



## AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF R.K. NARAYAN'S SHORT STORY: "THE AXE"

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### ABSTRACT

The present research article is a critique of the short story "The Axe" written by R.K. Narayan, from an ecocritical perspective. This article tries to analyze how R.K. Narayan exhibits his ardent love for nature and expresses his agony for the destruction of nature in the name of development and modernization. It further explores how Velan, the protagonist of the story grows in nature, spends all his life in the company of plants and trees, and treats them as his own children. The article tries to see Velan on par with Shakunthala, the immortal character created by the eminent dramatist of India Kalidasa, in 'Abhijnana Shakunthalam', a Sanskrit Drama. The article tries to expose how man is distancing himself from nature in the name of urbanization and development, by which actually he is becoming less human. The article finally tries to view Velan, a true son of nature, and R.K. Narayan, a true nature writer.

**Key words:** R.K. Narayan, Ecocriticism, The Axe, Nature writing, Velan

### Introduction

Man is inseparable from nature, though his relationship with it takes different shapes in different eras. When he was an uncivilized man, he totally depended upon nature for his food, security, and entertainment, just like other living beings. As he acquired knowledge and became an intellectual species through evolution, he started treating himself as the most important species in the environment. Mahatma Gandhi once said: "The earth provides enough to satisfy everyman's needs, but not every man's greed" (Schumacher P.29). Unfortunately, overpowered by his greed, man started plundering the earth and dominating other living beings. In recent centuries, his domination has increased so much that it turned into the exploitation of nature and its elements and destruction of other species. This mindless act of exploitation has been proved as a suicidal act by man, as the nature started retorting to the heinous crimes of humanity against nature and its other elements either directly or indirectly. In the name of modernization, development, progress, and industrialization, slowly man is distancing himself from nature and started disrespecting the other elements such as trees and animals. The phenomenon has caught the attention of scholars across the fields in the last few decades. They started analyzing the changing relation between man and nature and how the human acts started causing global warming, greenhouse effect, Tsunamis, and other ecological imbalances. As a result of different researches and

movements that focused upon protecting nature and environment, ecocriticism emerged as a significant field of study in the last century.

### Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism has been the buzzword of the literary field in recent decades. Though it is an interdisciplinary approach that tries to study the relation between man and his environment with the help of other fields like sociology, anthropology, economics, etc., it has become a prominent theory of literary criticism with its practical and purposeful outlook. Though the interest of literary men in exploring the relationship between man and nature is as old as civilization, the term 'ecocriticism' is of a new origin. The term 'ecocriticism' is said to have originated with the publication of William Rueckert's essay: 'Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism' in 1978 (Iowa Review pp. 71-86). Then onwards, different critics started defining ecocriticism in different ways. The most important definition of ecocriticism was given by Cheryll Glotfelty in the book "The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology" (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (1996:xviii). In his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," William Rueckert defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world" (1996:107). Serpil Oppermann says that "Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literature, and an ecological approach to literary criticism." (Oppermann 1999) Published at Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty of Letters. 16.2 (December 1999): 29-46.). Thus ecocriticism emphasizes the truth that earth is the center of the environment and man is one among several elements of nature.

### R.K. Narayan

Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Narayan Swamy, fondly remembered as R.K. Narayan, is one of the famous trio of Indian novelists in English, besides Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Narayan is a novelist, storyteller, columnist, and essayist. His novels became famous across the globe for their magnificent representation of Indian culture and traditions that are woven around an imaginary town called Malgudi. However, Narayan himself feels at home in writing short stories. In his introduction to the anthology of short stories "Malgudi Days", Narayan says that he enjoys writing a short story, compared to a novel. (Author's Introduction p.ii).

R.K. Narayan is mostly seen as a non-serious writer with humour as his weapon and Malgudi, an imaginary town as his permanent setting, and idiomatic Indian English as his language. But, for a serious and thorough reader of Narayan, there appear many facets of the writer in his novels and short stories. The dominant and recurring theme is Nature and man's relation to it. The permanent setting Malgudi itself is shown as a vibrant town symbolically representing a vast ecological setting with human beings, animals, and Nature itself as characters. Perhaps no other writer of his time has taken up the ecological issues as taken by Narayan. But, the dominant view of R.K. Narayan as a humorous storyteller has shadowed upon his ecological spirit and love for nature.

Narayan's style of writing short stories is simple yet touching. The characters in his stories do not surprise or shock us for the simple reason that they are part and parcel of our regular life and they are the representative figures of common elements of nature – both human and non-human. Interestingly, Narayan's stories do not show any partiality towards human beings. His world is nature-centric or eco-centric and never is anthropocentric. His characters include all common people – peasants, workers, drivers, etc., who enjoy wonderful relations with Mother Nature. One such character is 'Velan', the protagonist of the story 'The Axe'.

### The Axe – Short Story:

"The Axe" is a short story by R.K. Narayan that first appeared in the anthology named "An Astrologer's Day & Other Stories" which again later appeared in the book "Malgudi Days" (Narayan 1996). This short story moves the nature lovers deeply for its striking narration and the unforgettable character Velan, whose life is totally mingled with nature in general, and the garden and its trees of the Kumar Baugh in particular.

The story introduces Velan in his teenage in his village Koppal. An astrologer foretold that Velan would live in a three-storied house surrounded by many acres of garden. Everyone laughed at this prophecy for Velan's family was the poorest in the village Koppal and his family used to work in others' fields as coolies. But interestingly, 30, 40 years later, the prophecy of the astrologer proved true as Velan became the sole occupant of Kumar Baugh the palatial house on the outskirts of Malgudi town, after it was abandoned by its owners.

### **Velan and his Garden**

At the age of eighteen, Velan left home when his father slapped him for some mistake. Out of rage, Velan walked out of his village Koppal and reached Malgudi town, which is far away from his home. After starving for a few days, Velan could find work as an assistant to an old gardener in Malgudi. Their work was to clean a weed-covered land. Thus, Velan's long journey with gardening started.

Velan toiled for many days and converted the rough land into a plain area, by weeding out unwanted plants. As a result of Velan's toil and hard work, all the jungle gradually disappeared and the land stood as bare as a football field. On one side of the vast land, a house was to be built and on the other three sides, an extensive garden.

The construction of the house and the laying of the garden went parallel. By the time the mangoes had sprouted, they were laying the foundation of the house. About the time the Margosa sapling had shot up a couple of yards, the walls were also coming up. Velan used to compete with the constructors of the building in planting and nurturing his garden and plants. An interesting fact is that compared to the construction of the building, the development or growth of the garden was slow. But after a few decades, the building faded away, lost its charm, and became unoccupied, whereas the garden that was laid, nurtured, and looked after by Velan did never lose its charm. The fruit garden continuously gave fruits and the flower garden always remained charming and attractive. That's the power of nature. The more care we take of it, the more benefits and gifts it grants to us.

This parallelism between the building and garden has a symbolic message which needs to be understood. The construction of the building is a symbol of modernization and artificial infrastructure which may initially look attractive, but will fade out someday. But, plants, if nurtured wholeheartedly, will go on showering gifts that are permanent and ever vibrant.

### **Velan's Love for Plants**

Narayan's keen love for nature and his power of observation are well presented in this short story through the character of Velan. The flower garden consisted of a variety of flowers such as hibiscus, chrysanthemum, jasmine, roses and Canna. When the old gardener suddenly fell ill, Velan became the chief gardener. He took the role with utmost responsibility and respect. He started treating the garden as his own family and the plants his own children. He used to compete with the bricklayers and worked day and night to grow the garden. He used to talk to the plants in an encouraging voice to grow faster competing with the building. While watering them, he used to whisper:

"Now look sharp, young fellows. The building is going up and up every day. If it is ready and we aren't, we shall be the laughing stock of the town" (Narayan 137-138).

These words depict not only the innocence of Velan but also his immense faith in the spirit of equality among all the elements of nature whether human or nonhuman.

Velan heaped manure, aired the roots, trimmed the branches, and watched the plants twice a day, and on the whole, gave an impression of hustling nature. Mother Nature never disappoints those who keep faith in her. In the case of Velan also, she seems to have responded to his faith and hard work with love and abundance. So, by the time the family came to occupy the newly built building, Velan could present a good-sized garden to them. This incident of Velan's talk to the plants shows us how Velan almost treated the trees equal to him and understood them as living beings- which is the core philosophy of ecocriticism.

Here, Velan reminds us of the epic character 'Shakunthala' of the Mahabharat, as depicted in the famous Sanskrit drama 'Abhijnana Shakunthalam' written by eminent Indian dramatist Kalidasa. Shakunthala, who was born to sage Viswamitra and Menaka was later reared by Kanwa Maharshi in his ashram. She almost grew as a child of nature. She treated the trees as her sisters and communicates with them. This is the highest level of Indian philosophy which tells that in all elements of nature, the same soul exists. This forms the core spirit of deep ecology also. A similar scene where flowers do talk is shown in "Pushpa Vilapam" a Telugu literary work by Sri Jandhyala Papayya Sastry (Karunasree). Eminent Indian Scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose proved that plants do respond to our interventions.

### **Nature Never Disappoints**

Quite interestingly, the plants responded to the appeals of Velan and grew attractively as per his wish. Velan's establishment of bond with his plants and nurturing them as his own children don't surprise us as such persons are seen everywhere in rural India. Indian culture respects plants, trees, domestic animals, birds, and even non-living elements like mountains and rivers also as holy elements of nature and respects them. The same is reflected in Velan's character. This shows the bond between man and nature, which, unfortunately, has been broken due to modernisation and man's mad rush for money, property, and luxurious comforts. Velan proves that if a responsive heart and caring behaviour is there, nature gifts us all we need as a good friend.

Velan appears like a true human being by attributing human qualities to all his surroundings, mainly the plants. Velan used to talk to plants as if he was talking to a fellow human being. He went to the *Margosa* plant, gripped its stem with his fingers, and said:

"Is this all, you scraggy one? What if you wave your head so high above mine? I can put my fingers around you and shake you up like this. Grow up, little one, grow up. Grow fat. Have a trunk which two pairs of arms cant hug, and go up and spread. Be fit to stand beside this palace, otherwise I will pull you." (Narayan138)

Responding to the care, concern, and warning of Velan, the *Margosa* tree grew strong and with it, the house had acquired mellowness in its appearance. The words mouthed by Velan may appear rough and rustic, but they are filled with love and concern. He appears like a typical father who scolds his children for treading the wrong path.

### **A Habitation with more human look:**

Decades have passed since Velan came there. The house had gradually lost its colour and brightness. There appeared tints and shades on the walls. Interestingly, Narayan says that though the house had lost its splendence, it had now a more human look. "Hundreds of parrots and mynas and unnamed birds lived in the branches of the margosa tree, and under its shade, the master's great-grandchildren and the (younger) grandchildren played and quarreled." (Narayan 139) This description shows that R.K. Narayan is on the side of life in nature compared to the life in the concrete jungle of Urban locales. Through these lines, he strongly advocates that the habitations of men can get a true human look when they live in coexistence with other elements of nature – animals, birds, and plants.

As the days passed, the master of the house and the landlady became very old. Even Velan also changed much. He had to depend more and more upon his assistants to keep the garden in beautiful shape. Velan occasionally goes to his native place Koppal – mainly for Pongal, New Year and Deepavali. While returning from the village, he used to bring back with him one or the other of his grandchildren of whom he was extremely fond. This shows the unending love Velan had towards the garden he reared. Though he became very old, he was reluctant to go back to his village permanently. Such was the bondage between a true human being and nature.

With his full day of work in the garden, Velan was perfectly contented and happy. He demanded nothing more of life. This shows that a man who lives in the lap of nature and works without any complaints towards life

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and is not greedy can lead a contented and happy life. Such lives show how futile the lives of those who always worry about what they don't have and go after comforts and luxuries of modernity and urban life. Thus, Narayan's preference for rustic life or simple life in the lap of nature is expressed through the character of Velan.

#### **Bad days for Velan and his garden:**

In the latter part of the story, Narayan shows us how the changing attitudes and changing lifestyles of human beings have distanced them from nature. When the old master died, Velan worries not only for his future but also for the future of the garden. He wails: "What is to happen to the garden and to me? The sons are no good." (Narayan 140) Giving the first priority to the garden's future shows how much love Velan had towards the garden.

When the sons of the landlord started fighting within themselves and left the big house, good days have stopped both for Velan and to the garden. The old house was given to tenants, who also were not good, and dealt with Velan skeptically. They never showed any regard for the garden or Velan. They walked on flower beds, their children climbed the fruit trees and plucked unripe fruits, and they dug pits on the garden paths. All these acts made Velan feel very sad. But, he had no courage to protest. Ironically, the tenants used to lecture Velan on how to grow a garden. The whole business in the changed circumstances made Velan disappointed and he often thought of going back to his village Koppal, throwing up all his work in the big house. But, the idea of leaving his garden was unbearable to Velan. He could not bear the thought of severing his bond with the trees and plants which he planted and reared with his own hands. He couldn't live away from his plants. This shows the unbreakable bondage between man and nature. If a man starts giving his heart and life to nature, he will never feel like breaking ties with it. Such is the attractive power of nature. The motherly touch of nature doesn't allow us to leave her if we sincerely put our efforts in nurturing her and protecting her.

#### **Nature never stops giving:**

After few years, the troublesome tenants left the bungalow. The house was locked up for a few years. The family members of the house owner occasionally visited the house and inspected the garden. Gradually, they too stopped coming and left the keys of the house with Velan. As if the prophecy of the astrologer in Velan's childhood came true, Velan was very nearly the master of the house now. As he was growing old, he could not look after the garden. Although he did his best, grass grew on the paths, weeds and creepers strangled the flowering plants in the front garden. The fruit trees yielded their load punctually. The owners leased out the whole of the fruit garden for three years. This shows how nature continuously gives its gifts. Nature has the power to reward more than what we give to it. Though the beautifully built bungalow became dilapidated and unusable, the fruit garden which was grown parallel to the building, continued to give its fruits punctually. This shows that the cycles and activities of nature are punctual. It also reflects the spirit of a verse from Rig-Veda which says: "Thousands and Hundreds of years if you want to enjoy the fruits and happiness of life, then take up systematic planting of trees" (Dwivedi and Tiwari, 1987).

#### **Changing values - Land as a Commercial commodity:**

The final passages of the story narrate how the changing times have transformed the relationship between land and man. Earlier, man used to look at land more like a productive resource that feeds him and provides dwelling. But, in modern times, the land is looked at as a very precious commodity that has more commercial value. Hence, emotional attachments or cultural bondings have no place in the era of commercialization. The importance of greenery is totally neglected before its commercial value.

The big house gradually became dilapidated and was named a haunted house and people avoided it. The owners sold the house and the garden to a commercial buyer. The new party wanted to dismantle the house and clear the entire garden except for a few trees which are on the front part. They wanted no garden as they wanted to use the entire space to build small houses and sell them. For the new buyers, the flower garden is old-fashioned and crude, and that too, being the front part of the house, it appeared more valuable land to them commercially. The company which bought the house wanted to cut even the fruit trees by offering

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compensation to the leaseholder. They decided to wipe out the entire garden and pull down even the building. They are going to build small houses by the score without leaving space even for a blade of grass.

This transformation in the attitudes of people from having a spacious house with vast gardens to small houses without even a blade of grass indicates the change in the lifestyles, the impact of modernization, less connectivity with nature, more urbanization with growing commercial value to land in the name of real estate ventures. Narayan has clearly indicated through this incident how the land has become more valuable and how the land has become a commercial commodity, and how a built-up land is considered more valuable than a garden or agricultural land. Narayan's perception of the changing trends and human tastes was very apt as we now witness more aggressive destruction of farmlands, gardens, horticulture plantations in the name of real estate ventures. This shows how man is systematically alienating himself from nature in the name of modernity and urbanization.

#### **The sound of an Axe – Final blow to Garden:**

The story turns to a sad ending when Velan had to leave the garden and his trees with which he developed inseparable bondage for more than four decades. After the old building was bought by a new company, there was much bustle and activity, much coming and going. The new buyers gave Velan a fortnight's notice. Every moment of it seemed to him precious. Except during the times of his sleep, Velan went round the garden and stood gazing at his plants.

Two days after he was given notice, one day suddenly Velan stirred out of his afternoon nap, hearing the sound of an axe cutting a tree. Immediately, Velan got up and rushed out. He saw four men hacking the massive trunk of the margosa tree. Unable to bear the sight, he let out a scream and rushed at those who were hacking. When the workers asked what the matter was, Velan wept and said: "This is my child. I planted it. I saw it grow. I loved it. Don't cut it down....". (Narayan 143) As it was inevitable for him to stop them cutting, he made up his mind to leave the place immediately. So, he requested the workers to give him a little time until he bundles up his clothes and goes away. After he is gone, they can do what they like. They laid down their axes and waited.

Velan came out of his hut with a bundle on his head. He looked at the margosa tree and wiped his eyes. He said to the workers: "Brother, don't start cutting till I am really gone far, far away". (Narayan 144). Saying so, Velan moved out of the place in a hurry. Nearly half an hour later, the workers could hear Velan's voice from a distance, half-indistinctly: "Don't cut yet. I am still within hearing. Please wait till I'm gone farther." (Narayan 144). This moving incident highlights the depth of love and affection Velan developed towards the garden and the trees over years. It is a symbol of bondage between man and nature which is unfortunately severed symbolically with an axe by modernization, industrialization, and commercialization. Human greed is acting like an axe against the environmental balance and the harmonious relation between man and nature. Men like Velan cannot bear such a situation where harmony is upset. Hence he leaves the place.

The story ends on a tragic note where the longtime bondage between Velan and garden comes to an end. However, Velan remains in our hearts as an ardent lover of nature, friend of nature, and father of grown-up plants. His love for nature is so intense that he does not even bear the sight of axing a tree that he had grown for decades with his blood and sweat.

#### **Conclusion**

As mentioned earlier, there is a general impression that Narayan's short stories and novels are humorous writings on the lighter and general issues of middle-class South Indians. But many of his stories deal with significant issues of the universe from a cultural and sociological perspective. This short story 'The Axe' also shows how Narayan expertly deals with the contemporary issue of human society – alienation from nature in the name of development and urbanization. Hence, Narayan can be said as a writer of profound ecological issues, but in his own delicate and lighter way.

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