

Nature in Philippine Folktales

Karena A. Puguon

Ifugao State University, Cordillera Administrative Region, Philippines



ABSTRACT: Nature allows human beings to become stewards and to interface with animals. By acting as the cornerstone, human beings create meanings to their existence through their experiences with animals and other elements of nature. Folktales are not only mere stories of people but are stories that are didactic in nature. Folktales seek to promote the collective knowledge as well as serve as guide in directing people improve their relationship with nature. However, scholarship on how folktales handled nature and environment in different cultures is wanting. Therefore, this study analyzed 4 folktales to determine how nature and environment were handled as well as the different concepts of nature in the different cultures. The study utilized content-analysis based qualitative research method. The findings of the study revealed that nature is a friend of the Filipino people. Through nature, people find an abode or the dwelling place of something precious like enlightenment or wisdom, as mystery but may cause suffering, as a friend and as something mysterious. The folktales express an awe of the Filipino people to nature and a reminder of what the Filipinos need to do aligned to national goals on protecting the environment. This study provides a framework of analyzing Filipino folktales and similar works in order to promote the collective knowledge of the Filipinos about nature.

KEYWORDS: content-analysis, folktales, nature, Ifugao State University, Nature

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have been conducted on the role of literature in interfacing humans and the environment. One of the reasons for the conduct of such study is to understand people in their environment. The environment is planted with a history; the land, animals, plants and the sky had witnessed a lot of changes that occurred in the past and continues to the present. It is believed that ignoring the environment while studying man would give results that are not precise; man will perish as a result.

Because the environment and human culture cannot exist in isolation, they are an inextricable part of each other, hence, I believe, they should be studied in relation to each other.

In the United States, their studies focused on the use of ecocriticism as an approach, and these are under the auspices of universities. Rachel A. Klue in 2005 submitted to the University of Georgia her master's requirement titled *Man's Return to Nature: An Ecocritical Approach to Tournier's Vendredi Ou Les Limbes Du Pacifique*. The paper asserted that literature must be approached in a way that examines man as part of an ecosystem where he is neither master nor slave but simply one part of an intricate system. William Major and Andrew McMurray convened the essay to see how effective ecocriticism is in addressing pressing and poignant global environmental issues. The paper concluded with a note about the authors and their fascination with who they are and what they do as well as their frustrations and difficulties with dealing effectively with environment realities. Alia Afzal of the University of Iowa stated that nature and environment for the indigenous culture is not a pastime, and that landscape is not just a place to dwell on. This idea contradicts European thinking.

In Asia, John Charles Ryan studied the representation of the environment and ecological issues in the works of literature, film and popular culture. Literature review, textual analysis and case study were the methods used. The paper concluded that the relationship between history, religion, environment and literature offers a particularly salient and productive focus for Thai scholarship. Further, parallel to the development of environmental perspectives on literature, there should be increased professional activities to enhance the status of the field in Thailand.

Mishra, Sandip Kumar, on the other hand, explored the perspectives as envisaged in some selected world literature as well as Indian writings in English. The objective is to bring about ecological literacy among the readers making them eco-conscious, thereby, taking good care of Mother Nature.

Ahi, Berat of Kastamona University, Turkey studied how children's stories handled nature and environment through the texts and how these texts portrayed the concept of nature in different cultures. Content analysis was the methodology used. Of the 15 folktales that were analyzed, the subjects that were identified were nature- human interaction, negative attitude towards

Nature in Philippine Folktales

the environment, pollution, natural life and elements of nature and interaction of nature and human beings. These folktales are embroidered with therapeutic effect on human nature.

Culajara, Kareen explored how one of the Filipino writers named Satur Apoyon presented relevant ecocritical issues faced by people today through his collection of short stories. The three step approach by Glotfelty was utilized to find various representations of nature, the ecocritical issues embedded in the author's narratives, and the counterviews about the relationship between nature and humanity.

Noda, Apple Audrey presented that there were a lot of misinterpretations and conceptions about wilderness in children's literature particularly the Lola Basyang collection by Severino Reyes. The researcher recommends that through a reconceptualization of the wilderness, one can pursue a vision of guiding children and ultimately people into becoming better beings of a world largely determined by nature.

The few studies that were reviewed for the study most often used textual analysis or content analysis. Since the only source of data is the text itself, close reading was certainly conducted to identify the role and influence of nature on man or vice versa.

Most of the materials consulted were folktales, short stories and children's short stories that particularly presents nature, elements of nature, man in his environment or the environment causing havoc in man. It is interesting to note that although the studies were few, these were conducted in locale that do not only have a rich environment but has a culture that nurtures it. Thailand, Indian and the Philippines are countries in Asia that have rich landscapes and culture that conservatively preserves these.

Of the literature consulted, only two were particularly Filipino and the materials used were short stories from Lola Basyang's collection and from children's literature. The present study shall consult the wisdom of the old as reflected in their folktales that were collected by Dr. Resil B. Mojares. Contrary to other representations of nature, it appears that the themes of the collection of Dr. Mojares present nature as a friend, an ally and a refuge. In order to ascertain this observation, an analysis of the tales shall be conducted.

The paper aimed to determine how the four folktales handled nature and environment through the texts and how the concept nature and environment were portrayed in different cultures. Specifically, the paper answered the following specific problems how is nature represented in the selected tales from Isabelo's archive; and, what ecocritical issues are embedded in the selected tales.

To help advance the specific questions adopted in this paper, ecocriticism was considered for this paper. The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment is called ecocriticism. Ecocriticism studies the representation of nature in literature. They examine the role of physical setting in the plot of the novel, drama and short story. They examine consistency of the values expressed in the play with ecological wisdom. Further, ecocritics have added a new critical category called "place." They explore the ways literature affected human kind's relationship to the natural world.

This theory was particularly chosen since the folktales chosen have reference to nature extending its influence on man and man's involvement with them or their influence to man and his activities. This idea being the fundamental premise of ecocriticism implies a direct connection between the theory and the tales that were studied.

According to Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, "everything is connected to everything else." For instance, humans and land may have a reciprocal relationship; environmental conditions, economic modes or production and cultural values are related too. This in effect raises the consciousness among human beings.

Ecocriticism developed three primary steps. It studies the relationship between human culture and the physical world. It examines the representations of nature in fiction and drama. It analyzes the environmental literature in eastern and western countries.

METHODOLOGY

This paper analyzed how nature is depicted in four selected tales of the book titled, Isabelo's Archive, authored by Dr. Resil B. Mojares. The book was published by Anvil Publishing Inc. in 2013. The four folktales were among the folktales in Isabelo's Archive. The tales were selected based on content and origin.

In the analysis of the tales, content-analysis based qualitative research method was utilized. Specific lines and paragraphs were examined to in order to reveal the image of nature with its causes and to gain insights into how relationships between humans and nature were dealt with from different cultural perspectives. Below is the presentation according to their topic and theme.

Nature in Philippine Folktales

Title of the Folktale	Culture it Represents	Theme/Topic
Maidens Shrouded in Darkness	Southern Philippines	Nature-human interaction
Men with Tails	Manghian(Mangyan)	Living things in nature
Densities of Time	Tagalog	Natural Living
Dragon and Leech	Bisaya	Animals in Nature

RESULTS

1. Representation of Nature in the Four Selected Folktales

1.1. Maidens Shrouded in Darkness

In a major strand in the action of the Manobo Tuwaang epic cycle, the hero Tuwaang goes on a journey to seek and woo a “maiden shrouded in darkness- the maiden emerging from a dark interior, quiet, gentle and sedate, and luminous. She was the resplendent ray, the eye of the rising sun, coming up the horizon.”

This particular folk tale represents nature as an abode or the dwelling place of something precious like enlightenment or wisdom. In the case of the folktale, it is a maiden/ a liyamin or a princess that is hidden or cloistered but when she emerged, she was described to be in possession of a beauty that is described as luminescence.

When a maiden is covered or hidden ‘in darkness’, this suggests that nature through natural reasoning can tie one with worthy thoughts of nature, wisdom and reasoning through observance of activities in nature where man eventually receives enlightenment.

Nature serves as one of the means of cloistering the maiden hence the description “in darkness.” ‘In darkness’ implies ‘covering, isolating or cloistering’ and these acts are believed to regenerate power.

1.2. Men with Tails

In Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the strange story is told of a member of the Buendia family who had a cartilaginous tail shaped like a corkscrew with a tuft of hair at the end. He kept this secret in forty-two years of complete celibacy until he met a butcher who offered to chop it off with a cleaver. Unfortunately, the amputation was botched and he bled to death. The last of the accursed Buendia family, an infant child eaten alive by white ants, was also born with a tail.

This tale presents nature as though mysterious may be the cause of suffering.

The character in the story has experienced death and despair for a long time and has left him hopeless and has lost his feelings of belongingness because of a tail which he kept as a secret for forty- two years. His suffering must have started when he became aware that he is not like the other members of the Buendia family. This difference forced him to complete celibacy or seclusion. If not for this cartilaginous tale which he asked the butcher to chop, he would not have met his demise.

Perhaps the man with tail would not have suffered and had not died if nature had provided him with basic necessities like community or family. His having a tail did not displace him. It was his continuous awareness of the difference that had paralyzed him, the cause of his suffering

1.3. Densities of Time

This does not mean that we had no sense of temporality, of sequence and duration. Day changing into night, the ceaseless mutations of the surrounding world (the time when rice begins to bear heads, the time of the high water, the time when the gebgeb tree blooms), the demands of ritual observance and human labor, and most important, human mortality. All these and more immersed us in the experience of time. And it was not just the experience of being “in time; we were actively engaged in reckoning, calculating and measuring time.

Seasons were reckoned according to astronomical phenomenon. Native knowledge of the cycle of lunations was sophisticated. Inhabitants also marked the passage of time according to such phenomena as the appearance of the Pleiades (called *murupuru*, a flock of birds in Leyte, *namorocporoc*, boiling lights in Panay).

This folktale presents that man accords his activities with the seasons even adopting himself to the changes of non-human creatures around him. The environment seems to be wise and can greatly affect man if he is not keen in the performance of his obligations.

One way of satisfying an obligation is to conduct rituals either linked with the season or the land. As man performs these rituals, he is believed to be establishing an intimate relationship with nature and the surroundings making him receptive and wise not only for himself but for all creatures.

This tale presents nature as a friend and as a result, man wants to be in harmony with it. Harmony may refer to man living in tranquility or in accord with nature. As Afzal 2017 puts it, human dependence on nature models the submissiveness and respectfulness of man to the environment composed of both human and non-human species. The Ifugaos manifest their

Nature in Philippine Folktales

submissiveness by sowing their rice seeds not in any month that they feel like sowing but in December and January because they believe that this is the time when the first rain of the year will come in and that temperature is cooler during this time.

Alison Byerly in her essay, *The Uses of Landscape*, draws attention towards the aesthetic and picturesque view of nature. A harmonious relationship between man and nature is a prerequisite for a viable culture. This implies that if man nurtures nature, nature will provide for his needs. On the contrary, man has the power to destroy lives and properties to the extent that humans are depicted as powerless and helpless.

According to John Dewey, the aesthetic experience lies in the relationship between the individual and the environment. The environment plays a profound role in the life of an individual for the individual is a component of the environment not something distinct or different from it.

Survival in any landscape depends on the best use of all available resources. Nature nurtures the spirituality of the people. They are grateful to the landscape because it helps them in their quest as spiritual people.

1.4 Dragon and Leech

A Bisayan belief about time and space revolved around mythological creature called *bakunawa* (literally, "bent snake"), a large serpent with a looped tail that inhabits the underworld or the sky world. It is believed responsible for storms, earthquakes, and eclipses, rituals are performed to control its movements and effects. Thus in times of eclipse, villagers raise a tumult of cries, drums, and bells to entreat or force the sky dragon to release the sun or moon it has swallowed.

Like other cultures, animals or non-human creatures are characters in their tales. This particular tale uses a leech called *bakunawa*. It is said that this leech dwells in either the underworld or the sky world, thus, the leech has powers whose strength affects the activities of man. This folktale demonstrates that nature is mysterious. The *bakunawa*, although very small, can pose a threat to man merely by its movement.

Animistic cultures see the natural world as inspirited. Not only are people inspirited so are animals, plants, rivers and stones. Humans interact and communicate with nonhuman subjects. Entities such as animals, plants and rivers in nature are perceived as articulate. They are able to communicate with humans. People in animistic cultures regard nature as alive and articulate. The attitude of nature which regards nature as alive and articulate has consequences in the realm of social practices. Knowledge about nature is significant for the progress of institutions.

Another point of view states that when man harmonizes with nature and follows the natural cycle of living for their living, the environment becomes simple and peaceful. Rituals are performed as a way of harmonizing with nature. *Bakunawa* is believed responsible for storms, earthquakes, and eclipses, hence, rituals are regularly performed to control its movements thus, lessening or avoiding destruction of life and properties.

The observation that animals occupy a place in folktales is shared by Alia Afzal especially the role of animals as informers of climactic changes. With this observation, she asserts that the animate and inanimate show significant each one is for the maintenance of equilibrium in nature. It also suggests that the land and the sky work in coordination with each other. The Hungry Tide underscored that humans have trained themselves to live in a place where animals are in authority.

2. The Ecocritical Issues Embedded in the Tales

2.1. Capacity of Nature to Instruct

Instruct based on its etymology comes from the Latin *instructus* which means to build. Instruct then means 'to give knowledge to' and in the case of the folktale, it gives or provides knowledge to man.

Nature indeed provides knowledge to man that he might be guided in his activities; all he needed was keenness to read the signs that are provided around him that he might be wise.

One of the things that nature wants man to be knowledgeable about is his respect and love of the earth. Since his survival depends on the natural world, man must know how to best use all available resources because it is nature that nurtures people. If man exploits nature, man suffers is the simple knowledge that nature wants man to practice because man and nature ought to be in a mutual relationship with each other. Man is the steward of nature not an exploiter of nature. Like the *Manobo Tuwang* epic whose hero found a maiden who that was the resplendent ray, the eye of the rising sun, coming up the horizon, may man continuously find enlightenment from nature. As Saint Francis puts it, man must constantly rethink and refeel nature and destiny.

2.2. Nature as an Emotional Signifier

In the tale, *Men with Tails*, the man with cartilaginous tail died of bleeding when he a butcher offered to chop off the tail with a cleaver. The character should not have died if nature provided him a community where peculiarities are accepted not rejected. Being a social being also, he expected that the Buendia family would provide him the support he needed. Why did the man with a tail opt to hide this tail for forty two years? One reason perhaps is natural; he knows that revealing his nature would mean

Nature in Philippine Folktales

exposing his difference from other human beings. The other is cultural; he knows that revealing his nature meant losing the community/ family that adopted him.

This tale makes man aware that of the desperation of people or minorities who are perceived as different because of how they dress or how they conduct themselves. The environment, instead of providing an environment where they are accepted, often gives them the feeling of inferiority because of their difference. The environment metaphorically dries man from opportunities to see himself as man because he is associated with monkeys if not with the savage race.

2.3. Superiority of the Animate

In the tale, the Dragon and Leech, the leech or the bakunawa makes man aware of the power of the animate; the leech is shown as an informer of climactic changes. The leech is presented as a harbinger of omens and man may lose his crops because of a weather that is not supportive. Man, as a result, has trained himself to live in harmony with animals that are considered superior or authoritative. Like the people in the tale, they constantly observe the movement of the bakunawa because of their belief that it is responsible for earthquakes, storms and eclipse.

This particular tale makes man aware that all life on earth has an intrinsic value irrespective of human angle. The sky, the land and the animals play particular roles that directly affect man and his livelihood activities. Nature (land, sky and animals) work in coordination with each other and that man is dependent on their natural external condition. However, man is sometimes in a hostile relationship with land, sky and animals, thus, creating a dysfunctional environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Nature as represented in four selected tales from Isabelo's Archive is considered as an abode or the dwelling place of something precious like enlightenment or wisdom, as mysterious but may cause suffering, as a friend and as something mysterious. Since most folktales involve settings of place, environment and ambience, it implies that man and his activities are greatly affected by his environment. Further, each group has their own perception of nature and their environment based on their tales.

The ecocritical issues embedded in the four selected tales are: capacity of nature to instruct, nature as an emotional signifier, and the superiority of the animate. Since the tales selected have especially featured nature to exert an influence on the lives of the people, this implies that the folks who own these tales are aware of the issues confronting their nature and their environment. If these practices are retained until today, their nature and environment would not be compromised to development and progress.

REFERENCES

- 1) Klue, Rachel A. *Man's Return to Nature: An Ecocritical Approach to Tournier's Vendredi Ou Les Limbes Du Pacifique*. University of Georgia. 2008.
- 2) Major, William and McMurray, Andrew. Introduction: The Function of Ecocriticism. *The Journal of Criticism*. 2012.
- 3) Afzal, Alia. Ecocritical post-colonial studies on humans, land and animals. <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/etd>. 2017.
- 4) Ryan, John Charles. *Beyond East Asian Landscapes: A Survey of Ecocriticism in Thai Literary Studies*.
- 5) International Conference on Trends in economics, Humanities and Management. August 12-13, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15242/ICEHM.ED815006>.
- 6) Mishra, Sandip Kumar. Ecocriticism: A Study of Environmental issues in Literature. *BRICS Journal of education Research*. October – December 2016. Pp. 168- 169.
- 7) Ahi, Berat. The Concept of Environment in Folktales from Different Cultures: Analysis of Content and Visuals. *International Electronic Journal of Environmental Science*. Vol. 4, issue 1, 2017. pp. 1-17.
- 8) Culakara, Khareen B. Exploring Representations of Nature in Literature: Ecocritical Themes in the Fiction of Satur Ayopon. *International Journal of Languages, Literature, and Linguistics*, Vol 2, No.4. December 2016.
- 9) Noda, Apple Audrey L. Reconstructing the Wilderness: Finding Identity, Culture and Values in Filipino Children's Literature. *The Journal of Ecocriticism*. Vol 8 (1) March 2018.
- 10) Dulay, Milton P. Indigenous Systems of Ifugao, Philippines. *Resources and Environment*. pp. 45-51. 2015
- 11) Afzal, Alia. Ecocritical post-colonial studies on humans, land and animals. <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/etd>. 2017.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.