



Role of Women in R. K. Narayan's Novel *The Guide*

Saroj Bala

Assistant Professor in English,
Govt. College Nalwa, Hisar (Haryana).

sarojbhar@gmail.com

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Abstract:

R. K. Narayan, an important figure in Indian English literature, expertly depicted the complexities of women's lives through his diverse and nuanced female characters. R.K. Narayan's writing stands out for its realistic and deeply layered portrayal of women. By focusing on the everyday social realities of his time, his works highlight how women constantly struggled against rigid societal expectations to claim their own space and autonomy. Crucially, Narayan skillfully captures the psychological motivations that drive these characters, making their struggles both realistic and deeply impactful. Narayan's works explore women's roles within the family and society, tracking their gradual maturity and personal growth within a rigid social framework. In his novels, R. K. Narayan portrayed his female characters with a full range of attributes, creating a distinctive impact on the representation of women in society. R. K. Narayan in his novels explores many female characters – modern as well as traditional and the differences in their thought patterns, habits, ambitions, beliefs, conduct, aspirations and their way of looking at life. By providing a comprehensive analysis of "The Guide", this study contributes to a broader understanding of R. K. Narayan's literary works and their impact on Indian literature and society. In this paper, we will analyse R.K.Narayan's novel *The Guide* to analyse his depictions of women and their role in Indian society. An examination of the characters and themes throughout the book, we will discuss how Narayan's representations demonstrate an evolving worldview within the context of both tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Female character, Literature, Women, Struggles and Indian society.

Introduction

R.K.Narayan, one of the leading contributors to Indian English fiction, has depicted a wide range of women characters in his fiction. His novels clearly reflect the social realities and structural challenges faced by women in Indian society. Narayan's fiction proves that a male author can successfully navigate and depict the complex emotional landscapes and psychological needs of female characters. Graham Greene, a well-known English writer and journalist, and Narayan's mentor and friend, shares his views on Narayan's writings:

"Whom next shall I meet in Malgudi? That is the thought that comes to me when I close a novel of Mr Narayan's. I do not wait for another novel. I wait to go out of my door into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and a certainty of pleasure a stranger approaching, past the bank, the cinema, the haircutting saloon, a stranger who will greet me I know with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open a door on to yet another human existence."

His novels are a deep exploration of the female psyche. After India's independence, rapid social changes took place, and a new kind of Woman emerged as a force in every aspect of life. Even today, women's issues dominate the literary world. In his novels, Narayan examines the socio-familial positioning of women and their changing roles in both family and society. He has successfully presented the whole milieu of Indian society and has given a rich, opulent plethora of women. Britta Olinder, Univeristy of Gothenburg, writes about Narayan's female characters:

"They fall into three main groups: first, domineering powerful women; second, powerless, frustrated, oppressed women; and third, women accepting the system—in this case, the Indian society of strong masculine dominance –but at the same time finding ways and means to informal, indirect control of their situations." (97)

His novels show the evolution of Indian women from traditional to modern and progressive identities. R.K.Narayan portrays the many aspects of a woman's personality. His female characters reflect his attitude towards life, shaped by certain cherished Indian social values. Narayan is sensitive to the issues and problems faced by women within both the domestic and public spheres. In his memoirs, *My Days*, he talks about the emancipation of women, and he names it the Women's Lib Movement:

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the "Women's Lib" movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength.

A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances (119). He gives great importance to chastity in marital relationships. He seems to be against pre-marital and extra-marital relationships, as traditional Indian society does not accept these ideas. Narayan, who believes in loyalty, demands faithfulness in marriage. Those who cross the boundaries of faithfulness disrupt the normal order of society and bring unhappiness to themselves, their families, and society. Any deviation from the institution of family and marriage harms domestic life. This can be seen in the relationships of Sampath and Shanti in *Mr Sampath*, Raju and Rosie in *The Guide*, and Vasu and Rangi in *The Man Eater of Malgudi*. In *The Guide*, the romantic relationship between Rosie and Raju ultimately ends in mutual disillusionment and frustration. Rosie, the female protagonist, feels guilty for breaking the social, marital, and moral rules. While living with Raju, her lover, she experiences a deep sense of confusion. Eventually, she distances herself from Raju and returns to her husband Marco, realising, "After all, after all, he is my husband... I do and I deserved nothing less. Any other

husband would have throttled me then and there. He tolerated my company for nearly a month, even after knowing what I had done." (179)

The positioning of women in the Indian subcontinent is deeply rooted in ideological frameworks that celebrate the female archetype as Nari Shakti. It is believed that God resides there, where a woman is worshipped. This vision of women reflects our rich cultural heritage. Hence, women always deserve a significant place in our hearts. She constitutes nearly half of the world's population. There is hardly any work of art or literature where the artists have not spoken about women. In fact, she is a mystery that has puzzled humanity for centuries. All great dramatists and novelists in the world's literature have presented women in various ways. We are always in awe of their understanding.

He holds a unique position in the world of Indo-English literature. On many levels, he stands alone and cannot be compared to any other writer. He prefers the everyday humour that reflects the lives of middle-class people in South India rather than dramatic situations. From the outside, he seems like an ordinary man, one of the countless educated individuals in South India. Even from the inside, he looks like an average person. However, despite having nothing particularly remarkable about him, this humble individual rose to become one of the best, if not the greatest, Indo-English novelists of all time. Even though he is famous and travels the world, he still finds time to write about the simple, unrefined people of Malgudi, the village that serves as his imaginative backdrop. His novels are set in this village, which inspires his writing.

R.K.Narayan's *The Guide* was published in 1958. R.K. Narayan's 1958 masterpiece, *The Guide*, remains his most celebrated and intensely analysed work within the Indian English literary canon. Surely it represents the peak of the author's ability to manage ambiguity and irony, while it introduces a more daring narrative technique and allows for some contemporary

satire, as well. A critical examination of these three female characters from a feminist perspective exposes how their identities are structurally shaped by a male-centric worldview. Historically, both readers and critics of *The Guide* have shared this bias, consistently analysing the novel with Raju positioned at the narrative center. The narrative irony, structural ambiguity, and satire deployed in the delineation of Raju successfully elevate his status, albeit at the critical expense of the novel's female characters. The characterisation of Raju's mother successfully represents the orthodox Hindu womankind and reinforces such an image at the same time. Narayan makes no deliberate attempt to alter the traditional archetype of the Brahmin mother; instead, her character functions strictly within the established bounds of caste and domestic orthodoxy. The characterisation of Rosie serves to represent and reinforce the Devadasi tradition, positioning women as objects of beauty and sexuality. On the other, she is blamed for all misfortunes Raju experiences. The truth is the other way around; It is Raju who is responsible for the ruin of Rosie's life. The characterisation of Velan's sister represents the quintessential image of rustic womanhood. Collectively, these female characters reinforce prevailing social stereotypes regarding women's roles in society.

In the novel, we observe how Rosie's life was profoundly shaped by her mother's foundational decisions. She was arranged to marry a man who had recently married himself, due to societal pressures and the need to follow traditional norms. This man showed no interest in Rosie and was unable to understand her emotions or sexual feelings. Rosie's mother chose Marco as her daughter's husband because he was a responsible, respected, well-known, and wealthy individual in society. She never asked Rosie about her preferences or desires and made the marriage decision without considering her daughter's wishes. The writer illustrates through the story that many parents in society, like Rosie's mother, do not take their daughters' feelings into account when arranging marriages. They believe that marrying into a rich family will ensure happiness for their daughters. However, after the marriage, many women end up in situations

similar to Rosie's, highlighting the negative impact of such practices. Rosie's journey from a neglected wife to a celebrated dancer shows how the role of women has changed and how they have fought against the strict rules of patriarchal society. Her change into Nalini represents her search for freedom and the ability to express herself through art. Her story is about her fight against the expectations of society and her family. Her relationship with Raju shows the shift from being controlled by men to finding her own identity as a successful dancer. Rosie's path is also about discovering who she really is, and balancing her personal goals with what society expects. Becoming Nalini means she finds her true self through her art. Her realisation of her own strength and ability to succeed on her own marks her growth. Rosie/Nalini's character is often looked at from a feminist point of view, showing her struggle for independence and self-expression in a society that is ruled by men. Her move from a passive wife to an independent artist is a way of showing how patriarchal systems limit women's lives.

The novel showcases multiple women with varied roles –from supportive wives and loving mothers to cunning daughters-in-law –ultimately displaying the complex and diverse nature of Indian women's lives. In addition to Rosie, another female character to consider is Raju's mother. She represents a different aspect of womanhood in Indian society, as she showcases traditional values, cultural beliefs and the role of women as caretakers and nurturers within the family structure. In R.K.Narayan's works, traditional gender roles in Indian society are frequently brought to light, especially through his well-crafted characters. Narayan's *The Guide* vividly illustrates these gender dynamics as Rosie navigates the restrictive boundaries of her marriage and career.

The book "The Guide," which he wrote, was adapted into a successful film. This matters because Rosie travels to Malgudi by rail, bringing a touch of modernity to the otherwise traditional and unchanging culture of Malgudi. Her name, which is Westernised, has strange origins, which also shows the social mix she represents. Raju used to wonder.

– “*Why did she call herself Rosie? She did not come from a foreign land. She was just an Indian, who should have done well with Devi, Meena, Lalitha or any of the thousand names we have in our country. (Narayan 9)*”

Rosie in *The Guide* is a girl from a family of temple dancers, for girls from such families, marriage and family life were seen as an illusion at the time. However, Rosie's mother was a bit more sensible than other women from such families. She had different expectations for Rosie. She did not want her daughter to suffer through the pain and humiliation that she herself had experienced as a temple dancer. Rosie's mother sent her to school and helped her complete her postgraduate studies. Rosie's mother knew very well that education could empower a woman and free her from the stigma of being a 'public woman'. Women from such families were looked down upon in society. They were not treated with the same respect as women from more respectable families. Rosie herself shares this painful truth with Raju when he asks her about her family background. She says, "*We are not considered respectable; we are not considered civilised*" (84).

A pivotal moment in Rosie's life occurs post-graduation, when she must decide between the artistic freedom of dance and the societal safety of a traditional marriage. A newspaper advertisement changed the course of her life. Marco, who was looking for an educated, good-looking girl without caste restrictions, seemed like a gentleman with progressive ideas. When Marco proposed to Rosie, both Rosie and her family were surprised by this blessing. However, all the women in her family were impressed and excited that a man like Marco was marrying one of their own. It was decided that, if necessary, they would be willing to give up their traditional art. Rosie also felt that this marriage would free her from the humiliation and stigma of her birth.

In the Indian concept of marriage, being a wife brings respect and status in society. Marco is not just a rich man; he represents institutional patriarchy, bourgeois respectability, and the stagnation of tradition. To become the wife of such a rich man, Rosie felt very lucky. However, that did not last long. The reality differed from her expectations. Wifhood gradually turned into a burden for her. She was just a partner to Marco, never a beloved wife. His interest in archaeology and painting left little room for her. Marco was deeply absorbed in his studies and never paid attention to Rosie. Rosie and her husband, Marco came to Malgudi from Madras to see a King Cobra and to study the cave paintings. Marco is more interested in the sculptured figures in the caves than in his wife, who is a living embodiment of these images. What Marco really wants is a wife like a servant. Marco neglects Rosie totally. He ignores the fact that there is another human being with him. She is given beastly treatment by her husband. Rosie says:

I followed him, day after day, like a dog – waiting on his grace. He ignored me totally. I could never have imagined that one human being could ignore the presence of another human being so completely. I followed him like a shadow, leaving aside all my own pride and self-respect. (151)

Raju pointed this out when Rosie told him about Marco's interests in painting and art, saying, *"But not one which can move its limbs, I suppose"* (86).

Raju was right in judging Marco.

As a husband, he showed no concern for Rosie's feelings. Rosie was passionate about dance. The art of dance was a part of her being, flowing in her blood. But Marco forbade her from dancing. He could not even tolerate her speaking about dance. In fact, Marco never responded positively to anything Rosie liked or disliked. Anything that interested her seemed to irritate him (76).

Thus, Rosie shows herself to the audience in the conclusion as an extremely brave woman. Rosie has the capacity to break out from the clutches of males who are both indifferent and predatory toward her. She refuses to conform to society's unfair standards, which, combined with her employment, represent an effort to enslave her. Her work allows her to cultivate her own unique identity, which is the single most important aspect of her life. As a result, she may be seen as forerunner of the self-assured, hard-working Indian women of today who are also respectful of the traditions of their culture and appreciative of their heritage. They are able to successfully juggle the obligations associated with their career and those of their family. They do what is expected of them, but they are not hesitant to break with tradition and set whole new benchmarks if the custom seems to be impeding their own development in any manner. Rosie is a pioneer in each and every sense of the word when it comes to the Indian women of this new century. It is possible to argue that Narayan's compassion for women reflects a novelist's apolitical perspective on the plight of women in general and, more specifically, of traditional Hindu women who are fettered by custom and cultural conventions.

Conclusion

R.K.Narayan helps his readers visualise the conflicts in his stories. He is no exception in this regard. R.K.Narayan had a deep interest in the lives of the middle class. Because of this, he recognised the importance of women, who are the source of life. He had deep respect, love and sympathy for women in general, and especially for Indian women. R.K.Narayan believed that men and women are complementary to each other. One cannot exist without the other. He did not start from the idea of equality, but rather from the idea of equal opportunity. In Malgudi, women are not just shadows trailing behind men, but are individuals in their own right. He supports the idea of innate equality between men and women. As a skilled craftsman, Narayan develops his characters well. The scope of the novel is broad, and this is made possible by the variety of characters he provides. Each character is led toward their fate according to their

worth. The writer upholds the principle of poetic justice in the development of his characters. Each has a clear sense of individuality. Some are drawn with intense depth, while others are not. The main characters naturally receive the best of the writer's talent. Narayan is not a genius, but he achieves powerful effects through careful planning and strong narrative skill, which saves him from this limitation. Aside from the character of Rosie, who is well-rounded, all other characters are flat. Moreover, the hero is drawn in a flatly manner.

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