

The Indian Roots of Eco-Aesthetics

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The relation between nature and man was a complex one from the very beginning of human race in the world. The nature by its beautiful and dreadful moments influences man every time. At the same time by his innovative actions and energetic reactions the man tries to create his own world within the world where he is living. In the time of such an interaction every human value including aesthetic one came into being. This is a fact pertaining to the tradition of knowledge irrespective of east and west.

In the western tradition we see nature as an object to be conquered and exploited for the pleasure of man. The religions in the west put man in the centre and see nature as a property of man. Here we lose the sympathetic attitude to other living organisms in our surroundings. In their literature also we get enough examples for the attacking mind of western man towards nature. The practice of science and technology especially the invention of Telescope and Microscope gave more energy for the anthropocentric view of nature. But when the time was gone, in the middle of twentieth century, as an explosive impact of industrialization and two world wars, the western man changed his mindset for repositioning himself in nature for a better survival. The changing attitude of western man towards nature gets expressed first through Rachel Louise Carson's book *Silent Spring* in 1962. In her book she points out some of the dreadful

consequences of using chemicals and pesticides for the cultivation. The poisonous atmosphere kills all the singing birds and alike. As a result even in the spring season the earth becomes silent.

In fact, the Green philosophy or Eco-philosophy in the west started to flourish as a result of a conscious effort to avoid the separation between the ways of man and nature. The ecological thoughts and its practice in literature soon became a school of thought in the west with the writings of so many critics and scholars namely Joseph Meeker (1974) ¹, William Ruekert (1978) ², Rosemary Radford Ruether(1983)³ and Cheryl Glotfelti (1996) ⁴. Thus Eco-aesthetics became a total approach to literature which includes every manner of literary interpretation existed upto this time. That means green philosophy or eco-aesthetics is a new school of thought according to western literary tradition. But when we come to the Indian side we can simply find out that the ecological thoughts and its literary practices have strong roots in our classical tradition and literature. Here, I intend to point out some of the contexts in which the nature has strong role in human emotions and relations and the respect shown by man in the east towards nature as his mother and protector.

Nature as Physical and Spiritual Presence

The modern thinkers interpret nature as a social construct and a historical category. When we think in real terms nature was there even in the absence of a social consciousness in man. Nature was a reality even at the time of no historical sense in man. In our ancient scriptures man saluted nature while recognizing it's physical and spiritual dimensions. The ancient man in India experienced the vibrations from the earth full of spirit through out his life. He said like this :

ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत् किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा : मा गृधः कस्य स्विद्धनम् ॥

-Īśāvāsyam : 1

In this sūkta the Vaktā has an opinion that the God lives in all the materials around us. According to this belief nobody has the right to destroy nature for his personal gain. By way of sacrificing something live your life fruitfully. Here we can hear a voice for a socialist world in respect of all the species in the earth. These lines simply avoid the false humanism that speaks only for human beings. In modern environmentalism we recognize the same spirit that pleads for universal justice among the species in earth. We can notice many more things in ancient Indian scriptures including Vedas and Upanishads. In these writings and speeches a sincere voice had been raised for earth and it still exists energetically in Indian culture as a religious faith.

De-forestation and multi-level pollution are the main reasons for the environmental imbalance and it causes serious climatic changes also. As a result of western influence in the modern period we are also ready to put axe in the roots without any kind of regret. But our forefathers thought in a different way when they need help from nature. Here we can remember one prayer from Atharvaveda :-

यत्ते भूमे विखनामि क्षिप्रं तदपि रोहत् ।
मा ते मर्म विमृग्वरि मा ते हृदयमर्षिपम् ॥

In this prayer we see the humility man expresses when he goes to cut a tree for his unavoidable use. The sincerity and respect to natural resources are very much commendable and imitative to our own time. Here man gives up his balloon like ego and accepts earth

as a common place for each and everyone in the world. Actually, this is the essence of all environmental thoughts existing in the world today. We can quote one more line from *Thaitthireeyam* for showing our ancestor's love and respect towards nature .

नमस्ते वायो त्वमेव प्रत्यक्षं ब्रह्मासि

(*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 1:12)

Vāyu often symbolizes the supreme deity, the spirit that is formless in nature . Vāyu is not just the air as an element but the presence of being and consciousness that exists everywhere but cannot be seen anywhere. Vāyu is one of the key concepts of Vedic thought that has great importance in Yoga, Āyurveda and Vedānta. It has many profound implications both at a cosmic level and relative to our own individual lives. Indeed if one understands Vāyu, one understands everything, including time, space and karma, life and death and one's own deeper Self. This truth is working in us when we do yoga as a way of life. We must say sorry to nature for polluting such a precious Prāṇa Vāyu through our unhealthy life style.

Here is a portion from 'Aitareya Upaniṣad' which says about the relation between living structures and nature's spirit : ""Fire, becoming speech, entered the mouth. Air becoming breath, entered the nostrils. The sun, becoming sight, entered the eyes. The quarters of space, becoming hearing, entered the ears. Plants and trees, becoming hairs, entered the skin. The moon, becoming the mind, entered the heart. Death, becoming the outbreath, entered the navel: water becoming semen entered the generative organ."

(*Aitareya Upaniṣad* 1:2:4)

In short we find in India a culture which realizes all the prime factors as Gods and worship them by keeping everything clean. This

is what is called Panchabhootopasana. In Ayurveda and Naturopathy we can find this upasana as an internal life style. Moreover all the organisms in the earth get equal importance in our ancient scriptures. This type of consideration to all the species is the essence of eco-philosophy discussed in modern world.

Nature in Classical Literature

India's most popular classic poet Kalidasa sketches his characters with a deep sense of nature and human psychology. He mixes nature and human emotions in a manner which bring a higher sense of aesthetics. In the later period this sense became the backbone of Indian aesthetics and environmental vision.

One critic says like this: "Man's relation to Nature in Kalidasa is an aesthetic and spiritual oneness experienced by the realisation of the essential unity of the beauty, truth and joy of man's inner being with the beauty, truth and joy of Nature. One feels alike the play of the Unseen Hand in the joyful and beautiful aspects of Nature as in the workings of the feelings and emotions of the human personality. This conviction permeates the whole attitude of the poet to Nature.

The Yakṣa in the Meghasandēśa appeals, in the fullness of his emotion, to the cloud for conveying his doleful message of love to his beloved in the distant city of Alaka. For, according to the poet, true emotion which holds a person in its grip and transforms his whole nature, knows no difference between animate objects imbued with feelings and inanimate Nature".⁵

धूमज्योतिःसलिलमरुतां सन्निपातः क्व मेघः
सन्देशार्था क्व पटुकरणौः प्राणिभिः प्रापणीयाः ।
इत्यौत्सुक्यादपरिगणयन् गुह्यकस्तं ययाचे
कामार्ता हि प्रकृतिकृपणाश्चेतनाचेतनेषु ॥

(Meghasandēśa 1: 5)

Kālidāsa's noblest creation, Śākuntala, is the child reared in the lap of Nature. She is the intimate friend of the forest-creeper and the boon companion of the Āshrama deer. She is the foster-daughter not only of the sage Kaṇva but also of the divinities of the wood, and just as the sage feels intense sorrow on the occasion of his parting with Śākuntala, The sage addresses them in the same manner as he would address Śākuntala's mother. To the poet's fancy a beautiful damsel and a creeper are objects alike of beauty. They are one in the aesthetic sense. One touch of magic will transform, the damsel into a creeper. The creeper entwines itself round a tree, as the beloved would cling to her lover. In the following sloka we can see the nature related attitude of Śākuntala, that is why, in her departure the whole surrounding is weeping for her.

पातुं न प्रथमं व्यवस्यति जलं युष्मास्वपीलेषु या
नादत्ते प्रियमण्डनापि भवतां स्नेहेन या पल्लवम् ।
आद्ये वः कुसुमप्रसूतिसमये यस्या भवत्युत्सवः
सेयं याति शकुन्तला पतिगृहं, सर्वैरनुज्ञायताम् ॥

(Abhijñāna Śākuntalam, 4 : 8)

In Ritusamhāra- a poem dedicated to seasons- also we see a heartfelt combination of nature and human mind. In all its six chapters we can follow nature in its vivid details colored with human perceptions.

काशेर्मही शिशिरदीधितिना रजन्यो हंसेर्जलानि सरितां कुमुदे : सरांसि ।
सप्तच्छदेः कुसुमभारनतैर्वनान्ता : शुक्लीकृतान्युपवनानि च मालतीभिः ॥

(Ritusamhāra, 3: 2)

Since Kālidāsa laid a strong foundation in literature for bringing in natural elements and human content in a proper way,

the same formula still rules our imagination and the way of portraying nature in works of art.

Nature in Sanghom Literature

As in Sankrit literature the south Indian literature also shows many examples for nature based thoughts and nature related literary aesthetics. In Sanghom age- a historical period from first century AD to fifth century AD- we see poetry collections like Akanānūru and Puraṇānūru. The first one deals with romantic and individual themes, at the same time, the second one deals with socio- economic themes . In Tolkappium- a book of literary studies produced in the Sanghom period - we see a special approach by which one can categorise literary works on the basis of geographical portions and the emotions depicted in a poem. This technique is called Thina Concept. According to this concept each geographical area has its own behavioral patterns and emotional content. Each Thina contains Muthalpporul (Space and time) , Karupporul(flora and fauna in the area) and Uripporul (Emotional content). Kurinchi (Hilly area), Mullai (Forest and its surroundings), Palai (Dry land), Marutham (River and riverside), and Neythal (Coastal area) are the main Thinas described in Tolkappium.

On the basis of this concept we can study not only the Sanghom literary works but also the modern literature produced in east or west. A detailed study is needed for evaluating the contributions made by South India towards the development of Indian aesthetics. There is no doubt that this concept is an original contribution to the field of environmental aesthetics which gets prominence in contemporary literary scene.

Nature in Modern Literature

Even after centuries, the tradition of environmental friendship which actually started in Vedas and Upaniṣads, is still continuing in modern Indian literature also. In modern period we find this natural spirit mainly in Rabindranath Tagore, N. Kumaranasan, G.Sankara kurup and O.N.V. Kurup. In various poems like Geetanjali and Crescent Moon Tagore proclaimed the unity among the living organisms including the human beings. Moreover, the influence of Advaita philosophy in Tagore and Kumaranasan is very much visible in their way of envisaging nature as a protecting factor in human life. Nalini , Leela and Chintavishtayaya Seetha are equally elucidating the role of natural elements in human life. In G.Sankara kurup's poems like Sagara Geetam, Nakshatra Geetam, Suryakanthi and Viswadarsanam we see a very thoughtful and scientific approach to nature without losing the essence of Indian spirituality. O.N.V Kurup's Bhoomikkoru Charama Geetam and Surya Geetam are also eligible to quote for its sincere approach to the current environmental problems due to the unending exploitation by the greedy men.

The eco-feminists in our time must know the depth of our Kaavu culture especially existing in Kerala. It is a way for adoring Mother Goddess and a smart way of protecting forest lands from the harmful attack of greedy people. The noted Eco-feminist Rosemary Ruether equates nature with female and culture with male.⁶ But in Kerala the protection of nature became a culture from immemorial time. Still in Kerala we can see hundreds of Kaavu lands existing as rich in bio-diversity. Besides that we can remember the culture behind the rare concepts of a Forest Goddess (Vanadevatha) and a Sea Goddess (Kadalamma) existing in our society. It actually

shows the deeper sense of attachment towards nature carried by our forefathers.

In short, the philosophical back ground of modern eco-aesthetics was very much in the thoughts of indians from the very ancient period. The western writing for protecting nature is a recently developed one comparing to Indian tradition which created slogans like इदं न मम and वसुधैव कुटुंबकम्. As part of the westernization, we are also losing the roots of our ancient culture and the nature based outlook of life. But still we have hope in seeing the spark of our traditional attitude towards nature in our artistic and literary creations. Even in the post-modern period the Indian mind is vibrating for the Earth which is green in colour and rich in bio-diversity for a peaceful life.

Reference

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