

**“I KNOW MORE THAN THIS”: A JOURNEY BEYOND THE “REALITY”  
IN R. K. NARAYAN’S *THE ENGLISH TEACHER***

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**Abstract**

R.K. Narayan’s *The English Teacher* occupies a seminal place not only in the trajectory of R.K. Narayan’s writerly career and has been explored as a site for autobiographical resonances and considered as a catalytic moment for the author traumatized by the personal loss. This essay seeks to re-read the title and the multiple journeys of Krishna as teacher, husband, father, and spiritual seeker in search of an elusive truth and meaning. It attempts to analyse how the ‘search’ becomes an intensely loaded term and the various journeys beyond the surrounding realities anticipate the Derridean ideas regarding the signified and the truth.

**Key words:** Indian English novel, signification of truth

*The English Teacher* occupies a seminal place not only in the trajectory of R.K. Narayan’s writerly career but has been explored as a site for autobiographical resonances and considered as a catalytic moment for the author traumatized by the personal loss. There is a continuously probing plane of consciousness through the novel as Krishna is seen journeying in search of an elusive truth and meaning through various roles as a teacher, husband, a father, a and spiritual seeker and the domestic earthly bliss of soul incarnate in the first half and the disembodied spiritual ecstasy of the second completes the cycle. The ‘search’ becomes an intensely loaded term as Krishna moves beyond his Sarayu Street home and Albert Mission College, beyond the ‘letters’ of automatic writing to gain an entry into the realm of thought where he can visualize his dead wife Susila. This prompts a marked shift from Narayan’s preoccupation with realistic portrayal of a society and complex individual quest not only questions Syd Harrex’s categorization of Narayan’s novels as “comedies of karma and manners” (qtd. from King, 67) but, as this essay seeks to argue, makes the novel anticipate the Derridean ideas regarding the signified and the truth.

The 1930s marked the flourishing of Indian fiction in English and Mukherjee calls R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand as “the grandmasters of the Indian novel in

English” (*Twice Born Fiction* 9). Despite difference in their ideology, background and narrative modes, the three writers shared “an unspoken faith in a distillable Indian reality which could then be rendered through particularized situations” (Mukherjee, *Perishable Empire* 175). 1935 is a momentous year for Narayan as his manuscript impressed Graham Greene and led to the publication of *Swami and Friends* from Hamish Hamilton. *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and *The Dark Room* (1938) won critical acclaim and a daughter was born to Narayan and Rajam in 1937.

*The English Teacher* has been acknowledged as an autobiographical novel: “More than any other book, *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction.” (*My Days* 135) Krishna’s father, the luminous B.A. of his days, fastidious and precise shares an almost identical list of literary favourites with Narayan’s own father R.V. Krishnaswamy Iyer who went on to become headmaster and Narayan’s mother Gnanambal reappears as Krishna’s mother who tutors Susila to the intricacies of home-management. In July 1933, the 26-year-old Narayan had fallen in love with the 15-year-old daughter of a headmaster but the presence of Mars in the Seventh House of Narayan’s horoscope proved life-threatening for the bride. Unlike Chandran of *The Bachelor of Arts* Narayan is finally able to marry Rajam in 1934. After a brief but fulfilling stay in Madras, towards the end of 1938 Rajam returned to Coimbatore and Narayan to Mysore. She returned in early March and they began searching for a house and on June 6, 1939 the “girl from heaven” (qtd. from Ram 128), his wife Rajam died, plunging Narayan into “a perpetual, unrelenting climate of loneliness” (Narayan, *A Memoir* 136). Narayan wrote to Greene on 20 June 1939:

My wife passed away a fortnight ago, having been laid up for weeks with typhoid. With the best medical help and nursing she couldn’t be saved. The world appears very vacant and vague now and I too feel dead. My child is a little over three years old and she is my only link with life. (qtd from Frontline, June 8, 2001)

However, the arrival of *The English Teacher* in late September of 1945, marks a self-attained radical departure from the period of darkness and uncertainty that was intensely personal for Narayan and, in terms of the impact of World War II, for the entire humanity.

The title of the novel apparently suggests the preoccupations of the Indian English writer and Narayan had voiced similar concerns in various articles like “English in India”, “After the Raj”. “The Problem of the Indian Writer”, “Toasted English”. In his essay “English in India” Narayan had humorously referred to the vagueness surrounding the apple-pie for the teacher and the student alike though he expressed his awareness of the degree of flexibility in the English language that allows any experience to be communicated through it. He criticizes the traps of grammatical rules and instead wants his students to be carried with the sheer poetry of *King Lear* and in his essay “Literary Alchemy” declares that since Indians have fostered the language for a century they are entitled to bring it in line with their habits of thought and idiom. R.K. Narayan had been a rather reluctant pupil and his dislike of formal schooling becomes evident in works like *Swami and Friends*. His growing up years, predominantly under the tutelage of his grandmother, made him familiar with *shlokas*, myths, legends and epics. His father was a school teacher in the State service who later became the headmaster. He shared his love for English literature with R.K. Narayan which Narayan reminisces in “English in India”:

In our home my father’s library was crammed with Carlyle, Ruskin, Walter Pater, and double-column editions of Wordsworth, Byron, Browning and Shakespeare. My father enjoyed reading Carlyle and Ruskin, and persuaded me not to miss them. For his sake I

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read thirty pages of *The French Revolution*, *Sartor Resartus* and *Miscellaneous Essays*; twentyfive pages of Marius the Epicurean, a hundred pages of Fielding and Thackeray, and skipped through a dozen novels of Sir Walter Scott. (122)

Narayan's academic career was not bright and struggled through his graduation examination but he remained unaffected by his academic performance:

My natural aversion to academic education was further strengthened when I came across an essay by Rabindranath Tagore on education. It confirmed my own precocious conclusion on the subject. I liked to be free to read what I pleased and not to be examined at all. (*My Days* 73)

Narayan, the son of a headmaster, had failed two years in a row to pass the university entrance examination, once in English and then in Tamil and could not graduate at his first attempt. In his later essay "My Educational Outlook" Narayan rejects the educational system as "a well-endowed, elaborately organized, deep-rooted farce" (Krishnan 371) which needed to be remedied urgently. The concept of teacher, for him, was not a cane-wielding terror but as a liberator, as guru in the real sense. At his father's insistence Narayan joined the Mysore State Educational Service and promptly resigned when he was asked to teach physics. In 1930 Narayan published his first article "How to write an Indian novel" in *Punch* and began to contribute regularly to various periodicals and dailies like *The Hindu* and *Justice*.

Narayan never makes a violent resistance to English language which he himself had adopted for his writings. In an interview with Willam Walsh, Narayan confessed his fondness for English as a language: "I was never aware that I was using a different, a foreign language when I wrote in English" (Walsh 6). Yet, as he humourously observes in "English in India", the concept of apple pie bewildered both the teacher and pupils in Narayan's class:

"What was an Apple Pie? . . . To our eager questioning, the omniscient one, our English teacher, would just state, "It must be some stuff similar to our *idli*, but prepared with apple". . . . "What would it taste like? Sweet or sour?" The teacher's patience now being at an end, he would say, "Don't be a nuisance, read your lessons." (20)

In *The English Teacher* Krishna challenges the compulsion of the colonized to learn the foreign tongue in its pristine purity and the neglect of the colonizers like the Principal Brown to acquaint himself with any one Indian language. Facing the Junior B.A. class Krishna feels more like Raju facing the temple congregation, the listeners succumbing as if to a superior force and ready to accept any word as a divine pronouncement, a sham he must denounce. In one of her séances Rajam spoke against the rupturing the child's mental fabric with threats and Narayan shared a similar view on raising children and his unorthodoxy is reflected through the character of Leela's Headmaster—a character reminding of Dr. N.V. Gopaldaswamy who started the Sishu-Vihar in Mysore in the early 1930s as a model of how game-way in studies could be put into practice. Thus, the title of the novel prompts the need of penetrating beyond the visible layers of language and invested role to explore, understand and merge oneself with the true meaning of communication that occurs between Sushila and Krishna. By resigning from the profession of a teacher, Krishna is able to become a true seeker and learner who has to struggle, stumble, undergo frustration before entering into an undeciphered, unexplained reality.

*The English Teacher* is deeply embedded within the Malgudi ambience that permeates Narayan's all but one of fifteen novels. In his tribute to Narayan, Amitav Ghosh placed Narayan, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Premchand in the same bracket and observed that "Malgudi

has already become a part of the mythic landscape of India” (*Outlook* May 28 2001 58). Though Narayan had been, at times, accused of “lacking in the national self-consciousness” (Brunton 207), his presentation of Malgudi presents India in perpetual motion, not a literary cocoon where real-life conflicts, turbulence and socio-economic misery are erased. At the same time, Malgudi represents the “broad climate of inherited culture” (Narayan, “Introduction” vii) with endless variations—that of the world of the traditional storyteller who is “isolated from the mainstream of modern life” (Narayan, “World of the Storyteller” 232) or the automation person’s green haven – a retreat framed by casuarinas trees and touched in its fringe by the railway and highway. Krishna moves towards this core of existence, away from his professional and domestic duties, and from the vibrant Malgudi life represented by Jagan’s shop charged with the scent of jasmine and incense and imperceptibly blended with the fragrance of sweetmeats frying in ghee. Krishna had a glimpse of this remote and tranquil retreat in the figure of Susila praying: “To this day I never learnt what magical words she uttered there with closed eyes. Even when I mildly joked about it, “Oh! Becoming a yogi!” she never tried to defend herself....She seemed to have a deep secret life”. (*English Teacher* 36) As Krishna resigns from college, the Principal Mr. Brown does away with proprieties “to toast with coffee” during the celebration of this “sainthood” and describes him almost in Gandhian terms: “Everywhere, under every condition, he has proved himself to be an uncompromising idealist. His constant anxiety has been to find the world good enough for his own principles of life and letters. Few men would have the courage to throw up a lucrative income and adopt one very much lower.” (182)

Krishna’s journey from the familiar life to one of his inner calling can be read in connection with Narayan’s own experience after the death of Rajam. Narayan came to Madras and in November 1939 he was introduced to Raghunatha Rao and underwent at least twenty séances till October 1940 –an experience he said he incorporated with the departed Rajam’s consent into his fourth novel where the idyllic setting of Tayur with casuarinas trees and rippling waves creates the stage for a great revelation. The séances offered clarity of mind which prepared him to work towards self-development which is recorded in his unpublished journal entries from October 16, 1940 to November 24, 1942 and then for three consecutive days in early December 1944. The entry of March 3, 1941 indicates that he was already working on his fourth novel.

In *The English Teacher* Krishna inscribes on the blackboard questions regarding fate, free will, destiny and man’s attempts to overcome his. He initiates a process of self-questioning and discovery, while carrying out the role of the spiritual guru or guide in the Indian culture. Written during the World War II, a period during which a grave decentering was taking place, the novel charts a course from the written to the spoken and the thought as the college teacher witnesses the emergence of the temple of Vak Mata at Sankara’s saying. There is a deep-lain reverence to the ‘letters’ as the manifestation of the Reality within, as Krishna recollects his father fussing over the preparation of ink and later tells his daughter that one must be clean before touching Goddess Saraswati. Each visual of the rag book or catalogue similarly responds to the call of the reader and weave a *granthi*/text of tales-something which the Headmaster successfully accomplishes.

For the adult the external world of signifiers become a sort of barrier to an inner interaction so that the student Ramaswami dryly rephrases “My Days among the dead are past” as freedom from the worries of dead relatives. Krishna hates the numberless attempts at merely

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restating Plato perhaps because Plato's ideas regarding thought, speech and truth was assuming a profounder significance for him. "Plato," observed Iris Murdoch, "pictures life as a pilgrimage from appearance to reality" (2). In *Phaedrus* Thamus observes that writing spoils the direct relationship that speaking or hearing has to truth which exists only in the immediate consciousness. The ideal of knowledge is to see face to face and the individual should seek to move beyond discourse. The doctrine of *anamnesis* or recollection talks about the incarnate soul being reminded of its vision through suitable prompting. Derrida, on the other extreme of the time spectrum, is concerned with the signification of truth. The spoken words signifies mental experiences which, again, mirror natural resemblances and hence "a relationship of translation or natural signification" (Derrida 11) exists. The experience thus moves beyond the written and returns to be translated into the logos "for lifting a dead weight of sorrow and loss which now hangs over the minds of many persons who have lost near and dear ones." (Ram 296) *The English Teacher* thus prompts multiple reading practices challenging any hurried generalization or overt simplification.

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