



Literature and Human Values: Depiction of Human Predicament in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

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Abstract: Rashipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayan (1906-2001) is an eminent novelist and short-story writer who has published fourteen novels and more than two hundred short-stories. His maiden novel was *Swami and Friends* (1935) and his last published work was *Grandmother's Tale* (1992). Narayan has presented themes like exile and return, education, the status of woman in the society, myths and the ancient Indian past, tradition and modernity etc. through his works. He has also created a fictionalized place called Malgudi. He also depicts the themes of appearance and reality and the family. Narayan had a career of almost seventy years and in all these years, he has created countless characters who have projected the above mentioned themes. The present paper brings to light the human values in *The Guide* (1958). His major characters present the human predicament and disillusionment. The protagonist of the novel goes from being a tourist guide to a personal guide and ultimately a spiritual guide in the current novel. This journey of the leading character highlights human nature and human values.

Keywords: Human values, human predicament, human nature, social conditions.

The Guide was the first novel written in English which won R.K. Narayan not only Sahitya Akademi Award in 1960 but also several other awards. The book was later on adapted into both a movie (1965) and a play of the same name. In *The Guide*, R.K. Narayan has depicted the protagonist's journey from Railway Raju to Saint Raju. The novelist has portrayed various facets of Indian life such as religious nature of India, urban superiority versus pastoral simplicity, mixing of eastern and western culture, human emotions like love, greed for money, infidelity etc. Narayan has depicted Indian themes, situations and scenes with the help of his art form which is western.

A prolific novelist and a fine storyteller, R.K. Narayan created the fictitious town of Malgudi just like Thomas Hardy created Wessex which is the setting of his various novels. Time and again, Narayan has been compared to William Faulkner. Both of them have created similar fictional towns in their works. Just like Narayan, Faulkner also explored the energy of ordinary life. He used both humour and compassion as Narayan did in his fiction. Narayan has capability to restrict a narrative and it is because of this quality of Narayan that his short stories have been compared with those of Guy de Maupassant. It is considered the greatest achievement of Narayan that he made India accessible to the outside world through his literature. He presented small-town India to his audience in a convincing and experiential manner. Malgudi, the fictional town created by Narayan, was filled with characters who had their own idiosyncrasies and attitudes. These characters made the situation as familiar to the reader as if it were their own backyard. Narayan's writing technique was unpretentious and the element of humor was naturally a part of it. He created



ordinary characters who reminded the reader of next-door neighbors or cousins. It definitely provided a greater ability to relate to the topic. Narayan, at the same time, wrote about the complexities of Indian society. However, He did not modify his characteristic simplicity to conform to trends and fashions in fiction writing. It was something quite unlike his national contemporaries. Mulk Raj Anand ,Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan are contemporaries but their style of writing and subjects are contrasting. Mulk Raj Anand was a social reformist writer who tried to bring the dark sides of society to forefront and questioned them. Raja Rao was a philosopher who wrote about the Indian Mysticism and his perspectives in writing were spiritually bent. R.K. Narayan was the lightest in his approach; he was an observer of life and portrayed it through his characters and their day to day life with a sense of detachment.

Narayan is often criticized for the parochial and severed world that he created in order to portray the changing social conditions of Indian society. However, the socio-political issues prevalent in the contemporary are nowhere seen in his fiction. He explores the inner thoughts and ambitions of his characters. He weaves his human comedy against the backdrop of an Indian society that is constantly changing. His novels depict the conflict between conservatism and modernity. These novels also focus on the disintegration of joint family values and ties. His fiction is a wry comment on human nature. *The Guide* is perhaps the best and the finest specimen of Narayan's artistic genius which depicts a triangle love story of Raju-Rosie and Marco Polo. Narayan projects human predicament and disillusionment in a realistic manner. Graham Greene, in his introduction to the novel, *Swami and Friends* compares Narayan to Anton Chekov of Russia. M.K. Naik concludes R.K. Narayan's contribution to English Literature in a remarkable way. He mentions:

R.K. Narayan's chief contribution to Indian English fiction is two-fold: first, he has created a tiny but perfectly credible universe in Malgudi, which is in the same class as Hardy's Wessex and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha; and he has filled it with men and women who are as real to us as the people actually around us. Secondly, an eagle-eyed observer of life and human nature, he has illuminated the basic ironies' deep-seated ambiguities and existential dilemmas of the human condition. (Naik and Shaymla, 22)

Needless to say that human beings need some values in them and in their profession in order to lead life in their desired way. Narayan has created a variety of characters who present human nature. He selects some particular moments from the lives of his characters and he depicts these moments with utmost care. He paints life in its real sense. He does not aim at any instant or distant aims. He can be considered a detached artist who rarely shows sympathy for his characters. The current paper attempts to highlight the human values in his novel *The Guide*. The major characters of *The Guide* try to defy their traditional, religious and familial duties. They, due to some accident, drift towards their pre-decided destiny. Narayan's characters in this novel do not follow the traditional norms of the society and it leads to adverse outcomes. However, Narayan's moral vision is not consciously projected in his writing. Still, it remains in the background of all



his stories. Narayan does not feed any conclusion to his readers. In fact, he wants his readers to have their own respective intuitions.

The Guide has realistic settings and shows what happens in the lives of the characters in the same way it happens in the lives of people in Indian society. As the novel progresses, even the small events turn into fantastic happenings. The protagonist faces unexpected disasters. It appears that some characters have accepted their faith just the way some people accept it in real life. At the same time, these characters have faith that things will somehow turn out in their favor. It shows the basic viewpoint of the novelist to some extent. It also showcases that life gives chances to everyone to do what they desire to do. The same thing can be seen through the journey of Raju. He reaches his lowest point when he gets imprisoned. However, Raju is given a second chance and then he hopes for a better tomorrow.

From the time of its first publication, a number of critics have commented upon the novel. Bhagwat Goyal interprets the novel in terms of the transformation of the protagonist. For him, "The main theme of this novel is a sort of spiritual transformation. It deals with the story of a Picador, who finds himself transformed into a pilgrim; a criminal changed into a saint" (142). M.K. Naik, too, interprets the novel in terms of the transformation of the protagonist, finds Raju's transformation as "transition from the initial 'comic irony' to the somber hues of 'tragic irony' " (54). C.D Narasimhaiah however gives a totally different interpretation as he views Raju's death symbolically as a means of self-purification and self-realization. He observes, "... individual by losing his life in water brings rain (and life) to his fellowmen and his death is just 'death by water' - which is rarely not death but a means of self-purification and self-realization" (91). Likewise, K.M. Chandar observes Raju's fasting as a means to calm down his own mental tension. He views, "Raju does fast honestly; by the end of the eleventh day of sincere and complete fasting, most of his aggression and tension get resolved in the form of body- torture" (qtd. in Nair 73).

The protagonist of the novel is Raju. He, time and again, comes across questions of traditional existence when he realizes his dreams. He does not believe in the social and moral norms when it is related to Rosie. He seduces Rosie who is the wife of Marco. Gradually, he starts living with her and this decision of Raju violates a major conventional order. His mother too stands against him. still, he puts a blind eye on the severity of the chaotic situation. He faces financial trouble. Raju becomes some sort of social outcast due to his relationship with Rosie. Still, Raju does not think about mending his ways and it becomes the reason for his failure in maintaining order and harmony in his own life and his surrounding society.

The novel presents the story of Raju's life from birth to death. It begins in the middle of his life, or in *media res*. The novel uses anachronies, memory, ellipsis, iterative and repetitive frequency, scene and pause, dual narratives, multiple narrators, internal focalization, framing device and free indirect discourse etc. in order to convey the story. The story is narrated in a zigzag manner that moves backward and forward. It shows two narratives that take place in two different time frames. It has both the first person narration and third person narration. One narrative takes place in the past and is told in first person narration. It describes Raju's childhood and his career as a tourist guide. He mentions: "In a few months I was a seasoned guide. I had viewed myself as



an amateur guide and a professional shopman, but now gradually I began to think of myself as a part-time shop-keeper and a full-time tourist guide”(12). It also shows his meeting with Rosie and Marco and right up to his forgery and ultimately his imprisonment. The second narrative takes place in the present and is told in third person. It depicts Raju’s life after he is released from the prison. He goes to the deserted temple and gets involved in the affairs of Velan and the villagers. The villagers begin to consider Raju as a saint. All this leads him to observe a fast to end the drought. Through both the narratives, time keeps on changing. However, one thing that continues to remain in both the narratives is human values. Raju’s nature is presented in both the narratives.

Raju comes in contact with Rosie and her husband, Marco, due to his profession of a tourist guide. Marco remains busy with his archaeological studies. Due to this, he has to stay near a cave for few days. Raju takes this as an opportunity to flirt with Rosie. He somehow manages to seduce the beautiful wife of Marco. Rosie too seems to enjoy Raju’s company and this extra-marital affair takes place. As it was bound to happen, Marco finds out about her affair with Raju. Marco chooses to leave Rosie and goes away to Madras leaving Rosie behind. Raju decides to help Rosie in this situation and offers her to come and stay at his house. Rosie comes and stays with Raju in his one-room house. Raju’s mother attempts to tolerate her for some time. She tells Raju, ““She is a real snake woman, I tell you” (121). However, when things become unbearable, she calls her brother and goes away with him. She leaves Raju who is not ready to let Rosie go away.

When Raju finds out that Rosie is a born dancer and she practices regularly, he finds an opening for her. He makes plans for her professional life. he advises her to change her name to Nalini as it would be appropriate name for a traditional Indian dancer. She proves to be a grand success in her first appearance itself. She becomes busy soon in her professional life and it starts affecting her personal life with Raju. Raju begins to lead a lavish life. he drinks alcohol and gambles with his friends. Everything seems to be fine for both Raju and Rosie till Raju forges Rosie’s signatures to obtain valuable jewellery lying with her husband. The act lands him in jail. Rosie leaves Malgudi and goes away to Madras, her hometown. She continues to pursue her career with her dancing and does well without the help and management of Raju. Later on, Raju feels proud of Rosie.

Raju tells his story to Velan and remarks about Rosie, “I liked her to be happy—but only in my company” (149). This brutally honest statement of Raju indicates his deep selfishness. He does not care about Rosie as an individual. For him, she is someone who can fulfil his sexual needs and can provide him with money which leads him to power. Raju wants her to be completely dependent upon him only and that is why he desires to metaphorically keep her locked away from the world. He ignores her whenever she mentions her unhappiness in any matter and continues to force her to work in his quest to make the maximum amount of money. He manipulates her and avoids difficult conversations so as to not be made accountable for anything. Unlike the tourists and the temple villagers, however, Rosie comes to a breaking point and dismisses Raju. She is too self-aware and capable to endure Raju any longer. He even admits this himself, saying "She would go from strength to strength. I knew, looking at the way she was going about her business, that she would manage -whether I was inside the bars or outside; whether her husband approved of it or



not. Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated all along" (65).

The protagonist of the novel attempts to convey that during his conversation with Velan: "He realized that he had no alternative: he must play the role that Velan had given him" (24). He says that he does not get any choice in any matter. He feels as if he is merely put into situations. He thinks that Velan put him into a situation and he cannot get out of it easily. However, in reality, Raju is able to leave at any time. He actually doesn't want to leave. The protagonist is not skilled at doing anything. He does not want to return to his family for he fears of what they might say or the way they might behave. His people knew his downturn in fortune. He cannot even go back to Rosie because she will not accept him now. He is content with the fact that he is being provided for without having to do anything (though he does acknowledge he has no privacy anymore). He enjoys the feeling of being important and authoritative.

Raju accepts Velan's offer and remains in the temple after thinking about all the benefits that he could get from there. There comes a time when people begin to treat him as a spiritual person or saint. When there is no sign of rains, they show their faith in Raju who has observed a fast so that it may rain soon. At that time, every speech and activity of Raju manifests a fine stroke of irony in the novel. Raju spends the whole day thinking about the varieties of special dishes that he likes. He harbors to eat 'Bonda' which he used to eat in the railway station. Next day, the villagers come to the temple with full of enhanced reverence for Raju as he is fasting for their betterment. The protagonist has actually been expecting them to bring special food. To his surprise, he sees a crowd more than usual approaching to him. He becomes happy over the fact that he has prevented the violence. He saw the people bare hand and hoped. "They had the flour in a bag [. . .] they were bound to leave it in the Kitchen" (97). On the contrary, the reality is that they have actually come to him bare hand; unaware of the irony fully convinced that he is already in his fasting.

To cap it all, it can be stated that R.K. Narayan's has depicted human nature in a remarkable way. The protagonist behaves in every situation just as any ordinary person will behave in a similar situation. His work showcases his knowledge of Indian classical literature, philosophy, religion, morals and ethics. Still, the fact remains that the novelist does not burden unnecessarily his readers with discourses on his viewpoint and vision. His readers are free to interpret things in their own way without being burdened by the novelist's opinion on everything. His characters are happy, sad, frustrated, impulsive, non-believers in traditional way of life, ambitious etc. just like the people in real life. It would not be wrong to state that R.K. Narayan attempts to portray a vision of life, a life of opposing dualities, of appearance and reality with the help of his works. The present paper has shed light on the human nature projected by Narayan through the journey of the major characters in the novel.

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