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Treatment of Education: A Study of R.K. Narayan's Novels

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Abstract:

Since Narayan came from the family of an educationist and he himself taught for some time, observations about the contemporary education system are a recurring theme in his novels, particularly the ones concerned with education. This paper mainly focuses on the novels *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The English Teacher* (1945) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) for Narayan's somewhat jocular portrayal of the education imparted in the various schools and colleges of Malgudi. It critiques most of the phases of education and recommendations of various committees and commissions on education. Narayan exposes the kind of education being propagated by the British and identifies its shortcomings. The present paper also points to the fact that education certainly enabled the Indians to assess the situation prevailing in the country. Even if it did not entirely make them outstanding academics, it certainly got them government jobs, which were coveted by Indians. Historical facts are presented in his novels as passing incidents in the lives of students and teachers.

Keywords: educationist, contemporary, jocular, portrayal, committees, commissions, prevailing, academics, historical.

Introduction

R. K Narayan's first novel *Swami and Friends* looks at the world with the eyes of ten-year old W.S. Swaminathan and makes important comments on the contemporary system of Primary education. *The Bachelor of Arts*, through the thoughts and observations of Chandran, critiques the Higher Education. *The English Teacher* takes the view of the situation from the standpoint of Krishnan, the English teacher, who is dissatisfied with the nature of his job and ultimately resigns to join a kindergarten run on the lines of innovation and experimentation. *The Vendor of Sweets*, through the character of Mali exemplifies the ideal of western education gone wrong.

Swami and Friends starts with the bafflement of a ten year old subjected to a variety of subjects and his fear of Mondays:

He shuddered at the very thought of school: that dismal yellow building; the fire-eyed Vedgyanam, his class teacher; and the headmaster with his thin long cane.
(1)

His timetable for Monday at Albert Mission High School gives us a hint of the burden on a school going child:

First of course, there was arithmetic---those five puzzles in profit & loss; then there was English---he had to copy down a page from his Eighth lesson, and dictionary meanings of difficult words; and then there was Geography. (1-2)

When he starts attending the Board High school later, the situation is even worse there; since the homework is even more than at Albert mission:

Six sums in arithmetic, four pages of ‘handwriting copy’, dictionary meanings of scores of tough words, two maps, and five stanzas of Tamil poetry were the average homework everyday. (144)

Plus there are a host of other activities which keep him occupied even after four thirty.

Not to speak of the drill three evenings a week, there were scout classes, compulsory games, et cetera, after the regular hours everyday. (144)

Corporal punishment is meted out to the students who are weak in a subject, do the homework incorrectly or ask questions in class. They are punished by caning, standing on the bench or boxing of ears. Monetary fines and suspension is imposed when children do not attend school when an agitation against government is in progress. Attendance is cancelled. Swami leaves school when he is caned by the principal. Even Chandran at the degree level is studying a variety of subjects like “Modern history, Ancient history, Political theories, Greek Drama, Eighteenth Century Prose and Shakespeare” (18). In *The Bachelor of Arts*, he is disturbed on seeing his brother idling in front of the bathroom before school in the morning because “In his day in the Albert Mission he had studied for at least two hours every morning” (18).

In *The English Teacher*, Even in a small town like Malgudi, 200 students attend the English class at the college with Chandran. The English teacher Krishnan’s father is a graduate too. As Krishnan says:

He was a BA of the olden days brought up on Pater and Carlyle and Scott and Browning; personally looked after by Dr William Miller, Mark Hunter, and other eminent Professors of Madras College. (23)

Therefore people were baffled when he chose to take care of his land and property after his BA rather than looking for a government job. Even Krishnan becomes a teacher by default only. Krishnan reminisces:

I could still see where I used sit assiduously, cultivating correct language and trying to please the lecturer. Little did I dream then that I would be a lecturer in the same class. (14)

Although Krishnan takes up a job at the college, he does not get the job-satisfaction. He is uninspired and unenthusiastic about his work:

I read for the ...time Milton, Carlyle and Shakespeare, looked through compositions.... My duty in the interval had been admonishing, cajoling and browbeating a few hundred boys of Albert mission College so that they might mug up Shakespeare and Milton and Secure high marks and save me adverse marks from my chiefs at the end of the year. (2)

He thinks about the ‘Grim Tolerance’ (9) with which the boys listen to the poetry and the efforts of a teacher in explaining poetry to students. He always questions the system:

I was merely a man who had mugged earlier than they... Introduction and the notes in the verity edition of Lear, and guided them through the mazes of Elizabethan English. (12)

When he had not prepared his lecture once, he simply ‘banged the table, shouted and went through attendance and swallowed half an hour’ (12). Then he read the text, thinking, “I am merely trying to mark time because I could not come sufficiently prepared”(13), till the bell rang. For composition class he says, “The composition hour is a sort of relaxation for us where we can sit looking at notebooks and do not demand much attention from the boys” (14). When Krishnan is irritated with his student Ramaswami for writing irrelevant things about a poem, he asks him:

“Does this poem make no sense as far as you are concerned?”

“No sir...”

“Then why do you write so much about it? “

“I do not know sir...” (15)

His colleague Gajapathy whom we see in *Swamy and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts* has a low opinion of others regarding his subject:

Not ten persons in the world had understood Shakespeare; He asserted that there were serious errors even in Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*; he corrected everybody’s English; he said that no Indian could ever write English. (24)

In *The English Teacher*, a lot of fuss is made by the Principal Brown when a student spells ‘Honours’ wrong. In the staff room debate that follows Gajapathy resolutely says in favour of the principal, “How would you treat one of your students if he spelt Kant, Cant?” Dr. Menon of Philosophy says, “I couldn’t bother very much if he knew correctly what Kant had or hadn’t said” (17). But Gajapathy who is known to deduct marks even for a misplaced comma or semicolon says, “There is a merit in accuracy, which must be cultivated for its own sake” (18). When Menon says, “Americans are saner than their English cousins in most matters” (18), Gajapathy calls American spelling a “foolish buffoonery” (17), to which Krishnan replies caustically, “If we had Americans ruling us, I suppose we would say the same thing of the English people” (17).

However, even Gajapathy is perplexed in *The English Teacher*, where he says:

I will tell them that they are being fed on literary garbage and that we are all the paid servants of the garbage department. (226)

This argument amongst the teachers clearly tells us about the conditions of the schools and the fact that the teachers were going on with the routine syllabi mechanically without actually giving the students insight into what they were being taught. Despite English being taught compulsorily, the students did not have the basic skills of writing and understanding the language. This is evident in the way Swami and his friends write a letter to Ms Binns ordering sports goods for their cricket team:

...and then came the most difficult part of the whole affair – a letter to Messrs. Binns, ordering goods. Bare courtesy made Rajam offer the authorship of the letter to Mani, who declined it. Swaminathan was forced to accept it in spite of his protests and he sat a long time chewing his pencil without producing a word, he had infinite trouble with spelling and the more he tried to be correct more muddled he was becoming; in the end he sat so long thinking of spelling that even such words as ‘the’ and ‘and’ became doubtful. (135-36)

In the end, Rajam finalized the letter in half an hour and then they had a fresh set of doubts about the use of Sir/Dear Sir. Similarly in his post card to his friends, Sankar writes, “Is Swami and Mani doing well” (135)?

Clearly the students were not comfortable with English Grammar and spelling and were not even able to write a letter. Even Sankar, who always bordered on ninety per cent, makes a silly mistake in his letter. When a reply was received from Messrs Binns, they could not understand what was being said in the letter. Narayan presents a jocular account of the situation:

The trouble was that they could not understand whether Binns were going to send the goods or not. Mani promised to unravel the letter if somebody would tell what ‘obliged’ meant. When they turned the pages of a dictionary, and offered

him the meaning, he was none the wiser. He felt that I was a meaningless word in that place. (139)

Mani is not even able to pronounce ‘*obliged*’ and no one can understand the expression ‘remit’ and ‘25 percent’. A frustrated Swami tells Rajam, “I am surprised that you cannot understand this letter; you got 60 percent in the last examination” (140). To which Rajam’s reply is, “What has that to do with this? Even a BA cannot understand this letter” (140).

Swami is also unable to do simple arithmetic. When his father asks him, “Ten mangoes cost fifteen annas. What is the price of one?” (102), he is unable to answer.

He could not decide whether the solution lay in the realm of addition, subtraction, multiplication or division. (102)

Even when his father tells him “one mango costs fifteen over ten annas,” he takes fifteen minutes to come up with. “The price of one anna is three over two annas” (102). It takes him half an hour to tell that the price of four mangoes is six annas. In Tamil, he is unable to infer the moral of a story.

Rajam, the DSP’s son, has a home tutor who teaches him for two hours a day, thrice a week and he gets sixty percent, but he is in no better condition than Swami with his basic skills. All this comes when they are studying at Albert Mission High School which is considered to be the best school in Malgudi. The students of the Albert High look at the Board High School as imbuing its students with ‘a certain slowness and stupidity engendered by mental decay’(81).

The scripture lessons are given at the Albert high by Ebenezer, a fanatic who always degrades Hindu Gods and praises Jesus. He says:

Did our Jesus go gadding about with dancing girls like your Krishna? Did our Jesus go about stealing butter like that arch-scoundrel Krishna? Did our Jesus practice dark tricks on those around him? (4)

When Swami asks, “If he did not, why was he crucified” (4)? He tells him to meet him in private and when Swami questions Jesus drinking wine and eating flesh and fish, Ebenezer boxes his ear.

When his father sends a letter of complaint to the headmaster, he mentions, “The one conclusion that I can come to is that you do not want non-Christian boys in your school...” (10). He also mentions:

I hear that he (Ebenezer) is always most insulting and provoking in his references to the Hindu religion...This is not the place for me to dwell upon the necessity for toleration in these matters. (10)

For the boys it did not make any difference what was being taught in the scriptures, they could not understand anything of it.

It made little difference to them whether Ebenezer was making a study of Hinduism in light of *Bhagwad Gita* or was merely describing the nativity of Christ. (10)

The headmaster does not take cognizance of the matter. He simply visits the Scriptures class and demands explanation why the teacher is still teaching the Nativity of Christ so late in the session. He calls Swami later in his office. "I am Sorry", said the headmaster, "that you should have been so foolish as to go to your father about this simple matter" (10).

This episode also elaborates the cultural invasion in the form of denigration of the Hindu culture and identity. Under the influence of Christianity people started attiring themselves in Western outfit as we see Krishnan, Chandran, Mali and Rajam adopt Western dresses. While Chandran nurtures ambition of going abroad for his Doctorate, Mali actually succeeds in pilfering money from his father's stash and going abroad in his wild goose chase of the course in creative writing and comes back with the absurd idea of manufacturing a story writing machine. He looks down upon the Indian ways of life and his father's occupation and starts eating beef against the tenets of Hinduism. He becomes a confused hybrid who ultimately gets caught by police when a bottle of liquor is confiscated from his car. The only saving grace for Mali is that he has been spoilt by his father's affection and fear towards him. Similarly, Rajam's father is also influenced by the western education to a huge extent, as is evinced by Rajam's answer to Swami's quip about Muhammad Gazni that they destroyed our temples and tortured the Hindus. In response, Rajam says:

We *Brahmins* deserve that and more. In our house my father does not care for New Moon days and there are no annual ceremonies for the dead. (128)

He considers it to be a progressive attitude and tells Swami, "It is your Board High School that has given you this mentality" (128). This loathing of his Brahmin ideals in Rajam is inherited from his father who is under the influence of the colonial education. He leads a *lathi* charge on the protestors, for which Swami's father calls him a butcher. The dubious mission of Albert Mission School is clearly the propagation of the British Thought.

Narayan carefully and cleverly exposes all the lacunae in the education of the day through his characters. But he also makes us see how this very system acted against the colonial masters and triggered introspection among the intellectual masses. In *The Bachelor of Arts* Chandran is seen at the debate in Bachelor of Arts as the prime mover. As he looks at the pink face of his principal Mr. Brown, he thinks about the privileged status of Englishmen in India:

There he is, Chandran thought ...to press the bell and listen to speeches, but really his thoughts are at the tennis court and the card table in the English Club. He is not

here out of love for us, but merely to keep up appearances. All Europeans are like this. They will take their thousand or more a month bit won't do the slightest service to Indian with a sincere heart. They must be paid this heavy amount for spending their time in the English club. Why should not these fellows admit Indians to their clubs? Sheer colour arrogance. If ever I get into power, I shall see that Englishmen attend clubs alongwith Indians and are not so exclusive...Anyway, who invited them here? (56)

This inner monologue projects the question every educated and discerning man was feeling. Even ten year old Swami understood the British fondness for taxation. Thus when they made their cricket team, an apprehensive Rajam says, "The government seems to tax everything in this world. My Father's pay is about five hundred. But nearly two hundred and over is demanded by the government. Anyway, what makes you think that we shall have to pay tax" (132)? Equally innocent, Swami replies, "I mean if we don't pay tax, the government may not recognize our team or its name" (132). Even Rajam, who is forever siding with the British ideas, feels that the government did not seem to know where it ought to interfere and where not. "He had a momentary sympathy for Gandhi; no wonder he was dead against the government" (133).

The enthusiasm of Swami in going with the protesters may be only a result of losing his cap the previous day and not wanting to go to school without a cap, but even his half baked knowledge of the status of his country and his enthusiasm is exemplary. He is the representative of the school children who participated in the freedom movement, even if it was just shouting slogans, boycotting classes or smashing windows. Swami's father, a lawyer, also supports the *Swadeshi*. He calls the "Deputy Superintendent a Butcher" (119) after the *lathi* charge. Although he wears Western clothes at work, he says, "I won't have a paisa of mine sent to foreign countries. I know my duty" (119). When Swami says his cap was torn by someone because it was foreign, he is angered and says, "I paid two rupees and got it from the *Khaddar* stores. It is a black *Khaddar* cap" (119). He adds, "If any man says that they are not *Khaddar*, they must be blind" (119).

Veeraswami in *The Bachelor of Arts*, read a paper on "Aids to British Expansion in India" on the platform of the History Association. "It pilloried Great Britain before the Association, and ended by hoping that the British would be ousted from India by force" (45-46). As a result of this political paper, Ragavachar received a note from Brown directing him to submit all papers for review before they were read on the platform of the Association. Veeraswami has his own ideology about the Colonial rule. Chandran feels that he has 'got into bed with a porcupine' (46) whenever they are together. Veeraswami 'bristled with prejudices and violence. Imperialism was his favourite demon. He believed in smuggling arms into the country, and, on a given day shooting all the Englishmen' (46). He has his own fanciful ideas about sickness and cure. He feels that once he has made India healthy and strong:

He would assume the garb of a village worker, a rural reconstruction maniac, but secretly prepare the mind of the peasantry for revolution. (47)

Thus we notice how the modern education provided by the English changed the face of India. On the one hand, it caused a drifting away from the traditions and customs and struck at the roots of the Indian culture; but on the other hand, it created an awareness of the political situation of the country. The majority of students grappled with the courses for years and found to their chagrin that the education had not taught them much. The education being provided to them was not helping the bright students in moving beyond a limited choice of careers. The educated people were the first to feel discontented with the colonial rule which blocked the path for their potential growth in a free country. They also realized that the policies of the British were intended to keep the control in their own hands and they were only secondary citizens in their own country. This awareness was at the root of the mass movement for gaining the independence of the country.

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