# Mythical Method in the *Man-Eater of Malgudi*: A Critical Study

**Ramen Baruah**

**Abstract:** Myths have been playing a significant role in shaping and enriching the aura of Indian literature. Throughout the ages, the Indian authors have made use of the mythical tales from the epics, the *Puranas*, the *Panchatantra* and the *Jatakas* in their writings while designing their narratives. As a typical Indian author, R.K. Narayan has also used them abundantly in his novels and short stories. In the novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, the author has re-visited multiple myths ranging from the Bhasmasura myth to the recurring *deva-asura* war, sometimes to reproduce them as tokens of collective unconscious, while on some other occasion to appropriate myth to reality.

**Keywords**: Myth, d*eva-asura* war, collective unconscious, appropriate myth to reality.

## Introduction

It may appear quite outdated to look back to the world of myth in an age of extreme modernity, specialised by the explosion of sophisticated technology and information. The unprecedented advancement of science and technology has shaped and re-shaped the modern world in such a way that the people do not like to keep themselves engaged in the fantastic tales of the gods and goddesses, nor will they be fascinated by the mythical world of mystery and supernaturality. In spite of all these, the myths have still been able to prove, rather strongly, their timelessness and ever-contemporaneity. The assertion of proof may be questioned but, they are parts of the folk culture and people's belief systems. The German hermeneutic philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey, interestingly takes the position that mythology is the beginning of science; that is, he does not regard myth pre-scientific, which is mostly supposed to be the case. The basic reason behind it is the scope for multiplicity of interpretations that every myth can offer and their undying relevance. This is why they have stood to the test of time and successfully been able to sustain in terms of their credibility and acceptability even amidst a sea of change (Makkreel 2008).

This proves more solid when it is seen in the context of the Indian society - a society not only studded with a rich heritage of myth-making, but also a product of a great civilisation founded upon the ideals of the epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* and the *Puranas*. Throughout the ages, it is seen how deeply and integrally these mythical stories have seized the minds of the Indians and contributed to the framing each and every ideology and principles ranging from the normal day- to- day practices to the highest level of philosophical or spiritual aspirations. This very reality results into the abundant presence of the mythic elements in the literature of the Indian authors. Simply to say, the myths have become so integral a part of the Indians that the mythic elements have the obvious entry into the Indian writers' realm - no matter knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally. Being so, without looking into these elements and their world, it is impossible to understand properly the most of the

underlying implications of this literature. It sounds more plausible when it is about the authors like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore, Anita Desai, Nissim Ezekiel and Amitabh Ghosh. As such, an effort has been made in this paper to explore the use of the mythic elements in R.K. Narayan's novel the *Man-Eater of Malgudi* with special emphasis on the author's re-visiting of the mythic realm to situate them in the contemporary reality.

**Discussion**

The myths can briefly be defined as some imaginary tales constructed in the distant past, which are primarily about some superhuman figures and supernatural phenomena, their fantastic activities, the mysterious world pertaining to them, the ever-active cosmic forces and the kindred things. As such, they are about the antiquity, yet they are so constructed that they not only bear the mark of the peoples' way of life of a particular time, their set of beliefs, but also their vision, ideals, principles and philosophical orientation. On the other hand, they are carried from one generation to another with such faith, respect and involvement that they become a part of the 'collective unconscious', as stated by Norton Frye. (Frye 1957: 26)  In the context of India, the myths incorporated in the epics, *the Puranas,, the Panchatantra* and *the Jatakas* have, in reality, shaped and moulded the basic fabric of its civilisation, its religion, philosophy and culture. So, the most of the native Indian literature is reflective of the world of the Indian myths in multiple ways such as:

i. Re-producing of the mythical stories in the fiction like the *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi and  the *Maharathi* by Chandraprasad Saikia.
ii. Using myths to describe certain behavioural aspects of a character or some situations.
iii. Making some characters describe or refer to some myths on relevant occasions.
iv. Deliberately introducing myths to achieve a desired goal.
v. Using myths as parallel or counter-parallel to reality.

Excepting the first one of these to some extent, the remaining four are unarguably applicable in the study of R.K. Narayan's novel from mythic perspective. From his first novel *Swami and Friends* to the last one, the novelist, resorted to the vast arena of the Indian mythology productively. Of course, a perpetually changing trend can be seen in the course of his use of the myths for fictional narrative. For instance, in the *Swami and Friends,* the author just makes some characters reiterate parts of certain mythic stories on chosen occasions, that too either by a child or by Swami's grandmother, which happens naturally as a part of the collective unconscious of the Malgudian society. But the myths gradually come to the foreground as the days pass and the author's deliberate emphasis on the mythic tales becomes more vibrant in the novels like *Mr. Sampath,*  the  *Guide,* the *English Teacher,* The *Financial Expert* and the *Man-Eater of Malgudi*. In *the Waiting for the Mahatma* and in *the Tiger for Malgudi,* the first-hand use of the myths is rarely visible. In spite of that, Narayan tries to experiment here with the myth of Gandhism situating it into the contemporary reality, in the process of which he has also raised considerable amount of questions pertaining to the practicality of Gandhism. The critical twist herein is noteworthy because the novelist has made an attempt to deconstruct the pro-mythic Gandhism by positioning it into the day-to-day-life of

some selected Indians and thereby exposing the underlying hypocrisy. Observing such overwhelming use of myths by Narayan, S.R. Ramteck remarks, "The Hindu myths have gripped Narayan's mind so much that he naturally takes them up for themes in his novels." ( Bhatnagar 2002: 21)

It is interesting to note that Narayan's use of myth in his novels is sporadic to elaborate a perspective or to explain his view of life. He would introduce the myths almost in a similar manner as the most of the Indians do in their day-to-day conversation. This is generally done with a view to explaining the time-tested values which incessantly influence thoughts and behaviour even in the modern period. But it appears quite different in a novel like the *Man- Eater of Malgudi*. The difference is primarily earmarked by the all-absorbing trace of hilariousness which runs through the entire novel. This paper attempts to throw light on the way the novelist has re-visited certain Indian myths and then appropriated them to describe his contemporary reality.

The theme of this novel revolves around a hard-hearted cruel man named Vasu and his counterpart Nataraj, a printer by profession. As the antithesis of the taxidermist Vasu, Nataraj is portrayed as weak, helpless, idiotic and vacillating. The central myth applied in the novel is the myth of Bhasmasura. Professor Iyengar would like to see it in the light of the *Deva-Asura* war as he has maintained that the *Man-Eater of Malgudi* is "meant to be a modern version of one of the Deva-Asura conflicts of very ancient times." (Iyengar 1973: 382)

As portrayed in the novel, Vasu, with all his physical stature and strength, cruel and boastful nature, resembles an *Asura* of the Indian myths - a fitting manifestation of a demon in the modern time, whose presence comes as a disturbance to the entire peaceful ambiance of Malgudi - a chaos in the cosmos, so to say. Once he rushes into Malgudi, he starts killing the animals, sells carcasses and keeps moving from one place to another, resembling not only a familiar rouge of today, but also a demon of the mythical world. Like a demon, he thinks himself to be invincible and indiscriminately tortures men and animals. All these continue for a considerable span of time, but cannot be so endlessly. While at the moment of his extreme dominance and arrogance, his sheer fall comes when he severely hurts his own forehead on the way of slapping a disturbing mosquito and succumbs to death. A gigantic figure's exceptional boon of stature, strength and power proves a curse for himself, which leads to his unexpected death!

This side of the story parallels the myth of Bhasmasura. Bhasmasura was gifted with an extraordinary power by Lord Shiva by his devotion or *bhakti* by dint of which he could burn everyone into ashes simply by putting his hand on someone's head to bless him. But such a unique gift instantly proved a fatal curse for him as soon as this demon failed to rationalise that miraculous power out of his pride and foolishness. Immediately after having gifted, Bhasmasura crazed for testing his newly-gained power by touching the head of Shiva himself. The baffled Shiva had to run away out of fear while he was madly followed by the demon. Such a crisis necessitated Lord Vishnu's interference. In the guise of Mohini, a fascinating woman and the lone female incarnation, Vishnu urged Bhasmasura to test his power by touching his own head. Bhasmasura did that and he was immediately burnt into ashes.

It is evident that Narayan had deep knowledge of the Indian mythology and so he would repeatedly take recourse to it for shaping his fictional narrative. The remarkable exceptionality in a novel like the

*Man-Eater of Malgudi* is that the worlds of myth and the fiction are intertwined. If this is the fact, then it will offer another scope to interpret the story as the recurring war between the *'devas'* (gods) and the '*asuras'* (demons). Vasu with all the evil qualities resembles the *'asuras'* of the mythical world, while Nataraj the *'devas'*. But the point of difference with Nataraj is that he has been depicted as too weak and benumb a character to identify him with the *'devas'*. On the way of situating the myth to the contemporary reality, the novelist has distorted its original spirit. As narrated in the Indian myths, the '*devas*' possess immense power and are always studded with mystical and superhuman capability. But Nataraj in the novel is so weak and powerless a person that he cannot match Vasu to any extent. As such, he looks like a 'displaced' mythical figure. He is found easily undermined by Vasu and he can never show any courage to put resistance to this counterpart. It is evident when we find him praying God to save the elephant and the chariot-pullers on the festive day: "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." (Narayan 1984: 175-176)

This prayer of Nataraj not only unfolds his concern for the elephant and the innocent people, but his helplessness as well. Besides this, it reminds us of the mythical story of the *Gajendra Upakhyan* where the elephant prayed to God for its rescue when a monstrous crocodile caught hold of its leg in the lake. As God Vishnu rescued the elephant from the crocodile's grasp, destiny played its role to save the elephant and the innocent men and women by causing the sudden death of Vasu at this moment. Similar to the prayer of the elephant in the *Gajendra Upakhyan,* Nataraja's prayer is fulfilled because Vasu's death comes out as a great relief to the life of the elephant and the threatened chariot pullers.

The way Narayan has made use of this mythical story in this episode of the novel is indicative of the idea of the myth becoming a part of 'collective unconsciouses'. The Indians have the common tendency of submitting to God when amidst unassailable troubles. On the other hand, the novel further incites us to consider another myth-centric dimension, which is about the recurrent theme of the *deva-asura* conflict. The Indian mythology assertively establishes the destruction of the evil forces (the *asuras*) and the establishment of the good ones (the *devas*). The novel can be said to have attempted the same analogy through the conflicting Vasu and Nataraj. It is all about maintaining a balance, which comes as soon as Vasu dies. The entire development justifies the symmetry of the Indian mythology that stands on the proverbial proposition like "*sarvam atyanta garhitam*", i.e. too much of anything is condemnable. As an embodiment of the pure spirit of Hinduism, Narayan fosters a firm belief in moral order, which finds vivid expression in the *Man-Eater of Malgudi*. But the novelist's technique of using the myths by negotiating them with reality is an additional boon to his fictional narrative. Briefly to say, his archetypal use of the mythic pattern is exceptional and it has helped him immensely in running two narratives simultaneously - one on the surface level, while the other on the underlying level, resembling the undercurrent. By shaping the idea of the mythical demon through Vasu, he succeeds in describing its relevance to the modern time. As such, Nataraj is the modern prototype of the *'sura'*- the gods or the good forces and Vasu is of the *'asura'*- the demon or the evil force. Vasu's death by his own hand is indicative of the greater cosmic design that ensures the restoration of peace by causing the end of the evil strategically.

**Conclusion**

It is admissible that Narayan's objective of using myths as a part of his narrative strategy is neither to justify nor to establish their plausibility. This is evident in his attempt to deconstruct the mythic stature of the '*sura*' or *'deva'* through the character of Nataraj as well as to deconstruct the mythic stature of the *'sura'* and to go for the metaphorical usage of the entire myths. By doing all these, the author has minimised the gap between the world of myths and that of the contemporary reality and executed a balanced convergence of both in his novels. On the other hand, by repeatedly taking recourse to this world of myths, he could develop an identity of his own as a distinguishable Indian writer by projecting this art of story-telling as a potentially resisting force against the Western colonial aggression of his age. His fictional world of Malgudi has contributed to it as this locale is depicted with all the typicalities of a native Indian locality. In the research article 'Use of Myth in the Novels of R.K. Narayan,' Manisha Sarkar observes: "R.K. Narayan's novels project an Indianness through the presentation of Malgudi which emerges as steeped in three thousand-year-old tradition of Hindu culture. The gods and demons, an integral part of the Indian tradition, are a constant source of inspiration for him." (Putatundra 2002: 217) So that a tradition of its own can be developed against the aggressive Western aura of fiction, his Malgudi has been characterised by all Indianness - its topography, topology as well as its beliefs, tradition and culture. With this intention, he 'incorporates mythical incidents and the experiences of gods and demons" and successfully makes them "relevant to the people of Malgudi." In course of doing so, he does not experiment in alteration or modernisation of the myths, but endeavours to show their "timeless relevance as the most immediate form of human experience" through their "symbolic representation." ( Putatundra 2002: 217)

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