

# Unleashing Imagination and Insight with Anita Nair's Varaha and Narasimha

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**Abstract-** Mythology provides everlasting wisdom and Anita Nair's renditions of the Vishnu Avatars, Varaha and Narasimha in *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths* brings to life that wisdom for contemporary children. These strong folk stories based in the oral tradition convey the values, history and share life experiences while exciting young minds with imagination and wonder. The theory of Piaget's classification in concrete operational stage, provide children with a unique opportunity to learn to categorize and understand things better, just as these stories provide distance in their understanding of right and wrong and good and bad. Nair narrates these ancient stories as tantalizing, thrilling and easy to comprehend, while still keeping intact knowledge. Varaha is a story of how strength and courage protect the world while Narasimha points out how clever thinking and justice achieves the discovery of truth in the end. These stories do not just thrill, they teach children to think clearly, solve problems and adapt to challenges and frame their understanding of what is right. As Nair lovingly recounts ancient epics, she breathes life into time-worn lessons, teaching children to grow into engaged, courageous and curious people that prepared them to navigate towards modernity.

**Key Words:** Mythology, classification, tantalizing and navigate modernity.

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is a powerful bridge that joins the human imagination, history and culture and also connects former, current and future realities through the exquisite use of words. Throughout time, storytelling has been one of the most crucial ways for people to hand down knowledge, beliefs and traditions and realize wisdom and values through generations. One of these essential ways has been and still is folk narratives, particularly mythology which culturally representing the heart of culture and by expressing

culture, creates societal identity as well as sustains people's social memory. With a rich heritage in oral traditions these stories as old and new, have long been more than a source of entertainment that they create moral values, provide philosophical thought and reinforce and relive a community's norms and beliefs. Mythology as part of a broader branch of literature presents the cultural, the historical and the spiritual and that stories can often be patterned to provide solutions for life's mysteries or perhaps illustrate episodes of divine intervention and duality of human events. Symbolically, mythology connects the ordinary and extraordinary so that people can read the cosmos, understand their fate and find meaning and purpose in the unknown. Mythology continues to motivate in modernity; the narratives provide ageless anecdotes in human fulfillment, ethics and inspiration.

Anita Nair, one of the India's most luminous voices in Indian English literature today, has created an indie space for herself in all genres - to include fiction, children's literature and retellings of myths etc. Her imagination and phenomenal storytelling abilities have made it exciting to breathe new life into old stories while also engaging and giving meaning and sense of purpose to the readers of both young and old. Nair stands out because she is able to not only tell the stories that she has captured the imagination of many readers by embracing age old traditions, made it modern, relevant and also timeless within the chaos of the modern world. As a multifaceted writer who clearly has an acute sense of cultural sensitivity and grace in her narrative. Her stories spark curiosity and feelings of empathy into the hearts and minds of children while at the same time tinning nuggets of wisdom into their consciousness.

Nair's genius in reaping her versions of myth for contemporary readers prevails boisterously in *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths*. Such abundance

grounded not only in storytelling but also in authentically retelling myths in their distinctly Indian traditions. With originality and cultural nuance in staging India and her resounding mythic heritage, Nair breathes life into past lives by reshaping stories for swathes of children who never had these stories. Lively, engaging and often she reflect through creative retellings, combined with critical imaginary aplomb, merges wise fantasy with thought-provoking commentary. This book does not simply reinvigorate myths in turn it makes eternally complex theoretical issues accessible, understandable and resonant for children. Nair self-consciously exploits her creative, engaged voice, creating lyrical prose in which she upholds skilled storytelling, visually capturing the beauty and vitality of oral tradition in story performance, coveting both past-historical experience and contemporary periodization. Each of her tales act as a doorway for young storytellers and move through on their journeys pondering themes around heroism, fate, morality of one's choices and the eternal battle between good and evil. These tales are more than just retellings, they are crucial images to reflect upon and think through by connecting an emotional subjectivity, cognizing your values and reconsidering the meaning of action. Nair's contributions to children's literature go beyond crafting entertaining literature intended for fleeting devotion.

Folk narratives or oral literature is a type of narrative characterized by the transmission of traditional stories from one generation to another or from one community or society to another through oral traditions. Folk narratives exist in many forms including tales, legends and myths and they each serve to provide a sense of identity and establish ethical frameworks for society. In Indian mythology, which has its origins in Hindu tradition, folk narrative takes the form of numerous stories that have been a part of the culture for centuries that convey ethical principles and provide context for celestial phenomena or highlight heroic acts and legends. Folk literature is important because of its rich tradition of complex ideas conveyed by symbolism which is facilitated by the use of metaphors and divine agency to portray events in human life and other forces of existence. They are however thoroughly infused with ethical, moral lessons and generally reflect values associated with courage, duty and justice which can function as a guide for individuals and communities. Folk literature

should be considered more than a story; it is an important means of cultural transmission which is the means to record, preserve and transmit, across the generations, the laws, customs and beliefs of a community that would otherwise perish if unable to draw upon the wisdom of one's ancestors to inform and guide them into the future.

Two such mythological folk tales that represent these features are *How the Earth Was Dredged Back – Vishnu's Third Avatar: Varaha* and *The Killing of Hiranyakashipu – Vishnu's Fourth Avatar: Narasimha*. Nair's retellings highlights the important features of Hindu myths connected to Indian folk traditions.

This paper emerges two exciting folk mythological tales and literary heritage exploring rich mythological traditions that have been carefully maintained and passed down. The stories of the Varaha Avatar and the Narasimha Avatar form a section of epic mythology stories that center on the asura twins Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu who were asuras but they were also determined, intelligent and incomparable. Hiranyaksha became concentrated pure power in battle and was unrelenting no physical matter would stop him. At the same time, Hiranyakashipu who had previously undergone penance preparation and received cosmic boons endowed in him a master strategist which made him very manipulative but asura respect developed cosmos concept layers describing gods did not possess. Their tenacity, unwillingness to relinquish what they held and questioning what they would become that separated them from other common Meta Creatures. Ultimately they were common hubris equals. The combined arrogance of Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu led them to neglect their own demise at the eternal hands of Vishnu.

These two legends from Indian mythology, Varaha Avatar and Narasimha Avatar, involve asura twins bonded by their relentless aspirations and mutual defiance of divine hierarchy. When Hiranyaksha submerged the Earth into the cosmic ocean, Vishnu took the form of Varaha, mighty boar to recover the Earth and restore cosmic balance. Later, Hiranyakashipu who was a blindly selfish, ambition consumed a lifted by his desire for immortality, abused his own son Prahlada for being devoted to Vishnu. In defense of dharma, Vishnu took the form of Narasimha, a furious semi-lion and semi man which

would shatter Hiranyakashipu's illusions of immortality. These narratives from mythology not only demonstrate divine intervention but also emphasize the insatiable stubbornness of arrogance and righteousness, cementing the ultimate triumph of dharma.

Even the gods quaked because of its magnitude. A weapon that was beyond anything they had ever faced before. In that moment of despair, they went to Brahma for advice, Brahma who created the Universe and now also existed outside of it watching the chaos unfold. With great concern, they told him of Hiranya's powerful weapon of Death and how it stole even the hope that the gods had of coming back to life or giving them the courage to even try. There was no life to speak of and if Hiranyaksha was in fact powered by millions of prayers and devotion coming from all planes of existence, then many powers had been gone for far too long. But that did not mean the universe would remain in the disastrous position for eternity. The gods knew this better than anyone and given that Hiranyaksha believed he was now lord of creation and it was time they revealed to him that he was wrong.

As they deliberated on a path forward, the gods saw a glimpse of hope and purpose as long as they sought the best and not the harm. But the larger force loomed in the background; the Seventh Law, gravity and with that the interconnectedness of the Universe too. While everything fell apart, it was their age old belief that gratification is only real when others recognize one's importance from it first. The gods saw it clearly in the cosmology of destruction Hiranyaksha was creating in the void and all of the prayers lost in an overwhelming darkness. Devas laden with the crisis at hand, convened in haste to discuss what had happened in their dire predicament. The totality of existence humanity, birds, animals, trees and flowering blooms had been engulfed by the abyssal depths of the cosmic ocean, resulting in an obliteration of noise and motion. Without Earth, there was no life and moving through its gentle rhythm was impossible.

Lightning flashed across the skies and the stars dimmed in their orbits as the immense weight of the imbalance reverberated across the cosmos. Time appeared frozen and a mist of despair washed over the assembled deva. Hiranyaksha - a single force of unimaginable strength had left the gods searching for their next action. Hence, realizing how serious this was, that Vishnu came as the preserver of the universe

and decided it was time to act. In a flash of energy, he became the colossal boar Varaha, glowing with the majesty of the cosmos and divinity. Varaha had divinely powerful and visible, eyes of fire and sweeping, ivory tusks of power. The flames within him exploded and he-born of divine cosmic purpose erupted from the ocean to vanquish the darkness blanketing the realm of man's existence.

He chased the shadow of the river and plunged again and again into its depths, right into the swirling waves of death. In all that chaos, he barreled toward Hiranyaksha who-choked by a horrible arrogance-was hiding in the abyss. An impossible fight began-a match that shook the heavens, split the tides and caused the stars to flicker. After a thousand years of crashing chaos, minds bend of all living things to think with awe overcoming fear. Mountains shook, time slackened and the cosmos stared upon this epic conflict.

At last, Vishnu in his astonishing Varaha form split Hiranyaksha apart with one tremendous blow. The mightiest asura was defeated not through brute power but through divine righteousness. Varaha lifted the earth delicately upon his resplendent tusks and rose from the depths, restoring the planet back to its proper place in the universe and spreading the balance of light, harmony and nature. As the Earth found a home again, life stirred to life in a grand expression of renewal birds sang with songs of life, animals emerged from their long sleep and trees awoke in a joyous dance and just one of the many spiders that lived permitting it to weave its web again. A planet that once heard only chaos now heard harmony and balance once again.

Piaget's theory drives home how children develop the ability to classify objects, ideas and beings based on similarities and differences as well as their hierarchical relationships. In this story, Varaha - the great boar, continues to symbolize enduring resilience and strength and Hiranyaksha, chaotic destruction. Young minds can grasp that life's challenges similar to characters in a story that can be classified and understood. Just as Vishnu took on form that was necessary to reinstate order to the cosmos, children can learn that every life challenge has a solution if looked at, classified and approached it in the right context and way.

This story promotes critical thinking for young readers by showing them what it means to

identify patterns, determine good and bad and hence always make thoughtful choices throughout life. In making choices, children have to understand the importance of classifying things around them in life. Classifying things is a great way to help children think about situations in and apply it in real world situations such as organizing their thoughts, resolving conflicts or making decisions. Just as Vishnu selected the appropriate avatar for the appropriate challenge, children can learn to be flexible, adaptable, think strategically and approach challenges with clarity, confidence and resilience.

After hearing of his twin's death at the hands of Vishnu, Hiranyakashipu exploded with uncontrolled rage and thirst for revenge. Rather than weaken him, it gave him greater aspiration to establish himself as a being greater than the gods and bend the universe to his will. He determined to achieve a state of being that was untouchable and he withdrew from the world, making the intent of total undeterred penance. He sat in meditation for years, in complete silence enduring the pain from the flames burning bright within.

His commitment was so unwavering and relentless, that it shook the fabric of creation. Mountains cracked open and collapsed, rivers began moving in reverse and the gods were more terrified of him than ever as Hiranyakashipu's momentum in spiritual energy gained strength and breadth throughout the realms. The heavens viewed in silent horror while the asura's body burned like indefinite flames of tapasya, muscles and bones visible beneath skin that was fully stretched by concentration.

Ultimately, the god Shiva bound by the universal laws of balance was required to appear and while he would not grant absolute invincibility, Shiva did acknowledge Hiranyakashipu's penance and granted a boon that made him nearly immortal. He would not be killed by man or beast which meant that there could be no mortal or creature that could destroy him. There could be no weapon forged that could injure him and there could be no poison that could stop his breath who would protect him from all of the forms of die.

Furthermore, he would not die inside or outside. He would not be to die in the light of day or the dimness of twilight. There would be land, water or sky that he could die on. Full of confidence and arrogance, Hiranyakashipu emerged from meditation

and thought he had been undefeated and he won death itself and was a reigning king of all that existed.

Moreover, he was not destined to die by day or by night; therefore, he was beyond time itself. He would not die by land, water, or the air; therefore, he could not die by land, in water, or in the sky; therefore no realm of life or death had the power to end him. He could not be injured or harmed by no weapon, constrained by no force, nor could any creature ever defy him at least that is what he believed. With this complicated boon upon him, Hiranyakashipu believed himself invincible, a being beyond fate and above the laws keeping mortals and gods godly.

Filled with the immeasurable confidence that accompanies experiences of grandeur, Hiranyakashipu was arrogantly smug. Nowhere have one heard or thought of a mortal god being denigrated by a mortal creature (when not their so-called "messenger") in mortal manner. That being said, he mocked the gods, made a joke of the scriptures, stamped out anyone who had a concern at all about his superiority. He was calling himself the one true ruler of the universe, demanding worship just as if they were surrendering their own pantheon as they surrendered their worship, all in front of him, above the heavens, at least in his mind. He thought Vishnu was gone; he was an old name of fading face. His ambition enlarged into diabolical darkness that painted the three worlds Heaven, Earth and Nether-space which no longer coloured with their once goodness held up with faith, silence and space.

Thus commenced his shock reign of terror not only imagining and believing he could rule with power but also unchecked pride, which stared into the face of God - a confrontation that would forever change the equation of pride versus the good. Empowered by the formidable boon, Hiranyakashipu unleashed a relentless campaign against the gods, seizing Indra's celestial throne and asserting dominion over Heavens, Earth and Netherworld with unchecked arrogance. The gods powerless before his might turned to Shiva for aid but the great deity counseled patience for destiny had already woven the threads of his downfall.

Despite his reign of terror, Hiranyakashipu harbored deep love for his son, Prahlada. However, his affection soon turned to wrath when he discovered that Prahlada was a steadfast devotee of Vishnu. Enraged, he thundered, "Who is this Narayana? Where does he

live?" (*TPBMIM* 23) and stated that he was the only supreme ruler of the universe. Then he commanded Prahlada to renounce Vishnu and revere him instead. Yet unwavering in faith, the young prince defied his father's decree and continued his devotion.

Overcome by rage, Hiranyakashipu generated infinite schemes to kill his son. He sent crazed elephants to crush him, introduced poisonous snakes into his quarters and palled him in fire and other manipulations. Yet each time, Prahlada was impervious to every attempt of evil his father employed, all due to divine intervention. The demise of Hiranyakashipu was accomplished in a way that confounded every element of his boon. He did not die in a house or in an open area but entirely at the threshold of his palace at the juncture between the outside and inside. He did not die during the brightness of the day or during the calmness of the night; he died at twilight, the nuanced moment when light becomes darkness. Also, Vishnu did not appear as a man or as an animal instead he appeared as Narasimha, an overwhelming combination of both which has no earthly category (half man – half lion). He did not die by poison or by imposing any weapon instead Narasimha took his sharp claws and ripped through the tyrant, demonstrating that no pride can withstand the force of justice.

Children start to realize that objects, ideas and concepts can belong to many categories at the same time as Piaget's classification. This story is a great example of cognitive ability as demonstrated through the unique nature of Narasimha. He is neither man nor animal but both and each at the same time without being confined to Aristotle's categories. This breaks outside the rigid definitions of Hiranyakashipu's boon and ultimately results in his demise. The importance of flexible thinking in overcoming seemingly impossible problems is great. It is also important that by realizing that not everything is so confined to a category, learner start to construct knowledge of how the globe works in a complicated, interrelated way.

The story is a fruitful exploration of creativity, adaptability and problem-solving for young learners. It can invite them to reconsider like a Narasimha in fostering ways of engaging their imaginations to find solutions in unconventional ways. Many subjects at school have those incorporating ideas together moving through science and art,

rationale and creativity, rule following and creating. Their ability to integrate different fields is important to their ability to solve problems. In building the students' adaptable mindsets, thinking comes into play that classification is significant in social relationships and when students come to be comfortable with the many-faceted elements of people, perspectives and identities, they are learning to be empathetic and tolerant. Just as Narasimha is more than a singular definition, young learners can also begin to load up their minds with multiple skills, interests and identities as they grow to be people who will tackle challenges with adaptability, confidence and creativity.

Seamlessly weave in the big idea of divine intervention, perseverance and the victory of dharma over adharma. These folk stories all revolve around the same central theme of eternal struggle between overconfidence against righteousness and the restoration of harmony after chaos has unleashed the strife of evil upon the universe. The Varaha avatar while not as epic as the others, displays Vishnu's omnipotence, as he literally lifts the earth from the abyss of the cosmic ocean, representing regeneration and cosmic safety. The Narasimha avatar introduces a more bumbling trickster like representation of Sharma's power of creation and destruction because it requires divine ingenuity to outsmart the acts of overconfidence that he has undergone, identifying wisdom over indolence and prosperity over tyranny. Each avatar came with rich elements of symbolism - Varaha being the earth's protector and Narasimha being cosmic justice to delight and fascinate young thinkers with the lessons of flexibility, dedication and faith.

These epic stories capture the essence of folklore changing children's worldviews to be infused with wisdom, determination and the promise that a truth will ultimately prevail over any form of adversity. These legendary tales encourage children to engage in critical thinking, resourcefulness and resilience. With Varaha's courage and Narasimha's cleverness, these stories provide a true sense of optimism that every barrier has a solution, and that no portion of the universe can obscure the ultimate progress of truth and righteousness.

## CONCLUSION

These enduring stories serve as cornerstones of folk narrative and mythological literature, exemplifying oral traditions, symbolic storytelling and the timeless tension between chaos and order. Folk narratives depend on creative retelling or adaptation, where young readers learn about mythical beings, divine interventions and moral struggles, all the while absorbing significant wisdom of a different kind. Anita Nair's retellings continue to make these sagas available for modern readers to embrace the cultural and spiritual understandings, in addition to literature as entertainment. In addition to entertainment value, these stories contribute to cognitive development as children learn to view beyond strict classifications, engage with topics from multiple points of view and tackle problems by using their intelligence and resourcefulness. Like all legends that are passed down from generation to generation, they leave kids knowing stories do not merely serve the purpose of storytelling but they also belong to a lived experience that propels them to forward with the wisdom of the past to explore what lies ahead.

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