



Colonial Legacy and Traditional Cultural Norms in the Fiction of R.K. Narayan

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23766959>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 25-08-2026

Accepted: 24-09-2026

Published: 20-10-2026

Keywords:

colonial legacy, traditional norms, postcolonialism, sociocultural critique, Malgudi, caste and gender, Western education, Indian middle class, modernity and tradition, literary realism

ABSTRACT

This paper studies how colonial legacy and traditional cultural norms meet in the fiction of R.K. Narayan, a leading figure in Indian English literature. It reads three novels closely: *Swami and Friends*, *The Guide*, and *Waiting for the Mahatma*. The study asks how Narayan shows an Indian society that stands between the lingering effects of British rule and the weight of its own old customs. Colonialism is rarely the main subject of his stories. Even so, its marks can be seen in Western schooling, changing ideas of right and wrong, and the hopes of a growing middle class. At the same time, Narayan questions the social order of his own community, especially caste, gender, and family roles, through characters who struggle both inside themselves and with the people around them. Using a sociocultural and postcolonial approach, the paper argues that Narayan's quiet style hides a deep understanding of India's social and political change. His imaginary town of Malgudi works as a small model of a nation in transition, where the wish to modernise often pulls against tradition. The paper concludes that Narayan was both an observer and a gentle critic of Indian society in a very important period of its history.

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I. INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan is among the most important voices in Indian English literature. He created Malgudi, a small town that feels real and familiar to readers and that captures the spirit of everyday life in India. Readers know him for his gentle humour, but he was also a sharp observer of ordinary people. Beneath the light tone of his stories lie deeper social and political questions that shaped India during and after British rule.

Narayan seldom attacks colonialism openly. He shows instead how it slowly changed Indian society, and how it touched people's thoughts, relationships, and habits. In the same quiet way, his fiction questions old beliefs about caste, gender roles, religious custom, and the pressures of modern life.

This paper looks at how colonial history and deep-rooted social tradition come together in Narayan's novels and shape the lives of his characters. It focuses on *Swami and Friends*, *The Guide*, and *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Through these books, the paper shows how Narayan's realistic storytelling records the silent struggles of a society caught between old ways and new demands.

II. SWAMI AND FRIENDS: THE MAKING OF A COLONIAL SUBJECT

Swami and Friends (1935), Narayan's first novel, introduces Malgudi and follows a young schoolboy named Swaminathan. The book is often taken as a simple story for children. It also gives a quiet but thoughtful view of British rule. The novel opens with a simple line: "It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes" (Narayan, 1935). The boy's dread of school sets the tone for the whole book. Through Swami's days at school, his growing up, and his first brush with nationalism, Narayan shows how colonial rule shaped the way young Indians saw themselves and their place in the world.

A. *The Colonial Education System*

Swami is a child shaped by an education system that values English, Western ideas, and strict discipline. The Albert Mission School, which follows British models, is more than a school. It is a tool for turning students into loyal subjects of the Empire. The lessons, such as poems by English writers and arithmetic problems far removed from Indian life, make students feel cut off from their own culture.

The school is harsh and controlling, and the Headmaster who stands for it is cold, unfair, and demands obedience. This matches the real aims of British education in India. Thomas Babington Macaulay, in his Minute of 1835, wrote that the aim was to form "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English



in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835). Swami's school is a small version of that plan.

Swami's troubles at school are therefore more than bad days or strict teachers. They point to a larger problem. Many Indians felt lost and separated from their roots because the system treated Western ways as better and Indian traditions as lesser. The gap between what was taught and what was lived caused real confusion and pain for students like Swami.

B. Discipline and the Loss of Innocence

Swami changes from a carefree child into a worried and confused boy, and this change shows how colonial rule slowly took away cultural freedom. At first he spends his time playing with friends and inventing adventures. As he deals more with authority, whether in school, with his teachers, or at home with parents who are touched by British ways, his life begins to change. The fun fades and is replaced by pressure to follow rules and behave in a set way.

The scene in which Swami is punished for speaking up against a teacher who insults Hindu gods shows how risky it was to question authority under colonial rule. Even a small boy's protest is shut down quickly. The school does not help students grow freely. It trains them to obey from a very young age and shapes Indian children to fit the needs of the Empire.

C. Childhood and Early Nationalism

Narayan places the growing nationalist movement quietly in the background of Swami's story. Swami hears about political leaders, including Gandhi, from elders and from newspapers. In one scene the students are called to boycott their school, which is a direct nod to Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns. Swami joins in, but his reasons are unclear. Is it patriotism, or does he simply want to escape lessons?

This doubt is typical of Narayan's realism. He shows that nationalist ideas reached ordinary people in a mixed-up and incomplete form. For a child like Swami, nationalism is not a worked-out belief. It is part of the air around him, something he copies without fully understanding. Still, Narayan makes it clear that the seeds of resistance are planted early, even when children do not understand them.

D. Social Hierarchy and Caste

Caste is not a direct subject in *Swami and Friends*, but it works quietly through the relationships among the boys. Swami's friends Mani and Rajam come from different social positions. Mani is a rough,



unpolished boy from a lower background, while Rajam is the refined son of the Police Superintendent. Rajam's rank gives him authority among the boys, and this shows how colonial hierarchy reaches even into childhood friendships.

Swami's wish to impress Rajam reflects a wider colonial habit of wanting to be close to power. Rajam's lifestyle, clothes, and fluent English make him seem superior, though he is the same age as Swami. Narayan in this way offers a small picture of colonial mimicry, where even schoolboys take on the power games inherited from the Raj.

E. Family and Cultural Conflict

Swami's home life also shows the tension between colonial values and traditional norms. His father is educated in English and reads the newspapers, yet he keeps strict authority at home. He combines a colonial kind of rational thinking with old patriarchal discipline. His mother is warm and caring but passive, which repeats the traditional gender divide.

The father is modern but domineering, and the mother is loving but submissive. Together they show that colonial influence did not replace Indian tradition. The two lived side by side, and colonialism often made patriarchal habits stronger. The pressure Swami feels at home to do well in studies and to behave "properly" is part of a wider social wish to produce the ideal colonial subject, one who is loyal, obedient, and English-minded.

III. THE GUIDE: MORAL AMBIGUITY, MODERNITY, AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The Guide, published in 1958, is one of Narayan's best known and most meaningful novels. It tells the story of Raju, who changes a great deal over the course of the book. He begins as a railway guide, becomes a lover, and ends as a spiritual leader. The novel deals with right and wrong, with the ways people remake themselves, and with the thin line between what is real and what is an illusion. Its first sentence, "Raju welcomed the intrusion—something to relieve the loneliness of the place" (Narayan, 1958), already shows a man who is willing to become whatever the moment needs. Through Raju, Narayan paints a detailed and sometimes funny picture of India in a time of large change, caught between old customs and new ways, and between the influence of colonial rule and the hopes of a free future.

A. Raju as a Symbol of a Changing India

Raju, often called "Railway Raju," starts out as a friendly and clever tourist guide. He stands for the new Indian middle class. His work joins old traditions such as local legends, temples, and folklore with



modern things such as trains, tourism, and business. His skill at moving between these two worlds shows how India itself was changing, with old and new ideas mixed together, sometimes uneasily.

Raju goes from guide to manager of Rosie's dance career, and later to spiritual leader. These changing roles show how people had to adjust in the uncertain years after independence. His changes are neither fully honest nor fully false. They reflect a society that is still working out its identity, where people often invent new versions of themselves.

B. Rosie: Between Tradition and Modern Dreams

Rosie is a dancer from a devadasi family, a tradition that is both respected and looked down upon. She is educated and cultured, yet she is stuck in an unhappy marriage with Marco, a Western-minded archaeologist who has no respect for Indian art or spirituality. Marco's dislike of dance stands for the colonial attitude that tried to push Indian culture aside.

When Rosie decides, with Raju's help, to follow her passion for Bharatanatyam, it is a bold statement about who she is. It also brings criticism and judgment from society. She is not fully accepted by traditional society, and the modern middle class does not fully welcome her either. Narayan uses her story to show that society often claims to value tradition but still punishes women who want independence or artistic expression.

Raju's role as her manager makes matters more complicated. He helps Rosie succeed, but he also controls and uses her. This relationship shows that patriarchal power stays strong even when people believe they are free.

C. Morality Is Not Always Clear

One of the most interesting things about *The Guide* is that it does not clearly say who is right and who is wrong. Raju does many dishonest things. He lies to Rosie, forges her signature, and hides the truth from the villagers. Yet Narayan does not ask the reader to judge him too harshly. The story suggests that right and wrong are not always black and white, and that people are more complicated than they look.

Even when Raju becomes a holy man, it is hard to tell whether he truly believes in what he is doing or is simply playing one more role. Narayan leaves this open. This suggests that a person's beliefs and identity can change slowly through actions and experience. When Raju begins his fast, we cannot say whether it comes from real faith or from continued pretence. His possible death during the fast becomes a strong symbol of how a role, whether real or false, can still carry deep meaning.



This uncertainty fits Indian culture well, where faith and doubt often live together and where spiritual leaders sometimes have unclear pasts. Narayan is not mocking religion. He shows how it works in people's minds and in society, especially as India passes through great change.

The ending is also left open. Raju collapses after his fast, and we are left asking whether he has truly changed or whether this is only the last act of a life full of pretending. Narayan does not tell us. He shows instead that people keep changing, and that their true selves depend on their choices, beliefs, and repeated actions. Whether or not Raju finds redemption, the novel explores how people search for meaning in a world where truth and lies, and good and bad, are often blurred. Modern India, still finding its place after years of colonial rule, is much the same.

IV. WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA: NATIONALISM AND LOVE

Waiting for the Mahatma (1955) is Narayan's most direct look at India's struggle for independence. It follows Sriram, a young man from Malgudi, as he grows up alongside the nation. Sriram joins Gandhi's movement mainly because he loves Bharati, a devoted freedom fighter. Through their relationship, Narayan explores the complicated nature of Indian nationalism, the fight against colonial rule, and the personal cost of political awareness.

A. Sriram: The Apolitical Young Man

At the start of the novel Sriram is selfish and without ambition. His parents have died, and he has been raised by his strict grandmother. He cares little about the political unrest of the 1940s, and in this he stands for many young people of the time who thought more about daily life than about joining a revolution.

Narayan makes Sriram passive and uninterested in politics on purpose. He wants to show that people often join political movements for personal reasons and not because of strong belief. In Sriram's case, his interest in Bharati, a firm follower of Gandhi, pulls him into the freedom struggle. His involvement has more to do with his feelings for her than with politics, which shows how private emotions can become tied to larger public causes.

B. Bharati: The Idealist and Nationalist Woman

Bharati is one of the few strong women in Narayan's fiction. Unlike Sriram, who joins the movement mostly to impress her, she truly believes in the values taught by Gandhi: nonviolence, wearing khadi, helping the poor, and living simply.



Her respect for Gandhi goes beyond politics. She sees him as a guide to living with honesty and purpose. Even her name, which comes from "Bharat," the word for India, suggests that she carries the spirit of the country. Through Bharati, Narayan shows that women can hold strong ideals and independence, which challenges the roles that are usually given to them. She also makes Sriram look shallow, since he treats love like a game while she lives by her values.

Sriram's feelings for Bharati push him to change. To stay close to her, he must face ideas he never thought about before. This exposes the gap between his romantic hopes and her deeper commitment to the nation.

C. Gandhi's Presence: A Catalyst, Not a Character

Mahatma Gandhi appears in the story, but Narayan does not treat him as a legend or a distant figure. He comes across as a practical, down-to-earth person who gives speeches, talks with ordinary people, and even scolds Sriram when needed.

Gandhi plays no large part in the plot itself, yet his presence changes everything. He becomes the centre of the moral and social values in the book. Narayan does not try to make him perfect or larger than life. He shows instead how Gandhi's ideas, such as simple living, honesty, and concern for others, push people to grow and take responsibility.

Gandhi's way of life is very different from Sriram's behaviour. Sriram acts on feeling and often makes selfish choices, while Gandhi speaks for self-control, truth, and service. This difference creates the central conflict of the novel. Gandhi's ideals become the standard by which the other characters are measured, and his influence shapes their journeys.

D. The Politics of Love: Personal and Political Commitment

Waiting for the Mahatma is, at heart, a love story, though not an ordinary one. Sriram's love for Bharati is always shaped by the political situation around them. Narayan uses their bond to show how personal feelings can be affected, and even tested, by larger duties to the nation.

Sriram does not really grasp how serious the freedom movement is. He takes part more to impress Bharati than to help India. Bharati, however, sees the movement as important and meaningful, and she will not accept Sriram's love unless it rests on real values and a true sense of responsibility.



This makes their love story different from most. Their romance depends on Sriram growing up and learning to care about something bigger than himself. The novel raises some serious questions. Can love survive when it is mixed with politics and strong beliefs? Can a person find private happiness while the country is still fighting for freedom?

Narayan gives no clear answer. Sriram and Bharati do end up together, but only after pain and sacrifice. Their love does not vanish, but it changes along the way.

E. Village Politics and Nationalism on the Ground

When Sriram is sent to villages to spread Gandhi's message, the story moves into a new setting. Narayan uses this shift to show the wide gap between the goals of the freedom movement and the real lives of people in the countryside. Many villagers either do not understand Gandhi's message or have no interest in it. This shows how hard it was to bring large political ideas into the daily lives of ordinary people.

As time passes, Sriram becomes discouraged and grows impatient with the slow pace of change. Eventually he joins a group that believes violence against the British is the only way forward. This turn adds depth to the story. Narayan does not clearly back either Gandhi's peaceful path or the violent one. He shows instead how difficult and confusing the fight for freedom really was.

The novel offers no simple answers. It presents the independence movement as full of hard choices, slow progress, and the flaws of real people. Through Sriram's experience, Narayan helps us see that both strong belief and anger have limits when it comes to bringing real change.

F. Colonial Authority and Passive Resistance

The novel also looks at how the British responded to the growing independence movement. Through scenes of police questioning, jail, and protest, Narayan shows the tense and controlling mood of the last years of British rule.

Sriram's time in prison is an important turning point. There he starts to think seriously about his actions, no longer only to win Bharati's approval but to understand his own part in India's struggle. Jail becomes a moment of real change for him, much as it made Gandhi stronger.

Narayan, however, does not make suffering look heroic. He shows the pain and pressure that come with fighting for freedom. Gandhi's call for nonviolence is tested in a world where injustice is everywhere



and violence can seem like the only way out. Sriram's brief turn to violent resistance reflects the frustration many Indians felt at the slow pace of change through peaceful means.

V. CONCLUSION

Narayan's stories may look simple on the surface, but they carry deep meaning. Most of his novels are set in small towns like Malgudi, yet they reflect the large changes India went through during and after British rule. He shows that colonial rule went on influencing people's lives, including their goals, their thoughts, and their daily choices.

Narayan uses these quiet settings to explore important ideas. He shows how India's growing middle class was caught between following old traditions and accepting new ways of thinking. His characters face personal problems that mirror the bigger changes in the country. Some stand against old rules about gender, others question those in power, and many feel confused as they try to adjust to a changing world.

Although he writes about serious matters, Narayan never uses dramatic or difficult language. His style is plain and clear, and that makes his message stronger. He gently points out what is unfair in society and lets us see the emotional struggles of ordinary people. In the end, Narayan is not only telling stories about everyday lives. He is quietly recording the story of a country in transition, one that was trying to stay connected to its traditions while moving into a new future.

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