

---

## CASTE AND RELIGION IN THE WORKS OF RK NARAYAN

*Gagneet Pal Kaur*

*Asst. Professor, PG Dept. of English, Guru Nanak Khalsa College for Women,  
Gujarkhan Campus, Ludhiana, Punjab, India*

---

This paper attempts to explore the varied facet of caste and religion as portrayed by RK Narayan in his novel the *The Man Eater of Malgudi*. RK Narayan was born and bred in South India. The formative years of his life were passed in this particular part of the country, and therefore he presents his limited point of view and moreover, it was the life of middle classes he depicts so finely. Their day to day chores, their way of speaking, their conflicts, stresses and strains in human relations within the domestic circle of this class he had himself experienced gives him a view of the caste and religious system of their life. This is the 9<sup>th</sup> novel of the writer and it was published in 1961. It is an allegory showing that evil is self-destructive but destruction of this evil is interpreted through the mythical structure of the Mahabharata. Narayan employs the idea of the mythical demon and describes it in relevance to the modern context. And it is in this way that he brings out the similarities and contrasts between the present and the past.

India is country where religion is blindly followed. Sometimes, even the superstitions, the beliefs and the common thinking of the people also acquire the face of religious feelings. These superstitions and religious beliefs etc. are freely employed by RK Narayan to create the taste of Indian life. Thus, in the present novel, Muthu, the tea stall keeper constructs a temple on a nearby hill and he plans to celebrate the installation of the idol of the goddess with respective religious ceremonies and rites. In order to mark this important occasion an impressive procession is to be taken out.

*The Man Eater of Malgudi* was first published in 1961 by the Viking press, New York. This outstanding work of fiction is regarded by many critics Narayan's greatest novel

as yet. Rosanne Archer (In the *New York Herald Tribune*) opines, “in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* he is often if not always, at his very best: sure, dexterous and penetrating.” Anthony West (in *The New Yorker*) regards this novel as one of his most successful efforts. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is a delightful, funny and deeply thoughtful book.

The setting of the novel is in the town of Malgudi, South India. The point of action is the press of Natraj which consisted of two rooms. The press was divided into two parts, particulars being signified by the presence of a curtain between the press and the parlour. Natraj's other friends comprised of a poet and a journalist, Dean Shasrti. He was the man who helped Natraj in typing, printing, editing and binding. Friendly relationship exists among Natraj and Shasrti besides being the employer and the employee. The sudden change in Natraj's press occurred because he would boast about being a *Phalwan* once in his life. So to improve upon his robustness and potency he gave importance to his diet and could snap chains, twist iron bars, and pulverize granite. But because he was false to his guru, he left him soon after hunting and quarreling with him.

Showing his pugnacious disposition, Vasu without Natraj's confirmation starts residing in the upper part of his press. In return, Natraj was much stupefied at Vasu's demeanour, but consoled himself with the thought that after all he would not settle there interminably, as soon as he got a befitting accommodation. But he was wrong in this view, for Vasu stayed in the attic permanently. Though Vasu vanished for long periods yet when he was back he always made fun of the people in the parlour. Natraj came to contemplate him as a middle-aged man-eater who had smashed to smithereens his severe and placid life. One day Natraj turned down a forest official's request to get his book “*Golden Thoughts*” printed after a week, Vasu received a brown envelope from the forest Department, authorizing him only to shoot duck and deer and hence debarring him from shooting tigers and other larger animals. Vasu at once became antagonistic towards the forester and decided to challenge his authority by shooting animals in the Mempi forest. He began shooting wild animals illegally leaving no authentication behind. One day, Natraj is forced to go to Mempi village along with

Vasu leaving his crucial job of printing the invitation cards for the marriage of the adjournment lawyer's daughter. Being communicated about a tiger in the Mempiforest; Vasu leaves Natraj at a tea-shop and went away with the man who had given him the information. Natraj felt like a lost child as he did not have any money to go back by a bus. He becomes quite friendly with the tea-stall owner Muthu who cooperated with him by organizing a bus for him back to Malgudi. Next day Vasu came back and showed Natraj gloatingly which he had killed in Mempi forest. He did this annihilation illegally and was not at all abashed or contrite about it. Instead he felt proud that he had wriggle out of it. He took Natraj to his room and told him how the dead animals were processed and craned.

Natraj, thus came to know the source of the foul smell of which everyone complained. The room was filled with skins of variegated animals and Vasu continues to bring dead animals, stuffed carcasses, and as such his activities become an esoteric and enigmatic problem for Natraj. Mustering courage one day he asked Vasu to vacate the attic, of which Vasu makes fun and told him of the expenses which after he had increased in order to make the attic livable. After some time Natraj received summons from the house rent controller to appear in the court. As per the rules, Natraj was so much frightened by the summons that he hid them and did not show it to anybody and was much dismayed and disconcerted and for solving the matter, he sought the help of the lawyer who had not paid him for the invitation cards. He extracted a lot of money from Natraj to help him by obtaining adjournment of the case and extension time from the court. The result was that Vasu and Natraj came to have great ill-will for each other they no longer communicated with each other, but Vasu went on as usual in the attic. One day a sanitary inspector came up with a complaint lodged by Natraj's neighbors about the foul smell. Natraj was much despondent and helpless because he could do nothing. After some time, an inspector came by him and asked to prove him Vasu's intimidation and so went-away.

Meanwhile Vasu indulges in womanizing by inviting Rangi, the dancer to his attic. Muthu come to Malgudi in order to get his elephant cured and is helped by Natraj who

promises to help him in every possible way. The elephant had to be brought to the hospital for treatment and so with the help of a mahavat he was taken to Malgudi. On the other hand, the poet had completed his epic up to the point where Krishna meets Radha and in order to commemorate the occasion, it is planned to take out a procession for which financial contributions from the people are asked Vasu takes upon himself the task of collecting the donations and keeping it to himself. Others like satri, the poet and Natraj take upon the duty of printing the last few forms on the auspicious day. Rangi, the dancer woman apprises Natraj about Vasu's intention to shoot the elephant in the process. According to him, the dead animal was more worthwhile than the living one. Nataraj was petrified as this would lead not only to the death of the animal but many men, women and children would also be trampled and stifled in the stampede which would follow Natraj's efforts to convince Vasu's for killing the animal go in vain. He is totally unimpressed by his talk and in fact, became furious over Rangi for disclosing the plan. Natraj knew that it was useless to try to change his mind. He wanted to stop the celebrations but could not do so, as they had gone too far in the matter. Natraj was so distraught that he let out a terrific at which everyone was panicky that they rushed to him. But, after five minutes he was his usual self again and left the temple with his life leaving his son Babu with his school teacher. He expected that the celebration would go on as planned.

Vasu showed his strength by dislocating the Town Inspector's wrist with one blow of his fist. Everyone was frightened and they warned him not to harm the sacred elephant. Rangi had planned to visit Vasu and to impress upon him to change his mind by taking for him his favourite 'pulav'. At this Natraj's wife is envious of Rangi and so she goes away to the temple leaving Natraj alone at home. As the procession drew nearer, Nataraj could not resist the temptation of going to Vasu once again. He held Vasu's gun to his ear and lets the procession pass away peacefully. But the sound of the alarm clock frightened Natraj and he dashed outside. To everyone's surprise, Vasu was lying dead in his chair the next morning. Being unable to find any clue even after interrogation, the case was declared officially closed. But the air was thick with suspicion. Nataraj's wife confirmed it by telling him that everyone suspected him to be

the killer because of the rent control case. Gradually, everyone boycotted Nataraj. For him, this was the greatest net of destruction that the mean – eater had performed. He had ruined his name, his fame, his friendships and his world. Sastic came back after attending a marriage and he discloses the mystery over Vasu's death which he had been told by Rangi. Vasu had killed himself by slapping too forcefully on his own forehead with his open palm and this was the destiny of Bhasmasura a rakshasa. The blow of his own hammer – fist had killed him. Nataraj was convinced that one day everyone would believe the truth and come back to him.

RK Narayan has used the Bhasmasura fable as a conscious technique, the resolution being to stress the self-destructive attributes of Vasu, to enrich the texture of the novel and to juxtapose it with Indian classical tradition. The novelist himself tells about it:

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 . . . some years ago, I suddenly came upon a theme struck me as an excellent piece of IT was published under the title the Man-eater of Malgudi --- I based this on a well known mythological episode, the story of Mohini and Bhasamasura" (Narayan 47-8).

At the surface level, the name (Nataraj) connotes ironic intentions quite clearly. Thus, the novel seems to deal with the "fundamental questions about the good and evil and their role in human life" (Naik 55). The popularity between Nataraj, the self-effacing and charitable printer and Vasu, the jealous man of force, is too clear to be overlooked. Nataraj is mainly apathetic, has very less power to influence things which happen to him; while Vasu is the greatest champion of the distinctive accomplishment. Vasu is alone, from outside, and sets up the business of taxidermy unaided by anyone, fighting with forest department on one hand and the people of Malgudi, on the other. If action and inaction are two characteristics of Vasu and Nataraj bracketed together are also the qualities of tolerance and intolerance.

Narayan's preoccupation with violence is not a mere façade. By nature he would like to avoid encounter and antagonism. Natraj, the character through whose eyes we see the man-eater at large in Malgudi, is ineffectual of being belligerent to anybody. "Now it was having a middle-aged man-eater in your office and home with the same uncertainties, possibilities and potentialities." Fortunately every Rakshasa contains within himself the seed of his annihilation. This was the state of affairs with the Ravana, Mahishasura, and Bhasamasura. The last through his chaste tapas has gained a boon from Siva whomsoever he touched would immediately reduce to ashes. After, having acquired the boon, he decided to try this on Siva himself. Siva ran to Vishnu in panic for help, then Vishnu acquired the shape of a beautiful woman whose charisma the Rakshasa could not withstand. Mohini, the angelic vamp, pirouetted in front of the Rakshasa challenged him to do what she did, put her hand on her head –and when Bhasamasura, adopted the path he was reduced to ashes.

It should be noted that, however that inspite of his emphasis on being social animal, it was Vasu, himself who is anti-social in his detachment and self-interest. He scares children, kills dogs, repulses neighbors with the stench of his workshop and flouts social convention by bringing prostitutes home. All these negative traits set him apart from common human beings. Fairly early in the novel, Sastri, the aide to Natraj disconcerts him with the rakshasa, a manifestation of devastation. Vasu corresponds with Sastri's definition of rakshasa as a demonic creature, possessing colossal strength, exceptional powers and intellect, but without and incarnation of man or God. The demon gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is impregnable beyond every law, but finally he oversteps his limitation and is destroyed.

The antagonism Natraj and Vasu is so clearly marked, that one is tempted to read in the story of their feud an allegorical and mythical implication. There is enmity between *Satva* and *Rajas*. The clash between the Gods and Demons, the *Sura* and *Asura*, is a recurrent motif in Hindu mythology. The Asuras were mighty, invincible, omnipotent and sometimes even more than Gods and through victory over Indra they threatened Him with anarchy and commotion. But every time peace was restored and Indra's

thorn was saved through some divine mystery and maneuver whenever the demons created some sort of destruction.

The framework of *The Man Eater of Malgudi* more or less proceeds on *puranic* pattern. The blue curtains of the printer's room stands for order and conventionality, as it were and since the day the six-feet tall, broad shouldered gaint called Vasu crosses threshold intruding beyond the curtain, utter chaos begins. Vasu's very philosophy of life is in total opposition to peaceful, ordered universe of Malgudi. As PS Sundaram puts up "the modern rakashasa does not have to be ten-headed and twenty armed. Science and technology makes him more powerful than any Ravana and Mahishasura. He too like the old Rakashas as glories in his strength, recognizes no one and nothing as superior to himself, is scornful of the weak and rides roughshod on them. He has no use for either God or man: is in ourself that we are thus, or thus".

Two orders of human beings are described in *Bhagvad Gita*- the godly or the devilish. The asuras are devilish who say that universe is immoral, fake, false without God, brought into existence not by any mutual casual law but a synthesis based on lechery and sensuality:

"this have I gained today, this whim I'll satisfy; this wealth is mine and much more too will be mine as the time goes on".

"He was an enemy of mine, I've killed him, and many another too I'll kill. I'm master here. I take my pleasure (as I will); I'm strong and happy and successful."

"I'm rich and of good family. Who else can match himself with me? I'll sacrifice and I'll give alms: (why not?) I'll have a marvelous time!"

So (says Krishna) speak fools deluded in their ignorance.

Vasu's every act, every indication, every utterance underlines his rebellious nature with dark design. Vasu in fact, underlines rebellion as his natural tendency as he almost drags Natraj through his works, takes him to Mempi village in his jeep, plays devilry with the scared pedestrians and unceremoniously leaves the printer behind to his fate. Vasu's views on institution of marriage are also quite blasphemous or

atheistic. He was not even the slightest intention of being answerable to anyone as he walks away with the green folder containing the subscription list of the temple festival. He has taken the possession of the Natraj's upstairs room and stays there as long as it pleases him without paying rent for it. It is useless to argue with him as with a typhoon and moreover the police inspector sent away to mind his with scant ceremony when he dares to question him.

We live in a country where six-foot tall height is considered much above the average and Vasu who is more taller and has trained himself to bulldoze a three inch thick teakwood door with a bang of his fist, who rushes around madly in jeep disseminating poor law enduring citizens left and right, is nevertheless stung to insanity by a mosquito. This is one thing he cannot endure to. This is mentioned right in the beginning of the novel:

That fellow has done you a service in carrying away all your waste paper, but he has dehoused a thousand mosquitoes – one thing I can't stand'. He vigorously fanned them off as they tried to buzz about his ears. 'Night or day . I run when a mosquito is mentioned.

The apparent cure for this is of course the mosquito net which Vasu uses. But when he is boarded in his lair by a police inspector and three other men who interrogated him regarding his gun license, he gets furious and just to show his physical strength brings down his palm on the iron frame of his cot which ultimately gets cracked. He was concussed in this way his own grave. Since the cot had broken he had to stretch himself in that easy chair that fateful night. He was bothered by the mosquitoes which he hated, hit against them with all his physical strength and in the process killed himself.

This is what comes about when a colossus in his bad-temper decides to use his fitness and force tyrannously like a giant. As the common thinking that the atom bomb is dropped on the people whom one detests but who can sting; in the devastation that results in not only the gnats which are destroyed but also the super-power.



Undoubtedly, the novel has a mythical structure. It is great allegory of the modern age. Habituated to the modern times, it is an adaptation of puranic story, a prototype, emerging from the collective unconscious of universal humanity. It is the fable of the Jack, the giant killer and David and Goliath, all over again. Only Narayan has profited by what scientist like Haldane could see and set down: when one has to deal with a giant sixty feet tall one hasn't to do virtually anything at all - the giant will crumble under its own weight when he moves a step. It is not even essential to sling a pebble a mosquito will do.

In the conclusion, we can say that RK Narayan as a novelist is also a reporter of the expansive inclination of the culture and days. He follows the convention of storytelling as it occurred in the former or by gone India, but espouses his form and style from the west. The devices of his analytic approach are religion, comedy, irony and satire. Narayan has succeeded in driving home the moral truth that violence never makes way into the hearts of the common people. He has conveyed deep moral and religious truths of perennial significance.

## REFERENCES

Narayan.R.K.*The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. Penguin Books, India.101.

---.*The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. William Heinemann Ltd. 1962.

*The novels of R.K. Narayan – A typological study of characters*. (Hardcore), Ramesh Dnyate, "The concept and nature of rebellion", Prestige Publishers, 1997-09-01 p 95.

*The Bhagvad Gita*, translated by R.C. Zaehner, Chapter XI, verses 13-15.