Chapter One:

R.K. Narayan and his Critics
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Rashipuram Krishnaswamy Iyer Narayan (1906-2001), popularly known as R.K.Narayan, is admittedly one of the ‘founding fathers’ of Indian English fiction to whom the genre owes much of its popularity. A writer of an outstanding fecundity that Narayan is, the fact remains that his body of writing has evoked a mixed critical response. Some critics are effusive on Narayan’s immortal creation of Malgudi as a living ambience in his novels. At the same time there is virtually no dearth of some modern literary critics and scholars who judge Narayan’s work within the prism of academic insights and disciplines, gained from recent fields of study and find in Narayan’s work a great many lacunae like narrative closure, a deterrent, cocoon-like literary quality that at best can uphold only a provincial realism and betray a lack of social involvement. Now, such criticisms may merit some measure of justification. A huge body of recent literary criticism reveals manifold perspectives on Narayan’s works. But it seems that, critics in general, have hardly ever examined a larger issue of Narayan’s art — the problematic of ‘roots and identity’ mainly in terms of Narayan’s presentation of characters in the entire corpus of Narayan’s fiction, which this present dissertation humbly offers to study. A synoptic survey of the existing body of Narayan criticism is however necessary before the objective of this present study is properly spelt out.

Prof. Iyenger, a renowned critic of Indian English fiction, eulogises Narayan as the creator of a convincing world (Malgudi) peopled by persons credibly highlighting an exquisitely Indian sensibility. Narayan’s art in Iyenger’s terms, is the art of a detached yet content observer, one of ‘resolved limitation and a conscientious exploration’ (360). He points out that Narayan’s ‘happily limiting circumstances’ do not betray the exploration of the ‘inner countries of the mind’, heart and soul, the uniqueness of the ordinary and the tragic and the
prosaic' and Narayan’s Malgudi does not acquire the depth and amplitude of Hardy’s Wessex or Faulkner’s Yoknapatwapha. Nevertheless, Iyenger praises Narayan’s excellence as an indigenous writer adroitly using the foreign medium as suited to his purpose: “...much as we used to wear dhoties manufactured in Lancashire - but the thoughts and the feelings, the stirrings of the soul, the wayward movements of the consciousness, are all of the soil of India, recognizably autochthonous”(359). In Narayan’s treatment of characters, Iyenger discovers a general pattern of ‘a flight, an uprooting, a disturbance of order - followed by a return, a renewal, a restoration of normalcy’ (385).

M.K. Naik has located in Malgudi a ‘strong sense of place’ in Narayan’s novels. Naik’s evaluation further discerns Narayan’s comic-ironic gifts for keen observation, evocative description and the writer’s artistic use of ‘irony’ as a means of moral discovery integrated to R.K. Narayan’s world view. Naik also investigates the setting of Malgudi in all its ramifications and notes a strong allegiance of the locale to traditional bourgeois values. He is also of the opinion that in Narayan’s early novels, the repeated reaction of amused observation and the sense of situation and behaviour, create a distinctive vision of life. However, in spite of his admiration for some significant perspectives in Narayan’s work, Naik does not hold back his impression of Narayan’s talent as ‘totally unsuited’ to ‘a wholly serious tale’.

C.D. Narsimhaiah, another perceptive critic, views Narayan as one of the three makers of Indian English Fiction (the other two obviously being Anand and Rao), who, for all his comic irony, has unmistakably betrayed in his writing the wonderful Indian tradition with a keen recognition of the ‘spirit of place’ (i.e., Malgudi). He observes that Narayan’s comic genius detects the oddities in men, and presents common men with a marked potential for the uncommon. Narsimhaiah’s overall observation seeks to posit the writer as a master of the comic art owing to the writer’s greater degree of detachment and the consequent absence of intensity and capacity for profound engagement. It is
this use of the comic mode that enables Narayan to present even within the narrow ambit of provincial writing, the highest kind of reality which is a mark of Narayan's strength as a writer and also of the strength of his own tradition.

In his Preface to *The Novels of R.K.Narayan*, P.K.Singh has observed that “...the essence of Narayan's fiction lies in the ironic interplay between the traditional Indian Values and transcendent reality”(iii). Singh thinks that Narayan's fiction bears a rich sociological implication under the superficial veneer of technical expertise. Mr. Singh broadly divides Narayan's fictional ouvre into three periods - early novels with a sociological study of the colonial area, the middle novels of post-'47 period dealing with over-confident and deviant characters in society as products of the modern civilisation, and finally the later novels based on the classical myth, the law of life, the Hindu concept of cyclical existence and the four stages of human life. In addition to a lively appreciation of Narayan's stylistic originality as well as his gift of satire, irony and the comic, Singh seeks to perspectivise Narayan as a writer with the zeal of a social reformist: 'His fiction in its totality is an extensive metaphor on man on the centre of society' (86).

Jayant K.Biswal finds Narayan's comic art as corroborating the ideas of Potts and Northrop Frye. In the orchestration of two levels of reality- the social and the individual, Narayan's heroes show a pattern of order-disorder-order (very much as Prof. Iyenger suggests). The illuminating aspect of Mr. Biswal's study is the detection of some contiguity between the social and the moral world in R.K.Narayan's Malgudi-Comedy. Biswal exalts Narayan's comic genius in a broad philosophical sense of Indian sensibility that precludes, in his opinion, any sense of tragedy: “...The Indian worldview holds that the world and the various human attachments are 'maya' and failure in the mundane level does not necessarily bring any awful sense of tragedy [...] man is finally not alienated from but united with the universe [...] with the cycle of cause and
effect (‘karma’) operating from birth to rebirth...”

Paul Sharrad et al think that Jayant Biswal detects in Narayan’s fiction “the comedy of the grotesque where human struggle comes to be perceived in terms of the writer’s existential hero and the interest in the socially marginal figure does not necessarily carry approval but rather reflects the pathos of having to sacrifice individual will to civilizational order.”

Biswa’s analysis bears some affinity with K. Chellappan’s exploration of the ‘ontological’ base of Narayan’s comic-ironic perception of ‘Indianness’. This distinctive perception, according to Chellappan, reveals the quintessential Indian view of life which recognises at the core of reality an ambivalence which while enacting a problematic of values, valorises this sense of perception which renders the tragic or the comic as inconsequential. Indianness filtered through such a perception sanctions, as the critic contends, ‘no dualism’ between illusion and reality, spiritual and the physical, miraculous and the ordinary’ and hence Narayan’s artistic role within such contours of realisation, is one of ‘detached involvement or involved detachment’, so to say, a sense of ‘lila’ or ‘maya’ in the world. According to K. Chellappan, Narayan’s titles/heroes suggest: what matters in life is playing a role and growing up to fulfil another sacrosanctity, the dharma, the violation of which gives birth to the comic in Narayan’s universe. Chellappan’s study brings into focus the Hindu concept of Advaita (non-dualism) as operative in Narayan’s fictional world view.

A rhetoric of ambivalence characterises V.Y. Kantak’s analysis of Narayan’s fictional art: ‘...the naïveté of Narayan has a quality that haunts us as only art can, despite his meager means, scanty resources, thinness of tone ...’ (Mode of Perception, 21). Kantak detects in Narayan’s novels a ‘strong sense of place’ to be characterised by a peculiar ‘piety towards existence’ and it is this quality, not any ‘emotional and idealistic suggestions’ as pointed out by William Walsh, that confers permanence to physical objects in Narayan’s fiction.
Kantak further discovers in the struggle of Narayan’s heroes a ‘questing’ to connect this life with the achievement of a deeper rhythm, the ultimate goal of Indian tradition, a ‘questing’ that is embodied to perfection by great seers. However, V.Y.Kantak’s evaluation of Narayan’s language suffers from contradiction. In one article he commends its flatness, bare literary quality and thinness as somewhat symptomatic of concrete Indian reality. But at the same time, Kantak considers Narayan’s English ‘a one stringed instrument’ or ‘low-key’, at times unsuited to vent the vision of an ‘insider’, the vast psychological resources of critical moments in the lives of his heroes: “The staleness of the language, the lifeless tone, the very cliches that clutter the passage [...] announce that the challenge has not been fairly met and the opportunity is all but lost” (Language 230). Kantak’s analysis is important also in his penchant to deflate Graham Greene’s accolade to Narayan as an ‘Indian Chekov’ and to focus R.K.Narayan as great in his own right.

In a critical essay: “Narayan: Life into Art”, Meena Sodhi has elaborately explored the ‘cross-over points’ of life and art as located in the novels of R.K.Narayan. With reference to scraps of Narayan’s confessions recorded in his memoir and the semblance of predicaments and situations in the lives of some of his characters, the critic tries to establish that, Narayan “does not offer a mere transcription of life, but a selection, re-organization and transmutation of it in his fictions”(90). His writing may seem to be a matter of self-expression to the extent he channels his life into art with ‘the refashioning and shaping distance.’ Sodhi thinks that even through skimming ‘the riskiest kind of fiction writing’, Narayan applies his ‘touch-stone method’ to make Malgudi live on. To be objective, Meena Sodhi’s synthetic analysis further illumines the much discussed (and much de-valued?) autobiographical elements in the novels of R.K.Narayan.

Patrick Swinden has pointed out that some early novels of Narayan bear an obvious Western trait, while some novels of his later creative period acquire a
sort of balance between the indigenous Indian narrative tradition and the Western narrative art. Though from the first phase of his writing Narayan’s bias for the abiding concerns of Hindu mythology is apparent, this trait is relegated to the background in his early novels. The cardinal point of Patrick Swinden’s observation is that with maturity of genius, Narayan succeeds in exploring in his later novels a more effective way of bringing Hindu mythology from the background to the foreground of his novels.

G.S. Amur and Berry Margaret are, among others, two prominent positivist critics who attempt to analyse Narayan’s fictional art from the perspective of Hindu culture. Amur, for example, insists that Narayan’s novels should be approached from the Indian standpoint of culture since all his characters are controlled by values and ideals originating from his own culture. He traces in Narayan’s fiction the exposition of some core principles of Hindu shastra that are — ‘Purusharthas’ (Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha) and ‘Ashramadharma’ (Brahmacharya, Garhasthya, Banaprastha, and Sannyasa) — the concepts which according to Amur are “unique to Hindu culture and Hindu way of life” (125).

Berry Margaret perceives in Narayan’s novels an explication of the Indian philosophy of the transcendent imperative, the metaphysical conception of the world as a ‘lila’. It is obvious that Margaret’s evaluation of Narayan is, to some extent, a ‘follow-up’ on Chellappan’s identification of ‘Indianness’ in Narayan’s work. But the point of departure may be located in the contextualisation of an Indian faith in some divinely ordained scheme of existence that sanctions a sacrosanct entity for a writer: “Literature too, like life is a ‘lila’, another level on which the shadows play […] the novelist is thus certainly not a reformer. He is a story teller, a raconteur, repeating the work of the god” (3).
Uma Parameswaran uses a sort of classical paradigm to test Narayan's art of characterisation and her conclusion prefers the locale (Malgudi) to the people of Malgudi. She regards Malgudi as the only 'round character' in comparison to its human agents that are only 'flat' and one-dimensional owing to their creator's refusal for plumbing the depth of experience. Parameswaran's failure to perceive the mettle of struggle and strain in Narayan's heroes is however recompensed by her detection of 'character' in Malgudi and of a positive vision of the writer. The criticism offered by Parameswaran however touches one important vein of Prof. Iyenger's view that seeks to iconise Malgudi as the real 'hero' in R.K. Narayan's work.

With regard to Narayan's art of characterisation, Ramesh Dnyate in his Introduction to *The Novels of R.K. Narayan* observes that Narayan's characters present a peculiar case: "Having been created in a pre-ordainedly conceived world, they neither show any sign of apparent growth in their natural attitude or outlook. However, the Narayan characters, particularly the protagonists seem to be growing on a different plane of realization which, being mostly spiritual, remains imperceptible" (11). Dnyate underlines four major types of Narayan's characters - innocent, rebel, eccentric and sanyasi. What this critic tries to do, is to deflate Forster's dictum of 'flat' or 'round' in respect of Narayan's characters who according to him not only imbibe the spirit of this creator's culture, but 'are also realized through it'. Overall, Dnyate's analysis seeks to focus on three essential aspects of Narayan's art of fiction. First, Narayan's presentation of the 'epic' of the middle class Malgudi-life; second, Narayan's 'bifocal vision of comic irony' perceiving the essentially illusory nature of life and finally, Narayan's positive vision of life despite its 'pre-destinate' or *Karmaic* conception.

Rajeev Taranath locates Narayan's genius specially with regard to the treatment of characters explicit in the use of the 'creative use of ordinary'. He discovers a cyclic pattern in the journey of a protagonist in Narayan: 'from
average to extraordinary and back again to a more poignant state of average’ (309). Taranath’s emphasis on the term ‘ordinary’ corresponds much to Geoffrey Kain’s analysis of the ‘extraordinary ordinariness’ in Narayan and the tri-partite structure of development in Narayan’s heroes as discerned by Taranath, finds a faint echo in Prof. Iyenger’s perception of journey of a typical Narayan hero—‘a flight, an uprooting followed by order’.

K.V.S.Murti has discovered an element of transcendence in Narayan’s treatment of characters. He thinks that in a character of Narayan, there is an upward flight from the mediocre to the masterful, from the trivial to the ideal. In his opinion, an average protagonist in Narayan who begins as a monkeyish character after being mired by the illusory and destructive in life and beset with the heavy mechanism of incongruities and absurdities around him, finally ends up as a wiser and chastened personality and a spiritual realisation turns him a Hanuman character. This concept of transcendence is conveyed through the fabular ideology of the Hindu Myth. He contends: “Narayan’s bi-focal vision comprises the ‘ludicrous’ and the ‘ideal’ [...] while earthly monkey is ‘ludicrous’, mythical Hanuman is ‘ideal’ ” (124-125).

A.N.Kaul’s study of Narayan underscores an ‘insider’s point of view’ seeking to perspectivise Narayan’s fictional art within the contours of the specificity of the genre. In the opinion of Kaul, Narayan’s fictional ouvre projects a typical domestic comedy under the rigorous care and craft of the creator: “The centre of life as in the case of other comic writers, is of course domestic life. And how severely Narayan maintains his position [...] . Romantic or passionate love has no place in it. Any deviation from it, any impulse or act that denies its centrality is a prime aberration in Narayan” (55). A.N.Kaul’s detection of some measure of conscious craftsmanship in Narayan’s fiction may counter to some extent, a dominant bias in postcolonial academic criticism to treat R.K.Narayan as a simplistic and entertaining story-teller.
Two prominent Western critics - Graham Greene and William Walsh - have been canonical figures in the realm of Narayan criticism. It is Graham Greene’s critical appreciation that provided Narayan’s literary labour with the much needed Western boost to have a global exposure. The quintessential charm of Narayan’s art lies, in Greene’s view, in the ‘deceptively simple fiction with its distinctive voice, the fusion of the comic and sad, the lightness of touch and the undecorated style that is expressive and full of understated irony’. He pays a handsome tribute to the writer: “since the death of Evelyn Waugh, Narayan is the novelist I most admire in the English language”.

Interestingly, Narayan’s Malgudi with its beauty and plenitude offers ‘a second home’ to this literary maestro of British colonial epoch. N.Ram has pointed out in “Malgudi’s Creator”, Greene’s acknowledgement of the strong human appeal of Narayan’s fictional locale: ‘He knew that if he went out of the door into “those loved and shabby streets” of Malgudi, he could see “with excitement and certainty of pleasure” […] “a stranger who will greet […] with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open a door to yet another human experience”’.

Narayan’s gift of understatement also elicits praise from Greene: “This complete objectivity, the complete freedom from comment is the boldest gamble a novelist can take.” Narayan’s artistry in the blend of humour and seriousness urges Greene to call him an Indian Chekhov. According to Greene, the source of the peculiar Narayanesque comedy (which Greene thinks to be a rarity in the West now) lies in the simultaneous presence of involvement with and detachment from his fictional characters and the demands of their social environment.

A thorough and perceptive analysis of Narayan’s works by William Walsh has provided some abiding and path-breaking perspectives in the literary assessment of R.K.Narayan’s fiction. Narayan’s fiction, according to Walsh, is striking for its ‘coherence, its personal stamp and idiom.’ Narayan’s characters struggle towards ‘a spiritual maturity’, ‘a life freed from distracting illusions and hysterics’, true to the type of Indian tradition, and such struggle is always
operative in the system of sanctioned relationship both in the family and society. This maturity starts with a recovery from ‘age-old somnolence’ to an awakening in the consciousness that finally moves towards a life of balance. In the opinion of Walsh, Narayan’s art rests in the expression of an ‘acceptance of life’, a sense of piety (homely and human) celebrating the ‘naïveté of being human’ (Founding Fathers 78). Walsh further finds that Narayan’s comic talent (where irony is the recovery of recognition, not correction) by way of reservation of statement focuses on the nature of experience where the serious and the comic flow in and out of one another in the form of some ‘intricate alliance’. Walsh is of the opinion that there is a ‘sadness in Narayan at a human capacity for deception and victimisation but never sourness, bitterness or disgust. The sadness comes from the most intimate experience [...] namely the painful experience of dismantling the routine self (which the context, being Indian, sees less a private possession than something distilled by powerful and ancient conventions) and the reconstitution of another personality. The comedy arises from [...] sometimes absurd exploration of different experiences in the search for a new, and it may be, an exquisitely inappropriate role’ (Critical Appreciation 168). Walsh views Narayan’s ‘low toned’ and ‘limpid’ English as perfectly suited to Indian sensibility. Narayan’s Malgudi, as Walsh points out, is a hybridised entity of the pre-1914 British and the oriental. He also views the growth in Narayan’s characters as only ‘a vital part of the basic unit of Narayan’s narrative – the impression of mobility accounted for by the event happening...’. What is notable is that, Walsh views this ‘mobility’ in Narayan in the prism of a perennial and almost, a transcultural sensibility that eschews the parochial. The following excerpt will establish this point in Walsh’s estimate of Narayan: “The movement conveys that sense of flux in human life which he is so conscious of and the transparency of surface, characteristic of his writing, draws the reader’s attention down to deeper levels, a middle level of motivation and individual psychology and a more profound level of poetic myth and instinctive communal awareness. The effect of this method and the
lucidity of the medium is to render the reader sensitive to the woven, on-going unity of human action” (Narayan’s Maturity 157-158).

An eminent critic of Indian English fiction and postcolonial fiction in general, Meenakshi Mukherjee perceives in Narayan’s Malgudi, a quintessential Indian town, ordinary and uneventful where different characters engage in their habitual round of action - all in a gentle and unchanging rhythm. If complications arise, they are bound to be resolved gradually and balance is normally restored. The quality of such a life implies an ‘Indianness’ by which is meant a good humoured inertia and a casual tolerance which almost any reader in India is expected to realise. She finds in all his fictions ‘a homogenization of reality, an essentialising of India [...]’. According to her, the order-disorder-order pattern discernible in almost all the novels of Narayan gives rise to a problematic: “…whether Narayan was consciously using myth as a technique or was it an unconscious manifestation of the basic outlook which sees in the existing order of things a desired stability that should be permanent, and any external element threatening to change this order as something illusory” (144).

In this connection Meenakshi Mukherjee contends that the treatment of revolt in Narayan’s characters underscores the novelist’s belief ‘in nature’s ingrained scheme to balance the disorderly world and restore order’. According to this critic, ‘Narayan sees any sudden change not for what it produces, for what new possibilities it brings into existence [...] but much more negatively as a play of shadows, an illusion, an unreality like a bubble which will burst sooner or later, and the normal order of the cosmos will prevail again’ (145). Meenakshi Mukherjee’s critical response to Narayan’s fiction once again shows how far critical paradigms of fact vs. fiction or illusion vs. reality remain operative in the fictional world of R.K.Narayan.

But in the bulk of Narayan criticism, there is no dearth of dissenting voices. Several critics have displayed expertise to trace artistic blemishes in the fictional art of R.K.Narayan. Foremost among these critics is V.S.Naipaul who
views Narayan as an 'instinctive, unstudied writer' with a sort of naivety of art and the dominant traits of the Hindu identity turn his novels according to Naipaul, into 'religious books' (Area of Darkness 21). In fact Naipaul questions the veracity of the writer's vision of India and the principle of 'Indianness' as a mode of perception as expressed in Narayan's fiction: "The India of Narayan's novels is not the India the visitor sees. He tells the Indian truth. Too much that is overwhelming has been left out; too much has been taken for granted. There is a contradiction in Narayan's form which implies concern and the attitude which denies it" (Wounded Civilization 199). In the article "The Master of Small Things" (Time June 4, 2001 issue), Naipaul writes: "A more clear-sighted man would not have been able to filter out or make harmless the distress of India as Narayan does in Malgudi." In the same article Naipaul also dubs Narayan's mythical idea of an eternal India as 'anti-historical'. However Naipaul's downright dismissal of the element of social concern in Narayan's novels got slightly modified in his later evaluation of Narayan's art. But the tenor of diminution, though veiled under the deferential, persists even in his valedictory comment (where the title also insinuates the critic's attitude) on Narayan: "As Narayan had begun, so he continued. Fame, when it came ensured that he remained the man of Malgudi. He could not develop. He could only go for a walk and look for a new character" (29).

C.K. Karnani who holds in obeisance Narayan's gift of sincere artistry, conscientious craftsmanship, eschewal of aspiration for literary effect and value-judgment, nevertheless terms Narayan as a 'doyen without depth' owing to the writer's 'narrow range', his recurrent use of some features and devices (such as belief in Pseudo-astrology, run-away motifs, the sannyasi-cult etc.) and his conscious refusal to delve deep into reality. C.K. Karnani's evaluation concludes with the impression that Narayan's art like the 'sugary-sweetness' of De la Mare's poetry, 'shows no progression' (323). Refusal to grow out of the entertaining stuff, makes Narayan's novels according to Karnani, a 'moment's monument' yet lacking the breadth and amplitude of Forster's cultural studies,
Dostoyevsky’s portrayal of human predicament or Naipaul’s spectacular presentation of themes.

S.R. Ramteke analyses R.K. Narayan’s fiction from a different perspective which seeks to undermine the much acclaimed and self-chosen attribute of Narayan as a ‘detached observer’. Ramteke’s arguments are based on Northrop Frye’s theory as he writes: “… literature cannot be said to be detached and objective like physical science. ‘It shows a concern’ as Northrop Frye remarks, ‘over the man in society, his place in the universe and his ultimate destiny’ ” (13). According to Ramteke, Narayan’s Malgudi is a microcosm of Hindu society, a scenario in which characters and events highlight the truth enshrined in the Hindu myths and legends. He equates Narayan’s so-called ‘detached observation’ with a lack of conviction that again is actually a predicament of the Hindu identity which encourages acceptance even amidst the buffets of fate and secures an ulterior prospect of normalcy. Ramteke’s observation only highlights a mediocrity of range and a limitation in Narayan’s artistic vision in his projecting of an indigenous culture that looks insipid when compared to the force and vitality of Mulk Raj Anand’s novels. Ramteke observes that Narayan is “a novelist with full commitment to Hindu ideals in the garb of his detached and objective style of writing” (22).

A similar vein of criticism is evident in Pandurang Rao who comments: “Narayan is a writer with full commitment to certain spiritual and religious values and ideas, with which Indians are normally familiar”.

Side by side with the exuberance of Hindu ideas and ideals, some other dominant traits in Narayan’s fiction such as his overt treatment of the autobiographical and a so-called ‘lack’ of social commitment, have initiated criticism from a host of scholars.
Meena Sodhi in her "Narayan: Life into Art", mentions an article published in *Frontline* (Oct, 18, 1996), where N.Srinivas has denounced Narayan’s conspicuous treatment of the autobiographical that implicates the possibility of social commitment in his fiction. Taking his cue from Graham Greene, Srinivas says: “Such a writer, Greene pointed out, staked everything on his creativity. It is necessary to stress this now, for in the world today far more than before, the prizes go to those who champion causes considered worthy. Creativity alone is not enough” (Sodhi 100).

As far as the issue of social concern is contextualised, one may refer to T.D.Brunton who commends the unpretentious and ‘untheoritical’ character of Narayan’s works but thinks that Narayan “runs the opposite danger of having no commitment whatsoever.” Brunton underscores in his analyses the incompatibility between such themes without commitment and the avowed social character of the literary form: “This is a dangerous vacuum for a writer of such a socially involved form as the novel” (220). Even though this critic detects some sort of realism in Narayan’s fiction, such a realism is not a rich palliative for the writer’s bias for fantasy. According to Brunton, Narayan’s typical art is “an original compound of fantasy and realism. But when [...] this vein of fantasy predominates, his writing slips into escapism and triviality” (220). To be objective, such a radical assumption made by Brunton, has failed to elicit consensus from even many a severe critic of R.K.Narayan.

Balchandra Nemade, in a most controversial article, severely criticises Indian English Literature in general when he says: “The present-day blossoming of Indian writing in English is a swan-song.” His analysis of R.K.Narayan’s fiction is equally pejorative. He points out that R.K.Narayan’s novels “lack the native rhythm of Indian life.” Even in Narayan’s most outstanding creation *The Guide*, the writer “misrepresents the India we know” (35). However, Nemade’s analysis of Narayan though bearing some echoes of Naipaul’s
observation, is certainly biased and he fails to perceive the rich mechanics in Narayan's fictional art.

Harish Raizada too discerns in Narayan's fiction a conspicuous absence of social realism: "The great social, economic and political changes that have taken place in the last few decades seem to have left him untouched"(158).

The seeming constraints of Narayan's use of space also occasion the criticism made by Keith Garebian who observes in Narayan's novels "no division between his (Narayan's) geography and psychology." Malgudi's fixity of the Indian ethos and alleged insularity, so to say, in terms of India's freedom-struggle and encroaching modernity, prompt Garebian to view the locale as uncritical and simplistic: "The Malgudi life is low [...] in its training of perception upon itself"("Spirit of place" 291). In a different context the critic also detects in Narayan a sin of compromise, resulting in commission or omission when the writer uses irony and satire but chooses character rather than society as a material for inspection. Garebian is of the opinion that Narayan 'is half in love with the subjects of comedy and this limits the criticism of them'. Garebian is thus critical of Narayan's Vedantic humanism and "insiderism" which paradoxically betray a 'compromise with the norms he satirises'.

T.C.Ghai in a critical study of Narayan observes: "A careful analysis of his novels gives one the impression that Narayan never really made an all out, a thoroughly professional effort to develop his art"(34). Ghai detects in Narayan the lack of a 'central thematic' or a "bunching together of disparate scenes" that indicates a failure to integrate the human and the philosophical.

Harsharan Ahluwalia questions the credibility of social mores in Narayan's Malgudi because he finds in Narayan, a cocktail of myth and reality made palatable. This critic is of the opinion that Narayan "has got along prosperously
with one little spot called Malgudi to the almost complete exclusion of any concern with socio-political forces at work in the country”(64).

It seems that Narayan’s fiction has generated a welter of divergent views and criticism.

Ramesh Dnyate in course of his typological study of Narayan’s characters has grouped the critics of Narayan broadly into two categories – ‘Positivists’ and ‘Negativist’: “...the positivists seem to be extolling the novelist’s deceptive simplicity in terms of his language, his concern for the epic of the ordinary, his two-inch ivory tower and its miniature world miraculously acquiring representativeness, his therapeutic comedy, subtle irony and gentle satire and finally his artful treatment of the essentially ambivalent nature of life underlining the predicament of human existence. The ‘Negativists’, as the name suggests, seem to find fault with Narayan’s handling of the novel form, implying the novelist’s lack of social concern, his essentially flat characters suggestive of the novelist’s inability to delve deep into the psyche of his characters and dealing only with the surface realities and thus remaining oblivious of the bitter actualities of life around and finally, his failure to evoke any kind of poetic or emotional response through his pedestrian language”(23-24).

Conventional literary criticism overall, tends to posit R.K.Narayan’s fiction within a literary protective cover called Malgudi that encompasses in the form of *buildungsroman,* the calm and tranquil order of Indian life with at best some gentle irony in the presentation of characters and situations. The writer is supposed to be content with delineating certain human oddities within the matrix of Malgudi, a timeless Indian space untouched by the turmoils of history.
Interestingly enough, there is recently a trend to retrieve Narayan’s fictional art from the mires of mostly stereotyping and categorising approach of traditional criticism. These in turn, have their roots in the changing role and orientation of literature/literary criticism that have been necessitated by the epoch-making changes in politics and culture. Inspite of Narayan’s professed interest in storytelling, new critical approaches now locate in Narayan’s writings certain disturbing gaps and problematics like a predicament of alienation that lead to a search for self-definition and even a post-modernist subversion of binaries. Notably, some stray impressions and confessions of Narayan which are strewn in his letters, interviews and non-fictional prose, are being cited to have connections with some new critical paradigms and principles that tend to discover a conscious sophistication in Narayan and demand a discursive re-location of his fiction.

It is also worthwhile to consider some critics who locate patterns of deliberate craftsmanship in Narayan’s fiction. John Updike, for instance, in his study of Narayan’s memoir notes among other things a Western virtue, ‘the delightful gifts of caricature.’ He comments on Narayan’s Malgudi in the New Yorker, Sept.1974: “Few writers since Dickens can match the effect of colourful teeming that Narayan’s fictional city of Malgudi conveys, its population is as sharply chiselled as a temple frieze and as endless with always one feels, more characters around the corner” (80). A humanisation of literature in Narayan however draws a significant recognition from this critic as he writes in his article on Narayan in Span, April, 1975 issue: “Narayan is one of the vanishing breed -- the writer as citizen [...] . His citizenship extends to calling up municipal officials about inadequate street lighting, to dashing off virile letters to newspapers about corruption and inefficiency” (38-39).

Edwin Gerow delves deep into the Malgudi-mania of prevalent criticism to ‘identify’, as Ramesh Dnyate points out, “the literary roots of Narayan’s fiction and puts forth a theory that Narayan’s art expresses ‘a genuine formal as well
as contextual continuity with the best efforts of Indian literature [...] in the “classical” period (B.C.200-1200A.D.). Narayan’s is a classical art’ ” (22).

Afzal Khan, in one of his most scholarly articles, discovers ‘a realm of mythic realism’ in R.K.Narayan’s world of fiction: “The works of R. K.Narayan who combines Indian myth with critical realism in his ‘serious comedies’, reveal their ideological implications quite clearly”(27). Taking cue from Walsh’s analysis of the ‘pattern of balance’ discernible in Narayan’s characters, Afzal Khan goes to vindicate that the trials and tribulations faced by Narayan’s protagonists proceed towards ‘authenticity and maturity’, the goals of the Western realist mode with an active part played by Indian mythical and mystical tradition. Afzal Khan’s criticism provides an important insight into Narayan’s capacity for handling the Western mode of realist fiction.

Shyam.S.Agarwala has shown how Anita Desai concentrates on Narayan’s comic-ironic treatment of Malgudi men and manners: “Apart from compassionate realism with which Narayan observes life in this teeming microcosm, it is his sense of humour – fresh, sharp and wryly ironic – that prevents ‘Malgudi Days’ from crumbling into sugary crystals of sentimentality”(Agarwala 153). Desai’s criticism of R.K.Narayan’s novels seeks to debunk a dominant bias among many present-day literary critics to judge Narayan through the prism of a simple but entertaining story-teller.

Shyam S. Agarwala has further caught some of the problematics in Narayan’s treatment of characters belonging to two separate phases of the writer’s career-‘pre-colonial and post-colonial.’ Agarwala quotes from Ranga Rao and writes: “This division is justified, says Ranga Rao. He analyses the division thus, ‘In contrast to the sattvic temper of the pre-independence books, the post-’47 novels of Narayan are dominated by rajasic passions. The heroes of the earlier phase are gentile, sensitive conscionable, aspiring, truth-seeking [...] the post’47 Malgudi is progressively a country of unexpected depths of duplicity’ ”
Agarwala further navigates his analysis in the post-47 novels of Narayan which according to him, "carry a dismal trail of the debris of Indian joint family. Now Narayan looks out, not within, but without. The social mores of post-47 novels change from pure marital love to manifestations of overt sexuality" (154). This study further explores, with a Freudian sort of approach, the socio-philosophic growth in R.K.Narayan’s art of fiction.

In a recent book of criticism B. R. Agarwala and M. P. Sinha examine how the dynamics of contemporary religious, cultural and educational evolution vis-a-vis tradition and custom have been incorporated into the post-47 novels of R.K.Narayan along with the representative novels of many other writers. This varied spectrum of analysis throws light on, one can say, the ‘palimpsest’ of Narayan’s vision created on the basis of contemporary culture formations - both indigenous as well as appropriated.

Geoffrey Kain has offered some innovative critical insights into the art of R.K.Narayan. Kain celebrates Narayan’s fiction as a sort of artistic ‘anagnorisis’ of the uncommon depths of ‘Common man’ characters. Apart from Narayan’s excellence in the treatment of [un] common men and manners, Kain also has the keen eye to appreciate the clarity and simplicity of style in Narayan’s writing. Kain discovers in Narayan a distinctive influence of the Western literary tradition - the study of Shakespeare, Scott and Dickens on Narayan’s writerly self; and this trait, according to Kain, becomes manifest in the writer’s ability to create unique individual characters, a virtue that confers universality of appeal to his central characters. In the opinion of Kain, the clarity and simplicity of style in Narayan also pose another problematic in so far as Narayan’s brief explanations or definitions of some terms and concepts (fairly understandable to Indian readers) for the convenience of Western readers, may make the Western audience feel that “behind the quiet and simple facade, lie layers of suggestiveness” (5). Kain’s criticism also seeks to counter another
commonplace of traditional evaluation that posits Narayan’s indifference to political narrative.

Among other critics, R.M. George, Krishna Sen, Nandini Bhattacharya, Fernando Nihal, Douglas Killam, Vimala Rao, K. Venkata Reddy, Balbir Singh, William Hayden Moore and Mary Beatina Rayen have made their respective contributions to counter the stereotyping of Narayan the novelist.

Mary Beatina Rayen focuses on Narayan’s ability to expose us to the transcendent in life through his treatment of the commonplace or mundane: “Narayan encourages the idea that the highest life is only to be found by seeking or accepting experiences that carry us into a strange and often bewildering realm [...] accessible to ordinary people prepared by ordinary experiences” (136). The observation of this critic has similarities with Afzal Khan’s explication of mythic realism as also with Prof. Iyenger’s detection in Narayan’s works of a miracle, of ‘a transcendence and the renewal of life, love, beauty, peace’.

With their principal focus on *The Guide* (1958), Narayan’s magnum opus, Krishna Sen and Nandini Bhattacharya have made signal contributions to the field of Narayan’s criticism by positing Narayan’s art in a ‘procustean bed’ (as the term is used by Ramesh Dnyate) of problematisation. Both of these critics apply post-modernist and postcolonial principles of literary criticism to Narayan’s art. Krishna Sen considers that through a blend of contrasting literary traditions of fabulation (from the traditional Indian narratives), realism (as in the Victorian novel) and multi-textuality (as in modernist fiction), Narayan sought to create a new literary tradition, that of the ‘Indian novel’. In her opinion, Malgudi in spite of being a fictional locale, combines ‘secular and sacred histories’, change and continuity, holding the contours of life in the tripartite structure of religion, family and community. Sen also finds in Narayan’s Malgudi the qualities of the Bakhtinian ‘chronotope’¹⁴. Krishna Sen views
Narayan's characters as caught up in a clash of values. In respect of language, Sen finds that Narayan's English betrays symptoms of cultural hybridity and a qualified appropriation of a borrowed trope to the indigenous sensibility so as to breed an enriched medium of expressing the brand of 'Bharat English'. In fact, Krishna Sen's problematising study of R. K. Narayan seeks to fit the writer within the disciplines of current academic study of postcolonial literatures.

Nandini Bhattacharya's analysis of Narayan's art is necessitated by an urge 'to reclaim R.K.Narayan and situate him within the complex realities of the present world'(1). In her study of The Guide (1958), Bhattacharya identifies '...a political, complex and culturally engaged Narayan, [...] a writer addressing some of the most important problems of our times' (2). She locates in Narayan's fiction some disturbing gaps and fractures, a lack of closure, a post-modern subversion of dialectics such as 'realistic' and 'mythical', the condition of 'post-coloniality' and other like features that denominate the contours of prevalent academic disciplines. Nandini Bhattacharya's modernist appraisal of Narayan's fictions strives, like that of Krishna Sen, to locate Narayan's fictional art within the ambit of contemporary literary criticism.

In a recent research paper, R.M.George of the University of California argues for the timeless appeal of Narayan's Malgudi - a locale, the artistic longevity of which is impregnated with the seed of historical continuity: "...that in the pre-Independence days, this Indian small town was created from an artistic position not unlike that of the present day diasporic artists". He thinks that Narayan's Malgudi novels along with the works of South-Asian American writer Indira Ganeshan and the South-Asian-American artist Arijit Sen, ‘...attempt to map alternative articulations of the space of home and community in a diasporic context. Narayan's imaginary locale does reproduce a viable social sphere through creative work."15 Understandably, R.M. George discovers the concept of 'space' in Narayan's fictional art in terms of the theory of cultural historiography.
In the analysis of Nihal Fernandes, a prominent critic in cultural studies, a binarism of local and foreign cultures exerts a distinctive cross-cultural pressure on Malgudians of Narayan's early and mid thirties's novels (in particular his Swami and Friends (1935) and The Bachelor of Arts (1937). In the former, Nihal finds that the central character's affiliation swings between tradition and anglicised sophistication. Whereas in the latter, the protagonist's family demonstrates, according to the critic, a range of acculturation side by side the protagonist's journey from ambiguity to alienation; from detachment back to acceptance as a corollary to the predicament faced by him in a Westernising society. Nihal Fernandes' study serves to contextualise the concept of 'home' as a site of cultural oscillation between tradition and modern forces in Narayan's novels. Nihal's study highlights socio-cultural anomalies which in turn show a pattern of cross-cultural interactions in Narayan's fiction.

Some cities like H.L. Agnihotri, Michael Pousse, and O.P. Bhatnagar have detected a strong vein of Gandhism in the texture and characters of some novels of R.K. Narayan. Agnihotri traces Gandhian moral evaluation with its hypocritical and rather subversive treatment in Narayan's novels like Waiting for the Mahatma (1955) and The Vendor of Sweets (1967). O. P. Bhatnagar on the other hand, detects an extremely accurate depiction of the cardinal features of the Gandhian philosophy - Love, Non-violence and Freedom as worked out in the Waiting for the Mahatma (1955). He argues that Narayan's delineation of the protagonist testifies to a rigorous investigation of the Gandhian creed of proper behaviour, the correlation between the Gandhian moral code and its appropriation. Michael Pousse contends that the spell of Gandhism permeates the texture of all Narayan's novels. He identifies the Gandhian principle of 'experiment with truth' with the journey of Narayan's protagonists. Pousse further asserts that the 'short and linear' structure of Narayan's novels and simple unaffected language along with the original indigenisation of form and style, owe solely to the spirit of Gandhism. It is conspicuous that the tenor of these criticisms points to a discursive negotiation with Gandhian philosophy.
A constellation of critics and scholars traces a dominant trait of feminist consciousness in R.K. Narayan's fiction, especially in his later works. Vimala Rao, for example, demands a need for reappraisal of Narayan's fictional technique. Rao contests the accepted notion of Narayan as a comic ironist and suggests the opposite on the basis of studying Narayan's few short stories and one novel (The Painter of Signs) in particular, where the consciousness in male characters seems to be invariably regulated by an emerging question of 'Women's Lib' that seems to be seriously treated by the writer in the presentation of main female characters.

Laxmi Holmstorm in "Women as markers of social change", detects a problematic presentation of the Women’s question in a trilogy of Narayan’s novels - The Dark Room (1938), The Guide (1958) and The Painter of Signs (1976), where ‘Narayan's women characters stand both for change and resistance to change [...] the women protagonists themselves, who, although they are the markers of change, are at the same time aware of the devastation such a change might bring.’ On a sensitive reading of these novels, Holmstorm diagnoses an attitudinal crisis: ‘an ambiguity which mirrors the bafflement of a traditional largely male society, in his face-to-face encounter with new notions of selfhood and particularly, of womanhood.’(102-103).

Shaukat Ali, Douglas Killam and K. Venkata Reddy are some other modern critics who make a perceptive analysis of the technical aspects of Narayan's fictional art: his point of view, use of language and time etc. Douglas Killam compares the emergence of first language colonial writing with reference to India and Africa while noting common nationalistic drives to localise literature within the frame of an international language. This critic thinks that Narayan's place as a writer in the colonial period merits special attention in so far as, 'Narayan unlike Achebe, had a major written literary tradition behind him, but unlike Haliburton and Furphy, it was not in English'. In spite of certain constraints in relation to the discovery of an appropriate creative language,
Narayan's innovative use of English is praiseworthy: "Narayan had to reach the 'happy medium' of a recognizably Indian Vehicle and content that was yet internationally comprehensible. His characters live partly in a vernacular world of Hindu Traditions and partly in modernity experiencing change through Western Influences. His formal English is contrasted to Caribbean dialectal English (notable in Naipaul)."Obviously, Killam's views to some extent corroborate a postcolonial detection of a complexity in the treatment of cultural issue in Narayan's theme and language.

Shaukat Ali and K.Venkata Reddy primarily focus on Narayan's *The Guide*, in the context of the cultural deep-structure underlying Narayan's linguistic innovativeness; and their mode of analysis, one feels, echoes Franz Fanon's famous dictum that to use a language is to assume a culture. Shaukat Ali concentrates on Narayan's gift of combination - of ironic comment and comic manner, of detached narration and paraphrasing through indirect speech, of English syntactic Patterns and Tamil speech rhythms, of compounding (to impress the idea of Indian culture). The critic also praises the writer's deft use of certain specific techniques to create the Indian context through indirect reference to the addressee, the use of monologue to display personality, the device of repetition, and the presentation of meaning through paraphrasing.

K.Venkata Reddy on the other hand discovers in Narayan's *The Guide*, a duality in structure cohering the text. The critic identifies these as Shakespearean double-time technique - omniscient and autobiographical points of view in the mechanism of which 'flash-on' (present) and 'flash-back' (past) methods are retrospectively found to be delicately inter-connected. Reddy's search is directed to trace out a dominant Western influence on Narayan's narrative art.

William Hayden Moore who considers loss of 'home' as integral to the historical mandate of colonialism ("colonial history does not make for stability
of residence”), views Narayan's Malgudi as a locale with a surviving vitality—“both ancient and modern; basically it has not changed much since epic times, for human character is constant and customs go back to the remotest past....” Though convinced of a stable inner pattern of Malgudi, Moore however detects a growth in the outer order, a growth from ‘pastoral simplicity’ to ‘modern complexity’ necessitating a problematic of ‘innocence’. Moore further continues: ‘...characters and novels move through the ashramas from youth to old age. Innocence is lost during the Student and Householder stages and its recovery suggested in maturity’ (358). Moore specifically examines three of Narayan’s novels – *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1962) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) and detects Narayan’s ‘ironical melancholy’ divided in two phases - darkening innocence as explicated in the earlier novels and eccentric debauchery from *Mr. Sampath* (1949) onwards where deeper involvement in traditional lores comes into conflict with modernity. In the opinion of this critic, Narayan betrays a wider scope and vision in comparison with R.P.Jhabvala, as an interpreter of modern India and his works establish a “skeptical wonderment” and ‘celebrated stasis’.

George Woodcock finds ‘the mid-twentieth century alienation of the Indian middle class’ responsible for a sickness from which all the citizens of Malgudi allegedly suffer. Their lives according to Woodcock are diminished and unfulfilled owing to the cultural incompatibility between tradition and modernity: “Their traditional codes and hierarchies have been fragmented and private, so that no man can any longer fulfil himself in a traditional way except by holy withdrawal; yet the material success on the Western model to which the Malgudians aspire belongs to an alien model which they rarely understand, [...]” (19). While making a comparative estimate of Narayan and Naipaul, George Woodcock ranks R.K.Narayan with writers like Marcel Proust and Joseph Conrad. He thinks that Narayan’s intention is not primarily satirical, while Naipaul is a satirist in the Swiftian sense. Woodcock also refutes Naipaul’s charge against Narayan’s fiction (as essentially aimless and produced
by profound doubt about the purpose and value of fiction) on the ground of his conviction that Naipaul's evaluation of India as a failed culture is erroneous.

So far it had been a humble enterprise to touch the main veins of the existing body of literary criticism of R.K. Narayan's fiction. On the basis of the traditional and the modernist approaches, it can be asserted that the modernist appreciation of Narayan focalises many an area of his fictional art that offers a rich potential for a problematising study. New approaches of analyses and investigations into Narayan's theme and technique tend to focalise a discursive rehabilitation of Narayan's novels in consonance with some of the dominant disciplines of a post-modernist or postcolonial search for cultural historiography. An increasing craze for a perspectival re-appraisal of Narayan's art in the last two decades, with specific reference to some of Narayan's prominent novels (e.g. *The Guide*, *The Man-eater of Malgudi* and *A Tiger for Malgudi*) gives credence to the marked potential in Narayan's fiction for a contemporary critical re-examination.

Recent critical works undertaken by Balbir Singh, A.V. Krishna Rao, O.P. Mathur and Harsharan Aluawalia (On *The Guide*), Fakrul Alam and B. Parvathi (On *The Man-eater of Malgudi*), and Shyam Asnani (On *The Tiger for Malgudi*) are also major contributions to the study of Narayan's artistic excellence.

However, in the context of the continuing divergence in the field of Narayan Criticism, one can quote in defence of Narayan what N. Ram has written in "Malgudi's Creator", his obituary to Narayan in *Frontline*, June 8, 2001: "...Who is to say with what theme or problem or slice of life or imaginative experience a novelist must deal? [...] you can take your pick of world view, approach, theme, narrative technique, style, voice, it is a free literary world [...] . In the midst of all this, Narayan's work stands tall -- unpretentious yet
original, understated yet path-breaking, non-deliberate and accessible yet philosophical and profound" (12).

We dance in a ring and suppose
But the secret sites in the middle and knows.

-Frost. 17

The intent behind the use of these lines from Frost as a way of epigraph is to hint at the very object of his present survey. In an overall analysis, it reveals that criticisms on Narayan's fictional art as a whole have touched only the limits of the extreme - so-called Positivists, Negativists and to add another entity, Meliorists, have only tried in their respective métiers of evaluation to touch one or two main veins of Narayan's creativity, whereas, in the imbroglio of critical judgments and inferences, the essential Narayan seems to pass out of notice. It is the essence of Narayan's art, a central problematic of roots and identity in the entire corpus of his art of fiction that this present dissertation intends to spell out. To a clear-sighted reader with a sense of history, the problematic of roots and identity appears to be strewn in the entire body of Indian English Fiction since this literature itself is an offshoot of a bicultural interaction which in turn is resultant in a sense of 'alienation', and then in an emancipatory 'search' for 'a system of belonging' (ie 'roots') and finally for maturity in a measure of 'becoming' (identity) in a culturally redefined space. Meenakshi Mukherjee has diagnosed this search for a 'rooted identity' as a preoccupation of the earlier figures of Indian English fiction and as for Narayan, the writer himself has categorically specified his idea about the prerequisite for creative writing in his oft-quoted interview with Ved Mehta: "To be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots: both in religion and family. I have these things". The term 'anywhere' contains a problematisation of the concept of 'space' in Narayan's observation.
It is obvious that as for Narayan's conviction, the search for a rooted identity is the fundamental quality of literature, not only of the genre he was writing in, but also of all age and clime. Simultaneously, this statement does, among other things conspicuously highlight Narayan's firm recommendation for opting the same features as the criteria of literary criticism. Narayan's choice of 'religion' and 'family' as the automatic sources of authentic identity for an Indian writer, true to his tradition and culture, points to his conscious effort at indigenising the English novel which is a pronounced Western form of literary art. Not surprisingly, Narayan's conviction of one's 'roots' in the systems -'religion' (in particular) and 'family', has prompted many critics to relegate the writer's identity to a lower stratum of creativity – of a simple story-teller writing at times intensely Hindu religious fables with a range tempered by mediocrity of values and outlook.

The object of this present work in to distil Narayan's fictional art from the critical quagmire of value-judgments like this and thereby trace a pattern of search for 'roots' and 'identity' in the treatment of characters, as well as in the style/artistic stance adopted by the writer.

So far the presentation of character is concerned; a kind of existential dilemma or identity-crisis faced by Narayan's protagonist in The English Teacher (1945), seems to be intrinsic more or less in Narayan's presentation of characters in his novels. The resultant search in his characters is necessitated by a sense of being weaned from one's own native culture, of an alienation, which is wrought by a historical reality of experiencing colonisation and 'marginalisation'. The present study is also aimed at locating an 'anxiety' of influence in the search in Narayan's protagonists whose acquisition of identity betrays a tension, an ambivalence between traditional binds of native culture and dialectical pulls of the Western; between tradition on the one hand and modernity on the other. Prof. Iyenger and William Walsh have profusely dwelt on the mechanics of 'order-disorder-order' and the 'pattern of balance' in
Narayan's presentation of characters respectively. But they have not touched the ‘deep-structure’ in the identity of Narayan's characters that combines a binary of influences -- both of the tradition and the heritage of Indianness and the modernity or the Western reality. It is true that majority of critics has traced in Narayan an unequivocal bias for the indigenous tradition in the matrix of ‘being’ in his characters. But this present analysis concentrates on a centripetal force in the making of the characters' consciousness that ultimately shapes their being through a ‘cleaving to and from’ their national or native culture. This problematic of culture can be traced to the ambivalence in nationalist culture manifest in the search for a ‘rooted identity’ which encounters in Elleke Boehmer's terms, “situations of conflicted collaboration with European cultural forms”(115).

In fact, the ambivalence in such a construction of identity has in turn, its ‘roots’ in the nationalist question that presupposes a ‘cleaving to and from’ indigenous culture. The idea is clearly dealt with by Partha Chatterjee in his critique on the question of nationalism: “The Eastern type of nationalism, consequently has been accompanied by an effort to ‘re-equip’ the nation culturally, to transform it. But it could not do so simply by imitating the alien culture, for then the nation would lose its distinctive identity”(2). Narayan's characters in his major novels all start as ‘alienated’ beings seeking anchorage to some viable social entity. Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* (1935), Krishnan in *The English Teacher* (1945), Srinivas in *Mr. Sampath* (1949), Margaya in *The Financial Expert* (1952), Raju in *The Guide* (1958) – all are seen engaged in plumbing the depth of existence in native roots before they attain social foliage viz identity and they are found to be forging their niche in Malgudi, another problematising space in Narayan's fiction which remains stranded between tradition and modernity. A constant tension between commitment to tradition on one hand and a Westernised craze for individuality on the other, marks the construction of identity in every Narayan character. Thus an East-West conflict always characterises the journey of a protagonist in Narayan's novels forging a
co-existence of native and Western cultural attitudes and paradigms. This specific character of search in Narayan’s characters particularly reminds us of Robert Young’s celebrated use of Greenwich or Longitude Zero as the paradigm of wavering between the East and the West. It therefore in a way interrogates a sense of tension embedded in the entire colonial and the postcolonial project. This ambivalence can also be traced to the idea of Bruce King who thinks that this politics of ambivalence seems to create “conditions for appropriation and resistance from the moments of its impact, and to recognise how superficial the exigencies of political change and independence may have been in bringing the need for resistance and change to a satisfactory conclusion” (165). Narayan’s own views on his art of characterisation offers a sort of problematic on the subject: “All I can settle for myself is my protagonist’s general type of personality - my focus is all on character.”¹⁹ In his Introduction to Malgudi Days, Narayan writes: “Speaking for myself, I discover a story when a personality passes through a crisis of spirit or circumstances.[...] almost invariably the central character faces some kind of crisis and either resolves it or lives with it”(vii).

The alternate possibilities in the predicament of a character (who ‘either resolves it or lives with it’) reflects a problematisation of space as well as an alterity in subject position that responds much to the postcolonial search for self-definition or the discourse of a search for identity. Narayan’s characters thus as per the writer’s own conviction, faces not always a binary but complementary interaction between two sets of realities – the overpowering gravitational pull of tradition on the one hand and the modernist onus for appropriation that finally shapes social identity on the other. This co-existence of two cultural patterns projects that a major character in Narayan’s fiction journeys through his or her ‘roots’ in order to acquire or at least try to acquire an identity primarily in the Western realist mode. In Malgudi, which is conceived as Narayan’s fictional microcosm of India, a cumulative effect of all the traits of indigenous culture – like religion, social heritage, tradition, family
distribution myth, and rituals, produces in Narayan's characters, an inherent social awareness, a sense of 'history' that subscribes much to Gellner's and Anderson's notion of nationalism discussed in Leela Gandhi's book *Postcolonial Theory* and here in the context of Indian sensibility, it can be termed as the 'history' of Indianness. The evolution of sensibility in Narayan's protagonists seems to correspond much to what Leela Gandhi thinks as 'the rational process of self-consciousness through which an alienated essence of an individual citizen acquires a cohesive and reparative identity in the common life of the nation' (104-05). Such an identity in turn, is the goal of the Western realist mode of fiction. Thus the intervention of two cultural patterns forms the texture of a character's journey in Narayan's fiction. An inwardly operative indigenous tradition and the cultural hybridity of actually lived existence make Narayan's Malgudi characters the denizens of an interactive space between tradition and modernity.

Thus a sort of cultural interaction between tradition and modernity characterises the journey of a major character in R.K. Narayan's fiction. Krishna Sen in her book on *The Guide*, has quoted from Noel Perrin who finds two cultural responses, one of 'warm Hindu inefficiency' and the other 'cold Western efficiency' operative in a mode of conflicted alterity in the characters of Narayan: "He has written about the conflict for the Indians between the enormous, overwhelming sense of duty they feel toward all blood relations and their frequent desire for a merely personal life" (Sen 160). To the present analyst, the bicultural characteristics in the search of a Narayan character does not always correspond to a binary pattern (what Noel Perrin hints by using the term 'conflict'), rather they very often complement each other in the making of a character's identity. Thus the prominent characters in Narayan's fiction are seen to face an onus of making out some 'meaning' in the business of living in a space characterised by an overall bicultural hybridity. Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* (1935) strives to divest himself from the net of attachment endorsed by tradition in search of an individual life 'freed from all hysterical
illusions’ though paradoxically this life is enshrined in the tenets of Indian philosophy and spiritualism. In *The English Teacher* (1945), Krishnan’s academic frustration in the colonial pedagogic system (where teaching-learning process is fed on the ‘carcasses of dead literary muttons and histories’) breeds a penchant for individualism (an extremely Western phenomenon) which however finds satiety in the retreat to the ‘roots’ of indigenous culture and principles of education. Margaya’s initiation into the cult of wealth in *The Financial Expert* (1952) and his exclusive pursuit of wealth owe much to the Westernized craze of consumerism as well as to the materialistic goals of life as explicated in the Indian Shastras. Margaya’s rise to affluence is achieved through means marked by a curious antithetic of values, typical of a cultural hybridity one part of which induces a charlatan urge for felicity while the other a subconscious affinity for a reparative identity in the matrix of tradition. Margaya’s moderation also comes true to mythic truth that justifies myth as a part of ‘History’ holding empirical-veracity of experiences in the present. In *The Guide* (1958), Raju’s show-man’s insolence (a typical Western phenomenon) propels him through the lures of self-deception to a stage of self-discovery in which the appropriated self merges with reality, the vesture becomes the essence, true to the Indian spiritual goal of non-duality in existence. In *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), Jagan’s experience in his value-cherishing life is chequered by a cultural conflict between tradition and modernity. The conflict leads him to a plane of revelation which notwithstanding a withdrawal from human society, provides the character with an authenticity of self-hood, (basically a goal of the Western-realist mode) finding ‘home’ here in India’s traditional ‘ashramadharma’.

However, the preponderance of the Hindu ambience of Narayan’s novels, and the omniscient authorial stance which according to Robert Towers is reminiscent of classic-realist Victorian novel, allegedly signify in Narayan the existence of a homogenous culture and a common system of values shared by the author and his readers. Towers finds Narayan’s realism, ‘a retrograde
literary practice’, ‘a narrative mode that has remained untouched by all that we think of as modernism.’ This critic mourns that Narayan’s work lacks “the dissonance, the structural disjunctions, the obscurity or multi-level wordplay – indeed any of the radical techniques – by which the great writers of the century have jolted the reader from his sense of literary security [...]” (21). Obviously, Towers fails to notice that the recuperation and exaltation of pre-colonial values (the very traits he disapproves) in the characterisation and form of Narayan’s fiction, paradoxically assert a technique of postcolonial resistance against the academic iconisation of the West. In Narayan, this strategy of resistance is imbued with a subtle problematisation of cultural interaction as has been mentioned earlier in this paper. Elleke Boehmer subscribes to this element of realism in Narayan which according to her, focuses, in conformity with the Indian form of the English novel, “a quietist Indian way of life that gives way before and so eventually absorbs the forces of history rather than reacting destructively against them”(177). The struggle towards maturity in Narayan’s characters, their search for a rooted identity necessitates the problematisation of social realism which Narayan is sensible enough to recognise as an important agenda for any realistic fiction writer like him. Fully aware of the ‘new type of literature’ in English with its stimulation of ‘a new social awareness’ by projecting ‘evils of certain social customs’ and ‘orthodoxies of the day’, Narayan acknowledges his literary stand as a writer in his autobiography *My Days*: “I was a realistic fiction writer in English, [...]”(102). The following extract from Narayan’s essay “English in India: A process of Transmutation”, further points to how a foreign language like English can be indigenised to serve the purpose of Indian English writers like him who want to produce a literature that is indigenous in content yet English in form:

All that I am able to confirm,[...] is that it has served my purpose admirably, of conveying unambiguously the thoughts and acts of a set of
personalities, who flourish in a small town named Malgudi (supposed to be) located in a corner of South India. (22)

For a writer like Narayan who has his ‘main concern’ with the individual man, the observations cited above collectively imply not only a distinct approach of Narayan as an Indian English Writer but also a calibration of his characters to serve in general, a double purpose– to discover their own cultural roots in Indian life and sensibility as well as to strive for cultural appropriation towards the construction of a social identity in the colonial/postcolonial space.

But when the entire fictional ouvre of Narayan is taken into account, it reveals that the search in Narayan’s characters do not remain finally conclusive to a rooted identity in a community and in some of Narayan’s post-independence novels this search in a character offers a sub-text for a parallel quest for transcendence and truth. Raju’s ultimate transcendence of the ‘self’ in The Guide (1958) and Jagan’s renunciation which is an accepted practice in Indian spiritual life and his search for ‘truth’ or an authenticity of experience in The Vendor of Sweets (1967), may be termed as instances of the postcolonial strategy of ‘reverse narrative’ which is obscure to the West. From the narrative point of view, this again vindicates a postcolonial strategy of resistance mentioned by Leela Gandhi who taking cue from Tom Nairn’s The Break up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism, writes: ‘[… ] modernity itself far from being simply a benefit can also be read, as Nairn reasons, as an ‘ordeal’ which demands palliative energies of so-called atavistic enterprises” (110). In Narayan’s presentation of characters, this can be asserted that the transcendence of the ‘self’ and the search for ‘truth’ testify to another reverse-narrative used by Narayan who tries to reveal even from within the randomness of colonial presence, India’s self-sufficiency, her ‘inner strength’ with the cultural spaces for existence that being sanctioned over ages, reserve the potentiality to negotiate changes. In this way, the search in the major characters in Narayan’s fiction is seen to explore the existential condition and thereby forge a social identity through indigenous roots but ultimately it redirects itself towards an emancipatory possibility of transcendence and truth.
The same problematic of roots and identity is also operative in the sphere of Narayan’s technique as an Indian English writer. In addition to the problematic of indigenisation of a foreign language (what Boehmer terms—‘to be true to one self in borrowed robes’) and his view of English as a ‘swadesi language’, Narayan also categorically acknowledges the social concern of novels written in English in his non-fictional prose and interviews. Yet it is the same writer who once remarked: “I am an inattentive quick writer who has little sense of style”.20 On another occasion, Narayan further said in one of his interviews: “I’d be quite happy if no more is claimed from me than being just a story teller. Only the story matters, that’s all”21. In this self-adopted mantle of a ‘story-teller’, which, according to many hostile critics of Narayan, surely underscores the ‘naivety’ of the writer’s art, one can equally trace an emancipatory search, a desire for transcendence in a writer who seeks to purge literature of all academic and institution-biased compartmentalisation and categorisation, of the turning and twisting of spontaneity of expression to the desired shape of some ‘other’ interests. He writes in his essay, “The Nobel Prize and All That”: “Geographical, topographical, hemispherical or ethnic considerations are irrelevant in literature” (203). In another essay, titled, “Reluctant Guru”, Narayan has written: “[…] to take a work of fiction as a sociological study or a social document could be very misleading”(101). Obviously for Narayan, the word ‘story’ is invested with concerns greater than the populist craze for literary entertainment: “… people want a story, at the end of their day’s labours in the fields […] . He has no doubt whatever that the Vedas … contain within them all that a man needs for his salvation at every level.”22 Narayan’s exaltation of the status of a story-teller thus enshrines, in the context of the oral tradition of Indian literature, not only the traditionally honoured role of a writer, but also the sacrosanct and primeval purity of literature which dealing with fundamental truths of experience, only receives multiple forms of expression in different ages. Narayan’s narrative technique too, like his characters, shows a search for a rooted identity in the oral tradition; but the quest leads to an attainment of a transcendent reality like that of Malgudi and men.
NOTES

1. M.K.Naik has made this observation with specific reference to Narayan’s *The Dark Room* (1938) where Savitri, the central character, inspite of her rebellion against a bullying and promiscuous husband ultimately accepts her designated position of a tolerant Hindu wife. (*A History of Indian English Literature*, p.161).

2. C.D. Narsimhaiah in “The Comic as a Mode of Study in Growing into Maturity” writes about the creator of Malgudi and his characters: “He has scarcely stirred out of Malgudi nor have his characters; and if by ill-luck they did stray out of the municipal limits of Malgudi they invariably come back, sadder and wiser- such is the spirit of place, Malgudi the microcosm of traditional Indian society.”(p.103).

3. Jayant, K.Biswal in *A Critical Study of the novels of R.K.Narayan*, analyses that L.J.Potts considers ‘social sense’ to form the basis of comedy. He finds in man’s character a tendency for integration with the life of society, to merge with others with an urge for something greater than the individual self: “The conviction that the the individual is unimportant except as a part of something wider; the impulse to mix, and to seek common ground with the rest of one’s kind...”(*Comedy*, London:Hutchinson’s University Library,1948,p-18). Biswal thinks that in Narayan’s Malgudi-Comedy, ‘The emphasis is not so much on puritan moral values as it is on a social consciousness rooted in traditional morality that nevertheless allows concessions to human frailties’ (Introduction,p.2).Biswal quotes Northorp Frye’s view in this connection: “Comedy usually moves towards a happy ending, and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is ‘this should be’, which sounds like a moral judgement. So it is, except that it is not moral in the restricted sense, but social. Its opposite is not the villainous but the


5. K.Chellappan’s ideology of the *Karma* and *lila* as operative in Narayan’s worldview, sees the Narayan character, engaged in role-playing collectively relates itself to the concept of *Advaitya* which teaches that ‘Bramha’i.e, Truth alone is real and the world with all its physical realities is only *maya*, unreal, an illusion.

6. Greene’s phrase as used by M. N. Srinivasa, has been cited in Meena Sodhi, “Narayan: Life into Art”.


11. Nandini Bhattacharya in *R. K. Narayan’s the Guide*, identifies the term with ‘developmental novel’ dealing with a hero engaged in ‘search of his true identity’(10).Nandini Bhattacharya further refers to the *bildungsroman* structure as specified by Simon During in *Foucault and
Literature: “They (the Western Humanists) invest enormous cultural value in Bildung, a term which refers not only to the development of harmonious intermeshing of all human faculties within the individual, but also to the analogous development and harmonious intermeshing of all individuals within an organic society.” (Towards a Genealogy of Writing: London. Routledge, 1992. p-18.)


13. See, Nehru’s idea of ‘palimpsest’ as discussed by C.D. Narsimhaiah: ‘a geological metaphor suggesting layers on which one sees in addition to one’s own share those common traits which have endured through the ages – which make for the vitality and continuity of India’s culture.’ (“Making of Indian English: Some Reflections”, pp-29-30). Alexandra W. Schultheis also in course of his analysis of Rushdie’s In The Moor’s Last Sigh, considers that “Rushdie may have borrowed the trope of the palimpsest from Nehru in his, and finds that, that image is compounded, as it is in Nehru’s own writings, by the metaphor of the nation as family, whose longevity stems from its ability to synthesize both historical and seemingly ahistorical aspects of the nation. Nehru pictured Indian history as a palimpsest of successful intercultural exchanges that the new nation would constitutionally extend and guarantee.” (“Postcolonial lack and aesthetic promise in The Moor's Last Sigh-Critical Essay”).

14. Krishna Sen in Critical Essays on R. K. Narayan’s The Guide, thinks that ‘Malgudi may be said to be situated metaphorically at the intersection of the real and supra-rational, of physical space and time and mythic space and time one may extrapolate Bakhtin’s terminology (since Bakhtin
recognised historic, but not mythic time), and say that the Malgudi environment takes on the attributes of a ‘chronotope’ as defined by Bakhtin: “We will give the name chronotope (literally, “time-space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. ...”(p.153).


22. See, Narayan’s Introduction to *Gods, Demons and Others*, London: Heinemann, 1965.1-5 *passim*
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