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Down Memory Lane: An Eco-critical Approach to Bibhutibhushan's *Aranyak-of the Forest*

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Abstract: Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay was a leading Bengali novelist whose nature writings have an enduring appeal. Most of his novels have an autobiographical touch and it is his memory which is the key to his literary thought. The novelist has a personal experience of forest life which he put for a long time in the golden frame of memory. When the hurly burly of so-called civilized city life gets upon his heat oppressed brain, environmental imagination revives down his memory lane. The present paper seeks to analyze critically the role of memory used in creating a classic beauty *Aranyak-of the Forest* a memoir which is stuffed in recollection of the forest land of *Labtulia* and *Nara Baihar* where the novelist stayed for a period of time as an estate manager. Ecocriticism is a recent literary theory which is meant for scholarly appreciation of nature literature. *Aranyak-of the Forest* is the best example of ecocritical writing as it represents several ecological issues as well as human and nature relationship written in flashback technique. His personal feelings which he penned down in his diary, gets a universal appeal as he brings into light the eternal saga of human life living in close proximity with nature.

Keywords: Memory, Literature, Ecocriticism, and Environment.



Introduction

Memory is the recollection or recognition of previous experiences. Though memory comes from historical past, it is different from history. History is the storehouse of community's past narrative resource; on the other hand, memory is related to consciousness, time and individual identity which is stored in the form of diary, travelogue, and autobiography etc. Ecocriticism is the rethinking of nature in literary study. It is a contemporary theory which has gained huge popularity during the last three decades. This critical theory is a scholarly approach to nature writing in which a critic tries to find out ecological implications in a literary text. It's a green approach which has got its momentum in view of the global environmental crisis. The present world is suffering from so many ecological disasters like drought, flood, acid rain, thunderbolt, tsunami, frequent earthquake, landslide, cyclone, depletion of ozone layer and the like. There are some natural disasters for which man has a role; but there certainly are some disasters which are manmade. Human nature is essentially anthropocentric for he considers himself superior to many other organisms in our environment. Being the only literary animal, he likes to exploit nature for his own interest. The rainforest destruction, the unplanned construction in the hilly regions, the environmental pollution, the rise of atomic energy, deliberate use of natural resources etc., are essentially a by-product of human culture. But these are not favourable to keep up the ecological balance. According to Barry Commoner's first law of ecology "Everything is connected to everything else". So every organism has its role to play to keep up ecological balance. Nothing is superior or inferior to others and so there needs a symbiotic living of all organisms of the universe. When all other fields of human activity are striving hard to find out a solution to the global environmental crisis, literary studies took a rather late initiative to bring into focus the ecological issues in literature.

Ecocriticism: Rethinking Nature

Ecocriticism has developed as 'a worldwide emergent movement' during the last three decades. The scholars are still engaged in developing its nature and scope. The word



ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his book *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978). The part of the word 'eco' comes from the Greek root word 'oikos' which etymologically means household or earth and 'logy' from 'logos' means logical discourse. Together they mean criticism of the house-the environment as represented in literature. According to Rueckert, ecocriticism applies ecology or ecological principles into the study of literature. And in his book *The Environmental Imagination* Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism "as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist's praxis" (Buell 1996: 430). Further ecocriticism does not simply mean nature study; it has distinguished itself from conventional nature writing, first by its ethical stand and commitment to the natural world and then by making the connection between the human and the non-human world. But 'Ecocriticism' was popularized by Cheryll Glotfelty who gave a clarion call to the movement which started its journey from America. The book which is known as the *Bible* of ecocriticism is *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm where we find a comprehensive definition of ecocriticism:

Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (xviii)

Now it is considered to be any scholarly approach to nature writing from an environmentalist's viewpoint. In short, it is a rethinking of nature in an age of environmental crisis.

Aranyak-of the Forest: A Memoir

The very prologue of *Aranyak* suggests that the novel is going to be based on memory. The narrator was sitting on the *Maidan*, close by the side of the Fort after a whole day's backbreaking work in the office. Near him was an almond tree; it seemed to be evening and



he was sitting by the waters of *Saraswatikundi* on the northern borders of *Lobtulia*. The sound of a car horn shattered his delusion. It seemed it was a matter of yesterday, although it was a tale of events long ago. The narrator writes:

But these memories do not give me pleasure; they are filled with sorrow. By my hands was destroyed an unfettered playground of nature. I know too, that for this act the forest gods will never forgive me. I have heard that to confess a crime in one's own words lightens somewhat the burden of the crime. Therefore, the story. (Bandyopadhyay & Bhattacharya 2002: 3)

Keeping in tune with the environmental praxis, *Aranyak* exhales in both celebration and exploitation of nature revived in a dream by the narrator. The initial chapters are related to the celebration of nature while the later chapters deal with how nature is being exploited by human beings. Satyacharan, a spokesperson of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay recollects the wilder as well as the fiercer aspects of nature in this classic prose narrative. At first, his urban lifestyle revolted against the lonely forest life for which he had no love. He could not imagine a life without the company of friends, reading books in libraries, watching theaters and films and listening to music. Having newly arrived, he could not even understand the speech of the foresters. He only considered them as good as barbarians. He even felt the job to be useless and it was better for him to stay half starved in Calcutta rather than stifling to death in the forest. He found the jungle suffocating and longed to fly back to the city. The loneliness of the forest sat upon his breast like a heavy stone. He felt that he was all alone in the world. But after a few days, the jungle really got inside him. He got enthralled by the deep green serpentine forests, the rocky masses, flocks of wild parrots, herds of *Neelgai*, the sunshine, the exquisite moonlight, the open land etc. The rude and barbaric nature gave him so much freedom and liberation that he could not reconcile himself to perch in the bird cage of a city. He now understands:

What nature gives to her own devotees is invaluable. However, it is a gift not to be received until one has served her for long.....if you lie immersed in her, the greatest gifts of nature- beauty and exquisite peace- will be showered on you so abundantly



that they will drive you to ecstasy.....drawing you closer to immortality.
(Bandyopadhyay & Bhattacharya 2002: 95)

So we observe a gradual change Satyacharan's attitude to nature. The votary of urban life has transformed into a devoted lover of nature in her pristine beauty. He enjoyed horse ride in the forest on a moonlit night; he even sent Jugalprasad with enough money to the impenetrable forests of Jayanti Hills to bring saplings of 'dudhia' flower for beautification of Saraswati Kundi where variety of amazing birds like magpies, pheasant crows, wild parrots, sparrows, *chathares*, *ghughus*, *hariales*, *shyamas* and *hareets* flocked to take refuge after a huge part of the forest becomes a victim of deforestation. He enjoyed wondrous solitude in the unbroken quiet of Saraswatikundi which serves as a heaven to him with its honeybee creepers, wild *sheuli*, and its supernatural surroundings. A clear change in his attitude to nature is evident in his recollection here in these lines:

This was a different sort of life, I mused, as I rode through the moonlit forest. This was a life for the eccentric wanderer- one who did not care to remain confined within the four walls of his house, did not have housekeeping and domesticity in his blood. When I had left Calcutta and came to this terrible loneliness, to an utterly natural sort of lifestyle, how intolerable the uncivilized life here had seemed: but now, I feel this is the better life of the two. Nature- rude and barbaric here- had initiated me into the mysteries of freedom and liberation; would I ever be able to reconcile myself to a perch in the bird-cage city? (62)

The protagonist here would never like to exchange this happiness for all the wealth in the world. Satya's dream got enriched when he met with a strange fellow named Raju Panrey in the *jungalmahal*. He is poor but happy with the Chinese grass and salt and *makai* as his food. Satya offered him a few *bighas* of land to deforest it but Raju had no greed for the wealth. His philosophic bent of mind revels in his contemplation of the forest land.

The forest you see here is very beautiful. The flowers have been blooming for a long time and the birds sing, each with their own call: the gods themselves have merged with the wind and have left their mark on the earth. But wherever there is money or



transactions of cash, loan, and receipts, the air becomes polluted. Then the gods choose not to stay on any longer. So, whenever I pick up the cutter and the axe, the gods come and snatch away my tools. They whisper such thoughts into my ears that all thoughts of land and property are driven away from my mind. (Bandyopadhyay & Bhattacharya 2002: 76)

Although Satya returned to the city, Raju stayed in the forest for his eternal love for nature. Satyacharan's dream got a jerk on his vanity of urban life when he understood that he (a city man) was instrumental in conducting an ecocide. He was assigned to do so as a part of his profession. The jungle land of Nara-baihar and Labtulia had been leased out. There remained hardly any forests like those of former times. All the shady groves and creeper entwined trees and the secluded paths composed by nature for so many years were lopped off by the ruthless hands of the labourers. What had taken thousands of years to come up was destroyed in a matter of few days for setting up human habitation. There remained no mysterious green where enchanting fairies might descend on moonlit nights or thick jungle where benign *Tarbaro*, god of the wild buffaloes put up his hand to save the herd of wild creatures. But he had to lease out the land to the new settlers for the benefit of his employer.

Thus Satya memorizes; "One day I climbed up a tree and made myself comfortable on a branch: an indescribable joy filled me.....It is almost as if one can match the heartbeat of every plant and tree with one's own" (104). A clear change in Satya's attitude to nature is seen when he criticizes the city people who having the lack of imagination exploits forest as a mere picnic spot. "The women were a motley collection, completely devoid of imagination. They ran about gathering twigs for the fire on the edges of the forest and chattered endlessly, but not one of them were around to see where they were.....Did they know that only a dozen yards from where they sat, the forest spirits danced in the moonlight?" (189)

Meanwhile, Satyacharan has become a nature lover who was instrumental in the ecocide. He himself admits, "I had come here to settle new tenants in these forests. Having come to destroy the forestland, I have instead fallen in love with the beautiful forest maid" (114). He even did not let out the exquisite bit of forest by the side of Saraswatikundi. He



realizes that nothing would stand in the way of destroying such exquisite grove before human greed. According to him, the settlers did not care much for the majestic trees; they did not have the eyes to see the grandeur of the land; their only concern was to fill their stomach and to survive. He also laments, "If it were any other country, they would have had laws to keep the forests intact and preserve them for nature lovers, as they have done with the Yosemite Park in California, the Kruger National Park in South Africa or the National Albert in Belgian Congo. My distant employers do not care for the landscape: all they understand are taxes and revenue money.....the *Salami*, the *Irshal* and the *Hustabood*" (Bandyopadhyay & Bhattacharya 2002: 213) He also suspects, "I have sought to preserve the forest around Saraswati kundi....But for how long?" (213)

Ecocriticism strives hard to protect the rights of the marginal. *Aranyak* tells recollects the indigenous people of India like the *Gangotas*, the *Santhals*, the vagrant dwellers etc. whom the *Jamindar* is not willing to give a settlement. Thirty years ago, the land was swallowed into the womb of the river, surfacing again as char land twenty years later. But those who found their ancestral land broken up by the Ganga, thronged to reclaim them. The landlord deprived them of their right to forest land for earning higher revenue from the new *rayots*. Satya finds himself to be the representative of the Arians who after invading India deprived the just claim of those marginals. They were very poor, yet they were happy with their limited needs of life. Satya although a descendant of the *Arians*, had a close understanding of those people who were no barbarians but humans. Kunta, Manchi, Bhanumati, Gagru, Debru Panna, Raju Panre are the representatives of those class. They added to the beauty of the forest as a child looks beautiful in its mother's lap. The state has not taken their responsibility, nor has taken the so-called civilized society. When Satya asked Bhanmoti the princess of the *Santhal* Royal family, which direction is India, she looks astonishingly. Those primitive people have become a victim of the Arians ruling over them. So, Satyacharan holds himself responsible for the destruction of pristine wilderness, because it happened under his governance. Even his deep love for Bhanumati could not stop him from leaving Baihar, which mesmerized him with its profound majesty. Satyacharan could not



anymore stand the ruination of the forest and decides to leave Fulkia-Baihar. His concluding thoughts are clearly ecological:

Perhaps a time would come when men would no more be able to see forests: all they would see would be fields of crops, or the chimneys of jute and cotton mills. They would come then to this secluded forest land, as though on a pilgrimage. For those people, yet to come, let the forest stay pristine, undisturbed. (Bandyopadhyay & Bhattacharya 248)

As the forest of Lobtulia was disappearing fast, the charm for Satyacharan began to wane. The writer makes a final decision to leave Baihar. He begins his tale of nature seeking forgiveness, and due to the intolerable pangs of his mind, ends it beseeching forgiveness from the devastated Goddess, i.e. Fulkia-Baihar: "You the primordial deity of wilderness forgive me! Adieu!" Satyacharan is now a nature priest who cannot reconcile himself to the fact that he himself was responsible for abolishing the primordial forest. He is the voice of the novelist who denounces the third world style of development where development is meant for only a few and most people are forced to live in the filthy environment. His sense of guilt ever haunts him as his hands are smeared with the blood of forest plants. His condition is much like Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth who having felt a prick of conscience utters-"Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" (Shakespeare 1553)

So nature is not a silent spectator who will remain inactive despite human atrocities against her. To live in peace and quiet of forest will ever remain a dream for Satyacharan. To ride a horse through the vast expanse of the forest will ever elude his grasp. To build up a forest hut to live with Bhanumati will never be fulfilled in noisy city life. He will now recollect and repent for ever:

What do human beings really want: progress or happiness? Was it of any use making progress if no happiness came with it? I knew so many people who had certainly progressed in life but had lost happiness. Excessive indulgence had blunted the edges of their desires, now there was nothing that brought them joy.....If I could have lived here... married Bhanmati..... in the moonlit verandah of this very mud house,



the innocent forest maid would tell me her childish tales as she cooked, and I would hear the hural cry in the forest, the hyena laugh, and wild elephants go stomping by Bhanmati was dark, but in all of Bengal, you would not find such a healthy lissome slip of a girl or such a vibrant innocent being. She was compassionate, kind and affectionate- how many times had I proof of it...Even thinking about it gave me pleasure. A beautiful vision! What was the point in progress? Let Balbhadra make his way to Sengat and improve his situation. Let Rashbehari Sing improve his.” (Bandyopadhyay & Bhattacharya 251-252)

Conclusion

So *Aranyak-Of the Forest* is a story of memorization and understanding of the ecosphere of a forest land. It is as though a reverie that revives man’s lost relationship with nature. With the advancement of civilization, the primeval beauty of nature is being destroyed in the name of progress. But in each brick of modernization is attached the impression of disappearing nature and the eternal struggle of primitive human society. The thirty thousand *bighas* of forest land is not a mere setting of the novel; it has become a living entity in the elevated thought of the protagonist Satyacharan who could discover the intrinsic value of nature. The novel has a message that we should live in close harmony with nature and any violation of it would lead to disastrous consequences. As the forest lost its charm, Manchi gets lost; Dhaturia, the forest lad is found dead upon the railway track, and Bhanmati is seen ferrying a basket of coal in the wasteland instead of living a peaceful life in the forest. As the so called civilized world exploits nature as a commodity, the marginal people whose ecological vision is merged with nature get to suffer. Such kind of a recollection by Satyacharan brings about his ecological literacy which is essential for a better care of our environment. The novelist here pleads for the environmental protection. Every time we read the novel, our heart is filled up with repentance for the loss of green. Herein lays the ecocritical significance of this memory based novel.



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