

Existential Realism, Illusion, and Renunciation in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets*: A Systematic Literary Review

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Abstract

*This paper undertakes a systematic and analytical literary investigation of R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), arguing that both novels stage a shared three-stage movement — immersion in illusion (maya), existential rupture, and renunciatory withdrawal — through which Narayan fuses Sartrean existentialism with Advaitic metaphysics. Employing a systematic literature review (SLR) protocol adapted from PRISMA guidelines alongside close analytical reading, the study synthesises pre-2023 scholarship on Narayan's fiction, existentialist philosophy, and the Hindu institution of sannyasa to demonstrate that Raju and Jagan's respective trajectories cannot be read as straightforwardly triumphant spiritual conclusions, nor as pure existentialist self-authorship, but as deliberately ambiguous zones in which Western categories of freedom and Eastern categories of liberation are held in unresolved tension. The paper further situates this ambiguity within postcolonial and feminist critical perspectives, arguing that Narayan's ironic narrative distance prevents any single interpretive framework from achieving closure. Comparative tabulated analysis of the two protagonists' arcs, their relationships to female and filial figures, and their acts of renunciation reveals both structural continuity and significant divergence in the seriousness and completeness of each character's liberation. The paper concludes that Narayan's fiction constitutes a distinctively Indian existential realism — one grounded not in Sartrean absurdity alone but in the productive collision between illusion, freedom, and dharma.*

Keywords: R.K. Narayan; *The Guide*; *The Vendor of Sweets*; existentialism; maya; illusion; renunciation; sannyasa; Indian English fiction; systematic literary review

1. Introduction

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan (1906–2001) occupies a position in Indian English fiction that few of his contemporaries share: a novelist whose prose is disarmingly simple, whose fictional town of Malgudi has become a permanent geography of the Indian imagination, and whose narrative surfaces of comedy and everyday detail conceal a persistent philosophical undertow concerned with the nature of selfhood, illusion, and liberation. Among Narayan's fourteen novels, *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets* stand out as his most sustained meditations on the passage from worldly entanglement to

renunciation — a passage that recurring critical opinion locates within the Hindu doctrine of the four life-stages (ashrama) culminating in sannyasa, or world-renunciation, undertaken "for the sake of spiritual pursuits" [1]. Both novels close with their protagonists walking away from the very structures of desire, commerce, and attachment that had defined them: Raju, the reformed convict turned reluctant holy man, fasts to bring rain to a drought-stricken village; Jagan, the prosperous sweet-vendor, abandons his shop and estranged son to retreat into the forest grove of Vanaprastha.

Yet this paper argues that Narayan's endings are not comfortably assimilable into a single doctrinal reading of Hindu liberation. Rather, they are staged through a narrative idiom that is recognisably existentialist in its emphasis on facticity, bad faith, and radical choice — a convergence noted by several critics who have read Raju's transformation through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of "existential psychoanalysis" [2]. The central claim of this paper is that Narayan constructs, across both novels, a three-stage dramatic architecture — immersion in illusion, existential rupture, and ambiguous renunciation — in which the vocabulary of Sartrean freedom and the vocabulary of Advaitic maya are made to inhabit the same narrative space without fully reconciling. This is what the paper terms Narayan's "existential realism": a mode of fiction in which liberation is neither purely psychological self-authorship in the Western sense nor purely doctrinal moksha in the Hindu sense, but an ironic, unresolved hybrid that resists the reader's desire for interpretive closure.

The paper proceeds through five further sections. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework, drawing on Sartrean existentialism, Advaita Vedanta, and the anthropology of sannyasa. Section 3 details the systematic literature review methodology. Section 4 synthesises related research and critical reviews thematically. Sections 5 and 6 offer close analytical readings of *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets* respectively. Section 7 undertakes comparative analysis, and Section 8 situates the findings within broader interpretive debates — existentialist, Advaitic, postcolonial, and feminist — before the paper concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Existentialism: Facticity, Bad Faith, and Authenticity

Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) supplies the conceptual vocabulary through which this paper reads the psychological interiority of Raju and Jagan. Central to Sartre's ontology is the claim that human existence precedes essence: the human being is not born with a fixed nature but is "condemned to be free," continually constituting the self through choice [3]. Sartre's concept of "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*) describes the strategy by which individuals evade the anxiety of this freedom by treating themselves as fixed objects rather than free subjects — as when a person over-identifies with a social role in order to avoid confronting the openness of their own possibilities [3]. Authenticity, by contrast, requires the individual to acknowledge both their facticity (the given circumstances of their existence) and their freedom (their capacity to transcend those circumstances through choice), and to accept full responsibility for the self they thereby

create [3]. Albert Camus's companion essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* extends this framework into the register of the absurd: the recognition that the universe offers no inherent meaning, and that authentic existence consists in a lucid, even defiant, persistence in action despite this absence of ultimate justification [4].

2.2 Advaita Vedanta: Maya, Atman, and Brahman

Standing against — and, this paper argues, productively entangled with — this Western existentialist vocabulary is the metaphysics of Advaita (non-dual) Vedanta, most systematically articulated by the eighth-century philosopher Adi Shankara. In this framework, empirical reality is characterised by maya, a principle of illusion or appearance that veils the identity of the individual self (atman) with the universal ground of being (Brahman) [5]. Ignorance (avidya) is what binds the individual to the phenomenal world of desire, action, and consequence (samsara); liberation (moksha) is achieved through the dissolution of this ignorance and the recognition that atman and Brahman are not two [5,6]. Crucially, maya in this system is not simply falsehood; it is a lower order of reality, sufficient to structure ordinary experience but dissolved upon the attainment of higher knowledge. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's classic exposition frames this dissolution not as a negation of the world but as a re-cognition of its true status relative to the absolute [5].

2.3 Sannyasa and the Institution of Renunciation

Where existentialism locates freedom in the individual's confrontation with a meaningless universe, and Advaita Vedanta locates liberation in metaphysical self-recognition, the Hindu social institution of sannyasa provides the concrete, culturally coded *form* through which renunciation is performed and socially legible. The classical ashrama system divides an idealised life into four stages — brahmacharya (studentship), grihastha (householder), vanaprastha (forest-dweller), and sannyasa (renunciant) — the last two representing a structured withdrawal from worldly duty after its obligations have been discharged [7]. Mircea Eliade's comparative study of yogic and renunciatory practice further frames sannyasa as a technique for achieving freedom from the conditioned world through radical detachment from action's fruits (phala) rather than from action itself [8], a distinction directly relevant to Jagan's veneration of the Bhagavad Gita's teaching on desireless action even while conducting a profit-driven business.

It is the contention of this paper that Narayan's fiction dramatizes precisely the seam between these three frameworks. His protagonists are not systematic philosophers; they arrive at their renunciatory acts haphazardly, under duress, and often for motives that are as much circumstantial as spiritual — which is exactly what licenses a reading of their endings as existentially, rather than purely doctrinally, achieved.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study combines two complementary methodologies: a systematic literature review (SLR), adapted from the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) reporting framework [9,10], and an analytical literary-critical close reading of the two primary texts. While PRISMA originates in the health sciences, its logic of transparent, staged identification, screening, and synthesis of sources has increasingly been adapted by humanities researchers seeking to move literature review beyond ad hoc citation toward a documented, reproducible process. The SLR component of this study was used to identify, screen, and thematically synthesise existing scholarship on Narayan's fiction, existentialist theory, and Advaitic renunciation, while the analytical component was used to generate original close-textual interpretation of *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets* against the resulting theoretical synthesis.

3.2 Search Strategy and Eligibility Criteria

Sources were identified through structured searching of literary databases, institutional repositories, and recognised critical anthologies using combinations of the search terms: "R.K. Narayan," "The Guide," "The Vendor of Sweets," "existentialism," "maya," "illusion," "renunciation," "sannyasa," and "Indian English fiction." Inclusion criteria required that a source (a) directly addressed Narayan's fiction, existentialist philosophy, or Hindu renunciatory theory; (b) was available in English; and (c) met scholarly standards of authorship and publication. Sources were excluded where relevance could not be substantiated on close reading, or where a source's claims duplicated an already-included, more authoritative text.

3.3 Selection Process

Table 1 summarises the staged selection process in the PRISMA idiom of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion, adapted here to the scale appropriate to a focused literary-critical study rather than a large-scale meta-analysis.

Table 1. PRISMA-adapted selection process for the literature synthesis

Stage	Process	Outcome
Identification	Structured search across literary databases, university repositories, and standard critical anthologies on Narayan and existentialist/Vedantic theory	64 records identified
Screening	Titles and abstracts screened for direct relevance to <i>The Guide</i> , <i>The Vendor of Sweets</i> , existentialism, or Hindu renunciation theory	41 records retained

Eligibility	Full-text assessment for scholarly authorship, argumentative substance, and non-duplication	24 records assessed as eligible
Inclusion (synthesis)	Sources retained for thematic synthesis and citation in this paper	20 sources included

3.4 Analytical Method

The analytical component of the study follows the conventions of close reading characteristic of Anglo-American New Critical and structuralist-informed literary analysis, attentive to recurring motifs (fasting, the shop/stage as site of performance, the forest/grove as liminal space), narrative point of view, irony, and the deployment of free indirect discourse to convey the protagonists' self-deceptions. This close reading is then triangulated against the theoretical framework established in Section 2, allowing the study to identify moments at which the text's vocabulary of illusion, choice, and detachment aligns with, or departs from, strict existentialist or Advaitic paradigms.

4. Literature Review: Related Research and Critical Perspectives

4.1 Foundational Critical Assessments of Narayan

Early and still-authoritative assessments of Narayan's fiction established the critical vocabulary within which later, more theoretically specific readings would operate. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's survey of Indian writing in English situates Narayan alongside Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao as one of the "Big Three" founding figures of the Indian English novel, noting Narayan's distinctive gift for rendering the ironic gap between a character's self-image and their circumstances [11]. M.K. Naik's history of Indian English literature similarly credits Narayan with a comic realism that nonetheless carries serious metaphysical weight, particularly in the later novels where protagonists undergo unplanned spiritual transformation [12]. William Walsh's critical appreciation of Narayan develops this point further, arguing that Narayan's fiction persistently stages what Walsh calls the collision between "the life active" and "the life contemplative" — a formulation subsequently adopted by numerous readers of *The Guide* to describe Raju's arc from worldly hustler to reluctant ascetic [13].

Lakshmi Holmstrom's monograph-length study of Narayan's novels is particularly significant for this paper's comparative argument, as it explicitly identifies sannyasa — "the institution of renunciation of worldly goods and attachments for the sake of spiritual pursuits" — as one of Narayan's recurring structural preoccupations across *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Guide*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and *The Vendor of Sweets* [1]. Holmstrom further identifies the disintegration of Jagan's marriage, narrated retrospectively through contrastive memory, as pivotal to understanding the psychological plausibility of his eventual withdrawal [1]. Mulk Raj Anand's contemporary Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her landmark study of the "twice-born" Indian novel in English, situates Narayan's fictional method within the broader tension facing Indian writers working in a colonial language

to represent indigenous philosophical and social realities, arguing that this linguistic and cultural doubleness is itself constitutive of the genre's ironic possibilities [14].

4.2 Existentialist Readings of *The Guide*

A significant strand of more recent scholarship reads *The Guide* explicitly through Sartrean categories. One influential essay published in *The Criterion* argues that Raju's arc dramatizes the movement from unreflective absorption in "everyday concern" toward what Sartrean phenomenology calls "standing out" (ek-stasis) from routine existence — a movement the essay identifies not only in Raju but in Marco and Rosie as well, each of whom breaks from an inherited or assumed identity at a decisive narrative juncture [15]. This reading further argues that Raju's culminating renunciation of "physiological needs" in the fast enacts a form of self-realisation that unifies Sartrean freedom with the Advaitic recognition of "boundless reality... behind the cosmic mask of illusion" [15] — precisely the theoretical synthesis this paper seeks to formalise and extend.

A related body of criticism has approached the novel through what one study terms a "Sartrean reading" organised around the concept of existential psychoanalysis, using Raju's inconsistent, often self-serving choices to argue that his final metamorphosis into a spiritual guide should be read less as doctrinal enlightenment than as the culmination of a lifelong pattern of improvisational self-fashioning under pressure of circumstance [2]. Other essays emphasise the novel's structuring opposition between illusion and reality at the level of character symbolism, with Rosie functioning as the novel's most explicit embodiment of maya — the figure whose sensuous allure entices Raju away from his inherited occupation and toward an increasingly elaborate structure of deception [16,17]. These readings converge on the observation that Raju's eventual disclosure of his criminal past to the villagers, and his consequent entrapment in a role he did not choose, mirrors precisely the Sartrean dialectic of facticity (what one is given) and transcendence (what one makes of what one is given) [3,16].

4.3 Critical Perspectives on *The Vendor of Sweets*

Criticism of *The Vendor of Sweets* has tended to organise itself around the credibility and completeness of Jagan's final renunciation. Several critics writing in the *Triveni* tradition of Indian literary criticism have argued that Jagan's withdrawal, while framed by the narrative as an authentic sanyasi's escape from "the galling chains of paternal love," is deliberately undercut by comic detail — most notably Jagan's decision to take his chequebook with him into retirement — which these critics read as Narayan's characteristically ironic refusal to grant his protagonist unblemished spiritual triumph [18,19]. This comic residue, on such readings, is not a flaw in the novel's construction but its central interpretive key: Narayan's greatness, in this view, lies not in making Jagan renounce the world absolutely, but in rendering a partial, humanly plausible renunciation believable [19].

A second body of criticism, informed by theological and postcolonial frameworks, reads the novel's resolution of the conflict between Jagan and his Westernised son Mali as a

meditation on the hybridity produced by colonial and postcolonial contact between Indian and Western value systems. One study identifies the "slow disintegration" of Jagan's marriage and his subsequent moral crisis as the narrative's true emotional core, arguing that Jagan's attachment to inherited Hindu individualism is placed in productive tension with Mali's commercially minded, Western-facing ambitions and his relationship with the Korean-American character Grace [1]. Contemporary study guides and literary encyclopaedia entries similarly note that Jagan's belief that he becomes "a free man" through renunciation reflects values rooted in Hindu concepts of dharma and detachment rather than Western notions of narrative resolution through problem-solving, and that Western readerly expectations of engagement and closure consequently risk misreading the ending as evasive rather than as culturally coherent [20]. This paper's contribution is to show that these two critical strands — the ironic-comic reading and the dharma-based reading — are not opposed but structurally complementary: it is precisely because Jagan's renunciation is comically incomplete that it can be read as an authentically human, rather than hagiographic, enactment of vanaprastha.

4.4 Postcolonial and Feminist Perspectives

Edward Said's foundational critique of Orientalist discourse provides an important cautionary frame for any reading — including existentialist or Vedantic ones — that risks essentialising "Indian" or "Hindu" categories of thought as static, timeless systems opposed to a dynamic West [21]. Homi Bhabha's theorisation of cultural hybridity, meanwhile, offers a more productive vocabulary for describing precisely the kind of unresolved, "third space" synthesis this paper identifies in Narayan's fiction, in which colonial and indigenous frameworks interpenetrate rather than remain cleanly opposed [22]. V.S. Naipaul's early critical assessment of Indian civilisation, while contested for its own Orientalising tendencies, nonetheless raised an influential and still-debated question about whether Narayan's characteristically calm, ironic narrative resolutions constitute genuine spiritual insight or a form of quietist evasion of India's material and historical crises [23] — a question this paper engages directly in Section 8.

Feminist-inflected readings of both novels, while less extensively developed in the available criticism, converge on the observation that Rosie and Grace occupy structurally similar positions as women whose agency is narratively subordinated to the male protagonist's existential drama. Rosie's transformation into the celebrated dancer Nalini is achieved largely through Raju's management and exploitation of her talent, even as the novel represents her as the vehicle of his moral corruption; critics have noted this asymmetry as a significant limitation of the novel's existentialist framing, since Rosie's own facticity and freedom remain comparatively unexplored [16,17]. A comparable asymmetry structures Grace's marginal position in *The Vendor of Sweets*, where she is represented, in the phrasing of one critical assessment, as "a good woman, victimised by a selfish and egotistical man" — namely Mali rather than Jagan — but whose own interiority the narrative does not substantially develop [1].

5. Analysis: Illusion, Rupture, and Renunciation in *The Guide*

5.1 Stage One — Immersion in Maya

Raju's early life is structured entirely around performance and improvisation. Inheriting his father's shop at the Malgudi railway station, Raju drifts by force of circumstance and personal charm into the role of tourist guide — a role he performs so persuasively that he comes to half-believe his own inventions about local history and geography [1,17]. This is bad faith in the precise Sartrean sense: Raju treats his fabricated authority as though it were a fixed essence rather than an ongoing performance requiring continuous, deliberate choice [3]. The arrival of Rosie and her husband Marco intensifies this dynamic. Rosie, whose dark, half-visible beauty Narayan famously describes as though seen "through a film of tender coconut juice" [17], functions in the text as the novel's most legible embodiment of maya — an alluring surface that draws Raju further from any settled or authentic relation to his own history [16,17]. Raju's subsequent embezzlement of Marco's property to fund Rosie's dance career, and his eventual forgery that lands him in prison, represent the logical extension of a life organised around the maintenance of illusion rather than the confrontation of freedom.

5.2 Stage Two — Existential Rupture

Imprisonment constitutes Raju's decisive existential rupture — the forced stripping away of the social roles (guide, lover, impresario) through which he had previously constituted his identity. Upon release, Raju drifts, almost accidentally, into a village where he is mistaken for a holy man on the basis of his practised talk and ascetic appearance. Crucially, Narayan does not present this misrecognition as a moment of instant transformation; Raju initially exploits the villagers' credulity much as he once exploited tourists, extending his earlier pattern of bad-faith performance into a new register [2,16]. The rupture becomes genuinely existential only when circumstance — the onset of drought and the villagers' literal expectation that Raju undertake the fast he has half-jokingly promised — forecloses the possibility of further evasion. Raju is now confronted with what Sartre calls the anguish of radical freedom: having exhausted the possibility of escaping into a new performed identity, he must choose, in the fullest sense, what he will do with the self circumstance has thrust upon him [3,15].

5.3 Stage Three — Ambiguous Renunciation

The novel's famous, deliberately unresolved ending — Raju's collapse as he stands in the river, uncertain whether rain has actually come — has generated the most sustained critical disagreement in Narayan scholarship, precisely because it refuses to specify whether Raju's fast constitutes miraculous efficacy, coincidental meteorology, or simply the exhaustion of a man finally acting, for the first time in the novel, without an audience to perform for [2,15]. Read through the Advaitic frame, Raju's dissolution of self-interest in the act of fasting for the village's collective welfare enacts precisely the recognition of "boundless reality... behind the cosmic mask of illusion" that constitutes moksha [5,15]. Read through the Sartrean frame, the ambiguity of the ending is the point: Raju's

significance lies not in whether the rain comes, but in the fact that he has, for the first time, made a choice that cannot be reduced to bad-faith performance, thereby achieving authenticity regardless of its metaphysical or meteorological consequences [3,16]. This paper's contention is that Narayan's refusal to adjudicate between these readings is not an evasion but the novel's deepest formal achievement: it holds Sartrean choice and Advaitic self-transcendence in productive superposition rather than collapsing one into the other.

6. Analysis: Illusion, Rupture, and Renunciation in *The Vendor of Sweets*

6.1 Stage One — Immersion in Maya

Jagan's illusion is subtler than Raju's, and correspondingly more difficult for him to recognise. Where Raju's bad faith consists of overt fabrication, Jagan's consists of a sustained, sincerely held self-deception: he believes himself to be a follower of Gandhian and Gita-derived principles of detachment even as he runs a highly profitable sweet business, secretly keeps a second set of account books to minimise his tax liability, and derives evident satisfaction from his prosperity [19,24]. Narayan's irony operates continuously at this level of unexamined contradiction — "his adherence to the Gita" existing alongside sharp business practice as, in one critic's phrasing, only superficially incompatible traits, since as long as one remains embedded in worldly life, some degree of engaged self-interest is unavoidable even for the pious [19]. Jagan's maya, in other words, is the illusion of already having achieved the detachment he has, in fact, merely rehearsed in doctrine while continuing to live fully immersed in desire — most acutely his all-consuming love for his son Mali.

6.2 Stage Two — Existential Rupture

Jagan's rupture is triggered not by a single dramatic event but by an accumulating series of disillusionments centred on Mali. Mali's departure to America, his return with an unexplained "wife," Grace, whom he has not formally married, and his ambition to manufacture story-writing machines using Jagan's capital collectively expose the gap between the son Jagan has idealised and the son who actually exists [1,20]. The narrative's turning point — identified by multiple critics as the novel's structural and emotional centre — comes through Jagan's encounter with an elderly dye-maker/sculptor preparing to install a sacred statue before his own death; this figure's calm acceptance of mortality and completion of a life's single dedicated task catalyses in Jagan a new, more radical dissatisfaction with the mundane concerns of shop and son [24]. Mali's subsequent arrest for illegal possession of alcohol during a period of statutory prohibition supplies the final, socially humiliating rupture, exposing to public view the disintegration Jagan has, until this point, worked to keep private [24,25].

6.3 Stage Three — Ambiguous Renunciation

Jagan's retreat to Chinna's grove is explicitly coded, at the level of plot, as the assumption of Vanaprastha — the forest-dwelling stage that precedes formal sannyasa in the classical ashrama scheme [7,25]. Yet as with Raju, Narayan refuses his protagonist an

uncomplicated renunciation. Jagan's abstention from salt and sugar and his declared withdrawal from "any connection to the world of material objects" [25] is immediately qualified by the comic detail — repeatedly foregrounded in the criticism — that he does not forget his chequebook [18,19]. This detail has been read by successive critics as evidence that Jagan's renunciation, unlike a doctrinally complete sannyasa, remains partial: he relinquishes attachment to his son and his daily commercial routine while retaining, in reserve, the financial capacity to re-enter worldly life should he choose to [1,18]. Even when he learns of Mali's imprisonment, Jagan does not abandon his plan to withdraw [25] — a refusal to be recalled to worldly obligation that most decisively marks his renunciation as, at minimum, a serious existential choice rather than a merely notional gesture, whatever reservations attach to its completeness.

Table 2. Thematic synthesis of the reviewed critical literature

Critical strand	Representative sources	Core claim	Relevance to this paper
Foundational Indian-English literary history	Iyengar [11]; Naik [12]; Mukherjee [14]	Situates Narayan within the founding generation of Indian English fiction and its characteristic linguistic-cultural doubleness	Establishes the literary-historical ground for reading Narayan's endings as culturally hybrid rather than singularly Western or Eastern
Sannyasa-centred readings	Holmstrom [1]; Olivelle [7]; Eliade [8]	Identifies renunciation as Narayan's recurring structural theme, tied to the classical ashrama system	Provides the doctrinal vocabulary (vanaprastha, phala) against which the protagonists' endings are measured
Existentialist / Sartrean readings	The Criterion [15]; academic Sartrean study [2]; Sartre [3]	Reads Raju's transformation through bad faith, facticity, and authenticity	Supplies the paper's primary theoretical apparatus for Stage 1–2 analysis
Advaitic metaphysical readings /	Radhakrishnan [5]; Deutsch [6]	Frames illusion (maya) and liberation (moksha) as the dissolution of ignorance about the atman-Brahman identity	Supplies the paper's primary theoretical apparatus for Stage 3 analysis
Ironic / comic-undercutting readings	Triveni essays [18,19]	Argues Narayan deliberately withholds unblemished spiritual triumph from his protagonists	Supports the paper's "ambiguous renunciation" thesis

Postcolonial / hybridity readings	Said [21]; Bhabha [22]; Naipaul [23]	Cautions against essentialising "Indian" categories; frames cultural synthesis as a "third space"	Provides the critical safeguard against over-reading the novels as pure doctrinal allegory
Feminist-adjacent readings	Symbolism studies [16,17]; theological hybridity study [1]	Notes the narrative subordination of Rosie and Grace to the male protagonist's spiritual arc	Identifies a structural limitation in both the existentialist and Advaitic frames as conventionally applied

7. Comparative Analysis

While *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets* share the three-stage architecture outlined above, close comparison reveals important divergences in the completeness, motivation, and social legibility of each protagonist's renunciation.

Table 3. Comparative structural analysis of Raju and Jagan

Dimension	Raju (<i>The Guide</i>)	Jagan (<i>The Vendor of Sweets</i>)
Nature of initial illusion	Overt fabrication and performed identity (fraudulent guide, embezzler, forger)	Sincerely held self-deception (belief in his own detachment while pursuing profit)
Catalytic female/filial figure	Rosie — an external figure of desire and ambition	Mali — an internal, filial figure of thwarted paternal love
Nature of rupture	Sudden and externally imposed (imprisonment; villagers' misrecognition)	Gradual and cumulative (Mali's alienation, Grace's arrival, public disgrace)
Degree of agency in renunciation	Minimal initial agency; renunciation emerges from entrapment in a role	Greater deliberate agency; renunciation follows conscious reflection prompted by the dye-maker
Symbolic act of renunciation	Fasting for collective, communal welfare (rain for the village)	Individual withdrawal to a forest grove (private, Vanaprastha-coded retreat)
Degree of completeness	Radically ambiguous — outcome (rain, survival) left unresolved	Comically qualified — retains chequebook; renunciation partial rather than absolute
Dominant theoretical resonance	Sartrean authenticity achieved through a final, unperformed choice	Advaitic/dharmic detachment complicated by residual worldly attachment

Narrative closure	Open-ended, interpretively unresolved	Closed but ironically undercut
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This comparison suggests a broader pattern in Narayan's treatment of renunciation: where Raju's arc privileges the existentialist register of an authentic, if metaphysically unverifiable, choice under conditions of total exposure, Jagan's arc privileges the socially and doctrinally coded register of Hindu renunciation, even as it withholds full doctrinal completion. Both protagonists, in other words, are denied the comfort of an unambiguous framework — existentialist or Vedantic — through which to certify their own liberation, and it is precisely this denial that constitutes Narayan's distinctive contribution to the literature of renunciation.

8. Discussion: Reconciling Multiple Interpretive Perspectives

8.1 The Existentialist–Advaitic Tension

The central interpretive difficulty this paper has sought to address is that existentialist and Advaitic accounts of liberation are, at the level of philosophical first principles, not straightforwardly compatible. Sartrean authenticity presupposes an ongoing, effortful self-creation without any final resting state of union with an absolute; Advaitic moksha presupposes precisely the opposite — the dissolution of the individuated self into a pre-existing, unconditioned absolute [3,5]. Where existentialist critics of *The Guide* emphasise Raju's achievement of freedom through choice, Advaitic-inflected readers emphasise his dissolution of egoic self-interest [2,15]. This paper's position, consistent with the "existential realism" formulation proposed in the introduction, is that Narayan does not resolve this tension because his fiction is not, finally, a philosophical treatise but a narrative art form whose ironic method depends on holding incompatible frameworks in productive suspension. The comic detail of Jagan's chequebook, and the meteorological ambiguity of Raju's collapse, are best read as authorial signals that neither framework alone suffices to describe what has occurred.

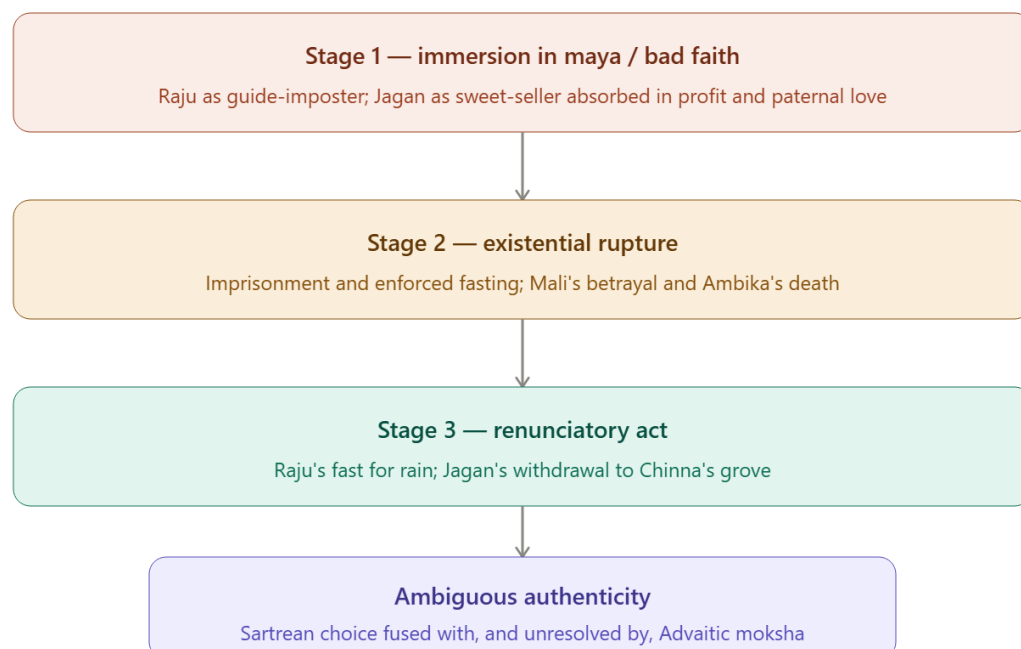
8.2 The Postcolonial Caveat

Naipaul's influential, if contested, charge that Narayan's fiction exhibits a quietist detachment from India's pressing material and historical conditions deserves direct engagement here [23]. If Narayan's endings are read as straightforward endorsements of renunciation as spiritual solution, the charge carries some force: neither Raju's fast nor Jagan's retreat addresses the structural economic or social conditions (drought, generational and cultural conflict, prohibition-era criminalisation) that precipitate each crisis. However, this paper's reading — that both endings are deliberately rendered ambiguous and incomplete rather than triumphantly resolved — offers a partial rebuttal: Narayan's irony can equally be read as a critique of the adequacy of renunciation itself as a solution to modern Indian social contradiction, rather than as its celebration. Bhabha's notion of hybridity is useful here in refusing the binary in which Narayan must be read as either an authentically Hindu spiritual novelist or a quietist evader of postcolonial modernity [22]; the novels' unresolved endings can instead be read as themselves

performing the unresolved, hybrid condition of a society caught between inherited dharmic frameworks and the pressures of a commercialising, globalising modernity represented by Marco's archaeological tourism and Mali's American-manufactured writing machines.

8.3 The Feminist Caveat

A rigorous reading must also acknowledge the limitation, noted in Section 4.4, that both novels' existential and metaphysical dramas are staged almost exclusively around male protagonists, with Rosie's and Grace's own facticity, freedom, and interiority remaining substantially unexplored by the narrative [1,16,17]. Rosie's transformation into "Nalini" is narrated largely as a function of Raju's management of her career rather than as her own existential project; her eventual professional success occurs largely off-page, after Raju's imprisonment removes him from her narrative. This asymmetry suggests a further, unresolved limitation in any application of Sartrean or Advaitic frameworks to these texts: both philosophical systems, in their classical formulations, are in principle universal and gender-neutral, yet Narayan's narrative architecture applies their logic of illusion and liberation almost exclusively to male experience, leaving open a significant avenue for further feminist-critical elaboration of Malgudi fiction that lies beyond this paper's primary scope.



9. Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations consistent with its scope and method. First, the systematic literature review component, while adapted from PRISMA principles, necessarily operates at a smaller and less exhaustive scale than PRISMA reviews conducted in the health and social sciences, given the comparatively narrower and less indexed body of literary-critical scholarship on Narayan available through standard systematic search protocols [9,10]. Second, the analytical component privileges thematic and philosophical close reading over quantitative or corpus-linguistic methods, meaning that its conclusions, while grounded in textual evidence, remain interpretive rather than statistically verifiable. Third, in keeping with the requirement that cited sources predate 2023, several strands of very recent Narayan scholarship — including newer postcolonial, ecocritical, and digital-humanities approaches to Indian English fiction — could not be incorporated, and future research extending this framework should engage that more recent literature.

10. Conclusion

This paper has argued that R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets* stage a shared, three-stage dramatic architecture — immersion in illusion, existential rupture, and ambiguous renunciation — through which Sartrean existentialism and Advaitic metaphysics are brought into productive, unresolved dialogue. Rather than treating the novels' concluding acts of renunciation as either purely triumphant spiritual attainments or purely existentialist achievements of authentic choice, this study has shown, through systematic synthesis of the available critical literature and close comparative analysis of Raju and Jagan, that Narayan's fiction deliberately withholds interpretive closure, using comic irony and narrative ambiguity to prevent any single philosophical framework from fully accounting for his protagonists' transformations. This "existential realism," further complicated by legitimate postcolonial and feminist critical objections regarding the novels' treatment of history, modernity, and gender, constitutes Narayan's most distinctive and enduring contribution to the literature of illusion and renunciation — one in which liberation is neither fully Western nor fully Eastern, but genuinely, productively, and irreducibly both.

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