



Pen Portrayal of Rural Life and Indian Myth in R.K. Narayan's Novel -The Guide

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Abstract

Among all the Indo-Anglian novelists, R. K. Narayan is regarded as the greatest. Today, R. K. Narayan is a writer of great eminence. Though he dies a few years ago, people still have read his novels interestingly. One such a great Novel is The Guide.

The Guide reveals the Indian way of life and also the culture and tradition of India. R.K. Narayan has used typical Indian characters and Indian atmosphere to portray Indian culture. The main characters of this novel are Raju, Rosie and Marco. R.K. Narayan has given a true social picture of India through 'The Guide'. The traits of Indian manners and customs are also reflected in this novel. Narayan has given a clear picture of Indian rural life and belief.

The poverty of India has been reflected with a personal touch of the author. The villagers are shown as suffering from poverty and ignorance and their illiteracy has been reflected as the root cause for all their sufferings. There are as gullible and kind hearted as any Indian village habitats.

This paper aims to portray rural life and Indian myth in the novel The Guide by R. K. Narayan. The task has been taken to analyse the real picture of Indian village life and their belief and superstitions as presented by Narayan in this novel to exemplify the culture, tradition and myth of India.

Keywords: Tourist Guide, Modern -type relationship, Illiterate habitats, Faith, Spiritual Guide.

Introduction

In 1930's three major Indian English novelists, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao based their novels on significant themes that they discovered such as emancipation from foreign rule, East – West relationship, the communal problems and the plight of untouchables, the landless poor and the economically exploited people. Mulk Raj Anand's major novels Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936) and Two Leaves and a Bud (1937) are all written as a crusade against social exploitation. R. K. Narayan also touched the social evils like casteism, inequality, injustice, gender –bias and superstitious themes and had added them into the themes of Indian novels in English through his novels The Guide (1958), The Financial Experts (1951) and The English Teacher (1945). The Indian Sanskrit rhythm in the syntax of English has been created by Raja Rao in almost all his novels Kanthapura (1938), The Serpent and the

Rope (1960), and exhibited the myths and legends of Hinduism as well.

The Guide (1958) has won Narayan the Sahitya Academy Award. He heard about an incident in which some Brahmins prayed to God for rain in knee-deep water for twelve days and then it rained. This became an inspirational factor for him to develop the plot for his novel 'The Guide'. He has portrayed typical Indian character in this novels filled with Indian emotions and also symbols representing Indian tradition, Rural life and Indian myth or beliefs. The Guide as a novel covers many sins and many virtues of its characters. The protagonist, Raju, goes to the Mangala village on the Sarayu River and he stays in a temple on the river bank. There he meets Velan, a simple villager, and it was this meeting which was fated to involve him in endless trouble.

Rural Life and Indian Myth

R. K. Narayan portrays a South-Indian conservative society in the village, Mangal. Though the contact of Western culture



brought many changes in the village, castes and traditional occupations continue to exist. Marriages are still arranged. Astrology is accepted there. Washing the feet before visiting a temple or a saint as a ritual of purification, pulling the temple chariot along the streets on festive days, smearing holy ash on the forehead, reciting all kinds of sacred verse, consulting an astrologer for auspicious or sacred time, lighting the lamp in the god's niche, reading the Bhagavadgita are some of the minor rituals appearing in *The Guide*. Touching the feet of the saint, making offerings in kind or prostrating before god, are other ritualistic forms. Raju's fasting to appease the rain gods and bring rain to save the people is the most significant ritual in the novel.

The people of the village had a clear idea of the fasting ritual and it is reflected through Velan's words. "Velan gave a very clear account of what the savior was expected to do—stand in knee-deep water, look to the skies, and utter the prayer line for two weeks completely fasting during the period—and lo, the rains would come down, provided the man who performed it was a pure soul, was a great soul" (Narayan 109). Referring to the fasting ritual by Raju to appease rain-god Narayan writes: "He felt suddenly so enthusiastic that it gave him a new strength to go through with the ordeal." Ritual is depicted as an ordeal because this is forced on the reluctant Raju who has no faith in it. However, the drought and the plight of the villagers have a persuasive effect on him and so he prays to heaven to send down rain to save the villagers". Narayan does not glorify the superstitious rituals. Similarly he does not deny the existence of a strong strain of faith among the villagers in the native rituals.

Analysis of Novel

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) is a novel written in such a socio-economic context when India was still a tradition based country with the majority of her population living in the villages. People of these villages were mostly uneducated, simple, gullible and

superstitious. Children here grew up hearing legends and myths of many gods, goddesses and sages, which entered into their intelligentsia and developed their aesthetic senses and moral values. Narayan himself may have heard many such stories from her grandmother and thus may have had a firsthand experience of these believes of the village people. Hence, he chooses such a village to unfold the story of the novel in point. The guide is set in Malgudi (a fictional town created by Narayan), and it opens with its protagonist, recently released from prison.

It is a man called Velan from this village, who first mistakes Raju for a saint and gradually makes other people of his village believe Raju to be a saint telling them of the miracle that he believes Raju has performed to solve a crucial problem of his family. Raju, perhaps already having a lesson of his misdeeds, feels reluctant to play the role assigned by Velan, but when Velan tells Raju his problem for a solution, Raju cannot help asserting his old habit of getting "involved in other people's interests and activities" (guide, 9). Irritated by the greatness thrust upon him, Raju tells Velan to bring his sister the next day and thus reluctantly accepts a position superior to Velan's.

Velan discovers Raju having something of a saint in the posture in which he is sitting. Velan meets him "sitting cross-legged" on granite slab "as if it were a throne, beside an ancient shrine" (5), a river flowing beneath it. Raju's sitting cross-legged reminds one of the postures in which lord Buddha kept sitting in meditation and in which Hindu religious gurus usually sit in meditation. The granite slab making a 'throne' for Raju seems to provide Velan with a symbol that implies a meaning related to the figure of a holy man. The Sanskrit term of 'throne' is Simhasns and it is derived from the two words Simha meaning a lion and asana meaning a seat "because a high priest's throne ought to be covered with a lion's skin (dubois 1968: 127). The ancient



shrine beside which Raju is sitting and the river flowing beneath it—two sacred symbols of India—also seem to provide further archetypal symbols of holiness that possibly lead Velan to take Raju for a saint. As Krisna Rao (1987: 170) observes: “the influence of the temple on the democratic consciousness is so profound and efficacious that it results in the ultimate transformation of Raju”.

The polarity in the character of Raju is complex and misleading. While, on one hand, he is reluctant to play the role unwittingly given by Velan, on the other hand he feels delighted at the success of his playing the role perfectly and “no one was more impressed with the grandeur of the whole thing than Raju himself” (47). When he is still angry with Velan for forcing on him the role of a saint, he acquires beard and prayer beads to heighten his spiritual status. The uncritical faith of the simple villagers and their fine compliments bewilder Raju, yet his uneasiness is only within him. He never makes any bold effort to clear his position. Thus Raju oscillates between reluctance and eagerness. His reluctance is partly due to his innocence—as he wants to tell velan: “I am not as great as you imagine. I am just ordinary (8)—and partly due to a covert fear that the high reverence of the humble folks and their unquestioning belief in his enormous “capacity” may bring him some unavoidable trouble. Raju senses some danger implied in this reverence and feels reluctant to be what velan wants him to be. But soon he agrees to play the role due to an inevitable necessity of his—the necessity of food. Once he discovers that his working, as desired by velan, will provide him with a sure means for food, the cheat in him rises. Thus that his decision of pretending to be a saint is determined by his selfish motives is clear in the following lines: Where could he go ? He had not trained himself to make a living out of hard work. Food was coming to him unasked now. If he went away somewhere else certainly nobody was going to take trouble to bring him food in return for just waiting for it. The only other

place where it could happen was the prison. Where could he go now? . . . He realised that he had no alternative: he must play the role that velan had given him. (Guide, 33)

Thus, completely motivated by a selfish end, raju decides not to leave the place where food comes to him unasked only in return for just waiting for it although at the same time fearing that someday the villagers [velan] might “come to the stage of thinking that he was too good for food and that he subsided on atoms from the air”—a foreseen comment that comes true in a different way in his life (33). For this selfish attitude of raju, balarum gupta (1981: 135) labels him as “a selfish swindler, an adroit actor, and a perfidious megalomaniac”.

Balarama gupta accuses narayan of being less “scathing and more covert” in his attacks on raju, “because he [narayan] can laugh at human follies and absurdities without any great involvement or a well defined commitment to human values” (1981: 135). Balarama gupta perhaps reads the guide as a delightful exposure of the ignorance ridden Indian rural society as well as of typically Indian pseudo saints, but the reverence of the simple folks for raju the sanyasi and their unquestioning faith in the sanyasi can be attributed to their cultural heritage. As radhakrishnan (1959: 35) writes:

From the beginning of her history India has adorned and idealized not soldiers and statesmen, not men of science and leaders of industry, not even poets and philosophers . . . But men who have stamped infinity on the thought and life of the country, men who have added to the invisible forces of goodness in the world.

In making raju a saint, it is not raju who himself plays any significant role; rather it is velan and his villagers whose reverence forces him to be a saint. The absolute reverence of the innocent villagers come to him as a sharp weapon at the end although raju should not certainly be allowed to go scot-free without owning partial responsibility for his fate. It is partially true that raju could



have avoided his end had he not simply agreed but raju's failure to establish control over the situation initiated by velan is fateful. However, if raju is at last a saint; his transformation should not appear a miracle because such miracles are not impossible in India which has been a land of gods and goddesses and where traditional beliefs are more than knowledge despite the invasion of the west. Although western colonial machinery already brought about considerable changes in India's many social and political levels, the knowledge of Indian classical myths remains almost unchanged in the psychological state of the people. In this regard Narayan himself comments: "with the impact of modern literature we began to look at our gods, demons, and sages, not as some remote concoctions but as types and symbols possessing psychological validity, even when seen against the contemporary background" ("English in India", commonwealth literature, 122). It is this hoary tradition of India that along with the unshakeable misplaced belief of the people of Mangala goes hand in hand in making raju a saint.

It also seems that the traditional Hindu belief about a saint plays some role in the transformation of Raju into a saint. In Hinduism such blind acceptance and consequent reverence for a saint are common knowledge. According to Hinduism, disciples should possess two qualities: *susrusa* and *sradha*. Zimmer writes "susrusa is the fervent desire to hear, to obey, and to retain what is being heard; it implies dutifulness, reverence, and service. *Sradha* is trust and composure of mind; it demands the total absence of every kind of independent thought and criticism on the part of the pupil; and here again there is reverence, as well as strong and vehement desire" (Zimmer 1952: 48). The presence of these qualities in velan and others of his village is functional. Raju is a saint not because he is a saint, but because velan and others of his village are perfect disciples embodying all these qualities: they are never

tired of hearing and taking for granted everything raju narrates; not only velan, even the teacher of the village school obeys what raju says, and they hear and retain everything minutely in their minds; and they are so reverent towards raju that they do never question what he tells them because they believe, as Nirad c. Choudhuri (1997: 303) says, that "it is Hindu conviction that no right path in religion can be found without instruction . . . By a qualified guide". Mercanti Stefano (2002: 82) says that "these cultural factors display the wisdom of an uninterrupted ancient tradition that moulds the minds of the characters and influences, often unconsciously, their thoughts and behavior". Hence, taking a rogue for a saint was not impossible for such people.

Narayan also seems to make a corrupt man a spiritual guide with the help of the mythic elements taken from Indian mythology. Raju's transformation corresponds to the lives of many Indian mythical sages like Nezam Aoulia peer, or valmiki. Nezam Aoulia, a thief by profession, one day comes across a pious man whom he wants to rob but the man asks Nezam Aoulia if his family members will share his sins. Nezam aoulia leaving the man tied with a tree in the jungle goes home and asks everybody if they will share his sins of robbing people but none agrees. Nezam aoulia feels repentant and atones by watering a dead tree until the tree blooms flowers and he is accepted as a saint by people. Similarly Valmiki, a forest plunderer, also becomes a saint by choosing a life of asceticism under a tree where he passes years until ants build a shelter above him.

Finally it can be said that it is not that Raju worked to be a saint; rather he had to be a saint under a compelling pressure over which he could not establish any control. He just reluctantly accepts the greatness thrust upon him by the innocence, ignorance, superstition and deep beliefs in religion of the simple, rustic people of the village of Mangala. Chance and incidence also play a dominant role in making him a saint. And



theoretically Narayan makes a use of the religious, philosophical and cultural beliefs based on the great Indian epics, legends and folk tales to transform Raju into a saint.

Conclusion

It is true that R.K. Narayan has proved that typical Indian thoughts and feelings can be expressed in foreign language without trying to imitate the native speakers of English. He gave his characters Indian thoughts and feelings and expressed it in his scenes and backgrounds. Indian culture and tradition is rich and varied and it is not easy to summarize through few situations or characters.

In all possible ways, the theme, the characterization, the use of language, the locale and the philosophy, the author has presented the novel as a typical Indian novel. Narayan has captured the Fauna and flora, the caste system, the social and political conditions and also every influence that has been enforced on Indian culture, tradition and myth. The poverty of India has been reflected with a personal touch of the author. The villagers are shown as suffering from poverty and ignorance and their illiteracy has been reflected as the root cause for all their sufferings. There are as gullible and kind hearted as any Indian Village habitats.

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