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***Maya and Mohini* in R. K. Narayan's
*The Guide and The Man Eater of Malgudi***

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Simple and Direct Language

The language R. K. Narayan uses in his works is simple and direct. But he also uses symbols that make us understand and appreciate the characters and the themes dealt with in his novels. This paper focuses on the study of *maya* and *mohini* symbols used in two novels of R. K. Narayan: *The Guide* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.

The Guide is the story of one man's journey through life. Narayan portrays this journey as a journey through a maze of *maya* or illusion. *Man-Eater of Malgudi* is a story based on a mythological narrative in Hindu epics and traditions. An act like Bhaskasura's boon from Siva is used in this story for the self-destruction of the trouble maker who dominates the lives of people around him and endangers their morals.

Maya

The concept of *maya* is as old as Hinduism itself, in a manner of speaking. *Upanishads* expound this philosophy and way of life, which is taken up for discussion, elucidation and adoption in many other works both in Sanskrit and other Indian languages.

Basically as a religious concept, *maya* refers to an abstract veil or some such barrier that does not enable one to realize that the soul of an individual or self is not different from the Universal Soul. The realization that self and Universe are one and the same comes after the elimination of *maya*. One overcomes *maya* through appropriate disciplines and realizes the Ultimate and Universal Truth that the Supreme Soul and our own soul are one and the same.

Vedanta and Maya

In Advaita Vedanta, the goal of human life should be the realization of this Universal truth after overcoming the illusion or 'Maya'. *Maya* is ineffable. *Maya* cannot be expressed or described in words. And yet it is always present and we all go through this in this world. That an ineffable abstract concept is also momentarily concrete is illustrated in at least two symbols by Adi Sankara. A rope is seen and even felt as a snake in darkness, but when light returns one realizes that the rope was after all rope, not a snake. In darkness the rope becomes or is felt as a concrete snake. Another metaphor is based on wet dreams.

Application of Maya in Our Daily Life – The Polysemous Title of the Novel: *The Guide*

Applied to our daily life, *maya* represents the transitory nature of everything around us. Life is an illusion, objects around are all illusory, our relationships are also illusory, and so on. While this sounds negative, in reality it is expected that the fact that we are surrounded by *maya* should enable us to take a very realistic view of life and not get attached to the attractions of this life but seek better and durable good.

In this sense, the title of the novel becomes an interesting polysemous phrase. *The Guide* stands to represent not only to the profession of Raju whose story is being narrated, it also points to the underlying principle of Hindu life.

Raju and the Maya He was Entrapped In

Raju in *The Guide* has an ordinary childhood. He has an out of the ordinary love affair. His life is a parasitic life, which ultimately lands him, for a term, in jail. In many ways, Raju is a normal Indian man with tastes, ideas, thoughts and behavior shared by millions of people in India. And he finally finds liberation from the illusion of this life.

Raju is drawn away from his daily routine once he sees Rosie and comes into contact with her. Rosie is also, sort of, portrayed as a *mohini*, presumably entrapping and seducing Raju into ways of life that he was not prepared for. After all, Indian thinking and judgment often put the blame on women for the woes of wayward men!

It is not really clear why the name of this alleged *mohini* should be Rosie! Is this choice a suggestion that the world around Raju, as he climbs the social and economic ladder, is more materialistic (for many, synonymous with modern life and western ways of life) and that Raju is entrapped in it? Is materialism, then, seen as the *mohini* of our lives, creating and setting up *maya* between us and our earnest hidden desire to seek the Universal Truth, our *atman*, or self reaching and uniting itself with the Universal Soul, Brahman?

Rosie in *The Guide* is portrayed as an embodiment of the ineffable principle of *maya*. She is a symbolic representation of *maya*, seducing and imprisoning Raju in his world of illusion, which would soon be burst and would become nothing. Here, Raju becomes infatuated with Rosie. He is so obsessed with Rosie that he forgets his business, falls into debt, loses his shop, the respect of his mother, and finally goes to jail. A common story told million times in day to day life, but this story comes alive with vivid description in the hand of R. K. Narayan.

Like all traditional writing, unfortunately, one gets the impression that the cause for Raju's fall is Rosie, a woman, and not Raju's willful choice.

Mohini in The Man-eater of Malgudi

The same concept of *mohini* is exploited in R. K. Narayan's another novel **The Man-eater of Malgudi**. **The Man-Eater of Malgudi** is modeled on Bhasmasura myth.

Narayan wrote:

At some point in one's writing career, one takes a fresh look at the so-called myths and legends and finds a new meaning in them. After writing a number of novels and short stories based on the society around me, some years ago, suddenly I came across a theme which struck me as an excellent piece of mythology in modern dress. It was published under the title "The Man-Eater of Malgudi". I based this story on a well known mythological episode, the story of Mohini and Bhasmasura. (Bhatnagar, P. 25)

Man-eaters of Kumaon and The Man-Eater of Malgudi

The title *Man-eater of Malgudi* is not a parody of Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*. If anything, R. K. Narayan borrows this title to focus on Man eating humans, in some spiritual and social sense, and how an evil individual terrorizes law-abiding citizens in a small town in India. Jim Corbett took pains to describe who and what man-eaters in the jungle are. He spent a lifetime hunting out these evil marauding animals. Jim Corbett's description of man-eating animals in Kumaon jungle, when applied to Vasu in Malgudi, puts the responsibility for his nature on the social and individual psychological factors for the terrorizing nature of Vasu in the story that takes place in Malgudi.

Jim Corbett wrote in his preface to the classic:

A man-eating tiger is a tiger that has been compelled, through stress of circumstances beyond its control, to adopt a diet alien to it. The stress of circumstances is, in nine cases out of ten, wounds, and in the tenth case old age. The wound that has caused a particular tiger to take to man-eating might be the result of a carelessly fired shot and failure to follow up and recover the wounded animal, or be the result of the tiger having lost his temper when killing a porcupine. Human beings are not the natural prey of tigers, and it is only when tigers have been incapacitated through wounds or old age that, in order to live, they are compelled to take to a diet of human flesh. (Corbett, p. x)

A leopard, in an area in which his natural food is scarce, finding these bodies very soon acquires a taste for human flesh, and when the disease dies down and normal conditions are established, he very naturally, on finding his food supply cut off, takes to killing human beings. (Corbett, p. xvi)

R. K. Narayan, on the other hand, focuses on a mythological story to bring end to the evil faced by humanity, even as he borrows the title from Jim Corbett's classic published in 1944.

Beliefs in myths and rituals are part of the common people's life in R. K. Narayan's Malgudi, which is a replica of any small town in India. It is interesting to see how the author uses the myth of a demon in the **The Man-Eater of Malgudi**.

Bhasmasura, Evil Incarnate

Unable to check the wicked activities of Vasu, the taxidermist, Nataraj and his friends are helpless. Not being able to do anything to stop Vasu bullying them and causing enormous pain and loss to them, they pray to Vishnu. They long in their heart that some invisible divine power would come to their rescue and everything would be alright. Vasu was found dead in the room he rented from Nataraj. Autopsy did not show that Vasu died of any poison or personal injury to him. It so turned out that Vasu tried to kill a mosquito sitting on his forehead. He slapped so heavily against his own forehead that he instantly died.

Bhasmasura in Hindu mythology had received a boon from Siva that if he touched someone's head with his hand that person should be burned to ashes alive. He became a terror to all the gods in heaven, including Siva who gave him the boon. Helpless Siva seeks the help of Vishnu, who shows up as a beautiful *mohini*, dancing woman. Bhasmasura wants her hand in marriage but the *mohini* would agree to marry him only if he matched her dancing skills with hers. In the process, one of the dancing poses led Bhasmasura to touch his own head and get burned into ashes alive. Helpless Siva and all the gods were saved by this tricky act of Vishnu who took the form of a *mohini*.

Narayan applies the mythological story of Bhasmasura to Vasu to underline the distinction between good and evil.

The strong man of evil continues to be reckless until he is destroyed by the tempo of his own misdeeds. Evil has in it, buried subtly, the infallible seeds of its own destruction. And however frightening a demon might seem, his doom is implied in his own propensities.

Rangi, the Mohini

The character of Rangi, a temple dancer, is very interesting for several reasons. She is a *devadasi*. As a devadasi, she is technically married to the god of that temple, who, in this case, is Krishna. She plays the role of Krishna in the death of Vasu.

It is Rangi the temple dancer and the devadasi who is instrumental in the death of Vasu. Having broken his cot in demonstrating his strength, Vasu has to do without his mosquito

net and sleep in the chair. But he could not stand mosquito bites. This compels him to depend on Rangi to keep them off. But while fanning the mosquitoes away to help Vasu to sleep better as ordered by Vasu, Rangi herself dozes off. As a direct consequence of Rangi's negligence, Vasu kills himself while trying to slap away the mosquito that lands on his head.

Every 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?" (The Man-Eater of Malgudi, P. 255)

Rangi is reported as saying, "Sir, I am only a public woman following what is my dharma" (**The Man-Eater of Malgudi**, P. 168).

R. K. Narayan's interest does not go beyond celebrating Rangi's "mythical" role as a *mohini*. Rangi's social redemption as a human soul with all its worth, irrespective of her birth and social status, imposed on her by tradition, is a story that some one else will write.

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