

## **The Interaction of Romance and Reality in R. K. Narayan's The Guide**

**Himadri Sekhar Roy**

*Department of English, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet 3114, Bangladesh*

**Email:** roy-eng@sust.edu

The aim of this paper is to reveal how R. K. Narayan deals with romance and reality in his novel, The Guide. His vision of life is portrayed through presenting characters realistically. His romantic view of life is mingled with social reality in a very dynamic way. The characters are emotional in nature and at the same time they are conscious about their social reality in which they can get themselves involved very successfully.

R. K. Narayan, a prolific writer of India wrote his novel The Guide in English and got the highest honour Sahitya Akademi Award of the country. In India up to first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century it was difficult to get acceptance through English writings by the native Indians. Though writers like Toru Dutta, Sir Aurobindo, R. N, Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Raja Rao, Manohar Malgonkar, Santha Rama Rau, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Desani, Dom Mares and Rajan were very prominent. The most interesting thing is that Narayan was born in the heart of south India; brought up in orthodox surroundings, spoke Tamil at home and Kannada in the streets; learnt English from, by and large, imperfect Indian teachers of English; did not even go to an English medium Convent or Public school, where English is generally better taught than in other schools; was not particularly brilliant in examinations; had hardly traveled beyond Madras for a good many years; mostly walks about in South Indian costumes in which he feels most comfortable; thrives on rice and sambar and raw supari (typical south Indian food). What important to Narayan is that he has observed the changes in society taking place in South India specially in Malgudi and has mingled characters from different cultures and their conflicts in his novel The Guide. Raju and Rosie were brought up in different ways and their understandings were quite dissimilar. Even the conflicts between Marco and Rosie are also portrayed in a significant way. Narayan has done this very artistically. Many researchers have worked on R. K. Narayan and the importance was given on his style and art of presenting Malgudi in naturalistic way. He is also placed by critics called 'Regional Writers' is a prominent example of literatures dealing with nature and landscape. Some of the internationally known major writers such as Thomas Hardy (depicting the region of Wessex County) and William Wordsworth (the Lake District), American novelist William Faulkner (Yoknapatawapha) and Indian fictionist R. K. Narayan (Malgudi) are admired. These authors show not only various facets of landscape, but they also show how company of landscape shapes human life and character. R. K. Narayan has portrayed the conflicts of the characters from this perspective where romance and reality are intermingled needs to be discussed and I have tried to focus on this matter especially with Raju and Rosie.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how R. K. Narayan's The Guide acquires a rich substance of life and attains the status of a major work of art through a constant interaction between romance and reality. Narayan's unified sensibility enables him to conceive romance realistically and present 'smiles and tears together'<sup>1</sup> with artistic care. He works out a synthesis of these two facets in order to secure a broad based vision of life. He sees the world as 'a mere balance of forces'<sup>2</sup>. In The Guide, the romantic view of life and the so called social reality impinge, on each other, in a dynamic way. The novelist shows a delicate poise in the handling of the 'simultaneous awareness of two states of being'<sup>3</sup>. The Guide is truly an aesthetic complex. It delineates the impact of the emotional life of the characters on their own selves in society and vice-versa. This, in a nutshell, constitutes the basic pattern of the novel.

The coming of the railway to Malgudi is symbolic of the impact of an industrial and urban society on a predominantly simple, agricultural community with its new problems which would mean the undoing of the old days of living and the cherished values of life. The tamarind tree which was the seat of Raju's boyhood and of village cartmen who unyoked their bullocks for the night is now full of lorries packed under it—for there is brisk activity because of the laying of the railway track. We see that Raju who grew up in a decent home has now picked up terms of abuse from the railwaymen and the father's words 'just my misfortune' sound ominous

in the light of the impending disaster. The railway meant the ruining of Raju and his old mother—a small shopkeeper's son becomes a railway guide, starts living by his wits, runs into Rosie and Marco, two tourists, gets emotionally entangled, neglects honest means of making a living, and brings ruin upon himself as well as a married woman.

Raju, Railway Raju as he is known, guides the tourists interested in the beautiful sights of Malgudi, the home town of the hero. He is very confident of his sincerity and sense of responsibility. He himself says: 'Once I take charge of anyone, I always feel that they are my responsibility till I see them of again'<sup>4</sup> (77) But the reader understands how the guide is being misguided and deceived by his own self. It is fairly apparent that the ironic vein runs through the novel at every turn of the narrative, giving it a distinct tonality of its own.

In course of his routine work, Raju meets Marco and his wife Rosie, who are apparently misfit for each other. Overwhelmed by the beauty of Rosie, he falls in love with her at first sight:

The moment she got down from the train I wished I had hidden myself somewhere. She was not very glamorous, if that is what you expect, but she did have a figure, a slight and slender one, beautifully fashioned, eyes that sparkled.<sup>5</sup> (58)

This is reminiscent of Chandran's first meeting with Malathi in The Bachelor of Arts. Raju, however, is far more enterprising than Chandran. It is this trait in his nature that brings him closer to Rosie. At the snake-dance show, especially, he watches her most intently. Rosie, on her part, is immensely delighted to see the performance. She 'swayed her whole body to the rhythm' (61), and that was sufficient to tell Raju what her dream-girl was, 'the greatest dancer of the country' (61). No wonder, Raju is always haunted by that image and is ever conscious of her presence:

'I ate my food in silence, trying to revive in my mind the girl's scent-filled presence' (p.62).

He tells her as much, as soon as he has the occasion to speak to her in private: '...life is so blank without your presence.' (65). This, however, is not one-sided love affair as is the case with Chandran in The Bachelor of Arts. Rosie also begins to take interest in Raju. Her newly kindled love for Raju finds expression in devious ways. At the dinner table, she snatches the dish from Raju's hand and gives him the pleasure of her 'golden touch':

She suddenly darted forward and forcibly snatched it away from my hand. Oh, that touch made my head reel for moment. I didn't see anything clearly. Everything disappeared into a sweet, dark haze, as under chloroform. (68)

Indeed, Narayan's language takes a joyous turn when he creates a situation of romance.

Raju has a smooth sailing in his love affair. He knows that Marco is always busy, 'completely preoccupied, probably a man with an abnormal capacity for trust' (102), and he takes full advantage of the situation. One day, as Raju and Rosie return to the hotel after enjoying an outing, they cannot withstand the temptation anymore:

It was nearing midnight. The man at the hotel desk watched us without showing any interest... 'Shall I go away?' I asked in a whisper. 'Yes, Goodnight,' She said feebly. 'May I not come in?' I asked, trying to look my saddest. 'No, no. Go away,' she said. But on an impulse I gently pushed her out of the way, and stepped in and locked the door on the world. (78)

The sexual union is thus consummated. Without any fanfare, the novelist suggests that the lovers have now entered the phase of carnal adventures. The whole scene has been presented with extreme delicacy. The language takes on the flavour of lived experience. William Walsh is right in suggesting that R. K. Narayan thinks of sex as 'something too private and holy to be allowed to appear publicly in art'.<sup>6</sup>

As Raju grows more and more absorbed in Rosie, there is a simultaneous change in his behaviour. He is jealous of everyone who comes in contact with Rosie. Thus, when the taxi-driver talks with Rosie, Raju is hit by a sense of jealousy:

I felt a sudden stab of jealousy as I realized that perhaps he too had been affected by the presence of the damsel and was desirous of showing off in her presence. (62)

Under the spell of Rosie, Raju forgets that he is only a guide. He begins to treat himself at par with Marco and expects from him words of regard and appreciation. But when this is denied, he begins to hate him:

I felt annoyed with him at this state. What did he take me for? This fellow, telling me that he wanted the car at this hour or at that hour.... A hateful fellow. I had never hated any customer so much before. (61)

R. K. Narayan projects the mental picture of a man, deeply in love with a girl:

I was obsessed with the thought that I hadn't perhaps shaved my chin smoothly enough, and that she would run her fingers over my upper lip and throw me out.... She was about to shut the door on me because I was not modern enough for her. This made me run to the tailor to make a few dashing bush-shirts. (102)

Such lovers also experience the consciousness of guilt, and Raju is no exception. The inner questioning plagues him: 'No, no, it is not right. Marco is her husband, remember. It's not to be thought of' (69). And Rosie, too, gives vent to her inward remorse:

After all ... after all .... Is this right what I am doing? After all, he has been so good to me, given me comfort and freedom. What husband in the world would let his wife go and live in a hotel room a hundred miles away? (106)

But this mood of self-introspection is momentary; their romance goes on as before. Yet the reality is that Rosie is Marco's wife and the impact of her clandestine affair with Raju is bound to wreck her married life. This happens all too soon as Marco senses their illicit connection and condemns her for ever. To Rosie's plea—'I want you to forget everything. I want you to forgive me' (134)—he gives a rather cold reply: 'Yes, I'm trying to forget—even the earlier fact that I ever took a wife...' (134). She gets her life out of joint which is but the logical outcome of her action. Raju, too, awaits his doom. Rosie comes to Raju and they begin to live like married couple. But they are ignorant of the fact that there is an outer reality that cannot tolerate such shameful living. It is Raju's mother who first cautions him: 'This can't go on long, Raju—you must put an end to it.... You can't have a dancing girl in your house' (135). His uncle also voices his resentment in unequivocal terms: 'Never dreamt that anyone in our family would turn out to be a dancer's back-stage boy' (149). But Raju brushes aside such obstacles. He is ready to sacrifice his mother, uncle, friends, business and everything. He clings to only one thing—Rosie. He is infatuated with her to the point of distraction. Even in a trying situation when Sait, a merchant, comes to demand his money, he keeps on thinking of Rosie. He is lost, as it were, in the jingling of her anklets:

A smile, perhaps, played over my lips as I visualized her figure on the other side of the wall. He felt irritated at this again. 'What, sir, you laugh when I say I want money'. (14)

Their love, however, dwindles with the passage of time. The impact of the social reality brings about a change in their attitude towards love. Rosie starts giving public performances under the name of Nalini. She enjoys a crowning success as a dancer. Now most of her time is spent with her friends. After all, for Rosie 'more than the attraction of sex is the desire to perfect her art and realize herself fully in her god-given gift'.<sup>7</sup> And Raju, for whom Rosie is the only reality, gives her all the encouragement. He is engaged in carrying out duties for her so that she may succeed in her performances. He runs the bank account in her name and acts as an impresario. From Raju he becomes Raj, a fully commercialized man, addicted to playing cards and drinking. Commercial instincts give almost a death-blow to his love. Rosie is now more an asset to him than a sweetheart. He develops a tendency to possess her which leads him to indulge in criminal activities. He forges Rosie's signature for the release of the jewelry from custody of a bank for which he is jailed. With this comes the end of their romance.

There is a clash of castes, classes and interests and the persistence of time-honoured customs and the old values on the one hand, and the weakening of the modern social and moral structure on the other. All this is concretely realized in terms of interaction of characters. Marco only paid lip-service to a casteless, conventionless society that was slowly, very slowly, taking shape before him by advertising for a good-looking, educated young lady regardless of caste. For Rosie had all these credentials and yet neither she nor he was happy in marriage. For what Marco really wanted was a wife like his servant Joseph who was in his opinion 'a wonderful man': 'I don't see him, I don't hear him, but does everything for me at the right time. That's how I want things to be', says Marco. To put it simply, marriage was a big mistake in his case.

Old prejudices die hard—and Marco for all his erudition looked upon dancing as mere street acrobatics and he killed Rosie's instinct for life and love of art by denying her both of them. The novelist shows by implication that Marco and Rosie could have been ideal husband and wife. He was interested in sculptured figures on walls and stones in caves but not in his wife who was the living embodiment of those images. Similarly Rosie wanted ancient models for her dances which her husband could have supplied from books and monuments which he had known so well. But there was not any understanding between them. It must however be said in fairness to her that Rosie did her best to please him, to be of use to him.

When husband and wife quarreled with each other it was Rosie who realized that she 'had committed an enormous sin'. She did not even want to dance. She apologized to him. But he gave her a cold look and

returned to his work without a word. Rosie followed him, day after day, like a dog, waiting on his grace. But he ignored her totally. She persisted hoping that he would come round. But what she got was: 'This is my last word to you. Don't talk to me. You can go where you please or do what you please'. Even at Raju's house she pocketed the insults of his mother and uncle because she was painfully conscious of her compromising position. Later, in her relationship with Raju it is she who comes off in a better light. Raju serves as a mere stage-boy. He believes in appearances, she in reality. It is he who suggests a change of name while for her there is nothing in a name. Raju is stuck up about his growing importance. It pleased him endlessly that he was on back-slapping terms with two judges, four eminent politicians and two textile mill-owners, a banker, a municipal councilor and an editor of a weekly. It is he who 'liked to hobnob with them because they were men of money or influence', whereas Rosie was 'tired of all talk of superior and inferior'. What is so superior about us? She asked in real indignation. He was a real upstart and all this wealth and importance went to his head. But she was a true artist and brought to bear the artist's sensitiveness on matters of daily life. Raju's interest in art was just as false as Marco's was dryly academic.

Rosie lost interest in dance when it was commercialized by Raju. He was an adventurer and all his talk of art and love for her proved to be so hollow and insincere in the light of the sordid use to which he had put Rosie's talents. He recalls later that it was 'lack of ordinary character' on his part that led to the disaster. And no wonder their relationship was not fruitful. It was not destined to be, when we know their cultural backgrounds. It is not in the least surprising that after the brief romance with Raju she lives alone upstairs and turns her thoughts to her husband. She is thrilled at the publication of his book and frames a newspaper picture of his and places it on her table. The refrain 'after all, he is my husband', runs through her mind during all the years of her separation from him. And the novelist sums up the tradition of centuries and her genuine regard for him, when she says: 'it is far better to end one's life on his doorstep'. All the same she did her best for Raju. She sold her diamonds, gathered all the cash she could and hired a lawyer from Madras to defend him. This she did as part of her duty and not out of love—he didn't merit any.

Narayan shows admirable freedom from convention in the portrayal of Rosie. For in his world right and wrong are not shown with 'statutory distinctness'. When the action starts nothing is certain. The certainty comes in terms of the process and has been 'earned'. There is in Marco a singleness of purpose and the fulfillment of not a very laudable objective as that of Browning's Grammarian. Without a human centre, the study of the dead past cannot enrich the life of the present. Rather, it has blinded him to the present. We have never been made aware of the value of his researches. It is very likely there was of none which Marco himself was aware. He was like Shaw's scientist working on dog's saliva without ever asking himself the value of such a research and Narayan's disapproval of such research is left in no doubt in the novel.

Long preoccupation with walls and stones has made a stone of him and the stone is in the midst of him. Narayan has not shown him as wicked; he is at all times correct. To be correct is his passion: whether in paying for services received and demanding vouchers or in acknowledging his indebtedness to one who walked away with his wife, he is always correct but not compassionate. He mistakes the means for the end, forgets the mainstream of life in his anxiety to belong to a tributary.

But for Raju, it may be argued, that Rosie would not have abandoned her husband. But then, we have nothing to believe that their future would have been any different from their past had not she met Raju. With all his limitations Raju's is a rich and complex life—achieving integration at last. It is worthwhile studying this singular success of the novelist's creation. It is obviously not very easy to make a saint out of a sinner, especially for one with a comic vision of life. 'From a slab stone to a throne of authority is a far cry'. And yet the creation is as convincing as any Narayan has ever done. Nowhere has the novelist stated or argued the case of his hero. The character unravels itself at each stage and the author has to steer through a perilous path avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentality and open condemnation. It is a long story but worth tracing, as it brings out Narayan's supreme success as a creator of complex, growing characters.

The interaction of romance and reality has a meaning in The Guide. The thesis that R. K. Narayan presents in the novel is that neither immorality nor commercial motives pay in life. Characters like Raju and Rosie suffer because of certain inherent defect in their temperament. But Narayan is an optimist; he is a positive thinker. He believes, like Keats, that suffering is a 'veil of soul-making'. It is in and through suffering that Raju and Rosie attain the state of self-purification. Rosie's final return to Madras to re-dedicate herself to the practice of traditional classic dance is 'born out of the same spiritual motivation'.<sup>8</sup> And so is the transformation of Raju into a true Swami, 'the progress of the typical individual consciousness in the guide from its narrow ego-centricity to the ultimate archetypal awareness of cosmic consciousness.'<sup>9</sup>

**References**

- [1] K. R. S. Iyengar, Indian Writing in English (Bombay, 1973), p. 384.
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 385.
- [3] Rajeeb Taranath, 'The Average as the Positive: A Note on R. K. Narayan', Critical Essays on Indian Writing, ed. M. K. Naik, et. al. (Dharwar, 1972), p. 298.
- [4] R. K. Narayan, The Guide (Mysore, 1958). All page references are to this edition.
- [5] R. K. Narayan, The Bachelor of Arts (Mysore, 1975), p. 55.
- [6] William Walsh, 'Literature and Humanity', A Human Idiom (London, 1964), p.143.
- [7] P. S. Sundaram, R. K. Narayan (New Delhi, 1972), p. 192.
- [8] A. V. Krishna Rao, 'R. K. Narayan and the Novel of Affirmation', The Indo-Anglican Novel and the Changing Tradition (Mysore, 1972), p. 88.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p.92.