

Eco Conciousness In Amulya Malladi's *A Breath Of Fresh Air*

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ABSTRACT

Literature well known for reflecting the contemporary issues could not have remained unaffected from this theme. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Ecocriticism. The word 'ecocriticism' first appeared in William Rueckert's essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978. Yet apparently it remained inactive in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting (in Loeur d' Alene), when Cheryl Glotfelty (at the time a graduate student at Cornell now Assistant Professor of Literature and Environment at the university of Nevada, Reno) not only received the term but worked for its use in the critical field which hereafter had been used as 'the study of nature writing.

Keywords:- Chola, Family, Fressh Air

I. INTRODUCTION

Glen Love (Professor of English at the University of Oregon) too seconded the call for ecocriticism at the same WLA meeting. Since that meeting in 1989 the usage of the term ecocriticism has bloomed. However, in the beginning scholars working in this field of literary theory remained marginal until the early 1990 when the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was established in 1992 along with the Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) in 1993. In 1996 it is said to be officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works: *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell.

Ecocriticism has come to mean not only the application of ecology and ecological principles to the study of literature, but also the theoretical approach to the interrelation web of natural cultural and supernatural phenomena. It began to explore constructions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse. Since literature has always

conditioned our philosophical understanding of nature, of environment. Even the aesthetic categories by which our feelings for nature are understood the beautiful, the picturesque, the scenic, the sublime, the wild etc. have been defined largely their use in literary and critical contexts. Most ecological work shares a common motivation, that is, the awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support system.

This awareness brings in us a desire to contribute to environmental restoration, not only as a hobby but as a representative of literature. Eco critics encourage others to think seriously about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications. Arthur Lovejoy's contribution in this field is also very eminent. He observes that one of the strangest, most potent and most persistent factors in the western thought is the use of the term nature to express the standard of human values, the

identification of the good with that which is natural or according to nature.

AmulyaMalladi's 2003 novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* is the text chosen to be discussed. In the novel, all the incidents narrated have their roots in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. This true incident in the history of India is also an instance of the State rendering unthoughtful welcome for industrial firms with colonial inclinations. Ecocriticism and environmentalism have always been anxious about the neo-colonial forces exploiting the environmental peace in the developing and under-developed nations. The tragedy is that the latter category of nations becomes welcoming hosts to the former, expecting a shower of progress and prosperity. This paper reads the novel *A Breath of Fresh Air* to unveil such political conditions which are explicit and at times implicit. World's most tragic disaster associated with industrial establishments, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, took place at night on 2nd December in 1984. The toxic chemical named methyl isocyanate leaked out of the pesticide plant Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh and the death toll reported in various surveys and news reports varies from 3000 to 8000. The number of injured persons, according to the government report, is 5,58,125. This amount, in total, would come up to 75% of the total population of Bhopal. One and half lakhs of the victims still survive

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy, as it is known in the history, took place in Madhya Pradesh in December 1984. The majority of the victims of this total leakage from the Union Carbide factory were slum-dwellers. The poor residents of the colonies named, Oriya, Chola and Jayaprakash and the homeless who camped beside the railway lines formed the majority who fell victims to the spread of methyl isocyanate. The dwellers of the Oriya colony were really dalits who migrated to Bhopal from Orissa. The greatest threat is the foreign mercenary firms' indifference towards the natural resources, moral frame work and humans of the host nation. The Union Carbide Factory's cruelty to the whole district of Bhopal is a historical lesson to the State that placing development

The foundation for the episodes in AmulyaMalladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air* is the Bhopal Gas Tragedy which took place in 1984 in Madhya Pradesh, India. This fact is obvious from the narrative

pattern of this family story as the mention of the tragedy intervenes frequently in the novel. The story revolves around three characters namely Anjali, Sandeep and Prakash. Prakash, a military officer, agrees to pick up his wife Anjali from Bhopal Railway Station in December 1984. However, he spends his evening with the wife of a superior officer who happens to be his extra-marital relation. Prakash then goes to sleep proving to be an epitome of irresponsibility. Anjali expects Prakash's arrival and waits for him at the railway station. At that same hour, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy occurs thousands of people get exposed to methyl isocyanate gas that leaked out from the Union Carbide factory. Anjali too couldn't escape from inhaling the gas which results in physical disorders later in her life. If Prakash could take her off to his residence at the right time from the railway station, Anjali would have been spared of even minor consequences of one of the greatest tragedies in the history of India.

Later, Anjali becomes convinced of Prakash having illicit relation outside marriage and divorces him. She then marries Sandeep and Prakash marries Indu. Anjali Sandeep couple has a son named Amar who bears the traces of Bhopal Gas Tragedy as fatal heart and lung diseases on account of being born in the womb of Anjali, whose internal organs consumed the poisonous gas on the day of the tragedy. Obviously, Anjali has more than enough reasons to hate Prakash. After years, Anjali and Prakash happen to live in the same place – in Ooty – with their respective families. Prakash makes in his presence felt in the life of Anjali again, with repentance this time.

Though Anjali finds this second coming of Prakash as mere intrusion and nuisance, Sandeep is disturbed, comparatively, to a greater extent. He is doubtful whether Anjali repents for her decision to divorce Prakash before whom Sandeep feels inferior for various reasons. Amidst these emotional confusions, Amar's physical condition worsens and he is subjected to more serious medical treatment. He is hospitalized and shifted to military hospital with the assistance of Prakash. The hospital becomes the place of final scene in which Amar expresses his desire to go out and have a breath of fresh air. Anjali, his mother, lets him have his wish and takes him out of the room to the balcony. From there, Amar takes his last breath. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy literally

shook the conscience of the whole nation at the time of its occurrence. Innumerable lives were lost as mentioned earlier and the sad and horrific thing is that the region and its inhabitants are still not absolutely free from the evil effects of the gas leakage. Babies born even today manifest traces of the 1984 tragedy through biological deformities. Methyl isocyanate has disturbed the genetic make-up of the innocent victims who inhaled the gas and these aberrations get displayed through their later generations which are presently in Bhopal.

Here is a portion of the narration of the day of leakage by Anjali in the novel: The homeless had started gathering their meager belongings, while others were standing up, moving, looking around, asking questions, trying to find out what could be done. Soon it became unbearable and the exodus began. People started to clamor to get out of the station . . . The struggle to get out of the station became harder because no one could breathe . . . People who just like us were trying to find a way out. It looked like every automobile in the city was out on the streets. The sound of honking vehicles mingled with the cries for help . . . We reached the taxi and as soon as we got inside, people clamored and banged at the car windows . . . I opened the taxi door and pushed into the people who swarmed around the car. There was no relief for anyone . . . the voices of others, screaming and yelling and demanding the gods for an answer. (BFA 3-7) The above scene is pictured in the prologue of the novel which is narrated by Anjali. After being taken to the military hospital from the mess in the street, the next day, Anjali failed in her attempts to concentrate precisely on anything. . . . I heard the faint voice of a newscaster saying something about a Union Carbide factory and some gas that had leaked into the city of Bhopal. (BFA 7). Thus ends the prologue.

This is how the Bhopal Gas Tragedy finds its way for the entry into the novel. The remarkable feature is that the novel focuses on the social disasters caused by the great tragedy explicitly and in detail only at this part which is the very beginning of the novel. Though statistical data reveal the depth and vastness of the cruelties of the leaked gas, the novel little depends on such factual elements related to the real incident. The novel is more a fictional work rather than a political one. The greater focus throughout the novel is on the emotional conflicts of

and the chemistry of relations between the prominent characters which are few in number. For the purpose of dragging the work on to a terrain of discussions on the great social disasters that the Bhopal Gas Tragedy has affected, the individual characters in the novel should be construed to be the representatives of the whole class of victims of the tragedy. However, even then, among the leading characters, Anjali and Amar only can be attributed that status.

The title of novel refers to the fettle of the victims at the time of the spread of the gas and also after that. Like Amar, the victims do not relish absolutely the soothing effect of *A Breath of Fresh Air*. *A Breath of Fresh Air* is, by nature, a right of all living beings in the universe. Even this right, which is accomplished with ease, is barred as far as the Bhopal Gas Tragedy victims are concerned. When the State offers assistance and protection for the profit-ridden corporate groups, even the elementary, natural rights and privileges of both humans and nature are frozen. The repression flows from the State and its corporate interests to the citizen, through nature. Debauching the nature in an incurable manner becomes an easy mode for the State to forcibly impose its interests upon the general public. It is obvious that any harm on nature and environment would cause harm to human beings of all community, class, gender, time and region. Therefore, when the State disregards this indisputable truth, it can be assumed that the State is free of the fear of getting harmed, that the State is inhuman. Amar, the only son of Anjali and Sandeep, serves more than one purpose in the novel. Like Anjali, he too is a representative of the community of patients with severe respiratory diseases which is one of the major horrific consequences of the leakage of the toxic gas. The doctor found that the baby to whom Anjali gave birth had difficulty in inhaling oxygen immediately after its birth. The baby was put in an incubator and a doubt lingered whether there was a problem with his lungs.

A Breath of Fresh Air has thus taken special care to represent those mothers whose wombs were perpetually made impure after the leakage. Through Amar, the novel portrays the tragic state and life of those children who were destined to feel the toxic gas right in the womb in thus to be physically or mentally

challenged. Anjali writes: . . . Amar's breathing problems were related to the methyl isocyanate gas I had inhaled in the Bhopal Railway Station. But that was years ago and I couldn't understand how something that happened so long ago could affect my baby. Then I found more about the deadly gas and how I shouldn't have more children, that any child we had would probably have the same set of problems. Some of the specialists said that they were surprised that I had even gotten pregnant. One of the symptoms of inhaling methyl isocyanate gas was infertility. And just like that, my past took over my future. (BFA 205)

Setting up of industries has always been considered as a mark of national progress. In the next era, where globalization and liberalization are widely accepted policies across the world, it has become easier for the private firms from foreign nations to set up industrial projects in lands which they find to be fertile. The host nations get enticed by the economic benefits that such a project would bring to enhance nation's development. However, the companies with imperial and colonial interests are found to be taking less care in the matter of preserving the environmental peace in the host nation. The authorities of the US-based Union Carbide factory disregarded every warning against the harm that they would render the people of Bhopal. The victims are spread across generations in Bhopal. AmulyaMalladi's novel A Breath of Fresh Air focuses on this aspect – that disturbing the rhythm of the physical environment will be giving rise to disasters not among one generation but those disasters will be transferred even to innumerable generations of the forthcoming era.

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries involuntarily facilitated a utilitarian, calculating view of the natural world that not much later would become the driving force behind its violation and exploitation by the industrial revolution (Bertens 199). Rather than being a literary theory, ecocriticism is a sustained attempt to set right the approach towards nature. Ecocriticism demands to take nature seriously, as far as is possible, in its own right and for its own sake. Kate Soper once satirically commented thus: "It is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer" (Coupe 124). All the major philosophical schools of thought which later enjoyed the status of literary theories were found to

have an obsession with language and linguistic matters.

II. CONCLUSION

They disregarded social matters like destruction of nature and eventual hazards. Soper's comment was a direct attack against this existing attitude. While earlier theories took a philosophical stand negating the existence of a thing called real nature, ecocriticism challenged this standpoint asserting that solid nature really exists. If Raymond Williams is right in his opinion of having great complexity in the very word 'nature', nature cannot be proved so simplistically to be non-existent. It should be added here that ecocritics do not fall in the traps of naive realism on their way to prove nature to be a real matter. They defend nature and make efforts to bring it to the center of critical thinking and practice. It has thus come to such a stage that ecocriticism is the most popular term for the study of literature and culture from a perspective informed by environmental politics or scientific ecology

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