

**Course Name: The Novel and Change**

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**Week – 09**

**Lecture 43**

R. K. Narayan's The Guide - Part 10

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled Novel and Change. We are looking at R.K. Narayan's novel The Guide. So, the following two sessions will be the concluding sessions for this novel. We will look at how the novel is also corresponding to some of the interesting social, political changes happening in India at that point of time because the whole point of a course like this is to look at the relationship between the text and the context. are looking at Faiza Afzal Khan's essay on Cultural Imperialism and the Indian English novel specifically on R.K. Narayan. And the whole point of taking a look at his essay is to look at how there is different kinds of cultural capitalism at play, different kinds of cultural identity formations, identity iterations at play and how the novel The Guide is a very interesting complex calibration of this entire a new identity ecology in early 20th century India and when I say identity ecology I mean the entire economy of new formed identities, different professional identities, social identities, intimate identities which are taking place at this point of time. Now if you remember the last bit where we stopped is the relationship of the sort of the transition that Raju has in the novel from being someone who is a mercenary, someone who is an opportunist in this new ecology of identities, someone who is forced to transform and of course we do not quite know whether he really transforms or not, in that the novel is magnificently open-ended and the open-endedness is of course part of the novel's narrative legacy. Now, in this section we will talk about the final phase of the novel and again how they correspond to newly emerging India at that point of time. because also remember this was a novel written when Narayan was in the US in a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship and this is also a novel where the perception about India in the West should also be factored in because this is a new India which is a

rising economy an emerging economy but also connected and plugged in to some templates of ancientness which also getting reformed in some sense because the idea of the guru for example from being the spiritual seer to someone who is getting increasingly collusive with the capitalist industry where the guru is also becoming an industry, the guru is also becoming a new kind of commodity identity, a new kind of consumerist identity in this point of time.

So, and this should be on your screen now. 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, which is why I spent some time talking about identity, how the manners, the performances then become the identity. So in that sense, the difference between the inner and the outer begin to disappear. What you are at an existential level and what you do at a performative level, they begin to blur and so the inner identity becomes the performative identity and vice versa. For a while in prison, Raju discovers the mythic life of pastoral pursuits, and this puts him in touch with the earth and with a side of its nature, a very individual, solitary side that he had never known existed. And this is a quotation now. And, you know, these are the pastoral bits in the novel, and we may have discussed this before, but it's worth revisiting because what I want to highlight today is looking at the relationship and how Raju recovers, in a way, essentially the pastoral, almost mythical life of a hermit, paradoxically only in prison. So the prison becomes, I mentioned this already, some kind of a purgatorio for Raju. And when he emerges from the prison, he's a changed man. But to what extent he's changed, we don't quite know, because whether he really becomes spiritual or whether he's just doing one more mimetic act of spirituality is a question that's left unanswered.

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 work how 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 happy to stay in prison permanently right so this is a paradox in the novel that he is actually feeling alive he's actually feeling more connected to his core existential

self only when he is Now of course the prison also is a temporal space because you only stay in a prison when you are serving a sentence right and sentence is again a temporal marker right. So there is temporality everywhere and we talked about how the arrival of the railways is a big change in spatial temporality. It changes the sleepy town of Malgudi into something else which is more episodic in quality, chronological inequality, more cyclical in quality and a prison too has a similar structure because you are only in prison when you serve a sentence. So, of course, Raju cannot remain in prison permanently nor can he remain totally cut off from his fellow beings or the goals of realism would remain unfulfilled. Now, we have spent a lot of intellectual energy already in looking at how there is a sense of mythical realism in the guide, in the sense of how this myth and realism put together. So there is social realism which is why this novel is such an important text for us to understand the complex cultural context of early 20th century India. But at the same time there is also a lot of myth. The vocabulary sometimes is very mythical.

It is plucked into the old mythical identities which are recycled and reused in different contextual conditions. But that mythical socialism, the mythical realism sorry is exactly what is happening over here. So there is a sense of temporality which must correspond to the realist novelistic technique. So, when he is released and this is on his screen, when he is released he seeks shelter in a deserted temple and there is perceived as some kind of a guru or holy man by the village community, right. So, again he is you know we talked about this already, but he is back pleasing others, he is back performing for other people. So, we saw how the transition happened from the Railway Raju when he was seen as performing for the tourists coming in and of course, he performed Marco, Rose's husband, when he was his travel guide, and then his bag being that in a different capacity. He is performing the role of the guru, he is pleasing others because he is supposed to perform what is expected of him. So, once again Raju finds himself taking on, albeit reluctantly, a role assigned to him by others and in so doing becomes, as before, a projection of what people need. So, it is a need-based identity and this is important because want to spend a little bit of time over here because what we see here is how even the ancient template of the Guru, the ancient identity of the Guru is now so heavily plucked into the contemporary identity which is need-based in quality, right. So, everything becomes purchasable,

everything becomes need-based in the sense that if there is a need in the market you have to fulfill it, you have to sort of you know perform and support it and satisfy it, right.

And the whole idea of market satisfaction, of customer satisfaction becomes important because you can see how the vocabulary of the new modern market is being connected to the identity of the ancient spiritual seer and those two become very problematically proximate with each other and this problematic proximity of oppositional categories is exactly what the novel does and I think very successfully. There is, however, a marked difference in the situation this time around. Now at last, Raju's own will matches his receptivity to others' suggestions. His decision to play the role required of him by others, by society becomes now a matter of individual choice. So, there is that subtle difference over here that Raju also wants to align himself to the role of that person who is satisfying others' will or others' expectations by performing the spiritual magical trick of bringing the rains in this particular case. Does the inner pattern and outer events flow together? And this is Walsh, Richard Walsh you know in the book on Narayan and it is interesting how there is a pattern over here, the inner pattern as in the existential core spiritual self and the market oriented more purchasable performative self they begin to acquire mappable patterns, similar patterns, comparable patterns. when the village people force him to fast as an appeal to the gods for an end to a drought, Raju's initial resistance gives way to a supportive resolve. So initially he is cynical about it, initially he does not know what to do, how to respond, but then eventually he supports them with a resolution. And this is a quotation that is there in page 212 of the guide. If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom and the grass grow.

Why not do it thoroughly? For the first time in his life, he was making an earnest effort. For the first time, he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love. Right, so this is an important thing over here, outside money and love, because there is this selfish need, bodily, visceral, financial, but he is now operating on something outside of that. immediate selfish need which is what makes a little bit different at the end. But again the question remains unanswered. To what extent is his need, is his performance over here genuine? To what extent is it authentic? To what extent is it really spiritual or is it just

another trick that he is trying to pull off? For the first time towards the end of his life, Raju does succeed in achieving a measure of self-awareness and authenticity, right. So a measure, the operative word over here is measure, a measure of self-awareness and authenticity and we don't quite know. Is it a full measure? If it's a full measure or maybe it's just some kind of a performative mimetic measure. He finally achieves wholeness by striking a balance between individuality and social responsibility. At the end of the novel, then, Raju is both an individual alienated from the crowd and yet also a character who is constituted not simply influenced by the expectations of others. So, there is this interesting intersection of individuality and social performance or social conformity right and that intersection becomes quite interesting at the end of the novel because he is quite confused at some level because he doesn't quite know whether he should do it but then he signs up for it in a very performative way.

But the final line of the novel as we may have discussed already where he says to Vellan that he can feel it, the rain coming up his legs, right and then he collapses, he gives in. We don't quite know even what that means. Does he die at the end or does he just pass out or does he just fall to the ground? We don't quite, we don't have a neat answer. And this irresolution at the end of the novel is exactly what makes it so fascinating and so authentic in terms of representing a very, very complex cultural condition where the relationship between good and bad, between authentic and inauthentic is just getting more and more porous in quality because it is a very market oriented economy at this point of time where everything is consumerist, everything is capitalized, almost everything can enter the market through the market or mediated by the market. So there the ontological differences, the functional differences become quite blurred in quality. So, when he stands at the very end up to his knees in water, he is utterly isolated from the crowd. Yet it is his collaboration in some sense with the expectations that produces their sense of a miracle. Now the miracle of course is something outside of rationality outside of logic but at the same time the miracle is something which is to be consumed over here collectively right. So he is someone who is a miracle maker and he is supposed to perform the role of the miracle maker. Now again I have to remind you here that this is also the time and age and there is this cultural momentum at this point of time where the miracle maker is someone who is

quite close to the capitalist industry, right, where the difference between the spirituals here and the hardcore capitalist is not quite very, very remote, not very far away.

So, the miracle maker can very much be part of the engine of the market, the financial engine of the market which produces identities uniquely. The suggestion at the conclusion that a reign may be on its way, again the word maybe is, the phrase maybe is interesting here, is again symbolic of the divine mythic intervention in the realist mode, right. Raju's transformation is in fact achieved through mythic and mystical means. The godlike heroism of a holy man that seems to have the approval of the gods of life. Thus, the goal of realism, achievement of balance, sincerity and maturity by the protagonist is achieved within the mode of the Indian mythic and mystical tradition. The idea that a holy man, of the holy man achieving a miracle for his people, right. What is interesting here is to look at the mimetic quality of the whole episode where Raju is very much plugged into the vocabulary of the mythical template, the spiritual template, the ancient Indian template, but at the same time the mimetic bit is never quite lost sight of in a sense that what he does in the end is also a mimetic act, what he does in the end is also a performative act. And, of course, you are aware that Narayan never really gave an answer, any authorial answer, an authoritative authorial answer as a resolution to this, to this conundrum. When he was asked by reporters, when he was asked by critics, what he thought happens in the end, he just said, I do not know. And this authorial distancing is really a quite commendable in my reading because he just makes the characters so lifelike, he just makes the characters so ambivalent and so complex in quality.

It becomes a properly round character rather than a flat character because he gave an answer if he offered some kind of a neat resolution that would have given the novel a sense of closure. They were also given the character sense of closure which would really undercut the enigma that the character of Raju continues to have even in modern times. The picaresque character who apparently becomes a saint or simulates saintliness or sainthood rather and the simulation of sainthood is important because then that continues or retains the picaresque tradition where the difference between the authentic and the mimetic are not quite resolved, right. So what we see in this particular essay. It is a really interesting essay

by Faisal Afzal Khan where Narayan's writing in general and there are references to other books in Narayan as well seems to really be plucked into or really see a very authentic reflection of the complex cultural time that India was going through at that point. Because this is an India which is newly emerging through new forms, new found forms of sort of market oriented identities where the jobs are opening up, the market is getting more and more liberalized and that in a very interesting way or psychologically also is undercutting and going against some of the earlier conservative templates of identity, templates of family, templates of kinship right and kinship of course is a very important factor in Narayan's writing where he establishes new forms or new found forms of kinship which are more closely corresponding to the you know the new forms of identity markers in a newly emerging India. So, what we see in Narayan's writing is a really interesting juxtaposition almost like a metaphysical conceit of an ancient India and a newly orienting India where the market oriented identities, the more capitalist oriented identities and more democratization that is happening at this point of time really creates a sense of newness which is not quite entirely removed from the ancientness but at the same time it gives a new color, a new flavor, a new sort of coordinates to it as it were. Now what we will do from this point before you wind up reading Narayan's guide as you can see I am scrolling down towards the end of you know this particular essay is look at Narayan's writing through a different prism and different ways in which he can be compared to other writers around that time because if we talk about Narayan as someone who is anticipating someone like Salman Rushdie, we find that in Rushdie's writing what we call the famous example of Chutnification where everything gets mixed in a sort of inseparable way. If Rushdie Chutnifies identity, if Rushdie Chutnifies history, what we see in Narayan is the sort of anticipation of that Chutnification, the anticipation of that you know contamination of identities, the contamination of forms of identity iterations. Now, I use the word contamination, I do not use it necessarily in a negative light.

What it also means is the idea of purity, the idea of authenticity, the idea of genuineness, you know it really gets replaced by different possibilities of identity iterations, possibilities which are also possibilities of precarity. Because in Narayan's Guide for example, if you just look at this novel, the difference possibility and precarity is never quite clear. And

what is a productive positive possibility can also become a site of precarity because if you look at the novel, there are many instances where Raju, the character of Raju, he does things which are risky in quality and it is a risk-taking identity, it is a risk-taking ecology, it is a risk-taking economy and it is a newly emerging economy which is which has got a lot of appetite for risks and its appetite for risk is important because that also offers you opportunities of growth, opportunities of elevation but there is also the possibility of decadence and degeneration. So here is a character and here is a cultural condition where the difference between you know growth, elevation, development, improvement is never quite far away from possibilities of pitfall right or possibilities of degeneration and decadence and even death because what happens to Raju at the end of the novel he loses all his money he goes to jail and he comes out of the jail and then we don't quite know whether he's going to live or not because the last image of him very infantilized image, baby like he is falling down on his knees, can't stand anymore. So, that infantilization can also be seen as some kind of an image of death, an image of the ultimate fall into death but then again, we are not quite sure because there is also the possibility that he is just maybe fainting or passing out or maybe just collapsing out of fatigue.

So that, that complexity, that cognitive complexity is really you know interesting and that gives you a very interesting picture of the way in which the market, the economy the politics, the value ecology were all changing in India at that point of time where conservative values were still around, traditional values were still around, values of kinship, intimacy, domesticity, duty but then again we were having a great amount of contamination that was happening with exposure of different forms where even ancient Indian heritage, ancient Indian relics, they were looked at from a different lens. If you look at the character of Marco for instance, we discussed how even the name Marco is interesting because it alludes to the original traveler from Europe, the original traveler, the earliest traveler really, one of the earliest travelers from the European world. to this part of the planet, Marco Polo really, where the whole idea of exoticizing the East, which is politically very problematic, but at the same time it was part of a knowledge system at one point of time, it still is. So that is, that gets recycled in the character of Marco over here because he is very anguished, he is wearing the perfect classical European traveler's attire

and the sartorial code is important because he wants to pass up and perform. the role of the explorer in the same way as Raju is performing several roles at different points of time. So, he is performing the role of the railway guide, the tourist guide. He is also becoming the manager of a celebrity at one point of time and of course in the end where there is indication that he is transformed, changed and he is about to do something for the greater good of the community, that too is very heavily plucked into the performative vocabulary because there is an audience which comes to consume his act. He stands knee-deep in water and he is praying to the gods to bring the rain. So, it just becomes a very public performance of sorts. So, we would see different kinds of mythical realism, social realism or cultural realism all mixing in different ways.

Now the ending of this essay is interesting because it talks about how, you know, the Rushdie and Narayan can be compared with each other. Because I see how Narayan seems to almost inadvertently anticipate the sort of the contamination, the chutnification of identities that Rushdie talks about. But it is also the nostalgic quality Narayan has. He is also looking back at the past, looking back at the myth as some kind of a repository that one can still be plugged into. And this is what appears on your screen now. So, ideologically speaking, Narayan stands in sharpest contrast to Rushdie. The latter can see no possibility for a whole identity in a culturally and politically fragmented world and conveys his belief through fiction in which all genres cancel each other out and where even myth debunks itself. In Narayan's fiction, on the other hand, not only do different genres and modes of myth and realism, comedy and tragedy hold their own, but for the most part, they interfuse with rather than diffuse each other. And myth, far from debunking itself, often reigns supreme. So, there is this... nostalgia about myth, that Narayan Retain. So, despite the fact that there was this problematic proximity between different kinds of genres, different kinds of entities, there is also a sense of nostalgia for an ancient India, where even the possibility that There is an original identity which may be recovered, an original self which may be recovered is articulated. When it comes to Rushdie, then that desire, that nostalgia disappears really. There is no need to articulate it, rather it is celebrated, that contamination is celebrated. So, Narayan doesn't offer us some kind of a seamless celebration, rather his admirations are quite mixed.

I mean the writing is quite mixed in that emotional way because there is obviously the sense of a very slow as well as quickly changing India, the value systems are changing, the kinship systems are changing, but at the same time there is also a constant looking back at the past. So there is this interesting you know interfusion rather than diffusion as it points out. Now what that means is this creates a possibility in the shipping screen, this creates a possibility of a whole existence for the fiction as well as the characters. But of course, this wholeness is made possible only if present reality is diluted and made more palatable by the comforting presence of an enduring, indigenous past, as my discussion of Narayan's last few novels has shown. Even for Narayan, this is not always possible. However, as Hasharan Aluwalia sees it, Narayan for the most part So, it is an interesting take really, not that we need to completely agree with it, but what this also means that there is a degree of romanticization happening in Narayan, a degree of reified representation happening in Narayan and what I mean by reified representation is it gives you an imagined space time, a chronotope if you will of Malgudi and the choice of space time is important, the choice of that particular site is important because it is a kind of a sort of time-space continuum which allows an Narayan to fictionalize the past as well as the present, right. So while it is absolutely certain there is a really interesting social representation in the guide for instance in the sense of how it represents different kinds of identities, different kinds of opening up of different identities which were impossible to imagine earlier but at the same time What that also means is that there is the possibility of protecting those identities in conjunction with the mythical past, in conjunction with the so recreation of the past, right. Because the very fact that there are so many mythical allusions, the very fact that there references and sort of throwbacks to ancient myths means that there is a nostalgia about the past. And in that sense, Malgudi is very much like an imagined chronotope, an imagined space-time. And you find that happening in other novelists as well.

If you look at novels of Thomas Hardy, we find similar chronotops at play. So there's a lot of social realism in Hardy, Thomas Hardy's novels. But at the same time, there is this nostalgic reimagining of an earlier England where the contamination with the current, with the contemporary conditions is not quite uh that bad not quite that that much in scale right

but in Narayan it is that this is both some kind of a chronotope uh as well as some kind of protective strategy a romantic strategy if you will uh to to put these mythical bits the nostalgia base together with the contemporary capitalist market oriented bits and if you see in the guide for example is an example of how the idea of the seer, the idea of the spiritual self is retained to a large extent. The vocabulary in the end is a combination of both the ancient and the modern. But at the same time, it is not really some kind of an easy celebration of newness or an easy celebration of contemporaneity. There is this resistance towards complete change, resistance towards absolute abandoning of earlier traditions, which is why even though it is mimetic, there is an effort that Raju gives in the end to go back in time to find back his touch with the pastoral and use that as some kind of a template or toolkit with which he may at least mimetically perform spirituality, perform ancientness, perform the whole idea of the sort of spiritual seer, right. So, there is that interesting tension as well as collaboration in Narayan's writing. So, with that we end this particular session we will have one more session where we talk about how in a macro way Narayan's writings in general and the guide in particular really it really anticipates it not just represents what is happening at that time in early 20th century which is something we discussed already but the last bit that I want to spend some time in is how it seems to anticipate some of the current conditions of India and Global South as it were in terms of how different forms of spirituality, different forms of messianic, mystical identities are very interestingly proximate to contemporary capitalist, consumerist ecology. And this correspondence is important because what Narayan seems to show in the guide as There is both the ancient and the modern, ancient and the new, and they all come together for different reasons. There is a sort of instrumentalization of the past, instrumentalization of nostalgia, but at the same time that instrumentalization is not really innocuous all the time.

It's also oriented towards a certain kind of future imagination, right? And that's something we'll talk about in the final session on the guide, which is basically a discussion on how Narayan's writing is really interesting. representation of 20th century India, early 20th century India, but also in anticipation of the India that is now, India that is today, right. So, with that we end this session and I look forward to seeing you at the subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.