

# The Guide as a Postcolonial Text: An Introspection

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## ABSTRACT

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* has been studied through multiple lens by multiple critics and scholars so far. And most of the studies were with the conclusion of Narayan's proneness to a sandwiched culture meant for progress. But this article is dedicated to assert how Narayan is adept enough to write back his nation's ethos out of 'postcolonial discourse'. Actually, the readers and scholars felt Narayan's bona fide stance of postcolonialism through an acute avoidance of any British scene and character in his novels till the end of British rule in India. But in 1950S we saw a different tone and style of Narayan. Many of his post-independent works are embedded with character and culture both from East and West. A transitional grey approach seems to come on the fore in his master-piece *The Guide*. This is most likely to be the cause that the scholars start to see through a different lens to the post-colonial novels of Narayan. And his *The Guide* has been a study in ambivalence in its postcolonial exegesis. By the bye, the term 'postcolonialism' may mean, with the sense of the prefix, the aftermaths of the colonial rule, but after its being a theory, it has developed many critical approaches which the readers and scholars should use to study a text of literature in the field of postcolonialism. However, this article is dedicated to discern the true stance and texture towards postcolonialism in R.K. Narayan's most acclaimed novel *The Guide*.

**Keywords:** *The Guide*, postcolonialism, R.K. Narayan, literary theory.

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## Introduction

The term 'postcolonialism' is a highly contentious and confusing one. It connotes the aftermaths of the colonial persecution or even may mean, with the sense of the prefix 'post', the era after the colonial rule throughout the world, though it is difficult to ascertain a single particular starting or ending time of it as the colonization does not start or end in the same year over the various nations of the world. However, political colonisation ends at long run, but the colonisers cannot rest on their laurel. In other words, once the political imperialism of the Europe ceases to exist anymore, they turn to the cultural imperialism in the name of various literary movements. They strive to sustain their so-called supremacy. They do not spare any stone unturned to keep it up anyhow. As a result various movements like commonwealth literature, liberal humanism or global literature come to the fore with Euro-centric 'panoptican'<sup>11</sup>. But with the passing of time the men of letters of the once colonized nations recognize the colonisers' sleight of hand to promote their culture, norms and practices in the name of the language and literature, and start decolonization by yearning to uplift their own glorious past, and rejecting the Euro-centric claims of universalism and liberal humanism. Therefore, the critics of the world start analyzing various forms of literature of the post-colonial era, and the opinions they come forward with also create debates at different levels. Nevertheless, we simply comprehend the postcolonial literary criticism as the literature delineating the lives of colonized people as imperial subjects written by both the colonizer and the colonized. And postcolonial criticism emerges as a distinct category only in the 1990S (Barry 185). It gained currency through the influence of such books as: *In Other Worlds* by Gayatri Spivak, *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, *Nation and Narration* by Homi Bhabha, *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, and so on (Barry 185). Now postcolonialism is quite a theory that critically analyses the history, culture, literature, and human consequences of the colonized people by the colonial exploitation and imperial legacy. However, Postcolonialism includes a number of approaches, though the theoreticians do not always consense on all of them.

<sup>1</sup>a type of institutional system of control designed by the social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## Postcolonial Approaches in Brief

By the bye, the postcolonial writers seek to express their ethnic beauties, sustain their traditional value and sometimes try to rejuvenate their language by abrogating the originality of the colonisers' language. They feel pride in writing back their ancient culture and tradition, ethos and essence, often using the language of the colonizers. They seek to create their own national identity. Tersely, the postcolonial critics reject the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seek to show its limitations of outlook, especially its general inability to empathise across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference. Hence, the postcolonial writers strive to decolonize this Euro-centric outlook in their writings. R.K. Narayan is one of those postcolonial writers who 'write back' throughout their life. Here I take the example of a novel of Narayan namely *The Guide* that poses a mature and skillful sketches of postcolonialism.

## The Stance and Texture of Postcolonialism in R.K. Narayan's Novel, *The Guide*

R.K. Narayan, who is one of the greatest pioneers of Indian Fiction Writing in English, is a bona fide postcolonial writer. He simply uses the trick of avoiding any British scene and character. His novels are of the small-town representation of the pictorial pastorals of India. His early pre-independent novels are critically devoid of British presence. It is at the awake of the colonization that Narayan observes the impact of the colonizers and writes accordingly in order to interface between the modern trends and the traditional legacy. Thus Narayan's *The Guide*, which is written in 1950s, is a mixture of scenes both ancient and modern, rather a culture of East and West intermingled. Many men of letters like critics and scholars comment and criticize on this mediating mentality of Narayan. Some say Narayan in this novel sets out to demolish the traditional orthodox of his time. Some say he seeks to substitute the Indian society with a sandwiched culture meant for progress. For example, O.P. Mathur says in his critical essay, *The Guide: A Study in Cultural Ambivalence*: "Narayan gives us the feel of life itself which is neither all white nor all black but the grey, twilight world of contemporary life quivering hesitatingly between tradition and modernity, East and West, inextricably mixed up in the minds of the individuals..." But to my mind, this is nothing but Narayan's political presentation of traditional value. He sets up things of trend and tradition in order to set off and showcase his own national values – the relations, the faith, and the devotion. And it is not actually possible to catch up the true stance of postcolonialism in *The Guide* until and unless one comes across the lines regarding the very inception of the novel that he inscribes in his memoir: "...I had been thinking of a subject for a novel; a novel about some suffering enforced sainthood. A recent situation in Mysore drought had dried up all the rivers and tanks; Krishnaraja Sagar, an enormous reservoir feeding channels that irrigated thousands of acres, had also become dry, and its bed, a hundred and fifty feet deep... As a desperate measure, the municipal council organized a prayer for rains. A group of Brahmins stood knee-deep in water on the dry bed of Kaveri,...on the twelfth day it rained, and brought relief to the countryside... This was really the starting point of 'The Guide'... and wrote my novel" (Sundaram 73). Such is the substratum of the story that we should always keep in mind while interpreting the angles and approaches of post-colonialism *The Guide* abounds with. Hence, in almost all his novels, *The Guide* being no exception, Narayan propagates the oriental philosophy. In Hindu philosophy realization of the truth comes after going through the acid test of 'illusion' or 'maya'. The transformation of Raju from paper vendor to railway Raju and from railway Raju to a fake sadhu, and from an enforced fake sadhu to a real philosopher of life makes Narayan's assertion of the Hindu philosophy of 'moksha' or 'absolute spiritual freedom'; as stated by the theologian philosopher Shankara. Besides, Rosie's elevation to a "Bharat Natyam dancer" from a mere 'devdasi', her grand success as an artist of Indian classical dance and ultimately her turning into Nalini as portrayed in the novel are means to highlight and assert the traditional Indian culture in the postcolonial era. Moreover, the Indian sense and sensibility is best upheld when Raju's mother leaves her own house considering her son's extra-marital affairs with Rosie against Indian ethos and even not worth-watching. Now, a postcolonial novel can hardly be free from the colonial traces, and such influences are not rare in *The Guide*. The advent of the railway in the pastoral setting of Malgudi is perhaps the most powerful image of postcolonial changes. For, with the advent of railway changes occur axiomatically. Raju abandons his traditional profession and becomes a tourist guide. Raju's sudden transformation into 'railway Raju' marks him as a post-colonial man. People like Marco, Rosie, Goffur, Joseph and the like appear and come in contact on commercial relations. New hotels are built, Transports and communications not only enhance in number but in quality and comfort also. Motor vehicles make their presence felt beside the traditional horse drawn carriages. The pre-colonial calm and innocence are replaced by the postcolonial hurry and complications. Juxtaposition of the old and the new, the pre-colonial and the postcolonial, is also an essential feature of post-colonialism. Thus, Marco represents an anglicized, westernized man with the liberal outlook marrying a girl from a castless 'devdasi' family, but still he is a hybrid, educated, post-colonial Indian, who is caught between the apposite pulls of the liberated west and the traditional India. He is not free enough from the orthodox Indian attitude of a married man to his wife in the Indian patriarchal society. Hence he does not allow his wife to dance in public. What is more, Rosie the heroine, a culturally awakened woman who is bold enough to break her

marriage-tie to fulfill her emotional and artistic desires, cannot break the Indian traditional thread of husband-wife relationship. She ultimately goes back to her husband and turns out to be 'Nalini', a typically Indian girl. On the other hand, the tragic hero, Raju the tourist guide, who was hiding from his tortured past and somehow bearing the sudden enforced sainthood, cannot but devote to the demand, faith and credulity of the common villagers in the end.

### Conclusion

To sum up, the limelight within the ambit of which the postcolonialism in *The Guide* is justified is 'cultural polivalency', which is the obvious result of different cultures being juxtaposed for days. And it is one of the important traits of a postcolonial text. For, one cannot evade the influence of a culture that dominates over a culture other than that. For example, if one is confined in a particular house in order to live as per the wishes of the owner of the house for a long time and suddenly freed from confinement, one cannot ignore altogether the culture that one is forced to imbibe for days, and becomes a by-product of the cultures- his own and that of the owner. So, as a matter of fact, post-colonial writers sometimes celebrate this 'cultural ambivalence'. But through this colonial control and consequences a post-colonial text must struggle for decolonization. R.K. Narayan, a stern postcolonial writer, also 'writes back' to the eastern essence by the acid-test of the inevitable colonial influences in the ethos. Like Narayan's all other novels, *The Guide* is also dipped into Indian theme and atmosphere, but at the same time one can see here the lure of western trends and traits owing to the long colonial influences. In other words, though a curious blend of eastern and western is unmistakable, Narayan is skillful enough to restore and uphold his nation's pristine sense and sensibility by the way of contrast and conflict, and herein lies the adept round-about representation of 'postcolonial discourse'.

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