



Environmental (In) Justice: An Ecocritical Study of R. K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism emerged in response to an environmental crisis and ecological spoilation which, through they became ever harder to negate in the closing decades of the 20th and 21st century. In the present time, earth undergoes several fatal environmental crises leading us to a disastrous future. This paper holds on close observation of R. K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* through the lens of Ecocritical perspective. In the novel the cause of disturbance for abusing animals happened at the arrival of Vasu, the Taxidermist and also known as the Man Eater of Malgudi. The disorder was created by the fact that Vasu who was symbolized by his act of removing the blue curtain and peeping into the inner room of Natraj's press. As this abuse caused by Vasu is concerned about environmental disorder and crisis, I would like to focus on different insightful and intuitive thoughts in this article in respect of Ecocritical perspectives.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecology, Malgudi, Environment, Nature, Catastrophe.

This paper tends to focus on how ecocritical perspective relates R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* in context of environmental catastrophe. Malgudi has ceased to be just the setting for R. K. Narayan's stories and has trans-mutated into a symbolic totem and a chronotope, reflecting a progressive society and culture as it evolves and finds its way in a postcolonial world. This global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has once again foregrounded the issue of environmental disaster and ecological disharmony in the present times and the times to come. Although environmental disasters are natural phenomena, those which now occur in the Anthropocene era basically anthropogenic, and more frequent and more violent. Whether natural or human-induced, violation on nature disturbs the socio-ecological system, aggravates the social, economic, political conditions, and involves the issue of justice, human rights and equality. C.D. Narsimhaiah regards Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* as an anti-climax coming as it does after, *The Guide*, an undisputed masterpiece. It has been highly praised by a number of critics and regarded as one of his finest works. Its popularity was immediate and universal. On its publication, it was highly praised by the editors of Times

Literary Supplement in the following words. Critics have found that the problem of people's unequal exposure to climate variability and consequent deprivation of basic human rights lie mostly in the practice of colonialism in the past and the contemporary neo-colonial/neoliberal world order. The human rights concerns involved in climate change have been addressed in imaginative literature by writers like Octavia Butler, Amitav Ghosh, Mohsin Hamid, John Lanchester, Margaret Drabble, Paolo Bacigalupi and many others. Their representations of individual and community experiences of climate change render the impersonal and empirical data on climate change-induced human rights violations perceptible.

We, the human beings are so apathetic towards nature and ecology on the basis of our over-possessive and anthropocentric notion we hold. In many cases, we violently do injustice towards nature without thinking its fatal outcome. Nature in the same way, brings violent catastrophe upon human. In this context, R.K Narayan has delineated such horrible picturesque by referring to Vasu, the taxidermist and the pioneering character of this novel. People like Vasu who are coercing on human and non-human animal even nature is not beyond of this, are every inch responsible for what is civilization going on in the present scenario and what is yet to come.

To quote the words of the editors of "Times Literary Supplement" we can praise that "Narayan has now written his most delightful story of the little world of Malgudi, his imaginary town in South India. The good printer Natraj and his close friends, a poet, and a journalist, find their congenial days disturbed when Vasu, a power-hungry taxidermist, moves in with his stuffed hyenas and pythons, and brings his dancing - women up the printer's private stair. When Vasu, in search of larger game, threatens the life of a temple elephant that Natraj has befriended, complications ensue that are both laughable and tragic. A not unwelcome death occurs, murder is indicated, and the search for the guilty party who might have been Natraj himself or anyone of his friends, or even the temple dancer- lends suspense to this bizarre, yet moving tale." (Times Literary Supplement 1958) The most striking part of the novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is the massive killing of animals and the ruthless process of stuffing. The activities of taxidermy detailed here can be extended to show the larger scale of environmental deranged. As hunting of animals is notable issue here, the connection between hunting and literature should be discussed briefly, and of course, it should be explored by the lens of ecocriticism.

Vasu has been defined as a villain, a person who does not want well-being others, who always tries to hurt someone else. Thus, his villainous role has been differentiated with the character of Iago in *Othello*. Iago was considered as intellectually a very superior type of character. This art of Shakespeare is unchangeable. Here the unheroic character of Natraj has been totally eclipsed by Vasu and Vasu has proved to be hero of the novel. There has been good gesture between them. As a taxidermist Vasu forcibly goes to Malgudi and violates the calm routine life of the peaceful town. The boldness and intelligence not used in a proper attitude has led him to do unauthorized work. He told that after all they are civilized human beings, educated, and cultured and it is up to them to prove their superiority over nature. So, he has been shown as a rootless intellectual. He has been a source for cultivating a scientific outlook and a rivalling nature even in his act of creation.

Matthew Cartmill (1993) in his book *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature throughout History* uses a phrase ‘romantic hunting,’ and he defines it in this way, “...a white man dressed in buckskins, who lives simply in the wilderness on intimate and friendly terms with the natives, dislikes white civilization, and hunts only to satisfy his basic need for food or clothing.” (227) This very concept of ‘romantic hunting’ justifies and legalizes hunting and is very anthropocentric in its outlook. In the novel *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, the forest officer Ramaswami is subjected to have murdered at least 18 elephants and 60 tigers till now and the justification provided is that it was done to save human lives. Then we are introduced to lines like these, “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.” (Narayan 2000)

In the same way it is reported in the novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* that the forestry officer Ramaswami is bound to kill at least 18 elephants and 60 tigers in his life and the reason behind this is to save human life which is an anthropocentric idea for the reason that intrusion in the abode of animals makes them unrest and consequently they are bound to attack human habitation. The novels based on the stories of hunting, for example, the novels are the attitude of Vasu towards human beings, and from this, it is not very difficult to conjecture his attitude to non-human lives. To Vasu, for example, an elephant is just a matter of earning money. In a very playful and light-hearted manner, he describes the monetary benefit of a dead elephant in this way,

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 tusks, if my calculation is right, must weigh forty pounds, that’s eight hundred rupees. I have already 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’s 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; trunk, legs, even the nails- it’s a perfect animal in that way. Every bit of it is valuable. I’ve already several inquiries from France and Germany and from Hong Kong. What more can a man want? I could retire for a year on the proceeds of one elephant. (Narayan 2000)

Regarding Taxidermy, he says, “When he stuffed a lion, he could make it more terrifying than it would be in the jungle.” (Narayan 2000)

The impact of anthropocentric idea can also be fixed in Vasu, and in his psyche, these two are intermingled together. It is next to impossible to find any ecocentric notion in him. On the contrary, he indicates by his rigorous activities and statements that anthropocentrism is a natural phenomenon and his

haughty reactions and attitudes towards animals and nature result from his anthropocentric notion. For this kind of claimed natural phenomenon of anthropocentrism, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin comment

Within many cultures - and not just western anthropocentrism has long been naturalized. The absolute prioritization own species' interest over those of the silenced majority is still regarded as being 'only natural'. Ironically, it is precisely through such appeals to nature that other animals and the environment are often excluded from the privileged ranks of the human, rendering them available for exploitation. (Huggan and Tiffin 2010)

Vasu was termed as an aggressive bully who did not care at all for the properties of life, which have sacredness for Natraj and the people of Malgudi in general. He was still known as a middle-aged man-eater with the same uncertainties, probabilities and possibilities. He forcefully occupied Natraj's attic without taking permission from him. Soon the attic turned into a graveyard where bodies were put. He shoots the animal of the Mempi forest illegally and in a secret procedure and this in turn brings him into a new problem with the forest department. But he hardly cares for it, and thus insults the forest officer and tells him to go out. He also showed no interest towards his protest. Not only that, he has not mended his ways and thus kills dogs in the neighbourhood and makes the children feel scared. So, his aggressive bully never mended rather expanded.

Md. A. R. Sarker (2019) in *Ecocritical Analysis of R. K. Narayan's The Man-Eater of Malgudi* says that "Ecocritically, it can be explained in this way that the claimed art is artificial, and taxidermists represent nature in an artificial way, and hence, it is the fabricated delineation of animal life" (55). Narayan however delves deeper and describes the imagery of skins hanging out to dry, jungle squirrels and feathered birds heaped in the corner, smell of decaying flesh and raw hide, taking out the eyes from the dead carcasses and setting artificial lens in their place, pickling the skin in tins of salt immediately after flaying and so on. A R Sarker continues to say in this regard that "Like The Lorax, in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, it can be seen that before the coming of Vasu there was one kind of peaceful atmosphere in the house of Natraj as well as in Malgudi, but that is destroyed with the intrusion of Vasu that Vasu's presence was subtly transforming Natraj 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 Natraj by his erratic behaviour, but as has been indicated above, even here Natraj 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.

In these aforementioned circumstances and reactions of different characters, it is obvious that Vasu proclaims war against animals and nature. Whenever he is successful in controlling any natural element, he

enriches the pleasure of victory. In his conversation with Natraj, he reasons that as human beings are civilized, educated and cultured, they should always try to prove their superiority to nature and he places science as one kind of opponent to nature. (17)

In the 20th and 21st century, a time of danger for animal and plant kingdom, still there are some places across the world where non-human lives enjoy peaceful and danger-free life. But human encroachment in these areas is so speedy that it is very difficult to ensure their safety in the future. This particular reality is echoed by this statement of Natraj, the first rays of the sun touched up the walls of the barber's house with the morning glory. Sparrows and crows were flying already in search of grain and worms. As I watched them a part of my mind reflected how lucky they were to be away from Vasu's attic windows." (61) So, Vasu has been termed as an evil incarnate. His intentions were to destroy the peaceful life of Malgudi and to destroy the reputation of Natraj. Secondly, he is not at all ashamed of himself occupying the attic of Natraj without his permission. Thirdly, he is active but acquires the seeds of destruction which would destroy himself.

Taking into account the ecocentric meaning, it must be observed that in this way evil characteristics of an animal are not attributed to a human being, but the evil characteristics of a human being are forcibly attributed to an innocent animal." (Sarkar 2019) The novel concludes with a symbolic warning, Vasu like the Bhasmasura demon from Indian Mythology is the reason for his own death, though Nature in the form of mosquitoes gladly helped him in his demise, that too in the presence of Rangi, who coincidentally fell asleep just like the guards of another cruel king Kansa, fell asleep when Lord Krishna was born. Nature is powerful enough to annihilate its enemies. R.K. Narayan's Malgudi being established as a life-place, a chronotope and a dwelling space for the emerging consciousness in a postcolonial India goes on to show that humankind and nature are intrinsically linked to each other and are well-reflected in subaltern literature. In his novels, the elaborate and sensitive presentation shows us that Narayan has focused on the varied ways Nature can play multiple roles specially in a post-colonial world that has a materialistic vision. Through a postcolonial and ecocritical reading of his novels however, we begin to appreciate the multi-stranded pluralism of worldviews in R.K. Narayan.

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