

PAGAN LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

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Abstract

Before the rise of civilization, life amidst nature was a constant struggle for survival. With the passage of time, people learned to survive in harmony with nature, taking only what was essential. Everything in nature was significant and estimable and was exalted by these Pagans in the form of folktales and folk songs. Worshipping forests, grooves, animals and streams not only created a bond between these men and their environment leading to their spiritual evolution, but also resulted in environmental conservation. It was the divine forms of nature which protected their family, farms, livestock and villages from harm and presided over their humble activities. The significance of literature can be traced back ever since Plato banished poets from his imaginary Republic for encouraging effeminacy through their poems. Since literature plays a pivotal role in shaping reality, this paper is an attempt to show how various forms of Pagan Literature contributed in increasing the levels of sensitivity and respect amongst people for their environment. It also examines the rise of Neo-Pagan cults and explores the possibility of a different world, had Paganism been practised as a way of life today by the majority of world population.

Key Words: paganism harmony environmental conservation spiritual evolution neo-paganism

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The word “Pagan” was first used by Tertullian, who is known to us today as the father of Latin Christianity. He was a Pagan from Carthage who converted to Christianity and was the first author to produce an extensive corpus of Latin Christian Literature. Through his writings, it is clear that Tertullian despised the pagans; had contempt for the ancient Greek philosophy and called Plato and Aristotle ‘*the patriarchal forefathers of heretics.*’ (Lisa Bettle). Edward Gibbon in his work ‘*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*’ (1776-1778) notes that with the increasing military pursuits of the Roman Empire, all non-military people such as the *hicks and rednecks* were referred to as *Pagans*. Christians adopted this term to refer to the groups of people who had not signed up as *Milites Christie*. By this logic, Pagans were the bystanders, non-combatants and observers from the sidelines who were not so sure about the romantic Christian belief of a spiritual warfare with the forces of evil which according to the Christians must not only be challenged but in the end would also be defeated giving way for the rule of *shalom*. However, for a Pagan the world was justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon and the Pagan God created the world not out of love or joy but in response to a titanic neurosis. “*Creation*”, as *Nietzsche* puts it in his work ‘*The Birth of a Tragedy*’ “*is in itself the careless by product of the deity’s internal cries.*” Thus to be truly Pagan, is to be an aesthete – to repudiate the claims that the world’s existence can be justified morally. It is the Monotheists who justify the world morally and believe in one single god, who created man first, and then woman, and the earth and its creatures and gave humans dominion over all, to establish the kingdom of their *moral God*. This belief alone allowed men to lose their reverence for nature giving them the permission to begin misusing the natural resources which were meant to be shared equally by all the inhabitants of this planet earth.

Genesis1:28- ‘Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on earth.”’

Luqman 31:20- ‘Do you not see that God has subjected to your use all things in heaven and on earth, and has made his bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, both seen and unseen?’

The above verses from the Religious Scriptures of the Monotheistic Religion have instilled a firm belief among scholars and academicians studying Paganism and its narrative discourse that Polytheism and Paganism is closer to nature and more conducive to ecological conservation than Monotheism. Such theories became prevalent during the 17th and 18th centuries. The Romantics reevaluated nature as being primordial, unspoiled and pure. Poets such as Wordsworth romanticised about nature and saw it as a source of spiritual elevation ‘Great God! I’d rather be/ A Pagan suckled

in creed outworn/ So might I, standing on this pleasant lea/ Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn.' In America, the Transcendentalist like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau in their works celebrated nature, life force and the wilderness as manifested in America. On the other hand, in India, nature worship and Polytheism was encouraged since thousands of years. Rig Veda has a number of hymns related to nature, the most famous of which is a hymn dedicated to Goddess Aranyani who is considered to be the spirit of the forest. **Aranyani Suktam (Hymn 146 in the 10th Mandala of the Rig Veda)** is dedicated to Goddess Aranyani. The hymn has also been repeated in **Taittiriya Brahmana of Krishna Yajurveda**. Sage *Devamuni* gives a very poetic description of Goddess Aranyani in poetic meter called *Anushtup*.

'AraNyaani, O AraNyaani, the elusive one who wanders away

Why do you not seek the village? Are you not afraid?

When the chirping chichchika bird responds to the roar of the vrishaarava

The forest nymph runs about with sound like the clanging of cymbals

Also some animals like cattle seem to graze, and there looks like a shelter

And in the evening the forest rattles like a cart

Here one is calling his cow, another has cut timber

In the evening the forest dweller thinks that he heard a cry

AraNyaani does not harm, unless another approaches her

eating tasty fruit, he settles down at will

Praise AraNyaanii, the mother of beasts

Who is perfumed and fragrant; and who offers varieties of food, though she does not till'

The Neo-Romantic movement of the 1900's, inspired new alternate religions based on the theory of Paganism and Nature Worship, developing and promoting ideas about a Pagan spirituality. These movements largely influenced Western perceptions about nature, ecology, environmental spirituality and since the last few decades have enjoyed a reputation of being progressive.

I. Pagan Traditions and Environmental Conservation

On December 26, 1967, Lynn Townsend White Jr. gave a lecture titled "**The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crises**" at Washington meeting of the AAS, wherein he argued that the

industrial revolution marked a turning point in our ecological history. The theory which catered the Industrial Revolution, that the earth was a resource for human consumption was much older and had roots in Judeo-Christian theology and its attitude towards nature. White says:

'In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of the particular situation, and to keep it appeased. By destroying Pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.'

To solve the environmental issues that cloud us today we must realize that every person on this earth has or had its own mythology and variety of nature religion. These mythologies and traditions have to be received with an open heart in order to be able to solve the threatening problems of our age. The anti-nature attitude of our politics, governance and religious institutions have brought us to the brink of self-destruction. We are all aware of the fact that Culture and Myth are formed by climate, landscape and nature; and that religion, nature and cultural identity are closely intertwined. Many Pagan rituals are in accordance with the cycle of the year and life and invoke the deities with the expressions of forces of nature, growth, fertility and decay, as well as kin and ancestry. In America the Troth's belief of nature religion and sacred earth tends to emphasize that the spirit of life force can be found in the wilderness. Landscape conservation and environmentalism are central to many Pagan beliefs and rituals and has become a very important facet of their religion. Their idea of a sacred and untouched nature and landscape along with ancient heritage sites has motivated environmental activism and has led to its conservation. To the ancient Druid priests of Gaul and Britain, the oak tree was considered sacred and held great importance in their rituals. Animals such as a boar, deer and wolf were very important symbols in many Pagan societies and were associated with both warrior and fertility Gods and Goddess. In ancient India, rivers were regarded as Mother Goddess as they nurtured and sustained the plants, animals and humans alike. Trees and plants like Neem, Pipal, Vat and Tulsi were considered sacred due to their medicinal properties, religious and cultural significance. Slaughtering animals in many ancient texts such as in the *Suttanipata* was condemned. In Native American philosophy it was a common belief that the Great Spirit who created the universe presided in all things on the earth. It is Paganism which embraces ritual and rationality, combines mysticism and science and joins ecological wonder to environmental action.

II. Pagan Narrative Discourse and its Significance

Storytelling is as old as the human civilization. The art of observing various events around us, capturing the belief and customs of a community, preserving history in the form of legends and mythologies and the tradition of passing the wisdom of the ancients to the next generation in the form of various folklores and songs dates back to a time when humans first sat by fire and told tales.

The role of pagan narrative discourse cannot be neglected while evaluating the ideals of environmentalism, which was an important component of Pagan Spirituality and the old earth religion. Outwardly the life of these Pagans was a constant struggle for survival against savage nature. All around them were dark forests inhabited by wild beasts peopled in their imagination with dragons and evil shapes; and the seas and oceans with their fogs, storms and ice. The indefinable deep and wild call of nature, which the Pagans heard were passed down from the ancients to the next generation in the form of folklores.

The poem *The Seafarer* is an Anglo-Saxon elegy in which the narrator yearns for a life at sea. The poem depicts love these men had for the sea and because these men loved the sea they heard its call '**No delight has he in the world/ Nor in aught save the roll of the billows; but always a longing/ A yearning uneasiness, hastens him on the sea.**'

This call is the call of the soul of the seafarer to be up and away to its home with God.

Beowulf attracts the better natured side of the reader and appeals to emotions like sympathy, empathy, kindness, courage, honour and ideals relating to preserving and respecting all life forms. The Pagan ideal of taking only what is necessary and leaving the rest is also evident in various events that occur in the poem. One such event occurs when Beowulf plunges in the sea where Grendel's mother lives. He defeats her and finds a cave full of treasures; but he heeds them not. On another occasion when after defeating the dragon, Beowulf is mortally wounded; Wiglaf cares little for the treasures in the dragons caves but showers all his attention and care on the dying Beowulf. Such unconditional love and respect for all living forms above material comfort and wealth is evident in the following lines from Beowulf: '**They left the riches, golden joy of earls/ In dust, for earth to hold; where yet it lies/ Useless as ever.**'

Shakespeare's works such as his comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You like It* and tragedies such as *King Lear* and *The Tempest* along with his various sonnets can also be analysed in light of Pagan ideals. Nature's loveliness and abundance attracted Shakespeare and so does its mortality. He compares the loveliness and the short life of flowers like rose, violet, lily to the mortality of humans and ultimately of all things. In Sonnet XII Shakespeare says:

*'When I behold the violet past prime
And sable curls all silver'd over with white;*

*When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which erst from heat did canopy the head,
And summers green all grided up in sheaves'*

In his Pastoral Comedy *As You like It*, Shakespeare portrays the Forest of Arden as having healing properties depicting the life amidst nature as pure away from the intrigue and corruption of court. Such a portrayal of nature in a readers mind creates an impression of innocence and beauty of nature and inspires them to preserve it. *The Tempest* is another important play by Shakespeare wherein he shows how the force of nature is superior to that of art. The play highlights various differences between art and nature but ultimately establishes that since art is weaker it must bend itself to nature. The opening storm scene in the play highlights the importance of nature in the society.

Nature has also been the prime subject in the poems of the English Romantic poets hailing from the Lakeside district of England. Having grown up in a region that was known for its natural beauty, with virgin forests, pristine lakes and rivers and a wide range of wildlife, these poets through their poems discussed the role of nature in acquiring meaningful insight into human condition. Poems such as William Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimation of Immortality* and *My Heart Leaps Up*, PB Shelly's *Ode to the West Wind* and John Keats' *Bright Star* contain rich nature imagery. These poems talk about the role of nature in the development of human identity and also of the sacredness and the divinity that is to be found in nature.

*'In a thousand valleys far and wide,
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:-
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!'*

These lines from the poem depict the sacred beauty of nature and also discuss the role of nature in the spiritual evolution of man.

In Vedic India the four Vedas have several references in them on environmental protection and ecological conservation. The protection of the environment was closely related to the conservation of the *Dyaus (Heavens)* and *Prithvi (Earth)*. Between the heaven and the earth lies the environment which is referred to as Paryavaran. The Rig Veda in particular, has various hymns devoted to deities like **Mitra, Varun, Indra, Maruts and Aditya** who are responsible for maintaining the required balance between all natural entities. Through these hymns the seers asked for the blessings of five gross elements or the Pancha Mahabhuta which constitute all the elements of the universe- *Akash (firmament); Vayu (air); Agni or Tejas (fire); Apah (water) and Prithvi (earth)*. People lived in harmony with the environment and refrained from activities that would cause harm to nature's bounties. They followed the

principal of replenishment: *'You give me and I give you'* ^[13] and looked at every element of nature as a friend and a sympathiser *'Mitrasyaaham chakshushaa sarvaani bhootani sameekshe.'* (Rig Veda)

Kalidasa's work *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is a model for everyone to return from a human centred system to a nature centred system. The entire play has live imagery and ravishing beauty of nature with dense forests, wild bucks, mango trees, jasmine flowers and birds and brooks. Seasons play an important role in the play. The play begins in summer and ends in spring- seasons being a metaphor for the cycle of life and death.

The poetry of Rabindranath Tagore also has rich nature imagery. As a boy when Tagore was confined to the four walls of his house, he looked lovingly and longingly at nature. Nature to Tagore was a medium through which he communicated with God.

His anthology *Banabani (Voice of the forest)* contains some of his best nature poetry. The description of nature in all these poems seems to be vivid. Plants, trees, flowers, birds, animals and brooks all seem to converse with Tagore and his attitude towards them being that of affection, gratitude and reverence. In one of the poems, there is a vivid description of how the Panch Mahabutas are worshipped as deities. Five children dressed as the five elements or the Panch Mahabhuta recites a poem seeking the blessing of divine nature. They say:

*'Oh great souls, fly the banner to conquer the deserts.
Oh the tender soul, bless every speck of dust on this earth with great piety.
Let the ever silent soil sing the song of your glory,
Oh the beautiful soul, encompass with flowers and greeneries.
Oh my traveller friend, come for a rest under the shadow of trees,
Come oh the playmate of winds and enthral the blue sky.
In the dawn aspire hope on the woods and
In the dusk, bless them with deep sombre.
Oh Great Mind, sing the tune of a peaceful corner on this earth.'*

III. Neopaganism: Final bellow of the wild

The immense challenges posed by global environmental and climate change today have prompted immense interest among scholars and academicians all around the globe in how ancient societies dealt with problematic environmental changes. Although the process of change in contemporary time is largely anthropogenic and unprecedented in the history of human civilization but literature and the field of social sciences gives us hope. Literature such as the one given above not only creates a profound sense of admiration and reverence for the environment but also aims to create a better understanding of the social and cultural

factors influencing the environment by analysing the role of imaginations, values, meaning making process and identities with regard to environmental behaviour.

The reason for the rise of Neopaganism can be attributed to Pagan Literature because with its influencing power it has been successful in sensitising populations around the globe. One such example of Neo-pagan cult is the Heimat Movement and Volkisch Religion in Germany. It is a romantic holistic movement which advocates the protection of the Heimat- the mythical unity of landscape, the past and the rural culture. The founding fathers of this Neo-pagan movement Wilhelm Bolscheand and his collaborator Bruno Wille, were influenced by the theories propounded by Earnest Haeckel (1834-1919) which provided inspiration for modern environmentalism and nature spirituality. Modern religions such as the Dark Green Religion and philosophies such as Ecospirituality considers **'nature to be sacred, imbued by intrinsic value and worthy of reverent care.'** Various tribal groups such as the Maori people of New Zealand who are deeply connected with nature and consider themselves as inseparable, equal, interdependent and kin of nature have also contributed to the rise of Neopaganism. The philosophy of the Maori's is deeply reflected by the word **kaitiakitanga** which means to guard and protect the environment as a sign of respect for the ancestors and to secure the future.

Literature has shaped civilizations, changed political systems and exposed injustice. Promoting Pagan Narratives can make people realise that **'Nature never did betray the heart that loved her.'**(William Wordsworth). This realization can evoke compassion, empathy and sympathy in the hearts of people for Nature and can result in creating dedicated leaders and ambassadors promoting the cause of environmental conservation and preservation.

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