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Ecological Imagination and Human-Nature Symbiosis in Selected Kachchhi Folktales

Ranbai Gelva

Research Scholar, Department of English
Gujarat University, Ahmedabad

&

Dr Pulin Bhatt

Professor,

City C.U Shah Arts and Commerce College,
Gujarat University, Ahmedabad



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Abstract: Culture, traditions, and history are profoundly shaped by a region's ecological conditions and natural environment, which influences and alters the lives of both human and non-human inhabitants. The detailed, intrinsic expressions of these aspects are often inscribed in the folklore of that region. Folklore, especially folktales, vividly portrays the interconnected relationship between ecology, culture, and collective consciousness, revealing a symbiotic bond between humans and the natural world. Kachchhi folktales, rooted in a land characterised by vast desert terrain, recurrent droughts, and a livelihood largely dependent on animals, portray the resilience and sustainable practices of communities facing ecological challenges. The study contributes to the underexplored area of Kachchhi's folk literature and unearths an embodied emotional bond that creates a unique worldview. It aims to analyse seven selected folktales of Kachchhi, primarily from Duleray Karani's folktale collections, which provide ample information about the Kachchhi language and literature. Using qualitative textual analysis, the paper examines the presence of ecological imagination and the active role of nature in shaping human life and relationships with the surroundings. The study is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of ecocriticism and environmental anthropology, drawing on Lawrence Buell's concept of environmental imagination and Govindrajan's perspectives on human-animal relations, respectively.

Keywords: *Kachchhi, folktales, ecocriticism, environmental imagination, human-nonhuman symbiosis*

Introduction:

Folktales are oral narratives and a subgenre of folk literature that form a part of folklore passed down from one generation to the next over hundreds or thousands of years, often reflecting the values, norms, and beliefs of a community or region. Sarma, while discussing the nature of folklore as enunciated by A. K. Ramanujan, calls folktales "autotelic" (qtd. in Sarma 744), thereby referring to the intrinsic nature of folktales as an expression of

the people, their land, their perspectives and relationships with their surroundings. Folktales not only portray the traditions and social life of people but also the environmental conditions, the importance and reverence for ecological elements such as trees, animals, and water sources, and the need for sustainability in an adverse climate. Kachchh's folk literature remains underexplored; however, it provides a vital site for folkloristics and ecocriticism through ecological awareness and the emotional bonds between humans and non-humans and the natural environment.

Dorson describes folklore as "past-minded and past-begotten, the relics of a departed age" (Dorson 33), suggesting that it preserves the lived experiences and imaginative worlds of earlier communities. As a repository of human civilisation, folklore reflects patterns of human behaviour and their relationships with the surrounding world. The environment is deeply rooted in inherited cultural narratives that can be critically examined through the analysis of folktales. A well-known couplet from the Kachchhi folktale 'Odho Jam and Hothal Padmini' vividly captures the essence of Kachchh: "kher, ber ne bāvari, bya kandhā ne kakhkh, Hothal! Halo kutchade Jit mādu savā lakhkh" (Kachchh may have khair, berry, acacia, thorn, and rock, but dear Hothal, its people are invaluable; let us return there) (Mehta and Chudasama 26). The lines express Odho's longing for his homeland while simultaneously foregrounding the region's harsh ecological conditions and the resilience and generosity of its people.

The region encompasses diverse ecological zones, including desert areas, islands, the vast Banni grasslands, coastal belts, rivers, mountains, and salt-encrusted plains, making it environmentally distinctive. Despite the richness of culture and ecological uniqueness, Kachchh remain critically underexplored in the academic discourse. This study, therefore, seeks to uncover the intricate cultural and ecological dimensions embedded within the folktales of Kachchh.

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine Kachchhi folktales through an ecocritical lens. It explores the ecological distinctiveness and challenges of Kachchh by analysing selected folktales compiled by Duleray Karani (1896-1989) in *Kachchh na Loksahitya ma Premkathao*, *Kachchh ni Rasdhar* (Parts 1–5), and *Duleray Karani Sahitya Vaibhav*, a collection of his miscellaneous works that also includes tales from *Kachchh Ni Rasdhar*. Some of these tales have been translated into English and titled as *Kutchi Folktales*. Karani has made a significant contribution to preserving and consolidating the rich body of Kachchhi oral literature. The study seeks to foreground the ecological imagination of the Kachchhi people by examining their relationships with the natural environment and ecological elements. The paper investigates how Kachchhi folktales construct human

relationships with nature. It examines whether the environment actively shapes human life or merely functions as a narrative backdrop, and also analyses how the people of Kachchh demonstrate environmental awareness and adaptive sustainability in the face of adversity, besides examining the impact of ecological calamities on people's lives and questioning human dominance or suggesting a symbiotic coexistence between humans and nature. The selection of seven folktales is guided by their capacity to reveal the natural environment and ecological diversity of Kachchh. Each tale presents a distinct ecological condition of Kachchh, encompassing drought and migrations, rivers and fertile lands, mountainous terrains, and animal-based livelihoods. Furthermore, these narratives foreground a nature-centric perspective, emphasising ecological interdependence rather than an anthropocentric worldview.

Ecocritical Overviews

Ecocriticism, also known as environmental criticism and green studies, was coined in the late 1970s by combining “criticism” with a shortened form of “ecology”—the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plants and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats (Abrams and Harpham 98). Ecocriticism, or more specifically environmental criticism, deals with the literature and the representation of the environment in writing. Ecocriticism does not simply mean nature study; it has distinguished itself from conventional nature writing by its ethical stand and commitment to the natural world and by making the connection between the human and the non-human world (Mishra 168). One of the foundational texts of ecocriticism, *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell, foregrounds the theoretical framework. Buell asks whether literature has shaped how people imagine, value, and represent the environment. According to Buell, literature doesn't merely reflect nature but actively constructs our imagination of the environment. Buell's central idea is that literature shapes how we treat the environment in practice. Nature writing, the description of the environment, is not merely an expression of creativity; rather, it is a cultural force that influences ethics, politics, and identity. To analyse the symbiosis and interdependency of human and animal, the study draws upon *Animal Intimacies* by Radhika Govindrajani. Kachchh is a region with a majority of rural population. Due to the dry climate in a vast area, people's dependency on animals is apparent before industrial establishments.

Ecocritical analysis of Folktales

Folktales and oral narratives, apart from offering various solutions, customs, and practices, also foster a sense of community, instilling a sense of history and belonging (Biswas and Roy 96). Notably, community, history and

belonging of any culture take shape from its environment and ecological belonging. This ecological belongingness and dependency are reflected in Kachchhi folktales. Where a snake is considered deity and worshipped through ages, people migrate due to drought and resettle in other land, settling down in new land at the same time longing for their homeland, lovers meet through sailing by river, love unfolds and family grows in a cave, people are ready to sacrifice their own life to save life of an animal, and animals become companions in practicing humanitarian activities.

1. Bherio and Sagai

The famous Kachchhi folktale 'Bherio and Sagai' highlights an eco-centric attitude of the region. At its core, the narrative draws attention to the conflict between human ambition and the natural world. In many indigenous traditions, the serpent is not just a creature but a significant symbol of time, motion and circularity. Sagai's vow to only marry the man who kills Bhujang reflects an anthropocentric impulse. It shows a desire to dominate nature by power and control. Here, nature is placed as an obstacle to human greed and unfair behaviour towards natural beings. Bherio's decision to kill Bhujang intensifies the greed of the human mind. His shared discipleship signifies a common ecological belonging of humans and the non-humans. Guru's anger and subsequent revelation of the vulnerability of Bherio's life, become the moral intervention to establish order again. The death of Garudi Bherio by Bhujang recentres nature's power over human greed. Furthermore, Bhujang, to date, has been worshipped by the people of Kachchh (Karani 26), which is a symbolic reverence and hidden fear of nature. Buell argues "environment is a central organizing principle for civilization" (Buell 2). This refers to the cultural practice of worshipping *Naag* is deeply connected to this environmental wisdom embedded in the psyche of the Kachchhi people.

2. Sasai and Punnuh

The story of Sasai and Punnuh is situated in Sindh, but it is prevalent in Kachchh as both regions share environmental and cultural similarities. The protagonists, Sasai and Punnuh's union, was precipitated by drought in Sindh, and their separation was mediated by trees and mountains and not through any human intervention. The story aligns with Lawrence Buell's idea that literature depicts the imagination of people they construct for their surroundings. Sasai and Punnuh imagine the environmental objects as responsive and not static such as trees, mountains and plain desert. This happens when Punnuh was abducted by his family, and Sasai marches alone on the scorching land. During her journey, she seeks guidance from babool trees and leaves, and shares her pain with

the trees and mountains. Here, trees and mountains symbolically respond to her cries. Same thing Punnuh does after escaping from the captivity of his family (Gor and Pethani 328). The ecological elements, such as trees and mountains, become companions of love-sick Sasai, which is evidence that natural elements share equal participation in the pain and pleasure of people in their imagination. In the tale, it is clearly seen that humans negotiate with the natural world as active participants in the trajectory of life.

3. Suhini-Mehar

The folk tale from Sindh and Kachchh, 'Suhini-Mehar', reveals the involvement of nature in challenging and supporting the lives of humans. The Sindhu River, a huge water body, plays the role of an obstacle in the union of lovers, literally and metaphorically. When Suhini ignores the boundaries of Sindhu and sails through it every night. Ultimately, she becomes prey of her father's treachery and is drowned in the water of the river along with Mehar. The folktale introduces powerful symbols and recurrent patterns where humans have to negotiate to the environment, if not directly, then indirectly. The narrative begins with the migration of Suhini's father caused by drought, which indicates that an immediate shift in the environment is a determining factor in human displacement and death. The river emerges as the central symbol in the narrative, which was once a life-saving force to the migrated Suhini and her family, but becomes a giver of death. It has played the roles of connector and divider simultaneously. It has enabled lovers' secret meetings and also caused a life threat to them. The earthen pot that Suhini used for crossing the river is another significant environmental element. She used to use a properly baked pot, but this time it was altered and replaced by an unbaked pot, which caused her death. It shows how human beings use and manipulate environmental elements as tools for deceit and destruction (Gor and Pethani 335).

4. Nagvado-Nagmat

Another tale with the drought as a responsible factor in the plot construction, and it alters the situation of the characters. Draught-stricken people of Nagmati's village migrated to another area where Nagmati meets Nagvada, and their love story began. Although the draught made the circumstances of their union, when it ends in the village in Nagmati, it becomes the driving force behind their separation. Another important factor is that a person's relationship and profession are accounted for by their proficiencies in farming. Nagmati's father's oath to marry her to a man with exceptional ploughing ability indicates marriage is not only determined by wealth, caste prestige, or lineage, but by farming competence, which is related to the knowledge of soil and nature. The ecology is seemingly embedded in the social value system.

The motif of temporary migration reflects a sympathetic gesture to the land by not exploiting it anymore during the period of drought and moving with animals to protect their lives. They smoothly displace and allow ecology to recover by itself. This suggests an implicit sustainability practice in Kachchh's folktale and its folks. For them, migration doesn't cause heavy distress; rather, they show an adaptive response in the draught-like situation.

Nagmati identifies their bodies beyond just the human body, and rather with ecological elements, such as the pond and its bank, *Naga* and *Nagini*, which shows the imagination considers human and environmental elements of the earth with equal grade.

5. Jam Odho and Hothal Padmini

From an ecocritical perspective, the folktale unfolds many layers of the relationship between humans and nature. Firstly, Hothal, as a figure of the nymph, is deeply symbolic and presents an intensified picture of ecological imagination. The nymph, a supernatural being associated with the natural world, is free and beyond social laws, like nature, unbounded and governed by different laws. Her union with Odho, a human, suggests a harmonious, temporary relationship between humans and the non-human or natural world, which is not possible in structured, controlled social environments. Thus, in the tale, their married life was much happier and peaceful while they were living in a cave, away from social rules and norms. The Cave symbolises the earlier existence of humans, deeply connected with nature. They returned to Kachchh because of Odho's insistence on a condition of not revealing Hothal's true identity.

The loss of Hothal symbolises humans' loss of connection with the natural world, brought about by showing off, as Odho does, to assert his dignity among his people (Mehta and Chudasama 20). The folktale presents an image of an earlier state of existence, where humans were closer to nature and therefore happier, but also shows the fragile bond that is ultimately unsustainable within a structural social system. Odho's deep love for Kachchh presents how deeply people are connected to the land they belong to. The concept of motherland emerges as a deep reverence for the environment and its ecology, where a person was nurtured and nourished. This reverence resulted in a deep emotional bond with the environment.

Symbiotic relationship of humans with the natural world

Symbiosis refers to an interdependent relationship among different species; these ecological species, including humans, influence each other's lives. It often fosters balance in the ecosystem. Radhika Govindrajan witnessed an incident during her research. Govindrajan studied the relatedness of animals and humans. She

ventured into the central part of the Himalaya, where she encountered a lady Munni who cares for her cow's life more than her own. "Her well-being was entangled with that of her animals; then, perhaps, her decision to remain with them made sense. Since their lives were so intimately connected, Radha's unhappiness and subsequent ill health had emerged from the misfortunes that had befallen Munni" (Govindrajan 3). This multispecies family is exemplified in a Kachchhi folktales titled 'Saint Mekan Dada' and 'Saint Hajipir', which illustrate the embedded symbiotic relationship of humans with non-human animals. These tales are the best example of the reciprocation and sacrifice to protect environmental balance.

6. Saint Hajipeer

Some of the folktales of Kachchh found by Karani are biographical sketches of saints and humanitarian icons of the region. The present two tales are examples of saints who have detached themselves from the material world, but remained closer to nature and continue to serve it, indicating a strong sense of environmental awareness among people.

Saint Hajipir was a soldier in the Mughal army. At a point, he realised that he was actually not fulfilling his soul purpose and thus he left the soldiery and came to a distant place in Kachchh and became a saint. One day, some dacoits forcefully tried to snatch away a cow from an old woman. Hajipir decided to help her; he got enraged at the dacoits and started fighting with them. And during that combat, he martyred while rescuing the cow from dacoits. The act of rescuing an animal at the cost of one's own life is a sign of the empathetic attitude of the people toward the lives of non-humans. Even today, people, irrespective of religion, Hindus and Muslims, worship Hajipir (Mehta and Chudasama 72).

The centre of the tale is a cow that is not only an animal but a symbol of coexistence in the natural world. This reflects the collective ethical standard that to harm any living organism is considered a sin. Therefore, taking charge of rescue is considered a pious and revered act. This shows a highly developed sense of eco-centric orientation where ecology is not passive but actively participates in the lives of people. As Buell explains, "Eco-centric repossession of pastoral has gathered force, its centre of energy has begun to shift from representation of nature as a theatre for human events to representation in the sense of advocacy of nature as a presence for its own sake" (Buell 52)

7. Saint Mekan Dada

Another example of a symbiotic relationship between humans and animals is Dada Mekan. Dada Mekan had pet animals like the 'Lalio' donkey and the 'Motiyo' dog: their job was to quench the hunger and thirst of travellers in the bleak desert of Kachchh (Mehta and Chudasama 76). He devoted his whole life to the holy activity of serving others. This compassionate conduct fosters humanity and good-natured behaviour in the animal that suggests ethical co-existence rooted in care and reciprocation rather than control and exploitation. It's said that when he died, Lalio and Motiyo, too, could not live longer in separation from their master. "Lalio munjo lakhavanto, Motiyo munjo bha" (my Lalio is well-mannered, and Motiyo is my brother...) (Gor and Pethani 180). These words from Mekan Dada are testimony to the non-hierarchical coexistence of human and animal. Humans and animals are shown to be emotionally connected, and animals are treated as another human being and not a mere labour tool. By calling a dog brother Dada, conveying deep eco-centric emotion, where humans are not supposed to be superior to all other beings, but should cultivate a brotherhood among them. Lawrence Buell states, "how we image a thing, true or false, affects our conduct towards it" (Buell 2). Dada nurtured and trained both the donkey Lalio and the dog Motiyo with love and care.

Conclusion:

Drawing on Buell's theory of ecocriticism and Govindrajan's theory of interdependency of species, the folktales of Kachchh present an ethical understanding that human survival is inseparable from care for the environment and non-humans, and that harm to ecological elements ultimately results in harm to human existence. Furthermore, these folktales reflect the lived realities of Kachchh's harsh climate and demonstrate how cultural practices and environmental stewardship shape imagination and identity. Across the folktale analyses, recurring motifs such as drought, migration, rivers, and fertile lands reveal that nature actively shapes the destiny of living beings, challenging the Western idea of ecocriticism, in which nature is often seen as oppressed or exploited.

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