

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 36

R. K. Narayan's The Guide - Part 3

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will continue looking at the work of R.K. Narayan, the guide which we happen to be studying in this particular course. Now, we already had a couple of sessions on the guide where I may have touched upon some of the important topics that are germane to the trust areas of this course, including the arrival of technology, the arrival of new kind of modernity in India. which is both backward looking as well as forward looking and this entire idea of conflicting attitudes and conflicting attributes, which we see, you know, getting a very ambivalent representation in the guide. And one of the things we touched upon repeatedly in the last couple of sessions in this novel is how ambivalence of the narrative strategy is really important for an understanding of this world because it situates itself as a work which is about a very rapidly changing India and in some sense it becomes one of the most powerful novels in this course really which is reflective of the entire ontology of change, the entire nature and function of change, right. Whether it is the arrival of trains, arrival of railway modernity, the new episodic structures of space and time. Or whether it's a conflict between the new emerging values which are aspirational and metropolitan in nature and quality as opposed to the more traditional values which are pre-colonial in quality. So in many ways it's a perfect novel to study change, to study the cusp of change. And we may have discussed the location of Narayan as well in the last couple of sessions, especially its use of English. If you look at the works of Narayan as well as his contemporary writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, we find that there is this inherited quality of English that they have, but at the same time there is also some kind of a you know the creation of a new kind of linguistic register which is at play. So again, at the linguistic representation

level there is this inherited legacy quality in the language as well as the aspirational newly driven quality about the language as well.

Now we will move on to a different secondary scholarship today. This is John Thieme's book R.K. Narayan. It is a Manchester University Press edition of the part of the writer series that they have. And Thieme over here is really giving an interesting example of Narayan as a writer who is representing a really interesting changing country, a changing nation. There is mobility in guide, there is aspiration and anxiety in guide. But at the same time it is also a novel about human character, human motives, human intentions because there are different really human characters in a novel, obviously the protagonist being Raju and Raju of course is a cross between a conman as well as someone who inhabits or embodies the newly aspirational India. He is very much part of the newly emerging middle class. And as you can see this novel, this particular book it has a really interesting survey of almost all of Narayan's works including Mr. Sampath, Waiting for Mahatma and of course the novel that we are studying in this course which is The Guide. So and if you turn to page 100 which we will in a minute you will find how it becomes a very interesting study of the novel per se. in terms of how the novel is part of a broader framework that Narayan is interested in representing, right. So that is something that we will look about, look in close details as well. Now I am just trying to move on to the page in question over here which is page 100. But we started reading, looking at the English teacher for instance in the last class. where we saw how the very identity of the English teacher is interesting because at some level English being a colonial language is very much a legacy language where the idea of using the colonizers linguistic register is there, there is a sense of shame about it, a sense of cultural baggage about it. But at the same time it is also a language which is most conducive to the newly emerging, newly aspirational middle class, right. So it is that contradiction as well as the ambivalence that we are trying to tap into. something similar happens in the guide as I may have mentioned earlier that there is this character of Raju who is like I said some kind of a tourist guide, he is a con man, he can lie through his teeth and he is obviously a very smooth talker but at the same time especially towards the end of the novel we find it difficult, we struggle to demarcate the saintly intention of Raju

whether he is actually someone who is capable of redemption, someone who is capable of prophecy, Or is it someone who just continues to be, you know, a con man.

So, that is never resolved. And the irresolvable quality at the end of *Guide* is exactly what makes it a very, very interesting novel. It is a very postmodern novel in that sense because the moral map in the guide, it is very, very ambiguous, it is very, very ambivalent. That ambiguous morality is obviously part of the narrative strategy of Narayan that it does not really give any neat answer. And of course, some of you know this was made into a film, a very popular film, a Hindi film starring Dev Anand and you know that was a big success as well. So, it, sort of also lent itself to, other, representational medium. Now, this particular chapter, which we'll start reading in a minute, it really looks at Narayan's middle work. So there are two novels in question here, *The Guide* and *The Painter of Science*. So again, you find the different professions that Narayan's protagonists have, whether it's an English teacher, or a tourist guide, a railway guide or a painter of science you know. So, these are newly emerging professions in a new country right. So, there is this ancient civilization that India represents but at the same time as a nation is quite new so there is this forward-looking aspirational almost anxious economy of India. So there is that pull in two different directions and I think in some sense the bi-directionality of India is also corresponding with the complex moral economy, the changing moral economy that Narayan's works constantly represent. So this should be on your screen. I will start reading the guide specifically. So just before that we need to also locate Narayan as a global writer of his time. So, his alliance with Graham Greene, his alliance with the major American and English writers, British writers at the time, also helps us remind that, also reminds us that Narayan was indeed one of the biggest names in Indian writing in English, specifically around that time of the sort of century, early 20th century, 1920s, 1930s. this is something which you know John Thieme also mentions in this essay which should be on the screen. So despite his involvement with Graham Greene and his tailoring aspects of his fiction to suit British taste, Narayan did not travel outside India until the second half of his life. Then after receiving a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship that took him to the United States in 1956, he paid a number of visits to American universities, among them University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Texas at Austin. Notable among these was a

period as a visiting professor in the University of Missouri in Kansas City in the spring of 1969, a visit which he wrote about without identifying his house in one of his best-known essays, the title piece of his collection, *Reluctant Guru*.

In this essay Narayan talks in characteristically witty vein about his difficulties in living up to American belief that all Indians are spiritually preoccupied and expectations that he could provide a key to a mystic life. Now this is really interesting because as you can see this cultural almost racial stereotype of Indians all being inclined spiritually and maybe having some kind of transcendental belief system is obviously quite problematic because it is a very essentializing way to look at the Indian identity. And I think in large part Narayan critiques that and parodies and lampoons that as well because the guide at the end of the day really becomes some kind of parody of the newly emerging guru culture. which is obviously quite collusive to the American economy, the American capitalist economy and you all know that in 1940s and 50s and 60s lots of Indians are making a lot of money in America by being this sort of spiritual engineers or you know people who will you know give you the spiritual direction to life. So, there is that you know collusion between spirituality and capitalism that Narayan also hints at and I think he also critiques it to a large extent. Because you know Raju in *The Guide* doesn't make a lot of money. I mean he uses Rosy becomes her manager. But at the same time, he doesn't really become the spiritual guru slash superstar, you know, although he may have aspired to become that. So at the end of the novel, we don't quite know, like I keep mentioning, whether he's actually gained some or acquired some prophetic potential or does he just do one of his, you know, con man show one more time. So, but at this moment it is important for us to realize that the cultural epoch that Narayan inhabits is also the time in which Indian writers, English writers particularly, are beginning to travel. Now because they are beginning to travel, they are beginning to get this exposure and vice versa with the Western world, there is a lot of curiosity about Indian-ness which is sometimes very stereotypically depicted through this prism of spirituality, religion, mysticism and all the rest of it. So, claiming that the Indian contemporaries, the westerners of the hippie generation who were looking to India for spiritual illumination were more interested in learning how to organize a business or manufacture an atom bomb or an automobile that would stand on one's head. Narayan

rightly points out the ironies and misunderstandings inherent in such East West encounters, focusing in particular on his own disinclination to play the part of a spiritual sage. So I think it's very easy to understand that Narayan's own position over here is quite He is quite cynical about this entire expectation to deliver a mystic message, or expectation to deliver or sort of embody the spiritual seer slash writer. And he doesn't want to do that, it's quite clear, because his writing is very, very in some sense quite you know, mundane.

He talks about very mundane people. He talks about people who just get on with their lives, they cheat each other, they try to make a little bit of money. None of his characters are really heroic in that sense or even transcendental in that sense. So, they are very, very quotidian characters and that I think stems from his own reluctance and disinclination to be this spiritual guru and that is the quotation that should be on your screen now. So, the belief in my spiritual adeptness was a factor that could not be easily shaken. I found myself in the same situation as Raju, the hero of my guide who was mistaken for a saint. And he began to wonder at some point himself if a sudden effulgence had begun to show in his face. So there is this kind of a foil relationship that Narayan has with Raju. Because even in Raju's situation in the guide, he's almost compelled to become a saint because there is this economy of expectations around him to just perform a magical trick, a magical act. And, you know, he begins to believe it at some point also, whether he's sort of realizing or trying to figure out whether there's some kind of a hallow around his face. So, Narayan seems to have had a similar situation which can be quite comical while he was visiting the United States. So, nevertheless, Narayan's experiences in the American Academy can be related to a partial reinvention of his persona as a writer that had been taking place in the years after the first visit to the country and writing a novel such as the guide, where Raju is taken to be a sadhum. Narayan had given explicit expression to elements that had been present if latent in his writing from the outset. So there is an extension of Narayan's own disbelief, Narayan's own critique of that sadhu culture where there is a sense of Also, the rogue sadhu, the fake sadhu who was just there to make a lot of money, who was obviously lampooning the entire spiritual system and who was getting more and more collusive with the newly emerging capitalist economy around this kind of a persona celebration. So significantly, the guide was written during his visit to Berkeley, suggesting that consciously

or unconsciously he may have in some way, have responded to the West's fascination with Hindu mysticism, albeit before its enhanced interest in Indian spirituality in the 1960s accorded cult status to figures such as Mahesh Maharishi Yogi and Indian gurus, whether genuine or charlatans, began, became ten a penny, right.

So, it's interesting and very curious to know that the guide was written when Narayan was in America. So when he was facing all these sometimes comical questions about his own spiritual belief, whether he was, you know, expected to perform or embody the role of the writer slash sage. So it was written from that particular experiential position, which is why his entire take on spirituality in the guide is so ambivalent, so complex and sometimes quite quite cynical in quality, right. Now this essay by John Thiem also reminds us, right, a couple of decades after this, in the 1970s for instance, the entire persona and culture, the cult, you know, culture among the gurus and sadhus began to become really big in America and Maharishi Yogi, Mahesh Maharishi Yogi is a good case in point. So as in his early novels, which were partly shaped by the requirements of London publishers, Narayan once again appears to have been influenced by the demands of overseas markets. So, it's a certain kind of idea which had to be represented, so Narayan obviously was conscious of it. However, I think the reason why the novel is so good and it is so complex and political as well because there is also a critique of that expectation, the critique that well if you look in India as just a space for spirituality and sadhus and fakirs and saints then obviously it is an exoticization of India which is quite offensive and problematic in its own way. However, if one compares his equations in his English makeover with his later responses to the type casting as a spiritual guru when he became a visiting professor in America, the picture that emerges is that of a novelist who is willing, at least in part, to allow his identity to be trimmed to fit perceptions about the reading public in England in the 1930s, but more reluctant to allow himself to be subjected to a similar transformation in America in the 1950s and 1960s, even though he may seem to be sanctioning this in his novels he wrote after first travelling to the United States. So there is this very complex model position Narayan himself takes. So, as he matures, as he moves towards fame and maturity, he is more and more reluctant really to portray the persona that the West wants to consume out of an Indian writer in English.

So, influenced though he may have been by his sense of how India was constructed by Western eyes, it is reductive to see Narayan as having seriously compromised his writing to accommodate Western tastes, which is why I think we still read Narayan as a great writer. because he didn't want to end up writing this talk flat characters who just fit in the western expectations, the western taste which is why most of his characters are so rounded, so complex, so alive, right and they keep connecting the different kinds of situational you know matrix. So, from the beginning of his career his novels bring western and Hindu specifically Tamil Brahmin elements together in a variety of ways. to produce fiction that locates itself in a very specific discursive environment and is minutely attentive to the implications of place but also succeeds in speaking to an international readership. So, there is that really interesting pull that Narayan manages to create. So, on one hand there is this excellent representation of the changing Indian ecology, moral ecology, you know finance ecology, all the rest of it but at the same time there is also a genuine effort to reach out to a global market, an international market which wants to read about India, which wants to read about Indian characters. So he manages to do a little bit of both without exoticizing anything. Although he has often been misrepresented as an authentic chronicler of a settled Indian world, Narayan's fiction fuses with gestures in an act of cultural brokerage that enables it to cross frontiers without losing a sense of Indian specifics and demonstrates how fluid, fractured and fleeting these specifics can be. So there is a sense of in-betweenness, interstitial quality about Narayan's writings. So he doesn't really want to appear as someone who speaks for whole of India, as someone who speaks as a sort of saintly figure in fiction but at the same time there is this really interesting mix of how fluid identities, fractured identities and sort of ephemeral fleeting identities also be very, very Indian in episodic ways.

So, the episodocity of Narayan's writing is really interesting and there is no big grand narrative whether spiritual, religious or messianic or mythical but what impresses one about Narayan's writing the most is a profoundly flawed, Quotidian, mundane daily quality of his writing, right, which is what makes it so relatable in so many ways. So, and while his early English makeover resulted in a stifling of the Hindu elements in his fiction, his later

American discovery unleashed the possibility of recording them centrally, thanks to the Orientalist vogue for Eastern spirituality that characterized Western and particularly American responses to India during this period, right? So, in a very paradoxical way, the fact that there's a great public in America which wanted to consume Indian fiction of a certain kind, that really allowed Narayan to create certain kind of characters, you know, problematic characters, flawed characters, but characters which fit into the Orientalist desire. So, a shrewd businessman, many of the small-time entrepreneurs who were at the centre of most of his middle period novels, he was, after all, the first Indian English novelist to make a living from the profession of writing. Narayan saw the potential this Vogue afforded for tapping the toe, partly suppressed, and Hindu wealth springs of his narrative imagination. So, there is this very interesting case we made where Narayan can be seen as a businessman writer. I mean it's a bit like what Dickens did a couple of centuries ago where a century ago where the whole idea of writing the kind of story which the readers want to hear, readers want to buy is something that governs Narayan's writing as well. Turning the impetus to write for his new market to advantage led to the production of some of the finest novels, and in this phase of his career, the admixture of Western narratives that fuse these two western and Hindu elements that characterizes all his work resulted in narratives that fuse those two discursive strands in a range of unresolved and indeterminate relationships. So, these are important words unresolved and indeterminate. So, we talked about this already how the East West operate in Narayan's novels not as a binary really, but as fluid entanglements. you know, concepts and experiences which shape and reshape each other.

So, there is an entangled quality about East West in Narayan's novels which is connected to moral ambiguity, narrative ambiguity and they are so reluctant to offer closure. So, however, far from endorsing a mystical conception of India, this indeterminacy highlighted tensions in secular South Indian life. In the third the twentieth century. So in a very granular level really what Narayan's work depicts is the South Indian secular life, metropolitan, sometimes non-metropolitan, but how that really becomes a kind of India, a really interesting zonal kind of India which is different from the transcendental, all-encompassing, meta-mystical conception of India which is something which Americans

wanted to really devolve as a concept. So, although Narayan had clearly become disillusioned with the cruder manifestations of stereotyping Indians as mystical and spiritual, so he was quite cynical about this. By the time he left the University of Missouri in the 1960s, it seems in the intervening years to have enjoyed the license it offered him to write on subjects that had been an important part of his Tamil Brahmin upbringing. So, in a paradoxical way, intellectually he may have been averse to stereotyping Indians as spiritual gurus or spiritual subjects. But at the same time, this expectation or this economy of expectations offered him to look inward and write about the kind of community that he grew up with, the kind of kinship structures that he had when he was a child, where religion may have been an important thing. So during this period of his life, he embarked on a methodical study of the mythical Hindu tales, with the help of a scholar, collected stories from the selection of retold myths that appeared as gods, demons and others, and in the 1970s produced versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Most significantly, in his new American incarnation of the reluctant guru, found himself able to give freer expression to the Hindu layers of his imagination in his fiction, and this led to the writing of two of his best novels, which are *The Guide*, which we will read, which many consider to be his finest book, definitely the most important, the most popular book, and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* which this study will argue is a superior work and its most consummately achieved piece of fiction. So, according to John Thieme, *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is the best work Narayan ever wrote but also he concedes that in terms of popularity, in terms of really reception across different media, *The Guide* remains the most important novel, the most popular novel. So we stop at this point today because what we are trying to do is look at the moral and cultural and linguistic landscape in which the guide is situated and you know in some level it is novel about, quite anticipatory in quality because the whole idea of this fake gurus or the fake culture of you know, cult, celebrities and everything which is, which is spiritual in quality is about to take off in the 50s and 60s and Narayan is writing just before that, right. So, he seems to anticipate, he seems to give some sort of cautionary tale. in terms of how this should not be taken in that scale.

But at the same time, he turns to the other side as well he flips it across where Raju the character who is forced to be the guide is compelled to perform certain kinds of things

which are corresponding to the ancient Hindu traditions of which he presumably has not much of an idea of. So there is a precarity as well when you adhere to something when you subscribe to something this play between precarity and subversion and I think Narayan does that massively in the guide. So, we will stop at this point today, but we will continue from where we left off in a subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.