

Restoration of Social Order in R.K. Narayan's *The Man-eater of Malgudi*

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Abstract: *One salient feature of the novels by R.K. Narayan is the fact that many of them deal with the universal conflict between good and evil with evil ultimately losing the battle. In Narayan's novels, there appears a domino pattern at work. In Narayan's novels, there is generally a flight, an uprooting, and a disturbance of order. But the disturbance is short-lived as it is followed by a return, a renewal, a restoration of normalcy. His novels end on a positive note. True, Narayan, in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, narrates a story of restoration of normalcy rather than that of an aberration of sanctity. Here in the novel a disturbing agent oversteps his bounds and eats into the very established norm of the little town of Malgudi. Narayan's creative genius seems deeply rooted in Indian culture. Like many other novels by Narayan, *The Man Eater of Malgudi* incorporates the theme of karma and self-destruction. In this particular novel in question, Narayan seems to approach the narrative from a mythological viewpoint.*

In this paper, I have attempted to trace the ways Malgudi as a whole is affected by the evil personified by Vasu the wayward, notorious taxidermist who disrupts Malgudi's peaceful atmosphere like a rhetorical demon. Vasu can well be likened to the mythological asura or rakshasa. The simple innocent Nataraj falls prey to his deceit. Through Vasu's character, the author portrays how an immoral, ruthless person who follows the law of the jungle eventually ends up being self-destructive. He also leaves the reader with a sense of respect for nature and the need to co-exist with one's surroundings. If anything, the unscrupulous Vasu symbolizes the cult of materialism. The gentle and self-effacing Nataraj represents a helpless and passive spectator. It is between the two polarities that one finds the golden middle path. In this paper I will also try to explore the subsequent restoration of order in Malgudi after Vasu's death. Evil is not the ultimate reality, there is always a return to order.

Keywords: *Order-disorder-order, Good versus Evil, Conflict, Restoration of Normalcy, Malgudi*

Research Area: *Literature and Culture*

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The Man-eater of Malgudi presents us with a picture of a society which is stricken by evil, and, in due course, is rid of it. The course the society follows is order-disorder-order. The society in question is not found back in order as long as it is not exorcised, as it were.

In every one of R.K. Narayan's novels, the usual order of life, the normalcy of the social order is disturbed by the arrival of an outsider into the sheltered world of Malgudi by some

flight or uprooting, but in the end there is always a return, a renewal and restoration of normalcy. The normal order is disturbed only temporarily and by the end we see the usual order established once again and life going on as usual for all practical purposes. The writer perceives an elaborate system of checks and balances operating in the universe, but in the end it's not the absurd or the eccentric that is enthroned but it is the moral order which is restored and established.

In this novel, normalcy is disturbed by the arrival of H. Vasu, the taxidermist and the man-eater of the title and it is restored when he kills himself. Here, the writer shows how a human being metaphorically turns out as a man-eater. Man-eater means a tiger that has once tasted human blood and has relished it and so attacks humans whenever it gets an opportunity to do so. It causes death and destruction and so is an object of terror to the entire neighborhood. There is no man-eater in this novel in literary sense, but there is the character, H. Vasu, who is as destructive as a man-eater to the people of a small imaginary town of south India, named Malgudi. The character, Vasu is a devil incarnate and a representative of the writer's thought of how evil corrupts mankind and society.

The imaginary town Malgudi is the locale with its serene atmosphere. A printer by the name Nataraj is a simple peace-loving and self-satisfied man with his wife and son and some intellectual friends. There is a blue curtain in the press which is described like a solid wall by the narrator and the curtain was never to be disturbed by anyone except Nataraj. The disorder created by Vasu is symbolized by his act of removing the blue curtain and intruding into the inner room of Nataraj's press, the blue curtain itself being a symbol of the normal established social order. Vasu disturbs the placid and solid routines of the life of Malgudi. He is six feet tall, callous, feeling less, brute in expression and he proves himself as a devil's apprentice as soon as he violates the holiness of the blue curtain. He dares fight everyone who comes against him, he dares challenge everyone. As he says –

After all we are civilized human beings, educated and cultured, and it is up to us to prove our superiority to the nature. Science conquers the nature in a new way each day; why not in creation also? That's my philosophy, Sir; I challenge any man to contradict me. [1]

As soon as Vasu enters into the town, he starts doing all sorts of devilish and unlawful matters. He has no moral scruples and sense of decency at all. He makes fun at everyone. According to Nataraj, He acts like a middle-aged man-eater with the same uncertainties, possibilities and probabilities. The polarity between Nataraj, the meek and tolerant printer, and Vasu, the man of evil actions, is too clear to be overlooked. Vasu goes on relentlessly in his fight against nature and mankind. The conflict is not between Vasu and Nataraj only but between Vasu and the society also. Vasu's superiority over everything and everyone sometimes compels the reader to think that evil is often far more dynamic and powerful than forces of goodness.

The taxidermist does not stop at anything. He shot wild animals even though he is not permitted by the authorities. He challenges the forest authority and starts shooting animals in illegal way. Soon he turns Nataraj's attic into a charnel house. The presence of Vasu in the attic made Nataraj angrier day by day as he watched him bringing in some bloody objects, small or big, every day, helplessly. The novelist has given a peep into his anguished soul through his monologue –

“Not in my wildest dream had I ever thought that my press would one day be converted into a charnel house, but there it was happening, and I was watching helplessly.”

Vasu does not have any place for humanity in his mind. He does not care for anybody. He hangs a stuffed Hyena and a huge serpent on the stairs of the attic. A foul smell always emerges out from his room because of the chemical what soon becomes a matter of great agitation for the neighbours. They accuse Nataraj for that. He does not pay any heed to the protestations and remonstrance of Nataraj and goes on in his disruptive activities unconcerned. He thinks that Nataraj has instigated the neighbours and he files a lawsuit against Nataraj with the rent control officer. Nataraj finds himself in a fix.

Vasu's illegal activities get curtailed by the forest department when he wounds a forest officer badly with his hammer-fist. He finds a lot of leisure time and this turns him to womanizing. A lot of women are seen going to his room. One of them named Rangi is a bit closer to him. He takes the responsibilities of collecting fund for the opening ceremony of the new book written by the poet but it turns out to be only for his personal gain. In the midst of all the preparation for festival, Rangi suddenly informs Nataraj about a devilish plan of Vasu's killing the temple elephant Kumar on the day of the procession; thus, causing great mental and emotional agitation to poor Nataraj. Finally, he makes up his mind to face Vasu but keeps quiet in fear as he always somehow feared the rough man. On the eve of the procession, he climbs into Vasu's room to find Vasu sleeping and his gun lying beside him. The evil thoughts suddenly creep into Nataraj's mind of killing Vasu but he cannot materialize it out of fear.

On the day of the festival, Nataraj's crying out shows us how disturbed and helpless he is. He goes back home without finishing the party he was much anticipating for. Next morning, Nataraj, to his great shock and dismay, learns that Vasu is dead. Suspicion is hurled at all the characters and investigation and interrogation follows. Everyone begins suspecting each other as the murderer but it was common that everyone suspects Nataraj. He thus finds himself in a painful situation. Later on, it is learned that Vasu himself was responsible for his own death. His own Hammer-fist, which he was so proud of, was the reason of his death. Sastri, the orthodox-minded Sanskrit scholar, compares Vasu to *Rakshasas*[2], who appear in the world with a special boon of indestructibility but carry the seed of destruction within themselves. The man-eater of Malgudi, Vasu, was of this type. He said- "Every Demon carries with him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self-destructions, and goes up in the air at the most unexpected moment". Once the agent of evil -- personified by Vasu -- is gone, the society graduates from worse to better, from ominous to auspicious. Life in Malgudi is set in motion; Nataraj is reconciled with his wife and Sastri returns to work. Malgudi goes back to the condition it was in before the arrival of Vasu.

The social order that exists in Malgudi before the arrival of Vasu is supposed to be restored after his death. Hence, before we go to comment on the restoration of social order in Malgudi, we are required to go through Narayan's description of the society of Malgudi. Before the arrival of Vasu, life in Malgudi was peaceful and undisturbed; there was no disruption. Nataraj, as the novel opens, is seen following his usual routines:

My day started before four in the morning. The streets would be quite dark when I set out to the river for my ablutions ... I went down Kabir Street, cut through a flagged alley at the end of it, trespassed into the compound of the Taluk office through a gap in its bramble fencing, and there I was on the edge of the river ... I stood waist-deep in water, and at the touch of cold water around my body I felt elated.

Malgudi, as the novel opens, appears as a town which has so far known no disturbances, no inroads of any agent of evil. Life here goes on in a perpetual harmony, as it were. Nataraj has a very friendly term with his neighbour, the Star Press. He can enjoy all the privileges of the Star Press as his own. There is not the least rivalry in terms of business between the owner

of the Star Press and Nataraj. Narayan, thus aptly presents to us, at the beginning of the novel, a town which is serene and to which violence and atrocities are anathema. There is not even a modicum of disturbance of normalcy as far as the life of the people of Malgudi is concerned: Nataraj is satisfied with his modest means, his wife is provided with all what she demands, his son is supplied with toys. Nataraj says-

My son, little Babu, went to Albert Mission School, and he felt quite adequately supplied with toys, books, sweets, and any other odds and ends he fancied. My wife, every Deepavali, gave herself a new silk sari, glittering with lace, not to mention the ones she bought for no particular reason at other times. She kept her pantry well-stocked and our kitchen fire aglow, continuing the traditions of our ancient home in Kabir Street (p. 7; ch. 1).

And Nataraj is indebted to the goddess Laxmi for all this. He has a framed picture of her poised on a lotus on the wall in the little room in front of his press in Market Road. Nataraj's press is next to the prosperous Star Press which has a large staff and an original Heidelberg printing press, with groaning cylinders (Walsh 80). Nataraj is "vague about the exact line between his establishment and the Star Press and importunate customers are sometimes passed through to the grander establishment to view the machinery" (Walsh 80): "I was so free with the next-door establishment that no one knew whether I owned it or whether the Star owned me" (p. 9).

However, the peace is to be disturbed, such being the destiny of Malgudi. The perpetrator is one Vasu who commits crimes remorselessly. He is bereft of moral scruples. He commits crimes not only against humanity but also against the Nature. He disrupts the harmony of nature which runs parallel to the disruption of social harmony.

The symbolic blue curtain is never to be violated by anyone other than Nataraj himself. The curtain stands for the long-standing order of the society. With the violation of the curtain, begins the working of the greater evil: the forest is violated by the brute force of Vasu, the tiger killed and stuffed, stinking of dead animal's spreads, the elephant Kumar gets sick and subsequently its life is at stake, Nataraj's business facing gloomy prospects, and the pet dog is shot dead, Nataraj's attic is turned into a place of devilish activities. To put it simply, Malgudi, as a whole, is afflicted by evil operations.

Nataraj cannot be reconciled with Vasu because "this means reconciling two different and hostile orders of reality" (Walsh 87). Or, as the pious foreman Sastri puts it, "Vasu satisfies all the definitions of a *Rakshasa*, and to deal with such a one, one needs the marksmanship of the hunter, the wit of a pundit, and the guile of a harlot" (Walsh 87).

Vasu is likened to the *Rakshasa* in that he has the seed of self-destruction in him in the same manner as the *Rakshasas* do. He falls an easy prey to his own flaw, that is, his anger. Irritated by mosquitoes, he, in order to kill them, strikes on his forehead with his own hammer-fist, and succumbs to his own blow.

Thus, the man-eater of Malgudi pays heavily for his sins. There is a well-established order prior to the sudden arrival of Vasu and this order is disrupted by him. There is disorder for some time, but order is restored once again by his equally sudden death. Evil is, thus expelled and normal peaceful life once again becomes possible for the little town of Malgudi. The Blue Curtain is drawn once again. In the novel, there is always a conflict between the forces of order and disorder, and in the end, there is a restoration of normalcy. It is not the absurd or the eccentric or the evil that is re-established, but the good and the normal. There is

always a renewal of life, love, beauty, and peace. Despite temporary aberrations, life must go on as usual. This seems to be the message of R. K. Narayan.

In Narayan's novels, there is generally a flight, an uprooting, a disturbance of order—followed by a return, a renewal, a restoration of normalcy (Iyengar 301). “Swami, the Bachelor of Arts, Savitri of *The Dark Room*, Margayya's son, Balu: all run away, but later come (or are brought) back. Srinivas returns to his paper, Maragayya to his knobby trunk, Nataraj to the restored quiet of his ‘office’; Sriram and Bharati are, one feels, back in Malgudi; and Sushila herself, defying death, is with her Krishna again” (Iyengar 301). Iyengar has no doubt that Narayan *seems* to see the world “as a mere balance of forces” where wrongdoers and policemen keep one another properly engaged, light and shadow endlessly chase each other, hope and failure for ever play a duet never to be concluded; but the ‘soul’ of Narayan's fiction is not this delicately self-adjusted mechanism of ironic comedy, but rather the miracle of transcendence and the renewal of life, love, beauty, peace. From ‘in my beginning is my end’ to ‘in my end is my beginning’ is a full circle (Iyengar 301).

That life and animation is restored in Malgudi is testified by Sastri's utterance “we must deliver K.J.'s labels this week. I will set up everything. If you will print the first colour” and Nataraj's reply “Yes, Sastri, I am at your service” (p. 183; ch. 12). The evil being eliminated, Malgudi is supposed to be back in its traditional order which we find as the novel opens.

Notes

1. The quotations are taken from R. K. Narayan's *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, first published in 1961 by William Heinemann Ltd., London. First Indian edition 1968, 15th reprint 2000.
2. *Rakshasas* appear in the Hindu mythology. They represent the destructive force.

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