

REFLECTION OF LIFE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN R. K. NARAYAN'S WORKS

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[What] profoundly affects modern autobiography is a general lack of relationship and social being.

-Roy Pacsal

R. K. Narayan autobiography or memoir gives us a glimpse into the uncomplicated life of a simple man, who subsequently became one of the 20th century's literary giants. Narayan's own life has been a major theme among many other themes he deals with. His own experiences, his encounters with other people, the major events of his life, the family and friends he grew up with, the kind of world they amounted to and he grew up in, have gone, into his work. He does not offer a mere transcription of life but a selection, reorganization and transmutation of it in his fictions. His writing may appear a matter of "self-expression" to the extent he channels his life into it, but as Northrop Frye observes in relation to Wordsworth, his refashioning and reshaping distances it from more self-expression. A close comparative reading of Narayan's autobiography. *My Days* with his novel *The English Teacher* give us the point.

R.K. Narayan's fiction, says William Walsh in *R. K. Narayan : A Critical Appreciation* "is unusually close to and intimate with his personal life." (pg 19) He maintains that Narayan is predominantly autobiographical and utilizes the experiences of his life to organize them in his work of art. Narayan's personal life in *My Days* reads like any of his novels, with his emphasis on the Indian domestic scene, the middle class, especially the small segment of the agricultural community, and the personal relationships. The Indian middle class, which Narayan says is the only class he understands, is beautifully represented not only in his autobiography but also in *The English Teacher* – the novel which have drawn heavily from Narayan's life. Though it makes Narayan limited in his scope of art, he is content, as Stuart J. Murray has asserted: Thus autobiography is the written story of one's life, one's life story. And yet, this act of "self" – writing frames "life" in such a way that the meaning of each term is obscured. "life" interrupts the act of self-writing, exceeds it, even though the writing is about life, and occurs within it, necessarily prior to that life's completion(101)

When Narayan wrote *My Days* in 1974, he was already well known as a novelist. As such his literary autobiography "forms a part of an oeuvre." Born in 1907 in a Brahmin family at Madras, Narayan's earliest memories are of his childhood companions – a peacock and a

monkey. *My Days* opens with the town of Madras in the background, and its various problems; then there is the family circle, the central framework of the autobiography. And in its midst is Narayan, the hero quite like one of those middle class men. The quiet city of Mysore where he spent a major part of his life becomes the Malgudi of his novels. It is an imagined small town in South India; and in the larger context represents the whole of India.

When Narayan wrote *My Days* almost thirty years after having written "The English Teacher", he was unable to give direct expression to his personal grief. Why did Narayan need the mask of Krishnan to give vent to his grief? Why did he think it necessary to talk about the death of his wife through a persona? Narayan says:

"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." (69)

The English Teacher is very much autobiographical. The theme of love, death and reunion run as a thread throughout the fabrics of the autobiography and the novel alike. In the novel, Susila dies in the prime of her youth, about four years after their marriage and just in one year after she comes to the city. Death, in the novel, is viewed as a continuation of life. Between the world of the living and the world of the dead, there exists no boundary.

The English Teacher, is firmly tethered in the detail of his own experience. Narayan's autobiography, like his novels, is regional in that it conveys an intimate sense of a given place in the novels. The life in *My Days* is that of Narayan's own class, the Indian middle-class, where people are not too well off to be unworried about money or brutalized by the total lack of it. He appears like the hero of one of his novels as sensitive, ardent, modest and very about himself, and with a hidden resolute will.

The novels of R. K. Narayan persistently concern themselves with the theme of man's search for his identity as the ultimate goal of life. Discussing the significance of this theme in relation to *The English Teacher*, Narayan writes: For Narayan, thus, the question of human identity appears to hinge on a full understanding of man's totality of relationships on the earth as well as beyond it. The other worldly dimension of man's identity assumes special significance for Narayan because he had found, in his own case, a particular strength and consolation to face his daily struggle for life after his wife's death and his subsequent 'contact' with her in a sort of telepathic experience. The horror of his experience of his wife's physical death was transformed into a kind of spiritual elation when he was told by his wife that she existed in a finer and more refined state of pure spiritual existence. This not only helped him bear his great loss with equanimity but also replenished his sagging creative vitality with a new and luxuriant energy. *The English Teacher* stands out amongst Narayan's novels by virtue of its intensity of feeling and a depth of penetration which give the book a spiritual quality. He refused to admit to a connection between his own experience and that of Krishnan, although the details of his marriage as recounted in his autobiography *My Days* show a clear parallel. In *The English Teacher* one senses a certain need to exercise or immortalize the author's deep felt experience. Narayan's reluctance to corroborate the facts reveals yet again his shying away from the idea of the individual.

Thus, the novels of R. K. Narayan are cast in the mould of a typical aesthetic pattern in which the protagonist usually sets out on a quest for identity, and through him we get a glimpse of the author. The English Teacher, is out and out autobiographical. From the beginning to the end, it is mostly based on the facts of Narayan's life, and has very little of fiction. In his absorbing autobiography entitled *My Days*, Narayan candidly confesses:

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 experiences 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.....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....(*My Days*,pp.134-135)

Narayan's theory that "fiction outlasts fact" finds a mention in *My Days*. Perhaps this was the reason why he mingled incidents, both major and minor, from his life, which he wove in his fiction. The artistic motive is to immortalize his life-experience by giving it the form of a story. Undoubtedly it gains a kind of richness by being transformed and transmuted.

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