

R. K. NARAYAN'S *THE ENGLISH TEACHER* – A POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

R. K. Narayan has emerged as a complex writer whose limpid novels reveal unsuspected depths. He has consciously attempted to naturalize or Indianize the Western novel by transporting the traditions of linear narration, Victorian realism and the modernist psychological multi-text upon the circular and digressive structure, and the symbolical and ethical framework, of the ancient Hindu narratives. This fabular quality in Narayan's fiction confers universality and depth and extends the significance of the novels beyond their immediate small-town context. This paper gives a detailed analysis of R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* in the light of postcolonialism by pointing out the tension or the conflict that one can find between colonialism and nativism.

KEYWORDS: Indianize, Ethical Framework, Postcolonialism, Colonialism and Nativism

INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan, one of the foremost Indian writers to gain international recognition, began his literary career in the 1930s when the freedom struggle was at its peak. Therefore, what strikes in Narayan's fiction are his scattered references to the then contemporary freedom movement and the imperialistic British rule. These references, recorded, as it were, in his novels seem to tell a profoundly ambivalent story about Narayan's relation to the political and nationalist movements that were popular across India during his early writing period.

This ambivalence resulting from the writers' scattered references to politics does give room for the readers to interpret some of R.K. Narayan's novels from postcolonial perspective. However, it should be noted here that the allusions to both native and foreign cultures as found in his novels are not Narayan's conscious attempt at revealing his political commitments. Of all the references found in his novels those that refer to English discourse are of paramount importance to the present chapter. On the one hand, the reference to English discourse make it clear that the colonial rule acted so effectively as a seducer that it has weaned the natives away from their own roots. On the other hand, it served as a provocateur; so much so that the natives aggressively felt the need for freeing themselves from the clutches of the tyrannical rulers. It is the tension between the two (seducer and provocateur) forces that lends R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* the possibility of reading it as a postcolonial text.

Teacher is set in the little town of Malgudi. Its protagonist and narrator is a lecturer named Krishna, who earns a hundred rupees a month lecturing on King Lear, Milton and so on to young Indian students. The story is about the collapse and recovery of happiness. Krishna's wife Susila dies halfway through the novel – yet she comes back to be with him forever. Krishna is enabled to establish, after a long practice, a physical contact with her spirit. Gradually realization comes to him that a profound, unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life – a realization that eases the pain of his wounded

heart and enables him to come to terms with life. Thus the theme of crisis followed by reconciliation is presented here on a supernatural plane.

DISCUSSIONS

The English Teacher is full of unexpected things – the turning of each page brings a surprise. The atmosphere and texture of happiness, and above all, its exclusiveness, have seldom been so perfectly transcribed. The poignancy of the Sunday, the day out by the restaurant and by the river and inspecting the imposing empty villas, from which Susila returns mortally ill, is still felt. One weeps over the succeeding chapters. But Susila's death, as it turns out, is only to begin a second phase of love. Communications from her begin to come through once a week, in the evenings, in a little summerhouse by a lily pool, the hero sitting beside an old man, who does automatic writing.

Krishna was a lecturer in English in the Albert Mission College, Malgudi. The novel *The English Teacher* describes the life of Krishna as a teacher of English in the college. But the important part of the novel centers round the love between Krishna and his wife Susila. They were living a very happy life when suddenly Susila died of typhoid. After that Krishna concentrated himself on bringing up his daughter Leela. Then the novel takes a mystic turn. Krishna started receiving messages from his wife through a medium, a cheerful gentleman with a philosophic outlook. Every week he used to go to the medium for a sitting and he received minute instructions about the things of his house, which convinced him that they could only come from his wife's spirit. He puts up his daughter Leela to a school run by a devoted master. The master's unhappy life and his devotion to the school form a minor sub-plot in the novel.

In the end Krishna resigns his job and joins that primitive school. That very night, he could in his home, directly talk to and see the spirit of his wife because he had reached that stage of mental development.

Thus this novel, which starts as an interesting novel of domestic felicity, later gets connected to the spiritual things and philosophic discussions, which tax the patience of the readers. As a work of art this novel is weak: the mystic world of spirit robs the novel of its realism.

The characters are well worked out. Susila is a symbol of a devoted Hindu wife with whom her family and her domestic duty came first. Even the minor characters are clearly sketched. Principal Brown, who gets angry because a student spelt the word 'honour' without 'u', stands in sharp contrast with professor Sastri of logic who was more practical and made more money out of estate brokage. Even the unhappy schoolmaster inspires dignity, fills the readers with a sort of reverence. But in spirit of its artistic style, subtle humour, the novel suffers from lack of interest.

Krishna, the hero of *The English Teacher*, was a product of a system of education which makes up morons, cultural morons and his repeating mugged up notes from year to year was "a fraud practiced (on young men and women) for a consideration of hundred rupees" (5). He believed in social freedom and independence of mind and was opposed to the perpetuation of the system that crippled his imagination. He had studied English Literature and admired the wonderful writers, but he could do so only at the cost of his creativity. His soul revolted against the English education. This led him ultimately to resign his job to maintain the freedom of conscience, which actually was the real goal of Mahatma Gandhi – political freedom being only a step towards the final liberation of mind of all temptations. It is only after this standpoint is accepted that the significance of the latter half of *The English Teacher* can be understood.

Krishna came under the spell of an old man who could establish contact with dead souls. Krishna also learned that technique and started communicating with the spirit of his wife. This habit was so developed that in the last scene of the novel he got out of his bed and garlanded his wife who, he felt was smiling, standing before him.

Krishna was irked to see the English Principal Mr. Brown – who feels all- important and puts the blame for everything on Indians. The Principal made a lot of fuss about the dropping of ‘u’ from ‘honour’ by a student without realizing the irony that Americans write ‘honour’ without ‘u’. Thus the theme is the disillusionment of the Indian mind during the British regime and the consequent generation of self-consciousness.

The English teacher’s conversation to Indianism or his excessive interest in the mystery called India is not an accident. It is worked out in stages and is warranted by circumstances. *The English Teacher* opened on the note of marital bliss. In the first half of the novel, the novelist dealt with the thousand smiles, worries, trifles and follies of married life. In the latter half, after the death of his beloved wife, Krishna drifted toward spiritualism and found back his wife in imagination although lost in life.

This bare outline cannot describe the complexities of the narrative. For instance, one cannot simply oppose the two pedagogical approaches to education offered by the text. Both systems of education participate in English discourse: Although the Albert Mission College is obviously a British institution run by the British Principal Mr. Brown, the experimental school run by Krishna’s friend is described by him in a language that cannot be extricated from its Wordsworthian traces:

This is the meaning of the word joy – in its purest sense. We can learn a great deal watching (children) and playing with them. When I watch them, I get a glimpse of some purpose in existence and creation. (*The English Teacher* 125-126)

The Indian headmaster’s words echo Krishna’s own earlier statements, in which a similarly Wordsworthian trace occurs:

Nature, Nature, all our poets repeat till they are hoarse. These are subtle, invisible emanations in nature’s surroundings; with them the deepest in us merges and harmonizes. I think it is highest form of joy and peace we can ever comprehend. (10)

Thus, in both its institutional and literary articulations, English discourse underpins the narrative. Infact, when it is read, the entire narrative shows how English discourse regulates its reception and has its influence upon Krishna. In particular it also points out how the two forces provocation and seduction act as a function of that discourse.

The opening pages of *The English Teacher* offer a nightmarish look at the conditions under which Krishna teaches English Literature at the Albert Mission College to distracted and bored students. He has a comparatively good position and is respected in the community, but he is deeply dissatisfied. He fails to see that there isn’t much point in what he is doing, and as the novel opens he takes stock of his life and reviews what he thinks of as his cow-like existence. Narayan describes Krishna’s daily routine in a characteristically comic, ironic, and in a disengaged way:

...My duty ... had been admonishing, cajoling and brow-beating a few hundred boys of Albert Mission college so that they might mug up Shakespeare and Milton and secure high marks and save me adverse remarks from my chiefs at the end of the year.

For this pain the authorities kindly paid me a hundred rupees on the first of every month and dubbed me a lecturer... I was constantly nagged by the feeling that I was doing the wrong work. (5)

This has a familiar ring to it; it could be the lament of any harassed academic. But by the time the last chapter of the novel has been reached Krishna had decided to resign and has become more explicit about the reasons for his dislike of his job. We can find one's philosophy, when he is in ecstasy or when he is in the most dejected mood. Here when Krishna is in most dejected mood and while he wants to resign his college job in search of a more harmonious existence, he wants his proposed letter of recognition-would be a classic one in its own way, describing his view on education system, in the following manner:

I would send in a letter, which would be a classic in its own way, and which would singe the fingers of whoever touched it. In it I was going to attack a whole century of false education. 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 feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories... This education had reduced us to a nation of morons: we were strangers to our own culture feeding on leavings and garbage. (25)

When Krishna gives up his job, he goes to teach in an experimental school for small children at a salary of 25 rupees a month, "... not with a feeling of sacrifice for a national cause, but with a very selfish purpose" (49) – the purpose of finding inner peace. Peace is sought through renunciation and through the repudiation of western values and attitudes; it is significant that Brown, the English principal of the college, Cannot understand Krishna's motivation. When the latter says "I have no use for money" (50), Brown looks baffled because the rejection of the commercial motive stuns him. Behind Krishna's abandonment of western culture there lies the rich Hindu tradition of contemplative asceticism, with its insistence on the primary importance of the cultivation of the inner self.

A further significant aspect of *The English Teacher* is the way in which Krishna makes contact with the dead wife through séances with a medium. The western reader is inclined to regard such activities as pre-posterous, but the joyful intimacy which Krishna comes to enjoy with his dead wife is one of the liberating forces at work upon his consciousness.

Narayan's perception of English education could not be clearer than this. Like most of his countrymen he too promotion of British culture which will effectively help to keep the country in subjugation and servility. This English education bred a class of youngsters revering the British culture, disregarding their own heritage and in some cases even showing contempt towards their own.

However, Krishna is not ignorant of the aesthetic value of English literature and is not opposed to teaching it as a matter of pride or principle. His opposition to English education is a well-informed decision. As Krishna later says to Mr. Brown who has been the principal of Albert Mission College for nearly 30 years "I revere them (i.e. the English dramatists and poets) and I hope to give them to these children for their delight and entertainment, but in a different measure and in a different manner" (5). Krishna also knows that Mr. Brown will not be able to grasp the idea of self-development, inner peace and service in the Indian sense despite having been in India for three decades. "His Western mind, classifying, labeling, departmentalizing..." (7), is so unlike Krishna's Indian mind. The subjugated native understands the western

conqueror, whereas the latter hardly makes an effort to learn the true culture, in his superiority – a fact that Indians vehemently resented at the time.

Through Krishna, Narayan questions the idea of correct and pure English. When Krishna's English lecturer remarks on the importance of the English language and the need for preserving its purity and claims that his "thirty years in India had not been ill-spent if they had opened the eyes of the Indians to the need for speaking and writing correct English" (6). Krishna reacts by saying:

Let us be fair, Ask Mr. Brown if he can say in any one of the two hundred Indian languages: 'The cat chases the rat'. He has spent thirty years in India. It is all irrelevant, said Gajapathy. Why should he think the responsibility for leaving is all on our side and none on his? Why does he magnify his own importance? (6)

For Krishna, who studied in the English language, the English writers, poets and the Bible, and who made a career out of the same education, did not bring him comfort or support or relief at his time of need. He realized education and his choice of career have actually removed him from his roots and culture – and ultimately from reality. He realizes the futility of an education such as this that serves to effectively keep them in subjugation not only physically, but also in their approach to life and mind-set, being discontent with their lot and hankering after another culture which will not sustain them. It is to Narayan's credit that he had interwoven this – this theme of roots, with the theme of reality.

Gauri Viswanathan's findings in "The Failure of English", in *Masks of Conquest: Literary study and British Rule in India*, are proven most persuasively through this passage and the first section of Narayan's *The English Teacher*, where there seems to emerge a picture that evokes all the unfulfilled promises of English literary education for the British colonial administration:

The Study of English literature had merely succeeded in creating a class of Babus (perhaps the Indian equivalent of the English Philistines of whom Mathew Arnold wrote so soothingly) who intellectually equipped with the desirable amount of knowledge and culture. English education came to be criticized for its imitativeness and superficiality and for having produced uprooted elite who were at once apostates to their own national tradition and imperfect imitators of the West. (159)

In this passage, Viswanathan is concerned with the state of affairs for the British administration in the late 19th century. By the 1930s and 1940s, of course, 'the uprooted apostates' and 'imperfect imitators' she mentions have turned out to be either active nationalists or effective and, in some cases, subversive mimics, or both depending upon the dispersal of particular discursive functions when English discourse is refracted through a modern lens.

In Narayan's text, the provocation of English discourse for the young teacher is its injunction to "stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and romantic poetry... into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, at the expense of lessons in the fullest use of the mind" (*The English Teacher* 178). Time and again, this portrait of the relentless rules of discourse emerges:

I spent the rest of the period giving a general analysis of the mistakes I had encountered in this batch of composition rather very, as such, for hence, spilt

infinitives, collective nouns, and all the rest of the traps that the English language sets for foreigners. I then set (the students) an exercise in essay – writing on the epigram “Man is the master of his own destiny”. An idiomatic theme, I felt this abstract and confounded metaphysics, but I could not help it. I had been ordered to set this subject to this class. (15)

In this passage, the subject-position of the teacher, or the set of rules enabling him to inhabit structures of power in the classroom, is most powerfully and ironically underwritten by both the colonial agency that assigns authority (“I had been ordered to set this subject”) and the theme of the composition topic (“Man is the master of his own destiny”).

We learn that the colonial agent in question is the British principal, Mr. Brown. Brown exacerbates Krishna’s provocation, reminding Krishna of the predicament of having to occupy intimately a discourse of power within which he himself seems disempowered. For instance, when Brown convenes a meeting of the teachers, he voices his anger at learning from an English honors student that the student did not know ‘honors’ was spelt with the obligatory British ‘u’. In private Krishna responds to this sarcastically, Brown’s thirty years in India had not been ill-spent if they had opened the eyes of Indians to the need for speaking and writing correct English! The responsibility of the English department was indeed very great” (5-6).

Here, Krishna interestingly confronts Brown by showing the ignorance marked by the school principal’s apparent knowledge. But he does not answer his own plaintive question (“Why does he think the responsibility for learning is all on our side and none on his?”); nor is his question actually answered by the novel itself. The conversation with Gajapathy comes to an end, and Krishna concludes, after some agitated thinking, that “all this trouble was due to lack of exercise and irregular habits” (7).

What, then, keeps Krishna in a profession, which affords so little satisfaction? Here, one might invoke the complementary play of English discourse as excitement. Specifically, the articulation of an emphatic position on the ideological practices of colonialism and nationalism is pre-empted by the ability of the British literary tradition to excite Krishna. When, at the end of the novel, Krishna resolves to resign from his job, he plays with the idea of stating anti-colonial motives in his resignation letter. Significantly, however, he cannot actually mobilize those anti-colonial statements in his letter of resignation because they are like a rabid attack on all English writers, which was hardly the purpose. “What fool could be insensible to Shakespeare’s sonnets or the ‘ode to the West wind’ or ‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever? I reflected” (78).

This question poignantly rewrites Krishna’s attempted negotiation of nationalist issues. Indeed, the appeal of the British literary canon is articulated throughout the text, and everywhere its function is to forestall a radical political critique. The liberal humanist assumptions at work here are clear: one sees the characteristic celebration of the human imagination, which is seen to function autonomously and independently of the public and political domains. Yet these very assumptions release immense complications when they are received as supposedly self-evident truths by Krishna.

For, recast in colonial India, the aesthetics of liberal humanism cannot be diverted of their political weight. Krishna simply cannot distinguish the literature’s colonial, ideological traces in his liberal humanist reception of it. Later it gives an idea of how this inability was historically inflected and produced rather than a mark of some sort of self-willed failure on Krishna’s or Narayan’s part. Viswanathan’s point of view is that “Momentarily locating, then, but never quite

fixing the repetitious habits of attempted negotiations and extrications, *The English Teacher* remains in what appears to be moment, which endlessly enacts, without resolving, the play of in-excitement” (Failure In English 234).

To some extent, these explanations help to contextualize and explain why and how English discourse could figure in Narayan's identification with and reception of it. It must be added, however, that in the modern 1940s, *The English Teacher* assumes a particular global, geopolitical dimension in its project to represent India to the West and the West-like in the West's own terms. Such a solidified material project would not have been possible in the nineteenth-century India, where more fluid, contradictory or correspondingly, more resistant readings of English discourse were occurring.

Another component of Krishna's journey is that he encounters the coexistence of western and native cultural attitudes, which also represent the attitudes of Indians of a newer and older generation. For example, when Susila is ill she is treated both by a doctor who practices Western scientific medicine, and by a Swamiji who uses mystical methods of healing. The Swamiji is summoned by Susila's mother, representing an older generation that Krishna himself, who believes the 'evil eye' could have fallen on her daughter:

She was convinced that the evil eye had fallen on her daughter and that at the new house a malignant spirit had attacked her. She admonished me: you should never step into an unknown house in this manner. You can never be sure. How do you know what happened to the previous tenants or why they left? She went out in the evening and visited a nearby temple and prayed to the god for her daughter's recovery. She brought in regularly every evening sacred ash and vermilion and smeared it on her daughter's forehead. (*The English Teacher*33)

And in yet another instance it is notable that Krishna feels ashamed that the doctor finds the Swamiji in the house, showing that he is alienated from, and embarrassed by, the native culture of the older generation of his own country.

Meanwhile, the doctor's car stopped before the house, and I heard his steps approaching. I felt ashamed and wished I could spirit away this mystic. The doctor came in, and saw him and smiled to himself. The mystic sat without noticing him, though looking at him. My mother-in-law's idea of treatment, I said apologetically. Ah, no, don't belittle these people, said the doctor. There is a lot in him too, we don't know. When we understand it fully I am sure we doctors will be able to give more complete cures. He said this with a wink at me. (*The English Teacher* 85)

In the event, both the scientific and the mystical attempts at healing fail, and Susila dies. Narayan presents us with the coexistence of these two systems of thought in Indian culture, but does not make an issue of being for one and against another because, in the matters of life and death that he wants to focus on here, the distinction between Western and Eastern thought becomes insignificant.

Other instances of the juxtaposition of English and native cultures can be seen in the novel. For example, it may be significant to point out the street where the headmaster lives, with its poor sanitation, and the place where the wild-looking children rolled about in the dust: the street is named Anderson Street. The name itself brings many aspects to think about:

Who is the Anderson of this lane? I asked, looking at the impressive nameplate nailed on to the wall of a house. God knows. At least to honour the name I hope they do something for this place... I have often tried to find out who Anderson was. But nobody seems to know. Perhaps some gentleman of the East India Company's days!
(*The English Teacher* 142-143)

But while this observation is potent, it is the observation he wishes to make on the educational system towards the end of the novel, which represents the main focus of his attack.

The final stage of Krishna's Journey takes him farther from the Western intellectual frame of mind, which though influenced him in the beginning later makes him turn towards his own native Indian spiritual practices. To reach his goal of harmonious existence, he takes up his deceased wife's physically-communicated challenge, which he receives initially through a medium, to develop his mind sufficiently to communicate with her physically himself, and bridge the gap between life and life-after-death. Although initially he had been bemused by his wife's devotional practices, mocking her with "Oh! Becoming a Yogi! (32) He now relies on her to guide him, from beyond the grave, in his self-development.

This self-development consists of Zen-like meditation in which, for a certain amount of time each day, he empties his mind. His main motive for undertaking this development is to have closer psychic communication with his wife, but he also experiences a general improvement in his state of mind as a result. "It was a perpetual excitement, ever promising some new riches in the realm of experience and understanding...there was a real riches in the realm of experience and understanding... there was a real cheerfulness growing within me, memory hurt less...(162)

Compare this to the boredom and spiritual deadness he had come to find in Western literature and philosophy and one sees how he has found something truly enriching in his native culture. The simply message of 'belief' which his wife offers as the key to his progress also shows hoe inadequate the Western approach, with its "classifying, labeling, departmentalizing, was for his real needs, 'Belief, Belief' above reason, skepticism, and even immediate failures, I clung to it" (162).

In R.K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), which prefigures some of the concerns explored by the author in *The English Teacher* (1945), the system of education which produces Chandran as a bachelor of arts is represented as having a disruptive effect in Indian society. The representation of English education, especially English literary education, demonstrates how far it is divorced from the everyday life of the Indian students. The English Teacher, Assistant professor Mr. Gajapathy, is presented as one who has unquestioningly accepted the canonical greats of English literature, but refuses to be intimidated by big names in literary criticism:

Though Downen had said so-and-so Mr. Gajapathi was not one to be browbeaten by a big name. No doubt Bradely and others had done a certain amount of research in Shakespeare, but one couldn't accept all that they said as gospel truth. Although he himself read Shakespeare in a sing-song fashion, with a vernacular twang, he claims that not ten persons in the worls had understood Shakespeare; he arrested that there were serious errors even in Fowler's Modern English usage; he corrected everybody's English; he said that no Indian could ever write English; this statement hurt all his colleagues, who prepared their lectures in English and wished to think that they wrote

well. (*The English Teacher* 23)

While Narayan's own tone is clearly ironical and makes gentle fun of *The English Teacher*, his description suggests that Indians were questioning Anglo-centric critical authority and quietly appropriating English literature as well as critical perspectives to it. The prestige attached to English in tertiary education is also reflected in Mr. Gajapathi's attempts to put all others users of English in their place.

Narayan's defence of his position as an Indian writing in English is worth quoting. His views are as follows:

We have fostered the language for over a century, and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own thought and idiom. Americans have adapted the English language to suit their native mood and speech without feeling apologetic, and have achieved directness and unambiguity in expression. (*The English Teacher* 197)

Narayan has expressed mixed feelings about the effect of the rise of English upon Indian languages, literature and cultures. In *The English Teacher* (1945) published just before Independence, the English head teacher (one of the very few non-Indian characters in his fiction) is keen to preserve the purity of the language, much to the anger of the protagonist Krishna, who abandons his teaching career, and repudiates the education.

This hostility may have something to do with the fact that Narayan's father was a head teacher. Nevertheless the English language itself he later imagines arguing:

I will stay here; whatever may be the rank and status you may assign me – as the first language or the second language or the thousandth. You may banish me from the classrooms, but I can always find other places where I can stay... I am more Indian than you can ever be. You are probably fifty, sixty, or seventy years of age, but I've actually been in this land for two hundred years. (*Selected Essays* 15)

CONCLUSIONS

To state in conclusion for Narayan, English is as Indian as any other language used in the subcontinent. Hence he has remained committed to writing his novels in Standard English if with a local habitation and a name. That name is Malgudi. The important aspects such as A dour indictment of the English system of education, Co-existence of East and West, The preference of Eastern aesthetic way of life. Narayan's contempt for those Indians who disregard their own native culture and his use of English in the novel paves a way for the readers to read the novel *The English Teacher*, in the light of postcolonialism.

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