

R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*: A Thematic Interpretation

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Abstract:

*After the publication of his fourth novel, *The English Teacher*, in 1945, Narayan's writing entered a period of greater maturity and confidence. The autobiographical element which had been so obvious in his earlier writing became less prominent, allowing him to develop his characters more freely. With the growing critical success of his novels in the West, he began to lead the life of the successful literary figure both in India and abroad. Marriage again plays a central role in *The English Teacher*. Narayan lost his wife to typhoid, and that is what happens to the central character, Krishna, in this novel. It is very sad, and very painful – just as it must have been for him in real life. The grief here is described with great tenderness, in passages that are quite haunting in their simplicity. The prose is like a funeral bell: solemn and resonant.*

Keywords: Greater maturity, autobiographical element, central character

Krishna, the central character in *The English Teacher*, by R. K. Narayan (1906-2001) undertakes an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual journey during the course of the novel. At the start of the novel he is an English teacher, living and teaching at the same school 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. The journey takes him from a lifestyle which he found unsatisfactory to finding a set of values and a way of life that he feels he can believe in wholly.

Krishna's change comes about not as a result of any grand plan or ambition, but as a result of his response to a series of challenging circumstances which arise once he begins to take steps away from the cloistered and protective environment of his school.

This day-by-day, unforeseen-event by unforeseen-event progress is reflected in Narayan's approach to the novel itself. Narayan gives the impression that he has no pre-planned plot in mind when the story opens, but instead focuses on a meticulously detailed depiction of Krishna's experiences, keeping to the observable surface reality of his perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, without digression or analysis or interpretation. This rigorous unadorned focus on observable phenomena results in some stunningly beautiful writing.

But although Krishna's journey takes place as a result of a series of unpredictable events, a number of recurring themes are being worked out in the course of the novel. These themes might be said to be Krishna's progress from predictability to unpredictability, from the academic world to the real world of life and death, from adulthood to childhood, and from a western mentality to an eastern mentality.

From predictability to unpredictability

Krishna repeatedly finds himself being drawn out of situations which ought to have been predictable and ordered by events which are spontaneous and unpredictable, and it is clear that he finds spontaneity and unpredictability to be stimulating and life-enhancing, while predictability and order, although providing a cushion of comfort and security, is ultimately stifling and deadening

Krishna is roused from his predictable and ordered life at his school, where he had come to feel he lived 'like a cow', and had a continuous 'sense of something missing' [Ch 1. p. 295], and where a pupil spelling 'honour' without the 'u' is seen as a catastrophe by his colleagues, by the unexpected news that his wife and child, both of whom are to be sources of spontaneity and unpredictability throughout the novel, are coming to join him, and that he will need to move out of his lodgings at the school and find a house for them. This marks the first step of what becomes a journey out of the cloistered world of the school and into the real world of ordinary people leading ordinary lives.

Susila, his wife, brings unpredictability into his life at every turn. For example when they go to look at a house she wants to make a long diversion to walk by the river and bathe her feet, where the rational orderly Krishna would have naturally taken the most direct route, and it is clear that he finds her unpredictable behaviour a source of delight and inspiration.

Krishna does not adjust to this new influence without a struggle, however, as is seen in the episode where she gets rid of the predictably-unpredictable alarm clock he had kept on his desk for years. This clock, which was liable to set off its alarm at arbitrary times of day and night, seems to symbolise his old attitude to predictability versus spontaneity. He held onto the clock for years, as if its unpredictable behaviour were precious to him, and yet he stifled it with a literary tome whenever it sounded its alarm. He seems to have cherished it for its unpredictability, even though that unpredictability was inappropriate and ineffective, without quite realising why, and when his wife gets rid of it behind his back it comes as a great shock to him and causes a row which drags on for several days before he can accept her act with equanimity.

This jarring episode seems to mark his transition from a world dominated by predictability to a world dominated by unpredictability, and from that point on he has to start actually living day to day on the basis of the truth which he may have previously intuitively sensed, but stifled, that there is a severe limit to what can be achieved in life through any system which is ordered, predictable, and knowable.

The turning point of the story arises from Susila's unpredictability. When they go to look at the house we could not possibly predict that she would go for a walk on her own, get stuck in a contaminated lavatory, and then become ill. When they prepare for the journey it might have seemed that Narayan was preparing for a plot in which something bad happened to their child while they were away, but in the event the important incident is not something that could have been guessed beforehand, either by the reader or by Krishna, but an unpredictable event which arises on the spur of the moment.

Krishna's intention was that their visits to view houses should proceed in an ordered, predictable, rational way, but Susila brought unpredictability to the occasions, resulting in moments of beauty, such as the walk by the river, but also in the awful tragedy of her becoming infected by a fatal illness. She brings reality into his life, which was previously protected from reality by the enclosed ordered world of the school, and later she initiates the most unpredictable event of all, her psychic communication with him from beyond death.

The futility of clinging to the belief that life can be orderly, predictable, and knowable is shown in two central, and symmetrical, predictions which occupy a prominent place in the novel. The first is the doctor's assertion that typhoid, which Susila has contracted, 'is the one fever which goes strictly by its own rules. It follows a time-table . . . ' [Ch 3. p.366] and that Susila will be well in a few weeks. But in spite of his further assurances that her attack is 'Absolutely normal course. No complications. A perfect typhoid run . . . ' [Ch 3. p.369] Susila dies.

The other prominent demonstration of the futility of believing that life can be knowable and predictable is seen in the headmaster's belief in a prediction made by an astrologer, 'who can see past present and future as one, and give everything its true value' [Ch 7. p. 450] that he will die on a given date. But although (just as the doctor had asserted that Susila's typhoid was 'A perfect typhoid run') the

headmaster has found that his 'life has gone precisely as he predicted' [Ch 7. p. 450], the headmaster lives.

Both predictions are propounded with certainty, and both prove to be false. The scientifically-based prediction of life is thwarted by death, and the mystical prediction of death is thwarted by in life.

Both of these episodes show the limitations of man's ability to know and predict the world. The truth is that we cannot know, and cannot predict, and any view of life, whether deriving from modern western science, or ancient eastern mysticism, which disregards the unknowable and sees only what is supposedly known, and supposedly predictable, is hopelessly inadequate.

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