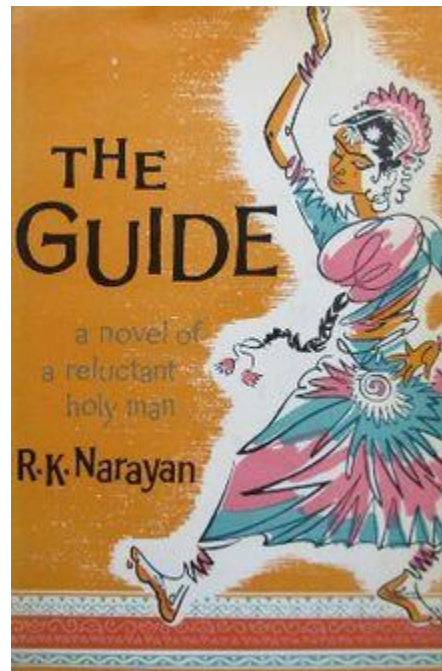


A Comparative Study of Swamis in R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* and
Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*

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Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Guide

Abstract

R. K. Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya are two prolific writers in the field of Indian English literature who deal exclusively with India and its social, economic and political conditions during the Colonial and the post-Colonial periods. Castes, superstitions, hunger and the emergence of fake *sanyasis*^[1] are some of the social evils in India that both of their works deal with vividly, that swept not only rural India, but also the 'city bulging with riches'. In India sanyasis are seen here and there in villages and towns and they appear as *Swami, Guru, Baba, Pujari, Purohit, Panda, Fakir, Yogi, Thakur, Mahatma*^[1] and in many other different names and forms. It is ignorance and credulous nature of the Indian masses that make them *Mahatma*^[2] and sometimes *Avatar*^[3] (reincarnation) of the almighty God. Swamis are found both in Narayan's and Bhattacharya's novels and they satirize the Indian masses and their blind faiths in swamis. The present paper is an attempt to explore the minds of the fake swamis, to know the path they followed

and to bring out their motives behind their apparent saintliness as it is seen in R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* and Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*.

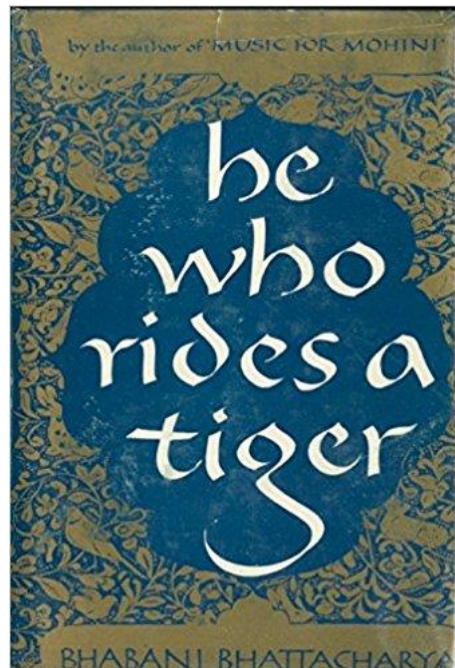
Keywords: Fake Swamis, Indian sanyasi, Indian ascetics, renunciation, Indian traditions, caste discrimination, R. K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya

Transformation of Raju from a Tourist Guide to a Swami

R.K. Narayan is one of the greatest novelists in Indian English Literature with his brilliant narrative technique dealing with Indian themes. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Guide* in 1960. Raju, the anti-hero of the novel *The Guide* is one of the moving and tragic characters. He is a tourist guide and he has played many roles before becoming a swami- Rosie's lover and manager of her dancing programmes, a prisoner and finally a swami.

Raju begins his career as a stall-keeper in the railway station of Malgudi and soon becomes a tourist guide with his good understanding of human nature. With the arrival of Marco and Rosie, a new chapter begins in his life. He becomes their tourist guide and starts showing interest in her skill of dancing and soon wins her heart by his sympathy. He succeeds in his attempt of her seduction and has had physical relation with her. After the departure of Marco, he gives her shelter and becomes the stage manager of her dancing programmes. Later he is sentenced to two years imprisonment for forgery. When he is out of jail, he does not return home out of shame and goes to a lonely place; people start treating him as a swami.

Transformation of Kalo from a Blacksmith to a Swami



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/who-rides-tiger-Bhabani-Bhattacharya/dp/B0006ATWP8>

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A Comparative Study of Swamis in R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* and Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*

Bhabani Bhattacharya is an important figure in the history of Indian English literature. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967. His novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* deals with the transformation of Kalo, a blacksmith to a bogus 'swami'. Like Raju he also had to play many roles before becoming a swami- a thief, a prisoner, a corpse-remover, a harlot house procurer and then a swami.

Kalo, the black skinned man is a *kamar*^[4] of the Jharna town. He lives with his only daughter Chandralekha after her mother's death. He raises her giving her a good education and he is satisfied for that, though she becomes a victim of caste discrimination during her school days. But his happiness is short-lived. Then comes the man-made hunger and with it the oppression and injustice brought in by the traders and the rich people. There's nothing to do in the town, and so most of the people of the town are leaving for Calcutta city. Kalo follows the same path leading to the capital city so he can live without fear holding his head high. While travelling on the footboard of a train to the city, he is caught for petty theft and given three months' rigorous imprisonment.

He is not given fair judgment; instead, during his trial the magistrate asks him some humiliating questions about him and his daughter. Even after his release from jail, the capital city does not welcome him to live a good and honest life. The city itself becomes a hell house, while the poor people are dying for food and the rich are hungry for debauchery and lust. Unwillingly he accepts some odd jobs to make his living and sends some money to his daughter. It is Kalo's *kismet*^[5] that his own daughter becomes a victim of that business of lust for which he works as an agent. But fortunately, he rescues his daughter from the trap before the worst thing happens. Kalo then becomes a swami along with his daughter.

Narayan's "Swami" and Bhattacharya's "Swami": a Comparative Study

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* and Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger* deal with the life of fake swamis. Raju, the anti-hero of the novel *The Guide* and Kalo, the anti-hero of the novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* have some common traits and differences too. Let's have a look at the facts:

1. Neither Raju nor Kalo can be called a swami in the true sense of the term. According to Swami Jnaneshvara, "A swami is a monk, one who has set aside all of the limited, worldly pursuits, so as to devote full time effort to the direct experience of the highest spiritual realization, and to the service of others along those lines." (What is a swami?) While Raju plays the role of a swami for food, Kalo becomes a swami to solve the problem of 'caste and cash.'

2. Both Raju and Kalo are jailed before they become swamis. Raju is convicted with forgery and is sentenced to two years imprisonment. He is a good prisoner there and works as a guide to the prisoners. Kalo is jailed for stealing a banana and is given three month's rigorous imprisonment. Like Raju he also appears to be a good prisoner and is released six days before completing the three months.

3. Raju plays a passive role in the way in which he becomes a swami. When he is out of jail, he does not return to his village out of shame and is resting near an old temple, he is mistakenly

accepted as a swami by the ignorant villagers. In fact, sainthood is thrust upon him. In the case of Raju, it can be said that it is *karma*^[6] that makes his destiny. Throughout his life, it is his karma that makes him change from a stall-keeper to guide, to a lover, to a manager, to a prisoner. However, *kismet* plays havoc in his life that makes him a swami. Kalo has an active role in his turning into a swami along with his daughter. He becomes a part of *kismet ka khel*^[7] along with his daughter. It is kismet that determines his character from a blacksmith to a thief, to a corpse-remover, to a harlot house procurer. But it is his actions that make him a swami.

4. Raju does a miracle before becoming a swami. He solves the problem of Velan's sister by convincing her to marry the groom of Velan's choice. Raju solves the problem using his common sense. Likewise, Kalo performs a miracle by installing a false god. He also performs the miracle by his common sense. He puts a Shiva stone on the lentils in a can and puts it in a selected spot and fills it with loose earth. When he pours water on the lentils, they sprout and the green image of Shiva come out. This is how the miracle happens.

5. Both Raju and Kalo are perfect in their roles. Infact, they are great actors who play their roles so perfectly that no one can figure out who they really are. Raju drifts into the role of a swami suddenly without any previous planning, but he performs in that role quite easily. In case of Kalo, the credit goes to B-10 who suggests to Kalo a way to make a living in the great city. *"Can you wear a saffron loincloth, smear your body with ashes and mark a red-paste trident of Shiva on your forehead? Then, as you walk the streets, your alms bowl will fill up in no time; and may be, if you have luck, someone with money enough to squander will see in you a yogi with great spiritual power."* (*He Who Rides a Tiger*, 40) Kalo uses this plan and becomes Mangal Adhikary.

6. Raju is a fraud throughout his life. He cheats Marco by seducing and having physical relation with his wife Rosie. Later he cheats Rosie when he forges her signature to have her jewelry. After his release from the jail he plays with the beliefs of the innocent and ignorant villagers as a swami. *"He decided to arrange the stage to display with more thoroughness. With this view, he transferred his seat to the inner hall of the temple. It gave one a better background. He sat there at about the time he expected Velan and others to arrive. He anticipated their arrival with a certain excitement. He composed his gestures to receive them."* (*The Guide*, 30) Kalo on the other hand was an honest man before becoming a swami. It is fate that determines his roles throughout his life. But he also plays with the beliefs of the people in the capital city and 'pollutes' them.

7. Both Raju and Kalo confess their true identities at the end. For Kalo it is easy to unmask and return to his original state after fulfilling his aim, but for Raju it is quite difficult to find an escape. Raju discloses everything to Velan but to his surprise, Velan is not affected at all and continues to address him as the 'swami'. When Kalo reveals his true identity, the people become furious, but he successfully gets off the tiger. Meenakshi Mukherjee has rightly pointed out: *"Whereas Kalo at the end throws away the mask and goes back where he began, Raju finds more and more difficult to tear off the mask until he finds the mask has become his face."* (*Mukherjee*, 119)

8. Though initially Raju was quite happy with his role as a swami, he repents for it when he is forced to fast to propitiate the rain-god. He is terrified and thinks of running away. When the people address him 'You are a Mahatma' Raju opposes, "Oh no, Don't say that.... Raju tried to cover his feet. He felt ridiculous playing this hide-and-peek with his feet. He could find no place to put them." (The Guide, 111) However, Kalo rejoices in his role when the rich people start worshipping a false god and touch his feet with adoration. To him it is not only a way of living but a stratagem to 'hit back' - "Let them pray to a false god. Let them seek benediction from a kamar. And let their proud women, limbs draped in jewels and chastity, bow down to a girl who had almost fallen." (He Who Rides a Tiger, 97)

9. The last stage of Raju's life is an unexpected one. When he is expecting his favourite food item to come, he has to fast in order to propitiate the rain-god. He suffers much for food, but there is no escape from his role as a swami and at the last moment he decides to eradicate 'all thoughts of tongue and stomach' from his mind. A change in his inner self is noticed as he starts fasting- 'If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom, and the grass to grow, why not do it thoroughly?' (The Guide, 232) For the first time in his life he does something in which he is not 'personally interested'. And this way Raju from a fake swami becomes a real swami and sacrifices his life as a **Messiah**^[8] for the villagers. In the case of Kalo, he returns to his former position simply not as a kamar, but as a social crusader who changes the outlook of the people as Biten has said, "You have been chosen, my friend. You have triumphed over those others- and over yourself. What you have done just now will steal the spirit of hundreds and thousands of us. Your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken." (He Who Rides a Tiger, 244-245)

10. A spiritual degeneration is seen at the end of Raju's role as a swami. But it is an upward transformation of Raju from a bogus and fake swami to an enlightened and genuine one. He becomes a true spiritual guide of the villagers. William Hayden Moore says, "A minor Oedipus, Raju lives on to redeem himself, the bogus holy-man changes into a dying god sacrificing himself for the people." (Moore, 90) In case of Kalo there is spiritual degeneration at the end of his role as a swami. From the role of 'twice-born' Mangal Adhikary, he returns to his former position, and yet it is not really degeneration, since he spends the rest of his life to reform society.

Conclusion

R. K. Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya, the two writers are totally Indian in their attitude, ideas and feelings. They use typical Indian scenes and situations to portray the blind and incredulous nature of the Indian masses and expose the ills of society. It is basically the ignorance of the villagers and the townsmen that help Raju and Kalo to play their roles of swami perfectly. Raju uses the ignorance of the villagers to fulfill his biological demand for food. Kalo uses the ignorance of the townsmen to fulfill his personal vengeance. Though they are not real saints and have no serious harmful motives, they do exert immense influence upon the lives of the people. Through the character of Raju R. K. Narayan depicts the Indian spirituality and points out the follies and ironies of life, while Bhabani Bhattacharya points out the individual inner struggles born out of the larger sociopolitical realities.

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Notes

- [1] **Sanyasi/Swami/Guru/Baba/Pujari/Purohit/Panda/Fakir/Yogi/Thakur/Maharaj** is a saint or a Hindu male religious teacher.
[2] **Mahatma** is a holy man or a sage or a great person.
[3] **Avatar** is a reincarnation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth.
[4] **Kamar-** is considered a lower caste in ancient India.
[5] **Kismet** is fate or destiny.
[6] **Karma** is the Hindu view of causality or Law of Cause and Effect.
[7] **Kismet ka khel** is a Hindi phrase means a play of fate or a mockery of fate.
[8] **Messiah** is a savior or rescuer sent by God.
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