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Mapping the Sacred in R.K. Narayan: Contextualizing Spiritual Suffering in *The English Teacher*

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ABSTRACT:

“The question about the meaning of life, even though dismissed with disdain by some positivists and postmodernists, remains one of the most pertinent and challenging questions man has ever asked and continues to ask... Even the modern literary masters have been seriously concerned with this question and in their literary output they have tried to come to terms with the despairing answer suggested by contemporary science and philosophy”. Pursuing any (post)modern text in light of ‘the sacred’ seems to me almost identical to visiting a 19th century or older text with postcolonial literary theories at hands. We are in times when applying traditional approaches to evaluate literature is looked over as ludicrous and outlandish and when more emphasis is laid on practicing postmodern and contemporary literary theories. As it is always dangerous to venture beyond the little known space, I will keep my study confined to a single writer and a single theme. In the present paper, I will attempt to visit R.K. Narayan for finding the sacred concerns of man by contextualizing the theme of spiritual suffering in his literary output (his novel *The English Teacher*).

Keywords: Sacred, Spirituality, Suffering, Paranormal, Detachment, Renunciation

*Who really knows, and who can swear,
How creation came, when or where!
Even gods came after creation's day,
Who really knows, who can truly say
When and how did creation start?
Did He will it? Or did He not?
Only He, up there, knows, maybe;
Or perhaps, not even He.*

– *Rig Veda 10.129 (Trans.)*

Researcher would like to begin with a couple of lines mentioned in the ‘Theme and Objectives’ section of the brochure of a seminar held at Srinagar: “The question about the meaning of life, even though dismissed with disdain by some positivists and postmodernists, remains one of the most pertinent and challenging questions man has ever asked and continues to ask... Even the modern literary masters have been seriously concerned with this question and in their literary output they have tried to come to terms with the despairing answer suggested by contemporary science and philosophy”¹. Literature dealing with the sacred spaces and theological concerns has, for several centuries, been a part of the literary

canon around the globe and Indian English literature, of course, is not an exception. Pursuing any (post)modern text in light of 'the sacred' seems to me almost identical to visiting a 19th century or older text with postcolonial literary theories at hands. We are in times when applying traditional approaches to evaluate literature is looked over as ludicrous and outlandish and when more emphasis is laid on practicing postmodern and contemporary literary theories. It is a notable point here that the involvement and presentation of the sacred in literature today is seen as a way of bringing in attention towards the impression that the sense of the sacred is still an integral part of the life. As it is always dangerous to venture beyond the little known space, I will keep my study confined to a single writer and a single theme. In the present paper, I will attempt to visit R.K. Narayan's fictional world for finding the sacred concerns of man by contextualizing spiritual suffering in his literary output (his novel *The English Teacher*).

The words 'sacred' and 'spiritual' are ambiguous. The dictionary meanings of the word 'sacred' are many – connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration; religious rather than secular; embodying the laws or doctrines of a religion; regarded with great respect and reverence by a particular religion, group or individual, and so on. The notion of sacred has many definitions: sacred is that "which is distinct from the profane, common and ordinary" (Livingston, 40); sacredness is "a value placed on objects commonly agreed on by specific groups" (Paden, 31). Similarly, 'spiritual', too, is generally applied to the religious matters of sacred concerns. It mainly refers to all that consists of spirit and not of material. Man has a body and a spirit; whatever belongs to the spirit forms the spiritual aspect of man. It not only refers to the concerns about the values in life and the ultimate meaning of life but also covers all that relates to the intellectual and higher endowments of mind. Spiritual does not imply only a belief in Supreme Being or in life after death; it is also related to the mental or the intellectual aspects of man. It pertains to the moral feelings or status of soul or spirit. Spiritual means the most powerfully experienced and most productive and creative aspects of our inner lives when we become highly conscious of them. The mystification that needs to be resolved to arrive at a clear definition of the word 'spiritual' is the difference between spirituality and religiousness. Religiousness is an adherence to the beliefs and practices of an organized religious institution, whereas spirituality passes on to a unique, personally meaningful experience. Spiritual does not necessarily involve religion; however, it may include various forms of religiousness. Some religious people consider the term 'spiritual' as involving God or the Divine or some higher power greater than us. But there are several others who divorce themselves from religious organizations and talk of spirituality independent of whether the human agent follows specific religious instructions and recommendations or not and in terms of extraordinary events, such as visions and other non-bodily experiences; and the present study launches that Narayan belongs to this category. Some of them even omit God or religion when they talk of 'spiritual' in such terms. Therefore, we see that in this world, many people are spiritual but not necessarily religious. The atheists also have their spiritual concerns. They, like religious people, can also discern the mysteries of life or their own limitations being in this body. By developing contacts with higher powers, they can also seek to grow spiritually. The difference is that the atheists, unlike religious people, do not need God or religion to gain high powers of life. Religious men seek spirituality by referring to such names as *Ishwar*, *Allah* or God, whereas others argue that their spirituality is found not in these names but in service to others and their dedication to a work which they feel is noble. Thus, a comprehensive definition of spiritual includes the rich manifestation of religious references to God or religion along with non-theistic attitudes and beliefs.

The world is not an earthly paradise with all happiness and pleasures. We do not lodge in some garden of eden, nor are we sempiternal beings; we are instead denizens of an ephemeral planet where survival is akin to suffering. Thus, suffering also constitutes a key part of life on earth; it is an indispensable part of *modus operandi*. Happiness and suffering are two punctuation marks in the ligature of life-span. One aspect cannot be realized well without the taste of the other. To understand and experience light, we need to come across darkness. In order to eulogize beauty, we need contacts with the ugly. Similarly, to experience happiness in life, we need to encounter suffering and misery. It is perhaps for this reason that God bequeaths us to suffering or we fabricate it for ourselves for a better understanding and experience of happiness and bliss. All of us suffer sorrows in our lives, but we do have our share of pleasure and euphoria. It is human nature that we screech over our despondency and suffering and hardly harp on our happiness and pleasant experiences. We simply feel crestfallen when things go wrong with us or move away from us, but we take it quite natural when something good or joyous happens in our favour. Suffering, considered an individual and subjective experience in general induces negative behaviour and threatens self-integrity of an individual. Therefore, nobody wants to suffer in life and everybody wants to make himself/herself happy by various means and yearns for a beatific life, a utopian world free from tears, disappointments, deaths and suffering. The teachings of Buddhism centre on the Four Noble Truths – *Dukkha*, *Samudaya*, *Nirodha* and *Magga*. The first Noble Truth teaches that life is full of suffering or *Dukkha* – to live is to suffer. It is impossible to live without experiencing *Dukkha*. It is such an integral part that almost every facet of life seems full of suffering – birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrows, grief, pain, despair and lamentations are sufferings, involvement in the unpleasant is suffering, dissociation from the pleasant is suffering, not to get what we want is suffering and, in short, the whole life is full of suffering and, as Wuthnow explains Berger, when these events are experienced personally, “they seem to occur on the fringes of everyday reality, thus forcing us to reckon with broader questions about the legitimacy of the reality. They take us to the edge of our existence and force us to think about the meaning of it all” (17). In other words, suffering arises in many situations – feeling helplessness and hopelessness, unable to make a choice, doing things against one’s wishes, acceptance of what is unacceptable etc. – all lead to suffering. The Buddha also “perceived nothing but suffering; strove for nothing but freedom from this suffering and that was his sacred goal” (GWR 68). This can better be confirmed in the words of Robert Jonson: “To suffer in this sense is to allow something to happen, perhaps, to allow ourselves to experience the responsibility for life choices which permits consciousness to grow. When we suffer in this sense, we are opening ourselves to experience the fullness of life’s diversity as a natural process of growth. Such a “suffering” with life must occur for psychological and spiritual maturity to develop” and this is exactly what Narayan impinges on in his *The English Teacher*. Unlike physical suffering, the experience of spiritual suffering is generally indirect or unconscious. Religions reveal that we come into this world as a consequence of our past *Karma*, and hence, we are bound to experience some sort of suffering in our lives because we would not have relinquished the preferences of the previous lifetimes. We reap today the effects of seeds sown by us earlier in our previous lives. Our weaknesses, our strengths, our diseases, our miseries, limitations of mind and defects of body – all are the results of our past *Karma* or past thoughts, actions and feelings of our past lives. Our past ideas, desires and deeds, thus cultivate our present body, mind, character, environment and circumstances. We are capable of doing good as well as evil because God has given us intelligence and freedom. Hence, we are responsible for the consequences of our deeds. Our suffering, therefore, is perceived as the result of our past indecorous actions or *Karma* that occurred either in our current life or in past life. Hinduism edifies that “the path to perfection is through suffering, strife and

sacrifice” (GWR 37). The novel exemplifies that one must be grateful to God for suffering since it could even be worse; Krishna, the English teacher achieves this ‘perfection’ towards the end of the novel. The negative can be transformed into positive by looking at suffering in such a way as to how it might be giving someone else a blessing for what is unpalatable to us can be dainty to the other. We must thank God for this. It is very difficult to appreciate suffering in any form or to turn negative into a positive. But this is the way we can grow spiritually: “How can we find joy in the midst of our suffering? One should not draw conjectures that one’s suffering is for punishment only. Suffering is always about change and offers an opportunity for a new understanding of the self” (Nemri). Spiritual suffering, like ‘sacred’, is, indeed, very difficult to put in words, it is something that one needs to experience. Some things in this world are really beyond words.

The English Teacher is a study not only of the intense suffering that Krishna and Susila experience, but also describes Krishna’s spiritual development which turns up only after intense suffering. The novel “portrays the anguish of the husband after the untimely death of his wife, and his experience of the spirit world in his quest for contact with her” (Sahai 35). Susila dies due to illness at the end of chapter three of the novel and subsequent part of the book deals with the responsibilities that Krishna has to shoulder as the father of a little girl. This second half of the novel conscripts the spiritual enlightenment which he achieves through the sacred spaces by overpowering all his suffering and by developing his mind and heart through practice. Sita Kapadia notices a change in Krishna’s concerns: “An absence of worldly wisdom, a pervasive listlessness, as well as an emptiness, seems to hover over his life, even when he is seemingly happily married. It is only after his wife’s death, when he is intuitively drawn to the life of spiritual living, that he finds fulfillment in non-attachment, sacrifice, and service, maturing thus far beyond his earlier self-absorption”(70). After sudden illness and subsequent death of Susila, life becomes jejune, insipid and almost impossible for Krishna. He cannot put up with the separation of his beloved wife and a vacuity occupies his mind. It is quite natural that the teacher, in Dnyate’s observation, “feels stunned and benumbed to witness the premature and tragic death of his beloved wife. . . . the loss of the essential harmony in his life, turns the bereaved husband philosophical” (72). He tries to console himself in the company of his little daughter and devotes much of his time to her: “I slipped into my double role with great expertness . . . I had to keep her cheerful and keep myself cheerful too lest she should feel unhappy” (97). Life is inseparable from change but we do not apprehend this. When we are in a pleasant situation, we regard it as everlasting and strive to make it so. All our desires are bound to be frustrated in the long run, and hence, when we lose the pleasant situation, we suffer. Krishna’s responsibility as a father, however, strengthens his mind as he forgets all his sorrows in the company of his daughter. The situation in which the child and the father are caught, is really very pathetic. William Walsh illustrates his poignant situation: “The second part of *The English Teacher* knits smoothly together Krishna’s devotion to his young daughter and – it is hard to put it down in plain language – his efforts to recover his connection with his dead wife. The child, whose personality is a tiny, brilliant mirror of her mother’s, keeps the mother’s presence from fading away, while increasing the painful sense of her absence” (56).

A new experience of practicing the art of communication with spirits fills a new thrill in Krishna’s life and he almost forgets all his suffering. This experience is important in relation to the sacred. It is not represented, as Griffiths opines, “as a relic of disappeared past and of outdated modes of knowing (25), but Krishna’s sacred spaces help him coming out of his suffering and undertaking his personal spiritual journey. In a couple of occult sittings, Krishna realizes that the spirit, he communicates with, is really that of his wife who now

exists in a world of pure spiritual existence. Such sacred spaces, sometimes, are so important to some people that sometimes they are required to be formed with the help of their specific imagination. These spaces have an identifiable impact on the people who are involved with them. This is the point where from Krishna's spiritual journey begins which, in Sahai's words, leads to "the unique experience of mystical ecstasy at the end of the novel" (40). In a number of communications, Susila's spirit acquaints him with several facts that he is unaware of or careless of. This is the beginning of his development as "an individual believing in and afraid of death into one who accepts death as a part of life to live like a selfless ascetic" (Ramana 61). Gradually, there occurs a great change in his life and behaviour and it seems to him that a new spirit, a new inspiration has developed within him: "Nowadays I went about my work with a light heart. I felt as if a dead load had been lifted. The day seemed full of possibilities of surprise and joy. . . . The sense of futility was leaving me. I attended to my work earnestly" (120). It is out of sorrow and suffering that man becomes interested in philosophical matters and begins his spiritual quest. This may not happen universally, but in most cases it does and Narayan demonstrates this through a considerable development in the sacred space available for Krishna. After a few 'sittings' of 'virtual communication' dealing with the recollection of previous life, begins the spiritual training of Krishna. Both, the man and the spirit of Susila, set out to enlighten his mind and soul by lecturing him on various spiritual truths. This, again, demonstrates the sacred space as Krishna communicates with the spirit of his wife; this communication with the sacred is not possible without "the language and gestures of our own social and historical experiences" (Livington, 48). Krishna is a college teacher, a learned scholar and his past knowledge and experience helps him in developing a communication with the sacred. At this point of the novel, it seems that the only motive of such communication is to train Krishna's mind in such a way that he may rise above all levels of suffering. Susila's spirit enlightens him by presenting him various thoughts:

Between thought and fulfillment there is no interval. Thought is fulfillment, motion and everything. That is the main difference between our physical state and yours. In your state a thought to be realized must always be followed by effort directed towards conquering obstructions and inertia – that is the nature of the material world. But in our condition no such obstruction exists. (131-132)

The training goes on and as the months roll on, Krishna develops the art of communicating with the spirit of Susila and the "communication between the husband and the wife takes place directly without the need of a medium. The boundaries of their personalities dissolve resulting in a harmony of souls . . ." (Hariprasanna 53). Thus, her spirit ultimately succeeds in raising Krishna above all poignant sorrows of life. Narayan has used this occult communication in the sacred spaces as an important novelistic device to show a remarkable improvement in Krishna's sensibilities and the growth of real cheerfulness in him by leaving all vague perceptions behind. When we crave for something and that does not happen favourably to us, we feel disappointed. We feel hurt when we fall short to get what we want from others. Sometimes, even getting, what we crave for, does not bring happiness, because we get it too late, long after we need it, and as a result of this, we lose interest in it and look forward to something else. Even when we obtain something we desire, we want more and more of it, and so greed arises. Hence, craving (or Trishna, referred to as one of the Four Noble Truths) makes us greedy and deprives us of happiness and contentment. But when we develop our minds and acquire wisdom through study, meditation and careful thoughts, we begin to see the things as they really are. We begin to realize the truth of suffering and transience of life. Thus, by overcoming craving, we can attain happiness and enlightenment.

Krishna's traumatic experiences and para-psychological experiments which become the starting point for him to embark on a personal spiritual journey, culminates in a considerable change in his outlook. This not only enables him to forget all his sorrows and sufferings, but also leads him to self-development which comes only after undergoing suffering at various levels. Eventually, he realizes the real truth of life:

“There is no escape from loneliness and separation . . . “ I told myself often. “Wife, child, brothers, parents, friends. . . . We come together only to go apart again. It is one continuous movement. They move away from us as we move away from them. The law of life can't be avoided. The law comes into operation the moment we detach ourselves from our mother's womb. All struggle and misery in life is due to our attempts to arrest this law or get away from it or in allowing ourselves to be hurt by it. The fact must be recognized. (177)

Krishna reaches that stage of life where one seeks to live in spiritual bliss – a stage where there are no constraints of time and space – a detachment – an appositive state of objectivity towards this world – an intellectual understanding that the self is a part of God and that we must follow *Dharma* or appropriate actions to have such understanding. We must carry on our life's duties and all worldly functions by keeping a detached outlook, rising above the feelings of pleasure and pain, success and failure, and profit and loss, and by performing duty without worrying about the fruit or reward of our actions. Jainism emphasizes that “when the soul is freed from the bondage of Karma and has transcended the possibility of rebirth, it attains deliverance. A person who has attained deliverance is called Siddha, a perfected Soul” (GWR 101). When a person gives up all desires or cravings in his waking mind and when his self is turned inward and satisfied within itself, at that time he is said to be stable of mind. This stage is called *Sthithaprajna*. The Gita teaches: *Prajahati yada kaman, sarvan partha mano-gatan,/Atmany evatmana tustah, sthita-prajnas tadocyate* (2.55). Krishna also achieves the stage where one realizes one's real existence and seeks satisfaction of innermost aspirations. He ruminates: “My mind was made up. I was in search of a harmonious existence and everything that disturbed that harmony was to be rigorously excluded, even my college work” (178). Life, as Wuthnow writes, revolves around linear time and three dimensional space, we cannot really live our daily lives in the form of ‘flashbacks’, we cannot escape our bodies, and we cannot occupy two places at the same time (14). Perhaps inspired by such thoughts, he resigns from his job as an English teacher confessing that the job of a teacher does not satisfy his inner life: “Of all persons on earth, I can afford to do what seems to me work, something which satisfies my innermost aspiration. I will write poetry and live and work with children and watch their minds unfold . . .” (180). Once we apprehend that all worldly and bodily pleasures and pains are transitory, we get strength to ignore the pains and troubles that we undergo and encounter. *Viveka* trains us to see how the process of change goes on continuously in everything at every instant and our private experience of the suffering and our contacts with the sacred enable us to discover and rediscover new boundaries of our existence in this world. Renunciation (*Vairagya*), another sacred space, is a state that comes only after *Viveka*. Renunciation, here, does not mean leaving home and family, and escaping to the forests and monasteries. It is the training of oneself to do without the non-essential things. Krishna gets ready to experience both pain and suffering by freeing himself from excessive attachment, an ideal renunciation, and the novel ends with the hints of his subsequent life-style – everyday he will spend in the company of little school children, a “paramount reality” in Berger's terms (26). and every night, he will experience the presence of his wife in his room and a union of the two: “The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy – a moment for

which one feels grateful to Life and Death” (184). Narayan successfully posits that moving in the sacred space is possible even without conventional religious practices such as visiting temples and singing prayers and hymns.

To sum up, there is no denying the fact that R.K. Narayan, though perhaps unconsciously, involves in ‘the question about meaning of life’; he may not be ‘seriously concerned with this question’ but he certainly has ‘tried to come to terms with the despairing answers suggested by contemporary science and philosophy’. *The English Teacher* may be called, in Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge’s words, “a premodern” text (391) due to its irrational undertones but Narayan, a courageous optimist, firmly institutes that sacred concerns and spiritual matters will continue to remain vital parts even in modern times. Krishna’s journey through the sacred space to overpower his suffering is a strong answer to those who hail the idea that the experience of the spiritual and the sacred belongs only to radically religious people. This opens new horizons to be ventured by the critics to explore Narayan’s fictional world. Narayan, as a writer, to the (post)modern generation, can look like, what Rana Nayar calls him, “a writer from another century, or even a dinosaur, if you like” (1), but he surely does not fit in the class of old literary masters who wrote deliberately on religious philosophies with a didactic purpose, nor is he too modern to omit altogether from his writing the spiritual concerns of man. Reading his literary output for an evaluation of the sacred therein is a field which still needs the attention of the critics.

Notes:

¹ A Three Day National Conference on “Literature and the Sacred: Legacies, Issues and the Path Ahead” organized by the Department of English, University of Kashmir, Srinagar (17-19 March, 2014)

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