Dislocating Anthropocentrism: R. K. Narayan’s *A Tiger for Malgudi*

**Abstract**

Anthropocentrism as opposed to ‘ecocentrism’ approves of human control over nature. It promotes artificial growth in nature. Anthropocentric discourses sanction human looting of natural treasure without minding of impending end of it. These discourses don’t justify nature’s dual role as preserver and destroyer. These see man and nature as two separate regions. The latter is only subordinate to the former.

The incessant exploitation of minerals and bio resources has posed innumerable challenges to human survival of catastrophic potential. Deforestation has destroyed to the larger extent the beauty of bio world. Forest animals became shelter-less. Deforestation shows the pathetic condition of animals. Materialistic discourses allow poaching and trading of rare species of animals and trees. R. K. Narayan undervalues the material hankering of modern people. In the novel, he puts forward his stand point from the stand point of Raja, the tiger and hero of the novel.

Modern man (especially materialist) doesn’t let others (poor people and animals) to survive if they are not at his beck and call. The novelist pities on the poor philosophy of modern materialist people. He brilliantly disbands human-centrism in the novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983).

**Keywords:** Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Raja, Modern Man, Forest, Animals.
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To see the frequent ecological imbalances, social and cultural scientists arose against continuing mal-treatment of entire manifest world (nature). By nature, they mean the whole cosmos. Nature is infinite and therefore everywhere. To respect nature is to save ourselves. They believe in the soundness of entire creation. Eco-critics contest and oppose flamboyantly any kind of interference with natural order for instance, crossbreeding. A man is simply the part of creation like other numerous parts of it. Every part of the creation is interrelated and interdependent. No unit can survive without other units. Air, fire, water, earth, and space are everywhere identically. And therefore ecological trouble will not affect exclusively one country instead will affect the entire world. Whatever we see around is part of and brought out by nature. Any attempt that takes man apart from nature will fail entirely to understand the system of creation.

The simplistic and sustaining potential of air, fire, water, earth, and space (countless by-products thereof included) evolved judiciously but mysteriously the entire creation. These great elements must be saved and nurtured primarily for lives on earth. There should be due harmony among all units of creation. Our enharmonic relations cause largely exploitation of nature in many ways for instance, phenomena of deforestation, desertification, water crisis, air-pollution, coastal inundation, increasing atmospheric-warmth, cyclones etc. Abuse of elements of creation by human hands can be held responsible for all forms and shapes of environmental crisis. Exploitation of any sort is directly the transgression of natural justice. Eco-critics critique anthropocentric ethical systems and ask people to go along with ecosystem. Since man is an intermediate player in the drama of material and abstract reality therefore, it is prerequisite to understand the nature of Nature and Man (here ‘n’ and ‘m’ are intentionally capitalized). Eco-critics never visualize men in conflict with nature. All forms of ecological imbalances are anthropogenic and hence they must be got over immediately.

Anthropocentrism refers to a system of belief that man is the center of all of things in the universe. It takes man and nature as two separate regions. The latter is
only subordinate to the former. Rob Boddice in an Introduction to his book *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments* opinionated, “Anthropocentrism is expressed either as a charge of human chauvinism or as an acknowledgement of human ontological boundaries. It is in tension with nature, the environment and non-human animals” (Boddice 1). As J. Baird Callicott remarks: An anthropocentric value theory (or axiology) by common consensus, centres intrinsic value on human beings and regards all other things, including other forms of life, as being only instrumentally valuable, i.e.; valuable only to the extent that they are means or instruments which may serve human beings (Callicot299).

During pre-Socrates era, two schools of thought come to the fore; one, believed that man had no distinction over other creatures like worms, animals etc. and the other known as the Sophists (a group of teachers and philosophers in 5th century B.C.) position man on the top of hierarchy. More or less the Sophists tradition continued through Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Then, the Stoics came over with novel ideology. The Stoics subordinated man to the universal laws of nature. He should go alongside nature. Rene Descartes in 17th century told that mind and body are two entities and the former rules over the latter. His dualism ensures man’s superiority over other non-humans as man is the sole possessor of rationality. He saw animals without feelings, sensations, and rationality. It is erroneous. His idea was based on the politics of dominance. Animals should not be viewed as human resources. Some animals if domesticated must be given family-like caring.

Definitely, animals don’t have man-made language but human beings likewise are poor at animal’s language. Both do their communication in their own ways. Aldo Leopold is sometimes designated as the father of environmental ethics. He examined man’s relation to land, vegetation, and animals in his critical writings published in 50s. John Muir and Jeremy Bentham sardonically disapprove of animal butchering and poaching. They see animals parallel to human beings. Eco-critics evaluate representations of animals and their relation with human beings in cultural discourses. The Judeo-Christian tradition signs man’s superiority over non-human beings and plants. All natural resources are for the betterment of men. Carolyn Merchant writes:
The new image of nature as a female to be controlled and dissected through experiment legitimated the exploitation of natural resources. Although the image of the nurturing earth popular in the Renaissance did not vanish, it was superseded by new controlling imagery. The constraints against penetration associated with the earth-mother image were transformed into sanction for denudation (Merchant 84).

In reaction to anthropocentric philosophies, eco-centrism arose. Eco-centrism places ecosystem at the centre (not in terms of space) rather than humanity. The survival of humanity is altogether at the mercy of ecosystem. Eco-critics strongly condemn the arrogance of anthropocentrism. Greg Garrard points out in his Eco-criticism (2004):

Much ecocriticism has taken for granted that its task is to overcome anthropocentrism, just as feminism seeks to overcome androcentrism. The metaphysical argument for biocentrism is meant to sustain moral claims about the intrinsic value of the natural world, which will in turn affect our attitudes and behaviour towards nature (Garrard 176).

To the Western and American thinkers, man occupies highest place in the web of life. For them, nature and natural resources are to be made subservient to human needs. Such kind of defective view of nature is ratified by Greek humanism, Judeo-Christian, and Christian culture and tradition, especially the Bible. These cults hold men superior to other living beings, and non-living things for their rational faculty. Here let me say that Hindus have greater exposure to eco-philosophies than that of Christian, and Judeo-Christian people. Hence turn to Hinduism. Lyn White traces roots of anthropocentric sight in Christianity. According to him, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen. It gives immense authority to men over nature. All creatures and nature are simply at his/her disposal. Lyn White further writes:

By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the
physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes. And, although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image (White 9).

Deep Ecology, the radical form of environmentalism was conceived by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in early 70’s but gained momentum in 80’s in the hands of US environmentalist Bill Devall and George Sessions. The vision of Deep Ecology is to shift ‘anthropocentrism’ into ‘ecocentrism’ to ensure our planet safe. Anthropocentrism has a very long history. A Greek philosopher named Protagorus contemporary to Socrates is of the opinion that ‘man is the measure of all things’. Even Holy Bible is at the core ‘anthropocentric’. In the first chapter of Old Testament-Genesis- God after the creation of man says, “Let them (mankind) have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that crept upon the earth.”(26).Deep ecologists recognize independent value of non-human world. Hence human beings have no right to destroy it except to meet vital needs. The value of it must not be determined by its utility to human beings. It asks for drastic changes in consumption habits not only for averting catastrophes but also for spiritual and moral awakening. To ‘deep ecologists’, mountains, rivers, hills, animals, trees, etc. deserve due respect. Ynestra King is of the opinion: “A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity” (King 20).

Hindu culture and tradition has been ever eco-oriented since Vedic period. Eco-oriented ancient practices still can be seen at least in rural belts of India. Indian culture is not opposed to growth and development. Development should take place but without disturbing the eco-system. Indian philosophers distinguish themselves by their spiritual philosophy from material philosophy of the West. Spirituality of the East never taught schemes of exploitation and appropriation. In the ancient Hindu traditions, man was looked upon as part of nature, linked inextricably with elements around him. The Hindu tradition is the oldest living religious tradition in the world. It believes in the all-inclusive world-view. It sees divine presence in all living and non-living objects. Hinduism teaches efficaciously how to live in harmony with God’s creation like earth, fire, rivers, forests, pet and non-pet animals and birds, trees, plants,
sun, air etc. No other religion lays as much emphasis on the superiority of nature as does Hinduism. In fact Hinduism is an argument for reverence towards all things in the cosmos. Hindu belief in immortality of soul and reincarnation can guarantee solutions to all kinds of social, cultural environmental crises and justice to all living creatures including human beings. Hinduism does not believe in the supremacy of men. By contrast, anthropocentrism of Western form accelerates materiality and consequently artificiality gains solid ground. Bill McKibben points at dangers of anthropocentrism in his book The End of Nature (1990):

> We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth manmade and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us (McKibben 54).

Owing to excessive anthropic interventions, biological diversity weakened badly and consequently a lot of animal and plant types got into the list of endangered species. Another wing of this trajectory of thought is ‘ecofeminism’. Ecofeminists oppose androcentric dualism, that is, man and woman are two thinking machines but not equally powerful. The latter is the weaker machine. Ecofeminists claim that men exploited women and nature simultaneously. Both are co-sufferers. As ‘anthropocentrism’ other-ed nature, women were other-ed by ‘androcentrism’. Androcentrism refers to a system of beliefs and ways that favours men over women. Ecofeminists by and large try hard continually to reverse the normal hierarchy in which men stood at the peak. It is altogether unlawful to judge animal lives by laws and logics of anthropocentric vision and standard. Eco-feminists express their sincere worries about the weakening biodiversity i.e. the variety of plant and animal life in a particular habitat (or in the world as a whole). Any tendency that promotes hierarchism weakens the eco-balance. A Few eco-feminists denigrate non-vegetarianism. The non-vegetarianism upholds machismo and victimizes women, animals, and the poor people. Eco-feminists does not approve of the hybridization of
seeds because it results in the extinction of several other kinds of eatable grains as well as the health deterioration.

Among the trios, R. K. Narayan is the first thinker and writer who wrote an autobiography of an animal from animal’s vantage point. Normally novels are abuzz with human beings and human characters occupy centre of attraction. Narayan as a novelist in the novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983) chose a tiger named Raja for the hero of the novel. The monopoly of human characters either as a hero or aides got dislocated. Definitely it is inane to take animals simply nature beings requiring no freedom, food, shelter, and our caring. The novelist humanized Raja, the tiger in the novel. The novel focuses on human-animal relationship. Narayan consulted a noted veteran K. Ullas Karanth on the lives of tigers. The novelist sheds light on the selection of the tiger as hero for his novel:

…with a few exceptions here and there, humans have monopolized the attention of fiction writers. Man in his smugness never imagines for a moment that other creatures may also possess ego, values, outlook, and the ability to communicate, though they may be incapable of audible speech. Man assumes he is all-important, that all else in creation exists only for his sport, amusement, comfort, or nourishment (*ATM* 7-8).

*A Tiger for Malgudi* is one of the most mature novels of R. K. Narayan. The novel moves round one central character Raja, a magnificent tiger. The novel begins with Raja, now aged, lost in thoughts about past days beginning from cubhood and early days roaming wild in Memphi forests to life in a cage. Captain, the owner of Grand Malgudi Circus made Raja captive. Raja here found great difference between the silence of forest life and noisy nature of human world-affairs. Raja abhors the human life pattern. Anyhow he brought himself round. He says:

It was uncomfortable, and I had to roar out my displeasure. The noise I made scared the spectators surrounding my cage and sent them [goats, bullocks etc.] running. My guards broke into laughter and shouted at the crowd, “If you are so scared of the tiger locked up in the cage, what’ll you do if we open the door and let it out?” This was their way of joking. And then much talk, inevitable wherever human beings are gathered. *For*
Later on, for the Jubilee Show of the Grand Malgudi Circus, Raja had to accept milk in the company of a goat. This performance was much advertised as “Four-in-one-Act”. During the show Raja could not restrain himself killing the goat. This caused him suffer heavy humiliations of Captain. And even he was ostracized from other animals. This hurt him very much. Gradually the name and fame reached to the ears of Madhusudan (shortened to Madan), a cine director and producer. He was very much impressed by a circus scene in which tiger was pitted against a goat signifying tiger’s belief in non-violence. Having been enamoured by ‘goat sequence’, Madan approached Captain and signed a contract with him for a film. Jaggu, an illiterate but dashing in person whom Madan met while travelling from Trichy to Madras, was chosen as the counterpart of Raja on the human side. Madan appreciated Captain’s prefatory not to the ‘goat-sequence’. He praises Captain’s attempt to train a tiger to live at peace with goat:

Nonviolence is India’s contribution to civilization. I got the idea from your own speech before the tiger act; violence can be conquered only by nonviolence… (ATM 82).

Raja took cine-life and duty embarrassing altogether. After long discussion, Ginger Field was finalized for the tiger shot. In the scene, it was projected to present Jaggu fearless and ward off the tiger by the back of his hand. However all security measures were arranged. On the very first trial, Jaggu could not maintain his personality. He lost his control and even left the set. Two men ran after him. Madan himself went and brought him in his car. He was persuaded that Raja will not kill him in many ways. As such many days passed without any final take. Madan always asked Captain not to be worried about money as the contract time was extending. Raja found Captain getting more and more materialistic. He even sought to make Captain out that he is fully tired and unable to continue serve the film and Captain although Captain was sentimental about Raja. He ever avoided using electric gadget so that he might not lose natural
pride an animal possess. “Although he was different generally in money matters, now a certain degree of greed was overcoming him, a gradual corruption through contact with the film world” (ATM 109), so thought Raja. Raja found film atmosphere completely different from circus. He took the cine activities senseless and degrading and wished a return to circus. Raja even tried to make Captain out in his typical manner but he could not get at. While shooting, Raja pounced on Captain and nipped off his head. As such Captain’s inability to get at the problem of Raja caused his death. Raja killed Captain and liberated himself. His entry into the human world caused much panic and terror among people. All the shops, schools, houses, were closed and sealed in helter-skelter. The school students were asked to return their respective homes. While returning students met across Raja. Students again ran down the school. Raja followed them. All the students were sheltered in the school hall. Raja finding school head master’s chamber open retired to it. He badly needed sleep and rest. Raja was not mindful attacking any one. “Tigers attack only when they feel hungry, unlike human beings who slaughter one another without purpose or hunger…” (ATM 117). He cursed human society and wished again to adopt jungle life. Raja now inside the room and the door shut up.

To see Raja locked up, a teacher remarked, “Now that this brute is safely locked up, we must decide - ” (ATM 118). Master, a saintly teacher immediately retorted, “Never use the words beast or brute. They are ugly words coined by man in his arrogance. The human being thinks all other creatures are ‘beasts’. Awful word” (ATM 118)! The headmaster escaped to attic and Raja in a corner fell asleep. Outside the room a crowd of local peoples, forest officials soon assembled in the school. A shooter named Alphonse along with Ramu and Shekhar came up. The forest and wild life officials opposed Alphonse killing Raja. Alphonse insisted that he would only kill tiger and save the headmaster. The people were excited and encouraging Alphonse. Even someone called Raja brute. Master opposed right away arguing, “He is no brute….No more than any of us here” (ATM 130). “My Master suspected that Alphonse had offered a substantial bribe, as he was known to be engaged in a flourishing business exporting tiger skins” (ATM 136). But Master later dared and got the headmaster’s safe relieving. Soon Master and Raja began to understand each
other’s sentiments. Through his yogic powers he subdued Raja's ferocity: “Understand that you are not a tiger, don't hurt yourself. I am your friend....” How I was beginning to understand his speech is a mystery. He was exercising some strange power over me. His presence sapped all my strength. When I made one more attempt to spring up, I could not raise myself. “When he touched me, I tried to hit him but my forepaw had no strength and collapsed like a rag” (ATM 144-45).

The people living close by were under the spell of Master’s feat. Raja used to follow him like a bear without casting glance on any one. Everything so far put on normalcy. Master told that no sacred text prohibited approach to a tiger. Raja now has become Master’s faithful fellow. He further explained to the chairman about his philosophy:

“There is no such thing as my life or your life before the eyes of the law: in the eyes of law all lives are equal. No one can allow you to murder yourself…” “Life or death is no one’s hands: you can’t die by willing or escape death by determination. A great power has determined the number of breaths for each individual, who can neither stop them nor prolong…” (ATM 142).

While discoursing with Raja, Master extolled God and His all-pervading spirit into “every creature, every rock and tree and the sky and the stars; a source of power and strength” (ATM 157-58). To Raja the term God was a little vague. On being asked how his God is. Raja replied. His answer dislocates smartly anthropocentric view of God:

…God must be an enormous tiger, spanning the earth and the sky, with a tail capable of encircling the globe, claws that could hook on the clouds, and teeth that could grind the mountain, and possessing, of course, immeasurable strength to match (ATM 158).

The number of visitors multiplied soon. Raja accepts that “he did not treat me as an animal which sat before him in respectful silence trying to understand his words; I only felt grateful that he was trying to transform me in so many ways. How he could
do it was his own secret’ (ATM 158). One day, while talking with a visitor Master showed his great respect for Raja:

…Remember he is only a tiger in appearance…. He is a sensitive soul who understands life and its problems exactly as we do. Take him as a gift from God; only please don’t put him in rough company (ATM 175).

On the basis of foregoing discussion, the novel A Tiger for Malgudi is more than an autobiography of Raja, a magnificent tiger. R. K. Narayan in the novel presented himself as a staunchest supporter of wild-life. Master changed Raja altogether. Thus Narayan’s arguments on various steps dislocated human oriented ideologies and visions. He is in fact a true eco-critic in modern sense. Save the tiger! Save the wild-life!
Works Cited: