

**Course Name: The Novel and Change**

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**Lecture 37**

R. K. Narayan's The Guide - Part 4

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled A Novel and Change where we are looking at John Thieme's take on R.K. Narayan's Guide which is a novel we are studying for this course. So, this should be on your screen but page 103 of Thieme's work it contains the background to guide in terms of how the novel got written but what are the different kinds of model that Narayan had at that point in time. So, this should be on the screen, page 103, second paragraph. The guide may have been written in Berkeley, but like Narayan's two previous novels, The Financial Expert and Waiting for the Mahatma, its more intimate, its more immediate origins came from an actual Indian source. And when asked in an interview about the possibility of elements in a novel having been transformed by his American experiences, he referred to it as totally Indian. So, there is something very, very interestingly Indian about Guy, but at the same time Narayan's own position is quite cosmopolitan, I mean he has his exposures in American universities. So, it is a fair question to ask whether there are any transformative American experiences to which he you know responds by saying well his novels are totally Indian, but it is also new kind of India, it is more metropolitan, more aspirational, more English speaking you know. So there is this entire economy opening up at this point of time. In my days, he explains how the idea for a novel about someone's suffering and false sainthood came to him from a Mysore soul. So, you know, as we mentioned in the last class, the fictional town Nalguri is quite close to Mysore in some ways. We don't exactly know for sure which novel that, which place that is.

There are different kinds of ideas about it, but Mysore seems to be a pretty safe bet. But

we also told that the whole idea of this little spiritual person who is, you know, who is forced to embody sainthood, that is an idea that, you know, came to him from the Mysore source. And what is the source? Let's read this. And I quote, A recent situation in Mysore offered a setting for such a story. A severe drought had dried up all the rivers and tanks. Krishna Maharaja Sagar, an enormous reservoir feeding the channels, is at you know that that irrigated thousands of acres had also become dry. So we can see this is exactly what happens at end of the guide because there is no rain and Raju is expected to be this spiritual seer and prophet who is expected to bring rain through some complex rituals. So something similar had happened in Mysore that Narayan was aware of and obviously he is drawing on that. As a desperate measure, the municipal council organized a prayer for rains. A group of Brahmins stood knee-deep in water, procured a great cross on the dry bed of Kaveri, fasted, prayed, and chanted certain mantras continuously for 11 days. On the twelfth day, it rained and brought relief to the countryside. So this is a really interesting story where in my days, Narayan says, where in Mysore there was this big drought and a big lack of rain, and then when nothing else was working, The municipality hired a group of people, a group of Brahmins really. They learned a priestly class and they came and stood on knee-deep water and performed different kind of rites, you know, social, cultural, religious rites. And you know luck would have it on the twelfth day it rained spectacularly and of course it brought massive relief to the countryside. Now obviously this is operated from a faith system.

This is operated from economy of credibility. So do you believe this or not? It's a different debate to be had. But Narayan obviously is aware of a similar situation which took place. Now the reason why the novel is a better novel than this is because Narayan doesn't tell us what happens at the end of Guide, whether rains come or don't come. It's a bit like to give you a popular culture cinema analogy, it's a bit like what happens at the end of this Christopher Nolan film called Inception, where the top keeps turning and we don't quite know if it's dream or real because there are top turns and then falls, it's a real thing. But if it keeps turning, it's a dream, but the camera moves away even before we have enough time to figure out whether it's for real or for virtual, right. So, something similar happens at the end of Narayan's novel as well. It doesn't really give an answer. cognitive indeterminacy,

interpretative indeterminacy which is deliberately designed which is what makes a novel so complex. This potential for alternative interpretations afforded by this episode clearly made an ideal grist for Narayan's fictional mill. More than just this, the exposure of the ancient temple that had lain beneath the waters of the modern reservoir and even to which Narayan takes over in the guide served as a metonym the notion of an archaeological layered, archaeologically layered India, albeit one in which different strata were coming to exist contiguously rather than a temporal sequence, since an ancient infrastructure was now present on the surface. So, there is a palimpsest like quality in Narayan's writing where quite literally and symbolically different kinds of architectural designs you know are built on top of other as different historical changes take place. There is that quality in Narayan's writing, particularly in *Guide* as well. So predictably, the ambiguity over which supernatural or normal meteorological forces were responsible for the coming of the rain to the area around the Krishna-Mahadaja Saga Reserver is carried over into the next novel, the novel. Whether notwithstanding the views of some of Narayan's critics who have been eager to detect a casual relationship between Narayan's fasting and a presumed end of the drought, the conclusion leaves the issue whether spiritual intervention has occurred open right, so that is left open, so we don't quite know like I mentioned it's at the top of the end of *Inception* film, we don't quite know whether it's a dream or real, we don't quite know whether the rains had come or it doesn't come, maybe the Rajas have died, one more theatrical performance, but we will never get to know.

So, in the guide, the group of Brahmins is replaced by a single Sadhu, the reluctant former tourist guide Raju. So, Raju finds this trust upon him, this greatness trust upon him whereby he is supposed to be, he is supposed to be the spiritual seer. Literally, he is supposed to see the rains are coming or not. So Raju who had, who has resisted the burdens of sainthood imposed on him by the villagers among which whom he finds himself and remains a suspect holy man to the very least. So there is, this is an interesting point because we find that Raju increasingly wants to run away from the village, he wants to escape the village because there is this agile aspirational metropolitan modernity which is beginning to happen in India and where travel, connectivity all become better with the trains, with other forms of communication So, it makes a lot of sense for someone with Raju's inclination to

leave at his first opportunity and go make a name for himself in this very creative capitalist industry, right. So, there is that quality in Raju as well. So, weakened by hunger, he says Raju, he says he can feel the rain coming from the hills. And although this may suggest the end of the draught is imminent, the opening leaves, the opening ending leaves the unresolved. So, he is dying word so that he can feel it rise along my body, right. So, there is this viscerality, this embodied quality about what he says, but we will never find out, find out because the novel comes to an end with that last line. So, this reading relives the sort of open-ended as it were or unresolved. So numerous critics seem to have missed this and the range of misunderstandings or misreadings of the of the ending perpetrated by critics is a striking example of the extent to which books read people just as people read books. So you know it's a really good phrase books read people instead of people reading books. So different stages, different generations, different dichronic movements have identified themselves and differently. So, the actual words of the closing sentence are as follows.

And this is what we'll end with. It was difficult to hold Raju on his feet as he had a tendency to flop down. They held him as if he were a baby. Raji opened his eyes, looked about and said, Velan is raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs. He sighed down. So the last act, the last theatrical act that Raju does, he calls Velan in the publication of everyone, and tells that he can feel the rains are coming up his feet. So, almost like a spiritual, messianic, mythical quality whereby he can feel, he can bring rain, he can have a visceral engagement with rain, etc. Except we never know whether it's for real or not because we never get to know whether Raju actually experiences an epiphany or is it just another sideshow with which he wants to move on and leave this for, leave this posthumously before he collapses. So various issues remain undecided. The text not only leaves the question of Raju's possible promotion to sainthood open it also fails to offer any kind of definitive information on whether the rains are actually coming or what Raju's eventual fate would be. So, as you can see what this sentence does is that progress of Raju and the ride with the train are put together. So we don't know whether trains will come or not and equally we don't know if Raju will succeed further in life or not or is it just bad luck from now. However, at least two eminent critics have said that he that he dies at the

end of the novel. So, the conflict is quite divided. So, some critics who are quite famous they say that Raju dies in a novel.

Right? However, and others refer to his losing consciousness. We don't quite know. He falls down, he collapses. Whether that's a collapse which leads to his death or is it a collapse which leads to his state of not being conscious, we don't know. This narrative indeterminacy, this interpretative indeterminacy is carefully crafted. But sagging down is hardly conclusive evidence of either. So similarly, although the people of the local village, Mangala, a name which denotes spiritual auspiciousness, convince them that Raju is a saint, particularly when he is seen to be fasting to break their drought, he initially deceives them by eating in secret and remains the moot point of whether or not he subsequently undergoes a transformation. what we see is Raju really doing a fast you know to put an end to the drought. Now whether that is what caused the rain, whether there is rain at all we will never know. So there are these empty gestures and sometimes maybe genuine gestures we do not quite know but from a reader response perspective it is also a novel which makes it almost impossible to put a finger on the moral character of any particular subject because there is such complex morality which is also connected with the mutability, the sort of monstrous mutable metropolises which are happening across India at this point of time. Right. So, So, the last bit before you wind up today, sort of crucial point here of course is that Narayan chooses to, this is page 105, is that Narayan chooses to end the novel here with all these issues unresolved. So, that is a very bold, brave and artistically sophisticated decision to keep it all unresolved. So, just, just don't cut it out and get rid of the knot. Let it stay knotty, let it stay unresolved and that is the way interpretative momentum will pick up in the times to come. So, commentating on the guide on a later occasion, he said, Narayan said that in an essay on the life of writing, he expressed exasperation at interviews who asked him whether Raju dies at the end of the story and whether it rained after all.

So, some people, some students, scholars, whoever met Narayan asked him bluntly, did it rain in Kolkata that day that you mentioned? Or is it just a date you make up at all, right. So, there is that you know quality of not knowing enough throughout the novel and in some sense it is also there when the reader is engaging in a novel not knowing enough, ok. So,

in short the guide resists any form of closure. So, there is something very anti-closure about guide. We don't quite know I mean this can also lend itself to a sequel, we don't know. The ending raises the possibilities that some kind of spiritual transformation may be taking place within Raju and that is that this may be accompanied by divine intervention so as to end the draught. But the final scenes are narrated in a death-pan documentary style like manner leaving the possibilities that Raju remains the charlatan that he is draught out draught the draught will continue as reasonable alternative inferences right. So it is perfectly valid to read Raju as a con man, as a charlatan equally perfectly valid to consider that a draught will continue even after Raju is either you know invalid or death right. So both reasons are perfectly valid in which case you know it doesn't really matter. But there is also the counter argument which says well maybe because we don't know Raju may have brought rain, Raju may have ended the draught. So, comparing the novel with V.S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Messor* which also deals with the supposed metamorphosis of a rogue hero into a holy man. So it's a very funny novel, *Mystic Messor*, recommend you all read it where a rogue agent becomes a holy man through some sartorial changes right. So M. K. Naik suggests that the guide is finally very different from Naipaul's very early earlier novel right. So *Namistu Masao* obviously being the early novel but the guide is quite different from that as well. Since in this case a hero is transformed from a picaro into a pilgrim. So with Naipaul's there is a clear transformation, there is a destination of the transformation but with guide there is no such thing because we don't know what Raja will become if he gets an opportunity later.

Certainly, there's a difference. Naipaul's protagonist Ganesh fairly obviously remains a charlatan to the very end, an utterly ironic technique. precludes is being said in as many words. So, both as you can see the *Mystic Masseur* by Narayan, by Naipaul and the *Guide* by Narayan, they also operate very in very subtle ways. They work with subtleties, not as if they are making big claims or the characters are larger than life. In fact, it's just the opposite in many senses. Okay, so Ganesh fairly obviously remains the character to the very end. And although the ironic technique precludes this being said in as many words, but Narayan's neutrality leaves the issue open. So, again this is a neutrality that Narayan often exhibits. He does not take any side, he does not give any kind of a narrative closure.

So, this suspension, this openness and his detachment from the dailiness of life also allows him privileged insights into what is really going on despite his having any kind of an experience with you know the politics of language, the politics of cognition. So, Raju's status as a sadhu, a holy man is a product of the views of others and so it is as if Narayan is holding the phenomenon of the Hindu holy man for inspection. So it's a very interesting observation. So Raju becomes the metonymy of holiness and almost like you know in describing Raju Narayan seems to be describing holiness attached to Raju. So that's interesting as well, right. In the closing episodes, Raju's fast attracts a good deal of media attention and aimed the crowd to reporters that flock to Mangala, who is a local journalist, to cover his story in an American documentary skin filmmaker Malone, who is eager to shoot a documentary about the Swami, right. So, again we find that this is why I mentioned cinema at the very beginning that Narayan incorporates, is obviously very aware of the newly emerging industry of cinema and the fact that there is a sort of nested narrative within the guide about a filmmaker coming and that also shows the cultural apparatus that Narayan is very, very interested in and this is why he wants to locate the guide, the novel. Narayan simply reports, but one appealing way of viewing the figure of Malone is to see him as a surrogate for potential American readers of the novel. So, you know, the filmmaker almost introduces a novel in a very meta-fictional kind of way. His response to Raju, which blends indigenously and disingenuously, seems to mirror Narayan's later reluctant guru comments on American interests in India.

And possibly also involves a materiality anticipate and sort of metaliterary anticipation of how it feels a novel may be read in the United States which is why I mentioned that there is a reader response study one can also do. Narayan seems to be doing some kind of metaliterary anticipation of how this novel is likely to be oriented in terms of reception. His comments on this identification with Raju, a secular man who finds himself the object American interpretation and appropriation as a guru certainly lend support to such a view, although in Raju's case enforced sainthood is first imposed on him by the local villagers. So, I stop at this point but this would cause a little bit of unpacking. Just like Narayan when he visited the US, there was this enforced saintliness or enforced spirituality which was given to him part of his entire writing persona, the public persona which he resisted, which

was very reluctant to appropriate. The same resistance and reluctance may be seen as transferred over to Raju who starts off with this very petty, secular, non-religious person but he finds himself in the middle of a situation where he looks very, very spiritual. He has this entire iconic totemic presence of a spiritual person and then that creates, generates a military economy of expectation around him which forces him really. to keep performing what he does. So, some level the novel is also a performance. The novel is also about performative identities and what happens to identity when society, model vocabulary, spiritual vocabulary all begin to change very, very quickly, right. So, identity becomes less ontological and more performative in quality and we find it is literally the Rosie the performance artist in the novel who dances and of course Raju who performs with his lies and fibs and his fabulation etc. So, performance becomes a very important part of what we call prosthetic identity. Identity is outside the body, but part of the ever fluid, ever expansive, ever interconnected cultural apparatus, right. So, we stop at this point today. I will continue with this reading in subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.