



Portrayal of a Rogue as the Hero in *The Guide* by R. K. Narayan

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Abstract: In this paper an effort has been done to understand how a rogue person, a tourist guide, Raju playing the central role in R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* is transformed into a saint. The jailbird Raju, after his release from the jail, is mistaken for a spiritual guide and later made to sacrifice his life to save the lives of the whole nation. Raju's life, his transformation into a sage from a rogue seems to correspond to the lives of many Indian mythical sages. This study attempts to show whether Narayan portrays Raju's transformation in terms of the myth of spiritual saints in relation to the prevalent myths of India.

Keywords: conman, reluctance, extravagantly, enunciate, supplanting.

Discussion: *The Guide*, Narayan's magnum opus, is not only his most mature book but also one that won worldwide fame by being filmed and won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1960. The theory of Karma is enunciated in the life of Raju, the protagonist. According to Hinduism, it is a foregone conclusion that an individual lives and dies in accordance with his *karma* and *vasanas*. Desires and thoughts which spring forth from one's *vasanas* makes it appear inevitable. John Updike observed in *The New Yorker*, "As a Hindu Narayan believes in reincarnation- a universe infinite rebirth. . . . He surveys his teeming scene from the perspective of this most ancient of practiced religions" (134).

Rogues are the characters nearest to the heart of R. K. Narayan. In the novel *The Guide*, Raju a onetime tourist guide turned saint was at the most crucial point of his career. He was brought to a position when he had to fast to propitiate the rain god. At this point Raju tells his whole life story one of his followers, Velan. Thus half the story of the release of Raju from jail and his meeting Velan, who believed Raju to be saint is supposed to be described by the author; whereas the entire life story of Raju put in as a flash back is supposed to be described in the autobiographical form. The story is a very simple story dealing with the life and death of Raju. A Novel of a Reluctant Holy man, this story traces the fortunes of one Raju who is in turn a railroad-station food vendor, a tourist's guide, a sentimental adulterer, a dancing girl's manager, a swindler, a jailbird and a martyred mystic.

Raju, the hero of the novel, *The Guide* was a rail road station food vendor, a tourist guide, a sentimental adulterer, a dancing girl's manager, a con artist, a jail-bird and a martyred mystic. After describing the early life and education of Raju, R. K. Narayan showed how Malgudi became a railway station and how Raju became the owner of a railway stall and then came to be a tourist guide. Trying to help a rich visitor, Marco, the archaeologist, in his researches, Raju was involved in a tangle of new relationships. Rosie, Marco's wife, became Raju's lover. Abandoned by Marco, Rosie realised, with Raju's help, her ambition of becoming a dancer. But Raju's possessive instinct finally betrayed him into a criminal action and he was charged and convicted for forgery. Coming out of the jail, he cut off all connection with the past. As he was mistaken as an ascetic he was compelled to lead a Sannyasi life. Once again he was caught in the coils of his own self-deception and he was obliged to undertake a twelve-day fast to end a drought that threatened the district with a famine. In vain he told his chief disciple Velan the whole truth about himself and Rosie and about the crash and incarceration. But nobody believed that he was anyone other than a saint. He had made his bed and he had to lie on it. The reader is free to conclude that, on the last day of the fast, he died fortunately, a martyr. Did it really rain, or was that only Raju's optical delusion? Did he really die, or merely sank down in exhaustion? Had the lie really become the truth, or had that been merely exposed? The reader is free to conclude as he likes.

Rosie, the dancer with her husband Marco came to Malgudi and employed Raju as a guide. They were an ill-matched couple. They had constant quarrels and Raju was left most of the time with Rosie. He fell in love with her and both of them planned out how she should gate crash into the public eyes as a dancer. Her husband left her and went away. Rosie lived with Raju and at last became a well known dancer. Raju turned to drinking and gambling and the gap between them widened. At last when Raju forged on a document the signature of Rosie, he was tried by her husband in the court of a law. Rosie spent a lot of money in defence but also firmly declared that they were parting their ways. Raju spent two years in jail and when he came out of jail, he left Malgudi and went to a village called Mangal. Here he was taken for a saint. A famine in the village brought about the crisis. People expected this pseudo-saint to work miracles with the rain-god and Raju went on a religious fast to move the pity of the rain-god. On the twelfth day he was too weak yet he went to the river and reached his basin of water where he daily prayed for rains. Then too weak he drooping down with these words, "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming under my feet, up my legs" (247). We see Raju supplanting his lyrical first love by his own self love. We see him as a petty thief in court and also as a pseudo-saint fasting and muttering his futile prayers for rain.

R. K. Narayan's protagonist in *The Guide*, Raju explores the complexities of a 'Reluctant Guru'. His multifaceted career is inevitably controlled by his destiny, as ironically he turns into a true hermit. Familiar with traditions, Narayan was surely aware of the unsavoury pasts of ancient sages like *Valmiki*. Through Raju, he tried to highlight the problems and possibilities of spiritual transcendence in a materialist world. Originally a railway vendor turned tourist guide, Raju meets and comes close to Rosie, and seduces her away from her husband Marco. As she acquires fame as a dancer, Raju as her impresario establishes himself as an influential member of the Malgudi high society. Then follows his imprisonment, and when set free, he continues as a fake hermit amidst the villagers of Mangal, till he discovers in him amazing spiritual strength and turns into a true

ascetic. Such a dizzying trajectory of roles advocates a wide range of interests and sensitivity looks unusual in a humble country youth. While a railway vendor, and even as a servant in the jailor's house, he learns a lot from 'scraps'. Clearly, he is no common conman. Narayan wanted to focus on the enigmas of human motivation rather than depicting a mere saint or pseudo-saint, and hence created Raju with even more care than his other would-be hermit, Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*.

Raju's life appears in three phases in the novel: his position as a tourist guide, his adventure with the dancer Rosie and her husband Marco, and finally his position as a swami at the village, Mangal. In all these phases Raju is a con. He cheats the tourists by giving exaggerated descriptions of things. As he says:

. . . if an innocent man happened to be at hand, I let myself go freely. I pointed out to him something as the greatest, the highest, the only one in the world. I gave statistics out of my head. I mentioned a relic as belonging to the thirteenth century before Christ or the thirteenth century after Christ, according to the mood of the hour. If I felt fatigued or bored with the person I was conducting, I sometimes knocked the whole glamour out by saying, 'Must be something built within the last twenty years and allowed to rack and ruin. There are scores of such spots all over the place'. (58)

Raju consider himself a kind of omnipotent master after being successful a guide and able to shape the fate of others if he wants. As the tourist guide, he pretends to know every detail about the sites. He relishes his role as Rosie's impresario, sitting on the middle sofa in the first row, surrounded by obsequious hangers-on, conducting the show simply with a signal by his hands. In the prison, he revels at being 'the master of the show'. The humble villagers of Mangal also admire him, believing that he can really control the destiny and 'fix it with the gods'. Raju is eager to maintain his superficial importance. He dresses in better clothes for the outing with Rosie, spends money extravagantly to secure a place in the Malgudi high society and keeps a beard and a long hair to look like a true hermit. He assumes that the best bait for winning Rosie is to show interest in classical dance and for making full of the villagers, to create an air of mysticism. Troubles arise as soon as he begins to believe in his own role-play. Caught up in his own egotism, he fails to realize the needs of others. Never has he tried to understand Rosie's sensitive, introspective nature. Bharat Natyam, to him, is simply 'the greatest art business'. While Rosie loves the dance, Raju likes the cheque that it brings in. Rich with Rosie's money, Raju begins to feel vastly superior to everyone and ironically resembles Marco – "She was my property. The idea was beginning to take root in my mind".

Still, he learns nothing, and repeats the same mistake with the villagers. While he had decided to reconcile to a common swami, uttering mysterious profundities to the people in return of food and respect, they wanted a 'Mahatma'. Faced with the prospect of a fast unto death, his flamboyance is silenced by fear as he realizes the enormity of what he has done. He felt that he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out. He had created a giant with his minor self.

Early in the fast, he swallows his leftover food on the sly and yearns to get rid of his ironical state. However, on the fourth day, he resolves to pray for the rain with earnestness. Later, while answering to the American reporter, he remarks – “I am only doing what I have to do...My likes and dislikes do not count”. Clearly it resounds his earlier comment as Railway Raju, but this time he overlooks his own good. Irony reaches the zenith as on the next and final day, he denies the repeated pleadings of the doctors to break the fast. “Help me to my feet”, he only says before collapsing down, and the self-absorbed man finally moves to self-renunciation. The blending of the two narratives perhaps suggests the reader to judge the character Raju both socially and spiritually.

A central theme of the novel is the conversion of Raju from his role as a tour guide to that of a spiritual guide. The title of the novel, *The Guide*, has a double meaning, and Raju is in a sense a double character. As a tour guide and lover, he is impulsive, unprincipled, and self-indulgent. After his imprisonment, and after his transformation as a holy man, he is careful, thoughtful and self-disciplined.

The novel also tells two stories, that of Raju’s relationship with Rosie and that of Raju’s relationship with the villagers as a holy man. The novel begins with Raju sitting beside the temple and meeting the villager named Velan, who mistakes him for a holy man. The novel then alternates between an account of Raju’s career as a holy man, which is told in the third-person and Raju’s account to Velan of his previous career as a tour guide and lover, which is told in the first-person. This dualism reflects the dualism in Raju’s character. He is transformed from a sinner to a saint, though he is never truly a sinner, and never truly a saint. Because of his capacity for empathy, Raju is a sympathetic character throughout the novel.

The fact that ironies of life never stop is realized in Raju’s case when after serving time in prison, he accidentally becomes a saint for the people of Mangal when he took refuge in an ancient temple on the outskirts. Velan becomes his protégé and Raju out of necessity mixes motives and desires, and once again the conman in him takes over. He spoke to the villagers on various issues of topical importance. He not only gave them discourses on the *Ramayana* and the characters therein, but also advised them on matters of cleanliness and godliness. He even prescribed medicines and settled disputes and quarrels involving property. He encouraged the village schoolmaster to reopen the school in the premises of the temple. He plays the role of the Swami to the best possible extent, but once again he is overtaken by the inexplicable eventualities. Things take a dramatic turn when Velan’s brother mistakenly reports that the Swami will not eat till rains come instead of ‘till they stop fighting’ over a matter of selling and buying. Events that followed were beyond Raju’s thinking or control. He never once imagined that there would arrive a time when the fake Sannyasi in him would become transformed into a genuine one. People expected him, as the holy one with spiritual power, to bring rain to the draught stricken land of theirs by his penance as it used to happen in ancient India. For some time, Raju tried to evade this role. But fate is something inevitable and relentless.

The first four days of his forced fast were sheer agony for Raju. The sight of food tormented him. He polished off the vessel containing the previous days left over food. He cursed his first meeting with Velan who

is responsible for the whole thing now. 'He felt sick of the whole thing' (210). He knew that the fact of his being a Sannyasi is a myth just as the old crocodile in the pond is. But then the people of this land survive on myths. It gave them something to fall back upon in times of crisis. It enhanced their belief and religious faith. The transformation in Raju is gradual, natural, if also wonderful. First it is Velan, asleep at his feet tired and perseverant, who stirred his conscience thus: "Why not give the poor devil a chance, Raju said to himself instead of hankering after food which one could not get anyway" (213).

The resolution to chase away the thoughts of food gives him a peculiar strength. It further forged his thoughts towards genuine fast.

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; for the first time he was doing something in which he was not personally interested. He felt suddenly so enthusiastic that it gave him a new strength to go through the ordeal. (213)

On the twelfth day of the Swami's fast, he hears 'rain in the hills' and sags down. In a masterful stroke Narayan leaves the readers in a state of wondering as to what happened to Raju. But what matters is that it is only after he stopped thinking about himself that he is free from attachment of any kind. He does become the Guide, but of a superior mould in the final analysis. The polarity in the character of Raju is complex and misleading. While, on one hand, he is reluctant to play the role accidentally given by Velan, on the other hand he feels delighted at the success of his playing the role perfectly and "no one was more impressed with the grandeur of the whole thing than Raju himself" (47). When he is still angry with Velan for forcing on him the role of a saint, he acquires beard and prayer beads to heighten his spiritual status. The uncritical faith of the simple villagers and their fine compliments bewilder Raju, yet his uneasiness is only within him. He never makes any bold effort to clear his position. Thus Raju oscillates between reluctance and eagerness. His reluctance is partly due to his innocence as he wants to tell Velan: "I am not so great as you imagine. I am just ordinary" (8) and partly due to a covert fear that the high reverence of the humble folks and their unquestioning belief in his enormous capacity may bring him some unavoidable trouble. Raju senses some danger implied in this reverence and feels reluctant to be what Velan wants him to be. But soon he agrees to play the role due to an inevitable necessity of his, the necessity of food. Once he discovers that his working, as desired by Velan, will provide him with a sure means for food, the cheat in him rises. Thus that his decision of pretending to be a saint is determined by his selfish motives is clear in the following lines:

Where could he go? He had not trained himself to make a living out of hard work. Food was coming to him unasked now. If he went away somewhere else certainly nobody was going to take trouble to bring him food in return for just waiting for it. The only other place where it could happen was the prison. Where could he go now? . . . He realised that he had no alternative: he must play the role that Velan had given him. (*Guide*, 33)

In making Raju a saint, it is not Raju who himself plays any significant role; rather it is Velan and his villagers whose reverence forces him to be a saint. It is partially true that Raju could have avoided his end, had he not simply agreed but Raju's failure to establish control over the situation initiated by Velan is fateful. However, if Raju is at last a saint; his transformation should not appear a miracle because such miracles are not impossible in India which has been a land of gods and goddesses and where traditional beliefs are more than knowledge despite the invasion of the west. Although western colonial machinery already brought about considerable changes in India's many social and political levels, the knowledge of Indian classical myths remains almost unchanged in the psychological state of the people. In this regard Narayan himself comments: "With the impact of modern literature we began to look at our gods, demons and sages, not as some remote concoctions but as types and symbols possessing psychological validity, even when seen against the contemporary background" ("English in India", Commonwealth Literature, 122). It is this old tradition of India that along with the unshakeable misplaced belief of the people of Mangal goes hand in hand in making Raju a saint.

Narayan also seems to make a corrupt man a spiritual guide with the help of the mythic elements taken from Indian mythology. Raju's transformation corresponds to the lives of many Indian mythical sages like Nezam Aoulia Peer or Valmiki. Nezam Aoulia, a thief by profession, one day comes across a pious man whom he wants to rob but the man asks Nezam Aoulia if his family members will share his sins. Nezam Aoulia leaving the man tied with a tree in the jungle goes home and asks everybody if they will share his sins of robbing people but none agrees. Nezam Aoulia feels repentant and atones by watering a dead tree until the tree blooms flowers and he is accepted as a saint by people. Similarly Valmiki, a forest robber, also becomes a saint by choosing a life of asceticism under a tree where he passes years until ants build a shelter above him.

It can be said that it is not Raju who worked to be a saint; rather he had to be a saint under a compelling pressure over which he could not establish any control. He just reluctantly accepts the greatness thrust upon him by the innocence, ignorance, superstition and deep beliefs in religion of the simple, rustic people of the village of Mangal. Chance and incidence also play a dominant role in making him a saint. And theoretically Narayan makes a use of the religious, philosophical and cultural beliefs based on the great Indian epics, legends and folk tales to transform Raju into a saint.

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