

Human and Nature Interactions in Kesar Lall's Folk Tales from Nepal: An Eco-Critical Reading

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Abstract

Folktales are traditional stories orally handed down to the succeeding generations. They portray the co-existence and collaborations of humans, non-human characters and environments. This study explores the relations and interactions of humans, non-humans and nature in Kesar Lall's Folk Tales from Nepal: The Origins of Alcohol and other Stories from ecocritical perspective. It has used ecocriticism as a theoretical tool. It is a library and qualitative research. The main finding of this study portrays the association and interactions among humans, non-humans and nature. The attitude of humans exploits the biological and physical environment for the sake of humans. Humans have hostile relations with non-humans like ogre in the natural world. The folktales demonstrate metamorphosis nature of gods and nagas. They portray the death of human beings as the natural process. They have abundant evidences of environments, and they transfer the value of ecological wisdom more to the readers. This study increases the environmental literacy of youths and expands the Nepali folktales to English speaking communities.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, environment, folktale, nature, non-humans

Introduction

Human lives and behaviors are affected by the interactions of humans with non-human characters and environments. Nature shapes the people's livelihood. This study explores the relationship and interactions of human beings with non-human characters and nature from the viewpoint of ecocriticism. It also explores the influence of nature on the human behaviors and cultures through the ecocritical perspective. Ecocriticism in literature discusses the human thought on nature, and human livelihood gets influenced from animals, natural and greenery. Ecocriticism rejects that the human lives are socially or linguistically

constructed as the various theories advocate. Ecocriticism as a theoretical perspective looks at literary texts to explore the relations between the humans and the animals and environments. Biological and physical environment influence the human livelihood and thought that have been cultured in human lives. Ecocriticism emphasizes that nature and non-humans formulate the cultures of human beings. Therefore ecocriticism proclaims the interconnections between nature and culture. Environmental issue has been a major topic in the world because of the relations between man and nature. The environmental experts advocate the value of environmental conservation to human lives. Literary writers depict the values of environmental sustainability connecting with humanity. Folktale is one of the major sources to impart the knowledge of environmental values to new generations.

Folktale is an oldest form of oral literature that carries the relations and interactions of men with other biological and physical environments. It imprints the knowledge of environmental conservation and protection on the new generations. It makes people aware of environmental utility and conservation to human lives. Everyone needs to become more environmentally aware of affliction and trauma of environmental damage. Folktales for children and green literature for adults may be educational tools for the wisdom and conservation of nature to overcome the devastation. Nepali folktales are rich environmental issue as in environmental literature. Nepali folktales have been still minimal study and discourse for domestic and foreign readers, especially the younger generations. The physical and biological environments play significant roles in generating the culture and attitude towards nature. Therefore, this study aims to explore the association of nature with human lives and culture in Kesar Lall's folktales. It studies human and non-human characters (such as animals, plants, objects) and their interactions in the folktales through the ideas and theory of ecocriticism that discusses the relationship of humans, non-humans and nature in the formation of culture. It brings together humanity and nature, and explores how nature and natural world are connected with humanity in the literary texts.

Statement of the Problem

Humans live in the natural environment. The behaviors of humans have been guided by the nature. Their behaviors and cultures have been formed naturally by connecting with non-human characters and environments. Therefore, they cannot be dissociated from non-human, nature and environment, and Kesar Lall's folk tales depict the relationships among living organisms and the adjacent physical environments. Natural world and environmental resources modulate human lives. What and how are the relationships and interactions among humans, non-humans and nature presented in Kesar Lall's folk tales? Human characters are connected to and concerned for non-human and nature. This study attempts an analysis of Kesar lall's *Folk Tales from Nepal: The origins of Alcohol and Other Stories* from ecocritical viewpoint.

Research Questions

- a) In what ways do the folk tales depict the relationships among human beings, non-human characters and nature?
- b) How do the non-human characters and the physical environment affect people?

Objectives

This research aims to find the following objectives:

- a) To find out the ways the folk tales depict the relationships among human beings, non-human characters and nature.
- b) To explore the non-human characters and the physical environment that affect people.

Ecocriticism as a Theoretical Underpinning

Ecocriticism as a literary theory is the study of literature how the relation between nature and humans is portrayed, and how nature influences human behaviours and cultures in literary texts. "Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint. Texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects" (Kerridge 530). Ecocriticism interconnects science and humanities, and analyzes the relationships and interactions between the humanity and the environment. In 1972, Joseph W. Meeker introduced the term *literary ecology* to refer to "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works" (qtd. in Glotfelty xix). In 1978, the term 'ecocriticism' was possibly first used by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (qtd. in Kerridge 530; Glotfelty xx; Barry 240). Rueckert explained ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (45). It first appeared in academic circles about 1990 (Glotfelty xx). "The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), now the major organization for ecocriticism world-wide, was founded in 1992 at a meeting of the US Western Literature Association" (Kerridge 530). Ecocriticism has fully been recognized as a movement in the 1990s.

Ecocriticism deals with humanities concerning environmental and cultural issues in literary texts. Glotfelty defines, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. [...] Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). Human culture has been impacted by the natural world. "Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and nonhuman" (Glotfelty xix). Dahl also explains the interconnections of "the reality of both nature and humans, [...] both the natural environment and the social system of humans" (1). Human destructive actions also devastate the environments; the destructions and climate changes consequently influence human behaviors and cultures. Ecocritical reading raises awareness for conserving the nature. "Human activities have progressed to

the point where they influence the globe” (Dahl 1). Ecocriticism interconnects humans and nature in literary texts. Environment impacts on the human's daily life, and the condition of physical and biological environments modify the livelihoods of human beings.

Ecocriticism explores the connections between humans, living organisms, physicochemical surrounding and the non-human universe in literary texts (Garrard 5; Cahn and O'Brien 15; Glotfelty xix). It advocates the influence of nature on human culture. “Ecocritics reject the notion that everything is socially and/ or linguistically constructed”, and ecocritics say, “Nature ... affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it” (Barry 243). Nature and humans are correlated. In literary analysis, ecocritics mainly asks the following questions:

- a) How is nature depicted in literary texts?
- b) What role does the biological, physical, geographical representation play in the literary texts?
- c) What is the link of sociocultural and ethical behaviors towards non-humans and environments?
- d) How is human culture related to the biological and physical world?
- e) How do representation and thematisation of environment influence human actions?

Dobie suggests ecocritics to ask such questions in literary texts:

Does the setting function simply as background, or does it play an active role in the narrative? If it plays an active role, how important is it in working out the narrative? If the physical setting were a character in the text, how would you describe him or her? How is nature affected by human beings in the text? How are the human beings affected by nature? How responsible are the human beings for the environment? What questions does the text raise about human interactions with nature? Does the text direct the reader's interest to nature, or only to the human characters? Does the text raise the reader's awareness of the natural world and his or her connections to it? (243)

According to Barry, ecocritics explore “the representation of the natural world,... [and] emphasises ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves” (254-255) in literary works. “The fate of the environment is subject to how the human mind conceives of its surrounding world. [...] Individual and societal treatments of others—both human and nonhuman—are subject to our relationship with them” (Yuki 18). Humans affect the environments. Physical environments construct the culture of humans. “Ecocriticism, unlike all other forms of literary inquiry, encompasses nonhuman as well as human contexts and considerations. ... The study of literature's relationship to the physical world has been with us, in the domain of the pastoral tradition, since ancient times” (Love 1). Ecocriticism encompasses the notion of humans, culture, non-humans, and nature; it also explores the conflicts of humans with nature and natural world.

The idea of nature has long been the subject of ecocritical analysis. Ecological thinkers have amply demonstrated the dangers of a notion of nature that excludes culture and its role in ecological crisis; it positions human beings as outside ecological conditions and superior to the other inhabitants of the world. However, the idea of culture defined by this binary, the exclusive realm of human enterprise, has not been adequately considered. (Feder 1)

Culture has been the product of nature and physical environments. "While our experience of the world is culturally mediated and constructed, culture is itself a product of nature, and human culture is only one of many types of culture in the material world" (Feder 1-2). Ecocriticism discusses "the relationships between characters and their environments, the limits of human power, and the costs and consequences of production" (52). Ecocriticism "is not simply a celebration of the pastoral or the sublime, nor is it a travelogue or an inspirational address" (Dobie 239). It takes environments as significant things that impact on culture. Ecocritics "examin[e] the relationship of literature and nature as a way to renew a reader's awareness of the nonhuman world and his or her responsibility to sustain it" (239). In folktales and environmental literature, ecocriticism advocates awareness or literacy about protecting and conserving the nature and natural world for the sustainability of human lives. "Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology" (Garrard 5). Ecocriticism does not only explore merely the nature and the connection of nature with humans but also analyze the impacts of nature and non-human on human culture and humanity. It investigates environmental issues, cultural issues concerning nature and attitude towards nature in literary texts.

The academic and scholarly studies on Kesar Lall's *Folk Tales from Nepal: The Origins of Alcohol and Other Stories* have not been done by any scholar so far. Therefore, there is no empirical review of this text available here. The study analyzes the text from the ecocritical perspective. The study of folktales creates a sense of belongingness of nature to the children, and also adults to Nepal. Folktales may become a significant educational means of preserving cultural traditions and protecting nature and natural environments for the young minds.

Research Methods

This research is interpretative qualitative study; it is a library research, but not a field research that provides the resources (print and online) to the required information to fulfil the determined objective. For this study, the primary sources (text) is Kesar Lall's *Folk Tales from Nepal: The Origins of Alcohol and Other Stories*, and its secondary sources are topic-related research papers and books. The key thematic terms related to the study such as "folktale", "humans and animals", "man and nature", "ecocriticism", "eco-critical reading" were employed to find the necessary materials from libraries and websites. In the analysis of the texts, content analysis method was utilized in order to interpret the local wisdom of people and the effect of nature on human beliefs, values and behaviours. Ecocriticism

as a theoretical tool has been applied to analyze the characters, their actions and the environmental issues, cultural issues relating environments and people's attitude towards environments presented in Kesar Lall's folktales.

Discussions and Results

Lall's *Folktales from Nepal* as an Environmentally Insight Work

Folktales are the traditional experiential stories of a community orally transferred from generation to generation; they carry the certain beliefs, customs and cultures based on the ancestors' experiences and observations.

Folklore is the experience of not a person, but of the community or the society at large. We may call it the wisdom of the people or the learning of the community. The individual earns knowledge through experience and when experience and knowledge are combined, they voice the same feeling which becomes the feeling of the society.

This feeling gets its expressions in the elements of folklore. (Islam 16)

Folktale has been an oral history that presents the past customs, cultures, practices and information concerning with human and nature. Folktales represent people from the past peasant or rural groups; they have been set in natural world, and human cultures are connected with environments. They reflect human characters' relations and connections with nature, and their socio-cultural and economic life connecting with the natural world. Kesar Lall here collected some Nepali folktales from different parts of Nepal and have published the stories in *Folk Tales from Nepal: The Origin of Alcohol and Other Stories*. These folktales have become an important source for Nepali literary and cultural studies. The result and discussion of this paper attempts to explore the connections and interactions of human beings with non-humans and environmental and ecological aspects in Kesar Lall's work *Folk Tales from Nepal*.

Of Lall's folktales, the story "The Keeper of the Treasure" depicts a man "Newar" and "Mohan Simha"; snake "naga serpents named Vasuki"; supernatural beings gods "Lord Shiva" and "Lord Vishnu"; a legendary bird-man called Garuda; fruit "rudrakshya"; Bagmati river and the religious place Pashupati temple. The relationship between man and snake is harmonious – "No Newar would ever think of harming a naga serpent" (1). The supernatural being Lord Vishnu protects Garuda that attempts to kill the naga serpent. The antagonism of serpent and *garuda* shows the hostile relations in natural world. After a long penance praying of the supernatural being Lord Shiva for protection, *Naga* serpent gets protection from the danger of Garuda. The relation of Lord Shiva and *naga* Vasuki is that Lord Shiva protects *naga* from *garuda* and *naga* safeguards of *rudrakshya* and other valuable treasure in the Pashupati temple. It means that the reptile animal *naga* serpent and supernatural being Lord Shiva help each other. As the ecocriticism advocates, here is the relation of animal and non-human. The *rudrakshya* and other treasures such as gold and silver are offered by human beings to the supernatural beings Lord Shiva in the religious places like Pashupati temple.

There is knowing what immense treasures there are in the temple of Pashupati, for it has been a repository for centuries of untold offerings of gold and silver by kings and commoners alike. The most valuable treasure in the temple is however known to all – it is a very seed called *rudrakshya*. A holy man gave it to a Manandhar of Banepa named Mohan Simha, who, in turn, took it to the temple and offered it to Lord Shiva. (Lall 3)

This narration indicates the relations of humans, supernatural beings (gods) and plant seed. It also represents the religious culture of humans offering seed *rudrakshya* to Lord Shiva in the Pashupati temple. The human culture is influenced by non-human gods, plant (*rudrakshya*) and religious environment Pashupati temple. The Pashupati temple is situated by Bagamati river. The religious places have usually been established either by rivers or amidst jungles. Ecocritical theory says that humans worship nature; people take Bagmati river as religious river in Nepal. There are not only good nature animals in the environment but bad nature animals. In the story, another *naga* lived Koyana many miles down the Bagmati river steals *rudrakshya* from the temple, but the keeper of the treasure *naga* Vashuki killed that stealer *naga* and restores safely in the temple. Thus, the folktale “The Keeper of the Treasure” depicts the relations and interactions of humans, non-humans and nature.

In the story “A Serpent’s Tale”, the relation and interactions of humans and non-humans are portrayed. Two men are on the way to the holy place Varanasi of India. It is a culture having religious pilgrimage in the society. There is a supernatural power that disguise a snake into a man. One of them is disguised as a man from a snake that belongs to Taudaha, Kathmandu – “I have assumed a human form only for travelling” (4). The disguised *naga* is obstructed by the *naga* of Gajuridaha of Dumja. He has to fight with the Gajuridaha *naga* to move further – “My friend, I am afraid I cannot go much further. I’ll have to wrestle with the *naga* of the lake before he will let me go” (4). He interacts with another man about the situations and message for his father lived in Taudaha:

Please keep this ring with you, he said. I am going into the water now. If you see milk in the water, I have won and I’ll come up. If you see blood, know that I have lost. Then, will you for my sake go to Taudaha. Drop the ring into the lake and let my father know what has happened to me. (Lall 6)

After a few minutes, the water of the lake becomes milky, but soon becomes red. The man goes to the lake Taudaha of Kathmandu to communicate the sad message to the *naga* of Taudaha. He throws the ring into the lake and describes the event of Gajuridaha to the *naga* of Taudaha. This indicates the practice of interactions between humans and animals. The symbol of ‘milk’ refers to life and victory, but the symbol ‘red’ death and defeat. These symbols have been used as a culture in human world. The lakes are also sources of lives for biological environments. Even in the story “The Women of Lubhu”, a *naga* disguised as a man interacts with a woman, and impacts positively on her life. In the story, a man visits Lubhu and stays overnight in a house. While drinking water, the host woman sees a serpent’s tongue in his mouth. Then “the man confesse[s] that he [is] a *naga*, a serpent disguised as a man, that he lived in a stream at Chobhar across the hills to the east of Lubhu. The man blesses to the woman’s daughters for hospitality. People still believe that a *naga*

visits the house in Lubhu and blesses women- "There is a house in Lubhu, where the family never uses a room. The room is dedicated to the unusual visitor who spent a night in the house" (66). This story presents the connections and interactions between humans and animals in the natural world. People still believe and practice of the activities influenced by the non-humans and nature.

Lall's another story, "The Ungrateful Snake" correspondingly portrays the connections and association of humans with animals. In the story, a snake trapped in fire begs for help to a man, and the man saves the snake from fire. But after being saved, the snake wants to eat the man, - "Gratitude must be repaid but I'm not going to do you any good. I'll eat you right away" (7). The helpless man proposes to ask other three animals about the snake's manner. Firstly, the man asks a cow and the cow replies, "As long as I was young I was fed with grass and gruel by my master. But now I have become old and I have no more milk to give. So my master has turned me out of the farm. As far as I am concerned, the snake may eat you" (9). The cow suggests punishing the selfish human. Secondly, an ox responds, "as long as I was young and strong, my master took good care of me, but now that I have become old and cannot work for him anymore, he has turned me out of his house. As far as I'm concerned, you may be eaten by the snake" (9). The ox also opines to harm the self-obsessed human. Lastly, the fox also complains about the self-centered human being: "If I carry but a small chicken from the farm, you would raise a hue and cry, throw rocks at me and chase me across the fields and wood" (10). Although the fox is indignant at men's inhumane behavior, it cleverly kills the snake and saves the man from the snake: "Gratitude must be repaid" (10). This story exposes the reprobate, self-centered manners of human beings to the animals like cow, ox and fox. Humans' inhumane attitudes to animals are injustice to nature. In the beginning of the story, the fire in a hill damages the animals and plants; it needs to be conserved for the sustainable environment for the lives of living things. The cow and the ox eat grass, and the fox eats chicken; it shows the association of animals and plants in the natural world.

In Lall's next story "The Frog", a farmer couple gives birth to a son. The life of people is connected with nature that is, farming. It indicates that humans use nature to live and the earth nurtures the humans. Unfortunately, the child metamorphoses into a frog. The frog makes dry milk of cows and buffaloes and water of pond. It means the supernatural power transforms animals into humans and vice versa. It is one of the ecological properties of folktales. In the story, the frog helps his parents at home and at fields, and interacts with other people, such as the king. The king and farmers farm cows and buffaloes for milk; animals make people's life easier. In the story, the frog marries the princess, and in front of the princess, the frog reveals himself into the god Narayan. When "the princess snatches the frog's skin and throws it into the fire" (17), "he disappears without a trace, leaving his wife to bemoan her fate" (19). The Frog's skin is burnt in fire; he must not remain on earth without his skin" (19). In folktales, the marriage between animals, gods and humans are prevalent; as the ecocriticism advocates, this marriage also connotes the union and connections of humans, non-humans and nature in the natural world.

The story "Titibincha" delineates the hostility and association between humans and animals at home and in the forests. In the story, a man named Titibicha farms one hundred cows, one hundred buffaloes, one hundred goats and one hundred sheep. He uses meadows and country landscapes for grazing in the mountain. The man makes his living happy by keeping livestock; he raises domestic animals in agricultural setting to produce various products such as milk, meat, wool, leather, etc. This shows the importance of the associations of animals to humans. A man-eating giant Ogre has been an enemy for the man, and the ogre damages the all livestock of the man; but with help of other animals such as the eggs, the needles, the peas, the serpents and rams, the man saves his hundreds cows, buffaloes, goats and sheep. 'The meadow in the mountains' represents the landscape of the countryside. Ecocritics celebrates animals in natural meadow.

Lall's stories "A Question of Life and Death" and "The Origin of Alcohol" portray the association and interaction of the life (human) and the death (supernatural spirit). When humans become poor and miserable, they look for the Death, but they become rich, happy and successful life with the help of the Death. Then, they attempt to deny the approach of the Death. The messengers of Death share that they come to visit the sick ones, and if the sick one is not going to die, they stand by her/his head. Or the sick one is about to die, they sit by her/his feet. "Whenever a person becomes ill, we visit him. If the person is not about to die, we stand by his head. Otherwise, we stand by his feet ready to take him away" (37-38). From that time people traditionally believe that no one should stand by the sick person's feet. Thus, the sayings and actions of non-humans depicted in folktales impact on human culture, thought and manners. In the story 'The Origin of Alcohol', a man traps the Death, people do not die. It creates a great problem and imbalance on the earth. Even the Lord Shiva worries about the death of people. To find out the death, the Pravati as the disguised ordinary woman makes alcohol for humans for the purpose of investigating the condition of the Death (40). People enjoy drinking alcohol. The inebriated man who has trapped the Death discloses his secrecy- "I'll not die. I have Death behind seven locks" (42). Then the Parvati releases the Death from human conspiracy. Here is the connections and interactions between humans and non-humans in natural world. After the Parvai leaving the earth, men were habituated of intoxication of alcohol: "from that time men have made their own drinks" (42). This tale shows the source and drinking culture of human beings; men make alcohol from the grains provided by the nature. Lall's collected folktales depict the associations and interactions of humans, non-humans and nature on the earth.

Conclusion

Folktales are traditional narratives orally handed down for illiterate people and for even in academic world. They are full of natural landscapes, non-humans, animals, supernatural beings, gods, hills, mountains, rivers, and lakes in which human live. The settings consist of village, forests, Kingdoms, etc. Ecocriticism associates humans and nature in literature. Here, the ecocritical study investigates the relationships and interactions between human beings and nature, and the impact of nature on humans. Human and non-

human characters talk to each other in the folktales. They depict things in nature where the ancient people live. The earth is the home of humans and non-humans. Kesar Lall's folktales portrays the ample representations of ecological environments, lakes, rivers, villages, landscapes, meadows, domestic and wild animals, plants which impact on human life. The folktales also depict the supernatural beings, gods, metamorphosis or transformation of gods, frogs and snakes into ordinary man or animals. The culture of farming livestock, drinking alcohol are also the products of the environments. Selfish and irrational human attitudes adversely impact on animals and natural world. The Lall's folktales portray the greedy possessiveness of humans upon the biological and physical environments. As an ecocritic, the life and existence of humans, non-humans and nature is possible and sustainable in harmonious associations, connections, interactions and collaboration between humans and environments. The study of folktales from ecocritical viewpoint transfers the values of nature and ecological wisdom to people, especially the younger generation.

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