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Eco-spirituality in Stephen Alter's *Wild Himalaya*

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Abstract:

In *Wild Himalaya* (2019), Stephen Alter relates his eco-spiritual encounters in the Himalayan range that traverses five countries—India, Nepal, Bhutan, China and Pakistan. Here he not only gives us the definitive natural history of the greatest mountain range on earth, but also shows his emotional and spiritual affinity with Himalayan nature. He attempts an appraisal of a pattern in the human-environmental interactions and its attendant consequences in the Himalayan region. However, a sense of oneness with nature is central to the spiritual dimension of ecology represented in his work.

Keywords: environmental identity, piety and pollution, non-violence, sustainability.

Eco-spirituality—an umbrella term for such concepts as deep ecology, ecofeminism, and nature religion—deals with relationship between ecology and spirituality. Valerie Lincoln has defined it as an embodiment of the spiritual bond between humans and the environment. In fact, it is an attempt to liberate ourselves from the shackles of the consumeristic and materialistic society. Yvonne Aburrow has argued that eco-spirituality adopts “an ethic of non-violence and sustainability.” By “non-violence” he refers to reverence for life in all its manifestations (human, animal, vegetable and mineral). For him, “sustainability” means the prudent use of natural resources, without damaging the natural balance and cycles of the environment, and development in harmony with the ecosystem (para 7). He has attributed the origin of ecospirituality to Arne Næss’s “deep ecology” that advocates the inherent value of life forms regardless of their usefulness to humans (para 8). Deep ecology argues that the natural world is a subtle balance of complex inter-relationships in which organisms depend on each other for their survival within ecosystems. The necessity of a deep ecological approach is being increasingly felt these days to ensure sustainability, biodiversity and the continuation of life on this planet (van Schalkwyk). Eco-spirituality also combines religion and environmental activism. Another catchphrase of the present academic world concerned with nature and sustainability is “environmental identity.” Susan D. Clayton and Susan Opotow have defined

it as “a sense of connection to some part of the nonhuman natural environment, based on history, emotional attachment, and/or similarity, that affects the ways in which we perceive and act toward the world; a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are” (45-46). Likewise, Vaughan-Lee speaks of a spiritual dimension of ecology regardless of beliefs and practices. This article, however, is intended to critique Stephen Alter’s *Wild Himalaya* (2019) that relates the author’s eco-spiritual encounters in the Himalayan range that traverses five countries—India, Nepal, Bhutan, China and Pakistan.

Most of Stephen Alter’s writings concern an appreciation for the outdoors. Based on the author’s extensive personal treks of and intense research on the Himalayan mountain range, *Wild Himalaya* appears to be a significant environmental discourse. Born and brought up in the hill station of Mussoorie, and having spent most of his life in Himalayan nature despite his American ancestry, Alter often feels like “an endemic species” of the Lower Himalayas (*WH*, 8). In one way, at the very outset of the work he asserts his “environmental identity,” to use the words of Clayton and Opotow. Oakville is not just their ancestral home but a part of the wider scheme of nature—“a habitat for hundreds of thousands of life forms—microbes, plants, trees, insects, arachnids, reptiles, birds and mammals” (*WH*, 8). With the rapid spread of recent development, transport and industry, man’s intrusive activities on the Himalayan mountains have increased, dominating and defacing the landscape. Often referred to as the “Third Pole,” the Himalayas that represent the largest accumulation of ice after Antarctica and the Arctic are likely to be affected by such activities. If the Himalayan glaciers dry up and disappear, as Alter apprehends, the entire region would look as dreary as the sandy wastes of the Sahara. Since its origin, the Himalayas have suffered the effects of climate change. Unlike previous climate change as evident in expansion and retreat of forests and glaciers in the Himalayan region, the recent changes are direct consequences of “human consumption and waste” (*WH*, 50). Apparently minor variations in temperature have serious consequences—glacial lakes bursting fragile ice dams, mudslides burying villages, erratic monsoons, disappearance of species and disruption of migration patterns. In Dha Hanu, a north-western district of Ladakh, the apricots were all destroyed because the worm-eating birds never arrived—their migration was disturbed. Global warming has also impacted countless microclimates that exist in the Himalayas besides annual weather patterns.

A river, as Alter argues, is much more than just water—it contains a relentless stream of mineral and vegetable matter, as well as microbial and other aquatic creatures. Furthermore, he draws our attention to the fact that the natural history of the Himalayas is as much a legacy

of water as it is of rock. Himalyan streams sustain numerous forms of life, from fish and other aquatic creatures to birds and insects, amphibians, reptiles and mammals. These riverine species are as much a part of the streams themselves as the submerged pebbles and stones that shape the course of the river or the vegetation that grow on the banks. Nevertheless, with increasing settlements in the mountains and tourist or pilgrim traffic, even the source water of these rivers is now contaminated with filth. Flowing water is an object of worship in most parts of the Himalayas and there are many ceremonies or rites associated with Himalyan rivers. Hindus perform *pind pujas* or *daan* to ensure that the souls of their ancestors, whose ashes have been sprinkled in the holy river, are released from the cycle of life and death. Devotees bathe at revered confluences, especially during auspicious festivals like Makar Sankranti and the twelve-year cycle of the Kumbh Mela. Alter seems to be up in arms against such unusual river rituals as the annual fishing festival called the Maun Mela in Jaunpur in which men from villages on both sides of the Algar River use anaesthetic, herbal substances to catch fish and thereby not only poison the river water but also kill several forms of aquatic life. Such age-old practices raise controversial questions about culture and conservation. There are also other illegal methods of killing fish, such as use of dynamite in the Himalyan rivers. Alter, however, does not forget to mention that fish are protected and revered at other places such as temple *ghats* along the Ganga in Rishikesh and Hardwar or Renuka Lake in Himachal Pradesh. Pilgrims feed them in a ritual of devotion, recognising both the transience and constancy of water, a sacred environment containing and supporting many forms of life. Despite being an atheist who does not believe in the dogmas and dictates of any religion, he still appreciates the sanctity and spiritual significance of natural phenomena that are imbued with mythical attributes by different faiths.

Alter here deplores the construction of a dam on the Ram Ganga at Kalagarh in the late 1960s that flooded a large area of the Patlidun and thereby drastically reduced open grasslands that had once supported a wide variety of wildlife ranging from hog deer and elephants to tigers. Such disruptions as the building of reservoirs and irrigation channels have severely impacted the migration of the chilwa (*Chela cachius*) that was once a common occurrence in North Indian rivers. Growing up in the Himalayas, the author enjoyed a privileged childhood, but all of the natural wonders he experienced, his visits to Corbett Park were most memorable. He recounts an incident in which he experienced a Blakean sense of terror and exhilaration during his encounter with a Himalayan tiger in the jungles surrounding Ram Ganga. Reminding us of the fate of Saraswati, one of India's seven sacred rivers mentioned in ancient texts, that

has presumably disappeared due to some natural causes, Alter warns us that other Himalayan rivers along with glaciers and wetlands might similarly vanish because of global warming.

Alluding to Dr Suzanne Simard of the University of British Columbia who discovered communication networks in stands of Douglas firs ("Wood Wide Web"), Alter claims that not only trees but also plants, shrubs and grasses in the Himalayan region interact with each other. As he writes, "One can hardly imagine the level of silent 'chatter' that pervades a Himalayan jungle" (*WH*, 110). Thus, like a propagator of deep ecology, he intends to listen to Nature instead of dictating her. He looks upon the high meadows of Dzongri as "a landscape full of symbols that pollinate a spiritual imagination" (*WH*, 111). Like most contemporary conservationists, he recognizes the fundamental defect in the colonial model of forest management that promulgates the wholesale annexation of forest lands and the exclusion of village and nomadic communities or local hunter-gatherers. The long-drawn animosity between the state forest departments and the indigenous people subsisting upon arboreal resources for generations continues even today. Consequently, arboreal communities such as hunter-gatherers and migrant shepherds lost most of their ancestral rights to natural resources and became dependent on forest officials for using forest resources. The insistent focus on commercial forestry that appears to be another colonial legacy in the forest department of India have altered the ecological balance of forests throughout the country, especially in the Indian Himalayas. Such forms of monoculture as the substitution of indigenous species with chir pines are responsible for a number of disastrous consequences ranging from the prevalence of wildfires to the extinction of innumerable shrubs and plants that constituted the forest undergrowth. Alter also draws our attention to the massive disappearance of Himalayan grasslands that played a significant role in traditional Himalayan economies, providing fodder for animals, thatch for roofs, and materials for other household products such as ropes and shoes. Wide grasslands in the Terai, where the Shivalik Hills and the first range of the Himalayas form *duns* or broad valleys, once supported a wide variety of wildlife like as rhinoceros and buffalo. The near extinction of such wild animals may be attributed to the disappearance of the Himalayan grasslands besides poaching. Ungulates like deer and goats that cannot climb trees are equally affected. Such birds as the chir pheasant or chukar partridge also depended on grasslands, feeding on this wild granary and using it as a hiding place to protect themselves from birds of prey and other predators. Even tiny life forms like as skinks, millipedes, ground beetles, spiders and ants, barring invisible mites and microbes, which rely upon grasslands to survive and procreate, face extinction.

Human beings are equally responsible for wildfires in the Lower Himalayas and the destruction usually occurs when the villagers burn grasslands, in the false belief that new growth will be more plentiful. Besides, such human activities as road building, illegal felling and lopping of trees and overgrazing by livestock are the other causes of deforestation. Moving back and forth across the mountains, steppe eagles occupy an important position on either side of the Himalayas, helping to maintain a balance of animals in two very different eco-systems. But the steppe eagles, drawn to a garbage dump at the side of the highway in the Dehradun valley, appears to be a depressive reminder of India's poor waste management, or rather, failure to cope with waste. The author is unhappy with the rapid degradation of the Himalayas and its environment. After spending seven days in the unspoiled forests of the Eastern Himalayas, he suddenly finds himself in a blazing wasteland of amassed filth with mountains of garbage ignited by spontaneous fire. He appears to be disgusted with the dismal picture on the outskirts of Guwahati where hundreds of storks, stooped like solemn hunchbacks with bald heads and heavy beaks, perched on the huge piles of burning rubbish. And he experiences "a grotesque vision of a polluted land, populated by carnivorous storks, who squawk and squabble over rotting skin, entrails and bones" (*WH*, 176). Deploring the amount of filth produced by practitioners of faith in the Himalayan world, he writes that the streams of holy water are defiled with untreated sewage from "Vedic Resorts" although mountains and rivers are revered and worshipped as maternal deities by them. His anguish and anger are manifest here: "Piety and pollution seem to go hand in hand while godliness has become inherently grubby. Pilgrims who travel to the mountains, along with those who enable these spiritual journeys, believe that Himalayan destinations will cleanse their sins. In return, the mountains receive nothing but offerings of filth" (*WH*, 379). The author, however, cites the instance of Bhutan where both the monarchy and parliament, as well as the religious establishment, have committed themselves to nature and wildlife conservation as a national priority.

Alter also draws our attention to the impact of heavy militarization of the mountainous frontiers like Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh and the construction of highways on both sides of the border between India and China. Convoys of trucks, carrying troops, equipment and ration, pollute the pure air of the mountains. Needless to say, human-animal conflict in the Himalayas is another chronic problem for conservationists, especially in the buffer zones and marginal settlements near national parks. He also warns us of the consequence of wildlife photography that visits to national parks in India have become increasingly dangerous because of the possibility of suffering a concussion. The growing craze for mountaineering is another

major threat to the eco-balance in the Himalayan region. Alter, however, believes that mountaineering can be a way to promote human-nature relationship. "Mountaineering promises," as he writes, "a release from existential malaise through the physicality of climbing and its rejection of social norms and responsibilities" (*WH*, 327). He has attributed the obsession of the British with mountaineering to the fact that they were the first truly industrialized nation on earth. In his memoir *Becoming a Mountain* (2014), the author has already related how his trekking and mountaineering in the high Himalayas helped him overcome the physical and psychological trauma that debilitated his life following a violent incident.

In *Wild Himalaya*, Alter has explored the flora and fauna in the Himalayan mountains with the critical eye of a naturalist, but his emotional and spiritual connection to Himalayan nature and his commitment to the environment are quite apparent. His concern for the ecological imbalance created by human activities in the Himalayan region rather haunts him time and again. He has noticed how climate change has affected everything in the Himalayas, from biology and glaciology to mountaineering and philosophy. Being from the Himalayas himself, Alter has an intimate connection to the landscape of the Himalayas which is also an integral part of the cultural and spiritual heritage of this region. He presumably subscribes to the Buddhist message of compassion and non-violence as a solution to the problems of ecological imbalance in the Himalayan region. Alter here adopts a deep ecological approach to ensure sustainability and biodiversity in the Himalayas. His connectedness to Himalayan nature reveals the spiritual dimension of his ecological explorations.

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