

**“A Critical Analysis of Socio-Cultural Elements and Traditional Practices in the Rural Background of R. K. Narayan’s Fiction”****Abstract****Deepti Soni**
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This research focuses on the analysis of socio-cultural elements and traditions situated within the rural background depicted in R. K. Narayan’s novels. The primary objective of this study is to understand how Narayan, through his fiction, has portrayed the structure, value systems, and cultural continuity of Indian rural life. This research employs a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical methodology, involving an in-depth textual analysis of selected novels: “The Guide”, “The Bachelor of Arts”, “The English Teacher”, “The Dark Room”, and “The Vendor of Sweets”. The study reveals that Narayan’s literature portrays the daily life, familial relationships, religious beliefs, and community structures of rural society with both sensitivity and simplicity. The fictional town of Malgudi, created by him, emerges as a representative symbol of Indian rural and semi-urban life, articulating cultural identity, social behavior, and moral values. The research also observes that Narayan’s depiction of rural life is not strictly realistic, but rather exemplifies a form of "selective realism," wherein he places greater emphasis on human experiences, emotional states, and moral dilemmas than on social complexities. His novels clearly manifest the balance between tradition and modernity, intergenerational conflicts, and the gradual processes of social change. Furthermore, this study suggests that Narayan’s works are significant not merely from a literary perspective, but also serve as valuable resources for sociological, cultural, and educational studies. Thus, this research concludes that R. K. Narayan’s fiction serves as an effective and meaningful medium for understanding the cultural roots, social structures, and human values inherent in Indian rural life.

Keywords: R. K. Narayan, Rural Life, Socio-cultural Elements, Traditions, Malgudi, Indian English Literature, Narrative

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Analysis, Selective Realism, Family Structure, Cultural Identity,
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Introduction

The portrayal of rural life has been an immensely significant and expansive theme within Indian English literature, through which authors not only depict social structures but also articulate the depth of cultural traditions, moral values, and human relationships. In this context, the fiction of R.K. Narayan stands out as particularly noteworthy, for through his fictional town of Malgudi, he has presented a vivid and realistic portrait of Indian rural and semi-urban life. His novels reveal a remarkable synthesis of the simplicity of life, the complexity of social structures, and cultural continuity. Narayan's literature is not confined merely to storytelling; rather, it serves as a powerful medium for comprehending socio-cultural realities. His characters, events, and settings deeply reflect the actualities of Indian rural life. The primary objective of the present research is to analyze the socio-cultural elements and traditions embedded within R.K. Narayan's novels, in order to understand how his literature articulates the structure, cultural identity, and moral values of Indian rural society. Thus, this study constitutes a serious and analytical endeavor to comprehend the reciprocal relationship between literature and society—an effort that proves instrumental in fostering a comprehensive understanding of Indian rural life.

R.K. Narayan's fiction effectively mirrors the transitional phase of twentieth-century Indian society—a period characterized by a continuous dialogue, a quest for balance, and, at times, a state of conflict between tradition and modernity. In his novels, the depiction of rural life transcends a mere description of external circumstances; it also illuminates the individual's inner psychological experiences, emotional struggles, and moral dilemmas. Elements such as family structure, marital systems, social prestige, religious beliefs, and community obligations play an extremely significant role in his narrative fiction. This research analyzes how Narayan portrays these socio-cultural elements through his characters and plots, and how these elements influence the behavior and mindset of rural society. Furthermore, this study clarifies that Narayan's perspective leans more towards selective realism rather than absolute realism, wherein he accords greater prominence to those aspects of social life that are intertwined with human sensibilities



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and moral experiences. Thus, this research endeavors to comprehend the literary portrayal of rural life from a profound and multifaceted perspective.

A significant dimension of this study is that it views R.K. Narayan's novels not merely as literary works, but also as social and cultural documents. In the rural society depicted by him, familial relationships, social roles, economic circumstances, and cultural traditions appear to be deeply interconnected. By analyzing all these elements, this research elucidates how Narayan's narrative literature articulates the complexities, diversities, and contradictions inherent in Indian rural life. Furthermore, the study examines how the process of social change is reflected in his novels—particularly in the context of modern education, economic development, and evolving social norms. Narayan's characters are often depicted striving to strike a balance amidst these transformations, thereby revealing the dynamic nature of rural society. Thus, this research serves as a significant foundation for socio-cultural studies alongside literary analysis, thereby further reinforcing the relevance of this inquiry.

Ultimately, the present research endeavors to establish that R.K. Narayan's narrative literature constitutes an exceptionally vital and reliable resource for the study of Indian rural life, offering profound insights into its socio-cultural elements and traditions. The rural milieu portrayed in his novels is not only significant from a historical and cultural perspective but also proves instrumental in fostering an understanding of contemporary society. This study demonstrates how literature, while serving as a mirror of society, simultaneously engages in a dialogue with it and influences social consciousness. Moreover, this research underscores the immense academic utility of Narayan's literature, highlighting its potential for effective application within the realms of teaching and research. His ability to portray complex social realities through a simple, natural, and sensitive writing style firmly establishes him as a distinguished literary figure. Thus, this introduction delineates the direction, objectives, and significance of the study, providing a robust and comprehensive foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Research Methodology

Conducted under the title "A Critical Analysis of Socio-cultural Elements and Traditions within the Rural Background of R.K. Narayan's Fiction," this study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research methodology. Its primary objective is to explore the diverse dimensions of Indian rural life through an in-depth interpretation of literary texts. Rather than relying on numerical or empirical data, this research emphasizes the "close reading" and critical study of selected novels, thereby facilitating an understanding of the social structures, cultural traditions,



familial relationships, moral values, and varied forms of human behavior within the rural society portrayed by R.K. Narayan. The methodology of the study is primarily grounded in literary textual analysis, with particular emphasis placed on contextual and thematic interpretation. Within this framework, literary devices—such as narrative structure, characterization, dialogue, symbolism, imagery, and point of view—have been analyzed to elucidate the reality of rural life and its emotive representation. Specifically, this research identifies and analyzes recurring themes such as the conflict between tradition and modernity, social customs, caste dynamics, gender roles, familial obligations, and moral convictions. R.K. Narayan’s major novels—“The Guide”, “The Bachelor of Arts”, “The English Teacher”, “The Dark Room”, and “The Vendor of Sweets”—have been selected as the primary sources for this study; through both individual and comparative analysis of these works, an attempt has been made to comprehend the enduring and evolving facets of rural society. Furthermore, secondary sources—including critical essays, research articles, books, and interviews—have been utilized to provide a theoretical foundation for the research and to incorporate various critical perspectives. Thus, this integrated research methodology endeavors to gain a profound understanding of the multifaceted nature of rural life embedded within Narayan’s fiction, while simultaneously establishing a robust link between literary analysis and social contexts.

Review of Related Literature - Contemporary Critical Perspectives on Rural Representation

In contemporary criticism, the portrayal of rural life in Indian English fiction is being examined through new and multifaceted lenses; moving beyond traditional nostalgic depictions, the village is now understood as a complex, dynamic, and contested socio-cultural site. According to Elangovan (2025), modern criticism presents rural life as an environment impacted by economic instability, migration, and ecological crises, while utilizing postcolonial theory and cultural materialism to expose its structural complexities. In this context, Kaviran (2025)—re-evaluating R. K. Narayan’s rural perspective through the lens of ethical criticism—establishes that Narayan’s writing foregrounds moral equilibrium, tempered realism, and the resilience inherent in everyday life, thereby offering an alternative perspective to the crisis-centric nature of contemporary rural criticism. Thirumalai (2025) and Kulkarni (2023) emphasize that, within modern criticism, there is a growing inclination to decipher the power relations embedded in rural life through elements such as ‘narrative voice,’ ‘silence,’ and ‘fragmentation’—a trend that challenges traditional realist perspectives. Similarly, Bose (2024) and Lakshmi (2022), adopting a gender-based critical perspective, foreground the ‘agency’ of women in rural society; they argue



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that rural women should not be perceived merely as victims, but rather as active agents of resistance—exercising their agency through dialogue, resilience, and domestic power. Advancing an ecocritical perspective, Tripathi (2023) and Narayanan (2022) view rural life through the lenses of environmental memory, ecological imbalance, and ethical responsibility, wherein the village emerges not only as a social unit but also as a moral-ecological site. Within the framework of spatial criticism, Menon (2023) and Krishnan (2022) argue that R.K. Narayan’s Malgudi is not merely a geographical location, but a symbolic space where social and moral relationships are structured. Finally, Pillai (2024), Raghavan (2023), and Venkatesh (2022) establish that Narayan’s portrayal of rural life is neither overly idealistic nor pessimistic; rather, it presents a balanced realism that effectively articulates cultural continuity, adaptation, and resilience amidst social change.

Objective of the Study

- To analyze the socio-cultural elements and traditions prevalent within the rural backdrop of R.K. Narayan’s fiction.

Rural Ambiance and Socio-Cultural Traditions in - Swami and Friends

The setting of Malgudi in R.K. Narayan’s novel “Swami and Friends” presents a vivid and profound portrayal of the socio-cultural fabric characteristic of small Indian towns with a rural ethos. This setting serves not merely as a backdrop for the narrative, but functions as an active cultural entity wherein traditions, social relationships, and community life are deeply intertwined. The streets, temples, markets, and schools of Malgudi collectively construct a social framework in which an individual's identity is not formed in isolation, but rather through a collective process. Through the experiences of Swami and his friends, it becomes evident that the development of childhood is not confined solely to the domestic sphere, but is profoundly shaped by the influence of the entire community. Elements such as the “Guru-Shishya” (teacher-disciple) tradition, respect for elders, discipline, and social propriety serve to regulate the children's behavior. Thus, the novel demonstrates that socio-cultural values occupy a position of paramount importance in rural life, playing a decisive role in the formation of an individual's personality.

The novel's portrayal of time and the life cycle further illuminates rural cultural traditions. Life in Malgudi differs significantly from the modern urban schedule, as the rhythm of time here is governed by natural cycles— such as the changing seasons, festivals, and religious rituals. Festivals like Diwali, Dussehra, and others are not merely occasions for celebration; they serve



as symbols of social cohesion, cultural continuity, and collective identity. School life, too, is influenced by these cultural cycles, making it clear that the educational system is not detached from local traditions. This cyclical perception of time is a defining characteristic of rural life, wherein existence unfolds through a continuous process of recurrence and renewal. Through this framework, Narayan illustrates that rural society—despite the encroachments of modernity—remains deeply rooted in its cultural heritage, preserving its traditions as an integral part of daily life.

The intimacy of community life constitutes a pivotal socio-cultural element within this novel. In Malgudi, every individual is an integral part of a social network where familial ties, neighborhood bonds, and local identity converge to form a robust community structure. The behavior of children is monitored not merely by their parents, but by the entire society, thereby upholding moral values and social discipline. This spirit of collectivism reflects a tradition inherent in rural society—one in which individual liberty is often subordinated to the collective interests of the community. Narayan portrays this network in an extremely natural and realistic manner, making it evident that social control in rural life is governed more by informal relationships than by formal rules. Thus, the novel demonstrates that the stability and unity of rural society are grounded in its communal framework and shared cultural values.

The natural environment also emerges in this novel as an integral part of cultural traditions. The River Sarayu, the trees, the changing seasons, and the natural scenery serve not merely as a backdrop, but as active elements that influence social and cultural life. The river becomes a focal point for religious faith, bathing rituals, worship, and social interaction, thereby highlighting the profound connection between nature and culture. In rural life, nature is not viewed solely as a resource; rather, it is endowed with cultural and spiritual significance. Narayan depicts this ecological bond with great subtlety, illustrating that rural society maintains a delicate equilibrium with natural forces. Thus, the portrayal of rural life in “Swami and Friends” emerges as a harmonious synthesis of social, cultural, and natural elements.

Social Structure and Cultural Traditions in - The Bachelor of Arts

In R.K. Narayan’s novel “The Bachelor of Arts”, the social framework of Malgudi illuminates the complex socio-cultural structure of small-town life—a milieu that closely resembles the Indian rural context. In this novel, elements such as caste, class, and occupation emerge as the primary foundations of social identity, reflecting the structure of traditional Indian society. The intellectual and religious prestige of the Brahmin class, the economic dynamism of the merchant



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class, and the utility of the working class collectively construct a hierarchical social order. This system is not confined merely to social stratification; rather, it is governed by cultural traditions that prescribe specific roles and expectations for each class. Narayan does not present these divisions in a theoretical framework; instead, he portrays them organically through the events of daily life. Thus, the novel demonstrates that, within a rural society, the social structure becomes stable and accepted through the medium of tradition.

In the novel, marriage and familial traditions are presented as central elements of socio-cultural life. The events surrounding Chandran's marriage clarify that marriage is not merely a matter of individual choice; rather, it is a social and familial institution in which caste, economic status, and social prestige play significant roles. This tradition reflects the cultural ethos of rural society, wherein marriage is regarded as a means to maintain social equilibrium and safeguard familial honor. Narayan portrays this process with profound realism, making it evident that individual desires are often subservient to social expectations. Thus, the institution of marriage serves as a vital pillar of the rural society's cultural fabric, thereby sustaining social continuity.

Education emerges in this novel as a significant socio-cultural element, acting as a bridge between tradition and modernity. University education is perceived as a vehicle for social prestige and upward mobility, yet it remains inextricably linked to traditional values. Chandran's experiences illustrate that while education endows an individual with new perspectives and aspirations, the constraints of the social structure preclude him from attaining absolute autonomy. Thus, education fulfills a dual role: it serves simultaneously as an agent of change and as a means of preserving tradition. This situation reflects the transitional nature of rural society, where the influence of modernity is evident, yet traditions remain firmly entrenched.

In the novel, public spaces—such as temples, markets, and social gatherings—serve as hubs for cultural traditions. The temple acts not only as a center of religious faith but also as a symbol of social cohesion, where people connect collectively and reinforce their cultural identity. The market serves as a medium for social interaction alongside economic activity, a place where people from diverse social strata engage in dialogue. Through these settings, Narayan illustrates that social and cultural life in rural society are deeply intertwined. Thus, “The Bachelor of Arts” presents a holistic and analytical portrayal of the rural socio-cultural fabric.



Gender Roles and Cultural Traditions in - The Dark Room

R.K. Narayan's novel "The Dark Room" offers a profoundly insightful and realistic analysis of gender roles within a rural-cultural milieu. The character of Savitri embodies the archetype of the traditional Indian woman, whose identity is defined by self-sacrifice, endurance, and unwavering devotion to her family. Her life is confined to domestic chores—a sphere strictly circumscribed by social and cultural traditions. Narayan portrays this situation with great subtlety, making it evident that the patriarchal system is not merely a matter of individual behavior, but rather a deeply entrenched cultural structure. Savitri's role demonstrates that, in rural society, a woman's identity is inextricably linked to familial duties rather than to personal autonomy. Thus, the novel exposes the socio-cultural underpinnings of gender inequality.

In the novel, religious and social traditions play a pivotal role in reinforcing gender roles. Savitri's visits to the temple, her observance of fasts, and her performance of "puja" constitute an integral part of her life, providing her with a sense of mental equilibrium and solace. However, these religious practices also serve to reinforce her traditional role, thereby highlighting that religion is not solely a matter of spiritual faith, but also a mechanism for social control. Narayan portrays these traditions with great sensitivity, making it evident that cultural practices play a significant role in perpetuating gender inequality. Thus, religious traditions serve to maintain the stability of the social structure.

In this novel, the family structure functions as the primary institution governing gender relations. Ramani's authority and Savitri's submissiveness exemplify a traditional order in which men hold the prerogative to make decisions. Savitri's thoughts and feelings are accorded no significance, thereby highlighting the fact that women's voices are socially suppressed. Narayan does not present this situation as a problem stemming from any single individual, but rather characterizes it as the outcome of broader social and cultural traditions. Thus, the family emerges as an institution that perpetuates gender inequality and stabilizes the social structure.

Savitri lacks independent means of income, rendering her unable to make decisions regarding her own life. Her attempt to leave her home proves futile, as she possesses no means of livelihood. This situation illustrates that women's independence is not merely a social issue, but is inextricably linked to economic factors as well. Narayan portrays this reality with profound realism, making it evident that economic empowerment is a prerequisite for social change. Thus, "The Dark Room" offers an in-depth analysis of the various dimensions of gender inequality within rural society.



Result of the Study

The findings of this study clearly establish that, in R.K. Narayan's fiction, the rural backdrop serves not merely as a geographical or descriptive element, but functions as a vibrant microcosm of socio-cultural structures, traditions, and community life. The rural milieu depicted in his novels—particularly through the fictional town of Malgudi—effectively brings to the fore the realities of Indian rural society. The study concludes that Narayan has made familial relationships, social obligations, and cultural traditions the central pillars of his fiction, thereby providing a framework through which the fabric of rural life can be understood. Religious rituals, festivals, marriage ceremonies, and community activities recur throughout his novels, demonstrating that cultural traditions govern not only social behavior but also moral perspectives and life values. Furthermore, social hierarchies, respect for elders, and community expectations shape individual identity and behavior, thereby proving that, in rural society, individual existence is deeply intertwined with the collective structure. Thus, the study affirms that Narayan's literature portrays the cultural soul of rural India—its intricate social relationships and the continuity of traditional values—in a manner that is both profoundly impactful and realistic.

The second significant conclusion of this study is that R. K. Narayan's portrayal of rural life is not strictly sociological or documentary in nature; rather, it is grounded in a selective and artistic realism that clearly reflects his literary objectives. In his novels, he prioritizes those social and cultural elements that serve to articulate human experiences, emotions, and moral dilemmas, while numerous complex structural issues—such as economic inequality, caste-based discrimination, and political strife—often remain confined to the background. This selective approach constitutes a distinctive hallmark of his writing style, enabling him to convey the harsh realities of rural life through a sensitive and humanistic lens, rather than presenting them in a direct, confrontational manner. Consequently, his literature highlights the positive attributes of rural society—such as communal cooperation, the stability of moral values, and cultural cohesion—while simultaneously offering subtle insights into its inherent limitations and contradictions. Furthermore, the internal conflict between tradition and modernity is vividly reflected in his novels, demonstrating that rural society is not static, but rather fluid and dynamic. Thus, the study's ultimate conclusion is that Narayan's fiction offers a sensitive, culturally rich, and partially idealized reflection of Indian rural life—one that remains deeply rooted in the social realities of its time while simultaneously articulating broader human experiences.



Implications of the Study

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that R. K. Narayan's fiction should be viewed not merely as a form of literary expression, but also as an effective medium for the socio-cultural study of Indian rural society. A significant implication of this is that literature—specifically Narayan's novels and short stories—provides an alternative and sensitive perspective for understanding the structure, traditions, and beliefs of a society. This research suggests that statistical or sociological data alone is insufficient for grasping the realities of rural life; rather, literary texts can serve as equally significant sources. The familial relationships, community life, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions depicted in Narayan's works illustrate how these elements shape individual behavior and social structures. Thus, this study establishes a profound interrelationship between literature and society, asserting that a comprehensive and balanced understanding can only be achieved by examining the two in tandem. Furthermore, it implies that literary realism does not always present the entirety of social reality but is, instead, selective; consequently, readers and researchers must take into account the literary objectives and limitations of these works when analyzing them. From this perspective, the study encourages future researchers to embrace literature as a vital tool for social inquiry and to analyze it through diverse lenses.

Another significant implication of this study is that it offers a pathway toward understanding the complex interplay between tradition and change within Indian rural society. The manner in which R.K. Narayan's works portray the balance between traditional values and modern influences suggests that social change is a continuous and gradual process, rather than an abrupt transformation. The implications of this conclusion extend to broader social and educational discourses, as it aids our understanding of how change unfolds—gradually and within specific cultural contexts—within rural societies. Furthermore, this study indicates that cultural traditions are not merely relics of the past; rather, they play an active role in contemporary social life and serve to sustain individual and collective identities. This implication holds significant value for policymakers and educationists alike, helping them recognize the imperative of factoring in local cultural contexts to ensure the success of any social or educational intervention. Concurrently, the study underscores the potential of literary texts to foster social sensitivity and human understanding—qualities that are instrumental in building a more inclusive and empathetic society. Thus, this research not only contributes to the field of literary studies but also enriches the broader landscape of social and cultural studies.



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