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## From Nature's Lap to Nature's Scrape: Depiction of Nature in Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya's *Pather Panchali* and Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing*

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### **Abstract:**

Ecocriticism is a comparatively new approach of reading, interpreting, and analyzing literature or art. It is an extensive theory that expects not only an engagement with nature, but also with the challenges, the crisis that nature or environment faces and hence deals within a way an ecocritical reading of a novel helps to extend our understanding of bio diversity and related issues. This paper intends to make a comparative study of the depiction of eco conscious values by the two authors under consideration. It will also attempt at investigating Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya's eco consciousness as depicted in his novel *Pather Panchali-Song of the Road* through his two major characters, the sister-brother duo- Durga and Apu as against modern eco centric challenges depicted by Uzma Aslam Khan in her novel *Trespassing*. The paper also endeavors to trace ecosophy/eco philosophy and deep ecology as presented by Bandopadhyaya in his novel against commercial exploitation nature leading to various form of pollution and gradual ecocide.

**Keywords:** Ecology, ecosophy, deep ecology, ecocide

Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya was a pioneer of ecological vision among the nature writers of India even when ecocriticism as a theoretical framework hardly existed. He showed his eco-critical sensibilities even before one could apprehend the malicious effects of environmental destruction. Both these writers have shown their angst against urban development in third world countries at the cost of exploitation of the natural environment and consequent ecological misbalance. At present when biodiversity is constantly threatened and ecological balance compromised, the novels of Bibhutibhushan and contemporary writer Uzma Aslam Khan give an opportunity to rethink anthropocentric attitude of human beings. Whereas the novels of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya invite his readers into a world of greenery, reminding one of pantheistic qualities of Wordsworth, the novels of Uzma vibrate with more advanced tech savvy commercial people who have severed the ties with nature for a more viable sustenance.

The land as a physical and geographical entity features predominantly in the novels of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya He admits, "I love not Man the less but nature more" (Roychoudhury

38). But nature here is not merely a backdrop of his long prose narratives rather it promotes a journey into understanding the ecosophy, the deep ecological musings and the crisis inherent in it. The land in his novels is no less than a living character; it determines the lives of the characters, especially those of women in accepting or rejecting them as citizens. It is through the story of Apu and Durga and later only through Apu that BB depicts the changing socio-economic condition of India. Apu and Durga's story is presented in a linear chronological narrative.

Within this linear chronological narrative, the narrative of rural social life, dynamics between the rich and the poor and female self-discovery within the Indian context unfold. It is in this narrativization of post-colonial rural life that Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya engages his readers into discovering, internalizing and assessing the concept of identity, Durga's self-discovery as a young female child in the village of Nischindipur. Durga's early identity as a child of nature, growing in the laps of nature echoes cultural ecofeminism's claims that her closeness with the land is intimately linked to her body and spirituality. She finds in nature, the nurturer, friend, philosopher and guide, one that understands her condition better than many others, excepting her brother Apu.

#### **In the laps of Nature:**

Although the novel predates the emergence of ecofeminism as an institutionalized theoretical field, Durga's connection with the land in *Pather*

*Panchali* can be seen through the prism of ecofeminism. Her rendezvous with nature seeking child-like pleasures in her arms as well seeking comfort at times of trouble and emotional disturbance, the provider of food to kill her pangs of hunger, her counsellor and nurturer are perceived as her romantic relationship with her land and nature. Her wandering in the orchards and paddy fields, getting lost in Kash bon are yardsticks of her simplicity of life and close proximity that she shares with Nature. Nature, the sun, the river and the beauty of the green fields appear as Durga's source of well-being. Her vivacious presence pervades the natural surrounding around her and invests each and every element of nature with happiness as she roams through the forest collecting sustenance for her family as well as play things for joy. She is her brother's mentor. She teaches him the simplicity of nature and its magnanimous qualities. It is she who teaches him how to recognize these qualities and foster them for mutual happiness and satisfaction.

Sarbajaya is Durga's biological mother. She is a loving and affectionate woman. However, the softer side of her is lost under the pressures of financial crisis. In the absence of her husband in the village, she is the sole protector and provider for her family that consists of her two children Apu and Durga and old window sister-in-law, Indir Thakurini. Managing the two children with limited resources at home had always been a challenge for her. Besides this, she also has to face several complaints and severe criticisms about Durga and her regular

thefts from neighbours' orchards. Hence, her relation with Durga is always marked with anger, frustration, intolerance and hatred. Under such circumstances, it is the nature that embraces Durga and provides her with required love and peacefulness. In order to forget such moments and otherwise as well Durga loves spending her leisure time running around on the canopied streets and amongst the groves, chasing and caressing goat kids and ducks in the pond, stealing and tasting ripe fruits. Her carefree life in the laps of nature, however, is not perceived well by her neighbours. The women flock of her village would often advise her mother to keep her under control and restrict her prancing in the wilderness. Durga's hours of rejoicing in the company of nature had never been without moments of tension. In fact most of the time that she would spend time outside home, would inevitably be followed by a series of complaints and reprimands. As it took a cyclic formation, Durga became more and more close to Nature. She turned to Nature not for just playing but more for peace; in search of something that could understand her and reciprocate to her love and caring nature. The landscape of Nischindipur village with its vast expanse of paddy fields, kash bon, orchards provide Durga with motherly comfort that she fails to find even in her mother's lap. Nature, her foster mother provides her with the much necessary love and affection that she otherwise misses at her home.

#### **Nature, Women and Cycle of life:**

Every organism here seems to have a symbiotic relationship with the

environment. The animals, cows, dogs, cats, birds, frogs, spiders, the frisking insects and the slithering snake, all these co-exist with the human beings here. The luxuriant vegetation merges with the houses here. And the wild growth just about threatens the crumbling house of Harihar. Rain is the life giver after hot summer days; it also kills when it floods the rural landscape. Though the wilderness in which Apu and Durga prance around is their abode of some carefree hours, it has its various facets hidden under this comforting one. The village of Nischindipur goes completely dry in the summer; so much so that in sunny hot afternoons, it becomes difficult to traverse the village roads. The big perennial trees however, come to rescue from the scorching sun. The rainy seasons become more dangerous. Though the summers can be managed, the rains have often left the village roofless, with gardens and roads all swept under rain water. The seasons with their characteristic features reflect the life of Apu and Durga's family. The sunny flowering season of spring symbolize Durga's simplicity and childish nature. The harshness of summer signifies Durga's difficult life; the cruelty of the neighbours and her own mother when she reprimands her and the social pressures that demand the growing girl to be leashed. The full bloom of kash flowers in Sarad or early autumn mark the arrival of Goddess Durga to her maternal family, time for festivities and celebrations. But the unpredicted heavy rains in off season brings a tragic end of the festival time. The destruction of the kash bon by the

impending human civilization marks the end of Durga's life as well. The electric poles that run across the kash bon and railway tracks that have engulfed a part of the paddy fields bring a sense of sadness and fear in Durga. Though she is amused by the sound of steam engine and runs with Apu to enjoy the sight and sound of the steam engine, it leaves her with a sense of impending pain and sadness. She is choked with joy seeing the miracles of science in the form of steam engine but what chokes her more is the thought of kashbon and paddy fields engulfed by human civilization. The novelist depicts this sense of pain and utter failure to preserve nature by her falling sick after getting drenched in the heavy rains. Her uncontrollable rising temperature can be read as uncontrollable growth and advancement of science and technology, the arms of industrialization and urbanization engulfing the villages and farmlands of the villagers.

The narrative of Apu and Durga's life in *Pather Panchali* runs parallel to the changing conditions of the forest, the surrounding farmlands and wilderness. The changing season with its unique set of characteristics reflect the changing scenario in Durga's life. As the innocent simple girl, Durga, who loved and worshipped nature hits her puberty, she is pushed into a new phase of forced rules and regulations, norms and dictums dictated by the women in her neighborhood as well mother. In the name of grooming the growing girl, society starts taking baby steps towards killing her divine simplicity. The patriarchal society

represented here in the form of her neighbours fail to understand and Durga's immediate needs as a lonely girl. As they try to restrict her wanderings in the wilderness, they take baby steps towards strangulating her simple, spontaneous life, almost like slow poisoning her to death. The social restrictions imposed on her reflect the cultural development that engulfs the wild kashbon and paddy fields. The new dawn of human civilization indicated in the form of introduction of steam engine and electric poles running across the paddy field ushering in a new era in human development actually marks the slow death of nature and Durga. In *Pather Panchali* both nature and Durga are oppressed by the patriarchy.

Shorbojoya metaphorically means of winning the hardship and she really proves this. During the long absence of her husband, she keeps her family going. She finds her children's faces as lovely as jasmine flowers usually after a shower. Durga is a Hindu goddess worshiped as a deity of power. In the novel, Durga who also metaphorically represents the goddess of power. She shields her family with the means she collects from nature. The tale of Indir Thakur represents another aspect of insensitive patriarchal society. The practice of polygamy endorsed by patriarchal society was another calculative measure to keep women in absolute subjugation and oppression. Indir Thakurini who was widowed at a very tender age even before getting an opportunity of meeting her husband and starting her life with him is a live instance of the oppressive conditions that polygamy

could bring about. Her lonely life with no children of her own, living at the mercy of her brother reflect the unbearable condition of many such women who were exploited in the name of *kanyaday* in a patriarchal Bengal society and became victims of polygamy. The cinematic version of the novel, rightly catches on the condition of her lonely life through the metaphor in her song as she sings in her feeble voice in the fading light of the day:

“Hori din to gelo, sandhya holo, par koro amaare” which translates to: “God... the day is finished, the evening has descended...now please take me across”. The old age has been implied as the evening of life, and crossing the bar of life has been implied as crossing a river by a boat.

However, the ending of the novel upset's readers' expectations. The Nature that had provided Durga with the much-needed comfort and solace in her times of crisis and helplessness, turns against her and becomes the reason for her sudden death. The novelist very subtly leaves his readers wondering whether the sudden change in Nature's relation with Durga is a consequence of man's intervention and exploitation of her extensive spread through the village. Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya takes this hypothesis further in his other novels and manages to show how man exploits every bit of Nature ultimately leading to man's crisis as well as nature's crisis as depicted in *Aranyak*.

### **Nature in Khan's *Trespassing***

In comparison to Bhibhutibhushan's depiction of the Nature

as a compassionate soul, providing solace and peace in its lovers' heart and mind, Khan's *Trespassing* provides the ugly fate of nature: Nature as a victim of human commercialization. The novel is set in both Karachi city as well as the coastlines of the Indus Valley. The narrative begins with a description of the human invasion of spaces owned by non-human species. The novel depicts humans as a menace to non-human habitations and the narrative also directs the reader's attention to the infringement of the habitats of indigenous groups (Indus Valley fishermen) by industrial corporates, resulting in polluted and fissured landscapes. The interweaving of the turtle's lament as she is digging her nest alongside the industrial encroachment in the main narrative in a way aids to gauge the exploitation of Nature by humans. The turtle's sense of helplessness and fear is further revealed as she says, "how much safer it had been when the coastline belonged to the fishermen" (1). Uzma beautifully draws the coastline lights and the intruding crowd of human species making space in the otherwise open parts of Nature, thereby introducing the natural beings to a wide range of challenges, making them feel helpless and stranger in its own habitat.

### **Nature a Victim of Human Exploitation**

The novel also provides important insight in the cannibalistic nature of big corporate companies. The multinational corporations, with their power of technology and capital, have erased the boundaries that existed between human civilization and the wide expanses of Nature with its seas and sea creatures.

Widening of urban spaces by cutting down nature and creating coastlines as depicted in *Trespassing* have left the sea fishes and those who earned a living through them in perpetual crisis and loss. The author also highlights the diminishing beauty and grandeur of the Indus Valley which has been reduced into a deserted and "parched" landscape (101) and the loss of wealth of natural resources, which in earlier times had provided daily sustenance to the inhabitants (124). The novel describes how the massive business activity generated toxic smoke, and the use of granite and other chemicals for fishing contributed to making the environment hazardous for the human living (126).

The narrative of *Trespassing* honours the co-existence of nature and non-human life in human settings. Nature does not only serve as the background or as the provider of symbols and images to illustrate human affairs, but they also form a consistent part of the narrative. The presence of silkworms and their growth process, constitute a very important dimension of the novel. If Bandopadhyaya subtly depicts the rage of Nature for being exploited by humans, Khan describes in detail the exploitative nature of industry and technology that gradually thwarted the natural processes and disturbed biotic integrity. Khan informs her readers that silkworms kept in factory breeding cells have forgotten how to eat. Some workers had to "chop up their food in tiny slivers and change the supply nine times daily or the fussy creatures would starve" (105). The novel beautifully reflects on how

nature extends its arms for technological aid to survive in the harsh environment of commercialized projects.

**Conclusion:** Nature as presented in these two novels helps us to realise man's relationship with Nature. The beautiful relationship between Durga and the Nature if at all has undergone a change is because of man's selfish nature. Bandopadhyaya's novel that was written at a time when ecocriticism as a theory was not even established proves the far sightedness of the author and is best encapsulated in Khan's *Trespassing*. The human instinct to spread commercialization and urbanization has not only crippled the Nature and natural inhabitants but has also severed the symbiotic relationship between the human world and Nature. The literary world of eco-conscious masterpieces relentlessly attempts to bring human consciousness to strive towards a better future where a harmonious co-existence between humans and natural world will be possible.

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