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An Ecocritical Approach in Dhruv Bhatt's 'Akoopar'

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism focuses on the analyses of man – nature relationship and also studies its reflection in literature. Dhruv Bhatt is one of the well – known writers of modern Gujarati literature. His works are embedded with human sensibilities and social satires; he celebrates humanity in the lap of Nature. The novel Akoopar (2010), translated in English as the Akoopar – The Infinite (2012) by Piyush Joshi and Suresh Gadhavi one such work celebrating the role of nature in human life. Ecocriticism studies the depiction of natural world and man – nature binary in the literary works. The present paper aims at applying the theory of ecocriticism on one of the Gujarati novels Akoopar by Dhruv Bhatt which depicts the issues of the natural world. Akoopar deal with the depiction of man – nature relationship. The novel is the finest example of man – nature relationship and thus the present paper aims at analyzing it through the theory of Ecocriticism.

Key Words: Gujarati Literature, Akoopar, Ecocriticism, Man – Nature Relationship.

Objectives:

The main objective of the research is to study nature from different perspective of Ecocriticism as evidenced in Dhruv Bhatt's novel.

- This research tries to understand, in the light of ecology how nature can be the best refuge to mankind.
- This present research shall be focus on the interconnection between human and environment.

Introduction:

Dhruv Bhatt has been a prominent name in the contemporary Gujarati fiction writing. His works represent his personal life experiences and acquaintances of the common people.



However, these common people's tales have the universal appeal. These tales also depict the collective wisdom that these common people have contributed in every walks of life. On the other hand, various regions of Gujarat find their vivid description with their cultural, social and geographical peculiarities found their description in his novels. Majority of his novels have been translated in English, Hindi and other languages. He is writer of remarkable talent. His works are radical as well as engrossing.

Akoopar is set in and around the forest of Gir and portrays the people, places and the heritage of the region in various Kathiyavaadi dialects. As in most of the regional novels of Dhruv Bhatt, Akoopar, too is resulted out of his extended stay at the region. It narrates the unique blend of the fact and fiction of the people and places that the author came across and observed. The present paper aims at reviewing the novel from the eco critical point of view.

Ecocriticism:

Ecocriticism is a post – modern theory which flourished in the 1960s but developed thoroughly through 1990s. The term 'ecocriticism' designates the state of living beings in their natural surrounding and their relation with that environment. Ecocriticism as a theory interprets the man – nature relationship and its depiction in the literary works. According to Cheryl Glotfelty in What is Ecocriticism?,

“Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound environmental implications” (Glotfelty).

The Ecocritical Reader – a journal by Cheryl Glotfelty is considered the milestone in the development of Ecocriticism. The major ecocritics are Cheryl Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Rueckert, Sullen Campbell, William Howarth, Michael P. Branch and Glen A. Love.

Ecocritical Approach in Dhruv Bhatt's 'Akoopar':



Akoopar (2010) is a celebrated novel chronicle the journey of an unnamed hero to Gir in search of the 'Earth' element for a series of paintings; and his encounters with local residents, their belief systems and lions. In the common imagery evoked by Gir — which is reiterated by the publicity blitzkrieg of the state tourism department — Asiatic lions hold the pride of place. However, the land is much more than the home of the animal kingdom's revered royalty; it is the site where life forms thrive in a unique symbiotic relationship. In Gir, humans do not have dominion over animals; people are a part of the system. This becomes the theme of the novel. In the beginning of the novel, the hero is unsure why he has come to Gir but at the end the visit becomes life-changing experience for him.

Akoopar is based upon the first novel in the history of Gujarati literature, which deals with the life of Maldharis and their relationship with lions, nature and the animals of Sasan Gir—the last homage of Asiatic lion. Akoopar unfolds not just the geographic space that is the wild life sanctuary of the few surviving Asiatic lions that are under the threat of extinction but the surviving tradition of the people that can be a solution to all our anxiety at the local, national and the global level.

To begin with, the writer's explanatory note: About the Title – Akoopar, states that he decided to write on Gir and Ghed (a coastal region north to Gir) regions rather than any characters or theme. The characters evolve as gradually in the given space. He further refers to the word Akoopar (Tortoise), referred to Bhagavat Gomandal and the myth of Akoopar from Mahabharat. The connection is drawn from the two incidences of his meeting of an old man whose utterance while narrating the calamity of the cyclone in 1882 and the half flat forest "...I thought that it was the end of the lifespan of Gir. But when I look at it today my dear has started to laugh. Now I can beat my breast (undoubtedly) and say that why the forefathers were saying is not wrong. Gir is my mother, eternal" (Akoopar 2). And another incident in Ghed when someone during the discussions on sky watching and revolution of Earth, spoke of the early belief that the earth is balanced on the hood of Shesh Nag and the back of the tortoise. At that time someone commented that, "if that was the case then the point on which the support was would be exactly under Gir" (Akoopar 6). This speaks of the centrality of the thorny Gir forest in the text and faith of the writer in the continuing tradition of wisdom for which he employs the title metaphorically to present the text as the witness to



eternal ethos of life just as the mythical Akoopar of Mahabharat. The writer's design of the text speaks of his design to blend the temporal with eternal. Akoopar gives the geographical map of the region just in the beginning and gives space to the original myth of Akoopar after the narration ends. Symbolically the fiction is presented/held/planted by two palms with all the consciousness of real concrete geographical space and the long past. In between is the unfolding of living wisdom that links the two.

The writer keeping with the tradition creates a narrator who is an unnamed painter on a assignment to paint the element of 'earth' among five basic elements for the interior decoration under a big project. The artist is the outsider who gradually unfolds the inner world of Gir. The wide range of characters from Maldharis (cattle rearers) who live within the forest, to forest officers and guards, villagers, wildlife activist, fishermen, characters dead and alive present the life of Gir and Ghed regions. It is a modern Aranyak Upanishad where the narrator sits at the feet of the Gir dwellers to attain wisdom. The painting of the 'Earth' element for a modern artist is more of an imagination while for the traditional artist as Aima.

The environment concerns interwoven in the text are numerable to take account of them exhaustively. To take note of a few are, human-wildlife conflict, lion poaching, encroachment on forest lands, stakeholders of forestry management, livelihood concerns in forest areas, recognizing access to forest resources for survival, fears of extinction of lion among wildlife conservationists, relocate some of the lions from Gir national park, illegal mining, biodiversity, coastal regulations, soil erosion, afforestation, hill ecology, endangered species, ecological balance and many more. The solutions lie in immunity that the characters inherit from traditional way of life and the values they live with. Aima, Sansai and her forefather Ravaata along with other characters reveal the secret wisdom of the local people that is spellbinding.

The opening of the novel with a colloquial expression "Khamma" by Aima (Akoopar 7), means 'May the Gir be blessed' that the meaning unfolds at the very end and resolves all the conflicts environmental as well as of life as a whole to end the work with the same blessing address. The contemplative urban artist narrator reveals the knowledge from usage 'khamma' used by Aima the local traditional artist. In her reply to a question during her painting exhibition in Ahmedabad that,



Do you like to stay there in jungle more than here in Amdavad?’ And someone else also spoke, ‘To go outing is fine; but to stay! without facilities, among the lions and leopards, fear of being killed or will be killed. Why to live where there no safety of life?’ ...

“My boys, all of you understand that no one is going to live forever staying in this pakka house. I have never heard that lion-leopard or scorpions ever killed the number people killed by the cars and trucks and motorcycles on the roads would be.” “We read daily in papers that don’t people die in quarrelling for nothing? And yet does anyone have the time to say khamma to the earth?” [Akoopar 255 – 256]

The exposition on the part if the narrator that almost merges with the writer is that “She does not just say khamma to the departed soul. To her pain of passing away of one soul is the sorrow of the whole universe. And that is why in her khamma the life on this beautiful planet has the strength to bear the shock and bloom on with the blessings and confidence that is heard” (Akola 135).

Aima had been living in Gayr since her birth and knows everything about the nature and the animals. Aima is the eldest in the community and hence people care for her and listen to her advice. She shows concern over the growing urbanisation. She felt that people have started to disrespect the nature and its creatures. She used to roam around in the entire Gayr and notice the changes that were taking place throughout Gayr. She was concerned over the smallest problem that arose in the Gir like the growing Kuvadiao plant. Aima said,

” I have never heard or seen since my birth that this plant of Kuvadiao Is there in Gayr. Nobody told me that this has been there for the last two years. After having alighted from the vehicle on my way I found it everywhere.” [Akoopar 90]

Then Aima talked about the plant of Kuvadiao that none of the animal eat. Kuvadiao is was the plant that doesn’t allow the other plants to grow and hence Aima felt that it is due to the change in the thinking of the people in the gir that is allowing Kuvadiao to grow. Aima could see and feel everything around her alive. She never thought of considering animals as animals and nature as simply nature. For her all the things people were surrounded with in the forests of gir were alive. She personified every inanimate object and filled life into it. She even felt that respect should be maintained for nature and animals if one is living in the gir otherwise



there is no purpose of them staying here. Aima was a true care taker and lover of the Gir and it's Nature. That's why she said 'Khama Gayrne' occasionally.

Just as in case of usages the recognition of lions by names as well as regarding them handsome (rupal) not just the beast but also, as in case the forest guide Mustaffa points at various hills by their names and speaking of one among them as the most handsome speaks of the mutualism in the true sense. The doha (a folk metrical composition in oral tradition) "Ghantalo paene ghantali ne, ne anvar vahadhor Hiran, Meghal Janadiu ne gyerma jakamjol" (Akoopar 33).

The couplet tells the story of blind and legendary Ravaata who brings together the threads of the complex mosaic plot, speaks of interconnected whole and realization that, and that invisible voice that said, "Gir, our land one time.... I accept it too. Neither is it ghost nor illusion. It is the one within me lac, crore or more years old me, yes myself." (Akoopar 284) Ravaata on whom the doha is based, speaks of a seemingly fantastic ceremonial marriage of two hills Ghantla and Ghantly celebrated by Ravaata in order to give a feast to people as he being blind had vowed not to marry but promised to feed the people and he did this by adopting Ghantala while Ghantli was adopted by the Divan of Junagadh Nawab! This is unbelievable and unimaginable that a person could think of marrying the hills but the reality is that the legend is alive with third generation to capture their imagination for whom there is Aima to paint the scenes of the story and according to her she paints what she believes in.

The novel Akoopar is also talked about ancient story of the Gir. There was one Rava Ata, a blind gentle man in Sansai's family. He has tremendous love for the animals and nature of the gir. Rata Ata heard that some Lat Sahib in Junagadh he wanted to go hunting in the Gayr with Nawabsahib. Then Rava Ata decided to save lions. He meet Latsahib and described the situation about lions. Rava Ata said,

" We exist just because of the Gayr and there because of us . Whether you kill them or us in one and the same thing. As the lions with their tails are there in the Gayr we exist otherwise we shall not be there either." [Akoopar 291

Then the Diwan himself arrived to Sasan with the Nawab's proclamation. All were gathered together and the message was read out:



” Having accepted the Angrej Sahib Bahadur’s request, The Nawab ordains that here after there would be ban on the hunting in the Gayr. The second order is that The authorities of the forest department should count the exact number of the lions, lioness, cubes, etc. And this report be submitted in the writing to the Angrej sahib Bahadur before he leaves Junagadh.” [Akoopar 292]

With this Rava Ata saved the lion and also saved the Gir. People of Gir believed that because of Rava Ata now we can see so many lions in the Gir. It shows that how much he loves the Gayr and the nature of the Gir.

Sansai, as is characteristic of Dhruv Bhatt’s works, is a powerful female character, She historically moves around the scene to present the essence of Gir, she is at once an enchanting Charan Kanya, a Jogmaya, the life soul, a Devi, Shakti incarnated, Shakti the power herself. She is Gir, a lioness with the trait of courage and concerns that she has inherited from Rawaata her great grand-father. She is omnipresent to carry forward and give unity to the plot. She is projected as self-confident and out spoken and one who cannot tolerate unjust word or action in the space.

In the beginning she is presented as a new bold and rustic woman portrayal but as and when we come to know the legendary success of Rawaata to stop the English Lords’ hunting of lions by walking all the way to Junagadh and persuade the Lordsahib. This results in Nawab’s order to ban hunting lions. Sansai inherits Rawaata’s commitment and large-heartedness; she is her own master like the lions of Gir. She cannot tolerate interference in her life and the life of Gir and replies in a straightforward manner when she asks for lift on the motorcycle from the narrator and Vikram and they pull her leg by asking whether she knew where they were going for which she answers, “Why are you asking me whether where you are going? I should ask myself where I want to go”. (Akoopar 271) She intervenes the discussion of students and forest officer on the wildlife issues of new home for lions to save lion king in Madhya Pradesh “Where the lion should live and where not should be decided by us or by the lions?” (Akoopar 152).

Again, the debate of lions and other wild animals found in the human dwellings around Gir is discussed extensively. Sansai and the narrator campaigned to trace the lion hunters. They call



meetings in the villages around the mapped Gir forest. During their expeditions the villagers discuss the issues regarding the territory of forest. According to the map it is not part of Gyar (Gir). Earlier the lions never came here but now as their number has grown they have started coming out” (Akoopar 119). Sansai has the spontaneous answer:

“We don’t want the mapped Gyar. Let that be so for the tourist. For us Gir is where ever the lion walks. Let it be even it reaches the sea of Ghed or Bayda mountain.” And then she questioned with fury, “and in the name of Gyar you sell your mangos, in the name of Gyar you sell ghee at that time you don’t remember that this Gyar is not its part?” One of them gave substantiated saying, “This too is Gyar. Who says that there never were lions here? In the real times I have heard that lions were found far up to Dwarka and that way in Gohilwar up to the bushes of Shihor” Sansai replied, “The number of lions have increased is the myth created by newspapers. How does an outsider know whether how far the Gyar extends? The fact is that we have started living in Gyar; yet the animals of Gyar kept our respect. As their space was encroached they went in, then whether it is lion or other lives, where would they go? (Akoopar 119-120)

Further when one of the villager confesses that they fence their farms with live electric current to guard their crops from roz deer not to kill lions she rebukes, “So you don’t consider roz as living beings. The day since you started differentiating a lion from a roz the troubles have set.”(Akoopar 120)

It is a master solution to all the environment debates possible – possible to be uttered only by one who find no duality in the animate and inanimate world. The mountains are married and lions are to decide where they want to live! It is she who is the company of the narrator with his first encounter and introduction of lions in wilderness and her restlessness after the lion poaching incident. The mutual respect ‘amanya’ is also a code that is decoded to respect not just lion the King but also for the grass that is demanded by Rawaata from all not to graze cattle on the hills. It is the wisdom of communalism or co-existence and if moved away the issues of soil erosion and ecological balance is alarming. It is the alarm sounded by Sansai on the weed that is fast spreading in the Gir which is useless even for grazing herds.



The stray incidents of attacks by lions and leopard are marked to bring home the reality that even the beast respect the humans especially in case of Dhannu. When lion attacked Kiran but Dhanu saved him. During that time Dhanu's shoulder attacked by lion. After that, in the hospital Dhanu said,

” There are three proofs – one, ‘he did not hold me from the throat’ Showing the second finger he said, ” he did not even shake his hand, otherwise he would have torn off my shoulder.” And then lifting the third he said, ” I was fallen down but he did not sit on me. Had he sat on me as he would doon the kill, his weight would have...” Dhanu stopped talking and then once again said, ‘ His intention was not to kill me.’ [Akoopar 183]

He is injured by the lion. Though he says states in the favour of lions. He says that lions are always faithful and loyal animals ever created on the earth. This indicates Dhanu's love for nature and lion

Writer comprehensively presents Ghed region with a different terrain and life that is indigenous to a landscape in between the water logged land during monsoon and the western most shores of India. Here too it is once again Rani the young widow Sarpanch who replaces Sansai and deals with the Global issue of saving whale. The whale that has been accepted as the Mascot in the space can be read in a The Times of India report of Jan.26,2011 where its head lines read: “Mangarol adopts whale shark as mascot”.(TOI 3) The issue is conservation of whale shark that are found on the western coast as they come to lay eggs during monsoon. They are hunted for the oil and meat and fins. The awareness to save whale is a success according to the said report but the same is resolved by the writer with the help of writers incorporating the seizer of a local boat by Pakistani coast guards with a young pregnant woman never to return and the pregnant whale shark hunted for the water proofing of their boats is well done through Rani who could bring the point home by correlating the incident in a statement as, “How is it when our daughters are coming home carrying a child in their womb is caught?(Akoopar 224) At once the message is understood and the fisher folk take a vow not to hunt whale. She succeed to stop fisherman for the hunting of Whale- Shark. This shows her love for the nature and animals.



The writer's contemplative novel also has a recurring circular narrative pattern. The work ends at the same point where they begin. This is to convey the message that everything is interconnected. The loose threads in the plot are so well inter connected at the end it seemingly episodic narration turns out to a master plot. This is in keeping with the aspect of circularity of time in nature. Nothing can exist or be on its own it has the design is conveyed in the often repeated usage Kak hai to kak aave ("if something is, something takes form") The wonder stuck artist recognizes the unity; "I think both the aspects are interrelated. Yes some unknown equation that influences the whole universe. One day or the other I shall find that universal equation" (Akoopar 198).

The novel is set in the region of Gujarat and narrates the life and time of the humans and the nature living with distinctive harmony. Nevertheless, the novel has a universal appeal of coexistence of man vis-à-vis nature rather than man versus nature. Unlike the imaginative world of the romantic nature with shades of truth in it, the author recreates the real world of his first-hand experience and adds shades of imagination to his novel. He eulogies the inclusive nature of the mother earth and also of those larger than life characters who live for and with nature rather than against it.

Conclusion:

Akoopar is one of the masterpiece of Dhruv Bhatt that not explores the forest of gir but also explores the relationship and bond that the maldharis share with the nature and its creatures in the gir. Thus, we can say that Akoopar is an ecocritical study of harmonious co- existence of mankind with nature. To conclude with the lines quoted in the dedication page of the Akoopar with true offering of the text to Earth poetically:

” The one Creation of fire Formed in space Appeared from water And Breathed life From air and holds All four Even now. To that, form of matter Earth. [Akoopar 2]

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