

# Testament of a Walker

By R. K. Narayan (1906-2001)

**Instructions for the students:** This material contains the explanation of the second chapter of Alternative English course. The students are requested to read the main text given in the form of images along with the explanation given below.

## About the Author

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, popularly known as R.K. Narayan was a leading author of Indian literature in English and well known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town named Malgudi. He has conferred the Sahitya Akademi Award for English, for his novel 'The Guide' in 1960. His writing style was marked by its simplicity and the use of subtle humour. His stories focused on ordinary people and everyday situations.

'Testament of a Walker' is an excerpt from Narayan's collection of essays titled *A Writer's Nightmare*. The essay is narrated in first person and takes a humorous look at the woes faced by the author, a worried owner of an imported car. The narrator describes his experiences of owning the imported car while making a strong case for using our own feet which are capable of functioning without petrol or gears.

## Point wise explanation:

### Introduction to author's car:

There are persons who have no ear for music being tone-deaf; others who have no eye for art, who may in a sense be called 'colour blind'. In a similar category, I am impervious to the subtler values in a car. To me an automobile is only the means to an end; I am satisfied if I am provided a seat and four-wheels that can roll and I am blind to all other points in a car. In spite of this constitutional defect, by a quirk of fate, I came to own an 'imported car', flashy and full of sophistication, which cause ecstasy in every auto-pundit who saw it. 'Ah! Recessed handle!' would cry one. 'Look at this steering manoeuvrable with a flick of the finger! Push-button glass raiser! Floating seats! Multicoloured speedometer. Ah! concealed air-conditioner! Taperecorder—digital alarm with calculator.' They would examine my dash-board panel admiringly, although I never understood at anytime the purpose of most of the buttons, switches, and gadgets, and found it safer to leave them alone. The air-conditioner, which was supposed to make one's journey free from dust, and heat, and noise was switched on, during the ten years I used the car, for a total period of thirty minutes, which worked out to less than three minutes a year. Whenever the air-conditioner was on, the windows were to be closed; which inhibited my driver, whose habit was to show right or left turn by thrusting his arm out, who, when the glass was raised, constantly hit it with his fist. He was also in the habit of gesticulating at erring pedestrians and addressing them volubly in passing. Now he felt constricted, encapsulated, and tongue-tied, and drove morosely. Also, I think, he was conditioned to driving to the tune of a rattle and roar of other vehicles beside, behind, and ahead, and without such accompaniments he could not proceed with any confidence.

The essay begins in first person with the author explaining about few people who do not appreciate music, others who have no eye for art. He puts himself in a similar category by saying that he is immune to the finer values of a car. For him, a car is a means of transportation and he is blind to all other features that the car is loaded with. Despite of having this attitude, he became the owner of an imported car that was flashy and sophisticated. Experts in the field of automobiles (Auto pundits) would be excited to see the unique installations in the car and its features. The author did not understand the purpose of the different buttons and gadgets installed in the car and preferred to leave them alone. During the ten years that he used the car, the air conditioner was used for only

thirty minutes, averaging to three minutes a year. The author's driver preferred to have the window open so that he could indicate right or left turns by thrusting his arm out. He also gesticulated at erring pedestrians and addressed them quite loudly. When the air conditioner was turned on, the glass would have to be raised, and it would prevent him from doing all these things. So he felt restricted in the confines of the car with the glass raised and the situation was quite gloomy. He was also conditioned to hearing the noise of the traffic, all of which made him proceed ahead confidently.

### **Rediscovering the Use of Feet:**

...any confidence.

I lack automobile sensibility and do not regret it, I have a strong belief that man's ultimate destiny lies in walking, that is why he is endowed with a pair of legs, which can operate without petrol or gears. It is this philosophy that leaves me indifferent at the mention of any petrol 'hike' (a hybrid term, which seems to flourish in oil). I know that

the hiking, will culminate where it can't 'hike' any further (that will be at a stage where it may cost a thousand rupees to travel one kilometer), and man will rediscover the use of his feet; when that happens oil wells will overflow into storm drains or stagnate for want of takers, and petro-civilization will have become defunct. The most ambitious work I have been planning for years is to be called 'Testament of a Walker'. The title has been ready for decades although the book may never be written, considering its boundless scope and ramification. Whether written or unwritten, the philosophy is deep rooted in me. Time was when I walked ten miles a day, morning and evening (Mysore beink ideal for such an occupation), and even now I continue the habit on a lesser scale, wherever I may be, and in any season. If I am compelled to stay indoors through bad weather, I can still get the mileage out in my verandah, though I may be presenting an odd spectacle pacing up and down like a bear in his cage. For a fanatic of this sort the possession of a car is an anachronism; and especially the acquisition of a sophisticated, imported make, an irrelevancy and a nuisance.

The author does not regret his lack of automobile sensibility and strongly believes that man is meant to walk. It is for this reason that man has been given a pair of legs that can work without petrol or gears. This philosophy makes him indifferent to talk of petrol hike. He says that the hiking will end after reaching a point from where it cannot go further and once that happens, people will start walking and oil and other petroleum products will not be in demand. The author also mentions how he has been planning to write about this philosophy in a book titled 'Testament of a Walker' for a long time.

He talks about the time when he used to walk ten miles a day, both in the morning and evening. He still continues to walk, though not as much as he previously used to. He also mentions that if bad weather prevents him from going outdoors, he walks in his verandah, though for the onlookers he may look like a caged bear pacing up and down. He says that for a person with his thinking, owning a car is an anachronism and having an imported one, a nuisance.

### **Author's privacy:**

Among the things I value are privacy and anonymity; both are lost when I allow myself to be carried about in a gaudy car. It is like sitting in a howdah on elephant back and hoping not to be noticed.

In a compact city like Mysore (where everyone can meet everyone else at will), movements became known to the whole town and someone or other would remark 'Ah, you were at the store this morning' or 'I saw you going down the market Road'. No harm, normally speaking, in such observation or enquiry; but in my case it leads to complications, embarrassment since I generally avoid all public engagements and invitations with the excuse that I will be away at Bangalore (100 miles) or Madras (300 miles) or Delhi (1000 miles), depending upon the persistence of the man asking me. Apart from all this, I was in constant

The author treasures his privacy and prefers being anonymous. These are lost when he travels in his flashy car. He compares it to sitting in a howdah atop an elephant in the ancient times and hoping to go unnoticed. The author lives in the city of Mysore, where the whole town knows each other and about one another's movements. This would lead to embarrassment for the author as he avoids public engagements and invitations by offering the excuse that he would be out of town. But riding his car after such excuses exposed his lies.

### **Costly Repairs:**

persistence of the man asking me. Apart from all this, I was in constant dread lest my driver should feel inspired to test my car's special virtue of being able to attain full speed in two minutes. At the workshop I could not help noticing the battered remains of many cars which had tried this facility on our roads. Our mechanic blithely explained. 'No problem. We can always bring them back to shape. Part of our job. Nothing is impossible. Insurance will take care of our bills even if we have to charge thirty or forty thousand for repairs. So why worry?'

The author is also fearful of his driver testing the car's ability to attain full speed in two minutes. At the workshop, he had noticed the battered remains of several cars which had been crushed beyond recognition. The author was quite disturbed when a mechanic cheerfully assured him that they were capable of repairing the inflicted damages, at a cost of thirty or forty thousand rupees. Since the author's car was not an ordinary one, he would have to seek service from the authorised workshop, located a hundred miles away in Bangalore. So he had to travel a long distance whenever the car needed any assistance.

### Special Service at a Special Price: description of the workshop:

Since my car was of a special pedigree, it was inadvisable to allow any ordinary workshop to open the bonnet. The accredited workshop with mechanics wielding special tools was a hundred miles away at Bangalore. For any attention, I had to drive a hundred miles every time.

At Bangalore a team of experts would stand around and pronounce their verdict. 'Engine mountings need replacement, if you want to get rid of the 'dug dug' sound which is bothering you; one of the front shock-absorbers must be replaced, better while you do it replace the pair so that your tyre wear will be uniform, otherwise your steering system will be damaged.' After their diagnosis, they would direct me to the one and only establishment this side of the Vindhyas which stocked imported spares, an exclusive shop catering only to the elite. They could toss across the counter anything you wanted from a little screw to a whole engine, at a price fit, indeed, for royalty still on their thrones. A customer entering this shop was expected to be lofty-minded and discreet enough not to question the price but part with his cash with an air of amused nonchalance and even benevolence.

I began to fear that at this rate (I was obliged to visit the workshop every other week to shed my savings), I should soon reach the brink of bankruptcy effortlessly. I seemed to have let myself into a strange world peopled by a class of high priests and voodoo-men, the workings of whose minds I could never fathom, but still, who held sway over me.

At the workshop in Bangalore, a team of experts would give suggestions on the parts to be repaired or replaced. They would direct him to an exclusive shop, that stocked spare parts for imported cars. Everything from a small screw to a whole engine would be available at a price fit for royalty. The shop was catered to the elite ( high class sophisticated people) where the customer was expected to kindly part with his cash without questioning the price. The author feared that he would soon become bankrupt going by the amount of money he spent on repairing the car.

### Missing Parts:

Two cyclists collided and fell on my car parked in front of the hospital, and smashed the parking light on the left side. It could not ordinarily be replaced in this country. The élite shop could produce one if I was prepared to pay two thousand for the piece. My mechanic enquired why I didn't visit New York and pick it up there. I had to remind him as gently as I could that he was talking nonsense. Then he examined the damage closely, and declared, 'Oh, yes ... only the glass is broken ... we will fabricate a cover in plastic ... though it may be difficult to get the curvature of the original ... I will try...' Briskly he unscrewed the whole assembly and left. He was away from the workshop for ten weeks on sick leave. When I met him again and enquired about the parking light, he looked puzzled and said, 'I remember I gave it to you. I needed only the measurement of the socket. Please check if it is at home in Mysore ... As a rule I do not like to keep such things with me.'

No further reference was made to the subject. It was impossible that both of us could be right. One of us must surely have suffered from hallucination; either myself seeing a vision of his taking out the light with the words, 'Let me keep it for safety ... otherwise the boys in this workshop may steal it ...' or he had an illusion of handing it over to me with appropriate words.

One day, two cyclists collided and fell on the author's car, because of which the parking light on the left side of the car was damaged. He would be able to buy the light from the exclusive shop at a cost of two thousand rupees. The mechanic informed him that only the glass cover of the light was broken and they could fabricate a cover in plastic. He removed the whole assembled part and left. When the author visited the workshop again and asked about the parking light, the mechanic said that he did not remember anything about taking the light away and was sure that

he had given it back. He said that he had a rule to not to keep things with him. The author remarked that it was impossible that both the author and the mechanic could be right at the same time. One of them might be under an illusion or hallucination.

**Author's Decision:**

That settled it, I was appalled at the thought of all the travail I had undergone and the expense, and considering that actually I had no use for a car, having no office or outside engagements, using it only to catch it at the end of a long walk ... it seemed to me the most thoughtless thing I had done in my life to have acquired this car, I decided to get rid of it, lock it up in the shed as soon as possible to turn my energies again to writing stories.

I am not the sort of person who would enjoy getting under the car on a Sunday, as is the case with a friend of mine, who generally spends his leisure hours under his imported car, having no trust in any mechanic or workshop in our motherland. All his time is spent in collecting spare parts from far and near; he has succeeded in piling up enough stock to assemble a couple of new cars if he so desires. Whenever it becomes necessary, he strips his car bare, cuts away a diseased part, and grafts a new one. At such moments he speaks like a surgeon specialized in heart bypass and kidney transplants. I admire his competence, though I cannot accept his advice, which generally runs on the following lines, 'Don't give up your car ... the thing to do is to be on the lookout for a similar model, buy it at any price, and then you could transfer all the necessary parts from one car to another. It will work out cheaper that way. Ultimately you can sell away the shell of the remaining car to any fellow who is planning to set up a wayside tea-stall, or you could convert it into a little garden house in your own compound.'

This incident proved to be a turning point and the author was horrified at the trouble he had gone through and the expenses incurred for a car, of which he did not have much use. He felt that

acquiring this car was the most unwise decision he had ever made in his life. He decided to get rid of it at the earliest and devote his energies again to writing.

He again speaks about a friend who does not trust the mechanics in our country and thus repairs his imported car himself. He spends all his time in collecting spare parts so he can use it whenever required. He advised the author not to put away his car, but to buy a similar model of his car so that the necessary parts could be transferred from one car to another. It will be cheaper for him and the author could later sell the shell of the car to a person who wants to open a tea stall by the wayside. Another suggestion was that, the author could himself convert the shell of the car into a small garden house in his own residential compound. Nevertheless the author did not accept his advice.