

Contours of Ecological Consciousness in Anuradha Sharma Pujari's *Iyat Ekhan Aaronya Asil*: A Study

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Abstract

Ecocriticism tends to explore the bonds between humans and the environment. As an interdisciplinary study of literature it deals critically with the relationship between the nature/environment and human beings. It reflects on the major environmental issues like deforestation, the crisis of climate change, man/animal conflicts, waste management etc. These issues have posed serious threats to the ecological world in the postcolonial developing countries. The Northeastern part of India, an ecologically sensitive zone, is known for its rich repository of natural habitation, wildlife etc. Since ages the indigenous knowledge and practices of its dwellers reflect on the interconnections of humans with nature. But the growing industrialization and urbanization is gradually degrading the harmonious relations of its inhabitants with that of natural world. In the present paper we make an attempt at discussing the aspects of human-nature relationship in one of the prominent works of the celebrated Assamese writer Anuradha Sarma Pujari's novel *Iyat Ekhan Aaronya Asil*. The writer here depicts the discourse of living co-existentially both with the human world and natural environment. It is thematically centred on the issue of encroachment in the Amchang Reserve Forest area of Guwahati, the Gateway to the Northeast. The effects of man and nature conflict and its aftermath have been well delineated in the novel. The narrator, here, is much concerned on the degrading wildlife habitats of in and around the hills of the city of Guwahati.

Key Word: Nature, Environment, Ecology, Deforestation, Ecological Balance,

Introduction:

Ecocriticism as a literary discipline in the field of criticism emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. It critically evaluates the relation of literary discourse /text to ideas of nature, wilderness, natural setting etc. It is about the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It focuses on the earth-centred approach to the literary studies. Nature is

the best teacher of the humanity and environment remains an integral part of all living beings in this world. The crux of ecocritical study is to restore the environment and protect it from the dire consequences of human actions. It examines how the literary discourses represent the physical or the external world and how moral questions about human interaction with nature are evaluated. To quote Joseph Meeker (1974) in his book *The Comedy of Survival*:

Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures...If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment-to determine what role it, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us (p.g. 3-4).

The term 'ecocriticism' was first coined by William Rueckert in his famous essay *Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978). According to him ecocriticism applies the principles of ecology to the study of literature. Ruckert was influenced by Rachel Carson, the first environmentalist who dealt with environmental aspects in his influential work *The Silent Spring*. Gradually in the literary arena from 1960s to 70s and there was an upsurge of write-ups on ecological literary criticism. It was widely accepted in the last decade of the 20th century with the publication of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, 1992) and the publication of a research journal named ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment in 1993). Ontologically the term is derived from two Greek words- *eco means oikos means nature* and *krites* mean 'house judge'. It is related to the very concept of ecology in scientific study that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats. Moreover the term Ecology was coined by Ernst Haeckel, a German Zoologist in 1869.

According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism is directed towards an earth centered approach where ecological concerns are of primary issue. To quote Glotfelty and Fromm,

“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, environmental critics explore how nature and the natural world are imagined through literary texts” (1996: xix).

In the twentieth century the prominent texts which contributed to the significant developments of ecocritical study were Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, drawing attention to the ominous degradation of the environment, and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* devoted to the devastation inflicted by newly developed chemical pesticides on wildlife, both on land and in water. Donald Worster’s *Nature’s Ecology* (1977) became a textbook for the study of ecological thought down the ages. The historian Arnold Toynbee recorded the effects of human civilisation on land and nature in his monumental work *Mankind and Mother Earth* (1976). Environmental issues and landscape use were also the concern of the Annales School of historians that has also been a novel one. Ecocriticism as a literary discipline emerged in the U.S.A. in the late 1980s and in the U.K. in early 1990s.

Thus ecocriticism always seeks to focus on the role played by nature in a literary text. Moreover, it finds out the way in which man and nature interact with each other. Ian Buchanan, interprets the relation between nature and environment ‘as a practice of reading literature from an earth centred rather than human centred perspectives’ (143). M. H Abrams and Harpham read it as the relation between man and nature and the devastation brought on that environment by the human activities (87). An overall definition of ecocriticism is given by P.K. Nayar as observed in the following lines:

Ecocriticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural text, paying particular attention to attitudes towards nature and the rhetoric applied when speaking about it. It aligns itself with the ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environments, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches (2010: 242).

The need of ecocritical reading is strongly felt in today's world of utter crisis posed by the environmental hazards caused by the issues of global warming, nuclear war, industrialization, and urbanization. The aim of this study is to restore the environment and protect it from the imminent dangers of destruction of the whole planet. Nature indeed is our Mother Archetype as mentioned by Carl Jung in his book *The Mother Archetype and Collective Unconscious*. Nature is a motherly figure as evident in the various forms of mountains, trees which are much integral to its bosom.

Since the time immemorial Indian philosophy is imbued with ecological thought. In Vedas equal importance was given to all the living organisms in the world. This was much reflected in literary works also. Assamese literature is of no such exception. It is reflected in the poetical works of Assamese writers such as, Nagen Saikia, Nabakanta Baruah, Hiren Bhattacharya, Harekrishna Deka, Nilim Kumar etc. To quote (Das 148-149): They have often intended to reflect burning ecological problems like species loss, pollution, global warming, toxicity, deforestation etc. through their writings. In the genre of short story also a good number of writers reflect on the themes of nature and environment. Mahim Bora's *Ekhan Nadir Mritya* (Death of a River) is a notable work which narrates the tales of death of the river Kalang which flows through Nagaon town. Then there are the works of Saurabh Kumar Chaliha, Apurba Kumar Chaliha and one of the prominent environmental activists of the region Soumyadeep Dutta.

Of the celebrated writers hailing from the state of Assam this paper deals with the selected narrative of noted Assamese author, translator, journalist Anuradha Sharma Pujari. She is the recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award for her novel *Iyat Ekhan Aaronya Asil* for the year 2021. She has authored many novels such as- *Mereng*, a biographical novel about the Indian Education Activist Indira Miri, *Hriday ek Bigyapan*, *Neel Prajapati*, *Baxantar Gaan*, *Sahebpurar Baraxun*, *Naharar Niribili Saa*, *Boragi Nadir Ghat* etc. She was born in 1964 in Assam's Jorhat District. She did her Masters in Sociology from Dibrugarh University.

Anuradha Sarma Pujari's Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *Iyat Ekhan Aaronya Asil* is one of the celebrated works reflecting on environmental consciousness in Assamese literature. It

depicts the issues of encroachment in the hilly areas around the Aamchang forest of Guwahati. The crisis of environmental degradation and its aftermath in the human as well as natural habitats have been well described in this novel. The novelist here urges for a co-existence of man-nature so as to make a balanced environment. Both the narrative and the narrator play an important role in creating ecoconsciousness among its readers e.g., the characters Ranjan, Rajbonshi etc. The novel is narrated through the lens of a journalist who writes extensively on the issues of deforestation, the politics of administration and the eviction drive among the dwellers of Amchang Reserve forest area of Guwahati. In one of Rajbonshi's speech where he asks the narrator what does he wants to know about the Amchang forest a strong affirmation of existence of the forest is evident as such he replies that Amching forest is the breath of the city. As such to quote Pujari (2018): Amar mohanagarikhanar uxah ei aaronyakhan (p.95.) A large section of the people has been living in the hilly areas around Guwahati since many years. When the capital of Assam was shifted from Shillong to Guwahati there was a rapid influx of people from different parts of Northeast so as settle in and around Guwahati. As the human habitation has been expanding at an alarming rate it affected the wild life habitation too. But the author very strongly affirms in the narrative that there are a large section of people who had not destroyed nature rather they glorified it. The anxiety of being evicted and how it has created turmoil in their lives is strongly expressed through the character of Madhuri in the novel who works as a maid in the author's household.

The novel can be studied in critiquing the anthropocentric as such the evidence of the impact of human centric activities which lead to deforestation, man-animal conflicts. Infact man's ever increasing habitation has deeply eroded the natural world. With the expansion of human habitats the biological world is decreasing at an alarming rate. The coexistence of natural species is evident in the novel as such we see the pair of owl and the pigeon sharing the same nest. The conflict of mankind/forest is ever growing with the demand of the human beings. To quote Pujari (2018):

“Aronyabur gaon hoise, gaon nagar hoise, nagar raona hoise mahanagarloi-kintu aronya stabdha hoise. Aronyar gatipath nai. Ase mathu nirabota. Manuh bonam aronya. Ei manastattik juddhokhan agbarhise torit gatire. Aronyar jibokular biruddhe, gasbur, paharburor biruddhe

manuhar agraxi juddha arambha hoi goise. Manuhar bahire xakalo pranie durbal hoi parise. Gasbore asray dibo nuwara hoise aronya adhikariburok. Manuh raktabij hoise. Janaxongkhya bisforito dexor , ei rajya-khanar praborjonar xute mati, pani, bayu adhikar kari loise, p. 24 (The forest has become village, the village has become town, the town has been transformed to city. But the forest has stopped its growth. There is no movement of the forest. Only there is silence. Man versus forest-this conflict has been increasing at an alarming rate. Except men all living things have become weak. The trees are unable to give shelter to the dweller of the forest. Man has become a destroyer. The land, water, air have been occupied by the influx of the people of this state which belongs to a country of wide population explosion).

But the people who are living in the forest areas are not to be blamed solely. Infact the novelist is sympathetic to the people who are living in close harmony with the nature. To quote Bormudoi (2022): “The novelist has not sided with the animals and the forest while keeping the interest of the humans aside. Her notion of Nature includes the existence of humans, but she does not wasn’t the activities of mankind to threaten the ecological balance”.

One of the forest workers Ranjan Das, infact, says: “Aronyar xoite thoka manuh aru Aronya Dhanxare Byowoxai Kora manuh, duyubidh xukia manuh” p. 53 (The people living with nature and the people trading with nature are two different classes). Moreover, the forest has been destroyed by a class of middle men brokers with the help of some dishonest persons in the administration and some elected representatives of the people.

The narrator expresses her concern for the birds, different living species, trees etc. To quote from the translated version of the novel titled as *The Forest Wails* (2021):

It is not a matter of competition whether people are important or the forest. It is about existence, about survival now (p. 181).

At the end of the novel the little girl of Madhuri’s younger sister cries over a dead butterfly and she asks her mother to make it alive again. This instance carries a sense of development of eco-consciousness among the common people. To quote from the novel in this context:

“Jiai de, jiai de mok pokhilatu...makjani bibroto hoi porise. Tai jimanei siori jiai de muk pokhilatu buli kandise, ximanei mor axa xonsar hoise. Ei bhabona jiai thakok. Jiai thakok prithivir bhobisat konmanijanir babe”, p. 176 (Make it alive, make the butterfly alive for me....the mother gets helpless. The more she is crying to make the butterfly alive, the more I become hopeful. Let this thinking be alive. Let the future of the world bloom for this little girl).

Conclusion:

Thus in this work we have observed that the author intricately weaves nature imagery so as to create ecoconsciousness among the readers. The need for protection and preservation of forest and its rich biodiversity should be the concern of human beings. It resonates with the idea of co-existential living of both human and nature in a city area which is constantly under the threats of socio-political vulnerabilities as well as environmental hazards.

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