

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 42

R. K. Narayan's The Guide - Part 9

So, hi and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We'll continue discussing R.K. Narayan's novel The Guide. So, we started reading the cultural capitalism, the cultural investments around which The Guide, the novel, is situated. We'll just continue from that point where we left off last time. which talks about the different kinds of complex ambivalences and cultural cross-currents in which the novel is situated. The idea of engineering and newness, the idea of individualism and collective identity, and so on and so forth. The idea of retrospection, nostalgia, as well as anticipation and anxiety. So all those get connected in a really interesting cultural ecology in which, through which, Narayan writes a novel. Now, at this point, it should be on your screen, we talk about how the character of Raju, the protagonist of the guide, emerges as a really interesting example of what is known as the anti-hero in a certain sense, because there is a picaresque quality, a roguelike quality about Raju, we talked about this already, but how that corresponds to the movement between individuality and collective identity, right, and the collective organism, the collective machine in which he is situated. And this should be on your screen. So in the guide, published in 1958 and considered by many critics as Narayan's best novel to date, however, the protagonist, Railway Raju, so-called because he serves as a guide to tourists who get off the train station in Malkudi, must reverse this direction, reverse from the picaro to the saint, the supposed saint.

To some extent, if he is to achieve the true ideals of balance and sincerity, Raju must strike a balance between extreme merits of behavior in order to become a sincere man. So we talked about last class, the last session, the whole, the politics of sincerity and insincerity,

how the borderline between the two sometimes becomes very, very blurry. And, you know, in order to become sincere, he deserves the confidence of himself and others. This dialectic between himself as individual and himself as a social phenomenon establishes him firmly within the Lukácsian mode of critical realism. Now, remember the title of the essay here is mythical realism, right. So, the relationship between myth and realism. So the entire affective apparatus, the imagination of the myth and how do you connect that to let's say the material apparatus of realism, right. So this is where the novel is situated. Lukács, George Lukács, Hungarian critic George Lukács has this really interesting idea of realism as a reflection of social changes and that's something which you see happening in the guide as well. that insists that man despite his individual autonomy is an ineluctably social animal right. So, there is the social over determinism that Lukacs talks about and of course some critics argue against that for instance Adorno talks about the relative autonomy of art as appears to be the social overdeterminism of the society over the individual. But the Lukács' imposition is that the human being, the individual is unavoidably and sometimes overdeterminately social and, you know, is serving the social structures, so to speak, or part of the social structures. At first, however, Raju is too much the social animal and has very little sense of himself. As an autonomous being with individual integrity, he is Railway Raju who exists, it seems, only in the public social role of guide to tourists. And this is a quote from the novel.

I came to be called Railway Raju. Perfect strangers, having heard of my name, began to ask for me. when the train arrived at Malgudi Station. It was written on the brow of some that they shall not be left alone. I am one such, I think. So, we talked about how the very quiet little town of Malgudi becomes some kind of a mobile chronotope with episodic movements of trains coming in, going out, and how the arrival of the train changes space-time, compresses, decelerates, accelerates space-time, and how that also creates new kinds of identities, social individual identities. So the railway guide or the tourist guide becomes a really important identity at this point of time. And of course, Raju becomes embodiment of that. But of course, he brings his lack of space for his individual solitary self on himself. And much of his action, of this action of pleasing others, consists in being false. So, he fabulates stories, he fabulates data, he just embellishes all kinds of narratives and he just

supplies stories, consumable stories to tourists, naive tourists who just come consume his stories and pay him for his time. as he himself admits. So, we talk about how the performative quality of identity is being iterated and dramatized in Narayan's writing, and not least, the ultimate example of sainthood that he achieves, the saint becoming, and the spirituality is also not something outside of the purview of the performative, so to speak. So, everything is within the purview of the performative. So, Rosie, the Bharatanatyam dancer, who brings in the ancient craft of dance and becomes a celebrity, a person who keeps travelling across South India to perform in different parts, becomes performative, obviously, but also Raju's ultimate goal or ultimate destination of becoming a saint, supposedly, also ends with a very ambivalent performance, a very open-ended performance where we don't quite know what is the result or the consequence of that.

But it is performative. So it starts from the performative bit that he does as a guide in a railway. As he himself admits, there are times when his responses to questions of tourists are an utter piece of falsehood. In going overboard to be of service to others, he loses all sense of personal integrity, as for example, in his relation to Marco, the archaeologist. Despite the latter's bullying and demeaning treatment, Raju continues to play guide for him. Even though he admits there is this tension between Marco and Raju, I felt annoyed with him, Marco, at this stage. What did it take me for? This fellow telling me what he wanted, that he wanted a car at this hour or at that hour. Did you think I was a tout? It made me very angry. But the fact that I was a tout, I was a tout, having no better business than hanging around Gafoor and a snake charmer and a tourist and all kinds of things. So there is this melancholia in this performative identity as well, where he says that there's no self-respect. he is taken for granted, he is completely commodified and this is again the interesting example of the increase in commodification happening in 20th century India where heritage is commodified, the archaeological sites are commodified, the rise of the tourism industry obviously is a big you know instrument in this commodification process and along with all of this human identity is also commodified.

So, it is no wonder then that becoming a projection of what Rosie, Marco's wife, needs, he becomes a lover. He takes on a role of sympathetic admirer of Rosie's dancing talents,

thus becoming someone she is desperately in need of, since her husband views this side of her with great disdain. So we talked about in the earlier class how to Marco, Rose's dance is little more than street acrobatic. He looks down upon her, upon her craft as something which is, and again there is a gender angle to it, it is feminized and so not to be taken seriously, whereas Marco's entire epistemic apparatus is evidence-based, data-driven and so it just gets more muscled up, so to speak. So, when her cold archaeological husband discards her because of her affair with Raju, the latter takes on the role of Rosie's financial manager and helps put her back on stage where she belongs. So, again, stage being the operative word over here, he puts her back on the stage or re-situates her on stage, which is also to say how know her craft her talent is made into some kind of a showbiz and again this is india a newly emerging country which is it's got a good appetite for showbiz a good appetite for performances so it's not no wonder that the talents are getting commodified where the you know the the entire idea of genius or craft has been transformed into some kind of a reified entity which is purchasable, which is consumable and so on and so forth. So stage here becomes a very symbolic space where talent can be performed, where the entire industry of showbiz produces and perpetuates talent in different forms. However, in his zeal to be helpful to Rosie, he ends up ultimately being unhelpful to her and neglectful of his duties to others in his family, especially his mother, and above all, neglectful of his duty to himself to be a morally sincere person. So, there is a sense of an overreacher in Raju. He literally, you know, he's someone who starts off in a very modest background, comes into money, comes into, you know, reflected fame and reflected glory because he's a manager of Rosie and that literally gets into his head.

He, you know, does something as an act of transgression. You know, he steals money, he forges money, he forges documents and in the end he gets caught. that begins to become its downfall. So there is a sense of overreach in many Narayan characters. So, you know the characters who have this anxiety to be appropriated or anxiety to appropriate the newly available coordinates and markers of success, fame. And in the process, they overstep the limits and that does begin as their descent, their fall, their absolute degeneration. which is what happens to Raju as well. Despite, or perhaps because of, his extreme accommodation to others, Raju's sincerity consists in being false. He is false to Rosie, who now takes on a

stage name Nalini. Again, the name Nalini as opposed to Rosie becomes interesting because the name is more suitable or more amenable or more compatible to the commercial consumerist industry that she is trying to get in. Because he loses his appreciation of her art and a commitment to it, rather, he becomes obsessed with the material benefit accruing from her performances and overbooks her to such an extent that when he talks to her of taking a vacation and enjoying ourselves, she can only reply, viciously. I don't think it's going to be possible until I fall sick or break my thigh bone. Do you know the bulls yoked to an oil crush up? They keep on going round and round and round in a circle without a beginning or an end. So this is what I meant just a little bit earlier when I said that this is an industry, this is a newly emerging industry which will transform the entity into a commodity, which will transform the talent into a product. And there's a huge amount of appetite to consume different kinds of performances, everything becomes performative, everything becomes part of an industrialization process, including heritage, including tourism, including architecture, and of course, human talent.

And this particular line of Rosie slash Nalini, the fact that it takes a different name also corroborates the performative quality of her identity, that she has to take a different name for the stage, the stage being the site, the agon for performance. And this particular melancholic line, almost mournful line where she's saying that I am tied as a bull to the yoke, to an oil crusher. So, I have to keep producing oil till the point that I collapse and get sick. That, of course, becomes a tragedy, the human tragedy that she finds herself stuck in, right? And again, the transformation from liberation to imprisonment. So, there is one imprisonment at the beginning where she is sort of having this sad, imprisoned life, the agency-less life of the wife, of, you know, indifferent husband. And then, of course, she finds liberation through Raju, who becomes her lover and then who introduces her to this opportunity, the spectacle, the industry, which will absorb her and welcome her through her dance forms. Until, that becomes excessive in quality and that begins to imprison her back again in a different form where she finds herself shackled back by her own craft, by her own art form, which is obviously the irony of the situation. Because Raju is unable to have a real harmonious relationship with the one person for whom he has given up any claims to a private individual existence. Since as Nalini's manager, he lives the most public

of lives. So again, what happens is the complete compromise of privacy.

So, he becomes a public figure, you know, everything becomes public about him. So that makes him lose his domesticity, his kinship, his family, the intimacy with his family. Gets destroyed in the process. by being too eager to play the required role, Raju ends up being false, not only to Rosie, but ultimately to himself, right? So this is the entire idea of insincerity that has been talked about over here. There's no method to be sincere. So in this entire industrialization process, in the entire commodification process, the only way this performative identity can be produced is through various forms of insincerity, right? And that is a tragedy of the situation as well. And from being too much the person involved with others, in this case with Rosie, he swings to the other extreme and becomes an egocentric individual concerned with making money and aggrandizing himself in the name of Rosie and her art. So the transformation from being someone who is obviously part of a collective machinery of consumption to someone who is egocentric and trying to make a lot of money that transformation is quite extreme and of course it swings back in the other direction towards the end of the novel where he becomes supposedly a saint, where again he is supposedly doing social service for a greater good of a collective. These things are very, very symptomatic because, you know, there are these different coordinates of ancient as newness, security, insecurity, tranquility, calm, as well as anxiety in this really complex ecology of an ancient civilization about to become a new nation or already have become a new nation. So, no wonder these complexities and these contradictions coexist.

In fact, as he later admits, he becomes so conceited as to think himself responsible for all of fame and success, though he ought to have known better. So, he begins to take a very vain entitlement in Rosie's performances and he attributes all that to himself, the fact that he made this happen as an enabler of Rosie. So, the egocentricity becomes important over here. And this is a quote from the novel. I became known because I went about with her, not the other way around. She became known because she had a genius in her, and the public had to take notice of it. I'm able to speak soberly about it now, only now. At that time, I was puffed up with the thought of how I had made her. As you know, this is a retrospection, this is a retrospective novel, a retrospective narrative. He is retelling the story

of what happened, right. So, in a more sobered down version, you know, he is telling the divinity of his ego, the hamartia, the error of judgment he made and of course the downfall, the descent that he suffered ultimately, right. But here is a passage which talks about how he got caught up in this reflected glory, he got caught up in this reflected fame. right, and she was the one making a lot of money and she was the one who was essentially exhibiting a talent and a craft but just being the manager of this person, he also thought he's becoming as famous as her and that obviously began to compromise his integrity, his moral principles and so on and so forth. Now this brings us to an interesting point because what we also see here is how the moral economy is changing in this changing India, right. So, the older values, the morality, the older values or ethics the older values of altruism and collective enterprise and collective responsibility and accountability are all getting shifted into a more self-centered, narcissistic project of vanity and assertion and individuality and so on and so forth.

There is a certain diseased condition over here, a certain pathological condition over here where this industry of commodification, this industry of reification also consumes the humanity of the human, the selflessness of the human and it sort of promotes certain kinds of selfishness which are quite aggressive in quality and sometimes violent in quality as well. And what happens in the process in this novel is the act of transgression, is the act of overreaching, overstepping, which then obviously causes Raju's fall, consequently. And he also begins to think of her as his property. Clearly, Raju has lost himself in a sea of self-deception, and something must be done if the impediments of insincerity resulting from extreme modes of behavior are to be removed from the path of his self-actualization and maturity. Until he becomes someone that he himself wishes to be and in being that is neither wholly egocentric, nor utterly subservient to others' wills, he cannot be said to have achieved a balanced maturity or an authentically sincere identity. So, the whole point of this essay and so look at how sincerity becomes an almost unachievable condition in this kind of a cultural, social setting where everything is so volatile and mutable, where the moral economy, the moral vocabulary, the entire vocabulary of values are changing and shifting. so quickly, so overtly and covertly, where the entire idea of sincerity and faithfulness begin to become old values, useless values, dysfunctional values. So in a

culture which prioritizes commodification and functionality, anything which doesn't fit the functional framework is seen as something which is regressive, which is useless in quality. It's very utility driven. It is very utility driven culture of commodification is something which is obviously critiqued to a certain extent in this novel, but also reflected in all this complexity.

It is now that myth and mysticism intervene in the realm of critical realism, which is where the mythical realism bit comes in, as a force to help Raju attain the goals of the latter's honourer. Having forged Rosie (alias Nalini's) signature to some documents sent to her by her former husband, Marco, Raju is about to be sent to jail for forgery, right? So, the story goes, you know, Marco sends some papers about the marital condition to Nalini slash Rosie and in order to stop Rosie from seeing it, Raju intervenes and illegally signs on behalf of her. And of course, that is found out, that is exposed and he is supposed to be, he is about to be sentenced to jail, you know, supposed to serve a prison sentence for forgery, although he does not yet know it. The fact that this jail sentence will change Raju's life irrevocably may remove the impediments to his true sincere self and social growth is underscored by the mythic song and dance performed by Rosie on the night that he's arrested. So again, the intertextuality becomes very interesting that she performs a mythical dance to a mythical song on the very night that he's about to get arrested. She entered carrying a brass lamp with a song in praise of Ganesha, the elephant-faced God, the remover of impediments, right? So, there's irony in the situation over here that Raju is about to go to jail and Rosie is performing the dance as a tribute, as an ode to Ganesha. the god who is supposed to remove impediments right but the irony is also double irony in that sense because only when Raju goes to jail the impediments to his true self are removed because you know the prison sentence serves as a sobering experience for him and then only after that only subsequent to that he begins to acquire this shift towards supposed saintliness although we don't quite know whether he actually achieves it or not now she goes on to uh performed a snake dance, which Rajan notes is unusual. This dance is one that elevates the serpent by bringing it out of its underground reptile clasp and transforming it into a creature of grace and divinity and an ornament of the gods. Again, so this changed or the changeability between the reptilian, the insidious and the dangerous into something which is worthy of

God's attention is interesting over here, which also indicates that the very quickly shifting vocabularies of valency in this particular cultural context. In parallel fashion, Raju is elevated through his experiences in the jail and later with the villagers, is elevated from a low life like the snake to a holy man, from a confidence man to a man deserving of others' confidence.

So from a trickster to a server of society, right? So from a trickster, from a con man really, from a charlatan, from a showman or some indirect showman, he tends to become someone who is trying or attempting to make himself part of a bigger social cause. In the final and crucial phase of the novel, the reader sees how the outer fit becomes an inner one, how the manner turns into the identity, right? So how the outside becomes inside and so on and so forth, how the entire performative bit becomes who you are really. But while in prison, Raja discovers the mythic life of pastoral pursuit. So it's almost like going back in time, you know, discovering or rediscovering the pastorality of your identity. And let's put them in touch with the earth and with the side of its nature, every individual solitary side. That he had never known existed. I worked incessantly on a vegetable patch in the backyard of the superintendent's home. I dug the earth and drew water from the well and tended it carefully. I loved every piece of this world. Oh, it seemed to be so good to be alive and feeling all this. The smell of freshly turned earth filled me with the greatest delight. If this was prison life, why didn't more people take to it? I'd been more happy to stay in this prison permanently. So this entire prison sentence becomes paradoxically some kind of a pastoral life for Raju and this sort of protects him or immunizes him from the trials and tribulations and the different kinds of seductions of metropolitan modernity. So, it is sort of going back in time, it is recovering his innocence, recovering the idyllic innocence that he had you know before he became the Railway Raju persona. So, the prison sentence over here actually elevates them spiritually and prepares them for what is to follow in the novel. Of course, Raju cannot remain in prison permanently, nor can remain totally cut off from his fellow beings, or the goals of realism would remain unfulfilled.

Because realism in the Lukaksian way, the George Lukaksian way, is also part of our social machinery, a social interconnected structure. So it cannot really operate in an

individual isolationist kind of manner. When he is released, he seeks shelter in a deserted temple, and there is perceived to be some kind of guru or holy man by the village community. So once again, Raju finds himself taking on, obeyed reluctantly, a role assigned to him by others, and in doing so becomes, as before, a projection of what people need. Now, I will stop at this point, but what is important, we'll just unpack this for a minute before I let you go. whole idea of the shift between the individual and the collective the shift between living on your own terms in a life of purity life of idyllic pursuits and then going back to a situation where you have to serve others in a performative way. That becomes a constant tension, a constant almost refrain in the narrative of the guide. So we see that happening in different forms and different disguises throughout the novel. So at the beginning of the novel, for instance, we have Raju, you know, serving as a railway guide. So, he's drinking reluctantly. He's helping people. He obviously, in exchange of money, But that's something that he doesn't quite enjoy after a point because he knows he's lying, he's fibbing and also he sees himself as a tout, as some kind of a broker with not much of a respectability quotient attached to it. But he goes on because it's the only way he can make money, the only way he can survive, right. So, of course, what happens in the middle of the story is complicated. you know, falls in love with a married woman and then becomes her manager and then gets a lot of money and he becomes greedy and overreaches his position and then the fall happens with his prison sentence. But paradoxically, the fall also elevates them as a spiritual person.

So it gives them the isolation and immunity from the, you know, the trials and tribulations, the snares, as it were, from modernity. And the word snare is important because Right before he is imprisoned, we have the allusion to the snake. How the snake is elevated to a godly position. And of course, the allusion to Ganesh is also important because Ganesh is supposed to be the protector against evil. And right after that, he goes to the prison. So the prison here becomes some kind of a purgatorio for Raji, right? To use a Dantesque reference. So it's a purges away his excesses, purges away, prunes away his moral excesses, his moral shadiness and darkness. And, you know, then he finds himself in a broken temple, in a dilapidated temple in one part of the village, where again, paradoxically, the projected identity is given to him that he is seen as a seer, he is seen as a saint. He doesn't seem to

have much agency about it. And it just becomes a projection of what people need. Right. So it's a different kind of consumption which comes back. So the earlier consumption was more mercenary, more superficial, more market oriented. But this one, of course, is more spiritual in that sense. It's more oriented towards spirituality. But this is interesting bit because if you look at the cultural context of the novel, and we discussed this already, this is also the time when mysticism was getting marketed.

The marketability of mysticism, the commodification of the saint was also happening in real time. So when Narayan was in the US writing this novel, the cult or the celebrity cult of the Guru was also beginning to take place in the Western world where there was a sort of exoticization of the Eastern branches of knowledge. Of course, very problematically through excesses, through embellishments, but it also created this opportunity, the opening, as it were, for some kind of charlatanism, right? It's a play, the performative quality of the saint who will become a celebrity, make a lot of money, and so on and so forth. So there is that subtext, which the guide is also hinting at at this point of time. But what that also means from Raj's perspective is that the agencylessness that he has, because he looks like a saint, he must perform. The saint's role. He does not seem to have an agency about it. And we will talk about this agency lessness in this very market oriented performative identity politics that Guide you know deals with and underscores underscores and illustrates. We will talk about all this in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.