

# The Myth of Bhasmasura, Modernity and Self-Destruction: A Study of R.K.Narayan's Maneater of Malgudi

Mr Aravind R

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vidyavardhaka First Grade College, Mysuru

## ABSTRACT

Myth is a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events that play a fundamental role in a society. Myths are often used by religious authorities and are closely linked to religion. The main characters in myths are usually non-humans like demons, fairies and some imaginative creatures. Myths generally include specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience.

Our ancestors weaved stories, legends with supernatural elements to bring about a moral fear and awareness among people. The concern for nature's preservation was evident in their literature. In the modern era, we are destroying nature at an unprecedented rate, threatening the survival of a million species – and our own future, too. Humans are transforming Earth's natural landscapes so dramatically that millions of plant and animal species are now at risk of extinction, posing a dire threat to ecosystems that people all over the world depend on for their survival. Global warming is one such example it seems to be a seed of man's self-destruction.

The myth of Bhasmasura speaks about such a self-destructive tendency of human beings. Disturbing and destructing nature, man is aiming at his own destruction, not of nature's. Bhasmasura misuses his boon and aims at destroying the very force that gave him such bounty, hence self-destruction was destined by Mohini avatar of Vishnu. In Man-eater of Malgudi, the myth is so well blended that the modernity is somehow a self-destructive seed for man. As William Wordsworth mentions that Industrial Revolution has marred the loveliness of nature. Probably Narayan through the character of Vasu is intending the same.

Vasu is an embodiment of such selfish and self-centered attitude of the modern man. His behaviour of having illicit sexual relations, blindly following the short-cuts to earn more and more money, at the cost of other's lives. Killing the innocent animals, threatening people of Malgudi, destroying their property – every bit of his character specifies the intoxication of modern man considering himself omnipotent and invincible that leads him towards his own destruction. Narayan gives a very powerful message through the character of Vasu that evil always brings self-destruction. He depicts the reality of modern man through this myth.

**Keywords:** Myth, Bhasmasura, Self-Destruction, Social Evil, Environmental Imbalance

R.K. Narayan is considered to be one of the leading authors of early Indian English literature along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. We can find social environment and day-to-day life of his characters stressed in every one of his novels. He has frequently been compared to William Faulkner, who also created a fictional city, and explored with humour and compassion the energy of ordinary life. R.K. Narayan, whose full name was Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, was born on October 10, 1906 in Madras in a working class South Indian family. Narayan's father was a head master. Narayan studied at CRC High School, Madras for a short time. When his father was appointed headmaster of the High School in Mysore, R.K. Narayan moved with his parents. In 1926, he joined Maharaja College, Mysore. After completing his academics he realized that he could only be happy in writing. He began his writing career, but was rejected by a lot of publishers. In 1933, Narayan worked as a journalist and in the meantime, he transferred his writings to his friend at Oxford who showed it to Graham Greene. Greene got the book published.

Narayan is extensively considered to be one of India's topmost English language novelists and had received prestigious awards and honours for his work. These include Sahitya Akademi Award, Padma Bhushan in 1964; and AC Benson Medal by the Royal Society of Literature in 1980. He was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1989. Apart from all these, he was also awarded memorial doctorates by numerous public and transnational universities like the University of Mysore, Delhi University and the University of Leeds.

Narayan created the fictional city of Malgudi and all his stories are set in this fictional city which represents any Indian city of South India. In *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, published in 1961, Narayan presents a clear use of the myth of Bhasmasura. Narayan's concern with myth is related to the creation of Vasu as a constant mortal miracle, as a form of evil present in every mortal society. In his novels we can find use of ancient myths, legends. That reflects the traditions, beliefs, customs, etc. of a society.

The story briefly is that the demon Bhasmasura ('Ash-demon') wanted to propitiate Shiva and underwent frightful penances to gain a boon from him. Shiva eventually appeared to him and gave him a wonderful gold bangle, which had the magical property of reducing instantly to ashes whomsoever he touched on the head with it. Bhasmasura immediately wanted to test his powers on Shiva himself. Shiva prayed to Vishnu for help, and Vishnu duly appeared as the beautiful divine enchantress Mohini. The demon was bewitched by her and stopped chasing Shiva. Mohini danced for Bhasmasura and encouraged him to do likewise. He began to dance and imitated all Mohini's movements. She ultimately touched her own head and when the demon did so, he was incontinently burnt to ashes. *Maneater of Malgudi* is generally interpreted as a story about two manly characters, Nataraj and Vasu. Nataraj struggles to incorporate the aggressiveness and naturalness of Vasu into his own personality until he's suitable to crop at the end of the tale, after Vasu destroys himself. If Vasu can be compared to Bhasmasura, Nataraj to Shiva, Rangi is the Mohini avatar of Lord Vishnu to destroy Vasu (Bhasmasura).

The novel has Vasu as its central character, a taxidermist by profession, he appears all of the sudden at Nataraj's press, ordering visiting cards intending to begin his career in Malgudi. He learnt the art of stuffing creatures from a master named Suleiman, but before that he learnt wrestling and killed his own practitioner with deadly shot, in a moment of fury. Nataraj is proprietor of the small printing press. He gives his garret on his press to Vasu only to have it overhauled by Vasu's life style, values and taxidermist profession. Vasu takes over his garret as living – cum – working quarter for himself. From the very beginning of the novel we can observe Vasu struck Nataraj as a man of abnormal features. Vasu

is no longer just a killer of creatures who disturbs Nataraj, but a true demon who threatens to destroy Nataraj's way of life. As numerous demons have ahead, Vasu threatens to destroy the entire world..

The battle between Vasu and Nataraj is framed in the environment of the myth. The novel is read as a restructuring of the stories of the Hindu Mythology where a demon works hard generally by prayer and penance, propitiates a deity of his choice, acquires a boon and also uses this for negative and destructive purposes. Eventually, the deity is so tortured that he takes godly help to destroy the demon. He thinks he's invincible, beyond every law, but eventually he oversteps his limitations and is destroyed. In Mysore we've the legend and myth of Mahishasura and his assistant Rakthabija. Mahishasura was a demon king who ruled Mysuru. He was eventually killed by goddess Chamundeshwari. Mahishasura is a Sanskrit word composed of Mahisha meaning "buffalo" and asura meaning "demon", rephrasing to "Buffalo Demon". As an asura, Mahishasura waged war against the forces of the world, as the gods and asuras were constantly in conflict Mahishasura had gained the boon that no man could kill him. In the battles between the suras(gods) and the demons( asuras), the suras, led by Indra, were defeated by Mahishasura., the suras assembled in the mountains where their combined godly powers transferred into goddess Durga. The invigorated Durga led a battle against Mahishasura, and killed him. later, she was named Mahishasuramardini, meaning The Killer of Mahishasura. According to Christopher Fuller, Mahishasura represents the forces of ignorance and chaos hidden by external appearances. The popular legend is that Mysuru( Mahishooru) gets its name from Mahishasuramardini, a incarnation of goddess Durga.. It's believed that goddess Durga( Chamundeshwari) killed Mahishasura on top of the Chamundi Hill. Rakthabija was the close associate of Mahishasura,-“ According to the sthala Puranas, he fought with Sumbha and Nisumbha against the goddesses Kali and Chandi, both forms of Durga. Rakthabija secured from Shiva, a boon according to which if one drop of blood from his body fell on the battleground, numerous Rakthabijas would arise from the blood and fight the enemies. Each of these Raktabījas would also be like the others in the matter of strength, form, and munitions. ”( From Wikipedia) still the legend goes that one form of Chamundeshwari, by the name Utthanahalli Thripurasundari, spread her tongue on the total of the battle field and sucked the blood dropped by Rakthabija and there by avoided the birth of numerous Rakthabijas and thereby killed the demon. In Man-eater of Malgudi, Vasu is also similar a character., Vasu is a taxidermist, who finds pleasure in draining mortal beings. He's recalled as person with satanic attributes.. Vasu is represented as the Man-eater of Malgudi who from his first appearance suggests the barbarous and evil rates underpinning in him. Vasu's death mirrors that of Bhasmasura in more than just that respect.

Vasu is like a Rakshasa in many ways. His extraordinary strength and appearance are obvious indicators that Vasu is not a normal man

Vasu who is an aggressive taxidermist, moves into Nataraj's attic, fills the place with an alarming number of stuffed hyenas, pythons and tigers. He introduces dancing girls into the tranquil ambiance and the ensuing events put the endurance of Nataraj to a stern test. In the novel, Vasu is introduced as an evil incarnate. He is six feet tall with large powerful eyes, bull neck, large forehead and hammer-fist. He is very confident, hard-hearted and does not have perception of morality. He boasts of being the rival to Nature whose values of life are based on material sources and destructive reasons.

Tommy Douglas says- “Man is now able to fly through the air like a bird, he is able to swim under the sea like a fish, he is able burrow beneath the ground like a mole. Now if only he could walk the earth like a man, this would be paradise.” Man has grown beyond limitations but he hardly realises that his own achievements may become fatal to him .In this era of AI (Artificial Intelligence) the scientists and

the technocrats have been warning about the usage of technology that is being fatal for nature flora and fauna . Ultimately man destroys himself, he is the self -destructive force .If no one can destroy him ,he destroys himself. In man eater of Malgudi, the character of vasu is an embodiment of such a realisation. Let us take the example of Kumbakarna in Ramayana who shows his gluttony diet, Vasu also possess the diet which involves almonds with milk, six eggs with honey every morning, rice and chicken at lunch and profusion of vegetables and fruits at night. His physical edifice, appearance and destructive thoughts reflect this. He petrifies children, slays animals, repels neighbourhood people with the stench of his workshop and defies social conventions by bringing in prostitutes. All these negative acts set him apart from common human beings. His bull-neck and hammer-fist, personalities make him appear more like a fiend than a man. The narrator shows all the definitions of Rakshasa for the character of vasu .Sastri went on to define Vasu as Rakshasa and says, “Every Rakshasa gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is invincible, beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him”. Vasu sketches to slay the temple elephant; it amounts to a direct attempt on the life of a god. Kumar is a sacred elephant being associated with the temple, and represents the Lord Ganesha. His killing of the sacred animals shows his disrespect for the gods which is a feature of demons

Vasu is not only just a killer of animals but also disturbs the existence of Nataraj. He acts like a true Rakshasa, a demon who threatens to destroy Nataraj's way of life. He kidnaps Nataraj and leaves him stranded far from home to pass through inevitable suffering which shows Vasu’s devilish spirit.. He also reckons to have poisoned Kumar, causing his illness and also shooting Kumar for financial benefit which is attributed to demons in mythology. He will not give importance to the cultural heritage and does not care for people’s spiritual and poignant emotions

In the novel, Narayan uses the Bhasmasura myth as a conscious technique, the mythical technique and the purpose being to stress the self-destructive nature of Vasu so as to enrich the texture of the novel and to link it up with the Indian classical tradition

In the novel, Sastri stresses the parallel between Vasu and Bhasmasura and hints at the manner of Vasu’s sudden and unexpected death. At the end Vasu dies like Bhasmasura with a blow of his fist on his own head and the novel concludes with the words of Sastri as, “Every demon appears in the world with a special boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the Rakshasa that were ever born. Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self- destruction and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?” He narrated again for Nataraj’s benefit the story of Bhasmasura, the unconquerable ,who scorched everything he touched, and finally reduced himself to ashes by placing the tips of his fingers on his own head” (240).

Vasu’s death suggests mythical parallel. The novelist wants to depict the karma philosophy. Even the character of Nataraj exemplifies the kind of people who the novelist would like to inhabit his Malgudi and who is the reader would also welcome in his midst as a person worthy of trust, in the novel Nataraj also support in launching the artist in the world which is a laudable attempt while he is also the person who indirectly destroys all that is evil in the microcosm of Malgudi so that good can prosper and proliferate. The rhythm of life returns to Malgudi and Nataraj after Vasu’s death.

## References

1. Narayan, R.K., the Man Eater of Malgudi. Mysore ,Indian Thought Publication,2022.
2. Sinha, U.P. Pattern of Myths and Reality, a study in R.K.Narayan’s novels.

3. Howarth, William. "Ecocriticism in Context". *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. Ed. Laurence Coupe. New York: Routledge, 2000.
4. Iyenger, K.R.S. *Indian Writing in English*. Delhi: Sterling Publication, 1983. p.380
5. Syal, Jyoti. "Characterization in R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*." *International Journal of Current Research*, vol. 9, no. 12, 2017, pp. 62974-62978.
6. Wikipedia, online searches and other web sources