

A Study of Automatic Writing with Special Reference to R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*

Dr. Jaya Tripathi

Asst. Prof.

Applied Science and Humanities
ITS Engineering College Gr. Noida

Life after death is a concept that has fascinated human race since time unmemorable. We all try to find answer to what happens to us once this body is no longer with us. As we know soul is immortal and it goes on to live even after the annihilation of our physical existence. We all have heard so many fascinating stories about the life after death, or near death experience all over the world. But the question that keeps on lingering in our mind is whether is it possible to conquer the indelible boundary that exists between life and death and reunite with the loved once? Or is it possible to remain physically absent and be a source of inspiration for the person still having the mortal frame? R K Narayan's *The English Teacher*, the most mature and serious of his autobiographical narrative, is an attempt to decipher the most convoluted enigma of human existence through his own personal experience. Narayan's novel probes on how he loved someone then lost her to the cruel hands of death, and finally reunited with her, with the help of ghost or auto writing and how this experience changed his vision about life and death.

This autobiographical narrative of the great author can be divided into three distinct parts. The first being the description of Narayan's family life with his wife and girl child, secondly the tragedy of his wife's illness and her eventual death and finally the author's communication with his dead wife through automatic writing and consequent calmness and maturity that comes to him as a result of this transcendental experience.

The novel which sounds like the divine yarn of timeless love has in its fold the surfeit of love, emotions, tears, intellect and spirituality. As Raghavacharyulu explains,

The English Teacher is a fictional Epithalamion on Indian married life, presenting both its subtle human fulfillments and its nervous anxieties, in the light of the consecrating domestic feeling which enables Krishna to achieve personal growth and poise. (p.38)

The novel opens on a very happy note where we find Krishnan, enjoying his days as an English Teacher in Albert Mission College. The first big change comes into his life with a letter that his father-in-law writes to him wherein he tells him that he is sending his wife and daughter to live with him. This letter generates in him mixed emotions of bliss and distress. As he in a way is used to live a life of vagabond and now this unexpected load of life somewhat puzzles him but for the connivance of his wife and daughter he leaves his college apartment and moves to a better apartment to live with his family. The next segment of the novel recounts Narayan's love life with his wife Shushila, who is the pivotal around whom his happiness revolve. This section of the novel enticingly describes the domestic life of a common married couple. It incorporates in itself the vibrancy of the middle class family life and values, with details such as the small occasions that are celebrated collectively in a family, or the struggle of a married couple to have a house that will be suitable for all their needs.

But as some poet has truly said that course of true love never did run smooth. Shushila dies a few years after contracting typhoid. Since the author intensely loved her, after her demise he finds it difficult to come over this rude jolt of life. Consequently he is plunged into whirls of sorrow. The most interesting details of novel are ushered with the letter, that Krishnan receives anonymously, which suggests that it is written by his dead wife Sushila. Details sent by this unknown person to Krishna about his identity are meticulously correct. This baffles the reader as well Krishna, but this peculiar way of communication coerced Krishana to divulge the mystery of the letter and the man sending the letter. No doubt he has another equally important urge to talk to Sushila and feel closer to her once more even though he has lost her forever. The letter which stated,

This is a message for Krishna from his wife Sushila who recently passed over... She has been seeking all these months some means of expressing herself to her husband, but the opportunity has come only to-day, when she found the present gentleman a very suitable medium of expression. Through him she is happy to communicate. (*The English Teacher* p. 106)

Conflagrate in him the deep proclivity and he decides to see this man, as he is the source who can assist him to unravel this conundrum.

After going through this letter Krishna is completely befuddled. At this moment the reader is also filled with trepidation and doubt whether it can be true. Can Shushila really communicate to her husband? Is love truly going to transcend the boundary between life and death? This part of the narrative is a unique blend of author's real life experience and a bit of his imagination as he himself stated in his autobiography, *My Days*,

More than any other book *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very later part of it being fiction... 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*, p. ix)

The psychic adjustment that Narayan referred to in the above quotation is described vividly in *The English Teacher*. In all Narayan has narrated his eight sittings with this unnamed character (the real name of this person was Raghunath Rao) in the novel who helps him to comprehend the nature of life and death. These sittings, which brought immense solace the depressed author, have some aberrant revelation about the concept of automatic writing and also enhances our understanding of the whole plan of the universe and our role in it.

Firstly, the medium or the person selected by the spirits to communicate is quite strange because this person does not even have the remotest acquaintance with the author neither he is well read or a man of some extraordinary sensibility. Secondly, the circumstances under which, this person received the message from the spirits, are quite enthralling. This 'sober dead farmer' as the author describes him, during one of evening walks feels the strong urge to express his thoughts in writing and for the purpose he brings a paper and pencil. The message that he receives first, startles him completely as it has no relevance either to him or to any of his acquaintances. Therefore, he decides to send this letter to Krishna, as per the name and address given by the supernatural forces.

Further, we notice the setting against which the spirits come to communicate has a divine tranquility; it seems it belongs to eternity and it 'cannot be touched by time or disease or decay'. These lines are so quintessentially true about the very existence of human soul, which can neither be destroyed, burnt or be touched by water or air. In scientific term soul it is just an enormous source of energy that can neither be created nor destroyed. Here, Narayan's has subtly woven the narrative around his fertile imagination juxtaposing it with the concepts of philosophy, spirituality and science.

Not only the spirits have selected an unusual medium and setting for sending the messages, they also communicate under some rigidly stipulated norms. They edify particular time, duration and day for sending messages. They even ask the writer to control the movement of his hands and exert the limited amount of pressure while writing. Failing to follow these preset norms the messages are only in the form of scribble, and hardly legible. Another very exigent condition is that the person who is doing auto writing must put aside his own personal feelings and emotions as a matter of fact he has to negate is entire thinking process. Like in the second sitting when the author asks the name of their child from Sushila, he gets the answer, Radha, which is not correct as their child is called Leela. This revelation depresses the author for a minute and he questions how she can forget her child's name, but then the spirits make it clear, that it is a mistake to think that she has forgotten the name of her child but

it is a piece of your friend's own mind....since we use the mechanism of your friend's writing, more often than not his mind interferes, bringing up its own selections. This is how you got Radha now. (*The English Teacher*, PP.115-116)

Therefore, the process of automatic writing, as experienced by Narayan was done under some conditions.

These pieces of automatic writing, which helped Narayan to overcome his sense of unmitigated loneliness and had a therapeutic effect on him, somewhere raises a great deal of doubt about its authenticity, and most of not so curious readers, will dismiss this part of the novel as mere a whim of the author's imagination. But if investigated carefully, it offers layers of meanings and significance and it carries a deep connotation. This whole concept can be explained in terms of imagination, philosophy, religion, spirituality on the one hand and on the other it simply represents the concrete strength of love, which cannot be diminished by any obstacle. This dream like sequence at times put froths such tangible evidences that one just marvels at the authenticity of the narrative. But our rational mind too has its queries, which keeps on reckoning and grapple for evidence. It is this inquisitiveness which forever strives to put everything in black and white and avoids the grey area of the problem. Perhaps Narayan knew this psychology of his readers too well; therefore in his autobiography he has discussed this matter in quite detail and made it clear,

All that factual side seemed to me immaterial. Even if Mr. Rao caught telepathically whatever went on in my mind...it did not matter to me. Even if the whole thing was a grand fraud, it would not matter. What was important was the sensing of the presence in that room, which transformed my outlook. The medium, after all was a human being, his mind and his writing could be subject to many shortcomings and trickeries, both conscious and unconscious. But I still valued the experience for its final effect on me. (*My Days*, P.161)

Therefore, the author has disassociated himself from giving a final answer to this debate, though he has surely given clinching details of this experience and has admitted that much of the writing was of doubtful nature and may be rejected as sheer trash, but at times the 'there came through flashes of unquestionable evidence'. He quotes the instance of a jewellery box that his wife mentions during one of the sittings and Narayan discovered the same box in his house. The details of the box as described by his wife: the shape, size and measurement were surprisingly very true. This episode has been captured brilliantly by the author in *The English Teacher*. The author tells about some references that he came across during these sittings such as she alludes to incidents or remarks at her brother's house which could be verified. She also refers to the fourteen letters that the author wrote to her, which she claims are still there in her father's house. When Narayan enquired about these letters to his father-in-law, he could not find it in the house but he told the author that he had seen a bundle of letters with Sushila. But for most of the time author did not care to verify the instances that come out of these sittings but had a tendency to ignore the facts as the sense of her presence around there at the place was all for him. It was this feel that the author had there was itself greatly satisfying.

Another important facet that the author mentions in this novel is his own attempts to communicate directly with Sushila. His wife exhorts him many times to concentrate, calm down and keep aside his thought process for some time and after initial failures he finally achieved success. Narayan in his real life also practiced psychic contacts some years after his wife's death. He says that he used to abstract himself from his physical body and experienced a strange sense of deliverance. The bigger revelation was the understanding of the fact that separation is an inevitable part of life.

The final effect that the author had on his personality was that it chiseled his perceptive of this world and the other world. Narayan admits it in his autobiography that he developed the ability to catch telepathic messages; he could even transmit his thoughts to others, his anticipation about how other may behave on particular occasion was also greatly sharpened as a result of this entire experience. He also learnt that "there is no escape from loneliness and separation... the law comes into operation the moment we detach ourselves from our mother's womb. All struggle and misery in this world is due to our attempt to arrest this law and get away from it or allowing ourselves to be hurt by it."(p.177). It is this realization which finally gives him strength to move forward in life. The philosophy which rather sounds pessimistic, instill the courage in the author to send his daughter with her grandmother, and he himself takes a job in a local primary school, and finally he also stopped practicing the automatic writing as he had fully understood the mysteries of this world and the other world. Finally we see him as a self-reliant man who searches for serenity and poise within himself.

The above analysis of concept of automatic writing with the help of Narayan's description of the same, exhorts that after being torn away from the anchors of life and then reverting back to life, was extremely difficult and the author taking shelter of automatic writing can be described as a defense mechanism, a technique to protect oneself from inevitable peril and fight back the difficult situations. The whole experience was a rock solid reality for Narayan and this communication helped him to feel the closeness of his wife once more and this and this single factor motivated the author to take the life head on with all its struggles and challenges.

Works Cited:

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2. *The English Teacher*, R.K. Narayan (Indian Thought Publications, Chennai, 31st Reprint, 2010). Further references are from this edition and will be marked as *The English Teacher* & pagination.
3. *My Days* autobiography, Centenary Edition, Indian Thought Publications , Thanikachalam Road, Chennai, 2010)