

R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* : A Socio-Economic Discourse

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The article examines the socio-economic problem of the novel *The Guide* by R.K.Narayan. The characters are situated against the backdrop of Post-Independence economic theories of India and analysed in the light of those theories. There is also a discussion of the impact of westernization and modernization and how the new culture, new ideologies, new trends, gradually transform the idyllic mindset of the protagonist, Raju. The article tries to extol human relationship, one of the essential characteristics of the novels of R.K.Narayan. Since the article deals with socio-economic discourse, it, therefore, critically analyses the text and the characters against the background of societal changes.

The Guide which won for Narayan huge accolades shows the novelist's skill in placing the orient into focus for occidental eyes. In this novel Narayan depicts a comprehensive picture of human activities, the comic and the tragic, the silly and the serious, the ridiculous and the sublime. Here we witness the spectacular representations of an ordinary man who eventually becomes a Mahatma as he begins to identify himself with the world and takes the terrible decision of sacrificing his life for a noble cause. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly holds the view:

Speaking generally, Narayan's is the art of resolved limitation and conscientious exploration; he is content, like Jane Austen, with a 'little bit of ivory', just so many inches wide: he would like to be a detached observer, to concentrate on a narrow scene, to sense the atmosphere of the place, to snap a small group of characters in their oddities and angularities: he would, if he could, explore the inner countries of the mind, heart and soul, catch the uniqueness in the ordinary, the tragic in the prosaic.(360)

So a critical study of this novel gives a complete vision of free India with all its varied economic, social and spiritual problems.

Narayan's novels represent a section of Indian society where life is steeped in middleclass consciousness. His characters portray certain characteristic features - either they are docile, timid, adhering to traditional values and pacifist by nature or they appreciate vulnerability, violence and excessive greed for money. In this context we can expound the fact that Narayan studies economic problem minutely and exquisitely and thereby frames several economic groups. While Marco and Rosie represent the well-to-do class, Gaffur and Joseph denote the low wage earner. In the character of Sait, the money-lender, we find a wealthy person one who amasses and hoards wealth thriving upon the troubles of other persons. Then there are the rich lawyers, who make huge amount of money at the expense of the clients. This class is shown through the character of the star lawyer of Raju in the case instituted by Marco against him. Further, the whole episode in which Raju is taken to be the saint is set on the axis of economic life. In the words of Prof. Krishna Sen,

At first sight, the world of *The Guide* seems to be structured along simple binaries- Malgudi and Mangal, the town and the village, urban sophistication versus rural simplicity, modernity versus tradition, and cynicism versus faith. On closer inspection, each of these components reveals itself to be highly problematic, full of hybridities, fissures and contradictions. As with the binary that Shakespeare created in *As You Like It*, settings off the court against the Forest of Arden, but with positive and negative elements existing within each ideological space so here too Malgudi and Mangal stand for cultural locations that appear to be simple only from a distant view. (17)

At the beginning of the novel we observe a clash between the ideologies of the father and son. Raju wants to study in a fashionable school whereas his father thrusts him to a pyol

school. Raju says, “I don’t know on whose advice my father chose to send me here for my education, while the fashionable Albert Mission School was quite close by. I’d have felt proud to call myself an Albert Mission boy. But I often heard my father declare, 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” (86). The entire passage clearly indicates how westernization seeped into the sap of the society. Raju’s father prefers to send him to the traditional school where as Raju wants to enjoy the ambience and glamour of Christian School. The change in Raju’s attitude towards education advocates the impact of westernization on society. Raju’s father adheres to traditional method of education because it is his conviction that Raju would be able to build his career under the supervision of the ancient master. His father says, “Many students who have passed through the hands of this ancient master are now big officials at Madras, collectors and men like that...” (25). From the quotation we can deduce the fact that Raju’s father envisages his son to be financially independent with a social nomenclature. Here Narayan seems to be influenced by The Second Five Year Plan, Nehru-Mahalanobis Model, as it intended to foster a self-generating path of development with an assurance to common man that poverty, unemployment, disease and ignorance would be removed so that individuals could realize their potential with the extension of social and economic opportunities. Nehru in his economic thought advocates for modern Indian society having international economic and fiscal cooperation.

Along with *The Financial Expert*, the issue of monetary pursuit also regains momentum in *The Guide* where Raju, the protagonist of the novel, is possessed with greed for money. To ensconce this statement we have to retrace our steps to the beginning of Raju’s life when he initiates his life as a ‘Guide’. In one of the fascinating passages Raju articulates:

You may want to ask why I became a guide or when. I was a guide for the same reason as someone else is a signaller, porter, or guard. It is fated thus. Don’t laugh at my railway associations. The railways got into my blood very early in life. Engines, with their tremendous changing and smoke, ensnared my senses. I felt at home on the railway platform, and considered the stationmaster and porter the best company for man, and their railway talk the most enlightened. I grew up in their midst. (26)

From the very beginning of his life, Raju identifies himself with the railways-which mark him out as the post-colonial man. The railway originally symbolizes the intrusion of colonial culture and Western attributes into a traditional, a non-descript hamlet Malgudi. The new culture, new ideologies, new trends in society, gradually transform the idyllic mindset of Raju, and he embraces the transformation in society. It is through Raju that Narayan explores the problems and possibilities of spiritual transcendence in a materialist world. At the onset of his life Raju observes the extravagance of his father and the frugal nature of his mother. Raju’s father bought a brown pony for the luxury of the family but his mother shows her displeasure at the unnecessary expense of his father. The author comments “she viewed it as an extraordinary vanity on my father’s part and no amount of explanation from him ever convinced her otherwise. Her view was that my father had over-estimated his business, and she nagged him whenever he was found at home and the horse and carriage were not put to proper use”(10).

In this context we may say that Narayan was inspired both by Gandhian and Nehruvian economic thought. We can definitely reiterate the economic philosophy of Gandhiji when we come to the character delineation of Raju’s mother. One of the ingredients of Gandhian economic thought is simplicity or simple living and high thinking. Raju’s mother has a firm faith in this thought and so gets extremely displeased with extravagance. In the words of O.P.Misra:

Gandhi’s plea for minimization of wants is the only way that gives an escape from the dilemma of limited resources and unlimited wants. As he was fully aware of the evils

of Western Civilization-mad race for money, craze for money, craze for satisfaction of increasing wants, callous exploitation, sturdy imperialism, bloody carnage, and etc-he laid stress on curtailment of wants. (38-39)

This shows that in *The Guide* we observe both traditionalism and westernization in its thematic construction.

If we situate the novel against the backdrop of Post-Independence economic theories of India, we find the prevalence of both the Gandhian economic thought and the Nehruvian economic thought in the narrative of the novel. Raju's father and mother eulogizes the age old values of the society, on the contrary Raju shows his inclination towards the new values, supported by the influence of Industrial Revolution. Gradually as we move from the domestic life of Raju to his educational life we once again perceive the impact of Gandhian economic theory. While conversing with his master Raju says, "After all, self help is the best help... (17)". The articulation of Raju has great significance. Through Raju Narayan reiterates another ingredient of Gandhian economic theory – sanctity and dignity of labour. O.P. Misra observes that "Gandhiji made an advocacy for manual labour for all irrespective of caste, qualification and occupation. He was a thinker of a different genre who made labour as dignified as mental or intellectual labour (46)". Here Narayan reveals the consequences that we would have to face if we rely too much on machines for each and every requirement of our life. Although Narayan here adheres to the principles of Gandhiji, he is not against Industrialization and Economic Development of the nation. As we progress with the novel we can also get an idea of varied aspects that the novelist explores. Raju continues to introduce himself as a guide as from chapter five where he himself says: "I came to be called Railway Raju (19). The dramatic change in Raju's simple life comes with the appearance of Rosie. The introduction of railways paves the way for westernization to percolate into the traditional society of Malgudi. Initially Raju seems to be dedicated to his profession and considered the couple as the tourist who has come to get the beautiful view of Malgudi, but when he comes to know about the complexities of Marco and Rosie's marital life, he seems to empathize with her. As Raju moves about with them he comprehends the characteristic difference between Marco and Rosie. Rosie appears to Raju as an embodiment of emotion and sentiments. Her innocence and simplicity can be compared to 'Duchees' of 'My Last Duchees' by Robert Browning. She appreciates the beauty of nature and when she observes the rich vegetation, "She ran like a child from plant to plant and cries of joy, while the man looked on with no emotion. Anything that interested her seemed to irritate him (55)".

This characteristic difference between Rosie and Marco brings a catastrophe in their marital life. Rosie, despite being an M.A. in Economics and a talented dancer, is abused and ostracized by the patriarchal society as she hails from the class of 'Devdasis'. Just for being illegitimate she is looked down upon and categorized as a low caste. Even Marco, who willingly ties wedlock with her in spite of knowing her origin, affirms patriarchal norms by forcing her to lead a submissive life and also forbids her to perform dance in public functions. This is also an outcome of materialistic society in which values are compromised for wealth and status. According to Rosie the solemnization of her marriage is occasioned by Marco's status and position in society. Rosie says:

But all the women in my family were impressed, excited that a man like him was coming to marry one of our class, and it was decided that if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice. He had a big house, a motor-car, he was a man of high social standing; he had a house outside Madras, he was living in it all alone, no family at all; he lived with his books and papers (76).

Here Narayan through Rosie enunciates the position of women in Indian society. Moreover when Rosie shares her sorrows with Raju and looks down upon herself for originating from a low class, Raju seriously protests against it. He firmly says: I don't believe

in class or caste. You are an honour to your caste, whatever it may be (85). This statement of Raju testifies to the fact that he believes in true modernization. Gandhian revolutions against caste distinction and Nehruvian ideas of advancement in science and technology perhaps have influenced him and so he breaks the chain of conventions and accepts Rosie. He wants to go against society. Perhaps 'Sarvodaya' (Welfare of All), one of the ingredients of Gandhiji's economic thought must have influenced the author and so his spokesperson expresses his respect for every human being irrespective of their caste or creed. Gandhiji's 'Sarvodaya' (Welfare of All) or Gandhian Socialism, struggled for creating an integrated man instead of supporting an economic man of Adam Smith and political man of Machiavelli.

The character of Marco is projected in a very interesting way. He is a completely different man, away from the mundane activities of the world, emotive gestures, and sentimental outbursts. He is an embodiment of impracticability. On the contrary Rosie is a dreamer, lost in her world of love, emotion and compassion. In accordance with the above mentioned points we can consider this passage:

I was accepted by Marco as a member of the family. From guiding tourists I seemed to have come to a sort of concentrated guiding of a single family. 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 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. (84)

While staying so close to them Raju develops a familial attachment with Rosie and Marco. Love, sex, marriage play a significant role in the life of an individual and so they are presented in such a way in *The Guide*. Raju is tempted and allured by Rosie's mesmerizing or charismatic appeal and is slowly and steadily driven towards her. When their clandestine relationship is exposed, Marco shows extreme displeasure but does not misbehave or thrash her harshly. By his indifferent behaviour and attitude he compels her to move away from his life. Rosie's plight is pathetic as Marco never tries to understand her nature either as a human being or as his wife. To Marco Rosie is just a feminine character with no voice to express her feeling. Under such circumstances she takes shelter in Raju's house irrespective of the societal problems. Raju supports her physically and morally and for this he expresses his dissent against his mother and refuses to accept the codified laws of the society. After this tumultuous situation in Rosie's life she decides to perform art publicly. Her public performance brought name, fame and money in her life. Gradually due to her popularity Raju's craze for money increased and he makes her work like a machine. An unhealthy competitive spirit develops in Raju and he is only after the money that every dance concert fetches her. It is money which brings a climactic change in Raju's flourishing life. Raju even tries to forge Rosie's signature with roughish intention of misappropriating her jewels and converting them into easy wealth. Just like Margayya Raju's latent ambition is to become a rich man with high status in the society. Since status of a man in modern society is very much linked with money, both the protagonists try to achieve that in their life. Money works miracles and corrupts the man. In modern society corruption has become widely rampant, and Malgudi is no exception. Raju's status in the society as described in the novel is through Nalini's dance concerts. This excessive lust for money is an outcome of the materialistic and consumerist society. In the wake of economic progress, mankind usually moves towards financial prosperity and desire for money increases inexplicably compared to tradition, culture and social values. As we move into the deeper analysis of the socio-economic perspective of the novel we come across several components relevant to the principles of westernization and urbanization. C.D. Narasimhaiah in R.K.Narayan's *The Guide* espouses

this in his critical perception: “There is a clash of castes, classes and interests in the persistence of time-honoured customs and the old values on the one hand and the weakening modern social and moral structure on the other. All this is concretely realized in terms of interaction of characters” (113). Raju’s mental turmoil crops up owing to his obsession for Rosie. He himself says: “The only reality in my life and consciousness was Rosie” (132). He feels disinterested in his profession and seldom attends his shop. Altogether he is ripped between anxieties and sense of insecurity and this is clearly perceived by Gaffur, the taxi driver. Gaffur says: “You are becoming rather stuck-up nowadays, Raju. You are not the old friend you used to be”(118).Among the economic groups Narayan projects in the novel, Gaffur belongs to the low wage earner’s group but he is sensible and rational. He is firmly rooted in his soil and is extremely traditional. He is professional and dedicated to his service. Indirectly he tries very hard to rescue Raju from the emotional tentacles of Rosie. Gaffur in his interaction with Raju throws some stinging remarks against modernization, emancipation of woman and urbanization. Marco leaves Rosie in the hotel and keeps himself engrossed in his archeological survey. As a husband he fulfils no responsibility and keeps her in isolation. In this context Gaffur comments: “After all mechanical brakes, you know; I still maintain they are better than hydraulic. Just as an old, uneducated wife is better than the new type of girl. Oh, modern girls are very bold. I wouldn’t let my wife live in a hotel room all by herself if I had to remain on duty on a hilltop” (115).The remarks reveal Gaffur’s patriarchal attitude to life. Raju is broad minded and has a respectable approach towards the feminine gender but Gaffur believes in gender discrimination. He is sceptical and cannot rely on the feminine sex. He is against freedom of women and prefers to keep the rein of his wife in his hand. This is a unique feature of the traditional Indian society. The intrusion or percolation of western values in Indian Society was appreciated and accepted by a particular class of the society whereas majority of the population still adhered to old values of a traditional and rigid Indian society. It is a fact that in the post colonial era modernization and westernization was instrumental. The Nehruvians wanted to marry Indian culture and Western culture and sought to implement particular secular western set of cosmological beliefs whereas Ghandhians sought to resist modernization for fear as it would lead to westernization.

This controversy, contrasting features are clearly visible in the concrete interactions of characters. Gaffur and Raju are the epitomes of two extreme fundamentals of society-conventionality and modernity.

The promiscuous relationship between Rosie and Raju continues with intermittent compunctions of Rosie. Rosie is asked to leave the house, and she takes a shelter in Raju’s house. From then onwards Raju emerges as a guide of Rosie and his only objective is to fulfill her goal in life. Gradually Rosie becomes a reputed public figure and this increases the greed of Raju by leaps and bounds. Raju from the beginning shows his inclination towards high caste. Incidentally due to Rosie’s fame and prosperity, Raju also mingles with high class people. He comments: “They addressed me as ‘Raj’ familiarly.I liked to hobnob with them because they were men of money or influence” (115). Raju becomes greedy every day. He begins to consider Rosie as his own property to earn money. Rosie is implicitly portrayed as a monetary resource. Rosie is exploited lovingly by Raju and he enjoys the pomp and grandeur of the high class society. Rosie is just opposite in nature. She is a perfect worshipper of art. She enjoys the charm of dancing the whole day and captivating the audience in the hall but she is not after money. She does not imbibe the greed for money from Raju rather she wants to lead a simple and normal life just like a next-door girl. When Raju tries to develop her sense of superiority, so that she can reject and abhor the company of ordinary people, succinctly she says: “That’s more money, she said. I don’t care much for that sort of superiority” (189). Here Narayan wants to evoke Gandhian economic theory through the character of Rosie. In Gandhian economic theory man is a supreme consideration and life is

more than money. He wants to elevate modern economic philosophy from its materialistic base to a higher spiritual plane where human actions would be motivated by social objectives rather than by individualistic and selfish considerations. In order to make her understand the significance of money, Raju philosophically says: "If we don't work and earn when time is good, we commit a sin. When we have a bad time no one will help us" (190). In response to this convincing statement Rosie articulates something more philosophically: "Is there no way of living more simply" (195). This assertive statement of Rosie is a clear indication of her firm faith in Gandhian economic theories of 'Simple living and High Thinking'. Raju's ideologies are much more practical, quite oxymoronic to Rosie's ideas of life. Breaking away the adamant chains of rigidity imposed by Marco, Rosie is now like a free bird, exploring her life and art. Her life force is her art and she is controlled by the rationality of Raju. In the words of Prof. Krishna Sen: "The modern Malgudi society that Raju embraces during his days of prosperity is hardly any better, either from the point of view of morality or humanity" (195).

Raju fully utilizes the power of money to get the permission for liquor from the government which was prohibited at that time. The author says:

'Permit Holder' became a social title in our land and attracted men of importance around me, because the permit was a different thing to acquire. I showed respect for law by keeping the street window shut when serving drink to non-permit folk. All kinds of men called me 'Raj' and slapped my back... Through my intimacy with all sorts of people, I knew what was going on behind the scenes in the government, at the market, at Delhi, on the racecourse, and who was going to be who in the coming week. (184)

Thus Narayan endorses a very ruthless and merciless and uncompromising picture of official and social cooperation existing in the society at that time just after the independence. In this context Prof. Krishna Sen remarks:

To these people culture is a commodity that is valued for the material benefits that it brings—they would have looked down on Rosie and her dance had she still been a devdasi, but now they lionize her because she is rich and famous. To a considerable extent, Raju's moral lapse in bending the law to gain a personal advantage (when he forges Rosie's signature) is symptomatic of this morally lax society, and not just an individual aberration. (196)

As days passed Rosie gets fatigued with the shows, name, fame and glory. She feels "like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs, or a performing monkey" (84). She suffers from remorse for being untrustworthy to her husband, Marco. The traditional bond of marriage suddenly ignites her soul and she cries out: "After all, after all, he is my husband" (203). This is where the author extols the ethos of Hindu Marriage. She realizes her fault and pangs for her legitimate relationship with her husband. We can say Narayan espouses this relationship notwithstanding the influence of modernization. There is a constant shift in between conventionality and modernity in the novel. Marco exhibits his progressive nature when he allows his wife to stay alone in the hotel at the same time he is traditional when he defines her art as 'street acrobatics'.

Narayan in one of his short stories titled 'Selvi' from the collection 'An Astrologer's day' projects a similar character like Rosie. Here the story is named after the protagonist Selvi because all the events in the story, the various nature of human behaviour are centered round her. Here Mohan can be compared to Raju for his monetary pursuits. Like Rosie Selvi also is considered as a source of money. Mohan controls her financial matters and tries to accumulate more wealth by exploiting her talent. Selvi is benign, simple and her ignorant appeal gives Mohan more opportunity to exploit her. Regarding Mohan the author comments: "He was a financial expert who knew how to conjure up money and at the same time keep Income Tax at arm's length. Pacing his lawns and corridors restlessly, his mind

was always busy, planning how to organize and manoeuvre men and money” (201). Mohan is considered almost a replica of Raju in financial matters. Selvi is kept away from the society and almost confined in a room. He considers her as his own property towards financial achievements in life. The rhythm of Mohan’s prosperous life is changed by his own behaviour. When Selvi wants to contact her mother, he is reluctant to give her permission because of her difference in social standard. Eventually she gets the news of her demise and this brings a complete change in Selvi. For the first time she becomes voluble and she says: “Please leave me out of all this, leave me alone, I want to be alone hereafter. I can’t bear the sight of anyone...” (158). Thus Selvi revolts against her ruthless husband and her stoic resignation shows her self-determination and mental strength. She is quite similar to Rosie as she also rejects Raju for his act of forgery and the revolting figure of Rosie adds a new dimension to the novel. It seems that Narayan satirises the western influence on Indian life. East and West conflict is always prevalent in Narayan’s novels and *The Guide* is not an exception to it. Raju goes against the conventional society when she keeps Rosie as a mistress within his own premises. It is a fact in Indian life, society is of supreme importance and severe restrictions are imposed on the individual by the society. Raju breaks a moral code of the society and pays a huge penalty for it. If we consider the mythological background of Indian Literary Resource, we can astutely compare Rosie/Nalini with ‘Mohini’ because she entraps and seduces Raju into ways of life for which he was not prepared. Rosie in *The Guide* is portrayed as an embodiment of the ineffable principle of ‘maya’. She is a symbolic representation of ‘maya’, seducing and imprisoning Raju in his world of illusion. According to John Thieme :

The Guide employs a complex contrapuntal structure. The movement between the story of how Raju becomes a putative Sadhu in the present and his account of his past, which centres his activities as a tourist guide and his affair with Rosie, a married temple dancer from Madras, involves a dialectical interplay between the two modes of narration as well as the two actions. The first person narrative clearly enlists sympathy for a character whose transgressive behaviour might otherwise seem reprehensible, while the third person ‘camera eye’ view of him in his sadhu persona withholds judgment on the issue of whether the former tourist guide can now reasonably be viewed as a spiritual guide. (164)

The novel ends with Raju’s transformation from tourist guide to a spiritual guide. Raju is perceived to be a holy man by the innocent villagers of Mangal. Raju’s redemption comes with his attachment with villagers. At the end of the novel Raju becomes a saviour. The novel is open ended as it is not stated whether the village was totally drenched by heavy shower with the death of Raju, but at least we can state that Raju tries to save the villagers from their precarious state. In assuming the sincere responsibility of a redeemer despite his imperfections, Raju plays a significant role out of the versatility that he has shown in the novel. The theme of the novel can also be compared to Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*. In the words of Sarala Krishnamurthy: “Raju the protagonist of *The Guide* and Mugo the protagonist of *A Grain of Wheat*, respectively, stand in front of the general public exposed in their shameful ignominy. Both are surrounded by thrumming sea of humanity, the multitudinousness of life ebbing and flowing around them with absolute indifference and rigour. Raju dies with the hope of rain in his eyes and Mugo is led away by the prison guards”(107).

At the end of the novel Narayan has drawn the picture of his protagonist with the skill of an artist. Raju, the egoistical character throughout the novel, who exploits Rosie’s innocent character, ultimately succumbs to death in a pathetic way. He always struggled to gratify himself and at the culmination he struggles with his life for spreading happiness among the villagers of Mangal. The denouement is neither a rejection nor a defence of the Hindu faith-it

gestures towards the complexity of life, in which there are no simple solutions. The novel also follows the cinematic technique. The novel is interspersed with two personas of Raju. The sections leading up to and dealing with Raju's fast are narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator. It is followed by the confessional first-person account of his former life, as narrated to one of the villagers, Velan. I would like to end my article by contrasting the analysis of two critics- C.D. Narasimhaiah and G.S.Balarama Gupta. C.D. Narasimhaiah considers "Raju a transformed man in the end, someone who has attained authentic sainthood: With all his limitations Raju's is a rich and complex life-achieving integration at last..." (106) In contrast, G.S. Balarama Gupta believes that Raju is a "Selfish swindler, an adroit actor, and a perfidious megalomaniac..." (127).

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