




*Ecological Consciousness: A Critical Study of Indian English
Novels*

Dinesh Kumar
Associate Professor of English
Dyal Singh College, Karnal
Email. Id. Dineshkarnal1@gmail.com



الوعي البيئي: دراسة نقدية للروايات الإنجليزية الهندية

دينيش كومار
أستاذ مشارك في اللغة الإنجليزية
كلية ديال سينغ، كارنال



Abstract:

It is a well known fact that nature and literature have always shared a close and intimate relationship. This intimacy can be witnessed through the writings of Indian authors. Ecology and ecological consciousness are among the significant and vital aspects discussed and debated in the corridors of Indian writing in English. Nowadays, in this globalised world, the idea of environmental balance is the topic frequently discussed by Indian writers many writers who have contributed a great deal in direction.

R. K. Narayan's novel, The Guide is a powerful exploration of the concept of ecology through the flowing Saryu River and ruined temples which are responsible for Raju's transformation into a saint. In his novel, Kanthapura, Raja Rao, through the depiction of rivers, mountains and other natural elements, has delineated peoples' respect for nature through their religious beliefs by exploiting natural imagery.

Kamala Markandaya, in her novel, Nectar in a Sieve, illustrates the idea of environmental consciousness through the use of strong natural images. So Many Hunger by Bhabani Bhattacharya is a realistic portrayal of ecological concerns through the effect of famine produced on its inhabitants.

In addition to it, the North East authors including Tamsula Ao, Monalisa Changkija, Mamang Dai and Mitra Phukan redefine human relationship with nature by challenging the dualistic construct of the Western thought in their works. They retrieve and preserve the world views and traditional ecological knowledge of their communities. These writers propound the idea that two components of nature-organism and their environment are not only much complex and dynamic, but also interdependent mutually reactive and related.

Keywords: Ecological consciousness, Eco-criticism, environmental balance, nature, ecology.

المخلص:

إنها حقيقة معروفة أن الطبيعة والأدب يتشاركان دائماً في علاقة وثيقة وحميمة. ويمكن رؤية هذه العلاقة الحميمة من خلال كتابات المؤلفين الهنود. تعد البيئة والوعي البيئي من الجوانب المهمة والحيوية التي تمت مناقشتها ومناقشةها في أروقة الكتابة الهندية باللغة الإنجليزية. في الوقت الحاضر، في هذا العالم المعولم، أصبحت فكرة التوازن البيئي موضوعاً يناقشه الكتاب الهنود بشكل متكرر، والعديد من الكتاب الذين ساهموا كثيراً في الاتجاه. تعد رواية "الدليل" للكاتب آر كيه نارايان استكشافاً قوياً لمفهوم البيئة من خلال نهر ساريو المتدفق والمعابد المدمرة المسؤولة عن تحول راجو إلى قديس. في روايته كانثابورا، حدّد راجا راو، من خلال تصوير الأنهار والجبال والعناصر الطبيعية الأخرى، احترام الناس للطبيعة من خلال معتقداتهم الدينية من خلال استغلال الصور الطبيعية. وتوضح كامالا ماركاندايا في روايتها "رحيق في غريال" فكرة الوعي البيئي من خلال استخدام صور طبيعية قوية. يعد فيلم "جوع شديد" بقلم بهاباني بهاتاشاريا تصويراً واقعياً للمخاوف البيئية من خلال تأثير المجاعة التي تحدث على سكانها. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإن مؤلفي الشمال الشرقي، بما في ذلك تيمسولا أو، وموناليزا تشانغكيجا، ومامانغ داي، وميترا فوكان، يعيدون تعريف العلاقة الإنسانية مع الطبيعة من خلال تحدي البناء الثنائي للفكر الغربي في أعمالهم. إنهم يستعيدون ويحافظون على وجهات النظر العالمية والمعرفة البيئية التقليدية لمجتمعاتهم. يطرح هؤلاء الكتاب فكرة أن عنصرين من مكونات الطبيعة والكائن الحي وبيئتهما ليسا فقط معقدين وديناميين، ولكنهما أيضاً مترابطان ومتفاعلان ومترابطان.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الوعي البيئي، النقد البيئي، التوازن البيئي، الطبيعة، البيئة.

In Indian English Fiction, the ecological concerns have always been there in various degrees. In early fictional writing, as in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, the villagers venerate the river Kanchamma as the Hindus all over India worship the Ganga. In R.K. Narayan's Malgudi-centric fiction, we find the benevolent influence of the river Sarayu on different characters. There is mention of the retreat across the river, of jungle-tribes living in hills, etc. all of which makes it a mysterious place imbued with the spirit of the place. Later in Kamala Markandaya's novels we see the evil impact of urbanization. The love for one's inherited land is integral to any environmental discourse. In her novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, industrialization and drought – as onslaughts of man and nature – combine to pauperize Nathan. Being old, he is unable to take to any other trade and is forced to migrate to city with his wife and they turn to beggary!

Arundhati Roy, an author-turned-activist, has passionately championed the cause of ecology. With Vandana Shiva and Medha Patkar, she fought against the proposed Narmada dam project. In her celebrated novel *The God of Small Things*, one finds nature in its pristine glory in the form of the free-flowing river Meenachal. The beauty of the landscape attracts the attention of the writer and the river Meenachal, seen through child's eyes – as the entire novel's point of view – evokes a beautiful picture in the reader's mind: "It was warm, the water green like reapplied silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it". But modernization changes things. Over a period of time, we find the change in culture with modern trappings of life changing public attitude: "Years later when Rahel returned, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had

been and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed....Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now”

The theme of degradation of natural habitat due to urbanization and industrialization is not new. We have seen tragedies on a gigantic scale in the form of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy in which the American multinational Union Carbide took all the earnings when the going was good but when, due to the poor upkeep of machinery, the lethal gas leaked out killing some 2500 people and maiming for life a large number of people, the company simply shut the door on the people including its employees. The hapless people were taken for a ride not only by the MNC but also by their own government which colluded with the multinational. A graphic account of the tragedy that life had become for the people is given by Indra Sinha in his novel *Animal's People*. The protagonist, a 19-year old boy, cannot stand up; he has to walk on all fours due to the effect of harmful chemicals released from factory. He was not always like that as Ma Franci tells him: “Such a beautiful little boy you were, when you were three, four, years. Huge eyes you had, black like the Upper Lake at midnight plus a whopping head of curls. How you used to grin. [...] your smile would break a mother's heart”. And now he dreads the mirror! His plight can be compared to that of the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, who were maimed for life due to bombing by America.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is a perfect piece of eco-fiction. Not only does it highlight the ecology of a unique natural region, the lifestyle of the people and animals, etc., but

also deals with important questions that have a bearing on ecology and the human population that is umbilically attached to it. Long back, the economist T.R. Malthus had pointed out that “the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man” (73). How, in search of subsistence, the dispossessed tend earth to bear fruit for them is graphically portrayed in *The Hungry Tide*. Also, the novel discusses the politics of multinationals that results in a horrible episode in which thousands of people are killed. In addition, there is a tender love theme that progresses through the warp and woof of the novel but which transcends the barriers of language, class and culture.

. The central political issue in Ghosh’s novel is the infamous 1979 Morichjhapi massacre of Hindu migrants from the then East Pakistan. Around 30000 migrants had settled in the Sundarbans despite its inhospitable terrain with a large number of small islands which got submerged with frequent waves rushing in from the sea. These islands had mangrove forests and dangerous creatures like tigers. The West Bengal government which was in collusion with the business house known as Sahara Pariwar is on record as having evicted around 10000 people from Jambudwip Island in 2002 because the corporate wanted to set up a tourist resort. On the face of it, the idea of a beautifully maintained natural habitat to be touted to the tourists seems to favour ecological maintenance, but the reality is different.

But we are not concerned as much with this story as with the backdrop of Sundarbans spread over parts of India and Bangladesh, where nature always challenges man. However, the refugees were able to live in a symbiotic relationship with nature – deriving their sustenance while at the same time

minding the conservation part. They had the dream of resettling in the Sundarbans which they considered as part of their motherland. They rapidly established Marichjhapi as one of the best developed islands of the Sundarbans. Within a few months, a thriving localized economy without any government support was built in the region. However, the negative fallout was that the Left Front government of West Bengal felt slighted at the successful resettlement of refugees in Marichjhapi and accused them of having violated the forest acts and caused serious ecological imbalance.

Through the character of Piya or Piyoli Roy, Ghosh has crafted a character who has devoted her life to the study and preservation of nature. A woman, it is ironically believed by the eco-feminists in our times, is a better custodian of nature than man. "Women have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional, and the particular, while men have been associated with culture, the nonmaterial, the rational, and the abstract". The support for this stand is found in early human societies. "Eco-feminists have claimed that archaeological research reveals that such early societies were ecological, equal and matriarchal".

Another great novelist and Booker winner Kiran Desai's focus in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* on the geographical nature, apart from being an aesthetic embellishment, also forms an allied motif of home. If the consciousness of home lies at the deeper level in the novel, that of the habitat is felt at the surface level, at the level of allied motif. The idyllic description in the vein of pastoral representation of the hill station shows Desai's ecological leanings, which she has inherited from her mother Anita Desai, the well-known novelist. If Nanda Kaul merges with the atmosphere in *Fire on*

the Mountain, in *The Inheritance of Loss*, it is the house that merges with the landscape: ‘When she looked back, the house was gone; when she climbed the steps back to the veranda, the garden vanished. [...] The gray had permeated inside, as well, settling on the silverware, nosing the corners, turning the mirror in the passageway to cloud’ The symbolic significance of the animal world is, of course, found in countless narratives produced in all times and climes. What stands out is the co-existence of the human and the animal world in that section of the *Cho Oyu* that is governed by the rustic cook and other servants. A saucer of milk and a pile of sweets is placed by the cook to pacify a pair of black cobras living in a hole. The archetypal cook, as his namelessness suggests, lives in harmony with nature believing that “The natural world exists in its own right and other beings have a will, a way of their own and their own stories”

Suravi Sharma Kumar’s *Voices in the Valley* is a novel that is suffused with ecological overtones as it highlights the topography, climate, flora and fauna of Assam in a big way. Besides, there is a sharp focus on local customs, food and dress habits, taboos, etc. of the community living in harmony with nature. Here is a specimen in which the writer reads the language of fish in the leaves: “Some trees were covered by vines, some stood bare, some bore leaves pointed like a singi fish, some spindle-shaped like the kuhi fish, some tiny like the puna fish” (68). The struggle in nature is noted at the minutest level: “Red weaver ants stitched up the leaves of a guava sapling in a corner into enclosures for homes. Drones and bees attacked a thick wasp, that had intruded into their hive, engulfing it in a ball of bees, exterminating it for its audacity”

Some other novels may briefly be considered here for their ecological interest. Aruni Kashyap has come out with an Assam-specific novel *The House with the Thousand Stories* (2013) which is focussed on the issue of insurgency in Assam. It has nature description in plenty, but it is still a backdrop. She talks of the scent of the earth, the river Bramhaputra, the animals, the insects, etc. essentially to present a pen picture to the reader. True to its name, the novel *Adrift: A Story of Survival at Sea* by V. Sudarshan relates a gripping account of a tourist couple marooned at sea in the company of the crew. The backdrop is the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with their pristine beauty. The novel *Frozen Waves* by S.S. Kumar takes up the Sundarbans region as the backdrop of the thriller that this novel is.

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