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The Conflict between Tradition and Modernity, R.K. Narayan's – The Guide

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Abstract: R. K Narayan was born in British-ruled India in the erstwhile city of Madras later renamed Chennai in 1906 and most of his works related to the fictional south Indian town of Malgudi. Narayan who is often compared with William Faulkner, alike the latter dwells in the social contexts and the usual life of his characters with humor and compassion and the energy that propels common life as the appealing inspirations. In 1933, Narayan met and fell in love with a fifteen year old girl who lived in his neighborhood and going against all astrological advice disapproving proposed marriage went ahead to marry her and though the marriage not very long lived with his wife Rajam dying prematurely, her entry into his life started changing times for him in better ways. The first three books written by Narayan, deal with socially accepted evil practices. Overall different novels written by Narayan throws light which shows the conflict between Tradition and Modernity.

Keywords: Narayan, Malgudi, Rajam.

INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan is well-known and acknowledged Novelist of Indian English literature. His style, language and ethics are highly commendable.

The Guide (1958; Sahitya Akademi Award, 1960) is easily Narayan's finest novel. Nowhere else is his irony sharper or more firmly wedded to the moral imagination, nor has his technique been subtle. As in *The Financial Expert*, the central theme is an ironic reversal, but not only is the irony multiple here; it also piles comic complication upon complication until finally, the pyramid collapses, crushing the hero to death. 'Railway Raju', a tourist guide, has an affair with Rosie, the unhappy wife of an unworldly scholar and makes her a successful professional dancer; but is jailed for forgery, trying to prevent a possible reconciliation between her and her husband. Mistaken for a sadhu upon his release, he is prompted both by necessity and vanity to play the part well, resulting in many ironic developments, until finally, the saint's halo becomes a deadly noose when he is compelled to die fasting, to bring rain to a drought-stricken village. The ending is charged with a Hawthornian ambiguity. Raju's last words are: 'it's raining in the hills,' but whether the fake sadhu's genuine ordeal has really brought rain or not is left vague. Raju's transformation from a railway 'guide' into a half-reluctant and half-purposeful guru are worked out through a neatly woven pattern of ironic complications, but the irony is not a simple blend of the comic and the tragic. It raises many disturbing questions about human motives and actions, compelling us to ponder problems such as appearance and reality, the man and the mask, ends, and means. Of all Narayan's novels, *The Guide* teases us into thought to an extent no other novel of his does. Narayan's fictional technique is also at its subtlest in *The Guide.* The narrative alternates between the past and the present, 'swinging backward and forward' as Rosie does when she dances, thus emphasizing how Raju's present is inexorably rooted in his past. The blend of the omniscient and the autobiographical methods of narration endows the story with a double perspective. The novel, which opens with Raju in the ruined village temple about to be reverentially accepted as a sadhu, ends in the same locality with his enforced death, thus giving the tale a perfectly rounded, circular structure.

In *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1962), Narayan's moral concern is expressed through a re-telling, in a modern context, of the ancient Hindu fable of Bhasmasura, the *Rakshasa* (demon) who, granted by Siva the boon of reducing to ashes anyone he touched on the head, was finally tricked by Vishnu (disguised as a beautiful damsel) into touching himself to death. The modern Bhasmasura is Vasu, the taxidermist, a selfish, godless bully who, as he waits to shoot the temple elephant, accidentally kills himself when he slaps at a mosquito buzzing near his forehead. To Vasu's demon, his friend Nataraj, the timid printer and the ineffectual angel are an excellent foil. The significance of Vasu's just end is underlined by Sastri, Nataraj's assistant and an eminent

representative of the average man: 'Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self-destruction, and goes up in the thin air at the most unexpected movement. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?' Comedy is provided by the usual group of eccentrics- this time a poet busy composing an epic on Krishna in monosyllabic verse and a retired forest officer engaged in compiling an Anthology of Golden Thoughts from world literature. The irony of the title, which suggests a hunting yarn and presents a moral fable instead is plain.

None of the remaining novels of Narayan comes up to the level of his three major works, for one reason or another. In *Waiting For the Mahatma* (1955), a novel dealing with the Gandhian freedom struggle, Narayan, trying to do too many things at one, only succeeds in telling a conventional love story ending in the union of Sriram, a typical, weak-willed Narayan hero and Bharati, a Congress volunteer and a determined young girl. If Narayan's main aim here was to depict the freedom struggle of 1942, his picture is neither representative nor evocative. Sriram's sudden conversion into a freedom fighter is unconvincing because he is so obviously interested in Bharati and not in *Bharat-mata* (Mother India). Certain touches in episodes like Gandhiji's visit to Malgudi, the chaos after Gandhi's arrest etc., raise hopes of a total ironic vision, but this stance is not kept up consistently, and when the scene shifts from Malgudi to Delhi, Narayan no longer appears to be on the sure ground.

The same lack of a hard, central core mars *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), which continues the Gandhian motif. Jagan, the sweet vendor, who is a Gandhian, finds his only son, Mali lured away by the West. Mali returns from the U.S.A. with half -American and half-Korean girl (to whom he is not married) and has plans for devising a novel-writing machine, making the frustrated Jagan renounce the world. Is Narayan's aim here to portray the clash of generations or to deal with East-West confrontation or to examine the efficacy of Gandhism in the modern world? The action of the novel raises all these issues but fails to add up to a coherent fictional statement.

The Painter of Sings (1976) followed after nine years of silence and added little to Narayan's reputation. Here again is a narrative of human relationship which fails to attain that extra dimension of significance which Narayan's major work possesses. The relationship between Raman, the young, unattached sign-painter and 'Daisy' of the Family Planning Centre goes through vicissitudes, finally leaving Raman *sans* both his aunt (who, disapproving of the match, goes on a pilgrimage) and would be wife. Expectations of an artistic use of an ancient Indian parallel as in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* are raised when Raman himself mentions the King Santhanu-Ganga story as Daisy starts laying down conditions on which she would marry him, but this is the last one hears of it. The Raman-Daisy relationship, which recalls that between Sriram and Bharati in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, is presented equally unsuccessfully. Daisy's changing reactions are not always adequately motivated and Raman's self-declared rationalism remains an unproved assertion. The novel makes us wonder whether the halcyon days of *The Guide* and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* are now over. The signs are all there, in *The Painter of Signs.*

Narayan's fiction is imbued with a strong 'sense of place'. His setting, Malgudi develops from novel to novel but always possesses a genius locus which gives reality to his men and women. Narayan is no poet and cannot give us what Henry James called the 'aroma of the meadows and lanes' in Hardy, but he certainly makes real to us the 'ankle deep' dust in Anderson Lane and the raucous noises in the market. Like Arnold Bennett, Narayan relies more on keen observation and steady accumulation of small details than on evocative description. He has no great heroes and heroines – only local nobodies and local eccentrics, and his style habitually wears a deliberately drab air so that the thrusts of his insistent irony are felt all the more sharply. It is out of its depth only when the author expects his words to take wing or catch fire. Narayan's fiction consistently creates a credible universe observed with an unerring but uniformly tolerant sense of human incongruity; but gains in stature when, at his best, he is able to hitch the wagon of his ironic action to the star of moral imagination.

The World of Nagraj, the latest of R.K. Narayan's magnificent Malgudi books, is beautifully written, funny and haunting, evoking in marvelously rich detail the atmosphere of a smalltown in Souther Indian and creating a magical world into which the reader is instantly drawn.

Set in the typical background of familiar Malgudi, which has undergone drastic changes, *The World of Nagraj*, written in the lucid and simple language, described the unwelcome complications and turbulence in the quiet and comfortable life of the protagonist, Nagraj. The conflict between tradition and modernity has been revealed through Tim's character, who house along with his wife Charu but in the end, like all rebellious characters in Narayan's novels realises his folly and returns to the fold of tradition and family life. The inbuilt comic irony adds to the charm of this novel.

The plot is properly developed. Nagraj invites conflict, unrest, and turbulence into his calm and quiet life by his queer and odd ambitions which remain unfulfilled to the lat. Nagraj lives in his family's spacious house with his wife Sita, a devoted wife. He fills his day writing letters, drinking coffee, doing some leisurely book-keeping for his friend Coomar's Baoeing Sari Centre, and sitting on his verandah watched the world and plans the book he intends to write about the life of the great sage of Narada.

It is a family novel like *Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts, The English Teacher, The Financial Expert* and *The Vendor of Sweets.* It deals with the obsession of Nagraj, an ordinary man, whose missionary zeal for writing a book on the great sage, Narad, is never fulfilled and his numerous behavioural aberrations and oddities he cultivates in the pursuit of fulfilling his mission; the break of joint family which reminds us of the breakup of family in *The Financial Expert* and, finally, the rebellion of Tim, the son of Nagraj's ambitious landowning brother Gopu, who under the influence of modernity recourses to drinking and evil ways, and who ultimately leaves his uncle's house along with his wife Charu but like Balu who is also spoiled by his father Margayya, returns to the traditional family fold and accepts the conventional values of simple Malgudi life. Endowed with the uncanny knack of observing comic irony with subtlety and depth, Narayan renders the oddities and angularities of his characters-

Nagraj, Gopu and Tim with great affection, understanding and intimacy. Narayan uses irony in his typical and individual manner as a rhetorical weapon to wake his characters out of their dreams and thus to bring them back to the fold of society. His comic irony aims at correction and integration as it evokes ridicule and laughter.

Nagraj, who narrates the story, fancies himself a man with a mission. He is obsessed with the idea of writing a book on sage Narad. In order to give shape to his mission, he is ignoring his wife's persuasions rises quite early in the morning and enters the *puja* room to mutter a prayer before the gods. He talks about his plan to Jayraj, his photographer friend. He spends most of his time sitting on the *pyol* n the veranda watching the goings on in Kabir Street. He has cultivated friendship with the Talkative Man, a well-drawn character, who spends all his time in gossips. He has inherited a big house and enough money to keep him going. He is "a blessed fellow, never married, unlike me (Nagraj) a prisoner of domesticity." Sambu, another neighbor, is a contrast to the T.M.

Nagraj is childless but he has a great liking for his brother's son, Tim. Crazy and eccentric, Nagraj blindly believes in tradition and puts on the ochre robe and observes complete silence while performing *puja*, as advised by a *sanyasi*. Following his advice, Nagraj keeps himself away from *Kama, Krodha, Lobh and Moha*. He tells himself that he must give up even the least sexual relationship with his wife. He religiously follows the ritual of putting on the ochre robe and observing silence for thirty minutes all through his life.

Nagraj goes to market after taking meals. He never forgets to meet his friend Kanni, his old chum of his primary school days at the municipal free school in Vinayak Street. His brother Gopu, who maintained himself as a superior person also studies in this school. Later on, Nagraj joined the Albert Mission School and Kanni became an apprentice under his carpenter father. Nagraj spends most of his time doing leisurely book-keeping for friend Coomer's Boeing Sari Centre. He visits Coomar's house in Ellamman Street, a narrow little place with a rice store in front. Coomar does not like the family business. Selling rice is dull work to him.

Nagraj takes every care of his old mother who resembles the grandmother in *Swami and Friends.* She is pleased with the dutifulness of her daughter-in-law, Sita, the wife of Nagraj.

The events of the past, especially the childhood days in a joint family, flash across his mind's eye and Nagraj is lost in thoughts. The novelist deftly employs the flashback technique. After his graduation, Gopu spurned Nagraj and ordered him about. He did not mind in but he continued to be a devoted younger brother. Their father sometimes remarked: "You are like Lakshmana in the Ramayana, who stood behind Rama, his elder brother." Here the comic irony is quite perceptible because Gopu thwarts his Rama image, whereas Nagraj maintains the Lakshmana image. Both the brothers shared the same room in their Kabir Street house. Gopu graduated and letters of marriage offer cam enclosing horoscopes from patents who had daughters. Gopu's marriage with the daughter of a 'sub-registrar' from Sembiam was settled. When Gopu's wife joined him at Kabir Street Nagraj had to leave the room he shared with his elder brother. Gopu refused to accept a job. He showed no inclination to go out of the house or seek work. He only shut himself away with his wife.

Gopu's wife sowed seeds of discord in the calm family life. She stood for disintegration and disharmony. She rebelled against family tradition. She cooked something especial only for Gopu on a special stove and vessels she had brought from her parent's house. Unlike other women of the town, she went herself to buy something to the Chettiar's shop. Charu, Gopu's wife, also mocked at her mother-in- law's cooking food over the smoky firewood.

After the Father's death, Gopu insisted on the partition of the parental property. Lakshman like Nagraj allowed Rama like Gopu to take whatever he wanted and contented himself with whatever was left. Gopu along with all his share, wife, Charu, and son, Tim left the ancestral continued to live in the Kabir Street house along with his mother and wife.

Nagraj loved Tim very much. He was deeply pained at the thought of Tim going to the 'Pyol School' in the village. One day to his great surprise Tim come sto Malgudi. He explains to Nagraj that he refused to go to the fields because he would miss the school bus. At this Gopu called him "donkey" and slapped his face. He refused to go back to the village. Gopu comes to persuade Tim to return to the village because he had to add so many things to the farm. He told that his wife Charu had eye trouble, cooking with firewood, kerosene being scarce, and the smoke had affected her eyes.

Nagraj and his wife Sita were very happy with Tim. He was admitted to Albert Mission Junior College. Nagraj closely watched the movements and activities of Tim who was getting spoiled. He came late in nights and smelt of wine when Nagraj asked him about the alcoholic scent, he time and again explained that some chap had sprayed eau-de-cologne at him. Poor Nagraj believed him. His wife, Sita repeatedly persuaded him to demand an explanation from Tim about his shady behaviour but he deferred it for "tomorrow or the day after". But he could not muster the courage to demand an explanation from Tim. But pretending to be bold he told his wife that he had given Tim a bit of his mind. He would gradually mend. Adding a literacy tag welling up from some unsuspected depth he added: "Naturally, you don't understand me. Rome was not built in a day." On the day he went to the school and cam eto know that Tim had stopped going to school. He was a dropout. Nagraj was badly shocked. Sita too was sore and unhappy over the revelation of Tim's delinquency. She requested her husband to inform Gopu about Tim's misconduct. Cowardly Nagraj compares himself to Macbeth who had neither will nor courage to kill Duncan and likens Sita to Lady Macbeth. The comic irony implied in this comparison makes us laugh.

Gopu knew all about Tim's shady dealings in Kismet. He cam eto Kabir Street to finalise an offer of Tim's marriage. Tim was married and his wife Saroja was interested in music which Nagraj disliked. Tim and Saroja occupied the middle room in the Kabir Street House, just as Gopu and his wife had done. Nagraj found it irksome. His peace was disturbed. When Tim left for Kismet, Saroja started reading aloud from a cinema magazine, followed by an as sudden burst of singing to the accompaniment of her harmonium. Nagraj, a lover of silence, tried to face the trial by staying away on the pyol, shutting the main door firmly behind him. But still the music pursued him and he could not watch the street life with abandon.

Nagraj's mission to write a book on Narad suffered obstructions due to Tim's misdeeds. But now he made up hos mind to complete it. He wanted to gather some authentic information on Narad. So, first, he went to Kavu Pandit, a funny and odd character, who was a notorious gambler. He fleeced two hundred rupees from Nagrajand wasted much of his time in idle gossip. Then, he went to Bari, who despite his boastful claims to give him genuine information on Narad, duped Nagraj.

At home, the sound of Saroja's harmonium was unbearable to him. A man of cowardly temperament, Nagraj failed to talk to Saroja on this issue. He went to a doctor to buy cotton wool for stuffing his ears with so that no musical sound might fall into his ears. One day Tim and Saroja leave his house with bag and baggage. He was badly disturbed and searched them everywhere. He, however, reconciled to his fate and did not require cotton wool to stuff his ears with.

Saroja started playing on harmonium in Kismet. Gopu came to know about his son's activities, quarreled with the owner of Kismet and searched his son and daughter-in-law everywhere. He failed in his efforts and returned to his village.

Nagraj seriously thought to complete his work on Narad and to study ancient classics and scriptures. He occupied Tim's room for his academic pursuits. But he could not enjoy this felicity for long. As he was finalising his plan to write his book on Narada, Tim and Saroja came with two trunks, bedding rolls, a basket, a large sized harmonium and a folding chair. Nagraj was confused, though he made several sounds of welcome and moved about the street door and the middle room excitedly accommodating and arranging their baggage, saying something all the time, not really knowing what to say. He wished to have ten pounds of cotton wool to plug his ears.

Saroja talked to Sita in the kitchen. Sita seemed to feel: "Now our home is back to normal." Tim moved about the house as if nothing had happened or changed. Nagraj had many questions to ask but Tim gave him no chance. Nagraj had again fallen on evil days. Nagraj said to himself: "I dread that tomorrow morning it (harmonium) will start blaring. I can have no hope of writing anymore. You could as well take the notebooks back to the old room, where at least white ants may relish my notebooks on Narad……..And another thing: don't be surprised if I wear the ochre robe when I am at home. It'll force me to remain silent and not speak out and upset the children and drive them out again. I shall also acquire a lot of cotton wool and try and pack it all in my ear so that even a thunderclap may sound like a whisper." So ends the novel with a note of comic irony.

The World of Nagraj is a well-written novel. Its plot is simple but artistically developed, characters are vividly portrayed and the language is racy, simple and vigorous. Narayan's genius, "which plays gently over this novel lies in his persuading us that the lives and characters of Malgudi represent substantial human nature, that what happens in India happens in Malgudi and what happens in Malgudi happens everywhere."

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