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Narratology and Myth in R. K. Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi*

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Abstract

In *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, R.K. Narayan makes use of the mythical technique, goes back to ancient myths and legends, juxtaposes them with the facts of modern life and this way brings out similarities and contrasts between the past and present. Narayan stated that "With the impact of modern literature we began to look at the gods, demons, sages and kings of our mythology and epics not as some remote concoctions but as types and symbols, possessing psychological validity even when viewed against the contemporary background. (1979: 21) The fictional space and slice-of-life reality mingle and assume a mythic dimension in his works. Anthropologist Claude -Levi - Strauss once suggested that much of the familiar classical repertoire has a mythological function in modern society. For R.K. Narayan, this familiar repertoire (of mythic, epical and scriptural narratives) serves a creative function. (Sarkar 217) In sharp contrast to his previous novels, Narayan switches over to the mythical discourse in the later part of his career.

Keywords: Heterodiegetic, homodiegetic, extradiegetic, Intradiegetic, Mythology, Semantics

Introduction

In *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, Narayan explores the perpetual struggle between good and evil using the Bhasmasura myth from classical Indian mythology. In this novel he deals with the problem of evil but the manner he chooses to deal with is essentially comic. Since the comic mode restricts considerably the exploration of the problem, the novelist devises the narrative strategy by having recourse to a myth – the myth of Bhasmasura as frame of reference or structural device (Patnaik 142). As already stated Narayan himself says that "I based this story on a well-known mythical episode, the story of Mohini and Bhasmasura." (1972:48) Thus Narayan's use of Bhasmasura myth in the novel was a piece of conscious literary strategy, successfully incorporated through the device of parallelism. The Bhasmasura parallel is clearly indicated repeatedly in the novel itself by Sastri who tells the homodiegetic narrator, Nataraj, in the middle of the story that Vasu "shows all the definition of rakshasha. A demonic creature who possessed enormous strength, strange powers and genius but recognized no sort of restraints of man or God" (ME 95-96). He further says: "Every rakshasha gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is invincible, beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him." (ME 95-96) The conscious use is again observed in the end of the narrative when Sastri again points out to Nataraj the moral of Vasu's sudden and unexpected end:

"Every demon appears in this world with a special boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the rakshashas that were ever born. Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of destruction, and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?" (ME 242).

Narayan follows the some Puranic pattern in the narrative, rendering "the ancient myth presented with both serious parallelism and ironic contrast" (Naik 65) in the form of Nataraj, the gentle friendly printer, the representative of all that is good, and Vasu, the self-centered, egoistic and the representative of all that is evil.

This parallelism is imprinted in the early part of the narrative when Vasu reveals that "the one thing I (Vasu) cannot stand is mosquito. He vigorously fanned them off as they tried to

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buzz about his ears. 'Night or day, I run when a mosquito is mentioned' (ME 26). He also says that the only way to escape from them is to use a net. And it is only these mosquitoes that became the cause of his end. Parallelism can again be seen when Vasu bringing down all his strength dislocates the wrist of the police inspector. This enormous power of Vasu has a parallel in his single blow at his *pahelwan* guru. So the narratee is made prepared just from the beginning through these repeated mentions that his single blow has an enormous power which can snap chains, splinter a three- inch thick panel of seasoned teak with his fist.

Vasu is indeed the perfect embodiment of the typical *rakshasha* of ancient Hindu mythology. Nataraj, the printer of Malgudi, is shown as leading a peaceful and comfortable life in quiet and friendly atmosphere of Malgudi. And the normal pattern of existence is disturbed by Vasu. From the very beginning he tries to affect the peaceful, ordered universe of Malgudi. First he sets up his business as a taxidermist in the attic which was forcefully occupied without even taking the permission of Nataraj. He kills animals, brings them to the attic, stuffs and exports 'from this humble town of Malgudi stuffed carcasses radiate to the four corners of the earth'. (ME 67) The whole place is filled with a strong stench of rotting flesh which does not disturb him in the least. He becomes a threat to the normal flow of life. Instead of feeling any gratitude to Nataraj, Vasu rather complains against him to the house rent controller. He is rightly nicknamed as 'man eater' by Nataraj who observes: "now it was like having a middle-aged man eater in your office and home with the same uncertainties, possibilities and potentialities" (ME 30). Vasu does not hold any good of the cherished values of society. He respects no authority, no code or convention. He becomes a law into himself. Family, friends, relations don't matter for him. Vasu himself does not refer anywhere to his domestic antecedents rather quite eloquent of his adventures, exploits and achievements in other fields. He views all types of marriage with dismissive contempt: "Only fools marry and they deserve all the trouble they get. I really don't know why people marry at all. If you like a woman, have her by all means. You don't have to own a coffee estate because you like to have a cup of coffee now and then." (ME 38) He does not even care for children and would scare them away. When Nataraj's son, Babu happens to come to the press, he virtually orders him away. His anti- social behavior can be seen in the narrative when his thoughts are depicted mimetically by the 1st person narrator Nataraj:

He says, "Your whole crowd sickens me! You are a fellow without any sense, why are you enthusiastic about a poet – as obsessed with monosyllables I don't know. And then that local Nehru. Who does he think he is? All of you joining to waste every one's time and money! If I had any authority I'd prohibit celebrations of this kind as a waste of national energy." (ME 171)

His demoniac qualities are on the rise when he goes to the extent of bringing temple prostitute Rangī, and a procession of other immoral women to the attic. When with the strict vigil of the guards, the Mempo forest becomes inaccessible to Vasu, he starts shooting pet dogs and animals. Vasu also plans to kill the sacred temple elephant "Kumar" and touches the heights of the embodiment of evil. Sastri rightly compares him with *rakshasha* and comments: "every *rakshasha* has a tiny seed of destruction in him. Sooner or

later something or other will destroy him." (ME 95) "I challenge any man to contradict me" (ME 15) is his motto. He justifies his plan to shoot the temple elephant. He calls himself a man of "scientific outlook" (ME 175). He says, "There is nothing terrible in shooting. You pull your trigger and out goes the bullet, and at the other end there is an object waiting to receive it. It is just give and take." (ME 176).

Vasu is thus a complete *rakshasha* and the close parallel between his story and the myth of *Bhasmasura* is quite evident, as is indicated in the text by Sastri twice, who seems to act as the mouthpiece of the author in making his world vision clear. Sastri also illustrates: "Bhasmasura, who acquired a special boon that everything he touched should 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 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 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 becoming active on his own head." (ME 96-97) There is thus persistent interweaving of serious parallelism where Vasu "the invincible" is *The Man Eater of Malgudi*. He can now easily be placed in the Malgudi community as a *rakshasha* – a demon and Rangī, the temple dancer, is the parallel of Mohini, the seducer and destroyer of *Bhasmasura*.

If Nataraj is the homodiegetic narrator at extradiegetic level, Sastri serves as a heterodiegetic narrator at intradiegetic level. The framing story is told by Nataraj throughout the narrative and the mythical framed narrative is narrated by Sastri. The structural framework of the narrative built on the mythological story of *Bhasmasura* and Mohini is supported by some other mythical analogues. After establishing Vasu as a perfect demon in disguise of a man, the heterodiegetic narrator Sastri draws some other parallels between him and the other demons of Indian mythology. He draws a parallel between Ravana and Vasu and informs the inevitability of the end of his pride: "There was Ravana, the protagonist in Ramayana who has 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." (ME 96) His drawing a parallel to Mahisha informs us of the cruelty, sensuality and diabolic nature of Vasu: "or take Mahisha, the asura who meditated and acquired a boon of immortality and invincibility and who had secured an especial favour that every drop of bloodshed 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, came riding for the fight on a lion which sucked every drop of blood drawn from the demon." (ME 96) Then by paralleling Vasu to Daksha, he suggests the inevitability of death. Through this device, Narayan suggests the magnitude of Vasu's evil. All these proleptic statements drawn by Sastri, the narratee is given a hint of the future plan incorporated in the narrative.

Though the mythical frame work of the narrative is successfully handled by Sastri, but some myths are also referred by the framed story narrator Nataraj. The story of Krishna and Ramayana are subtly infused quite early in the narrative. On page 9 Nataraj tells about his father: "As he

grew older my father began to spend all his time sitting on the pyol, on a mat, reading the Ramayana or just watching the street.” (ME 9) Here the reference of Ramayana guides the attention of the narratee to the mythic structures underlying the day-to-day transactions of Malgudi’s inhabitants. U.P. Sinha while commenting upon the obvious craft of the narrative says, “Prominent presence of myth makes the artistic failure of disjunction in patterning.” (ME 57) But there are some myths e.g., the Gajendra Myth, that is so closely interwoven in the narrative that it becomes “instrumental in the orchestration of understanding the problem of evil and its consequences.” (Patnaik 144) The narrator Nataraj is reminded of the Gajendra myth at the very crucial moment of his life. Nataraj thinks it his moral duty to save the elephant, since it is he who borrowed it for the temple festival. Secondly, elephants in India are considered divine with religious sanctity and Nataraj feels anxious to save Kumar. He tries his best to entreat Vasu not to harm the elephant but the reply he gets is “Has it occurred to you how much more an elephant is worth dead?” (ME 73) Feeling helpless to do anything and in the course of his drowsy day-dreaming, unknowingly he let out a terrible cry and fell unconscious. “Unknowingly I let out a terrific cry which drowned the noise of the children, music, everything, ‘Oh, Vishnu’ I howled ‘Save the elephant and save all the innocent men and women who are going to pull the chariot. You must come to our rescue now.’” (ME 183) Gajendra, the elephant of myth steps into a lake and has his leg caught in the jaws of a mighty crocodile. The elephant struggles helplessly and in desperation calls on Lord Vishnu, who immediately appears and gives him strength to come out of the jaws of the crocodile. The intervention of Vishnu brought redemption to both the elephant and the crocodile. So by parallelizing both the events, the myth has an added relevance to the meaning of the novel – a struggle against the evil and negative force of life that is Vasu. The festival, despite the narrator’s apprehensions proceeds smoothly. “The God answered Nataraj’s call” (Gerow 79). Kumar returns back to his village. Thus Narayan makes use of the mythical technique, goes back to ancient myths and legends, juxtaposes them with the facts of modern life and this way brings out similarities and contrasts between the past and present. Narayan stated that “With the impact of modern literature we began to look at the gods, demons, sages and kings of our mythology and epics not as some remote concoctions but as types and symbols, possessing psychological validity even when viewed against the contemporary background. (1979: 21) The fictional space and slice- of- life reality mingle and assume a mythic dimension in his works. Anthropologist Claude –Levi – Strauss once suggested that much of the familiar classical repertoire has a mythological function in modern society. For R.K. Narayan, this familiar repertoire (of mythic, epical and scriptural narratives) serves a creative function. (Sarkar 217) In sharp contrast to his previous novels, Narayan switches over to the mythical discourse in the later part of his career.

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