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Anthropocentric Labefaction and Eco-Warrior: An Eco-critical Study of Ranjit Lal's *Faces in the Water*

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Abstract:

Children's Literature, in our present scenario, has contributed immensely through deep excavation of the psychological fields of children with the chance of reacting to literature and amplifying personal ideas. It upholds deeper sphere of child's mind with emotional intelligence directing to the modern materialised dystopian realm where children are rigorously exploited and inflected to the strange and unknown world of fear and mystery. Children and nature are quite equally weighted on the ground of purity, innocence and spontaneity. The present paper aims to map out the process of exploitation and subjugation of female child along with the natural aspects through the sordid topic of female infanticide by anthropocentric despotism and destructive mind of 'male-gaze' society. Ranjit Lal, being a defiant champion of the green world in the present global literary vistas, endeavours to set up a link between literature and environment through the honest portrayal of Gurmeet as eco-warrior in his novel *Faces in the Water*, who struggles to resist the destructive nature of other male characters to save the children, especially female child, as well as nature or environment. This present paper mainly concentrates through theoretical narration to place the novel into the sentimental ecological model of nature writing.

Keywords: Children's literature, Dystopian, Subjugation, Male-gaze, Eco-warrior, Ecological.

Ecocriticism as a term, encompasses the deep academic study of the relationship between environment and humans taking the root place of our recent literary theoretical discourse. In our present scenario, human minds are completely motivated and directed by the excessive development of science and technology. Out of the illusion of materialistic success, human beings gradually destroy the natural resources and ecological balance. In return, they are confronting constantly different forms of natural disasters such as tropical warmth, global warming, draught, desertification, flood and pollution. The effect of environment reaches all sectors of human life such as livelihood, food, class, gender, religion, psychology and economics.

Awareness and high consciousness towards eco-system and environmental preservation become the very crucial part of our life in present time. Ecocriticism as a literary theory was ignited by the publications of *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Laurence Buell. Being a defiant leader, Glotfelty has pleaded in her book *The Ecocritical Reader* in the following:

Simply put, 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 reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty xviii)

She also endeavours to convey the idea that ecocriticism attempts to make out the reciprocal and interconnected relationship between humans and non-humans by exploring the eroded connection between humanity and the universe. She rightly points out in the same book:

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class and gender were the hot topics of the twentieth century, but you would never know that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all. (Glotfelty xvi)

Another important critic and thinker Glen. A. Love has concentrated much on the development of the ecocritical perspectives by bringing natural sciences and humanities together. His quest for the role of human nature towards ecocriticism finally directed him to write a book entitled *Practical Ecocriticism*, published in 2003, where he writes in the introductory section:

At the beginning of the third millennium and of a new century often heralded as – the century of the environment, a coherent and broadly-based movement embracing literary environmental interactions, commonly termed – ‘ecocriticism’, unlike all other forms of literary inquiry, encompasses non-human as well as human contexts and considerations. On this claim, ecocriticism bases its challenge too much postmodern critical discourse as well as to the critical systems of the past. (Love 5)

Gradual practice and experimentation on ‘Ecocriticism’ implies a new dimension called ‘Ecofeminism’, coined by Francois d’Eaubonne in her book *Feminism or Death*, published originally in 1974, that unifies ecology with another literally and theoretical movement named ‘Feminism’ to bring forth the simultaneous exploitation and suppression of both nature or environment and women by the patriarchal culture. This movement posits a critique against patriarchal culture that considers women and nature as mere objects.

The theoretical framework of the present paper endeavours to posit the novel *Faces in the Water* in sentimental ecological model of nature writing. Richard M. Maggie, an eco-critic points out in his book *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women and Literature* – “In the sentimental ecological model of nature writing, the human concerns are not ignored, but are presented as parallel to, and inseparable from, the concerns of nonhuman nature” (68). The protagonist Gurmeet of the present novel is portrayed as an eco-warrior. The term ‘Eco-Warrior’ has been introduced by a media of United Kingdom and demarks – “An Eco-Warrior is an individual who cares about our environment and the diversity of life forms that share it. Being an Eco-warrior is to simply care for our environment in our daily activities and decision making” (ecowarrior.org, 2015).

Ranjit Lal's famous book *Faces in the Water* won the Crossword-Vodafone Award for Children's Fiction. The storyline of the novel centres the Diwanchand family that brags about having on male children without female child. Through the gradual flow of the action the protagonist Gurmeet, otherwise known as Gurmi, the only son of Diwanchand family, due to the renovation the the house in Delhi, is sent to their ancestral house where he with his spirited and adventurous mind visits the forbidden well, called "Badi Kothi" and revealed the secret of the continuous line of sons of Diwanchand family. Gurmi also unearths that the pretty girls who are drowned into the forbidden well to maintain the row of only male children of this family are emerged in a sequence of ghosts. Ranjit Lal in time of presenting the beautiful dead girls, delineates the background with beautiful natural aspects in order to make a parallel identity between the Nature and the dead girls. He voices that the ghosts are – "surrounded by the wavy silvery-green-and-gold grass was a ring of waist-high multicoloured lantana bushes, the mysterious, forbidden well whose water had kept me and my family fighting fit, and which six rottweilers guarded every night." (Lal 12). Ranjit Lal quite brilliantly deals with the sensitive issue of female infanticide and righteousness of gender and hence turns the narrative into a fantasy where the girls like living beings perform the act of discourse. The design of the novel *Faces in the Water* is simple but much suggestive that the girl children of the Diwanchand family through their sentimental actions, create an aesthetic value of the story of the novel. The novel also highlights the subjugation and exploitation of tribal people and women in our present scenario.

The narrative of the novel depicts some magical happenings that immediately associates the novel to a new outlook called 'Magic Realism' that quite technically fuses the realistic and sarcastic tone of the writer with the magical presentation of the, to give a vibrant touch of critical investigation of the contemporary surroundings. Lois Zamora and Wendy B. Farris in the book *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* that quite emphatically points out that- "the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism" (Zamora & Farris 3). In the

novel *Faces in the Water*, Ranjit Lal has portrayed the ghosts of the girls who are the part of the ancestral farm house of Diwanchand's family through the lens of perceptions of the other characters regarding the presence of ghost girls. Quite unconsciously, Diwanchand family satisfies their hearts concerning the absence of the girls through the creation of the virtual world of magic and mystery.

The very outset of the novel *Faces in the Water* advocates a key to the crucial issue and the future action of the novel: "they say no one can really remember when a girl was born the last time...no one can remember when anyone in the family fell sick" (Lal 1). For the sake of good health of Diwanchand family members, they are very indebted to the forbidden and ancestral well of their farm house where the dead girls are reflected in the supernatural forms. It is very much obvious that the pride of the family rests on the magic well. Gurmeet, during his first visit to the ancestral forbidden well of the farm house, is strictly instructed not to visit the well which is believed as "exotic health-giving minerals leach into the water turning it into a sort of elixir" (Lal 1). He found the images of the three girls namely Mohini, Nandhini and the Baby, when he for the first time cast his look on the water of the well. These girls sacrificed their lives to maintain long and proud chain of male children. The author has mentioned well that through gradual and periodical sacrifice of girls, the water of the forbidden well became pure. The purity of water is immensely associated with the innocence and purity of the girls. So, it can be said that the girls reflect the natural purity or vice-versa. Through his deep realisation regarding the sins of Diwanchand family, Gurmeet suggested to poison the water to give a lesson for their merciless attitudes and action. Quite brilliantly, the reactions of the ghost girls are in the following:

Mohini shook her head and looked painted. 'Don't even think about it. They're our parents after all, in spite of everything. We can't do such a thing' ... She – and the other two – was sitting at the bottom of this well ... and she was ready to forgive and forget without batting an eyelid. (Lal 24)

Mohini's response and reaction towards Gurmeet's attempt to poison the water quite convincingly refers to her responsibility to

maintain the ecological system and to prevent the ecology from pollution. She even suggests that if the water of the well becomes polluted, the Diwanchand family would change over to some packaged water without recognizing any crime they have committed to the girls. Water is generally considered as a main source of human sustenance and in this novel the water is used as a medium of destruction of lives for retaining the pride of Diwanchand family. The power structure is continued generation after generation as they exploited two life-giving resources of nature – water and woman. Ranjit Lal quite deliberately has posited a critique towards the power of anthropocentric labefaction as the power of man not only damage the natural resources or ecosystem but exploits and destroys one natural element to harm the other. Women being identified with the natural element are also molested, exploited and subjugated. The flow of power can never be retrained anymore; rather it takes its course in different way with various societal disciplines and norms that bind up the authoritative and common agents together from different spheres of society. Power always exercises founding its base on knowledge in creating a well-knot networking system to run the society with a smooth peregrination. Combinedly, power and knowledge, through their effective circulation and distribution, produces discourse that creates a compromised solidarity of any subject or idea. Regarding the exercise of power through discourse, Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and theorist rightly argues in *The History of Sexuality, Vol-I*:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and the unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrumental and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling – block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault 100)

The forbidden well can be interpreted from the liberal and metaphorical point of view. It gives a vivid picture of patriarchal notion of controlling woman and nature to satisfy their ego. On the connotative level, the well maintains a deep connection between nature and woman

with integrity. The interplay of non-patriarchal elements and femininity finally develop the tricks of emancipation from the clutch of patriarchal gaze.

Generally, the mental structures of the people are strictly controlled by the disciplines of socio-economic power discourse. Out of their profit and pride, people engage themselves with criminal and atrocious activities. In the realm of patriarchy, the birth of a girl child is considered as the destruction of family wealth. In order to uphold such kind of misdeeds, Lal has designed the mental sphere through the lens of Surinder's view:

Why do we think we are so respected and envied in the community? We have such a reputation to protect. Everyone looks up to us, like we are royalty. It's a matter of great pride and the family's honour. Besides think of the amount of money that has been saved. (Lal 95)

The novel through its narrative not only deals with the problem of female infanticide, rather it universally portrays the sense of negligence, suppression and deranged condition of women who are the essential part of environmental integrity. Here, Diwanchand family's constant deprivation of the girl children to retain the row of male child fractures the balance of gender proportion and creates a crisis in ecological equity. The novel *Faces in the Water* introspects the prevalence of female infanticide through ages and the pressure of socio-economic and gender problems. Another eco-critic Lawrence Buell mainly traces on the fact that community people emphasise much on the environmental ideologies as a weapon of social justice rather than on the eco-centric ideology that extremely claims a proper care for nature. In the book *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*, Buell points out that "anthropocentric emphasis on environmentalism as instrument of social justice as against an "ecocentric' emphasis on caring for nature as a good in itself" (Buell 33). Concerning this issue, Lal by positing a move from 'anthropocentric' to 'gender-centric' and from 'environmentalism' to 'ecology' wants to convey the idea that everyone should take the responsibility to maintain the natural balance in our surrounding.

Through the emotional connection, Gurmeet, the protagonist of the novel perceives the presence of his invisible dead sisters. Ranjit Lal quite superbly depicts how a great vacuum has been created unconsciously by the absence of the girl children in the minds of family members of Diwanchand family. Such crisis intensifies the desire of Gurmeet and other members also to see the girls. The supernatural projection has beautifully been designed in the virtual world where the girls are accompanied by Gurmeet, Arnav, Barun and Donny in different amusing games and the bond between brother and sister remains water-tight with their emotion words regarding Raksha Bandhan. The exchange of words is depicted by Lal thus:

It's a festival in which a brother renews his promise to protect his sisters. So, you have to protect us. Okay ... so no big deal. But my heart had sunk. Ah, you don't get off so easily. Brothers also have to give their sisters elaborate and very expensive gifts at this time. (Lal 120)

These words quite obliquely convey strong responsibility of Gurmeet to protect the girls of Diwanchand family in future. He felt a deep agony regarding past atrocity of Diwanchand family's activities of diminishing the girls to maintain the line of only male child. Gurmeet determines to save the girls like an eco-warrior by hiding himself in the well while the girls will be thrown inside the well. Thus, he endeavours to maintain the balance between women and natural resources by saving the girls.

Ranjit Lal has sarcastically reflected the apparent mask of the family members of Diwanchand family, particularly the father of Gurmeet. Gurmeet's father is a man with grouchy nature, who became tormented within and collapsed when he learns about his twin girls. Actually, he was oscillated in between reality of family heritage and unconscious wish of having baby girls. When Gurmeet's father was haunted by the pricks of his conscience, Mohini showed her sympathy towards her father as a poor fellow. Gradually, in course of time, it is found that he unveils himself as a changed man with his deep association with the dead girls. Lal has represented the introspective scrutiny by maintaining the same weight between man and woman. The close association of the ghost girls with their father and mother is overcharged with sentimental

tone. Regarding this bond, Gurmeet with his positive sentiment points out that:

Certainly, the presence of the girls in the house seemed to put both Mama and Papa into a good mood. Mama's bitter, sour look was gone, and Papa was no longer piranha, ready to bite your head off for no reasons; he was jovial and laughed a lot. (Lal 160)

Thus, Ranjit Lal quite tactfully manages to deal with the strong appeal through various actions and reactions of the characters to change the image of anti-ecological mind-set of a group of people in particular and of the world-wide people in general. In the novel *Faces in the Water*, the narrative gives a speculative vision of non-patriarchal space where men and women are interlinked and inter-webbed with ecological order pointing out the environmental stability. By employing the tool of 'Magic Realism', Lal has concretised the sense of femininity and identity of the ghost girls who are drowned and killed to maintain the pride and tradition of male child of Diwanchand family. Ranjit Lal through this, novel attempts to erase out the false and fake ideologies of human being regarding their vanity and masked cruelty in order to open up the soft corner that will tie up with pure, balanced and inviolable ecological web. Last but not the least, Gurmeet, being an eco-warrior, fights against all kinds of evils and prejudices which always damage the translucence of human and non-human world. We should end with the view of Alan Drengson and Bill Devall who in *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*, conceives the future world with such eco-warriors:

In the future ideal society, there will be people who might use most of their energy doing highly specialised, difficult things, but as amateurs – that is, from inclination and from a mature philosophy of life. There will be no fragmentary men and women and certain no fragmentary ecologists. (Drengson and Devall 122)

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