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## John Fowles's *The Tree*: An Ecological Perspective

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John Fowles' non-fictional semi-auto-biographical work *The Tree* presents a new take on the environment and the green movement. In a very anecdotal fashion, Fowles raises certain thought provoking questions. *The Tree* is only a context and its sub-text is a whole lot rambling questions on ecology and creation. Fowles presents no solutions to the problems but leaves it to the reader to ponder (and to smoulder!!). And like most of his works, there is a twist here, too. This paper tries to unravel the seemingly simple but complex web of ideas in this poetic prose.

John Fowles's *The Tree* (pub.1979) is a thought provoking book, which argues in favour of the 'untameable wild' of nature. His real subject, according to Barry Lopez is "our distance, real and imagined, from the material world. The key to his fiction lies in his relationship to the natural world. John Fowles seems to be a follower of Deep Ecology. It is a contemporary ecological and environmental philosophy, which advocates the inherent worth of all living beings regardless of their use for man. It calls for a radical re-structuring of ideas. Fowles starts the book with an interesting anecdote—he tells us how his father, living in a suburb at the mouth of Thames, forty miles away from London, cultivated apples and pears in the backyard of his home, which was less than a tenth of acre. He portrays his father as a part-time gardener, who through his constant pruning and de-branching, produced the best apples and pears that he had ever eaten. However, at the very outset he differentiates his attitude from that of his father's. What he recognized in himself was a passion for natural history and countryside; that is, "a longing to escape from those highly unnatural trees in our back garden and all they stood for". Fowles found himself secretly craving for everything that his environment did not possess – space, wildness, hills, woods . . . the woodland especially the 'real' trees.

He contrasts his father's interest in growing, ordering and pruning as quite different from his own nature. He describes himself in his later years, as the owner of thirty acres of wild land. On a deeper analysis, he concludes that successful artistic parents rarely gave rise to successful sons and daughters. It may be because the urge to create, which must always be the need to escape everyday reality, is better fostered by pruning and confining natural instinct. Citing Freud, he states that nine-tenths of all artistic creation derives its basic energy from repression and sublimation. The fact that he should have differed so much from his father in his attitude towards nature, he says, is not because of Oedipal guilt, but a healthy natural process. Using the metaphor of the growth of the branches of a tree, he illustrates:

That I should have differed so much from my father in this seems to be in retrospect not in the least a matter of Oedipal guilt, but a healthy natural process, just as the branches of a healthy tree do not try to occupy another's territory. The tree in fact has biochemical and light sensitive systems to prevent this pointless and wasteful secondary invasion of one branch's occupied space by another. The fact that the two branches

grow in different directions and ways does not mean they do not share a same mechanism of need, a same set of deeper rules (21-22).

He confesses that he had shocked his father buying a 'derelict' farm. Though his father thought it madness to take on such a 'jungle', Fowles says that he left it largely alone, in effect to his co-tenants, the wild birds and beasts, its plants and insects. He admits that his father would never have understood that it was his equivalent of his father's own beautifully disciplined apples and pears and that it was just as much cultivated, though not in the literal sense.

In the third section of his work he had stated:

I do not plan my fiction any more than I normally plan woodland walks;  
I follow the path that seems most promising at any given point not some itinerary decided before entry(55).

But a tentative structure seemed to emerge from the randomly haphazard thoughts. The first part discusses the contradictory attitudes to Nature of the father and son. The second section talks about the scientific and artistic attitude towards nature – he elaborates and labours on this point. The third and concluding part which is the most mystic and poetical part of his work, exposes his awe and wonder of Nature. He emotionally states that he is bereft of words in the midst of 'wild' nature. Here he raises questions but does not provide any solutions. Nevertheless, the questions he raises concern the crux of ecology – should one try to manipulate Nature or be a part of it, deriving succour from it?

In the second part of the work, John Fowles says that there are two ways (modes) of seeing or knowing Nature : (1) Nature as an external assembly of names and facts and (2) Nature as an internal feeling. The first one is an abstract intellectual concept. The second one is an experience whose deepest value lies in the fact that it cannot be directly described by any art, including that of words.

Fowles describes Carl Linnaeus as "the great warehouse clerk and indexer of Nature" who attempted to docket most of the animate beings from 1730 to 1760. Fowles was of the opinion that the process of classifying and encoding destroys the inwardness of landscapes. He states:

Even the simplest knowledge of the names and habits of flowers or trees starts this distinguishing or individuating process, removes us a step from total reality toward anthropocentrism; that is, it acts mechanically as an equivalent of the camera viewfinder. Already it destroys or curtails certain possibilities of seeing, apprehending and experiencing (27).

Fowles traces the chasm between man and Nature , which came about because of the advance of science and technology and the resultant industrialization. Fowles explains that this has happened because we have devalued the kind of experience or knowledge we loosely define as art and the way we have failed to differentiate it from science. According to Fowles:

No art is truly teachable in its essence. All the knowledge in the world of its techniques can provide in itself no more than imitations or replicas of previous art. What is irreplaceable in any object of art is never in the final analysis, its technique or craft, but the personality of

the artist, the expression of his or her unique and individual feeling (42).

Fowles further elaborates that full knowledge or experience also requires an art— some inwardly creative or purely personal factor beyond the power of external teaching to instil or science to predict. Metaphorically, he calls the artist, the individual experience, the ‘green man’ hidden in the leaves of his or her unique and once only being. The ‘green man’ in all of us is aware of the power of natural knowledge and imagination. In a very poetic manner, Fowles describes Art and Nature as siblings, branches of one tree. He further elaborates that just as Nature has been classified, Art has also been classified and explicated, making it monotonous. The inexplicability of Creation and that of Nature on its audience is similar. Yet, Fowles clarifies that we cannot say that the “green” or creating process does not happen just because it is largely private and beyond lucid description and rational analysis. In the light of intense thought, John Fowles states that nature is not something that is exterior to us. The wilderness in man can be found in the inner core of man (the Id) to which he must retreat in order to cleanse himself. Just as a walk in the wild nature cleanses and renews the soul, the inner journey into the soul re-activates the creative processes.

According to Science, Nature needs to have a purpose. In looking for a purpose in everything external to us and internally in everything that we do—this addiction to finding a reason has become synonymous with pleasure. This has become so universal and widespread, that Fowles satirises that the modern version of hell is purposelessness.

In the third section of the book, John Fowles draws an analogy between travelling through the woods and travelling through any narrative – whether it is cinema or words on a page. John Fowles sees the trees, the wood as the best analogue for prose fiction. All novels are also, in some way, exercises in attaining freedom. In any act of artistic creation, there is a retreat from the normal world. Fowles very clearly explicates that a part of that retreat must always be into a “wild” or an ordinarily repressed and socially hidden self; into a place, which is always a complexity beyond daily reality, never fully comprehensible or explicable. He states:

The return to the green chaos, the deep forest and refuge of the unconscious, is a nightly phenomenon, and one that psychiatrists – and torturers – tell us is essential to the human mind. Without it, it disintegrates and goes mad. If I cherish trees beyond all personal (and perhaps rather peculiar) need and liking of, them, it is because of this, their natural correspondence with the greener, more mysterious processes of the mind – and because they also seem to me the best, most revealing messengers to us from all nature, the nearest it’s heart (76) .

The last part of the book, the walk through Wistman’s Wood is almost poetic. He attempts to capture for us the intensity of ‘wildness’ while at the same time insisting on the difficulty of capturing them. He states:

There is certainly something erotic in them, as there is in all places that isolate and hide; but the woods are in any case highly sensuous things. . . , Nowhere are two great contemporary modes of reproducing reality, the word and the camera , more at a loss ; less able to capture the sound

(or soundlessness) and the accents, the temperatures and moods, the all roundness, the different levels of being in the vertical ascent from ground to tree-top in the range of different forms of life and the subtlety of their inter-relationships. In a way the woods are like the sea, sensorially far too various and immense for anything but surfaces or glimpses to be captured. They defeat the view-finder, drawing paper, canvas, they cannot be framed; and words are as futile, hopelessly too laborious and used to capture reality(59-60).

Fowles enigmatically tells us that in order to protect Nature from exploitation we have turned it into a consumerist item. Even Nature has been commodified—the slogan “God’s own country” is a case in point. John Fowles is against the exploitation of Nature. Nature can be mediated through camera or words. But the last word for Fowles is the intuitive communion with Nature-- this cannot be replaced by anything else.

Fowles has a very interesting theory or proposition. He elaborates that because he was brought up without orthodox faith, there was some religious feelings towards woods. He conjectures that the first holy places in Neolithic times long before the Stonehenge, were the artificial wooden groves made of felled, transported and re-erected tree trunks whose roofs must have seemed less roofs than artificial leaf canopies. He points out that even the smallest woods have their secrets and secret places. He also traces that the ancestors of the modern novels that began to appear in the early Middle Ages had the forest as the setting and the quest for central theme. Further on, Fowles clarifies that the attraction of the forest setting was in no way an attraction to the forest itself. The forest was seen as an incarnation of evil; but being evil, gave convenient excuse for the legitimate portrayal of all its real or supposed dangers to the traveller. The Church saw nature as external to man. The attraction was for ‘tamed nature’ or for “emblematic walled garden” of civilization.

Never mind that the actual forest is often a monotonous thing, the metaphysical forest is constant suspense, stage awaiting actors: heroes, maidens, dragons, mysterious castles at every step . . . We have simply transferred the tree setting to the now more familiar brick- and- concrete forest of town and city(60-61).

Fowles connects architecture to nature and points out the drawback of twentieth century architecture. He blames the Neolithic peoples, whom he calls, “the slaves of the cultural invention of farming”, as the great deforesters of our landscapes. He says, perhaps, it was guilt that made them return to the trees to find a model for their religious buildings—in which they were followed by the Bronze Age, the Greeks and the Romans with the columns and porticos, the Celtic Iron Age with its Druids and sacred oak groves. According to him, the stupidest mistake of the twentieth century architecture, has been to forget this ancient model in the more grandiose town planning. He points out, “Geometric linear cities make geometric linear people; wood cities make human beings”(62).

Pointing to the suspicious attitude to wild Nature, Fowles claims that in the last thousand years, true human nature (and virtuous beauty) has lain for European mankind in nature tamed on its knees or emblematic walled garden of civilization. According to Fowles, so powerful was this concept that naturalistic artistic representation of wild landscape is entirely absent before the seventeenth century, and so rare before the advent of the Romantic



Movement. Public concern for nature, with positive steps to protect it, did not come well into the nineteenth century.

John Fowles points the inability of well-known painters like Pisanello and Durer to compass the reality of the wild, to look nature entire in the world. He attributes it to some “deep mental blindness or complex”. He describes a beautiful and famous painting by Pisanello in the National Gallery in London—*The Vision of St. Eustace*.

The saint- to- be sits on his horse in a forested wilderness—he is out hunting – arrested before his vision of a stag bearing Christ crucified between its antlers. Other animals, birds and flowers crowd the background of the small picture. The artifice of the ensemble, above all when compared with Pisanello’s own survived work-sketches of individual beast and bird in it, is almost total. The sketches and drawings are entirely and dazzlingly naturalistic; yet in the painting their subjects become as heraldic and symbolic, as unreally juxtaposed as beasts in a tapestry. I know no picture that demonstrates more convincingly, and touchingly, this strange cultural blindness; and it is fitting that Pisanello should have chosen the patron saint of dogs (and formerly of hunting, before St. Hubert usurped that role) as the central figure, and distorter of the non-human life around him. What is truly being hounded, harried and crucified in this ambiguous little masterpiece is not Christ, but nature itself (65-66).

Even in the seventeenth century landscapists, such as Ruysdael, according to Fowles, did not really get close to natural reality. Nature was still a mere background to be composed and gardened in accordance with their own notion of the picturesque.

Untamed nature was regarded as a vast and essentially hostile desert, a kind of necessary evil. The one place where both physically and psychologically –in which wild nature remains unwelcome and detested is the private garden. But Fowles is all for the wild.

It would seem that Fowles is advocating an ecological movement termed as ‘deep ecology’. Contrary to the anthropomorphic attitude towards Nature, Fowles has a deep empathy towards Nature. Unlike in the *Genesis*, he does not believe in having stewardship over Nature. He does not believe that man is superior to Nature, but that Man and Nature should live in close communion and believes that there is a symbiotic relationship between Man and Nature. The deep ecologists believed that man through his greed had exploited Nature and through his interference had led to the depletion of the natural resources. In order to foster nature, man needs to control population and lead a simple life. In conserving Nature, man is not conserving it for the future generations but for its own sake.

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