

R.K. NARAYAN'S «SELVI»  
AS A REFLECTION UPON THE FEMININE SELF

Un livre est le produit d'un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices. Ce moi-là, si nous voulons essayer de le comprendre, c'est au fond de nous-mêmes, en essayant de le recréer en nous, que nous pouvons y parvenir. [...] Cette vérité il nous faut la faire de toutes pièces.

Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 127

Although «Selvi» is one of the finest stories by Narayan, it has never received specific critical attention, possibly on account of its collocation among the «new pieces» in the 1982 revision of *Malgudi Days*, which is mostly a collection of reprints, or perhaps because it is rather difficult to tackle women characters in Narayan's stories. P.B. Jyoti 2008, for instance, in an article devoted to *Psychoanalysis of Women in R.K. Narayan's Short Stories* introduces her half paragraph devoted to «Selvi» with these words:

His female characters are passive and unimpressive. Narayan's women are like Dickens women characters. Narayan doesn't give them any name or assign any important role because they lack any independent existence very easily they become the victims of joy, sorrow, surprise and anger. It is common that women are treated as doormats by their life partners.<sup>1</sup>

I will contend that the author's attitude, at least toward this particular character, is far more complex; Narayan proves to be a keen and perceptive observer deploying irony and mystery to beguile the reader into an exploration of the protagonist's self. The lines that follow represent an attempt to study the short story by combining literary cognitivism (Adler - Gross 2002; Green 2010) and Lodge's exploration of the literary self. As in most of Narayan's works, in «Selvi» irony creates a detachment that both intrigues and puzzles the reader

<sup>1</sup>) Jyoti 2008, p. 120.

(David - Abidi 1982; Kain 1993). However Narayan's irony is usually enjoyed at the expenses of the protagonist, while in this case the reader seems to be both the audience and the victim of the author's irony<sup>2</sup>. I will contend that this ironic detachment is strictly connected with a subtle use of knowledge, and that the entire story may be described as an ultimately disappointing quest for Selvi's self. Ironic detachment creates an epistemological mystery about the main character, which the readers are encouraged to investigate.

By "self" I mean here the same kind of consciousness Proust refers to, a reflection of one's personality that is neither public, nor immediately evident. Selvi's art is the product of a different self from the one she would manifest in her habits and – to an omniscient narrator – in her thoughts. David Lodge 2002 claims that this self is the product of the negotiation between one's soul and the environment, including one's body. A novel, Lodge contends, is usually an exploration of this most subjective and inscrutable part of the individual, and its value lies in this very subjectivity, this uniqueness. Narayan offers a description of both Selvi's art and public look, but not of her private soul, we are left with an unequal relation: what are we supposed to do with her environment, if we don't have her soul? It may be argued that the reader's search for Selvi's self parallels her own unrecounted quest, since her submissive attitude has long prevented her from developing her consciousness. The important difference is, of course, that the reader cannot be an agent in this development, but at most a sympathetic witness. Still, at the end of the tale, a number of questions remain unanswered: is Selvi conscious of what she did? Is she happy with her new predicament? What exactly made her change her mind? Does she feel guilty at leaving her husband?

The story line is simple and it closely recalls part of the plot of Narayan's most renowned novel, *The Guide*. Selvi is a very talented singer from a lower class family in Malgudi until Mohan, a former Gandhian freedom fighter, "discovers" her and becomes both her husband and impresario. Under Mohan's guidance, Selvi achieves fame and success, but when her mother dies alone in her poor house, Selvi decides to leave her husband and her glamorous life to establish herself in her late mother's destitute dwelling, where she gives free concerts and apparently lives on offerings.

Likewise, in *The Guide*, Raju, the protagonist, becomes Rosie's lover and manager. Rosie is a talented Bharata Natyam dancer who achieves fame and success thanks to the man's support. As time goes by, the manager-lover loses interest in her art and becomes all-absorbed in business. Raju exploits Rosie's talent to make money until he gets into trouble and ends up in prison; this puts an end to his liaison with the dancer who becomes her own manager. In «Selvi», the manager is actually a "lawful" husband; other than that the relation that mingles love, art and business is very much the same and so is the epilogue.

*The Guide* was published in 1958 and has been the most acclaimed of R.K. Narayan's novels ever since. There is no telling when R.K. Narayan actu-

<sup>2</sup>) I am referring here to the classical description of irony proposed by Muecke in his seminal *The Compass of Irony*, London 1969.

ally wrote Selvi, but it is certain that he never published it before 1982<sup>3</sup>. Why would Narayan go back to more or less the same plot after over twenty years? It would not have been surprising had the short narrative preceded the longer one, because that could have been considered as an expansion of the former; but that is hardly the case. Is there anything in *The Guide* Narayan was not happy with? Is there anything he wanted to add to the story he had, in a way, already told? Strangely enough, the question does not seem to have ever been addressed. Literary cognitivism investigates the work of fiction as a piece of knowledge: its main asset is that fiction can express some kind of knowledge by its very fictionality, which would be different or, at least, less forceful if stated otherwise. I believe that Narayan had been reflecting on the motives of *The Guide's* heroine and expressed them in this story as an afterthought.

The first step is then to rehearse all kind of information given in the story and see who knows what. In this way we notice that both the story and the novel revolve around south Indian traditional arts; that the women have no narrating agency; that the narrator moves easily into Mohan's or Varma's thoughts and never intrudes into the women's self; that Selvi's real look is unknown to anyone but her husband; that Selvi refuses to give any reasons for her behaviour.

Neither narrative lingers on the nature of performing art: neither Carnatic singing nor Bharatha Natyam, pertaining to the short story and to the novel respectively, are actually explored in any depth. In both cases they stand for Art in general, or possibly for traditional feminine art – a world beyond men's reach. Aesthetic issues or even the artists' training are not mentioned in the two narratives, where the point of view is masculine and the women's love for art is exploited to achieve different ends.

In *The Guide*, for instance, Raju candidly admits:

She brightened up. Her eyes lit up with a new fervour at the mention of dancing. So I sat up with her, helping her to daydream. I found out the clue to her affection and utilized it to the utmost. Her art and her husband could not find a place in her thoughts at the same time; one drove the other out. (TG p. 107)

Similarly Mohan:

During a concert [...] Mohan occupied as a rule the centre seat in the first row of the auditorium and riveted his gaze on the singer, leaving people to wonder whether he was lost in her spell or whether he was inspiring her by thought-transference. Though his eyes were on her, his mind would be busy doing complicated arithmetic with reference to monetary problems,

<sup>3</sup>) In the story Mohan boasts a very thick agenda, so that Selvi is not free for performances before 1982, implying that it sounds like a far-off date. We learn that Mohan has a gallery of pictures in which Selvi is portrayed with various celebrities like Tito, Bulganin, John Kennedy, Charlie Chaplin (168), which seems to shift these encounters to the Sixties. At the time of the epilogue, we know that Selvi and Mohan have been married for twenty years. This might mean that the story is set in the mid Seventies, which may also be the time when it was written, or revised.

and he would also watch unobtrusively for any tape-recorder that might be smuggled into the hall (he never permitted recording), and note slyly the reactions of the V.I.P.s flanking him. (MD p. 170)

Even the marital relationships within the two couples are quite similar. Still some important differences should be taken into account: starting from the very title, in *The Guide* the protagonist is Raju, the man, whereas in «Selvi» the main character is the woman; *The Guide* is told partly by an omniscient narrator, partly by Raju himself; «Selvi» on the contrary is the story of a woman, told by a semi-omniscient narrator with an internal focalization shifting from Mohan, Selvi's husband, to Varma, a representative of Selvi's fans.

The peculiar choice of binding the focalization to characters other than the alleged protagonist triggers the reader's curiosity to know more about Selvi as a person and her consciousness. Narayan's technique creates a disturbing void beyond Selvi's name. "Selvi" becomes a tag for a body or for a performer, but never a character in its own right. Besides the reader's interest is aroused by her odd behaviour which is judged rather differently by Mohan and Varma. A glimpse on her inner self would help readers to take part, but the mystery remains unsolved.

Both Mohan and Varma may have been interested in pursuing Selvi's motives, but apparently they both fail for opposite reasons. In fact neither is interested in Selvi's self, but rather in her body or her voice. Mohan is too interested in her look (the colour of her skin, the pitch of her voice, the thickness of her eyebrows) to actually understand her as a person, while her fans are too interested in her art to go beyond that. Selvi's real self, if such a thing exists, is lost between her body and her art so that it can never be grasped. Throughout the story Mohan thinks that Selvi should be grateful for his work, and when he realizes that she is not, and, on the contrary, wishes for a different life, he pronounces her a «fool» and an «ungrateful wretch». On the other hand Varma, the prototype of her fans, sees her as a goddess and not as a human being. Perhaps, the only person who ever saw Selvi as a human being was her mother, but we are never given a glimpse of their relationship.

Having detached the readers from the protagonist, Narayan is very careful to ensure that the reader does not sympathize with the deserted husband: he depicts him as a selfish, hypocritical man who makes money out of Selvi's talent and who has betrayed – in facts, if not in words – his former affiliation with the Gandhian movement.

Likewise the reader only sympathizes with Varma inasmuch as he is ill-treated by Mohan, but, again, he is never much more than an enthusiastic fan and his obsession is somewhat annoying. To him Selvi's aloofness makes her resemble a deity, so much so that she is named «The Goddess of melody» (169) and her fan prays to be granted a «darshan<sup>4</sup> of Selvi» (166).

Selvi's alleged secrets are calculated to enhance curiosity: it is told, for instance, that nobody has ever seen the true colour of Selvi's skin, and only Mohan knows her real face; likewise Selvi's marriage has taken place almost

<sup>4</sup>) *Darshan*, which means apparition, epiphany, is a word usually reserved to gods.

secretly. Every time the narrator begins a description of Selvi, as a young girl or as a singer, or of her story, the narration ends up relating the puzzled impression that this or that character (usually Mohan) got of her. We do not even have an idea of her inclinations: it is always Mohan that tells her what she should or should not sing or wear, whom she must or must not meet. Even when asked, Selvi is reluctant to let anything of her self get through; on seeing her new mansion, a former East India Company grand house, she laconically comments that the place is «very big», leaving all in doubt whether this is a reason to like or loathe the place.

This technique of focalising on minor characters leaving the protagonist unfocused is rather peculiar to «Selvi»: and proves rather frustrating for the reader who is hoping for a final explanation and is eventually left in doubt.

In the author's introduction to the tales, Narayan states that he

discover[s] a story when a personality passes through a crisis of spirit or circumstances. In the following tales, almost invariably the central character faces some kind of crisis and either resolves it or lives with it. (*Malgudi Days*, 8)

Thus a crisis may be the moment when one's self is revealed. In Selvi's case, the crisis occurs when her mother suddenly passes away. Selvi had repeatedly expressed her wish to visit her mother, but Mohan – perhaps sensing some kind of danger in the mother/daughter relationship – had apparently coaxed her into postponing the visit. When Selvi reaches her mother's modest abode, after the funeral has already taken place, she decides not to go back with Mohan, without offering any explanation.

Narayan's novel *The Guide* leaves its protagonist's thoughts the very moment he is achieving an illumination. Yet an inevitable corollary of external focalization is doubt and unreliability and we remain unsure of Raju's fate. Likewise, those who see in Selvi a saint are justified in doing so as is Mohan in calling her an ungrateful wretch. In fact, whether her choice to leave her former public life for a life of retirement in Vinayak Mudali street is a sudden inspiration or a spiritual renunciation to luxuries, or a form of commitment to art, or even a passive atonement for neglecting her mother, or everything clubbed together will forever remain a mystery. It is impossible, and probably not even desirable, to know what lies deep within people. Ironically, the search for knowledge of Selvi's real truth remains unfulfilled; just as her listeners enjoy her music without ever talking to her, we can only enjoy her story and be content to speculate about the unattainability of ultimate truths and the pettiness of our own curiosity.

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