

THE MAN-EATER OF MALGUDI

R. K. Narayan

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.

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.

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.

Sen Sen is a journalist and a good friend and advisor of Nataraj. He visits him nearly every day in the printing office, where he offers advice on everything from medicine to politics. At several key points in the story, treatment of the elephant Kumar, the procession to announce the publication of a book and a marriage, Sen provides valuable advice and assistance to Nataraj.

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

NATARAJ (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.

VASU (Demonic)

Character Vasu is a taxidermist who comes to reside in Nataraj's house. On first reading, he appears to represent brute force, in contrast with Nataraj's cultured sensitivity. He kills and stuffs animals; Nataraj discusses poetry and publishes religious books. Vasu is physically strong, with a thick-neck and powerful arms. It is suggested that he is a demonic force (*rakshasa* in Hindu mythology). In other words, Vasu is brutal, menacing and self-centred. However, just as with the seemingly one-dimensional Nataraj, Vasu's character is actually more complex. Compared to the kind yet cunning Nataraj, Vasu has a refreshing spontaneity and an instinctive passion for life and pleasure. It is true that his chosen profession may involve pain to animals, but Vasu is a dedicated craftsman. He is hardworking, holds high standards and appreciates excellence in other professions, as well. He is well-travelled, good humoured and capable of loyal friendship. And yet, his brute force is what destroys him in the (humorous) conclusion: when he smacks a mosquito on his temple, he gets a brain tumour and dies. As Narayan reminds us, evil is self-destructive.

Activities Vasu is a dedicated taxidermist. He spends hour upon hour meticulously reconstructing animal bodies and displaying them. He also hunts and kills animals, for his work. He is unmarried but has a mistress, a local dancer.

Illustrative moments

Cruel Vasu's cruelty, especially to animals, is expressed when he shoots dead a neighbour's dog. There is no provocation, no reason, for the shooting, except that the dog seemed to dislike Vasu.

Strong Vasu is questioned by the police about his possibly illegal hunting in the national forest. When a policeman slaps him, Vasu grabs his wrist and dislocates it with a mere twist of his hand.

Spontaneous Vasu's spontaneous good-nature is shown when he first meets Nataraj in the printing shop. He immediately befriends him, joke with him and gives him an order for business cards. What a jovial, good-natured person this is, we say to ourselves.

Craftsman Vasu is a dedicated craftsman, who takes pride in the quality of his work. When Nataraj praises the eyes of a stuffed eagle, Vasu replies, 'So you are taken in! You poor fool. Those eyes were given it by me, not by God. That's why I call my work an Art.'

SEN (Opinionated)

Character Sen is one of those minor characters who have a significant influence on the protagonist of a novel, in this case, on Nataraj, the printer. Sen, whose names suggests that he is not a local man but comes from Bengal, is a loyal friend to Nataraj. Sen is an educated and opinionated man, who likes to tell everyone what he thinks. He is not an overly industrious person, and seems to enjoy the job of a journalist, which means he must read the newspaper every day. In some ways, he forms a contrast with the muscular Vasu, another one of Nataraj's friends. Most important, he is ready to help Nataraj with original ideas whenever the printer is in trouble. Although Sen is loyal to Nataraj, he, like everyone else in Malgudi, suspects that Nataraj killed Vasu and turns his back on him in the end.

Activities Although he claims to be a journalist, Sen has published nothing and appears to like his leisure. He is a daily visitor to Nataraj's printing press office, where he occupies a wicker chair, reads the newspapers and treats everyone to a running commentary on the politics of the day, especially a tirade against Prime Minister Nehru. He is forever talking, and the only time he keeps quiet is when he comes across a problem for which he can find no reason to blame the government. Only in one brief scene do we see him actually working, at home, in a converted garage, with the low light of a

kerosene lamp. He writes his editorials and then waits for someone to finance a paper to print them. No financier ever comes.

Illustrative moments

Opinionated As a journalist, Sen has a lot of opinions and likes nothing more than to share his political wisdom with the less-informed members of Malgudi society. The very first time we meet him, he is ensconced in his habitual place, a comfortable chair in Nataraj's print shop reading the newspaper. At that point, a customer arrives, wearing a Gandhi cap, which Sen knows will mean that he supports the current Prime Minister, Nehru. Once the customer has sat down and begins talking business with Nataraj, Sen clears his throat and begins a mini-lecture on the misguided intentions and ineffective measures of Nehru's Five-Year-Plan to improve the Indian economy. Without bothering to quote from the plan or to use any facts or figures, Sen the journalist explains why socialist planning won't work. 'Now, take this splendid enterprise right here,' he says, referring to Nataraj's business, 'why, if that plan is implemented, then...' Ten minutes later, he is pontificating, but no one in the office is listening.

Defensive Sen has the confidence of his convictions, but he does not like to be challenged. This characteristic is illustrated in a somewhat humorous incident, which again takes place in the office of Nataraj's print works. Sen is expatiating on the evils of Nehru's policies, when the muscular and nearly illiterate Vasu enters. Having listened for a few minutes, Vasu asks, 'Who is this big-mouth? If he's so much smarter than Nehru, why doesn't he become prime minister, eh?' Sen is dumbfounded by this insult and protests that he will not be silenced, that free speech is essential to democracy and so forth. 'If people are not well-informed, that is not my fault,' he says haughtily, 'but they should not insult those of us who are.' Narayan knew many journalists, and he respected them, but he also knew how an educated man in a provincial town environment could develop a superiority complex.

Loyal Sen's loyalty to Nataraj is his most endearing trait. He may like to hear himself speak, but he does come to his friend's aid at crucial points in the narrative. And he is especially resourceful when it means he can utilise his vast knowledge of local (or national) politics. There is a good illustration of this combination of giving assistance and showing off knowledge in a scene toward the end of the book. Nataraj has come to Sen's house, a few dingy rooms of a converted garage, to ask for his help in finding a hospital to treat an elephant that he (Nataraj) has saved from the forest. Nataraj arrives unexpectedly, and Sen is thrown off for a moment because he prefers to be the guest not the host. Then he offers coffee or to take Nataraj to a restaurant. Nataraj refuses and puts his problem before him: does he know of any veterinary hospital in the area? Nataraj has enquired everywhere with no results. Sen thinks for a moment and then goes to a stack of old, dusty newspaper resting on a sagging rack. 'Yes, yes,' he says and pulls down a half-yellowed paper. He has found a news item about a government-funded hospital not far away. 'Nobody heard about it,' he explains, 'because they didn't send out the invitations in time.' Here is the quintessential Sen: the journalist who prides himself on knowing everything that has happened and will happen in the district, and the man who uses that knowledge to help his friend.