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**THE MALGUDI TRILOGY AND THE INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL  
CONCEPT OF THE ASRAMAS: NARAYAN'S FICTIONAL RE-  
INSCRIPTION OF THE VEDIC LIFE-STAGES**

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<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Abstract</b>
<i>R.K. Narayan, Malgudi, Asrama, Dharmasastra, Brahmacharya, Grhastha, Vanaprastha, Sannyasa, Indian philosophy, Postcolonial fiction.</i>	R.K. Narayan's semi-autobiographical trilogy— <i>Swami and Friends</i> (1935), <i>The Bachelor of Arts</i> (1937), and <i>The English Teacher</i> (1945)—occupies a central place in Indian English literature. Critics have examined these novels through postcolonial theory, comic realism, and the framework of the Western bildungsroman. Comparatively little attention, however, has been paid to their relationship with the Hindu concept of the <i>asramas</i> , the four stages of life described in Vedic and Dharmasastra traditions. Narayan's trilogy can be read productively through the lens of the <i>asrama</i> system. The three novels follow a movement that closely parallels the traditional progression of life stages. Swaminathan's experiences reflect the world of <i>brahmacharya</i> , or studentship. Chandran's aspirations and struggles align with the responsibilities of the <i>grhastha</i> , the householder stage. Krishnan's spiritual and emotional journey points toward <i>vanaprastha</i> and an incipient <i>sannyasa</i> , marked by withdrawal, reflection, and renunciation. Viewed together, the novels reveal a narrative structure shaped by an indigenous



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philosophical logic. Human experience is organised not only through psychological growth or social development but also through successive stages of spiritual maturation. The trilogy, therefore, suggests a pattern of development that differs from the assumptions of the conventional Western bildungsroman. Drawing on the work of William Walsh, Meenakshi Mukherjee, C.D. Narasimhaiah, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, and other scholars, this study contends that attention to the *asrama* framework deepens our understanding of Narayan's fiction. Such a perspective also restores a philosophical dimension that has often remained secondary in interpretations informed primarily by Western critical models.

### Introduction

R.K. Narayan's fiction is often celebrated for its ability to discover significance within ordinary life. His fictional town of Malgudi, with its Lawley Extension and Market Road, its Albert Mission College, and the banks of the River Sarayu, has become one of the most recognisable imaginative spaces in modern literature. Graham Greene famously observed that Malgudi possesses "a reality more convincing than that of many a city recorded in the annals of geography" (Greene, 1935, p. 7). However, Narayan's achievement extends beyond realistic representation. Beneath the surface of everyday life, his novels are shaped by patterns of meaning rooted in Indian philosophical and cultural traditions. This dimension becomes particularly visible in his first three novels—*Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), and *The English Teacher* (1945). When read as a connected sequence, these works reveal a developmental pattern that closely parallels the Hindu concept of the *asramas*, the four stages of the ideal human life. The movement from childhood and education to adulthood, responsibility, reflection, and spiritual withdrawal is not merely a narrative progression. It also reflects an indigenous philosophical framework that quietly informs the trilogy's structure.

The *asrama* system occupies a central place in classical Hindu thought. It is codified in texts such as the *Manusmṛti* and the Dharmasutras of Gautama and Apastamba, and further elaborated in the Upaniṣads and the *Mahabharata*. The system divides human life into four sequential stages. The first is *brahmacharya*, the period of studentship associated with learning, discipline, and celibacy. This is followed by *grhastha*, the householder stage, marked by marriage, family life, and social responsibility. The third stage, *vanaprastha*, involves a gradual withdrawal from worldly attachments. The final stage is *sannyasa*, characterised by renunciation and the pursuit of *moksa*, or spiritual liberation. Patrick Olivelle emphasises that the *asrama* system is more than a social institution. It provides a comprehensive philosophy of life and a framework for understanding the relationship between *kama* (desire), *dharma* (duty), *artha* (material prosperity), and *moksa* (spiritual liberation) (Olivelle, 1993, p. 34). The system therefore offers a way of organising human experience that is simultaneously ethical, social, and spiritual.



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Read through this framework, Narayan's Malgudi trilogy reveals a pattern that extends beyond the conventions of the modern novel. The progression of its central characters mirrors the movement through successive stages of life envisioned in the *asrama* tradition. Narayan's achievement lies in his ability to translate this philosophical logic into a modern fictional form without making it overtly didactic. The trilogy thus becomes a subtle negotiation between ancient Indian thought and the narrative possibilities of the modern novel.

### **The Asrama System: Philosophical Foundations**

Any discussion of the *asrama* system requires attention to its philosophical foundations. The concept emerges from the Vedic understanding of *ṛta*, the cosmic order that governs both nature and human society. Within this framework, the *asramas* represent a human reflection of a larger cosmic pattern. Just as the seasons follow a natural sequence, the ideal human life moves through stages of growth, fulfilment, withdrawal, and transcendence. This relationship between the individual and the cosmos is central to Hindu philosophical thought. The *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* presents the self (*atman*) as enclosed within a series of successive sheaths (*kosas*). These include matter, vitality, mind, intellect, and bliss. Spiritual development involves a gradual movement through these layers toward a deeper awareness of the innermost self.

The discipline associated with each *asrama* contributes to this process of unfolding. Life is therefore understood not as a random sequence of experiences but as an ordered progression directed toward self-realisation. As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan observes, the purpose of human existence lies in the gradual unveiling of the inner self through the responsibilities and disciplines appropriate to each stage of life (Radhakrishnan, 1929, p. 541).

The *Manusmṛti* offers one of the most systematic accounts of the duties associated with the *asramas*. During the *brahmacharya* stage, the student is expected to study the Vedas under the guidance of a guru. Self-restraint, humility, and obedience form the core virtues of this period. The stage is designed not only to impart knowledge but also to cultivate discipline and moral character.

The responsibilities of the *gṛhastha* differ significantly. The householder must sustain the family and participate fully in social life. This stage includes the performance of the five great sacrifices (*pancha-mahayajna*) and the fulfilment of obligations to gods, ancestors, guests, fellow human beings, and other living creatures. Within the traditional framework, the householder occupies a central position because the social and religious order depends upon the fulfilment of these duties.

The later stages mark a gradual movement away from worldly involvement. The *vanaprastha* begins the process of withdrawal, reducing attachment to material concerns and turning increasingly toward contemplation. The *sannyasin* carries this movement further by renouncing



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social ties and pursuing spiritual liberation. Together, these stages redirect attention from worldly responsibility to self-realisation and transcendence (Bühler, 1886, pp. 198–204).

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan regards the *asrama* system as an expression of human wholeness. In his view, it recognises that different stages of life bring different needs and responsibilities. At the same time, it maintains a larger spiritual orientation that gives coherence to the whole journey. As he observes, the system "recognises that human life has different needs at different stages and provides for the satisfaction of each without sacrificing the ultimate goal of spiritual realisation" (Radhakrishnan, 1929, p. 543).

### ***Swami and Friends and the Stage of Brahmacharya***

*Swami and Friends* is, on one level, a novel of childhood. It explores the pleasures and anxieties of school life, the intensity of friendship, and a child's attempt to navigate a world shaped by adult rules that often seem confusing or arbitrary. Its protagonist, Swaminathan, studies first at Albert Mission School and later at the Board High School in Malgudi. Read through the lens of the *asrama* system, the novel acquires an additional philosophical dimension. Swaminathan occupies the stage of *brahmacharya* in both a literal and symbolic sense. His life revolves around learning, discipline, and self-formation. His most important relationships are with teachers and fellow students, the social world traditionally associated with the student stage.

Narayan's portrayal of Swaminathan captures both the ideals and the limitations of *brahmacharya*. The boy is curious, rebellious, affectionate, and frequently inattentive. He is neither an ideal student nor a complete failure. Instead, he embodies the tensions that accompany the process of growth and education. Formation emerges not as a smooth progression but as a series of conflicts, mistakes, and gradual insights. A similar ambivalence shapes Swaminathan's relationship with authority. At different moments, he admires his teachers, fears them, and resents their control over his life. This pattern recalls the traditional *guru-sisya* relationship described in classical Hindu thought. Texts such as the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* encourage students to revere the teacher while also presenting education as a path toward independent understanding (Radhakrishnan, 1929, p. 537). Narayan's novel reflects this tension. Authority is respected, yet it is also questioned and tested through childhood experiences.

William Walsh remarks that *Swami and Friends* offers "a faithful record of the process by which the individual is shaped by institutional structures—structures that, in the Indian context, carry the weight of an ancient pedagogical tradition" (Walsh, 1982, p. 28). His observation becomes especially relevant when the novel is examined through the lens of *brahmacharya*. Education remains central to Swaminathan's development, yet the form that education takes has been profoundly altered by colonial rule. Albert Mission School exemplifies this transformation. Its English curriculum and Christian ethos set it apart from older Indian models of learning. The



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institution functions not merely as a school but also as a site of cultural displacement. Traditional conceptions of education emphasised the transmission of knowledge through a personal relationship between teacher and student. Learning carried ethical and spiritual dimensions alongside intellectual instruction. Narayan's depiction of the colonial classroom suggests a different set of priorities. Education becomes increasingly bureaucratic and disciplinary. Rather than cultivating spiritual formation, the system is directed toward administrative efficiency and the production of subjects suited to colonial governance. Swaminathan's frustrations with school, therefore, acquire a significance beyond childhood rebellion. They point to a broader tension between inherited cultural traditions and imported institutional structures. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar makes a related observation in his discussion of Narayan's fiction. He argues that the novelist's portrayal of the school system implicitly critiques the colonial appropriation of education, a sphere that Indian traditions had long associated with the moral and spiritual development of the individual (Iyengar, 1985, p. 365). Read in this context, *Swami and Friends* presents *brahmacharya* not as a preserved ideal but as a stage reshaped by the conditions of colonial modernity.

Another important aspect of *brahmacharya* is the regulation of desire. The stage is traditionally associated with celibacy and with directing one's energies toward learning and self-discipline. Swaminathan's world reflects this condition. As a prepubescent boy, he is concerned with cricket, friendship, classroom rivalries, and the everyday dramas of school life. Erotic desire has not yet entered the narrative as a shaping force. This absence is significant for the larger structure of the trilogy. Swaminathan's desires remain relatively uncomplicated and immediate. He wants success in a cricket match, approval from his friends, or relief from school discipline. The conflicts he experiences arise from childhood itself rather than from the competing demands of love, duty, and personal aspiration that dominate later stages of life.

The novel, therefore, establishes an important point of contrast. The emotional simplicity of Swaminathan's world prepares the ground for the turbulence that emerges in *The Bachelor of Arts*. Desire has not yet become a source of inner division. As C.D. Narasimhaiah observes, "Swaminathan's world is a world before desire—a world in which the self has not yet been divided against itself by the competing claims of duty and passion" (Narasimhaiah, 1969, p. 110). The observation captures a defining quality of the novel. Childhood appears as a stage of formation in which the self remains largely undivided, even if it is not entirely free from conflict.

### ***The Bachelor of Arts and the Tensions of Grhastha***

*The Bachelor of Arts* marks a decisive transition within the pattern established by the trilogy. In terms of the *asrama* system, the novel occupies the space between *brahmacharya* and *grhastha*. Traditionally, this transition is associated with *samavartana*, the ritual completion of studentship, and the individual's subsequent entry into adult social life, particularly marriage and household responsibility. Chandran, the novel's protagonist, stands precisely at this threshold. Having



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completed his education, he faces the uncertainties of adulthood for the first time. The relatively ordered world of studentship begins to give way to a more complex reality shaped by desire, responsibility, and social expectation. Much of the novel's narrative energy emerges from this period of transition. Chandran encounters experiences that were largely absent from Swaminathan's world. Romantic desire becomes a powerful force in his life. Questions of employment and livelihood acquire new urgency. Marriage appears not as an abstract social institution but as a personal and emotional concern. At the same time, Chandran is drawn toward broader reflections on identity, purpose, and the meaning of existence. The novel, therefore, captures the tensions that accompany movement from one stage of life to another. Education has ended, but stability has not yet been achieved. Chandran occupies an intermediate position between the student's discipline and the householder's responsibilities. His uncertainties and crises reflect the challenges inherent in that transition.

Chandran's attraction to Malathi provides the central turning point of *The Bachelor of Arts*. He first sees her on the banks of the Sarayu, and the encounter sets the narrative in motion. The awakening of romantic desire marks an important shift in Chandran's life. Within the logic of the *asrama* system, it signals movement toward the *grhastha* stage. Classical Hindu texts recognise desire as a legitimate dimension of human life. Both the *Kamasutra* of Vatsyayana and the *Manusmṛiti* acknowledge *kama* as a necessary human pursuit, provided that it remains guided by *dharma*. Chandran's difficulty lies not in the existence of desire itself but in the obstacles that prevent its fulfilment. His wish to marry Malathi is frustrated when the horoscopes fail to match, and the marriage negotiations collapse. The disappointment produces a crisis that is simultaneously emotional and philosophical.

Meenakshi Mukherjee identifies Chandran's predicament as part of a broader pattern within the Indian novel. As she observes, "The Indian protagonist is caught between the claims of individual desire and the requirements of a social order that is grounded in communal rather than individual values" (Mukherjee, 1971, p. 120). Chandran's experience reflects precisely this conflict. His personal aspirations come into confrontation with social expectations and inherited structures of authority. The *asrama* framework offers a useful way of understanding this tension. One of its central concerns is the relationship between *kama* and *dharma*. Desire must be acknowledged, yet it must also be integrated into a larger ethical order. Chandran struggles to achieve that balance. Unable to reconcile personal longing with social reality, he attempts to escape the problem altogether. He leaves Malgudi, shaves his head, and begins wandering through the countryside as an ascetic.

This episode is especially revealing when viewed through the lens of the *asramas*. Traditional texts insist that the stages of life should be experienced in sequence. Renunciation follows the fulfilment of worldly responsibilities; it is not intended as a substitute for them.



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Chandran's decision, therefore, represents a premature movement toward *sannyasa*. Rather than emerging from spiritual maturity, his withdrawal is driven by disappointment and emotional turmoil. William Walsh describes this episode as "a parody of genuine renunciation, motivated not by spiritual maturity but by emotional despair" (Walsh, 1982, p. 52). Lakshmi Holmstrom reaches a similar conclusion. She argues that Chandran's asceticism does not transcend desire but merely negates it. It becomes a refusal to engage with the realities of embodied existence, a position that ultimately proves unsustainable (Holmström, 1973, p. 58).

Chandran eventually returns to Malgudi and accepts an arranged marriage. Some critics have interpreted this conclusion as a surrender to social convention. Within the *asrama* framework, however, the episode carries a different significance. His return marks a delayed but necessary entry into the *grhastha* stage. The responsibilities of marriage and household life are not presented as obstacles to spiritual growth. Instead, they form an essential part of that process. A.N. Kaul captures this dimension of the novel when he argues that "Chandran's return is not a defeat but an acceptance—an acknowledgement that wisdom cannot be achieved by evading the claims of the world but only by engaging with them fully and responsibly" (Kaul, 1971, p. 207). Read in this way, the novel presents maturity not as withdrawal from life but as participation in it. Chandran's journey suggests that spiritual growth begins not with renunciation but with the acceptance of worldly responsibilities.

### ***The English Teacher and the Stages of Vanaprastha and Sannyasa***

*The English Teacher* completes the trilogy's movement through the stages of the *asrama* system. At the beginning of the novel, Krishnan serves as the *grhastha*. He is married to Susila, devoted to his daughter Leela, and employed as a lecturer at Albert Mission College. The opening chapters present the satisfactions of domestic life in considerable detail. Family relationships provide emotional fulfilment, stability, and a sense of purpose. Narayan depicts the householder stage not as a burden but as a meaningful form of participation in the world. Susila's death from typhoid shatters this stability. Her loss marks a decisive turning point in Krishnan's life. Within the traditional *asrama* framework, movement toward *vanaprastha* is generally associated with ageing and the gradual completion of household responsibilities. Narayan adapts this pattern to the realities of modern experience. In the novel, bereavement becomes the catalyst for withdrawal and self-examination.

Susila's death functions as more than a personal tragedy. It creates an existential rupture, forcing Krishnan to confront questions that had previously remained in the background of his life. The routines of work and family no longer provide sufficient meaning. His attention turns increasingly toward the nature of existence, the reality of death, and the possibility of spiritual continuity. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes, Krishnan's bereavement becomes "the catalyst of his spiritual awakening—the event that forces him to confront the ultimate questions of existence and to seek answers that the material world cannot provide" (Iyengar, 1985, p. 371).



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The second half of the novel traces the consequences of this transformation. Krishnan's attempts to establish contact with Susila's spirit move the narrative toward explicitly spiritual concerns. Within the logic of the *asrama* system, these experiences suggest an approach to the ideal of *sannyasa*. The emphasis shifts away from social identity and toward recognising the *atman* as a reality that transcends physical existence. This aspect of the novel has generated considerable critical debate. Shiv K. Kumar argues that the supernatural dimension creates an unresolved tension within the work's realist framework. In his view, the movement from social comedy to spiritual autobiography is too abrupt to achieve complete aesthetic coherence (Kumar, 1982, p. 88). Uma Parameswaran offers a different perspective. She maintains that the supernatural elements remain consistent with Indian philosophical traditions, which do not draw an absolute distinction between material and spiritual reality (Parameswaran, 1983, p. 42).

C.D. Narasimhaiah provides perhaps the most persuasive interpretation of the novel's spiritual dimension. He sees it as the culmination of a philosophical movement that extends across the entire trilogy. According to Narasimhaiah, the sequence progresses from childhood innocence through the conflicts of desire and ultimately toward spiritual insight (Narasimhaiah, 1969, p. 126). Read in this way, *The English Teacher* completes a pattern that has been developing since *Swami and Friends*. Krishnan's decision to leave the college and devote himself to educating young children carries particular significance. The experimental school he joins recalls the principles of the traditional *gurukula* system. More importantly, the decision reflects an inner transformation. His energies are no longer directed toward personal advancement or social ambition. Instead, they are invested in service, teaching, and spiritual understanding.

Through this development, Krishnan moves beyond the concerns that define the *grhastha* stage. His life begins to reflect the values associated with *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa*. Withdrawal does not take the form of complete isolation from the world. Rather, it becomes a mode of engagement grounded in detachment, selflessness, and a deeper awareness of spiritual reality. The trilogy concludes not with worldly success but with a vision of inward growth that closely parallels the final stages of the *asrama* tradition.

### **The Asrama Framework and the Form of the Novel**

The relationship between Narayan's trilogy and the *asrama* system raises broader questions about the encounter between Indian philosophical traditions and the modern novel. As a literary form, the novel emerged within the intellectual climate of Europe and is often associated with individualism, secular rationalism, and empirical observation. The *asrama* framework rests upon very different assumptions. It is grounded in a metaphysical understanding of existence that views human life as part of a longer spiritual journey extending beyond a single lifetime. The contrast between these frameworks is significant yet also productive. Much of Narayan's achievement lies in the way he negotiates their coexistence.



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Meenakshi Mukherjee's notion of the Indian English novel as a "twice-born" form offers a useful perspective on this process (Mukherjee, 1971, p. 3). In her view, the genre acquires new meanings when it enters the Indian cultural context. Western narrative conventions remain present, but indigenous traditions of thought and storytelling reshape them. Narayan's trilogy provides a compelling example of such adaptation. Each novel reflects this process differently. The episodic structure of *Swami and Friends* resists the tightly linear progression often associated with the nineteenth-century European novel. Its rhythms frequently resemble the cyclical and ritualised movement that characterises the *asrama* framework. *The Bachelor of Arts* draws upon a pattern of departure, wandering, and return that recalls narrative structures found in Indian epic and Puranic traditions. *The English Teacher* moves still further from conventional realism. Its engagement with spiritual experience, metaphysical inquiry, and inner transformation places it in conversation with traditions associated with the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

M.K. Naik identifies another important feature of Narayan's fiction. He notes its distinctive quality of acceptance, an openness to dimensions of experience that Western rationalism might dismiss as irrational or supernatural (Naik, 1983, p. 73). This quality is not merely a narrative tendency. It also reflects a philosophical orientation that aligns closely with the *asrama* worldview. The *asrama* system does not reject any aspect of human experience outright. Instead, it seeks to assign each aspect an appropriate place within a larger hierarchy of values. Desire, duty, worldly achievement, contemplation, and renunciation are all recognised as meaningful elements of life. Their significance depends upon context and stage rather than simple opposition.

A similar inclusiveness characterises Narayan's trilogy. The novels do not privilege the material world at the expense of the spiritual, nor do they subordinate everyday life to transcendental concerns. Instead, they hold these dimensions in a productive balance. Childhood, desire, marriage, grief, education, and spiritual insight all become part of a continuous process of development. Read through the lens of the *asrama* system, the trilogy reveals a vision of human life that accommodates both worldly engagement and spiritual aspiration. It is this synthesis that gives Narayan's fiction much of its enduring depth and distinctive character.

## Conclusion

An examination of the Malgudi trilogy through the framework of the *asrama* system brings into focus a dimension of Narayan's fiction that has received comparatively limited attention. Critics have rightly emphasised the novels' comic realism, memorable characters, and detailed portrayal of small-town Indian life. However, these qualities do not exhaust their significance. Beneath the surface of everyday experience lies a coherent philosophical pattern shaped by the traditional understanding of human life as a movement through successive stages of development. Viewed from this perspective, the trilogy acquires a new level of structural unity. Swaminathan's experience of *brahmacharya*, Chandran's difficult transition to *grhastha*, and Krishnan's gradual progression to



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*vanaprastha* and *sannyasa* together form a progression that closely parallels the logic of the *asrama* system. Narayan does not present this framework explicitly or in doctrinal terms. Instead, it is woven into the fabric of the narrative and expressed through the ordinary experiences of his characters.

Recognising this philosophical dimension does not reduce the broader appeal of Narayan's fiction. If anything, it helps explain its continuing resonance. The *asrama* framework offers a way to understand growth, responsibility, loss, and self-discovery that extends beyond a single cultural context. Readers from different backgrounds continue to respond to Narayan's characters because their struggles reflect widely recognisable experiences: the transition from childhood to adulthood, the challenges of desire and obligation, and the search for meaning in the face of suffering and change. The achievement of the trilogy lies in its ability to hold together the particular and the universal. Narayan draws deeply upon Indian philosophical traditions, yet he does so through forms of experience that remain accessible to a broad readership. The result is a body of fiction that speaks simultaneously to its cultural context and to enduring human concerns. Read through the lens of the *asrama* system, the trilogy reveals a carefully shaped vision of life in which worldly experience and spiritual growth are not opposing forces but interconnected stages of a larger journey.

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