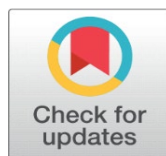
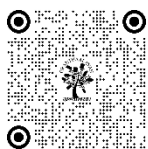


MARRIAGE - BEYOND CONSUMMATION: THE METAPHYSICAL UNION OF KRISHNAN AND SUSILA (WITH REFERENCE TO THE NOVEL THE ENGLISH TEACHER) R.K. NARAYAN

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ABSTRACT

The novel *The English Teacher* is the spiritual odyssey of the novelist R.K. Narayan to achieve peace and harmony in his life after the sad demise of his young wife. Krishnan, the English teacher of Albert Mission College lost his wife Susila after brief illness. The premature demise of Susila created a spiritual vacuum in Krishnan's happy married life. He was in deep sorrow and despair. But this dark phase did not continue for a long period in Krishnan's life. He established a psychic union with his departed wife by the help of a communicator. The communicator was a gentleman from the village Tayur near Malgudi. Later, the spirit of Susila suggested Krishnan not to depend on other people and get her assessed directly. It was a difficult task but the love of Krishnan for Susila made it possible. Initially Krishnan did not get success but with rigorous mental and spiritual exercise he finally got success to make contact to Susila's spirit. It was an unforgettable moment in the life of Krishnan. It gave hope and happiness to him. Narayan's depiction of Krishnan has a close resemblance to his life. The novel is autobiographical in nature.

Keywords: R.K. Narayan, Spiritual Odyssey, Psychic Union, Autobiographical Touch

The novel *The English Teacher* begins with the depiction of personal and professional life of Krishnan, a thirty years old teacher of Albert Mission College. He was leading the life of a boarder at the hostel of Albert Mission College. He was married to a beautiful girl Susila. He spent a disciplined life. He got up at eight every morning. He was a hard-working teacher. He taught his students faithfully. His students also secured good marks in the English subject. He was paid the salary of a hundred rupees. The salary was given on every first day of the month. As a teacher he was satisfied with his academic performance. The chief of the Albert Mission College was Mr. Brown. He was a strict administrator as well as a good academician. One day he noticed that a student of Honours class in English failed to articulate honours in a correct way. He was enraged as well as agitated by the unsatisfactory performance of English teacher. The academic performance of the student was a matter of concern.

"Could you imagine a worse shock for me? I came across a student of the English Honours, who did not know till this day that 'honours' had to be spelt with a u?"¹

This was too much for the teachers of the department of English. They felt insulted by the wild behaviour of Mr. Brown. The Assistant Professor Mr. Gajapathy was not satisfied by the performance of the teachers as well as students. Mr.

Brown underlined the importance of the department of English. Gajapathy gave furious look to his colleagues but Krishnan remained unaffected. Gajapathy called his students disgraceful. It forced Krishnan to react on this statement of his senior teacher.

I felt irritated and said; "Mr. Gajapathy there are blacker sins in this world than a dropped vowel." (3)

The above utterance highlights the Indian emotions and feelings of Krishnan. Mr. Brown desired that Indian students must speak correct English irrespective of the influence of their mother tongue. However, Mr. Brown never learnt the native language of India. He thought that he belonged to the superior race of master. Later during the night hours, the teachers gathered and talked about the incident. They were Rangappa, the philosophy teacher and Gopal, the mathematics teacher. They discussed about it and later departed to their respective rooms. The next day Krishnan decided to change the habits of life. Like a true Indian saint, he woke up early. He took bath in holy river Saryu after a brisk morning walk. He came to his room. He needed coffee. He told Singaram to bring coffee. Singaram was an old man of eighty and he was the servant of the college. He served the boarders of the hostel. Singaram wanted to know the reason behind his delay in taking coffee. Krishnan told about his morning activities. He felt happy that Krishnan followed the true life of an Indian. Krishnan was a good teacher. He never bluffed the students. In fact, he was a teacher in true spirit. He had a sense of duty. He did not want to cheat the students for the sake of money. The day he went for morning walk, he failed to make proper preparation to take the class. A teacher who comes without preparation in the classroom always try to pass the time in non-academic activity like delaying in roll call and other activities. The same feeling came to Krishnan. At one point, he thought to reveal the truth before the students. He felt like breaking out in confession.

"My dear fellows don't trust me so much. I am merely trying to mark time because I couldn't come sufficiently prepared, because all the morning I have....."

I stole a look at the watch Only fifteen minutes more. (13)

It was the real experience of a faithful teacher like Krishnan. A good teacher is always aware of his own shortcomings in his academic life. Krishnan had deep respect for his Indian roots. He told the gathered teachers in the common room to call a meeting to decide how many marks had to be deducted for spelling honours with middle 'u'. This was an ironical and humorous comment on the part of Krishnan. Gajapathy looked over his spectacles and he remarked:

"You are joking over yesterday's meeting, I suppose?" I replied, "I am not joking, I am serious." (17)

Krishnan had a successful professional life. As a teacher he was absolutely truthful. His personal life had peace. He loved his wife, baby, father and mother. Krishnan was leading the life of a boarder. His wife did not live with him. She lived in her father's place. After doing his college work, Krishnan returned back to his room. He saw the letters one from his father and another from his wife. These two letters changed the contours of his life. His father wanted that after his marriage he should live a comfortable life along with his wife. He suggested him to keep his wife along with him. The other letter was written by his wife. The letter had a fragrance of jasmine. Susila his wife had written about their seven months old daughter and other domestic things. After a lot of thinking, Krishnan decided to bring his wife to Malgudi. Like a true husband, Krishnan began to search a home to settle with his wife. He told his friends, students and well-wishers to search a home. Initially Krishnan lacked confidence to begin the life of married man. The situation warranted him to take the stewardship of a married life.

...But I didn't bargain to accept her guardianship so suddenly. I had seen my sister's children of that age, seven months or eight months old, and they started howling and crying at nights till we felt that they would not survive whatever was afflicting them. (23)

Krishnan had to make a lot of preparation for of his family before their arrival. The house was to be searched. He was too much obsessed with house searching. He always remained occupied with these thoughts. He saw several houses but it did not satisfy his taste. On the other hand, his father's letter had a suggestion to set up his households. His father had mentioned a post script on the letter.

“To help you set up the family your mother is quite willing to come and stay with you for a few weeks. I have the slightest objection....” (23)

He did not get a suitable home. he searched several houses but did not select any of them. At last, his one of the students helped him in this matter. Krishnan had earlier searched house in every important location of Malgudi like South Extension, Fort Area, Racecourse Road and Vinayak Mudali Street. He omitted Lawley Extension deliberately. One of the students informed him about a house in Saryu Street. He suggested him that land owner wanted a cultured family. Krishnan scrutinised his behaviour and went to see the house. The old man was the owner of the house. He was an eccentric old man. He was a partially blind person. He asked several times about the need of garage to Krishnan. Krishnan did not speak plainly about garage. He disliked the behaviour of the old man and caretaker boy. The old man was rude in his behaviour. He almost offended Krishnan this his words.

“....Don’t pretend you own a car. You have come walking. Even if I’m blind, do you think I can’t notice it?”
“Look here,” I cried,....’I’m not here to learn lessons from you. I am myself a teacher: and I teach a thousand boys in that college, mind you? (33)

The anger of Krishnan worked wonder. The old man became meek. He saluted Krishnan. He decided to give his house on rent to Krishnan. The houses had a lovely view of Saryu Street. The rent of the house was decided twenty-five rupees for a month. Krishnan came to his rented house. He was helped by Singram in carrying the goods from hostel to the rented house.

Krishnan was a devoted husband and sincere father. His wife was expected to come to Malgudi. However, before the arrival of his wife his mother came to his house. She arranged every household things. She purchased kitchenware and small utensils for the kitchen. Krishnan liked the home. Her mother disliked the kitchen but to appease Krishnan she did not speak against it. Krishnan felt pride on the selection of his house. Krishnan and his mother talked on several domestic issues. Krishnan’s mother had no good opinion about his elder brother’s wife. However, she had good opinion about Susila. She told Krishnan; “Susila is a modest girl. She is not obstinate”. (40) The arrival of Susila to Krishnan’s place was coming close. Krishnan was mentally and emotionally agitated. The day came when Susila was expected to arrive Malgudi railway station. He became active. She was coming with her father by train. Krishnan went to the platform. He was too much worried about his wife and little baby’s safety. He had advised them to come by second-class compartment but they did not speak anything clearly to Krishnan. In fact, they came by third class compartment. The train stopped only for seven minutes. Krishnan was in need of help so he approached to Number Five, the coolie known to him for several years. He assured him that he had a long experience to do these things. However, the husband of a wife and father of a baby Krishnan lacked confidence because of overdose of emotions. He was emotionally perturbed and approached to station master. The station master tried to satisfy him. Krishnan waited desperately for the trains at the railway station. The train whistled and came to the platform. The Number Five swung into action. Krishnan hurried towards the crowd and saw his father-in-law. They came down from third class compartment. He saw Susila sitting with her baby. The baby and mother came out safely from the train. Her father helped her. Number Five worked wonder within a split of second. Susila’s father told Krishnan that his wife and daughter got comfortable place. Susila promptly replied in favour of her father justifying their journey in third class compartment.

My wife answered” “What if there are a lot of others in the compartment? Other people must, also travel. I didn’t mind it.” (45)

She indirectly supported her father for travelling in third class. Later he reached home along with his wife and baby. His father-in-law did not continue even for a day and he left the place in the same evening because of his other engagements. He returned by the evening train. Krishnan’s mother received her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter. She was very happy to see them. She “welcomed her at the gate. She had decorated the threshold with a festoon of green mango leaves and the floor and doorway with white flour design.” (46)

The perfect domestic harmony displayed in the life of Susila and Krishnan. Krishnan was absorbed in his academic life and Susila in managing domestic affairs. Krishnan wrote poems and she admired his poems. They had trifle quarrel on domestic issues but they loved each other. Susila was a religious woman. She prayed God every day. Krishnan loved his

wife and he gave his salary in the hands of Susila to run the domestic affairs. She was a strict accountant. The money multiplied in her hands. Krishnan admired her for this quality.

Now it was in the hands of someone who seemed to understand perfectly where every rupee was going or should go, and managed them with determined hand. (52)

Everything was well in their marital life except one quarrel. Krishnan had behaved his wife rudely for selling his wall clock which he had purchased in Madras junk market. He was so much offended by this act of Susila that he left home and took his evening snacks in college. This had tremendous impact on Susila. By that time, Susila was helped by an old lady sent by Krishnan's mother. Susila was so affected that in the midnight she started sobbing. It was beyond the endurance of Krishnan. When he heard the sob of Susila he went to his room. She burst her anguish.

"You go away to your room. Why do you come and abuse me at midnight?" she said.

"Stop crying, otherwise people will think a couple of lunatics are living in this house...."

I went back to my room – a very determined man.

I lay on a mat, trying to sleep, and spent a miserable and sleepless night. (70)

This was the only quarrel between husband and wife. The next day they went to cinema. But the marital life of Krishnan and Susila ended in a tragic way. Susila died prematurely because of typhoid. The fate played a cruel joke in the life of Krishnan. It is difficult to change destiny. Before being attacked by the deadly typhoid, Krishnan and Susila had gone to search a house to buy for themselves. They left the home early morning. They spent their morning hours together. They went to Sastry's house, a teacher in Krishnan's college and also his friend. He had entered in the business of house building. They went to see house with Sastry and a contractor. Krishnan and Susila saw several houses. They liked one house which had a good appearance. The location of the house was also good. It was the last house in the last crossroad of the New Extension. The house was also a newly constructed building. They selected the house and also wanted to buy it. Everything was well. Susila wanted to go outside in the field. Krishnan came to see her. Susila told her to remain inside the home with contractor and Sastry. She had gone to toilet but she did not tell this matter to Krishnan. But she did not come for a long time. Krishnan came outside. He searched her but did not see her. He began to shout her name. He heard the shrill voice of Susila. He ran towards the direction of voice. It was the voice of Susila. She was inside the lavatory. He opened the gate by force. He saw Susila was extremely terrified. She was barefoot. Susila replied:

"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.

I thought something terrible had happened..... Ah, the flies and other things there!" (89)

This proved a fatal moment of Susila's life. After this incident she became ill and never recovered. She went to the temple and later reached home. She did not take food and went to sleep. She failed to recover her health. She was given medicine. Krishnan like a devoted husband gave her every kind of cooperation. He also supported her emotionally. He gave courage to his wife. She was declared suffering from the deadly disease typhoid by Dr. Shankar. This disease proved fatal and she left the mundane world in young age leaving her husband, little daughter and host of relatives. After her departure Krishnan was emotionally shaken. He knew that time is mighty. No one can control the wheel of time. Susila was also aware of her illness. She was looked after by her mother and father. Krishnan was aware of her serious ailment. Her health deteriorated every day. Her mother tried everything to retain her health. Even the intervention of mystic people yielded no results. The best doctor of region failed to recover her. Her temperature ranged between 102 to 105. Dr Shankar lost his hope. He managed the best physician from Madras for the treatment of Susila. It was the efforts of Krishnan that Dr. Shankar requested the physician to see Susila.

Even in our wildest dreams we could never have hoped to get this physician. His reputation was all over the Presidency and his monthly income was in the neighbourhood of ten thousand. (132)

But the condition of Susila did not improve. Susila did not survive. She left for heavenly abode. Her body was taken for the last rites.

The parting moment has come. The bearers, after brief and curt preliminaries, walk in; lift her casually without fuss Her face looks at the sky, bright with the saffron touched on her face, and the vermilion on the forehead, and a string of jasmine somewhere about her head. (138)

Her last rite was completed by Krishnan. He came back home. He was a changed man. He did not give any information to his daughter about the tragic departure of his mother. He decided to accept the dual role of mother and father. He tried to keep his daughter happy. He failed to save the life of Susila but the last legacy of his wife, Leela was under his custody. He outrightly rejected the custody of Leela to anyone in the family. The sensitive father appeared to the ground of reality.

It kept me very much alive to play both father and mother to her at the same time. My only aim in life now was to see that she did not feel the absence of her mother. (141-142)

Krishnan had reconciled to his life with heavy heart. The time healed all the wounds. Only three people were there in Krishnan's home. They were his daughter and old lady beside him. He did not have any grudge against God. he did not have any effect of condolences, words of courage, lamentations or assurances. He was a changed person. He had seen the premature demise of his wife. Illusion had no place in his life. He had overcome from day dreaming. He had landed himself to the land of realism. He became a realist. The death of his wife dawned a new reality in him. Krishnan accepted this reality.

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. (140)

The life of Krishnan after the demise of Susila had become monotonous. He became indifferent to pain and pleasure of life. Slowly and steadily his little daughter Leela also came to know the sad fate of his mother. Krishnan's world was limited to his daughter. His mother came occasionally to his home but she failed to persuade him to give his daughter to her custody. He was stubborn to relieve his daughter to anyone. He was also busy in academic life. But one unexpected incident changed the course of his life. Once when he was engaged in his class room in taking class, a boy came to meet him. He met him when he became free. The boy delivered him letter. The letter was sent to him by boy's father. The letter was highly mysterious because the message delivered in the letter was related to his late wife Susila. The message was close to truth. Krishnan became too much curious to meet this man. He lived in village Tayur which was near to Malgudi. He was unknown to Krishnan but now he became very close to him. The message was so touching and appealing that Krishnan rushed to meet the man.

The handwriting on it seemed to be different. It began: "This is a message for Krishna from his wife Susila who recently passed over She 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. Through him she is very happy to communicate. She wants her husband to know that she is quite happy in another region, and wants him to eradicate the grief in his mind. (156)

After reading the message Krishnan was emotionally, mentally and psychologically agitated. He met the man. He seemed to be truthful and sincere living far away from city humdrum in his village Tayur. Krishnan entered into the world of unknown, through this gentleman. Krishnan entered in the metaphysical and spiritual world that belonged to his wife Susila. There was a regular communication between Krishna and his wife on every Wednesday through this man. The man was the medium to establish communication between Krishnan and Susila's spirit. This also brought a tremendous change in Krishnan. He had become pessimistic man after the death of his wife but spirit of Susila made him optimistic. The dead Susila became more influential than alive Susila. She guided Krishnan on several occasions. When the gentleman was out of station owing to some important engagement, Krishna failed to contact Susila's spirit. He lost his self-composure and returned to his old days of pessimism and doubt. In emergency Susila had to contact to this gentleman to bring peace and harmony in the life of Krishnan. He was so upset that he disliked the company of the people. At last, Krishnan received the message from his wife.

"The most important thing I wish to warn you about is not to allow your mind to be disturbed by anything. For some days now, you have allowed your mind to become gloomy and unsettled....

“We must thank your friend who has yielded to our suggestion, to try to these absent sittings. I’m sure you will benefit by them....” (229-230)

Susila’s spirit suggested him to make a direct communication with her. He should become more sensitive. He should prepare himself to become free from pain and pleasure. He should meditate an image of her to contact with her spirit initially. Krishnan failed to communicate with the spirit of Susila. Later after rigorous exercise he enhance his yogic spirit and finally got success in making communication with Susila’s spirit.

Krishnan was a man of high spirit and unparallel virtues. When the headmaster of Leela’s school behaved in eccentric way, he did not scold him. He tried to understand him. He did not believe in headmaster’s death prophecy easily. He was himself in the contact with the spirit of his wife Susila but never revealed this secret to anyone. Later he resigned from the college. He left the lucrative job of college teacher where his salary was one hundred rupees. He devoted himself to the cause of little children at mere twenty five rupees. He sent his daughter to his mother and father. Krishnan was a highly principled man. He was an outstanding personality. It was the only reason that his wife loved him even after her death. He was a devoted husband, sincere father, faithfully friend and obedient son. He became successful in every role. He is role model of Indian family.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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