

The Wounded World: A Study of the Ecological Consciousness in the Poetry of Niranjana Mohanty

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Abstract – Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" has incited the minds of the critics to give a deep thought to the condition of the natural world, constantly under threat due to anthropogenic activities. Activities like deforestation, unreasonable use of natural resources, spreading pollutants in the environment has benefitted man initially but disturbed the ecological equilibrium giving rise to great disasters in the human community. According to William Rueckert, the most glaring problem faced by ecologists is to find grounds upon which both the human and the natural world can coexist and flourish in the same biosphere. Literature plays a vital role in creating/disseminating bioregional consciousness in human beings. Niranjana Mohanty is quite aware of this fact and his poems provide ample illustrations to this. In this paper I shall take up certain representative poems of Mohanty like "A Subtle Difference", "A Poem that Never Begins", "Digging", "Kalahandi", "Grief", "The World", "Prayers to Lord Jagannatha" etc. to discuss Mohanty's consciousness regarding nature which, if disturbed, threatens the existence of man on earth.

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Little we see in Nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

This sea that bears her bosom to the moon;

The winds that will be howling at all hours,

And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;

It moves us not. ("The World is Too Much with Us" MP, 180)

This sonnet by Wordsworth very well express the insensitiveness of human beings towards the beauty of nature. Men are always busy in amassing more and more wealth and spending those. What Wordsworth said years ago is more than true in this post-modern age. Nature has always been a constant source of support to human beings but human beings have always exploited nature for their own benefit. Compared to nature's benevolence towards human beings, man has done very little for nature. The different activities of man like deforestation, unreasonable use of natural resources, spreading pollutants in the environment through various activities have not only threatened nature but also threatened the existence of man on earth. The consumerist

attitude of man has disturbed the ecological equilibrium which has led to very big disasters in the human community. Therefore, for a safe and healthy living, maintenance of ecological balance should be one of the primary concerns of man. The 20th century has led scientists, artists and critics to think and develop ways to create an awareness in man regarding nature and her preservation. This has given birth to a new genre called "nature writing". The relationship between living organisms and their environment are very active, one affecting the other either with its presence or absence. This serious issue has created a new branch of literary theory called Ecocriticism, defined by Cheryll Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* as:

The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment 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-centred approach to literary studies (Glotfelty: 1996, xviii).

Literature is the platform which is utilized to unravel our awareness towards nature. In fact, literature

shapes our place consciousness and influences the human community to devise ways to coexist with the natural community. William Rueckert traces the problem faced by ecologists in the essay "Literature and Ecology", which is—

To find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community. This is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature. (Rueckert in Glotfelty: 1996, 107)

Nature has always been a part of literature, from the age-old to the present day. In the Indian context the epic *Ramayana*. Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* etc. shows the relationship between man and nature. Even the trees were worshipped as Gods there. Man should co-operate and co-exist with the benevolent nature because the current environmental crisis is a by-product of the human culture. Whenever man has exploited nature unethically, it has retaliated in the form of storms, drought, flood, earthquake, landslides and other natural calamities etc. A brief glance at D.C.Chambial's "When I was" Green describes the disastrous effects of an earthquake:

When I was green

never bothered

about the summer red

and blazing hot sands.

There was a quake,

the earth vomited fire;

there was smoke and smoke, the wind blew and blew,

the trees clashed the wood.

I stood a silent spectator staring at the fury of nature.

("When I was Green" *CRIPE*, 305-306)

Rueckert says that what is of utmost importance in this situation is to "promote an ecological vision" (114) because as Arthur Boughey has argued, and as quoted by Rueckert:

There is no population, community, or ecosystem left on earth completely independent of the effects of human cultural behavior. Now [this human] influence has begun to spread beyond the globe to the rest of our planetary system and even to the universe itself. (Rueckert in Glotfelty: 1996, 114)

Niranjan Mohanty in his presentation of the native landscape of Orissa, expresses his concern for the depleting resources of nature. The bountiful aspects of

nature are recorded by Mohanty in the poem *All That Happen in a Late November*, where the poet provides the picture of the exhilarating farmers at the time of harvest in the month of November. The farmers dance around the vast paddy fields celebrating their hard work with loads of dreams in their eyes to live a better life:

The endless paddy fields,

burst with flavescent laughter

when the farmers

dance around

hoping to live on

year after year.

Everything happens

in this late November

("All that Happens in a Late November" *LL*, 28)

Mohanty's ecological consciousness drives him to urge his readers to plant more trees because one tree is equal to one life. Trees are also the shelter of different species of birds "depraved and hungry" ("Tree of Love" *AHR*, 36) and when the butchering saws cut the trees down, the birds lose their natural habitat. Trees are also responsible for bringing down rains and the fact that a rich harvest requires adequate rains cannot be ignored at all. Denudation of forests only but destroy the ecological balance of nature. Such an idea is expressed in the poem "A Subtle Difference":

One tree, one life.

Plant more trees.

Our farmers need rains, rich harvest.

Don't denude the forest

Don't disturb nature

Ecology would be imbalanced

Nature's beauty never fades. ("A subtle difference" *LL*, 68)

The act of deforestation disturbs the wild life to a great extent. The wild animals are devoid of their natural habitat of the forests and therefore encroach upon the habitation of human beings creating damage and death. In the poem *Sunset* the poet sings of the fate of the woodcutters who go to the forests not to return back home, leaving their wife

"weeping and shed vermillion, broke bangles"
("Sunset" LL, 34) and children in a state of trauma:

That's how the wood-cutters went

into the woods and didn't return

and their women waited, weeping

and shed vermillion, broke bangles

weeping; their children

grew afraid of the tigers,

of the leaping darkness beyond the sunset. ("Sunset"
LL, 34)

Orissa is famous for her sandy sea-beach at Gopalpur and Puri. The sight of the sea shore, the dancing waves, the dawn-white surf, the "uninhibited, un-embowered clapping clamour of splashing waters" ("The Sea" AHR 118) is comforting and relaxing for the tourists for it makes

them oblivious of all their worries and burdens of life. Mohanty sketches the picture of the sandy sea-shore in the following lines of the poem "Grief":

You can always go to the sea.

Watch it, dancing.

It's dawn-white surf, comforting,

and composing a song for you

or may be for others

who came for a relaxation ("Grief" LL, 64)

In contrast to the pleasant scenic beauty of the sea lies the unpleasant and ferocious cyclone which creates havoc in the land of Orissa. Such a natural calamity is the outcome of the unethical use of nature. The cyclone-stricken picture of Orissa is not restricted to this region only. Such a natural calamity can happen in any part of the world. In the poem *Digging*, the poet mentions the occurrence of such a cyclone and the havoc created by it in the land:

The last year's Super Cyclone had uprooted

seven of our bright-eyed coconut trees. ("Digging" AHR, 2)

Man lies helpless at the hands of natural fury suffering passively the wounds inflicted by nature on human mind and psyche. The poet in Mohanty mourns at his helplessness for not being able to do anything when the mangoes rot at his backyard due to the hailstorm, when the wild wind blow away the roofs of houses in

his village, when the farmers lose everything in the flood and weep bitterly. The following lines from the poem "A Bird" well explains the situation:

Could I do anything

when the hailstorm blackened

the faces of mangoes in our backyard?

And when the wild wind blew

strongly denuding houses

of their roofs in my village

what could I do except

stretching out my palms?

Nothing could I do

when the farmers wept blood

against a nonchalant flood.

I became a scarecrow of nothingness

piling up my woes and woes of others

who left them on this land's edge. ("A Bird" OTYOP, 66)

The poet presents the aftermath of flood in the above poem and expresses his inability to do anything for the flood-affected farmers, who have lost everything. This picture of the flood is not limited to the region of Orissa but is universal. The massive destruction wrought by flood can happen in any area of any country. In "A Poem That Never Begins", the poet presents the flood-stricken pitiable condition of the human and the non-human world in his native land of Orissa. The poet equates the condition of the "pregnant buffaloes, goats" (OTBG, 47) and the "girls" (OTBG, 47) at the stage of puberty in the abnormal situation of flood as in the following lines:

And how that year

the flood took a heavy toll

of children, cows, calves

pregnant buffalos, goats

and girls at the age of puberty

And cart-loads of unthrashed corns.

("A Poem That Never Begins" OTBG, 47)

Flood takes a heavy toll of lives, both of humans and animals. Trees get uprooted, thousands are rendered homeless. The crops get water-logged and die out. As a consequence, there is scarcity of foodgrains. There is death and destruction everywhere. People are devoid of the basic necessities of life. In utter distress the poet questions himself:

what place is this I'm living in?

what air is this I'm breathing in?

what clamour is this I'm swallowing in?

what silence is this I'm slicing in? ("The World" LL, 59)

Quite contrary to the picture of flood lies the picture of drought. No rains for months, no cultivation, as a result there is a scarcity of food grains. Farmers leave their own land and migrate to the towns and cities in search of work. Life comes to a stand still in the villages. The condition of women at home can be compared to the rotten bamboos lying in the village pool. Even the grass "groan against the repetitious vacancy of the sky" (*Prayers to Lord Jagannatha*, 56). The poet paints the picture of drought in a village and his utter helplessness to relieve the people of their suffering is expressed in his prayer to Lord Jagannatha:

Cracked the fields, the eyes of cows

moistened. At the heart of the hearth

a cat sleeps. Farmers migrate

to the city of steel. Like rotten

bamboos in a village pool, the women.

Oh Lord! save my countrymen. (*Prayers to Lord Jagannatha*, 56)

The same abiding picture of agony is noticeable in the poem "kalahandi". Kalahandi was once a place of maritime plenty but now drought has become the fate of the place. No rains for years, no foodgrains has turned the people of the place to mere skeletons. There is hunger, suffering and death all around. The poet compares the "feather-thin arms" (*AHR*, 30) of an old woman to twigs "fallen from a thunder-struck tree" (*AHR*, 30). Rivers, pools and wells are devoid of water. The lot of the animals is no better than that of the human beings:

Cattle chew paper scraps and linen,

butterflies flounder about black stones.

Rivers do not flow here. The pools

and wells never glow with the bliss of water.

No vegetation, no fruition

only the bones' hunger seeks an ascension. ("Kalahandi" *AHR*, 31)

Jayanta Mahapatra also draws the same drab picture of Kalahandi—a place struck with poverty, giving vent to hunger and death. In the poem "Possessions" Mahapatra makes his readers encounter with the stark reality of the place:

Tonight, the politician will turn

on the country with his power.

His face will be well under control

and tomorrow, sixty thousand children will go hungry

again.

Poets will sip their tea in stupid-looking cafer,

or dangle in unknown fields

like embarrassed scarecrows. ("Possessions", *Shadow Space* 24-25)

For a healthy living on this earth human beings should use nature and natural resources reasonably. As Rueckert puts it, that this problem is not a national one, but "global, planetary" (114). Nature pays man in his own coin in the form of different natural calamities when man has expressed his selfish and exploitative attitude towards nature. Mohanty's deep concern for the depletion of nature is quite evident in his treatment of nature, in his poignant appeal to his readers to save nature. Ecocritics are working at warfooting level to save the environment, by making people aware of the otherwise consequences of misusing nature. Mohanty is hopeful enough that some reformatory measures will be taken up by both governmental and non-governmental organizations for the preservation of the environment. As William Rueckert quotes Ian McHarg from his book *Design With Nature*:

Each individual has a responsibility for the entire biosphere and is required to engage in creative and cooperative activities. (Rueckert in Glotfelty: 1996, 114)

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