

INDIA EMERGING: R. K. NARAYAN'S PRE-INDEPENDENCE NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

R.K. Narayan's is a prolific writer in Indian writing in English. Narayan (1906-2001) was born and grown up in a period when the Indian nationalist movement was emerging day by day. From his very childhood he witnessed that the people of India was struggling for freedom. He also witnessed cultural hybridization was already institutionalized in the Indian Sub-Continent. Like other Indian writers in English, such as Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan is seen to scrutinize the Indian society continually under change due to the colonial rule and its casual consequence-an emerging India evolved from thatcultural hybridization. Between 1935 and 1945 R. K. Narayan's four novels were published—Swami and Friends (1935), The Bachelor of Arts (1937), The Dark Room (1938) and The English Teacher (1945). These novels are striking representations of emerging India. These are, in brief, a sociological study of pre-independence India.

KEY WORDS: ambivalence, cultural hybridization,emerging India,Indian nationalist movement, sociological study, patriarchal society, pre-independence India,sociological study.

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R. K. Narayan is often regarded as one of the three prominent Indian novelists writing in English for an international audience who emerged in the first half of twentieth century along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. His writing is a distinctive blend of Western techniques and Eastern material, and he has succeeded in a remarkable way in making an Indian sensibility at home in English art.

R. K. Narayan was born in 1906 and grew at the time when the Indian nationalist movement was emerging day by day. From his very childhood he witnessed that the people of India was struggling for freedom. Although he was a child he still observed the rise of nationalist activity that broke out in India immediately after the First World War I, and he was about thirteen when the JallianwalaBagh massacre (1919) took place. During the period of his maturity, Narayan, supposedly, was influenced by the Quit India movement, Gandhi's ideas, the non-cooperation movement and all other forms of anti-British activities, which were active during the period. Narayan himself has commented on various occasions that "growing up in the first half of the twentieth century in India one couldn't but be swept away by the rising tide of the nationalist movement" (quoted in Alam 202). Besides, in a talk that he delivered in a radio interview and was later published with the title "The Problem of the Indian writer" in *A Storyteller's World*, he remarked that the thirties was a period for modern Indian writing when "all that a writer could write about became inescapably political" (quoted in Ram & Ram 179).

Between 1935 and 1945 R. K. Narayan's four novels were published—*Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938) and *The English Teacher* (1945). These novels are striking representations of emerging India. These are, in brief, a sociological study of pre-independence India.

SWAMI AND FRIENDS

R.K. Narayan started his career as a novelist with *Swami and Friends* which was published in 1935. The beginner briefs the Indian society between the period 1920s and 1930s when the British had already dominated India for over one and a half centuries and when the anti-British sentiment and its resultant movement was at the peak. In *Swami and Friends*, the novelist tries to delineate how the British raj transformed the century-old Indian culture into a hybrid one making people accept certain aspects of the colonizer's culture even as they were struggling against the colonial rule politically for Indian independence.

When *Swami and Friends* was published the anti- British sentiment had spread out like a fury all over India, engaging the whole nation in a struggle for its independence. The novel was written in this socio-political background and because of this an anti- British feeling of the inhabitants of Malgudi is naturally visible here. But the activities of the people living in Malgudi in this anti-British upsurge are so ambiguous and ambivalent that it creates a sort of problem for the readers to fully comprehend the writer's actual political stand.

The novel describes the life of boys in South Indian schools, and much of Narayan's personal experience has gone into the making of the novel. We get a vivid portrayal of the thoughts, emotions and activities of school boys. The plot revolves round the activities of Swaminathan, the little protagonist and his friends Mani Shanker, the most intelligent boy of the class, Somu, the monitor, Samuel, the short-statured, and so called the Pea, and Rajam, a late arrival, intelligent and charming, the son of the Police Superintendent.

Swaminathan is sharply aware of the political unrest of the 30s that affects the small town Malgudi. In the chapter "Broken Panes" there is a description of a strike in the school. Swami

and his friends attend the public meeting organized to protest the arrest of GauriShanker, a prominent public leader of Bombay. An earnest looking man clad in Khaddar stands on a wooden platform and addresses the gathering. The political feelings are aroused when in a high piercing voice the khaddar-clad man pursues: “Let every Indian spit on England, and the quantity of saliva will be enough to drown England” (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 110). Swami takes interest in the “plight of Indian Peasants”, “boycott of English goods” (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 111) and pleads to wear homespun cloth. He participates in the agitation and shouts loudly with other agitators in the procession—“Gandhi ki Jai” and “Bharat Matha Ki Jai” (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 112). The evening closes with a bonfire of foreign clothes. Swami watches the red glares. He flings his cap into the fire with a feeling that he is saving the country. In this connection C.D. Narasimhaiah remarks:

What interests Narayan is the brave talk of the youngsters who collect in street corners and echoed the high-sounding words of their elders, most of whom could not have been any more effective than the school boys who employed nationalistic postures to no purpose. It is this that brought forth Narayan’s comic gestures in fiction (Narasimhaiah 138).

The anti-colonial activities of Swami in joining the agitation and thus burning his British cap enrage his father very much. He rebukes Swami for his act of rebelliousness against the British rule. This attitude of Swami’s father, indirectly, shows his support towards the colonizer’s authority. But, strangely enough, the same person writes a complaint to the headmaster of the AlbertMissionSchool against its fanatic scripture teacher who abuses Hindu deities and punishes Swami for doubting Christ’s divinity. Thus, one can see a double standard policy in the behaviour of Swami’s father regarding the British issue. While Swami’s father seems to follow such a double standard policy, the text also shows the sympathy and admiration of the common people of Malgudi to some facets of Englishness and incorporation of various icons of western culture in their daily lives even as they resist westernizing and participate in various anti-colonial activities. Thus, Rajam is heartily welcomed and accepted by the classmates of his new school because, Narayan writes:

There were vague rumours that he had come from some English boys' school somewhere in Madras. He spoke very good English, “exactly like a ‘European’”; which meant that few in the school could make out what he said. (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 14).

When Ranjam arrives, the M.C.C. (Malgudi Cricket Club) is formed with Swaminathan and his friends as members. In this way Rajam imported in Malgudi the cricket-culture from the west. In the eyes of other boys his honour increases by the fact that his father is a police superintendent, an important position in the colonial administration. Moreover, Swami is delighted in taking the title ‘Tate’, the world’s greatest English cricketer then.

In another occasion Swaminathan is admonished by the Headmaster of Albert Mission School when he joins an angry mob in throwing stones at the AlbertMissionSchool for taking part in a political demonstration and he leaves the school in a huff. He is admitted to BoardHigh School, which is considered lowly and inferior. He is excluded from his former group of friends and Rajam, the son of the Superintendent of Police, a government servant, stops speaking to him because of Swaminathan’s political leanings. He is anti- political, meaning thereby anti-national. He makes fun of Swaminathans’s and his admiration of his new school friends like “a nice Muhammadan”(Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 128) boy, Akbar Ali who calls “Muhammad of

Gazni and Aurangzeb rascals”(Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 128) because they destroyed our temples and tortured the Hindus. Rajam shouts,

We *brahmins* deserve that and more ... In our house my father does not care for New-Moon days and there are no Annual Ceremonies for the dead...I tell you what, it is your Board High School that has given you this mentality (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 128).

He is also not happy with all the “dirty politics and strikes” (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 129). His father is a government servant, and hence his family is anti-political. Swaminathan believes him, but he is ready to forgive him for the sake of their friendship. Swaminathan sheepishly agrees, “You are right. I should have remained at home on the day of the strike” (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 129).

The friends decided to set up a cricket team, a colonial game and, like everyone else, hero-worship cricketers like Bradman, Hobbs and Duleepsinghji. They paste their pictures in their scrap books, but to Swaminathan, all the cricketers look the same. He agrees to go along with Rajam. Mani soon joins them. After the selection of the team’s name, the major difficulty that stalks them is that of paying taxes. Swaminathan points out that in case the team has two names, they will have to pay two taxes to the Government. Rajam considers it undue interference by the Government in people’s activities. “The Government did not seem to know where it ought to interfere and where not. He had a momentary sympathy for Gandhi, for he was dead against the Government” (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 133). Then Swaminathan thinks of another problem:

Even if we want to pay, whom are we to pay the taxes to? Certainly not to His majesty or the Viceroy. Who was the Government? What if somebody should take the money and defraud them, somebody pretending to be the Government? Probably they would have to send the taxes by Money Order to the Governor. Well, that might be treason. And then what was the amount to be paid?(Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 133).

Strong nationalist overtones crop up again in the drafting of the letter ordering for goods to the British sports firm, MessrsBinns, the Shop for Sports Goods. The friends quibble over the language to be used. Rajam appoints himself captain of the team because he writes and posts the letter written in the colloquial language and idiom. The next difficulty is making head or tail of the formal letter they receive from MessrsBinns. Unable to understand it, they return the letter to the firm saying that it was “somebody’s letter” (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 141). Their improvised efforts at domestic cricket end in a fiasco as all attempts at blindly copying the British were fated. Swaminathan is conferred the title of Tate when he bowls out the Captain in the very first ball, signifying that indigenous attempts always succeed in any undertaking. Thus, neither Swami nor his father appears to be fixed in his response to the British rule in India; rather Swami’s enthusiasm for English heroes like cricketer Tate, institutions such as the MCC and Rolls Royce cars affirms that though the ordinary Indians were living in their own India, they could not escape some amount of westernization in their outlook.

Gita Rajan (1993) in her essay “Colonial Literature as Oppositional: R. K. Narayan’s Unconscious Secular Register” calls *Swami and Friends* an ambivalent text because of Swami and his father’s shifty attitude to the British rule. In her reading, Swami rebels against imperial authority but his rebellions are aborted and in the end he submits to the colonial status quo. To this post -colonial critic, the evasive attitude of Swami and his father to the colonial rule reveals contradictions in Narayan’s stance and presents him as someone sensitive to the tyranny of the British rule but “refusing to vocalize the independence metaphor” (Rajan 34). But a close

reading of the novel shows that it is far away from revealing contradictions in the novelist's stance. Moreover, it gives a negative picture of colonial authority and unequivocally shows that Narayan steadily speaks for India's freedom. It should be remembered that Narayan was not a political writer and he was not writing the novel as a political propaganda to accelerate the pace of independence movement. What he has done as a politically conscious writer is objectively record the anti British sentiment and the nationalist movement activities of the time. Another point is that the shifty attitude of the characters to the British rule reveals Narayan's awareness of such ambivalence and his Chaucerian acceptance of life in all its diversity. The ambivalence or contradictions, it is to be noted that, are with Narayan's protagonists. Narayan was not exactly autobiographical, though he used his experience for fictional representation.

In *Swami and Friends* Narayan has just shown how earnestly Indians were struggling for freedom as was evident from the fact that children like Swami were greatly affected by the nationalist movement. The novel also shows how much Gandhi was loved by Indians who unfortunately failed to realize the true spirit of his non-violence movement. Swami's response and reaction to the nationalist sentiment and the British rule may not be well thought and preconceived but it was spontaneous and patriotic. He joins the anti- British rally not merely out of fun what the immature children normally do, but inspired by a sense of patriotism. Swami is so charged by the nationalist speech that he cannot prevent himself to shout loudly "Gandhi ki jai". Listening to the description of the plight of Indian peasants he cannot prevent his tears that are his genuinely patriotic tears.

Narayan's anti- European feelings and utterly scornful remarks on the colonial empire in India have been scattered in different parts of *Swami and Friends*. Whenever he has got an opportunity to include an anti-colonial element in the novel, he has appropriately used it as we notice when Swami sat to read the political map of Europe "puzzled him how people managed to live in such a crooked country as Europe. He wondered what the shape of the people might be who lived in places where the outline narrowed as in a cape, and how they managed to escape being strangled by the contour of their land" (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 63). Swami's friend, Mani, wears pure khaddar because he won't "pay a paisa to those Lancashire devils" (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 111). Even Rajam, son of the police superintendent, a British agent in India, doubts the sanity of the British Government, thereby exposing the lawlessness and exploitations practiced by the colonial authority in India and shows his "momentary sympathy for Gandhi; no wonder he was dead against the Government" (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 133). Rajam criticizes the British thus: "The Government did not seem to know where it ought to interfere and where not" (Narayan, *Swami and Friends* 133). The situation occurs when Rajam faced the possibility that the cricket team he was forming in collaboration with Swami could be taxed.

Another interesting matter is that in *Swami and Friends* Narayan has voiced the independence metaphor not merely through Swaminathan, his father and his friends but through some other characters as well whose names are not mentioned in the novel. The novelist has beautifully recorded the time's ongoing increasingly militant nationalist upheaval as we find reflected in the nationalist rhetoric delivered by the orator in front of the gate of AlbertMissionSchool in protest of the arrest of GauriSankara as mentioned earlier. The rhetoric, on one hand, maintains the past prosperous glory of India and, on the other hand, delineates the common anti-British sentiment of Indians.

An analysis of the novel reveals that the novel fictionalizes the adventures of a group of boys growing up in the colonial era in the midst of the disturbances of the nationalist struggles and recorded the way how unconsciously the colonized accepted some facets of the culture of the

colonizer despite struggling against the same for freedom. Theoretically, this novel endorses the issue from postcolonial perspective which shows that Narayan has upheld here a negative picture of the colonial administration, even though he has shown the natives getting Anglicized in outlook. This assimilation of English culture, in broader perspective, became part of Indianness.

THE BACHELOR OF ARTS

The Bachelor of Arts was first published in 1937 with a preface by Graham Greene who has called Narayan “the novelist I most admire in the English language”. The publication of this novel firmly established Narayan’s success and reputation in the field of fiction. The storyline of the novel delineates the transition of an adolescent mind into adulthood. It revolves around a young boy named Chandran, a typical representative of Indian upper middle class youth of the pre-independence era.

The real theme of the novel is “reaction to the traditional marriage custom of India and the family relationship that of son and parents” (Singh 15). In this connection William Walsh comments:

The family, indeed, is the immediate context in which the novelist’s sensibility operates, and his novels are remarkable for the subtlety and conviction with which family relationships are treated—that of son and parents, and brother and brother, for example, in *The Bachelor of Arts*” (Walsh 36).

In this novel the young man's search for a place in the society consequent upon his taking the B.A. degree is, however, complicated by the various ups and downs in his life. The story of the novel begins with Chandran's life in AlbertMissionCollege in the late colonial times. Chandran is studying in the final year of B.A. R.K. Narayan focuses on that crucial state in which this young man passes his final year at the college and his first year in the world. The academic pursuits as well as the extracurricular activities of a B.A. student have been given an authentic description in the first part of the book. Chandran remains busy with these activities and plans to go abroad (in this case England) after graduation.

In this section it is seen that in the AlbertMissionCollege, a Historical Association is formed and Chandran is assigned the task of organizing the inaugural meeting as the Association's secretary. But Chandran's notions

as to what one did on the day of the meeting were very vague. He faintly thought that at such a meeting people sat around, drank tea, shook hands with each other, and felt inaugural (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 30).

This is the common trend of pre-independence India and Narayan tries to highlight by showing the hero’s satire on meetings and such other assemblages.

Moreover, by giving emphasis on history, the novelist somehow delineates his idea on nation. History is, by and large, helpful in creating nationalist sentiment by opening our past glory. At the inaugural Meeting, the speech of Professor Brown is described by Narayan in words which, somehow, may be applied to Narayan's own vision:

He held the audience for about an hour thus, with nothing very serious, nothing profound, but with the revelation of a personality, with delicious reminiscences, touched with humour and occasional irony (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 38).

He sat down after throwing at his audience this advice:

Like art, History must be studied for its own sake; and so, if you are to have an abiding interest in it, take it up after you leave the university. For outside the

university you may read your history in any order; from the middle work back to the beginning of things or in any way you like, and nobody will measure how many facts you have rammed into your poor head. Facts are, after all, a secondary matter in real History (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 38).

The novelist introduces us to the stark socio-political reality in this part of the novel. He wants to say that the total election-system is losing its democratic value in India, even in pre-independence era and this is reflected in the election of College Students' Union of Albert Missions College. The election-system of the College has lost its true sanctity and it is held under illegal influences. In a close talk to Chandran, the Students' Union Secretary Natesan discloses the secret of his winning the election.

I will tell you a secret...If I had kept clear of the Union elections, I should have saved nearly seventy rupees....Every vote was purchased with coffee and tiffin, and, in the election month, the restaurant bill came to seventy. My father wrote to me from the village asking if I thought that rupees lay scattered in our village street (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 7).

The interesting matter is that such illegal practice to win an election was not uncommon in 1937, when the novel was published.

Moreover, in Part I, we get an image of Chandran's mother which is the replica of the traditional Indian woman. Like the other Hindu women she loves to worship the household gods with the offerings of flowers and this is evident from her argument with her husband: "Twenty-five rupees on the garden and not a single petal of any flower for the gods in the *Puja* room" (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 41). The religious-mindedness of the mother is also reflected when the flower-thief is caught and she interposes by saying that: "You can go now, sir. If you want flowers you can take them. There couldn't be a better way of worship than giving flowers to those who really worship" (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 43).

In this section we see Chandran's contact with Veeraswami, the young man of twenty-two years with revolutionary zeal. One day he came to Chandran and offered to read a paper on "The Aids to British Expansion in India" in the Historical Association. Chandran was delighted. He had never met anyone who volunteered to address the Association. The novelist writes:

On a fateful day, to an audience of thirty-five, Veeraswami read his paper. It was the most violent paper ever read before an association. It pilloried Great Britain before the Association, and ended by hoping that the British would be ousted from India by force (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 45-46).

Imperialism was Veeraswami's "favourite demon" (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 46). He believed in smuggling arms into the country, and, on a given day, shooting all the Englishmen. He assured Chandran that he was even then preparing for that great work. According to Veeraswami, Indians were hopelessly underfed and sickly and he proposed to cure hunger by encouraging the use of coconuts and the fruits of cactus for food. "He would assume the garb of a village worker, a rural reconstruction maniac, but secretly prepare the mind of the peasantry for revolution" (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Art* 47). By introducing Veeraswami, Narayan somehow wants to present radical revolutionary zeal which was very active in India at the time of struggle for independence.

The second part of the book is a graphic description of the hero's infatuation for a beautiful 15 year old girl Malathi with a sure psychological touch—how the hero falls in love at first sight, how he shows his impatience to marry the girl though his love has not been reciprocated by the girl, and how his ambition and plans are finally smashed. Within the six months of his becoming a

graduate, Chandran is faced with the problem of finding a job for himself. Unable to find a job, he passes the time by sleeping for long hours or walking on the banks of the river. During one of his walks, he sees Malathi, the beautiful fifteen year girl, and instantaneously falls in love with her without knowing her real identity. Chandranthinks:

If India was to attain salvation these watertight divisions must go--Community, Caste, Sects, Sub-sects, and still further divisions. He felt very indignant. He would set an example himself by marrying this girl whatever her caste or sect might be (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 56).

Here, Narayan touches the burning social issue of caste system of that period.

Through Mohan's co-operation Chandran comes to learn that Malathi is unmarried, and that she is the daughter of Mr. D. W. Krishna Iyer, Head Clerk in the Executive Engineer's office. The suffix to the name of the girl's father is a comforting indication that he is of the same caste and sub-caste as Chandran. When Chandran relates the matter to his parents and urges to marry her, his father replies,

Do you think marriage is a child's game? We don't know anything about them, who they are, what they are, what they are worth, if the stars and the other things about the girl are all right, and above all, whether they are prepared to marry their girl at all.... (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 69)

Here, Narayan portrays a truthful picture of the conventions of marriage followed at the time. First, a girl should be of appropriate age. What that means is she should be younger than fifteen years of age. When Chandran says, "I hear that this season she (Malathi) will be married because she is getting on for sixteen" (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 69) his mother screamed : "They can't be all right if they have kept the girl unmarried till sixteen. She must have attained puberty ages ago. We have a face to keep in this town" (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 70). Secondly, both the bride and the groom should belong to the same caste, community etc. Marrying out of caste is as good as social suicide. Chandran knows it well that his "father would certainly cast him off if he tried to marry out of caste" (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 67). Thirdly, the proposal should always come from the bride's parents:

Whatever happened they (Chandran's parents) would not take the initiative in the matter; for they belonged to the bridegroom's side, and according to time-honoured practice it was the bride's people who proposed first. Anything done to the contrary to this would make them the laughing stock of the community (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 70).

Then comes the dowry arrangements and it is evident from GanapathiSastrigal, the match-maker's comment:

I think they (the family of Malathi) are prepared to give a cash dowry of about two thousand rupees, silver vessels and presents up to a thousand, and spend about a thousand on the wedding celebrations. These will be in addition to about a thousand worth of diamond and gold on the girl (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 78).

And despite this Chandran's mother was "slightly disappointed at the figures" (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 78). Lastly, the horoscopes should match perfectly. "How are we to know whether two persons brought together will have health, happiness, harmony and long life, if we do not study their horoscopes individually and together?" (Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* 78) It goes without saying that the most important persons of the marriage, the bride and the groom, have no say in the matter whatsoever. Practically, the marriage proposal is rejected by the girl's

parents since his horoscope describes him as a *manglik*, a condition in which a *manglik* can only marry another *manglik* and if not, the non-*manglik* will die.

Thus fatalism which marks the common attitude to life has been reflected here. R.K. Narayan wants to show here how the Indian society is under the ravage of orthodox belief in astrology. The novel also shows that—

how free choice of emotional relation is made limited by fate and astrology and the choice of life partnership is determined by the mercy of astrologers. Narayan accepts that free communication between a boy and a girl before or without marriage is impossible in the society (Singh 16).

All this creates a feeling of despondency in the mind Chandran, the hero of the novel. He does not wish to live at home and desires a change, so he leaves for Madras which has been described in third part of the book. He wanders aimlessly in various parts of South India in order to forget Malathi and get mental peace which eludes him. In the end, he becomes a *Sanyasi* and travels long distances on foot and remains on alms.

On the way he meets many people and some villagers take him for a great sage. He grows very weak and looks tired. He is unable to get any peace of mind. The life of *Sanyasi* does not suit him. Due to pressing compunctions and personal realizations, he decides to return home. In the fourth part of the novel the hero's life as an agent of "the Daily Messenger" has been depicted. To get the agency of this newspaper he has to face a tough competition but turns up victorious with the help of his uncle and finds himself settled down in his life. At last he marries Susila, the beautiful daughter of a Talapur advocate and thus leads his conjugal and domestic life happily. In this way, the whole story begins with his college days where he is a bright student of the B.A. and ends in his finally getting settled in life with a beautiful wife.

While delineating the transition of the adolescent mind into adulthood, the novelist has also touched upon the various social and religious customs and traditions of a typical South Indian family which is deeply rooted in old traditions, blind superstitions, class snobberies etc. In this way the novel gives us a representative picture of the colonial Indian society.

Like many of Narayan's protagonists, Chandran comes back to his Indian roots, after enterprising to find a place in the colonial society, attracted by the profitable benefits and material wealth. It is Narayan's belief that Indian culture, and most importantly Hindu culture and heritage can bring stability and harmony to an otherwise struggling society and this is his concern in the novel, *The Bachelor of Arts*.

THE DARK ROOM

R.K. Narayan's third novel, *The Dark Room* (1938) offers a feminist view of the contemporary South Indian society. From the general perception the novel seems to be "a sociological study of an Indian household which demonstrates the typical Indian attitude of life where the husband is lord and master and it is a sin for a wife to disobey him" (Singh 18). The story entails the tale of a tormented wife, Savitri. *The Dark Room* is a superb examination of a patriarchal society and also reflects the injustices that this type of society causes to woman and children.

At the very beginning of the novel, we witness the rift in relationship between husband and wife. Ramani, the office secretary of Engladia Insurance Company is very domineering and cynical in his ways and hence governs his house according to his will. As he is always irritable, the atmosphere in his house is generally gloomy and his wife, Savitri, three children, Babu, Kamala, and Sumati, and servants always remain in a state of terror. The first chapter sees him

criticising everything that his wife serves him on the table. He curses the cook and freely taunts his wife, Savitri.

Savitri is a representative Indian housewife who like many helpless housewives, becomes a toy in the hands of her husband. In the beginning of the novel we see when Savitri prevents her son Babu from going to school, who is reluctant to go because of illness, she is completely humiliated with such remarks: “Mind your own business, do you hear?...Go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown up boy to me. It is none of a woman’s business” (Narayan, *The Dark Room* 1).

In the later stage of the story we come to learn a clear-cut husband management skill from Ponni, the rustic wife: “Keep the men under the rod, and they will be all right. Show them that you care for them will tie you and treat you like a dog...that is the way to manage them. (Narayan, *The Dark Room* 105-106). The husband-management skill of Ponni creates laughter, no doubt, but, apparently, a feminist overtone is heard here.

As the story progresses in certain distance we come to learn that Ramani, the husband of Savitri has got engaged with another woman, a beautiful new employer, Shanta Bai who is pretty and recently separated from her husband. Ramani is taken in by her charms and in order to set up her place he vacates a spare room in the office and even has shifted many of their furniture from home. These include one of Savitri’s favourite furniture also. While returning from his golf club, Ramani regularly starts spending time at her room, and sits spellbound listening to her.

While shocked by the news of his relation Savitri tries to win back her husband but cannot do so because of Ramani’s adamant nature. At first, she tries to retreat to her dark room. But she realises that hiding in there won’t help. A great realization comes to her and so she utters:

I’m a human being...You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging, and slaves at other times. Don’t think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose (Narayan, *The Dark Room* 85).

Therefore, she decides to leave the house. She wants to take the kids along, but Ramani stops her harshly. Then she shouts: “Don’t touch them or talk to them. Go yourself, if you want. They are my children” (Narayan, *The Dark Room* 87)

The deliberate disrespect shown by her heartless husband causes such dejection in her heart that she wanders alone in the street and even plunges herself in the river. Mari, a blacksmith by day and burglar by night, saves Savitri from the river. He brings along his wife, Ponni who tries to befriend Savitri. She offers Savitri shelter and food. But a peculiar madness snatches Savitri that she refuses to eat anything not earned by herself. She says, “I am resolved never to accept food or shelter which I have not earned.” She is dismayed at being at the mercy of the men in her life – father, brother, husband. She gets so obstinate about not taking any more charity from anyone that she starts working at a temple as a cleaner for a bad tempered priest. But in a day she realises the impracticality of her choice and decides to return home. Literally, she returns home, though a part of her is dead now. Her husband, Ramani is somehow relieved to find her back, less for her sake, and more to keep up social pretenses.

The Dark Room was written in the late 1930s and during this time a new kind of discourse on the status of Indian women was heard in the society. As literature is “a criticism of life”, after Matthew Arnold, so it would be quite natural that *The Dark Room* will reflect some contemporary social issues. So the novel is about a particular woman’s indignation and revolt. Savitri is a stereotyped Hindu wife who follows the glorified footsteps of other mythological Hindu wives like Sita and Savitri. The title corresponds with the ancient legend of Savitri and

Satyavan that appears in the *Mahabharata* where Savitri challenges death to save her husband Satyavan and is finally victorious in the encounter. Although Savitri in *The Dark Room* lives up to the ideals of servitude and devotion implicit in the powerful feminine figure of the *Mahabharata*, she is betrayed by a patriarchal system that allows her the freedom of infidelity but denies her the right to economic independence. At the close of the story she finds herself trapped in a marriage that she cannot end and that she can barely alter. But she does rebel, though her rebellion is enormously circumscribed by her gendered helplessness. Contrary to her Santa Bai is presented as a less sympathized character. But Santa Bai is a self-made, bold and educated woman who has left her husband because he ill-treated her, and unlike Savitri, she never returns to her ill-treated husband. The two female characters, thus, contradict each other. If one is the custodian of tradition, the other is desperate to break it and herein lies the ambivalence which is the regular feature of R.K.Narayan's work.

It is true that Narayan's sympathies are with Savitri but he somehow passes away from making a grand feminist statement in this novel. Savitri leaves her family for valid reasons, but reconciles and comes back. We see some of Narayan's characters rebel against a traditional and regressive society. Earlier in *The Bachelor of Arts*, the young protagonist is sickened at his inability to get the girl he wants and turns a monk for a while. But quickly realising the narrowness of his world, he comes back into the mainstream. Here, Narayan shows us the possibilities. He shows us how conservative India was opening up to new attitudes, yet clinging to the past narrowness. He registers a protest, giving a voice to Savitri, but does not deconstruct the society. The point to be noted is—Narayan's fictional world depicts a nation in process. A change is coming like Yeats' *Easter 1916*. The beauty to be born would be fractured and ambivalent. It would be hybrid in essence. And Narayan posits his protagonists in the liminal zone of transition.

THE ENGLISH TEACHER

The English Teacher (1945) is the last of Narayan's novels which were published before independence. It was written seven years after *The Dark Room*. Probably it was the shattering blow, that he received in the death of his wife, which made him incapable of sustained artistic effort, and during this interval he could compose only short stories or sketches. This novel, dedicated to Narayan's wife Rajam, is not only autobiographical but also poignant in its intensity of feeling. The story is a series of experiences in Krishnan's life - some joyful, some sorrowful; and his journey towards achieving inner peace and self-development, in the traditional Indian sense.

Krishnan, the central character of the novel undertakes a journey, which is altogether emotional, intellectual, and spiritual, during the course of the novel. At the start of the novel Krishnan is an English teacher in the Albert Mission College, living and teaching at the same institution where he was once a pupil, and at the end we see him resigning his post, beginning work at a nursery school, and learning to communicate psychically with his dead wife. He learns and changes during the course of the novel in a way which he could not have predicted at the beginning

When the story opens we see a very nervous and anxious Krishnan expecting the arrival of his wife and daughter to Malgudi where he is an English Teacher. Krishnan's wife Susila is with her parents, some miles away as she had recently given birth to their daughter Leela.

Krishnan wants a drastic change in the society where he lives. He takes the task of debating the possibility of regenerating the society which is trodden by customs and tradition. And, to

him, the tragedy lies in the fact that a major section of the Indian populace is self-assured victim of superstitions, smugness and social evils. Regarding the education system, he is a stern critic of the education system run by the British. The irony is that he himself is the product of this education system. In Chapter Eight of the novel, while writing the resignation letter to the principal of his college, Krishnan criticizes the “false education” system which has reduced the people of India to “a nation of morons” (Narayan, *The English Teacher*, 178). He is opposed to the perpetuating system of education that cripples his imagination and hence believes in social freedom and independence of mind:

I was going to explain why I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind (Narayan, *The English Teacher* 178).

He has studied English literature and admired the wonderful writers, but he cannot do so only at the cost of creativity. His soul revolts against the British education and hence he gives up his job and prefers to work as primary school teacher. Thus, like most of his countrymen Krishnan detests the promotion of British culture which will effectively help keep the country in subjugation and servility. This English education breeds a class of youngsters revering the British culture, disregarding their own heritage and in some cases even showing contempt to their own.

However, Krishnan is not ignorant of the aesthetic value of English literature and is not opposed to teaching it as a matter of pride or principle. His opposition to English education is a well-informed decision. As Krishnan later says to Mr. Brown who has been the Principal of Albert Mission College for nearly 30 years: “I revere them (i.e. the English dramatists and poets). And I hope to give them to these children for their delight and entertainment, but in a different measure and in a different manner” (Narayan, *The English Teacher* 180). Krishnan also knows that Mr. Brown will not be able to grasp the idea of self-development, inner peace and service in the Indian sense despite living in India for three decades. “His western mind, classifying, labeling, departmentalizing...” (Narayan, *The English Teacher* 179) is so unlike Krishnan’s Indian mind. So, when an ‘Honours boy’ praises Krishnan in farewell meeting by saying that--“ Our country needs more men like our beloved teacher who is going out to-day. The national regeneration is in his hands...” (Narayan, *The English Teacher* 182-183)-- Krishnan replies:

Gentlemen, permit me to thank you all for your kind words. Let me assure you I’m retiring, not with a feeling of sacrifice for a national cause, but with a very selfish purpose. I’m seeking a great inner peace. I find I can’t attain it unless I withdraw from the adult world and adult work into the world of children. And there, let me assure you, is a vast store-house of peace and harmony... (Narayan, *The English Teacher* 183).

Throughout the novel Krishnan encounters the coexistence of western and native cultural attitudes, which also represent the attitudes of Indians of a newer and older generation. For example when Susila is ill she is treated both by a doctor who practises western scientific medicine, and by a Swamiji who uses mystical methods of healing.

The final stage of Krishnan’s journey takes him further from the western intellectual frame of mind, inherited from the British, in which he was embedded at the opening of the novel, and further towards native Indian spiritual practices. His friendship with the headmaster of a

kindergarten school transforms his life. The eccentric headmaster is a refreshing contrast to Krishnan. 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 education system that the headmaster is running is a direct contrast to the western educational system. Krishnan gives up 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 realises 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.

The problem of illiteracy has been discussed in the novel. Narayan expresses through Krishnan his displeasure over the present education system which failed to solve the problem of illiteracy. Illiteracy in woman is very often seen in India, and more so in the colonial phase and this is the reason why the majority of heroines in Narayan's work (keeping aside Daisy and Rosie) are illiterate, including the wife of Krishnan, Susila in *The English Teacher*. This illiteracy of women is the root cause of their exploitation in society. Another prime reason of their exploitation is their dependence on men regarding economic matter. And this dependence is also because of their illiteracy. Narayan raises the issue in the novel.

Finally, it is pertinent to say that the issue of roots plays a pivotal role in *The English Teacher*. For Krishnan, who studies in the English language, the English writers, poets and the *Bible*, and who makes a career out of the same education, finds that these do not bring him comfort or support or relief at his time of need. He realizes education and his choice of career have actually removed him from his roots and culture –and ultimately from reality. He realizes the futility of an education such as this that serves effectively to keep them in subjugation not only physically, but also in their approach to life and mind-set.

From the above discussion, it is found that R.K. Narayan remains pre-occupied with the treatment of social and national issues like nationalism, traditional social norms, typical Indian attitude to family life, sound familial relationship, beliefs on other worldly matters, feminism, faulty education-system, social evils like dowry system and caste system, east-west encounter, degeneration of values, rural-urban conflict and freedom struggle in his pre-Independence novels. R.K. Narayan accepts the reality as it presents before him. He sees the Nation in transition and in emerging stage with an ironic detachment and accepts reality ungrudgingly. As the pre-Independence period is marked by a transition, the conflict between tradition and modernity, between east and west naturally come into being in the literature of this period. So, the theme of east-west encounter depicted in Narayan's pre-Independence novels marks the beginning of the tradition of highlighting the interaction between Oriental and Occidental people and cultures which is developed further in his post-Independence novels.

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