

A Comparative Analysis of Myth and Folklores in *The Man Eater of Malgudi* of R. K. Narayan and *A Tiger at Twilight* of Manoj Das

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Indian literature has been known for its distinguished feature of the mingling ancient narrative either of classical Hindu mythology or regional folklore with modern literature. Recently this trend was gaining more popularity as some famous writers taking pride and claiming back the rich cultural heritage of India in a new way. Indian literary genius always showed their inclination towards the use of myth and folklores. R.K. Narayan and Manoj Das two distinguished writers of Indian English fiction use this cultural reservoir for making balance between tradition and modernity. Both draw upon deep seated cultural beliefs yet their way of using these resources and their philosophical objectives stand them apart. Narayan in his *Man Eater of Malgudi* uses the myth of Bhasmasura of Hindu Puranic scripture and gives the message of the destruction of evil by itself and victory of good over evil. Das in his *A Tiger at Twilight* makes the use of tribal folklore as well as illusive historical myth of Vaneswari and Yaksha. Both Narayan and Das enrich Indian English Literature significantly, but their contributions are divergent in scope Narayan's work reinforces the enduring power of the classical Puranic tradition and enforce stability, while Das's fiction delves deep in folkloric reality to analyse the psychological cultural transformation. The contrast illuminates the diversity within South Asian fiction. Study shows that both offer the moral certitude of the mythic tradition and the profound psychological depth of the mythic tradition.

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Introduction

South Asian literature has been known for its distinguished feature of the mingling ancient narrative either of classical Hindu mythology or regional folklore with modern literature. Recently this trend was gaining more popularity as some famous writers taking pride and claiming back the rich cultural heritage of India in a new way. The traditional Indian literature is the reservoir of great heritage of narration including myths, legends and folklores. Myth and folklores are the essence of every great culture. Generally, the term "Myth is used often in popular culture to mean something that is false or deceptive, a made-up story that is not true." Contrary in anthropology, "myth is defined as a well-

known story that explains primary principles, beliefs, and values outside of chronological time." (Hasty, *Myth and Religious Doctrine*) According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a myth is 'a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.' In other words, a myth is a piece of lore, usually about something or someone greater than us that accounts for the way things are. (Burton 3) Donna Rosenberg opines, "Myths concern the powers who control the human world and the relationship between those powers and human beings. Although myths are religious in their origin

and function, they may also be the earliest form of history, science, or philosophy. (Rosenberg xxiv-v)

“It must be recognized that each myth and each tale constitutes a problem in itself if one is to know its life history. One can, of course, take high ground, as many of the schools already mentioned have done, and tell us offhand that all myths and all tales have come to us by a particular, favored route.” (Thompson 107) ‘As we get away from Western cultures and enter the circle of more primitive peoples, there is less concern about separation of folktales into the mythical and non-mythical.’ (Thompson 106) In the classical sense Myth is a grand, cosmological narratives often associated with divine figures and provides a framework for universal laws and moral principles. On the other hand Folklores and legends are localized forms that focus on spirits, mystical environment and regional history. It often deals with the psychological and cultural elements.

Indian literary genius always showed their inclination towards the use of myth and folklores. R.K. Narayan and Manoj Das two distinguished writers of Indian English fiction use this cultural reservoir for making balance between tradition and modernity. Both of them draw upon deep seated cultural beliefs yet their way of using these resources and their philosophical objectives stand them apart. The literary production of both Narayan and Das is rich with traditional forms like myths and folklore. The study seeks to find out a clear distinction between the approaches of selected writers. Both Narayan and Das utilize these narratives as vehicles for articulating

philosophical thought and social ethos. Narayan is convenient in the use of myths mentioned in Hindu religious scriptures whereas Das prefers local lore and legends. Narayan in his *Man Eater of Malgudi* employs the myth of Bhasmasura and Mohini. Das in his *A Tiger at Twilight* draws the myth of Vaneshwari. Both Narayan and Das utilize these narratives as a medium for articulating philosophical ideas and social customs.

Narayan in his other works has utilized the fictional world of Malgudi as a setting for the mundane everyday life and struggle of the Indian middle class people. But in the case of *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, he has broadened this setting to a cosmic drama. On surface the novel appears a comedy between timid printer Natraj and his tenant Vasu a bullying taxidermist. The story is a representation of Pauranic Myth of Bhasmasura in a modern form. Narayan masterfully applies the classical framework of battle between evil and good. Vasu is the archetype of rakshasa, a monster who possesses enormous strength, intelligence and ego. He disrupts the social order of the peaceful town Malgudi. As the narrative begins a stranger named Vasu arrives at the press of Natraj, the gentle printer of Malgudi. He is a taxidermist who forcefully became the tenant in attic over Natraj’s press. His imposing aggressive and amoral behaviour is like a rakshasa. He rejects the social law and scorns religious sentiments. He has no reverence for the sanctity of life. His profession also symbolises his demonic personality. He slays the living animals of Mempi forest only to preserve their stuffed dead body. Like the demons described in

mythology he attempts to conquer nature. Once he says, “We have constantly to be rivalling Nature at her own game.” (Narayan 63)

Sastri, the orthodox employee of Natraj enumerates the similarity of Vasu with the demons. “He shows all the definition of a rakshasa,” persisted Sastri and went on to define the make-up of a rakshasa or a demonic creature who possessed enormous strength, strange powers, and genius, but recognised no sort of restraints of man or God. He said, “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” (Narayan 94)

Sastri identifies Vasu as a nuisance and a modern manifestation of a demon. He compares him with the ravaging figures from the epics and Hindu mythology. Vasu represents the force of evil that threatens the established order. Sastri compares Vasu with many demons and illustrates their disaster and thus foretells his inevitable life ending, “There was Ravana, the protagonist in 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. Still, he came to a sad end. Or take Mahisha, the asura who meditated and acquired a boon of immortality and invincibility, and who had secured an especial favour that every drop of blood shed from his body should give rise to another demon in his own image and strength, and who nevertheless was destroyed. The Goddess with six arms, each bearing a different weapon, came on a

lion, for the fight, which sucked every drop of blood drawn from the demon. (Narayan 95)

The conflict between Natraj, the landlord and Vasu, the tenant represents a spiritual battle of human with demon. Natraj is the embodiment of ‘good’ who is too weak to fight directly with the aggressive Vasu the representation of ‘evil’. It reflects the recurring mythological theme of helpless humanity against demonic power. The end of Vasu expresses the message that when human is helpless, divine and cosmic intervention will work upon their design of evil’s destruction. The myth of Bhasmasura is the salient feature that transforms the story into a cosmic importance. After obtaining the boon from Lord Shiva, he became all powerful. His power to burn anyone only by putting hand on it led to his hubris. Considering himself invincible, he tried to burn the boon giver Lord Shiva himself. He could not be defeated by anyone else so Lord Vishnu by deception make him place his hand on his own head and in this way he himself became his own destroyer, “Then there was Bhasmasura, who acquired a special boon that everything he touched should be scorched, while nothing could ever destroy him. He made humanity suffer. God Vishnu was incarnated as a dancer of great beauty, named Mohini, with whom the asura became infatuated. She promised to yield to him only if he imitated all the gestures and movements of her own dancing. At one point in the dance Mohini placed her palms on her head, and the demon followed this gesture in complete forgetfulness and was reduced to ashes that very second, the blighting touch becoming active on his own head. Every man

can think that he is great and will live for ever, but no one can guess which quarter his doom will come” (Narayan 95)

Narayan adapts this mythical narrative with brilliant irony. Vasu seems invincible throughout the novel. When he decides to shoot Kumar the sacred elephant of temple, all the people including the police, the forest officers, and the townspeople feel powerless to stop him. Meek natured Natraj finally decide to take action, “I would steal up to his room, walk softly to hid side;... stun him from behind and save everyone all the worry and trouble of argument” (213) But when he is ready to either act or embrace tragedy, Vasu is found dead. The climax of the novel serves as a modern re-enactment of the Bhasmasura myth. When the mystery of his death is solved, it is found out that he was killed not by a hero’s arrow or a divine bolt, but a slap from his own hand. While waiting to shoot the elephant, a mosquito comes on Vasu’s forehead. Slapping to kill the insect, his immense strength crushed his own skull in the process. In his demise Rangi the temple dancer represents Mohini the female incarnation of Lord Vishnu. She acts as the feminine, divine protective force that brings the cycle of cosmic law to its closure. The whole incident creates a profound irony that the man who slayed ferocious tigers and powerful elephants is brought down by a tiny mosquito and his own strength became the source of his own destruction. As Sastri says, “He had to conserve all that might for his own destruction. Every demon appears in the 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?” (Narayan, 240)

Narayan validates the message of ‘Puranas’ that evil carries the cause of its own destruction. The novel indicates that evil and chaotic forces finally turn inwards to destroy self. With the use of Bhasmasura myth Narayan suggests that evil does not require the hero for its destruction but itself becomes the cause. Natraj could not take action yet the cosmic law asserting itself restore balance and peace in Malgudi.

Narayan’s uses of myth in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* bridges the gap between the traditional and the modern world. Narayan asserts that the ancient archetypes are still relevant in a world of printing presses and taxidermy. He portrays that noise and aggression of modern life cannot destroy traditional perpetuity and the underlying moral order remains intact. The “Man-Eater” Vasu is defeated not by a superhero, but by his own hubris, reaffirming the timeless Indian conviction that Dharma protects those who protect it, and adharma (evil) eventually destroys itself. The novel conveys the message propounded in Hindu scripture Manusmriti:

धर्म एव हतो हन्ति धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः ।

(Dharma Eva Hato Hanti Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitak)

‘Dharma, that is, justice violated indeed destroys the one who violates it’ (Kumar 366)

Manoj Das in his novel *A Tiger at Twilight* uses myth not merely as a backdrop but the very essence of the narrative. The myth helps in transforming a post-feudal tiger hunt

into a psychological and spiritual exploration of reality. Das, a conjurer of narrative, applies "magic realism," and makes blurred the boundaries between the empirical world and the supernatural. He employs myth to dramatize the painful transition of Indian society from the era of kings, mysticism, curses, and folklore to a modern world of democracy and scepticism. The word "twilight" of the title symbolises the transitional state where daylight of reason and darkness of superstition coexist and this coexistence gives space to ancient myths to fit into the present. As the novel opens, the myth of the Goddess Vaneswari, the presiding deity of the forest and the ancestral protector of the Samargarh royal family is produced:

"The raja's ancestors were accustomed to passing their summers at Nijanpur. They did so not so much for the beauty and excellent climate of the place as much for the ancient deity, Vaneswari, a representation of the primeval goddess, housed in an old temple on a small lake behind the castle." (Das 7)

The myth of Vaneswari is illusive - historical construction. The narrator at first gives the relation of his family lineage to the Vaneswari, "Once upon a time, Vaneswari had been the family deity of my forefathers. Though they were rulers over a tiny territory, they were proud of their ancestry, which they traced to an illustrious sage who fell in love with a princess, consorted her and inherited her father's kingdom." (Das 7) He also cites the beginning of curse, "When, generations ago, a ruler of Samargarh usurped our land at the culmination of a long-drawn conspiracy he had hatched in collaboration with some other feudal lords, the deity's wrath struck his family

and death began to claim its members in several odd ways. Many died inexplicably (Das7). This foundational myth dictates the family's history, the royal lineage stained by an ancient sin, their trapping in a cycle of guilt and loathsome necessity of human sacrifice to appease the goddess. Vaneswari represents the fierce, primal energy of nature that demands blood for balance. This mythical framework of narrative elevates it from a simple adventure story to the level of a Greek tragedy. The characters are combating not merely animal but a cosmic curse also.

The folktale that occurs in the narrative is of a Yaksha who is referred as the guardian of the treasures "Between the castle and the temple was a small lake that remained ice-cold for a greater part of the year. It was said to be the abode of a yaksha, one of the demi-godly guardians of the buried treasures of the earth. Each raja, after his coronation at Samargarh, would pay a visit to Nijanpur, offer obeisance to Goddess Vaneswari and throw a piece of gold or silver into the lake as his tribute to the yaksha. In return, whenever a raja faced a pecuniary crisis, the yaksha would come to his aid: the raja would stumble upon a jarful of gold ingots or a box filled with gems or jewellery." (Das 9)

Das, a writer from the land of Odisha, mirrors the folklore of tribal folk of his land while drawing the character of Heera. She serves as the living embodiment of this mythical force. She is presented as a "were-tiger" figure. In Indian tribal folk it is believed that sometimes animal consciousness penetrates human conscious. Heera the mysterious half-sister of Raja is the physical

manifestation of the forest's vengeance. Throughout the novel, the distinction between Heera and the man-eating tigress prowling the valley is promiscuous. She like tiger's power over its prey exerts a hypnotic and demonic influence over the male characters. Das skilfully employs the "were-tiger" myth to externalize the subconscious violence and violent nature of the feudal aristocracy. In the climax of the novel simultaneous death of the tigress by single shot of a bullet, and the collapsing of Heera at the same moment confirms the metaphysical connection between the woman and the beast. By killing the tigress, Dev and the Raja do not just remove a physical threat but with the death of Heera they dismantle the last sign of the violent, irrational past that Heera represented. The death of Heera represents the end of the "myth" itself. Finally the sick princess Balika representing the innocent future inherits the castle, free from the "possession" of history. Das applies these mythical elements to comment on the nature of reality itself. The narrative suggests India lives in two times simultaneously. The rational protagonist, Dev is a sceptic but is forced to witness events that science cannot explain. With the use of Vaneswari curse myth, folklore of Yaksha and the Heera-tiger duality Manoj Das suggests that though the political structures of feudalism have vanished, the psychic and spiritual forces remain influential in the form of myth, until they are confronted and resolved.

Conclusion

The comparison leads to the result that R. K. Narayan employs primary archetype of Rakshasa (Demon) and Avatar (Mohini) while Das uses mystical animal, and nature spirits- Vaneswari and Yaksha. The source of Narayan's myth is Bhasmasura legend of Puranic Mythology and Das's source is local folkloric legends and occultism. In Narayan's narrative battle is moral and ethical between dharma and adharma whereas in Das's novel it is psychic. The resolution propounded by Narayan is that evil force extinguishes by itself. Das presents no apparent resolution. With his magic realism technique, he only leaves transformation, disillusionment and unsolved mystery. To sum up, both writers enrich Indian English Literature significantly, but their contributions is divergent in scope Narayan's work reinforces the enduring power of the classical Puranic tradition and enforce stability, while Das's fiction delves deep in folkloric reality to analyse the psychological cultural transformation. The contrast illuminates the diversity within South Asian fiction. Study shows that both offer the moral certitude of the mythic tradition and the profound psychological depth of the mythic tradition.

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