

# Development versus Nature: Reading RK Narayan's *The Axe* as an Ecocritical Discourse

Rajesh Kumar Mishra

Assistant Professor

PURC, Muktsar

## Abstract

From an ecocritical perspective, the present research piece is a critique of R.K. Narayan's short story "The Axe." This essay looks at how R.K. Narayan conveys his fervent love for nature and his suffering for the environment and how nature is being destroyed in the name of progress and modernisation. It also says Velan, the protagonist of the narrative, spends his entire childhood growing up among wilderness and plants and trees are his children, and he treats them as such. The purpose of this article is to show how man is separating himself from nature under the guise of development and progress.

**Keywords :** Axe, Ecocriticism, Garden, Nature

## Introduction

Rasipuram Krishnaswamy also known as R.K. Narayan, along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao is one of the famous trio of Indian novelists in English. Narayan is an author, storyteller, journalist, and public speaker and also an essayist His works were famous all over the world for their brilliant depictions of Indian culture and customs that revolve on the fictional village of Malgudi. In his introduction to the "Malgudi Days" compilation of short stories, Narayan says "he prefers writing short stories than writing novels" (p.ii Author's Introduction). R.K. Narayan is often known for being a lighthearted writer who uses humour as a weapon, uses Malgudi as his permanent setting, and uses idiomatic Indian English as his vernacular. However, a diligent and thorough reader of Narayan's books and short tales would notice various characteristics of the writer with nature and man's relationship as a repeating theme. Malgudi, the permanent setting, is depicted as a bustling town metaphorically depicting a huge natural setting, complete with inhabitants, animals, and nature itself as characters. Perhaps no other writer of his time has taken as keen interest in environmental issues as Narayan. However, R.K. Narayan's image as a witty storyteller has cast a pall over his environmental spirit. Narayan's short story writing style is straightforward but heartfelt. His characters do not surprise or shock us since they are regular facets of nature, both human and

nonhuman. Surprisingly, Narayan's stories are devoid of human prejudice. His world is always focused on nature or the environment, and never on humans. His characters include peasants, labourers, drivers, and other ordinary people who have beautiful relationships with Mother Nature. The main character of 'The Axe' is one such character. R.K. Narayan's short story "The Axe" initially published in the anthology "An Astrologer's Day & Other Stories," and was later included in the book "Malgudi Days" (Narayan 1996). The fascinating figure Velan, whose life is completely intertwined with nature in general, and Kumar Baugh's garden and its trees in particular, strikes nature lovers deeply in this short fiction. Velan is introduced in his adolescent years in his hamlet of Koppal. Velan would dwell in a three-story house surrounded by many acres of garden, according to an astrologer. Everyone laughed at this prophecy because Velan's family was the poorest in Koppal, and his family used to work as coolies in other people's farms. However, the astrologer's forecast came true 30- 40 years later, when Velan became the lone inhabitant of Kumar Baugh, a stately house on the outskirts of Malgudi town, when its owners abandoned it.

### **Development Versus Landscape**

Velan fled home at the age of eighteen when his father slapped him for making a mistake. Velan walked furiously out of his hamlet to Malgudi town, a long way from his home. Velan could find work as an assistant to an elderly gardener in Malgudi after famished for a few days. Their task was to clear a weed-infested area. Velan's long gardening journey began with this. Velan toiled for days, clearing out weeds and converting the ground into a plain area. The jungle vanished and the land became a field as an outcome of Velan's efforts. A home was to be built on one side of the site, with a large garden on the other three sides. The home was built at the same time as the garden was laid out. They were laying the foundation of the house by the time the mangoes sprouted. The walls began to rise around the same time as the Margosa sapling had grown a few yards. Velan used to establish and nurture his garden and plants in competition with the building's constructors. A notable point is that the development or expansion of the garden was slow in comparison to the building's construction.

However, after a few decades, the structure faded, lost its allure, and became vacant, whereas Velan's garden, which he laid out, cultivated, and cared for, never lost its allure. The fruit garden never stopped producing fruit, and the flower garden never stopped being appealing and attractive. Nature has that kind of power, the better we look after it, the more joys and treasures it gives us. This similarity seen between building and the garden has a symbolic significance that must be deciphered. The building's

construction is a sign of modernisation and artificial infrastructure that may appear attractive at first, but will fade away over time. Plants, on the other hand, if properly cared for, will continue to provide offerings that are both lasting and vigorous. The house's colour and brightness have faded over time. The walls had colours and shades to them. Interestingly, Narayan claims that while the mansion had lost its radiance, it now had a more human appearance. "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 quarrelled" (Narayan 139). This description demonstrates that R.K. Narayan prefers life in nature over life in the concrete jungle of urban areas. In these words, he argues that men's dwellings can take on a truly human appearance when they interact with other natural elements such as animals, birds, and plants.

Through the character of Velan, Narayan's deep passion for nature and his skill of observation are vividly represented in this short story. Hibiscus, chrysanthemum, jasmine, roses, and Canna were among the flowers in the flower garden. Velan took over as chief gardener after the old gardener became ill. He approached the position with utmost seriousness and respect. He began to treat the plants as his own children and the garden as his own family. He used to struggle with the construction workers over the garden, working day and night. He used to encourage the plants to grow quicker in order to compete with the construction. While watering the garden, 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 remarks convey not just Velan's innocence, but also his deep belief in the spirit of equality that exists among all aspects of nature, whether human or nonhuman. Velan piled manure, vented the roots, pruned the branches, and checked on the vegetation twice a day, giving the image of a diligent nature. Mother Nature never fails to deliver to those who trust her. Velan seemed to have reacted to his devotion and hard work with adoration and prosperity as well. As a result, by the time the family moved into the freshly constructed home, Velan could show them a nice garden. This conversation between Velan and the plants demonstrates how Velan almost regarded the trees as equals and saw them as living entities, which is central to ecocriticism.

## Nature Responds Back

Amazingly, the plants reacted to Velan's pleadings and flourished attractively as he desired.

Velan's creation of a link with his plants and raising them as his own offspring is not surprising, since such people can be found all over rural India. Plants, trees, household animals, birds, and even non-living elements such as mountains and rivers are revered as holy parts of nature in Indian culture. Velan's character reflects this as well. Velan gives the impression of being a truly human being by attaching human attributes to everything around him, particularly the plants. Velan used to converse with plants as if they were human beings. He approached the Margosa plant, grasped the stem with his hand, 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 can't hug, and go up spread. Be fit to stand beside this palace, otherwise I will pull you. (Narayan 138).

The Margosa tree grew robust in response to Velan's care, worry, and warning, and the house took on a more mellow appearance. Velan's remarks may come across as gruff and rustic, yet they are full of love and concern. He appears to be a regular father who openly mocks his children for overstepping their boundaries.

## Farewell to Garden

Velan had to leave the garden and his trees, with whom he had built an inseparable link for more than four decades, and the story comes to a sad conclusion. There was a lot of activity and coming and going once the old building was purchased by a new corporation. Velan was given a fortnight's notice by the new buyers. Every second seemed priceless to him. Velan walked around the garden, staring at his plants, except when he was sleeping. Velan awoke from his slumber two days after being served notice, hearing the clang of an axe chopping down a tree. Velan leapt to his feet and dashed out. He noticed four men slicing at the margosa tree's huge trunk. He screamed and ran at those who were hacking, unable to take the sight. When the workers inquired about the problem, Velan sobbed and responded "This is my child. I planted it. I saw it grow. I loved it. Don't cut it down" (Narayan 143). Because he knew he couldn't stop them from cutting, he took the decision to depart right away. So he asked the staff to give him some time while he packed his belongings and left. They can do whatever they want once he's gone. They set their axes down 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).

This touching story demonstrates Velan's deep love and affection for the garden and plants over the years. It's a symbol of man's connection with nature, which has been figuratively cut with an axe by development, capitalism, and commercialization. Human greed is wreaking havoc on the ecosystem and disrupting the peaceful relationship between man and nature. Men like Velan can't stand it when the balance is thrown off. As a result, he departs. The novel concludes on a terrible note, with Velan's long-standing relationship with the garden coming to an end. Velan, on the other hand, lives on in our hearts as a passionate lover of nature, an ally of nature, and the father of grown-up plants. His fondness is so strong that he can't stomach the thought of chopping down a tree he'd nurtured for years with his own blood and sweat.

### **Conclusion**

As previously said, the prevailing impression is that Narayan's short stories and novels are lighthearted explorations of middle-class South Indian themes. However, many of his stories deal with important cosmic concerns from a cultural and sociological standpoint. The Axe, a short fiction by Narayan, also demonstrates how he brilliantly addresses a current issue in human society: alienation from nature in the guise of development and urbanisation. As a result, Narayan might be described as a writer who addresses serious environmental issues in a sensitive and light manner. Velan was totally comfortable and cheerful after a busy day at work in the garden. He had no expectations from life. This demonstrates that a guy who lives in the midst of nature, works without complaint, and is not hungry can live a contented and joyful life. Such lives demonstrate how pointless the lives of those who are constantly concerned with what they lack and pursue the pleasures and luxuries of modernization and urban life. Thus, the figure Velan embodies Narayan's preference for a rural or simple livelihood in the midst of nature.

## WORKS CITED

Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm. (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Narayan, R.K. *Malgudi Days*. Indian Thought Publications, Chennai, Author's Introduction p.ii, 1996.

Narayan, R.K., "The Axe". *Malgudi Days*. Indian Thought Publications, Chennai, 1996, pp.136-144.

Opperman, Serpil. "Ecocriticism: Natural World in the Literary Viewfinder," in *Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty of Letters*. vol - 16.2, 1999, pp. 29-46

