

Tradition and Modernity : A Reading of R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* through a Feminist Lens

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Abstract. Indian English Literature (IEL) refers to a specific body of works written by the Indian writers in English. Some of the predominant figures of this genre are R.K Narayan, Raja Rao, and Tagore. Modernism in Indian English Literature is primarily characterized by individualism, experimentation, absurdity, symbolism, and formalism. It can be deciphered that R.K Narayan attempted to present a diverse range of works to his readers across the globe. For instance, his novel *The Guide* which tends to be a reflection of the entire oeuvre of narratives structured under the frame of Modern Indian English Literature. The characters in the novel seem to be Indian not only by representation, but by real configuration too. They can be seen struggling for a living, often deprived of an agency to speak, and often harassed by certain oppressive societal constructs. Moreover, alienation is another significant characteristic of IEL and it seems to be a prominent issue in the livelihood of almost every character in the aforementioned novel. This research paper attempts to analyse the contrast between the elements of modernism and tradition through a feminist lens and this study will specifically focus on the character of Rosie as represented in the selected novel *The Guide*. This paper will also study the key concepts of alienation, symbolism, and individualism while examining the grounds of certain instances in the select text.

Keywords : Modernism; tradition; individualism; symbolism.

The narrative this study opts to analyse is *The Guide* (2017) which can be deciphered as the story of a man, Raju, who undergoes a spiritual transformation with passage of time. The narrative constantly drifts in between the present and the past. It outlines the story of a man who undertakes a spiritual journey in his conscious and even in his subconscious mind. However, it is the presence of another character, Rosie, which provides a thought-provoking turn to the novel. Moreover, the readers can analyse the outline of the novel from various dimensions, however, the aspects of tradition versus modernity and feminism are the ones which capture the attention of the readers in an intriguing manner.

Rosie, another character in the novel, wants to be a successful dancer who possesses great reverence for dance. On the other hand, her husband Marco is depicted as someone with great interest in studying sculptures of the caves. Rosie is a lively woman who aspires to become a great dancer but her husband never encourages her love for her passion. When Raju came to her life, he encouraged her to pursue her dreams and asked her to accept her potential to become a great dancer in the near future. However, destiny has already interwoven a sceptical chapter for both of them. When the story progresses, the readers get to learn that Marco abandons Rosie when he learns about the extramarital affair between her and the railway guide Raju. However, during such a period of distress, it was Raju who supported Rosie and accepted her as another member of his family.

The methodology used in this paper involves a critical analysis of the selected text through the lenses of Feminism and Modernism. A review of certain essays has also been carried out to receive a deeper insight of the theme of the research. From a feminist point of view the readers can note that both the male figures in the novel, Raju and Marco, treated Rosie as a commodity and eventually used her for their own motif. One can decipher from the narrative that Marco subjugated Rosie as his wife while Raju used her as a dancer and forced her to dance in every other platform only to finance his own extravagances. Here, one can take a note of what Bhargavi V. Davar has to say about the role of women in the society. Davar in her paper "Our Mind Our Madness" argues that a woman's value, goals, and actions are often decided by the socio-cultural imperatives. Davar also contends that the inner voice of an Indian women is silenced while she tries to become a socially acceptable being. Moreover, as argued by Davar, if self-identity is about the spiritual experience of an individual's existence this is not allowed to develop in average Indian woman even in her private life (397). Similar scenarios are visible in Narayan's *The Guide*. Rosie, for instance, was never allowed by the society to decide for herself. One of the noteworthy suggestions such scenarios make is understanding the condescending role the patriarchal ideologies the society play when a woman tries to climb the ladder of social mobility. Thus, it is arguably true that women's devalued self-esteem is a result of the constant socialization enforced on them through the patriarchal ideologies of the society.

On the other hand, it can be deciphered that a deep sense of alienation constantly lurks as the overarching theme in the aforementioned narrative. For instance, when Rosie was abandoned by her husband,

Marco, she gradually succumbs to loneliness and it can be deciphered from her behaviour. Moreover, it can be seen that Raju also gradually becomes a victim of similar attitudes of the society. It is seemingly true that Raju has entrapped Rosie with an intention of living an extravagant life. Raju entrapped Rosie to come to his life. Moreover, he deliberately forced her to live according to his ideologies. However, it can be deciphered that the character of Raju often becomes a victim of his own desires. It seems his emotions and actions are trapped within his own mind and eventually he struggles with the dual persona that he tries to maintain. He struggles to maintain the ideologies of two persona “the loafer/the vagabond” that he once used to be and “the Swami” that destiny made out of him. Thus, *The Guide* is arguably a narrative of life that represents how people are trapped by their own desires.

On the contrary, the concept of individualism finds an exposition through the character of Rosie in the select text. Even at the worst of her time, she never appears to the readers as a helpless woman, but it should be noted that often her indecisive nature lands her into trouble. Furthermore, as portrayed in the select text, Rosie originally belongs to a Devadasi family. It will be pertinent here to quote a few words from the text *The Guide* to understand the scenario better:

I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers, my mother, grandmother, and, before her, her mother. Even as a young girl I danced in our village temple. You know how our caste is viewed? (88)

The character of Rosie seems to be an embodiment of enthusiasm, aspirations, dreams, and desires. However, her husband Marco barely supports her aspiration to become a dancer. Marco conditioned her to believe that a wife should always appreciate her husband's choices and work accordingly. With passage of time the notion of rebellion roots in her mind and she eventually manages to overcome the constructs of the society and become a dancer. It has been portrayed in the text that she even overthrows the societal construct of marriage and starts to live with another man out of wedlock. On the other hand, the character of Marco tends to symbolize patriarchy which is a societal hindrance for woman. He repressed Rosie's desire to become a dancer and even conditioned her to give up her dream, however, Marco himself has great reverence for his own interests. He enjoys exploring caves and

ancient structures while dance for him is a mere form of “street acrobatics”.
To quote from the text :

I’m not prepared to discuss all that with you. An acrobat on a trapeze goes on doing the same thing all his life; well, your dance is like that. What is there intelligent or creative in it? You repeat your tricks all your life. We watch a monkey perform, not because it is artistic but because it is a monkey that is doing it. (153)

From the given excerpt it can be comprehended that Rosie looked up to Raju as her rescuer because it appears to her that Raju saved her from the constant oppression Marco has been imposing on her since years. Furthermore, it can be seen that Rosie has tried her best to become an ideal wife for Marco, but her efforts were constantly looked down upon by Marco and such an attitude forced her to leave behind Marco and move ahead in her life. Such scenarios enable the readers to comprehend that often a woman’s voice is repressed by her family first and then by the society. Hence, it is arguably true that Rosie’s cry for emancipation from the societal barriers symbolically represents the desire for emancipation valued by every other woman in the society. Furthermore, on a larger scale it can be realized that a woman can reclaim an esteemed identity in the society only if she can realize the significance of unionization of woman and collective feminine identity. Thus, such texts deliberately promote even the value of collective feminine identity in the society.

R.K Narayan thought provokingly explored the concepts of individualism and existential crisis through the characters in the select novel. Moreover, individualism is acknowledgement of one’s own identity and difference from the rest. It appreciates the urge that individuals should develop to recognize their own choices. Individualism tends to be one of the most important features of Modernism in Indian Literature in English (ILE) and Narayan explored significant aspects associated with this area in his novels. For instance, Marco prefers to live a detached life, but his pursuit of such individual solace often hurts the sentiments of his wife. On the other hand, Rosie gradually realized that there is very little space left for her in Marco’s life, hence, when Marco abandons her, she considered Raju as her saviour. However, she was not at all aware of

the fact that Raju was only bewitched by her beauty who will nevertheless exploit her in the upcoming days.

Rosie wanted to become a dancer and she eventually manages to become one though it was Raju who stayed by her side when every other person left her alone. Rosie was explicitly exploited by her husband and even by Raju, but her passion for her dreams positions her as an empowered woman of the society too. She eventually manages to become an independent woman and in the later part of the narrative, it has been mentioned that she eventually leaves for Madras and continues to expand her own empire there. Her journey from deprivation to eventual empowerment is a thought provoking one. Devki Jain and Nirmala Banerjee in their paper “The Tyranny of the Household” argue, When a woman tries to fulfil their individuality, the first factor that challenges her determination to be an empowered person in the society is the institution of the family. It tends to hinder her determination and gradually disrupts as a woman tries to exert her autonomy (411).

Similar scenarios are seen in *The Guide* when Rosie tries to affirm some autonomy and strives to become a successful dancer. Marco constantly looked down upon her and underestimated her dream of becoming a dancer. His patriarchal practices in a way forced Rosie to distance herself from him and that becomes the sole reason for the gradual disharmony between them.

Moreover, the slow but unwavering growth in the character of Rosie has been attracting attention of various critics and scholars since years. Her individuality becomes her power and she eventually overcomes the restriction imposed on a woman by the society. In the beginning of this narrative the readers get to see a woman who is meek and submissive, but with the progress of the narrative the readers witness her gradual transformation into a strong woman who manages to overthrow the shackles of the society and succeeds into becoming an independent woman.

Simone de Beauvoir in her text *The Second Sex* (2011) contends, since childhood a girl seems to lose her ground in intellectual and artistic field while there can be many reasons for the same and one of those reasons is that she is often expected to be an embodiment of the duties that femininity implies (357). Similar scenarios are visible in *The Guide* too. The relationship Raju and Rosie shared was constantly looked down upon by their friends and family because they started to live together out of wedlock which is an overt disrespect of the societal norms.

However, it was Rosie who encountered greater pressure and social abhorrence. It seems the society entirely disregards a woman who begins to exercise her power against the established norms. Rosie was often referred to as the snake woman by Raju's family members. Raju's family accuses Rosie to be the snake woman who possesses the capacity to destroy the fortune of other people. It seems, the same society was least interested to know what she went through because her existence barely mattered for them. However, it can be deciphered that Rosie succeeded to challenge the patriarchal norms of the society and take a stand for herself as the new woman of the era who is self-dependent and empowered enough to question the barriers set by the condescending society. This text also highlights the importance of understanding the condition of an individual who seems to be undergoing certain amount of existential crisis in their lives.

The aspect of Feminism arguably becomes another significant characteristic of Modern Indian Literary platform. Feminism advocates emancipation of women from the restraints imposed by a patriarchal society. As a matter of fact, the discourse of Feminism started as a keynote in the Indian context since 1830s and since then it is visibly continuing to safeguard and assert the significance of the role of women in the society. The readers can appropriate the lens of Feminism if they want to explore the character of Rosie to a larger detail. Rosie seems to be a perfect amalgamation of the elements of tradition and modernity. She is a dancer by passion and an unrivalled warrior by mind. Moreover, it can be seen that Narayan has depicted her character as someone of flesh and blood. Her constant struggle against the societal rules testifies the intimidation every other woman has to face in the society even in this day and age. Raju's uncle accuses her of being a seducer of young man. Moreover, she was often referred to as the snake woman by others. To quote from the text :

You seem to be a good, sensible girl. You should not walk into a house like this and stay on. Did anyone invite you? No. Even if you are invited you should go on staying where you belong, and not too long here. You cannot stay like this in our house. It is very inconvenient. You should not be seducing young fools, deserting your husband. Do you follow?
(*The Guide*,175)

However, it can be deciphered that the character of Rosie symbolizes the determination a woman should possess within herself to deal with the ordeals of life. Rosie highlighted the significance of reclaiming one's own identity that's lost. Rosie was even forced to give her real identity and was asked to accept the new name Nalini because Raju believed that the new name Nalini will help them attract the attention of the audience as a dancer. Thus, the character of Rosie becomes an amalgamation of the aspects of tradition and modernism. Moreover, the character of Rosie has been depicted as the "new woman" of the society who believes her existence and identity should have a role to play in the society. Moreover, the concept of new woman has evolved in the contemporary period through a Feminist lens. Sarah Grand, an Irish writer, used the term New Woman to refer to those independent women in the society who prefer to seek radical changes.

Furthermore, a new woman challenges the boundaries set by the society and eventually thrives against such condescending structures. She possesses a radical mindset and has a positive outlook for everything. Rosie undeniably carries the essence of traditionalism but it carries the shade of modernity as well. She appears to be a naive woman at times but, she eventually emerges out as a determined woman. She originally belongs to a family devoted to the Lord, but she overcomes the restraints imposed on her by the society and steps ahead as an emancipated woman who possesses the capacity to free herself from every restraints imposed on a woman. She tends to represent the ideals of new woman of the contemporary period. As depicted in the narrative Rosie has tried her best to be a compatible wife, but she was often looked down upon by Marco. Thus, at the end of the narrative Rosie decided to become an independent woman and eventually succeeded to become the same. She even transgressed the boundaries endorsed by the society for women and decided to live with Raju out of wedlock. Hence, the character of Rosie is an amalgamation of the aspects drawn from modernity and traditionalism. Thus, Narayan has skilfully used the concepts of symbolism, existential crisis, and modernity in the novel *The Guide*.

Finally, by existing silently in the end of the narrative the character of Rosie succeeds to make an impression on the readers that women undoubtedly possess the potential to challenge the ideologies of a patriarchal society and they should consider challenging those rather than submitting meekly. To conclude, it can be argued that Narayan's *The Guide* overtly imbibes in various elements of modernity and

traditionalism and this provides a realistic turn to the text. Thus, it can be concluded that Narayan in a very astute manner explored themes such as emancipation of women, sense of alienation, modernity versus traditionalism, and existential crisis in his texts and such characteristics are the key features of Modernism in Indian English Literature.

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