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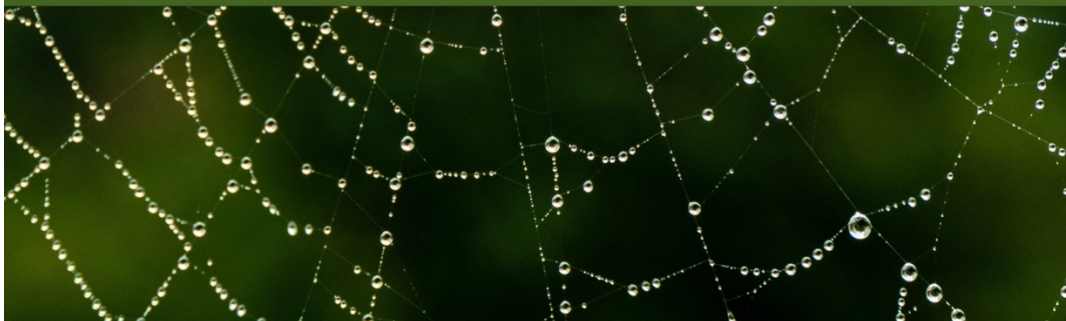
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Ecofear in Mohan Koirala's *Ambassadors of the Wetland*

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Abstract

People who are conscious of the impact of environmental degradation become fearful of its consequences. They deal with this issue in their creations. Such creative works including literature function to make the readers both aware of the possibility and fearful of the consequences. As a result, these ecoconscious people will be ready to work for the preservation of the environment. This bifurcated idea of ecofearism (generation of the fear of the impact of environmental degradation through consciousness, and the resultant readiness to preserve the ecology) can be seen in the epic *Simasaarakaa Raajdut* [*Ambassadors of the Wetland*] composed by a modernist Nepali poet Mohan Koirala. Written on the poet's deathbed and published posthumously, the epic deals with the fear of the protagonist about the destruction of the flora and fauna of the Nepalese plains. It depicts the fate and fear of the birds and bird conservers. The epic symbolically connects the fear of the poet and the protagonist with the increasing fear of ecoconscious human beings about the possible annihilation of human civilization if the depletion of ecological balance continues in the same extent as it is going on now. In this context, this article interprets the epic to throw light on the connection among growing human consciousness, fear, growing ecological imbalance and the poet's appeal for the preservation of nature. For this qualitative research, the ideas of ecofearism developed by Simon C. Estok, and R. Micheal Fisher and other growing ecofearists have been used as a theoretical perspective. The step-wise formula of ecofearist studies "Life-Consciousness-Knowledge-Eco-Crisis-Eco-Fearism" has been referred to in the development of the paper.

Keywords: Annihilation, ecoconsciousness, ecology, fear, poetry

Introduction: Ecoconsciousness in Koirala's Writings

Mohan Koirala is a modernist Nepali poet. His contribution is noted for various experiments in Nepali poetry. Bishnubibhu Ghimire claims that Koirala is the most powerful poet of his time (156). Tulasi Bhattarai gives a detail of Koirala's creations and reports that Koirala started his poetic journey from 1943. However, his notable modernist creation was a poem "Ghaaite Yuga" ["Wounded Age"] (1960) that dealt with the end of democratic freedom in the nation and the consequent impact on the life of the people (138). The title itself shows Koirala's focus on the impact of human activities on the life of innocent people.

Many of Koirala's poetic creations are connected with nature. Some of the titles themselves establish the poet's interest on nature: *Himachuli* [*Mountain Peak*], *Gajapath* [*Elephant Trail*], *Leka* [*Mountain Slope*], *Noona Shikharamaa* [*On the Salt Peak*], *Hritu Nimantran* [*Invitation to the Seasons*], *Nilo Maha* [*Blue Honey*], *Nadee Kinaaraakaa Majhee* [*Boatsmen on the Riverbank*], *Himachulee Raktima Chha* [*The Himal Peak is Reddish*], *Yatika Paailaa Khojdai* [*Searching for Yeti's Footsteps*], and his popular poem "Pharseeko Jaraa" ["Pumpkin Root"]. All these titles connect nature and the people in the margin. Tulasi Bhattarai reports that *Leka* [*Mountain Slope*] is Koirala's first long poem, and it gives a beautiful picture of nature and the life in the margin

(139). His “Pharseeko Jaraa” [“Pumpkin Root”] and “Saarangee” [name of a musical instrument] have connection to nature and rustic life images, and thematically they are the satires on the city life that has forgotten nature and humanity. *Nilo Maha* [*Blue Honey*], according to Bhattarai, is a picture of life in the Nepalese Himalayan region (140) with its highlight on nature and the marginalized people. These poems display that nature is intrinsic in Koirala’s creations.

His last poem *Simasaarakaa Raajdut* [*Ambassadors of the Wetland*] (2008) shows how nature and the life of the people in the margin are closely connected and the characters fear that if they cannot preserve nature, their existence falls into crisis. Tulasi Bhattarai discusses the background of the creation of this poem. Its ideas and details were collected during the Jungle Literary Festival organized by Chitwan National Park in April 2005. Koirala visited different spots of Sauraha area in the National Park and took a detailed note of the flora and fauna available there. He visited, with a keen interest, the Tharu museum there and collected the details of how the Tharu people were embedded with nature for their livelihood (142). Ghimire opines that the poem “Ambassadors of the Wetland” reads like a jungle of images and symbols that demand the readers’ own preparation to navigate its theme and style. Ghimire claims that the readers need to be sensitive enough in terms of language and theme while reading Koirala’s poetic pieces including this one. He stresses that language is not enough to express the emotions and experiences of this poet (157). These observations of Koirala’s close friends, who are themselves writers and critics, make us think about the connection of the poet and his poem with the ecology, environment and marginality of the Nepalese plains.

Govinda Raj Bhattarai, the editor and preface writer of “Ambassadors of the Wetland,” highlights the poetic sensibility and ecoconsciousness of the poet as expressed in this long poem. Bhattarai mentions that it was the creation on the poet’s deathbed and was published posthumously. And so there is enough connection with death and decay in this poem (1). Bhattarai connects Koirala’s consciousness with the important global theme and trend of literature in the time—ecoliterary scholarship (4). This orientation, as Bhattarai believes, gives an incomparable height of newness and experiment in Nepali poetry (5). Bhattarai further stresses on the fact that the poem is full of conflict, envy, war, terror, bloodshed and suicide. It symbolically covers the seven-decade long history of Nepal as well (12). Finally, Bhattarai claims that this poem presents the conflict between traditional profit-based thinking and recent human thought of the need of protecting the environment (14). This discussion connects the poem with the theme of ecology.

While reading the poem and going through the critics’ views on it, a question that occupied my mind was: Why does the poet use so much destruction in the poem? Similarly, the next question was: Does the poem give expression to the poet’s fear of his death and the decay of the environment in the world? This article is an attempt to search for the answer to these questions.

Ecofearism as an Approach to Literary Studies

The fearist thinkers believe that fear is “basic to human nature and in general to animals’ instinct” (Adhikari, Kalu and Subba xiii). They connect it with the growing problems in ecology: “The eco-turbulence has become much more dangerous than any other natural calamities like earthquake, volcano, tornadoes, cyclones and the like” (li). Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist argue that “[s]immering eco-anxiety had been with us for years but now we had entered the realm of eco-fear and full-blown eco-trauma” (5). They further highlight the growing ecoanxiety on the

globe: “Many of the emotional conditions we’ll talk about are already familiar to us in their non-environmental forms, but the “eco” in front of their names creates newly-specific meanings that relate them to the environmental causes of the current disorder” (7). They argue that it is good to replace the term “ecoanxiety” with “ecofear” because “the first term implies a cause within the mind, whereas the second recognizes this fear to be a genuine and realistic response to outer crisis” (8). Finally, they conclude that ecofear is “completely normal and useful, even if profoundly disturbing” (9). This article argues that these ecofearist concerns are expressed in Koirala’s poem “Simasaarakaa Raajdut” [“Ambassadors of the Wetland”].

Ecoconsciousness is naturally connected with fear in the sense that this consciousness is the result of the growing depletion of environmental resources in the earth. As the word ‘eco’ in English has its Greet root “oikos” that means *home*, the destruction of the environment is connected with the destruction of our home. And “[w]hen our home is threatened, fear is natural and even healthy, just as it is in a burning building.” Thus, “[t]he fear in eco-anxiety is the body’s healthy response to a frightening situation, a signal that something must be done and action must be taken.” After all, “if [one’s] home is on fire, fear and then actions are the appropriate responses” (Buzzell and Chalquist 10). In this connection, R. M. Fisher argues that “the *ecology of fear* construct and dynamic is inevitably constructed in a co-emergence with the *ecology of risk* construct and dynamic in systems” (“Further” 6).

Fisher contextualizes ecocriticism in connection with the ‘culture of fear’ and reports that the scholarship goes back at least to the mid-1980s, although “the dynamic had begun much earlier” (“Ecocriticism” 13). Conclusively, he argues that “to focus on the context of the Eco-Fear Problem” is to take account of “all the other major problems, including environmental crises, ecophobia, racism, sexism, etc.” (13). This idea of ecofearism is connected even with the survival strategy of an organism, for example in this case, primarily that of the human beings. It is argued that the long-term survival of the species “depends on the ability to learn from, and optimally respond to, a potential or real threatening stimulus (Mobbs, Hagan, Dalgleish, Silston and Prévost 6). It means that the fear connected with ecological depletion is a fear connected with the existential crisis of the organism.

As ecofear is consciousness and need-based, its nature is different from place to place or community to community. It is claimed that ecofear is,

...a culture-specific trope. There could be various reasons for ecofear like climate change and the resultant floods, devastating cyclones, extensive wildfires and even a viral pandemic. The spectrum of fear may vary according to the agencies, context of interactions, and the various reasons for the fear, depending on the cultures in discussion. (Concept Note 1)

Ecofear connects humans with nature and at the same time disconnects them from nature; and so relates itself with the context of human-made calamities.

Adhikari, Kalu and Subba believe that “the present global ecological decline can also be properly addressed by the help of positive fear imposed in the minds of the people on time” (40). They argue that “[i]f we become able to do so, then it is possible to save the devastating condition

of the ecological and environmental situation of the globe” (40). Thus, the ultimate goal of ecofear studies is to make people aware of the present condition of ecology and environment and to motivate them for the preservation of nature.

Koirala’s poem “Ambassadors of the Wetland” has presented the scenes, characters and actions that make the readers aware of the critical situation of the balance in nature. The poem displays the poet’s ecoconsciousness; and consequent ecofear that has been portrayed throughout the poem. The following sections discuss how the poem is guided by ecoconsciousness and ecofear. The quotes from the poems are my free translations of the lines in Nepali.

Pro-nature and Anti-nature Characters

The poem “Ambassadors of the Wetland” presents contrasts between pro-nature and anti-nature characters. It also shows how the nature is threatened by human-made culture. Out of about one dozen characters in the poem, a few of them are birds, too. Here, one type of bird, whatever is their number, is calculated as a single character. There are many ducks, many cranes and many other species of birds. The roles of ducks and cranes are dominating and symbolic. This use of birds as characters shows how human beings look at the world of nature. Each bird may have their specific lifestyle that distinguishes it from the rest. But human thought is developed in such a way that all birds are similar. After all, these birds represent the force of nature that is usually calm and moves in its own way until it has to resist against threat upon natural balance. In the last section of the poem, the birds attack the human beings and show how the encroachment into the nature results into a fearful situation for the human beings themselves.

The human characters in the poem are of two types: pro-nature and anti-nature. Durgam Mahato is the leader in the anti-nature camp. His name ‘Durgam’ itself has some cacophonous connotation. The word ‘durgam’ in Nepali means some place that is very difficult to reach. Though reached, it is not easy to accommodate there. In the poem, this character exhibits a similar attitude. It is very difficult to get him convinced on the value of nature for human society. For him, immediate material benefit is everything. He is fighting to register the jungle in his name as a personal property so that he would grow rich and can rule all species in the jungle. The poet mentions that if he wins the case in the court, he will make the birds his labourers in the field. This intention of Durgam is symptomatic of the characters of the modern human world that plans to capture nature and use it as a personal property.

Durgam develops a special relation with the people of the capital city of the nation to fulfil his objectives. He is ready to accept a lady who is impregnated by someone else so that the relation with the family of the powerful will be beneficial for him in the days ahead to achieve his objectives. This connection with the city is symbolic of his connection with the culture of profit, treachery and enjoyment at any cost with the use of money and power. This lady is his fourth wife and the only one who tries to help him in his plan. There are very few people in his support; but all the rest cannot speak in front of him because of his wealth, power, connection and control.

On the other hand, there are characters whose sole motive of life is to protect the ecology. Karatab Chaudhary is the lead character in this group. His name ‘Karatab,’ in the Tharu tone of speaking Nepali, means duty. The poet symbolically means that it is our duty to preserve the nature. He is from the aborigine community of Nepalese plain unlike Durgam Mahato who belongs

to the immigrant community from India to Nepal. It also indicates the connection of the aborigine people with the nature as they are embedded with it. Karatab is devoted to establish a hospital for birds. He has seen many birds being wounded and sick in the wetland. He can feel their pain because he has been close to them from his childhood. But Durgam does not have such feelings and attachments. He is an immigrant and wants to collect as much as possible. For Karatab, the land is for all flora and fauna; whereas, for Durgam, the land is just a means of profit. This attitudinal difference is the major focus of the poem.

Karatab's supporters are his wife, daughter and some innocent villagers who cannot speak against Durgam and his destructive attitude and activities. Robert Mack, an Australian tourist, is also in Karatab's support. All these people are from the margin. Their creative struggle is the struggle against the destructive mainstream. All of these characters are working with unselfish motives; whereas, the characters in the opposite camp are all greedy and treacherous. Govinda Raj Bhattarai argues that all these characters, who work for the preservation of nature, represent freedom and democracy that is always under threat by the profit-minded people. Bhattarai stresses that the focus of the poem on the history of the bird's civilization has highlighted the profit-oriented and the cruel human mentality (15) developed as the common culture in modern cities. Thus, the poem shows how the pro-nature characters (by implication the people in the rural society) fear the loss of ecological balance; whereas the anti-nature characters do not fear and so continue to destroy the flora and fauna. It further indicates that ecofear is connected with ecoconsciousness.

Human Induced Destruction: A Scene

The penultimate section of the poem is "Samhaaraleela" ["Drama of Apocalypse"]. This section of the poem begins with a sad tone: "He who was never defeated, has been defeated now" (117). When everything in the process of the establishment of the birds' hospital was on the way, an unthought-of incident occurs. One morning, suddenly, all birds in the area are found dead. The devastation in the bird community was found to have happened in a dawn: "The night not ended, the day has not started." The speaker in the poem comments that "the scene exhibits the defeat of undefeatable." It was something unthought-of; but it happened:

So many cranes are dead in a single group
Corpse upon corpse, bird's corpse upon bird's corpse
Crane upon crane
The paddy field is white, filled with fallen cranes
There is no place to speak; there is no place to think of. (117)

The scene of destruction is described further. There are some birds that are about to die. Some are in deep pain. Some are already dead.

The poet describes the horror spread around: "Even the fear is fearful." As hundreds of birds are dead at a place, "nobody has dared to touch any of them/nobody has dared to lift them up." The speaker comments: "It must be late for the hotel/It must be late for the restaurant" (117). These verse lines present the cause of the destruction: the business-minded and consumption-oriented people have planned for this destruction. The poem indicates that Durgam has done it to curb Karatab's attempts of preserving the birds.

The poet symbolically uses the atmosphere of the day to indicate that it is a terrible and man-induced destruction of the nature: “The light has not been able to come because of shame/the dump and dump of fog has not stopped covering the ground” (117). Here, the poet indicates that this is the crime against nature; and must be induced by men: “landscape of crime, geography of crime, line of crime.” Humans have been causing such destruction for ages; this is not the first instance. The poem further mentions that “the more the sun comes up, the more the time is added/the more birds are added dead” (119). It is not only that the number of dead birds increase with the progress of that particular day, but also it symbolically means that with the progress of human civilization the destruction of nature and natural lives have been increasing. The scene has shown that human being is a destroyer.

The scene is even more detailed. On this day, there is no place where the dead duck is not found; they have filled all the ponds. In each house, in each yard, in each verandah, in each child-care centre; there are dead birds everywhere. The scene shows that the old strategies for the preservation of birds do not work now. So, it is necessary for the birds/nature and the nature-lovers to develop a new “survival intelligence as the organism’s ability to master its environment by minimizing local threats and adapting to novel threats in changing ecologies” (Mobbs, Hagan, Dalgleish, Silston and Prévost 2). The new dangers and its “[t]hreatening stimuli” demand the “ongoing behaviors to cease” and finally such situations “lead to freezing and the orientation of attention toward the threat” (9). Such a new development in the field causes ecorage, i.e., “anger at those we perceive as responsible for the ecocide. Frustrated at not being able to stop the bad actions of others, we may strike out” (Buzzell and Chalquist 19). The people who have been working for the preservation of the ecology get to the point of ecorage. Here, Karatab develops such a psychology.

But Durgam is virtually fearless of the consequences of the destruction of nature. It is because “[*faux*] fearlessness is a negative quality, too, if possessed by the so-called elite class who are governing the world economy and committed to destroy the planet through rampant and careless resource extraction in the name of wealth generation” (Adhikari, Kalu and Subba xiv). If the *faux* fearlessness of such elites goes on growing, it is very difficult for the conservationists to go ahead. And this is a very sad moment for the entire humanity. The poem finally indicates this grave reality.

Poet’s Fear of Apocalypse/Ecofear

The crux of the poem is in its last section “The Moment of Suicide.” Here, after the destruction of the birds’ community, i.e., the nature, the human suffering and ultimate destruction in the human world is described. This section begins with a character called Gambheerman’s thought and fate. He is the single person who has foolishly entered into the scene of this destruction to collect the dead birds. He wants to collect as many birds as possible and sell them to the hotels and restaurants to earn a lot. This symbolizes the foolish and materialistic human intervention into nature. As nature is always ready to passively accept any actions against it, humans are encouraged to misuse it for their benefit. But the situation does not remain the same forever.

*“If humans do not end their destructive behaviour, there will
be nobody to sympathize with them...”*

When the human induced destruction crosses the limit, nature turns back at humans. The poem describes that the birds have grown fearless today. No bird is afraid of Gambheerman. Suddenly, the birds begin to attack him:

The ducks perched on Gambheerman's body and began to tear it with teeth.
Gambheerman fell onto the ground; but the ducks did not stop tearing up his body
Now, they began to scratch his cheeks and eyes
The ducks did not stop tearing his body;
It was the anger of the ages.

This shows how fiercely the nature retorts if humans cross the limit. The speaker adds at this point: "Human beings, do you have any spot that pains, too!" (122).

This is a really piercing point: a surprise in the syntax of a question. It indicates the level of human insensitivity. Humans have grown so cruel that they have lost all feelings. As a result, when it comes to its own destruction, there is nothing that will sympathize with humans: "The ducks ask: Gambheerman, why are you screaming uselessly!/ Do not scream, there is nobody to listen to you now/ Was there anybody to scream for the ducks when you killed it?" (122). This is a serious warning of the poem to the human world. If humans do not end their destructive behaviour, there will be nobody to sympathize with them at the time of apocalypse.

The poem also indicates that the fear is growing among the conscious people about the possible end of humanity on the earth. It exemplifies the process of the growth of ecofearism: "Life-Consciousness-Knowledge-Eco-Crisis-Eco-Fearism" (Adhikari, Kalu and Subba 46). At first, the poem presents the way of life in the modern world: people running after material benefits and pleasure. Durgam's life is an example in case. Slowly, the growth of the consciousness about the need and condition of nature is described. Karatab's consciousness represents this phase of growth towards ecofearism. His activities help to increase the knowledge about the human-nature relation in the world. His conflict with Durgam is a source of knowledge for the people in his village and for the readers of the poem. Even the process of the poet's understanding of the problem is the same. The poet, a conscious individual, looks at life and acquires the knowledge of the reality.

Slowly and gradually, ecocrisis is revealed in the poem. The problems in the birds' world are symbolic of this situation. The final destruction of the birds is its climax. All these realities have grown fear in the poet. It is how a conscious person acquires the fear of the collapse of the nature that ultimately harms the human world. This is a terrible fear in the mind of the poet, i.e., a conscious and sensitive person who is worried about the future of the world. The fear that the destruction of the ecology leads to the destruction of the human world is ecofear. It is very effectively presented in this poem.

The next aspect of ecofear is presented at the end of the poem. It is not only the birds that are destroyed, but Jhumka, Karatab's daughter and the winner of Miss Tharu competition, is also found dead. It can be assumed that she has committed suicide. The title of the last section "The Moment of Suicide" indicates it, however. There is no other cause for her demise than the failure in the accomplishment of her commitment to help her father in the establishment of the hospital

for birds. Her death is not only the end of a girl's life, but it is also the end of a young spirit of the 'Miss Tharu' who has committed her life to make the world a beautiful and inclusive place for all living species. This is the suicide of the human spirit of preservation and balanced ecology. This is also a symbolic act of the society that compels the nature lovers to die in the lack of support. This is the greatest fear of the poet and that of ecoconscious people in the world at present.

Jhumka has gone through ecodpression, i.e., "melancholy and even despair if we don't support people and help them find new joy and purpose in life" (Buzzell and Chalquist). "Eco-despair is the most serious form of eco-depression" (27) that leads to ecosuicidality, i.e., the individual's condition that shows them "so upset about the state of the environment that they are suicidal" (28). Jhumka has committed suicide because of the same. This aspect and incident in the poem is related to the cause of ecofear.

This poem, thus, is an example of the logic that the fear problem "is inter- and transdisciplinary in nature, and cannot be reduced to simple notions of "fear" as a problem in the psychological and psychiatric sense" (Fisher, "Ecocriticism" 18). It further shows that "ecophobic content or their rebuke of it is an obvious yet under-utilized strategy for ecocriticism scholars and other professionals to bring more public attention to society's deepest misdirected fears and anxieties" (Estok 381). At the same time, it exhibits that "representations of ecophobia are culturally nuanced and determined" (Estok 381). As Estok maintains that ecophobia is contextual, "excavating the past is important for understanding ecophobia" (383).

This poem, thus, exhibits the capacity of gathering sympathy in favour of the preservers of nature despite their stark failure in achieving their mission. It has great meaning in relation to the poet's fear of apocalypse. The speaker is able to make the readers realize that the misuse of nature is sure to call upon our ultimate destruction. Such an ecofear can be helpful in the protection of nature as exemplified with the case of Karatab's attempts. Here lies the success of both the poem and that of ecofear studies.

Conclusion

Mohan Koirala's poem "Simasaarakaa Raajdut" ["Ambassadors of the Wetland"] exhibits how ecofear of the poet can take a universal form. Combined with the poet's fear of personal death and the death of human consciousness with the decay of ecological balance on earth the poem details how a society in the Nepalese plains loses an ecoactivist and how that loss leads to despair in the ecoconscious people. The conflicts between nature and culture, village and city, ecodestroyer and ecopreserver, and materialistic and nature-lovers have been presented in the poem with the employment of specific characters and their activities. The scene of the death of all the birds in the location shows the result of the dominance of human activities. Similarly, the nightmarish scene of the dead birds tearing the poacher's human flesh is a warning of the poem about the possible apocalypse in case we do not preserve the nature before it is too late to do so. In conclusion, this poem deals with the causes and consequences of materialistic and anthropocentric encroachment into nature. Reading this poem, one grows conscious about the need of the preservation of nature and fearful of the possible fate in case the human world disregards this need of the hour.

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