



Indian Literature

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PLAY

- The Dream of a Child* Bundeli 114
Dipak Barkhade

ESSAYS

- The Intersection of Caste and Disability in
Premchand's Rangbhoomi* 126
Akhilesh Kumar

- The External Influence and the Internal Strife:
Yassin's Development in The Refugee* 136
Aroma Delight Samson and D. Nalina Palin

- Krishna—The Complete Man* 142
Durga Bhagwat
Tr. Leena Chandorkar

- Delineating Resilience through the Autobiographies of
Women Partition Survivors* 147
Twinkle Dhall

- Ecological and Cultural Consciousness in Selected Indian English Poems* 157
Sabitha M.M

- Lako Bodra – A Study in the Context of Social, Cultural and
Literary Emancipation of the 'Ho' Community* 163
Tapan Kumar Khanra

- Kondh Myths and Oral Epics of Odisha* 175
Mahendra Kumar Mishra

MEMOIR

- Some Fragments of a Memoir* Bengali 190
Pratima Devi
Tr. Shilpi Das

Ecological and Cultural Consciousness in Selected Indian English Poems

Sabitha M.M

The word "Ecology" is a combination of two Greek words "eco" ("house or dwelling place") and "logos" ("the study of"). Ecology is a branch of science that deals with the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment including other organisms and human ecology is the study of interaction of people with their environment. The imbalance between the human world and the natural world is disturbing the natural cycle and rhythm among all living organisms. This causes a great harm to environment and natural surroundings. It is obvious that modern man has been responsible for the large-scale devastation of natural resources. The term "consciousness" refers to the state of being conscious and the power of self-knowledge and internal perception about some particular object or state. This paper focuses on exploring the levels of consciousness in the human mind towards the importance of natural heritage, towards saving the environment, towards the conservation of natural resources and the importance of coexistence of man and nature for the welfare of the entire world.

The theory of ecocriticism reflects the need for understanding on the part of human beings to develop a harmonious relationship with the natural world in an age of environmental crisis. Over-exploitation of natural resources and man's disregard for the air, the water and the soil, that sustain him, have given rise to the question of the survival of both man and the planet. Therefore, ecocritics have come forward with their novel plea to advocate the dictum "Save the Planet". Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment and literary scholars try to analyse the texts or works of writers that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways in which literature treats the subject of nature.

William Rueckert used the term *Ecocriticism* for the first time in his essay entitled "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*". He defined ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world." Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the pioneers in this field defines ecocriticism as "the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment and one of the implicit goals of the approach is to regain professional dignity for the undervalued genre of nature writing." Ecocriticism has several sub approaches such as Deep ecology, Ecofeminism, Ecocide, Ecoterrorism, etc. It cultivates the awareness that man has reached the limits of environmental destruction and is damaging the planet's basic life support system. Literary writers and critics have tried to convey this message through their writings. Alongwith western writers initiating steps to create awareness about this menace, Indian literary artists also felt a great need to awaken the public of India towards the decline of natural beauty and natural heritage. This paper seeks to explore select poems in Indian English literature from an ecocritical perspective.

Dilip Chitre's poem "The Felling of the Banyan Tree" is symbolical, mythical and eco-centric as it involves many ecological concerns such as urbanization, flat construction, road making, renovation of older buildings and supply of wooden logs to saw mills. In the poem, the renowned Marathi writer, Dilip Chitre apparently describes how his 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. (01-04)

The poem depicts the poet's deep concern for ecology. Not only the house of the tenants were brought down, but all the trees surrounding the poet's house were cut down one by one. The poet's grandmother protested against this cutting down of trees:

Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say
 Felling them is a crime but he massacred them all (05-06)

Thus, one by one all the trees, shoega, the oudumbar, the neem were chopped down. Even the great banyan tree, which was there for the last two hundred years, "Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives" (09), and the tree which was

“three times as tall as our house” (11) was ordered to be cut down. The poet’s writing is essentially imbued with his culture and his religious worldview. The grandmother’s aversion at the cutting down of trees is based on her religious beliefs, the concept of “sacred” in Hinduism—sacred species, sacred groves, and sacred landscapes. These religious and cultural customs link Man to Nature. The banyan tree or batbriksha symbolizes the Trimurthi in Hindu religion—Lord Vishnu is believed to be the bark, Brahma is believed to be the roots, and Lord Shiva is believed to be the branches. The banyan tree also symbolizes life and fertility in many Indian cultures. It is also sacred to the Buddhist as Lord Buddha is believed to have sat down beneath the banyan tree after he attained enlightenment. The cutting of the banyan tree affects the entire environment and ecology of the place.

While the poet’s father orders to cut down the trees, his grandmother points out that trees are sacred and cutting them down is a “crime”. The ecofeminist interpretation is relevant here, the attitude of the grandmother or the Woman who tries to protect nature as Prakriti is in sharp contrast to the poet’s father or the Man who tries to dominate and show his mastery over Nature by destroying them. Finally, the poet gives an idea of the Urban landscape where his family migrates, from Baroda surrounded by nature to the concrete city of Bombay, “Where there are no trees except the one/ Which grows and seethes in one’s dream, its aerial roots/ Looking for ground to strike.” (23-25)

If Dilip Chitre’s “The Felling of the Banyan tree” depicts 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. Both the poems share the lethal wrath involved in killing a tree and is symbolic of the extensive deforestation going on throughout the world thereby annihilating nature and ecology. The poem “On Killing a Tree” shows the poet’s strong protest against the violence and ecological terrorism inflicted by Man on Nature. Gieve Patel begins the poem in a simple note:

It takes much time to kill a tree,
Not a simple jab of the knife
Will do it. (01-03)

Being a Parsi poet, through the poem Gieve Patel metaphorically talks about the age old full grown Parsi tradition which cannot be easily wiped off. Though the poem is a record of the thoughts and feelings that arose from Patel’s real experience of the shock he felt on seeing a huge peepal tree lying uprooted in his college campus after a stormy night; it is suggestive enough to

comprehend the Parsi community's rootedness in the Indian soil and their struggle against being rooted out.

The tree, which has grown slowly consuming the earth, and risen out of its crust over a period of time absorbing air, water and sunshine cannot be killed easily. It takes much time to do it. A severe hacking or chopping of the branches may not yet kill the tree as new shoots will appear and the tree will grow again to its former size.

The bleeding bark will heal
And from close to the ground
Will rise curled green twigs. (13-15)

But greedy man does not want it to come to life again. He makes a deep cavity in the earth and hounds up the roots, the strength and soul of the tree, which were kept safely inside Mother Earth for years. After uprooting the tree, it is taken to various processes to make it fit for man's commercial purposes. He cuts it into pieces, scorches and chokes it. Finally, after much browning, hardening, twisting and withering the killing of tree is complete and the living tree is converted to dead timber: "And it is done." (35)

R. Parthasarathy's poem "River, Once" is greatly significant in the modern world as it indicates that man's detachment to the beauty of nature. The poet expresses his sense of disbelief at the degradation of the river Vaikai, which flows through the city of Madurai. The poet shows how the river that was once the cradle of a glorious culture has now become a sewer through the contrastive images. The river is personified as a mother and how the mother river feels for its lost glory and speaks about her pitiable condition:

I am become a sewer
now, no one
has any use for Vaikai
river, once
of this sweet city. (21-25)

The Vaikai was a fast-flowing perennial river once and was the centre of a glorious civilization. Now it has turned to a play-field and the mischievous boys "tickle the ribs" with paper boats. Buffaloes are wallowing in it and have turned the river into a pond. Once there were flower gardens on the banks of the river and now one could find only thorny bushes and shrubs. Once she was the refuge of emperors and the inspiration for the great Sangam poets. In the past kingfishers and egrets were regular visitors, but now they have flown away as she is unable to feed them. The river is a symbol of the flow of life but

in the present contaminated state it is only a symbol what human life has become. The poet is anxious over decay of the river and 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.

Keki N. Daruwalla's poem "A Boat-ride Along the Ganga" is a record of the poet's journey by boat upstream the river Ganga. An ecocritical reading of the poem reveals how man is responsible for polluting the holy river. The poem tries to give an idea about the environmental concerns and the environmental realities of the river Ganga. The Ganga, the most sacred river of the Hindus, is associated with the Goddess Ganga in Hindu religion and mythology. People believe that taking a dip in the river Ganga, cleanses everything—not only physical dirt but also symbolic dirt, all the sins of their entire life time.

The poem begins with a simple description of an evening, but the poet's "conscience" for "hygiene" makes him curse it. The poet gives a vivid description of the dualistic attitude of the people towards the river. The Hindus worship the Ganga River with reverence and respect, 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 hesitation. Thus, in the poem while the panda was describing the greatness and religious significance of the Dasasvamedha Ghats, the scene of the pollutants being recklessly thrown into the river water through the sewage 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. (09-13)

The poem throws light on the hazards of polluting the holy river and the author intends to make one "queasy" and to develop hygiene as a part of one's conscience:

Hygiene is a part of conscience and I curse it
And curse my upbringing which makes me queasy here.

The poem also reflects 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. Thus, the concern for the environment and ecology as presented in these poems not only mirrors our personal and cultural attitudes towards the environment, but also serves to shape a formative opinion among the masses towards the preservation of nature, environment and ecology.

These poems are concerned with the individual's attempt to reconcile contrasting cultural heritage. The poems are the products of a specific culture and what make them individualistic is the poet's ability to translate a specific cultural experience into terms of another culture. They show how literature can be used as a powerful vehicle to take to the world messages on ecology. In a natural system, the well-being of species is dependent on the growth and harmony of the whole ecosystem. Therefore, it is a fundamental and ethical responsibility of man to respect and protect nature, its resources and life supporting system. E.O. Wilson has rightly said, "Nature holds the key to our aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive and even spiritual satisfaction."

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