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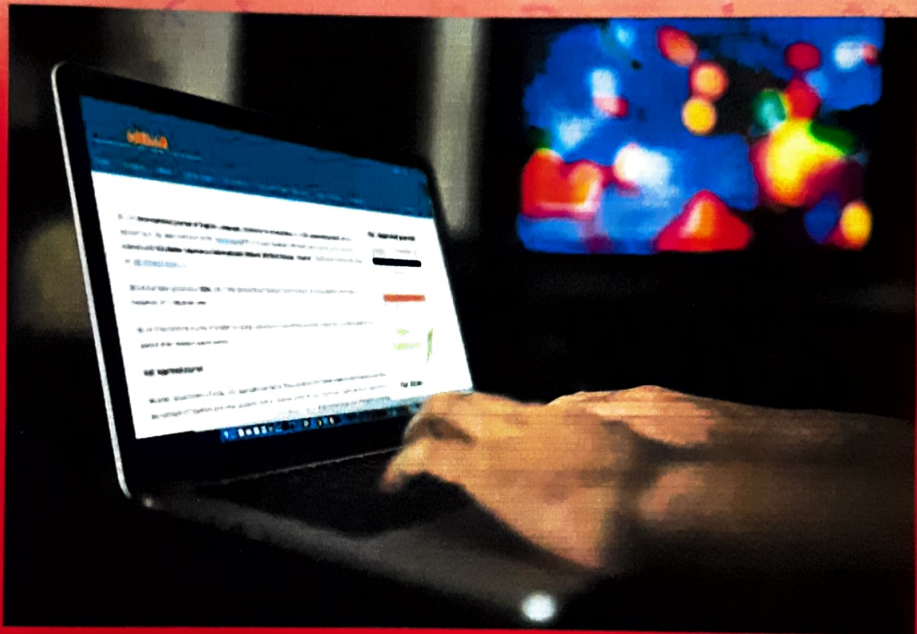
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Debasish Dey

Assistant Professor

Kalinagar Mahavidyalaya

Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

debasish0037@gmail.com

### Reconstructing Identity: an Undaunted Journey of Rosie in Narayan's

#### The guide

**Abstract:** The society we live in is always male - oriented and takes women as objects for pleasure. In this society women are striving to create a self - identity apart from the identity like daughter, sister, wife etc., which are attributed to them by the patriarchal society. The quest for identity has gained a significant framework in the Indo - Anglican novels of the 20th century. R.K. Narayan holds a unique place among the greatest Indian writers writing in English. In each of his novels, there is at least one female character who occupies an important place in the story and Rosie is such a female character in *The Guide*. In R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* Rosie belongs to a family of 'devadasi'. But, she is an educated and ambitious woman who strives to attain independent economic entity according to her own taste and talent. When Marco marries her, her family thinks that she is given an identity by helping her in coming out of a marginalized existence. Rosie seeks to make an identity that is completely self - defined. The present article tries to show how Rosie emerges as totally an independent woman depending on her creative ability overcoming all social hardships.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, feminism, New woman, identity, myth.

In the novels of R. K. Narayan the woman characters can be seen to go through a process of evolution. If we go through the four novels of Narayan, namely, *The Dark Room* (1938), *Mr. Sampath* (1949), *The Guide* (1958) and *The Painter of Signs* (1976), we find this evolution in the woman characters portrayed in the novels. Savitri in *The Dark Room* is a traditionally suppressed housewife, submitting to the demands of patriarchy, Shanti in *Mr. Sampath* and Rosie in *The Guide* are a perfect combination of the traditional and westernized modern culture, and in *The Painter of Signs* Daisy surprises us with her sexual openness and individual strong identity. Whereas Savitri of *The Dark Room* and Daisy of *The Painter of Signs* seem, to certain extent, constructed to a formula by the author, and thereby rendering their actions an air of predictability, nothing can be predicted about Rosie due to her multi-dimensional personality and her way of thinking. This helps her make an identity which is different from other women in society.

Narayan's award winning novel, *The Guide* deals with the woman's role and condition in a society which is dominated by men. The novel discusses the problem of individuals and specially women who are forced to play predefined gender roles such as daughter, wife or mother and it shows the result of such oppression. So, the effect of this problem is woman's rebellion to beliefs, values and ideas dominating in society. Rosie, like all the other characters in R.K. Narayan's novels, begins her journey of realization for creating her real identity and during this quest she confronts many hardships, but at the end she emerges as an independent woman free from the clutches of men. "Identity" is a central concept for much contemporary cultural and literary criticism, which, along with its even vaguer terminological twin, the "self", has become a cliché without becoming clear. The word "identity" is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women. Carolyn Heilbrun in her brave book, *Reinventing Womanhood*, claims that successful women are "male- identified" but that it is a "failure" for a "woman to take her

identity from her man" (pp. 46). Women never form a self because they "need never undergo an identity crisis", yet they have an identity to lose: "the price of wifehood is abandonment of self"(pp. 103, 178). And it is quite true in the case of Rosie. Charles Correa in his essay named 'Quest for Identity' says "we develop our identity by tackling what we perceive to be our real problem ... we find our identity by understanding ourselves, and our environment "(pp. 10).

Rosie has a "quest for self-definition "from the beginning ---- she wants to excel in the art of dancing. Rosie belongs to a family of "devadasis" ----"I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers""----and is under no illusion as to how "devadasis" are regarded ---"we are viewed as public women ---we are not considered civilized ""(*The Guide*, 84). Raju's mother echoes the conventional wisdom when she warns her son ---"...don't have anything to do with these dancing women. They are all a bad sort ""(*The Guide*, 69). Raju's uncle is also a part of the patriarchal society that opposes her free movement---"Are you of our caste? No. Our class? No. ...After all, you are a dancing girl. We do not admit them in our families. Understand?"""(*The Guide*, 169). But none of them pays any heed to her other identity as an educated woman with an M.A. degree in Economics. "Rosie's situation is emblematic of the hypocrisy of patriarchal society that uses even religion to exploit women" (Sen, 60). It is true that Rosie is extraordinarily lucky in being able to negotiate marriage with a rich, upper class man (considering her good looks and her education), and thus come out of the marginalized/ghettoized existence, that most of her caste members are doomed to. Marco's act of marrying Rosie from a newspaper's matrimonial advertisement, on the basis of good looks and education, is definitely commendable. Still, a question haunts us ---Is he really so liberal to do this? His act reminds me of Nikhilesh's 'enlightened' act (but nevertheless patriarchal) of bringing out his wife from the sphere of 'home into the 'world' in Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)*. It is typical of an impractical and academic man enjoying a lot of inherited income, and without a family

to vet his decisions. Marco's gesture may have been just---- a gesture, coming from a typically academic man, living on the basis of theories ---- but he is unable to cope, when realities break upon his ideologically constructed world. If Marco had truly come out of his patriarchal mindset, he would not have continuously shuddered at the reference to Rosie's past as dancer or refused to let her practice her art. What he expects from his wife is that she should simply exist to serve his needs, and maintain an unquestioning, shadowy existence.

This results in a loveless, stifling marriage where Rosie is definitely the loser because she neither gains any emotional/physical compatibility, nor any artistic independence. Marco refuses to even admit that dancing can be as significant a mode of self-expression as archeology. So, when Raju asks Rosie what interests her, she replies, "'Anything except cold, old stone walls'" (*The Guide*, 72) and both her sexuality and her ambition to be a professional classical dancer in contemporary South India seem to be at odds with Marco's obsession with a sterile past: "'dead and decaying things seemed to unloosen his tongue and fire his imagination, rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs'" (*The Guide*, 710). That is why the moment she set her foot in Malgudi, she asked Raju, 'their 'guide' ---- "'Can you show me a cobra ---a king cobra it must be ---which can dance to the music of a flute?'" (*The Guide*, 64). Raju succeeds in arranging this for Rosie, and Rosie's spontaneous movement as she imitates the swaying cobra convinces Raju that she is a blessed dancer. Raju describes the reaction of Rosie at the sight of the king cobra's dance:

The whole thing repelled me, but it seemed to  
fascinate the girl. She watched it swaying with the raptest  
attention. She stretched out her arm slightly and swayed  
it in imitation of the movement ; she swayed her body to  
the rhythm---for just a second (*The Guide* , 68).

Later, when Rosie becomes a successful dancer, her "masterpiece" is the "snake dance" (*The Guide*, 211-212). Raju's mother misses this aesthetic quality in Rosie when she abuses her as a "serpent -girl" (*The Guide*, 170), which implies that Rosie is like a snake in having a venomous and harmful nature. But, the symbolism of the snake has far deeper significance in the novel.

We know that in many cultures and mythologies the snake, which is 're-born' by sloughing off its old dead skin annually, is taken to be the symbol of the mystic, the mysterious, the eternal renewal of life on earth. Again, the image of the snake as the mystic emblem of Shiva is related to Rosie herself--"she, too, is from an "underground" or socially stigmatized class, and yet she can come close to the gods through her dance, which is for her the sincerest form of worship" (Sen, 51). The spiritual transformation of Rosie through dance is signified in the changing of her name from "Rosie" to "Nalini". According to Raju, this transformation of Rosie is a kind of "rebirth" or "reincarnation". Thus, Rosie creates a self-defined identity through the expression of her instinctive or creative energy as represented through her dance.

The importance of dance may seem to be a secondary concern of the novel, functioning solely as a medium for developing Rosie's character, but it is a significant subject in its own right in the novel. Rosie's success, as a practitioner of *Bharat Natyam*, is generally considered to be the oldest and most traditional of the six major forms of Indian Classical dance and still widely performed in Tamil Nadu. So, as she trains herself to become proficient in this ancient art, she is undergoing a transformation which is analogous to Raju's in the later action. Besides, dance is a trope for performative identity more generally. Again, Rosie's study of the '*Natya Shastra*' may suggest an attempt to learn the conventions of an ancient form of dance which if simply copied in a mimetic way would preclude creative reinterpretations and her absorption in her art seems to distance her from the temple-dancer stereotype, with its lowly associations. Rosie becomes a star performer of a classical art form that saw 'resurgence' at



the beginning of the twentieth century and a similar ' resurgence' --- a resurgence of her instinctive energy through dance --- happens in the creative realm of Rosie.

While Raju's mother is a recognizable Indian type, Rosie is definitely a ' modern woman ' --- a ' new woman ' like Nora in Ibsen's *The Doll's House*. She has the ability to lead the life as she wishes and to achieve her goal. As Gaffur notes in derision: "... an old uneducated wife is better than the new type of girl. Oh, modern girls are very bold." (*The Guide*, 115). Rosie is one of a number of Narayan's female characters who are not the "playthings "of men in the patriarchal society. She is, like Shanta Bai in *The Dark Room*, both educated and a woman who feels she has a stigma attached to her because of her caste background. She comes from a "family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers "and is consequently viewed as a "public woman ". But still she achieves the heights of success in the same society that rejects her, like Shanta Bai who holds her own. The only difference is that unlike the siren figure of Shanta Bai, who serves as a foil to the orthodox and complex Savitri in *The Dark Room*, Rosie is represented as a woman who demonstrates both professional and personal integrity, behaving impeccably towards Raju after he has been dishonest to her. Rosie is more like Shanti, the widowed actress and dancer in Narayan's *Mr. Sampath*, than Shanta Bai. Rosie, when she is rejected by her husband, is able to sustain herself through her art, like Shanti. Shanti and Rosie represent the more independent women of an India slowly changing under the influence of the west. At the end of the novel, Shanti simply disappears --- she takes a train and vanishes into the great Indian landmass just like Rosie, leaving a message that as a widow, she may go back to the traditional life of widowhood:

I am sick of this kind of life ... If I find you pursuing me , I will shave off my head fling away my jewelry and wear a white sari . ... I am, after all, a widow and can shave my head and disfigure myself, if I like. ... I had different ideas of a film life.

Like Rosie, Shanti is freer from the bondage of patriarchy than Savitri. Her artistic talent gives her the privilege to create her own space, and her ultimate decision to conform is not dictated by necessity, but chosen at will, as is true of Rosie.

Narayan reinvents the category of the so-called "fallen women" through the character of Rosie and gives it a completely different dimension. The novel is about the woman who steps out of the confines of a loveless marriage, and does not impose on herself punishments like death, widowhood or exile in Kashi. Instead she moves from strength to strength, and fulfills ultimately her desire to become a true artist. The novel shows a woman's ability to come out of the clutches of both an indifferent husband, and an exploitative lover. Raju eyes Rosie, not simply as a physical conquest, but as a potential means of income. Raju is consumed with jealousy that Rosie should be able to organize everything on her own:

I know I was growing jealous of her self-reliance. [ ... ] I feared that , in spite of protestations to the contrary, she would never stop dancing. [ ... ] She would go from strength to strength. I knew , looking at the way she was going about her business that she would manage --- whether I was inside the bars or outside , whether her husband approved of it or not ( *The Guide*, 222- 223 ) .

At last, Raju is forced to believe that Rosie / Nalini's life has an inner vitality and that she can emerge as a truly independent woman, free from all kinds of male dominations:

Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life which had her own sustaining vitality and which she had underestimated for so long (*The Guide*, 222).

To conclude , Rosie not only is a free woman , as said by Raju himself --- " She ... was a free creature , while I was a jailbird " ( *The Guide* , 221 ) , but also remains loyal to her husband , even after she is deserted by him . During moments of remorse, Rosie almost repeats the same sentiments: "After all he is my husband. I have to respect him. I cannot leave him there" (*The Guide*, 119); "... is it not a wife's duty to guard and help her husband, whatever the

way in which he deals with her?" (*The Guide*, 120), and in reply to Raju's taunting about how Marco left her she says: " I deserved nothing less . Any other husband would have throttled me then and there. He tolerated my company for nearly a month after knowing what I had done "*(The Guide*, 201). Even she carried out Marco's book amidst all the riches of her house. Rosie is attracted to Raju only because she believes that he appreciates the art of dancing , and she abandons him when she finds that this is not so . Raju wanted her to continue her dance full-fledgedly only because it brought in money and fame. But, for Rosie it has no professional importance, rather it is a form of self - expression and a way to show her devotion to her god. It is something spiritual to her, as stated by Raju :

Nalini cherished every garland that she got at the end of a performance. She cut it up, sprinkled water on it , and preserved it carefully , even when we were in a train . She said, holding up a piece of garland and sniffing the air for its fragrance, " To me this is the only worthwhile part of our whole activity." (*The Guide*, 194)

Later , she goes through a kind of self - imposed '*agnipariksha*' ( a trial of purity by fire ) by paying off all of Raju's loans , and earning enough money to engage the best lawyer for Raju. However, when the sentence is pronounced on him, her duty is finished, she is able to overcome the temptation of money, fame and physical desire. Now she is an independent woman, and no longer needs the support of either of the men in her life. This is a different kind of Indian woman, complicated and independent, and free from the patriarchal "de-scriptions" of the mythological characters like Sita and Savitri that have compelled Indian women to remain in confinement for centuries.

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