

ECOSTERIES: SPACES FOR PRACTISING CO-EVOLUTION

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Abstract

Literature sensitizes the world through its intellectual deliberations and innovative stance. Right from the tradition of oral literature and folk tales down to modern experimental techniques, it throws light on varied cultures and perspectives. Indian literature, which is replete with exemplary artists and geniuses, takes another leap to picture the environmental disaster. Not stopping with theoretical outlooks, it offers practical solutions also. Ecocriticism has provided a platform for ecological discussions and debates. The critics and theorists have come out with valuable findings and suggestions that would redeem humanity from the nearing extinction. The deliberate and delicate analysis of the ecological issues commingle past, present, and future thereby reminding humanity to look back and realise the harm it has done to the natural world. The current paper attempts to analyse the effort of the Indian writers to re-establish the lost connection with nature. The outcome of their vision, which is painted vividly with ecological brush, comes in line with the depiction of 'ecosteries' as conceived by Anthony Weston. The novels taken for study are Anita Nair's *The Artist of Disappearance*, Shome Dasgupta's *The Seagull and the Urn*, Benyamin's *Goat Days*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Shadowland*.

Key Words: Ecosteries, Anthony Weston, nature, Anita Nair, Divakaruni, Benyamin, Shome Dasgupta

Literature sensitizes the world through its intellectual deliberations and innovative stance. Right from the tradition of oral literature and folk tales down to modern experimental techniques, it throws light on varied cultures and perspectives. Writers pen down their observations, experiences, and wisdom thus letting the inner light spread out to embrace the entire world. Their concern is not limited only to the human world but is extended to the non-human world also. Though the impact and influence of nature have been depicted faithfully by many writers, contemporary literature focuses much upon this realm as per the demand of the situation. Human beings' exploration into the possible realms of knowledge has paved the way for their intellectual growth and material comfort. The consciousness of self-centredness

started dominating community consciousness ultimately devaluing the system of holistic principles. Humanity has not only cornered its fellow beings but also nature. This ruthless attitude has dragged the world towards the dangerous zone of natural calamity. The clarion call from the writers has awakened the human beings from their deep slumber of intellectual ignorance. Indian literature, which is replete with exemplary artists and geniuses, takes another leap to picture the environmental disaster. Not stopping with theoretical outlooks, it offers practical solutions also. The current paper attempts to analyse the effort of the Indian writers to re-establish the lost connection with nature. The outcome of their vision, which is painted vividly with ecological brush, comes in line with the depiction of ‘ecosteries’ as conceived by Anthony Weston. The novels taken for study are Anita Nair’s *The Artist of Disappearance*, Shome Dasgupta’s *The Seagull and the Urn*, Benyamin’s *Goat Days*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Shadowland*.

Ecocriticism has provided a platform for ecological discussions and debates. The critics and theorists have come out with valuable findings and suggestions that would redeem humanity from the nearing extinction. There exist so many movements and theories in this field that each stands unique in its stance in sowing the seeds of reformation in the minds of humanity. The deliberate and delicate analysis of the ecological issues commingle past, present, and future thereby reminding humanity to look back and realise the harm it has done to the natural world. Some writers propose ideas of profound wisdom while some others aspire to materialize their vision. One such personality is Anthony Weston who proposes a model for contemporary environmental ethics. He says succinctly in his essay “Before Environmental Ethics” that, “We cannot reach theoretical finality; we can only co-evolve an ethic with transformed practices” (321). According to Weston, “‘ecosteries’ that have been proposed on the model of monasteries” are an “attempt to create actual, physical spaces for the emergence of trans-human experience, places within which some return to the experience of and immersion in natural settings”(334).

Ecological sensitivity and affinity play a vital role in binding together the protagonists under study. Each protagonist is peculiar in his/her way in creating an ecostery; while some make the environment conducive for themselves, some others attempt to accommodate others also. Thus, the different character portrayals in Indian Literature highlight the serious attempts taken by the novelists to emphasize the need of the hour – communion with nature. Anita Nair, the famous novelist known for the portrayal of the complex web of relations and emotions, presents a protagonist who seeks his comfort zone in nature. Nair’s *The Artist of Disappearance* is a collection of three novellas and Ravi figures in the title novella. He is distinguished from other protagonists owing to his outstanding ecological sensitivity. The author pictures him as a person who identifies him with his environment. As an adopted son, he is brought up with all sophistication. But he is neither attracted towards the material comforts nor towards the lessons of high order. He suffocates in this sort of confinement, both physical and intellectual. He feels relaxed and elated only when he is let outdoor: “Outdoor was freedom. Outdoor was the life to which he chose to belong ... One had only to be silent, aware, observe and perceive – and this was Ravi’s one talent as far as anyone could see” (101). When he is sent to Bombay, his soul struggles a lot in that city atmosphere and it yearns to be with the natural environment. The sight of seashore makes him ecstatic and he wades into the sea to study it closely. He feels an entire lifetime may be needed to study “the strange,

extraordinary life that teemed in it – minute, multifarious and totally unlike any earthbound equivalent” (115). The mystic connection that he possesses with nature brands him as an eccentric but he does not mind such snide remarks. After this intimidating episode, he goes back to his native place only to lose all human relationships one after the other; his mother, father and his mother’s companion Miss Dora Wilkinson pass away leaving him all alone in the big mansion. But Ms. Wilkinson’s carelessness has burnt the house leading to a dilapidated state. The external appearance of the building provokes so many tales of horror and mystery in the locale, not sparing Ravi. But Ravi is least bothered about all such exaggerations, rather continues to exist unmindful of the local updates. He adheres to his routine in the house, neither worried about its condition nor how to mend it. The mentality of taking things as they appear is itself a hallmark achievement in turning inward. This mentality of Ravi does not project the idea of severing his ties from the rest of the world rather it rejects the idea of living by farce standards. His place of living being thus, his intake also goes in line with it. He does not make any fuss about food and he accepts whatever food is given to him by Bhola. Ravi’s conversation with Bhola’s children and his frequent visits to his house enable him to mark as one who has not forsaken the human world.

Ravi, who is able to lead life as simple as possible, exhibits his outstanding mastermind when he designs a garden at the foothills of the Himalayas all by himself. He creates a small garden with his aesthetic outlook over a hidden glade. He works like an architect whose perfect vision materializes with the help of the natural elements. The author pictures him in sharp contrast with the venal crew who hails from Delhi. The members of the crew try to produce a documentary on the devastation caused in the Himalyan foothills. While media, a powerful tool for even redesigning the thought process of the public, strives to cast its pessimistic eye on nature, Ravi takes an optimistic stance by proclaiming the effect of man joining hands with nature through the eco-garden he has designed. This is akin to ecostery that elates the level of the ecological sensitivity and consciousness of the human beings; rather seeks to experience the unconscious union with nature. When Shalini, one of the venal crew from Delhi spots out the place, she marvels at the intricate and aesthetic display of the garden. This bower like structure “seemed deserted, as composed and still as a work of art. Or nature. Or both, in uncommon territory. The place thrummed with meaning. But what was the meaning? Was it a place of worship?”(139). In contrast to mere material existence, this place seems to reverberate with heavenly vibrations. This ecostery exemplifies the innate urge in any being that strives to be connected with nature in order to be renewed and rejuvenated. A sense of belongingness, throbbing with love and reverence, is visible in the air. An ordinary man is in real an artist of excellence, his platform being Motherland. As a son, he feels comfortable at Her lap but he recedes from other folks who make unnecessary attempts to highlight ordinary things in an extraordinary way. This is the reason for his secreting from the crew. His act typifies nature’s annoyance towards the modern world’s temperament of projecting the ordinary as extraordinary. Ravi’s disappearance is symbolic of an artist’s sincere emotions that cannot be captured and retold. Ravi echoes Desai’s musings thus: “I cannot explain it, but I know the creative art is a secret one. To make it public, to scrutinise it in the cold light of reason is to commit an act of violence, possibly murder” (James Warner, 2012). Ravi has set up an ecostery that voices the intention of Anthony Weston: “...the aim is modest: simply to make it possible to hear the birds, the winds, and the silence once again. If bright outside lights

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

were also banned, one could see the stars at night and feel the slow pulsations of the light over the seasons” (334).

The Seagull and the Urn, which is written by Shome Dasgupta, narrates the story of March, an extraordinary girl who has the ability to sing songs that would tend everyone to sleep; but the irony is that she is unable to sleep. March starts singing right from the few days of her birth and this odd talent seems strange in the land in which she was born – Kolkaper. The City Council of Kolkaper makes a decision to excommunicate her from the society and to abandon her in the Cave forest, a place for all such ex-communicated people with inconceivable extraordinary talents. But owing to the help from persons like Nirana, she safely reaches the arms of the Armers in Koofay. Brought up by the Armers as their child, she forgets her place of birth and her real parents. Her extraordinary talents are known to Armers also; contradictory to the reaction of the City Council of Kolkaper the Armers embrace and encourage her. After the death of the Armers, she realises that her roots are elsewhere through the letters written by her father to the Armers. Wishing to see her parents, she undertakes a journey to her home town only to find her parents at a desolated state.

The death of March’s parents turns out to be an important event as the sun never sets after their funeral. The people feel it as a curse upon them for separating the parents and their child. The people seek the mercy of March to redeem them from their disaster. When March decides to sing a song to put the sun to sleep, she feels elated:

She felt something inside, a spectacular sensation she hadn’t felt before. .. she was in a daze – she was awake and dreaming. When the spectacular feeling and the glorious sensation inside of her was in perfect harmony with the world, she opened her mouth. This was her enlightenment. (136)

The sun sets at last; so does the ignorance of the people too. They have learnt an important lesson in life, that is to respect the diversity and individuality of each being. Apart from the people’s enlightenment, the author underscores the effect of ecostery upon March. The experience of ecostery is provided by the Cave Forest. If Himalayan Foothills is an ecostery for Ravi, so is the Cave Forest for March. When March visits the place towards the end of the novel, she is taken aback by the scenic beauty thus letting her dissolve into the aesthetic experience of the providence: “March felt comfortable in the Cave Forest. She couldn’t understand why the people of Kolkaper thought this was a place to be shunned. She thought that it was quite the opposite” (142). She decides to spend rest of her life in the Cave Forest which she finds to be peaceful and interesting rather than the material world she has inhabited so far. While Ravi is for individual inhabitation, March reflects Weston’s idea of “serious ‘re-inhabitation’” which means, “...perhaps with more emphasis on place and community than upon the individual re-inhabiters” (334). Standing in line with this viewpoint, March does not opt for leading an individual life in the Cave Forest but she likes to live in a community with all the extraordinarily talented ex-communicated members.

Benyamin’s *Goat Days* details the trials and sufferings of a Gulf worker Najeeb. He leaves his homeland India intending to work for a construction company but unfortunately becomes a prey to a tyrant arbab. His three and half years of service earns him nothing other than the companionship of goats and camels. Though he is able to escape from the rigid clutch undertaking a desert odyssey, his love for the animals that he looked after lingers in his memory and heart. If Ravi and March are able to experience a revelatory state in their

ecosteries, which are typical landscapes with natural environment, Najeeb goes a step further in creating such ecostery replete with goats. The goats have become an inseparable part of his being. Najeeb feels: “It felt as though I was going through my initiation ceremony as a shepherd. . . I realized that my life had become inescapably bound to those goats” (72-73).

In the beginning, it is a Herculean task for Najeeb to come into terms with the place and the animals. But as days roll by, he develops a sense of attachment and affection towards those harmless creatures. He understands that even the activities like milking come naturally to an animal lover and the animals instinctively discern them from their mimics. In due course, his close association with the goats and the camels teach him their nature and habits; the goats are scattered within seconds if not lined up, they (especially he-goats) are annoyed when beaten, and they keep jumping when their routine is changed. He even names them and calling them by their names strengthens the intimacy. He names the goats after the people he is acquainted with in his homeland like Aravu Ravuthar, Pochakkari Ramani, Marymaimuna, Indi Pokkar, Parippu Vijayan, Chakki, Ammini, Kausu, Raufat, Padmini, Lalitha and Raghini. The emotional bond starts with naming the new-born goat as Nabeel, the name he had thought for his son. Neil Evernden observes in *The Ecocriticism Reader* thus:

The act of naming itself be a part of the process of establishing a sense of place. This is fairly easy to understand in a personal sense, that is, giving personal names to special components of a place, but it also may apply in the case of generic names. (101)

Thus Najeeb is able to form an ecostery that gives him solace and happiness amidst the antagonistic atmosphere. The external bond that he has created is internalized. The affinity that he develops towards Nabeel is expressed thus: “He was my own son” (111). Months before, he was musing that he needed to hold on to something to survive. But the notion of survival is transformed to a revelatory state.

While the animal world gives him mental stability and happiness to sustain through the hardships the natural world teaches Najeeb valuable lessons of life. He marvels at the winter landscape that spreads like a green carpet before him. He wonders at the plants lying under the earth’s surface quietly bearing the extreme heat of the desert but at the same time preserving their lives. They teach him the ideal lessons of perseverance and hope. Peter Barry makes a note at the distinct quality of wilderness thus: “... The wilderness is entered as if instinctively by those who would ‘find’ themselves ... These spaces, then, seem to perform a special function for us, a function vital to our well-being” (247). Thus, his connection with flora and fauna instills in him a sense of belongingness and comfort. The boundaries of language, habitat, and habit melt down creating a new space defined by their inter-relatedness. This stance of Najeeb represents Mary Midgley’s idea of “mixed communities” quoted by Weston (323); he means promoting relationships with other species in the world – creating a space where harmonious relations prevail between different species. Weston further says that, “One’s identification and loyalties lay not with the extended human species, but with a local and concretely realized network of relationships involving many different species” (323), and that, “It is not hard to work out policies to protect and extend such practices” (335). By ‘such practices,’ he means the symbiotic relationship that the human world shares with other species.

Divakaruni’s *Shadowland* pictures a typical ecostery at the outset – the Silver Valley. The human and the non-human world are inter-related and live a harmonious life. The human

world comprises the healers who have mastered the arts of life like the art of Transformation and the art of Persuasion for common good. The conch, which is believed to have magical powers, adorns the highest pedestal in their Brotherhood. The protagonist Anand communicates with the conch when he wishes, and it signifies the internalized bond that exists among all components of the world. When Anand prepares to leave for a three-day trip the conch asks Anand to touch it before he leaves; this is indeed symbolic of nature's appeal to feel it. The author wishes humanity to sense nature's heart-beat as Anand does: "He picked up the conch carefully and brought it to his chest, feeling it pulse against his heart" (9). Anand relies upon the conch to find solution to any crisis. The conch resolves his problems both at physical and mental planes. Thus, Divakaruni underlines the therapeutic effect of nature aiding all beings. So, nature prospers when the culture of respecting each being flourishes. The cultural integrity of the community in the Silver Valley owes a lot to the ecological sensibility it possesses thus creating an ecostery. The serenity of the atmosphere is echoed thus: "...flowerlined pathway that led past the dormitories and mango orchids" (12). Also Divakaruni pinpoints at the important and inevitable role of any being in an environment. The loss of conch collapses the tranquility of the atmosphere. Anand, with his companion Nisha, undertakes a quest journey to the techno-city Kol in search of the conch. After innumerable experiences they are able to restore the conch in its proper place thereby reinstating the original atmosphere of the Silver Valley. Divakaruni aspires to create an ecostery reverberating with spiritual temperament. This deed of paying respect to each thing/creature of this world typifies Weston's notion of the 'real world.' Weston states thus:

Neither the wilderness nor the city (as we know it) are "the real world," if we must talk in such terms. We might take as the most "real" places the places where humans and other creatures, honored in their wildness and potential reciprocity, can come together, perhaps warily, but at least openly. (335)

Thus, while Ravi creates a space for individual inhabitation, March aspires to create it community-based. Najeeb moves a step further to encompass other species into its fold, and the Silver Valley gives equal space and dignity to all creatures. All these spaces depict models of ecosteries, and upon the creation of which humanity can flourish and prosper along with the other components of the world. J. Baird Callicott comments on Weston's ecosteries thus: "...quiet places where one can immerse oneself" (180). But just contradictory to the serenity of Ravi's garden and the Silver valley, Najeeb's *masara* (the house for the goats) and the Cave Forest might be animated more with activities and other noises owing to the inhabitation of 'mixed communities.' This parallel study leads to a disclosure that apart from external silence or noise, there exists an internal tranquility promoted by the communion of the self and the environment. Weston's model, apart from being the spaces for co-evolving enhanced environmental ethics, serves as an eye-opener to humanity to step into the threshold of the inner world that is unlocked by the heavenly reverberations sent from the exterior world – that is from an ecostery!

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