



AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF R.K.NARAYAN'S NOVEL: "SWAMI AND FRIENDS"

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Article Received: 11/05/2021

Article Accepted: 14/06/2021

Published online:24/06/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.2.227](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.2.227)

Abstract

The present research paper is a critique of R.K. Narayan's first novel Swami and Friends from ecological perspective. It gives a brief introduction about the importance of nature in literature and describes what ecocriticism is. Next, it introduces the author with his writings and achievements. Then, the essay tries to explore how the novel which was the first one written by the author, introduces the imaginary town Malgudi, and then moves on how the author described the urban and rural elements in and around the town. This paper tries to evaluate Narayan as a nature writer by analyzing the important ecological aspects appeared in the novel such as description of urban areas as well as natural elements and relation between nature and human society. It also tries to explore how the colonial rule of the British destroyed the existing social and cultural ecosystem of India. The essay tries to assess Malgudi as an ecosystem with interdependent subsystems. It portrays how the nature's supposed dual role as an enchanter and frightener is presented in the novel.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, R.K. Narayan, Swami and Friends, Malgudi, Nature writing

Introduction

Since the beginning of literature, both oral and written forms, Nature and its elements have always remained the main subjects of many works. Though many poems and drams appear to have revolved around the stories of human beings, they actually explain about the ever interesting and complicated relation between nature and human society. The influence of nature on the evolution of mankind has been the direct or indirect subject of many literary texts across the globe and across the languages.

In Indian writings also, from ancient Vedic literature to modern literature, nature has occupied an important role – both as a central subject as well as a background of the literary work. In the modern

era, many Indian writers have woven their stories around the relation between nature and man, and the influence of nature on human society and culture. The famous Indian English novelists and poets are of no exception to this trend.

Ecocriticism:

Ecocriticism is considered as an interdisciplinary approach that explores the relation between environment and literature. As a literary theory it began in 1990s and became popular across the globe in recent years. It tries to analyze the literary works from the perspective of nature and environmental issues. The initial working definition of Ecocriticism was provided by Cheryl Glotfelty in the book 'The Ecocriticism Reader: landmarks in Literary Ecology'. She defines Ecocriticism as 'the

study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996, p. xviii). Later definitions and principles have further broadened the area and connected it to many other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, economics, etc.

While the term ecocriticism is famous among the American critics, the field is called as 'green studies' in the U.K. With the advent of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment), the ecocritical study of literary texts has increased across the globe. Compared to many other literary theories, Ecocriticism has become more purposeful by bringing awareness among the people on various environmental issues and emphasizing upon the man's responsibility in protecting the nature and environment.

R.K. Narayan:

R.K. Narayan, whose full name is Rasipuram Krishna Swami Narayan Swami, is one amongst the first set of popular Indian Novelists in English. He is considered the best novelist for his magnificent treatment of typical Indian subjects in the alien language English and for introducing various aspects of Indian culture to the non-Indian readers. R.K. Narayan's life as a novelist spans for more than seven decades with about 14 novels, more than 70 short stories, many humorous sketches and essays, non-fictional writings, short and simple forms of epics – Ramayana and Mahabharata in English, mythological stories and characters of Gods and Demons as they appear in Indian Mythology.

By creating a fictional town 'Malgudi', which is a microcosmic representation of India or even to say the whole world, Narayan not only explored the various aspects of human nature, but also explored the contours of nature itself, and the relation between nature and culture. It is significant here to remember Graham Greene's words in his preface to Narayan's *Swami and Friends*. Greene said: "It was Mr. Narayan with his *Swami and Friends* who... first brought India... alive to me" (*Swami and Friends* 1935). This essay tries to explore the ecocritical aspects or the aspects of nature and environment that appear in his very first novel 'Swami and

Friends' and tries to evaluate Narayan as a writer of Nature.

'Swami and Friends' – Novel:

'Swami and Friends' is Narayan's first novel. Outwardly, the novel appears as a short narrative of the incidents in the life of a typical school boy called Swaminathan (Swami). The novel brings out different aspects in the life of Swami, during his childhood – such as his life in school, his relation with his friends, his relation with his family members, his interest in games and outdoor activities, his adventures and fears and his emotional experiences at different times with different characters. But, an in-depth study of the novel – 'Swami and Friends' which introduced the imaginary town Malgudi that evolved in the later novels by R.K. Narayan gives us a vivid understanding of Narayan's views on Nature, and its relation with and impact on human life.

Malgudi, the setting of the novel appears like a microcosmic representation of the universe – presenting different characters and situations that can have universal appeal – but in the form of a typical South Indian, middle class setting. The little town Malgudi can be considered as an Ecosystem representing – the interdependence of nature and man, the relation between different elements of nature – the place, the human beings, the animals, birds, forests, trees, etc. The role played by nature in man's life and man's treatment or ill-treatment of nature – man's treatment of his fellow elements of nature, etc., are well represented in this novel.

R.K. Narayan provides the description of the nature both in urban and rural settings. Yet, he appears at his best when he describes the nature in its pure and rustic form and the wilderness of nature than the urban settings or artificial settings of nature such as gardens, buildings, etc. The novel indirectly, and in some places directly, shows how the colonial rule by the British has changed the ecosystem of India socially and culturally with its introduction of new education system with prominence to English language, Christian scriptures, criticism of native Indian (Hindu) traditions and culture. The influence can be seen in many areas like education, sports, dressing, food, etc.

In this novel, Malgudi's Landscape has been used as an important ecological setting. The novel presents the landscape and geographical surroundings of the town along with the natural settings – forests, rivers, mountains, as well as the urban streets, roads, highways, etc. Though Malgudi is an imaginary town, other villages, towns, hilly areas, cities presented in the novel have real existence. The characters are influenced by the settings both natural and artificial. Narayan skillfully presents the external features of nature in this novel. His narrative on ecology focuses on the trees, animals, flora and fauna, seasons and their relation with the human beings in and around Malgudi. Interdependence between man and nature are so fundamental to ecology which is presented in this novel at many places. He also presents the nature's positive and frightening powers.

Description of Geographical Elements in Malgudi:

Narayan's description of the elements of the town is very vivid and interesting. Starting from the Albert Mission School, which is a dismal yellow building (Swami and Friends 3), Narayan goes on describing many other places of Malgudi town including the Malgudi Railway station, the Sarayu Bridge, the town hall, market and other roads. Many of these elements symbolically represent different aspects of the Malgudi's ecosystem. Albert Mission School, in which Swami was studying, was a symbol of discipline and authority. Sarayu river is the nature's gift, but the bridge over it is a man-made one. This shows the coexistence of nature's elements and man-made infrastructure. Narayan says that "River Sarayu was the pride of Malgudi." (Swami and Friends 13), highlighting how civilizations evolve on the banks of rivers.

Other geographical descriptions in the novel are - Nallappa's Mango grove, Grove Street, Kabir Street behind the Market (where Somu lives), Abu Lane (where Mani lives in a low roofed, dingy house), Ellaman street, Lawley Extension, Town Hall, etc. All these streets, roads and places also symbolically represent how different strata of society live in coexistence harmoniously. They also stand as symbols of coexistence of Indian culture and Western culture.

Lawley Extension is a residential area in Malgudi where the rich, high-class, and official people live in. It is named after the mighty (British) engineer Sir Frederick Lawley, who was at one time the Superintending Engineer for Malgudi Circle (Swami and Friends 26). Ellaman Street is the last street of the town, chiefly occupied by oil mongers. The people who live in this area are mostly illiterates. While describing the Abu lane where Mani lives, Narayan gives a picturesque representation of the deserted street with a donkey standing near a gutter, patiently watching its sharp shadow, and a cow munching broad, green, plantain leaf. This shows how, in particular areas, animals and humans live together in absolute coexistence. Town Hall is a symbol of modernity. The Trunk Road leading to Trichinopoly is a symbolic link between Malgudi and the outside world, which brought the look of urbanization to the town, and made it different from the surrounding rural villages and hamlets near the Mempi forest.

Description of Rural Areas around Malgudi:

Malgudi is surrounded by rural areas. Narayan describes the outer area of Municipal limits with minute details – a streak of water running under the culvert on a short stretch of sand, paddy fields on the sides of the road, groves of Mango and coconut, the deserted trunk Road during summer, occasional movement of country carts, etc. (Rural areas around Malgudi: (Swami and Friends 79).

The Coachman's location - Keelacheri is in contrast to the urban or refined areas like Lawley Extension. It consisted of thatched huts and dingy hovels, smoke-tinted and evil-smelling, clustering together irregularly (Swami and Friends 75). The people of this area also are in contrast to the educated, upper class people of the Malgudi town. The description of the area is picturesque: "Scurvy chickens cackled and ran hither and thither.... (The Sun was unsparing)... Two or three mongrels lay in the shade of a tree and snored. A general malodour of hencoop and unwashed clothes pervaded the place (Swami and Friends 76). This part of the novel tells how the urban and rural areas coexist for their dependence.

Description of enchanting little things with childlike interest:

Narayan is skillful in describing the ordinary, simple and small things in an interesting way, which are otherwise unnoticed. Through the description of drainage, he tries to bring out the curious and enchanting mind of children. The description of the setting includes a dark volume of water, odd pieces of paper, leaves, and sticks, floating in the drain, the passage of a small piece of tin in the drainage. Swaminathan takes interest in all these surroundings and follows the drain. He makes a paper boat, puts a small ant in it and lowers the boat into the stream. At one point, the boat wrecks beyond recovery and the ant is not found there. (Swami and Friends 33).

Description of Elements of Nature

(a) **Sarayu River:** Narayan is at his best when it comes to the description of various elements of nature, which shows his excessive interest in natural and rural settings rather than artificial and urban surroundings. His description of the river Sarayu, the Summer season, and finally the surrounding forest is so enchanting and vivid that he unequivocally qualifies (himself) to be called as an eminent writer of nature and a fond lover of nature.

The second chapter of the novel begins with the lines - "River Sarayu was the pride of Malgudi." This not only highlights the dependence of the Malgudi town on the river but also stands as an example of Narayan's love for nature. His keen observation of natural elements is exhibited so well in the sensuous description of the river Sarayu and its surroundings:

"...The peepul branches overhanging the river rustled pleasantly. A light breeze played about the boughs and scattered stray leaves on the gliding stream below. Birds filled the air with their cries. Far away, near Nallappals' Mango Grove, a little downstream, a herd of cattle was crossing the river. And then a country cart drawn by bullocks passed, the cart-man humming a low tune. It was some fifteen minutes past sunset and there was a

soft red in the West...." (Swami and Friends 13).

Thus, Narayan lays such a serene, harmonious setting for the evening when the three friends Swami, Mani and Rajam were trying to patch up their differences. The final passage of the chapter is a fitting representation of nature's role in bringing harmony and peace in the human world:

"The river's mild rumble, the rustling of the peepul leaves, the half-light of the late evening, and the three friends eating, and glowing with new friendship – Swaminathan felt at perfect peace with the world." (Swami and Friends 20).

(b) **Summer Season in Malgudi:** Narayan's description of summer season in Malgudi (or to say Malgudi in Summer season) is also very vivid and interesting. The Chapter –XI of the novel begins with the description of summer. During summer – Malgudi was one of the most detested towns in South India. The roads were deserted between twelve and three. Even donkeys and dogs also prefer to stay under shade. But interestingly, the children like Swaminathan and his friends dare to walk and play on the roads. The noon and the afternoon were the most fascinating parts of the day for them (Swami and Friends 78). This shows how children enjoy the summer while others detest it.

(c) **Description of the Forest: Dual quality of Nature:** Narayan's love for nature and its elements is clear with his in-depth and enormous description of the forest road into which Swaminathan enters as an escape from home and school. Swami entered into the thin forest through a narrow road branching to the left of the Trunk Road. The place contained white ball-like wood-apple, green figs, and the deep purple Eugenia, peeped out of thick green foliage. (Swami and Friends 155). But the attraction for the road didn't last long as it was deserted and there was no life and traffic. The same trees which otherwise would have attracted Swami in normal condition, now started frightening him because of his loneliness. The branch road oppressed him with stillness. His weakness due to long walk and desperation to go home raged a fierce hunger within him. When hunger became unbearable, he plucked

and ate fruits (Swami and Friends 156). This incident shows the role of nature as a giver.

Swami missed his way back to the Trunk road as he had unconsciously entered a road which joined the Mempi Forest Road. That road leads to the thick belt of Mempi Forests after seventy miles. Night fell suddenly, and Swami's heart beat fast. As he was moving forward, the trees were still thick and the road was still narrow. The sky is invisible except the gleaming of the stars through occasional gaps overhead. Narayan evokes our senses when he describes the sharp rustling noise made by Swami's feet which fell on the leaf-covered ground. The fluttering of the birds' wings created a ghostly fear in the heart of Swami. Narayan further says that there was something reassuring in its spaciousness and in the sparseness of vegetation. But, he says that the closeness of the tree-trunks and their branches intertwining at the top gave the road the appearance of a black bleak cavern with an evil spirit brooding over it. All this setting frightened Swami. He started walking very cautiously to avoid disturbing birds again. (Swami and Friends 157).

Narayan gives further vivid description of the various sounds and noises that Swami hears during his walk:

"...His feet came down on the ground with a light tick or a subdued crackle or a gentle swish, according to the object on the ground: small dry twigs, half-green leaves, or a thick layer of dry withered leaves. There were occasional patches of bare uncovered ground, and there the noise was a light thud, or pit pat; pit pat pit pat in monotonous repetition. Every noise entered Swaminathan ears. For some time he was conscious of nothing else. His feet said pish-pish-pish-pat-pit-pat-swish and crackled...." (Swami and Friends 158).

To Swami, who is alone and walking in darkness, the monotonous and endless sounds appeared like sinister whispers calling him to a dreadful sacrifice. He imagined that a devil was calling him by his name and was expecting his sacrifice. In his imagination, he saw an immense monster crouched, with its immense black legs wide

apart, and its shadowy arms joined over its head. (Swami and Friends 158). But, actually it turns out to be a view of massive tree-trunks and their top branches. Here, the frightening appearance of nature is seen. The same nature which enthralls us when our mood or mental state is good will frighten us when we are alone and particularly when our mental state is not good. Narayan very skillfully narrates how the darker side of nature appears and frightens us.

Swami liked the forest area and surrounding trees initially. He even ate fruits provided by the trees. But, as the sun set and darkness entered, and he was reminded of his loneliness, the same trees frightened him. This shows the dual nature of 'nature' / 'environment' which enchants as well as frightens us depending upon our mental status and context. The truth is that nature never frightens us but it is our mind and the context that evoke the emotion of fear within us. The dual role of nature as the giver and destroyer of life is shown symbolically in this forest incident.

Swami's imagination grew further as he could see elephants, snakes, tigers, leopards, and lions appearing before him and trying to attack him. He even imagined of whales, wild elephants, and demons surround him together. He saw a cobra and a scorpion within an inch of him. Frightened by all these, Swami started running. After some time, he collapsed with exhaustion. He was later saved by Ranga, the cart-man, who was returning to his village in his bullock cart. Ranga brought Swami in his cart and handed over to the Government Forest Officer living in the Travellers' Bungalow. The Irony is that Swami and his friends once made fun of Cartmen, during their outings and frightened a cart-boy for entering into the town (Swami and Friends 81) and it was another cartman Ranga who saved his life.

Concern for fellow living beings:

Though the novel Swami and Friends appears as a children's novel, Narayan tries to present some core Indian philosophical aspects in it. In the incident where a paper boat containing an ant turns down and wrecks beyond repair, Swami shows his sympathy for the supposedly dead ant. He takes a pinch of earth, utters a prayer for the soul of the ant,

and drops it into the gutter (Swami and Friends 33). This small, childish act symbolically represents the core Indian spirit of equality among all living beings that was pronounced by Indian scriptures.

In Bhagavad Gita – Chapter 6, Verse 29 pronounces:

*sarva-bhūta-stham ātmānam sarva-bhūtāni
chātmani ikṣhate yoga-yuktātmā sarvatra
sama-darśhanah*

It means - thee true yogis, uniting their consciousness with God, see with equal eye, all living beings in God and God in all living beings. By performing the symbolic last rites to the supposedly dead ant, Swaminathan displays the common Indian's belief that all living beings are equal and have soul. This is the profound message India gave to the world which reflects the core spirit of deep ecology.

Swami's friends- Representatives of Different Sections of Social System:

In Malgudi town, the people belong to different social classes. There are superior official class people working in the British Government. There are middle class families mostly Brahmins. There are people of workers class with poor financial background. However, all these people live together harmoniously. It is symbolically represented with Swami and his friends.

Swami's friends represent the vibrant society of India. They are from different social strata, different communities, yet living together. Somu, the Monitor was a confident and calm fellow who mingles easily even with teachers. Mani is a mighty Good-for-Nothing. He seldom brings books and never bothers about home-work. He had wooden clubs at home with which he threatens to break the backs of those that dared to tamper with him. Sankar is the most brilliant boy of the class. Samuel, known as the 'Pea' on account of his size is a Christian boy. Rajam, the new entry with polished looks, decent dressing and city culture, is the son of a Police officer, Though he too befriends with all the group, the trouble starts when Swami tries to be close with him, neglecting a bit his old friends. Rajam serves symbolically as an external element that disturbs or changes the existing ecosystem. With his

socks and shoes, fur cap and tie, coat and knickers, a car, and very good English speaking skills, Rajam represents the class of Indians that was influenced by the Europeans. The air gun he brings also represents the European class against the rough club used by Mani.

Differences between social and economic statuses of the people were represented through the houses/rooms of Swaminathan, Rajam, and Mani – Rajam's house is a bungalow in Lawley Extension (Swami and Friends 27). Swami's house is located in Vinayaka Mudali street and it is reasonably spacious house; Mani's house is a low-roofed, dingy house in Abu Lane. This represents the lower class of the society. Even other sections like workers, etc. live in other areas like Keelacherry. Thus, Malgudi presents a geographical ecosystem, a harmonious landscape balanced with areas of different classes and sections of the society.

The occasional differences that crop up among the children are normalized and harmony is established within no time – which symbolically represents the balancing nature of human society that settles the occasional issues and ensures sustenance of the social system. Rajam, who appears as the cause for the differences among Swaminathan and his old friends, himself takes the initiative to patch up the differences and finally establishes harmony. There lies a lesson for human beings in it. Man, who is the cause of the ecological or environmental imbalance with his limitless exploitation of natural resources, has to take the initiative to settle the imbalance and to save the ecosystem. The incident in which all the friends forget their enmities and come together displays the power of sacrifice and joy of giving – which is the core principal of nature.

Role of Family Relations and Human Relations:

Further, Narayan portrayed Family relations and human relations as inevitable sources of sustenance of the social ecosystem. The relationship between Swaminathan and his Grandma shows us how the values are passed from one generation to the other in the form of stories. Swaminathan feeling safe and secured in the lap of his grandma (Swami and Friends 21) symbolically

represents the harmonious relation that used to exist among the family members barring generations in the joint family system, the fall of which in the present days is causing many social problems.

Man is a social animal and he cannot live without establishing or continuing relations with his fellow beings. In 'Swami and Friends', R.K. Narayan explains how the relations with fellow human beings vary depending upon the base of the relations. During summer holidays, Swaminathan's attachment with Somu, Sankar, and the Pea (Samuel) ceases after the school is closed because it is purely scholastic relation. But, his other attachment with Rajam and Mani is more human. So, it continues even after the closure of the school.

Colonial rule as the destroyer of Indian Ecosystem:

In this novel, R.K. Narayan showed how the colonial rule of the British with its Western model of education system has become instrumental in destroying the social and cultural ecosystem of India.

Albert Mission School, in which Swami was studying, was a symbol of discipline and authority. Swami feels that it takes away the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday. (Swami and Friends 3) The English education system, the school, the subjects, the teachers – everything appears as the colonial influence on the Indian society and changes the existing social and cultural ecosystem of India. The modern education system that was introduced by the British rulers in these Mission schools acted as a colonial tool to develop a colonial mindset and to belittle the native (Indian) culture. This shows how the serene and peaceful social ecosystem was disturbed by the colonial forces.

While the history class is full of stories about the foreigners Vasco da Gama, Clive, Hastings, etc., with no place to native people, the Scripture period is full of Christian teachings and vehement criticism on Hindu scriptures and Gods. The Scripture Teacher Mr. Ebenezer was a fanatic and says: "*Oh, wretched idiots! Why do you worship dirty, lifeless, wooden idols and stone images? Can they talk? No. Can they see? No. Can they bless you? No. Can they take you*

to Heaven? No. Why? Because they have no life. What did your Gods do when Mohammed of Gazni smashed them to pieces, trod upon them, and constructed out of them steps for his lavatory? if those idols and images had life, why did they not parry Mohammed's onslaughts?' (Swami and Friends 5) – This particular scene depicts how the colonial forces, through their education system, tried to destroy the ecosystem of India in the social and cultural spheres and used the religion as a tool to make the native Indians feel inferior to the British. Even in the field of sports and games also, the influence is very much seen. Indians started fascinating cricket, a game of the British people, leaving traditional Indian games aside. This is evident from the fascination of Swami and his friends towards cricket and their establishment of M.C.C. (Malgudi Cricket Club) in the line of 'Melbourne Cricket Club'.

The negative impact of colonial rule on economic system of India also is explained in the incident where Swami and Mani participate in an anti-British freedom struggle movement. There they come to know about the brutalities of the English rulers against the peasants and artisans of India.

Malgudi as a Harmonious Geographical and Social ecosystem:

Malgudi is an interesting mix of urban dwellings surrounded by rural areas. This mix is seen everywhere as we can see both motor cars and mat-covered carts drawn by bullocks going side by side. The Urban domination over the rural areas and its people is very much visible. It is symbolically shown in the incident where Swaminathan, Rajam and Mani threaten a village boy/ cart driver to stop his cart in the disguise of police officials. However, the more striking feature is the harmonious coexistence of urban and rural people.

Swami's friendship with Sam, the Pea, at Albert Mission Highschool, and with Mr. Akbar Ali at the Board High School is a symbol of harmonious existence of religions in Indian Social system. Swaminathan calls Mr. Akbar Ali a nice Mohammedan – because he calls Mohammed of Gazni and Aurangzeb (who are considered as

religious fanatics) were rascals (Swami and Friends 108)

Conclusion

Thus, an in-depth analysis of the first novel of R.K. Narayan – ‘Swami and Friends’ from the ecocritical perspective portrays how Narayan represented the natural world in and around Malgudi, how he showed the symbiotic relationship between different elements of the ecosystem – urban and rural, animal and human, Western and Indian. It also shows how nature acted as a very important backdrop at different incidents portrayed in the novel. The topographical material presented in the novel also increases the readers’ interest. Narayan’s keen observation of nature and its relation with human beings is visibly seen in every chapter of the novel, making it fit for considering Narayan as a nature writer and many of his novels and stories as ecological texts.

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