



Women's Resistance to Subjectification in *The Guide* by Narayan (1958) and "Sunset Coast" by Sakkarawartha (2022)

M. M. S. N. Marasinghe¹, E. H. D. S. B. Ehelapitiya²

¹ University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

² University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Email addresses of the corresponding authors - shakymarasinghe@gmail.com; doonyaehelapitiya98@gmail.com

Abstract

The bind between women and the nation they belong to has historically revealed a dynamic and contentious nexus. Bound within a dialectical relationship, women are deemed the nation embodied and subjected to its attendant sufferings, whilst simultaneously being burdened with the task of reproducing the nationalist rhetoric that they themselves have no hand in penning. In such a context, this study undertakes a discussion on the configuration of female subjectivity through *The Guide* by R.K. Narayan and "Sunset Coast" by Sakkarawartha, situated in postcolonial India and Tamil separatist war era Sri Lanka, respectively. Moreover, it examines and evinces the differing ways in which women overtly and covertly assert agency within the circumscriptive bounds of patriarchal nationalism. In elucidating the narratives of women striving for autonomy, this essay contends that these two texts function as discourses of resistance to androcentric nationalism.

Keywords: Nationalism; Female Subjectivity; Resistance

Introduction

Within the discursive terrain of nationalism, women and nation embrace in fraught union. Yoked within the unyielding bounds of virtue, tradition, and motherhood, woman, in all her toils and anguishes, becomes nation-embodied, and her contours, an ever-shifting discursive parameter. Dilating upon the woman-nation nexus in "Nationalist Projects

and Gender Relations", Nira Yuval-Davis evinces that within the nationalist framework, the gendered body, deemed a symbol of the "unity, honour and the raison d'être of specific national and ethnic projects" (Yuval-Davis, 2003, p. 19), must bear the onerous task of biologically and culturally reproducing the nation-state within sanctioned bounds. "Women, in their 'proper' behaviour", both in terms of reproductive duties and broader societal norms, "embody the line which signifies the collectivity's boundaries" (Yuval-Davis, 2003, p. 18). Thus, she is trammelled to the domestic sphere and prescribed femininity by way of overt coercion and/or insidious hegemony to ensure that the hearth of tradition and nationalism is kept ablaze. Further, her role in the private sphere inherently precludes her from participating in the public domain where the tenets of nationalist discourse are determined. Thus, in the narrative of nationhood, the woman finds herself in a curious bind, simultaneously debarred from penning nationalist discourse and yet deemed the very lifeblood that sustains it. She is both the muffled other and the indispensable vessel through which national identity claws forth.

The cruel paradoxes inherent in the woman-nation bind have been exhaustively dissected by the likes of Partha Chatterjee, Sumathy Sivamohan and Nira Yuval-Davis, demonstrating that the dialectic relationship between woman and nation is deeply contingent upon the specificities of historical

context, cultural dynamics, and socio-political forces. Female subjectification, therefore, is oft tethered to the vicissitudes of the dominant nationalist ideology within a particular socio-historic milieu. Despite the considerable scholarly attention devoted to this topic, a lacuna persists in comparatively illustrating how these dynamics manifest across various contexts. Hence, this study dissects *The Guide* by R.K. Narayan and "Sunset Coast" by Sakkarawarthy, moored in postcolonial India and the Tamil separatist war era Sri Lanka respectively, to trace the constraining configuration of female subjectivity in such historical junctures of tumult. Further, the study underscores the differing ways in which women navigate and strive for agency within the delimiting parameters of patriarchal, nationalist discourse.

"*The Guide* is regarded as R.K. Narayan's most celebrated and perhaps, his best work" (Silva, 2014, p. 1). "Hailed as a masterpiece, *The Guide* interweaves humour and pathos to chart the trajectory of the life of Railway Raju, who transforms himself from tour guide to spiritual guide" (Narayan, 1958, as cited in Silva, 2014, p. 1). Raju, the protagonist of the novel, is a widely known tour guide in Malgudi, the fictional town in which the author situates the narrative. Once, he is asked to escort two customers from Madras, an academic named Marco and a woman called Rosie, who "belong(s) to a family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers" (Narayan, 1958, p. 73). Raju becomes fascinated by Rosie's beauty, particularly her dancing skills. He initiates a clandestine love relationship with Rosie and assists her to become a well-known and established dancer until her name eventually becomes "public property" (Narayan, 1958, p. 136). Raju considers Rosie his "property" (Narayan, 1958, p. 140), "utilize(s) Rosie's services" (Narayan, 1958, p. 124), and becomes a person with social and economic power owing to Rosie's successful career. However, a tragic fate befalls Raju. As a result of a case of forgery, he receives two years of life imprisonment, despite having benefited from a lavish and ostentatious lifestyle. Raju's mother detests Rosie and perceives her as a "serpent girl" (Narayan,

1958, p. 128) and a seductress who beguiled Raju and made him suffer a dreadful fate. Silva (2014) in "Representing the 'other': the politics of nation and gender in R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*", posits, "Rosie is cast as a beautiful temptress who entices Raju and lures him into a life of decadence" (p. 1).

As mentioned earlier, the main focus of this study is to examine how female subjectivity is configured and conditioned by the dominant nationalist discourse of a particular socio-historic milieu while also understanding how women both overtly and covertly assert agency by resisting to conform to the ideologies that are advocated through patriarchal nationalism. In such a context, this essay will centrally focus on the main female characters of the two literary texts that will be used for this study. Rosie, whom Raju subsequently names 'Nalini', will therefore be the focus of the analysis concerning the novel *The Guide*.

Rosie, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, is of the devadasi lineage. "The devadasi stood at the root of a rather unique and specialised temple artisan caste, which displayed in its internal organisation the operation of pragmatic, competitive and economic considerations encouraging sophisticated, professional and artistic activity" (Srinivasan, 1985, p. 1873). Thus, the devadasis were considered professional female artists in pre-colonial India, and it was particularly along with colonialism (Mitra, 2006) that the honorable reputation of the devadasis began to dwindle, and their position in society came to be associated with notions of impurity and inferiority.

Unable to accept the close association and co-existence of the sacred and the profane, the British educated middle classes of India, in conjunction with the colonial powers and their Christian sensibilities, started a smear campaign against the surviving *devadasi* tradition and its liminal status within society, identifying these women as mere prostitutes (Mitra, 2006, p. 10).

Rosie, speaking of her family lineage and Indian

society's perceptions towards the devadasis, says, "We are viewed as public women," ... "We are not considered respectable; we are not considered civilized" (Narayan, 1958, p. 73). Rosie is essentially relegated to an inferior social position and actively discriminated against by a certain section of the society that she inhabits due to her being a member of the Devadasi community. "During the nationalist period and post-independence, India... found the need to desexualize the image of the nation and its people, particularly its women" (Mitra, 2006, p. 12). "Within this nationalist trope of the newly cleansed vision of India and Indian womanhood, the liminal practices of the *devadasis* and her sexually empowered role in society and in art, posed a serious threat to the nationalist project" (Ram, 2000, as cited in Mitra, 2006, p. 13). The nationalist policies that advocated for a chaste Indian woman imposed a direct influence on the female dancer, whose status was eventually shaped according to the Hindu nationalist discourse (Mitra, 2006). One of the questions that this paper therefore seeks to address is how the social position of women like Rosie, who are of devadasi lineage, was reformed according to the nationalist narrative that was dominant during post-colonial India.

Moreover, this study will discuss in depth how Rosie is dictated and governed by societal and patriarchal norms, as women in post-colonial India were bound to a "new patriarchy" (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 627). This discussion will be done by paying close attention to Rosie's and Marco's marriage and Raju's treatment of Rosie. Marco demands that Rosie conform to the patriarchal norms imposed on Indian women during post-colonial India, and Raju considers Rosie "(his) property" (Narayan, 1958, p. 140) and has a "monopoly of her" (Narayan, 1958, p. 139). "The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination" (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 629). This essay seeks to examine the question of whether Rosie

continues to adhere to the role of the domesticated, virtuous woman that the nationalist narrative that prevailed during post-colonial India championed or whether she builds her career through art as a dancer, liberates herself from the conventional gender norms propagated by nationalist ideologies, and asserts her independence.

Similarly, "Paduvaankarai," a Sri Lankan short story translated as "Sunset Coast" and which appears in *A Lankan Mosaic: Translations of Sinhala and Tamil Short Stories*, reflects the narrative of a marginalized Tamil woman who assumes the role of an empowered female figure. Situated in the context of the Tamil separatist war in Sri Lanka, this particular short story by Sakkarawarthy brings to light the tragic story of two women who, as vulnerable as they are, refuse to be victimized by the oppressive forces of Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan Army (SLA). When Sarasuvathi, the protagonist of the story, learns that her husband "has been taken away by the boys" (Sakkarawarthy, 2002, p. 345), the Tamil militants, under the suspicion that he is a traitor to them---she anxiously goes in search of him on a pitch-dark night along with her infant and old mother. Despite their vulnerability, the two women vehemently resist submitting to the powers of the Tamil militants when the latter threatens to shoot them. Even though Sarasuvathi fails to combat their ruthless powers completely, she anxiously yet desperately attempts to rescue her husband from them. One could contend that "Sunset Coast" reflects a tragic yet important story that develops a critical discussion on the subaltern yet empowered Tamil woman in Sri Lanka who is entrapped by competing nationalist forces. Thus, one of the questions that this essay examines is how Sarasuvathi and her old mother assert a certain level of agency by attempting to withstand the repressive forces of the SLA and the Tamil separatist group with the intent of taking a stand to safeguard their family, despite being disempowered in many ways. Hence, the main focus of this study is to examine how female subjectivity is constructed according to the dominant nationalist narrative of a certain socio-historic context while also

understanding how women both overtly and covertly assert agency within male-dominated spaces and resist being bound to dominant nationalist agendas through the above-mentioned literary texts. In developing a discussion of women asserting agency, this study contends that these two texts are counter-hegemonic discourses of patriarchal nationalism.

Materials and Methods

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of *The Guide* by R.K. Narayan and "Sunset Coast" by Sakkarawartha to scrutinize how female subjectivity is constructed, buttressed and contested within the respective nationalist frameworks. To do so, the study draws on the postulates of Nira Yuval-Davis in "Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations". To underscore the ramifications of colonialism on India's body politic and its subsequent attempts to carve out a national identity, this study borrows from Partha Chatterjee's "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India". Similarly, to contextualize the nationalist discourses at play during the Tamil separatist war in Sri Lanka, the analysis engages with "Territorial Claims, Home, Land and Movement" by Sumathy Sivamohan.

Results and Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction as well, in relation to R.K.Narayan's *The Guide*, the nationalist project that operated in the post-colonial period of India advocated for a sanitized and pure image of the nation (Mitra, 2006). Thus, the status of devadasi dancers like Rosie (the female protagonist of *The Guide*), who were perceived as inferior and impure, "was re-inscribed to fit the Hindu nationalist agenda" (Mitra, 2006, p. 13). Rosie becomes a well-established dancer and attains stardom through the "'respectable' high art form" (Mitra, 2006, p. 13) that the aforementioned nationalist project established, which evinces how the social position of Rosie, who is of the devadasi lineage, was shaped and reconfigured in accordance with the nationalist discourse that was disseminated in post-colonial India. As Silva (2014) argues, "her

traditional art becomes a symbol to uphold what is deemed to be 'national' culture" (p. 2). Moreover, in analyzing Rosie's position as a wife or a partner to the men she associates with in her life, one may contend that she is undoubtedly subjected by them to conform to the image of the 'stereotypical' Indian woman propagated through patriarchal nationalism, particularly during post-colonial India. Marco does not appreciate Rosie's talent as a dancer, and as Rosie herself says, "The word 'dance' always stung him" (Narayan, 1958, p. 114). He does not seek a woman with aspirations; instead, he attempts to confine Rosie to the domestic sphere (Wickramagamage, 2021), thereby forcing her to perform the role of the 'ideal', Indian woman. He does not want her to be an independent, successful woman who is not limited to the domestic space, as, according to him, such a woman can jeopardize his career and identity. Raju, despite assisting Rosie to attain success and fame as a "*Bharat Natyam*" (Narayan, 1958, p. 124) dancer, constantly ensures that she is invariably within his authority. Chatterjee (1989), in his discussion on "the new patriarchy advocated by nationalism" (p. 629) argues, "No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues..." (p. 627). From the ways in which Rosie is treated by both Marco and Raju, it can be understood that she is a sufferer of the oppression that "the new patriarchy" (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 629) imposed on the Indian woman.

Conversely, the question of whether she continues to be the domesticated, 'ideal' Indian woman or whether she liberates herself from the conventional gender norms that constrain her freedom and individuality remains. As Silva (2014) argues, "Though she is yoked to patriarchal structures and power relations, there are indications that she transcends the bounds of these structures and establishes herself as a dancer of repute" (p. 5). Raju, at a certain point in his life, "grow(s) jealous of her self-reliance" (Narayan, 1958, p. 161) and thinks "she would go from strength to strength" (Narayan, 1958, p. 161). He realizes later in

his life that “Neither Marco nor (he) had any place in her life...” (Narayan, 1958, p. 161). Rosie is certainly not the atypical woman that India’s post-colonial, patriarchal nationalist narrative undermines. Nevertheless, she builds her career as a successful dancer, breaks away from traditional gender roles, and “negotiate(s) a space for recognition and autonomy” (Silva, 2014, p. 5).

Amidst the gunfire and smoke of the Tamil separatist war in Sri Lanka, “Sunset Coast” illustrates the torment inflicted upon the subaltern Tamil woman. Sumathy Sivamohan avers that “both Sri Lankan and Tamil nationalism have been laden with the metaphor of woman as land” (Sivamohan, 2016, p. 371), illustrating how “the violence of the state and the violence of the (Tamil) nation often sought their scapegoat for failure or crisis in the woman as an extension of her relation with land” (Sivamohan, 2016, p.377). Against such a backdrop, the grim tale of Sarasuvathi unfolds. Cast to the peripheries of Sri Lankan nationalist discourse as the progenitor of the burgeoning Tamil nation, yet afforded none of the sanctity and security that she, as mother and nation, is promised within the Tamil nationalist rhetoric, Sarasuvathi’s tale articulates a narrative of gendered suffering that eludes the romance of androcentric nationalism.

The tale unfolds to delineate Sarasuvathi as a pregnant Tamil woman in the conflict-ridden North, whose dire circumstances are worsened by her husband’s disappearance at the hands of “the boys” (Sakkarawarthy, 2002, p. 345) on suspicions of whistleblowing to the SLA. Desperate to forestall death, Sarasuvathi, accompanied by her mother and infant, braves the perils of the marshy bush at night. As she trudges through mud, her body “writh(ing) in pain” (Sakkarawarthy, 2002, p.348), she confronts her husband’s captors and is threatened with gunfire. This harrowing trek unravels the Tamil nationalist narrative that venerates the militant as the benevolent custodian of (Tamil) women and nation, tracing upon her thrashing contours, a strain of gendered suffering that is not only elided but also outright denied in

male-inscribed narratives of nationhood. Though successful in freeing her husband, her relief is fleeting. Labelled a “terrorist” (Sakkarawarthy, 2002, p. 355) by the SLA, her husband is whisked away once more despite being “thrashed” (Sakkarawarthy, 2002, p.356) by his purported comrades not long ago. In their wake, the throes of childbirth grip Sarasuvathi, her body readying to birth new life into a strife-laden world she must now navigate widowed. Thus, the tale challenges the simplistic hero-victim dichotomies imposed by male-authored nationalist discourses.

Demanding recognition, neither Sarasuvathi nor her mother accepts confinement within the reductive metaphor of woman as passive, vulnerable land to be safeguarded. Though pronounced the “raison d’etre” (Yuval-Davis, 2003, p. 19) of the Tamil separatist nation, both women are cognizant of their victimization by the same narrative: “Isn’t it because we exist that you commit all these evil deeds? Get rid of all of us...” (Sakkarawarthy, 2002, p.350). Thus, carving out more agency than ascribed to them, they illuminate the hypocrisies that mire Tamil nationalism. Similarly, they refuse to remain silent before the SLA; Sarasuvathi’s mother repudiates their actions as an “awful thing” (Sakkarawarthy, 2002, p. 356). Thus, in their victimization by two contesting nationalist forces, both women grasp fervently for some semblance of agency in defiance.

Conclusion

Nation is invariably informed by gender dynamics. In nationalist discourse, woman and nation share a dynamic relationship. *The Guide* by R.K. Narayan and “Sunset Coast” by Sakkarawarthy develop a discussion on how female subjectivity is configured by the patriarchal nationalist ideologies of a particular socio-historic context. More importantly, these texts can be identified as narratives of resistance to patriarchal nationalism, given that they reflect the multiple ways women strive for independence within male-dominated spaces. Thus, one may contend that the political dialogues these texts produce, attempt to build inclusive societies where the woman is not essentially placed at the periphery of the nation-state.

Acknowledgement

Our immense gratitude extends to Professor Carmen Wickramagamage and Professor Sumathy Sivamohan for their input during our undergraduate phase into the understanding of *The Guide* and “Sunset Coast” that are used in this study.

References

- Chatterjee, P. (1989). Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India. *American Ethnologist*, 16(4), 622–633. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/645113>
- Halpē, A., NuḱamāṇE. Ē., & Obeyesekere, R. (2002). *A Lankan Mosaic: Translations of Sinhala and Tamil Short Stories*. In *Google Books*. Three Wheeler Press. https://books.google.lk/books/about/A_Lankan_Mosaic.html?id=oNjAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Mitra, R. (2006). Living a Body Myth, Performing a Body Reality: Reclaiming the Corporeality and Sexuality of the Indian Female Dancer. *Feminist Review*, 84(1), 67–83. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400301>
- Mitra, R. (n.d.). Cerebrality: Rewriting Corporeality of a Transcultural Dancer. <http://www.digitalcultures.org/Library/Mitra.pdf>
- Narayan, R. K. (1958). *The Guide*. Penguin.
- Silva, N. (2014). Representing the “other”: the politics of nation and gender in R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide*. *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences*, 37(1-2), 1. <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljs.v37i1-2.7374>
- Srinivasan, A. (1985). Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20(44), 1869–1876. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4375001>
- Sivamohan, S. (2016). “Territorial Claims: Home, Land and Movement: women’s history of violence and the history of resistance in Sri Lanka’s north.” *The Search for Justice: The Sri Lankan Papers*. Zubaan Publishers.
- Sivamohan, S. (2022, November 22). *Lecture: “Sunset Coast”* [Word].
- Wickramagamage, C. (2021, December 12). *The Guide* [Online Recording]. <https://artsmoodle.pdn.ac.lk/>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2003). Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations. 9–36. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/52677>