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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ECOLOGICAL OVERTONES IN SELECTED INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

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Abstract

The ecocritical view is to look at how nature is presented in literary works. This research paper tries to look at the eco critical perspectives portrayed in the selected works of Toru Dutt, H.L.V. Derozio, Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan, Gieve Patel and Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla. The selected works are analyzed by dividing them into two categories namely, 1. The works which depict the unique loveliness and freshness of Indian scene as said by V.K. Gokak, in his book, 'The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglican Poetry' and 2. The writings which portray the deterioration of ecology due to man's actions. It tries to help man realize himself to be a part of nature rather than a master of it.

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Introduction:-

Poetry, according to Dodiya is a creative and aesthetic activity and has three ingredients namely, experience, beauty and emotion. In short, this could be called the 'BEE' principle of poetry. It is also the communication of experience in the form of art (20). The oldest form of Indian English Literature is Indian English Poetry. It has attained both richness and excellence of both British and Indian poetry. It has started to grow from 1850s. The Indian poets of First Phase from 1850 - 1900 imitated the Romantics and the Victorians. They echoed the Indian ethos in English. The Second Phase of Indian English Poetry is from 1900 -1947. These poets shared the nostalgia of the predecessors and the quest for identity of the successors. The Third Phase of Indian English poetry is from 1947 - till date, this is marked with painful soul searching. The Post-Independence Indian poetry in English began in an atmosphere of changes, modernity and experimentation. They tried to maintain the harmonious relationship with Nature and environment while experimenting with novel techniques and themes. The Indian English poems of the post-independence era have a pastoral impulse or an aesthetic appreciation of Nature. The use of Nature and the environment as the obvious theme in the poems, they speak of the deterioration of a particular region, geography, locale, environment and ecology, it is symbolic of the gradual deterioration of the global ecology and man's role in the process of destruction. It makes the theme of the poems not only eco-centric but much more transitional.

The eco-centric poems by Indian poets can be divided based on two aspects. One is as V.K. Gokak says the poems which delineate the extraordinary uniqueness of the Indian scene and the freshness of vision with which it is seen (31). The other is the poems which depict the deterioration of the ecology due to man's actions.

As Archana Dahiya writes, different writers have responded to environment in various ways. A few celebrate the divine beauty of Nature and the other a few depict the harsher aspects of Nature in their writings, and there are another category of writers who become philosophic in their descriptions of Nature. Based on the distinction made earlier, the selected poems are categorized and analyzed.

The poems which depict, the unique loveliness and the freshness of Indian scene, 'The Lotus' by Toru Dutt.

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Ecological Overtones in 'Lotus' by Toru Dutt:

Toru Dutt is one of the famous Indo-Anglican poets. By birth she is an Indian. Later, she went to France and next to England. Finally, she returned to India and learned Sanskrit. Though she is a converted Christian, she wrote a number of poems on Indian mythical stories. Most of her poems have an Indian theme and an Indian background. Toru Dutt's poem 'Lotus' is a part of her Nature Poetry. It is poem of royal beauty and fixed significance. 'Lotus' is a lyric which tells the legendary tale of how this flower, the Lotus, came into existence.

In the poem 'The Lotus', the two flowers, the lily and the rose are competing with each other to attain the supreme position of the "queenliest flower". Each flower has its own support from poet. The poem begins with Goddess of Love coming to Goddess of Flora asking for a flower, which would be the unchallenged 'Queen of flowers'. She wanted a flower, which was stately as the Lily and delicious as the Rose. The poet writes, "Give me a flower delicious as the rose / and stately as the lily in her pride" (9-10). When asked of the color, there a conflict of which color to choose "Rose red", then prayed, - / "No, lily-white, -or, both provide;" (11-12). For this reply, Goddess of Flora created Lotus combining the redness of the rose with the paleness of the lily. With this she resolved the long standing quarrel between Lily and Rose.

The goddess of Flora gave the Lotus, mingling the qualities of the both – the sweetness and redness of rose and the grandeur and whiteness of lily. Here, the lotus becomes the symbol of the harmonious vision of life and Nature. The poem, "The Lotus" unfolds Toru's keen sensitiveness to Nature and the awareness of her soul to colors (Singh 20). 'The Lotus' proves Indianness. The Lotus is the eternal flower of India. Toru carried Lotus to Europe, beyond the boundary of India. Despite her stay, education and bringing up in the West she always nourished her in born love for the Indian scene. The poem, when it is seen in the Ecological perspective of the world, it signifies the symbolic meaning of the various flowers and it tries to give importance to the whole kingdom of Flora in general.

The poems which depict, the deterioration of earth's environment and ecology

1. 'Morning After a Storm' by H.L.V. Derozio
2. 'A River' by A.K. Ramanujan
3. 'On Killing a Tree' by Gieve Patel
4. 'The Ghaghra in Spate' by Keki N Daruwallah

Ecological Overtones in 'Morning after a Storm' by H.L.V. Derozio:

Henry Derozio, who is called the forgotten bard of India, is the first Indian poet to spark the flame of Indian poetry in English. He, under the Western influences, especially of Romantic poets, pioneers Indian poetry in English with his poems of various themes (Chavda 82). He wrote narrative poems. Blake is the predecessor of Romanticism in English Literature. The Romantic aspects of Nature can be seen in Blake's 'A Poison Tree'. Like Blake, Henry Derozio is the predecessor of Eco-centric poems in India. The poem 'Morning after a Storm' is written in April, 1837. This is written, in two different parts of the Romantic nature.

In the first part, Derozio observes the disaster created by the storm and talks about the Nature's power. The mayhem caused by Nature is precisely detailed,

1. "To mark the havoc that the storm had made
2. I wandered forth, and saw great Nature's power.
3. The hamlet was in desolation laid
4. By the strong spirits of the storm; there lay
5. Around me many a branch of giant trees,
6. Scattered as leaves are by the southern breeze
7. Upon a brook, on an autumnal day;
8. Cloud piled on cloud was there..." (5-12)

Derozio here writes on the footsteps of Byron, who depicts the destructive nature of Nature in systematic way in 'Child Harold's Pilgrimage'. He succeeds in portraying the mayhem created by the storm. The Romantics loved Nature. The poem 'Daffodils' by Wordsworth and 'The Nightingale' by Coleridge shows their love for Nature in all its forms. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Derozio is also a lover of Nature. He appreciates the beauty of Nature in the second part. In this context he writes,

"Oh! Nature, how I love thy face! And now

That there was freshness on thy placid brow
 White I looked on thee with extreme delight,
 How leapt my young heart at the lovely sight!
 Heaven breathed upon me sweetly, and its breath
 Was like the fragrance of a rosy wreath.” (15-20)

As Chavda says, the poem ends with a Wordsworthian attitude (84). Wordsworth in the poem, ‘Imitations of Immortality’ says, ‘Child is the father of a man.’ He learns to enjoy every moment from the child. Derozio who after viewing the wreck-strewn river’s waves comes to the conclusion, and writes,
 “...but Oh! There
 I learned a moral lesson, which I’ll store
 Within my bosom’s deepest, in most core.” (26-28)

The moral which he says, is the ‘The Ripple Effect’. The ripples which he sees in the River, shows how the Nature replies back to the havocs created by man. This poem shows the reality of Nature, with contradicting presentations. When he describes the tranquility of Nature he is depicting Wordsworth and while describing the havoc created by Nature, he is echoing Byron. His concept of Nature is a combination of all of romantic ideologies such as ordinary, spiritual, supernatural, mystical, transcendental and intellectual presentations of Romantic poets. Identifying such influences of English Romanticism on Derozio we find ecological perspectives. Thus he turns to be the pioneer of eco-critical poets like Blake who pioneered the Romantic poets (Chavda 86).

Ecological Overtones in ‘A River’ by Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan:

A.K. Ramanujan is one of the leading Indo-Anglican poets. Some critics even regard him as one of the big three of Indo-Anglican poets, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. Ramanujan's poetry is largely autobiographical and reminiscent the past.

In the poem ‘The River’ the narrator talks of the river Vaikai, flowing through the ancient city of Madurai in the State of Tamil Nadu, in India. The poet, A.K. Ramanujan brings out the truth about the river during summer, and reminiscent about the flood and destruction caused by it. The river is given spiritual significance and is considered holy in the past, and in the present. Madurai, in this poem, has been sketched by the narrator, who visits, to see the culture, but to him it is in a state of dissolution. He observes that the poets, past and present only speak of the river during the rains and floods; whereas, A.K. Ramanujan investigates the relation between humans and the river in the everyday world. It shows how this river, praised to have originated from the waters of the Ganges, has today lost all its beauty and has become symbol of environmental and cultural degradation. The poet’s understanding of the environment is clearly noted in this poem.

In ‘A River’, A.K. Ramanujan criticizes the poets who like to sing about floods but overlook the ‘River’ which dries up every summer. The poet is in awe, to see, the river present two different visions, in two different seasons. It is totally dry in summer, and is flooded in the rainy season. During summer, a very thin stream of water flows. The poet writes it as,

“every summer
 a river dries to a trickle
 in the sand,
 baring the sand ribs,
 straw and the women’s hair
 clogging the watergates
 at the rusty bars
 under the bridges with patches
 of repair all over them
 the wet stones glistening like sleepy
 crocodiles, the dry ones
 shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun
 The poets only sang of the floods.” (4-16)

The stones that are on the bed of the river are exposed. The wet stones look like resting crocodiles and the dry ones resemble shaven buffaloes resting lazily in the sun. The portion of the river under the bridge is also visible. The water gates are clogged with the hair of the women. His concern for the 'unsung river which dries every summer' is very significant. The river attracts poets only during its devastating flood. Ramanujan criticizes the poets who do not see the problems of drought. The poet presents the cruelty of the flooded river in Madurai City, as he was there for a day, when they had the floods. He recollects the day's happenings and writes it as,

“People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda, as usual.” (19-27)

They see how three village houses were damaged and carried off by the floods. They know how the two cows Brinda and Gopi were carried away. They also know how a pregnant woman was drowned in the river during the flood. Both the old and the new poets have mentioned these things in their poems. During the rainy season, people observe it very anxiously and they remember the rising of the river inch by inch from time to time. They remember how the stone steps of the bathing place are submerged one by one but people never care for the river when it is dry. They don't keep it clean though it is the life force of many living beings. The selfish attitude of men is described by the poet. He tries to make man sensitive towards Nature. Man's action is the cause for the river to show its anger, in the form of the floods and destruction. Man as usual fails to understand. The poet also tells about the fauna of the region while explaining about how the stones in the river look during summer.

Ecological Overtones in 'On Killing a Tree' by Gieve Patel:

Gieve Patel is regarded as one of the prominent Indian poets writing in English. He is a medical practitioner by profession and he lives in Mumbai. He is one of those writers who subscribe themselves to the "Green Peace Movement". His poems act as mouthpiece to his anxiety and animosity at man's cruelty to Nature.

Gieve Patel's "On Killing a Tree" is a poem which presents a graphic picture of the total eradication of a tree. In the poem the tree symbolizes Nature. Modern man out of his greed and selfishness roots out Nature and its very spirit. The murderous rage involved in killing a tree is symbolic of the extensive deforestation going on throughout the world thereby destroying world and ecology (Roy 96). This poem of Gieve Patel is recorded as the protest against violence inflicted by man on Nature.

Man's greed is not quenched by the mere physical process of killing a tree. Man realizes that it is not easy to kill a tree because it has grown slowly consuming the earth, absorbing water, air and sun rays for years. The sheer act of hacking and chopping is not sufficient to kill a tree. The poet writes this as,

“It takes much time to kill a tree,
Not a simple jab of the knife
Will do it.” (1-3)

The tree does not seem to feel any kind of pain because the bleeding bark heals all the time. The tree overcomes man's onslaught by branching off small stems close to the ground and resumes life and grows again to its former size. Knowing a tree's power to come to life again, man decides to pull out the root of the tree. Like a butcher, he makes several cuts in the tree and cuts it down. He then cuts it into several pieces. Still his greed is not satiated. Man is firm not to allow Nature a second life. He makes a cavity on the earth and roots out the tree which is anchored safely in the Earth. The Earth has so far protected and fed the tree like a mother. But, the cruel man uproots it from the lap of the mother Earth. The poet puts this act of man in the poem as,

“The bleeding bark will heal
And from close to the ground

Will rise curled green twigs...
The root is to be pulled out —
Out of the anchoring earth...
Or pulled out entirely,” (13-24)

After the tree is down, man further subjects it to various torturous acts to make it fit for commercial purpose. He further torments the tree by ‘scorching’ and ‘choking’ it in the sun and the air. He also subjects the tree to various methods such as ‘browning’ and ‘hardening’. With this, the total killing of the tree is absolutely done. Man is ensured that the tree has no second life. “And then it is done” writes the poet in the poem, victoriously. The poet describes man’s cruelty to Nature with bitter irony and indifference. But his own sympathy is with Nature. The poem is a commentary on one of the major environmental issues. The usage of words such as “bleeding” and “jab” proves that the tree is personified as a human being throughout the poem. The human personification is brought by the poet to bring the emotions in the hearts of the modern men, who meddles with the ecosystem, by thinking himself to be the master of it, rather than realizing himself to be a part.

Ecological Overtones in ‘The Ghaghra in Spate’ by Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla:

K.N. Daruwalla is one of the major Indo-Anglican poets. He has depth of feeling, economy of language and novelty of insight. He has established poetic talent, literary stamina, scholarly strength and social awareness. He has a sharp perception for environment.

The poem, ‘The Ghaghra in Spate’ by K.N. Daruwalla, tries to give an idea about the environmental concerns and environmental realities. The Ghaghra River is the most sacred to the Indians; it is the very lifeline of millions of people in the region. The poet gives a vivid description of the attitude of the river. ‘Ghaghara’ the name of a river also called Karnali. It is a perennial trans-boundary river originating on the Tibetan Plateau near Mansarovar. It goes through the Himalayas in Nepal and joins the Sharda River at Brahmaghat in India. ‘In Spate’, it is a phrase which means, a river overflowing due to a sudden flood. The title gives the core idea of the poem.

The poem begins in a calm evening. One could see inverted trees and shadows reflected on the water. Whole the atmosphere is serene. The river ‘Ghaghra’ changes the flowing direction every year. Daruwalla writes this beautifully in the poem, by personifying the river to a woman. The changing course is depicted with a women “turning over and over in her sleep”. Unexpectedly, at night the flood arrives. It merely takes twenty minutes for the water to raise high and it causes panic among the people living on its banks. The water of the flooded river rushes into the villages nearby, bringing down the mud and straw cottages. The poet puts this in lines as,

“And suddenly at night
the north comes to the village
riding on river-back” (23-25)

K.N. Daruwalla explains the miserable situation of a buffalo which floats to the rooftop where the men take shelter. It is hungry for three days and her udders have turned red and swollen with milk-extortion. Other people who are ten miles away from the river are happy. They do not care for what happens to their fellow beings who live close to the river. Farmers go to paddy fields for catching fishes which have come to fields due to the flood. There are a few women in ‘chauffeur-driven cars’, they collect driftwood, to decorate their house and rooms. The poet puts this act of indifference of fellow men as,

“peasants go fishing in rice fields
and women in chauffeur-driven cars
go looking for driftwood.” (53-55)

The undercurrent of the poem is about the loss of people’s concern about their fellow beings. This attitude of man causes ruthless fury to the river. All the natural disasters occur because of man’s actions, which is contrary to the rules of Nature. Nature tries to bring in man the sensitivity and the emotion for all the living beings in the world with which he co-exists but man to Nature’s disappointment does not care even for his own species. The poet calls the river as a ‘spine’ of the society, but the very spine is taken aback by the man’s selfish deeds.

The ability to practice unconstrained love towards Nature and other beings of the world can surely transform the world into a better place. The sensitive nature towards other species will help us recognize the noblest in ourselves. The poems of the writers which were mentioned above once again reaffirm the basic fact that human beings exist in an ecosystem. They try to tell that the world does not act only for the wishes of men, but to the wellbeing of all the species on the Earth, who equally have the right to lead a life. The concern for the environment and ecology as presented in these poems depict our cultural outlook towards the environment. It additionally tries to shape a positive supposition among the masses towards the protection of Nature, environment and ecology.

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