

**ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS (VALUES) REFLECTED IN VERRIER  
ELWIN'S *PHULMAT OF THE HILLS: A TALE OF THE GONDS***

**Sonu Singh**

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Languages  
IGNTU Amarkantak (M.P.)

**Abstract**

The present paper will attempt to analyze Verrier Elwin's *Phulmat of the Hills: A Tale of the Gonds* from an eco-critical perspective. Through a course of time environment has changed. Today, we find that there is a big gap between early natural world and present modern world. The present modern world treats the natural world only as a source of consumption and such changing perception of human beings has affected the ecology. The present modern world has destructed and exploited the nature in the name of human growth and development. Lust for industrialization, urbanization and technology has not left even Tribals, including Gond tribe untouched, however, they are still practicing and promoting their great culture and tradition in one way or the other. They are trying to maintain the gap between early and present world. It is seen that ideology, culture, traditions and way of living of Gonds as well as other tribal influenced with environment which find reflection in tales. Nature is the first priority in their every social and cultural practice. They never attempt to harm or destruct the bio-diversity of the earth. Actually, they are the protector/well-wisher of the Nature. So, the present paper will explore the eco-relation of Gond tribe with nature depicted in *Phulmat of the Hills: A Tale of the Gonds* by Verrier Elwin.

**Keywords:** eco criticism, nature, ecosystem, environment, folktales, culture and traditions, Gonds.

In the world of globalization and modernization, a serious attention is required towards the bio-diversity or ecosystem of the earth which is rapidly moving towards the danger zone. In the name of development and improvement, the industrial world has exploited the natural resources available on the earth. We are living in a polluted world for which the capitalist ideology of nature's exploitation seems to be responsible. Bio-disaster and degradation is the consequence of exploiting and selfish nature of the human beings. Abrams and Harpham's following view encapsulates the present scenario:

By the latter part of the century [twentieth century] there was widespread concern that the earth was in an environmental crisis, brought on by the industrial and

chemical pollution of the “biosphere” (the thin layer of earth, water, and air essential to life), the depletion of forests and of natural resources, the relentless extinction of plant and animal species, and the explosion of the human population that threatened to exceed the capacity of the earth to sustain it. (Abrams and Harpham 97)

In such crisis, we find the emergence of ecocriticism that makes us aware of the importance and existence of nature on the earth. Its role is to explore and study the relationship between human and nature as depicted in the literary texts and to the reader of it. A great ecocritic Cheryll Glotfelty defines in the ‘Introduction’

. . . ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. . . . Ecocriticism takes as its object the interconnection between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of culture and language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and nonhuman. (Glotfelty xix).

According to the M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, ecocriticism “. . . designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on the environment by human activities” (Abrams and Harpham 96). Ramchandra Guha in his *Environmentalism: A Global History*, talks about the environmentalism – “goes beyond the literary appreciation of landscapes and the scientific analysis of species.” He argues that “environmentalism must be viewed as a *social* program, a charter of action which seeks to protect cherished habitats, protest against their degradation, and prescribed less destructive technologies and lifestyles” (Guha 4).

In such crisis, if we move to the social and cultural world of tribal people where their culture and social values are wrapped in the natural phenomenon. In their folktales and folksongs has been emphasized their harmony with nature. Their lifestyle reflects their concern mutual relationship. Perhaps, their dependent behavior makes them realize that nature is everything for them. Since early day, some of the eminent figures have scrambled to protect and promote biodiversity of the Nature. If history of environment/ecology is studied, it is found various movements like Chipko Andolan were started for the safety of Nature. Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) was in opposition to the dam construction. A great effort has been made by the activist and socialist to save greenery of the earth. This industrial world has seen the forest and wild life (biodiversity) only as cheap source for its raw material of the production.

Beauty which nature and environment was embedded with is subsumed in the lust of human being for industrialized, urbanization and technology. Wild life is extinguishing due to materialistic approach of industrial world. Ramchandra Guha’s *Environmentalism: A Global History* highlights the ways industrial revolution advancement in science and technology have contributed to the degradation of ecological balance. He observes:

More humans producing more and consuming more led axiomatically to greater pollution and habitat degradation. The pace of environmental destruction greatly accelerated. Nature became a source of cheap raw material as well as a sink for dumping the unwanted residues of economic growth. Open-cast mining and the ever-growing appetite of industry decimated forests and wild-lands. New and dangerous chemicals were excreted into rivers and the atmosphere. (Guha 5-6)

Tribals are known as the worshiper of the nature like Wordsworth does. They have their own philosophical view to see the world and nature. Their values and life style provides others a source of learning. Like Wordsworth, they also see the divinity in nature. At any special occasion and ceremony they worship the nature like the branch of *semur* tree, *bumboo* etc. Even they celebrate the festival of Hariyali in the happiness of crop cultivation. The Hariyali festival shows their affection towards the nature. They celebrate their happiness by singing, dancing and worshipping the Mother Earth. They see the virtues of motherhood in nature. Earth is like their mother who nurtures, provides shelter and takes care of them.

Gonds, a small group of the tribal people are still entirely dependent on nature for their survival. Their ceremonies and festivals start with the worshipping of nature. Their folktales and folksongs are full of descriptions of forest and wild life which shows their awareness and importance of nature and environment in the life of a human being. Their ways of living and their ideologies are still followed in their life. But it does not mean that they are untouched by the modern technology and products. Historical evidences reflect that Gond dynasty was demolished after the interventions of foreigners and they were forced to live in the forest. Their life has spent among the wild animals and so they have great sensitivity and affection towards the birds and animals. They have developed an attachment and a deep relation with nature. They never want to destruct the nature which nurtures life of human beings, animals and plants.

People have to understand the importance and limitless wealth of the nature. In the text, *Phulmat of the Hills* by Verrier Elwin contains twenty chapters in which we find description of the Pardhan's association with the nature and wild life such as birds, animals, plants as crucial parts of their life. Pardhan's sympathetic attitude towards the birds and animals connects them so deep that they can understand their feelings and emotions. Basically, the text depicts the story of a Pardhan girl, Phulmat, known for her beauty and kindness in her village, Mulmula. The novel opens with the beautiful description of the village, Mulmula situated at the top of the hills. People love the village and they want to die there only.

This village, Mulmula, stands high in the Maikal Range that runs a hundred miles from the Saletkri Hills to sacred Amarkantak, all its sprawling rocky limbs covered with forest. . . . Here rises Narbada, which one day is to surpass all other sanctity, and flows westward to the sea; and here springs the golden-armed Sone which runs five hundred miles to Ganges. It was to these evergreen forests of towering sal that the Gonds retired before the fierce onslaught of the Moghuls and the more subtle corruptions of civilization. Here lives witches and every kind of ghost; the tiger and the bear move freely in sheltered, half-forgotten glades; wild and naked tribesman eke out a scanty living with roots and berries. (Elwin 12)

The village is famous for its beauty. Above description of the village gives a soothing and peaceful picture of a village in which these Pardhan and Gond people live together. Village is surrounded by the trees and the great rivers. Rural areas especially villages are always the place of attraction for the Tribes. Not even in the songs but also reflected in the tales. It has also been reflected that a sense of fraternity exists among the villagers. They are so helpful and kind for everyone in the village. She is well-wisher of the village. Phulmat and her family members have their own way of living, culture, traditions and belief system demonstrates that they are the worshipper and protector of nature.

One of the important aspects of Pardhan tribe, bard of the Gonds, is clan system. Pardhan are grouped in the clan system in which every clan worships an animal called totem. In the novel, Julan and Gamira belongs to the Netam clan whose totem is tortoise, Satula belongs to

Eti-Kumras clan and worship goat, Phulmat is the daughter of Parteti who worship the crocodile. Every clan worships not only a particular animal but also tries to save it. As the text reflects –

All tribal society is divided into clans whose members must not marry one another; most of the clans have a totem to which they are bound by special ties. Thus it was Julian's solemn duty not only to refrain from killing a tortoise himself, but if ever he saw a neighbour about to kill one, he must fall at his feet and offer him money or a plump chicken in its place. . . . She [Phulmat] was a daughter of Parteti, the crocodile, and once when she heard that a crocodile had been killed, she broke the earthen pots in her house, and fasted for a whole day. (*Phulmat of the Hills* 24-25)

It's the duty of a particular clan to save their totem. In this way they are not only saving the animals but also protecting them from its killing. With such a great tradition they spread the message to save wildlife. In the very opening lines of the text, it has been expressed that the Serpent Dance is one of the most dangerous dance form. As its name itself manifests that it may be dangerous for the rest of dancers.

The great snake, a full hundred feet in length, lashed round viciously. Its huge body writhed and twisted, and there were loud shouts of excitement as the long line of men, each clutching desperately at his fellow, swung to and fro. It was the Serpent Dance, climax of the great Saila of the Gond tribe, a dangerous dance, one not often seen, for if the man at the head can catch and bite the man at the tail, his victim will die of the bite of a real snake within year. (*Phulmat of the Hills* 11)

Though, it is a form of Gond's Saila Dance but it reflects their attitude towards wild animals through their belief system. They are aware of the nature of wild animals which shows their affinity with them. Their belief systems are full of a symbolical message for everyone. The Head of the dancers, Bhuta, is possessed by the spirit of snake and it is believed that if he bites anyone, the victim will die within a year by real snakebite. Such beliefs make people aware about the fact that to which extent an animal could be so dangerous for any human being.

It has also been described that nature and tribals are complimentary for each others. Nature fulfills their needs and tribals promote it through their traditions and belief system. Gonds are entirely dependent on the forest products such as hunting, gathering and collecting firewood, fruits, roots etc. for their livelihood. They go to the forest to collect roots and fruits: "When the forest is green all the world goes to pick wild mangoes. . . . They had not gone a mile before they began to sing forest-songs, improvising them as they went along, for the glory of the morning worked strongly within them" (*Phulmat of the Hills* 91). Singing and dancing are the two major part of their culture. They use to sing while they are going to the forest or fetching water from the river or cultivating in the fields. They try to cheer up themselves to work hard. Therefore, they sing while engaged in the work. They play with animals in the forest by shouting, laughing and singing. Thus, they enjoy the moment when they are in the harmony of nature. This is how nature fulfills their needs. Their fundamental needs are water, forest and land. Basically, they depend on in agriculture for the livelihood and it reflects a strong relation with land, water, plough and cattle. They spend most of the time in the fields only. For them the Earth is like their mother and they worship it. Before sowing the seed, they perform some rituals and rites: "This year, the village had asked the Baiga to perform the ceremonies at the sowing of the seed – and he had indeed performed such a worship of Mother Earth as they had never seen before" (*Phulmat of the Hills* 203).

They also keep knowledge about different kind of flora and fauna available in the forest and its appropriate use in the treatment of any disease, infection or wounds. Tribals rarely go to the hospital for treatment. When Phulmat worries about Gamira about snake-bite at the time of Serpent Dance, she directly goes to the old Baiga for solution. As it has been depicted in the text:

So he told them to gather the bark of tendu and char in case Gamira was bitten by a black cobra. They were to grind it, and mix it with water, and give him some to drink and stuff some up his nose. But if the little putki snake bit him they must get the root of the chandur nar, and for the long spotted jaddu snake the leaves and roots of the creeper they called phaduka nar, and for the long black evil-looking dundarkarail snake, the sukla grass that grows on a rock and some dankidotu roots – if possible from an ant-hill. (*Phulmat of the Hills* 114)

Even in the snake-bite, people apply their own way of treatment for snake bite. They live in the forest so they are quite familiar with the use of different plants; if they get any kind of injury or disease, they prefer plant medication on basis of their own knowledge to recover. They know very well its utility. Pardhans have faith in their own experiences and experiments. But it is going to be lost because it is still in oral form. Traditional knowledge does not possess any authenticity in presence of scientific invention. Therefore, present science does not concern the value of traditional knowledge; its importance and significance in the human life is decreasing. Mrinal Miri in her “Indigenous Knowledge and its Transformation” has significantly observed:

Both ‘indigenous knowledge’ and scientific knowledge seem to share the quality of temporal limitation of knowledge: what is valid at one point of time may be shown to be invalid at another point of time. But indigenous knowledge is location specific while scientific knowledge is universality. (Miri 220)

Traditional knowledge should be preserved and promoted. Otherwise, it will be lost. The most important thing is it can be saved through the promotion of Gonds’ culture and tradition.

One more aspect of their culture is that worship trees and plants assuming that their deities inhabit in them. Among Gonds, a famous legend on Bara Deo was that a Gond king was worshiped in place of Mahadev as their Bara Deo. “But when he [Gond king] died they took him to a saj tree and buried him beneath it, and drove a nail into the tree so that his ghost shouldn’t wander. Then ever since they have worshipped this prisoner of the saj tree, and have left the worship of Mahadeo” (*Phulmat of the Hills* 43). Therefore, people rarely go to the *Saj* tree even no one dares to cut it. They make shrine under the trees on the top of hills and worship him. Some of the trees are worshiped during their ceremonies such as marriage or festivals. Their belief associated with trees makes these trees sacred and protect from the ecological point of view. When Phulmat is on her pilgrimage, she reaches Chiraidongri and finds “On the left, under a giant pipal tree, was a shrine to Mahadeo. On the other side was an abrupt little hill, covered with a light veil of trees” (*Phulmat of the Hills* 278) and she climbs the hill – “Then she got up and wandered about the hill-top, among the tall grasses, till she found Chiraipat, the place of the bird, at the foot of a manjani tree. There was nothing there at all, it was a true Gond shrine, save the broken coconut shells scattered about. . . . and she soon went back to the edge of the hill where Pawan Dassorie lived” (*Phulmat of the Hills* 280). Pawan Dassorie, the wind strengthens Phulmat when she roams alone in the forest. The wind is one of the important part of nature, without which a human life is not possible. The life on earth depends on its presence. The wind strengthens a forest dweller and always gives new courage to go further. This is how a nature, in every aspect, accompanies and nurtures the life of a human being. For them rivers too are more sacred. It has also been described that Wainganga River is one of the holy rivers. Verrier Elwin

has given the description how Wainganga River comes on the earth. It's a Gond landlord who offers his own daughter and her daughter's lover drown into the pool of water in order to complete Mother Earth's demand and the Mother Earth allows Wainganga River to flow on the earth. Worship of nature and its various phenomena such as trees, plants and rivers, indirectly shows their protective attitude towards the nature. Not only tribals but also other people ignore to cut the tree or pollute the water. Through their mythical/legendary stories regarding the mountain, rivers, trees etc. people are instructed to worship Nature and behind all their belief always a message is hidden. Thus, their devotion and faith in the nature lead the people to admit stories and worship rivers, trees, mountain and hills.

Through the popular practice of storytelling and myths, tribal spread the message of valuing natural world and its importance in the life of a human being. A myth about the origin of the earth is quite popular among Gonds as depicted in the text; there was only water and nothing else. The great God molded the crow, Karicag, from his dirt and sends him to find earth to make the world. The crow went to the tortoise, Chakramal Chatri and convinced him to help him in search for earth. Both go to the Worm and he vomited twenty-one times; each time it vomited a different kind of earth. The Crow brought all earths to the God and again he was ordered to sow in the water. He also sent the Crow to fetch Bhimsen and Pawan Daorrie, the Wind to make the world firm and steady. This clearly reflects that there was no human being; it was animal who came first on the earth. They made the earth and helped in bringing winds, rocks, mountain, earth etc. Their popular tales and myths explicate that this cosmos is made of all five elements such as earth, wind, sky, water, and fire. Tribals are aware of that human survival is not possible in absence of these elements. Its pollution and degradation can ruin the human world which can be observed in the present scenario such as problem of air pollution, water pollution, lack of soil fertility, increasing temperature etc. As in the text, little Jiggeri tells Phulmat the story of "A hen and a scorpion". In this way it is apparent that practice of storytelling is one of the best medium to survive and transfer their moral values and traditional knowledge, attitude in their children. Thus, their tales and the practice of storytelling play an important role to scatter the knowledge and moral values among people.

Thus, it is observed that Gonds' culture, tradition, and their ways of living is simple and congenial for environment. Their attitudes, values of life, belief systems are always in the protection of biodiversity of the earth. They live amidst nature; therefore, they are aware of the importance of nature on the earth. They are very much conscious for the protection and promotion of the nature which is reflected in their social and cultural practices. Modern generation of contemporary age is struggling with many environmental crises due to their negligence and lacking observance about decaying of nature. Progress and development has led nature to its degradation. Deforestation and pollution are the issues by which the present modern world is going through. In such crucial stage, all the human beings have to change their treatment of nature. They should subsume and promote Gonds' life style and culture. Every activity and action of the human beings must be nature critic with the nature. People have to work in establishing a healthy relation between human and non-human world. Development and progress of human world should not be perpetuated through the destruction of environment and wild life. Human existence is not possible in the absence of wildlife and biodiversity. It's our duty to protect and preserve the nature. According to the philosophy of Deep Ecology — "Our world view, thinking, responses and action are human-centric (technically called 'anthropocentrism'), but in order to ensure a safer planet we need to become eco-or biocentric" (Nayar 246).

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