



## Feelings of Love and Loss in R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*

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### ABSTRACT

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayanswami, popularly known as R. K. Narayan (1906-2001), was an Indian writer and novelist best known for his work set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. He was the leading writer in early Indian English literature. Narayan's *The English Teacher* is a famous novel for its simplicity and autobiographical elements. *The English Teacher* gives a glimpse into India's education system during the 1940s. The novel was written in 1945 and was renamed as *Grateful to Life and Death* in 1953. The novel's title is appropriate because Krishna, the main protagonist, learns to make sense of death as the novel progresses. The story draws from Narayan's personal experience of grief when he lost his wife due to typhoid in the year 1939. It is the self-expression of grief, loss, as well as love for his wife. This novel is highly autobiographical, as Narayan depicts his sorrow after the loss of his wife. Most of the authors' suffering has gone into making this novel.

**Keywords:** *autobiography, grief, existence, innocence, simplicity*

**FULL PAPER****Introduction**

The English Teacher follows the life of Krishna, a teacher at Albert Mission College. Krishna's parents choose a wife for him, Susila, and eventually, she and their daughter, Leela, live with him. Initially, Krishna is hesitant to leave his bachelor-like existence, but soon grows to love his new family life. Krishnan and Susila lived a joyful, prosperous life for quite a while, like any other household in Malgudi. They would discuss college matters and share every moment to make it even more beautiful. Susila, the English Teacher Krishnan's wife, is a loving mother. She is the replica of an ideal Hindu wife. Even though she enjoys a short, happy married life, her presence pervades the novel.

Like Krishnan, however, Narayan does not tell her much about her physical appearance. The reader understands her capacity as a faithful Hindu wife when she celebrates her religious rituals, learns and takes charge of household duties from her mother-in-law, and, as a responsible housewife, reigns over the house with an iron hand after Krishnan's mother leaves. She becomes his "cash-keeper" and proves to be 'a ruthless accountant'. Krishnan says: In her hands, a hundred rupees seemed to do the work of two hundred; all through the month, she was able to give me money when I asked. When I handled my finances independently, after making a few savings and payments, I simply paid for whatever caught my eye and paid off anyone who approached me, with the result that after the first days, I went about without money" (1). With Susila's arrival, all of this has changed. She keeps a strict check on household expenditure, and whenever Krishnan even slightly deviates from her grocery list, it leads to a minor squabble between the two.

Only once does it lead to a fierce quarrel when Susila sells his old alarm clock with some useless papers. Krishna is livid, and he shouts at her. They do not speak for forty-eight hours, and eventually it is Krishna who makes the first move, as he cannot bear her sobbing and crying. Susila readily agrees, and they go out to watch a film. They resolve not to quarrel because, as she firmly believes, such quarrels can affect a child's health. She serves him coffee and tiffin, and Leela is looked after by Krishnan until she goes about preparing dinner. She regards the old woman sent by Krishnan's mother to help her in her domestic chores as an 'unnecessary expense' but is soon reconciled to this. "When we are old, we must never trouble others for help. And remember there is a daughter, for whose marriage we must save."(2) She firmly believes in the adage that one must live within one's means and save enough. She has extracted a firm promise from Krishna. Whenever he jokes about having more children, she covers his mouth with her fingers and reminds him of his promise.

Susila shares Krishnan's love for poetry and encourages him to write. Susila's helplessness, innocence, and simplicity move him deeply. Her eyes always laughed. He recalled a perpetual smile in her eyes. Before going to

Lawley Extension, Susila wants to take a detour to the riverside to wash her feet. Krishnan agrees. He promises to take her on a tour of Europe when he has made enough money from his books that he is going to write.

Nevertheless, alas, this is not to be. Susila contracts typhoid. She is bedridden for weeks on end. Krishna has genuinely grown to love his wife, even though when they met, he thought her too traditional and submissive. Even though he remains optimistic through her illness, it ultimately takes her life. Much of the novel focuses on how Krishna copes with this loss. The central character of the story is so dedicated to her that he completely loses track of time as he attempts to bring her back to health. He is devastated when she passes away after a mere five years of happy married life. There is a sense of 'peculiar blankness and emptiness' in Krishnan's life. He is stunned at this sudden loss.

Susila's passing leads Krishna on a grief-filled and spiritual journey of self-discovery. Krishna confronts the discontent with his job as a teacher, questioning the relevance of teaching English literature in India. He criticises the educational system for disconnecting people from their culture and mindlessly following another, declaring it a form of intellectual subservience. This clash of civilisations is a common thread in Narayan's stories and speaks to Narayan's broader discussion of English colonialism and his patriotic spirit as an Indian writer.

The novel takes a mystical turn when a stranger reaches out to Krishna, letting him know they have been in contact with Susila after her death. Having access to the spirit world gives Krishna hope, something he lost after Susila's death. A series of supernatural and mystical events occurs to him, leading him to believe he can regularly communicate with Susila in the spirit world through this medium. This communication brings him comfort. The untimely death of Susila disrupts the harmony in the life of teacher Krishnan and forces him to express his views on the cemetery. "This is a sort of cloak room, a place where you leave your body behind" (3). One may point out Krishnan's dejected reaction: ' nothing will worry to interest me in life hereafter.' It suggests Krishnan's temporary negative attitude towards life. The thought of despair comes out of illusions of life. It takes a positive turn as soon as he connects with Susila's soul. The process of meeting is considered the union of two souls.

Krishnan's positive philosophy of life, spiritual maturity, and the union of two souls contribute to his arriving at 'the spiritual catharsis of despair and salvation.' Krishnan accepts the truth of death and his feelings that he is alone. Acceptance of death and loneliness is the law of life. There are two natural agents of the bond of human relationships. He understands that there will never be a way out of forlornness and detachment. As he indicated, the institution consisting of a spouse, kids, siblings, guardians, and companions is not permanent but rather temporal.

All these individuals leave us as we leave them. This is a positive way of thinking about life and Krishnan's achievement in religio-spiritual

development. Narayan presents a spiritual rebel. Krishnan's last rebellion is considered an extension of spiritual rebellion. The resignation underscores Krishnan's dissatisfaction with his teaching job. Krishnan's rebellion seems to have peaked in his act of resignation from his teaching profession and his decision to 'join the headmaster's school 'Leave Them Alone.' The British system of education, he feels, has subdued the learner's power of imagination, and hence he keenly expects social freedom and independence of mind. 'Leave Them Alone' exists as a God-sent mission, where he can pursue the work of his choice.

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