

The Mythic sub-text of R.K.Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi*

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ABSTRACT

Myth is a non-realistic fabulous story. It sustains artistic creation. It meets the need of a creative artist for an archetype or parallel situation in the tradition of a nation. Myth has always been a natural presence in Indian writing in English. Modern Indian writers in English specially draw on ancient myths and legends of the land to view modern situation or reality in an ironic parallelism or contrast. The sparkle of Narayan's creative genius as well as his essential Indianness is well reflected in his use of grand Hindu mythic narratives in fictional space to project contemporary truth. His *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* has a definite sustained mythical structure 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." (M.K.Naik : The Ironic Vision, pp.72-73) Here Narayan grafts an account of modern South Indian life on the ancient Hindu mythical tale of Bhasmasura (reminding us in passing of other mythical figures like Mahisasura, Ravana, Gajendra and so on and so forth) in the Faulknerian manner of serious parallelism and contrast, highlighting thereby two diametrically opposed attitude to life as represented by Vasu and Natraj.

1. Introduction

Myth is an anonymous story, rooted in primitive folk beliefs, presenting super natural episodes to explain natural events and phenomenon. Most Myths, as Harry M. Johnson points out, "have to do with origins_ the origin of the gods, of the world, of culture, of certain features of nature." Other myths have to do with the "stories of exploits of the gods or exploits or miraculous events in the lives of religious leader. Myths attempt to interpret creation, divinity and religion to explain the meaning of existence and death; to account for natural phenomena; and to chronicle the adventures of racial heroes. Myth is an aesthetic channel to redirect, ventilate, explore and recreate the experience of the self in relation to the past. By living the myths we are transported from "Chronological" or "clock-time" to "Sacred" or "primordial" time. Every country and literature has its mythology. Writers are interested in myths because of their literariness, their enduring nature and because they provide story patterns. Modern literature has resort to myths to serve various purposes. Modern Indian writers in English make an extensive use of the outlines of myths drawn from ancient times or from Hindu scriptures and epics to provide their fictional narrative with the required frame work. Thus several literary works of Indian writings in English are structured around mythic narratives which supply them with elements of story- telling.

Up to the Renaissance Greek myth was used for poetic ornamentation, as moral allegory or as a trope. Indian English novelists make an extensive use of Indian myths to express modern concerns, to give shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which prevail everywhere. Indian novelists in English make a liberal and easy use of myths and legends because Indian psyche is moulded and transformed by our mythological and legendary tales and conditioned by the stories from the *Panchatantra* the *Ramayana* and the Mahabharata. Myth has been used in

Indian English novel in two distinct ways: the digressional and the structural. Of the 'Big Three' of the Indian English fiction Raja Rao is the most outstanding exponent of the digressional use of myth in the whole corpus of the Indian English fiction while the other two stalwarts use it as a means of structural parallel. To quote Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Raja Rao uses the mythical parallel to extend our understanding, but Anand does the exact opposite. Anand follows the mythical design to a certain point and then changes it to totally, intending perhaps to indicate that the same ending is no longer possible (or desirable) in our time." Narayan does not use myths incidentally, rather he integrates myths to the total concepts of the plots of his novels in his usual Order-Disorder-Order pattern. Now, in this article I proposed to explore how the fictional narrative of R.K.Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is based on a mythic sub-text to deal with some fundamental questions about good and evil, their roles in human life, the fate of evil --- how good ultimately triumphs over evil, as well as his own answers to them. Narayan here bases a modern realistic account of South Indian life on an ancient mythical tale, thereby re-creating myth in modern context and ensuring that the answers to the questions he raises here lie firmly rooted in his own cultural ethos, an achievement which ensures the appeal of a work of Indian English fiction as something more than a mere literary exercise.

2. Narayan's use of myths and legends in his novels

By the use of myths legends R.K. Narayan penetrates the core of Indian mind and lays it bare with all its bewildering complexities, contradictions, superstitions and traditions. Almost all his novels are moulded on our ancient myths or popular Indian beliefs. Every novel of R.K.Narayan has a mythological base. His *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* stands out distinctly because it seems to be the only novel by R.K.Narayan where the novelist has made a conscious use of mythological theme in the modern context.

3. The Puranic pattern of The Man-Eater of Malgudi

The narrative of The Man-Eater of Malgudi is based on the Vishnu Purana, a collection of stories celebrating the triumph of Lord Vishnu over the rebellious demons. The Purana gives us a sensational account of the demon Bhasmasura (lit. ash-demon) Now, the demon underwent years of very hard *Tapasya* (mortification) and pleased Shiva, one of the three supreme gods in the Hindu pantheon and received from Shiva the boon of a destructive palm ---i.e. on whatever he would lay his palm it would at once turn to ashes (bhasma). The demon was so ungrateful that as soon as he received it he dared to test it upon Shiva himself. But somehow Shiva managed to escape from the destructive palm with which he himself had gifted the demon. Then the demon began to rampage God's creation by way of testing the power of his divine gift. The gods in heaven were terror struck and they fled to Vishnu seeking his help to save themselves from the destructive hand of the ungrateful demon. Urged by the endangered suras to ensure their safety Lord Vishnu incarnated as a dancing girl, Mohini who infatuated the demon. The demon wanted to marry her. Mohini agreed to his proposal on the condition that he would swear integrity of his love by laying his two palms on his head. The demon attempted to oblige the Mohini and was in the process instantly reduced to ashes by his own destructive hands. According to a different version, while dancing Mohini laid her palm on her own head and asked Bhasmasura to follow suit. Bhasmasura followed her and he was at once reduced to ashes by his own destructive palm.

Narayan's *The Man-Eater Malgudi* is a reworking in fictional narrative this ancient Hindu mythical tale in modern context. According to the Purana 'pride hath a fall', and a demon or an adversary of God gets to be swollen with pride of his power, which inevitably paves the way for his own doom. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is a working out of this moral.

Introducing Vasu:

In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* Narayan introduces the demon Vasu. The 'Man-Eater' of the title of the novel is no cannibal but it ironically refers to Vasu, the taxidermist. Here the title is metaphorical rather than literal. The is suggestive of demonic traits of Vasu. Here he has been projected as an embodiment of evil to convey the message of its self-destructiveness.

Vasu proves himself to be the scourge and terror of the people of Malgudi upsetting the peaceful tenor of life of the town, ridiculing all that is sacrosanct there, disrupting the serene and well ordered life of Nataraj, shooting the animals of the Memphi forest, polluting the atmosphere of his locality with stench of carcasses, attacking man, turning into a womaniser, horrifying the whole town by shooting an eagle and announcing his plan to shoot the temple-elephant Kumar, though in the process he kills himself. Thus Vasu is the perfect embodiment of evil, almost dead to all noble qualities of head and heart.

Vasu, a mythical Rakshasa:

Vasu is indeed like a rakshasa of ancient Hindu mythology, a copybook example of the demoniac lot as described in the *Bhagwad-Gita*. The demonic traits mentioned

in the *Gita* are cruelty, pride, wrath, harshness of speech, insatiable desire, overweening pride etc. Men of such lot "go to the lowest state."

Vasu's resemblance with Bhasmasura:

Vasu's resemblance with Bhasmasura is indicated by Nataraj, the narrator when he says that Vasu "shows all the definitions of a rakshasa... a demonic creature who possessed enormous strength, strange powers and genius, but recognized no sort of restraints of man or God." He further says that "Every rakshasa gets swollen with his ego. He thinks that he is invincible beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him." (p.96) this based on the story of Bhasmasura.

We have another reference to Bhasmasura when at the end of the novel Sastri points out to Nataraj the moral of Vasu's death: "Every demon appears in the world with a special boon indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the rakshasas that were never born. Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, 'a tiny seed of self-, and destruction and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?"

Vasu's resemblance with Ravana :

Vasu, like a mythic rakshasa is comparable to Ravana. As Sastri says, "There was Ravana, the protagonist in the Ramayana who had ten heads and twenty arms and enormous yogic and physicapower, 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." Again Ravana revelled in the thought of his invincibility and his authority was challenged by a monkey. Narayan emphasizes that it is an animal--- the member of a supposedly lesser species---- that proved the vulnerability and ultimately the vincibility of Ravana. Likewise Vasu whose motto was "I challenge any man to contradict me", it is a mosquito, a species of even less consequence, proved the futility of his assumption of invincibility. Again like Ravana, Vasu initiates a reign of terror as a result of his failure to respect the principle of *Ahimsa* (non-violence).

Vasu's resemblance with Mahishasura :

Again Vasu, like a mythic *rakshasa* is comparable to Mahishasura. His first appearance, as described by Nataraj, reminds one of Mahishasura, "he was a huge man, about six feet tall. He looked quite slim, but his bull-neck and hammer-fist revealed his true stature." His sudden, mysterious appearance and disappearance and his dishevelled appearance also remind us of the mythical asura.

Allusion to Gajendra myth:

Last but not the least, the novelist has also used the Gajendra-Gandharva myth in the frame work of the novel. As the myth goes, Gajendra in his former life was the king of Dravilla--- Indradyumna, and the Gandharva was named Huhu. Both of them were cursed to be reborn as animals. Gandharva was reborn as an elephant of the same name and Gandharva as a giant crocodile. One day, while stepping into the very lake the mighty crocodile living, Gajendra, the mahishasura elephant was trapped into the jaws of the crocodile. Finally with

the intervention of Lord Vishnu both the elephant and the crocodile were redeemed. In the novel Natraj feels extremely helpless when Vasu plans to kill Kumar, the temple-elephant, and he prays for divine intervention. Natraj now keeps his full faith in Vishnu Purana and firmly believes that this time too Lord Vishnu will save Kumar, and prays for the power of good to destroy the evil forces of life.

4. Conclusion

Thus the novel is a grand specimen of re-creation of ancient myths and legends in fictional narrative and using them in modern context. To quote M.K Naik, “the

Bhasmasura myth and the polarities represented by Vasu and Nataraj emphasize sharply that the moral issues involved here concern the entire question of human relationships. one can mismanage human relationships by practicing both a militant egotism which submits tamely to evil and thus actually furthers its carrier, The remedy as shastris indicates lies in respecting one's own individuality , in taking a sane , practical view of things ; and in maintaining a firm faith in the divine dispensation which may allow evil to flourish for a time only to ensure that it destroys itself completely in the end...”

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