

**AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INDO-ANGLIAN WRITING WITH  
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO R.K. NARAYAN'S UNDER THE BANYAN TREE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where the scholars of literature analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Ecocriticism, in its simplest possible terms, is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. The holistic approach of Ecocriticism maintains that literature cannot be approached in a way that sets man and nature in opposition to each other. Instead, it examines man as a part of ecosystem. Nature and literature have shared a very close relationship in almost all the cultures of the world. The writers of today in order to understand this intimate relation between the two components have textualised the entire analyses. Talking in the Indian perspective, there is a large variety of ecosystems ranging from Himalayas in the north to plateaus of south and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the east to dry Thar of the west. But these ecosystems have been adversely affected by the ever-increasing population and avarice of mankind. Under these circumstances it was impossible for literature, well known for reflecting the contemporary issues, to remain unaffected by these depletions. The present paper would illustrate the influence of Nature upon mankind and their culture besides Nature's significance and indispensability in human lives through the study of R.K. Narayan's story Under the Banyan Tree. The proposed work focuses upon an ecological interpretation of the story to ascertain the relationship between mankind and nature and to evaluate the degree of ecological awareness in human beings as reflected in subaltern literature. Keywords – Ecocriticism, Avarice, Holistic, Ecosystems, Depletion, Subaltern.*

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where the scholars of literature analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Ecocriticism, in its simplest possible terms, is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. The holistic approach of Ecocriticism maintains that literature cannot be approached in a way that sets man and nature in opposition to each other. Instead, it examines man as a part of ecosystem. Nature and literature have shared a very close relationship in almost all the cultures of the world. The writers of today in order to understand this intimate relation between the two components have textualised the entire analyses. Talking in the Indian perspective, there is a large variety of ecosystems ranging from Himalayas in the north to plateaus of south and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the east to dry Thar of the west. But these ecosystems have been adversely affected by the ever-increasing population and avarice of mankind. Under these circumstances it was impossible for literature, well known for reflecting the contemporary issues, to remain unaffected by these depletions.

The word 'ecocriticism' first appeared in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. But apparently it remained inactive in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting, when Cheryl Glotfelty not only received the term but also worked for its use in the critical field which hereafter had been used as 'the study of nature writing'. Ecocriticism faced difficulty in gaining recognition as a legitimate literary theory in its initial stages but at present it is in full swing and is readily accepted theory worldwide.

Ecocriticism is a critical study which analyses the relationship between environment and literature. The other term used for it is green cultural studies, eco-poetics or environmental literary criticism. It has come to mean not only the application of ecology and ecological principles to the study of literature, but also the theoretical approach to the interrelational web of natural, cultural and supernatural phenomena. It began to explore constructions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse. Since then literature has always conditioned our philosophical understanding of nature and environment. In the critical and literary contexts even the aesthetic categories have been defined largely. Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crises and also as to how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications

When we talk about Man- Nature relationship there are two beliefs which need to be analysed viz. the Eastern belief and the Western belief. The Eastern belief propogates that Man and Nature complement each other by sharing the responsibilities of creation and its sustenance. In the absence of Nature man cannot exist. He will be lost. But the Western belief opposes this eco-affable notion. The western concept places man as superior to Nature where he acts as the master of Nature. He acts as a self-appointed authority. This belief system claims the superiority of civilization over nature. But this is a contorted outlook which has certainly left a negative and wrong impact on society and literature. Under the influence of this belief, Man has always tried to conquer Nature without ever stopping and giving a thought to the end result. Such environmental crises that makes the Man-Nature relationship quite

fragile and vulnerable has acquired an existential dimension. So, ecocriticism is an awareness about nature and our environment which organizes the human and non-human interactions.

The issue of environmental balance has crept as the core topic in literature and the Indian literature is no exception. The modern literary figures have tried to draw the attention of society on these issues. The popular writers like Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh are great environmentalists who provide a proof to this study. A few more Indian novels in the history of Indian English literature can be read through the lens of ecocriticism. Though a serious concern with ecology seems to be lacking in the earlier works, yet nature has been used as an important backdrop against which the story develops in much modern Indian fiction. The writers such as R.K. Narayan, Manohar Malgaonkar, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai have invoked Nature and its elements for expressing their contemporary regional and social atmospheres. Nature has been portrayed as benign and the creator and as well as aggressive and destructive and depending upon the situation, mood and need of the story, these qualities are applied accordingly.

R.K. Narayan is a regional novelist like Faulkner and Hardy. He too has created a fictional town called Malgudi on which all his stories are based. It is the only locale of his eleven novels and many short stories. It is difficult to comprehend his art and mind comprehensively without a thorough understanding of his Malgudi – the fictitious appellation given by him to the region. Its geography and life in his variegated shades and forms has been painted in his prose narratives. It is true that the action in his novels centres round Malgudi; though literally it is a small

township created by the novelist for his convenience, metaphorically it grows far beyond the clustered dimensions where the limits fade leading to the new vistas of a wide world. Through his works, Narayan tried to communicate the life of Malgudi. The physical geography of Malgudi is never dealt with as set piece but allowed to reveal itself beneath and between the events. One comes to have a strong feeling for the place's identity. Malgudi bore a special flavour- a blend of oriental and occidental. This fictional place offered details of public life, of the shabby swarming street and the stifling by-lanes, the cobbles of Market Road and sands on Sarayu bank, the banyan tree outside the central Co-operative Land Mortgage Bank, the glare of Kitson lamps and the open drain down Vinayak Mudali Street. The delicately established world of Malgudi is not only Indian and British, or not only East and West, but also ancient and modern. Here we find the hints and suggestions of the continental vastness and variety of India in which this provincial life is set. For e.g., there is the Trunk Road vanishing into the mysterious distance, there is the menacing jungle at its edge, there is the railway station from which one's friends and their families can be suddenly transported to continue their lives and careers a thousand miles away. The life in Malgudi is actually the life in India. The novelist has exploited the entire social, psychological and regional atmosphere in his writings. He has used nature as the background setting in his novels and short stories. Malgudi is used as a central setting of his writings where the mother nature plays the role of both a preserver and a creator. This is evident in many of his works such as *Malgudi Days*, *Man Eater of Malgudi*, *The English Teacher*, *The Guide* etc.

R.K. Narayan gave life to a place, Malgudi, and developed it as a character. He used landscape as an important theme in his

writings which is one of the very important considerations under ecocriticism. The flowing Sarayu, the ruined temple and the stone slabs influence Raju in *The Guide* and contributes to his sainthood. It is the spirit of Malgudi that helps him to face the ordeal of fast in the right earnest. It is the retreat across the river that almost transforms Jagan. Thus, Malgudi is a character. Under the salubrious influence of serene nature Krishna becomes so spiritual that he begins to communicate with the soul of Susila. Malgudi becomes the symbol of the transitional India shedding the garb of old age traditions and accepting the modern western civilization.

Under the Banyan Tree also has Malgudi as its backdrop. It revolves around Nambi, a technically illiterate story teller who lived in a little temple of Somal, a small village in Mempo Hills used to tell long stories under the banyan tree on moon lit nights. Every fortnight when he was ready with a new story, he would light a lamp under the tree to flash a signal to all the villagers to assemble for hearing to his new story. This was his routine all his life. This had been his passion and occupation throughout his life. But all of a sudden one day, he could not remember the next phase of his story. His memory failed him to utter even a single word. He was left flabbergasted. He tried to recreate his magic repeatedly but each time he failed miserably. Finally he ended his career by making a genuine and a bold announcement of taking a vow of silence for the rest of his life, realizing that a story teller must possess the sense to know when to stop and not wait for others to tell him to stop.

The village Somal is populated with both human and non-human life forms displaying a perfect ecologically balanced environ. There are no clashes of any human and non-human entities. But to some extent Somal, the rustic settlement can be viewed

as intrusion of the civilization into the serene realms of Mempo forest. The straggling cottages and twisted lanes smothering each other denote suffocation, inadequate space and over-crowdedness, and seem to tarnish the virgin ambience of the forest. But again, this human effort has been penalized by spreading of malaria and typhoid along with the stagnation of house drain water in the form of green puddles in the backyard of all houses as signatures of Nature in protest against human encroachment in her sanctuary. Despite being deprived of all materialistic privileges, the villagers remain engrossed in a sort of enchantment delivered by Nambi's attractive stories. They do not use any inorganic disinfectant to sanitize the surroundings which in a way is a pro-nature promotion of organic cleanliness. The villagers have converted the highway into a waste-land of biodegradable matter which indicates Nature's rejection of the man-made scientific advancements. The use of mud-lamps which are environmentally harmonious, is another way of showing the eco-centric perspective of the story. The fusion of mud, fuel and fire to produce light exhibits the ecological utilization of natural ingredients which is quite eco-friendly. Another remarkable instance shown in the story which averts the ecological crime of ravaging and annihilating other living beings is the adoption of the oral method of narrating stories by Nambi. It certainly contributes to the conservation of flora and fauna. His stories act as a life force for the villagers by relieving them of their stress. He firmly believes that he gets illumined with enamouring ideas by the grace of Mother Nature. He finds tremendous solace under the Banyan tree, beneath the blue sky where he finds more dynamism. Nambi is against cultivation of flowers by using artificial techniques. It seems that nature has employed Nambi as her agent to convey her message pertaining to ecological ethics.

Under the Banyan Tree is a testimony to Narayan's trivialization of man's irrepressible desire of colonizing and conquering landscape and nature as a paradigm of power-demonstration. Man attempts to conquer and colonize nature in the form of different territories and name them as mark of possession to manifest his capability, power and authority, but cannot obviate its eventual dilapidation into dust predestined by nature. The story under study instructs us to enjoy and preserve our natural environment without exercising authority over them. Under the Banyan Tree globally advocates for and emphasizes upon the urgency of man's undergoing integral self-realization so as to reinforce his immediate return to nature from gross synthetic world of consumerism and capitalism. Thus, through his elaborate and sensitive presentation, Narayan stands out as another spokesman of ecological movement and enigmatic Nature.

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