

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF R. K. NARAYAN

Dr. G.M.A. Christy, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Maha Vidhalaya College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

Abstract:

R. K. Narayan's novels are highly autobiographical in all aspects. They seem to be identical with his real life. Several researches were dedicated to prove this aspect. This paper aims at the extent to which the autobiographical elements are used by the novelist to promote his protagonists towards their path of maturity of mind and character. It also becomes one of the prominent themes of the genre Bildungsroman. The real life incidents of the novelist were woven with the plot of almost in all of his novels. Swami and His Friends and The English Teacher are two novels which are highly autobiographical in form. These two novels are strewn with more personal incidents from the life of R.K. Narayan. They are novels and hence, the real life incidents were altered to suit the plot of the novels and the characters of the real life were given different names. R.K. Narayan cleverly mixed together the realism with his poetic imagination.

Key Words: *Autobiographical elements - R. K. Narayan - The English Teacher - Swami and His Friends -*

R.K. Narayan has a supreme place in Indo - Anglican Fiction. He remains a pure novelist and his simple and direct English has expressed the stress and strain of modern man in Indian society leading an ordinary life. Through his simple language he narrates the irony of human life blended with humor. His use of irony can be compared with the irony used by *Shakespeare* in his later plays and also with *Jane Austen*.

R.K. Narayan suggests through his novels the simple and truthful way of living. He lived a simple life and his simple way of living is also projected in his novels, for his novels are mostly autobiographical. His protagonists are simple men and women from ordinary life and they exhibit the importance of Indian culture and society a lot. The readers, along with the novelist, get involved in the progressing of the novels and both the reader and the novelist get maturity of mind and character which compromises the primary theme of the genre Bildungsroman.

The autobiography of R.K. Narayan gives us a glimpse into his life and it also narrates how he became a freelance writer and all the important events that were adopted by him in his novels were actually part of his real life incidents. His childhood was spent gladly in the house of his grandmother, Ammani. R.K. Narayan's father was a school headmaster and used to get transfer, and in order to prevent his son from being often shifted from one school to another, he made R.K. Narayan to stay with his grandmother. R.K. Narayan's experience with his grandmother was often referred and used in his works. *Swami and Friends* has most of the real time incidents. P.S. Sundaram observes in his *R.K. Narayan as a Novelist* that:

Narayan's name at home was Kunjappa ("the little one"). In school and college he must have been R.K. Narayanaswami, but when *Swami and Friends* was published he was induced (or decided) to drop "Swami" so that the book might not be taken as an avowed autobiography. The abbreviated form is a boon to his many foreign friends and admirers who might well have tripped over the longer name. (1988:2)

He enjoyed his life with his grandmother in Madras. His grandmother was a devoted gardener and she used to grow more varieties of jasmine and hibiscus in her garden. R.K. Narayan has referred to gardening and the jasmine in his novels *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*. His grandmother was very fond of plants and when the hot climate of Madras wilted the plants, she felt miserable and shed

tears and even cursed the hot climate of Madras.

Art is a reflection of real life and the novelist R.K.Narayan has reflected his life into his art work. William Walsh in his *R.K.Narayan: A Critical Appreciation* observes that the fictional world of R.K.Narayan "is unusually close and intimate with his personal life." (1983:19). R.K. Narayan's autobiography *My Days* (1974) is itself a novel, in which he emphasizes on the middle class life and on all the domestic Indian scenes.

His autobiography *My Days* was written after he has become famous as a novelist. His memories start with his early childhood in the grandmother's house along with his two companions- a peacock and a monkey. The town Malgudi is the Mysore where he led most of his early days. In *Swami and Friends* Malgudi was a small town. The early childhood of R.K.Narayan was dealt with the story of this novel. His grandmother became an epitome to all the other characters of grandmother in his novels.

In his next novel *The Bachelor of Arts* Narayan has recorded the youthful days of his college life and his love affair. In this novel Narayan takes the theme of search of identity in a society by a young man after finishing B.A. Degree. Narayan's friend Ramachandra Rao was the Ramu whom we find as the friend of Chandran in this novel. Like Chandran who falls in love with Malathi and was not given permission by his parents to marry her because of the mismatch of the horoscope, Narayan fell in love with Rajam and the same happened in the life of Narayan while he stayed at Coimbatore in 1933 in his elder sister's house. He saw Rajam and was suddenly in love with her and boldly approached his father to get his permission for their marriage.

The horoscope did not match and it would lead to the death of the bride if he marries Rajam. This was protested by Narayan and this was observed by M.K. Naik in his edited work *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*:

We believe that marriages are made in heaven and a bride and a groom meet, not by accident or design, but by the decree of fate, the fitness for a match not to be gauged by letting them go through a period of courtship but by a study of their horoscopes; boy and girl meet and love develops after marriage rather than before. (Naik, 1979:21)

The novel *The English Teacher* has only a few pages of fiction and the entire novel reflected his own tragic life. In the novel, *The English Teacher*, Krishna's mother is like the mother of R.K.Narayan. Susila was under the best impression of her mother-in-law as was Rajam with her mother-in-law. Krishna expresses the same condition of Susila as that of Rajam:

My wife was the last daughter of the family and was greatly petted by her parents, in her own house, where she spent most of her time reading, knitting, embroidering or looking after a garden. In spite of it, after my marriage my mother kept her in the village and trained her up in house-keeping. My wife had picked up many sensible points in cooking and household economy, and her own parents were tremendously impressed with her attainments when she visited them.

(Narayan, 2015:39)

As Rajam was infected by Typhoid and died an untimely death within five years, Susila in *The English Teacher* contracts the same disease and meets her untimely death within five years leaving behind her husband Krishna lamenting over her death. Krishna suffers of loneliness but R.K. Narayan overcame his loneliness with his art of writing. He talked about this in his autobiography *My Day*. A friend of R.K.Narayan has given him the suggestion of writing his own story into a novel: "You will write a book which is within you, all ready now, and it is bound to come out sooner or later, when you give yourself a chance to write." (*My Days*, 2008: 152).

The spiritual communication that Krishna undergoes in *The English Teacher* is what exactly happened in the life of R.K.Narayan. He too started communicating with his dead wife Rajam's soul and thus the novelist has firsthand experience in writing the novel with a theme of psychic communication. In

his autobiography R.K.Narayan records that when he had started his communion with his wife's soul, Rajam's spirit told Narayan.

Mr. Sampath was Narayan's printer and this printer became an important character of his novel Mr. Sampath. His experiences as an editor in Indian Thought created the editor Srinivas in his next novel *Mr. Sampath* who has started The Banner along with Mr. Sampath, the printer of Malgudi.

Thus, the novels of R.K. Narayan reflect his life and most of the incidents were from the personal experiences of the novelist. His experiences vary from that of middle class society to that of a higher class society along with its beliefs and superstitions. Being a sensitive man Narayan tries to bring out the emotional conflicts and the zeal of independence in his protagonists. Narayan gives a brief note about their society, religion, tradition, ethics and these were given as parallels with his own personal experiences.

Reference:

1. Narayan, R.K. *Swami and His Friends*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publication, 2002. Print.
2. _____. *The Bachelor of Arts*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publication, 2002. Print.
3. _____. *The English Teacher*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publication, 2002. Print.
4. _____. *Mr. Sampath*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publication, 2002. Print.
5. _____. *My Days*. Chennai: Indian Thought Publication, 2008. Print
6. Iyengar, Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1962. Print.
7. Sharan, N.N. *A Critical Study of the Novels of Narayan*. New Delhi: Classical publishing Co., 1993. Print.
8. Naik, M. K. (ed.). *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 1979. Print.
9. Sundaram, P.S. *R. K. Narayan as a Novelist*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1988. Print.