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The Clash of Mundane and Spiritual in R.K. Narayan's Novels

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Abstract:

The paper probes the role of spiritual in communicating Narayan's overall life vision. Narayan is a mature artist who has his feet firmly rooted in his social and cultural ethos. His chief protagonists, though leading the most ordinary life of tourist guides, English teachers, vendor of sweets and the like, go through- in some part of their life- a process of self introspection and ultimately self realization. This is, in a sense the juxtaposition of the mundane and spiritual. This is generally done by man's interaction with himself, with his environment and also with the nature. The sudden change in man's life or position, in his novels, is nothing but an aberration. Return of normalcy is the normal course of life. All through in his novels there surrounds an aura of mystery that is beyond the realm of ordinary beings. An ambiguity rules the world of Narayan, which, if fact, is the ambiguity of human situations.

There is an obvious design of the clash of the Mundane and the Spiritual in the works of R.K. Narayan. In his novels human life is juxtaposed not only with its environment but also with its own being. As commented by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Narayan approaches human life in three aspects- "in relation to himself, his environment and his gods" (*Indian Writing in English*, 384). Thus his chief protagonists always tend to bypass the material life and cross into the ethereal one. The much discussed pattern of Narayan's novels, i.e. of "order, disintegration of order and reinstatement of order" (*The Twice Born Novels*, 211) is one of the machineries of assessing this interplay of mundane and spiritual. It is one of the devices that brings the protagonist to his real self, giving him the chance of self introspection and finally of self realization.

Narayan is a mature artist who is concerned with the ordinary life of ordinary men and women of this world. His interest is not in ideas, ideologies, events or dogmas, but in the individual himself. He generally appears aloof from all the turbulence and hubbub of public affairs. But the deeper deliberation reveals in him a Chaucer like artistic detachment and a gentle irony. In his delineation of characters and situations he remains totally detached, never taking sides. He just holds before us the mirror in which realities reflect themselves. There are no good or bad characters. The community life he is dealing with is neither "internally weak" nor "historically absolute". Here are presented the "strength and tenacity of life itself" (*R.K. Narayan and the East West Theme*, 235).

This is an adult vision of life of "things being neither particularly right nor wrong but just balancing themselves" (*The Average as the Positive: A Note on R. K. Narayan*, P. 310). He just unfolds the situations in which people and events balance and condition one another. Narayan points out the absurdities and incongruity of human situations and laughs good humouredly at them. His satire on man and his situations is quite congenial and benevolent. His mild irony is nothing but the irony of normal human situations, i.e. man's inability to know himself and the situation around.

Critics have established that an important device of Narayan is to make normalcy controls extraordinary, for the main pattern of his novels is the return of normalcy after a sudden eruption of extraordinary. The chief protagonists traverse through the stages "from average to extraordinary and back again to more poignant state of average" (*The Average as the Positive: A Note on R. K. Narayan*, 309). At one of the freak circumstances, his major protagonists shed their ordinary self and try to become extraordinary, only to bring pain, suffering and unrest to themselves and those around. Meenakshi Mukherjee calls it almost *Puranic* for it seems to suggest that a sudden change in man's life or position is not a fact of history, but rather "an aberration, an allusion or a bubble that is sure to burst" (*The Twice Born Novels*, 211). Return of normalcy is the normal course of life. In most of his novels the chief protagonists try to overcome this abyss and come face to face with themselves.

As T.S. Eliot has stated that a great artist while writing of him writes about his age. The age when R.K. Narayan wrote his mature works was one of transition. The fruits of developments have not arrived in India. There was the atmosphere of confusions, as the theme of East- West conflict was very much to the fore. The image of India that time was that of the land of snake charmers and *sadhus*, too much obsessed with spiritual discourses rather than worldly affairs. No doubt we find the hosts of snake charmers, holy men, astrologers and temples and places of worship in Narayan. But these are only to create the vignettes of real India. Narayan has accused the westerners of wrongly supposing that all Indians are deeply spiritual beings. However, being an artist, with his feet firmly rooted in tradition and cultural ethos of India, some aspects of Indian spiritualism naturally creeps into him.

Talking to Ved Mehta in 1962, Narayan had confided, "To be a good writer any where you must have roots, both in religion and family. I have these things" (Quoted in *Frontline*5). Mature Narayan has never lost touch with his roots and tradition. His novels are firmly rooted in social and cultural ethos of India, especially of south India. "Malgudi is where much of Indian middle class has lived.....its aspirations and frustrations, and its ironies and comedies, these too have been ours. This is the East-West comedy as it has affected real day to day living in India." (*R.K.Narayan and the East West Theme*, 233)

The rhythm and intricate pattern of this life is vividly portrayed in his novels. The images of grand temples with all its rituals, *sadhus*, and *Mahatamas* with all their antics, astrologers with all their tricks are recurring motif in Narayan. It is not that

Narayan writes about spiritual discourses or about God and various means to realize Him. He even does not speak well of many god men and so called holy persons who claim to make men connect with God. To Narayan, these seemingly spiritual figures themselves are lost in the mud and froth of worldly affairs. Whoever is not aware that the spiritual guide of the village temple of *The Guide*, Raju himself is a fraud? Similarly the foretelling of different astrologers in his novels is always shown to be as incorrect. Human life is so complex that nobody can predict what is there store for us. The futility of believing that life can be knowable and predictable is seen in *The English Teacher* where the headmaster of the nursery school naively believes in a prediction made by an astrologer, 'who can see past present and future as one, and give everything its true value' (*The English Teacher*, 177) that he will die on a given date. But as he finds later that despite his 'life has gone precisely as he predicted' (*The English Teacher*, 177), the headmaster lives.

As usual in Narayan he does not go on romping against such persons. He just present the events in which the real faces of them is reflected. Similarly he neither approves nor disapproves certain beliefs and practices of what we may call traditional Indian wisdom. Rather he gives a minute presentation, leaving for us to interpret the implications. In an important scene in *The English Teacher* when Susila, wife of Krishna is laid down with Typhoid and the western scientific medicine is not proving very effective, her parents call a *Swamiji* who uses mystical methods of healing. "He felt his pulse. He uttered some mantras with closed eyes, took a pinch of sacred ash and rubbed it on her forehead, and tied to her arm a talisman stung in yellow thread." (*The English Teacher*, 93)

Educated Krishna may feel 'ashamed' that the doctor has found the *Swamiji* in their house and ill Susila may get 'panicked' at his obscure look. But equally strong is the conviction of Susila's mother that the 'Evil Eye' has fallen on her daughter. Both are true and untrue at the same time because both present a perspective. Real life is the mixture of both and Narayan is convinced of this. An aura of mystery surrounds the novels of R.K. Narayan and this adds much to his assignment with the spiritual. The image of light and 'dusky' Rosie in *The Guide* is an example. Similar inscrutable is the contaminated lavatory where Susila catches Typhoid in *The English Teacher*. "The door was so bright and I thought it'd be clean inside.....but oh!" she screwed up her face and shuddered, unable to bear the disgust that came with recollection" (*The English Teacher*, 93)

The unpredictability of situations appears at the zenith when Susila dies in her ill-bed. Previously it had appeared that it was a simple illness and Susila would recover in a few days. Even the doctor had asserted that typhoid, which Susila had contracted, 'is the one fever which goes strictly by its own rules. It follows a time-table . . . ' (*The English Teacher*, 89) and that Susila will be well in a few weeks. But in spite of his repetitive assurances that her ailment is 'Absolutely normal course. No complications. A perfect typhoid run . . . ' (*The English Teacher*, 177), she dies.

The English Teacher is a unique novel that depicts the interplay of the mundane and the spiritual in more obvious way. The story is a series of experiences in the life of Krishna, an English teacher, and his quest towards achieving inner peace and self-development (Iranga Fernando, www.wmich.edu/dialogues/texts/englishteacher). In a more specific plane it is Krishna's flight from the mundane to the spiritual. Krishna, an English lecturer in Albert Mission College is leading a happy domestic life with his wife and child, Leela. Almost half of the novel focuses on his simple day-to-day affairs and ordinary joy and sorrow of worldly life. Such mundane affairs, though banal and monotonous, are very much real and substantial. The only fact that Krishna is a good husband and father as well as a good teacher is enough to prove the worth of mundane for the inhabitants of this world. It is the simple ode of life that goes on at its different pace, sometimes smoothly, sometimes haphazardly.

This seemingly simple pace of life, however, sometimes confronts abrupt phases giving supernatural to overshadow the mundane. Sushila's catching typhoid in the damned lavatory and her death after brief illness- is one of such incidents. This throws Krishna, her husband, to take recourse in the realm of supernatural. His troubled soul finds solace in his supposed communication with the spirit of his dead wife. However, the ambiguity of this cannot be lost sight of. Even in the heyday of his communion with the supernatural, Krishna is beckoned again and again by the worldly affairs- by the needs and innocence his daughter Leela as well as by other mundane objects.

The fact that after his brief brush with the souls and spirits, Krishna has to return to the real world of men and women- proves that it is earthly that matters. The world, however, is so inscrutable and its inhabitants so vulnerable, that a world appears beyond its precincts also. Susila's unexpected death throws Krishna at the brink of disaster. He even thinks of committing suicide but gives it up for the sake of his daughter. He would have committed something foolish. But he receives a letter from a stranger indicating that Susila has been in contact with him and that she wants to communicate with him. Whether Krishna's wandering in the realm of spirits is a fact or just an imagination of his troubled mind, is not clear. Like many other issues Narayan has also left if unexplained. What is obvious is that it makes Krishna more collected and cheerful.

Or rather this is the artist's machinery employed to depict Krishna's journey in search of enlightenment. Krishna's search of meaning in life is culminated in his resigning his post of college teacher and beginning work at a nursery school. "I was in search of a harmonious existence and anything that disturbed this harmony was to be rigorously excluded" (*The English Teacher*, 205) He already has developed an admiration for Leela's Headmaster and his 'The Leave Alone System' in the nursery school that he thinks will make the children "wholesome human beings, and also help us, those who work along with them, to work off the curse of adulthood". Krishna, in the meantime, has learnt to communicate psychically with his dead wife and has acquired a state in which 'one's mind became clean and bare and a mere chamber of fragrance' (*The English Teacher*, 212) and whenever his wife appears before him he reaches 'a

moment of rare, immutable joy - a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death.' (213)

Srinivasa Iyenger's criticism of *The English Teacher* on the basis of its unfamiliarity or for its alleged whimsical or fantastic rambling in the realm of the supernatural does not hold much ground. No doubt rational thinking has no place for such occult and magical elements. However, these have been used just as an instrument in Krishna's attainment of mental and emotional composure after the havoc felt by the loss of his wife. Besides, there is no denying the obvious autobiographical parallel of the death of Narayan's beloved wife Rajam in the novel. Narayan may have some type of mystical unification with his dead wife that is in some way reflected in the novel. Every one of us has our own peculiar way to overcome the loss of our near and dear ones. Narayan has taken recourse to the occult and magical for showing the futility of excessive indulgence with the mundane. At the same time they are used as the mediums in the emotional, mental and intellectual development of the ordinary English teacher Krishna.

The open interaction with the supernatural for getting connected with spiritual, however, is not very common in Narayan. He even does not speak well of many god men and so called holy persons who claim to make men connect with God. However, a phase in his novels comes when the common men engrossed in their earthly affairs, become self conscious. They come face to face with their inner being and thus realize the ultimate truth of which an ordinary mortal is entitled. This is generally done by man's interaction with himself, with his environment and also with the nature. Man, here is also face to face with the unknown side of his own being, about which he is generally unaware of. This is self realization or the realization of the ultimate reality.

The undistinguished, average middleclass boy Swaminathan in *Swami and Friends* faces much upheaval when he is heightened to the mythical status of the formidable fast bowler Tete and is supposed to bowl the rival cricket team out in the cricket match between the MCC and the YMU. The novel has several episodes where the hero Swaminathan, unable to grab the mythical excellence what he intends to achieve, returns to his ordinary self. His complaints against the 'fanatic' scripture teacher Mr. Ebenezer, his participation in anti-School demonstrations, his endeavor to retaliate against the tricky coachman, by punishing his son, his dodging of drill classes for practicing in the coming cricket match - all are of the same category. In the end of all the episodes he makes a hasty retreat, wishing to be "out of all the happenings".

Swami's flight from the scene of cricket match and his loss in the forest is instrumental in his returning to his own original self. The picture of the helpless, fatigued Swami, lost in the jungle, trying to find his way home is an eternal one:

Presently he realized his position. He was on an unknown, distant road at a ghostly hour... All the same he kept tottering onwards, knowing well that it was meaningless, aimless, marchIts remoteness gave him a feeling that

he was walking into a world of horrors, subhuman and supernatural. (*Swami and Friends*, 160)

Such fear creates an aura of mystery and unpredictability and provides a fertile ground for the evocation of supernatural. As common in Narayan, fear, an obvious tragic emotion emanates from commonplace situation such as the fear of loneliness, the fear of inviting the wrath of Gods, the fear from rivals, the fear of failing in the examination or in any other endeavor as also the fear of death of near and dear ones. Fear in the extreme form results in terror. But like other emotions in Narayan, 'terror' too is somewhat 'frivolous'. It is aroused of the same hackneyed situations. Raju, in the *Guide* is overtaken by terror when he realizes that he will have to fast for bringing rain. He tries to run out of this untoward responsibility but is unable to. This inability or helplessness brings self pity and subsequently results in disgust and finally in detachment.

Sufferings, no doubt is the hallmark of Narayan's grand design of his philosophy, i.e. a "flight, an uprooting, a disturbance of order- followed by a return, a renewal, a restoration of normalcy" (*Indian Writing in English*, 385). Suffering opens eyes to larger realities, leading the way for better understanding of oneself and the surroundings and finally acceptance of life as it is. For this one has to reconcile to oneself and also to those around. Swaminathan's fear and terror, while wandering alone in the forest, reconciles him to his parents and also to the situations.

Such occurrences in Narayan firmly establish that it is with the real world and its real inhabitants that he is interested in. The ethereal just traverses and sometimes even intrudes the real with the purpose of explaining its inscrutability. Or rather it is machinery to expand the real and explain its incomprehensible aspects. R.K. Narayan, as a mature artist, is interested in what goes inside the mysterious mind and heart of his characters. His characters develop in the course of the development of the plot of the novels. Self introspection and for that matter self realization in Narayan is arrived generally through the interaction between various characters. "The interactions are so patterned as to bring out an objective view of life through understanding of its complexity which, at a crisis, tends to be mute ambiguity" (*The Average as the Positive: A Note on R. K. Narayan*, 313). Rosie in *The Guide* is the most obvious example. Her life from the very beginning reflects this helplessness. This talented girl from the family of *Devdasies*, revolts against her fate. She gets education, takes an MA degree in Economics and gets married to Marco, a renowned scholar of archeology. Rosie, however, does not know that this is not the end of her ordeals. Marco may be a great intellectual but he is a snob. He does not care for her desires and likings. "I could never have imagined that one human being could ignore the presence of another human being so completely", (*The Guide*, 134).

This is the boredom, helplessness and aimlessness of the individual and situations in modern matter of fact life. It has the potentials of bearing out tragedy. Marco's leaving Rosie to her fate and going back to Madras is tragic in the same sense of the term. "I followed him, day after day, like a dog-waiting on his grace. He ignored me

totally..... I followed him like a shadow, leaving aside all my own pride and self respect. I hoped that ultimately he'd come round." (*The Guide*, 134)

Marco's apathy throws Rosie in the arms of Raju, who flatters her saying "a gem lost to the world" (*The Guide*, 41). He also provides her with the opportunities to fulfill her suppressed urges. Rosie, at the time of her marriage with Marco was unaware of these eventualities. Similarly Raju, at the time of winning over Rosie was unaware of the fate of their relationship. It is the relation between Raju and Rosie in *The Guide* that holds the key to understand the complexity and unpredictability of life. No doubt Rosie is devoted to Raju. She also loves him passionately. But she has her own instinct and urges. Marco is "after all her husband". Moreover, Raju's attitude was one of the possessive masters. "I liked to keep her in a citadel." (*The Guide*, 172), Raju himself asserts. He later acknowledges "She was my property. The idea was beginning to take root in my mind" (*The Guide*, 172). Rosie is reduced to just a money minting machine in her new avatar Nalini, the famous *Bharatnatyam* dancer. Raju is now, as insensitive to her needs and expectations as Marco used to be. Rosie soon she gets tired of the 'circus existence'. "I feel like one of three parrots in a cage taken around village-fairs or a performing monkey." (*The Guide*, 181).

Raju has failed to understand the shift in Rosie's mood. He does not make up whether she is sane or insane. "I felt bewildered her sudden affection for her husband. I did my best for her. Her career was at its height. What was it that still troubled her?" (*The Guide*, 180). His insecurity makes him not let Rosie see the new book written by her husband. He even forges her signature to get the jewelry box Marco has sent for her. Such acts of deceit break her heart totally. She has once even thought of making a suicide pact with Raju. But her experiences make her believe that she may even be deceived in this by Raju as he will not follow the pact and she will be left to die alone. Now the only wish she has is to be left alone.

Raju is very much distressed when Rosie does not weep when he is taken to jail for forgery. He is also bewildered by her bubbling activities after his arrest. She has sold up all her diamonds and hired a reputed lawyer from Madras for his early release. Raju comes to realize all this only after a long time. "I was growing jealous of her self-reliance....her strength....her vitality" (*The Guide*, 199). Such realization, though late and many times also painful, brings the protagonists face to face with themselves. It helps them understand the situation that is otherwise too complex and arbitrary. Self introspection and for that respect, self realization forms the crux of Narayan's artistic vision as it conveys his profound philosophy of life currents following its course in the midst of obstacles and hindrances.

Similarly Raju's elevation from a fraud to a 'saint' involves much of self introspection. In the process of attaining the rank of *Swamiji*, some of the attributes of real holy men naturally comes into him. Raju cannot deceive the credulous villagers, who have posed all their hopes for bringing water in him. He gets resigned to his fate. A glimmer of belief is now overtaking him that he is the chosen agent by the Gods in this great task

of human welfare. He is even willing to sacrifice his life for this great cause. "I am only doing what I have to do...My likes and dislikes do not count". (*The Guide*, 218), he tells the American reporter. On the fifteenth day of his fast, Raju denies the repeated pleadings of the doctors to break the fast. "Help me to my feet", it is only what he tells Velan.

"He went down to the steps of the river, halting for breath on each step, and finally reached his basin of water. He stepped into it, shut his eyes and turned towards the mountain, his lips muttering the prayer..... It was difficult to hold Raju to his feet, as he had a tendency to flop down. They held him as if he were a baby. Raju opened his eyes, looked about, and said, "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs--" and with that he sagged down." (*The Guide*, P.221).

Towards the end in *The Guide* there is great excitement and high hubbub. Every one is willing to have a glimpse of the holy man who has undertaken such a sacrament of self renunciation for humanity. There is large rush of media, photographers and even public figures. However, in the din of so many self seeking faces, the noble cause of Raju's sacrifice seems to wane to some extent. However, in keeping with his comic vision such happenings are quite natural in Narayan.

In this way the clash of the mundane and the spiritual, and for that matter any another theme in Narayan is in Keeping with his overall artistic vision. Narayan is neither for this nor for that. Everywhere he maintains a great artist's impartiality. His artistic achievements are the rainbow combination of all shreds. Different facets and experiences of life are mingled to bring out the complex and composite whole, i.e. real life. An ambiguity rules the world of Narayan, which if fact is the ambiguity of human situations. The climax scene from *Swami and Friend* is an apt example:

Swaminathan's upturned eyes met his. At the sight of the familiar face, Swaminathan lost control of himself and cried: 'Oh, Rajam, are you going away? When will you come back?' Rajam kept looking at him without a word and then (as it seemed to Swaminathan) opened his mouth to say something, when every thing was disturbed by the guard's blast and hoarse whistle of the engine. (*Swami and Friends*, 178)

After Swaminathan's 'betrayal' of Rajam by fleeing from the cricket match with the YMU, his attempt to effect reconciliation is lost in the din and hubbub of the railway engine and he returns home thinking Rajam has forgiven him.

This is the ambiguity of human situations and the tragedy inherent in it is, in fact, the tragedy of real life itself. Different characters respond to the same situation differently. Confronting spiritual is nothing different from confronting their own beings. Narayan's short story *The Shadow* makes this vividly clear. Here the two characters- the mother and the son- respond to a similar situation in quite a different way. For

Sambhu, the son, seeing his dead father acting in the film is like getting him back to the life, whereas for the mother it increases his loss many folds.

As he was climbing into it himself from the darkened hall a familiar voice said, 'Kumari! Will you go out or shall I throw you out! On hearing it Shambhu's heart became heavy and he burst into tears: he was affected both by his mother's breakdown and by the feeling that this was the final parting from his father. They were changing the picture next day.

This is the tragedy of human life. It is its helplessness of human situations beyond which neither the man nor anything made by him can go. It is at this point the spiritual creeps into the real. Thus for Narayan the spiritual is as important as the mundane. They confront and coalesce with each other in explaining life in totality. Hence they are complementary in bringing out the life vision of R.K. Narayan. Thus the spiritual as Narayan sees it is only in 'Belief, belief..... Above reason, scepticism, and even immediate failures, I clung to it'. (*The English Teacher*, p.183) These lines from *The English Teacher* very much form the crux of Narayan's vision.

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