

The Dichotomy of Nature and Culture: An Ecocritical Study of Bibhuti bhushan

Bandyopadhyay's *Aparajito-the Unvanquished*

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a contemporary theoretical framework that has gained significant recognition as an academic discourse for examining the intricate interplay between literature and the natural world. This approach involves examining a literary work from a new perspective with a view to depicting the reciprocal relationship between nature and culture. During the final two decades of the 20th century, a group of scholars initiated a paradigm shift in literary studies by introducing ecological issues. In light of the current global environmental crisis, issues related to environmental concern hold substantial relevance. The field of environmental literary studies has undergone a transformation known as ecocriticism, which is often used interchangeably with terms such as green cultural studies, environmental literary criticism, and environmental activism. This paper aims to examine the different facets of green literature through the lens of ecocriticism. It also highlights the manner in which Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's prose narrative *Aparajito* depicts some crucial issues with a view to addressing the contemporary ecological crisis by foregrounding the reciprocal relationship between man and nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Green Studies, Deep Ecology, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

Over the past few decades, environmental issues have emerged as a significant discourse to both human society and the planet. The widespread misapplication of natural resources has brought us to the precipice of a critical situation. The destruction of rainforests, the rapid depletion of fossil fuels, the disruption of seasonal cycles, the increasing frequency of ecological disasters worldwide, and the precarious state of our ecosystem collectively indicate a concerning situation. In response to the prevailing circumstances, a new theoretical framework for analysing literature emerged, which is known as ecocriticism. The emergence of this global movement may be attributed to a response to humanity's anthropocentric perspective of exerting dominance over the natural

world. This particular revisionist movement has gained significant traction within the field of humanities in recent decades, making it one of the more recent developments in this area of study. The contemporary global landscape is currently grappling with ecological catastrophes, placing our ecosystem in a precarious state. It is pertinent to mention that the global ecological catastrophe cannot be effectively addressed just by the application of science and technology. Hence, it is imperative to alter our perspective regarding the natural environment with a view to blurring the division between man and nature. Literature does not exist in isolation from life; rather, it serves a distinct purpose within the broader context of human existence. Throughout history, there has been a tendency among literary critics to overlook the significance of nature and the depth of research it deserves. As a result, writings that centre on ecology promote a deeper comprehension of nature and its wider ramifications. Ecocriticism has emerged as a global movement over the past three decades. Academic researchers continue to actively explore and refine the nature and scope of the discourse. It is important to mention that Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's literary masterpieces, which were produced almost a century ago, may be attributed to their profound ecological awareness. The renowned author from the Bengal province of British India had a deep understanding of the fundamental importance of nature. The literary masterpieces of Bandyopadhyay, namely *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, and *Aranyak*, serve as prime examples of the profound alignment between human beings and the natural world.

Ecology encompasses two distinct perspectives: "shallow ecology" and "deep ecology". Shallow ecology may be characterised as having an anthropocentric perspective, when nature is primarily seen as a commodity to fulfil human needs and desires. This viewpoint asserts that humans hold a dominant position over nature, with mankind perceiving itself as superior to other living beings. Furthermore, it promotes the methodical utilisation of natural resources such as coal, gas, forests, oil, and other similar sources, with the aim of ensuring a sustainable future. However, "deep ecology" presents a counterargument to the conservation approach by advocating for the preservation of nature in its pristine state without any human intervention, as it recognises nature's inherent right to exist and thrive. All living entities of the planet have inherent value, and no individual can claim dominion over another. This realisation ensures the equitable allocation of rights to all organisms, thereby promoting ecological equilibrium.

Ecocriticism places significant emphasis on the cultivation of eco-consciousness, which involves a shift away from ego-consciousness in individuals. This observation challenges the notion of human superiority in relation to other entities in the natural world. Within the ecosystem, there exists a complex network of interconnected relationships where every component is intricately linked to one another. In the context under consideration, no entity may be deemed inherently superior or inferior to another. The current environmental disaster may be attributed to the influence of human culture. The origin of this issue does not stem from the functioning of the ecosystem; rather, it stems from the functioning of our ethical system and our behaviours towards the natural environment. Ecocriticism fosters an increased consciousness within individuals. In the current global environmental catastrophe, it is imperative to foster a deep ecological consciousness in order to cultivate a heightened awareness and appreciation for nature.

The concept of ecocriticism was initially introduced by William Rueckert in his scholarly work titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. The term "eco" originates from the Greek root word "oikos", which, in etymology, signifies household or earth. Similarly, "logy" is derived from "logos", denoting logical discourse. Collectively, these terms signify the analysis and evaluation of the portrayal of the physical and social surroundings in literary works. Ecocriticism emerged as a response to the acknowledgment of environmental catastrophes in the latter part of the 20th century. Rueckert posits that ecocriticism involves the integration of ecological ideas or concepts into the analysis of literary works. According to Lawrence Buell, ecocriticism may be defined as an academic discipline that examines the interconnections between literature and the environment, with a strong emphasis on advocating for environmental activism (Buell, 1996, p. 430). The field of ecocriticism extends beyond traditional nature studies since it sets itself apart through its ethical stance and dedication to the natural environment. Moreover, ecocriticism establishes a link between the human and non-human realms. According to Joseph Wood Krutch (1948), Thoreau's literary contributions do not solely focus on the study of plants, animals, or birds; rather, his writing delves into the intricate dynamics of his personal connection with the natural world, almost as though it explores the interplay between Thoreau's own self and the encompassing realm of nature (Buell, 1996). Patrick D. Murphy pertinently asserts that ecocriticism is a form of literary criticism that emerges from and is focused on the examination of the dynamic and interconnected

relationship between humans and nonhuman entities. However, a widely accepted definition of ecocriticism is provided by Cheryll Glotfelty, a professor of English at the University of Nevada, USA. Glotfelty played a significant role in introducing the term ecocriticism to the literary community, collaborating with the Modern Language Association in 1996 to establish its recognition as a legitimate literary discourse. In the *Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty says:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty, 2009, p. xviii)

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aparajito, the Unvanquished*, serves as a continuation of the narrative presented in *Pather Panchali, the Song of the Road*. The first novel concludes with an optimistic portrayal of a promising future. *Aparajito* effectively maintains a cheerful atmosphere as it extols the beauty of existence through a profound connection with the natural world. The work was initially composed in the Bengali language with the title "Aparajito" and released in the year 1938. Subsequently, the work underwent translation into the English language by Gopa Majumdar and was subsequently released in 2003. The novel was adapted into two films by Satyajit Ray. *Pather Panchali* was followed by two other films in the Apu Trilogy, which subsequently garnered international acclaim.

The narrative commences at the point where the events of *Pather Panchali* conclude. The character Apu, who formerly resided in a rural setting in the novel *Pather Panchali*, has now transitioned to an urban environment in *Aparajito*. There exists an enduring conflict between the realms of nature and culture, as well as between the rural countryside and the urban cityscape. However, nature consistently emerges as the prevailing force throughout the narrative. The main character is confronted with the mundane aspects of metropolitan life, occasionally prompting nostalgic reflections on the past.

Apu consistently perceives the faint beckoning of the natural world within the monotonous routine of urban existence. The narrative revolves around Apu's experiences throughout his time in school, his vivid imagination regarding the environment, his

unquenchable need for knowledge, the intricate dynamics of human connections, the arduous battle against poverty, and the sorrowful demise of his mother and wife, all of which contribute to the establishment of a melancholic atmosphere. However, Apu's spirit stays undefeated despite enduring several sorrows and hardships. Similar to the mythical phoenix, his spirit perseveres with optimism, continuously acquiring knowledge regarding the profound ecological importance of the environment. Hence, the narrative foregrounds the concept of the "return to nature" as advocated by various thinkers who are associated with ecocriticism.

An essential component of ecoliterature involves its comprehension of the principles underlying "deep ecology". While *Pather Panchali* explores the Ecosophy of life, *Aparajito*, in contrast, showcases the protagonist's profound comprehension of "deep ecology" which is an important concept within the domain of ecocriticism. The field of environmental philosophy advocates for the "intrinsic value" of all species, regardless of their practical usefulness to humanity. The ecological movement posits that within natural systems, organisms maintain a complex connection to sustain a state of equilibrium within an ecosystem. The integrity of this relationship is compromised by anthropogenic interference, posing a significant risk to the ecological balance encompassing both human and non-human entities. The fundamental tenet of "deep ecology" posits that the environment ought to be perceived as an integrated entity endowed with inherent rights to ensure its preservation. The term "deep" is used to denote a profound understanding of the intrinsic connection between humanity and the natural environment. Additionally, it attains a deeper philosophical comprehension of ecology in contrast to its predominant perception as a subdivision of biology. The prevalent ecological movement is characterised by its opposition to anthropocentrism, which encompasses the human-centric perspective that prioritises the exploitation of the environment solely for the benefit of humans. "Deep ecology" is founded upon certain philosophical assumptions that advocate for a holistic perspective on the world, rejecting the notion of human beings as separate entities from the environment. They constitute an integral component of the ecology. The profound intellectual comprehension of the environment serves as a fundamental basis for the green movement. It promotes certain ethical principles, such as the protection of wilderness areas, the implementation of population control, and the adoption of a lifestyle characterised by simplicity, all with the aim of fostering a sustainable and healthy

ecosystem. The proponents of the “deep ecology” movement argue that the Earth should not be regarded as a mere commodity to be exploited without restraint by human beings. The viability of any organism is contingent upon the overall welfare of the entire system. The deep ecologists propose the use of an eight-tier platform as a means to substantiate their assertions:

The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and there are also values in themselves. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital human needs. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening. Policies must, therefore, be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes. (Devall & Sessions, 1999, p. 70)

The central character in the story, Apu, may be identified as an adherent of “deep ecology” due to his inclination towards a lifestyle characterised by simplicity and contemplation. It examines the author’s environmental imagination, his perception of rural and urban environments, the transformative influence of nature’s restorative qualities, and the themes of reconnecting with nature and the perpetuation of life cycles in intimate proximity to the natural world. Numerous interruptions occur throughout the course of one’s life journey. However, these obstacles do not impede the progress of the voyage; instead, they serve as catalysts for a heightened desire to delve further into the realm of nature.

The central character, Apu, in *Aparajito*, has a conflict between the organic surroundings of his early years and the constructed aspects of urban existence. Apu became disillusioned with the monotonous nature of city life upon encountering the dehumanising circumstances present at Mr. Nakuleshwar Seel's workplace. He held the position of a clerk within the organisation and discovered the deplorable state in which his other colleagues were situated. All individuals were required to arrive in the morning and engage in labour until evening. The premises consisted of multiple rooms and two halls that were occupied by a significant number of employees. Under such oppressive circumstances, the labourers were compelled to endure their duties under the constant illumination of artificial electric light, which persisted for the entirety of the day. Even on Saturdays, individuals were required to engage in work for the entire duration of the day. The office setting in which Apu worked was characterised by a sense of claustrophobia. Furthermore, due to his limited income, he was compelled to transport Aparna from their rural residence to Kolkata, as he was unable to sustain two separate households. He leased a compact living space within a residential property that contained multiple separate units. Apu found the profound narrowness of their mindset to be a source of great sorrow. However, he found himself without any means of escape. Due to financial constraints, he was unable to sustain the maintenance of a household in Monshapota, his place of residence. In an urban setting, he encountered difficulty securing a more desirable flat in a superior neighbourhood for a mere sum of thirteen rupees.

Apu also experienced profound empathy towards the urban residents, comprising entire communities whose members resided exclusively within the city limits, never venturing beyond its boundaries. The observers had not previously witnessed the dynamic transformation of the sky's hue as it stretched over the expanse of the reed-covered field. He had not previously encountered the auditory signal emitted by a dove, originating from within the dense forest, during a tranquil fall afternoon. During their upbringing, he did not experience any emotional connection with the deep blue aparajita flower. He had not previously experienced the act of occupying the porch of a diminutive dwelling while observing the intermittent illumination of moonlight upon the fronds of coconut trees.

The narrative also exhibits a profound exploration of nature, interwoven with vivid environmental imagery. The central character, Apu, demonstrates a propensity for engaging in imaginative contemplation of the surroundings on a regular basis. While

situated alongside the Bakratoa River subsequent to a horseback excursion, Apu attained a comprehension that the superficial aspects of existence and the global sphere had little significance. Under the surface of our bustling, superficial, and ordinary lives lie an obscured realm, an alternate reality. The experience is aesthetically pleasing, emotionally satisfying, filled with happiness, and characterised by a sense of peace. The perpetual nature of its current resembled that of the river Mandakini, imbued with an enigmatic quality, traversing through several epochs with remarkable velocity.

During his journey to Amarkantak, a dense jungle, Apu found himself reminiscing about his earlier experiences. After liberating himself from the confines of urban living, he was able to vividly see his requirements at Mr. Seel's workplace, which ultimately enhanced his perspective. He expressed a strong desire for a modest amount of unobstructed area, as they were confined within a compact and gloomy chamber for a duration spanning from eleven o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock in the evening. While commuting between two sessions, he gazed intently at the sky situated behind the spire of the prominent church adjacent to the Maidan, a vast open field, displaying a profound yearning. His experience of living in a confined and constricting environment had stimulated his desire for a more improved and unrestrained way of life. It had facilitated his acquisition and preservation of physical energy, rather than squandering it. While traversing the forest, he gained insight into the profound significance of existence. The author depicts, "How many people had learnt to recognize life, and understand its true meaning? What one saw was so often affected by the way one was conditioned from birth. It blocked one's vision. The true purpose of life was neither seen, nor appreciated. Besides, how many people bothered to try to understand it, anyway?" (Bandyopādhyāya et al., 1999, p. 324)

In the secluded wilderness devoid of human civilization, Apu would occasionally hunt and consume birds for sustenance. On a particular occasion, he fortuitously encountered a deer that was within the range at which he could shoot. He was greatly taken aback by this occurrence. The sambar and barasinga species typically exhibit a high level of caution and promptly retreat upon encountering human presence. However, the entity was positioned a little over twelve yards away from his equine companion. Filled with satisfaction and anticipation, Apu elevated his firearm and directed his focus towards his target. However, rather than fleeing, the deer exhibited a behaviour of curiosity by

cautiously observing Apu from the safety of the brush. Apu experienced a sudden surge of emotion as his gaze intersected with that of the animal. The eyes of the timid creature bore a striking resemblance to those of Kajal, characterised by their notable size, clarity, expressiveness, and an unmistakable sense of naive curiosity. Apu expeditiously lowered his arms and proceeded to unload the firearm. Subsequently, he relinquished the practise of hunting, which clearly shows his ecocritical perspective.

Apu had cultivated a sense of expectation that encompassed all segments of society. He had encountered various individuals in several settings, including the streets, markets, villages, towns, and trains. These encounters ranged from interactions with esteemed holy men, teachers, and singers to individuals of more humble occupations like store owners, beggars, puppeteers, hawkers, poets, and writers. Apu's intimate connection with nature enabled him to comprehend the significance of all species and all societal segments within the physical environment. Periodically, Apu contemplated the ongoing degradation of the environment in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa. He held the belief that, at some point in time, nature would enact retribution. Each instance of human arrogance, such as the establishment of empires, the attribution of geographical features to monarchs, the exploitation of wildlife for commercial purposes, and the deforestation of majestic pine forests for industrial expansion, will ultimately face consequences. In the Chhindwara Forest, Apu was overseeing the implementation of a siding line for a copper mine. At that moment, he experienced a stunning realisation of the immense potency of the forest and the formidable forces inherent in nature. She patiently awaited her turn, seeming engrossed in a state of deep contemplation.

Apu perceives a sense of novelty and vitality in the rural existence within the realm of his imagination. Upon his return to the village after an extended absence, the protagonist observes several notable changes. However, amongst these transformations, the melodious songs of the koels persist, the children continue to derive pleasure from the river, and the ladies persist in their routine of fetching water from the river. Durga, his younger sibling, is the sole individual who stays unaffected. She remains in a tranquil state beneath the aged chhatim tree situated within the cremation site of the community. She has not experienced the process of ageing, nor has she exhibited any signs of physical maturation. The glass bangles she possessed and the bag she used for storing desiccated fruits remain undamaged. During moments of solitude and darkness, she surreptitiously infiltrated a

secluded break within Apu's psyche, where the untainted and unsullied consciousness of a juvenile male resided, obscured by the accumulation of erudition, encounters, labour, and aspirations associated with maturity. With tears welling up in her eyes, she embarked on a quest to locate the child, commonly referred to as little Apu, who had dutifully accompanied her throughout the passage of time. As Apu positioned himself by the river during the onset of twilight, he found himself capable of perceiving death from a distinct perspective. She perceived that the cyclical nature of existence, encompassing both life and death, has perpetually been orchestrated by the almighty over the course of history. He possessed the knowledge of arranging things sequentially, determining their structure and the specific sequence in which they should be placed.

The narrative demonstrates that nature functions as a touchstone for the restoration of human afflictions. After the tragic demise of his spouse, Aparna, during the process of childbirth, Apu makes the conscious choice to seek solace and sanctuary in the embrace of the natural world. He was compelled to discontinue his residence in Kolkata. Apu found the repetitive nature of his daily existence and the lack of variety in his job to be completely unbearable. Apu experienced great delight when witnessing the vast and compacted expanse of the forest. The trees extended towards the elevated meadow. Apu had not previously encountered a woodland characterised by such profound stillness and melancholy. Hence, he experienced complete disconnection from human settlements and descended into a profound state of seclusion within the forest. Intermittently, there existed dwellings constructed with thatched roofs, serving as abodes for the laborers, sometimes referred to as coolies. While under his supervision in the isolated forest, as he traversed the terrain on horseback, he experienced a profound sense of solitude, perceiving himself as entirely detached from the rest of humanity. Apu experienced moments of despondency, but he also received a fortuitous sense of motivation and vitality from the natural world, enabling him to survive. The author writes:

Disappointed though he was, Apu realized one thing. Being alone in these isolated places brought a change in his own state of mind. In the city, one's mind might be wholly preoccupied with thoughts of self, desire or ambition. Here, under the colossal expanse of the star-studded sky, these things seemed both irrelevant and insignificant. The mind could expand here; learn to be more generous, tolerant and

observant. One's whole angle of vision could change (Bandyopādhyāya et al., 1999, p. 316)

As Apu proceeded at a leisurely pace towards the ghat located in the village, a multitude of fragmented pictures resurfaced within his recollection. The individual expressed a desire for the manifestation of the village deity, Vishalakshi Devi, and thereafter engaged in a discourse with her:

“Who are you?”

“I am Apu,”

“You are a good man. What would you like?”

“Nothing, Devi, except the childhood I had spent here in the woods, by the river and in the shadows of bamboo groves. Ten years of innocence, eagerness and unending dreams. Can you give those back to me?”

“You enter it by the Ancient Way

Through Ivory Gate and Golden”(Bandyopādhyāya et al., 1999, p. 468)

The novel serves as a continuation of *Pather Panchali* and demonstrates remarkable eco-poetic magnificence in its profound comprehension. The young Apu of *Pather Panchali* matures, which enables him to comprehend the profound ecological significance of nature. After experiencing the loss of his loved ones, Apu may potentially succumb to a state of profound despair. However, the outcome is, in fact, the opposite. He has developed in a manner similar to that of mature lumber, exhibiting minimal flexibility. He has a lot of internal tensions due to the chaos of city life. Nature alone provides for him and heals his broken heart after his wife's death. The pure and regular joys of life far surpass the wealth, fame, and grandeur associated with urban living. Therefore, nature shapes his lifestyle by emphasising the absence of materialistic desires. For him, the act of living in harmony with nature serves as a profound source of comfort for a traumatised individual, as it instils a renewed sense of purpose and enthusiasm for life. Apu possesses a profound comprehension of the deep ecological implications of nature, which ultimately facilitates his journey towards self-realization. Hence, Apu, in the narrative of *Pather Panchali*, undergoes a transformation from a romantic individual to a more mature version of himself. Hence, this narrative depicts that every commonplace object found in nature, as well as every organism, holds a profound meaning and significance for the purpose of maintaining a harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world.

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