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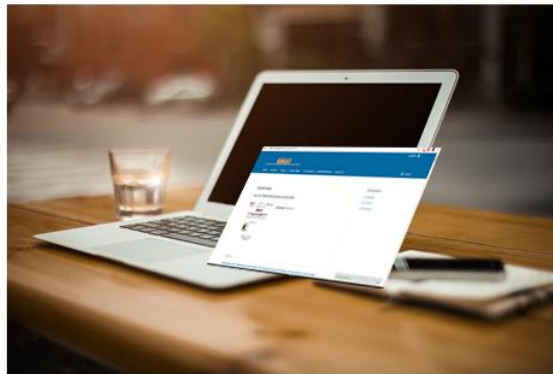
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An Ecocritical Study of Dhruv Bhatt's *Samudrantike*

Abstract:

The scientific evolutions and developments of 21st century have been achieved through the destruction of nature and humans have lost the harmony with nature and have put themselves in the threat of their survival. Literature often echoes these issues and also studies it through the theory of Ecocriticism which emerged in the 1990s. Ecocriticism focuses on the analyses of man – nature relationship and also studies its reflection in literature. Dhruv Bhatt is one of the well – known writers of modern Gujarati literature. His works are embedded with human sensibilities and social satires; he celebrates humanity in the lap of Nature. The novel *Samudrantike* (1993), translated in English as the *Oceanside Blues*(2001) by Vinod Meghaniis one such work celebrating the role of nature in human life. The novel is the finest example of man – nature relationship and thus the present paper aims at analyzing it through the theory of Ecocriticism.

Key Words:Gujarati Literature, *Samudrantike*, *Oceanside Blues*, Ecocriticism, Man – Nature Relationship, survival, seashore.

Introduction:

Every living creature on the Earth is important to complete the great chain of being but as it is seen the scientific evolutions and developments of 21st century have been achieved through the destruction of nature and humans have lost the harmony with nature and have put themselves in the threat of their survival. An article in the *Times of India* claims that India is the most vulnerable country to climate change. The same article also claims that this climate change could cut agricultural incomes and could hit the hardest areas by rising temperatures and declines in rainfall.¹ Even at a conference Ex – President Pranab Mukherjee expressed his views on climate change and said that “climate change has moved center – stage in policy

formulation and its ill effects are visible in the abnormal behavior of nature in recent times.”ⁱⁱ Even some of the areas of the world are sinking day by day towards their end. The news of melting ice, tsunami, earthquakes and more have become very common phenomena. Some of the animal and bird species have also become extinct. The reason behind this entire imbalance in the natural world is the interference of humans and human activities. This interference is destructing the natural cycle and so the issues of the survival of the humans and natural world have been voiced by many activists and writers. Literature definitely reflects this phenomenon and nature has been truly the sole inspiration for such writers but with the imbalance of the natural surroundings, the theories related to the survival of environment also started developing in the European countries. One such theory is ‘Ecocriticism’ which studies the depiction of natural world and man – nature binary in the literary works. The present paper aims at applying the theory of ecocriticism on one of the Gujarati novels *Samudrantike* by Dhruv Bhatt which depicts the issues of the natural world.

Dhruv Bhatt is a Sahitya Akademi Award (2002) winning author from Gujarati literature. His career as a writer spans across innumerable novels and poetry collection. Some of his important novels, like *Samudrantike* (1993), *Tattvamasi* (1998), *Akooparetc.*, deal with the depiction of man – nature relationship. Majority of his novels have been translated in English, Hindi and other languages. He is writer of remarkable talent. His works are radical as well as engrossing.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a post – modern theory which flourished in the 1960s but developed thoroughly through 1990s. The term ‘ecocriticism’ designates the state of living beings in their natural surrounding and their relation with that environment. Ecocriticism as a theory interprets the man – nature relationship and its depiction in the literary works. The writers from England and America tried to draw attention towards the environmental threats in their works. The early example of ecological writing in England is the *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789) by Gilbert White where the author has described his close observation of England’s wildlife and rural world. Also the works like *Walden* (1854) by Henry David Thoreau and *Travels* (1791) by William Bertram are considered the early works of this genre in America. By the 20th century, even scientists declared the threat to environment. Ecocriticism as a theory began with this discussions on climate change. There is also an established association called ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and

Environment) established by the ecocritics which publishes its own journal known as ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment). Ecocriticism is a combined branch of humanity and natural sciences. *The Ecocritical Reader* – a journal by Cheryll Glotfelty is considered the milestone in the development of Ecocriticism. The major ecocritics are Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Rueckert, Sullen Campbell, William Howarth, Michael P. Branch and Glen A. Love.

Ecocritical Study of Dhruv Bhatt's *Samudrantike* (1993)

In the novel *Samudrantike*, Dhruv Bhatt has tried to show the hidden as well as visible damage cost upon the natural elements due to human activities but at the same time, he has highlighted the aspect of independence of nature that is always changing and always alive. The task of nature is to maintain the balance between men and nature. Though, out of their greed and materialistic needs, humans have turned nature into a capitalistic commodity, but nature is always unfolding different aspects of its own. Thus, according to Glotfelty & Fromm, "ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies." (XVIII)

The novel *Samudrantike* (1993) provides the sketch of the people living nearby seashore and how they survive in the harsh conditions of the natural climate. The unnamed narrator of the novel is designated the task of measuring the land for establishing the chemical factories in that area as it is not the fertile part of the land. But through the process and with the continual contact with people living there and also experiencing the joy of living in the surrounding nature changes the mind of the narrator and provides him with a view of his own 'human side'. The novel explores how nature becomes the key element in the survival chain of the growth of every living creature and how it also helps humans to adjust with the continual changes of the world and nature around them. The people seem to be happy even in their poorest of the conditions. This strength comes from the surrounding nature.

It begins with the beautiful description of the seashore. As it is a common feature of Dhruv Bhatt's novels, the narrator is unnamed and is supposed to reach at Estate Bungalow where he is appointed as an engineer of the area. His job is to prepare a report for the government about the fertility of the land. The government is planning to develop a chemical zone and factories in that area if it is found to be less fertile. The narrator hails from a modern and developed city and his job has put him into this undeveloped land of underprivileged village. He is a bit disappointed with this situation and he also contemplates on his longer

stay at such a place. On the way to the Estate Bungalow he accepts a one night hold at Valbai's Vadi (a small farm with a well in it) and is treated humbly by the family although he is a stranger for them. This hospitality surprises the narrator because he has seen in his city that neighbors do not even talk to each other. When he reaches at the 'Estate Bungalow', he meets Aval, the owner of the bungalow. She tells him not to go to the "upstairs with your shoes on" (Bhatt 23) as the rainwater is collected in the terrace for the coming year. There are no transportation facilities available in the area and so the narrator hires a horse named Kabira who in the process becomes his mate.

While wandering in the area frequently, the narrator meets certain important characters, who consciously or unconsciously teach him the value of nature and environment around them. One of them is Noorbhai – a forest officer – who has grown up in the area and who frequently remembers the lush jungle and birds in the area he had seen as a child; which is now replaced with the dry patch of sand and few *babul* trees that he himself grew as an officer. Another character is Bangali Baba – the wandering 'sage' who is aware about the changing environmental conditions. He is the best example representing the Man – Nature relationship. His words are thought provoking and soothing to the mind of readers. Once the narrator expresses his deep frustration about establishing the chemical factories in the area which would harm the surrounding nature; at this moment Bangali Baba asks him, "D'You think by writing your r'p'rt you'd ruin this land, that by drawing up plans for changing face of this land, you'd be responsible for outcome?" (Bhatt 119) Bangali Baba also tells him that, "There was a time when earth did not exist. Then too nature existed. When earth was born, a ball of fire it was. Then came water, seaweeds and plants. They also perished, only to be reborn. Nature is always absolute, unconfined. No one can ever fetter it or foul it. Get that into your head." (Bhatt 120) This discussion between the narrator and Bangali Baba explores the clash between nature and culture. Money and factories are human made concepts and thus it will ruin the natural beauty of the place. Nature has been treated as a Capitalistic commodity which Greg Garrard rightly explains that, "it is no coincidence that this view of nature took hold most strongly with the rise of capitalism, which needed to turn nature into a market commodity and resource without significant moral or social constraint on availability." (Garrard 69) The novel explores the dependency of humans on nature.

Another fine example of man – nature bonding is in Sabur's attempts to acquire land and farming the gardens over there. The portion of land given to him is known as the '*Rukmipano*', a two - three acre stone land, where it was impossible to grow a little grass

even if it rains for the whole year but with the fruitful attempts of Saboor and his wife they were able to grow the saplings of mango, coconut, chikoo and pomegranate. His hard work pays him fruits and they are able to acquire the land as well as its fruits. The narrator contemplates that man – nature bonding is an age old phenomenon. The nature calls upon us but very few are able to answer its call. The narrator contemplates that, “Beyond doubt, there exists in this universe a secret code by which the animate and the inanimate are able to interact.” (Bhatt 183) Thus, nature not only is essential for survival of humans but it is itself a surviving entity.

The author has also tried to show the harms done to nature in a very philosophic and effective way. His narrator is an engineer and his task is of preparing a report for the establishment of the chemical factories but somehow he is not sure about submitting this. His conscience keeps on prompting him not to move on with this task ahead. He feels himself one with the place and surrounding nature. The “dazzling opulence displayed by the night sky studded with myriad stars ... inspire me to write that merely because a region is barren of trees, infertile and sparsely populated, it must not be condemned to produce poisonous chemicals.” (Bhatt 117 – 18)

At the same time his civil mind prompts him to ponder that his attempts to establish the chemical factories would allow the place to develop. He thinks that the trail will be turned into, “in a few years from now on, a tar road bustling with honking vehicles. The headman of Khera would not have to plod seven or eight miles of marshy path before he could catch a bus. Most of the things that the man of modern times regarded as prerequisites for happiness would then be readily available here.” (Bhatt 156) But this development would also cost a heavy price on the surrounding natural aspect. It will change “these saline swamps swept by dust – laden tornadoes, this vast emptiness, this deserted yet extremely picturesque seashore, these ravines – probable hideouts of frolicking fairies and angels descending the heaven to play hide and seek on earth – and this crisp, transparent sky.” (Bhatt 156)

The people of the area are one with their surroundings. They have themselves mingled in the aspects of nature and they never try to harm it or earn from it. Thus, the uneducated and underprivileged have never thought of nature in capitalistic terms. It is the task of those so called ‘developed’ and ‘civilized’ to ruin the natural world in the name of preservation and production. By this developments society will drift away from nature and in future the children will be unaware about the sources from which their survival has continued. The

situation in America is very tragic in this regard as Harold Fromm explains that the most of the children “are rarely in a position to experience a connection between the commodity that fills their need and their natural source.” (Fromm 33) Thus Dhruv Bhatt, here, tries to show that nature does not merely sustain the human survival but it greatly affects the human emotions and psyche. The people of the area treat natural aspects the way they treat humans. The only reason behind their simplistic approach and ability to survive in any situation comes from “Nature! That was the only explanation.” (Bhatt 157) The narrator explains, “I had always observed that those who lived in close proximity of nature inherited its essence – simplicity, candor, fortitude and openness.” (Bhatt 157)

The novel also shows how harsh nature itself can be and how humans prove to be a bit of nothingness in its greatness. A tornado strikes the area once and so the narrator along with Aval and other kids of the village takes shelter in the basement of the bungalow. They are stuck in the basement for two – three days and the only food they have is ground nuts, puffed rice, gram and jaggery. They could not sleep as it continuously rained outside and the waves kept thumping on the walls of the bungalow. At night a scorpion strikes from the bathroom and the narrator moves forward to kill it with his shoes but Aval stops him and tells him that even scorpion has no other shelter than this one. Aval’s dialogue shows the essence of the people of that area. They do not harm the animals or any creature unnecessarily. Because they understand that not only humans but every living creature has senses and every creature tries to survive in the harshest of the conditions. Humans are no exception in this great chain of being.

Through this small village and people around their, the author has tried to explain that nature has always been superior and humans have always been inferior even after all these scientific developments. According to Scott Slovic, “it is only by testing the boundaries of self against an outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to realize who *they* are and what’s what in the world.” (352 – 53) The author, with the help of his narrator tries to realize his self and also emphasizes the importance of each and every aspect of nature: beginning from small creatures to larger entities – the sea. The sea becomes the biggest metaphor in the novel as it is treated by the people of the area as some deity who allows them to enter in and who also throws away everything unnecessary. The character of Krishna Tandel – a *kharva*: a fisherman shows that it is always the wish of the sea to allow humans to dive in it and no human is able to dive against its wish. Through Krishna’s philosophy the author tries to show that humans are mere puppets in the hands of nature and

it is always the nature which runs the survival of humans. The belief that humans are the inventors and humans are the originators is proved to be false here and nature is given prominence in every aspect of human life.

Thus, the author tries to show that man – nature relationship should be a balanced one and every creature is important. Every living creature has its own sense of survival. The belief of humans being superior to other creatures is also proved to be false as it is humans who need nature and natural entities for their survival while nature is independent in itself. Even before the humans, nature was there and even at the end, it will be there. The characters of Bangali Baba, Noorbhai, Aval, the Sarpanch and Saboor represent all those who have learnt to respect nature, understood their minimal state in front of the magnificence of nature and also how nature becomes an important element in realizing one's own existence. Thus, the novel is a fine example of how nature should be treated and what role it plays in the survival cycle of not only humans but each and every living being.

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