

Vol. 8, Issue-III (June 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



The Criterion

UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

ISSN 2278-9529

An Ecocritical Approach to R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

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Article History: Submitted-28/05/2017, Revised-23/06/2017, Accepted-29/06/2017, Published-05/07/2017.

Abstract:

Ecocriticism is a critical approach that seeks to foreground the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Its aim is to explore the fundamental kinship between man and nature, and between nature and culture. It also intends to raise awareness about the environmental degradation caused by inhuman and thoughtless activities of human beings. Narayan's finest novel *The Guide* (1958) is the story of Raju who not only plays the roles of different guides including that of a fake 'sadhu' but also undergoes a sea change and proves to be a real saint in the end. Besides focusing on issues like enforced sainthood, self-deception and Indian traditional values, the novel sheds ample light on the environmental concerns. The present paper is going to evaluate *The Guide* from an ecocritical perspective. It is to demonstrate how anthropocentrism has been replaced by ecocentrism in this novel. It is also intended to explore the interaction between the novel's human characters and the wild nature. Besides, the damages done to the environment by human actions and the consequent environmental crisis, as shown in the novel, will be accentuated in this paper.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, environment, literature, man, nature, anthropocentrism.

Introduction

Ecocriticism is a recent literary approach that seeks to explore the inherent and essential relationship between the physical environment and the human race. To put it differently, it refers to the study of the relationship between the physical environment and literature. Possibly, the term 'ecocriticism' was first used by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". However, this critical approach started in the U.S.A. in the late 1980s and in the U.K. in the early 1990s. Cheryll Glotfelty, co-editor with Harold Fromm of the book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), was the acknowledged founder of ecocriticism in the U.S.A. On the other hand, the founding figure of ecocriticism or 'green studies' in the U.K. was the critic Jonathan Bate, author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991).

Cheryll Glotfelty has aptly defined ecocriticism in the following words:

"What is then ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious

perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth centred approach to literary studies". (xviii)

There is no denying the fact that the modern man's rat race for material prosperity has been wrecking our physical environment. Population explosion, deforestation, exploitation of the natural resources, rapid growth of multi storey flats and apartments, increasing number of vehicles and factories – all these bring about the environmental degradation. Curiously enough, ecocriticism is often marked by an activist dimension. The ecocritics seek to create awareness about the need to protect our natural environment. So, it is only natural that many ecocritics take an active part in the environmental justice movement.

Abrams and Harpham have beautifully defined ecocriticism in the following way:

"Ecocriticism designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities" (96).

The latter part of the twentieth century witnessed huge damage being done to the physical environment. The earth was undergoing an environmental crisis owing to the industrial and chemical pollution of water, soil and air. Under these circumstances, ecocriticism came into existence. Thus, it is quite natural that ecocritical writings seek to raise the readers' awareness about the environmental degradation and often prompt them to action.

Peter Barry has beautifully traced the origin of ecocriticism:

"Ecocriticism, as it now exists in the U.S.A., takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force and the wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)" (240)

Barry also points out that the U.K. version of ecocriticism "takes its bearings from the British Romanticism of the 1790s ..." (240). The American and the U.K. version of ecocriticism have a lot of things in common. But they have some differences too, as pointed out by Peter Barry:

"Generally the preferred American term is 'ecocriticism', whereas 'green studies' is frequently used in the U.K., and there is perhaps a tendency for the American writing to be 'celebratory' in tone (occasionally degenerating into what harder left critics call 'tree hugging'), whereas the British variant tends to be more 'minatory', that is, it seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial and neo-colonial forces". (242)

Ecocriticism always seeks to focus on the role played by nature in a literary text. Moreover, it explores the way in which man and nature interact with each other. In addition to that, this critical approach unearths hints and clues suggestive of the environmental crisis.

Cheryll Glotfelty has aptly pointed out:

“Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of the novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterise nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what way, has literacy itself affected humankind’s relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?” (xix)

The ecocritics propagate that anthropocentrism should be replaced by ecocentrism. They also reject the traditional binaries like man/nature or culture/nature. Many ecocritics recommend the expansion of the ‘green reading’. While the western religions grant human beings an unquestionable dominance over the physical environment, primitive religions including Hinduism and Buddhism project the natural world as a living and holy entity with whom man lives in harmony. The ecocritics, therefore, show an interest in the primitive religions and cultures. Abrams and Harpham have nicely pointed out:

“Some radical environmental critics maintain that the ecological crisis can be resolved only by the rejection, in the West, of the Judeo Christian religion and culture, with its anthropocentric view that human beings because they possess souls transcend nature, and are inherently masters of the non-human world, and by adopting instead an ecocentric religion which promulgates the sacredness of nature and a reverence for all forms of life as intrinsically equivalent” (99)

Another important aspect of ecocriticism is the exploration of the relationship between nature and culture. Unlike most other theories, ecocriticism rejects the view that everything is socially or linguistically constructed. In this connection, one may remember the observation made by Peter Barry:

“For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, and not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. Nature, then, isn’t reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice (as we might conceive a deity, for instance, and project it out onto the universe). Theory in general tends to see our external world as socially and linguistically

constructed, as 'always already textualized into 'discourse', but ecocriticism calls this longstanding theoretical orthodoxy into question ..." (243)

The Guide (1958) is, no doubt, the finest novel by R.K. Narayan and it fetched him The Sahitya Academy Award in 1961. The very title of the novel is suggestive of the roles of different guides that the protagonist, Raju, played in his life. Born and brought up at the lap of nature, Raju first took the charge of the railway hut shop that his father had left behind after his death. Gradually, he became a tourist guide at Malgudi railway station and "came to be called Railway Raju" (55). One day he fell in love with Rosie, the unhappy wife of an unworldly scholar, Marco. But Lady Fortune refused to favour him for a long time. After a few months of adultery, Raju committed a grave mistake by forging Rosie's signature. He was arrested, convicted and punished with imprisonment. On his release from jail, Raju took refuge in an old shrine beside a river. He was mistaken for a 'sadhu' by Velan, a villager from Mangal. In the end, he underwent a sea change and developed into a real saint. He undertook a twelve day fast to bring rain to the drought stricken villages. Out of starvation, he collapsed and possibly died.

The Guide begins with Raju sitting cross-legged on a granite slab beside 'an ancient shrine'. He was all alone amidst the sights and sounds of nature. It is quite clear that the unpolluted nature provided him with a safe refuge. Thus, the kinship between the protagonist and the non-human world has been foregrounded at the very outset. A fine description of nature contained in the opening paragraph deserves special mention:

"The branches of the trees canopying the river course rustled and trembled with the agitation of birds and monkeys setting down for the night. Upstream beyond the hills, the sun was setting" (5)

The opening of the novel thus shows how the objects of nature vibrate with life and feelings. This natural environment which has not yet been contaminated by human activities has proved to be a friend to Raju and provided him with solace and security. It is interesting to note that man is not here projected as a master of the non-human world but a constant companion to it. One may, therefore, feel tempted to point out that the opening of the novel has rejected anthropocentrism in favour of ecocentrism.

While narrating his childhood to Velan, Raju lets us know how he preferred to spend time in the company of nature:

"With that I was off to the shade of a tamarind tree across the road. It was an ancient spreading tree, dense with leaves, amidst which monkeys and birds lived, bred and chattered incessantly, feeding on the tender leaves and fruits. Pigs and piglets came from somewhere and nosed about the ground, thick with fallen leaves, and I played there all day". (13)

It is crystal clear that Raju developed intimacy with nature since his childhood. From an ecocritical perspective, one can argue that the novel presents an inseparable kinship between

mankind and the environment. Nature is not an inanimate background but a living character in this novel. It is full of life and vivacity, and capable of friendly love and affection.

As his conversation with Raju was over, Velan went back home, leaving the 'sadhu' all alone in the darkness of the night. Raju had no option but to pass the time interacting with nature:

“He sat there for a long time, watching the river flow into the night; the rustle of the peepul and banyan trees around was sometimes loud and frightening. The sky was clear. Having nothing else to do, he started counting the stars”. (16)

Narayan goes on describing the interaction between Raju and nature:

“He started the count from above a fringe of Palmyra trees on his left hand side ... he suddenly realised that if he looked deeper a new cluster of stars came into view ... He felt exhausted. He stretched himself on the stone slab and fell asleep under the open sky”. (17)

The novelist keeps on hinting at Raju's bonhomie with nature time and again:

“Raju sat on the step and watched the river dazzling in the morning sun. the air was cool, and he wished he were alone”. (21)

There can be no doubt that Narayan has presented a beautiful and pure environment that continues to soothe the troubled soul of mankind. The river, the sun, the cool breeze, the trees, the open sky - all have become a living entity here.

Besides emerging as a good, old friend, the river acquires symbolic connotations:

“... ‘What must happen must happen; no power on earth or in heaven can change its course, just as no one can change the course of that river’. They gazed on the river, as if the clue to their problem lay there ...” (22)

As the novel progresses, readers come across more and more references to nature and natural phenomena:

“The sun was setting. Its tint touched the wall with pink. The tops of the coconut trees were aflame. The bird cries went up in a crescendo before dying down for the night. Darkness fell”. (34)

While narrating the bygone days to Velan, Raju relates how the railway tracks were laid and how the train arrived in Malgudi:

“One fine day, beyond the tamarind tree, the station building was ready. The steel tracks gleamed in the sun; the signal posts stood with their red and green stripes and their colourful lamps; and our world was neatly divided into this side of the railway line and that side”.(37)

Nobody can dispute the fact that railway stands for progress and advancement in the field of communication. The introduction of railway in Malgudi, therefore, signals the triumph of science. But it also meant the destruction of a portion of green nature by human action. It unquestionably points to the damages caused to the physical environment by the cruel activities of mankind. In this context, it is important to remember what Krishna Sen has observed about the railway:

“The main signifier of the alien culture in the novel is, of course, the railway. In the novel, the railway, with its connotation of mobility, is the marker of a new social economy that subverts the fragile equilibrium signified in the co-presence of the missionary and pyol schools”. (Krishna Sen., 112)

Besides running the hut shop, Raju had also worked as a tour guide and this experience taught him how to handle different types of people. One day he took Marco and Rosie to the Peak House on Mempi Hills. The description of this place, as offered by Narayan, speaks volume about the wilderness:

“The Peak House was perched on the topmost cliff on Mempi Hills – the road ended with the house; there was a glass wall covering the north veranda, through which you could view the horizon a hundred miles away. Below us the jungle stretched away down to the valley, and on a clear day you might see also the Sarayu sparkling in the sun and pursuing its own course far away. This was like heaven to those who loved wild surroundings and to watch the game, which prowled outside the glass wall at nights”. (75)

The Guide seems to celebrate the beauty and bounty of nature and it brings to the fore the essential kinship between human and non-human worlds. Raju, the protagonist of the novel, goes on to describe the charms of the physical environment:

“It was about seven-thirty in the evening. We had seen a gorgeous sunset. We have seen the purple play of colour in the northern skies after that, and admired it; we saw the tops of the trees lit up by stray red rays even after the sun was out of view, and had found a common idiom to express our admiration”. (77)

As Raju is now playing the role of a ‘fake sadhu’, people from the surrounding villages continue to visit him for his seemingly wise advice. That Raju’s hypocrisy has not been able to destroy his love for nature is evinced in the following passage:

“... the swiss of rain and wind in the trees and the swelling river ... lent a peculiar charm to the proceedings. Raju loved this season, for its greenness everywhere, for the variety of cloud play in the sky, which he could watch through the columned halls”. (91)

Cheryll Glotfelty has aptly observed:

“... most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life supporting system. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse...” (XX)

The Guide not only focuses on the sights and sounds of nature but also warns us of environmental threats. The cruel and thoughtless activities of modern men continue to deal a death blow to our environment, thus leading the earth to an ecological crisis. The far-reaching consequences of human actions result in flood, drought, earthquake, global warming and destruction of life on earth. The present novel addresses such a serious environmental problem, namely drought:

“... the river seemed to wind back to the mountain ranges of the Mempi, to its source, where he had often conducted tourists. Such a small basin, hardly a hundred square feet with its little shrine – what had happened there to make this river shrink so much here? He noticed that the borders were wide, more rocks were showing, and the slope on the other side seemed to have become higher” (92)

The present novel continues to shed light on environmental degradation and its fatal consequences:

“People listened to discourses and philosophy with only half interest. They sat around, expressing their fears and hopes. ‘Is it true, Swami, that the movements of aeroplanes disturb the clouds and so the rains don’t fall? Too many aeroplanes in the sky’. ‘Is it true, Swami, that the atom bombs are responsible for the drying up of the clouds?’ “ (92)

Thus, the novel explicitly lays bare the bitter truth that we, the human being, are responsible for the whimsical and cruel behaviour of the environment.

The far reaching consequences of drought are manifested everywhere. The people of Mangal and other adjoining villages have been subjected to the fury of nature:

“Cattle were unable to yield milk; they lacked the energy to drag the plough through the furrows; flocks of sheep were beginning to look scurvy and piebald, with their pelvic bones sticking out”. (93)

Cheryll Glotfelty has rightly pointed out:

“...current environmental problems are largely of our own making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture” (xxi)

An acute environmental crisis continues to plague the villagers in the form of drought:

“More cattle were found dead here and there. When the earth was scratched it produced only a cloud of fine dust. The granary of the previous year, in most of the houses, remained unreplenished and the level was going down...” (96)

The wrath of nature can be extreme and destructive if it is disturbed ceaselessly by cruel activities. The consequence has, therefore, left everyone dumb-struck:

“Someone brought the news that upstream a crocodile had been found dead on the sand, having no watery shelter and being scorched by the sun. Someone else came with the news that the fast drying lakebed in a nearby village was showing up an old temple which had been submerged a century ago, when the lake was formed”. (103)

Besides focusing on the kinship between the human and the non-human worlds, ecocriticism lays emphasis on the inherent relationship between nature and culture. Cheryll Glotfelty has observed:

“Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. as a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse it negotiates between the human and non-human”. (xix)

The rustic folk of Mangal and other villages had taken it for granted that Raju was their saviour and he was going to undertake a fast to appease the rain-god and bring rain to the drought-stricken area. The ritual of fast, as described by Velan, unquestionably sheds a great deal of light on the interconnection between nature and culture:

“Velan gave a very clear account of what the saviour was expected to do – stand in knee-deep water, look to the skies, and utter the prayer lines for two weeks, completely fasting during the period – and lo the rains would come down, provided the man who performed it was a pure soul, a great soul...” (109)

Raju, the fake ‘sadhu’ now began to realise that he was going to be caught in the cobweb of his self-deception:

“He felt that he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out. He could not betray his surprise. He felt that after all, the time had come for him to be serious - to attach value to his own words... he now saw the enormity of his own creation. He had created a giant with his puny self, a throne of authority with that slab of stone” (109)

As the first person narration goes hand in hand with the omniscient narration in this novel, the readers come to know that Raju's love for nature was intact even when he worked in the vegetable field as a prisoner:

"I love every piece of this work, the blue sky and sunshine, and the shed of the house in which I sat and worked the feel of cold water; it produced in me a luxurious sensation. Oh, it seemed to be so good to be alive and feeling all this; the smell of freshly turned earth filled me with the greatest delight". (228)

Towards the end of the novel, Raju felt compelled to succumb to the wish or demand of the villagers who believed in the power of a long fast to bring rain. A sea change took place in the protagonist, turning him from a hypocrite to a real 'Mahatma' or saint:

"He developed on those lines: 'If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom, and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly?' For the first time in his life he was making an earnest effort; for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love; for the time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested. He felt suddenly so enthusiastic that it gave him a new strength to go through with the ordeal". (238)

One feels tempted to reiterate the fact that Raju's fasting took place at the lap of nature. Thus, an ecocritic will simply foreground the interactions between man and nature, and between nature and culture:

"He (Raju) went down the steps of the river, halting for breath on each step, and finally reached his basin of water. He stepped into it, shut his eyes, and turned towards the mountain, his lips muttering the prayer". (247)

Curiously enough, the novel remains open-ended. Raju lost all his physical energy and he was unable to stand properly on account of his long fast. He claimed that he could feel the rain drops, but it is not clear whether it really rained or it was just a hallucination. Besides, the novel ends with the information that Raju collapsed. But it is not clear whether the protagonist died or simply fainted:

"They held him as if he were a baby. Raju opened his eyes, looked about, and said, Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs –he sagged down". (247)

M.K. Naik has aptly pointed out:

"The ending is charged with a Hawthornian ambiguity. Raju's last words are: 'it's raining in the hills', but whether the fake sadhu's genuine ordeal has really brought rain or not is left vague"(171)

However, the ending also demonstrates the bond between the human and the non-human and proves that this interconnection is eternal and everlasting. According to K. R. Srinivasa Iyenger, Narayan's "experience of life, his clarifying triple vision of man, in relation to

himself, his environment and his gods, his widening and deepening sense of comedy, all give new dimensions to his art as a novelist". (384)

Conclusion:

To conclude, one must maintain that *The Guide* teems with hints and suggestions which shed ample light on the beauty and bounty of nature and man's inseparable bond with it. It accentuates the interconnection between physical nature and human culture, too. Thus, *The Guide* not only shows the dangers of self-deception and enforced sainthood but also brings to the fore the fact that nature can be our friend, philosopher and guide. The physical environment is not dumb and dead but active, vigorous and alive. It is also clear that nature has close relationship with human culture. Last but not least, the present novel has exposed the fact that if we, the human beings, continue to cause harm to the physical environment, it will certainly take revenge upon us in the form of drought, flood etc. In a word, this novel warns the readers against the consequences of cruel activities of man towards nature. Hence, the novel calls for an ecocritical analysis.

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