

FALSIFICATION AND AUTHENTICATION IN R.K. NARAYAN'S THE GUIDE

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Abstract

Though critics by consensus seem to agree with William Walsh that R.K. Narayan's fastidious art blending exact realism, poetry, melancholy, perception and gaiety is without precedent in English literature, yet doubts persist about his sincerity and authenticity as a writer. For many, Narayan seldom rises above the average and the ordinary to come to terms with the complex human condition. Narayan achieves this, according to Kantak, by exclusion-by being able to say 'no' to inviting possibilities which a process of might prove snares to his art. He goes further to call it a triumph of self-denial. 2 contraries to Kantak's assertion Narayan continues to write, almost in a spirit of playful self-affirmation, fictions that engage the readers almost everywhere. There is however some who see no innovation or progression on his art. A.N. Kaul, while recognizing his significance, feels that Narayan is not only an old world but also an old-fashioned writer, unconcerned with the literary experiments and innovations of modern times. These judgements are rooted in assumptions that fortify by now over-stated case for Narayan's simplicity

and naiveté. This tendency, wide and pervasive as it is, has prevented even well-meaning admirers of Narayan to have a second look at his work. The fusion of a self-affirming sincerity and a self-negating irony, apparently naïve and simple, is so perfect in his art that it tends to make any serious effort at critical evaluation irrelevant.

Key words: *Malgudi, Nature, Humanism, Irony, Judgement, Significance, Perception,*

Introduction

The delightful but hidden persistence of the quintessential India in the ever-changing ambience of Malgudi that make his art deceptively accessible, remains yet inaccessible to his critics. This deceptive 'accessibility' makes his art charmingly enigmatic and Narayan seems to relish it. Over the years he has created and carefully sustained the image of an artless artiste, who writes without any sophistication of style of simple things and simple people in an ordinary fictional place called Malgudi or a place nearby. He has claimed, more than once, that he is very unconscious of style, that he wishes to make the style as unnoticed as possible, and that he is aware of this style which is one that abolishes style. To quote him again, he is an inattentive writer, who has little sense of style. Like many of his protagonists, he has enticed many of his readers and critics into believing that though admirable, he is a writer without a convincing credo or a commendable craft.

While some early critics were early persuaded by this artful ploy, recent criticism has declined to take these statements at their face value. Early critical adulation has been increasingly challenged by a new generation of critics. For example, reacting to Rajeev Tarant's contention that Narayan's achievement finally lies in the uncompromising way in which he forces the ingredients of limitation towards evolving an authenticity which satisfies, Kirpal Singh argues that while Narayan's authenticity charms and lulls, it really does not satisfy. Singh traces this incapacity to Narayan's preference for what he calls the "satiric mode. Narayan, as he puts it, does not allow the average and the ordinary transcend their situation, because he is incapacitated by his ironic vision to see beyond ridicule and ambiguity. Narayan's charm, most critics agree, lies in his irony. But if his irony and sincerity were to be suspect where does one look for the source of Narayan's universal appeal, his unfailing charm? What is that beyond the obvious which creates the Narayan enigma? The answer, it seems to me, lies in the elements that make his novels "deceptively accessible" in his simple yet not so simple narratology. I intend to argue here with reference to his most widely read and critically examined novel *The Guide* (1958), that concealed behind Narayan's apparent simplicity and naiveté there is a sophistication one encounters only in the best of the contemporary novelists or theorists of literature. I have chosen *The Guide* because this packed, lucid, beautifully organised, deeply Indian Novel seems to me, an ur-text which provides interesting insights into the art of Narayan, the novelist. Narayan demands, like any significant writer, to be read through his own idiom, an idiom that evolves out of a fusion of the oral and written traditions. The surface structure with its "before and after" narratives and its ambivalent ending seems to support this view though critics are not quite certain about the final import of the ending. The inferred death of Raju enables admiring critics like Walsh to conclude

that “there is some measure of objectivity of endorsement by reality in Raju’s transformation”, which we are supposed to believe, has “the approval of gods, of life.”

Theme

Though the ending shows Raju sagging down, the act itself does not establish that he finally dies a saint. He goes down doing exactly what he had been doing all along-convincing his uncritical audience of a miracle that has never taken place) The impending rain, of which he tries to convince Velan, may be a reality for Raju, it is not there for the rest. On the contrary the ending affirms what The Guide as fiction has been doing-affirming the unreality of the apparently real. The answer to the enigma in The Guide lies not in an understanding of its ending but in understanding the kind of fiction Narayan writes.

The statement is crucial, for while emphasizing the fictive, here (Narayan underplays the mimetic and the representational. Fictions, though drawn from life, are finally inventions of imagination, both individual and collective. The Guide demonstrates this. The book, Narayan tells us in My Days, was initially conceived to be “a novel about someone suffering from enforced sainthood” and was inspired to a certain extent by an actual situation in Mysore. However, it was written in Berkely, California, here the idea actually “crystallized”. The novel thus, came to being through an interaction between the real conception and its imaginative “crystallization”.

The Guide, it is evident from My Dateless Diary” was to large extent influenced by the writer’s experience in the USA. Constant exposure to a critical but admiring audience of teachers and students had made Narayan actually self-conscious of the problems of a writer face-to-face with his audience. There are several references in the Diary to suggest the indirect ways in which Narayan’s self-consciousness was entering into the shaping of the novel. (Though primarily concerned with the pre-determined ontology of the protagonist, Narayan in the course of writing seems to have become concerned with the predicament of the writer in the act of writing.)

This identification between the ontology of the protagonist and the ontology of the text had opened up fictional possibilities to which Narayan seems to have been quite alive. (Beginning with Raju, the guide, Narayan seems to have become increasingly interested in The Guide, the text, the fiction. The result is that in The Guide, we find elements that have come to be associated with contemporary met a fiction or the self-reflective novel. The two phases of Raju’s ontology produce two texts or rather a text within a text, one reflecting on the other. The two lives of Raju, the one before his going to jail and the one after, though told differently, are two fictions of the same reality. The two simultaneously juxtaposed fictions make The Guide a consciously self-referential and self-reflective novel though it would appear that by making Malgudi the permanent referent Narayan makes all his Malgudi fiction self-referential. It does not exist outside Malgudi though Malgudi itself is capable of unrolling “a new sight-seeing places each time.” (p.63)

Thus, The Guide originating in actual experience emerges finally as a fiction about fiction in which the ontology of the text is coeval with the ontology of the protagonist though taken for an ordinary rogue, Raju is essentially a tabulator caught in the act of tabulation. He is the traditional story-teller who must entice his audience and get himself enticed in the tabulating process. Raju,

the guide, thus stands in the same relationship with the tourist as the narrator stands in the relation to the narration or the author stands in relation to the reader.

The Interaction starts from the beginning when Raju establishes his relationship with Velan. (Velan, who also represents the illiterate folk, is the uncritical listener who forces upon the teller the ultimate responsibility for the veracity of what he tells. Confronting him, Raju is also confronting a culture where telling is not simply a matter of reporting, it is an act of faith, a way of sharing an unspecified bond of values. In fact, it is the need to address this uncritical, almost reverential audience that compels self-reflexivity on the part of Raju, the narrator. Raju's final gesture emanates from this narrative responsibility. The narrative act becomes an act of self-discovery. As he starts telling his story to Velan, Raju discovers the way he had become the storyteller, the saint and the teacher of an unsuspecting society.

When we first meet him, he has already grown "an apostolic beard" (p.6). The thought of the beard reminds him of the encounter he had with the barber outside the jail. The barber, with his naïve inquisitiveness reminds him of the moral choices open to him. Asking him about the nature of crime, he forces self-reflectivity on his part. Later, confronted with Velan, Raju faces the same problem posed to him in a different manner. He must define himself in telling him about himself. He must define himself in the narrative act. Raju is hesitant initially "I am not so great as you imagine, I am just ordinary" (p.8), he tells Velan. But soon, like the inevitable Karma, he is carried away by his "old, old habit of affording guidance to others (p.9).

He recalls how tourists recommended him to other tourists by telling them, "If you are lucky enough to be guided by Raju, you will know everything. He will not only show you all the worthwhile places, but also help you in every way" (p.8).

Thus, in the very beginning Raju the guide gets hold of Raju, the narrator. He feels he is unique, because it was "in his nature to get involved in other people's interests and activities" or he should have "grown up like a thousand other normal persons without worries in life" (p.8). It is interesting; therefore, to observe that critics elaborating his growth seldom look upon him as a narrator, though retrospection on his own life, he does become the narrator in the act of storytelling. Confronted with the taste of story-telling, he becomes aware of his own narrative resources, in the same manner in which Narayan had become aware of his own resources. In his *My Dateless Diary*, he observes:

My manuscript being what it is, I had to revert to the ancient system of oral story-telling. I think, a story acquires an extra dimension in this kind of narration and it's such a labour-saving device." Taking stock of his own narrative resources, Raju recalls the stories his mother used to tell him, "Once upon a time there was a man called Devika." (p.10). (Much of the middle section of the novel is concerned with the transformation of Raju, the guide, into Raju the narrator. Though a guide, Raju is fond of the speech-act. He likes "to talk to people"; and "to hear people talk" (p.43). The "panorama of life" enchants him (p.13). As a guide, he is like the author who manipulates reality to suit his own purpose, He purveys Malgudi to those who have "the time and the money" (p.54). Like a shrewd writer persuaded by the prospects of profit, Raju learns to make distinctions among his own audience: "I had classified all my patrons. They were very varied.

Malgudi and its surroundings were my special show. I could let a man have a peep at it or a whole panorama.... I could not really decide how much to give or withhold until I knew how much cash the man carried or if she carried a cheque- book, how good it was (p.54). Raju, the narrator, is aware of his own degeneration, under the pressures of an economy conditioned by Time and Money. He compromises his honesty and sincerity to pursue money and success. As he unfolds his story, we see the growing commercialization of Malgudi since the coming of the railway station. It is no more a place of art, religion, history or community. It is a place inhabited by financiers, seedy hotel-keepers, cunning lawyers and fake creators. Thus, Malgudi does not remain a simple town; it comes to represent the complex reality of a world increasingly dominated by the value of Time and Money – a world full of activity and glamour but ultimately devoid of substance.)

Since these aspects of surface realism come to us through narrative indirection, we hardly notice them though they are there staring us in the face. The writer in such a world is like Raju, a degenerated form of folk wisdom and insight who must invent fictions ultimately to deceive him. In fact, we discover this degenerated world only in the retrospective narrative act. The act of telling is also act of narrative discovery. Raju learns, for example, to theorize about fiction. “The thing to do is to start from a comer and go on patch by patch. Never work from the top to the horizon, but always the other way. Raju traces his roots in the folk, in the bits and fragments that he gathers from the community as he grows. The folk thus becomes not only the source but also the end of fiction. The narrative act does not remain a mere verbal exercise; it becomes an enactment in a series of enactments in which the folk affirms its continuity. Raju comes to perceive this, the moment Velan appears before him. He must enact in order to survive.

He racked his head secretly, wondering where to start. Could he speak about tourist attraction in Malgudi or should it be moral lessons. Then once upon a time there was a so and so, so good or bad that when he came to do such and such a thing, he felt so utterly lost that he played... (p.45). Oblivious of his ultimate commitment, he learns to enjoy his new role: “I lamed while I thought and earned while I learned and the whole thing was most enjoyable.” (p.56) In fact, Raju had discovered his creative self while in jail. He visits the various departments as a “sort of benevolent supervisor”, (p.202) and talks even hardened criminals “out of their blackest moods” (p.203).

Though Raju is aware of the gap between his pose and the reality confronting him yet he cannot resist the temptation of pleasing his audience, it is not because he wanted to utter a falsehood, but only because he wanted to be pleasant. He gradually cultivates a moral ambivalence that makes him impervious to what he says or does. He learns to distort reality and is suspicious of those “with a scholarly turn of mind” (p.51) He represents the reality of Malgudi to his unwary clients according to his own fancy: But it was all the same to me, and the age I ascribed to any particular place depended upon my mood at that hour and the type of person I was escorting. If he was of the academic type, I was careful to avoid all mention of facts and figures and confine myself to general description letting the man himself do the talking. You may be sure; he enjoyed the opportunity. (p.51)

Interacting with his audience Raju discovers quite early that the best part of story-telling is to let the listener complete what is left untold. He lets Velan “has the satisfaction of saying things himself” (p.51). Velan’s reverential response to Raju is rooted in the folk though Raju feels he was “the stuff disciples are made of, an unfinished story or an incomplete moral never bothered him, and it all is in the scheme of life” (p.17).

Also differ in sight seeing” (p.56) the narrative process for Raju does not remain merely a matter of showing and telling, it also becomes a process whereby he learns to make distinctions between different audience and different tastes. It also gives a sense of detachment that comes from maturity and experience: “well, it was not my business to comment. My business stopped with taking them there” ... (p.56). It is obvious that Raju is not an ordinary conman. (He is like

He is aware, for example, that every art form has an “idiom”. Unable to comprehend Rosie’s “fervour” for dancing, he wishes he could “keep pace with her idiom” (109). Though not a sophisticated interpreter, he none the less feels moved by “the movements, rhythm and time” of her dance. (p.110). He is familiar with Shakespeare (p.134) and watching Rosie practise “from an art critic’s point-of-view” he also becomes “a sort of expert” on art (145). He admits his inability to understand Marco’s work because he lacked the “idiom” He knows what “irony” is and how to use it (p.72). In many ways, Raju, the narrator resembles Narayan the writer. The close resemblance between the techniques of the two which left at least one critic wondering as to “why the Novelist cast the protagonist in his own image,” does not come as a surprise if we consider *The Guide* as a self-reflective fiction.

In fact, the two texts of the novel, one reflecting upon the other make it quite narcissistic. The simultaneity of the two generates the irony that amuses some and baffles others. Raju, the narrator reflecting on Raju the guide is the substance of the novel though this is made possible only through the other fictions that appear and disappear in the text.

Thus, fiction in *The Guide* does not remain merely a process of limitation and representation. It becomes a chain of enactments in which one fiction derives its life from the life of the other. Since everything is in the enactment, there is no beginning and no end. It is, as Raju realises while meditating on his own life, like “a cluster of stars” which one cannot assimilate into one’s reckoning without losing sight of “the starting point” (p.16). Though Raju learns to falsify reality, “with confidence and nonchalance” (p.52), he is aware of it only in the act of self-reflection. Thus, the narrative process becomes a contemplative process in which the narrator and narratee are actively involved.

The narrative becomes a way of making those distinctions by which the self-separates itself from the non-self and discovers its own authenticity. It is neither true nor false, being itself a series of enactments through which man learns to live with the ironies and paradoxes of existence. However, the ultimate irony that we counter is the fact that no enactment is possible without related falsification. It is, therefore, appropriate that Raju begins in the beginning: “My troubles would not have started but for Rosie” (p.8). In fact, his falsification begins with the arrival of Rosie. His relationship with her is like his relationship with Malgudi. He appropriates her as he appropriates Malgudi. From the moment he meets her he treats her as an object of manipulation. The medium

of this manipulation is language. He starts “waxing poetic” from the moment he sees her. (He seduces her by praising “her art” (p.9). “Who would decorate a rainbow” he tells her when he wants her to come out with him and later avers that his life was a “blank” without her presence.

Though Raju seeks to turn Rosie into a pleasant fiction, she lets him do exactly what he lets others do-invent their own fictions about him. Like fiction, Rosie has no fixed identity. She has no father and we do not ultimately know where she belongs. In manipulating her, Raju himself gets manipulated. He loses his identity; he ceases to be Raju, the guide. First, he loses his business, then his house, then his family and finally his own self. In order to retain his hold over Rosie whom he treats as his property (p.168), he ultimately resorts to forgery-a visible manifestation of what he has been doing all along. His involvement with Rosie whom he treats “as a pure abstraction” (111) produces only a false signature, the fake that he is, he produces only a fake text. (Faking becomes his “karma” (p.193), as she tells him at the time of his arrest. His arrest and subsequent incarceration close a chapter in his life. They mark the end of fiction, so we are made to believe, but Raju the guide must begin another fiction to discover Raju, the man.

Raju’s fiction, however, could not have been possible without the other fictions of Rosie and Marc. Rosie remains a passive participant in the fiction that Raju invents for both of them. She lets him believe in his own invention so that while he gets manipulated, she herself remains unaffected at the core. Committed totally to her art, she finally emerges into an artist who refuses to be manipulated by the audience/Rosie’s growth as an artist produces another kind of text which provides a contrast to the kind of text Raju produces. Raju’s text is unreliable because it is based on an unreliable medium like language. In fact, various narratives in the text are disrupted because of the unreliability of the language. Raju thrives on this unreliability in the beginning but later becomes a victim of it. Uncritical Velan encourages him to believe in the power of fiction, his idiot brother forces upon him an unforeseen closure. As Tabulator, he is prisoner of language that of his own and of others.

Rosie on the other hand is free of the trappings of language: “You think, you can please me by all this? You think you can persuade me to change my mind?” she asks Raju ironically when he attempts to flatter her to do his bidding. While Raju enjoys this “word of showmanship” (p.164), and gets “swelled with pride” (1964) thinking of himself as “a man of consequence and status who had charge of a growing celebrity” (p.165), Rosie herself remains aloof from the entire drama of money, power and influence. Rosie discovers her own vitality by totally identifying herself with her “idiom” which being based on sound, movement and rhythm is free of the ambiguity that is inherent in language. Her art is not vitiated by the pursuit of meaning, so that intuitively she looks for a medium close to the primary rhythms of life. She reveals it first in her desire to see a king cobra “which can dance to the music of flute” (p.57). Later, she initiates herself into the rhythms of the dancing snake: “She watched it swaying, with a rap test attention. She stretched out her arm slightly and swayed it in imitation of the movement; she swayed her whole body to the rhythm” (p.61).

This unconscious identification with the primary rhythms of life transforms Rosie into another being. It is like the transformation of “an underground reptile into a creature of grace and

divinity and an ornament of the gods” (p.189), so that while Raju remains captive in the serpentine coil of his own fiction, Rosie is liberated in art. Raju discovers her vitality much later when his own fiction comes to an end and the illusion shatters: “Everything went to prove that she could get on excellently without me.... Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself underestimated all along” (p.119).

Like Raju, Rosie also discovers herself through art though to achieve that she has to falsify herself. She connives with Raju in inventing a fiction of success. The final irony of their fiction is that while Raju can visualize it “as a sort of comedy in three acts” and can laugh away its tragic implications, he himself is not afforded the same consolation in art. In a way both Raju and Rosie are aware of this tragic irony of creativity. They must invent fictions in order to live. The only character who does not go through this cycle is Marco. He is interested neither in art nor in life. He is a fossil gatherer content to collect and reproduce what is already dead. Rightly he descends into the caves to find what he negates on the surface. With his knowledge, precision and industry, he produces a book, but conspires against those who are the true makers like Raju and Rosie. No doubt, he always remains on the fringe, a constant threat to creativity in art and life. His intrusion destroys the text Raju so fondly invents. Raju fails to determine the ending of his own fiction.

The need to invent new fiction is, however, eternal. Coming out of the jail, Raju is trapped once again in narrative necessity. Earlier, he was tempted into self-deception by the total submission of Rosie, now he is tempted into it by the total submission of Velan, “I have to play the part expected of me, there is no escape” (45). His pose of a detached narrator enables him to mouth profundities, but does not really liberate him from narrative entrapment. Convinced of his own fiction, he sags down assuring Velan of the impending rain. Fiction can be clearly observed in his interview with Malone, the TV and film producer from Caledonia. Not only does Raju agree to grant him the interview, he also prepares himself to show what he tells. Malone does exactly what Raju did for his tourists. He is not interested in the drama of life around him; he is interested in reproducing it for his viewers. The interview destroys even the second text with a delightful irony.

Conclusion

Thus, *The Guide*, the text, ends with the sagging down of Raju, the protagonist, suggesting that the complex ontology of Raju is embedded in the complex ontology of the text. The text is all that, ultimately remains and it affirms, it affirms at all, man’s need for fictions, for inventing and telling stories though each act of telling is accompanied by its own tragic irony. The story-teller is like one of the bulls “who are yoked to an oil crusher” and “keep going round and round and round in a circle without a beginning or an end” (p.180). Exploiting the professional guide’s reliance on showing and telling, Narayan invents a fiction about fiction in which the author, like the guide, is in a seemingly playful but ultimately tragic encounter with his own created world. His self-effacing irony is nowhere more evident than in the ending, for *The Guide* ends parodying the author who is incapable of liberating himself from the entrapment of his own fictions.

Thus, with a text within a text, a protagonist with a narrative doppelganger, a setting which is symbolic and real at the same time, a narrative that reflects upon its own narrative resonances

as it confronts a traditional idiom derives from the life of the folk with the cosmopolitan and the modern, *The Guide* becomes a fascinating fable of our times. Narayan seemingly falsifies through his irony what he accepts us as readers to affirm in art and life, but the fable itself lifts the ordinary and the average into the domain of the extraordinary.

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