in the protagonists’ search for identity in Narayan’s major pre-Independence novels. Chandran in The Bachelor of Arts (1937), an adolescent turned adult, renounces the world in protest against the institution of traditionally arranged marriage. But he is found to authenticate his identity only after he returns to his familiar world of Malgudi, marries a girl according to the choice of his parents and lives in perfect harmony with his family and community. The English Teacher (1945), another major pre-Independence novel of Narayan, projects how Krishnan, an English teacher of Albert Mission College, gets bored with the cultural snobbery induced by the colonial system of education and finally finds his cultural roots in his decision to join a nursery based on the purely indigenous model of education.

But when the entire fictional ouvre of Narayan is taken into account, we notice that the sense of search in the characters is not merely referrable to a strictly social concept of roots and identity. On the basis of recent literary studies of Narayan that locate certain disturbing spaces of socio-familial problematisation in some of Narayan’s post-independence novels, it is noticeable that the search in the character[s] here offers a sub-text for a parallel quest for transcendence and truth. This transformative twist in the search probably involves a prominent postcolonial strategy to evolve a flexible identity-formation or to subvert, what Homi Bhabha terms, in course of his critiquing on Franz Fanon’s ideology on nationalism, the process of ‘calcification’, ‘fixity and fetishism’ (9) in relation to the retrieval of roots and repressed histories. The sense of search in the principal characters of Narayan’s two post-Independence novels, The Guide (1958) and The Vendor of Sweets (1967), culminates in a different sphere of reality, a space which conforms neither to an unqualified form of tradition nor to the codes of a mechanised society, but to a process of an evolving possibility, a plane of transcendence from the designated subject-position. This
transcendence finally provides an authentic realisation of the truth of existence that is exclusively Indian. In *The Guide*, protagonist Raju's career shows an urge for cultural appropriation followed by an ultimate transcendence of the 'self'. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, the story of Jagan, a veteran Gandhian, also focalises a problematic of identity. For a Gandhian idealist like Jagan, allegiance to idealism, even after a certain amount of appropriation, fails to encounter the contentious ways of the forces of modernity. Jagan's renunciation, an accepted practice in Indian spiritual life, thematically reveals a quest for 'truth', an authenticity of experience. Narayan's concern about the search of a character or an individual is evident in the following statement recorded in his autobiography *My Days*: “A sixteenth century Tamil mystic has sung, ‘one may learn to walk on water, mesmerize a mad elephant, muzzle a tiger or a lion, walk on fire, and perform other feats, but yet the real feat would be to still the restless mind and understand one’s real self’” (149). In fact, the celebration of this 'transcendence' and 'self discovery' in the presentation of Narayan's characters has been analysed by many critics from many different critical standpoints that tend to valorise the indigenous tradition and culture. But in the context of the historical reality of colonisation and the hybridised cultural formation of Indian English fiction, the celebration of the themes of self-realisation along with those of 'retrieval', 'return', 'renewal' and idyllic childhood is, far from being an autistic exercise of nativism, a part of the postcolonial reverse-narrative which is characterised by appropriation and 'subversion by imitation' (Boehmer 175).

It can therefore be suggested that in Narayan's characters, the transcendence of the 'self' and the search for 'truth' testify to another reverse-narrative which tries to reveal, even from within the randomness of colonial presence, India's "... comprehensibility or if not that, its capacity for survival despite interference from outside[...]" (Boehmer 177). Judged from this perspective, the treatment of the themes of transcendence, truth, renunciation etc, notwithstanding their origin in the spiritual tradition of mythic Hinduism,
betrays from the narrative point of view, an assimilation of the Westernised ideals of subjectivity and its rhetoric of inheritance. In the final reckoning, the sense of search in the major Narayanesque characters, proceeds through an avenue of trial and error towards the construction of a social identity through indigenous roots, but ultimately redirects itself towards transcendence and truth.

The present study includes four prominent novels of R.K.Narayan, two each from the colonial and the postcolonial period of Narayan’s writing career, where the principal characters are seen to be actively engaged in exploring distinctive modes of survival, a space for belonging, a set of values that they can rely on. They find a space for identity only through an odyssey through their indigenous cultural variations -- history, religion, social heritage, tradition, family distribution sanctioned by myth, rituals (both rural and folkloric), spiritualism, and in a word philosophy -- all in turn affirming an intricate social awareness in the context of an Indian sensibility.

Even though a search for roots and identity conspicuously emerges in Narayan’s presentation of characters in a generalised form particularly in his major novels, the sense of search in the central characters of *The Bachelor of Arts, The English Teacher, The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets*, seems to represent convincingly, the complex nature of the quest for identity and roots. In these four prominent novels of Narayan, the search in the protagonists stems from an active urge for a true, substantial meaning of their authentic existence. The other pre- 47 novels of Narayan, *Swami and Friends* (1935) and *The Dark Room* (1938) are not included in this dissertation for the simple reason that they show a different focus of interest. Though Swami, the school boy, has his sense of identity in his own world with the friends, and also in the colonial world where teachers like Ebenezar in the Missionary schools abuse the Hindu gods as a prelude to the glorification of christianity, in the final analysis, the novel is a fictional autobiography of R.K.Narayan, a recreation of childhood
extravaganza, an exquisite blend of lively material and experiences that conjure a world to be visualised through the eyes of a four foot minor of ten. In *The Dark Room* (1938), Narayan makes a conscious fictional attempt to explore the inexorable plight of Hindu women (specially the married ones) in the traditional, patriarchal structure of Indian society. Narayan writes in *My Days* about the subject of the novel:

> I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the “Women’s Lib” movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. My novel dealt with her, with this Philosophy broadly in the background. (119)

Savitri leaves her household in protest against her promiscuous, bullying husband who, a perfect patriarch, jealously guards the children as his ‘property’. But she soon realises that for a traditional Hindu wife like her, it is impossible to live without either the company of children or the familiar household, which implying an inferiorisation of her status though, provides a modicum of security. Savitri’s ignoble return to her family underscores a tame compromise with system and the writer also does not offer any viable alternative here. Inspite of making a spirited start, Savitri’s search for identity is, therefore, seen to be aborted *in medias res*.

social identity as the editor of a proposed newspaper (The Banner), is paradoxically a fault with a major lapse of social duty in so far as, he neglects his familial responsibility. The launching of his dream-project seems feasible as he comes in contact with Sampath, a printer, who is practically a cunning fellow possessed with an ambition of achieving something great and unusual in life in stead of an engagement with a trivial set of activities. Srinivas finds the key to a ‘harmonious existence’ which combines both familial duty and social responsibility. But this maturity in Srinivas comes not so much by initiatives on his own part, as by a peculiar turn of events, some changes in others’ lives; whether it is an actor’s fit of insanity or the trajectile fall of Sampath. Margaya’s search for identity in The Financial Expert is characterised by the intervention of both myth and reality, a ‘mythic realism’, as pointed out by Afzal Khan Fawzia. Margaya’s pursuit of wealth (even at the possibility of forfeiting enlightenment) subscribes to the traditional motto of ‘Dhanarjanam’ (which says ‘Earn money’), as well as the present-day trend of consumerism which involves, willy nilly, a question of value-judgement, a problematic of the question of morality. Margaya’s ritualistic observance of Laxmi-worship (the worship of Goddess Laxmi, the deity of wealth) and a consequent publication of a sex-manual composed by Dr. Pal, a self-named sociologist, provides an interesting binary at hand. Margaya’s rise to fortune (initiated by the publication), his expansion of financial wizardry in money-lending and amassment of money through the machinery of ‘distraint’, face a peripety in terms of his clash with Dr. Pal who notwithstanding his active cooperation in Margaya’s fantastical rise, now as if reverts his role in leading Balu, Margaya’s only son, astray. Margaya’s meteoric rise through an indiscriminate choice of means, his abrupt fall, the inexplicable role of Dr. Pal as destiny in Margaya’s career – all these seem to render an aura of a fabular intelligence/message to the narrative of The Financial Expert in which Margaya, a petty money-lender, ends as part of the deus-ex-machina in a fable on the rampant consumerism in the present-day world. Judged from this perspective, Margaya’s character and his search for identity form a focus
different from that of Raju and Jagan. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the character of Sriram also lacks the intellectual and spiritual (not in the religious sense) strength of Raju and Jagan to re-locate the self finally in an authentic space for belonging. An ordinary individual living with his grandmother, Sriram comes in contact with the Mahatma on a purely personal motive – to be near Bharati, a devoted Gandhian disciple with whom he has fallen in love. That Sriram’s perception of Gandhism remains superficial, becomes apparent when Sriram, out of frustration, is seen to resort to the path of armed-revolution during his separation from Bharati at the time of her imprisonment. Sriram’s return to the mainstream of the freedom movement along the Gandhian line (that too, at the behest of Bharati), his success in getting the Mahatma’s approval of their marriage, only underscore the fact that even in the epi-centre of changes in national life, his search for identity operates merely at the level of individualistic emotions, and not at the level of intellectual perception.

Similarly, self-awareness leading to a quest for identity comes indirectly in the lives of the protagonists in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and *The Painter of Signs* who like Srinivas, lack the conviction or resolution of Raju or Jagan to authenticate a distinctive cultural space for existence. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Nataraj’s harmonious existence with his family, press and friends in Malgudi receives a jolt only after the arrival of Vasu, the taxidermist-hunter who represents the principle of ‘anti-life’ with his aggressiveness and nihilistic air. Nataraj’s self-awareness faces an inherent binary between his faith and convictions that are rooted in tradition as well as myth, and the actual disquieting experiences of Vasu’s activities that are posing a veritable menace to life in general in Malgudi. Nataraj’s piteous invocation of Lord Vishnu to spare the temple elephant which Vasu has been aiming to shoot from Nataraj’s attic, as if gets retrospectively answered. In a frantic bid of driving mosquitoes, Vasu kills himself with a mighty fist on his skull thus sparing Malgudi of its man-eater. M.K.Naik in his book *The Ironic Vision*, has quoted from one of Narayan’s interviews in order to show that the novel has a sustained mythical
structure: “Narayan’s use of the Bhashmasura myth in the novel was a piece of conscious literary strategy. As he told an audience at Columbia University in 1972, ‘...some years ago I suddenly came across a theme which struck me as an excellent piece of mythology in modern dress. It was published under the title, The Man-Eater of Malgudi [...]. I based this story on a well-known mythological episode, the story of Mohini and Bhashmasura’ ”(66).

Keeping in view Narayan’s conscious use of a literary strategy and his presentation of basically innocent and sensitive type of personality of the protagonist that shows neither the resolution of Raju nor the dynamism of Jagan (at his later stage), the novel has been left out of the present study. Narayan’s The Painter of Signs traces the growth in Raman, the sign painter, a professed rationalist whose search for identity faces two contrary states of reality -- on the one hand, an unconditioned allegiance to myth and tradition that is symbolised by his aunt and an extremity of individualism symbolised by Daisy, a liberated woman and a fanatical exponent of the birth-control scheme of the Government on the other. Raman’s rationalism bears an inherent lack of conviction which comes to be apparent when he spells his impression of Daisy: ‘I feel as if we have known each other several janmas’ (91). Raman’s affair with Daisy, that leads to his rupture with his aunt does not mature into marriage either, owing to Daisy’s last minute announcement: “…married life is not for me. I have thought it over” (178-79). Raman fails to rationalise his predicament as matured individuals like Raju and Jagan and one finds in his consolatory philosophy, the defeat of a self-claimed rationalist who has not been able either to delink his cultural roots in tradition, or to grasp the true import of rationalism: ‘May be we will live together in our next janma’(183). The novel is also significant in the presentation of Daisy whom Laxmi Holmstorm views as a ‘marker of social change’, like Savitri in The Dark Room and Rosie in The Guide. But apart from Savitri, none of the characters, Daisy or Rosie is treated in the stature of the protagonist. As for Rosie, Narayan clarifies his authorial stance in an interview with Cynthia Van Driesen: “My main focus was on
Raju. I simply fitted Rosie into the pattern around Raju.” In reply to Driesen’s query as to whether Narayan has shown his disapproval of the ‘liberated woman’ through the presentation of Daisy, Narayan says: “No, not really, I see her as a comic figure. Comic, because she is fanatical. Anyone who acts fanatically becomes laughable.” Talkative Man (1983), A Tiger for Malgudi (1986), The World of Nagaraj (1990) and The Grandmother’s Tale (1992) are the other works (the last one being actually a novella) of this grand old man of Malgudi for reference.

So far it has been my effort to establish that an emancipatory urge for a true identity, a desire for transcendence from the ordeals raised by circumstances, have been experienced, more or less, by all the major characters in the post-47 novels of Narayan but in Raju and Jagan, the trait is comparatively more prominent than in their counterparts in the other novels of the period. The criterion chosen for the selection of novels - an active urge in the protagonist for a true, substantial meaning of an authentic existence, has a semblance to the analysis made by Tabish Khair who considers that in some novels, such as Swami and Friends, The Dark Room and The Painter of Signs, there is a ‘slow’ and ‘nearly negligible’ revelation of this search for self-awareness in the major characters. This observation is apparent when the central characters of these novels are compared with the protagonists like, Chandran, Krishnan, Raju and Jagan in the novels analysed in this dissertation. Again, novels like Mr. Sampath, Waiting for the Mahatma and The Man-Eater of Malgudi are also kept out of the present study, because in these novels, the search for identity in the protagonists like Srinivas, Sriram and Nataraj begins as an effect of what Prof. Khair rightly suggests, the presence of some more powerful and assertive characters like Sampath (in Mr. Sampath), Vasu (in The Man-Eater of Malgudi) and even the Mahatma himself (in Waiting for the Mahatma) respectively. The present work chiefly endeavours to focus only on those characters in Narayan’s fiction who actively display a capacity for a cultural relocation of self in terms of a distinctive identity formation. Tabish Khair has
further noted that the sense of search in most of the characters in Narayan is
directed to a kind of ‘existential’ rather than what William Walsh considers as
‘spiritual maturity.’ Locating his analysis within the framework of a
Brahminised /Babuised alienation typical of Indian middle class, Khair argues
that in the novels that show an evident growth of self-awareness in the
protagonists, one can find ‘the tendency towards the creation of ‘value’, the
acceptance of the consequence of one’s action [...] all of which point towards
existential awareness and a reduction of self-estrangement rather than a
vaguely spiritual attainment’ (235).

Khair’s findings are partly correct because almost every protagonist in
Narayan’s fiction is seen to explore his/her existential conditions so as to
discover, after a phase of acculturation, a sense of ‘belonging’, a system of
values to depend on. But what Khair has overlooked is that, in the context of
Narayan’s protagonists, the term ‘spiritual’ is not necessarily identical with any
religious/philosophical construct, but with a state of realisation, an evolution of
consciousness that helps a character to authenticate his own cultural space and
identity.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One reviews the
multiplex form of the existing body of Narayan Criticism and seeks to validate
the necessity for re-working on his novels. Four other chapters (Chapter 2, 3, 4
and 5) deal with the four selected novels of Narayan. Chapter Two analyses
how Chandran in The Bachelor of Arts gradually tries to articulate his identity
in terms of his indigenous cultural space that he had tried earlier to ignore as a
plausible threat to his adolescent individualism. Chapter Three traces the sense
of growth in Krishnan in The English teacher who gradually discovers his roots
through an experiential odyssey, both at personal and professional levels.
Chapter Four explores the case of Raju in The Guide as a problematic of
identity-formation. The two seemingly incompatible parts of the narrative (ie,
the ignoble past of Raju and his noble present with an altruistic end) have been
sought to be analysed as contributory parts of the narrator's textual strategy that presents in the person of a character, the transcendent aspect, the teleologic prospect of Indian Culture ad via opposite. In Chapter Five, the sweet-vendor Jagan's experiences in *The Vendor of Sweets* have been studied in terms of an idealist's search for the truth of his identity.

The critical focus of the dissertation has been set in the opening chapter. The next four chapters deal with four representative novels of Narayan where the protagonists display four cardinal aspects of the sense of search of a Narayan character: roots, identity, transcendence and truth.
NOTES


3. See N.Ram’s obituary in Frontline, June 8,2001,p.5

4. Krishna Sen cites Bakhtin’s definitions of ‘chronotope’ in her study of Malgudi as a chronotope on the basis of a living intersection of regional and universal/human traits: “... Malgudi is more than a physical location – it also has a mythic dimension, which enables Narayan to invest his realistic stories with moral and metaphysical significance.”(Critical Essays on R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide*, p-153).

5. Narayan’s interview with Ved Mehta in *John is Easy to Please*,p-150.

6. Elleke Boehmer writes that the ‘culturally alienated’ writers, whether they were migrants like Rhys and Christina Stead or nationalists like Narayan of India or Callaghan of Canada, were equally ‘related to the crisis of meaning-making experienced by their London- and Paris- based counterparts”.(*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*,p.129).

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