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Spiritual Quest for Self-understanding: Metamorphosis of Raju in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

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Abstract:

The present paper explores how Raju in R. K. Narayan's novel *The Guide* pursues a spiritual quest for self-understanding. At this end, I aim to bring out how R.K. Narayan shows the evolution of Raju's character from his role of a tour guide to that of a spiritual guide, and in so doing how Narayan upholds the traditional Hindu ideal of detachment from the corporeal desires and material quest. At the same time, this paper seeks to bring out how Narayan problematizes the complexities of the enforced sainthood and the ancient paradigm of *sadhu* by transposing it to the modern setting through his delineation of Raju's character.

Keyword: Carnal desire, self-mis/understanding, spiritual growth, metamorphosis, humility and godliness, innate divinity.

It is pretty impossible for an individual to realize and uphold the established Hindu ideal of detaching oneself entirely from a life of self-indulgence and material pursuits. In fact, there is an unpredictable complexity in human behaviour and action. In other words, the essence of human existence is always characterized by an antithetical pull between his propensity to material desires and his struggle for partaking in divinity. Hence, the delineation of human character and action has been a favourite theme for artists since ancient ages. R.K. Narayan is also no exception here. In a BBC interview with William Walsh, R. K. Narayan opines: "My main concern is with human character – a central character from whose point of view the world is seen, and who tries to get over a difficult situation or succumbs to it or fights it in his own setting"¹. So, the statement speaks volumes how Narayan as a novelist was motivated in delineating "human character" with all subtleties and delicacies and how as an artist he was interested in the complexities in human nature within the context of the traditional Hindu ideal of detachment from a life of self-indulgence and carnal yearnings.

Since the publication of the novel in 1958, *The Guide* has arrested numerous scholarly and critical attention down the ages. A good number of articles and papers have been written by scholars on the transformation of Raju. However, a research gap has always been there so far as the exploration of Raju's character is concerned from the perspective of unpredictable complexity in human behaviour and action. Evidently, Narayan's novel *The Guide* is all about the transformation of the central character Raju from his role of a tour guide to that of a spiritual guide. The life story of Raju is the parodic re-enactment of the dedicated life of the sages of the yore. However, it is to be noted with due care and attention that through him, Narayan problematizes the complexities of the enforced sainthood and the ancient paradigm of sadhu by transposing it into the modern setting.

The Guide opens with the release of the central protagonist Raju from prison and on his taking shelter in an old temple on the banks of the river Sarayu. Before his imprisonment he was a public figure though lived in utmost poverty earlier. Because of his natural talent he succeeded in playing several roles: a tourist guide, an adulterous lover and a theatrical impresario. Having lived the life of an adventurer he eventually sacrifices his life as a saint, a new Mahatma as the people around him say, for the welfare of a rural community. Raju is fated to be a guide by chance and temperament. He becomes a tourist guide by chance when he is given charge of a railway shop. He buys papers and old books to wrap articles; he reads books and papers to while away his time and gathers information about Malgudi, never says "no", gives false information, and becomes famous as a tourist guide. In fact, he tells Velan "It was not because I wanted to utter a falsehood, but only because I wanted to be a pleasant" (Narayan, *Guide*55). Raju's role as a lover and stage manager is very appreciable. Being ignorant, he does not understand the basics of dance, but he understands Rosie's desire to be a dancer and thus financially he manages her affairs perfectly. His love, jealousy and possessiveness instigated him to copy Rosie's signature which ironically leads to his imprisonment.

After his release, when he is sitting lonely near a dilapidated temple a villager called Velan mistakes him for a "swami" because there is something saintly about Raju's appearance. Velan gazes at Raju respectfully, unburdens himself, and looks for advice and guidance. Raju, on the other hand, is tempted to play the role of the swami because "it was in his nature to get involved in other people's interest and activities" (Narayan, *Guide*9). He feels disconcerted by the devotion of the peasants who believe that a superior soul has come to live near the village. Ironically, Raju's

old habit of offering guidance to others when he was a tourist guide asserts itself when he wants to be honest this time. The special attention of the villagers makes him ‘feel uncomfortable’ and so he wonders if he could devise some means of escape from the company” (Narayan, *Guide*31). His circle of devotees inevitably widens because he is believed to have worked a miracle on Velan’s stepsister. Consequently, it becomes a daily practice of Velan and his fellow villagers to bring food for the Swami and the result is that men, women and children in large number come to have *darshan* of him.

The affection and devotion of the peasants transform Raju to such an extent that he assumes the role of a spiritual guide: “his bear now caressed his chest, his hair covered his back and around his neck he wore a necklace of prayer breads” (Narayan, *Guide*53). As the narrator tells us Raju “felt moved by the recollection of the big crowd of women and children touching his feet. He felt moved by the thought of their gratitude” (Narayan, *Guide*111). The unshakable faith of the people of Mangala transforms Raju into an instrument of their will so that he feels naturally inclined to fast for survival. When he is called upon to fast by his devotees, and thus to bring rains to the parched land, he realizes that, “he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out” (Narayan, *Guide*106). Raju became aware about the fact that something has changed within himself: “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 has making an earnest effort, for the first time he has learning the thrill of complete application, outside money and love, for the first time he is doing a thing in which he was not personally interested” (Narayan, *Guide*237). This results in the complete metamorphosis of Raju from his previous self to the present state of attaining sainthood. As a “Savior”, he is expected to stand in “knee deep water to look the skies, and utter the prayer lines for two weeks completely fasting during the period – and so the rains would come down provided the man who performed it was a pure soul. Was a great soul” (Narayan, *Guide*109). Thus, Raju spends his days muttering prayers as a result of his liberation from his ego, and it is revealed by his words: “I am only doing what I have to do; that is all. My likes and dislikes do not count” (Narayan, *Guide*243) until on the eleventh day when he collapses with the prophetic declaration that it is raining in the hills. The novel thus ends with the magnitude of his spiritual gain.

So, at the end of the novel we are threatened with so many unanswered questions. Is Raju a real saint or is he a fake? This question has puzzled most readers of the novel ever since its publication. Sally Appleton in the review titled “The Ambiguous Man,” which appeared

in *Commonwealth Magazine*, a few weeks after the novel's publication, observes: "The author must decide whether or not holiness will work . . . the author abandons the reader to choose arbitrarily whether or not, as Raju sinks into the muddy river bed, he is dying, whether or not, as the water rises to Raju's knees, it rises because "it's raining in the hills" or because Raju himself is sagging into it"². It is not surprising that critics are divided on this question. C. D. Narasimhaiah considers Raju a transformed man in the end, a saint, whereas G. S. Balarama Gupta believes that Raju is a selfish swindler, an adroit actor, and a perfidious megalomaniac (Paranjape 177). In the words of Paranjape:

The question is not so much whether Raju is a willing saint or not because, like all of us, everyone within the novel notices Raju's reluctance, even his unfitness for gurudom. But does that really change who or what he ends up becoming? So what we have here is a real problem, one that leads us to the crux of Narayan's artistry and to his relationship to Indian modernity. Because if Raju is a fake, Narayan is putting into doubt not just an individual but the institution of guru itself. (177)

The question that is raised here is not so much whether Raju is a willing saint or not because readers notice Raju's reluctance for gurudom but the real problem here is one that leads us to Narayan's artistry and his relationship to Indian modernity. Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that Raju performs the role of sanyasi well in the end. Mukherjee asserts: "Towards the end Raju loses the feeling of an actor performing an act; the act becomes reality, the mask becomes the man, and Raju the Guide turns into a guru" (124). Mukherjee's argument is quite affirmative so far as the evaluation of Raju's character is concerned. The gap which primarily existed between the man and the mask vanishes; the culprit is transformed into a sage. Moreover, this is not the role playing, but the process of identifying the self helps Raju discover himself.

Therefore, Raju is no more a fake guru, on whom gurudom had been thrust. Instead, he seemed to grow in stature to fit its mantle. Raju who was thus the villagers' disciple until he is obliged to convert himself into their guru by the intensity of their demand of the "Guru function" from him, ultimately finds his true self of a sanyasi. Narayan wanted to tell the readers that there are many Rajus or fake sanyasis in our society. Despite being so aware of the dangers of shaming such a serious thing as being a guru, Narayan actually came out in favour of the institution in the end. He did not want the novel to be a propaganda tract against superstitious villagers and

unscrupulous charlatans. *The Guide* could be read as a “complex allegory satirizing the process by which gods and demi-gods came to be established within the religion, wherein through the centuries myths and stories came to be built around a man until he gradually attained the stature of a god and joined the ranks of celestial beings as a divine incarnation” (Sankaran 129). In this view *The Guide* would be a satire, albeit a gentle one, about the system of worship within Hinduism. Raju was in a sense, the distillation of a type of character that had existed in Hindu mythology for nearly five centuries—“the trickster sage.” In Hindu mythology the sages and even the gods were shown to be fallible, and no one was considered perfect or lying so low as to be incapable of reaching great spiritual heights. Similarly in Hindu mythology transformation could occur to a person due to an outside agency without the volition of the person. “Raju would, in this light, be eminent ‘sage’ material” (Sankaran 135). If we judge Raju’s transformation in the light of Sankara’s arguments, we can aver that Raju undergoes a metamorphosis owing to his susceptibility to the desires of other people whom Raju comes into contact at point of time in his life.

What Narayan shows, therefore, is that the process of guidance and transformation that the institution of the guru implies is neither unconditional nor simplistic. David W. Atkinson³ argues that there is

a definite sense of spiritual transformation, which suggests that each person, through individual effort and action in the world, can grow and shape a richer spiritual personality. To speak of tradition in Narayan's fiction is not only to speak of the social and cultural fabric which clothes his stories, but to point to fundamental ideas and values long expressed in the Hindu tradition. So it is that Narayan's novels stand as celebrations of the individual's small triumphs that express the innate divinity that lies within all human kind. (26)

This is definitely an insightful observation. Atkinson evaluates Raju’s spiritual growth and transformation in the light of the traditional Hindu ideal of detachment from physical and material desires. There has always been a tug-of-war in Raju between his tendency to material objects and his struggle to partake in divinity. Ultimately, Raju the picaro gets defeated by Raju the hermit to the “celebrations of small triumphs that express the innate divinity that lies within all human kind”.

To conclude, R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide* is seen in the tradition of picaresque novel which features a series of adventures by a roguish hero. Though Raju is a picaresque hero, Raju shows a

kind of moral transformation that is not characteristically found generally in a picaresque. Velan refuses to leave Raju despite his confession because Indian mythology is full of stories of the criminal who turns saint- Valmiki, Viswamitra for example. Nobody even remembers their past; their spiritual revolution is what matters. Finally, caught in a web of his own making, Raju is forced to play the Swami, the "ascetic", to the end. But through this process his spiritual transformation becomes complete. His prison life enables him to cherish good qualities within him. Raju is no learned mystic or devotee of God. It is only through good action, renunciation of self and a return to a life governed by dharma, that he wins moksha.

Notes:

1. Quoted in page no 124 of Holmstorm's *The Novels of R. K. Narayan*, published by Writers' Workshop, 1973.
2. Quoted in Paranjape, Makarand. "The Reluctant Guru": R. K. Narayan and *The Guide*." *South Asian Review*. 24.2 (2003): 170-186.
3. David Atkinson's "Spiritual Growth in the Fiction of R.K. Narayan" is an insightful essay on Narayan's *The Guide*. An advanced reader can read the entire article in the special issue on *Essays on Indian Writing in English* in *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Summer, Fall 1987, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 16-27.

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