

**“Theme of East-West Encounter in R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide*”**

**Author: Kamalakar Baburao Gaikwad**

SIES Graduate School of Technology,  
Nerul, Navi Mumbai.

**Co-Author: Vijay Digambar Songire**

SIES Graduate School of Technology,  
Nerul, Navi Mumbai

**Abstract:**

*R.K.Narayan, the first recipient of most prestigious award, Sahitya Akademi, and one of the leading figures of early Indian English Literature, is an Indian writer and the productive journalist. He is acclaimed as a regional or social novelist. His works are set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. His writing is realistic with actuality, humour and incongruity. All of his novels are marvelous and readable. His dialect is extremely clear and transparent. He composes for both the youngsters and grown-ups. The present paper focuses on the major issue, the east-west encounter. The author delineates the disputes between the tradition and modernity through the theme in his magnum opus *The Guide*.*

**Keywords:**

East-west influence, self deception, dispute between tradition and modernity, Indian spirituality and mysticism, urban sophistication versus rural simplicity, etc.

encounter between the holy man and the semi-Westernized family of the New Extension of Malgudi is in a way an encounter between ancient and modern India. The modern has reverence for the ancient, the ancient cannot ignore the modern, but they hardly understand each other. ... The law protecting private property, and the holy man with his belief in his right of access to others’ houses and gardens, exist side by side in Malgudi, an epitome of modern India, without coming into confrontation.... Narasimhaiah, C. D. (170-171)

R.K. Narayan’s magnum opus *The Guide* (1958, Methuen) is the autobiography of Raju. The author portrays various roles of Raju as a railway station food vendor, a tourist guide, a sentimental adulterer, a dancing girls manager, a swindler, a jail bird and a martyred mystic. He also describes the early life and education of Raju, who later on becomes an owner of a railway stall. Besides this, he also works as a tourist guide. Being a tourist guide, Raju helps a rich visitor, Marco who was the archeologist. Meantime he fell in love with Marco’s wife Rosie. When Marco realized about his wife’s extra marital affair with Raju, he abandons her. Now with the help of Raju, Rosie becomes a dancer. Later on, Raju is involved in criminal action and charged and convicted for forgery. Anyhow he manages to come out of jail. The he cuts off all connections with the past. Once again, he is caught in the coils of his own self deception and he is obliged to undertake a twelve day fast to end a drought that threatens the district with a famine. He shares the truth about himself and Rosie to his chief disciple Velan. But everyone

believes that he is the sacred and holy saint, a reluctant Guru. On the last day of the fast, he dies as a martyr. Through this incidence, author wants to put few questions in front of readers- Does it really rain, or is it only Raju's misbelief? Does he really dies, or merely sinks down in exhaustion? Has the lie really become the truth, or has it been merely exposed?

The readers find bildungsroman and picaresque narrative in this novel. The novel has an episodic structure and unconventional plot. Sen rightly asserts, "The unconventional plot of the novel circles freely in time and space, both within and between chapters, moving from the past to the present and back again. And from Malgudi to the Mempi hills to Mangal in a seemingly random way." (Sen,15). Through the character of Raju, as a guru or a sage, the audience witnesses the doses of Indian spirituality and mysticism. R.K.Narayan proclaims about his protagonist Raju, "I felt myself in the same situation as Raju, the hero of my Guide who was mistaken for a saint and began to wonder at some point himself if sudden effulgence has begun to show on his face. The author visualizes Raju as a guide, and not as a guru. Paranjape asserts, "Indeed it would almost seem that Narayan wishes to tone down "guru," which etymologically conveys the idea of heavy, to something lighter in calling Raju a guide. But the crucial question is whether the slighter, lighter, or more ironic title of guide makes a real difference in the end" (Paranjape 176). The characters like Rosie, Velan, Raju's mother and uncle, Gaffur, the driver, Joseph-the steward of bungalow, exhibits the Indian tradition, culture and ethos. On the contrary, Raju and Macro reflects modern culture and manners. Raju has modernistic approach. He doesn't believe in traditions like bow down and touch the feet of elders. When Raju came out of jail, the villagers came to see him. Velan wanted to touch Raju's feet but Raju did not allow him to do so. "Velan rose, bowed down and tried to touch Raju's feet. Raju recoiled at the attempt. I will not permit anyone to do this. God alone is entitled to such a prostration. He will destroy us if we attempt to usurp his rights." (16)

Though Rosie is a post graduate woman, she is not modern in nature. She has no modernistic values. She is a traditional Indian wife. She longs for affection and care from her husband. Any how she cannot cope with the archeological interests of her husband, Marco. Marco do not tolerate any kind of disturbance in his studies by Rosie. He expects that Rosie should appreciate him for research contribution. There is a huge difference in wave length between this couples which causes quarrel between them every now and then. Joseph, the steward of the bungalow only can understand his master well rather than Rosie. Sometimes he appreciates his master for research activities. He tells Raju when Raju asked him if Marco bothers him in any way, "Oh, no, he is a gem. A good man; would be even better if his wife left him alone. He was no happy without her. Why did you bring her back? She seems to be a horrible nagger" (Narayan 129). Macro finally realized the love affair of his wife with Raju. He deserted her and left for Madras by train. Later on Rosie came to Raju's house for shelter at evening time. Seeing her coming to the house alone, Raju's mother surprised. She asked her, 'Who has come with you, Rosie?' Rosie blushed, hesitated and looked at me. I moved a couple of steps backward in order that she might see me only dimly and not in all raggedness. I replied,

'I think she has come alone, mother.' My mother was amazed. 'Girls today! How courageous you are! In our day we wouldn't go to the street corner without an escort. And I have been to the market only once in my life, when Raju's father was alive.' (141) Here we can observe the difference in attitude and temperament. Being a traditional Hindu woman, Raju's mother is denied public exposure. She was prohibited and hence afraid to go out alone, whereas Rosie is a modern woman. The western influence is evident in her attitude, behaviour and temperament. She is not all afraid to go out alone. The question arises in the minds of the reader about Raju whether he is a saint or is a fake? Appleton comments in "The Ambiguous Man", "The author must decide whether or not holiness will work. . . . The author abandons the reader to choose arbitrarily whether or not, as Raju sinks into the muddy river bed, he is dying, whether or not, as the water rises to Raju's knees, it rises because "it's raining in the hills" or because Raju himself is sagging into it. (Paranjape 176) C. D. Narasimhaiah considers Raju a transformed man in the end, a saint, whereas G. S. Balarama Gupta believes that Raju is a selfish swindler, an adroit actor, and a perfidious megalomaniac (Paranjape 177). To quote Paranjape again: The question is not so much whether Raju is a willing saint or not because, like all of us, everyone within the novel notices Raju's reluctance, even his unfitness for gurudom. But does that really change who or what he ends up becoming? So what we have here is a real problem, one that leads us to the crux of Narayan's artistry and to his relationship to Indian modernity. Because if Raju is a fake, Narayan is putting into doubt not just an individual but the institution of guru itself." (177) It is the belief of village people of Mangal that it will rain and thus put an end to the drought if a true sanyasi does genuine fasting for twelve days. It is a belief among the Hindus as such in India. Whether that people have direct experience of this miracle or not, does not lessen their faith in it. Narayan only wants to portray such beliefs and rites prevailing among his people. He does not want to glorify or condemn such beliefs. There is no clear hint given at the end of the novel whether it rained. Rather one has to doubt it based on the description of the topography.

Though Raju was a fake guru, on whom gurudom has been thrust, he does seem to grow in stature to fit its mantle. He was willing to sacrifice his life. Since the villagers believed that his fasting would bring rain he had no other alternative than continuing the fast to the twelfth day. Raju understood that he could not correct the villagers' misconception about him. They considered him as a true sanyasi and hence his genuine fast would bring rain. Thus Raju was trapped. He has no existence other than a sanyasi's. He could have saved himself as the doctors and Velan requested him to stop fasting. But once he stopped fasting what would the hundreds of people assembled there think about him? Wouldn't it be a betrayal of faith laid on him by the people? So he might have thought that it was better and nobler to die a martyr than live an ignoble life, despised by others. Narayan wants to tell the readers that there are many Raju's or fake sanyasi's in our society. Despite being so aware of the dangers of shamming such a serious thing as being a guru, Narayan actually comes out in favour of the institution in the end. He is unable to show the villagers rejecting Raju, or Velan abusing and unmasking him. He does not want the novel to be a propaganda tract against superstitious

villagers. Narayan does not endorse tradition in a sententious manner. He does not reject or condemn it but rather creates a space for it. He points out that in the struggle between tradition and modernity, tradition wins though in a reluctant manner. Raju's penance and his ultimate sacrifice are real no matter how painfully flawed his motives may have been earlier or how ineffectual their outcome. "In other words, the irony strengthens the "Hindu" world view, not weakens it, though at first it appears as if the opposite is the case" (Paranjape 182).

The world in *The Guide* is "structured along simple binaries—Malgudi and Mangal, the town and the village, urban sophistication versus rural simplicity, modernity versus tradition, cynicism versus faith" (Sen 86). R. K. Narayan portrays a South-Indian conservative society in the village, Mangal. Though the contact of Western culture brought many changes in the village, castes and traditional occupations continue to exist. Marriages are still arranged and astrology is accepted there. Washing the feet before visiting a temple or a saint as a ritual of purification, pulling the temple chariot along the streets on festive days, smearing holy ash on the forehead, reciting all kinds of sacred verse, consulting an astrologer for auspicious or sacred time, lighting the lamp in the god's niche, reading the Bhagavadgita are some of the minor rituals appearing in *The Guide*. Touching the feet of the saint, making offerings in kind or prostrating before god, are other ritualistic forms. Raju's fasting to appease the rain gods and bring rain to save the people is the most significant ritual in the novel. The people of the village had a clear idea of the fasting ritual and it is reflected through Velan's words. "Velan gave a very clear account of what the saviour was expected to do—stand in knee-deep water, look to the skies, and utter the prayer line for two weeks completely fasting during the period—and lo, the rains would come down, provided the man who performed it was a pure soul, was a great soul" (Narayan 109). Referring to the fasting ritual by Raju to appease rain-god Narayan writes: "He felt suddenly so enthusiastic that it gave him a new strength to go through with the ordeal." Ritual is depicted as an ordeal because this is forced on the reluctant Raju who has no faith in it. However, the drought and the plight of the villagers have a persuasive effect on him and so he prays to heaven to send down rain to save the villagers" (Rani, 67). Narayan does not glorify the superstitious rituals. Similarly he does not deny the existence of a strong strain of faith among the villagers in the native rituals.

Malgudi is a microcosm of India. Just as British India sought the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the post-Gandhian Malgudi looks up to Raju as a saviour. As Gandhi fasted in matters of public interest or concern, Raju also fasted for the redemption of Malgudi from drought. *The Guide* is a brilliant illustration of Narayan's artistic talent in creating inner and outer landscapes balanced by a set of traditional values. The coming of the Railway to Malgudi is symbolically the impact of an industrial and urban society on a predominantly simple, agricultural community. The cherished values of life give way to the modern ways and their attendant evils. Raju who grew up in a decent home has now picked up terms of abuse from the Railway men and his father's words 'Just my misfortune!' sound ominous in the light of the impending disaster. "The Railway meant the undoing of Raju and his old mother—a small shop

keeper's son becomes a Railway guide who starts living by his wits and runs into Rosie and Marco, two tourists, gets emotionally entangled, neglects his old, honest means of making a living, and brings ruin upon himself as well as a married woman" (Narasimhaiah 132) In *The Guide*, the readers find a clash between castes, classes and their old values on the one hand and the weakening social and moral structure on the other. Marco only paid lip-service to a casteless, conventionless society that was slowly taking shape before him by advertising for a good-looking educated young lady regardless of caste. Old prejudices die hard and Marco for all his erudition looked upon dancing as just street acrobatics and he killed Rosie's instinct for life and love of art by denying her both of them (Narasimhaiah132). Narayan's novels are written in a bi-cultural perspective. The clash between the ancient Indian traditions and values on the one side and modern western values on the other side is visible in many novels. The three major characters in *The Guide* are concerned with the revival of indigenous Indian art forms. In the words of John Oliver Perry: Marco, Rosie's soon deceived husband, obsessively studies ancient cave art and thus loses his wife, but ultimately his work illuminates older culture for present audiences; Rosie betrays her husband in order to foster what she vaguely calls "cultural traditions" through her inbred, caste-decreed dancing profession, and she is quite successful aesthetically, personally and socially. Raju's more irregular successes as a guide to local cultural sights and to Rosie-Nalini's traditional dancing lead directly to his virtual apotheosis as god-man fasting to death to bring villagers' desperately needed rains. (173-174)

Raju seems to be the psychological projection of the typical individual in Indian social set up. In the social behavioural pattern, Raju is critical of the age-old institutional values, albeit he himself is deeply rooted in the family tradition. Rosie's caste affiliation is attacked by the general people as 'public woman' but Raju negates the prevalent mode of thinking and asserts that Rosie's caste is 'the noblest caste on earth.' Gajendra Kumar quotes, "R. K. Narayan's 'The Guide': The Vision of Indian Values," "Time is changed and continuously changing. Now, there exists no caste, class or creed. Marco too demonstrates his modesty and embraces Rosie as his wife" (174). In the novel *The Guide*, Narayan seems to be particularly fascinated by the ubiquitous presence of swamis and saints, gurus and guides, charlatans and philistines, cobras and concubines in India's colourful society. With his characteristic humour, he is able to capture the spectrum of Indian life, with its superstitions and hypocrisies, its beliefs and follies, its intricacies and vitalities, its rigidities and flexibilities. The action of the novel proceeds in two distinct streams, presenting two different aspects of Indian culture. Malgudi, a miniature of India, presents the rich traditions of classical dances by Rosie-Nalini and the breath-taking paintings that embellish Marco's *The Cultural History of South India*. Mangal, the neighbour town village presents the spiritual dimension of Indian culture presented through Raju's growth into a celebrated Swami. "Thus Raju, Rosie and Marco become temporal symbols of India's cultural ethos" (Goyal, 143). While Marco's aspiration seek their fulfillment in unearthing the buried treasures of India's rich cultural past, Rosie's longing seeks satisfaction in the creative channels of classical dancing in the midst of an ever-present, live audience. Raju is all the time dreaming of an elusive future till a time comes when he is irrevocably committed to

a definite future by undertaking a fast in the hope of appeasing the rain-god. “While Marco is cultural historian of the past, Rosie is a cultural ambassador of the present, and Raju is a cultural prophet of the future” (Goyal 143)

Raju is successively a ‘student’ preparing for life in the platform vendor and Railway Raju phases, a ‘house holder’ and man of affairs in his illegal union with Rosie and as her corrupt business manager, a ‘recluse’ during his days in prison, and an ‘ascetic’ in his role as the fake guru. Raju’s fasting for the rain, the denouement in the novel, is a travesty, reminiscent of the story of the sage-king Bhagirath who conducted severe penance to bring down the goddess Ganga. This story is found in both the Ramayana and the Mahapurana (Sen 24). The entire ritual by Raju may or may not have brought rain, but it did help bring peace to the strife-torn Mangal and turn the community back to religion. Thus The Guide can be triumphantly called a Hindu novel. “The denouement is neither a rejection nor a defense of the Hindu faith—it gestures towards the complexity of life, in which there are no simple solutions. It is this ambiguous and open-ended denouement that raises the novel far above the level of a mere moral fable, or a story with a simplistic happy ending” (Sen 25). Raju’s parents and uncle, and the old pylon school master represent tradition, orthodoxy, hierarchy and conservative values. The peripheral character who is crucial to the progress of the plot is Velan. He was the sole person responsible for the final plight of Raju. But Velan’s contribution is not merely to oppress Raju. It is he who builds Raju up into a ‘saint,’ and it is Velan’s unshakable faith that finally enables Raju to rise above himself. “Velan is a catalyst for Raju’s apotheosis” (Sen 71) Raju’s father does not follow the traditional Brahmin calling of priesthood. Thus it becomes ironic that Raju comes back full circle to his caste occupation as a performer of sacred rites in a most ambiguous way. His father is a worldly man who takes the full advantage of the colonial world trade and commerce. Perhaps his father’s worldliness may be the source of Raju’s worldliness. It is the railway which brings the outside world, with its modernity and hybridity to Malgudi. It bifurcates the world of Malgudi both literally and metaphorically. Western notions of individual choice and self-expression are thoroughly out of place among the people of Malgudi. The locale that oppose tradition are the the westernized parts of the town where Raju and Rosie carry on their assignations—the cinema hall, the Taj restaurant, and the hotel. “This fast moving, individualistic, opportunistic world is as familiar to post-colonial India as the centuries-old traditions” (Sen 88). Paradoxically, it is this newly urbanized rich world of Malgudi, and not the traditional world that Raju’s mother and uncle inhabit, that fosters the renaissance of art by encouraging Rosie to express herself as an artist and classical dancer. The same Rosie who was shunned as a devadasi by those who swore by their traditional norms (people like Raju’s mother and uncle), is reborn Nalini, the respected classical dancer, because of the emergence of an affluent and cosmopolitan class of people in Malgudi. Yet it is the villagers of Mangal who show the quintessentially Indian emotional response—the spontaneous, implicit, unquestioning faith in a person perceived to be a holy man. The holy man or ascetic is an integral part of traditional Indian society. He is respected for representing the heritage of Indian values and wisdom, and it is not customary to question his authority.

“Orthodox Hindus believe that there is no spiritual salvation without a guru, and the guru-shishya relationship is considered to be one of the closest and most sacred ties in Indian society” (Sen 92).

When Raju dissociates himself from society and pursues Rosie he has moral degradation and he faces unpleasant repercussions. When he returns to society as a swami he achieves redemption. In the words of Arun Soule: Thus, it is seen that in the Western context, the individual can grow and develop, if he dissociates himself from society and becomes individualistic: whereas in the Indian context if an individual dissociates himself from society, he comes to grief, but if he takes society along with him, then he will be at peace with himself and his surroundings, and will be able to grow and develop. (33) The Guide is a satire, albeit a gentle one, about the system of worship within Hinduism. Raju is in a sense, the distillation of a type of character that has existed in Hindu mythology for nearly five centuries—‘the trickster sage.’ In Hindu mythology the sages and even the gods are shown to be fallible, and no one is considered perfect or lying so low as to be incapable of reaching great spiritual heights. Similarly in Hindu mythology transformation can occur to a person due to an outside agency without the volition of the person. “Raju would, in this light, be eminent ‘sage’ material” (Sankaran 135). The characters in The Guide can be reducible to symbolic meanings. Velan is a valid positive Indian average representing in particular the psychological reality of the rural ethos. Velan is the spiritual guide of Raju, the professional guide. Raju remains professional even in his mask. Raju, Velan and Rosie are the central characters in the novel. . . . In Hindu thought, a mental or physical act is called Karma. Karma is the sum-total of a man’s past actions, in the present and the previous lives, which determines his life now. One can achieve liberation only through spiritual self-realization” (44). In Hindu philosophy names of individuals do not matter. Actions determine one’s individuality and character. The names of central characters in The Guide are not individualistic. In fact, they are vague, impersonal. The reader is never told either Raju’s or Marco’s real name. Raju’s spiritual triumph at the end of the novel is a reaffirmation of the satwik potential that is innate in every individual. The same critical frame work can be applied to Rosie’s character also. The ending of the novel is very Indian. The main character narrates his own story to an acquaintance overnight and by the time he concludes, the cock crows. In this traditional way of story-telling, the story-teller, Raju, holds the listener, Velan, in his grip as the ancient mariner had held the wedding guest. Thus Narayan achieved a supreme triumph through this narration. To quote C. D. Narasimhaiah from his essay, “R. K. Narayan’s ‘The Guide,’” “It is not surprising when we know that at all times Narayan writes not merely with an intense social awareness of his own age but with the past of India in his bones. Thanks to him our social sympathies are broadened and our moral being considerably heightened” (198). The Guide not only depicts Indian society, its customs, traditions, culture, ostentations, superstitions, religious faith but also presents a conflict between the traditional and modern values which are symbolized by Raju’s mother and his maternal uncle on the one hand and by Raju and Rosie on the other. In such conflict, old values have to give place to new values and thus Raju’s mother leaves her home for Raju and Rosie. “The novel also presents a

conflict between the Eastern and Western culture and synthesizes the two through their assimilation which has been symbolized by Rosie's transformation in to Nalini.

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