

Beyond Stereotypes: A Feminist Reading of Women Characters in R.K.

Narayan's *The Guide*

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ABSTRACT

R.K. Narayan occupies a distinctive position among the most celebrated Indian writers in English. His novels vividly capture the ethos of Indian life and sensibility, often rooted in the fictional town of Malgudi, which serves as a microcosm of South Indian middle-class society. In each of his novel, there is at least one female character who occupies an important place in the story and Rosie is such a female character in *The Guide*. She represents a modern woman who is educated and ambitious and strives to attain independent economic entity according to her own taste and talent although she has to pay a heavy price for it. The other female characters in the novel are Raju's mother and Velan's sister. Raju's mother represents the conservative and orthodox women who follow tradition and culture. She is a dutiful wife and a loving mother. She serves as both a moral compass and a guardian of values, offering guidance to Raju and Rosie, and eventually withdrawing from the household when her counsel is ignored. Velan's sister, although a minor character, plays a crucial role in shaping Raju's transformation into a spiritual figure. This paper is a humble attempt to study this aspect of R.K. Narayan's characterisation.

INTRODUCTION

Literature, particularly novel, is intimately bound to life. Characters or what E.M. Forster calls 'People' form the most essential aspect of the novel. People react and respond to the actions of other people, or to the situations in their lives. In R.K. Narayan's novels characters are clearly more important than the situations. His novels make a delectable study of characters.

Like Fielding, Dickens and many other illustrious novelists, Narayan is deeply interested in character portrayal. A character in a situation is to him, as to Joyce Cary, the central and starting point in a fictional work. Naturally, in reply to the question: "which hold the primary place in his composition-situation or character?" he spontaneously remarked: "Character in situation." (Atma Ram,

Perspectives, 97)

The delineation of women characters in his novels has been one of the unfailing considerations of Narayan. His novels from *Swami and Friends* to *The World of Nagaraj*, present a great portrait-gallery of women. Though all the female characters belong to the same imaginary place Malgudi, they are much different from one-another. All these women are different individuals with different merits and demerits of character. Thus, Narayan has successfully presented the whole milieu of the Indian society and has given a rich, opulent plethora of women. Britta Olinder writes about Narayan's female characters:

They fall into three main groups: first, domineering powerful women; second, powerless, frustrated, oppressed women; and third, women accepting the system—in this case, the Indian society of strong masculine dominance—but at the same time finding ways and means to informal, indirect control of their situations. (97)

The Guide is one of the most popular novels of R.K. Narayan. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1960 for this novel. It is his masterpiece and one of the immortal classics of the world literature. “After a series of half successes and near successes. Narayan has reached in *The Guide* the full maturity of his powers.” (M.K. Naik, *Aspects*, 176)

There are three female characters in *The Guide* – Rosie, Raju's mother and Velan's sister – of which Rosie is the major one. She is not only the main female character of the novel, but also ranks among well-known female characters delineated by R.K. Narayan. Her name Rosie, may suggest that she is not an Indian. Uday Trivedi opines:

The name of the heroine Rosie, denotes an unconventional, modern, non-Hindu girl and one wonders what she is doing in Narayan's novel which endorses traditional values. (134)

But, in reality, she is thoroughly an Indian who wears Indian dress like a saree and has long hair. Her Indianness is more confirmed in her being a traditional classical Bharatnatyam dancer. Rosie's husband is named Marco by Raju in parody of an explorer, Marco Polo. He is obsessively devoted to his pursuit of deciphering ancient art and painting in known or unknown remote caves and temples to the point of total neglect of his wife's desires, wishes and tastes. William Walsh comments on his personality as one who is “a queer, old abstraction of a man...” (122)

Rosie and Marco have utterly different interests and likings. Rosie has an unfathomable love for

dance and her veins tingle at the very mention of it. But her husband Marco abhors dance and calls it “street acrobatics” (*The Guide*, 147) and not an art. When she asks Raju to show her a king cobra as she likes to enjoy its dance to the tune of a flute, her husband taunts her by saying “your interests are morbid.” (TG, 64) She despises his morbidity of interest in cold lifeless stones. While replying to Raju’s query about her personal interests, she remarks that her interest lies in anything except “cold, old stone walls” (TG, 83). Thus, there is a complete dissimilarity of interests between the wife and the husband. Hence, she lives discontented, unhappy and unfulfilled life. A.K. Mukherjee writes; “Their marriage failed since Marco and Rosie were diametrically opposite in nature. She was an artist, a born dancer, desired to cultivate her interest in dancing.... Macro was cold, both sexually and mentally. (80) As a result, they often quarrel. She sulks and falls a victim to the clever scheme of Raju. O.P. Saxena writes: “Marco’s indifference and Raju’s sympathetic flattery bring Raju and Rosie closer.” (O.P. Saxena, *Glimpses*, 118)

Rosie’s sexual relationship with Raju is more a result of circumstances than of any wilful immoral tendencies in Rosie. The callous indifference of the husband to the inner desires of her being and unabashed maneuvering skills of Raju to exploit her discontentment to his own ulterior selfish motive combine together to cause her moral downfall. Raju constantly encourages her for dance to tickle her ambition and guarantees his whole-hearted cooperation in making her one day an unparalleled dancer. Such cajoleries completely win her to his side. She blurts out to him, “What a darling! You are giving me a new lease of life.” (TG, 125)

The fact that she is not basically a morally debased woman becomes clear in her occasional contemplative and morose moods even during caresses and love-making of Raju. A strain of sincerity for her husband always lies in her heart for his good gestures to him. She openly acknowledges to Raju the goodness of her husband in giving her all the comforts in a hotel all by herself. She feels the sting of her faithless entanglement with Raju when She says:

...- Is this right what I am doing? After all, he has been so good to me, given me comfort and freedom. Whose husband in the world would let his wife go and live in a hotel by herself a hundred miles away. (TG,120)

But Raju is too clever to let her persist in such mood.

During one of her visits to the Peak House, under emotional stress consequent upon Marco’s

persistent interrogation, she breaks down and makes a self-confession of her extra-marital relations with Raju. This breach of nuptial trust results in irreconcilable breakdown of their husband-wife relationship. She feels penitent for her mistake and assures him of giving up her interest for dance forever and guarantees her complete loyalty to him in future. She follows him up and down the Peak House to the caves continuously for thirty days. Hardly any words pass between them. Whenever she tries to help him in anything he repels her. He doesn't forgive her. The final rupture comes when at the time of departure for Madras at the Malgudi station Marco leaves her there telling her that he has only one ticket for himself. On the predicament of Rosie, Uday Trivedi writes:

She tries her best to regain Macro's sympathy and follows him like a dog but when all her efforts fail to win him, she turns to Raju to provide the stimulant to her dormant talent. (135-36)

Rosie is by temperament a genuine artist. She is sincerely devoted to dance. In the hotel at Malgudi, she undergoes a rigorous discipline of dance rehearsals. She resumes her assiduous practice at Raju's house after her desertion by Marco. Ultimately, she becomes an accomplished classical dancer by dint of sheer hard work and devotion. Under pseudonym Nalini she stages dance performances in different parts of India. Her engagements stand three months in advance. She gets a lot of acclaim and earns a lot of money which is solely managed by Raju who misuses it according to his own whims in showmanship.

Rosie is modest in temperament and habits. Her devotion to the traditional Indian classical dance shows her regard and attachment for the traditional cultural trappings of the Indian society. Lakshmi Holmstrom writes:

It is in fact when she attempts to move outside her caste and into respectable society that Rosie's position becomes ambiguous. The things pull against her role as a wife: her need for passion and her need to dance, both symbolized in the snake, the snake dance. (68)

First, she wants to develop this talent in the homely atmosphere of her husband and subsequently in the old ancestral house of Raju. She expresses her wearisomeness and boredom with the life of public performance done for mercenary ends. She tells Raju, "I am tired of this circus existence."

(TG, 221). On a previous occasion, she expresses her feeling thus: “I feel like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs, or a performing monkey.” (TG, 203)

Rosie’s simplicity, modesty and capacity for adaptability to circumstances get illustrated in her behaviour at Raju’s house. She helps Raju’s mother in domestic chores like sweeping, cleaning and scrubbing of utensils after finishing her dance rehearsals. After Raju’s mother’s departure for her brother’s house, Rosie cooks food for Raju. She doesn’t want that they should engage a cook just to cook food for two persons.

Rosie-Raju relationship reaches the breaking point after the revelation of Raju’s trickery and deceit. Rosie is totally disillusioned with him because of his fraudulent acts of misusing all her money and forging her signatures on a legal document sent by Marco for the release of her jewellery box kept in the bank under their joint custody. Still, she helps him till the disposal of law suit against him. She manages her performances independently in order to earn money to pay for the lawyer’s fee. After Raju’s conviction to a jail term, she leaves Malgudi, settles in Madras and continues her performances in different parts of India. Thus, she succeeds in surviving the ups and downs of her life on account of the inherent strength of her adjustability to the changed adverse conditions. Uday Trivedi writes about Rosie:

She is presented as a woman who can rise above the humdrum and has the strength to be true to herself. In her the ideals are redefined. Social castigation is not necessarily justified. Nor is it the end of the world. (136)

Raju’s mother is another female character in the novel. She is an ordinary and orthodox lady. Her sphere of concern is limited to the world of her husband and son. She is prudent, frugal and vigilant housewife. Like a dutiful wife, she keeps awake till her husband, who runs a shop selling coffee, eatables and peppermints, comes back home at midnight. She advises him not to be casual in taking his food as it will tell upon his health.

Raju’s mother is a loving and affectionate mother. She takes care of all the needs of Raju when he is a child. She lulls him to sleep by telling him the story about Devaka. Raju tells Velan about his mother: “She told me a story every evening, we waited for father to close the shop and come home. The shop remained open till midnight.” (TG, 19). Further he says, “Her presence gave me a feeling of inexplicable cosiness.” (TG, 20)

When Raju starts going to school, she bestows full attention on him so that his school going becomes smooth.

After her husband's death, she advises Raju to keep himself to the running of the shop at the railway station. She does not approve his job as a tourist guide. But Raju puts her off by assuring her that he is keeping proper care of the shop accounts. Her fears come true when the porter's boy to whom Raju has entrusted the job of running his shop cheats him and Raju loses his shop to him. She warns Raju against the danger of getting involved with one whom she calls 'a serpent girl' i.e. Rosie. But he doesn't care about her caution and the result is the loss of his source of income. The episode of Rosie's stay at Raju's house reveals the mother's qualities of tolerance, kindness, understanding and traditional wisdom. Despite her disapproval of Rosie's stay with Raju, she does not maltreat or misbehave her. She believes, like a traditional Hindu wife, that the right place for a married woman is always with her husband and a woman, in no circumstances, should leave him. She suggests all this to Rosie through recounting to her parables and anecdotes. Raju describes the mother's behaviour in these words:

After a few days she began to allude to the problems of husband and wife whenever she spoke to Rosie and filled the time with anecdotes about husbands: good husbands, bad husbands, reasonable husbands, unreasonable husbands, savage ones, slightly deranged ones, moody ones and so on and so forth; it was always the wife, by her doggedness, perseverance, and patience, that brought him round. (TG, 155)

She tenders her advice to Rosie suggestively through oblique references so that she may not feel hurt. This shows her tender, sympathetic and human heart.

When in spite of her brother's anger and threats Raju does not let Rosie go, she leaves her old house to go with her brother not so much in anger as in sadness. She is steadfast in not compromising with an act she considers socially unacceptable even if it entails making a great sacrifice like leaving her house to which she is so sentimentally attached. While departing from the house, she takes with her only the religious prayer books saying "I need nothing more. This will do." (TG, 174). Her contentment born out of her pious faith, is supreme. Initially, she feels upset at Raju's trial on the charge of forging Rosie's signatures on a legal document. But in the end when Raju is convicted to two years' imprisonment, she is reconciled with what has happened

as something fated to happen. She passes the rest of her life in peace with her brother.

There is a third minor woman character in the novel. She is the sister of Velan who is a villager of Mangala and comes in contact with Raju at the deserted shrine on the bank of the river and later on becomes his typically devoted disciple. Velan, who has a lot of affection for this fourteen-year-old girl wants to marry her with his cousin's son. But she doesn't agree and runs away from home and when brought back she sulks lying in a room without eating or speaking to anyone. This saddens Velan a lot. He asks for Raju's advice on this issue. As Raju directs, she is brought to him the next day. But Raju doesn't talk to her as he is mentally pre-occupied with his own problem of what he should do in future after his recent release from the jail. Coincidentally, on returning home the girl changes her mind. She agrees to marry the boy of Velan's choice and regrets her past conduct. This unexpected transformation in the girl confirms to the superstitious and naive mind of Velan that Raju is a saint who can work wonders. This incident of Velan's sister is significant as it is the first occurrence in the novel which makes Raju appear in the role of a saint.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Guide* by R.K. Narayan presents a rich and nuanced portrayal of female characters, encompassing both traditional and modern archetypes. Through characters such as Rosie, Raju's mother, and Velan's sister, Narayan explores the diverse dimensions of womanhood in Indian society. Each character is distinct in terms of her values, aspirations, social conditioning, and personal choices, thereby reflecting the complexities of female identity within a changing cultural landscape. Rosie, with her quest for artistic and financial independence, embodies the challenges and triumphs of the modern Indian woman navigating a patriarchal world. In contrast, Raju's mother represents the conservative mindset, steeped in tradition and duty, while Velan's sister, though marginal in terms of narrative presence, serves a critical symbolic function in Raju's spiritual journey. The interplay of these diverse female voices contributes significantly to the depth of the novel, transforming it into a multifaceted exploration of human relationships, societal expectations, and personal transformation. Through this intricate web of characterization, Narayan not only brings to life the everyday realities of Indian life but also subtly critiques and reflects upon the evolving roles of women in a transitional society. Thus, the female characters in *The Guide* are not merely peripheral figures but integral to the thematic and emotional fabric of the narrative, reinforcing Narayan's skill as a keen observer of human nature and social dynamics.

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