

***The English Teacher* (1945)**

Story *The English Teacher* was R K Narayan's third novel in his series of portraits of life in Malgudi, a small, south Indian town that served as the fictional setting for most of his work. Like all his fiction, the story appears slight, with somewhat stereotypical characters, but acquires a mythic depth and manages to combine sadness, insight and humour. Written only a few years after his own wife's death from typhoid, and dedicated to her, it is the most autobiographical of his novels.

Krishna is the teacher of the title, who works as a lecturer in the Albert Mission College. (At the time, most higher education institutions had been founded by Christian organisations, although they were not 'Christian' colleges.) He is bored and disinterested in life until he marries and develops a deep love for his wife, Sushila, and their daughter, Leela. When Sushila dies, Krishna is miserable and only stops committing suicide because he must take care of Leela. Later, he receives a mysterious letter from someone who claims to be 'in contact' with Sushila and eventually holds seances in which Krishna talks with his dead wife and gains peace of mind. Meanwhile, we are introduced to Leela's school headmaster, who is a profoundly religious man and devoted teacher. So devoted, in fact, that he neglects his wife, who is unlikable in any case. When an astrologer predicts the exact day that the headmaster will die, he leaves his family to meet his fate, but the prediction proves false. In the end, the headmaster and Krishna both achieve a better understanding of themselves and the novel ends on a positive note of 'immutable joy.'

Characters

Krishna Krishna is a bored, westernised college lecturer who goes through a transformation that is at the core of the novel. He marries and has a daughter, which brings him some joy, but his wife dies and he is again cast down in despair. Through spiritual means, however, he learns to 'communicate' with his dead wife, which enables him to survive and to keep his daughter happy.

Headmaster The school headmaster, who teaches Krishna's daughter, Leela, is the polar opposite to Krishna. He is thoroughly immersed in Indian culture, praying and meditating for 15 minutes before every meal. His philosophy of education also differs radically from the one Krishna feels trapped within. Nevertheless, the headmaster is not a caring husband or father and shows little concern for his family. Later, he too, achieves a self-realisation that enable him to live at peace.

Sushila Sushila, Krishna's wife, is an idealised image of the traditional Indian wife. Like the headmaster, and unlike her husband, she prays everyday and has few material desires. As one graphic example, she washes her feet in the river, while Krishna wants to put in a tiled-bathroom. In this way, while alive and even after death, she provides the bridge that Krishna can cross from his colonial mentality to a deeper happiness in Indian culture.

Themes

Colonialism While Narayan's fiction is never overtly political, in this novel he comes closest to making a statement about the evils of colonialism. The English teacher of the title has a moment of recognition toward the end of the book when he reflects that 'I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind. This education had reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage.'

Education The contrast between colonial and Indian cultures is dramatized through comparison of the westernised college system with the local primary school. In the college, the goal is to fill up the mind, whereas in the school it is to open up the mind. In Krishna's classroom, he tells students to 'shut up' and 'don't ask questions' whenever they seek clarification, while the headmaster believes that the 'business of education is to shape the mind and character of a child.' The headmaster's superior approach, which relies a lot on storytelling, is called by Narayan the 'Leave Alone System.'

Transformation Krishna undergoes a profound character transformation. After marrying, he begins to see that there is more to life than being disgruntled with his job. Loving his wife opens up his heart to a new and more optimistic view of life. Then, he loses her and falls prey to deep despair, even contemplating suicide. His desire to make contact with his dead wife leads him to a 'medium' through whom he speaks to her and learns to be more tolerant of people, to be courageous for their daughter and to change his profession.

Balance Each of the two main characters, Krishna and the headmaster, undergo a similar kind of transformation that results in a greater balance between the adult world and the children's world, which represent the external world of responsibility and the inner world of the imagination. In Krishna's case, he explains that he 'can't attain it [peace] unless I withdraw from the adult world and adult work into the world of the children.' It is the reverse for the headmaster, who learns to withdraw from the classroom and be more tolerant of adults.