

Tracing out identity crisis in the light of biocentrism

¹A Fredrick Ruban, ² Dr. Helen Unius Backiavathy

¹ M.Phil., Scholar Department of English Karunya University Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

² Assistant Professor, Department of English Karunya University Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

“Tracing out Identity Crisis in the Light of Biocentrism” aims to venture the cause and effect of bringing a wild bear to Delhi road from the hills of Himalaya. Earle Birney, a Canadian bard has attempted a biocentric approach to emphasize the identity crisis of a Himalayan bear in the poem “The Bear on the Delhi Road”. The paper defines Biocentrism and its ethics to draw out the Biocentric view: ‘identity crisis’, as well as the reason for identity crisis of the bear is brought forth. Furthermore, the paper traces the interdependency and struggle for survival between human beings and nature. Picturisation of Himalayan bear as a victim of Kashmiri men’s callous act in exploiting the real identity of the bear which is worded in Earle Birney’s “The Bear on the Delhi Road” is also delineated in the paper.

Keywords: Biocentrism, Identity crisis, Interdependency, and Survival

Introduction

‘Identity crisis’ insinuates the loss of real identity of any creature; the term is used generally and specifically. Predominantly literature advocates for the lost identity of human beings, correspondingly Earle Birney, a Canadian bard has attempted a biocentric approach to emphasize the identity crisis of a Himalayan bear in the poem “The Bear on the Delhi Road”. It portrays the eye witnessed scene of the poet in his travel through India in 1958 by the road side of Srinagar; he sketches the interdependency between human beings and nature.

The Biocentric approach is nature based and favours only nature: accuses men for exploiting nature and labels human beings as victimizers and nature as a victim of God’s creation. Biocentric ethic asserts the relationship between humans and nature, also states ‘the nature doesn’t exist to be used or consumed by humans’. Biocentric thoughts preserve nature, and the advocates of Biocentrism argue for the preservation of biodiversity. Paul Taylor, a Biocentrist, in his *Respect for nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (1986) defines biocentrism as ‘attitude of respect for nature’. Biocentric thought primarily sparked from Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859): its influence on science, philosophy and literature is extensive.

In literature, preservation and admiration of nature were prioritized by the Romantic Movement in 18th and 19th centuries; it defended the intrinsic value of the natural world. Though the theme emerged long back, still conservation and preservation of nature and its components are favoured. English literature has rendered a vast space for nature writers. There are innumerable writers in literature who have advocated for the equality of nature. E.J. Pratt, Earle Birney, Maya Angelou, Shiv K. Kumar, Gabriel Okara and many others have composed poetry aiming to highlight the preservation of nature. Earle Birney, an author of numerous books of poetry, born on 13 May 1904 in Calgary is Canada’s well-known writer of 20th century, he provides the readers

with the wide-ranging pictures of the Canadian and foreign experiences. “The Bear on the Delhi Road” is an eye witnessing experience of Birney, picturing a wild bear as a domestic creature. It also carries the Biocentric ethic, ‘using nature for humans’ need’. The poem delineates a bear which is captured from the fabulous Himalayan hills by Kashmiri men. The bear gets a masculine description in the poem; in addition, the poem discloses the reasons for identity crisis of the bear.

Identity crisis - cause and effect

Real identity is lost when a creature does unnatural actions other than what it is expected to do in nature. In Birney’s poem, the bear does unnatural actions to entertain the onlookers, which takes off his real identity; performing unnatural actions portrays the wild bear as a mere toy. The poem claims that the capturers of the bear who are identified as Kashmiri men spoil the real identity of the bear.

There is a proximate association among identity, interdependency and survival; therefore, Birney wishes to lighten the view: ‘losing identity is a consequence of interdependency and survival’. Indubitably, interdependency is the basic factor for exploitation of nature and its resources. The poem unfolds the interdependency found between the bear and the Kashmiri men; however their interdependency is inevitable. Interdependency changes the real identity of the bear where he is treated as a toy and obeys the trainers absolutely.

The men who have led the bear to the Delhi road have trained him to perform circus in streets to earn their livelihood. For this, they torture him to perform unnatural actions such as standing on hind limbs, and dancing. They train him in a more sophisticated and novel method. This draws the attention of the commoners and a huge crowd gathers to watch the Himalayan bear. The unusual treatment on the bear makes him lose his real identity as a wild bear. They train him to perform many unrealistic acts in front of the crowd. This indeed is a tormenting training which snatches the identity of the

Himalayan bear. The callous attitude of the Kashmiri men towards the bear is apparent in the following lines:

One pulls on a ring
In the great soft nose His mate
Flick flick with a sick
Up at the rolling eyes “The Bear on the Delhi Road” (7-10)

“The Bear on the Delhi Road” springs out by voicing the unnatural scene: the appearance of a Himalayan bear by the road side, contrast to its natural habitat, forest. Once it was in the fabulous hills but now by the road side. By this Earle Birney divulges that the bear has lost his true identity for his victimizers’ well-being. The poem evinces the intention of the Kashmiri men to bring the bear on the road, ‘it is not to kill him’:

They have not led him hear
Down from the fabulous hills
To this bald alien plain
And the clamorous world to kill
But simply to teach him to dance
“The Bear on the Delhi Road” (11-15)

The line: “but simply to teach him to dance” communicates the ambition of the men to bring him out of his habitat - to train him dancing. It is unrealistic to find a bear dancing, especially on streets, but the Himalayan bear – a wild animal does it and loses his identity. He is taught to dance to earn for the survival of the men and himself: an action of interdependency between human beings and animals.

They are peaceful because the bear provides them livelihood, in addition, he also obeys them in all circumstances which highlights the flexible nature of the bear. Furthermore, it unveils his adaptation to an alien land where he visualizes strange creatures- human beings. But unfortunately, the flexibility of the bear is exploited by the Kashmiri men for their survival. The lines: “They are peaceful both these spare / men of Kashmir and the bear / alive is their living too” “The Bear on the Delhi Road” (16-18) claim that the existence of the bear is their living; by this the Biocentric view of the poet: ‘men use nature for their livelihood’ is lucid. It also points out the action of interdependency and exploitation: obvious that the former and the latter can ruin the real identity. Earle Birney hints at the truth: the Kashmiri men destroy the real identity of the Himalayan bear by training him the art of dancing, making him stand on berries and teaching him to spring forward on the hind legs. All these actions seem to be the cruelty caused to him, but the poet vindicates the deeds of men for a making the wild bear – the Himalayan bear to do such unrealistic actions.

Earle Birney has penned, ill-treating the bear to entertain the onlookers in the hot dust and under the shadow of the cedar tree is only for the survival of the three – two Kashmiri men and the bear. And the following lines substantiate it:

It is no more joyous for them
In this hot dust to prance
Out of reach of the praying claws
Sharpened to paw for ants
In the shadow of deodars “The Bear on the Delhi Road” (26-30)

The Bard has imparted the Biocentric view: ‘men exploiting nature’ portraying the bear as a bread winner for them. Since, they exploit the bear only for their livelihood, the poem does not figure out these men as sadist. Besides, it emphasizes the truth that they are completely dependent on the bear for their bread.

Having a rethought in a general perspective admits human beings are dependent on nature and its resources for all their fundamental needs. This makes them exploit nature, and hence as a consequence of their dependency, nature and its resources are destroyed. Through this, the poet desires to throw light on the fact that human existence is tough and it is interdependency alone that makes it easier and simpler.

Conclusion

Struggle for survival is the fabric of life. Therefore exploiting each other in the ecosystem becomes evident and inevitable. Travel for the bear from the hills to road snatches his true identity of being a wild bear and his nature of adaptability to any hard circumstance is clear. The poet has not portrayed the men as sadists but he has engraved the Biocentric thought: of using nature for survival in the poem. The autobiographical voice of Earle Birney in “The Bear on the Delhi Road” vindicates the cruelty done to the bear by disturbing his real habitat in order to train him to stand on two legs. According to the revelation, the survival of the Kashmiri men is dependent on the identity of the bear. The men have led the Himalayan bear to the Delhi road for their livelihood and the poet portrays that it is a very difficult task and compares the task to that of freeing myth from reality. Hence, the struggle for survival, in the case of the Kashmiri men has become a paradox.

Thus the poem discloses a reply to the Biocentric interrogation “why is the identity of the bear lost?”. The poet reasons out and admits that the struggle for survival has acted upon the bear and has taken off his true identity of being a wild bear. Therefore Earle Birney acknowledges the fact that destruction of nature and its resources are the consequences of human dependency.

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