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Narrative Levels and Voices: A Study of R.K.Narayan's "The Guide"

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Abstract

The Guide is considered as the most representative novel known for its complex narrative structure. To convey the story the novel uses anachronies, memory, ellipsis, scene and pause. There is an ulterior narration in the novel in both the stories since the homodiegetic narration is also a memory. The novel begins with an impression that the heterodiegetic narrator will tell the story of Raju but after three pages of the text Raju reveals himself as a homodiegetic narrator. Narayan employs the heterodiegetic narrator for the present narrative movement. Time and again internal focalization is used to make us aware of the inner mind of characters. The past narrative movement is given to the homodiegetic narrator so that he can judge himself objectively, and assess his actions with detachment. There is a psychological and temporal gap between the narrating 'I' and narrated 'I'. By studying the diegetic narrators we see how a narrative effect is achieved in the narrative. The present paper proposes to analyze the different narrative levels and voices employed by R.K.Narayan in his most popular novel *The Guide*.

Key Words: Flashback, Memory, Heterodiegetic, Homodiegetic, Focalization, Narrator

Article

The Guide is considered as the most representative novel known for its complex narrative structure. To convey the story the novel uses anachronies, memory, ellipsis, scene and pause etc. There is an ulterior narration in the novel in both the stories since the homodiegetic narration is also a memory. By studying the diegetic narrators we see how a cumulative effect is achieved in the narrative. The present paper proposes to analyze the different narrative levels and voices employed by R.K.Narayan in his most popular novel *The Guide*.

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 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 says that "any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrative act producing this narrative is placed." (Genette, 228) Genette calls the primary narrative "extradiegetic" and the framed narrative "intradiegetic". He introduces second set of criteria to determine the status of a narrator. The narrator who is absent from the story is called heterodiegetic and the one who participates in it is called homodiegetic. The narrator is also called autodiegetic if he or she is the protagonist of 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 narrator. Raju's

narration of Narrative-II is intradiegetic level narration done by homodiegetic narrator. He may also be called 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.

Narayan ushers the reader into the novel through a heterodiegetic narrator. The present narrative movement is controlled by him. Every experience and feeling of the characters is delineated through Raju's filtering consciousness. 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 to 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.

The chronological account of the events in Raju's life does not match the reading experience. The novel narrates its story on two time grooves-- past and present. The novel tells the story of Raju's life from birth to death but it begins, not at the beginning but in the middle of his life, or in *media res*. The narration moves backward and forward in a zigzag manner. This plan gives the novel two narratives happening in two different time frames. . One narrative, which takes place in the past, told in first person narration, describes Raju's childhood, his career as a tourist guide, his meeting with Rosie and Marco, and right up to his forgery and imprisonment. Whereas the present narrative, told in third person narration depicts Raju's life since his release from jail, his coming to the deserted temple, his getting involved in the affairs of Velan and the villagers, their mistaking him as a saint, and forcing a fast on him to end the drought At the macro level, *The Guide* has two narratives. The narrator of both the narratives is different. All the events pertaining to the past of Raju are narrated by Raju himself in first person autobiographical mode, and rest of the events pertaining to the present are narrated by the third person omniscient narrator. The novel begins with the impression that the heterodiegetic narrator will reveal the story of Raju but after three pages of the text Raju projects himself as a homodiegetic narrator. Out of 173 pages of homodiegetic narration 119 pages fill the textual space from 7th to 10th chapters. The earlier fifty four pages are interspersed in the first six chapters of the text. Parallel narrations intermingle and alternate with each other in the first six chapters. In subsequent four chapters Raju offers a retrospective view of his life. The whole section from chapter 7 to chapter 10 is dramatized through reported dialogue and summaries, and the recollections through interior monologues. In the concluding chapter the "subject/ narrator Raju again takes the role of an object/ character observed by the author/narrator." (Sura P.Rath 129)

This double narrative told from two points of view performs several dramatic functions in the text. Raju's talking direct 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 of his consciousness. Consequently the reader feels detached amusement as Raju puts 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 direct 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 thoughts of Rosie. I revelled 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 as much 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.

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 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.

The main bulk of Narrative – II concerning his past has been narrated in the autobiographical mode by the participating character Raju. He recounts the events of his personal experiences, his faults, his betrayals, his guilt, his love and his separations. The question arises whether Raju as a narrator can be distinguished from Raju as a character. Making this distinction clear, Gerard Genette writes that "the two actants the 'narrating-I' and the 'narrated-I'", i.e. Raju-the adult as a narrator and Raju- the child as a character- focaliser, are "separated by a difference in age and experience" (Narrative Discourse 252). As in any character-narrator, so in Raju too there is a temporal and psychological gap between the character and the narrator. Hence Raju-the narrator is also a detached critic of Raju-the character. The narrator Raju comments on the character Raju's crime as:

It was only such perverse lines of thought and my excessive self-pity that enabled me to survive those moments; one needed all that amount of devilry to keep oneself afloat. I could give no time for others. I could not bother to think of her own troubles, of the mess she had been led into of the financial emptiness after all those months of dancing and working, of the surprise sprung upon her by my lack of—what should we call it, judgement? No, it was something much lower than that. Lack of ordinary character! I see it all now clearly, but at that time I still clung to my own grievances, and could watch without much perturbation her emotional tantrums (219).

Manifest here are the narrating and the narrated-self existing in two different times and having two different perspectives. This detached perspective also accounts for Raju's realization of his unjust behavior towards Rosie:

"I knew my mind was not working either normally or fairly. I knew I was growing jealous of her self-reliance. But I forgot for the moment that she was doing it all for my sake."(222)

It is this very difference that authorizes the narrator to treat the character with "ironic superiority". He suggests that "the voice of the error and tribulation" (the narrated I and the suffering character) cannot be identified with "the voice of understanding and wisdom" (the narrating I or the narrator) in a narrative discourse (252). Where another novelist might be inclined to make an overt authorial observation, Narayan skillfully makes an ironic distance. He enters into a dramatic relation with the reader. The fact that the narrator Raju never restricts himself from telling the absolute truth about the character Raju testifies to his spiritual integrity. The extradiegetic narrator also marks a stamp on it when he says: "Raju had mentioned without a single omission every detail from his birth to his emergence from the gates of prison" (232). Thus the narrator Raju's faithful narration of the character Raju emphasizes the distinction between the two.

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 middle is also perhaps an indication towards an open-ended structure. From the above analysis it becomes clear that *The Guide* is widely divergent as far as the experimentation with the narrative levels and voice is concerned. 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.

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