

**MAN, NATURE AND CULTURE: AN ECO-CRITICAL
ANALYSIS OF INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE MOTH-EATEN
HOWDAH OF THE TUSKER***

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Abstract

*Eco-criticism explores and examines the ways in which the environment is represented in literature and aims to propose possible solutions to our current environmental issues. Indian Civilizations have always had an intimate relationship with the ecological world. The culture of the seven sisters too finds its roots deep into the lap of nature. Modern Assamese writers have often carried an eco-critical undertone in their novels. Indira Goswami has frequently dealt with socio-environmental issues in her works. This paper shall analyse her novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (2004) through an eco-critical lens. The novel highlights the "Gossain" family's dilemma of environmentalism and their struggle to keep hold of a dying traditional way of life. Nature and culture co-exist in peace in the Assamese "Satras". Cultural activities affect the environment and the local communities are dependent on the natural resources of their area. It is the dire need of the hour to re-examine our relationship with nature to keep the planet in order. An eco-critical study of the novel aims to develop ecological wisdom among the readers and to promote green peace.*

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Nature, Culture, Assamese, Environment, Indira Goswami, The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

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Eco-criticism explores and examines the ways in which the environment is represented in literature and therefore, aims to propose possible solutions to the environmental issues at hand. In an era of environmental crisis, it is the immediate need of the hour to assess our relationship with nature to keep the planet in order. Eco-criticism is a new way of analyzing literature and it improves our understanding of the environment by allowing the readers to analyze a text from nature's perspective. Eco-criticism, therefore, encourages the readers to take better care of the environment. When the earth is suffering from horrifying ecological issues, literature cannot brush away the issues at hand under the rug as it has always shared an intimate relationship with nature. This intimate relationship of people with their immediate natural surroundings has been textualized in endless literary pieces time immemorial. The ancient Greek and Indian civilizations believed in giving equal importance to all living entities.

“Indian civilisation expressed a profound awareness of the need to evolve a balanced pattern in the man-environment interaction and certainly not work towards ‘denaturing humanity.’ In order to calibrate this man-environment interaction, ancient Indians divinized nature and laid down well formulated guidelines to define and nurture this relationship free of exploitative propensities.”(Ganguly para 2)

The pantheist Romantic poets believed that nature is a living thing. Lene (3) comments that man receives wisdom through his good relationship with nature as it is a faithful and truly ally of man. It is, has been and will be a source of life for all civilizations. Lewens (5) also echoes the similar belief, “If we set ourselves the very general project of asking what is nature, what is culture and how we should distinguish the two, then we will inevitably fail.” Therefore, we cannot really look at nature and culture as two separate constructs. They do not run in parallel or separate realms. Infact, their relationship is overlapping and

interdependent. Cultural activities, more or less, interfere with the local environment and the local communities, in turn, are dependent on the natural resources of their area.

“Cultures are rooted in time and place. They define how people relate to nature and their immediate physical environment. Even in the globalized world of transnational people, cultures tend to make roots in a specific environment. Cultural ethics decide what is environmentally right or wrong as biological and cultural diversities are closely interdependent. They interact with and affect one another in complex ways in a sort of co-evolutionary process.” (Culture and Nature)

Near-about all the countries of the world have rich traditions embedded in the ethics of protecting nature and among them, Indian civilization is largely considered as an eco-friendly civilization. Perhaps no other country in the world can provide such a rich variety of cultural practices having a natural backdrop as the Indian.

“Some of the earliest views of nature in Indian thought are found recorded in textual traditions called the Vedas. Beginning with the worship of nature gods and reverence hymns to the earth, a large part of the belief system of these earliest thinkers was deeply influenced by close observation and contact with nature and therefore, Indian literature reflects the ethos of the country’s intense cultural relationship with nature through prose and poetry.”(Baindur 4)

Be it the sacredness of trees or the sympathy with animals, Indian authors have effectively mirrored the cultural beliefs into literature in various languages. The northeast India is the house of innumerable species of flora and fauna. The culture of the seven sisters finds its roots deep into the lap of nature. This region of India has witnessed endless environmental movements and activism. Indian philosophy is rich in ecological thought since the Vedic period. Early Assamese Literature too reflected this eco-critical consciousness. A good number of modern writers too, have consciously or sub-consciously delivered an eco-critical perspective in novels. “They have often intended to reflect burning ecological problems like species loss, pollution, global warming, toxicity, deforestation etc. through their writings.” (Das 148-149) Indira Goswami has authored a number of novels and poems reflecting the relationship between nature and culture. Her literary pieces often possess a subtle eco-critical undertone. One of her most celebrated novels; *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (2004) deals with the ancient Assamese ‘Sattrā’ (a Vaishnavite ashram in Assam) and effectively showcases the blend

of nature in their traditions and beliefs. The Sattras are institutional centers that are associated with the Eksarana tradition of Vaishnavism which has its cultural roots in the varied biodiversity of Assam. Nature itself becomes an important character and plays a significant role in the development of the events.

“Although the oppositional binary between nature and culture is drawn in the narrative, yet we witness several occasions of over-lap and fluidity between the two socially constructed ideals. Set against the cultural history of Assam, the novel is a canonical indigenous piece of postcolonial narrative.” (Baruah 44)

The conflict between the modern socio-economic forces and a traditional feudal system sums up the major theme. The title itself is reflective of the sentiments of the locals threatened by an imposing revolutionary agreement. The “howdah”, back seat of the “tusker” (elephant) is attacked by the evil “moths”. The moths eat away the long-withheld culture and traditions, leaving the society exposed to further decay. So it’s a continuous struggle of the traditional Gossain family to keep their culture alive in the brooding air of modernisation. The ‘howdah’ is finally destroyed by the sacred elephant Jagannath of the “Gossain” family.

“Threatened by the rising wave of communism and the upcoming Land Reform Act following the British rule, the followers of Sattras are torn between tradition and the approaching storm. Effectively interwoven in the narration are the plights of peasants, women and the torch bearers of a dying traditional way of living. This is reflective in the nature-centric relationship wherein the attitude of reverence, love, fear and preservation of nature has been maintained by the locals.”(Baruah 44)

While the cultural ethics decide what is environmentally “right” or “wrong”, the relationship between nature and culture is open to transition. It begins with harmony but ends up into a conflict as the novel progresses. The new changes in the society brought about by the impending policies and modernity are truly against nature. But the community somehow develops a balance between tradition and modernity and

therefore, the relationship between nature and culture is open to transition. The traditional feudal system and the culture that always treated nature as a part of religious belief are marred with the sudden onset of globalization and cruel politics. The peaceful intertwining of nature and culture is destroyed by the socio-cultural 'moths'.

The 'land' becomes an overpowering motif in the narrative. A piece of earth is not just a property but a storehouse of ancient traditions, moral values and cultural memories. The rules and regulations of the 'Sattrā' are maintained by the way followers make use of the land, the order of connecting revenues, the non-exploiting policies and the like.

"The political and economic power concentrates in a superior or the formal head called the Adhikar or Gossain who is invested with social authority and an extensive feudal landed property. The Gossains are held in the highest respect by all persons of all ranks and creeds."(Dutta 623)

The domination of land involves the domination of nature. The sanctity has to be maintained in business and agriculture. The Land Reforms of the 1950s come as a threat to their cultural make-up. With the advent of colonialism, the ownership of land shifts from the hands of "Gossain" family to the labourers. The land, as the symbol of social status and privilege, becomes the legacy of the commoners. Durga's last wish before death remains the occupation of land back to the Gossain family as it was the prestige of their clan:

"Go back Indranath, go back! My blessings will always be with you! You'll be able to reclaim that Marabhita land. I feel certain! It will not remain a festering sore any longer. You will bring the old prestige of the family. Remember! If I die you must come and perform my last rites. ...Go, go!"(Goswami 258-259)

The voices of resistance on the lands including "Marabhitha", instilled by the revolutionary discourse of communism, severely disturb the peace of "Sattras". It becomes an obligation on the future "Gossain" Indranath to give away the shares to the farmers. The religiously superior "Gossain" family also lends their land to save the locals from the brooding evil of opium addiction but to no avail. The spell had been cast and the

villagers had given themselves up to the addiction. The values of the “Sattras” were deeply shaken and the rise of the moral degradation of the society was inevitable. “Few of the postcolonial ideas of land can be traced in the novel wherein land has become a space of identity, social status, security, monetary revenue, labor and dignity.”(Baruah 46) There are many instances in the novel where the women’s purity is oft paralleled with land’s purity as well as culture’s purity. The women of the “Gossain” family own the land but their culture doesn’t allow them to put a foot on their own land. They are spiritually attached to the farms but their union is more cosmic than material. When Indranath asks the Gossainee and aunt Durga why they do not undertake farming on their own when they know the farms better than the disciples, the response of the two women is surprising:

“Good gracious! We are ladies of the Gossain family! Go out there and expose ourselves? SaruGossainee gets things done through her disciples. She has never set foot on the land herself. That is why she is respected so much by everybody! She did not even go to Gauhati to fight the land litigation case. Everything was done by her disciples. She knows how to keep the dignity and honour of the family intact!” (Goswami 9-10).

The women are respected for keeping her foot inside the house and are praised when they do not step out even for fighting for their own rights. The patriarchal structure of the culture provides a false notion of the dignity of the women as well as the dignity of the land. The ownership of the land also turns out to be the cause of the downfall of the women of the family as Mahidhar uses the emotional weakness of SaruGossainee to cheat her of her fortune. He collects baina under her nose from the prospective buyers of her land and also steals another widow Durga’s jewellery. The rigid social structure does not allow women to fight for justice.

The incident of the “ruined howdah” symbolizes the dual face of nature. Nature is both the creator and the destroyer. Its spirit is present in all living forms. The opium also serves as a very strong symbol to mirror the same. The “Gossain” family considers the elephant Jagannath as “divine”. He is both loved and feared. The destruction of crops

under his feet is ignored and considered a trivial act but when he takes the life of a human, the family has to give up and support the investigation. The larger-than-life, kind and holy animal Jagannath becomes the epitome of destruction. His wild tendencies shoot up and his death is later justified by the officials.

Indira Goswami has presented an insight into the deep-rooted cultural beliefs of the Assamese Sattrā in an ecological setting. Nature plays a powerful role in the progress of the events and is intermingled with the emotions and thought-processes of the characters. They share an intimate relationship with land, flora and fauna which is an important aspect of their cultural belief system. A conflict between traditionalism and liberalism serves as a driving force behind the changing relationship of man with nature. The relationship between cultural invasion and environmental degradation is directly proportional to each other and an eco-critical analysis of texts definitely develops ecological wisdom among the readers and therefore, promotes green peace. At a time of intense environmental crisis that we are living in today, literature cannot turn its face away. Therefore, it's the dire need of the hour to re-examine our relationship with nature by reading texts through an eco-critical lens as a step towards sustainable development.

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