

THE GUIDE

R. K. Narayan

The Guide (1958)

Story

Most critics regard *The Guide* as R K Narayan's best novel. It is both a parody of Indian culture and a poignant love story. Its hero is the guide of the title, who begins by running a bookstall on a railway station platform. Having memorised useless information from book about the local sights, he is able to pass himself off as a guide to innocent tourists. One of his clients is an archaeologist, Marco, whose bored wife, Rosie, wants to realise her dream as a dancer. Rosie leaves her husband and takes up with Raju, causing him to break off relations with his mother. Raju becomes Rosie's manager, successfully arranging for her to perform at more and more venues, all the time pocketing much of the money. Eventually, he is arrested and put in prison for fraud and forgery, but on his release he is mistaken for a holy saint by a villager. His reputation, seemingly but not entirely without his contrivance, grows and grows until he becomes known all over India, attracting film crews, even from Hollywood, when he undertakes a fast in order to bring the rains and end a drought that has plagued local people. But no plot summary can tell the story of this novel, with its shift in narration, doubling back in time and layer upon layer of irony.

Themes

Gullibility The overriding theme of the novel is gullibility, the tendency of people to believe what they want to believe. People believe Raju is a guide when he is really a con-man. Rosie believes she is a great dancer, when she is very ordinary. Velan believes Raju is a holy man when he is actually just hiding in a cave.

Love A second theme is the impossibility of unselfish love. Marco loves his work more than his wife. Rosie loves her dance more than anything. Raju, of course, loves nothing except money. Neither couple (Marco-Rosie; Raju-Rosie) has the balance that, Narayan suggests, is essential for a loving relationship.

Characters

Raju Raju, the 'guide' of the title, is the main character, a shifty charlatan, who is nevertheless not without sympathy. Although self-centred and deceitful, in the end he appears to have transformed into a religious saint.

Gaffur Gaffuris a local taxi driver whom Raju befriends and uses to transport his clients on their tourist travels. As an older man, Gaffur acts as a surrogate father to Raju, a moral conscience, giving him sound advice, which Raju ignore.

Marco Marcois an archaeologist whom Raju takes around to see the temples and caves in the area. He is completely self-absorbed in his work and makes important academic discoveries, but he ignores his wife, who falls in love with Raju and leaves him. Marco gets angry but in the end acts honourably toward his unfaithful wife and shares his property with her.

Rosie Rosieis Marco's wife and later Raju's lover. IN contrast to Marco's cerebral activity, she is pure physical, a dancer who revels in the cobra snake dance she sees in a local grove. She dedicates herself to her profession as a dancer and becomes famous. In the end she leaves Raju and returns to her husband.

Velan Velanis a goatherd, an illiterate peasant who symbolises the common man. He plays a key role in that he discovers Raju hiding in a cave and believes that he is a religious ascetic. Even Raju's claim that he is not a holy man serves to convince Velan because genuine holy men are self-effacing.

RAJU (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.

ROSIE (Conflicted)

Character Rosie is a conflicted and enigmatic character. She is certainly naïve and innocent, believing that Raju will make her a great dancer, while at the same time she remains partially loyal to a husband who does not appreciate her artistic talent. She appears to be malleable, shaped by Raju's profit-driven schemes, but she also harbours a tremendous desire to realise her dancing potential. She even has two names. Rosie is her given name, but she adopts 'Nalini' as a dancer. At the end of the story, when Raju is arrested for forgery, she disowns him, realising that he was not a 'true friend, but merely a technician [of my success].' Although vain and obsessed with her own supposed talent, Rosie is a saint compared with Raju, a deeply scheming and duplicitous man. She may appear to be fickle and flighty, but underneath she has a strong will.

Activities Rosie is a dedicated dancer. She practices all day and performs at night, sometimes for hours at a time. She also spends a lot of time arguing with her husband, accusing him of neglecting her for his work (something she herself will do when she leaves him and devotes herself full-time to dancing).

Illustrative moments

Naïve While her husband is studying temple sculpture, Rosie asks Raju to take her to see a 'cobra dance dancing to the music of a flute' (which is, of course, the famous example of Indian exoticism and illustrates Rosie's naiveté). When Raju shows her a snake-dance ritual in a grove, she sways to the music and convinces Raju that she is the greatest dancer on earth.

Conflicted Although Rosie becomes Raju's lover, she is not without sympathy. Her husband ignores her and Raju praises her as the world's greatest 'artiste.' Even after they become lovers, Rosie is stricken by her conscience. She says, 'After all, he is my husband...is this right, what I am doing? He has been so good to me, given me comfort and freedom.' A day later, she asks Raju to leave her, to allow her to be a 'good wife.'

Sympathetic A month later, however, Rosie turns up at Raju's mother's house with her trunk and asks if she can stay. She explains that Marco had disowned her, called her a 'slut' and a 'street-dancer.' Raju comforts her, just as we the reader would want him to do.

Discussion questions

The name 'Rosie' sets this character apart from the others. It is not a traditional Indian name, but one borrowed from the west. The same is true of 'Marco', her husband. What explanation can you suggest for these choices by the author?

Rosie is a dancer, or she thinks she is a dancer, or Raju convinces her that she is a dancer, or her audiences create her as a dancer. Is Rosie a 'performer', in the same way that Raju performs for his audience?

Marco (Self-absorbed)

Character Marco, an archaeologist and the husband of Rosie, is the complete opposite of Raju, the protagonist and titular 'guide' of this novel. Whereas Raju is disorganised, impulsive, emotional and oddly likable, Marco is an organised and rational planner, who likes to control everything and everyone with cold efficiency. On the other hand, he is liberal-minded, as shown by his marriage to Rosie, who, as a temple-dancer, was not considered a proper marriage partner for a middle-class man. He is also fair-minded towards Raju (his guide), overlooking (or possibly ignoring) his minor imperfections and paying him well—as long as Raju gives him proper receipts. He also acknowledged Raju in his published book on the cave paintings, thanking 'Sir Raju, of Malgudi Railway Station for his help.' Finally, he separates from Rosie amicably and allows her to keep half of his financial assets.

In every respect, then, he is the stereotypical academic: self-absorbed, dedicated to the point of being unable to empathise with others, and slightly otherworldly. He is described this way: 'He dressed like a man about to undertake an expedition, with his thick coloured glasses, thick jacket, and a thick helmet, over which was perpetually stretched a green, shiny, waterproof cover, giving him the appearance of a space-traveller.' As someone who loves solitude, he may be a terrible husband, but he is a successful scholar who has an important book published

Activities Marco spends all this time devoted to activities involving his research. He likes nothing more than to tramp around the countryside outside Malgudi, looking for cave paintings and taking notes. Back in the simple accommodation of a forest rest house, he remains bent over his papers and drawings, writing and reading for hours.

Illustrative moments

Self-absorbed Marco is so absorbed in viewing the ancient cave paintings near Malgudi that he is blinded to the realities in front of him. This absorption in his work, and its unintended consequences, are dramatised in a scene when he, his wife, Rosie, and Raju, his guide, are staying in a guest house. Rosie wants to go out on the veranda to watch for wildlife and asks Marco to sit with her. 'I can't,' he says, without even raising his eyes from his papers. 'I have to look through these documents.' Raising his eyebrows at Marco's statement, Raju then steps into the breach and accompanies Rosie outside, where they talk in the night and begin a path that ends with their love affair. From time to time, Marco looks up from his work, glances at the veranda, sees their shadows and returns to his papers. This is the whole novel in a nutshell.

Controlled One of Marco's prominent qualities is his self-control. It has some positive aspects—he doesn't get angry and he doesn't raise his voice—but it also has the chilling effect of not showing any emotion, even to his wife. After Marco learns of his wife's infidelity, he cuts her off from any interaction with himself. He becomes a piece of stone that does not react to her presence. When Rosie pleads with him, saying 'I am your wife,' he replies. 'You are not my wife, and you are here only because I am not a violent person.' Then Rosie compares Marco with Othello in Shakespeare's play, and feels that Othello was actually kinder to his wife, Desdemona, even though he kills her. At least, Rosie thinks, he felt strongly enough toward her to murder her, while he [Marco] feels nothing.

Firm Although Marco appears completely unaware of the love affair developing between his wife and Raju, and although he shows admirable fair-mindedness when it is revealed, he can also show firmness when dealing with his deceptive guide. This quality is illustrated in another scene when Marco, Rosie and Raju are staying in the countryside while Marco pursues his endless research on cave paintings. When Rosie hints to him, rather strongly, that Raju is a nuisance, Marco takes decisive action. He marches up to the unsuspecting Raju and fires him. 'Who are you?' he asks, rhetorically. 'What is your business with me?' 'A great deal,' Raju answers. 'I have helped you with your work for many weeks.' Marco is unmoved and says, 'I dispense with your services this very minute.' Raju is stunned, and Marco adds, characteristically, 'As soon as you have submitted your accounts.' Even in this tense scene, the man retains his orderly, business-like behaviour.