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The Guide as a reflection of Indian society

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ABSTRACT

The essence of literature is to enable one to think and draw parallels between the text in concern and the day and age one lives in. This paper aims at achieving the afore-mentioned end, by examining the plethora of themes present in the novel. It also throws light on the characters who serve as mouthpieces for all that Narayan aims to convey through the text. Set against the backdrop of a fictional Indian town, the novel is a vivid description of all that the Indian society stands for.

Key Words : Indian society, Archetypes, Tradition, Religion, Gender discrimination

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The Guide (1958) by R.K. is centered around India - its landscape, culture, traditions and conventions, together with the gradual shift in the ethos owing itself to modernity. While also considering these aspects, it is essential to club together with them, the facet of evils present in the society. This paper attempts to examine the novel as a manifestation of Indian society, through the characters and themes.

The novel is based on a real incident that took place in Mysore, a few years before the novel was written. Krishnaraja Sagar, an enormous reservoir, had dried up on account of a severe drought. As a last resort, the municipal council held a mass prayer for rain. A group of Brahmins stood in knee-deep water in the river Kaveri, fasted, chanted and prayed continuously for a period of eleven days. The twelfth day saw rain, bringing relief to the countryside.

The characters in *The Guide* are archetypal of the society in which it is set. The protagonist, Raju is representative of the large Indian populace who constantly strive to attain fame and wealth. Though belonging to a lower middle class family, Raju is not deterred in his dreams to make it big, and he eventually realizes his dream through Rosie. In the later part of the novel, when Raju disguises himself as a sage, Narayan hints at the "pseudo religious values in society" (Singh 124) and the mask worn by those who portray themselves as deeply religious and pious, be it sages or priests. He is further a symbol of those who have great regard for religion and its dictates, irrespective of the degree to which they practice it in their lives.

Rosie, the daughter of a temple dancer, and a dancer herself, portrays the archetypal Indian woman who is ready to forego her dream of becoming a dancer if her husband Marco becomes more

inclined to their conjugal life. Though she gets involved in a relationship with Raju, she is not completely rid of her feelings for Marco. Rosie also stands for the women who are traditionally temple dancers or devadasis, and were considered “public women” (Narayan 88). They are thought to be dedicated to the temple and the gods, but are exploited physically by the priests. This brought about an attachment of immorality with the profession of dancing and those associated with it. Rosie also stands for the Indian woman who will slowly, but surely break free from the chains of male domination, once she realizes her strength. “A woman is not a gadget by any chance is evidently revealed in the character of Rosie who is replete with desires and spirits” (Ramteke 55).

Marco who comes across as “curt and taciturn” (Prasad 7) is symbolic of the average Indian for whom family takes a backseat, while profession and its demands are the driving forces. He becomes so involved in his work as an archaeologist that he pays little or no attention to his wife, Rosie. “Dead and decaying things seemed to unloosen his tongue and fire his imagination, rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs” (Narayan 85). Though he appears to be magnanimous by marrying a girl who otherwise has no social respect, he is like most Indian males who are of a conservative frame of mind and it is precisely this line of thought that leads him to forbid Rosie from dancing. “The woman’s point of view has been totally consigned to oblivion by Marco” (Ramteke 55). Though he appears to be least concerned about anything besides his work, he is, in reality, “venomous and vindictive” (Narayan 226) and it is his actions that change the course of Raju’s life.

The character of Raju’s father is typical of the Indian men who struggle on a daily basis so as to fend for the family. His mother, too, is a prototype of the Indian women who are confined to the four walls of the house and sacrifice their own interests for that of the husband and children. She is seen as constantly “adjusting herself to the unpredictable moods of his father” (Singh 122) and “adjusted herself to the status of a widow” (Narayan 49) after the death of her husband. The Indian ethos of hospitality is also largely reflected in her. Though she harbours a dislike for Rosie on account of the latter belonging to the low caste of dancers, she continues to provide food and shelter to her guest. However, her actions which fuel the suppression of Rosie are what Narayan draws on to epitomize her as the woman responsible for the suppression of another woman. When she seeks help from her domineering brother to deal with Rosie, she reveals the weakness of the traditional Indian woman, who relies on domineering males to resolve her problems.

Velan is the epitome of innocence and vulnerability in the novel. From the beginning of the book when he comes across Raju to the end when the truth of the latter is revealed, he is depicted as one who is extremely in awe of the Swami. “Even after listening to the past life of Raju, Velan continues to acknowledge him as Swami; he took Raju’s confession as a mark of humility and godliness” (Christy 1173). He, thus, goes on to become “a prisoner of his own credulity” (Ramteke 60). Narayan, through the character of Velan, directly indicates the manner in which rogues disguised as sages and priests exploit the masses. This is reiterated through the village folk who, like Velan, blindly believe the Swami and all that he says. However, it is because of Velan that Raju becomes a saint. He is Raju’s “spiritual guide and introduces spiritual transformation in him” (Jha 111).

Gaffur, the taxi driver, and Mani, Raju’s secretary, represent the small section of the Indian society that is loyal to those whom they are associated with. The former, while also constantly staying by Raju’s side as a friend, reprimands him for the mistakes he commits. Mani, too, shows his unconditional support in the face of Raju’s predicament on being arrested, by being the only one to visit him in jail.

The adjournment lawyer and the Sait stand for the group of people who are only concerned with climbing the ladder of success, often at the expense of others.

The station master and the teacher at the pyol school represent the corruptness present in the Indian society. The former “obtained unlimited credit for anything” (Narayan 50) that he and his children took from Raju’s shop and also got his reading material from there, while the latter asked for

gifts in both cash and kind from the parents of the boys. The man who took care of the horse that Raju's father had bought was also corrupt and it becomes evident that he was misappropriating their funds. They portray the attitude of most Indians who only help others to get something in return, or take up a task solely for their advantage.

Narayan intricately weaves the themes along with the characters in the novel to paint a picture of Indian society that is closest to reality. The most evident theme in the book is that of the significance of tradition, culture, the rigid norms associated with them and the strict adherence to the same. Indians believe that violation of traditional beliefs and values leads to disorder while conformity brings order. This is best illustrated through the character of Raju who "repudiates the tradition" (Alam 2) and is "fated to be punished as he shirks from his moral obligations" (Singh 130). He deviates from tradition, has an illicit relationship with Rosie, disrespects his mother, and commits a crime. Later, when Raju conforms to tradition, sees the faith of the villagers and attains spirituality, the chaos in his life is replaced by order, happiness and finally, the salvation of his soul.

The aspect of family as being the center of life in the Indian society is seen throughout the novel. This is visible right from the beginning when Raju's father is portrayed as a family-oriented man who toils endlessly so that he can provide for his family. Raju's mother too, is seen to be a very devoted wife and mother. Furthermore, the degeneration of their marital life and the deprivation of "domestic contentment" (Dnyate 163) were what led to Rosie's involvement in an illicit relationship with Raju who gave her "a new lease of life" (Narayan 130). She married Marco on the advice of her family because he "had a big house, a motor-car, he was a man of high social standing" (Narayan 89). This is characteristic of most Indian marriages which appear to be more like a business deal rather than a union of souls. Narayan concerns himself, to a large extent, with the life of middle class Indian society, thereby rendering the novel as greatly relevant to most Indians.

The notion of hospitality is of great value in the context of the Indian society where a guest is placed next to God. Though Raju's mother detests Rosie whom she considers as being "a bad sort" (Narayan 72), she does not refrain from making the latter feel comfortable. In a similar way, Velan and the other villagers of Mangala go an extra mile to arrange food for the Swami, though they themselves suffer and starve on account of the drought. A slight hint of the aspect of hospitality is also seen through the character of Joseph, the caretaker of Peak House who, though in return for money, takes the best care of those who come to live there.

Religion is another theme that Narayan uses to further the novel. Most characters in *The Guide* appear to be deeply rooted in their faith. But this piety is merely superficial and what exists beneath the surface is a shallow interest in religion. What religion propagates is seldom practiced by the followers. The author also shows how those who are at higher levels in the religious hierarchy exploit "gullible masses of rural India" (Ramteke 59), like the villagers of Mangala through whom Narayan shows the "undaunted faith of the community in the spiritual power of an ascetic" (Dnyate 53). The placing of pictures and idols of gods and goddesses in the houses and places of work, and beginning the day with prayer also show the importance given to religion. Further, the many superstitious beliefs and the belief in fate that the reader comes across through the course of the novel have their base in religion.

Gender discrimination is largely discussed in the novel, though by means of subtle instances. Raju's mother is seen as a character who is continually dependent on the males in her family - first on her husband, then her son, and finally her brother. However, the fact that she admires Rosie for being educated and for having "established her own individuality" (Ramteke 59) shows that she too, has the desire to break free from the restraints of patriarchal society and from the "traditional role of a suppressed Indian wife" (Ramteke 59). Rosie, too, is subdued by her male counterparts at different levels of life - first, by the men who consider her as a mere sexual object because she is a dancer, second, by her husband who regards her as being subservient to him and third, by Raju's mother who, though being a woman herself, reminds Rosie of how a woman should conduct herself and

condition her own mind to believe that she is below the man. At a certain level, even Raju objectifies Rosie when he says, "She was my property" (Narayan 195). The fact that only boys are sent to school in both Malgudi and Mangala and girls are left out shows the scenario of contemporary Indian society where, especially in rural areas, girls are still not at par with the boys on the didactic front.

The concept of art and the need to preserve it is reinforced through the character of Marco whose priority is his profession of archaeology. In the present era of globalization, man is so immersed with enhancing the products of industrialization, and often does so at the expense of cultural heritage, including art. History is almost entirely forgotten by the modern man. Narayan implicitly brings forth this issue to the readers, urging them to realize the importance of and prospects that come with art. The fact that the author shows Rosie attaining unimaginable heights through her skill of dancing is indicative of the fact that art, in whatever form it may exist, has both aesthetic values and pecuniary advantages attached to it. Again, through the dance of the king cobra when the snake-charmers play tunes on the flute, the Bharatnatyam dance form, the reverence given to ancient works of art such as the *Natya Shastra* of Bharat Muni, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, Narayan stresses on indigenous culture. Together with the richness of nature, art also contributes to the field of tourism as seen in the novel.

The ulterior motive of those in power in the Indian society is seen in Narayan's novel when the "government machinery is brought in full swing" (Ramteke 59) and special arrangements are made for the fasting Swami, during the "moment of his redemption" (Mehrotra 208). The government officials depute doctors for him though they do nothing for the villagers who are also faced with the aftermath of the drought. Politicians in India are often seen rushing to affected spots and expressing their sympathy for those affected, through their promises which are hardly ever materialized. Getting media coverage and publicity is a reigning factor as far as Indian political strategy is concerned, thus serving the purpose of gaining popularity among the masses. Coupled with this theme is that of undue importance given to the rich and the advantages they take from the social status they bear. "The rules and government laws enacted from time to time are meant only for the have-nots; the rich remain entirely untouched" (Ramteke 62). Raju himself attained power and misused the influence that came with it.

The Guide acts as a mouthpiece for Narayan who is a propagandist for education. He also revolts against the sub-standard education that most children of unprivileged classes in India receive. This thought draws parallels when Raju compares the appalling state of the pyol school to the conducive atmosphere of the Albert Mission School. It should be noted here that the parents sent their children to the pyol school not because they wanted to educate them, but because the teacher would keep them "in his charge for the major part of the day" (Narayan 29). With the arrival of the railway facility in Malgudi, Raju's father puts an end to his education for the "sake of economic prosperity and security" (P. Singh 42). The author further asserts the importance of education when the Swami asks the teacher in Mangala to start evening classes for the boys of the village. The words of the teacher sum up the sad plight of the Indian education system when he says that it is "no different from what it used to be" (Narayan 46).

In most of his novels, Narayan illustrates Malgudi as a character. The setting is Indian in many respects. The impact of modernity on India has been dealt with by Narayan and is shown through the changes that Malgudi sees. But Narayan keeps his characters "within the grip of culture" (Christy 1174). Malgudi and its tradition together stand for Indian society as a whole. The village of Mangala, too, has its own significance as the name itself "seems to be charged with spiritual ardour" (Dnyate 56). It is depicted as being extremely serene with a river, a temple, a village, and becomes complete with the arrival of the Swami.

Narayan uses several other oblique nuances of Indian society in the novel. One such instance is the presence of betel leaf shops in railway stations which act as meeting places not only for the passengers but also for others who work at the station. It is here that people often discuss issues

ranging from the rumours within their society to the politics and governance of the country. The betel leaf shop of Raju's father is thus, typical of the same.

The afore-mentioned aspects contribute to the idea of Narayan's novel, *The Guide*, being a poignant example of all that Indian society constitutes. It provides a realistic picture as the author concentrates on both the bright and the dark sides of India, through the "many sins and many virtues of its characters" (Christy 1173). He weaves the two together with remarkable craftsmanship and this adds to the universality of the novel.

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