

**Myth as a Device in R K Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*****Shubham Tiwari**

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**Abstract**

In general, myth is considered to be a traditional tale which involves supernatural power whereas history comprises the chronological details of past events which refer to facts. Myths have been playing a significant role in the aura of Indian English literature. Myths have their own roots in Indian English literature and Myth has become a supportive backdrop. From the ancient time Indian authors have made use of the mythical tales from the Epics, the Puranas, the Panchatantra and the Jatakas in their writings. Indian English literature is embellished by tales and concepts of *Vedas*, *Upnishads*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is obligatory novel based on Hindu mythical stories accordingly referencing to Hindu Gods and Goddesses. As a typical Indian author, Narayan has also used myths and metaphors abundantly in his novels and short Stories. In this novel, the author has re-visited multiple myths ranging from the Bhasmasura myth as a deva-asura war from *Vedas* and *Puranas*. R. K. Narayan borrowed Myth and Folklore from Indian Culture and Religion.

**Keywords:** Myth, Deva-Asura war, Good and evil, Realism and Love-Hate relationship**Introduction**

R. K. Narayan is pure artist, who follow a tradition of story- telling as it existed in ancient India. The story is narrated in the first person by its tragi comic hero Natraj, a printer of Malgudi. In his printing works, he is assisted by Sastri who is a compositor, a proof reader and a machine man all combined in one. Devdutt Pattanaik defines says, “Everybody lives in myth. This idea disturbs most people. For conventionally myth means falsehood. Nobody likes to live in falsehood. Everybody believes they live in truth” (Pattanaik XV). Myth is a special kind of communication that establishes a relationship between the universe, society and humans through three avenues narratives, symbols and rituals. In literature, the word myth is used to describe a traditional story that typically aims to explain a natural or social phenomenon. In literary myths, the use of supernatural beings is common and the time period

usually dates back to a period of early history of the beginning of various civilizations. The story begins with the description of Natarain's settings of his press and office in Malgudi, South India.

The press consisted of two rooms, the front room served as a parlour and the back room sacred tradition of the Press. Between the press and the parlour there hung a blue curtain as a partition wall. In Indo-Anglian literature there is a rich use of mythology. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is not an exception. Even T S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and many other English poets have used ancient myths in their literature. Narayan's Indianness in the novel is best seen in the use of Indian myths, legends and folklore. In the novel Sastri narrated to Natraj a number of Indian myths of rakshasas. In this regard M.K. Naik rightly opines, "*The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is an impressive novel dealing with ethical issues such as the fate of evil and the question of human relationship and the precepts and practice of the entire business of living" (Naik 73-74). Narayan is well versed with the Hindu epics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharat* and other Hindu scriptures as also in the myths and legends which form a part of the Indian folklore. He has read ancient culture very minutely and thoroughly. Reference and allusions to such myths and legends abound in his stories.

The first part of the novel *Man-Eater* is too apt and suggestive if not in letter, at least in spirit. *Man-Eater* implies a tiger who has once tasted human blood, has relished the flesh of man. Tiger attacks human beings whenever it gets an opportunity to do so. It causes death, destruction and chaos is an object of terror to all in the neighborhood. He is very terrible and people start running here and there and endeavor to save their life. There is no *Man-Eater* in Malgudi in the literal sense. It means there is no tiger but there is a man who is like a tiger and causes destruction, disorder and disharmony. In the literal sense the novelist compares him to a tiger. This tiger is Vasu, the taxidermist, as destructive as a *Man-Eater*. Like Hardy's Wessex, Malgudi is the chosen region which forms the background to the works of Narayan. Malgudi is Narayan's Casterbridge, by the inhabitants of Malgudi, although they may have their recognisable local traits, are essentially human and, hence, have their kinship with all humanity.

Let us discuss the second part of the novel, Malgudi. The title concerned, it is quite appropriate for at once indicates the particular place or locality where the various events and incidents narrated in the novel take place. Malgudi is located in South India. It is a heart of South India, essentially a "country of the mind", provides setting to the novel. Novelist has selected number of its localities such as Market Road, Kabir Street, Sarayu river, The Taluk office, The Lawley Extension, The Mempoiforest. Then we come to know professions, beliefs, customs, tradition and superstitions prevailing in Malgudi. Malgudi is shown to be a developing town. People are conservative and economically very backward, but some intelligent persons are living there who want to improve the economic growth of the town. So there are

rapid changes are taking place. The project for the establishment of a Veterinary Hospital has been cleared, and Veterinary doctors are already there. However, the implementation of the project has been delayed because of the apathy of the officials concerned. But there is a rumor to paucity of funds. Hence, the hospital project can't be implemented.

Narayan uses ancient myths, legends and folklore in his novels. He is well-versed with the Hindu epics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharat* and other Hindu scriptures as also in the myths and legends which form a part of the Indian folklore. In his works we find the study of entitled Gods, demons and other stories. References, and allusions to such myths and legends abound in his stories in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. He has consciously used myth as a technique in the manner of such modern English writers as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and many others.

Further there are different myths. There was Ravana, the protagonist in the *Ramayana*, who had ten heads and twenty arms and enormous yogic and physical powers, and a boon from the gods that he could never be vanquished. The earth had shaken its head under his tyranny. Another example of Mahishasur, the asura who mediated and acquired a birth of immortality and invincibility and who had secured a special favor that every drop of blood shed from his body gave rise to another demon in his own image and strength, who nevertheless destroyed. The Goddess with six arms, each bearing a different weapon, came riding for the fight on a lion which sucked every drop of blood drawn from the demon.

There was Bhasmasura who acquired a special boon that everything he touched be scorched, while nothing could ever destroy him. He made humanity suffer. God Vishnu was incarnated as a dancer of great beauty, named Mohini with whom asura became infatuated. She promised to yield to him only if he imitated gestures and movements of her own dancing. At one point in the dance, Mohini placed her palms on her head and the demon followed this gesture in complete forgetfulness and was reduced to ashes that very second, the blighting touch became active on his own head. Every man can think that he is great and will live forever, but no one can guess from which quarter his doom will come.

The Bhasmasura myth is retold in modern terms in order to draw a parallel between Vasu, the taxidermist and the rakshasa Bhasmasura, and Nataraj (Shiva's namesake) the printer and Shiva who makes the mistake of being misplaced in his altruism. Shiva in the original myth commits the error of being benevolent and generous to Bhasmasura because he flatters him with his penance, little realizing that by granting a boon that empowers Bhasmasura with the power to turn anyone he lays his right hand on to ashes, he is not only putting the lives of the other devas at risk but also his own! Alarmed at the prospect of a Bhasmasura who threatens to lay his hand on Shiva's head, Shiva runs to Vishnu for help. Vishnu takes the form of a beautiful danseuse, Mohini who lures and entices Bhasmasura into placing

his fatal hand on his own head thus destroying himself! Mohini's role is played by Rangi, the temple dancer in the novel, who is indirectly responsible for Vasu's death. In his Ph.D dissertation, Sowntharya cites Narayan's own words through the article of Sharma and Birendra Kumar:

At some point in one's writing career, one takes a fresh look at the so called myths and legends and finds a new meaning in them. After writing a number of novels and short stories based on society around me, some years ago, suddenly, I came across a theme which struck me as an excellent piece of mythology in modern dress. It was published under the title *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. I based the story on a well-known mythical episodes the story of Mohini and Bhasmasura (Sharma and Kumar 126).

Vasu had threatened to kill the temple elephant Kumar for its skin and carcass. When Nataraj comes to know about the killing of the temple elephant Kumar during the procession, he takes sincere efforts to prevent it. He meets Vasu and pleads him that: "Vasu, you are a human being with feelings like any of us. I am sure you are pretending to be so wild" (Rao 186). Rao remarks that "The Man Eater is a man, not a tiger, an ego centered man for whom the objective world is not existent, a modern rakshasa who wants to kill that belongs to temple" (Rao, Air Interview 50). Rangi planned to sedate Vasu by poisoning him using his favorite pulav. However, Vasu refuses to eat the food she brings. Instead, he instructs Rangi to fan him while he sleeps to ward off the mosquitoes that irritate him no end. Rangi falls asleep on the job, thus indirectly causing a mosquito to bite Vasu on his forehead. Vasu, who prides himself on an iron fist, is angered by the mosquito bite, and brings his hand on his own forehead forcibly to swat the mosquito thus causing his own death. Prof. Iyengar comments, that "*The Man-Eater of Malgudi* was perhaps "meant to be a modern version of one of Deva-Asura conflicts of very ancient times" (Iyengar 382).

Narayan used a mythical technique between Vasu and Bhasmasura which is all about myths and legends and which juxtaposes with the facts of modern life and in this way brings out the similarities and contrasts between the past and the present. The modern artist is acutely conscious of the bewildering variety, complexity and intricacy of modern life.

Narayan is primarily remembered for his novels and short stories that humorously and ironically depict rural and Suburban India. He does not adapt the storyline directly from the Indian Mythical text but rather he uses the elements and characters of the same as Indian Mythical text. Ancient myths, stories and folklore are intentionally used as narrative devices. Narayan used the concept of Karma in the narrative as a mythical approach and puranic language. Shastri outlines the various definitions of a demon. He said, "Every rakshasa gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is invincible, beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him" (Narayan 94).

Malgudi has been described as the "Country of the mind". Some of the critics identify this as the original mythical town. Srinivas Iyengar discusses that Malgudi is in Coimbatore, has many landmarks - river on the one side, forests on the other side, school and college, and all the extensions mentioned in the stories. The atmosphere of Malgudi is very peaceful, calm and serene. Malgudi is the symbol of the mythical space which actively participates and determines the action of the novel. Psychological and physical level play an important role in this novel, which brings a religious dimension in the novel. Narayan includes fantasy and realism in the novel. As a realistic novelist, Narayan deserves all praise. In this regard Britta Olinder, states, "Narayan's realism is above all seen in his drawing of the background, the day to day life" (Olinder 8-10).

All the myths and legends Narayan uses point to the fact that the surface difference between the customs, beliefs and way of life. Similarities lie beneath contrasting appearances and there is a fundamental unity in diversity. The modern novelist, poets and prose writers express their thoughts with the help of mythical technique. There is bewildering variety, complexity and intricacy in modern life and culture. Narayan uses historic sense and his works are highly effective if he uses regions and myths of history. Thus, historical sense is the way to make the work very illuminating, the past, present and future are dove-tailed. This sense enables the reader to understand the ideology, concept and overview of his piece of art. Hence, the technique of similarities and contrast is very beneficial and without this technique the world of art is incomplete. The modern world is very complicated and it is full of complexities and hardships. The author uses his art to give proper order to his piece of art. Narayan traces some myths from history and modern problems are compared with the old traditions and regions. Various similarities lie beneath contrasting appearances. There is fundamental unity and diversity. These similarities and dissimilarities give just opposition as used by Narayan in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.

Vasu is an evil incarnate. He frightens children, kills dogs, repels neighborhood people with the stench of his workshop and defies social conventions by bringing in prostitutes. All these negative acts set him apart from common human beings. He has no consideration for the feelings of others. He is bully, arrogant and cruel. Vasu corresponds to the letter with Sastri's definition of a rakshasa as a demonic creature, possessing enormous strength, strange powers and genius, but recognising no sort of restraint of man or god. In the beginning of the novel, Shastri identifies him with the Rakshasa, embodying forces of destruction. He thinks he is invincible, beyond every law. Later, he is the cause of his own death as he oversteps his limitations and he is totally destroyed. There has been a parallel between the character of Vasu and Bhasmasura. Like Bhasmasura Vasu also was the cause of his own death. Thus, Sastri

stresses the parallel between Vasu and Bhasmasura and hints at the manner of Vasu's sudden and unexpected death. He dies like Bhasmasura with a blow of his fist on his own head and the novel concludes with the following words of Sastri, as it has been rightly said:

Every demon appears in the world with a special boon of indestructibility yet the universe has survived all the rakshasas that were ever born. Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self-destruction and goes up in the air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?" (Rao 255).

He narrated again for Nataraj's benefit the story of Bhasmasura the unconquerable, who scorched everything he touched, and finally reduced himself to ashes by placing the tips of his fingers on his own head.

The opposite temperament between Nataraj and Vasu is so clearly marked that one is tempted to read in the story of their conflict an allegorical implication. Theirs is the opposition between Sattva and Rajas. The battle between the gods and demons, the suras and the asuras, is a recurrent motif in Hindu mythology. The asuras were powerful, sometimes even more than the gods, and many times they triumphed, threatening Indra in heaven with chaos and confusion. But every time Indra's throne was saved by some miracle of divine strategy whereby the demons caused their own destruction and order was restored in the cosmos again. Vasu announces himself as a rival to nature soon after his arrival. He goes on relentlessly in his fight against nature by stuffing dead animals to make them look real. The relationship between Nataraj and Vasu is clear: Nataraj is weak, and Vasu is strong. That is why Nataraj is afraid of Vasu, and at times he even praises him. Nataraj is a peace-loving and have patience. It is appropriate to quote Meenakshi Mukherjee who writes the relationship between Nataraj and Vasu:

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The conflict is not between Nataraj alone, but between Vasu and society in general and Vasu's seeming superiority over such a vast force merely underlines the fact that evil is often far more dynamic than forces of goodness. Nataraj's fascination for Vasu and his attempts to re-establish friendly relations with the taxidermist indicate that evil is not merely stronger but also more attractive than goodness. Nataraj's experience reflects this universal human reality. In the words of Nagendra Nath Sharan,

The novel acquires the suspense of a detective novel when Vasu, the embodiment of evil, meets his mysterious end. Irony reaches the pitch of its powers. It becomes an instrument of moral discovery. Narayan succeeds in grafting a modern narrative based on the ancient Indian myth (Sharan 25).

Natraj and Vasu have been shown as two contrasted characters. Natraj on one hand is the central figure and the whole action takes place through his eyes. He has been termed as an unheroic hero, good at heart, but very passive and inactive like most of them. Vasu on the other hand is an evil incarnate and like Milton's Satan he has all the fascination of evil about him. He has been termed as an anti-hero, aggressives and bullying, and Natraj is both attracted and repelled by him. The novel thus makes it clear that it is a love- hate relationship. Thus, though Natraj has been focused as a hero, he still remains an unheroic hero because the influence of Vasu on the story of the novel has been much more, and Natraj has been shown as an active person but passive in his ways which have further made him unheroic.

The novelist has succeeded in driving home the moral truth. He has told an entertaining story, but at the same time he has conveyed deep moral and religious truths of perennial significance. He has told about the good and the evil characters of Natraj and Vasu; the moral and about the contrasted characters between Natraj and Vasu He has shown how tolerant was Natraj towards Vasu, when he had occupied his attic, later when he was discussing with the adjournment lawyer, how he took Natraj blindly with him to the Mempi forest Then, his hesitation for not saying anything to Vasu even though Vasu did not finish with his misdoings towards Natraj Thus, this shows how tolerant was Natraj and how intolerant was Vasu towards him. Vasu destroyed the peaceful life of the people of Malgudi. He created havoc among the people of Malgudi. He affected the peaceful life of Natraj and destroyed his reputation. However, Narayan's morality is not obtrusive, it can be acquired only by the discerning reader who can read between the lines. The novel has to be read on two levels.

The New York Times reviewer read the novel as an allegory and pointed out how closely the novel follows the allegorical pattern of Sanskrit Literature. Even a casual reader noticed the allegorical pattern of the novel. The difference which has been shown between Natraj the printer, and one who is intolerant, Vasu cannot be overlooked because it is very clear. Natraj has been passive, lethargic about the events that are happening to him. While Vasu is a great advocate of individual achievements. Meenakshi Mukherjee presents it as a symbol of the ongoing battle between good and evil in society. She observes: "The conflict is not between Vasu and Nataraj alone but between Vasu and society in general, and Vasu's seeming superiority over so vast a force merely underlines the fact that evil is often far more dynamic than the forces of goodness" (Mukherjee 147-148).

While Natraj has a very little power of influence over the events. Vasu is alone, he comes from outside and sets up a business of a taxidermist without taking the permission from the forest department on one hand and the Malgudi people on the other hand. His individual achievements are such that he secures a room, a jeep and a game license of his own initiative, and kills, processes, stuffs animal, packs them in boxes and sends them out to different places single handedly, while "I (Natraj) noted it all from my seat in the press and said to myself from this humble town of Malgudi stuffed carcasses radiate to the four corners of the earth".

*The Man-Eater of Malgudi* has many of the features of a picaresque novel. Vasu is a picaro, an anti-hero and adventurous wanderer. The stress on his many roles and adventures makes the plot loose and episodic. Vasu is evil and the novel gives the account of his wanderings, of his adventures, and of the many roles he plays and the many masks he wears. We are given a detailed account of his past, of his several adventures and roles, before he comes to Malgudi to play the role of a taxidermist. Continuing with the account of his adventurous past and of the many roles he has played. Thus, Vasu has been a scholar, pahlawan, patriot, an adventurer in search of a career and now he sets up as a taxidermist in Malgudi. As he tells Nataraj, the fame of Mempi forests has brought him to Malgudi. He cringes and flatters the forest officer in order to get his permission to shoot big game in the Mempi forest and when the permission is not given, he plays the role of a poacher and shoots wild animals there. Soon the attic is turned into a charnel house and the foul smell emanating from there gets intolerable. When at last he has to give up poaching in the Mempi forest, he plays the role of a womanizer.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, one can say that Narayan has an immense knowledge of Hindu mythology. This has been clearly brought out by a study of his work entitled Gods, Demons and other stories. References and allusions to such myths and legends abound in his stories. His immense belief and faith in the Indian religion are used in this novel. Here, he has stressed about Narayan who has been a pure Indian and also who has never stressed much on the Western culture. A beautiful description has been given about Malgudi, a typical Indian town with forests on one side and river on the other side. Narayan's belief in the myth, folklore is immense. He has been well-versed in it and it is also clear from the study of his work. How Vasu killed himself has been expressed in a detailed manner Vasu has been described as a person who has superhuman strength and who conserved it for his own destruction. He has been compared with Bhasmasura who was a demon and laid his hand on his head, which resulted in its total destruction.

In this novel it has been said that every demon appears in the world with a special boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the rakshasas that were ever born. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?

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