

Tradition and Modernity in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

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Abstract

Of all Indian-English novelists of our day, R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) occupies a distinctive place by virtue of his wide range of subjects, impressive narrative technique, sparkling wit and humour and imaginative richness. R. K. Narayan might have created an imaginary world of his own, which is known as the Malgudi world, but his keen observation of men and women and their manners cannot be gainsaid. R. K. Narayan is one of the leading writers of early Indian English novels. He was one of the 'Big Three' in Indian-English fiction, quoted by famous critic William Walsh. He was bracketed with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. R.K. Narayan has established himself as a writer of social incongruities. Like most Indian writers, Narayan's writing too revolves around the houses of the Indian family and society. Narayan's novels are tales of the common Indian individual located in and around Malgudi. Narayan's Malgudi is famous because of its representative nature. Malgudi is fictional but smells, tastes and sounds like any common Indian town of 1940s-70s.

The Guide is Narayan's award winning Text. Narayan achieved the 1960 Sahitya Academy Award for the novel. The novel portrays the stories of individuals caught between a society rooted deep in traditional values, superstitions and beliefs and the newly developing ideas influenced by the arrival of western modernity. The conflict between the older and the new values, ideals and beliefs is very prominent in the novel's narration. In *The Guide*, Raju can be considered as the average Indian in contact with the new modern concepts of life and survival

Keywords- Indian, Tradition, Values, Society, Modernity, Literature, Malgudi

Introduction

R.K. Narayan is one among the three important figures of Indian Writing in English, the other two being Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. His novels are known to provide the reader with a taste of everyday India through the language, the setting, the characters and indeed the whole narrative style. His novels are also famous for their setting: Malgudi. For most of his fiction, the setting is in and around Malgudi, a small developing town around the time of India's Independence and the following post-independence years. Malgudi becomes important because it becomes representative of every developing town in India, and the areas around Malgudi representative of rural India as a whole. Despite the diversity, India has always hold on to the similarities and these similarities help in looking into the overall changes and social situations that India has gone through down the eyes. Through the social portrait of a single region, Narayan succeeds in presenting the larger picture of Indian society, both general features as well as in its especially post-independence lineaments. The difference in attitude, as well as the temperament is seen here. Raju's mother is a traditional Hindu women who is denied public exposure. She was prohibited and hence afraid to go out alone, whereas Rosie is a modern women. The western influence is evident in her attitude, behavior and temperament. She is not afraid to go out alone.

The novel *The Guide* portrays two Indians; the traditional India, and the modern sophisticated India. In the traditional India, women have no opportunity for asserting or expressing their talent and personality. Women are extremely suppressed by the males. Men are seen as superior to women and hold good position while women realize this painful reality only when they dare to express themselves and try to secure their fulfillments. R.K. Narayan says in *My Days: A. Memoirs*:

“From this immemorial man assigned her a secondary place and kept her these with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her status and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian so the will to society was an ideal victim of such circumstances”

Whereas if we look at the modern India, Jennet P. Gemmill says, it is:

“a broad based on dynamic concept involving an awareness of time, the will to revitalize traditions: a craving for novelty and variety, exploitation of the social conditions for the fulfillment of human personality and a struggle for progress.”

Narayan's post-colonialism in *The Guide* is revealed neither through rejection of Westernization nor through celebration of tradition. Narayan is not only aware of the inevitability of change, but also of the problems that attend the processes of change in a traditional society.

“The interface between traditions and modernity is mediated with characteristic irony. Narayan is interested in looking at the extent to which the cultural life of the past can be viably integrated with the post-independence reality of India”

After the impact of imperialism a new kind of subjectivity and society emerged in India. Indian modernity was not just an imitation of western modernity. The aspects of Indian modernity included enlightenment, rationality, science and western knowledge. To quote Makarand Paranjape:

Indian modernity marks its own distinct path. This path consists in taking critical aspect of western modernity and trying to combine them with India’s usable past. But because both western modernity and Indian traditions have multiple possibilities and processes, the self- constitution of India’s modernity becomes a plural and diverse adventure rather than any simplistic supplanting of tradition with modernity or the revival of tradition at the expense of modernity. Indian modernity is thus neither anti-traditional nor necessarily pro- western. It is, instead, a complex interplay of multitudinous forces which are sometimes complimentary and sometimes contradictory. Reform, revival, resistance, conflict, collusion, collaboration, compromise, adoption, adaptation, synthesis, hybridity and multiculturalism are all a part of India’s experiment in modernization. (173)

R. K. Narayan’s novels teach what is especially different about Indian modernity. His books not only reflect the course of India’s resent social and cultural evolution, but actively articulate and arbitrate its various attitudes and stances. The western impact on Indian life and society is very well depicted in narayan,s novels. The East-West theme is thus unavoidable in his novels. But Narayan has not presented this theme in terms of a vast social, economic or political conflict, nor in terms of a philosophical contribution. Its dimensions are ethical, so deep and unobtrusive that one might easily miss it all together. Narayan ridicules the exclusive orthodoxy of Indian conservatism and is clearly sympathetic towards modernity. His ironical attitude itself is largely western; it has few parallels in Pre-modern Indian authors. Rosie, in *The Guide* is a character, who is deeply rooted in tradition, occupies the most unique position among the Narayan’s women. She comes from a “family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers”. (The Guide,75)

She belongs to the “devdasi” clan in which women were dedicated to deity and not permitted to perform mundane domestic chores for the men. Through her name Rosie, Narayan’s ironic intention becomes clear in which her name like a rose shows that her life remains

surrounded by the thorns. She shows first assertiveness by breaking the fetters of darkness of the “Devdasi” clan and leaps towards the light of learning by obtaining Masters in Economics, which respond or matrimonial advertisement in the newspaper; “An educated, good looking girl to marry a rich bachelor of academic interests. No caste restrictions good looks and University degree essential.” (Bhatnagar,75) She marries Marco, a rich bachelor of Academic interests. The marriage shows how she has scored over her “Devdasi” sisters. Shalini Gupta says in her essay, “The caged bird shakes her wings, breaks the bars with jubilant hopes and flies in one sweep to Marco’s nest”

So, the marriage symbolizes Rosie’s adventurous spirit and her aspirants for the freedom of the outer world appear to assume the fulfillment of her artistic learning and yearning. It is very necessary to understand the nature of her marital relationship with Marco which enforces her to make extramarital relationship with Raju, a railway tourist guide. Rosie chose to marry Marco to get status and respect of wife. But there is no similarity between their natures, attitude and interests. So, if Rosie is vivacious spritely and passionate than Marco is cold grim and unemotional.

R.K. Narayan portrays a South-Indian conservative society in the village, Mangal. Though the contact of western culture brought many changes in the village, castes and traditional occupations continue to exist. Marriages are still arranged. Astrology is accepted there. Washing the feet before visiting the temple or a saint as a ritual of purification. Touching the feet of the saint, making offerings in kind or prostrating before god, are other ritualistic forms. Raju’s fasting to appease the rain gods and bring rain to save the people is the most significant ritual in the novel.

Malgudi is microcosm of India, just as British India sought the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the Post –Gandhian Malgudi looking to Raju as a savior. As Gandhi fasted in matters of public interest or concern. Raju also fasted for the reputation of Malgudi from drought. *The Guide* is a brilliant illustration of Narayan’s artistic talent in creating inner and outer landscapes balanced by the set of traditional values. There are four major symbols that constitute the basic structure of the novel. They are : the temple, the village, the town of Malgudi and the river Sarayu. To quote A.V. Krishna Rao:

The temple’s influence on the democratic consciousness is so profound and efficacious that it results in the ultimate transformation of Raju. It enables the establishment of the identity of the mask and the man. The second symbol of the village, Mangal as well as Malgudi, signifies native strength, continuity of

tradition , the ecology of a whole race with its inescapable influence on the individual consciousness and elemental determination of individual destiny... Thirdly Malgudi is the symbol of modern India caught in the throes of change under the impact of western civilization. Its faith and resilience are effectively affirmative of the root of a changing tradition...Lastly Narayan's intention of Mampi Hills is paralleled in his creation of Sarayu River, thereby completing the image of whole country as a structural symbol for the universe itself. (170-171)

The coming of the Railway to Malgudi is symbolically the impact of an industrial and urban society on a predominantly simple, agricultural community. The cherished values of life give way to the modern ways and their attendant evils. Narayan's novels are written in a bi-cultural perspective. The clash between the ancient Indian traditions and values on the one side and modern western values on the other side is visible in many novels.

From the social point of view *The Guide* not only depicts Indian society, its customs, traditions, culture, superstitions, religious faith but also presents a conflict between the traditional and modern values which are symbolized by Raju's mother and his maternal uncle on the one hand and by Raju and Rosie on the other. In such conflict old values have to give place to new values and thus Raju's mother leaves her home for Raju and Rosie.

"The novel also presents a conflict between the Eastern and Western culture and synthesizes the two through their assimilation which has been symbolized by Rosie's transformation into Nalini. Like Anand, Narayan points that one has to go to the west in order to come back to the East". (Yadav, 28)

Narayan's novels were written in a bi-cultural perspective. The clash between the ancient Indian tradition and values on the one side and modern western values on the other side was visible in many novels. Raju seemed to be the psychological projection of the typical individual in Indian social set up. In the social behavioral pattern, Raju was critical of the age-old institutional values, albeit he himself was deeply rooted in the family tradition. Rosie's caste affiliation was attacked by the general people as 'public women' but Raju negated the prevalent mode of thinking and asserted that Rosie's caste was the noblest caste on the earth'.

Narayan's treatment of the English language in the novel is Indian in its restraint, particularly where sex is concerned. Sex, though pervasive in the novel, is implicit always. Even when Raju decides to enter Rosie's room and stay alone with her for the night how characteristically Indian and different he is from his western counterpart.

To conclude, it can be said that, through the character of Rosie, Narayan's humanistic concern is revealed which deals with the overgrowing awareness of the need to expand the area of woman's freedom. His fictional world is circumscribed by a traditional Hindu society in which men rather women hold a superior place. Women are generally confined to the daily drudgery and all sorts of prohibitions are imposed on them but the milieu has changed from a strictly orthodox to the progressive and liberated value systems in modern civilization and women too have gradually begin to assert themselves in the society. The woman characters that move in quest of some relief from the suffocation and suppression of their established routine face a clash with the society and in the end they achieve much for themselves. Rosie is a typical example of this type of situation of a woman wins our admiration in Indian society. Thus, Rosie wins our admiration and respect by making her own way of living. Rosie as a rebel, reflects the complex blending of tradition and modernity.

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