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R K NARAYAN'S "THE BACHELOR OF ARTS" AND "THE ENGLISH TEACHER":  
PRECURSORS OF INDIAN NOVELS IN ENGLISH WITH CAMPUS SETTING

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ABSTRACT

There is a general impression that Indian novels with campus setting emerged in twentieth century. But we come across vivid description of campus setting in R K Narayan's early novels like *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teachers*, These novels, therefore, can be termed as precursors of Indian novels with campus setting. This paper critically looks at this new angle.

Indian novels in English with campus setting are believed to be of recent origin and an offshoot of western influence. Broadly known as campus novels, this genre became a craze with the publication of Chetan Bhagat's "Five Point Someone" in 2004.

However, Campus setting in Indian novels dates back to R.K.Narayan's period when he wrote his novels *The Bachelor of Arts*(1937) and *The English Teacher* (1945). Even though academic setting in these novels is confined to few parts, these can be considered as the precursors of campus novels in India as these novels sowed the seeds of novels with campus setting.

There are a few more Indian English novels with campus setting that were written before the 1980s. But these novels did not come to lime light as the readers were not impressed by them. *The Vermilion Boat*(1953) by Sudhin N. Ghose is in three parts and recounts the college education of its hero. His college days are just a part of his growing up. The novelist concentrates more on his relationship with a Eurasian girl Roma than on his college life or campus events. *The Flame of the Forest*(1955) by the same writer too provides a campus setting and it contains "a fine satirical picture of the avaricious college professor, who prescribes his worthless anthology as a textbook for monetary gains". The novel brings out the sycophantic nature of the teachers whose aim is academic excellence through attendance of the Vice Chancellor's Durbars and not through their scholarliness and intellectuality.

However, R K Narayan is of a different category and held in high esteem. The famous British novelist Graham Green describes Narayan as "the novelist I most admire in the English language"

R K Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher* written in pre independence era were highly popular and can be considered as the first Indian novels with campus setting. A thorough analysis of these novels will bear this fact out.

***The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) by R. K. Narayan**

The novel revolves round an undergraduate, H.V.Chandran, who is studying in the final year of B.A. at Albert College. It depicts college setting through Chandran's eyes. His college days are exhausted in scheduling of studies, company of friends, living their lives with their aspirations, wants, discussions and joys and fun of extra-curricular activities such as union debates, historical societies etc. Ramu, his only companion,

spent most precious time together. Their indulgence would be smoking, coffee, cinema, quarrelling, sharing life pacts and long walks at the banks of Sarayu river.

The novel unfolds with a debate competition in the college. Chandran, a history major is persuaded by one of his fellow students to take part in a union debate. He was to be the prime mover in the debate "Historians should be slaughtered first." After much persuasion Chandran agreed to slaughter his own tribe , that is historians and even won the debate.

Even at such early stage of novel with campus setting, we notice an element of satire in the portrayal of professors, a common factor noticed in such novels. "The Assistant Professor of English was Mr. Gajapathi, a frail man with a meagre moustache and heavy spectacles. He earned the hatred of the students by his teaching and of his colleagues by conceit...When he valued test papers and examination papers, he never gave anybody more than forty percent. He constituted himself as an authority on punctuation and deducted half a mark per comma or semicolon in the papers that he corrected."

Further describing his teaching style, Narayan says, Mr. Gajapathi "entered the hall at a trot, jumped on the platform, opened his book and began to read a lesson in Othello .He read Shakespeare in a sing-song fashion and with a vernacular twang."

The disinterestedness of students in literature class has also been captured candidly by the author in the novel. When Professor Gajapathi admonished the students "Heads down and pencils busy, gentlemen," and "Listen to me with your pencils, gentlemen, Chandran with his head bent began to scribble on the sheet of paper before him: "Oh, Gajapathi, Gajapathi! When will you shut up? Do you think your lecture is very interesting and valuable? In these two lines Shakespeare reveals the innermost core of Iago. Gaja, in Sanskrit means elephant; pathy, is probably master. A fine name for you, you Elephant Master ".

The monotony of the lecture is further depicted."The bell rang. Gajapathi intended to continue the lecture even after the bell; but two hundred copies of Verity's Othello shut with a loud report like the cracking of a rifle. The class was on its feet."

Despite the satirical description of the class room happenings and professor's idiosyncrasies, campus setting comes alive during Inaugural Session of Historical Association. Goaded by the History professor, Ragavachar, Chandran takes up the mantle of secretary of the association and invites Principal Brown to deliver the inaugural address. The loquacious nature of professors comes to the fore when professor Ragavachar in his introductory speech says "I will take only a few minute, perhaps only a few seconds to enlighten you on a few facts concerning our association..." "He then filled the hall with his voice for full forty minutes."During this forty minutes, he has repeated the cliché that he would not stand between the lecturer and the audience. Further, the high brow attitude of the Principal and lack of respect for history were perceptible in his speech and derisive tone. Tracing his relation with history, Principal Brown spoke "When he entered Oxford, he shook off history of his person" He found the subject "as treacherous as a bog at night" With a fair amount of contempt, he dismissed the subject by saying "In all History, I remember only 1066".His concluding advice is equally derisive. "Like Art, History must be studied for its own sake; and so, if you have an abiding interest in it, take it up after you leave the university."

One sees, the portrayal in the book, in particular of Chandran, the mundane affairs of every aspiring college student- rebellious streak, passion for things and thoughts of idealism keep them in the longing wait for future, desires and wants, which may not be necessarily so material in nature.

An important facet of college setting of that period was dislike for the colonial education, which is also reflected in this novel. Chandran seems to have convinced that the system of education churns out "clerks for business and administrative offices," and reduces India to a "nation of morons." But a lot of clerks is what a dependent economy needs; there is really no way out for the intelligent and sensitive Chandran, who joins, as reluctantly as Swami once did, other adolescent students in playing at being grown up and serious. He is not at ease in doing so. He feels "distaste for himself" as the secretary of his college's historical association. He tries to keep his distance from the revolutionary student and the poet student; he scrapes through his final examinations, feeling "very tender and depressed."

West east conflict, a prominent facet of the novels of this era surfaces a number of times in this novel. The writer while depicting college setting touches upon the issue of conflict between languages by referring to

the education system of his times. The education system introduced by the Britishers in India allowed the dominance of English language over the regional languages. The negligence of regional languages can be seen in the novels like 'Swami and Friends' - where the students do not pay attention to the Tamil Pundit's class but are very much attentive in English class.

One also finds in this novel like Narayan's other novels how the encounter with the half-baked modernity of colonialism has uprooted Indians like Chandran and has turned them into what Narayan in *The English Teacher*, describes as "strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage." Chandran is one of the first in Narayan's long gallery of young restless drifters who, hungry for adventure, very quickly reach the limits to their world, and then have to find ways of reconciling themselves with it.

The conflict between western and Indian culture is a prominent facet of academic settings in *The Bachelor of Arts* and other novels of R.K. Narayan. Chandran, like many of Narayan's protagonists comes back to his Indian roots, after endeavouring to find a place in the colonial society lured by the lucrative benefits and material wealth. This ambivalence and crisis between the two opposing ends is a constant battle against which his protagonists wage war like Swami, Chandran, Krishna, Mali (*The Vendor of Sweets*), Raman (*Painter of Signs*) and a host of others. It was his belief that Indian culture, and most importantly Hindu culture and heritage that could bring stability and harmony to an otherwise beleaguered society.

One also finds in his works the writers, poets and other artists who are interested in creating the literature and art influenced by the ancient Indian classics, Hinduism and epic stories. The poet in 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi' composes a story of Krishna and Radha in monosyllabic verse. In the novel 'The world of Nagaraj', the protagonist is interested in writing about life of the great sage Narada. Rosie in *The Guide* is interested in dance. In *The Painter of Signs*, Raman is interested in art and calligraphy. Occasionally there are persons like Mohan (poet) in *The Bachelor of Arts*, who, under the influence of the waves of western art forms, try to experiment on them.

Campus setting in the novel comes to an end with the description of the last day of the term. "Every professor and lecturer came to the end of the subject and closed his book." They left the class "amid great cheering and clapping of hands." The 'Class Socials' "group photo with the Principal sitting in the centre" "A large lunch" Songs and shaking hands marked the end of college life, so also the campus setting in *The Bachelor of Arts*.

#### ***The English Teacher (1945) by R. K. Narayan***

*The English Teacher*, published in late September 1945, is Narayan's third novel dealing with school and college life in India. Like *Bachelor of Arts*, the campus setting in *The English Teacher* is in parts and not throughout the novel. Even the names of professors are also same like Gajapathy and Principal Brown. Krishna, the protagonist is a sensitive and sincere teacher working at Albert Mission College, Malgudi. In the beginning, one sees him as an enthusiastic teacher who avidly teaches literature to his students and stays with them in the hostel.

Unlike *Bachelor of Arts* where one sees only college setting, in *The English Teacher* we found true campus setting in the sense that hostel life is depicted vividly here. Scenes like after dinner get together for light talks, waiting outside bath rooms, discussion at the gate, aged hostel servant, antique and erratic alarm clock makes campus setting lively in this novel. But the after dinner get together for light talks were mostly on the happenings of the day like Principal Brown's conference on spelling. English honours students dropping u from words like honours is a sacrilege for an orthodox English professor.

Even the hostel bathrooms are depicted with lurid details. So also the hostel servant, Singaram. The bath rooms are like -"hell on earth", "semi-dark, damp place, with a glass tile giving its sole lighting". The hostel servant, Singaram, "a shrunken old fellow, with angry wrinkles on his face", has been there for last forty years and "has contempt for all of us, including our senior professors and principal." It seems as if Singaram is a symbol for the decadence of the college.

Equally glaring is the description of staff common room, class rooms and library. In the staff common room, about a dozen teachers sat looking at a book or at the ceiling vacantly in an oppressive silence. Some

even found reading four-day old newspaper. However, if somebody starts a topic, like Krishna did, it assumes a debate's proportion in which some are speaking in favour and some against.

As a part of the campus setting, the rigors and routines of professors have been captured vividly in the novel. Daily life a professor comprise of getting up at eight every day, reading for the fiftieth time Milton, Carlyle and Shakespeare, looking through compositions, swallowing a meal, dressing up and rushing out of the hostel when the second bell sounded in the college. Similarly his daily duty is "admonishing, cajoling and browbeating a few hundred boys of Albert Mission College so that they mug up Shakespeare and Milton and secure high marks." and this is to save the professor from adverse remarks from his chief at the end of the year.

Description of professors with a tinge of satire is yet another facet of campus setting in this novel. While some professor like Rangappa has been described like "ever-questioning philosopher", "a dry philosopher"; some other like Ganesh, the mathematics genius is "sharp as a knife-edge" in his subject but is "very dumb and stupid in other matters." Continuing in the same vein, the author describes the mathematics professor, Ganesh as one "who never contradicted and patiently listened for hours, though without showing any sign of understanding." And "His precise literal brain refused to move where it had no concrete facts or figures to grip. Symbols, if they entered his brain at all, entered only as mathematical symbols". Rangappa takes a jibe at the peculiarities of English expression. He says to Gopal you have come across the expression "Raining cats and dogs" "Have you actually seen cats and dogs falling down from the sky".

Krishna found campus life somewhat oppressive due to daily load of work and responsibility, more so, he starts viewing his profession as superficial because the purpose of education is "to pass exams.... mugging up Shakespeare before teaching". There comes a time when Krishna feels he can "no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry" in fact he believes they are becoming "strangers to their own culture and camp followers of another culture." He finds nothing inspiring in his chosen profession and teaches it without emotion. He "doesn't care about these children" all he does is to make them sit in rows and "take attendance" every lesson and is flooded with the "greatest relief" when the bell rings to signify the end of a lesson. This is a typical westernized way of portraying school and schooling and the writer tries to mock this as it gives an impression that he does not agree with the system.

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