

Nataraj (Narayan's novel *The Man-eater of Malgudi*) Passive

Character Nataraj owns a printing shop. He is an intelligent, sensitive and cultured man, who appreciates music and poetry, loves animals and his children, and contributes to cultural events for the benefit of the whole community. This is the external picture. On the inside, however, Nataraj lacks courage, to the point of being a coward. He is henpecked by his wife, he is cheated by lawyers and he is bullied by his tenant, and alter-ego, Vasu. He can also be vain and self-important, as well as pleasure-seeking and materialistic. His true, paradoxical character is revealed, during the course of the novel, through his changing relationship with Vasu, the taxidermist who comes to live in his house. At first, Nataraj is repelled by the brute force of the man, his violent profession and his brusque behaviour. Slowly, however, the soft-spoken Nataraj comes to realise that he admires Vasu and even begins to identify with him. This process of transformation, in which Nataraj (and we, the readers) come to understand that simple black-and-white contrasts (Indian vs western; spiritualism vs materialism; passivity vs aggression) are illusions, is the heart of the novel.

Activities Nataraj owns and manages a printing shop, which occupies most of his time. He also spends hours with his friends discussing poetry and mythology, especially the erotic love between Radha and Krishna. He supports local cultural events and animal welfare programmes.

Illustrative moments

Sensitive Nataraj is pained by the illness that befalls an elephant, who works for the forest department. He seeks a vet to heal the animal's condition and continues to be concerned with its welfare, especially when the villain Vasu decides to kill it for his taxidermy business.

Altruistic Nataraj is genuinely altruistic. This is demonstrated when he takes it upon himself to single-handedly organise an event to celebrate the publication of a friend's religious book.

Timid The best illustration of Nataraj's timidity is his inability to ask his unruly tenant, Vasu, to vacate his house. Vasu has, in Nataraj's words, turned his house into a slaughterhouse, but when he tries to throw him out, words fail him. 'Why couldn't I ask him to get out?' Nataraj asks himself.

Vain Despite his positive characteristics, Nataraj is also self-important. In his printing shop, he erects a blue curtain to separate himself from the rest of the workforce so that customers will appreciate that he is the boss. By cunning means, he also manages to create the impression that his printing shop owns a fancy machine, which actually belongs to shop next door.

Transformation The transformation from coward to hero occurs when, with great trepidation, he enters the room where Vasu lives in his house. He knows that Vasu is planning to kill an elephant, and that he keeps a gun for that purpose, but Nataraj is so determined to save the elephant that he puts these fears to one side and acts.