



Research Paper

The Psychology of Transformation: Guilt, Desire and Redemption in R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*

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Abstract: R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) explores the psychological transformation of Raju, whose journey from tourist guide and opportunistic entrepreneur to an apparently saintly figure is shaped by desire, guilt, identity, responsibility, and redemption. His pursuit of recognition, material success, erotic fulfilment, and control culminates in deception and imprisonment, forcing him to confront the consequences of his actions. After his release, Raju's accidental assumption of the role of a holy man initially continues his pattern of performance and manipulation. However, the unwavering faith of Velan and the villagers gradually compels him to reconsider his responsibility towards others. His decision to undertake a fast for rain marks a significant movement from self-interest to self-sacrifice. Drawing on psychological perspectives and the Indian philosophical concepts of maya, karma, and dharma, this paper argues that Narayan presents transformation as a gradual and ambiguous process rather than a sudden spiritual conversion. Although Raju's redemption remains unresolved, his final act suggests the possibility of authenticity and moral renewal through responsibility, sacrifice, and self-transcendence. The paper further argues that Raju's transformation is inseparable from the novel's narrative structure: the protagonist who constructs his identity through storytelling eventually trapped within an identity constructed by others.

Keywords: R. K. Narayan, *The Guide*, Raju, psychological transformation, desire, guilt, redemption, identity, maya, karma, dharma, Indian English literature

I. Introduction:

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) occupies an important position in Indian English fiction because of its ability to combine humour, irony, social observation, psychological insight, and philosophical ambiguity. At the centre of the novel stands Raju, a deeply flawed but compelling protagonist whose life passes through a series of apparently contradictory identities. He begins as the son of a small shopkeeper, becomes "Railway Raju," develops into a tourist guide, transforms himself into Rosie's lover and manager, serves a term of imprisonment for forgery, and eventually becomes a reluctant spiritual figure in the eyes of the villagers of Mangal.

The apparent distance between these identities is gradually reduced by Narayan's narrative technique: each role is connected to Raju's extraordinary ability to adapt him to the expectations of others. His earliest public identity is explicitly connected with his ability to create an image for himself. Reflecting on his emergence at the railway station. Raju observes, "I came to be called Railway Raju" (Narayan, 1958, p. 19). His authority therefore depends less upon knowledge than upon his ability to appear knowledgeable.

The novel's psychological significance lies precisely in this instability of identity. Raju does not possess a fixed conception of himself; rather, he repeatedly creates versions of himself according to circumstance. His talent for storytelling, persuasion, performance, and social adaptation initially provides him with success. Yet the same qualities that enable him to prosper also become the source of his moral downfall. His desire to be admired, needed, loved, and obeyed gradually develops into possessiveness and deception. The relationship with Rosie intensifies these tendencies, ultimately leading to the forgery, results in his imprisonment.

The narrative form of the novel reinforces this psychological instability. Chitra Sankaran observes that *The Guide* presents "a double perspective" through the third-person narrative and Raju's first-person account, creating what she describes as a "braided time-scheme" (1991, p. 127-28). The significance of this structure is that Raju does not merely live his past; he narrates and interprets it. His identity is consequently inseparable from storytelling. Sankaran further argues that beneath the English novelistic form lies an older Indian narrative pattern, observing that in *The Guide* "we perceive features from the katha of ancient Sanskrit literature" (1991,

p. 130). This insight is particularly relevant to Raju's transformation. The novel is simultaneously a psychological study of a modern individual and a narrative that gradually places him within the cultural pattern of the sage or holy man.

John Rothfork provides another important perspective. His study of the novel identifies *The Guide* as a work deeply connected with Hindu mystical thought and argues that it is "a biography of an imagined contemporary Hindu mystic" (1983, p. 32). Such a reading complicates the assumption that Raju's transformation is merely fraudulent. Rothfork's interpretation allows the reader to consider the possibility that the role Raju initially performs gradually becomes a spiritual reality.

Narayan, however, does not allow Raju's story to end with punishment. His imprisonment becomes a period of interruption between two phases of his existence. When he emerges from prison and settles near an abandoned temple, he is again assigned an identity by others. Velan, a villager from Mangal, mistakes him for a holy man. Initially, Raju responds to this misunderstanding in exactly the manner expected of him: he improvises, performs, and takes advantage of the situation. Yet the circumstances gradually become different from those of his earlier life. The villagers' faith creates a moral responsibility that he cannot indefinitely manipulate. His eventual acceptance of the fast for rain transforms what begins as another performance into an act of genuine sacrifice.

This paper therefore examines Raju's journey through the interrelationship of desire, guilt, identity, responsibility, and redemption. It argues that the psychological transformation in *The Guide* is neither sudden nor absolute. Raju does not become a saint simply because society calls him one. Instead, the role imposed upon him gradually produces a confrontation between the person he has been and the person others believe him to be. His final act becomes significant because, for perhaps the first time, he acts without calculating personal benefit.

Desire and the Construction of Identity: Desire constitutes the fundamental psychological force shaping Raju's early life. His ambitions are not restricted to material possessions; they include recognition, social importance, emotional attachment, and the desire to control circumstances. From his early days at the railway station, Raju discovers that his knowledge of the local environment and his ability to communicate effectively can make him valuable to strangers. He soon understands that tourists are not necessarily interested in factual accuracy. They want stories, excitement, entertainment, and an apparently authoritative guide. Raju supplies all of these. His statement, "I never said, 'I don't know'" (Narayan, 1958, p. 19), reveals more than professional confidence. It suggests a psychological refusal to acknowledge inadequacy. Raju's authority depends upon his capacity to fill gaps in knowledge through speech. Storytelling becomes compensation for uncertainty. Instead of admitting limitations, he creates an image of competence.

The emergence of "Railway Raju" therefore represents the first major construction of his public identity. His success depends upon performance. He learns to understand what people want and then presents himself accordingly. The tourist guide is not simply a profession for Raju; it becomes a psychological pattern. He derives satisfaction from being needed and admired, and he gradually becomes dependent upon the image that he creates for others. This pattern becomes more pronounced when he encounters Rosie and Marco. Rosie represents both emotional desire and a new field of self-expansion. She is an accomplished dancer whose artistic aspirations have been suppressed by her husband's conventional attitudes. Raju becomes fascinated by her beauty and by her passion for dance. At the same time, he recognizes the possibilities that her talent offers him. His involvement with Rosie is consequently never purely romantic rather it can be considered as erotic attraction, emotional dependence, ambition, and economic interest.

Raju's decision to encourage Rosie's dancing initially appears generous. He provides the support and confidence that Marco refuses to give her. Yet his involvement gradually becomes controlling. He renames her "Nalini," organizes her professional career, manages her performances, and assumes increasing authority over her personal and financial affairs. Rosie's artistic success therefore simultaneously becomes Raju's own success. The psychological complexity of Raju's desire lies in this fusion of love and possession. He does not merely want Rosie to succeed; he wants to be indispensable to her success. His relationship with her becomes an extension of his own need to construct a significant identity. His growing fame reveals this narcissistic dimension. At one point, he asks, "Do you know how well-known I am?" (Narayan, 1958, p. 59). The question exposes his dependence on external recognition.

As his dependence on Rosie grows, so does his insecurity. The fear of losing her and his concern over her money eventually lead him to forge her signature to gain access to her jewellery box. The forgery becomes a crucial psychological turning point because it exposes the darker dimension of Raju's desire. The action is not simply a financial offence. It reveals the extent to which love has mixed with ownership, anxiety, and control. The man who had once presented himself as Rosie's protector becomes the person who violates her trust. Narayan therefore demonstrates how desire, when deprived of ethical limits, can turn into possessiveness and self-destruction.

Raju as a Performer: Identity, Deception and Psychological Insecurity: One of the most distinctive features of Raju's character is his ability to perform different identities. He is a guide when tourists need guidance, a lover when Rosie needs affection, a manager when her career requires organization, and later a holy man when villagers seek spiritual direction. These roles are different on the surface but psychologically connected.

Raju possesses an unusual capacity to read the expectations of others. His identity is therefore relational rather than autonomous. He understands himself partly through the responses he receives from other people. His storytelling is not merely professional skill; it is an instrument of self-creation. This tendency can be understood in terms of psychological compensation. Raju's continual reinvention suggests an underlying insecurity about his own significance. Rather than discovering a stable sense of self, he repeatedly seeks confirmation from external sources—tourists, Rosie, audiences, villagers, and finally Velan. Sankaran's analysis helps clarify this pattern. She notes that Raju's narrative is “in the form of an apologia” and is episodic in a manner that resembles the oral storytelling tradition (Sankaran, 1991, p. 128). The word “apologia” is particularly significant. Raju's narration is not neutral autobiography; it is an explanation and defence of the self. Consequently, Raju becomes both protagonist and advocate in his own story. He controls the sequence of events through which Velan—and initially the reader—understands him. His storytelling becomes a form of psychological self-defence. Yet the irony is that the storyteller eventually loses control of his own story. The villagers construct a new narrative around him, transforming the former guide and prisoner into “Swami.” Raju, who once manipulated narratives for personal benefit, becomes the subject of a narrative created by collective faith. His imprisonment removes many of the external supports through which he has previously defined himself. Money, social position, professional success, and Rosie's presence disappear. Prison therefore functions not merely as legal punishment but as a psychological interruption. When he leaves prison, he has lost the identity that he constructed through worldly success. Yet he has not acquired a new identity of his own. His encounter with Velan provides him with another role.

Guilt and the Recognition of Moral Responsibility: Unlike desire, which operates strongly and visibly in Raju's early life, guilt develops gradually. During his relationship with Rosie, Raju is aware of his conflicts with his mother, his betrayal of Marco, and the questionable nature of his financial dealings, but he repeatedly rationalizes his actions. His ability to narrate events allows him to construct explanations that reduce his sense of responsibility. This is why his imprisonment is psychologically important. The consequences of his actions can no longer be postponed or explained away. Yet Narayan avoids presenting guilt as a straightforward moral awakening. Raju does not emerge from prison as a reformed man. His old instincts remain intact. When Velan discovers him near the temple and assumes that he is a holy man, Raju initially accepts the role because it provides him with food, shelter, and social security. The crucial difference, however, is that this new performance involves people who place genuine moral and spiritual faith in him. Earlier, Raju's deceptions primarily served his personal ambitions. Now, his words influence the lives of an entire community. This tension between inner identity and external identity becomes central to the novel. The villagers see holiness; Raju sees fraudulence. The psychological conflict emerges precisely because neither identity can completely erase the other. His confession to Velan becomes a major psychological turning point: “I am not a saint, Velan, I'm just an ordinary human being like anyone else” (Narayan, 1958, p. 98). The statement represents an attempt to reject the false identity that has been imposed upon him. Ironically, the confession does not free him. Instead, it deepens his moral predicament.

Velan and the Power of Faith: Velan occupies a crucial position in Raju's psychological transformation. He is not simply a secondary character who accepts Raju as a saint; he is the person whose unwavering faith creates the conditions for Raju's transformation. When Raju finally confesses his past to Velan, he expects that the revelation of his crimes will destroy the image of the holy man. He recounts the facts of his earlier life in the hope that Velan will reject him. Yet Velan refuses to withdraw his faith.

Sankaran's interpretation is particularly useful here. She argues that the novel's structure gradually places Raju within the pattern of the traditional *katha*, and she notes that Raju becomes authentic “on two levels, on the mythic level and on the narrative level” (1991, p. 134). This duality explains why Velan can continue to believe in Raju even when the rational narrative of Raju's past appears to disqualify him from sainthood. The villagers do not know Raju merely as the criminal who was imprisoned. They know him through the story of the Swami. The two identities therefore coexist. Raju knows himself as a fraud, but Velan refuses to reduce him to his past. This creates a new form of responsibility. Raju can no longer simply say that he is unworthy and therefore free from obligation. Velan's faith consequently functions as an external moral force. It does not magically purify Raju; rather, it places him in a situation where his actions must correspond to the expectations attached to his assumed identity. Mukherjee aptly captures Raju's psychological transformation when she observes that “the act becomes the reality, the mask becomes the man, and Raju, the guide turns into a guru” (Mukherjee, 1971, p.

128). The man who has spent his life manipulating the expectations of others is finally confronted by expectations that he cannot manipulate without causing serious harm.

The Crisis of the Fast: The drought provides the decisive crisis in Raju's psychological development. When the villagers interpret his words as a commitment to fast until rain comes, Raju suddenly realizes that his role has acquired potentially fatal consequences. His first reaction is fear. This response is entirely consistent with the Raju of the earlier narrative: when confronted with danger, he seeks an escape. His confession to Velan is initially motivated partly by self-preservation. Raju declares that he is not a saint and cannot perform the act expected of him. However, the confession fails to release him. The situation gradually changes from performance to responsibility. The significance of the fast lies not simply in physical suffering but in the transformation of motivation. Throughout his earlier life, Raju's actions are directed towards personal advantage. He wants money, recognition, affection, power, and security. Even his generosity towards Rosie is influenced by his own ambitions. During the fast, however, personal advantage disappears.

Raju reflects: "If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom, and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly?" (Narayan, 1958, p. 213). Narayan immediately emphasizes the uniqueness of the moment by describing Raju as doing something "for the first time" in which he was "not personally interested" (Narayan, 1958, p. 213). This is arguably the most important psychological evidence of Raju's transformation. His actions are no longer driven by acquisition. He is willing to suffer without a guarantee of personal reward. "Narayan has studied a character first on the test of social ... in the context of his community, set up and social environment, secondly, he studies a character in relation to himself" (Ramana, 1993, p. 44).

Rothfork's interpretation deepens this reading. He argues that Hinduism's ultimate orientation is mystical and that "the goal of Hinduism is mysticism" (Rothfork, 1983, p. 32). More importantly for Raju, Rothfork sees the two major movements of the novel in relation to different forms of spiritual development. Raju's attachment to Rosie represents one stage, while his later existence as a Swami opens another. Rothfork's argument does not require us to accept Raju as a fully realized saint. Rather, it suggests that the novel permits the possibility that Raju's fraudulent role can gradually become spiritually meaningful. The fast therefore becomes the point at which role and reality begin to converge.

Desire, Guilt and the Possibility of Redemption: Raju's transformation can be understood as a reorientation of desire rather than its complete disappearance. Narayan does not suggest that human desire simply vanishes. Instead, the direction of Raju's desire changes. Earlier, he desires to be admired by tourists, loved by Rosie, and recognized as a successful manager. Later, he becomes increasingly concerned with the well-being of the villagers. This progression should not be interpreted as perfectly linear. Raju repeatedly moves backwards and forwards between selfishness and responsibility. His transformation remains incomplete because his earlier identity never completely disappears.

Redemption, consequently, is not presented as a reward bestowed upon a morally purified hero. Raju does not become innocent again. His past cannot be erased. What changes is his response to responsibility. The distinction is important. Redemption in *The Guide* is less about erasing guilt than about responding ethically to guilt. Raju cannot undo the forgery, his betrayal of Marco, his exploitation of Rosie, or the pain caused to his mother. He can, however, choose how he will act in the final crisis. Sen interprets Raju's final ordeal through the framework of Hindu mythology, arguing that "Raju is re-enacting the penances of the sages of yore" (2004, p. 24). The fast therefore represents the first moment in which Raju voluntarily accepts suffering for the sake of others. Rothfork's argument is particularly useful here because he emphasizes that Raju's journey should not be dismissed merely as fraud. He observes that Raju "is not ... meant to serve as a guide for anyone else" but must work out his own "unique karma" (1983, p. 32). The observation helps shift the critical focus from whether Raju is objectively a saint to whether his actions constitute a personal movement towards self-transcendence. Thus, redemption becomes psychological before it becomes theological.

Maya, Karma and Dharma: A Cultural-Psychological Reading: The psychological trajectory of Raju gains additional depth when read alongside the philosophical concepts associated with Indian cultural thought. Among these, *maya*, *karma*, and *dharma* offer particularly productive interpretive frameworks. The concept of *maya*, broadly understood as illusion or deceptive appearance, resonates strongly with Raju's repeated construction of identities. His life is marked by appearances: the tourist guide who embellishes facts, the lover who becomes a manager, the manager who exercises control, and the prisoner who eventually becomes a holy man. Sankaran's reading of Raju as an archetypal "trickster-sage" is particularly valuable in this context. Thus, the apparent contradiction between fraud and saint is not necessarily a flaw in the novel; it is part of its deliberate structure.

The idea of *karma* is equally relevant. Raju's actions produce consequences that he cannot indefinitely avoid. His manipulation of Rosie, his financial misconduct, and his forgery eventually result in imprisonment and

social isolation. Yet suffering does not merely punish him; it also creates the psychological conditions for reflection. Rothfork's observation that each person must work out his or her "unique karma" (Rothfork, 1983, p. 32) is particularly appropriate to Raju. His final transformation does not arise because an external religious authority declares him redeemed. It emerges through his own sequence of actions and consequences.

Finally, the concept of *dharma*, understood broadly as duty, ethical responsibility, or right conduct, becomes particularly significant during the final phase of the novel. Raju initially assumes the role of swami without accepting its moral responsibilities. Gradually, however, he recognizes that the role requires him to respond to the faith and suffering of the villagers. His decision to fast can thus be interpreted as an acceptance of *dharma*. Narayan does not turn these concepts into a simple philosophical lesson. Instead, they operate within the psychological drama of the protagonist. The novel remains open to both religious and secular interpretations.

Relationships as Agents of Transformation: Raju's psychological development cannot be understood independently of the people who surround him. Each major relationship reveals a different dimension of his personality. Rosie is associated with desire, ambition, artistic freedom, and possession. She initially provides Raju with an opportunity to become more than a railway guide. Through her career, he acquires wealth and prestige. Yet his increasing control over her also exposes his inability to distinguish love from possession. Rothfork's discussion of the novel's mystical pattern is relevant to the Rosie-Raju relationship. He interprets Raju's attachment to Rosie through the concept of *bhakti*, describing his love for her as an early stage in his spiritual journey. According to Rothfork, "Raju gives up his secular Western identity and becomes dedicated to the temple dancer Rosie" (1983, p. 32). This reading does not deny the selfishness in Raju's love; rather, it suggests that his attachment to Rosie becomes one of the stages through which his later transformation develops. Rosie ultimately achieves a degree of independence that Raju cannot accommodate. His failure to accept her autonomy demonstrates the possessive dimension of his desire. Marco represents an alternative form of desire. His intense commitment to archaeology contrasts with Raju's social adaptability. Marco's absorption in scholarship leaves little room for emotional intimacy, while Raju's emotional responsiveness is accompanied by opportunism. Their opposition reveals two different forms of incompleteness. Raju's mother represents familial responsibility and moral convention. His alienation from her is an important indication of the costs of his self-centered ambitions. Velan, in contrast, becomes the central figure of Raju's later transformation. His faith does not emerge from intellectual analysis; it is simple, sincere, and emotionally powerful. By continuing to believe in Raju even after learning the truth about his past, Velan becomes the catalyst through whom Raju encounters a responsibility greater than he does. Thus, transformation in *The Guide* is fundamentally relational. Raju does not change in isolation. His relationships first nourish his desires and later confront him with their consequences.

Narrative Structure and the Psychology of Self-Construction: An important dimension that strengthens a psychological reading of *The Guide* is its narrative form. Raju's life is not narrated chronologically from childhood to death. Instead, the novel begins after his imprisonment and then moves backwards into his past through his storytelling to Velan. This structure has psychological significance. Raju is literally required to narrate himself into existence. The past becomes something he selects, arranges, and explains. The reader therefore encounters not only Raju's actions but also Raju's interpretation of those actions. Sankaran's study is especially important here. She identifies the novel's "double narrative" and its movement between present and past, noting that Raju's retrospective narrative resembles the oral storytelling tradition of the ancient Indian *katha* (1991, p. 127–31). She further observes that the novel incorporates "features from the *katha* of ancient Sanskrit literature" (Sankaran, 1991, p. 130). This is important because Raju's story gradually acquires the structure of a saint's tale even though he begins as an ordinary, morally compromised man.

Sankaran's most significant observation for the present argument is that Raju becomes "an authentic character on two levels, on the mythic level and on the narrative level" (1991, p. 45). The statement allows us to understand why the novel can sustain two apparently contradictory interpretations simultaneously: Raju can remain a flawed human being while also becoming meaningful as a mythic or spiritual figure. The structure also creates irony. Raju believes that storytelling gives him control. Yet his own story gradually escapes his control. The villagers transform the story of the guide into the story of a saint. The storyteller, therefore, trapped in his own story.

The Ambiguous Ending and the Meaning of Redemption: The conclusion of *The Guide* is one of the novel's most powerful features because Narayan refuses to provide a definitive answer regarding Raju's spiritual status or physical fate. As the fast progresses, Raju becomes increasingly weak. In the final scene, he appears to sense the arrival of rain: "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs—" (Narayan, 1958, p. 247). With these words, Raju collapses. The novel does not offer an unequivocal confirmation of whether his sacrifice has caused the rain or whether the natural event is coincidental. Rothfork's

interpretation encourages the reader to take the spiritual possibility seriously. His central claim that *The Guide* can be read as “a biography of an imagined contemporary Hindu mystic” (Rothfork, 1983, p. 32) makes it possible to read the ending as more than ironic exposure. At the same time, Sankaran's emphasis on the coexistence of the mythic and novelistic levels prevents a simplistic interpretation. Raju can be understood simultaneously as a psychologically complex individual and as a figure who gradually acquires mythic significance. The ambiguity is therefore essential. If Narayan had explicitly declared Raju a saint and confirmed the miraculous arrival of rain, the novel would risk becoming a conventional religious narrative. If, on the other hand, the final episode were presented simply as another deception, Raju's development would lose its moral significance. Instead, Narayan maintains both possibilities. Redemption, therefore, remains possible rather than guaranteed. The novel does not establish whether Raju has achieved spiritual liberation. What it does establish is that he has reached a point at which he is willing to suffer for others. The final scene is important less because it proves Raju's sainthood than because it demonstrates a change in his relationship to the self. Earlier, Raju is obsessed with what he can obtain. At the end, he is willing to lose everything. This is the psychological basis of his redemption.

II. Conclusion:

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* explores the complex relationship between performance and authenticity, desire and responsibility, guilt and redemption. Raju begins as a man who constantly adapts himself to others' expectations, seeking recognition, wealth, love and control. His deception ultimately leads to imprisonment. However, his accidental transformation into a spiritual guide gradually makes him aware of his responsibility towards those who trust him. The novel's ending marks a significant psychological change in Raju. His statement, “I am not a saint, Velan, I'm just an ordinary human being like anyone else” (Narayan, 1958, p. 98), reveals his self-awareness, while his decision to undertake the fast demonstrates his movement from self-interest towards selfless responsibility. It suggests that he is finally willing to act without personal gain. The ending remains deliberately ambiguous, leaving the reader uncertain whether Raju's sacrifice produces a miracle or is merely coincidental. His transformation is therefore not a simple journey from sin to sainthood, but a gradual movement from performance to responsibility, possession to sacrifice, and an externally constructed identity towards inner authenticity. Narayan ultimately suggests that redemption does not require perfection; it can begin when an individual accepts responsibility for others despite his past failures.

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