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Literature and Environment: Inextricable Discourse

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The very concept Environment challenges any semantic fixity in Post-Derridian debates in Academics. By simple means it is no more just “surrounding: external conditions influencing development or growth of people, animals or planets, living or working conditions.” (Savindra, 15) This premise at once demands three clarifications – what is surrounded? By what surrounded? And where surrounded? The answer to the first question is decidedly all living objects in general but man in particular. Physical attributes that surround man or living objects is the answer to second question and the answer to third question is the space or habitat. So in a way all biotic objects which surround lives of all living beings at a given point in space and time in environment. But in a later development besides the physical aspect of planet Earth viz. land, water, air and biotic communities, man extended his environment through his social, economic and political functions. A major environmentalist, A Goudie has taken environment as the representative of all physical components of the Earth wherein man is an important factor affecting the environment. Gradually environment evolved into an inseparable whole and is contributed by the interacting systems of physical, biological and cultural elements which are interlinked individually as well as collectively in

myriad ways. Environment is classified into two broad divisions, abiotic (physical environment) and biotic (living) environment.

The three major components of physical elements: solid, liquid and gas make respectively lithosphere, hydrosphere and the atmosphere. The biotic component of the environment consists of flora (plants) and fauna (animals) including man as an important factor. Here environment comes akin to nature which encompasses both the human as well as non-human nature. Man's social, cultural and economical ventures do affect and are affected by its respective environmental milieus and thus literature too becomes an important segment of environment. Literature at time shapes and is shaped by its surrounding environment. It shapes when it appeals mankind to return to nature and when it alarms mankind against the merciless exploitation of natural resources notwithstanding the rebounding repercussions on his own existence. Realising this rich potentiality of literature, the critics have initiated discussions on Environmentalism and Eco criticism just three decades ago. But creative writers have always been conscious for the inseparable and inextricable rapport between nature and man on one hand and on the another the entire universe as one big organic whole. Right from the Classical Epics to all future writings, no writer can afford to eschew environmental issues until he is determined to do so. There is variation indeed in the depiction of the quantity and mood of environment. At times nature is depicted as a perennial healer with its all-time benign mood ready to sooth away all anxieties, agonies and dejection of humanity, while on some occasion it is portrayed as a cruel leveller that brings havoc and equal all disharmony. At some other instances it is put forth as neutral agent that remains a mute background indifferent to the changing vicissitudes of human nature. Like its smaller unit Man, Nature too has its own shades of gloom, alacrity, violence and serenity in literature of all time and that of all countries.

It would be a logical sequence if light is thrown on the development of recent critical trends and doctrines regarding Environmentalism and Eco criticism first and then discussion of environmental consciousness of creative writers would be put forth. In the domain of Environmentalism and Eco criticism texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful affects. "Direct representations of environmental damage or political struggle are of obvious interest of Eco critics, but so is the whole array of cultural and daily life, for what it reveals about implicit attitudes that have environmental consequences" (Waugh, 530). The term Eco criticism, later to be broadened as Environmentalism, was introduced by US critic William Rueckert in 1978 but as it always happens a few works may be traced raising similar apprehensions without using the rubric of Eco criticism. As one significant exponent is Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973). The United States exhibited its serious mulling's on environmental damage by establishing The Association For The Study Of Literature And Environment (ASLE) in 1992, now it is the central location for Eco-critics world-wide. The British counterpart of the US critic is Jonathan Bate who in his book *Romantic Ecology* communicated the English anxiety on dwindling concerns for environment.

In India the rise of Regional and Tribal literature and its translation in English has showcased an avidity and has revived flavor for environment where the forests, mountains and jungles are portrayed as a safe haven for their life. Searching for alternatives to the most devastating forms of industrial development, many Eco critics have looked to indigenous non-industrial cultures, exploring the possibility of alliance between these cultures and the wider environmental movements. The Environmental Justice Movement is a collective term for the efforts of poor communities to defend themselves against the dumping of toxic waste, the harmful contamination of their air, food and water, the loss of their lands and livelihoods and the indifference of Governments and corporations. Ecocritics

responsive to environmental justice will bring questions of class, race, gender and colonialism into the eco critical evaluation of texts and ideas, challenging versions of environmentalism that seems to be exclusively preoccupied with preservation of wild nature and ignore the aspirations of the poor. This perspective enlarges the scope of environmentalism and the rise of Dalit and Tribal literature may be seen as a result of such awareness campaign. The sole motto of Dalit and Tribal literature in India is to revolt against the insular mainstream conventional view of dividing the society on name of class and caste. That keeps a major and strong part of our environment at periphery and devastates its potential energy that could have meant a lot in the development of the entire Indian nation and civilisation.

Now these two dimensions, one the biotic and abiotic surroundings and second the human world itself, have been weighed and communicated through literature in all ages and would continue in future too. The mode, indeed, is polymorphic. The present time writer's concerns are tied with worry while the earlier writers concerns were due to natural love for the environment. The Social theorist Barbara Adam is worth quotable here:

Environmental problems are frequently invisible, differed, gradual, too small, too large and subject to racial uncertainty. As such they are representable by our customary forms of narrative, verbal and visual. Often we are not confronted with the environmental harm we do, because it occurs later and elsewhere....culture lacking the complex multiple perspectives of time and space these hazards call for, can't find symbols, visual images or, stories of individual lives to give them adequate representation. Inventing these new forms, or helping writers and artists invent them, is the modern and present project of Eco criticism (150).

Here onwards the discussion would be focused on the depiction of environment in various shades in India as well as non-Indian literatures. Indian literature right from the beginning

with Vedas and Purina's and the duo of unparalleled epics The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* to down the ages through Kalidas, Banbhatt, Surdas, Kabirdas, Tulsidas, Jaishankar Prasad, Sumitranandan Pant, Kashinath Singh and Kedarnath Singh and that of Ravindranath Tagore, has always held environment as superior and perfumed with divinity. It is projected as an agent that bless human life with life force. The Vedas have fully developed sections on Fire (*Agnisukta*), Water (*Indrasukta*), and Air (*Varunsukta*). The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* show that its writers have conceived the herbal and the human world as one whole in which the environment reciprocates the human affair and changes its colors and hue in accordance with the weal and woe of human world. A frequently repeated cliché of these two epics is "all the three worlds", *teeno lokon me*, is celebrating your victory with joy or mourning with your misery. The three world is a tripartite division of the cosmos: the celestial, the sublunary and the subterranean world. The Ganges in the *Mahabharata* is depicted as a perpetual guide and shelter to one of the most powerful Military Commander Bhishma.

Till agrarian culture was a major support of society the environment enjoyed a pious and venerable state in literature. This veneration was not lopsided but nature also was shown as an animated object with Personification and transferred epithets. One beautiful example is in the fourth act of Kalidas' *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. On the very intimation of Shakuntala's departure from the Ashram of Kanva, the entire forestry, trees, flowers, ivy leaves and even animals are drowned in deep dejection. The small roes vomit out what they have eaten, the peacocks have given up their jubilant dancing mood and ivy leaves are crestfallen. Kalidas has drawn a vivid imagery of the gloomy ambience:

*Udgalitdarbhkavla mrigya, parityakta nartana mayurah,
Apsritpanduputra munjantishruniva latah!*

Such an empathetic rendition of the entire surrounding despondent ambience is rarely matched anywhere else in literature. It is how the visionary litterateurs of our culture have envisaged environment and have delineated it as a happy sibling. The emotional entanglement between them is more remarkable where separation of one unit is felt by another.

The advent of industrial culture gradually superseded the erstwhile agrarian one and a ruthless exploitation of natural resources was started. The human world dragged itself far away from Nature and the pastoral world. Their life was now surrounded not with the rolling sound of “Sylvian Wye”, but with the “din and fretful fever of the world.” The Romantic poet William Wordsworth makes a strong criticism of developing Materialism at the cost of Nature in his oft quoted sonnet *The World is too Much With Us*:

The world is too much with us late or soon,
In getting and spending we lay waste our powers,
And little we see in Nature that is ours,
We have given our heart away a sordid boon.

Imbued from tip to toe with Rousseau's philosophy Wordsworth snipes at the growing lust for materialistic craze among modern men urges them to return to nature. Because he believes that Nature always return to man what it receives from him. Whatever it may be love, respect, faith etc. the emotion would be exchanged with similar attributes but in a greater degree. His appeal turns to be stronger in *Tintern Abbey*:

Nature never did betray the heart that loved her most
Tis her privilege to lead us from joy to joy.

The joy nature provides is not any ordinary but an ethereal ecstasy. Tennyson's long poem *Maud* has a beautiful stanza where the rapturous mood of Nature swings with the happiness and excitement of lover on the scene of his beloved. A matchless use of pathetic fallacy to enliven the whole surrounding nature. The flowers reflect the changing moods of lovers from

despondency to waiting to impatience, nervousness and excitement, everything which he has undergone throughout the night:

There has fallen a splendid tear
 From the passion flower at the gate
 She is coming my dove my dear,
 She is coming my life my fate
 The red rose cries, she is near, she is near
 And the white rose weeps she is late
 The larkspur listens I hear I hear
 And the lily whispers, I wait I wait.

Environmentalists are conventionally seen as defenders of nature, but it can be argued that all human behaviour, including the environmentally destructive, derives from natural impulse. Kate Soper writes in his book, *What Is Nature?*, of our need to retain two conflicting perspectives. We need to value natural eco systems and acknowledge our dependence on them, without forgetting that nature is a series of changing cultural constructions that can be used to praise and blame (119). Nature is therefore not simply the unencroached piece of earth but also natural human impulses, contrary to considered actions. The natural is the opposite of the artificial. Bill Mckibben argues in *The End Of Nature* (1990), that Global warming has brought out the possibility of this pure state of nature to an end:

By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth manmade and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning: without it there is nothing but us. (54)

Stealing the independence of nature while attempting a hegemony over it, the human world has corrupted the entire environment. And tragically he would be the worst sufferer of the unhealthy consequences in future. T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* begins with a juxtaposition that modern men have perpetrated to the natural world. The sweetest month April is converted into the "the cruelest month breeding lilacs out of dead land."

Eco critics Diane McColley and Ken Hilten in their readings of Milton's *Paradise Lost* argue that Paradise is not any celestial setting but a congruous and harmonious environment of man on earth. It is lost because man has not just plucked the forbidden fruit but the entire source of that fruit. Eden is a recurrent motif in Western culture. Repeatedly Paradise is lost and fleetingly regained. In the 20th century, but the earth is lost, normal air, water and land are in want, man is doomed to hanker even for the commonest thing. Eliot's voice in *Gerontion* is a warning:

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought
My house is a decayed house.

The house is not just one house in some square feet but the entire mother Earth occupied by men. Such apprehensions of creative writers have interdisciplinary values. Their anxiety is not just in reference to biotic and abiotic surroundings but also to the social and cultural lacunas though invisible but pertinently present. Stratification of human beings on the basis of class and caste is one big hurdle in realising and living complete harmonious environment. Until and unless the entire human world is treated as one big fraternity, inharmonious human environment would remain a great threat to the civilisation. It is in this context the emergence of Dalit literature in India should be seen. Dalit literature tends to struggle for making human society one whole not divided or breached:

Dalit literature would tell us about the cultural conflict of the socially, economically and culturally deprived and disadvantaged group of people. Unlike its antecedents Dalit literature wouldn't play the role of a separatist but an integrationist. (Rai, 40)

A Study of Dalit literature is a promising one as it has bright prospects for making our society largely integrated. Dalit

literature promotes cooperation and love which are cardinal lineaments of a good society. In this way it has begun to bring about a change; to enable nondalits to deconstruct a traditional mindset which makes them perceive Dalits as lower than themselves; and instead to see Dalits as equals rather than pitiful victims. It also fills Dalits themselves with confidence and pride. Surely it is an apt compensation for the lack of philosophy in Dalit literature. Their philosophy is to bring them in equation with others and this vision can't be rendered true until they have confidence and pride in them. Once they become confident and proud, they begin to shatter the social system which imparts Dalitism. This is the ultimate aim of Dalit literature. It fights against the system and not against men.

With such convictions it may be concluded that literature has a cosmic structure which encompasses within it every lineament of this universe. Man, besides Nature, is a significant asset of the environmental design of the planet earth and he always has been the first and ultimate object of all literary ventures. As a unit he is not independent and segregated from his environment but inseparably intertwined within. Therefore wherever man is, his environment would be and without any alteration same is true for literature and environment too.

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