

Environmental and Ecocritical Concerns in Regional Poetry with Special Reference to Bhai Vir Singh's Poetry

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Abstract

With the initiative taken by Cheryl Glotfelty, the new discipline and theory known as Ecocriticism came into existence. Ecocriticism tries to explore the relationship of literature with the natural world and further it examines the role that natural surroundings and environment play in the minds of the creative writers during their imagination and creative process. The present study is an attempt to focus on Bhai Vir Singh's selected poetry in the

theoretical framework of ecocriticism in order to shed light on the poet's vigilant views about the relationship of human life and nature.

Bhai Vir Singh is a renowned modern Punjabi poet and novelist. He is essentially a poet of nature and mysticism. His opinions towards nature support his position to be considered as a major representative of recent environmental issues and ecocritical concerns in Punjabi literature. He could also be called the father of modern Punjabi literature as he began to write in this language when nobody was interested in it. It was an era when people's thoughts were more influenced by Urdu and Persian. He gave Punjabi verse a sophistication and new expressions. He draws the attention of the lethargic and the inert towards the imperishable beauties of the universe. He sought objective correlatives from the world of nature, flowers, springs, and birds to invoke the invisible and abstract force which is active behind the external visible reality. He was the first one to use blank verse form in poetry and was the author of numerous novels, plays and poetry collections. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore an integral relationship woven between nature and man through the pen of Bhai Vir Singh.

Key Words: blank verse, ecocriticism, environment, imperishable, mystic, nature, Punjabi literature.

The Padma Bhushan awardee, Bhai Vir Singh is a many-faceted personality in Punjabi language, literature and culture. He was a reformer, educationist, political thinker, religious divine, theologian, philosopher, prose writer, novelist and poet. This incredible amalgamation of flairs made him an arduous person. There is no aspect of Punjabi culture which has not been illumined and enlarged in the writings of Bhai Vir Singh. By his dedicated and inspiring works, he put Punjabi language and literature on the same pedestal as the other modern Indian languages. He set new trends in the development of Punjabi letters. He also turned to social commentary and addressed issues and concerns of his contemporary society at large, and pushed for reforms. He is truly the doyen of the commonwealth Punjabi letters. The majority of his poems concentrate on the natural aspects. In Punjabi literature and academia Bhai Vir Singh has been acclaimed as Iqbal in Urdu, Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali or Wordsworth in English. He gave the language a new style, a new rhythm, a new flow and a new thought-content.

Dr Radhakrishnan assumed while appraising the great poet's contribution to Indian literature, "Bhai Vir Singh is one of those representative Indians, deriving inspiration from the classical wisdom of our land and living it before our eyes. (Guleria 8)"

Bhai Vir Singh as a representative poet of the Punjab in the present century, interprets his entire imaginative flight in terms of nature. He is at his best when he talks of the spirituality and mysticism. Though very sensitive to the hardships and sufferings of his countrymen, he soars above the crisis of the present into the empyrean to catch a glimpse of the holy and the mystical world. His poems, not only sway us by the spring and autumn breeze but also carry us away towards the spiritual in the ethereal regions. By his genius and vision, he built a silver bridge between the ephemeral and the eternal, the corporal and the metaphysical, the earth and heaven and the living and non-living beings. Yet in spite of his lofty thought and spiritual passion, he keeps his feet on the ground and reminds us of the temptations and opportunities of human life. He has left his indelible impression, of social reforms, religious and educational institutions which he started and supported. Above all, he towers as a poet philosopher in the line of Walt Whitman, Wordsworth and Tagore. Bhai Vir Singh is essentially a great exponent of nature. He is alive to its feast of colours and forms. He catches its contours, its light and shade like a painter.

The term Eco- criticism was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". It did not become popular until the 1989 meeting of the Western Literature Association, when Cheryl Glotfelty engaged the word as a part of a vocabulary for a critical style to studying nature writing. In the collection *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Glotfelty elucidates:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender- conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its readings of the texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (xviii)

All developments of science, technology and commerce in the name of progress are mainly anthropocentric or human centric and definitely neglect the claims of our natural environment. Such a misbalanced view of progress in due course of time compelled man to make his progress bio-centric or earth created, so that the natural environment may be endangered and its balance with human life may be maintained.

Defining Ecocriticism, Richard Kerridge inscribes:

Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint . . . Ecocritics analyse the history of concepts such as 'nature' in an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis. (530)

Simply defined, eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticisms examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness or modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, eco- criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. Eco-criticism takes as its stages the interconnection between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts language and literature. Cheryll Glotfelty also mentions in introduction of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* that:

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. (19)

The third world countries are following the ideologies of developed ones that has resulted in the complete destruction of natural environment. A lot of raw material is used in industries and it is an over exploitation of the natural resources. Ramchandra Guha, a well known historian and Environmentalist rightly says in his book named, *Environmentalism: A Global History*, "Nature became a source of cheap raw material as well as a sink for dumping the unwanted residues of economic growth" (4). There is another reference

from Arundhati Roy, an intellectual and an environment conscious writer who is concerned with two major ongoing issues prevalent in India; the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* and The Campaign against Nuclear Weapons in India. In her essay “The Greater Common Good” she reminds of the coming dangers in the future. She says:

. . . We have to fight our specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, perhaps that’s what the twenty first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. (5)

Even Cheryll Glotfelty mentions in the introduction of his book entitled as *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, that

Ecocriticism is predominantly a white movement. It will become multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice. It is expected that the ecocritical scholarship becoming even more interdisciplinary, multicultural and international. (25)

The literary people named it “Eco-criticism” or “Environmental Literary Criticism”. Ultimately, the study addresses how humans relate to non-human nature.

Ecocriticism emphasises on the conservation of environmental and ecological balance. This balance is in effect seeks to protect interdependence of nature and man. It analyses the role that the natural environment plays in the imagination in the minds of the poet.

A great poet is one who sees into the life of things. For Bhai Vir Singh the wonders of the world and the beauties of nature constitute an inexhaustible treasure and he had the talent of giving things of everyday life a certain quality of charm and vibrance. Through his poetry, Bhai Vir Singh draws the attention of the lethargic and the inert towards the imperishable beauties of the universe. Bhai Vir Singh was essentially a mystic and nature Poet. The

spiritual poetry of love is the poetry of mysticism. The mystic believes that the invisible creator and the soul of man are akin to each other.

Bhai Vir Singh is capable of transferring any ordinary experience into contemplation of life. He has breathed human feelings into the natural things like trees, leaves and seasons. Nature has always been an evergreen source for Bhai Vir Singh, the Punjabi poet. Being a lover of nature, Bhai Vir Singh has presented characters longing to live with nature.

Born in 1873, at Amritsar in Punjab, Bhai Vir Singh was an epoch in himself. He contributed majorly in the revival and renewal of Punjabi literature. Vir Singh learnt the Sikh scriptures as well as Persian, Urdu, and Sanskrit languages. He completed his school at the Church Mission School, Amritsar and learnt about the efficacy of the written word. Vir Singh was married to Chatar Kaur from Amritsar. He started his writing career with romances, considered as forerunners of the Punjabi novel. His novel *Subhagji da SudharHathin*, *Baba Naudh Singh*, popularly known as *Baba Naudh Singh* was serialised in *Nirguniara* from 1907 and published as a book in 1921. He wrote an epic *Rana Surat Singh* which discusses the theme of a prominent social evil based on forcefully ending a widow's life with her dead husband (*Sati*) prevailed in that period. Another important work was Vir Singh's annotation of Santokh Singh's *Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth*, published from 1927 to 1935 in fourteen volumes.

T. L. Vaswani appreciates the genius of Bhai Vir Singh in the following lines:

Bhai.Vir Singh's was a voice of the New Renaissance in India. He was a silent man: in his silence were wonder and worship. He was a man of action; in his action was a song and as he sang, he opened our hearts and we saw the world was Godfilled. (qtd in Guleria)

He is considered the forerunner of modern Punjabi literature. Nature is a prominent theme in the works of Bhai Vir Singh. His broad body of work includes scenes from nature from dewdrops to honeybees to the mehndi plant. His major poetic collections are: *Dil Tarang* (1920), *Tarel Tupke* (1921), *Lehran De Har* (1921), *Matak Hulare* (1922), *Bijlian De Har* (1927) and *Mere Sayian Jio* (1953).

The relationship between man and nature is indistinguishable. It is a universally acknowledged fact that man has to depend on nature. Literary eco-scholars started writing about nature and the environment around. Nature is represented in literature as “virgin land, Eden, Arcadia, howling wilderness” (Glotfelty xv). One can understand Bhai Vir Singh as a lover of nature. He talks about joy, mirth, defeat, failure and success through his novels. He uses his characters as mouthpiece for expressing his feelings for nature. This is quite transparent in his poems. Probing through his poems, undoubtedly one can put his writings under the literary field of eco-criticism.

He turns to nature not to the lost beauty of its form but to pierce the veil of the unknown and to get at the spirit of which the beauties of nature are a manifestation. He looks at the dew glistening on the petals of the rose. He is charmed by its beauty but he does not get lost in the form so as to produce a catalogue of its minute details or a flood of pseudo-sentimentalities but he searches for the cause of which this rare beauty is the external look. The dew-drop attains to consummation of its being when it attains communion with beauty in the form of his prose and produces for the onlooker that celestial joy which never was on land or sea.

For Punjabi literature in the nineties of the last century signified a turning point. This was a time of change, of fresh aspirations and commencements. Under influences which had silently been at work, the hold of tradition was loosened and the freedom spirit extended. There was an unprecedented upsurge of the creative consciousness. New modes of expression were established. New themes became current. With these arose a whole structure of fresh vocabulary and metaphor, tone and style. Historically, a phase was reached which set off the old from the new. It was unmistakably the beginning of the modern period. The man who grasped the full implications of the prevailing urges and impulses and brought about this transformation in Punjabi letters was Bhai Vir Singh.

The relationship between nature and human beings is the one of the most often discussed subjects in literature. In the following poem entitled “Please do not cut us off our branch”, Bhai Vir Singh gives human emotions to the flower of rose:

Please do not cut us off our branch
 For we've set up our business of fragrance.
 Were million shoppers to come by?
 Surely not one would go empty-handed.

But if you pluck us
We'll be consigned only to you;
That too a meeting evanescent:
Our beauty and scent will soon vanish.

The rose flower pleads not to break it from the branch, because roses are considered to be the storehouse of fragrances. Whoever comes to smell, never goes without having a smell of it. If you break me then it will remain only for you. If you take the flower away from the branch, its appearance and fragrances exist only for a short while.

Moreover what rose thinks not about itself, but about the entire human race, that if someone has plucked it away from its branch, it will remain only for himself/herself? But he/she does not pluck it then the entire human race can take the soothing fragrance of it. It is not thinking about its own life which will come to an end after being plucked away from the branch. Rose is not selfish like human society which thinks only about itself and nothing else.

The main characteristic of Bhai Vir Singh's poetry is that the natural object becomes their own spokesperson instead of a poet becomes their voice. Bhai Vir Singh gives voice to the non-human objects; he becomes their voices and expresses their internal emotions and desires.

Bhai Vir Singh gives emotions to the flower of rose. Roses symbolises love, beauty and passion. In this poem entitled "not to break it away from the branch", rose specifies its sorrows that how people use to break it away for their momentary pleasures and makes its existence only for themselves. However the flower of rose exists only for few days, but its appearance and fragrances attracts everyone towards it and everyone wants to make it their own personal property. Rose pleads not to break it away from its branch.

Biocentric equality, an important concept of ecocriticism, also flourishes in this poem, which involves all things in the biosphere and have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual unfolding. Bhai Vir Singh also considers all human and non-human as equal beings, he is treating trees as living human beings, who have an equal right to live and enjoy their lives. Bhai Vir Singh takes the natural world as his own physical/personal world, he feels one with entire natural world. Environmental ethics in ecocriticism also attentions on the same value and views the interest of ecosphere with the interest of individual species.

As it is seen in anthropomorphism as a part of ecocriticism, in which the human feelings are applied to non-human objects. Bhai Vir Singh in this poem also applies human feelings to rose. The concept of ecosphere also concentrates on the same value, and emphasises on the interaction between the living and non-living components. Bhai Vir Singh also stresses on the same assess here.

Ecoaesthetics, as discussed under ecocritical theory, shapes the same value, and implies bestowing completely to the insensible of ourselves engaging with nature, especially at the beginning of aesthetics appreciation the aesthetics of engagement of man and nature. It focuses on the engagement of nature and its beauty, during this process the onlooker of beauty should forget himself and experiencing nature aimlessly. Only by this means can poet will be able to come to the core of nature and appreciate more and more natural beauties. When Bhai Vir Singh writes poem, he always favours himself as a portion of nature, places himself into the natural round and appreciate the untainted beauty of nature of the ecological world.

Ecological engagement principal as defined in ecocriticism, makes it entry here and emphasises on the engagement between man and nature that is the observer of natural beauty must put himself into nature and becomes an engaged part of it, as Bhai Vir Singh does in the above mentioned poem.

In the following poem entitled “Sun and Dew”, the dew asserts its emotions and laments that it is dew which stays on grass. Its eyes are full of tears; that is why it takes the appearance of dew and becomes drop of desire which is constantly waiting. It laments to its lover to be by its side, so that it can remain in its lover feet.

On grass I stay, says the dew,
 All eyes I am; Longing for you
 I welled up And water, sheer water,
 I became - Now a drop of desire
 With nothing of me! a come from your celestial seat –
 I'm spread at your feet to hold you tight.

As rose exists for a very short time, same the dew of the drop remains for a very short period. The arrival of the sun makes its existence towards an end.

While living in the Garden of Eden,
Adam, they say had some fruit.
He was charged a criminal and
Expelled from the land of paradise.
Had he pressed the fruit in a jar
And drunk its nectar,
Adam would have gone far beyond Eden.
He would have attained the eternal seat!

Bhai Vir Singh gives the description of Adam and Eve, who ate the fruit of disobedience. God has punished them and expelled them from heaven. Ecospirituality in ecocriticism emphasises on the connection between ecology and spirituality. Bhai Vir Singh connects his poem with the story of Adam and Eve. He unites the universe with spirituality. The fruit, garden, and nectar all these are the products of nature and by combining these objects he gives a kind of relation which ecology shares with the spirituality. Bhai Vir Singh always treats the natural objects as living beings and for him the existence of all natural beings really matter. He is not one of the person who only speaks on the behalf of all these non-human objects, but he wants to be one with the entire nature and be the part of it. That is the reason why when someone tries to destroy these non-human objects, he feels the pain of all these objects.

Oh selfish owners of land,
Why do you fight us?
We don't grow out,
We grow tall and straight.
Our rings and breadth
Extend only in space;
We take but a palm of land
Even then you grudge us?

Tree pleads in this poem and throws light on the selfish motives of human race. Human society cuts trees only to fulfil their personal motives. They are ignoring what these trees provide to them. Trees take a very few spaces. Bhai Vir Singh gives a description of the self-declarative role of a tree, who recounts its characteristics that springs respite to human beings. Trees provide a lot to human society. This statement will not be dubious, that all essential needs of human beings like food, clothes and shelter are rewarded by the trees.

The existence of ecocentric ethics defined in ecocriticism, is grinded in this context. The entire atmosphere, including inanimate elements, rocks and minerals along with animate plants and animals, is arranged an intrinsic value. This concept states that everything is connected to everything else. This poem fulfils all the necessities of this concept how trees laments and shows its emotions to the entire human society.

As the concept namely anthropocentrism described under ecocriticism indicates that human feeling are attributed to non-human beings. Here the tree is uttering its feeling to human beings. Forests, trees are very much browbeaten by the human society, while ignoring the ultimate truth of the fulfilment of all of their desires.

Here ecocentric, as demarcated in ecocriticism, makes its entry, which states that the interests of the ecosphere must override that of the interest of individual species.

Anthropocentrism throws light on the fact that humans consider themselves at the centre of this universe and gives privileges to their own selfish motives. Trees in this poem also give a lot of description about the selfish motives of humans. Even trees want nothing from them, in spite of all these facts humans continuously destroy these trees.

In the following poem entitled “a Hearty Welcome” Bhai Vir Singh addresses sun and laments about sun’s non arrival. Bhai Vir Singh welcomes the sun whole heartedly and receives it with full of pleasures. Arrival of the sun gives him lot of happiness and joy and fills him with optimism.

You have been behind clouds,
 For so many days handsome sun!
 I have been waiting in pain,
 To see your radiance again!
 You have appeared on your own this morning,
 Welcome, a most hearty welcome!
 Seeing you brings me tremendous joy,
 Your lustre fills our earth and skies.

Rising sun symbolises birth, life, light and optimism. Bhai Vir Singh also wants to attain these things from the sun. It seems that he talks to the sun as he is talking to the person.

Anthropomorphism, as defined in ecocritical theory, implies the human emotions and feelings on non-human objects. Bhai Vir Singh in this poem also implies the human feelings to the sun. That is why its absence hurts him a lot.

Biocentric equality of ecocriticism, is also flourished in this poem, which involves all things in the biosphere and have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual unfolding. Bhai Vir Singh also considers all human and non-human an equal beings, he is treating sun as living human beings, who have an equal right to live and enjoy their lives.

Bhai Vir Singh wants to merge in the beautiful world of nature with the arrival of sun. Ecoaesthetics states the same significance. Only by this means can poet will be able to come to the core of nature and appreciate more and more natural beauties. He wants to enjoy each and every aspect of nature.

Bhai Vir Singh is welcoming the arrival of spring season, it fills him with hopes and desires in this poem. The spring season is full of transformations. The temperature rises to a more bearable degree, opposing Mother Nature's last few months of freezing surroundings. The leaves fall and flowers are budding into lush, green, picture-perfect plants. Aside from the weather's transformations that occur in the spring season, human being's lives are also get transformed.

Spring is here
Spring is here
Hearing the call,
Flowers came out to see
Blooming with joy.
Lifting their fragrance
Spring swung ahead
Lifting their fragrance
Spring swung ahead
And entering our house
Says: Open your doors.
Then in an uproar:

There is no more winter or snow,
so open your doors.

Flowers are also enjoying the advent of this beautiful season and are full of sanguinities. The fragrance of the flowers is started entering into the houses and fill these household with lot of hopes. Flowers are also conveying the messages of optimism.

Spring is a season after winter and before the summer. The weather gets warmer because the ground is tilted towards the Sun. In many parts of the world plants grow and flowers bloom. This helps the plants, grow and the flowers bloom. Bhai Vir Singh feels one with the entire nature and he is welcoming the advent of spring season.

Environmental unconsciousness of ecocriticism, emphasizes on the same worthiness and states the embeddedness in the environment as a condition of personal being. Here in this poem, Bhai Vir Singh makes a new and different kind of relationship with the spring and the concept namely eco spirituality also states the same relevance. Eco psychology, which is a most important concept of ecocriticism, studies the relationship between human beings and natural world. Here Bhai Vir Singh also throws the light on the earnest relationship with the natural world. That is the reason he speaks on the behalf of the entire human civilization.

The philosophy of human life is in total harmony with the ecocentric values in this poem. So ecocide also demonstrates its importance here.

In the following poem “Encaged Bird”, Bhai Vir Singh gives voice to the lament of the bird. How the bird cries when it is encaged and the human society laughs at it. It seems that Bhai Vir Singh is able to understand the suffering of that bird.

Merciless, he stands in the open air
Claims, What a pretty cage!
But if he were inside, I had ask
Now tell me how beautiful is it?
Without wings I am a captive on land.
You heartless idiot:
For a flying bird
You call this deathly prison lovely?

The merciless liked its colour,
He liked its sweet tones too.
How nice of him to profess its merits
Having cast his net so slyly before!
He captured the bird, put it in the cage
And parted it from all its friends.
To hell with your praises,

Your friendship is nil

Bhai Vir Singh describes the lament of this bird as some human being is describing his pathetic situation. Bhai Vir Singh in the guise of human being questions the entire human society that why you are laughing at my situation; comes inside the cage only then you will be able to understand its situation. In anthropocentrism human feelings are applied to the non-human creatures and in the present poem bird flings light on the suffering which it has to suffer at the hands of human society. The bird also tells the selfish attitude of bird that how human society continuously destroys the environment and its creatures without having any kind of sensitive attitude towards birds. Anthropocentrism in ecocriticism states the selfish attitude of human beings and tells how human beings consider themselves at the centre of the universe. This concept makes its existence in this poem and asks human beings have they ever come into this cage.

Ecocentric, an important method in ecocriticism, comprises the entire universe including rocks, minerals, human society etc. Bhai Vir Singh gives an equal weightage to both animate and inanimate objects in this poem.

Hence it is clear in above discussion that in Bhai Vir Singh's poetical imagination nature remains an integral and essential part of human life. Whenever he finds himself gloomy, he takes solace into the lap of nature. Almost each and every poem of Bhai Vir Singh is full of natural elements and imagery. In the poet's intuition, nature and humanity are inextricably woven together in the web of life. He does not think about nature in its functional role of creativity or destruction. Bhai Vir Singh's imagination always finds the topics of his poetry from the beautiful aspects of nature. In majority of his poems, his readers find themselves in the company of nature. Nature always plays an essential part in Punjabi life. In the eyes of Bhai Vir Singh, the miracles of the world and the beauties of nature constitute an inexhaustible paragon and he owns the ability of giving the appeal of innovation to things of every-day life and has the power of exciting the

sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature. It will be impossible to find any poem of Bhai Vir Singh which is devoid of the natural imagery. Moreover, regional Punjabi poetry in the hands of Bhai Vir Singh represents nature as a fundamental necessity for the survival of human life. He paints the pastoral Punjabi life following the ways and norms suiting the conservation of natural and ecological balance.

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