

The Man Eater of Malgudi – A Metaphysical Novel of R.K.Narayan

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The Man Eater of Malgudi is essentially a novel based on Hindu mythical structure, accordingly referencing to Hindu Gods and Goddesses rather liberally. The story begins with the description of Nataraj's settings of his press and office. "A framed picture of Goddess Laxmi poised on her lotus, holding aloft the bounties of earth in her four hands", ¹ is hung up. This is a very common sight amongst Hindu businessmen in India where a picture or idol of Laxmi and or Ganesh is kept. Goddess Laxmi is worshipped regularly in Hindu houses and is considered as the Goddess of wealth. People seek her blessings for good luck and protection from evil forces. As Nataraj went on to say that with the grace of Goddess Laxmi he was not doing badly, for he could send his son to a good school, his wife could afford to buy the expensive sarees she wished and their household was well stocked with food which in other words described a well-to-do family. Goddess Laxmi, unlike Goddess Durga or Kali are worshipped commonly in various states in India stretching from North to South and East to West.

At the outset of the novel, R K Narayanan introduced a very common Hindu Goddess and thereby set the novel on a solid mythical foundation. When Nataraj was forcefully taken by Vasu to Mempi and was mercilessly abandoned there, he made friends with a tea-seller, Muthu a simple god-fearing man who struggled much in his life and could ultimately set a decent business to support his family. We again find that Muthu, after establishing himself comfortably in his vocation, took to the maintenance of the old temple at the confluence of mountain and plains. Hindu ethos is again portrayed when Muthu explains:

Hundreds of vehicles go upto those summits and to this day we have never heard of an accident, although some of the roads are narrow and twisting, and if you are careless you will drive over the ridge. But there has not been a single accident. You know why? He pointed at the turret of the shrine showing above the roadside trees.²

This is a reference to the deity inside the temple again a Sthala-Purana – type pointer towards a religious significance accorded to a particular temple or place which is believed to have divine powers and it is believed the God or Goddess of that temple protects the people of that place. We find in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* about Goddess Kenchamma. R K Narayan too, while writing this novel on a mythical structure, ensured that the traditional faiths and beliefs are aptly portrayed in the novel to enable the Indian readers to mingle themselves with the milieu and get the feel and flavour of Indian atmosphere. It is also to be borne in mind that R K Narayan had created this mythology of Sthala-Purana in his imaginary town of Malgudi. Apropos to this temple description the social activities of the village are embodied round this temple. When the villagers of Mempi gathered around to discuss about the treatment of temple elephant Kumar who was sick they gathered together at the temple yard where "the four-armed Goddess watched our proceedings serenely from her inner sanctum".³ There a reference to a Goddess is made but the name of the

¹ *The Man Eater of Malgudi – Page 1*

² *The Man Eater of Malgudi – Pg. 43*

³ *The Man Eater of Malgudi – Pg. 121*

Goddess is kept anonymous. Since it is a protector Goddess it can be construed it would be the deity of Shakti Goddess Durga, Kali or a local Goddess like Kenchamma.

Much of the activities of the novel is centered around the 'poet's endeavor to write a grand epic on the life of Lord Krishna in monosyllabic verse. God Krishna is again one of the very popular Hindu Gods who is worshipped throughout the length and breadth of the Country. Krishna is looked upon by the Hindus as an ideal God who possesses all the qualities an ideal person should have. He is a lover, a philosopher, a friend (as Draupadi always address Krishna as 'Sakha' or friend), a Saviour and in times of need a diplomat. R K Narayan who was a leading novelist of Indian English literature had weaved the plot of the novel in such a manner where the reference of Lord Krishna pervades the entire novel. Narayan had perhaps consciously used the mythical reference of Krishna because Krishna is the God who is known by the Indians as well as by the Westerners. Interestingly Krishna is not looked in the same manner as in the East compared to the Western World. Krishna is an enigma. In the East he is looked upon as the 'Dark Lord, an attractive appearance with a face bearing an enigmatic, mysterious and mischievous smile' ⁴

On the other hand Western Indologists are critical about Krishna and their feelings can be summed up as

A bizarre figure! A Yadava chieftan who looks and acts not uncommonly like a mortal – and a very ordinary mortal at that – and who has the incredible effrontery to say that he is a god! A cynic who preaches the highest morality and stoops to practice the lowest tricks, in order to achieve his mean ends! An opportunist who teaches an honest and a god-fearing man to tell a lie, the only lie, he had told in his life! A charlatan who declares himself to be the god of gods, descended from the highest heaven for establishing righteousness on earth, and advises a hesitating archer to strike down a foe who is defenseless and crying for mercy.⁵

Such opinion about Krishna could not however make any influence in India and he is revered and worshipped throughout the country and temples of Lord Krishna are spread out in all the states. In the novel too Lord Krishna is the presiding deity and so is Radha. The major activities are centered around launching of the poet's book on the occasion of Spring Festival at Lord Krishna temple. Elaborate descriptions are given about the preparations, decorations of the deities and the procession throughout the town with images of Lord Krishna and Radha. Narayan, by such vivid description of celebrations could convey to his readers of the Western world that Indian philosophy has deep roots of reasoning and by some prima facie references of certain acts decisions are not made. It is the epistemology that is involved in analysis the subtleties of dharma.

Apart from the references of Goddess Laxmi, Lord Krishna, Radha and four armed Goddess in the temple of Mempi, R K Narayan makes a reference of the bird Guruda. This bird is considered as the messenger of Lord Vishnu and is revered by the Hindus. The notoriety of Vasu is illustrated when he plans to kill the Garuda bird and stuff it and sell it to the God fearing Hindus who would want to keep it in their house. By making reference of these Gods, Goddesses and their messengers R K Narayan built up the mythical structure of the novel so that the Indian readers could identify themselves with their Indian heritage and their own tradition and progress with the novel. For the non-Indian readers R K Narayan could deftly introduce to the non-Indian readers to Indian culture based on Indian philosophy with its source in mythology so that they could correctly understand the heritage of India and get rid of some of the baseless but commonly accepted belief about India and the people. The writer also referred to Satyanarayan Puja in the novel. In *Kanthapura* Satyanarayan Puja was vividly described by Raja Rao and it was also used as a method to develop a peaceful protest by the Gandhians against the British rule. In *The Man Eater of Malgudi* Satyanarayan Puja is mentioned in a dialogue between Shastri and Nataraj 'I'd not trouble you but for the fact that this 'Satyanarayan Puja' must be performed today in my

⁴ KRSNA: *In Defence of a Devious Divinity Bimal Krishna Matilal: Essays on Mahabharata Edited by Arvind Sharma – Pg. 401*

⁵ KRSNA: *In Defence of a Devious Divinity – Bimal Krishna Matilal: Essays on Mahabharata Edited by Arvind Sharma – Pg. 402*

house; my children and wife will be waiting for me at the door”⁶. Through this dialogue Narayan introduced another Hindu ritual, which is again performed in the households widely all over India. By short and effective references to Pujas R K Narayan has shown the world the strong bondage the Indians have with their traditional values and how they keenly the experience a sense of oneness with God.

In the novel we find that everyday at the daybreak the writer reaches an isolated place near the river and “when the east glowed I sat for a moment on the sand reciting a prayer to the Sun to illuminate my mind”.⁷ This is a ritual amongst devoted Hindus to stand inside the water facing the Sun, and recite a prayer for the Sun God. An average Hindu believes that the Sanskrit slokas are so profound and full of wisdom that those who read and practice it experience a sense of serenity and calmness.

Through such references the writer also makes us realize the mythical functions as explained by Joseph Cambell particularly ‘Mystical function’ and ‘Cosmological functions’.

Often Indian writers in English have used mythical modes and models to introduce the richness and complex metaphysical issues and make them intelligible to the readers.

Though in *The Man Eater of Malgudi* myth is used as a structural parallel to the myth of Bhasmasura in the novel it is only natural that a story cannot precisely follow a definite direction. There might be certain diversions from the main plot; some twists which together make a novel interesting. In spite of the novel following the technique of structural parallel we also find the use of digressional technique too. Nataraj was forcibly taken by Vasu to Mempi and later abandoned since Vasu changed his mind and went away for the hunting of a leopard in the forest of Mempi. Poor Nataraj who had left press his work place totally unprepared for the journey was penniless and hungry. Fortunately he met a kind and sensitive god-fearing person in Muthu a tea seller in Mempi. It is here in the novel we find a story within a story when Muthu starts describing his journey through life and how he had traveled this far. Although this can be just a literary ruse to introduce a character in the novel, the digression part is noticed when Muthu started describing about his initiative to rebuild an old temple with his funds since he believed that the Goddess in the temple was protecting the vehicles which were going up the hill and coming down everyday. Muthu was not only limited to renovating the temple but he wanted to celebrate the ‘consecration of the temple’ “on a grand scale by carrying the Goddess in a grand procession with pipe music led by the elephant”.⁸ By introducing the character Muthu and describing his interest about renovating an old temple with his funds Narayan portrayed the bond the common Indians love to share with their Gods. It is more out of love that Muthu takes up the task to rebuild the temple with his hard earned money. One has to keep in mind also that Muthu is an ordinary road-side tea seller but he is blessed with extra ordinary courage to take up the onerous task. This courage also comes out of a total faith in the Almighty that in any honest and good work God will be there with the good Samaritan however lowly and poor he is. R.K. Narayan refers to the ritual of temple consecration. In *The Man eater of Malgudi* we find Muthu’s plan for consecration after renovation of the temple in which the young elephant Kumar whom the villagers had adopted was to lead the procession. In later part of the novel we also find a detailed description of the grandeur of the procession of the temple at Malgudi wherein the elephant Kumar was leading the procession on occasion of Spring Festival, festival of Radha-Krishna and commemoration of the poet’s work *Radhya-Kalyan*. Particularly in Hindu religion there are community gatherings followed by rituals to celebrate different religious occasions. There may be some social reasons as it gives an opportunity for the people to gather together for a common cause. For religious purposes the bond is strengthened by common action, belief in common mythology; and heritage. Through activities of processions, pomp and show one does not try to might the hard instinct. It is the occasion to experience ecstasy. Realisation of the infinite they come through this experience of love and supreme gay. Thus the mythological framework works like a mode to attain transcendence. Hence for the attachment of all through the bonding of love such community rituals like consecration, procession with the deities are organized. People go into dancing in total

⁶ *The Man Eater of Malgudi* – Pg.11

⁷ *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* –Pg 5

⁸ *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* –Pg 44

dedication to the God, like we find in the description in the novelist, monosyllable “Girls with girls did dance in trance”⁹ or in the dancing of Rangi the temple dancer in front of the deities. Such actions give a feel of joy within oneself and irradiate transmission of the feeling the joy and love to others. This is also a method to realize the reality around us.

Narayan initially gives a picture of a vibrant Indian joint family system where people of different kinds reside under the same roof sharing common values, the same codes of conduct and staunch belief in ahimsa. The Grand Uncle stayed in a small room and everyday gave a coin to Nataraj to buy sugar for the ants and birds were allowed to share the food of human beings for they too had a right to live as much as human beings. These references of customs helped Narayan to build the structure of the novel in a traditional Indian style where he, as the narrator retells the traditional legends and myths “that continue to inform and explain the world of the reader in vital ways that keep these stories alive and meaningful, so that “truth” and “reality” must inevitably include the fantastic and fictional”.¹⁰ Narayan, while unfolding the rich beauty of the Indian tradition, also described not withdrawing alongside though, how Indians drifted away from their roots for which they had to suffer. The novelist portrays this by describing how their joint family, which they maintained for generations, broke over a small quarrel on a festive day. The two uncles of Nataraj ignored their elder brother’s (Nataraj’s father) advice to avoid such incidence on a sacred day, and instead abandoned their mid day meal which they sat together to eat the partition of the ancestral property actually came in the following few days. Through this incident Narayan intimated that by ignoring our tradition we are responsible for forming a society that continued to tear itself apart. As a fall out of this partition we find Nataraj commenting that while he was returning from the river after taking his bath, he met his cousin who gave him a cold look for she hated Nataraj for staying in their ancestral house. This is a significant aspect which needs a special attention that as people grew more and more enlightened with modern education and flaunted what we call the modern outlook, they slowly started becoming more self-oriented, self-seeking, and bothering more for themselves rather than the world around them. This crude reality is all the more exposed when people do not even care to look after their ageing parents or weak siblings. This is important in this context since as per our traditional mythical teachings it is taught in Maya Upanishad that “*ayam bandhurayam neti ganana laghuchetasam udarcharitanam vasundhaiva kutumbakam*” (Chapter 6 Verse 72). “Only small men discriminate saying: One is a relative, the other is a stranger. For those who live magnanimously the entire world constitutes but a family”.¹¹ It is also said that Gandhiji’s concept of non-violence a kind of magnified extension of was the ancient Indian concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. Thus Narayan, through his deft handling of events, touched upon some very important aspects of world unity and universal welfare. The novelist seems to have donned the mantle of a social critic. Narayan not only glorified the mythology of India, he also viewed his own society with a critical temper. According to Joseph Campbell myth has four basic functions. Narayan has explained all the four mythical functions without in anyway diminishing the flavour of the novel and has integrated them into the structure of the novel. At the very start of the novel we find a reference and description of Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Lakshmi, Lord Vishnu Krishna and Radha along with certain descriptions of Hindu customs. As per Hindu mythological belief the Gods and Goddesses are the ‘ground of being’ the source of all phenomena. It is believed that Lord Brahma created the universe but the Protector of the Creation is Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva is the Destroyer. So whatever event happens to the people of the universe, the great sages and seers have given an answer in the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas etc. which is believed to be compiled with great knowledge while experiencing the blessings of Divinity within oneself. It is also a common feature to start a mythical work with an invocation to God which Narayan has carefully done at the outset. Then comes the Cosmological function where Nataraj gracefully describes his very early morning experience in the river. Nataraj reaches the river well before sunrise and even in that early hour finds an isolated place for himself at the foot of a palmyra tree on a granite slab and after taking his bath “when the east glowed”¹² he sat for a moment on the sand reciting a prayer to the Sun to

⁹ *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*

¹⁰ *The Indian Journal of world Literature – Vol. 3&4 2009 – Pg.22.*

¹¹ *Wikipedia – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/vasudhaiva_kutumbakam*

¹² *The Man Eater of Malgudi – Pg.5*

illuminate his mind. Thus the greatness and vastness of the cosmos is captured and Nataraj offers his humble prayer to the Sun which not only illuminates the earth but also the minds of persons like Nataraj. By this Narayan tells the Hindu mythical teachings that teach man to show sensitivity towards the cosmos and understand its disciplined order and feel humbled by its enormity. Along with description of the sunrise the other portrayal of trees, river, stone-slab, earthen pots, dripping toddy, come alive for us and thus infuse into the reader a sense that all these objects have their place and meaning in the cosmic scheme which the myth provides. The third aspect of myth according to Campbell is the Sociological function. It is those functions which pass down 'the law', the moral and ethical codes for the people of a particular culture to follow and which help to define that culture and its prevailing social structure. The entire story of the novel *The Man Eater of Malgudi* possibly illustrates with this function. However, while enumerating the workings of this function Narayan intelligently presented it in the inverted manner. The entire story right from the onset of Vasu's appearance till the end portrayed a person who completely defied all norms of all socially acceptable behavior, words and actions. It is also seen that people of the society dislike Vasu but cannot confront him due to his mighty strength and raw courage. It is seen that a person who does not care to follow the social norms or accept its codes of conduct is never accepted in the society since the sociological function has its roots in the mythology honoured and diligently practiced from time immemorial. Hence, a departure from those norms is not allowed in the society. The fourth function as Campbell states is pedagogical function – which teaches how to pass into and live the different stages of our lives Narayan here again, through the character of Vasu, portrayed how an immoral ruthless person who killed innocent animals ruthlessly for his own interest, behaved indecently with people and followed a law of the jungle that 'might is right', himself died when accidentally inflicted a fatal blow onto himself while waiting to kill Kumar, an innocent temple elephant. Further, although the neighbours of the locality wanted to reason the cause of his death, ironically there were no mourners for his death and he died like an animal or a 'stray dog' as it is commonly said of a person who lead an immoral life. Therefore through his novel Narayan elucidates how a person should live his life so as to make a passage harmoniously from one stage to another with a sense of fulfillment and purpose. In *The Man Eater of Malgudi* the narrator Nataraj is as they say a meek and mild person who lived on his small letter press on Market Road. He was a friendly, helpful person and people felt at ease to visit his press and have a chat with him. This friendliness of his character helped Nataraj to get good business and he felt that with the grace of Goddess Laxmi he was doing well. This again goes to prove that Nataraj was a God-fearing person and accordingly attributed his success to divine grace. Such a belief is common amongst many Indians who feel that good or bad happens to them as and when Providence willed them to happen. The origin of such a feeling lies deep in the philosophical teachings of Hinduism. Nataraj was also influenced by the traditional Indian way of life of having a parlour and a work place separated from each other and the separation was made by putting up a blue curtain in between the two places. In traditional Indian way of life a clear distinction was made between the 'outside' and 'inside' of a house. Generally outsiders were not allowed to come inside the house and even certain norms were followed like removing shoes or washing the feet before entering the inside of a house. This is clearly in contrast to the Western ways of life, where although drawing room and parlours were maintained but the strict ritual of entering the inside of the house was much relaxed. However, for Nataraj we find that no one was allowed to enter beyond the 'blue curtain' area, not even his close friends like the poet and Sen. This was the perfect setting for Nataraj till such order was broken by Vasu who just ignoring all norms of Nataraj encroached beyond the blue curtain into the privacy of Nataraj whereby disorder began. We find a situation when Nataraj was at a loss to find a suitable way to save the poor elephant Kumar from being killed by Vasu and with the incident the probability of losing several lives of the people of Malgudi and Mempi. During such a situation the common trait amongst the distressed people is to turn to God desperately crying to be saved. Such a belief has a strong foundation in us through the retelling of several mythological tales wherein we find God ultimately coming to the rescue of the innocent and the weak or the devoted who is in the right path. That is the reason an average Indian has a belief that he who is in the right path will always have God with him and would be victorious. Likewise Nataraj who was at his wits end as how to save the poor elephant from the hands of Vasu suddenly remembered the mythological tale of Gajendra who was saved by Vishnu from the jaws of the crocodile and concluded "our ancestors have shown us that an elephant has a protected life

and no one can harm it”¹³ This is Narayan’s portrayal of how people gather strength from mythology during their moments of helplessness like the myth in *Bhagavata Purana* where Gagendra the elephant was a devotee of Vishnu in his previous birth and when it was attacked by the crocodile in his next birth and was virtually losing his life, he sincerely prayed to Lord Vishnu to save him and his prayers were answered by Lord Vishnu who came down to earth and saved Gagendra’s life. But Nataraj who was in a state of utter frustration, wanted to think that all elephants were a protected species by God. Such is the dependence of the average Indian on their mythology that during times of desperation they even like to interpret the mythical tales in their own way to find some mental strength, a characteristic, which Narayan depicted. What is also important is that on the strength of such mythological belief Nataraj offers his prayer to God for saving the elephant and innocent lives,

“Oh, Vishnu”. I howled “Save our elephant, and save all the innocent men and women who are going to pull the chariot. You must come down to our rescue now. Unknown to myself, I had let out such a shout that the entire crowd inside and outside the hall stood stunned, and all activity stopped. The Chairman’s speech was interrupted as my voice overwhelmed the loud speaker. Rangi stopped dead in her dance. I was soon surrounded by a vast crowd of sympathizers. I felt faint and choked by the congestion”.¹⁴

This description of the ultimate submission to the greatest power is a feature that has its origin in mythology, which has been passed down from one generation to the other through the form of storytelling as has been well described by Narayan while mentioning the words “our ancestors”. Narayan thus recognized our deep roots in our mythology. Ultimately after certain dramatic incidents we find the possessor of enormous strength Vasu dying by his own blow, and poor Nataraj being temporarily suspected of murdering Vasu by his neighbours but at the end Nataraj gets back to his normal routine with dignity. From this Narayan once more conveyed the feeling of the average Indians that the just is rewarded at the end, which is the ultimate message of Indian mythology.

In the conclusion Narayan, through this novel, conveyed what the concept note of ‘Summer School of The Mahabharat Today’ conducted by Indian Institute for Advance Studies Shimla in 2010 aptly mentioned about feelings which one gets after reading the mythology of this great country India “there is almost none who does not undergo a sense of dejavu – an inescapable feeling that the ‘present’ she/he inhabits is only a replay of ‘happenings’ already – recorded; an eerie sensation that most of the ethical dilemmas, the logical paradoxes, the unavoidable impasses which baffle the modern man as well as the mood of irresolution following every resolution that keeps plaguing him have already been punctiliously check listed”.¹⁵

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¹³ *The Man Eater of Malgudi* – Pg. 180

¹⁴ *The man Eater of Malgudi* – Pg. 181

¹⁵ *Concept Note of Summer School on the Mahabharata conducted between 14 & 28 April, 2010 at IIAS Shimla.*