

R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*: Representation of the Dichotomies of Life

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Abstract

[This research delves into the profound narrative craftsmanship of R.K. Narayan focusing on his novel 'The Guide'. Examining the interplay of dualities, beliefs, and betrayals, the study explores how Narayan seamlessly weaves together traditional values, existential dilemmas, and human relationships in his literary canvas. The analysis delves into the moral and ethical dimensions shedding light on Narayan's subtle critique of societal norms through his humorous narration. Additionally, the research dissects the transformation of the protagonist- Raju, in 'The Guide' emphasizing themes of self-realization and spiritual enlightenment. By drawing on Indian classical literature and philosophy, Narayan creates a rich tapestry that portrays the complexities of human nature and the delicate balance between appearance and reality. The study particularly aims at focusing on the dichotomies of life providing valuable insights into Narayan's unique narrative style.]

Keywords: Representation, Dichotomies, Transformation, Society, Human relationships.

R.K. Narayan, one of India's most celebrated literary figures, masterfully explores the intricacies of human existence in his timeless novel- *The Guide*. Set against the backdrop of a small Indian town, the narrative delves into the complexities of traditional values, existential dilemmas, and the delicate balance between appearance and reality. Narayan's unique storytelling artistry illuminates the dichotomies of life offering readers a profound glimpse into the human experience. In this research paper we embark on a comprehensive exploration of Narayan's literary world dissecting the themes of moral and ethical quandaries, the interplay of beliefs and betrayals, and the transformative journey of the protagonist- Raju. By delving into the depths of *The Guide*, this paper aims to unravel the layers of meaning woven into Narayan's narrative tapestry shedding light on his enduring impact on the literary landscape and the rich cultural heritage of India. Through a meticulous analysis, this study endeavors to unravel the nuanced complexities of Narayan's vision offering readers a deeper understanding of the profound philosophical underpinnings that make *The Guide* a timeless literary masterpiece.

This research employs a qualitative approach to explore the multifaceted themes, narrative techniques, and philosophical underpinnings of R.K. Narayan's novel- *The Guide*. Qualitative research is chosen for its ability to delve into the complexities of literary texts, allowing for an in-depth analysis of characters, plot dynamics, and thematic nuances. This study uses library data which are categorized into two: namely- primary and secondary materials. Both the primary and secondary sources of information will be used from evaluative and analytical angle to establish the main theme of the study. In fact, the works of and on R.K. Narayan shall be vastly analyzed to probe into the key investigation of

the study. For this reason, ‘arguments and counter-arguments basis’ analysis shall be the most viable approach to the study. A list of references of the books and articles used in the study will be included at the end of the article. The research study follows the MLA 9th manual for the citation and references of the works and quotations used in this paper.

The essence of Narayan’s success lies in his embodiment of essential values, both personally and professionally. His literary repertoire is a testament to his versatility and depth covering a vast array of topics that span the entire spectrum of human experience. Upon delving into Narayan’s works, readers are immediately struck by the sheer diversity he offers. Each story carefully selects pivotal moments in his characters’ lives exploring them with meticulous attention and sincerity. Narayan’s narratives are a true reflection of life in its raw, unfiltered form, devoid of any ulterior motives or distant objectives. As an artist, he maintains a detached perspective, yet his empathy for his characters remains unwavering. Narayan fearlessly introduces subjects and characters that are ripe for comic exploration, deftly blending humour with poignant insight. In this regard William Walsh says:

Success in it calls for a sensibility preserved from ambivalence or fracture, an unusual unity in the point of view as well as a social tradition in which the comic and the sad are not sharply marked off one from the other. It requires too a certain equanimity, an evenness of temperament and manner, to hold back the exaggeration of farce and the one-sidedness of sentimentality. (114)

Furthermore, his mastery of the English language is unparalleled; he not only imparts grace to his prose but also ensures its functional effectiveness. In essence, Narayan’s success can be attributed to his unwavering commitment to authenticity, his ability to capture the human condition in its entirety, and his skill in weaving these elements into compelling narratives that resonate with readers across the globe. William Walsh again sums up these issues as “pitched at that middle level on which we live the staple of our lives” (114).

Narayan has ascended to the pinnacle of literary acclaim as one of the most profound and evocative artists, owing to his unmatched simplicity, clarity and contemporary style. Much like Thomas Hardy’s Wessex in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Malgudi stands as Narayan’s emblematic creation, a world meticulously crafted and imbued with depth. Narayan’s brilliance lies not only in his deliberate selection and arrangement of material but also in his discerning dismissal of elements beyond his creative scope. Through such artistic self-restraint, Narayan has achieved literary eminence. His primary objective is to engage and captivate his readers by presenting life’s subtle ironies in a rational and dazzling manner. If there exists any underlying message within his works, it remains subtly woven into the narrative allowing readers to discern it for themselves. Narayan’s genius is characterized by objectivity and neutrality illuminating his literary creations with a timeless brilliance that continues to resonate with readers worldwide. In this regard SK A. Salam says in his article- “R.K. NARAYAN’S ‘THE GUIDE’ AS A POST- COLONIAL TEXT”:

Assuredly *The Guide* delineates an Indian which tries to come to terms with a bewildering set of changes entailed by colonialism by bringing into a sharp focuss the magnitude and depth of this change and transformation in post colonial era, the text ensures its claim to be a classic text. (445)

Narayan’s portrayal of life in the remote township of Malgudi stands as a remarkable endeavour uniquely shaping the framework of a regional novel that captures not only the essence of humanity but also the very soul of India. He emerges as a perceptive analyst of human passions and motives rendering himself as a profound critic of human behaviour. So, Narayan exposes the “vast Indian hinterland of

semi-urban and rural settlements where people cherish traditional values, and old-world customs and beliefs still retain their hold” (Sen 5). In his narratives, he impartially presents both the virtuous and the malevolent refraining himself from taking sides. Narayan’s writing acts as a mirror reflecting nature truthfully devoid of any distortion or bias. Despite this impartiality, he subtly conveys the message that immoral or malevolent actions lead to unfavorable consequences while virtuous actions result in positive outcomes. Narayan’s vision is fundamentally moral, addressing ethical quandaries within his novels. His exploration often delves into Hindu traditionalism, depicting confrontations when characters challenge these traditions with more modern and individualistic values as the writer exposes a very uncommon practice in regard to marriage in the novel:

‘My daughter is married to my own sister’s son: and so there is no problem. I often visit my sister and also my daughter; and so no one minds it.’

‘Why should anyone mind in any case if you visit a daughter?’

‘It’s not considered proper form to pay too many visits to a son-in-law,’ explained the villager.

(6)

Here the villager breaks the established tradition that marks him as a more modern individual as through his character we find “a focus on the psychology of the individual” (Gangopadhyay 28). The villager comes out of the dichotomies of the traditional values establishing his own identity.

Existentially, the dilemma revolves around conforming to the world as it is or transforming it according to personal desires and needs. This existential struggle is not confined to physical spaces; rather, it encompasses the individuals, their actions, and reactions that collectively shape a world. Each character perceives the world through a unique lens making personal choices that influence the world they inhabit. So, from existentialist point of view, the characters in this novel are attracted with “Anguish, despair, anxiety, the absurd, authenticity, nothingness, and so on,…” (Appignanesi and Zarate 14). Narayan skillfully weaves these existential dilemmas into the fabric of his narratives, creating a rich tapestry of human experiences and moral contemplations as he writes in *The Guide*:

The villager on the lower step looked up at his face with devotion, which irked Raju. ‘Why do you look at me like that? He asked brusquely. The man replied, ‘I don’t know. I don’t mean to offend you, sir.’ Raju wanted to blurt out, ‘I am here because I have nowhere else to go. I want to be away from people who may recognize me.’ ... He tried at least to say, ‘I am not so great as you imagine. I am just ordinary.’ (8)

The research paper delves into the exploration of R.K. Narayan’s vision on dichotomies of life and human values intricately woven into *The Guide*. In this captivating narrative, Narayan’s central characters challenge conventional norms, religious beliefs, and familial obligations inadvertently veering towards their predetermined destinies. In Narayan’s literary universe, deviations or confusion arising from non-conformity to societal norms inevitably lead to unfavorable consequences. However, it is crucial to note that Narayan’s moral vision is not overtly or intentionally cultivated within his writing; instead, these values are subtly embedded within the artistry of his storytelling and the cultural milieu that serves as the backdrop for his tales. Consequently, readers are entrusted with the task of deciphering Narayan’s message in *The Guide* based on their own intuitive understanding as his moral underpinnings are intricately interwoven into the narrative fabric, inviting readers to engage and interpret the story’s moral nuances according to their individual perspectives. The novelist exposes in the novel:

A different life was planned for me by my mother. She put me to school early in life; I studied well. I took my Master’s Degree in Economics. But after college, the question was whether I

should become a dancer or do something else. One day I saw in our paper an advertisement – the unusual kind you may have see: “Wanted: an educated, good-looking girl to marry a rich bachelor of academic interests. No *caste restrictions*; good looks and university degree essential.” (75)

The Guide commences by portraying the ordinary settings and everyday occurrences within a cross-section of Indian society featuring characters from diverse social strata. However, as the narrative advances- fate, chance, mistakes, or missteps interweave to transform these mundane events into extraordinary happenings. The hero experiences unexpected calamities and unforeseen strokes of good luck with equal ease. Remarkably, the characters in the story face their destinies with a remarkable equanimity reflecting a deep-seated faith that circumstances will eventually lead to a favorable outcome. This attitude subtly mirrors the fundamental perspective of the novelist and underscores the life philosophy he appears to advocate. Raju, akin to a leaf carried away by the winds of fate, plummets to his lowest point when he finds himself imprisoned. Yet he is granted a second chance fostering hope for a brighter tomorrow despite his tumultuous journey. This resilience and hope in the face of adversity encapsulate the novel’s underlying ethos portraying a belief in the inherent optimism that life can offer even amidst its most challenging trials. The novelist again says in the novel:

I never said, ‘I don’t know.’ Not in my nature, I suppose if I had had the inclination to say ‘I don’t know what you are talking about,’ my life would have taken a different turn. Instead, I said, ‘Oh, yes, a fascinating place. Haven’t you seen it? You must find the time to visit it, otherwise your whole trip here would be a waste.’ I am sorry I said it, an utter place of falsehood. It was not because I wanted to utter a falsehood, but only because I wanted to be pleasant. (49)

In *The Guide* the protagonist- Raju grapples with questions of traditional existence as he pursues his dreams and desires. He defies societal and moral norms by engaging in a relationship with Rosie, Marco's wife, disregarding the conventional order. The whole society including his own widowed mother stands against him but he puts a blind eye on the severity of the chaotic situation. He gets into financial trouble and becomes a kind of social outcast due to his relationship with Rosie, but he refuses to mend his ways and thus fails to bring order and harmony in his own life and his surrounding society. Raju's life becomes a total failure and he earns the wrath of everyone around him because he deals erratically with each one of them. Narayan’s profound understanding of human experience and his compassionate perspective form the essence of his mature existential vision, enriched by his witty narrative style and his embrace of traditional and religious values. Throughout his narratives, Narayan strategically places his characters in moral dilemmas, emphasizing the contrast between enduring values and peculiar, hypocritical customs. His humour serves as a discerning tool distinguishing between the enduring and the absurd allowing Narayan to gently satirize individuals attached to eccentric traditions.

Raju felt like an actor who had come on the stage, and, while the audience waited, had no lines to utter or gestures to make. He said to the master, ‘I think you may take the children away to their corner for their usual lessons; take one of the lamps with you –’ Even as he said it he could not help thinking how he was issuing an order about the boys who were not his, to the teacher who need not obey him, pointing to a lamp which again was not his. (44-45)

In *The Guide* Raju is portrayed as an ordinary and unremarkable individual, yet Narayan crafts the narrative with a blend of humour and seriousness. Raju’s awkward attempts at achieving greatness and his journey toward spiritual and moral maturity unfold gradually. Unlike tragic protagonists in Shakespearean dramas, Raju’s self-awareness is attained through a challenging process, devoid of heroic

grandeur. He undergoes a cleansing process albeit without the heroic intensity typically associated with tragedy. As an anti-hero, Raju does not reach the tragic heights of Shakespeare's characters. Nevertheless, his self-realization and the subsequent sense of social and spiritual fulfillment in the end leave readers astonished and appreciative. In this regard the writer writes:

Raju soon realized that his spiritual status would be enhanced if he grew a beard and long hair to fall on his nape. ... By the time he arrived at the stage of stroking his beard thoughtfully, his prestige had grown beyond his wildest dreams. His life had lost its personal limitations; his gatherings had become so large that they overflowed into the outer corridors and people sat right to the river's edge. ... He sighed a deep sigh of relief and turned to be himself, eat like an ordinary human being, shout and sleep like a normal man, after the voices on the river had crossed for the night. (47-48)

Narayan's fiction is a multifaceted exploration of life and human experience, intricately weaving together humour, moral dilemmas, and spiritual growth. Through his characters, he delves into the complexities of existence inviting readers to reflect on the human condition with a blend of amusement and contemplation. Narayan views human relations, traditional values and conventions as essential elements of an orderly human life. Besides, he also seems to believe that in order to attain harmony and peace in human life it is very essential to give due attention to relationships because man is basically a social being and relations give stability to his existence. The marital relationship between Marco and Rosie breaks down because in the beginning Marco neglects Rosie and later Rosie dares to break the chains and refuses to blindly respect and revere the tradition of marriage. The severing of relationship brings emotional trauma in its wake. Both husband and wife eventually suffer and repent for not giving due regard to their mutual relationship. The relationship between Marco and Rosie in *The Guide* is not based on conventional philosophic values. This couple does not share the ideal kind of bond and therefore, their relationship does not become everlasting and in Narayan's system is bound to bring doom. Thus, the role of traditional values and philosophical touch to human relationship has been emphasized by Narayan apparently in *The Guide* like his other novels. Narayan presents the characters passing through a period of struggle and transformation but towards the end they attain a new vitality which provides them with a new explication of common situations. The normalcy in the life of Raju comes only because of his submission to traditional values and self-realization. Further, Narayan's vision also embodies the great theory of order and disorder. He applies a pattern in almost all his novels including *The Guide*. This pattern is found in the relationship between Raju and his mother, Marco and Rosie and even Raju and Rosie. Order and peace prevails in these relationships in the beginning but this order does not remain for a long time. These relationships do not attain any suitable dimension because the motives of the individuals involved in these relationships clash with each other and their viewpoints and attitudes differ from each other that we find in the novel:

I called her flatteringly a shrewd girl, laughed and enjoyed it as a joke, fondled her, and made her forget the subject. I thought it was a dangerous line of thought. It seemed absurd that we should earn less than the maximum we could manage. My philosophy was that while it lasted the maximum money had to be squeezed out. We need all the money in the world. (Narayan 169)

Indeed, Narayan's literary works are infused with his profound knowledge of Indian classical literature, philosophy, religion, morals, and ethics. However, he does not impose his viewpoints on his readers through lengthy discourses. Instead, Narayan skillfully weaves his insights into the fabric of his

narratives. His approach to life's imperfections is marked by understanding and sympathy, characteristic of an artist, rather than a missionary zeal. Behind the facade of his novels, Narayan endeavors to depict a vision of life characterized by inherent dichotomies. His storytelling delves into the intricate interplay between appearance and reality, beliefs and betrayals offering readers a nuanced exploration of the complexities of human existence.

In conclusion, R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* stands as a testament to his unparalleled storytelling prowess and deep understanding of the human condition. Through the lens of Raju, the novel's protagonist, Narayan explores the delicate balance between tradition and modernity, fate and free will, and appearance and reality. The characters in the novel grapple with moral dilemmas and ethical choices reflecting the universal struggles faced by individuals navigating the complexities of life. Narayan's ability to infuse humour and compassion into his narrative adds layers of depth to the story allowing readers to connect with the characters on a profound level. The novel serves as a rich tapestry of Indian culture, tradition, and societal norms inviting readers to contemplate the age-old philosophical questions that continue to resonate with contemporary audiences. Through our research, we have delved into the multifaceted themes explored in *The Guide* unraveling the layers of meaning and shedding light on the subtleties of Narayan's narrative craft. His nuanced portrayal of human experiences coupled with his insightful commentary on morality and existence cements his legacy as a literary giant. As readers immerse themselves in the pages of *The Guide*, they are confronted with profound questions about identity, destiny, and the transformative power of self-awareness. Narayan's vision of life as a series of dichotomies – beliefs and betrayals, appearances and realities – resonates deeply challenging readers to reflect on their own lives and choices. In essence, *The Guide* stands as a timeless work of literature, inviting readers to ponder the complexities of the human psyche and the intricacies of our moral compass. Through Narayan's storytelling brilliance, readers are not only entertained but also enlightened gaining valuable insights into human psychology.

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