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Indianness in R. K. Narayan' *The Guide*: An Overview of Indian Myths and Society as Represented by Narayan

Poulami Ganguly
Research Scholar,
Bankura, West Bengal, India

Abstract

R. K. Narayan as a member of a traditional Hindu family has infused in his novels the stories of Hindu myths in a social setting that is gradually changing because of the rapid growth of industry, deconstruction of culture, education and effulgence of bourgeoisie class. In *The Guide* traditional South Indian society explores how Hindu myths are intricately related in the lives of Raju, Rosie, Marco and Raju's mother in Malgudi that undergoes a sea change with the advent of railways, essentially a feature of post-colonial India. In the complex web of intricate personal relationship Raju and Rosie simultaneously attain the state of salvation or *moksha* through the self-sacrifice and dance respectively. Rosie's transformation into Nalini represents the metamorphoses of culture in a society torn aside by class, caste and economy. The conflict between Raju and his mother exhibits the difference of attitudes between two successive generations because of the inclusion of education in a conventional society. Through self-degradation Raju comes to realize the very essence of *Atma* and the significance of its association with *Paramatma*.

Keywords: Hinduism, Myths, Society, Culture, Self-Annihilation, Self-Realization

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami (1906-2001), an ever luminous star in the genre of Indian English fiction, has guzzled the very core of Indian culture, tradition, values and belief in almost all his epoch-making novels. Being born in an orthodox Hindu family Narayan as a tiny child comes to know from his grandmother Parvati about Hindu mythologies, Sanskrit and south Indian customs that remain a life-long inspiration to him in order to create the characters and setting of Malgudi, the fictional town of South India. The Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *The Guide* (1958) brings to the fore Indian social taboos like Devdasi custom, relationship of a married woman like Rosie to her insensitive husband, Rosie's sexual liaison with Raju and the subsequent fatal outcome of the extramarital relationship, close-bonding of Raju and his mother in the changing phenomena

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of the post-independent India in concordance with the stories Hindu puranas (the stories Devaka and goddess Parvati) and presumption of the common mass in the miraculous power of a Swami. To Narayan, Indian classical culture can restore the meaning of Indian selfhood as well as he insists upon national consciousness that is “fundamental to our ways of living... Narayan feels happy in a compassionate absorption of himself in the lives of ordinary Indians. For this reason alone, Narayan’s Indian microcosm Malgudi, his fictional world, mirrors the life of the sub-continent in all its diversity” (Baral 73-74).

The Guide, a kind of bildungsroman of a picaro, is a portrayal of the quintessence form of India where the four stages of an ideal life (*brahmacharya, garhasthya, vanaprastha and sannyas*) are strictly persuaded. Here Raju suffers miserably as the four different phases of his life have undergone a perversion. Though in the first phase he adjusts himself to the status of a student preparing himself as a platform vendor, he enters into the muddles of life through the illegitimate affair with Rosie and his ever increasing greed for money, after being punished for his ‘karma’, life again gives him a prospect of becoming a ‘vadhyar’ in the jail but finally he takes the role of fake guru in Malgal that ultimately brings his self-purification. Raju as a corrupt guru bilks everyone- “his tourists (to whom he lies), Marco (whom he deceives), Rosie (whom he misleads), and the villagers (whose faith he almost betrays, before recuperating his integrity at the end)” (Sen 23). But Raju’s transformation from a corrupted state to an altruistic one is explicitly a manifestation of the Bhagavad-Gita’s sayings where the Lord Krishna claims:

yada yada hi dharmasya
glanir bhavati bhārata
abhyutthanam adharmasya
tadatmanā saajāmy aham (chapter 4, Text 7)

“Whenever and wherever there is decline in religious practice, O descendant of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion- at that time I descend Myself” (quoted in Prabhupada 274).

Malgudi, a metonymy for India, keeps its root in social, mythological, spiritual fragrance of Indian culture and tradition through its association with the sacred river Sarayu. It “provides the strong sense of place...This is India distilled- an urban India, but one in which a hinterland of jungle, of small villages, of wide plains is still present” (Introduction to *My Days* xi). Raju was brought up in such a changing phenomenon of India because of the society’s adherence to science and technology and growing effect of colonialism. He lives in a “small house” with a docile, submissive mother and a commercial father just opposite the Malgudi station. Raju’s father, a man of material pursuit, in keeping pace with trade and commerce of modern civilization opens a “hut shop” (Narayan 11) selling the required things of the wayfarers on the Trunk Road. His father loves to gossip with the villagers and “cartmen” (Narayan 19) who gather in the shop to eat or to buy and continue to chat about the topic of contemporary issues like “ the price of grain, rainfall, harvest, and the state of

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irrigation channels”(Narayan 19). It is the Railway bringing a sea change in Malgudi and segregating the locality into two facets- one like Raju’s mother’s world stagnant with age-old tradition and custom, and the other like Rosie’s sphere suffused with contacts, connection, individuality and self-assertion. His father prefers Pyol School to Albert Mission School due to his distrust to the missionaries who are supposed to convert the Hindu boys into Christian being disrespectful to Hindu gods. Raju is brought up as an exemplification of Brahmin lad “I washed myself at the well, smeared holy ash on my forehead, stood before the framed pictures of gods hanging high up on the wall, and recited all kinds of sacred verse in a loud, ringing tone.” (Narayan11)

Railways have become an early association for Raju. Because of the railways he has to leave the school for the economic prosperity of the family. But his conscious spirit for self- upliftment is persisting. The outcome is this cognizance on the part of Raju, “Selling bread and biscuits and accepting money in exchange seemed to me a tame occupation. I always felt that I was too good for the task”. (Narayan 42)

He enriches the mind by reading the old books left for sale by the boys. Raju’s ardent efforts to illuminate his mind with the light of knowledge through self-reading are a commonplace phenomenon in India during 1950s. “In this circumstance”, P. K. Singh observes, “his interest in educating himself through self-education is seen awakened in the absence of adequate formal education which remains the problem of millions of under-privileged boys of Indian populace” (42). From a student he becomes a vendor of the Railway platform and subsequently an efficient tourist guide whose quick observation, power of assimilation, self-confidence, an enthusiasm of probing into the dark recess of the mind and finally, a taste for the finer things in life make him at ease among his social superiors like Marco and other well-read tourists. Raju becomes an apotheosis of Narayan’s ideology of human motivation and the enigmas of life. It is apt to call up Narayan’s view of human character expressed to William Walsh in BBC interview “My main concern is with human character- a central character from whose point of view the world is seen, and who tries to get over a difficult situation or succumbs to it or fights it in his own setting. (Quoted in Lakshmi Holmstorm 124)

Chances and incidents compel Raju to meet with Rosie whose dream of becoming a great dancer mutates with the aesthetic guidance of Raju. Marco’s insensitivity to his wife’s aspiration gives a vent to the fact of Rosie’s seduction by Raju whose carnal desire for her transforms into a pure form of abstraction seeing her to dance. Marco, a typical Indian husband, leaves Rosie without paying heed to her imprecation. Rosie comes to stay with Raju’s home without the consent of his mother who wonders “how she was going to accommodate a ‘Rosie’ in her home” (Narayan 140). As an orthodox Hindu mother Raju’s mother protests against Raju’s sexual relationship with Rosie without being wedded: “You can’t have a dancing-girl in your house. Every morning with all that dancing and everything

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going on! What is the home coming to?”(Narayan 153). She thinks her son has gone astray because of the nocuous influence of a serpent woman like Rosie; thus she warns: “She is a real snake-woman, I tell you” (Narayan 154). Like a traditional Hindu housewife Raju’s mother emphasizes not upon economic independence of women but upon the dependence of the women upon the husbands. To teach a “she-devil” like Rosie Raju’s mother tells her the utmost devotion of Sita, Savitri and all other legendary figures of Hindu mythology. To gain salvation a wife should fall at the feet of her husband, the only redeemer in the material world as “No husband worth the name was ever conquered by powder and lipstick alone” (Narayan 154). Raju’s uncle, a fuddy-duddy having the age-old belief in the caste and clan modus operandi of traditional Indian society, does not endorse a single woman’s quest for individuality and self-freedom. His vehement aggression to Rosie becomes explicit through the following lines, “You are not of our family? Are you of our clan...No. Are you of our caste? No. Our class?” (Narayan 169)

Malgudi in *The Guide* no longer remains either Eden or the ancient glorious pastoral land; rather it turns out to be caste and class ridden foggyish Hindu society. Raju’s mother leaves her the ancestral home owing to the wagging tongues of the neighbours who insinuate Raju’s love with a “dancing girl”. The same Rosie who was ostracized by the conservative South Indian society, takes her rebirth through Nalini, the effulgent Bharat Natyam dancer of India .These ideological differences about the status of marriage, women, heterosexual relationship outside the thread of marriage in a society between two successive generations has occurred due to the rapid growth of industrialization, effect of modern civilization and the rise of the bourgeois class. Krishna Sen rightly defines it as a collision between two worlds, “Paradoxically, it is this newly urbanized, nouveau riche world of Malgudi, and not the traditional world that Raju’s mother and uncle inhabit, that fosters the renaissance of art by encouraging Rosie to express herself as an artist and classical dancer.” (90)

Rosie transmutes into Nalini with her devotion, skill, perseverance and assistance of Raju, the guru to achieve perfection. A guru must be free from all mundane *maya*- the world of illusion. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna addressed to Arjuna about the true nature of a man comes to the fore through Krishna consciousness that is the detachment of the soul from all earthly desires like *lobh and kama*:

yah sarvatranabhisnehas
tat tat prapya subhasubham
nabhinandati na dvesti
tasya prajna pratisthita (Chapter 2, Text 57)

“In the material world, one who is unaffected by whatever good or evil he may obtain, neither praising it nor despising it, is firmly fixed in perfect knowledge”(Quoted Prabhupada 178).

But Raju lacks the devotion of a guru- a leader who aids the soul to take a journey from darkness to light, ignorance to knowledge- the ultimate union of the individual self (*Atma*) with Lord (*Paramatma*). His capricious nature and lavish lifestyle bring his doom all on a sudden. He never comprehends Bharat Natyam is Rosie's art, her devotion, a way of attaining sublimity and finally, a denouncement of this material world. His extreme coercion to perform more and more dance performances only in pursuit of money spills her up with a fatal weariness. Having lost her freedom Rosie feels "like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs, or a performing monkey" (Narayan 203). Raju spends the entire day chatting and playing cards with his affluent friends with liquor, tea and coffee. Because of his greed Raju forges Rosie's signature and is subsequently sent to prison. Rosie terms the entire incident as *karma* (the cause-effect relationship in Hindu mythology). Raju's yearning for Rosie whom he dubs "lovely and elegant" (*The Guide* 65) reinforces the endless passion and unlimited desires of an individual causing the destruction of spiritual elevation. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna says to Arjuna that individual self is responsible for his own action:

bandhur atmatmanas tasya
yenatmaivatmana jitah
anatmanas tu satrutve
vartetatmaiva satru-vat (Chapter 6, Text 6)

"For him who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends; but for one who has failed to do so, his mind will remain the greatest enemy" (Quoted in Pabhupada 378).

Thus from the beginning of Raju's life to the time of his going to the prison house is the story of deception gradually leading him to the heights where he must meet the inevitable Fate of being doomed or being resurrected. Suffering in the jail proves to be a kind of "payment for his spiritual health and honour" (Kumar 26). He is evidently resurrected as a common-place man without Rosie, liquor and money whom Velan holds as "Swami" (Narayan 232). A swami or sanyasi in Indian mystic tradition must have "no name, no class, no ancestry as he is a free soul, a *mukta atma* and any kind of bondage is foreign to his nature" (Amar Nath Prasad and S. John Peter Joseph 33). Raju's role as a Swami relates how a man raises high above the self gradually overcoming the *maya* of this transient world with the aid of *karma yoga* and *bhakti yoga*. Raju's advice to Velan's sister "What must happen must happen; no power on earth or in heaven can change its course, just as no one can change the course of that river" (Narayan 22) emphasizes his strong assertion of the power of Supreme Being which can only be achieved through perpetual meditation. But the journey from the world of the egoistical pleasure to the world of the eternal is not an easy one as Mahatma Gandhi reiterates in *An Autobiography*, "Renunciation of objects without the renunciation of desires, is short-lived, however hard you may be." (9)

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Raju's abjuration towards the temporal world comes not even after taking shelter in the forsaken temple of village Mangal rather he cons the gullible villagers who believe in the miraculous power of a saint like Raju, "He is a big man, he may go anywhere; he may have a thousand things to do. He has renounced the world; he does nothing but meditate. Yogis can travel to the Himalayas just by a thought." (Narayan 32)

In traditional Hindu community the ignorant, illiterate villagers seek the succor of a guru to get rid of this *sansar* or the world of birth and death. Guru in Indian philosophy is a unified entity of the trinity of gods- Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara. The unquestioning devotion of an Indian to his spiritual guru can be explained through N.C. Chaudhuri's voice:

...it is a Hindu conviction that no right path in religion can be found without instruction, through initiation, by a qualified guide. Therefore when a man or a woman has chosen a guru he or she follows his directions without question, surrendering all his or her spiritual and mortal freedom and judgement. (303)

But Raju does not turn out as a spiritual guide only; he has a sharp eye on the social realities of India simultaneously. His strong assertion on the need of education for the younger generation justifies it: "Boys must read, first. They must, of course, help their parents, but they must also find the time to study" (Narayan 44). The Second Five -Year Plan (1956-1961) enunciates the importance of education to establish self-reliance and equality in the society. On the other hand, the village Mangal appears to be not as a blessed country but a blighted one that is torn asunder through drought, cholera, internal strife, mistrust, ignorance and illiteracy. But it is the service, devotion and dutifulness of Velan causing Raju to alter his motives. Digambar Singh Dewari considers the *mokhs* attained by Raju is not a personal salvation rather the Raju- Velan relationship is equally responsible for this: "the complete transformation of Raju is brought through Velan, a villager, who wipes away from Raju's mind even the very desire for food"(Bhatnagar 192).

In the complex web of social realities Raju comes to comprehend he has no other choice but to play the role of a guru. But in this passage of time his spiritual transformation becomes complete through self-realization and contemplation; he achieves the stage of *Samadhi*. He learns to subordinate the self for the sake of others. He is the Mahatma Gandhi to the villagers who postulates: "If he fasts there will be rain. Out of his love for us he is undertaking it. This will surely bring rain and help us" (Narayan 102). He sacrifices his material association to the will of others through his renunciation even the bare necessity of life i.e. food. He goes on his fasting for long twelve days and on the morning of very day he tells to Velan: "...it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs" (Narayan 247). It is the utmost moment when Raju achieves self-annihilation, self-gratification, the union of the self with *Brahman* and *moksha* i.e. the liberation from the sufferings of the world of illusion. None but Malone remains out and out unsympathetic to the self- realization of Raju. Binayak Roy aptly comments: "For him, Raju's penance is a

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peculiar religious practice in a third world country” (115). Before his end Raju is held up by Velan and others as a baby and it reinforces the immortality of the soul and conception of rebirth in another world. In *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna speaks to Arjuna of the eternity of the soul:

Vasamsi jirnani yatha vihaya
navani grhnati naro parani
tatha sarirani vihaya jirnany
anyani samyati navani dehi (Chapter 2, Text22)

“As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones” (Quoted in Pabhupada 128).

R. K. Narayan as an orthodox Hindu incorporates the concept of the immortality of the soul through the resurrection of Raju in another world. In his autobiography *My Days* Narayan declares: “Death is only vanishing point of the physical framework in which a personality is cast and functions; that same personality is unperceived before a conception, and will be lost sight of again at death, which we repeat is a vanishing point and not the end” (142). Thus Raju a self (*Atma*) makes himself free from desire, greed, passion and attachment enacting *moksha*. Viney Kirpal in his essay relates Raju’s attainment of *moksha* following the path of *dharma* in following terms:

The *Bhagavad Gita* places action and *dharma* above knowledge and devotion. Raju is no learned mystic or devotee of God. It is only through good action, renunciation of the self and a return to a life governed by *dharma*, that he wins *moksha*. (Kirpal 361)

Like Raju Rosie also achieves her *mokhs* through the dedication of the self to her art i.e. dancing. The westernized name Rosie proclaims her social hybridity. Raju becomes amazed at the exotic nature of her name, “Why did she call herself Rosie? She did not come from a foreign land. She was just an Indian, who should have done well with Devi, Meena, Lalitha, or any one of the thousands names we have in our country.” (Narayan 49)

Rosie, as Krishna Sen opines, “challenges the orthodox Hindu conception of what a woman should be, and yet there is a part of her nature that is intensely orthodox” (48). In spite of being an M.A. in economic she clings to traditional opinion of the society about the *devadasi*, a distinct community of her own: “We are viewed as public women... We are not considered respectable; We are not considered civilized” (Narayan 84). Through a newspaper advertisement she gets married to Marco, a man of great social learning and knowledge. Rosie’s marriage to a grotesque creature like Marco evidently epitomizes the instance of social mobility for a *devadasi*:

The question was, whether it would be good to marry so much above our wealth or class. But all the women of our family were impressed, excited that

a man like him was coming to marry one of our class, and it was decided that if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice. (Narayan 85)

Unlike most of the traditional Indian women who find their gods in their husband, Rosie finds her own through her art. Evidently the outcome of the marriage ought to be a loveless, stifling one. Marco keeps himself alienated from the gusto of life being emerged in the old paintings of the caves but none “which can move bits limbs” (Narayan 86). Rosie’s suppressed desires to dance and also of becoming a “good housewife” (Narayan 77) finally finds its fulfillment through her extramarital affair with Raju who appreciates Rosie’s dancing skill as her impetus. Rosie’s illicit relationship with Raju is not a manifestation of insatiable carnal desires but for Rosie “more than the attraction of sex is the desire to perfect her art and realize herself fully in her god-given gift” (Sundaram 192). She has an outermost dedication to Shiva-Nataraja, “the god whose primal dance created the vibrations that set the worlds in motion” (Narayan 122). As a punctilious classical dancer she tries to retain the purity of dance forms and considers *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as the treasure houses of India. Her innermost desire to dance is reflected through the affinity with the snakes, the primal force of nature. The cobra dance in Malgudi is a thing of repulsion to Raju but a thing of profound charm for Rosie. Raju himself asserts:

The whole thing repelled me, but it seemed to fascinate the girl. She watched it swaying with the rapt attention. She stretched out her arm slightly and swayed it in imitation of the movement; she swayed her whole body to the rhythm- for just a second, but that was sufficient to tell me what she was, the greatest dancer of the century. (Narayan 68)

The snakes in Hindu mythology are associated with the Cosmic Dancer Shiva-Nataraj. Snakes are also yoked with the concept of rebirth. To quote Krishna Sen:

In many cultures and mythologies the snakes, which annually sloughs off its old skin and is ‘re-born’, is taken to be an emblem of the mystic, the mysterious, the psychic unconscious, the eternal renewal of life on earth through the cycle of the seasons. (50)

Through dance Rosie transforms into Nalini. The westernized name Rosie stands for her social exclusion but her new name Nalini is Hindu from the very core; Nalini means lotus, the seat of goddess Laxmi. It is also the place of Brahma as “the four faced god and Creator of the Universe...rests on a bed of lotus petals in a state of contemplation” (Gods, Demons and Others 5). This metamorphosis exemplifies Rosie’s seeking of an entrance “into the orthodox society that rejects her” (Sen 52). Rosie is co-related not only with the snakes but also the very essence of Nature. Rosie, Binayak Roy argues, “tries to resurrect in spirit the pristine state in which man and nature are one as the twofold embodiment of the same amoral, primordial cosmic energy” (Roy 117). She is quite at ease in the dense forest of the

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Mempi Hills, “The girl was in ecstasy...she ran like a child from plant to plant with cries of joy” (Narayan 76). She does not fear to live in a place where panthers, bears, elephants prowl at night. For “Here at least we have silence and darkness, welcome things, and something to wait for out of that darkness” (Narayan 77).

Rosie remains an enigma both to Marco and Raju. She is devotional as well as unfaithful to her husband. Marco approves neither Rosie’s art of dancing nor her amoral relationship with Raju. She is both unfaithful as well as devotional to her husband. Marco approves neither Rosie’s fascination for dancing nor her amoral relationship with Raju. Marco’s denunciation of dance dwindles a dancer like Rosie to the status of a monkey: “We watch a monkey perform, not because it is artistic but because it is a monkey that is doing it” (Narayan 148). Marco’s emotional aridity and sadistic nature compel Rosie to turn in arms of Raju who imparts Rosie a roof to shelter, food to eat and guidance to become Nalini. But as a traditional Hindu wife she venerates the institution of marriage and to protect the knot of wed-lock she candidly confesses her guilt to Marco. Though Rosie finds self-fulfillment through dance, she is ready to shun it in lieu of getting back the grace of her husband at the cost of her self-respect and pride. But Marco as a male-chauvinist renounces all communication with his wife. He denounces Rosie: “You are a woman who will go to bed with anyone that flatters your antics. That’s all. I don’t, don’t want you here, but if you are going to be here, don’t talk. That’s all” (Narayan 162).

Rosie’s subsequent relationship with Raju also fractured because of the difference of attitude to her artistic skill of dancing. Through dancing she makes herself isolated from the boredom of life and *sansar*; it is a form of worship to her, a medium of assimilation with the *Brahman*- it is the same what Arjuna says to Lord Krishna in *Bhagvad Gita*:

Arjuna uvaca
param brahma param dharma
pavitram paramam bhavan
purusam sasvatam divyam
adi-devam ajam vibhum (Chapter 10, Text 12)

“Arjuna said: You are the Supreme Personality of Godhead, the ultimate abode, the purest, the Absolute Truth. You are the eternal, transcendental, original person, the unborn, the greatest” (Quoted in Pabhupada 620).

While dancing is a sacred thing to Rosie, to Raju it becomes a mean of acquiring more and more money. Raju’s ever increasing passion for money-making exasperates her who prefers obscurity to celebrity.

Thus throughout the entire novel Narayan shows all the characters have their roots in Hindu vision of life in a setting of economic and social transformation. To conclude, the opinion of William Walsh is worth remembering:

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Narayan's fastidious art, blending exact realism, poetic myth, sadness, perception and gaiety, is without precedent in literature in English...It is but unsentimental, mocking but uncynical, profoundly Indian but distinctively individual. It fascinates by reason of the authenticity and attractiveness of its Indian setting. (169)

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