

Abstract

This essay provides an introduction to the life and work of Narayan (1906-2001), a pioneering name in the Indian-English literature, focusing on his novel *The Guide*.

Key- Words: Narayan, *The Guide*

Resumo

Introdução a vida e obra de Narayan (1906-2001), escritor pioneiro na literatura Anglo Indiana, com ênfase no romance *O Guia*.

Palavras-chave: Narayan, *O Guia*

The current literary scene of Indian authors writing in English offers an overwhelming variety of world-views, approaches, themes, narrative techniques, styles, voices; it is an all-encompassing literary world. The contemporary boom of Indian-English literature can be traced back to the end of the 19th century, when the contact of the Indian intellectual elite with European books and systems of thought was consolidating. The Bengali authors were the first to be exposed to Western influence, as this region was the administrative centre of the British Empire. Founded in 1860 as a trading post for the East India Company and established as the capital of British India in 1912, Calcutta soon became the centre of Indian intellectual life. Partly due to the discovery of Indian classic literature by European scholars of Sanskrit, but also as a consequence of the establishment of the first universities, the Bengali youth formed a new intellectual elite which was to produce the first writers that employed new kinds of literary models. Forms such as the sonnet, blank verse, and the novel were taken on by this generation of writers. In subsequent decades this originally Bengali phenomena was spread throughout the subcontinent, reaching Madras and South India, the homeland of Narayan, the novelist who is the object of our attention here.

Brazilian publishing houses have been offering the public a considerable number of titles from Indian-English contemporary literature. Names like Jumpha Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Gosh, Manil Suri, Arundhati Roy, Vikas Swarup, Aravind Adiga, Vikram Seth, Chitra Diwakaruni and, - on another niche - Thrity Umrigar, among others, are well known and appreciated by Brazilian readers. Nonetheless, titles by Narayan, the leading figure in the first generation of Indian novelists are just now being translated.

Narayan's international standing is expressed in the fact that his novels, short stories, and retellings of Indian epics and myths can be read in most of the world's major languages. Not only has his fiction been the subject of a substantial scholarly and critical literature produced over several decades, but also elaborate literary tributes have appeared in the world's media. He was short-listed on more than one occasion for the Nobel Prize, and held position as visiting professor in several American universities, among them the University of California in Berkeley, the University of Texas and University of Missouri. By the time of his death in 2001, Narayan had secured a lasting place in international literature and earned many prizes and distinctions, such as India's highest literary prize - the Sahitya Akademi Award - for *The Guide*. He was also elected an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1982 and he received the Padma Vibhushan, an Indian civilian distinction, in 2000.

His fiction, deceptively simple in terms of literary technique, is distinctive for its voice, its fusion of the comic with the sad, and its philosophical depth. He is known for his lightness of touch and undecorated style full of understated surprises. Narayan has been repeatedly compared to Dickens and Chekhov. The comparison with Dickens stems from the creation of a vast gallery of unforgettable characters; with Chekhov for the structure of the stories. Interestingly, both these writers have often been accused of being sentimental, a feature totally absent in Narayan, whose work could hardly be described as anything near sentimentality. Narayan's ability to convey the idiosyncrasies of the colourful display of characters from all walks of life is another feature that places him in the Dickensian tradition. A significant feature of Narayan's literary world is that it is densely populated by small-time swindlers, street peddlers, small businessmen, drifters, all forming a gallery of Indian characters very far from the stereotypes of extreme poverty or spiritual exoticism attached to the subcontinent. Borderline figures like Raju in *The Guide*, for example, make the reader aware of this down to earth aspect of life that pervades his work.

In his numerous novels and of short-stories, Narayan showed a special ability to make the rhythms and intricacies of South Indian life accessible to people of other cultures inside India as well as to people of other cultures round the world. Central to this achievement was the creation of Malgudi, the fictional South Indian town, which he peopled with ordinary men and women made memorable by his writing. The stuff of his fiction is the precise registration of the particular and the local, as said by V. S. Naipaul:

He [Narayan] seems forever headed for that aimlessness of Indian fiction [...] but he is forever rescued by his honesty, his sense of humour and above all by his attitude of total acceptance. He operates from deep within his society. [...] the India of Narayan's novels is not the India the visitor sees. [...] There is a contradiction in Narayan, between his form, which implies concern, and his attitude, which denies it: and in this calm contradiction lies his magic. (NAIPAUL, 2002, p.232)

It is understatement as much as anything else that defines Narayan. An overwhelming number of learned essays in major literary journals and comprehensive critical books have been written about it, and the concepts of subdued irony and gentleness of touch are recurrent. Narayan's is an original and humour-laden voice. In the registration of ordinary life in Malgudi, its unhurriedness and its humour are set against a sad and poetic background, enveloped by many shades of irony.

Narayan's life span stretches through almost the length of the 20th century. Born on October 10th, 1906 at Chennapatna, near Mysore in southern India, Narayan was one among many siblings, his father a provincial Brahmin headmaster. Narayan studied at his father's school and disappointed his family's emerging middle-class aspirations as he failed his first attempt to qualify for the graduate course in Arts. Eventually he was accepted at university and graduated. In the meantime he never faltered in his resolve to write for a living; he also tried to make ends meet by freelancing journalism and keeping odd jobs. He kept on writing and submitting stories for newspapers and magazines. When Narayan finished his first novel, he could find neither a publisher nor a reading public. The India of the 1930s and early 1940s lacked an organized publishing industry. The absence of a significant book-buying public for Indian fiction in English meant small or nonexistent means to support oneself as a writer. In 1931, after trying to interest all available publishers in his short stories and after trying to find a job in the newspaper *The Hindu* as a trainee reporter, he had a book review and short story published in *The Indian Review*. In 1933, *Punch* published his short satirical article, "How to Write an Indian Novel." In 1934 and 1935, he worked as the Mysore reporter for *The Justice*, the official organ of the non-Brahmin movement. In the late 1930s, Narayan started to contribute regularly with short stories and other pieces to *The Hindu*. Thus began a long association with this Indian newspaper group, which meant that many of the writer's short stories and essays were first published in it. From the second half of the 1980s, the magazine *Frontline* started publishing a number of Narayan pieces, some short stories, and three novels in serial form. In the middle period of his creative writing, Narayan had a productive

association with *The Illustrated Weekly* and *The Times of India*. R. K. Laxman, India's greatest cartoonist and the writer's youngest brother, has also had a lifetime association with these periodicals.

In his autobiography *My Days*, Narayan tells about how he never wavered from the decision he made early on in life: to become a writer. The reader familiar with Dickens' career as well his life is not surprised with the parallels. In a way the connection between these two writers goes beyond the criticism on their treatment of characters. In the midst of all the ups and downs in literary trends in criticism, Narayan's work remains not only an object of study in the academy, but also a source of delight for readers across the English-speaking world and in translation to several languages. It is high time the Brazilian readers got acquainted with Narayan's understated writing style in his original and enticing novels.

The most remarkable fact about Narayan was that once he came up with his fictional South Indian town Malgudi, he stayed with it for life. All his inventiveness and philosophical resources were invested in this small town, now familiar to millions of people in and outside India through his short stories and novels, not to mention TV series, and films. Graham Greene's famous line: "Without Narayan I wouldn't know what it is like to be an Indian"¹ has shaped virtually all criticism, either providing elements that concur to his role in approximating India to the western readership of questioning the basis for his realism and avoidance of overt politics. After Greene, William Walsh² now classical book on the author has been a reference for all the critics that came after him. His claim that the Malgudi novels are unique in their indianness made him an easy target for the host of critics who accused him of "essentialism", which has become a sort of insult word in poststructuralist oriented scholarship circles.

When *The Guide* was published in 1958 by Methuen in London and by Viking Press in New York, Narayan was already a fairly well known writer in India, England and United States. His previous novels, *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* (1945), *Mr. Sampath* (1949), *The Financial Expert* (1952) and *The Printer of Malgudi* (1957) had gained him a faithful reading audience. *The Guide*, nonetheless, consolidated this growing reputation and has since then been generally considered his most complete achievement. What follows is a very brief overview of the

¹ In the introduction to the first edition of Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*. Reprinted in Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1980.

² Walsh, William. *R. K. Narayan, A Critical Appreciation*. University of Chicago Press, 1982.

novel's plot and narrative techniques. Here a warning is necessary. Those who do not wish to spoil the pleasure of suspense should proceed only after reading the novel itself.

A central theme of the novel is the transformation of Raju from his role as a tour guide to that of a spiritual guide. The title of the novel, *The Guide*, has a double meaning, and Raju is in a sense a double character. As a tour guide and lover, he is impulsive, unprincipled, and self-indulgent. Gradually, after his imprisonment, and after his unwilling transformation into a holy man, he is careful, thoughtful, and self-disciplined.

The setting of *The Guide*, as most of Narayan's novels, is Malgudi, the fictional town in southern India. Raju, the protagonist, grows up near a railway station, becomes a shopkeeper, and then a resourceful and cunning tourist guide. He meets Rosie, an attractive traditional ritualistic dancer, and her husband, whom Raju nicknames Marco, because he dresses in a way that reminds Raju of Marco Polo. Marco is a scholar and anthropologist, more attentive to his research than to his young wife. Rosie and Marco hire Raju as a tourist guide for a sightseeing tour. She wants to see a king cobra dancing and go shopping whereas all Marco wants to do is to study cave paintings. Rosie and Marco are constantly bickering; Marco remains cold and aloof toward his wife. While Marco is away analyzing cave paintings, Raju falls in love with Rosie; when Marco gets to know about the affair, he abandons her and returns to Madras.

Raju becomes obsessed with Rosie and neglects all else. He forgets his business, falls into debt, and ends up losing his shop at the railway station. He also loses his mother's respect and support because he is living with a married woman. Raju's mother moves out of their house, and the property is claimed to pay off his debts. Raju encourages Rosie to resume her career as a dancer, becomes her manager, launching her on a successful career as an interpreter of Bharat Natya, the classical dance of India. In the meantime he squanders her money, and ends up forging Rosie's signature for a package of her jewels, a mistake that earns him a two-year prison sentence.

On his release from prison, Raju stops to rest near an abandoned temple, where a villager named Velan mistakes him for a holy man. As Raju does not want to return in disgrace to his family in Malgudi, he reluctantly decides to play the part of a holy man. He is happy to accept the daily offering of food that the villagers bring him. Gradually he accepts the role which has been thrust upon him, and assumes a fake attitude as a spiritual advisor to the village community. Raju is content with the arrangement, until a drought occurs, and, in order to save face, he is supposed to go on a twelve day fast, as a typical spiritual leader is supposed to. As a big crowd gathers to watch him during his fasting, he apparently begins to

believe in the role he has taken on. For the first time in his life he has taken on an unselfish task, not for earthly urges of love or money. Despite grave danger to his health, he continues to fast until he faints. His legs sag down as he feels that the rain is finally falling. The closing of the narrative leaves unanswered the question of whether he dies, or whether the drought has really ended.

This is a chronological account of the events in Raju's life, but does not match the reading experience, as the narrative does not follow this order. The novel is told through a series of flashbacks, and in fact tells two stories, that of Raju's relationship with Rosie, and that of Raju's relationship with the villagers as a holy man. The novel opens with Raju sitting beside a temple and meeting the villager named Velan, the first to mistake him for a holy man. The narrative then alternates between an account of Raju's career as a holy man, told in the third-person, and Raju's account to Velan of his previous career as a tour guide and lover, told in the first-person. This dualism is in keeping with the dualism in Raju's character. He is transformed from a sinner to a saint, though he is never truly a sinner, and arguably never truly a saint. In spite of that, and on account of the subtleties in the narrator's voice, Raju gains the reader's solidarity throughout the novel.

Since the book is called *The Guide*, the reader cannot fail to make the link between the array of meanings of this attribute and the different stages or levels of guidance offered as the plot unravels: tourist guide, who provides strangers with practical information; career guide, who provides Rosie with strategies for artistic achievement, teacher, who provides school boys with simple knowledge; spiritual guide, who provides villagers with sound advice. Should the role of community saviour be added to this list of good deeds? The legacy of the novel is what the reader ultimately makes of this guide figure. Raju is evidently not a guide in the sense of a leader who steers a community towards a better future. All his actions are self-centered. He guides the others with his own interest in mind. Narayan is making a satirical point in the very backbone of the narrative: the guide that people look up to is himself the one most in need of guidance. After constantly dodging responsibilities along his life, the protagonist is clueless to the last days of his fasting. As a son, Raju hires a cheap lawyer rather than face the eviction which left his mother homeless. As a lover also, he lives from day to day, lives on scraps of Rosie's favours, not considering a true commitment. In the end, he goes on with the fast, not out of a belief in his powers to bring rain, nor out of compassion for the community of villagers that have helped him, but rather as a sort of selfish whim: "if by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom, and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly (p. 188)?" Here this last outburst of stubbornness is attenuated by the narrator's voice, which

gives the reader its interpretation of the facts: “For the first time in his life, he was making an earnest effort; for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested (p. 189).”

But is this narratorial voice to be trusted? By this point of the narrative the reader has already made his or her mind, the reader has already taken sides: either he or she believes Raju is good at heart, truly redeemed or this narratorial voice is a last ironic remark added to the others scattered in the novel. Could he have been redeemed by means of as almost “deus ex-machina” device? If the answer is yes, the novel can be read as a sort of comforting religious parable. The protagonist’s last minute truthfulness to his title confers the reader with a sense of meaning. Regardless of how selfish, silly and incompetent he is, there an unforeseen destiny that makes his role in this life fit in with the greater good in the universe. But if the answer is no, then one is inclined to agree that human affairs consist of pointless wanderings and self-illusion, and there no guide guiding the guide, so to speak.

It is probably safe to argue that none of us is entirely devoid of preconceived ideas about that which is unfamiliar to us. We tend to assume that India will live up to the imagined ideas that we have about them, most stemming from pop culture and yoga classes. Narayan forces us at least to ponder about their validity. When our assumptions are challenged, our first impulse is not to question our ways of thinking but rather to label the different culture as too exotic to be taken in beyond a superficial level, or not worth the effort. It is my argument that beneath the novel’s soft but encrusted layer of satire about the guru and the peasant’s gullibility, the author acknowledges that specific Hindu related traits survive and live on regardless of whichever waves of Western influence it is subject to.

The guru/guide’s personality is described in a way that draws upon preconceptions that can be linked to Indian traditions. Many of the secondary characters are also ascribed stereotypical features such as Gaffur’s practical wisdom and the uncle’s zeal for the family’s reputation. In that respect, Narayan’s novel plays with these stereotypical assumptions under in terms of cultural difference. His critique on the cliché views of what a Hindi guru should look like and behave affect and color our perception of Raju. With his humorous account, the narrator calls the reader’s assumptions into question, because even though we are laughing or smiling, in the end of the day, it is hard to tell apart whether we are laughing at our own prejudices or at the events of the plot.

The manner in which the reader instantly recognizes the way the characters in *The Guide* are labeled or stereotyped indicates our readiness to equate certain features with

specific religious traditions, nationalities and cultures. The ease with which this is done proves hard to sustain a position of total impartiality. So much as we would like to claim, we are not unbiased readers, and our bias is more evident when exposed to a novel so deceptively simple like *The Guide*.

When it comes to the cultural aspects, my view is that there is no such a thing as an innate indianness, since I prefer to think that we are all much more alike than we are different, regardless of cultural roots. That said, I must add that going to the opposite end of the stick and dismissing the specificity of Narayan's writing in the name of a vague universalism is also a mistake. We do find a Hinduist mythological stratum in his text that is not to be found in the European novel. Still, as odd, or as silly, or as surreal as the image of Raju's unlikely final sacrifice might be, the idea of an individual self-sacrifice to save the others is at the core of one of the most important Western founding stories too.

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