



REVIEW ARTICLE

THE SIX COMPONENT OF THE MYTH IN THE MAN- EATER OF MALGUDI OF R.K. NARAYAN

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 23rd August, 2017
Received in revised form
16th September, 2017
Accepted 09th October, 2017
Published online 30th November, 2017

Key words:

Mythology,
Bhasmasura, demon,
Tanning,
Hammering,
Providentially

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Citation: Dr. R. Bakyaraj and S. Srinivas, 2017. "The six component of the myth in the man- eater of malgudi of R.K. Narayan," *International Journal of Current Research*, 9, (11), 61618-61620.

ABSTRACT

The man-eater of Malgudi is a modern version of the ancient tale of Bhasmasura, a demon. The point that Narayan uses the Bhasmasura, myth in The man - eater of malgudi is evident. In his essay "Gods, Demons and modern times." Narayan describes how once suddenly he came upon a theme that struck him as an excellent piece of mythology in modern dress, published under the title, "man eater of malgudi" and how, "I based this story on a well – known mythological episode the story of Mohini and Bhasmasura." Further, the novel itself bears reference to the myth twice. Once, when sastri, identifying Vasu with a rakshasa, defines the make – up of a demonic creature. Expatriating on the lives of various demons in Puranas, sastri narrates the story of Bhasmasura as under.

INTRODUCTION

Nataraj, a printer in malgudi, lives a peaceful life with his employee, sastri, a few visiting friends in his press, and with his wife and son at home. The congeniality is broken by the intrusion of one Mr. Vasu, a taxidermist. Vasu orders Nataraj to print five hundred visiting cards for him, the bill for which is never paid. As desired by Nataraj, Vasu narrates his past, explaining how under a rigorous training received from the pahelwan, his master, he acquired an enormous strength and how ultimately he left him. One day Vasu drives away junk from Nataraj's attic, makes it habitable, and soon establishes himself there quite against Nataraj's will. Vasu's bullying talk is frighteningly intolerable to all around. One day while Nataraj is busy with printing the invitation cards for the marriage of the daughter of the adjournment lawyer, Vasu arrives there in a jeep, bundles Nataraj into the jeep and drives him away to Mempi village. Nataraj is stranded on the way, hungry and penniless. He is helped greatly by Muthu, a shop – keeper. Next day in the evening Vasu turns up with the carcass of an enormous tiger. Not only tigers but also animals and birds of various sorts, including pets, fall a prey to Vasu's bullets. Nataraj's press is soon converted in a chanel house. Tanning, hammering, moulding and sawing of the broth become Vasu's chief occupation. Now, Nataraj, tired of Vasu, requests him to vacate the house but he is surprised to find a complaint lodged against him in turn. Nataraj is sunk in great agony. Sastri, Nataraj's assistant, is an orthodox – minded Sanskrit semi-scholar. He always avoids Vasu.

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He serves as a chorus, foretelling Vasu's inevitable doom ultimately. He narrates the stories of certain demons, including that of Bhasmasura, to illustrate his point that the evil has its own seeds of destruction. Among Nataraj's constant companion is a poet who is engaged in writing the life of God Krishna in monosyllabic verse. The presence of Vasu fills the poet with terror. Vasu becomes hostile to Nataraj. He suspects Nataraj of having set the forester on him. Vasu creates a scene at Muthu's shop and threatens him with his gun. The funds are raised to celebrate the poet's writing of the epic. With a promise to double the amount, Vasu snatches away the green folder. But he embezzles the entire funds. Vasu has great passion for women. Women mean – character, chief among them Rangi, frequent him. The rumour that Vasu is planning to kill Kumar, the temple elephant, on the celebration of a festival, creates immense threat and confusion. Some people, accompanied by a police inspector, visit Vasu to tell him not to kill the elephant. But Vasu becomes aggressive and breaks the police inspector's wrist in an encounter. He also breaks the iron frame of his cot with his fist to show off his strength Rangi, immensely worried about the safety to the elephant, persuades Nataraj to take preventive measures. She finally devises a way to save the life of the elephant. She brings a hamper of food for Vasu. She mixes some sleeping drug with the food, hoping that Vasu would be in a stupor when the procession passes by under his window Vasu, angry over many things, refuses to take his food that night. As he has broken the frame of his cot, he is compelled to stretch himself in an easy chair. He orders Rangi to fan him to keep the mosquitoes away. He dozes off. Providentially Rangi also dozes off. The fanning stops consequently. The mosquitoes come in a battalion. Vasu meets his heath in crushing a couple of mosquitoes that settle his forehead, with is own palm. The version of the Bhasmasura myth, as narrated below, is based on Shree Shivalilamrata in Marathi. However, an access to

certain other sources is frequently made later in the chapter to drive home the significant pieces of information. Bhasmasura, a demon, is born of ashes smeared on the body of Lord Shiva. The moment Bhasmasura is born, he stands before Shiva, requesting him earnestly to let him enjoy the privilege of serving him. Shiva assigns Bhasmasura the job of bringing fresh Bhasma daily, to be smeared on his body. He serves Shiva with a great devotion. A demon as Bhasmasura, he thinks of destroying all the creatures, conquering all the gods and there upon establishing an empire of the demons. With such a vile intention he goes to kailash, the abode of Shiva. Pretending that Bhasma is no more available anywhere, he prays to the Lord to grant him such a boon as would turn anyone into ashes on whose head he places his palm. Pleased at the great devotion towards him, Shiva grants him the boon. Bhasmasura is now swollen with arrogance. His evil joy knows no bounds. He soon engages himself in slaughtering the creatures. The havoc goes on intensifying itself. The entire earth turns pale with death. People begin to hide themselves in caves with their families. And the worst of all, it is found impossible to tame this demon.

Bhasmasura continues the delivery of Bhasma to Shiva as per his routine, feigns humility before Him and returns to the earth for his hunt. Lord Shiva, on being informed of the great ruin caused by his devotee through his special power, gets infuriated. When crossed by Shiva, Bhasmasura comes forward to apply the power to Shiva attempts an escape. He is followed by Bhasmasura everywhere. The chase ends with the appearance of Vishnu in the guise of Mohini, a beautiful dancer. Mohini allures Bhasmasura by her charms. She promises to marry him as per his desire, on the condition that he should perform a dance with her, imitating faithfully all her gestures and movements. The dance follows and during the course of this dance, Mohini tactfully places her palm on her head. Bhasmasura follows her unwittingly and as a result he is turned into ashes that very moment. Shiva is also infatuated with Mohini, a beauty incarnate.

The divine dimension of the myth is displaced in the novel through the moral dimension. The transfer of the Bhasma - particle from Shiva's body to the earth, leading to a miraculous event, the birth of a demon and the very idea behind it, comprise a divine dimension. On the other hand, Vasu's educational qualification sets in ironic contrast to his profession as a taxidermist, his patriotism during the civil disobedience movement, his earlier profession of a pahalwan, demonstrating his strength in public shows, cover the moral dimension. As far as the origin of Bhasmasura is concerned, the entire credit for it goes to Shiva whose strength is supposed to be "greater than all the gods together." Similarly, the credit to originate Vasu as a taxidermist goes to a master, Suleiman, capable of making a stuffed lion look "more terrifying than it would be in the jungle." And the credit to originate Vasu as a strong man goes to the pahalwan who is capable of bearing "a half-ton stone slab on his cheek," snapping "steel chains" and pulverizing "a block of hard granite with his fist". More over, a characteristic difference concerning the origins of Bhasmasura and Vasu lies in way they are narrated. Bhasmasura's origin in the myth takes a linear narrative, whereas Vasu's origin in the novel has two kinds. First, as Vasu appears in the linear fictional narrative. Second, the way Vasu originated as he is found with reference to the pahalwan and Suleiman, retrospectively narrated in the novel. Thus, the novel is displaced from the myth through a change in the sequence of events.

In view of the second component of the myth, Bhasmasura's routine, delivering ashes to Shiva every day, Bhasmasura is found to be offering his services to Shiva through the delivery of fresh Bhasma. The search for fresh Bhasma on the earth each day marks Bhasmasura's routine to which he is devoted sincerely. And this daily ritual, performed by Bhasmasura, is found "excellent" by Shiva. In a similar vein, equating Shiva in the myth with the pahalwan in the novel, Vasu's routine also begins as an apprentice to the pahalwan. The routine comprising exercises and dietetic rigour is "unsparing". His training includes waking up at three o'clock, going through

exercises, eating a hundred almonds, six eggs, honey, chicken, rice, vegetables, fruit and drinking half a seer of milk. But Vasu's training under the pahalwan is retrospectively narrated in the novel. Thus, the novel is displaced from the myth through a change in the sequence of events. In view of the third component of the myth, moral corruption in Bhasmasura, it seems that the piety inherited by Bhasmasura is itself reduced to the ashes in the process of delivering Bhasma. Bhasma in Shiva's sense signifies a mature and complete view of death which leads to a detached view of life and the virtue of self-control. But the evil mind of Bhasmasura, with egotism and ambition, fails to understand the true significance of 'Bhasma'. Ironically, he understands 'Bhasma' literally as annihilation of all life. Consequently, he perpetrates the acts of death. With overweening pride and ambition, Bhasmasura fancies to establish "an empire of the demons" through the murder of "all the gods including Vishnu". Vasu's character shows the very first sign of moral corruption only when he becomes stronger than his master and maltreats him. Similarly, Vasu, quite unmindful of the pains and cares that his master took to train him as a pahalwan, revolts against him. Vasu uses ungratefully the strength and skill imparted to him by the pahalwan against him. The immature mind of Vasu leads him to believe that his master has been misusing him and earning money through him.

In view of the fourth component of the myth, the boon given to Bhasmasura by Shiva for the assumed purpose, the boon culminates in the immeasurable strength of Bhasmasura. On acquiring the boon Bhasmasura becomes an object of wonder and terror. The specialty of the boon enables Bhasmasura to "turn anyone to ashes on whose head he fancies to place his palm." Similarly, in the novel, after having received the training from his master, a pahalwan, under rigorous conditions, Vasu himself becomes a pahalwan with enormous strength. He becomes capable of splintering "a three-inch panel of seasoned teak" with his fist, snapping "chains", twisting "iron bars" and pulverizing "granite". Vasu's real strength is revealed later in the novel when saying with a cynical laughter to the police inspector, "if I had hit you with my hand do you want to see what would have happened?" he brings his palm flat down on the iron frame of the cot and cracks it. In view of the fifth component of the myth, Bhasmasura's misuses of the boon, his atrocities, the demoniac nature in Bhasmasura is evident. Vasu in the novel qualifies all the characteristics of a "rakshasa" "Vasu is indeed the perfect embodiment of the typical rakshasa of ancient Hindu mythology. He seems to be a copy - book example of the demoniac lot described in detail in the sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad - Gita." The misuse of boon in the hands of Bhasmasura extends to the state of transgression, bringing about a massacre of the innocents, the rebellion against Shiva, the originator, and the lust for Parvati, Shiva's consort. He becomes a superpower, almost untamable. This component of the myth is largely elaborated in the novel, tracing meticulously the demonic traits in Vasu.

With regard to Bhasmasura's indiscriminate killing of the innocent creatures including human beings on earth, Vasu in the novel in engaged depleting the forests of Mempi of all their creatures. Vasu's hunt includes wild animals of all varieties tiger, deer, stag, squirrel, hyena, python, crow, eagle etc.

In the context of the sixth component of the myth, Bhasmasura's consequent death through a divine trick, it is quite interesting to note that the factors leading to the destruction of Bhasmasura in the myth and that of Vasu in the novel are more or less similar. Neither in the novel are more or less similar. Neither Bhasmasura nor Vasu is allowed to commit finally a sacrilege. Bhasmasura's sacrilegious threat to kill Shiva and his lust for Parvati in the myth and Vasu's evil determination to kill Kumar the temple elephant, are finally frustrated. Another significant parallel worth mentioning here is that Bhasmasura and Vasu at this stage become equally ferocious and untamable. Bhasmasura's ferocity leads to a critical situation in the myth. Bent upon reducing Shiva to ashes, and seducing Parvati there after, Bhasmasura renders Shiva, the most powerful of all the gods, powerless. Everyone gets panicky as Bhasmasura sets out to place his

hand on Shiva's head. "All the subjects including the saints began to run helter – skelter. Shiva also began to run away." Though Vasu in the novel is not killed by Rangi, she helps him destroy himself. Rangi is "an unconscious instrument of his destruction." The circumstances which lead Vasu to his death are quite curious. Vasu is compelled to stretch himself in an easy chair the night he is to kill Kumar, the temple elephant. He cannot sleep in his cot, protected by a mosquito - net, for he has broken earlier the frame of the cot to show off his strength to the police inspector. As Vasu hates mosquitoes, he orders Rangi to keep away the mosquitoes with a fan. After some time he dozes off, and providentially, Rangi also dozes off. And so, the fanning ceases, allowing the mosquitoes to return in a battalion for a fresh attack on Vasu. He flourishes his arms like a madman, strikes his forehead by bringing the flat of his palm with all his strength. Plasters two mosquitoes on his brow and also brings an end to his life. Obviously, Bhasmasura is destroyed through a divine trick, whereas Vasu is destroyed through a providential trick.

The divine dimension of the myth is displaced in the novel through a secular dimension. Thus, the novel is displaced through a change in dimension.

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