

As Literature Converses with Nature

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Abstract

This paper presents the literature as converses with nature. multi-layered space can evoke a multi-layered, polyphonic narration which in turn can impart a whole new dimension to the space itself. The space, in such cases, becomes inseparable from the text since it undertakes the huge responsibility of taking forward the story and the characters. And this is exactly why a place, whether real or fictitious, is just not a place, but an integral part of a community which includes its people, non-human inhabitants, geology, climate and even the seemingly unimportant man-made, non-living structures.

KEYWORDS: Literature, Nature, spaces, narration

Just as the ecological and geological uniqueness of the different places in India has always inspired Indian English literature of all times, literature has also, in turn, contributed in creating many virtual and semi-real spaces overlapping the real physical spaces and sometimes powerful enough to transform them. There are a large number of writers who have successfully explored the beautiful possibilities space imparts as a narrative tool; classic examples being Amitav Ghosh, RK Narayan, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Sara Joseph, OV Vijayan, MT Vasudevan Nair; the most recent writers being Kiran Desai, Arvind Adiga and Shubhangi Swarup, to name a very few.

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This is the context where the concept of life-places comes into play. Robert L. Thayer has defined in detail the concept of life-place, which, in brief, may be described as a unique region marked by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and non-human living communities. It signifies a deep and respectful attachment to a particular place and its other-than-human inhabitants. It is also the locus of what E.O Wilson refers

to as 'biophilia'-the feeling of oneness with all life forms-and what Yi-Fu Tuan defines as 'topophilia'- the affective bond between people and place or setting.

The writers who have used such bioregions and ecological spaces have also, interestingly, used them for a wide variety of reasons and purposes-to explore the impact of political and gender power structures in India(**The Lowlands, Midnight's Children**), to mark and re-mark the female spaces in the Indian society (**The God of Small Things**), to expose the cultural affectations of globalization(**The White Tiger**), to amplify the meek voices of the marginalized and subaltern groups, to probe into the symbiotic relationship between man and nature(**The Hungry Tide, The Latitudes of Longing**), and many more.

In recent decades, the strained relationship between human beings and nature has caught the attention of many writers and as a result, many wonderful works have been produced which serve as eye-openers for the catastrophe created by man. There has always been a debate on the very duality presented by the phrase 'man and nature'. There are many critics who argue that this very duality is contradictory as it puts man and nature at two opposite poles and underlines the notion that man is not part of nature-the very premise that has nurtured him. But this duality, which is now very common, was constructed over the decades after the symbiotic relationship between them disintegrated. Over the ages, man's need ceased to be genuine and natural, and it started becoming value(profit) based. This gap accelerated with the advent of industrialization and has reached almost its culmination point today. The unmistakable alarm bell was quickly recognized by the litterateurs and they soon joined hands with the nature activists to produce an array of ecologically relevant and path-breaking works.

Works, which may be categorized as earth-centered, were already being produced long before eco-criticism as a unique branch of literary criticism took form. The works of Raja Rao, Kamala Das, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Markandaya, Jayanth Mohapatra , to name a few, may be called the forerunners in this genre. But as the 'waves 'of ecocriticism gathered momentum in the first wave (in the 1970s) to be carried forward to the second, third and fourth waves(spilling to the millennium), litterateurs began producing works which conversed with nature in a more conscious way. Now, literature began to lead the way to conserve nature, rather than reflect and reminisce about nature, and this echoed urgent redress for the mess created by man. In short, literature started to become an active participant rather than a passive observer and contemplator. Man and his rights were shown as no more important than any other organism in the world. And the idea that nature has its own correction mechanisms to the man-made disasters created due to ecological imbalances was projected more vividly.

Ghosh's**The Hungry Tide** is classic example, which questions the very idea of ownership of a piece of land. What begins as a desperate attempt of the ousted, homeless refugees to find a home in an uninhabited land culminates in an ugly tug-of-war between the government, who proclaims as the owner of the land, and the refugees. A lot of difficult questions stare at the reader and poke fun of his long-established concrete belief systems. Is it necessary that every single piece of land is to be 'owned'? If so, who are we to own it? Why should our rights be over other creatures? Does being on the top of the evolutionary ladder give us the right to rule and destroy anything that hinders us? What is

the sense of right that rules our consciousness when we drive away a stray lizard from our home? The novel underlines the idea that though we may sympathize with the lesser mortals (compared to us) who are tortured by the government, nature deserves the greatest sympathy (or empathy?) as it is pushed to the wall and has no other go but to capsize the whole bioregion.

The same idea finds roots in the recently published **The Latitudes of Longing** by Shubhangi Swarup. Here, the novel opens on a newly married couple living in the Andamans. The novel travels languidly through four sections named 'Islands', 'Faultline', 'Valley' and 'Snow Desert'. As suggested by the sub-titles, it is the eco-spaces in the different segments that form the very spine of the narration. We get to see a woman in the islands who can talk to trees, communicate with ghosts and feels very much at home with them; then we are transported (with a jerk!) to the mountain land of Nepal to see the journey of a hot-blooded activist Plato, and finally to the white deserts of glaciers and snow mountains where an old couple rediscover life with their newly found companionship. Here, the trees embrace, sands contain castles within them, centipedes overpower the wit of man, and conch shells contain multitudes of worlds within them. The novel is interjected with the catastrophes as Tsunami and earthquakes but, as in the case of **The Hungry Tide**, the final sympathies are with nature.

Literature can be seen as finally having active conversations with nature rather than just creating picturesque images of it and romanticizing all that is just beautiful. The good, bad and ugly aspects of nature cohabit in the eco-sensitive works of today and remind man that it is time to sit up, watch and act until it is too late.

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