

Nature in the Eyes of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay: A Study of *The Mountain of the Moon*

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Abstract

Being a social animal, human being has a close relationship with nature. Recently the green look of nature is faded away day by day and we now feel the need of environmental advocacy. This paper attempts to show how nature is treated in Bibhutibhushan's *The Mountain of the Moon* (Chander Pahar, 1937), a fiction that is based on a daring adventure of young Bengali man, Shankar Roy Choudhury. Bibhutibhushan's search for the varied forms of nature- the wild, the spiritual and the beautiful- shows his interest in his study of nature with perfect accuracy and minute details. The present paper is a study to look back at Bibhutibhushan's tribute to nature in his seminal text *The Mountain of the Moon*.

Keywords- Nature, Environment, Wild, Beautiful, Spiritual.

Introduction:

The word nature refers to the external environment around us. It encompasses both the living and the non-living objects of the world. So, human beings are an important part of our environment. And there remains an intricate and primordial relationship between nature and the human beings. Nature also plays an important role in so many literary works. The concept of nature is echoed in literary works and nature writing emerges as an important sub-genre of literature. Nature and human beings should be co-existed with each other to maintain the ecological balance of our environment.

The concept of ecocriticism first introduced in the meetings of Western Literature Association in the 1970s. In the 1980s it started its initiative journey in the USA and in the UK it emerges in the 1990s. The word 'ecocriticism' is coined by William Rueckert in the essay "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*" and it is used by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in their seminal work entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Glotfelty has an immense contribution for the establishment of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment). At that time Karl Kroeber, the famous American personality wants to be an acknowledged ecocritic by his claim for using the term 'ecological' for the first time. But the credit goes to Glotfelty who has a significant contribution for the popularity of ecocriticism as an important theoretical approach. Barry opines,

Both terms ('ecocriticism' and 'ecological') apparently lay dormant...Glotfelty ...not only revived the term 'ecocriticism' but urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field that had previously been known as 'the study of nature writing'(249).

This is the brief history of its origin in the USA. And in the UK ecocriticism comes to be known as 'green studies'. It gains its popularity in the UK after the publication of Jonathan Bate's *Romantic*

Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition and Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*. Thus we find the emergence of ecocriticism both in the USA and in the UK. But two general distinctions are noticed in their approach to ecocriticism. Firstly, the American ecocritics use the term 'ecocriticism', whereas the UK ecocritics use 'green studies' and secondly, the American critics were "celebratory' in tone" (Barry, 251) but Barry comments that the British ecocritics want

" to be more 'minatory', that is, it seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial and neo colonial forces"(251).

Whatever name we may use to call it, but the theorists of this study are mainly concerned with the interrelationship between literature and environment. It indicates the origin of a new type of criticism and theory and recently it gains a massive popularity for a group of literature loving academia. Ecocriticism is defined by Cheryll Glotfelty:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. 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 the texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (xviii).

So her clear indication is that there is an interconnection between literature and environment. The interdisciplinary relationship between literature and environment is also echoed in the observation of P .K. Nayar-

In fact, ecocriticism is, as, we shall see, resolutely interdisciplinary, as embodied in the title of one of its most significant journals, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*(ISLE) (243).

As literature is the mirror of our society; literary texts must deal with the issues concerned with our environment.

The ecocritics read or re-read the literary works to find out the representation of nature in the writing and they pay their homage to those who consider nature as the most important theme in their literary creations. Instead of giving importance on the cultural and social background of a text, they consider eco-centric perspective as their central focus in case of literary writings. Ecocriticism is the study of relationship between nature and human beings. They try to point out the importance of nature to shape the human civilization and the importance of natural resources in our lives. They criticize the human deeds which may spoil out the mutual bonding between human beings and nature. Barry observes,

The ecocentred reading, by contrast, focuses outside, on the house and its environs, rather than inside, on the owner and his psychology (260).

The environmental movement in India also took its origin in the 1960s and 70s. The movements like-Chipko Movement, The Silent Valley Project, Narmada Bachao Andolan- made campaign against the destructive development of our country and gave a clarion call for the greening of India.

Nature to Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay:

Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay is one of the pioneering figures of Bengali literature. As an Indian Bengali author he has an immense contribution for the development of modern Bengali literature. This great personality wrote sixteen novels in Bengali and such masterpieces undoubtedly enrich the treasure house of modern Bengali literature. Some of these novels have English renderings and some of them

have its cinematic rendition. Of these sixteen novels *Chander Pahar* or *Mountain of the Moon*, published in 1937, is an immortal creation of Bandopadhyay and this novel brings a special charm to Bengali literature as an adventure novel. Naturally the novel gains its popularity as a young adult story by arousing excitement in the mind of the readers. This novel tells the tale of a thrilling adventure and becomes a new addition to the genre of classic Bengali literature.

As a nature lover Bandopadhyay always chooses nature as the background of his so many masterpieces. Like *Aranyak* and *Ichamati*, *Chander Pahar* is also set in the midst of nature. The whole novel tells the story of a young Bengali boy, Shankar Roy Choudhury, who starts his adventurous journey to Africa.

Chander Pahar is a story of that young hero Shankar and his experiences on the way to the forests of Africa in the midst of the wilderness of nature. After being pent up in the work of a jute mill clerk for a long time, he wants an escape from this confinement and starts his adventurous journey to Africa. Getting information from a Portuguese explorer Diego Alvarez, the young protagonist Shankar wants to explore the unexplored and encounters so many experiences through the deep and dark forests of the Dark Continent. Daniel Pinto in a book review of *Chander Pahar* notes that this novel becomes

“a survivalist adventure story of the Bildungsroman and a cleverly insinuated horror element” (n.pag).

Bandopadhyay presents nature in multiple forms in his classic Bengali text *Chander Pahar*. The three-fold versions of nature-the wild, the spiritual and the beautiful- are depicted by Bibhutibhushan in this fiction. Here we would like to explore the author’s environmental awareness and how it is depicted in the fiction like *Chander Pahar*.

Wilderness as a Concept:

Now we briefly discuss about the concept of wilderness. The concept of wilderness suggests that nature is never contaminated by civilization. According to Greg Garrad,

Wilderness has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth... (59).

He also mentions two types of wilderness- old world wilderness and new world wilderness. The meaning of wilderness has been changed with the passage of time.

The word wilderness is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word ‘wilddeoren’ meaning a place “where ‘deoren’ or beasts existed beyond the boundaries of civilization” (60). The concept of old world wilderness is based on ‘Judaeo- Christian history and culture’ (60). The old world wilderness, according to Garrad, “combines connotations of trial and danger with freedom, redemption and purity. ... (61)”.

This is related to the history of paradise. The Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the earlier texts of wilderness, describes it

“as a threat, and by the time the Judaic scriptures were written it is viewed with ambivalence at best” (61).

Next Garrad discusses about the concept of Burkean sublime. For Schama, Burke finds sublimity in “shadow and darkness and dead and trembling, in cave and chasms, at the edge of precipice, in the shroud of cloud, in the fissures of the earth” (qtd in Garrad, 64). Burke makes a distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. He thinks that the sublimity in nature is able to arouse

“Astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of Horror” (Garrad, 64).

Garrad also says that

“the beautiful is loved for its smallness, softness, delicacy, the sublime admired for its vastness and overwhelming power” (64).

Then we find the emergence of the concept like new world wilderness. Garrad mentions the pioneering figures like Thoreau and Muir in his discussion about new world wilderness. Muir’s argument is that nature is created for its own “intrinsic value”. It is suggested in Garrad’s observation:

Muir argues that alligators, lions, poisons and disease are all ample proof that Creation is not prefabricated for human use and comfort, and that every living thing down to the ‘smallest transmicroscopic creature’ has intrinsic value(68).

So they consider wild nature as a place far from the madding crowd’s busy-scheduled city life. Cronon also says –

Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul (qtd in Garrad, 69).

Garrad also mentions the view of Gary Snyder who

“argues that civilization is the locus of chaos and disorder while wildness epitomizes the free self-organisation of nature” (qtd in Garrad, 83).

Wilderness is an important aspect of ecocriticism. P. K. Nayar observes that

“nature writing often privileges wilderness as an authentic, pure form of the landscape. It is the very opposite of a corrupted human condition and man-made landscape” (252).

Wilderness in *The Mountain of the Moon*:

Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay has presented nature in its authentic, pure and wild form and a dense wilderness prevails through the entire atmosphere of the text. As a care-worn nature conscious fellow Bandopadhyay portrays Shankar’s yearnings for wild life and his immense pleasure in the wild African environment. As Shankar is a common idolater of the great explorers like Livingstone, Marco Polo and such others, he encounters his journey to Africa.

Bandopadhyay has depicted the wilderness both in natural set up and also in its representation of some ferocious African animals like the lions of Uganda, the black mamba, the bunip. His liking for the animals shows that nature to Bibhutibhushan is not only the green world but also it includes both the flora and fauna of this physical environment. As physical environment encompasses both the plant life and the non-human world, Bibhutibhushan presents both these worlds in this novel. Ecocritics now consider animal studies an important part of ecocriticism. P.K.Nayar opines that “ecocritical reading also asks us to focus on the state of animals worldwide” (253). Bibhutibhushan depicts the nature of the wild animals in the deep and dark forests of Africa.

While the protagonist Shankar works as a clerk at the Uganda railway station, he encounters so many dangerous experiences in the wild atmosphere of Africa. In the middle of nowhere this young protagonist is deeply threatened by the lions of Uganda- the man-eating lions. But in the midst of that savage continent these lions of Uganda are wildly natural. Bandopadhyay depicts their wildness so clearly that his depiction reminds us of Blake’s fearful symmetry in his description of the tiger. Similarly

these man eating lions are fearful but symmetrically they are maintaining the ecological balance of African environment.

Shankar then experiences another risky event during his encounter with Black mamba. It is the most venomous and deadliest snake of Africa. They are dangerous but in the wild atmosphere of Africa they are there to keep a balance in the ecological atmosphere of Africa. Next Bandopadhyay gives a vivid description of the wild nature of the mythical monster, the bunip. It is rumored that he guards the mine on the 'Mountain of the Moon'. The story of Bunip is told in this way:

Bunip! It was the terror of the Richtersveld Mountains and the valleys, the monster that prevents man or beast to set foot in its territory. Shankar now realized why the forests here were so awfully quiet, just because no living creature would dare to come where the Bunips lived" (54).

The adventure lover Shankar is the midst of danger. He is encircled by coyotes, wolf, dogs and hyenas. In that no man's land all these wild animals enhance the ferocious atmosphere of that dense, dark forest. The forest as depicted by Bandopadhyay is the densest forest of Africa. Danger is felt in each and every corner of that deep, dense forest. Nature is thus presented in its primitive, wild look:

"The coyotes were moving closer now, their eyes glowing red in the fire light. A burning wood thrown at them pushed them back, but they kept waiting. That wolf of the early evening paid a visit too and a family of hyenas joined the group a little later, expecting a big feast ahead" (90).

Not only the forest but also Bandopadhyay attracts our attention in his depiction of the wilderness of mountain and desert of Africa. Getting inspiration from Alvarez's exploration, Shankar, from rural Bengal resigning from the job of the railway clerk, accompanies Alvarez and starts his journey to the 'Mountain of the Moon'. This is actually a part of the Richtersveld Mountains. Richtersveld is very wild in its appearance. Bandopadhyay has depicted that this range of mountains are not properly marked out even on the maps.

Bandopadhyay enhances the wildness of the forest and the mountain by depicting the incident of sudden volcanic eruption in the midst of the forest. This simple natural happening makes the travelers acquainted with a volcano. The map can never identify this mountain as a volcano. This wild volcanic eruption is the symbol of the destructive power of the Lord Shiva:

Though their map did not show this mountain as a volcano, it had been named *Oldonio Lengai* meaning the 'Bed of the Fire God' in Zulu. Perhaps it had remained dormant for many years and was presumed dead by the makers of the map (65).

The young protagonist Shankar defeats all the odds and evils of the wild atmosphere of nature. He conquers the mountain and at last he arrives in the Kalahari Desert. Kalahari Desert is there as a symbol of wild force of nature. Shankar's life is threatened and his life risk increases at a high amount in the midst of that terrible desert and the narrative says:

Then the full scale of the Kalahari Desert came into view and Shankar shivered at the look of it. There was only an endless ocean of tawny sand and high dunes as far as the eye could see. It was like a furnace out there with the temperature of 127 degrees in the scale. How on earth could one get across it? (80).

The ecocritics have an interest in indigenous culture. Bandopadhyay has also depicted a group of tribals in *Chander Pahar*. Indigenous culture is presented through their hunting practices, myth and belief. The nature lover Bibhutibhushan treats the African tribal people in the same way. They are superstitious and believe in their own myth about Bunip. They are very close to nature and they give a

minute description of the wild nature of hills and forests in Africa. They are naturally simple without any touch of modernization and civilization. Due to their simple, natural knowledge they consider a piece of diamond as a white stone. They are aware of the wildness of nature. They warn the outsiders about the wild nature of forests, mountains and Bunip. They live in the midst of wilderness. Naturally these primitive people become wild in their life style. They are very savage and not bound by any rules of law.

Nature in Indian Spiritualism:

Indian religious beliefs, rituals, folklores, arts and crafts vividly highlight the fact that living in a complete harmony with Nature is one of the integral parts of Indian culture. From time immemorial Indian people give values to Nature remembering the thought that human beings should protect Nature for their own survival. Indian people specially the tribes treat Nature not as an object of exploitation but as an object of reverence and of course as a living entity with whom they have intimacy of trust and love. In ancient India people worship trees, animals, the sun considering the earth as Mother Goddess. From that time Indian people try to give importance to the relationship between Man and Nature.

Some of the fundamental ideas of ecological studies – the interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features – were revealed in the ancient Indian scriptural text, the *Ishoponishad* over 2000 years ago. It says that each individual should be in close relationship with other species and no particular species should encroach upon the others' rights. The oldest cave-paintings of Bhimbekta of Madhya Pradesh depicting birds, animals and humans living in close harmony is also another example to prove Indian people's love and reverence for Nature.

Based on religious faith from historical times many plants and animals have been considered sacred in India. The banyan tree, tulsi and many other trees are worshipped and so are never cut and bettlenut, lotus, sandalwood trees are considered as sacred. These traditional faiths are very much helpful in the protection of various species of trees in India. Likewise, from ancient time many animals like tiger, peafowl, bullock, and snake have been worshipped and not hunted as they are seen to be related to gods and goddesses. So, it can be said that without knowing the scientific necessity to protect Nature, Indian people from ancient times have been aware of the interdependence of all life forms on this earth. More or less every religion of India like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and specially Hinduism has always been environment conscious. *The Mahabharata, the Ramayana, The Bhagavad Gita, Upanishad* contain the earliest advices for environmental preservation and ecological balance.

Spiritual Treatment of Nature in *The Mountain of the Moon*:

This ancient tradition of Nature worshipping can easily be found in Bandopadhyay's *The Mountain of the Moon* where Shankar, a young boy from an Indian village, after watching the volcanic eruption during this journey in the Richtersveld Mountain, feels proud of being one of only two people to have witnessed this amazing natural phenomenon. He is truly carrying the age-old convention to worship Nature as god and to accept natural phenomenon as the activity of the Almighty God. In the remote place of Africa, Shankar has become a representative of Indian people who have great reverence for Nature which is clearly visible in the following narration:

But just before leaving the site of destruction, Shankar automatically folded his hands in obeisance to the great Lord Shiva, who in his form as Rudra is the Lord of Destruction. "We are grateful to you, O Lord, for letting us have a look at your great dance of devastation. It was a privilege and honour for us to see this vision which is worth more than a hundred diamond mines. O Lord, we bow before your majestic self, in total submission. (65)

Just few days ago of this magnificent volcanic eruption, when Shankar observed the entire landscape, the enormous green forest and the moon-lit night, he becomes mesmerized and instantly his Nature worshipper- self comes out. Then the narrator describes it in this way:

The majestic Richtersveld looked like a saint, silently meditative. This is heaven, Shankar thought. He thanked God for letting him be at a place where very few human beings had never ventured and get a glimpse of this magnificent sight. Diamonds were nothing compared to what he had experienced (54-55).

Again and again it is proved that the purpose of discovering the diamond mine is only a material one which is hundred times less valuable than the magnificent experiences felt in the natural scenario in Africa. Here, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's treatment of Nature gets spiritual dimension and the co-existence of spiritualism and realism in his awareness of Nature makes him unique in the field of Bengali literature. Like every spiritualist to him also this exploration for diamonds seems a foolish one in comparison to live in the midst of awful but beautiful Nature. Here, it is very compatible to quote the following narration:

Don't be a fool rushing around for diamonds. Dangerous place – these forests, they are so much trouble. Something was whispering to him from inside. Just lie down in the shade and relax. No better way to spend your life, so quiet, so peaceful (58).

Today, people throughout the world are conscious of the degradation of environment and harmful effects of this. But as a writer of the pre-independent era Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay was equally aware of conservation of Nature. So, today's environmental movements and the ecological studies are not new in the history of India.

Portrayal of Natural Beauty in *The Mountain of the Moon*:

His treatment of nature has close similarity with that of the Romantics of the English literature. His sense of wonder after observing Nature resembles with the observation of the Romantics because the fascinating beauty of Nature attracts both of them inspiring to enjoy it to their heart's content. The description of natural beauty and Shankar's feelings in this novel is a proof of Bandopadhyay's romanticism in his depiction of Nature:

In spite of all the hardship, Shankar found the forest beautiful. Orchids, in wonderful shades were in bloom and large white lilies were abundant on the grasslands. The macaws and parrots were flying about in a riot of colours and the butterflies were like a painter's dream. An occasional waterfall came down the slope in sparkling cascades adding further to the beauty of the place. It's God own creation, Shankar thought and he decided to enjoy the scenery on the way. (49)

Here, we should refer to the comment of Richard Kerridge in the essay "Environmentalism and ecocriticism" where it is told that

The Romantic gaze frequently belongs to a lone figure stilled in contemplation of immanent nature, or of landscapes suggestive of infinity – mountains, chasms, oceans, distant plains (541).

This type of gaze is found in Bandopadhyay because the narrative says that "But in the Wilderness, these still dark nights with sparkling stars, these unseen dangers lurking around the corner were an answer to his prayer. This is the life Shankar wanted to live, always" (19).

Conclusion:

In *The Mountain of the Moon* nature is thus presented in multiple forms and it helps the text to gain its status as nature writing. In this text we find a depiction of how literature represents the environment. Besides being an adventure novel, his depicting of nature in three-fold forms in *The Mountain of the Moon* shows the author's consciousness of some ecological issues. Thus *The Mountain of the Moon* can be read as a text where a perfect respect is conveyed to the natural world- the essence of our safe existence and sustainable development on the earth.

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