

Moving towards an Ecosocial Transformation: An Ecocritical Reading of Selected Poems of Contemporary Indian Women Poets Writing in English

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Abstract

Although ecocritical approaches have become widespread in India due to large-scale environmental pollution and receding forest cover, they have yet to filter down through society into the general consciousness; they still remain more theory than practice. In view of burgeoning population growth, unless something concrete is done in the form of policies to check this expansion, it will remain a tough task to protect our ecology. However, ecocritical sensibility does find its expression in Indian literatures in general, and in contemporary Indian writings in English in particular. The selected poems of contemporary women poets writing in English discussed in this paper depict the ecosystem – without which mankind cannot survive with health and vigour.

Keywords: ecology, modernization, nature, culture, rupture, innocence and experience

Ecocriticism, which came into being in the 1990s, has significantly changed the traditional way of reading literature; nature is foregrounded, enabling us to properly understand environmental degradation and threats and to highlight positive steps we ought to take, not just for nature-friendly policies, but also to build nature-centric relationships. Modernization has greatly eclipsed the delight and pleasure of directly coming into contact with various natural phenomena. Although William Rueckhart contributed enormously to the debate relating to ecocriticism as early as 1974, the movement received a strong response with the publication of the book *The Ecocriticism Reader Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheyll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996). The authors attempted to link nature to the ideological structures of culture. Ideological ramifications take a complicated form because of the deliberate attempts by humans to achieve immediate benefits for mankind, bypassing the

cause of ecology. The paper studies selected poems by Jane Bhandari, Anjum Hassan, Rachna Joshi, Anjum Katyal, Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Rizio Raj, taken from the anthology *We Speak in Changing Languages: Indian Women Poets 1990–2007* (edited by E. V. Ramakrishnan and Anju Makhija, 2009) in the light of ecocritical thought.

In the poem “Hard Frost”, Jane Bhandari creates a natural world which is fresh and lively. There is a description of the vivacity of nature, with rain reigning supreme. However, there is a rupture in the natural phenomena described by the poet:

As the rain of the last week
Lies cupped in the fields,
Sky splintered across the grass,
Flat sheetslike foil
Beside the grey turmoil
Of the river , swollen
Almost out of its bed. (42)

The poet captures the attention of readers by giving an image of “grey turmoil”, which adds extra significance to the status of the river during the rain. Such “grey turmoil” of the river may occur because of land-slides or the river bursting its banks. It indicates the widespread deforestation of river banks, deposits of silt, and the draining of toxic waste from towns and cities into the river bed, due to which the river is almost out of control. Such a disaster could be posited on the ecocritical thoughts put forth by Glotfelty and Harold Fromm:

Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging our planet’s basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. (xx-xxi)

In the poem “Beachcombers”, the poet gives a gloomier picture of life (43). It is about a cyclonic devastation that has taken place and has destabilized life in the sea. This has its genesis in global warming. It is the ecology of the planet that is at stake, and this sends a spasm of shiver down the human spine. “The beach grew a green crop,” the poet says in the second line of the poem, reflecting the loss of green land with which she is deeply concerned. It is not that in reality the beach is green. The previous consciousness of being habituated to an abundance of greenness pervades the reality of the devastated ecology. There is a clash of two different consciousnesses. The lamentation over such a loss is inextricably linked to the desire to restore the previous ecology. The title “Beachcombers” signifies the imposition of capitalist culture in which large numbers of lower-class people are jobless. Since they do not have any livelihood, they pick up selected objects, largely plastics, from the dumped sea-shore garbage to support themselves. Without the ecological destruction, the same people would have had a decent livelihood by utilizing jungle plants and agricultural products.

Anjum Hassan, who writes with a similar consciousness and spirit, lives in Bangaluru. She was born in Shillong. Bangaluru, located in the southern part of India, is not only the capital city of Karnataka state, but also one of the few big cities of India to be known as a centre of education and employment opportunities, particularly in the field of information technology. Shillong is the capital of Meghalaya state, lying in the hilly terrain of the scenic North Eastern part of India. Looked upon as the Scotland of the East, it has a temperate climate throughout the year. The city has a unique multicultural mosaic, yet its aboriginal culture is a prominent component of the city's life. As the poet hails from such a cultural background, she cannot avoid reflecting these origins. In the poem "My Folks", as a representative of the aboriginal people, she sadly speaks about her growing up out of tune with nature. Aboriginal cultures, which used to be at one with nature, are nowadays heading towards modernity. As a result, their original cultures are on the wane. The sordid growth of contemporary cultures gives no importance to the eco-cultural ethos. Hence, she writes:

We have hills in our blood
but end up smelling fat cars on city streets
and garbage strewn under rain.

We speak in stories:
raconteurs, mimics, chronicles all,
with vast memories and no name-plates.

We shall never lose our shyness
or build house unselfconsciously
or live outside books.

[...]

We look through an open window
and like the predictable movies,
the leaves and sky melt and signal
that we're making the blurry journey
to another place and time. (133)

In the first two lines, the poet projects the deep-rooted innocence of the aboriginal people of Meghalaya, to whom the hills are the centre of their existence. But the lines show a transition that takes place over the course of time. Modernization takes over the region, at the cost of the vitality of their life: hills are cut, roads made and ecosystems disturbed. "Garbage strewn under rain" by the road-side is a part of modern life, not of primeval life. Moreover, the way aboriginal people speak has a magic of its own. They speak in stories, and it is their memory which is a repertoire of enlightenment and knowledge. The poet is very much worried about the preservation of such stories. The aboriginal people are shy and tradition-bound. Innocence is their greatest virtue. They build houses as per their customs and live by whatever is written in their books. It is their innocence and shyness which prevents them from becoming critical. They never used to hanker after identity. Hence, the

idea of hanging up a name-plate never occurred to them. The poem, however, concludes with a note of pessimism, as the poet is well aware that these people are set to lose their original identity under the impact of modern life-style. Hassan's creativity synchronizes well with contemporary ecocritical thought:

Overexploitation of natural resources and man's disregard of the air, water and soil that sustain him have given rise to the question of the survival of both man and the planet (Earth). The end of the twentieth century showed clearly that *everyone* had to do something to help the Earth survive. Ecocriticism is one of the ways in which humanists fight for the world in which they live. The reflection of that difficult struggle in the area of culture and spirit speaks for the urgency of action or the urgent need to do something in this respect. (Tošić 44)

Rachna Joshi's poem entitled "Jageshwar", the site of twelve ancient Himalayan temples, presents not only the change of mindset among humans, but also the corresponding change of ecology. Ecology is affected by human insensitivity, which is the result of poor and unhealthy thinking. Joshi speaks about the suffering of those existing at the lowest levels of caste and gender, which covertly expresses the ecological deterioration. This poem implies that ecology is not just a topic of concern, it is an integral part of life. If there is a decline in living standards, ecology too suffers. Our religious consciousness could include ecological awareness and look at life with fresh attitude and insight. Joshi's views could be contrasted with deep ecology.

Deep ecology emphasizes the role of the individual who is invited to behave as a citizen of the World and Earth and to take responsibility for it. It is important to see that this philosophy involves *all* the aspects of human life and thought. The inspirational quality of such an approach is enormous and the Deep Ecology Movement is gaining in influence year by year, particularly in America. It is holistic and it involves the acknowledged unity of man and all the creatures and the environment around him. (Tošić 45–46)

The following lines quoted from the poem "Jageshwar" make clear Joshi's love for innocence and earthly love, not for culture based on falsehood and hypocrisy.

My blood wants the palpability of earthly love –
not to obscure the predatory passions
within the sanctified code. (141)

Joshi refers to the genealogy of mankind, which is in tune with "earthly love", delicately sandwiched between existence and ecological exuberance. As time passes by, ecological concern is bypassed. "Predatory Passion" remains camouflaged in the "sanctified code" developed by mankind. Politics is at work in any form of cultural configuration. Jageshwar is closely connected with the highly mythicized Hindu deity in the hills. The poet is highly critical of the site's transformation into a major pilgrimage destination at the cost of its ecological health.

Joshi's move towards deep ecology is evident in the later poems such as "The Death of my Grandmother" and "Periplum". In "The Death of my Grandmother" she seeks her grandmother amidst the richness of nature. Her melancholy is more for the loss of the bountiful nature, which is now in a fragile state. It is the nature amidst which the poet's grandmother lived. Hence, after her death it was this nature which served as a source of consolation for her. The present fragility of nature is an obstacle to such communication. Ultimately, the poet loses the spiritual existence of her grandmother because of the depletion of ecology. The poet's grandmother being synonymous with nature can be observed in the following lines.

Midnight, you stared at the deep stars,
the washed, blue sky,
remembering old railway stations: Phaphamow, Triveni, Kankhal;
cold morning journeys with the women to the Ganges,
passing ponds choked with water hyacinths,
flat expanses of bulrushes, cold dust by the riverside.
You drank hot tea from earthen mugs,
shivered and gossiped in the cold stream. (145)

As in the above poem, also in the poem "Periplum" Joshi situates her mother in a troubled ecosystem. Here also the entire poem is in the form of a memory with a strong spiritual impact.

Mother, I see you
blooming once again. My arms,
is around your waist...pigeons
sit on our joined shoulders.

[...]

Life revolves
in its own feathery way.
The swirling, crowded
pigeons screech at us
a thick chorus
of benedictions. (147)

Anjum Katyal projects her ecological sensibility in the poem "Cliff". Katyal views the cliff from a typically human point of view. By frequently referring to the natural landscape being poisoned, she points out the high level of pollution. However, she tries her best to rise above her own consciousness and looks at everything from the angle of the natural world. The natural world, the poet feels, is either not aware of such pollution or transcends it intentionally, as it does not possess a terrestrial mindset. Polluted or unpolluted, its spirit remains undisturbed, and it also rises above the mortality experienced by humans.

The cliff, sliced, searing,
falling (to live on the edge, gasp

of space, vast, vast) and still, just
the air, breathing, and birds,
All the wells are poisoned
yes, there could be
birds, calling and nesting
and the sea, *all the wells* sighing,
pulsing like blood, unceasing
are poisoned and the light lying clear,
cool as water, the wells lapping
at eggshell walls of room which
open to each other *the wells*
like grain poured from hand
to hand and you *are all* moving
like a promise, like hope, like
peace itself just
beyond my poisoned
sight. (155)

In the poem “Gulmohar”, in similar fashion, Rukmini Bhaya Nair speaks about the ecological imbalance due to which the Gulmohar tree is in utter discomfort. The monsoon which the poet describes as a ‘hooligan’ brings less rain to the soil, which is the root cause of the gulmohar losing heart. The Gulmohar is an active participant in the discourse of the Indian spring. With decreasing rain because of the ecological disturbance, the spring season in India is in decline. A healthy and abundant spring contributes to the collective memory of the people of this subcontinent, representing a source of joy and creativity. This forms the basis of a larger cultural configuration:

Today, the sky is a bowl
each ribbed gulmohar leaf
an imprisoned angel-fish

swimming round and round
in the cold, grey licence
of the hooligan monsoons

but unable to escape, play
her deft wit off against
a loutish rain cloud.

The gulmohar loses heart
sheds her vivacious fins
her wild, scarlet flowers.

Is this the nature of a tree
to be tied down eternally
or can the gulmohar be free

Can she? (167)

Rizio Raj writes “Poem” in honour of an Arunachalee poet named Mamang Dai (a poet of Arunachal Pradesh, a state of immense natural beauty in North-East India, close to China); writing in English, Mamang Dai speaks about the land, its aboriginal people and the culture of Arunachal Pradesh. Up to a point, the information about Arunachal Pradesh Rizio receives from Mamang Dai has an impact. Beyond that, Rizio becomes herself. She is swayed away more by innocence, and less by her experience and knowledge of culture, customs and rituals of the land – a knowledge to which Mamang Dai has made a major contribution. The “dawn”, as the poet says, is a confluence of innocence, happiness and ecological health. With the increase of the day, such purity dwindles, and what comes in its place is human experience, which is not altogether compatible with ecology.

I know the meaning of this departure:
a dawn alone can bear witness
to such assemblage of variance,
for, before the morning sun
everyone – man, tree,
flower, fish, bird, beast –
is a child waking from sleep. (212)

Ecological sensibility, as we find in the poems discussed, sides more with innocence, and is in harmony with the yearning for purity and virtue. To preserve our ecology, we will have to retreat from the pressing issues of the contemporary world in nostalgic reminiscence of a world that we have lost; we will have to attend to and value what is good in earthly existence, here and now.

All human making, including the largely unintentional remaking (or rather, undoing) of the earth's ecosystems remains dependent upon physical processes which precede and exceed human knowledge and power. All human being, meanwhile, remains interwoven, albeit often invisibly, with the life of countless nonhuman beings, who continue as best they can to pursue their own ends in the midst of an increasingly anthropogenic environment. (Rigby 154)

While living on this Earth, our lives can embody the ethos of an ecosocial relationship that is more relevant today than ever. We can be inspired by the ‘greening’ of those many and varied places, however urban, where we actually live today, and where we might yet learn to dwell equitably and sustainably in the future. “... [W]hat is probably most needed is not the capacity to think beyond the humans, but the courage to imagine new ways in which human and non-human societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed” (Huggan and Tiffin 215). We are aware of human rights and their abuses. We have neither extended the rights to other species, nor have we rethought the bridging of the gap between the human and animal. Rights are undoubtedly an important safeguard. Most of the Indian women poets writing in English address the question of these wrongs, “less through legal or rationalistic frameworks than in imaginative writing that is both finely attuned to the injustices attached to the racism-speciesism nexus and consistently attentive to the emotional lives of animals and our relationship to animals – lives and

relationships in which our instinctive empathy with animals is neither scornfully dismissed nor systematically suppressed” (Huggan and Tiffin 202).

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