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The Marginalized Vs. The Civilized: An Ecocritical Approach to Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aranyak*

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a worldwide emergent movement which pleads for a sustainable development of all organisms. This revisionist movement criticizes the anthropocentric attitude of the humans which is a hindrance to a sustainable future. Today even in the twenty-first century when we witness a rapid growth of science and technology, the marginalized people are still being deprived of their equal rights to survive. They are yet to have a taste of true development even in the developed or developing countries. They are more ecological when the so called civilized people have put our ecology at stake. They are dedicated to their roots, yet they are being exploited by the capitalistic society. They even fall an easy prey to the state sponsored terrorism. Ecocriticism advocates development of every individual in close proximity with nature. The present paper seeks to explore the cultural clash between the civilized and the disadvantaged regarding their attitude to nature as evidenced in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aranyak-Of the Forest*. Care for nature which is the basic approach to Green Studies is the focus of this study. In view of the global environmental crisis, the article seeks to care the wounds of the dispossessed for a sustainable future of human as well as the non-human.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Development, Nature, Deprived, Sustainable

Introduction:

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's epic novel *Aranyak* is a great environmental text advocating preservation of the rights of the marginal people. The very prologue of the novel suggests that the novel is going to be the story of the dispossessed. Our earth has many paths where civilized people seldom tread. Along those paths, the strange cross-currents of life trickle their way through obscure pebbly channels. The novelist wants to tell the story of these unsophisticated people in the wilder regions of Bihar and Jharkhand. They have a wider

understanding of nature in her pristine beauty. Living in close proximity with nature, these people never harm the eco-system of their land. Yet the people who deserve their right to land, water and forest are often deprived of their basic human rights.

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 term ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. 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 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" (*The Environmental Imagination*, 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. The present article will highlight the relationship between nature and the marginal in the light of Ecocriticism which challenges the anthropocentric attitude of men exploiting nature. In the physical environment, every organism plays equal share along with the others for keeping up eco-system in good order. The marginal people also have their role in our environment. In fact, they live in a more sustainable way than the so-called civilized society which takes little care of nature.

Into the Wild

The novel starts with the frantic search of an unemployed youth for the economic safety of service life. Having finished his graduation in Law, he was hankering for a job in Kolkata but

finding it difficult to trace. At last, fortune shined on him when he met his old friend Abinash who was most cordial to offer him with a job. They have in Purnea, a jungle mahal of thirty thousand bighas for which they are searching for a trustworthy estate manager who will conduct the act of deforestation. Their sole concern of is to clear up the land to draw potential tenants for earning more revenue. Satyacharan got a sigh of relief so he did not hesitate to agree with this opportunity. He started from Bengal and having reached BNW station he took a bullock cart and traveled all night. The density and stillness of the jungle reminded him how lonely the forest life is going to be. There was hardly any trace of human habitation; only forests big or small, dense in some places and sparse in others. Occasionally, there were stretches of open virgin land. Next morning he reached his office known as the katcheri, an area of fifteen bighas of cleared up land with a few wood huts with straw thatch. So the city man Satyacharan who had spent most of his life in the company of friends, and in libraries, theatres, films and music sessions and a man who could not imagine a life without any of these pleasures fell into the wilderness of deep forest. He found it difficult to get through the lonely hours of silence. He simply stayed in the room to read the few books he had brought to, somehow, plough through the time. In his own words, "The people of the katcheri were as good as barbarians; neither dsid they understand my speech, nor I theirs. Those first ten days excruciating. Ever so often, I felt that having a job was of no use; it was far better to stay on half-starving in Calcutta than stifle to death here. It had been a horrible mistake to acquiesce to Abinash's request and come to this absolute jungle. This was not the life for me."(10) But life took a turn for Satyacharan when he heard a few words from Goshto-babu, the Mohuree:

Oh, it was very heard when I first came here-I used to find the jungle suffocating. But now, it's come to a point, where let alone my home in Bengal, I can't stick it out for more than two days when I have to go to Purnea or Patna on work....You are newly come from Calcutta, your heart longs to fly back to the city, and you're yet young. Spend some more time here. And then, you will see.....The jungle will get inside you. (11)

The jungle really got inside him, not because of the forest only, but because of the people living over there far from the artificialities of city life. Those people are very simple leading a life of poverty far away from the madding crowd's ignoble strife.

In the heart of the forest, Satyacharan met Raju Parey an extremely poor, very harmless, shy, religious man grazing his three buffaloes. Out of sympathy, Satyacharan provided him with two bighas of land to deforest and cultivate. He even promised him more. But Raju, a person without any greed could not hurt nature; one can deny the human nature bond here in Raju's statement:

The forest you see here is very beautiful. The flowers have been blooming since 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 whenever there is money or transactions of cash, loans and receipts, the air becomes polluted. Then the gods choose not to stay 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. (76)

Satyacharan also met Kunta who despite her misery did not lose her modesty. Having lost her husband, the poor woman with her trail of children eked out her everyday life picking wild berries in the jungle. She is almost an out-caste in society, yet led a graceful life.

In the forest Satyacharan met the Santal King Raja Dobru Panna, Bhanmati the princess with a certain natural poise and an inherent sense of dignity. The members of the royal ancestral family are now in their decadent state. Having invaded by the nomadic Aryans, then by the Mughals and by the British they took refuge in the natural caves and mountains. Their culture is no less dignified than the others. They take pride in hunting and cattle grazing for their livelihood. They serve their guests with fruits, milk, honey and meat and the like. They never like to clear the forest for a farmland as it goes against their culture. And interestingly they hunt in a sustainable way to keep the resource intact for future. They keep the burials of their forefathers in a dignified manner. Their burial ground lacked the pretension and the wealth and splendor of the works of the wealthy Egyptian Pharaohs. They were poor people but they had their innocent culture and own civilization created in their palace of caves and the royal burial grounds. In the shadows of the afternoon, Satyacharan could glimpse quite another world in comparison to which the Puranic and Vedic age seemed like time present. He could well imagine the nomadic Aryans crossing over the north-west mountain ranges and come down like a torrent into an ancient India ruled by primitive non-Aryan tribes. The history of the vanquished non-Aryans had always been neglected and not written down anywhere. Perhaps it was written only in the darkness of the forests. The victorious Aryan had never been anxious to decipher that script. Until present date, the vanquished wretched tribes continue to be ignored, shunned and disdained. The Aryans proud of their civilization had never spared them a glance, never sought to understand their way of living. Satyacharan is the representative of the victorious race. On the other hand, old Dobru Panna, youthful Jagru and the maiden Bhanmati are those of the suppressed. Satyacharan with his evident pride of an Aryan was looking upon Dobru Panna of the royal lineage as an old Santal, Princess Bhanmati as a Munda coolie woman and the royal palace that they were so proud of as an ill-ventilated, ill-lit cave, a den of spirits and snakes. It seemed before his eyes was enacted the great tragedy of history. The actors of the drama comprised of the poor

defeated disdained king of the non-Aryan origin-Dobru Panna, the young princess Bhanmati, the young prince Jagru Panna on one side and on the other were Satyacharan, the narrator of the story, his companion Banowarilal and his guide Buddhu Singh.

Nature Vs Culture:

At first, his urban lifestyle revolts against the lonely forest life about which he had no love. He could not imagine a life without the company of friends, reading books in libraries, watching theatres 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 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. Living in close proximity with nature, He now understands:

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. But what happened at last? Satyacharan couldnot stay in the forest for ever: he returned to the hurly burly of city life without marrying Bhanmati, whom he considered to marry once. His vanity of of urbanism forbade him to do so. But what does he get in return? It's only life-long repentance of his misdeed.

On the other hand the landlord has no respite for the marginal people living in these foresters. After deforestation, the land got captured by the land mafias, the industrialists, the flat-makers making the virgin land impure. Even the original inhabitants are removed of their land. Such violation of nature leads to violence of the left wing extremists as we see now in the Maoist activities in India.

Deforestation-an Eco-cide:

Ecocriticism proliferates into several subfields. One of them is ecocide. The word derives from the Greek 'oikos' which means house or home and the Latin 'occidere' which means 'strike down, demolish, or kill'. So it literally means killing our home, the earth, the only place to live in. In a broader sense it is the destruction of the natural environment, especially

when it is deliberate. According to Wikipedia, “ Ecocide is an extensive damage to or destruction of the ecosystem(s) of a given territory whether by human agency or by any other, causes to such an extent that the peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants of that territory has been or will be severely diminished”. As a result the earth’s basic life support system will be at stake. The term is a recent development used to refer to the destructive impact of human beings on natural environment. It is the inevitable result of unsustainable exploitation of earth’s useful resources. Human nature is essentially anthropocentric which assumes the primacy of man. For this we exploit nature for our own benefit. In an era of materialism, we are exploiting nature in a way never seen before. The most notable example is the destruction of rain forest causing damage to natural environment for urbanization or industrialization. The US environmentalist Patrick Hossay opines that we, the human species are committing ecocide via industrial civilization’s impacts on the global environment. Today many environmental activist movements are stemmed out of this precept of ‘ecocide’.

Bandyopadhyay’s *Aranyak* is an epic of environmental text that can be analysed from the perspectives of ecocide. The city-bred Satyacharan is a typical product of built environment. Naturally he has little care initially for the wellbeing of the natural environment.

But Satyacharan’s vanity of urban life gets a jerk on his when he understands that he (a city man) is instrumental in conducting an ecocide. He is assigned to do so as a part of his profession. The jungle land of Nara-baihar and Labtulia had been leased out incessantly. 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.

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 Saraswati kundi. 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*.”(213) He also suspects, “I have sought to preserve the forest around Saraswati kundi.... But for how long?” (213) Satyacharan clearly understands that nothing can withstand the greed of the civilized to destroy the land of the foresters, the marginalized.

A Spiritual Awakening:

But Satyacharan is not a ruthless destroyer of nature. He has a living conscience for which he has a self-realization of his activity. Thus he now builds up a kinship with nature which is now no more an object of mere beauty or an object of exploitation. Nature is a living entity which can react to any injustice done to her. In nature he finds a divine presence to be worshiped. Like an ecocritic, he has an understanding:

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. (95)

Satyacharan could not anymore stand the ruination of the forest and decides to decorate Saraswati Kundi with herbs of different species. He encourages Jugalprasad, a nature loving soul whom he met in the jungle to afforestation. He denounces the malpractice of the city people of making the forest dirty after a picnic. 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. (248).

He cannot reconcile himself to the fact that in spite of his growing love for nature, a holy abode of the marginal, he remained instrumental in deforestation to satisfy the design of his employer. While describing the story after long years, he even says:

“ But these memories do not give me pleasure; they are filled with sorrow. By my hands was destroyed the unfettered playground of nature. I know too, that for this act the forest god will never forgive me. I have heard that to confess a crime in one’s own words lightens somewhat the burden of the crime.”(3) Therefore, he is describing this story. He also understands that to ride a horse in the moon-lit night in the forest will ever elude his grasp; to cherish of living with Bhanumoti in the forest will ever remain a dream. Rather people like Rasbihari Sing will promote the land to the industrialists and to that huge population rushing hard to buy the land to set up human habitation. The indescribable mystery, solemnity, and purity of the forest

will be replaced by the filthy air, smoke and dust. The eternal silence will yield place to the noise of population explosion. The primitive tribal will be disposed of their natural habitat. The eco-system will be violated and Satya will have an unpreferable dream that Bhanumati is selling coal in a basket on her head losing her luster as a forest prince.

Conclusion

Therefore, the present study shows that the marginalized people often become the victim of the so-called sophisticated society. They take better care of nature, yet they become an easy prey to the evil design of the capitalist society who uses to commodify nature. The crosscurrents of life also twinkle in deep forest in a splendid way but the civilized society imposes the stigma of barbarism upon the foresters! We see that Nature is at her best when uncontaminated by population, industrialization, smoke and noises. And the marginal people add to her beauty as they live in harmony with nature without exploiting her. The novelist leaves us with a message that nature has her own right to survive. Satyacharan's pangs of conscience are the result of his understanding of deep ecology. He will never be able to forget the people like Kunta, Manchi, Dhaturia, Dhautal Sahu, Bhanumati, Debru Panna, Jagru and many more who use to live in a sustainable way. His superiority complex of a city man gets demolished in the wilder regions of Lobtulian forest and Nara Baihar killed by his gory hands smeared with blood like Macbeth. So how can he forget his sin? Like the great Shakespearean tragic hero his conscience gets heavy with this line:

“You primeval gods of the forest, forgive me.”(254)

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