

THE ENGLISH TEACHER AS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

M.A. 4th SEM ENGLISH LITERATURE

The English Teacher is essentially an autobiographical novel. What Dickens wrote about his novel David Copperfield is true of Narayan's The English Teacher. Dickens wrote:

The pen that wrote David Copperfield was often dipped in my own blood

This is, really speaking even more true of The English Teacher than of David Copperfield. As Sons and Lovers is the imaginative and emotional transcription of Lawrence's life and David Copperfield of Dicken's life so The English Teacher is of Narayan's life. It is fiction only in name. It is his autobiography. We can say that it is the fictional child, and above all of his ecstasy of his married life and his poignant shattering grief at the death of his most beloved wife.

In the novel he writes about the house searching, the selection of the house, the entry of Susila in a lavatory, the shutting of the door on her, her pounding of the shut door, her screaming, her repulsion at what happened in the dirtiest possible place, her refusal to eat anything and then her fever. This is really what had happened to Rajam, Narayan's wife Rajam. He writes about his father's constant illness, and his dependence on his wife. He tells that his mother could not often visit him because she had to look after her sick husband. He tells about his mother that she had a passion for house-keeping. He tells about his

love for his daughter Hema. He does not allow his father-in-law to take his daughter Hema with him. He loves her so much that he does not send her even with his mother. He feels guilty and repentant when he does not spend more time with her. All this has been described in the novel.

The English Teacher is, above all, the imaginative and emotional transcription of Narayan's love of his wife and her sudden immature death. The novel almost lifts this love episode from the writer's personal life.

Within five years of Narayan's marriage his wife Rajam died of typhoid. Susila the wife of Krishna also dies of typhoid within five years of their marriage. Narayan was stunned at this sudden tragedy, and was so miserably grieved that he left all interest in life. Krishna in the novel is shocked, and feels so desolate, so poignantly hurt that he thinks of committing suicide. He thinks of thousands ways in which he can end his life. And but for his intense love for his daughter, Leela he would have committed suicide. Narayan is so much disillusioned that he stops writing novels. He begins to write after a long time only when persuaded and inspired by his two friends Dr. Paul Brunton and Graham Greene. Krishna in the novel does not only leave writing poems but also resigns from college. Narayan never married again. Krishna also does not marry though he is, as Narayan was, still young. Narayan became a mystic, developed psychic art, and began to communicate with his wife, Rajam. Krishna in the novel also develops his psychic art, and communicates with Susila. Whenever the communication is successful he feels rapturous but when he fails to communicate with her, he feels disillusioned and lost. He regards himself as having fallen down into an

abyss and the ladder he finds there is broken. Rightly does William Walsh call *The English Teacher* a “personal tragedy.”

Narayan himself writes *My Diary*: 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 is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi; but he goes through the same experience 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 developments, are based on my own experience.

Rightly does R.M. Varma observe that “*The English Teacher*, is largely an autobiographical in disguise.” William Walsh praises this autobiographical novel for “the maturity of detachment and control.” And for controlling the chaos of life by submitting it to the discipline of art.” No doubt in many ways the novel touches us, moves us, and overwhelms us with tragic pathos. But in our hearts of hearts we feel that the vivacious, sprightly Susila could have been saved. We sometimes feel that the doctor who treated him, was inefficient and negligent. He is responsible for the deterioration and the death of Susila. He misdiagnosed typhoid for malaria, and then did not follow the advice of the Madras physician. But ultimately, as Hardy killed Tess, Narayan killed Susila. He had to kill her somehow because he was writing autobiography. His wife Rajam was dead. And so Susila, who is Rajam, must die. But the death of Susila is not so convincing. The readers suspect something because the death is not inevitable. But Susila must die because Rajam died. The point to note is whether fiction is pure autobiography. No, Narayan was, after all, writing fiction, and not autobiography. Susila could have been spared from death. In life death

may be caused by fever or by an accident. But art requires cause and effect relationship. After all art is not life. As it is, The English Teacher is an artistic failure.

Dr. Rajani Singh
