

MYTHICAL ELEMENTS IN R.K. NARAYAN'S *MAN-EATER OF MALGUDI*: A CONFLICT BETWEEN MATERIALISTIC AND SPIRITUAL VALUES

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ABSTRACT

For the writer in India, the ancient classics and legends are an indispensable background to his own writing. They are no merely historical curios, but form the very stuff of his cultural outlook. Literature, in its dealings with society, may treat modern problems realistically or symbolically as the ancient writings have done, revealing the good and evil inherent in human nature. These very forces which determine behavior create in the aggregate, the social conditions which become the writer's subject. Narayan has consciously made use of myth in the novel. As we go through the novel, we find the novel very different from some of Narayan's other novels. The Indian tint in the novel is very conspicuous, both at the surface and the depth.

Keywords: *India, Mythology, Philosophy, Puranic, Vedanta*

I. INTRODUCTION

The calm and quietly life of Malgudi is stirred by the appearance of a man of huge stature and obnoxious nature. He goes shooting birds and animals in the Mempi forest against the wish of the people of Malgudi. The people there are helpless and cannot say anything to him in protest but they hope like true Indian, that a day will come when, this demoniac creature will meet this own destruction. The novel ends when Vasu's plans to kill the much adored temple elephant fail and Vasu's plans to kill the much adored temple elephant fail and Vasu is found dead in his room. It is learnt that he had died from concussion of his brain when he had slapped his own temple to kill a mosquito.

II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

R.K. Narayan's attitude towards Indian myth is based on archetypal pattern. He used myth as a structural parallel where myth situation underlines the whole or as a parallel in structure is used consistently throughout the novel. *The Man Eater of Malgudi* is rich in myths and legends and the use of this technique is apparent to a greater or lesser mythologizing contemporary reality becomes more apparent and important. Various critics have considered it from various points of views, some have read it as an allegory, and others have pointed out that the novel closely follows the classical pattern of Sanskrit literature. Narayan is aware of the total design of the plot of the novel. He succeeds in maintaining the integrity of structure. About the inevitable triumph of

virtue over vice in the classical mythology, Narayan comments "The strong man of evil continues to be reckless until he is destroyed by the tempo of his own madness. Evil has in it, buried subtly, the in fallible seeds of its own destruction and, however, frightening a demon may seem, his doom is implied in his own evil propensities". Definitely, this novel has a mythical structure of order followed by dislocation of order and which is again followed by restoration of order. This mythical design is employed by references to the ancient conflict between spiritual and material values. Here the question arises whether Narayan using consciously myth as a technique in the novel or it is an unconscious expression of his basic outlook which sees in the existing order of things a desired stability that should be permanent against all the odds of the evil? Reintegration of an original state of stability and normalcy is the conclusion of the novel. The festival has larger mythical dimension. It is a symbolic reaffirmation of the community itself. Narayan is a pure Indian writer both in letter and spirit, that is why there is both the realistic and the fantastic elements in his novels and both these elements are successfully fused to form an organic whole.

The story thus unfolds a universal theme-the triumph of good over evil, the people of Malgudi standing on the side of good and Vasu representing evil. But this universal theme is unfolded with the help of Indian Mythology - Where Gods and demons are constantly at war, and the demons, though apparently winners destroy themselves ultimately. Vasu is the demon here, a rakshasa, who causes devastation and panic in the world of Malgudi, ultimately destroying himself.

There are broadly speaking, two kinds of comedy in Narayan, the comedy that arises from the disturbance of a classic way of life by a modern; and the comedy that arises from the sudden and brutal incursion of evil, violence or corruptions into the pleasant pacific eccentricity of Malgudi. Vasu reenacts the depredation of the rakshasa Bhasmasura. This parallel is clearly suggested in the novel at more than one place by Sastri, who tells Natraj that Vasu, shows all the definitions of a *rakshas*... a demonic creature that possessed enormous strength, strange powers, and genius, but recognized no sort of restraints of man of God. He goes on to say, "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."

Sastri illustrates this principle from the story of Bhasmasura "who acquired a special boon that everything he touched should be scorched, while nothing could destroy him. He made humanity suffer, God Vishnu was incarnated as a dancer of great beauty, dance Mohini, with whom the asura became infatuated. She promised to yield to him only if he imitated all the gestures and movements of her own dancing. At one point in dance Mohini placed her palms on her head, and the demon followed in complete forgetfulness and was reduced to ashes that very second, the blighting touch becoming active on his own head." Another reference to the Bhasmasura myth comes right at the end of the novel, when Sastri points to Natraj, the moral and meaning of Vasu's sudden and violent death. Sastri says, "Every demon appears in this world with a special boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the rakshasas that ever born. Every demon carries with him unknown to himself, a tiny speed of self-destruction, and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?"

In fact, Vasu is the Perfect embodiment of the typical rakshasa of ancient Indian mythology; Vasu fits in the description of the rakshasa as given in the sixteenth chapter of Bhagwad Gita. Conceit, pride, wrath, harshness of speech, insatiable desire, and cruelty are among the many demonian characteristics mentioned there. "The

rakshasa is always pictured as a being of superhuman strength, ugly and ferocious in appearance, with cannibalistic propensities. Incapable of affection, gratitude, sympathy or regard for other, and in fact reveling in inflicting pain, a nocturnal creature, a creature of the jungle, full of mystery, dirty and unclean in habits, and a being completely amoral, obeying no laws of God or man."

Moreover, the demons are often knowledgeable, skilled and capable of undergoing penance with which they secure valuable boons from the gods. Shkracharya, the guru of the asuras was a learned scholar who could bring the dead of life with his skill in Sanjivani Vidya; similarly Havana who was well-versed in the Vedas is said to have invented new and systematic ways of reciting them; Mayasura was also an accomplished architect. Such a description of the rakshasa fits Vasu perfectly in all respects. His very appearance is rakshasa like in the novel; he is described as one having a tanned face, large powerful eyes under thick eyebrows, a large forehead and a shock of unkempt hair, like a black halo. The *Man-Eater of Malgudi* is undoubtedly a vivid and significant phenomenon in Narayan's creative work for the imaginative rendering of the ancient puranic myth with both serious and ironic contracts. More often the novel is seen, in Sastri's terms, as a moral fable of the self-destructiveness of evil, a sort of witty and fantastic justification of the pacifism of Gandhi. But Narayan presents Vasu as more than a rakshasa. He is a real character with a conflict traceable to his past when he was in and out of jail and was trained in two curious and violent professions. In the *Man-Eater of Malgudi* Narayan has presented the triumph of faith, which again is typical of the Indian worldview. Muthu, the tea-shop owner in mempi forest has firm faith in God; It is he who acquires the temple elephant Kumar. Allegorically, Muthu is the man of faith, pitted against the devils disciple Vasu. He is like the mythological devotee of Vishnu, Prahlada, standing up to all sufferings in defense of his faith.

Vasu attacks the faith and tradition of the people of Malgudi in the name of science and reason. Ultimately, he is not able to do much harm to Malgudi in spite of his powers of demonic propensities because of faith. At one point in the novel, Sastri brings some sacred ash from his pilgrimage, which Natraj applies on his forehead; this act asserts the way of life of the people of Malgudi and their faith in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Fortunately, as has been said earlier, every rakshasa contains within him the seeds of destruction. The demon gets swollen with his ego and oversteps his sense of measure. Vasu crosses his limits when he decides to shoot the temple elephant during the Vishnu Festival procession. This description shows that the twentieth century rakshasa does not have to be ten-headed and twenty armed. With the advancements of technology and science he has become more powerful and self-destructive. According to Edwin Gerow: "In a sense the rakshasa represents evil, but this puts too moral a cast on it, he is rather an aspect of creation - the chaotic, the disruptive, his weakness is not that he is bad, but that he is ultimately not real."

Gerow further says that the settled order of the world according to the Hindu worldview is a basic ontological fact; Vasu brings change and disrupts the order of the settled world of Malgudi. This symbolized by Vasu's intrusion into the privacy of the press which is partitioned from the external world by the blue curtain which symbolizes innocence, normalcy and order. With the death of Vasu order and normalcy return in Malgudi. The blue curtain is once more drawn and Sastri once again resumes printing K.J's labels for soft drinks. After having discussed the novel as an exemplification of the age-old conflict between "good and evil, the gods and demons, the sura and the asura," we must see what Narayan achieves by making this conscious use of the mythic. The mythical analogue enables Narayan to bring together the mundane and the mythological, the timeless and the

temporal, the world of external verities and the world of social flux. In fact that several asuras from the paranoiac lore are invoked along with Bhasma as analogues to Vasu gives him by implication significance beyond the merely human world.

Through his use of the Bhamasura myth, Narayan is able to convey, in terms of fictional art, the traditional Indian belief regarding evil, its destructiveness. There is in *Man-Eater* yet another related traditional belief implicitly present. It reinforces the central theme of the novel and helps us to see more comprehensively Vasu's destructive violence which is directed almost entirely against animals, reptiles which is directed almost entirely against animals, reptiles and birds. The traditional belief here is the belief in transmigration and rebirth according to one's karma, one's deeds and conduct, in the course of the cycle of birth and *Chandhyoga* Upanishad, one of the oldest Upanishad, says: "Those whose conduct here has been good will quickly attain a good birth, the birth of a Brahmin, the birth of a Kshatriya or the birth of a Vaisya. But those, whose conduct here has been evil, will quickly attain an evil birth of a dog or the birth of a Chandala." The *Katha Upanishad* puts it thus: "Some souls enter into a womb for embodiment; others enter stationery objects according to their deeds and... thoughts."

III. CONCLUSION

Traditional Indian thought upholds that one is not doomed to eternal suffering. The soul has chances of acquiring merit and thereby of advancing to eternal life. There is hope, though there is no change from the working of karma. The novel re-affirms the fact that Narayan's conception of life is an essentially Indian one. According to *The Gita*, dharma protects those who protect dharma. Narayan also has great faith in the balance of power in human relationship. He views stability as permanent and any forces of changes as illusory. This recurring pattern is a reflection of his worldview hence it operates unconsciously in his novels. It is archetypal, emanating from the collective unconscious of universal humanity.

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