

## The Existentialism in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

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Published in 1958, *The Guide* is the most acclaimed novel of R. K. Narayan that won him not only immense popularity but also the Sahitya Academy Award for 1960. Of all the Indian novelists writing in English, Narayan alone has the distinction of being a pure artist, one who writes specifically for the aesthetic satisfaction and not for any ulterior motives like propagating his political or economic agendas. In all his novels, he presents a slice of life as he sees it, neutrally and justly. However, one must not presume out of this, that Narayan does not have any vision of life. It only means that he does not construct his novels around an officious message. Consequently, his novels are entirely free from didactic tendencies.

R.K. Narayan incontrovertibly one of the most famous writer in India, perhaps the most well known and commented upon Indian English writer. His chronicling of the life at the “back of beyond” township of Malgudi has been recognized as a unique attempt to create the outer framework of a regional novel which essentially captures the spirit of humanity in general and India in particular. He told stories of simple folks trying to live their simple lives in a changing world. He is a traditional teller of tales, a creator of realist fiction which is often gentle, humorous and warm rather than hard hitting or profound. Life for Narayana is the greatest teacher. Most of his characters are in quest of inner peace and freedom from the collective.

Narayan is a penetrating analyst of human passions and human motives, which makes him a great critic of human conduct. He presents both the good and the evil and never takes sides. He holds a mirror to nature, and like a mirror shows nature truthfully without any distortion. Despite this, he does take the pain to communicate that bad or evil actions lead to similar consequences and good actions yield good results. There is no doubt that Narayan's vision is essentially moral, for the problems he sets himself to resolve in his novels are largely ethical. Besides, it usually revolves around Hindu traditionalism in Narayan's works, and involves a confrontation when that traditionalism is defied by the characters that entertain a more modern and more guilelessly individualistic values. Interestingly, in *The Guide* too, Narayan's main characters resist the traditional, religious and familial duties and then inadvertently drift towards their destined doom because in Narayan's system the aberration or disorder caused by the non-adherence of norms definitely leads to adverse outcomes. However, as stated Narayan's moral vision is not consciously or explicitly cultivated in his writing. They are incidentally and inherently part of his art of story telling and of the cultural environment, which is the background for all his stories. Thus, Narayan's message in *The Guide* also, has to be garnered by the readers themselves according to their own respective intuitions.

It is not less of a problem to define Existentialism satisfactorily. Existentialism is a style of philosophizing rather than a body of philosophical doctrines, the term first used by Kierkegaard. Existentialism is to be or not to be, to be satisfactory with the worlds around us or should we

change ourselves according to the ‘worlds’ or change these ‘worlds’ according to our need and desires. The world however is not the place alone. It is in fact the men, women, their actions and reactions that make a world, where each character perceives the world from a personal point of view and makes his choices.

In the novel, the protagonist Raju encounters questions of traditional existence when he sets out to realise his dreams and aspirations. He does not care to abide by the social and moral norms when it comes to Rosie. He seduces Rosie, the other man Marco's wife, begins living with him, and thus violates a major conventional order. The whole society including his own widowed mother stands against him but he puts a blind eye on the severity of the chaotic situation. He gets into financial trouble and becomes a kind of social outcast due to his relationship with Rosie but he refuses to mend his ways and thus fails to bring order and harmony in his own life and his surrounding society. Raju's life becomes a total failure and he earns the wrath of everyone around him because he deals erratically with each one of them. Krishna Sen aptly observes in this context: The theme revolves around Raju's failure to fulfil the moral responsibilities of being a guide\_\_ that is, to show the true path and interpret it correctly. (23)

Strikingly, Narayan's human experience and compassion constitute a mature existential vision which is vitalised by his humorous narration and given depth by his acceptance of traditional and religious values, which at various points in his narratives place his characters in moral relief. His humour discriminates between the permanent and the absurd; thus while Narayan gently mocks some peculiar, pretentious or hypocritical attachments to traditional customs, or displays some of the inept incongruities which result from a blunt attempt to amalgamate tradition and modernity he indicates time and again that the traditional way provides the best guarantee of joy and fulfilment. In the novel, Raju is portrayed as an ordinary and not-so-great human being and Narayan presents in a humorous yet serious vein, his clumsy attempts at realising his potential for greatness, and also the spectacle of his efforts towards maturity that is spiritually enlightening and morally uplifting. We see Raju maturing before us by stages, over a period of time. His self-awareness is hard earned but not in the way in which a tragic character earns it. The cleansing takes place no doubt but not in the heroic strain. As Raju is a kind of anti-hero, Narayan does not show this 'common man' reach the tragic height of Shakespeare's protagonists, although Raju's self awareness and the sense of social and spiritual fulfilment that results from it in the end, is something that astonishes us and elicits appreciation.

As a matter of fact, in “The Guide” there are many characters and many situations which could yield to existentialist interpretations. Rosie's desire and effort to ‘exist’ is nothing but an ‘existents’ effort to have her ‘free will’ and her survival as a dancer is a ‘beings’ fight with the existing world. Marco makes his choice and lives by it – committed as a research scholar. Raju's basic need is to ‘exist’ and to exist he has to act and so in the novel he acts as a guide, as a lover, as a manager and finally as a Swami. Rosie, Raju and Marco do not accept life as it comes to them. They assert their ‘free will’ and make their existential choices. Rosie has a passion for dancing, Raju loves ‘role playing’ as they come to him and Marco is committed to his research. All three deviate from the normal course of their lives sanctioned to them by society and the results are alarming Marco loses his wife. Rosie, her husband and Raju lands himself in jail. The ‘world’ comes in the way of their fulfillments.

Raju enjoys his works as a guide, but as soon as he comes in close contact with Rosie, he feels an urge for looking presentable, discards his ‘Khakhi’ ‘coat and dhoti’ and goes in for a

new dress. The world of the guide no more fascinates Raju and therefore, he creates another one – that of a lover. The lover in Raju now takes a back step and he becomes Rosie's manager in the show business. Similarly in the jail and later on as a Swami, Raju wonderfully lives in the world he gets into.

Raju finds himself in a new world but Marco and Rosie create a world of their own. Both of them have either 'wills'. Velan, Gaffur and others identify themselves with Malgudi – life style and have no nation of a world of their own. They simply live as a part of the collective consciousness. The world as Raju's mother and his maternal uncle accept, is the world of traditions and age old conventions. For them it is difficult to digest the fact of Rosie living in their house with Raju and that too dancing in the courtyard.

There is no human existence apart from the world in which he exists. The human existence is not a self-sufficient point of consciousness to which a world gets added on. To exist is already to be in a world. And if it is true that the human existent organizes his world it is also true that the world has an independence over against him, that there are elements in it which stubbornly resist man's efforts to comprehend things in a uniform order, that the world reacts on man as surely as man acts on the world. Sartre says:- Without the world there is no selfhood, no person; without selfhood, without the person, there is no world.

Narayan's knowledge of Indian classical literature, philosophy, religion, morals and ethics pervades his writing, but as said already he does not burden unnecessarily, his readers with discourses on his viewpoint and vision. This is perhaps so because Narayan views life's lapses not with any missionary kindness or zeal but with the understanding and sympathy of an artist who acknowledges various compulsions and complexities of life and then describes them accordingly, through his chimerical narrative modes. So behind the narrative mask of his novels, Narayan attempts to portray a vision of life, a life of opposing dualities, of appearance and reality, beliefs and betrayals. According to S. C. Sharma and Birendra Kumar, "Narayan uses myth as a technique to illustrate his moral vision of life. More interestingly, he always comes upon an ancient myth which enables him to express his view of the world and vision of life" (145). For instance, "Raju, in re-enacting the penances of the sages of yore, is trying to bring rain to end the drought. This is reminiscent of the story of the sage-king Bhagirath who conducted severe penance to bring down the goddess Ganga, a story found in both the Ramayana and Matsyapurana" (Sen 24).

Like Narayan's other novels, *The Guide* too begins with realistic settings and everyday happenings in the lives of a cross-section of Indian society, with characters of all sections. Gradually fate or chance, fault or blunder transforms mundane events to fantastic happenings. Unexpected disasters befall the hero as easily as unforeseen good fortune. The characters accept their fates with an equanimity that suggests the faith that things will somehow turn out happily. This, in a way implies the basic viewpoint of the novelist and depicts the approach towards life he seems to advocate. Raju, like a leaf drifts away with the wind of circumstances, reaches his nadir when he gets imprisoned, is given a second chance and then hopes for a better tomorrow. P. S. Ramana observes: Narayan has studied a character first on the test of social order i.e. in the context of his community, set up and social environment, secondly, he studies a character in relation to himself. (44)

Narayan's fiction combines different facets of life and experience. Narayan views human relations, traditional values and conventions as essential elements of an orderly human life. Besides, he also seems to believe that in order to attain harmony and peace in human life it is very essential to give due attention to relationships because man is basically a social animal and relations give stability to his existence. The marital relationship between Marco and Rosie breaks down because in the beginning, Marco neglects Rosie and later Rosie dares to break the chains and refuses to blindly respect and revere the tradition of marriage. The severing of relationship brings emotional trauma in its wake. Both husband and wife eventually suffer and repent for not giving due regard to their mutual relationship. The relationship between Marco and Rosie in *The Guide* is not based on conventional philosophic values as devised by Manu in Manusmriti—dedication, surrender, mutual respect and proper understanding. This couple does not share the ideal kind of bond and therefore, their relationship does not become everlasting and in Narayan's system, is bound to bring doom. Thus, the role of traditional values and philosophical touch to human relationship has been emphasised by Narayan apparently in *The Guide* too, like his other novels. Narayan presents the characters passing through a period of struggle and transformation but towards the end they attain a new vitality, which provides them with a new explication of common situations. The normalcy in the life of Raju comes, only because of his submission to traditional values and self-realisation. Further, Narayan's vision also embodies the great theory of order and disorder. He applies a pattern in almost all his novels including *The Guide*. This pattern is found in the relationship between Raju and his mother, Marco and Rosie and even Raju and Rosie. Order and peace prevails in these relationships in the beginning, but this order does not remain for a long time. These relationships do not attain any suitable dimension because the motives of the individuals involved in these relationships clash with each other and their viewpoints and attitudes differ from each other.

When these characters comprehend the transient nature of human relationship based on selfishness and contrary purposes, the relationships split. But by the end, as they learn the lesson that traditional values are mandatory for any human being to achieve salvation and self-realisation, they attain spiritual calm and tranquillity in life. Narayan shows that it is these values that help a person to maintain his or her equilibrium in times of discord, disagreement of motives and conflict. For instance, when in the novel, "Raju, the worldly man, turn into a Swami to perform the saintly act of penance, he negates the world of egoistical pleasure to seek in an act of goodness and God the ultimate goal of his life" (Mukhopadhyay 18). It is interesting to note that although, most of R. K. Narayan's characters have grounding in the cultural life of their society and have deeply absorbed and assumed the philosophical ways of life, there are some, who are outgoing and bold in their approach. Characters like Raju and Rosie besides cherishing the ancient values and retaining the traditional ways of life, do not yet hesitate in bringing about a change, adopting and adapting to the modern ways of life. But thankfully, when they cross the line of social dignity in doing so, they are pulled back on the right path by twisted circumstances and situations.

Evidently, Narayan's stories also emphasise the spiritual view of self-realisation and Moksha, which form an important subject in Indian philosophy too. The Bhagvad Gita and its Karma philosophy regard self – realisation or enlightenment as the absolute goal of man's life. Man's soul ultimately acquires concert with God and this unison gives him moral and intellectual perfection transcending the distinction between good and evil, between doubt and faith, between being and non-being. He becomes ready for his last release and attains the disposition of a saint.

Narayan has very artistically interwoven these thoughts in his novels including *The Guide*. He has presented the theory of renunciation, and liberation or Moksha in *The Guide* through the character of Raju, the tourist guide. He is initially entrapped in the illusory world when the materialistic philosophy guides and governs his life. He forges the signature of Rosie and is accordingly punished for the crime and sent to the jail. His foul deeds have the obvious outcome. He receives his ill fate as per his evil actions. But during his stay in the prison, he finds time for his moral and social transgression. The prison provides him an ideal opportunity to look into the innermost regions of his soul and shake off his material and social deceptions. Thereafter, Raju's character evolves gradually but this evolution becomes a ceaseless and ongoing process. By the end of the novel, Raju attains that selfless state like a saint, which sets the stage for his release from all the worldly shackles. Conclusively, *The Guide* is the story of the protagonist's journey through life. It is his journey through a maze of illusions and the attainment of the ultimate universal truth. The concept of liberation has been underlined again and again in the novel and the character of Raju becomes the most convenient vehicle for Narayan to elucidate human weaknesses and subsequent enlightenment. Human existence is nothing but the endeavour of 'individual-self' to become the 'pure-being'. The former is prevented from reaching the ideal state of 'pure-being' because of ignorance, which drives it into the labyrinth of illusion. We tend to blindly seek our true self but we can attain it only through the proper perception of life's ultimate goals. The individual soul recognises the boundless reality existing forever behind the cosmic mask of illusion and realises that its own true nature is identical with the pure-being. This self-realisation makes it achieve the ultimate freedom. Through Raju, who eventually renounces his physiological needs and offers to sacrifice his life for the well-being of others, Narayan invites us to share the infinitude of Raju's liberation which unifies him with the cosmos.

Man as being-in-the-world and concerned with the world, is not content to leave things lying around. He finds them at hand, so to speak as potentially serviceable to his needs. He is constantly expanding his world and making it more complex by incorporating new things into the range of his concern. This is what Raju does in this novel.

In the existential world of 'The Guide' Marco, Rosie and even Raju 'stand out' in breaking out from their routine concern of everyday life. All three transcend their immediate concerns for achieving, a higher goal. Marco shines in the field of learning, Rosie becomes a star in the world of art and Raju sparkles in the world of religion and faith. The common denominator in the success story of these three remarkable anticrafts of R.K. Narayan is that they detached themselves from their routine concerns, made their decisions and pursued them zealously. Velan, Gaffur and others only stick to their routines and so do nothing spectacular.

Among the Indian novelists in English Arun Joshi and Anita Desai come very close to being existentialist novelists. R.K. Narayan is not by design an existentialist novelist existential principles seep into his fiction just by the way. The situations and conflicts in 'The Guide' are the clashes of 'will' and 'freedom' and so are of an existential nature.

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