

A Study of the Multi Dimensional themes of R.K.Narayan's *The English Teacher*.

Leena Sarkar

Narula Institute of Technology, Department of English, 81, Nilgunj Road , Agarpara, Kolkata – 700109 , India.

*Email : leenasarkar.80@gmail.com

Abstract

There are fourteen novels in the oeuvre of R.K.Narayan. The English Teacher, one among them, published in 1945, has multifarious themes in its construction. The paper attempts to explore all such themes embedded in the novel, to give a new dimension to its interpretation. Since it is published before Indian Independence, colonial paranoia is deployed as one theme. There are autobiographical elements scattered in the novel as it is a testament to the agony of the author after his beloved wife's untimely death. Above all there is a psychological discourse as we observe conversation of spirit and their transformative effect on the narrator's life.

Keywords: Colonial Paranoia, Autobiographical element, Conversation with Spirit and Transformative effect.

1. Introduction

R.K.Narayan's the English Teacher tells the poignant story of a bereaved Hindu School teacher in the last years of the imperialistic regime. It has a bipartite structure but there is coherence in all the parts of the novel. It is the most thematically unified novel of Narayan's first period. The novel begins with Krishnan's life in a hostel away from his family, for the purpose of his profession. At the outset it is discussed how Krishnan stays apart from his wife, a married man, yet to enter the second ashrama¹ as a householder. The remaining part of the first half of the novel takes the concrete shape of a gradual movement towards the grihastha², with the young couple's search for a home of their own assuming a central importance. Unfortunately the premature demise of Susila takes the novel to a different level. The second part of the novel displays the sorrow of Krishnan. It narrates the difficulties of a father to rear a small child. The second half of the novel witnesses some autobiographical elements scattered everywhere. The justification of the above statement comes along with the following quotation from *My Days*³ : " More than any other book The English Teacher is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being the fiction." The final part observes a spiritual manifestation. There is a spiritual communion between Krishnan and Susila's spirit. The pages of the text are devoted to the spirit conversations and their transformative effect on the narrator's life.

2- Colonial Paranoia

The novel begins with Krishnan's professional life in the Albert Mission College. The administration in the college is under the jurisdiction of the Imperial rulers and this constantly puts pressure on him. The very fact alienates him from his traditional existence. The alienation is also from his culture – one as a teacher of English, being a colonized subject; and at the same time as a worker under the colonial institution. Unlike his colleagues he is absolutely dissatisfied and disgruntled with his profession. In the following extract Brown expresses his irritation at the mispronunciation of a word by a student : " I came across a student of the English Honours, who did not know till this day that 'honours' had to be spelt with a 'u'?" (Narayan, 6) Then Mr. Brown, Krishnan's chief in college, narrates a speech on the importance of English – "Brown cleared his throat as a signal for further speech and we watched his lips. He began a lecture on the importance of the English language, and the need for preserving its purity."(Narayan, 6) Gajapathy, another faculty of English supports Brown and agrees with him. The confrontation stems up from the beginning itself because Krishnan gets irritated with the statement. Krishnan retorts:

Mr Gajapathy, there are blacker sins in this world than a dropped vowel. He stopped on the road and looked up and down. He was aghast I didn't care. I drove home the point. Let us be fair. Ask Mr. Brown if he can say in any of the two hundred Indian languages: ' The cat chases the rat". He has spent thirty years in India.(Narayan,6)

The retaliation of Krishnan reveals his high Hindu subjectivity. He is against the, Anglicized culture being fostered by Mr. Brown and his other co-workers in college. Mr. Brown and his other co – workers accepts forceful appreciation of British culture. Krishnan has a pro-Hindu perspective from the beginning of the text. He struggles to enliven his tradition and culture and so he remarks: “I said the English department existed solely for the dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s.” (Narayan, 7) Krishnan’s attitude against the colonial domination is perhaps reflected in every change of his body language. He is pragmatic and spontaneously speaks against his profession. Here we can determine the significance of money, as he is associated with the job only for material gain and not for any mental satisfaction. His self- reflexive statement goes in this way - “I did not do it out of love for them or for Shakespeare but only out of love for myself. If they paid me the same one hundred rupees for stringing beads together or tearing up paper bits everyday for few hours, I would perhaps be doing it with equal fervor.”(Narayan , 7) Krishnan’s abhorrence of western education is in reality a realization of self, a rudimentary feature of Gandhian philosophy of education. Krishnan in his quest for identity could be specified as a Gandhian character, one who has personal, racial, cultural and national dimensions.

The realization of Krishnan, that the ultimate objective of every profession, is to earn money and to sustain one’s family. This realistic approach to life embedded in the sentence reveals his maturity and consciousness. His simple and casual statements observe the importance of labour in life for bread and butter. In these statements there is an evocation of the third tenet of Gandhian economic theory- ‘Sanctity of Labour’. By this tenet Gandhi makes an advocacy of manual labour for all irrespective of caste, qualification and occupation. In Krishnan’s occupation mental labour is the only labour which he has to come across. Gandhi not only preached this principle in his economic theory but also practiced it in his daily life. He wrote in this connection – “I do not know whether I am karma Yogi or any other yogi. I know that I cannot live without work. I crave to die with my hand at the spinning wheel.”⁴

In the first half of the novel there is also a bit of East and West encounter in the discussion between Krishnan and Gajapathy. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, “In the novels written during the Gandhian era, we find the East – West theme operating as the conflict between pre-industrial modes of life and mechanization. “ (Mukherjee, 69) In a discussion pertaining to East and West, Gajapathy articulates: “The whole of the West is in a muddle owing to its political consciousness and what a pity that the East should also follow suit.”(Narayan, 16) The speech indirectly refers to the political turmoil in the west. The novel was composed in 1945 when the West was undergoing the trauma of Second World War and in the East, the final war of Independence. In response to the statement of Gajapathy , Kumar retorts : “ Corporate life marks the beginning of civilized existence and the emergence of values.”(Narayan, 16) The author here reinforces the value of corporate life or western life or life full of mechanization, away from the agrarian and idyllic life of people. Narayan focuses on the transformation and modernization of human values which can never be constant but ever changing with the demands of the society.

3- Autobiographical element

The second half of the novel is full of autobiographical elements. In 1939 Narayan’s wife, Rajam, died of typhoid. Narayan was devastated after her death. In *My Days*, Narayan expresses his feeling in these words:

I have described this part of my experience of her sickness and death in *The English Teacher* so fully that I do not, perhaps cannot, go over it again. More than any other book, *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction... (Narayan, 150)

In *The English Teacher* the autobiographical elements are sporadically scattered. In *My Days*, the author says: “I was careful with money, never spending more than a rupee a day”. (Narayan , 147) The attitude of the author towards money gets reflected in Krishnan’s wife Susila. In one of the conversation with Krishnan, she utters: ‘ “ We must live within our means, and save enough”. She often declared: “When we are old we must never trouble others for help. And remember there is a daughter, for whose marriage we must save.” ’ (Narayan, 43) Susila is so realistic and insightful that she does not want to become a spendthrift. In the midst of this autobiographical discussion there is an overtone of Gandhian economic theory. Gandhi promulgates the theory of ‘Simple Living and High Thinking’. In the words of Gandhi, the ultimate purpose of human life is the realization of self. As Gandhi was aware of the evils of Western Civilization- mad race for money, consumerism, callous exploitation, sturdy imperialism, bloody carnage, etc, he laid stress on curtailment of wants. In the light of O.P.Misra, Gandhi’s view was: “Simplicity and Minimization of wants, according to him, lead to real happiness and fuller development of personality.”(Misra, 17)

Krishnan after marriage due to situational pressure stays away from his wife. During his separate existence he communicates frequently with his wife through letters. In one of his overt expressions, he articulates:

I smelt my wife's letter before opening it. It carried with it the fragrance of her trunk, in which she always kept her stationery- a mild jasmine smell surrounded her and all her possessions ever since I had known her. I hurriedly glanced through her letter. In her uniform rotund hand, she had written a good deal about the child which made me want to see her at once. (Narayan, 20)

The emotional and overwhelming description of Susila's letters brings out the hidden feelings of Krishnan which finds a parallel with Narayan also, as he also used to communicate with his wife through letters. In one such page of *My Days* Narayan voices out his feelings : " She always gave me her solemn word that she would drop me a note at least once a week to say that she and the child were keeping well, but she could never keep this promise." (Narayan, 148) In Chapter eleven of *My Days*, Narayan speaks out that

The English Teacher of the novel, Krishna, is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi; but he goes through the same experience. I had gone through, and he calls his wife Susila, and the child is Leela instead of Hema. The toll that typhoid took and all the desolation that followed with a child to look after, and the psychic adjustments, are based on my experience. (Narayan, 151)

The bereaved husband, Krishnan has a terrific agony at heart after the demise of his wife Susila. In a pensive mood when he carries the stretcher of Susila's dead body to the cremation ground, Krishnan also has the same overwhelming sorrow like Narayan himself. In the words of S.R. RamTeke : " The death of his wife fills *The English Teacher* with the belief that death is not the end of everything and that man has several other planes of existence. It promotes him to undertake psychic communion with the spirit of his dead wife." (RamTeke, 29) In utter despair and in a helpless state Krishnan utters these lines: "I feel nothing, and see nothing. All sensations are blurred and vague." (Narayan, 95)

The most challenging part for author and Krishnan is rearing the child, and satisfying the child with her query about her mother. In one such query Krishnan helplessly replies: "Mother is being given a bath, and that is why the door is closed..." (Narayan, 101) In another such incident Leela opens the door of her mother's room to see whether she is inside the room and finds out that there is no one and so in terrific fear rushes to her father to disclose the fact "Mother is not there!" (Narayan, 102) Krishnan nonchalantly moulds the situation in a different way so that she is not paranoid and sustains her disbelief that she will return one day. The sorrow of Krishnan merges with the sorrow of Narayan and the author ventilates the pent up feelings in *My Days*: "Perhaps death may not be the end of everything as it seems – personality may have other structures and other planes of existence, and the decay of the physical body through disease or senility may mean nothing more than a change of vehicle." (Narayan, 151)

4- Spiritual Manifestation

In the words of John Thieme :

In the second half of the novel, Krishna encounters two figures who provide him with possibilities for overcoming his despair: a medium through whose offices he hopes to contact Susila and a headmaster whose educational thinking challenges colonial norms. (Thieme, 60)

The final part of the novel observes a spiritual connection after normal death or the transition from life to death and beyond. There is an autobiographical overtone in this part of the text also. In *My Days*, Narayan presents himself as someone who has "no faith in spiritualism which seemed to oversimplify the whole problem of life and death with trappings and lingo." (Narayan, 141) In the same manner the protagonist Krishnan in *The English Teacher* initially shows no interest in occult, and indeed expresses his disgust when his mother – in – law arranges for an exorcist to see her sick daughter. Nevertheless, both Narayan and his fictional alter-ego Krishnan accepts the offer of an attempt to communicate with the spirit of the departed through spiritualistic procedures: the medium allows his hand to write whatever comes into his mind, and these messages are interpreted as attempts on the spirit's part to communicate with her sorrow stricken husband. The entire final part of *The English Teacher* is dedicated to the spirit conversations and their transformative effect on the narrator's life. In an essay entitled "The Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious" the Swiss psychologist Carl G. Jung³ discussed a technique for psychological development that bears much similarity with what the disgruntled English teacher and grieving widower Krishnan in *The English Teacher* embarks on several conversations with

the spirit of his departed wife. In the essay Jung narrates the concept of “anima”, the psychological image of a man’s female side and it has remained central to the study of Jungian psychology. What Jung puts forward in this particular essay is the “technique of holding actual conversations with this figure of the psychological imagination; it involves the objectivities of the anima.” (Jung, 211) In the novel “anima” is the spirit of Susila playing for Krishnan when she says: “At stated hours sit for psychic development, that is, to enable me to get in touch with you directly without the intervention of the medium.” (Narayan, 177) According to Steven F. Walker, the conversation with Susila and Jung’s conversation with the anima can be classified under three headings-

not mental concentration, but psychic relaxation and receptivity; actual questions as part of a systematic attempt to engage the “feminine side” in an intrapsychic dialogue; and finally a transformation of the person’s psychological outlook as a result of this soul – making fiction.(F. Walker, 3)

In view of Sp. Ranchan and G.R. Kataria:

Transformation ordinarily means change of form. In psychological terminology, however transformation is taken to mean a deep change in the existing personality structure. In Jungian analytical psychology, transformation describes a massive shift from the ego to the self, ego being the center of personal consciousness, which has a certain measure of continuity and consistency, while self denotes a center of the whole of consciousness in which the conscious and the unconscious are integrated in a dynamic way. Transformation thus understood is a vital happening, a geological upheaval wherein the limited ego personality structure gives way to a deeper, wider, and a more transpersonal personality dynamic. (G.R.Kataria, 5)

Our objective in the paper is to find out the psychological transformation Krishnan undergoes due to the conversation with the spirit. Krishnan passes through an exhilarating state when the spirits tell him that Susila is eager to communicate with her husband. A long sorrowful journey of Krishnan after Susila’s death comes to an apparent end in his life as he can communicate with her spirit. With the help of the mediumistic old man whose appearance is literally providential, Krishnan gets an opportunity to interact with Susila’s spirit. Innocently he strains himself to get a glimpse of Susila but her physical appearance remains in his imagination only. In extreme jubilation he retorts: “The semi-dark air seemed to glisten with radiant presences – like myriad dewdrops sparkling on the grass on a sunny morning. I strained my eyes and mind to catch a glimpse of these presences.” (Narayan, 115) However he gradually reconciles to her bodiless presence around him, guiding him, reconnecting and revitalizing his semi dormant, disinterested and dejected physical condition. Susila’s spiritual communion has a conciliatory effect on him. He feels light and quite rejuvenated and gradually through several other communications, gets back the energy to work. Thus Susila becomes his teacher guiding his life and bringing back the dead Krishnan alive once again. In the words of Nancy AnnWatanabe ,

Krishnan’s reunion with Susila affirms India’s religious heritage. During their separations, his soul-searching parallels India’s quest to preserve a national identity that has incessantly been eclipsed by the Colonial regimes of foreign empires. In the end, a divine manifestation reveals to Krishna that he has succeeded in resurrecting his marriage to Susila, surmounting barriers separating life from death, the future from the past. (Watanabe, 69)

The theme of transformation follows other trajectories also in Krishnan’s life. The Headmaster of Leela’s school eventually brings a massive transformation in his life. The Headmaster’s progressive educational philosophy, a clear alternative to the rigid British system eventually moulds him to tender his resignation from the post of a lecturer in Albert Mission College. Krishnan’s resignation is an attack on the educational curriculum and adding a new dimension to the text. Krishnan writes: “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.” (Narayan, 179) So the groundwork for Krishnan’s resignation and attack on the educational curriculum has been prepared by the unconventional ideology and philosophy of the Headmaster. Krishnan willingly and happily succumbs to the headmaster’s theory of life.

5- Various other interpretations of the text

The novel is not just a theorization of the colonial paranoia and spiritual manifestation but various other interpretations also share the common platform along with them. Krishnan’s attitude to life is quite different from the attitude of a typical patriarch. In a statement Krishnan makes an advocacy: “Man or woman is not born

merely to cook and eat'. (Narayan, 42) The statement has an in-depth meaning. Generally we associate women with cooking but the progressive mentality of Krishnan moves far beyond it. He respects womanhood; he adores women and considers them equally important as 'men' in the society. The progressive mentality of the author gets parallel reflection in the main character of the novel, Krishnan. Even Susila highlights the concept of birth control when she blurts out: "Leela should be our only child"(Narayan, 14). The concept of birth control is also highlighted by Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*.⁶ It is very much a modern concept and we can take it as reaction of the author against the society. All these discussions evoke the societal condition after the industrial revolution. Man brings reformation in the society in the post industrial society of mechanization and industrialization.

6-Conclusion

In conclusion we would like to say that the author with extreme meticulousness and erudition tries to assimilate the domestic, political, the psychoanalytic and the spiritual together in the narrative of the novel. From the beginning to the end the novel is circumscribed by his first-person angle of focalization and it is about his state of mind. *The English Teacher* allows Krishnan and Susila to know the spiritual fullness of their love in the richness of its reality. The novel reveals the spiritual dimension of Narayan's love for Rajam, and also for India.⁷ The culmination is attained with Krishnan's spiritual rebirth with Susila. Overall the author's delineation of the characters and the multifarious incidents touches the heart of readers with unfathomable pleasure. As the protagonist gets back the life force after his spiritual communion, the author also regains his creative potential after the psychological orientation, thereby giving us, the readers, some sense of that "rare, immutable, joy"(Narayan, 184), for which we in turn are grateful.⁸

Notes:

1. Second Ashrama refers to the concept of 'Varnashramadharm'. This is not a man-made system but it refers to natural classifications that appear to various degrees in all human societies. Each 'varna' and 'ashram' has its own specified dharma. The Second Ashrama means household life.
2. Grihastha is a part of 'Chaturashrama', prescribed in *Manusmriti* for the 'Dvija' castes. A person becomes 'Grihastha' from the age of 25 and this grihastha phase ends at the age of 49. Once a man becomes Grihastha, he is expected to settle down, get married and produce children.
3. Narayan R.K. (2006), *My Days*, Chennai, Indian Thought Publications.
4. Prabhu R.K. and Rao U.K., *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, p.136.
5. Carl Gustav Jung, Swiss psychotherapist and psychiatrist, who founded analytical psychology.
6. Narayan R.K. (2005), *The Painter of Signs*, Chennai, Indian Thought Publications.
7. Pousse Michel observes, "Despite family pressure and Indian tradition, Narayan never considered getting remarried. He kept little Hema with him and went on living in Mysore," where he "started a magazine, *Indian Thought*."
8. There was broad based industrialisation of Indian society and economy during the period of the First Five Year Plan. Due to this the outlook of the academic or middle class people, and their social perception underwent a drastic change.

References:

1. Bhatnagar M.k. ed 2008, *New Insights into the Novels of R.K. Narayan*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd. See the essay “ R.K.Narayan: A Novelist committed to Hindu Ideals and Beliefs” by S.R. RamTeke.
2. F Walker Steven, 1989, Volume 6.2, essay. Online Available: Weber- Studies, weber. Edu/archive/archive A volume – 1-10.3/vol6.2/6.2 Walker.htm.
3. Frontain Raymond Jean, Chakraborty Basudev ed. 2012. *A Talent for the Particular*, New Delhi: Worldview Publications. See the essay “R.K.Narayan’s Ultimate Realism: India’s Spiritual Rebirth in *The English Teacher*” by Nancy Ann Watanabe.
4. Jung Carl Gustav (1956), *Two essays in Analytical Psychology*, New York, Meridian Books. p. 211.
5. Misra O.P. (1995), *Economic Thought of Gandhi and Nehru: A comparative Analysis*, New Delhi, MD Publishers (P) Ltd. p.17.
6. Mukherjee Meenakshi (1974), *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel*, India, Arnold-Heinemann Publishers, p.69.
7. Narayan R.K. (), *The English Teacher*, Chennai, Indian Thought Publications.
8. Ranjan S.P. and Kataria G.R. (1987), *Transformation via The Feminine In R.K.Narayan’s Krishnan, Raju and Jagan*. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol.22. No2, Essays on Indian Writing in English, 5-15.
9. Thieme John (2010), *R.K.Narayan Contemporary World Writers*, New Delhi, Viva Books Private Limited, p.60.

Author – Leena Sarkar is an Assistant Professor of Narula Institute of Technology, Kolkata, India. She has around 8 years of teaching and 5 years of research experience. Her Master Degree in English is from Kalyani University, 2003; double MA in English from IGNOU, 2008. Her specializations were American Novel, Women Studies, Indian Literature in English and Linguistics. Her Bachelor Degree in Education (B.Ed) is also from Kalyani University, 2005. From 2009 onwards she is a registered Ph.D scholar of Kalyani University, West Bengal, India. She has published five research papers in reputed International Journals and has presented research papers in two International Conferences. Her major field of study is contemporary Indian Literature in English and she is also interested in Women Studies.

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. There's no deadline for submission. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a **fast** manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Recent conferences: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

