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## **An Ecocritical Study of Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Boatman of the Padma***

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**Abstract:** Manik Bandyopadhyay's canonical text *The Boatman of the Padma* lays bare an inextricable bonding shared between nature and the fishermen of Ketupur, living along the banks of Padma River. This paper ecocritically analyses how the river governs and dictates the lives of marginalised people of rural Bengal. My paper also endeavours to portray the camaraderie and interconnectedness shared between womenfolk of Ketupur and nature.

**Key-words:** Nature, ecocritical, marginalised.

Ecocriticism is relatively a new addition to the theoretical canon. It has made its emergence with the publication of the canonical text *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson. Ecocriticism tries to make an interconnectedness between literature and environment. Ecocriticism deals with environmental ethics, pollution, global warming, animals, man-made disaster and the harmonious communion as well as the disharmonious relation shared between human beings and non-human nature. Ecocriticism is an emerging field which tries to encapsulate certain nuances from other disciplines like environmental ethics, animal rights, geography, history etc. So it has emerged as an 'interdisciplinary field'. In today's twenty-first century the burgeoning interest in technology renders the mother earth and its precious resources plundered and exploited by human beings. Technological innovations and anthropocentric attitudes of human beings dismantle the pristine relationship shared between man and nature. The present text *The Boatman of the Padma* chosen for analysis proposes to make an illuminating discourse about how ecology inadvertently and directly dictates and regulates human lives and their culture. But we must delve deep into interpreting the multifarious definitions of ecocriticism before interpreting the text *The Boatman of the Padma* in relation to ecocritical theory. William Rueckert is the first person who used the term



“Ecocriticism” in 1978 in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". He defines ecocriticism as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (xx). According to Cheryl Glotfelty

Simply put, 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 readings of the texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (xviii).

She also concedes

In philosophy, various subfields like environmental ethics, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social ecology have emerged in an effort to understand and critique the root cause of environmental degradation and to formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with the earth (xxi).

William Howarth has given a detailed presentation about the etymological root of "ecocriticism":

*Eco* and *critic* both derive from Greek, *oikos* and *kritis*, and in tandem they mean ‘house judge,’ . . . So the *oikos* is nature, a place Edward Hoagland calls ‘our widest home,’ and the *kritos* is an arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order... (69).

Greg Gaard also refers to the all-encompassing nature of this theory stating that

As ecocritics seek to offer a truly transformative discourse, enabling us to analyse and criticize the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture takes place (4).

Ecocriticism of present era strives to foreground the disastrous effect of human activities that endanger the lives of other species and rupture the camaraderie shared between human-beings with non-human nature.

J. Donald Hughes in his book *An Environmental History of the World* evaluates the role of environmental history in reinforcing the effect of human activities on non-human nature and vice-versa. He delineates



As a method, environmental history is the use of ecological analysis as a means of understanding human history. It studies the mutual effects that other species, natural forces, and cycles have on humans and the actions of humans that affect the web of connections with non-human organisms and entities. Environmental historians recognize the ways in which the living and non-living systems of the Earth have influenced the course of human affairs. They also evaluate the impacts of changes caused by human agency in the natural environment. These processes occur at the same time and are mutually conditional (4).

Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padmanadir Majhi* or *The Boatman of the Padma* underpins how the ecological phenomena (here the principal character is played by the Padma River) dominates the lives of people residing along the banks of the river. The very title of the novel connotes that fishermen are bound to ride to the river. *The Boatman of the Padma* is an intriguing tale of the lives of fishermen of Ketupur (a village in Bangladesh) who undergo a multitude of hardships to sustain their livelihood. They spend a precarious existence combatting with the adversaries from the outer world. The river posits a significant role in their lives. She serves a dual purpose: life-sustaining force and the inscrutable force of destruction. The arbitrary nature of the river Padma keeps the villagers of Ketupur under perpetual fright. The seasonal turbulences in weather particularly storms like northwester etc. wreak havoc on the lives of the people of Ketupur, Portrayed against the silhouette of Kuber's solitary life-struggle for survival the author successfully presents the saga of survival of fishermen and common dwellers residing along the banks of Padma. Their simple lifestyle which is thoroughly devoid of the intrusion of intricacies of urban life holds up the picture of a pastoral lifestyle spent at perfect equipoise with natural surroundings. Here the Padma is not a mere natural phenomenon. The author with his majestic writing style bestows anthropomorphic features on the river, and these endearments render the river the status of a human character.

The beginning of the novel introduces the readers to the scene of fishermen involved in the arduous task of fishing 'ilish' (a sweet-water fish) from the breast of Padma. Their relentless task of fishing ilish would earn them a livelihood. The process of fishing is described as follows:

The ilish season was on in the Padma; fishing was proceeding in full swing with no respite throughout the day and night. In the evening one could see from the jetty hundreds of dots



of light moving about on the river like ever-glowing fireflies. Those were the lights in the fishing boats; all through the night they would flit about in this way looming like arcane signs in the faint mysterious darkness of the river (3).

The environmental concern is discerned by the novelist in his way of mentioning the erosion of land by the water of Padma. The omniscient narrator of the novel states that the river Padma tries to engulf the land of Ketupur day by day. The fishermen of the village not only have to combat natural calamities like nor'wester in the midst of river; they have to remain ever vigilant about every changes that take place in Padma. Their very residence situated along the banks of river is threatened by swelling Padma in monsoon. It is best understood in reference to the context where a low-lying alluvial land called Channar Char is swept away by Padma. This accident jeopardises the inhabitants of Chanar Char (a neighbouring village of Ketupur ). This gruelling accident delineates how human lives are destined by the vagaries of nature. The passage reads

There had been extensive rains that year. Some five miles of Ketupur, a low-lying alluvial land of the Padma called Channar Char had gone half under water; out of panic, many had fled the land. One never knew whether the tract of land that the capricious Padma had created long ago would suddenly be devoured by her again! (56)

The engulfment of land by Padma River uprooting the dwellers from their own land gives the researcher to analyse this novel from ecocritical perspective. Here the benign nature is replaced by its antagonistic form. Even sudden devouring of alluvial land called Channar Char by Padma does not spare the inhabitants of that village to evacuate the land on time and migrate to a safe abode. The stream of water inundate the “small sandbanks in the middle of the Padma” (57) and its massive flow of water “sweep away houses, people, and cattle in those habitations like so much straw” (57) The visit of Ganesh and Kuber in Channar Char to gather information about the whereabouts of Kuber’s wife’s relatives unravel the perilous existence into which people are thrust to endure. The description not only unfolds to the readers about the deplorable and wretched condition of human beings but it also gives a painstaking account about the sufferings of livestock who are devoid of any shelter. When Kuber reaches Chardanga (a village in Channar Char) to meet the family of his father-in-law he notices that not “an inch of dry land anywhere around” (58) is



left to be inundated. But the most compassionate picture that crops up is the benevolence on part of the villager to try to save their livestock. As the translation reads

Mala's old father Baikuntha was feeding the pain-stricken cows; her elder brother, Adhar was catching fish with an angling rod, sitting on the roof, while some naked boys and girls sat dangling their legs from the bridge that had been contrived by fastening two bamboo poles side by side;...(58)

The calamities of nature wreak havoc on their crops leaving least to survive on. Even Kuber feels suspicious to take responsibility of the family of his father-in-laws. Because his own village Ketapur also becomes a victim to nature's whims. Kuber recounts "The aush paddy having been destroyed, there were indications of an impending famine visiting the land; food grains were already dearer in the country under water" (61).

This vagaries and changing attitude of nature also remind us of a novel by Adwaita Mallabarman's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* where people migrate to other lands due to the drying up of large mighty river Titas at an alarming rate. In Mallabarman's novel, we notice how a natural calamity like the rise of alluvial soil land or "silt bed" on Titas endangers the business of catching fishes for Malo fishermen.

In both these river-centric novels we discern how river dictates and governs the lives of people residing in the riparian locality. *The Boatman of the Padma* describes how feminine sensibilities share a camaraderie with a natural force. During the storm, the womenfolk of the village try to appease the wrath of nature by observing certain rituals. During the violent storm, the female members of the village try to take refuge to the Almighty God seeking a solution for this natural calamity. The chanting of prayers to mitigate the wrath of nature is observed in certain houses.

When the storm rose, the women in the house after house laid out wooden planks on their courtyards for the tempest god to sit upon and calm down. In every house, women offered desperate prayers to the deity. Was this the wrath of god? What caused this visitation? (69)

The novelist also takes recourse to the natural metaphor to relate to the emotional turmoil in Kuber's heart. When Kuber comes to the hospital seeking medical help for treatment of the broken



leg of her girl child, Gopi he feels utterly destitute. The novelist tries to project a harmony between the torments of Kuber's mind with the waves of the river lashing against the shore. The following excerpt will substantiate my argument.

...leaving his only daughter at this faraway hospital he was standing stupidly on the riverbank not knowing where to go or what to do. The ship steamed off hooting its siren; the waves it stirred up in the water lashed against the shore. There was a similar turbulence in Kuber's heart for his daughter (83).

The other pertinent factor of the novel is the earnest urge of Hossain Mian, a shrewd rich villager, to colonize a wild land. The land is here named as Moynadwip. Hossain Mian conceives it of as a utopian land or dreamland. His fervent wish is to set up a colony in Moynadwip and make it a habitat for human beings. The character of Hossain Mian is quite ambiguous in nature. Sometimes the readers feel that he tries to make a society at Moynadwip irrespective of religions and devoid of communal hatred. He wants to set up a colony at the far off island of Moynadwip where people will lead a peaceful life. May be he wants to set up a society devoid of hierarchical societal structure. But a close reading of the novel would unfold his devious plans. He is also presented as a money-lender. But behind the veneer of munificence the dark desires of his heart lurk in. He chooses downtrodden and crestfallen people from the village of Ketupur who are struggling with chilling penury. They are thrust into spending their lives in wilderness of Moynadwip and inhabit the place with their offsprings. The people have to endure a precarious life combatting with the creatures like venomous snakes in this wild island. Nature in wilderness of Moynadwip is presented as a threat. To materialise his dream of setting up a colony at Moynadwip he uses the poverty-stricken people as sitting ducks. Rasu, the one who succeeds to escape from Moynadwip, gives a horrid and harrowing account of his stay there. The novel presents Hossain Mian as a capitalist. His greed for exerting sovereignty over nature is portrayed here. Hossain Mian is a representative of modern human beings who try to colonize and inhabit every empty land. He uses laborious and able-bodied men from Ketupur to serve his purpose. But the poor villagers have no other choice but to be governed by Hossain's idiosyncrasies. So they arduously try to cope with the wilderness and stay at Moynadwip living the lives of 'noble savage'. The intersection between human and nature as



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presented by humans' encroachment into the abysmal territory of Moynadwip also resembles the peaceful existence shared by aboriginal in the lap of nature. The utmost effort shown by the settlers of Moynadwip to grow vegetables, rabi crop actually resonate the simple primitive lifestyle which heralded the dawn of civilization.

The paddy crop had been harvested; some mustard, gram, and pea seeds had been sown; greens and vegetables like radish, spinach, and cabbages had not survived the previous year; this year efforts had been made on an experimental basis by applying a new variety of fertiliser in a few bighas of land; nothing could be predicted about the result (118).

But the clearing of wild forest for setting up human habitat produces an uncanny terror in the mind of Kuber. A brief description is given about cutting trees and making habitat there. May be the description lays bare how the virgin forest is robbed of her chastity. The lines are

The clearing in the midst of dense forest all around looked so dreadful that it seemed that as if the woodland which had been virgin since the day of creation of this island had had a handful of flesh torn away from her breast!(118)

Here we find a resemblance between the oppressed existence of nature and the marginalized existence of womenfolk of Ketupur. Both are victims of patriarchal oppression. The concluding part of the novel which showcases Kuber's meek surrender to the wills of Hossain Mian by uprooting himself from Ketupur and rerooting himself with Kapila at Moynadwip apparently lays bare the surrender of marginalized class in front of an influential capitalist class. By manoeuvring a nasty trick and entrapping Kuber by the false allegation of theft Hossain Mian manages to add a new member to the dwindling population of Moynadwip. Here the emigration of Kuber from Ketupur to Moynadwip doesn't serve as an escape to the pastoral world, but it does enmesh him within the abysmal darkness of wilderness. Hossain Mian's fervent wish to colonize a wild land by using the helpless people of Ketupur as noble savages lay bare the imperialist mentality harboured by him. This also renders the novel to be viewed as an eco-marxist one where the greed of asserting power over land constitutes the primary objective of capitalist human race.

In this way, the researcher has tried to explore diverse ecological connotations found in Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Boatman of the Padma*. I hope this ecocritical interpretation, giving a





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thrust to the study of a marginalised community of fishermen, would add a different dimension to the study of this canonical text.

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