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**Role of Literature in Environmental Awareness:
An Ecocritical Study of Aranyak (of the Forest) by Bibhutibhushan
Bandyopadhyay**

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Abstract:

Literature has served two roles since antiquity. To some, it is art for art's sake and to others; it is the mirror of contemporary society. Great literature is always built upon these two concepts. Down the ages critics have analyzed several contemporary issues of literary values like Classicism, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Marxism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Deconstruction, Post-colonialism, and Feminism and so on. But literary studies for a long time did not pay any attention to a serious issue, which is the environmental concern as represented in literature. The world has suffered a lot from global ecological crisis mostly due to human atrocities on nature. So literature cannot turn its face away from this. Towards the end of the previous century, a new area of studying literature came into existence. It is a scholarly approach to studying nature writing which is popularly known as ecocriticism. This environmentally oriented study of literature is also known as Environmental Literary Criticism, Green Studies etc. The present article seeks to explore the several Ecocritical issues as represented in the great nature novel, Aranyak (Of the Forest) by one of the major Bengali novelists named Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay whose works have often been translated into English. The present work will try to investigate how this long prose narrative can lead to the self-realization of a city dweller about his sin of deforestation although he had not any love for forest life in the beginning of the novel. As the novel progresses, we see a gradual change in his attitude to nature. His initial 'ego-consciousness' yields place to his 'eco-consciousness' at the end. Human nature interconnection which is the very basis of Ecocriticism is paramount in the novel.

Keywords: Nature, Literature, Environmental Concern, Ecocriticism.

Introduction: Environment is a hot topic of the day in view of some present ecological issues. The depletion of the earth is a much-talked matter of these days; it is the byproduct of human activities for a long time. Literary criticism did not pay any heed to this grave problem for a long time. William Rueckert first made use of the term 'ecocriticism' in his critical prose-work "Literature and Ecology-An Experiment in Ecocriticism"(1978) to mean "the application of

ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology.....has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world...(Rueckert 107). Ecocriticism as an academic discipline arose during the last decade of the 20th century when Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm Published a book named *The Ecocriticism Reader* an anthology of critical essays on nature. Glotfelty gave a clarion call to this movement and did yeomen service to include the term in modern language association. Mere science or technology is not enough for building up an eco-consciousness among the humans. Ecocriticism undoubtedly does this work of consciousness rising among the readers.

Ecocriticism pleads for a symbiosis (living together) which suggests an ecological relationship between the human and the non-human. The Man lived in close kinship with nature until there prevailed his hierarchic feeling being the only literal animal. His materialistic attitude led him to look upon nature as a commodity. "The dogma that culture will always master nature has long directed Western progress, inspiring wars, invasions, and other forms of conquest, that have crowded the earth and strained its carrying capacity"(Coupe 164). As long as the humans will carry on this anthropocentric attitude, nature will be exploited leading towards the ultimate doomsday of the earth.

Ecocriticism studies culture in relation to the geography of a place or landscape. Because culture is created by the people who have been living in particular place over the years. The impact of such kind of landscape on characters we find in Hardy's Wessex novels, Synge's writings on Aran Island, R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi*, Bibhutibhushan's *Laltulia* and the like.

It does not simply deal with environmental disorder as represented in literature. An ecocritic is not, after all, an ecologist; ecocriticism seeks to explore the interconnection between man and nature. The harmonious relationship between human and the nonhuman will build an eco-wisdom among the readers. In a sense, ecocriticism is a process of self-realization of who we are, where we stand, how we should treat our habitat, how we should behave with the other organisms etc.

Whereas the US version of ecocriticism hails the celebration of nature, the UK version mostly known as 'green studies' deals with the threats and dangers of nature. But Ecocriticism is undoubtedly a better term as it studies nature to find out its wider significance through a critical lens, rather than a simple nature study.

Ecocriticism a Revisionist movement:

Although Ecocriticism started as the celebration of nature, it has now emerged as a revisionist movement. It aims at correction of our anthropocentric attitude which harbors the notion of exploitation of nature for human interest. "Our global crisis is not because how ecosystems function. It is because how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires

understanding our impact on nature. It requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them.” (The Ecocriticism Reader) Ecocriticism also strives hard to find out interconnection between the human and the nonhuman world. The researcher here explores how the urban concept of environment gets changed in wild nature’s paradise.

Aranyak as an Ecocritical Text:

The very prologue of the novel gives us a hint that Aranyak is going to be a highly ecocritical prose work. The setting is in the outdoor wilderness of Bihar. The whole novel is written in the form of reminiscence of forest life experienced by the novelist himself. About the novel, he writes, “There are no dense forests close to human habitation. The forests lie in the distant land, where on banks of Godavari, the winds are burdened with the smell of ripe-fallen jambu fruit. Aranyak is an account of the imaginary land. This is not a travelogue; nor is it a diary, it is a novel....Yet, the background of Aranyak is not entirely imagined. There used to be and there still are, such vast expanses of forest spreading to the horizon.”(Aranyak-Of the Forest, back cover page) Composed between 1937-39., the novel is based on Bibhutibhushan’s long and strenuous years in North Bihar, where he came across the dispossessed- landless peasants, poor Brahmins, wretched migrants, homeless labourers and wild Adivasis. “It is these people that I shall speak. Our earth has many paths where civilized men seldom tread. Along those paths, the strange cross-currents of life trickle their way through obscure pebbly channels- such currents I had known and the memory of knowing them remains with me.”(Aranyak,3)

The whole novel is a recollection as it is presented in the mode of a flashback. But these memories do not give him pleasure. They are his sorrowful experience. The novelist writes- “By my hands was destroyed an unfettered playground of nature. I know too that for this act the forest goddess will never forgive me. I have heard that to confess a crime in one’s own words lightens somewhat the burden of the crime. Therefore the story.” (3)

The City Man’s Dilemma:

Etymologically ‘Aranyak’ means Of the Forest. This novel narrates the journey of the protagonist Satyacharan in the dichotomy of the urban and jungle lives. During the intervening period of two world wars (1st & 2nd) when restlessness, unemployment, uncertainty were very common in the social life of Kolkata, Satya gets the job of an assistant manager under Jamindar Kshelatcharan Ghosh in the Purnea district of Bihar. The Chotonugpur Plateau area is filled up with dense forest where his master has thirty thousand Bibhas of land. Satya has to deforest the land to set up new habitation that would provide his master with huge revenue. Initially, the city-bred Satya has no love for the jungle life. The loneliness of the forest troubled him so much that it sat upon his breast like a stone. He felt that he was all alone in the world in the frightful jungle. He has spent most of his life in Calcutta with his companions enjoying libraries, theaters, films and music without which he could not even imagine a life. To him, the people in the katcheri

were as good as barbarians who could not even understand his words! It seemed, that kind of life was not for him.

But the jungle which looked suffocating, gradually got inside him so much that he could not think of returning to the din and bustles of Calcutta leaving aside the forest environment. He recalls, "Almost three years have gone by. I have gone through many changes in these three years. Nature- in and around Lohitulia and Ajmabad- has so captivated me that I have almost forgotten the city. I am so drawn to the attractions of solitude, of the constellated open sky, that once, when I had gone to Patna only for a few days, I suffered greatly from the narrow tarred roads and longed to return to Lohitulia-baihar."(113)

As days went by, he got increasingly ensnared by the fascination of the forest. The wild jhau (tamarisk) which the setting sun splashed with crimson, the wide expanses of forest land, the wild fragrance of the sun-scorched land, the freedom from the hurly-burly of urban life- all engrossed him so much that he could not imagine returning to his urban life.

A Celebration of Nature:

Keeping in tune with the environmental praxis, Aranyak exhales in both celebration and exploitation of nature. The initial chapters are related to the celebration of nature. Satyacharan is the spokesperson of nature lover Bibhutibhushan. He describes the wilder as well as the fierce aspects of nature in this classic prose narrative. However, the ultimate message of the novel is how a man can lead a happy life in close connection with nature. Satya recalls, "one day I climbed up a tree and made myself comfortable on a branch: an indescribable joy filled me.....It is almost as if one can match the heartbeat of every plant and tree with one's own" (104). A clear change in Satya's attitude to nature is seen when he criticizes the city people who have the lack of imagination exploits forest as a mere picnic spot. "The women were a motley collection, completely devoid of imagination. They ran about gathering twigs for fire on the edges of the forest and chattered endlessly, but not one of them were around to see where they were.....Did they know that only a dozen yards from where they sat, the forest spirits danced in the moonlight?"(189)

Human Nature Interconnection:

Aranyak deals with the human nature interconnection which is the true spirit of Ecocriticism. During his survey work Satya perceives human nature interconnection. The men and women depend on the forest for their very sustenance. Kunta, Manchi, Bhanmati add to the beauty of the forest for their naturalness. Nandalal Ojha, Chatu Sing are some others who exploit nature for their selfishness. But human nature relationship is best exposed in the following characters.

We see a gradual change Satyacharan's attitude to nature. The votary of urban life has transformed into a devoted lover of nature in her pristine beauty. He enjoys horse ride in the

forest on a moonlit night; He even sends Jugalprasad with enough money to the impenetrable forests of Jayanti Hills to bring saplings of dudhia flower for beautification of Saraswati Kundi where variety of amazing birds like magpies, pheasant crows, wild parrots, sparrows, chathares, ghughus, harials, shyamas and hareets flocked to take refuge after a huge part of the forest becomes a victim of deforestation. He enjoys wondrous solitude in the unbroken quiet of Saraswati kundi which serves as a heaven to him with its honeybee creepers, wild sheuli, and its supernatural surroundings. A clear change in his attitude to nature is evident in his recollection here in these lines-

“This was a different sort of life, I mused, as I rode through the moonlit forest. This was a life for the eccentric wanderer- one who did not care to remain confined within the four walls of his house, did not have housekeeping and domesticity in his blood. When I had left Calcutta and came to this terrible loneliness, to an utterly natural sort of lifestyle, how intolerable the uncivilized life here had seemed: but now, I feel this is the better life of the two. Nature- rude and barbaric here- had initiated me into the mysteries of freedom and liberation; would I ever be able to reconcile myself to a perch in the bird-cage city?” (62). The protagonist here would never like to exchange this happiness for all the wealth in the world.

In the jungalmahal Satya met with a strange fellow named Raju Panrey. He is poor but happy with the Chinese grass and salt and ‘makai’ as his food. Satya offered him a few bihas of land to deforest it but Raju has no greed for the wealth. His philosophic bent of mind revels in his contemplation of the forest land-“The forest you see here is very beautiful. The flowers have been blooming for a long time and the birds sing, each with their own call: the gods themselves have merged with the wind and have left their mark on the earth. But wherever there is money or transactions of cash, loan, and receipts, the air becomes polluted. Then the gods choose not to stay on any longer. So, whenever I pick up the cutter and the axe, the gods come and snatch away my tools. They whisper such thoughts into my ears that all thoughts of land and property are driven away from my mind” (76). Although Satya returns to the city, Raju stays in the forest for his eternal love for nature.

Jugalprasad is a nature loving soul, a faithful companion of Satya to fulfill his design to adorn the forest with flowers. He is a selfless lover of beauty who never bothers to gain from scattering and planting seeds all over the forestland. Although very poor, he has an intense desire for unceasing toil to add to the splendor of the forest. He has an ecocritical bent of mind that could not bear the least exploitation of nature.

Deforestation, an Ecocide:

Satyacharan is instrumental in conducting an ecocide as he was assigned to do so as a part of his profession. The jungle land of Nara-baihar and Labtulia had been leased out. There remained hardly any forests like those of former times. All the shady groves and creeper entwined trees and the secluded paths composed by nature for so many years were lopped off by the ruthless

hands of the labourers. What had taken thousands of years to come up was destroyed in a matter of few days for setting up human habitation. There remained no mysterious green where enchanting fairies might descend on moonlit nights or thick jungle where benign Tarbaro, god of the wild buffaloes put up his hand to save the herd of wild creatures. He had to lease out the land to the peasants and the new settlers for the interest of his employer.

Care for Nature:

Meanwhile, Satyacharan has become a nature lover who was instrumental in the ecocide. He himself admits, "I had come here to settle new tenants in these forests. Having come to destroy the forestland, I have instead fallen in love with the beautiful forest maid."(114) He even did not let out the exquisite bit of forest by the side of Saraswati kundi. He realizes that nothing would stand in the way of destroying such exquisite grove before human greed. According to him, the settlers did not care much for the majestic trees; they did not have the eyes to see the grandeur of the land; their only concern was to fill their stomach and to survive. He also laments, "If it were any other country, they would have had laws to keep the forests intact and preserve them for nature lovers, as they have done with the Yosemite Park in California, the Kruger National Park in South Africa or the National Albert in Belgian Congo. My distant employers do not care for the landscape: all they understand are taxes and revenue money-the salami, the Irshal and the Hustabood."(213) He also suspects, "I have sought to preserve the forest around Saraswati kundi....But for how long?"(213)

The Marginals:

Ecocriticism strives hard to protect the rights of the marginal. Aranyak tells about the indigenous people of India like the Gangotas, the Santhals, the vagrant dwellers etc. whom the Jamindar is not willing to give a settlement. Thirty years ago, the land was swallowed into the womb of the river, surfacing again as char land twenty years later. But those who found their ancestral land broken up by the Ganga, thronged to reclaim them. The landlord deprived them of their right to forest land for earning higher revenue from the new ryots. Satya finds himself to be the representative of the Arians who after invading India deprived the just claim of those marginals. They were very poor, yet they were happy with their limited needs of life. Satya although a decendent of the Arians, had a close understanding of those people who were no barbarians but humans. Kunta, Manchi, Bhanumati, Gagru, Debru Panna, Raju Panre are the representatives of those class. They added to the beauty of the forest as a child looks beautiful in its mother's lap. State has not taken their responsibility, nor has taken the so-called civilized society. When Satya asked Bhanmoti the princess of the Santhan Royal family, which direction is India, she looks astonishingly. Those primitive people have become a victim of the Arians ruling over them.

Pangs of Conscience:-

So, Satyacharan holds himself responsible for the destruction of pristine wilderness, because it happened under his governance. Even his deep love for Bhanumati could not stop him from

leaving Baihar, which mesmerized him with its profound majesty. Satyacharan could not anymore stand the ruination of the forest and decides to leave Fulkia-Baihar. His concluding thoughts are clearly ecological: “There will be a time when people won’t find any wilderness – only cultivable land, jute mills, chimneys of factories would come to view. Then people would come to this calm wilderness, as people come to a shrine. Hope this forest remains intact for those future days.”

As the forest of Lobtulia was disappearing fast, the charm for Satyacharan began to wane. The writer makes a final decision to leave Baihar. He begins his tale of nature seeking forgiveness, and due to the intolerable pangs of his mind, ends it beseeching forgiveness from the devastated Goddess, i.e. Fulkia-Baihar: “You the primordial deity of wilderness forgive me! Adieu!” Satyacharan is now a nature priest who cannot reconcile himself to the fact that he himself was responsible for abolishing the primordial forest. He is the voice of the novelist who denounces the third world style of development where development is meant for only a few and most people are forced to live in the filthy environment. His sense of guilt ever haunts him as his hands are smeared with the blood of forest plants. His condition is much like Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth who having felt a prick of conscience utters-“Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (Act-5, Scene-1,Page-2).

Conclusion:

Therefore, the novel shows how the anthropocentric attitude of man gets purged off in close proximity with nature. It makes us learn how we should behave with Mother Nature and how human atrocities in the name of development and progress of human civilization are actually robbing us of peace of mind. Satyacharan is the symbol of those people who in the name of the growth of the soil indulge in deforestation for plotting out land for industrialization and progress. It is very interesting that, like today’s ecocritics, Bibhutibhushan could well understand the importance of preservation of natural environment, and his sensitive mind was against harmful practices of man which alienate him from the origin much ago in the 1930s . In short, the novel may be regarded as a pioneering effort creating environmental awareness among the readers. Much like Henry David Thoreau’s Walden, Aranyak shows the novelist’s penchant cry towards an eco-centric lifestyle long before ecocriticism came into existence.

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