



FACETS OF SOCIAL REALISM AND COMIC VISION IN RK NARAYAN'S *THE GUIDE*

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Abstract

The term Realism can be put in multiples ways. To a few, it is the fidelity observed in the transcription of life as it is. According to Percy Lubbock, it is the exactitude to life for literal transcription of life is impossible. Green speaks about it as a plausible interpretation of life. Different from the French naturalists and realists, R K Narayan exhibits an artistic reality, because the bare realism of life has little artistic splendour in it. He perceived the Indian psyche completely with all its uncomfortable aspects painting superstitions, naiveness and the tendency to appreciate what appears beyond one's comprehension. Realism in literature was part of a greater movement in the arts to focus on ordinary people and events Literary realism most often refers to the trend, beginning with certain works of nineteenth century French literature and extending to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors in various countries, towards reflections of contemporary life and society "as they were." The vision of the entire novel *The Guide*, is comic marked by realism. The novelist has made a profound study of the Indian setting and has keenly observed the realistic Indian lives. The novel flickers with comic elements and humorous situations, characters and words. Narayan neither warps nor magnifies, but simply employs irony as a tool to hit at the human foibles and follies.

Key Words: Realism, Comic Vision, Irony, Humour

Realism (from Latin "*realis*"-) defines any expression of philosophical realism, the idea that reality exists independently of observers, whether in philosophy itself or in the applied arts and sciences. A shift from Romanticism, Realism is any attempt to depict life as it truly is. In the middle of the 19th century, the aristocratic class, the warriors and knights, demonic creatures, spirits, sea creatures, and nymphs gave way to farming folks, merchants, traders, labourers, and lay men. Realism in literature was part of a greater movement in the arts to focus on ordinary people and events Literary realism most often refers to the trend, beginning with certain works of nineteenth century French literature and extending to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors in various countries, towards reflections of contemporary life and society "as they were." In the spirit of general "realism," Realist authors went for the portrayal of everyday and vapid activities and experiences, instead of a romanticized or similarly much hyped presentation.

Rural India is the focal point of *The Guide*. A great deal of attention is given to the boyhood of Raju presented at Malgudi. Raju's father is typical shopkeeper of an Indian village. His shop is made of planks and gunny sacks. It is frequented by peasants and drivers of bullock carts. He sells peppermint, fruit, tobacco, betel leaf and so forth. But with the arrival of railways in Malgudi, his business improves. Lack of education is a major short coming in Indian social system. Raju's village teacher behaves rudely to the children. Consequently, we find Raju, in guise of a swami, expressing his wish to see all young kids literate and intelligent. He attempts to become a good teacher by founding a school at the shrine. But he fails. Raju's growth from the shop keeper to the Railway guide, and to Rosie's lover are all real images. He reaches the epitome of Indian life when he is hailed as a Swami by the poor and ignorant villagers. As the fruit of education is being denied to the villagers, they are all rooted in superstitions and ignorance. Velan represents a character of this sort. Raju's tale about his shady past never dents his reverence for him. As Rosie's lover, Raju appears greedy. Perhaps the poverty of his childhood has filled in him a gluttonous craving for wealth. Yet he is not free from the evils caused by money. He is driven towards gambling and drinking as a young affluent man in India is tempted to. The sainthood thrust on him saves him from all such vices.

The characters in the novel are all true embodiments of the people of India. The very delineation of Marco is explicit in the novel. His wisdom and scholarship make him apathetic towards his wife and her skills, but he is very particular about the vouchers. Consequently, he takes a sadistic pleasure by sending his wife's lover to prison. Velan is a stereotypical, uneducated villager controlled by his superstitions. The village folks affected by the pathetic draught, turn to the swami for relief. How these gullible people can be exploited by feigned saints is represented clearly in their relationship with Raju. Their altercations and passions come down after hearing consolatory words from Raju, the Swami. The village shop men, like any other sellers in India, increases the price during the draught, but the villagers move furiously against him. They never find fault in taking the law in to their hands. India, the haven of wizards and swamis, has instilled in her citizens the belief that water for agricultural needs can be obtained only through rains and rains by prayers and fastings.

R K Narayan, despite being a realist, shuns sordid realism. The awkward aspects of life are staved off. He differs from C.E.M Joad who explained realism in literature as an attempt to state life as it is, devoid of romance, fantasy and sentimentality. Gaffur and Rosie are sentimental beings, and the novelist gives a romantic setting to his realistic descriptions. He has adopted realistic language and method of narration. The language articulated by the characters is in accordance with their education and social status.

R.K. Narayan is undoubtedly one of the greatest humourists among the Indo-Anglian writers in fiction. In this respect he can be ranked with Fielding and Dickens on the one hand, and with Chaucer on the other. His humour is diversified. We come across in his novels like "The Guide" humour of character, humour of situation, farcical humour, wit, irony and satire. Above all, humour is mingled with pathos and tragedy as in Shakespearean plays. He shares with Chaucer a comic vision of the world. Graham Greene has observed that his humour is closer to Chekhov than to any English writer, for he has an underlying sense of beauty and sadness., Harvey Breit agrees with this view when he says "Narayan is to India what Chekhov was to Russia". Antony West describes Narayan as a "writer of Gogol's stature". He is endowed with a keen eye, tolerant mind and a compassionate heart which are the essential qualities of a true humourist. He can perceive the comic and the incongruous in the ordinary.

Narayan is a pioneer figure in employing irony which he uses abundantly in his comic vision. But his irony, far from being bitter, is sweet and congenial. Raju is called Swami by Velan unwittingly, which is an example of the irony of situation, for Raju dies as a Swami. After his release from jail, Raju gets shaved clean in a barber's shop and prides himself that he has got rid of his past like his beard. But when he is taken for a Swami he regrets the smoothness of his chin, for a beard becomes a Swami better. Like the beard, his past also adheres to his mind. Raju dons the role of a saint to get food, but it is his hunger that gives him the status of a Mahatma. Many government officers pour into Mangal, but none recognizes Raju, the jail-bird. Raju's wish to live obscure is thwarted by the irony of Fate that brings him to limelight as a Swami. Raju is constantly aware of the mask he puts on, but he is unable to shake it off. Raised to the status of a saint, Raju is consumed with an itching desire to cry to the people to get out and leave him alone. But he has his back to the wall, and there is no retreat. Velan provides him with everything necessary for his comfort, except food, which is his dire need. The village of Mangala itself is an irony of situation. The area is drought-affected, but people are pouring in, and all facilities, formerly unavailable, are provided. When the villagers comment, "Appearances are sometimes misleading", they are hardly aware that it fits Raju. The greatest irony is that a single, illiterate innocent man, Velan, is responsible for the entire commotion and uproar.

Raju and Marco provide a striking contrast and the author has exploited the occasion with a great deal of irony. Marco is an intellectual, scrupulously honest; while Raju is a dishonest rogue guided by possessive instinct. Yet in the end, Marco gets isolation while Raju shoots into fame and wins an abiding place in the hearts of innocent people. Rosie is another character dealt with irony. She is the daughter of a Devadasi, eager to escape the stigma of her community, but in the end she becomes a for the public while a Devadasi dances only for the pious. is back to square one with little gain.

Occasionally we get farcical humour that arouses loud laughter. The boys in the school in Malgudi pry into the house of the master whom, they find cooking in the kitchen while his wife stands by and giggles, for she is amused by the situation. The readers are again convulsed with laughter when the Swami goes in to have some food and throws away in anger the empty pot he finds there.

The ball of humour is set rolling by several statements uttered by the various characters in the novel. For instance, Raju says, "The essence of sainthood seemed to lie in one's ability to utter mystifying statements". The author himself makes such comments to expose and ridicule the various aspects of the society. Of the lawyer he says, "A case in his hands was like dough, he could knead and draw it up and down". Describing Raju's status as a Swami, he says, "Raju soon realised that his spiritual status would be enhanced if he grew a beard and long hair" The interview between the American reporter and Raju at the close of the novel is a diverting one. It is not a Yogi, but a Bhogi, who is being interviewed and asked to express his views on a number of philosophical questions.

The whole plot is composed like a biography. Raju's romance, his greed for money, his sin and repentance form the gist of the novel, but we have to admit that this is the story of every man growing from ordinary vices to extra ordinary virtues. Raju the railway guide becomes the spiritual guide. Like all human beings, he has an odd mixture of good and bad qualities, and he is more sinned against than sinning.

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