



Understanding nature and the non-human: Need for a right perspective

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Abstract

Victimization of nature and the non-human by human beings is perhaps the most tragic happening of the current phase of the Anthropocene. The unwarranted human dominance and abuse of nature and the non-human has precipitated a grave ecological crisis for the world. Consequently, the life support mechanism of the planet is fast crumbling, sending out signals of imminent danger to the very survival of human race. Yet, man appears not to have taken note of it. His exploitation continues unabated. The reason is the human lack of understanding and recognition of nature and the non-human as the benefactors of life on earth. But, the world literature does not lack such understanding, which is based on love, compassion for all forms of nature and kinds of non-human. This should be brought home to the modern man, who has, of late, grown utterly egocentric and is in a mad race for money and matter resulting in indiscriminate destruction of nature and the non-human. Literature with its power of appeal and persuasion can set right the blundering mind of man and restore to him the right perspective to treat nature and the non-human as companions. Such a change of mindset will contribute substantially to arrest the global ecological crisis.

Keywords: nature, non-human, perspective, understanding, crisis

Introduction

In the past, nature and the non-human were looked upon as the sustainers of life across the globe. Man used to live in a benign environment with a kind of enlightened companionship with them. The holistic co-existence was fundamental to ways of life in earlier time. The wealth of wisdom which has been handed over from the ancients came from their intimate connection with the living nature. Man's vision of the world was unified in which he was "the guardian of a living organism" (Mehta 186). Man stayed close to nature, where he felt an essential kinship. That holistic perspective, however, has given way to an utterly self-centred attitude. The concept of an organic world has now become alien to the modern man. He has become thoroughly materialistic and egocentric. To fulfill his selfish, commercial interest, he is ravaging nature and abusing the non-human by misutilising the new technologies. With each passing day, his perversity grows abnormally. He goes on killing birds and animals, destroying nature in thousand devious ways. Such mindless activities have already resulted in destabilizing the support base of the planet. Speaking metaphorically, mother Earth is now dying. By deforesting, polluting earth, air and water, man has virtually turned in to a Frankenstein's monster. Man's irrational conduct can be attributed to his utter lack of understanding of how significant and indispensable nature and the non-human are for the survival of human race. Thus, in this situation, literature can serve well to restore the right perspective and understanding, which he possessed in the earlier time. Literature across the globe and throughout ages has been advocating the urgent need for a harmonious life for man, to live with peace, joy and fellowship with nature and the non-human. This message is required to be brought home to the erring humanity by employing various suitable modes and methods. Literature by virtue of its power of appeal can influence and set right the deviant mind of modern man. With this point of view,

the author has cited for discussion some poems of English poets namely Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, the Indian poet Sitakanta Mahapatra.

Purpose

The objective of this research article is to analyze briefly William Blake's "The Lamb", "The Tiger", S.T Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner", William Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of immortality", "Tintern Abbey", John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale", Sitakanta Mahapatra's "Cockfight", "A Tree Litany" to show how the messages the poems carry are powerful and profound enough to change the negative attitude of the modern man, restore his understanding and right perspective on nature and the non-human.

Methodology

This article is research based and qualitative in methodology, sourcing the materials from reference books and the internet. The cited materials have been examined in terms of their usefulness and relevance to the issue in question and have formed part of the findings.

Discussion and Findings

The issue for discussion is about what kind of message literature carries that can help in setting right the perspective for man with regard to his understanding of nature and the non-human, which at present is in the negative. It is also necessary to focus on the suitability of such message for mankind. It is beyond doubt that the voices of great literary masters are authentic on account of their insight and perception into the nature of things. Their works and utterances are time tested and timeless as well. Their understanding of nature and the non-human are enlightening, which can influence and improve man's relationship with them and thereby resolve the ecological crisis substantially. Focusing on the relevance of art and

literature in this regard, Lawrence Buell et al have observed "...that the arts of imagination and the study thereof –by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven and direct environmental concern – can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of eco-degradation that afflict planet Earth today (Buell et al 418). To further the discussion, some poems of the great English Romantics namely Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, who were writing in the backdrop of industrial revolution and its accompanying evils have been taken. In addition, poems of a great Indian poet Sitakanta Mahapatra, who is writing in the context of the present scenario, have been taken to corroborate the author's point of view.

The first reference is William Blake: his concept of the tiger and the lamb. Blake in his two remarkable poems titled "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" has set out his vision of God's scheme of things, where the lamb and the tiger are essential components. Though they symbolize two contrary states of mind and human experience, they are complementary as per divine dispensation and their continuance and perseverance is necessary for the cosmic design of nature and the well-being of mankind. One needs to realize that behind every creation, God's purpose is immanent. All creatures should respect their allotted place in the scheme of nature. The lamb and the tiger manifest God's purposeful design and represent two conflicting as well as indispensable aspects and forces: innocence, weakness on the one hand, experience and power on the other. Both are essential as well as inevitable for the cosmic arrangement to continue. One will find his vision in his self-evident simple query in "The Tyger", "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" (Blake 120). It carries a clear message to mankind for nurturing a holistic attitude to nature and the non-human and to adopt the right perspective.

S.T. Coleridge in his magnum opus "The Ancient Mariner" has conveyed a fundamental truth about life by telling a tale of crime and punishment. He has narrated how the mariner of a ship had killed a sea-bird albatross, the pious bird of good omen and thereby committed a hideous crime and suffered punishment for his guilt and got relief only when he felt love at the sight of water snakes and blessed them. The crime is committed by the irrationality and perversity of will. The crime is against nature, against the sacred law of life. Stopford A. Brooke in the Introduction to his "The Golden Book of Coleridge" has perceptively indicated that for the poet "... compassion and love for animals secures in the heart compassion and love for man and God" (Brooke 15). Coleridge sums up his message to humanity:

He prayeth best, who loveth best All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (Coleridge 275)

Thus, love and companionship towards all is the key to a meaningful life. This clear, unambiguous utterance of the poet should be the guiding factor in setting man's perspective towards nature and the non-human. William Wordsworth, the high priest of nature believes in an interlocked universe, where man and nature respond to each other. To him, man should love nature sincerely, which, in turn, will provide him everlasting joy and solace. His famous "Ode on Intimations of Immortality" is a

"declaration of his trust that nature will sustain him" (Bowra 100). The poet sings:

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might. (Wordsworth 247).

For the poet, nature is not dead. A spirit is immanent in the manifest nature. Man's task is to enter into communion with the soul of nature through love seeking pure joy and bliss. Poet's "Tintern Abbey" clearly reveals his pantheistic view of nature:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy Of
Elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air... (Wordsworth 237)

Here, Wordsworth's message to humanity is unambiguous. Pure love and fellowship with nature holds the key to a joyful life.

A rare example is illustrated from another Romantic poet, who has in his passionate love for nature and the visible world has immortalized the singing bird Nightingale in the golden pages of literature. The poet John Keats in his unforgettable "Ode to a Nightingale", has celebrated the beauty and richness of the world of Nightingale, where the bird sings of "summer in full-throated ease" (Keats 359). The bird is in perfect harmony with its world. It shares the immortality of nature. In contrast, the poet shows man's world of suffering, disharmony, alienation which the Nightingale has never known:

"The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other grown;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow... (Keats 360)

The poem, in short, is a message to humanity for restoring his love for nature and the creatures of nature. Nightingale is not an individual bird. It is symbolic for the whole of non-human world, the inclusive nature. The message is an authentic guide for course correction of man's existing relationship with nature and the non-human.

Sitakant Mahapatra, the internationally acclaimed Odia poet, well-known for his love of man, myth and nature has in his poem "Cockfight" has highlighted cruelty to innocent creatures for the sake of fun. The poem dramatizes a familiar scene of rural sport and recreation in the village festivals of Odisha particularly in tribal belts. Two cocks armed with gaff, a metal spur on the leg are provoked by onlookers to attack each other. The gathering crowd gets frenzied and spurs each of the roosters to fight the other till the end:

The two heroes understand nothing-
Why this battle formation, who the enemy is? why the
fight and for what

over this silent earth
 in this oceanic commotion? A weapon pulls the nerves,
 ignites the blood.
 The nape swells
 and it feels as if feathers will fly from the flesh. Anger and
 spite fill every cell.
 The great war starts in an instant-
 kill or be killed,
 the last story... (Mahapatra 68-69)

The game usually terminates with killing of both the cocks from fatal wound. The poem is a pathetic record of torturing animals to death, a scathing comment on human folly, a pointer to man's depravity, lack understanding of the non-human. Here is the poet's appeal to humanity for saneness for all living beings. A poet by virtue of his special knowledge is capable of understanding the nature and the non-human. His primary concern is the well-being of mankind in harmony with them. For him, existence is co-existence. Fellowship, not cruelty should be the criterion for man's relationship with nature and the non-human. Man's perspective needs to be reset accordingly.

The said poet Sitakant Mahapatra in another poem "A Tree Litany" has projected the image of a tree as a multi-functional, multi-dimensional phenomenon in complete harmony with man, nature and the non-human. He has portrayed the tree as "The goddess wears a lovely green sari/body ornamented with flowers"; "a loving mother/ A tired traveller sleeps in its shadow"; "a hospitable house holder/ invites home-bound birds", "a simple unassuming soul/ tiny squirrels run through its body/ to make it laugh, tickle it with affection"; the tree like a poet in passionate love with moon-lit-night "keep writing a lovely poem/ in the sky" (Mahapatra 75-76). This vision of tree as a metaphor for an integrated world is the poet's clear and unambiguous message to humanity for preservation of nature. A poet's perception is unmistakable and should be acted upon with all seriousness.

Conclusion

From the discussion made in the preceding passages, it is found that a comprehensive world view based on love and fellowship with nature and the non-human should be the right perspective for man. Literature carries this valuable message categorically for all human beings, who need to understand it properly for a peaceful and harmonious life. Joyful co-existence with nature and the non-human should form the essence of his living on earth. Such a perspective will greatly contribute to halt further degradation of the ecology and pave the way for its restoration and preservation. However, the State should come forward to take up the responsibility of spreading this message, associating in the process appropriate institutions, voluntary organizations, social activists, thought leaders, and mass media. In other words, a popular mass movement can be launched to continue till the message reaches one and all, showing positive result.

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