



Deforestation and Biodiversity: A Literary Perspective

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Abstract: Literature is an important tool to make people aware about environmental degradation. Literature makes the people aware, the way they are damaging the natural world. Environment plays an important role in the life of social beings and the impression of nature can be seen on individual's literary writings. One can probably say that literature cannot exist solely in the vacuum and the activities that take place in this society are related to the human life that exists on this planet. The interrelatedness of nature, human life and literature cannot be ignored. Natural environment has always remained an important part of many literary texts and with the recent increase in environmental problems and issues, writers have specifically focused on environmental problems. Such texts reflect social, economic and cultural implications in the literary works and presents complicated relationship between humans and their physical environment. Our forests are more and more prone to human influence, be that from extensive deforestation, or from an ever-expanding tourist infrastructure. Most recently, environmental hazards that trigger the death of the forest and cause environmental depredation have become popular literary topics. The present paper seeks to explore some novels which inform about the deforestation and ecological concerns.

IndexTerms - forest, deforestation, trees, nature, environmental degradation.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is the source which can bring the light in the field of ecology and increase the awareness among us towards the non-human world. William Ruckert says, "We need to make some connections between literature and the sun, between teaching literature and the health of the biosphere" (109) Literature informs both the beauty of the forest and the process of deforestation poetically, by highlighting human attitudes toward nature in this process. Readers are able to form critical opinions about these issues by weighing the characters' perspectives against one another. As Glen A. Love in "Revaluing Nature" says, "The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world"(237). Since the time of "Hebrews" and "Hesiod", individuals have always experienced an emergent need to preserve the environment; and even Plato remarked on "severe deforestation, and lamented the loss of fertile soil and defaced landscapes" (Wapner, 2010, p.39).

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), widely credited, with the first rallying of environmentalism as a public movement, was a study of the toxic effects of residues of industrial and agricultural chemicals in animal and human bodies. Cheryll Glotfelty as the founder of U.S. Ecocriticism. She "greened" the field of literature through her important anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader*. On the British side of things, Ecocriticism emerged through critic Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*; and similar to *Silent Springs*, many British critics have drawn inspiration from Raymond Williams' book *The Country and the City*. Lawrence Buell in his essay, *Literature and Environment*.

DEFORESTATION AND BIODIVERSITY

Deforestation is the removal of a forest or cluster of trees from land which is then converted to a non-forest use. Deforestation can involve conversion of forest land to farms, ranches, or urban use. The most concentrated deforestation occurs in tropical rainforests, which are particularly important to the world because they provide a habitat for millions of species of organisms, they regulate the world's climate, they store nearly half of the world's rainwater and they contain plants that are used in modern medications. Rain forests also absorb massive amounts of carbon dioxide (CO₂).

About 31% of Earth's land surface is covered by forests. Deforestation can directly lead to biodiversity loss when animal species that live in the trees no longer have their habitat, cannot relocate, and therefore become extinct. Deforestation can lead certain tree species to permanently disappear, which affects biodiversity of plant species in an environment. Deforestation affects biodiversity in a number of ways. Trees may be removed from particular areas in order to make various wood products, to clear land for new buildings or roads, or for creating new farming or grazing land. It can also occur as a result of natural disasters or accidental fires.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FOREST

Forest is a part of the ecosystem that plays a significant role in cultivating nutrition and conservation of biodiversity. Trees take care of greenhouse gas emissions which prevent global warming by absorbing carbon dioxide. But over time human activities have interfered with the environment causing significant changes in carbon dioxide level. According to an article “The Atmosphere: Getting a Handle on Carbon Dioxide – Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet” published on the official website of NASA, “the concentration of carbon dioxide in Earth’s atmosphere is currently at nearly 412 parts per million (ppm) and rising. This represents a 47 percent increase since the beginning of the Industrial Age, when the concentration was near 280 ppm...” (Buis, 2020). In addition to the enhancement in carbon dioxide concentration, deforestation activities left forests with little room to fulfil their intended purpose. Environmental destruction has been at its height following industrialization and urbanization, with immense impact on ecosystems, livestock and people. There have been various such instances in which individuals have struggled in emerging and industrialized nations.

THE LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

Arundhati Roy has given her view that “writers must sometimes take sides in protesting against flagrant social and/or environmental injustices need to be measured against the constitutive instabilities of her chosen (literary) form.” (Huggan and Tiffin 34).

Literary engagement with forests and deforestation is particularly seen in the novel *The Glass Palace* written by Amitav Ghosh. “The Glass Palace” is a historical novel, which is set in Burma, and Bengal, India. It presents man’s selfishness for land and money that leads to the destruction of ecology. He gives the vivid description of the Burmese forest and exploitation of environment by Britishers and links to the history. Burma had a rich landscape and natural resources before invasion of British as Rajkumar, a pivotal character reflects, —Ah, Burma- now Burma was a golden land. (TGF494).

The Glass Palace mainly depicts the concept of environmental degradation. The sole intention of British attack over Mandalay is the teak forests which they want to convert into the ligneous yards for their commercial purposes. So, the logs of wood are the cause of the war and the British intervention in the South Asia results into an unusual explosion of deforestation where the large type of flora and fauna were polished out to make for commercially money-spinning plantations, wood factories and industries.

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh exposes involvement of man’s exploitation with the natural resources. It depicts the deforestation and exploitation of the Earth through many ways. They had killed birds, animals, and deforming the landscape and biodiversity. Burma has rich teak forests and the English captures Burma for trade as Ghosh described, in the novel, —A war over wood? Who’s ever heard of such a thing? (15) Teakwood trees are cut down in large amount for industrial purpose. Ghosh provides a detailed account of brutal deforestation by the Britishers in Burma as given: The trees once picked, had to be killed and left to dry . . . The killing was achieved by the girdle of incisions, thin slits, carved deep into the wood at a height of four feet and six inches off the ground . . . The assassinated trees were left to die where they stood, sometimes for three years even more . . . Dead though they were, the trees would sound great toxins of protests as they fell, unloosing thunder explosions that could be heard miles away bringing down everything in their path, rafts of saplings, looped nets of rattan. (69).

He further informs us, Often the logs came in not singly but in groups, dozens of tons of hardwood caroming down the stream together: when they hit each other, the impact would be felt all the way up the banks. At times, a log would snag, in rapids or on the shore and within minutes, a tangled dam would rise out of the water, plugging the stream. One after other logs would go cannoning into one another, adding to the weight of the accumulated hardwood. The weight of the mass would mount until it became an irresistible force. Then at last something would give; a log, nine feet in girth would snap like a matchstick. With a great detonation, the dam would capsize and a tidal wave of wood and water would wash down the slopes of the mountain. (60)

The British has sent troops and conquered Burma over a trivial quarrel about tax levied for logs on the British timber companies. Such green destruction has been detected by one of the major characters of the novel, Dolly, while roaming around the rubber plantation, observes the changes in countryside. Ghosh portrays the harsh reality, the degradation of the green culture. He focuses on the never-ending human greed which is not only bitters the environment but also humans. Amitav Ghosh says in this novel that the invaders have destroyed the store houses, oil tanks and the successful sounds of attacking. The dangerous clouds of smoke are the creators of air and noise pollution and a warning to the human and non-human worlds and passionately contributing in the environmental degradation. This unbeatable and impossible attitude of man towards nature and mankind itself is a warning to the world.

Nature acts as both preserver and destroyer. The law of the nature that, if man lives in harmony with nature, it protects him. But if man becomes enemy to nature, then same nature will also ruin him in the form of natural disaster. In *The Glass Palace* is described that a female character named Jaya was adorned by the attractiveness of palm trees, but under that palm tree there were houses of birds, where they took protection during night as mentioned, “Jaya was fascinated by the oil palms . . . Between the palms there were birds-houses” (500).

Ghosh tries to remind the human beings that animals and birds took shelter in the lap of the nature. Animals build their houses in the forest on earth and birds build their nests on trees. Human beings should stop from grabbing their houses as well as food. During deforestation, human beings are uninformed that they are making thousands of birds and animals homeless. Nature provides them with food and shelter. When man becomes enemy of nature, accordingly, nature also shows its indifferent attitude towards man. By deconstructing nature, man is not only creating hurdles for himself, rather upsetting the bio-diversity and future generations. It is not only birds and animals that take shelter in the lap of the nature but human beings too.

Thus, through the pages of *The Glass Palace* Ghosh makes us aware of the importance of forests in the social, historical, economic, cultural and industrial development of nation. Forest plays a vital role in the maintenance the ecological balance. He describes the unmindful attitude of the people who have ruined the forests to plant the rubber estates with the usage of modern techniques and their after effects. The Britishers, Indians and Burmese people have exploited the Nature for their own interests.

Mahasweta Devi , is an Indian writer and an unswerving activist. Her novels extol the forgotten heroes like Rani Luxmi Bai, Birsa Munda, Chotti Munda and many others who fought for the cause environment. The novels *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* recreate the tribal history of the Mundas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the British had consolidated their economic and political hegemony over India at the cost of her natural wealth and freedom of her people. *Aranyer Adhikar* or *Rights to the Forest* was originally written in Bangla in 1975 and published in serial form. This novel discusses the issue of the “rights” of the inhabitants of the forest to their land through the historical events of the Ulgulan, the Munda rebellion led by Birsa Munda against the British colonial regime in the period 1895-1901. During the colonial period, the British devised policies to exploit nature and people. Large scale destruction of forest cover was done to meet the demands of the rapidly developing industrial society in Europe. All this was done very shrewdly to befool the people. The process of industrialization in England was fuelled by India’s teak and Sal forests and bamboo forests. The novel reveals the destruction of the forests that led to the loss of biodiversity and also the primitive life and culture of tribal people.

The Book of the Hunter is another novel of Mahasweta Devi, that throws light on various ecological issues and their impact on the tribals, the children of Nature. Of them the first is the depletion of natural resources. She views that it is the civilized people who engage themselves in the depletion of natural resources, by destructing the forests. They hardly realize that deforestation is one of the greatest threats to environment and that it would destroys the plant and the animal lives but also the Shabars (tribals) of their environment. *The Book of the Hunter* exposes that Mahasweta Devi has clear message for the readers that one should plant at least a tree and learn to imbibe the sense of oneness that the tribals share with the forest and thus keep going a green environment for posterity.

The Overstory Richard Powers deals in large part with these questions about American environmentalism and its people. Humanity has grown at a pace which has led to irreversible environmental effects. All developing and developed countries are suffering in different ways because of this. To reduce rising inequality and achieve prosperity, the use of a large range of commodities in these nations needs to be put to equability. The consumption of “the earth’s resources” by “an average American” is believed to be greater “than ... an average ecosystem dweller of the Third World” (Gadgil & Guha, 2005, p.178). In *The Overstory*, Jorgen Hoel believes that the chestnut tree he has planted in his garden will be a source of play for his children as they will “shake the trunks and eat [its fruit] for free” (OS7). It is from such an expectation that we learn the vital environmental needs of humans. According to people like Hoel, their only wish is for “sustainable development” to ensure that the trees whose shade and fruits he had at his time would be enjoyed by his future generations too. The giant trees of America known as Redwoods and dubbed as John Muir which were once considered its heritage after the 1850's started to be cut down. Such trees that the citizens previously admired for their immense height, greater life expectancy and the consistency of not being easily withered due to issues such as forest fires, etc., later became in their eyes a source of income. Starting from the county of Humboldt, these logging activities started to spread across the region, picking up a pace soon after World War II. The conifer species known as Douglas-fir which had been ignored earlier in contrast with redwoods had also been placed into use and made to disappear as the need for houses emerged after the war. In the novel, Powers deals with these species and their mass destruction, by observing which environmentalists came out as individuals or as groups in order to limit the cutting down. Human civilizations have now consumed natural resource. Powers also quotes Thoreau in *The Overstory* as he says “Old trees are our parents, and our parents’ parents, perchance. If you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity...” (5). The novel's theme can be summarized across these few lines, where it becomes easy to estimate the zeal of the lead characters to save America's heritage trees and protect them on the stake of their own lives.

If you want to maximize the net present value of a forest for its current owners and deliver the most wood in the shortest time, then yes: cut the old growth and plant straight-rowed replacement plantations, which you’ll be able to harvest a few more times. But if you want next century’s soil, if you want pure water, if you want variety and health, if you want stabilizers and services, we can’t even measure, then be patient and let the forest give slowly. (555) We see how he implores the reader to protect the trees and Mother Earth.

In *The Overstory*, we note that as a young girl Patricia begins to engage with trees and has a fondness for them. Soon just like her father, she also begins to understand their significance, which is why her father shares his thoughts on trees with her instead of her brothers and offers her Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* on her birthday saying “For my dear daughter, who knows how big and wide the family tree really is” (p.147). Patricia like Thoreau is also able to study trees and stay among them because this is what brings a sense of peace to her. As she mentions that the tranquillity experienced by Anne Frank during World War II at the sight of a chestnut “in [her] hopeless hiding” is incomparable to all other earthly pleasures (p.275). Olivia, another female, who is the ‘Erin Brockovich’ of *The Overstory*, changes her role from being a girl with tumultuous feelings to a woman with modelled altruistic behaviour. Erin discovered the poisoning of water in Hinkley by Pacific Gas and Electric Company, and promptly brought a lawsuit against them. Olivia also felt the decay of the old growth trees as shown to her by the creatures of light, which ignited in her a desire to preserve these heritage trees. Not only did this girl live among the trees for more than a year, but she also appealed to the men around her to understand the damage done to these trees and the need to stand up for them.

CONCLUSION

Deforestation thus became important subject in the works of the writers. They conceived of a sustainable practice for caring forests, so that future generations would not be adversely impacted, and that they would have access to the same resources as the current

generation. The writers clearly show their concern and consciousness towards the environmental issues. Readers too are able to form critical opinions about these issues by weighing the characters' perspectives against one another. Through the pages of the novel, the writers contribute to the current discussion about environmental issues by promoting a more reflective and reflexive attitude toward forests and the processes of deforestation, which are accelerating at an alarming rate in our globalized world.

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