

SHEPHERD & THE TIGER: WILLIAM BLAKE'S & ARUN KOLATKAR'S HOLISTIC VISION OF NATURE

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“When a man wants to murder a tiger, he calls it sport; when the tiger wants to murder him, he calls it ferocity. The distinction between crime and justice is no greater.”

—George Bernard Shaw

Though nature & literature are indivisible since the time immortal, at present eco-criticism has taken centre stage in the literary studies thanks to the various issues of environmental degradation like deforestation, soil erosion; air, water, soil & noise pollutions; climate change, global warming etc. The alarming rate as well as the high magnitude of the current environmental crises throughout the world has shaken common people to their very core. It has compelled them to rethink their priorities in life. The advanced science & technology that are responsible for innumerable comforts of the modern life are also the culprits in this regard. Consequently the need is increasingly felt to go beyond science & technology—which are involved in developing new and sophisticated ways of charting, measuring & rectifying the environmental damage—to psychology & literature which can enlighten us about thoughtless and short-sighted actions of human beings in the first place.

Eco-criticism

Since late 1960s scholars & writers across the world in various disciplines were foregrounding the issues of environment in their writings. But there was no organized movement as such till late 1990s. William Rueckert was the first person to use the term ecocriticism in 1978, in his essay titled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* where he intended to focus on “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.”ⁱ Lawrence Buell defined “‘ecocriticism’ ... as [a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis”.ⁱⁱ Thus eco-criticism examines the various ecological values reflected in a text including the mapping of a particular territory, human perception of wilderness, current environmental issues etc. David Mazel in an essay titled, *American Literary Environmentalism as Domestic Orientalism* (1996), draws on the path-breaking work of Michel Foucault and Edward Said to point out the fact that, ‘the construction of the environment is itself an exercise of cultural power.’ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Meeker in *The Comedy of Survival* (1974) argues that current environmental crisis is caused primarily by the Western cultural tradition of separation of culture from nature & elevation of culture to moral

predominance at the expense of nature. Other eco-critics accordingly emphasize the need for convergence of nature & culture to give rise to a holistic world. e.g. Buell perceives “human beings as ecologically or environmentally embedded” & proposes a “remediation of human kind’s alienation from the natural world.” (Buell: 2005. p 8) He is especially critical of ‘arrogance of scienticism’ (19) while John Elder is critical of ‘arrogance of humanism’ (22).^{iv} Luc Ferry calls for a ‘natural contract’ as opposed to ‘social contract’ propounded by humanist thinkers like Hobbes, Locke & Rousseau; to “check this egoism & re-establish the harmony that has been lost” between nature & humanity (Ferry xx) & to guarantee, in Rene Cassin’s words, “all animals are born equal & have same rights to exist.” (3)^v

Significance of tiger in eco-criticism

Tiger is the ultimate predator who has always fascinated the human beings. As a handsome & royal animal, tiger symbolizes both bravery & treachery. His extraordinary strength, flexibility & unique style of hunting—silently waiting for the prey for hours, then quickly identifying & ambushing it, attacking it with lightening speed & finally killing it within a few seconds by biting off its throat—have inspired awe among people for generations giving rise to many myths & legends. Tiger’s skin is in great demand for its attractive look & likewise his other body parts are used in various traditional medicines for the belief that they increase men’s virility. Moreover hunting a tiger is supposed to be a test of one’s bravery. All these factors have resulted into mass scale poaching of tiger threatening his very existence on the earth.

Tiger is not just a top carnivore at the apex of the food chain he is also the emblem of wild life itself & the measure of the healthy environment. Nature is capable of self-sustenance by maintaining the fine balance among her various elements like plants, herbivores, carnivores & micro-organisms through their interdependence. Plants are the primary producers which convert the abiotic factors in the environment into biotic factors i.e. food through photosynthesis. Herbivores consume the plants & in turn are consumed by the carnivores. Whenever the living things die the micro-organisms convert them back into the abiotic factors which are again used by the plants for yet another life-cycle. Thus the life goes on forever. All the elements in this cycle are equally important & absence of any one element can severely affect the existence of all others. e.g. If tiger becomes extinct due to poaching or lack of habitat, the entire ecosystem will collapse as the population of herbivores like deer, wild buffalo, antelope etc. will increase beyond limit resulting in overgrazing of grasslands & forests. Consequently there will be acute scarcity of food for these herbivores as well who will eventually starve to death. Thus gradually the entire ecosystem will be destroyed. On the other hand, if there is enough number of tigers in a forest they keep the population of herbivores under control & indirectly conserve the plants. As a result, saving tiger means saving the environment.

It is in the above context that the portrayal of tiger in literature is important for ecocritics. Tiger has figured as a character in innumerable works of literature like ancient books of folktales *Aesope’s Tales*, *Katha Saritsagar*, *Panchatantra*; famous poems William Blake’s *The Tyger*, Emily Dickinson’s *A Dying Tiger*, Pablo Neruda’s *Cat’s Dream*, Sylvia Plath’s *The Night Dances*; popular novels Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894), Jim Corbett’s *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944), R. K. Narayan’s *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), Yann Martel’s 2001 Man Booker Prize winning novel *Life of Pi* & Amitav Ghosh’s *‘Hungry Tide’* (2005) to list a few. The present paper focuses on representation of tiger in William Blake’s *The Tyger (Song of Experience)* & Arun Kolatkar’s *Ajamil & the Tigers (Jejuri)*.

‘Fearful Symmetry’ of William Blake’s *The Tyger*

The Tyger from *Songs of Experience* is perhaps the most famous poem by William Blake. It is widely anthologized & read along with *The Lamb* from *Songs of Innocence*. Blake wrote *Songs of Innocence & Songs of Experience* to show ‘two contrary states of the human soul’—first in the paradise & second after the fall. However what Blake seems to emphasize through his series of companion poems in the two books is that though contrary to each other these two states belong to the same soul & so like two sides of the same coin they are inseparable. *The Lamb* begins with a child’s innocent question to a lamb, “*Little Lamb who made thee? / Dost thou know who made thee?*” & goes on to describe his gentle nature. Then in the second stanza, the lamb symbolizes Jesus Christ emphasizing the Christian values of tenderness, humbleness & peace. The final couplet explicitly identifies God as the creator of such a gentle creature & also bestows blessings on him. “*Little Lamb God bless thee / Little Lamb God bless thee.*”

Like *The Lamb*, *The Tyger* too begins with the rhetorical question to the ferocious tiger, “*What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*” Tiger is both beautiful & terrible. He symbolizes the temptation of evil in the world. Blake wonders how such an enigmatic animal is in fact created. From what part of the cosmos could the tiger’s fiery eyes have come, and who would have dared to handle that fire? What sort of physical presence, and what kind of dark craftsmanship, would have been required to “*twist the sinews*” of the tiger’s heart? How its creator would have had the courage to continue the job, once that horrible heart “*began to beat*”? If the creator be a blacksmith, what anvil and furnace would the project have required? Which smith could have actually wielded them? & finally how would the creator have felt once the job was over? However the most crucial question for Blake is, “*Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*” because it is supposed that the creation is upto large extent reflection of the creator himself. In the poem *The Lamb*, Jesus Christ is explicitly identified with the lamb. In Christian symbolism too Jesus is often referred to as a kind shepherd who takes good care of his guilible lambs. According to Orthodox Christianity, evil is the creation of Satan who is the binary opposite of good God. But Blake with his own spirituality & personalized mythology (as fully elaborated in his more ambitious work *The Marriage of Heaven & Hell*) differed drastically from such dogma. For him lamb & tiger are two creations of the same creator. The inscrutable splendor of such a terrible beast, his ‘*fearful symmetry*’ can be crafted only by an ultimate authority i.e. God who through his creation inspires awe for the absolute enormity of his power, the intricacy of his creation & sphinx-like quality of his will. Tiger’s great capacity for violence signifies the resident evil in the world which cannot simply be relegated to Satan but must be acknowledged as a mystery of creation. The switch over of the verb in the last stanza from ‘*could*’ to ‘*dare*’ raises the issue of divine intention & willfulness. This obvious trepidation of *The Tyger* in dichotomy with the innocent faith in benevolent God of *The Lamb* together presents the comprehensive portrait of ‘*jeev*’ (creature), ‘*jagat*’ (creation) & ‘*jagdish*’ (creator).

Arun Kolatkar’s ‘Good Shepherd’ in *Ajamil and the Tigers*

Jejuri is a seminal collection of poems by Arun Kolatkar which narrates the poet’s visit to a famous place of pilgrimage in Maharashtra i.e. Jejuri through a skeptical lense. Kolatkar is disenchanted with not just the place but also the God, the faith & the people. As a result, all the poems in this collection assume the ironic connotation & *Ajamil and the Tigers* can be read as a political allegory where corrupt politicians (Ajamil) enjoy feasts at the cost of their own subjects (sheep) & don’t care at all for the great sacrifice the brave & courageous soldiers (sheep-dog) have done for the country. Nevertheless, this particular poem displays deep ecological insight as well.

The poem begins with the description of the plight of tigers—they “*had nothing to eat,/ not a bite,/ for 15 days and 16 nights.*” The starving tigers complain to the tiger king & he plans a huge hunting mission in a very pompous manner. “*Make preparations for a banquet./ I'm going to teach that sheep dog a lesson he'll never forget.*” Disregarding the warning of his queen, he alone goes for the hunt & is very badly beaten up by Ajamil’s sheep-dog. Then all the tigers together launch an attack but the sheep-dog single handedly defeats them all. The condition of the tiger king is especially bad as he loses even a tooth in the fight. When brought before Ajamil, the tiger king lies that he had no intention of hurting Ajamil’s sheep; he & his people had actually come to forge the bond of friendship with Ajamil. Obviously the sheep-dog is disgusted with this lie but surprisingly Ajamil seems to believe the tiger king & he sets all the tigers free & hosts a banquet for them where they are fed well. Moreover he even signs a treaty of friendship with them & “*sent them back./ Laden with gifts of sheep, leather jackets, and balls of wool.*” The poem ends with Kolatkar’s comment on the whole incident as follows.

*Ajamil wasn't a fool.
 Like all good shepherds he knew
 that even tigers have to eat some time.
 A good shepherd sees to it they do.
 He is free to play a flute all day
 as well fed tigers and fat sheep drink from the same pond
 with a full stomach for a common bond.*

Though belonging to two different eras, two different places & two different sensibilities, Blake (18th century British romantic poet) & Kolatkar (20th century Indian modernist poet) display profound commonalities. Both the poems in consideration here—*The Tyger & Ajamil & the Tigers*—have explicit religious symbolism. As discussed earlier, *The Tyger* draws on but modifies as well the traditional Christian imagery of Shepherd (God, divine wisdom), Lamb/Sheep (meek or good people) & Tiger (evil spirit). *Ajamil & the Tigers* too uses the figures of Shepherd, Lamb/Sheep & Tiger with same meanings but here the frame of reference is the specific Hindu belief system of Non-dualism (*Advait Vedanta*).

According to Hindu mythology Brahma, Vishnu & Mahesh are the trinity of divine spirit who represent three aspects of the world respectively—creation, operation & destruction. The role of Mahesh or Lord Shiv, in particular, is very important as he destroys old to make way for the new. Consequently another meaning of the word ‘Shiv’ is ‘Mangal’ i.e. auspicious & his son Lord Ganesh who is also called ‘Mangalmoorty’ is worshipped at beginning of any new thing. The point in consideration here is that in Non-dualism, creation & destruction are not opposites but one & the same. Similarly, Lord Shiv & his consort Goddess Parvati or Shakti—also called Purush & Prakruti symbolizing individual soul / ego & overall natural world—together are worshipped as ‘Ardha-nari-nateshwar’, an emblem of fusion of male & female principles. Thus cosmic unity is one of the defining features of Lord Shiv. Lord Malhar who is the presiding deity at Jejuri is believed to be the incarnation of same Lord Shiv & as a result, his devotee Ajamil displays the same unitary sensibility in his dealing with the natural world.

Holistic Vision of Nature as a Remedy for Environmental Crises

As various eco-critics have pointed out the main reason behind the environmental crises throughout the world is the dichotomy of nature v/s culture which in the 20th century onwards is reworked into environment v/s development. Thanks to the enlightenment philosophy which accompanied Renaissance in Europe, the resultant humanism focused on the human ego &

marginalized the natural world. The success of human beings came to be measured by their knowledge of nature & consequent power to exploit nature for their own benefit. It totally ‘otherized’ & ‘thingified’ the nature & any progress of human civilization led to corresponding degeneration of environment. This extremely myopic vision of humanity further led to categorization of everything around into good or bad, useful or useless, holy or evil etc. from human point of view & cultivation of purely utilitarian attitude by discarding the later for the former. For instance, it is completely ignored by human beings that lamb & sheep are the natural prey of tiger; tigers hunt them not for sport but for survival & ‘poor’ lamb/sheep are termed as good/holy as against bad/evil tiger. However at the same time, the same human beings feel no guilt when lamb & sheep are domesticated to be fattened & slaughtered for them; or when tigers are hunted down to make medicines to increase human virility & to furnish human fashion with the tiger skin. As Jason Horn puts it,

‘Ultimately the goals of eco-criticism are to change the way people think about themselves in relation to nature, to promote humanity as being embedded in nature with the hopes that...humanity will see the natural world as being endowed with the same rights attributed to the human world...For the environmental sciences to be able to exact the kind of change that need to be enacted, humanity on a whole needs to be able to see the parasitic nature of humanity’s relationship with nature & in turn the value of a symbiotic relationship in its place.’^{vi}

In this context, the non-dualistic philosophy of ancient Hinduism & the active and self-transforming naturalism of romanticism point to the same direction—trust in nature & replacement of egocentrism with ecocentrism. Both display a poetic sensibility where nature is perceived & addressed as ‘Thou’ instead of ‘it’ & where animals & humans talk to each other in same language illustrating a convergence of human & natural. Thus Blake’s vision of tiger’s ‘*fearful symmetry*’ aims at tearing down all false dichotomies through annihilation of self / ego while Kolatkar’s acknowledgement that ‘Ajamil wasn’t a fool’ leads to an empathy for all living things. This holistic vision of nature where lamb & tiger are made by the same God & as a result where “*well fed tigers and fat sheep drink from the same pond/ with a full stomach for a common bond*” is not just the ultimate aim of eco-criticism but also the only hope for humanity for survival on the verge of total destruction.

ⁱ Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm (Eds). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens and London: University of Georgia, 1996. P 107

ⁱⁱ Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1995. P 430

ⁱⁱⁱ Dissanayake, Wimal. *The Importance of Eco-criticism* in Sunday Observer dated 8th April 2012 <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2012/04/08/mon02.asp>

^{iv} Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis & Literary Imagination*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.

^v Ferry, Luc. *The New Ecological Order* (translated by Carol Volk), The University of Chicago Press. Chicago Illinois 1992

^{vi} Horn, Jason John. *A Perfect Unity: Retrospectively Enlisting William Blake into The Eco-critical Canon*. May 23, 2013 by Rambler