

The use of Myth as a special technique in R.K Narayan's novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*

Ratan Ghosh

M.A. (English literature),

M. Phil, B. Ed.

Ph.D. Research scholar

(Department of English)

Abstract

This paper initiates to introduce R.K Narayan's ingenuity in the use of Myth or Mythology and Folks in his novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. India is a land of ancient myths and folks as seen in the great epics and in the 'Puras' and these myths and folks are the vehicles of social history expressing the social ethos when they become a significant part in literature, history and sociology. In his novels Narayan has deeply studied them and used them in his own way reflecting the socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political and psychological aspects of Indian society. His *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* ably represents these aspects of the society through the character of Vasu, the demon or the Rakshasa, a symbol of evil forces of human life. The main objectives as mythical structure, technique and methods are organised in such a way that the author is able to create a metaphysical world in it. The author's use of Hindu mythology finds a true reflection in this novel and through it he is able to represent a philosophical world of human mind and its overall effects on human society. Narayan's main attempt in this novel is to introduce the two contrasting forces- 'Good and Evil' that exist in every human mind, are distinctly focused. The novelist also represents in it a good lesson for every individual how the evil forces though possess immense power are ultimately vanquished and the good forces triumph over them. In fact, 'Poetic justice' finds its true expression in this novel and with it peace, prosperity, a world of love, sanctity, solitude and harmony are established.

Keywords- Myth or Mythology, folktales, Hindu mythology, psychology, Poetic justice

In a land of great epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and in a land of noble poet Kalidasa, a great Classical Sanskrit writer of poetry and plays based on the Indian Puranas, Myth or Mythology will no doubt play a special role in the technique of writing literature; be it in English, Hindi, Sanskrit, Bengali or any other Indian languages in general. Indian in theme and technique but writing in English has been a medium of expression for those who have dreamt of a cosmopolitan literary world. R.K Narayan is one whose dreams as

The use of Myth as a special technique in R.K Narayan's novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*

BY

Ratan Ghosh

cosmopolitan writer reflected in his great works like *The Guide*, *Swami and Friends*, *Malgudi Days*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The English Teacher*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and many more. The term 'myth' has been widely used in Indian literature and it is as a form of fictitious stories or as the mythical stories of ancient Indian civilization play a powerful and predominant role in the formation of the background of Indian writing in English. In the modern era especially from last few decades 'Myth' has become a something cliché of the literary criticism. Apart from literary criticism the term is used in a variety of meanings in Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, Philosophy and Theology. Each field of study invests it with different connotations but its use in literature is more extensive. In this context Northrop Frye asserts- 'The typical forms of myth become the conventions and genres of literature'.

In general Myths exist in every society, as they are basic elements of human culture. The main function of myths is to teach moral lessons and explain historical records. Authors of great literary works have taken refuge for their stories and themes in myths since the beginning of literary as an individual art form. Myths and their mythical symbols have significant literary value in creative art. The cultural significance can get its utmost expression in the works where myths are used as the vehicle of creative activity. There has been a controversy about the origin of religion and Myths. It is thought and accepted that myths have originated before religion and all religious stories are, in fact, retellings of global mythical themes. Besides literature, myths also play a great role in science, psychology and philosophy.

The use of Myth in literature highlights the classical tone of the age because myths are the bearers of cultural trends of any civilization. Myths not only reflect the cultural heritage of a civilization but also reflect people, society, custom and past history of the nation. In literature there are mainly two ways in which Myths are used. Of the two the popular one is the conscious use of myth which is a popular literary device and a part of modern trends. The great modern British writers like T.S Eliot, James Joyce, E.M Forster and many other have consciously used myth in their noble works. All these writers differ widely in their techniques and intentions but they are common in their use of myth. Each one of them uses mythical or classical situations or characters in a modern context and reflects the predicament of contemporary man and the larger perspective of time. The unconscious use of myth is another type of technique in which the writers may not be conscious about the use of it but the critics and scholars discover the use and functions of the myths in everyday literary text. There are many novels, mock-epics, lyric poems and plays in which myths have played significant role to highlight the cultural tradition of the nation hitherto unknown.

There are questions regarding the importance of reading Myth in literature. Why do the myths operate powerfully in the modern literary works and why myths and legends are a significant factor in the thought pattern of the writers? The answer to these questions is very simple. The poets and writers always draw their attention towards myths and legends for their

quality of timelessness and antiquity reflecting the distant and far-off things of the nation. The importance of myths lies in their quality of attraction reflected through the art of enchantment and charm in an uncanny situation. Indian mythological stories have fundamental significance even today. Indian writers in these days reflect the social narratives through the classical stories of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas and other long standing orally transmitted tales. Indian writers are always aware of this fundamental significance and referred and recreated to the classical mythological stories in their literary possibilities. Myths and legends attract the authors because the writers derive from those legend or folk tales patterns of stories or story contents or essential principles of story-telling. Canadian critic Northrop Frye's remark in *Fables of Identity* is praiseworthy: "Writers are interested in (them) for the same reason that painters are interested in still life arrangements because they illustrate essential principles of story-telling"

Myths, legends and folk tales have their own literary nature and their literariness attracts the writers to embody them in their story pattern. Indian myths are part of Indian literature and they have a significant position in Indian literary writing. R.K Narayan, an acclaimed Sahitya Akademi award winning writer who has used myths as structural parallels where a mythical situation underlines the whole or a part of a novel. Mythical structure as employed in his novels is a self-conscious device.

R.K Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* has a definite sustained mythical structure. It is the method of using myth as a structural parallel which has been consistently applied in this novel. This novel is rich in myths and legends and the novelist has used this technique more consistently and effectively in this novel than any other of his novels. As in his other novels the structural parallel method has not been thoroughly used rather it is done in a fragmentary way with an incoherent assimilation of character and situation. The materials that the novelist uses in this novel are rich in myths and legends and he uses the same old technique. The relevance of the classical myths and legends to modern life is apparent to a greater or lesser extent in his novels. In the novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* his method of mythologizing contemporary reality becomes ever more apparent and important. Here the author has presented a definite sustained mythical structure. Reviewers have read it as an allegory and some have pointed out that the novel closely follows the classical pattern of Sanskrit literature. In his introduction to Gods, Demons and other's, which followed the present novel, Narayan explains some of the principles which constitute the classical myths in his novels. His principle of introducing myths, legends and folk tales is the inevitable triumph of good over the evils existing in the society since ancient times. He emphasises on the law of 'karma' for shaping the future of an individual. He believes in the time-scheme of the gods and the role that god plays in the activities of every individual. He narrates the specific stylized roles of gods, demons, kings and sages in his works and they get interested to the readers of all generation. These 'puranic' characters are not described as the remote

mythological characters invested with invisible spectral power rather act as types and symbols possessing psychological validity in the context of the modern literature.

The structural unity of the novel *The Man Eater Of Malgudi* is wholly based more on a mythical parallel than on a philosophical concept. In mythical narratives the chief characters who are gods, demons, dragons, sages and other beings are larger in power and both the good and evil forces have unique supernatural forces that empowers them in such a way that they are able to do what they wish and no other common force dares to enter into their zone. The powerful evil forces try always to do away with the good forces and humanity and gods and sages ultimately demolish their attempt and establish a world of peace, harmony, humanity and sanctity. In this novel Vasu stands for the evil forces of life. Vasu is the power hungry taxidermist and the dynamic man of action who lives much above the common run of men. He has been ironically described as 'The Man eater' and the Rakshasa as a demonic creature possessing enormous strength, strange power and extraordinary genius far above the ordinary level of humanity. He is designed after the Ravans, the Rakshasa character of the Ramayana and the Asuras available in the Indian Puranas. He is portrayed as the incarnation of evil force that threatens common humanity in general. He occupies an all pervasive monster-like position. His demonic or Asuric personality raises him to the level of an Asuras. By his character the novelist tries to establish a philosophical view of spiritualist that implies that no one on earth is so powerful as to evade the stern hand of divine justice. Vasu is a man of hot-headed and self willed and such a personality is always obdurate and does have the sense of morality. Such a personality runs at his own will intending to fulfil his own desire. It is he who threatens to defy all the prized human values and pricking of conscience to satisfy his own selfish needs. It is well said that a demon is morally and virtually bound to be barren to be demolished in the hands of almighty and thereby the society in general is able to define the good forces of life in the context of evils. That is why, the poetic justice is seen when Vasu is caught in his own trap and dies by his own hand. Here the destruction of the 'Man eater' offers a parallel to the destruction of the evil doer Ravana in the hands of Rama, the god man. There may be controversy that Ravana in the Ramayana was a devoted disciple to the lord Shiva and he had not violated even Sita's chastity, then how can he be treated as demon. The very simple answer to the controversy is that Ravana was an emblem of self ego and an undefeatable personality. His self ego made him blind and in spite of being a devoted disciple of Lord Shiva he has to die for lacking of ethical values. Sastri's view about mischievous forces to Nataraja signifies the moral 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 Rakshashas that were ever born. Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self destruction, goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity. (*The Man Eater of Malgudi*)

Narayan has deeply studied the Hindu mythical trilogy of Bhasmssura Praveen, an Asura or demon who was granted power to burn up and immediately turn into ashes (bhasma) anyone whose head he touched with his hand. Bhasmasur was tricked by the god Vishnu's only female avatar, the enchantress Mohini, to turn himself into ashes. From the Bhasmssura trilogy Narayan has created his Vasu who like Bhasmssura met his death by his own hands. Through the character of Vasu Narayan is able to give an insight into the innocent minds Malgudi about *The Man Eater Of Malgudi* whose myth and fact cannot not be clearly distinguishable. Heroic character either good or bad becomes true heroic when it is transferred to the qualities of legendary mythical character in general. For such a mind a fact does not become significant until it can be related to a myth. Vasu, the hard hearted taxidermist is given to cannibalism and the annihilation of his own kind. Narayan follows the Indian classical tradition by giving his central character a mythical status.

The mythical structure of the novel is designed by the puranic conflict between 'sura' and 'asura' i.e. a conflict between good and evil. The use of myth has a structural relevance to the total concept of the plot and this is not incidental. A controversy arises here in the structural pattern of the story of this novel-was Narayan using consciously myth as a technique in his work? Or was it an unconscious expression of his basic outlook which sees in the existing order of things a desired stability that should be permanent against all the odds of the evil? The answer to the very controversy is that Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi* apparently falls into the category of archetypal pattern where mythical situation underlines the whole or part of a novel. This is seen in this novel in certain archetypal figures, situations and relationships. Vasu is the archetype of evil force that goes on relentlessly in its fight against truth and nature. The archetypal situation as occurred in the last part of the novel is interesting enough when the unconquerable man eater succumbs to death by his own weapon "Reduced himself to ashes by placing the tips of his fingers on his own head".

Narayan has created domain of human psychology to show the destructibility of the evil forces and eternity of peace and order originated from the ashes of destruction of the evil forces as seen in the novel. Evil forces though powerful are bound to destroy by the true forces of peace and order and thus there will germinate a new dawn to usher a new world order. By this novel the novelist envisions of a positive world where orderly life moves smoothly when the darkness, unreality, illusion and disorder like bubble sooner or later will burst. The normal order of cosmos will prevail with the destruction of evil forces.

It cannot be denied that Narayan very often uses the myths, legends and folk tales in his novels sarcastically. In the novel *The Man- Eater of Malgudi* Vasu is a representative of those who wish to deserve power through evil action. In this novel myths and legends are part of the characterisation of Vasu and also they are integral to the development of the events of the story. The design of the novel though not complicated makes recognition through its structure. In this context Northrop Frye's classification of recognition in fiction is praiseworthy. Frye has spoken two types of recognition in fiction. As arte facts of the

imagination, literary works, including "the pre-literary categories of ritual, myth and folk-tale" (*Archetypes* 1450) form, in Frye's vision, a potentially unified imaginative experience. He reminds us that literature is the "central and most important extension of mythology"..... every human society possesses a mythology which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by literature" (*Words with Power* xiii). Mythology and literature thus inhabit and function within the same imaginative world, one that is "governed by conventions, by its own modes, symbols, myths and genres" (Hart 23). Integrity for criticism requires that it too operates within the sphere of the imagination, and not seek an organizing principle in ideology. To do so, Frye claims:

. . . leaves out the central structural principles that literature derives from myth, the principles that give literature its communicating power across the centuries through all ideological changes. Such structural principles are certainly conditioned by social and historical factors and do not transcend them, but they retain a continuity of form that points to an identity of the literary organism distinct from all its adaptations to its social environment (*Words with Power* xiii).

Narayan's novel *The Man- Eater of Malgudi* assumes a new meaning as soon as the recognition of the identity of the total design is experienced, "One is the continuous recognition of credibility, fidelity to experience. The other is the recognition of the identity of the total design, into which we are initiated by the technical recognition of the plot"

The author is quite aware of the total design of the novel. He succeeds in maintaining the integrity of the structure. His observation of poetic justice in the classical mythology is widely acclaimed, "The strong man of evil continues to be reckless until he is destroyed by the tempo of his own misdeeds. Evil has in it, buried subtly, the infallible seeds of its own destruction and however frightening a demon may seem, his doom is implied in his own evil propensities"

Narayan executes this idea of the mythical demon in this novel and describes its relevance to modern time. His portrayal of Vasu, the taxidermist as narrated in the early part of the novel shows the demonic quality clearly, 'He shows all the definitions of a Rakshasa, persisted Shastri, and went on to define the makeup of a Rakshasa.....He said, 'Every Rakshasa gets swollen with ego' He thinks he is invincible, beyond law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him'

Literary works adorned with mythical elements have mock-heroic quality. The mock-heroic method as used by Narayan in the story depends on a balance between credibility and irrationality. With the establishment of Vasu's image as Rakshasa and with the exposition of his complete tenacity and aggression, all encounters with him take on the character of mock-heroic skirmishes with an invincible demon. Like Dr. Faustus Vasu is too confident of himself, too sure of his superiority over other and too quick to challenge the knowledge and

authority of others. Nataraj narrates him, 'Now it was like having middle aged man-eater in your office and home, with the same uncertainties, possibilities and potentialities'.

Yet all events in the novel remain credible while the final explanation of Vasu's death alone is deliberately absurd. He has smashed in his own skull. Death is inevitable; no power can survive forever and save anything from it. Demons adorned with evil forces of life desire to occupy the power of the whole earth and intend to conquer the good forces through the tricks of black art. But by the inevitable power of death drags them to the ultimate doom. Vasu's death is an established fact which was inevitable in the course of time. Like every demon as we see in the great epics and the Puranas of India Vasu also carries within him consciously or unconsciously the tiny seed of 'self-destruction' which brings about his end. What happens in the destruction of the demons in the great Indian epics that the demons are dubbed by God with the pledge that they are immortal but they fail to see the tricks played? As in the case of Mahisasur who is befooled with a promise that no man can harm or kill him. It does not mean that he will not be killed by woman. Devi Durga, a symbol of truth, justice and power defeated and killed him in the form of woman. The story that Vasu killed himself is a parody of the well known myths about demon of Indian epics. Shastri returns to Malgudi, having shrewdly absented himself while the police investigation was going on in the press. He offers Nataraj the mixed holy ash of his pilgrimage as if absolving him from his involvement with Vasu. In fact, the mythical structure of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is partly a self conscious device, it is mainly the archetypal pattern that is to be found in many of his novels.

Works Cited

1. Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Singapore: Thomson Asia Pvt. Ltd, 2003.
2. Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. London: Faber, 2009.
3. Frye, Northrop. 'Fables of Identity' *Studies in Poetic Mythology*. London, Jacks Press, 1963.
4. Gangopadhyay, Avik. *Literary Theories and Criticism; Beyond Modernism*. Kolkata: Books Way, 2005.
5. Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007.
6. Narayan, R.K: *The Man Eater of Malgudi*; London, Makey, 1999.
7. Sanyal, Samares C. *Indianness In Major Indo-English Novels*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1984.