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RIVER SARAYU: THE HEART AND SOUL OF MALGUDI - AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF RIVER SARAYU IN R. K. NARAYAN'S FICTION

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Abstract

This research article tries to analyse the portrayal of River Sarayu in the fictional world of R.K. Narayan, woven around his fictional town Malgudi. No ecological system is complete without aquatic elements such as rivers, ponds, seas, and oceans. The role played by rivers in shaping human civilization is immense. In Indian literature, mention about rivers has been very frequent. But it is rare to see a writer presenting an entirely fictional river with all its magnificence and beauty. R.K. Narayan achieved this rare accomplishment by creating the river Sarayu and making it an immortal character. Beginning with his first novel 'Swami and Friends' R.K. Narayan showcases Sarayu as a dominant element that played a key role in shaping the lives of the people in Malgudi, their culture, and their socio-economic system. Sarayu not only added beauty to the town of Malgudi on its northern side, but also acted as a spirit that arose the feelings of love and romance, a spring of inspiration to the poets, artists, and even to politicians, a source of irrigation and economic activities in the surroundings of Malgudi, an icon of cultural, religious, and spiritual heritage, and a messiah of peace and harmony. This article tries to analyse how the river Sarayu is portrayed in the novels of R.K. Narayan with its various shades and shapes and how it became an immortal character of Narayan's fiction, particularly from the ecocritical perspective.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Malgudi, R.K. Narayan, Rivers, Sarayu.

Introduction

R.K. Narayan is one of the most charming storytellers that India has ever produced. His greatness lies in the fact that he took the medium of English language and moulded it to his requirements and needs to continue the tradition of Indian storytelling. His literary creation spans across seven decades with about fifteen novels, more than 60 short stories, many other works including shortened forms of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and stories of important epic characters – Gods and demons, and many non-fictional essays, journal articles, memoirs, and autobiographical works.

R.K. Narayan is well remembered by the readers for many of his significant achievements – for his usage of typical Indian Idiom in the English language, for introduction of Indian culture, mythology, and mysticism to the Western world through simple stories and novels, for making wit, humour, and satire as his main literary devices, and for making his characters universally appealing and everlasting. But, his greatest ever achievement for which generations will remember is his creation of Malgudi, the immortal fictional town and its surroundings that include the Sarayu River.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a literary theory that gained momentum in the last few decades. Practitioners of Ecocriticism try to explore the old and current literary texts to find out how nature is portrayed and how the relationship between the human world and the surrounding ecology is projected in these works. John Glotfelty defined Ecocriticism as "the study of the relation between literature and physical environment" (by Cheryll Glotfelty and Fromm 1996 (xviii)). An ecocritical reading of literary texts not only brings nature closer to the modern man but also serves a practical purpose by throwing light on the current issues pertaining to the environment. Such awareness will surely slow down the destruction of nature. In this context, it is important to remember the observation made by William Rueckert: "The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying natural community, and with it the human community. This is what the ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude towards nature. (Glotfelty 107)

Exploring R.K. Narayan's fictional world from an ecocritical perspective helps us understand how the relationship between man and nature has been changing across the times and going towards ecological imbalance. Further, his fiction provides us how ancient Indian culture used to treat and respect nature and its elements with theological and spiritual connotations. Thus, Narayan's novels and short stories stand as examples of eco-theology and eco-spirituality.



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Importance of Rivers in Ecosystem

It is a known fact that the greatest civilizations of the world have taken birth on the banks of rivers – be it Indus Valley Civilization, the Egyptian civilization, the Mesopotamian civilization, the Chinese civilization, or any other civilization that is worth mentioning. Rivers played a crucial role in shaping the culture of the human societies around them, besides being the sources of development and progress. In Indian literature, rivers have always been given a significant role. In Vedic texts, many hymns were addressed to the rivers such as Sindhu and Saraswathi. The first epic in Sanskrit – The Ramayana elaborately makes mention of the Sarayu, the Ganges, the Godavari, and other rivers. Another epic the Mahabharata has its origin itself in the story of Ganga and Shantanu. In Indian culture, rivers are not just seen as lifeless aquatic elements but are considered as the Gods and Goddesses with spiritual significance.

The tradition of including River as a significant element in literature is followed by R.K. Narayan also in his fiction. Narayan's novels and short stories together can be considered as a long epic woven around the imaginary town called Malgudi, its surroundings, and its people. Besides the human characters created across the novels and short stories, the non-human elements also get equal significance and play important role in shaping the fictional world of R.K. Narayan. One such non-human and immortal element created by Narayan is the river Sarayu. Beginning from his first novel 'Swami and Friends', Narayan made the river Sarayu an important background to the plots as well as a significant influence on the characters. Thus, the river Sarayu appears as the moulder of the lives and cultures of the people of Malgudi and its surroundings.

River Sarayu – The Pride of Malgudi

The River Sarayu that appears in R.K. Narayan's fiction is different from the real river with the same name Sarayu, which flows through Ayodhya, the birth place of Rama, in Uttar Pradesh. Narayan created this fictional river 'Sarayu' to suit his fictional setting 'Malgudi'. Those who debate on the real influences on Malgudi generally compare it to the river Kaveri that flows in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

The mention of the River Sarayu begins in the first novel of Narayan, 'Swami and Friends'. The River Sarayu is on the northern side of Malgudi town. It was about ten-minute walk from Ellaman Street, which is the last street of the town. (p.13). Sarayu River comes on the backside of Kabir street houses also. Narayan calls Sarayu as the 'Pride of Malgudi', thus indicating it as an important geographical entity of Malgudi's ecosystem. "The Municipal President took any distinguished visitor to the top of the Town Hall and proudly pointed to him Sarayu in moonlight, glistening like a silver belt across the North." (p.13). The significance attributed to Sarayu River is further elaborated in all his novels and short stories from various aspects.

Source of River Sarayu

The details of the geographical source and course of the river were provided in the novel 'The Guide'. The source of Sarayu was on the misty heights of Mempi Peak. The Tourist Guide Raju takes the tourists there showing it as a beauty spot and a place with spiritual significance. The tourists who visited the spot were all praise for it. (p.59)

The tourists take holy baths in the river basin. There was an inner shrine with an ancient stone image on the pillar, with Shiva absorbing the Ganges River in his matted locks (Gangavatharanam). It was believed to be "the source of Sarayu mentioned in the mythological stories of goddess Parvathi jumping into the fire: the carving on one of the pillars of the shrine actually shows the goddess plunging into the fire and water arising from the spot et cetera." (p.59-60) Thus, the source of the river Sarayu is linked to mythological references and to the goddess Parvathi.

Mythical and Historical References

There is no river in India that is not considered sacred and that has no link to epics. It is the same case with Sarayu also. The magnificent epic and mythological references of Sarayu are interestingly revealed in imagination by Srinivas, the editor of 'The Banner' Newspaper, in the novel 'Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi'. His thoughts on Sarayu and Malgudi are no doubt, a mix of reality and creativity yet serves as a fitting Sthalapurana for a magnificent river like Sarayu.

Srinivas links the origin of the river Sarayu to the Ramayana days. When Lord Rama was on his way to Lanka to battle with Ravana, he rested on a sandy stretch in a grove and looked about for a little water for making a paste for his forehead marking. But, he could find no water there. Then, "He pulled an arrow from his quiver and scratched a line on the sand, and water instantly appeared. Thus was born the river Sarayu." (p.206.)



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Srinivas says that Buddha also walked on the sands of Sarayu. He refers to a little crumbling masonry and a couple of stone pillars, beyond Lawley Extension, as the spot where the Buddha had held his congregation. (p.207) Then, Srinivas takes the history and the significance of the river to the days of Adi Shankara. The great Shankara installed the goddess there and preached his gospel of Vedanta: the identity and oneness of God and His creatures. Later, Srinivas elaborates how, in the later centuries, the Christian missionaries entered with the Bible, and how it paved the way for the British merchants and soldiers and how the Engladia Bank emerged, and so on (p.207) Srinivas concludes his imagination saying that **“Dynasties rose and fell, Palaces and mansions appeared and disappeared, the entire country went down under the fire and sword of the invader, and was washed clean when Sarayu overflowed its bounds. But it always had its rebirth and growth.”** (p.207)

In modern history, during Independence Movement, Mahatma Gandhi came to Malgudi and addressed a gathering sitting on the sands of Sarayu. He even visited the huts of the poor scavengers who were living there on the banks of the river in a wretched condition. (Waiting for the Mahatma)

Though the river Sarayu was a fictional river created along with the fictional town Malgudi by Narayan, the narration of its origin, progress, and flow is so convincing that it appears very much real to the readers. They fell in love with the river and long to visit the holy places and historic relics on its bank.

Beauty of Sarayu and its surroundings

In almost all his novels and short stories wherever the mention of the river Sarayu occurs, Narayan mesmerizes the readers by providing its magnificent scenic beauty. The following description touches upon the beauty of the river 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 Nallappa’s 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)

In ‘The English Teacher’, the description of the river’s beauty is much more intense and enchanting. Krishnan describes his morning association with the river as follows:

“The sand was damp with the morning dew, but as I buried my feet, they felt deep down the warmth of the previous day’s sun. In the half-dark dawn, I saw some persons already out at work, fording the river, bathing and washing. There were immense banyan trees hanging over the river, and birds stirred and chirped in their nests. I walked on at an even pace, filling my lungs with morning air, and taking great strides. I felt I was really in a new world.” (p.8)

Enchanted by the beauty of the river and its surroundings, Krishnan intends to write a poem on nature – including the cold water’s touch on the skin, the cold air blowing on chest and face, the rumble of the river, cries of birds, the magic of the morning light, all of which created an alchemy of inexplicable joy (p.8) . Later, when he visits the river along with his wife Susila, Krishna tells her how much he used to love the early morning walk along the river when he was in the hostel. He says that there was a magic in the atmosphere. Susila also enjoyed her walk along the river. She splashed her feet in the water, rested under the banyan, and heaped up sand.” (p.79) .

In “The Guide” also, the beauty of the river is described very well: **“The branches of the trees canopying the river course rustled and trembled with the agitation of birds and monkeys settling down for the night. Upstream beyond the hills, the sun was setting.”** (p.1). In ‘The World of Nagaraj’, **“Nagaraj enjoys the rumble of the river; the low splash and swish and the far-off strains of rough music from cart men crossing Nallappa’s grove while urging their animals on, the sounds softened by the distance....”** (p.166)

In the short story “Second Opinion”, the musical quality of the river is well presented. **“The river flowed down rather tamely at some distance from their houses although one could hear it roaring along wildly in spate when it rained on Mempi Hills.”** (Malgudi Days 249) **“It was all right as a vision to open the little door at their backyards and sit at the edge of the flowing river to listen to its music.”** (p.249) **“The evenings on the bank of Sarayu, one can hear rustling of the leaves overhead and the sound of running water, the birds chirping and crowing in the dark while settling on their perches for the night.”** (p.249)



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A Resort to All People

The sand-banks of Sarayu River are the evening resort to all the people of the town. (Swami and Friends¹³) Children like Swami, Mani, and Rajam play there. Youngsters like Chandran like spending their evenings at the river, staring at the beautiful girls and falling in love with them. The college and hostel were very nearer to the river. Hence, college students come to the river very frequently. Margayya's son Balu, who has no interest in studies, goes to a restaurant and later buys a packet of cigarettes and then spends on the bank of the Sarayu River, behind the college. (The Financial Expert)

In the backyard of Raman, the painter's house, river Sarayu flowed softly and birds on the trees over the steps created a din before settling down for the night. Men sat around in groups, some walked along the sands; women were filling their pitchers or washing clothes along the river's edge. (The Painter of Signs)

In 'The Guide', it is further elaborated how the river bank is used as a retreat by the people of Malgudi:

The evening had darkness. There were still a few groups sitting here and there on the sand. Some students were promenading. Children were playing and running in circles and shouting. On the river step, some men were having their evening dip. Far off at Nallappa's grove, cattle were crossing the river with their bells tinkling. The stars were out. The Taluk office gong sounded seven. A perfect evening- as it had been for years and years." (p.150)

A setting of Serenity and Harmony

Narayan frequently describes the river Sarayu and its surroundings as the setting of harmony and Peace. In 'Swamy and Friends', he lays this serene, harmonious setting for the evening when the three friends Swami, Mani, and Rajam were trying to patch up their differences:

"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." (p.20)

After taking bath in the river, the English teacher Krishnan felt he had a new lease of life. (The English Teacher 8) He attributes his joyful feeling to nature and its elements. He says:

"... There are subtle, invisible emanations in nature's surroundings: with them the deepest in us merges and harmonizes. I think it is the highest form of joy and peace we can ever comprehend." (p.9)

Provider of Health and Happiness

In Indian culture, taking a river bath every morning is considered a spiritual and healthy habit. Many of the characters of Narayan's fiction have this habit of taking an early morning bath in the Sarayu river. The English teacher Krishnan, his pune Singaram, the printer Nagaraj, the adjournment lawyer, the Painter Raman and his old aunt... all have the habit of taking river bath. Stressing upon the importance of river bath, Singaram says: **"...A river bath is the real thing for a real man. I am eighty years old, and have never had a day's sickness, and have never bathed in hot water." (The English Teacher 11)**

Grand Setting for Love and Romance

The banks of the river Sarayu provided an apt setting for expressing the feelings of love and romance. In the Bachelor of Arts, Chandran used to wander on the banks to watch beautiful girls. He finally fell in love with Malathi here only. In The Painter of Signs, Raman's true love begins on the river steps in his backyard when Daisy unexpectedly comes and meets him. Sitting on the sands of Sarayu Rosie tells her past story to Raju. She experiences joy in the lap of nature. In The Dark Room, Ramani spends his secret evenings and nights with his clerk Shanta Bai on the sands of the river. Thus, the river Sarayu and its sand-banks provide an apt setting for the romantic feelings among the youth and the consummate lovers.

Centre of Religious and Spiritual Activity

Many people visit the Sarayu River's source on the Mempi peak and take a plunge in its holy waters. There are many ancient and famous temples and spiritual centers along its bank. Raju, used to take tourists to these temples. Interestingly, after his release from prison, Raju takes shelter in an old temple at the river bank near the village Mangala, which later turns into a place of immense spiritual activity. Velan, a villager from Mangala mistakes him for a Swami. Later, the thrust role of Swami leads Raju into forced fasting inviting rains to end a drought. However, after a few days, he continues the fasting with willingness and a sense of sacrifice. The same River Sarayu, whose source in the hills he used to visit as a guide has now become the seat of his spiritual activity. A huge crowd surrounded the old temple to watch Swami (Raju) perform his penance. His fate and life go with the analogy of a river's course.



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It is apt to quote his own words in this context: **“What must happen; no power on earth or in heaven can change its course, just no one can change the course of that river”** (The Guide 22).

Source of Development and Economy

Sarayu River is the source of Agriculture and allied activities and other economic activities in the Malgudi region. **“Sarayu was one of the loveliest rivers in India, coming down from the heights of Mempi Hills and winding its way through the northern sector of Malgudi, an ornament as well as a means of irrigating tens of thousands of acres...”** (Mr. Sampath 71)

The development in Malgudi by clearing the jungles and mountains began during the British rule. Frederick Lawley, a military governor, who had settled down in Malgudi was responsible for the development. **“He cleared the jungles and almost built the town of Malgudi.”** (Malgudi Days 153) He established here the first cooperative society for the whole of India, and the first canal system by which thousands of acres of land were irrigated from the Sarayu, which had been dissipating itself till then....” (Malgudi Days 154)

In ‘Mr.Sampath- The printer of Malgudi’, the Board President opens a bridge, five miles from Malgudi, across the Sarayu. Sampath says to Srinivas: **“Do you know that it is going to transform our entire Malgudi district? This is going to be the busiest district in South India.”**(p.70) This shows the growing significance of Sarayu for the economic development of the area. On the river banks, agricultural and other activities increased over a period of time. Dr. Pal, who used to live in the old garden near Sarayu, had to move out of it as someone bought it, and has been farming on a large scale there. (The Financial expert)

Power projects, Modern industries, circus companies, and film studios were emerging on the banks of Sarayu. A film company has taken five acres beyond the river on lease and was building a studio. (Mr. Sampath- The Printer of Malgudi). The power project and other forest activities at the source of the river on the mountain in the Mempi forest increased the assortment of people and traffic through the small and silent villages on the road to Mempi forest.

The river bank also has become a location of new government offices, colleges, and hospitals. In “The Man-Eater of Malgudi”, there is a mention of laying the foundation for a veterinary college and animal welfare hospital on the other bank of Sarayu, by a deputy minister, and allotment of ten acres of land for the same. (p.92)

On one way, all this development appears as progress, and on the other way, it appears as the encroachment of riverbank, which will, in the long run, result in environmental problems and ecological imbalance.

Harbinger of Environmental Crisis

R.K. Narayan is not just a lover of nature, but an environmentalist in his own way. Through all his stories and novels, he highlights environmental issues and emphasizes the need for protecting nature. He uses River Sarayu in his stories and novels not just as a beautiful setting, but also as a harbinger of environmental crisis. He portrays very clearly how the change in the river ecosystem impacts the environment.

The river Sarayu which gifted civilization, culture, prosperity, and identity for generations started suffering the impact of man’s selfishness in the modern era. Earlier, people used to show their respect and reverence towards the river with religious fervor and spiritual practices. But, in the modern generation, the river is only looked at as a retreat for entertainment and a source of material progress. The modern achievements in science and technology also started showing their negative impact and influenced the course of the river. All these issues have been presented by R.K. Narayan in his novels and short stories, in an indirect manner.

The change in the surroundings of the river Sarayu over a period of time is well explained by the bearded man, in ‘The Vendor of Sweets’. He says that “the place is not as it used to be. Now, too many buses run on the highway, ever since that project in the hills started...”. (p.87). He further says: **“In those days people did not go up the mountain as much as they do now; robbers hid themselves in the jungles, and tigers and elephants roamed the foothills.”** (p.87). This narration clearly shows how the highways, irrigation, and Power projects have encroached upon the natural systems like forests and mountains and made the wild animals homeless.

In the short story “Second Opinion”, the protagonist’s mother presents how the change in people’s attitudes and habits has resulted in the change of the course of the river Sarayu and posing an environmental problem. Earlier, the river Sarayu was very nearer to their backyards in Kabir Street. Gradually, it became inaccessible, owing to thorns and wild vegetation choking the path. The



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mother says that in her younger days they had treated the river as a part of the home. Every house in Kabir street was having access to the river through a back door. The women bathed and washed and took water in pots. The men sat on its sand bank at dusk and dawn for their prayers. (Malgudi Days 250) She further says: **“the river used to be much nearer to us in those days...it’s somehow moved away so far out. When wells were dug people became lazy and neglected the river; and no wonder she has drawn herself away.”**(p.250)

The mother stresses the importance of caring for the river: **“at Ellaman Street, even today, the river nestles closer to the houses, since they care for it and cherish it. They have built steps and treat her with respect. They never fail to light and float the lamps in Karthik month... Whereas in our street people are lazy and indifferent.”** (p.250). She throws light on the root cause of the river’s retreat when she says that by digging individual wells at backyards, people neglected to respect the river, and hence, the present situation. **“In those days, I begged your father not to dig a well, which encouraged others also....”** She could never forgive the well-diggers. (p.250). This particular discussion stands as one good example to showcase R.K. Narayan’s concern for nature in general and worry for the plight of the rivers in particular.

There is another significant angle to the mother’s argument. As long as the people lived as a community and used the river for their common good, they respected it. But, when they became selfish and dug wells in their backyards, they started living lives without any social contact, and neglected the river or to say neglected nature. It highlights the importance of community participation in protecting nature.

In ‘The Guide’ the devastating results of the change in the course of the river Sarayu due to modernization, man’s interference in nature’s activities, and the impact of scientific explorations are well discussed. When he looks at the drying river, Raju thinks **“... the river seemed to wind back to the mountain ranges of the Mempi, to its source, where he had often conducted tourists. Such a small basin, hardly a hundred square feet with its little shrine – what had happened there to make this river shrink so much here? He noticed that the borders were wide, more rocks were showing, and the slope on the other side seemed to have become higher.”** (p.95) The question of Raju is not just for himself, but to the entire humanity, which needs to think seriously about the issues such as droughts, environmental pollution, depletion of water resources, etc.

The discussion of the innocent peasants with Raju gives further clues on the causes of such a distressing situation: **‘Is it true, Swami, that the movements of aeroplanes disturb the clouds and so the rains don’t fall? Too many aeroplanes in the sky’. ‘Is it true, Swami, that the atom bombs are responsible for the drying up of the clouds?’** (p.96) Here, the aeroplanes and atom bombs are symbolic representations of modern science and technology. The discussion refers to the direct and indirect impact of modern technological developments on the environment.

The impact and ill-effects of the negligence of the river ecosystem are further discussed in the same novel. **“The wells in the villages were drying up. Huge concourses of women with pitcher arrived at the river, which was fast narrowing. From morning to night, they came in waves and took the water. Raju watched their arrival and departure as they passed in files on the high ground opposite; looking picturesque, but without the tranquility inherent in a picture.”** (p.96) Later, the further impact of the drought is seen in the deaths of crocodiles and domestic animals. The environmental degradation was even responsible for the social unrest that cropped up in the small village. This description highlights the importance of the protection of rivers to have tranquility and harmony in human life.

Conclusion

Although the fiction of R.K. Narayan appears to have been dominated by the sketches of middle-class people with a touch of humour, an in-depth analysis of his works brings out his immense love for nature and intense concern for the environment. In his fictional world of Malgudi, the river Sarayu becomes the heart and spirit with its varied forms and magnificent messages. It brings harmony among the fighting children, attracts youth towards love and romance, and inspires poets, painters, and dancers to dedicate themselves to their chosen art form. It helps people with broken hearts to seek peace and harmony. It even transforms a selfish tourist guide into a self-less soul that prays for rains to end the drought. Finally, the River Sarayu, in Narayan’s fiction gives humanity a strong message: **“Care for the River: Then the river cares for you”**.

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