

ECO CRITICAL READING OF GIEVE PATEL’S “ ON KILLING A TREE.”

Jolly K V

Assistant Professor in English, Pavanatma College, Murickassery, Idukki
srjollypcm@gmail.com

Abstract

The environmental and ecological perspective has made a tremendous change in our response to literary studies. A man of literature cannot ignore the fact that there is an umbilical link between human culture and the natural environment. Gieve Patel, a man of letters challenges the mindless minds through his poem “On Killing a Tree.” He invites the readers to the brutal murder scene of the tree. The merciless butchery and the deserted graveyard compel the reader for an attitudinal transformation since he is the loser ultimately. Our education and wide exposure should motivate us to advocate sustainable development. Or the ecosystem will react and that will be an irretrievable disaster.

Key words: bio centric, ecological terrorism, murderous action, earth-cave, sustainability

“Trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky(Gibran 22).”

In the present scenario, literary studies extend their boundaries and accommodate new trends that frequently change the horizons of the field. The environmental and ecological perspective has made a tremendous change in our response to literary studies. A man of literature cannot ignore the fact that there is an umbilical link between human culture and the natural environment. Ecological approaches prove that the anthropocentric attitude of man is his tragic flaw and he has forsaken his bio centric vision. He believes that he is there for conquering, domesticating, violating and exploiting the physical world. Here is the crucial role of a literary artist with his mighty weapons to correct and motivate the world. Gieve Patel, a man of letters challenges the mindless minds through his poem “On Killing a Tree.” Humanity today faces manifold challenges, and the ecological crisis is critical among them. Thoughtless cutting of trees for their immediate gains made the Common Home naked and impoverished. Consequently we encounter hazards such as climate change, endangered species, environmental degradation, natural catastrophes, pollution, water scarcity etc. Earth, like a mother provides bed and board for her children. Quite unfortunately, the children take weapons to annihilate their mother. Gieve Patel invites the readers to the brutal murder scene of the tree. The merciless butchery and the deserted graveyard compel the reader for an attitudinal transformation.

“Eco criticism”, the word in the anthology *The Eco criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* is defined by Cheryl Glotfelty, “Eco criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii).” Eco criticism becomes highly relevant today launching a call to literature to connect to the issues of today’s environmental crisis. Gieve Patel, like all other reputed ecological poets and

environmentalists protests against the violence and ecological terrorism inflicted by Man on nature. Patel's tree grows deep rooted "absorbing years of sunlight, air, water"(7). Out of its leprous hide, it "sprouts its leaves" (Patel9).Reception of nutrients from the earth points to the mutual relationship prevails among the elements of nature. Spreading its branches out, the tree expresses its inclination to sharing- leaves, flowers, seeds, branches, fruits and above all oxygen, the by product of photosynthesis. Human beings never practise this art of giving; instead, they always receive until the giver gets bankrupt.

Patel succeeds in bringing an evergreen visualisation in our minds. It can be a huge tree where "the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches" (Matthew 13:31-32) or the fig tree. You may have the picture of a casuarinas tree in your farmland or an Oak or Teak. Whatever may be the taxonomy, the tree is huge and very old reminding us of the "world tree". "The World Tree' is a motif present in several religions and mythologies, particularly Indo- European, Siberian and Native American religions. "The World Tree is represented as a colossal tree which supports the heavens, the terrestrial world and through its roots, the underworld. It may also be strongly connected to the motif of the 'tree of life" (Wikipedia)."

The tree is deep rooted and the murderer comments: 'a single jab of knife' is useless. Hence they make their approach crueller- "hoping and chocking" (Patel 10). There is no room for sentiments. Or else, are we humans capable of empathising? The tree overcomes all the bruises and wounds and the "bleeding bark gets healed" (Patel 13). The murderous action proceeds with:

Pulled out- snapped out
Or pulled out entirely,
Out from the earth-cave,
And the strength of the tree exposed (Patel 23-26)

The rational being easily recognizes the source of strength and vitality of the tree-its roots. 'Earth cave' is the safer zone for any flora like a mother's womb for a foetus. The most vulnerable part is being attacked now. Man, unsaturated with all his material gains, goes further with "Scorching, chocking, browning, hardening, twisting, and withering"(Patel 33) and exalts: "And then it's done"(Patel 35).

Trees are true friends and genuine benefactors to human beings. Belonging to the perennial flora, they accumulate large quantity of water and cause showering rain water for the withered areas. They keep the air clean and fresh, sucking the atmospheric carbon dioxide. Their widespread root system holds the soil firm, devoid of erosion. Think about the cool shade where we took rest and had some childish funny games!Trees refuge the wild life, protect the biodiversity and combat the climate change. In the recycling process of fallen leaves, they provide minerals and nutrients for plants and animals to thrive in. Poets, artists and philosophers hugging the trees and contemplating their panoramic beauty contributed creatively to the generations. Statistics states that in a year, an acre of trees can provide enough oxygen for 18 people. Still they are treated as enemies- to be demolished, devastated and ruined completely. Anyone who loves life and humanity loves trees and the natural environment. We can cite a number of examples:

Henry David Thoreau, the literary giant of transcendentalism in American soil was captivated by trees and they played a significant role in his artistic creativity, philosophical

thought and his interior life. He spoke their language. Nothing, he said, “stands up freer from blame than a pine tree” (Higgins 11). Thoreau knew the ecological and psychological value of trees. “A town is saved”, he wrote, “not more by the righteous men in it, than by the woods and swamps that surround it.” “Trees” he said with customary frugal eloquence, “are good for other things than boards and shingles.” They should be allowed to “stand and decay for higher uses” (Higgins 13).

According to Hermann Hesse, the noted philosopher, “Trees have always been the most penetrating preachers. I revere them when they live in tribes and families, in forests and groves. And even more I revere them when they stand alone. They are like lonely persons... in their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity... when a tree is cut down and reveals its naked death-wound to the sun, one can read its whole history in the luminous, inscribed disk of its trunk...(web).

Maya Angelou’s “When Great Trees Fall” is rich in ecological perspective:

When great trees fall
In forests,
Small things recoil into
Silence,
Their senses
Eroded beyond fear” (1-6)

Joyce Kilmer in “Planting a Tree” praises the planter:

What does he plant who plants a tree?
A scion full of potency,
He plants his faith, a prophecy
Of bloom, and fruitfulness to be;
He plants a shade where robins sing
Where orioles their nestlings swing;
A burning bush- a miracle!
Who plants a tree,- he doeth well! (1-8)

Excitement and over joy of the butcher in Patel’s poem is transient. Though man appears as an achiever, he is the loser in the planet. Temporary victories are counted as great conquests. Considering the scientific and technological advancements, we face drastic changes everywhere. Easy and quick availability of everything at the finger tips! Quite amazing! But there is yet another darker side to this fast development. Drastic climate change, up heaving temperature, melting ice, endangered natural habitats, extinct variety of species- who will shoulder the responsibility of all these is a relevant question. Man is only a custodian but he plays the role of a master. Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si* laments: “A sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey, even as technological advances and consumer goods continue to abound limitlessly” (americamagazine.org).”Our education doesn’t help us to broaden our vision. Culture, development, exposure, civilization.....everything we need. But

while aiming all these, our primary concern and criterion should be sustainability. Chief Seattle reminds us: “Only when the last tree has died and the last river has been poisoned and the last fish has been caught will we realise that we cannot eat money.”(Voices education.org)

Simon Estok noted that “Ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections”(Estok, 220). Gieve Patel’s poem highlights the cruel behaviour of human beings towards nature. They thoughtlessly annihilate the green, fresh and natural environment. Our education should help us to think in parallel line with sustainable development. Otherwise the ecosystem will turn against us and the ruin will be irreplaceable and irretrievable.

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