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The English Teacher: Narayan's Depiction of Own Spiritual Experience

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Abstract

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami is one of the most distinguished Indian novelists writing in English. He brings out autobiographical element in his novel 'The English Teacher'. This novel narrates Narayan's pains and agony that he suffered after the unexpected and untimely demise of his wife, Rajam. The novel celebrates fulfilled union, psychically extended after the wife's death and a period of desolation in between. It deals with spirituality in its own way. In the novel the spirit of Susila becomes an embodiment of divine power which brings about a total transformation in the character of Krishna. The depth of his grief and sorrow is nakedly and movingly reflected in the concluding part of the first section, through describing Krishna's response to Susila's death. The second part of the novel to the end of it describes Narayan's own spiritual experience of holding communion with the spirit of his departed wife. Leela, though a child, exerts her influence on her father. This paper is a humble attempt to prove that an artist may take inspiration for his art from his own life, and experience. The novel portrays story of Narayan's own marriage and the early death of his wife Rajam.

Keywords: Autobiographical, Transformation, Spirituality, Spiritual Experience

Introduction

R. K. Narayan, full name Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, was an Indian writer, best known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. He was a leading author of early Indian literature in English, along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. His stories were grounded in a compassionate humanism and celebrated the humour and energy of ordinary life. He made India accessible to the people in foreign countries—he gave unfamiliar people a window to peep into Indian culture and sensibilities. His simple and modest writing style is often compared to that of the great American author William Faulkner. Narayan came from a humble

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south Indian background where he was consistently encouraged to involve himself into literature. His work involves novels like: 'The Guide', 'The Financial Man', 'Mr. Sampath', 'The Dark Room', 'The English Teacher', 'A Tiger for Malgudi', etc. Narayan received many awards and honours, including the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature, the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Vibhushan, India's third and second highest civilian awards.

Narayan creates an imaginary town of a modest size and he names it Malgudi. It is situated somewhere in the Madras Province and it is dominated by orthodox Brahmin families; and this culture is well reflected in the novel. It is against this imaginary locale that Narayan casts all his characters. Narayan himself belongs to a middle-class family and so he is well conversant with their psychology and the nature of the vicissitudes they pass through. And so his characters are true to life.

Narayan's *The English Teacher* was published in 1945, seven years after *The Dark Room*. Probably it was the shattering blow that he received in the death of his wife Rajam, which rendered him incapable of sustained artistic effort, and during this interval he could write only short stories and sketches. *The English Teacher* is an autobiographical novel. This is the third and final part in the series, preceded by 'Swami and Friends' (1935) and 'The Bachelor of Arts' (1937). This novel, dedicated to Narayan's wife Rajam is not only autobiographical but also poignant in its intensity of feeling¹. The story is a series of experiences in the life of Krishna, an English teacher, and his quest towards achieving inner peace and self-development. Krishna, the central character undertakes an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual journey during the course of the novel. 'At the start of the novel he is an English teacher, living and teaching at the same school where he was once a pupil, and at the end we see him resigning his post, beginning work at a nursery school, and learning to communicate psychically with his dead wife. He learns and changes during the course of the novel in a way which he could not have predicted at the beginning. The journey takes him from a lifestyle which he found unsatisfactory to find a set of values and a way of life that he feels he can believe in wholly.'² Narayan (1974) says about this novel:

I have described. . . my experience of her sickness and death in *The English Teacher*...so fully that I . . . cannot, go over it again. . . *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fictional.

Krishna, the protagonist of the novel is an English lecturer at the Albert Mission College. For several years he has enjoyed a bachelor's life, but this changes when his wife, Susila, and their child, Lila, move in with him. Krishna's life expands to include the happy domesticity of living with his wife and child: nearly half the novel focuses on the mundane joy of his day-to-day experiences with his family. However, one day Susila contracts typhoid after visiting a dirty lavatory and dies from the illness. Krishna is destroyed by her loss but receives a letter from a

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stranger indicating that Susila has been in contact with him and wishes to communicate with Krishna. This leads to Krishna's journey in search of enlightenment, with the stranger acting as a medium to Susila in the spiritual world. The sub-plot in the novel is the story of the headmaster who attempts to change the educational system through his "Leave Alone system" of education. The headmaster exerts a distinct influence in transforming Krishna's life. It is only on his pressure that Krishna takes stock of his career and realizes that he has to do something meaningful in life. He resigns from his job as a lecturer and joins the head master in the running of his school. It is only then that he realizes that life will have meaning for him. From a man dependent on his wife and daughter for happiness, and later the medium, Krishna becomes self-reliant and realizes that happiness, or in his case, peace of mind and equanimity comes from within. His peace of mind comes to him at a time when he least expects it, i.e. when he gives up everything- cleansed himself of all worldly possessions, his wife, his daughter, a good income in the form of a respected job and salary.

The most prominent character in the novel, after Krishna and his family, is the headmaster of Leela's school. He is a champion of childhood, having devoted his life to children since receiving the prediction that he would die, and believes they are 'angels' ,the real gods on earth', and employs what he calls 'The Leave Alone System' in his school. Krishna befriends the headmaster, and although at one point he fears that the headmaster is 'a man mentally unsound'. He is drawn towards the headmaster's views, which are reinforced by his wife's psychic communication that children are more in tune with the psychic side of life than adults, and at the climax of the novel he decides to work with the headmaster in his nursery school.

The main theme of *'The English Teacher'* is life and death. 'Both Krishna and Lila lose an important member in their family. While Lila continues her normal routine, the life of Krishna is thrown out of gear. It takes a lot of effort on his part and the guidance of his late wife for him to come to terms with his wife's death'³.

The English Teacher was published in 1945 approximately seven years after 'The Dark Room' was published (1938). This novel was dedicated to his late wife, Rajam who died prematurely of typhoid in 1939. The unexpected, untimely demise of his most beloved wife, Rajam, now a mother of a little baby-daughter, left him in inconsolable sorrow and despair. It took a much longer time to recover from this traumatic shock; and Narayan's busy pen had been frozen into silence for about six long years. Narayan, like Krishna in 'The English Teacher', had an exceptionally happy marriage. He was a devoted husband to his wife Rajam and a caring father to his daughter Hema. Narayan used to feel anxious whenever they were separated from him and felt guilt for neglecting them. At this time Narayan was having difficulty establishing himself as a fulltime author and suffering financially. His happy family live helped him to endure this period of despondency and low spirits. Though they had their arguments, it was clear that

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they really cared for each other. In 'The English Teacher' Krishna has a similar relationship with his wife. Unlike Narayan, Krishna was financially secure and was happy in his profession as a lecturer of English. Their arguments centered on a clock and their suffering and patch ups shows that it is a normal aspect of married life.

Narayan was a devoted father to his daughter Hema. He has portrayed his love for his daughter through Krishna's relationship with Leela. Krishna is always anxious for the well-being of his daughter. This is evident in the scene when he tells his wife to be careful of the baby while she is getting off the train. He is very conscious about the eating habits of his daughter, as he is reluctant to buy her outside food. After returning from college Krishna spends a lot of time with her and after the death of his wife she becomes his only reason for living. Narayan was always anxious about his daughter's well being as well.

The original title of this novel as given by Narayan was "Grateful to Life and Death" but the American publisher, not pleased with the original title, suggested the present title of "The English Teacher". Narayan was so much infatuated with Rajam that he married her despite the fact that their horoscopes did not match. There cannot be a greater misfortune in the life of a young man than to have lost his most beloved wife at such an early age. It was at this time that Narayan addressed a letter to Graham Greene, stating that he had found it difficult even to write a letter and wondered how long this state would last. Narayan, in his autobiographical account, "My Days" describes 'The English Teacher' as autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction saying that "the dedication of the book to the memory of my wife should to some extent give the reader a clue that the book may not be all fiction" ⁴

Narayan's novel *'The English Teacher'* proves that people are ruled by destiny. Nowadays people do not believe in astrology. The death of Narayan's wife which was previously predicted by astrologer, make people question their conviction. In 'The English Teacher' Narayan has shown how horoscopes can predict the future. The pain Narayan suffered after his wife's untimely death is described in this novel. The extreme love Narayan felt for his wife is shown clearly in 'The English Teacher'.

Much of Narayan's personal suffering has gone into the making of this novel. It tells a love story with a difference. It narrates the domestic life of Krishna a lecturer in English in the Albert Mission College, Malgudi. Though he is thirty years old, he feels bored with life in the absence of his wife and baby daughter. They arrive after a few months, along with his mother. Krishna and Sushila, his wife, lead a happy contended life for several months. But then their house is not quite good, and so on an ill-fated day they go out on house hunting. As ill-luck would have it, Susila is stung by a flea, develops typhoid and dies after a few days. The death of Susila is a stunning blow to Krishna. He is much upset and loses all interest in life and in his work at college. The only comfort to him is his little daughter Leela, who now occupies much of

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his time and attention. He frequently wanders about a lotus-pond where he meets a Sanyasi who can communicate with spirits of the dead. Through him Krishna is able to communicate with the spirit of his dear departed Susila. Krishna is thrilled, and regains his interest in life. 'K R Srinivasa Iyengar says 'the description of Krishna's married life - the first few years of happiness, the excruciating agony during the weeks of Susila's illness, the 'last journey' to the cremation ground - is one of the most moving and flawless pieces of writing in modern English fiction. Not a word is wasted and not a word rings false. The second half of the novel, however, takes us to unfamiliar regions. Krishna's numbed misery and his wish to be both a mother and a father to Leela are understandable enough, but the experiments in psychic communication with Susila with the help of a medium introduce a whimsical or fantastic element into a story which, up to that point, had been transparently true to life.'⁵

Narayan uses simple language to describe the characters of his novels. This is the reason behind his popularity as an artist. 'Narayan is best known for his use of clean, lucid and wonderfully expressive language and he never complicated his English by mixing the flavor of Tamil or any other Indian language into it'⁶. Narayan, says Singh (2006), is an acute observer of society, and through his art he conveyed the good as well as the evil in society. Singh (2006) says that Narayan expresses human follies and eccentricities by mixing satire with gentle humour but he neither directly comment nor react to them.

A writer gets inspiration for his writing from the world around him. He cannot create great writing based on situations about which he has no knowledge. Not every piece of writing is autobiographical. The incident or people which have had impact on the author's life are expressed through his works. Writing based on reality gives the reader a sense of authenticity; it increases their knowledge about different culture and society. It proves that reality is greater than fiction. Narayan is able to extract and use the tranquil contentment out of his own marital experience. He, too, was an uninspired and unsatisfied English teacher once. His wife Rajam and their marriage transformed him both as a person and writer. The story of Krishna's life, happiness and grief are both relatable and inspirational for many. Even the flirtations with the supernatural, philosophical and metaphysical are understandable. The tragedy of human loss and the yearning to regain the lost love is not subject to mortality of flesh and bones. Narayan gives a theory of death where it is just the culmination of the physical existence. The soul remains eternal and preserves the emotional synapses within it.

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