

Myth and Memory of Rivulets: An Eco-critical Reading of Buddhadeb Guha's *Kojagar (The Bounty of Goddess)*

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Abstract

The advent of capitalist colonialist modernity has brought about constant and continuous changes in the indigenous culture of the riverine country like India. As an outcome of the western notions of development, rivers which constitute the lifeline of this country had been exposed to numerous perils and are thus strategically destroyed. Therefore underlying monolithic narration of nation building is a tragic story of disruption in ecological balance. To be specific the river, the progenitor of human race, has been turned into mere memory with its infirm existence as rivulets. This paper offers a post colonial ecocritical reading of Buddhadeb Guha's novel *Kojagar (The Bounty Of Goddess)* to explore how it resurrects the mythic glory of rivers, the ancestor of Indian civilization, and their prevalent existence in the memory of the tribes. Tribal characters in the novel, reminisce a stream full of water that was once the source of living for both the foresters and the animals has now turned into a drainage for the Company's project of civilization. These lost tides allude to the extremes of neocolonial politics and practices that reshape the map of the nation. Consequently, both the tribal folk and the river are in constant threat of erasure from the ideal map of the modernised nation. Unlike other river narratives Guha's novel deals with lost legacies of these waterbodies as well as their significant presence in the memory of forest dwellers. This paper therefore, tries to explore the symbiotic transaction between these human and nonhuman entities in Guha's fiction and how it offers a critique of linear narrative of neocolonial development and expansion.

Keywords : Myth, Memory, Historiography, Rivulets, Postcolonial etc.

In this maddening era of internet and intertwined culture human finds a way to go far from this for the sake of fresh air and freshening energies. Everything has been explored and examined. There comes theory after theory and after post theory to evaluate what is etherised upon the table. There is no theory at all. The glocalisation has turned up with a magic of alluring thesis antithesis to a melting pot in hope of framing a global perspective. Not only economy or politics but the geography is being reshaped in order to make the world a global village. Therefore Post colonialism is a only term that has still been left to recover and rediscover the angles touched again and again. To justify ecological perspective more in this vital time of ecological disruption a shift from anthropocentric to eco-centric view becomes necessary “postcolonial criticism should shift it’s main interest from an anthropocentric view ... where social justice is a main important battle, to a more life-centred one” (de Tapia and Gonzalez 112). Eradication of past as well as reshaping the map of colony is a common nomenclature in postcolonial literature, but the net of western cobweb is interspersed in full many a way which is still to be probed.

In the processing of global village environmental balance becomes the prey to “technocratic apparatus” of neocolonialism (Huggan and Tiffin 27) resulting in climate change. The diversified human-nature relationship is cankered by the historical injustices that imbricated colonial power over natural resources as well as humans. Therefore the deep-rooted and holistic connections of human with environment should be the main focus of post colonial approaches to bridge between the rot present with a better-shared future.

In a real world of increasing ecological crisis and political decision making, to exclude nature except for it's cultural determination or linguistic construction is also to accept the

continuing degradation of a natural world that is most in need of active human recognition and engagement. (Love 8)

In the riverine country like India there a constant and continuous change has been entertained by the advent of capitalist colonialist modernity. Natural resources are being curved to serve the purpose of need. As a result, river which constitutes the lifeline of this country had been exposed to numerous perils and strategically destroyed by the project of development. The increasing number of industrial projects cut the natural flow of river that results draught and dryness. And very strikingly acquisition of river-bed for establishing settlement brings misfortune for the existence of the river and creates disruption in the ecological balance. As an outcome, river, the old progenitor of human race, has been turned into mere memory with its infirm existence as rivulets. Therefore the notion of nation building is a tragic story.

This paper offers a post colonial ecocritical reading of Buddhadeb Guha's novel *Kojagar* (The Bounty of Goddess)¹ to explore how it resurrects the mythic glory of rivers, the ancestor of Indian civilization, and their prevalent existence in the memory of the tribes. River in this novel is a fantasy for the forest dwellers who try to memorise river or sometimes drive deep in their memory to frame a myth about the existence of river in their motherland. It may have been forgotten or wiped out from the map in their region, but the fact is oscillating between acceptance and denial. Only the river could have asserted that if it had a soul. The folk who are far away from the nation building project has an interconnection with river and are also under threat of erasure like the natural elements. Rivers that have secured a place in the memory of tribes now at present exist as rivulets in different parts of that region providing a very poor source of living for foresters.

In this novel, Buddhadeb Guha skillfully portrays the protagonist, Sayan, as an outwardly sophisticated Bengali 'bhadrolok' whose encounters in Valumar, a secluded segment of the Palamou forest region, lead to a profound inward transformation. Initially arriving for a company project, Sayan becomes enamoured with the captivating beauty of the forest and the myriad adventures it conceals. As the narrative unfolds, Sayan develops a deep familiarity with the jungle and its indigenous inhabitants. Notably, he forms a profound connection with Titli, a tribal girl who serves as his maid, culminating in their marriage. This intercultural union underscores the convergence of Sayan's refined knowledge and cultural background with the ancient, forgotten wisdom inherent to the Valumar forest—a realm that defies conventional textbook teachings. The juxtaposition of Sayan's sophisticated upbringing with the profound, untapped knowledge embedded in Valumar exemplifies Guha's nuanced exploration of the interplay between urbanity and ancient wisdom. Through Sayan's experiences, the novel posits that there are aspects of understanding and cultural richness that transcend formal education, emphasizing the transformative power of direct engagement with nature and indigenous cultures. Guha thus invites readers to contemplate the intersections of modernity and tradition, knowledge and experience, as Sayan's journey in Valumar unfolds, illustrating how the forest becomes a repository of wisdom that surpasses the boundaries of conventional learning, offering a scholarly discourse on the coexistence and mutual enrichment of diverse cultural and intellectual realms.

Therefore, this paper also observes an interplay of memory, sometimes insinuated with myths, that supports the examination of ecocritical understanding. Memory is an important tool that interprets the relationship between power and culture, tradition and representation, individual and collective, and thus, most importantly human and non-human experiences:

...examination of everyday life, the links between culture and power, questions of identity and representation is the role of memory in the making of meaning for individuals, communities and cultures as a whole. (Nayar 177)

Memory plays a pivotal role in this narrative. Rivers having a very minimal exposure in the frame narrative of the story, is being recapitulated time and again by the rustics who are also insignificant like them. As we all know that memory is a powerful tool to revoke the present and retract the past, the deliberation of using memory is observed through out the story. Here, the folks, living in the jungle, reminiscences the past condition of this locale with full of greenery and smooth flows of rivulets spread across the jungle, but the present scenario does not match with the picture in their memory. It gets faded from the image they have conceived in their minds. The woods face change, the land faces change and then the atmosphere and thereafter the balance of natural law gets changed.

River, the silent observer, that has recorded the past and experiences the present, is being portrayed as subaltern, struggling to exist like forest dwellers. Industrial expansion and wild life reservation project function for the particular products they are programmed for. Both the River and the folks do not fit in the criteria of being preserved. In order to smooth running of company's vehicle roads are made broaden in the jungle resulting to loss of trees and pollution. Bridges are made on rivers for the sake of company's project of establishing production house and a colony of workers adjoining to it. All these projects disturb the heavenly peace of the Valumar jungle and change the course of nature. As a result, Tigers raid the tribal houses and butcher domestic animals and humans: "last night Lalu was caught by Cheetah. It used to lie on the old sacks at my veranda." (Guha 97)

As the Valumar is refashioning its former characteristics, the life style of Valumaras have been changed with due course. Cruelty, jealousy and atrocity enter their houses and infect their harmonious living in Bhalumar. As a result, humans become prey to wild animals and wild animals become enemy to humans. Both kill each other like wanton boys. Living for both becomes impossible day by day. It is only industry that rules over there surreptitiously and silently making the locale an industrial cosmopolitan devoid of natural garbages.

The memorization of river may be a deliberate attempt by the tribal people. River, the will of the past, narrates the worn-out history to race after race. Mamang Dai famously writes in her poem “Small Town and the River” that a river experiences the surroundings and stores knowledge more than humans as it sees from the first drop of rain to the dryness of the earth: “It knows stretching past the towns/ from the first drop of rain to dry earth.” Therefore the memory of river may be imagined by those unlettered foresters to vindicate their identity with the projection of loss. In their imagination river gets vanished, leaving its poor legatee rivulets, with the tropical forest and it would become a wasteland very soon.

In order to portray the exigency of rivers in real map Guha took help of myths that could easily be the voice of voiceless. This is not only to make a presence of rivers in the map but also for reaffirming the history of the nation. In this regard Das and Som observe: “Guha revisits popular religious myths in his texts to fore-ground the metaphysical core of nations, on the other he employs them to urge the poor and the unlettered to play an active role in the nation building exercise.” (4). For example the very title is related to the very famous legend of “Kojagori lakshmi Puja” that indicates a microscopic view of the entire nation: “On that night every part of

this vast country, every small, unknown, sleeping village of hill and forest, even this tiny Valumar, would be bathed in the milk-white light of the moon”(Guha 456)

Therefore Guha's narrative in introducing rivers with no practical presence on the map, such as Mirchabeti, Satnadiya, Jhanjhatiya, in his work, serves as a poignant metaphorical device. These rivers, despite lacking a tangible existence, are metaphorically woven into the narrative to underscore the essentiality of their symbolic presence. This symbolic introduction can be interpreted as an assertion of the imperative need for their existence, symbolizing the broader significance of rivers in the context of the narrative. The deliberate choice of beautiful names for these non-existent rivulets enhances the aesthetic quality of the narrative. These names not only evoke a sense of enchantment but also contribute to the vividness of the imagery. Guha employs meticulous descriptions that are so compelling that they transcend mere fiction, blurring the line between reality and imagination. The narrative prowess enables readers to suspend disbelief, immersing them in a world where these rivers, though absent on the map, become palpable entities.

At its core, Guha's narrative raises a poignant commentary on the transformation of the nation. As India evolves from its palaeolithic past to a futuristic modernity, the novel underscores the alarming obliteration and neglect of its forests—the foundational essence of the nation. While the nation undergoes metamorphosis, the forests, repositories of India's historical roots and cultural heritage, are being pushed to the periphery of collective consciousness. It not only transcends a mere depiction of environmental degradation; also serves as a clarion call to acknowledge and reclaim the forgotten presence of the forests. Guha crafts a narrative that goes

beyond mere nostalgia for the past; it is a reminder of the indispensable role that forests play in shaping the identity and sustainability of the nation.

As the protagonist's journey unfolds in this literary landscape, the narrative extends beyond a nostalgic exploration of the past. It delves into the contemporary and future implications of environmental degradation, especially in the context of climate change. The introduction of these symbolic rivers becomes a vehicle for expressing the urgency of addressing ecological concerns, serving as a literary device to awaken collective consciousness.

The novel, therefore, becomes a multifaceted exploration—an excavation of forgotten landscapes, an elegy for disappearing rivers, and a prophetic indicator of a jeopardized future. The adaptation of an uncertain future, though seemingly lucrative in the eyes of modern Indians, is juxtaposed against the stark reality of environmental decline. Guha's work becomes a literary conscience, urging readers to confront the climate crisis beyond the confines of newspaper articles and prospective research fields.

Guha's masterful narrative in introducing symbolic rivers, thus, serves as a powerful means to convey the urgency of acknowledging and preserving the nation's ecological heritage. The novel is not merely a literary creation but a resonant call to action, prompting readers to consider the forgotten past, the endangered present, and the imperative need to secure a sustainable future for India's ecological treasures.

ⁱ Buddhadeb Guha's original work *Kojagar* was written in 1987. Later it was translated as *The Bounty of Goddess* by John W. Wood in 2004.

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