

## Conflict Between Good and Evil in R.K. Narayan's the Man-Eater of Malgudi

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*R.K. Narayan occupies a prominent position in the annals of Anglo-Indian literature. In his novel, The Man-Eater of Malgudi, Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, introduces the "demon" Vasu. Vasu is the killer of animals, the purveyor of carcasses, the enemy of Kumar, the Temple elephant, and the terror of all men; he is of blackness all compact; he grows with evil; he is the prince of darkness. The miracle of Vasu's death by his own hand causes a surge of faith in the believers, and Kumar is hale and hearty again and Natraj slips back into his old routine with great relief. The conflict between good and evil is not as sharply polarized in The Sweet Ve ndor as in The ManEater of Malgudi. Natraj is repelled by Vasu and his activities but he is also strongly fascinated by him, for Vasu, like Milton's Satan, has all the fascination of evil in him. The Man-Eater of Malgudi is an allegory of good and evil. The good is represented by Natraj; on the other hand, Vasu is an embodiment of evil.*

R.K. Narayan occupies a prominent position in the history of Anglo-Indian literature. He is one of those Indian novelists who have contributed a great deal to the development of Indian fiction. An Indo-Anglian novelist is confronted with a wide range of problems from freedom movement and racial-relationship to hunger and starvation. Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya write with the avowed purpose of bringing about social change. Anand's novels arise from the missionary zeal with which he pleads with them for the amelioration of the lot of the have nots.

In his novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, introduces the "demon" Vasu. Narayan has since narrated, in "Gods, Demons and Others" (1964), some of the mythological stories from *The Ramayan*, *The Mahabharata*, the *Yoga-Vasishta*, and other ancient classics and perhaps *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is itself meant to be a modern version of one of the Deva-Asura conflicts of very ancient times. Vasu is the killer of animals, the purveyor of carcasses, the enemy of Kumar, the Temple elephant, and the terror of all men; he is of blackness all compact; he grows with evil; he is the prince of darkness. But where is the power that is going to rid Malgudi of this demon, this cannibal, this rakshasa? Narayan takes hint from the Bhasmasura myth. The Asura, having won by tapas from Shiva the power to reduce anything what so ever to ashes by the mere touch of his palm, promptly advances towards the God himself. The miracle of Vasu's death by his own hand causes a surge of faith in the believers,

and Kumar is hale and hearty again and Natraj slips back into his old routine with great relief.

The conflict between good and evil is not as sharply polarized in *The Sweet Vendor* as in *The Man Eater of Malgudi*. In *The Guide*, evil takes the form of frivolity and sensuality, in, evil is, as it were, anti-life, anti-nature, anti faith. The love-hate relationship between Natraj and Vasu is the essence of the novel. Natraj is repelled by Vasu and his activities but he is also strongly fascinated by him, for Vasu, like Milton's Satan, has all the fascination of evil in him. There is a love-hate relationship. A complex and strangely fascinating relationship is formed between Natraj and Vasu.

According to some critics, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is an allegory of good and evil. The good is represented by Natraj; on the other hand, Vasu is an embodiment of evil. Edwin Gerow, in a perceptive analyst of the novel, has pointed out

How closely the novel follows the allegorical pattern of Sanskrit literature. (LEI)

The polarity between Natraj the meek and tolerant printer, and Vasu, the dynamic man of action, is too clear to be overlooked. Natraj is mainly passive, things happen to him and he has very little power to influence events; Vasu, on the other hand, is the great advocate of individual achievements. Vasu is alone, he comes from outside, and sets up his business of taxidermy unaided by anyone fighting with the forest Department, on

one hand, and the Malgudi people, on the other.

In fact, Vasu represents the idea of R.K.Narayan's normalcy that disturbs the order and restoration of normalcy. In every one of Narayan's novels, the usual order of life, the normalcy is disturbed by the arrival of some outsider into the quiet world of Malgudi, or by some flight or uprooting, but in the end there is always a return, a renewal, and a restoration of normalcy. The normal order is disturbed only temporarily, and by the end we find the usual order established once again, and life going on as usual, for all practical purposes.

Vasu secures a room, a jeep, and game license on his own initiative, and kills, processes, stuffs animals, packs them in boxes and sends them out to different places single handed, while

I (Natraj) noted it all from my seat in the press and said to myself from this humble town of Malgudi stuffed carcasses radiate to the four corners of the earth.

(TMEM)

It should be noted, however, that in spite of his insistence on man being a social animal, it is Vasu himself who is anti-social in his violation and egoism. He frightens children, kills dogs, repels neighbourhood people with the stench of his workshop, and defies social conventions by bringing prostitutes home. All these negative acts set him apart from common human beings. Fairly

early in the novel, Sastri identifies him with a rakshasa, embodying his definition of a rakshasa as a demonic creature, possessing enormous strength, strange powers and a genius, but recognizing no sort of restraint of man or god. In *The Man Eater of Malgudi* also, the demon gets swollen with his ego. He thinks himself to be invincible-beyond every law, but finally he oversteps his limitations which become the cause of his destruction.

The opposition between Natraj and Vasu is so clearly marked that one is tempted to read the story of their conflict as having allegorical implication. According to Paul Verghese,

We can compare the good and evil in terms of Vasu and Natraj love hate relationship who show the opposition "between Satva and Rajas".

(PICWE)

The battle between the gods and demons, the suras and the asuras, is a recurrent motif in Hindu mythology. The asuras were powerful, sometimes even more than the gods, and many times they triumphed, threatening Indra in heaven with chaos and confusion. But every time Indra's throne was saved by some miracle of divine strategy whereby the demons caused their own destruction and order was restored in the cosmos again.

The structure of *The Man Eater of Malgudi* more or less follows the same puranic pattern. The drawn blue curtain of the printer's room stands for order and normalcy, as it were, and from the day

the six foot tall, broad shouldered giant, representative of evil, Vasu crosses the threshold intruding into the privacy beyond the curtain, confusion begins. Vasu's very philosophy of life is in opposition to the peaceful ordered universe of Malgudi.

Vasu, who has been presented as an evil incarnate, fights against the established order of the society. He himself announces as a rival to nature soon after his arrival,

After all we are civilized human beings, educated and cultured, and it's upto us to prove our superiority to nature. Science conquers nature in a new way each day: why not in creation also? That's my philosophy, Sir, I challenge any man to contradict me. (TMEM 51)

There is no denying the fact that he goes on relentlessly in his fight against nature by stuffing dead animals to make them look real. The conflict is not between Vasu and Natraj alone, who are the principal representative of evil and good respectively, but between Vasu and society in general. Vasu's seeming superiority over so vast a force merely underlines the fact that evil is often far more dynamic than forces of goodness. Natraj's fascination for Vasu and his attempts to re-establish friendly relations with the taxidermist indicate that evil is not merely stronger but also more attractive than goodness. Edwin Gerow remarks in this context,

In a sense, the raksha represents evil but, this puts too moral a cast on it, he is rather an aspect of creation the chaotic, the disruptive, his weakness is not that he is bad but that he is ultimately not real.

(LEI)

Gerow goes on to state that:

The settled order of the cosmos is in the Indian view the fundamental ontological fact. This settled order was threatened with dislocation by Vasu. But the threat is finally dissipated and the novel ends where it began with the enduring cosmos. (LEI 51)

It is evident that the story of *The ManEater of Malgudi* follows the familiar pattern of a tale from the puranas where a demon, the symbol of evil, gets too powerful, threatens the heaven with his elemental forces of disorder, but finally goes up in the air like a bubble, leaving the universe as calm as before. Vasu meets a similar fate. He destroys not only wild animals but also the peace of mind, the fair name and reputation of Natraj which is, indeed, an evil deed. But ultimately the aggressive and bullying taxidermist, the anti-hero and the very incarnation of evil, kills himself with the blow on his head from his own hammer fist.

The human situation is portrayed in a sort of uncanny atmosphere in *The ManEater*

*of Malgudi:* Vasu lives a gross philistine existence. His evil can be seen the way in which his highly inflated ego breaks and challenges and the humble society of Malgudi can only build a relationship of tame submissiveness with him. He virtually creates a parallel world where he reigns supreme. He has his own ideas and logic that confound our moral sense and the time honoured social values. He considers marriage to be an unnecessary social institution.

The spirit of independence has taken an exaggerated form in him and he brooks no moral or social barrier while celebrating the urges of his self. Even though Natraj is embarrassed and overawed by Vasu he feels “a sneaking attraction” (TMEM 61) for the letter’s spirit of independence and his manly defiance. Natraj’s predicament springs from his evil traits and his transactions with the fantastic Vasu. From the Vasu-Natraj relationship, the scene moves to the sphere of the community when Vasu decides to shoot the temple elephant. The comedy of Vasu’s relationship with the people of Malgudi is sustained with continuing anxiety till the man-eater is undone by the mere mosquitoes. Vasu revolts against all routine habits of mind, against all accepted beliefs and patterns of human behaviour. With such an attitude, his transactions with a normal world produce a bizarre spectacle.

Vasu can be labelled as an incarnation of evil by the fact that he jeers at all sorts of social institutions. He belittles the world that does not allow the individual full sovereignty. He breaks the arm of the police Inspector, flirts with any woman he likes without caring least for the public opinion and shoots according to his whims. In all his actions, he brings

down the world around him to its knees. So, it is evident that the evil figure inform of Vasu struggles against the established goodness of the society. But, in spite of all his apparent successes, he remains a solitary, mysterious figure. A proper study of his character and his strange relationship with the world is not possible unless the workings of the inner depths of his existence are probed.

K.R.S. Iyenger thinks that Vasu is the symbol of “evil and anti-life” (LEI). But on the individual plane, Vasu lives his life to the full, even to an enviable extent, whereas, Natraj, a symbol of goodness, and his sort are just ordinary people living a life of bridled aspiration and instincts. Vasu just can’t be dismissed as inimical to the spirit of living once the darker recesses of his unconscious are understood. Vasu is a forlorn figure having no kith and kin for reasons unknown to us and is divorced from the mainstream of life. Possibly the monstrous actions of Vasu is form of his evil deeds that, we witness, are the results of his injured ego, the inevitable consequences of some deprivations in the earlier part of his life.

Behind the violent facet, he still nurtures some of the dreams of life. His possessive affection for Rangī and his desire to build a cozy home with her provide a glimpse into one part of his inner self that is tender that cares for the simple, elemental values of life. In his young days, inspired by patriotism, “he had joined the civil Disobedience Movement against the British rule, broken the laws, marched demonstrated and ended up in jail” (TMEM 81), bears testimony to the man that lies concealed beneath the surface monstrosities. In his violent actions, he tries possibly to

compensate what he has lost, what he has been deprived of. Here is a grotesque figure driven by violent impulses of his own character, and in the end when these forces reach their ultimate point, he meets his doom.

This is, of course, depending too much on psycho-analysis. But Vasu's conduct and character cannot be explained without it, as very little is known about him. As Erich observes:

The human passions (such as striving for love, tenderness, freedom as well as the lust for destruction, sadism) are answers to "existential needs" which in turn are rooted in the very condition of human existence. (TMEM 48)

The character of Raju, Sampath and Margayya can be looked at with sympathy when viewed from this angle. And Vasu, failing to find satisfaction in the higher levels of life, creates for himself the drama of destruction. (TMEM 81), Vasu's response to this world takes up an evil and terrifying form. The awesome personality of Vasu, the docility of the Malgudi folk and a revered Indian tradition facing on apparent threat all act and react with one another to form a comedy of the grotesque.

Natraj and Vasu are contrasted characters. Natraj, no doubt, is the central figure and the action of the novel is viewed through his eyes. It is his point of view that we always get. But he is an unheroic hero, good at heart, but passive

and inactive like most of us. Vasu, on the other hand, represents evil that embodies satanic traits. He is an anti-hero, and Natraj is both attracted and repelled by him. The novel makes it clear that there is a love-hate relationship.

The parlour of Natraj is frequented by two people, one a poet, who is writing the life of God Krishna in monosyllabic verse, and the other Sen, a journalist, who holds forth on the mistakes Nehru is making.

Natraj is upset when he finds that the sanctity of his premises is being violated by a stranger who is the bringer of evil in Malgudi. He soon learns that this stranger's name is H. Vasu. With the passage of time, a complex and strangely fascinating relationship is formed between Vasu and Natraj. As Natraj says,

I began to feel intrigued by the man, I didn't want to lose him even if I wanted to, I had no means of getting rid of him. He had sought me out and I'd have to have him until he decided to leave. (TMEM 49)

Due to the contrasted temperaments the relationship between Natraj and Vasu is a relationship between good and evil as well as a relationship between love and hate. Vasu is a Faustian character with his virtually insatiable curiosity and thirst for power and knowledge. He holds his master's degree in history, economics and literature and says Natraj about him, "The Man's curiosity was limitless and recognized no proprieties." (TMEM 67) Natraj, on the other hand is a typical

Narayan's character with non-committal neutrality as his ideal.

Natraj is struck by Vasu's sweep of mind. He calls him the lord of the universe who has no use for other people's words. Natraj comes to realize that Vasu is a defiler of his precipices but he finds himself helpless to do anything about it. He watches helplessly his attic being converted into a charnel house. In spite of the fact that Natraj is oppressed and harassed by the presence of Vasu, he does not cease wondering at him. He says about Vasu that Vasu was a terrible specimen of a human being.

Vasu, an embodiment of evil, does not allow Natraj to carry on his business undisturbed. When one day Natraj is discussing business with the adjournment lawyer regarding the printing of wedding cards urgently needed by the lawyer, Vasu drags out Natraj forcibly. He shoots wild animals even in the Mempi Forest without the permission of authorities. Vasu does not care for any social norms. In the novel, the normal social order is disturbed; there is conflict between the forces of order and disorder. It is not the absurd or the eccentric or the evil that is re-established, but the good and the normal.

Thus, the relationship between Natraj and Vasu is a love-hate relationship. Natraj himself a passive and colourless, is attracted by Vasu's forceful dominating personality, but he is also repulsed by him for he is evil incarnate, a demon or a rakshasa. Vasu has all the fascination of evil. Vasu's response to this world takes up a terrifying form. The awesome personality of Vasu, the docility of the Malgudi folk and a threat all act and react with one another to form a comedy of the

grotesque. Various existential problems are posed and not only Vasu, but also Natraj and other characters meet these problems in their own ways.

Against Vasu's defiant manner of living a life of instincts, Natraj, the orthodox moralist, looks ridiculous. In the drama of Malgudi, we find life in all its totality where man tries to assert his status and lives by various designs, however, puny and evil these may be. The truth is that all human passions, both the "good" and the "evil" can be understood only as a person's attempt to make sense of his life. Even the most sadistic and destructive man is human, as human as the saint. He can be called a warped and sick man, who has failed to achieve a better answer to the challenge of having been born human, and this is true, he can also be called a man who took the wrong way in search of his salvation.

K.R.S. Iyenger surveys the scene from the social context and finds Malgudi a field of unpredictable forces, the forces of the good and evil. Man's fundamental condition has been expressed as absurd in terms of Vasu who right from the time of Dr. Faustus, Don Quixote and many others, right from the time of man's birth into this universe, lives with his instincts and yearning, wishes and dreams. In this connection C.D. Narasimhiah says that

...in the tragedy in terms of comedy lies Narayan's unique achievement in Indian fiction. <sup>(TSTE)</sup>

The comedies of Narayan can be labelled as the comedies of Malgudi which is a distant community, but it is also a part of the universal human community. "Nothing could be more

provincial and localized than the life of Malgudi town, yet R.K. Narayan successfully achieves a universal vision through it.<sup>7</sup> says Meenakshi Mukherjee in this connection.

Thus, in *The ManEater of Malgaudi*, R. K. Narayan is not able to resolve the conflict between good and evil till the end of the novel. The novel does not present any solution for the conflict to be ended, the end lies in the personality of Vasu himself who like other Narayan rogue- heroes, Sampath, Margayga and Raju, Vasu is also a bully for men, but is terribly afraid of mosquitoes. He is a destructive, callous and assertive, and lacks in social morality. In his pride of power custom free directness of manners, and blindness to human predicaments he decides to kill the tusker which is supposed to lead the procession to pass by the window, he slaps his forehead to kill the mosquitoes but ironically kills himself. There is no other outer agency which is responsible for the destruction of evil inherited in Vasu himself. Evil always carries the seed of its destruction, goes the adage and Vasu proves it true. The skill of the novelist lies in comparing Vasu with Bhasmasura. The mythical reference renders the anticlimax credible. Vasu's character is interesting even if cruel, because it is stretched by other equally delightful character, Natraj, the printer of Malgudi. The tragedy of Vasu does not cause any tears for the simple

reason that the novelist has skillfully manipulated. The situation that preceded his death, so much so that even when the mischievous but delightful Vasu kills himself no one feels sad. On the contrary readers of the novel chuckle to find Vasu dead, and Natraj continues to be worried over trifles like and automation while following the dictates of his assistant in the office of the press. The printer assistant Sastri explains the mystery of Vasu's death. Like this:

He had to concentrate all that might for his own destruction. Every demon appears in this world, with a special boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the rakshasas 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? (TMEM 62)

This is the only kind of hope the novelist can offer to humanity, it is the stubbornness of life that enacts self perpetuation, and not the fallible man.



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