Research Paper Literature

Major Symbols in R.k. Narayan's 'THE GUIDE'

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KEYWORDS

Fiction that claims serious attention cannot but use symbols to enhance the po- ssibility of wider implications. A straight and factual narrative may be delightful for its theme or its facile language, but it cannot linger for long in the reader's mind if it does not use myths and symbols.

The word 'symbol' has different meanings for different persons, and is used for different purposes, in logic, semantics, theology, fine arts and letters Like other loose terms such as 'romanticism' and 'classicism' the term 'symbolism' can also be very elusive. It is not easy to define.

The effort in this paper is to point out some of the symbols that figure in The Guide (1958) and show how Narayan makes use of them and how they are woven into the very texture of this novel.

R K. Narayan is generally recognised for the comic portrayal of life and its characters of Malgudi. On the surface level it does not seem that Narayan has consciously employed the symbolic technique in any of his novels. But on a closer examination of his novels. we find a number of symbols incorporated in his work and they enlarge the scope of varied interpretations.

It can be said without reservation that Narayan had a symbolic bent of mind from the very beginning of his literary career. Almost, without exception, the action in his novels and short stories is located in or around a fictional town called Malgudi. This clearly shows that Narayan had a sort of mythopoeic imagination and from the very beginning of his literary career he wished to create fables on modern life in terms of the experience of the people of the imaginary town of Malgudi.

Narayan "embodies the pure spirit of Hinduism" and we find that a sustaining theme of Hinduism operates quietly and unpretentiously throughout his fiction. He has used extensively the symbols like temple, river, village, hills, caves, snakes, dance, fire, milk, lotus, tree etc. to present an authentic picture of Indian life. As the scope and purpose of this paper is limited, the effort is restricted to the study of only four symbols. They are (1) the town of Malgudi; (2) the village; (3) the temple, and (4) the river. These four symbols to be the 'major symbols' used in The Guide(1958).

Thomas Hardy in his Note Books observed "It Is better for a writer to know a little bit of the world remarkably well than to know a great part of the world remarkably little". R.K. Narayan's fiction is a copy-book example of the truth of this statement. Malgudi, an imaginary small town of South India, is the backbone of all the novels of Narayan.

Malgudi is a sort of compromise between the oriental age old traditions and the modern accidental civilzation. Narayan's aim is not to plead for the ancient or the modern values but to know how the indigenous values are being corroded under the heavy impact of the western culture. Malgudi, in a way, is symbolical of modern India rooted in the ancient tradition", It is symbolic of changing Indian civilization Like Delhi and New Delhi, there are old and new towns and 'extensions' everywhere. Malgudi's affirmation of its natural beauty is symbolic of the self assurance of India herself. In The Guide there are "spacious bamboo jungles of Mempi." Marco, Rosie's husband, takes rooms in Mempi Peak House and explores caves and wall paintings. The Mempi Hills are "The Himalayas" of Malgudi while the caves are symbolic of the Indian cultural continuity.

Coming of the railway to Malgudi (in The Guide) is symbolic of the impact of an Industrial and urban society on a predominantly, simple agricultural community with its new problems. The tamarind tree which was the seat of Raju's boyhood and the village cartmen is now full of lorries packed under it. Raju who has grown up in a decent home picks up abuses from the railway men. The railway meant the ruining of Raju and his old mother—a small shopkeeper's son becomes a railway guide, starts living by his wits, runs into Rosie and Marco, gets emotionally entangled, neglects honest means of making a living and brings ruin upon himself as well as a married woman.

Narayan is quite aware of the fact that more than eighty per cent of India's population lives in her villages. That is why most of the action in his novels, if not set in Malgudi proper, is set in some village around Malgudi. For example, the drama of Raju's enforced sainthood and martyrdom (in The Guide) is enacted in Mangal village, about 10 to 15 miles from Malgudi.

The village in Narayan, always symbolises native strength and simplicity. It reinforces the individual pilgrim in quest of Truth, with the necessary vision. Raju grows in urban atmosphere among those who were busy managing shops and building railway stations and worked as a grown up man among custodians of law and order like the policemen and the magistrates and the jailer, but after leaving out this hectic life, when he requires peace he goes to the suburb of Malgudi (near village Mangal) to gain perspective from a distanc. This atmosphere of the village is totally different from the atmosphere of Malgudi. The village becomes a symbol of primitive openness. It depends on the vagaries of monsoon, completely ignorant about the changes the world has wrought. The villagers of Mangal are a helpless lot Without anyone to guide them except the pretender Swami, the ex-convict. The sylvan scenery not only enchants Raju but also, irrespective of its liking or disliking, puts him on the right track to salvation.

Another peculiar aspect of Indian life is also revealed through this setting. The continued absence of rains evokes fantastic speculation from the villagers. One of the villagers wants to know if the rain fall because of the movement of aeroplanes that disturbs the clouds while the other seeks to know if "the atom bombs are responsible for the drying up of the clouds" (The Guide, p. 81). All this shows remarkable co-existence of science and superstition, knowledge and ignorance, mythology and weather-prediction—the traits not only of the villagers of Mangal but of the whole rural India.

The temple, symbolizing the National Cultural values is recurrent Idea in Narayan's novels. The temple is one of thos rem-

nants of the cultural past of India that even now have their hold on the minds of the Hindus. The spiritual needs of Malgudi are Well served by about half a dozen temples, the most notable of which is the Iswara temple in North Extension with hundreds of "minute carvings" depicting episodes—from the Ramayana all along the wall. Marco spends two hours here, while Raju takes Rosie to see the cobra dance.

Is R K. Narayan, the temple gives shelter to the neglected and Ipeor effecting a change in the heart of the shelter seeker. In The Dark Room (1938) it is the temple which gives protection to Savitri untill she recovers from the psychological shock of having been humiliated by her husband.

Is The Guide (1958), the temples' influence is so deep that it result in the ultimate redemption of Raju. The confession of his crimes would not have been possible if he were not cornered from all sides in the temple. The temple converts the sinner into a saint. The action of the whole novel has been set against the permanent landscape, Is of the temple. If we recall the first meeting between Raju and Velan, we may note that while Velan is an ordinary villagers for Raju,Raju is not an ordinary human being for Velan. It is because Raju is sitting cross-legged (the posture of a saint). Velan washes his feet and face before entering the temple. The external landscape is the clue for Velan to the internal one. Raju tries to reveal the reality before Velan, but it does not make any difference for Velan because Raju is the part of the landscape of the temple. Had Raju told about his life sitting at some other place, Velan might have believed his story. But here at the temple he was full of reverence for the man. It is the overall landscape of the temple that elevates Raju's gesture to the level of rituals. These very gestures divorced from the temple background would have become mere physical acts.

Here in the temple Raju takes fruits only after the riualistic offerings to the God in the sanctum sanctorum. He shares the eatables with others whereas in jail, Raju would gulp down anything before the other could notice. M. Sivaramkrishna in an issue of the Osmania Journal of English Studies rightly observes :

If the jail stands for the insular self locked up in its own secular selfishness, the temple represents the eternal myth of 'togetherness' of sharing, of conferring not cornering.

The far ranging symbolism of the temple is given a further edge by number of related details. Velan's sister was spotted in "a festival crowd amidst a temple procession. Rosie is also connected with the temple. She is a Devdasi's daughter. She tells Raju :

I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to temples as dancers; my mother, grand mother and before her, her mother. Even as a young girl, I danced in our village temple.

Raju, Marco, and Rosie in their own way violate the natural order and harmony in terms of the temple For Raju it is a tourist for Marco, it is a curio cerebrallv cut off from the rest of life and for Rosie it is a part of what she regards as an ignorable past which has to be exorcized. None of them has any awareness of the mythic significance of the temple. And for this violation and ignorance —for this secular reduction—both Raju and Marco pay heavily. Marco wrecks his marriage and Raju goes to jail -Rosie is cut to size and slips into anonymity.

Like the temple the river is also rooted in the myth of Indian culture. If Malgudi is 'a miniature India' and if Mempi hills are the 'Himalayas', the Saryu river is its Ganges. This river originates in the Mempi Hills and is one of the important spots that that Raju as a tourist guide shows to his clients.

The ennobling moral force of the river is revealed in The Guide, From Raju's pretentious sainthood to his final self-realization, the events are dramatized on the bank of the river. Whenever Raju got confused he would fix his gaze ott the river and felt at ease. In the present novel the river flows between the village Mangal and the old shrine where Raju sits. The villagers folk have to cross the river before visiting the temple. The villagers who are ready to blow off each others nose in their village quite forget all about their quarrels in the temple. One of the reasons of this sudden chaage might be that both their bodies and their minds are purified while crossing the river.

Raju's death, a 'death by water' signifies that the individual by lossing his life in water brings rain (and life) to his fellowmen. His death is not but death a means of self-purification and self-realization.

The symbols like the swamis, the snakes, the beggars, Bharat Natyam and the Yoga have, no doubt, been used by novelists like Raja Rao, but they were mainly to present a handy guide to the tourists of India. In Narayan's case, however, the use of these symbols is not only a structural necessity, but also necessary for the depiction of genuine India.

The Guide remains a fine example of the fusion of all these four symbols. From Raju's pretentious sainthood to his final realization, the events are dramatized on the banks of the river, beside the temple, near the village on the outskirts of Malgudi.

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