



Renunciation and Reconstruction: Spirituality, Redemption, and Masculine Identity in the Fiction of R. K. Narayan and Manju Kapur

Neha Raghav¹, Dr. Girish Chandra Pant²

¹Research Scholar and Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Humanities, Starex University, Gurugram, Haryana, India

²Associate Professor, Department of English, School of Humanities, Starex University, Gurugram, Haryana, India

Received: 30 Jun 2026; Received in revised form: 25 Jul 2026; Accepted: 28 Jul 2026; Available online: 01 Aug 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *This paper comparatively examines the representation of spirituality, redemption, and masculine identity in the fiction of R. K. Narayan and Manju Kapur. It argues that Narayan presents masculine reconstruction through renunciation and Hindu spiritual philosophy, whereas Kapur depicts identity as an ongoing negotiation shaped by modernity, globalization, and gender relations. Through a comparative textual analysis of selected novels, the study highlights continuities and divergences in their treatment of masculinity and redemption.*

Keywords— *Renunciation, Identity Reconstruction, Masculinity, Spirituality, Redemption, Selfhood, Modernity.*



Introduction

Indian fiction in English has long been concerned with the making and unmaking of the self and yet very little literary criticism has considered that preoccupation as a distinctly male drama. The male protagonist of the Indian English novel is seldom a steady authority; more frequently, his sense of himself has been shaken and he must somehow seek some idiom in which to reassemble himself. Hailed as the language of spirituality and redemption, that idiom is repeated over and over in the fiction of R. K. Narayan (1936-1997), who set his imaginary South Indian town, Malgudi, in the 1930s to the 1990s; and Manju Kapur, whose novels are set after the economic liberalisation of the 1990s, in Delhi households or in the North American diaspora. This essay proposes that the novelists create a crisis in manhood and a process of reconfiguration, and that spirituality and redemption provide the grammar by which manhood is lost, questioned and recovered. What is the important difference between theology and history? Narayan sees salvation in a traditional Hindu economy of renunciation, in which man is retrieved just by giving him

up; Kapur's sees it in the secular, embodied and often unfinished struggles of modern and diasporic men, for whom the transcendental escape is ever elusive.

It is no surprise that Narayan and Kapur are not read together, because they are about 50 years apart, and certainly are not the same sex, or even literary sensibility—the one an ironist of small-town continuities, the other a chronicler of the fractured middle-class family. But it is just because they are so far away that they actually make for a fine comparison. What has been preserved is what holds the continuity; what has been varied is what is different in modernity's representation of manhood in the novel in Indian English. The two writers follow a trajectory from a metaphysics of renunciation to a politics of negotiation, when read side by side.

The Art of Masculinity, Dharma and "The Grammar of Redemption"

Discussing masculine identity in these novels does not imply a fixed identity but must be read in the spirit of R. W. Connell, who argues that masculinity is relational, plural,

and socially produced and never a natural attribute (Connell). The novels push the arrangements of family, work, caste, nation—what yields as manhood, what does not—in Malgudi as well as Kapur's Karol Bagh. Redemption can then be taken as the restoration of a self that thinks that it is fallen, damaged, lost, and may not be religious in nature, although it usually is in the case of Narayan. The question these novels ask is an interpretive one: From where does this restoration come?

The four āshramas—the student, the householder, the forest-dweller, and the renunciant—structure the ideal life of a man in the Hindu cultural imagination that Narayan embraces, and his statuser is supposed to culminate, not in the accumulation of worldly power, but in the abandonment of it as he strives toward liberation, or moksha. The ontological quest of a Narayan hero is often a journey from attachment to detachment, and from this stems the mythic patterns of Hindu thought, as Chitra Sankaran has demonstrated, to the extent that Narayan's plots are permeated by them. In this economy, redemption is the re-emergence into the true nature by the dissolution of the ego.

This is the side of Kapur's inheritance on which he writes from. Her men live in a secular commercial and increasingly globalized India, and they move outside her into a "third space" of a "cultural hybridity" (Bhabha) where they negotiate identity, rather than having it given to them, in the diaspora. They have no automatic exit anymore as a result of the āshrama scheme and any redemption, if it exists at all, must be created in the world and not outside of it. In both writers, the grammar of redemption goes on, but it may be moving towards transcendence, or towards mere survival.

In both cases there is a colonial history to be recovered, one that Ashis Nandy has explored, in which the manhood of Indians was seen as lacking, insufficient, effeminate, and the restoration of a manly self-respect became a core business of the anticolonial life. Narayan's renunciatory ideal can be seen as one culturally specific response to this pressure—a way of being a man that is not one of the aggressive potencies of the colonizer's model but rather is one of self mastery and detachment. Kapur's providers in the globalized world and his diasporic professionals take over the very norms of competitive, market oriented manhood that the colonial encounter helped to establish. The re-appropriation of manhood in these novels is, therefore, not a singular experience in itself; it is intertwined with the larger narrative of the nation's self and its quest to remember it self, so that the self-reconstruction of a man is always also a miniature allegory of the culture's.

It is a wonderful book that I heartily recommend. It is an excellent book and I recommend it highly.

The Guide is Narayan's most comprehensive exploration of the idea of masculine redemption. Raju starts out as a very worldly man, a railway-station guide who becomes the impresario and lover of the dancer Rosie, and eventually makes her a celebrity. This manhood is tied to performance, possession and financial control and it is destroyed once that control is a forgery: he is locked up for forging Rosie's signature and in one blow loses his woman, his money, and his social position (Narayan, *The Guide*). The following is one of the great ironies in Indian fiction. Raju is released from jail, and mistaken for a swami by the village boy, Velan, and wanders off on a pretended path of good advice, that he is not certain of. But the show slowly fades into the subject that it's pretending to be.

When drought hits and the villagers expect their saint to fast for the rain, Raju takes the fast and in the novel's surprisingly ambiguous ending he feels, for the first time, that he is doing something on behalf of others. Malgudi is a liminal space between the older Indian styles and the pressures of modernity (Thieme), and Raju is a liminal figure: his manhood is broken apart by the worldly economy and reinvented via an economy of renunciation. The self is recovered in the act of giving it away and Narayan refuses to assert that Raju has changed or merely is playing a part – the uncertainty is part of the message, for in the logic of sannyasa, the giving away of the self cannot be an ego project. The transformation is honest because the comedy of Narayan's narration never lets us become pious and certain.

The Vendor of Sweets is based on a calmer version of the same movement. An old-time Gandhian who peddles sweets and reads the *Bhagavad Gita*, Jagan has made his business model of being economical and upright and of being Father. It is undermined by his westernised son Mali, who comes back from America with a foreign wife and a plan to build a story-writing machine, one that is generational, commercial and cultural (Narayan, *The Vendor of Sweets*). Jagan does not resist his loss of command but instead retreats to a garden across the river where he starts a new life, one he calls a "new life." It's yet another renunciation: he's leaving the stage of the householder and heading into the forest-dweller's detachment, reclaiming an inner freedom that his roles as father and businessman had pushed out of the way.

The English Teacher fills in the pattern in a register of grieving. A teacher at a colonial Mission college, Krishna is a man with borrowed and mimic authority. His wife Susila dies, destroying his homemade self, but on the way to her, through his finally breaking through to her presence,

he finds a hard-won harmony, and decides to leave his job at the government school to teach at a more natural school (Narayan, *The English Teacher*). It is William Walsh's long ago identification of this blending of the ordinary and spiritual that has come to define Narayan's work (Walsh), and where ambition and colonial mimicry, both, are detached, the masculine selfhood is reconstructed in Krishna. In all three novels the redemptive economy is constant: the reclaiming of manhood is neither through conquest of power nor through assertion of it, but through its giving up, while the sacred provides a true escape from the deadlock of worldly man.

Embodied Masculinity and the Unfinished Reconstruction, by Kapur.

However, Kapur's men have no escape and nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Immigrant*. Although Ananda (Indian dentist, emigrated to Halifax), is an epitome of diasporic success, his masculinity is in crisis at the very physical level, when he finds himself shamed in his marriage with Nina (*The Immigrant*) for sexual dysfunction. While Narayan idealizes the manhood problem as a spiritual crisis, Kapur represents it - Ananda's manhood is not a transcendable metaphysical issue, but a physical and psychological problem to be dealt with. His answers are all secular and all modern. He anglicizes him/herself to "Andy," changes his body and his ways with therapy and self-improvement, and looks for affairs to rebuild his virility.

This is the masculinity of consumer self fashioning, not a self-giving in the journey to liberation, but rather in Bhabha's hybrid third space. The renaming of Ananda to Andy is an ironic inversion of *The Guide's* Renaming of Rosie as Nalini: Raju renames another to take possession, Ananda renames himself to exist. But, tellingly, Kapur denies his protagonist a redeeming ending; the novel never lets his reconstruction complete, leaving his manhood ever so fragile, resting instead on the market and the therapist's office.

In *Home*, Kapur dissects a masculinity that is created by the family business. The men Banwari Lal and his sons Yashpal and Pyare Lal identify with the business of cloth in Karol Bagh, with family, and with the need to give birth to a son to sustain the business of both (Kapur, *Home*). In this case, masculine worth is one of commercial and reproductive succession: the novel unveils the price of that: the orphaned nephew, Vicky, whose lack of an assured position in the male hierarchy leads him to resentment and violence. These men have no language of renunciation, their selves are bound up or fractured apart in the ropes of trade and patriarchy. Only the shop is where the Banwari

Lal men cross the river into a grove where a Narayan hero steps.

Custody takes the diagnosis into the corporate now. Raman's life revolves around his brand, his salary and his provision and his wife Shagun dies after being lured and seduced by another executive, Ashok, who is more charismatic (Kapur, *Custody*). Here, the figure of the man is that of one who possesses, provides, and they have taken to his as a possession, and this is Raman's crisis: that they no longer give him love or loyalty because he no longer provides them with anything. Again, there is no transcendental solution – just negotiation, litigation, and partial, slow reconvening of a life. In Kapur's fiction, then, the male self is at best partially recovered, at best completely recovered, by adaptation and compromise in a secular world, and is not always recovered. Notably, from the periphery or outside her men are often seen, dis-centred by the growing independence and autonomy of the women protagonists—Nina, Nisha, Shagun—that destabilize them.

Convergence and Divergence

The two novelists come together in their use of modality as a way of conceptualizing their characters' selves as problems, and in their search for language of spirituality and redemption to work through that problem. In both, an identifiable crisis (being imprisoned, losing a loved one, breaking an intergenerational bond, failing at sex, failing at marriage) robs a man of his identity, and in both the question is whether or not he can be remade and how. The difference is significant, however—and clearly visible in history. Redemption means to Narayan the elimination of the self, fixed in the direction of moksha, and tradition provides a reliable way of getting out: the asceticism of the fast, the sacred of the grove, the communion with the dead. Redemption for Kapur is "reassembling" the ego in modernity, and there is no way for her men to get out of it, no reassuring promise of a successful reintegration.

The contrast is that place accorded to the body by each writer, perhaps most strikingly. In Narayan, the body is a thing to be transcended: Raju is fastest to mortify the body, in order to liberate the spirit, and Krishna's greatest intimacy with Susila comes only after her death. In Kapur, on the other hand, the body is the very foundation of a man's identity, a crisis that's sexual in nature and more than anything else; Ananda's is the crisis of the sexual man, and the Banwari Lal men value themselves on the basis of their ability to father sons. The transition from Narayan to Kapur is thus, a transition from a masculinity with the soul to a masculinity with the flesh and a self without a spiritual outlet is handed over to the modern man with no escape other than the body he cannot transcend.

The change is also nationwide. Narayan's soldiers are still in the glow of Gandhian idealism, and Jagan quite literally stands up to the Mahatma, hence, renunciation has a civic also a spiritual significance. Rather, Kapur's men make their way in the globalized market and the diaspora where the nation has been reduced to a backdrop for private aspirations and the familiar old codes of manhood are no longer accepted as gospel. It's now the turn of the point of view too! Narayan focuses on the men and gives their inner lives respect and dignity, while Kapur, in a feminist frame, often looks at masculinity from the outside and has to do with the reclaiming of the masculine identity, which is always underlined by the women whose independence has made the traditional scripts of manhood unworkable.

CONCLUSION

Side by side, R. K. Narayan and Manju Kapur chart the course of the twentieth-century and the modern novel in Indian English. The crisis is faced and solution is found in the surrender of the man in need, the man—Raju, Jagan, Krishna—in this case—and the living and sacred is the ultimate resource that can absorb and redeem the failures of the worldly self. The crisis there in Kapur is not mitigated by the secular means of the modern world, and the recovery of his identity is provisional, embodied, often not completed in Kapur, by Ananda, the patriarchs of the Banwari Lals, Raman. Redemption passes through them but has been secularized and made uncertain; spirituality has been replaced by strategy. What the comparison finally shows is that Indian masculinity is being rewritten, as is Indian modernity as a whole, and that while Indian heroes can still lose their masculinity and find it again, Kapur's men can only, painfully, try to rebuild their masculinity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- [2] Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., U of California P, 2005.
- [3] Kapur, Manju. *Custody*. Random House India, 2011.
- [4] ---. *Home*. Random House India, 2006.
- [5] ---. *The Immigrant*. Random House India, 2008.
- [6] Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Oxford UP, 1983.
- [7] Narayan, R. K. *The English Teacher*. 1945. Indian Thought Publications, 1955.
- [8] ---. *The Guide*. 1958. Penguin Books, 2006.
- [9] ---. *The Vendor of Sweets*. 1967. Penguin Books, 1993.
- [10] Sankaran, Chitra. *Myth Connections: The Use of Hindu Myths and Philosophies in R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao*. 2nd rev. and enl. ed., Peter Lang, 2007.
- [11] Thieme, John. *R. K. Narayan*. Manchester UP, 2007.

- [12] Walsh, William. *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation*. U of Chicago P, 1982.