

Contextualizing Ecocriticism as a Bio-centric Study of Relationship between Human and Nature in John Favreau's The Jungle Book

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Abstract: The felicities of nature are bountiful but the basket of man is rather constricted, owing to the profiteering mindset of mankind. Essentially humans are inclined towards loving but when we tend to humanize nature there the eruption of desires starts crowning. In the history of human evolution there are numerous cases of humanly exploitation of nature and its tacit undermining of natural resources. Literature had always been true to the projection of life be it in conundrum of civilized cities or the pristine life in jungle. So as with The Jungle Book (2016) directed by John Favreau based on the classic work of children's literature i.e. Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Book (1894). This paper aims to deal with the projective analysis of the movie from ecocritical vision further elucidated with emerging biocritical approach of human in terms of their relationship with nature. Constructing an argument towards the anthropocentric vision of an ostensible humanity.

Keywords: Nature, Eco-criticism, Anthropocentric vision, Speciesism, Biocentricism.

Introduction

The aspect of nature is devout...

the happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The relationship of humanity particularly with nature has been of contention since a few centuries now. Owing to the degenerated thinking of mankind or the mechanically progressive attitude towards the passive receptacle nature has started showing up severe symptoms of its uproar. Never ever, an attempt is made to seek the support of the community itself to dig the roots of the problem. (Mishra, 2018) Magnification of our own deeds into cinematic experience freezes the thought process in mind for long which is the root cause of this paper. Triggered by the picturesque work of John Favreau, *The Jungle Book* (2016) the string of thoughts leads towards a contested area of research i.e. Ecocriticism. Owing to the fact that the ubiquitous nature is much exploited because of its exquisite beauty and humanly lust for more profit yielding. The relation of man and nature's abuse has gone to an extent of blurring the focus of humanity and thrusting a vision of nature as a separate entity to be and man as a sole ruler of it.

*Dear nature is the kindest mother still
Though always changing, in her aspect mild
From her bare bosom let me take my fill
Her never-weaned, though not her favorite child
Oh! She is the fairest in her features wild
Where nothing polished dares pollutes her path.*

-Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Though in poetry the eminence of nature is equivalent to mother and is untarnishable but we see role reversal when it comes to life where humans tend to see nature as a ploy of their hand. It is a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment. (Mishra & Mishra, 2018) There comes Ecocriticism which is concerned with the crucial relation between nature and culture. Here culture stands for the so-called civilized race of people and nature is one entity comprising both humans and non- humans i.e. trees, animals, birds etc. According to the book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry elucidates:

“ecocriticism rejects the notion that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed. For the ecocritics, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present

as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it.”
(243)

ecocriticism is first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in an essay “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*” and the credit to interpret the term goes to Cheryll Glotfelty. Instead of strictly defining the borders of ecocriticism given by the former she unbarred the terms and said ‘*all possible relations between literature and physical environment*’ is ecocriticism. Deciphering the cinematic progression from the lens of ecocriticism unravels numerous precepts in filmic studies as defined by a critic Maricondi:

“Cinematic ecocriticism or eco-cinecriticism must engage with how visual representations position nature and natural features, how these are framed by the lens of the camera or shaped by the editing process.”

Adaptation since long ago has been the centre to the process of filmmaking since almost the beginning and could have well maintained its dominance into the cinema’s till the second century. The term adaptation in itself states that getting into the skin of the work or getting into the fundamental idea that the written piece of work tries to present. One basic and an important issue that happens with the adaptation in contemporary theme is how much it can be changed from the actual text and fabric of the story keeping in mind the sublime idea of the play intact. Some changes that are inevitable are, the geographical changes, social structure, the time of work, etc. (Dutta & Mishra, 2019). The present paper highlights the eco-critical perspective of the movie *The Jungle Book* directed by John Favreau. The adaptation of *The Jungle Book* is therefore a perfect amalgamation of human with nature and animal world as one entity with distinctive traits and features. Calling Mowgli, a man-cub is the best elucidation in crisp for this ecocentric vision. The story of Mowgli as a child raised by wolves’ bags some of the most crucial lessons of life living in the jungle. As the name suggests *The Jungle Book* is a story of an orphaned boy who gets lost in the jungle founded by black panther Bagheera. Enchanted by his innocence he hands over the man-cub to an Indian wolf named Raksha, who took him to the pack. Raising the man-cub Mowgli as her own child and introducing him to the entire wolf’s ways of surviving. One day in the dry season the water truce is called where the Bengal tiger Shere Khan whiff Mowgli’s sent and unveils his vendetta towards humans and fire. This leads Mowgli to run amidst a stampede of water buffalos

and accidentally bumps into a reticulated python Kaa, who tells him the story of his father fighting and losing from Sher Khan but also giving him a life-long scar from Red Flower i.e. fire. Finally saved by a Himalayan brown bear Baloo, who further bonds over the difficulty to fetch honey. Meanwhile in the jungle Sher Khan in quest to kill Mowgli hunted Akela, the leader of the wolf pack. Mowgli on the other hand helps the elephants and forcibly transported to king Louie in Bander-lok where he was offered protection from Sher Khan in return Mowgli has to give the gigantic king ape, the red flower (fire). There Bagheera and Baloo tried to save him but, in the escape, Mowgli got to know about the death of Akela because of him. Somehow Mowgli escaped from there and entered a village to steal the red flower (fire) to confront Sher Khan himself. Unknowingly on his way to the jungle Mowgli in process of carrying the fire, burnt the whole jungle. There Sher Khan repudiates him to be cruel and like his father and also due to the fire the wolves were frightened of him too. Taking a step of spirit Mowgli threw away the fire and then every animal joined hands for a fight with Sher Khan. The whole jungle holds of Sher Khan till Mowgli goes to the burning jungle and makes trap for Sher Khan and finally defeats him.

ECOCRITICAL VISION IN *THE JUNGLE BOOK* (2016)

The Jungle Book is not merely a movie of adventures or animation for fun, it has higher stances than that, which is why it deserves an ecocritical study as it presents a congenial relation between human and the natural world. Just as pantheistic views god everywhere and in everyone so as the ecocritics tries to excavate the relation between man and nature as a coexisting being in the literary texts. Similarly, it is Ecocinema where the focus is on nature through the vision of human and non-human world on the same pedestal sharing mutual interdependence. In today's world modern man seeks to redeem nature in the purest form of it possible for his own growth and so-called progression. Oblivious to the fact, the civilized people are unknowingly going on a wild goose chase by digging up to nature.

*Baloo: but if you send him back to the village, they'll ruin him...
they will make a man out of him.*

The projection of man's image through the eyes of animals make it an indispensable case for taking a paradigm shift in our ways of handling the nature. Mowgli as seen in the movie is characterized on the image of our barbaric predecessors, aboriginal beings who co-exist with nature peacefully.

Though Mowgli thriving on natural resources but still subservient to the needs of jungle at first place. As he was a primitive being untouched from the civilization, he was able to command over most sacred lessons of humanity. From the wolves he learned the power of collectivism, as they sing aloud:

*“This is the law of the jungle,
As old and true as the sky,
The wolf that keeps it will prosper,
But the wolf that breaks it will die,
For the strength of the pack is the wolf,
And the strength of the wolf is the pack.”*

No matter how many amenities our technology is giving us but the still standing disquietude is prevalent in our modern ways of living as we are crushing nature every now and then. Acquisition of commodities remains the sole aim of a civilized man in today’s world and our mindset being apart from nature has grown to be self-centred. Whereas if we see Mowgli as a man-cubin lap of nature, he has become altogether a distinct human who is full of compassion for other beings, be it helping Baloo in fetching honey or the gigantic elephants to recover their calf from the pit. In contrast to him in today’s world man tend to exert force over nature to comply to his need through numerous torturing ways like deforestation for settling civilization or using animals for their skin or tusks even flesh which creates severe imbalance in the ecosystem. Human’s tend to mobilize their needs to an extent of harming the nature without even paying heed to the unanimous nature of our existence on the same planet. But if we look at the life of Mowgli as close to nature, he and Baloo sings the most apt song which is the need of the hour:

*“The bare necessities.... the simple bare necessities
Oh! mother nature’s recipe,
Wherever I have wandered, wherever I roamed,
I couldn’t be fonder of my big home.”*

For millennial as we are the people attuned to our own clock instead of the light of the sun of the dark of the moon. Unconsciously progressing towards a generation that assumes humans is the

centre of the universe supporting anthropocentric vision. A mindset that propagates the vision supporting humanly whims and needs are to be fulfilled by all non-humanly life forms and this is their sole purpose of existing. Bryan Norton in his thesis ' *Concept of weak Anthropocentrism* ' discusses that we as man-kind should practice broad anthropocentrism as we are biologically in a superior position to change and conserve the environment. Instead of man's diabolical stand on nature as a resource to extract or to procure and respect, animals in The Jungle Book are well assured of their side. As we see Akela the leader of the wolf pack often chiding Mowgli on his humanly ways of doing things by saying " *enough of your tricks, we'll make you a fine wolf* ", here we could clearly see an exemplified example of anthropocentric vision. Viewing your species as higher from the others is another component of anthropocentrism i.e. Speciesism, a term coined by Richard D Ryder in a pamphlet titled ' *Speciesism* '. The term was further made popular by Peter Singer in his book named *Animal Liberation* (1975) which states that Speciesism is a tendency to see your species as higher from the other and a caring factor towards one's own species is prevalent in it. As far as Akela is concerned he definitely viewed the wolf way of doing things is the best way but still has the humility to take care of the man cub whenever any threat comes near him like in the water truce where Sher Khan furiously asked about the man-cub, he took a stand:

Akela: Mowgli behind me, don't leave my side.

Sher Khan: I can't help but notice there's a strange odour today.

I almost think it is some kind of man-cub.

Akela: Mowgli belongs to my pack Sher Khan.

He's just a cub.

Sher Khan: doesn't my face reminds you of what a grown man can do?

A man cub becomes man and Man is Forbidden.

Raksha: the cub is mine, so go back to where you came from you burnt beast.

Sher Khan: you want to protect him fine... but ask yourself,

How many lives does a man-cubworth?

Perturbed with the death threat but still consistent on their vows to protect Mowgli, The Jungle Book depicts paradoxical side of anthropocentric vision which civilized man fails to comply at times. Owing to the misconception that humans are the highest being in the universe and it is nature

which is made for us even keeping our ethics on stake, anthropocentrism makes ethics a human enterprise. Further elucidating on the point the originator of ecocriticism William Rueckert says that there is an unavoidable link between ecocriticism and anthropocentrism, he says:

[M]an's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanise, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing. The ecological nightmare ... is of a monstrously overpopulated, almost completely polluted, all but totally humanised planet (113).

BIOCENTRIC APPROACH IN THE JUNGLE BOOK MOVIE (2016)

Staunchly over following any one stream of thought never paves any way for balanced living. Once humans tend to live with nature peacefully but with the increasing advent of consumerism and modernization, we have distanced ourselves from nature to an extent of creating a domino effect in exploiting nature which in turn is severely affecting us. In fact, it is through language only that human civilization has come out of the stone age and developed science, art, technology, law, etc. at a great extent and the English language has undoubtedly become a means of mass communication, education, governance, career and survival in any profession globally. (Mishra & Mishra, 2020) Therefore, a holistic vision to view the world as a shared community is the need of the hour, which paves way for biocentric vision. It involves political, cultural and sociological theories as well as philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference. (Prakash & Mishra, 2015) Aldo Leopold in 1940's shaped this biocentric thought and its ethical implications by further giving way for other thinkers. Van De Veer and Christine Pierce in their book *The Environmental Ethics and Policy* defined biocentrism as "*the claim that all living things are of equal moral worth or equal intrinsic value.*" Analysing the Jungle Book's cinematography from biocentric vision gave numerous instances where the animals took the man-cub Mowgli to be one of them. Specifically, when Sher Khan threatened the whole jungle to leave Mowgli or else, he'll hunt recklessly, the counsel of wolf has to face a serious question of how to keep Mowgli safe; there the concern was the safety of the man-cub:

Raksha: we raised him as our own.

Bagheera: I'm the one who brought him to you, and now I'll return him to where he belongs.

Raksha: I won't let you.

He's my cub.

Akela: we knew the day will come.

Raksha: we are the only family he's ever known.

Akela: it's the only place he'll be safe.

Mowgli: it's ok ami, I won't go far

I'll come back and visit.

Raksha: never forget this.

You're mine.

Mine to me.

No matter where you go or what they may call you,

You will always be my son.

Acceptability towards the humans by non-humans i.e. animals highlight the major cause of biocentric vision, which triggers a holistic worldview.

Conclusion

Throughout time and history there have always been conflicts between good and bad, right and wrong, love and war, individuality and religion. (Sinha & Mishra, 2019)

Dwelling on the presumptuous grounds of owing all requisites in life and even more than them is a dream that the modern man always cherished, which makes him recklessly exploit whatever nature graces over us. Following a path of anthropocentrism humans thought them to be the masters of all species which the non-humans in *The Jungle Book* aptly contradict. Animals in their cinematographic views, voices the most biocentric vision that the humans failed to see, giving equal pedestal to every life form.

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