
An Ecological Study of Snakes through the Select Retold Mythological Stories of Anita Nair

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Abstract:

Snakes are the living beings in this mother earth. But their venom kills all creatures when they bite. Snakes are portrayed to be holy creatures in some of the myths and to be evil creatures in several myths too. They have the dastard roles in the stories and also in the minds of all human beings, as per the belief. But no one spares them when they enter one's home or place. This paper deals with the study of the snakes especially the ecological point of view by using several mythological stories of Anita Nair in her select retold mythological stories.

Key words: Snake, Ecology, mythological story.

Introduction:

Anita Nair is an Indian Women Writers who is considered to be the voice of Gods Own Country, the Kerala, and the theme of women rights. But she is a good writer of Children literature too. She writes many short stories based on various myths in this world. She is a creative writer who is teaching the subject creative writing for so many years in India and other invited organizations. She writes *The Puffin Book of World Myths and Legends* and *Magical Indian Myths* for attracting children audience for her writing. These books also provide wonderful entertainments and necessary information for their readers to understand the Myth is a customary story, especially one relating to the early record of a people or illuminating a natural or communal phenomenon, and characteristically relating mystical beings or events. This word *myth* comes from the Greek term *mythos* which means speech, thought, story anything informed by oral for unknown source. But this research deals with the mythological stories of Anita Nair in her select books. It means those stories are based on the myths and they are retold by Nair entitled "The Snake's Secret" and "The Churning of the Ocean."

Ecology is an umbrella term for protecting nature through all perspectives. According to *the Encyclopedia of Britannica*, the Greek term *oekologie* means “relation of the animal both to its organic as well as its inorganic environment.” The term *Oikos* means “home or place to live.” This concept of ecology talks about the environment where all living and non-living beings living and it is useful for the readers to know the special features of the select living beings.

Anne Raine in their “Ecocriticism and Modernism” scrutinizes the historical relation between modernist studies and ecocriticism. They inform their readers that the “modernist literature offers rich resources for ecocriticism because it responds to the changing environment of industrial modernity in ways that sometimes affirm but more often productively question conventional romantic and realist ideas about nature.” This ecocritical analysis is dealt with the study of snake in the select two stories of Anita Nair.

The select first retold mythological story “The Snake’s Secret” from *The Puffin Book of World Myths and Legends*, is based on the Ethiopian Legend story. Ethiopia is found by Queen of Sheba the Biblical character who goes to Jerusalem. It is one of the African countries, especially which is sharing its borders with Sudan, Kenya, and Eritheria. This story informs the belief of the Ethiopians who have their traditional faith of their own. Now-a-days Ethiopia’s major religion is Islam. But according to the historical reference, its traditional faith is also on monotheistic culture of Oroma people. There are two percentages of people, who have believed on their past traditional faith, live there.

In this story a mythical bird named Holowaka, is a heavenly bird and it is a bird of messenger between God and other beings, ordered by the Almighty to carry a secret to overcome the old age of human beings. He creates and wonders for his creation of human beings. But God worries about the old age of the human beings that is the reason for sending a secret through Holowaka. This mythical bird flies from the God’s land to earth for a long time and gets tired without eating any food. When it crosses the forest in the earth, it has found a snake which is going to eat a dead Penelope. The hungry status of Holowaka makes it to concentrate little on food which is in the hands of the snake. The cunning snake which knows the duty of the Holowaka, uses the chance of the situation for demanding to give some valuable thing for compensation of giving food. At last this Holowaka tells the secret of God to the man, “When you feel yourself getting weak and old, all you need to do is slip out of your skin” (40). So the cunning snake starts to check the secret by slipping out its skin. That is the reason for snakes to just slip out their skins whenever they feel old.

This story talks about the conversation between Holowaka and Snake. Snake is a proto Germanic term of *snakon* which means *crawl or creeping thing*. Snake has different variety in appearance. The theme of the study is about snake. Actually snake is portrayed to be the cunning creature from *the Holy Bible*. The book of *Genesis* tells, the first criminal activity of the evil snake how it has converted the mind of Eve in the Eden Garden. But in this Ethiopian story it has spoiled the mind of the bird Holowaka in order to know the secret

which is carried by Holowaka to human beings from God. But this Holowaka is spelled as a male bird. When readers compare the snake in the Holy Bible with this Nair's Snake, the character is almost similar. It is the belief of the particular believers in Ethiopia for sharing the secret of God of their land.

According to the Van Wallach and James A Peters of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, it is also called as serpent. They said as follows:

Nearly every culture since prehistoric times (including various present-day cultures) has worshipped, revered, or feared snakes. Serpent worship is one of the earliest forms of veneration, with some carvings dating to 10,000 BCE. Although Satan is depicted as a serpent in the biblical account of the Creation, snakes are revered by most societies. A vast global compendium of superstitions and mythologies about snakes has sprung up. Many stem from the snakes' biological peculiarities: their ability to shed their skin is associated with immortality; their ever-open eyes represent omniscience; their propensity for sudden appearance and disappearance allies snakes with magic and ghosts; a phallic resemblance embodies procreative powers; and the ability to kill with a single bite engenders fear of any snakelike creature.

These words of *Encyclopedia Britannica* are the evidence for the scientific analysis on Snakes which are actually as per the ideas of science. Here in this story it gets the secret of skin shedding which is mentioned for human beings. But somehow it has the bond with other beings according to the situation. Even the skin of the snake is used for some level. According to the editors of WebMD,

People apply snake skin to the skin for skin disorders, including sores, abscesses, boils, itching, scaly and itchy skin (psoriasis), and scabies, as well as eye infections, cloudy spots in the eye, sore throat, and hemorrhoids. Snake skin is also used in ointments and creams to reduce pain and stiffness.

The shed skin of the snake is used for some medicinal purposes too. They are ingredients for making ointments too. The study entitled "Shed skin as a source of DNA for genotyping-by-sequencing (GBS) in reptiles" informs "shed skin provides DNA of sufficient quality and quantity for the identification of large number of SNPs, but requires greater sequencing depth, and consideration of the GC richness of microchromosomes when selecting restriction enzymes." Hence it is proved the existence of cells in the peeled skin of the snakes.

The second story is taken from the book *Magical Indian Myths* by Anita Nair. The story "The Churning of the Ocean" tells about the help of the giant serpent Vasuki at churning of the ocean for the nectar. In this story Vasuki plays the position of rope by coiling the mountain Meru for grinding the ocean. The upper portion of its body is used by Asuras and tail part is used by Gods to churn the ocean. It helps but it starts to spout its venom due to

the tiredness, so many creatures have started to die in the action of spitting venom, due to the dangerous churning in the middle of the ocean.

The venom of the snake is dangerous one. But it has medicinal attributes too. The research of snake venom is mentioning it as a medicine for heart attack and stroke. It is healthy attribute in some extend. BBC News website informs, Researchers at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine are busy collecting venom from deadly snakes in order to develop a new generation anti-venom treatment against the bite of every dangerous snake in sub-Saharan Africa, where snake bites kill about 30,000 people each year.

Even the study about the venom of snakes informs that “Snake venom metalloproteinase (SVMP) is a group of zinc-dependent enzymatic toxins classified into three primary categories based on their domain structures: P-I, P-II, and P-III SVMPs.” This sort of chemicals will disrupt the blood of the beings and causes coagulopathy, hemorrhage.

So, snake is portrayed as a cunning creature one side and another side it is portrayed to be the savior by some mythical elements. They are all up to the mind and situation of the human beings too. If people feel pity/fear as God they spare it, unless they will kill for the sake of fear for its venom and bites. Though the scientific study mentions the venom is good for health, if it is taken as a medicine, it will be the good one. If it bites, there will be severe death. That death plays a crucial role for the life of both human beings and snake.

From these two stories, one can understand the characteristic sketch of the species snake, the *serpentes*. Between these stories one is from Ethipion Legend story and another one is Indian myth. Though they are taken from different sectors, they are retold by Anita Nair as mythological stories. In Indian myth, Snake is coiled by Lord Siva around his neck. It is portrayed to be Nagaraja and Nagarani. They are assumed to be the pet creatures of some deities. Hindu People of India worship the Anthill where the King Cobra lives. They have passion to worship it as per the tradition of their myth. This snake is in the story of *Raahu* and *Keathu* too. But according to the biblical advice and other western ideology, snakes are only devils and demons. They are also creatures in this world. They are also fellow beings for human beings. They too have involved in the food chain in some circumstances. It is the creature which kills the rats which spoils the grain in the green field in some occasion according to the food chain.

The strategies of both goodness as well as evilness are in the hands of the snakes. The appearance of snake Vasuki at the huge ocean area describes the hard works of snake in the field. The role of unnamed snake in the first story describes the cleverness of the snake. It provides food to the bird, at the same time it cheats the bird. So, snakes play vital roles in the retold mythological stories because they are oral stories that give awareness and information to the next generation. These snakes are too living beings in the world as per the creation the Lord or Nature. So they have to be protected by the human beings for the sake of maintaining the balance of food chain overall. Human beings have to think about the ecological concerns and act according to the need.

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