

**Krishna's Journey towards Authenticity through his Wife:  
A Study of R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher***

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**Abstract**

The present paper aims at depicting Krishna's journey towards authenticity through his wife in *The English Teacher*. Krishna, an English lecturer in Albert Mission College, Malgudi is an inauthentic person in his life. He undertakes an emotional, intellectual and spiritual journey through involvement with his wife and her soul after her death. Conversation with Susila's soul takes Krishna towards authenticity in his life by maturing and developing his mind.

*The English Teacher* (1945) is the most autobiographical novel of R. K. Narayan and is dedicated to Narayan's wife Rajam. It is the third and final part of the trilogy, preceded by *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts*. It tells a tragic love story of the divine separation of two souls of Krishna and his wife Susila. The protagonist Krishna undergoes an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual journey during the course of the novel which helps him to achieve inner peace and self-development. This journey also guides him to leave inauthentic involvements so that he may live an authentic life.

Krishna teaches English at the Albert Mission College in Malgudi where he has been living in the college hostel. His wife and daughter live some distance away with his parents-in-law. His growth begins when his wife Susila and his daughter Leela move in with him. Susila introduces him to the pastoral traditions of the past. The involvement of Krishna with his wife continues even after her death conversing with her soul. Krishna's mind gets matured by communicating psychically with his dead wife. The involvement with Susila's soul takes him towards authenticity. If one commits resolution, determination, freedom and responsibility in the role assigned to oneself, he proves himself an authentic person.

Thirty-year-old Krishna is a teacher of English in Albert Mission College Malgudi, where he has been a student earlier. He does his work mechanically without deriving any real pleasure or satisfaction out of it. Here we find that Krishna is inauthentic towards his role of English teacher as he feels it boring and mechanical. Though he has interest in English literature but he doesn't like the ways of teaching adopted in the college. William Walsh comments:

“His earlier idealism for his subject and his interest in his students were both rapidly thinning out. He was constantly nagged by the feeling that he was doing the wrong work.” (Walsh 48)

One day Krishna receives one letter from his father and the other from his wife. Through these letters, he comes to know that his wife Susila and his seven month old daughter are coming to live with him in Malgudi. He is sceptical about his ability to manage a family but he is assured by his father that his mother is accompanying his wife and child to help in setting up of house in Malgudi. So he sets about searching for a house and at last finds one and moves into it a few days before joining his family there. Sarbani Putatunda comments:

“Her arrival, instead of making him ecstatic, nonplusses him. Unused to the responsibility of looking after a family, he starts fretting. The first question that torments him is-finding a proper house for his wife and child. At last, Krishna seems to have grown up.” (Putatunda 141)

Here one finds that Krishna dreads to carry the responsibility of managing a family. He has been living in hostel since last ten years. He doesn't know how he will take care of seven months old child. We don't expect such things from a matured person. Thus we can say that he is inauthentic in his role. When he is assured by his father that his mother will help him, only then he takes a house on rent. Still Krishna dreads how his wife will behave under his mother.

On the following Friday, Krishna paces in great agitation at the Malgudi station and eagerly waits for Susila and the child. He is worried about the lot of luggage she will bring and about the child's safety. His mind gets relaxed only when they reach safely at home. This shows his immaturity and childish nature. Now his involvement with his wife will help him to acquire a mature mind otherwise till now he is inauthentic in carrying the responsibility of the family.

Krishna starts a happy and blissful marriage life with Susila. He leaves college daily at 4.30 p.m. and reaches home within twenty minutes. He finds Susila tinkering in the garden, ostensibly waiting for him though she pretends: "I didn't come out to look for you, but just to play with the child..." (*The English Teacher* 35)

Susila prepares food and also takes care of her daughter. She sides with her husband in all the discussions and proves herself a good housewife. But on financial matter, she has her own theory and she doesn't like interference. Susila is cash-keeper and financial planner of Krishna. She reminds Krishna that they have decided not to have any more children and she is concerned about the future and marriage of her child for which she wants to save money. P. K. Singh comments:

"Susila is replica of a devoted Hindu wife with whom her family and her domestic duty comes first. She is an apt cash-keeper. She appears Krishnan to be so a ruthless accountant that a hundred rupees seemed to do the worth of two hundred and all through the month she was able to give money whenever Krishnan requires." (Singh 25)

However Susila is persuaded by Krishna to keep the old lady as cook. Susila gets ready due to the reason that the old lady has been sent by her mother-in-law. Keeping the old lady as a cook gives Krishna and Susila more time in their involvement with each other. William Walsh comments:

"Thus we see in Krishna's growing devotion to his daughter and wife, how he rejoins the world of genuine response and human reality when he had been in danger in the college and the hostel, of drying up in a society of formal relationships, abstract preoccupations and waspish egotisms. Life now becomes present, actual, surrounding and supporting." (Walsh 53)

Krishna's love for poetry is revived when he gets spare time. He gets a notebook of about five hundred pages and writes both in English and Tamil. Krishna and Susila pass their marriage life happily but their first quarrel takes place when Susila sells Krishna's old clock

that rings at all odd times but soon they decide not to quarrel with each other hereafter as such quarrels affect a child's health. P. K. Singh comments:

“The matrimonial relation of Krishnan and Susila is supremely happy. A minor strife takes place in between them when Susila sells an old watch. They did not talk each other for a while but soon their pride fumbled and prejudiced dissolved.” (Singh 26)

Thus Krishna and Sushila live a happy married life in involvement with each other. Their love story is different from traditional love story as it starts when they have become father and mother of a child. Krishna's concern for Susila is evident from his anxiety at the Malgudi railway station when he worries unnecessarily and ceaselessly about her though he is inauthentic in his concern for Susila and the child as Susila is coming with his father safely.

On the occasion of Leela's birthday, Krishna's father offers to advance him money to buy a house in Malgudi. John Thieme comments: “The possibility of Krishna's genuine entry into the role of *grihastya* comes when his father offers to advance him the money to buy or build his own house rather than have to rent.” (Thieme 57)

Susila and Krishna decide to go to Lawley Extension to choose a house or a plot on one Sunday. Susila wears her usual indigo *saree* which Krishna likes very much. He admires her beauty. Krishna is so enchanted with her that he is warned by Susila that they are going on a public road. This incident shows that Krishna though a teacher is very childish in nature and hence he is inauthentic here in his behaviour on the public road. P. S. Sundaram comments:

“More than three years after their marriage Krishnan and Susila are just discovering themselves and are caught in the wonder of their blossoming love. They give it an understanding but hardly, in their shyness, a tongue.” (Sundaram 42)

Krishna and Susila meet Sastri, Krishna's colleague who sends for a building contractor. As Krishna is negotiating the price with Sastri and the contractor, Susila walks to the backyard on her own. She finds herself locked in a lavatory and comes out red and trembling when Krishna kicks open the door. She is not able to get rid of the feeling of disgust after repeatedly washing her hands, feet and mouth. Krishna asks her not to think of that incident any more. John Thieme comments:

“Susila is thoroughly traumatized by her experience. She emerges from the lavatory filled with disgust and, although Krishna is slow to realize it, the auspicious promise of the house has been completely negated.” (Thieme 58)

After returning to home, Susila is not her usual self and falls ill. She doesn't like to eat. Krishna visits Dr. Shankar of Krishna Medical Hall as he is considered the most successful medical practitioner in the town. Susila takes his medicines for about two weeks but the temperature doesn't go down.

Krishna requests the doctor to visit Susila at least once a day. Doctor's visit cheers the family but the temperature doesn't come down. Then one day doctor takes a blood sample which reveals that Susila has mild attack of typhoid. Soon Susila's room is changed into a sick ward. Medicines are placed near her bed on a table. Child is not allowed to enter the room and she spends most of her time with her friends and grandparents. P. S. Sundaram comments:

“And at this stage of paradisaal bliss, that king among fevers, the cobra typhoid, strikes and strikes to kill. The learned doctor who imagines that he can control the fever is as much taken aback as the patient and her relatives. So much for science and man's mastery over the forces of nature!” (Sundaram 42)

The bond between Krishna and Susila strengthens more in this situation. He forgets the count of days and continuously does the same set of things, but doesn't feel burden of it. The novelist comments:

“But I liked it immensely. It kept me so close to my wife that it produced an immense satisfaction in my mind. Throughout I acted as her nurse. This sickness seemed to bind us together more strongly than ever.” (*The English Teacher* 81)

The temperature rises and Susila gets delirious and starts talking incoherently. Now the doctor also loses his cheerfulness. He brings a visiting specialist from Madras to examine Susila at her home. The specialist stops the medicines prescribed by Dr. Shankar and administers glucose and brandy with solomine every two hours. The fever temporarily comes down and Krishna is happy. But Susila's condition takes a turn for the worse. She starts breathing noisily. Dr. Shankar starts fomentation but it is all over. The doctor leaves and there is sudden stony silence in the house. Preparations are made for the funeral. The priests and the bearers are sent for and Krishna watches all this silently. The novelist comments:

“They build up a pyre, place her on it, cover her up with layers of fuel .... Leaving only the face and a part of her chest out, four layers deep down. I pour ghee on and drop the fire.” (*The English Teacher* 96)

Krishna feels devastated after the death of his beloved wife Susila. Everything is over in the world for him. He contemplates committing suicide but the thought of his daughter Leela stops him from taking this extreme step. Krishna refuses to send Leela when Susila's parents

want to take her away. He also stubbornly refuses to send the child with his mother when she returns home. He spends all his time in looking after Leela except the college time. P. S. Sundaram comments:

“When Susila dies Krishnan is loath to part with the child, even for a brief spell, and makes up his mind not to marry again; his wife though physically dead is not dead to him, and he is content to make looking after the child his chief occupation in life.”  
(Sundaram 44)

Thus Krishna feels loneliness after the death of Susila and doesn't like society. He feels his mind dead and is indifferent towards sympathy or consolation from others. His only aim now is to care for his daughter. He thinks that only he can care for her. Later on we find that he is inauthentic in his thinking as he lacks something in caring for her.

Krishna continues his teaching work in college but finds it doing mechanically and rushes home as soon as the bell rings. Thus Krishna is doing teaching with not heart and hence he is inauthentic in his role. He rents the extra class imposed on him by Gajapathy: “I implored Gajapathy to spare me this pain since as a student I had found language a torture, and as a teacher I still found it a torture.” (*The English Teacher* 104)

Here we find that Krishna is greatly depressed by the death of his wife. He also loses the little interest he had in teaching at college and feels bored with this role. Thus he is not doing justice with students. Hence he is inauthentic in his role of teacher. Nazar Singh Sidhu comments:

“This teaching of English just holds him in life, there is no authentic satisfaction. He, therefore, badly needs something where he can forget temporarily the cause of his alienation.” (Sidhu 41)

As soon as Krishna leaves the classroom, a fifteen year old boy gives him a letter which is from his father. It contains a message from Krishna's dead wife Susila that she wants to express herself to her husband. Krishna goes with the boy at his house. He finds himself mystified and confused. The gentleman tells him the story of spirits in detail. He tells Krishna to come next Wednesday.

After one week they sit together. The man has a pad of paper and a pencil in his hand. Suddenly the pencil begins to write at a terrific speed. He is asked to slow down for better results. Krishna is told that his wife is excited but she is not able to collect her thoughts easily. When Krishna asks, Susila's spirit tells her daughter name as “Radha” whereas it is Leela. Krishna is disappointed but he is assured that the results will not be accurate that day and will take some time.

Conditions are more favourable on the following week when Susila's spirit communicates with Krishna. She blames Krishna that he has destroyed all the letters written by her to him. Susila's soul also tells him to keep safe her sandalwood casket into which she has put all her knick-knacks. When Krishna does not remember such a sandalwood box in her possessions; Susila's soul gives him its specifications.

At the next meeting, Susila tells Krishna not to do so much worry about their daughter Leela. She tells him that he should not feel miserable due to her. She also advises him to put Leela in the school where she has started going on her own. Krishna feels light and relieved and goes in college cheerfully. He starts preparing his lectures every morning carefully. Harish Raizada comments:

“This new and strange type of contact with his dead wife, introduces a fresh charm in his life and his interest in these occult meetings increases more and more. He now goes about his work with a light heart and feels as if a dead load has been lifted from his mind. The day now seems full of possibilities of surprise and joy to him. (Raizada 36)

Thus due to involvement with Susila's soul, he feels freshness and shows some authenticity towards his role of English teacher. The novelist comments: “At home I devoted myself to my studies more energetically. The sense of futility was leaving me. I attended to my work earnestly.” (*The English Teacher* 120)

Thus we find that a few meetings with Susila's soul bring change in Krishna. He feels that his load has been removed. Susila's advice about Leela helps him to remove his anxiety and worrying about Leela. Susila advises him to put Leela into the school of neighbourhood. At the next meeting, Susila tells Krishna that she is disappointed to look his sorrow. She advises him to play veena and he will feel her presence. Susila also tells Krishna that she is the same person as on earth but finer and quicker than on earth and without the encumbrance of the physical body.

Here we find that Susila teaches Krishna the value of time and meditation in life. She also tells him that aspirations and joys are important in life. All this helps Krishna to feel and follow these things which will turn him from the path of neurosis to the authentic way of living. Susila's telling that the souls are free from all ills and worries and hence enjoy a happy life; brings some changes in his mind also and these changes help him to leave his inauthentic thoughts. Ved Prakash Gaur comments:

“The aim of human beings is to turn to authentic existence, to attain salvation (*moksa*) a state which is opposite of fallenness. In the world (*samsara*) we are in a fallen state, a sinful existence. The revealed truths of the *Upanisads* invite us to live in Pure Bliss Consciousness and Knowledge.” (Gaur 33)

Susila promises Krishna that she will accompany him when he will go home. She requests him to think about her before sleeping to bed. The effect of this is felt by Krishna when he passes across Nallappa’s grove; he feels lighter thinking that she is accompanying him. The novelist comments:

“Her presence was unmistakably there. I could sense it. The darkness of the night was not felt by me. The distance and loneliness were nothing to me. She was with me. I quietly enjoyed the fact without stirring the slightest thought.”  
(*The English Teacher* 133)

Thus the narrative shifts to the spiritual level and Susila transfers her mind thoughts to Krishna who starts feeling peace in his mind. Still a nagging feeling remains that he has not found the sandalwood box and her fourteen letters. Krishna misses three or four sittings with his friend who is ill for a few days and then becomes busy with some work. Krishna tries to call Susila’s spirit at his own level by sitting beside the pond but gets no response. He feels desolate. The novelist comments:

“The awful irresponsiveness of Death overwhelmed me again. It unnerved me. All the old moods returned now. It looked as though they had been in bondage all these days and were now suddenly unleashed. I was overwhelmed.” (*The English Teacher* 149)

Krishna returns home and sleeps badly that night. He hates his food and work. Next day he loses his temper on a good student when he asks a question. Krishna sits alone on the bank of the river and thinks of suicide. He is not worried even about her daughter thinking that he has saved enough money for her. Seeing a funeral pyre burning near the river, he ponders: “This is also my end. Oh, God, send me to those flames at once.” (*The English Teacher* 151)

Thus we find that Krishna’s learning has not been completed and his old thoughts of suicide develop again in his mind. He even forgets his only daughter in his disturbed, restless state of mind. He becomes restless on seeing a funeral pyre. Robert G. Olson comments on this inauthentic state:

“In this mode of being we have no deep feelings, only petty fears and neurotic anxieties. We do not attempt to understand what we are doing; our behaviour

is determined by habit, custom, or a vague sense of what is required of us by das Man.” (Olson 137)

Krishna passes dreary and unhappy days till he receives a letter from his friend, the peasant. He advises Krishna to manage for an “in absentia” sitting, as for spirits there is no value of space. They may go anywhere. He gives Krishna the time of four o’clock on next Sunday for this sitting. Two days after the sitting, Krishna receives a letter from his friend with the message of Susila:

“The most important thing I wish to warn you about is not to allow your mind to be disturbed by anything. For some days now you have allowed your mind to become gloomy and unsettled. You are not keeping very strong either. You must keep yourself in better frame....” (*The English Teacher* 152)

In next sitting on the following Sunday, Susila advises him to free his mind from choking thoughts. After ten days, Krishna’s friend returns and they have a sitting as before. Susila advises Krishna to make an attempt for his psychic development. She tells him:

“Just as I am thinking of you, I know you will also be thinking of me. But I want this thought to be coupled with the desire to commune with me. It is this aspect that I want to impress upon you as necessary for psychic development and free communion between us.” (*The English Teacher* 155)

Susila promises to be in direct communion with Krishna without the intervention of the medium. Krishna tries that night but can’t communicate. In next few sittings with the medium, Susila guides Krishna step by step for direct communication. In next sitting, Susila suggests Krishna that he allows his mind to move round her. She advises him to keep her picture in his mind without allowing his thoughts to move away from her. Susila knows that Krishna needs psychic development. She motivates him for direct communication with her. When he finds difficulties, she helps him at each step. Thus we find that the effect of Susila’s death on Krishna is such that he is not able to put his mind authentically in the phenomenal world. His excessive love for her makes him a psyche case though Susila’s soul is trying to divert his mind on an authentic path. Robert G. Olson comments:

“A free and morally responsible agent is primarily one who understands the world in which he lives and who has sufficient mastery over it and over himself to accomplish his chosen goals. What separates a man from his future is not the nothingness of his being but rather ignorance, lack of self-control, or the cruelty of an as yet untamed natural and social environment.” (Olson 161)

Krishna's self-improvement goes on as advised by Susila's spirit. He gives up regular Wednesday meetings and now communicates with her once in six or seven weeks. His nightly contacts with his wife's spirit give him peace. Susila feels satisfied when Krishna has a sitting beside the pond with the peasant. She reminds him of their outing in the garden four days ago.

Krishna's mother arrives one day and gives a gold chain to Leela out of a sandalwood casket. Krishna finds that this is the same casket that Susila mentions during her sittings. Krishna's mother stays for one month. During this time Krishna realises that his handling of the child has been inadequate. So he allows Leela to go with her grandmother when she and his mother request him to do so. Lakshmi Holmstrom comments:

“In the course of his oscillation between total despair and the hope of still making a meaning of existence, Krishna comes to terms with his loneliness, accepting it as a ‘law of life’. This is why he agrees to part with his daughter, who has been, since Susila's death, his only means of emotional stability.”  
(Holmstrom 48)

Thus Krishna's sensibilities improve after frequently communicating with his wife's spirit. Feelings of disturbances and restlessness are removed from his mind. Sarbani Putatunda comments:

“Krishna is in search of a spiritual recluse. He realizes that he can never replicate his previous world which has already been dissolved by forces of disorder. Nonetheless, his optimism prevails, and he is certain that this new world of innocence will restore him the desired peace and harmony by divine intervention and ineluctable cosmic law.” (Putatunda 66)

Krishna is able to communicate freely with his wife's spirit. She still carries the fragrance of jasmine about her when she visits him at night. She guides him to satisfy his inner urge. The novelist comments at the end of the novel: “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.” (*The English Teacher* 184)

Thus Krishna who lives in inauthentic involvements throughout the novel is moved towards authenticity at the end of the novel after his strong resolutions which he lacks all through the novel through involvement with his wife and her soul. John Thieme comments:

“On a secular level Krishna is denied the role of house-holder, but he becomes a different kind of teacher, choosing a form of education which is at odds with

colonial practices, as the novel's conclusion moves beyond everyday concerns." (Thieme 65)

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