

Inspection of Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism: Contextualizing Ecological Acuity in Select Works of R.K. Narayan and Ruskin Bond

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Abstract

Along with the encroachment of various technologies in every corner of the world, literature, with the assistance of culture, takes a pivotal role in upholding the heritage and regard of all living beings and non-living objects within the environment. In the era of globalization, some ecocritical theorists and critics such as – Cheryll Glotfelty, Rachel Carson, Lawrence Buell, and William Rueckert cherish the concern of ecological significance in their critical writings. Humans, with their megalomaniac attitudes, turn out to be idiosyncratic in the contemporary world, and, therefore, humanity will lose the ethical-moral fiber regarding animate and inanimate entities. We recognize India for its well-known biodiversity, and Indian scholars and writers have also come forward to delineate the picture of nature in their writings to portray its aesthetic beauty and alert people about its worth in the ecosystem. In this paper, some ecocritical perspectives are well interpreted in the opuses of R.K. Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, and Ruskin Bond's *Angry River*, to narrate humanities and moralities concerning the perception of the environment. This paper analyzes how the two prominent writers have tried to explain the anthropocentric outlook and the ecocentric etiquettes representing the characters and natural aspects of the select texts.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Domination, Humanity, Preservation, Holism.

Introduction:

In the Romantic Age, the writers would express their thoughts and emotions to the readers through nature's innate splendor and attractiveness. However, from the middle of the 1980s, the tradition of writing had been transformed into ecocritical consciousness on preserving and protecting the environment. In the continuance of ecological degradation for a decade or more, literary writers and scholars fetch an ecological revolution in the light of ecocriticism. In 1978, William Rueckert, in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," represents ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of

literature" (Glotfelty xx). In the word ecocriticism or environmental criticism, some scholars bestow precedence to the term *eco-* over *enviro-* because *enviro-* is anthropocentric or dualistic, which believes that humans are at the midpoint, encircled by everything.

In contrast, *eco-* emphasizes the interdependence and interconnectedness between humans and nature. Regarding the discussion of inherent and intrinsic value, anthropocentrism, an ethical philosophy that believes only humans possess an intrinsic worth for their cognitive ability, comes forward to defend human beings' value compared to other entities' importance in the environment. Humans consider themselves moral agents for their cognitive aptitude; for this reason, they should have a responsibility and respect for other entities.

Since the Vedic era in India, nature has played an essential role in maintaining a balance in biodiversity. Modern Indian literary writers are not even behind in expressing their feelings and emotions based on the natural environment. Many Indian authors like- Rabindranath Tagore, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, R. K. Narayan, and Ruskin Bond have portrayed nature in their writings to show the harmony between literature and nature. Among these well-known writers, R. K. Narayan has written many novels based on ecological humiliation and its impacts on society, such as – *Swami and His Friends*, *The Guide*, and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, which focused on the anthropocentric attitude of humans. A tendency to show the Earth that human beings are the central facet of the natural world is a perspective of anthropocentrism. Other forms of life existing in the environment are considered less critical, and they are here only for the utilization of human beings. The narrow focus on human-centeredness becomes a cause of environmental problems like – climate change, habit destruction, and species extinction. The anthropocentric association with nature is the primary reason for environmental degradation, and, therefore, we must reconsider our worldview to recover ecological problems.

On the other hand, some scholars look after anthropocentrism as an ethic because they believe it embraces human ingenuity and can improve to address environmentalism. They seek anthropocentrism by promoting a holistic view of the natural world that values nonhuman life to maintain its intrinsic value. Without the aid of human beings, nature cannot be reformed and reevaluated, as humans can utilize their moralities and conscience to make the whole atmosphere immaculate. W.H. Murdy writes about anthropocentrism, "It is anthropocentric to value the factors that make us uniquely human, to seek to preserve and enhance such factors and to counter antihuman forces which threaten to diminish or destroy them. Nature outside of man will not act to preserve human values; it is our responsibility alone" (Murdy 1171).

Ruskin Bond's novella *Angry River* is explained through ecocentric perspectives to discuss the inherent and intrinsic value of all animate and inanimate objects. Environmental philosopher or ecologist Aldo Leopold coins the term *ecocentric ethic* to indicate nature-centered, which is semi-similar to the concept of deep ecology. The ecocentric perspective highlights that all living and nonliving organisms, regardless of their significance or effectiveness to human beings, have intrinsic value in the world. A vital component of this ethic is to lead a higher environmental executive, as some critics believe that all living beings, including human beings, are the effect of a lengthy evolutionary method. In the movement of politics and ethics, ecocentrism becomes one of the main streams of environmentalism, which desires to look after and progress the natural world by transforming environmentally destructive human activities into the reevaluation of humanity. The function of ecocentrism toward

environmental consciousness is more potential than anthropocentric ethics. Ecocentrism emphasizes the biotic community and discusses the importance of natural aspects or phenomena. The difference between ecocentrism and biocentrism may need to be defined because biocentrism accentuates the intrinsic value of all living beings in the environment.

On the other hand, an ecocentric viewpoint grants value to all living and nonliving entities. It also believes a sustainable environment will be built through the vision of interdependence and interconnectedness between humans and nature. Lawrence Buell interprets ecocentrism thus, "Ecocentrism is more compelling as a call to fellow humans to recognize the intractable, like-it-or-not interdependence that subsists between the human and the nonhuman and to tread more lightly on the earth than it is as a practical program" (102).

Anthropocentric Analysis

R.K. Narayan is one of the prominent novelists among Indian writers, and his famous novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is described to alert the people about environmental degradation and its dreadful outcome in biodiversity. In the novel, the story of a mythological demon named Bhasmasura is narrated by relating the character of Vasu, the novel's antagonist. Ecocritically this type of demon is treated as an agent who wants to destroy nature. The novel's protagonist, Nataraj, an Indian printer living in Malgudi, is depicted as amiable for his meek behavior towards animals. Anthropocentric and ecocentric ethics, the two contradictory inspections, are well interpreted by two characters- Nataraj and Vasu. Vasu, a taxidermist, comes to stay in the attic of Nataraj's press to kill wild lives in the nearby Mempi hills. The action of taxidermy is an example of an anthropocentric attitude because the wild lives and natural resources are debilitated for the utilization of human beings. The story based on the entire novel is about hunting, stuffing, and killing of wild animals, as well as the novel shows how the socio-ecological balance between flora and fauna is collapsed in the ecosystem.

At the novel's beginning, we find that Nataraj leads a happy life with his friends, including a poet, a journalist, and his employee Sastri but the invasion of Vasu infringes on the peace of Malgudi. In the novel, the report is mentioned that the forestry officer Ramaswami is compelled to eradicate at least 18 elephants and 60 tigers to protect humans and their habitations. The bitter truth is that the Earth was not created only for humans; instead, it has been formed for all humans and nonhumans to live together. However, an anthropocentric attitude makes Vasu's mind so rigid that it cannot think about any ecocentric perception. He thinks each animal is an object and has a value to be sold in the market. To Vasu, an elephant is an item for earning money, and he expresses his point of view through these lines, "Has it occurred to you how much more an elephant is worth dead? You don't have to feed it in the first place. I can make ten thousand out of the parts of this elephant – the tasks, if my calculation is right, must weigh forty pounds, that is eight hundred rupees. I already have an order for the legs, mounted as umbrella stands, and each hair on its tail can be sold for twelve annas for rings and bangles; most women fancy them, and it is not for us to question their taste. My first business will be to take out the hairs and keep them apart, while the blood is still hot; trunks, legs, even the nails – it is a perfect animal in this way" (qtd. in Sarker 46).

From ecocritical dimensions, the approach of superiority and hierarchical discrimination between animate and inanimate entities should be excluded forever. A sustainable environment can be built by reforming people's anthropocentric attitudes. In the novel, Vasu directs the act of

hunting as an artistic creation that can be compared with the profession of a surgeon or sculptor. He argues, "Of course, it will be preserved if you get help from a taxidermist who knows his job" (Narayan 100). Through the activities of Vasu, it is crystal clear that he declares combat against wild creatures and wants to win it by killing animals. He constantly boasts of his dominance over nonhumans; in discussion with Nataraj, he claims that humans have cognitive intellectuality and should prioritize their intellectual ability over other wild creatures. The thought of domination makes a man selfish and individualistic because the manner of superiority and inferiority between humans and wild lives creates hierarchical biases. Besides killing the wild animals, he has stored the animals' skin, flesh, and horns in the attic of Nataraj's press. The stench of rotten flesh makes spoiled the whole socio-ecological equilibrium, and the people of the area became frustrated by this kind of heinous activities of Vasu. The egocentric attitude of human beings is the central barrier to transforming anthropocentric behavior into ecocentric insight. To Vasu, these types of actions are the effect of anthropocentric conception. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin interpret anthropocentrism in this way, "Within many cultures – and not just Western ones – anthropocentrism has long been naturalized. The absolute prioritization of one's own species' interests over those of the silenced majority is still regarded as 'only natural.' Ironically, it is precisely through such appeals to nature that other animals and the environment are often excluded from the elite ranks of the human, rendering them available for exploitation" (5).

The destructive consequences of anthropocentrism explore the context of the novel, and it recommends a more ecocentric view of environmental conservation and to make a relationship between humans and nature. In the novel, most characters except Vasu delineate themselves as nature lovers and are constantly aware of ecological inconsistencies. The novel's protagonist, Nataraj, raises the question of people's ill-treatment of animals. The tiger, to him, is not only a wild animal, instead a natural resource that they should preserve for developing a potential ecology. A few people become responsible for natural calamities, but all the people put up with nature's resentment through various natural disasters like- floods, storms, global warming, etc. Humans should be very sympathetic to nature to get the remedy of nature's revenge. The crucial concern of preserving nature and its resources depends on reforming our humanity towards other nonhuman beings. Keith Makoto Woodhouse interprets his ecocritical thought like this, "Ecocentric thought assumed that trees, bears, fish, and grasshoppers should receive as much consideration as humans in decisions large and small about the shape of modern society. An ecocentric outlook granted no more value to people – at least in terms of a basic hierarchy of existence – than it did to plants, animals, and ecosystems" (96–97).

In the ecocritical concern, we recognize that nature cannot transform itself into a sanctified expanse without humans. Suppose human beings are responsible for breaking the chain of peace in nature. In that case, they keep the skill to bring back concord in the natural environment by leaving their dominating attitude and utilizing their moral sense towards nonhuman beings. Such characters in the fiction - Nataraj, Muthu, Rang, and Sastri play a positive role in saving the life of Kumar, a temple elephant in Mempi. When Nataraj is informed about Kumar's illness, he takes him to a doctor for treatment. Influenced by consciousness, he preserves the life of Kumar and wants to maintain nature's balance in the ecosystem. He does not desire to gain or lose money by doing this activity. Rang, the female prostitute, also takes a risk to save the life of Kumar from the gunpoint of Vasu. Nataraj tells about Kumar's illness, "I had

to overlook the responsibilities on hand. Kumar's welfare became an all-important issue. The visiting card that I was printing could wait, but not Kumar" (Narayan 115). Rangi is presented negatively in the novel, and she is considered a slave of Vasu. However, she is morally conscious of natural resources, and for this, she immediately informs Nataraj about the lousy intention of Vasu, who wants to kill the temple elephant, Kumar. Ecofeminist, in this context, argues that domination and exploitation of nature and women are ingrained in patriarchal systems of power. Though Rangis's genuine love for Kumar can compare to Kafka's lines, "Animals are closer to us than human beings. That is where our prison bars lie. We find relations with animals easier than with men" (qtd. in Harel 14). At the novel's end, the writer alerts the people showing Vasu's death as a symbol of humanity. Vasu's strong and muscular hand becomes the reason for his death; similarly, people can destroy themselves by harming natural assets.

Ecocentric value

Ruskin Bond, another meticulous nature lover, is an eminent writer of children's fiction and short story. Several personal experiences of the writer revolving around nature are depicted in his writings. The story of a small girl named Sita who lives with her grandparents in a hut on a small island is narrated in Bond's renowned novella *Angry River*. The river and an old peepul tree are the two natural phenomena described in the fiction to focus on natural disasters and the survival of human existence. The relationship between nature and humans based on interdependency and interconnectedness is genuinely interpreted in the novella. Sita's grandfather, an old fisherman who remained on the island for a long time, became aware of the flood and specified some instructions to his granddaughter to keep herself safe. The old peepul tree on the island is regarded as a savior of the island, and sometimes Sita's grandmother compares the tree to the body of the mighty Lord Krishna. In India, people believe that the peepul tree is a habitation of Gods and Spirits; therefore, it sometimes becomes good and evil. Sita's family witnesses the diverse mood of the river with its cyclic variations; the writer closely represents the river's grumpy temper, "The river was furious; it was like a wild beast, a dragon on the rampage, thundering down from the hills and sweeping across the plain, bringing with it dead animals, uprooted trees, household goods and huge fish chocked to death by the swirling mud" (Bond 44–45).

Due to uninterrupted rain, the river rises highly, and most of the part of the island is drowned under the water. The river becomes a friend of Sita because it knows about her pleasure, mourning, and struggles throughout her life. In the time of threat, Sita believes the Peepul tree, which has existed on the island for a long time, is a savior of the land and can save her life from the river's anger. However, the Peepul tree cannot resist the river's anger, and ultimately, the tree is uprooted by the force of the water. Bond depicts the whole scenario like this, "With a flurry of its beautiful leaves, and a surge of mud from below, the tree left its place in the Earth, and, titling, moved slowly forward, turning a little from side to side, dragging its roots along the ground... Then the tree moved into the river's main current and went faster, swinging Sita from side to side. Her feet were in the water, but she clung tenaciously to her branch" (46). The little girl holds the branches of the uprooted tree tightly and floats on the water to save herself. The tree saves Sita's life until Krishan, a small boy, comes with a boat to rescue her from the flood. Ecocentric writers argue that every small or large object has an intrinsic value, as all living and non-living things are part of a web of life. They believe that natural aspects like- rivers,

mountains, and trees deserve to be respected and protected regardless of their instrumental value to humans. In the novella, we find that Sita makes a harmonious relationship with the tree earlier, and at the crucial time of her life, it saves her life.

In the ecocritical study, Holism refers to the idea that the natural world and all its components are interconnected and interdependent, as everything in the environment, including humans, is part of the larger ecosystem. It focuses on the significance of the environment and human society and requires protecting and preserving the integrity of ecosystems to maintain a sustainable balance among all species on Earth. In the book *Holism and Evolution*, Jan Smuts argues that "Natural wholes are always composed of parts; in fact, the whole is not some entity added to the parts but is just the parts *in their synthesis*, which may be physic-chemical or organic or physical or personal. As Holism is a process of creative synthesis, the resulting wholes are not static but dynamic, evolutionary, creative" (86). Sometimes nature becomes angry with human behavior and expresses it through natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, violent storms, etc. Humans should be morally conscious of other nonhuman beings and inanimate objects to eliminate the curse. In *Angry River*, the writer has well amalgamated two critical factors- nature's inconsistency and human existence, to deliver a message of making a harmonious relationship between humans and nature so that both can live together without discrimination. Two contradictory movements of nature are presented in the text; at the beginning of the writing, the narrator renders nature as an enemy of humans representing the river's rage, and on the other hand, he conveys the worth of the peepul tree among humanity. Sometimes nature becomes angry, and it takes revenge on human beings. Krishan tells Sita about the harshness and the kindness of the river like this, "Sometimes the river is angry, and sometimes it is kind... We are part of the river... We cannot live without it" (Bond 83).

Conclusion:

R.K. Narayan and Ruskin Bond both portray the picture of anthropocentric and ecocentric ethics in their writings to increase consciousness of natural worth among people. Through Nataraj's character development, Narayan explores the consequences of anthropocentrism and the importance of ethical considerations. In the novel, Nataraj embodies anthropocentrism initially as he lives in a human-centric bubble disconnected from the wider natural world. However, the arrival of Vasu, a taxidermist who disregards ethical norms and a lack of respect for nature, challenges Nataraj's anthropocentric worldview. Nataraj's ethical dilemma emerges when he finds himself torn between his friendship with Vasu and his growing awareness of the moral implications of Vasu's behavior.

On the other hand, in the novella "Angry River" written by Ruskin Bond, the elements of ecocentrism can be inferred from the story's depiction of the relationship between humans and the natural environment. The protagonist, Sita, profoundly appreciates the natural world, its beauty, and its inherent value. This appreciation suggests an ecocentric worldview, where the well-being of the natural world is valued and respected. It encourages readers to contemplate the importance of a balanced and respectful relationship with nature, suggesting a sympathetic alignment with some of the principles associated with ecocentrism.

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