PUNE RESEARCH DISCOVERY ISSN 2455-9202
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED STUDIES VOL 2, ISSUE 4

CHARACTERIZATION IN R. K. NARAYAN'S *ENGLISH TEACHER*

DR. K. KOTESWARA RAO
T.G.T (English)
Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya
Kalujuvvalapadu (Post)
Tarlupadu (Mandal) Prakasam (Dist)
(AP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The English Teacher, issued in the U.S.A. as Grateful to Life and Death, is Narayan's last novel before Independence. It was meant to be a nuptial song in poetic prose; it is not entirely fiction and a large part of it is based on author's own life. Krishnan, the protagonist, is also the narrator. He is a teacher of English in Albert Mission College. Unable to derive a job satisfaction from teaching, he is constantly tormented by a feeling that he is "doing the wrong work."

INTRODUCTIUON

Narayan brings out the latent unconventionality of Krishnan's nature by creating a host of minor characters by his side. "Frustration of Krishnan, like that of Savitri in The Dark Room, is irksome and teasing to him alone, and it may be attributed to the unconventionality of his temperament, for there are other teachers in the college who can lead a life of repose and contentment in the prevailing circumstances. There is Rangappa, who teaches philosophy. He is a dedicated teacher and witty enough to confound Gopal, the book-worm of the Mathematics department, equipped with stock phrases like "raining cats and dogs." Gopal is an "agreeable friend" who never contradicts anybody owing to his poor understanding. He has a precise and literal brain, fit only to grip "concrete facts and figures" and "mathematical symbols." Then there is Sastri, the logic lecturer, very straightforward and immensely interested in reading the old newspapers. Narayan ironically describes him as a "marvellous man, a strange combination of a logician inside the class and "a connoisseur in houses outside, assiduously labouring to acquire wealth and position through property dealing. He is making more money out of his business of "house-salesmanship" than from his job of lectureship. Dr. Menon, a Ph.D. from Columbia University, is obsessed with American way of life. Gajapathi, the ever grumbling teacher of English, is a bully. Unlike Krishnan, none of

them feels "angry and insulted" at slight provocations. Their grim tolerance, fatalism and passivity have deprived them of dynamism and progressive outlook with which Krishnan is endowed. They are the worst specimens of tradition-bound teachers all over the country who are accustomed to a life of compromise and comfort. It is through them that the novelist penetrates into the deeper layers of human nature, and perceives pettiness, ignorance, greed, jealousy and, in some cases, callousness and inhumanity of the so-called nation-builders of India.

Krishnan hates "the grim tolerance" with which students have to listen to the boring lectures which their teachers deliver, without caring whether they understand them or not. The entire system is rotten, as it fails to make them disciplined from within. The coercive and repressive measures of shortening attendance, expulsion, etc., aimed at establishing the unaccountable authority of teachers on the campus, tend to be despotic, demanding obedience all the time and leaving little or no scope 'for free thinking or for the exercise of intellect. Krishnan very truly realizes that discordance between the teacher and the taught is often due to teachers' tendency to terrorise students into submission and to cow them down by their "superior force." Krishnan very aptly records his inner weakness as a teacher:

I felt like breaking into a confession. "My dear fellows, don't trust me so much. I am merely trying to mark time because I couldn't come sufficiently prepared...

These feelings of Krishnan reveal his dedication to duty and commitment to the cause of education. He realizes that it is a loving and sympathetic attitude towards grievances of the students rather than "the lion-tamer's touch" in a teacher that can help him strengthen his ties with them.

Krishnan, being a conscientious teacher and a poet at heart resorts to self-criticism for having taken the teaching profession only for the sake of earning his livelihood. Teaching is not a money-minting profession, and should not be taken up as such. He visualizes the shallowness and barrenness of the British education system, which has failed to fit in with the old and noble traditions of India, and is at present dominated by a gross materialism. In such circumstances, a teacher is no longer a seer, guide, friend or philosopher for his students, but only a senior student "who had mugged earlier than they the introduction and the notes in the Verity edition of Lear, and guided them through mazes of Elizabethan English."

Through Krishnan, Narayan very successfully brings out the prevalence of selfishness, greed and the fast detetioration of moral standards in the contemporary tea teaching community. Even inside the class, a teacher hardly does anything out of his love for learning or for students. Krishnan very frankly confesses:

> *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 every day for a few hours, I would perhaps be doing it with equal fervour.*

The self-reproaches and introspections of Krishnan are born of righteous thinking and of irritation or anger. According to him, it is a sin to misguide students for a consideration of pecuniary benefits.

With powerful strokes of realism, Narayan portrays the traditional creakness inherent in a system of education imposed by a colonial regime. The novel might well be called Narayan's lament on educational system, which is a bastardized version of the British curricula. As envisaged by Lord Macaulay to produce clerks, the system has utterly failed to achieve its basic aim of moulding, refining and enlightening of man. Narayan in My Days-Memoir forcefully expresses his unconventioia1 outlook on education:

> *My outlook on education never fitted in with the accepted code at home. I instinctively rejected both education and examinations, with their unwarranted seriousness and esoteric suggestions. Since revolt was unpractical I vent through it all without conviction, enthusiasm or any sort of distinction. Going to school seemed to be a never-ending nuisance each day, to be borne because of my years.*

Narayan repeatedly underlines his aversion to the cramming up of facts, vomiting them out in the examination hail, and thus securing a good rank without any feeling of involvement in studies, in an interview he tells Susan E. Croft:

> *I'm opposed to the system of just cramming and examination and all the grading. I think it's a waste of energy. It doesn't affect anyone in depth. It's simply competitive-First class, Second Class, there's no feeling involved¨*

Narayan focuses his attention on the evil tradition of making examination results the means of gaining power position and popularity in society as well as in the employment market. Again, in Reluctant Guru, Narayan reflects on the tyranny of the education system, prevalent in India, with its detestable pattern of examinations, forced discipline compulsory attendance and fruitless instruction, Narayan recalls:

> *My educational outlook had always differed from those of my elders and well wishers. And after five or more decades, my views on education remain unchanged, although in several other matters my philosophy of life has undergone modification. If a classification is called for I may be labelled Anti-educational: I am not averse to en1ightenment but I feel convinced that the*

> *entire organisation, system, outlook and aims of education are hopelessly wrong from beginning to end....*

Like *The Bachelor of Arts, The English Teacher* too is a sad commentary on the miserable condition of the Indian youths who are products of an alien culture embodied in convents, Mission Schools, Board Schools and colleges which represent "a whole century of false education." Narayan considers education to be a big fraud leading the Indian youths away from their cultural heritage, and thus making them foreigners in their own country:

> *This education had 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.*

Krishnan, completely disillusioned with the incompatibility and uselessness of the traditional education, wants to tell boys at the grave risk of losing his job that "they are being fed on literary garbage and that we are all the paid servants of the garbage department." These scathing and authentic observations from one who has felt things on his pulse expose the deplorable state of educational system and call for an early revamp of it. Lack of correlation between life and learning the root of all our social ills. Krishnan's advice to one of his students, when the latter calls on him to get something explained indicates how utterly education has failed to solve the real problems f life. Krishnan says:

> *"Don't worry so much about these things-they are trash, we are obliged to go through and pretend that we like them, but all the time the problem of living and dying is crushing us.*

The novel not only castigates what is wrong with our education, but also suggests a way out of it. Disgusted with the prevalent system, Narayan visualizes a new pattern called: "The Leave Alone System," which is practised by the old, eccentric headmaster. It is an unconventional system of education having no room for boredom, tyranny and frustration. This, as the headmaster hopes, will transform children into "wholesome human beings," retain their "natural state of joy" and also keep teachers "off from the curse of adulthood." The rebellious and revolutionary spirit of the headmaster (loved and venerated by his pupils to mark his distinctiveness from the despotic teachers) should not be under-rated by calling him eccentric. He is not a simple preacher, uncertain about the usefulness of his ideal choice, but a practical innovator who proves beyond doubt how the creative faculties of a child can best be brought forth by leaving him to himself. A teacher must identify himself with the pupil and modulate his voice to suit its tenderness because "Adult Company is unfit for angels." Believing with Wordsworth that child is the best philosopher, he wishfully narrates how the idea of starting a school for children was prompted by "the memory of my own young days," "that grand period.... a time at which the colours of things are different, their

depths greater, and magnitude greater, a most balanced and joyous condition of life... "As a matter of fact, there is no substitute for an intuitive vision and "a natural state of joy" of childhood, which is the first thing destroyed by "our own schooling which put blinkers on to us; which persistently ruined this vision of things and made us into adults." Rising into a revolt against the formal education, the headmaster justifiably puts the entire blame on teachers who "helped us to take a wrong turn." Perhaps, his postulation of the "Leave Alone System" is identical with the idea of Basic Education being experimented by Gandhi in the 'forties at Tolstoy Farm in South Africa. The great value of this unconventional system of education for the Indian masses is further conveyed by the novelist through Krishnan's irresistible attraction for it, and his subsequent resignation from the post of a college lecturer to become a votary of children's education. Thus, Narayan here seems to be visualsing a system of education which does not smother the creative urges of pupils by leading them with the dead weight of books and dry academics. Our literary histories are replete with, examples of unlettered Kalidases, uneducated Shakespeare and non-graduate Tagores who were products, not of a system governed by any creeds or codes, prejudices or predilections, but of an atmosphere enlivened with simplicity and warmth, congeniality and friendship.

The English Teacher, like any other book of Indian fiction, paints poverty, squalor and filth, rampant corruption and cultural slavery of past centuries. It is in this sense that the novel, not withstanding its intimate autobiographical tone and tenor, acquires sociological implications. Narayan ridicules the traditional lack of sanitation and hygiene in slum localities of Indian towns. The Anderson Lane of Malgudi, in which the house of the old headmaster is situated, is a veritable hell on earth, giving us an insight into the appalling social conditions of our towns where the teeming millions, comprising "carpenters, tinsmiths, egg sellers and miscellaneous, lot of artisans and traders," live in the 'most abominable circumstances. It is "a street within a street, and a lane tucked away into a lane," "littrred with all kinds of things- wood shaving egg-shells, tinpieces and drying leaves." It is a horrible locality where the gutter gurgles and "runs down spreading all kinds of dreadful diseases." "Unkempt and wild looking children" roll about in the dust, dogs growl at strangers and donkeys stand here and there. Similarly, the house of the eccentric headmaster is in no less a miserable condition. Krishnan remarks: "...the whole place was unspeakably wet. The hail was choked with old furniture, clothes and vessels. Beyond was a narrow kitchen, black with soot "The deft touches of his irony make this harsh reality some thing like a laughing matter and thus we find a seriousness of social purpose combined with a touch of lightness.

Narayan exposes the traditional hypocrisy, callousness, apathy and criminal negligence of the municipal authorities in Malgudi who have earned notoriety for their "disputed elections, walkouts, and no-confidence motions." Apart from "this sort of activities, they only talk, but "do little by way of municipal work. Dirt, filth, open gutters and heaps of ankle- 'deep dust in the Anderson Lane are signs that the municipality 'has forgotten the existence of this part of the town. Sanitation is maintained mainly by the powers of sun, wind and rain. The climate of

Malgudi being hot, the sun burns so severely that bacteria and infection dry down and turn to ashes. Narayan portrays this inhuman situation with the characteristic touch of his gentle irony:

> *This place had a general clean up when the high winds rose before the monsoon set in, and whirled into a column, the paper scraps, garbage, egg-shells, and leaves; the column precipitating itself into the adjoining street, and thence to the next and so far till perhaps, it reached a main thoroughfare where the municipal sanitary staff worked, if they worked anywhere at all.*

The work of washing and flushing the streets is done not by the municipality, but by rain water which, owing to the lack of any drainage system, flows along the roadways till it joins the river.

Narayan deals at length with glaring contrasts in the life of Malgudi where prosperity and penury exist side by side. Whereas the wards of the affluent and well-to-do people attend Mission schools, convents and Board schools, the poor have to remain contented with schools having thatched roofs, floors covered with clay, and walls of "bamboo splinters filled with mud." The headmaster does his teaching work without a table and chair, knowing full well that "... we are a poor country, and can do without Juxuries." A shed and a few mats and open air' are all that make a school for the have not's, whereas the schools for the elite class cart well afford "all the heavy furniture and elaborate buildings" worth thousands of rupees.

The sharp contrasts that exist between the living conditions of the elite class and those of the common people in Malgudi have been laid bare in this novel. The living conditions of commonalty are exemplified by description of the Anderson Lane, a slum locality of the town, and by that of the crossing at Nallapa Grove which is alive with "jingling bullock carts, talkative villagers returning from the town, and a miscellaneous crowd on the dusty path leading to the Tayur Road on the other side." Localities like Market Road and Lawley Extension present an entirely different picture of a fast developing township, bustling with progress and latest architecture. The Bombay Ananda Bhavan, a modern restaurant at the Market Road, is a multi-storeyed building, having wooden, marble-topped tables, chairs and walls lined with fancy coloured bathroom tiles which lure Krishnan and Susila much and remind them of their own "smoke-ridden, wet, dripping -bathing-place." The Lawley Extension, the southern most portion of the town, consists of "well laid-out residential buildings.., neat roads and cross roads." Thus, Malgudi is gradually but steadily moving towards unconventionality, shedding its outdated and traditional life style. The following lines vividly describe people's craze for a house in new and modern surroundings:

At one time, only those with very high incomes could have residences there, but about five years ago, under a new scheme, the extension developed farther south; even beyond the

Trunk Road the town was extending. There was a general scramble for these sites and houses, which received an uninterrupted 'southern breeze blowing across the fields…

Furthermore, there is an attractive' house suited to the modernized and fastidious tastes of Krishnan and Susila:

> *It had a wide compound, broad windows, and general appearance of spaciousness and taste. All the doors and the walls looked fresh with paint. The gates moved on silent hinges.*

In contrast to the old and congested houses, this posh house has been built after a meticulous planning. No wonder then that it fascinates Susila and Krishnan, as it has "a hail, four rooms, in addition to the kitchen." There are plenty of space for the guests too. Nevertheless, even posh localities in Indian towns are not totally free from the fouling influence of poverty and ignorance, which render the people insensible to the needs of sanitation and cleanliness. The contrast realistically sums up the tragedy:

> *This is one of the curses the place. It is so far out and so near the field and village that all kinds of people passing this way stop here for shelter and the foul lavatory is beyond description....This is not the first time such a complaint has come to us.*

All that glitters is not gold, and often seemingly beautifii1 places are inwardly rotten, filthy and full of dirt, flies and insects. Consequently, Susila becomes a victim of the filth and dirt lying behind the beautiful "green painted lavatory door."

The novel also unravels the distinctive conventionality of women living in the villages of India. The informal talk at the bus stop between Krishnan's mother and another elderly village woman brings to the fore the worldly wisdom of village grannies, who cling to the age-old and rigid notions on marriage and man-woman relationships. Quite unaware of Krishnan's unconventional ideas, the old woman gives him a motherly piece of advice to "marry again" because he is so young. Men, she is sure, "are spoilt if they are without a wife at home." Her views are based not on a far-fetched philosophy, but on the native wisdom acquired through intimate experience. Hence her repeated assertion that "A man must marry within fifteen days of losing his wife. Otherwise he will be ruined" is quite realistic and loaded with practical wisdom. She supports her orthodox views with her own example:

> *"I was the fourth wife to my husband and he always married within three weeks. All the fourteen children are happy. What is wrong?"*

In fact, for the average humanity, it is better to marry again than to seek sexual pleasures by transgressing the social code, chasing some one's wife or daughter and inviting the wrath and condemnation of a whole community.

Krishnan's mother is a woman of religious temperament. She has an unwavering faith in taboos and traditions that are widely respected by the village community. She sums up her whole concept of womanhood thus:

> *"If a woman can't take charge of a house and run it sensibly, she must he made to get into man's dress and go out in a procession…*

She is intensely religious and follows a pious and puritanic routine. To quote her own words:

> *"Unless I have cleaned the house I can't go and bathe. After bathing I have to worship and only after that can I go near the cows"*

Like Chandran's mother in The Bachelor of Arts, Krishnan's mother is completely wrapped up in her household duties. The essence of her existence consists in the thrills and pangs and the satisfaction that she derives in running a well-ordered household.

India is a sacred land where counterfeit sainthood is a notoriously ubiquitous phenomenon. The English Teacher exhibits Narayan's awareness of the generosity shown to the fake saints and swamis. Gullible women serve delicious food to the charlatans in order to receive their blessings in return, whereas they grudge even a little food to honest servants who work by the sweat of their brow. India is, thus, a strange land where worship and kindliness do not always go together. The rituals, which were primarily meant to promote one's spiritual well-being, are now observed for the fulfillment of worldly ambitions. Krishnan's mother-in-law has a greater faith in the mystic powers of Swamiji to cure Susila of typhoid than in the scientific treatment by a doctor. Senseless antics of the holyman to cure Susila's illness narrated by the novelist with a mild touch of irony:

> *He felt her pulse. He uttered some mantras with closed eyes, took inch of sacred ash and rubbed it on her forehead and tied to her arm a talisman strung in a yellow thread.*

The warm hospitality, shown to this sadhu of doubtful holiness, is quite characteristic of superstitious folk exploited by conmen in our country. Krishnan recounts his mother-in-law's undue politeness and respectful behaviour towards the charlatan in the garb of a Sanyasi:

> *When he (Swamiji) came out of the room, my mother-in-law seated him on a mat in the hail, gave him a tumbler of milk to drink and placed before him a tray containing a coconut, betel leaves, and a rupee....*

The mother-in-law believes that some 'Evil Eye' or a "malignant spirit" at the new house is the only cause of her daughter's illness. She visits the temple and prays to the deity for her daughter's early recovery. She is convinced that the "sacred ash and vermillion," brought from the temple, will surely rid Susila of all her troubles.

Similarly, the contractor who builds houses and deals in them is a man of orthodox views. He has no faith in modern medicine and modern doctors. He rather prefers the indigenous herbal treatment. His friendly advice to Krishnan is:

> *"Never trust these English doctors. My son had typhoid. The doctors tried to give him this and that and forbade him to eat anything; but he never got well though he was in bed for thirty days. Afterwards somebody gave him a herb, and I gave him whatever he wanted to eat, and he got well within two days.*

The English Teacher is, thus, a demonstration of the novelist's own unconventionality in so far as the protagonist Krishnan is portrayed as a heretic, questioning dogmas, blind beliefs and a rotten system of education. No living culture can afford to be static, and no human being can always remain the same. Krishnan's dilemma is the predicament of modern man who has lost his grip over the certainties of life. After his wife's death, Krishnan feels distraught, and seeks relief in spiritualism. His contact with the spirit of his dead wife may be having occidental overtones, but it is also an assertion of the protagonist's mystical awareness that death has not been able to destroy the soul of his wife which is still living with him. It is a sort of affirmation of the Hindu idea of immortality of the soul.

REFERENCES

1. *The English Teacher*, (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1981), p.1.
2. *My Days-A Memoir*, p.53.
3. Cited by Susan E. Croft, "Interview with R.K. Narayan," *R.K. Narayan-A Critical Spectrum*, p.25.
4. "My Educational Outlook," *Reluctant Guru* (New Delhi: Orient Paperback, 1974), p.17.