

# Reading R.K. Narayan Postcolonially

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R.K. Narayan was born in 1906 in British India; his first novel came out as Indians struggled for independence; he managed to get three more novels into print in the waning days of the Raj, and he produced his best work in the fifties and sixties when decolonisation became a global phenomenon. Moreover, Narayan has continued to be active as a novelist in the last three decades at a time when postcolonialism has caught on as a viable field of academic studies. It is not surprising, then, that scholars writing about Narayan should have tried to situate him, first in colonial, and then in post-colonial contexts from the time *Swami and Friends* came out in London in 1935 and he attracted significant attention as an Indian writer in English. So how does he fare when viewed from colonial and post-colonial angles? I propose to answer this question by reviewing Narayan's work and their reception, beginning with the books he wrote in British India and then moving on to the major novels he wrote after India achieved Independence.

## I

The English publisher Hamish Hamilton appeared to have consciously staked a claim for Narayan as a writer branching out in a different direction from the archcolonial Kipling by replacing Narayan's original title for his first novel, "Swami, The Tate" with *Swami and Friends*. As he pointed out in a letter, this "has the advantage of not only [being] easy to remember, but of having some resemblance to Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* with which I am comparing the book on the dust cover" (Quoted by Ram & Ram 155). Comparisons with representations of India by Western writers appeared inevitable to those looking at Narayan's novel at this time. Thus Malcolm Johnson of the American publishing firm Doubleday, explained why he would have to reject *Swami and Friends* even though he thought so highly of the book: "it is by far the best and homeliest picture of Indian life a that I

have seen, but the interest here in books on India is largely limited to such tub-thumping as Katherine Mayo's [*Mother India*] (Quoted by Ram & Ram 160). But Graham Greene put it best in his Introduction to Narayan's second novel *The Bachelor Arts* (1937) when he noted how India seemed to have eluded even the sympathetic E.M. Forster and implied that the colonizer's gaze was bound to be limited compared to the depth of the colonized's field of vision. Greene goes on to observe: "How Kipling would have detested Narayan's books" (ii), implying that the typical colonial writer could not stomach the reality of India, gesturing thereby at a direction post-colonial criticism would take in locating Narayan: he gives us effortlessly glimpses of a life lived under colonial rule which the colonial writer could or would not see, of a culture which the colonizing imagination would rather evade than confront or come to terms with.

But perhaps the most helpful comments which post-colonial critics can glean from early appreciations of Narayan are those made by Malcolm Muggeridge. This English writer had spent a great deal of time in Travancore and Calcutta and saw clearly that Narayan's early novels were about "a way of life which [had] come to pass in India as a result of century and a half of British rule there" (quoted by Ram & Ram 205). As well, Muggeridge implied here and elsewhere in a letter to Narayan himself, they were of great value as portraits of the twilight of the Raj (Ram & Ram 200). In other words, while Greene and other early admirers valued Narayan for giving them an India not visible in English writer's representations, Muggeridge is sensitive to the fact that Narayan also depicts a region fundamentally altered by the colonial process.

Writing from a postcolonial perspective in 1993, Gita Rajan makes a somewhat different point about the way Narayan registers the English presence in India in his novels. In her essay, "Colonial Literature as Oppositional: R.K. Narayan's Unconscious Specular Register", Rajan views the novelist as one "who narrates his position as other to a central, Imperial culture" (26). However, this is unconsciously done, since Rajan has Narayan shaping his novels as "socially marketable product[s]" for the centre and finds him betraying a "certain admiration for replications of Imperial power structures" (26). A novel such as *Swami and Friends* to her is an ambivalent text which simultaneously "reveal[s] an allegiance to Imperial authority (inside), and insurgence against this oppression (outside)" (27). In Rajan's

reading. Swami's rebellions against imperial authority are repeatedly aborted in the novel in favor of the colonial status quo, although she is willing to concede that Narayan has to be seen as daring and patriotic in writing about aborted rebellions against the English in 1935. To this postcolonial critic, then, when Swami attends an anti-British rally, and is inspired by a speaker to make the insurgent gesture of burning his British-made cap, only to excuse himself for this act to his father, he is revealing the contradictions in Narayan's stance as someone sensitive to the tyranny of British rule but "refusing to vocalize the independence metaphor" (34).

Narayan himself has had the occasion to take a "postcolonial" view of India. In the essay, "When India was a Colony," written after the "Raj Revival" of the eighties that Salman Rushdie, among others, had critiqued in his 1984 essay, "Outside the Whale", the novelist laments the fact that "Anglo-India apparently has a market, while a purely Indian subject has none" (*A Writer's Nightmare* 222), reflecting no doubt on the difficulties his early novels had in securing a market anywhere. Narayan shows in the essay that he has no admiration for "the glamour of the feudal trappings of the British Raj" and of misrepresentations of India and Indians in the films and television serials associated with the Raj revival. Narayan remembers the colonial Englishman as someone who, typically, "preferred to leave the Indian alone, carrying his home on his back like a snail" (223). Perhaps this is why Narayan, with few exceptions, does not bother to fictionalize the Englishman in India. He shows scant respect, too, for "Brown Sahibs" (224), and it must be said that there are few traces of them in his novels. While willing to praise high ranking Indian bureaucrats of British India for their efficiency, Narayan stresses how they had become "dehumanized, especially during the national struggle for independence, when they may well be said to have out-Heroded Herod" (225). Narayan slights Indian Anglophiles, too, for being "so brainwashed that they would harangue and argue that India would be chaos if the British left, and called Mahatama Gandhi a demagogue and mischief maker".

A close reading of *Swami and Friends* itself suggests that Gita Rajan is unfair to Narayan's portrait of Swami's father the lawyer when she reads him opposing colonial insurrection - he is just another father rebuking his son for getting into trouble! - and finds Narayan upholding the power of colonial authority through his depiction of Swami's admiration of the local

Police Superintendent who happens to be the father of his friend Rajam. True, Swami is impressed by the paraphernalia of power, but the reader should be able to see the writer's amused perspective here. Rajam himself may seem to glory in the trappings of colonial power, but it is important to note, as Rajan does not, that he has his moments when he "had a momentary sympathy for Gandhi; no wonder he was dead against the Government" (*Swami* 112). Also, far from affirming colonial authority, *Swami and Friends*, gives us negative portraits of colonizing figures as in the character of Swami's scripture teacher, the Zealot Ebenzer, who thinks it is his mission to disabuse his Indian pupils of heathenism. And while Narayan nowhere critiques the primacy of English in colonial education, he hints at the unreality of textbooks such as the one prescribed for Swami "about a woolly sheep" (*Swami*, 24)- a point which is accentuated when we read Narayan's essay "English in India" where he talks about his puzzlement as a young boy when he came across "A was an Apple Pie" in his English Primer (*A Story-Teller's World* 20).

A nuanced postcolonial view of Narayan's treatment of colonial Malgudi would therefore see Narayan reflecting the way English rule had pervaded the life of the colonized, who, even as they struggle against it politically, had willingly or unwillingly accepted many aspects of the colonizer's culture. Thus while *Swami and Friends* describes its central character as swayed by the 1930 Civil Disobedience Movement and participating with the schoolboy's unthinking zeal in it and even being expelled from school for his violence, it betrays his enthusiasm for English heroes like the cricketer Tate, institutions such as the M.C.C., and even Rolls-Royce cars at the same time. And while Swami's father scolds his son for his part in the anti-colonial movement, he does not seem to be against it and even appears to be something of a partisan for the nationalist cause. Swami may be growing up in a self-sufficient "Indian" world, but he cannot escape some amount of Anglicization in his outlook.

Which is to say, growing up under the Raj meant that English cultural icons alternated in the Indian subjects's psyche with local ones; just as a map of Malgudi town would reveal a road called Vianyak Mudali street running close to one named Lawley Extension. This is why in her recent and helpful work *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* Elleke Boehmer overstates the issue when she argues that Narayan may be using the English Languages,

but does so to "demarcate a very non-English cultural space, defined by its own beliefs and practices" (176). A more accurate observation would be to note that the early novels show an essentially Indian middle-class way of life, but one molded to an extent by more than hundred years of colonial rule.

In fact, *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, and the first part of Narayan's fourth novel *The English Teacher* taken together constitute something of a bildungsroman of a colonial upbringing where we witness consistently ambivalent responses to induction into the colonized's culture. Even though the three books have different protagonists, in all three we see the heroes simultaneously resisting or treating with suspicion some aspects of colonial culture while being influenced or stirred by some other elements in it. Thus *The Bachelor of Arts* Chandran goes to a college where he is taught Greek drama by the principal, Professor Brown, and participates wholeheartedly in the debating society but resents secretly the Professor for going through the motions of presiding over a debate. As far as Chandran is concerned, Brown's thoughts really "are at the tennis-court and the card-table in the English Club," a club which will not admit Indians out of "sheer color ignorance" (5). Nevertheless, he will freely acknowledge his liking for Brown and his admiration for his classes afterwards. Chandran is taught English by the fastidious and conceited Mr. Gajapathi, who declares at one point that "no Indian could ever write English" (24) and at another that it was a mistake to assume that critics such as Dowden or Bradley were always right about Shakespeare, implying thereby that he, an Indian, knew more than they did about the Bard.

Like *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* reflects clearly its origins in a society in ferment because of the anti-colonial movement. At a meeting of the College Historical Society, of which Chandran is the general secretary, for example, an Indian Professor alludes to the controversy about the Black Hole of Calcutta, revealing thereby the way Indian historians had begun to contest English versions of the notorious incident, but then declares confusingly that what India needed at the moment was not really "Self-Government or Economic Independence, but a clarified, purified Indian History" (37). Another Indian, Veeraswami, reads a paper blasting British rule in India and urging for their expulsion; his extremism, predictably, leads to threats of censorship on future presentations made at the Society from Professor Brown, and causes Chandran to distance himself from Veeraswami.

But while the air is thick with talk of political reform, anti-imperialist sentiments, threats of censorship, and debates about the past, present and future course of Indian history, daily life seems to be unaffected by the political turmoil and Chandran even toys with the idea of going to England for more studies !

In *The English Teacher*, Krishna, the thirty-year-old protagonist teaches students at the Albert Mission College to “mug up Shakespeare and Milton and secure high marks” (2). He resents Principal Brown’s fastidiousness about correct English and inability to use “any of the two hundred Indian languages” (3), but despite his bitterness about teaching the language and its literature, he is almost moved to tears while teaching the storm scene of *King Lear* to his Malgudi students. Unlike Narayan, who seemed to have no doubts about choosing English as his medium for creative work, and has declared unambiguously that to him “English is an absolutely *swadeshi* language” (*A Writer’s Nightmare* 26). Krishna vacillates between writing in English and Tamil, unable to make up his mind about which language he would make his name in.<sup>1</sup>

Of his early novels, the third one, *The Dark Room* (1938) is the only one which is not autobiographical, and uniquely for Narayan, has a woman as the protagonist. It is also a book which does not allude directly to the colonizer’s presence, although it is a work which records the strains created by westernization in affluent Indian families. In it the central character Savitri makes a bid to leave her philandering and bullying husband but finds at the end that she is unable to take her place in the world outside without her family.

Although *The Dark Room* has no explicit reference to the colonizer’s presence - despite the signs of westernization that are everywhere in the book - at least one critic has attempted to read it postcolonially. In *The Politics of Home : Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-century Fiction*, Rosemary Marangoly George approaches this work as one where there are many “indirect references to the burgeoning nationalism and its many attendant valorization of Indian tradition” (121). Narayan, George declares, is using the novel to critique the westernizing of India under colonial rule through his depiction of Savitri’s adulterous husband Ramini. He has succumbed to the liberated working woman Shanta Bai who quotes Omar Khayyam, detests Indian mythological films, and is devoted to Garbo and Dietrich. According to George, “Shanta Bai is portrayed in this novel as manifestation of the poverty of self-

identity that colonialism offers those who reject their : Indianness". "Indians," George argues, "is in this discourse as elsewhere, completely subsumed by the precepts of Hindu ideology" (123), thereby joining the ranks of a number of postcolonial critics who attack Narayan for upholding an essentially upper class, Brahmin, and even reactionary ideology. Narayan is seen by these critics to resist change and reveal a "conservative nationalism" (123). Shanta Bai is typical of the "loose" (i.e. immoral, Westernized) women and men in Narayan's novels" in being an outsider and in being repulsed or vanquished at the end. Narayan, George suggests, has a utopian streak in him which makes him construct a Malgudi in all his fiction which will inevitably resist change coming from outsider like Shanta Bai. To this postcolonial critic, this affirmation of tradition must be seen as a constant in all of Narayan' novels: his "reiteration of the importance of a traditionally ordered society serves to consolidate the solace offered by Hindu nationalism in 1938, as in 1995" (124). And therefore George sees Savitri in Narayan's novel reverting back to the role the novelist has assigned her even in her name - Savitri is the Hindu archetype of the long-suffering, all-sacrificing woman—and going back in defeat to her family.

The problem with George's "postcolonial" reading of *The Dark Room* though is that it is too reductive and is patently unfair to Narayan. For one thing, George does not mention that, if we leave aside Ramani, the most disagreeable character in the novel is the priest in whose temple Savitri is given a job and a place to stay - clearly Narayan has no sympathy at all for the "official" upholder of tradition and religion and caste. Also, while Shanta Bai is portrayed unsympathetically as a drifter and a wrecker of homes, at the end it is Savitris vanquished and not her. Moreover, while the westernized Shanta Bai is cast negatively and the typical Hindu wife Savitri is defeated, Savitri's close friend Gangu is shown to be triumphant in her marriage. Gangu, we are told, is training to be a film star, a professional musician, the Malgudi delegate to the All-India Women's conference, as well as a politician, Although she seems to be overambitious, she has the full support of her school teacher husband who thinks of himself as a believer in women's freedom. True, Narayan treats the couple humorously, but the marriage is working and Gangu is a happy woman. Far from showing women as constantly vanquished, *The Dark Room* offers us too the character of Poni, wife of the locksmith-thief who rescue Savitri when she tries to drown herself

after she leaves her house. Poni should be especially vulnerable since she is childless and since she and her husband come from the lowest rung of caste society, but she appears to be completely dominant and is perhaps the most likable and spirited character in the novel. To make the point directly, what Narayan had done through his treatment of the "Savitri" myth is open up discussions about the role of women in a modernizing society without telling us through the ending that all Indian women are doomed to replay the part laid out for them by tradition.

A post colonial reading of *The Dark Room* (or other Narayan novels) need not, then, assume that Narayan is completely against change and always in favour of the status quo. What is certainly true is that he registers changes in the fabric of society under the impact of colonial rule and depicts the fissures created by modernization. It is precisely his ability to portray some areas of Indian life as being transformed by Western ideas while showing how other aspects resist change that make him a major novelist. Thus George is wrong in thinking that because Shanta Bai is described as reacting negatively to Indian mythological films and preferring Hollywood ones, Narayan is slighting Westernization through a negatively cast character (George 123), since Savitri's children too declare their dislike of Indian theological films, opting instead for Hollywood productions such as the Tarzan series or *Frankenstein* or Shirley Temple movies. And while Savitri is "enchanted" by the film about a long suffering wife of Indian myths it is only her cad of a husband who approves of the patience and uncomplaining behaviour of the woman (*The Dark Room* 29).

## II

Narayan's great theme, the, is not resistance to change but the inevitability and the problematics of change in a modernizing India. *The Dark Room* is only the first of his novels where he goes back to Indian myths and legends to illustrate this theme. Reverting to the Savitri legend in this novel was part of his search for more indigenous molds for his tales, and in the novels that he wrote after India's independence. Narayan kept returning to Indian scriptural traditions to provide scaffolds for his fictions about Malgudi. It is important, however, to realize that going back to his Indian roots is not primarily an anticolonial gesture. As he observes in his essay, "English in India," the very idea of looking "at the gods, demons, sages, and kings of our mythology and epics, not as some remote concoctions but

as types and symbols, possessing psychological validity, even when seen against the contemporary background" came "under the impact of modern literature" (*A story-teller's World* 22). It is also important to note that Narayan's use of them did not mean that he would be retelling these stories without ambiguity or with the thought that the endings of these tales were already foreclosed. As he embarked on his major fictional phase after independence, Narayan would go back to the immediate and colonial past as well as founding myths to explain the present and explore routes into the future for the newly independent nation, but he would always have a very wry and ambiguous perspective on the way ancient myths applied to the present.

*Mr. Sampath* (1948), the first Novel that Narayan wrote after India's independence, is not one of his best novels, but it is an interesting attempt to represent Malgudi in the waning days of British rule and connect it with a mythical period of Indian history and arrive at a complex perspective on successive waves of colonization. The novel's central character Srinivas is a rather confused but likable journalist who gets into film-making when his printer, Sampath, involves him in a film project as its script-writer. Myth enters into the novel partly through Srinivas's meditation - his ever-wandering mind often finds an archetype in Nataraj, God of dance -and partly through the film-script Srinivas is made to write by Sampath.

Soon after Sampath persuades him to join his film production team, Srinivas wonders about a possible story-line: as he tells his wife, perhaps he would write " about our country's past and present. A story about Gandhiji's non-violence, our politics, all kinds of things" (*Mr. Sampath* 96)".<sup>2</sup> When he presents his ideas to Sampath and his Hollywood returned Chief Executive De Millo, this has become the story of "Ram Gopal, who had devoted his life to the abolition of the caste system and other evils of society. His ultimate ambition in life was to see his motherland free from foreign domination. He was a disciple of Gandhi's philosophy" (98). Not surprisingly, the production team is quite indifferent to the notion of such an idealistic script, and soon Srinivas is working on a "proper" Indian subject for a film: the story of the God Shiva, his love for Parvithi and his encounter with Kama, the God of Love. Srinivas tries to project himself into the world of the gods to make his script come alive, but the quotidian constantly keeps interrupting him. For one thing, Sampath and De Millo tamper with the myth to make it fit for

the popular cinema until it becomes almost a parody of the original. For another, Ravi, a neighbor that Srinivas has befriended, loses his job because the company he works for fires him because he misspells the name "Cholmondeley." So, instead of ruminating on the "ice-capped home of Lord Shiva" (102), he finds himself interceding on behalf of Ravi with his boss, Mr. Shilling, the Director of Englandia Banking Corporation, and remonstrating with him for acting as if the East India Company was still in business. Clearly, the ancient myths are quite remote from life in colonial India and cannot be reproduced in their essential forms anymore!

Later in the novel, Srinivas witnesses a kind of exorcism in his own house performed to drive out what appears to be evil spirits who have taken over Ravi's mind and driven him mad. As he observes the ceremony, Srinivas tells himself that he has entered a zone free from time. He imagines the whole of Indian history, from the time of the Ramayanas to the present period of Edward Shilling and his Englandia Bank, parade past him. The moral of the pageant seemed to be that India would go on and survive the latest wave of colonization: "Dynasties rose and fell, Palaces and mansions appeared and disappeared. The entire country went down under the fire and sword of the invader.... But it always had its rebirth and growth" (207). In other words, neither India's mythical past nor its more recent colonial phase mattered in the ultimate analysis since Indian history exists inevitably in a state of flux. Myths such as that of Shiva and colonial administrators such as Shilling impinge on everyday life directly or indirectly but neither can take over the present forever. Ruminating on India's multilayered history could only lead to a recognition of the country's complex heritage and its endless ability to elude typecasting.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the allusions to Gandhi and the political protests going on in India in the decade before the country achieved independence and the indignation against the English presence and arrogance exemplified by someone like Shilling, *Mr. Sampath* contains a number of other references which situate it as a novel written at a time of colonial repression and intense anticolonial feeling. There is, for instance, the declaration Srinivas has to make in court to the effect that his paper would steer clear of politics to comply with colonial policy, especially rigorously applied in India in the years before independence, and allusions to draconian press laws. There are

also references to a country in ferment when Mr. Sampath describes labor trouble everywhere. Throughout the novel, Narayan has Srinivas reflect confusingly, and at times somewhat fatuously, on these reminders of an agitated India, and on the cycle of violence which Gandhi had decided to counter with non-violence at this time. Narayan is certainly not a political novelist and is never abrasive about the colonial presence, but clearly Srinivas represents the perplexity of the sensitive individual in an India rendered frantic by the "Quit India" agitation.

*The Financial Expert* (1952), the work that followed *Mr. Sampath*, inaugurates the major phase of Narayan's work as a novelist. As Elleke Boehmer has indicated in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Narayan joins in this phase other postcolonial writers of the period who "tried to integrate the cultural life of the past with their post independence. Westernized reality" (202). Boehmer contends that, "more specifically than in his early stories, the plots of R.K. Narayan's 1950s and 1960s novels are patterned on concepts of Karma and Hindu spiritual progression" (203). But while this observation may be true, it does not preclude the possibility that Narayan uses Hindu myths and beliefs in the works of this period with, at times, considerable ambiguity. What Bruce King has observed about Narayan's use of cultural myths in his fiction is especially true of *The Financial Expert* and almost all the novels that follow: "the references to myths and cultural ideals are neither satiric nor ennobling; the novels treat Indian philosophy and legends ambiguously, leaving the implication that traditional wisdom is still true, although its truth is revealed more through absurdities than the strict application of traditional formulas to modern life" (King 181). Which is to say, in his use of Indian myths and legends Narayan is ironic in the postcolonial manner and not a traditionalist by any means.

*The Financial Expert*, for example, has an indigenous scaffold in that Narayan is intent on illustrating through the novel the scriptural injunction that a man wanting to succeed in this world could not expect to count on Saraswati, goddess of enlightenment, and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth at the same time. But Narayan approaches the traditional belief enigmatically: the central character becomes rich by following the fantastic prescription set out by a priest who may or may not be a fraud and who asks him to propitiate Lakshmi.

*The Financial Expert* contains only a few allusions to the British presence in India, but everywhere we come up with the evidence of a society being transformed under the impact of modernization. At the outset we see the central character, Margayya, making a living by acting as a "financial expert" to illiterate peasants who find taking loans directly from the local co-operative bank too intimidating. Margayya himself, however, is intimidated by the challenge offered to him by the secretary of the bank, "a very tidy young man who looked 'as if he had just come from Europe'" (16). The class divisions of society have been accentuated by such people and Margayya feels very "plebeian" because of them (20). In a fit of pique, he lectures his clients that "they must all adopt civilized ways" (24) if they wanted to survive in the new world. To be "civilized" meant to Margayya to have all the icons of colonial power: money, a car, a son studying "not in a Corporation School, but in the convent" and hobnobbing "with the sons of the District Collector of the Superintendent of Police" (29), and a house in Lawley Road where the colonial elite lived.

The backdrop to Margayya's rise to the pinnacles of financial power in the novel is Malgudi in the last decades of British rule in India; that is to say, a society in turmoil because of the war years and the agitation going on in the waning days of the Raj. It is a world of rampant corruption and go-getters where rice-merchants as well as druggists hoarded their stocks and sold them illicitly, of devious army contractors, of touts and middlemen, of black marketers and corrupt New Delhi government officials (192-3). In this world, Margayya in his incarnation as a financial wheeler-dealer and the wealthiest man in Malgudi is so indispensable that even the government courts him so that he can contribute to the War Fund, only to be repulsed by his devious adviser, Dr. Pal, who has an anti-colonial argument ready for it: "Why should we contribute to a fund with which the British and the U.S. fight their enemy - not our enemy; our enemy is Britain not Germany" (198). This is, of course, the line adopted by Congress during the war to thwart British intentions to defer talks on independence on account of the war, but Narayan is really showing the way anti-colonial arguments were being used to cover the greed of a section of businessmen. It is as if Narayan is depicting the wolves let loose as the long night of the colonial period drew to its close.

Narayan's most detailed portrait of the years leading to Indian independence his most direct engagement with political history in fiction is his subsequent novel, *Waiting for the Mahatama* (1955). Written eight years after Indian Independence, it is also a book where Narayan seems to be doing a postmortem on the roles played by Indian in their struggle for freedom and the implications these had for the future. To this end, Narayan weaves the story of his central character, Sriram, and his obsessive pursuit of the Gandhian activist, Bharati, with all the major happenings of the pre-independence years: the Quit India Movement, Gandhi's non-violent programs against British rule and for mental emancipation of all Indians, his arrests, the Dandi March, the violent struggles against the British, including Subhas Bose's program for the National Army, and the repressive response, independence itself, partition and the chaos that accompanied it, and at the end, the assassination of Gandhi.

Narayan, however, is not interested in making any anticolonial statement through the novel - there is even a memorable encounter in it between Sriram the "Quit India" activist and the planter Matheison where the expatriate Englishman has the better of the exchange with the nationalist. In a way this encounter helps us to understand Narayan's Major intention in writing *Waiting for the Mahatama* : he wants to suggest through this novel his belief that the massive problems and bloodletting that accompanied India's independence, the thwarted ideals of non-violence and the promises denied in the years that followed, were inevitable when viewed in the context of Gandhi's life and death, the nature of his followers, and the eventual dissipation of his ideals of non-violence. As the back cover blurb of the Indian Thoughts Edition of *Waiting for the Mahatama* - in all probability written by Narayan himself - has it : Gandhi's tragedy is that "he is so much greater than his followers. Most of them accept his ideas enthusiastically, and without realizing it, pervert them to suit their own coarser personalities." Thus in the counter with Matheison, Sriram shows a testiness one would not associate with an exponent of non-violence, and the dignity of the planter's response contrasts sharply with Sriram's almost violent words.

Narayan presents Gandhi as a wise, principled, and inspirational leader who knew that Indians had to change themselves and their society fundamentally if they were to achieve true independence. With the exception of Bharati, however, the Gandhi of the novel attracts followers who join his

movement more out of self-interest than love of him or India. Sriram, for example, is drawn to the movement only because of his passion for Bharati and feels lost when she is incarcerated. He drifts into violence, lets himself be guided by the unprincipled terrorist Jagadish, and becomes a convert to Subhas Chandra Bose's project of driving the British out of India by force till he is caught by the police and put into jail.

Because nearly everyone who had joined Gandhi's movement against British rule does so without a change in their hearts and minds, when independence comes India is shown to be a land where nothing much had been transformed even after the British had left. If anything, things are much worse soon after the British have quit. This is why when Sriram is released from jail and walks out of it into independent India, he realizes with a shock that nothing had changed for the better: "What was the sign that it was independent? He looked about him. The trees were as usual, the road was not in the least improved, and policeman still rode on the footboard of highway buses" (*Waiting* 149). Worse, he is told, the food situation was worrying, things were chaotic, religious riots had broken out in different parts of the country, and people were in "various difficulties and hardships" (151). Unscrupulous people like Jagadish thrive in this new world by playing up their contributions to the war of independence, even though he had managed to stay out of trouble during it while Sriram had found himself in jail as a terrorist. Only Bharati - significantly named by Gandhi "daughter of India" and weaned away by him from violence into complete devotion to his cause of non-violence and self-denial - seems to have decided to pursue Gandhi's ideals till the end.

*Waiting for the Mahatama* concludes with Gandhi's death, but because he has consented to Sriram's marriage with Bharati before the assassin gets him, the novel can be said to be not entirely pessimistic in its ending. We can assume that Bharati, a representative of the innumerable women who had joined Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and had advanced it along his lines, is going to take over the task of nation-building by looking after the children orphaned by the riots that accompanied independence. She also appears capable of enlisting Sriram in this cause and guiding him so that together they could keep Gandhi's mission alive.

Infact, the ending of the novel is so schematic that one is tempted to say that it has been conceived as a "national allegory" in the sense that

Frederic Jameson has defined the term in his much-talked about essay on postcolonial writing, "World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism." Jameson, we remember, had observed how writers of the "third world" reacted to the failure of independence movements which failed to transform themselves into genuine occasions for reform by resorting to allegory, a genre out of fashion in the west, so that "the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself" (Jameson 158). Jameson's insight allows us to note that Narayan is intent in this text in contributing to discussions on national failures in the post-Gandhi era and the path which could be taken to develop a national identity in his image. Or to put it differently through a phrase used in another context by Timothy Brennan in a discussion of the novel and nationalism : *Waiting for the Mahatama* is Narayan's most direct attempt to "explore postcolonial responsibility" even as it is presented as a story of disappointment (Brennan 63). It is also Narayan's most overtly political work on a topical issue of national importance, Gandhi's death and his legacy in post-independence India, although he would make another attempt to deal with another national issue directly in his fiction in *The Painter of Signs*, as we will soon see.

The next two novels that Narayan wrote, both among his best-known works, *The Guide* (1958) and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), move away from politics and revert to his strategy of using Hindu beliefs and myths ambiguously as scaffolds for fable-like narratives of presentday Indians. *The Guide*, thus, presents us with the story of the roguish Raju who seems to end his life on a saintly high by fasting till death for a village stricken by famine, as if he is an reincarnation of the mythical Devaka who "was a hero, saint, or something of the kind" (19) In shrewdly casting Raju's modern story - his life encapsulates the coming of the railways in South India and ends with an American film crew reporting on his apparent ascension - in the classic mold, and in suggesting wryly that the life embodied concepts of Hindu paths to beatification and sainthood, Narayan in this novel assumes that mantle of the postcolonial writer intent on using the myths of his people but in an ironic manner.

Nevertheless, *The Guide* (and its author) has come for some harsh comments from one of the leading postcolonial critics of our time, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and it is therefore pertinent to find out why she treats

the work so dismissively. Spivak wrote her essay, "How to Read a 'Culturally Different Book' with "a feminist reader or teacher in USA" in mind (Spivak 133), and she reminds them of the importance of reading a text such as this one so that its realism is seen in conjunction with an emerging sense of nationhood and as a work to be contextualized in "the neo-colonial traffic in cultural identity" (127). At the same time she would like to provide her readers with "a clue to the roadblocks to a too-quick enthusiasm for the other, in the aftermath of colonialism" (135). From such a perspective, it is quite appropriate that Spivak more or less ignores Raju's ambiguous progress from rogue to sainthood and concentrates on the presentation of Rosie, the temple-dancer turned educated but bored wife. Raju becomes infatuated with and turns impresario to as she turns into a professional "classical" dancer. Categorizing Narayan as one of the first generation of Indo-Anglian writers who are "novelists of the nation as local color" (128), dismissing the ambiguity of the ending as "a nice bit of controlled indeterminacy", accusing the Indo-Anglian writers of the first phase of producing "an immediately accessible 'other' without tangling with the problems of racism or exploitation" (130), Spivak rests her case against Narayan ultimately by describing his treatment of Rosie as an instance of the elision of the temple-dancer's predicament in society. Or as she so gnomically puts it: "the transmogrification of female dance from male-dependent prostitution to emancipated performance helps the colonial elite to engage in a species of historical (hysterical) retrospection" which produces a golden age" (135).

Like Rosemary Marangoly George on *The Dark Room*, even, more maddeningly so, Spivak critiques *The Guide* and its creator without bothering to read the novel for its own sake. Her feminist radical chic interpretation of the novel makes her inevitably treat Rosie as a subaltern who is misrepresented and not allowed to represent herself. In the novel itself though, Rosie may start as a confused and vulnerable woman but ends up as someone who finds her own voice, even if she cannot shake off her allegiance to her husband completely despite the indifference with which he had treated her. Spivak mentions repeatedly that her task in her essay is "decolonising the imagination", but seems unaware of the irony of becoming a guide herself of the elite of the western academy. In contrast, it hardly needs to be affirmed, Narayan's strength is in being rooted in his community. Spivak appears to be unaware that Narayan has written continuously for

Indian readers as well as western ones ever since he took up writing as a career. Also, as a careful reading of the ending of the novel will reveal, Narayan has the detachment necessary to laugh at Indian routes to sainthood as well as western exaltation of Indian mystics. Far from being "a local color" novelist; Narayan's treatment of the western media circus surrounding Raju at the end reveals his amusement at purveyors of the exotic and the commodification of sainthood. Spivak, hyper-serious and ultra-politically correct feminist critic bent on patronizing an elderly male novelist cannot grasp that far from being a "nice bit of indeterminacy", the ending is manic comedy about the irrational in Indian culture and its apotheosizing by a section of the west. It is surprising in this context to see how Spivak goes of on a tangent to discuss the temple-dancer in Indian culture but fails to take note of the temple-dancer Rangī of Narayan's next novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, revealing thereby a lack of familiarity with Narayan's oeuvre. Obviously, she does not have the time or the inclination to read Narayan's novels in their context or without hoisting her "revolutionary" political agenda on them

Reading postcolonially therefore should involve an appreciation of the ironic mode in which Narayan works and the complexity of his stance. The point can be made once again in discussing Narayan's use of Indian myths in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and his wry use of such stereotypes of Indians as their passivity. On the surface, this is the story of a confrontation between the narrator, Nataraj, the wily but warm-hearted and docile printer of Malgudi, and Vasu, an eccentric and hyperactive taxidermist who forces himself into Nataraj's attic and proceeds to disrupt Malgudi life and traditions. Narayan casts Vasu in the role of the demon Ravanna and pits him against the forces of orthodoxy represented by Nataraj and his friends. At the end, Vasu self-destructs in the way demons often do in myths, and Nataraj and his Malgudi friends are able to go back to a quietist mode of life.

Narayan, however, inserts into this ostensibly nonpolitical plot a number of references to issues about nation-building which stamp the novel as one exploring an issue central to postcoloniality : should the newly independent nation reject the western model of development ? To Molly Mahood, Vasu represents the modernizing westernizing option available to India which would transform Indian life at the expense of the rhythms of traditional Indian society. In the end, Mahood claims, Nataraj rejects the allure

of Vasu's apparent dynamism and "the alien political philosophies and economic aims" they signify (Mahood 113).

It is easy to see that Vasu is domineering, destructive, reckless, and anti-social and that in the course of the narrative he is alienated from almost everyone in Malgudi. But the text reveals too that Vasu is a patriot and has been an activist in the cause of Indian disobedience and in opposing British rule. Moreover, he has even been sent to jail for his nationalist zeal. Obviously, then, he cannot be, as Mahood thinks he is, the type of the neocolonialist. One notices, too, as does Nataraj, that there is much to admire in Vasu. For instance, his spirited, no-nonsense, good-humored ways appear preferable to the small-talk Nataraj's friends indulge in and the purposelessness, inactivity, and inefficiency they display. When Vasu insists that his countrymen are "spineless," and declares that they must "show better spirit" we tend to agree that he has a point (*Man-Eater* 133). His impatience with festivities of the type Nataraj has a hand in arranging to commemorate the publication of an epic poem of dubious merit composed by one of his friends is also understandable.

Significantly, Nataraj is not only attracted to Vasu, but by the conclusion of the book he has become quite energetic and combative - indeed, he starts to act like the restless Vasu and even manages to render him ineffective. As I have argued at length elsewhere, one can thus read *The Man Eater of Malgudi* as a story of identification and displacement where at the end Vasu is neutralized after stimulating Nataraj unwittingly into becoming a bundle of energy. (Alam 141-53). To put it differently, Nataraj can dispose of Vasu, once he has imbibed his activism. This suggests that Narayan does not advocate rejecting the western option completely. On the otherhand, the text does not endorse the moribund society of Malgudi, even though this is not the same thing as saying that Narayan would like to do away with it completely. Perhaps, then, Narayan's narrative is designed to indicate that Indians should get rid of their passivity and inculcate some of the west's dynamism without giving up their sociability and all of their traditions.

In *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, (as in *The Guide*), Narayan's intentions are therefore much more complex than they may appear to be and his tone polyphonic. Failure to record the novelist's ambiguous relationship to his characters and Indian myths and beliefs, the subtlety with which he views change, and the irony with which he pits western values against eastern ones.

have led critics to oversimplifications about his plots and themes and perspective on traditions, modernization, and nation-building. Even the great postcolonial writer V.S. Naipaul is drawn to such oversimplifications, as can be seen in his comments on Narayan's next novel, *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), which he interprets as a book ending with Narayan endorsing orthodox Hindu values (Naipaul 32-39).<sup>4</sup>

True, *The Vendor of Sweets* sets up tradition against disruptive, western influences apparently only to affirm orthodoxy. Tradition here is represented by Jagan, the vendor of sweets, and modernity by his spoiled son Mali who has come back from the USA not only with a Korean-American woman called Grace but also American idioms of business. Clearly, we are into a postcolonial world of cross-cultural exchanges and it is thus appropriate to find that among the oppositions presented in the novel is that between Jagan's purist concept of India and the opening up favoured by Mali's generation.

*The Vendor of Sweets* is set in the sixties, but Narayan manages to remind us of the way the colonial past has sedimented in the mind of the older generation throughout the novel by taking us into Jagan's consciousness. He does so by making Jagan thing back continually to the time he had participated in Gandhi's movement against colonial rule. Jagan had even gone to jail for it, and tries desperately to hold on to Gandhian beliefs in a world which appears to have forgotten his example. Paradoxically, Jagan is also attached to mementos of the Raj; among his prized possessions is a signed portrait of the Englishman, Mr. Noble, who had been District Collector of Malgudi, and who used to visit him for lessons in Astrology. Paradoxically, too, his canon of great writing includes Shakespeare as well as Valmiki, Bharati, and Tagore. Jagan is also drawn by instinct to the statue of Sir Frederic Lawley, an enduring icon of colonial rule in Malgudi's cityscape. Try as he might then, Jagan cannot embrace "authentic" Hindu culture and was never able to do so; his thoughts mark him as irredeemably hybrid in that colonial rule has left its stamp on him forever. No wonder his orthodox sister and brother had ostracized him for doing something as heretical as joining Gandhi and mixing with untouchables! And as he will admit occasionally: "There are bound to be changes of outlook from generation to generation. Otherwise there will be no progress" (*Vendor* 46).

As Ashok Bery has stressed in "Purity, Hybridity and Identity: R.K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*". Narayan may be setting up an opposition between westernizing and purist concepts of Indian culture, but it is "an opposition which inverts the dominant hierarchy" (Bery 53). Thus at the end of the novel Jagan may have taken refuge in a Hindu retreat as a response to a world contaminated by relationships such as that between Mali and Grace, but he by no means renounces the world and his possessions completely to do so - he cannot resist taking his cheque book along with him ! He is even willing to forgive his son and accommodate him in his house although he has defiled it by living in it with a casteless woman whom he has not even bothered to marry. Significantly, Jagan is especially sympathetic towards Grace and appreciates her attempts to be an Indian wife/daughter-in-law and is quite ready to accept her till he finds out that Mali had backed out of his promise to marry her. It is noteworthy too that the novel ends with Jagan's testament to Grace's character: "she was a good girl" (*Vendor*, 192) and offer to help her. We discover moreover that she has found a job in a woman's hostel in Malgudi. Berry's postcolonial reading of the novel, therefore, appears to be a sound one : far from being an affirmation of Hindu beliefs centering on purity. *The Vendor of Sweets* is "precisely about accommodating imperfection and hence hybridity. By destabilizing ideas of purity, it paves the way for different conceptions of identity" (berry 62).

Narayan followed *The Vendor of Streets* with *The Painter of Signs* (1976), the last of his novels to deal centrally with issues relating to India's colonial heritage and its postcolonial situation. Interestingly enough, it is also the most intertextual of his works in that it echoes in its themes and structure a number of his earlier novels. The plot, for example, where Raman, the painter of signs of the title, obsessively pursues Daisy, a woman who has dedicated herself with missionary zeal to the national issue of the seventies - overpopulation - reminds us of *Waiting for the Mahatama*, where, we remember, the protagonist Sriram is drawn inexorably to the zealot Bharati. If Bharati is inspired by the Mahatama, Daisy is a soldier in the cause of family planning promoted by Indira and Sanjoy Gandhi. Sriram's encounter with the painter Matheison in the earlier novel is clearly alluded to in this one through the book about the Anglo-Indian planter that Raman

reads. Throughout the novel, Narayan has Raman brood on philosophical as well as topical issues in the manner of Srinivas of *Mr. Sampath*. The name Daisy, of course, echoes the equally "modern" sounding Rosy of *The Guide* and contrasts with Savitri of *The Dark Room*. She, we recall, had to go back to the confines of her house unlike them.

It is a measure of Narayan's assessment of the progress made by women in India since freedom from British rule that he can portray Daisy at the end of *The Painter of Signs* as insisting on her independence and rejecting Raman, unlike Savitri, who goes back to her philandering husband, and even Bharati, who accepts the single-minded Sriram. As Shanta Krishnaswamy has emphasized in her feminist reading of the novel. "Daisy Paints Her Signs Otherwise": "It is an act of courage, not only on her part but also on the part of the novelist, given the granite harshness of Brahmin orthodoxy in the Malgudian context" (Krishnaswamy 123). Krishnaswamy no doubt overstates her case in her enthusiasm for Daisy the woman warrior, but Sadhana Allison Puranik in her fine essay, "*The Painter of Signs* : Breaking of Frontier" also notes the "radical overturning of convention" depicted through the character of Daisy, even though she is also able to see "the enigma of Narayan's outlook" which allows him to juxtapose his subversiveness with "his love of traditional elements of Indian life and art" (Puranik, 132). More critical than Krishnaswamy of Daisy's fanaticism about family planning and population control, Puranik finds Narayan making a political statement through her : "By linking Daisy with Mrs. Gandhi's India, Narayan implicitly criticize the attitude of cultural extremism apparent in the government's domestic policies"(129).

Daisy's extremism, however, is not the only indication in *The Painter of Signs* of major transformations in Malgudi's social fabric and physical features. For instance, we are given glimpses of college students who are "admirers of hippie philosophies" (*Painter*, 10). The narrator informs us how the town and its environs "was changing in 1972" (12). Raman broods on corruption and other aspects of his world which cause him anxiety. On the other hand, the drive for reform, of which family planning is manifestation, is also a cause of tension, as is the state-imposed Emergency. There is much more explicit sexuality everywhere, and *The Painter of Signs* itself is explicit about sex to a degree unprecedented in Narayan's novels. Also, people, in this world appear driven by a desire for cash as never before.

At the same time, Narayan also reminds us that the India of century-old traditions has not disappeared despite Daisy and other signs of modern times. He thus juxtaposes Daisy's radicalism with the puritanism of Raman's aunt who will not be shaken in her belief about the duties assigned to women in the shastras and who takes off for the holy sites of the Himalayas at the end. Narayan himself, it has been argued, goes back to legends once more for a scaffold for his story of the ultramodern woman : Raman is like King Santhanu in chasing Daisy who reenacts the part of the goddess he was infatuated with. She, the legends narrate, "kills her own children, "even as "Daisy in her modern incarnation, preaches population control" (King 181).

In a crucial encounter, almost midway in the novel, Daisy meets her match in hermit in a remote village and is shaken by his insight into her past. For a while, it appears as if the liberated, contemporary woman cannot stand up to the holy man of traditions. Nevertheless, we need to note that the holy man turns on her because he feels threatened by her success in spreading the message about birth control. Also, Raman detects in the hermit an immoral strain and a strange note of aggression when he asks him questions about the women who came to his cave to be cured of barrenness. Moreover, in this far-off village, it becomes obvious, Daisy in winning converts amongst women. Narayan, in other words, is indicating that even in the margins of society exemplified by the village and its womenfolk where Daisy is somewhat vulnerable, she is not by any means unsuccessful. He is not willing to have the hermit have the last word or have Daisy humiliated or viewed as an example of deviant femininity, although her extremism is never in doubt. On the contrary, it is to Narayan's credit that he is able to show through her unwavering commitment to her cause how in independent India spaces had opened up for women like Daisy which allowed them public roles so that they could endeavour to transform themselves and the lot of women in general.<sup>6</sup> As Dennis Wilder has emphasized in his recent book, *Post-Colonial Literatures in English* : Narayan treats Daisy with sympathy and shows the women of contemporary India supporting reforms, thereby characteristically reversing a stereotype (Wilder 101). Wilder's discussion of the novel is also useful because it draws our attention to Narayan's strategy of depicting the "competing ideologies of its time" (101) and the pressures they bring to bear on individuals, and because he is thereby able to contend for "the disturbing history of the book in the post-colonial context" (102).

### III

Reading Narayan's early novels postcolonially, then, takes us to stories of Indians living under colonial rule, molded by it in some instances, resisting it in others. His novels become valuable from this perspective because they present an India and Indians not represented in Anglo-Indian fiction. They also depict a region and people transformed decisively by over a century of colonial rule. As we have seen, taken in sequence the early works constitute a portrait of a colonial upbringing - the protagonists of *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, and *The English Teacher* may have different names but they reflect successive phases of growing up under British rule. In these novels and the first few novels Narayan wrote after independence, we get fairly detailed representations of Indian society in the last days of the Raj. To the postcolonial reader, these novels in general register the impact of British rule and Indian resistance while *Waiting for the Mahatma* in particular deal with the movement for independence inspired by Gandhi. This book and subsequent ones are important too because they fictionalize Indians coming to terms with independence and contemplating the legacy of Gandhi in a free country. We have noticed too that Narayan writes his novels amount other reasons, to explore postcolonial responsibility and record disappointments in building up the nation. Narayan also uses his novels to reveal Indians pursuing alternative models of nation-building. Taken as a whole, we have found that the novels consistently reflect the tensions created in Malgudi society because of the impact of modernization and deal with the appeal of, as well as the resistance to, westernization. The Narayan that this postcolonial reading has come up with is thus one who registers the inevitability of change and one who has an ambiguous and complex stance on tradition and modernity, subverting orthodoxy in some instances and showing his acceptance of timeless Indian ways in others. This is a Narayan who can set up oppositions such as that between purity and hybridity, only to unsettle them. At the same time, we have seen Narayan going back to Indian myths and beliefs to structure his tales of postcolonial India in a conscious bid to utilize indigenous moulds for his fiction. On the other hand, he will project through a novel like *The Painter of Signs* a character such as Daisy who appears determined to take India into the future.

In short, a postcolonial reading of Narayan offers us a novelist consistently dialogizing through his fiction changes in Indian society under

the impact of colonial rule and westernizing. In addition, a postcolonial reading of his novels shows a Narayan who does not habitually pit himself against such changes, but represents transformations in society and consciousness as inevitable and, in some cases, even desirable. Reading Narayan postcolonially, we could also say, makes us see a Narayan writing with historic specificity about competing visions of India in his novels without committing himself to either a reactionary or radical position, although in the final analysis he comes off as more progressive than he is often made out to be. A writer such as Naipaul who suggests that Narayan reacts to change either with despair or withdrawal and prefers quietism, or a critic like Richard Cronin, who accuses the Indian writer of "a deep-rooted conservatism, a comprehensive hostility to change" (Cronin 59), or the politically correct Rosemary Marangoly George and the radical feminist postcolonial Spivak who would perhaps endorse this interpretation of Narayan, I hope I have been able to demonstrate, have got it wrong : Narayan is a writer whose strength, specifically, is providing nuanced views of societies emerging from colonial rule to postcoloniality.

### Notes and References

1. Narayan himself never appeared to have harboured doubts about writing in English. In addition to calling it one of India's language in the essay from *A writer's Nightmare* quoted above, he has offered us a very "postcolonial account of the legitimacy of English in India elsewhere in the volume: "We have fostered the language for over a century and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own habit of thought and idiom" (179).
2. This of course, is very much like the theme Narayan himself will take up in his seventh novel. *Waiting for the Mahatma*, as we shall see a little later.
3. Compare V.S. Naipaul's very different reading of this passage in *India: A Wounded Civilization* (17). Naipaul is not prepared to allow that Narayan treats Srinivas with irony and that we should therefore have a more complex attitude to his musings than Srinivas himself.
4. As a reader of Naipaul's assessment of *Mr. Sampath* in *India : A Wounded Civilization* will have already realized, I have disagreed with his interpretation of that novel too (Naipaul, 13-19)
5. *The Painter of Signs* also looks forward to Narayan's recent novel *My Grandmother's*

*Tale* (1992) and gives us our first glimpse of the plot of this novella. Moreover, the hermit of the novel who stumps Daisy by relating her past clearly resembles the guru of *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983) : the story of the shaming of the tiger by the yogi which is part of that novel is first narrated to Raman in this one.

6. I have chosen to end my survey of Narayan's work from a postcolonial perspective with *The Painter of Signs* even though it is by no means his last novel because it is obvious to me that there is a narrowing of his range in his subsequent works. *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), for example, constricts itself by giving us the tiger's perspective on life in the forest, the circus, and with a holy man, charming and wise though it is. The slightness of *Talkative Man* (186) precludes the possibility of the complexity with which Narayan treats his themes in the fuller works. *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) in a full-length work but it too is restricted in scope. And *Grandmother's Tale* (1992), the last of his novels that I have been able to access, despite being set in the period of the East India Company's rule, is quite narrowly focussed on a family legend.

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