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R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*: A Modern Version of a Panchatantra Tale

*Bhaskar Roy Barman**

Abstract

This paper aims to deal with R. K. Narayan's novel, *The Guide*, as a modern version of a Panchatantra tale of a thief transformed into a saint. A unity of vision and tranquillity of temperament commingle in the novel. The language, in which the narration is couched, is generally luminous and lucid, metaphorically temperate and simple in syntax. The smooth conveyance of the novel's easy action to the readers imparts a sharp-eyed and taught feeling of gentleness in the portrayal of Narayan's character. Though this feeling verges on contemplative gentleness, Narayan's attitude is not that simple and encompasses expertness in defining the linked and confused territories of sincerity and self-deception. The complex association of sincerity and self-deception is indeed the organizing theme of the novel.

The story of the novel is closely interlinked with the experience R. K. Narayan was exposed to in his childhood which moulded his thinking of writing this novel. He owed conceptualizing the character of Raju, the hero of the novel, to his impression of the 'Super Guide' who guided him and his friends around the National Broadcasting Corporation Studios at the Rockefeller Center.

The idea of the story stemmed from his experience of a ritual fasting which led to the germination of the motif of 'enforced sainthood' in his mind before he visited the United States in 1957 in a new novel underpinning suffering due to enforcing of sainthood. The experience he gained of the ritual fasting provided him with the outline of the plot appurtenant to the subject he found himself contemplating. The paper details how the idea has materialized into the full-fledged novel.

* *Independent Researcher, South Bank of Girls Bodhjung Dighi, Itakhola Road, Banamalipur (Middle), Aggartala, West Tripura, Tripura, India. Email: bhaskarroybarman@gmail.com*

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Introduction

In speaking of R. K. Narayan's masterpiece, *The Guide*, published in 1958, as an exceptional specimen of the genre quite difficult to handle, the genre being the serious comedy. William Walsh says succinctly,

> Success in it calls for a sensibility preserved from ambivalence or fracture, an unusual unity in the point of view as well as a social tradition in which the comic and the sad are not sharply marked off one from the other. It requires too a certain equanimity, an evenness of temperament and manner, to hold back the exaggeration of farce and the one-sidedness of sentimentality. (114)

In *The Guide*, the unity of vision and tranquillity of temperament commingle with its tone "pitched at that middle level on which we live the staple of our lives" (Walsh 114). The story of the novel has not been imagined out of nothingness. The Super Guide's speech, smooth as it was, was so vibrant and striking that it outshone and recreated "history and archaeology out ofthin air." (Narayan 1988: 32)

The idea of the story allied to the Panchatantra tale of a thief transformed into a saint by the devotion of the inmates of the house he had entered to steal, disguised as a saint, have been solidified by his experience of a ritual fasting into the germination of the motif of 'enforced sainthood' entailed by the Panchatantra tale in his mind before he visited the United States in 1957 in a new novel underpinning suffering due to enforcing of sainthood. The experience he had gained of the ritual fasting provided him with the outline of the plot appurtenant to the subject he found himself contemplating along the line of the Panchatantra tale, so to say. R. K. Narayan was well-read in the Panchatantra tales.

In the extreme desperation that resulted from a severe drought which had dried up all the rivers and tanks in the novelist's home town of Mysore, and even the Krishnaraja Sagar, a huge reservoir which helped with its water in the irrigation of several thousands of acres, the municipal council decided to have recourse to rituals and prayer. Krishna Sen says, alluding to R. K. Narayan's *My Days*, apropos of the incident:

> A group of Brahmins stood on the parched bed of the river Kaveri, submerged up their knees in water which had been ferried to the spot at

> great cost, fasting and chanting mantras for eleven days and nights. On the twelfth day the rains came, and the countryside was saved from the impending famine (3).

Narayan conceived *The Guide* as a conventionally Indian story concentrated on a characteristic strand of Indian life, the "vast Indian hinterland of semi-urban and rural settlements where people cherish traditional values, and old-world customs and beliefs still retain their hold" (Sen 5).

The uneven action of the novel revolves round the development of Raju, the protagonist, from his humble origins upwards to the status of a renowned tourist guide in Malgudi. Narayan makes Raju his mouthpiece to explore and investigate the psychological and situational complexities connected with enforcing of sainthood. As a tourist-guide he gets associated with Rosie, later renamed 'Nalini', a gifted dancer and as intricate a personality as Raju. She is abandoned by Marco on ground of her dalliance with Raju. Raju is convicted of forging Rosie's signature and sent to jail. After his release from the jail, some circumstances beyond comprehension combine together to propel him to sainthood. Velan, a simple peasant from the village of Mangal, is instrumental at the hands of the circumstances combined inturning Raju into a swami, rather, a fake swami. Towards the end of the novel, Mangal and the neighbouring countryside come to grips with a severe drought owing to the failure of monsoon rains to pour down.The villagers, who regard him as their guru, insist, at the instance of Velan, on Raju undertaking to take on a ritual fast to propitiate the rain god. Raju cannot bring himself to disdain the faith they repose in his sainthood and gets down to the twelve-day ritual fast. On the eleventh day he collapses on the verge of death, articulating a strong intuition for the rains to come. "However, the denouement strongly suggests that Raju, the confidence trickster and fake sadhu, has redeemed himself through his self-sacrifice" (Sen 8).

Chapterwise Analysis

A chapterwise analysis can unearth the multi-faceted aspects of the novel. In the first chapter, the novel opens in medias res with "RAJU welcomed the intrusion – something to relieve the loneliness of the place" (Narayan 2003: 5), though, the novel maps out the story of Raju's life from birth to death.Velan, who is worried over his step-sister's unwillingness to marry the man he has chosen for her, meets with Raju sitting on the river bank and mistakes him for a holy man and seeks his advice. Raju agrees to speak to her. In this chapter we learn of part of Raju's life narrated by him to Velan–his childhood spent at his father's way-side hut shop and

at his home overlooking the site where the Malgudi railway station started being built.

Raju's reminiscence of his childhood continues into the second chapter and fills the first part of this chapter. He continues reminiscing about how he spent his childhood at the railway construction site and his trying to avoid going to school. The part brings us from the past to the present and we find him talking to Velan about his problem. Raju soft-talked Velan's defiant step-sister into agreeing to marry the man Velan has chosen for her. In fact, she is so impressed by his highly-coloured language that she even goes to the extent of apologizing to her elders for her defiance and accepts marrying the man. And this convinces the villagers of his supernatural powers. Raju's several attempts to escape are foiled by the villagers' faith in him and his supernatural powers. He has no alternative before him but to stay put in the place, acting out the role of a sadhu or Swami.

In the third chapter, Raju's childhood memory keeps on, zeroing in on the arrival of the first train at the Malgudi station to the benefit of his father's strategic food stall opposite the station, his father having amassed money by selling food to railway passengers who gathered around the stall to buy food so much so that he was able to buy a horse-drawn carriage and employ a groom and invested in a large grocery shop right on the platform. He put Raju in charge of the hut-shop to Raju's relief in that he had not to go to school any more.

The fourth chapter takes us forward to the present to watch Raju busy in convincing the villagers of the necessity of educating their children. Raju himself opens a school on the premises of the ruined river-side temple he has made his home. Though there is already a school master in the village, Raju takes it upon himself to teach the children. His fame spreads so far that even the parents of the children stop by, returning from their work in the fields to listen to Raju teach their children. Raju then gives himself over to ruminating on how he, after his father's death, had assumed control of the platform shop and reconstructed part of the shop into a stall filled with books and newspapers. He owes his knowledge that has impressed the villagers to the books and papers in the stall. Towards the end of the chapter, Raju has whipped up a large following and has grown a long hair and a beard which have established him as a swami.

In the fifth chapter, we find Ruju once again reminiscing about how he has wafted out of the platform stall into the job of guiding willing passengers to sightseeing, which paves the way for him to become a full-fledged tourist-guide, to be known as Railway Raju. In the course of tourist-guiding passengers he comes across Rosie

and her scholar husband, peculiar and eccentric, and nicknames him 'Marco'. While Marco expresses his desire to photograph the carvings on the ancient caves high up on the Mempi Hill, because he intends to use the photograph in a book he is writing. Rosie articulates her desire to see a king cobra dance to the music of a snake-charmer's flute. Raju somehow manages to arrange it. He sees Rosie moving her body to the tune of the music of the snake-charmer's flute. He is convinced, Rosie is a gifted dancer and in course of time gets to know that Rosie has been born into a family of the despised low-caste temple dancers, and is in particular devoted to the Bharat Natyam. At the insistence of her mother she had been educated and even gone up to a university, receiving an MA in Economics incongruous with her profession. She was in response to an advertisement sort of forced into marrying Marco with eyes on social prestige. But this marriage has not fit into her nature. Her nature has threatened to be jeopardized, because Marco is opposed to her continuing dancing after the marriage, for it is unbecoming of a married woman to dance. With her nature unsatisfied and her nerves tinkling, she desperately clings to Raju as a way to revive her love for art by persuading Raju to arrange the cobra dance. Rosie and Raju happen to be of the kind that trickles them into falling in love with each other. There is not anything strong and frenzied about the affair, which undiscerning readers are likely to construe asbeing much of a critical point of nerves as of ardour or infatuation. Their relationship, as we shall get to know when Rosie breaks off with Marco to live with Raju, is not passionate but temperamental.

The sixth chapter hauls us from the past on to the present. Raju is now busy, deep in conversation with Velan and other villagers, taking on the role of a *sadhu*, holy man. Then bad news arrives of the severity of drought with the cattle dying, food getting scarce, consequent upon shopkeepers hoarding supplies and charging exorbitant prices. The villagers resort to fighting at the slightest provocation. Raju conciliates them, thus presenting himself to the villagers as their leader. One day villagers tell Raju they want for him to take on a ritual fast to bring the drought to an end, flinging Raju into horns of a dilemma. He is quite aware that he is no holy man possessing supernatural powers and decides to shed off his pretence to convince Velan he is no holy man.

The seventh chapter deals with Raju's confession to his affair with Rosie. Taking advantage of Marco's remaining engrossed with his work at the Peak house on the Mempi Hills Raju enjoys dallying with Rosie in a hotel in Malgudi. The reason why Rosie feels attracted to Raju is because she thinks that it is only Raju who can guarantee her a new lease of life by fuelling aflame her inherent ambition to dance

and her love for art. Rosie happens to confide to her husband in a careless remark, the secret of her innocent dalliance with Raju, propelled by her feeling of guilt of betraying her husband. Marco gets infuriated at her simple and honest confession which has a tinge of remorse, and departs from Malgudi, leaving her to fend for herself. Left helpless with nothing to do for herself, she takes shelter in the house of Raju to the dismay of his mother and uncle. Grappling with the problems foisted off on him by Rosie's presence and her dance, Raju starts neglecting attending to his profitable platform business so much so that he is served with a notice by the railway authorities to vacate the shop for someone else to take his place. But he has to look after the needs of his mother and Rosie without any other source of income.

The eighth chapter tells of the continuance of Raju's miseries with his main creditor, the Sait, suing him at court for recovery of a debt of over eight hundred rupees and his old friend Gaffur, the taxi driver, estranging himself from him, angered at his refusal to separate from Rosie. Exasperated and ashamed at this turn of events, Raju's mother leaves Raju's house to live away in her brother's house in the village. However, Raju is not disheartened at his mother's departure and perseveres in getting Rosie a foothold in dancing. His perseverance bears fruit. Due to his efforts, Rosie wangles herself her first dance engagement with an annual social of the Albert Mission School. In view of the prestige associated with her new identity as a Bharat Natyam exponent she takes on the stage name Nalini.

Chapter nine tells of Rosie's or Nalini's lightning rise as a classical dancer sending her up to the summit of fame which brings in huge money. Raju handles her fame and money as her agent and impresario. He takes nonchalantly the news of his father's old house having been sold by a court decree to the Saitto pay off his debt, as he lavishly lives in Rosie's mansion and rolls in wealth. Power and pelf he acquires at Rosie's expense gives unto him an opportunity to socialize with powerful and influential people. Wealth corrupts and it has corrupted Raju and has octopused him in greed. Rosie has grown meantime so obsessed with dancing Bharat Natyam as a worship offered to the Supreme Dancer Shiva-Nataraja that she has grown indifferent to power and pelf, Raju taking the advantage of her indifference. But she feels annoyed at the burden of heavy schedule Raju foists on herwith a view to stashing away more and more money. His cosy existence at the expense of Rosie stands suddenly jeopardized by two incidents. Strangely enough, Marco sends to Rosie a copy of the book he has published on the Mempi Hill caves, which flings Raju unconfident about Rosie's staying on with him because of her admiration he fears of Marco's accomplishments. He conceals the copy from her. Unfortunately,

for him, Rosie happens to read a review of the book and gets to know of Raju'shaving concealed it. This discovery leads to a major riff in their relationship. In a few days Raju intercepts a letter addressed to Rosie by Marco's lawyers, seeking her signature on an enclosed document for a box of jewelry held under their joint signature in a bank. Fearing that Rosie might try to re-establish contact with Marco and not wishing to relinquish the claim to the jewelry, Raju stoops so low as to forge Rosie's signature on the document, which results in a few days in his being arrested on the charge of forgery.

In chapter ten, we see Rosie gets Raju out of the police lock-up on a bail of ten thousand rupees after Raju has stayed three days in the police custody, though their relationship has suffered a jolt. To her utter dismay, Rosie tumbles to the fact that Raju has squandered away all the money in the bank account in his pursuit of his lavish living. Though Rosie has refused to dance again, she has to resume dancing in order to be able to defray the expenses Raju's trial entails. She now gets along with her own career. When the trial begins, despite all the efforts of the 'adjournment lawyer' paid by Rosie to portray Raju's heroism in rescuing her from the claws of her diabolical husband, the circumstantial evidence obtained from Raju's secretary Mani, the postmaster and the handwriting expert goes against Raju and he is sentenced to a two-year imprisonment. But in the prison Raju behaves himself well, advising other inmates and teaching them moral lessons, thus acquiring the name 'Vadhyar' (teacher). His mother has died in the meanwhile. All his relatives, even Rosie have shunned him. Only his secretary Mani visits him when he is released, he finds himself alone in the world.

In chapter eleven, Raju finished his confession in the hope that Velan, having known of his past history, will not insist on him saving the villagers from the drought. But Velan remains unmoved from his earlier trance. He says, India has a long tradition of saints redeemed from sins or crimes to become saints, and believes that Raju is incarnated from that illustrious paradigm. Raju has no alternative but to undertake a ritual fast for twelve days, standing in the knee-deep water. On the eleventh day, extremely weak from the fast, he faints in the water, mumbling, "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming under my feet, up my legs." (Narayan 2003: 147)

Transformation

As we have seen in the chapter-wise summary of the text of the novel, Velan, a simple peasant wields an immense influence over Raju and turns him from a criminal

into a saint. Though he looks a fake saint at first, he redeems himself, succumbing to Velan's simple faith. When, just released from the prison, Raju has spent the whole day, sitting in the sacred place in loneliness; Velan intrudes into the loneness.Raju welcomes the intrusion and grabs itas something comes to relieve him of the loneliness. He drags him into an intimate conversation.Velan, ritually purified sitting beneath, augurs "the ambiguity of relationship on Raju's side [and] certainty of it on the peasant's" (Walsh 116). To Raju his intrusion appears as a happy break inhis isolation and a happy relief in the loneliness and for the peasant Raju has come over to fill a vacancy.

> It was good to hear the human voice again. After this the villager resumes the study of his face with intense respect. And Raju stroked his chin thoughtfully to make sure that an apostolic beard had not suddenly grown there. It was still smooth. He had had his last shave only two days before and paid for it with the hard-earned coins of his jail life. (Narayan 2003: 06)

William Walsh writes,

> Raju fits into the context of the sacred shrine; he completes it and revives; the character that Raju presents to him is one absorbed from the stones of the temple. But it isn't just the accident of place which gives him this conviction. It is Raju's fate to be the product of other people's convictions. (116)

Again William Walsh comments,

> In his (Raju's) nature there is developed to the point of extremity what exists in all of us to some degree – the quality of suggestiveness to the desires of others. Plasticity of response in most of us is limited by an unyielding core of self. It operates only so far as the bias of a nature allows. But in Raju it was the centre of his nature and an influence at each phase of his odd character. (116-17)

The passage quoted above shines a particular torchlight ontothe blending of a firm line and suggestive shadow on Rahu's inability to grapple with the role devolved upon him by Velan. Raju is here in the novel particularizing that human type in whom character co-exists with certain amorphousness. The messianic part offered to him by Velan, which is hinted at from the beginning suggests itself in the beginning. Raju feels himself falling into a situational trap; he is quite conscious of the fantastic absurdity linked to this particular role, trying his best to suppress the embarrassment at his having been just released from jail. Yet he has to force himself into putting on

the air of one rightly deserving respect. To divulge his own feeling in this situation would mean shaking Velan's faith and it goes against Raju's nature to sting another's feeling. In the words of Walsh,

> While the pseudo-prophet's regard for the peasant's feelings works to make Raju all the more amenable to Velan's will, the peasant's deference to him doesn't at all mitigate against the force of his influence on Raju. Politeness, which makes the apparently impressive Raju even more pliable, also makes the humbly deferent Velan the more effective. (117)

This politeness makes disappear the social or class difference between Raju and Velan.Velan's simplicity and faith determines Raju's fate. The villager on the lower step looked up at his face with devotion, whichirked Raju "Why do you look at me like that?" The man replied, "I don't know. I don't mean to offend you, sir." Raju wanted to blurt out, "I am here because I have nowhere else to go. I want to be away from people who may recognise me." But he hesitated, wondering how he should say it. It looked as though he would be hurting the other's deepest sentiment if he so much as whispered the word "jail". He tried at least to say, "I am not so great as you imagine. I am just ordinary." Before he could fumble and reach the words, the other said, "I have a problem, sir." "Tell me about it," Raju said, "the old, old habit of affording guidance asserting itself…." (Narayan 2003: 8-9)

Here Raju feels himself flung into a fake sainthood and there is no way out in sight of it. But one cannot help perceiving a sense of unity which eliminates all the differences of experience, education and candidness between Raju and Velan and brings them into close intimacy, emboldening Velan, on the one hand, to take Raju into his confidence about his family problem centering onhis sister's refusal to marry the man he has chosen and Raju, on the other, to treat Velan to his life-story in an endeavour to tell him how he comes over here to become a holy man in this sacred place.

Here we notice an unbroken connection between Raju, the guide and Raju, the prophet. In both the cases he lived for others. In both the roles Raju played as the tourist-guide and as the prophet encircled by devout villagers all eagerness to see a miracle occur at his behest or a message come through him, otherness was reflected in his character. He is projected as a pliable form quick in assuming any shape which may be needed.

> So extreme a degree of accommodation means that Raju's sincerity consists in being false, and his positive existence is being a vacancy filled by others.

> The events leading from the beginning to the conclusion of Raju's career, the links between the guide in the railway station and the swami in the temple, make up a natural, realistic sequence. (Walsh 122)

Velan and Rosie are no less important characters than Raju. Velan acted as a catalyst to the transformation of Raju from the tourist guide to the swami, from the ordinary to the extraordinary and Rosie as a fuel to ignite the fire dormant in Raju's mind. Raju's imprisonment redeemed him from the guilt he had developed while handling Rosie's earnings. Rosie also owes a great deal to Raju so much so that she has bailed Raju out and paid for his trial. The relationship between Rosie and Raju, though construed as passionate at the beginning, assumes a different character in the course of the development of their relationship. This primarily personal relationship gradually develops into a primary function or official relationship. Raju recognizes Rosie's dancing gift and encourages her to rigorously apply her talent to rising to the height.

Conclusion

The story narrated in the novel (*The Guide*) bears a close affinity with the Panchatantra tale of a thief transformed into a saint by the devotion of the inmates of the house he had entered to steal. Disguised as a saint, the main character of the novel gives the readers a clear impression that the novel is but the modernization of this Panchatantra tale.

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