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AN ECOCRITICAL SURVEY OF GULZAR'S POETRY

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a field of literary studies where literature may study from the perspective of the environment. The interdisciplinary relation between literature and the environment get developed in the ecocritical studies of literary texts. Nature is the fundamental element in this and so is focused centrally. Gulzar is an Indian poet who is famous for his use of nature and images to convey things. This paper aims to study the poetry of Indian Hindi-Urdu poet Gulzar through the lens of Ecocriticism. The paper attempts to establish the relation between environment and chosen poems.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Environment, Nature, Green Poems

A brief note on Ecocriticism

When an ordinary reader enters a book store, he usually chooses books of the authors whom he knows. Or we can instead say whose biography he knows. Readers have always been interested to know about the author's life, his personal experiences, circumstances, his highs and lows etc. to see where his ideas came from. And that is how Biographical Criticism came. Cultural Criticism focuses on the cultural and historical context. Post-Colonial Criticism explores the way world literature's process, a history of colonial domination as well as the way that was colonising powers depicted and often misrepresented the local cultures that they controlled. Feminist Criticism explores literary representations of women and gender in general and exposes what critics often find to be stereotyping of characters or perpetuation of unexamined gender roles. Queer Theory Criticism extends gender studies even farther to focus on sexual and gender identities as they challenge normative expectations. Marxist Criticism

examines the depiction of economic forces and texts. Formalist Criticism looks at a text very closely for the way genres are constructed almost completely ignoring the author or the historical moment in which the work was produced. Deconstructionist Criticism emphasises an indeterminacy of texts. Because the post-structuralists have argued throughout the twentieth century, that language in itself is indeterminate. Language cannot adequately grasp the outward word beyond the sphere of language.

All these methods of study or theoretical interests keep attention primarily on what is called the human sphere. And that may seem so initiatives that it doesn't even bare a second thought. Alexander Pope, a poet from the eighteenth century, said famously that,

" Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;

The proper study of mankind is a man (An Essay on Man, Wiki)."

But some scholars find that very unhelpful and limiting so enter Ecocriticism. In the mid-1990s, a new field of study was developing. It paid attention to troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits. The time when the consequences of human culture are damaging the planet's basic support system. In Cheryll Glotfelty's words,

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was earth at all. In contrast, if you were to scan the newspaper headlines of the same period, you would learn of oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, battles over public land use, protests over nuclear waste dumps, a growing hole in the ozone layer, predictions of global warming, acid rain, loss of topsoil, destruction of the tropical rain forest, the controversy over the Spotted Owls in the Pacific Northwest, a wildfire in Yellowstone Park,

medical syringes washing onto the shores of Atlantic beaches, boycotts on tuna, over tapped aquifers in the West, illegal dumping in the East, a nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl, new auto emissions standards, famines, droughts, floods, hurricanes, a United Nations special conference on environment and development, a U.S. president declaring the 1990s "the decade of the environment," and a world population that topped five billion. Browsing through periodicals, you would discover that in 1989 Time magazine's person of the year award went to "The Endangered Earth." (Glotfelty & Fromm XVI)

Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as a "study of the relationship between the literature and physical environment"(Glotfelty& Fromm, XVIII).

A brief note on Gulzar

Gulzar is a veteran poet, lyricist, short story writer, novelist, screen writer and director. He is widely known for his songs and films having career span of around sixty years. His song 'Jai Ho' got him Academy Award popularly known as The Oscar and the prestigious Grammy Award. He is always appreciated for his use of images in his songs and poetry. Apart from his songs and films he has a huge canvas of literary writings including many poetry collections such as 'Neglected Poems', 'Suspected Poems', 'Green Poems' etc. Short story collections like 'Ravi Paar' and 'Half a Rupee Stories' and a novel called 'Two'. He is also one of the finest contributor of children literature in India with works like 'Ek Mein Do', 'Pinocchio' and 'SamayKaKhatola'.

An Ecocritical Survey of Gulzar's Poetry

As a matter of interest, Gulzar always gets fascinated by nature. His writing has that touch of nature, images, and sometimes even in some of his short stories jungle is the setting and animals are the characters. In his poetry, one can see the centre shifts from Man to Nature, where nature is the observer of humankind and give its comments on it. One of his poetry collection called 'Green Poems' is the work of entirely eco-centric poems where all poems are for nature or from nature. It is his quality that he doesn't just present nature as an object of observation by a man like most poets do;

furthermore, he allow nature to participate as a subject. His concern for the environment and his try to act like an eco-critic can be seen in his introductory lines of 'Green Poems' where he writes,

Some dry leaves dropped from the tree. The season was changing. But the rustle of the leaves had something more to say. I heard them. What they said was profound, to save the globe from rotting.

'Save the environment and keep the globe green,' they said.

I have heard many leaf-and trees, rivers, mountains and waterfalls. I am relating their stories to people in poems. (Green Poems XV)

This enlightens us with his perspective toward nature and his concern for the environment of this rotting globe.

As the owner highly poetic imagery, Gulzar in one of his poems called 'September' personifies the sky as an ill person. As he writes,

In September

The sky remains ill every year.

It has some kind of allergy, perhaps

Pieces of clouds, like dirty, soiled nappies

A patch of the sky...stung by poisonous scorpion...

For many days a cough wracks the sky...

My sky in September remains very unwell!(Green Poems 5)

Here it is clear that how environment is the major factor in the development of the poem. The imagery and the personification of the poet make it a poem of environment.

In his writings about other subject matters like religious harmony or conflict, even socio-political satires of him can't be entirely free from nature. Nature somehow manages to peep into the setting of his all kind of poetry. There is this poem in his collection 'Neglected Poems' titled 'It Was Cold and Misty'. Full of rich images of nature

where morning is shown as 'half awake' and its 'half eye is yet to open'. 'A temple size of wallet' and 'a mosque not bigger than a locket'(Neglected Poems 13). But the whole poems sums up at an old ancient waterfall where he said that two gods (a Hindu and a Muslim) are resting together under that one ancient waterfall. While deconstructing the meaning one can see that he is giving more superiority to that ancient stream than the Gods of two major religions of the country.

When he writes for such serious issues like partition of India, the most bloodiest event in the socio-political history of Indian subcontinent, his use of environmental or to be specific zoological metaphors shows the innocence which was captured, raped and slaughtered by the religious riots. In one of his poems about refugees who managed to migrate from one side of the border to other during partition, he uses the metaphor of fishes in a fish tank to describe them in refugee camps. Gulzar being a child of partition has seen those dreadful events through his own eyes, he along with his family migrated from 'Dina Village' (now in Pakistan) to Delhi. So he has seen all those camps and inhumane things. And so he laments in the poem by seeing fishes in his tank.

The many small fish in my tank
Are growing up...
Does the thought ever came to them
The memory of a river or some sea?
Before they came to my tank
They were born in another 'tank'!
Children in tents and shelters
Who have lived in 'refugee camps' for years
Have begun to grow up...(Suspected Poems 73)

Gulzar's poetry cannot deal any topic without the involvement of nature in it. He in his poem titled 'Lotus Flowers(Suspected Poems 69)' which is about migration of Tibetan Buddhist monk Dalai Lama and his followers in 1960s, he call them lotus

flowers. The sanctity and peace of Buddhism in general and Dalai Lama in particular, and the historical background of Tibet under China's attack is beautifully expressed by just the metaphor of lotus. Which sprouts in sludge as Dalai Lama and those Buddhists sprouted in the sludge of Chinese political hatred?

Apart from his serious poetry when Gulzar writes about children, which I think is his favourite subject, he simply take his child readers to the imaginary natural world. In a poem called 'What the Clouds Conceal' he asks his readers to 'peel the layers of clouds' for there must be 'many hidden pockets attached'. Where rain stops are hidden.

Where do they keep the drums whose resounding startles children?

In some belt must be hidden the whiplash of lightening

Balloons full of gusts of wind too

Don't you think these clouds are very clever magicians? (Green Poems 11)

He involves the reader into nature and makes him think imaginatively and nature friendly for children must learn about environment in a light, playful and wonderful way. And Gulzar's poetry provides that very interestingly.

In conversation with Pavan K. Varma his translator of four books at Jaipur Literature Festival the poet said,

If you look around your environment, you'll see you're related to it. If you give it a human persona you will see how the environment becomes a part of your family as much as we are a part of its family. (J.L.F. 2016)

In a poem, titled 'The Forest' Green Poems, he writes, "When I pass through the forest I feel my ancestors are around me, I feel like a new-born baby.....one very old bearded bargad takes me in his lap.... And tells me: now you have begun to walk" (Green Poems). In this poem he establishes a relation with nature and he accepts superior seniority of nature over human beings.

Citing the "cruelty of burying living wells", the poet expressed concern over the gradually disappearing ties between man and nature and cautioned against mindless development.

Humans are looking to make life simple at every juncture. They don't realise on what they are losing in achieving this easy life. You look back sometimes at how things are today and wonder what is happening. The relationship and love which humans had with nature is disappearing. (J.L.F. 2016)

There is this poem titled 'Leaves of Autumn' where the poet shows the one by one falling down of the tree. Starting from leaves in autumn which is natural it goes to the cutting down of branch and ultimately leads to uprooting the whole tree by men for their materialistic purpose. The main conflict of the poem is presented in closing lines. When earth itself speaks to the cutting tree.

The earth itself was forced to say:

Remember when a tiny seed you peeped out

And saw the leaves when they first sprouted?

Come again, to be born in my womb

If I survive! (Green Poems 21)

This "if I survive" is that pessimistic lament of planet earth and the poet. Maybe they both knew that it won't survive in the present scenario. There will be no place for a tree anymore for they'll build some building or mall or anything on that land, anything but the tree will placed there in the name of development. This poem shows how humans become so selfish towards nature and how one by one nature is being eliminated by our over ambitious dance of development.

In this era of concrete our houses are surrounded by other houses and buildings. In highly populous and dens areas it is hard to see the sky or sun because other buildings blocks the view of it. In such drastic situation still man is building new structures and making it more difficult. This kind of situation is presented in the poem

titled 'Placing Stone Upon Stone' where the poet presents an under construction house which is trying to see the sky.

Placing stone upon stone

A house is trying to rise itself

Placing its elbow on the neighbouring roof

It strains to see a corner of the sky! (Green Poems 59)

Gulzar like an ecocritic shifts the centre from man to nature in his poem titled 'Return to Thimpu'. He talks about his visit to the place and describes how the mountain had said something to him when he visited the place. In the poem what the personified mountain said to the poet is something the world needs to understand. Something that only can keep the harmonious relation between man and nature saved.

Come hold my hand

Put your foot on my ribs, come up

Come, let me at least see what you look like;

Just as you cannot recognise my ants individually

You all seem the same to me

With one difference:

If you catch it by your fingers, throw it off

And kill it

I don't do that! (Green Poems 129)

The poet here makes difference between nature and the humans where humans have no concern for other beings like ants and others. But nature is not like humans, nature cares for us, it never harm mankind. Though it is far superior to humans it won't do that. The poem is all about how the mountain is trying to show us that how puny we

are in front of the nature. Our lives are short, fragile and we move ahead in futile relations with each other are.

Conclusion

In the field of eco-criticism Gulzar's poetry illustrates environmental concerns and examines the various ways to treat the nature. Nature as a driving force of these poems gives it a status of environmental literature. Where the literary devices used are metaphor, personification, imagery etc. for the theme of nature. And as some of the poems discussed nature as an observer of man, shows how the main function of Eco-criticism which is shifting the centre from man to environment is get fulfilled. In our times when global warming is the central problem for many poets like Gulzar are needed more in numbers who can influence their readers to contribute as much as they can in saving our beautiful planet. The rotting present can be stopped and repaired for the fresh future for us and for generations to come.

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