

## **ECOCRITICISM IS THE FLAGSHIP TO HUMANITY: REVISITING AND DECODING ABHIJNANASAKUNTALAM AND ARANYAK**

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### ***Abstract***

*Health is a reciprocal term that combines mutual co-existence in the environment with a considerable veneration to all forms of life. Life on earth is a result of some favourable conditions in the environment from the empirical point of view. So, the health of the environment remains the supreme, and thereby life, once created, has to keep up the conditions in order to sustain or survive itself. Thus there has always been a fascinating relation between health and environment since the dawn of creation of life on earth. Among the innumerable forms of life on earth human beings are considered the best since they are gifted with immense possibilities to comprehend, create, nourish, admonish, reject and accept. So, they have to shoulder the responsibility largely to secure the health of the environment which, in other terms, is the health of the varieties of life forms on earth. Through the ages they undertook overwhelming initiatives that surely advertise humanity; and literature, especially Eco-critical, has been the best call to humanity in order to restore health which is, as mentioned earlier, very much reciprocal. Literature upholds and worships the heavenly relation between health and environment, humanity and Nature. It celebrates the reconciliation of man and environment in the name of poetry very often.*

**Keywords:** Mutual Co-existence, Responsibility, Reconciliation, Relation, Restore, Eco-critical.

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### **1. Introduction**

The modern world is buzzing with immense amount of technological growth from the North Pole to the South Pole. The more it is drawn to the allure of science and technology, the more it is retreating from Nature. Having lost the very roots of creation, it incessantly indulges in so called ‘development’ which is not sustainable in character. Literature, as the best school of philosophy, has always paid the best homage to Nature; even before the rationalists began to trace sustainable developments<sup>2</sup> in Nature. Literature in all known languages on earth, always advocates inclusiveness and shows respect to health, environment and humanity for social progress in constant. Throughout the ages human beings have invariably indulged in violence, posing threat to peace. But Literature has tirelessly tried to champion the communion between man and Nature for the sake of humanity. Now, in a bio-social context of unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of Nature and environmental hazard, the term “Ecocriticism” originates. Ecocriticism believes that literary, visual and other representations of nature

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<sup>2</sup> Sustainable development means development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

have very much to do with an age's views and treatment of nature. Further, it seeks to establish a link between literary studies and environmental activism, between human beings and environmental discourse. When mankind is 'efficiently' committing ecocide making the planet inhospitable for life, Ecocriticism seeks to bring out how theoretically informed readings of cultural texts can contribute to consciousness-raising as well as to look into the politics of development and the reconstruction of nature (Nayar 2013: 241). Romanticism in literature was a definite reaction to industrialization; and the glorification of nature and landscapes in Romantic poetry highlighted the delicate balance between man and the environment. Needless to say, this paper will fall short to cite examples from literature to enunciate it substantially. However, a few can be illustrated and analyzed here briefly to show how literary works ceaselessly introspect and create mass awareness against the ruthless paws of the anthropocene.

## ***2. Kalidasa's treatment of Nature in Abhijnanasakuntalam: A Place of Solace***

In Indian literature, Ecocriticism finds its roots in the classical period when the great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa (ca. 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE) composed his magnum opus *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (uncertain dates). Aptly hailed as the "Shakespeare of India" by Sir William Jones (1876: iii), Kalidasa portrays Nature in this play in such a way that the text can be read as one that reflects Nature in its entirety. It is no wonder that this play remains one to be analyzed and debated by the new school of Ecocriticism preaching sustainable development. Starting from the prologue that praises summer as the season of love (Kalidasa 1999: 170), Nature comes alive in the play which not only exhibits its beauty but also inculcates in us love and respect for Nature. The vivid descriptions of Nature in this play hardly leaves any opportunity for the readers to avoid being overwhelmed by the beauty of the woods with wild bucks, lush green forests, flowers, birds and brooks. The meticulous care that Kalidasa invests to describe the sensuous beauty of the forest, transports the readers directly into the enchanting beauty of the wilderness. The poet subtly portrays how human culture invades Nature through the picturesque description of the antelope. It appears with its haunches folded into the chest and the open mouth from which the half-chewed grass drops on the path. This heart rendering image of the terrified animal running fast to take refuge for protection, indicates the encroachment of the outsider, king Dushyanta, into the forest. Kalidasa here represents the penance grove of Kanva as an emblem of Nature where the antelope finds solace in the crisis, and the ascetics' interaction with the king is in common with the purity and integrity of the intercourse between nature and creature:

*How fragile the life of the deer!  
How cruel your sharp-pointed arrows, swift winged!  
Never should they fall on his tender frame  
Like tongues of flame on a heap of flowers.*

*Quickly withdraw your well-aimed arrow, bound  
To protect the distressed, not strike the pure. (Kalidasa 1999: 173)*

Again, the picturesque description of the hermitage of sage Kanva reveals the exquisite beauty and uniqueness of nature and her peaceful communion with human beings. The king's first encounter with the penance groves mesmerises him:

*...Right here  
Grains of wild rice fallen from the tree-hollows  
Where parrots nest, lie scattered under the trees;  
Those stones there look moist, glossy, from the oil  
Of ingudi-nuts split and pounded on them;  
All around, deer browse in their tranquil haunts,  
Unafraid if the chariot's approach: yonder. (Kalidasa 1999: 174)*

The forest path strewn with “wild grain under the trees”, “the parrots nest in hollow trunks”, the stones “stained by the dark oil of crushed *ingudi* nuts”, the deer having trust on human voices not to “break their gait” – all add colour to the heavenly relation between nature or environment and humanity. The nature is serene and undisturbed, and the nuts and grains lie under the plants and trees untouched by humans around it while the bucks move freely at the presence of the *ashramites* (the dwellers of the hermitage) without any hesitation. Life of these *ashramites* is in tune with nature and they are inseparable from each other. Kalidasa brilliantly portrays the heroine Sakuntala, practicing ecological anthropology as she says,

*O Anusuya, what a charming sight, this marriage of vine and tree. See, the jasmine has this very moment entered into her budding youth. And the mango tree is laden with young fruit indicating he is ready for enjoyment.* (Kalidasa 1999: 177)

Actually, an atmosphere of sole tranquillity pervades here, and humanity is so mingled with nature that the hermitage is completely devoid of fear and friction. All life forms are respected here as an indispensable organ of the hermitage and its surroundings to keep up the reciprocal bonding that ensures the health of all living there peacefully. Kalidasa not only personifies the jasmine creeper and the mango tree, but also celebrates their marriage in *gandharva* rituals<sup>3</sup> which is a brilliant display of eco-spirituality<sup>4</sup> in classical context. This is a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment, and Kalidasa champions it by securing an endearing niche for it. Dushyanta and Sakuntala follow nature to accomplish their marriage in the absence of the sage Kanva and they accept the *gandharva* marriage as divine (Kalidasa 1999: 209). They are inclined to believe that life becomes happy, healthy and peaceful when man lives in harmony with nature.

Ever since its origin, the human species has evolved, no doubt, as the super-dominant agent in the global biosphere resulting in malevolent consequences. Kalidasa wrote the play in a society which was also no exception to it. That society, in its academic discourse, hardly learnt about the terms as ‘anthropocene’, ‘ecocriticism’ and ‘environmental humanities’. Still the poet treated nature in the text, which is substantially ecocritical as compared to the original source, in such a way that earnestly upholds not just sustainability but also eco-spirituality, environmental activism and environmental praxis. Thus, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* fairly disseminates the messages for developing bioethical principles to secure global health, both physical and mental, which is now in serious jeopardy due to environmental degradation at an alarming rate. So, the relation between environment and humanity, as represented in the literature of the classical period is to be restored to evade the crisis of health in modern times. We have to check the intervention of such culture that breaks the communion between man and nature. Only then could the world be transformed into a spot of biodiversity or ecological hub, like the penance grove of sage Kanva, where we can have abundance of life and a remedy for everything.

### **3. *Environment and Humanity in Bibhutibhusan’s seminal text Aranyak: A Criticism of the Anthropocene***

*Aranyak* (1976) by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay (1894 - 1950), one of the greatest pieces in Bengali literature, is regarded as a pioneering effort in creating environmental awareness among the modern anthropocentric readers. The novel shows the novelist’s predilection towards an eco-conscious lifestyle much before the theoretical term ‘Ecocriticism’ came into being. Set in the outdoor wilderness of Bihar, the novel is written in the form of reminiscence of the forest life experienced by the protagonist,

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<sup>3</sup> *Gandharva* marriage is one of the eight forms of marriage recognized in Hinduism. As Lochtefeld defines, “A *Gandharva* marriage takes place when a man and woman have sexual intercourse by mutual consent, but without consulting anyone else” (2002: 233). It was a valid form of marriage in ancient India, though not widely preferred.

<sup>4</sup> Eco-spirituality is a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment. According to the environmentalist Sister Virginia Jones, “Eco-spirituality is about helping people experience ‘the holy’ in the natural world and to recognize their relationship as human beings to all creation” (cited in Nayar 2013: 251-52).

Satyacharan himself. He was appointed as an assistant manager under Jamindar Kshelatcharan Ghosh in the Purnia district of Northern Bihar to deforest the land, almost three thousand bighas, in order to set up new habitation that would help his master in raising huge revenue. Crushed under the wheel of restlessness, unemployment and uncertainty at the backdrop of the World War II, the city bred educated youth did not have any love for the jungle initially. Having felt all alone in the frightful forest, the enthralling city life of Calcutta with theatres, libraries, films and music used to haunt him. Sometimes he got lost in the dichotomy of urban and forest lives, and thought of leaving his job (Bandopadhyay 2002).

As the story progresses, Satyacharan undergoes a gradual change in his attitude to nature and he feels the interconnection between man and nature, that leads to the self-realization about his sin of deforestation and destruction of pristine wilderness. He says in the preface,

*It is these people that I shall speak. Our earth has many paths where civilized men seldom tread. Along those paths, the strange cross currents I had known and the memory of knowing them remains with me. But my recollections are not pleasurable, rather sorrowful. By my hands was destroyed an unfettered playground of nature. I know too that for this act the forest goddess will never forgive me. I have heard that to confess a crime in one's own words lightens somewhat the burden of crime. Therefore the story.* (Bandopadhyay 2002: 4)

The very confession of the narrator at the outset of the story sets the ball of Ecocriticism rolling throughout, and thereby criticising the anthropocentric onslaughts of modern civilization. However, during the course of his journey with the 'barbarians' in an environment stuffed with flora and fauna in and around Lobotulia and Ajmabad,<sup>5</sup> he gets so much overawed that he could hardly imagine returning to his urban life. The man who was instrumental in the ecocide, gradually becomes an ardent lover and worshipper of nature.

Satyacharan gradually explores the diverse world in the forests of Lobotulia and Nara-Baihar and discovers the natural beauty of the land which is extremely rich in biodiversity. He ultimately falls in love with the mysterious enchantments of the forests. A man who has been sent to devastate the natural vegetation and to convert the land into agrarian settlement, gradually discovers a heavenly and perennial relation between nature and humanity. He starts bleeding internally on several occasions, all the while suffering from the dichotomy of serving his master for the generation of revenue and serving his conscience of bio-ethics. He is moved to come across the man, Jugalprasad, a man utterly indifferent to his family, who finds eternal bliss in sowing seeds of creepers that would adorn the forests with their flowers. He is amazed to find the philosophical bent of the mind of Raju Panrey. The man could only accumulate a square meal with seeds of Chinese grass, salt and *mokai* (maize). But when he has been offered a few *bighas*<sup>6</sup> of land to deforest it for cultivation, Raju retorts,

*The forest you see here is very beautiful. The flowers have been blooming for a long time and the birds sing, each with their own call; the gods themselves have merged with the wind and have left their mark on the earth. But wherever there is money or transactions of cash, loan, and receipts, the air becomes polluted. Then the gods choose not to stay on any longer. So, whenever I pick up the cutter and the axe, the gods come and snatch away my tools. They whisper such thoughts into my ears that all thoughts of land and property are driven away from my mind.* (Bandopadhyay 2002: 76)

The selfless love of Raju and Jugalprasad for the forest touches the soft strings of humanity within the soul of Satyacharan who presently discovers the eco-critical bent of his own mind that could not bear the least exploitation of nature. So, he promotes Jugalprasad to venture the impenetrable forests of Jayanti Hills to collect saplings of dudhia flowers (*Euphorbia Hirta*) to adorn the Saraswati Kundi where he enjoys wondrous solitude (Bandopadhyay 2002: 108 -109). He enjoys enormous bliss on getting the

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<sup>5</sup> Ajmabad is a village in Telyani Block in Fatehpur District of present-day Uttar Pradesh, India. It belongs to Allahabad Division.

<sup>6</sup> A *bigha* is a unit of measurement of land in south Asia. Roughly, it is equal to half acre.

varieties of birds back to their habitat, taking refuge there after a huge part of the forest has gone extinct. He becomes reluctant in having land settlement made with Chatu Sing, for this would destroy the symbiotic ambience. He cannot accept the huge sacrifice of this forest land (almost one thousand acres) for human settlement and for a handful of wheat to fill their stomach. He, therefore, intentionally forwards the application to higher authority so that it gets delayed. But he cannot skunk the aggression of the plunderers like Nandalal Ojha and Chatu Sing, and has to undergo the intolerable pangs of conscience. He strongly criticizes the city people for their lack of the sense of eco-aesthetics and their exploitation of the greenery as a mere picnic spot:

*The women were a motley collection, completely devoid of imagination. They ran about gathering twigs for fire on the edges of the forest and chattered endlessly, but not one of them were around to see where they were.....Did they know that only a dozen yards from where they sat, the forest spirits danced in the moonlight?* (Bandopadhyay 2002: 189)

Satyacharan himself realizes the call of his inner soul. He admits that he came there to settle new tenants in those forests. But having come to destroy the forestland, he instead fell in love with the wilderness. His recollection clearly indicates his initial 'ego-consciousness' yielding place for his subsequent 'eco-consciousness':

*This was a different sort of life, I mused, as I rode through the forest. This was a life for the eccentric wanderer - one who did not care to remain confined within the four walls of his house, did not have housekeeping and domesticity in his blood. When I had left Calcutta and came to this terrible loneliness, to an utterly natural sort of lifestyle, how intolerable the uncivilized life here had seemed; but now, I feel this is the better life of the two. Nature- rude and barbaric here-had initiated me into the mysteries of freedom and liberation; would I ever be able to reconcile myself to a perch in the bird-cage city?* (Bandopadhyay 2002:62)

The growing eco-consciousness within Satyacharan gradually brings about a remarkable turn in his social character. He grows pantheistic in due course with strong eco-aesthetics, and this pantheism begets the exfoliation of civilizational layers to carve out the humaneness that had been presumably vanquished by the onslaughts of consumerism within his character. It is the symbiotic ambience of the forest that influences and draws him close to the tribal communities namely Santhals and Gangots,<sup>7</sup> and also to their social and cultural life. He cannot resist visiting their cottages whenever he manages to have some leisure from his hectic schedule. He visits the tribal king Dobru Panna Birbordi with great honour and enjoys the 'royal' hospitality in their dilapidated capital, which he considers no lesser than ancient Egyptian kingdoms in grandeur of antiquity. On his second visit to the Santhal princess Bhanumati, Satyacharan rises above the prejudices gathering around the racial identity of individuals in colonized India.<sup>8</sup> He bequeaths the right to cook his food to the Santhal princess who gets initially surprised to listen to it.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Nature teaches him also the lesson of humanity to embrace all the subalterns – landless peasants, poor Brahmins, migrant labourers and the wretched tribals - without any sense of discrimination in terms of caste and creed. At the same time, he vents out deep resentment against the anthropogenic turn of civilization. He, therefore, reprehends contemporary political culture, and laments,

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<sup>7</sup> Santhals are an ethnic group of eastern India, numbering well over five million at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their greatest concentration is in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa. Gangots are a community in the Indian state of Bihar. Most are cultivators or landless agricultural labourers.

<sup>8</sup> Colonized India was divided in the name of caste that formed a hierarchy with the Brahmins at the top and the Shudras at the bottom. The Shudras were often considered as untouchables.

<sup>9</sup> Being a tribal, a Santhal would have been considered an outsider to the mainstream Hindu society. Neither an orthodox Brahmin would eat any food prepared by a Santhal, nor would a Santhal dream of cooking for him. Naturally, Satyacharan's 'bizarre' and unexpected request initially shocks Bhanumati.

*If it were any other country, they would have had laws to keep the forests intact and preserve them for nature lovers, as they have done with the Yosemite Park in California, the Kruger National Park in South Africa or the National Albert in Belgian Congo (Bandopadhyay 2002: 213).*

#### 4. Conclusion

Literature combines two great concepts- art for art's sake<sup>10</sup> and critique of contemporary society - down the ages, and serves humanity perpetually across the globe. It upholds and celebrates life since antiquity. Great literature always caters to enjoyment no doubt, but it has never been devoid of the lesson of humanity, essential for the peaceful co-existence of all organisms and an autograph of mutual respect. But the study of literature in its most stereotypical approach fails to disseminate that very celebration of symbiosis prevalent in literature of all ages. However, it was just towards the end of the twentieth century that the theoretical term "Ecocriticism" appeared as a scholarly approach to study literature with an environmental orientation. Ecocriticism arose as an academic discipline after the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. These scholars proclaimed that mere technological progress is not enough to ensure health of the humans, both physical and mental, along with all organisms on the earth (1996: *sic passim*). Almost at the same time Nobel Laureate Prof. Amartya Sen advocated sustainable development for human beings while conserving ecological balance (Sen and Dreze 2002: 220 – 23). Since then, depletion of the earth in the name of development evolved as a subject of serious existential discourse, and it is assumed that literature should not turn away its face from this noble endeavour of disseminating eco-consciousness among the anthropocentric. But this paper tries to draw our attention to the fact that literature, particularly Indian literature, has never been without the proclamation of the heavenly communion between man and nature. Starting from the classical period up to the modern age, literature has always celebrated ecocriticism, eco-ethics, eco-aesthetics and eco-spirituality. But unfortunately, it is our Eurocentric approach to study and interpret them that missed such an awesome repository of symbiotic wisdom. The texts that have been analysed here, truly had given the clarion call for environmental humanities much before the rationalists started calling for that, and sometimes arranging for debates, discussions and even global summits to address the crisis. So, the process that has always been there with its uninhibitedness, is now changed into an apprehensive one in order to stabilize the environment that has gone vulnerable from sheer anthropocentric practices throughout the ages. However, the present call for inclination to develop bioethical principles through literature is, once again, very significant for an ecologically sustainable future for mankind. It is better late than never to admit after Shelley that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley 1975: 253 – 55).

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<sup>10</sup> Art for art's sake is a slogan translated from the French *l'art pour l'art*, which was coined in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by the French Philosopher Victor Cousin. The phrase expresses the belief held by many writers and artists, especially those associated with Aestheticism, that art needs no justification, that it need not serve political, didactic or other end (Nayar 2013: 133-34).

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