

Two Contrary Facets of Woman : A Study in *The English Teacher* and *The Guide*

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The credit of bringing name and reputation to Indo-English fiction goes to a few contemporary writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Nirad C Choudhary and R.K.Narayan. And among them R.K.Narayan is one of the leading figures. Narayan got much praise for his books, including the semi-autobiography trilogy of *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*. Narayan's works also include *The Financial Expert*, which is hailed as one of the most original works of 1951 and Sahitya Akademi Award winner, *The Guide* which was adopted for film. In a sixty year of writing career Narayan received many awards and honours. These are A C Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature and the Padma Vibhushan , India's second highest civilian award.

R.K.Narayan was best known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. Malgudi is a microcosm of India. It represents India in a miniature through all the novels of Narayan.Malgudi presents two groups of women. One group consisting of the mothers, aunts or grandmothers who cling to the long established traditions of orthodox Hindu society and the other group consisting of the women of modern generation, tempered with modern western craze, who attempt to break through all traditions and taboos that thwart their freedom.

East-west conflict is a major theme in R.K.Narayan's novels. Here I have deliberately chosen two female characters who are the great figures in the recent history. Both are symmetrically opposite—one represents tradition, the other modernity.

The first character is 'Susila', a woman of traditional values from *The English Teacher* (1945).This novel dedicated to Narayan's wife 'Rajam' is not only autobiographical but also poignant in the intensity of feeling. Narayan embraces his tradition through 'Susila' who is the replica of a devoted Hindu wife and for whom her family and her domestic duty come first :

There on a pedestal she kept a few silver
images of god and covered them with
flowers; two small lamps were lit. Her

husband saw her standing there with light
in her face, her eyes remain closed and
her lips slightly moving. (*The English Teacher* 37)

Narayan's portrayal of Susila epitomises the representation of Indian culture and tradition exemplifying everything in an Indian woman. Every time Krishna watches Susila and in her company he feels contented and in 'high spirits'. Krishna mocks Susila by calling her 'a yogi' for observing prayer each morning. In Srinivasa temple, while worshipping :

...her eyes shone with an unearthly
brilliance. Her cheeks glowed, the rest
of her person was lost in the shadows of
the temple hall. (70)

Susila is presented as an immediate contrast to Krishna, being spiritual while he is not :

Please, please, she pleaded recklessly.
I must wash my feet in the river today.(59)

There is a perfect amity and harmony between Susila and her husband. Except for a brief tiff they never quarrel. The brief tiff brings them still closer. There is deep love in their relationship :

She waits in the garden everyday for his
return from work... (36)

Susila is frugal in her household expenses. She spares money even after the end of the month. Unlike Krishna, who is extravagant, she is thrifty and parsimonious. She manages money with the determined hands. Krishna says :

In her hands, a hundred rupees seemed
to do the work of two hundred, and all
through the month she was able to give
me money when I asked.(39)

Susila wants to save money as much as possible, especially for the marriage of her daughter, when she grows young. She tells Krishna that they must live within their means and save enough so that when they are old they must never trouble others for help.

On the whole Narayan has presented a true picture of Susila as a

responsible Indian woman. She has emerged from the rich treasure of Indian culture. She has a strong base of Indianness and is deeply entrenched in values and traditions. In *The English Teacher* we get a calm and quiet picture of Susila with her customs and traditions. She does not show any sign of feeling suffocated or feels that her freedom is thwarted by the taboos she has been observing in the society.

While the other variety of woman character is that of 'Rosie' in *The Guide* who represents the emergence of new woman in the world of Malgudi. It was published in Great Britain by Methuen & co.Ltd. and in U.S. by Viking. Its 61st reprint appeared in 2006 which reveals the popularity and greatness of the book.

Rosie is a woman of independent mind and thinking. She has been described by the novelist in the following manner:

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, 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)

Rosie was fond of dancing. She loved dancing more than her husband, more than Raju and more than any other thing in her life :

She got up at five in the morning, bathed, and prayed before the picture of a god in my mother's niche, and began a practice session which went on for nearly three hours. The house rang with the jingling of her anklets. She ignored her surroundings completely, her attention being concentrated upon her movements and steps. (136)

Dancing is in her blood and spirits. "...she would never stop dancing. She would not be able to stop, she would go from strength to strength." (222)

When Marco deserted Rosie and took train to Madras, she came to Raju's house for shelter. Seeing her coming to the house alone in the evening

Raju's mother was wonderstruck and asked :

Who has come with you Rosie?(124)

Raju replied, "I think she has come alone, mother." His mother was amazed and said :

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.(125)

Rosie wants to lead the life of excitement, zeal and warmth and her husband is just opposite to her that is why her marriage is a failure. Enthusiastically she wants to make her career in dancing. R.K.Narayan has presented the wave of emancipation and empowerment of women through the character of Rosie. Ultimately she is known as a successful classical dancer.

What is notable is that Rosie is not judged and condemned for what she is, but presented as a woman of 'self possession' who always makes her own decision. Rosie is more free from the bondage of patriarchy than Susila. Her artistic talent gives her the privilege to create her own space, and her ultimate decision is not dedicated by necessity, but chosen at will. When she is rejected by her husband she is able to sustain herself through her art. Rosie presents the more independent woman of an Indian story changing under the impact of the west.

Narayan sees the plight of women looked up within the confines of an orthodox society which has nothing to offer a woman except material refuge. In this society a woman has nothing of her own except her body. Since ages Indian society is male dominated. From the days of *Manu smriti*, she has to live under the shelter of man. As Manu says:

पिता रक्षतु कौमार्यं पति रक्षतु यौवने ।
पुत्र रक्षतु वार्धक्ये न स्त्री स्वातंत्र्यं अर्हति ॥
(Manu IX. 3)

[During her childhood, the father protects her, the husband during young days, the son during old age. She is never independent].

Modern European and American novels influenced the Indian novelist and Narayan was no exception. His new woman is bold, self-reliant and assertive. She struggles for freedom and searches for identity. She brings

earth-shaking changes not only in her man but also in the society. Ramani's Shantabai in *The Dark Room*, Sampath's vision of beauty, Shanti in *Mr. Sampath* and Raju's Rosie in *The Guide* – all are very passionate and devoted towards their works but they all are unhappy in their family life. Therefore, they move out of their family and make themselves rise and build their identity. Narayan shows his progressive thought and idea through these women who are strong and independent. In *My Days* R.K.Narayan says :

From time immemorial, man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, her status and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. (49)

We cannot ignore the fact that Narayan doesn't endorse tradition in a loud or sententious manner. He doesn't reject or condemn it but rather creates a space for it. He points out that in a struggle between tradition and modernity, tradition wins through in a reluctant manner.

Thematically, *The English Teacher* and *The Guide* are good illustrations of R.K.Narayan in which he has interweaved two different facets of women based on 'Indian tradition' and 'Western civilisation'.

Works Cited

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