

Transformation and Redemption in R.K. Narayan's 'The Guide'

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ABSTRACT

R.K Narayan's, 'The Guide' published in 1958, portrays the voyage of a man from a trickster to a pure soul devoid of sins. The novel precisely highlights the banal life of his characters and engages the reader throughout. 'The Guide', became the first novel winning 1960 Sahitya Akademi Award for English. Here, the article tends to illustrate how a selfish swindler, an adroit actor and a perfidious megalomaniac transforms himself in the end. Time is a slut and it teaches one how to handle oneself after being screwed. The story forfeits the metamorphosis Raju underwent after the mort of his father. The metaphor of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly encapsulates with Raju.

Wyatt Mason & Edmund Wilson's assessment of Walt Whitman,

"He does not write editorials on events but describes his actual feelings", applies equally to Narayan.

One of the leading Indian writers of that time, Narayan is credited with bringing Indian writing to the rest of the world. His writings are characterised as pedestrian and naive because of the simplicity of his language and diction and also the lack of any complexity in the emotions and behaviours of his characters.

With an unpretentious writing technique Narayan provides the reader something that novelists struggle to achieve, a complete insight into the lives of his characters. The common themes of middle class life are written with an unyielding and un pitying vision. His creation of 'Malgudi', brought a striking difference in his novels, a stereotypical small town, where the standard norms of superstition and tradition apply. Narayan's approach to subjects was very simple and realistic, capturing the elements all the same.

The ease and limpidness of his writings, made Narayan reach the reputation of being one of the great evocative artists. His sole aim is to involve and entertain his readers by presenting before them life's little ironies rationally & dazzlingly. The end in his novels is never conspicuous and it is for the readers themselves to conclude it from their readings of novels. Objectivity and neutrality are the hallmarks of Narayan's genius.

Through the series of events in 'The Guide' Narayan presents the paradoxes & ironies and then the transformation and redemption of the protagonist. Readers see the novel revolving around irony and then redemption. The Guide begins with realistic settings and everyday happenings in the lives of the characters coming from all sections of society. Gradually fate or chance, fault or blunder transforms mundane events to fantastic happenings. Raju, the protagonist of 'The Guide' - from becoming shopkeeper to tourist guide to stage manager to holy man showcases his journey towards redemption. The novel delves both into the falls and then redemptive rise. Over the course of the novel, Raju adopts different identities often dishonestly, in his pursuit of money and prestige. And then Karma hit him back with his imprisonment. After completing two years in jail, he is mistaken as a spiritual yogi in a small village and then also he willingly adopts the role, although he is far

from spirituality. Towards the end of the novel Raju has to undertake the fast for the villagers believed in him that this would end the drought and would rain. At first reluctant, but then he commits to undertake the fast genuinely; this was the final transformation he underwent subjecting himself to a greater sacrifice and risking his life in the process, all for the purpose of fulfilling villagers' hope for rain.

Raju being a tour guide tried guiding Rosie's career as a dancer, posed as a sage who was supposed to guide people to spirituality. He as the title character never succeeded in his responsibility; rather he violated the definition of guidance. Ironically, Velan, a minor character, guides him to his transformation by designating him a sage, holding him accountable and believing in him. As a guide he seems knowledgeable, full of insight but in reality he hates school and does not finish it. His learning only comes from random books that filter into the railway station that he works at for few years. Thus, it is amusing when Narayan writes:

"The thing that had really bothered him was that he might sound too brilliant in everything he said"

In reality he is far from being brilliant and is mostly making up, fudging or confusing the stories he tells to the gullible villagers.

While Raju has spent much of his life deceiving and swindling others under various guises of a guide, this life of deceit is mitigated through the sacrifice he undertakes by fasting. Raju's redemption through this act of sacrifice is suggested in the final image of the novel.

Last lines,

" The morning sun was out by now; a great shaft of light illuminated the surroundings. It was difficult to hold Raju on his feet, as he had a tendency to flop down. They held him as if he were a baby. Raju opened his eyes, looked about, and said, 'Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs' - He sagged down."

The image Raju sees in the final scene, raining over the hills, suggests a spiritual enlightenment – indeed Raju tells Velan that he feels the rain rising in his body. Thus, irrespective of whether it rained or not, Raju's vision of rain alludes to the great change that has come over him. This famous last line, leaves several things open to interpretation. Plathora of doubts arise in the mind of the reader – Did Raju die? Or Did it actually rain? Narayan is ambiguous on purpose, forcing readers to

involve deeply and think deeply about Raju's connect throughout the novel. John Thieme sums this up reasonably,

"In short, 'The Guide' resist any form of closure. The ending raises the possibility that some kind of spiritual transformation may be taking place within Raju and that this may be accompanied by divine intervention to end the drought, but the final sections are narrated in a deadpan, documentary - like manner, leaving the possibilities that – Raju remains a charlatan and that the drought will continue as a reasonable inference."

Regardless of what exactly happens, Narayan suggests that even the most trickster of men can be redeemed. Raju undoubtedly is an amoral, obnoxious and self interested character, who uses others to make himself feel good and to make money. However the novelist doesn't let him continue like this. Instead, has Raju's gig as a holy man result in a real act of redemption and transformation. Eventually, Karma catches up with all of us.

The Guide is the journey of a man who even as he transforms himself often dishonestly moves towards the fulfilment of his destiny. By finally taking on the responsibilities of a holy man, Raju acts according to the dharma that governs his life, playing the role of guide in its most benevolent and selfless sense . In this way, Raju not only fulfills his destiny but also redeems himself through his self sacrifice. The sense of realisation at the end freed his soul from the worldly cage and attained the enlightenment. After all the unfortunate episodes and disguises a soul is redeemed, the moment one discovers the truth. One has two options in life either to be the leaf which surrenders itself and goes with the stream or be the masonry going against all the odds; outshining every hurdles; touching the silver line. The journey between the threshold and silver line shows whole varieties of adventures sometimes salubrious and sometimes blatant. The journey must go on!

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