

R.K. Narayan's Social Awareness in *The Guide*

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Abstract:

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* projects Raju, the sinner, as the saint of the people living in the village of Mangal. Narayan deals with the theme of education in this novel at several stages during the development of the plot. Raju's schooling, his withdrawal from school by his father to run the hut-shop, Raju's collection and selling of magazines and books after his father's death, his habit of reading various types of books, even the scraps to broaden his knowledge whenever he got time, his interest in education for the poor children at Mangal speak a volume about the need of literacy and knowledge. The arranged marriage of Marco and Rosie is also based on the theme of education, but Rosie pursued the career of a dancer after Marco's exit from her life. Marco is presented as an impractical man running after study and research. The lack of literacy among the superstitious villagers at Mangal makes a seducer like Raju, a redeemer. Even the doctors and school masters act like the illiterate ones when Raju was undergoing fasting. In this article all these points are to be scrutinized to analyze the novelist's treatment of education in *The Guide*.

Keywords: Raju, Education, School, Withdrawal, Superstitious

R.K.Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) is published in decolonized India when the people were facing rapid modernization of life in the novelist's imaginary town at Malgudi. The novelist has to his credit many other novels, but *The Guide* is his most popular and best novel that fetched for its writer the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1961. This novel was also successfully filmed.

The novel, *The Guide*, depicts the calm, quiet and traditional life of the people living in Malgudi. But the novelist's aim is not only to portray the undisturbed conventional life, he also skillfully depicts how modern changes affect the calm and quiet life of the people living in this part of the world. Although the novel presents the themes of hypocrisy, materialism, conventionalism, modernism, dishonesty, transformation, feminism, karma, sex and marriage, human relationship, superstitions, illiteracy, money; the motif of education is probably the most dominating force throughout the novel. The novel delineates three major characters- Raju, Marco and Rosie in length, but among them it is Raju who is the life force of this novel, *The Guide*, and through the portrayal of his character Narayan presents a man who could have emerged as a better human being like Marco had he gone through proper education. In *The Guide*,

“Narayan, however, is not content merely to sketch vivid pen-pictures of the physical attributes of his chosen region. His interest lies far more in its social than in its topographical features. This, indeed, is Narayan's forte – the shrewd observation and the

incisive detail that penetrates below the surface to expose the hollowness of many of our hallowed and conventional pieties.” (Sen 83)

After he is released from jail, Raju reaches the village, Mangal, where he reminisces his childhood days in school. He recalls that his father sent him to school because he learned to use vulgar abuses from the labourers working for the urbanization of the place. Coming to know this, his father decided to send him to school and told him, ‘Oh, that is so, is it? You will not idle about picking up bad words any more. I will see to it. You will go to a school tomorrow and every day’ (Narayan 26). He further remembers:

A tremendous fuss was made before I started for my school each day. My mother fed me early and filled up a little aluminium vessel with refreshment for the afternoon. She carefully put my books and slate into a bag and slung it across my shoulder. I was dressed in clean shorts and shirt; my hair was combed back from the forehead, with all the curls falling on my nape. For the first few days I enjoyed all this attention, but soon developed a normal aversion; I preferred to be neglected and stay at home to being fussed over and sent to a school. But my father was a stern disciplinarian; perhaps he was a snob who wanted to brag before others that his son was going to a school. He kept an eye on my movements till I was safely on the road each morning. He sat in his shop and kept calling every few minutes, “Boy, have you left?” (Narayan 26)

He went to school very reluctantly as the school was located away from his locality. The fashionable Albert Mission School which was close to his residence was not selected by his father as he had heard his father saying, “I don’t want to send my boy there; it seems they try to convert our boys into Christians and are all the time insulting our gods”(Narayan 27). Narayan as a child was a student of Lutheran Mission School and he was one of the non-Christians in his class. He recounts his experiences at the school in *My Days*. In the Scripture classes the teachers used to attack and lampoon the Hindu gods and so, violent abuses were heaped on idol-worshippers as a prelude to glorifying their god, Jesus. Regarding the *pyol* school his father had high opinion. He boasted, “Many students who have passed through the hands of this ancient master are now big officials at Madras, collectors and men like that...”(Narayan 27) Raju could not accept it as a school. All classes were held at the same time and the teacher had to attend each class in turn. Raju as a child belonged to the ‘youngest and the most elementary set, just learning the alphabet and numbers’ (Narayan 27). The aged teacher of the school called them donkeys and abused their genealogies. Raju also reminisces that when the teacher would enter his house for a nap, or for his food or for any reason, they would make some naughty tricks. In the *pyol* school, there was a drain beneath the *pyol* and they used to float paper boats. He goes back to those days :

We tore off loose leaves from our notebooks, made boats, and floated them down the drain, and in a short while it became established practice, and a kind of boat-racing developed out of it; we lay on our bellies and watched the boats float away on the drainwater. He warned us, “If you fall off into the gutter, you will find yourselves in the Sarayu River, remember, and I shall have to tell your father to go out and look for you there, I suppose!” and he laughed at the grim prospect. (Narayan 28-29)

Although Narayan humorously and wittily presents Raju's experiences in *pyol* school as a child, through Raju he establishes the fact that the kind of education the children received in the school was good and the teacher loved his students with no bounds:

In spite of all the apparent violence and purposelessness, I suppose we did make good under our master, for within a year I proved good enough for the first standard in Board High School; I could read heavier books, and do multiplication up to twenty in my head. The old master himself escorted me to the Board School, which had just established itself, and admitted me there; he saw me off in my new class, seated me and two others, and blessed us before taking leave of us. It was a pleasant surprise for us that he could be so kind. (Narayan 29)

The critic, P.K.Singh writes :

Narayan is sharply aware of the changes that have been taking place on the Indian social scene as important consequences of independence and of the Five-Year Plans with their stress on education. He appears to be critical of the poor and inadequate teaching standard of Indian village schools where teachers are interesting more in one rupee a month which the pupil brought him. But he seems to be aware of the pitiable economic condition of school teachers. And in such a poor academic atmosphere that Narayan's Raju is seen building his academic base in his village. (Singh 41)

But Raju's father had withdrawn his son from school in order to look after the hut-shop. It is a kind of decision by Raju's father that the average Indian guardians do. He withdrew Raju from school to enlarge his business at the Railway Station and it is an inhuman decision. A school-going child is withdrawn from school and used to look after business for family's financial prosperity and security. Such mentality of Indian guardians jeopardises the holistic development of Indian children. After his father's sudden death Raju closed down his father's business with his mother's consent. At that time he was opening up a new business. He started to stock old magazines and newspapers and sell schoolbooks. As Albert Mission College was established at Malgudi, demand for books increased gradually. Students waiting for train at the station gathered at the shop and Raju got inspired to keep many books on display at the place of coconuts which he saw when his father was alive. People would bring old and stolen books and Raju showed no interest to buy them. But during selling the books to customers he was very careful. The idea of bookselling business came to Raju's mind after his father's death because he would see customers carrying off bought goods in their hands. His father did not invest money in buying wrapping-paper to increase profit-margin. Raju remembers:

I made it known far and wide that I was looking for old paper and books, and soon gathered a big dump. In my off-hours I sat sorting it out. During the interval between trains, when the platform became quiet, there was nothing more pleasing than picking up a bundle of assorted books and lounging in my seat and reading, occasionally breaking off to watch through the doorway the immense tamarind tree in the field. I read stuff that interested me, bored me, baffled me, and dozed off in my seat. I read stuff that pricked up a noble thought, a philosophy that appealed, I gazed on pictures of old temples and ruins

and new buildings and battleships, and soldiers, and pretty girls around whom my thoughts lingered. I learned much from scrap. (Narayan 50-51)

In a gathering at the village temple of Mangal, when Raju asked the young boys if they were studying, the boys replied that they did not go to school. One of the aged persons told, “We cannot send our boys to the school as you do in towns; they have to take the cattle out for grazing” (Narayan 45). Raju like an educated man said to the gathering, “Boys must read, first. They must, of course, help their parents, but they must also find the time to study” (Narayan 45). He found out a solution to the problem. He encouraged the parents to send their children to learn at the temple hall in the evening. Raju expressed his mind to the hesitating school master of the village :

“I like to see young boys become literate and intelligent.” He added with fervour because it sounded nice, “It’s our duty to make everyone happy and wise” (Narayan 47)

The episodes of Marco and Rosie are also based on education. Knowing fully that Rosie belonged to the family of *Devdasi*, Marco married her because she was highly educated and good-looking. Raju’s own assessment of Marco goes :

Marco was just impractical, an absolutely helpless man. All that he could do was to copy ancient things and write about them. His mind was completely in it. All practical affairs of life seemed impossible to him; such a simple matter as finding food or shelter or buying a railway ticket seemed to him a monumental job. Perhaps he married out of a desire to have someone care for his practical life, but unfortunately his choice was wrong – this girl herself was a dreamer if ever there was one. (Narayan 11)

Raju’s assessment of Marco, though he makes it from his own social position, makes it clear that Marco and Rosie were of different nature. Marco was obsessed with books and his research, while Rosie was having practical attitude to life. When Rosie asked Raju if he could show her the dance of a king cobra to the music of a flute, Marco told her:

“We have other things to think of, Rosie. This can wait.”

“I’m not asking this gentleman to produce it at once. I am not demanding it. I’m just mentioning it, that’s all.”

“If it interests you, you can make your own arrangements. Don’ expect me to go with you. I can’t stand the sight of a snake; your interests are morbid.” (Narayan 67)

Their quarrel in a public place made Raju reach the conclusion that though they were husband and wife, they lacked mutual respect for each other. Marco’s visit to *Iswara* Temple in North Extension kept him busy as he remained fully engrossed in studying the carvings on the walls. Instead of going with Rosie to enjoy the cobra dance, he found it more interesting and important like a true academician. While Marco remained busy studying the carvings in the ancient caves high up on the Mempi Hills for his book, Rosie and Raju spent endless time in a hotel at Malgudi. For study purpose, Marco had to stay in Peak House for over a month and Raju had to give Rosie his company. Raju recollects :

Once in two days she went up to see her husband. She was showing extra solicitude for him nowadays. She fussed a great deal over him. It was all the same to him. His table was

littered with notes and dates, and he said, “Rosie, don’t go near it. I don’t want you to mess it up. It is just coming to a little order”(Narayan 118).

It is obvious from the above quotation that Marco did not want Rosie touch his study materials, though he married her through newspaper advertisement. The novelist shows a stark contradiction in their attitudes to life. Marco, fully aware of Rosie’s root, married her, but he had forbidden her to dance which Rosie loved most in her life. Marco did so considering his social position. It might be a drawback in his character forbidding Rosie not to pursue her career in dance, but it is nowhere stated that Marco refused to discharge his duty as a husband. He was undoubtedly a great scholar, but he was not able to read his wife’s mind, and as a result, Raju, the railway guide, secured his intimacy with Rosie. Rosie also accepted Raju as he could flatter her art of dance which she had desired, but she had not received it from Marco. Raju was no match for Rosie, but Rosie placed Raju in Marco’s place. Marco realized it and so, when he left Malgudi at the end of his research, he could not take Rosie with him. He felt cheated in married life.

After Marco’s exit from Rosie’s life, she was completely dependent on Raju and subsequently Raju used Rosie’s talent as a dancer to earn a huge amount of money by arranging numerous shows for Rosie. And it is Raju who transformed Rosie into Nalini. What the novelist may want to teach the society is that Rosie should have used her wisdom before she got in Raju’s trap. She is a post graduate in Economics, and it is expected from her that she should take rational decision in such crucial phases of her married life.

When Raju’s mother came to know that Rosie was educated, she felt highly impressed. In her words there was a touch of reverence for Rosie. She valued her education and appreciated that she was a better woman than those she knew. Her words were full of significance :

“Good, good, brave girl. Then you lack nothing in the world. You are not like us uneducated women. You will get on anywhere. You can ask for your railway ticket, call a policeman if somebody worries you, and keep your money. What are you going to do? Are you going to join government service and earn? Brave girl.” (Narayan 147)

Narayan sharply criticizes the illiteracy and superstitious beliefs of the poor villagers at Mangal and at large the superstitious Indians when Raju was undergoing fast to bring rain to save the life at Mangal from drought. Even the educated men like the school master and doctors are not spared as they also acted like the innocent, illiterate villagers. Their academic qualification could not remove blind faith from their minds. It might also be argued that under the pressures of circumstances they felt compelled to perform as they did. Increasing gathering of crowd on the river bank made it clear that the Indians, despite many wants in their life, were led by their belief in the magical power of a Saint, or they leave everything to the mercy of God whenever they feel hopeless and helpless. The place took the look of a fun fare or *mela*. Narayan describes :

Children shouted and played about, women came carrying baskets filled with pots, firewood, and foodstuffs, and cooked the food for their men and children. There were small curls of smoke going up all along the river bank, on the opposite slope and on this bank also. It was studded with picnic groups, with the women’s bright-coloured saris

shining in the sun; men too had festive dress. Bullocks unyoked from their carts jingled their bells as they ate the straw under the trees. People swarmed around little water-holes. (Narayan 242)

Lack of education and logical awareness in most of the Indians is bitterly satirized by the novelist. A man is fasting to bring rain, it is nothing but an irrational activity and that man is encouraged and worshipped like a hero is really shameful and ridiculous. The above description projects the hollowness in Indian society that when someone is suffering from fast, the curious people gathered to experience it are in a picnic mood. Even in the night, 'film shows, which were all about mosquitoes, malaria, plague, and tuberculosis, and BCG vaccination' (Narayan 248) were arranged. There was also screening of 'Government of India films about dams, river valleys, and various projects, with ministers delivering speeches' (248). When Malone, the American journalist asks doctors about Raju's health, the reply we get is highly disappointing and penetrating, 'Not very satisfactory; blood pressure is two hundred systolic. We suspect one of the kidneys is affected. Uremia is setting in. We are trying to give him small doses of saline and glucose. His life is valuable to the country' (253). It is the lack of education and scientific awareness that leads the poor villagers of Mangal accept Raju as a holy man. Prof. Krishna Sen writes :

... it is the villagers of Mangal who display the quintessentially Indian emotional response in this book – the spontaneous, implicit, unquestioning faith in a person perceived to be a holy man. Why they should suddenly take a complete stranger for a spiritual guide may well puzzle a western reader, but it will be understood by the Indian reader. The holy man or ascetic is an integral part of traditional Indian society. He is venerated for representing the heritage of Indian values and wisdom, and it is not customary to question his authenticity. (Sen 91-92)

Education has been a recurrent theme in many of Narayan's novels. In *Swami and Friends* we find that Swaminathan, the central character, is sent to Albert Mission School where he experiences that the teachers are apt to convert the boys into Christian and all the time they insult the Hindu gods and goddesses. Swaminathan as a school-boy considers Monday unpleasant because it is the first day in a week to start to go to school after the boundless freedom of Saturday and Sunday. He is also fully aware of the political disturbances of his time and takes part in movements against British oppression. He is mercilessly beaten for taking part in such movements. Later in Board High School, he is also severely punished for missing his drill classes. His defiant act of snatching the cane from Head Master's hand and running away from the school is a failure of the academic system. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran, a student of Albert Mission College is found confused about his career after spending sixteen years of his life in education. In *The English Teacher*, Krishnan, the hero of the novel, is dissatisfied with the British system of education, although he is a product of it. In his maiden speech in Rajya Sabha on 27 April, 1989, Narayan mentioned the plight of the Indian education system that was formed in imitation of the colonial masters. He unambiguously expressed his worries about the burden of school bag and the load of syllabus. He also clearly conveyed his concerns about the mental health of the children who did not get time to play, imagine or dream. Although, almost nothing has been changed after his speech.

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