

Indianness in R.K. Narayan's novel "The guide"

Anita Sharma

Ph. D Research Scholar, JJT University, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 07 September 2018

Keywords

Tourist Guide, Modern - type relationship,
Illiterate habitats, Faith, Spiritual Guide
Indianness

ABSTRACT

Indianness and Narayan's writings are almost synonymous. In fact, India with its landscape, culture, conventions and customs becomes picturesque in his writings including The Guide. Again to a large extent, the country India is an ideal representative of the sub-continent India. But universality in The Guide (1958) cannot be ignored because the country India and India as a sub-continent undoubtedly symbolize many features of the world. This paper attempts at examining Narayan's creation of characters who represent both sub-continental and universal elements. The Guide reveals the Indian way of life and also the culture and tradition of India. R.K. Narayan has used typical Indian characters and Indian atmosphere to portray Indian culture. The main characters of this novel are Raju, Rosie and Marco. R.K. Narayan has given a true social picture of India through 'The Guide'. The traits of Indian manners and customs are also reflected in this novel. Hospitality of Indians is a well known trait all over the world. Narayan has given a clear picture of India at the time of narration without idealizing the country and he has not also condemned it. The poverty of India has been reflected with a personal touch of the author. The villagers are shown as suffering from poverty and ignorance and their illiteracy has been reflected as the root cause for all their sufferings. They are as gullible and kind hearted as any Indian village habitats. This paper aims at annotating the concept of Indianness in the novel The Guide by R.K. Narayan. The task has been taken to analyse the Indian characters and Indian atmosphere as presented by Narayan in this novel to exemplify the culture and tradition of India.

1. Introduction

R.K. Narayan is generally acknowledged the most wonderful and the most creative Indian author writing in English. He is at his best when he unites gentle irony with serious moral concern. His solitary endeavor is to give artistic gratification and he undoubtedly emerges as a notable writer in the 1930's. R.K. Narayan whose first novel appeared in 1935 is the most unpretentious and unassuming novelist. He always creates a convincing situation to suit his characters who live in the limited region of Malgudi. We may recall Thomas Hardy immediately. This small South India town imposes structural limits on Narayan's novels, but it also tends to provide them with textual cohesion and unity, leaving little space for digression and ramblings. Narayan is the truest artist who does not bother about social or political doctrines, nor is he bothered about the contemporary nature of his subject matter. Sex does not make an appealing theme to him. Thus, R.K. Narayan keeps himself distinct and distinguished from other Indo-English novelists. R. K. Narayan as a member of a traditional Hindu family has infused in his novels the stories of Hindu myths in a social setting that is gradually changing because of the rapid growth of industry, deconstruction of culture, education and effulgence of bourgeoisie class. In The Guide traditional South Indian society explores how Hindu myths are intricately related in the lives of Raju, Rosie, Marco and Raju's mother in Malgudi that undergoes a sea change with the advent of railways, essentially a feature of post-colonial India. In the complex web of intricate personal relationship Raju and Rosie simultaneously attain the state of salvation or moksha through the self-sacrifice and dance respectively. Rosie's transformation into Nalini represents the metamorphoses of culture in a society torn aside by class, caste and economy. The conflict between Raju and his mother exhibits the

difference of attitudes between two successive generations because of the inclusion of education in conventional society. Through self-degradation Raju comes to realize the very essence of Atma and the significance of its association with Paramatma.

R.K. Narayan whose first novel appeared in 1935 is the most unpretentious and unassuming novelist. He always creates a convincing situation to suit his characters who live in the limited region of Malgudi. We may recall Thomas Hardy immediately. This small South India town imposes structural limits on Narayan's novels, but it also tends to provide them with textual cohesion and unity, leaving little space for digression and ramblings. Narayan is the truest artist who does not bother about social or political doctrines, nor is he bothered about the contemporary nature of his subject matter. Sex does not make an appealing theme to him. Thus, R.K. Narayan keeps himself distinct and distinguished from other Indo-English novelists.

As far as Indian novel in English is concerned, it discovered its distinct shape in the 1930's. The making of India as a nation and the making of Indian English novel go side by side. On the one hand, Indian novelists were interested in exploring the rich historical material, and on the other they showed their keen interest in recent social and political awareness. That is why, their novels embody the experiences of socio-cultural and socio-political movements related to Indian freedom struggle. Not much significant development took place for some time in this genre; the output consisted of historical or romantic novels. The appearance of Mahatma Gandhi on the scene shifted the focus of fiction to his works and thinking. The distinct national appearance and the political

scenario of India from 1920 to 1950 played a crucial role in determining the history of Indian English novel.

It has been said that Narayan is at his best in novels like *The Guide*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and *A Tiger for Malgudi*. *The Guide* describes the adventure/ misadventures of Raju who starts his career as a tourist guide. The novelist shows how Raju uses his holiness only as a convenient disguise in order to fulfill his own vicarious wishes. The way the account of this past life is narrated to one of his disciples makes it abundantly clear that Raju is not at all interested in doing anything. It is true that things always happen to him. He takes everything so casually and even when he does not know anything about the places, he tells the visitors about these places in exaggerated terms:

His chance meeting with Rosie brings another new turn in his life. With characteristic thoroughness he learns the ways of the world as a tourist guide:

Through the character of Raju, R. K. Narayan shows how Raju's life is nothing but an interesting series of improvisations. He develops the habit of living for the moment. He believes in postponing the crisis indefinitely. He does not want to look beyond the present moment.

In this moment of illumination he makes a bold effort to transcend his own individual self. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly says:

"In the story of Raju, what we have is the created object transcending its creator. The sainthood that Raju has created out of his deception ultimately transcends his control and obliterates his former self".¹⁸ (1985:129)

In other words, through this immortal character, the novelist graphically depicts the predicament of a common boy who wants to earn name and fame by hook or crook in his life.

"The Guide" received the Sahitya Academi Award (1930). The novel has been filmed. Narayan was awarded Padma Bhushan in 1969. His considerable merit. He observes life in its depth and variety. The characters he has portrayed are generally from the middle-class society. He has a keen eye for the comic in life arounds him. Irony is the most powerful literary devices used by Narayan to convey the incongruity and the contradiction between reality and appearance. He has successfully established himself as a creative writer who balances the roles of a spokesman of the community and that the free spirit of a water. In 1967, the University of Leeds conferred on him degree of honorary D.Litt. in 1973. The British council enrolled him as an eminent writer of India writing in English. R.K. Narayan is also known in Britain and America, as an eminent writer of English Literature in India. Narayana published a number of books and he made a unique positions among the most popular writers of his time. He also started his own publishing house called Indian Thoughts Publication in Mysore.

2. Objectives

The objective of this present paper is to attract the attention of the readers towards works of Indian English writers who have enriched the Indian English literature by their unforgettable works. The topic of this paper is of great significance because the vitality of Indian elements in Indian English literature has not been properly felt by scholars as well as serious readers.

3. Indian Elements or Indianness in R.K.Narayan's the Guide

As it happens to be a fact in other writings in R.K. Narayan, sub-continental and more particularly Indian elements are lively present in his *The Guide*. In spite of this commonness, the role playing of the universal elements in *The Guide* deserves consideration. The fake swami represented by Raju and typical Indian woman represented by Rosie, family, middle class life, beliefs, values and customs, the ancient temple, the pyol school, the betel leaf shop at the railway station, gossip loving trait of the people, hospitality, the dance of king cobra and Bharat Natyam become materials to draw a genuine picture of India or Indian sub-continent. On other hand, love and sex, jealousy, money, mysterious female characters, the theme of crime and punishment, spiritual regeneration through self-negation, simultaneous existence of happiness and sorrow, pleasure and sadness from the same source but with separate implications for different persons, complexities of mind, and ups and downs in an individual's life are truly universal. Raju's possessing the qualities of a universal rogue is also worth-mentioning.

The protagonist of *The Guide* is Raju. He belongs to a lower-middle class family. Their small house is opposite to the Malgudi railway station. Beginning with the profession of a tourist guide, Raju later plays the roles of a lover criminal and a fake swami. To avoid the shameful situation of facing his own people, he prefers the role of swami to returning home after his release from imprisonment. This sainthood comes into his favour for the time being. But when a situation forces him to observe fasting for bringing rain for the draught-stricken people, he faces a plight. The novel ends with no clear indication about Raju's death or survival.

4. India- the Source and Subject Matter of the Guide

In an interview Narayan was asked whether the elements in *The Guide* had been 'transformed' by his American experiences, he referred to it as being 'totally Indian'. In his autobiography *My Days*, he explains how he conceived an idea for 'a novel about someone suffering enforced sainthood', "A recent situation in Mysore offered a setting for such a story. A severe drought had dried up all the rivers and tanks; Krishnaraja Sagar, an enormous reservoir feeding channels that irrigated thousands of acres, had also become dry and its bed, a hundred and fifty feet deep, was now exposed to the sky with fissures and cracks, revealing an ancient submerged temple, coconut stumps and dehydrated crocodiles. As a desperate measure, the municipal council organized a prayer for rains. A group of Brahmins stood knee-deep in water (procured at great cost) on the dry bed of kavery,

fasted, prayed and chanted certain mantras continuously for eleven days. On the twelfth day it rained, and brought relief to the countryside" (My Days 167).

5. Malgudi, Narayan's India

Narayan's India is symbolized by Malgudi, an imaginary locale in his novels. It is as significant as Hardy's Wessex novels. The spirit in the place has a great influence on the characters and actions like the Egdon Heath in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. Malgudi is a "a blend of oriental and pre-1914 British, like an Edwardian mixture of sweet mangoes and malt vinegar; a wedding with its horoscopes and gold-edged, elegantly printed invitation cards; tiny shops with the shopkeeper hunched on the counter selling plantains, betel leaves, snuff and English biscuits; the casuarinas and the Post Office Savings Bank; the brass pots and the volumes of Milton and Carlyle; the shaved head and ochre robes of the sanyasi and Messrs Binns' catalogue of cricket bats" (Walsh, *Indian Literature in English*, 73).

6. Fake swami and typical Indian woman

Let us first consider the fact of being swami. Traditionally, majority of the people of this sub-continent have a deep respect for religion no matter to what degree they apply it in their practical aspects of life. So, they place the religious persons on a high ground. They consider the religious personalities such as 'sadhū' or 'swami' as proper media for communicating with the spiritual world. That is, the people want to achieve the Almighty's satisfaction through the satisfaction of the holy persons. As a result, many exploit this credulity of the common people. A bright example of this exploitation is *Tree without Roots* (Lal Shalu) by Syed waliullah of Bangla literature. In this novel, Majeed wraps an old grave with a red cloth or 'lal shalu' and introduces it to villagers as the grave or 'mazar' of a saint. As the caretaker or 'Khadem' of this 'mazar', Mojeed earns not only his livelihood but also power and fame. The uneducated, superstitious and blind believers who are also simple in mind become easy victim of Majeed's falsehood.

Like majority of the sub continental women, Rosie is ready to abandon her desire for dancing if her husband Marco becomes kind and soft in his dealings with her in their conjugal life. She is devoted to Marco in spite of his impotence and priggishness. She might have resisted her physical involvement with Raju if her husband had showed the least amount of kindness and consideration for her. Like the Indian women of butterfly-type, Rosie is glamorous and charming and not very particular and respectful about chastity, virtue etc. She causes disorder in her family life and in the life of Raju. As a typical Indian woman, she restores peace and harmony.

7. Marco as a Husband

Though not as an ideal Indian husband, Marco does not take care of his wife's beauty and also other demands, he is not either a western type husband. Unlike many western husbands and like most of the Indian husbands, Marco cannot support Rosie's dancing for Raju in the hotel room.

8. Stress of Family

The appreciating aspect of the Indian to put emphasis on family is also evident in *The Guide* as it occurs in other novels of R.K. Narayan. Sooth to say, "The family is the immediate context in which his sensibility operates, and his novels are remarkable for the subtlety and conviction with which family-relationships are treated" (William Walsh, R.K. Narayan)

9. Middle class life

The life and life style of middle class Indians make an important feature of Narayan's *The Guide*. Raju himself belongs to a lower middle class family. Rosie also comes of the same class. So the beliefs and ideas held by Raju and Rosie, and their facing various situation in life are certainly of those who belong to their class.

10. Hospitality

The people of this region have a praiseworthy tradition of entertaining the guest. They are extremely hospitable. In *The Guide*, we can see that Raju and his mother take care of every comfort of Rosie. His mother does not raise any question at first though later on she becomes dissatisfied with Rosie and leaves home bag and baggage as Rosie continues living in her house. In the same way, Velan and other villagers of Mangala arrange for the meals of the swami, not asking any question though they themselves suffer from drought.

11. The Dance of King Cobra and Bharat Nattiyam

The dance of king cobra displayed by the snake-charmers playing tune on flute may be less important considering the Indianness but a minute picture of India is presented by it. Bharat Nattiyam, a special kind of dancing is a unique cultural element of India that is of South-India.

12. Summing Up

To sum up; the research scholar comes to the point that India is a great country and it is known as the land of cultures and traditions and is one of the oldest civilization in the world. Indian culture and tradition are rich and unique in their own way. In our country there are many communities and sub-communities, each of them has their own culture, tradition, religion, language and literature. Literature plays a very important role in the establishment and growth of the society. Plots depicted in the fictional writings are inspired by the reality. So we should not treat the stories just as stories, but as the reflection of the reality. In our country there are many great authors who wrote about their land and people, for e.g. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayana: the founding fathers of Indian English literature were mainly concerned with the downtrodden of the society, Indian middle-class life and the expression of the traditional and cultural ethos of India. The Indian authors have touched each and every aspect of Indian life.

In 1930's three major Indian English novelists, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao based their novels on significant themes that they discovered such as emancipation from foreign rule, East – West relationship, the communal problems and the plight of untouchables, the landless poor and the economically exploited people. Mulk Raj Anand's major

novels *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936) and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) are all written as a crusade against social exploitation. R. K. Narayan also touched the social evils like casteism, inequality, injustice, gender – bias and superstitious themes and had added them into the themes of Indian novels in English through his novels *The Guide* (1958), *The Financial Experts* (1951) and *The English Teacher* (1945). The Indian Sanskrit rhythm in the syntax of English has been created by Raja Rao in almost all his novels *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), and exhibited the myths and legends of Hinduism as well.

The writings of these authors – with their narrative techniques and style – make Indian Literature in English to expand its literary landscape. They had created characters that

are unique in World Literature. R. K. Narayan started writing from his childhood. He observed the life of the people around with utter care. Later, he made use of those characters in his novels. Thus, his characters have an Indian flavor and they are often drawn from middle class and lower middle class society.

Acknowledgements

I consider it is my moral duty to pay honour, regards and thanks to the authors, Learned Researchers, Research Scholars, librarians and publishers of all the books, Research papers and all other sources which I have consulted during the preparation of the present paper.

References

1. Iyengar, Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1962.
2. Narayan, R.K. *The Guide*. London: Methuen & Co., 1958.
3. Narayan, R.K. *My Days*. New Delhi: Orient Apeer Backs Ltd., 1986.
4. Sharan, N.N. *A Critical Study of the Novels of Narayan*. New Delhi: Classical publishing Co., 1993.
5. Dalal, Dr. Rita and Mehta, Nidhi. "R. K. Narayan's Moral Vision with Special Reference to *The Guide*", *South Asian Academic Research Journals*, Vol. 2, Issue - 7, July 2012, ISSN - 2249-7137.
7. Dar, Showkat Hussain. "R.K. Narayan: The Grand Old Man of Indian Fiction", *Dash, Bibhudatta*. "Travelling through Cultural Spaces: R.K. Narayan – the Indian Vs the Writer in My Dateless Diary: an American Journey",
8. Dash, Rajendra Kumar and Panda, Namita, "Hiding in the Light: R.K. Narayan as a Feminist Novelist",
10. Dharmadhikari, Prashant. "Myth, Memory and History: Finding Equilibrium in R.K. Narayan",
11. Dieter, Riemenschneider "The Train Has Moved on: R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* and Literary History", *Asiatic*, Vol. 3, Dec. 2009, ISSN – 1985-3106.
12. GrishmaManikrao, Khobragade. "The Bonds of Matrimony and Portrayal of Its Heroine in The Major Novels of R.K. Narayan", *Indian Streams Research Journal*, Vol.-1, August 2011, ISSN -2230-7850.
13. Gunasekaran, S. "R.K. Narayan's Humour in 'Swami and Friends'",
14. Gunasekaran, S. "The Comic Vision in the Stories and Sketches of R.K. Narayan",
15. JanraoNikam, Dr. Madhukar. "R.K. Narayan as a Post-Colonial Novelist", *English Literature Journal*, Vol. X, January 2012, ISSN - 0973-1628.