



SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEF IN R. K. NARAYAN'S THE BACHELOR OF ARTS AND THE ENGLISH TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

Indian English Literature is written by Indian people in English. It could be in the form of poetry, prose, fiction or drama. English is not our mother tongue and we are not native speakers of English, yet when in the early decades of the nineteenth century, English was introduced as the medium of instruction in our educational system, Indians were able to read Western literature that was available in English. They found the language and the literature versatile and some intellectuals took to conveying their social and religious thoughts in this language. The writings of people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and others started pouring in and gave rise to a body of prose literature having great socio-cultural relevance. Soon poets like Toru Dutt and many others took to writing poetry in English. But this literature was highly influenced by the style and content of English literature.

INTRODUCTION

Kushwant Singh is better known as an eminent Sikh historian, editor and journalist rather than a novelist. His novel Train to Pakistan is considered as an Indian classic and his latest novel The Company of Women has been hailed as a landmark in the history of Indian English fiction.

R. K. Narayan's narrative style usually follows the traditional pattern. R.K.Narayan is often described as a man of letters, pure and simple. His first novel Swami and Friends came out in 1935. His other important works are Bachelor of Arts, The Dark Room, The English Teacher,



Mr.Sambath, The Financial Expert, Waiting for the Mahatma, The Guide, and My Dateless Diary.

There are critics and commentators in England and America who appreciate Indian English novels. One of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction though India was probably a fountain head of story-telling, the novel has emerged as an importation from of writing. "Indian Writing in English is to me primarily part of the literature of India".

"THE BACHELOR OF ARTS"

It is the story of a 'Bachelor' destined to lead a well settled married life after much aimless wandering as a Sanyasi. His final return to Malgudi is symbolic of the strength and sustenance of the traditional values and the age-old customs being upheld and scrupulously followed by his parents. Chandran's impulsive renunciation of the world and the veneration he receives from the villagers, betrays imperfect personality. However, his renunciation though a temporary phase of life, can be looked upon as a revenge on the society and the circumstances in which he is place. In the end, Chandran's submission to his fate, but the reality, we observe in Hindu culture which is perfectly in keeping with Narayan's comic philosophy of life.

Irrational and ridiculous nature of social customs has been realistically presented in the novel, with great precision, in a completely detached manner, for which Narayan is so highly acclaimed. The formalities like the matching of horoscopes, etc. that precedes the marriage ceremony quite upset the mind of Chandran, the chief character in the novel, who gets infatuated with Malathi. That the initiative in the matter should come only from the bride's people makes him very uneasy. To top it all, when Chandran finds that his mother is very keen in following the time-honoured customs, he reacts sharply: "To the dust pots with your silly customs." The rigid of caste system prevalent in the society troubles his mind. Chandran fears that perhaps his parents would not allow him to marry the girl he loves. He blows out the lamp and sits in his chair completely absorbed in the thoughts: Suppose, though unmarried, she belonged to some other caste?

*A marriage would not be tolerated even
watertight divisions must go - Community,
Caste, Sects, Sub-sects and still further
divisions. (BA, 2)*



Chandran felt very indignant and he resolved to set an example himself by marrying this girl (Malthi) whatever her caste or sect might be: an appreciable stand in complete contrast with the old social values upheld by his parents.

Chandran's father did not appear to place active obstacles in Chandran's way. However, Chandran wanted to be free to arrange his life as he pleased. But when he found that his parents had upper hand in almost every matter he asked indignantly:

*Why should we be cudgelled and nose
led by our elders? Why can't we be
allowed to arrange our lives as we please?
Why can't they leave us to rise or sink on our
own ideals? (BA, 3)*

However, it was Chandran's father who took initiative in sending one Mr. Sastrigal – keeping aside the time honoured custom – to the house of the bride to bring about the settlement. Horoscopes were exchanged. But the bride's father D.W.Krishnan iyer was so orthodox in his attitude that he rejected the marriage proposal outright, saying that Chandran's horoscope was ill-matched. "I know a little of astrology myself. I am prepared to overlook many things in a horoscope. I don't usually concern myself with the factors that indicate prosperity, wealth, progeny, and all that. I usually overlook them. But I do feel that we can't ignore the question of longevity. I know hundreds of cases where the presence of the Mars in this house... I can tell you that... He hesitated to say it. It kills the wife soon after the marriage. He said, when pressed by Chandran's father. Love marriages are a distant possibility under such circumstances. K.R.Shrinivas Iyenger is right when he says: With rigid caste prohibitions to be respected and difficult astrological hurdles to be crossed, how can there be 'love marriages' in India?

Chandran lost his temper. Choking his emotions, he wrote a letter to Malathi, which he called a simple, matter of fact piece of writing. That the letter remained undelivered was a different matter. But it shows the struggle amongst the young people of modern generation against the orthodox nature of Hindu culture.

One of the themes deftly and thoroughly worked in the novel is the domestic one. Family is supposed to be the sacred institution of the Hindus which enfolds both the ultimate and immediate texture of experience. It is, as Narayan says, the duty of the women to translate and refine the principles of orthodoxy and correctness into codes and etiquettes covering the basic drives for food, shelter, sex and company, and Chandran's mother is shown to be doing exactly the same thing for her family. Under such circumstances one can understand the



position of Chandran and his younger brother too, when the question of his marriage is brought up. Chandran's younger brother Seenu cannot even bring himself to voice the matter to his brother. As for Chandran, it is impossible for him to address the girl he has fallen in love with, directly.

The Bachelor of Arts depicts the old social values questioned every now and then by people with modern and rational approach towards life. Persons like Chandran, have failed to achieve the desired goal. They have to accept defeat in life, firstly because their minds have been trained to accept and obey the elders in the family and the society in which they live, secondly, if at all they like to bring about some changes in the accepted social norms, their half-hearted efforts fall miserably short; and they simply could not withstand the collective force of the traditional society. Except a few like Chandran, all others see to it that the accepted social norms are kept intact, for the *status quo* is always advantageous to the religious old folk and they try their utmost to maintain it at all costs. What Narayan's protagonist wants to achieve, in the words of Chandran, is a life free from distracting illusions in the Indian tradition; the freedom from hysterics is the cool qualification introduced by Narayan. At first the intention is obscure, buried under the habits of ordinary life, personal responsibilities and since this is India a heavy inherited burden. The novel plots the rise of this intention into awareness, its recognition in a crisis of consciousness and then its restoration as it happens in the case of Chandran, the protagonist of the novel.

“THE ENGLISH TEACHER”

Narayan's The English Teacher was published in 1945, seven years after The Dark Room. Probably it was the shattering blow that he received in the death of his wife Rajam, which rendered him incapable of sustained artistic effort, and during this interval he could write only short-stories and sketches.

The English Teacher is an autobiographical novel. Much of Narayan's personal suffering has gone into the making of this novel. It tells a love story with a difference. It narrates the domestic life of Krishna a lecturer in English in the Albert Mission College, Malgudi. Though he is thirty years old, he feels bored with life in the absence of his wife and baby daughter. They arrive after a few months, along with his mother. Krishna and Sushila, his wife, lead a happy contented life for several months. But then their house is not quite good, and so on an ill-fated day they go out on house hunting. As ill-luck would have it, Susila is stung by a flea, develops typhoid and dies after a few days.



“While Krishna teaches at the Albert Mission college his wife and daughter live some distance away with his parents-in-law. But a move to a small, rented house, soon permits the couple to enjoy a life of marital bliss. Yet paradise is short-lived.

Never has the magical storyteller of imaginary malgudi woven tragedy and humour so deftly together. The death of Susila is a stunning blow to Krishna. He is much upset and loses all interest in life and in his work at college. The only comfort to him is his little daughter Leela, who now occupies much of his time and attention. He frequently wanders about a lotus-pond where he meets a sanyasi who can communicate with spirits of the dead. Through him Krishna is able to communicate with the spirit of his dear departed Susila. Krishna is thrilled, and regains his interest in life. Krishna says:

*“can I touch you now?” “not yet.”
“you didn’t know it when I got up and ran away” she
said with a great triumph in her voice, as if I had
kept her in detention and she had managed to escape .*

Krishna now meets the head-master of a new Children’s School. He is very much impressed by his educational theories, gives up his job in the college to serve the new institution. That very night he is able to communicate with the spirit of his dead wife directly, for the first time. At this, an ineffable joy descends upon his soul.

Human connections are not achieved easily in Narayan’s fictional world. Indeed, what often strikes you about that world something well concealed by Narayan’s instinct for humour and sense of absurdity is its extraordinary lovelessness. A Brahmanical formality circumscribes the relationships within families, the father being especially aloof, often cold, and romantic love, when it occurs, is either a loss of self-control (The Bachelor of Arts, Mr. Sampath, The Guide, Talkative Man), or so beset by anxiety and fear (Waiting for the Mahatma) that its failure comes (as in A Painter of Signs), almost as a relief to the protagonists.

This is what makes so remarkable the first part of The English Teacher, where the narrator, Krishna, describes the quiet happiness of suddenly falling in love with his wife. The happiness is celebrated here through the many details of domestic life: the little squabbles, the shopping expeditions, the reading of poetry, the fussiness over the first child, the search for a new house.



Narayan's writing style, which is inseparable from the observations of Krishna, the first-person narrator, has been showing us this all along. Right from page one Narayan has presented us with only 'the barest truths and facts of life'.

The truth Krishna wants to discover cannot be found in Shakespeare, Carlyle, or Plato, it is found only among real people leading real lives, it is 'the law of life'.

The law of life can't be avoided. The law comes into operation the moment we detach ourselves from our mother's womb. All struggle and misery in life is due to our attempt to arrest this law or get away from it.

“SUPERSTITION BELIEF IN R.K.NARAYAN’S *THE BACHELOR OF ARTS AND THE ENGLISH TEACHER* :

R.K.Narayan is a magical story teller of imaginary Malgudi woven tragedy and humour, so deftly together. Human relationship, which is the major theme of his works, clearly shows his way of expressing ordinary life. Also love and hatred in the relationship and the cause for it. Apart from the vigour of the narrative, what is remarkable about his works are the unself-conscious ease and humour with which he conveys the flavour of Indian life.

In those days arranged marriage is a common phenomenon and horoscopes are often compared. This happened in Narayan's own life. Narayan married Rajam in spite of the fact that their horoscopes did not agree. The astrologer of the girl's side had predicted that Narayan would prove a widower, but he was defeated by Narayan's own pundit who at the sight of rupees was all praise for Narayan's horoscope. Narayan lost his after five years, and this confirmed Narayan's belief in horoscope all the more. Chandran in Bachelor of Arts does not marry the girl he loves because the horoscopes do not tally.

Most of his characters are innocent at large pitted against an unsympathetic environment. They are traditional and superstitious. They believe that everything on the earth is preordained and that no amount of efforts can ease the situation. The heroes of his novels do not control them. They are helpless creatures torn by desires and tossed this way and that by the caprice of fortune. Chandran, The Bachelor of Arts, who is intensely in love with Malathi, cannot marry her because the horoscopes do not agree. He leaves home and becomes a sanayasi. Chandran renounces the earthly world out of sheer reluctance to its irrational and ridiculous nature of social customs, but finally returns to his family, marries in the same old traditional way and settles down in life.



Narayan does not seem to approve of their attitude or any kind of rebellion on their part. There is a marked attack on sentimentality in all the novels. Chandran is able to lead his life properly and seriously when he overcomes sentimentality that causes frustration in his life.

Though the progression in the field of scientific technologies, but the man's superstitions and belief has not changed. In the middle of the novel, the main character. Chandran has appeared very upset and became sanyasi very soon he came back to his originality. He was ready to marry another girl of his parents desire. We should not like to hear to that kind of superstitions. It destroyed our peace and happiness. We should have enough bold to break the superstition beliefs. Man should not control under the superstitions rather it should control their conscience. The study of Bachelor of Arts with view of superstitious beliefs is not a vainless one.

Indian culture does not attach much value to money and physical attainments. But, the western influence on material acquisition is on increase in 20th century. This conflict is very well presented in Narayan's works. The novel 'Mr.Sampath' reveals the general Indian belief in the futility of running after money. 'The Financial Expert' also echoes the same philosophy. But, the materialistic philosophy of life has humorously been presented by Kailas in 'The Bachelor of Arts', who says: "A man must spend forty years in making money and forty years in spending it."

Astrology plays vital role in the day-to-day life of Indians. The conflict between the believers and non-believers in stars and fate is frequently seen in Narayan's stories. In "The Bachelor Arts" there is mismatch between the horoscopes of Mr.Chandran and his dream girl Malathi. In the financial expert margayya is assured of a better future by an astrologer. In the same novel, another episode reveals how money can dictate the very stars in their courses in the short store "An Astrologer's day", Narayan presents an astrologer who dons the role under forced circumstance.

CONCLUSION

In the final chapter the issues of the novel come to a head with Krishna's resignation from his post as English teacher and his psychic reunion with his wife. In his attack on the system he is rebelling against he criticises not English Literature itself 'for who could be insensible to Shakespeare's sonnets, or Ode to the West Wind' but India's adherence to an educational system which stifles the spirit of its students and alienates them from their native culture:

This education has reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage . . . What about our



own roots? . . . 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 administration offices. (CH 6)

In conclusion we might say that the quote 'What about our own roots?' which I chose as the title for this essay could apply to Krishna's journey on a number of levels. It could apply to all of us as adults, alienated from our roots in childhood; to modern Indians, alienated from their native cultural roots; and to humanity as a whole, in that we have become rational human beings, alienated from our roots in the unknown.

Additional commentary on *The English Teacher* and excerpts from comments from Indian critics by S. N. Radhika Lakshmi

At the beginning of *The English Teacher* we find Krishna to be a sensitive and sincere teacher who is completely wrapped in his work of teaching Carlyle and Milton to the students of Albert Mission College at Malgudi. In the first half of the story Krishna is portrayed as an affectionate and protective father to Leela as well as a doting husband to Susila. But after his wife's death he is forced to face the harsh realities of life and is tortured by feelings of loneliness. He leads a mechanical existence, attending college and looking after his daughter, to whom he is both a mother and father. Krishna was on the verge of committing suicide after his wife's death, but he resisted the temptation because he felt it was his responsibility to bring up his daughter.

Krishna receives a message from an old man that his dead wife is trying to communicate with him through the old man. During their psychic meetings, with the old man acting as a medium, Susila's spirit infuses into the almost-suicidal Krishna the strength and courage to face the harsh realities of life.

Susila's spirit expresses her inability to communicate with Krishna as he is not in the right state of mind to receive her messages. First of all Krishna should rid his mind of all trace of sorrow about her untimely death. In course of time Krishna attains a state of mental readiness to receive her messages without the intervention of the medium.

Krishna develops friendship with a headmaster who runs a kindergarten school. He admits his daughter in the same school. The eccentric headmaster is a refreshing contrast to Krishna. The headmaster doesn't believe in spoon-feeding or excessive discipline and allows the children to play games most of the time, teaching them lessons in between their play. This mode of learning seems to be effective.



The headmaster is a hen-pecked husband. He does not go home for lunch, knowing that his wife will be waiting for him, and chooses to have his meal with Krishna instead. When he goes home the first question he asks his children is, "Is your mother at home?" When they reply, "No" he says, "Excellent" with great relief. His termagant wife does not allow their children to study in his school and brings them up in a wild and barbaric manner.

The headmaster tells Krishna that according to an astrologer's prediction, he will die in a few days' time. His feelings about his own death may perhaps be a psychic phenomenon, or a suicidal wish to escape from his worries and miseries. When the death for which he waits so calmly does not come, he cuts off all his connections with his family and treats himself as dead and his life as a new birth. The irony lies in the fact that although he proves to be a good teacher and a good headmaster to his students, he is a failure in the role of a father to his own children, for he fails miserably in bringing them up.

The headmaster exerts a distinct influence in transforming Krishna's life. Krishna resigns his job at college as he finds it meaningless, and joins the headmaster's school as a teacher. He finally attains peace of mind and realizes that life will have meaning for him from then onwards. He gradually overcomes his grief over the loss of his wife and finds happiness and fulfilment in bringing up his young daughter. He no longer requires the presence of Susila's spirit to infuse confidence in him to face life, though Susila's spirit remains with him forever. Narayan writes about the myths and magics in his novels, which may appear unconvincing to the modern and western readers. In his autobiographical novel 'The English Teacher', the protagonist Krishna, after the death of his wife Sushila, communicates with her spirit, with the help of a Sanyasi. Frequent use is made of Indian myth and legends in his novels and short-stories. An Indian myth (Bhasmasura) forms the background to 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi.

Narayan frequently narrates the rituals, superstitions, traditions and beliefs as if they are quite common and credible in Indian context. Many popular superstitions, rituals and belief are frequently exploited in his novels and short stories. In "The Guide" there is fasting to bring down the rain, and Raju is easily taken to be a Mahatma by the credulous villager. Communication with the spirit of the dead is also shown in "The English Teacher"

Indian culture respects the Sanyasis and Godly-men without waiting for a proof of their virtues or miracles. The role of Sanyasi, whether as a truly remarkable and powerful holy man in 'The English Teacher' and 'The tiger for Malgudi' or as a cheat in 'The Guide' or merely as a wanderer in 'The Bachelor of Arts', is a recurring character in Narayan's fiction. Foolish veneration of Sanyasi reaches such a height in 'The Guide' that Raju, originally, a



cheat, mistaken by the villagers as Sanyasi, is worshipped by them. Interestingly, Raju is compelled to live in the character by fasting for twelve days to appease the rain gods.

WORKCITED

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