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The Enchanting Snake Charmer of Malgudi: An Ecocritical Study of R.K. Narayan's Short Stories: 'A Snake in the Grass', 'The Snake-Song', and 'Naga'

Noojilla Srinivas

Lecturer in English
Govt. Degree College, Alamuru &
Research Scholar,
JNTU, Kakinada.

&

T. Ashok

Professor,
Department of English,
Adikavi Nannaya University,
Rajamahendravaram.

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Abstract:

This research article tries to explore R.K.Narayan's three short stories – 'A Snake in the Grass', 'The Snake-Song', and 'Naga' to assess how in these stories Narayan expressed his deep love for non-human living beings, particularly the most dreaded snakes. Making animals as important characters in literature is not new in Indian literature. All Hindu epic and mythological stories revolve around such animal allegories. Buddha Jataka tales and Pancha Tantra are good examples for the creation of literary texts around the animal characters. In Modern Indian English literature also, many writers exhibited their interest in continuing this tradition. R.K. Narayan is prominent among them. He used animals as his main characters in many short stories. He tries to present the ever-interesting and everlasting relationship between the animal world and human beings. He also presents direct and indirect references to culture, religion, spirituality, and environmental issues in these stories. Particularly, the three short stories on snakes – 'A Snake in the Grass', 'The Snake-Song', and Naga touch upon various aspects of the relation between man and nature, with a touch of humour, appreciation of Indian culture, and references to Hindu mythology and Spirituality. Particularly the short story Naga stands as an exemplary work on ecotheology or ecospirituality by an Indian author in English.

Keywords: R.K. Narayan, Ecotheology, Ecospirituality, Naga, The Snake-Song, A Snake in the Grass.

Introduction:

India is known as a land of many interesting religious practices and spiritual experiences. Many of these practices are deeply rooted in the core Hindu philosophy that sees oneness in the whole creation or simply to say the whole ecosystem. Ancient Vedic texts like Prithvi Sukta considered 'the Earth as Mother and man as her son'. (Prithvi Sukta-XII-12). Hindu texts speak about the earth-centric ecosystem in opposition to the anthropocentric ecosystem. In Hindu dharma, divinity is seen in every tree and every creature. Hindus worship the trees like Banyan, Neem, and Basil (Tulasi), consider the cow as a holy animal, and offer prayers even to the most dreaded reptiles fondly calling them Naga devathas (Snake Gods).

Snake Worship & Snake Mythology:

The word 'Naga', which originated from the Sanskrit name 'Nag' refers to a deity, in the form of a snake. Snake worship in India is an age-old practice. People have the highest level of respect and devotion towards Snakes. Hindus worship snakes in many ways and at many places. They worship them at temples, under the trees, or at their natural habitats during festivals like Naga Chavithi and Naga Panchami. The devotees offer them milk and other things during their prayers. Many devotees install the statues of carved hooded snakes in temples (Naga Prathishtha) and under holy trees, with a faith that such an installation will bless them with children or cure them of any disease or misfortune. In certain parts of India and other south Asian countries, like Srilanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Snake is worshipped as Lord Subrahmanya.

The references of Snakes with different names and different forms are seen across the Hindu epics, mythological works, and folk and classical literature across India. Some of the prominent snakes in Indian mythology are- Vasuki, Nagendra, Anantha, Kadru, Manasa, and Vinata. Vasuki is said to have been used as the rope bound to Mandara mountain during the churning of the Ocean of Milk (Ksheera Sagara Mathanam) both by Devas (Gods) and Asuras (the evil forces) with an aim to bring Amrutha out of the ocean. It is also believed that Lord Shiva blessed Vasuki and wore him around his neck as an ornament. (V. Jayaram)

Hence, in Hindu culture, Snake is not considered as an evil spirit or as an enemy of God. Snakes are attributed with divinity and magnificence, and are considered as providers of material and spiritual prosperity. In the modern times also, India is well known in the west as a land of snake charmers. Belief in Mantras and usage of certain herbs for cure of snakebites still exists in remote areas of India.

Ecocriticism:

Ecocriticism is a literary theory that became popular in recent years. Many researchers across the globe are trying to use it as a tool to bring the attention of the world towards the environmental problems or ecological issues. Ecocriticism mainly focuses on exploring “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii).” Since the 1980s, ecocriticism has been expanding with new themes and approaches such as – pastoral, Ecofeminism, Ecomarxism, Zoocriticism, Deep Ecology, Ecotheology, and Ecospirituality.

Zoocriticism is a sub field of ecocritical literary studies, which is concerned with how the literature reflects the relationship between human beings and animals. The term Zoocriticism was coined by Postcolonial ecocritics Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. According to them, Zoocriticism is concerned “...not just with animal representation but also with animal rights” (Postcolonial Ecocriticism 18).

Ecotheology talks about the relationship between religion and nature. It focuses on the premise that the religious and spiritual practices would be responsible either for preservation or for destruction of nature. Ecotheology, as a theory, has its roots mainly in the lectures of Seyyed Hussein Nasr, a Professor of Islamic Studies in George Washington University, and an Islamic Philosopher, and the article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”, written by Lynn White Jr., Professor of History, University of California in 1967. (Lynn White)

Ecospirituality, as an approach, connects ecology with spirituality. It brings together environmental science with religious and spiritual practices. It has a much broader view than ecotheology. Ecospirituality has been defined by Valerie Lincoln as “a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment”. (Valerie Lincoln) Ecospirituality has been mainly influenced by the ideas and principles of deep ecology which was based on “recognition of the inherent value of all living beings and the use of this view in shaping environmental policies” (Alan Drengson)

It is very unfortunate that the initial discussions on ecotheology and ecospirituality did not give much prominence to the ancient Hindu Vedic scriptures which spoke about the very fundamental principles of Deep Ecology, Ecotheology, and Ecospirituality thousands of years ago. However, in recent years organisations like UNO, and some NGOs started recognizing the importance of principles and practices of Hinduism in conservation of nature. Therefore, today we are able to see a shift towards Eastern countries including India to find solutions to the burning issues of the environment. Many hymns of ancient Vedic texts spread the message of ecospirituality and deep ecology in a much louder voice. Mat McDermott, in an article named "12 Things You Need to Know About Hinduism" says that Hinduism sees the Divine present in all existence. He says:

"The deepest single spiritual truth presented through the Vedas is that Brahman (roughly understood in English as 'the Absolute' or 'the Divine') pervades the entire universe. This divine reality, or its essential nature, is present in all living beings, eternal, and full of bliss. Brahman is understood as the cause of creation, as well as its preservation, and dissolution and transformation, all done in a constant, repeating cycle." (McDermott).

Hence, ecocritical analysis of the literature produced by Indian writers like R.K. Narayan becomes more fruitful when the Indian ecological principles are taken as the basis, than totally depending upon the western ecocritical literary theories.

R.K. Narayan – His Love for Nature and Animals:

R.K. Narayan is one of the most famous writers of Indian English. Narayan enchanted the world with his novels, short stories, and other non-fiction works. All his fiction writings were woven around Malgudi, a marvelous fictitious town created by him. His novels and short stories depicted the lives of common men, with the techniques of humour, irony, and satire, and usage of typical Indian idioms. Narayan was a great lover of nature and hence, in many of his works, he dealt with man's relation with nature and its elements. Being a staunch believer of Hindu Philosophy, which tells about the equality among all living beings, Narayan depicts many animals as key characters in his novels and short stories. His animal characters include the ferocious tigers, the domesticated goats, the faithful dogs, the naughty rats, the playful squirrels, the mischievous

monkeys, and the dreadful snakes. No other contemporary writer in Indian English has created such a colourful spectrum of stories making the animals as main characters.

Further, Narayan loves to depict Indian culture in its vibrant form, touching upon its myths, epics, beliefs, interesting religious practices, and customs of folklore. Therefore, Narayan's representation of animals in his stories also usually has cultural, religious, and spiritual connotations. Though he never limited himself to any boundaries of narrow ideologies and literary theories, most of his works qualify as texts fit for ecocriticism particularly the branches of zoocriticism, deep ecology, ecotheology and ecospirituality.

Snake Stories of R.K. Narayan – Summaries

1. A Snake in the Grass:

“A Snake in the Grass” is a humorous story about the incidents that take place after a snake appears in the garden of a house. After hearing that a cobra has got into their compound, the family assembles in the garden with great agitation. They summon their old servant ‘Dasa’ to search for the cobra. The neighbours also join the group. The discussion on the snake shifts on to various issues like - Dasa's negligence, non-availability of tools to cut the bushes, increasing prices of iron tools during war-time, black market and corruption, alarming statistics about deaths caused by snake-bites, etc. A beggar woman who comes there for alms suggests the family not to kill the snake as it is Lord Subrahmanya. Then, the mother remembers the vow she made to perform Abhishekam to Lord Subrahmanya, and she prays that she would perform it soon. Then, a snake-charmer enters the scene. But he says that he can catch the snake if it is shown to him only. He leaves asking the people to inform him when they find the snake.

The family members and neighbours clean the garden with all sorts of tools. Suddenly, Dasa appears with a closed pot and says that he caught the cobra in it. The whole group appreciates him for his alertness. After Dasa leaves on the excuse of letting the snake outside, the family sees a cobra emerging out of a hole in the compound wall. It crawls under the gate and disappears along a drain. Thus, the story ends leaving it for a guess whether Dasa really caught the Cobra or there existed two cobras. (Under the Banyan Tree 93-95)

2. The Snake-Song

"The Snake-Song" is another humorous story by Narayan which narrates the exaggerated experiences of the talkative man with a snake. The talkative man learnt music when he lived in a village called Kumbum. Then, he served a master musician and learnt to play the flute. While he was practicing his music on flute one night, someone knocked on the door saying that he was a Sadhu, seeking alms. The talkative man asked the Sadhu to go away. When the Sadhu repeatedly requested, the talkative man became very angry and used some bad words. The Sadhu gave a curse that it would be the last day of talkative man's music practice and left. Frightened by the words, the talkative man opened the door but he could not find Sadhu there. Talkative man resumed his practice. When he started playing 'Punnaga Varali', a Cobra appeared before him listening to his music. When he stopped playing the song, it tried to come nearer to him. Frightened by that, the talkative man resumed his song and played the same for many times. Finally, he found himself exhausted. So, he prostrated before the cobra, crying that he could play no more. When he opened his eyes again the snake was gone.

When the talkative man narrated this incident to his master, he told him that 'Punnaga Varali' should not be played at night. He also warned him not to play music further as there is an imminent danger of the cobra coming again. So, the talkative man stopped his music practice from that day. He further says that he has been in search of the unknown Sadhu who may take his curse back so that he can resume his practice. (Malgudi Days 93-99)

3. Naga

'Naga' is a captivating story about the relation between a snake named 'Naga' and a Snake-charmer's family consisting of a father and his son. The Snake-charmer (father) used to give performances with the cobra 'Naga' by going around the houses. To please the audience, he used to narrate interesting stories about how he caught the snake, how he was bitten by it, and how he saved himself from its venom by using a certain herb, etc. He also narrates interesting mythological references of Snakes. Then, he plays his gourd pipe and makes the snake swing to his music. The snake-charmer's son also learnt to handle Naga and entertain the audience in his own style by the time he attained an age of ten. The father used to say that the snake was like their family member. He also told the boy that the snake will grant a valuable diamond (Naga Mani) after it becomes old.

Later, the boy found a playful monkey on a tree. His father caught the monkey, named it 'Rama' and taught it many tricks. The father-son duo with the snake and monkey used to entertain the children and others at public gatherings. They used to earn enough money to lead a satisfactory life. But, the father got used to drinking. He was also in a passionate relationship with a married woman. One day, the father left the boy and snake in the hut and went away along with the woman and the monkey. The boy wept a lot for being left alone and for the loss of the monkey. However, to lead his life, he started giving performances with 'Naga'.

After a few years, 'Naga' became very old and was failing to entertain the public. The boy decided to let 'Naga' free, and find some work for himself. So, he took Naga to a safe place full of sand and bushes and let it free from the basket. But, Naga started coming back in his direction. The boy saw a Brahmani Kite (Garuda) making rounds in the sky. So, he immediately caught Naga and safely kept it in the basket and brought it back home. He found some work in the Railway station, and decided to take care of Naga by keeping it safely in the basket. (Malgudi Days 215-229)

Ecocritical aspects reflected in the Snake Stories:

1. Relation between Man and Animal:

The Snake Stories of R.K. Narayan present the relationship between man and animals in an interesting manner. Particularly, the two stories 'A Snake in the Grass' and 'Naga' tell about how a separate community of 'Snake-charmers' existed in olden days and how they used to earn their livelihood. Snake-charmer communities earned their livelihood by performing tricks with snakes, by catching-snakes, and by selling some herbs as cure for snake-bites. They used to play a gourd pipe with which they appear to have hypnotized the snake. The snakes sway their heads responding to the movement of the gourd pipe and the swaying of the snake charmer. In India, the snake-charmers are almost a dwindling community due to the implementation of Wild Life Protection Act 1972. Owing to modern culture also, they lost their ground as entertainers villages and towns. Still in some rural areas, they are found as snake-catchers and quacks offering herbs for snake bites.

In the story 'A Snake in the Grass', there is just a momentary appearance of a snake-charmer. The old snake-charmer surprises us with his remark that he can catch a snake if it is shown to him only. (p. 94) Thus, he remains a comic character. In the story 'Naga', the whole

story is about the Snake-charmer community. It tells about how their living is totally dependent upon the snakes and how a deep relation exists between them. No doubt, the snakes are initially subjected to cruelty to make them non-poisonous and behave as per the instructions of the snake-charmer, but over a period of time, there grows a bond and relation between the snake-charmer and the snake that the snake almost becomes a family member of the snake-charmers. In this story, the Snake-charmer treats 'Naga' as his family member. He carefully looks after its needs, and gives it eggs from time to time. While thrusting a piece of sweet between the jaws of the snake, the father says to his son: "He is now one of our family and should learn to eat what we eat." (p. 218) This scene depicts the innocence of folklore as well as their love and affection towards the animals which give them their livelihood.

Though the father's character appears like an evil one because he leaves his son alone, he always utters wise words, with common sense and knowledge about animals. He treats the animals like snakes and monkeys in a respectful manner by giving them names, rather than just calling them as snakes or monkeys. He says to his son that no monkey would respect him (the child) if he utters bad words. Further, he suggests that it is the man who needs to feed the animals rather than being fed by them. When his son asks the monkey to give him a tamarind fruit, the father tells him: "This is no way to befriend him. You should give him something to eat, not ask him to feed you." (p.219) This shows the fundamental principle for a harmonious relation between man and animal.

It is the same level of love and bondage that exists between the boy and 'Naga'. Though Naga became old and hardly performed any tricks that earn money to the boy, the boy didn't want to get rid of it unceremoniously. He wanted to give it a safe and respectful farewell by leaving it in the bushes where it can meet fellow snakes. But, Naga followed him back. When the boy saw a kite in the snake approaching nearer to catch it, he immediately rescued Naga and brought it home. He decided to earn his livelihood by working at the railway station and to look after the snake. This shows the kind heart and compassionate nature of the boy towards Naga. Thus, the story tells us how the relation can develop between human beings and animals and how emotions like care, love, and compassion can be expressed and reciprocated between them.

2. Relation between Culture & Nature:

Culture and Nature are interdependent, as many aspects of culture such as art, music, and literature derive their source and inspiration from nature. In Indian culture, the bond between snakes and art forms like music, dance, and sculpture are inseparable. In the short story 'The

Snake-song’, the talkative man makes a reference to a raga of music named ‘Punnaga Varali’, and says that when he played it a Cobra appeared before him. (p.96) Relating Snakes with music is not new to Indian culture. Indians strongly believe that the snakes listen to music played by the snake-charmers and sway to it. ‘Punnaga Varali’ which was mentioned in the story is a raga in Carnatic Music. This raga is said to be associated with Karuna Rasa and is frequently played by the snake-charmers. Carving of Snakes in black stones and installing them is a custom in Hinduism. The talkative man, while referring to the snake says that “it might have been a carven snake in black stone, so still it was.” (p.97)

In the story ‘Naga’, the snake-charmer refers to a certain herb he used when he was bitten by the snake. (p. 216) This tells us that in earlier days, the folklore used to have knowledge of medicines and antidotes for venom. Unfortunately, the traditional medicinal knowledge of folklore is undermined due to domination of the Modern medical system.

3. Zoocriticism – Representation of Cruelty against Animals:

Zoocriticism, as was mentioned earlier, is not only about the representation of animals in literature, but also about their rights. The story ‘Naga’ shows how the animals are treated cruelly to train them for performances in the public. The Snake-charmer says to his audience: “... I laughed and pulled him out, and knocked off with a piece of stone the fangs that made him so arrogant; and then he understood that I was only a friend and well-wisher, and no trouble after that.”(p.217). This has reference to various crude methods used by snake-charmers to remove the poisonous fangs of the snakes. While training the monkey also, the snake-charmer starved the monkey for fifteen days and bullied it. By cajoling and dangling fruit before the monkey’s eyes, he taught it the tricks. Then, the monkey ceased trying to bite or scratch. Whenever the monkey attempted to push his cap back and rip it off, the snake-charmer whacked it with a switch. (p.220) Thus, after much starvation and hardship, the monkey learnt to perform the tricks which entertain people. However, nowadays, such scenes are rare as the Government has prevented the snake-charmers and other tricksters from possessing the monkeys and snakes, under the Wildlife Protection Act passed in 1972.

Another interesting aspect that can be observed is that the animals which are subjected to an artificial environment and captivity lose their original spirit and become prisoners and their basic rights are taken away. The monkey which entertained the boy with its natural antics later had to learn the tricks that are taught by the snake-charmer. Further, when the animals are made pets,

their food habits also change. In the story 'Naga', the Snake-charmer thrusts a piece of sweet into the mouth of Naga (p.218), but it is an unnatural food for it.

In the story 'Naga', the boy expresses his agony at the weak and old serpent: "Naga, I hope you are dead, so that I may sell your skin to the purse makers; at least that way you may become useful." (p. 215 Malgudi Days) This expression of his agony reveals an ecological issue where the animal skins and other body parts are used to make ornaments, purses, belts, dresses and other accessories, which increased their poaching and smuggling in the modern days. So, through casual conversation of the boy, R.K. Narayan touches upon the issue of animal poaching for the enjoyment and luxury of human beings.

4. Ecotheology & Ecospirituality:

All the three Snake-stories of Narayan talk about the relation between nature and religious and spiritual practices in India. In these stories, we can 'recognize an inherent value of all living beings' (Deep Ecology), which is the basic philosophy of deep ecology that laid the foundation for ecotheology and ecospirituality. The Hindu philosophy itself emanates from the belief that the same supreme spirit (Brahman) exists in all elements of the creation. Vedic scriptures like Prithvi suktam talk against anthropocentric view. They treat man and non-human creatures on an equal path. Hence, many religious practices and beliefs in Hinduism consider many animals as holy beings and godly spirits. This is shown in the three Snake stories of Narayan.

In the story, 'A Snake in the Grass', the beggar woman says: "...you are fortunate. It is God Subrahmanya who has come to visit you. Don't kill the snake." (p.94) Then, the mother agrees saying that she forgot all about the promised Abhishekam to Lord Subrahmanya and the appearance of the snake is a reminder. Worshipping Lord Subrahmanya (Murugan or Kumaraswamy) in the form of a snake and offering him Abhishekam is common in India and other South Asian countries. It shows how Hindu religion, as a form of custom or faith, laid certain limitations against killing the snakes.

In the story "The Snake-song" also, the snake that appeared before the talkative man was considered as a divine one. The talkative man says: "*I saw the serpent in all its majesty. The very venom in its pouch had a touch of glory: now I saw its divinity as it crowned Shiva's head: Parvathi wore it as a wristlet: Subrahmanya played with it: and it was Vishnu's couch....The whole composition imparted to the serpent a quality which inspired awe and reverence.*"(p.96-97). The dignity and authority of the snake impressed the talkative man so much that he thought: "Which

God would forgo the privilege of wearing this in His hair?...” (p.97) This reference is to Lord Shiva who wears the Cobra in his hair and around his neck, and to other gods who wear it as an ornament. When he is tired of playing the same snake-song several times, the talkative man prostrates before the snake, crying, “Oh, Naga Raja, you are a god; you can kill me if you like, but I can play no more...” (p.98) Thus, the place of Snake in Hindu religion as a god that is worshipped is very well presented in this story.

In the story ‘Naga’, the mythical references of snakes are much more deep and significant. The snake charmer says to people that he caught the snake from a crevice in the floor of the sanctum of Lord Shiva, as he was instructed by Lord Shiva in his dream (p.216) The preamble spoken by the snake charmer then refers to the magnificence and divinity of snakes:

“Shiva is the lord of Cobra, which he ties his braid with, and its hood canopies his head; the great God Vishnu rests in the coils of Adi-Sesha, the mightiest serpent, who also bears on his thousand heads this universe. Think of the armlets on goddess Parvathi! Again, elegant little snakes. How can we think that we are wiser than our gods? Snake is a part of a god’s ornament, and not an ordinary creature. I obeyed Shiva’s command – at midnight walked out and put my arm into the snake hole.” (p.216).

This elaborate description has many mythical references which are part of Indian epics and Indian culture. Snakes, as Gods and Goddesses, have significant place in Hindu religious and spiritual practices. In Hindu epics, several Snake Gods are mentioned. ‘Adi Sesha’ or ‘Anantha’ (a thousand hooded serpent), on whose coils Lord Vishnu rests, is said to hold all planets and universe on his hoods. According to Hindu mythology, the snake ‘Vasuki’ was used as a rope during ‘Sagara Mathanam’ and was worn by Lord Shiva as an ornament around his neck. Hindu puranas tell about many other significant snakes. The Snake-charmer says:

“After all, what is a serpent? A great soul in a state of penance waiting to go back to its heavenly world. That is all, sirs.” (p.217)

This shows the immense faith of Indians that snakes are not just ordinary animals but are holy spirits that are worth worshipping.

In this story, some popular beliefs among the folklore also are there. It is a common belief among Indian folklore that the Cobras possess snake-diamonds (Naga Manis) which are of immense value. The father tells the son:

"We must not fail to give Naga two eggs a week. When he grows old, he will grow shorter each day; some day he will grow wings and fly off, and at that time he will spit out the poison in his fangs in the form of a brilliant jewel, and if one possesses it, he would become a king."(p.218).

In the same story, the mythical references around monkeys also are presented. The snake-charmer names the monkey as 'Rama'. The reason he gives is: "*Rama, name of the master of Hanuman, the Divine Monkey. Monkeys adore that name.*" (p.219). One more important mythical reference is made to the white-necked Brahmany Kite, popularly called as 'Garuda'. It is believed to be the vehicle of Lord Vishnu and hence considered sacred. It is a common custom among Indians to pay obeisance whenever they see Garuda, which is observed by the boy in this story. He shut his eyes in a brief prayer to the bird: "*You are a god, but I know you eat snakes. Please leave Naga alone.*"(p.229) This innocent prayer of the boy shows how beautifully R.K. Narayan weaves the culture, myths, and nature into his stories. Indian culture considers every animal and every bird as a holy one and as a reflection the Supreme spirit. An illiterate snake-charmer boy recognizing the importance of Garuda and making obeisance indicates how deep-rooted Indian customs are. Thus, the stories show the ecological spirit of India.

Conclusion:

The three short stories of R.K. Narayan – 'A Snake in the Grass', 'The Snake-Song', and 'Naga' are well remembered for the portrayal of Snakes. These stories present typical humour and irony of R.K. Narayan, but more than that, they touch upon various aspects – environmental, cultural, religious, and spiritual, pertaining to the snakes. These stories display how much love and care Narayan has towards non-human elements of nature. Further, they show how the Indian culture is intermingled with nature, and how animals like snakes and monkeys are portrayed in our ancient and modern literature. It touches upon the core issues of ecotheology and ecospirituality, where the religious and spiritual practices of people are believed to be the influencing factors on conservation of nature. These stories show how the Indian culture sees the same Brahman (Supreme spirit) in every creature and how it provides many ways to protect them in the name of customs and traditions.

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