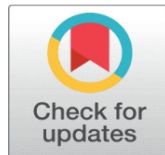


# RE-ORIENTALISM AND PORTRAYAL OF THE DOWNTRODDEN INDIAN PEOPLE: DECONSTRUCTING THE CONCEPT OF 'ORIENT' IN R.K. NARAYAN'S THE GUIDE.

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## ABSTRACT

In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said underscores the differences and interpersonal interactions between the colonisers and the colonial natives. In order to gain power and control over the colonised, the coloniser subjugates and controls them. The consequent relational disparity contributes to the development of a colonial discourse in which the native people's identities are shaped by the colonisers. The colonised people's thinking have been so profoundly affected by this process that even after the termination of the colonial rule, a number of colonized people view the fellow countrymen through the colonial lenses formerly used by the colonizers. They fail to get rid of their minds from the prejudices set up by the European settlers. This process of creating 'orientalism' within the native country by its own people is what Lisa Lau calls, 'Re-orientalism'. Re-orientalism basically aims to shatter the domination of the natives over their fellow countrymen thereby creating an alternative discourse of the indigenous people. The renowned Indian novelist and short story writer, R.K.Narayan in his novel *The Guide* (1958) vividly showcases such an attitude of the native Indian people towards their own countryfolk and how some of them adopt the colonizer's tricks for acquiring striking benefits. Nonetheless the main character Raju disguises himself as a saint in order to escape the bitter complexities of his past life and to make a new beginning of his life by exploiting the trust of the villagers. Just as the settlers acquired the power and confidence over the natives in the colonial era, likewise, Raju, in the post-independence era, attempts to secure his position by establishing his irresistible dominion over the villagers. The present paper seeks to trace re-orientalism in *The Guide* and wants to demolish the enduring supremacy of the notion orientalism. Leaving his story open-ended, the novel reinforces the significance of the voices of the general mass for constructing their own discourse.

**Keywords:** Re-orientalism, Domination, Power, Space, Deconstruction.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (*Culture and imperialism*, 7).

Said's investigations into the past predations of Orientalism, colonial rule, and imperialism, as well as his works on the contemporary distress of the Palestinian people, are both recto and verso examples of writing processes that bring power, knowledge, and geography closer in acutely tangible manners. Said has consistently emphasised geography's role in orientalism and imperialist civilizations in general. Even after the termination of the colonial rule, the colonised people are much engrossed with its domination that they often practise the same in real life. When they are in a position to exploit the other people, they create otherization like the colonizer. This is the will to power by having mastery over the others.

R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* divulges the ambience of Malgudi town and quotidian lives of the people living there. Raju is a boy growing up in the humdrums of south Indian village life. He grows under the strict supervision of his father who has a little shop in the railway platform. Dealing with various types of people, he learns the trick to survive in life often by getting favour of them or by catering to their demands. He thus knows the stratagems to carry on his small business around the shop.

Edward Said describes the European cultural norms of orientalism as an age-old method of understanding the East as the exotic other. That is why western minds regard the orient or east as a kind of underworld self that they do not recognise. The east serves as a reservoir of elements such as harshness, lethargy, and sensuality, as well as a captivating world of the unusual, mystical, and alluring. They also believe that it is a realm where faceless masses rather than people exist, and that the activities of the masses are motivated by basic emotions such as lust and horror. Said demonstrates how the perspectives of oriental discourse and order are vociferously European and how the concept of discipline was employed to govern, investigate, and reconstruct and then later to invade, rule, and exploit the non-European societies. He also believes that the creation of identity includes defining contrasts and "others," and that it occurs as an ongoing struggle which engage people and organisations in all cultures.

Edward Said refers to as 'the economy of objects and identities', based on the structured, regulated, and distinct allotment of position. Said proposes that humans have the general habit of defining in their imagination a familiar area which is "ours" and another space outside "ours" which is "theirs" is an instrument for the construction of identity. Sigmund Freud analyses the growth and development of a child's psyche from boyhood to adulthood and how it assists in the formation of self and other binaries. For Freud, whenever a child learns to separate himself from the mother's body, he begins to shape his subjectivity by differentiating himself from external world affairs.

## 2. RE-ORIENTALISM IN *THE GUIDE*

Right after Gaston Bachelard, Edward Said defines the discipline of power as poetics of space. For instance, a house's physical space—its corners, corridors, cellar, and rooms—is significantly less important than what it is artistically equipped with. For Edward Said, this is characterised by an imaginative or metaphorical worth we can recognise and feel: therefore, a house can be possessed, homelike, prisonlike, or enchanted. So space gains subjective and even cognitive sense through a poetic method in which the unnamed expanses of distance can be transformed into meaning for people.

For the sake of understanding re-oriental perspective, we can take into consideration the bi-partite structure of the events and experiences in Raju's life. When he was a boy, he observes the deeds and conversations of the villagers and the people with whom his father interacted. He was not much interested in carrying on his reading though his father scolded him for his lethargy. Raju is the product of a culture that has imposed on him everything to make him what he is. Raju's father was afraid of religious conversion of the English medium school. The first person narrator comments on the informal education under the guidance of a local teacher:

"I don't know on whose advice my father chose to send me here for my education, while the fashionable Albert Mission School was quite close by. I'd have felt proud to call myself an Albert Mission boy" (*The Guide*, 25).

The influence of colonial reign is also shown in Raju's mind. In absence of his father from the shop, Raju skilfully managed to go on the business. But he became well-known as a guide to the tourists. Raju is capable to guide other people in their critical situation. He views his habit of guiding people as a means of self-assertion. He likes to get involved in other people's problems and activities although it often causes trouble in his own life. As the first person narrator says, "The railways got into my blood very early in life. Engines, with their tremendous clanging and smoke, ensnared my senses. I felt at home on the railway platform, and considered the stationmaster and porter the best company for man, and their railway talk the most enlightened. I grew up in their midst. Ours was a small house opposite the Malgudi station" (G, 10).

Malgudi seems to him a sightseeing place when Rosie and her husband Marco came from Madras to visit several ancient temples of Malgudi. Raju seduces Rosie and aspires to become a wealthier person. He manipulates Rosie to earn money. The first person narrator says,

"We had calls from hundreds of miles away. Our trunks were always packed and ready. Sometimes when we left Malgudi we did not return home for nearly a fortnight. Our engagements took us to all corners of South India, with Cape Comorin at one end and the border of Bombay at the other, and from coast to coast. I kept a map and a calendar and tried to plan

out our engagements. I studied the invitations and suggested alternative dates, so that a single journey might combine several engagements”(Guide, 191).

Raju neglects his works and duties to maintain his business in the railway platform. He brings ruin upon himself when he assigns a boy in his shop and becomes entirely indifferent to his business. Marco engages devotedly to his research in the archaeological sites of Malgudi and Rosie falls in love for Raju. Raju behaves like the romantic lover whom Rosie desires and who will help her to flourish the dancing interests. Rosie thinks that if Raju is by her side, she will become famous one day. Raju makes arrangements for her dancing and both of them lead a luxurious lifestyle with the earning money. But they never become happy as they initially desired. Their relationships are tinged with misunderstandings and contradictions which profoundly affect them later.

Another turning point in Raju's life begins when he gets released from prison after six years. He moves far away from his native village and takes shelter in a ruined temple on the bank of a river. The next day a stranger (namely Velan) comes across Raju beside the temple. The stranger is in dilemma and shares his problem with Raju. The omniscient narrator depicts the mind of Raju in the following manner:

“He(Raju) had been all alone in this place for over a day. It was good to hear the human voice again. After this the villager resumed the study of his face with intense respect. And Raju stroked his chin thoughtfully to make sure that an apostolic beard had not suddenly grown there”(G, 6).

Raju is sensible as he has faced many hardships in real life. In a way, he has overcome disasters in life and he develops a power of understanding human nature. From the stranger he comes to know about the village (Mangal) on the other side of the river. He thinks that Velan is a simple man who can put trust on Raju. The third person narrator comments on Raju's behaviour,

“Ever since the moment this man had come and sat before him, gazing on his face, he had experienced a feeling of importance. He felt like an actor who was always expected to utter the right sentence”(G, 14).

Raju thinks to behave like a learned man before Velan and his sister. Velan tells other villagers about the saint and brings them to meet him. Raju said to himself, ‘I shall be rewarded for this profound service to humanity. People will say, “Here is the man who knows the exact number of stars in the sky. If you have any trouble on that account, you had better consult him. He will be your night guide for the skies. The thing to do is to start from a corner and go on patch by patch. Never work from the top to the horizon, but always the other way”(G, 16).

Prison life has trained him to eat anything at any time. He is obliged to starve there for long time. That's why whenever he gets food, be it late night or dawn, he avoids to share with others. When Velan brings for Raju a basket full of bananas and edible things, Raju accepts the offerings in a clever way. He recognizes the stratagems to gain their favour in religious ways. The third person narrator says, “Suddenly he (Raju) picked up the basket and went into an inner sanctum. The others followed. Raju stopped before a stone image in the dark recess. It was a tall god with four hands, bearing a mace and wheel, with a beautifully chiselled head, but abandoned a century ago. Raju ceremoniously placed the basket of edibles at the feet of the image...”(G, 18)

In his pretentious saint life, Raju finds comfort as he has no worries for food and shelter anymore. It is the place where his anonymity can be maintained. By narrating the mythological stories to the villagers, he preaches them religious instructions. He teaches them that offering something to the God will increase his mercy. The village folks are simply charmed by his oratory power, for which they consider Raju as a wise man, learned and much experienced. In his new role, he begins to teach the children of the villagers. All of his activities make him superior in the eyes of the villagers. By telling various stories of Indian gods and noblemen, he overwhelms the listeners. The omniscient narrator peeps into his psyche to expose the following:

“He racked his head secretly, wondering where to start. Could he speak about tourists' attractions in Malgudi, or should it be moral lessons? How once upon a time there was a so-and-so, so good or bad that when he came to do such-and-such a thing he felt so utterly lost that he prayed, and so on and so forth? He felt bored. The only subject on which he could speak with any authority now seemed to be jail life and its benefits, especially for one mistaken for a saint. They (the villagers) waited respectfully for his inspiration”(G, 51).

Raju realizes that he is able to live in the unknown land only by means of his sainthood. The people of Mangal are loyal to his words and suggestions. Whatever he advises becomes valuable for them. Even problems of many are solved by his good religious teachings. For them, Raju becomes a guru or guide. The trust of the villagers strengthens his dominion over them. Through his deeds, Raju attempts to make them believe that they are right in judgements. The positive interactions between the saint and his followers help to turn the ruined place into a sanctified one. Raju's life is no more bound to the fever and fret of the past events, nor he is bothered by the passing of time. He senses a kind of eternity in leading life amidst the occasional gatherings of those people and their children. Through the activities of the village folks

and through natural seasons of rain, sun and mist, he roughly counts the time. He feels no necessity to keep calendar or anything else. "Several months (or perhaps years) had passed. He counted the seasons by the special points that jutted out, such as the harvest in January, when his disciples brought him sugar-cane and jaggery cooked with rice; when they brought him sweets and fruits, he knew that the Tamil New Year was on; when Dasara came they brought in extra lamps and lit them, and the women were busy all through the nine days, decorating the pillared hall with coloured paper and tinsel; and for Deepavali they brought him new clothes and crackers and he invited the children to a special session and fired the crackers"(G, 90).

### 3. SPACE AND POWER DIALECTIC

Critics of postcolonial studies have reinforced the importance of space in the arrangements of colonial power. Even after the termination of the colonial rule, the trace of their influence is found in many aspects of the native people's lives. Raju's gradual accession to the height of a saint bears proof to that. Postcolonial country folks are never really free from the colonial ideology of binaries. Raju comes to know about the modesty of the villagers and believes that they will never harm his sentiment. Just as the colonizers thought the colonized uncivilized and inferior, Raju deems the villagers his disciples. In this context, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's remarks about Bengali people are relevant. While describing the connections between culture and power in the specific backdrop of Bengal, he argues that Indians are lagging behind the Westerners not because of their lack of muscle power, but because of the former's too much obsession with the other world, a transcendental one. Whereas the western people utilise knowledge to acquire power in the materialistic universe, the Indians use knowledge for gaining redemption in after life. The Indians failed to defeat the foreign rulers for their lifelong pursuit of a transcendental goal. Therefore, Raju knows the fragility of the villagers.

But the matter becomes a grave concern for him whenever the village is assailed by a natural disaster. "The wells in the villages were drying up. Huge concourses of women with pitchers arrived at the river, which was fast narrowing. From morning to night they came in waves and took the water. Raju watched their arrival and departure as they passed in flies on the high ground opposite, looking picturesque, but without the tranquility inherent in a picture. They quarrelled at the water-hole for priorities, and there were fear, desperation, and lamentation in their voices"(G, 93).

Narayan breaks the myth of orientalism by disrupting the domination of Raju over the lives of the villagers. Raju can solve small complexities of villagers' lives. Although villagers address him as Swami, he does not feel for them passionately. Whatever he does, his self-interest lies not to lose the shelter by any chance. Cattles of the villagers are found dead in many areas; snakes and poisonous insects bites are increasing in the village. Moreover, a violent rivalry grow among them. The cruelty of the shopman who demands greater price for rice makes them angry. Velan is severely attacked by the opposed party. Raju worries for a safe place. "Velan and his men also picked up axes and knives and started out for the battle. Shrieks and cries and imprecations filled the air. The little hay that was left was set on fire, and the dark night was ablaze. Raju heard the cries, coming on the night air, and then he saw the blaze lighting up the landscape beyond the mound"(G, 96).

Frantz Fanon examines the psychological effects of colonial governance, both among subjugated and the settlers. He is opposed to the stability of imperialist categorisations such as black-white, native-foreigners. His theories challenged colonial assumptions about subordinated people.

In case of Raju, power works through the politics of body and gestures. His long beards make his appearance as grave as a hermit. Velan is initially bemused by his reticence and reflective attitude. The villagers dependency on Raju makes the latter perform rituals. Raju's eclectic knowledge and practical experiences help to establish his predominance over the ignorant village folk. But his power over the common villagers is not undisputed.

After hearing the turmoil in village from Velan's brother, Raju is irritated on the villagers for their quarrelsome nature. He is afraid of the police who may arrive the place if villagers carry on their rivalry for a long time. This time also he employs his trick to calm them. "He did not like the idea of so much commotion. It might affect the isolation of the place and bring the police on the scene. He did not want anyone to come to the village. Raju suddenly began to think positively on these matters. He gripped the other's arm above his elbow..."(G, 99).

The villagers think themselves blessed to have a Swamiji like Mahatma Gandhi who did a lot for his countryfolk. They consider him a great soul who will risk his life to save the land. Once the village is affected by drought, they come to Raju for warding off drought. Raju is troubled with the idea of fasting as it would be extremely difficult for him. His mental health is described in this way: "Did they expect him to starve for fifteen days and stand in knee-deep water eight hours? He sat up. He regretted having given them the idea. It had sounded picturesque. But if he had known that it would be applied to him, he might probably have given a different formula: that all villages should combine to help him eat bonda

for fifteen days without a break. Up to them to see that the supply was kept up. And then the saintly man would stand in the river for two minutes a day, and it should bring down the rain sooner or later”(G, 110).

Raju thinks to run away from the temple as he is incapable of fulfilling the expectations of the villagers. But his escape cannot bring him proper solution. He shares his past happenings with Velan. But the news of the draught reaches the government and newspaper reporters. A newspaper agent comes to the village and learns about the repentance of a Swami. He, in an exaggerated way, writes about the Swami's contrition to end drought from the village. This news has increased the public interest. The third person narrator comments,

“The hum of humanity around was increasing. His (Swami's) awareness of his surroundings was gradually lessening in a sort of inverse proportion. He was not aware of it, but the world was beginning to press around. The pen of the wandering journalist had done the trick. Its repercussions were far and wide. The railways were the first to feel the pressure. They had to run special trains for the crowds that were going to Malgudi. People travelled on footboards and on the roofs of coaches. The little Malgudi station was choked with passengers. Outside, the station buses stood,...And the crowd congregated around the river at Mangala. People sat in groups along its sandbank, down its stones and steps, all the way up the opposite bank, wherever they could squeeze themselves in”(G, 239).

The place is filled with reporters, special messengers and families who promised their children to meet the sage living there. Raju loses his privacy under the surveillance of people and press reporters. He is unable to do what he likes. He is utterly restrained by the crowd around him who keeps a constant vigilance on him. Whatever he does is observed by the gathering people as part of his rituals and holy fasting. He will end his fasting on twelfth day. Fasting makes his body emaciated day by day. Thus he is caught in his own trap. The villagers who provided his sustenance so far, have now become the cause of trouble in his life. In this way his authority is questioned and his supremacy is being shattered. The novel is open-ended and the conclusion is strikingly described in the following manner :

“In the profoundest silence the crowd followed him down. Everyone followed at a solemn, silent pace...Raju could not walk, but he insisted upon pulling himself along all the same. He panted with the effort. He went down the steps of the river, halting for breath on each step, and finally reached his basin of water. He stepped into it, shut his eyes, and turned towards the mountain, his lips muttering the prayer. Velan and another held him each by arm. The morning sun was out by now; a great shaft of light illuminated the surroundings. It was difficult to hold Raju on his feet, as he had a tendency to flop down. They held him as if he were a baby...He sagged down”(G, 247).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Thus the novelist shatters the complacent position of Raju, who is the representative of those few in the post-independence era trying to build their composure by imitating the colonizers. Narayan thus deconstructs the myths of orientalism to create alternative discourses. Orient does not mean the exotic other, it is the same mystic who can be active to reverse the situation. Through the apparent unity and potentiality of the village folks, the novel seeks to pulverize the placidity of dominant people. *Orientalism* creates a juxtaposition of the orient and occident; Narayan's novel sets up a counter discourse by inverting the centre-periphery opposition. What remains in the periphery has brought to the centre and it is chiefly shown by the demolition of Raju's supremacy.

#### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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