

## R.K. NARAYAN'S THE GUIDE : A STUDY IN MAJOR THEMES

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R.K. Narayan has long been regarded as one of the best Indian writers in English. The adjective 'Indian' was to be heavily underscored on several counts. Narayan is neither Anglo-Indian nor Indo-English; he is very much an Indian both in thought and spirit. He does not write with any eye on foreign audience, though he is published and widely read abroad. He does not choose his themes nor distort them in order to please those in the West who continue to treat Indians as of inferior breed. He deals with big themes—all that has been happening in India—but with simplicity. R.K. Narayan takes his main characters from urban middle class. The religious and mythical Indian tradition has been successfully presented in the novels of R.K. Narayan.

It is mainly the result of the sincere efforts of the leading writers like R.K. Narayan that Indian novel in English has secured a place of prestige in English literature. Narayan writes with complete objectivity, strange mixture of humour and irony and underlying sense of beauty and sadness.

Very successfully he tries to project the true image of India through his meticulous portrayal of Indian life.

Malgudi is the fictional setting of R.K. Narayan's novels and stories. It is as remarkable a place in literature as 'border countries' of Sir Walter Scott, 'Lake District' of Wordsworth, 'The Wessex' of Thomas Hardy or 'The Five Towns' of Arnold Bennett. Malgudi is an imaginary South Indian town round which Narayan has woven the complex pattern of lives of his characters.\*\* He takes us to Malgudi to laugh, sympathise, and share the vicissitudes of its inhabitants. Malgudi in fact does not exist on the map of India. It is Narayan's triumph as an artist that makes us have complete faith in the reality of Malgudi. It is so strongly implanted in our imagination that we wonder when we are going to

meet in this own.... The streets and lanes appear to be as familiar as one's home town.

R.K. Narayan's view of social reality is essentially Indian. He is dedicated to his craft which is sincere and familiar portrait of life.

The Indian society is divided into several sets of life and it is guided by Varnashramdharma (a man's role and duties according to his place in a scheme of castes and stages of life). Karma (the principle of deeds) is worked out both in his life and in successive births until the ultimate release from the cycles of rebirth. The hierarchy of values is classified as Dharma (right action), Artha (Worldly interest) and Karma (human love). These are governed by cyclic order of time and universe. In Shrimad Bhagvad Gita, there is also such classification of society.

Chaturvarṇayam mayā sṛṣṭam guṇakarma vibhagaṣah Tasya Kartaramapi mam viddhyakartaram avyayam.

(The four-fold caste was created by Me by the different distribution of Guna and Karma though I be the author thereof, know Me to be the actionless and changeless).

All Hindus do not hold these beliefs in their scriptural form to the same extent. They also do not apply them to all situations, still they are always referred to and they are taken for granted in institutions and rituals. These are possible attitudes to Varna and Caste. These can be replaced by a man's professional pride and responsibility towards his occupation. Class may be stressed rather than caste or caste may be outright rejected as valueless. In Asrama, ideal division of a man's life is studenthood, the status of a householder and renunciation of the world. The place of householder is superior and youth is a training and preparation

for it. There are a few persons who renounce the world at the appointed time, therefore, the ideal of renunciation has a strong hold on the Hindu imagination.

Karma is after all a speculative possibility and it provides basis of all moral actions. It is evidence of success and failure of a man corresponding to Dharma. Moreover, Karma is mixed up and confused with fate. In this way a man's responsibility for his situation is partly or totally denied by undue importance given to Karma. Shrimad Bhagvad Gita defines this: 'The Karmayogi, who neither hates no desires should be ever considered a Sanyasi (renouncer).

The value of Moksha (release) is at times added to this scheme of Dharma, Artha and Kama. Moksha is not compulsory rather it is optional than those three wordly values. In Indian Hindu mythology, time is conceived of in a series of cycles. The largest of it is the Kalpa. Kalpa starts with the creation of universe out of Brahma (the creator of the Universe) and ends with the destruction of the universe. It is made of a Thousand Mahayugas and a Mahayuga is made of four Yugas (ages). The present Yuga is Kali-Yuga, which is the fourth and the worst in the series.

Narayan gives psychological insights in describing idealised roles of student, householder, hermit and Sanyasi (Varnasrama). Raju and Rosie in *The Guide* are an example of fixed roles covering fixed duties and responsibilities.

*The Guide* (1958) holds a place of eminence among his novels, bagging the much coveted Sahitya Akademi Award for the year (1960), for his "brilliant accomplishment". The rising fortunes of Rosie, the talented dancer with the able support of the guide Raju, form the motif of the novel.

Raju despite possessing the craftiness, credulity, the adventurous spirit, the romantic flamboyance and the mystical leaning, is a passive character. He does not seem to do anything. Things just happen to him. His entire life is but a series of accidents and improvisations. He drifts into a role, and his role changes as naturally as seasons without

any conscious effort of deliberation on his part.

Next to Raju, the lovely girl Rosie, passionately fond of dancing is suppressed by her husband Marco, an antiquarian, whose imagination is fired only by whatever is dead and decaying, "rather than things that lived and moved and swing their limbs." She is perturbed by the fact that her husband, whom Raju calls 'Marco', is more interested in books, paper, painting and old art than in being a "real live husband". Not realizing the invaluable treasure his wife is, he is "like a monkey picking up a rose garland!"

Narayan's *The Guide* is the expression of various problems of middle class society in which he has been absorbed. He is always a realist in *The Guide*. He portrays complex and tragic figures of society suffering to purify the sins of others. A bogus holy man changes soon into a dying god sacrificing himself for the people. In the end his tragic hero Raju becomes the reality. The metamorphosis of Raju from a petty Vendor to a tourist guide, from a fateful lover to a desperate prisoner and from a Sanyasi to a martyr is a kind of escapism from society. Yet Raju faces society in the wildest situations. His very career as a tourist guide began very casually, almost as an accident. To start with, he was only the owner of the sweet-meat stall on the railway platform.

It is again by sheer accident that Raju became Rosie's business manager and publicity agent. Only one did Raju act voluntarily and deliberately, and that was a case of forgery. He made a successful career out of being Rosie's lover and impresario only to fall into a trap set for him by Marco. He was charged with forgery and sentenced to imprisonment.

Once out of jail, Raju finds himself drifting into the role of a "Sadhu". On his release he reaches an abandoned temple where a simple peasant, Velan, mistakes him for a holy man. When he is unwittingly mistaken for a "sadhu" he decides to go along with the credulous villagers who feed him and offer him worship. As Meenakshi Mukerjee rightly puts it, "not once does he deliberately try to pass

himself off for a holy man, but when he finds that people want to believe in his spiritual power, he cannot disappoint them."

But, as gross misfortune would have it, the joke goes out of hand. A situation arises in which he cannot but undertake a fast for rains. During the prolonged drought in the village, some minor quarrel flares up into a riot. Raju gets upset as he is afraid that his identity will be disclosed if, by any change, the police arrive there to contain the situation. It is, thus, a purely selfish reason that makes Raju tell a young man that if people go on indulging in such quarrels, he would not eat. The Youngman, a blockhead, gives a completely different version of what Raju has told him-that the "Swami" will not eat until it rains.

But realizing soon what he is in for, Raju confesses his past story to Velan hoping that he will no more be regarded a saint. But, ironically enough, Raju's confession only confirms Velan's faith in his saintliness.

Seeing the logic as well as the irony of his gesture, Raju goes on with the fast even against medical warnings and dies just as the rain beings.

Raju, the guide, finally becomes what he had posed to be, a real 'Guru'. Meenakshi Mukherjee, for instance, concludes that "towards the end Raju loses the feelings of an actor performing an act, the act becomes the reality, the mask becomes the man, and Raju the guide turns into a 'Guru'." In this way Raju plays different roles in society.

The Marco-Rosie relationship is a study in marital disharmony. Their marriage is based on matrimonial advertisement of the news-paper. Rosie belongs to a family of professional dancing girls, devoted to the art, for whom dance is a part and parcel of life. Marco is a rich bachelor of academic tastes. Rosie marries Marco only for social consideration and her prestige in the society. She is fascinated by the excitement of a new life with a wealthy intellectual. She feels more than flattered when a man like Marco wishes to marry her and remains loyal to her in spite of his indifference and

coldness. She craves to dance and longs to express herself through dancing. But far from encouragement, Marco has compelled her to respectable life. She is pathetic, for she suffers from a bruised inward life. Her mental anguish and incapacity to prove her process in dancing tortured her immensely. Marco is only interested in sculptured figures on walls and stones and not in his wife the images incarnate.

Rosie arrives in Malgudi with her husband Marco. Seeing the cobra dance, she too unknowingly sways, imitating it, and for the shrewed Raju, it was sufficient to assess her talent as the greatest dancer. With Raju's assistance, her ecstasy for dancing is unbottled and she comes up gushing, frothing, effervescent and buoyant, excelling as a dancer. Her life becomes meaningful. Her fascinating dance performances turn her into a celebrity and she basks in the glory of popularity.

In *The Guide* Narayan has taken a radical view of the subject like marriage. Narayan advances grounds on which the ship of marriage of Rosie and her husband Marco wrecks. Both of them are artists in their individual capacity, but the lack of understanding brings about the catastrophe. Fidelity is the main stay of husband and wife and this is missing from the wedlock of the two. Rosie reacts and confesses to Raju that she was ready to bear any pain if she gets the company of a loving husband. Rosie always repents for her choice as Marco. Therefore, she is attracted towards Raju, the Guide.

Raju more or less creates 'Nalini', the dancer, through his motivation. He performs the role of Rosie's business manager and publicity agent with relish and perfection, excelling as an impresario. Along with Rosie's rising graph towards fame, adulation and eminence, aju too rises in stature. Wealth and success intoxicate him and he loses all sense of proportion. The company, in which he moves, induces in him contempt for the law and he overreaches. With an almost childish irresponsibility, he forges Rosie's signature, and is subsequently jailed.

Narayan treats forgery as the most sinister

thing in society. The avarice of Raju has made, Rosie the unfortunate tragic heroine. She has been denied spiritual fulfillment by the society and she remains dissatisfied to the last. Neither Marco nor Raju had any place in her life. The concept of vital relationship between man and a woman has been violated first by Marco and secondly by Raju in *The Guide*.

Narayan's *The Guide* is an expression of various problems of middle class society in which he has been all absorbed. He finds that religion has no binding on marriage as it is too weak to hold the matrimonial trust. It can only rest on biological and spiritual needs. But so far as Raju is concerned, he neglects his mother's suggestion of marrying Lilitha, a girl from the village. He dislikes traditional marriage. Narayan also seems to underline this point.

R.K. Narayan is a man of moral conscience. In his novels he shows that immorality does not pay in life. In this novel Raju violates the socio-moral norms in the first tragic episode and gets involved with the wife of another person. He is fated to be punished as he shirks from his moral obligations. The Nemesis falls on him not because he is immoral from the sexual point of view, but it is his avarice and he has a tendency to stick to the material values of life. At first he grabs someone's wife and then someone's

money. The first crime unsettles him in society and the second sends him to jail. In *The Guide*, fate is not rooted in the will of the hero; it is in the very personality of the hero.

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\*\* Malgudi is, in fact, Mysore, Narayan's home town