



# NATURE AND/OR CULTURE?

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**Abstract :** Nature is like the seed that has sprouted the offspring 'Culture'. Very similar to how our roots and traditions are forgotten with the eventual progress, so has Nature been relegated to oblivion. The paper discusses the same and analyses the dual existence that is present in the ongoing centuries. The idea that Nature can exist as a Culture in itself has also been discussed through the Harvest festivities around India which celebrates the bounties of Nature. While a conflict exists strongly, there are traces of coexistence as well. The paper also attempts to study the dominant culture and the omnipresent Nature through the course of literature spanning eras to bring about the portrayal of simultaneous ideologies among contemporary and pan regional authors. The concern regarding the behaviour of the 'submissive other' Nature, the way in which She protects herself from harm, the danger we humans are bringing to our civilisational development - all are subjects covered by the paper which has tried to provide definite answers to such questions.

## **Index Terms**

**Nature, culture, harvest festivities, other, coexistence conflict.**

The subsistence of Nature alongside Culture poses questions incomprehensible. The efforts of Culture to efface Nature, in its entirety, into a meagre abstraction thrive multiple times as results of innumerable reasons. Will the above postulations be able to gain their stand point in the coming future is the keynote of debate that this paper wants to hold out through the themes discussed henceforth.

Religion, the principles that hold the candle to our living and lifestyle, was Pagan when humans originated; such impressing was Nature's grasp on the evolved little apes that they started leading their lives according to her guidance and philosophy. The affective filter and cognitive core in the devil's workshop inculcated culture, emphasizing to be termed as 'civilizing'. And exactly at that crucial juncture of evolution, came, what has since made all the difference. Rightly put into words is this: "Our most cultural state is one of total certainty – which is the reason those of us who are most certain are those who are most out of touch with nature," quotes Anthony Marais, an American writer in his 2008 book *Delusionism*.<sup>[1]</sup>

'Nature', this word is derived from *natura*, a Latin term which meant 'birth', in the archaic sense. It is the physical world that includes everything which is not man-made. On the other hand, 'culture' can be traced back to Cicero who used the term *cultura animi*, meaning development of the soul. It can be simply defined as a path of life pre-defined by the society: the rules, norms, behavioral patterns that are laid down to be followed by the people who would become a part of that culture. Culture nurtured the barbarians and the savages, who were allegedly the sons of the Nature, and made them like what we are today, polished and well-dressed. A human being is a part of Nature; culture is a part of the human being. These two ideas cannot be separated till the last human being is alive and breathing on this planet. None of the two can be considered superior to the other; they were born with the emergence of human beings and continue to thrive within their mindset.

The concepts of nature and culture are interdependent when it gets related to the world of humans so much so that, both continue to influence the lives of billions. The human world is highly impacted by Nature on the outside and Culture from within. Since the advent of humanity, people have not only distanced themselves from nature in general and their natural relations in particular, but they have also chosen to maintain this distance since time immemorial. In other words nothing has been done towards improving the natural relationship that man has with nature and natural beings. It is often perceived that the need of urbanization and in turn globalization has compelled humans to create a new world of their own which is furthered from mother earth. This new world is a concrete jungle, grayish and dark, noisy and tempestuous. Human lives, emotions, even their beliefs are far removed from nature's own ways. Humans are more concentrated towards building a 'new nature' within the old set up yet change the base and the foundation. This thought that is prevalent among big minds is infectious, marginalized and destructive. Technological advancement, profitable projects, progress towards a nuke age – all notions frequent our minds and divert our paths from calm to calamity. As a result of this, not only have the natural resources being harmed, but natural beings – animals, birds, reptiles and what not – have also lost their habitats. Their dwelling places are fast disappearing, they are being taken over by malicious humans who idolize taking over the whole world and keeping to themselves. Selfish and vested interests restrict them from sharing their acquired 'riches' with them who are the actual inheritors. In every possible view is seen destruction, destruction that knows no end.

Akin to nature is culture. People; specially the other, the East, the Orient; have time and again wanted to imitate the West, the main, the Occident. We are the products of the colonial and the post-colonial era, the consequences of which have been grave

and deep. Even if we don't want to imitate we will do so subconsciously, we know 'they' are better because they were the rulers. We have succeeded and we have changed. But what got left behind is a plethora of traditional values and religious morals. A good change is always welcome yet like man who distanced himself from nature we distanced ourselves from our culture. There is no salvation and our commitment towards such an unnecessary change is beyond redemption. We have been different in our dresses, food, mental and physical upbringing as well as societal norms. Now we are similar to them and different from our forefathers, our forefathers who used to worship natural forces and had staunch belief on their cultural mindset.

We have not only uprooted our trees or our traditions, we have uprooted our Nature and Culture from our existences. We have replaced them by only us; like God, humans have now become omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. We cannot think otherwise, cannot let others share this world with us and cannot let our own culture win the popular spot in our hearts. We have grown this affective tendency of hegemony and of monopolizing this whole geographical landscape gifted to us and care for nothing else.

"Culture is what people invent when they have lost nature," says Diane Ackerman<sup>[2]</sup>, an American poet and naturalist. The root cause of the gradual degradation in the perceptions of mankind probably lies in culture itself. Culture does save us from savagery, but we can also state here that culture did nothing to save us from denigrating ourselves. It was earlier in our cultures that we worshipped Nature, yet it was culture again that made us slaughter animals and then again it was the need to become more 'cultured' that we destroyed trees, polluted the air, made the soil toxic and diluted the water. Now, we are even sparing our fellow humans. Culture remains the catalyst in all these spheres. The constitution that was laid down had plenty of loopholes. These faults were never rectified and they gradually led to this nowhere.

As Indians, residents of the land of diverse cultures and glorious heritage, people witness the natural hide and seek play through subtle occasions celebrated to uphold the dignified aura of the haloed Nature. The harvest festivals are many, where Nature is maintained to be the vibrant showstopper, walking the planned and laid out ramps of Culture. She is portrayed as the mother, the savior, the deity and the hope of dependence who nurtures all her children equally.

Nobanno is basically a Bengali harvest festival celebrated with new food and lots of dance and music, especially in Bangladesh and West Bengal. It is mainly a festival of food, made from the freshly harvested grains, and thus, many local Bengali cuisines are prepared. Baisakhi of the Punjab provinces is essentially a spring harvest festival of the Sikhs. This day, besides being the day of the establishment of the Khalsa order, is a day for the Sikhs to visit Gurudwaras, hold long processions and celebrate with exchanging numerous sweet dishes prepared to commemorate the day. Ugadi or Gudi Padwa of the Deccan and Konkan is yet another such festivity that marks the lunisolar New Year and the bounty of nature. We can see people decorating their houses with colorful designs, visiting temples and cooking their special dish *pachadi* busily. Vishu, celebrated in South India around the same time of the year also attracts attention through the elaborate feast called *sadhya* and reaches a new spectacle through firework shows that are the master attraction. It involves all people, young and old, rich and poor. None of these festivals are restricted by boundaries of locale, religion, caste, financial condition or creed. These are the festivals of Nature, one who accepts all without discrimination.

Yet, these festivals are still mostly a phenomenon of the farmers in the rural areas. Nature yet has not been able to surpass through, to make her way to the skyscrapers and apartments. The exact dates of the harvest festivals or their appropriate purposes are neither remembered nor known in the urban locale of even those regions that are widely known for these celebrations. This proves that the conflict is specific, not applicable to all. Like the tribes of the Pygmies, Oraons, Jarwas, Mundas or Santhals, who have preserved their culture among the boughs of Nature, the agriculturists too are the sons and daughters of Nature unlike the civilized city dwellers.

Theories are plenty and texts several that talk of this aforementioned nature-culture conflict. When analyzed theoretically, references to this debate on nature versus culture can be explicitly found in some of the infamous literary theories that are being worked on across the world extensively.

Through post-colonialism, this paper finds it very interesting to find out that elimination of culture is more prevalent in those civilizations and countries that have undergone years of colonialism and imperialism. Since they have been ruled by superior forces, the cultures of such countries have changed to assimilated cultures consisting of diversity. The orient takes the occident as the apex model of being cultured and tries to mimic that. In the works of Edward Wadie Said, especially *Orientalism* (1978)<sup>[3]</sup>, Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994)<sup>[4]</sup>, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999)<sup>[5]</sup>, this thought has been visited over again and again. Until and unless the mind is decolonized, the scope of retaining the native culture will get narrowed into alleys.

Elzbieta Hałas can be quoted as saying that this theory is the "antithesis to the intellectual dogmas of naturalism."<sup>[6]</sup> Culturalism is the central importance of culture as an organizing force in human affairs. It is also described as an ontological approach that seeks to eliminate simple binaries between seemingly opposing phenomena such as nature and culture.<sup>[7]</sup> Coined by Polish-American philosopher and sociologist Florian Znaniecki in his book *Cultural Reality* (1919), culturalism is the epistemological approach aiming to eliminate dualisms such as the belief that nature and culture are opposite realities.<sup>[7]</sup> This theory would help the paper to substantiate the point stated above that discusses the similarities between Nature and Culture.

The paper mentions this recent theory of studies, Gender Studies; that covers a wide genre of topics and serves mostly as an umbrella term, because of Sherry Beth Ortner, an American cultural anthropologist. During the 1960s and 1970s, she drew a parallel between the gender roles and the concepts of nature and culture, wherein Sherry emulated that woman is the nature while man is the culture.<sup>[8]</sup> This similar delineation can be taken to depict that nature has been always considered to be the weaker force, while culture is the influencer. Yet in recent times, man has forgotten all boundaries to unfold himself as the new master.

A similar theme has been dealt with in the works of some of the best authors around the world. They have, time and again, come back to the themes of nature being civilized by culture, or at the least being attempted to. All the authors of the texts mentioned below are renowned enough to help give voice to the voiceless of the society, the oppressed who are given no equal footing, no equal treatment, to the nature and her bosom children.

The greed of the humans and the constant chase of Nature have been perfectly portrayed in the American writer Herman Melville's famous novel *Moby-Dick or The Whale* (1851)<sup>[9]</sup>. Ahab, the captain of the whaling ship Pequod obsessively quests for Moby Dick, a giant white sperm whale; everything because this sea beast bit off Ahab's leg from the knee. This quest is

really unnecessary because a whale that cannot be held responsible for defending itself against unwanted interference in its home ground, the sea, is being chased with the purpose of taking revenge. Ahab, here, behaves absolutely like a normal human being who does not care about the existence of Nature or of his culture, he was not born to think differently, he was born just to follow what his contemporaries were doing.

Tess is a pure representation of Nature, in the novel *Tess of D'Urbervilles*<sup>[10]</sup> by Thomas Hardy. She is forced to become the face of culture by the prevailing dominating circumstances therewith ultimately being subjugated for not accepting the harsh civilizing manners. Alec d'Urberville is brought out as the superior, a representative of culture who dislikes preserving the natural form, he wants to ravage and destroy it. The execution of Tess was unforeseen yet it was not protested against by anyone. This can be equated with the human nature of understanding that something wrong is happening but no one wants to bell the cat. Acting like Angel Clare is not enough unless the raised voice is heard clearly and is persistent.

Another literary masterpiece, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818)<sup>[11]</sup>, portrays man's greed to become the ever-prevailing God. Victor Frankenstein, a young scientist, gravely wanted to turn himself into a God by creating a living being with his own hands. Just like man is today, the monster that was created turned out to be hideous, emotionless and lacked culture. Again, like Victor had forsaken the monster after it turned out to be beastly and awful; humans have also forsaken Nature as Nature is now lifeless and ugly. There is nothing more left to admire. No beauty is left for the eyes of the beholder.

*Brave New World* (1932)<sup>[12]</sup> is a famous dystopian novel written by the English author Aldous Huxley. This novel portrays the dystopian society that is mainly driven by technology, intelligence and manipulation. This paper has taken up this novel to make the point concrete that if nature and culture are both rejected from a normal human life, what would eventually become of it. The course of this novel basically deals with the same, and it is very disturbing in its entirety. The treatment meted out to the Savage is what civilization has been doing to Nature since ages; the Savage thus becomes the Nature. The paper suggests that we should, if possible, become Bernard Marx already, when there is still time and not regret later.

Both nature and culture now seem to thrive minimally amidst bigger ideas. While you might not be able to find a dense forest you will probably catch a glimpse of a tree, a single one, inside acres of residential complexes. Animals are not found roaming habitually in dense jungles; we find specially created national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, biosphere reserves for them. We suddenly had the urge to protect them so they are now bound to preserve themselves in the way we want them to. Keeping a pet has become a trend these days. There has been a sharp rise in the count of pet owners. But that again is an unwanted practice. Those animals are to be living in the wild, enjoying their free life. Since we want them to be with us, in our homes, as our companions, they have to be; they cannot be living in the wild. Natural organisms cannot get extinct because we do not want them to. Culture has ceased as well. We are reminded of our roots during celebratory occasions only. The over-dominance of social media in our lives makes us conscious about various trends. To showcase one such we often wear ethnic and eat local cuisine to show, 'just to show,' that we have not forgotten the culture, where we belong. Both existences are up to that. We remember nature on specific days; we remember our culture during specific moments: a pseudo nature and a pseudo culture are prepared to be staged, cut and fitted according to our whimsical needs. Culture exists today because it is again us who won't let the culture die.

In the Eastern society, we conceptualize the notions of Nature and Culture as dichotomous; they survive differently and are not interrelated. This paper thus takes up the pains to prove that it is not so. The paper believes that the 'nature-culture divide'<sup>[13]</sup> is just taken up on the basis of the fact that these two ideas have already been separately treated. If we study till the depth of the two matters concerned here, we will see that nature and culture have a lot of similarities and are utterly interdependent. Nature gave birth to culture, such has also been proposed by the fresh theory of neo-Darwinism, while culture itself tried to prune nature. If one is blocked out, the other cannot keep shining. The social versus biological debate is of utmost prevalence in this regard. Anthropologists have taken help of this to taper down the division between nature and culture as they reluctantly reject biological determinism. Thus, this paper presents the central idea which demonstrates the nature and culture are the two faces of the same coin, the coin that should be judiciously used by the humankind at large.

Though mainly a scientific topic, not much of interest from the perspective of liberal arts, the views put forth by Rosi Braidotti, Alan H. Goodman, Bruno Latour et.al. are worth giving a mention. While a current concept of 'nature culture dualism' is swiftly coming up, Braidotti, though yet unsuccessfully, urges philosophers to think beyond the ontological division of nature and culture and create something new, she maintains a neutral stance.<sup>[14]</sup> But on one hand, Goodman is trying to scientifically rationalize and justify all natural (moral and biological) occurrences<sup>[15]</sup> while on the other hand Latour absolutely nullifies the idea of nature, rejecting her from all academic fields.<sup>[16]</sup> He is returning back to the essentialist view of early anthropologists, neglecting the forced cultural changes happening all around. Surprisingly, Latour has faced both – people for and people against his views. What this paper stresses on is the fact that they are all well – known and critiques of repute. Yet, if their standpoints vary like heaven and hell, so remains the division unresolved, conflicted and easily strived. This paper, even then, stands with nature and vetoes the division.

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