

Course Name: The Novel and Change

Professor Name: Dr. Avishek Parui

Department Name: Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Institute Name: IIT Madras

Week – 09

Lecture 41

R. K. Narayan's The Guide - Part 8

So, hi and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We're looking at R.K. Narayan's novel, The Guide. So, from this particular session, we will start with a macro reading of The Guide in terms of how it is reflective of the cultural conditions of its times, because as you remember, the principal theory, the principle philosophical framework of this course is to look at the relationship between text and context. And the book you're reading, we are drawing on, is Faiza Afzal Khan's Cultural Imperialism and the Indian English Novel. So again, if you look at the title of the book, Faiza Afzal Khan, Cultural Imperialism and the Indian English Novel, which is to say how the cultural capital, how the entire cultural geography is invested and embedded in the production and consumption of the Indian English novel. And in particular, of course, we will study the role and relevance of R. K. in Narayan. Now on your screen, the title of this particular chapter is The Realm of Mythic Realism. Now, it sounds a bit oxymoronic like magic realism but that is exactly the point because there is a really interesting combination between the myth and contemporary materiality as we have discussed already in Narayan's writings. So, we have a lot of resurrection and recreation and reconstruction of ancient myths, ancient Indian myths.

Which are retooled and re-situated in contemporary contexts. We see that happening in the guide throughout. So this particular chapter will give us some more macro view in terms of how this informs Narayan's writing in general and of course to guide in particular. So just let us dive in. The works of R.K. narayan, who combines Indian myth with critical realism in his serious comedies, reveal the ideological implications quite clearly. So, as

you can see from the very first sentence, It talks about the production of paradoxes or the productive paradoxes in Narayan's writing. The whole idea of serious comedy for instance. There is a sort of satirical quality to these comedies which also contain very relevant and quite profound social scenarios and messages. But they also expose or reveal the ideological implications, the ideological position somewhere this kind of writing is produced. As William Walsh, in his book R.K. Narayan, A Critical Appreciation, points out, and there's a quotation from Walsh, the reader will have felt the effects of the principle which orders the pattern and affects the structure of Narayan's fiction, namely that of balance. This is the principle of the greatest significance in novels, which are comedies of sadness, works in which the material and attitudes appropriate to different genres flow in and out of one another, right. So, there is this really interesting and complexly carnivalesque quality in Narayan's writing which is why all these seemingly oxymoronic terms are used, comedies of sadness for instance, you know genres flowing in and flowing out.

So, what appeared to be conflicting, what appeared to be sort of contrapuntal to each other in other works seem to be sort of creating some kind of a structure of supplementarity in Narayan's fiction. And this structure of supplementarity or structures of supplementarity are really interesting because this is exactly how he blends together ancientness and newness on ancient civilization and the aspirations and anxieties of a new nation, right. So there is this idea we discussed already. how there is a sort of immutable, unchanging civilizational solidity, which is something that Narayan's writing is plucked into. But at the same time, there is this very immutable, metropolitan, anxious, insecure identity formations which are happening and which get produced in the new economy of the new nation, right. So, this contradiction as well as supplementarity is very important for us to underscore. In other words, there is a balancing of various genres in Narayan's novels, a harmonious coexistence symbolising a unity, a whole-ness, towards a towards which Narayan's protagonists are constantly progressing and which they must achieve if they are to mature fully, right? So, there's a sense of wholeness and harmony that is aspired for. Now, of course, what we see is the wholeness that Narayan has in mind or Narayan creates to his characters is something which sometimes becomes almost non-perceivable. or not

achievable in a strict sense of the term. There is a constantly slippery, elusive quality about that concept.

The wholeness, which, as I will show later, becomes a hollowness for Salman Rushdie, the most modern of the four novelists to be considered, is possible in the Malguri of Narayan's novels because it is a world rooted in Indian myth and tradition, a town that is still pastoral in its innocence of the political reality of modern 20th century India. So again, the whole idea of the pastoral and the metropolitan and how the slow and sudden changes that take place. For instance, the most dramatic one in the guide is the arrival of railways, which really changes a sleepy little town into some kind of episodic volatile center of movements coming in and coming out. This becomes a liminal territory, if you will, where space time becomes episodic, experiences become episodic, fractured in different points of time, right. So, there is that transformative quality in the landscapes in space-time which is also represented and calibrated in Narayan's writings. And this is of course the very interesting and complex picture of 20th century India which is still plucked into ancientness in many ways. It is still plucked into very old values but at the same time it is also looking forward and the orientation is also forward looking in its anxieties, insecurities, aspirations of more modern India, right. So it is clear that Malguri, although a small region, is a place of ancient myth and history which Narayan does not choose to re-examine, right. So there is a sort of immutability about Malguri, the chronotope which is laminated in space-time which doesn't change, which is still very heavily plucked into the old myths, the old value orders etc. Here, what matters most is not how the natives deal with the aftermath of political fragmentation, but whether they will achieve an authentic and sincere identity as Indians in an inauthentic Indian setting.

Now there is a sense of this is what I mean by anxiety. So whether at all the identities, the characters in Narayan's fiction will ever achieve authenticity or can authenticity only be achieved through the inauthentic methods. Now this should remind us of the last image of the last bit in Narayan's guide where Raju's orientation to a sainthood is never really clear whether it's a sincere sainthood or it's some kind of a you know, charlatan, showman idea of the saintliness where he is performing it in a very superficial way. The novel really does

not make it clear. It is very inconclusive in that sense. And we talked about the inconclusivity as a narrative category in Narayan's fiction. Now, the issue of authenticity is tied closely to that of sincerity, we just talked about sincerity right now, which can be achieved only through the growth of self and social awareness. And most of Narayan's protagonists are able to achieve some measure of both. So, there is a sense of social awareness, self-awareness, we saw, we studied earlier or the biological growth of Raju and the sort of the osmosis through which he acquires social awareness, they go hand in hand. So that sense is a Bildungsroman in the proper sense of the word, except that towards the end it becomes more complicated where Railway Raju becomes a tourist guy from which he becomes lover of a married woman and from that he becomes the manager of you know artist and then of course he becomes some kind of a fraud guy who gets arrested for forging signatures and then he ends up supposedly as a saint.

So, that supposedly here being the operative word. Now here it is important to understand or underscore rather how you know what is called mythic realism in this particular essay is different. It is comparable as well as different contrary to the classic realism that we find in Western novelistic traditions you know for instance Robinson Crusoe, Jane Eyre and then works of Jane Austen, right. So the goal of Western realism as seen in Jane Austen's novels, for example, is for the individuals to achieve a state of balance between individual autonomy and social responsibility. So there is that desired balance which is there, the equilibrium, if you will, between autonomy and collectivity, between individuality and collective identity. Of course, through accountability, responsibility and so on and so forth. Neither extreme being viewed as good. And this is usually achieved through becoming honest or sincere about oneself and one's motives, which in turn leads to sincerity and responsibility towards others, right? So there's a sense of altruism, empathy, which are produced due to true forms of sincerity. And this is where the Western realism seems to be plucked into. Now what this aims to achieve at a level of categorization is consistency of character, right. So, whether it is a good character or bad character, the illusion of consistency or the construct or the construction of consistency is important to different plot patterns, to different forms of, forms of emplotment. Although such authenticity of character and maturity are achieved primarily in the Western realist mode in Narayan's

work, the part played by the Indian mythical and mystical tradition in achieving these desired ends cannot be underestimated. So there is again the really magnificent ambivalence in Narayan's fiction where on the one hand he is obviously at the level of craft, he is very heavily plucked into the Western realist tradition but at the same time he is also drawing on quite extensively one would argue on the Indian mythical traditions. So there is this mythic method that Narayan uses quite similar to Joyce's mythic method that Eliot talks about in *Ulysses* and other works and there is also of course the realism that he borrows from the Western tradition. So there is a sometimes uneasy and sometimes seamless interplay of these different traditions.

Narayan, it seems, cannot get away from mythification because it is through the use of Indian myth that some measure of an authentic Indian past can be recreated. So, it's only through the mythic method that the authentic Indian past can be recreated, retold. So, again, through a ludic, performative quality. However, it should be clear at the outset that the petrifying effects of myth are not always offset by the balancing effects of realism. So, this is something which we talked about already earlier, that how the fundamental framework of Narayan's writing is deconstructive in quality. So, it's not really one of dualisms, but rather of deconstruction, where the newness and the ancientness, where the realism and the mythical quality are not really undercutting each other. So, not all of Narayan's protagonists choose to respond to the call of social and familial duty or to the demands and pressures of real life, right. So I know some of them choose to respond differently to the pressures of real life or the you know escapist qualities of certain forms of spirituality. They are very individual that way which is why we still tend to remember Narayan's characters as characters of flesh and blood. They are quite organic in the individuality, in the differences, in the different forms of acceptance and rejection. Some like Krishna in the *English teacher* and Jagan in the *vendor of sweets*, choose to retreat from the pressures of social living into a world of mysticism and myth. In other words, they choose against maturity and sincerity in the realist mode, although they may achieve some authenticity and wisdom within the mode of myth, right? So there is realism, there is myth. So there are certain characters which gravitate more towards myth, there are certain characters which gravitate more

towards realism, but it is always an entanglement. That is the process of shading, as it were, which has been talked about over here. It is not really a monolithic oppositional play.

So, thus it is important to remember that there are contradictions to be found in Narayan's works, happy contradictions or productive paradoxes, symbolic of the inherently confusing situation in which the Indo-English or for the matter any postcolonial writer finds him or herself. So, this confusion, this intellectual confusion, this artistic confusion is very typical of any postcolonial production process where there is this anxiety to still remain faithful to the indigenous myths but at the same time there is this sort of navigation to the new methods of storytelling more often than not to the western model of classical realism. Yet, by and large, the pattern of Narayan's novels is one that, according to one critic, gives us the account of an enveloping or evolving consciousness beginning in isolation and confusion and ending in wholeness. So there is a sense of moving towards wholeness that we see, an approximation of wholeness. Now the important word here is approximation because with approximation is connected the idea of performativity. So, the fact that Narayan makes Raju the protagonist and the guide approximate sainthood or perform sainthood also means that yes there is proximity towards that category but also there is some kind of a liminal gap between the real saint and what Raju ends up becoming. So we don't quite know as we may have discussed already whether or not Raju actually becomes a saint, whether he actually manages to bring the rain because we just have to take its words in the end. that he can feel the rain coming up his his feet right and that's that's it the novel ends there Right, so in other words the demands of the mythic and realist modes often coalesce, so they blend together and in responding to those demands the protagonist often achieves a balance of both. So, there is this asymmetric entanglement between the mythical method and the material method, between the mystic realism and the real realism. So, these two categories keep blending in Narayan's novels.

So, there is a discussion on another novel *The Bachelor of Arts* which we will not read because that is not something we are studying at the moment but we can sort of skip through it and come to another important aspect of Narayan's writings which is to say his dealing and engagement with ambivalent articulations, right, the idea of you know Someone who

is still drawing on someone is still shaped by the civilizational ethos of India. But at the same time it's a mobile subject, is an aspirational subject moving across different urban coordinates and so on so forth so. So there is this, this should be on the screen, this theme of the reversal of cause and effect of someone becoming sincere, although being insincere, is a paradox that delights Narayan and is central to his ironic vision of life. So this is a really important bit, the ironic vision of life. So all identities iterated in Narayan's fiction are ironic in quality. They are ironic iterations or ironic identities. Where paradoxes become connected, paradoxes become productive. This is a reversal of cause and effect as it were and insincerity can only be achieved or sincerity can only be achieved through insincerity right. So there is that productive paradox at. So, the same pattern is repeated in many of his other books, most prominently in *The Guide*. You know, so that's obviously a novel we are reading specifically, but that's something which occurs in other books as well. So, in *The Guide* in which the protagonist Raju begins by playing a role, but ends up assuming it for real. Although such a reversal rarely implies self-transformation, it does lead to self-discovery as is obvious in Chandran's case.

So, either the self-transformation or self-discovery either through an accident or through a liminal passage. So these things are very familiar tropes in Narayan's writings. Now, what is interesting to note is that such a reversal leading to self-discovery and a measure of authenticity and sincerity occurs often in a state of mystical withdrawal. So, mysticism over here is not seen as something strictly escapist in quality, strictly confusing in quality, but rather mysticism it seems to give light, give a sense of clarity, empirical clarity, logical clarity to a problem at hand. So again, what we're looking at here is not looking at or not examining mysticism and rationality as oppositional categories, but rather mysticism is something which lends itself to reason and makes it a more holistic vision. So, George Woodcock, in an article on Narayan, sheds some light on the implications of such a withdrawal. And there's a quote from Woodcock, can a modern Indian reject westernization with its political and ultimately moral implications? The only way to attempt it, Narayan suggests, is by withdrawal into one or two Indian worlds that remained relatively untouched by the intrusion of the Raj. These are the interlocking worlds of villages, still living largely by traditional techniques as well as beliefs, and the wandering holy men. In

Narayan's novel, such withdrawal rarely provides a way to self-transformation, but it does often lead to self-discovery.

Now, there is this idea of untouched by the original sin, untouched by the crime of the Raj, the crime of the empire, so to speak. So the villages in Narayan's fiction, the rural landscapes in Narayan's fiction appears to be untouched, appears to be non-contaminated by the evils and excesses of imperialism. So that becomes then a way of self-transformation. It is also a way to process self-discovery. So, although the outcome of such a withdrawal is often an awakening in the protagonist of a sense of sincerity to himself leading to sincerity and responsible behaviour towards others in which is the ultimate aim or goal of realism, certain attitude in Narayan's work generally results from the symbolic immersion and the rituals of Hindu mysticism and mythic beliefs. So, there is as I mentioned that Narayan seems to have a lot of sympathy of certain Indian beliefs and myths and there is a sense of immersion, sense of description, immersion, engagement, empathy at a cognitive emotional level that his characters seem to be exhibiting, right. the word immersion here is important. So we talked about Chandran who's a character from another novel as well but we'll skip a little bit of that and we'll come to the great the guide and there is a reference to a dark room which again is quite political in itself and the same structures of confinement and question are taking place right and Confinement as in is coming from certain power structures, from certain erstwhile protocols, this cohesion from certain residual patriarchal orders. But at the same time there is liberation, there is an opening up of the market, opening up of the moral vocabulary, the value vocabulary and so on and so forth, right. So when we say market and economy in Narayan's writing, we are not just talking about market and economy in the financial itself, there is also the moral market, the moral economy and how and what happens to that in a very quickly changing India, where the urban centres become more important, the urban centres become the sort of central battle points where identities are iterated. So, there are references to English teacher, the references to early Narayan's writing as well but we will move on to the guide because that is the novel we are reading and that in some sense is perhaps Narayan's best work, right. So, the very title as I suggested earlier is an allusion to the Hindu Indian teacher tradition, right. but that is something which is you know quickly frustrated and in the end

the novel becomes some kind of just a parody not just a parody of the sort of spiritual guru culture but also a sense of self-realization where Raju the protagonist is increasingly deflating away from his earlier achievements and ambitions and so on and so forth. We'll come to the guide now and we will see how the guide becomes almost some kind of a centerpiece to Narayan's fiction because it is that novel which really gave him the most fame.

It was made into a film, as I mentioned, starring Dev Anand, which Narayan wasn't particularly happy about. or really appreciative of, but you know the fact that it lends itself to another medium is important for us to understand, okay. And there is reference to financial expert, there is reference to a whole host of other novels in this particular essay. But just to give you a sense of what the essay is saying and also elsewhere that we have studied so far, is how there is a sense of ambivalence, carnivalesque comedy, gallows humour, dark humour, all that is there in Narayan's fiction because there's a sort of tongue-in-cheek style of communicating comedy but also there are instances where there's slapstick, there are instances where there are comedies by accident and they all get woven in in Narayan's fiction because It incorporates a complex sentimental structure, a complex emotional structure. It's never really monolithic or static, but rather something which is always mutable and always subject to change, vulnerability, embellishment, amplitude and so on and so forth. So, we stop at this point today and hopefully this essay is beginning to give you some of the macro conditions in which Narayan's writing is emerging from and we'll continue and hopefully finish this section in the subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.