Green Poems: An Ecocritical Reading of Select Indian Poems in English

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Abstract:
Ecocriticism is the interrelationship between literature and the environment, about how the environment is reflected in literature. Although literature has dealt with environmental concerns since antiquity, never has the relationship between man and nature been explored with such urgency as it is done today. The paper seeks to explore select poems in Indian English literature from an ecocritical 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. The paper makes an ecocritical analysis of select Indian English poems to give vent to the general deterioration of the earth’s environment. It makes the theme of those poems much more relevant and transnational.

Keywords: Nature, Environment, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Literature, Culture, Man.

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. One major reason for this is the global environmental crisis that threatens the life system on earth, one that is well documented in its various manifestations of industrial pollution, resource depletion and population explosion. Time and again questions have been raised about the relevance of the environmental and ecological perspective of literature from different sections of the academia. “The very fact that literature cannot exist in a vacuum and that all creative activity takes place on this earth where life exists (sic), is reason enough
for all literary---environmental connections. Moreover, texts envelop a natural world, which becomes a part of the subject on the printed page. Even if such tendencies are not explicit, they are bound to emerge in later interpretations.” (Sumathy 01) Besides, it is also important to remember that since literature is an expression of the culture which produces it and which in turn influences and even modifies the very culture by which it is produced, literature might prove to be an useful and potent tool not only to have a historical understanding of the man/nature relationship but might also influence the way man treat nature in future. Glen A. Love goes one step further when he points out that “Teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all human life seems increasingly short sighted, incongruous” (16).

Ecocriticism as a field of literary enquiry began to gain prominence in the Western academia in the 1990’s. However, this does not imply that ecologically informed issues were absent in literatures of the earlier periods. In fact ecologically sensitive issues can be traced in Western literature in as early as The Epic of Gilgamesh and in Eastern literatures such as the various sacred texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism and the various fables and folklores associated with those cultures. Despite, while the environmental worldviews reflected in disciplines such as religion, philosophy, sociology, law etc. has long been explored, literature remained immune from any such interpretations. The prime reason for this as Creeryll Glotfelty puts it is that ‘each critic was inventing an environmental approach to literature in isolation.’(xvii) but ‘they did not organize themselves into an identifiable group’ (Glotfelty xvi). Ecological criticism is methodologically similar to other forms of cultural criticism such as postcolonialism, Marxist, queer and feminist criticism. It is just one of the many different ways of looking at literature and to interpret the various issues in a literary text in particular. For example, just as feminist criticism tries to investigate how the categories of sex and gender are represented in literature and how the notions of both sex and gender has changed over time, and how such attitudes has come to influence our culture today, ecological criticism similarly tries to understand how nature is represented in literature and how the idea of nature as well as the relationship between man and nature has evolved over time as they are represented in literature. To put it simply, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.” (Glotfelty xix) Greg Garrard in his book Ecocriticism defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship of the human with the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself.” (5) In the book The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture, Lawrence Buell gives an idea about what primarily constitutes an environmental work:1) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. 2) The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. 3) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation. 4) Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text (7-8). It is important to remember that ecologically informed criticism is not limited to works on nature alone. Various canonical texts such as Spenser’s The Faerie Queene,
William Shakespeare’s plays such as *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Tempest*, Thomas Hardy’s novels such as *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Tess of D’Urbervilles*, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, the Romantic poetry of the sublime, postcolonial works like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Chicano writings like Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* may also be interpreted ecocritically.

One of the strategies with which the postcolonial poet/critic writes back against the empire is by the use of themes in his poems about his 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. One major reason for this is that colonialism starts with the loss of the locale, the environment and nature to the outsider colonizing force. And the lost landscape has to be recovered first and foremost through imagination only. Thus postcolonial poets like Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Judith Wright, G.D Roberts, and Archibald Lampman all wrote about their own natural landscape and environment. The Indian poets in English were no different. Although initially the Indian poets in English were deeply influenced by the Romantic British poets, Indian poems in English has established itself an identity through the evolving phases of imitation, assimilation and experimentation. Notwithstanding the experimentation with themes in recent poem in Indian English, the attitude towards the nature, environment and ecology were mainly that of a pastoral impulse or an aesthetic appreciation of nature. As Vinayak Krishna Gokak puts it in the “Introduction” to *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry*, “Indo-Anglian poets have loved to write about and also the philosophic or mystical attitude with which they have responded to Nature.”(31) Thus Toru Dutt’s *The Lotus, Our Casurina Tree*, S.K Chettur’s *Red Lotus*, R.R Shreshta’s *Coconut-palms, Juhu Beach*, M.S Iswaran’s *The Neem is a Lady*, Mannmohan Ghose’s *Poplar, Beech, and Weeping Willow*, Greece C. Dutt’s *Kanchun Junga and the Terai*, Rabindranath Tagore’s *Breezy April*, Sarojini Naidu’s *Summer Woods* all depict “the unique loveliness of the Indian scene and the freshness of vision with which it is perceived.”(Gokak 31) However, despite the use of nature and the environment as the overt theme in their poems, Indian poems in English has refrained itself 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. 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.

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
(01-04)
But, 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 cutting down of trees:

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

Since the poet’s writing is essentially imbued with his culture, a reading of his poem also gives an idea about his religious worldview about his culture, environment and ecology. To understand the grandmother’s aversion at the cutting down of trees one has to understand her cultural and religious background; the concept of ‘sacred’ in Hinduism—sacred species, sacred grooves and sacred landscapes. These religious and cultural norms link Man to Nature.

“The concept of ‘sacred species’, ‘sacred groves’ and ‘sacred landscapes’ represent various stages in social selection. The guiding principle that regulate the use of natural resource, are embedded in the codified and often non-codified institutions that they have evolved...While religious norms explicitly foster social solidarity, the conservation values, ipso facto, also get fulfilled.”(Ramakrishnan 42-43) Thus one by one all the trees--- the sheoga, the oudumber, the neem were chopped down. Even the great banyan tree, the tree which was there for the last two hundred years, ‘Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives’ (Chitre 09), and the tree which was ‘three times as tall as our house’ (Chitre 11) was ordered to be cut down:

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
(13-15)

Not only does trees have cultural significance but they are also profound religious significance in Hinduism. The banyan tree or batbriksha symbolises the Trimurti 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 symbolise the life and fertility in many Indian cultures. The banyan tree is also sacred to the Buddhist. Lord Buddha is believed to have sat down beneath the banyan tree after he attained enlightenment. That is why banyan tree are never cut. 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.(16)

It is to be noted the difference in attitude between Man or the poet’s father and Woman or poems grandmother. While the poet’s father gives instruction to cut down the trees, his grandmother points out that trees are ‘sacred’ and cutting them down is a ‘crime’. The ecofeminist interpretation becomes all the more relevant here. Thus the attitude of the grandmother or the Woman who tries to protect her nature as Prakriti is in sharp contrast to that of his father or Man 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) 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.’(Chitre 23-25).

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) Ecoterrorism is chiefly environmental political in nature. However there is a counter argument against this definition of ecoterrorism. 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. In the poem Gieve Patel describes in great detail the murderous rage with which a tree is killed. Here the tree symbolises 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.  
(01-03)

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,  
(13-15)

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 in complete and the living tree is converted to dead timber:

   And then it is done.

(35)

Baldoon 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.

(05)

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 labourers 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.

(06-10)

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.

(23-25)

“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 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.

(06-07)

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 ghats, 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.

(09-13)

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:

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

(32-33)

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.

Notes:

“These socially selected species are valued for cultural or religious reasons. For example, sacred basil, locally called in India as tulsi (Ocimum sanctum) became sacred as part of the conscious decision by the Hindu society, linked to its tangible value for its multipurpose medicinal properties. On the other hand, a species of fig (Ficus religiosa) became sacred, as it is valued both by Hindus and Buddhist for varied reasons, and also provides intangible benefits of supporting animal biodiversity. Attaching sacred value to species like oak,
olive, apple, and fir by considering them to be god’s/goddess’s favourite was prevalent in Mediterranean region. In Iran, some 158 trees like walnut, willow, cypress, spruce, fir, etc. are considered sacred

Culturally valued species, such as oaks (Quercus spp.) locally called bhanj, in the central Himalayan region are important fodder and fuelwood species, but also performs not so obvious functions such as maintenance of soil fertility through efficient nutrient cycling, soil moisture conservation through extensive root system, and thereby support biodiversity. Indeed, oak acts a trigger for ecosystem/landscape rehabilitation. Oak and Nepalese alder (Alnus nepalensis) because of their nitrogen fixing properties play a crucial role in maintaining ecosystem integrity.” (Ramakrishnan 50)

Ecofeminism refers to the connection in theory and practice between Women and Nature such that the oppression and dominance of one leads to the oppression and dominance of the other.

The Dasasvamedh Ghat is the main ghat on the river Ganga in Varanasi. The religious significance associated with this Dasasvamedh ghat is that Lord Brahma sacrificed ten horses during Dasa-Aswamedha yagna. According to Hindu religion, goddess Ganga descended to Earth from Heaven. She is also the vehicle of ascent to Heaven. She is also called the Trilok-patha-gamini (Skt. Trilok=’three worlds”, patha=’road”, gamini=’one who travels”). Cremation by the side of the river Ganga is thought to have instant salvation.

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