

## Raju (Narayan's novel *The Guide*)

## Duplicitous

**Character** The main character of the novel is Raju, the titular guide, who is a duplicitous anti-hero. He might also be described as a comic con-man. From the very beginning we see that Raju is corrupt and unscrupulous, who makes his living by cheating and deceiving naïve tourists. At the same time, he is a somewhat lovable rogue, more weak-minded than intrinsically evil. More rascal than villain, he is flawed but not vicious. We believe that he actually loves Rosie and helps her to realise her dream, but then we realise that he is using her for financial gain. In the end, his success as a (sham) holy man is the result of other's self-deception rather than his own virtues. As he himself explains, he didn't cheat others because he wanted to, but only because he 'wanted to be pleasant.'

**Activities** Raju spends most of his time guiding others and, at the same time, being guided by them. In other words, he has no core character, but is rather a chameleon, who reflects the colours around him. He listens to others, not to understand them but to pick up useful hints and pointers. He is not an idle person and is constantly coming up with new schemes to further his aims.

### Illustrative moments

**Charlatan** Raju is the classic con-man, who will tell others whatever they wish to hear in order to maximise his own gain. In the opening pages, he is approached by tourists who step off a train and ask him, as a bookseller on the platform, what sights they should see. Raju simply recites a few paragraphs he has memorised from a guide book, which convinces the tourists that he has tremendous local knowledge.

**Self-centred** One of Raju's 'customers' is an archaeologist who is travelling with his wife, Rosie. Raju manages to charm the bored Rosie and they become lovers. Now Raju becomes another kind of 'guide', in fact a theatre impresario who manages Rosie's dancing career. He bullies the venue owners, he manipulates the audiences and he exploits Rosie, taking more of the profit than he tells her.

**Possessive** Raju has become the manager for Rosie, a dancer, who has left her husband. Raju loves her in his own, manipulative way and tries to control her. When her ex-husband sends her a letter, he hides it for fear that it might reawaken Rosie's old feelings for him. When another letter arrives, Raju forges Rosie's signature on a document (which would enable her to collect her jewellery from her ex-husband). Raju is then arrested and sent to prison.

**Innocent rogue** The complexity of Raju's character is illustrated in the final pages when he assumes the role of a holy man, but only because others want him to play that role. In the middle of a devastating drought, villagers approach him and ask him to undertake a fast to bring the rains. Raju acquiesces, not because he is spiritual or wishes to become a saint, but only because others want him to. He grows a beard and long hair, sits in a cave and refuses to eat. Miraculously, or not, the rain begins to fall.

### Discussion questions

In the final scene, when Raju's penance appears to bring the rain, we are unsure if his self-mortifying penance represents a transformation from con-man to holy man or whether it was just another role he played to perfection.

Raju is a 'guide' in several senses. Can you identify them? Can we say that he is 'guided' by others?

The novel constantly shifts between the present, the recent past and the past. First identify these shifts and then discuss how they contribute to the themes of the novel.