

“Changing the Script”: R. K. Narayan and Hinduism

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COMMENTATORS ON R. K. Narayan generally see in his work an affirmation of Hinduism. Edwin Gerow, for instance, argues that Narayan has an “unflinchingly traditional outlook,” and that he can only be understood in relation to a “traditional philosophical and metaphysical universe of discourse” (17). Syd C. Harrex suggests that both Narayan and his contemporary Raja Rao have a “profound and discriminating reverence for those ancient traditions which they find to be still culturally and morally vital” (13). For V. S. Naipaul, Narayan’s novels are “religious books, at times religious fables, and intensely Hindu” (22). But Naipaul sees Narayan’s Hinduism as often being on the defensive. This view is apparent in his analysis of *The Vendor of Sweets*, whose protagonist, Jagan, renounces the world in the time-honoured Hindu fashion. Naipaul interprets this action as a desperate attempt to counter the threat to Hindu culture posed by Jagan’s son Mali, who has returned from America with a girl-friend and a bizarre plan to manufacture a novel-writing machine:

Jagan’s is the ultimate Hindu retreat, because it is a retreat from a world that is known to have broken down at last. It is . . . not a return to a purer Aryan past, as Jagan might imagine, but a retreat from civilization and creativity, from rebirth and growth, to magic and incantation. (43)

Here, the retreat is a symptom of cracks in the Hindu view of life, cracks which Narayan cannot openly acknowledge. It is a sign of Hinduism’s failure to adapt to modernity.

Although the importance of Hinduism in Narayan’s work is undeniable, what I want to argue in this article is that this picture of him as a Hindu traditionalist, whether of the confident or the

defensive sort, gives a distorted perspective on his work and needs some qualification. A number of his novels in fact probe limitations and contradictions in Hindu world-views and identities. They do not simply affirm Hinduism; they identify tensions within it.

I shall argue these points with reference to two works which focus on concerns central to Hinduism: *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), in which the Hindu community's stability is threatened by forces linked with Western modernity, and *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), which is based on the notions of reincarnation and *karma*. Both texts also rely on traditional narrative models. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* reworks a myth about the god Vishnu, and *A Tiger for Malgudi* draws on the didactic animal fable, examples of which can be found in collections such as *The Pancatantra* or *The Jataka* (stories of the Buddha in his past lives).¹

I

A number of concepts crucial to Hinduism are also crucial to these two novels. Perhaps the most important is the notion of *dharma*, a term which has been translated variously as "law," "religion," "the eternal law that governs all human and non-human existence," "right action," "conformity with the truth of things," the "rules of conduct (mores, customs, codes, or laws) of a group" (Zaehner 2; Radhakrishnan 56; Embree 210). Common to many of its meanings is the idea of order, something on which Hinduism places great emphasis, as R. C. Zaehner makes clear in his definition of the term:

Dharma is . . . the "form" of things as they are and the power that keeps them as they are and not otherwise. And just as it maintains the whole universe in being in accordance with eternal law . . . so, in the moral sphere, does it maintain the human race by eternal moral law. (2-3)

In its widest sense, then, it refers to something like "cosmic order." In relation to the individual and society, the term *dharma* can be translated as "duty." Duty, however, is not something to be worked out in the privacy of the individual conscience; it is defined by institutions such as caste and family.

Another central Hindu concept, *karma*, can be seen as the law of cause and effect applied to the sphere of morality. One suffers

or benefits from the consequences of one's actions, depending on whether those actions were bad or good. The doctrine of *karma* is linked with the idea of reincarnation: the fruits of action can make themselves felt over many lives. However, Hinduism also places great emphasis on *moksha*, the eventual liberation from the cycles of death and rebirth. According to Zaehner,

The Upanishads teach . . . that the human soul in its deepest essence is in some sense identical with Brahman, the unchanging something that is yet the source of all change. This soul, then, must be distinct from the ordinary empirical self which transmigrates from body to body carrying its load of *karma* with it. How to realize this eternal soul and how to disengage it from its real or imaginary connexion with the psychosomatic complex that thinks, wills, and acts, is from the time of the Upanishads onwards the crucial problem facing the Hindu religious consciousness. (60)

These doctrines can give rise to a number of anxieties, particularly when considered from the perspective of Western individualist ideologies. The stress on *dharmā*, for instance, subordinates individual desires to the demands of society and religion, to the maintenance of order and the fulfilment of family and caste duties. The individual is diminished in other ways, too. "True" reality is located not in the "empirical self," but elsewhere (the "eternal soul," Brahman). According to the doctrine of *karma*, rewards or punishments accrued from unremembered previous lives shape one's fate and determine one's current chances of happiness. These ideas appear to devalue individual human life in this world, the only life of which we have knowledge. Such concerns seem to underpin Naipaul's denunciation of the notion of *karma*:

the Hindu killer, the Hindu calm, which tells us that we pay in this life for what we have done in past lives: so that everything we see is just and balanced, and the distress we see is to be relished as religious theatre, a reminder of our duty to ourselves, our future lives. (17)

Although Naipaul expresses a commonly held view, others, it should be added, dispute this interpretation. M. Hiriyanna, for instance, rejects the implication of fatalism, arguing that "nothing in the doctrine . . . either eliminates responsibility or invalidates self-effort" (130).

Uneasiness about life as "religious theatre" might be reinforced by the concept of *maya*. This word is usually translated as "illusion," and sometimes interpreted to mean that the phenomenal world itself is unreal and of little value (although again there are alternative accounts which dispute this view). Such ideas can give rise to the uneasy feeling that the individual self and the phenomenal world are unimportant, and that one's actions lack autonomy, since their origins and causes lie in forgotten past lives. In the sections that follow, I analyse ways in which Narayan's novels *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and *A Tiger for Malgudi* engage with such anxieties.

II

The general contours of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* are reasonably well established.² The novel is organized round a pattern found in many of Narayan's works and in Hindu narratives generally: the disturbance and restoration of the Hindu order or *dharma*. The agent of disruption is a taxidermist named Vasu (the "man-eater" of the novel's title), who arrives in the town of Malgudi, where he rents a room from the novel's hero, Nataraj, the proprietor of a small printing-press. He uses this base to run his taxidermy business and in doing so causes considerable upheaval for Nataraj and Malgudi.

Vasu's actions quickly establish his opposition to Hindu values. For instance, he sacrilegiously kills and stuffs a golden eagle, identified by the outraged Nataraj as a sacred "*garuda* . . . the messenger of God Vishnu" (50). Vasu's challenge is not only a religious one, as V. Panduranga Rao notes when he observes that "the novel is an allegory of the coming of modernity to India and more particularly to South India" (38). Vasu represents forces associated with Western modernity, such as individualism, industrialism, and commercialism. One example of this is the way he compounds his sacrilege over the golden eagle by thinking of turning it into a business activity and selling stuffed eagles to the faithful (50).

Vasu's threat to Hinduism is particularly apparent in the novel's climax, which centres on a religious festival. An important feature of this festival is a temple elephant whose recovery

from illness Nataraj has been instrumental in helping to achieve. Vasu plans to shoot the elephant and sell its parts; however, before he can do this, he accidentally kills himself. Waiting in his room for the elephant to pass below, he is plagued by mosquitoes, and, in swatting those which settle on his forehead, he crushes his own skull (he earlier was depicted as immensely powerful).

If Vasu is the destabilizer of the Hindu order, Nataraj is its somewhat comic defender. His name, which means "Lord of the Dance," is an epithet of the God Shiva. As the champion of Hinduism, he tries to forestall Vasu's attempt to kill the elephant. Nataraj is also less driven by commercial imperatives than Vasu is. He dedicates his business activities to the Goddess Laxmi; and, unlike his neighbour, the Star Press, he does not possess modern printing machinery.

The mythological parallels to the plot are described by Nataraj's employee Sastri, who identifies Vasu as a *rakshasa*, "a demoniac creature who possessed enormous strength, strange powers, and genius, but recognized no sort of restraints of man or God." A *rakshasa*, Sastri adds, "gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is invincible, beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him" (72). He then recounts the myth which the novel re-enacts, the myth of the *rakshasa* Bhasmasura, who "acquired a special boon that everything he touched should be scorched, while nothing could ever destroy him." Because of this gift, he caused suffering, until the god Vishnu took the form of a dancer named Mohini, to whom Bhasmasura was attracted:

She promised to yield to him only if he imitated all the gestures and movements of her own dancing. At one point in the dance Mohini placed her palms on her head, and the demon followed this gesture in complete forgetfulness and was reduced to ashes that very second, the blighting touch becoming active on his own head. (73)

Vasu's own death is a version of this, the role of Mohini being filled by a temple dancer named Rangī.

At the end of the novel, Sastri describes the lesson to be learnt from the story of Vasu/Bhasmasura: "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" (173-74). Narayan makes the same point in his essay "The World of the Storyteller":

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. (5)

In the same essay, Narayan also offers an explanation of the reworking of myth in terms that clearly align him with the traditional storyteller:

The characters in the epics are prototypes and moulds in which humanity is cast, and remain valid for all time. Every story has implicit in it a philosophical or moral significance, and an underlining of the distinction between good and evil. (4-5)

Bhasmasura is the prototype for Vasu, and the moral significance of the story concerns the self-destruction of evil, the restoration of *dharma*. In this way, then, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* would clearly seem to affirm Hindu ideas.

In his essay "The Quintessential Narayan," Edwin Gerow extends this conclusion, relating the novel very clearly to Indian philosophical conceptions of action and reality. The point about the *rakshasa*, Gerow argues, is not the fact that he is evil, but that he is "ultimately *not real*." The reason for this lies in Indian ideas of order and change:

The settled order of the cosmos is, in the Indian view, the fundamental ontological fact: change itself is not seen for what it produces, for what new possibilities it suggests or creates . . . but much more negatively as a play of shadows within the stable whole which is creation. (3)

As a result, Indian narratives are typically marked not by a plot resolving "a play of forces" and leading to a conclusion but by an "anti-plot," a term Gerow defines as "the reintegration of an original state . . . which has for a time been threatened with dislocation" (3-4).

Furthermore, activity in the phenomenal world is devalued, since "events . . . are a moment of mere appearance in . . . another, more fundamental level of existence" (6). Classical story lines, Gerow goes on to argue, embody this view, since they

“deny the efficacy of action by asserting that the agent is unable to intend the real significance of his own acts. ‘Action’ remains as a kind of disembodied event, obeying its own laws through, but not by, the actors . . . ” (7). Gerow sees this as being true of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*:

All that “happens” is that the miasma of confusion created by the demonic “irruption” is finally dissipated; all that can happen is what we began with: the stable cosmos. . . . What Vasu and the others think they are doing, in fact, not only is not done but is as action ephemeral. (4, 9)

It is not Nataraj’s actions that hinder Vasu: “Narayan’s point is partly that . . . the entire rationale of directed activity is disruptive, demonic, and ultimately futile, and partly that Nataraj embodies precisely that level of existence which is *not* action-oriented” (12).

Gerow’s analysis of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is wide-ranging and illuminating. I want to suggest, though, that it is possible to put a different construction on the same features of the novel that he has noticed—a construction which poses questions about the view of action he describes.

Naipaul’s term “religious theatre” helps to focus the issues involved here. This seems an appropriate description of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*; Nataraj’s efforts to save the elephant can be seen as “religious theatre” in the sense that they arise out of devoutness but have no real impact on the situation since Vasu is already dead. However, this may raise disturbing questions: if the end is pre-ordained, what is the point of Nataraj’s actions? The idea that our “directed activity” may be “ultimately futile” is an uncomfortable one.

We can approach the novel’s engagement with these anxieties by noting Fakrul Alam’s point that Narayan does not set up a simple opposition between good (Nataraj) and evil (Vasu). Nataraj has certain limitations, such as passivity, and Vasu though demonic nevertheless has positive characteristics: spontaneity, impulsiveness, spiritedness, a greater capacity for action than Nataraj, and a concern to regulate his great physical strength (Alam 77-82). During the course of the novel, Nataraj identifies with and absorbs some of Vasu’s more active qualities, as is clear

from the initiatives he takes in organizing the temple celebrations and from his attempt to forestall Vasu. Then "having incorporated many features of this more instinctive, more primitive being," Nataraj is able to "dispose of him symbolically by putting himself into a position where he can stand guard and contemplate the destruction of this other self." The novel, Alam concludes, can be seen as "a narrative of identification" with the double (88).

Alam's analysis suggests that *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* does not simply set Nataraj and traditional Hinduism against Vasu and Western individualism; nor does it simply endorse the former and condemn the latter. It can be argued that the novel in part interrogates a passivity encouraged by some currents within Hindu thought.

In fact, the novel goes even further and probes the possible foundations of that passivity in Hindu ideas of action and consequence, such as those described by Gerow. This view can be substantiated by considering the narrative organization of the events leading up to Vasu's death—in particular, the way Narayan builds up a sense of tension only to dissipate it in anticlimax. During much of the temple procession, Nataraj is at home, resting after a collapse brought on by exhaustion. He is the narrator and this means that as the novel moves towards its crisis we get only his distant, uncertain perspective on events. Neither Nataraj nor consequently the reader can have a clear idea of what Vasu is up to. This is one source of the tension. A second source is the fact that the crisis is deferred because of Nataraj's repeated failure to act. Although he is enveloped by anxieties about Vasu's plans, he falls asleep, and wakes up later to find that the festival procession is on a road parallel to his house. One might expect him to do something at this stage, but instead the music from the procession sets him musing about his childhood, and he falls asleep again. When he wakes up for the second time, the procession is nearly within range of Vasu. It is only now that he finally stirs himself.

The tension is accentuated by what follows when he goes to Vasu's room. Finding Vasu apparently asleep in a chair, Nataraj grabs a gun, intending to hold him at gunpoint until the proces-

sion has passed. Vasu does not wake up but, as far as the reader knows, he might do so at any moment and spark off a conflict. (He is, in fact, already dead, although neither we nor Nataraj learn this till later on.) When the procession has passed, the incident ends anti-climactically: an alarm clock goes off, startling Nataraj, who runs away. The point I want to emphasize is the way Narayan structures these events so that they build up to a potential crisis—a confrontation between Vasu and Nataraj—which, in the end, does not take place, and indeed, given Vasu's death, proves to be unnecessary.

I have already described one set of ways of interpreting this sequence of events: Gerow's view that the novel denies the "efficacy of action" and Naipaul's claim that Narayan's works are "religious theatre." John Thieme summarizes this type of interpretation, saying that the "novel endorses his [Nataraj's] inertia by suggesting that active human effort is irrelevant in the struggle against demonic forces and that a preordained order determines the outcome of all events" (16).

However, a different emphasis is also possible: Narayan, in fact, focuses attention on a source of unease. By building up the tension in the ways I have outlined, and then not supplying the "natural" or "obvious" resolution of that tension—a showdown between Vasu and Nataraj—the novel arouses only to deflate the reader's expectations. In doing so, it enacts and emphasizes the disparity, the lack of connection between what Gerow calls "directed activity" (Nataraj's attempts to save the elephant) and outcome (the quasi-divine protection of the elephant through Vasu's "miraculous" death). Nataraj's actions are directed towards an end which *is* achieved; yet it is achieved not as a consequence of those actions but by quite other means.

Instead of seeing this as an affirmation of divine preordination, then, one might argue that the puncturing of narrative expectations serves to sharpen our sense of what Gerow describes as the "wide gap . . . between action and consequence, to the point where the two are considered almost separate categories of existence" (11). Reading the novel in this way, we can see that it contains elements which do not just assure us that everything will work out well but instead help us to focus on a problem

within Hindu ways of thinking. From this perspective, therefore, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* does not simply endorse passivity and resignation to divine will; rather, it poses questions about these attitudes and about the conceptions of human action which underlie them. It problematizes, rather than just reaffirms, this particular aspect of the Hindu view of life.

IV

Questions of action are also central in *A Tiger for Malgudi*, this time in relation to the idea of *karma*. Again, however, anxieties concerning the possible pointlessness of human action make themselves felt. Here, too, Narayan draws on a traditional narrative form, the animal fable, which his novel resembles in a number of ways. Its narrator is an animal, the tiger, Raja, which is captured and made to perform in a circus until he kills the owner and is taken under the protection of a holy man. When Raja grows old, the holy man arranges for him to be taken care of in a zoo. The framing of the narrative resembles that of the animal fables: as in the stories of the *Pancatantra*, we loop back at the end to the narrating situation with which we began: the tiger in his cage at the zoo.

The novel also resembles the animal fable in its didacticism, its depiction and endorsement of Raja's moral progress and of the notion of *karma*, a doctrine which the novel repeatedly emphasizes. When Raja describes his sufferings during his early days in the circus, the holy man, known as the Master, explains that these sufferings were the consequences of the tiger's actions in an earlier life:

You probably in a previous life enjoyed putting your fellow-beings behind bars. One has to face the reaction of every act, if not in the same life, at least in another life or series of lives. . . . people only follow their inclinations, and sooner or later find their reward or retribution. That's the natural law of life. (42-43)

Elsewhere, the Master tells Raja that "Whatever one had thought or felt is never lost, but is buried in one's personality and carried from birth to birth" (143).

What Raja has to learn, suggests the Master, is to eradicate his pride, violence, and anger, and to "start a new life" (127). In-

creasingly remorseful about hunting and killing, Raja curbs his appetites in an attempt to "attain some kind of purification." He begins to feel "nobler" as a consequence: "I felt I had attained merit through penance, making myself worthy of my Master's grace" (137-38). The text thus is endorsing a lesson to do with the purification of *karma* through non-violence.³

Yet here too there are elements which suggest problems in the doctrines it appears to uphold. One point of tension that David Atkinson has noted is to be found in the tiger's concluding fate: the Master arranges for the ageing Raja to be put in a zoo. At the end of the novel, therefore, Raja's predicament is the same as it was in the circus: he is again trapped, without control over his fate. As Atkinson argues, the "aesthetically unsettling way in which the novel is left hanging is . . . an effective counterpoint to the implied inadequacies of the world view which it espouses" (13).

There is, however, a further aspect to this ending which ties in with wider patterns of the novel. I have in mind here the narrative frame referred to earlier, the way it begins and ends with the tiger in the cage. I have related this circularity to the narrative structure of collections of didactic animal fables, but other interpretations are also possible. The novel is haunted by anxieties about the possible repetitiveness and illusoriness of action, anxieties that we might merely be living out our lives "like marionettes in a puppet-play," as Zaehner puts it in a comment on the *Mahabharata* (107). In turn, these anxieties raise questions about the lesson of *karma* and rebirth which the Master preaches. This fear that our lives might be like those of "marionettes in a puppet-play" is present in *A Tiger for Malgudi*, disturbing the official moral of the narrative. The novel is founded on the theory of *karma* but is concerned also with its implications.

The circular structure of the narrative is a formal analogue of such anxieties. Other symptoms are a number of motifs which recur during Raja's experiences in the circus: the feeling of being coerced into performing meaningless and repetitive activity, the idea of action as illusion, and the notion of following a script. During his training, for instance, Raja is constantly made to do things which seem meaningless to him. In one episode, the

owner of the circus, a man known as the "Captain," tries to force the uncomprehending tiger to move between two cages:

He gave me no rest, but drove me round and round . . . till in sheer desperation, . . . I dashed on and found myself in another cage, where the door immediately came down. This was my first act of obedience. (40-41)

The same elements—lack of comprehension and a sense of being forced into pointless activity (running "round and round")—reappear again a few pages further on: "I ran round and round in circles in pursuit of nothing—and that seemed a very foolish senseless act" (45).

Again, when he is being trained to drink milk with a goat beside him, he is first confronted with a dummy goat, which he mistakes for a real one and repeatedly attempts to attack. Each time, however, the goat is whisked away, bewildering the tiger: "what was happening was beyond my understanding" (55).

The same features are emphasized when Raja is hired for a film:

Day after day I had to do the same thing over and over again. . . . A motley crowd around, outside the enclosure, watching me perform acts which I never understood. . . . He [the cameraman] was never satisfied and wanted me to repeat, improve, further improve and repeat, my Captain blindly carrying out his orders, whipping, hitting and yelling. (96-97)

Clearly, such accounts of acting without understanding are partly due to the fact that the narrator is a tiger with (initially, at least) a limited conception of human actions and purposes; but they can also be read as oblique indications of a more general anxiety about one's actions being meaningless and determined by an outside power.

The novel also hints at other dimensions to this anxiety, such as the worry that action might be illusory. Here, the cinema's capacity for visual deception is a suggestive source of images. The Captain offers Madan, the film director, a piece of advice that underlines this:

You must utilize the flexibility of the film medium. On my side I'll make Raja stand on his hind legs and place his forepaws on a wrestler who is not there, and you will ask your giant to imagine himself to

wrestle with a tiger which is not there. . . . Shoot them separately and join them through an optical printer. (88-89)

This advice is followed, and the "giant," a strong man called Jaggu, is "rehearsed endlessly and made to go through the motions of wrestling with an unseen tiger" (94-95). Film, then, can fabricate an event which never took place, a vivid image for the notion of *maya*.

Another feature of the cinema serves further to embody anxieties about *karma*: the script, in which one's actions are written down in advance. For instance, when the simple-minded Jaggu is told by the film director, "I have written a story in which you knock down the tiger, kill it, and then marry a beautiful girl," he responds with horror, "Oh no, I'm married" and is taunted in terms which link script and fate: "It's all written down like fate, nothing can be changed" (94). Elsewhere, tensions between fidelity to, and deviation from, the script, are debated. In one episode, the film-director, Madan, wants the tiger to retreat with its tail between its legs, and the Captain points out that he has never seen an animal of the cat family doing this. "But . . . it's in the script," says Madan, to which the Captain responds, "Change the script" (84-85). Again, when Madan says "at some point we must follow the script," the Captain questions this: "You mention it as if it were your scripture rather than your script" (87). In such exchanges, too, the novel seems obliquely to raise the question of whether our lives and actions are merely *karmic* scripts to be followed, scripts which are produced by forces outside us.

V

An understanding of these two novels is clearly impossible without reference to such central aspects of Hindu thought as *dharma* and *karma* and to such Hindu narrative traditions as mythical prototypes and the didactic animal fable. Gerow is right to claim that Narayan needs to be linked to a "traditional philosophical and metaphysical universe of discourse." Yet, as I have argued, if one reads the novels with an eye to their partly submerged tensions, Narayan no longer emerges as simply an affirmer of Hinduism. Although Hinduism is indispensable to him, it is not

unchallengeable. He is engaged in questioning—and thereby raising the possibility of changing—the Hindu script.

NOTES

- ¹ See *The Pancatantra* (trans. by Chandra Rajan); and *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* (ed. E. B. Cowell).
- ² In addition to the commentators on *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* quoted in this article, see also Mukherjee 150-55 and Mahood 92-114.
- ³ Atkinson also sees the novel as endorsing this lesson of *karma*.

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