



WOMAN EMPOWERMENT IN R.K. NARAYAN'S *THE GUIDE*

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Abstract

The patriarchal family set up gives woman a marginalised place. She tolerates insults, abuses, scoff and scorn and many a times faces physical, mental and emotional harassment. However after the colonial rule the economic stand of her own has strengthened her feet. As she has become economically independent she makes her own judgements. Rosie is educated talented and capable of taking her independent decisions. Her art of Dance is named as Monkey Tricks, street acrobatics and mesmerizing the cobra. But she outdoes every scorn and shines out like a dancing star.

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R.K. Narayan sees the female protagonist as not in relation to a male but in relation to reality in *The Guide*. Rosie is seen not primarily as the wife of Marco or the love of Raju but as an individual with desires and aspirations of her own which clash with the reality around her. She is definitely not one of the passive women whose lives are food as opposed to men whose lives are money. She is much more of an egoist than the women we have come across so far. It is Narayan's way of obliquely hinting that the ideal independent woman may have as much egotism and as much aggression as the tyrannical patriarch they criticize. The process of growth in feminine consciousness seen in Bharathi and Ambika is continued in Rosie. She ceases to be quivering jelly of emotions that society had got accustomed to when she introduces an element of volition of choice in her life. She had to confront the male-oriented cultural milieu which stares at woman's independence. She typifies the movement of the Indian woman from her habitual world of deep rooted and mystic beliefs into a sophisticated and cynical one. Her's is the dilemma of the Indian, female, who has to make adjustments in the post-Gandhian world. The new heroine like Rosie illustrates another dilemma. When the modern women achieve a position of dominance and take on norms or traits of aggression and

independence, their unconscious exertions drive them on to suffer as men would suffer being but human, masculine female or feminine male, they suffer the weakness of the flesh, the inequity of the law. They are drawn by their desires, human and biological, and restrained by some code of conduct.

The emergence of the resilient Rosie means the disappearance of the good things associated with the old definition of the female: the tenderness, the caring, the emphasis on personal relationships and courtesy and decorum. Raju bringing about his fall through his own cupidity and weak mindedness, she loses all respect for him, for the male. He is now reduced to a sort of hunger-on in the house; the control passes on to her. She now manages her manager.

When the first shock of the affair had subsided, she became hardened. She never spoke to me except as a tramp she had salvaged. It could not be helped. She had had to scrape together all her resources to help me. She went through her act of help in a sort of cold, business like manner. (*The Guide* 218)

There is, as Raju finds out, enough strength in her. She would manage successfully. Her career, at its height is now a mirage, a circus-life' for her; yet she sticks to it and Raju reads about her commercial successes as an artiste from the newspapers that he gets in his prison cell. She is not wholly callous towards Raju: "If I have to pawn my last possession, I'll do it to save you from jail. But once it' is over, leave me once and for all; that's all I ask. Forget me. Leave me to live or die, as I choose; that's all". (*The Guide* 222)

Rosie keeps her word. She picks up her dance engagements to collect enough money to argue his case. Raju is sentenced to a prison term of two years. She drops him out of her life completely and goes from strength to strength. By taking up a specific career decisively, she liberates herself from the twisted vision that cultural conditioning had imposed on her. Though it is hard to visualize the details of her future, one thing is certain: she does not need Marco or Raju any more, she would never be subordinate to another human being. Raju realizes the truth: "Neither Marco or I had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated all along." (*The Guide* 223)



During all her unethical transactions she remains the figure of a docile, innocent Indian woman and her inner self seems not to have been stained by what she does on the surface. After Raju's imprisonment she becomes a completely pathetic figure, being virtually alone in the world. She tries her best to save Raju, which she considers only an obligation and duty. Her sins, if not from an ethical yet from an existential stand point, are vindicated and her suffering combined with her moral lapses makes her strikingly different from other women characters in Narayan's novels.

Indeed, she has rejected her tradition, her routes, in favour of marriage but ironically, it is her dances, her tradition which now not so much money as dance, which she had inherited as tradition and which she discards in favour of marriage, which is her refuge. After a deep crisis of conscience she feels herself truly bound and obliged to Marco. Like Shanti she too, feels disgust for her present life. She tells Raju: "I am tired of this circus existence" She returns from Malgudi to live her life as a reputed artist and as a sincere, remorseful wife in anonymity.

All Narayan's female characters reveal a total fidelity to home and hearth. Rosie is also not an exception. Once she tells Raju: "After all, for two people, we don't need a cook moping around the house. I must not lose touch with my womanly duties". This emphasizes the middle class mentality of Rosie. As compared to other women of there social standing, no doubt, she appears to be quite free candid and modern. Raju's mother appreciates this thing in girls like her, "Girls today! How courageous you are! In our days we wouldn't go to the street corner without an escort, and I have been to the market only once in my life, when Raju's father was alive." (*The Guide*141)

Undoubtedly, Rosie proves to be a courageous woman. She resolves to become an artist when she finds in Raju a guide and a patron. On the peak of success, she remembers Marco and never accepts Raju as a husband substitute. She feels guilty and remorse-stricken for having deceived her husband:

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 her wife go and live in a hotel room by herself, a hundred miles away? (*The Guide* 120)

It is a curious factor in Indian literature, easily noted in a writer like Narayan, that the emergence of the active feminine is accompanied by the reduction of the male. The hero is no longer there. The woman, even when she is a problematic figure of conflicting beliefs, exploding assumptions upon which the Indian society is contingent, towers over the man in the realm of intellect and career is no longer an exclusive masculine preserve. The active woman turns her attention from passivity, from reproduction to action and achievement. The quest of the female may often be disillusioning as in the case of Rosie; it may lead to a violation of their natures, it may not lead to lasting peace or happiness –but it leads most often to inward enlightenment. The reduction of the male protagonist and the emergence of the active female reflect the changing social, political and economic roles of man and woman in Indian society.

It is a regret that the woman no longer forms part of mutual imagination in wedded life. There is no music, no harmony in marriage. It is an invalid life where love is invalidated. Every relationship is, in Sartre's parlance, a contest for possession. One either possesses or gets possessed. What Narayan has here is the feminine exclusivity. The female is the possessor, the aggressor, the male is possessed bewitched and fooled. Rosie who had stifled her natural love for dancing, for the sake of upliftment from the mire of caste prejudices, finds herself trapped as before. Faced with the choice of being a house-wife or a devadasi, she chooses the former. She answers Marco's advertisement in the matrimonial column, gets herself and her university certificate examined by him, and gets married: "All the woman 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." Marco seems to have everything a girl could dream of, "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 book papers". (*The Guide* 85)

Life seems to be made of luxury for her, especially, as Raju points out, with no Mother-in-law to meddle and spoil the broth. Yet here is what Rosie states: "I'd have preferred any



kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one real live husband." Despite her unusual name, she tries to be the ordinary housewife with a love for dancing. Raju comments:

She chose to call herself Rosie. Don't imagine on hearing her name that she wore a short skirt or cropped her hair. She looking just the orthodox dancer that she was. She wore saris of bright hues and gold lace, had curly hair which she braided and be flowered, wore diamond ear rings and a heavy gold necklace. I told her at the first opportunity what a great dancer she was and how she fostered our cultural traditions and it pleased her. (*The Guide* 9)

Rosie's tragedy is Marco's lack of appreciation for her art. She watches the king cobra for her snake dance. She tries to practice dancing every now and then when her husband is not around. She lives and breathes and talks non-stop about dancing. She has too much of dance in her blood to give it up for the sake of a dull, dry partner like Marco. Raju gets a niche in her heart precisely because of his appreciation of her art. An appreciation that she sorely needs as an ego boost. Raju manipulates her through her craze for dancing. Rosie falls into the trap set for her by Raju. Adultery is no longer a male privilege. To be fair, she succumbs only after she feels that Marco had crushed her to the core. She concludes that her marital obligations have ceased. This conclusion is arrived at after a lot ambivalence on her part. There is no looking back in Marco's rejection of her and her art. He calls her art "street acrobatics" and rejects her totally. He buys a single ticket back to Madras and throws her out unceremoniously. There is no pity, no remorse even as she tries waiting for his grace, following him like a dog.

In contrast to Marco's high social standing Rosie is looked down upon and still she has a master's Degree in Economics. She is married to Marco through a matrimonial advertisement. She has a zest for life even if Marco is cold and always busy with his books and papers. He doesn't prove to be a "real, live husband" to an enthusiastic and lively girl like her, "Dead and decaying things seemed to unloosen his tongue and fire his imagination, rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs." (*The Guide* 82)

Marco treats Rosie not so much as a human being as a thing whose presence is taken for

granted. He wants to treat her as a lifeless doll, a mere commodity, having no right to indulge the luxury of creative urge or aspirations. He praises his cook Joseph and calls him a wonderful man. "I don't hear him but he does everything for me at the right time. That's how I want things to be." (*The Guide* 127)

Marco may be the perpetrator of crime in the fall of relationship but Rosie also cannot escape some of the blames. She is a post graduate and so should have known the ways of a man of scholarly pursuits. As a wife, and Indian wife, she is expected to respect her husband's wishes and see his point of view. No doubt Marco fails to tackle this problem but she too acts childishly, stubbornly. She could, if she has so desired, easily understood the rationale behind her husband's objection to dancing. But instead of understanding anything, she fights. Her inheritance and upbringing give her the moral strength to fight with the result that both Marco and Rosie reach a point of no return in their relationship. Rosie afterwards succeeds in making a world of dance for herself, but at what cost? She losses Marco but fails to forget him, she lives in new world but the shadow of the past looms large enough to disturb her peace of mind. Rosie becomes an accomplished sought after dancer, whose engagements find a mention in all the important newspapers of the south, only when she has been freed from the burdens of looking after her husband's kitchen. If the novel is viewed from Rosie's career graph, it may appear merely a tale of the hardships in the life of a blooming artist. But Rosie's case is different as K. Chellappan point out:

Rosie is an Indian woman whose accomplishments with an M.A. degree and the professional competence to dance conferred on her were of little avail as she waited on her husband's doorstep day after day for him to change his mind. (Chellappan 51)

The phrase 'Indian woman' has a definite connotation here. Middle-class Indian women at that point of time were not encouraged to take up the vocation of dancing, because it was not considered really respectable. Hence, it is Rosie being an Indian, comes in the way of developing her skills. Furthermore, her academic excellence also does not enhance her status, when she has to represent the middle-class milieu of housewives. Like Savitri, she too, has to wait at the doorsteps of her



husband day after day to change his perception about her artistry. Yet, when Marco had married her, he had been gracious enough to ignore her antecedence because of her university degree:

I had myself photographed clutching the scroll of the university citation in one hand, and sent it to advertiser. Well, we met, he examined me and my certificate, we went to the registrar and got married. (*The Guide* 85)

Rosie has absolutely no misgivings about her social status; hence, she dares to utter the truth. And it is this forthrightness in her that really wins us over. By way of winning her trust, Raju at first encourages her to pursue dancing yet again. With utmost earnestness, he assures her, "I will do anything for you. I will give up my life to see you dance. Tell me what to do. I will do it for you." Rosie is overjoyed. Never in her wildest dreams had she expected to meet a man encouraging her to take up the vocation of her passion. Naturally, she takes him to be her saviour, though unaware of his actual intentions. Raju, meanwhile, has other plans up his sleeves, "I found out the clue to her affection and utilized it to the utmost." Therefore, when Marco refuses to take her back, unhesitatingly she lands up at Raju's doorsteps, expecting refuge.

Initially, Raju's mother accepts this newcomer with utmost politeness. She offers her a mat to sit upon. But the moment she comes to know of Rosie's previous circumstances, she starts spitting venom. "You can't have a dancing girl in your house... What is the home coming to?" However, like a true Indian woman, she spares Rosie the ordeal. To her, she is truly a mother figure, offering the required amount of affection. The predicament of Raju's mother, however, is understandable. It is her ingrained social conventions that prevent her from gracefully giving shelter to an outcast. Like Marco who tries to brush aside her proclivity as street acrobats, she too cannot accept the fact that a devdasi has taken refuge in her house. It is the same old Hindu dogma that plagues both educated Marco and illiterate Raju's mother forcing them to undercut the girl's talent. Moreover, accepting someone else's wife as her son's mistress is difficult for her to digest.

In case of Marco, however, the dichotomy is slightly different. The dancing figures in the temple walls that so enrapture him as wonderful specimen of ancient art are

deliberately undermined as "street acrobats", when Rosie tries to imitate them and present them live. "The word dance always stung him". This dichotomy consequently alienates the husband and wife further. Yet Marco cannot be called a villain because it was his magnanimity that had driven him to marry Rosie and uplift her socially – from public woman to a respectable housewife. Yet, when Rosie desires to pursue her first love, he refuses to give in. Expectedly, a gulf of misunderstanding sprouts up between them. So what could have been Marco's prerogative – to introduce a budding talent into the realms of creative art becomes the cause of rift in his personal life.

In Narayan's fiction a woman is never ridiculed. Even a Devadasi like Rangi of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, with her betel-red lips and black but seductive face would not titillate Narayan's comic sense. Even Shanti, the cause of Savitri's, misfortune in *The Dark Room*, or Grace, the American unwedded spouse of Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets* do not incur the wrath of the novelist. He blames the man for all that happens to woman. This is why even in *The Guide* where the major part of the story hinges on the illicit affair between Raju and Rosie, the lady is above criticism. She was ridiculed, insulted and neglected by her husband even though she was fully devoted to him. Her attachment to and dependence on Raju do not reduce her to a sex-crazy or morally loose woman. She remains mentally chaste and ultimately when Raju is put behind bars she realizes how even Raju was not necessary in her life. Her interest in dance was so intense and pure that once she got started on it, she was to go on. She repents her adultery with Raju and curses herself for not being capable enough to win her husband's love. Like Ramani's cruelty, Marco's indifference and scholarly cold-bloodedness make Rosie miserable. Savitri and Rosie are similar in that both are meek, pliable and devoted to their husbands, but the former was unemancipated, hence unhappy, whereas the latter was educated, talented and capable of taking independent decisions. This is why one pities Savitri, but one likes Rosie and despite her physical fall admires her.

Rosie breaks free again because Raju turns out to be no better than her husband. If, to Marco, dancing was nothing more than 'street-acrobatics', to Raju Rosie becomes 'a gold



mine... You know Bharat Natyam is really the greatest art business today.' (*The Guide* 162) Raju just wants to exploit the artist in her for money and he admits that he too wanted to keep her "in a citadel." Understanding his designs, this is how she shows her disgust: "I feel like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs, or a performing monkey, as he used to say". Male power thrives and dominates when women are kept in powerless positions. This, says Kelkar, is achieved through, "women's resourcelessness and economic and emotional dependence. Women are considered men's property; their sexuality, fertility and labour are systematically controlled". (Kelkar 2) Well, this explains why Savitri fails to break free of patriarchal violence and dominance and why Rosie succeeds. Rosie is the real modern woman who leaves behind whatever vestiges of tradition were in her. Rosie, as Raju estimates her, indeed goes from strength to strength. Financially independent, an established danseuse, she becomes the truly liberated woman – liberated from emotional ties and liberated from the restraints of domesticity.

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