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### **Role of Social Conventions in R.K. Narayan's "*The Guide*"**

#### **Abstract**

Narayan's *The Guide*, which was adopted for a popular film of the same name, won him international recognition as an eminent Indian English novelist. The novel earned him the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award in 1960 and flooded the bookstalls and counters. Reviews filled the pages of dailies and periodicals. A close study of the novel reveals that it is a fine document of India's customs, wide-spread ignorance and backwardness. It gives the reader a glimpse of superstitions, arranged marriages, exploitation and debased religion. It represents outdated morality and the on salguth of the new values of money, individualism and materialism in Indian Society. The novel gives a vivid description of Malgudi-its men and vehicles, hogs and boys-the panorama of life, including its fairs and festivals, temples and Swamis. Raju, the protagonist, wistfully recalls to Velan how the town, before the arrival of the railway and the inception of Albert Mission College during the thirties, was mainly a business centre for the rural peasantry.

**Keywords :-** Civilized, Traditional, Conventional, Society, Morality, Superstition

#### **Introduction**

The novel is an illustration of Narayan's taste for depicting the glaring contrasts of grinding poverty and wasteful luxury in the Indian life. The house of the poor, whether near the railway station or in the Ellaman Streetm are all in a sorrowful condition. On the other hand, New Extension is a locality of the people overflowing with money, fame and influence. The stylish house in which Raju and Rosie live at the zenith of their career provides a sharp contrast to the poor housing conditions in the rest of Malgudi and its nearby villages. It is a two storeyed house, with a large compound, lawns, garden and garage. The upper floor has several bed-silk carpet at one end, leaving a space of marble tiles for Rosie to dance on. The outer veranda I cluttered with benches on which people sit and wait all day.

*The Guide* is also a guide providing a peep into the heart of rural India. Whereas the people of the modernized parts are disturbed mentally and spiritually, the people of the

village Mangala lead a serene and peaceful life. The city is a symbol of sophistication, selfishness and competition. Malgudi with changing modern colours is losing calmness. Hence Raju, in search of peace, leaves the madding crowd of Malgudi, and goes to Mangala to live among the simple, innocent and god-fearing people of the village. The village represents simplicity and native strength which are cut-off from the civilized areas. The villagers depend on the course of monsoon and on their instincts for guidance. They are completely unaware of the changes wrought by the modern world. In the hour of a calamity like drought, their only hope is the fast and penance of the Swami that can save them from hunger and famine.

In this novel some of the characters are thoroughly steeped in tradition. Raju's mother, his maternal uncle, Velan and the villagers belong to this category. All of them are born and brought up in rural surroundings. They draw their inspiration and nourishment from the memory of the bygone days. They have unquestioning faith in tradition and its sacred values. Raju's mother is a continuation of Swami's granny in *Swami and Friends* and Chandran's mother *The Bachelor of Arts*. She is a lady of religious temperament. She gets up at five in the morning, takes her bath and prays before the portrait of a god in the niche. She is a touch-me-not kind of woman, and is averse to mixing up with strangers. She does not like Raju's idea of leaving his shop and taking up a new profession of offering guidance to all sorts of tourists alighting at the station. Raju's love for Rosie is the main distracting factor in her life. In his mania for ministering to Rosie's needs, Raju starts neglecting his mother. This breeds worry and tension in her mind. She had always been thinking of marrying her son to her brother's daughter in the right conventional manner.

Despite all sorts of suspicions in her mind, she extends a customary welcome to Rosie who has come to her house as a guest. However, she remains curious about the girl's education, place of birth parentage and whether she is married or not.

She finds it impossible for herself to put up with the scandalous living of her son with a tainted woman. The mother's outlook on husband wife relationship is thoroughly conventional. She asks Rosie to return to her husband and fall at his feet.

Raju's maternal uncle is no less conventional than the aged mother. He is robust fellow six feet tall, darkened by the sun from working in the fields, having a knotted tuft on his skull, wearing a dhoti that is brown and not white like a town man's. An unmannered villager that he is, he picks a quarrel with Raju soon after his arrival at the latter's house. His eyes bulge with contempt and cynicism. His language is rude and rough, full of abusive words. Instead of persuading Raju to obey his mother, he threatens him in a filthy language.

This uncle of Raju represents false pride and vanity of the illiterate, ignorant and orthodox villagers. He does not know how to talk to an educated girls of sensitive temperament. The absurd questions that he puts to Rosie are indicative of his being uninitiated in the basic tenets of cultured life.

Then there is Velan who listens to every word falling from Raju's lips with deeply absorbed. He is a symbol of the power of superstition, principality and ignorance. He represents the insanity absurdity and simplicity of the primitive man who first indulges in hero-worship of men like Raju and then lets them fall with a crash. Velan, the credulous fool, is made of such stuff as disciplines are made of. For solving the problem of his sister's marriage, he seeks the advice of Raju, a bogus Sanyasi and an ex-convict. He believes that problem has been ultimately solved not by the turn of circumstances, but by the benevolent blessings of the Swami. He is happy that in keeping with the convention of his village he has married his daughter to his sister's son. The village tradition forbids too many visits to a son-in-law, and Velan knows it pretty well. He shows the same devotion, respect and honour to Raju as the latter had once shown to the charms of Rosie.

*The Guide* presents Malgudi in the process of a continuous modernization. Malgudi of the early novels was by and large a traditional town. In the novels of the Middle Phase, especially in *Mr. Samath*, it has passed from semi-agricultural to a semi-industrial town. The impact of war is first felt in *The Financial Expert* where the rice-mercahnt indulges in black marketing. In *The Guide*, we find Malgui still advancing towards a modern township.

Raju's associations with the older ways of life, which his father had followed for a whole life time with such ease and calmly, are little by little left behind. In his railway shop Raju develops new lines which consist of two main things: reading the old books and discarded magazines; and listening to the enlightening talks of his customers. These two things transform his mind and thinking. He becomes an unconventionalized youth equipped with modern thinking and sensibility. He grows susceptible to the passion of this youth and to the impressions of the outer world. This leads him to fall apart with the orthodox ideas of his aged mother. He finds his mother's view-point intolerable. The clash of ideologies ultimately leads to the alienation of the mother and the son. This is the period when Raju, in search of his personal ambitions, tries his energy in worldly pursuits, such as fame, love and money. In pursuit of these, he overlooks his duties towards his mother, and flouts all traditional decency and norms of behaviour.

As a guide, Raju learns new unconventional tricks of the trade. He learns how to be pleasant and agreeable with his customers even at the cost of truth. He never says no to any one.

Raju is very antithesis of his mother and maternal uncle. While the mother and the uncle are helpless to overcome their love of tradition, Raju throws to the winds the considerations of caste, tradition, and proper conduct. Narayan purposely portrays the clash between the holy, systematic and disciplined life of the aged another and the immoral, erotic and haphazard life led by Raju and Rosie. Raju, for the sake of Rosie, discards a whole set of people, the whole society. He disregards society with a gesture of arrogance, and treats it with the scantiest attention. He falls a prey to the evils of gambling and drinking. He does all this for the appeasement of his lust and rapacity in his later life; he feigns saintliness and exploits the faultless faith of the villagers to earn for himself an easy bread. Thus, he is true or sincere to none. He is an example of motives and performances against existing ideals.

Marco and Rosie, the husband and wife, are unconventional characters. They are cases of extreme type. While Marco is whole-heartedly and single-mindedly devoted to scholastic pursuits, Rosie has wholly dedicated herself to dancing. To her, life means passion for dance. They have undermined the importance of love and sex in married life. In absence of the cementing forces of love and sex they lead an unnatural as well as unconventional life. The tragedy of their wedded life is woven out of their own extraordinary talents and nobles aspirations. Their sufferings are shaped on the anvil of their uncommon interests and uncompromising temperaments.

Rosie's predicament in the conventional world of Malgudi is really very great. On the one hand, her exposure to modern education has kindled in her a desire for an independent life, and on the other, it has placed her against a social set up which still has certain rigid and well-defined attitudes towards women. Besides this, she belongs to a class of women traditionally looked down upon by the society other woman of orthodox. She believes in the power of destiny. When Marco deserts her, she is heart-broken and says : "Well, it is just as well. We were not meant to be in each other's company."

However, in the final analysis of her character, it has to be conceded that Rosie is a liberated woman. In pursuit of her tastes, she neglects the wishes of her husband. Finding an opportunity, she indulges in an affair with Raju, and consequently ruins his household by driving out his aged mother and leading a luxurious life with him. In many ways, she is the reverse of what a traditional Indian woman is expected to be "the keeper of the hearth and the

bringer-up of her children, the role that Savitri of *The Dark Room* is made to play much against her wishes and dreams.”

In Marco too, we find this ambivalence as the most outstanding quality. Despite being an India, he, like his wife Rosie, has been given a non-Indian name. Though professionally he is engaged in a study of ancient Indian culture and art, his thoughts and feeling are more unconventional than traditional. He marries the daughter of a temple-dancer on the basis of her response to his matrimonial advertisement. His criteria for selection of the bride are not her birth, her parentage, her caste or creeds which are the foremost considerations in a conventionally arranged marriage. He rather gives weightage to her personal attainments such as her personality, her looks and education. Her M.A. degree in Economics, he hopes, will help her manage the household in better way than any rich family background. After marriage, he discovers in himself a deep-seated dislike for Rosie’s traditional dances. Though professing matrimonial loyalty he does not believe in the eternity of the bond of marriage. He neglects his wife. Lost in the work of wall-gazing, he leaves her to languish in her hotel-room. An avid researcher of ancient art, he is totally lost in his work. He is absentminded about everything except his research.

Marco is a man of sterile reasoning. He is utterly lacking in human qualities of love, warmth and compassion expected of a husband by his wife. He discards repentant Rosie at the railway station without any moral regrets. His decision to send Rosie her wedding jewellery is not impelled by his love for her. It is rather a part of his habit of keeping all his dealings in perfect order.

### **Conclusion**

*The Guide* is a shining example of the clash between tradition and unconventionality, and also of Narayan’s view that tradition must prevail in Malgudi despite all surprises and setbacks caused by the influx of unconventional forces from outside. Hence Raju, after leading the unconventional life of a bad guide, retires to the traditional role of a hermit by persistently disciplining his heart and mind. Rosie, belonging to the class of temple dancers, seeks fulfillment in the traditional dance pattern of Bharat Natyam, as her husband Marco does in rediscovering the glory of ancient Indian art and culture.

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