

Problematizing R.K.Narayan's Use of Myth in *the Man-Eater of Malgudi*

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This paper attempts to scrutinize R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* as a novel that presents a fictional vivification and problematization of Robert Connell's theoretical framework that studies the interconnections between masculinities woven into a recasting of the Bhasmasura myth. Interesting insights into the social organization of masculinities in middle class upper caste Southern India are offered by the novel nesting as it does within a fictive and mythic context. Before getting into an analysis of the novel itself, it is important to clearly outline the theoretical framework that will be employed to study the novel.

Twenty first century critical practice classifies masculinities studies under the broad umbrella of gender studies. It has become common parlance to talk in terms of femininity and masculinity not as unitary fields of enquiry but as plural, and therefore the terms 'femininities' and 'masculinities'. Connell's work in the area of masculinities' studies is seminal in that his theoretical paradigms offer vivid and often imagistic models that clarify and facilitate our understanding of gender as "social practice" in the present times. He classifies the complex relations within masculinities under the following heads: "Hegemony, Subordination, Complicity and Marginalization" (5). Before moving on to his classification of the nuanced relationships within masculinities, it is important to look at how he defines the term 'masculinity'. As a concept, it assumes "a belief in individual difference and personal agency" and rests on "the conception of individuality that developed in early-modern Europe with the growth of colonial empires and capitalist economic relations" (1).

Connell accedes that the term is conceptually and "inherently relational" (1) in that it is always looked at in opposition to 'femininity'. Just as disempowering as the other crucial binary of the private and the public as separate spheres, such a conception relies heavily on arbitrary norms that prescribe what masculinity is, should be and ought to be. The term 'masculinity' has been defined by Connell briefly as "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (3). What is noteworthy here is that the definition looks at masculinity as a patriarchal creation that has been intentionally projected as a pedestal worthy of aspiration. Patriarchal forces have been continually re-inventing ways and means of projecting it as a seat of power which can allow man access to the "patriarchal dividend" (7).

This paper seeks to show how Narayan uses a re-telling of the Bhasmasura myth in modern terms in order to scrutinize the social practice of gender, especially masculinity, in middle class upper caste Southern India. Narayan's location as an upper caste South Indian Brahmin is itself problematic and immediately makes him vulnerable to allegations of being classist and exclusionist as a novelist. The novel indeed offers enough evidence that shows that his central protagonist, Nataraj, the printer, is petty, domineering, patriarchal and chauvinistic to the core. As a husband, he does not hesitate to dominate his wife and cows her protests down when she expresses her disapproval at his interactions with the local temple dancer, Rangi. He is quite brazen about looking leeringly at the women who visit Vasu, his so-called tenant, who practices the trade of taxidermy in the attic of Nataraj's printing press. While he does not hesitate to castigate Vasu for encouraging such visits by "loose women", he has no qualms at indulging in bouts of fantasy over them himself. With the few people in the novel over whom he can exercise his power, he is quite aggressive and pushy. Indeed Narayan seeks to show that this is hardly desirable as a model of masculinity through instances like the one involving the waste paper buyer or the *raddiwalla*. The *raddiwalla* is a poor Muslim who is harassed by Nataraj and kept waiting for hours on end at the end of which he strikes a hard bargain.

I called up a waste-paper buyer, who was crying for customers in the streets, and sent him up the rickety staircase to make a survey and tell me his offer. He was an old Moslem who carried a sack on his back and cried, "Old paper, empty bottles," tramping the streets all afternoon. "Be careful," I told him as I sent him up the stairs to estimate. "There may be snakes and scorpions up there. No human being has set foot in the attic for years." Later, when I heard his steps come down, I prepared myself for the haggling to follow by stiffening my countenance and assuming a grave voice. He parted the curtain, entered my parlour and stood respectfully pressing his back close to the wall and awaiting my question.

"Well, have you examined the lot?"

"Yes, sir. Most of the paper is too old and is completely brown."

"Surely you didn't expect me to buy the latest editions for your benefit, or did you think I would buy white paper by the ream and sell it to you by weight?" I spoke with heavy cynicism, and he was softened enough to say, "I didn't say so..." Then he made his offer. I ignored it completely as not being worth a man's notice.

At this point, if he had really found my attitude unacceptable, he should have gone away, but he stayed, and that was a good sign. I was looking through the

proofs of a cinema programme and I suddenly left him in order to attend to some item of work inside the press. I came out nearly an hour later, and he was still there. He had set his gunny sack down and was sitting on the door-step. "Still here!" I cried, feigning astonishment. "By all means rest here if you like, but don't expect me to waste any more time talking to you. I don't have to sell that paper at all. I can keep it as I have kept it for years". (Narayan 23-24)

So much for his much touted non-materialistic attitude! It is through the behaviour of the powerful towards the powerless in the novel that Narayan allows his readers to form their attitudes towards the main characters who represent oppositional attitudes to life. In the second chapter, Nataraj very grandly declares, "I welcome friends rather than customers. I'm not a fellow who cares for money". (22)

The Bhasmasura myth is retold in modern terms in order to draw a parallel between Vasu, the taxidermist and the *rakshasha* Bhasmasura, and Nataraj (Shiva's namesake) the printer and Shiva who makes the mistake of being misplaced in his altruism. Shiva in the original myth commits the error of being benevolent and generous to Bhasmasura because he flatters him with his penance, little realizing that by granting a boon that empowers Bhasmasura with the power to turn anyone he lays his right hand on to ashes, he is not only putting the lives of the other devas at risk but also his own! Alarmed at the prospect of a Bhasmasura who threatens to lay his hand on Shiva's head, Shiva runs to Vishnu for help. Vishnu takes the form of a beautiful danseuse, Mohini who lures and entices Bhasmasura into placing his fatal hand on his own head thus destroying himself! Mohini's role is played by Rangi, the temple dancer in the novel, who is indirectly responsible for Vasu's death. Vasu had threatened to kill the temple elephant Kumar for its skin and carcass and Rangi planned to sedate Vasu by poisoning him using his favourite *pulav*. However, Vasu refuses to eat the food she brings. Instead, he instructs Rangi to fan him while he sleeps to ward off the mosquitoes that irritate him no end. Rangi falls asleep on the job, thus indirectly causing a mosquito to bite Vasu on his forehead. Vasu, who prides himself on an iron fist, is angered by the mosquito bite, and brings his hand on his own forehead forcibly to swat the mosquito thus causing his own death.

What makes the novel an interesting re-telling of the Bhasmasura myth is the fact that the competing characters of Nataraj and Vasu present two extremes of the masculinities spectrum that are both, one would like to think, undesirable and avoidable as socially practicable models of masculinity. Nataraj plays the role of the complicitly masculine but is inconsistent, petty and imbalanced in his approach to life. Vasu plays the role of the hegemonic model who is clearly an embodiment of all that is undesirable and unwelcome. What is also interesting is that while Nataraj is portrayed in communitarian

and relational terms, Vasu is portrayed as being individualistic and insulated as a personality. Tabish Khair's analysis of the action of Narayan's novels can be illuminating. Khair writes:

The action in Narayan's novels adopts the following course:

1. The character lives in a largely traditional, middle-class, respectable-caste set-up, and also shows evidences of alienation (mostly 'existential' and bourgeois) which leave him/her open to influence by stronger characters.
2. This set-up is disturbed by the introduction of a stranger who captivates the character.
3. The status quo is restored in the end, with or without a perceptible change in the character's existential status. (236)

Khair's analysis fits *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* perfectly. Nataraj belongs to an upper-caste family which is essentially a middle-class, conventional one and is certainly meek enough to be cowed down by a character like Vasu whose arrival disturbs his otherwise placid life. However, there is no change in Nataraj's character even by the end of the novel. He remains a rather ineffectual character with a thoroughly misplaced sense of priorities. Vasu as the stranger who unsettles Nataraj's humdrum, routine existence rankles because he poses "a challenge to the settled middle-class (mostly Brahmin) ethos of Malgudi" (Khair 238).

The critic M.K. Naik writes, "*The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is at once a re-creation of the old Hindu myth of Bhasmasura in modern form and a presentation of two diametrically opposed attitudes to life" (142). As a novel where character and plot are closely interwoven, the work embodies a conflict between the insulated personality and the open and the vulnerable one. The characters of Nataraj and Vasu present interesting foils into which traces of Robert Connell's categorization of the hegemonic and the complicit masculinities can be read. Hegemonic masculinity has been viewed as the embodiment of a strategy that is currently accepted by a dominant group that seeks access to the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell). This can be seen embodied in Vasu's character, however it has been problematized by Narayan by using the mythic parallel.

Vasu comes across as the quintessential *rakshasa*. He has all the requisite qualities of one. He demonstrates an overweening pride, wrath, harshness of speech, insatiable desire and cruelty. Additionally, as Naik puts it he is endowed with "... superhuman strength" and is "ugly and ferocious in appearance with cannibalistic propensities, incapable of affection, gratitude, sympathy or regard for others." (143). He is "a creature of the jungle, full of mystery, dirty and unclean in habits and a completely amoral

being, obeying no laws – of God or man.” “He has a ‘bull-neck’, a ‘tanned face’, ‘a hammer fist’, ‘large powerful eyes under thick eyebrows’, ‘a large forehead’, ‘a shock of unkempt hair like a black halo’, loud and gaudy clothes (red checked bush shirt and field grey trousers). He drives the jeep at breakneck speed and Nataraj describes him as ‘the prince of darkness’.” (143-144) Also like the *rakshasasin* Hindu mythology, Vasu is not an ignorant monster. He is also a learned taxidermist.

Complicit masculinity also realizes the patriarchal dividend without running the risk of being ‘the frontline troops of patriarchy’. Men like Nataraj who respect their wives and mothers, are never violent towards women, and bring home the family wage. Nataraj’s character however can be problematized in that it does not fit neatly into this category. He comes across as modest, un-selfconfident, timid and nervous. While he is apparently loyal and devoted to his wife he progressively proves himself to be patriarchal and domineering. He pretends to be benevolent but actually demonstrates a strong business acumen. His gesture of welcoming any passerby into the parlour of his printing press is also not devoid of selfish intent as one can see in the very first chapter of the novel. “Anyone who found his feet aching as he passed down Market Road was welcome to rest in my parlour on any seat that happened to be vacant. While they rested there, people got ideas for bill forms, visiting cards, or wedding invitations which they had asked me to print...(Narayan 1-2).” He projects an impression of not being money minded but is quite petty at times. He is rather spineless in comparison with Vasu but shows complicity with patriarchy.

In conclusion, one could say that while Narayan cleverly uses the Bhasmasura myth and the contrasting personalities of Nataraj and Vasu to drive home the point that misplaced and imbalanced altruism will only lead to disaster, the novel ends up being an example of *babu fiction* that is prejudiced to say the least. The phrase is borrowed from Tabish Khair’s work which looks at the *babu* as “an urban, westernized, English-educated person” (9). Both Narayan himself and his characters fall into this category. Khair maintains that such a location influences the literature produced.

...I do not wish to imply that the mere fact of belonging to a social class precludes the possibility of transcending the boundaries of that class or that material economic factors directly and solemnly determine cultural representations. But I definitely wish to investigate how these boundaries are expanded and defined, and how the fact of belonging to a privileged class in a highly class and caste conscious society impinges upon the literature created.
(22)

One cannot help but agree with Khair that

It is in these tensions and cross-tensions, in these silences and enunciations that Narayan's art not only constitutes itself but also reveals Narayan's dual position as a subaltern and Babu, as Western and Indian. In his depicted world of Malgudi he has broken the fetters of a colonized Indian English imagination and brilliantly given speech to a silenced aspect of ordinary Indian life. On the other hand, this very speech is often predicated on the continued silencing of certain other aspects of India – even to the extent that the discourses that Narayan employs (whether Hindu-Brahminical, Babu-secular or existential) often serve to obscure the intensity and activity of alienation across socio-economic lines. (240)

Works Cited

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