

# Critical Reviews of R K Narayan's Literature

Dharmendra Singh

Research Scholar, Singhania, University, Rajasthan, India

**Abstract:** The critical reception of R.K. Narayan's fourteen novels over a period of more than half a century has established him as the most popular of the three founding fathers of the modern Indian novel in English. Nearly 900 publications – monographs and essay collections, contributions to learned journals and magazines, reviews of single works in diverse media, and filmed versions of at least two works – exceed by far the attention paid to Mulk Raj Anand, or Raja Rao's achievement. They testify, besides, to the sustained interest in Narayan's narrative oeuvre that ranges from *Swami and Friends* (1935) to *The World of Nagaraj* (1989). An overview will give an idea of the number of critical responses during the periods 1935-1970, the 1970s, the 1980s, and 1990-2004. Besides, it will permit a close look at *The Guide* (1958), Narayan's most popular novel. Its literary innovative features will show that this story, though embedded in the intermediate period between the late colonial and the early independence years in India, is a forerunner of the post-1980s Indian novel in English.

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Literary criticism understood as textual analysis and evaluation is intimately intertwined with parameters of quality and much less with those of quantity. Still, statistical figures arrived at by looking at the overall critical reception of a writer's oeuvre, the attention paid to his early and/or mature works and the ranking of individual texts offer insight into his achievement and certainly intellectual pleasure to the mathematically-minded observer. To start with, I would like to pick up on this idea and investigate the critical reception of R.K. Narayan's work from this angle, and in particular the response to *The Guide* (1958). Thereafter I shall relate my findings to a selection of critical-analytical insights presented by his literary critics. What do figures collected and assembled from a period of six decades (1934-2004), tell us, and where do they take us with regard to a qualitative assessment of the writer's overall achievement, and of his *The Guide*?

My own comprehensive Narayan bibliography (2005) contains 858 publications, including 134 reviews, written by approximately 600 authors and thirty anonymous reviewers. 180 of the 600 critics, or three of ten, are foreigners: a considerable percentage, which documents Narayan's international reputation. Concomitantly, I noticed that Narayan criticism proper is set in only twenty-five years after the publication of his first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), and after nine of his fourteen works had already been available, first from well-known English publishers, and then from an Indian publishing house, the author's own Indian Thought Publications in Mysore. With the appearance of *The Guide* however, critics appear to have woken up suddenly, and as their increasing

attention from the 1960s onward testifies, they have never since lost sight of the novelist's work.

This, his eighth novel, has remained the author's most popular work. In 1961, it was honoured by the Sahitya Akademi in New Delhi, as the first Indian novel in English to win the Akademi's national award. Statistically speaking, it has been scrutinised, analysed, and written about more often than any other Narayan novel, which virtually invites us to establish a connection between quantitative and qualitative criteria of assessment. Eighty-four essays and books on *The Guide* by far outnumber the thirty critical responses to *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), the novel that comes next in popularity – not to mention the two essays on *Mr. Sampath* (1949), for many critics the author's least convincing novel. Very much the same can be said about reviews: twenty-five on *The Guide*, or nearly double the number than on *The Financial Expert* (1952), a novel obviously very much appreciated by American reviewers (Riemenschneider 231- 32). Furthermore, we must not overlook the numerous analyses of *The Guide* contained in general essays on Narayan's oeuvre, or in comparative studies that relate his work to other Indian or to international novelists writing in English. Naturally, these figures must be related to the number of years a book has been on the market. Even so, *The Guide* takes an impressive lead, with a factor of 2.43 that arises from the number of critical essays and books divided by the number of years the novel has been in print. Here *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) with a factor of 0.12 makes up the 14th and last position

Let us now have a look at characteristic features of

Narayan's writing during the four periods into which I have subdivided the reception process, starting with the years 1935 to 1970, and followed by the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s and after. About ninety more or less brief publications, complemented by about 100 reviews appeared during the initial period. Basically, the essays attempt to present us with an overall-view and a general evaluation of Narayan's works, not unexpectedly summarising and commenting upon their plots and characters, their themes and narrative modes and the author's use of English. Already now, references to *The Guide* figure prominently, with the remarkable number of twenty-one reviews published in 1958, the same year as the book. Altogether in a positive vein – which was an exception among Indian critics of the time when commenting upon their compatriots' writing in English – the writer's story-telling talent is as much lauded as his gentle humour and simple language, his sharp focus on the Indian middle-class, and his refraining from commenting upon his stories and from preaching. Characteristics, as William Walsh (1961) remarked, that defined his "Indian sensibility" (92), and caused C.D. Narasimhaiah (1961) to praise his writing as "truly Indian" (66), and K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (1962), to speak of the author's "thoughts and feelings, the stirrings of the soul... all of the soil of India, recognizably autochthonous" (280).

Overall, textual analysis or close reading is the preferred method of interpretation, which reflects both, a critical awareness of the need to introduce Narayan to his new readers, and the predominant methodology of the time, the school of New Criticism. Still, apart from focusing on the text qua text, we also come across comparative studies meant to explore common themes and narrative structures, and to contextualise Narayan's writing from a literary- historical, a psychological or an ideological angle. Iyengar, for example, takes his cue from the town of Malgudi, the novels' exceptional setting, and suggests, "that Malgudi is the real 'hero' of the eleven [sic! nine] novels and many short stories" (284). The novels' characters, on the other hand, "seem to achieve some sort of transmigration from body to body and name to name" (284). "Narayan," he argues, "seems to see the world as a mere balance of forces," and focuses on "the miracle of transcendence and the renewal of life, love, beauty, peace" (301).

As it would prove over the next four decades, Iyengar's judgment was almost taken as the final word on Narayan and was hardly ever questioned seriously, not the least, I believe, because it appeared so strikingly true to Indian critics on the one hand, while an international critical discourse on the Indian novel in English was to

develop only gradually, with the reception of Narayan's work abroad and "non-Indian" critical approaches to a comparatively "new"

genre of the novel. For example, Walsh, Narayan's first serious British critic, broadens Iyengar's character analyses by placing these figures against their social and cultural background, and he also invites our attention to the fact that non- Indian readers will not immediately understand the novels' cultural references: a *sine qua non*, as a look back at the critical misjudgement of the East German Walter Ruben's (1967) Marxist-Orientalist approach demonstrates. Calling the portrayal of Raju, "ein untypisches kleinbürgerliches Einzelschicksal" – "an atypical petit bourgeois fate of an individual," betrays Ruben's ideologically blinkered view as much as his non-knowledge of India (Vol. 3, 154).

Walsh, Iyengar, and Ruben – to whose names we can add James Dale (1965) and K. Venkatachari (1969) – look at Narayan's whole oeuvre, but they also pay much attention to *The Guide*, while Narasimhaiah and Satyanarain Singh (1968) offer extended analyses of the novel. However, their estimate of its thematic concerns and character portrayals – Singh, for example talks about "crisis and resolution" – does not fundamentally differ from their colleagues' conclusions.

A look at the writer's achievement in the 1970s suggests a reversal of the previous period, a creatively most productive phase in Narayan's career, since he published just one novel, *The Painter of Signs* (1976). Yet these were no barren years, because they witnessed the publication of three collections of short stories, a travelogue, an autobiographical account and the condensed prose versions of *The Ramayana* (1973) and *The Mahabharata* (1978). At the same time and luckily, the long break between *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) and *The Painter of Signs* (1976) appears to have invited many critics to take stock and assess the novelist's achievement up to that point; an altogether promising task, as it proved, since by now his eleven novels had become easily available, both in India and abroad. 140 critical responses, including ten reviews, demonstrate that Narayan had begun to establish himself as a writer worthwhile reflecting about and writing upon.

The 1970s experienced the publication of four books on the author and two on *The Guide*. Besides, we now also encounter a widening interest in Indian writing in English and concomitantly, a growing number of general studies of the Indian novel in English, quite a few of which would contain separate chapters on Narayan's works or relate

them to those of others. To mention only a few and more original publications: Meena Shirwadkar's *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Fiction* (1979) is a first step towards Indian feminist studies and pays more attention to the author's women characters than earlier critics have done, whereas Uma Parameswaran's *A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists* (1976) takes existing Narayan criticism as her point of departure, thus creating an awareness of the methodology of reception aesthetics. Looking at the author's narrative talent often praised by others, she considers him a weak narrator, since in "seven out of ten novels the plot breaks midway, never quite managing to resolve the incongruence between realism and fantasy which are its main components" (46). Only *The Guide*, she feels, differs because of the story's ambiguous ending with its near perfect unity of realism and fantasy. Besides, Parameswaran's earlier verdict, that Raju "speculat[es] that this risk [of death or survival] pays dividends," and that he will recover to accept a glucose-saline injection and his light will shine brighter than ever for his devotees" ("Rogues in R.K. Narayan's Fiction" 214), certainly strikes a new note when compared to other critics' morally-veiled judgment of the guide's sacrifice and/or redemption.

The very question of narrative mode also brought into play by Parameswaran, is pursued by several of her colleagues who comment upon the comic, the parabolic, the symbolic or the mythic mode. For Keith Garebian (1976), Narayan's vision of life in its totality, a characteristic Indian attitude, is best served by a comic impulse (77), which is most convincingly presented parabolically and episodically. M. Sivaramkrishna (1978) foregrounds the symbolic mode and feels that in *The Guide*, symbolically speaking, cave and temple are structuring devices. Thus, Raju, Rosie, and Marco become equally "guilty" as they conceive of the temple, respectively, as a tourist item, as "part of what [Rosie] regards as an ignoble past," and as a "curio cerebrally cut off from the rest of life" (77). However, Raju's gradual insight into the true meaning of this building does not only restore "order" – Iyengar's category – but appears to redeem him. Parabolically speaking then, he mutates from sinner to saint, or as Goyal (1977) and van den Driesen (1979) have entitled their articles, respectively "From Picaro to Pilgrim" and "From Rogue to Redeemer." As a final example of original thinking, Vijay Misra's (1979) philosophical handling of the dialectic of *māyā* and Indian literary texts takes recourse to the philosopher Shankara's idea of structuring the relationship between Brahman (the *Real*) and the phenomenal world as "metaphysical encounters." Misra refers to them as "meta-text I." Discussing *The Guide* vis-à-vis this perception, its text proper, called "text II," reveals

itself as patterned along the tension of *nartakī* (Rosie), the self (Raju) and *bhakti* (Raju's escape from *samsāra*); which leads Misra to conclude that the Indian novel cannot get away from the weight of the construct, the "meta-text II." That is to say, "Indian literary texts carry within themselves theories about Indian literature" (56): the knowledge of perceptions articulated in Indian aesthetics helps the critic towards placing even a text in English within his own literary-philosophical tradition.

Approximately 240 critical studies, including more than half a dozen monographs and four comprehensive essay collections, written by 150 critics, of whom fifty are from outside India, appeared in the 1980s. More urgently than hitherto, such heightened attention paid to the author, whose last three novels had appeared between 1983 and 1989, makes us ask about the relationship of quantity and quality. Do we encounter criticism that more or less and necessarily repeats and summarises insights the discerning reader has already come across? Do essays in collections and journals depart, if not altogether, then at least to some degree, from well-worn paths? And finally, do we encounter more recent methods of investigation, say Sanskrit aesthetics or feminist theory, or fresh ones like the "new" trends of postmodernist or postcolonial theorising?

The answer would be: usually not, but at times, yes. The narrative mode continues to attract critics, for example, U.P. Sinha (1988), who discusses the idea of a "mythic" novel, which when successfully put into practice, presents "*the mythic element of Indian sensibility in a creative grapple with reality*" (author's emphasis; 1). As Sinha maintains, the status of "mythic" can be bestowed upon Narayan's work because of the author's "mythic consciousness" (2) that makes the world of Malgudi "simultaneously temporal and timeless" (6). D.V.K. Raghavacharyulu (1985) returns to comedy, which he says, can "evoke pity and terror, and through them work towards an appropriate *katharsis*" (29), brought about, for example, in *The Guide*. Such a reading, he says, brings to light that facet of the Indian aesthetic tradition that "stresses on [sic] *sama-drishti* as the capacity to view suffering and sorrow... as but an integral part of the ontological situation" (30).

S.P. Ranchan and G.R. Kataria contribute to the feminist discourse (1987) by employing C.G. Jung's idea of the Feminine, which causes them to reject a traditional reading from a Hindu-philosophical angle of the male protagonist's transformation, for example in *The English Teacher* (1945), in favour of one "brought about by the Feminine." It is "radically different from the kind of transformation



sought after by most religions through meditation or visualization" (5). Similarly, Raju comes to the Feminine not through Rosie but through the "descending force of the Feminine which is symbolized in the descent of the rain in the distant hills" (12). Both critics differ from Ram Dial's (1981) psychoanalytical approach, who argues that it is the interaction of Raju's anima and Rosie's animus that furthers their development towards Self: a Self eventually realised when Raju is transformed "through his interaction with the collective psyche into the living archetype of a Wise Man" (150). Unfortunately, one should add, Ram Dial drops Rosie somewhere on the way to her realisation of Self – as does the author: a relapse from psychoanalysis into Advaita Vedanta.

Attention paid to a single Narayan novel is one of the outstanding quantitative features of the 1980s, and here every third of roughly seventy essays focuses on *The Guide*, with *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961) coming second, but boasting merely a dozen critical responses. Among the more exciting readings, we come upon differing analyses of the psychological make-up of characters in *The Guide*. For K.M. Chandar (1984), Raju suffers from an inferiority complex, which explains his partly successful, yet eventually failing attempts at over-compensation. Escape from over-anxiety as a last resort complements the picture of such a mental disposition, with the novel's protagonist finally accepting his fate, not because of his insight, but because of his weakness brought about by fasting. Jai Dev (1987) looks at Raju's childhood, a period totally controlled by his elders, which foreshadows his need to be supported by his community – as Velan does, holding him literally up in the river. It is a view not shared by G.S. Amur (1985), to whom Raju's end symbolises transcendence, while Viney Kirpal (1988) insists on *varnashrama*: Raju journeys through the four stages of life to Self-realisation. Finally, O.P. Mathur (1982) considers the ambivalent make-up of all major characters as culturally determined by their traditional world, into which the West has entered and created a "grey twilight world of contemporary life quivering hesitatingly between tradition and modernity, East and West, inextricably mixed up in the minds of individuals" (71).

Considering Narayan's advanced age and surmising that *The World of Nagaraj* (1989) would perhaps be his final novel, it was to be expected that criticism from the 1990s onward might turn more often towards attempting an overall assessment of his literary achievement. Indeed, the impressive number of twenty-seven book-length publications between 1990 and 2004 testifies to this development, especially when compared with the previous

decade. Similarly pertinent is the observation that eighty essays deal with a single novel, which might be partly attributable to the fact that the number of "first-time" Narayan critics had grown faster than ever before, most of them, of course, being academic newcomers who would naturally choose to focus on just one work. Indeed, of the 600 authors listed in my book, about every fourth scholar's name makes its first appearance during these years.

Still, and in spite of the spate of these publications, a close look at them betrays an imbalance between quantity and quality, if the latter is to be understood as bringing about original insights and thus adding to and widening our understanding and appreciation of the writer's literary output. More often than not, old traces are being followed by young academics, many of them from university departments of English, who seem to be not always aware of existing scholarship, perhaps innocently so because of the lack of resources.

Remarkable again is the supreme role *The Guide* plays during these years, so is the "resurrection" of *The Dark Room* (1938) and *Swami and Friends* (1935) after their long slumber in limbo and due to feminist studies and an increased interest in children and young adult literature. *The Guide* though continues to set critics on the track of character analysis, with Raghavendra Narayan Singh (1994) and R. Ramachandra (1994) drawing our attention to the neglected aspect of their loneliness. For Narayan Singh, they battle their condition in a gender-specific manner: males by resorting to their amorous instincts, women by turning to artistic occupations. (154) Michael Gorra (1994) and K. Meera Bai (1994) reject such simplistic notions and point to the influence of Hindu perceptions of man and woman, while contrasting views on the figure of Rosie-Nalini are offered by Balbir Singh (1990), Lakshmi Holmstroem (2000) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1996). Singh relates the Jungian idea of human beings' desire for immortality as a "primordial affirmation," and its realisation in the collective unconscious, to the Indian ideal of conveying "a sense of timelessness" (38). Holmstroem contextualises Rosie by foregrounding the social aspect of her "development": a "deliberate ambiguity in [her] portraiture" (102), attributable to the woman's presentation from a male narrator's angle, which mirrors "the bafflement of a traditional, largely male society, in its face-to-face encounter with new notions of selfhood and particularly, of womanhood" (102-103). Spivak addresses the figure of Rosie from a postcolonial angle and calls her, the "remote instrument of Raju's enforced sanctity," and "the *nautch* (dance) girl... a cliché of the imagining of British India" (244), who eventually "is

not needed in the last phase of the book: the phase of ethnicity over culture. India is folk kitsch" (245).

A further aspect of *The Guide* is story-construction, although character "development" continues to play its part here too. For Patrick Swinden (1999), the "only change [in life and character] is in the recognition of the unchanging" (66), due to parameters of Hindu philosophy playing an important role in the novel. On the surface, Raju appears to change, an impression brought about by the writer's use of Western story-telling techniques, such as changing the point of view and time-shifts. Yet Narayan's employment of Hindu myths and traditional narrative patterns, Swinden maintains, forces us to read Raju as a saint and a trickster, a personality not unlike a hero taken from an Indian epic, such as the *Ramayana* (78). Chitra Sankaran (1991) too emphasises the writer's "instinctive assimilation of his native literature" (127), and draws on story-telling elements of "the ancient Sanskrit genre, the *katha* or tale" (128), with its insertion of different stories into a single narrative, its movement back and forth between past and present, and accordingly, its employment of different narrative tones. Likewise, characterisation is also dictated by traditional considerations (133): Raju is the "trickster sage" of Hindu mythology, acting as a link between the Gods and humans (134). Nonetheless, to this critic *The Guide* is not a myth but a novel, where Narayan succeeds in "making it feasible to interpret Raju's fate in both these lights" (148).

A final cross-cultural reading of the book highlights hybridity as the catchword of its "postcolonial scenario" in Monika Fludernik's comparative study (1998). Hybridity links Raju to postcolonialism in that his lack of self-confidence is a direct outflow of the dependency the colonial power had forced upon its subjects. Further, accepting his role as a sadhu, might not only "signal a kind of token nationalist and traditional revival" (270), but also "constitutes the major instance of hybridity in the text... in that Raju appropriates traditional signifiers for his own decidedly secular ends" (271). Other phenomena of hybridity, Fludernik proposes, are Marco, the "blind" colonial usurper, who is tricked by the crafty native, and Raju's commercialisation of Indian culture in his role as guide and impresario. *The Guide* then "illustrates a pattern of postcolonial hybridity," where the traditional wins over the modern, but "only after having been hybridized by the influence" of the Western world (273).

My summarising account of the critical discourse on Narayan's novels, and particularly on *The Guide*, from the angle of statistics shows first of all, the prevalence of a particular critical approach at a given period, which reflects,

or is apt to mirror, the dominating influence of a critical school. Further, the choice of particular questions directed at a text is an outcome of what critics feel to be uppermost in a writer's mind. Applied to Narayan, it is his interrogation of the make-up and fate of his character(s), and to tell their stories appropriately. Not at all an unusual or unexpected finding as far as novel analysis goes, but a relevant challenge for a host of critics to focus again and again upon these two aspects in *The Guide*.

The question as to whether Raju is going to die after his long fast or will survive, and as to whether he fantasises that the rain is arriving or whether it is really going to start, has invoked a host of critics to understand the true meaning of the narrative's concluding sentences:

Raju opened his eyes, looked about, and said, "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs –." He sagged down. (247)

These are words that epitomise non-closure and the shift of perspective: two narrative devices rarely employed in the Indian English novel written between the 1930s and 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Literary-historically speaking, their use in a 1958 novel makes it a forerunner of narrative practices more prevalent in the post-1980s Indian novel in English, with its "literary experimentation," the replacement of a reliable with an unreliable narrator, its doubt in the truth of a master narrative, and its shift towards the figure of the loner.

For example, in Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (2001), the seventy year-old narrator Pareshe delves into his own past and that of his family under the motto, "ki unhone kyakya, kyakya nahi kio," "what he did do and did not do." It is a maxim that also motivated Raju to tell his life-story to his listener Velan. Now however, the question of *what* is pursued by foregrounding the aspect of *how*, of probing into *what* by creating a post-modern pastiche of modulated narrative bits and pieces that offer the reader an astounding range of thematic references and diverse variants of what happened. Compared with Narayan, the extent of narrative experimentation takes us much further, because now the story is clearly open-ended and the storyteller refrains from even attempting to solve a character's quest for "place" – an ending Narayan had merely suggested as perhaps impossible. With Hari Kunzru's main character in *The Impressionist* (2002), the array of names given to him – Pran, Rukhsana, Pretty Bobby, Jonathan, "an eight-anna" – takes us even further: creating an identity by naming has itself become doubtful, thus forestalling a person's quest for a "place."<sup>3</sup>

Narayan's innovative procedure in *The Guide*,

embedded as much in the political-historical period adjoining the late colonial phase and the early years of independence in India as in the literary-historical period adjoining realistic and post-realistic story-telling, has without doubt, though unwittingly, "shown the way" to future Indian English novels. The first sentence he said he penned as an author: "The train had just arrived at Malgudi," could be complemented voice-over by Railway Raju: "and has since moved on to new destinations."

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