

DEATH AND THEOSOPHY IN R. K. NARAYAN'S *THE ENGLISH TEACHER* WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY *MY DAYS: A CRITICAL STUDY*

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Abstract

Death, the most ancient question has its deliberation throughout the history of human civilization in various forms of writing. Likewise death and after life also remain one of the most explained motifs and as an archetype recurs and occurs again and again throughout different genres of literature and culture. The Theosophical Society, founded by Madame Blavatski and others propounded that ancient belief in a more structured way that the person with 'educational bias' may perhaps positively agree with it. R. K. Narayan's two books, *The English Teacher* and *My Days* re-pronounce that structure, philosophy and belief as propounded and practiced by the theosophists and as attested by ancient texts and religions. The paper thus aims to deliberate the philosophical questions of death, after life, theosophy, regarding the above mentioned books of R. K. Narayan.

Keywords: Death, philosophy, theosophy, *The English Teacher*, *My Days*.

Annie Besant, one of the greatest orientalist and intellectuals, in her book *Death —And After?* (Theosophical Publishing Society, London, 1893) gives an interesting description of St. Paulinus talking with the Saxon king Edwin of Britain, where the Christian priest bade the king see in the flight of a bird as he was speaking of life, death and immortality. As the bird flies out of an unglazed window, he refers that as the trajectory of human life and also tells that his faith believes in soul, passing from the hall of light:

...winging its way not into the darkness of night, but into the sunlit radiance of a more glorious world. Out of the darkness, through the open window of Birth, the life of a man comes to the earth; it dwells for a while before our eyes; into the darkness, through the open window of Death, it vanishes out of our sight" (Besant, 5).

In *Srimadbhagavadgita*, Lord Krishna also reprimands Arjuna over his decision not to fight his relatives and enlightens him over the immortality of soul:

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“He is not born nor does He ever die; after having born, He again ceases not to be. Unborn, eternal, changeless and ancient. He is not killed when the body is killed.” and further “Just as a man casts off worn-out clothes and puts on new ones, so also the embodied self casts off worn-out bodies and enters others that are new and “weapons cut It not, fire burns It not, water wets It not, wind dries It not” (*Bhagvad Gita*, Sri Swami Sivananda, 21).

In the ancient Egyptians customs, we see that along with the mummified dead bodies, their near and dear ones, their coveted treasures, utensils etc., were also sent to their pyramid because they had the belief that these persons will be reincarnated and they would use these things then. The general belief in reincarnation or life after death is enough to prove that the religions of which it forms a central doctrine, believes in the survival of soul after death. *Manusmrti*, the ancient law book of the Hindus claims that, amid of all the holy acts, the knowledge of self is said to be the highest; this indeed is the foremost of all sciences, since from it immortality is obtained. The ancient Persian theological book *Zend Avesta* also confirms this existence of soul. In China, the immemorial custom of worshipping the souls of the ancestors shows how completely the life of man was regarded as extending beyond the tomb. The *Shu King*, regarded by Mr. James Leage as the most ancient of Chinese classics, contains historical documents ranging from BC 237-627 and is full of allusions to these souls who with other spiritual beings watch over the affairs of their descendants and the welfare of the kingdom.

Death consists indeed in a repeated process of unrobing or unsheathing. The immortal part of man shakes off from him one after another its outer castings and as the snake from its skin, the butterfly from its chrysalis, emerges from one after another, he also passes into a higher state of consciousness. St. Paul also describes this subject in his own characteristics way about the distinction of natural body and spiritual body. C.G. Jung, one of the greatest psychological philosophers in his ‘Life after Death’ from the book *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* says:

Critical rationalism has apparently eliminated along with so many other mythic conceptions of the idea of life after death. This could only have happened because nowadays most people identify themselves almost exclusively with their consciousness and imagine that they are only what they know about themselves. Yet anyone with even brisk knowledge can see how limited this knowledge is. Rationalism and doctrinism are the disease of our times; they pretend to have all the answers. (p 300)

He further opines that a great deal is yet to be discovered which the present limited view of the human being would have ruled out as utterly impossible. The problem with us is that we cannot visualize another world ruled by quite other laws, the reason being that we live in a specific world which has helped us to shape our minds and establish our basic psychic conditions and worldly opinions in our own way. We are strictly limited and prohibited by our innate structure and therefore bound by our whole being and thinking to this world of ours. Mythic man surely demands a going beyond all that, but scientific man cannot permit this because of what Andrew Jackson Davies terms as ‘education bias’. To the intellect of the modern human being, this subject seems to have no value at all. But to the emotions however, it is a healing and valid activity, it gives existence to a glamour which he would not like to do without. Parapsychology opines it to be a scientifically valid proof of an afterlife that the dead manifests themselves either as ghosts or through a medium and communicate things which they alone could possibly know.

But even though there are such well-documented and known cases, the question remains whether the ghost or the voice is identical with the dead person or is a psychic projection and whether the things said really derive from the deceased or from knowledge which may be present in the person, accustomed to the deceased. But we must not forget that for most people it means a great deal to assume that their lives will have an indefinite continuity beyond their present existence that ends through death. They live more sensibly, feel better and are more at peace with the idea that one has centuries or one has an inconceivable period of time at one's disposal. Jung in his characteristic way further tells that there are people also who feel no urge for what is called immortality, and who shudder at the thought of sitting on a cloud and playing the harp for ten thousand years and they certainly prefer cessation than continuance. But in the majority of cases, the question of immortality is so urgent, so immediate and also so ineradicable that people must make an effort to form some sort of view about it. Jung further recalls many incidents in which he dreams someone accompanying a deceased person and sometimes later he or she died. He has seen the reflection image of drowning actually occurred and he concludes that in the reality unconscious helps by communicating things to us, or making figurative allusions as "Myths are the earliest forms of science" (Jung, 304). Here he links the myth certainly with the trajectories of psychological vision. Thus he opines that death is only the vanishing point of the physical framework in which a personality is cast and functions; that some personality is unperceived before a conception, and will be lost out of sight again at death.

Founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky, also known as Madame Blavatsky and Henry Olcott, the current Theosophical Society, both international and American chapters, enumerates three 'objects' of philosophy: 1. To create a universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction related to race, creed, sex, caste, or color. 2. To encourage the extensive study of comparative religion, philosophy and science and 3. To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and power patent in human being. The International Theosophy Society defines theosophy as the wisdom underlying all religions when they are stripped of accretions and superstitions. Its teaching aids the unfolding of the latent spiritual nature in the human being without dependence to others. Blavatsky and Olcott moved the Theosophical Society to India in 1878 and established headquarter in Adyar of South India and published the first issue of the *Theosophist* in October 1879. Annie Besant became an integral member of this movement after joining in 1889 and took over the leadership of society after the death of Blavatsky in 1891. Beyond the explicit aims, it stands for Blavatsky's modern occultism, according to which the ancient wisdom or the universal religion derives from the East. Theosophy arose as a part of an upsurge of occult movements throughout the West in the late 19th century. Blavatsky transformed the occult tradition in two highly significant ways. The first of these appears in the way she reinstates the ancient wisdom in response to the scientific and moral doctrines that were then producing such a widespread crisis of faith throughout western societies. The whole universe, she argues, is animated from an infinite being that infuses all things and thereafter it evolves through a plethora of cycles, moving out of the infinite and becoming increasingly physical until at last it reaches a turning point. It then retraces its route, finally being reabsorbed into the divine from which it first arose. The divine force behind the evolutionary process therefore is not a blind mechanical law but the purposive movement of divine spirit. All people, all thing, all matter, all beings contain a divine spirit, the divine spirit which is the source of all forces alone and with the belief of immortality of soul. The human beings also always strive for the communication with dead. Moreover

Blavatsky opines that we can see and come into contact with the divine spark within us by adopting an appropriate ascetic practice. Mystic purify themselves in order to have an unmediated experience of such true unity with God. The second significant way in which Blavatsky defines the occult tradition is to identify India as the source of the ancient wisdom. Whereas earlier theosophists typically traced their doctrines back to ancient Egypt, she significantly argues that the very same ideas expressed in almost identical language may be read in Buddhist and Brahminical literature and expressed by the works of orientalist such as Jacolliot and Jones on the antiquity of Indian religions and their influence on western culture. She claims that Judaism, Christianity and indeed all faiths had their roots in universal religion, she equated with the teachings of Vedas. In the *Mahabharata*, we have a specific example of this kind of communication as at the end of *kurukhestra* war, the sage Vyas by being moved by the grief and lamentation of the women, brought back their departed husband's soul for a single night. He also gave the opportunity to these grieved ladies to speak, see and even touch them. But at the end of night when the dawn breaks and the time of departure comes, the sage again being moved by the supplication of the bereaved ladies, send some of them directly with their husband from this earth to the abode of the deceased as per their wish. So, it is evident that psychic communication is not a new thing in philosophy and literature. Dr. Franz Hartman in his book *Magic, White and Black* also says that the astral corpse of a person may be brought back into an artificial life by being infused with a part of the life principles of the medium. He further opines that if that corpse is one of the very intellectual persons, it may talk very intellectually; and if it was that a fool it will talk like a fool.

With these discussions we shall proceed on a deliberation on Narayan's two works, *The English Teacher* and *My Days* that have significant rendering of this particular aspect of human culture. The greatest difficulty of reading R. K. Narayan, the novelist is his outward and even sometimes unwanted simplicity, as a result one has to achieve the conclusion often that Narayan is not what seems to be and rather he is what seems not to be and this ambiguous screen is often the positive forte of his writings. But to procure that definite understanding seems to be a laborious intellectual task often. This has baffled many Narayan's readers and critics in the past and perhaps more will be prone to this whirl in the coming future again and again whenever any serious, intellectual and in depth study will be taken on this author. As for example, we can cite of V.S Naipaul who presumed to have understood the simple Indian anecdotes and discern the spicy elements in Narayan's, later agrees to have discovered the complete hermeneutic cycles in his novels, that do point out the basic truths that life inherits and possesses. Likewise his characters are not simply characters that could be called complete fictions but rather are the tales, often spring from his own life, the tales called life. The lives with its various stories, lives, truths, ambiguities and meanings, both deep and superficial, are revealed here in his novels that could be a veritable storehouse for any anxious Narayan reader.

Narayan's *The English Teacher* likewise baffled many of his ardent readers. His simplicity is deceptive. The romantic love story of the first half of the novel suddenly changes into a brooding philosophical tale of sacrifice and renunciation after the sudden demise of Susila, the English teacher's wife. However Narayan tells a tale of his own life and he has not colored it for the sake of fiction or otherwise. Further R. K. Narayan in his autobiography *My Days* of chapter 11, gives an acute description of his wife Rajam who was staying at her paternal house for sometime in Coimbatore and actually even after Narayan's repeated pleading to her to come

back, her parents resented her leaving as there were some omens. This same story is enacted in the novel *The English Teacher* also though in more figurative way. Actually we know that at the time of their marriage some astrologers predicted bad things for the match. Some days after her arrival however, Narayan records, "...within a hundred days of her arrival, Rajam had departed from this world. She caught typhoid in early May and collapses in the first week of June 1939. Looking back it seems as if she had had a premonition of her end, and had wanted to stay back with her parents and sister" (*My Days*, 150). He further says, "I have described this part of my experience of her sickness and death in *The English Teacher* so fully that I do not, and 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" (150). The comment is significant and as far as the two books are concerned, there can be a very profitable relative study concerning these two books which are not only related to each other but also in a sense intertwined in a way that they cannot be separated in a sense of the term. The reflections concerning death and life are equally valuable as the author says:

"One had to get used to the idea of death, even while living. If you have to accept life, you are inevitably committed to the notion of death also....Perhaps death may not be the end of everything as it seems— personally 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" (*My Days*, 151).

The reflections of the author simultaneously match with the notions of theosophy as propounded and practiced by Blavatsky, Olcott and other theosophists. In the pages hereafter he goes on describing how his tormented self with dismal emptiness were going through life of meaningless existence as there was hundred mementoes and reminders each day that were deeply tormenting for him. He describes how through one of his cousins he comes in contact with one Raghunath Rao who suggests to him "Why don't you come in Wednesday evening about six o'clock? We are conducting some psychic experiments and you may find them interesting" (*My Days*, 157). Rao says that they were experimenting and have no definite views on this subject. He says that he was generally skeptical, but when he was writing down something, some months ago, he felt that his hand was being forced by some other power, and he let it go, and there came out of it certain writing, which interested both him and his wife. So, at the same hour on the same day, Rao and his wife sit and try and certain scribbling occurs, which sometimes turn out to be prayers or hymns. They have gone through this process for several weeks. When Rao sits up alone, nothing happens. But when his wife sits along with him, a lot of writing comes through. When they get a third person in, sometimes everything stops and the visitor generally goes away after making fun of them. Rao thinks that the presence of some persons who are psychically inclined may prove to be helpful for these experiments. Rao further tells the author that they wonder what his company is going to mean to them that day for the experiment. The autobiography thus records every details of their process of psychic communication. Narayan observes that during the thirty minutes Rao held the pencil over the sheet of paper and how it moved and filled the pages. The writing goes like this:

"Your bands of helpers are here, and welcome your visitor today...we can see that his heart is still very heavy and anguished. If we could help him and others like him, to understand the nature of life and death, and relieve the pain at heart, we will have achieved our purpose.

Death is only the vanishing point of the physical framework in which a personality is cast and functions; that some personality is unperceived before conception, and will be lost sight of again of death, which we repeat is a vanishing point and not the end...." (*My Days*, 159) and thus it went on sheet after sheet, at a pace of writing which was not normal-the pencil points broke off or tore through the paper. At one stage, the pencil said, "The lady is here, but will not communicate with her husband yet.....She is somewhat agitated today, since this is her first effort to communicate with her husband." (P 159) and it further tells that the lady wants to assume his bereaved husband that she exists but in a different state, she wants him to lighten his mind too, and not to let gloom weigh him down. Narayan observes that within thirty minutes of time twenty four hundred words had been written, and which is certainly an extraordinary speed of writing. He thinks with amazement by seeing this that if one can write by hand five thousand words an hour, a novel of eighty thousand words shall be completed in sixteen hours. Both the books *My Days* and *The English Teacher* thus record several instances of psychic communications in great details that made the author thoroughly believe in the immortality of soul which is also the basic characteristics of theosophy.

Andrew Jackson Davies in his illuminating book *Death and The After-Life* states very perfectly that though the subject of death and after life is very much ancient but it is "nevertheless quite foreign to most people's habits of thinking, opposed to their educational bias" (Andrew Jackson Davies, P1). The point is significant for the present topic. Narayan's two books are in a way complimentary to each other and can be better understood if only read side by side. The present books thus not only tells the life of a person but very significantly points out to the most ancient questions of human being, regarding the true nature of life, death and the existence of soul *The English Teacher* represents the fiction of the life and *My Days* deals with the life of the fiction and they both deliberate with the ancient question of death without the bias of education and thus the books are not only unforgettable specimens of literature but they are also significant for their deliberation on philosophy of death and theosophical explanation of it, which is unique in the field of literature, especially in the realm of fiction. The two books thus become Narayan's deep probing into the study of theosophy and literature and a joint adventure into the mysteries of human life.

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