

R.K. Narayan's The Guide – Character of Rosie

In Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Narayan's The Guide, Rosie is as multi-faceted a personality as Raju. This is only to be expected from a character who moves from being a 'devdasi', to an M.A. in Economics to a house wife, to a woman who is rejected by her husband for infidelity but nevertheless becomes a successful professional dancer – and yet continues to regret her failed marriage. At first glance, it is difficult to understand Rosie's contradictory motives. She seems to be at one and the same time conservative and self-assertive. She is child-like in following her desires without giving thought to consequences, and a woman of the world in the way she manages her career after her break with Raju. She can be naïve and willful, and she may well be criticized for being responsible in her personal relationships. Yet she is not only utterly sincere and totally committed to her art, but also has considerable knowledge of its classical traditions. She challenges the orthodox Hindu conception of what a woman should be, and yet there is a part of her nature that is intensely orthodox. Rosie, like Raju, reveals the complexity of human nature.

The non-traditional name is a marker of Rosie's social hybridity, which is emphasized in The Guide. Rosie belongs to a caste and a class outside the pale of organized patriarchal Hindu society. Rosie hails from a family of 'devdasis' and is under no illusion as to how they are regarded – 'We are viewed as public women ... We are not considered respectable; we are not considered civilized'. To signify Rosie's 'difference', and her position outside the boundary of 'normal' society, she is associated in the novel with nature in its most primal and unfettered manifestations. She is completely at ease during the night vigil at the Peak House in the dense jungle high up on Mempi Hills where panthers, bears and elephants prowl at night. But the most crucial comparison from nature for understanding her character is the identification of Rosie with the snake, the cobra. When she becomes famous dancer, Rosie's greatest performance, her 'masterpiece' is the 'snake dance'. Again, Raju's mother abuses Rosie as a 'serpent-girl', implying that Rosie is like a snake in having a venomous and destructive nature. The symbolism of the snake has far deeper reverberations in the novel.

Rosie's spiritual transformation through dance is signified in the changing of her name from 'Rosie' to 'Nalini'. Raju actually compares this change to a kind of rebirth or reincarnation. The Westernized name 'Rosie' had marked out her state of social exclusion. But 'Nalini' means 'lotus', the seat of the goddess Lakshmi. Brahma, too, 'the four-faced god and Creator of the Universe ... rests on a bed of lotus petals in a state of contemplation'. Through the

change of name, Rosie symbolically seeks an entry into the orthodox society that rejects her, but it also points to her creativity which is expressed through her dance. Indeed, the metaphor of the 'dance' defines Rosie's fate in the same way that the metaphor of the 'guide' defines Raju's. It is her deep love for dance that brings trouble into her life – she gets frustrated with Marco because he forbids her to dance, and gets seduced by Raju because he appreciates her dancing. But Rosie's attitude to dance is completely different from Raju. For Raju, dance is a cultural commodity which can be exploited for money and fame. For Rosie, dance is a vocation. This soon leads to conflict, and this rift in their values eventually leads to their separation.

Rosie's identity as a temple dancer and as the exponent of Bharat Natyam, the centuries-old temple dance of southern India dedicated to Shiva-Nataraja, also helps to explain the apparent contradictions in her character which puzzle Raju so much. For a woman who jeopardizes her marriage for a casual acquaintance, Rosie seems to have extremely old-fashioned notions about the relationship between husband and wife, and about the role of women in society. Even as a successful professional dancer, she seems to be almost ashamed of being spirited and talented and a woman of wealth and social standing in her own right. These contradictions appear to stem partly from her ingrained traditional values, which she imbibed from the sacred environs of the temple and partly from the sense of being a social outcast, which was the actual lot of the temple-dancer. Rosie's desire to serve food to her husband and Raju at the Peak House during their happier days and 'be the last to eat like a good housewife', can easily be understood as her delight in having a regular home life, a common enough experience for most women but one which is usually denied to the 'devdasis'. Her gratitude to Marco for having married her and her abiding sense of guilt at having betrayed his trust can be traced to the same reason. Again, she also shows her sense of duty towards Raju by financially helping him to fight the criminal case. But she would rather, if she could, go back to Marco who, however, will not have her again. As a votary of Nataraja, it is the traditional Hindu world-view that defines her horizon. It is this deep-seated sense of identity with her own culture that accounts for Rosie's veneration for the institution of marriage, as well as for the traditional roles of husband and wife.

Thus Rosie is caught in a contradiction between the dedication to dance and its patron god on the one hand, and the cultural norms and values that are predicated by her vocation on the other. Paradoxically, it is this same almost religious, dedication to dance that turns out to be the core of her inner strength. Marco had attempted to make Rosie feel ashamed of dance because he associated it with the cults of the 'devdasis'. Raju, on the contrary, wanted

her to be proud of her career as a dancer, but only because it brought in money and fame. Both of them misunderstood the way Rosie felt about dance. For her it was a form of self-expression and a way to show her devotion to her god. Though she feels grateful to Marco for marrying her in spite of her low caste status, his ban on her dancing had begun to suffocate her. She is attracted to Raju only because she believes that he appreciates dance, and she leaves him when she discovers that this is not so. In our final estimate, caught between the pressures of the Old and the lure of the New, Rosie does venture to realize her potentialities only to face hostility and end up in failure: Rosie is like a tide that rises, reaches at the climax, and then recedes to the centre.

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