

## THE PRESENTATION OF DEATH AND WOMAN: A CRITICAL STUDY OF R.K. NARAYAN'S *THE MAN-EATER OF MALGUDI*

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### ABSTRACT

Apart from being a somewhat comic and fascinating story of Indian scenario of some unrecognized and conjectured south Indian town of Malgudi, dealing with its normal and traditional life, nuances and elements, Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi* invariably yields multiple layers of meaning if the readers are not dazed by the sparkling of its comedy and spicy story elements. This novel is after all the story of a man's (Vasu) pursuit after death and how Natraj, the prototype of Shiva with the help of Rangji, the subaltern dancing woman, representing Mohini, enacted the mythical story of modern Bhasmasura (Vasu). The philosophical doctrine of sankhya yoga representing woman as the power behind creation plays its role in the portrayal of the characters and incidents, where death and woman unites themselves to present the structure of the story.

**Keywords:** death, subaltern, woman, mythical, Bhasmasura, structure.

Apart from the detective novels, perhaps there is no such fictional work which is so thoroughly and inherently mesmerized with death, at least in Indian English literature. It is on death, about death but it is not surprising. Both our two epics and other spiritual scriptures have abundant representations of the theme. As for example we can cite the example from '*The Mahabharata*', from where a fine anecdote can be taken as a very profitable and apt example which goes like this-once in Dwaitban the pandavas were very thirsty on a certain afternoon, having wandered far from their ashram or residing place. They rested under a tree. Yudhistira, the elder brother, asked Sahadev to fetch water from any lake or pond nearby and he found one with very clear water after some search. When he was about to touch the water, a voice spoke in a warning stop and forbade him to fetch water. This situation gradually led to the famous Yaksha-Yudishtira conversation where along with many questions, the Yaksha asked, "Which is the biggest wonder of this earth?" and Yudishtira promptly answered, "To feel that one is immortal. Everyday a person sees people dying, still one person thinks that he will not die or he should not die." There are also several examples in Upanishads and other theological scriptures. As an Indian author thus it is not surprising that Narayan should focus on the vast realm of ever broadening, ever justifying and ever meaningful death. For the theme of the novel, Narayan went to Hindu mythology, taking the story of

Bhasmasura, a demon who obtains a boon from Lord Shiva that anybody he touches will be burnt to a cinder immediately. Being powerful by this boon, the demon went on applying and tasting it indiscriminately-virtually running after and for death. Our present story is the tale of a modern Bhasmasura, who obtained the boon of extraordinary physical prowess along with extraordinary mental cruelty that make him the allegorical representation or prototype of his ancient, mythic forefather.

The novel opens characteristically with Narayan's self-imposed style. A placid, satiated Malgudi man Natraj, the printer is seen at the very opening who declares that he is rather happy by not letting the front room of his press which "was coveted by every would be shopkeeper in our town" and he cannot "explain myself to sordid and calculating people". His business is going well if not tremendously flourishing. His son 'felt adequately' happy with the abundant supply of toys and other gifts that any child may desire and his wife is not much demanding either. It was an ideal and idyllic Malgudi life with his friends- the monosyllabic poet, writing an epic on Lord Krishna, Sen, the argumentative journalist and few others of his coterie and of course, there was Shastri, the worker-printer always serious and busy at work, trying to compensate the proprietor's lacks and with them our Natraj, hobnobbing with in his plain, floating and easy life. One of the very interesting and curious element of the novel is the character of Shastri, the semi-scholar working in Natraj's press but well-versed in life's deep philosophy. It was in fact he is the first person to declare the demon like elements in Vasu and identify him with Bhasmasura, the person running after death. The avid Narayan reader can well remember this figure or rather the name appeared in 'The English Teacher' also, the philosophy teacher in Krishna's college who virtually laid Sushila on the verge of death though unknowingly and unintentionally while going for finding a suitable house for the Krishna - Sushila family. Does Narayan want to project Shastri an identifier of death? It will be a very serious question to deal with. However, Natraj had "no need to be present or attend to them in any way." This suggests Natraj's life- timid, placid, and non-intervening or non-intervened. On the other hand, the name Natraj is provocatively suggestive of and actually the name of Lord Shiva and he is also the king of "Nata", all kinds of arts. The novelist's shrewd identification of Natraj, the printer with Lord Shiva at once testifies the mythical tale of Bhasmasura and Lord Shiva and also the artful destruction of the demon by Mohini.

In chapter 1, the first person narrator persona Natraj refers "between my parlour and the press hung a blue curtain. No one tried to peer through it." But in chapter two, "an unusual thing happened." The curtain stirred, an edge of it lifted, and the monosyllabic poet's head peeped through. An extraordinary situation must have arisen to make him do like that. His eyes bulged. "someone to see you",

he whispered.” Thus the extraordinary situation brings one extraordinary person-our modern Bhasmasura, Vasu. From the very first appearance, the novelist had not missed any single chance to suggest the unhumanliness of the person-“a tanned face, large powerful eyes under thick eyebrows a large forehead and a shock of unkempt hair, like a black halo”. So, it is keenly suggested that the person is nothing but a demon, a veritable inhuman figure with a “black halo”, not the halo of light perhaps that we are accustomed to and fond of associating with any divine creature and equally suggestive is the response of Natraj-“My first impulse was to cry out, “whoever you may be, why don’t you brush your hair?” , the person came forward “practically tearing aside the curtain, an act which violated the sacred tradition of the press” and ultimately Natraj’s traditions of life.

This person Vasu, who is a taxidermist, dealer in death, believes in the act of stuffing dead animals as a kind of creation “that proves man’s superiority over nature”. While describing his past, he talked about his master, a phaelwan who could bear stone slab on his chest, snap steel chains and other extraordinary physical activities. Vasu, the once freedom fighter went to him for becoming his disciple and he was lucky in “finding a man who enjoyed stuffing me like that.” This is the wake of stuffing. The novel published in post-independent India (1962) thus possibly hints at the degeneration of the once freedom fighters into the enemy of nature and people which Vasu proves to be in the due course of time.

Vasu from the very wake of his career also proves to be the destroyer of his benefactors which also quietly alludes to the thematic allegory of the novel, which is Bhasmasura-Shiva story. He hit him (his master) “therewith an edge of my palm with a chopping movement...and he fell down and squirmed on the floor.” Vasu had soon settled in the attic of Natraj even without an approving word from Natraj and what remains more interesting and surprising is that, Natraj’s passivity, even when he understands a little later in chapter three “his nature would not let him leave anyone in peace.” Soon we come to know Natraj’s own philosophy of life as he expresses his view, “I had resigned myself to anything. If I had cared for a peaceful existence, I should have rejected Vasu on the first day. Now it was like having a middle-aged man eater in your office and home, with the same uncertainties, possibilities, and potentialities.” The remark is very baffling and entangles into the multiple possible layers of meanings that the novel loads into it. Natraj lives in passivity, it is thoroughly clear. It also alludes to the mythical tale of Lord Shiva that he had granted a boon to Bhasmasura without thinking about the possible calamities that it could have. But the man eater has settled at last in Natraj’s attic. Soon this man-eater of Magudi kills one man-eater and the attic is being filled up with all kinds of stuffed animals and their skin-flesh, rotten smell-a veritable hell on the earth. This demon-Vasu can even compare this process in his own distinct style:

“Actually the whole process of our work is much more hygienic and clean than paring skin of vegetables in your kitchen” and poor Natraj can only “shudder at the comparison”. He also understands, “No creature was safe, if it had the misfortune to catch his eyes”, just like Bhasmasura running after his benefactor. Even the suggestion to him to leave the house does not yield any result and Natraj agrees, “I was lulled into a state of resignation.” In chapter six, Shastri, the semi scholar-worker in Natraj’s press declares about Vasu: “He shows all the definition of a rakshasa.” It is he who first points out the Bhasmasura episode among others: “Then there was Bhasmasura, who occupied a special boon that everything he touched should be scorched, while nothing could destroy him. He made humanity suffer. God Vishnu was incarnated as a dancer of great beauty, named Mohini, with whom the asura or demon become 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 remark seems to be prophetic for Vasu’s fate is sealed in almost the same way.

But the story needs Mohini to complete it. Soon Rangi arrives there to infuse dispirited Natraj. The name is very much akin and suggestive of mythical Mohini, (for Rangi means colorful or one who can change colors according to his or her own mood) the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Rangi-Mohini are the answers of the novelist and so to say the world’s and nature’s ethical plan to counter anomalies that trespassed, shook, and caused commotion in nature’s plan. Now this dealer in death, reigning high in his death’s kingdom and with his silenced, stuffed and dumb beasts is to face Rangi-the colorful women or who is prone to change herself like Mohini who can enchant and at the same time bewilder others. We can note the first response of Natraj in seeing Rangi in the midnight stairs-‘animated hayena’, which suggests with all her other characteristics the very animated and vibrant energy also which our Natraj lacks miserably. From her very first appearance it is also evident that Natraj comes to think and brood on her and he admits that, “my mind was busy following the fleshy image of Rangi and perhaps I resented the intrusion.” We see Narayan is so much fond of this word ‘intrusion’. But where in his *The Guide*, Raju welcomed intrusion; here Natraj resented at least on the very first impulse. Perhaps because that intrusion changed Raju’s voyage of being in life’s way and Natraj resented because the intrusion has already intruded and he wants to be remain glued in its ‘fleshy image’, and moreover who can prevent and resent over intrusion at last?

The situation becomes all the more tense with the arrival of Kumar, the pet elephant of temple, managed by Mempi villagers and Vasu takes it as an easy prey to ply on when strict vigil on the part of the

forest officials has narrowed and dried up his source in the jungle itself. It was Rangi who informed our Natraj in a near mystical appearance at a midnight about Vasu's intention. We know Narayan is very much fond of this mystical portraiture of appearances and realities which he used so vigorously in many of his novels, like *The English Teacher* which shares almost a half of the total size of the novel with spirituality-death-communication theme and so many mystic perceptions. We have also seen this in *The Guide* where the once commercial guide becomes the spiritual guide and he can even sense rain in the hills after long terrific draught. After the night's dreamy hallucinated eyes become clearer, Natraj finds "She was not rugged", and he says to himself, "not bad, not bad. Her breasts are billowy, like those one sees in temple sculpture. Her hips are classical." We can surely find this effort of accentuating Rangi, the downtrodden pros-girl to traditional womanhood and form and even a keen desire to merge her with divinity and again a little later, "She stood on the last step, a goddess carved in the cinder." But the news she delivers is rather a blow that interrupts his midnight dreamy fantasy that sides with breaking the traditional norm of the society and be merged with Rangi. Rangi tells, "I must get back before he awakes. Listen, he is talking of shooting your Kumar tomorrow. Be careful."

Natraj is changed somewhat. He changes himself to act. He declines and denies Shastri's home-going and send him to the binder. He can now say with self-spirit "Nothing shall happen. I shall have Rangi and that paramour of hers in the police lockup."

In the essay, *The Blank Page and Issues of Female Creativity*, Susan Gubar states that male writers often use literature as a way to create woman they would like to be created; women are the 'blank page' upon which the male writers writes so to say the female is not complete yet until the male author has finished her, if the male sees female as a 'blank page'. Another theorist Judith Kegan Gardiner also states that, "female identity is a process." Here Narayan also sheds his rosy spectacles and exposes the darker side of life and world, and women figure a very significant position in that exposition going through a process of identification as Narayan himself commented at Columbia University in 1972:

After writing a number of novels and short stories based on the society around me, some years ago I suddenly came across a theme which struck me as an excellent piece of mythology in modern dress. It was published under the title, *Man Eater of Malgudi*...I based this story on a well-known mythical episode, the story of Mohini and Bhasmasura.

Narayan's treatment of Vasu is also very puzzling. While he carefully bestows all sorts of negative elements on him, his rough-demon like appearance, his provoking behavior, immoral character etc. as in chapter nine after hearing Natraj's request not to harm the temple elephant, the narrator describes: "he laughed diabolically. You want to know everything my boy. Wait and you will know. Whatever you have to know will be known one day." He said in a 'biblical manner'. This juxtaposition of two opposite characteristics of nature made him really a complete mythic-mystery. The person is at once diabolical and biblical. In chapter nine, we also see Natraj letting out a terrific cry which drowned the noise of children, music and everything, "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 to our rescue now." The circle is complete as we see in the mythical Shiva-Bhasmasura episode; ultimately Lord Vishnu comes to the aid of Shiva by being incarnated into Mohini. So also here our Natraj, (another name of Shiva) cries for Lord Vishnu's help. Someone remarks, "This man is possessed, listen to him" and he himself thought, "I realized that I had an odd commanding position. People were prepared to do anything I suggest." In chapter ten, it was said about Vasu, "He was the prince of darkness, and in darkness his activities were to be conducted" and soon he killed himself slapping on his own forehead very much like Bhasmasura.

We should conclude this essay by pointing out the remarks of V. S Naipaul who says in his *'India: A Wounded Civilization'* about Narayan, "...what had seemed speculative and comic, aimless and 'Russian' about Narayan's novels had turned out to be something else, the expression of an almost hermetic philosophical system. The novel I had read as novel was also a fable, a classic exposition of the hindu equilibrium, surviving the shock of an alien culture, an alien literary form, an alien literary language, and making harmless even these new concepts it appeared to welcome." What is noteworthy is that he corrects himself and at last could discern the 'hermetic philosophical system' playing its tune in it.

The Sankhya Yoga of Indian philosophical doctrine holds that prakriti or nature is said to be the root cause of all philosophical happenings and prakriti is simultaneously identified with woman. Thus it is the woman who stirs the male protagonists to act, think, and that too in different ways and transforms them towards spiritual enlightenment and identification. Rangi here plays that role and induces Natraj in *The Man Eater of Malgudi*

Thus, the present essay attempts to look into *The Man Eater of Malgudi* as a novel that can be read as a death's discourse and woman has a very large and almost ingrained role in it. These are the factors which differentiates the present novel in the tradition and discourses of novel.

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