



# Colonial Influence and Postcolonial Reflection in R.K. Narayan's Novels

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**ABSTRACT:** This research paper explores the colonial influence and postcolonial reflections in the novels of R.K. Narayan, a prominent Indian author. Narayan's works, deeply embedded in the Indian context, provide a nuanced understanding of colonialism's legacy on Indian society. By analyzing key novels such as *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), and *The Guide* (1958), this paper examines how Narayan addresses the complexities of colonial rule and the subsequent emergence of a new national identity in postcolonial India. It argues that while Narayan's works reflect the colonial impact on the Indian psyche, they also serve as subtle critiques of both colonialism and postcolonial society. The paper highlights Narayan's depiction of the tensions between tradition and modernity, the ambiguities in the postcolonial identity, and his portrayal of the common man navigating the aftershocks of colonial domination.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonialism, Postcolonialism, R.K. Narayan, Indian literature, national identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan (1906–2001) is regarded as one of the foremost figures in Indian English literature. His works, predominantly set in the fictional town of Malgudi, offer a remarkable exploration of Indian life under British colonial rule and the subsequent challenges of postcolonial existence. His writing style is deeply influenced by his experiences as a subject of the British Empire, and his novels reflect the tensions between colonial dominance and the struggle for identity that characterized the postcolonial era. This paper examines how colonialism shaped Narayan's worldview and how his narratives explore postcolonial concerns of identity, cultural conflict, and societal transformation.

## II. COLONIAL INFLUENCE IN R.K. NARAYAN'S NOVELS

The influence of colonialism on Narayan's novels is apparent in both the thematic concerns and character development within his works. Although Narayan was not overtly political in his writing, the backdrop of British colonialism and its impacts on Indian society are integral to understanding the social and cultural landscape in his novels. In *Swami and Friends*, the first of Narayan's novels, the protagonist Swaminathan's experiences with the British educational system reflect the deep-rooted colonial presence in everyday life. Swami, like many of Narayan's characters, navigates a society where British norms, values, and authority structures are imposed on the Indian population, highlighting the tension between colonial dominance and indigenous traditions.

Colonial influence in Narayan's writing can also be traced through his depiction of education and the legal system. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, the protagonist, Chandran, reflects on the limitations of the education system, which is shaped by British ideals and values, and which stifles the individuality and cultural identity of Indian students. Narayan's portrayal of Chandran's disillusionment with this system subtly critiques the colonial educational framework that was designed to produce subservient citizens, rather than encouraging independent thought and the nurturing of indigenous values.

Moreover, the colonial presence in Narayan's works is often depicted through the lens of the English language. While Narayan wrote in English, his prose is marked by simplicity and directness, blending Indian idioms and local expressions with English syntax. This hybridization of language reflects the complex interplay between colonial and native influences and signals a tension between adopting English as a tool for modernity and preserving indigenous linguistic identities. In *The English Teacher*, Narayan explores this theme further by focusing on the life of a man caught between the English language and his deep-rooted Indian values.

R.K. Narayan's works, though not explicitly focused on colonialism, are deeply influenced by the social, cultural, and psychological impact of British rule in India. As an Indian writer who lived through both the colonial period and the



country's post-independence transformation, Narayan's novels reflect the subtleties of colonial influence on Indian society. Colonialism in Narayan's works is visible not just through direct political or historical references, but also in the structures of society, education, and the legal system, all of which were shaped by British imperialism.

### **2.1. The Colonial Educational System**

One of the most evident forms of colonial influence in Narayan's novels is the portrayal of the British educational system, which was designed to create a class of educated Indians who could assist in the administration of the empire. In *Swami and Friends* (1935), Narayan introduces readers to the protagonist, Swaminathan, a young boy who attends a British-run school in the fictional town of Malgudi. Swami's experiences reflect the stark contrast between the colonial education system and traditional Indian ways of learning. The curriculum emphasizes British ideals, values, and a system that alienates children from their own culture and heritage.

In *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), the protagonist Chandran, like many young men of his time, grapples with the limitations and frustrations of a Western-style education. This system, which is heavily influenced by British models, often leaves students disillusioned, struggling with their identities as they try to reconcile their traditional upbringing with the education they receive. Through these characters, Narayan critiques the colonial education system that placed value on Western thought while disregarding Indian knowledge and culture.

### **2.2. Colonial Authority and the Legal System**

The influence of colonialism in Narayan's novels is also evident in the legal and administrative structures that were inherited from British rule. The novels often show characters who are caught within the complexities and inefficiencies of a system shaped by colonial governance. For example, in *Swami and Friends*, Swami's interactions with the British headmaster and the school's authoritarian discipline reflect the colonial power structures that were imposed on Indian society. This strict hierarchical order, where British officials and authority figures are given unquestioned power, mirrors the broader colonial system that subjugated Indians under British rule.

Additionally, in *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), Narayan illustrates the tension between traditional Indian values and the modern, Westernized legal and business practices. Jagan, the protagonist, runs a sweet shop and lives a life rooted in Indian customs, but his son, who has adopted Western ways, challenges the traditions his father holds dear. This generational divide, influenced by the legacy of colonialism, highlights the friction between colonial modernity and indigenous practices.

### **2.3. Language as a Colonial Tool**

Another important aspect of colonial influence in Narayan's works is the English language, which serves as a symbol of both colonial subjugation and modernity. Narayan wrote in English, yet his prose was deeply infused with Indian expressions, idioms, and cultural references. This blending of English with Indian vernacular reflects the complicated relationship between the colonizer's language and the colonized. While English was a tool of colonial administration, Narayan's use of it as a medium for storytelling allows him to present a nuanced portrayal of Indian life during and after colonialism.

In *The English Teacher* (1970), Narayan explores the tension between the English language and Indian culture through the life of the protagonist, Krishna. Krishna, who teaches English at a local school, struggles to balance his professional life with his personal connection to his wife and child. The novel touches upon the larger societal divide between those who embrace Western influences and those who hold on to traditional values. Through Krishna's relationship with English, Narayan subtly critiques the colonial legacy that associates Westernization with progress, while questioning its suitability for the postcolonial society.

### **2.4. The Presence of the British**

While Narayan's works do not focus on political movements or overt colonial confrontations, British figures often appear in the background, signaling the omnipresence of colonialism. In *Swami and Friends*, for example, the school's headmaster and the British officials embody the imperial authority that dictates the daily lives of the Indian population. Though Narayan does not delve deeply into the British characters' motivations or personal lives, their positions of power serve as a constant reminder of colonial domination.

In contrast to the overt political presence in the early part of his career, Narayan's later works reflect a more complex and nuanced understanding of the colonial legacy. In novels like *The Guide* (1958), the influence of British culture and practices is less direct, but still felt in the characters' navigation of personal and societal issues. The protagonist, Raju,



like many individuals in postcolonial India, is caught between the traditional Indian way of life and the allure of Western influences. Narayan subtly critiques the postcolonial condition, which is marked by the anxiety of attempting to reconcile Western modernity with traditional Indian values.

The colonial influence in R.K. Narayan's novels is pervasive, but subtle. It appears not only in the representation of colonial figures or direct references to British rule, but also in the portrayal of colonial institutions like education, law, and the use of the English language. Narayan's works provide a complex reflection of how colonialism shaped the social, cultural, and psychological landscape of India, even as the nation moved towards independence. His exploration of the tension between colonial rule and the desire for cultural autonomy continues to resonate with readers today, offering valuable insights into the lasting impact of colonialism on the Indian psyche and society.

### **III. POSTCOLONIAL REFLECTIONS IN NARAYAN'S NOVELS**

Narayan's postcolonial reflections are evident in his exploration of the complexities of identity, modernity, and the disillusionment that accompanies the transition from colonial to postcolonial societies. The postcolonial struggle for identity is particularly visible in *The Guide*, where the protagonist Raju's journey reflects a quest for self-identity amidst the changes brought about by independence. Raju's transition from a railway guide to a spiritual guru represents the challenges faced by the newly independent nation in reconciling traditional values with the allure of modernity.

In *The Guide*, Narayan also addresses the issue of cultural transformation in postcolonial India. Raju's character embodies the shift from colonial subjugation to self-determination, but his story is also one of failure and redemption. Narayan's subtle critique of postcolonial aspirations lies in Raju's eventual downfall, symbolizing the difficulties faced by individuals who are caught between the traditional and modern aspects of their identity.

In his later works, such as *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), Narayan reflects on the disillusionment that arises after independence. The novel examines the conflict between tradition and the forces of modernity, represented by the character of Jagan, a sweet vendor. Jagan's life is disrupted by his son's attempts to embrace Western values, and this familial conflict mirrors the larger societal struggle to reconcile pre-colonial cultural practices with the postcolonial quest for progress.

Through these narratives, Narayan portrays the anxiety and disillusionment that permeates postcolonial societies as they navigate the legacies of colonial rule. While Narayan's characters may not overtly engage in political struggles, their internal conflicts reflect the psychological and emotional repercussions of living in a postcolonial world.

R.K. Narayan's works, while steeped in the traditions of Indian life, also deeply engage with the postcolonial condition of India. After the end of British rule in 1947, India faced a complex set of challenges in forging its identity in a newly independent world. Narayan's novels reflect on the psychological, cultural, and societal shifts that took place in the postcolonial period, while highlighting the tensions between the inheritance of colonial structures and the aspiration for self-determined modernity. His exploration of postcolonial concerns is subtle but rich, dealing with questions of identity, cultural conflict, modernity, and the often contradictory forces of tradition and progress.

#### **3.1. Quest for Identity in the Postcolonial Era**

One of the central themes in Narayan's postcolonial novels is the quest for identity, a theme that reflects the larger national struggle in postcolonial India. After independence, India faced the challenge of reconciling its colonial past with the need to build a new, autonomous national identity. Narayan, through his characters, explores this tension between tradition and modernity, illustrating the difficulty of navigating a world that is in transition.

In *The Guide* (1958), the protagonist Raju's journey can be read as a metaphor for postcolonial India's search for self-understanding. Initially, Raju is a tourist guide who becomes a petty criminal, and later, a spiritual guru. His transformation reflects the shifting social values in postcolonial India, where individuals struggle with their own sense of identity and place in a rapidly changing society. Raju's journey from confusion to self-awareness symbolizes the larger search for meaning and cultural stability that many Indians experienced after gaining independence. His eventual recognition as a saint suggests that, despite the postcolonial disillusionment, a new sense of identity can be forged by drawing upon traditional values, but with a modern perspective.

Similarly, in *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), Narayan explores the postcolonial search for identity through the character of Jagan, a traditional sweet vendor, whose life and values are challenged by his son's Westernized beliefs. Jagan



represents the older generation, which tries to hold onto traditional ways of life and values in a postcolonial world that is moving towards modernization. The father-son conflict in the novel encapsulates the generational and ideological divide in postcolonial India, where the younger generation often sought to embrace Western ideals while the older generation clung to precolonial traditions.

### **3.2. Modernity and the Tension Between Tradition and Progress**

In postcolonial India, the tension between preserving traditional culture and embracing modernity was a significant theme. Narayan portrays this conflict in several of his works, reflecting the complexities that arose as India sought to modernize while remaining anchored in its cultural past. The tension is apparent in his exploration of characters who find themselves torn between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern.

In *The English Teacher* (1970), Krishna, the protagonist, is an English teacher at a school in Malgudi. His life is marked by a struggle between the familiar, traditional Indian way of life and the more Westernized, modern outlook promoted by the colonial educational system. As Krishna grapples with personal loss and seeks to communicate with his deceased wife, his spiritual quest represents a desire to return to traditional values while also coming to terms with the modern world. The novel thus illustrates the postcolonial dilemma of balancing respect for tradition with the pressures of modernity.

This theme is also evident in *Swami and Friends* (1935), Narayan's first novel, where Swami's schooling under the British system contrasts with his home life, deeply rooted in Indian traditions. The clash between Swami's indigenous family and his experiences at the British-run school serves as an early reflection of postcolonial struggles—how Indian children were caught between two worlds: the traditional one at home and the modern one imposed by British rule. Although this novel is set during colonial times, it anticipates the postcolonial conflict over cultural identity that would unfold after independence.

### **3.3. Disillusionment and Social Transformation**

In postcolonial societies, the excitement and optimism of gaining independence were often tempered by disillusionment as the new nation struggled with issues like poverty, corruption, and the complexities of modernity. Narayan subtly critiques this post-independence disillusionment through the everyday lives of his characters, who navigate personal and societal struggles in a world still burdened by colonial legacies.

In *The Guide*, Raju's fall from grace, from a corrupt railway guide to a self-proclaimed holy man, mirrors the national disillusionment with the failure of postcolonial reforms and the hollow promises of modernization. The novel critiques the false hopes that some postcolonial leaders and intellectuals had in achieving social and economic progress. Raju's eventual spiritual redemption can be seen as a metaphor for India's search for a deeper, more authentic connection to its roots, beyond materialism and Western ideals.

In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan's life is also marked by a sense of disillusionment. His son's desire to become a Westernized entrepreneur challenges Jagan's traditional worldview. The novel critiques the emerging postcolonial middle class, who, in their pursuit of Western-style progress, begin to lose sight of traditional values. This generational conflict represents the broader social transformation that India underwent after independence, as it sought to modernize its economy and society while grappling with the preservation of its cultural heritage.

### **3.4. Spirituality and the Search for Meaning**

A recurring theme in Narayan's postcolonial novels is the search for spiritual meaning in a world that is often marked by uncertainty and change. This reflects a broader societal quest for deeper purpose in the wake of colonial domination and postcolonial uncertainty. In *The Guide*, Raju's transformation into a spiritual guru symbolizes the way in which postcolonial societies sought to reconnect with their spiritual roots after the disillusionment of colonialism and the complexities of modernity. Raju's eventual realization that his true identity lies in helping others reflects a desire for self-realization that transcends the materialism of colonial and postcolonial society.

Similarly, in *The English Teacher*, Krishna's journey of grief and eventual spiritual awakening points to the idea that spirituality, rather than material success or Western progress, offers a path to understanding and fulfillment. Krishna's reconciliation with his wife's spirit after her death and his search for solace through meditation and prayer reflect a postcolonial yearning for spiritual roots in a world that has been fractured by colonialism and modernity.





### **3.5. The Common Man and Postcolonial Society**

Narayan's focus on the common man is perhaps one of his most significant contributions to postcolonial literature. His novels often feature ordinary individuals whose struggles represent the broader challenges faced by postcolonial society. These characters, like Raju in *The Guide*, Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets*, and Krishna in *The English Teacher*, are not extraordinary heroes or intellectuals, but rather individuals who navigate the complexities of life in the wake of colonial rule. Narayan's portrayal of the common man emphasizes the emotional and psychological challenges faced by ordinary people in postcolonial India, where change is inevitable, but the future remains uncertain.

R.K. Narayan's novels provide a rich and subtle exploration of the postcolonial condition in India. His characters grapple with the legacies of colonial rule, the struggle for identity, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the quest for spiritual meaning in an uncertain world. Through his portrayal of the common man, Narayan captures the complexity of postcolonial life, where individuals must navigate a path between the inherited colonial past and the aspirations of a newly independent nation. While his works do not provide overt political commentary, they offer a profound reflection on the emotional and psychological effects of colonialism and the ongoing struggle to reconcile modernity with cultural heritage in postcolonial India.

## **IV. NARAYAN'S DEPICTION OF THE COMMON MAN**

One of the defining features of Narayan's writing is his focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people. His novels often feature characters who are far removed from the political and social elites, yet they are deeply affected by the currents of colonialism and the postcolonial transformation. In *Swami and Friends*, Swami's experiences highlight how colonial rule permeates even the most mundane aspects of life. His interactions with the British headmaster, the school system, and the colonial bureaucracy reveal the pervasive nature of colonialism. Similarly, in *The Bachelor of Arts*, Narayan illustrates how the colonized subject's personal struggles are often compounded by a broader national context of change.

In the postcolonial era, Narayan's characters often find themselves grappling with a new set of challenges. The postcolonial man, as portrayed in works like *The Vendor of Sweets* and *The English Teacher*, faces a dilemma: how to maintain cultural authenticity in a rapidly changing world. Narayan suggests that the quest for identity is not merely a political struggle but an emotional and psychological one. His depiction of the common man serves as a microcosm of the larger national experience, where individuals attempt to navigate the complexities of modernity while remaining rooted in traditional values.

R.K. Narayan's literature is deeply rooted in the everyday lives of ordinary people, a defining feature of his works that makes them universally relatable. His portrayal of the common man reflects the complexities of individual lives in a society that is simultaneously shaped by colonialism, modernity, and tradition. Narayan's characters are typically not extraordinary heroes or intellectuals; rather, they are ordinary individuals who face the struggles and challenges of life, reflecting the broader experiences of Indian society during both colonial and postcolonial periods. In this way, Narayan humanizes the social and cultural dilemmas of India through the lives of ordinary people, exploring themes of identity, morality, love, ambition, and spirituality in ways that resonate with readers across time and space.

### **4.1. Humanizing the Ordinary**

Narayan's works focus on the lives of people who may seem insignificant in the grand social or political context, but whose personal journeys reflect universal truths about human nature. His characters are usually middle or lower class, living in small towns like Malgudi, a fictional setting that serves as the backdrop for many of his novels. Malgudi is symbolic of any typical Indian town, representing a microcosm of Indian society, with its cultural and social norms, aspirations, and limitations. By focusing on the "common man," Narayan allows readers to see the world through the eyes of characters whose daily lives are shaped by personal, familial, and societal concerns, rather than by grand historical events.

In *Swami and Friends* (1935), for instance, Swaminathan, the protagonist, is a schoolboy whose small-town life revolves around the familiar struggles of childhood: school exams, friendships, family dynamics, and a sense of personal autonomy. Swami's experiences, though rooted in a particular time and place, resonate with readers because they reflect the universal concerns of youth. His personal struggles with his school life, his rebellion against authority figures, and his desire for independence symbolize the broader human experience of growing up.



#### **4.2. Moral Ambiguity and Everyday Struggles**

Narayan's common man is rarely depicted as purely good or purely evil. Instead, his characters often embody a moral ambiguity that reflects the complexity of human nature. The struggles and contradictions of his characters—whether they are trying to balance personal desires with societal expectations, or whether they are grappling with the expectations imposed on them by colonial or postcolonial structures—create rich, multidimensional portraits.

In *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), for example, the protagonist Chandran navigates his youthful rebellion against societal expectations while trying to find his place in the world. He struggles with the rigidities of the educational system, which he sees as an imposition of colonial values, and attempts to reconcile his desire for a meaningful life with the realities of a traditional Indian family structure. His journey from youthful idealism to mature disillusionment reflects the broader experience of India's postcolonial generation, caught between the influences of the past and the possibilities of the future.

Similarly, in *The Guide* (1958), Raju's transformation from a petty thief to a revered spiritual figure highlights the moral ambiguity that Narayan often explores in his characters. Raju, a common man who starts as a railway guide, engages in unethical practices, but later attempts to redeem himself through spiritual leadership. His journey demonstrates that ordinary people, regardless of their shortcomings, can undergo profound transformations, reflecting the human capacity for growth and change.

#### **4.3. Emotional and Psychological Depth**

Narayan's depiction of the common man is not superficial; he invests his characters with emotional and psychological depth, making them relatable and complex. His characters often face inner conflicts, doubts, and personal dilemmas that mirror the universal human experience of searching for meaning, purpose, and belonging.

In *The English Teacher* (1970), Krishna, the protagonist, is an English teacher who faces the loss of his wife and the subsequent emotional turmoil. His personal grief and spiritual journey are central to the narrative, revealing Narayan's ability to create characters who reflect profound emotional experiences. Krishna's search for peace and spiritual fulfillment highlights the emotional complexity of common people who are grappling with personal loss, societal expectations, and a desire for personal growth.

In *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), Jagan, a sweet vendor, struggles to understand his son's desire to adopt Western values and live a more modern, entrepreneurial life. Jagan's internal conflict between holding on to his traditional beliefs and accepting his son's choices speaks to the generational divide that often exists in postcolonial societies. Narayan's exploration of Jagan's psychological turmoil gives readers a deeper understanding of the emotional struggles faced by ordinary individuals in a changing world.

#### **4.4. Cultural and Societal Reflections**

The common man in Narayan's novels also serves as a lens through which to explore the cultural and societal norms of India. Narayan's characters are shaped by their social and cultural contexts, and through their experiences, the author critiques the contradictions and challenges of Indian society, both under colonial rule and in the postcolonial era.

For example, in *Swami and Friends*, the characters' interactions with the British colonial educational system reflect the ways in which colonialism shaped the lives of ordinary people. Swaminathan's experiences with his British headmaster and the educational expectations imposed on him highlight the alienating effects of British colonialism on Indian children. At the same time, the novel reflects how Indian children like Swami attempt to assert their own identities and find autonomy within a system that is meant to suppress them. Narayan's depiction of the school system as a microcosm of colonial society subtly critiques the psychological impact of colonialism on the Indian youth.

Similarly, in *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan's adherence to traditional Indian values in the face of his son's Westernized desires reflects the cultural tension in postcolonial India. Narayan uses Jagan's life to comment on the difficulties of maintaining cultural authenticity in a rapidly modernizing world. Jagan's resistance to change, though rooted in traditional values, is portrayed with a sense of empathy, illustrating the common man's emotional attachment to his heritage even as the country moves towards progress.

#### **4.5. The Common Man in the Face of Modernity**

Narayan's depiction of the common man is especially relevant in his postcolonial novels, where the clash between tradition and modernity plays a central role. His characters are often caught between the past and the present,



attempting to navigate the complexities of a changing world. This duality is embodied in characters who try to maintain their traditional ways of life while adapting to the demands of a new, modern world that often seems alien to them.

In *The Guide*, Raju's transformation from a petty criminal to a spiritual guide reflects the postcolonial search for self-identity in a world caught between the old and the new. His journey, marked by personal failings and eventual redemption, represents the larger struggle of the common man to adapt to the pressures of modernity while remaining rooted in tradition.

R.K. Narayan's depiction of the common man is one of the most compelling aspects of his literary legacy. His characters are ordinary individuals whose lives are marked by universal human experiences—love, loss, ambition, confusion, and transformation. Narayan's focus on the common man allows him to explore the emotional and psychological complexities of life in a way that makes his characters relatable to readers across different cultures and times. By grounding his novels in the lives of ordinary people, Narayan offers a profound and empathetic portrayal of Indian society, providing insights into both the personal and collective struggles of individuals navigating the legacies of colonialism, the challenges of modernity, and the search for meaning in a rapidly changing world.

## V. CONCLUSION

R.K. Narayan's novels provide rich insights into the impact of colonialism and the subsequent reflections on identity and society in postcolonial India. While his works are not overtly political, they offer a nuanced critique of both colonialism and the postcolonial condition. Narayan's characters, caught between the legacies of British rule and the aspirations of a newly independent nation, navigate a world of complex cultural and social tensions. His writing, characterized by simplicity, compassion, and subtle humor, offers a profound exploration of the human experience in the face of colonial domination and postcolonial transformation. Through his portrayal of the common man, Narayan provides a unique perspective on the emotional and psychological impact of colonialism, making his works a significant contribution to both colonial and postcolonial literature.

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