

SYNOPSIS

Ecocritical Reading of the Selected Writings of

Dhruv Bhatt and Gopinath Mohanty

Submitted by

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Introduction

As a critical practice in literature, ecocriticism emerged in 1990s in the American and European literary domains. As the nomenclature itself suggests, ecocriticism critically evaluates cultural artifacts like literature in their ecological contexts. It studies human relationships with the environment that envelopes the entire universe into its protective fold. Ecocritics explore various aspects of the human role and responsibilities either in aggravating or mitigating the global environmental phenomena like climate change and global warming which have been exasperated exceptionally in the Anthropocene.

According to the 2015 android version of Merriam-Webster dictionary, if nature means “the physical world and everything in it (such as plants, animals, mountains, oceans, stars etc.) that is not made by people,” then, ‘what is made by people’ is understood as culture. Man, like other species, is also a part of nature. Yet, he thinks he is superior to nature because of his culture. This nature-culture dichotomy and its detrimental impact on ecology are clearly reflected in the present-day global environmental politics.

Although polities across the world principally agree on the international environmental platforms like the Earth Summits or Conference of Parties that recovering ecobalance is a collective and ethical responsibility of the entire mankind, neither the developed economies like the USA nor the developing economies like India or China are ready to sacrifice their national economic interests for the sake of international ecologic welfare. This situation categorically pronounces the urgency to infuse ecosensitivity in the political psyche and raise environmental awareness in the socio-

cultural practices at individual/collective levels. In response to this necessity, in 1990s ecocritics like Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Simon C. Estok, Greg Gerrard and Harold Fromm initiated earth-centered praxis like ecocriticism, thinking that it can play a vital role in the global environmental discourse.

Like other countries, developing economies like India will also need to deal cautiously with the environmental impact of industrialization, deforestation, urbanization, population explosion and poverty. Enacted in the wake of the Bhopal Gas tragedy (1984), under article 253 of the Indian constitution, although the Environment Protection Act of 1986 legally empowers the central government in protecting natural resources from industrial pollutions, governments seem to be still struggling to effectively tackle the issues such as illegal sand-mining, poaching and logging, minimizing the flow of chemical pollutants into rivers like Ganga, Narmada or Yamuna.

Arundhati Roy narrates in an on-line article “Cost of Living” about the disastrous ecological impact of the Narmada dam project on both the natural and the social ecologies of the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh (6). As reported in an article by Sohini Das, appeared in *Business Standard* of July-2015 edition, the chemical industrial clusters of Ankleshwar and Vapi of Gujarat top the CBCP infamous list among the ‘critically polluted’ industrial clusters of India. In 2020, this situation has not changed much.

Literature, being a lamp and mirror of life, and the critical practices of the same, being the most effective intellectual devices to transform human psyche, could surely play a substantial role in this scenario by voicing/appreciating ecological concerns. However, till 1980s, as Amitav Ghosh, in his *Great Derangement* notes, literary critics

and even authors in general have largely ignored the environmental issues taking place around them.

It may be observed that although the internationally acclaimed Indian English novels written during the last couple of decades- such as *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (1997) and *The White Tiger* by Arvind Adiga (2008)- have been remarkably appreciated from sociological aspects, the links between social ecologies and natural ecologies therein have not yet been discussed adequately. *Shodhganga*, a compendium of research work done in the Indian universities, also echoes the fact that the area of the study of Indian literature from ecocritical aspects have remained largely unexplored.

Considering the rich environmental insights stored in the religious and spiritual heritage of India, the progressive strides India has taken in the matters of science, technology and in the fiction writing in English, India can certainly contribute significantly in the global environment awareness mission.

It is for this reason that I have proposed in this thesis to examine the selected writings of Dhruv Bhatt (b.1945) and Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1991)- since the themes of their writings are essentially nature-centric. I will try to analyze some of their writings to see how eco-centric depictions of Nature and the approaches of their human characters towards the non-human world- i.e. animals, birds, forests, rivers, oceans, valleys, trees and the earth- offer imaginative scopes to ecosensitize us by stimulating our latent love and concerns for Nature.

Literature Review

Both Bhatt and Mohanty have won Sahitya Academy Awards for their effective fictionalization of real stories of Gujarat and Orissa respectively. Works of both authors reflect their experiences enriched by their close connections with the forests and valleys in which they have spent considerable amount of their lives in their regions.

Bhatt has given nine novels and a collection of poems. Stories of Bhatt's novels chosen for study take place in settings like forests, seacoasts and river valleys. Out of Bhatt's nine novels, five have been translated into English; whereas Gopinath Mohanty's four novels are available in English out of his 25 works. Mohanty's portrayal of the poor and the tribal people are characterized by his deep humanity, his Marxist leanings and his love for Gandhian philosophy of sustainable growth. Besides 24 novels, honored also with Padma Bhushan and Jnanpith award, Mohanty has also given 10 collections of short stories, three plays, two biographies, two volumes of critical essays, and five books on the languages of Kandh, Gadaba and Saora tribes.

It would be interesting to see how a study of two authors- born approximately before and after India procured her political independence- representing two horizontally opposite regions located on the Indian map contribute towards interpreting ecological problematic in Indian contexts.

As the chapterization shows, I have selected three of Bhatt's novels (*That Thou Art*, *Oceanside Blues*, *Akoopar*) and one of Mohanty's novels (*Paraja*) for my studies. As mentioned, these stories focus on the events that take place in the forest, on the riverbanks and on the coastline areas of Gujarat, whereas Mohanty's works fictionalize stories of tribal people living harmoniously with nature amid hills and rivers of the forests of Orissa.

That Thou Art

That Thou Art is a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel of Bhatt that weaves a story about the lives of the tribes and other communities living around the riverbank of Narmada. Indian by birth, the narrator of the tale is a young American university student, who has been sent as a part of the cultural study project to India by an American professor to live with the tribal folk residing in the forests that stood on the Narmada riverbank. His letters to his American friend Lucy allow us to have a closer look at the lives of the tribals living in the forest valleys from the Indian/non-Indian or the insider's/outsider's perspectives.

Oceanside Blues

Oceanside Blues talks about the possible ecological and cultural consequences of establishing chemical units along a large area of the 1650 km long seacoast of Gujarat that constitutes approximately 25% of the country's coastline. This novel is in form of memories of a young civil engineer who has been deputed by the government to hold a survey of a dry region of Saurashtra in order to approve installation of chemical factories therein. Along with the journey of the protagonists, as the story progresses, we learn how ecology has been protected by the environmental wisdom of Indian cultures preserved by the local communities, and how along with the evacuation of these people a rich cultural heritage would also be demolished that has retained for centuries the sanctity of the wilderness, and habitats of the birds and sea-creatures. The novel depicts the struggles between a conventional and faith-driven culture and that of a profit-oriented, selfish, economic force.

Akoopar-The Infinite

Akoopar-The Infinite, Bhatt's semi-autobiographical work, fictionalizes real incidents the author had encountered during his long stay in the National Park of the Gir forest of Gujarat, the only natural habitat for the Asiatic lions. The narrator of the story is an anonymous painter, who has taken up a project of painting the elemental forms of the earth. Here, the Gir forest and the lions emerge as characters. Besides that, the novel encompasses a wide range of human characters such as 'maldharies'- cattle-breeders, forest guards, forest officers, fisher folk, villagers, a foreign student who pursues research on the lions, her courageous jungle guide and wildlife activists. While delineating how nature responds to human attitudes towards nature, the novel relates interesting observations on the lives of people who protect nature. Dhruv Bhatt's close associations with Gir forest, the Narmada valley and seacoast of Saurashtra provide strength of experience to the fictional frameworks of his stories.

On the other hand, Gopinath Mohanty's both works below bear a stamp of authenticity of the intimacy he had developed with the tribal communities during his long tenure of Orissa Administrative service between 1938 and 1969.

Paraja

Written originally in Udiya language in 1945, *Paraja* is one of the best works available in English by Mohanty. The novel talks about the 'Parajas'- which is a colorful and proud tribal community living in tiny clusters of helmets in the southern regions of Orissa. Epical length of this saga weaves a long story of two generations, which encapsulates an in-depth assessment of the tribulations and exploitation of the tribal world. Out of Mohanty's other works, as I needed to devote more time to understand and appreciate the complex structure and thematic design of this novel, discussion on

this novel has occupied more space on the chapter on Mohanty's works. Mohanty's unique prose style that includes phrases from the day-to-day speech of ordinary people describes the forest tribes' struggle over the use of natural resources against the excessive government constraints and feudal patriarchy that determine their fate at a point of time when in-roads of 'modernity' has begun to undermine the self-sufficient, age-old fabric of tradition.

The Ancestor

Parja is the tale of one's attachment to the soil of one's ancestors; whereas *The Ancestor*, the English translation of *Dadi Budha*, talks about the old order undergoing a change to yield a place to the new ways of life. The thematic focus is largely on the relationship between two worlds-the natural world and the human world. This novel also portrays a poignant tale of the disintegration of a tribal community under the impact of modern civilization. Dadi Budha is an ancient date palm tree epitomizing the eternal tribal ancestor. Near it stands a termite mound called Hunka Budha; another symbol of the primitive and innocent faith of the tribal world. They symbolize the cultural heritage of the tribes and their rituals, while silently witnessing the drama of their existence, their struggles, their joys and sorrows.

Objectives of the Research

The selected texts will be studied in order to understand:

- How human conceptions of nature determine human behaviour towards environment.
- How human definitions of social ecology influences natural ecology.
- How economic considerations impact ecologic concerns.
- How constructs of gender affect our environmental practices.
- How cultural traditions and belief systems shape human imagination about the non-human world?
- How conceptions of nature are exchanged among people belonging to different social and economic spaces and cultures?
- Are there solutions to protect biodiversity by minimizing pollutions spread by humans?
- How literary texts can affect our imagination of and our behavioral patterns with nature?

Research Questions

- How nature is represented in the selected works?
- How and why certain characters behave with the non-human world the way they do in the texts?
- How language reflects socio-cultural conceptions of nature?
- What is the role of the locales in the selected works?
- Are the values highlighted in the works consistent with ecological wisdom?
- How the socio-cultural constructs and politics of exploitation affect ecology?

Methodology: My Working Plan

- For the thematic assessment of the texts, I have adopted compare-and-contrast method. While writings by the same authors, I will be comparing the styles of both the authors so far as their depictions of nature, characters, and locales are concerned.
- I have translated some nature-centric poems written in Gujarati by poets like Kalapi, Umashankar Joshi, Sitanshu Yashaschandra, Mehul Devkala to link their ecological ideals with those of the select works.
- I will also try to understand the select works with the help of the religious, socio-cultural or linguistic insights offered by literary figures other than the mentioned above, and the philosophical thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, Emerson, Karl Marx, Vandana Shiva etc.
- Ecocritical insights of some ecocritics like Cheryl Glotfelty, Greg Garrard, Harold Fromm, Lawrence Buell etc will also be considered to have clear perspectives of the text-based-ecological issues.
- Personal interview of Dhruv Bhatt may help me understand the works from authorial viewpoint.

Chapterization

My thesis contains five chapters and a conclusion. In the following discussion I have touched upon the core ideas explained in each chapter.

Chapter-I: Introduction.

This chapter seeks to highlight basic aspects of the term ecocriticism. It includes etymological flashback of the term, some of its definitions, and its salient features. Global ecopolitics and its impact on environment have been briefly touched upon here, and it is also explained here how the long absence of environmental consciousness in literature and literary criticism gradually led to the emergence of the praxis, and how it developed during different phases called Waves in the West. Ecocritical trends such as ecosociology, ecofeminism and deep ecology have also been very briefly explained in light of which select writings have been examined in subsequent chapters. In the concluding part of this chapter, movements like Neoclassicism, Romanticism and Transcendentalism have been mentioned to see how nature-writings of the select texts also counter neoclassicist approaches to life and they share some common features with their Romantic forerunners. This concluding part seeks to understand how nature-oriented thoughts pervade authorial consciousness across times and geo-political and linguistic borders.

Chapter-2 : Changing Perceptions of Nature in Human Consciousness

By juxtaposing changing patterns of man-nature relationships with a poem by Mehul Devkala, this chapter intends to capture the major shifts that have taken place in the human psyche about nature through the passages of times. In the beginning, the chapter attempts to make assessment of the impact of the religious, scientific and poetic

philosophies on the Eastern and Western environmental interpretations of nature, and their influences on phenomena like Industrial Revolution which is founded on exploitation of natural resources of colonized countries like India. This chapter also discusses how Indian natural resources were ravaged and non-human entities were destroyed during the Mughal dynasty and the British Raj, and how environmental exploitation has been extended through different ways and means even in the post-independent India. In this context, relevance of ecocritical reading of texts from local literatures has been established, and before putting the short descriptions of the select stories in the concluding section of this chapter, connections between the genre of traditional nature writing and ecocritical reading of nature-based texts have been considered.

Chapter-3 : Ecofeminist Reading of Dhruv Bhatt's *That Thou Art* with reference to *Akopaar* and *Oceanside Blues*

This chapter attempts to understand the texts mentioned in the title through ecofeminist lenses. Some ecofeminists believe that the male-centric practices of comparing the features of the earth with female body is the root cause of exploitation of them both. They outrightly reject phallocentric socio-cultural sexual politics. They refuse to accept the androcentric vision that have legitimized oppression of women folk and the earth by portraying them both inferior to men. They interrogate and undermine gender essentialism that projects superiority of male over female by placing male first and woman second in the stereotypical sexual dichotomies such as culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion, creativity/productivity etc.

This chapter covers issues such as ecofeminist socio-political activism in India during post-independent era, while looking at some varieties of Western ecofeminist

theories. Some ideas of Vandana Shiva's radical ecofeminism have also been taken into account to see how Bhatt's select writings reflect them in various ways.

Chapter-4: Ecosociological Exploration of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*

In this chapter I have attempted to evaluate the texts in light of eco-sociological viewpoint. Ecosociology studies the links between the ecological degradation and the capitalist economic policies that abstract the collective natural wealth as well as exploit the human resources for the benefits of the select few. Theoretical frame works of such studies apparently carry Marxist and Socialist connotations.

In the first part of this chapter, definition and concepts of ecosocialism as discussed by some ecocritics like Greg Gerrard has been discussed, and the contribution of ecosociologists like Murray Bookchin, a pioneering voice in the field, has also been briefly taken into consideration. In the second section of the chapter it will be seen how Marxist ideology and Gandhian idea of sustainable development characterize Mohanty's sympathetic and humane treatment of his characters representing the poor, hardworking forest dwellers who are mentally and socially tortured by the exploitative traps set in by money lenders symbolizing feudal economy, and by the forest guards representing the government's repressive policies denying ecological justice to the tribals. This chapter attempts to see how socio-economic exploitation of the marginalized voices leads to environmental degradation.

Chapter-5: Deep Ecology in Bhatt and Mohanty's Writings

with special reference to *Oceanside Blues*, *Akoopar* and *Paraja*

Arne Naess (1912-2009), a Norwegian philosopher, coined the term in 1973 'Deep-ecology' to promote an all-inclusive world view which recognizes intrinsic

existential rights of all entities. Deep ecologists believe that any scientific study which excludes existential rights of the non-human organisms remains superficial, since entire universe is biologically and spiritually interconnected.

Practitioners of deep ecology reject speciesist tendencies and anthropocentric interpretations of the facts, figures and human-centered observations of ecological science- which exclude ethical dimensions of the complex environmental problematic. Deep ecologists' biological egalitarianism and their insistence on following intuitive wisdom in framing norms about ecological justice have been criticized as anti-scientific and anti-philanthropic by many environmental groups.

In the introductory part of this chapter, basic ideas about deep ecology have been explored while tenets of this movement have been explained with the help of the theoretical framework of deep ecology. In light of these insights, in the second section of this chapter, I have attempted to compare texts of both the authors to see how thematic aspects and portrayal of locales reflect their deep ecological concerns. Linguistic aspects of some authorial comments and dialogues of characters have been studied here to see how authors have highlighted the need to preserve environmentally rich tribal mores and Indian religious and spiritual heritage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while reiterating significance and relevance of ecocritical praxis in the present glocal environmental discourse, I will be taking a flashback into the thesis to see how the different modes of expressions of both the authors contain potential to contribute towards re-vitalizing environmental consciousness of their readership.

Limitations and scopes of the present study:

Limitations: The strategy of having close ecocritical reading of the select texts has helped me take a satisfactory view of the overall picture of the major ecocritical approaches. However, within the purview of this research, some other still emerging and very important variants of ecocriticism such as eco-spiritualism, ecopsychology or eco-linguistics could not be accommodated here.

Because environmental concerns touch each aspect of human and non-human lives lived in any part of the world, as global academic platforms like Academia.edu or journals like *Nature* suggest, numerous observations, findings and coinages in environmental discourse keep poring in from all directions. Amid constantly changing economic, ecological and social climates, emergence of ecological connections with plethora of thoughts and theories and practical aspects of our lives on one hand creates a sense of incompleteness regarding any research on this subject; on the other hand, the flexibility of this multidisciplinary platform offers innumerable opportunities to understand environmental problematic holistically.

Looking at the multiplication in the environmental complexities and their attendant challenges, it is easy to presume that inevitability of ecosensitive literature and the praxis of its appreciation will continue to be felt by the humanity in the coming days. Therefore, research scopes in this area are immense in future-which will continue to compel the mankind to focus more and more on the impartial assessment of the constantly changing patterns of man-nature relationships through examining fictional expressions in ecological contexts.

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