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R.K.NARAYAN'S *THE ENGLISH TEACHER A TALE OF LOVE*"

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ABSTRACT

R.K.Narayan , the magical creator of an unforgettable locale 'Malgudi' was one of the leading authors of early Indian writing in English . The social complexities and relatable characters portrayed in the fabric of his fictional world were simple and compressed yet appealing and significant in the present context of literary world. The most autobiographical of all his works 'The English Teacher' is a close parallel between R.K.Narayan's life and the protagonist Krishna. It is dedicated to the writer's wife Rajam who left for her heavenly abode when their only daughter was three. The novel narrates the trauma, pain, agony and helplessness of Krishna and his journey to attain the spiritual insight on life and death. From being a not so happy English Teacher to have been living an uninterrupted domestic journey to the sudden demise of his wife, Krishna's transit is beautifully penned with ease and poignancy. The present paper would be a humble effort to delineate the aspect of love in Krishna's life and how it became a source of enlightenment in his gloomy and soulless life after the death of his wife Susila.

KEYWORDS:

Love tale, Meeting, Death

INTRODUCTION

One of the best loved fictional town of Malgudi with its simplicity is evergreen and forever cherished in Indian writing. The words emanating from the busy shops or the sound of chirping of birds or the scene of unrestrained water flowing in the river, all are effortlessly penned in the fictional world of Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, popularly known as R.K.Narayan . One of the greatest writers in English of the 20th century , his career encompasses seven decades with a perfect mastery over art . His novels, short stories, and retelling of Indian epics and myths made him more relatable, accessible and distinctive too. He was born to be a writer which is truly reflected in one of his interviews

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to Ved Mehta in 1962. To quote : "I really have more stories than I can write in a lifetime, and probably in the next janma (birth) I will be not an author but a publisher... How nice it would be to live in Malgudi."

He made people of Malgudi, memorable. Its unhurriedness, innocence, its imperturbable humour with an undercurrent of sadness is beautifully blended in the intricacies of human life. Right from childhood, RKN was an observer , who had the company of a peacock and monkey , enjoyed his vacations ,loved football and instinctively rejected both education and examinations but had to accept it as it was a family compulsion. His own daughter when expresses her anger to learn arithmetic, he let her drop without a word or argument. Isn't it surprising.....After he failed in B.A exam, that too in English RKN had free time to read the writings of Palgrave, Keats, Shelley and Byron, he felt inducted into the secrets of nature's splendor. His sensibilities got deepened with time and mostly he was in the library, reading as much he could. In his own words, "I looked for books that would leave me crushed in the end. Thus Mrs. Henry Wood's East Lynne left me shedding bitter tears , and I read it again and again". (P.66)

He started writing and sending manuscripts for publishing which initially got rejected. After graduation, he moved to Bangalore to stay with his grandmother, where he began his first line of a novel, writing about Malgudi. He was satisfied and could write everyday now. As per father's wish, he had to take up a job as a teacher in a Government school. He didn't like it at all. He left at the day of joining and came back to Mysore, where he was scrutinized and speculated by all. He knew what he wanted so, took a call and got busied himself in his drafts and developing Swami (character) . Time was running at its speed, a phase came in his life, Love sickness, in an era where girls and boys were not even allowed to talk to each other. He kept on falling in love until a real thing occurred in his life , can call it true love ... In July 1933 he went to Coimbatore to his sister's place, where he saw a girl drawing water from street tap and that was it. He was in love seriously this time. Her father was a family friend, so approaching him for his daughter's hand in marriage was not a problem. He expressed his affectionate feelings for his daughter to him. He was shocked but did not react at this sudden proposal. Everything was perfect, caste, class and community but stars. The girl's horoscope was not compatible with RKN and predicted disaster. Finally, after hopelessness and wait the marriage happened with the same girl he was in love with, Rajam. Everything was smooth until one day in June 1939 she died of typhoid.

'The English Teacher' penned by RKN is based on his personal experiences and is the most autobiographical of all. It was published in 1945 dedicated to his late and beloved wife Raja.

The original title of this novel was "Grateful to Life and Death" but the American publisher, not pleased with the original title, suggested "The English Teacher". There was a six year long gap before RKN wrote this novel, as he found it difficult to come out of the pain, suffering, a void that was created in his life . The novel begins with a portrayal of routine life of Krishna, "The feeling again and again came upon me that I was nearing thirty I should cease to live like a cow, eating, working in a manner of speaking, walking, talking etc- all done to perfection, I was sure , but always behind a sense of something missing"(P. 1). As a reader one can sense the unpredictability in his life. He was teaching English, Shakespeare, Milton but everyday asking students to mug up such great literature always made him uneasy, but he could not help it. He was married to Susila who was staying with her family as Krishna was still looking for a better accommodation facility to be able to bring his wife and their only daughter, Leela. His wife, Susila used to write letters to him. One fine day he receives two letters, One from the Father where he is asking him to get a house soon and the other letter from Susila.

"I smelt my wife's letter before opening it . It carried with it the fragrance of her trunk, in which

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she always kept her stationery- a mild jasmine smell surrounded her and all her possessions ever since I known her"(P.24). One could sense and feel the affection portrayed in the gesture shown by Krishna in the novel for his wife. Again he picked up the letter and read every word repeatedly and felt a deep urge to see his wife and daughter. He started hunting for a place and finally got it through one of his students. His mother arrived to help him in setting up everything. After few days Susila reached with the daughter and very soon got adjusted to the new house. After staying for two months with them, the mother left for the village. RKN has beautifully expressed the unsaid romance between the two through simplicity and propensity. For instance, when Krishna tells Susila about her habit of standing near the door and waiting for him to come back from work, She says shyly, "I didn't come out to look for you, but just to play with my child..."(P.48). Susila was an ardent devotee of God, praying deeply and Krishna used to admire this aspect of her daily routine. They were compatible and comfortable with each other. She used to listen everything Krishna had to tell her or share about his colleagues too. They used to talk for hours, something sadly missing from the lives of most couples. Krishna was happy in his small world with Susila and their little daughter, Leela. She was his cash keeper too and a very strict one. On the first day of every month he would give her ten rupee note (100Rs) for monthly expenses. Mentioned one such occasions, when she saw some discrepancy in the list she made for provision and the one that was brought by Krishna , it lead to an argument between the two . "This National Provisions man is a thief", she cried, "the sooner you change the better". "This annoyed me very much". (P.54). But then after a while, "I stood at the doorway and watched her. I felt a great pity for her, the more because I had not shown very great patience" (P.55). Thereafter, promising not to go against her list, he followed it every month strictly. "I loved to see her so pleased and handed her the change to the last pie" (P.56).

After Krishna's mother sends an old lady to assist Susila and look after Leela, she had more time for herself. Krishna asks wife to spend time in reading books as he was aware of her love for the books. During the initial days of their married life, they used to spend lot of time in discussing poetry and classics. After the birth of the child, it stopped. One fine day, looking at Krishna biting his pen and wanting to write something, Susila teased him and challenged to write something on her. He made her sit in front of him and the words flowed magically:

"She was a phantom of delight, when first she gleamed upon my sight: A lovely apparition, sent to be a moment's ornament"(P.65). Once when he got angry on Susila for giving away an old clock to someone without his knowledge. She cried a lot and there was no communication between the two for the next 48 hours. To break the ice, he asked Susila to accompany her for a movie, she readily agreed and while coming back home they decided not to argue or fight as it is unpleasant for the child. On Leela's third birthday, Krishna's father offered him the money to buy a big house. They fixed a day (proved a fatal one in their lives) and went to see a house . There something happened and it changed their lives forever. Susila went inside to a room where she got bitten by a fly on her lips. When Krishna saw her, she was shivering and rubbing lips with her fingers. After a while, she felt better and while returning home they went to temple, where, "I shut my eyes and prayed" God bless this child and protect her" (P. 92). He got really anxious about Susila.

Four to six days passed, Susila did not leave her bed. Doctor was called and medicinal treatment began. She was diagnosed with typhoid and her room was converted into a sick ward. Checking temperature every six hours and praying for it to come down was a ritual for Krishna every day, but there was no sign of improvement. In the entire process, he felt a very strong bond with his ailing wife,

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"Throughout I acted as her nurse. This sickness seemed to bind us together more strongly than ever." (P.118).

Krishna's parents in law came to see their daughter. With each passing day, the doctor lost his hope for any kind of recovery and one day he said while leaving, "You may expect a change in about two and a half hours" and then "neighbours, relations and friends arrive, tears and lamentations, more tears and lamentations, and more and more of it" (P.138). Yes, she passed away. The child was sent to the next house to be engaged and not be a part of this tragic affair. RKN has described the funeral in such painful words, "There are no more surprises and shocks in life, so that I watch the flame without agitation. For me the greatest reality is this and nothing else.....Nothing else will worry or interest me in life hereafter"(P.140) He was completely shattered, heartbroken turned into a soulless creature. The days were blank and void for him. The only hope in his lifeless life was Leela. He started taking care of her throughout and became more responsible. Often he felt the echo of his wife's voice around him which made him think of even leaving that house which was engulfed with her beautiful memories. The immense love he had for Susila was the totality of his existence which he felt was lost.

While busy in his college, one day a young boy of 15 years old came enquiring about Krishna and handed over a letter to him. As he opened it to read, he refused to believe the words penned on it, which began, "This is a message for Krishna from his wife Susila who recently passed overShe has been seeking all these months some means of expressing herself to her husband, but the opportunity has occurred only to-day, when she found the present gentleman a very suitable medium of expression.....She wants her husband to know that she is quite happy in another regionAnd I'm always watching him and child" (P.156) The entire incident was quite baffling and he requested the boy to take him to that man. During their meet, he told Krishna how it all started on the day he thought of writing a drama or verse, "I poised the pencil over the paper. Presently the pencil moved..I was struck with the ease with which it moved ...All the function my fingers had was to hold the pencil, nothing else....Here we are, a band of spirits who've been working to bridge the gulf between life and after-life. We have been looking about for a medium through whom we could communicatePlease, help us, by literally lending us a hand-your hand, and we will do the rest"(P.166)

Krishna was silently listening to what the man told him about his wife Susila when she asked him to convey the message to him through the letter. The next meeting was fixed on the following Wednesday and Krishna was eagerly waiting and counting every minute to pass and fly. Holding his breath for the moment when he could feel the presence of Susila through words on paper, he met him again and was staring at the paper. "Letters appeared on the paper...Sheet after sheet was covered thus with scribbling ..." (P.169)

Krishna was trying hard to catch glimpse of her unseen presence around him but failed. He asked him if Susila can communicate with him directly now, but the reply was in negative as the medium which she was using now was much more convenient for her. All this made him nostalgic taking him back to the time when he went to see his future bride for the first time. Now, he has endless questions to ask but there is no time. He felt like ceasing the moment and wanted more and more time with her, through that medium. Again he got appointment for the next week meeting where she talked about Leela and suggested Krishna not to be worried about her. This kind of spiritual communion with his wife unloaded the extreme grief from his life and Krishna started living life all over again. He loved each moment of spending time with his daughter nurturing with affection and watching her grow. Especially

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her first day to school, Krishna was excited and filled with joy.

Weekly meetings with his wife were not relieving for him. Susila urged him to get some of her letters from a trunk. He searched but in vain. Everything related to her refreshed all the memories . "These tiny phials had compressed in them the essence of her personality , the rustle of her dress , her footfalls, laughter, her voice and the light in her eyes , the perfume of her presence" (P. 191) Krishna felt the presence of Susila with him now. The kind of interactions he had with her made him realizes the reality of life. Thoughts expressed by her to him now were full of wisdom which made Krishna was completely mesmerized.

Krishna got to meet the Headmaster of Leela's school who became a friend of his and had philosophical discourses with him. For five to six weeks due to some reasons his regular meetings were canceled with Susila. He was disappointed until one day he receives a letter from that man asking Krishna to try and experiment to communicate directly with his wife. The meetings resumed as usual but with a change, now Susila asked Krishna to be receptive and prepare his mind for everything, only then he will realize the reality of life and death and be at peace. He made himself ready for the communion with her but failed when he tried. He cried desperately to talk to her but felt miserable. He went to his friend and heard his wife saying, "To receive impressions from our side, the mind must be calm and unruffled..." (P. 237)

Krishna kept his mind open and was calmer than before. Now, he felt relaxed thinking of his wife with a smile. Headmaster offered him to take over the responsibilities as he, according to him, had his days numbered. "The only reality I recognize is death. I have trained myself to view it with calm." (P.246) This transition in his thought process made him fearless and infused with radiant energy.

These moments of transformation gave Krishna a positive outlook towards his mundane life. How could one allow anybody to control the steering wheel of one's life. He confessed, "My mind was made up. I was in search of a harmonious existence and everything that disturbed that harmony was to be rigorously excluded , even my college work" (P.269). He resigned from his job , a long pending and delayed decision. While coming home after the farewell, he bought some jasmine which Susila was very fond of. He lay on bed and was thinking of everything that happened that day and suddenly he said, " Susila! Susila, my wife.....with all my being.I fell into a drowse, whispering," My wife, wife.....When I opened my eyes again she was sitting on my bed looking at me with an extraordinary smile in her eyes"(P.279) Narayan's genius is reflected in each word he has penned weaving this autobiographical. The pain he went through is unimaginable, the undying love for wife never allowed him to remarry and the enlightenment he attained is beyond words.

The novel ends on a beautiful note rendering a pure ecstatic moment of love, "We stood at the window, gazing on a slender....A cool breeze lapped our faces. The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy- a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death" (P.280) Susila became a source of enlightenment in his life, illuminated the love forever and Krishna was alive again.

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