The Sacred and the Secular: Post-Colonial Mythopoeia and Cultural Identity in R. K. Narayan's *The Man-eater of Malgudi*

ABANTIKA CHAKRABORTY
State Aided College Teacher
Department of English (UG and PG)
Mahishadal Raj College
(NAAC Accredited 'A' Grade College)
West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT

In the post-colonial Indian Anglophone literary scenario, the urge to represent a distinctly Indian cultural identity is the effect of both modernist experimentation and a nationalist assertion. Mythopoeia, mainly a post-religious literary aesthetic, becomes a favourite trope for certain Indian litterateurs, as it conveys an intermediate perspective between the doctrinal sacred and the liberal secular. The retelling of ancient Indian myths in the context of contemporary post-colonial reality becomes trendy in literary imagination and functional in asserting an Indian cultural identity in the second half of the previous century. To bring home the point, I would consider R.K. Narayan's *The Man-eater of Malgudi* as a case study, which, in the words of John Thieme, is the "most mythic novel" (120) among all the fourteen novels he has written. This paper would explore Narayan's dexterous and subtle use of religio-cultural references from ancient Indian mythology as found in the epics and the Puranas, and establish the point that Narayan's mythopoeic treatment is essentially secular. This paper attempts to challenge the superficial reception of the character of Vasu as archetypally "demonic," as Nataraj's assistant Sastri finds him. Even Vasu's death at the end of the novel, which Sastri finds resembling the destruction of the mythical Bhasmasura in the 'Shiva Purana', may be seen from a post-religious perspective: justifying the death of the despicable. This paper finally aims to establish that Narayan's representation of Indian cultural identity relies more on the minute delineation of the Malgudi society, its culture and people rather than on Nataraj's campaign of the 'sacred'.

Keywords: Sacred, Secular, Mythopoeia, Post-colonial, Cultural Identity

Mythopoeia, mainly a literary-cultural aesthetic, conveys not only the decorative style of writing but also explores the functional and ethno-societal dimensions of literary works. The term 'mythopoeia' has its etymological origin in Greek, meaning the making of myth. This cultural phenomenon came into literary practice in different parts of the world as a trope to assert cultural identity from the middle ages. It could be seen being used by writers of Anglophone works of literature at the beginning of the post-colonial periods precisely to emphasize ethno-national identity. Mythopoeia could also be seen as a post-religious aesthetic in the context of constitutionally secular India. The resurgence of the Hindu myths and legends from the epics and the Puranas becomes trendy in substantiating Indian cultural identity following the independence of India in 1947, and this cultural identity is, therefore, a political identity. It is observed that most of the mythopoeic treatments in Indian literature in English not only encompass the legendary and the mythical figures but also represent the ethno-cultural identity of the society. These legendary figures from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, from the Upanishads and the Puranas have influenced the imagination of Indian writers. They have also played its role in shaping a moral vision for the people in Indian society. The Indian wrier-mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik in his *The Book of Ram* (2009) points out—"the *Ramayana* has never been a tale of Ram's life", and by "retelling his tale the storytellers hope to inspire themselves and others to live as Ram did" (128). Therefore, it can be observed that writers and storytellers have retold myths and legends from the epics and the Puranas in order to represent Indian cultural identity in their works. This assertion of Indian cultural identity in the post-colonial scenario was necessary because, at the time of colonial expansion in India, European coloniality substantially altered the social, cultural and even psychological status of the colonized people in India. With the end of the western imperialism, the world has witnessed several significant socio-cultural changes in the thoughts, perceptions and attitudes of the people, and mythopoeic literature has become a vehicle in recasting the ethno-national consciousness in the post-colonial India.

India is the home of diverse cultures, religions, languages, social traditions and customs specific to its diverse communities and population. However, constitutionally, the nation is secular and allows equal rights to its people in observing the religio-cultural rituals. With the end of the British imperialism in 1947, the hard-earned political independence appeared not so sweet to the people of the Indian subcontinent, as British-ruled India was cut into three pieces on the ground of religio-cultural identity. While the other two geographical areas show up as an Islamic nation, the new-born nation of India retains its secular nature despite being a Hindu-majority country. The issue of national identity was probably the most significant issue to address at that time of political chaos following the independence of India. It was quite essential to examine whether the cultural hegemony of western colonialism has succeeded in transforming the cultural identity of the Indian people after its century-long influence of western education. I attempt to foreground the view that cultural legacies of British colonialism had partially anglicized the

Indian people and to assert the Indian ethno-cultural identity on the face of a nationalist awareness, it was relevant to insist on the cultural heritage and the retelling of Indian myths and legends which writers like Narayan accomplished correctly in his *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. Narayan's exclusive representation of Indian life and society, his aesthetic sense and simplicity, the clarity of his style and his subtle irony put him in the forefront among the contemporary writers of Indian Anglophone novels. This article is an exploration of Narayan's *The Man-eater of Malgudi,* where the politico-cultural identity has been entangled with mythical sensibilities to produce an ethical choice for the reader. The conflict between good and evil, the moral dilemma of choosing between the sacred and the secular, the poetic justice of 'karma'—all are normative issues associated with the cultural identity of an Indian. Narayan addresses these issues from the stand of a detached observer, adding the heritage material from the Puranas to the everyday life in the fictional locale of Malgudi of post-colonial India. Narayan's intention to write this novel is not only to capture the events but also to extract the aesthetic essence from the past on the present. In her book *The Twice Born Fiction* (2005), Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that "the mythical structure of *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is only partly a self-conscious device; it is largely the same archetypal pattern that is to be found in all his novels" (Mukherjee 145). His treatment of Indian legends and ancient myths is firmly entrenched within this narrative and how "ancient lore pervades everyday experience" (Thieme 124) of our life is reflected throughout the novel.

From the very first page of the narrative, Narayan skillfully emphasizes the society of his fictional locale named Malgudi giving the references to the Hindu religion in order to demonstrate the sacred nature of the central character Nataraj's household and the society in Malgudi at large: "I hung up a framed picture of Goddess Laxmi poised on her lotus, holding the aloft the bounties of earth in her four hands… My wife every Deepavali, gave herself a new silk sari" (*MM* 1). The novel more or less concerns Hindu religiosity, and creates a traditional cultural ambience of fictionalized Malgudi society where Nataraj starts his day early morning after performing the ritual: "I set out to the river for my ablutions" (*MM* 3), and after a while as the East glows he starts meditation and offers prayers to the sun to illumine his mind and soul, which represents Indian tradition. It is also important to note that the principal character is named Nataraj, which is another name of Lord Shiva. Sastri, Nataraj's assistant in the press, is "an orthodox Sanskrit semi-scholar" (*MM* 77) who has a habit of citing Sanskrit proverbs quite often, and probably this way he makes justice to his name "Sastri", a man of 'Shastra' or Hindu scriptures. As he tells Nataraj about the event of Satyanarayana puja—"I'd not trouble you but for the fact this Satyanarayana puja must be performed today in my house" (*MM* 9) is undoubtedly a statement representative of the sacred ritualistic values of India. This type of solid sacred trust on God could be found elsewhere in the novel, as Muthu, the tea-stall owner on the way to Mempi hills, tells Nataraj about the condition of the dangerous road to Mempi: "But there

has not been a single accident… the Goddess protect us" (*MM* 35). These references make it quite clear that with the presentation of Nataraj, and other several characters, Narayan does not forget to show how Indians carry the old customs, traditions from ancient times: "Hindu culture with its philosophy enshrined in the so-called sacred shastras which the Hindus held so dear to their heart" (Ramteke 64). Narayan's meticulous depiction of the religious nature of every individual character is a proof of the 'sacred' dimension of the contemporary Indian cultural identity: in Nataraj's and Muthu's performance of the puja regularly, in the detailed description of the local festival of Radha Krishna and also in the Poet's treatment of the Radha-Krishna myth in his poem—"where Krishna meets his future wife Radha, and their marriage is to be celebrated" (*MM* 110). Muthu's encouragement and dedication to celebrating the consecration of the temple, rebuilt by his fund and his carrying the Goddess in the procession led by the temple elephant Kumar shows the community rituals of ordinary middle-class Indian life of the time and add a marvellous flavour to the narrative.

However, alongside the 'sacred' issues of the daily life of Malgudi and its people, Narayan's treatment of the 'secular' in this novel relies substantially on the cultural and ideological constituents of post-independence India, as these influence the politico-national cultural identity of the Malgudi people. His fascination for India, mainly the traditional glories finds a reflection in his literary works through the cultural milieu of the Indians: "a site that represents quintessential Indianness" (Thieme 1). As a great realist and writer of the social novel, Narayan's aesthetic vision captures Nataraj's everyday life, including his personal as well as professional. Though in personal life, Nataraj follows the routine like any Hindu orthodox, at the same time in his professional life his way of interacting with the customers and friends relates a similar characteristic: "the effect of establishing that he is an orthodox Hindu, but other details of his morning perambulation take the form of well-defined encounters of a less spiritual kind" (Thieme 120). Nataraj always shows his dedication to work as he does not want to waste time. Narayan also grasps the political state of Indian society, in the transitional period or in the time of partition, when traditional joint-families show a tendency to get divided into nuclear families "to signal broader erosion of older, communal values, for which the division or semi-emptiness of the house in Malgudi's most aristocratic street serves as a trope" (Thieme 121). In terms of postcolonialism, Narayan's mastery does not show the conventional conflict between the East and the West; rather, it enjoys the charm of the secular life at Malgudi. His depiction of every individual in the novel is rooted in the Indian 'social' order, where people still feel the concern for the oppressed and the poor. According to Ranga Rao, "Narayan's success derived partly from the particular background he enjoyed and the different goal he set for himself: secular, un-academic and non-didactic" (Rao 29-30).

As the mythopoeic treatment of the story of Vasu and Nataraj lies at the heart of this article, it would be rather practical to find how their relationship affects the sacred-secular binary in the novel. From the very beginning of the narrative, Vasu's appearance may seem to be invincible before the rather meek personality of Nataraj. His "bull neck", "tanned face" and "large, powerful eyes under thick eyebrows" (*MM* 10) showcase him as a demonic figure, and by nature, he appears quite anti-religious, without any faith on the divine. Throughout the novel, readers see Nataraj's perception towards Vasu, who forcefully tries to enter into his sacred place, which is separated by a blue curtain, which balances between his social life and spiritual life. The blue curtain in Nataraj's printing press that separates the inner space of the room as sacred and the outer world as typical is seen to receive a hard blow for the first time with the entrance of Vasu, an unknown person to Nataraj: "practically tearing aside the curtain, an act which violated the *sacred traditions of my press*" (*MM* 15; my italics). The entry of Vasu as an invincible power challenging the "sacred" world of Nataraj's press symbolizes that these two characters would soon represent two antagonistic value systems. Ludmila Volná correctly points out the conflicting representations of Nataraj and Vasu as she observes: "Nataraj represents the values defined as Indianness, whilst Vasu, coming from beyond Malgudi, affronts them" (Volná 158). Volná also affirms that the blue curtain symbolically "guards the interior space of Indian sacred learning" (161). Vasu's arrogant nature and cruelty trouble the peaceful domain of Nataraj and the society of Malgudi at large. While telling Nataraj about his professional life, Vasu identifies himself as a taxidermist, a bestial art of killing animals and stuffing the fleshes for commercial purposes. At Nataraj's printing press, while in conversation with him he shows his only comfort in talking about business-deals: "Are we here on business or to fight? If it's a fight, tell me. I like a fight" (*MM* 17). Even he does not care for any mannerism while talking to Nataraj's little boy. Vasu's indecent behaviour towards the people of Malgudi shows when he carries the enormous head of tiger for his business purpose; he shouted to them "Get away and mind your own business" (*MM* 48). Alongside all such issues, Vasu also introduces himself as an educated and sufficiently civilized human being who can master over modern science. Even as a taxidermist, he boasts that he can preserve the animals with all their life-like attributes! His pride and invincible nature lie at the root of his self and serve the role of 'hubris' in the tragedy to come. Despite Vasu's scholarly knowledge and skill in taxidermy, people of Malgudi, as well as some critics of Narayan find in him the *rakshas* self just for his ego. In his scholarly article, the eminent critic M. K. Naik points out an interesting issue which shows that Vasu has those attributes common to the legendary monsters in Hindu myths: "The demons in ancient Hindu mythology have another interesting characteristic. They are often seen to be not ignorant, unlettered monsters but skilled in intellectual and scientific pursuits…. Shukracharya, the guru of the *asuras*, was a learned scholar who could bring the dead to life with his skill in *sanjivani vidya*; Ravana who was well-versed in the Vedas." (Naik 67; italics original).

There is a tendency among some of the prominent critics of Narayan that they read this novel as an allegory upholding the fight between good and evil forces and the rebirth of the moral self (Woodcock 21; Walsh 168). After comparing the plot of *The Man-eater of Malgudi* with "the climactic action" of a scene in the *Ramayana*, Raymond-Jean Frontain observes: "Vasu, the bullying taxidermist who disrupts both village and forest life, and who falls victim finally to his own ferocious solecism, is a kin of Ravana the powerful *asura* whose abduction of Sita throws the cosmic order into disarray" (167). It is true that Vasu disrupted "the cosmic order" of the tranquil life of Malgudi by his brutal nature, but this is also true that Nataraj used to feel a kind of sneaking attraction for this tough fellow. As an iconic God-fearing Indian family-man immersed in daily domesticity, Nataraj may feel afraid of Vasu's sins, but he was also equally interested in Vasu's 'achievements' and heroism. Vasu is not just the representation of a legendary *rakshasa*, but an egoistic modern man of science, who understands the economic dimension of taxidermy well. Apart from all ethical and 'sacred' issues of sin and karma, a subtle enquiry into some historical details may help to attain a logically 'secular' explanation. Mysore, in addition to being the home of R. K. Narayan, was also a hub of taxidermic production (world-famous big cat taxidermists like Van Ingen and their rival Theobald Brothers hailed from Mysore) at the beginning of the last century (Walther 77). I agree with the opinion of Sundhya Walther, as she points out: "The novel uses Vasu to represent the evils of modernization, and especially of the entry of India as a nation into international flows of capital; in this role, he creates disturbance in the balanced composition of Malgudi as a community" (Walther 81). The binaries of good and evil, religious and secular ultimately appear behind the conflict between the traditional value system and the profit-laden economy of 'scientific' modernity.

The impact of colonialism on Indian life can be commonly seen in most of the Indian English writings in the post-independence era. However, Narayan's consciousness and his immense engagement with Indian myths reflect the co-existence of the sacred and the secularism. As Sastri compares Vasu with a *rakshasa* figure—"all the definitions of a rakshasa ...a demoniac creature who possessed enormous strength, strange powers, and genius, but recognized no sort of restraints of man or God" (*MM* 72-3), the reader of *The Man-eater of Malgudi* gets ready for the mythopoeic package of the Bhasmasura myth in the *Shiv Purana*. M. K. Naik finds him to be a "copy-book example of the 'demoniac lot' described in detail in the sixteenth chapter of the *Bhagawad-Gita* (verses 4 to 17)" (Naik 66). For Sastri, the death of Vasu is similar to that of the mythical Bhasmasura, because God has given proper justice to Malgudi people and the proper punishment to the demon. The end of Bhasmasura in mythology happens only when Lord Vishnu decides over his death, though the demon Bhasmasura was powerful only after the boon of Lord Shiva. Apart from the usual mythical story, there is an exciting twist offered by Narayan in the narrative. The reader may remember that Vasu had made some taxidermic experimentation with the corpse of a dead eagle, which made Nataraj feeling

seriously disturbed as the bird eagle is considered as the representation of the sacred Garuda, the messenger of Lord Vishnu in Hindu mythology. This minor connection also bridges Vasu's taxidermic skill and invincible ego with the 'sacred' wrath of Lord Vishnu, and there appears Rangi, who has been considered by Narayan's eminent critics as the Mohini figure created by Lord Vishnu to destroy Bhasmasura. M. K. Naik points out that the "name 'Rangi' is obviously derived from 'Ranganatha', one of the appellations of Vishnu, but the contrast between Mohini and Rangi is replete with irony. Mohini is a divine damsel; Rangi a poor temple dancer whose morals are universally suspect" (Naik 69). Though the narrator has described Rangi as "a woman of the temple", "the woman to avoid" (*MM* 115) "a dancing woman" (*MM* 147), and even with such invective as "the perfect female animal" (*MM* 82), she is the servant of God in the local temple, as she has the professional identity of the 'Devadasi'. Though she has the status of a public woman, Rangi appears to be robust and powerful in the narrative, as Teresa Hubel observes: "In Nataraj's mind, Rangi becomes a female figure of immense power" (Hubel 24). A mythical reading may encourage considering Rangi as the *femme fatale* and Vasu as her victim, but a logical interpretation insists on to consider Vasu's strength and ego as his 'hubris' and the resultant end.

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