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Critical Realism in R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*

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Abstract:

The aim of this article is to review R. K. Narayan's novel "The English Teacher" on the principles of Critical Realism, a term coined by M. Gorky in 1934. The theory "Critical realism" commonly refers to a philosophical approach associated with Roy Bhaskar. The theory that some of our sense data can accurately and justly represent external events, incidents, objects and properties while other sense data do not represent the external events, incidents, objects and properties exactly and accurately is described as Critical Realism. Although in the past it was used mainly to the study of sciences and social sciences but now the trend has changed. Attempts are made to study the literary art through it. It found its expression in the novel genre of literature. R. K. Narayan vividly and fantastically depicts the prevailing system of his society through the approach of critical realism.

Keywords: Critical Realism; Sense data; External events; Expression; Transcendental Realism; Critical Naturalism; Responses and Reactions.

According to critical realists reality exists independently of human beings and of their knowledge or perception of it. In critical realism, reality consists of three different layers: empirical (observable through our sense perceptions), actual (existing in time and space), and real (trans-factual and more enduring than our perception of it). The relationship between these layers is summarized in the below diagram as Figure 1.

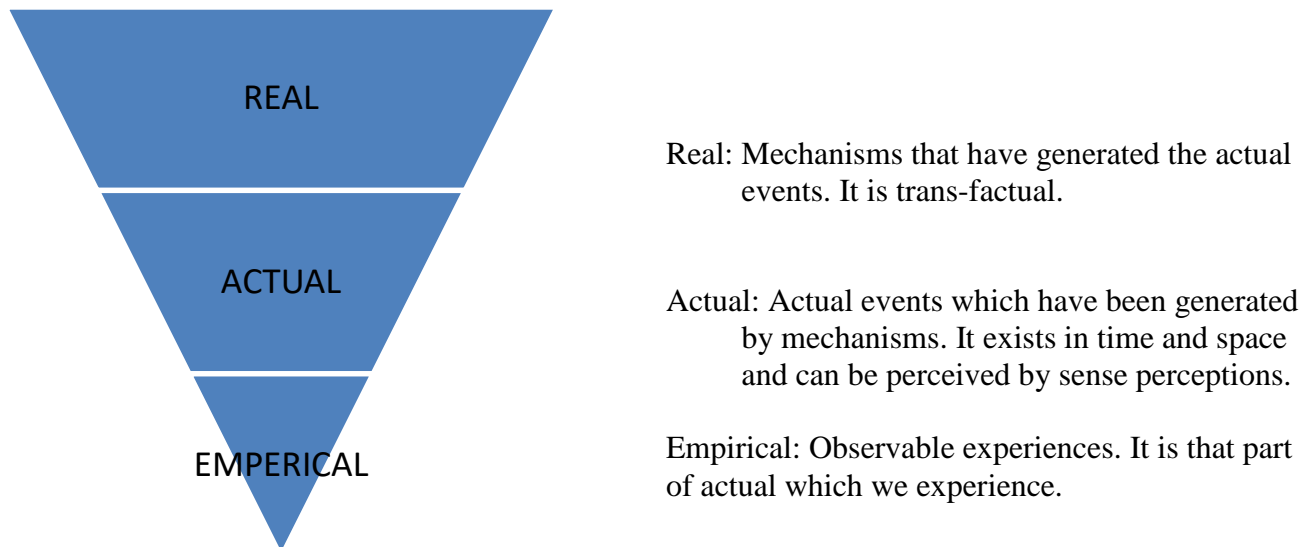


Figure 1 – Bhaskar's three different layers of reality.

Roy Bhaskar argued “mechanisms, events and experiences constitute three overlapping domains of reality, viz. the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical” (56). The real domain consists of the process that produces events in which “the generative mechanisms of nature” (50) or causal powers exist independently with a tendency to produce patterns of observable events under contingent conditions. Next is the actual domain, where pattern of events occur, whether they are observed or not. Finally there is the empirical domain, in which experiences can be obtained by direct observation.

Critical Realism is when we apply knowable methodology in gaining the knowledge of reality which exists independent of our perception. It is a position that maintains that there exists an independently knowable, mind-independent reality, while acknowledging the roles of perception and cognition. Critical Realism is representational realism where objects act as mediators between perceivers and the real independent objects. In simple terms critical realism focuses on that aspect of the world which is mind dependent, which helps us in understanding the mind independent world.

Bhaskar actually tries to explain “how the intelligibility of experiments presupposes that reality is constituted not only by experiences and the course of actual events but also by structures, powers, mechanisms and tendencies – by aspects of reality that underpin, generate or facilitate the actual phenomena that we may (or may not) experience but are typically out of phase with them.” (Archer et al. 05)

Bhaskar's thought combines a general philosophy of science that he called as transcendental realism, with a special philosophy of social science that he refers as critical naturalism, to describe an interface between the natural and social worlds. The two terms were combined to form umbrella term Critical Realism.

“Transcendental realism tries to build the mind independent world so that scientific investigation is possible. The object of that investigation must have real, manipulable,

internal mechanisms that can be actualized to produce particular outcomes.” (Sensagent sec. 4)

Critical naturalism argues that the transcendental realist model of science is equally applicable to both the physical and the human worlds. However, when we study the human world we are studying something fundamentally different from the physical world and must therefore adapt our strategy to studying it. “Critical naturalism therefore prescribes social scientific method which seeks to identify the mechanisms producing social events”. (Sensagent sec. 4)

The term “Critical Realism”, in the field of literature, is applicable when writers especially fiction writers look ironically at the situations, men and women in their respective works of art. English critical realism flourished in the forties and fifties, of 19th century. The critical realists described with much vividness and artistic skill the chief traits (characteristics) of their society and criticized the prevailing system from subjective viewpoint. It found its expressions in the form of novel. The greatest English critical realist of the time was Charles Dickens followed by William Makepeace Thackeray, Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy.

On Indian scene Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and others expressed their perceptions in the similar way.

In this research article, Narayan’s novel “The English Teacher” is reconstructed through the perspective of Critical Realism.

In “The English Teacher” R. K. Narayan depicts his experiences and observations through the mouth-piece of Krishna, the narrator and protagonist of the novel. Through Krishna we met and understood different characters on the pages of this novel. We came to know about their views, ideas and perceptions. These characters’ views, perceptions and ideas vary according to their respective experiences.

R. K. Narayan’s novel “The English Teacher” begins with Krishna’s conflict between inner and outer aspirations. Krishna, a man of nearly 30 years old, is an English teacher at Albert Mission College. Outwardly he was satisfied but inwardly he was confused. He meditates,

What was wrong with me? I couldn’t say, some sort of vague disaffection, a self-rebellion I might call it. The feeling again and again came upon me that as I was nearing thirty I should cease to live like a cow...eating, working in a manner of speaking, walking, talking, etc. – all done to perfection, I was sure but always leaving behind a sense of something missing. (Narayan 01)

He felt satisfied that he had been dubbed as lecturer and receives a handsome salary but he was “constantly nagged by the feeling that I was doing the wrong work” (02). This reaction is the result of his experience because he made his students to mug up lectures only to secure high marks in the exam so that he can save himself from adverse comments from

higher-ups. Being a teacher, he perceives certain defects in the education system but he didn't make it wholly responsible for his uneasiness. He felt there is something else which he is not able to understand.

Even the staff meeting at Albert Mission College clearly depicts Critical Realism at work. Mr. Brown, the chief of the college, summoned teachers to his room because he felt surprised at the student of English honours who was not aware that 'honours' had to be spelt with a 'u'. Of course it is a shock for a person like Mr. Brown but is it same for a teacher like Krishna? Surely not. The latter is an Indian and can understand the problems faced by the students while leaning foreign language than the former who never learned any foreign language than his own. But there are some Indians like Gajapathy who supports the view point of Mr. Brown. Krishna, a non-native of English has himself faced such problems while learning English. He felt annoyed at the irrational behaviour of Gajapathy. He said to Gajapathy' "...Ask Mr. Brown if he can say in any of the two hundred Indian languages: 'the cat chases the rat'. He has spent thirty years in India" (04). Krishna wanted to make Gajapathy clear that if an English could not translate an English sentence into any Indian language then how would he expected the accuracy of English language from his non-native students. While further discussing the issue and to decide "how many marks are to be deducted for spelling honours with the middle u" (16). Sastri, the logic lecturer, thinks the discussion is unnecessary. For Dr. Menon, the Assistant Professor of Philosophy, it didn't matter very much how a student spelt anything if he knew correctly what a Philosopher had or hadn't said. Every teacher reacts to this issue according to their experiences and perceptions.

Every human being is unique. Creator has made his mind with unique qualities. It is because of this feature that every person perceives things uniquely and differently. Everything leaves a different impression on the mind of the perceiver. Same event or object creates different impressions on different persons resulting in differences of opinions. These differences of opinions are presented by R. K. Narayan in his novel "The English Teacher" through the technique known as critical realism.

On the lines of the same principles R. K. Narayan depicts a scene where he shows the conflict between two persons – protagonist and the old-man, resulting from their respective observations and experiences of their lives. When Krishna received a letter from his father telling him to set up his family (Susila and Leela, his daughter) and not to live in the college hostel anymore, he searched for a house. After much struggle he found one in "Ellamman Street" owned by a semi-blind old man. When Krishna asked him, "Has it a garage?" the old man snapped with disgust:

Go, go away. I am not prepared to talk to you anymore. I don't want to give you my house. I have seen hundreds like you who come and ask questions and vanish out of sight.... See the house and then come and talk to me. (Narayan 31)

In the scene the behaviour of the old man seems dictatorial and authoritarian. As the discussion of Krishna and the old-man progresses we understand that it is out of his life

experiences that old man rebukes him. But when he came to know that Krishna is a teacher, his attitude altogether changes and he salutes him and said, “I revere college teachers, our Gurus. Meritorious deeds in previous birth make them gurus in this life. I’m so happy. I only wanted a good cultured family.” (33) But Krishna was losing patience, “If you are letting the house, let it, otherwise don’t talk.... I’m not here to learn lessons from you.” (33) According to his age, old man was correct but with his chattering Krishna became impatient because he hadn’t experienced the bitterness of life like him

Similarly alarm clock incident depicts how a single object had been taken by two persons – Krishna and Susila – differently. No doubt the old alarm clock always disturbed Krishna every morning with its non-stop ringing but he still cherishes it. While Susila hates it because of the same reason. Fed up with its’ continues ringing Susila sold it but when Krishna found it missing from his table he became very angry with his wife (Susila) and questioned her,

“What have you done with my clock?”

“Answer...where is the clock?”

“Who asked you to give away that clock?”

Susila through her sobs replied, “...if I had known you cared more for a dilapidated clock.” (Narayan 67-70)

Critical Realism justifies the point that there isn’t any idea like right or wrong. Everything is subjective because the conceived idea or reality is modified at the time of perception and Knowledge is acquired through perception and perception is influenced by persons’ learning, expectations, and attention and past experiences. The English Teacher depicts this approach through Krishna and Susila. Susila’s expectations and experiences as a house wife differ greatly from her husband, a teacher.

Once Susila drew up “the monthly budget and list of provisions” (52) and told her husband to get them accurately and exact in quantity. But Krishna slightly made alteration in the list on shop-keeper’s suggestion. When Susila questions him, he became angry. She wondered over Krishna’s anger and called the shop-keeper “a thief”. These words sparked Krishna’s temper because he trusted and liked shopkeeper. Against his wife Krishna affirmed that he is the honest man. When his temper softens, he felt that he hadn’t shown patience. To normalize the situation he told his wife, “I will return the jiggery if it is too much.” (55) Susila replied while pushing the glass goblet before Krishna,

“This can hold just half a viss of jiggery and not more; which is more than enough for our monthly use. If it is kept in any other place, ants swarm on it”. (Narayan 55)

This incident shows the woman’s expertness in household management and man’s limited knowledge of the same.

It is a fact that profession influences our behavior, character, manner and way of thinking. We, usually, didn't accept other professional's way of thinking easily. Dr. Shankar's (a medical practitioner) behaviour and thinking is different from Krishna's (a teacher). This difference is presented by Narayan in the encounter between Dr. Shankar and Krishna in chapter three of the novel. When Susila fell ill, Krishna went to the doctor. The doctor asked, "a few questions, write down a prescription, and put it away..." (105) and became busy with other patients. Krishna "was disappointed with the mechanical, red-tape method" (106) of the doctor because latter didn't explain the cause of illness and the means through which Susila would be healthy again. He was not satisfied. He said to the doctor, "what I want to know is...Don't you have to see the patient?" (106) Dr. Shankar replied, "Oh, no, it is just malaria. I have fifty cases like this on hand, no need to see her." (107) Krishna was not able to think that how a doctor like Shankar could treat his patients fairly. Krishna underestimates Shankar's experience as a doctor.

Later, in the novel, experience and innocence is weaved around Krishna and his daughter, Leela. While Krishna and his father-in-law were taking turns to nurse Susila, who was suffering from high fever due to typhoid, Leela was anxious to play with her father. This collision of experience and innocence is brought home in the following conversation between Krishna and Leela:

"Not yet, not yet. Don't touch me. You can speak to me from a distance, that is all. I have not had a wash yet"

"... Does mother's fever climb on your hands and stick there?"

"Yes"

"Won't it get into you?"

"No"

"Why"

"Because I am an elder". (Narayan 128-129)

After her mother's death Leela persistently asked questions about the sick room which she found shut on her return from neighbour's home on the day of Susila's death. That room had an "irresistible fascination" for her. She looked at the door and questioned Krishna,

"Father, why is that door shut?"

... She repeated authoritatively: "Why is that door closed?"

... She looked at me fixedly and asked: "Why is that door closed?"

"Mother is being given a bath, that is why the door is closed...."

Towards the evening she came up once again and asked: “The door is still closed, father. Is she bathing still?”

“... If the door is open, she may catch a cold....” (Narayan 146-149)

Leela looked on the shut door with a lot of “secret pleasure”. She wanted answer to her questions from her father with “ruthless determination”. For adults it was not easy to answer her puzzling questions. The more they attempted to answer her questions, the more sense of curiosity grew in her. Thus through the behavior of Leela, child’s point of view has been conveyed. She looked at life with curiosity but was happy and peaceful because her limited experiences had not exposed her bitterness of life. For her life is finding company and play. On the other hand, Krishna had faced thorns of life. After his wife’s death outwardly he behaved calmly in his daily life but his inner self was restless.

Even personal faith and convictions influence our views. This we see when we met Krishna and head master in the closing chapters of the novel. Certain views of head master and Krishna were same. Both characters hated adult world and loved to live in the innocent company of the children. When headmaster came to know about Krishna’s psychic efforts to have communication with his dead wife with the help of Sanyasi he declared that his views regarding death are different from his:

Don’t mistake me. It is all a matter of personal faith and convictions. But I am not interested in the life after death.... It is immaterial to me. The only reality I recognize is death. To me it is nothing more than a full stop...my trust is only in regard to matters of this life, not an inch beyond.... I’ve never looked at that page more than once. My knowledge of past, present and future, strictly pertained to this life. (Narayan 246)

Krishna felt upset because he thought “was she nothing more than the mute elements, the funeral fire resolving her into vapour, unseen air, and dust?” (247) But headmaster corrected him “this is my view. But don’t let it disturb you....” (247)

Critical realism is an individualistic realistic view of the physical world. Critical realists value the individuals above plot. They create stories and actions that explore the psychology of their characters. The knowledge of acquired reality is a result of social conditioning. So it can’t be understood independently of social factors which are involved in the knowledge derivation process. R. K. Narayan, as a novelist is sensitive towards man and his happenings in the society. He possesses the qualities of a great narrator and his eminence as a novelist lies in his strong management of the narrative.

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