



## **Urban Freedom and Alienation in RK Narayan's *The Guide***

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) explores urban freedom and alienation through the changing lives of characters like Raju and Rosie/Nalini.

**Methods:** Drawing on Georg Simmel's concept of the city's dual nature, the paper interprets Malgudi as a semi-urban space that navigates the characters' freedom and alienation, allowing them to evolve different identities. The protagonist Raju's journey from a tourist guide to a fake holy man and Rosie's journey to Nalini are interpreted using Simmel's idea that city life allows change but can lead to isolation.

**Results:** The study finds that in Malgudi, Raju assumes multiple roles, including those of a businessman, a good lover, and a corrupt prisoner, taking advantage of the opportunities the town offers him. The city shapes Rosie's identity, transforming her from an ignored wife in a private home to a celebrated artist.

**Conclusion:** This paper concludes that *The Guide* reveals both the promise and the pain of city life. Malgudi is a place of dreams and disappointments, where freedom and loneliness are inextricably linked.

**Novelty:** This study provides a spatial interpretation of *The Guide*, highlighting how urban settings influence characters' identities, choices, and relationships. It moves beyond moral or cultural readings of the text, bridging the gap between fictional lives and real city experiences.

**Keywords:** alienation, city, crises of self, freedom, transformation



## **Introduction**

City life has long been characterized as a paradoxical space of liberation and estrangement. Cities shape human experiences by offering a dynamic interplay of freedom and alienation. Narayan's [The Guide \(1958\)](#) exposes the transformation of Raju, a small-town tourist guide who changes into a fraudulent holy man, capturing both the vibrancy and moral decay of urban and semi-urban spaces. The novel explores urban themes, including ambition, deception, and self-reinvention, as it juxtaposes the allure of city life with its isolating and alienating effects on identity and relationships.

Simmel's concept of the city's double-edged nature emphasizes the greater personal freedom and independence afforded by urban life, freeing individuals from traditional social constraints. In the novel, Simmel's theory of the city's double-edged nature is applied to explain Raju's transformation in *The Guide*, where his fame in the city affords him personal freedom but ultimately leads to moral decline and eventual alienation. Rosie's struggles stemmed from the social norms of both urban and rural settings, which shaped her identity and limited her autonomy despite her artistic talent.

### **Critical Reception of Narayan's *The Guide* (1958)**

South Asian literature frequently transforms individual and collective identities within expanding urban landscapes. Scholarships on Narayan's *The Guide* have extensively engaged with the themes of spiritual transformation. They read Raju's journey as a movement from materialism to spirituality, focusing on the redemptive arc that concludes his transformation into a spiritual figure. These readings highlight Raju's moral development and the socio-cultural context of rural India.

In this regard, [Atkinson \(1987\)](#) argues that Narayan's understanding of spiritual growth is expressed in *The Guide* in a deft style. "This transformation in Raju is carefully orchestrated as the novel moves back and forth between a third-person account of Raju's present circumstances and a first-person account of his past life" (p. 25). The chronological shifts reflect Raju's fragmented identity and evolving self-awareness, underscoring the theme of spiritual growth as a gradual and often ambiguous process. [Sharma \(2021\)](#) finds that "the transformation of Raju from a tourist guide to a spiritual *Guide* for the sake of humankind and his interconnectedness with the Divine owes much to the self-realization as well as to his heart" (p. 57). Sharma's findings rightly emphasize that Raju's evolution is not merely circumstantial but rooted in an internal awakening that aligns personal growth with a broader, altruistic purpose. "The protagonist, Raju, detaches him from the material world, changes inwardly, realizing the self, and transforms by following ritual practices, and becomes a saint" ([Paudyal, 2022, p. 41](#)). His study adds depth by emphasizing the role of religion as a transformative force in Raju's journey, framing his shift as a process of inner transcendence through ritual and self-realization.



Similarly, [Akter and Talukder \(2023\)](#) explore human nature and the complexities of societal roles, providing valuable insights into the transformative power of personal experiences and the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment in the novel through a nuanced analysis. They conclude that “*The Guide* is a profound exploration of personal transformation and spiritual awakening” ([2023, p. 144](#)). Their research offers a broad and thoughtful perspective by situating Raju's transformation within the universal human quest for meaning and self-discovery. Atkinson's (1987) analysis of the dual narrative structure and Sharma's emphasis on *internal awakening* highlight Raju's gradual transformation. At the same time, [Paudyal \(2022\)](#), [Akter, and Talukder \(2023\)](#) underscore the universal and religious dimensions of his journey. However, these studies predominantly frame Raju's alienation and superficiality as outcomes of existential or spiritual crises, neglecting the socio-urban context of Malgudi.

On the other hand, [Rajput and Chaudhari \(2020\)](#) find that “Rosie, the central female character in the novel, demonstrates strength, ambition, and resilience. Her journey from a dancer to a successful and influential woman can be viewed as embracing her autonomy and control over her personal and professional life” (p. 8308). They conclude that the novel is an engaging work of fiction and a thought-provoking exploration of the evolving dynamics between gender, power, and agency in Indian society. This interpretation broadens the novel's scope beyond Raju's transformation, emphasizing how personal liberation intersects with wider social change. [Sangwan \(2019\)](#), and [Giri and Singla \(2023\)](#) argue that Narayan's works reflect the colonial impact on the Indian psyche. They serve as subtle critiques of colonialism and postcolonial society. In this manner, [Sangwan \(2019\)](#) writes, “Raju's transformation from a petty criminal to a spiritual guide reflects the postcolonial search for self-identity in a world caught between the old and the new in the novel” ([2019, p. 2109](#)). Likewise, Giri and Singla write, “Raju's transformation from a tour guide to a holy man embodies the Indian struggle for self-identity amidst British influence” ([2023, p. 15](#)). By highlighting both colonial influence and subtle critique, they position Raju's journey as a reflection of a society grappling with the tension between tradition and modernity amid British influence.

Furthermore, [Ghai \(1975\)](#) critiques the structure and themes in Narayan's novels, pointing out the lack of deliberate artistry that highlights *The Guide*'s exploration of Raju's duality. He writes that “*The Guide*, however, is largely free from one otherwise persistent tendency of Narayan's—to introduce details and episodes that have no bearing on the story” ([1975, p. 48](#)). His critique provides a structural analysis of *The Guide*, praising its generally tight narrative focus and highlighting instances of digression that weaken its cohesion. [Khair \(1997\)](#) employs existentialist theory, noting that characters like Raju are other-defined. He argues that the acceptance of the consequences of one's action, the distancing of the self from the *Other* (religion or person)—all of which point towards existential awareness and a reduction of self-estrangement rather than a vaguely 'spiritual' attainment ([1997, p. 153](#)). This perspective compellingly shifts the focus from



mystical transcendence to grounded self-realization. This aligns with urban alienation, where individuals become lost in their societal roles.

The existing scholarship on [The Guide \(1958\)](#) richly explores Raju's spiritual transformation, moral evolution, existential awakening, self-estrangement, loose narrative, and broader themes, such as postcolonial identity and female agency. There has been a limited focus on how urban environments contribute to Raju's fragmented identity, role-playing, and ultimate sense of isolation. [Simmel \(1950\)](#) offers a compelling framework for this previously unexplored dimension. Thus, a research gap exists in examining *The Guide* through Simmel's urban sociological lens to investigate how the psychological impact of urban life fosters alienation, superficiality, and identity fragmentation, adding a fresh dimension to the novel's well-studied themes of transformation.

### **Alienation and City**

A city is a densely populated and organized urban area that serves as a center for economic, political, cultural, and social activity, characterized by infrastructure, institutions, and diverse populations. Wirth defines a city as "not merely a geographical location but a distinct social entity characterized by its significant population size, high density, and pronounced social heterogeneity" ([1938, p. 117-8](#)). Raju's early life in Malgudi as a railway shopkeeper and tourist guide places him in a bustling environment filled with people, commerce, and transient relationships. Simmel asserts that "the psychological foundation... of the metropolitan type of man is the intensification of nervous stimulation" ([1950, p. 414](#)), which causes the individual to become emotionally blunted. Complementing Simmel's idea, Wirth argues that demographic features foster a "way of life" ([1938, p. 117](#)) characterized by the predominance of secondary over primary contacts, leading to relationships that are often anonymous, superficial, and instrumental, and a weakening of traditional social controls.

Raju's life, particularly in the early chapters when he works as a tourist guide near the railway station, reflects this overstimulation in the novel. His exposure to a daily parade of travelers, goods, noises, negotiations, and changing demands desensitizes him to human emotions and fosters a transactional mindset. Narayan writes Raju's assertion, "I became the most famous guide in Malgudi. People came to me not only for sightseeing but also for their problems. I told them what they wanted to hear" ([2012, p. 43](#)). Raju's interpersonal relations are driven not by empathy but by performance. He adapts himself like an urban flaneur, always observing, adapting, and manipulating his surroundings. He knows what to say and how to behave to maximize benefit, not meaning. This performativity is emblematic of the blasé attitude, where even emotional expressions are commoditized.

The money economy and urban rationality transform human interactions into calculable exchanges. Raju's relationship with Rosie exemplifies this. Initially enchanted by her passion for dance, Raju soon begins to treat her art and personhood as instruments for his self-aggrandizement



and economic gain. In the novel, he asserts, "I had created a world around Rosie and installed myself as its master" (2012, p. 135). This sentence illustrates the mechanization of romantic and artistic relationships. Though a dancer full of vitality, Rosie becomes another form of stimulus for Raju—an object of beauty, a performing machine, and a means to wealth and fame. His failure to genuinely connect with her aspirations or emotional needs signifies his alienation, one born not of geographical dislocation but psychological saturation.

The urban subject tends to become detached even from them. The overstimulation of desires, ambitions, and anxieties can lead to the loss of individuality, making the self an object among many. Raju's journey into fraudulence and eventual imprisonment marks this descent. Narayan writes, "There were two Rajus now—the man I wanted to be and the man I turned out to be" (2012, p. 190). This poignant reflection speaks directly to the experience of alienation. Overwhelmed by the multiplicity of roles and expectations, Raju loses sight of authenticity. Simmel writes that the blasé person "experiences all things as if they were of equal value" (1950, p. 417), and this flattening of effect is seen in Raju's moral decline. His falsification of Rosie's signature is not accompanied by guilt but rather by anxiety about being caught.

In *The Guide*, Raju is mistaken for a holy man and begins to fast for the villagers, which initially appears to be a departure from his earlier urban alienation. However, even this can be read through Simmel's framework. In his retreat from the marketplace of life into a silent, sacrificial figure, Raju's blasé attitude is challenged and reconstituted. Raju's inner monologue in the novel reveals ambiguity: "It was funny, I had always wanted to be something grand, and now I was it. But I wasn't sure if it was real" (2012, p. 37). Even in this supposed spiritual climax, Raju remains a figure of performance. However, fasting withdrawal from consumption and sensation symbolically reverses the overstimulation that once defined him. Fasting here becomes a form of deceleration, a counter-practice to the accelerated stimuli of the urban subject. By the end, Raju no longer reacts to stimuli but seeks transcendence through renunciation. Whether or not his transformation is genuine, the act of choosing stillness over movement and abstinence over indulgence hints at the psychological toll of prior overstimulation and alienation. His final moments by the river, ambiguous and possibly self-sacrificial, can be seen as a desperate reassertion of meaning in a life previously devoid of depth due to performance and manipulation.

### **Freedom in the City**

A city is a space that offers individuals the freedom to redefine themselves and their identities. In this context, George Simmel states, "It grants a kind and amount of personal freedom which has no analogy under other conditions" (1950, p. 416). However, as Simmel states, this freedom comes with the cost of authenticity in the city, "life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings which tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparability" (1950, p. 422). Narayan's *The Guide* explores the theme of the paradox that freedom, especially in the modern, existential sense, often leads to isolation. The novel's





protagonist, Raju, pursues various forms of freedom throughout his life: freedom from routine, freedom to love, freedom to possess, and ultimately, freedom from worldly responsibilities.

The psychological overstimulation of meeting tourists, managing perceptions, and maintaining a false self-image forces him into hollow freedom, where autonomy comes at the cost of sincerity. He is admired and obeyed but not truly known. His new freedom distances him from authentic relationships with his mother, past, and internal self. Thus, the first freedom he experiences already carries the seeds of isolation. Rosie's story parallels and deepens this theme. As a woman married to the cold, unimaginative scholar Marco, Rosie stifles her passion for dance, seen as vulgar and unworthy. Her affair with Raju and subsequent break from Marco appears to be a courageous pursuit of liberation. Raju's words in the novel, "She came alive only when she danced. Otherwise, she was like a coiled spring" (2012, p. 97); now, "She has lived the life she has visualized" (2012, p. 153). Rosie claims agency over her life by choosing her art over social conformity. However, her freedom, achieved at a significant personal cost, does not bring her happiness. The more successful she becomes as a dancer, the more isolated she feels. Her relationship with Raju, once rooted in passion and companionship, becomes exploitative as he commodifies her talent for financial gain. Ironically, Rosie's emancipation through art places her in another kind of confinement dictated by public expectations and personal loneliness. Her inner conflict is hinted at when Narayan writes, "I don't know what I have achieved. I dance and dance, but what for?" (2012, p. 156). Her freedom has lost its purpose. She is surrounded by applause but not intimacy. Like Raju, she became a performer before the world but was inwardly detached.

Raju's involvement with Rosie initially stems from admiration but quickly transforms into control. Simmel (1950) observes that as individuals become more autonomous in modern life, they also become more isolated from traditional structures of meaning. Raju's freedom from the grocery shop, his mother's authority, and the moral norms of society initially seem empowering. However, in Simmelian terms, "These breaks also dismantle the individual's embeddedness in a network of affective and social relationships" (1950, p. 418). Raju's relationship with Rosie exemplifies this. He claims freedom from social conventions by entering a romantic and professional partnership with her. However, that freedom quickly becomes possession and exploitation, devoid of trust or mutual growth. Raju is isolated even when living with Rosie, caught in a role he must constantly maintain, "I had created a world around Rosie and installed myself as its master" (2012, p. 148). Simmel interprets this as the illusion of freedom. While Raju appears in control, he is enslaved by the demands of the false identity he has constructed. He desires the freedom to shape her life, manage her career, and dictate her choices. His manipulation of Rosie's success and finances illustrates a subtle but dangerous distortion of love; he seeks not mutual freedom but dominion. This form of control alienates both Rosie and Raju.

While Rosie grows increasingly distant, Raju becomes trapped in the image he has created: that of a supportive partner, a sophisticated manager, and a man of influence. The deeper his



involvement in Rosie's career, the more he isolates himself from ethical judgment, authentic love, and, eventually, the law. His falsification of her signature, a desperate act to preserve his illusion of control, results in imprisonment. The freedom he sought to direct both his and Rosie's fate becomes the reason for his ultimate isolation, "Now I had nothing to do, nowhere to go, and no one to wait for me" (2012, p. 187). This moment occurs after Raju's release from prison, and it signals not just the loss of social position, relationships, and routines but the collapse of all the roles he once performed: tour guide, lover, manager, and even prisoner. When one's identity is built through external performance rather than inner substance, freedom from roles does not result in liberation but existential isolation.

*The Guide* offers a rich, layered portrayal of freedom not as a straightforward ideal but as a double-edged experience in Malgudi. Raju and Rosie's quest for social, artistic, and emotional liberation is met with increasing alienation. Their journeys in Malgudi suggest that while freedom of self-realization is possible in the city, it also isolates the self from the bonds that give life meaning. The mundane activities in Malgudi reveal that the pursuit of autonomy, when detached from love, ethics, and community, often leads not to fulfillment but to a state of solitude. Thus, *The Guide* powerfully affirms the double-edged nature of the city, which promises freedom for all while also breeding isolation.

### **Rationalization in the City**

The city prioritizes rational calculation over emotional or moral values, leading to relationships that become transactional. Simmel argues that "money rationalizes human interactions, replacing emotional values with quantitative assessments" (1950, p. 415) and fosters detached, indifferent psychology in the individual. He means that modern capitalist cities are characterized by the dominance of the money economy, which reduces the value of qualitative human experiences to quantitative exchange values. Money, he explains, becomes the "common denominator" (1950, p. 416) through which all objects and relationships are evaluated. In *The Guide*, the encroaching money economy and rationalization distort human relationships and personal authenticity. Raju's metamorphosis from a shopkeeper's son to a tourist guide, manager, prisoner, and reluctant holy man is deeply entangled with the effects of money, rationality, and commodification. As his life becomes increasingly shaped by the logic of the money economy, his capacity for sincere feeling and ethical judgment diminishes. He treats relationships, emotions, and art as commodities to be exploited. When Raju takes over the management of Rosie's dancing career, he stops seeing her as a person or a lover and begins to evaluate her purely in economic terms. As he narrates, "Rosie was a gold mine... I had merely to put up my hand to collect the gold" (2012, p. 131). This metaphor comparing a human being and an artist to a mine perfectly illustrates Simmel's point. Rosie's body, talent, and time are no longer valued for their intrinsic beauty or emotional significance but for their marketability. Under Raju's management, Rosie's art is



repackaged for mass consumption, and performance schedules, bookings, and profits consume her identity. Her dance's artistic and emotional essence is replaced by its financial utility.

The blasé attitude is a psychological defense mechanism adopted by urban individuals to cope with the overwhelming stimuli and commodification of modern life. It results in emotional dullness, indifference, and loss of genuine meaning. Raju's life trajectory reflects this psychological transformation. Initially, Raju is deeply responsive to beauty, people, and life. However, as he moves deeper into the money-driven world of tourism and performance management, he becomes increasingly numb to moral consequences and emotional bonds. His growing indifference is most apparent in his relationship with Rosie. As her fame grows, so does the emotional distance between them. He reflects in the text, "She danced, and I collected the money" (2012, p. 158). This cold division of labor reveals a profound detachment. Raju is no longer her lover, confidant, or partner in any meaningful sense of the word. He has become a collector and a beneficiary of commodified labor. Rosie dances for an audience that does not see her soul, and Raju counts the notes. This emotional and moral numbness is the essence of Simmel's blasé man. This person has lost the capacity for deep experience due to the monotony and instrumentalism of the modern world.

The money economy fosters a rational, calculative, and impersonal mindset in the city. The individual, to navigate in the city, develops a "heightened awareness and a predominance of intelligence" (Simmel, 1950, p. 415), where actions are weighed for their practical outcomes. For Simmel, rationalization involves the increasing dominance of objective, calculable, and efficient modes of thought and action, often leading to the objectification of both self and others. By the time Raju becomes Rosie's manager, his life has become deeply entwined in the logic of the market and the pursuit of success, which in this context is driven by monetary gain and social status. As Narayan depicts, Raju becomes "absorbed in the new task of shaping Rosie into a celebrity" (2012, pp. 142-3), a task that is as much about financial gain and social climbing as it is about art. His identity becomes inextricably linked to his role as Rosie's manager, a position that affords him the lifestyle and influence he craves. The moment of forgery arrives when Marco, Rosie's separated husband, sends a legal document requiring Rosie's signature for the release of her jewels. For Raju, Marco's re-entry represents an existential threat. It's not just about the jewels; it's about the potential loss of Rosie, her income, and, consequently, his entire constructed identity and livelihood. His emotional detachment from the ethical weight of the act, his lack of remorse and focus on the risk of being caught, illustrates Simmel's blasé attitude where "all things appear to be of equal value" (1950, p. 417), reducing even moral choices to functional calculations. Raju justifies his act by saying, "I had to do it. I could not let the situation slip out of my hands" (2012, p. 172). This line underscores the self-preserving logic behind his forgery; it was not an impulsive act of betrayal but a deliberate effort to uphold the illusion of control. In this sense, Raju exemplifies Simmel's rationalized modern subject, alienated from deeper emotional or ethical





engagement and acting within the cold framework of instrumental reasoning. The act becomes a symbol of his urbanized, commodified existence where personal relationships are restructured through the lens of profit, legality, and reputation rather than trust or intimacy.

Simmel also explores how the rational structures of capitalism and bureaucracy lead to the "dehumanization of the self" (1950, p. 417). Raju's imprisonment, ironically triggered by his rational act of forging Rosie's signature, strips him of his name, identity, and freedom. He becomes just another inmate, lost in the impersonal mechanism of the law. Even after his release, villagers regard him as a holy man, another social role he assumes for his survival. Just as he once performed for tourists and Rosie, he now performs sanctity. The villagers offer him gifts, follow his instructions, and ask for miracles. Nevertheless, Raju is emotionally distant in this role as well. He reflects, "I was just playing a part they cast me in" (2012, p. 71). Once again, his self has become a function shaped by others' expectations and social systems. Raju is no longer free or emotionally connected, like Simmel's urban individual, who is crushed by external forms and emptied of personal depth.

## **Conclusion**

In light of Simmel's theoretical framework on urban life, it becomes evident that Malgudi, though often portrayed as a quaint, semi-rural town in Indian Literature, operates in *The Guide* as a city in the sociological sense. It becomes a symbolic urban space where the intensification of sensory stimuli, rationalization of relationships, and commodification of values are deeply entrenched. Malgudi presents a paradox. It is not a metropolis in terms of scale, but it mimics urban modernity in its function and psychological effects. Within this space, Raju transforms from a socially grounded individual to a fragmented self, detached from authentic experience. His performative identity as a tourist guide, his exploitative relationship with Rosie, and his final role as a holy man are all enacted within the spatial, economic, and social dynamics of Malgudi.

*The Guide* critiques the modern condition by showing that even a place like Malgudi, a small town, can embody both the liberating and alienating tendencies of urbanity. The city, for Simmel, is not defined by physical size alone but by the psychological effects it produces: the overstimulation that necessitates detachment, the dominance of the money economy that reduces relationships to transactions, and the individual's struggle for autonomy that ends in isolation. Malgudi becomes such a site of transformation, where the freedom to redefine oneself becomes a trap of endless performance. Both Raju and Rosie seek liberation; he through social roles, she through artistic expression, but their freedom is compromised by a culture that turns people into spectacles and feelings into currency.

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