

Rosy as Indian Clytemnestra in R. K. Narayan's 'The Guide'

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This literary study investigates how Clytemnestra's complex use of gender, specifically her use of masculinity, allows her character to be understood in a different light by a modern audience in contrast to the original interpretation of her character in ancient Greece. The transformation of Clytemnestra's understanding demonstrates the impact that she has not only on the plot of the play, but also on its survival, since the depth of her character is what continues to engage audiences even in modern day. It also focuses on R. K. Narayan's effort to redefine the position of women in the society that has always constricted their opportunities. His feminist sensibility lies in allowing her heroine to explore her talent rather than reducing her to an ideological position prescribed by society.

[**Keywords** : Feminism, Chauvinism, Women, Power, Gender roles]

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CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES, Vol. 32, No. 3 (July-September), 2023
Peer Reviewed, Indexed & Refereed International Research Journal

In Greek mythology, Clytemnestra was the wife of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae or Argos. She was the daughter of Tyndareus and Leda, rulers of Sparta, and sister of Iphigeneia, Polydeuces, and Helen. When her sister Helen and wife of Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus, was abducted by Paris and was taken by Troy, Agamemnon decided to help his brother and bring his wife back, thus starting the Trojan war. Before the army left for Troy, Agamemnon was forced to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigeneia, as he had caused the wrath of Artemis. While he was away, Clytemnestra started an affair with Aegisthus, with whom she plotted against her husband. Clytemnestra was angry with her husband, both because of her daughter's sacrifice as well as because Agamemnon had killed her first husband and taken her by force.

Upon his return from Troy, Agamemnon was welcomed by his wife. When he went to take a bath, Clytemnestra threw a net on him and stabbed him. Agamemnon's concubine, Cassandra, who was outside the palace, had seen the plot, but as she was cursed by the God Apollo, no one believed her and she reluctantly accepted her fate and was slain. Subsequently, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra took the rule of Mycenae for seven years, until Orestes, the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, returned and killed his mother, and her lover as revenge for his father's death.

Her masculine role, which is most clearly seen in the language she uses and the actual murder at the end of the play, allows her to gain the power needed to take revenge on her husband. However, she also has no qualms about playing a subservient feminine role in order to accomplish this. Her feminine role is revealed by the language she uses which is the language the men of Classical Athens would have expected of women: deceptive and duplicitous. McClure comments on Clytemnestra's double role, arguing that "Clytemnestra plays the part of a faithful wife before the male chorus, the messenger, and ultimately her husband, but abandons this disguise once she has successfully carried out her plan" (McClure, 27). Clytemnestra artfully switches between playing a persuasive masculine role and a seemingly subservient feminine one. She manages to shape her language to every particular situation in order to place herself at an advantage. However, as McClure points out, she abandons this meek disguise once she has successfully murdered her husband. With his death, Clytemnestra's

true heart is revealed, which will be examined further at the end of this section. By playing both masculine and feminine roles, Clytemnestra disrupts the balance of the male-centered society. She does this by acting contrary to men's expectations of how an ideal woman should act. Yet even when she plays the female role which is expected of her, she also disrupts society through her deception and duplicity.

The Guide by Narayan is the quest for spiritual fulfilment, for within the Hindu mythology, the path to spiritual illumination requires mentoring from a guru or a guide. There are multiple puns on the word 'guru'. Raju goes from being a tourist guide, to Rosie's mentor or guide, to the spiritual guide of the villagers of Mangal. He is a born leader and people seek him out, but Raju is a travesty of a guide, because he actually misguides people.

Narayan's avant-garde in *The Guide*, Rosie comes from the family of temple-dancers. She is given the privilege to receive formal education and is an M.A. in Economics. No doubt she has from her early years 'the making of a liberated woman' (Mathur, 17). The author has allowed Rosie to grow independent of the social security, believed to be given only by a man (father), until her marriage. The absence of fatherly protection indicates Narayan's denial of a phallic identity which is made essential for a full-fledged womanly existence in the society. From the very beginning she is confident and clear in her thoughts. While she analyses the matrimonial advertisement and questions, 'Have I looks?' her answer to her own query is positive. She wanted a live husband who is sensitive to her needs which is indicated by her statement that she'd 'have preferred any kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one real, live husband' (*The Guide*, 76). She is extremely comfortable with her physicality which patriarchy universally couches in terms of moral censure. Her body was for her, not an embarrassment but a mode of expression.

Individuality to a woman is a distant dream in a collectivist society such as in India, so the author allows Rosie to enter the institution of marriage. The preferential quality to Marco for marriage is education and beauty. His matrimonial advertisement suggests this for he wanted "an educated, good-looking girl to marry a rich bachelor [Marco] of academic interests. *No caste restrictions; good looks and university degree essential*" (*The Guide*, 75). One becomes aware of the fact that a woman's worth is measured in terms

of her beauty since it is to be considered as a status symbol. Her degree is of the same value. No consideration is given to “mutual suitability or unsuitability of the tastes and likeness of the partners” (Gaur, 63). The manner in which the advertisement is framed and the subsequent examination of Rosie and her certificates with a business-like determination, reflect the cold attitude of Marco towards the delicate bond. He seems to be entering into some sort of a transaction he is having in exchange of the social identity and luxury he was to provide to the lady. Marco wanted someone like his servant Joseph who did everything for him at the right time without bothering him. Raju reflects the same when he says that Marco “married out of the desire to have someone to care for his practical life” (*The Guide*, 100).

The young and beautiful wife of Marco, and love object of Raju, Rosie’s most striking quality is her immense genius for dance, most clearly manifested in the ‘serpent dance’ she only performs on special occasion. Descended from a poor, lower-caste family who has traditionally devoted themselves to the art of temple dancing, Rosie, in spite of her own passion for dance, attempts to escape the constraints of her caste and poverty by marrying a wealthy, educated, upper-caste man. And yet, rather providing Rosie with deliverance, the men with whom she becomes entangled inevitably attempts to repress her creativity and independence. Not only does Marco condemn and ban Rosie’s pursuit of dance, but Raju with whom she commences an affair soon after she arrives in Malgudi with her husband, also lets her down. While Raju genuinely supports and encourages Rosie’s pursuit of her art at first, once she achieves fame as the dancer Nalini, he begins to exploit her success in his role as her manager to enrich himself. Not only that, but Raju repeatedly lies to and deceives Rosie and attempts to control

her contact with the others due to his jealousy. And yet, try as they might, the men in Rosie’s life ultimately fail to contain and control her. Forceful, free-spirited and a brilliant talent, her artistic and feminine powers are such that, by the end of the novel, she has discarded the chains that both men have sought to confide her in, and is outshining both as a free and independent woman, successful beyond measure.

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Rosie's identity is now determined by the male in her life to whom she is now subordinate. She is to fit into an idealized figure of a 'home-spun' woman with great patience and has to maintain equilibrium even if it meant to constrain her desires. One gets the idea of commoditization of Rosie by Marco for social status and by Raju for sexual gratification and as a money generating machine.

Feminist criticism may take different avenues of approach to major works by male authors. It may, for example, reconstruct cultural assumptions regarding gender roles, status, or assumptions from a neutral point of view, or it may choose to focus on the implicit misogyny of the author's vision.

There is on one hand, from Zeitlin's interpretation of the Oresteia as reflecting the misogyny of Aeschylus and his society in his portrait of Clytemnestra's committing an outrage on Agamemnon and the state, "Portrayed as a monstrous androgyne, she demands and usurps male powers and prerogatives". On the other hand, there is Philip Vellacott's focus on the misogyny of the outrage done to Clytemnestra and the implicit warning to Aeschylus's society this entails.

'She is driven to her murderous act not only by love of Aegisthus, hatred of Agamemnon, jealousy of Cassandra; the deepest spring of her tragedy is the knowledge that she, who has it in

her to be the head of the kingdom, if need be, as well as of a family, can be freely ignored as a wife and outraged as a mother by a man she knows her inferior. She thus confronts Athenians with a problem which it is evident they have not solved'. Clytemnestra is described by the watchman as "a woman in passionate heart and man in strength of purpose". The chorus reinforces this idea of having 'manly' qualities and her discarding gender roles saying, "lady, you speak as wisely as a prudent man".

These manly qualities are best demonstrated in Clytemnestra's use of language, particularly, "I stand where I dealt the blow; my purpose is achieved. Thus, I have done the deed; deny it I will not' and 'You are testing me as if I were a witless woman'."

Rosie and Clytemnestra are both victims of the patriarchal hegemony. The ideology that defines woman as inferior debars her from the possibility of attaining self-satisfaction and independence through education or through art and skill as in Rosie's case and a drastic step to kill her husband in the case of Clytemnestra.

Rosie's attempt to convince Marco to allow her to dance and her decision to subside her desire reflects a patriarchal set up where the male voice is the law and of which she is the victim. However, in the case of Clytemnestra, she was devoid of her say in anything at all. She was forcefully taken by Agamemnon after he slain her husband, he sacrificed Iphigenia, her daughter, and still couldn't do anything. The only way she sought was to free herself from the clutches of a dominating and a suffocating bond.

Certainly, R. K. Narayan dreamt of redefining the position of women in society and this formulated his representation of Rosie as a 'new woman'. Narayan's feminist sensibility in the representation of the character of Rosie lies not in her challenge to convention but in her resistance to reduction to a single ideological position defined by the male world. She moves within and beyond the physical world to discover inner power and hidden essences.

By playing a masculine role and a rebellious feminine role, Clytemnestra is able to seize and power in order to bring about her husband's death and then to also hold onto power as a ruler of Argos. However, like any usurper, she must then confront those who would rebel against her rule. In this case, such rebellion comes from within her own family.

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