

REIMAGINING HUMAN–NATURE RELATIONS: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF AMAR JYOTI’S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper seeks to investigate the ecological consciousness reflected in Amar Jyoti’s poetry, with particular focus on how her poetry responds to contemporary environmental degradation shaped by capitalist and consumerist ideologies. The study employs the theoretical approach of Ecocriticism to critically analyse Amar Jyoti’s selected poetry. Through close textual analysis, the paper attempts to explore the representation of nature, human–environment relationships, and ecological ethics in the selected poems. The analysis reveals that Amar Jyoti’s poetry reflects the adverse impact of anthropocentric and consumerist lifestyles on the natural environment. Moreover, her work critiques ecological exploitation while simultaneously envisioning a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Her poetry reveals a strong ecological sensitivity and serves as a cultural critique of unsustainable modern practices. It opens possibilities for further interdisciplinary research on literature as a means of environmental awareness and ethical transformation. The study contributes to the growing body of Ecocritical scholarship in regional Indian literatures, particularly Punjabi literature, by exploring its role in addressing global environmental concerns.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Punjabi Literature, Amar Jyoti, Environmental Crisis, Anthropocentrism, Consumerism, Ecological Consciousness.

Change is the basic law of nature, but in recent times, the natural environment is changing rapidly, and has attained a level and urgency never before experienced. Man, like all other living organisms, is also influenced by this natural process of change. Gradually with the advent of civilization, man started adapting his surrounding environment as per his needs. But in recent times, human race has become so dominant that everywhere nature can be seen affected by man. This dominance and monopoly of a single species is considered to be a huge danger not only for other species and the environment but also for the human race itself. If man is trying to extend his control over natural resources it is also his responsibility to make efforts to solve the environmental problems taking place from the process of control. This is the basic presumption on which the role of literature can be discussed in the context of ecological criticism. Late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been marked by the accelerated ecological deterioration attending rising global temperatures, ice caps melting, mass extinction of species, diminishing groundwater reserves, desertification, poisonous industrial wastes in the atmosphere and rising resource wars. Such environmental disasters have forced theorists in the humanities to reconsider the nature-culture dichotomy, and literature has become a key area of concern in theorizing ecological awareness and ecological ethics (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012).

One of the significant changes in the intellectual landscape is the introduction of the concept of Ecocriticism, which studies literature and ecology from an interdisciplinary point of view, where scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. It seeks to invoke a deeper connection between humanity and the natural world. It is a study of the mutual relationship between the depiction

of literature and the material environment (Glotfelty and Fromm, XVIII). It can also be called a mode of interpreting a literary work in the context of contemporary environmental issues. Ecocriticism, although emerging within Euro-American settings, has expanded to become an international practice, embracing more and more a wider range of environmental history, indigenous cosmologies, and postcolonial politics (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996; Huggan and Tiffin, 2010).

The theoretical basis of the present study is the interdisciplinary area of Ecocriticism, which is a part of the literary and cultural studies, and explores the connection between the environment and literature. The idea of Ecocriticism was developed by early theorists named William Rueckert, who depicts literature as a means by which ecological principles could be comprehended (Rueckert, 1978). The institutionalization of the field started in the 1990s with such works as *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996), which defined Ecocriticism as the study of the connection between literature and the physical world. Eco-critics put forth the view of the poets' representations of human nature relationships, environmental concerns, and the ethics of the environmental world within the context of poetry. This definition was later extended by other theorists such as Lawrence Buell, who maintained that environmentally oriented literature should be able to represent nonhuman environment as a living entity that can affect narrative, character and theme (Buell, 1995). In the 2000s, the theoretical breadth of Ecocriticism expanded even more with the emergence of environmental justice theory, animal studies, ecofeminism, and postcolonial Ecocriticism (Garrard, 2012; Huggan and Tiffin, 2010). The collection of Glotfelty and Fromm contributed to the canonization of the main concepts, including nature writing, pastoral literature, wilderness narratives, and environmental justice. These initial systems focused on the moral value of nonhuman lives and the need to consider nature to be not a passive background but as an active entity. Ecocriticism, therefore, puts literary studies to task to recognize the material environment as an analytical object worthy of being studied (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

Since independence, the theme of ecological imbalance and the changing relationship between man and nature can be seen in much of the poetry of that era. Due to the effects of fast-paced urbanization and industrialization, the issues of depletion of forests, river pollution, and the commercialization of sanctified land keep recurring in that poetry. In other words, the ecological concerns can be addressed in relation to socio-cultural dynamics that include a centuries-old history of colonialism, the fast-paced post-colonial industrialization, discrimination, and differential access to the environment due to the caste system, and persistent conflicts over lands, forests, and rivers among tribal and underprivileged communities. In such a way, Indian environmental humanities are part of the Indian landscape defined by cultural memory, sacred geography, and development challenges. This makes Indian as well as Punjabi literature a rich resource of understanding the interaction between nature, culture, and the contemporary environmental challenge.

The other significant aspect of eco-poetry is the issues relevant to urbanization. This poetry portrays urbanization as a place of pollution, overcrowding, sewage, industrial waste, and rotting infrastructure. Their writings describe the destruction of natural environments, the change of rivers into poisonous streams, and the estrangement of people in aggressively industrial environments. These images point to the ecological violence inherent in the process of urbanization and the modern world of development. These poems mirror the rest of the environmental justice movements in Punjab that criticize the disproportionate damage wrought by the fast economic growth. Poems about polluted rivers, city poverty, depletion of

forests, or groves of sacred places ravaged by industry have the effect of indirectly criticizing unfair development policies (Anupama, 2014).

Punjabi literature, in this case, portrays a profound respect for nature, pointing to the interconnectedness of all living things. Due to its five rivers and fertile land, Punjab has mostly remained in harmony with nature. It is mostly an agricultural region, so major ecological changes occurred only after the Green Revolution in 1966, which modernized farming. However, recent developments in industrialization have also affected the environment of Punjab. To some extent, these ecological changes also influenced the lifestyle and thinking of the people of Punjab, and this influence can also be seen in Punjabi writers' writings. It is generally said that literature cannot directly alter things, but it can help in understanding the course of things in a clearer and broader perspective. As in the early Punjabi poetry, like in Gurmat Kav, Sufi Kav, Kissa Kav, and Lok Kav, the beauty of nature is highly appreciated. Guru Nanak expresses the importance of nature in human life through a wonderful symbolic method: *Air is the Guru, water is the father/ and earth is the great mother of all.*¹

Ecological concerns have a significant place in the poetry of numerous modern Punjabi poets such as Bhai Vir Singh, Pooran Singh, and others. In the same way, Punjabi women poets such as Amrita Pritam, Prabhjot Kaur, and many more also talk about seasons and other aspects of nature in their poetry. A brief analysis of the poetry of initial modern Punjabi poets reveals that most of these poets just appreciate or worship the beauty of nature and compel the readers to spend some time in the lap of nature. There is no awareness of environmental concerns in their poetry. But in this era of science and technology, awareness about environmental issues is becoming an important theme of contemporary literature. Now, there are so many Punjabi poets, such as Surjit Patar, Ajmer Rode, and Shiv Kumar Batalvi, known for writing about the environment, ecological loss, and urbanization. The present study is an attempt to focus on Amar Jyoti's, a prominent diaspora Punjabi woman poet, selected poetry in the theoretical framework of Ecocriticism in order to shed light on the poet's vigilant views about the relationship of human life and nature. The paper also aims to analyze how the poetic descriptions of nature, in her poetry, relate with the more general socio-cultural, political, and environmental crisis in contemporary society.

Amar Jyoti is bold enough to fight against the fineries that keep man away from *Mother Earth*. Her poetry is well-known for its allusiveness and reference to a wide range of mythological and literary subjects. At the same time, the study on the use of nature and ecology in her poetry has seldom been available. This paper offers a critical analysis of Amar Jyoti's selected poetry through the lens of Ecocriticism. Her opinions towards nature support her position to be considered as a major representative of recent environmental issues and Ecocritical concerns in Punjabi literature. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the environmental concerns highlighted in Amar Jyoti's poetry. Her well-known poems entitled *Jugnua'n Da Kafla (Convoy of Glow-Worms)* and *Paun De Kandharde (Piggyback of Wind)* from the collection *Waqt, Mausam and Nazam (Time, Weather and Poetry)*, are analyzed. In these poems, she tries to trace out the changes occurring in the environment in this era of modernization, and also talks about the exploitation of natural resources being done by men for the sake of personal gains.

Her poetry mainly highlights the issue of the water of Punjab, which is being polluted by the industries in the name of development. This polluted water, by further flowing into other natural sources, is destroying the other species also. Amar Jyoti also complains that no one,

even so-called social workers, nature lovers, or our leaders, pays attention to this issue. As she writes: *The water was trickling towards the villages of Punjab/ when the poison from the factories was mixing in it.*² These lines encapsulate a profound Ecocritical engagement with environmental degradation, and foreground the ethical and material consequences of industrial modernity on rural ecologies. Situated within the agrarian landscape of Punjab, these verses interrogate the disruption of the human–nature relationship through man-made intervention, thereby aligning closely with the central concerns of Ecocriticism. The above verses present a striking paradox through the personification of water as an agent of ‘deception’. Traditionally, water in Punjabi cultural and ecological consciousness signifies purity, fertility, and sustenance; however, Amar Jyoti subverts this symbolic register by depicting it as a medium of betrayal. From an ecocritical standpoint, this apparent betrayal is not intrinsic to nature but is instead the outcome of human-induced pollution. The poet thus shifts the blame from nature to human practices, and exposes the fallacy of human-centric assumptions that treat the environment as a passive, limitless resource. In this sense, the ‘deceptive’ water becomes a metaphor for a compromised ecosystem, reflecting the consequences of exploitative human actions.

Here, Amar Jyoti boldly identifies industrial pollution as the source of the ecological crisis. The imagery of poison depicts a slow and insidious form of ecological violence and reinforces the idea that environmental degradation often operates through gradual, cumulative processes rather than sudden disaster. The usage of the progressive form indicates the permanence of this pollution, implies that ecological destruction takes place continuously and systematically, being an integral part of capitalist industrialization processes. The ecocriticism approach emphasizes the connection between the unregulated development of industrialism and consumerism and the destruction of the ecological balance. Furthermore, the reference to ‘the villages of Punjab’ signifies the ecological crisis within a specific socio-geographical context. Rural societies, which heavily rely on natural resources for agriculture and daily survival, are disproportionately affected by this pollution. The poem thus boldly critiques the uneven distribution of environmental harm, where the benefits of industrialization are often used elsewhere, while its toxic consequences are borne by marginalized populations. This dimension of the text resonates with ecocritical concerns regarding the intersection of ecology, economy, and social inequality.

Importantly, the above poem also contributes to the reimagining of human–nature relations by challenging the reader to reconsider the ethical implications of environmental exploitation. Thus, the poem acts not only as a criticism but also as an admonition, calling for a transition from destructive anthropocentrism to a more sustainable interaction with nature. Through her poetry, Amar Jyoti attempts to bring into focus the hitherto neglected and ecologically fragile issues. As she strictly warns the people against the continuously increasing environmental issues arising from deforestation, she highlights the cruelty of modern human towards trees. *Don't punish the trees/ if the trees get angry/ what will you do? (Paun De Kandharde, 80)* In these lines, there exists a very precise eco-critical message regarding the delicate interconnection between human existence and the natural environment. The author makes use of personification of ‘trees’ in order to attribute emotions to nature and to refute the prevalent anthropocentric perception of nature as something passive and vulnerable for being used for any purposes. The warning about punishing the trees symbolizes deforestation and the thoughtless extraction of natural resources. From the perspective of Ecocriticism, the rhetorical question, *what will you do?*, acts as a moral appeal to reflect upon ecological

² **Note-** The excerpts from the poems quoted in the paper have been translated by the researcher himself. The translations however are of working nature only.

disequilibrium. It suggests that human survival is necessarily connected with the prosperity of trees, which provide humans with oxygen and regulate the climate conditions. In fact, the retaliation of nature can hardly be regarded as deliberate because it is only a reaction to the destruction of the environment caused by human activities. Therefore, the mentioned lines redefine human-nature connections since they put the emphasis on interrelation rather than subjugation.

At the same time, she also condemns the skyscrapers that are being built by neglecting the natural environment. As she writes: *In the cities/ forests of buildings grew/ it seems so/ the days of trees are over* (Paun De Kandharde, 80). This poem offers a sharp ecocritical critique of urbanization and its impacts on the natural environment. In his poem, Amar Jyoti uses the metaphor of ‘*Jungles of buildings*’ to stress how man-made structures (buildings) have replaced the natural jungles. The irony here is that although cities seem to ‘grow,’ such development necessarily causes environmental degradation.

From the Ecocritical perspective, the statement ‘*the days of trees are over*’ conveys a feeling of loss and despair, emphasizing how nature has been displaced by human intervention. Moreover, the poem is an indictment of the anthropocentric attitude which favors the expansion and progress of the city at the cost of ecology. The poem also reflects the disconnection between man and nature in the context of contemporary urban societies. Here, the poet depicts the artificiality of the urban life, which is largely against nature. To her, this type of lifestyle seems to be a barrier to the natural environment in the name of development and modernity. She further writes: *Sunlight hits / the glass windows/ Begs/ to enter the rooms* (Paun De Kandharde, 80).

Amar Jyoti also asks human to think about the other species whose lives are in danger due to his destructive behavior towards nature. While mentioning the importance and beauty of nature, she wants to make people aware of environmental conservation. As she writes:

Whirlwind's echo
birds' song
evening music
.....
if all imprisoned in the buildings,
how will you breathe?

These verses represent a poetic and urgent reflection from an Ecocritical perspective regarding the disruption of natural harmony as a result of urbanization. The use of imagery in Amar Jyoti's description of natural sounds such as the hum of the bee, the chirping of birds, and the music of the night represents an ecocritical representation of a healthy and vibrant ecosystem. From an ecocritical perspective, the depiction of natural elements like these as ‘imprisoned’ inside the building signifies the destructive effects of over-urbanization. The use of such imagery is not limited to the loss of biodiversity in an urban environment but also represents the destruction of human contact with nature itself. The use of a rhetorical question like “how will you breathe?” serves as a stark reminder of humanity's dependence on nature. Breathing represents the literal act of sustaining life, but also refers to the general idea of existing harmoniously in an environment.

To sum up, it can be said that the ecological crisis has not arisen out of mankind's need to survive; rather mostly it is the result of greed and consumerism. Amar Jyoti has a keen sense

of changes occurring in the natural spaces. After the analysis of her poetry, we get an overall picture of what is happening in the natural environment and how we can interfere with it positively. We also come to know how man is disturbing the other species of nature as well as the whole environment by exploiting the natural sources. Through her poetry, she warns people about environmental issues and wants to give the message to live an eco-friendly and meaningful life. The above discussion exemplifies how the poet articulates the crisis of ecological imbalance while simultaneously calling for an ethical reorientation of human attitudes toward nature. Through evocative imagery and regional specificity, Amar Jyoti not only documents environmental degradation but also foregrounds the urgent need to restore harmony between human activity and the natural environment. Hence, the interpretation of the selected poetry through the lens of Ecocriticism helps redefine the relationship between man and nature and recognize the resulting disequilibrium that emerges out of such an approach to development.

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