

From Silencing to Selfhood: Human Values and Subaltern Identity in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the study of Human Values through the famous novel *The Guide* by R. K. Narayan using a theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies. The novel is often seen as a story of moral confusion and spiritual change. This study argues that Rosie is a subaltern character. Her social status is different within the structure of social systems like patriarchy, class distinction, and rural conservative faith of the society. Rosie is a character whose artistic voice is suppressed and controlled by her husband and the social rules of marital authority, as well as the social morality of the upper strata in which she lives. The close textual reading and analysis explain how silence and social pressure affect the life of Rosie. She makes her journey towards self-understanding through her suffering, mistakes, repentance, and moral change. The study demonstrates how Rosie moves towards selfhood. The novel highlights important human values such as self-respect, responsibility, sincerity, and moral awakening in the lives of marginalized people. The study reflects *The Guide* not just as a story of dishonesty, fraud, and redemption, but as a deep reflection of subaltern people and the rebuilding of human values at the end of the story.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Subaltern Studies, Gendered inequality, Marginality, Identity, Selfhood, Human values.

Introduction:

The novel *The Guide* is written by the famous Indian English author R.K. Narayan, who is famous for his fictional town, *Malgudi*. It was published in 1958, in the post-independence era. A critic such as M. K. Naik observes that Narayan's fiction frequently portrays "the quiet tensions of Indian middle-class life" (Naik 164). The story deeply reflects the life of Rosie, a subaltern figure in her own society. She lives with her husband in the upper strata of a society that possesses a rigid patriarchal system and customs. She is a very good dancer, but her skill of dancing has been suppressed by her husband. Nalini, alias Rosie, becomes an empowered woman who searches for her own identity and selfhood in society. The story deals with the study of the marginality of the character Rosie with her suffering, struggle, and transformation from silence to awakening of selfhood. Rosie represents the gendered subaltern. William Walsh remarks that Narayan's art lies in revealing "the moral ambiguities of ordinary existence" (Walsh 72).

The novel, therefore, examines a movement from silencing to selfhood and studies the transformative power of human values.

Theoretical Framework:

In this research paper, the researcher has used the combined theory of Martha Nussbaum's *Capability Approach* and Ranjit Guha's *Subaltern Theory* together to study human values. According to Nussbaum, every human being needs to live with dignity, while Ranjit Guha shows how powerful people in society stop marginalized people from getting all the rights that make their lives dignified. Together, these theories provide a proper framework to understand dignity, freedom, and change in the life of the major character Rosie in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*.

Martha Nussbaum defines Life as:

"Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely" (Nussbaum 33). However, Ranjit Guha states that subaltern groups exist under systemic inequality: "The subaltern classes were subject to the dominance of the elite" (Guha xii). Thus, survival itself becomes politically structured. The capability of *Bodily Integrity* requires: "Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence" (Nussbaum 33). Guha explains how dominance operates through force: "Dominance was structured and operated primarily through coercion" (Guha xii). Hence, bodily freedom is central to human dignity. For *Practical Reason*, Nussbaum states: "Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life" (39).

Guha similarly asserts subaltern autonomy: "The politics of the people was an autonomous domain" (Guha 3). This connects moral choice with resistance. In *Affiliation*, Nussbaum emphasizes: "Having the social bases of self-respect

and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others” (39). Yet Guha critiques elite historiography: “The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism” (Guha 1). *Recognition* is, therefore, socially contested. Under control over one’s environment, Nussbaum includes: “Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life” (34). And materially, “Being able to hold property... and having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others” (34). Guha notes exclusion from national voice: “The subaltern classes did not speak in the voice of the nation” (Guha 1). Finally, *Emotions* involve: “Being able to have attachments... to love... to grieve” (33), and “Not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety” (33). This integrated framework identifies six essential human values necessary for analyzing dignity and agency in *The Guide*.

Martha Nussbaum states that every individual has a basic right to live a full life. He or she must not die early because of injustice in the family as well as in society. Poor and subaltern people are always controlled by the powerful groups or people in society. Even their safe living depends on the power and politics in which they live. But Nussbaum opines that a person should be safe and free from violence. Respect starts with control over your own body. A person should think for themselves and decide their future. According to Ranjit Guha, power often works by force and pressure. Ordinary people can think and act independently. According to Nussbaum, choosing your own path can be a form of resistance. Everyone deserves respect and equal treatment, not only in the family but also in society. To explain Subalternity Ranjit Guha talks about Historiography, in which history is usually written by powerful people. In society, respect is not easily given; it must be struggled for. Nussbaum includes that people should take part in decisions that affect their lives and earn money and their own necessities equally. Ranjit Guha states that marginalized people do not get rights to speak freely in their society. They are always suppressed by the dominant people. About emotions, Nussbaum explains that humans should be able to love and feel deeply satisfied in the environment in which they live, and their fear should not destroy their emotional growth.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further discusses by asking, “Can the subaltern speak?” (271). Rosie’s artistic expression is significant in this context: her dance functions as her medium of speech and makes her own identity in a society that otherwise silences her.

Life, Bodily integrity, Practical reason, Affiliation, Control over one’s environment and emotions, these six values help us to study dignity and freedom in the novel *The Guide* by R.K. Narayan.

Rosie’s Life & Bodily Integrity:

Rosie’s marriage denies her emotional and bodily freedom. It is her central human capability that is necessary for a dignified human life. Without it, a person cannot live with dignity. In the case of Rosie, she lives with Marco under his patriarchal authority. Her identity is suppressed by the patriarchy of her husband. Her married life with Marco is shaped by his patriarchal control and emotional neglect. Her husband, Marco, represents a male-dominated, rigid, and intellectual person who holds all authority and expects his wife to remain obedient and silent in the family. He does not like to live in her company as he possesses orthodox views and male dominant nature. He says, ‘Leave her alone...I can’t afford to be fooling around, wasting my time.’(Narayan 80)

When Raju asks her about their husband and wife relationship, she frankly says, “When we are alone and start talking, we argue and start quarreling over anything. We don’t agree on most matters, and then he leaves me alone and comes back, we are all right, that’s all’ (Narayan 83) Here, she makes it clear that they do not agree at any point. There is no mutual understanding in their relationship as husband and wife.

She wants to be a dancer, as she has an instinctive talent for dancing, which she inherited from her mother. She has many ideas to try as a dancer, including getting a proper education in dancing through the study of Bharatmuni’s *Natyashastra*, and from *the Mahabharata and Ramayana*. She wants to become a famous dancer as her husband is a famous scholar in the study of historical artefacts like caves. He is male dominating husband and does not like Rosie competes to him as a scholar. On this point, he says,

“Oh, you want to rival me, is that it? This is a branch of learning, not street acrobatics.”...An acrobat on a trapeze 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. We watch a monkey perform, not because it is artistic but because it is a monkey that is doing it. (Narayan 147-48)

Rosie’s individuality is suppressed in Marco’s patriarchy. Elaine Showalter argues that women’s creativity has historically been confined within male-controlled institutions (Showalter 12). But when she decides to become a dancer, it is her right to complete her own dream as it is her identity, passion, emotional expression, and her connection to her body. Marco does not beat her; he tries to control her dancing, thinking it is low or immoral. He discourages her from performing. He neglects her emotionally. So Rosie cannot freely use her body to dance, which means that her bodily integrity is suppressed by Marco. Here, Martha Nussbaum’s concept of Bodily integrity and practical reason from her *Women and Human Development* is clearly visible.

According to Marco, Rosie is not an individual with desires and talents. He sees her mainly as his wife, and as a woman, she must behave according to social respectability. He is emotionally distant and absorbed in his archaeological research and shows little affection or companionship toward Rosie. He does not try to understand her emotional needs. He considers her passion for dance to be not valued; instead, he considers it inappropriate and inferior. But she expects him to permit her to dance. This reflects a patriarchal mindset where a woman’s artistic identity is dismissed. Patriarchy appears here not only as domination but also as indifference. He tries to control the Female Body using patriarchal authority that regulates women’s physical freedom. When he sees Rosie dancing in the

cave, he reacts with anger and humiliates her. For him, her dancing is a sign of moral weakness. He attempts to control her body and artistic expression and values his reputation and scholarly recognition more than Rosie's happiness. He is concerned about how society sees him, as per his aristocratic status. Rosie's background as a Devadasi's daughter is considered shameful in society. His patriarchy is linked here with class distinction and social hierarchy. Its power works through emotional withdrawal and moral judgment. His cold silence and moral superiority create psychological pressure for Rosie, and she feels small, ashamed, and emotionally isolated in her husband's house.

Practical Reason and Affiliation:

These two things are considered human values according to Martha Nussbaum's Capability Approach. They are part of human development. When Rosie thinks independently, she decides what is good or bad. She plans her own life as per her own choice. Her decision to dance protects her own dignity and autonomy. When she chooses dance as her profession, she exercises: "the planning of one's life" (Nussbaum 39). Her artistic independence represents an autonomous self-definition of her own life.

She wants to be treated with dignity when living in society. Her dancing provides her self-respect and equal social recognition. Practical reason and affiliation are human values in Nussbaum's theory because they are essential for living a fully human life. Her success restores her social recognition as the best dancer and a self-sufficient woman. Peter Barry notes that postcolonial criticism often reveals "the tensions between domination and resistance" (Barry 192). Rosie's journey and struggle reflect precisely such tension.

Rosie's Control over Environment and her Emotions:

By earning independently, Rosie achieves material capability: "the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others" (34). She moves from dependency to agency. She controls her life socially and economically. Without her own voice, her identity is suppressed by her husband and her own caste when she tells her caste to Raju. She says, 'I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers; my mother, grandmother, and before her, her mother. Even as a young girl I danced in our village temple. You know how our caste is viewed?'... 'We are viewed as public women'... 'We are not considered respectable; we are not considered civilized.' (Narayan 84)

Her early emotional life is marked by fear and suppression, violating: "Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety" (33). Later, her confidence reflects emotional freedom, and she boosts her confidence in the company of her friend Raju.

Conclusion:

The Guide can be read as a narrative of human value realization through Nussbaum's central capabilities and Guha's critique of dominance. Rosie achieves dignity through economic and bodily autonomy. The novel ultimately deals with the struggle for human capabilities within structures of social power. R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* explores the story of Rosie's marginality and her awakening from silence to selfhood. She represents the gendered subaltern who receives identity through her artistic expression. Through suffering and self-recognition, marginalized Rosie reconstructs the meaning of her own life.

Thus, *The Guide* transcends its story of deception and redemption. It becomes a meditation on how subaltern identity intersects with the transformative power of human values.

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Conflicts of interest

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