

Beast in Pensioners' Paradise: Ecophobia in K.R Usha's Monkey-Man

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Abstract

Ecophobia is a fear of the natural world and of natural elements. Biophobia is one of the manifestations of ecophobia in which human beings feel terrorized by animals and beasts. It also indicates poor psychological health and maladjustments of individuals in their physical surroundings. Ecophobia also comes under the domain of ecopsychology that studies the impact of nature on mental health. K.R Usha's *Monkey-man* is an interesting eco-centric novel that explores the causes of psychological maladies in a fast changing urban landscape. This paper is an attempt to deploy the theoretical positions of ecocriticism and ecopsychology in analyzing Usha's narrative to show how human beings get alienated from nature and are eventually victims of technology-induced nightmares. This paper uses the technique of close reading and methods of ecocriticism to examine the characters and their behaviour as depicted in Usha's narrative. Both the tenets of ecophilia and ecophobia are explored in this paper.

KEYWORDS: Ecophobia, biophobia, ecophilia, ecopsychology

Simon Estok defines ecophobia as an "irrational and groundless fear or hatred of the natural world, or aspects of it" (Al-Momani 48). Ecophobia can be considered as an outcome of the anthropocene culture of the capitalist world, where human beings themselves consider supreme to nature and claim control over biota, generating real and imaginary friction with non-human lives. This human-centric approach becomes significant in the study of human evolution, as man has been constantly altering the natural environment for convenience and luxury. The notion of 'controlling nature' comes from the numerous vantage points in human history, leading back to stone age era, where shelter and tools were made using natural resources like stone and wood, which protected people from harsh weather and predators. Animals were killed for fur and meat. Human domination on earth, further, continued with exploration of new lands, leading to colonization and imperialism. The world, consequently, had to witness war and genocide – the darker side of history, where, both humanitarianism and environment were overpowered and destroyed beyond thoughts by the imperialist/fascist forces. Nevertheless, the late modern period got crucial with industrial revolution and growing capitalist economy, with worst exploitation of wilderness and ecology. Today, the hyper-industrialization comprising manufacturing units and IT hubs along with vast expansion of real estate and infrastructural developments continue to deplete the natural world, proving man's indifference and disregard towards nature. Abusive treatment of earth and hatred for its natural elements including other species, is a reality and a fact which cannot be ignored. Ecophobia, thus, is linked to "anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism" (Arikan, www.litinfo.ge).

Ecophobia also refers to man's psychological maladies with respect to man-nature relationship in the fast changing urban landscape. In cities, wilderness is narrowed down

to smaller and definite spaces, resulting in business oriented environments like cafeterias, markets, malls, commercial buildings and housing complexes. Nature, is therefore merely a resource and is valued on its usefulness. The objectification of nature and man's obsession to replace and materialize physical world is in a way responsible for natural catastrophes like flood, climate change and global warming, which is beyond human control, further generating hatred towards anything that is earth-centered. Urban population, in the process, gets disassociated from the natural environment, due to which it is unable to connect with ecological concerns. Although urbanization intends human progress, it also means "imagining and marketing of badness in nature" (Estok 4). This imagination terrorizes human mind, which leads to emotional disconnect between natural and human spaces. Ecophobia can be viewed from various dimensions like fear of animals or other living organisms (biophobia), nightmares of natural disasters and environmental crisis and maladjustments.

The concept of ecophilia, which is the contrary of ecophobia, also comes under the larger domain of ecopsychology. Ecophilia refers to "the affective and embodied bond between humans and place and between humans and nature" (Hung 50). Here, meaning of place and nature can differ from person to another. "Place can refer to both natural environment and the built environment" (50) whereas "nature can be understood as the natural processes of living organisms and the environment which encompasses the interaction of all beings" (50). Through the notions of ecophobia and ecophilia, eco-centric texts can be read from the psychological perspective, which will determine both positive and negative effects of nature on characters' lives and behaviour.

This paper examines K.R Usha's *Monkey-man* through the theoretical lens of ecocriticism, with ecophobic components as the primary focus. *Monkey-man* is set in Bangalore city (officially known as Bengaluru), one of the progressing IT hubs in India. The narrative revolves around a range of characters, all of them hailing from different socio-political background, and they deal with usual urban maladies like traffic, pollution, congestion, inflation and other issues in day to day city life. Usha's brilliance, however, is evident in her realistic description of the drastic transformation that the city has undergone in last 20 years – from a "Pensioner's Paradise to an aspirational Silicon Valley" (Usha 13). Also, the sudden appearance of a monkey-like creature in Ammanagudi Street, and some of them witnessing this daunting beast, makes the narrative even more dramatic and engaging.

The narrative begins with a prologue and hints the catalytic role of the beast in the story and its significance in the rapidly growing metropolitan city like Bangalore: "Half man-half beast, it made its appearance in Ammanagudi Street in the south-eastern part of the city, an area that would once be described as a middle-class residential locality but now hovered between house, office, market and slum" (Usha 3). Usha also mentions the menaces people face by frequent developmental works by PWD, like the unscheduled power cuts and digging of footpaths. One is able to connect with real life experiences as these are common occurrences even in other Indian cities like Mumbai and Delhi.

Usha, further introduces Mr. Shrinivas Moorthy, a senior professor in history at the National Trust First Grade College, also a "long-time resident of Ammanagudi Street"

(Usha 3). He claims to be the first person to spot the creature, near the parking lot of his building, as it jumps from the balcony:

It appeared that the creature almost had first alighted on the terrace of the building, made its way down the drainpipe to the balcony of MrMoorty's second floor flat, where it mangled a litter of newly born kittens, before raking a casual paw through his wife's forearm when she came out into the balcony to see what the noise was about, then swung itself down to the balcony of the beauty parlour on the first floor, where it destroyed a potted plant garden, before finally dropping down to the ground floor and fleeting past the alert and resourceful MrMoorty. (Usha 3-4)

The creature's actions are scary yet amusing as it brachiates and jumps from one floor to another. One can imagine apes swinging from branch to branch in a forest land. The scene is quite suggestive of urban encroachment of natural habitats, which has resulted in extinction of animal species in a large number. Destroying of the potted plant garden is also symbolic as gardens and landscape are mockery of wilderness and nature, since they cannot replace the natural environment and its values. Gardens also have ecophobic relevance, since it is the altered form of natural plants, revealing man's fear of uncontrolled wilderness.

Miss Pushpa Rani, a call centre employee, while on her way home to Ammanagudi Street, reveals her opinion to a newspaper reporter in context to the creature: "It was Yama, the God of Death himself, I know it..." (Usha 4). The reference to Yamaraj or the God of death is clearly an ecophobic element and an irony that religious myths are evoked to amplify fear. In one of the chapters, there are also references to traditional and cultural rituals: "...satynarayanapoojas, thread ceremonies, grihapraveshas and variety of other homas – the demand for poojas had gone up of late" (Usha 68). Here, tradition forms an interface between man and nature, bringing a hierarchical order, projecting culture above nature. The very belief that traditional rituals can control negative forces in nature, has an ecophobic connotation. Moreover, Rani is also a believer in omens and symbols: "...every lizard that chirruped on the wall only confirmed her train of thoughts, the weekly horoscope told her what she already knew for she was always ready for the unexpected..." (Usha 84). Omens and symbols are extensions of religious myths, followed traditionally. In addition, the concept of speciesism is also relevant here, as myth discriminates animals as positive or negative signs to judge future occurrences, by categorizing them on the basis of colour, size, stripes and sounds they make. Misappropriation of religious myths, therefore, becomes one of the root causes of biophobia, especially among Indians.

The first chapter opens up with the description on Mr. Moorty's routine activity. Later it describes how on 3rd January 2000, as he steps out of his building gate, he finds footpath dug up for laying fibre optic cable. Moorty seems to be annoyed with the repeated digging, although he is not against technological development. He feels "...they were too bright, too loud, too brazen, challenging the very sun as they lay casually coupled in orange and blue..." (Usha 12). He also believes that his father, Vasudev Moorty, who worked in Indian telephone Industries for thirty years "would not have

approved of this footpath being dug so savagely” (Usha 12). Here, one can appreciate Moorty and his father’s ecophilic mindset, since they are aware of the importance of a balanced ecosystem. Repeated digging leads to habitat fragmentation, affecting both plant and animal species. It also leads to dust formation in the atmosphere, resulting in health ramifications. Moorty, further observes: “Out of its depths two snakes had emerged, one blue and one orange, which now rested, entwined, at the end of the mud stretch... For the twisted coils of orange and blue plastic carried fibre optic cable... They made for better ‘bandwidth’, which seemed to be operative word these days. But these creatures seemed not to know their place” (Usha 11-12). At this juncture, Usha’s use of snake metaphor is apt and sarcastic, as there is a steep decline in number of snake species which can lead to ecological concerns. Moreover, snake also becomes abiophobic image, as it is one of the species which people are scared of. At one instance, the real snake is spotted behind a computer in the cabin of Dr. Subramanyam (the head of research) at CSES, a centre for higher education and one for research. A snake catcher from the nearby village is called to get hold of the reptile, since “the security men fled” (Usha 22).

Mr. Moorty is able to associate Bangalore with his father’s nostalgia – “... Pensioner’s Paradise, which suggested a cityful of toothless ex-public servants taking the balmy evening air together, as they added notes on respective ailments...” (Usha 13). On the contrary, today it is an aspiring “Silicon Valley” (Usha 13), with city traffic conditions disrupted by construction of flyovers, leading to congestion. In addition, growing population and increase in number of private vehicles are resulting in chaotic atmosphere along with pollution: “... Ammanagudi Street had embraced it all – the noise, the traffic, even the sludge of brown mud that flowed in from the excavation on the main road, silting its monsoon drains” (Usha 13). Current scenario of the cityscape is ecophobic in itself, as it becomes difficult for older citizens like Mr. Moorty to acclimatize to such a makeover of the environment in a short span.

Usha also tries to make readers understand the situations that have led to such a cluttered development in Ammanagudi Street. It all started with the property dispute among Shrinivas Moorty’s father and his brother, as they received the builder’s proposal to raze their bungalow for construction of flats:

Thiers had been the first ‘bungalow’ to make way for flats on Ammanagudi Street. He thought of the relief, and the disbelief, with which his father had received the builder’s proposal twenty years ago. They had grown tired of the house his father had built, despite the large compound and full grown mango and sapota trees that yielded fruit year after year, for it was now crumbly and beyond repair; thick nests of caterpillars bred in every damp nook and fungus-ridden cranny, and colonies of huge black ants seeped out of the floors when the weather turned warm. (Usha 15)

In the above extract, caterpillar, fungus and black ants take nightmarish associations, revealing the ecophobia in the narrator’s mind. This event in the narration also becomes significant as it proves that materialism is largely responsible for the loss of wilderness. The hatred for nature as against its intrinsic worth, is bred out of avarice and changing social values in humans. The episode also implies that, if man ignores natural environ, the

nature itself will take over the wilderness with all the biotic factors like reptiles, insects and fungi.

Usha also refers to the erratic development in the village of Sundarpalaya: "...new buildings were coming up haphazardly, dwarfing the older shabby houses, even hutments sometimes of the original inhabitants, all of them separated by mud tracks..." (Usha 87). In addition, farm lands are being used for illegal cultivation of parthenium, a deadliest species of weed, known for its harmful effects on environment, including human beings. It destroys useful crops and livestock, due to its allelopathic properties, whereas it causes intense respiratory ailments and skin allergies in humans. This is one of the ways, maybe, through which agricultural lands are occupied for business.

Another ecopsychological issue explored in the narrative is human maladjustment in bioregion. Characters are seen out of sync with the surroundings, physically and psychologically. For instance, Pushpa Rani's father develops many symptoms including blurred vision and numbness of hands which appear to have psychological origin, as "they had moved to Sundarpalaya at the wrong time..." (Usha 89). Usha also emphasizes on how people settle for smaller and rundown buildings in an urban space. She also mentions how open spaces like playground are sold to construct buildings and shopping malls.

There are also repeated references to postcolonial perspectives in the narrative – one of them being the critique of ecophobia. At one point, Usha takes readers back to Mr. Moorty's college days in 1960s, where SVK, an English teacher, asks his students to watch a movie, titled *Queimada*. The film is about "a revolution in a Portuguese colony in the Caribbean, incited by a British agent provocateur in the name of freedom but actually to serve British interests in the sugar plantation on the island" (Usha 114). At another instance, new books are added to the book shelves of the college library, as recommended by SVK: "...Brecht, *Aid as Imperialism*, *The Communist Manifesto*, Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*, Gorky's *Mother*, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*" (Usha 118). Mr. Moorty is also happy to find copies of books like "...Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four* and the new American classics, *Of Mice and Men* and *Old Man and the Sea*" (Usha 120), in a second-hand bookshop. The teachers and students are also shown discussing issues related to postcolonial theory, capitalism, imperialism and Vietnam War. Usha aims to bring readers' attention to the relationship between postcolonial literature and environment. However, one can relate ecophobia to postcolonial critiquing as "the fear experienced by the colonizers due to ideological and cultural conflict between the colonizers and the colonized, resulting in western stereotypes about the colonized people and their nature, in which the colonized are portrayed as uncivilized and frightening" (Al-Momani 48). Colonizers' domination over colonized land and further exploitation of nature, with "aggressive and oppressive acts" (49), is an anthropocentric paradigm, as the hatred and fear of dark skin and animals go hand in hand.

Further, one of the chapters describes how severity of weather affects some people physically and psychologically: "January is a cruel month, a cold deceptive month, a month of false allusions for the sky is bright and the sun benign but the cold cuts and your skin can be lacquered into a crust, and everywhere dry leaves heap up in desolation"

(Usha 159). Usha's intention of using the adjective "cruel", maybe, is to indicate the human aversion towards nature. One is not able to ecologise natural outdoor conditions, possibly due to the fear of physical maladies, resulting in a psychological estrangement between man and nature. Usha also points out, how individual experiences, with respect to natural phenomenon, differ from one person to another. For instance, Mr. Moorthy's romantic vacation after marriage turned out to be a "...disaster when it started raining in the hills and they were shut indoors in a small cold room with each other, and his hand turned heavy and inert" (Usha 159). In contrast, Balaji Brahmendra, a popular radio jockey, indulges in outdoor pleasure, which exemplifies his ecophilic behaviour: "January for Balaji Brahmendra was good. He loved the bracing air and the blue skies, and his sweaters hung well on him. He usually spent the Christmas and New Year week in Goa, partying with friends and swimming in the cold sea, which he found exhilarating – a great way to begin the new year" (Usha 159).

Towards the end of the narrative, ecophobia is consolidated as the mass fear of the unknown creature. Usha sustains this mood to indicate how people are perplexed and terrorized by the unknown aspect of nature: "–a plane? A bird? A monkey? A man? The whole of the city has been waiting to know since last evening, when an unusual creature was spotted on Ammanagudi Street in South Bangalore" (Usha 247).

Usha seems to assert in her narrative that a pristine living space such as Bangalore has become a location of terrible estrangement between the bioregion and its dwellers, resulting in massive fear of the nature. The novel ironizes the human instinct to exaggerate the unknown by showing that there is a thin line of difference between exaggeration and fear.

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