



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

An UGC Approved Open Access Journal

Vol. 2 No.4/ December, 2017

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

<http://daathvoyagejournal.com>

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

Department of English

Dr. K.N. Modi University, Newai, Rajasthan, India.



‘Right to Memory’ and Engendering Ecology: A study of select Tree poems

Prudha S Raja

Assistant Professor

The Postgraduate Department Of English

The Zamorin’s Guruvayurappan College

Calicut, Kerala, India.

Abstract Memory is at its best both fatal and enlivening. The memory of the familiar is outrageously courageous in filling the void of the human heart that is continuously been created in the expanse from childhood to the adult life. The undulating life of ours finds permanency and stoicism in remembrance. The familiar memory is warm, oozing and lucid unlike the raw, rasping ones of the competitive adult life. It engenders within a sense of loyalty, a bond truly stronger than the forces of nature and creates a niche to every heart that longs home. The memory of a familiar or childhood space is encumbered with the sensuous experience of the soul which resonates deeply at every point of life. The memory so treasured is an act of emulation which follows all eternity. Thus the one who remembers and the thing or place or nature remembered becomes truly immortal then. The attempt of this paper is to analyze ‘tree poems’ of select poets and understand their relationships with them and how such a relationship could forge within the value of ecological consciousness. Here, the symbol of tree becomes an agency of change, of positivity, of hope and of values once cherished by mankind. The tree symbol becomes a force to reckon with in the face of adversity. This paper thus attempts to depict the long term relation between memory and environment and how this psychological dependence would aid in the conservation of nature, a dire need of the hour.

Key words: Memory, Ecological Consciousness, Eco- criticism.

“He who plants a tree, plants a hope.”

— **Lucy Larcom**



Ruskin Bond in an article on May 2 in Times of India was talking about his experience with trees. He quotes, “sitting on the turf beneath that lovely Pine, I would experience a surge in confidence in myself, a feeling that I could do all the things I’d set out to do-love and be loved, grow things, write great stories.”He talks about how the creativity is passed on to him“its resinous properties perhaps, or just its spirit. The spirit in the pine trees. Of course, all trees are places of power”. As a comeuppance for the deeds of previous life perhaps, I am destined to be a teaching in a college which is literally in profusion with trees. The picturesqueness of the campus does help people alleviate their day to day grievances. The tree becomes a sentiment; a symbol with the college is identified with. Lodged on a scenic and comfortable hill, away from the maddening crowd of the city, the campus changes colors with seasons which has paved way for innumerable artists, poets and writers. As a student too in the college, I was more attracted to these leafy-beings and dreamt like Keats or Coleridge in search of the nightingale and the solitary reaper. As an ardent pluviophile, I couldn’t complete my picture without the lush greenery around. People tell me that I am a hopeless romantic and can’t really conjure up the images of Development. They thank the democracy for the roads and bridges and what not and mock me for using the facilities provided despite my derision. My thoughts don’t stem from my wrath against the progress in a nation. I was led by the notion of the ‘right of memory’ which I think should be included as the next fundamental right. My memory is a part of my identity and if I couldn’t find it, my identity is lost. Loss is a tragic yet powerful word. It re-arranges one’s priorities.

Almost all my memories have trees in them. I still remember holding the branches of a banyan tree and swinging to and fro till my mother came from our house a few meters away and took me home. I looked back at the tree wishing for the next evening. The neem tree in front of my home was a gift, its leaves glistening in the sun is something I wish I had now. Every time I visit my ancestral home, I long to see my long-lost friend, the nutmeg tree, which was cut down for making an inconvenient extension to our house. Pondering over this for quite a while, I was led to the impression of the role of memory in shaping our perspectives. Was it a vital tool that could



either make or break the future? Can ecological consciousness thrive if we furnish it with our memory? But, today as we witness this dramatic climate change with the disappearance of almost all the major species of the world with the world at the verge of ecological imbalance. There is an immediate need to sit back and retrospect. We always place a lopsided account of our memories. If I look at development as a tree cutting massacre, another person may look at it in terms of the buttery asphalt roads. There is always a progress at the expense of another where the another is always at the losing end. From time immemorial, the people who had the narrative power wrote according to their prerogatives which propelled massive stereotypical representations and left a scar of contorted images. It is only until the last decades that suppressed nations started using the language of the colonizers to resist such misrepresentations. Likewise, the voice of the voiceless need to be heard, in this case, the flora and fauna that inhabits this planet Earth. They have had occupied this earth longer than us which justifiably makes them the rightful owner in terms of the law of succession. We have enforced ourselves upon them leaving behind large scales of deforestation and habitat destruction. I often laugh at the joke when we say that a tiger or a leopard has ‘transgressed’ into the village or city. In fact, it does so because we have taken away their habitat. Hence, our narratives should be their tongues, our perceptions their ideas. It starts by recognizing them as “alive” which correctly is emphasized by Arne Naess through his Deep Ecology.

Human beings have always marveled themselves with their exquisite ability to surpass and create a world of their own. But what we have significantly lacked is the ability to assess what we are leaving for posterity. This evolutionary process which has seen greater progress is turning into the greatest impediment the earth is yet to witness. If we analyze today’s world in terms of the environment, we find that there is no room for the consideration of the well-being of other species who also have an equal right to live and roam around this earth. When did man become so selfish and self-centered? Or is it just another incident where we use the Darwinian epithet “the survival of the fittest” to embellish our flaws. Or is it because technology has gained precedence over nature



that we tarry not in destroying the very basis of our survival? If we talk to the newer generations about the efficacy of ecological conservation, there is observed (albeit there are always exceptions). What could be the plausible reasons for them? Out of the many, the cardinal one might be what the previous generation has contributed to their memory. Our concept of progress and development is solely based on our perceptions of them which is later manifested into cultural productions. These cultural productions are accountable in understanding how nature was treated in particular generations. Our world is run by exploitative capitalism which ideally suits the stalwarts who run the economy of various nations. Money is our new motto. Everything in life which is worthy of upholding is devalued by money. Human beings as a race are neglecting their prime supporter and wishing to procure something totally futile and fleeting as money. Money rules over everything and the government, bureaucracy and all the institutions that we have developed has caved under the monetary deity.

Strangely, the proverb of the Native American community holds like a Damocles' sword.

“Only when the last tree has died
and the last river been poisoned
and the last fish been caught
will we realize we cannot eat money”

-Cree Indian Proverb

Visible catastrophic changes in the ecological system propelled writers like Rachel Carson, John Muir who had voiced their concerns about the representation of nature, hence, justifiably could be considered as the inspiration behind the emergence of ecocritical study. Cheryll Glotfelty's definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) is that "it is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Nayar, 242). It carefully analyzes the human culture-nature interaction and almost always is mutually influential. As we look around at concrete forests



and our life stemming and residing at the tip of our fingers, we need to ask ourselves what we are creating as a memory for the future. As an English literature student, I had the fortune to read and enjoy the Romantics, the writings of Indian writers like R.K.Narayan, Ruskin Bond, and the American Robert Frost and also understand the pantheism of Native American poetry. I sojourned with Frost in the snowy evenings to listen to the songs of Keats' nightingale to lie in the embalmed climate of the foothills of the Himalayas to experience the fragrance of the Frangipani. Their memory was colourful, strong and sensual. My world was "transformed". Truly, we have had poets, writers who could take inspiration from the luscious nature around back then and engage us. Rabindranath Tagore extolling the tree as a giver of the qualities of calmness, peace with of his childhood and his longing back to revert time with his "The Banyan Tree" to Toru Dutt entwining her life's legacy through her "Casuarina Tree". It is not a surprising fact at all that surrounding oneself with plants or nature can leave us with a better state of mind. Nature in itself is filled with positivity. There is no room for despair or being negative.

Though we are the most developed in comparison to our older generations or centuries perhaps, in terms of technology, we are the worst or most poorly linked in all the other facets of life. There is dwindling economy, wars, famine, droughts, bio-war, and antipathy towards fellow human beings. Who should take the blame? The blame is in lack of awareness. Education which should foster values is adulterated. There is a fault in imparting values and also there is a lack of discipline in following them. We need to understand that we aren't the cog of the machine. It is nature that drives this whole system and like any system it has a containing capacity. Once, it gets saturated nature explodes. Hence, the need for action is imminent which can only be brought by perseverance. Our actions speak louder than words. The children of the future will learn from the actions of their adults. Our actions will become memory and our memory, their value. So it is the duty of every previous generation to act smarter and take greater responsibility. Ramachandra Guha's *Environmentalism*, advocates this sentiment in acknowledging "Rasputin as, for his contemporary Vasily Belov,[who regarded] the village [as] the "wellspring of morality, religious



meaning and harmony with the natural environment, and moreover, the only reliable medium through which these values can be transmitted to future generations”(Chap 7:Socialism and environment 187). Nature therefore is a repository of knowledge, of knowledge that is everlasting and fulfilling and empowering everything and everyone that comes to its aid. The poems discussed here takes into account how trees affect human kind at the personal, societal and also at the spiritual level.

In Naomi Shihad Nye’s poem “My Father and the Fig Tree”, Naomi fondly remembers her father through this poem. Her father always craved for ‘the largest, fattest and sweetest fig in the world’. For him, the fig was everything that he has left behind, the fig was his identity and all the good things that had happened to him in his life When he puts a fig in his mouth and closes his eyes, it is magic. The fig tree was his past that he reminisced and wanted to go back to and how figtrees always became a partner in crime. His words fill with the deepest desire when he says, “I wish they were figs”. The fig tree was his only acquaintance in this strange world and her father looked at everything else with an “indifferent” air. They were his connection to his childhood presumably, to his wants and needs, to his laughs and worries and to his memories. And the want lay void and couldn’t be filled with “lima beans, zucchini, parsley, beets”. The fig becomes a gift from Allah, a manna from heaven, a surprise from the universe when out of nowhere in Dallas, Texas, the father finds a fig tree in the backyard and breaks in to a “figsong”. A mystical and secret connection that only the fig tree and the father shares is evident here. The tree becomes a symbol of his prayer, a symbol of his continuity and of his existence on this earth.

The sentiments of a blossoming friendship and the need to invite an intimate stranger are rampant in the poem by Risha Ahmed. In her poem, “About a tree”, this twelve-year-old poet questions as to why the tree is distrustful of her invitation “to the cakes I made”. She tries to ask the tree who is on this earth “just to give me shade” if it finds her synonymous to the “axe and the saw”. She wants the tree who “bear[s] pretty flowers” to befriend her. She wants to console the tree by pointing to its many “sandy paws” and that no number of axes and saws can destroy the



multifarious physiognomy of the tree. The tree is always many things to many people and this pluralism will always exist despite the efforts taken by mankind. She is desperate for its companionship which includes “just the tree and me” and requests the tree to forego all apprehensions and trust her. It is like she wants to let the tree not to condone her for the wrongdoings of mankind.

Trees are inarguably the best teachers for any person. According to Native American belief, God bestowed trees upon us to learn the quality of strength from an oak, flexibility from birch, to stand tall as a redwood, to live gracefully as a willow. The need to give sanctity to trees was the first step in conserving these species on the earth. A similar tradition of ‘sacred groves’ or ‘kavus’ in India fosters this sentiment among the public. They are inarguably the harbingers of biodiversity.[Though recently a newspaper article focussed on the disappearance of sacred groves in many areas in Kerala which makes the conservation issue absolutely imperative.

When the trees purpose is served, it changes but still proves useful to mankind. Isn't that what truly immortal means? E.g.: Roland Barthes article titled “Toys” talks about the subjectivity of objects. He propounds that a toy fashioned from the left over tree will always contain the memory of the tree, a power in itself. Unlike plastic toys that have sharp edges and focus on the ‘use and throw’ sentiment, toys from nature display longevity and perhaps are transferred from generation to generation. The vintage quality upholds their status and always act as a connecting link among generations. Almost the same sentiment is evoked in Richard Walker’s The Cedar Tree. Here, the cedar tree becomes synonymous to the life of a man himself. Richard Walker at the beginning fosters a spiritual sentiment by pointing out how the people in the northwest still respect the canoe made from the cedar tree. The cedar tree having served its purpose of telling “us by its rings when salmon runs were big,” by “providing shelter for birds and other animals, providing bark fiber for clothing and for fishing nets, providing bark fiber for baskets in which to collect berries or cook shellfish, fine woven baskets that are passed from mother to daughter, and from grandmother to granddaughter?” was turned into a canoe. The canoe in itself becomes a message of selflessness as



this canoe became “a seagoing canoe that carried the People on waters the Ancestor knew carried the People to gatherings and sacred ceremonies.” The cedar tree was also a spot of burial of the ancestors. Hence, the canoe becomes synonymous to their ancestors to be treated with reverence. The cedar tree becomes the memory of the traditional songs and the songs of the ancestors that the people can relate with and continue. The tree becomes the continuance of tradition. The tree becomes a constant reminder of our frivolous existence on this earth and kindles within us the message of being useful to people during life and after death. The cedar tree evokes the quintessential existence of the spirit over body. It focusses on the interconnectedness of life on its sacredness thus establishing within us the message of divinity within which is a reflection of divinity outside. It reaffirms the fact the cosmic universe is within us as much as we are in it.

“Trees” by Joyce Kilmer is a poem of contemporary relevance. This was one such poem that prompted people to plant trees as part of ecological conservation. He regards people like himself as fools in only composing poems advocating the merits of the trees. But the tree which is truly a wonder can only be created by God, the supreme. A tree “that may in summer wear, a nest of robins in her hair” and who “intimately lives with rain” and “upon whose bosom the snow has lain” symbolizes the very message of patience and tenacity. The tree never complains but becomes a symbol of hope for the people who think that there is no way out of their bleak future. There is willful surrender to god as the tree “lifts her leafy arms to pray”. The tree becomes a reflection of mankind both of them more or less sharing the same physiognomy. The tree evokes in us the memory of god’s love, constantly reminding us of our purpose and through its life tells us to emulate it. Here, the tree becomes critical in asking us the pertinent question “what are we leaving behind for our future generation?” The tree becomes an agency of power and of change. The poem written after the wake of the First World War has had desired effect on the poet. It teaches mankind that to create out of love and out of pride and arrogance never have the same results.

The main idea is to revamp our policies regarding environment and most of our belief systems by orienting them towards an ecological consciousness’. One of the ways is to integrate



economy with the climate; to make people understand that by helping climate dual motives can be achieved. One it may sustain our life on earth and our economy from dwindling. Human Beings should consider a proactive empathetic approach to flora and fauna alike to make this world a better place to live in. It is to this account that the 'Memory-Card' can be used. It is at its best both fatal and enlivening. It can either create or destroy. One can either learn or re-learn from the memory that acts as storage units of all our actions of the past.

Therefore, our spirit can only be revived by going back to nature. We have risen from mud and it is to the mud that we return. It is a seldom reminder that unless we check our practices and completely transform our measures, we solely would be responsible in destroying the past, present and the future of coming generations. It is the dire need of the hour that we move from our anthropocentric constitution to eco-centric positioning.

“Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago”.

-Warren Buffett

Works Cited

Guha, Ramachandra. *Environmentalism: A Global History*. Penguin Random House, 2016.

Nayar, Pramod. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. 7th ed., Pearson Education, 2014.