

The Man-eater of Malgudi (1961)

Story In yet another story set in the fictional town of Malgudi, Narayan finds another way to explore his fascination with the vicissitudes of everyday life. The title, which playfully recalls the 1944 'Man-eaters of Kumaon,' the famous book by the hunter-turned-naturalist Jim Corbett, refers here to a two-footed predator in the form of Vasu, a taxidermist who comes to Malgudi in search of wild animals to stuff and sell. Vasu thus intervenes in the serene life of Nataraj, a middle-class man who makes a modest living as a printer (it is notable how many of Narayan's key characters are somehow involved in the production of books). Before the arrival of his dangerous man, Nataraj enjoys simple things, such as discussing poetry with his friends. Vasu disrupts this content life by appearing and immediately demanding that Nataraj print 500 business cards. Although suspicious of Vasu, and put off by his brash behaviour, Nataraj allows him to take up (temporary) residence in the attic of his large, ancestral home. Slowly but surely, Vasu establishes himself in the centre of Nataraj's life by doing things that the printer finds abhorrent. Vasu bullies his customer, shoots a neighbour's pet dog, kills birds and other animals near the house and produces a noxious atmosphere through his use of chemicals in his taxidermy. Nataraj challenges Vasu on his activities, and Vasu responds by filing a complaint against him as a landlord. Things threaten to get out of hand, when Nataraj learns that Vasu is planning to shoot and kill an elephant, which is tethered nearby. Nataraj had been responsible for bringing the elephant down from the hills and healing it. Nataraj tries frantically to convince Vasu that he should not kill the elephant, but Vasu is interested only in making money for his business. One day, Nataraj finds Vasu lying dead on the floor. At first everyone suspects poison, but the autopsy reveals that he had been struck with 'a blunt instrument.' Given that the ferocity of Nataraj's quarrel with the dead man was well known, public opinion turns against him. His printing business fails and he is shunned by many people. In the end, however, Nataraj discovers that Vasu (who prided himself on being a strong man) died from a self-inflicted wound. Apparently, he died from a damaged brain nerve caused when he used his hand to smash a mosquito on his temple. A humorous and somewhat improbable but nevertheless satisfying conclusion to this tragi-comic novel.

Characters

Nataraj Nataraj is the kindly, unassertive printer at the heart of this novel. He is a cultured man, who enjoys Indian classical music and poetry. His flaw, if he has one, is that he is too accommodating and allows others, especially Vasu, to take advantage of him.

Vasu Vasu is the antithesis of Nataraj. He is an eccentric taxidermist, who kills and stuffs animals for profit. He is also an arrogant bully, who respects no one and does whatever he pleases. Narayan suggests that he represents a rakshasa, a demonic figure in Hindu mythology.

Rangi Rangi is a dancer, who is held in low esteem by Nataraj because of her profession (considered indecent by conservative people at the time of the novel). She, however, proves herself to be honest and loyal, especially when she helps Nataraj in his struggle against Vasu.

Themes

Good and evil On the surface, this is a straightforward story of the struggle between good (Nataraj) and evil (Vasu). This is complicated, however, by the fact that Nataraj cannot help but admire Vasu, who is cosmopolitan and strong-willed. As the author says, 'Evil is not merely stronger but also more attractive than goodness.' Narayan seems to suggest that goodness by itself is not enough to achieve happiness. One also needs determination.

Paradox The paradoxical nature of reality is another theme of this subtle novel. Nataraj both fears and admires the brute force of Vasu. He is repelled by his animal killing yet impressed by his perfectionist work habits. 'I began to feel intrigued by the man; I did not want to lose him,' Nataraj tells us. In this way, Narayan suggests that black-and-white perspectives are illusory and that paradox is the true condition of life.

Identification Over the course of the novel, Nataraj comes to identify with Vasu, his alter-ego. Nataraj notices that they both are craftsmen, for example. Nataraj also admits to dark sexual urges

toward Vasu's mistress. He also finds that 'this man's presence aroused in me a sort of pugnacity.'
In other words, the victim is identifying with the aggressor.