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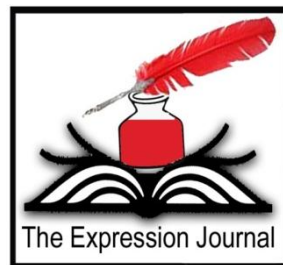
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Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

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UNDERLYING IRONY IN R. K. NARAYAN'S *THE GUIDE*

Dr. Satrughna Singh

Associate Professor, Department of English

Raiganj University

Raiganj, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal

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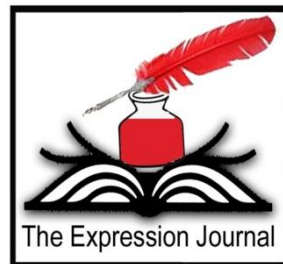
Abstract

In *The Guide*, R.K. Narayan has profusely and analytically used almost all the forms of irony, e.g., verbal irony, dramatic irony, irony of situation, etc. Raju, the protagonist of the novel, is an innate guide who passes through three phases—as a railway guide to ordinary people, as a romantic guide to Rosie (Nalini), and lastly as a spiritual guide to the people of the village, Mangala. He turns from the light to the serious, from the sinner to the saint, from the rough to the sublime. But the greatest irony lies in this that though he guides other people, yet he fails to guide himself properly in its earlier life. It is only through the coincidence or a sense of respect and obligation that he succeeds in guiding his own sinful soul in his last phase of saintly life. So, the title of the novel is itself ironic. In the novel, irony permeates the narrative as Raju evolves from a deceptive tour guide to a genuine spiritual leader. The irony lies in his unintentional transformation, juxtaposed against his initial fraudulent persona. Raju's ascent to a revered sage, driven by circumstances, underscores the unpredictability of life. The narrative irony becomes more pronounced as Raju, who initially guides others for personal gain, ends up guiding himself towards spiritual enlightenment. The irony is a subtle commentary on the unpredictable and paradoxical nature of human existence, as Raju's journey unfolds in unexpected ways, challenging conventional expectations.

Keywords

Definition of Novel, Ironic Reversal, Aesthetic Longingness, Downtrodden and the Havesnot, Inner Conflicts, Spritualism.

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Marco, the man of academic interest, studies sculpture and digs out some unknown things, which the tongues of stone want to express. He is so much interested in examining the stones that he spends a very little time, or better say, no time at all to his better-half, who is possessed with the extraordinary quality of dancing and other artistic things. He compares the dancing of his wife to street acrobatics: "An acrobat on a trapeze goes on doing the same thing all his life; well, your dance is like that. What is there intelligent or creative in it? You repeat your tricks all your life."¹

It is a great irony that he neglects the living beauty like his wife and devotes most of his time to the study of the beauty of the dead stones. When the Weird Sisters enkindled ambition in *Macbeth*, Banquo warns Macbeth against it. But as is often the case, man, at such moments, muffles the voice of conscience and marches valiantly to the hell of destruction. In Keat's *Lamia*, we find the same thing. At the time of Lycius's marriage with Lamia, Apollonius, the tutor of Lycius, goes to attend the wedding uninvited. Amid all the music and feasting, it was observed that Apollonius's gaze was constantly fixed on Lamia's face. She seemed terrified by the searching look of the old philosopher, and when Lycius protested, Apollonius gruffly muttered in his ear a warning. He told him that he would not see him fall a prey to a serpent woman. He gazed at Lamia and when he called her a serpent, she shrieked and vanished. The same is the case here with Raju. He too muffles his voice of conscience and commits such a blunder, which goes against the norms of ethics.

To read R. K. Narayan is to know India, entirely different in a way than V. S. Naipaul. Narayan, happily for his readers, had never faced the problem of diaspora, a term we have been hearing for quite some time from the critics who have remained ritually loyal to what has come to be known as post-colonial criticism. Bill Ashcroft who recently visited Calcutta has further extended the scope of post-colonial criticism by including even pre-colonial writings, and also those written during the period of colonisation. That covers up satisfactorily a vast field indeed, and writer as prolific and influential as Narayan finds a place within the praxis of post-colonial criticism.

There are certain books by Narayan which take special place in his creative work: *Gods, Demon and Others* (1965) and *The Ramayana* (1972). The main characters of these books are not people of contemporary India but demons and gods of Indian mythology. Narayan wanted to come into contact with the original purity of Indian fantasy and folk and epic reality. It would be a mistake to think that the writer tries to escape from contemporary reality into the world of mythology and classic art which lack social contradiction and political problems. Meenu Dubey observes:

Out of a great number of epic characters Narayan thoroughly selected main characters for his legends. In Narayan's book we can find brave and selfless kings Lavana, Harish Chandra, Shibi, courageous Rama, and the faithful Sita in their struggle against evil demon Ravana and Savitri who managed to pull out her sweet heart Satyavan from the hands of the Death God, Yama.²

Narayan's *The Guide* may be considered a representative novel which brings forth the incompatibility of interests of human beings who are ironically brought together by fate. The triangular love story presented in the novel tends to be tragic for all the three main characters of the novel. The hero of the novel – Raju is popularly called 'Railway Raju' because he serves railway passengers as a touristguide, and his career has flourished quite successfully.

The turn of events takes place when Marco and his wife Rosie arrive in Malgudi. Marco is an academician preoccupied with his Fresco hunting in ancient caves, and does not pay much attention to his young wife. He does not even consent to her organising the art of dancing which he looks upon as a degrading activity. Raju is employed by Marco in his professional capacity to show him the caves in and around Malgudi. Marco gets too busy studying. Dr. Beena R.Zanwer (Rathi) holds the view:

The young guide finds that he gets ample opportunities of spending a happy time with the young dancer Rosie whom he flatters cleverly. Infact, he is infatuated with Marco who comes to know of their relationship, disowns his wife and returns home.³

In the temple of Village, Mangala, Raju pretends to be a saint and delivers a very short discourse to the credulous gathering. There is a great difference between his saintly life he is leading in the village temple and the sinful life he led in his early life. His loquaciousness turns into taciturnity; agility into soberity; criminality into purity. He, like the astrologer in the story, "An Astrologer's Day" speaks a very little and "was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone: that was more a matter of study, practice and shrewd guesswork"⁴

In course of delivering discourses, Raju speaks such general truths, which look ironic. He says : "If you show me a single home without problems, I shall show you the way of attaining a universal solution to all problems".⁵ Here the irony lies in this that he preaches the whole world to lead a life free of problems, but he himself failed to show or guide his own soul to the right path.

Thus, R.K. Narayan *The Guide* is a classical work of English literature. It is not simply rich in theme and thought but it is also full of beautiful images and symbols and all other demands of literature.

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