

FEMINIST SENSIBILITY IN R.K. NARAYAN'S *THE GUIDE*

A seventeenth century Mughal noble suggests:

“Buy a Khurasani woman for her work, a Hindu woman for her capacity for nursing children, a Persian woman for the pleasures of her company, and a Transoxianian for thrashing her as a warning for the other three.” (Ashraf)

This statement is exemplary of a biologically and culturally determined behavior established by patriarchy for the fair-sex. It reflects the desperate need to dominate and control. With such an archetypal social perception, women have not been able to “define themselves in a world that would deny them the right to shape their own lives, control their own bodies, explore their own needs and express their own desires” (Morgan). However, there is no denying that there has been an awakening towards the discriminatory set-up that condition women to a willing subjugation. In the Indian context the feminist consciousness has borne least bearings accounting to the unorganized approach, insecurity and an illusioned position of a woman in the society.

When it comes to a written representation of women by a male author, justice seems not done. A male writer tends to trap them in a

"doll/Madonna imago in all its incorporeal flawlessness" (Morgan). Furthermore, when the author is specifically Indian, the reader tends to fix his expectations believing him to conform to the society he stays in and thus analyze his works within a narrow range. Though the cultural and national identity usually goes with the writer, it is difficult for him to free his expression from the effects of economic change, industrialization and modern milieu on the community, class structure and family ties. The writer thus becomes a medium of cultural contact and cultural change. R.K.Narayan has shown his sensitivity to the world he lives in which has resulted in a redefinition of a number of old norms and values since he "could not stop the winds of the West from blowing through his Malgudi" (Mathur).

Narayan definitely did not approve of the socially approved method of subduing women by denying them decision-making powers, dignity, pride and self-esteem. He has been a writer who favors and admires what is right and proper in human conduct and thus, gives a picture that allows freedom of thought and a scope for analyzing so that it can be an active agent in society and work for the betterment. In the novel *The Guide*, Rosie is one character- a channel which allows mobility of thought which accounts for Narayan's sensitivity to the aspiring position of women in patriarchy by ways of 'asking and answering questions, constructive and critical dialogue with mainstream philosophical views and methods' (Frederic).

Narayan's avant-garde in *The Guide*, Rosie comes from the family of temple-dancers. She is given the privilege to receive formal education and is an M.A. in Economics. No doubt she has from her early years 'the making of a liberated woman' (Mathur). The author has allowed Rosie to grow independent of the social security, believed to be given only by a man (father), until her marriage. The absence of fatherly protection indicates Narayan's denial of a phallic identity which is made essential for a full-fledged womanly existence in the society. From the very beginning she is confident and clear in her thoughts. While she analyses the matrimonial advertisement and questions, 'Have I looks?' her answer to her own query is positive. She wanted a live husband who is sensitive to her needs which is indicated by her statement that she'd 'have preferred any kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one real, live husband' (*The Guide*, 76). She is extremely comfortable with her physicality which patriarchy universally couches in terms of moral censure. Her body was for her, not an embarrassment but a mode of expression.

Individuality to a woman is a distant dream in a collectivist society such as in India, so the author allows Rosie to enter the institution of marriage. The preferential quality to Marco for marriage is education and beauty. His matrimonial advertisement suggests this for he wanted "an educated, good-looking girl to marry a rich bachelor [Marco] of academic interests. *No caste restrictions*; good looks and university

degree essential" (*The Guide*, 75). One becomes aware of the fact that a woman's worth is measured in terms of her beauty since it is to be considered as a status symbol. Her Degree is of the same value. No consideration is given to "mutual suitability or unsuitability of the tastes and likeness of the partners" (Gaur). The manner in which the advertisement is framed and the subsequent examination of Rosie and her certificates with a business-like determination, reflect the cold attitude of Marco towards the delicate bond. He seems to be entering into some sort of a transaction he is having in exchange of the social identity and luxury he was to provide to the lady. Marco wanted someone like his servant Joseph who did everything for him at the right time without bothering him. Raju reflects the same when he says that Marco "married out of the desire to have someone to care for his practical life" (*The Guide*, 100).

Rosie's identity is now determined by the male in her life to whom she is now subordinate. She is to now fit into an idealized figure of a 'home-spun' woman with great patience and has to maintain equilibrium even if it meant to constrain her desires. She stood nowhere near the 'dead and decaying things' that 'fire his imagination rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs' (*The Guide*, 72). One gets the feel of commoditization of Rosie by Marco for social status and by Raju for sexual gratification and as money generation machine. Narayan's attempt is to highlight the constraining effect of marriage as a

social institution that places a woman in a marginalized position and the ignorance they face at the hands of their caretakers.

Rosie is now a victim of patriarchal hegemony. The ideology that defines women as inferior debars her from the possibilities of attaining self satisfaction and independence through education or through art/skill as in Rosie's case. Her attempt to convince Marco to allow her to dance and her decision to subside her desire reflects a setup where the male voice is the law and of which she is a victim. Marco may be seen as liberal-minded taking into account his priority of an educated woman foregoing all foundations of social structure and marrying a temple-dancer but he fails in the very first test. It must be understood here that "ideology is not necessarily a direct expression of ruling-class [or gender] interests at all moments in history and that at certain conjunctures it may even move into contradiction with those interests"(Kuhn). Narayan here, in *The Guide* sets a beginning to those contradictions. Such contradictions enable us to examine the power of cultural ideals over our thinking and our lives. Through Marco Narayan reflects his deep understanding of the dominant male discourse which would look at dancing as a synonym of prostitution. Rosie's attempts to convince her husband to allow her to explore her area of interest/her art just the way he was doing, Marco denounces her saying, "Oh, you want to rival me, is that it? This is a branch of learning, not street-acrobats" (*The Guide*, 130). Marco may show his individual strength (of intellect)

and weakness (of body), but in capacity as a moral 'overseer' he is vigilant in maintaining the conventional premise of status quo. Such a moral coercion does not benefit to Rosie making her susceptible to Raju. She sees in him a warm flow of life that ministered vital human needs of which she had been so far starved (Narasimhaiah, 133).

Narayan has used Raju to deal with the sexuality and individuality of Rosie. It is through him that the reader is given physical appearance of Rosie:

“she is 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, a complexion, not white, but dusky, which made her only half visible - as if you saw her through a film of tender coconut juice”
(The Guide, 58).

When Rosie is seduced by Raju, Narayan's purpose is to express his belief in a healthy and life-giving force of free and unrepressed sexual activity. He has given due recognition to volatile female emotion and sensations and treats them in the way he treats a male. It is significant that while giving Rosie the physical characteristics of a voluptuous woman, a sexy woman, Narayan did not mean her to be dumb or loose in morals. He, therefore, stands with conviction with his

heroine. Further, Rosie's sexuality is self indulgent allowing her the right to control her body. However, to bring the two-sexiness and moral seriousness, together in a single female has always been considered subversive in society. It seems to hit hard in the face of conventional code and belief. This is because the 'conceptual bifurcation' of a woman has deep influence on society which accepts the concept of two types of women – one fit for sex and the other for wife. Ironically, such a bifurcation consolidates a division between women themselves. In the novel we see Raju's mother warning him against the dancing woman (who are believed to be low in morals) and expecting Rosie to conform to the norms set by the society for a woman (to go back to her husband). If Rosie stands for change, Raju's mother stands for resistance to change.

The constraining social mores and assumptions account for Rosie's suppression. Marco strips her of her real 'self'. In nullifying her needs and desires, he enforces Rosie's subjugation. For Raju, Rosie is a sexual object and her dance business. He is the one who makes her passion for dance mechanical making her feel like a bull yoked to an oil-crusher that went round and round without a beginning or an end (*The Guide*, 180). He talks of her in monetary terms of utilizing her 'services and make money' and adds, 'she is a gold mine'. Raju's mother and his uncle represent social disapproval that Rosie has to face for exploring her talent.

Narayan gives his heroine a role that is active, assertive and self-determined and explores every opportunity that defines her very 'Self' even if it has to be the sway of the cobra. These are preliminary preparations of her birth as an individual. Rosie schedules her dance practice, perfects it and takes charge of earning a livelihood while Raju is preoccupied with the physical passion. She does excellently and her genius could not be ignored even by Raju. It is the sexual vitality that infuses in her animate life vigor of body and mind and from there we witness her intelligence, strength, courage and emotional generosity. Time and again, it seems Rosie is falling back into her defined role of false values and crumbling ideology when she remarks,

“Is this right what I am doing? After all, he has been so good to me, given me comfort and freedom....is it not a wife’s duty to guard and help her husband, whatever the way in which he deals with her?” (*The Guide*, 106)

This is the result of the conflict between ones own 'self' that stresses on individuality and moral coercion that stresses submission. The ingrained ideology makes her guilt-ridden and fearful and her chances of emerging out seem to be distant. One realizes that overcoming cultural ideology alone cannot liberate one and that psyche must be first overcome since it is an essential terrain.

Rosie struggles to achieve self-fulfillment in a society that is deeply entrenched in the patriarchal concept of female submission. The tension, conflict, stress and strain that the events bring in allow Narayan to delineate the new. Rosie thus takes control of her life which reflects her courage and determination. Raju believed to have 'monopoly of her and nobody had anything to do with her.... She was my property' (*The Guide*, 168). He strongly believed that he controlled her and that she was dependent on him. But the truth is that Rosie would have, had it not been Raju, bloomed the way she had even if she might have returned to Marco. He could not have suppressed her for long, she was bound to break and make her way. It is Rosie who mentored Raju providing him financial support and moral if he is thought to have so. Once Rosie takes control of her life and goes about her business, it accounts to her economic independence. A woman remains dormant as long as she is unaware of her 'self'. But once she becomes consciousness of it, it cannot be imprisoned. So is the case with Rosie. Once her emancipation is achieved, the author leaves her. Narayan has propagated a shift in the contemporary ideology for which "the culturally valued model [for women] was sweetly reasonable and compliant, not free thinking and rebellious. And, moreover, her highest aim would be, not only to please the men in her life with her attentive devoted ways, but also to keep herself in constant preparation for a husband" (Morgan).

CONCLUSION

R.K. Narayan dreamt of redefining the position of women in society and this formulated his representation of Rosie as a 'new woman'. Narayan's feminist sensibility in the representation of the character of Rosie lies not in her challenge to convention but in her resistance to reduction to a single ideological position defined by the male world. She moves within and beyond the physical world to discover inner power and hidden essences.

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