

Beyond the Nature's Law: Eco-critical perspective on the select poems in Indian English Literature

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Abstract

A green literary text or an eco-poem is the wisdom of understanding human through nature. Green discourse is the need of the hour. Environmental chaos has given birth to the reinvention of glorified nature. Its purpose is to bring human beings from their insensitiveness towards nature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse it negotiates between human and non-human. It aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature. Although literature has dealt with environmental concerns since antiquity, it has never been explored with such urgency as it is done today. The paper seeks to explore select poems in Indian English literature from an eco-critical perspective. Although there has been many poems in Indian English literature which deals explicitly with the nature, the attitude towards nature in those poems were that of pastoral impulse, an aesthetic appreciation of nature or a philosophical and mystical attitude towards nature. This paper makes an eco-critical analysis of select Indian English poems to give vent to eco terrorism and the general deterioration of the earth's environment. It makes the theme of those poems much more relevant and transnational. The present study throws light on the rampant industrialization and urbanization that result in the degradation of man's harmonious life with nature. The study also explores how literature can be instrumental in retrieving nature from the imminent crisis.

When we speak of Nature in Indian context, it is about the meaning of Nature that has come down to us from the Vedic times. Throughout the long history of India, we have shared a fascination with, and respect for, Nature and animals. Indians regard everything around them as pervaded by a subtle divine presence, may it be rivers, mountains, lakes, animals, flora, the mineral world, as well as the stars and planets. It is so because the Divine reality is present as Prana/Shakti, energy, power, in every electron, particle, atom, cell and in every manifestation of matter. The five cosmic elements earth, water, air, akasha and fire all constitute a major role. Mother earth, the giver and sustainer of life; water, the lifeline of human existence; air, the prana, the essential life to live; Akasha, the creative energy; and fire, the source of all warmth and illumination. In Indian view, nature is considered a mother. She is worshipped in different forms.

There is a strong relation between human and non-human worlds in the poetical works of Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, HLV Derozio, Kasiprasads Ghose, Madusuthan Dutt, Toru Dutt and Sri Aurobindo. The nourishment of earth, beauty of the sky, trembling of leaves, blooming of buds, blossoming of flowers, chirping of birds, current rivers vastness of sea are the subjects of ecology that sow seeds of poetry in the minds of the poets. They are interconnected either through pleasure or pain.

Toru is essentially a poet of trees and woodland wilds. Toru is "a landscape painter" revealing in the world of variegated foliage. Her poems reveal the poet's "keen sensitiveness to nature Tagore's view of Nature was sympathetic and decidedly infused with a high religious element. The spiritual phases of nature leap up to his God-filled eyes kindle devotion in his heart and set song on his lips. Sarojini loves Nature for its own sake, for its beautiful and charming aspects. Hers is an aesthetic kind of response to Nature, characterized by Keatsian ecstasy and sensuousness and expressed in Shelleyian lyrical effusions. Poets like Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutt have a harmonious view of Nature embracing man's existence into her fold. Also noteworthy is that they carried forward the spiritual kinship that they found in the culture and literature of the India.

However despite the use of nature and the environment as the overt theme in their poems, Indian poems in English has refrained it from portraying the gradual deterioration of the earth's environment and ecology. This concern for the earth's ecology and environment can be traced in a few Indian English poems such as Dilip Chitre's *The Felling of the Banyan Tree*, Gieve Patel's *On Killing a Tree*, Baldoon Dhingra's *Factories are Eyesore*, and *Boat-Ride along the Ganga* by Keki N. Daruwalla. They have employed their poetry as a medium to lament the damages done to their vulnerable ecosystems and express their apprehensions about the impending apocalypse. By writing and raising concerns about the endangered environment, these poets endeavor to create an environmentally sensitive consciousness.

This paper attempts to read these poets from eco-critical perspective and how their respective backgrounds have shaped their interpretation of Nature, the general deterioration of the earth's environment and degradation of man's harmonious life with nature. The physical environment and literature, which is the mirror of the society, are both interconnected. Both are the part and parcel of the universe. The disturbance caused by any of them affects both. It denotes their strong inter-relation. In today's society which is highly civilized and therefore, artificial, man has completely alienated himself from Nature. However to relocate himself has become very problematic says Williams as "We have mixed our labor with the earth, our forces with its forces too deeply to be able to draw back and separate either out." Furthermore he continues, "If we alienate the living processes of which we are a part, we end, though unequally, by alienating ourselves."

Raymond Williams quotes Burke: "In a state of rude nature there is no such thing as a people.... The idea of a people is the idea of a corporation. It is wholly artificial; and made, like all other legal fictions, by common agreement. What the particular nature of that agreement was, is collected from the form into which the particular society has been cast." In the course of 'development' - farming, constructing dams, roads, houses, - man started alienating himself from the natural order of things. Along with this alienation man's idea of Nature too started changing.

This alienation of man from nature has created a permanent imbalance. Very few poets have captured such vision and bereaves for the future generation. Dilip Chitre's poem 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree' was included in his collection of English poems Travelling in a Cage (1980), published by Clearing House. Chitre's poem 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree, enacts the story of a fall, the fall of the rural, agrarian way of life and its values. It signalizes a gradual retreat from the countryside and the lap of nature and a shift towards the urban, industrial way of life. The drama of the felling of the old tree which has been part of a green dream for long, generates a sense of loss that is irreparable. The lines –

'We watched in terror and fascination this slaughter

As a raw mythology revealed to us its age'

indicate anxiety, anxiety about the change that is about to come because of the mindless 'slaughter' of the banyan tree which stands for non-human nature/environment/other. This cruel act of denying a place-scape where the tree can belong symbolizes the transition from Indian and middle-eastern 'mythos' to European 'logos', from cosmo-centric environmentalism to Western logo-centric/man-centric environmentalism.

This is an eco-text which portrays not only a transition but also a clash of values and attitudes between two generations, the old and the new, grandmother representing the ancient vedantic philosophy of life

'Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say

Felling them is a crime but he massacred them all'

"Indian women have been at the forefront of ecological struggles to conserve forests, land and water. They have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as Prakriti, the living force that supports life." (Vandhana Shiva) Finally the poet gives an idea of the urban landscape where the poet's family migrates. Contrary to their earlier stay at Baroda surrounded by nature, the new city of Bombay is a concrete city

'Where there are no trees except the one

Which grows and seethes in one's dream, its aerial roots

Looking for ground to strike.'

The line – 'Insects and birds began to leave the tree' – is a clear threat to biodiversity, concerns questions of animal/species rights and calls for environmental justice. The plain matter-of-fact narration thus talks of one thing but implies another. Let us hope that the 'aerial roots' of this green dream will one day find some 'ground to strike'. The poet is concerned about the pace with which the traditions are changing and are affected by modern notions. The value attached to the trees in earlier times is not of concern to people living in modern society.

If Dilip Chitre's *The Felling of the Banyan Tree* records the poet's subjective expression at the felling of the trees, Gieve Patel's *On Killing a Tree* is much more objective in narrating the difficulties involved in killing a tree. However, both the poems share the murderous rage involved in killing a tree and is symbolic of the rampant deforestation going on throughout the world thereby destroying nature and ecology. In a way very much like Chitre, Gieve Patel's *On Killing a Tree* may be read as a record of his protest against the violence and ecological terrorism indicted by Man on Nature. Eco-terrorism has been defined as the "destruction or the threat of destruction, of the environment by states, groups or individuals in order to intimidate or to coerce governments or civilians." (Encyclopaedia Britannica) Environmentalists point out that there are certain multinational companies, groups and individuals who cause severe pollution and cause an irreparable damage to the environment and ecology. These agencies, groups or individuals are the eco-terrorist in the real sense. In the poem Gieve Patel describes in great detail the murderous rage with which a tree is killed. Here the tree symbolizes Nature. The tree grows out of the earth crust of the Mother Earth. It matures slowly into a big tree taking water from the soil, sunshine and air. It is very difficult to kill such a tree. A simple cut with the knife will not make it dead:

'It takes much time to kill a tree,
Not a simple jab of the knife
Will do it.'

It has to be hacked and chopped with the axe to death. But Nature has great regenerative power. Soon the bleeding bark will heal, new leaves will come out from below and small boughs will regenerate into big branches:

‘The bleeding bark will heal
and from close to the ground
Will rise curled green twigs,

But Man in his greed for more does not want it to come to life again. He makes a deep cavity in the earth and hounds up the roots, the source of life and soul of the tree which were kept in safety inside Mother Earth for years. After pulling down the tree Man subjects it to various processes to fit it for his commercial purpose. He cuts it to pieces and scorches and chokes it. Finally after much browning, hardening, twisting and withering the killing of the tree is complete and the living tree is converted to dead timber:

‘And then it is done.’

Balloon Dhingra’s *Factories are Eyesores* points out the social and environmental ramifications of factory pollution. Although the poem posits the poet’s ambivalent attitude towards nature and technological development, the environmental concern can in no way be ruled out. Dhingra not only points out the ugliness of the dusty factories at the lap of serene nature but also points out the environmental implications of setting up of such factories in the midst of serene nature. The factories seem ugly in the midst of the green nature. They belch out black smoke day and night that pollute not only the air but also landscape of the entire area:

‘The factories, eyesores as you say,
Make iron lines against the sky.
Standing to eastward, gaunt and high
They belch black smoke by night and day,
Blots on the landscape, as you say.’

Not only does the poet point out the severe environmental pollution created by such factories but he also points out the severe adverse environmental conditions in which the factory laborers are made to work:

‘Weary and desperate with toil,
Man labours in that acrid space,
Time and again he turns his face
Away from grimy smoke and soil
To pray he shall have done with toil.’

Although the poet points about how the factory brightens up under the sunlight of the morning sun and wonders about how those polluting factories have made an impression on Claude Monnet, he veritably points out the ugly conditions in which men work till death:

‘Man works beneath, until he drops
Out of the world of wheels one day.
Factories are eyesores, as you say.’

“My poems are rooted in landscape... [It] is not merely there to set the scene but to lead to an illumination.” (Mehrotra 77) Keki N. Daruwalla’s poem *Boat-ride Along the Ganga* is a record of the poet’s journey by boat upstream the river Ganga. However, the poem also tries to give an idea about the environmental concerns and the environmental realities of the river Ganga. The river Ganga is the most important and also the most sacred river of the Hindus. Despite as such, people have a very ambivalent attitude towards the river. The river Ganga is associated with the Goddess Ganga in Hindu religion and mythology. Nothing is more purifying to a Hindu than taking a dip in the river Ganga. It cleanses everything. What the Ganga water removes is not only physical dirt but also symbolic dirt. It purifies the bather not only of all the sins of the present but also of the entire lifetime. Still, the river Ganga is also one of the most polluted rivers in India. This scene of ugliness and pollution at the river ghats has been very well described by Daruwalla:

‘Palm-leaf parasols sprouting like freak- mushrooms
Brood over platforms that are empty.’

Not only that the poet also gives a vivid description of the dualistic attitude of the people towards the river. The Hindus worship the Ganga river with reverence and respect, any religious ritual is incomplete without water from the river Ganga. The river is also the very lifeline of millions of people in the region. Still, the attitude of the people towards the river is that of indifference. All the filths and wastes from cities and towns are recklessly thrown in the river water without any hesitation. Thus, in the poem ,while the *panda* was describing to the poet, the greatness and the religious significance of the Dasasvamedha ghats³, the scene of the pollutants being recklessly thrown into the Ganga river water through the sewage drains made the poet all the more uneasy:

‘As the *panda* points out Dasasvamedh.
I listen avidly to his legend-talk
Striving to forget what I chanced to see:
The sewer- mouth trained like a cannon
On the river’s flank.’

The poem exhibits the Hindu’s Vedic ideology of love for all creatures, where everybody is linked to everyone else. Thus the poet sees the bamboo poles fixed in river water to allow the thirsty birds to drink water from the river:

‘Poles scattered on the river to provide some room
For birds to perch on when attacked by thirst;’

The idea behind this ambivalent attitude towards the Ganga by people might be that the Ganges has a cleansing property, it washes all, and it purifies everything. Thus the concern for the environment and ecology as presented in these poems not only mirrors our personal and cultural attitudes towards the environment, it also serves to shape a formative opinion among the masses towards the preservation of nature, environment and ecology.

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