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From Worldly Desire to Inner Renunciation: A Gita-Centric Reading of Raju in *The Guide*

Dr.S.V. Rama Rao

M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., Lecturer in English, Dr. V.S. Krishna Government Degree
& P.G. College(A), Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

E-Mail Id: svramarao2021@gmail.com

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* has often been read as a novel of irony, social satire, or accidental sainthood. However, such readings tend to underplay the deeper spiritual implications of the protagonist's transformation. This paper offers a Gita-centric reading of Raju's journey, viewing his evolution from a desire-driven individual to a figure of inner renunciation through the philosophical framework of the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*. Drawing upon key Gita concepts such as karma yoga, renunciation without escapism, and the immortality of the soul, the study argues that Raju's final act of fasting represents not mere penance or social role-playing, but a movement towards spiritual self-realization. The paper positions *The Guide* as a modern spiritual allegory that reflects the continuity of Indian philosophical traditions within Indian English fiction.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, Gita Centric reading, Renunciation, Karma Yoga, Spiritual Transformation

Introduction

R. K. Narayan occupies a unique position in Indian English literature for his subtle depiction of ordinary lives shaped by ethical dilemmas and moral growth. *The Guide* stands apart from his other works due to its profound engagement with spirituality, transformation, and self-realization. The novel traces the life of Raju,



whose journey from a manipulative guide to a fasting holy man raises crucial questions about the nature of renunciation, authenticity, and spiritual awakening.

Critics have frequently described Raju's transformation as ironic or accidental. However, such readings often neglect the philosophical substratum that informs Indian cultural consciousness. This paper contends that Raju's evolution can be meaningfully interpreted through the Bhagavad Gita's ethical vision, particularly the principle that true renunciation lies not in withdrawal from action but in detachment from desire and ego. As Lord Krishna states, "One who performs his duty without attachment, surrendering the results unto the Supreme Lord, is unaffected by sinful action" (Bhagavad Gita 5.10).

By employing a Gita-centric approach, this study aims to demonstrate that Raju's final transformation is neither purely accidental nor entirely ironic, but rather a gradual internal shift toward selfless action and moral responsibility.

Srimad Bhagwad Gita has been, perennial source of morality and knowledge. Srimad Bhagwad Gita is not only for reading but to practise in daily life. The principles in the "Gita" are to be made the patterns of life to make it successful and purposeful. The volume teaches us how to make this worldly existence meaningful and fruitful. Every reading of the "Gita" teaches us the new meaning of life. Bhagwad Gita creates a new hope in the suffering mind. The volume has been manual not only for Indians but for the mankind. It is the unending stream of spiritual knowledge. One adopts an optimistic outlook to life. It gives a rare type of courage to face our problems and difficulties. It is a great solace or comfort for the disturbed soul. It imparts harmony and tranquility which is the need of the modern age.

It is how the divine Guide, Lord Krishna encourages his disciple Arjuna to take action. It is how the teacher or the Guru creates a new confidence in the disciple to face the challenge to fight against the evil. He wants to prove that the good must be dominant over the evil.

Arjuna refused to fight against Kauravas and other relatives. He declared to Lord Krishna that he would not fight the war for the Kingdom or any other material gain. The purpose of Arjuna was weakened. His will power deserted him. He said, "I would not fight, if the kingship of three worlds were my reward." Lord Krishna



replied to this question of Arjuna at the opening of the Bhagwad Gita. Arjuna must fight for three reasons.

The first reason is that death is negligible and soul is immortal. The body is killed or dies but the dweller in the body, soul does not die. Soul cannot be killed, slaughtered or burnt. One should not grieve because death is certain for the born and birth is certain for the dead.

The divine charioteer, Krishna describes the second reason for the war, duty. Arjuna is a soldier and it is his duty to fight. Impulses that produce action are important and their consequences are eternal. The soldier must follow his soldierly impulses and Brahmin his priestly. A soldier must fight to save others without thinking of the result of war. A Brahmin must worship God as a representative of others to seek blessings of the Almighty. Arjuna was going to represent the bright side of human life. In the struggle between good and bad, good must win.

The remaining part is concerned with Krishna's third reason for the war, which deals with the problem of renunciation and attempts to harmonize the needs of this life with eternal truth. E.M. Forster mentions, "The saint may renounce the action but the soldier, the citizen or the practical man should renounce not action but it's fruits". We should help others without expecting any returns or remuneration. A help with selfish motive or for name or fame is of no use. One should accept happiness and misery in the same way. It will attain to the eternal peace that is offered to the practical man as well as to the devotee. Arjuna was going to fight the war not for personal reasons, not for Indraprastha but for the sake of mankind.

After listening to Lord Krishna, Arjuna gains knowledge, becomes firm, drives into the battle happily and wins the great war against the evil. The *Bhagavad Gita* rejects escapist renunciation and instead advocates inner detachment through selfless action. Raju's final phase—marked by fasting, acceptance of suffering, and fearlessness in the face of death—mirrors this spiritual ideal. By reading *The Guide* through a Gita-centric approach, this paper argues that Raju's evolution represents a movement from worldly desire to inner renunciation, culminating in a state of moral and spiritual transcendence.



Review of Literature

Scholarly responses to *The Guide* have largely focused on irony, narrative ambiguity, and moral uncertainty. R. S. Sharma views Raju's transformation as psychologically driven and socially conditioned, emphasizing the role of circumstance rather than spiritual intention (Sharma 65). Similarly, K. N. Sinha highlights Narayan's deliberate ambiguity, arguing that the novel resists definitive spiritual interpretation (Sinha 44).

R. K. Dhawan acknowledges the presence of Indian religious concepts in Narayan's fiction, including self-discipline and renunciation, but does not explicitly connect Raju's journey to the *Bhagavad Gita* (Dhawan 47). Meenakshi Mukherjee and K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, while appreciating Narayan's cultural rootedness, treat *The Guide* primarily as a social and ethical novel. However, relatively little critical attention has been given to the novel's engagement with Indian spiritual philosophy, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The present study fills a critical gap by offering a **systematic philosophical reading** of Raju's transformation using the *Bhagavad Gita* as a conceptual framework, particularly drawing from Srila Prabhu Pada's authoritative commentary, which emphasizes **inner renunciation through disciplined action** rather than external withdrawal.

While some critics acknowledge the religious undertones of Raju's final fast, they often treat it as accidental sainthood or social irony, this study tries to fill that gap by examining Raju's transformation in direct relation to Gita teachings, thereby offering a fresh interpretative framework that integrates literature and philosophy.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology. The primary text analyzed is R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*, with close reading of passages related to Raju's moral decline, renunciation, and final fast. These moments are examined alongside relevant verses from the *Bhagavad Gita*, particularly those dealing with karma yoga, renunciation, and the immortality of the soul. Secondary critical works are consulted to contextualize the discussion, while the primary emphasis remains on textual analysis and philosophical interpretation.



Discussion and Analysis

"The Guide" by R.K. Narayan reflects teaching of the great verse "Gita" very effectively. After his imprisonment, Raju, unable to face the people of Malgudi, takes a refuge in an old ruined temple of Mangal where the process of his rebirth begins. Raju had read Bhagwad Gita and knew that time had come to implement those principles. While observing fast Raju is not frightened of death. Rather he embraces death willingly because death is negligible for him.

The people of the villages believed Raju to be their "Saviour". So, he was expected to please rain god and the rains would come down, provided the man who performed it, was a pure soul. Raju is a representative of typical Indians. Though it is a story of an opportunist, a reader does not hate Raju in the end. In fact, his mistakes are those of men impelled by circumstances and are redeemed by his last act of martyrdom. The faith of villages brings a sudden transformation in him and Raju derives a peculiar enjoyment from fasting. Narayan adheres to the ancient tradition which is deeply rooted in the beliefs of the transmigration of the soul, Karma, reincarnation and renunciation. K.N. Joshi & B. Syamala Rao mention, "This story of a sinner becoming a saint is a story that has the grandeur of the Indian scene". It is the centuries old tradition that helps transform a sinner into a saint. The fraud or a rogue is thus changed into a saint or Mahatma, the great soul. Raju's transformation reminds us the story of Valmiki, the Adikavi. Ashok Kumar Jha says, "Raju's transformation has got an essential mythical parallel in Valmiki's myth". Valmiki, like Raju was notorious because he used to rob people in the forest path. One day Valya or Ratnakar fisherman met seven sages who were visiting the earth. It proved to be turning point in his life. Narada told him the story of Rama and he had a grand vision of Rama's life. He became a great sage and composed the great "Ramayana." In the beginning, Raju looks like a common type of the tourist guide but becomes a mythical hero with the halo of a saviour. In the end, he is not a fake but real Swami, the benefactor. The transformation of the selfish and lustful Raju into a true Swami, a Dharmatma is a great triumph of the novelist. According to Dr. K.N. Joshi and B. Syamala Rao, "Raju dies in the true spirit of a saint." His death at the end is for the "Dharma" that holds up the suffering humanity. Sacrifice is the real teaching of Indian culture and he represents the culture honestly and wholeheartedly. Raju's journey is from evil to good. His voyage is from false to truth. Once Raju's spiritual journey starts, Rosie, Marco, Gafur, Raju's mother and all others who were important to him in the past, are forgotten by him. They all go away from the scene. It is because such



journey must be taken alone. It is the journey of the soul, for the development of soul. The spiritual conversion takes place in Raju through his rapport with the innocent villagers of Mangal. He hides his true identity from the villagers successfully, presents himself as the great man, the swami. But when he no more hides his true identity before Velan, the curtain has been raised in his spiritual life. The reality of his identity bows to the falsehood he professed, because in that falsehood the traditional beliefs and intense feelings of the community are contained. And these have the power, by virtue of its innocent sincerity, to transform any falsehood into truth. It ultimately happens to Raju who from the false or deceitful becomes the real.

R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* is not merely a social comedy but a profound metaphysical drama that mirrors the spiritual progression outlined in the *Bhagavad-gita*. The protagonist, Raju, embodies the human struggle between the pull of the senses and the call of Dharma (duty). His journey can be categorized into three distinct spiritual phases corresponding to specific teachings of Lord Krishna.

1. The Trap of Sense Gratification (The 'Railway Raju' Phase)

In the first half of the novel, Raju is defined by his intense attachment to Rosie (Nalini). His motivation is driven by *Kama* (lust) and *Lobha* (greed). He creates a web of deceit (forgery) to maintain his possession of her, losing his social standing and peace of mind in the process.

Narayan illustrates here that intellect alone cannot save a man if his senses are uncontrolled. Raju's downfall is a textbook example of the "ladder of fall-down" described in the Gita. His contemplation of Rosie as an object of enjoyment leads to attachment, which evolves into a blinding lust that destroys his intelligence, as illustrated in — *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, 2.62

*dhyāyato viṣayān puṁsaḥ
saṅgas teṣūpajāyate
saṅgāt sañjāyate kāmāḥ
kāmāt krodho 'bhijāyate*

"While contemplating the objects of the senses, a person develops attachment for them, and from such attachment lust develops, and from lust anger arises."



2. The Pretender and the False Sannyasi (The Early Mangala Phase)

After his release from prison, Raju takes refuge in an abandoned temple. The villagers mistake him for a holy man (*Sadhu*). Raju plays the role to secure food and shelter, enjoying the reverence without possessing the internal purity or knowledge.

In this phase, Narayan critiques the performative aspect of spirituality devoid of intent. Raju physically acts like a renunciant—sitting in the temple, speaking vaguely philosophical words—but his mind remains dwelled on material comfort and past memories. Krishna strongly condemns this hypocrisy, labeling such a person a "pretender." It was clearly stated in — *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, 3.6

*karmendriyāṇi saṁyamya
ya āste manasā smaran
indriyārthān vimūḍhātmā
mithyācāraḥ sa ucyate*

"One who restrains the senses and organs of action, but whose mind dwells on sense objects, certainly deludes himself and is called a pretender."

3. The Transition to Nishkama Karma (The Fasting Phase)

The turning point of the novel occurs when the villagers, driven by a drought, mistakenly believe Raju has vowed to fast for twelve days to bring rain. Trapped by his own image, Raju initially tries to escape. However, a transformation occurs. He realizes that for the first time in his life, he must do something entirely for others, with no hope of personal gain.

He decides to stop fighting the circumstances and accept the fast as his duty. He moves from being a 'pretender' to a practitioner of *Nishkama Karma* (action without desire for fruits). He tells Velan, "*With all this fasting, I have lost all aim.*" This loss of "aim" is actually the loss of personal ego. He performs the austerity simply because it is required of him for the welfare of the world according to — *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, 3.19

*tasmād asaktaḥ satataṁ
kāryaṁ karma samācara
asakto hy ācāraṁ karma
param āpnoti pūruṣaḥ*



"Therefore, without being attached to the fruits of activities, one should act as a matter of duty; for by working without attachment, one attains the Supreme."

4. Final Liberation and Peace (The Climax)

In the final moments of the novel, Raju collapses in the water. Whether the rains come or not is ambiguous, but Raju's internal state is not. He has transcended his bodily cravings ("My eyes are dim..."). He has given up the sense of proprietorship over his life.

By sacrificing his life for the villagers without desire for survival or fame, Raju achieves a state of peace that eluded him as a wealthy tour guide. He embodies the *Sthita-prajna* (person of steady mind) described in the Gita—one who has given up all desires for sense gratification, which is clarified in — *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, 2.71.

vihāya kāmān yaḥ sarvān
pumānś carati niḥspṛhaḥ
nirmamo nirahaṅkāraḥ
sa śāntim adhigacchati

"A person who has given up all desires for sense gratification, who lives free from desires, who has given up all sense of proprietorship and is devoid of false ego—he alone can attain real peace."

Conclusion

A Gita-centric reading of *The Guide* reveals Raju's journey as a movement from worldly desire to inner renunciation and is consistent with Indian philosophical thought. Far from being a merely ironic figure, Raju embodies the Gita's ideal of disciplined action without attachment. His transformation underscores the possibility of moral redemption through duty, humility, and surrender. Raju's journey from worldly desire to inner renunciation reflects the ethical and philosophical teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, particularly the ideals of karma yoga and spiritual detachment. Narayan presents transformation not as sudden sainthood but as gradual purification through suffering, responsibility, and selfless action. Through *The Guide*, Narayan demonstrates that the path of the Gita is accessible even to the accidental sinner. Raju begins in ignorance (Verse 2.62), survives through hypocrisy (Verse 3.6), but



ultimately finds redemption through selfless duty (Verse 3.19) and renunciation (Verse 2.71). The novel validates the Gita's teaching that even a man of questionable character can be elevated if he eventually aligns his actions with the welfare of others and surrenders the fruits of his labor.

Thus, this Gita-centric reading of Raju's transformation provides a culturally rooted perspective on *The Guide*, offering a fresh dimension to existing criticism while highlighting the continuing relevance of Indian philosophical traditions in literary interpretation.

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