

R. K. NARAYAN: THE QUESTION OF CONTRADICTION AND
ELISION IN *THE ENGLISH TEACHER* AND *THE GUIDE*

My tongue swore, but my mind's unsworn.

(Euripides: *Hippolytus*)

In this section, we would examine R. K. Narayan's nationalist identifications in *The English Teacher* and find them to be contradictory, shifting between a deep affiliation with the British literary tradition and an abstract resentment against the British colonial power. Further, Narayan's translation of Indian subjects into English in *The Guide* is problematic because, in the seemingly neutral and uniform use of the English language, his translations elide the categories of class and gender. Hence, critical appraisals of Narayan's "nationalism" must be revised so that contradictory nationalist identifications and effects of translation into the English language may be seen as disruptions to Narayan's "truthful" representation of India. In a larger theoretical context, one may begin to see Indo-Anglian/English nationalism as a construct that cannot be detached from its representational and discursive functions.

One of the major Indian writers in English to achieve any international stature, R. K. Narayan began his prolific career in the thirties in an India up in frenzied arms against the British imperialist occupation. But, except for *Waiting for the Mahatma*, there doesn't seem to be an overt nationalist agenda in his work. There are, instead, scattered allusions to the contemporary struggle for independence and the status of the English language. But, using this text as exemplary, nationalist work on Narayan too easily and quickly attributes nationalism to him, as if it were a self-

evident fact. Nationalist critics have sought, and not surprisingly found, elements quintessentially Indian and nationalistic in all of Narayan's fiction, from his use of the English language to his overriding themes. To some extent, what has happened was inevitable, because Narayan had to have a number of identifications with anti-British sentiments; but these identifications are uneven and contradictory. Similarly, although Narayan must have been sensitive to the critical dictum that one remains an Indian even when writing in the medium of English, his use of translation does not allow the reader access to an economically, politically, and linguistically situated understanding of India.

In studies such as *Dimensions of Indian English Literature* [1984] and *Raja Rao* [1971], M.K. Naik has shown the correspondences between the Gandhian movement and "the Indian political novel". Even though the nationalist struggle for freedom from colonial occupation had begun a century ago (with the Indian Mutiny of 1857 marking its historical origins), Gandhi revitalized it in a way that traversed the Indian social, cultural and political sites. According to Naik:

The Indian freedom struggle was already more than a generation old, but with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi it was so thoroughly democratized that freedom consciousness percolated for the first time to the very grassroots of Indian society and revitalized it. It is possible to see a connection between this development and the rise of the Indian novel in English; for fiction, of all literary forms, is most vitally concerned with social conditions and values.

(*Raja Rao*, 16)

The novels that Naik links politically to nationalism are, among others, R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Mulk Raj

Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle*. These texts have overt political agenda; according to Naik, they are:

political novels ...that action, character and setting would appear to be more or less grounded in politics, in them. These novelists differ considerably in their approach to their material, and consequently, their fictional value is conditioned by the success with which their authors are able to deal with politics in artistic terms.

(*Dimensions of Indian English Literature*, 118)

What Naik needs to note is that Gandhian nationalist thought, more than any other dominant nationalist thought, was characterized by its economic and philosophical rejection of the British imperialism. Here, Gandhian nationalism cannot avoid being displaced in the aesthetic context, in "artistic terms", in the literature which is itself a product of the British imperialism. Second, Narayan's portrayal of Gandhian nationalism is ironic in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, his most obvious implication being that Gandhi's subtle manoeuvres against the British government went largely misunderstood and misinterpreted by the common man. And irony as a literary style works toward further displacing the actual political practice of nationalism.

Narayan's identifications with the political nationalist movements that were popular in his early writing period present a morass of contradictions. In *The English Teacher* (pub. 1945, two years before formal Indian Independence), the main character is unevenly but obviously identified with Narayan himself, for the text is a semi-autobiographical project. Its protagonist, Krishna, teaches English literature, at the Albert Mission College, to bored unwilling students. Narayan himself taught English at a government school in Mysore for a total of two days; the job had been secured for him with much difficulty by his father, but Narayan, seeing no excitement at the prospect of reciting Tennyson's "Morte d' Arthur" to

twelve year old Indian boys, left Chennapatna. (*My Days*). Similarly, Krishna resents the job:

I got up at eight every day, read for the fiftieth time Milton, Carlyle and Shakespeare, looked through compositions, swallowed a meal, dressed, and rushed out of the hostel...four hours later I returned to my room; my duty in the interval had been admonishing, cajoling and browbeating a few hundred boys of Albert Mission College so that they might mug up Shakespeare and Milton and secure high marks and save me adverse remarks from my chiefs at the end of the year. For this pain the authorities kindly paid me a 100 Rs. On the first of every month and dubbed me a lecturer...I was constantly nagged by the feeling that I was doing the wrong work. This was responsible for a perpetual self-criticism and all kinds of things aggravated it.

I was merely a man who had mugged earlier than them the introduction and the notes in the Verity edition of *Lear*, and guided them through the mazes of Elizabethan English. I did not do it out of love for them or for Shakespeare but only out of love for myself...If they paid me the same 100Rs. for stringing beads together or tearing up paper bits every day for a few hours, I would probably be doing it with equal fervour.

(*The English Teacher*, 12)

He is markedly ambivalent about the status of the English language, wielded in this instance by the British school principal, Mr. Brown:

He motioned us to our seats and said, "Could you imagine a worse shock for me? I came across a student of the English Honours, who did not know till this day that 'honours' had to be spelt with a 'u'?"...He began to lecture on the importance of the English language and the need for preserving its purity. Brown's thirty years in India had not been ill spent if they had opened the eyes of the Indians to the need for speaking and writing correct English! The responsibility of the English department was indeed very

The enormity of this student's crime is repudiated by Krishna, but underscored by his colleague, Gajapathy:

"Disgraceful. I never knew our boys were so bad... We cannot pretend that we come out of it with flying colours."

....I felt irritated and said, "Mr. Gajapathy, there are blacker sins in this world than a dropped vowel.... Let us be fair.

Ask Mr. Brown if he can say in any one of the two hundred Indian languages: 'The cat chases the rat.' He has spent thirty years in India."

"It is all irrelevant," said Gajapathy.

"Why should he think the responsibility for learning is all on our side and none on his? Why should he magnify his own importance?" (6)

"Why should he think the responsibility for learning is all on our side and none on his?"—Krishna's plaintive remark is clearly directed toward the unequal power relations between Indians and the British, relations which make it incumbent on him to master and teach correctly the laws of English grammar:

I spent the rest of the period giving a general analysis of the mistakes I had encountered in this batch of composition—*rather very, as such* for hence, split infinitives, collective nouns, and all the rest of the traps that the English language sets for foreigners. (15)

Yet, even as he rebels under this yoke, he doesn't wish to do anything to shift the status quo. He is inordinately moved in class as he recites from *King Lear*. Being a poet, he is inspired by the Western liberal creative ethos; teaching students who have no ready access to the British literary canon is an academic activity opposed to that creative ethos. Narayan also subscribes to this traditional Western split

between writers of fiction and academic teachers or critics. When he determined to do a graduate degree in English literature, a friend dissuaded him. Narayan recounts:

While I was going up the stairs of the Maharaja's college with my application for a seat in the M.A. class, a friend met me halfway and turned me back, arguing that this would be a sure way to lose interest in literature. I accepted his advice and went downstairs, once for all turning my back on college studies.

(*My Days*, 75)

Elsewhere, in *The Painter of Signs*, Narayan returns to the power of the British literary tradition. His protagonist, Raman, is steeped in his love for, among old books, the Western classics:

His cupboard overflowed with the books he had cherished since his college days—Plato to *Pickwick Papers*, some of them in double column editions, with paper turning grey, yellow, and brown, and etchings that transported him.

(*The Painter of Signs*, 17)

In his Memoirs, *My Days* (pub. 1974), Narayan lists the literature he had read in 1925, one year before he enrolled in the B.A. program in English in Maharaja College, Mysore: Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*; the poetry of Keats, Shelley, Byron, Browning, and Pope; the novels of Walter Scott, Dickens, Rider Haggard, Hardy, Tolstoy, Marie Corelli, Mrs. Henry Wood and H.G. Wells; Long's *English Literature*; the plays of Moliere, Marlowe and Shakespeare. Among literary journal and magazines: *Little Folks*, *Nineteenth Century and After*, *Cornhill*, *Boy's Own Paper*, *Strand Magazine*, *Bookman*, *Harper's Atlantic*, the American *Spectator*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Life and Letters*. All this Narayan had accomplished at the age of eighteen and at a time when national opinion was already radically split with regard to the British Raj. R.K. Narayan's father was an administrator of several pro-British government

schools, and it was his position of authority that gave Narayan full access at all times to college libraries. Narayan's father wore tweed suits and customarily stopped by at the Officers' club to play tennis before he came home.

This is to suggest that Narayan was to some extent affiliated to the Western, specifically British, humanistic literary and creative tradition, which left him ambivalent toward Indian nationalism. As a child in 1916, when nationwide protests were under way against the Rowlatt Act, Narayan, "entranced", joined the *Madras march*. He was later scolded by his uncle for doing so because his uncle "saw no logic in seeking a change in rulers". (*My Days*, 15).

At least one contradictory or at best ambivalent identification with nationalism, then, gets to be articulated in terms of (1) a frustrated and abstract resentment against manifestations of the British power and (2) an affinity with the British humanist literary tradition (from which any trace of power relations is absent), an affinity which was as much received from without as it was internalized.

At the conclusion of *The English Teacher*, Krishna decides to resign from his nightmarish teaching job (as did Narayan). He toys with the idea of stating anti-British motives in his resignation letter:

....I was going to attack a whole century of false education. I was going to explain why I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories....This education had reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage. (178)

But he cannot, because,

It was like a rabid attack on all English writers, which was hardly my purpose. "What fool could be insensible to Shakespeare's sonnets or the 'Ode to the West Wind' or 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever'?" I reflected. (178)

This poignant realization greatly contradicts Krishna's/Narayan's relation with questions of nationalist identity even as it serves as an acknowledgement to his deep literary influences.

This kind of contradictory identification is crystallized in Gajapathy's argument with Krishna over the spelling of "honours":

"Politics need not butt in everywhere. There are times when I wish there were no politics in the world and no one knew who was ruling and how", said Gajapathy. "This would help a little clearer and freer thinking in all matters. The whole of the West is in a muddle owing to its political consciousness, and what a pity that the East should also follow suit. It is like a weed chocking all other human faculties. Shelley in his 'Sensitive Plant'..." (16)

While his referent is Shelley and the British canon, Gajapathy rails against Western politics, reserving for himself some uniquely apolitical position. But this apolitical position points to a characteristic contradiction in Narayan's writing and in Indian-English studies in general: colonial power to influence Indianness is either denied or ignored, but the denial takes place within the context of colonial discourse. By using Shelley, Gajapathy is using British discourse in order to make a non-Western case against the West.

Further, we might say that what Indian critics such as M.K.Naik have called Narayan's "nationalism" is the kind of nationalism that, in his writing, was translated into the English language. The Latin preposition *trans*, working as a prefix in trans-lation, connotes a sense of crossing over (across, to or on the farther side of, beyond, over, through etc.); translation consequently suggests not

merely the rendering of something into another language but a specific instance of displacement. We have already seen how the debate between the regionalist and Indo-English nationalists produced “true” representations of nationalism (“How is it true to India?”, Introduction). Here we can predict the regionalist critic’s objection to the kind of Indian nationalism that is translated into English by the Indian-English writer: how can one express a post-colonial national identity that is distinct from the Other when one is writing in the Other’s language? A leading Indo-Anglian critic, C. Paul Verghese, uses guarded language to indicate the stakes of this debate:

There are many Indians who believe that the writer in India ought not to write in English because, they say, it is a foreign Language and to write in English is a kind of disservice to the nation and is quite incompatible with our national pride. A few others take an apparently scientific stand and argue that only through an Indian language can an Indian consciousness be expressed and that the attempt of the Indian novelist on English to depict the life of those whose emotional and intellectual life is fashioned by a different language is characterized by a total absence of the mutual nourishment between the writer and his society. They also point out that since he writes for a western audience he will inevitably fail to present a true image of India inasmuch as in his own interest he will try to create an image that is most saleable. (Verghese, 99)

Verghese addresses these charges by locating the Indian writer’s choice of language in “the fundamental right of the creative artist to express himself through whatever language he likes” (100).

What both the regionalist and the Indo-English nationalists fall prey to is a simple understanding of the workings of language. Neo-colonialism is a form of government in which the old structures of power reinstate themselves subtly in the form of new masters who, in the case of the Indian subcontinent, were the

nationalist politicians who went on to rule the country. In other words, what is Indian has already been touched by the Other, first in the form of Orientalism, next in the form of neo-colonialism. Hence, the regional claim ("only in an Indian language can an Indian consciousness be expressed") wrongly assumes that the use of an Indian language indicates a pure Indian identity. But the Indo-Anglian claim to nationalism ignores the kinds of indeterminacy that can arise in a linguistic system of signification which is a product of translation. Verghese makes language the transparent medium for meanings which are perceived to be self-evident and readily available. He overlooks the fact that if much of the Indian-English writer's English consists of translation from an Indian language, one is then faced with specific instances of linguistic displacement that greatly complicate easy access to a discernible national identity.

Hence, translations in Narayan's novels are a literary practice that ruptures the apparently unmediated nature of his nationalist affinities. We can take, for instance, his construction of the imaginary, quaint, provincial South Indian town of Malgudi. Narayan peoples it with cross-section of the Indian population and social classes (from vendors, beggars, farmers, sweetmeat cooks to sadhus, bankers and teachers). Malgudi, according to Narayan, is a metaphor for the entire Indian subcontinent; it is a rendering on a smaller scale of any town anywhere in India, even though it is most specifically Mysore in South India. If, as critics feel over Malgudi, is the site for Narayan's articulation of nationalism, then we need to see that Malgudi is itself a translated product that can only unevenly be identified with the Indian subcontinent.

An indication of Malgudi's tenuous relation to the actual Mysore cropped up during the filming of Narayan's novel, *The Guide* (published in 1958). Narayan led the film crew around Mysore, pointing out the old familiar haunts that had wandered into the novel as Malgudi. He was under the impression that authenticity would be respected, that his representation of Mysore in the form of Malgudi would be honoured. Instead, to his outrage, the venue of *The Guide* was

shifted to Jaipur (a more scenic town) in North India. When he expressed his indignation, he was told: "Where is Malgudi, anyway? There is no such place; it is abolished from this moment." (*My Days*, 174). In other words, Malgudi had given itself over to interpretation as a town that, because it was a translation of an Indian town in imaginary terms, could be situated anywhere by virtue of its not having existed anyway.

Having deplored the film producer's change of site Narayan further complicates matters by stating in *My Days* that Malgudi is a universal place, to be found anywhere in the world. He has also likened it to "an old Greek city in its physical features... [and] the habits of its citizens are also very Hellenic" (131).

Just as Narayan's India is a translated India, the imaginary "Malgudi", so also the categories of socio-economic class are products of displacement in his novels. For it is crucial to note that the Indians in Malgudi are not Indians; they are characters made Indian, stylized to be Indian. This making marks linguistic displacement—in the sense that some representation of India and India's people has been translated into another register of representation in the English language. The price of this stylized Indianization, which has uniform neutral access to the English language, is a lack, even an absence, of those categories of class, linguistically defined, economically and politically situated as they must be, which would enable a reader's gestures to move between and inter-relate the stratifications of a nation more real even if less accessible. Why, one may ask, do Narayan's working class characters speak perfect British English and what are the consequences, for readers, of such radical translations? Finally, where in all this translation is the status of Narayan's "nationalism"?

What is at stake here is not the fact that the real India, the "true nation" is elided. This notion of the "real India" waiting to be unearthed by the Westerner had already been demystified by novels like E.M.Forster's *A Passage to India* (but the fact that India, after having signaled the impossibility of its own existence, is still

the active subject signaling its absence in *A Passage* served to subtly reinstate the India of Hindu mysteries, echoing caves, etc.). The “real India” is not so much this mysterious realm that is elided as it is another viable system of signification or body of texts that is either inaccessible or not in a position to represent itself to an English-speaking audience. It may occupy the position of “subjugated knowledges” or “disadvantaged discourses” that Foucault talks about in *Power/Knowledge*.

To the publication market and a readership that lies largely outside India and in Europe and North America, however, these were and still are not displaced representations of an India which is inaccessible to the Indian writer in English. More, Indian writing in English serves to present India as a nation for the first time, from the horse’s mouth, as it were. The fact that a working-class character in Narayan’s novel speaks perfectly grammatical British English seems “natural” in the face of the exigency of a native Indian’s writing situation; it doesn’t seem to problematize the nation-making process that Narayan is apparently undertaking.

So Narayan’s working-class characters who either speak perfect English or don’t speak at all give the impression of a unitary linguistic system. Further, they also create the impression of a class-free society, at least to the extent that the way they speak English is no index of their economic status; they either speak or don’t speak uniformly and predictably.

One crucial elision in Narayan’s translated representations (which are also presentations) is, then, the category of class. A unitary linguistic system which doesn’t acknowledge the heterogeneous adaptation of English in this subcontinent—in the linguist Braj Kachru’s “cline of bilingualism”, it ranges from ambilingualism and standard Indian English to adequate competence in one or more registers and “Babu”/Butler/Bearer/Kitchen English (Kachru, 391-410)—

or the lack of the adaptation of English in some quarters, seems then to give the deceptive impression of homogeneity and of a class-free society.

How characters talk, however, should be an index to their economic status, for an empirically situated analysis should point to the more or less direct correlation between class and access to education and the English language. Typically and ironically, the Indian fiction in English which has subjects speaking a homogeneous uniform English becomes the most accessible in the Western hemisphere; correspondingly, these books become the more sellable in the international publishing market. It is not by mistake that the novels of R.K.Narayan are reprinted year after year by several different leading publishers in Britain and in North America.

Narayan's use of translation tends to obliterate not only social classes, but also crucial gender stratifications. For instance, let's consider the representation of Rosie in R.K.Narayan's *The Guide*. This story is a bildungsroman that follows the vagaries and romantic adventures of a tourist guide, Raju, in Malgudi. Upon falling violently in love with a married woman, Rosie, Raju helps her break ties with her archaeologist husband and sets about establishing her in a career in dancing. Rosie rises to national fame and Raju is reduced to being her appendage and publicity manager; he even banishes his conservative and tradition-minded mother from the family house when she objects to Rosie's presence there. In due time, Raju becomes corrupt, partaking to alcohol, gambling, and the unhealthy company of fair-weather friends. He is arrested by the police and sent to jail over an instance of forgery. *The Guide* attempts to weave this past into Raju's present condition in the form of flashbacks. His present condition is that of a man who, upon being released from jail, takes refuge at a temple where he is mistakenly taken to be a holy man by the villagers.

When, after Rosie leaves her husband, Raju brings her to his house, a strange exchange with his flabbergasted mother occurs:

She asked next, "Where do you come from?"

"From Madras", I [Raju] answered promptly.

"What brings you here?"

"She has come to see friends".

"Are you married?"

"No", I answered promptly.

My mother shot a look at me. It seemed to me meaningful. She withdrew her glance from me, and looking at her guest kindly, asked, "Don't you understand Tamil?"

I knew I should shut up now. I let Rosie answer in Tamil, "Yes. It's what we speak at home". (124)

It is when Raju says, "I let Rosie answer in Tamil", that readers are shocked into remembering that the characters are to be understood as speaking in the Tamil language, Narayan's own South Indian tongue, even though they are speaking in English. During such gaps in the narrative, the text takes on the air of an absurdly impossible enterprise, all of it going on supposedly in Tamil but actually in English. What Rosie may have said in Tamil marks its own absence here as another equally valid, yet inaccessible way of saying something.

One notes as well that it is the male prerogative that drives Raju to speak for the female subject. Rosie, the speaking subject, is erased from the text not only because her own Tamil goes unheard by the reader but also because Raju is defining her textual identity; he explains her to the point at which he then "lets" her {allows her to} speak for herself.

Interestingly, all of Narayan's female characters who have broken from the normative patterns of South Indian society are given English names. They have been translated to the English register so that, on the one hand, their marginalized identity may be explained away by Western standards (of adultery, pre-marital sex, undefined social origins, and so on) and, on the other, that identity may be conveniently excised from the Indian register. Even in *The Painter of Signs*, the

female character who is instituting governmental family planning programs in rural South India is named Daisy. A woman exceptional by Indian standards because of her progressive and feminist views, Daisy engages in pre-marital sex with the main character, Raman. Of her name, Raman comments:

She called herself just Daisy. She was a slender girl in a sari.
No one could say who was her husband or father or brother,
or where she came from—a sudden descent on Maigudi. Daisy!
What a name for someone who looked so very Indian, traditional,
and gentle! One would expect a person on this job to be
somewhat matronly, like a Mother Superior in the convent—
large, broad-faced, towering over others, an executive type
who could with a flourish of her arms order people about.

(The Painter of Signs, 16)

In *The Guide*, Rosie belongs to a debased caste and class that isn't even clearly located by Narayan:

"I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to the temples
as dancers; my mother, grandmother, and, before her, her
mother. Even as a young girl, I danced in our village temple.
You know how our caste is viewed?"
"It's the noblest caste on earth", [Raju] said.
"We are viewed as public woman", she said plainly, and I was
thrilled to hear the words. "We are not considered respectable;
we are not considered civilized." (73)

One might ask, could there have been a representation of Raju's "thrill", upon hearing Rosie describes herself as a prostitute, in the Tamil register? Raju seems to be "thrilled to hear the words" that are spoken in English, and it's in this manner that his "thrill" is legitimized.

As if to underscore her already marginalized status, Raju's uncle, who has travelled to Malgudi at Raju's mother's request in order to evict the unwelcome

Rosie, repeats her own received representation of herself even as he asks and answers his own queries:

You are not of our family. Are you of our clan? No. Do we know you? No. Do you belong to this house? No. In that case, why are you here? After all, you are a dancing girl. We do not admit them in our families. (149)

Raju's mother calls Rosie a "she-devil", "demon" and "viper" (150). Again, the point to be made here is that, by virtue of being given an Other name, Rosie's social status, marginalized as it is in Narayan's actual orthodox, Hindu, South Indian society, removes itself from that society's set of attitudes and attaches itself to Western bastardization. It may then become an understandable object of orthodox Indian society's revulsion; a more pleasing picture of Indian femininity may thus be preserved. For, especially in 1958, when *The Guide* was written, there could be no other way of accommodating a defiant Indian character who was to be perceived as a prostitute of lowly social origin, who committed adultery, and who left her husband to move in with another man. In chapter IV, a discussion will be made on how the nationalist preservation of ideal Indian femininity is an interested one and one that constituted a significant part of Indian nationalist thought.

Finally, then, nationalist identifications in Narayan's work are hugely complicated by the interrupting and disrupting status of contradiction and elision. The value of highlighting such a complication is that we are able to examine Indo-English studies as not merely an "academic" (and therefore somehow disinterested) enterprise but an ideological structure that participates in the work of representation and discursive practice. Like Narayan himself, nationalist critics have skirted the embarrassing stratifications of social classes and gender in their essentialist representations of India. Hence, one may see that the very exclusion of gender and social classes becomes central to the representational, discursive nation-building process.