

**Course Name: The Novel and Change**

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**Lecture 44**

R. K. Narayan's The Guide - Part 11

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and change. We are looking at R. K. Narayan's novel The Guide. We will have the final session on that novel and we will not discuss the novel per se because we have done that already quite extensively, I believe. What we will do instead in the final session is look at how this novel and also Indian writing in English in general, it seems to really capture and sort of contemporize some of the things that were happening in India at that point of time and also the Global South. And finally, what I also aim to do is to look at ways in which the novel The Guide and Narayan's writing in particular seems to anticipate many things which happen later in terms of identity iterations, in terms of cultural formations and reformations, etc. So, we again drawing on this really wonderful book that we are reading, Fawzia Afzal Khan's Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel. And we look at the certain bits in the introduction. We start with Frederick Jameson. There is an interesting reference to Jameson that I think will be really interesting for us, particularly in ways in which we are reading this novel. Because Jameson as you know as a Marxist critic is someone who is also very, very interested in looking at relationship in art, literature and society. And to what extent is art and literature and narratives reflective of society, reflective of cultural conditions, but also equally anticipatory in many ways, which is what I would like to spend some time doing in terms of looking at how this novel in particular and Narayan's writing in general seems to anticipate many of the conditions which were to come later in this part of the world and continue to sort of characterize us today.

So, this should be on your screen, the Jameson reference Frederick Jameson in his book The Political Unconscious states that ideology consists of strategies of containment. The

writer, by unconsciously or often consciously attempting to validate himself and his group in the face of what he perceives as an antagonistic other, ends up confining himself to the limited and limiting economic and socio-political interests of his people, class or group. In a similar fashion, he confines the other to an antagonistic value system. Now, this is interesting because what it means is you are talking about what is known as writerly bias where the writer's location, their own location culturally, socially, ethnically, linguistically that could sometimes inform and shape the production of the protagonist and the antagonist, right. So, what kind of features go into the character of the protagonist, the hero, as it were and similarly what kind of features inform the character of the antagonist. So, that would also be plugged into the value system the writer is inhabiting, right. So, that psyche will get sort of externalized as it were. In a similar fashion, he confines the other to an antagonistic value system. Certainly, this has been true in the case of many hegemonic Western writers who have tried to contain the colonized other in the narrative frameworks in order to then to justify the groups of imperilous activities. As Edward Said explains in *Orientalism* and this is a quotation from *Orientalism*, the Oriental is depicted in Western political and literary texts as something which one studies and depicts as in a curriculum, as some something one judges as in a court of law, something one disciplines as in a school or prison, something one illustrates as in a zoological manual. The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks, right. So, the frameworks are important over here, the word frameworks because what frameworks obviously mean is how what is the prism through which the representation is operationalized or operative, right. So those prisms contain, those frameworks contain biases, locations, preferences, orientations and so on and so forth. Now that would determine in a very profuse and profound way the creation of characters, the creation of orders, the creation of narrative proclivities as it were. And this is especially true for Indian writing in English because if you look at someone like Narayan who is always inheriting you know the novel tradition and from a very western tradition, but at the same time he is Indianizing it in very successful ways because there is a lot of really deep-rooted as you mentioned already Indian epic elements, Indian mythic elements in Narayan's writings.

By the same-time, it is very, very new the writing because it contains, it inhabits a very

new genre of writing which is the novel of course. So, these dominating frameworks arose as Said makes clear because the West had made an assumption during the 19th and 20th centuries that the Orient and everything in it and by analogy in every other colonized geographical area was if not definitively inferior to and certainly in need of improvement by the West. So, again this becomes important and we will deal with these things more deeply when we come to the final bit of this course where we look at how something like literary theory for instance could be a very useful method to study novel and change because when we have some kind of a cultural system which looks at identities through a hierarchical prism, through an unequal prism where there is one savior identity and one identity which requires saving according to that prism, right. So, of course, that makes the politics of representation very asymmetrical in quality and if anything, novel becomes a very interesting study of asymmetrical identities, right. Identities which are not symmetrical but are not equal in quality right. So, the West was seen in this orientalist prism, orientalist method of writing as something which is capable of saving, capable of you know intervention, positive intervention of course and the non-West is someone who with what requires such intervention. Now what is interesting is to see how the same sentiments, the same sort of structural sentiment is operated even today which is why I said that we will look at Narayan's writing in particular and that cultural zeitgeist in particular as something which is relevant even in 2024 where we are inhabiting now. Since the West was the more powerful culture, Western writers possessed certain privileges. They could penetrate, wrestle with, give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery, right. So, the sense of mystery, the sense of the uncanny, the sense of the supernatural, so all these were exoticized and also given meanings too from a very, very convenient strategic Western position.

The hermeneutics practiced through such a policy of representation are essentially those of the Western Historicism, definitively enunciated in the theories of such post-Enlightenment philosophers such as Jurgen Habermas and Ernst Georg Gadamer. So, Habermas and Gadamer are important figures of Enlightenment tradition. In his central study, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer, for instance, raises the questions that writers herein analyze and all attempt to grapple with in their respective words? Can we hope to

understand works or cultures that are historically and culturally alien to us? And is objective understanding possible? Or is all understanding relative in their own historical situation? Now the reason why we are reading this is because when it comes to someone like Narayan, it is really, really interesting because he is using a narrative method, an epistemic prism if you will, a framework which is very Western in quality, the novel being a very Western import, an import from the West. But at the same time the content within this framework is very, very Indian and this is paradox or this sort of tension, if you will, between the content and the form is something that shapes in Narayan's writings in a very interesting way. And the same thing that sometimes which becomes incongruous, odd, almost funny and absurd, you find that happening even today in sort of 2024 India, where you find certain old forms of spirituality which are Indian in quality, old forms of know mysticism again very Indian quality suddenly very collusive with western capitalist methods you know the entire industrialization of spirituality or capitalism or capitalization of spirituality turned to some capitalist commodity which generate a lot of revenue and money and wealth We find that happening in industrial scales in 2024 in India, also other parts of the world.

Now Narayan's writing, especially the guide in particular, seemed to have anticipated this paradox in a very, very interesting way because what happens at the end of the novel as we have discussed at length already. is a great mystery whether rains will come or not, whether Raju is capable of doing a miracle intervention or not stays unanswered, right. So that question stays unanswered. But what it does do and so the way it positions itself as a prophetic novel is how it looks at certain forms of mimetic spirituality, certain forms of performative spirituality gaining more and more currency because the last Birla novel is where entire villages come to watch the performance as an American reporter who is making a documentary film on this miracle worker called Raju and of course that the entire spectacle, the entire machinery around Raju's mimetic act seems to really be prophetic because what we see in India today and also elsewhere is how the relationship between spirituality and commodity, the relationship between identity, existential identity, performative identity, are never quite clear, right. So, there is this sort of digitality with which identity can be created, circulated, manufactured, manipulated, consumed, right. So

of course, you know Narayan is writing in a pre-digital India, something that you know is very much a print, print based media that we are talking about over here. But there is a lot of audio-visual quality in Narayan's writing too and obviously the novel *The Guide* was made into a really successful film in Indian film, the Hindi film industry, a film starring Dev Anand. One of the biggest superstars in Hindi film industry at that time, which also shows the how amenable this kind of vocabulary was, how amenable this kind of a writing was to the cinematic medium, the film form as it were, right. So, this all these things really make the novel very complex. The ambivalence, the moral complexity, the moral ambiguity, but also the anticipatory quality in Narayan's writing despite being pre-digital, it is so cinematic in quality and how you know Much of what goes on in the guide, much of what happens in the guide of the novel is so relevant to the cultural conditions we live in today.

Now Gadamer's question here, both Hemamas and Gadamer are asking the same question in different vocabulary, different language maybe and that is, is it possible to establish a relationship of empathy with the other to the extent that we can represent the other without bias, without any kind of proclivity or whether any kind of presuppositions. Gadamer's own answer to these questions reveals the cultural biases inherent even in Western liberal humanism. Even though for Gadamer all interpretation is situational, shaped, and constrained by the historically relative criteria of a particular culture, interpretation of an alien work from within one's own or from an alien culture is possible either through dialogue between the past and the present which is why we read this in context with the guide dialogue between past and present if the work happens to be from the same culture which in Narayan's case is or between self and other if the work is from an alien culture. with the guide it is an intersectional novel really and which is why we picked this passage because it really fits in reading of the guide because it is both a dialogue between past and present. There is a past India, there is a spiritual India, there is a sort of pure idea of India and that is getting more and more sort of closer as it were to the idea of the current India, the present India, the newly oriented India, of technology, media, communication, market, etc. So, there is that past and present. But also, the self and other because India looked at by an Indian who is also mediated by the Western gaze. Narayan as a writer just at a very

superficial level, Indian writer who is situated in the West writing about India. So, there is a self-other going on there as well.

How the sense of self becomes also fractured because Narayan's own position as a writer is both Indian as well as someone who is very, very Anglicized, someone who is very, very influenced as it were by the West. So, the intersectionality between past and present and self and other is really and complexly operative in Narayan's writing, particularly in relation to the guide. So, confronted with such a work, we listen, according to Gadamer's paradigm, with wise Heideggerian passivity towards unfamiliar voice, tone, content. By allowing the unfamiliar to question the familiar, the past to question the present, begin to interpret the world hence also the alien culture more fully right and which is why I think the questioning becomes important because not all questions require answers and some questions left unanswered unresolved actually become more complex questions because what happens in the end of the guide for instance does Raju really bring the rain it's a question that both Indians as well as non-Indians would like to know but there's no need answer and your location as an Indian or location as an American will make no difference in terms of getting the right answer because there is no right answer, right? So again, this harks back to the intersectionality that Nobel is trying to promote. The bridge between the past and the present, the past coming back to the present, recreated by the present, but at the same time the bridge between the self and the other.

Because Raju is so many selves in the novel. He is so fractured as a self in the novel. He starts off as a railway guide, then he becomes someone who is a, you know, he has an affair with a married woman and then he becomes a manager of a celebrity, the same woman becomes a celebrity, then he goes to jail, he becomes a prisoner and of course he ends with becoming some kind of a quasi-spiritual saint, right. So different selves interact with each other in the novel and there is no neat answer. It is just really interesting questions and complex questions through which we can read the novel. So, what this means is what Gadamer calls the event of understanding. And again, the event of understanding gets more and more complex when it comes to the India that Narayan is representing, which is both ancient and modern, which is both backward looking as well as forward looking, which is

both nostalgic and conservative as well as futuristic and innovative. And we see that same tension and collaboration happening even today in the India we live in today, because there are these ancient bits that are brought back and some of them, some of those ancient bits get really interestingly collaborative. with modern technology, modern orientations, contemporary futuristic orientations. So, in that sense, Guide is a very, very prophetic novel. It really speaks to us as we stand in 2024 in this really interesting time in India. So, the event of understanding comes about according to Gadamer when our own horizon of historical and cultural meaning, so the horizon of reading, horizon of meanings which is ever fluid, ever expansive, it really becomes interesting because that is how you read a text, that is how you inhabit a text. So when our own horizon of historical and cultural meanings fuses with the the horizon of with within which the work operates at such a moment we enter the alien world or the artifact but at the same time gather it into our own realm reaching a more complete understanding of ourselves instead of leaving home gardener remarks we come home understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity but has a placing of oneself within a process of tradition in which past and present, self and other are constantly fused. And I think this is actually one of the best ways to read the novel, The Guide, because the self and the other are constantly fused, the past and the present are constantly fused and the idea of leaving home and coming home, they also become connected in many ways because if you look at what happens at the end of the guide, it is a bit of a spiritual homecoming that Raju is trying to at least mimetically appropriate or perform, right. We do not quite know again if it is really a homecoming in a spiritual sense where they actually manage to connect.

To his sort of true ancient Indian self, whether it is just one more trick, one more corn job which is market oriented, supposed to manipulate and manufacture some kind of a collective customer satisfaction, we do not quite know. But the possibilities are present and the paradoxical possibilities of contradictory readings are articulated over here. So Gadamer's assumption is that there is a unifying tradition underlying all of history and that is a recognition or an acceptance of this tradition, this bias that will help us understand literature and ourselves. The question asked Gadamer contains Terry Eagleton in his book Literary Theory. The question implicitly asked by postcolonial writers of the colonizing

countries or counterparts is, whose tradition is such a hermeneutics based on? For Gadamer's theory is based on the enormous assumption that there is indeed a single mainstream tradition that all valid works participate in, that history forms an unbroken continuum, free of rupture, conflict, contradiction, and that the prejudices we who have inherited from our tradition are to be cherished. Such a hermeneutics assumes, in other words, that history defines a landscape where one can always and in all places be at home. Their works about the past or about a different culture or history about the other will not confuse us, but will rather increase our self-understanding. In other words, that the alien is always secretly familiar, that the other is both inscrutable and always already known, right? So, what we see now is how someone like Terry Eagleton is questioning some of the universal assumptions of someone like Gadamer. So, the Enlightenment logic of universality, the Enlightenment logic of identity and kinship and intimacy can be questioned, should be questioned, must be morally questioned by the post-colonial you know rewriting of that kind of history or rewriting of that kind of a narrative structure. And in that sense, this is what I wanted to sort of come to really.

Arrive at is looking at Guide by Narayan as a post-colonial novel or the cultural condition that Narayan is representing as a classic post-colonial moment and this is what we will wind up with and I will leave you with this thought that in a sense that there is Of course, this postcolonial temporal sense post hyphen colonial is written after a colonization, after India has become a new nation. But also the kind of rewriting that is happening in the guide where there is this you know colonial enlightenment logic oriented novel writing that know, Narayan is inheriting the structure, the form, but at the same time, the way that Narayan deconstructs novel writing, the way it makes it open-ended, the way he brings in Indian tradition, non-novelistic tradition, at the same time, post-novelistic tradition, like for instance, we talked about cinema, how this novel became a film so easily and so complexly and so successfully really. So, it is both novelistic as well as post-novelistic. In that sense it is very, very post-colonial at a very stylistic sense because if you look at the character Raju, a picaresque character becoming a sort of a pseudo saint as it were, it again it inhabits the sort of the blurry borderlines that novels love to manipulate and promote and produce and foreground. But at the same time there is also an allusion to epics, an allusion

to spiritual structures, an allusion to spiritual templates, messianic templates really which are non-novelistic in quality, right.

So, in that sense it is also deconstructing the European novel by making it so profoundly So, the Indianization of the cultural ecology, the Indianization of the matrix in the guide is very, very important for us to understand because that is what makes it post-colonial and also very topical, also very contemporary in 2024 as I mentioned The kind, the type of identity iterations that the guide offers us is quite relevant even today where the lines between the genuine, the authentic and the shallow superficial performative is not quite clear all the time. And how the collision between capitalism, industry and spirituality, the triangulation is still very much part of contemporary vocabulary, right. So, the idea of contemporaneity in the guide is must also be studied in terms of looking at the novel as a postcolonial novel, right. So, post both in terms of temporality and post also in terms of style, in terms of narrativity, right, the condition of narrative that it is espousing and articulating. Now, the concluding thoughts about Guide is, of course, the complexity of characters, the moral greyness around characters. We have dealt with that at some length, but my parting, my leaving message about this novel is how this particular novel by being so amenable to so many different cultural conditions of India, it is so profoundly Indian, right, it is so profoundly and typically Indian in so many different ways. And the paradox is it is sort of giving us a landscape, giving us a space time which is purely fictional because quite literally it is fictional, literally fictional being the paradox over here. Because Malgudi is a fictional space, it is not really a place in India. So, despite being so Indian and despite being so post-colonial Indian, it is describing a space which does not exist, Malgudi, right. So, this play between fictionality and reality, this play between an imagined territory and imagined space time and a historical space time is what makes the guide so post-colonial as a novel and so prophetic as a novel.

So, what I content is that this is one of the finest novels really in terms of looking at the slow changes as well as the sudden changes that shape societal formations that shape societal identity iterations because a lot of suddenness and guide a lot of really filmic moments uh filmy moments uh larger than life moments but at the same time there are also

moments of slow change uh both overt and covert changes both visible and invisible changes and it is this control and manipulation of visibility and invisibility of covert and overt changes which makes this novel so such a great work of art really and how seems to anticipate much of what India became and continues to be today. It is really complex ecology of authentic, inauthentic, market oriented, spiritual oriented identities that we constantly find ourselves engaging with and Narayan does all that by taking a fictional landscape, Malgudi, a place which is also a no place. So that sense is a very utopian novel because it takes place at a site which doesn't exist. It's a no place. So, I use the word utopia not as a perfect place, but as a no place, right. So, the guide is about no place and no time. At the same time, it's a novel about a very, very real, realist depiction or realistic depiction of historical time, socio-cultural time, which is India in the 50s and 60s. how it was emerging, and how it shaped subsequently, and how it speaks to us even today in 2024, where identities, especially post-digital identities, and one can sort of look at the guide, especially the different kinds of fake identities, forced identities, manipulative identities, are something which seems to anticipate much of the panic around manipulation much of the panic around forgery, much of the panic about fake identities which we find ourselves engaged with in a post-digital world, right. So, in a very interesting sense, the guide can be read in a very original way and I invite all of you to read it. We may not have time to do it now, but that is a paper waiting to be written for those of you who are specializing in Narayan.

To what extent is Narayan's writing particularly the guide so profoundly post-digital, so profoundly dialogic rather with some of the concerns and panic and fears and possibilities and promises of the post-digital world especially post-digital India which really relates to ancientness in very interesting ways. It really connects to ancientness in very interesting ways. But at the same time, it is nostalgic in a futuristic way, nostalgic in an anticipatory way, nostalgic in an orientation which is quite forward looking, right. So, all that makes, you know, Narayan's writing really complex, really relatable and really prophetic, I argue, in terms of how we can read it using some of the epistemic apparatus, some of the knowledge systems available to us today in contemporary India. So, with that we end reading the guide. With that we also end looking at Narayan as a really interesting writer

who is reflecting, whose writing is reflective of some of the concerns and panics and fears and you know promises and aspirations and anxieties of early twentieth century India as a post-colonial new nation state. but also, the India we live in today, the India we inhabit today, the India we internalize today again very complex, very, very technologically you know interesting at the same time a country which constantly engages with this collaboration and sometimes tension between the past and the present, the past and the future right in all kinds of ways technological ways, historical ways, cultural ways, sentimental ways and so on and so forth. So, Narayan seems to offer us a novel which really gives us this sentimental ecology with which we can not just read. India as a post-colonial nation state, which is what the novel is depicting at a real literal level, but also India as we stand in today, as one of the biggest democracies in the world, as a really interesting nation, as a really successful experiment in democracy, but at the same time as a site which offers astonishing opportunities for growth, openness, liberation, But all of that also contains the panic of precarity, the panic of a pitfall, the panic of transgression, the panic of you know overstepping right because among other things the novel is also about transgression, it is also about overstepping, it is also about overreaching right. What happens when opportunity and overreaching come together and that creates this really interesting moral structure which it is very asymmetrically complex, very asymmetrically entangled with good, bad, evil, ugly all kinds of moral elements and valencies, right.

So, values become very important in guide as well, values become very important in Narayan's writing as well. The mutability of values, both nostalgic values, conservative values as well as forward-looking futuristic values and now values can be fractured and now the fracturing of values can also connect different kinds of identity iterations. So, with that we end our reading of Narayan. I hope it was useful for you and we will continue with the next text in subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.