



## R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*: A Regional and Social Novel

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R. K. Narayan is often understood as a regional novelist because all his novels and short stories are set, totally or partly, in a small town named Malgudi. It is an imaginary town in the South India which has been used as a locale for his writings. And his keen observations and good-humored criticism of the strange habits and silly character of small town life have earned him the title of a social novelist. *The Guide* offers a more comprehensive picture of a region and society than any of Narayan's other novels. The novel develops in and around Malgudi where Raju, the hero of the novel, lives and the village and its social life give the novel its social trait. The locale of the novel spans between the small town and the village, between Madras and the other big cities where Rosie, the heroine, is invited to dance. This semi-urban and largely rural setting is very typical of Indian life thus provides a microscopic picture of that life. It is this quality of the novel that makes it a regional and social novel. Therefore, the present paper attempts to understand *The Guide* both as a regional and social novel.

Narayan presents the social portrait of a single region in his description of the larger picture of Indian society in general as well as in specific way. Malgudi is a dull place located between the sacred river Sarayu and the Mempi Hills where the river has its source close to some ancient caves with historic paintings. In the childhood period of the hero the town was old-fashioned, just having hut-shops and alleyways, and small houses with external decks. The horse-drawn carriages were used for transportation purposes. Raju went to a school where an ancient schoolmaster made the boys recite their lessons loudly in unison. The schoolmaster suddenly hit the boys with his cane if they made mistakes. Narayan offers the pre-independence social reality when we read that Raju's father sent his son to the ancient schoolmaster rather than to Albert Mission School. The father believed that the Missionaries seem "to convert our boys into Christians and are all the time insulting our gods" (Narayan 25).

The society of Malgudi is predominantly Hindu but the relationships between Hindus and Muslims are presented as amicable. This kind of coexistence between different communities is a unique characteristic of Indian life. A major change occurs with the



coming of the railways. Despite the transportation revolution, the coming of the railways symbolizes the intrusion of the colonial Westernization of traditional culture. The Madras train opens doors of Malgudi to the world and once the sleepy little place grows up to a bustling tourist place. Malgudi people are over numbered by strangers with a different lifestyle. Consequently, the lifestyle of Malgudi people undergoes a change. By the time Raju became a young man, Malgudi boasts to have shopping area called Market Road, cinema halls, hotels and taxis. Within a few years, Malgudi has developed into a big city having suburbs containing the stylish houses that Raju and Rosie build one for them. Their house is called “New Extension” of “two-storied, with a large compound, lawns, garden and garage” (186).

The Mempi Hills, a part of the rural site, are steep, high and thickly forested. When the story of the novel begins, the human habitat is far away from the hills and the wild animals are still roaming on them. The caves that Marco explores are damp and ill-maintained and they are still the archaeological sites of the Indian countryside. The other village, Mangal is equally typical of rural India containing thatched huts, muddy lanes, thin and weak livestock, and fatalistic villagers living on a meager subsistence from their poor farmland. There is a river close by, with a ruined temple on its bank under a spreading tree. Life of the people living there is hard and their tempers are short. They nurse grudges longer in their life rather than love. There is little entertainment for the people to divert their minds. They gather around Raju while appealing him to tell mythological stories and moral fables in the evening. It is a common truth about the rural India that the people there depend on the monsoon rains.

The novelist prefers to depict the social features of the region he used as the locale for his novel. His observation goes deep into the social surface to expose the hollowness of many of our conventional pieties. The traditional Malgudi society represented by Raju’s parents and uncle is patriarchal, traditional, caste-ridden and narrow-minded. Despite Rosie’s being postgraduate in Economics, and a talented dancer, she is rejected as by Raju’s family on the basis of illegitimacy and of a low caste. Even Marco who marries Rosie tries to force patriarchal norms on her by insisting her to be submissive and home-bound wife. He opposes her art of dancing and public show of it. The Malgudi society is also a materialistic society in which values are neglected for money and social status. Rosie’s and Marco’s marriage is neither an arranged traditional Indian marriage nor even a



Westernized love marriage. Their marriage is a modern urban Indian phenomenon organized through a newspaper advertisement.

Rosie gives reasons for her marriage that the women folk in her family insisted to marry with Marco because:

He had a big house, a motor car, he was a man of high social standing... no family at all...if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice (85).

R. K. Narayan is critical of the customary Indian conception of a good and decent marriage as he links the failure of Rosie's marriage with the emotionally unsatisfactory relationship between husband and wife. The modern Malgudi society is no match to the traditional Malgudi society. What the modern Malgudi is missing is the morality and humanity. Raju's embrace of the modern Malgudi testifies his lacking both the moral and human values. The novelist is not only critical of the moral degradation of the society but he is critical also of social and official corruption of his time.

We are presented an uncompromising picture of official and social corruption in the "permit raj" (196) during the decades following India's independence. Liquor, gambling, and the manipulation of rules have become a way of life of urban middle class. These people earn profit from the exploitation of their culture. Culture has become a commodity having value for the material benefits. They would have preferred Rosie and her dance had she still been a *devadasi*, but now they hate her because she is rich and famous. The Malgudi society's moral lapse has reflected in the moral lapse of Raju. His moral fall occurs when he forges Rosie's signature to gain a personal advantage. In other words, Raju's moral lapse is symptomatic of the Malgudi society's moral lapse.

The villagers in *The Guide*, interestingly, appear to be far more spiritual. They carry the simplicity and faith. However, the novelist is subtly critical of their hunger for spiritual guidance. These people simply refuse to think rationally of the religious matters. It is their blind faith in religion compels Raju to accept sainthood. Raju honestly tries to tell them that he is not a wise man, but they would not listen:

Raju said, "I want you all to think independently, of your own accord, and not allow yourselves to be led about by the nose as if you were cattle."

There were murmurs of polite disagreement over this advice. Velan asked, 'How can we do that, sir?..It is wise persons like your good self who should think for us' (52).



This kind of naivety of the people will certainly make a fake Mahatma happy. But this implies that the spirituality of the villagers is somewhat flawed.

The novelist ironically treats the religious belief of the villagers. The scenes leading to Raju's martyrdom are infused with a quiet irony that gently mocks the tendency of inflating every situation into a quasi-religious. As Raju fasts, standing in the water of the draught-stricken river, huge crowd gather at the place they think a sacredness one. For them it is a place of pilgrimage consecrated by the holy man. The place has turned into a fair where thatch-roofed shops sell food and the colorful things flare up in the sky. The Tea Propaganda Board and the Health Department busily organize their official program. The loudspeakers blare "popular hits on the gramophone" (239-40) and the presence of balloon-sellers and peddlers of all varieties including a gambling make the scene regional. The government pretending to care the sentiments of the masses sends doctors to attend Raju without bothering to know events leading to Raju's martyrdom. The scene becomes more comical than serious when the American television producer filming this oriental event for his global audience.

It is clear that *The Guide* is set in a specific part of India with a distinctive culture of its own. Raju has words to say about his tourist guide days:

No use expecting a man to be clear-headed who is fresh from a train journey. He must wash, change his clothes, refresh himself with *idli* and coffee, and only then can we expect anyone in South India to think clearly on all matters of this world and the next (61).

R. K. Narayan's pictorial description of the South Indian society makes the novel a regional one or a novel having local color. It offers a critique of society which not limited to the South Indian society but all Indian society.

#### Works Cited

Narayan, R. K. *The Guide*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1999. Print.