

**RESEARCH PAPER****Ecological Perspectives in the Selected Novels of R.K. Narayan: A Comparative Study****Shajar Uddin**

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Email: shsdsn@gmail.comReceived: 15th Feb. 2024, Revised: 27th Feb. 2024, Accepted: 20th March 2024**ABSTRACT**

*Ecocriticism examines the dynamic relationship between literature and the natural world, focusing on the representation of ecological concerns and their cultural significance. This paper investigates the ecological perspectives in R.K. Narayan's selected novels, highlighting their relevance to contemporary environmental issues. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983) presents a unique narrative with a tiger, Raja, as the protagonist. Through Raja's human-like emotions and actions, the novel reflects humanity's anthropocentric interpretation of nature, revealing both the strengths and limitations of this perspective in understanding the natural world. *The Guide* (1958) is analyzed for its transition from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, charting the journey of Raju, a man who undergoes spiritual transformation amidst his interaction with the natural world. The novel's exploration of human-nature relationships underscores the environmental challenges arising from human exploitation and its consequences. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), ecological disruption is symbolized by Vasu, a taxidermist who disregards the harmony of Malgudi, intruding into private and ecological spaces. His actions reflect the dangers of exploiting nature without regard for balance, leading to chaos. This novel serves as a critique of human domination over nature and its repercussions. The study also revisits *Swami and Friends* (1935), focusing on the fictional town of Malgudi as an ecosystem where human, animal, and natural interactions are interwoven. The paper explores how colonial rule impacted the social and environmental fabric of the region, highlighting nature's dual role as a source of beauty and fear. By analyzing these novels, the research reveals Narayan's nuanced portrayal of ecological issues and his contribution to the discourse on environmental awareness in Indian English literature. This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach to analyze the selected novels using the principles of ecocriticism.*

Keywords: Ecocriticism, environmental crisis, ecological perspectives, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, R.K. Narayan, Malgudi, human-nature interaction

INTRODUCTION

The term ecocriticism is widely attributed to William Rueckert, who introduced it in his 1978 essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. However, it gained prominence in the late 20th century, particularly in the United States during the 1980s and the United Kingdom in the early 1990s. Cheryl Glotfelty, co-editor of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), is regarded as a pioneer of this approach in the U.S., while Jonathan Bate established "green studies" in the U.K. through his book *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991).

Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," aligning it with other critical approaches like feminist and Marxist criticism. However, ecocriticism shifts the focus to an earth-centered perspective. In the context of the growing awareness of environmental vulnerability, this approach bridges literature and ecological consciousness by examining how nature is represented in cultural texts and offering solutions to environmental crises. Ecocriticism challenges anthropocentric perspectives, advocating for ethical frameworks that value all life forms equally.

R.K. Narayan's works, including *A Tiger for Malgudi*, *The Guide*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and *Swami and Friends*, are ripe for ecocritical analysis. These novels reflect humanity's relationship with the natural world while addressing ecological imbalances. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi* stands out for its innovative narrative—a tiger's autobiography told from Raja's perspective. By humanizing the tiger, Narayan critiques humanity's exploitative treatment of animals, emphasizing

that they possess emotions, desires, and identities. This narrative questions the belief that animals exist solely for human utility, making it a significant contribution to Indian ecological literature. Ecocriticism as a literary theory explores the intricate connection between humanity and the environment. It addresses contemporary ecological crises such as deforestation, overpopulation, and resource exploitation, urging readers to recognize the impact of human actions on the planet. As Pramod K. Nayar notes, this discipline highlights the interdependence between language, culture, and ecology, creating awareness about environmental degradation while advocating for sustainable coexistence.

REGIONALISM IN R.K. NARAYAN'S NOVELS

Regional novels celebrate the unique cultural and geographical characteristics of a specific area, portraying the lives, traditions, and histories of its people with emotional depth. These works immortalize the regions they depict, creating a symbolic microcosm of society. In R.K. Narayan's novels, the fictional town of Malgudi embodies this regionalism, reflecting the everyday lives of ordinary individuals. Malgudi, a recurring setting in Narayan's works, symbolizes a harmonious blend of culture, environment, and human interaction.

Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, an early example of Indian nature writing, introduces Malgudi as a richly detailed ecosystem, where urban and rural landscapes coexist. This fictional town mirrors India's evolving social and cultural landscape under colonial rule. Through an ecocritical lens, Malgudi becomes a representation of humanity's interdependence with nature, while also highlighting the duality of nature as a source of beauty and fear.

Despite its regional specificity, Narayan's writing transcends geographical limitations, achieving universal appeal. Characters like Margayya, Raju, Rosie, and Marco challenge traditional norms, embodying individuality while staying rooted in their cultural contexts. Narayan intertwines human lives with the environment, offering a subtle commentary on ecological and cultural dynamics. Malgudi thus serves as both a specific locale and a universal metaphor for humanity's complex relationship with the natural world.

By examining these novels through ecocritical and regional perspectives, this study highlights R.K. Narayan's contribution to Indian literature and his nuanced exploration of the interplay between humans, culture, and the environment.

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN 'A TIGER FOR MALGUDI'

The narrative begins with Raja, an aging tiger, reflecting on his life. From his early days in the Memphi forests, where he lived freely, to his eventual captivity in a circus, Raja's journey showcases the stark contrasts between the natural and human worlds. In the forest, Raja experiences peace and autonomy, but in captivity, he faces the noise and artificiality of human life. He finds human actions puzzling, particularly their dominance over animals and disregard for their well-being.

Raja's life takes a tragic turn when humans capture his mate and cubs. Forced into a circus, he is subjected to exploitation for entertainment, where his natural instincts are suppressed. Even as a captive, Raja retains a sense of dignity, often displaying restraint despite provocation. His relationship with his captor, the circus owner, is marked by moments of violence and eventual understanding. Raja's transition from a ferocious predator to a spiritual being under the guidance of a monk reflects a journey of transformation and redemption.

The novel contrasts the serene forest with the chaos of Malgudi, symbolizing the power imbalance between nature and human civilization. Raja's violent acts in the forest are portrayed as necessary for ecological balance, whereas his acts of defiance in captivity are misunderstood and punished by humans. This juxtaposition highlights humanity's failure to respect nature's intrinsic value.

Raja's eventual spiritual awakening under the monk's guidance represents a significant shift in his identity. He moves beyond his animal instincts, embracing a more introspective existence. However, this transformation is not without critique, as it reflects a human-imposed framework on an animal's life, underscoring the anthropocentric tone of the narrative.

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE GUIDE

R.K. Narayan, one of the most celebrated Indian novelists, is known for his contributions to Indian English literature, particularly through his nuanced depiction of human relationships and their interaction with the environment. His novel *The Guide* (1958), set in the fictional town of Malgudi, intertwines environmental concerns with the personal journeys of its central characters-Raju, Rosie, and Marco. Through this narrative, Narayan subtly critiques environmental degradation caused by human activity and highlights its repercussions on both nature and society.

From an ecocritical perspective, *The Guide* presents nature not as a passive background but as an active, integral part of the story. Raju's transformation from a tourist guide to a spiritual leader is deeply connected to the natural world, with elements like rivers, railways, and temples symbolizing broader themes of spirituality, redemption, and self-discovery. Malgudi itself, a serene and harmonious locale, symbolizes a tranquil existence threatened by the disruptions of colonialism and modernization.

Narayan's vivid descriptions of nature underscore its emotional and symbolic significance. For example, the stormy weather mirrors Rosie's marital strife, while the river Sarayu represents Raju's spiritual and emotional journey. The river's unpredictable flow reflects Raju's turbulent conscience, highlighting the interplay between human emotions and the natural world.

The changing seasons further symbolize Raju's character development. Just as the environment transitions through phases, Raju undergoes moments of growth, crisis, and renewal. Nature actively participates in Raju's spiritual awakening, culminating in his fast to bring rain-a symbolic gesture to restore balance and harmony in both the natural and human worlds.

Narayan also addresses ecological crises, such as drought, as a consequence of human negligence and environmental exploitation. Raju's fasting, motivated by the villagers' expectations, becomes an act of reconciliation with nature. The drought's depiction-a dry river basin, weakened cattle, and struggling vegetation-underscores the interconnection between human actions and environmental degradation.

THE ROLE OF NATURE IN RAJU'S JOURNEY

Narayan opens the novel with a striking image of Raju sitting cross-legged near an old shrine, enveloped by the unspoiled beauty of nature. The serene setting, with a sunset over the river and rustling trees, establishes nature as a source of solace and renewal for Raju. This connection is reinforced as Raju recounts his childhood affinity for the natural world, spending time under a tamarind tree amidst chattering monkeys and birds. These moments highlight his enduring bond with the environment, reflecting an ecocentric worldview that values the natural world as an equal partner in human existence.

Raju's relationship with nature deepens as the narrative progresses. For instance, after Velan leaves him one night, Raju finds companionship in the stars, trees, and flowing river. The vibrant descriptions of sunsets, the rustling of leaves, and the calm of the night sky create an atmosphere where nature becomes an active participant in Raju's introspection. The river, in particular, assumes a symbolic role, representing the inevitability of life's events and offering a mirror to Raju's inner struggles.

Narayan juxtaposes this harmonious depiction of nature with the impact of human activity, such as the construction of the railway in Malgudi. The railway symbolizes progress but also disrupts the natural landscape, dividing the town and altering its dynamics. Similarly, the wilderness of the Mempi Hills, described as a sprawling jungle viewed from the Peak House, celebrates the raw beauty of nature but also underscores its vulnerability to human encroachment.

RAJU'S TRANSFORMATION AND ECOLOGICAL BALANCE

As Raju transitions into the role of a spiritual guide, his actions become increasingly aligned with the natural world. His fasting ritual at the river symbolizes an effort to restore equilibrium, not only within himself but also between humanity and the environment. This act of self-sacrifice, though ambiguous in its outcome, signifies a profound recognition of human dependence on nature.

The novel's conclusion reflects Narayan's ability to intertwine human and ecological narratives. Raju's claim of sensing rain before collapsing embodies a moment of spiritual fulfillment and reconciliation with nature, though the actual arrival of rain remains uncertain. M.K. Naik aptly describes this ambiguity as "Hawthornian," leaving readers to ponder whether Raju's sacrifice influenced the natural world or was merely symbolic.

NATURE AS A LIVING ENTITY

Throughout *The Guide*, Narayan portrays nature as vibrant and dynamic, capable of emotional resonance. From the lush greenery of the rainy season to the stark desolation of drought, nature mirrors the characters' inner lives and serves as a silent companion to their struggles and triumphs. Raju's affinity for the environment remains constant, whether he is admiring sunsets, finding solace in the countryside, or working in prison fields. The simplicity of sunlight, cool water, and freshly tilled earth brings him joy and peace, emphasizing the therapeutic and nurturing aspects of the natural world.

Through *The Guide*, Narayan illustrates the profound interconnectedness of humanity and nature, urging readers to reflect on their responsibility toward preserving the environment. His use of ecocritical themes offers a timeless message about the need for harmony between human progress and ecological balance.

ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE MAN-EATER OF MALGUDI

R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961) provides a compelling exploration of these themes through the character of Vasu, a taxidermist whose actions symbolize human exploitation of nature. The novel portrays the disruption of Malgudi's peaceful harmony, as Vasu's intrusion into Natraj's printing press—marked by the removal of the symbolic blue curtain—becomes a metaphor for human interference in the natural and social order. This paper examines these disruptions through an ecocritical lens, highlighting the broader implications of Vasu's destructive actions.

In this novel, Malgudi transcends its role as a fictional town to become a symbol of ecological and social balance, reflecting the evolving dynamics of a postcolonial world. Narayan critiques the anthropogenic destruction of the environment and its role in exacerbating socio-economic and political inequities. Much of this destruction can be traced to colonial legacies and modern neoliberal policies that prioritize profit over ecological justice. Vasu's character exemplifies these anthropocentric tendencies, embodying human dominance over nature and the commodification of non-human life. Through this portrayal, Narayan underscores the urgent need for an ecological consciousness.

VASU: A SYMBOL OF ENVIRONMENTAL EXPLOITATION

Vasu is depicted as a forceful, self-absorbed individual who imposes his will on both humans and animals, embodying humanity's destructive relationship with nature. His actions disrupt the calm rhythm of Malgudi, turning Natraj's attic into a space of death and decay. By poaching animals from the Mempi forest, violating regulations, and even killing neighborhood dogs, Vasu disregards the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. His anthropocentric worldview rationalizes his exploitation of nature, portraying it as a demonstration of human superiority. Through this character, Narayan critiques the commodification of the natural world and humanity's tendency to prioritize material gain over ecological harmony.

Narayan juxtaposes the tranquil coexistence of humans and nature before Vasu's arrival with the chaos he creates. Vasu's taxidermy business, which thrives on the killing of animals and the artificial preservation of their forms, becomes a powerful metaphor for humanity's exploitative approach to nature. Despite Vasu's intelligence and audacity, his misuse of these qualities leads to his downfall. His ironic death—caused by a mosquito bite—underscores the resilience of nature and its capacity to retaliate against human aggression. This parallels the myth of Bhasmasura, a demon destroyed by his own arrogance, reinforcing the idea that unchecked human hubris leads to self-destruction.

ECOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM IN MALGUDI

Through its setting in Malgudi, the novel reflects the intricate connections between human and non-human life in a postcolonial context. The town, initially a symbol of harmony, becomes a battleground for ecological and moral conflict after Vasu's arrival. His relentless killing of animals and grotesque taxidermy processes highlight the broader consequences of environmental exploitation. These actions serve as an allegory for the environmental crisis of modernity, with Vasu representing the destructive forces of industrialization and unchecked human ambition.

Narayan's portrayal of taxidermy amplifies its ecological significance, turning it into a symbol of humanity's alienation from nature. By converting living animals into static objects for display, Vasu's work illustrates the commodification of life and the denial of its intrinsic value. This perspective resonates with Mathew Cartmill's concept of "romantic hunting," which rationalizes the killing of animals as a basic need while claiming to live in harmony with nature. In the novel, Ramaswamy, a forestry officer, embodies this idea, presenting a contrasting perspective on the ethics of hunting and the human relationship with the environment.

From an ecocritical perspective, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* highlights the devastating consequences of humanity's exploitative attitude toward nature. Through Vasu's character, Narayan critiques anthropocentrism and its role in perpetuating ecological harm. The novel's conclusion, which sees nature reasserting itself through Vasu's ironic demise, underscores the resilience of the natural world and its ability to restore balance when threatened. By intertwining ecological and moral themes, Narayan offers a cautionary tale about the need for harmonious coexistence between humans and the environment. His work serves as a timeless reminder of the profound interconnectedness between humanity and nature, advocating for an ethical and sustainable relationship with the natural world.

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SWAMI AND FRIENDS

In *Swami and Friends*, R.K. Narayan masterfully presents nature as an integral part of human life, offering vivid descriptions that juxtapose urban and rural settings. Malgudi, the fictional town central to the narrative, functions as a symbolic ecosystem where humans, animals, plants, and the environment coexist in interdependence. The river Sarayu, a recurring motif in the novel, exemplifies Narayan's profound connection to nature. It serves as a vital force in the lives of Malgudi's inhabitants, symbolizing tranquility, renewal, and the passage of time. Through its gentle currents and surrounding flora and fauna, the river reflects Narayan's sensitivity to the natural world and its emotional and symbolic significance.

Narayan contrasts the serene beauty of nature with the disruptions caused by British colonialism. Colonial rule, through its imposition of Western education, cultural practices, and a foreign perspective on nature, upends the indigenous social and environmental balance. This tension is subtly embedded in the narrative, illustrating the conflict between traditional Indian life and the forces of modernization introduced under colonial rule.

Narayan's portrayal of nature encompasses both its enchanting and unsettling aspects. The forest, for instance, is initially inviting, with its rich foliage and diverse wildlife. However, as Swami ventures deeper into its solitude, it transforms into a foreboding environment. The same trees that once appeared welcoming now take on an ominous quality, reflecting the dual nature of the human relationship with the environment. This duality illustrates how nature can evoke comfort or fear depending on an individual's emotional state and context.

NATURE'S ROLE IN SWAMI'S JOURNEY

Narayan underscores the dynamic role of nature in shaping Swami's experiences. A significant moment occurs when Swami, lost in the forest, encounters the dense Mempi Forest Road. Initially drawn to the forest's natural abundance, Swami enjoys its offerings, such as the fruits from its trees. However, as darkness falls, the environment shifts from being peaceful to menacing, amplifying Swami's loneliness and fear. The trees, once sources of comfort, now loom over him like threatening figures. Narayan skillfully captures this transformation, showing that nature itself is neither inherently good nor bad; rather, its impact depends on human perception and circumstances. Swami's fear escalates as his imagination conjures terrifying images of wild animals

and supernatural beings, driving him to exhaustion before being rescued by Ranga, a cartman. This rescue is deeply ironic, as Swami and his friends had previously mocked cartman, highlighting the interdependence of individuals within a social ecosystem.

Another instance that reflects Swami's sensitivity to the natural world is his reaction to a paper boat containing an ant that he accidentally destroys. This small moment symbolizes the Indian philosophical belief in the sanctity of all life. Swami's gesture of sympathy toward the ant echoes the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, which advocates seeing all beings as equal. This theme aligns with the principles of deep ecology, emphasizing the interconnectedness and intrinsic value of all living organisms.

THE SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM OF MALGUDI

Malgudi serves as a microcosm of a harmonious social ecosystem, where people from diverse backgrounds coexist. The friendships among Swami, Somu, Mani, Sankar, and Rajam reflect the complexity and richness of this ecosystem. Each character represents different social and economic strata, yet their bond transcends these differences. Rajam's more refined, Westernized upbringing introduces tension into the group, symbolizing the disruptions brought about by external influences. However, their eventual reconciliation suggests that harmony can be restored even in the face of conflict, mirroring the resilience of traditional social structures.

Swami's family also plays a vital role in maintaining the social balance. His relationship with his grandmother embodies the transmission of values and traditions across generations. The joint family system, which provides security and continuity, represents the stability of a well-functioning ecosystem. In contrast, the colonial education system, as represented by the Albert Mission School, disrupts this harmony. By focusing on Western history and Christian teachings, the curriculum alienates students from their cultural heritage, illustrating how colonialism eroded India's traditional social and cultural fabric.

MALGUDI AS AN ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL SYMBOL

Narayan's depiction of Malgudi blends elements of urban and rural life, creating a setting that embodies ecological and cultural balance. The town's residents, despite their differences, live in relative harmony, reflecting the interdependence of all life forms. However, the colonial mindset, which sought to dominate both the land and its people, poses a threat to this balance. By introducing Western ideologies and practices, colonial rule disrupted the coexistence of India's diverse social and environmental elements.

The novel critiques these disruptions while celebrating the resilience of traditional Indian values. Malgudi's portrayal as a self-sustaining ecosystem highlights the interconnectedness of human and natural life. The river Sarayu, forests, and even the town's social structure symbolize the symbiotic relationships that sustain life in the region. Swami's adventures, set against this backdrop, offer a lens to explore these relationships and the impact of external forces on them.

CONCLUSION

R.K. Narayan's works, including *The Tiger for Malgudi*, *The Guide*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and *Swami and Friends*, offer profound insights into the intricate relationship between humanity, nature, and the broader ecosystem. Through these narratives, Narayan encourages readers to reconsider the anthropocentric mindset that often exploits nature for human gain, urging a more symbiotic and respectful coexistence with the natural world. In *The Tiger for Malgudi*, Narayan explores the journey of Raja, the tiger, whose transformation from a symbol of wild nature to a more spiritual being reflects the complexities of human-animal relationships. By portraying Raja's journey, Narayan critiques humanity's imperialist domination over nature and wildlife. *The Guide* further delves into the interconnectedness of human culture and the environment, using Raju's journey to highlight the environmental consequences of human actions. The novel serves as a cautionary tale about the repercussions of neglecting the natural world, urging readers to adopt an ecocritical perspective that values the preservation of nature alongside human progress. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Narayan presents a cautionary narrative about the dangers of ecological imbalance, using the character of Vasu to symbolize human exploitation of nature. Similarly, *Swami*

and Friends offers an insightful ecological critique, examining the delicate equilibrium between natural and social ecosystems. Narayan's portrayal of nature, alongside the tensions introduced by colonialism and modernity, reflects his deep awareness of ecological interconnectedness. R.K. Narayan's literary works collectively emphasize the profound interdependence between humans, nature, and society. They serve as powerful reminders of the ecological imbalances caused by human actions and the moral imperative to preserve the natural world. Narayan's narratives offer timeless reflections on the need for greater environmental awareness, mutual respect, and the urgent necessity of ecological preservation in the face of ongoing environmental crises.

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