

# **LANGUAGE IN INDIA**

**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**

**Volume 10 : 1 January 2010**

**ISSN 1930-2940**

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Papers Presented in Karunya University International Seminar

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## My Responses to *The English Teacher*

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### Introduction

*The English Teacher* by R K Narayan is the story of a young man teaching English in a missionary college. The story is set in Malgudi, in the twentieth century colonial India.

The Reader Response theory is a form of literary theory which focuses on the reader and his understanding and interpretations of the text. It explores and seeks to explain the divergence and diversity of reader's responses to particular texts. In the school of reader response criticism, the varied responses and interpretations of a reader to multiple readings of a literary text are analyzed.

When I first read *The English Teacher*, I was surprised, for I had hitherto known R K Narayan only as a writer of children's stories, having read only his *Swami and Friends*. The inclusion of the super natural in the novel surprised me and I felt it was irrelevant. I didn't understand the plight of Krishnan in coming to terms with his wife's death and all that interested me were the antics of the child Leela.

I have now read the book as a part of my curriculum. I found that I have responded entirely differently from how I have responded to the book in the first instance. I now find the book an engrossing example of how human relationships are to be depicted. The descriptions of Krishnan's married life, his agony during Susila's illness and his trials in coming to terms with her death have moved me.

In this paper I discuss the implications of the reader response theory and my responses to the novel *The English Teacher*.

### My Responses to *The English Teacher*

The Reader Response Theory is a form of literary theory which lays emphasis on the reader and his understanding and interpretation of a text. It arose in large measure as a reaction to the New Criticism or Formalistic approach.

The history of literary criticism can be broadly categorized into three stages:

- i. A preoccupation with the author (the nineteenth century).

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- ii. An exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism).
- iii. A marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years.

### **Modern Reader Response Criticism**

Although every Literary Theory has long paid some attention to the reader's role in creating the meaning and experience of a literary work, modern reader-response criticism began only in the 1960s and '70s.

Important predecessors to the modern reader response theory were I. A. Richards and Louise Rosenblatt. In his *Principles of Literary Criticism*, I. A. Richards constructed an affective system of interpretation, that is, one based on responses. He tested his theory by asking Cambridge students to write their responses to and assessments of a number of poems of varying quality. He then analysed and classified the responses into categories according to the degrees in which they differed from the right or appropriate interpretation.

Like Richards, Louise Rosenblatt affirms the importance of the reader but is not willing to relegate the text to secondary position. Also, Louise Rosenblatt feels that irrelevant responses have to be ignored in favour of the relevant responses unlike Richards who categorized responses but did not ignore irrelevant responses. According to Louise Rosenblatt, a poem comes into being only when it receives a proper (aesthetic) reading, that is, when readers “compensate” a given text (*The Reader, the Text and the Poem*).

The path laid down by both these critics paved the way for the modern reader response criticism.

From being a concern of the literary critics only, reader response criticism encompassed the use of psychology also in the study of the interpretations of the responses to the texts. Because it rests on psychological principles, reader response generalizes into other arts: cinema or visual art.

### **Principal Theorists**

The principal theorists of modern reader response criticism are Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Norman Holland and Stanley Fish.

Wolfgang Iser is a German critic who applied the principle of phenomenology to the interpretation of literature. Phenomenology deals with the “understanding of how things appear”. The phenomenological idea of knowledge is that reality is not found in the external world itself but in the mental perception of individuals.

According to Iser the critic should not explain the text as an object but its effect on the reader. Reader’s experiences will govern the effects the text produces on them.

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Moreover, Iser says a text does not tell everything, there are gaps or blanks which he refers to as indeterminacies of the text. Readers must fill these in and thereby assemble the meaning thus becoming coauthors in a sense. He says this creation of the text by the reader does not mean that the text is no longer the author's. It is rather a proof of the text's inexhaustibility.

Hans Robert Jauss is another German scholar who promulgated a theory called the reception theory. According to him readers have an understanding of a genre and its conventions. They have what he terms as the "horizon of expectations". And their interpretation of a literary text is based on their expectations in a particular genre. For example Pope's poetry was judged highly by his contemporaries who valued clarity, decorum and wit. The next generation had different horizons of expectation and was surprised that he was considered a poet at all. Thus, according to Jauss, we cannot say that a work is universal, that it will make the same impact on readers of all times.

Recent psychological critics like Norman Holland are focusing on the role of the unconscious in the interpretation of texts. Norman Holland states that all people inherit from their mother an identity theme or fixed understanding of their personality. Whatever they read is processed to make fit their identity theme, he states this in *The Miller's Wife and the Professors: Question about the Transactive Theory of Reading*".

Differently put, readers interpret the texts as expressions of their own personalities.

All the above theorists do not deny or destroy the importance of the text. But David Bleich in *Subjective Criticism* denied the existence of a text independent of the readers. According to him, a text may be independent of the reader but its meaning depends on the symbolizations in the minds of the reader. Meaning of a text is not found; it is developed in the minds of the readers.

### **Meaning Retrieval**

Stanley Fish, the proponent of the Affective Stylists technique, does not agree with the New Critic notion that a text has to be understood whole at once. According to Fish, meaning must be negotiated by readers a line at a time. Meaning is what happens to readers during the negotiation. The process of reading is sequential and dynamic.

Later in his book *Is There a Text in this Class*, Fish attributed more initiative to the reader and less control by the text in the interpretive act. He concluded that **every reading results in a new interpretation** that comes about because of the strategies that readers use. This difference in interpretations might arise because of the difference in the approach of the readers towards the literature in different instances. Changes in the psychological thinking of the readers lead to difference in interpretations.

### **A Summary of the Premises of the Reader Response Theory**

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Summarizing the basic premises of the reader response theory:

- Literature is a performing art in which each reader creates his or her own text related performance.
- The meaning of the text is the result of a transaction or negotiation between the reader and the text i.e. **the reader + the text = meaning**. The reader is an active participant with the text in creating the meaning.
- Though it gives a wide berth in the type of interpretations it does not allow any kind of interpretation to be passed off as a valid interpretation.
- Reader manipulates the linguistic elements of the text in order to extract a meaning.
- Reader brings outside knowledge to the text; he or she uses this information to derive meaning from the text.
- Interpretation becomes the key to meaning without the authority of the author or the text. The important element in reader response criticism is the reader and the effect of the text on the reader.

In the next part of my paper I will be discussing about my responses to the novel *The English Teacher* by R K Narayan.

### ***The English Teacher***

*The English Teacher* written in 1945 is the last of the trilogy preceded by *Swami and Friends* and *Bachelor of Arts*. The hero is the schoolboy in the first novel, is a college student in the second, and is a lecturer in the third. This novel is not only autobiographical but also poignant in its intensity of feeling. It was occasioned by the death of Narayan's wife Rajam in the year 1939.

### **Plot of the Novel**

Krishna is an English lecturer at the Albert Mission College. For several years he has enjoyed a bachelor's life, but this changes when his wife, Susila, and their child, Lila, move in with him. Krishna's life expands to include the happy domesticity of living with his wife and child: nearly half the novel focuses on the mundane joy of his day-to-day experiences with his family.

However, one day Susila contracts typhoid after visiting a dirty lavatory and dies from the illness. Krishna is destroyed by her loss but receives a letter from a stranger indicating that Susila has been in contact with him and wishes to communicate with Krishna. This

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leads to Krishna's journey in search of enlightenment, with the stranger acting as a medium to Susila in the spiritual world.

### **The Sub-plot**

The sub-plot in the novel is the story of the headmaster who attempts to change the educational system through his 'Leave Alone system' of education. The headmaster exerts a distinct influence in transforming Krishna's life. It is only on his pressure that Krishnan takes stock of his career and realizes that he has to do something meaningful in life. He resigns from his job as a lecturer and joins the head master in the running of his school. It is only then that he realizes that life will have meaning for him.

### **From Within**

From a man dependent on his wife and daughter for happiness, and later the medium, Krishna becomes self-reliant and realizes that happiness, or in his case, peace of mind and equanimity comes from within. His peace of mind comes to him at a time when he least expects it, i.e. when he gives up everything- cleansed himself of all worldly possessions, his wife, his daughter, a good income in the form of a respected job and salary.

### **My Early Reading of *The English Teacher***

I first read the novel *The English Teacher* at the age of thirteen. I had hitherto read only *Swami and Friends* and I expected that the novel was for children. The very title of the novel misled me. I had expected that the novel would talk about what an English teacher did at work, something like what Mr. Braithwaite does in *To Sir With Love*.

The book, *The English Teacher* with its distinct plot, depicts the futility of the very concept, that life can always be conventional and logical and predictable. The ironies of life and, indeed, the record of the realities of sustenance ideally take the story to a level where the unpredictability so very well harmonizes with predictability.

### **My Second and Later Reading**

My second reading of the novel was as a student of literature. I read the book as a part of my course work in my post-graduation. I noticed that a little reading had changed my expectations. No longer was Narayan the writer of children's stories for me. He was an author who depicted the lives of commonplace people in an interesting and fascinating manner.

### **Setting**

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The setting of the place Malgudi was not new to me having read his *Swami and Friends*. Narayan's Malgudi is a great literary creation and is a microcosm of a small Indian town, which does not shed its basic character even with the influence of the west. In the novel Narayan does not venture much out of Malgudi like he did in *The Guide* or in the *Bachelor of Arts*.

In my first reading I noticed with interest the description of the river, and its banks. Another description of the landscape which struck me was the description of the house of Krishnan's friend. The small wood, the lotus pond and the alcove in a corner are described so beautifully that they seem to dance before our eyes.

Later I discovered that Narayan has given apt settings to the happenings in the novel. The setting of each scene acts as a catalyst in the presentation of the scene. For example, the filthy surroundings of the head master's house give us an indication of the harmony that might be expected in the house.

### **Plot**

The inclusion of the super natural in the novel surprised me. I was interested only in the first half of the novel in the beginning. The antics of the child Lila were the only things which interested me in the second half of the novel. I felt that the second half of the novel was not in resonance with the first part of the novel. I was disappointed because of the death of Susila. And I couldn't understand why Narayan was making a fuss about a person's death and the efforts put by those living to lead a normal life.

### **Order-Disorder-Order**

I have observed that most of Narayan's novels follow the pattern 'Order-Disorder-Order' and this novel is no exception. The married life of Krishnan establishes the order in the novel. The visit to the infected lavatory and subsequent illness of Susila mark the disorder. Order is once again restored in the novel with the union of Krishnan and Susila. Later, having gathered an idea about the life of Narayan it came as no surprise to me that he had included the supernatural in the novel. Having witnessed the death of a near one, I could later connect with Krishnan's efforts to cope with the loss.

### **Characters**

The protagonist of this novel is Krishnan, a lecturer at the Albert Mission College. As the novel progresses, we find that the frivolous youngster has been replaced by a person who is thoughtful, and selfless. We see Krishnan in the ancient *ashrams* in Hindu *Dharma*, namely, *Bramhacharya*, *Grihasta* and *Sanyasi*.

Though he has evolved into an admirable individual, he himself does not realize this and does not acknowledge the compliments paid to him on his farewell day. He is basically a student of literature and he always has literature at the back of his head. He keeps quoting

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poets and writers. Krishna is not ignorant of the aesthetic value of English literature and is not opposed to teaching it as a matter of pride or principle. He shows great care and diligence in nursing his wife. Even after his wife's death he makes heroic efforts to get on normally with life, even though he finds no purpose in living. He is a good father to Lila and strives to make her forget her mother.

**Susila**, Krishnan's wife, is a character which interested me a lot. She is the perfect epitome of how a wife should be. Though she was petted and cared for at home she shouldered responsibility and excelled in housework. Her quick wit and sense of humour make her a lovely companion. Added to that is her constant urge to learn new things. Though she has stopped formal education, she reads at home whenever she can make time. Even after she passes away, she is interested in the welfare of her husband and child and watches them constantly. She brings a streak of unpredictability in Krishnan's monotonous life starting with the disposal of the alarm clock to her demise.

The **headmaster** is a very important character in the novel. He is the person who makes Krishnan realize that money is not important as long as we do something which brings us emotional fulfillment. (Frankly in the first reading of the novel what interested me in the headmaster was the fact that he did not use a towel!!) What struck me as soon as I read about the headmaster was Socrates' quote about wives making philosophers of men. The headmaster's leave alone system of education was an innovation which he hoped would help people fight off the curse of adulthood.

**Lila**, the daughter of Krishnan is another important character in the novel. She arrives at her father's place at the age of seven months thereby transforming his life. He learns how to be selfless because of Lila. She learns to live without her mother in a very short span of time and showers all her love on her father. Her antics interested me in the first reading of the novel. In the subsequent reading of the novel, I understood how Narayan brilliantly created the character of the child. He brings to our notice the short attention spans and the tantrums thrown by children using Lila's character.

## Themes

The main theme of the novel is **life and death**. The problems that one encounters in coping with the death of a dear one are depicted in the novel. Both Krishnan and Lila lose an important member in their family. While Lila continues her normal routine, the life of Krishnan is thrown out of gear. It takes a lot of effort on his part and the guidance of his late wife for him to come to terms with his wife's death.

Another important theme of the novel is **the system of education in India**. The lack of a proper system of education had made a generation of morons according to Krishnan. That is why he decides to resign and join the headmaster in starting a new system of education where the development of the individual would be given importance.

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**Conflict between the west and the east** is also evident in the novel. For example, when Susila is ill, even though Krishnan brings a doctor, his in laws invite a Swami to treat their daughter. In coming to terms with the death of his wife, literature, philosophy and rationalism are no use to him and it is only the Indian concept of Zen like meditation which brings him closer to his wife, as conceived by R. K. Narayan.

Though mentioned in passing, Narayan also makes a mention of the bad working of the municipalities in the small towns in India. He describes in detail the unkempt surroundings of the Anderson Street and says that since the municipalities were busy with internal fights they had no time to waste for such developmental activities.

Another recurring theme in the novels in the pre-independence era was the effect of the colonial rule in India. In *The English Teacher* also, the presence of the crown and its agents is there, though not as much as in other novels. In the scathing remarks Krishnan makes on the Principal Mr. Brown and on the education system, we come to know about the bitterness that people had toward the British.

### **A Chronicle of Human Relationship**

The book is an excellent chronicle of human relationships. The sweet and harmonious domestic life of Krishnan and Susila is contrasted with the discordant relationship of the headmaster and his wife. The cordial relation between colleagues, between supervisor and subordinate, the social sensitivities and the decorum to be followed, for example, by the mother-in-law and son-in-law are depicted in a touching manner. This was a part which I could connect to easily since I had seen my grand mother observe the same decorum when guests came to the house.

The book, *The English Teacher*, with its distinct plot, depicts the futility of the very concept, that life can always be conventional and logical and predictable. The ironies of life and, indeed, the record of the realities of sustenance ideally take the story to a level where the unpredictability so very well harmonizes with predictability.

### **Reader Response Does Differ from Age Group to Age Group**

Most of the themes of the novel were noticed by me only in the latter reading of the novel after I gained some knowledge about the study of books. In the first reading of the novel. I observed only the main theme of the novel, i.e. that of life and death.

But regardless of the magnitude to which technical knowledge can aid in literary analysis, there is no substitute for an initial response to the reading of a text. In case I would have proceeded without an unbiased response I would not have been able to appreciate the text as a whole.

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Thus, we can say that the creation of meaning in the mind of reader is a continuous process. Every interaction of the reader with the text results in a different interpretation thereby giving scope for change in meaning.

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