**Study Materials**

**PG: Fourth Semester (CCAE)**

**Subject: English**

**Course 402: Special Paper — I**

**Option A: Literature of the Indian Sub-Continent: Fiction and Non-Fiction in English Course**

**Unit: 02 (*The Guide*)**

**1. Discussing the narrative technique of *The Guide*:**

*The Guide* has a dual narrative: the protagonist himself recounts the sections relating to his past (his childhood, his role as a tourist guide or even his role as a an impresario for Rosie) in the first-person autobiographical mode whereas the sections relating to the present, which basically deal with Raju’s assumption of the role of *Swami* and its consequences, are delineated by the omniscient third-person narrator. These two narratives, Krishna Sen justly observes, weave in and out of each other in a braided structure that metaphorically represents the way in which a person’s past impinges on his present life. Raju is able to tell the story of his own past with detachment. Thus he can confide in the readers about his emergence as ‘Railway Raju’: “I came to be called Railway Raju. Perfect strangers, having heard of my name, began to ask for me when their train arrived at the Malgudi railway station. It is written on the brow of some that they shall not be left alone. I am one such, I think.” This popularity never leaves Raju. Even in the jail he is not left alone. He becomes the teacher and comforter of the prisoners whom he could talk out of their blackest moods, the friend of the warders, and personal servant and secretary to the Superintendent. Raju’s assessment of himself is therefore perfectly sensible.

But Raju cannot obviously be an ideal narrator for the incidents of the present – when he prepares himself for assuming the role of a priest or resolves to undertake the ritual fast. The omniscient (third-person) narrator therefore has the role here. One may quote a couple of sentences from that section of the novel where the third person narrative strand brings home Raju’s arduous preparation to present himself as a sage to the world: “He composed his features for his professional role and smoothed out his beard and hair, and sat down in his seat with a book in his hand”. Raju is thus compared to an actor who continues to perform his role of a Guru till he is caught in his own meshes and compelled to identify himself as an instrument of the will of the villagers of Mangala.

There are some other vital points to be noted here. The central character provides the unity by interweaving his past and present by a blurring of time distinctions. The flashback technique makes for constant alertness on the reader’s part. It also provides a window on many aspects of life: marriage and morals, classes and levels of culture. But no single character represents the novelist’s total vision of life; all of them together do.

The time-span of the story is fairly long covering many years of the protagonist’s life – his boyhood, youth and manhood – giving ample scope for its development. But echoing C.D. Narasimhaiah we may say that the story has an excellent organization: not the traditional beginning, a middle and an end, but all of them at odds with one another, yet well-knit. The story offers, by its method of narration, fact and sense of fact alternately, fact as it happened in the past and the narrator’s comment on it. The first-person narrator thus reflects on his unfair behaviour towards Rosie when he is out on bail: “I knew my mind was not working either normally or fairly. I knew I was growing jealous of her self-reliance. But I forgot for the moment that she was doing it all for my sake”. This kind of self-critiquing helps in adding an interesting dimension to the character of the protagonist.

**2. Locating elements of humour and irony in *The Guide*:**

Humour is Narayan’s forte in *The Guide.* Narayan’s sense of humour is delicate as he contends that “nothing evaporates so swiftly as humour the moment it is examined or explained”. The reader has to be alert throughout in order to locate the elements of humour in the narrative. Krishna Sen rightly observes that the essential qualities in Narayan’s anatomy of humour comprising observation, exposure and deflation require objectivity and detachment, but the final quality of sympathy demands the involvement of the reader in the joys and sorrows of the protagonist.

Being the Sadhu has merely been a bit play-acting for Raju before he takes the resolve to undertake the ritualistic fast. And by his excellent histrionic talent he even persuaded himself of his authenticity:

. . . he began to feel that it was but right they should touch his feet; as a matter of fact it seemed possible that he himself might bow low, take the dust of his own feet and press it to his eyes. He began to think that his personality radiated a glory.

So it is evident that Raju had nearly convinced himself of his own exalted status. But this was a familiar feeling for Raju. He had always been in the habit of surprising himself with his own excellent performance. Years ago when he was launching Rosie on her career as a dancer he was impressed by his own oratory:

Heaven knows where I had found all this acquaintance. I delivered such a lecture on the importance of our culture and the place of the dance in it that they very simply had to accept what I said.

The use of a braided double narrative in which the omniscient third-person narratorial voice weaves in and out of Raju’s first-person autobiographical narration thus helps the author realize his conception of humour to the full.

*The Guide* is a remarkable example of the especially difficult genre to which most of Narayan’s work belongs, the serious comedy. Success in it calls for a sensibility preserved from ambivalence or fracture, an unusual unity in the point of view as well as a social tradition in which the comic and the sad are not sharply marked off one from the other. This is how William Walsh appreciates Narayan’s fiction. We may say that a subtle ironic vision is at the heart of Narayan’s ‘serious comedy’.

To cite an example, when the Swami was half-way through his fast and there was no water in the river there is an ironical account of the efforts made to fulfil the requirements. Since it was difficult to find knee-deep water the villagers had made an artificial basin in sand and when it did not fill up, they fetched water from distant wells and filled it. Stupidity and superstition could not go farther. Narasimhaiah succinctly observes, “For anyone without Narayan’s comic vision the humour of the situation is completely lost and would even be sacrilegious to the highest degree to view it as ironical. But Narayan’s sunny temper wouldn’t miss the incongruity of a situation however sacrilegious”. The author’s ‘sunny temper’ is reflected throughout the narrative.

**3. Considering the appropriateness of the title of *The Guide*:**

The title of *The Guide* is loaded and there are multiple puns on the word ‘guide’. As a railway guide Raju is phenomenally successful. He has a gift to examine the psychology of his tourists and accordingly mete out different treatment to his customers. As Raju notes, if the customer was:

The academic type I was careful to avoid all mention of facts and figures [...] letting the man himself do all the talking. [...] On the other hand if an innocent man happened to be at hand I let myself go freely. [...] I gave statistics out of my head.

This throws an interesting light on a certain aspect of Raju’s character, and that is, he is gifted with ‘water-diviner’s instinct’. With this rare instinct and enormous confidence Raju is able to size up Marco and Rosie as his potential customers. He exploits both Rosie and Marco. He correctly assesses that Rosie and Marco are not a good match for each other and tries to gain advantage of the problematic situation. He is partially successful to seduce Rosie but the situation gets complicated when Marco comes to know of it and deserts her. He would have got over his disappointment if Rosie herself had not reappeared in his life. He found himself acting as Rosie’s impresario. He certainly did not have the capacity to guide Rosie in her career as a performer of classical dance but it is true that he relished his role as Rosie’s manager.

When he is thrown in the prison for his act of forgery he drifts into the role of a model prisoner and is accepted by other jailbirds as a *vadhyar* or teacher. This is indeed a prelude to his assumption of the role of a *Swami*, a spiritual guide, once he is out of the prison. And when he is accepted as a *Sadhu*, Raju, with the characteristic thoroughness, pays attention to details like his appearance, his beard, his fluency in uttering mystifying statements. Meenakshi Mukherjee is right when she observes, “Raju’s entire life is a series of improvisations. His quick adjustment to the part of a sadhu falls in line with similar improvisations done throughout his life”.

But the question is inevitable: Is Raju a real saint or is he a fake? Makarand Paranjape in “The Reluctant Guru: R.K. Narayan and *The Guide*”problematizes this issue. In fact, critics of the novel are divided on this question. C.D. Narasimhaiah, for instance, considers Raju as a transformed man in the end, someone who has attained authentic sainthood: “with all his limitations Raju’s is a rich and complex life – achieving integration at last”. In contrast, G.S. Balarama Gupta, insists that Raju’s belief that it is finally raining is “a pathetic hallucination of a starving imposter”, and that Raju remains “a perfidious megalomaniac who meets with an appropriate ignominious end”. Paranjape rightly points out that the question is not so much whether Raju is a willing saint or not, because everyone within the novel notices Raju’s reluctance, even his unfitness for Gurudom. During his enforced fast Raju resentfully thinks, “This single man [Velan] was responsible for his pleasant plight. Why would he not go away and leave him alone?”. But does that really change who or what he ends up becoming? The question raised by Paranjape touches upon a philosophical debate on ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. It is true that before embarking on the fast, Raju even thought of escaping from the place. But what kept him back was the collective faith of the people: “He was moved by the recollection of the big crowd of women and children touching his feet”. Raju actually did not want to betray the trust of the villagers. The abiding trust of the people in his magical powers at last brought a transformation in him. The argument of Meenakshi Mukherjee may be quoted here: “Towards the end Raju loses the feeling of an actor performing an act; the act becomes the reality, the mask becomes the man, and Raju the guide turns into a guru. Whether his fasting really brought the rains down or not is an irrelevant question. The superb ambiguity at the end serves its purpose. More important is Raju’s moment of transcending his limited self”.

The argument of Mukherjee compels conviction. At this point, one may very well draw one’s attention to Raju’s resolution as he finally passes through his penance: “If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly?” This interior monologue is followed by the observation of an omniscient narrator: “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 the money and love; for the first time he was doing something in which he was not personally interested”.

This is an epiphanic moment – a moment in which an individual acquires the power to go beyond the limits of his self. *The Guide* is therefore not altogether ‘a novel of enforced sainthood’, as the author envisioned it.

**4. Critiquing *The Guide* as a post-colonial novel:**

*The Guide*, which is often described as a moral fable of a Hindu sinner turned Hindu saint, does not at first glance appear to offer material for a post-colonial reading. But on closer inspection the post-colonial hybridity of the milieu is inescapable. This is the view of Krishna Sen and it certainly compels conviction. When Raju takes his tourists around Malgudi town for sight-seeing, Narayan has an opportunity to represent the simultaneous coexistence of colonial and postcolonial presences in the urban/suburban topography of post-colonial India:

While passing the New Extension, I pointed without even turning my head, ‘Sir Frederick Lawley ... The man left behind Robert Clive to administer the district. He built all the tanks and dams and developed this district. Good man. Hence the statue.’ At the tenth-century Iswara temple at Vinayak Street, I reeled off the description of the frieze along the wall: ‘If you look closely, you will see the entire epic *Ramayana* carved along the wall ...

The simultaneous coexistence of *pyol* school (where Raju receives his lessons form a pundit) with the fashionable Albert Mission school is also noteworthy in this context. Raju’s father does not want to send his boy to a missionary school because: “it seems they try to convert our boys into Christians and are all the time insulting our gods”. It is interesting to note that this has a precise autobiographical reference. In *My Days* we read:

Ours was a Lutherean School – mostly for boarders who were Christian converts. The teachers were all converts and towards the few non-Christian students like me, they displayed a lot of hatred. Most of the Christian students also detested us. The scriptural classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu gods and violent abuses were heaped on idol-worshippers as a prelude to glorifying Jesus.

The autobiography and the fiction thus cross-fertilize each other in a fascinating way and adds a significant dimension to the post-colonial reading of *The Guide.*

While discussing the colonial encounters and postcolonial transformations in the novel Nandini Bhattacharya states that *The Guide* is a classic postcolonial text because it maps the engagement with change, dislocation, and transformation in India. The sanitized, untouched quality of Malgudi is shattered with the advent of railways and the arrival of new people and new ideas in it. The building of railway tracks changes the landscape of little Raju’s world: “I lost to some extent my freedom under the tamarind tree, because the trucks were piled there”. Significantly, Raju begins collecting nuts and bolts from railway tracks and preserving them in his mother’s suitcase where they mingle with her traditional silk sarees. Perhaps this is the finest example of the conjunction of the old, and the new.

The arrival of railways brings in a new and even an alien culture in Malgudi. And Raju thoroughly embraces this new culture by adopting the profession of a tourist guide. With his limited knowledge (whether historical or geographical) of Malgudi town and the neighbouring areas he soon flourishes in his profession because wit and common sense never fail him. He is able to impress even Marco, a serious researcher, when he reaches Malgudi under the apparel of the touring European. But the interesting divide between Raju and Marco, the ‘native’ and the ‘foreign explorer’ is that, Raju has known the existence of the caves on Mempi Hills since birth, but lacks the scientific knowledge and technical expertise of Marco to ‘discover’ it for the world.

Rosie’s move from the position of a *devadasi* to that of a cultural diva, who integrates herself with the respectable mainstream of the nation, is also interesting under the postcolonial study of the novel. It is important to note that both Raju and Marco ignore the *devadasi* background of Rosie. Marco, however, never pays honour to Rosie’s talent but Raju does. Although Raju has his own selfish interest in this respect, he is instrumental in promoting the career of Rosie alias Nalini as a professional Bharat Natyam dancer. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in an article titled “How to read a culturally different book”, however, critiques Narayan for representing Rosie in a manner that marginalizes her. Spivak focuses on Rosie as the historically oppressed figure. The dancer is the subaltern, and she, according to Spivak, has no voice or agency. It is not easy to disagree with Spivak. There is obviously a need to read the novel with the kind of sensitivity and critical awareness that recognizes the structures of an oppressive patriarchal system that continues to subjugate those who are already marginal and powerless. But it is difficult to accept that Rosie is entirely devoid of agency in the novel. Rosie is a dedicated dancer. She is grateful to Raju for giving her a new lease of life. But once her schedule as a performer becomes hectic she raises her voice and wants to come out of a ‘circus existence’. Her final transformation is remarkable, as she has conquered her desire for both money and fame. It is worthwhile to quote Raju’s observation at the end of the novel: “Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated so long”. Rosie therefore is finally able to defy the patriarchal structure and choose her own direction in life.

**Reading List:**

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