

LAYERED VOICES: A NARRATOLOGICAL STUDY OF R.K. NARAYAN'S *THE GUIDE*

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Abstract: Narratology is the study of narratives—how stories are told. It looks at the structure, techniques, and methods used by authors to present their stories. Instead of focusing only on what the story is about, narratology asks: Who is telling the story?; From what point of view?; In what order are events presented?; Is the narrator reliable or biased?; Are there multiple perspectives or just one? Layered voices mean that more than one narrative voice or perspective is used in the story. These layers can be: Different narrators (like first-person and third-person), Different time frames (past and present), Contrasting viewpoints (such as personal vs. societal), Multiple characters sharing their versions of events. When these voices are layered, it adds depth, complexity, and richness to the story. It also allows readers to see things from different angles.

It means analyzing how a story is told using multiple voices or perspectives and studying how this affects the way we understand the story. Moreover, studying layered voices helps us understand the psychology of characters, the themes of the story (like identity, truth, transformation), the author's technique and artistic choices and how readers are guided to interpret the story. The present paper "Telling the Tale Twice: Narrative Duality in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*" analyses the novel in this context. It explores Raju's character from different angles; questions what is true and what is just Raju's perspective and see how his identity changes depending on who is speaking or being described.

Keywords: Flashback, Memory, Heterodiegetic, Homodiegetic, Focalization, Narrator.

1.0 Introduction

R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) is a landmark in Indian English literature, celebrated not only for its engaging storytelling but also for its complex narrative structure. A narratological study of *The Guide*—that is, an examination of how the story is told—reveals a tapestry of "layered voices" that add depth and meaning to the novel. This layered narrative is a deliberate artistic choice, enabling Narayan to explore themes of identity, transformation, morality, and cultural conflict with greater subtlety and resonance.

Narratology is the study of narrative structure and how it affects our perception of a story. It involves analyzing elements such as point of view, narrative voice, time, and the relationship between the narrator and the events described. The concept of "layered voices" refers to the use of multiple narrative levels or perspectives within a single work. *The Guide* is unique in Narayan's oeuvre for its narrative structure. The novel is structured on the basis of two narrative discourses. The first discourse is that of the novel's narrator who makes the narrative begin. And the second discourse representing the viewpoint of Raju, offers various interpretations of the text. Of crucial importance in Narayan's novel is the question of narration through which the different segments of Raju's life are recounted and how the narrative structure of the novel creates the narrative effect achieved by the reader. The structural framework of Narrative-I and Narrative-II will be understood better if we first consider the status of the narrator in them. According to Genette, this is possible only when reference is made to both the narrator's narrative level and the extent of participation in the story.

Genette's dual criteria reveal the complexity of the narrator's functions in *The Guide*. Narrative-I is a framing narrative which contains Narrative-II as a framed narrative. Narayan as an omniscient narrator narrates the events of Narrative-I which is called extradiegetic level narration done by heterodiegetic narrators. Raju's narration of

Narrative-II is intradiegetic level narration done by homodiegetic narrator. He may also be called an autodiegetic narrator because Raju himself is the protagonist of Narrative-II. This structure is further complicated by the fact that Narrative-II itself frames one more narrative, the events of which are recounted and narrated by Rosie. In other words Rosie's narration is a story within story, thus constituting a hypodiegetic narrative. These dual layers create a rich, multifaceted view of the protagonist's journey.

Narayan ushers the reader into the novel through a heterodiegetic narrator. The narrative begins at a dramatic moment.

"Raju welcomed the intrusion---something to relieve the loneliness of the place. The man stood gazing reverentially on his face. Raju felt amused and embarrassed. "Sit down if you like," Raju said, to break the spell. The other accepted the suggestion with a grateful nod and went down the river steps to wash his feet and face . . . and took his seat two steps below the granite slab on which Raju was sitting cross-legged as if it were a throne, beside an ancient shrine." (*The Guide* 5)

After dramatizing the event the narrator arouses the suspense of the reader by focusing attention on Raju's inner thoughts. The chapter's structure gives the reader an idea of the chaotic working of Raju's mind at this point in his personal experience. The authorial narration moves from outer reality into the minds of the characters, enabling the reader to establish personal relationships with them. The reader is thrust quickly into the psychological states of the minds of main characters. This retrospective narrative gives readers access to Raju's inner thoughts and emotions, providing a subjective account of his transformation from a tourist guide to a spiritual figure. The first-person voice is deeply personal, confessional, and reflective.

This double narrative told from two points of view performs several dramatic functions in the text. Raju's talking directly to the reader invites the readers' immediate sympathy whereas Narayan as an omniscient narrator "invites our scrutiny and interpretation upon the character". (Sura P. Rath 129) In the beginning, when Raju meets Velan and decides to play the role of a holy man the reader is placed at a distance from Raju and does not have much access to his consciousness. Consequently the reader feels detached amusement as Raju puts on the mask of a spiritual guide. But the first person narration takes us inside his mind; reveals his inner thoughts; in the process the distance between the character and the reader is reduced, which helps the reader to be involved in Raju's fate and to sympathize with him even in his unforgivable actions. However there are few sections when the heterodiegetic narrator without passing any overt judgement on the behavior of the character manipulates the reader's response by allowing him to go near his consciousness. In Ch.11 the internal focalization is employed to enter into the mind of Raju:

Lying on his mat, he brooded. He felt sick of the whole thing. When the assembly was at its thickest, could he not stand up on a high pedestal and cry, "Get out, all of you, and leave me alone, I am not the man to save you. No power on earth can save you if you are doomed. Why do you bother me with all this fasting and austerity?" (235)

During Raju's fast the mimetic mode of speech takes the reader directly into the internal mind of the character. Though revealing a negative aspect of his character the statement earns sympathy for him just because of an inside view. As Booth says, "the sustained inside view leads the reader to hope for a good fortune for the character with whom he travels quite independently of the qualities revealed." (246)

In homodiegetic narration also, when narrating 'I' is unfolding his past before Velan, it reaches the height of pathos. The psychology of the narrated 'I' is vividly portrayed. Raju says:

"I was in an abnormal state of mind . . . I was losing a great deal of my mental relaxation. I was obsessed with the thoughts of Rosie. I reveled in memories of the hours I had spent with her last or in anticipation of what I'd be doing next. . . . But I was becoming nervous and sensitive and full of anxieties in various ways. Suppose, suppose---suppose? What? I myself could not specify. I was becoming fear-ridden. I could not even sort out my worries properly. I was in a jumble." (115)

The narrative here is so close to the narrated 'I' that the information draws the reader nearer to the character. Raju speaks out his thoughts in a most reliable way so as to bring out sympathy for him. This narrative, while seemingly objective, still carries a subtle interpretive tone that influences how the reader perceives Raju and other characters.

This shift between two narrative layers creates a dialogue between Raju's self-perception and the events of his past. It allows readers to compare Raju's version of events with a more external view, thus questioning the reliability of the narrator and encouraging a more critical engagement with the text.

At the same time Rosie's first person narration at hypodiegetic level shortens the distance between Rosie and the reader and earns sympathy for her. So by allowing Rosie to speak in her own voice Narayan makes the reader feel attached more to Rosie than to Marco. If Marco is also given the third view point, it could not have been so effective and the preference might have been shifted to Marco because he would have been a victim of Raju-Rosie's relationship. By constantly shifting the narrative focus from one perspective to another Narayan on one hand maintains the suspense and on the other arouses the curiosity of the readers.

However, the heterodiegetic narration by maintaining a distance between the character and the reader reveals Raju's hypocrisies and debauchery, which invites the readers' judgement upon the character. One can easily see how Raju exploits the poor villagers when the extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator describes his evolution towards 'sainthood':

The essence of sainthood seemed to lie in one's ability to utter mystifying statements . . . He was dragging those innocent men deeper and deeper into the bog of unclear thoughts. . . . Raju soon realized that his spiritual status would be enhanced if he grew a beard and long hair to fall on his nape. A clean-shaven and close-haired saint was an anomaly. He bore the various stages of his make-up with fortitude, not minding the prickly phase he had to pass through before a well authenticated beard could over his face and come down his chest. By the time he arrived at the stage of stroking his beard thoughtfully, his prestige had grown beyond his wildest dreams. (52-53)

The use of free indirect discourse is another feature of Narayan's deft handling of narration in creating a cumulative effect that we can neither totally reject Raju nor totally respect him. The following passage not only depicts narrator's voice but also Raju's pre-verbal perception and feeling when the fast is thrust upon him. "Raju almost glared at him. This single man was responsible for his present plight. Why would he not go away and leave him alone? What a wise plan it would have been if the crocodile had got him while he crossed the river! But that poor old thing, which had remained almost a myth, had become dehydrated. When its belly was ripped open they found in it ten thousand rupees' worth of jewellery. Did this mean that the crocodile had been in the habit of eating only women?" (236-237). The passage clearly reveals the character of Raju who could see humor even in his plight, which draws the reader close to him.

Narayan's choice to narrate the story out of chronological order is another narratological strategy that enhances the novel's thematic complexity. The novel begins with Raju already in the temple, speaking to Velan, who believes him to be a holy man. Only gradually does the reader learn how Raju came to be in this position. This dislocation in time serves to foreground the novel's themes of transformation and redemption.

By placing the spiritual climax of Raju's life at the beginning of the narrative, Narayan compels the reader to reinterpret past events in light of their consequences. This reverse structure emphasizes the cyclical nature of Raju's journey—from deception to accidental enlightenment. It also mirrors the philosophical idea that enlightenment often emerges not from intention but from circumstance.

Narayan's layered narrative can also be seen as a response to the complexities of Indian identity in the postcolonial era. Set in the fictional town of Malgudi, the novel portrays a society negotiating between tradition and modernity, colonial influence and indigenous values. The guide metaphor extends beyond Raju's profession to encompass his role as a mediator between these worlds.

Narratologically, the movement between different narrative modes mirrors the cultural hybridity of the text. The third-person narrative often adopts a tone reminiscent of Indian oral storytelling, while the first-person segments evoke a more introspective, Western literary tradition. In this sense, the "layered voices" are not just narratorial but cultural, reflecting the pluralistic reality of Indian society.

The novel ends with a profound ambiguity. As Raju collapses at the riverbank, having fasted for days in an attempt to bring rain, the narrative closes with the line: "He sank down. Velan was still holding his hand. Rain was falling in

the hills.” This moment leaves readers unsure whether Raju has truly achieved sainthood or simply died in vain. This open ending is a powerful narratological move. It refuses closure and forces the reader to confront the limitations of narrative itself. The dual voices throughout the novel have prepared the reader for this lack of resolution, reinforcing the idea that truth is always partial, layered, and contested.

The ambiguous and open-ended structure, the dual narration, a fine interplay of multiple narrators, the zigzag narration, all contribute to the novel’s merit and elevate it to the esteemed position of the best Malgudi novel. Krishna Sen rightly says that “the denouement is neither a rejection nor a defense of the Hindu faith. It gestures towards the complexity of life, in which there are no simple solutions.”(25) The narrative strategy in the novel reinforces its theme. Raju’s leaving the story of Devaka in the middle is also perhaps an indication towards an open-ended structure.

From the above analysis it becomes clear that *The Guide* is widely divergent. In the novel the author has been successful to a large extent in maintaining objectivity. Despite everything Raju does, the reader cannot cast him off for his wickedness; he earns our sympathy as well. It is Narayan’s skillful handling of his mode of narration that helps the author to achieve this complex effect. The layered voices—through shifts in perspective, time, tone, and cultural register—create a narrative that is as complex and multifaceted as its protagonist. By weaving together personal confession and external observation, spiritual myth and social realism, Narayan constructs a novel that challenges readers to engage actively with its narrative structure.

2.0 References

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