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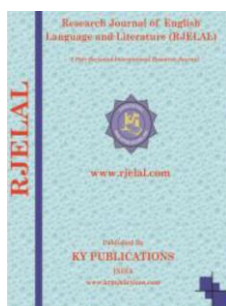
## A PROBE ON THE THEME OF RENUNCIATION IN SELECTED WORKS OF R.K NARAYAN

M. KARTHIKA

M.A English (student), Sathyabama Institute of science and technology (Deemed to be university),  
Jeppiaar nagar, Rajiv Gandhi Salai, Chennai – 600119, Tamilnadu, INDIA.

E-mail: [karthika8875@gmail.com](mailto:karthika8875@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper tries to find Narayan's usage of the theme of renunciation in some of his novels, such as "The Dark Room", "The English Teacher", and "The Vendor of Sweets". This theme is strongly correlated to another persistent theme of his narrative which is the theme of family. This connection seems more usual as well as proper. This paper reveals how each of the protagonists of Narayan's selected works react to the problematic situations in their life and the steps they take to overcome it by means of renunciation. The use of the theme of renunciation makes the selected works of Narayan a more realistic one. Generally Narayan's novels pursue an arrangement in which the protagonist follows some exciting figure, thrust into the unknown, has false impression regarding his truth and identity, then reunite with reality and then discover his factual self. The protagonists of his novels endure turbulent changes before they discover their true selves through which they unfold the reality at the end. The writer employs many themes such as conflict between tradition and modernity and familial relationships, education, parental love in his novels and the most recurrent theme among these is renunciation. This paper ends with the depiction of variety of renunciation that the protagonists of each of his selected works portray and also the importance that each of the protagonists gives.

**Keywords:** renunciation, theme, true self.

### INTRODUCTION:

R.K. Narayan is highly praised as an isolated spectator of life. His novels are set in malgudi which deals with different characters. His novels are comprised of thematic outline that moulds his characters' visualization of life. The novels of Narayan are all built on certain themes such as self-deception, generational disaffiliation, family, disagreement between tradition and modernity, education, the east-west encounter, renunciation etc.

In the novels of Narayan it is to be noted that the man and woman from ordinary abilities are those who think about renunciation or tries it to

achieve success rather than extraordinary people. Generally, Renunciation is rejecting something, particularly those that the renouncer has earlier enjoyed.

In religion, renunciation is often signifying a rejection of quest of material comforts, in the happiness of gaining spiritual enlightenment. It is vastly practiced in Jainism. In Hinduism, the renounced way of life is called as sannyāsa; in Buddhism, "renunciation" is considered as nekkhamma, which conveys more specifically the giving up of worldly life and leading a sanctified life or freedom from envy, craving and desires. Likewise in Christianity, some religious group have a custom

of renunciation of the Devil. Hence renunciation can be considered as one of the commonly valued supreme. There is barely a society or religion though it is ancient or modern, it does not respect or appreciate the memory of one who has given up his all for the sake of others or to endeavour for a noble objective. But it is only in India that renunciation is given a specifically dignified place in the Hindu way of life and it finds its own place in the set of values developed in this country.

This study highlights and examines the diversity in Narayan's usage of the theme of renunciation with special reference to three of his novels namely *The Dark Room*, *The English Teacher* and *The Vendor of Sweets*. The importance given to the theme of renunciation increases from one novel to another. In *The Dark Room*, Savitri, the protagonist undergoes awful marital distress and she is helpless. So she feels driven to abandon her husband, children and decides to leave her home. She envisions that what she did is good for the household. But then she got a chance to realise that she is much attached towards her children and family when she stayed in the village temple all alone. Then she returned back to her home in spite of her husband's disgusting betrayal and callousness. This is where she thinks of renunciation. In *The English Teacher*, the novel mainly portrays the more sensitive analyses of husband- wife relationship. The protagonist Krishna is filled with grief due to the sudden death of his wife Susila and he is left out with only one option that is to coming in terms with the disastrous fact. Later he comes out of his distress and accepts her death and decides to give importance to the education of his children by giving up his lectureship in the local college.

So the protagonists of *The Dark Room* and *The English Teacher* feel driven to attempt some type of renunciation because of frustration and irretrievable loss. Likewise in *The Vendor of Sweets*, the protagonist Jagan, a middle aged widower tries another form of renunciation during an attempt to resolve the crisis created by Mali. That is he leaves his house as well as his son and goes under an orchard which is in outskirts of Malgudi to live a life of hermit with a determination to escape from his attachment towards his son. Hence each of the

selected novels in this paper is categorized by different means through which each protagonist's attain renunciation in their life. Such as unenlightened and untimely renunciation in "*The Dark Room*", renunciation by being obliged to existence and death in "*The English Teacher*", renunciation by means of enforced sainthood in "*The Vendor of Sweets*".

#### **UNENLIGHTENED AND UNTIMELY RENUNCIATION IN THE DARK ROOM:**

*The Dark Room* is one among the early novels of R.K. Narayan. The novel unfolds the drudgery and dishonour of a wholly conventional and quite dutiful wife whose husband disgustingly and heartlessly let down her faith and trust which he had on him by his open disloyalty. The protagonist in this novel is Savitri, the devoted wife who undergoes a traumatic experience and while coming out of this distressful situation she chooses some kind of renunciation. Though during the time of torment she decides to give up her bond towards her family but mentally she is not prepared for the renunciation. Hence she retires back to her normal life. Hence renunciation becomes the foremost theme in this novel.

Savitri's parents brought her up in a traditional way of life and so she believes that it is important to be obedient, submissive and devoted to her husband. But unfortunately she was married to a self-centred and disloyal husband. He treats her disrespectfully and rarely with arrogance and a sort of hostile kindness. At times he used to show deep overexcited love towards her even in front of their children and servants. So he is a man who changes his behaviour rapidly. It is in the hands of Savitri to keep her husband Ramani in good mood daily. Though it is fifteen years since they have got married her situation does not change.

From the beginning till the end of this novel we could get a clear picture about the disgrace that Savitri is bound to face in her life. The novel opens up with a brief conversation between Savitri and her husband Ramani about their son Babu's headache, with this we could understand the humiliation that Savitri faces in her married life:

"Go and do any work you like in the kitchen, but leave the training of a grown-up boy to me. It is none of a woman's business."(The Dark Room)

She is overruled by her husband and does not allow her to take any decision of her own and became helpless and powerless. Even if the servant doesn't cook properly its Savitri who gets the scolding. It was a great task for her to keep Ramani in a good mood every day. Even during Navaratri dolls festival she got scolding from ramani due to some fault with the lightings which babu has fixed for navaratri, the power of entire house has gone and the house is at darkness when ramani returns from office. Hence she was scolded severely for it and so in order to find solace she retires to a dark room in her house without even taking food. As she is taught to be a devoted wife to her husband by her family, she respects, admires, loves and fears her husband. The only happiness she gets is her from three children, she is profoundly attached to them and it is because of them she forgets all her sorrow and leads her life with her treacherous husband. Thus her life moves on in tranquillity but it is soon troubled by Ramani's affair with Shanta Bai, his newly appointed office assistant. When she turns out to be conscious of Ramani's ill affair she cries out to her husband:

"Don't touch me!" She cried, moving away from him. "You are dirty, you are impure. Even if I burn my skin I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch." He clenched his teeth and raised his hands. She said, "All right, strike me. I am not afraid."(The Dark Room)

"Do you think that I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here, and eat food you buy with your money? No, I'll starve and die in the open, under the sky- a roof for which we need be obliged to no man."(The Dark Room)

She decides to take some brave decisions in order to emphasize her self-respect. It was almost midnight during which she decides to leave her house. She heads towards the river Sarayu in order to commit suicide by drowning herself but to her luck she was rescued by Mari, a tinker-burglar. He

takes her to his home and asks his wife to offer some food to her but she refuses to agree to receive their shelter and food rather asks them to arrange a job for her so that she could earn by self without depending on anyone. They found an employment for her with a meagre pay in the village which she accepts due to her dejected mood of self-denial without knowing the complication of the job she accepted:

"Any work which will keep my life in my body, though why it should I can't say, is suitable for me. I don't want to depend on anyone hereafter for the miserable handful of food I need every day."(The Dark Room)

Being unknown about the ways of the world she accepts to live an ascetic way of life which she considers as a new approach to life. This is the point where she takes her thoughts to renunciation. That is to renounce from all the familial bonds:

"What more fitting life, she thought, could one choose than serving a god in his shrine? A half- measure of rice was more than what she deserved, she felt.... she would dedicate her-life to the service of god, numb her senses and memory, forget the world, and spend the rest of her years thus and die, no husband, home or children."(The Dark Room)

Though she decided to renounce her familial ties, her mind was with her children- Babu, kamala and Sumathi. But she was so determined about her renunciation and decided not to give up for the sake of her children. Even though she was determined, her thought of renunciation was a fragile one because when she prays, her first prayer would be for her children.

Everything got changed in a single night which she spends in darkness in the temple. It is when she realised that she is acting against the principle of the society and escaping from all the attachments which is an impossible thing to her. She began to think about her children and it drove her to come back home. Her determined renunciation gets broken. Hence her renunciation becomes

unsuccessful. Her failure is due to the situation she faced.

"And then, the children, what a void they created! "I must see them; I must see Babu, I must see Sumati, and I must see kamala."(The Dark Room)

After returning back home she did not even say where she was living when she left her home and feels that her responsibility is to look after her children.

#### RENUNCIATION BY BEING OBLIGED TO EXISTENCE AND DEATH IN THE ENGLISH TEACHER:

The English Teacher presents a different facet of renunciation that is in the novel The Dark Room the renunciation is presented as something futile. Whereas in The English Teacher the protagonist Krishna does not give up any main responsibility. Instead he created an attitude of non-attachment towards life which becomes the most important thing for a man who is seeking renunciation. Narayan's way of handling the theme of renunciation in this novel is in such a way that the family and married love is appropriately linked with the theme.

When the novel opens, Krishna works as an English teacher in the Albert Mission College of Malgudi. He is married and has a baby daughter. Though he is married he stays in his college hostel and his wife susila and daughter are staying with her parents. There is an important trait which is to be noted in his character that is he is a self-critic and introspective. Throughout this novel his character is portrayed in such a way. He is not satisfied with his job because he feels that being an English teacher is something hollow instead he wants a job which should be meaningful and have a purpose. At the end of the novel he finds what he was longing for.

As he is staying away from his family, he decides to find a house and bring his family there. So he starts searching for the house. Finally he finds one and starts living with his wife and daughter. Now he leads a different life because he is surrounded by love and care. He is away from his boring life. But this happiness in his family life was a short-lived one because his wife susila dies

unexpectedly due to typhoid. The bliss of married life which he experienced for few years was jolted by her sudden death. The first part of this novels ends with susila's death.

The next part of the novel focuses on Krishnan's sorrow, unhappiness, solitude, anguish and finally the entire novel ends up with his recovery and his psychological contact with the spirit of his wife. It is to be noted that through the spiritual development which he gains from the intuitive contact with the ethereal spirit of his wife he discovers his profession and during which we could see the theme of renunciation being active in this novel. The days after Susila's death were gloomy. The only source of solace and relief was his daughter Leela. And so he becomes too much attached towards his daughter. He even decided not to marry again rather to look after his daughter all alone and determined to **'live it out alone, face the problems alone, never drag in another to do the job'**. (The English Teacher)

He was living a life of dejection and into his darkness comes an unexpected ray of hope through a stranger who brings a letter from the spirit of Susila.

"This is a message for Krishna from his wife Susila who recently passed over... she has been seeking all these months some means of expressing herself to her husband, but the opportunity has occurred only today, when she found the present gentleman a very suitable medium of expression. Through him she is happy to communicate. She wants her husband to know that she is quite happy in another region, and wants him also to eradicate the grief in his mind."(The English Teacher)

After reading the letter Krishna was perplexed but later he understands about the letter and was held with excitement. This became an influential turning point of his life. He started to create an extrasensory contact with the spirit of Susila. This made him to develop spirituality. Hence, this connection with his wife made him to come out of grief and restored faith in his life. The spirit of Susila gave him guidance as well as inner strength. It

is through her he comes to know about the interests of Leela, who was eager to go to school and this marked his interest in children's education. Slowly, the connection with his wife made him to feel light hearted:

"I felt as if a dead load had been lifted. The day seemed full of possibilities of surprise and joy. At home I devoted myself to my studies more energetically. The sense of futility was leaving me. I attended to my work earnestly." (The English Teacher)

It is to be noted that till then the psychic contact with his wife was through a stranger who served as a stranger but then Krishna wants to connect directly unfortunately everything went in vain. Now again he became grief stricken. To his surprise he gets a letter from his friend who is in the outskirts of town. The letter suggests that Krishna could try some in absentia sittings to connect with the world of spirits. This trial became success and so again he was able to connect with the spirit of his wife. She advises him to become mentally and physically fit. If he does not follow it may become a barrier for his psychic development with her.

Due to his change in attitude towards life, he understands that he should send his daughter to live the way she wants. So he decides to send Leela to her grandmother house in order to grow among the children of her age as well as under her grandmother's care. It was a very difficult task for him to separate from his daughter but has to do it. So he diverts his thoughts by watching the how the kids of his daughter's school play and how their headmaster narrates stories to them. Hence the headmaster Mr. Brown becomes the source of relief. He was completely filled with joy and happiness as a result his sense of loneliness was eradicated from him. This shows the progress in his self development.

His decision of leaving his job as lecture and starting to work among children in his daughter's school are due to his relationship with the headmaster Mr. Brown. This relationship shows relevance of the theme of renunciation in this novel. It is to be noted that the character of headmaster is the best example for this theme that is he gives up

his family and familial bond in order to renounce his life of prosperity to a life of simplicity and material comfort. Even at the young age he was too much attached with children and always wanted to start a school. He even thought not to marry but unfortunately he was forced to marry. However he was stubborn in his own decision. Meantime an astrologer predicted about his death. On hearing it he left everything behind and decided to start a school of his own in spite of his financial circumstances. As he decides to live a life of simplicity, he devoted his life to children in his school. He does not find any interests in worldly things. So, he turns away from his family and thinks that it is a hindrance for him to attain renunciation.

The headmaster had a good opinion in Krishnan and so he decided to give the responsibility of taking care of the school after his death. But the prediction of his death became false. Meanwhile Krishna is intensely impressed by the headmaster's attitude. And after he sent his daughter to live with her grandmother, Krishnan was left alone and so the headmaster became his basis of comfort. So Krishnan withdraws from the world of adult into that of the world of children that is being a teacher in college he decides to resign the job and join the school. But his main intention of leaving the job is to do some meaningful work that will please his inmost ambition. Though he had this idea right from his marriage days but only after his wife's death he became too much focused in attaining it.

At the end Krishnan became mentally, spiritually and morally mature as he chose to live a simple life. And considers life and death with equanimity. Hence, it is to be noted that at the end there is an inner development in Krishna. Among the characters of Narayan's selected work, it is Krishna who never thinks of renouncing his family or world instead he continues to keep hold of his attachment towards his family. But at the same time he thinks of giving his job in the college and considers it has renouncing however this type of renunciation is considered as less important one.



**RENUNCIATION BY MEANS OF ENFORCED SAINTHOOD:**

The vendor of sweets is a novel which mainly focuses on the theme of father-son relationship. The theme of renunciation is also interwoven with it. Especially, while describing the confusions, discomfiture and complications of the relationship between the middle aged protagonist Jagan and his only son Mali, the theme of renunciation comes into action. The novel is narrated in third person narrative and in the point of view of the protagonist. He is a middle-aged widower and an affluent confectionist with an average intelligence. He is also a follower of Gandhi and so leads a simple life and wears only khaddar which he spun himself in the charkha. But when it comes to his wealth, he does not follow Gandhian ways by escaping from tax.

Jagan is deeply attached with his shop as well as towards money and there is a constant battle with the ideals of non-possession and non-attachment in Bhagavad-Gita which he used to read when he comes to his shop. This provokes the theme of renunciation in the novel. As long as his wife Ambika lived they had a happy and normal father-son relationship but when she died everything changed. A gap started to develop between them and there was no communication between both even though they are in the same house. But jagan's love for his son is always the same.

Hence Jagan's life moves in calmness but it is disturbed by a sudden announcement from his son that he is not going to study anymore. Jagan becomes stun and becomes speechless. He feels as if his son has unexpectedly grown up and behaves in a different way. He decides to watch Mali secretly in order to know about his sudden change in behaviour. Mali plays trick with him to avoid seeing him. Though, jagan feels calm outside, he is shattered inwardly:

"He could not understand where his son spent the day, or what he ate. He had never suspected that his zeal for education was going to ruin their relationship. He wanted

to make it up with his son" (The Vendor of Sweets)

In order to find the whereabouts of Mali, jagan decides to approve to his plan to become a writer thinking that at least then he could talk with his son. But Mali felt as if his father is suspecting him. But jagan tried all possible ways to understand his son's mind. But unfortunately their gap grew bigger. It is to be noted that the reason for the gap between them is that Mali was too much attached with his mother and so thinks that his father is responsible for his mother's suffering and death. The next shock which Mali gives to his father was that he is planning to go to America in order to learn the art of story-telling. But jagan came to know through the cousin. So he gets hurt as his son goes without getting his permission. Jagan becomes sad thinking that he should live alone in the house when his son goes abroad.

After a very long time, jagan receives letter from his son and he feels much excited as if he came back home. Hence, jagan began to read letters which he received from his son and so his habit of reading Bhagavad-Gita becomes secondary. Hence by reading the letters he became aware of the culture of the American society. But everything changed due to the sudden arrival of Mali. It is from now on that jagan faced the real challenge of life. The next shock which jagan gets that his son comes with a girl named Grace whom he introduces as his wife. She is a Half-Korean and Half-American. Now jagan is totally puzzled and speechless. He could not face people thinking that they would ask about his son. But his daughter-in-law becomes adapted to the situation of his house and she does all the household work according to jagan's favour. Jagan could feel the difference in his daily routine after the arrival of Grace. He becomes affectionate towards her and feels like he got someone to communicate freely. But he is not aware that his son actually did not marry her. Soon his problems start rising up when his son decides to invest some money as a chief shareholder for a project of manufacturing story-writing machines. After very long time of silence between the father and the son it is for the sake of Mali's business that he decides speak with his father. But jagan misses this opportunity to talk

with his son by wandering his mind without listening to the substance of the talk which his son spoke.

Meanwhile Jagan feels that Mali spoke to him only to get money for his silly venture and so he tries to avoid both Mali and grace in order to escape from giving money for their business. But everything went in vain and so instead of giving him money he decides to give his own sweetshop to his son:

"If you feel you can take up the business and run it, do so; it is yours if you want it." (The Vendor of Sweets)

But his son rejects his offer and refers his father as **"a vendor of sweetmeats"**. Jagan felt sad and helpless on hearing it. He lost his peace of mind and drastically reduces the price of all sweets in his shop. Jagan compares his conflict with Mali similar to that of the kurukshetra battle. At this point of time he happens to meet chinna durai, a sculptor. He has come to seek support in order to complete the picture of goddess Gayatri. But on the other hand the sculptor becomes a god given gift for him during this situation. We could relate this situation to that of Krishna in the English teacher who gets connected with the soul of his wife through which he gains the psychic experiences.

Chinna durai takes jagan to the mango grove where his master used to live and work. Hence jagan feels that visiting to the grove is very important so that he could get some diversion from his daily routine things. Soon it became a practice for them to go to the bank of river sarayu, which is surrounded by pleasant surrounding and with that the sculptor's description about his master gives a picture of new world. Hence, the description of his master and the sculptor himself becomes relevant to that of the theme of renunciation. For a while he becomes unaware of upcoming shocks that Mali kept for him. Later the thoughts of his son again get occupied in his mind.

On one such visit to the grove, the sculptor solemnly requests jagan to buy the grove so that they could install the deity there. But jagan was reluctant about buying the grove like a shrewd businessman. Then he gets suggestions from others and gives a spontaneous reply:

"Yes, yes. God knows I need a retreat. You know, my friend, at some stage in one's life one must uproot oneself from the accustomed surroundings and disappear so that others may continue in peace." (The Vendor of Sweets)

Jagan decides for a transformation in his life without knowing its inference and consequence. This time when he returns back from the grove, he feels a sense of excitement and a change in his identity. But all these things are short-lived. On seeing his son looking puzzled about starting his business, jagan feels pity for his son and curses the obstacle which has sprung up between them.

Soon jagan comes to know from Grace that she and her son are not married. It became a great shock for jagan and the respect and affection he had with his daughter-in-law was shattered. Hence, jagan insists both of them to get married because he does not need an unmarried couple to live in his house but the idea of marriage was rejected by Mali.

Jagan who feels ashamed of drifting all the things in his life is now obsessed with self analysis. He sits under the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley and becomes nostalgic over the different phase of life. This made him to understand that how his life changed in the due course. He feels lonely because his only son rejected him. The only thing which gave him peace in his life is that his visit to grove with chinna durai is like entering into a new world.

Surrounded by the feelings of renunciation, jagan decided to leave his house and so he packs up his things which include his charkha. Though leaving behind the familial bonds is not an easy task, he is determined to leave his house. On his way he meets cousin and comes to know that his son is arrested for violating the exclusion laws. But he was not worried about it and now he is much focused to leave everything behind:

"A dose of prison life is not a bad thing. It may be just what he needs." (The Vendor of Sweets)

But cousin comes up with the plans of bringing Mali out of jail but jagan was not happy with it and says:

"If what you say is true, well, truth will win. If it is not true, there is nothing I can do. who are we to get him out or put him in? Truth ought to get him out- I wish you all luck.—but don't expect me to take any part in it. Leave me out of it completely; Forget me and I'll go away without asking too many questions--- I will seek a new interest- different from the set of repetitions performed for sixty years--- I am going to watch a goddess come out of stone. --- everything can go on without me." (The Vendor of Sweets)

Even cousin was amazed by the sudden transformation of Jagan. Hence he continues his visit to the grove for retirement without regret or bitterness. He doesn't actually attain renunciation, he is yet to obtain the equanimity of mind and escape from attachment. His way of renunciation is so simple like developing austere food habits. It is prominent that his perceptive of renunciation is ordinary that is under the pressure of the problems he learns to renounce himself by means of detachment.

### CONCLUSION

Narayan's novels consist of principle characters which always experience solitude and regard separation as something fruitful. Thus, Narayan has proposed the theme of separation in his novels in order to integrate the philosophic apparition of India. This apparition has been addressed by most of the Indian scriptures through the theory of self-realization. Hence, through this paper we could understand how the protagonists of each of his novels lose the importance of the renunciation.

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