

*Plot and Character in R. K. Narayan's*  
*"The Man-Eater of Malgudi":*  
*A Reassessment*

FAKRUL ALAM

AT THE HEART of R. K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961) is the relationship between the narrator Nataraj, a wily but warm-hearted printer of the town of Malgudi, and Vasu, an eccentric taxidermist who forces himself into Nataraj's attic and uses it to house himself and practice his profession. Commentators of the novel do not hesitate to identify Nataraj as the protagonist and Vasu as the antagonist of the novel. Most of them prefer to read the events of the narrative as a confrontation between the two characters, with Vasu, in the words of George Woodcock, cast in "the role of the malign titan Ravanna" pitted in a "great fight between good and evil forces" against Nataraj and his friends (Woodcock 21). According to this way of looking at their characters and the plot, the sociable, tolerant, passive Nataraj is unsettled for a while by the egotistical, destructive, unforbearing Vasu till the latter self-destructs, as demons are supposed to do, albeit in comic fashion, killing himself while trying to squash a mosquito which has landed on his forehead.

A few commentators, however, have not failed to observe that the Nataraj-Vasu relationship is somewhat complicated by the deeply conventional printer's admiration for the truculent taxidermist. Far from being continually repelled by Vasu, Nataraj is at times attracted by aspects of the outsider's personality, which is very different from that of himself and his townspeople. Noting Nataraj's fascination for Vasu and repeated overtures to his difficult tenant, Meenakshi Mukherjee concludes that "evil is not merely stronger but also more attractive than goodness" (Mukherjee 155). In "A Proper Detachment: The Novels of R. K.

Narayan," Shirley Chew also detects the "sneaking attraction" that Nataraj has for Vasu (Chew 72). But while both Mukherjee and Chew fail to integrate their observations into their readings of the novel, M. M. Mahood offers a political interpretation of what she describes as a "love-hate relationship" (Mahood 100). According to Mahood, Nataraj's "colonial mentality" makes him desire the domineering outsider's unconventional approach to life. Vasu, in her opinion, represents the modern alternative to traditional India, and after being allured by this option for a while, Nataraj rejects it and the "alien political philosophies and economic aims" they represent (Mahood, 101, 106, 113).

Although Mahood's attempt to use the Vasu-Nataraj relationship as a basis for a reading of the novel is laudable, she has not treated the relationship with the concentration that it deserves because of her preoccupation with political haeres. For, as this essay will try to demonstrate, Mahood has skirted the psychological aspects of the relationship, by-passed its storm-centre, and misread the false calm that descends on Malgudi after Vasu's death. It will be the contention of this paper that Mahood, as well as the other critics mentioned above, has been less than fair in judging Vasu and Nataraj, has failed to trace the involutions of their relationship, and has ignored the identity transference that takes place in the course of the narrative. To prove these assertions, it is necessary, first, to reappraise the two leading characters and reassess the nature of the events that befall Nataraj after his meeting with Vasu, and then use these revaluations to represent the plot of the novel.

To take the character of Nataraj first, it is difficult to deny him a certain amount of charm and virtue. In many respects he is friendly, meek, helpful, and passive. He is a good citizen interested in the welfare of the community at large for whose benefit he is willing to forego even the profits he makes from his press. No better example of Nataraj's altruism can be seen than in his sustained attempt to organize a festival to commemorate the publication of the epic written by his friend, the monosyllabic poet. For this event he stops working and tries to arouse the whole town and channelize its resources on his friend's behalf and for the cause of culture, Nataraj also shows his good side in his dedi-

cation to the cause of the temple elephant when its life is threatened by Vasu.

But Nataraj has more to him than charm and virtue. He is also cunning, aggressive, ambitious, and not free from self-interest. As the narrator, it is obviously in his own interest to make himself appear as attractive as possible, but he is not always what he pretends to be.

The opening pages of the narrative prepare us for the complexity of Nataraj's stance. Although he appears to be altruistic in opening up his parlour to any casual visitor, he is aware that “while they rested there, people got ideas for bill forms, visiting cards, or wedding invitations which they asked me to print” (2). In the interest of his own business, he does not hesitate to pass off as his the neighbouring press's prize possession, an original Heidelberg machine. Shrewdly, he has managed to win over the citizens of Malgudi by his seeming disinterestedness. Content to let everyone imagine him to be ready for big tasks on the strength of the Star's machine, Nataraj was “so free with the next-door establishment that no one knew whether I owned it or whether the Star owned me” (3).

In his personal relationships, Nataraj has a tendency to dissimulate. Outwardly, he wants himself to be seen as inoffensive or friendly. Inwardly, however, he can be skeptical, resentful, or impatient with his fellow citizens. On his way back from his daily walk to the river, for example, he meets the “adjournment lawyer” — so-called because of his skills at delaying legal proceedings — with mock-horror: “I am undone: Mr. Adjournment will get me now” (5). Outwardly, however, he says or does nothing, content to be the butt of the lawyer's wit. Later, in a delightfully comic scene, when the lawyer speaks sentimentally of the expenses incurred in raising a family, Nataraj cannot help thinking: “and you have to manage all this by seeking endless adjournments.” Outwardly, though, he sympathizes with the disagreeable man: “‘Yes life today is most expensive’” (58).

Not that Nataraj is always so passive with the people of his community. For instance, with K. J., a customer whose order of fruit-juice labels he has not been able to deliver in time, he is quite aggressive. Although K. J. comes thundering in to demand

an explanation, Nataraj so successfully cows him and makes him look “so ignorant, wrong and presumptuous” that the fruit-juice seller can only remain dumb (140). Indeed, so relentless is Nataraj in his offensive that in the end he manages to extract from this profiteer a promise to offer free drinks at the festival. At home, Nataraj alternates between being the husband who is eager to please his wife and child and the tyrannical man who must be appeased. As his wife puts it on one occasion when he is acting impetuous: “But now I have your breakfast on the fire, and I know how you will dance for it and make us dance who serve you, the moment you come out of the bathroom” (167).

If Nataraj is a more complex character than previous critics have made him out to be, so is Vasu. He, too, should not be seen in black-and-white terms. Indeed, far from being obviously demonic, Vasu has his good qualities. The negative aspects of Vasu’s character can be conceded readily — he is brutal, self-centred, menacing; he has no respect for tradition, religion, or the law; he sets himself up against nature; he loves to bully the weak; and he will do anything to achieve the goals he has set for himself. But Vasu is all these and also spontaneous in his responses, spirited in his attitude towards life, good-humoured, and endearingly nonsensical in his way of looking at others. Among his other admirable characteristics, one notices that he is a patriot, an artist, or at the least a hard-working craftsman who recognizes merit and achievement in others. Also, despite his immense strength and violent profession, he tries his best to control himself and remain non-violent in the face of provocations.

Vasu’s spontaneity is evident in his initial commitment to Nataraj. Without knowing anything about the printer, Vasu embraces him as a friend. Evidence of his spiritedness and patriotism can be seen in the sketch of his life that he offers to Nataraj: he had joined the civil disobedience movement aimed at ending British rule and had been incarcerated for his nationalistic views and activities (so much for Mahood’s view of Vasu as the type of the neo-colonialist!).

Not only is Vasu spirited, he is ready to admire people who are lively. He likes Nataraj, for instance, because of his quick re-

sponses to his provocative comments. Passing pedestrians, whom Vasu habitually intimidates when driving, get a word of praise when they swear back at him. As he confides to Nataraj on one such occasion: “‘That is how I like to see my countrymen. They must show better spirit’” (133). As a doer, a man of action who detests small talk, he may hate the poet and the journalist for gossiping away their time in Nataraj’s parlour, but, by the same token, he is ready to applaud them when he hears that the poet had just completed his *magnum opus*, the epic on the life of Krishna, and the journalist had made arrangements for starting a news-sheet in Malgudi.

Vasu’s admiration for the poet’s achievement reminds the reader that he is a kind of artist himself. Indeed, he has chosen taxidermy as a profession precisely because it has an aesthetic side. As he puts it while praising his master: “‘That is what Suleiman taught me; he was an artist, as good as a sculptor, or a surgeon, so delicate and precise!’” (62). It is as an artist, a creator, that he sets himself up as a rival to God/Nature. From this perspective, he can take immense pride in his creations, for example, in the pair of eyes of the stuffed eagle which had seemed to Nataraj to be natural: “‘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!’” (63). As an artist, Vasu’s masterpiece, of course, is the stuffed tiger cub that he creates, something that evokes a divided response in Nataraj; fascinating him with its obvious beauty, but repelling him because it reminds him of the destructive aspects of Vasu’s craft.

But if there is a violent side to Vasu’s profession, and if he has the physique of a demon, he exerts great control over his immense physical strength when dealing with people. Thus when Vasu and the journalist seem to be coming to blows, the strong man assures the anxious Nataraj that he never hits anyone unless hit first. Nataraj, in fact, comes to admire this aspect of Vasu’s character. As he reflects later: “‘Considering his enormous strength, it was surprising that he did not do more damage to his surroundings’” (47). It is only when the town police inspector tries to slap him that Vasu, instinctively fighting back, dislocates the policeman’s

wrist, reminding Nataraj of the tremendous control he exerts over his strength in everyday life.

Although Vasu's unpredictable behaviour and aggressive tactics cause the Malgudi folks to stay away from him out of fear or bewilderment, it is significant that the two people who come to know him best, his mistress Rangi and his reluctant host Nataraj, can see his attractive as well as his repulsive side. Thus Rangi, despite her determination to stop him from shooting the elephant and disrupting the festival organized to celebrate the poet's achievement, and despite her confession that her lover often tried to make her jealous by bringing home other women, admits: "He cares for me very much" (160). Far from being repelled by his abrasive methods, Rangi, as Nataraj phrases it, is "obsessed with the grandeur and invincibility of the man" (205).

Previous critics of the novel have therefore been less than fair in their evaluation of Vasu and Nataraj, for Nataraj is not all goodness and Vasu has some desirable qualities. Recognition of this fact leads to the second stage of this reevaluation of the characters and their relationship and this reconstitution of the plot of the novel. In this stage the focus will be on the way in which Vasu obviously discomfits Nataraj as well as the manner in which his admiration of some of Vasu's traits begins to influence his own behaviour.

That Vasu can easily discomfit Nataraj is obvious in their very first meeting. Then the printer alternates between fascinated attention, abashment, indignation, uncertainty, and aggression, as he tries to adjust to this strange visitor to his press. This pattern and these emotions are repeated later, when Vasu picks him up from his press, drives him to a neighbouring town, and, hot on a trail, abandons him to fend as best as he can in an alien environment with nothing more than an empty pocket, a growling stomach, and his native wits. On occasions like this, a note of fear, of something like paranoia, possesses Nataraj as he fantasizes of being abducted by Vasu to a tiger cave and held for a ransom. Often, Nataraj is simply bewildered by Vasu, as when the taxidermist, offended by the printer's timid attempt to make him leave his attic, serves him with a summons from the rent controller, demanding explanation for his unlawful bid to evict a tenant,

although Vasu has signed no agreement and paid no rent. And in the climax of the story, Vasu obviously manages to perplex Nataraj and his Malgudi allies for a long time by refusing to deny that he meant to shoot the temple elephant and disrupt the festival.

If fear is one of the major emotions evoked by Vasu in Nataraj, admiration, paradoxically enough, is another. There is, for instance, an element of admiration in Nataraj when he begins to see Vasu's gruffness as merely a stance: “I understood the situation now; every other sentence was likely to prove provocative. I began to feel intrigued by the man. I didn't want to lose him” (14). When he comes to know him even better, Nataraj learns to appreciate Vasu's professionalism, despite the brutality associated with taxidermy: “I admired him for his capacity for work, for all the dreadful things he was able to accomplish single-handed” (93). Even in a difficult period of their relationship, when Nataraj is brooding on the summons Vasu has engineered against him, he finds something to praise in this most unpredictable tenant: “Amidst all his impossible qualities, he had just one virtue: he never tried to come to my part of the house” (85). A note of admiration can also be detected in Nataraj's reflections on Vasu's relationship with Rangi:

She went about her business with such assurance, walking in and out of a place like a postman. My mind seethed with speculations. Did Vasu bring her in his jeep at the darkest hour? Not likely. What a man he must be who could turn his mistress out in cold blood when morning came! (109)

Indeed, so attracted is Nataraj to Vasu that despite himself, despite what his conscience, his friends, acquaintances, and his wife tells him, he persists in harbouring this disturbing presence, or at the least, enigmatically refuses to drive him out. In the beginning, Nataraj's feelings about having Vasu as a tenant are somewhat mixed — a complex of apprehension and anticipation: “. . . it was like having a middle-aged man-eater in your office and home, with the same uncertainties, possibilities, and potentialities” (30). But as Vasu makes a “charnel-house” of his attic, and exhibits other offensive tendencies, Nataraj finds himself asking the obvious question: “Why couldn't I ask him to get

out?" Try as he might, however, he cannot account for his reluctance to dislodge Vasu; it was something that was "impossible to explain" (66). Other people found no reason for him to be so considerate. His wife, for instance, "said simply, sweetly . . . 'Ask him to go, that's all'" (69). Neighbours remind him that he has only himself to blame for his predicament. When Nataraj, trying to account for the summons from the rent controller, informs the lawyer that he is letting Vasu stay as a friend who does not have to pay him rent, the lawyer points out: "If I were a judge, I would not believe you. Why should you let him live with you?" (81). The old man whose grandson's dog Vasu has so heartlessly shot also asks the obvious questions: "'What's your connection with him? Is he related to you? Is he your friend? . . . Who is this man? Why should you harbour him?'" (91). And near the end of the narrative, at a time when public opinion is pointing a finger at Nataraj as the murderer of his tenant, his assistant Sastri, acquiescing in the dominant interpretation of the cause of Vasu's death, reminds his boss yet again: "'On the very first day he came here you should have turned him out. You didn't'" (225).

Not only does Nataraj put up with Vasu despite the latter's provocative actions, but he also tries to shield his tenant from the accusing eyes of Malgudi's people. Faced with the indignant grandfather who wants to confront the man who has shot his grandson's dog, for example, Nataraj anxiously hopes "that the old man should be bundled off before someone or other should offer to point Vasu out to him" (92). When the warden of Mempi forest, concerned at the number of wild animals killed in his reserve forest, wants to know about Vasu's activities, Nataraj does his best to feign ignorance and evade implicating the taxidermist, even refusing point-blank to cooperate with this representative of the law. When Sastri, full of righteous indignation, reports the presence of immoral women in the attic, Nataraj, instead of joining in condemnation, sidesteps the issue by thinking of some customers wanting to do business (107).

Even when Vasu's hostility towards him becomes obvious, and the strong man seems to be doing his best to unsettle him with one aggressive act after another, Nataraj does not stop craving for



Vasu’s attention. On the contrary, as the relationship between them enters the stormy stage, Nataraj finds himself regretting Vasu’s “rough company” (93), and abjectly hoping for a reconciliation. “I was longing for a word with Vasu. I stood like a child at the treadle, hoping he would look at me and nod and that all would be well again” (94). Although Sastri uses his religious learning to predict Vasu’s destruction and a Vasu-free attic, Nataraj chooses to ignore his assistant’s predictions, hoping instead that “we would part on speaking terms” (97). All along, the printer seems to be holding out hopes for a reconciliation with his tormentor. Thus when Vasu, with typical unpredictability and indifference to what has happened between them in the immediate past, summons Nataraj to his jeep, the printer has “an impulse to drop whatever . . . [he] was doing, rush up to him and seize the chance to make friends with the monster again” (102). Although his pride wins over his instincts on this occasion, later, in a similar situation, Nataraj decides to respond to Vasu’s summons to go to his jeep, since “it was better than being continuously ignored” (132).

However, Nataraj is not content merely to tolerate, harbour, defend, or admire Vasu; he also occasionally acts like him or perceives their two situations as not dissimilar. For example, Nataraj sees himself as not too different from Vasu in the work that they do. Although their professions appear to have nothing in common, and although the printer has his assistant to help him while the taxidermist works all alone, Nataraj cannot help thinking that their businesses are somewhat similar. Such a conclusion is surprising, and Nataraj checks himself on this occasion thus: “I do not know why I should ever have compared myself with him, but there it was. I was getting into an abnormal frame of mind” (68). Later, when the relationship between the two has become strained, and Vasu appears to be aloof, indifferent, or even hostile, Nataraj once again perceives himself to be reacting like his strange tenant: “I was, I suppose, getting into a state of abnormal watchfulness myself” (92). But it is especially during his efforts to organize the festival, when he is in a hyperactive state, that Nataraj starts to behave like Vasu. On this occasion, after he rebukes the poet for thinking while they were busy print-

ing, he realizes somewhat guiltily that he had “sounded like Vasu,” and immediately assumes a softer tone (154). Later, as he reflects bitterly on his wife’s suspicions about his relationship with Rangi, suspicions which were planted in her mind when the temple-dancer prostitute called on her husband, Nataraj finds himself approaching the situation from Vasu’s point of view: “When Rangi spoke to me on an important matter, the thing for a rational being to do was to ask what exactly it was all about and approach things in a scientific frame of mind. . . . No wonder Vasu was bitter against the world for its lack of scientific approach” (215).

In fact, Nataraj’s responses to Rangi consistently bring out the Vasu-side of his character. From the moment Sastri reports to him that “loose women” like Rangi were frequenting Vasu’s quarter, Nataraj finds himself fascinated by the notion of such women visiting his attic. So when Sastri comes to him in a state of panic about the failure to meet a customer-imposed deadline, Nataraj confesses: “My mind was busy following the fleshy image of Rangi and perhaps I resented the intrusion” (110). Like a voyeur, he spies on Vasu’s love-life through a pin-hole in a bamboo curtain, making sure, however, that other eyes should not follow the strong man’s affairs. There seems to him to be “an irresistible physical attraction” around Rangi (157). The “monogamous chastity” he had so unquestioningly practised in a “whole lifetime” seems to be threatened by the “halo” that she, no less than Vasu, has around her (159). Totally aroused, and eager to be seduced, Nataraj even dares public opinion in trying to attract Rangi’s attention while she is dancing in the festival parade. When Rangi comes to him later to tell him how determined Vasu was to shoot the elephant and thwart the festival proceedings, and to say that she would go back to Vasu despite his terrifying mood, Nataraj, “with a grand show of confidence and aggression” (205), asks her not to go to her lover, unwilling to let her be further enchanted with Vasu’s prowess.

Indeed, for a man who has been described as timid, tolerant, and passive, Nataraj shows a great deal of confidence in himself and aggressiveness in the later part of the narrative. Moreover, he seems to grow more and more active and forceful as Vasu

appears to be more and more hemmed in by the forces of law and order and by public opinion which Nataraj has tried in some ways to mobilize against him to prevent him from disrupting the festival. This shift in roles becomes noticeable at the moment when Nataraj takes it on himself to organize the festival, and at a time when increased surveillance of the Mempi forest and a collective indignation at Vasu's anti-social stance constrict his predatory activities. Then, Nataraj finds himself harbouring almost violent impulses such as “flinging a tumbler of cold water” over the poet's head or “shouting in his ears” (153) as they try to rush a copy of the epic into print before festival-day. Frenetically, he attempts to involve the town in the festival proceedings, trusting no one but himself to do all the organizational work. In this state of mind, Vasu's stature is reduced in his eyes till “the man-eater” of his anxiety-ridden past becomes no more than “an irrelevant thought” (181). The external world appears unimportant as Nataraj observes the start of the festival which he has set into motion. Unused to such hypertension, however, Nataraj gives a mighty scream and then collapses, causing a bystander to observe that he was a man “possessed” (183). Significantly though, his domineering mood does not completely desert him when he returns to his senses. Then, finding himself surrounded by Malgudi's notables, he feels better when he realizes that he “had an odd commanding position. People were prepared to do anything I suggested” (184).

Perceiving that Nataraj is the instigator of the campaign against him, Vasu throws a challenge to the printer and, for the last time, defies conventional society by humiliating the police officer who comes to threaten him. Significantly, Nataraj decides to take up the challenge offered by Vasu and proceeds to climb up to the attic in a bid to neutralize the man-eater of Malgudi. As he is on his way up, Nataraj considers, among other things, stunning Vasu from behind to render him harmless, but decides in the end to try other, non-violent, methods to stop him. Once in the attic, however, Nataraj, oblivious of the fact that the Vasu stretched out on the easy chair before him is dead, dashes for the hunter's gun, seizes it, and decides to stand guard till the procession passes his establishment. This he does, leaving only when

the parade has passed out of view, and when, comically, the alarm bell set by Vasu goes off, making him “dash for the landing out of Vasu’s reach” (218).

What is one to make of one’s recognition that both Nataraj and Vasu are complex characters, and one’s perception that Nataraj is fascinated by Vasu and starts acting like him, ultimately trying to even contain him? The answer to this question can be found in the concept that psychoanalysts know as *identification*. Freud has described the concept thus:

The basis of the process is what we call as identification, that is to say that one ego becomes like another, which results in the first ego behaving itself in certain respects in the same way as the second; it imitates it, and as it were takes it into itself. This identification has not been inappropriately compared with the oral cannibalistic incorporation of another person. (Freud 86)

There is of course more to the concept than that, as this account by Charles Brenner brings out:

... identification plays its part in ego development on more than one score. It is first of all an inherent part of one’s relationship to a highly cathected object. . . . In addition we have noted the tendency to identify with an admired though hated object, which Anna Freud called “identification with the aggressor”. Finally, there is the last mentioned factor that the loss of a highly cathected object leads to a greater or lesser degree of identification with the lost object. However, regardless of the way in which identification takes place, the *result* is always that the ego has become enriched thereby, whether for better or for worse.

(Brenner 48-49)

Equipped with these insights into human relationships, one can draw on the preceding reevaluation of the major characters and events of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* to represent its plot: it is a narrative of identification; and it is plotted to show how the narrator-protagonist is aroused by an aggressive figure with whom he increasingly identifies till, having incorporated many features of this more instinctive, more primitive being, he can dispose of him symbolically by putting himself into a position where he can stand guard and contemplate the destruction of this other self.

Nataraj, the man who in the beginning of the narrative is the embodiment of timidity and passivity, as can be seen in his

opening confession that "he could not explain himself to sordid people" who were critical of his business sense (1), is gradually aroused by his contact with the spontaneous, spirited, and enigmatic Vasu. Even in their initial encounter, Nataraj realizes that they were fated to meet and interact: "I began to feel intrigued by the man. I didn't want to lose him. Even if I wanted to, I had no means of getting rid of him. He had sought me out and I'd have to have him until he decided to leave" (14-15). Significantly, in this first meeting Vasu manages to bring out Nataraj's other, dormant, side, as the printer responds to the taxidermist by being aggressive and pugnacious, and by confessing that he too could enjoy "the thrill of provoking" another person (17). And by the time they have their second encounter, Nataraj is ready to confess: "Somehow this man's presence roused in me a sort of pugnacity" (19).

That Vasu's presence was subtly transforming Nataraj into another person becomes obvious when he comments on the forest warden's manuscript of selected epigrammatic sentiments and moralizings: "It was meant to elevate young minds no doubt, but I'd have resented being told every hour of the day what I should do, say, or think. It would be boring to be steadfastly good night and day" (33). In the middle part of the narrative, Vasu manages to bewilder Nataraj by his erratic behaviour, but, as has been indicated above, even here Nataraj finds himself admiring Vasu, and continues to shield him from the world's censure. Now, as he unconsciously tracks Vasu, he gets "into a state of abnormal watchfulness" (92). Soon, he starts to identify himself with the aggressor.

Nataraj, of course, is not aware except in some dim way that in aspects of his thought and behaviour he is becoming like, or imitating Vasu, but once the work on the festival begins, this becomes apparent even to himself. Now Nataraj suddenly seizes the initiative and displays reservoirs of energy that no one would previously suspect him of containing. He also longs for Vasu's woman, and sounds and acts like the strong man. The two next appear set on a confrontation course: Vasu with his plans to shoot the elephant and Nataraj with his determination to make the festival a success. Ultimately, Nataraj wins; the festival is a

triumph, and in intention, if not in actuality, he manages to render Vasu inoperative by the kind of instinctive, aggressive gesture that only the taxidermist was capable of. Or perhaps Vasu, having realized that Nataraj had awakened to a new and more formidable self, decides to leave by self-destructing.

After the discovery of Vasu's death, Nataraj goes through a period of depression, "a clinical condition in whose psychopathology unconscious identification with a lost object regularly plays an important role" (Brenner 48). Nataraj is especially depressed as he thinks of the once powerful man's helplessness after life has passed him by: "I was depressed to think that a man who had twisted iron rods and burst three-inch panel doors with his fist was going to do nothing more than lie still and wait for the doctor to cut him and examine his insides to find out what had caused his death" (226). Nataraj then discovers that the townspeople, including his wife and son, were suspecting him of Vasu's murder, and looking at him with either awe or apprehension, feelings which the man-eater had previously aroused in them. However, their suspicions dismay him only for a time until it occurs to him that it was not improbable that he himself has destroyed the threat to Malgudi's settled ways: "Perhaps while he slept I had rammed the butt of the gun into his skull, who could say?" (235). After all, "It had been an evening of strange lapses." Recognition of his capacity for destruction, and the fear and unease that he was so unwittingly generating in Malgudi, now makes him even more Vasu-like: "A touch of aggression was creeping into my speech nowadays. My line of thinking was, 'So be it. If I have rid the world of Vasu, I have achieved something'" (237). This mood alternates, however, with one of self-pity: he cannot help lament the loss of his reputation and his alienation from his fellow citizens and blames Vasu for this state of affairs.

Rangi's confession that she was a witness to the taxidermist's self-destruction manages to clear things up and removes Nataraj from approbation associated with murder. But Sastri, who breaks the news to his boss, cannot help being frightened somewhat by the sight of Nataraj holding Vasu's stuffed tiger cub in his hand while listening to his account. In a sense, once the strong man's

function of arousing the timid printer is over, he can disappear from the narrative, but the tiger cub — the ultimate symbol of Vasu's aggression as well as his creative powers — which Nataraj had inexplicably stolen from Vasu's possessions after his death and which he now seems destined to possess for the rest of his life as his inheritance — indicates once more that to a certain extent Nataraj has become the image of the dead man. The Malgudi folks can return to their old ways, but in a subtle and profound way, Nataraj has been changed. One notes, thus, the confident, mock-servile tone that Nataraj assumes in talking to Sastri in the last paragraph of the book: "When you are gone for lunch it [the colouring ink] will be drying, and ready for second printing when you return. Yes Sastri, I am at your service! I said" (242). This contrasts tellingly with the craven, whimpering voice that can be heard in the second chapter: "What about my lunch? Sastri did not care whether I had time for food or not . . . he was a tyrant when it came to printing labels, but there was no way of protesting. He would brush everything aside" (11). The inescapable conclusion: it is a new, self-assured protagonist that has emerged in the course of the narrative once Nataraj's relationship with Vasu has run its course.

It is not enough to say then that *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is simply about "the great fight between good and evil forces" (*pace* Woodcock). This reading has tried to indicate that there is a more complex pattern in the novel than that — a pattern based on identification as well as displacement. Recognition of this pattern should lead to an appreciation of just how intricately plotted Narayan's work is and how fascinating his characters are. Thus, although this essay disagrees with William Walsh's interpretation of plot and character — for Walsh too reads the novel as a story of good and evil and places Nataraj squarely on the side of good and categorizes Vasu as a demon — it should reinforce his general assessment of "the complex tone of Narayan's serious comedies" as something based on "the rebirth of the self and the process and condition of its pregnancy and education" (Walsh 168). Similarly, though it has differed from Woodcock's reading, it should buttress his defence of the Indian novelist as "a very urbane and subtle man" against V. S. Naipaul's patroniz-

ing description of him as “‘an instinctive, unstudied writer’” (Woodcock 12). It is to be hoped that this reading of Narayan’s *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* as a narrative of one self’s identification with another will reaffirm this novelist’s complexity, urbanity, and subtlety, and will place this work in the tradition of such classic studies of identification as Dostoevski’s *The Double* and Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer.”

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