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The Mask that becomes the Face: A Comparative Study of the Fractured Self and Spiritual Authenticity in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* and Manoj Das' *The Escapist*

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Abstract: The figure of ascetic occupies an important place in Indian cultural imagination. A character of sadhu or holy man bridges the gap between mundane life and metaphysical existence and between tradition and modernity. In Indian English literature most of the writers dealt with the figure of holy man. These writers focused on the psychological self and spiritual authenticity of ascetic figures. The paper presents a comparative analysis of R. K. Narayan's The Guide and Manoj Das's The Escapist. In both novels the central figures are caught in a situation when they have to bear the role of swami. Both Protagonists becomes holy man by accident but their life journey and quest of inner self go on in different ways. Narayan's Raju is the manifestation of sociological exploration of the fractured self and Das's Padmalochan presents a psychological examination and mystical experience that turns him into a genuine ascetic.

Keywords: Spirituality, mask, fractured self, ascetic, swami, psychological, devine will.

"Theme that seems to have fascinated many Indo-Anglian novelists is the place of faith in the socio-cultural life of India."

(Mukherjee, Twice Born Fiction 29)

Introduction

Some critics consider the post-colonial Indians as a fractured self who finds entangled between the glorious Vedantic tradition of past and scepticism of modern West. The research starts with the question what is self and how it is fractured. In APA dictionary of psychology the self has been defined as 'the totality of the individual, consisting of all characteristic attributes, conscious and unconscious, mental and physical. Apart from its basic reference to personal identity, being, and experience, the term's use in psychology is wide-ranging.' (apa.org) Writers including William James, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Karen D. Horney, Gordon W. Allport defined the 'self' in different ways. Sterling Hall defined, "One's self' is not something passively given but is instead something that is produced. Work and labour go into creating sustaining a self." (Hall 117) Heinz Kohut a psychoanalyst of America used the term 'self' to denote 'the sense of a coherent, stable (yet dynamic) experience of one's individuality, continuity in time and space, autonomy, efficacy, motivation, values, and desires; he believed that this sense emerges through healthy narcissistic development empathically supported by the significant figures in one's early life and that, conversely, narcissistic developmental failure leads to a fragile or incoherent sense of self.'(apa.org) This fragile self is fragmented, broken or inconsistent in sense of identity, it becomes fractured self. An individual behaves differently before others and in private. Erving Goffman in his famous

work Self in Everyday Life gives the theory of dramaturgy in which he explains that while making social interaction people plays different roles like theatrical performances. Individual adopts mask or persona according to different social setting and hides their true self from others like theatrical performances on 'front stage' verses on 'back stage'. He further adds "The 'true' or 'real' attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behaviour." (Goffman 1-2)

The fragmented experience of tradition and modernity of Indian writers led them to the creation of a unique literary archetype of accidental ascetic which is peculiar to Indian English literature. This type of character is not a holy spiritual person but holiness is thrust upon him by society accidentally. 'Repeated though the marginal figure of a spiritual mentor figure- a guru or a saffron- clad ascetic many of these novels serves the dual function of proclaiming the wisdom and spirituality of the ancient Hindu civilization and admitting at the same time its ineffectuality in the colonial domain of action and power.' (Mukherjee, *Perishable Empire* 18) William Walsh also mentions the importance of holy figure in India, "the guru, the holy man, the ascetic who has renounced the world, the keeper of the temple, all have some measure of religious authority and work for the diffusion of Hindu values and the ordering of behaviour. (Walsh, *Indian Literature* 8) He extends his view, "We are not, I think, deceived in detecting beneath the apparently exotic and even alien the common and extraordinary rhythm of life and the special beat given to that rhythm by an intense, unaffected and unquestioning religious spirit." (Walsh, *Indian Literature* 9)

R. K. Narayan and Manoj Das though belong to different generation, different regions and having different philosophical approach, both shares a common feature of the

use of this archetype. R. K. Narayan dealing with the middle class society concentrates on its weaknesses in ironical manner and gives importance to Karma and realism. While Manoj Das a staunch follower of Sri Aurobindo is deeply influenced by his philosophy and blends magic realism with spirituality in his works. *The Guide* of Narayan and *The Escapist* of Das appears two novels written in same vein but they are different apart. The comparative study of R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* and Manoj Das's *The Escapist* facilitates a crucial framework through which the portrayal of spiritual authority and personal transformation in modern Indian English literature can be understood perfectly. In both novels the protagonist is an antihero who is accidentally compelled to bear the responsibility of a holy man, a guide or a Swami and from that moment he embarks on a journey of self-reckoning. "The ascetic or the sanyasi has always been held in reverence in India, because renunciation is an ideal not many can achieve, and this partially explains the cult of the Guru very much prevalent all over India. But quite often pseudo-mystic Gurus arise to meet the demands of blind faith, and this process has attracted novelists as different from each other as G. V. Desani, Bhabani Bhattacharya and R. K. Narayan. The imposture is not always pre-planned, and what really matters is not the real or imaginary powers of the Guru, but the phenomenon of faith and attitude of mind implied in such situations. The imposter gains some material benefit, no doubt, but he also fulfils a social need." (Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction* 29-30)

Narayan as a sceptical humanist employs irony to evaluate middle class morality. In his masterpiece *The Guide*, he targets the commercialisation of faith in Indian middle class society. Whereas Das influenced by Sri Aurobindo explores deep metaphysical concepts through his novel *The Escapist*. Through his magic realism he emphasizes the inevitability of

spiritual evolution. Both novels have different psychological approaches, narrative aesthetics, sematic and philosophical understanding, theme of escape and redemption and role of society in the construction of divinity. The comparison between these two novels displays the dichotomy of post-colonial presentation of spiritual elements in literature. Both novels focus on the special feature that is mentioned by Minakshi Mukherjee in her *The Twice Born Fiction*, “the blind faith of the people represents an essential moral weakness as well as a very elemental strength, the people who make a business of spiritualism certainly present an aspect of sin or evil. Sometimes the two issues impinge upon one another and the sheer force of simple trust transforms the evil in man's mind into a reservoir of goodness. (Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction* 30) Narayan in his novel *The Guide* expresses ‘Existential Dharma’ and Das in his *The Escapist* gives importance to ‘Evolutionary Providence’. The comparative analysis of these two seminal works tries to establish robust yet theoretically grounded structure.

In *The Guide* the protagonist Raju assumes many roles similarly in *The Escapist* Padmalochan Pramanik performs many roles. Both of them possess ‘fractured self’. Life journey of Raju from railway guide to spiritual man shows that as fluid take shape according to the container, he adjusts himself to any role that falls before him. He is a man of commerce who guides tourists and his every action has the motive of benefit. While in search of livelihood, Padmalochan does jobs but the role of holy man is accidentally imposed upon him. Both protagonist fulfil their roles but their ways are different that mirrors their self.

Narayan's Raju displays his fractured self in his romance with Rosie. He shuns his mother, his maternal uncle, his society and his shop for the sake of his Rosie. He adapts modern way of living to influence her. He accepts, “this made me run to the

tailor to have him make a few dashing bush-shirts and corduroys, and invest in hair- and face-lotions and perfumes of all kinds.”(Narayan 120) She falls for him and leaves her husband Marco for pursuing her career of dancer. Raju helps her in every way and launches her as Bharatanatyam dancer Nalini. Thus he reinvents and transmigrates himself from the role of guide to impresario. He believes himself to be the architect of Rosie's success but in fact he is a parasite feeding on her art. Later he accepts, “She became known because she had the genius in her, and the public had to take notice of it. I am able to speak soberly about it now-only now. At that time I was puffed up with the thought of how I had made her.”(Narayan 188) His fractured self is visible when he tries to control her in the name of love, “I knew it was only a partial truth. If I examined my heart I knew I had pulled her out because I did not like to see her enjoy other people's company. I liked to keep her in a citadel.”(Narayan 199) When he is charged for forging Rosie's signature on the documents sent by her husband, this identity of impresario and lover shatters completely. He who discarded his family, relatives, society and even his profession now changes into a person who despises her to the core. He reviles, “but actually venomous and vindictive, like the cobra lying in wait for its victim. I can now see that it was a very wrong line of thought to adopt.”(Narayan 226) “It was a cruel thing to say. Some devil was wagging his tongue within my skull. I was suddenly racked with the feeling that after all I had done for her she was not sufficiently sympathetic to my cause.”(Narayan 227) These words show his true face that Rosie is only a puppet in his hand. A true lover can never fall on such a low level. He is jealous to her powerful spirit, “I was now a sort of hanger-on in the house; ever since she had released me from police custody, the mastery had passed to her. I fretted inwardly at the thought of it.”(Narayan 225) “Her empire was expanding rather than shrinking. It filled me with gall that she should go on without

me.”(Narayan 236) All these incidents show his drifter personality.

After imprisonment he emerges from jail not as a reformed man, but as a blank slate. He decides not to go back to the places related to his past but leaves for unknown place. He takes refuge in an abandoned temple. A villager Velan from the nearby village Mangala mistook him for a saint. But Raju a man of fractured-self neither denies it nor claims to be a saint. He lacks conviction to assert his true identity. He enjoys the obeisance and offerings of villagers until the draught affect the area. Narayan asserts that spiritual authenticity in India is often a construction by community rather than an individual achievement. The garb of sainthood is given to him by the villagers he only adapts the role. When Velan meets and puts his problem before him first ‘Raju nods his head and speaks like a wise and mystic man, "So has everyone...If you show me a person without a problem, then I'll show you the perfect world. Do you know what the great Buddha said?" (Narayan 15) The climax of the novel mirrors perfectly his fractured self. In a dramatic way by a dumb head villager spreads the news that Swami will observe fast until the rain fall. Raju is compelled to do so. But he tries in every way to evade even he relates true life story to Velan. But Velan full of obeisance interprets the confession as a sign of the Swami's greatness. Raju feels trapped by the gaze of the other. He thinks in his mind, "He will not leave me alone...This man will finish me before I know where I am.”(Narayan 241)

Here Raju's two selves are forced together. He begins the fast out of fear of being exposed, a purely performative act. However, as the days pass and hunger sets in, his self takes a psychological shift. He for the first time in his life decides to do for the sake of other's help. “He had his back to the wall, there was no further retreat. This realisation helped him to get through the trial with a little more resignation on the second

day of his penance.”(Narayan 244) ‘With a sort of vindictive resolution he told himself, "I'll chase away all thought of food. For the next ten days I shall eradicate all thoughts of tongue and stomach from my mind." (Narayan 246)

His modern self which is self-centred gives way to the spiritual self and he achieves authenticity by committing himself completely to the role entrusted upon him. When he gets over his ego, his fractured self is healed. His resolution for observing fast gave him strength. ‘For the first time in his life he was making an earnest effort; or 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. He felt suddenly so enthusiastic that it gave him a new strength to go through with the ordeal.’(Narayan 246)

Das's narrative in *The Escapist* is more satirical, sharp, and deeply rooted in the absurdity of the human condition. The protagonist Padmalochan Pramanik, is a fugitive. He is an orphan who reaches in the city after a dramatic incident at village. The opening line of the novel throws light on his fractured self with his assuming a new role. He says, “The silly act of a moment caused a bout of nervousness or mood for fun? - and the result is I step into my new avatar undreamt of, incredible.” (Das 9) Further he adds "Chance was the pseudonym of God which He used when He does not wish to put down His signature." (Das 13) With this statement Das sets the stage for Universal Will where the "fractured self" is not just a social accident but a play of that Will.

Padmalochan arriving in the city works for a politician Sharmaji. After the death of Sharmaji, he in search of job reaches at the house of Jayant Thakore a despicable contractor. Padmalochan is an ordinary man who wants to earn earnestly. Unlike Raju, who seeks to exploit,

Padmalochan seeks to hide. His transformation into Swami Padmananda is a calculated escape from the brutality of the ordinary world. It is not his contrivance but only the momentarily escape. He ponders, "Was it providentially ordained that I should be clad in the robe of the holy? Could it be a punishment? ...Could it be a reward? If so, for what?" (Das 54)

Padmalochan's broken self is more intellectual than Raju. He finds himself painfully bounded to playact. "I knew that to be ambitious - playing a clown in the crude circus of the ego was no doubt degrading. But despite having grown up as a hapless orphan, I was, unfortunately, ambitious in a weak way. I was yet to learn that in some cases meaningful aspirations of the soul too, bursting out into our exterior self-steeped in ignorance, could seem as ordinary craving for power or popularity, albeit temporarily, soon to get sublimated into an urge for inner growth." (Das 23)

Das deciphers the complex layers of his psychology that is different from Narayan's. Thakore's wife Ranjita Devi takes Padmalochan as a sadhu baba. From that moment he constantly finds himself torn between many selves. His circumstances compel him to play the role silently yet his one-self demands to be true. This higher-self inspires him to become a real ascetic but his lust for Sushie degrades him. He continues his masquerade and finds that the society around him is even more fractured than he is. The wealthy men, the politicians, and the desperate masses are all playing games. Padmalochan's 'fake' spirituality stands contrast to the 'fake' reality of the modern world. It is Ranjita Devi's death that shatters his tranquillity of mind at first and his self feels reprimanded, "Could it be that a certain truth of my inner self unknown to my mind had revealed itself to her? I can never forget her last look. It appeared to have reached and stirred a hidden realm deep within me and I was beginning to feel a

strange new faith in myself. Keeping pace with this newfound faith in the process of formation, the guilt haunting me for long was melting away. I had dozed off and dreamt of my own body lying dead. Much later I was to understand that the vision symbolised the slow death of my old little self, one characterised by superstitions and prejudices and petty concepts of good and evil.”(Das 93)

This was the beginning of the realisation of true-self by Padmalochan. Later Shushie broadens his perspective on the hypocrisy of his own and of society. She dismantles his romantic world and makes him realise his true higher self. When he proposes her to escape Himalaya with him, she laughs and says, “But have you reflected on the practicability of your yearning? Can anyone follow someone else to the world beyond life? Is that a highway measured by milestones? The fire-flies of our ego and anger, passions and attractions are likely to make the darkness at the crossing even more opaque. How can one locate another receding soul - and keep company in that kind of darkness?”(Das 165)

He eventually realizes that he cannot escape himself. He achieves the realization that the role he played was his destiny. He evolves from a trickster into a seeker, realizing that the ‘false’ start was the only way to the higher goal of spiritual authenticity. And he can win over his stubborn, fractured self only by embracing the spiritual path. This turning point of *The Escapist* is distinctively influenced by the Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. Manoj Das suggests that even a fake sadhu may be the part of a Divine evolutionary process. Padmalochan, while pretending to meditate, begins to have actual experience of spirituality and his mask begins to suffocate his ego. Finally after beaten to death by Thakore's men, he is saved by a Spiritual Guru who helped him to the realisation of spirituality. In the concluding line he says, “The phase of my life that

began as a farce, matured into a truth at least for myself.”(Das 182)

Conclusion

The comparison shows that *The Guide* and *The Escapist* are two distinct portraits of the Indian experience. The main difference between the narration of Narayan and Das lies in the conclusion. Narayan, a modernist at heart leaves the question of spiritual authenticity unfinished. He leaves to the reader to consider whether Raju hallucinating or genuinely achieved spiritual power. Yet it shows his belief that authenticity is performative and if one acts like a saint till death, is a saint. In this way the fractured-self finds resolution in the sacrificial action and the mask becomes the face. Contrary to Narayan, Manoj Das writes with spiritual conviction. He shows that the fractured-self is a necessary step that leads to human evolution. All Human beings are ‘escapist’ as they are trying to escape The Divine Will by veiling behind ego. The escapist Padmalochan finally stops escaping and leaves everything on the Devine Will. His journey that begins as a liar finally ends with smashing ego before the Divine will. Thus he achieves a state of consciousness when mask is not needed and he appears with his true face and healed self.

R.K. Narayan's protagonist is a guide who leads others while being lost himself and he finds his way only when he stops moving. His surrender to the faith and tradition heals his fractured self and leads him to spiritual authenticity. While Manoj Das's *Escapist* is a man who flees from reality only to find that reality is a circle, and his true escape is inward. Raju's authenticity is sacrificial, Padmalochan's authenticity is evolutionary. Ultimately, both novels suggest that logic, science, or modernity cannot mend the fractured self. It can only be mended by surrendering to a script larger than

oneself. The mask, if worn with enough suffering and sincerity, eventually burns into the skin, and the imposter becomes the icon.

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