

## Understanding of Religious Ethics: Novels by R.K. Narayan

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to study R.K.Narayan's man protagonists in the novels *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967). The master craftsman weaves his story line in a manner wherein Nataraj in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* show personal disposition which have strong roots in religious ethics, righteousness and spirituality. The qualities of altruism, empathy, wisdom, kindness, divinity are associated with the Hindu religion. The man protagonists, not only show the above mentioned traits, but act in accordance to the theory of Dharma and Karma ( duties, actions and the resultant consequences). Narayan's novels are important in today's world when people are becoming violent, impatient and have low regard for ethics and values. Thus Narayan's novels cross the boundaries of culture and time. Further they serve as a reference point for wise and selfless actions.*

### Introduction

Spirituality has been defined as a process of personal transformation in accordance with religious ideals. Since the 19th century spirituality is separated from religion, and has become more oriented on subjective experience and psychological growth. It may refer to almost any kind of meaningful activity or blissful experience which involves doing good to others, empathizing,

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being contented and at peace with self. Religion, on the other hand, is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. Many religions have narratives, symbols, and sacred histories that are intended to explain the meaning of life and/or to explain the origin of life or the Universe. From their beliefs about the cosmos and human nature, people derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle. Religions may also contain mythology. The typical dictionary definition of religion refers to a 'belief in, or the worship of, a God or Gods' or the 'service and worship of God or the supernatural'. Hindu religion advocated the theory of dharma and karma which focuses on duties expected of men and the subsequent results of all action thus performed.

P.S. SUNDARAM observes Narayan's novels as 'religious fables'. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, there exists a deep mythical structure. The story of the peaceful printer Nataraj who must overcome the demon like Vasu is structured very much like a myth. As myths and spirituality are implicit in Hindu society, the world of Malgudi is full of mythical elements. To complement these mythical elements, comparisons and references are made to various Hindu myths throughout the book, which act as signposts to the significance of what is going on in the story itself. The myths referred to give a greater insight into the action and into the characters themselves, by showing more subtle aspects of the story which are juxtaposed against the myths. The battle between Vasu and Nataraj is framed perfectly in the context of myth. The action that occurs in the novel bears many similarities to other myths that are either mentioned or alluded to, in particular the Ramayana and the myth of Bhasmasura. The structure of the story is the same as a myth, with the protagonist facing an unstoppable enemy who eventually meets his end by his own hand.

Ashok Kumar Kundu analyzes:

Narayan draws directly from the myths of our epics and classics. By using them successfully in metaphor, personification and symbol, he has kept tradition alive. Through his writings, Narayan has expressed his world view. His writing shows that, he believes in eternity, karma and the theory of reincarnation, and the deterministic world. He seems to consider emancipation from the wheel of the life as the pinnacle of human desire. Moreover, his interpretation of life is spiritualistic. (147)

Myths we know are not merely fanciful stories but pragmatic embodiments of moral wisdom and primitive faith. They are a medium of moral instruction and myth makers are great philosophers and teachers. Myths not only set exemplary patterns of behaviour but set the scale of values as well as the ideal goals. Human being emulates the behaviour of divine beings or their mythical ancestors. Myths, can therefore be said to have a power to change a man's life. (148)

The man protagonist, Vasu is shown to bear traits of ethical and virtuous ways. When he visits Vasu's living space full of carcasses of animals, blood and stench all over, he can't 'imagine any human being living in this atmosphere' (60). He is aghast when he notices that Vasu has killed a crow, asks him, "What did the crow do to you?" (62) and finally realizes that it is a 'garuda' (63). Nataraj says and ponders on the situation thus :

"Don't you realize that it's sacred? That it's the messenger of God Vishnu?" I shivered slightly at the thought and the way his mind worked. Nothing seemed to touch him. No creature was safe, if it had the misfortune to catch his eye. I had made a mistake in entertaining him. I ought to send him away at the earliest possible moment. His presence defiled my precincts. My mind seethed with ideas as to how to throw him out, but he noticed nothing.(64)

Vasu's profession of taxidermy provides a direct challenge to Nataraj's belief in the sanctity life and this is underscored by various mythological references. When Nataraj visits the attic he is shocked to discover the carcasses of various animals including a cat that has frequented his press , a tiger poached from the forest and a stuffed crow . The place has blood and stench all over. He can't 'imagine any human being living in this atmosphere' (60). He is, however, most disturbed to see Vasu working on a dead eagle and the full extent of his repugnance emerges as he tries to convince Vasu that the bird is a sacred garuda, ' the messenger of God Vishnu'. Nataraj says and ponders on the situation thus :

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Religion and the rituals of worship associated with it, come to the board when Narayan describes the temple, ceremonies and the statue of God in detail:

The God was beautifully decorated. He wore a rose garland, and a diamond pendant sparkled on his chest. He had been draped in silk and gold lace, and he held a flute in his hand: and his little bride, a golden image draped in blue silk and sparkling with diamonds, was at his side, the shy bride. The piper was blowing his cheeks out , filling the air with " Kalyani Rag", a lovely melody at this hour. The temple was nearly a century old, built by public subscription in the days when my grandfather and a few others had come here as pioneers.(178-9)

One of Nataraj's friends is a poet, who is writing an epic about the life of Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu and during the course of action the poet arrives at the moment of the hero's marriage to *Radha*. To celebrate this event, it is agreed to hold an elaborate ceremony, centred on an elephant in conjunction with the annual spring festival at the local Krishna temple. Worried that Vasu, who has been quick to grasp the commercial possibilities of a dead elephant, will try to kill it, Nataraj initially feels that he must act as an elephant's protector, but then remembers a mythic tale that suggests otherwise:

The sight of the God , the sound of music, the rhythm of cymbals and the scent of jasmine and incense induced in me a temporary indifference to everything . Elephant ? who could kill an elephant? There came to my mind the tale of elephant Gajendra, the elephant of mythology who stepped into a lake and had his leg caught in the jaws of a mighty crocodile: and the elephant trumpeted helplessly, struggled, and in the end desperately called on Vishnu, who immediately appeared and gave him the strength to come ashore out of the jaws of a crocodile. “ In this story I told myself, “ our ancestors have shown us that an elephant has a protected life and no one can harm it.” I felt lighter at heart. When the time came the elephant would find the needed strength. The priest was circling the camphor light before the golden images, and the reflections on the faces made them vibrate with a living quality. God Krishna was really an incarnation of Vishnu, who had saved Gajendra; he would again come to the rescue of the same animal on whose behalf I was.....(180)

The novel is full with words of wisdom and knowledge coupled with faith and spirituality. Sastri tells the man protagonist Nataraj that ‘Every man can think that he is great and will live for ever, but no one can guess from which quarter his doom will

come’(95) and at the end of the novel that ‘(E)very 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?’ (240)

Following Hindu religion means eating pure food like vegetables, milk products, pulses and grains which are generally good for us. It also implies consuming food items only for one’s need. Further, the correct time for eating meals is also outlined in holy scriptures. Thus Jagan, the man protagonist in *The Vendor of Sweets* is outraged when his son Mali writes to him that he has taken to eating beef. Jagan in his understanding of shastras knows that ‘killing of a cow’ headed the list of five deadly sins(56-7). Jagan has moderate eating and drinking habits. He does not ‘drink more than four ounces of water a day’ which is ‘boiled at night and cooled in a mud jug open to the sky’(103) and ‘keeps off sweets and salt’(114). In fact he firmly believes that ‘ diet has a lot to do with the colour of one’s hair’(107). Throughout the story Narayan lets the readers know of Jagan’s plans of writing a book on ‘diet controlled according to nature’s specifications’(108)

The man protagonist’s philosophy of connecting with the nature comes across when he remembers his ‘father who died at ninety without a single tooth loose in his jaw. Jagan has immense faith in the properties of margosa, and in spite of its bitterness , he called it ‘Amrita’, the ambrosia which kept the God alive ; and sometimes he called it ‘Sanjeevani’ the rare herb mentioned in the epics which, held at the nostrils, could bring the dead to life’. Jagan stresses being as close to nature as possible. According to him, “Socks should never be worn because they

are certain to heat the blood through interference with the natural radiation which occurs through one's soles, and also because you insulate yourself against beneficial magnetic charges of the earth's surface(68).

Hindu religious scriptures state a wife's place as next to her husband. Jagan believes in this philosophy. When Mali informs him that his 'wife' Grace will go back to her own country if she has no work, Jagan's view, "But a wife must be with her husband, whatever happens", says it all about his religious bent of mind. Similarly as a husband he is aware of his own duties towards his wife and his faith that husband and wife should be together at all times is highlighted when he says, "use or no use, my wife..... I look after her all her life"(135).

Jagan is upset when he finally comes to know that Grace and Mali were not married and were living together in his house. This is a blow to his sting sense of righteousness and religious beliefs.

Importance of celibacy is worded by Jagan when he says:

Nature has never meant sex to be anything more than a means of propagation of the species, that one drop of white blood was equal to forty drops of red blood, and that seminal waste and nervous exhaustion reduced one's longevity, the essence of all achievement being celibacy and conservation.(166)

Divinity and purity dominate his thoughts. He keeps a copy of The Gita, refers to it as 'truly a treasure-house of wisdom' and reads it everyday. He believes that there is no such thing as reading this book finally; it is something to be read all one's life. He quotes Lord Krishna in the Gita, "it is all in one's hand. You make up your mind and you will find object of your search" and that, "The Gita also says every man must perform his duty in the right spirit and right measure".(99-100)

R.K.Narayan talks of the ultimate truth of life, as is highlighted by the Hindu religion in the dialogue he gives the male protagonist, "The world doesn't collapse even when a great figure is assassinated or dies of heart failure. Think that my heart has failed, that's all." (184)

Studying the narrative technique of Narayan, Nityananda Pattanayak(2012) says that each of Narayan's novels has a message. To transmit that message, the author selects his devices carefully so as not to cause any imbalance between the matter and the manner of telling it. Narayan has a comic vision of life, his message is mostly covert; even themes of deep philosophical understandings are treated in a comic mode. (p:271)

Narayan's adherence to the ancient Indian tradition( as reflected in his fiction) a tradition which is deeply rooted in the beliefs of the transmigration of the soul, karma, renunciation and reincarnation, becomes clear through a perspective study of his fiction. Narayan's writings are accepted and read the world over. Simple writing makes for a delightful reading. His novels cross the boundaries of culture and time for the simple reason that he deals with emotions. The story-lines have subtle messages and it inspires the reader to think. (C.N.Srinath)

Spirituality and humour go hand in hand. The understanding that life is not permanent and that one is here for a limited period of time can enable people not to take life too seriously. In this journey, then, one can forgive and let go of past hurt and resentment.

In India : a wounded civilization, V.S. Naipaul reports a remark that Narayan made to him during a conversation in London in 1961: "India will go on". For Naipaul this comment crystallizes what he views as Narayan's conservative belief in an old equilibrium, a stable social order understood through a quietist philosophy with roots in orthodox Hinduism. Like all of Narayan's



heroes, his character exemplifies a set of concerns that go beyond his social role to embody a view of identity that is only partly defined by his occupation, actions and standing in the community. These concerns have their roots in traditional Brahmanical thinking, but, as Tabish Khair points out, it is a mistake to see Narayan's characters as aspirants of "spiritual maturity". Instead, they aspire for "Existential maturity". In Khair's view, a significant number of Narayan's protagonists are not very spiritual or religious. They are primarily concerned with the secular problem of living, though they often mechanically observe religious customs. (Thieme:126)

Research on R.K. Narayan's novels is a never-ending process. Reading and re-reading his works will keep providing insights to wise, ethical living sprinkled with humour and the beauty of customary existence.

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