



REVIEW ARTICLE

USE OF MYTH IN R.K.NARAYAN'S *THE MAN EATER OF MALGUDI*

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ABSTRACT

To R. K. Narayan was born on 10th August, 1906 in Madras in a working class south Indian family. R.K. Narayan is widely considered to be one of India's greatest English language novelists. The most attractive feature of Narayan's personality is that he is a pure Indian both in spirit and thought, despite his preference for English language over his mother tongue for the expression of his creative urge. Deeply rooted in religion and family, he is understandably indifferent to literary fashions of the West. All his works take place in the village of Malgudi, the typical Indian village. In *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, published in 1961, R.K.Narayan makes a conscious use of mythical technique. He goes to the ancient myths and legends, juxtaposes them with the facets of modern life and in this way brings out the similarities and contrasts between the past and the present. The novel presents a clear use of Narayan's experiment with the form of fiction, 'experiment in the employment of the Ravana and Bhasmasur myth'. It is clear that Narayan's employment of the Ravana and Bhasmasura myth in this novel is explicit. Narayan's concern with myth is related to the creation of Vasu as a constant human phenomenon, as a form of evil present in every human society, especially in urban developing societies like that of Malgudi. Vasu is modern equivalent of Ravana. The reference of the Ramayana is related to the myth of Ravana in a complex way. The present research is an attempt to prove that the use of myth, suggested and gathered up in bits here and there, is important for one valid reason. Even the simpler realities of life, however bold and uninteresting, they may appear to less discerning eyes, shows that eternity looks through the common place and meager chunks of life.

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INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan is considered to be one of the leading authors of early Indian English literature along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. We can find social context and everyday life of his characters highlighted in most of his works. He has often been compared to William Faulkner, who also created a similar fictional town, and explored with humour and compassion the energy of ordinary life. But at the same time he has also been criticised for the simplicity of his prose. For his simple and modest writing style Narayan is often compared to the great American author William Faulkner. R.K. Narayan, whose full name was Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, was born on October 10, 1906 in Madras in a working class South Indian family. Narayan's father was a head master. His father had frequent transfers. So it was not possible for Narayan to stay with his father. This is the reason Narayan spent his early childhood with his maternal grandmother, Parvathi in Madras and used to spend only a few weeks each summer visiting his parents and siblings. It was his grandmother who taught him arithmetic, mythology and Sanskrit.

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Narayan studied at Lutheran Mission School for eight years and also at the CRC High School, Madras for a short time. When his father was appointed headmaster of the Maharaja's College High School in Mysore, R.K. Narayan moved back in with his parents. In 1926, he passed the university examination and joined Maharaja College of Mysore. After completing his graduation, Narayan worked as a school teacher in a local school for some time. But soon he realized that he could only be happy in writing fiction, and that is the reason he decided to stay at home and write. His decision of staying at home and writing was supported by everyone in his family. R.K. Narayan began his writing career with *Swami and Friends* in 1930, which was rejected by a lot of publishers. The book was important in the sense that it was with this book that he created the fictional town of Malgudi. In fact most of his works including *Swami and friends* are set in the fictional town of Malgudi which represents any Indian town of South India, but having a unique identity of its own. In 1933, Narayan worked as a reporter for a newspaper called 'The Justice' and in the meantime, he sent the manuscript of *Swami and Friends* to his friend at Oxford who showed it to Graham Greene. Greene got the book published and thus his first book got published. His second novel, *The Bachelors of Arts* was published in 1937 again by Graham Greene, who by now had become his

counsellor and guide as to how to write and what to write to target the English speaking audience. The book, *The Bachelors of Arts* was based on his experiences at college.

The Second World War made it difficult for Narayan to use English publishers. So he started his own publishing company, 'Indian Thought Publications', which is still active. The most attractive feature of Narayan's personality is that he is a pure Indian both in spirit and thought, despite his preference for English language over his mother tongue for the expression of his creative urge. Deeply rooted in religion and family, he is understandably indifferent to literary fashions of the West. He told stories of ordinary people trying to live their simple lives in a changing world. R.K. Narayan has numerous works to his credit which include *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* (1945), *The Financial Expert* (1952), *The Guide* (1958), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *Malgudi Days* (1982), and *The Grandmother's Tale* (1993). Narayan is a recipient of various prestigious awards and honours for his works. These include: Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel *The Guide* in 1958; Padma Bhushan in 1964; and AC Benson Medal by the Royal Society of Literature in 1980. He was elected an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1982. He was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1989. A part from all these, he was also awarded honorary doctorates by many national and international universities like the University of Mysore, Delhi University and the University of Leeds.

R. K. Narayan is a true follower of great Indian epics and he beautifully pictures the Indian mythology and uses the fables and legends of India in his fiction. William Walsh writes: "The religious sense of Indian myth is a part of Narayan's grip of reality, of his particular view of human life and his individual way of placing and ordering human feeling and experience." Most of Narayan's stories are based on classical Indian narrative texts and often we can find clear references of *Puranas* and other scriptures from the Indian standard in his novels. In his novels we can find use of ancient myths, legends; folklore as a technique of narration. As he is well versed with the Hindu epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata and other Hindu scriptures, myths and legends find an important place in some of his works. He makes a conscious use of mythical technique. He goes to the ancient myths and legends, juxtaposes them with the facets of modern life and in this way brings out the similarities and contrasts between the past and the present.

In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, by R.K. Narayan, there exists a deep mythical structure. The novel offers obvious patterns of myth and reality, which interact with each other, but hardly cohere, related as they are to each other by arrangement, rather than by compulsion. The novel presents a clear case of Narayan's experiment with the form of fiction, 'experiment in the employment of the Ravana and Bhasmasura myth'. The placid life of printer Nataraj and peace loving Malgudians is rudely disturbed by the power hungry taxidemiist, Vasu. The demon-like Vasu is structured very much like a myth. The impact is in the main, felt by Nataraj, who with his close friends, the poet and Sen, helplessly watches his settled life going away. The whole situation turns to be the worst as the intruder takes complete charge of the unwilling host, Nataraj, who is driven to the wall. Vasu is real enough to suggest a semblance of Ravana and as such Narayan's attempt to forge

an alliance between the myth of Ravana and the reality of Vasu.

The Man-Eater of Malgudi, opens on a smooth and placid note. Nataraj in the congenial company of his friends, a poet and a journalist is at peace with the world. Into this happy set of lotus eating Malgudians barges Vasu, the demon, with his grotesque plans to depopulate Mempo forests of wild animals. Similarly the bullying tactics of Vasu, his wanton sex orgies in the attic and his fiendish plan to shoot Kumar, the temple elephant present a queer amalgam of the fascination of evil and horror. The story of the peaceful printer Nataraj who must overcome the demon-like Vasu is structured very much like a myth. As myths and spirituality are an inseparable part of Hindu society, we find the world of Malgudi in the novel full of mythical elements. To complement these mythical elements, comparisons and references are made to various Hindu myths throughout the book, which act as signposts to the significance of what is going on in the story itself. The myths referred to give us greater insight into the action and into the characters themselves, by showing us more subtle aspects of the story which are juxtaposed against the myths. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, myths serve to shed light on what is really going on in the world of Malgudi.

In the novel, we find a deliberate use of Hindu customs and myths. We find the characters following the traditions for their well being. E.g. there is a Hindu belief that worshipping Lakshmi always keeps on a flow of money uninterruptedly. Nataraj, the protagonist follows the tradition of worshipping Goddess Lakshmi for a peaceful and contented life. He declares: "I hung up a framed picture of Goddess Lakshmi poised on her lotus, holding aloft bounties of earth in her four hands, and through her grace I did not do too badly" (*The Man-Eater of Malgudi* 7). Another character, Sastri, Nataraj's friend and a scholar, who is a Brahmin, performs Satyanarayana Puja on fullmoon days as homage to Lord Vishnu.

Further, the clash between Vasu and Nataraj is presented perfectly in the context of myth. There are many incidents in the novel which bear many similarities to other myths that are either mentioned or eluded to, in particular the Ramayana and the myth of Bhasmasura. The structure of the story is the same as a myth, with the protagonist facing an unstoppable enemy who eventually meets his end by his own hand. Sastri is the one who seems to be the most associated with the scriptures and ancient wisdom, and serves to link the myths with reality. The mythical framework is so pronounced that he almost looks a reincarnation of a figure from pages of our legendary lore. Through reiterated analogy by Sastri, Vasu is suggestively and later unmistakably, identified with the mythical demon, Bhasmasura. The analogy is maintained all through - from the moment of his first appearance with 'a tanned face, large powerful eyes..... and a black halo' (17), to the last moment of self destruction. His colossal physical strength, divorced from conscience, degenerates into a formidable destructive power. The man eater of Malgudi, Vasu is a 'giant' of a man, a potent and dangerous bully, a wild 'threat of challenge' to the norms and peaceableness of society from the jungles of Junagarh in the northern India. He has acquired his expertise in violence from a famous *pahelwan*. He imposes his aggressive presence on Nataraj's printing press in Malgudi and stuffs his room with carcasses of animals for what he theorizes as 'revealing nature at her own game.'

Vasu is not only just a killer of animals but also disturbs the very existence of Nataraj. Acting like a true *rakshasa*, a demon he threatens to destroy Nataraj's way of life. He kidnaps Nataraj and leaves stranded far from home to pass through inevitable suffering which shows Vasu's devilish spirit. A clear parallel may be drawn between the event of Nataraj's kidnapping and the kidnapping of Sita by Ravana in the *Ramayana*. He also reckons to have poisoned Kumar, causing his illness, which is an attribute to demons in mythology. He will neither give importance to the cultural heritage nor does he care for people's spiritual and poignant emotions. Talking about temple elephant Kumar, he reckons Nataraj: "I can make ten thousand out of the parts of this elephant". Such statements of Vasu are clear indications of his devilish attitude with no sympathy for living creatures. This makes Nataraj mentally upset and spiritually anguished and he loudly cries out 'Vishnu', which makes the agitated people rush to him to see what has gone wrong. "Oh, Vishnu!, I howled. 'Save our elephant, and save our innocent men and women who are going to pull the chariot'" (155)

In search of a larger game Vasu's evil eye is set on the temple elephant, Kumar. He is bent upon killing Kumar on the occasion of the annual festival at the temple when God's procession is to march throughout the streets, with Kumar leading the procession. Nataraj being confirmed traditionalist, 'continuing the tradition of our ancient house in the Kabir Street in Malgudi, puts up a desperate fight the sinister design of Vasu but nothing stands up to the resolutely fatal fist of this demon with which he 'settles many problems'. However the elephant has a miraculous escape. In order to trap a couple of mosquitoes, Vasu, short of temper, as he is, bangs violently on his forehead with his fist and drops dead of concussion. Sastri, a friend of Nataraj, makes a wise and conclusive comment- he is after all the semi scholar in Sanskrit with encyclopaedic knowledge of mythology and folklore who first discovers the demoniac qualities of Vasu: "Every demon appears in the world with a specific boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the *rakshas* that were born. Every demon carries with him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self destruction and goes up in thin air at the most expected moment, otherwise what is to happen to humanity." (203)

Narayan's concern with the myth is limited to the creation of Vasu as a constant human phenomenon, as a form of evil present in every human society, especially in developing urban society, like that of Malgudi. Vasu is a modern equivalent of Ravana. On one hand, he represents highly particularised social mal-content, and on the other, he symbolises a continuation of Vasu as over bearing adjuncts of social reality. The reality content he presents is unmistakably contemporary and so authentic and intimate, its appeal far exceeds the appeal of the mythic content. He represents a sharp and harsh from a confident but aggressive 'dadagiri'. This emphatic reality content dislocates its unity with myth, the pattern of reality does not coalesce into those of myth, they remain distinct close parallels. He shows all the definitions of a *raksha* persisted by Sastri, and went on to define the make-up of *raksha* or a demoniac creature who possessed enormous strength, strange powers not genius but recognised no sort of restraints of man or God. He said 'Every *raksha* gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is invincible, beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him (84). In the novel, Narayan uses the Bhasmasura myth as a conscious

technique, with a purpose to stress the self distributive nature of Vasu. Sastri says:

There was Ravana, the demon of 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 shook under his tyranny. Still he came to a sad end. The other demon Mahishasura who meditated and acquired a boon of immortality and who had secured an especial favour that every drop of blood shed from his body should give rise to another demon in his own image and strength, and who nevertheless was destroyed. The Goddess with six arms, each bearing a different weapon, come riding for the fight on a lion which sucked every drop of blood drawn from the demon (84).

Sastri goes on referring to the Hindu myths:

Then there was a Bhasmasura, who acquired a special boon that everything he touched should be scorched, while nothing could ever destroy him. With this special boon he made humanity suffer. Later God Vishnu was incarnated as Mohini, a beautiful dancer with whom the asura turned out to be obsessed. She assured to acquiesce to him merely if he imitated all the gestures and movements of her own dancing. At the end of the dance, Mohini put her palms on her cranium, and the fiend pursued the same gesticulation in absolute forgetfulness and was reduced to ashes that very moment, the blighting touch flattering active on his own cranium. Every man can assume that he is great and will be eternal, but none can speculate from which part his destiny will approach. (84 – 85) Sastri goes on stressing the parallel between Vasu and Bhasmasura and hints at the manner of Vasu's sudden and unexpected death. At the end Vasu dies like Bhasmasura with a blow of his own fist on his head and the novel ends with the wise comment of Sastri on Vasu's death:

Every demon appears in the world with a special boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the *Rakshasa* that were ever born. Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self destruction and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity? 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 (203). The reference of the Ramayana is related to the myth of Ravana in a complex way. Apparently the myth of Ravana is embodied in the Ramayana, but here this reference subtly sets in the mythic tone. Recurrence of such mythical slices may be interpreted as guiding. The technique of this treatment – myth suggested and gathered up in bits here and there is important for one valid reason. Even the simpler realities of life, however, bold and uninteresting they may appear to less discerning eyes, show that eternity looks through the common place and meagre chunks of life.

Vasu is perhaps the only character of Narayan who remains remarkably alive even if he is stripped off his mythical dimensions. One can notice the way Vasu's personality is introduced in the terms of certain implied impact in the atmosphere. Vasu's 'unkept hair' is symbolic of the force of disorder that lets loose in Malgudi. The rhythm of life returns to Malgudi and Nataraj after Vasu's death. The use of myths

and legends in the fiction of R.K.Narayan is important both thematically and structurally. Myths and legends, which are an inseparable part of Indian culture and heritage, contain the basic ideas through which the entire culture of India is governed. He does not transform them but through their symbolic representation but tries to reveal their timeless relevance. The novel confirms the fact that Narayan's conception of life is an essentially Indian one.

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