

Course Name: The Novel and Change

Professor Name: Dr. Avishek Parui

Department Name: Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Institute Name: IIT Madras

Week – 07

Lecture 35

R. K. Narayan's The Guide - Part 2

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and change where we're looking at R.K. Narayan's novel The Guide. So, we just started discussing this novel in terms of locating it in a very complex and changing cultural situations in which the novel is embedded. So, we'll just follow up from where we left off last time. Now in this section of the essay that we're studying there's a reference to Michel Foucault's writing and the whole idea of the archaeology of knowledge as the multi-layered epistemic structures in which knowledge production, consumption, circulation must be studied, the structural, the monumentality of knowledge, the materiality of knowledge and of course the politics of you know creating knowledge systems, sort of the interplay of inclusion and exclusion. And how of course all these come together to produce the collusion or underline or illustrate the collusion between knowledge and power, knowledge and punishment and so on and so forth. Now the references, there are two Foucault books which are referred to over here in this section. One is the Archology of Knowledge, the other being Discipline and Punish. So, this exactly is what we talked about right now. The triangulated relationship between knowledge, power and punishment. So how of course knowledge production is a political process, knowledge circulation is also a political process and how the politics of producing and consuming and circulating knowledge must be studied in textual material as well as affective ways, you know, how do power imbalances, power, how does power asymmetry works. Now, the reason why this is important is that this helps us understand the kind of English that Narayan and his contemporary writers such as Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand are writing because there is this idea of inherited language, the

idea of English which is obviously part of the colonial project, the Macaulayn action plan as it were.

But at the same time, there is also a rewriting going on. There is also some kind of a writing back going on. So there is both inheritance and insurrection. There is both subservience as well as subversion. And, which is what makes this particular genre, the sub-genre, so interesting in a diachronic way. Because on one hand, of course, they have inherited it. There is something which is handed down to them. But at the same time, this is something that they are using the instrument of English to rewrite and critique and write back about very local stories about a newly emerging India. So that can be studied in a very interesting way as a cultural practice as well and not just a literary practice. So, the reference to Foucault is on your screen. I have in mind Michel Foucault's project in the Archaeology of Knowledge, which can be described as conceiving a methodological account that does not automatically ground its truth in a self-willing and autonomous human agency, but instead looks at a particular conditions which govern and regulate the truth, the truth value statements, right. So what are the material, cultural, political conditions through which the value, the valency of truth may be produced and manipulated, right. So the manufacturing and manipulation of truth valencies obviously take place through the material substructures and superstructures around that knowledge production site. which is why the metaphor of archaeology is important. So, it is a site of knowledge and of course like any site there are also these peripheral sites and the play between the center and the periphery as is the case of any archaeological construction which of course becomes a very useful spatial metaphor to study the manufacturing and manipulation of truth. Hence archaeology is such a wonderful metaphor. Archaeology thus conceived is an examination of statements as worthy of study in and of themselves. But remaining at the surface of those statements it is also a method which tries to lay bare the conditions which make possible and perpetuate certain discursive formations, right. So, what are the, you know, the societal discursive designs which control the formation and production and circulation of truth conditions, right.

What are the discursive designs? As Ian Hacking puts it, Foucault's project is to analyse

the source not in terms of who says what, but in terms of the conditions under which those sentences will have a definite truth value and hence are capable of being uttered. the conditions of iteration in other words, the conditions in which iterations happen, the conditions in which truth is articulated. What are the material, social, discursive conditions in which iterations of truth are taking place and oftentimes what this kind of a lens allows us to understand is to look at how the materiality or the ecology of truth really and the environment of truth really It profoundly influences and shapes the matter of truth, right, the idea, the matter, the statement, the ontological reality of knowledge. So there is this peripherality of material conditions and of course we have the ontic quality of the truth condition but of course it is a very, very interactive process. So, the iteration of truth happens in an interactive process with the subject and the object, the material and the mind as it were. Now of course starting with discipline and punish, the birth of the prism Foucault's attention was to move away, move from the surface of words to the materiality in everyday practice, to the everyday iteration, the quotidian iterations and material conditions around those iterations, shaping and reshaping the process. But his formulation that discourse functions in ways that do not necessarily or always implicate human intention which is itself only possible because of the terms in which a certain discourse allows and disallows is productive, right. So there is a sense of the humanist always already implicated in the material practices and in that sense whatever the subject iterates as truth or knowledge is profoundly shaped and colored and filtered through those material conditions right. So in other words this is pretty much what we are doing in this course. So, we are looking at a work of fiction, a fictional text which may be said or seen as some kind of an iteration of fictional truth, creative truth, right.

But that creative truth or fictional truth must be situated, must be located, must be, you know, studied in correspondence with the material ecological conditions which govern it, okay. So it's a productive process of understanding, a productive process of inquiry. Now, why do we have to say, why did we go to Foucault on hacking for this? Because it sort of allows us to dial back. to Narayan and Raja Rao in terms of how what they are saying in terms of the language used, in terms of the instrumentality of language must also be situated in the discursive diagrams all the times. So, it allows me to say that Narayan and Rao do

not autonomously or willfully choose to be heavily influenced by English discourse. So, it is part of the historical reality that they are influenced already by the English discourse at the time. But of course, what they choose to do is to rewrite it, is to critique it. So it's a bit of an insider's critique. So you're both situated within it as well as you're critiquing it. So it becomes a really complex process. So, they're heavily influenced by the English discourse and thereby prove to be individually culpable in the whole westernizing process, right. So, you know, we sort of We cannot say well Narayan and Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand and other writers at the time, they are willfully producing this westernizing process. So they are intentionally producing or perpetrating the western influences. It's a historical reality that they are part of the influence, that they belong to the generation which inherited that influence in some sense. But at the same time, it doesn't stop there, it gets, it becomes more complex than that because it really gives them the instrument through which it can self-critique that inheritance, self-critique that situatedness, right. So, this is what the writer says right away, rather I wish to point to how it was the English discourse came to hold in such a sway among certain members of the Indian elite classes, that is, how many educated Indians were in the position to receive British discourse in the way that it did. This essay wishes to engage the systematic and insistent function of English discourse in early modern texts of Narayan and Rao, with the assumption that this discourse is not willed into existence by these writers, that they were not simply or negatively persuaded by it Rather, it is a discourse which regulates the manner of its use by these writers. And the most important word over here is regulates, right. So, this is a discourse which is shaping and reshaping the writing of these figures like Rao and Narayan. So, there is a historical reality of the inherited English that these people have.

But at the same time, it should not be seen as something that they are doing willfully or they're choosing to do it. It's part of who they are as historical animals, as historical beings at a certain point of time. But what they are choosing to do is to represent the newly emerging nation, represent the aspirations and anxieties and recreations and reconstructions of the newly liberal, liberalizing nation, opening up a market etc. using this inherited language right. So, which is why you find it becomes such a complex chronotope in many ways because we have these different attributes of ancientness coming in at the

same time they are connected to the idea of anxiety and aspiration which also is connected to nostalgia in some sense. And all this gets represented, all this gets written really in an inherited language. So we can see how you know interesting the entire terrain becomes. I use the term English discourse as shorthand for all the Western discourses of progressive liberal humanism underpinning emergent conditions of modernity and colonial India. But English discourse in a colonial context cannot function in the same way as at home. And colonial India it cannot be separated from the its institutional status that is to say the body of autonomous or sorry anonymous historical rules, its everyday practices as evidence in British colonial administration, its hegemonic restructuring of the Indian social classes, its codification of an Indian education in 1835, its traces of the English literature received by Indian readers and so on.

So, see how this one sentence really brings in so many historical processes, the Macaulan action plan of creating this in-between breed of Indians who will be the bureaucrats, who will help the British govern better. So it was a completely mercenary motive, as you can see, nothing really benevolent about it. But at the same time, the codification in Indian education through which, you know, different kinds of English or British literature, you know, they get in, the Shakespeare gets taught, and that, of course, becomes part of the internalization process of an entire generation which grows up reading and consuming these knowledge practices. by English discourse, this is what is defined over here, by English discourse then is conveyed the discursive functioning of everyday English in India, with discourse itself viewed as a textual practice, a systematic way of reading and ordering which through historical reputation and institutional insertion in a colonial context gains an authority and value, right? So we have in one hand reputation commodification, but also value production, right? So the reason why we attribute certain literary value to Indian writing in English especially writers like Rao and Narayan and Anand and of course later writers as well is because it's part of a historical moment where different kinds of qualifications are happening. So, there is of course historical continuity of you know the leftover English from the colonial Raj. Now that of course doesn't stop there. It gets picked up by creative writers like Anand and you know Raj Rao and Narayan. And that code gets recoded into some kind of an Indian English, right? So it just becomes, increasingly

becomes an autonomous entity of its own. And of course, as I mentioned, by the time you come to Salman Rushdie, it's just become a different linguistic map altogether. So, there is that sense of production and accumulation of value, sometimes subversive value as well.

Now, the next section, you know, deals with Narayan's *The English Teacher*. Of course, we will not read the novel in detail because we are reading the guide. But it is important for us to understand and the reason why I am reading this a little bit because the whole idea of *The English Teacher*, as you can imagine, it belongs to that liminal cusp moment really where the British English, the idea of value-added education, the idea of cultural artefact which is associated with English, all those get embodied in very direct ways. But at the same time, there is also some critique of that, some kind of a rewriting of this. What we can see in Narayan's writing is both consolidation and critique. It's both a legacy continuity as well as legacy subversion. And this happens in all kinds of ways, which is why the metaphor of sideways reading is very important when it comes to Narayan rather than a linear sequential method. Because again, if you go back to the key moments in a novel with the arrival of the train as it were which entirely changes the space-time laminations as it were in Malgudi. The sense of space changes, the sense of time changes, it just becomes more episodic, more interval based as it were, more rhythm based. The regular rhythm begins to govern the sense of the experience of space-time. So, all that is happening, but at the same time, there is the sort of reappropriation of the guru culture, the ancient guru, the ancient Hindu guru, which is both produced and parodied in the novel. So, there is that going on as well. So all these different cultural tensions and collaborations and collisions are taking place and which is why just mention of the English teacher as a novel becomes important because that figure of the English teacher is both a consolidation and a critique of the different kinds of legacy narratives that Narayan is engaged with. So the first Indian novelist in English to secure international recognition, R.K. Narayan began his prolific career in 1930s during the heyday of the Indian political mobilization and the campaign of civil disobedience against British imperialism, right. So again all these writers are writing at the time where massive movements of imperialism, anti-imperialism are taking place. So they belong to that cusp, this generation belongs to that cusp of change, from the colonial to the post-colonial, right. So that which is why their writing is so rich and so

layered and so complex because you can see that societal change happen. You can literally see the arrival of new entities and disappearance of many entities, arrival of different kinds of vocabularies, moral, financial, cultural and the disappearance of other vocabularies, erstwhile vocabulary. So it just becomes such an interesting case study. So, what takes place of an overt nationalist agenda in Narayan's fiction are scattered allusions directed at both the British in India and the contemporary struggle for independence.

So, there is hardly any direct depiction. of independent movements in a direct depiction of political movements, where rather they have this almost peripheral, sometimes you blink and miss kind of a situation or a reference to some real historical moment of disobedience and civil disobedience and non-cooperation and all the rest of it, right. So there is that very strategic under-representation of historical reality, right. And that again that really begs the question why, right. So why is that part of that concealment method that Narayan is using, right, because why is that not a direct depiction or a spectacular or public or linear depiction of what is going on at the point of time in India, right. So, that again obviously reflects the artistic strategy of Narayan in some sense. It just, there is more subtlety, there is more complexity, there is more of an interplay between the overt and the covert that is going on in the plots. So these allusions, casually recorded, as it were, in the margins of his text, seem to tell a profoundly ambivalent story about Narayan's relation to the political and nationalist movements that were popular across India during his early writing period. So, you know, this was just mentioned, the whole idea of the casual quality of the allusions and what does it tell us about the ambivalence in Narayan's writing. And if there's one word, that may be used to describe Narayan's fiction that is probably ambivalence because there is so much of almost a mysterious quality that you don't quite know which side is taking, you don't quite know which side to trust. And that inconclusivity, that indeterminacy, that interpretative indeterminacy is exactly what makes the novel or Narayan's writing so fascinating and so postmodern in some sense, right. It anticipates a lot of postmodern techniques. We do not really have a closure. You have this sort of opening up of this suspended moment, the open-ended moment really where all kinds of interpretations, all kinds of readings may be simultaneously valid and true, right. So that

just becomes this writing strategy which is why ambivalence is such a key word when it comes to Narayan.

So, this ambivalence, however, perhaps owes less to Narayan's conscious engendering than to a particular, to the particular functions released by English discourse in the space of his writing. So this may be a conscious strategy, ambivalence. On the one hand, in the guise of the canonical British literary tradition to which Narayan was and is intensely affiliated, English discourse acts as the seductor, right. So the whole idea of that seductive in a powerful engine of knowledge that is very much there which is why the English teacher becomes such an important novel. English is that big machine of seduction, cultural seduction, aspiration and all the institution instituting desire and exciting Narayan and his male protagonist under the with the promise of plentitude. So, this is the way you can make a living. This is the way you can create and enjoy abundance, cultural acceptance, cultural celebrations. That just becomes the the ecosystem really to desire for, to aspire for. And the alchemy of the inexplicable joy. So there is a sense of alchemy and it is an interesting choice of word because it is why everything mixes together to create something magical, create something almost out of the ordinary, something extraordinary. You create something bigger or more important than the sum of the parts which come together. And English discourse over here becomes exactly that, that alchemical transformative possibility which is there in Narayan's writing. But at the same time there is also critique, it is not just some kind of a senseless seduction you know from a powerful epistemic engine but it's also some kind of a critique, some kind of a resistance, some kind of a rewriting of that as well. On the other hand, it is in its institutional, more obviously colonial capacity, it plays a provocator, inciting them to an aggression and frustration whose intensity is rarely expressed, let alone relieved. So, this is a fascinating bit with which we'll end today in this session.

So, there is both seduction and provocation. There's both a pull towards seduction consolidation as well as a provocation to critique and this is exactly what I was talking about a little while earlier which is what makes Narayan's writing as well as pretty much the writing of this time in Indian English such a complex sub-genre because there is both

inheritance, there is both internalization and there is this provocation, there is this mimicry, there is this hybridity, there is this retelling and reconstruction and revision. So this play between revision and consolidation, this play between reification and revision is exactly what makes R.K. Narayan's writing so fascinating at a linguistic level, but also a level of its characterization, the kind of characters it creates. They embody this ambivalence, they embody this interplay of loyalty and subversion they embody this interplay of adherence and departure, which is what English Teacher is all about. We will not read English Teacher, we will stop here at this point, but we will use this philosophical framework, we will use this cultural reading, this textual reading, and move on to the novel that we have in this course, which is The Guide, which again is a very complex novel about a rogue protagonist, sort of the formation of the anti-hero as it were, you don't quite know if it's heroic or anti-heroic, and that moral interpretative ambivalence exactly part of Narayan's narrative strategy. So we will stop at this point today and we will move on to a more direct reading of Narayan's guide in the subsequent classes. Thank you for your attention.