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PORTRAYAL OF THE SANYASA IN R.K.NARAYAN'S *THE BACHELOR OF ARTS* AND *THE ENGLISH TEACHER*

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ABSTRACT

R.K.Narayan has presented various types of characters in his novels set in the background of Malgudi. While reading through them we find that these characters can be grouped under different categories. This paper analyses one major trait of a character that Narayan has portrayed in his novels. The study is based on the character of the sanyasa which is found in many of the novels of R.K.Narayan. To limit the analysis, I have chosen *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*. Sanyasa being the fourth stage in the life of a person, how it is dealt in the two novels is briefly analyzed with some of the characters undergoing this phase in their life.

Key words: Sanyasa; fake; ashrama; dharma; deceptive.

Introduction

R.K.Narayan belongs to the first generation of Indian novelists writing in English. The uniqueness of Narayan is realized through his multi-faceted image that has created an aura of his imagination. His novels are novels of character and the novelist has always tried to explore human existence with its elemental issues through the central consciousness of his novels.

When we analyze the novels of R.K.Narayan, we find that there are different types of characters. The types seem to have a distinct identity telling us about the mark of Narayan's conception of character. On reading the novels of Narayan, Sanyasa, a typology of study is revealed in many of his novels. The writer presents every conceivable face of a sanyasi from the fake to the full-fledged one. Sanyasa seems to be the strategy to realize the basic principles of illusion versus reality.

The Role of Sanyasa: Sanyasa is the fourth stage in the religious life of a person and enjoins upon him the complete renunciation of the world and its possessions and attachment. It means the abandonment of temporal concerns: total abstention from sexual enjoyment. A sanyasi is one who renounces everything and undergoes a complete change of personality. The reason for one becoming a sanyasi is easily answered. A personal tragedy or frustration, a deep compelling philosophy of life, or a flash of illumination may drive one to seek a change. Whatever be the cause, when one becomes a sanyasi, one obliterates one's past. A sanyasi is to be taken as he is at the moment. A sanyasi's past life is an obscure one. It would be a crass, inconsiderate act

even to ask a sanyasi his name. He assumes a new name, bearing no mark of his ancestry or class, but indicative of some general beatitude. He has freed himself from all possessions and human ties. Among certain sects; the man will even perform his own funeral ritualistically before becoming a sanyasi. A sanyasi is a wanderer living on alms, never rooted to any place except when he seeks the seclusion of a cave or forest at some stage for prolonged meditation.

For, Narayan, sanyasa becomes the concluding frame of the typology. Significantly, sanyasa too is a recurring feature in Narayan's novels. Almost every novel of Narayan has a sanyasi character. The different faces of sanyasa in Narayan's novels create an opinion of Narayan's notion of sanyasa. It may also be possible to underline the implications underlying the individual cases and note the strategies Narayan employs to delineate the sanyasi portrayals.

Portrayal of the sanyasa character in *The Bachelor of Arts*: Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts* has two faces of the sanyasa: the popularly realized one and the fake one. The graduating Chandran, in the early part of the novel, is confronted with a genuine looking sanyasi who is, however, taken as a thief stealing flowers. It is only after he is caught by Chandran's father and almost man-handled by Chandran that he is identified as the sanyasi.

In an apparent case of mistaken identity, one may, however, discern other implications as well. First, the scene projects the cultural psyche symbolized in Chandran's mother. She is not given any name so as to underline the representational image. The moment she realizes the mistake, she becomes panicky and exclaims: "Ah, leave him alone, let him go." Beneath her panic there is a concealed belief that the curse of the holy man will fall on the family. Secondly, the scene also underlines a far reaching irony that Chandran, the antagonistic youth, after the failure in love, finds himself turning into a sanyasi, obviously a fake one. There also seems to be a deep irony that the genuine sanyasi's serenity seems to have been taken as a triviality, and in Chandran's case triviality is regarded as serenity.

As the desperado unwittingly runs into a drunkard, Kailas, and encounters a prostitute, he is horrified and consequently finds himself playing the role of a sanyasi. Initially as his own decision and later as the rustics's compulsive desire, Chandran continues to play the role of the sanyasi sponging on the hospitality of the village community. But as the mask on account of the pricking conscience starts paining him, he sheds off the holy clothes, casts off the fake role and returns to the world of normal life. In an apparently simple act of donning and discarding the ascetic's robes, several implications seem to be concealed.

The kind of sanyasa that Chandran plays seems to be the travesty of the sanyasa dharma prescribed in the shastras. Sanyasa comes as the last and culminating stage in the ashrama system. It also bespeaks the maturity of the mind to understand the serious and decidedly purposive nature of sanyasa. Chandran's sanyasa may be regarded as the most impulsive act which, indirectly perhaps, seems to be flouting the sacred codes and religious order. It is here that one can recall the sublime sanyasa of Adi Shankaracharya as against the trivially and ridiculously realized sanyasa of Chandran.

Although Chandran's sanyasa denotes the illusory notion of life, his deviation from the traditionally accepted norms and becoming a sanyasi is a natural act in the Indian context. Chandran is evidently seen suffering in his sanyasi robes. It is only when he discards the cherished clothes and puts on the ordinary and plain ones that he once again feels free and almost rejuvenated. Ironically, it is not the sanyasi but the ordinary man of the world that is shown happy with himself. Beneath the irony, there is a suggestion of the madness of illusion and the wisdom and sanity of the ordinary real life which seems to underline Hemingway's view that "individual aberration may be tolerated for a while – by society or by the Gods – but must inevitably erode".

In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran passes through the two crucial stages of experience, one with Kailas and the other with the rustics. The journey realized on the geographical as well as the mental plane proves to be the self-realizing and self-educating experience for Chandran. Realizing the folly of him playing the fake sanyasi, feeling guilty for the naive rustics and sorry for the parents, Chandran returns home. It is here that Narayan follows the theme of the return of the native. Chandran's return asserts the importance of the life of the average and the ordinary symbolized in the mute but deciding force of the rustics and Chandran's own

realization of his essentially ordinary self. Through Chandran's sanyasa, Narayan reiterates the pervading theme of his novels, illusion versus reality.

Portrayal of the sanyasa in *The English Teacher*: *The English Teacher* displays three types, each underlining ironic implications. The first of the three sanyasis, known as the Swamiji, is introduced as the "Man with his forehead ablaze with sacred ash, and a thick rosary around the neck and matted hair" (92-93). The spiritual healer, invited for the sake of the ailing Susila, underlines the mistaken identity as the agnostic Krishnan takes him for a beggar and says, "Go away" (93). As he gives a pinch of holy ash to the patient and ties a talisman to her arm, Narayan seems to present the sanyasi as a holy man. Krishnan's mother shares the attitude of Chandran's mother towards the holy man. The Swamiji symbolizes the common man's spiritual reverence and faith in the miraculous and godly power of the spiritual healer. One also notes different attitudes towards him. Dr.Shankar, the family doctor, though takes an almost non-committal stance, he certainly does not disown the holy man. Krishnan's fury at the sight of the Swamiji clearly indicates the former's agnostic and scientific attitude to god men. But more important seems to be the irony concealed in the attitude towards the Swamiji. It may be recalled that towards the end of the novel, Krishnan not only echoes the family doctor's view of the unknown ways of the holy man but also unreservedly accepts it.

The protagonist himself plays the role of a sanyasi in *The English Teacher*. At the end of the novel, as he ultimately succeeds in attaining spiritual communication with his dead wife Susila, and as he realizes that the boundaries between life and death get dissolved, he finds himself at the threshold of a new awareness. He is now in a position to look at life and its issues from a wider perspective. It is at this point of time that Krishnan, like many of Narayan's heroes determines to have life freed from hysterics and distorting illusions. Knowing fully well what he is required to do, he acts immediately. Krishnan takes two decisions almost simultaneously: he is determined to join the headmaster's *Leave Them Alone School* for children and tenders his resignation to the principal of his college. Thus he displays the basic aptitude for sanyasa. He shows willingness to detach himself from the worldliness and accepts the inevitability of the dissolution of human ties.

Krishnan symbolizes a sanyasi. Narayan deceptively suggests Krishnan's dissatisfaction in "earning and spending," which is reflected in his talk with the principal. He says, "I have no use for money." His leaving Leela at her granny's house may also be taken as the protagonist's gesture of the snapping of the ties in the world conceived as Maya. Significantly, to underline the spiritual aspiration of "the uncompromising idealist," the novelist has suggestively introduced *The English Teacher's* association with Plato. Krishnan says: "I will ... get through this stuff on Plato's idealism, I read." (73) (Plato, the father of Idealism, espoused the view about 400 years BC, in his famous book, *The Republic*. Plato believed that there are two worlds. The first is the spiritual or mental world, which is eternal, permanent, orderly, regular, and universal. There is also the world of appearance, the world experienced through sight, touch, smell, taste, and sound that is changing, imperfect, and disorderly. This division is often referred to as the duality of mind and body. Reacting against what he perceived as too much of a focus on the immediacy of the physical and sensory world, Plato described a utopian society in which "education to body and soul all the beauty and perfection of which they are capable" as an ideal. In his allegory of the cave, the shadows of the sensory world must be overcome with the light of reason or universal truth. To understand truth, one must pursue knowledge and identify with the Absolute Mind. Plato also believed that the soul is fully formed prior to birth and is perfect and at one with the Universal Being. The birth process checks this perfection, so education requires bringing latent ideas (fully formed concepts) to consciousness).

Although Krishnan does not don the ochrish robes and traditionally enter the *sanyasashrama*, he seems to imbibe the essential principles of sanyasa. In fact Krishnan's spiritual development, although particularized in his decision to "write poetry and live and work with children and watch their minds unfold," (208) may be discerned in his ability to understand the "law of life" and act accordingly. Harrex puts it thus:

Krishnan's development follows a recognizable Vedantic path of selfhood. By submitting to the "law of life," which necessitates the renunciation of attachment, he severs some of the spiritually constricting bounds of Maya. (63)

And most significantly, the sanyasi seems to have discovered the root cause of human misery and the basic truth of human existence. Krishnan's philosophy does not sound verbose and airy. On the contrary, it sounds authentic, as it has emerged out of his personal life, and seems to have a universal endorsement:

We come together only to depart ... The Law of life cannot be avoided ... All struggle and misery in life is due to our attempt to arrest this law or get away from it. ... The fact must be recognized. A profound unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life. (203)

The eccentric headmaster may also be considered as a typical sanyasi in *The English Teacher*. Significantly, sanyasa in his case does not come as the natural stage of his life but only as a resort. In a queerly realized story, when the headmaster survives the prophecy of his own death, he determinedly turns his back on his household and dedicates his life for the experimental school for children, called *Leave Them Alone*. Krishnan's sanyasa can be taken as the culmination of his philosophical development and the headmaster however laudable, remains basically the whim of the eccentric.

One finds it difficult to suspend one's disbelief and accept the innovative and experimental school founded and developed by the headmaster. The atmosphere of the school has not been properly evoked and even the children in the school have been realized as stock figures, reflecting their creative imagination. They seem to play their measured or tailored roles. As regards the school, it has more of an airy and dreamy than solid and real atmosphere. It is here that Narayan's symbolic intentions behind the school become clear. The school, representing the essence of good innocence in the form of children, remains the symbol of Krishnan's sanyasa. Contrasted with the warring world, represented by the headmaster's household, the *Leave Them Alone* school symbolizes the ideal world represented by the joyous and divinely innocent company of the children.

In the final analysis, *The English Teacher* can be considered, like its protagonist, a three-dimensional study of sanyasa represented by the one liner Swamiji, the cardish headmaster and the round character of the English teacher whose growth seems to have been realized through the catalyst, headmaster and the ficelle called "Medium."

Conclusion:

As one takes into account the typology of sanyasa in its entirety in the two novels, one notes that in the two novels there is a face that either belongs to the genuine type or at least partially resembles the serious one. In terms of types there are some that seem to be fully aware of the magic of the ochre-coloured garb and they play the fake sadhus and, cash in on the naive believers' faith in the holiness and spiritual power of the sanyasi. Some of them play the sanyasi role not as a consciously planned out act but rather obligingly. Their sanyasa, as the outcome of the troubled conscience, however, does not belittle their purposefully played role. There are others who, symbolically imbibing the essential spirit of sanyasa, renounce the materially realized world and snap worldly ties. Narayan also presents an ambivalent sceptic and a metamorphosed one.

The typological study reveals that sanyasa mainly symbolizes the deep-rooted Hindu family tradition, and is regarded as the most ideal stage of life by the culturally nourished masses. It becomes the novelist's strategy to focus on the deviation of the character, or it suggests the illusory way of life, or it emphasizes the spiritual growth of character.

To sum up, we may say that the typological study of sanyasa, ends Narayan's overall conception of humanity. The typology of sanyasa stresses the last stage, *sanyasashrama*. Narayan's presentment of sanyasa may mark his idea of spiritual experience. Thus Narayan depicts the characteristics of the entire humanity in the two Malgudi novels through the universally acknowledged stage of spiritual experience.

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