



LITERATURE AS A REFLECTION OF LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CONCORD: A STUDY OF R. K. NARAYAN'S *THE GUIDE*

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Abstract

Literature is a living mirror of language and culture that gives expression to the values, traditions, culture and way of life of a society. The purpose of this study is to present how R. K. Narayan through his Indian English has portrayed Indian culture, social traditions, religious values and beliefs authentically. Main characters of the story – Raju, Rosie and Marco – represent the duel between tradition and modernity, social responsibility and individual freedom. In this paper, it is analyzed that Narayan's language is not just a medium of expression but also an expression of Indian cultural consciousness and sensibility. By incorporating the localized character of Indian English, indigenous idiomatic expressions, cultural references and the Indian world view, the author effectively demonstrates the intrinsic relation between language and culture.

Keywords

Culture, Consciousness, Indian English, Narayan, Indian Sensibility, etc.

Full Article

Language, culture and literature are deeply interconnected, and influence, modify and transform one another. Together they mould and shape human thinking, identity and social life. Language and literature are not just tools of communication or artistic expression, but are potent forces that influence individuals and society. This paper attempts to study literature, with special focus on R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*, as a reflection of linguistic and cultural concord. *The Guide* (1958) is one of the most popular novels which expresses the idea of the togetherness of language, culture and literature as it is written in a foreign language but foreign language is indianized pertaining to the needs of Indian culture. In the novel *The Guide*, Narayan uses English, a foreign language, as his language and transforms it into a vehicle for expressing Indian values, traditional beliefs and social changes.

Language is the primary medium through which culture is communicated. It passes values, beliefs, customs, and traditions from one generation to another. Language is carrier of memories, identities and worldview. It is not a means of communication only, it is a means of communication of something meaningful, and a thing becomes meaningful only when it is associated with and rooted in culture. Language carries culture and it speaks through literature. As Jhumpa Lahiri, in her Autobiographical novel *In Other Words* (2016), finds language not only a medium of expression but also a carrier of culture and identity. This work of her is not just an autobiographical creation but also a spiritual journey of language, identity, culture and self-exploration. To understand Italian culture, she learns Italian. Language is not separate from culture; it is the primary medium through which culture is experienced, preserved, negotiated, and transformed. Every language carries a culture and philosophy with itself. When she learns Italian, she not only learns new words but she begins to understand culture, thinking, life and culture of Italy. Language is the basic source of emotions and creativity. To find herself in new terms, she writes in a new language i.e. Italian, and it was a 'new birth' to her. So language in literature is not used as a technique but as an emotional



experience. She finds literature a bridge between language and culture; and language and literature as base of literature.

Literature does not grow in vacuum, and it exhibits the experiences of the society in its cultural context. A work of literature is not only a piece of aesthetic art; it is deeply rooted in the realities of society. It is a cultural text. It documents social truths and preserves the experiences of a society. Religious traditions, myths, and philosophies deeply influence literary symbols, narratives, and character motivations. Nirmal Verma, an eminent Hindi writer and novelist, in his famous essay “*Language and National Identity*” (1992) finds language a carrier of memories and cultural identity of a nation, while literature gives identity to that expression and preserves it. So a society has to conserve its language and literature for its cultural existence and creative development. Literature reinforces cultural identity by celebrating shared history, heroes, and ideals. Though he is of the firm belief that literature should be written in one’s own language only then it can do justice with culture of a region or nation, R. K. Narayan wrote his literature in English but he used it in a truly indianized way and presented Indian culture without making any mistake. Narayan showed his master class in writing in a foreign language and presenting minute cultural details, national flavour, and psyche of Indian characters imbued in Indian culture. *The Guide* is his masterpiece which is a classic of Indian literature written in English and presents Indian society, its traditions, and orthodoxy as well as changing approach towards modernism, female voices and cultural transformation.

The experiences which Indians experienced during the British rule shaped their thinking which became a part of their culture that got expressed in language and literature. Literature reflects the social, political, and cultural realities of its time. Post-colonial literature shows how British rule affected Indian psyche, and Indians faced and are still facing identity crisis after colonialism. Feeling of inferiority for their culture, language, eating habits and dressing sense that was rooted in their mind by the Britishers was expressed by the writers like Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie etc. Many writers wrote in English just out of their feeling of inferiority about their language and culture but this cannot be said about R. K. Narayan. Narayan’s English is quite simple, natural and transparent. Through simple and natural foreign language, he makes the realities of Indian life very real. He doesn’t rely upon the complexities of language and linguistic display. M. K. Naik remarks that Narayan’s English is ‘transparent and unobtrusive’; it brings Indian reality alive without linguistic display. Naik says, “Indian English literature is an inevitable product of the nativization of the English language to express the Indian sensibility” (Naik, 4). Narayan portrays the atmosphere of Malgudi, Railway station, market, village and the life of common people very realistically and effectively. Readers find as if they are witnessing the life of these characters.

The Guide is written in English but the language remains deeply Indian in spirit. By the time, R. K. Narayan was writing his novels, English was not an alien language any longer. It had become the language of Indian intellect. Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and many other writers were using English with such precision that English was indianized and fit for Indian themes and Indian culture. Narayan writes, “English has proved that if a language has flexibility, any experience can be communicated through it.... It has served my purpose admirably....”(Kumar, 135) English literature in English became an instrument for Indians to reach the world. Indian culture, traditions, routine, family values and family system are being appreciated by the world, and reading about India in English language has helped Indians in learning English and using it conveniently.

When a writer writes not in his native language, but in some other language about his own culture, tradition, rituals and social experiences, he not only translates his thoughts in other language, but also presents his culture to other cultures. Culture may be defined as a way of life or a shared way of life. Culture is not static, it is a living process, that is dynamic and evolving. E. B. Taylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law,



custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Taylor, 1). And what Raymond Williams defined as “a whole way of life” (Williams, 4) Culture strongly influences both language and literature, as they emerge from the social, historical, and cultural environment of a community. The way people live, think, and believe is reflected in how they speak and what they write.

Writing about India in English is a sort of ‘cultural translation’. The writer has to express Indian experiences, emotions, values and social behaviour in such a way that it can become meaningful and interpretable for the readers of English language. Meenakshi Mukharjee points out, “Every act of writing in English about India involves an act of translation across culture” (Mukharjee, 12) Narayan also, through English language, opens a window for the world to peep into and understand Indian culture and society. He writes in English but his expression and art of storytelling is definitely Indian. He uses many Indian words such as veranda, mahatma, darshan, table, puja, dhoti, sadhu etc which are retained to preserve Indian cultural identity. So a foreign language is used creatively and Narayan’s literature reflects national culture. Though his novels are about changing Indian society, they also protect India’s cultural society. *The Guide* presents Indian family values, religious faith, Indian spirituality, and social traditions. William Walsh points out that Narayan “has succeeded in a remarkable way in making an Indian sensibility wholly at home in English art” (Walsh, 3).

Rural people are presented as innocent and illiterate who easily believe in everything that is told to them. They even believe that Swami ji has the solution of all their problems and answers of all their questions. When rains don’t fall they ask, “is it true, Swami, that the movement of aeroplanes disturb the clouds and so the rains don’t fall? Too many aeroplanes in the sky” (Narayan, 92). They even believe the atom bombs are responsible for the drying up of the clouds. But they are shown so humble that they get easily convinced with whatever explanation is given by the Swami. They follow whatever the Swami says. It shows the Indian character of believing in sadhus and saints beyond doubt. They say, “You are not another human being. You are a Mahatma. We should consider ourselves blessed indeed to be able to touch the dust of your feet” (Narayan, 106). Raju understands people’s psyche very well and he always explains things in complicated words and mysterious ways as “the essence of sainthood seemed to lie in one’s ability to utter mystifying statements” (Narayan, 52). Even village teacher loses his confidence and logic in the presence of Swami. He asks the village master to teach kids in the evening in the temple. But the master himself sits in front of Swami and says, “I’ll do anything under your guidance” (146). The village master listens to him with children, talking Swami about Ramayana and characters in the epic. Villagers’ response to Swami’s stories and philosophical talk, sometimes make Swami believe in that he is a real sadhu. Narayan writes:

He was hypnotized by his own voice; he felt himself growing in stature as he saw the upturned faces of the children shining in the half-light when he spoke. No one was more impressed with the grandeur of the whole thing than Raju himself (Narayan, 47).

Narayan uses English language with such dexterity that he presents Indians and their behaviour and their approach towards problems and their solutions such authentically that English language doesn’t seem a foreign language. It is used in such a way that it represents Indian culture as it genuinely is and “his writing is a distinctive blend of Western technique and Eastern material” (Walsh, 3) When Raju’s uncle tries to intimidate him, Raju says, “Do you know what we do when an intractable bull calf? We castrate it. We will do that to you, if you don’t behave” (Narayan, 167) So Narayan’s language is not Indian but the thoughts and expressions are essentially



Indian. The way Raju's uncle raises questions about Rosie's caste, clan and family, and calls her 'serpent-girl' and 'dancing girl' that shows the sensibility of Indian society about class, caste and religion. Writers often use language creatively to question injustice, discrimination, and oppression. Through rural background, illiterate and orthodox people, religion and rituals, Narayan portrayed a genuine living image of India but at the same time through the character of Rosie, he presents a changing India. Rosie is one of the most remarkable characters of Indian literature in English. She represents the changing women in the post-independent India who is struggling and fighting to claim her freedom, identity and self-respect. It was the time woman was supposed to follow the patriarchal society as an obedient wife and a quiet homely woman, but Rosie challenges those traditional boundaries. On the one hand, a character like Rosie is portrayed to present the transience women was going through in the post independence India, on the other hand, character of Raju's mother presents a traditional Indian woman carrying on her shoulders the culture and thinking of hundreds of years old Indian society. When Rosie comes to live with Raju and his mother as their guest, Raju's mother feels amazed and says:

Girls today! How courageous you are! In our day 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 (Narayan,141).

But soon she comes to know what the whole village says about Rosie and she refuses to live with a "tainted woman" (Narayan, 154). She deserts her home and decides to live at her parentel home with her brother. She accepts her traditional role while Rosie emerges as an independent and ambitious woman, a changing, modern Indian woman. Her husband, Marco, fails to understand her love for dance and restricts her to the status of wife only. But she shows courage and ends her unhappy marriage, and chooses her passion for dance instead. She gets fame and earns reputation for herself. She chooses to dance and presence of a huge audience doesn't affect her adversely. She says, "They might be logs of woods for all I care. When I dance I hardly notice any face. I just see a dark well in the auditorium, that's all" (Narayan, 211). When the story begins, Rosie is shown dependent on her husband, Marco. In the middle part of the novel, she depends on Raju for her dance, for shows, for her finances etc. But in the end, she is shown completely transformed. She manages not only her shows herself, but she does so very successfully. The reforms that occurred in India during colonial rule due to Indians' exposure to western thinking and education were abolition of sati pratha, class and caste oppression, social injustice, and these changes found space in literature and moulded the thinking of Indians and transformed Indian culture, and Rosie's transformation can be seen as cultural transformation of Indian women. While there is transformation in Rosie, Raju's character also undergoes substantial change, from a tourist guide to a lover, Rosie's manager, a prisoner and finally, a sadhu. With every change, his language and approach towards life changes. His changing language mirrors his evolving identity.

As a tourist guide, his language is lively, persuasive and humorous, and his approach to life is practical and opportunistic. When he falls in love with Rosie, his language becomes emotional and encouraging. He admires Rosie's artistic talent and uses comforting words and motivates her to build her confidence. He is full of romance and says, "you may come out as you are and no one will mind it. Who would decorate a rainbow?" (Narayan, 72) As a manager, his speech becomes authoritative and wishes to reveal less and conceal more. He becomes ambitious and materialistic. But the moment he is sentenced imprisonment, he becomes reflective and he begins to understand the consequences of greed, deception and selfishness. He accepts himself as a moral failure. During the fast, he evolves from a fake sadhu into a real mahatma who is genuinely concerned for other's welfare. His transformation is both spiritual and moral. His language becomes philosophical and compassionate. He says, "I am only doing what I have to do; that's all. My likes and dislikes do not



count” (Narayan, 243). Narayan demonstrates that language reflects not only a person’s social role but also his moral growth and cultural consciousness.

So, a study of *The Guide* shows that the novel is one of the finest examples of linguistic and cultural concord. This work has successfully conveyed the Indian cultural sensibility and identity to the global readers. This work proves that language, literature and culture are inseparable from one another. Language gives structure to cultural expression, while literature deepens, questions, and renews it. Together, they shape how societies remember their past, understand their present, and imagine their future.

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