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Metaphysical and Mystical Dimensions in R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*: A Critical Study

Rukhsar, Rajan Lal

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3162-8009>

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5833-3962>

Corresponding Author: Rukhsar, Research Scholar, Department of English Studies and Research, Jagdish Saran Hindu Postgraduate College, Amroha, (Affiliated to Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India), rukhsar.2030@gmail.com

Co-author: Rajan Lal, Assistant Professor, rajanlal634@gmail.com (Same affiliation)

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Abstract

Aim: This paper critically examines the metaphysical and mystical dimensions of R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*, set in colonial India. It traces Krishna's transformation following the death of his wife, Susila, charting a journey from personal grief to spiritual awakening. The narrative blends the ordinary with the transcendental, exploring love, loss, and communication with the spirit world. Themes of existence, consciousness, and the afterlife are interwoven, presenting the novel as a timeless work of Indian English literature that unites emotional healing with philosophical inquiry.

Methodology: The study employs textual analysis of *The English Teacher* to examine its thematic, philosophical, and stylistic elements, highlighting its metaphysical and mystical layers. Secondary sources—critical essays, scholarly articles, reviews, and philosophical writings—are incorporated to provide a well-rounded interpretation grounded in literary and spiritual contexts.

Outcome: Findings reveal that the novel transcends personal tragedy to depict an odyssey of the soul, engaging with concepts of immortality and transcendence through Krishna's evolution. Mystical communication with Susila becomes a means for emotional and philosophical resolution, positioning the work as both a reflection of Indian spirituality and a narrative of universal significance.

Conclusion: Blending psychological realism with metaphysical depth, *The English Teacher* affirms the human capacity for inner peace and transcendence, enriching Indian English literature with enduring spiritual and philosophical resonance.

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The paper critically surveys metaphysical and mystical elements, that integrates philosophical inquiry with spiritual insight. Metaphysics, as the study of *existence, reality, causality, and consciousness*, incorporates schools like idealism and dualism, and branches such as ontology and cosmology. It often intersects with mysticism—personal experiences of the divine or higher reality through meditation, prayer, or inner stillness. These transcend empirical logic and provide profound, peaceful revelations. In India, such practices are found in many religions. These include Hinduism, Sufism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Each tradition offers a unique path. Yet, all move toward the goal of transcendence and spiritual insight. The paper reflects this *pluralistic ethos*, and explores inner journeys that dissolve boundaries between mind, soul, and higher consciousness. How do metaphysical and mystical dimensions shape the protagonist's psychological and spiritual journey in R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*? Will be the research question of the paper. In her paper "R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher: Krishna's Quest for Inner Peace and Self-Development*" (*IJCRT*, Vol. 12, Issue 9, Sept 2024), Rajani Meena examines Krishna's spiritual journey beyond life and death, highlighting his search for inner peace and self-realization. In her article "*Aspects of Self-Expression in R. K. Narayan's The English Teacher*" (*The Creative Launcher*, Vol. 4, No. 6, Feb 2020), Chandni Rani explores how the protagonist's emotional and psychological growth mirrors Narayan's own search for identity and creative self-expression. In her paper "*A Study of the Multi-Dimensional Themes of R.K. Narayan's The English Teacher*" (*Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 3, No. 13, 2013), Leena Sarkar examines the novel's diverse themes, including colonial tension and autobiographical elements, reflecting the author's personal grief and emotional depth.

The problem that this study addresses, is how the metaphysical and mystical dimensions in R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* contribute to the protagonist's journey of inner transformation, self-realization, and transcendence beyond worldly grief. The major psychological, metaphysical and mystical part of the novel begins with Krishna's profound grief over Susila's death, and it explores the emotional and psychological impact of loss. This initial focus on grief is a realistic portrayal of human suffering and the struggle to cope with

profound loss. Krishna becomes increasingly consumed by the haunting memory of the tragic lavatory incident that marked the beginning of Susila's physical and psychological decline. This moment, which initially appeared minor, ultimately led to her delirium and prolonged suffering. Rajani Meena observes that Krishna attains "the spiritual catharsis of despair and salvation" through his acceptance of mortality, loneliness, and the transient nature of human relationships (Meena 6). After her death, Krishna is overwhelmed by sorrow and personal loss. His reflections are filled with intense emotional pain, and he vividly recalls the scene and its devastating consequences. His inner turmoil finds expression in a deeply poignant and symbolic visualization, as described below:

The half a dozen flies are still having their ride. After weeks, I see her face in daylight, in the open, and note the devastation of the weeks of fever—this shrivelling heat has baked her face into a peculiar tinge of pale yellow. The purple cotton saree which I bought her on another day is wound round her and going to burn with her. (Narayan 139)

The cremation of Susila is solemnized with the weight of cultural and ritualistic observances. However, the emotional gravity of the moment is truly borne only by Krishna and a few close companions who share in his intimate sorrow. For the rest—ritual participants, acquaintances, and especially professionals like the priest—the ceremony is more a matter of custom than emotional involvement. His personal pain is profound, metaphorizing an inner wound that no cultural script can soothe.

R. K. Narayan portrays Susila's cremation with psychological depth and minimal dramatization. Krishna, emotionally shattered, watches the rituals in numb silence, unable to act or engage. Overwhelmed by grief, he feels reduced to an imbecile, performing rituals mechanically under the priest's instructions. His actions are devoid of meaning, driven not by belief but by obligation. A bearded beggar nearby symbolizes the indifference of the world to his sorrow. The entire episode reflects Krishna's mental paralysis, where cultural conformity overshadows personal grief. Narayan powerfully captures the dissonance between inner trauma and the external demands of tradition. Narayan captures Krishna's inner anguish with remarkable psychological precision, as expressed in the following passage:

I am unable to do anything, but quietly watch in numbness...I'm an imbecile, incapable of doing anything or answering any questions. I'm incapable of doing anything except what our priest orders me to do. Presently, I go over, plunge in the river, return and perform a great many rites and mutter a lot of things which the priest asks me to repeat. (140)

The English Teacher explores Krishna's existential quest in the wake of Susila's death. Confronted with profound loss, he begins to question the purpose of life, the value of material existence, and the nature of reality itself. This emotional and philosophical crisis triggers a transformation, as Krishna gradually moves away from social dependencies and toward solitary endurance. His grief leads to a heightened consciousness, shifting him from a rational teacher to a spiritually inclined seeker.

This odyssey reflects not escapism, but a deeper engagement with existence. Narayan depicts this transition with psychological realism and metaphysical depth, which echoes *Vedantic* ideals of detachment and liberation. Krishna's inner evolution culminates in a spiritual awakening, one that transcends life, death, and self—beautifully expressed in his reflection, "There are no more surprises and shocks in life... nothing else will worry or interest me in life hereafter" (140). Chandni Rani writes in the abstract of her paper, "The present work depicts the aspects of self-expression in his autobiographical novel *The English Teacher*" (Rani 1).

Through Krishna's progressive detachment from material concerns and his inward turn toward spiritual reflection, *The English Teacher* interrogates the worth of material possessions and societal conventions. It proposes the existence of a more profound reality beyond the physical realm. After Susila's death, Krishna's disillusionment with professional duties and social obligations becomes increasingly evident. The monotony of daily routines, the mechanical adherence to cultural rituals, and the diminishing relevance of external roles highlights his growing estrangement from the material world and reveal an underlying search for transcendental meaning. His retreat into memory, grief, and metaphysical exploration signifies not mere withdrawal, but a conscious movement toward inner harmony and philosophical insight.

In the wake of personal loss, Krishna experiences a deep emotional paralysis and spiritual confusion. His former identity as a committed teacher erodes into a performative shell, exposing the futility of worldly roles when unanchored by deeper purpose. The narrative thus critiques the illusion of materialism and affirms the soul's longing for a higher truth. The following excerpt captures his inner emptiness and mechanical adherence to duty:

I was too weary to exert myself. I was past that stage of exertion. A terrible fatigue and inertia had come over me these days and it seemed to me all the same whether they listened or made a noise or whether they understood what I said or felt baffled, or even whether they heard it at all or not. My business was to sit in that chair and keep my tongue active--- that I did. My mind itself could only vaguely comprehend it. (Narayan 154)

This moment illustrates the disintegration of Krishna's engagement with the material world. His teaching—once a source of identity—has become a lifeless ritual. Narayan thus exposes the *illusion of materialism*, and suggests that worldly roles and responsibilities, when detached from emotional and spiritual fulfillment, become meaningless. Krishna's psychological fatigue mirrors his rejection of the external world in pursuit of deeper, metaphysical truth.

According to Misra, Gandhi believed that true happiness and the fuller development of personality stem from simplicity and the minimization of wants (Mishra 17). In the wake of Susila's death, Krishna experiences a deep existential crisis, marked by disillusionment and a loss of structure or direction in life. His thoughts frequently shift, which reflect an unsettled mind caught between grief and philosophical reflection. At times, he expresses certain beliefs or insights, only to question or contradict them moments later, which signifies his consciousness in flux. This tension between sentiment and reason highlights his gradual movement toward philosophical inquiry, as he begins to reflect more deeply on the meaning of life, death, and existence.

Krishna symbolizes a fragmented self who is emotionally wounded and existentially uncertain, yet from this disintegration emerges the seed of philosophical contemplation. As he cares for his daughter, who has been with him since she was “a seven-month baby” (Narayan 146), in the same house where

Susila passed away, he slowly becomes aware of subtle, transformative changes within himself. These changes mark the beginning of a more introspective and contemplative life, where Krishna seeks not external guidance but inward clarity. S. R. Ram Teke notes that the novel reflects a belief in life beyond death, which prompts Krishna to seek psychic communion with his wife's spirit (qtd. in Sarkar 3). R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* explores the profound journey of Krishna from personal grief to philosophical resilience, and it reveals a nuanced portrait of stoic endurance, emotional reconstruction, and spiritual autonomy. The novel subtly engages with the concept of *karma*, reflecting that Krishna's suffering is not accidental but perhaps linked to past actions by adding metaphysical depth to his path of self-discovery.

In the wake of Susila's death, Krishna experiences what he describes as "blankness and emptiness" (Narayan 141), an emotional vacuum and void that transcends ordinary grief. This existential disorientation destabilizes his identity, and confronts him with the challenge of constructing meaning in a reality bereft of love and companionship. In the wake of this void, his daughter Leela becomes the emotional anchor. Through her, Krishna undergoes a transformation that destabilizes traditional *gender binaries*. He assumes a "double role" with "great expertness" (141), which encompasses both fatherly duty and maternal tenderness.

Krishna's caregiving can be critically read through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (*Gender Trouble*, 1990), which posits that gender is enacted through repeated behaviours rather than being biologically predetermined. His nurturing actions such as organizing meals, offering emotional reassurance, and maintaining domestic harmony, exemplify Butler's assertion that *identity is performative*. His caregiving emerges organically from love, not from societal expectation. Thus, his caregiving dismantles patriarchal norms and embodies an emotionally intelligent masculinity. As he affirms, "My one aim in life now was to see that she did not feel the absence of her mother... I had to keep her cheerful and keep myself cheerful too lest she should feel unhappy" (Narayan 142). This performance, however, is not without cost; Krishna's cheerful façade masks a silent anguish, which reveals the emotional labour beneath his stoic exterior.

Narayan presents Krishna's transformation not as dramatic or heroic in the conventional sense, but as quietly resilient. His grief does not result in *nihilistic* withdrawal; instead, it catalyzes a journey of introspective strength. This inward evolution aligns with Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy in *Ekla Chalo Re*—the call to walk alone in the pursuit of truth. Krishna embraces this solitude, declaring, "God has given me some novel situations in life. I shall live it out alone, face the problems alone, never drag in another to do the job for me" (142). This assertion marks his emancipation from dependence, whether familial or emotional.

A pivotal moment in Krishna's development occurs when he refuses his mother's offer to take Leela away. His decision is guided not by pride but a deepened sense of self-reliance. Later, when Leela innocently asks about her grandmother's return, Krishna refrains from comforting illusions. He insists, "Living without illusions seemed to be the greatest task for me in life now" (143), which signals a philosophical maturity grounded in existential realism. His reflection, "Twists and turns of fate would cease to shock if we knew, and expected nothing more than, the barest truths and facts of life" (143), encapsulates the novel's *stoic core* that suffering, when accepted without illusion, becomes a source of inner clarity and strength.

Love for nature attains a *mystical dimension* when it reflects an emotional or spiritual union with the divine, and becomes *metaphysical* when it prompts philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence and reality. For example, in William Wordsworth's expression of "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused..." (Wordsworth 100), the mystical is evident as he perceives a divine presence permeating the natural world. Conversely, Ralph Waldo Emerson's nature writings, particularly in his essays, often probe what nature reveals about human existence and the universal soul. His assertion, "Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence" (Emerson 56), exemplifies a synthesis of metaphysical reflection and mystical insight.

R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* explores the enduring nature of love that transcends physical death, as exemplified in Krishna's profound connection with his deceased wife, Susila. In the aftermath of her passing, Krishna

experiences a deep sense of emptiness and emotional void, which prompts him to seek solace in the natural world. *His increasing proximity to nature becomes not merely a retreat but a spiritual refuge.* Sharing his feelings with Medium, his friend, Krishna expresses a “transcendental nature” and a growing “love for nature,” which indicates a *mystical* rather than *metaphysical* orientation. The language of peace, tranquillity, and detachment signals a spiritual communion with nature. Such language reflects not analytical reasoning, but an intuitive and sacred engagement with reality. Nature becomes a living presence that heals and sustains his soul, and offers a sense of timeless continuity beyond mortal suffering. Here, nature becomes a gateway to the eternal, embodying spiritual stillness and divine permanence beyond worldly impermanence. This mystical dimension is most powerfully conveyed in Krishna’s reflection, “This casuarina and the setting sun and the river create a sort of peace to which I’ve become more and more addicted... It gives one the feeling that it is a place which belongs to Eternity, and that will not be touched by time or disease or decay” (Narayan 165).

According to Steven F. Walker, Krishna’s conversation with Susila, like Jung’s with the anima, involves psychic receptivity, a conscious dialogue with the inner feminine, and a resulting transformation in psychological outlook (qtd. in Sarkar 4). A significant mystical element in *The English Teacher* is Krishna’s capacity to communicate with Susila’s spirit. Initially through dreams and later via a medium, this connection evokes questions about the soul, the afterlife, and the possibility of transcendent communication. John Thieme observes that in the novel’s second half, Krishna meets two transformative figures—a medium who helps him reach Susila’s spirit, and a headmaster whose views challenge colonial educational norms (qtd. in Sarkar 3). Krishna, weighed down by lethargy and emotional detachment, lives in a mechanical stupor. His time with his daughter is marked by a sense of aimlessness. This inertia is disrupted when he receives a letter from a man claiming to be a medium—a spiritual *conduit*. The letter, relayed by the Medium, is profoundly mystical. Susila speaks to Krishna from the afterlife, and assures him of her well-being and encourages him to let go of his grief. “We are nearer each other than you understand,” she tells him, emphasizing the continuity of love beyond physical death (Narayan 156). This message becomes a turning point in Krishna’s psychological healing and spiritual

awakening. It reveals a metaphysical worldview in which emotional bonds transcend material existence.

Gradually, Krishna experiences a reawakening of his creative faculties. In one instance, he finds himself writing spontaneously, as if guided by an invisible force. He reflects, “I didn’t know what I was writing—verse, drama, or whatever it was troubling me” (165). This episode introduces the concept of automatic writing—a mystical process where Krishna becomes a passive instrument for higher spiritual communication. Later, through the same Medium, he receives a message from a group of spirits: “We have been looking about for a medium... Please, help us, by literally lending us a hand—and we will do the rest.” To this, Krishna responds, “I’m honoured, I will do whatever I can” (166). His readiness affirms his transformation—from a grieving husband to a spiritually attuned medium, which facilitates communion between the material and the metaphysical realms.

According to Sp. Ranchan and G.R. Kataria, transformation in psychological terms refers to a profound change in personality. In Jungian psychology, it marks a major shift from the ego—center of personal consciousness—to the self, which integrates both the conscious and unconscious. This transformation signifies a deep inner upheaval, replacing the limited ego with a more expansive, transpersonal self (qtd in Sarkar 4).

Krishna’s experiences with the spirit world lead to a significant spiritual transformation. He becomes more detached from worldly concerns and more attuned to spiritual truths, which reflect a path to enlightenment through loss and transcendence. Krishna’s sessions with the Medium mark a turning point in his inner life. As they sit together at dusk, the atmosphere becomes spiritually conducive, and the Medium’s hand begins to write—conveying that Susila’s spirit is present and will now communicate with Krishna directly. Susila addresses his doubts gently, “I saw the doubts crossing and recrossing your mind... How can you believe what you can’t see?... was that not the line of thought going on in your mind?” (Narayan 172). Initially, Krishna remains sceptical, especially when the medium mistakes his daughter’s name. However, as the spirit’s words resonate with his thoughts, he is moved to introspection. He finally admits, “You are right, absolutely right... It did not require much self-scrutiny to see it” (172).

This moment signifies Krishna's shift from rational doubt to spiritual receptivity, highlighting his transformation through mystical communion and emotional transcendence.

Krishna's inquiry about Susila's existence in the afterlife elicits a metaphysical response that redefines temporal understanding. Susila explains that time in the spiritual realm is not linear or measurable, but experienced as a continuous state of being. Narayan contrasts earthly temporality with spiritual eternity, and underscores Krishna's deepening mystical awareness. Susila describes their existence as one of "thought and experience," where "meditation" and "the Divine Light flooding us" bring the "greatest ecstasy" (193). This exchange marks Krishna's further movement toward transcendental insight and detachment from material perceptions of time.

In the novel, R. K. Narayan subtly blurs the boundaries between life and death, presenting them not as oppositional states but as interconnected phases of existence. The novel culminates in Krishna's spiritual evolution, wherein death is redefined—not as cessation but as transformation. His communion with Susila's spirit transcends ordinary mourning and culminates in a metaphysical union that affirms the continuity of consciousness beyond bodily demise.

Krishna's ability to establish direct and mystical communication with Susila—free from any intermediary—marks the climax of his inward journey. No longer reliant on the Medium, Krishna discovers an intimate and sustained connection with Susila's presence, now internalized. Her voice becomes not a figment of memory or imagination, but a conscious, guiding presence that emerges from deep meditative stillness. This experience, described as "the rarest moment of my life," signifies the attainment of spiritual harmony and emotional resolution. The final scene of the novel embodies a moment of transcendence, where Krishna and Susila's spirits converge in silent communion. The boundaries separating the physical from the spiritual, the temporal from the eternal, dissolve in a moment of sublime stillness and unity, "We stood at the window, gazing on a slender, red streak over the eastern rim of the earth. A cool breeze lapped our faces. The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy—a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death" (280).

Narayan does not offer a conventional resolution to *The English Teacher*, but he concludes the novel on a note of contemplative serenity, which shifts the narrative from personal grief to spiritual realization. The absence of dramatic finality reflects a metaphysical vision rooted in Indian philosophical traditions, particularly the concepts of *vairagya* (detachment) and *atman* (the immortality of the soul). Krishna's journey—from *anguish to awakening*—culminates in a mystical experience where boundaries between the self and the other, life and death, dissolve. The novel transcends its realistic framework to explore a deeper spiritual truth: that love, when elevated beyond the material, becomes a bridge to the eternal. Thus, the narrative ends not with resolution but with transcendence, affirming that true fulfillment lies in spiritual unity and inner peace.

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Rukhsar

Rukhsar is a researcher in the Department of English Studies and Research at Jagdish Saran Hindu Postgraduate College, Amroha, affiliated with Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India. She has contributed a book chapter titled "A Study of Narrative Technique in R. K. Narayan's The Guide" in the edited volume *Indian English Fiction: Recent Critical Dimensions* (Doaba House, 10 January 2023).

Rajan Lal

Dr. Rajan Lal is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Studies and Research, J. S. Hindu P. G. College, Amroha (U.P.), India. He has participated in workshops, presented research papers in national and international seminars, and published in peer-reviewed national and international journals as well as edited volumes. A freelance poet, editor, and literary critic, he has served on the editorial board of *Pahal Horizon: An International Research Journal in Social Sciences, Humanities and Management*. He is also an active member of the English Literary Society of Agra (ELSA) and a life-long subscriber to *Re-Markings: A Biannual Referred International Journal of English Letters*. He has attended numerous online webinars on diverse literary and educational topics.