**Survival through Ecological Concern in Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing and Dhruv Bhatt’s Akoopar – the *Infinite***

Dr. Mansi Joshi

Science & Humanities Department,

L. D. College of Engineering, Ahmedabad, India

[majoshi@ldce.ac.in](mailto:majoshi@ldce.ac.in)

**Abstract**

With the advancement of industrialization and globalization, human being has started living a concrete life. In the name of progress, somewhere man has neglected the importance and value of the environment. All the environmental resources from which man can survive have been inherited to us by God. Mankind has raced blindly towards the progress forgetting its roots from where he has evolved. Environmental degradation prevails in every corner of the world; of which Canada and India are no excuses. The causes for it may vary, but the effect of the degradation on the human race is the same. Literature has always been the mirror of human life. The relationship between human with the nature is analyzed in the theory of ‘ecocriticism’. Mankind’s interaction with natural dwellings as well as with animals, wilderness and with the earth itself is shown in the works of a Canadian writer Margaret Atwood and an Indian writer Dhruv Bhatt. Both the writers have tried to build better ecological conditions through various characters. This article will focus on man’s response to the environment, nature and the city. Though having different cultural and geological background, both the writers portray the fact that when the nature becomes united with the human actions, the identity of human race as well as other creatures on earth is not threatened. Hence, happiness prospers all around.

**Key Words**

Environment, Woman, Survival

**Introduction**

The relationship of progress and economy is interlinked. But the progress of any culture or nation can never go beyond the limits of its natural sustainability. Any progress is worth only if it protects the environment. Man has bulldozed trees, farms, jungle to build concrete jungle. As a result of that man has to face disasters many a times. In the race of progress, man has put life of human being in danger. There are so many spokespersons of environmental issues like Vandana Shiva and Sadhguru who have taken charge to save mother earth. With the advancement of industrialization and globalization, human being has started living concrete life. In the name of progress, somewhere man has neglected the importance and value of the environment. All the environmental resources from which man can survive have been inherited to us by God. Mankind has raced blindly towards the progress forgetting its roots from where he has evolved. Environmental degradation prevails in every corner of the world; of which Canada and India are no excuses. Whenever man neglects the importance of his own roots, own belongings, his existence comes to danger. Human being has reached to the stage from where he needs to rethink about his existence, his survival through environment.

Ecological imbalance and ecological degradation have become a global issue of concern. This not only puts the human race in danger, but the whole ecological system is affected. It endangers all people along with its ecosystem irrelevant of caste, color, region, language, custom or rituals of human race. Man is facing hazardous effects of environmental degradation across the world in the form of depletion of ozone layer, global warming, famines, flood, earthquake, cyclone etc. man is responsible for all the imbalance and hence, man only can save the environment by implementation of sustainable development.

Literature’s prime aim is to sensitize the society towards the issues related to society, economics, gender, class, etc. Environmental awareness also is spread through literature aiming to make ecosphere worth living in which a human life can sustain easily. Literary production is always the mirror of the culture of human species. Thereby, literary study is cultural study as well. The theory that examines human life in literature from the spectacles of environment is known as ecocriticism. Ecocriticism takes its subject as the interconnection between nature and culture and especially the language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other is on land. Most ecocritical works share a common motivation; to connect to the environment. The human race has reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support system. Ecocriticism is a term derived from Greek language words - ‘oikos’ and ‘kritis’. ‘Oikos’ means ‘household’ an abode of human being, other species, nature and the spirit of nature, too; and ‘Kritis’ means to judge. Man is a social animal and his actions are based on his social and cultural understanding. Man reflects towards nature according to his cultural adaptations. In the words of William Howarth –

"a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action." (Howarth, 69)

Literary production is always the mirror of the culture of human species. Thereby, literary study is cultural study as well. Different writers writing in different biodiversity, keeping in mind different ecological concepts, their different effects on the culture reflect the same differently in their works. They examine what insight literature offers into human relationship with other species and with the world around. Meeker calls this study ‘Literary Ecology’. The mankind, as always is surrounded by and influenced by several ecological aspects. Several writers have presented the same according to their different perspective.

**Ecological Concern in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing***

Majority of Margaret Atwood’s novels are based on themes like cultural and individual survival. Atwood has been of the opinion that ‘powerlessness and silence go together’, hence women should break the chains of the society and find a new place to live happily. Atwood in her novel *Surfacing* focuses some prominent implications regarding human-nature relationships. The novel throws some light on the disruption in modern life styles and so the narrative in her work moves towards the journey to nature. As nature plays a major role in shaping the psychology of a human being, the character’s actions and reactions are the responses to the environment in which he lives. By portraying these issues, Atwood has discussed ecological imbalance created by the human being for the satisfaction of his greed. In one of an interview Atwood advocated environment, “Our tools have become very powerful. Hate, not bombs, destroys cities. Desires, not bricks, build them”. Only the sustainable development can lead to the real progress. Margaret Atwood describes the political power through this novel.

Atwood has showed a pen picture of the nature which has already been destroyed for personal gains in the first chapter of the novel. It begins with the ‘weekend in the country’ idea. The protagonist goes on a journey that is not only a landscape of rocks, trees and water but also a landscape of mind, the heart and the soul. She identifies herself with the nature,

“I lean against a tree; I am a tree leaning… I am a place”- Atwood, *Surfacing* (181)

And then

“I am part of the landscape; I could be anything a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock.”- Atwood, *Surfacing* (187)

She identifies herself with each part of the nature and when she realizes its destruction, she could not resist herself to stand by it. With this idea, Atwood tries to portray that earth is considered as mother earth and the special power of production and reproduction is gifted to her by the God.

The protagonist stands by the nature opining that rejection of nature is rejection to the fundamental part of life. She raises her voice against the violence by the Americans, responsible for the destruction with words,

“I wanted there to be a machine that could make them vanish, a button I could press that would evaporate them without disturbing anything else, the way there would be more rooms for animals, they would be rescued.”- Atwood, *Surfacing* (154)

The narrator in the novel makes a clear distinction between the creator and destroyer of the earth. She wants to destroy enemies of the nature, without creating disturbances to anything. Her concerns for every ecological aspect are visible through her actions. She wants to move beyond the will of power and come to nature not as a conqueror, but as a worshipper. As all the aspects of nature exist and coexist in the harmony of one another, human being’s existence too lies in living with the harmony of all surrounded ecological aspects. She says, ‘I am the thing in which trees and animals grow.’ She stands against the system of the resort developers as well as the hunters who kill the Heron. Human has reached to the stage when a man needs to understand the coexistence of the environment in which he is nurtured, to attain sustainability.

At last, the protagonist acquires her identity with the natural world, being on an island Quebec. She refuses to be in urban setting and decides to be free from the destructive effects of the technological world. The narrator wants to be free from all the burdens of the civilization.

“It’s true, I am by myself; this is what I wanted, to stay here alone. From any rational point of view, I am absurd; but there are no longer any rational points of view.” -Atwood, *Surfacing* (173)

She finds her survival in returning to nature in order to experience harmony and peace. She raises her voice alone without any follower. She begins a protest without any army. She completely rejects everything associated to the destruction of the earth.

“Her plunge in the ancient glacial lake ‘resurfaces’ with the power to refuse to be a victim,”- Atwood, *Surfacing* (191)

In the life of the protagonist, nature plays its role for the sustainability of mankind and it is the responsibility of mankind to protect the environment. Nature plays a pivotal role to survive in her life. Atwood compares nature with the protagonist. As both are feminine, both need tender approach to be protected. Mankind should behave and think ethically. Man is accountable for nature and its condition. Ultimately nature saves humans.

**Ecological Concern in Dhruv Bhatt’s Akoopar *– The Infinite***

*Akoopar – The Infinite*, a novel written by Dhruv Bhatt, has depicted so many incidents woven with one another. The independent incidents are tied together by the writer’s discovery of the ingrained wisdom of uncommonly common people of Sasan Gir whose way of life has sustained the cultural heritage over the ages. Dhruv Bhatt has depicted the wilderness of Gir, life of people over there from the experiences of a painter; hence the whole novel is a series of different incidents leading to the care and concern for animals (lions, cows), the mountain, the crops and as the mother Earth.

Dhruv Bhatt put emphasis on the idea that the characters act along with nature. These characters blend their life with the landscapes and with the environment in which they live. Their interconnection with their environment is used as a strategy to subvert the conceptual frameworks of today’s destructive perception of nature. Hence, the novels present nature as an active character of the story in an ecologically informed literary discourse. Throughout the plot water, mountain, sea, animals, fish, bird act as the eco-literary tool of postmodern writing. All the characters involved in plot directly or indirectly are ‘earthbound’ and so they establish interconnected relationship between culture and nature. Human emotions are merged with nature to create stories in the plot of the novels, thus the novel projects an ecological awareness. Greg Garrard has explained the same in ‘Ecocroticism’,

“ecocriticism traces…the interplay between local myth and scientific knowledge, the tensions between human place and climatology… an interesting field to explore the interconnection between science and literature… including ancient literature as well” (Garrard 210).

Wisdom comes from the unconditional acceptance of the situation in which we are living. Lions are considered to be the dangerous animals, but people in Gir believe them to be the friendly animals. Unnecessarily they do not attack on people. The grandeur is the trademark of lions. Lions have learnt to live with people without doing any kind of harm to them. Man in Gir has learnt to adjust with lion respectfully. This reverence towards lions has enabled them in their synchronized life.

“The lion is quite different from other animals. Its status is unique and equally unique is its respect.”

(ATI 81)

The essential point discussed in the novel is that a painter, the city dweller who is an ‘outsider’ in Gir, acquires the concern for all aspects through small incidents. He has received some new insight and he is sometimes pleased at the same time confused, but ultimately at the end of the novel he becomes one with Gir like Sansai and Aima.

The story is told to us through the mouth of a painter. In spite of being an ‘outsider’ in the ‘Gir’, the painter is attached to all the aspects of it. The story begins with the words – “Khama Gayrne” (May the Gir be blessed.) spoken from the mouth of Aima and ends with the same words from the mouth of Mita, a character from urban life. The painter experienced and narrated a series of incidents to Mita and made her feel same kind of compassion for Gir. The Gir, here is not just a jungle – a habitat for lions, it is the celebration, rather a mission of all the people living there to keep intact the beauty and existence of the ‘Gir’.

The forest ‘Gir’ rises as one of the characters from the story. ‘Gir’ is the mother to all. Only a mother has the capacity to sustain in life, even after taking acute labour pain while giving birth to a child. A woman has cultivated the same capacity like the earth, bearing pain, still full of happiness, being capable to sustain and making the generations capable enough to sustain in their life. ‘Gir’ has stood still after all the natural calamities, nurtured the life living in it, just like a mother. And so ‘Gir’ is infinite.

Sansai, one of the major characters in the novel, has grown up in the lap of ‘Gir’, playing with ‘Ramzana’ – a lioness. She constantly talks to lions and whenever she observes anything wrong happening or harming the property of ‘Gir’, she promptly advocates for them. She dislikes Dorothy the lady who has come for the research on lions because her research causes disturbance for lions. The wilderness, lions and all the aspects are living characters for Sansai. Even the earth itself is like a member in her life. She raises her voice when she has found unwanted weed across ‘Gir’. If she is a teacher to the painter, then she is an elder sister to the girls who have come for the camp to ‘Gir’. If she scolds everyone like a mother, then sometimes she is very friendly to all. Each step taken by her is a proof of her concern for ‘Gir’; as if she is alive just because she bears the responsibility of taking care of her surroundings. Fearlessly she roams in the jungle, like a saint – pure by heart, brave by nature and caring as mother. Nature has given her confidence to sustain in her life, so she always thrives to sustain ‘Gir’.

The animals, river and mountains also speak about their existence. The painter could not distinguish the difference between lions. Sansai could very well identify them by their name and by their appearance, but the painter could not as he belongs to the city and not to the Gir. Aima blesses Gir – the place where they all live. Gir is their mother; the earth is the mother for all and man need to understand to value where he resides.

“I had seen both Ramjana and Saryu together and I had not been able to make any distinction between the two. These people can clearly see the difference between animals and hills. Why so? I did not know. If I can understand the reason perhaps, I may be able to go ahead on the track to understand why Aima used the term ‘Khama Gayrne’.” (ATI 62)

The novel begins with the word ‘Khama Gayrne’ by Aima when a panther strikes a peacock or some beast. But instead of showing any compassion for either of the animals, Aima is compassionate about the ‘Gir’. Even the painter could not understand this gesture. The mother earth bears all the justified and unjustified gestures of all the species on it. It has never turned her face, always stood there to protect all of us – animals, birds, humans, etc. Aima has showed her concern and literally scolded people as she has found weed, ‘Kuvadio’(cassia tora) in ‘Gir’. Aima in very strict voice declares that the species, animals and the earth – the ‘Gir’ should be protected in their original form. Sansai, too is with Aima in this concern. When a human being does not care for the mother earth, one amongst all female, which cannot be naked. Hence, this type of weeds starts growing in ‘Gir’ ant it is useless.

Lajo, a friend of Sansai, too shows her compassion towards her cow. When a lion pounce upon her, she, she tells her husband not to save her, as she will suffer a lot and the lion too will remain hungry. Living among wild animals, still showing compassion, care and love towards them only can be possible if they realize their survival in all condition at the same time they have accepted the fact that if the earth is saved, their life will be sustained. Aima proudly says that the life in ‘Gir’ is safer than the life in city. She firmly believes that the amount of people killed by vehicles is in larger, than by lions or leopard. This is another proof of a spokesperson of sustaining life.

These kinds of ecological implications help readers to empathize as well as appreciate the philosophy of ecological concepts in their life. The readers also realize that through these kinds of stories they have adopted the religion called environment preservation unconsciously and that guides them in their thoughts and actions. The environment rejuvenates readers’ life. Thus, the writers like Dhruv Bhatt also regenerate and rejuvenate basic values of Hindu culture and advocate the same. Sharifa Vijaliwala comments in this regard,

“Indian Culture travels from information to knowledge and knowledge to wisdom.” (Vijliwala web)

**Conclusion**

There are some similarities and some differences in the novels of both the writers, though they have talked about the survival of human being with the nature. Canada and India both have been colonial countries. Both are under the victimized effect of industrialization. Both the countries are facing ecological threats. And both the countries represent values and ethical actions of human being to worship nature, being one with it. Modernization and development through technology and science can never be only the parameters for the development. Development is an essential part of our life, but not at the cost of ecological destruction. The protagonist and the painter both have realized their survival being away from the urban life, being one with environment. It is very ironic that literature, writers and environmentalists have to create awareness about saving environment and protecting it. Nature and environment have been the main source for development. Earlier it has been respected and utilized with reverence. But later on, environment is disturbed for selfish reasons in the name of progress. Dhruv Bhatt has satirically and sharply pointed out this awareness in illiterate and simple people for the sustainability of all human beings. Atwood and Bhatt, being in different environment settings, advocate similar ideas. The characters portrayed in both the novels share same concerns to protect the environment and while doing so they have realized their identity and true self.

**References**

1. Atwood, Margaret, *Surfacing*: New York: Anchor Books A Division of Random House, Inc, 1972. Print
2. Bhatt, Dhruv, *Akoopar – The infinite*. Trans. Piyush Joshi and Suresh Gadhavi. Ahmedabad: Tatvam Publication, 2014. Print
3. Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*: London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, Second edition, 2012. Print
4. Howarth, William. ‘Some Principles of Ecocriticism,’ in The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, Eds., Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1996 pp.69-91. Print.
5. Meeker, Joseph W. "The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology." New York: Scribner's, 1972.Print.
6. Shivaramakrishnan, Murli, et al. *Ecological Criticism for Our Times Literature, Nature and Critical Inquiry*: Delhi: Authorspress Publishers of Scholarly Books, ,2011.Print
7. Vijliwala, Sharifa. “Shree Dhruv Bhatt ni Navalkatha 'Samudrantike' No Aaswad.” Shree Janak Nayakni Shashthipurti nimitte Navalparv – 22 Navalkathaona aswadno Aath Divsiy Mahotsav -  Ame Badha,Chhinnpatra ane Perelisis. 15 August 2014.  Lecture. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI25jnNkRyc>