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CHASING IDENTITY OF THE 'SELF' IN R. K. NARAYAN'S '*THE ENGLISH TEACHER*'

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Abstract

The present paper aims at studying in detail the relationship between Man and Society. It is further the study of identity of the 'self' in R. K. Narayan's novel, *The English Teacher*. No doubt, the novels of R. K. Narayan deal with the problems in the society. Specially, his characters and their identity are the main concern. Narayan does not forget to point out the cruelties existing in the prevalent society. The paper gives a detailed account of Krishnan and the events that happen in his life. The hero in the first stage is the schoolboy, then in the second stage, he is a student of B.A. final and finally he enters into the world and starts working as a lecturer in English. There is an operant attempt to understand the 'Self' of Krishnan throughout the present paper.

Keywords: Man, Society, Social problems, Identity, Self, Schoolboy, Student, Teacher / Lecturer etc.

R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* appeared seven years after his last novel, *The Dark Room*. It was published in the year 1945 by Eyre & Spottiswoode, where Graham Greene was a Director. It is dedicated to his Rajam. Now, the question that naturally comes to our mind is if it is autobiographical in content and theme. For a precise and appropriate answer, it is better to go to the view of the author himself. Narayan in his famous memoir *My Days* points out:

'More than any other book, *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction, the *English Teacher* of the novel, Krishna, is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi; but he goes through the same experience I had gone through, and he calls his wife Susila, and the child Leela instead of Hema. The dedication of the book to the memory of my wife should to some extent give the reader a clue that the book may not be all fiction: still, most readers resist, naturally, as one always does, the transition from life to death and beyond.' [134-35]

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Now, it is quite clear that The English Teacher is autobiographical in theme and content. Narayan's Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher constitute a trilogy. In this context there is little difference between Swami, Chandran and Krishnan. The hero in the first stage is the schoolboy, then in the second stage, he is a student of B.A. final and finally he enters into the world and starts working as a lecturer in English at Albert Mission College. Professor Narasimhaiah rightly observes:

‘The English Teacher is logical sequence to The Bachelor of Arts and one may without loss skip the intervening The Dark Room which for all its pathos develops melodramatically and has a didactic ending’. [Narsimhaiah, C. D.: 1969: 143]

At the outset of the novel, we become familiar with the mechanical routine life of Krishnan. Though he is hardly thirty years, yet his life is dull and dreary. He gets up at eight daily, reads for the fiftieth time Milton, Carlyle and Shakespeare, looks through his composition books, swallows a meal, dresses up and rushes out of his hostel room as soon as the second bell rings at the college. During the four hours of work, he admonishes, cajoles and brow-beats –

‘a few hundred boys of Albert Mission College so that they might mug up

Shakespeare and Milton and secure highmarks’ [1]

This process saves adverse remarks from his chiefs. When the college hours are over, he returns to his hostel room, chats with his colleagues, indulges in lengthy discussions and finally goes to bed at night.

After a few months, there occurs a change – an agreeable change, in his life. Krishnan leaves the hostel for good and sets up his independent family life in a house which he takes on rent. His mother comes from the village and settles things in their proper places. She has come mainly to guide and assist things to Krishnan's wife, Susila, in domestic work. She stays with her for two months and trains her up in home-keeping. Susila and Krishnan lead a happy and balanced life routine. In the evening, he returns home when his classes are over to find that Susila and the child, Leela are waiting for him. He then takes his bath, puts on fresh clothes, enjoys the night they relax in the hall and discuss merrily the college affairs and their neighbours. On the first of every month, Krishnan passes on a pay-pocket of one hundred rupees to Susila. This packet contains ten-rupee notes. Susila manages the affairs of the house deftly within the limited income. She draws up the monthly-budget and Krishnan follows it strictly. He found in her an expert house-keeper and a woman of ruthless determination. She often insists buying

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articles from co-operatives and cheap stores. She is not in the habit of spending even a shell more than an article actually deserves. She utilizes the money in her own way. The remaining amount at the end of the month goes directly to the savings bank:

Thus, life has slipped into a pleasant position. But fate was unkind to this happy couple. On one Sunday morning they decide to go out in search of a suitable house to Lawley Extension. Susila contracts typhoid there, in an infected lavatory. She dies after a prolonged illness of several weeks. Her parents and Krishna nurse her well, but his responses are not at all encouraging. Susila's life is cut short in the prime of her youth and this causes excruciating pain in the life of Krishnan.

Susila's death marks the end of the first-half of the novel. Thereafter, begins the second part which is essentially a dull and uninteresting part of the book. Krishnan does not send Leela to her grandparents. She absorbs much of his time and attention. He leads an aimless life. One day, a peculiar incident takes place in his life. He comes across a strange man who knows how to establish contacts with spirits in another region. In course of his sittings by the side of a lotus pond, he is in a position to elicit convincing pieces of information from his dead wife, Susila. This new and novel type of psychic contact brings about fresh charm and interest in his dull and unattractive life.

These occult meetings help him in learning a lot about Susila. Now, his work becomes very light for him. He feels as if a dead load has been lifted from his mind. The days acquire many possibilities for him.

It is from one of these sittings that Krishna comes to know about Leela going to a school nearby. Pressed by his daughter, he meets the headmaster of the school. He is very much impressed by his views on children's education. He is happy to note that the headmaster treats children very affectionately and leaves them alone to do whatever they like. It really sounds strange that his own children have not joined his school because of his nagging and cantankerous wife. He is himself a perfect idealist, but he is constrained to lead a miserable life because of the pugnacious disposition of his wife. One day, in a fit of dismay and dejection, the headmaster leaves his family and house forever and starts devoting himself fully to the cause of children education. Krishnan is also dissatisfied with the prevailing system of education in schools and colleges. He is also frantically in search of mental peace in order to establish direct communion with his wife. He sees in the headmaster's dynamic and dedicated personality a retreat from his dull and drab existence. He develops strong liking for his 'Children School' and decides to co-operate with the headmaster in fulfillment of his lofty mission. He sends his daughter to his mother and tenders his

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resignation from his college service. He returns to his lonely and secluded life. One night after attending a farewell party arranged at college on the occasion of his final exit, he goes to bed. He dreams of his wife and experiences an immutable joy. This union of the living and the dead is really unique in the Indo-Anglian fiction. At this stage, the novel closes.

The title of the novel is pertinent. Krishnan is the central figure in the novel and the whole novel revolves round some of the important incidents in his life. His life as a lecturer is beautifully presented in the novel with a sense of realistic touch. The English Teacher marks the end of the first phase of R. K. Narayan, the novelist. As this novel is autobiographical in content, very little part of it is fiction. Susila stands for Rajam, the author's wife to whom the novel is dedicated to perpetuate her memory. The author observes in his noted memoir *My Days*:

‘Within a hundred days of her arrival, Rajam had departed from this world. She caught typhoid in early May and collapsed in the first week of June 1939. Looking back, it seems as if she had a premonition of her end, and had wanted to stay back with her parents and sister. I have described this part of my experience of her sickness and death in *The English Teacher* so fully that I do not, perhaps cannot, go over it again. More than any other book, *The English*

Teacher is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction’. [Op. Cit.: 1975: 134-35]

The plot of *The English Teacher* is divided into three distinct parts for the purpose of our study – the life led by Krishna before his wife joins him – the life led by him in the sweet company of his wife and child and the life led by him after his wife's death. The last part of the novel is very probably the dullest part. It would be futile to search a sense of coherence and compactness in Narayan's *The English Teacher*. We may go to the extent of calling it the most incoherent of all his works. The hero's long and sustained efforts near the lotus pond and the temple for establishing contacts with his dead wife may prove to be of intense interest to the students of parapsychology.

Krishna's independent life in the hostel is a terribly busy life. During leisure hours and holidays, all have a rollicking time. Krishna discusses with other lecturer's points of common interests. Such discussions are very fruitful in the first phase of a lecturer's life.

Krishna is fond of taking a walk by the side of the Sarayu river. The rumble of the river arouses his poetic feelings and inexplicable joy. The most unpleasant part of hostel life is its bath room which annoys Krishna a great deal. An agreeable change

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occurs in his life with the arrival of his wife Susila and their child, Leela. Krishna bids a good-bye to hostel life and shifts to a corner house in the Sarayu Street. The story of their married life is a prose lyric on which Narayan has lavished his fine gifts as a writer. Krishna goes to the Malgudi Railway Station to receive his wife and child. His mind is full of anxiety for the safe arrival of his wife and the child.

Krishna, the lecturer, is frantically in search of a harmonious existence. He thought it fit to send his resignation letter to Principal Brown. He had further decided to make a biting attack on the whole system of education in India:

‘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 feel them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind. This education has 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’. [205]

Here, the novelist points out the difference between the East and the West and the Indian’s mentality to imitate the latter blindly. Besides this, Krishna loses Susila in the flesh, but towards the end of the novel, she comes back to him, to be with

him forever. According him, to be with her was a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death.

Narayan’s novels are not remarkable for their plot-construction, but for their bold and sharp characterization. Thomas Hardy, the begetter of the Wessex novels, feels that characterization is the most important element in the novel. In this realm, Narayan’s success is admirable. Narayan’s genius reveals itself like Charles Dickens, the great romancer in the London Street, in portraying the oddities and peculiarities of a character. His characters are not types. They are generally individuals with distinct merits and demerits.

Narayan’s main character in this novel is Krishna. He is a typical tragic-comic hero. The novelist has portrayed him as a man of sharp intellect and fine poetic sensibility. He lectures the undergraduate on Shakespeare, Milton, Carlyle etc. at Albert Mission College. On the first of every month, he gets a salary of rupees one hundred. This life is mechanical. It is fallen into the ruts of routine. In the beginning, he resides in a room of the college hostel. When the college hours are over, he comes back to his room and spends his time in leisurely discussions with his other colleagues who also reside there. In this way live moves onwards.\

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Krishna is not serious. His teacher and departmental boss Prof. Gajpathi correctly remarks,

‘You must cultivate a little more seriousness of outlook’. [14]

Krishna is a sharp-witted lecturer. He was often asked as to why they should grow a jasmine bush in a boy’s hostel. The hostel bath room was a nuisance. And Krishna often reflects to have a home of his own. In this way, he becomes fed up with hostel life.

Krishna is a poet at heart. His poetic sensibility expresses itself best in the appreciation of Susila’s beauty. On a Sunday morning, they get ready to move to Lawley Extension. Susila prepares herself for the outing. She appears at the kitchen, ‘like a vision, clad in her indigo saree, and hair gleaming and jasmine covered’ [55]. He consciously quotes Wordsworth to give befitting expression to her tall and slim figure:

‘She was a phantom of delight

When first she gleamed upon my sight’. [56]

Quoting poets and authors is a habit of the English teacher.

Krishna’s mother wants to take Leela with her, but he disagrees. He goes to the bus stand to see her off. Leela is also with

him. They are waiting for the bus to start. At this stage his mother persists,

‘You are unpractical and stubborn’. [109]

Kittu, as his mother affectionately calls him, is really stubborn. He resolves to face the problems arising out of the changed situation.

He is unpunctual, lazy and liberal. He attends his classes in a hurried manner even when residing in the boy’s hostel within the campus. He proposes to read a lot but fails to keep his word. During his youth, he was a lover of music, but the interest in this fine art diminished with the oppression of time. The dead soul of his wife emphasizes the role of music in establishing personal contacts. She explains briefly:

‘When I think of you or your of me I am at your side. Music directly transports us’. [148]

Actually, gloom looms large after the death of his beloved wife. His strange friend, who was in the habit of establishing contacts with the dead, influences his life and succeeds in changing its course. Krishna’s intense interest in these unfamiliar regions really counts considerably. Numerous sittings ultimately end in the meeting of the living and the dead.

Being a keen student of English literature, Krishna is very sentimental. His

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differences, at times, with his wife take the shape of pleasant quarrel ending in love and compromise. His wife, Susila has sold out his dilapidated clock. He gets angry with her. At night, Krishna hears that the silence is punctuated by sobs. He goes to her room and finds her sobbing. Sentiments swell up in him, but his forbidden pride gets the upper hand and he returns to his room. But, he finds that a heavy weight is on his mind. He does not enjoy a good sleep that night.

Krishna is a man of minute observation. He can discern the merits and demerits of persons who come in his contact. He understands fully the personality of the idealistic headmaster for whose cause, he tenders his resignation from his post. He functions both as father and mother to Leela and often acts according to her wish. He goes out to a walk simply because Leela like it and it gives her a chance to meet her class-friends on the sand of the river.

Krishna is not interested in reading and understanding Shakespeare and Carlyle, he is also deeply interested in the change that must take place in the prevailing system of education in India. He is much impressed by the 'Leave Alone System' of education as propounded by the gentle, but hard-working headmaster of the children school. Tomorrow will be last day of his life according to the prophecy. Krishna does not believe in such things, but he has a mind to devote a good deal of his time in the

education of small children. Hence, he thinks of sending his resignation to Brown, the Principal of the college. In his resignation, he attacks the prevailing mode of education and expresses his sense of revolt. He says:

'I am up against the system, the whole method and approach of a system of education which makes us morons, cultural morons, but efficient clerks for all your business and administrative offices'. [206]

Krishna is not greedy. To him, money is not the sole consideration of life. In his talk to Principal Brown, he says that he has no use for money. In a children school, he will willingly bear the financial loss of about twenty five rupees a month. His duty in future will be to –

'write poetry and live and work with children and watch their minds unfold' [208]

The net impression of Brown regarding Krishna is very briefly summed up in his small sentence,

'You have done admirably as a teacher of literature'. [208]

Krishna is self-conscious. A grand send-off is arranged at Albert Mission College. In the works of Krishna:

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‘I was pressed into a high-backed chair. Next to mine was another chair for Brown. On my left sat Gajpathi. All around were gathered a miscellaneous crowd of teachers and boys. Everybody kept staring at me. I felt very unhappy. I had never felt more self-conscious in all my life’. [209]

Principal Brown arrives and starts recounting the qualities of head and heart of the young lecturer Krishna. He says:

‘I remember the day he came to my room with application for a seat in English Honours, I’ve seen him grow under my eyes; he has shown himself as an able teacher Everywhere, under every condition, he has proved himself to be an uncompromising idealist. His constant anxiety has been to find the world good enough for his own principles of life and letters. Few men would have the courage to throw up a lucrative income and adopt one very much lower. But he has done it. Success must be measured by its profitlessness said a French philosopher. Our college can look upon this idealist with justifiable pride’. [210]

This is a real tribute to a real teacher. The brief passage just quoted, gives a vivid picture of the success of Krishna in the walk of life.

In his reply to the felicitations Krishna tries to look into his self. He gets up and extends profuse thanks to everybody. He is of the view that his giving up the

college service is not a kind of sacrifice rather he is doing so with a selfish end. He is really in search of an inner peace and withdrawing from the adult world would lead him to the correct path. In the world of children there is a vast store-house of harmony and peace. Krishna’s final meeting, after returning from the college, with his wife’s dead soul provides him with real pleasure.

The headmaster’s system of education is described in the novel as ‘The Leave Alone System’ which can make children wholesome human beings. He believes in astrology and soothsaying. An astrologer who happens to be a vagrant Sadhu has given in detail the events of his life. When he finds the time of his death has finally come, he goes to Krishna and wants to transfer the burden of running the school over his shoulders. He requests Krishna,

‘Please at least keep an eye on the school, and see that these children are not thrown into a hostile world’. [184]

Krishna resigns his job and joins the headmaster’s school because of his deep impact on his own mind. The head-master is not at all interested in the life after death as Krishna is. His concept of death is very modern. It is the only reality that he recognizes. He says,

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‘To me it is nothing more than a full-stop’.
[187]

Matters of this life interest him much and he has not trust in life beyond. His knowledge of past, present and future strictly pertain to his life.

Fortunately, the Sadhu’s prediction does not prove true. It is the hermit’s first error, and we may call it an agreeable error. Now, he leaves his house finally to meet the needs of the children of his school. There comes a change in the behaviour of his wife, but it is too late to mend. He has become fed up with his wife and considers his life onwards a new birth. Hence, he decides finally to abandon his family although he is ready to give them a monthly allowance of their upkeep.

The headmaster is a kind and a liberal man. He shuns his family yet he does not treat them cruelly. His wife and children visit him often, at least, thrice a day. He treats them kindly but he has a firm resolve not to visit them at home. He attains ‘Sanyasa’ as it were and advises his wife and children not to call him husband or father. His wife, now a changed woman, often implores him to bring food but the headmaster firmly declines the offer.

To sum up, the portrait of the headmaster is life-like. His views are very sound on the problems of education but we

cannot miss the point that he is eccentric and hence suffers in his life for some time. His dedication to the cause of children education is really commendable.

Besides, these two major male characters in this novel, there are some minor male characters also who influence the actions and activities of the people. They are Krishna’s colleagues at college, the old college peon, his father and his father-in-law, Dr. Shankar of Krishna Medical Hall and the Swamiji.

Krishna’s father is a B.A. of olden days. He has been brought up on the line of Pater, Carlyle, Scott and Browning. He is a product of Madras College. He is very strict and fastidious. For writing letters, he used his own home-made ink, memo-pad and steel pen with a fat green wooden handle. After passing his B. A., he refused to enter government service, as many of his generation did, but went back and settled in his village and looked after ‘his lands and property’ [17]. In is old days, he was becoming rather difficult. Krishnan’s mother explains how impatient he becomes when he hears swish of a broom or the noise of scrubbing, and he shouts at the top of his voice. He is, at times, down with this annual rheumatic attack. In a word, Krishna’s father is affectionate and liberal.

Krishna’s father-in-law was more sociable:

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‘He was an important land holder in his village, and beside that, he was on the directorate of a number of industrial concerns in Madras’. [91]

In spite of his old age, he was unorthodox in his habits and speech. He always advised Krishna to keep his family small.

It was Rangappa who introduced Krishna to Dr. Shankar of Krishna Medical Hall. He used to call him ‘the most successful practitioner in the town’ [78]. The doctor had a lovely personality. He looked like a film star being mobbed by admirers. But the reality is that Dr. Shankar is not an intelligent physician. It becomes considerably difficult for him to distinguish between malaria and typhoid. His weak and wrong diagnosis is partly responsible for Susila’s death. The doctor does not disapprove of the Swamiji’s charms who had come to dispel evil spirits by some mantras and that way he was sure to cure Susila fully.

Susila is the major character. She is wife of Krishna, the English teacher. She was last daughter of her family. Naturally, she was greatly petted by her parents. In her parent’s house, she spent most of her time in reading, knitting, embroidering or looking after a garden. After marriage, Krishna’s mother trained her up in house-keeping.

Susila has ‘picked up many sensible points in cooking and household economy’

[29]. Krishna’s mother says, ‘Susila is a modest girl. She is not obstinate’ [30]. It is not in the nature of Susila to be demonstrative. She tinkers at her little garden whenever she finds time. She loves her husband sincerely and deeply. She always awaits his arrival from the college after 4.30 p.m. When Krishna says, she exhibits her ready wit by adding,

‘I didn’t come out to look for you, but just to play with the child’.
[36]

Susila is a docile housewife. She drew up monthly budget with great accuracy. She makes a complete list – from rice down to mustard. She advises her husband not to make a slight change in it. Really speaking,

‘there was an autocratic strain in her nature in these matters, and unsuspected depths of rage’. [39]

She induces her husband to change over from the N.P.S. to Co-operative Stores in order to buy cheap and good commodities. Her perfectness in running within the budget has been very aptly described by the novelist in these words:

‘She watched these containers as a sort of barometer, the level of their contents indicating the progress of the month She

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was reigning supreme in the kitchen' [42-43]

She is the cash-keeper of Krishna. She happens to be a ruthless accountant. 'In her hands, a hundred rupees seemed to do the work of two hundred, and all through the month she was able to give me money when I asked'. [39]

Susila had a rich fund of humour. She is quick-witted also. In the earlier years of her married life, she used to read poetry along with her husband. The line of the famous poem, 'My true love hath my heart and I have his' has a great appeal for her. She becomes red in the face and questions within her mind,

'Why can't each keep his own or her own heart instead of this exchange?' [45]

She then hurriedly puts out her hands and searches all the pockets of Krishna saying, 'In case you should take away mine' [45]

Susila is lovely to look at. Her deadly disease binds them together more strongly than ever. Ultimately, her death causes unmitigated suffering in the life of Krishna. The pang of separation is intolerable but the divine order cannot be changed. Psychic development of Krishna renders him with a series of occasions to meet the soul of Susila. These meetings enhance his love for the dear departed.

Even in the unfamiliar regions, she is particular about the welfare of her husband and her daughter, Leela. In different meetings, she suggests ways and means for the improvement of their worldly life. She sends the message,

'She is as deeply devoted to her husband and child and the family as ever' [131]

In her yellow trunk, Susila keeps all kinds of toilet sets she has acquired in her lifetime. She has very fond of vulcanite cases with mirrors and small bottles. She behaves like a child in her enthusiasm. Every day, she gives a commission to Krishna while going to college for a purchase on his way back.

Susila has a knack of story-telling. She begins a story with childlike simplicity of two brothers, woodcutters, one of whom is good and industrious and the other is lazy and bad. In between the lines, the corrections are those of Krishna. She is very fond of taking a walk along the river in moonlight. But for all the years of her married life, her wish remained unfulfilled.

The novelist has drawn up the character of Susila with great care and exactness. He has lavished a very rich language to build up her poetic images. From the beginning of the novel, Susila catches our attention and the process is

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prolonged till the close of the novel. Her virtues are noble and befitting a good wife.

Krishna's three years old daughter, Leela provides an interesting study. She is curious and care-free. Her mother's room remains closed after her death. The child puts a question out of curiosity, 'Father, why is that door shut?' [112] It throws Krishna into a frenzy because he does not know what to reply. In the evening, the little one comes and repeats the same question. This chokes Krishna and he tries to satisfy her with a superficial reply. He plays both the father and mother to Leela. Leela's eyes look like

'a pair of butterflies dancing with independent life, at such close quarters'. [114]

Her friend's name is Kamala. While taking a walk in the company of her father, she points out to her father towards her school friends. She feels very easy in the unambitious headmaster's ideal school for children. 'The Leave Alone School' gives a very successful treatment of the carefree and sensitive nature of children.

Thus, Narayan's characteristic humour is not missing even in this novel. Undoubtedly, it is his somewhat a serious attempt to maintain irony and humour in the novel. The idealistic headmaster's wife is a quarrelsome woman. She starts insulting her husband in presence of Krishna. The

headmaster tries to make her understand that the visitor is a cultured man whereupon, she reacts sharply,

'Let him, what do I care? If he is a big man to you. He is not a big man to me'. [164]

Krishna decides to leave the place at once.

The headmaster peeps into his past life. He has his step relations including mother occupying his father's house and he has no mind to fight for it. Krishna tells him to exercise his right and that would place his wife and children in better circumstances. The headmaster's reply is replete with irony:

'You think so? No chance of it my friend. She will create just those surroundings for herself even in a palace'. [165]

In a nutshell, The English Teacher proves to be the best novel of Narayan's second phase of writing. It is the period of experimentation and evolution of the artist. Slowly yet surely, the novelist is unfolding the 'Self' of Krishnan and the full flowering of his genius is discussed in detail throughout the novel.

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