



The story of King Satal Singh: An ecocritical reading

Raj Kumar Tharu

Tribhuvan University, Mahendra Multiple Campus Nepalgunj, Nepal
rajtharu62@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research paper aims to apply ecocritical theory in the reading of one of the major Tharu language folktales The Story of King Satal Singh. The ecocritical theory is the latest theory developed in the mid-1980s that fundamentally examines in the texts the interrelationship between human beings and the things in the ecology. This is an earth-centered approach of analysis that is interdisciplinary by nature. It looks at the entire ecosphere to trace their interdependency. The plot of the story of king Satal Singh develops in the rustic environment among a small royal family, which is not much different from the family of the ordinary people. The king, queens, prince and his friends, sparrows, pigeons, peacock, elephant, monkey, thistle, marigold, marjoram, river have vital roles in the story. They are all intertwined in such a way that they give a complete picture of rural society in the ancient historic period. Since it's a Tharu folktale, the characters and their behaviors, setting, dialogues resemble more of the Tharu people, who are quite eco-friendly from the time of civilization. For the theoretical interpretation of the text, the ecocritical theory has been applied. As the primary source, the Tharu and English language version of the story was used; whereas the books and articles on the environment, ecology, and ecocriticism were used as the secondary sources of data. The paper concludes that The Story of King Satal Singh embodies the features of ecocritical literary writing in abundance.

Keywords: Calotropis, ecocriticism, ecology, folktale, flying bedstead, Hukka wood, marjoram.

Introduction

The Story of King Satal Singh is a folktale of the Tharu language. The story was limited to oral transmission from one to another generation for the ages. In recent times some written versions of this folktale can be found in the Tharu literature. Folktales are normally associated with ancient times but the Tharu folktales differ from the rest of the community's folktales in the case of its setting and characters' integration with the environment. This is verified with the claim of the caste that they call themselves the children of the land or what they call in their own native term '*Bhumiputra*,' meaning the son of the land. In this sense also Tharu folktales are primarily attached to nature, wilderness, animals and birds, the woods, the rivers, etc. Lombardi explains the features of folktales saying that "it describes how the main character cope with the events of everyday life and the tale may involve crisis and conflict. These stories may teach people how to cope with life (or dying); and also have the themes common among cultures worldwide"¹. Suresh Frederick opines that modern ecological consciousness stresses the balance to be maintained between humans and the natural world. He argues that "a perfect ecology is one in which plants; animals, birds, and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other"². The Story of the King Satal Singh also gives high importance to such things in its plot. It has addressed human life and ecological issue inextricably. Hence the ecocritical reading of the folktale has been presented in this paper.

According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism looks at the relationship between literature and the physical world. He says that it applies an earth-centered approach to literary studies that question how nature is represented in the writings. It discusses, according to Glotfelty, the role of physical setting in the plot of the novel, and asks if the values expressed in the play are consistent with ecological wisdom. He further mentions "Ecocriticism also questions how we characterize nature writing as a genre; it sees how literacy itself has affected humankind's relationship to the natural world"³. The changing concept of wilderness is kept at the center of ecocritical studies that examine the overall effects of the environmental crisis trickling into contemporary literature. Considering the definition of ecocriticism mentioned above, and looking at the story of king Satal Singh, we find an inseparable attachment of the lifestyles of the people of king Satal Singh's time with the natural world.

The Tharu folktale of king Satal Singh describes the lives of the indigenous Tharu people in the unknown past time in history. It is not only the story of kings of Tharus of that time but also the lives of common people who had the foundation of their lives in the jungles, animals, rivers, and many natural things. Their country was not as big as the country of the present time. But their faith in the things of nature was definitely bigger than it is at the present time. Folk or oral tales might simply be linked to the past age of some unknown time, yet, they have served to stabilize, conserve, or challenge the common beliefs, laws, and norms of the groups"⁴. The king has an intimate friendship with

the birds and animals that help him a lot to remain safe and get to his destination. Spending time in the jungle, he gets lost in one hand and also gets his queen due to this on the other hand. All the major characters in the story have survived because of their faith and dependency on the woods, animals, birds, and rivers as well. They have learnt that “ecosystem cannot be understood without taking into account human intervention that may have taken place for thousands of years”⁵. This is the reason why they become able to live in the jungle.

The entire story takes place in the periphery of the physical things of nature. It has shown human relations with non-human things as well as the natural environmental world itself: It has described the distinctly human quality of talking to birds, animals, and plants too. Human traits of understanding non-human language were quite common in the ancient time. Characters in this folktale possess these qualities abundantly. People in the story have the ability to realize non-human feelings too. The death of Satal Singh's mother was similar to the death of the mother sparrow that lived in the royal palace. This is the portrayal of the similarity of fate that both human and non-human creatures share commonly on the earth. He got lost in a big jungle where he has to go through along with his friends after he was expelled from his country for twelve years. The human relationship with the jungle is that they need it to make their houses; and they have to take shelter in the same place as soon as they become homeless. Satal Singh became the king by killing the pigeons to finish the demon off. This very act is an example- how human beings in particular have been using innocent birds and animals for the fulfillment of their necessities. He too was killed and buried in the land and dug up later, ruled again with the indirect help of a flying bedstead. His journey of life from his own country to the new country that he conquered by himself, is tied up with the contribution of nature and natural animals and birds.

Statement of Problem

The human relations with the environment and ecology are inextricable. Human, non-human creatures, as well as plant kingdom, are dependent on each other. Human beings have failed to realize their responsibility towards the ecological system, even though, nature is doing all that it could so that human life would keep on surviving. Why have the people at present turned much cruel to nature and other creatures on the ecological system? What has stopped them from getting harmonious with nature?

Hypothesis

The Story of The process of human civilization itself began in the harmony of nature. Humans have their existence because of the existence of the earth, a part of nature. Human scientific advancements became possible due to nature itself but the tragic thing about them is that they have started giving more importance to themselves instead of giving equal importance to

the entire ecological system as well. People believe more in the human sciences than in nature and natural sciences. This very tendency of human beings has made them indifferent to nature and the natural environment.

Methodology

For the analysis and interpretation of a Tharu language folktale - The Story of King Satal Singh, an ecocritical reading of the text has been applied. Both the primary and secondary sources have been used for the analysis of the text. For the interpretation of the theoretical aspect, some texts on ecocriticism were studied and the theory was related to the characters, their actions, and the environment shown in the folktale. As the primary source, the Tharu language version of the folktale was used. Websites have been massively used for finding topic-related materials.

Objective and of the study

Exploring the interrelationship between nature and human beings is the objective of the study; it also aims at showing the dependency of the latter with the earlier. Bringing forth the issue of ecology through the interpretation of a folktale is yet another objective of this research paper. This study equally focuses on the necessity of keeping the environment and ecology in the condition that it would keep becoming favorable to us.

Limitation of the study:

This paper has been prepared keeping in view the recently developed theory about the environment and the ecology – ecocriticism. I have tried to focus on the actions of the characters that have something to do with the ecological system. My attention is more on discovering how human life is shaped by the environment they live in. I have chosen only a single text for the discussion of an ever-widening literary theory.

Literature Review

Folktales can't exactly be told which time period of the past they belong to; however, some anticipations can be made. It is so, because “they have been told by both literate and illiterate cultures often addressing the wishes and needs of its audience through mythic themes of heroism and adventure”⁶. These types of stories date back to years and years but yet they have some kinds of relevancy with their historical, cultural, ecological, social, political, and economic importance as well. Such qualities of the folktale have distinctly been felt and the process of documenting them in the written form has taken place worldwide sooner or later. Passing down stories orally from one to another generation always has a risk of distortion in the story because the changing environment in the practicality can affect the way people describe the environment of the past time. To stop such risk, the writing of the folktales has also been started globally. The Story of King Satal Singh has also been written for the future generation to know how the time, environment,

and characters of that time differed from the present time environment, characters, etc. The story of Satal Singh presents the intimate relations of human beings with nature, animals, rivers, and birds in different situations. Regarding this relation of human beings with nature Glotfelty writes:

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts 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 the nonhuman.

Looking at the beginning of the story of Satal Singh we find the fate of the baby sparrow and the prince Satal Singh: both of them lose their mother. "Sparrows play an important role in preserving the ecosystem"⁷. The baby sparrow dies due to his stepmother; and the prince is expelled from the country due to the same. This presentation in the text is of ecocritic type based on the idea of Glotfelty, who says that "ecocriticism puts one foot on literature and another on the land"³. The story (as literature) has shown the tragedies of baby sparrow and the prince that befell them due to their mothers' death (the natural process on the earth).

Prince Satal Singh is accused of scratching and pulling the hair of his stepmother. The king believes the new queen and expels the prince for twelve years. But the reality is that the queen scratches herself with a peacock's paws. The innocent bird she had petted at home was used for blaming the prince. This is an example of the human nature of using birds and animals for their vested interests. Peacocks are pet for the beautiful attraction. They dance beautifully to entertain us. But they do not get much love and care from human beings. The queen misuses the peacock. She fails to realize the importance of the bird in the entire ecological system. Looking at the ecological point of view, the misuse of a peacock by the queen in scratching herself is an act that has gone against the ancient tradition of respecting the beauty of the birds in human life. This very act of the queen can be taken as "the reason for the peacock's mortality due to human intervention"⁸. Talking about how birds can give happiness in human life, the Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet Mary Oliver⁹ (1935-2019) writes in her poem *In Our Woods, Sometimes a Rare Music*:

Every spring
I hear the thrush singing
in the glowing woods
he is only passing through.
His voice is deep,
then he lifts it until it seems
to fall from the sky.
I am thrilled.
I am grateful.

After the prince obeys the royal exile for him, luckily, he is accompanied by three of his friends: sons of the Kayastha, ironsmith, and the carpenter. In those days people would take shelter in the jungles in such a situation. From the time of Lord Rama to the time of Lord Buddha, the woods have always presented themselves as the second house. Satal Singh and his friends stay and pass through the Biryabir Khanda jungle from where the story starts taking a problematic twist. A monkey teases the prince showing him his stomach and feet. Monkeys always have had a special kind of relationship with the human being because "monkeys appear to compare types of social relations and make same/different judgments about them"¹⁰. The prince fails to know what the means to communicate, although his friends get what the monkey tries to tell them. Human beings naturally have weaker senses than those of animals and birds. Prince Satal Singh agrees with their interpretation that the monkey was asking them to eat not too much for they still had to travel the long distance. In the same jungle, the prince Satal Singh by mistake kills his favorite elephant and cries bitterly later. He fails to understand "the interconnection of the life human beings and elephants have shaped landscapes and determined the destinies of empires stimulating new kinds of knowledge, skill and practice; and their encounters have also produced intimate forms of companionship as well as conflict"¹¹. He fails to guess that it was his own elephant that was following him from the day he left the palace. He was unable to sense him at night even though the elephant was capable of getting a signal of the prince even from the far distance. *Bhaura Hanta*, the elephant worried about the fate of the prince out of the palace, that is why he follows him despite his poor health. *Bhaura Hanta* gets killed by the man for whom he had traveled up to the jungle. This is an irony on the humans that they are knowingly or unknowingly killing the animals that are worried about and care the human beings. Highlighting on human responsibility of giving love and care to non-human creatures David S. Favre¹² in his book *Respecting Animals: A Balanced Approach to Our Relationship with Pets, Food, and Wildlife* writes:

We need a reset, a reconsideration of the relationship between human beings and the other living beings of this planet. Anyone viewing Earth from high above in time-lapse pictures would perceive that humans are seeking to kill the wildlife of the planet by either consuming them as food (e.g., tuna and sharks), destroying their living places (e.g., the growth of palm oil plantations), or transforming them into products for commercial consumption (e.g., elephants and ivory). It is not a pretty picture. Some of the significant factors that got us to this place include too many humans, capitalism running amok, unseen billions of animals killed every year (e.g., chickens and fish), and the human ignorance of their impact on other beings that share this earth. This is a good planet; it is our only planet. Should we care about all of these other beings? Is there a path forward for the human individuals in our society who do care about these other beings?

The series of bad luck starts in the life of prince Satal Singh after he kills his *Bhaura Hanta*. He cries over the dead body of the elephant the whole night and his friends move ahead without taking him hoping that he would catch them somewhere in the jungle. When he returns to the place where they had slept, it is dawn and the friends had gone already. He is left alone in the dense forest; walks fast on the way which he thinks his friend might have gone through but couldn't find them even by lunchtime. His friends want him to join in the travel: they leave some indication for him on the way. For this, they speak to the food left for him, and some flowers plucked on the way to keep him optimistic about getting united again. About all these things the story reads:

They told the food – "If you are true enough, please keep evaporating until Satal Singh arrives." The rice didn't get cold as long as Satal Singh didn't arrive there. Satal Singh returned, didn't see his friend, and went to search them. On the way, he found the rice hot and evaporating. He knew that it was left for him by friends. He ate it up. To see the hot evaporating rice, he would feel that they were just close from there. He would speed up walking hoping to meet them. His friends would pluck the sweet marjoram flower on the way so that he would not go in another direction. They would say the plucked flower- "If you possess the truth, you won't fade". To find the fresh flowers kept, Satal Singh would follow them. They also kept calotropis flowers on the way. They put marigold flowers on the way. Satal Singh found the flowers as fresh as before¹³.

In the lines above, we see a better example of human dependency on nature and natural things whenever they are in a crisis. They didn't have any other means of communication in that situation in the way of the jungle. They could only ask natural things to help them. Although, the story does not tell us if those things spoke or not they too have been shown in such a way if they understood the human language and respond to them as expected: the rice keeps on evaporating, sweet marjoram, calotropis, and marigold flowers accept their request for Satal Singh and don't fade. These flowers remain fresh as long as Satal Singh doesn't arrive there. The human and no-human communication, a part of ecocriticism is noticed vividly in the above scenario too. This incident in which human non-human communication talks place can also be studied as a healthy relationship between these two things. Plants, the vital things in the ecological system have been found acting in human favor for the fact that "they serve as a symbol in many celebrations and rituals, understanding the past and the current roles plants have in human culture can provide insights into society's value and ensure a continued relationship between plants and people"¹⁴. That is why it's a human duty to respect them and know the limit of their utilization, only then the ecological system won't be affected negatively.

As the story of the King Satal Singh moves ahead, the prince reaches a palace that is seen after crossing the Biryabir Khanda.

That palace belongs to a demon king. His daughter and the prince Satal Singh fall in love with each other and he has to kill her father on her request for he wanted to eat up the prince, who gets the demon's daughter married. Thus, prince Satal Singh becomes King Satal Singh. For this too, Satal has to kill three innocent pigeons on whom the 'life' of the king demon was kept secretly. For the life of his own, King Satal Singh finishes off four more lives. He seems to have felt in realizing that, like other birds in nature, "pigeons have remarkable ability to live in the human environment; and they are considered key species in the ecology"¹⁵.

King Satal Singh and his queen go to have a bath in the nearby river. In those days, the rivers and ponds were good and secure enough even for the queens, kings, and royal family members. The golden hair of the queen flows down to another country and later it becomes the main cause of the death of king Satal Singh. Kutni Burhya comes from another country through the same river. In ancient times people, most often, used to travel through the rivers on boats. The rivers and the brooks served people by providing them water routes too. They had to depend on such natural channels for the simple reason that they were comparatively easy to use than walking ups and down in the thorny ways through the jungles. Kutni Burhya stabs the king on his stomach. The king dies. One of the primitive kinds of belief is that if a person's 'life' residing place is known and finished off, that person is bound to die. This practice has been shown in the death of the demon king and also in the death of king Satal Singh. This practice might sound just superstitious, but it was part of socio-cultural practice in those days. Regarding this kind of socio-cultural practice, Eugene Subbotsky¹⁶, Reader, Lancaster University writes in his article *Religion and Belief in the Supernatural* :

The psychological experiments of the recent decades demonstrated that despite the joint efforts of the official religion and science to uproot the belief in magic from modern Western society, the belief in the supernatural remained on the subconscious level. The presence of phenomena that cannot be explained by science confirms that belief in the supernatural is not strictly atavistic remnants of the human psychology of past historical eras, but has certain empirical foundations.

King Bhondu's desire to get the widower of King Satal Singh as his wife invites tragedy to himself, but he's spell bounded by her golden hair and asks his countrymen to search for her. It's nobody but Kutni Burhya who has an idea to reach to her. She tells king Bhondu that for the completion of the royal job she needs special kinds of boat and oars. The king manages special kinds of the boat made of *Hukka* wood and its oars made of *Manchita* wood. Kutni Burhya, the wicked lady becomes able to get to the country of Satal Singh sailing on the same boat on the same river which had brought the golden hair in the hands of King Bhondu. Ecologically rivers and streams have historical relations with human beings because "they flow connect people, places, and other forms of life, inspiring and sustaining diverse

cultural beliefs, values, and ways of life. The concept of environmental flows provides a framework for improving understanding of relationships between river flows and people, and for supporting those that are mutually beneficial¹⁷. Whenever human beings want to do something difficult job, they are bound to take the help of natural things. Bhondu's wishes are also going to be fulfilled by the use of the woods and rivers. The wicked lady recites some magical lines also so that the boat could sail upward on the river. This indicates how intimate the human relationship with nature is. Human quests for their fanciful wishes and dreams always remain incomplete if they cannot get cooperation with nature.

The queen of Satal Singh is a widower now because Kutni Burhya killed him by deceiving her, who tells her where the life of the king resided. King Satal Singh is shown to have been killed because "it is no surprise that the theme of fear and violence are prevalent in folk and fairy tales"¹⁸. The queen is unaware of the plot of the king's murder. She cries her out for many days. The wicked lady becomes able to take her to the country of King Bhondu, who gets her consent for marriage after a month, provided that he would host a feast for the public for a week. The three departed friends of king Satal Singh arrive to attend the royal feast; the queen comes to identify them. In a few days, she is taken back to her own country via sky route in a flying bedstead made by the carpenter friend of Satal Singh. Before flying back to their country, they have to kill king Bhondu and Kutni Burhya both. The skill of the carpenter friend gets proved very helpful for the rescue of the queen; moreover, the ironman joins the skeleton of the king; the Kayastha man possesses the knowledge to revive the king. He is revived because "the folktales accept the hero as the basic element"¹⁹. The king gets the second life. It is the flying bedstead and the distinct quality of the king's friends that give a happy ending to the story. The story of king Satal Singh heavily depends upon the natural settings, characters, actions, time, fate, and remedy also.

Conclusion

The Story of the King Satal Singh is the picture of the rural monarchy in the sense that the palace described in the story seems quite small with very few courtiers. The father of king Satal Singh doesn't possess a big urban castle with hundreds of servants working for him; neither has he been shown enjoying the royal luxurious life. He just works as a king, probably among a small population. These all the things make it a genuine folktale that is very much popular among the western Tharu community of Nepal. The story doesn't have any description of a city; it starts in the periphery of the village, jungle, and rivers as well. It has plenty of incidents in which the animals and birds have equal importance as those of the men. The ecocritical view is that human beings, birds, animals, and many other things in nature, have a kind of inextricable bondage. They have been surviving due to their mutual relationship. This very concept is found to have been applied in

this folktale of the Tharu language. In a broader sense, the story has spoken a lot about human and non-human relations from the beginning to the end of the story. It's not only the story of Satal Singh but also the story of entire human relations with the whole ecological environment. The opinion of Patrick D. Murphy has also verified the same as he describes ecocriticism as a study of literary work that keeps at the focus the representation of the connectivity among the human and non-human world that has ever been associated with the human agency for rethinking social activities. He further views that the ecocritical ideas give priority to the relationship of the reader's attitude towards the representation of the text. According to him this very perspective also focuses on the extra-textual world more than the world imaginatively represented in the text²⁰. On the basis of Murphy's idea, the Story of King Satal Singh can be said to have illustrated the human and non-human relation inextricably from an ecocritical perspective.

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