



MYTHICAL ELEMENTS AS EMPLOYED BY R.K. NARAYAN IN HIS NOVELS: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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R.K. Narayan was born on 10 October 1906 into an orthodox Hindu middle-class Tamil family. His childhood was spent in his grandmother's home in Purasawalkam, a quaint and old-fashioned part of what Narayan knew as Madras city. Perhaps a much greater influence on him as a writer was his grandmother who taught him Sanskrit slokas and filled his mind with tales from Hindu myths and epics. "Though Narayan is not very religious in a conventional sense, the Hindu values he had imbibed in his childhood had always remained with him and are unobtrusively reflected in his writing" (Krihnan, VII). From the publication of **Swami and Friends** onwards, Narayan impressed as a prolific writer – novels, novellas, newspaper columns, collections of essays and short stories, and re-tellings of Indian epics and myths poured from his pen in regular succession.

Amitav Ghosh's tribute to Narayan and to his impact on his innumerable readers, bears quoting here at some length:

"From time to time, India produces a writer whose stories, by sheer virtue of their narrative power, spill over linguistic and regional barriers and seep into the soil of the entire subcontinent. Saratchandra was one such writer.... Premchand was another such. R.K. Narayan was one of the very few contemporary writers to gain entry into this select group. His Malgudi has already become a part of the mythic landscape of India... a place where no event is without meaning, and opinion is without remedy. Narayan was a protean figure who could justly have claimed a substantial part of the credit for creating a world-wide readership for contemporary Indian writing. That he never made such claim is a tribute to his many extraordinary qualities as a human being" (Outlook, 58)

Narayan set out with an ambition to be a modern writer. His fictional world has mythical dimensions. The creation of Malgudi itself is a new myth. He has successfully made use of myth in different directions, thematically, technically and literally. He has endeavoured to re-alive India's hoary past in the present contemporary reality. The myths made use of in the novels of Narayan reveal a remarkable insight in perceiving and establishing links between the present world and the epic world of the ancient times. They also reveal his interest in folk literature, his faith in the ancient Indian values and his pride for the rich heritage of his own country. He is, no doubt, an adept in imaginative re-creation of mythical, mythological incidents and situations.

The Man-Eater of Malgudi (1961), The Vendor of Sweets (1967) and The Painter of Signs (1976) make a group of novels which shows Narayan at the pitch of his powers" (Walsh, 134). Further stated by the same critic as "it can be read as the conflict between the insulated personality (Vasu) and the open and vulnerable one, Nataraj or it can be taken as a dramatization of the theory of the necessary flaw, the mysterious balance tremblingly sustained in being by fallibility" (p.145). In the words of Hariprassanna, "In **The Man-Eater of Malgudi**, Narayan follows the same puranic pattern, rendering the ancient myth with credibility using both parallelism and ironic contrast – Nataraj the gentle friendly printer, the representative of all that is good and cherished in the tradition and Vasu, the self-centred, power thirsty individual". (p.145) Regarding use of the Bhasmasur myth, Srinivasa Iyengar says:

"**The Man-Eater of Malgudi** was itself meant to a modern version of one of the Deva Asura conflicts of very ancient times. Vasu is the killer of animals, the purveyor of carcasses, the enemy of Kumar, the temple elephant and the tremor of men (the other); he is of blackness all compact, he glows with evil, he is prince of darkness. The evil here is anti-life, anti-nature and anti-faith but where is the power that is going to rid Malgudi of this demon, this cannibal, this Rakshas?" (Iyengar, 382)

Nataraj and his friends seek the help of Deputy Superintendent of Police who is rendered helpless by Vasu. He dislocated the inspectors wrist. This scene makes it explicit how the strong man of evil continues to be reckless until he is destroyed by the tempo of his own misdeeds. Nataraj thinks it his moral duty to save the elephant, since it is he who borrowed it for the temple festival. Deciding to deal with Vasu, he visits Vasu and entreats him not to harm the elephant and the reply he gets is:

"Has it occurred to you. How much more an elephant is worth dead". (p.167)

Nataraj returns crestfallen, he tries either to postpone or to change the route of the procession. Helpless to do or to change the route of procession. Helpless to do anything, he goes to the temple to watch **Puja** being 'performed'. He is reminded of the Gajendra myth. Gajendran the elephant of the myth steps into a lake and his leg is caught in the jaws of a mighty crocodile. The elephant struggles in desperation and calls on Vishnu, who immediately appears and saves him from the jaws of the



crocodile. According to Bhagvata Gita, Gajendran was in its former life a human being name Indrayumma, king of Dravila. Cursed by Agastya for the poor reception given to him, the king was born as king elephant and his servants as the elephants of its herd. The crocodile which gripped Gajendra's leg was in the previous birth a Gandharva (a semi-divine being) named Hubu. The intervention of Vishnu brought redemption to both the elephant and the crocodile. So this Gajendra story has an added relevance to the meaning of the novel. Nataraj believes that like Gajendra, the temple elephant could be saved by Lord Vishnu. He prays:

“Oh! Vishnu! Save our elephant and save all the innocent men and women who are going to pull the chariot. You must come to our rescue now”. (pp.175-176)

This is a struggle against the evil and negative forces of life that is Vasu. The festival has another larger mythical dimension. It is a symbolic reaffirmation of the community itself. And the festival despite Nataraj's apprehensions, proceeds smoothly and uneventful “the God answered Nataraj's call” (p.79). Vasu is found murdered during the night. Nataraj is suspected of having committed the murder but there is no allegation against him because of lack of evidence. He becomes a social outcast. Nataraj thinks, “this was the greatest act of destruction my name, my friendship and my world”. He appears to be hopelessly lost. But soon the truth about his death comes to light. Rangi tells Sastri, “The Men (Vasu) had trapped a couple of mosquitoes which has settled on his forehead by bringing the flat of his palm with all his might on top of them” (p.231). “Thus, Vasu, the mighty taxidermist, the hot-headed and self-willed manifestation of evil, who threatened to defy all cherished human values to fulfill his own selfish needs is ultimately right dies at his own hands”.

Narayan takes a hint from the Bhasmasura myth. The Asura, having won by Tapas from Shiva the power to reduce anything whatsoever to ashes by the mere touch of his palm, promptly advances towards the God himself. Shiva flees from the Asura and seeing this Vishnu appears as Mohini to distract his attention. The Asura in his lust now forgets all about Shiva and wants to seize Mohini but the enchantress gets him by ingenious maneuvers to touch his own head and to destroy himself. But then God fulfills himself in many ways even in unorthodox ways. The miracle of Vasu's death by his own hand caused a surge of faith in the believers and Kumar is hale and hearty again and Nataraj steps back into his old routine with great relief. About his death, Walsh says,

“That it was the frailest of animals, the mosquito, which helped him, the exterminator of animals and the eater of men, to his own death, clinches the lightly drawn parable”. (p.146)

Sastri draws the parallel once again. He brings out the moral fable underlying the mythical structure of the novel. ‘Every demon appears in the world with a special boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the rakshasas that were ever born. Every demon carries without himself, unknown to himself a tiny seed of self-destruction and goes up in the thin air at the most unexpected moment’. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?”. So this remark offers a word of hope about the possibility of human survival. Ron Shepherd observes:

“Vasu in **The Man Eater of Malgudi** is possessive, thoughtless and brutal. Beneath the comedy, irony and satire of Narayan's treatment there exists a powerful allegorical component where good and evil are set in precarious balance... The lesson from **The Man-Eater of Malgudi** applies more generally to the other novels. Evil carries the seeds of its own destruction and left to its own devices will finally destroy itself just as Vasu ends by destroying himself in the story”. (p.39)

Further he says:

“Narayan's fiction demonstrates that man can never completely, control his own destiny. There exists a definite limit to human freedom. On the other hand, man may rest assured that, in the continuing battle between benign and malign influences operating in the universe good will finally win through. It is because the imaginative creation of Malgudi rests on a larger conception of universal order that Narayan's satire can afford to remain good-humoured, non-polemical and finally self-effacing”. (p.79)

In **The Bachelor of Arts**, the delineation of the four stages in Chandran's life has a close parallel with ancient Hindu tradition of four Ashrama's – Sisya, Grahastha, Vanaprastha and Bhikshu. Savitri in **The Dark room** bears the faint echoes of Shankuntala, in her assertion of the right to live and die, her encounter in the temple shanty, the frustration and the futility and her weakness to live with support of her family and home probably Narayan recreates the ancient Tamil bardic story of Kovalan and Kaunaki. ‘The Dark Room’ also directly refers to **The Ramayana**. Like Kaikyee, Savitri enters ‘Kopabhavan’ and she is exposed to the truth that her husband was infidle. **The English Teacher** stands unique because of its new direction and dimension. One can relate Krishnan's relentless efforts to establish a physical contact with the spirit of his dead wife. Susila, with the story of Savitri's efforts to win back her husband Satyavan from Yama, but the roles of husband and wife are reversed here.



The Financial Expert, in one way, a moral fable on the illusion of get-rich – uick scheme. Narayan uses milk and lotus to represent wealth and two contrasting mythical symbols Lakshmi and Saraswathi with their devotees Margayya and Dr. Pal. In **Mr. Sampath** Srinivas the scenario – writer does the existence of Malgudi to the Puranic times. He narrates that Sri Rama, Lord Buddha and even Sankara passed through this village and left indelible marks there. In **The Guide**, one is made to believe that the Goddess Parvathi jumped into the fire and produced the river of Malgudi. The entire novel reverberates with Valmiki myth. In **Waiting for the Mahatma**, he uses the newly created myth of Gandhi. He has brilliantly woven the historical Gandhian myth into fine strands of love, politics and idealism. In **The Vendor of Sweets**, Narayan narrates, though in a comic vein, the ancient Hindu concept of ashrams. The value embedded in the ‘Gita’ greatly influenced the life of Jagan. His attitude of self-surrender to the will of Gayatri Devi, is but a reflect of the self, that dwells within his heart. In **The Painter of Signs**, the relationship between Daisy and Raman is based on the legendary tale of king Santhanu of ‘The Mahabharata’.

Myths are, no doubt, responses to basic human situations and instincts. The use of myths in creative writing enables man to unravel and understand the multidimensional complexities of human mind. Myths are about Gods, Goddesses, super humans, sages, Rakshass. They populate our psychological, spiritual and superstitious worlds. To understand them is in a way to understand ourselves because of the ready-made frame work, to make the people easily believe in the story, writers opt for myths as important components in their themes and plots. R.K. Narayan’s use of ‘myth’ is cosmic and characterized by irony. He never used fragments of various myths.

To conclude, R.K. Narayan uses only myth in a novel. Almost all his novels express Indian religious faith. He gentle humour perhaps acts as a spice and make his novels appeal to all kinds of readers in India and abroad. In the words of Shyam M. Asnani, “... His works transcend the narrow political, social and cultural frontiers and embrace human values that are valid for all times and all climes”. (p.30) In short, the selection of myths should not be for the sake of the art but for the sake of the society, then the society will evolve on the lines of values and ethics that crop up from our myths.

Works Cited

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