

Ecological Concern in Indian English Poetry

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Environmental crisis is one of the major hazards encountered by the world today. Nature is brutally plundered and victimized. Man's exploitation of nature is because man has forgotten and gone away from the basic premises of ecology. The basic concept in ecology is that everything is related to everything else. Man should live in harmony with nature. World should not be anthropocentric, but bio-centric where every plant, animal and human coexist with each other. Environmental problems result from the lack of ecological sensibility. Living in an age of constant ecological and environmental crisis, the study of natural-cultural relations has become an important aspect of modern studies. Literature is the medium to reflect the current problems of society. Since time immemorial literature has been mirroring the various incidents that have shaped the course of history for mankind - various revolutions, the wars and battles and the rise and fall of the empires. Thus it is no surprise that literature should document the relationship that exists between man, environment and nature. With the evolution of man from a bipedal mammal to modern technologically developed man, his relationship with the environment and that of nature has evolved through the passing phases of wonder, fear, reverence, respect and indifference. However, rarely has there been any attention given to trace in literature the relationship

that exists between man and nature with such urgency as it is done today.

The creative writers have been addressing these problems in their writings from time to time in order to remind mankind its responsibility towards Nature and the impending danger if it is not looked into. This consciousness of the writers has brought the two disciplines ecology and literary criticism together. The purpose is to restore the Earth's health, which is lost owing to man's wrongdoing. Various lethal activities by men have caused a great harm to ecology. The incessant cutting of trees for human use and deforestation, use of weapons and missiles, of radioactive material in nuclear power plants, industrial pollution, resource depletion and population explosion, etc., have led to serious ecological problems such as global warming, increased rate of pollution, frequent coastal inundation, tsunami and cyclones, earthquakes and floods. This damaging of the nature has not only caused a disastrous change in the climactic conditions all over the earth but has also proved destructive to the ozone layer, the protective shield of our earth. And now there is an urgent and pressing need to safeguard the environment and make earth a better place to live.

The study of ecology has gained immense popularity in the recent years as people have become more concerned about the

deteriorating environment and eco-system. The study of the relationship between literature and environment consciousness is an interdisciplinary study termed as Ecocriticism. The term “ecocriticism” was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” Interest in the study of nature writing and reading literature with a focus on “green” issue grew through the 1980’s and by the early 90’s. This, Ecoconsciousness has led to a new approach in the field of literature and it mainly deals with a critical reading of literary texts in relation to environment, nature and literature. William Rueckert says, “The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying natural community, and with it the human community.” This is what the ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude towards nature. (Glotfelty 107) For the ecocritics, nature as an entity really exists which can affect us and which, if mistreated, can be affected by us fatally. While environmentalists argue for the preservation of natural resources for human purposes, deep ecology is concerned with the recognition of inherent worth in nature. In deep ecology, there is a shift from a human-centered or anthropocentric to a nature-centered or ecocentric system of values. Jonathan Bate says about his renowned work *The Song of the Earth*, “It is about the capacity of the writer to restore us to the earth which is our home.” According to Bate, Ecoconsciousness can be expressed through any of the two ways, one by

showing love for nature and by showing concern for nature.

The tradition of nature worship in India dates back to the Vedic period. There are poems in praise of the beauty of the earth and the powers glimpsed behind the radiant veil of nature. Nature and its forces have been worshipped as Gods. Nature attracts the literary writers and their works embellish with depiction of nature. Indian Literature is rich in concepts of nature worship and Indian English poetry also reflects it. The poets of pre-independent and postcolonial India have expressed their concern and reverence for nature. Various poets have responded to the environment in diverse ways. Some rejoice in the wondrous and divine beauty of Nature whereas some depict the harsher aspects of Nature and there are some that become philosophic in their descriptions of nature. One of the strategies with which the postcolonial poets write back against the empire is by the use of themes in poems about their own nature, landscape and ecology. This has been an intrinsic feature in the poems of most poets of the postcolonial nations like Africa, Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Sri Lanka etc. The Indian poets in English are no different. The Post-Independence Indian poetry in English began in an atmosphere of changes, and challenges, modernity and experimentation. During this period, there started a new creative urge for awareness, a new faith and a pledge of sharp departure from the established and accepted themes and techniques. The Post-Independence poets while experimenting with new techniques and themes have tried to maintain the harmonious relationship with

nature and environment. They are more concerned for natural and environmental influences and inflexions.

This paper attempts to present the ecological concern expressed by Indian English poets in select poems and to trace the attitude of Indians towards nature. This concern for the ecology and environment can be traced in a few Indian English poems such as R. Parasarthy's *River, Once*, Keki N. Daruwalla's *Boat-Ride Along the Ganga*, Dilip Chitre's *The Felling of the Banyan Tree*, and Gieve Patel's *On Killing a Tree*. Though the poems speak of the deterioration of a particular region, geography, locale, environment and ecology, it is symbolic of the gradual deterioration of the global ecology and man's role in that destructive process. It makes the theme of the poems not only ecocentric but also much more transnational. The poems studied in this paper are related to rivers and trees as they happen to be the most vital part of environment. Water and trees are life maintaining resources and it is found that these are the stake of destruction. In India Rivers and Trees are worshipped as Gods and it is found with utmost anxiety that they are left to decay and die. The poems *River, Once* and *A Boat-Ride Along the Ganga* present the decadent and polluted state of the rivers.

R. Parasarthy's poem on the river Vaikai is titled *River, Once*. The title is highly suggestive as it indicates that it was a river once and it is no longer a river due to man's indifference to the beauty of nature. The poet expresses his sense of shock at the degradation of the river. Using the device of contrast effectively, the poet shows how the

river that was once the cradle of a glorious culture has now become a sewer. The river is personified as a mother. The mother river feels for her lost glory and speaks about her present pitiable condition. The Vaikai was a fast flowing perennial river once and a glorious civilisation flourished on its banks. Now it has become a play-field for boys and the mischievous boys "tickle the ribs" with paper boats. The word "ribs" has been used metaphorically for the banks of the rivers. Buffaloes have turned the river into a pond and are wallowing in it. Once there were flower gardens on the banks of the river and now one finds only thorny bushes and shrubs. "There is eaglewood in my hair / and state flowers." Now a lot of eaglewood floats on the water and state flowers are thrown into it can be seen. Once she was the refuge of emperors and poets. The poets of the past came to her for inspiration. She inspired them to write great poetry. Here the poet makes a reference to the three great Tamil Academies that flourished at Madurai in the ancient past and to the great contribution made by the Sangam poets to the richness of the ancient Tamil Poetry. In the past, birds like kingfishers and egrets were regular visitors and as a mother the river fed them. Now they have flown away as she is unable to feed them. The poet presents an altogether different scene of the river today in a humorous and ironic vein. Every evening "When bells roll in the forehead of temples", a man comes to the river for defecating in it unmindful of the divine call of the temple bell. The poet presents this ugly scene to highlight man's indifference to the beauty of nature and the environmental decay. Once people

congregated on the banks of the river Vaigai for noble purposes but ironically now they do so for different and unholy purposes. Now the river Vaigai has become a receptacle of refuse. *River, Once* is indeed a powerful poem deeply felt and powerfully expressed. The river is a symbol of the flow of life but in its present contaminated state it is only a symbol what human life has become. Anguished over decay of the river the poet seems to convey the idea that nature has made everything beautiful but man has rendered it ugly because he has lost the sense of wonder and beauty. The poet has succeeded in presenting this idea tellingly through contrastive pen-pictures.

An ecoconscious reading of Keki N Daruwalla's poem *A Boat-Ride Along the Ganga*, reveals the hazards of polluting the holy river and how man is responsible for it. It is a record of the poet's journey by boat upstream the river Ganga. The poem tries to give an idea about the environmental concerns and the environmental realities of the river Ganga. For the Hindus, Ganga is a sacred river, a mother, divinity, life giver, and river of salvation. Despite as such, people have a very ambivalent attitude towards the river. However, the poet, views it differently and states the sad reality of the river. On the banks of the river, he finds death, disease and staleness. The poet casts a wry look at the contradictions that abound in the life of a Hindu, "What plane of destiny have I arrived at/ where corpse-fires and cooking-fires burn side by side?" Through the lines of the poem, he utters his embarrassment to see things in the river and its banks, while he is riding upstream a motorboat, with a boat rider, at dusk, slowly

the ghat-amphitheatre unfolds "Like a diseased nocturnal flower in a dream / That opens its petals only at dusk. Palm-leaf parasols sprouting like freak-mushrooms Brood over platforms that are empty". He expresses his indifference with the words of panda and the things which he happens to see while rowing, "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. It is as I feared" 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. "Hygiene is a part of conscience and I curse it /And curse my upbringing which makes me queasy here." The poet's conscience for hygiene makes him curse it. The loss of purity of the river is at the base of concern as water is the life-force of nature. The scene of ugliness and pollution at the river ghats has been very well described by Daruwalla.

Dilip Chitre's *The Felling of the Banyan Tree* apparently describes how the poet's father prior to their migration from Bombay to Baroda demolishes everything and sells it off:

My father told the tenants to leave

Who lived in the houses surrounding our
house on the hill

One by one the structures were
demolished

Only our house remained and the trees

Behind the apparent simple theme lies the poet's deep concern for ecology. Not only the houses of the tenants were brought down, but all the trees surrounding the poet's houses were cut down one by one. The poet's grandmother protested against this saying, "Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say/Felling them is a crime but he massacred them all." The mighty tree was slaughtered and was not an easy task, "Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives." The felling of a tree is equal to the death of a generation, a legacy.

Its scraggly aerial roots fell to the
ground

From thirty feet or more so first they cut
the branches

Sawing them off for seven days and the
heap was huge

Not only does trees have cultural significance but they are also profound religious significance in India. The banyan tree symbolises the life and fertility in many Indian cultures. The cutting of the banyan tree is not only a harm to the tree only but it also affects the entire environment and ecology of the place. The banyan tree forms an ecosystem in microcosmic form. Other organisms such as the insects and birds which depend on the banyan tree are equally harmed by the cutting of the tree. "Insects and birds began to leave the tree." The line expresses a clear threat to biodiversity,

concerns questions of animal/species rights and calls for environmental justice. The lines ".....but he massacred them all/The sheoga, the oudmuber, the neem were all cut down/But the huge banyan tree stood like a problem/ Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives/My father ordered it to be removed"- speak volumes about the priorities of the concretized structure of modern urban life and its ecocidal tendencies. Grandmother, being a woman, is more intimately related to and concerned about, nature/environment and warns her son of the grave consequences of his domineering and masculinist action. That her ecofeminist voice fails to influence her son's decision is a pointer to the usual humiliation and defeat suffered by women at the hands of patriarchy which enacts a story of othering and domination. It is to be noted the difference in attitude between Man or the poet's father and Woman or poet's grandmother. The ecofeminist interpretation becomes all the more relevant here. Thus the attitude of the grandmother and the mother in A. K. Ramanujan's poem *Ecology* who tries to protect her nature as *Prakriti* is in sharp contrast to that of his father or the son who tries to dominate and show his mastery over Nature by cutting them down. Vandana Shiva nicely puts it, "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." (Shiva xxxii)

The poet expresses anxiety over the loss of the place (the oikos) and the tree when he says, "Soon afterwards we left Baroda for

Bombay/ Where there are no trees except the one/Which grows and seethes in one's dreams, its aerial roots/booking for ground to strike." Chitre's poem 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 and irreplaceable. 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 space where the tree can belong symbolizes the transition from cosmo-centric environmentalism to logocentric/man-centric environmentalism.

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 inflicted by Man on Nature. Ecoterrorism 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 ecoterrorist in the real sense.

Patel is one of the foremost Indian writers in English and one of the few writers who subscribe themselves to the "Green Peace Movement". *On Killing a Tree* is a classic example of the poet's anguish at the cruelty of man to Nature. In the poem Patel describes in great detail the murderous rage with which a tree is killed. It is a sarcastic poem about man's indiscriminate destruction of trees. The tree is presented as an enemy to man. Man is presented as a professional killer who thinks of all possible ways to torture the tree. The poem begins ironically, describing the crime committed by the tree. For years it has consumed the earth's crust. Like a thief it has absorbed sunlight, air and water and has grown up like a giant. 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,

It will again become a threat to man. But Man in his greed for more does not want it to come to life again. So the tree should be tied with a rope and pulled out entirely. 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. Its white, bleeding root should be exposed. 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." This poem paints a vivid and brutal picture of what is involved in killing a tree. The poet uses strong images to show that it takes quite a bit of doing to kill a tree. It is not enough to merely hack it with an axe. One must pull it up by the roots too eliminate it. Only then will it die. The poem gives a realistic picture of man's attitude towards trees. The tree is his greatest friend. But man is so foolish that he doesn't realize the fact that he is cutting his own throat when he cuts a tree. This poem highlights a lot of morals. It displays the destructive nature of humans and it

shows that Mother Nature is inevitable and cannot be easily destroyed. One cannot resist looking at the symbolism of environmental decay used to define civilizational decay, where killing is not only a manual act, but rather more about denying and annihilating the otherness of the other beings, other cultures, other societies.

All know that human beings and other creatures depend on the natural world for survival. Human existence solely depends on the survival of the natural habitat. But Man is selfish and he ravages nature unceremoniously. The destruction of the trees signifies the crumbling of the delicate relationship between humans and nature. It also highlights the problem of deforestation and its effects. Attempts have been made to save trees from deforestation and the 'Chipko' Movement in India is a great example of how people, especially women, have realized the worth of trees and stood strong to protest and protect trees. The great concern of our ancestors for preservation of environment is exemplary. Thus the concern for the environment and ecology as presented in these poems not only mirrors personal and cultural attitudes towards the environment, it also serves to shape a formative opinion, ecoconsciousness among the masses towards the preservation of nature, environment and ecology.

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