

The ‘Identity’ In R. K. Narayan’s *The English Teacher*: A Critique

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R. K. Narayan’s *The English Teacher* appeared seven years after his last novel, *The Dark Room*. It was published in the year 1945 by Eyre & Spottiswoode, where Graham Greene was a Director. It is dedicated to his Rajam. Now, the question that naturally comes to our mind is if it is autobiographical in content and theme. For a precise and appropriate answer, it is better to go to the view of the author himself. Now, it is quite clear that *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in theme and content. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher* constitute a trilogy. In this context there is little difference between Swami, Chandran and Krishnan. The hero in the first stage is the schoolboy, then in the second stage, he is a student of B.A. final and finally he enters into the world and starts working as a lecturer in English at Albert Mission College. Professor Narasimhaiah rightly observes:

‘The English Teacher is logical sequence to The Bachelor of Arts and one may without loss skip the intervening The Dark Room which for all its pathos develops melodramatically and has a didactic ending’. [Narsimhaiah, C. D.: 1969]

At the outset of the novel, we become familiar with the mechanical routine life of Krishnan. Though he is hardly thirty years, yet his life is dull and dreary. He gets up at eight daily, reads for the fiftieth time Milton, Carlyle and Shakespeare, looks through his composition books, swallows a meal, dresses up and rushes out of his hostel room as soon as the second bell rings at the college. During the four hours of work, he admonishes, cajoles and brow-beats –

‘a few hundred boys of Albert Mission College so that they might mug up Shakespeare and Milton and secure highmarks’

This process saves adverse remarks from his chiefs. When the college hours are over, he returns to his hostel room, chats with his colleagues, indulges in lengthy discussions and finally goes to bed at night.

After a few months, there occurs a change – an agreeable change, in his life. Krishnan leaves the hostel for good and sets up his independent family life in a house which he takes on rent. His mother comes from the village and settles things in their proper places. She has come mainly to guide and assist things to Krishnan’s wife, Susila, in domestic work. She stays with her for two months and trains her up in home-keeping. Susila and Krishnan lead a happy and balanced life routine. In the evening, he returns home when his classes are over to find that Susila and the child, Leela are waiting for him. He then takes his bath, puts on fresh clothes, enjoys the night they relax in the hall and discuss merrily the college affairs and their neighbours. On the first of every month, Krishnan passes on a pay-pocket of one hundred rupees to Susila. This packet contains ten-rupee notes. Susila manages the affairs of the house deftly within the limited income. She draws up the monthly-budget and Krishnan follows it strictly. He found in her an expert house-keeper and a woman of ruthless determination. She often insists buying articles from co-operatives and cheap stores. She is not in the habit of spending even a shell more than an article actually deserves. She utilizes the money in her own way. The remaining amount at the end of the month goes directly to the savings bank:

Thus, life has slipped into a pleasant position. But fate was unkind to this happy couple. On one Sunday morning they decide to go out in search of a suitable house to Lawley Extension. Susila contracts typhoid there, in an infected lavatory. She dies after a prolonged illness of several weeks. Her parents and Krishna nurse her well, but his responses are not at all encouraging. Susila’s life is cut short in the prime of her youth and this causes excruciating pain in the life of Krishnan.

Susila’s death marks the end of the first-half of the novel. Thereafter, begins the second part which is essentially a dull and uninteresting part of the book. Krishnan does not send Leela to her grandparents. She absorbs much of his time and attention. He leads an aimless life. One day, a peculiar incident takes place in his life. He comes across a strange man who knows how to establish contacts with spirits in another region. In course of his sittings by the side of a lotus pond, he is in a position to elicit convincing pieces of information from his dead wife, Susila. This new and novel type of psychic contact brings about fresh charm and interest in his dull and unattractive life. These occult meetings help him in learning a lot about Susila. Now, his work becomes very light for him. He feels as if a dead load has been lifted from his mind. The days acquire many possibilities for him.

The plot of *The English Teacher* is divided into three distinct parts for the purpose of our study – the life led by Krishna before his wife joins him – the life led by him in the sweet company of his wife and child and the life led by him after his wife’s death. The last part of the novel is very probably the dullest part. It would be futile to search a sense of coherence and compactness in Narayan’s *The English Teacher*. We may go to the extent of calling it the most incoherent of all his works. The hero’s long and sustained efforts near the lotus pond and the temple for establishing contacts with his dead wife may prove to be of intense interest to the students of para-psychology.

Krishna's independent life in the hostel is a terribly busy life. During leisure hours and holidays, all have a rollicking time. Krishna discusses with other lecturer's points of common interests. Such discussions are very fruitful in the first phase of a lecturer's life.

Krishna is fond of taking a walk by the side of the Sarayu river. The rumble of the river arouses his poetic feelings and inexplicable joy. The most unpleasant part of hostel life is its bath room which annoys Krishna a great deal. An agreeable change occurs in his life with the arrival of his wife Susila and their child, Leela. Krishna bids a good-bye to hostel life and shifts to a corner house in the Sarayu Street. The story of their married life is a prose lyric on which Narayan has lavished his fine gifts as a writer. Krishna goes to the Malgudi Railway Station to receive his wife and child. His mind is full of anxiety for the safe arrival of his wife and the child.

Krishna, the lecturer, is frantically in search of a harmonious existence. He thought it fit to send his resignation letter to Principal Brown. He had further decided to make a biting attack on the whole system of education in India:

'I was going to explain why I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feel them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind. This education has reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp-followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage'.

Here, the novelist points out the difference between the East and the West and the Indian's mentality to imitate the latter blindly. Besides this, Krishna loses Susila in the flesh, but towards the end of the novel, she comes back to him, to be with him forever. According him, to be with her was a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death.

Narayan's main character in this novel is Krishna. He is a typical tragic-comic hero. The novelist has portrayed him as a man of sharp intellect and fine poetic sensibility. He lectures the undergraduate on Shakespeare, Milton, Carlyle etc. at Albert Mission College. On the first of every month, he gets a salary of rupees one hundred. This life is mechanical. It is fallen into the ruts of routine. In the beginning, he resides in a room of the college hostel. When the college hours are over, he comes back to his room and spends his time in leisurely discussions with his other colleagues who also reside there. In this way life moves onwards.\

Krishna is not serious. His teacher and departmental boss Prof. Gajpathi correctly remarks,
'You must cultivate a little more seriousness of outlook'.

Krishna is a sharp-witted lecturer. He was often asked as to why they should grow a jasmine bush in a boy's hostel. The hostel bath room was a nuisance. And Krishna often reflects to have a home of his own. In this way, he becomes fed up with hostel life.

Krishna is a poet at heart. His poetic sensibility expresses itself best in the appreciation of Susila's beauty. On a Sunday morning, they get ready to move to Lawley Extension. Susila prepares herself for the outing. She appears at the kitchen, 'like a vision, clad in her indigo saree, and hair gleaming and jasmine covered'. He consciously quotes Wordsworth to give befitting expression to her tall and slim figure:

‘She was a phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight’.

Krishna’s mother wants to take Leela with her, but he disagrees. He goes to the bus stand to see her off. Leela is also with him. They are waiting for the bus to start. At this stage his mother persists,

‘You are unpractical and stubborn’.

Kittu, as his mother affectionately calls him, is really stubborn. He resolves to face the problems arising out of the changed situation.

He is unpunctual, lazy and liberal. He attends his classes in a hurried manner even when residing in the boy’s hostel within the campus. He proposes to read a lot but fails to keep his word. During his youth, he was a lover of music, but the interest in this fine art diminished with the oppression of time. The dead soul of his wife emphasizes the role of music in establishing personal contacts. She explains briefly:

‘When I think of you or you of me I am at your side. Music directly transports us’.

Actually, gloom looms large after the death of his beloved wife. His strange friend, who was in the habit of establishing contacts with the dead, influences his life and succeeds in changing its course. Krishna’s intense interest in these unfamiliar regions really counts considerably. Numerous sittings ultimately end in the meeting of the living and the dead.

Being a keen student of English literature, Krishna is very sentimental. His differences, at times, with his wife take the shape of pleasant quarrel ending in love and compromise. His wife, Susila has sold out his dilapidated clock. He gets angry with her. At night, Krishna hears that the silence is punctuated by sobs. He goes to her room and finds her sobbing. Sentiments swell up in him, but his forbidden pride gets the upper hand and he returns to his room. But, he finds that a heavy weight is on his mind. He does not enjoy a good sleep that night.

Krishna is a man of minute observation. He can discern the merits and demerits of persons who come in his contact. He understands fully the personality of the idealistic headmaster for whose cause, he tenders his resignation from his post. He functions both as father and mother to Leela and often acts according to her wish. He goes out to a walk simply because Leela like it and it gives her a chance to meet her class-friends on the sand of the river.

Krishna is not interested in reading and understanding Shakespeare and Carlyle, he is also deeply interested in the change that must take place in the prevailing system of education in India. He is much impressed by the ‘Leave Alone System’ of education as propounded by the gentle, but hard-working headmaster of the children school. Tomorrow will be last day of his life according to the prophecy. Krishna does not believe in such things, but he has a mind to devote a good deal of his time in the education of small children. Hence, he thinks of sending his resignation to Brown, the Principal of the college. In his resignation, he attacks the prevailing mode of education and expresses his sense of revolt. He says:

‘I am up against the system, the whole method and approach of a system of education which makes us morons, cultural morons, but efficient clerks for all your business and administrative offices’.

Krishna is not greedy. To him, money is not the sole consideration of life. In his talk to Principal Brown, he says that he has no use for money. In a children school, he will willingly bear the financial loss of about twenty five rupees a month. His duty in future will be to –

‘Write poetry and live and work with children and watch their minds unfold’

The net impression of Brown regarding Krishna is very briefly summed up in his small sentence,

‘You have done admirably as a teacher of literature’.

Krishna is self-conscious. A grand send-off is arranged at Albert Mission College.

In a nutshell, *The English Teacher* proves to be the best novel of Narayan’s second phase of writing. It is the period of experimentation and evolution of the artist. Slowly yet surely, the novelist is unfolding the ‘Self’ of Krishnan and the full flowering of his genius is discussed in detail throughout the novel.

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