
R.K. NARAYAN'S THE ENGLISH TEACHER:A JOURNEY BEYOND LIFE AND DEATH

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Abstract

Narayan was alone among the Indo-Anglian writers of fiction, who was the regular practitioner of serious comedy. In art and form his novels are not ordinary light-hearted comedies but pensive comedies. It has been considered by the critics that in his novels the gay and the serious, the tragic and the comic are blended so artistically that many a time tear, and laughters go together. It will be unjust to the introduction of Narayan, if we fail to put the trinity: Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K Narayan, apart. We may best evaluate Narayan's stature as a novelist if, and when we compare him with his great contemporaries, M. R Anand and Raja Rao. Dr. Anand is the novelist of the socio-political man; Raja Rao is the novelist of metaphysical man; while Narayan is the novelist of the common individual man. Narayan and Anand are different in their angle of vision.

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The new wave of romanticism and realism that swept over Indian literature in 1920s and 1930s had for its outstanding exponent and writer Rashipuram Krishnaswamy Narayan. True to the ambitions and aspiration of just a simple storyteller, Narayan made the novel as his medium, and this genre was to remain dominant for the Indo Anglian writer up to present day. Narayan was alone among the Indo-Anglian writers of fiction, who was the regular practitioner of serious comedy. In art and form his novels are not ordinary light-hearted comedies but pensive comedies. It has been considered by the critics that in his novels the gay and the serious, the tragic and the comic are blended so artistically that many a time tear, and laughters go together. It will be unjust to the introduction of Narayan, if we fail to put the trinity: Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K Narayan, apart.

We may best evaluate Narayan's stature as a novelist if, and when we compare him with his great contemporaries, M.R Anand and Raja Rao. Dr. Anand is the novelist of the socio-political man; Raja Rao is the novelist of metaphysical man; while Narayan is the novelist of the common individual man. Narayan and Anand are different in their angle of vision. We never find in Narayan, the angry protest, satire, and revolutionary change and the

tragic proneness of Anand. He [Narayan] is basically associated with the lower middle class of youth India, free from agonies, political conflicts and economic depressions of Anand's India. While the story of the novel is secondary for metaphysical Raja Rao, it is primary for ironic R.K Narayan. His [Narayan's] novels present the comic vision of India, especially South India. As K.R Srinivasa Iyengar avers:

He is of India, even of South India:the wayward movements of the consciousness, are all the soil of India, recognizably autochthonous.(1)

It is only *The English Teacher* written by R.K Narayan which shows the real incidents happened in his actual life. This particular book makes his dream possible that he reunites with his dead wife. The happenings in Krishana's (protagonist of *The English Teacher*) life can be easily related to the incidents in the life of Narayan. Exactly what happens with Rajam [Narayan's wife] happens with Susila [Krishana's wife]. The similar struggle traced as Hema [Narayan's daughter] was not allowed to enter her mother's room during illness; the same was being thrust on Leela [Krishana's daughter]. The writer tries to console himself through the projection of his protagonist's life, and for this reason, when this novel was published in America; it was entitled as 'Grateful to Life, and Death.' Narayan himself accepts the verisimilitude incidents of his own life with this novel in *My, Days*:

The *English Teacher* of the novel, Krishna, there is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi; but he goesshould to some extent give the reader a clue the book may not be all fiction; still most readers resist, naturally, as one always does, the transition from life to death and beyond.(2)

It is very interesting to note that *The English Teacher* is Narayan's last novel before Independence. And it was necessary at that time to the writers to write 'Quit India' between the lines and story of their works. Writing about the impending Swaraj was very much on the point of the pen when the novel was being written. Not even writers but all were trying to contribute more and finding what should be their role to get freedom. And in this atmosphere of getting freedom by hook or by crook, it was really tough time for the writers who used to write in English. Writing in English expressed a sense of guilt for choosing an alien language as their medium of expression. But in this regard, Narayan never limits himself with the themes of Swaraj, the problems of underdogs, the propaganda of untouchability, and the disturbing equations of caste, creed and religion. After all he writes the demands of literature and what Sir Sydney has said that the true end of literature is to teach and delight.

The English Teacher is full of Hindu sensibility and ideals. Narayan has frequently sketched the Indian myths like renunciation, incarnation, re-birth and the law of Karma. He firmly believes in the reality of Indian myths. His characters of almost all the novels, Srinivasa, Margayya, Nagaraj or the guide Raju, Krishana or Ramani- are deeply dived into Puranic traditions of India. In this context Mohit K. Ray writes:

The most noticeable aspect of R.K. Narayan's novels is perhaps his commitment to Hindu ideals. Religious identity in general and caste identity in particular forms of an ideological matrix from which Narayan appears to operate his consciousness. And therefore, he speaks as though from within the four walls of conflicting culture which is opposed to the all-inclusiveness of Indian culture where private (or communal) is treated as more essential than the public (or national).(3)

Spiritualism is deeply rooted in the thoughts of Narayan and it can easily be traced in his novels. He always keeps aware of the concepts like Maya, Karma, Dharma, and Moksha while providing roles to his characters. However, these concepts have failed to establish a contact with a deep sustaining source of human experience. Mulk Raj Anand writes in his erudite book *Old Myths and New Myths: Recital versus Novel* that "Narayan determines the pattern without overt intention. He makes value judgement frequently alike."(4)

Sometimes his characters also felt suffocation in the binding areas of Hindu myth and religion, particularly the females. With the feminist point of view it is always claimed that the relationship between husband and wife in a Hindu family is a one sided. Man dominates the entire family situations and woman is deprived of her fundamental rights. She struggles for her place in her family. Though Narayan time to time uses a female as a soothing instrument to keep the family harmonious and united, but she is subjected to inhuman cruelties in the hands of the orthodox Hindu family. As Marco remarks Rosie in *The Guide*, "But you are not my wife; you are a woman who will go to bed with anyone that flatters your antics."(5)

More or less Narayan's Rosie is similar to Shaw's *Candida*. Both are criticised as mental prostitutes, but is this word- prostitute- really justify the character of Rosie and *Candida*? The next question arises that, are Narayan and Shaw a rebellious writer? Though the wives [*Candida* and *Rosie*] are rebellious but not enough to cross the limits and do whatever suits them. It is clear that *Candida* is mentally mismatched with Morell but Shaw mirrors the reality that food, shelter, and cloth are supreme to feelings and freedom, and that's why he forced *Candida* to live with Morell. Again, it is proved that power is in man's hand. Is it not similar to what Browning's poetry *My Last Duchess* evoked?

Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity(6)

Going through the entire major works of Narayan, it seems that he has no such jaundiced eye as the other female biased writers have. Like a torch-bearer if he focuses on the pathetic cry of the females in the orthodox Hindu families, he makes an honest criticism also by his male characters like Raju. Raju is absolutely right in saying:

Even Sita who is recognised as ideal woman in *The Ramayana* faces similar cruelties and injustice in the hands of her husband. The cruelty of Ram is seen during the pregnancy of

Sita. With the malicious gossip in the town that Sita must have conceived from Ravana while she was in Lanka.(The Guide, 81-82)

To bind up Narayan's attitude towards feminism, it seems that he has observed carefully the mind of Indian women under the Western influences. He noticed closely the women's liberation movement that how the society is ready to accept the demands of females. Females were not only changing the quality of household but also taking part in freedom movements to unshackle herself as well as the country. Narayan was really keen observer of the development of Indian or twentieth century South Indian women's life. John Thieme correctly writes about Narayan's treatment of the female characters:

His treatment of masculinity has not received the same degree of attention, though his habitual focus on the four-fold division of the life of the twice-born Hindu, as outlined in the Manusmriti, is predicated on a male model. Consequently, bearing in mind that women were proscribed from reading Sanskrit, one would argue that this exclusion means that any discussion on his work that focuses on such codes is implicitly male inscribed. Of the novels, only *The Dark Room* has a female protagonist, though modern women appear in the characters of Bharti in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Rosie in *The Guide*, Grace in *The Vendor of Sweets* and Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*. These novels of Narayan are focusing on the development of Indian womanhood from a mere submissive housewife to modern and free woman with all this subtle change is necessary. Savitri starts the season for the identity and strives as the rebellious sprite arose in her. This struggle is led forward by Rosie, and Daisy extends to his modernization and towards social and national, missionary spirit in humanism. (7)

Moving on towards Narayan's belief in Indian, myths like- reunion, rebirth, and reincarnation, *The English Teacher*, paves a way from natural to supernatural. He presented a pure Platonic love in between the relationship of a husband and wife. The aspect, the approach, and the ambition behind writing such novel is nothing but the Platonic vision of Narayan. *The English Teacher* is a journey from Natural to Supernatural. But this journey of Supernaturalism needs no Coleridgean concept of 'willing suspension of disbelief.' Coleridge's Supernatural man deals with power while Narayan's man deals with love. Narayan firmly believes in the philosophy of life and death, and he proves the notions like union with soul after death. What in his life he has experienced after the death of his wife, here in this novel Krishna feels after Sushila's death? In *My Days* Narayan has written that how he has been assured by the spirits:

The lady wants to assure you that she exists in different states; she wants you to lighten your mind too, and not to let gloom weigh you down. She advises you not to let anxiety develop about the child. She is well, and she will grow up well. I watch her. I now see her in a room, wearing blue skirt, and playing with another child; they have three dolls between them. The lady says goodbye until next week. (*My Days*, 160 – 161)

Almost the same emotional communication is marked when dead Susila used to assure Krishna about Leela:

You fret too much about the child. Have no kind of mercy about her. When you are away to your college, you hardly do your work with a free mind, all the time saying to yourself, 'What is Leela doing? What is she doing?(8)

This should be kept in mind that this concept of Spiritualism and the existence of soul after death is not Narayan's belief in religion or spirituality only, but it has been proven by the physiological researchers, and the scientists too. The point that soul exists after even death can be sure after the critical approach of Swami Abhedananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who in his book *Life beyond Death* writes:

Pythagoras, Plato and their followers believed in the theory of transmigration and metempsychosis of the soul. He describes in an allegorical way how and where the souls go through the process of transmigration in *Phaedrus*.(9)

"The English Teacher is the song of love in marriage", (Iyengar, 370), and through his simple style of writing, Narayan has sketched the characters of the English teacher with the supreme form of love i.e. Platonic. The story is moving softly with the Indian tradition of love after marriage. Being an English teacher in the Albert Mission College, Krishna wishes to settle his family there. Susila, his wife, and Leela, his child, have to come to stay with him. He manages his house according to Susila's taste and temperament. This act is purely presented by Narayan in the mood of typical Indian love story. The Eastern husband is as eager to meet with full passion to his wife like the Western lover to his beloved. Here is the love after marriage, there marriage after love. Krishna take care of everything, likes, and dislikes, of his wife, and he is worried about the problems she has to face in train and at the station. This tension is maximizing with the minimizing time of the coming of train:

...I was facing the little Malgudi railway station in great agitation. I had never known such suspense before. (*The English Teacher*, 30)

Narayan uses the station as a stage where the hero meets with the heroin just as what happens in typical Hindi romantic movie of Late Yash Chopra. For Krishna everything around him stops working, and Susila's simple, sober, and fresh appearance stunned him:

... this is a chastened Romeo married to a sensible Juliet, this is a 'lower middle class' Ferdinand enacting married love with a rather unexotic Miranda. Because they love intensely, everything is lovely, all is lovable, and even little quarrels are suffused with poetry. (Iyengar, 368)

The happy and prosperous family has no trace of bitterness in their life, but the ray of disharmony comes with Susila's entry into the infected lavatory, and then into the temple. Infection works badly, and she takes ill by the diseases- typhoid. The novel contains stark and

unnerving tragedy with the death of Susila. And the death is the central point of the novel, to the development of the protagonist. The grim and tragic episode of Susila's death feels the novel with deep grief. However, the tragedy in the life of Krishna and Susila, is not in the vain of Shakespearean tragedy where the protagonists are responsible for tragedy in their life. Here tragedy is very much similar to Hardy's concept, that fate and chance plays a major role to shorten the shortly notes of happiness from the characters' life. Irony also plays the vital role in Narayan's fictional corpus. As Krishna's father offers him money to own a house; the couple goes in the search of house and Susila is locked in the lavatory of a prospective house. The idea of beginning a new life under own roof is shattered before it has blossomed. After this incidence, Irony triggered off and in resulted Susila's death. So, the Greek concept of tragedy is operating here for the tragedy is caused due to the working of inexorable fate. Here Susila is a victim in the hands of fate and chance. The trick of fate which kills Susila, reminded of Shakespeare's lines:

“As flies to the wanton boys, we are to the gods;
they kill us for their sport.”(10)

Some critics claim The English Teacher as an artistic failure and they charge Narayan for killing Susila. They are of the view that Susila's death could have been averted. The patient was being treated for Malaria while she was suffering from typhoid. It is really noticeable that typhoid was not incurable disease even then. Critics blame that because of autobiographical approach, Susila has to die for Rajam dies. Such critical comments declared the book as an artistic failure. But this allegation seems uncalled-for. It should be kept in mind that artistic intentions of the writer can't be questioned. If Narayan was intended to write a tragedy, he can't be asked for the death of Susila. Narayan has himself accepts in My Days that The English Teacher is very much associated with his life. If possibility and probability take place in real life that a patient dies in spite of right diagnosis and treatment, why should it not be happened in fictitious life of fiction? So, such criticism that The English Teacher is an artistic failure reflects prejudice towards the writer.

Self-development and assessment of the protagonist is the recurrent theme in Narayan's novels. Here too, Krishna is developing due to the demise of his wife. Her sudden death leaves him shattered and it is his attempt to establish a communion with her that makes him aware of his aim in life. Devoid of all worldly attachments, emotional leanings, social stature, and economic stability when Krishna reigns from the post of a lecturer, he achieves happiness. Susila, the dead wife of Krishna, succeeded in developing philosophical wisdom in her husband. The teacher, who lost all interest in living, found a new meaning of existence, where his wife, the source of his inspiration, is constantly beside him. Krishna's union with Susila's sole is really the Metaphysical union of two souls. It is not a subject of mere feeling, but deep understanding. This is the manifestation of true love, where no separation is considered as separation at all. Is it not similar that the great Metaphysical poet, John Donne writes?

“... Dull sublunary lovers love
[Whose soul is sense] cannot admit.

Absence because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we buy a love, so much refin'd
That our sleeves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

Our two soules therefore, which are one,
Though I must goe, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like goal to ayerythinnesse beate...”

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(A Valediction: forbidding mourning)(11)

Iyengar sums up the entire scene of reunion and resurrection as:

In Kalidasa's play, Dushyanta's losses Sakuntala here, and rejoining her in the Ashram of Marichi there- on the other bank of it were. Krishna too loses Susila in the flesh, yet- on the last page of the novel- she comes back to him, to be with him forever. (Iyengar, 370)

There is no harm in saying that The English Teacher is a journey from natural to supernatural and the higher philosophical understanding where the barrier between Life, and Death vanishes.

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