

R.K. NARAYAN'S 'THE GUIDE' - A STUDY OF THE SUBCONSCIOUS



Dr. Geeta Kapil,
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
Vidyant Hindu P.G. College,
Lucknow.U.P.India,

Abstract

The novel 'The Guide' a 1958 novel, written in English, is based on Malgudi, a fictional town in South India. The novel describes the transformation of the protagonist Raju from a tour guide to a spiritual guide and then one of the greatest holy man of India. This journey is from the external to the internal told through a series of flashbacks. As Michael Gorra regards Narayan as 'easy to read and hard to understand.' Though the book is all about beautiful landscape, the carvings, conflict between eastern spirituality and western materialism, the hardships and natural calamities faced by poor villagers, the intellectual superiority and practical wisdom. But in this article, I have confined myself to the mental, psychological and the spiritual undergoings of the protagonist reflected through his behaviour in the whole journey of his life. As I believe that the change in his character is not outside the psyche. The railway Raju who used to enjoy his meagre income and his intellectual capability as a guide, suddenly starts feeling nervous and develops complex before the historian Marco; in an attempt to divert his thoughts, he is drawn towards Marco's wife Rosie; the circumstances which he tries to be emotional but just on the material plane control; lands up in prison for forgery and finally undergoes a transformation, ends up as a spiritual Guru and achieves redemption. The book provides insight into the Indian thought process.

Key words: complex, conscience psyche, salvation



Introduction

The novel is the story of the movement from one state of materialistic desire to another; the change from a shopkeeper to a tourist guide is the first stage of his attachment to selfish materialism. The second stage is reached when he gets emotionally involved with Rosie. This love is neither Platonic nor even. It simply happens; there being nothing else by way of compatibility between the two. He is highly motivated not by feelings of love seeking selflessly the good of the beloved but by money. Raju himself says: "My philosophy was "that while it lasted the maximum money had to be squeezed out. We needed all the money in the world."

'we' does not indicate emotional tie up but practical existence of a middleman who lives on the earnings of others. His love too is on the materialistic plane, he wants to make the best use of his control over Rosie before he could launch Nalini as a dancer he uses the same salesmanship to fix her first public programme which finally proves her golden break.

Narayan's pride in the infallibility of the Indian sense of values can neither allow a swindler to succeed nor to end the novel at this aesthetically satisfying point; he must see the sin redeemed. After all his religious roots never allow him to outstep the charmed circle of the Indian heritage:

"I can't write a novel without a Krishna, Ganesha, Hanuman, astrologers, temples, devdasis or temple prostitutes.....that has turned out to be my India."

Narayan's concept of life is that of balance. Money is necessary but it should be earned honestly and otherwise it just leads to disastrous consequences as in the case of Raju. The end must therefore establish the balance which Raju has lost because he becomes a prey to money. He must learn to do things without materialistic ends in view. The ending 'as a spiritual guide' is not another pose of Raju, the unscrupulous fraud. It is more or less a choice, partly reached under the pressure of circumstances, but more due to a willing surrender to the inevitable which acceptance of the role involves. If at all 'Raju



is a sinner, a sinner is a sinner'; he must also have possessed the earlier resourcefulness as a cheat. He could have assumed the role of a fasting ascetic fasting for the sake of poor villagers whose misery he could not see and yet could have extricated himself easily out of the piquant situation. The first casualty of sinful existence is the very spring of human sympathy. There is a clear indication of serious introspection on the part of the sinner and we are left in a state of happy possibility that at long last the swindler tries and succeeds in correcting the wrong balance he had struck because of selfish materialism. He seems to follow the path preached by the Lord in '*Bhagwad Gita*' where the seeker for freedom from the wheel of existence is said to be sans fear, sans anger and above all sans desire. It was the desire for success in the worldly sense which made him to graduate from his ordinary existence as a shop-owner to a guide, then to an impresario and manager of Rosie. But given the traditional framework of his unconscious, he can at long last easily change the direction of his life and be a redeemer of not only the faithful villagers but of his own self. As in Shakespeare's '*Tempest*', all attachments shed, what remains is simple charity on which even gods bestow their benediction. And that is we in the end are not told whether the rains visit the cursed village or not. It is taken for granted that once such a spiritual odyssey is undertaken, the wish of the seeker is sure to be granted, as suggested by Narayan in his statement on the circumstances of conceiving the plot of the novel when a severe draught had overtaken Mysore and after the Brahmins fasted and prayed for eleven days ".....it rained and brought relief to the countryside."

Thus it is the strength of Narayan's faith in the Indian tradition which regards no evil incorrigible that Raju's comic involvement with the mundane is transformed into a pursuit of the spiritual. The beginnings are comic but the end is all with tragic sombreness which makes us to contemplate on the strange web of events which lead the hero to decide on an action never expected of him—a weak vessel of desire-called Raju.

R.K.Narayan has a depth of perception that enables him to see beyond externals. In writing about the corners of southern India he has seen into men's' souls to present their good and evil. '*The Guide*', story of Raju, 'the best guide in all India' is a masterpiece on



human nature-that is, some humans and some natures.

The very purpose of the zig-zag narration seems to be to help us see the principal character in a three dimensional perspective-what he was, what he is and what he is destined to become. We see Raju, as he sees himself, in a three dimensional or triple mirror and see the three images constantly juxtaposed. The novel unfolds as Raju relates his life to Velan, a villager of Mangala, as a last and desperate attempt to escape fasting. Prior to this, in the capacity of a tourist-guide, Raju assists Marco in his archaeological research, gets involved with Rosie, Marco's wife, helps to get her artistic potential recognised, and ultimately ends up in prison for forging her signature. After release he is forced to assume the role of a saint at Mangala which include fasting for rains when draught affects the village. The ending of the novel is deliberately made obscure-one is not sure if it rains and if Raju dies in the end. This ambiguity, however, adds to the poignancy of the novel.

From a psychological point of view, Raju's personality becomes interesting after the arrival of Marco and his wife Rosie at Malgudi. Raju develops a strong sense of inferiority before Marco and later, even before Rosie. Raju classifies Marco as one of those rare tourists who with his knowledge of the carvings, reduces Raju to a meek, self-effacing state. Raju becomes aware of Marco's intellectual superiority rapidly but also gets involved with Rosie. Though being a sensitive individual, he is aware that his relationship with Rosie has no social sanction;

"I did not want to be observed going to Room '28.I was becoming self-conscious about it. I very much wished that the architecture of the place could be altered so that I might go up without having the desk-man watch me."

Freud includes the formation of a moral conscience – that of ideals and self-observation –among the functions of the super ego. It could thus be seen that the super-ego and the ego of Raju are not conflicting ends regarding his present relationship with Rosie. In addition to this, Raju's taxi –driver friend Gaffur, Raju's mother and uncle by their



disapproval intensify the conflict in him. Raju successfully suppresses the tension arising out of this conflict but this has stronger repercussions on the psyche later.

As Rosie's artistic potential gets a nationwide recognition, the tension accumulating in Raju also intensifies. His personality gradually gets impregnated with a sense of inferiority. According to *Adler*, an individual seeks to overcompensate his inferiority feelings by becoming domineering and assertive- Raju's dominating attitude towards Rosie can be recalled in this regard.

Later Raju's attempts at identifying himself with the upper –class society –the social elite, could also be seen as a reaction to his feelings of inferiority. His close friends are: two judges, four eminent politicians, two big textile mill owners, a banker, a municipal councillor and the editor of 'The Truth'

The incidents which follow illustrate R.K.Narayan's supreme craftsmanship and understanding of the psychology of characters he is sketching. Henceforth events which occur in the novel gradually increase the tension and anxiety already accumulated in Raju. It is in this context that the validity of *H.M.Williams's* following observation becomes apparent:

"The new freedom of psychological exploration led....to the tragic plot of *The Guide*, Narayan's most ambitious employment of the devices of retrospective narrative and juxtaposition of time past and time present....."

The arrival of the Book 'The Cultural-History of South-India' by Marco [with a note of acknowledgement of Raju's services], the hiding of the book and the discovery of the same by Rosie add a strong guilt complex to the already tension-ridden mind of Raju.

The arrival of the promissory note, Raju's forgery of Nalini's signature and the resultant jail-term are important events in Raju's life from a psychological point of view; it is here that he is reduced into a very aggressive individual because of his unresolved tension and anxiety. Raju enters jail life only to discover that he is damned by the police force totally, chiefly by the superintendent. The police officer who happened to be Raju's card playing



mate reduces him to the status of his personal servant.

As each and every spot in Malgudi can unmake Raju's unconscious, he resorts to the commonest defence mechanism-escapism-we find him running away to Mangala where he again becomes the centre of attraction and is bestowed with a spiritual status. Here he suddenly finds himself asking, "Have I been in a prison or in some sort of transmigration." When draught affects Mangala and the village-folk thrust upon him the role of the fasting sage-saviour, he tries to reveal his identity to Velan in a last ditch attempt to escape, apparently from fasting whereas the real motive behind this confession is to resolve the internal tension that is accumulated in him due to the numerous role playing he has done. He is, in fact, at a stage wherein he is prepared to do anything to resolve his aggression by surfacing it. But Velan like other villagers earnestly believes that Raju is their saviour. Thus, the confession does not help Raju to resolve his mental turmoil. Raju, however, accidentally discovers that partial fasting helps him. Fasting-a means of self-inflicted body torture-duly assists Raju in getting rid of the aggression accumulated in him due to the previous unresolved tensions and mental anxiety.

R.K.Narayan propagates Oriental philosophy in all his novels and 'The Guide' is no exception. In Hindu philosophy realisation of the truth comes after going through the acid test of illusion or '*maya*'. The ability to perceive '*reality*' is the end product of experience. The illusions of his life: Rosie, tourists, money and matter gradually start diminishing and he passes the test of time and achieves salvation.

Raju does fast honestly, by the end of the eleventh day of sincere and complete fasting, most of his aggression and tension get resolved in the form of body torture. In this regard, the myth of the crocodile could be risked with a little interpretation. If the crocodile representing hypocrisy and cruelty [aggression in psychological terms] dies out of dehydration, Raju's mind gets rid of all tension in him by fasting. In this sense, the novel describes a remarkably comprehensive phase in Raju's life. William Walsh in his book '*The Human Idiom*' puts forth the same views. R.K.Narayan is intensely aware of the way



in which human character is constituted.

For him the very conditions of human growth are individual discrepancy and communal collaboration. And character does develop by means of clues offered by others. It is this double insight which the character of Raju embodies and justifies. Raju is utterly isolated but it is his collaboration- uneasy, desperate and finally total-with the expectation of the people that turns their immense illusion into something like the truth.

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