

# Asian Resonance

## Environmental Philosophy in Literature

One of the most notable concerns of the modern world is the issue of environmental protection. Most of the developing as well as the developed countries put this issue at the top agenda and allocate specific funds to achieve optimum success in this direction. It is globally felt that the biggest menace to humanity in recent years has not come so much from military invasions as from the environmental disasters. The chief factor responsible for environmental deterioration is believed to be the modern way of living impacted by the capitalist thought of industrial imperialism. This leads impious encroachment into the world of Nature which tends to strike back after a certain interval of time. Remarkably, the world literatures have contributed a great deal for maintaining ecological balance. Various philosophical trends are traceable in these literatures attempting to create harmony between Man and Nature for peaceful coexistence.

**Keywords:** Nature/Man, Environment, Literature

### Introduction

Relevance of the age old dictums- "Literature is the mirror of society", and "man is the product of his environment" – will never sink into oblivion. The world literatures go a long way towards proving the veracity inherent in these sayings. Man and Nature are the two inseparable elements that constitute global environment, and, therefore, the quality and dimension of the environment so constituted may be defined in terms of Man's response to Nature and Nature's response to Man. The process of interaction between the two is incessant and is productive of certain attributes leading to define socio-political, socio-economic, socio-geographical and socio-religious scenario. A more minute observation and analysis can unravel the sunken facts of the world literatures showing how Nature played a significant role in changing the individuals as well as whole civilizations. Indian, European, and American literatures are ingrained with evidences to prove how the power of Nature brought revolutions in the social life of nations and paved path to the formation of various philosophical doctrines casting a long lasting impact on human psyche in terms of materialism and spiritualism.

The world of Nature, in Wordsworthian sense, is both the source of "beauty" and "fear"<sup>1</sup>, whose composite features are embodied in grass, plants, trees, creepers, crops, orchards, groves, gardens, forests, brooks, streams, lakes, fountains, rivers, gulfs, oceans, tides, tsunamis, cloudbursts, mountains, mounts, hills, volcanoes, earthquakes, breezes, winds, hurricanes, cyclones, hailstroms, avalanches, blizzards etc., forming a gigantic corpus of geography, affecting human life in a variety of ways. If we environ this tremendous body of elements with the cycle of seasons, the truth of the Darwinian doctrine of species,<sup>2</sup> epitomized in the axiom "survival of the fittest" no more remains enshrouded in mystery for the intellectual reader. Human beings, as inevitable part of the geographical world, have co-existed with these elements, often struggling with, and sustaining themselves against, the fury of Nature emanating from cyclones, volcanoes, earthquakes, floods tsunamis and cloudbursts. Paradoxically, the same Nature grants multicoloured rainbows, blue, orange and starry skies, the lotus and lily lakes, hilltops with cedarn covers, the moon-lit oceans, snow topped mountains, the green turfs with fragrant flowers, and so on. In this catalogue of the frightening and the fascinating features of Nature the frightening ones are not stable; they are likely to pounce upon humanity at any time with all their sound and fury, as Phailin<sup>3</sup> and Katrina<sup>4</sup> did.

Geographical and geological changes have always been a cause of concern for human race. Man, as an intellectual species, has always been conscious, cautious, and curious about these changes and has adapted himself to the various vagaries of environmental disasters. Amidst the phenomena of environmental furies looming ahead, the scientists of different disciplines, especially from geography and geology, have been



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# Asian Resonance

perpetually questing to devise new methods of sustainability of human race which, in a gradual passage of time, has become divided in the groups of individuals, states and nations.

Man and Nature have a universal affiliation to each other. Geographical environment, a part of Nature, grants natural substances to man; but Man, not satisfied with what has been granted to him, begins to draw from Nature more and more things in the most unnatural way. This tendency of man imbalances the Man/Nature relationship and brings the twain on collision course. If man destroys Nature, Nature will destroy Man.

Frolov in his depiction of correlation between society and environment writes, "The development of society also changes and widens the Geographical Environment."<sup>5</sup> In their natural state the elements of the Geographical Environment do not necessarily satisfy the growing requirements of production. For this reason, man transforms them, and therefore acts as the most powerful agent in the transformation of the Geographical Environment. But the extent, nature and forms of change depend on the level of technology and social system. "The anarchy of production and the competition prevailing in capitalist society more often than not stand in the way of rational influence on Nature and cause changes in the Geographical Environment which are harmful to society."<sup>6</sup>

The recent cyclone Phailin that devastated the coastal regions of Andhra and Odisha may be seen in relation to Man's attempt to destroy Nature. It has been reported that Odisha government ordered to cut down trees so that the establishment of Posco Steel Plant could be facilitated. **Ashish Senapati's** report, published in *The Times of India*, October 13, 2013, maintains that the government of Odisha "felled more than 1.7 lakh trees and betel vines that would have acted as natural barriers against strong winds."<sup>7</sup> This indicates that the natural disaster would have proved a bit less horrendous had the trees not been felled in such a huge quantity. The report further highlights the fact that the Phailin hit-surroundings in Odisha "had an abundance of casurina and cashew trees apart from betel vines that were removed. Casurinas are evergreen shrubs and trees that grow up to 35 m tall, are highly tolerant of cyclones and often planted as windbreaks."<sup>8</sup> Promoting industries and housing colonies on the cost of Nature is a notable evil of a capitalist society.

In *Death of a Salesman* Arthur Miller highlights the evil of commercialism of mid twentieth century America and the anguish of the individual at indiscriminate destruction of Nature to build up housing colonies and to set up industry.<sup>9</sup>

Willy : The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard. They should've had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?

Linda : Yeah, like being a million miles from the city.

Willy : They should've arrested the builder for cutting those down. They massacred the neighbourhood. (Lost.) More and more I think of those days, Linda. This time of year it was lilac and wistaria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils. What a fragrance in this room!

One of the causes of Willy's depression is his sensitiveness to the deteriorating environment which offers no whiff of fresh air to survive in. His appeal to arrest the builder for cutting trees and his sense of loss on the disappearance of lilac, wistaria, peonies and daffodils from the land express the concerns of a sensitive environmentalist.

In Indian literature the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Purans*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* may be held as the first authoritative texts polemically depicting God, Nature and Man. These texts meticulously comment on the nature of universe and on what we term as geographical environment. It is revealed that the cult of polytheism and henotheism led people to worship various deities of nature whose blessings were necessary for environmental peace, prosperity and health. To appease these deities Man started worshipping various objects of Nature such as trees, rivers and mountains. Mounts and hills were popularly considered as impersonation of divine forces. In India, the worship of the Mt. Goverdhana by the people of Brij is still rampant, illustrating people's faith in the sacredness of hills and mounts. Such religious faith has proved congenial for the protection of Nature culminating into the intactness of ecological balance. Notably, the excavation of Aravali Hills has been banned by the court of law. Besides religious faith, hills and mountains are supposed to be the rich sources of rare herbs and the most cherished places for solitude and tranquility. As they are also the harbringers of rains, they symbolize the country's fertility and consequent prosperity.

The epic *Ramayana* illustrates the concept of ecological balance through the episode of construction of a bridge across the sea (*setusamudram*) for the march of the forces of Lord Rama to invade Lanka governed by Ravana. Initially Lord Rama politely requested the sea-god to give them way to pass on safely. But the sea-god did not move. Then an angry Lord Rama decided to dry up the sea by using the *Brahmastra* (the ultimate weapon). Terrified by Lord Rama's decision, the sea-god appeared, requesting Him not to use the *Brahmastra* because it would not only dry up the sea-water, but would also destroy all the sea-creatures; resultantly, the rains would fail, the crops would wither, the flora and fauna would collapse, famines and epidemics would escalate on earth with all their monstrosity,- all detrimental to ecological balance. This episode has also been depicted by Tulsidas in *Ramcharitmanas*.<sup>10</sup>

Many symbolists, anthropologists, mythologists and writers of allegories have treated Nature as a destructive as well as a preservative force. The ancient Indian classics, the Greek legends, and

# Asian Resonance

English literature have shown all alike Nature's ambivalence. These literatures allude to numerous ritualistic ceremonies held to appease the deities of Nature to obtain their blessings for peace and prosperity. The prevalence of polytheism, according to the Indian and the Greek literatures, made the people believe that the earthly environment was under the control of these deities and its goodness and badness depended on their mercy. In *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot refers to an episode described in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, focusing on an occasion when men, tortured by a great famine on earth, went to Prajapati, the Creator, to seek for his blessings; they told Prajapati about their predicament and narrated in detail how water had vanished away from earth, as the lakes and rivers had dried up:

"Ganga was sunken and the limp leaves  
Waited for rain, while the black clouds,  
Gathered far distant, over Himavant."<sup>11</sup>

Prajapati, before blessing them, made them realise that they themselves were responsible for their miseries, as they had lost favour of Nature because of their immoral and impious way of living.

*The Golden Bough* by Sir James Frazer and *From Ritual to Romance* by J.L. Westen are unique studies on anthropology tracing the civilizations from the primitive to the modern period. These books record various rituals of religious faith found to be rampant in ancient civilizations. A.D.F. Macrae notes that Frazer's account of these rituals matches with the similar account given by Westen. The people in ancient Greece used to perform ceremonies in honour of Adonis, Osiris, and Attis, the fertility-deities, "to ensure the return of spring and the fertility of the crops. Water is essential for fertility; without water, in rain or river, the land and the people die."<sup>12</sup> Both the Indian and the Greek myths under reference illustrate the fact that Nature would withdraw her favours when humanity went astray by way of becoming absorbed in the pursuit of evils. Some nineteenth century English poets, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge, have expressed a similar philosophy. For Wordsworth, Nature was a great educating and civilizing force; he found Nature as a teacher, a mother, a guide, a preacher:

"One impulse from the vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good  
Than all the sages can"<sup>13</sup>

Nature teaches Man to keep away from evils; if man still reaches for what is immoral, "Nature herself frightens him, places phantom images in his mind which haunt him day and night."<sup>14</sup>

With the rise of Islam and Christianity, polytheism was replaced by monotheism that believes in the dominance of one almighty God, leaving the Nature deities to the world of superstition. This new cult in human societies led to the growth of materialism and neglect of Nature. Wordsworth, chagrined by the curse of materialism, would relinquish Christian faith and would relieve himself from the curse of worldliness by desiring to have sights of water deities, Proteus and Triton:

"Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn".<sup>15</sup>

The Nature deities of air, water and fire were believed to appear at critical times to protect humanity from disasters. Keats' *Ode to Psyche* also takes the reader back to the primitive times when people used to worship the various elements of Nature when polytheism was at its heyday in Greece:

"When holy were the haunted forest boughs,  
Holy the air, the water and the fire, ....."

Keats' panegyric of polytheism is founded on the view that in those days people were worshipers and preservers of Nature who would not tolerate any damage to it. This religious faith prevented people from destroying trees and contaminating rivers, thus consciously or unconsciously protected environmental deterioration.

Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* may be cited as the most significant example to highlight the philosophy of environment. He allegorically shows how Nature seeks revenge on a man who kills a sea-bird, albatross. The sinner undergoes a series of misfortunes thereby realizing his evil deed and repenting sincerely for the same:

"He prayeth well, who loveth well  
Both man, bird and beast"<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion:

Apart from delineating the aesthetic, ethical, and mythical side of human civilizations, literature retains the potential to interpret these values in a scientific way so that the juxtaposition of aestheticism and scientism may produce a new meaning in the interest of human aggrandizement.

## References:

1. William Wordsworth: *The Prelude, selected poems and sonnets*, ed., Carlous Baker, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1963, p.212: "Fair seed time had my soul, and I grew up fostered alike by beauty and by fear."
2. Charles Darwin (1809-1882): English natural scientist of the Victorian Period, founder of evolution theory. He generalised contemporary biological knowledge. In the *Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, or the *Preservation of Favoured Races in the struggle for life (1859)* he set forth the basic propositions of his theory.
3. Phailin: Name of the cyclone (category 4) that hit the coastal regions of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha in October, 2013, disturbing more than one million people, and damaging buildings, roads and disrupting road transport and airways.
4. Katrina: Category-5 cyclone that hit North America in 2005, with the wind velocity of over 250 kmph, causing a great loss of people and property.
5. I. Frolov: *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1984, p.158.
6. I. Frolov: *Ibid*, p.158.
7. Ashish Senapati: *The Times of India*, Chandigarh, Oct. 13, 2013, p.8.
8. Ashish Senapati: *Ibid*, p.8.
9. Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman*, ed., Dr. N.S. Pradhan, Arnold Heineman, New Delhi, 1979, p.52.
10. Tulsidas: *Ramcharitamanasa*; Sunderkanda.
11. T.S. Eliot: *Selected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1980, p.66.
12. A.D.F. Macrae: *York Notes on The Waste Land*, Longman, England, 1980, p.16.
13. William Wordsworth: *opp. cit.*, p.79.
14. Peter Westland: *The Romantic Revival*, The English Univ. Press, Ltd., London, 1950, p.69.
15. Wordsworth: *The World is too much with us*.
16. S.T. Coleridge: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Part-VII.