



From Play-Acting To Self-Realisation In R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

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Abstract: *The paper aims at bringing out the blend of comic and tragic irony by R. K. Narayan in order to bring out the peculiar paradox of life and human nature in one of his most famous novels, The Guide. From being an arch deceiver and cheat, the protagonist of the novel, Raju moves towards a state of true sainthood. Even as the 'Bhasmasura' in him destroys him physically, the 'Valmiki' in him manifests itself. Self-deception thus gives way to self-realisation as man and mask become one.*

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* provides us with the story of an ex-convict being elevated to the status of a saint or a spiritual guide by the people. The book exposes the numerous fake Swamijis who inhabit India, preying on the naiveté and gullibility of the simple-minded natives. There is no shortage of such 'seers' in the land as Raju's tryst with the barber at the very beginning of the book shows us. At the same time, the book could also be seen as a sign of the human potential for redemption as Raju's saintly mask gradually gives way to bring out the real 'saint' within in the last part of the novel. As is the case with most of his works, Narayan uses his favourite device, irony to bring about a fusion of comic and tragic visions, to evoke both laughter and pathos. He uses it to bring out the strange anomalies of the world and especially of India and Indians, to show the strange paradox that India is. Anomalies, like that of the Elephant God seated on a puny mouse (which he talks of in the opening paragraphs of *The Man Eater of Malgudi*) seem to be a part of the Indian mental makeup.

Narayan's concern is definitely moral although he remains objective and detached in his approach, describing the events as they transpired, without pronouncing any moral judgement on his protagonist, Raju. As Dr M.K.Naik has shown us in his insightful analysis of Narayan's novels in his book, *The Ironic Vision*, the irony in Narayan's masterpieces, such as *The Guide*, *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, and *The Financial Expert* attains the dimension of "moral discovery." (Naik 3) The moral purpose and perhaps a deeper philosophical purpose are evident in the direction that the irony takes- the comic irony assumes a tragic form as the novel proceeds and there is no room for laughter at the end. To put it in Dr M. K. Naik's words, "the all-pervading irony that informs the entire action" "raises overwhelming questions such as the relation between appearance and reality, the man and the mask, and ends and means, thereby highlighting the essential ambiguities of the human condition". (54)

The idea of a vast difference between appearance and reality is explored fully through the leit-motif of role-playing that is central to the novel, *The Guide*. In spite of his objectivity, Narayan is by no means sympathetic towards his protagonist and often emphasizes the fact that he is merely acting, pretending to be something else for some personal gain. Raju is a grand actor and plays every part to perfection. Towards the end, the mask and the man become one, but he has to traverse a long journey before this level is reached. And he pays

for it with his life, hardly the kind of ending that Raju would have envisaged or desired. Narayan in general seems to be both piqued and amused by the sight of self-styled gurus such as Raju in *The Guide* or Margayya in *The Financial Expert*. These men, who are out to light up other people's path (symbolized by the name "Margayya"), have to first come to grips with their own limitations and accept their own weaknesses in order to redeem themselves in the eyes of the readers.

Raju is happiest when he is leading or guiding others. He seems to look upon it as an act of 'Providence' that has given him his 'vocation' in life. On the most superficial level, he is a tourist guide showing people around the town of Malgudi. He makes a perfect guide with his glib talk, charisma, and the ability to win the confidence of people. He always assumes a false air of wisdom and knowledge, be it as a tourist guide, as Rosie's secretary or as the Swamiji in Mangal. As he tells Velan, "I never said: 'I don't know'. Not in my nature, I suppose." (Narayan 49)¹ This is the tragic flaw that brings about his downfall at every stage of life. Of course, it could be seen as his strength as well, as it gives him the aura of confidence required to delude people into believing in him. Besides, Raju possesses the shrewdness to quickly size up people and behave exactly as they would wish. He has both the ability and the desire to please and plays every part to perfection, whether it is that of a tourist guide, or of Rosie's lover and later her secretary and manager. He is a model prisoner in jail and a perfect Swamiji in Mangal. But this perfection is merely superficial. At the core, Raju remains childish, impetuous, selfish, and insecure, craving for attention to make up for this deep sense of insecurity. By his own confession, he loves to get involved in other people's affairs and as he says elsewhere, always desires to be "master of the show" (202). And this proves to be his *hamartia* and is at the bottom of all the roles that he undertakes.

His interest in Rosie is by no means disinterested. He is infatuated by her physical charms and wishes to possess her. Ironically enough, her husband Marco makes Raju her guardian. Raju, with his ability to play the part of Rosie's lover and art-lover successfully, satisfies her feminine vanity and gives a fillip to her dream of becoming a dancer. He exploits her first physically, and then lives off her earnings when she becomes a famous dancer. Admittedly, Rosie too uses him. But Raju's later actions make him the greater culprit. She is content to let him guide her, and he begins to believe himself indispensable. Raju envisions and projects himself as truly noble, the knight saving the lady in distress, her saviour and patron. But the reader is able to discern that his motives are purely worldly, a combination of greed and lust. The desire to possess Rosie permanently, in fact, makes him commit forgery and lands him in jail, ruining his life and their relationship. The movie version of the book of course, completely sensationalised and distorted the narrative by turning Raju into a victim, while projecting Rosie as a heartless, callous, self-centred betrayer.

In prison too, Raju becomes the role model for other prisoners, a "Vadhyar" (which literally means teacher in Tamil), again a guide. It is highly ironical that Raju is ecstatic while describing his life in prison. He is happiest in prison, obeying the rules and being subservient to the officials. But this is the real Raju, ever ready to please. Paradoxically, while he believes himself to be the dominant master, he allows himself to become a captive in every relationship, be it with Rosie, in prison, or later in Mangal. Narayan's irony is at its best in describing Raju's life in Mangal. Narayan uses a third-person omniscient narrative to describe this phase of Raju's life, whereas Raju's past is told in the form of a first-person narrative by Raju himself. This gives Narayan the advantage of making full use of irony in his observations on the last and most important phase of Raju's life and gives a greater degree of reliability to the narrative.

Raju comes to Mangal to seek shelter and oblivion, to escape from other human beings. But, ironically enough, he becomes the most sought-after man in Mangal. What could be more ironical than the fact that a man who avoided taking up any responsibility for self, who hung around in Mangal to avoid fighting for a "living space in his own home" or finding "cash to redeem it" (31) is entrusted with the responsibility of leading and fighting for the multitude? With his usual uncanny knack of impressing people and a certain air of wisdom, Raju lets slip a few wise words in front of Velan, who immediately mistakes him for a seer, a yogi, the ultimate

¹ R. K. Narayan, *The Guide*. (1958; Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1961) 49.

All subsequent references to the book are from this edition. Hence, only page numbers are given in brackets.

honour that our 'guide' could desire. Thanks to his usual weaknesses, his vanity and his indolence, Raju accepts the role readily enough initially. He is glad to lap up the food and the adulation that come his way without having to work for anything. Raju's giant size ego reaches grandiose proportions as he begins to revel in the deification he receives from all quarters. Narayan informs us: "He felt he was attaining the stature of a saint" (15), "He had gradually come to view himself as a master of these occasions. He had already begun to feel that the adulation directed to him was inevitable" (17). A little later, we have remarks such as, "No one was more impressed with the grandeur of the whole thing than Raju himself" (42) and "He began to think that his personality radiated a glory" (94). So begins a fresh cycle of self-delusion as Raju gets entrapped in the new role thrust upon him. Narayan constantly juxtaposes the mundane with the spiritual to reveal Raju's true nature. While pearls of wisdom drop from his lips in front of others, he is obsessed with most puerile thoughts such as food and ways of getting rid of the multitude. Every remark of his and even his silences are taken as supremely meaningful by the naïve villagers. The ease with which he deceives them is amusing but it also paves the way for his destruction. The comic irony gradually begins to take a tragic turn, as Raju gets entangled in the web that he has woven around himself. A fine sample of dramatic irony comes through this statement in the early part of the novel: "Raju was filled with gratitude and prayed that Velan might never come to the stage of thinking that he was too good for food and that he subsisted on atoms from the air" (30), as though to give the reader a glimpse of the twists in the tale.

Although one could argue that Raju does not consciously set out to deceive the people and has the status of a Swami thrust upon him unwittingly, it is equally true that all that happens to him is not a mere quirk of fate. He must accept the moral responsibility for accepting and assuming this false mask- at a very overt level, he grows a beard, narrates parables, and drops seemingly wise and noble remarks from time to time to keep up the posture. According to Narayan, "He was dragging those innocent men deeper and deeper into the bog of unclear thoughts." (46) And appropriately, it is Velan's half-witted brother who is responsible for turning the hitherto comic situation into a cruelly comic one. He misinterprets Raju's half-serious avowal of taking up a fast to stop the fight in the village into that of a desire on his part to take up a fast to bring in the rains and relays the message accordingly. They believe him as Raju himself had spoken of such miracles, of how God would send the right person at the right time to save them.

Thus, we have a supreme example of the 'Bhasmasura' myth, which Narayan explores more fully and literally in *The Man Eater of Malgudi*. Raju becomes a victim of the myth that he himself has created. Narayan describes the situation in these words: "He felt he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out. He now saw the enormity of his own creation. He had created a giant with his puny self, a throne of authority with that slab of stone." (96). By his own folly and false pretences, he had now lost any choice or chance of escape that he had earlier- "he must play the role that Velan had given him" (30). Thus, their roles are now reversed as Velan unknowingly becomes the master and Raju is his poor slave or prisoner. There is supreme irony again in this, for all along, Velan appears as the perfect disciple with his doglike devotion and faith in Raju. But this very fact gives him a greater hold on Raju's life than Raju himself possesses and determines the direction that Raju's life takes. Velan now assumes a Godlike position- he is Raju's Nemesis. He becomes Raju's confessor, as Raju pours out to him the tale of his entire life in a last-ditch effort to save himself by making Velan realize that he had been harbouring a crook all along. Ironically, however, it fosters a kind of spiritual growth in Raju as he retrospects and introspects to admit the truth about himself. It is literally Raju's 'midnight hour of unmasking', as the tale begins at night and ends with the crowing of the cock. This is a big achievement for someone who by his very nature "avoided a direct and bald truth" (98), even though the motive with which it is done is trivial. Ironically again, it fails to have the desired effect on Velan, who is now in greater awe of him. Thus, there is now no choice for our Bhasmasura but to use the boon granted to him by God (or rather Velan who is now almost in a similar position), to turn it on himself and play the role right through. As Raju says in the beginning, "God will destroy us if we attempt to usurp His rights." (15) Raju's desire to play God boomerangs on him. More importantly, he has exploited and cheated the people, literally bit the hand that fed him, and he must pay for this.

One wonders how Raju will come out through the final test. Initially, Raju's decision to undertake the fast is an act of desperation and he manages to procure some food for himself during the first two days. But paradoxically he experiences a gradual change as the fast progresses. The habitual egoist that he is, he begins to

enjoy the role: “If by avoiding food, I should help the trees bloom and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly?” (213) But this egoism gradually disappears. The author himself credits Raju with authenticity: “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; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested” (213), the first time that Narayan has anything positive to say of his protagonist.

Gradually, the man and the mask start becoming identical as Raju genuinely tries to live up to the image that he is projecting and, in the end, the two fuse totally. As Dr M. K. Naik points out, the end of the novel may make us wonder if Raju’s final action is again a sign of true saintliness or merely a case of delirium or an act of “fatalism”, or of “self-deception” (Naik 58), the ultimate step in his play-acting that makes him heedless of whether he lives or dies. What complicates the case is that the ambiguity at the end still leaves us with a certain amount of doubt as to Raju’s metamorphosis. This is probably because the credit for the change cannot be traced to Raju alone. As William Walsh aptly sums up, “--- in the transformation in the Eastern tale the personality is relatively passive, the source of change is outside the psyche in some mysterious law of life, and the process itself is as much a matter of illusion as sincerity, of self-deception as much as of *know thyself*.” (Walsh 132)

But one cannot forget the fact that Raju could have saved himself by taking the glucose that is offered him. But he chooses to play his part perfectly, to complete the job that he has undertaken and is therefore, redeemed in his death. What makes us believe that he is making a conscious choice is the smile on the face when the message from the government officials to give him glucose and saline is read out to him. This supreme act of self-sacrifice deservedly bestows on him the stature of a saint. Thus, what could be termed as his tragic downfall again has an ironical twist in it- his descent in worldly terms leads to his spiritual ascent, portrayed symbolically by Narayan’s description of “the great shaft of light” that “illuminated the surroundings” (221). In keeping with Narayan’s tendency to avoid any sentimental excesses, he has deliberately blurred the ending, leaving us unsure of whether Raju dies or not. Even assuming there is no physical death, there is definitely a symbolic death as our hero sheds his old self.

The scoundrel in Raju probably deserved to become a victim of his own deceptive strategies, but the habitual egotist seems to have ultimately annihilated his ego to transcend self in this last-ditch effort to do his bit for the people who fed him. Irrespective of whether the rains come or not, this act of unselfishness is the first of its kind for Raju. From the point where Raju begins to have a “peculiar floating feeling” (223) after taking the decision to abstain from food, one gets the feeling that Raju at last has found that *peace of God which passeth all understanding*. It is a spiritual rebirth for Raju- the movement begins with his private confession to Velan that becomes a mode of catharsis and self-discovery, the *anagnorisis* that leads to the *peripeteia*, resignation to the role that determines his destiny. But the resignation gradually gives way to acceptance and at the end, his spiritual evolution is complete. He is a changed person, a real guide and role-model that people can look up to. The ending therefore becomes both a case of Nemesis and self-realisation. The Bhasmasura myth gives way to the “Valmiki” (Biswal 126) myth as J. K. Biswal points out in his analysis of the novel.

The tragic vision therefore is offset or rather complemented by the comic. The humourist in Narayan continues to take a dig at the Indian scenario till the very end: the jostling crowds, the gullibility of the people, the commercialization of the fasting site and the American journalist thrown in, provide us with a fine sample of Narayan’s tongue-in-cheek humour. But the humourist in reality is overpowered by the humanist in Narayan with his warm, humane approach to human foibles and weaknesses. This is the touch of the master comedian, whose irony never carries any suggestion of satire, even while providing a critique of society and life itself. It also helps to ward off the danger of any of his works deteriorating into melodrama, even in the face of the most dramatic twists provided by fate. As Prof C.D. Narasimhaiah aptly sums up in his essay, “R. K. Narayan: The Comic as a Mode of Study in Maturity”, the comic mode allows the author a greater degree of detachment “to sensitize us to the possibilities of the commonplace---the privilege of comic art.”(Narasimhaiah 117) *The Guide* is no exception as it goes beyond providing a mere exposé of a fake swami and the Nemesis that dogs him, to show us the possibility of salvation for the most ordinary mortals, even for sinners like Raju.

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