



Restoring the Symphony of Nato(u)re: An Ecocritical Reading of Jibanananda Das's poem 'Banalata Sen'

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the ecocritical dimensions of Jibanananda Das's celebrated opus 'Banalata Sen' by looking back at Natore. Using the rural place of Natore in Bangladesh metaphorically, the poet has established a profound rapport between human beings and nature's belongings. William Wordsworth wrote in his poem, 'Tintern Abbey', that "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her" (Wordsworth, 2000, p. 134) to bring forth the reciprocal mechanism of the Man-Nature relationship. And, indeed this line contributed immensely to the advancement of Eco-criticism. Despite the fact that the existing studies talk about the surreal and ideal aspects of the poem, this article presents a comprehensive review of Jibanananda Das's 'Banalata Sen' from an eco-critical point of view, where the existence of problematic anthropocene and the plight of nonhuman agency are being discussed. The eco-critical reading of the poem shifts our focus to two different and deeply entwined entities, Natore and Banalata Sen. Natore is a place of consolation and bliss, whereas Banalata Sen is catered as a panacea to the poet's sufferings with the aim of intensifying the interdependency and interconnectedness of the entities. Banalata Sen provides the poet with the *joie de vivre* on his inertia to renew his spirit. This eco-critical understanding of the poem unfolds the magnitude of the lady, who brings solace to the poet's worn-out soul and her association with nature. And it helps us understand the way this poem articulates ecological consciousness and the importance of the neighboring ecosystem in shaping human lives.

Keywords: 'Banalata Sen', Jibanananda Das, Anthropocene, Nonhuman agency, Ecological Consciousness.

Introduction

This paper begins with the concern for ecology when we read literature. And it asks, "[a]s readers, teachers, and critics of literature, how do we become responsible planet stewards?" (Rueckert, 1996, p. 114) Do we spare a few words in the discussion for the sake of the environment concerning its phenomenal existence? Do we even utter the words like "ecological vision" by chance? The possible answer would be 'No' with a laden conscience. Since, in an anthropocentric condition, the ecology is being exploited to the hilt and in this moment of ecological juncture, the meteoric practice of Eco-criticism provides us with a new dimension in the human-nature relationship. It castigates the human world because of its perpetual negation of the non-human agency. In order to save the environment from humans, the ecocritics emerged with a simple but bold slogan that prioritizes ecology. They shout "Earth

First!” and with this assertion, they deny anthropocentric superiority over nature and call for a recuperated environment far from the inhuman and exploitative touch of man. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism “takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xvii) As the saying goes, Nature nurtures humans. Hence, it assumes that Nature should also be taken care of by humans. Our concerned dichotomy revolves around the existence of two entities – Nature and Literature – and their presence throughout human history. Nature’s presence was denied until we started practicing Ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism emphasizes the need to describe the non-human world’s prosaic sufferings instead of its poetic beauty. In terms of aesthetics, it always appears vibrant and colourful. But realistically, nature is bruised and devastated. Professor P.K. Nayar observed:

Romanticism in literature was a definite reaction to industrialization. The glorification of nature and landscapes in English and European poetry and paintings highlighted the delicate balance between man and the environment. The movement against cities in Wordsworth and others was a response to the grime, smoke, and pollution of the city by gigantic machinery and profiteering industry. (Nayar, 2020, p. 244)

William Rueckert, in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” asserted that “nature should also be protected by human laws...” and “trees should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights.” (Rueckert, 1996, p. 108) He mentioned Commoner’s First Law of Ecology that “Everything is connected to everything else” (Rueckert, 1996, p. 108). Thus, the Ecocritical plank of “Earth First!” continues to serve the purpose through its intellectual praxis. Furthermore, Rachel Carson, a prominent nature writer from Pennsylvania observes that man has become oblivious to everything else, along with his origin and the inevitable needs for his survival. Water, which we consider life, also succumbed to the callous human beings (Carson, 2002).

Therefore, for the preservation of our environmental resources, or in other words, for sustainable practices and conservation efforts, the practice of ecocriticism became inevitable. Ecocriticism paves the way to meet the purpose by examining the keen association of the environment with humans, literature, and culture. The ecocritics look for such a place where they can see humans and nature coexist harmoniously without destroying the natural community per se. They want an ecological sphere where the human ego cooperates with environmental eco to ensure the safety of nature. In fact, it is possible to locate Nature and Banalata Sen collectively within Ecology. The present essay delves into an ecocritical reading of “Banalata Sen,” juxtaposing the importance of Nature’s symphony and Banalata’s pulchritude in preserving the harmony between anthropocene and nonhuman agency.

At the very beginning, it is to make clear that the practice of Ecocriticism did not start accidentally but deliberately because it was a need of the time. In the backdrop, genuinely two persons have a headache regarding nature’s deterioration. One is a poet, and the other one is an Ecologist. If the poet worships nature, the ecologist nourishes it. Their prime concern is to keep nature unaffected by the detrimental touch of humankind. In *Silent Spring* the dire consequences of human de-naturalization of the ecosystem led Rachel Carson to mourn the death of Robin birds around her residence. Abram quotes Latour’s definition of nature which is:

Nature is not a thing, a domain, a realm, an ontological territory. It is (or rather, it was during the short modern parenthesis) a way of organizing the division (what Alfred North Whitehead has called the Bifurcation) between appearances and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, history and immutability. A fully transcendent, yet a fully

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historical construct, a deeply religious way (but not in the truly religious sense of the word) of creating the difference of potential between what human souls were attached to and what was really out there. (Abram, 2019, p. 20)

Furthermore, Rueckert mentioned William Faulkner's take on ecology in *Absalom, Absalom!* "[t]hat nature is an interacting process, a seamless web, it is responsive to laws, and it constitutes a value system with intrinsic opportunities and constraints upon human use." (Rueckert, 1996, p. 119) In her edited volume *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty, a pioneer of ecocritical study, has compiled essays across various disciplines based on environmental implications. She defines Ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii). The intersectionality of ecocriticism lies at the center of literature, cultural studies, and environmental science. The ecocritical study of nature or environment in literature deconstructs its artistic portrayal by analyzing the nonchalant anthropocentric attitude towards the environment. Therefore, ecocritical practices pave the way for unearthing the environmental issues and potential solutions to an ecologically sustainable environment. The ecosphere is on the verge of destruction because of the radicalization of technology. Arthur Boughey thinks:

There is no population, community, or ecosystem left on earth completely independent of the effects of human cultural behavior. Now this human influence has begun to spread beyond the globe to the rest of our planetary system and even to the universe itself. (Rueckert, 1996, p. 114)

Jibanananda Das as an Ecopoet

It was the best of times and it was the worst of times when Jibanananda Das was pursuing his literary career. In the Post-Rabindranath era, he was one of the famous Kallol poets who marked a new beginning in the history of Bengali literature. In his biography *A Poet Apart*, Clinton Seely captures Jibanananda's poetic brilliance by appreciating the observation of another contemporary genius Buddhadeva Bose when he writes:

To Buddhadeva's ways of thinking, only one modern Bengali poet could be termed a true nature poet: Jibanananda Das. Even those of his poems that seem to be concerned with love were still basically nature poems, Buddhadeva argued, for "the natural environment looms much larger and more alive in the poet's imagination than does the woman of his love." As for influences, there were Keats, the Pre-Raphaelites, and something reminiscent of the young Yeats, too. But, having said all this, Buddhadeva reiterates that, in the final analysis, Jibanananda's creative power and his vision remain uniquely his own. (Seely, 1990, p. 117)

Jibanananda composed 'Banalata Sen' when he went back to Barishal. His Natore is as charming as William Wordsworth's Yaaro, where someone can have the Minstrel's harp akin to the tender touch of Banalata. Natore is in present-day Bangladesh; it is a countryside of irresistible beauty, nestled amidst the lush greenery, full of natural wonders and biodiversity. This symphony of Natore is created by a charismatic nonhuman world of paddy fields, majestic rivers, and dense forests. Moreover, it has intensified the essence of an unblemished natural environment and ensured the place's cultural dignity. Jibanananda's Natore is part and parcel of his irresistibly beautiful Rupasi Bangla. In the article, "Ecopoetry, and Landscape, Dwelling, and Environment: A Study of Jibanananda Das's *Rupasi Bangla*", Akaitab Mukherjee hails Jibanananda Das as a true ecopoet and observes that his "poetry tries to dismantle the wall between the human and non-human worlds." (Mukherjee, 2022. p. 5)

Professor Timothy Morton, in his book *The Ecological Thought*, has pointed out that ecology has something more to do with poet and creative faculty than science and social policy, and he quotes Shelley, “[w]e want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know.” (Morton, 2010, p. 1) Ruckert has a deep sense of love and reverence for the poets. He considers them as generous because their association with nature is passionately transcendental. Ruckert writes that the poets “hold it close” and “give it all away.” He adds that “every poem is an action which comes from a finely developed and refined ecological conscience and consciousness.” (Rueckert, 1956, p. 116) Jibanananda Das’s portrayal of two unlike entities-Natore and Banalata Sen is faultless and thought-provoking. The poet succeeded in balancing the equilibrium of Human life and Natural Community. Md. Shamim Mondal, in his article “Jibanananda Das’s Aesthetics in Beautiful Bengal: An Eco-critical Study”, argues:

This contemporary ecological and environmental philosophy advocates the inherent worth of living beings regardless of their instrumental utility to human needs. It also advocates the restructuring of the present societies in accordance with such ideas. It argues that the natural world is a subtle balance of complex interrelationships. So human interference and destruction of the natural world pose threats to the existence of organisms along with humans and natural order within ecosystems. Departing from anthropocentric environmentalism, the view of human beings here is much more holistic. The natural world is not to be freely exploited by humans. The ethics is the survival of any part is dependent upon the well-being of the whole. (Mondal, 2019, p. 114)

Anthropocene and Non-human Existence in ‘Banalata Sen’

In the context of this poem, the article refers to Prof. Mukherjee’s take on ‘Dwelling’ in “Ecopoetry and Landscape, Dwelling and Environment: A Study of Jibananda Das’s *Rupasi Bangla*”, where he quotes Naess and concludes that dwelling leads to self-realization. It is a “counter-modernist” approach that calls for a “return to nature” from the hurly-burly of daily city dwellings. Hence, after conducting a go-through of his entire literary works, one may easily conclude that Jibanananda Das used to find mirth not in the city of sound and fury but in the rural Bengal of seclusion and tranquility. His ecological concern lies in his acceptance of rural breeze and rejection of urban wind.

As far as the philosophy of deep ecology is concerned, it suggests that our approach must be bio-centric to attain a safer planet. (Nayar, 2020, p. 335) Serpil Oppermann states that ecocriticism aims to promote ecological awareness and bring environmental consciousness into the practice of literary criticism. (Abram, 2019, p. 19) Dipesh Chakraborty, in his article “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” deals with the man-made environmental crisis and refers to Giovanni Arrighi’s take on the same issue. He argues that “the heat burns the world in Arrighi’s narrative comes from the engine of capitalism and not from global warming.” (Chakraborty, 2009, p. 200) Christopher Abram argues in his book *Evergreen Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature*:

Nature abhors a vacuum, so the saying goes, yet prevailing humanistic critiques have been guilty of attempting to vacuum the seal Society away from Nature, either by ignoring the nonhuman world altogether or by backgrounding it as merely the stage on which the drama of human history takes place. (Abram, 2019, p. 19)

Indeed, ecologists always prioritize the practical relevance of the agency over its theoretical elegance. The overlooked nature becomes highly important when its ideology shifts

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to the praxis. Lawrence Buelle writes, “[h]istorically, artistic representations of the natural environment have served as agents both of provocation and of compartmentalization, calling us to think ecocentrically but often conspiring with the readerly temptation to cordon off scenery into pretty ghettos.” (Buell, 1995, p. 4) Buell believes that the thick description of the external world is the major concern in ecocriticism. It has been left merely as a setting. (Buelle, 1995, p. 84) He refers to Wordsworth’s dictum that “every flower enjoys the air it breathes,” and he believed that “plants have minds, are conscious of their existence, feel pain and have memories.” (Buelle, 1995, p. 193)

In the poem ‘Banalata Sen,’ we have read and understood that the speaker had made a tedious journey. For thousands of years, he had roamed around the earth in search of peace. He had been in the city of Vidarbha. But to him, Natore, a rural setting, was the sole source of peace where Banalata Sen embalms his weariness. Ashis Nandy, in his book *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and the Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*, defines village or the rural setting as a “depository of the traditional wisdom and spirituality, and of the harmony of nature, intact community life, and environmental sagacity.” (Nandy, 2001, p. 20) The manifestation of the poet’s obsession with city life occurs in his depiction of ‘the gray world of Ashoka,’ where he was missing the vibrant presence of the ‘glimmering fireflies’ that could ‘paint in the story’ and decorate his night with beautiful mélange of color. In this discussion of country and city, it is worth mentioning Raymond William’s feelings that he captured in his book *The Country and the City*: “[t]his country life then has many meanings: in feeling and activity; in region and in time.” (Williams, 1973, p. 4)

This article refers to Clinton B Seely’s translation of the original poem for this interpretation. Interestingly, the very words “moment’s peace” strike the poet’s friend and admirer, Sanjay Bhattacharya, while he was going through the piece. His thought process was electrified and Mr. Bhattacharya thus ends up writing that “Jibanananda had lost faith in the real world, then regained a faith of sorts in a fantasy land of his construing, embodied” in the poem (Seely, 1990, p. 98). To authenticate the preference of the non-human world of tranquility over a chaotic anthropocentric land we must have a look at Raymond William’s sayings. He writes following his hands-on experience:

I have stood in many cities and felt this pulse: in the physical differences of Stockholm and Florence, Paris and Milan: this identifiable and moving quality: the centre, the activity, the light. Like everyone else I have felt also the chaos of the metro and the traffic jam; the monotony of the ranks of houses; the aching press of strange crowds. But this is not experience at all, not an adult experience, until it has come to include also the dynamic movement, in these centres of settled and often magnificent achievement. (Williams, 1973, p. 5)

In ecocriticism, the muzzling up of non-humans is still an unresolved issue. Christopher Manes, in his essay “Nature and Silence,” opines that nature is silent in our culture in general as it is subject to anthropocentric exploitation. However, Hans Peter Duerr believes that “people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them” since “social power operates through a regime of privileged speaker,” as Michel Foucault demonstrates. In his essay, Manes’ epicenter was his quest for counter-ethics to defend the ‘ism’ of anthropocentric environmental consciousness. He demands a “viable environment ethics to confront the silence of nature” and to combat the ecological crisis. (Manes, 1996, pp. 15-29) Jibanananda Das’s poem ‘Banalata Sen’ tries to break that long silence through animation. Animesh Bag writes in his article “Like a Tangerine: Despair, Death, and the Poetic Self in Jibanananda Das’s Select Poems” that Jibanananda Das “finds himself amidst nature, not as an outside part rather an integral

component of it, that creates ontological tensions.” (Bag, 2022, p. 10) Bag also talks about the ‘object-oriented ontology’ which “puts object at the center deprioritizing human subjectivity” and Martin Heidegger’s rejection of the anthropocentric superiority over non-human existence. (Bag, 2022, p. 10)

Stacy Alaimo’s book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* discusses the concept of “transcorporeality,” which considers the body as an environmental construct. (Alaimo, 2010, p. 15) “Transcorporeality” is something that completely denies the boundary that lies between human bodies and the environment. With the advent of this term, Alaimo shakes the complete notion of the existence of two different entities. She believes that human existence is shaped by the environment. And the former has an intimate association with the latter. Akin to this, Das’s concern for ecology also endeavors to bridge the gap of transcorporeal existence.

Morton believes the slogan “local is better than global,” and to some extent, he agrees with Jibanananda Das’s concern for ecology and writes, “the more information we acquire in the greedy pursuit of seeing everything, the more our sense of a deep, rich, and coherent world will appear unavailable.” (Morton, 2010, p. 56) We find an inward connection of same with Jibanananda’s ecological consciousness when he murmurs, “I have gazed at Bengal’s face, and hence the world’s beauty I no longer go to seek” in one of his other poems.” (Seely, 2015) The entire concluding stanza of the poem is dedicated to a keen and vivid description of a non-human world, the poet is intimately associated with. In this world of non-human existence, the poet finds mirth amidst the wiping immortal hawks and “glimmering fireflies.” Without them, every beautiful aspect of Banalata would have remained vain and incomplete. The poet is in ardent pursuit of defining Beauty followed by the sublime by blurring the binary of light and darkness. But no more! The beautiful rural Bengal of the poet is on the edge of ruination.

Rachel Carson’s take on the gradual deterioration of nature shocks us, when she reminds us of the dire consequences of affecting nature. Carson mourns the loss of this beautiful non-human world where beautiful birds used to dwell and sing songs but alas! “[a]fter several years of DDT spray, the town is almost devoid of robins and starlings; chickadees have not been on my shelf for two years, and this year the cardinals are gone too.” (Carson, 2002, p. 60. Questioning human folly, she asks, “Can I do anything?” for the sake of this irreparable loss, she asks whether the birds will ever come back. In another section entitled “Nature Fights Back”, Carson confesses that the irony lies in our stubbornness to mould nature as per our satisfaction in which we failed. (Carson, 2002, p. 128)

Conclusion

When all is said and done, it is clear that the ecological projection of Nature is aesthetically incredible and realistically appealing. And throughout the faultless presentation of Nature, the poet succeeded in establishing the ‘counterethics’ to challenge the discourse of the Anthropocene. Christopher Manes asserts that to break the silence of nature and to resist the exploitative machinery of human subjectivity that interferes with the rightful existence of the nonhuman agency, we need environmental counterethics as tit for tat. (Manes, 1996, p. 16) The poet’s effort to bridge the gap between the human and nonhuman world has been significantly acknowledged by the eco-critics to accelerate the understanding of deep ecology. Jibanananda’s Bengal replicates his Banalata. Clinton Seely writes in Jibanananda Das’s biography, *A Poet Apart*, that through his poetry “Jibanananda Das relieves Bengal to the fullest, an animal-vegetable-mineral rural Bengal, not the human society of cosmopolitan Bengal.” (Seely, 1990, p. 91) It is of course analogous that if Banalata could be a goddess, then Nature’s scenic beauty could have the charm of God’s garden. Therefore, we may conclude by saying that Jibanananda Das, through his poems, goes on conveying a very commonsensical

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message that “nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves... as an entity which affects us... perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it.” (Barry, 2002, p. 252) Unfortunately, chances are more to lose the god's garden and the goddess Banalata one day.

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Bio-note

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