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Ecological Elements in the Indian Narratology: A Study of Anand, Gita Mehta and O. V. Vijayan

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There is a tendency to define the literature of the entire world as a singular act done by an individual. In India 'Sahitya' is a collective enterprise which encompasses composition and interpretation. Positive portrayal of Nature and the re-cognition of the creative urge in all living and non-living things are features of 'inclusiveness' of Sahitya and this is ecological. The hegemonic relationship between beings is a feature of Western literature and finds expression in Western discourses. Anand tries to locate man as an organic part of a broader network of relationships. In Gita Mehta's novel, river Narmada acts as the strand that unifies the diverse tales. O. V. Vijayan's novel expresses a willful surrendering to the forces of the nature. Unlike Western literature, Sahitya is not trapped in letters, words or technical devices, instead it deals with the entire universe and every element of creation thus Sahitya is ecological.

The Sanskrit term 'Sahitya' is generally used as the translation of the word 'literature'. The Kerala writer and cultural thinker, Anand [P. Satchidanandan, b.1936] has investigated into the ancient denotation of 'Sahitya.' It is an activity done by many, not by a single individual. Though it is the author who composes a piece of Sahitya, it is interpreted by diverse readers differently. The English word stems from letters/alphabets/ 'literati' [Latin]. Literature has a tendency to narrow down to a single author or reader while Sahitya is a joint venture by authors and readers. Meanings are derived by collective interpretation. Thus creativity is a social act rather than an individual effort. This is vivified in orature or folklore. Sahitya is orature added to literature. Literature is trapped in words but Sahitya encompasses all creative realms and brings to its arena the diverse, conflicting and at the same time challenging ideas through social interaction. It is not confined to a particular space or time instead it transcends all boundaries and is all-inclusive. Being polycentric, it gives due importance to the marginalized in its representations.

Sahitya brings together all the strands in the web of cosmic life. This inclusiveness has various dimensions or levels. The desilencing of non-human things/Nature, is foregrounded by the resurgent/recent ecological critics like Christopher Manes in theoretical studies such as "Nature and Silence" (*Ecocriticism Reader*, 15-29). Literary characters that have only 'virtual' life may sometimes play the role of authors. The uncouth thief Ratnakaran who was transformed/ evolved into Valmiki is considered to be the author of *Aadikaavya Ramayana*. The author and the character are so intertwined in the epic that it is difficult to demarcate where the individual author ends and the character begins. The author plays multiple roles as a creator and as a

character. “Within the story of Rama is the story of the composition of *Ramayana* by Valmiki, and within that is the story of Valmiki himself as a hunter, and so on and so forth, an apparently endless process of interiorization” (Paniker 6). Sahitya is the outcome of the multiple interventions of authors and characters. It has stood against institutionalized concepts and has been reluctant to admit that cultural productions exist beyond criticism. Besides this, it invites readers to be an integral part of creation. The authors, characters and readers come together and melt into cultural constructs. Ganapati who has been summoned by Vyasa to be the scribe of *Mahabharata* finds himself linked to the story.

It is difficult to distinguish between Sahitya and mythology. Mythology is an attempt to communicate metaphorically the ‘irrational’ yet, not unreal, elements present in life and is an outcome of communal, collective and societal creativity. Fantasy is used in myths to acclimatize the objectionable reality of the world to gratify the desires of the author or the reader. “The author fantasizes, so does the reader, so that fantasy becomes an interface that the reader’s imagination shares with that of the author. The reader is allowed to be as creative as the author, although the former’s imagination is triggered off by that of the latter” (Paniker 8). Westerners find it difficult to comprehend the presence of animals, birds, streams sharing the human sphere in Indian mythology. Basically, or generally anthropocentric in outlook, the Westerners view with sarcasm the congregation of Indian gods which range from mountain, tree, river, elephant, and monkey to snake.

Man has made not only God in his own image: according to the popular belief among Indians, he has made a god or goddess out of everything around him and invested natural objects with some element of divinity...The Indian mind delights in conferring godhead on any object that he comes across, thereby subjecting the objective world to the subjectivity of human imagination. (Paniker 9)

The Indian mythological vision of the divine is not as some superior biota, but as one among the network of ecological living things. God, in the West, stands far apart from the earthly inter animation.

The ecological logic, inherent in the ancient Indian precept, as resuscitated by Anand, is almost the same as the American/Red Indian environmental aesthetes envisage in resurgent ecocritical theoretical deliberations. The study of the non-Western literature poses a problem for Western readers, who naturally tend to see Eastern literature in terms that are familiar to them. Because of this, students of traditional American Indian literatures have applied the terms *primitive*, *savage*, *childlike* and *pagan* to these literatures. Perceiving only the most superficial aspects of American Indian literary traditions, Western scholars have labelled the whole body of these literatures *folklore*, even though the term specifically applies only to those parts of the literatures that are the province of the general populace.

Paula Gunn Allen, a Red Indian/Native American ecological literary critic contrasts the Euro-American and the Native American visions on literature. Her observations are identical with that of Anand.

Traditional American Indian literature is not similar to Western literature because the basic assumptions about the universe and, therefore, the basic reality experienced by tribal peoples and by Western peoples are not the same, even at the level of folklore...The purpose of traditional American Indian literature is never simply pure self-expression... In this art, the greater self and all-that-is are blended into a balanced whole, and in this way the concept of being that is fundamental and sacred spring of life is given voice and being for all. (*Ecocriticism Reader*, 241-42)

The concept of Sahitya as a creative process which stretches beyond human sphere is stressed in Indian *Puranas* and *Itihaasas*. The changes in life and social structures of humanity naturally get reflected in creativity too. When the written word replaces the oral, creativity tapers down to a single author who exists in a particular period. Sahitya eventually falls into the hands of a privileged few. As a result it has lost its holistic purpose -to move the masses across boundaries of caste, creed and hierarchy. Moreover resistance to the elements within a text replaced conformity to the dominant view. The Indian *Puranas* and *Itihaasas* combine historical documentation and mythological criticism. The irreverence which plays a vital role in shaping mythology later disappeared from Sahitya. Sahitya eventually lost criticism which in turn resulted in an end to the myth making process. Writers depended on their own imagination or borrowed stories from Puranas to narrate.

Anand in his “Preface” to *Jaiva Manushyan* [the Bio-Man, 1991], postulates the policy/perspective of his ecological, theoretical deliberations and the historiography/writing the intellectual history of human interactions with Nature:

Things can be examined in two ways. One, as the scientist does—things shall be separated from their larger context and studied under a microscope, and the other, observing after distancing things; but, they are viewed as connected to the contextual surroundings. The second method naturally leads to the discussion of the organic state of things, under study. Things are viewed as a part of a wider—society, life, Nature---organism. (9).

Then, Anand states that in this book, he tries to investigate into the man as an organic part of a broader network of relationships. Such an approach demands that everything connected to man has to be scrutinized as fractions of larger entities (9). This network-bonding study is the same as his retrieval of the ancient Sanskrit, term Sahitya, because Sahitya is not reductionist like the English-equivalent, ‘literature.’

Allen points out that in the Red Indian/ Native American world view, as reflected in traditional native literature, there is no hierarchal structure and the bonding among diverse things in the cosmos:

These people acknowledge the essential harmony of all things and see all things as being of equal value in the scheme of things, denying the opposition, dualism and isolation (separateness) that characterize non-Indian thought. Christians believe that God is separate from humanity and does as he wishes without the creative assistance of any of his creatures, while the non-Christian tribal person assumes a place in creation that is dynamic, creative and responsive. Further, the people allow all animals, vegetables and minerals (the entire biota, in short) the same or even greater privileges than humans. (243)

Anand distinguishes the biocentric egalitarian ecology from humancentric ecology. Biocentric ecology is non-hierarchical in structure, while the other is based on power and hierarchy. Anand presents the question of the identity of a human being in connection with vertical and horizontal relationships. Vertical relationships, that is, man-made-organizations, political power, gods and religious institutions and the like have inherent hierarchical structure. The horizontal relationships, that is, humankind as a strand in the web of life, are with the soil, air, rivers, trees, animals, in short, with all the non-human in the world, which is often referred to as 'Nature.' (*Charitrapaadangal*, 47, 50).

In *Jaiva Manushyan*, Anand expresses the difference between human ecology and biocentric new ecology. The environmental movements and schools of thought, generally, are part of anthropocentric human ecology.

Is it the anxiety regarding the dangers to human life that may come out of the in equilibrium consequential to the disasters that fall upon animals behind the highly propagated environmental movements today? There is not the humility that we/humans are only one among the different living beings. There is no trace of doubt in the conviction that humans are the right heir of the earth. All other things exist for the sake of man. (240)

Anand's postulations and perspectives are not an isolated in the Post-Carson epoch. The non-ecologic interiorized in the conservation discourses have been unearthed by Western environmental investigators also. Robert Pogue Harrison in *FORESTS* remarks that modern forestry reduces forests to their most literal or "objective" status: timber.

A new "forest mathematics" goes so far as to measure them in terms of their volume of disposable wood. Method thus conspires with the laws of economy to reappropriate forests under the general concept of "utility," even in those cases where utility is conceived in aesthetic terms: forests as recreational parks, for example, as "museums" of original nature...We argue for the preservation of forests on the basis of their numerous uses and benefits. Why should we preserve

the tropical rain forests? Their abundance of unique plant species, scientists argue may one day prove useful for science and medicine. This concept of utility is more insidious and historically determined than appears at first glance (107-108).

The interdependent mindset, that is the eco-logical outlook, is not reckoned within the biotechnological research:

Studies pursue cultivation without soil and sunrays. Researchers are going on for culturing all plants in labs. There was a time when farmers did not view crops as mere cash. Culture, at that time, was not merely for producing food, but it made life wholesome/ complete. Agriculture was an activity that connected soil, plants and man. Today our relation to plants is that of to machines in factories. Plants are the machines that give out a certain output if a certain input of water and fertilizers are fed. (Anand, *Jaiva Manushyan* 241)

Anand continues that the farmers and botanists speak about new seeds, crops, fertilizers and pesticides like factory managers and mechanics. Even the phraseology of conservationists is that of the salesmen who market air conditioners and pollution control methods (241). Harrison also arrives at a resembling statement:

Man had the humble view of inseparability of nature and the living things that grew luxuriantly in it. Man was prepared to assign an equal status to other living things in nature. But, when human civilization began to march forward, man began to alienate himself from his surroundings. The mindset of inseparability began disappearing and in its stead, the craze of utility started overpowering. (246)

Positive portrayal of Nature and the re-cognition of the creative urge in all living and non-living things are features of 'inclusiveness' of Sahitya and this is ecological. For exemplifying the ecological attitude of Native American orature, Allen gives a contrast.

For example, American Indian and Western literary traditions differ greatly in the assumed purposes they serve. The purpose of traditional American Indian literature is never simply pure self-expression. The 'private soul at the public wall' is a concept alien to American Indian thought. The tribes do not celebrate the individual's ability to feel emotion, for they assume that all people are able to do so. One's emotions are one's own; to suggest that others should imitate them is to impose on the personal integrity of others. The tribes seek –through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales—to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things. (Allen, 242)

What Allen says about the traditional American Indian literature is perfectly applicable to traditional Asian Indian concept of 'Sahitya.' Anand has divulged this earlier. Traditionally, orature, not the written/alphabetical 'literature,' or 'Sahitya' is not pure self-expression or an individual's patented achievement. It is communal in composition, conservation, interpretation and enjoyment. Western self-expressive theory of literature is fundamentally a trans-formation of theocentrism/inspiration/transcendental imagination, to anthropocentric/individualism. The sense of community, harmony, interdependence and such ecological values are eroded. Instead of all these the idol of god/man/individual is installed. The ancient Indian 'Sahitya' concept is all-including, that is, not just humankind but all the biotic and the abiotic. Asha Menon, in his ecocritical study of O V Vijayan's works observes:

The perspective of Sahitya as interdependent becomes highly meaningful in O V Vijayan. An artistic creation turns out to be comprehensive or holistic only when the multiple-voices in nature are infused in it. His works impart a great degree of environmental alertness. Even in the songs of men we can discern the presence of Nature. When the conscious and the unconscious link together in a state of interdependence, an artistic creation becomes wholesome. They integrate to form a sanguine network of ecology (Menon, 105)

Ravi, the school master in O V Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* relates the story of a journey undertaken by two spores. Seeing a lush green valley, the elder one stopped but the younger one wanted to discover and hence continued the journey. Before leaving, the elder spore asks "will you forget your sister?" To which, the younger one replied "never". The bigger spore feeding on death and memory sprouted over the earth and the little one moved on. One day a young girl came to gather flowers from the Champaka tree. As the young girl held the twig to pluck the flowers, the twig broke and Champaka said, "My little sister you have forgotten me" (61). The story recounted by Ravi sheds light to the common link that connects humans with plants. The words of Champaka remind us of biotic fraternity. The descriptions of this meeting and such other incidents narrated in the novel have urged the Malayalam ecological critic Asha Menon to opine that *Legends of Khasak* is Sahitya.

In Theocentrism, creativity is reserved for a divine/transcendental one. In tribal biocentric perspective, everything in the universe participates in the process of creation. If the humans lose paradise by their disobedience to the divine, they gain freedom to share the joy of creation or the freedom to act as per the will and pleasure of every being. Earning one's daily bread by the sweat of one's own brow is not curse but blessing. "The Indian participates in destiny on all levels, including that of creation." (Allen, 243) The tales of tribal narration contain such a perspective. Allen analyses such an American Indian tale and comes to that conclusion. Like the Asian Indian concept of creation, that is, *panchabhootas* (all things are the synthesis of five elements—earth, air, water, fire and sky), the American Indian All Spirit, Maheo creates out of the void four things—the water, the light, the sky-air, and the peoples of water: 'How beautiful

their wings are in the light,' Maheo said to his Power, as the birds wheeled and turned, and became the living patterns against the sky.

The loon was the first to drop back to the surface of the lake. 'Maheo,' he said, looking around, for he knew that Maheo was all about him, 'You have made us sky and light to fly in, and you have made us water to swim in. It sounds ungrateful to want something else, yet still we do. When we are tired of swimming and tired of flying, we should like a dry solid place where we could walk and rest. Give us a place to build our nests, please, Maheo.'

'So be it,' answered Maheo,' 'but to make such a place I must have your help, all of you. By myself, I have made four things... Now I must have help if I am to create more, for my Power will only let me make four things by myself.' (243-44)

Maheo is not omnipotent in creation. The creative power is inherent in every object in the universe. The All Spirit is only the 'starter'—any kind of creation/genesis myth has to begin somewhere and the position or status of the All Spirit is that. "The All Spirit, whose 'being was a Universe,' has limited power as well as a sense of proportion and respect for the powers the creatures." (Allen, 244) Contrast this spirit with the Judeo-Christian God, who makes everything how it may and may not function if it is to gain his respect and blessing and whose commandments make no allowance for change or circumstance. The American Indian universe is based on dynamic self-esteem, while the Christian universe is based primarily on a sense of proportion and loss. For the American Indian, the ability of all creatures to share in the process of ongoing creation makes all things sacred. (244)

In that sense, there is no division between the sacred and profane/mundane. Gita Mehta (b. 1943) traces the meaning of Narmada, one of the seven holiest rivers of India in her novel, *A River Sutra* [1993], establishing that the division profane/sacred is relative and often arbitrary. The pre-colonial implication of *Narmada* is "a mere glimpse of the Narmada's waters is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births" (151). The narrator of the novel who is overwhelmed by the sanctity of the river is shocked when Dr. Mitra says, "Did you know 'narmada' means 'whore' in Sanskrit?" The westerners could not cognize a river as sacred or spiritual, that which would ameliorate diverse strands of this cosmos including all living and non-living things. But an Indian can easily imbibe this spirit. The novel *A River Sutra* portrays the rigorous meditation and fasting of Naga Baba and he puts an end to the fast on Shivaratri by begging at the houses of unclean, untouchable or profane (242). The sanctity of Shiva's acolyte is enhanced by receiving alms from the outcastes of the society. The anthropocentric westerners cannot agree with this act of a sage or a saint, enacted upon the river banks of Narmada, the Delightful Daughter of the Lord Shiva. The novel narrates another incident, revealing the ecocity of Sahitya. The naga sages are not anthropocentric; but, biocentric and 'philo-biotic'. Narmada awakens Lord Shiva from meditation through her alluring charm and awakens in him a desire

for this world. Naga baba, who lives on the banks of the river saves a child from a brothel by asking her as alms. Fearing the wrath of the ascetic, the brothel owner hands her over to the sage. He renames her 'Uma' meaning 'peace in the night'. The sage cleanses her by immersing her in the sacred river, Narmada (252). The river that brings Lord Shiva to the reality of this world through her enthralling splendor at another juncture purifies and reclaims a lost child through Naga baba and reintegrates her to this world by renaming her. Hence the river Narmada is not a whore but an active link in the network of this universe that rescues a probable whore. This novel narrates similar incidents which establish that *A River Sutra* (sutra signifies the connecting threads) is Sahitya, not a sectarian/narrow western piece of literature. It is the ecologicality inherent in this work that makes it Sahitya. The Latin etymological meaning of the term 'sacred' derives from 'sacrificium' denoting 'set apart,' later in theocentric culture, 'set apart for god'/divine. As the division of sacred and the non-sacred does not exist in biocentric tribal culture, everything is either sacred or there is nothing that is to be particularly set apart as sacred. As everything divine derives from divinity, creation is only by god and that created is perfect, having no option for choice or change. As divine creation is perfect, even man, made in the image of god is denied the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Knowledge is forbidding and forbidden even to man, if not to tell about other strands in the web of biota. Denial of the power of creation/knowledge and strict hierarchy are two basic aspects that contrast the creation myths of the theocentric occident and that of the biocentric tribal.

In [Judeo-Christian] paradise, God created a perfect environment for his creatures. He arranged it to their benefit, asking only that they forbear from eating the fruit of one particular tree. In essence, they were left with only one means of exercising their creative capacities and their ability to make their own decisions and choices. Essentially, they were thus prevented from exercising their intelligence while remaining loyal to the creator. To act in a way that was congruent with their natural curiosity and love of exploration and discovery, they were forced to disobey God and thus be exiled from the perfect place he had made for them. They were severely punished for exercising what we might call liberty. (Allen, 244)

Then, Allen contrasts the Semitic myths with the American Indian:

The notion that nature is somewhere over there while humanity is over here or that a great hierarchical ladder of being exists on which ground and trees occupy a very low rung, animals a slightly higher one, and man (never woman)—especially 'civilized' man—a very high one indeed is antithetical to tribal thought. The American Indian sees all creatures as relatives (and in tribal systems relationship is central), as offspring of the Great Mystery, as co-creatures, as children of our mother, and as necessary parts of an ordered, balanced, living whole (246).

In a later passage, Allen confirms the partitionary, instead of the participatory perspective of the occident, as derived from the divisions like the sacred/profane, the symbolic/mundane and the transcendent/transient.

In English, we can divide the universe into two parts: the natural and the supernatural. Humanity has no real part in either, being neither animal nor spirit—that is, the supernatural is discussed as though it were apart from people, and the natural as though people were apart from it. This necessarily forces English-speaking people into a position of alienation from the world they live in. Such isolation is entirely foreign to American Indian thought. At base, every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is a part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole being (247).

Eco-logical writers have re-interpreted even ancient myths—hitherto cognized to be theocentric—as per ‘Sahitya’ theory. Vishnunarayanan Namboothiri [b. 1939], the renowned Kerala poet and environmental activist, has reinterpreted Adam-Eve-Garden of Eden myth (*Bhoomigeetangal*, 10-16]. Here, God condescends to come down to the earthly hut of Adam and Eve. God realizes his folly in ousting them out of the Paradise, as they have created a better heaven on earth. They lost nothing; but, gained vast avenues for exercising triumphantly their imagination, creativity and hard work. This poem is a sub/version of the traditional theocratic and theocentric Semitic myth of Adam and his fall. It is subversion in both the senses of the word—this narrative is not the main version and it resists and fights back at the theocentric ideology. Placing this poem in the ideational context of Paula Gunn Allen’s “The Sacred Hoop,” discussed earlier, one can see that the power to know, to express one’s creative urge in one’s own way and the natural gift/capability to adapt/survive overcoming hurdles and misfortunes and the like are articulated by man.

Robert Pogue Harrison in his study on the impact of forests upon the cultural imagination of the West, from the age of myths/pre-historical eras to the present, states that even most of the present day ecologists speak of Conservation in terms of usefulness or utility (*Forests*, 124). This type of ‘eco-logic’ as opposed by Harrison is similar to the stance of Anand as expressed in *Jaiva Manushyan*. Anand’s point of view is that environmentalism should be practiced and propagated not only because that it has become imperative and inevitable for the survival/non-extinction of humankind, but a paradigmatic shift, favoring the comprehensive vision and ecological inclusiveness as a mission that gives meaning to human existence, has also dawned.

The foregoing analysis of the various aspects of Sahitya as retrieved by Anand shows that the ancient term is fundamentally ecological as it is concerned with the relationship that links every component of this universe. It is a comprehensive term which embraces the diverse realms and perspectives in creation and composition. The democratic nature of the term permits discordant ideas, heterogeneous characters, different genres and contrasting interpretations. It stretches beyond the human sphere and dissipates the margins that separate beings based on caste, creed

and hierarchy. Sahitya views creation as a community work. The narrator or scribe finds inseparably bound to the story. Meanings evolve from collective interpretations and are open to criticisms. As it is poly centric, the centre often shifts according to the contexts/perspectives of the interpreter. All forms of creativity fall under Sahitya and there is no dichotomy between sacred/ profane, human/nonhuman, man/god and conscious/unconscious. Unlike literature, Sahitya is not trapped in letters, words or technical devices; instead it deals with the entire universe and every element of creation thus Sahitya is ecological.

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