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Use of Myth in the Novels of R.K. Narayan

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The present paper entitled "Use of Myth in the novels of R.K. Narayan" focuses on Narayan's use of myth in his fiction in a metaphorical manner. He uses myth as a metaphor in order to deal with contemporary life in terms of mythic life. The characters of the novels are the modern prototypes of mythic figures. By using myth he discusses that both good and evil exist in all ages. The conflict between the two is eternal. He attempts to establish the fact that in the conflict between good and evil, evil, at last, is destroyed and good becomes victorious.

Keywords: myth; prototype; structural parallel; taxidermist; parable

R.K. Narayan is an eminent Indian novelist and short-story writer in English. He is one of the 'Big Three' of Indian writing in English. Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao are the other novelists who constitute the body of first generation of Indian Novelists in English. If Anand is a social critic and Raja Rao a metaphysical novelist, R.K. Narayan is undoubtedly a pure artist who used his art as an end in itself. His art is pure and perfect like any other artist. He projects events and characters they appear to be not as they should be.¹



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Narayan reveals life in his novels with perfect sincerity and truthfulness. He amuses and entertains his readers by using irony and humour in a very vivid and realistic manner. He presents both good and evil aspects of life objectively. His novels are entirely free from any ideological prejudices. He holds a mirror of society and tries to show the true image of events and people in it without any distortions.

The Ramayana, like other epics, has been a great source of inspiration to R.K. Narayan. One can witness in the *Ramayana* the ancient and popular Indian myths which transcend the literary significance into the devotional ethics and the ethical contexts into the moral and philosophic meanings. Narayan writes in this regard:

It may sound hyperbolic, but I am prepared to state that almost every individual among the five hundred millions living in India is aware of the story of the *Ramayana* in some measure or other. Every child is told the story at bed time. The *Ramayana* pervades our cultural life in one form or the other at all times. Everybody knows the story but loves to listen to it again. The *Ramayana* in the fullest sense of the term could be called a book of perennial Philosophy.²

Narayan's vision is moral and philosophic in his novels. His main purpose is to make people moral and virtuous and this he does by describing contemporary reality in



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the light of mythic life. The present paper aims at discussing the structural use of myth in R.K Narayan's novels *Mr. Sampath* and *The Man Eater of Malgudi*.

According to Harish Raizada, "Every story of Narayan has implicit in it, philosophical or moral significance underlying the distinction between good and evil."³

Mr. Sampath (1949) not only refers to India's hoary antiquity, but also introduces characters and stories from Indian epics and Puranas alive in the twentieth century. The novel is based on the myth of the burning of Kama, the god of love, who is reduced to ashes by Lord Shiva's third eye. R.K. Narayan uses myths to make a link between the present situation and its parallel one of the epic times. The conflict between Srinivas and Sampath is a mythical conflict between the good and the evil, the gods and the demons, the Suras and the Asuras. The battle between the two 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 or divine strategy whereby the demons caused their own destruction and order was restored in the cosmos.



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Sampath is a typical modern asura (demon). He is fleeing to Memphi hills along with Shanti. His act is reminiscent of Ravana's abduction of Rama's wife Sita.

Unlike Sampath, Srinivas's life is guided by the wisdom of the Upanishads. That is why he perceives a balance of power in human relationships, and marvels at the inevitable forces of the universe, which maintains this subtle balance in all matters. Srinivas says,

If only one could get a comprehensive view of all humanity, one would get a correct view of the world, things being neither particularly wrong nor right, but just balancing themselves.

Srinivas has a comprehensive view of humanity. He is very kind and generous in his dealing with others. He has no time for his family but he is always ready to help anyone in difficulties, whether his landlord, or Ravi, or Ravi's family.

It becomes quite clear that the novel *Mr. Sampath* is a parable that is deliberately conceived as life in India, against the rich legendary background. The Shiva myth used by Narayan adds depth to the quest itself, which metaphorically highlights the inner



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vision towards which Srinivas is fitfully moving and it is interesting that the myth takes possession of Srinivas's imagination.

Thus, by using two main myths of Shiva and Sita, Narayan is very much successful in intermingling the mythic elements in the novel.

The *Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961) is a modern version of the ancient tale of Bhasmasura, a demon. The novelist makes use of a number of Indian myths in the novel. He intermingles the mythical and the contemporary by creating such characters and situations, which resemble those in the myths. In this novel, Narayan uses the Bhasmasura myth as a structural parallel where as other myths like Rama-Ravana, Mahisasura, Gajendra Moksha have been used in a digressional manner. All the events and characters of the novel are presented in metaphorical manner.

The novel again is centred on the Shiva myth. Natraj, the hero of the novel, is a printer in Malgudi. He describes his own story and the disruption of his peaceful rhythmic life caused by an aggressive intruder Vasu, a taxidermist who comes to hunt out animals for his business from the Memphi jungle.



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In the novel Narayan introduces the demon Vasu who is modern prototype of Bhasmasura. Like Bhasmasura, Vasu creates many serious problems for Natraj. As a taxidermist he kills birds and animals and stuffs them. Consequently, there is intolerable foul smell, which bothers the inhabitants of the locality. Like Lord Shiva after he had given the boon of indestructibility of Bhasmasura, Natraj runs here and there soliciting help against the very person whom he had given his attic free of charge. When Vasu threatens to shoot the temple elephant, Kumar, it is Rangī, the temple dancer, like Mohini of the myth, who becomes instrumental in the death of taxidermist. As Bhasmasura was reduced to ashes by the touch of his own hand over his head. Vasu strikes his powerful first on his forehead to trap some mosquitoes and in the process kills himself.

According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, “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 little power to influence events while Vasu is the great advocate of individual achievement”.⁶

Vasu himself embodies the disruptive force threatening the social order. He is a modern rakshasa who does not have any supernatural powers of moving anywhere at any time nor has he the power to destroy things at will. But he has a jeep and a gun which



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provide him the power to go anywhere at anytime and to kill any creature. According to William Walsh, “Vasu is one in whom the will is unqualified by the past”.

Like Bhasmasura, Shiva, and Vishnu as Mohini, there are other myths of Rayana, Mahisasura and Gajendra Moksha, described metaphorically in the novel. The myth of Ravana is used to sketch the character of Vasu. it is relevant to quote shastri when he describes the demonic features of Ravana:

There was Ravana, the protagonist in the Ramayana who had ten heads and twenty arms, and enormous yogic and physical powers and a boon from the gods that he could never be vanquished. The earth shook under his tyranny till he came to a sad end”.

Like Bhasmasura, Rana too had tried to dislodge the Kailash Mountain from its foundations, knowing that it is the abode of the boon-giver Lord Shiva. In the novel, Vasu attempts to dislodge Natraj from his respectable position which he had in the society and also dislodges him from the printing press.

According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, “The conflict is not between Vasu and Natraj alone but between Vasu and society in general and Vasu's seeming superiority



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over so vast a force merely underlines the fact that evil is often for more dynamic than the forces of goodness”.⁹

Thus R.K. Narayan has endeavored powerfully to probe deep into the realm of ancient myths and integrating it with the present experience. He has succeeded in making the contemporary reality clearer. In both novels *Mr. Sampath* and *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, Narayan has used several myths as metaphors. In *Mr. Sampath*, Narayan presents a man who strives hard, despite several distractions to find a deeper purpose and meaning of life than the mere worldly duties and worldly aims. He conveys the moral that growing a beard or shaving one’s head are not necessary if one has the strength of true inner discipline. In *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, the foregrounding of the ancient and the modern focuses how an ancient fable can have an immediacy and relevance to our age. Narrating the stories of *Mr. Sampath* and *Vasu*. Narayan conveys that an evil way always leads to misery and trouble. He is of the view that man is accountable for his own destiny. In this context it is relevant to quote the novelist when he writes the following dialogue which occurs in ‘*God and the Atheist*’.

An Interesting exchange. To the atheist’s question “oh, come on, what about catastrophes, calamities and holocausts one sees around.” God answers:



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Most of it is man-made, and the others are caused by-we need not go into all that now. Normally the universe is stable, stars run their course without bumping into each other....only human beings are unpredictable. They are ready to pounce on and exterminate each other individually or as groups, communities... In all creations, human beings alone display as much ego, aggression and greed. On the other hand, animals, birds and other creatures naturally practice a philosophy of 'live and let live'. Even beasts which kill for food attack only when they are hungry. But man will attack, pillage and grab and jealously hold on it, whether it be food, money or territory.”¹⁰

In the perpetual conflict between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in both of his novels, Narayan shows ‘evil’ as destroyed and ‘good’ victorious. The structural use of myth helps Narayan to underline the continuance of the historical process, the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past that T.S. Eliot writes in *Four Quartets*:

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps contained in time future,

And time future contained in time past.¹¹



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In brief, R.K. Narayan employs myth as a literary device that helps him in describing contemporary reality in a very effective and ingenious manner. He shows the humane side of man despite his lust for money and power. In the beginning of his novels the normal social order is disturbed. There is conflict between the forces of order and disorder. At the end of the novel, order is again restored ushering peace and harmony in the universe. Narayan believes that there is always a renewal of life, love, peace and beauty; despite temporary distortion and aberration, life must go on as usual.

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