

R.K. NARAYAN'S 'THE ENGLISH TEACHER' – A PERFECT BLEND OF FACT AND FICTION

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to highlight how there is a delightful blend of fiction and personal stuff in R.K. Narayan's novel, 'The English Teacher'. Narayan proves here that he is a level headed writer capable of dealing with serious issues. Fact and Fiction combine well to give it an interesting shape. Generally, a piece of writing can never be completely free from personal elements; there will be traces of the autobiographical details of the author. A writer has to walk a tightrope between fiction and personal elements. Narayan's 'Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts' and 'The English Teacher' are autobiographical portraying Narayan in different phases of his life. 'The English Teacher' happens to be a work of art with a delightful blend of fiction and personal experiences. Being intensely autobiographical, the novel is able to dispel the doubts that arise in the minds of the readers about the veracity of the events that happen in the second half of the story. 'The English Teacher' is an autobiographical work of fiction. Here the main character is based on the life of the author and the events narrated are rooted in the real events in the life of the author.

Tags: Fact, fiction, blend, personal elements, autobiographical

Introduction:

When one writes, it is well-nigh impossible to avoid personal details spilling into one's writing. At the same time adhering too closely to one's own life experiences has the danger of losing one's ability to write as one pleases. One has to walk a tightrope leaning too much on neither side if one wants to gain credibility with one's readers. R.K. Narayan has the knack of keeping a perfect balance between fiction and personal stuff. Though most of his works are based on his own personal experiences, Narayan's 'Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts' and 'The English Teacher' portray Narayan in different phases of his life. 'The English Teacher' happens to be a work of art with a delightful blend of fiction and personal experiences. Being intensely autobiographical, the novel is able to dispel the doubts that arise in the minds of the readers about the veracity of the events that happen in the second half of the story.

A fictionalized autobiography and a work of autobiographical fiction share common boundaries and the difference between the two is minimal. The extent of personal details included in the work decides the difference. A fictionalized autobiography is generally an authentic account of the life of the author. The author takes liberty with the order of the events or leaves out certain areas in his life in order to gloss over unpleasant facts. On the other hand, in an autobiographical work of fiction the

main character may be based on the author and the events narrated on real events in the life of the author. However, fiction will be predominant fact being small in ratio.

Narayan's "The English Teacher" can rightly be called an autobiographical work of fiction. It has two parts as made known by Narayan.

"That book falls in two parts—one is domestic life and the other half is "spiritual." Many readers have gone through the first half with interest and the second half with bewilderment and even resentment, perhaps feeling that they have been baited with the domestic picture into tragedy, death, and nebulous, impossible speculations. The dedication of the book to the memory of my wife should to some extent give the reader a clue that the book may not be all fiction; still, most readers resist, naturally, as one always does, the transition from life to death and beyond" (My Days 135).

The fictional first part sounds original and genuine made so by the alchemy of Narayan's art. Things that happen are premonitory. When Krishnan and Susila go to Lawley Extension to look over a house they intend to buy. She enters the mosquito infested bathroom and gets the fatal bite on her lips.

"The door was s bright...she replied softly. "I thought it'd be clean inside too... but I couldn't come out after I went in – the door shut by itself with a bang" (The English Teacher 72).

There is a temple nearby that looks as if constructed for their convenience. It is the temple of Srinivasa who according to Susila is a beneficial god who grants all of one's boons and blesses all one's efforts. She prays to Lord Srinivasa with all devotion. The premonitory part of the whole event is heart-rending.

"What a lovely image!" Susila remarked. She brought together her palms and closed her eyes in prayer. I stood watching her. The priest broke the cocoanut, and placed it and the other things at the feet of the image. He lit the camphor, sounded a bell, and circled the flame around the image. In this flickering light the image acquired strange shadows and seemed to stir, and make a movement to bless – I watched my wife. She opened her eyes for a moment. They caught the light of the camphor flame and shone with an unearthly brilliance. Her cheeks glowed, the rest of her person was lost in the shadows of the temple hall. Her lips were moving in prayer. I felt transported at the sight of it. I shut my eyes and prayed: "God bless this child and protect her" (The English Teacher 74-75).

Narayan's life was a long period of struggle both socially and academically. It is an eventful life which gets reflected in all his works. Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayan Swami, whose name was shortened to R.K. Narayan at the behest of Graham Greene, was born on 10 October 1906. He was kept under the care of his grandmother in Madras for the first fifteen years of his life. Narayan's father worked as the headmaster of a school in Karnataka and the family had to move wherever he was posted. Narayan's formative years which were full of excitement and thrill get a detailed account in his autobiography. 'My Days' presented with great fidelity. He had the company of a monkey and a peacock, his beloved pets, whose antics gave him great diversion. His maternal

uncle was kind and yet disciplined him in line with the demands of the occasion. It was customary on the part of Narayan to visit his parents, his brothers and sisters during the summer holidays. When he was fifteen, he left for Mysore to join his family. Narayan joined a school in which his father was the headmaster. Life was now easy sailing as he was with his own family members.

Right from his childhood, Narayan had a feeling of intense dislike for examination. He wanted to read what he liked and examining him on what he had read was anathema to him. After his belated graduation, he had a short stint as a school teacher. He left it at once in preference to becoming an English writer.

His first novel was 'Swami and Friends' which saw the light of day in October 1935 after much prodding. Narayan initially worked as a freelance writer cherishing the dream of becoming a writer. With the backing and support of Graham Greene, the publication of 'Swami and Friends' became a possibility. The life long friendship that blossomed between Narayan and Greene did a lot of good to Narayan. The publication of his subsequent novels like 'The Bachelor of Arts' and 'The Dark Room' helped him climb the ladder of literary success.

There is no iota of doubt about Narayan's reputation. He can take pride in a literary career that is seven decade long. He is definitely one among the best writing in English. He is widely accepted by readers all over the world and for the sheer readability of his novels he can be placed at the top. He has been revered by the likes of Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene. However, Narayan was not one who had become popular overnight. His path to success was not strewn with roses. There are people who have a lurking feeling that Narayan is no serious writer at all. This misprizing of his merits has a lot to do with Narayan's own disowning attitude.

Though Narayan has written short stories and prose pieces, his major forte happens to be the novel. Most of the novels written around and after the Independence of India show that Narayan's world is also mutable like the growing India full of changes and uncertainties. The even tenor of his life was changed when personal tragedy struck His dear wife Rajam died all of a sudden which left him stunned and stupefied.

Things that followed did not help him much. Life was full of hurdles. He could not put pen to paper as the flow of his creativity had dried up. No big opportunity came his way to cheer him up. For seven long years there was a lull in his major creative activity. He began to doubt his ability to write. Like Krishnan, the hero of 'The English Teacher' he began to think that a profound loneliness is the reality of life. With each passing day, life became a desperate struggle. His tremendous resilience seemed to give way to despair. He went to the extent of ending his life in a mood of sheer exasperation. As he was a consummate artist, he was able to come out of his shell unscathed. He was able to mould his personal tragedy into an artistic creation of great value. 'The English Teacher' was born making Narayan fly high in the world of Indian writing in English once again. Narayan says:

“The loss of my wife was sudden and not even remotely anticipated by me—although my father-in-law had had his doubts while looking into my horoscope earlier. But now I had to accept her death as a fact. 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. And yet one cannot stop living, acting, working, planning—some instinct drives one on. Perhaps death may not be the end of everything as it seems—personality 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. This outlook may be unscientific, but it helped me survive the death of my wife—though I had missed her so badly while she was away at Coimbatore. I could somehow manage to live after her death and, eventually, also attain a philosophical understanding” (My Days 135).

Narayan’s assertion that ‘The English Teacher’ is out and out autobiographical seems to give an air of originality and genuineness to his psychic and otherworldly experience.

“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. The “English teacher” of the novel, Krishna, is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi; but he goes through the same experience I had gone through, and he calls his wife Susila, and the child is Leela instead of Hema. The toll that typhoid took and all the desolation that followed, with a child to look after, and the psychic adjustments, are based on my own experience” (My Days 134-135).

Conclusion:

R.K. Narayan’s ‘The English Teacher’ stands out as a good example in which fact and fiction have a delightful blend. The first half of the novel, predominantly fictional, proves to be good read thanks to the compelling narrative power of Narayan. The first part deals with domestic bliss based on Narayan’s married life. The readers find it interesting as the whole experience sounds authentic and they find no artificiality about it. The second part deals with spiritual life which initially did not go well with the readers. The matter of the fact is that the second part of the novel is more authentic than the first one as all these things are based on real life experience which happened to Narayan. This becomes evident when one comes to know that the novel was originally named ‘Grateful to Life and Death’ which was changed to “The English Teacher’ at the instance of the publisher. The original title of the novel is suggestive of the seriousness with which Narayan has written about the trauma experienced by him because of the premature death of his wife. The trauma was so severe that his artistic creativity got stifled and resulted in a seven year hiatus. But he was able to get over the tragedy transforming the personal tragedy into an artistic creation of great merit.

Works cited:

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