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## **Nature and Man's Epiphany: Transforming Terrains in *A Bowstring Winter* and *The Collector's Wife***

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### **Abstract**

The article could be broadly divided into two parts. The first part renders the views of several noted writers on nature; they have looked upon it as a biotic community and man is part of it; when man gets in connection with it, it nourishes his inner being and makes him come in touch with himself. The views range from romantic ecology to positive aesthetics. Many writers hold that virgin nature is beautiful. Nature is not just a self-existent entity. On the other hand, it has intrinsic value and man is in a position to preserve it to avoid the peril mankind faces. The second part takes up two texts namely *The Collector's Wife* (2005) by Mitra Phukan and *A Bowstring Winter* (2006) by Dhruba Hazarika to examine the depiction of nature. Hazarika seems to capture the sights and smells North – East India, specifically Shillong. The tale revolves around a deadly game of passion and hatred, trust and treachery. It is Dor Kharkongor, ace archer, who has the spirit of hills. In *The Collector's Wife*,

Rukmini, the collector's wife residing in Parbatpuri, Assam faces turmoil and violence in the land. Kidnappings, extortion, political instability and shooting seem to be the course of life. In the midst of this how does nature soothe Rukmini?

### Keywords

Nature; Man's Epiphany; Dhruba Hazarika; *A Bowstring Winter*; Mitra Phukan; *The Collector's Wife*.

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.... Every Stone, and Every Star a Tongue  
And every Gale of Wind a Curious Song.  
The Heavens were on Orakle, and spake Divinity.

- Thomas Traherne

Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (1991) does hold certain basic principles which certainly can have a bearing, if adhered to. Timothy Clark in his analysis specifies that romantic ecology reverences the green earth because it recognizes that neither physically nor psychologically can we live without green things; it proclaims that there is one life within us and abroad, that the earth is a single vast ecosystem which we destabilize at our peril (16). At present, especially in the postmodern era, humans have alienated from nature that psychic or cultural wholeness is wounded. It requires to restore the former mode of healthy, fulfilled and closer to nature living. In fact mankind seems to have neglected the regard for nature, while some activists invest their energy and life to preserve nature. Our psychic wholeness depends on the green world, the rock and the mountains, the river and the falls, the streams and the oceans, the tiny plants and the flowering trees, the creeper and the bushes. The music of the birds needs to soothe our agitated system. The quiet move of animals makes us pause to ponder.

The romantic tradition expresses 'a principle of homeostasis, of a psychic and ethical counter balance' (18). Clark furthers the argument that if the society is afflicted by a divisive individualism, then the natural expresses the counterweight of community; in modern society calculative rationality dominates but the natural praises intuition and feeling; if society tends to be instrumentalist and materialist, then the 'natural' may be celebrated in terms of more selfless values (19). An unalienated humanity would make life in harmony with the natural world. Bate even considers along with Wordsworth that natural is non-exploitative and works towards stable settled-ness and if this mode is adopted humanity may not be destroying the resources. In romantic ecology the claims of the non-human appear as a helping agent to realize a less exploitative and more natural human society.

Each thing in nature is so vital and that is well emphasized by Jim Cheney. The inanimate can speak to us. Cheney writes:

Rocks can teach us things by their very presence. Once we give up epistemologies of domination and control, nature's complexity, generosity, its kinship and reciprocity come to mark our epistemological relationship with the earth matrix. (qtd. in Clark 20)

In a world dominated by technoscience, instrumental rationality, and booming economics, this idea may sound ridiculous and unacceptable. Cheney unswervingly asserts that the rocks are watchful. It is undeniable that our life is never isolated but is intermixed with the earth and nature.

Gary Snyder presents his view in a similar vein and justifies that human beings are earthlings. He questions, if not for the planet, how we would have lived and got over shape. The two conditions gravity and the temperature that range between freezing and boiling have given us fluids and flesh. The tree we climb and the earthy ground we walk on have given us fine fingers and toes. Glen A. Love quotes him:

The “place... gave us far – seeing eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears. The land gave us a stride, and the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind. We should be thankful for that and take nature’s stricter lessons with some grace. (95)

Our exterior and interior being depends on nature. At the first reading, the rational mind might refute the view but only in vain. If not for the land, which human being would have learnt to walk and carry on his physical, social and spiritual life? Whether we acknowledge it or not, it is true that we gain our footing due to nature, we survive on its yield and we exhilarate on its breath.

Nature may be looked upon as a place of dread and awe. Sometimes it is looked upon as a sanctuary and at another level as something sacred. Some environment may not be sacred but gives as scared sense. Nature around us provides us security but can forewarn danger too. Nevertheless, some human experience with nature is mystical. It is J.B. Callicott who emphasizes on the intrinsic value of nature. Human beings are part of a biotic community. Brennan and Lo distinguish instrumental value and intrinsic value. A certain herb may have instrumental value because of its medicinal property and for an aesthetist it may offer aesthetic pleasure but if the plant has value independent of these instrumental values, it has intrinsic value (11). Human beings cannot be ranked to have more intrinsic value than all the other non - human things on earth. If they are given such status based on some qualities like self - awareness, intelligence, moral sense etc, it relies on anthropocentric and meritocratic ways of thinking structure (45). It automatically leads to categorization of sub species of human beings by proving one race to be superior to the other scientifically called ‘scientific racism’. It is nothing new for it had gone on for centuries and this sort of attitude leads to exploitation of human and non – human world. Brennan and Lo argue along with Tom Regan

that all subjects have equal inherent value and that gives all an equal moral right not to be harmed and that includes non – human animals too (62).

In clarifying aesthetic qualities, Allen Carlson speaks of two groupings of qualities. They are sensory or sensuous qualities and formal or design qualities. The former refers to textures, colours while the latter refers to shapes, patterns to designs which are in turn resultant effect of the former qualities. The aesthetic value of overall scenic quality of landscapes is evaluated in terms of variety or diversity (28-29). All virgin nature is aesthetically good. Carlson refers to different writer's views: William Morris feels that men should abstain from willfully destroying that beauty; David Lowenthal holds the view that the favored landscapes are wild but if it is altered by man it becomes sordid and concludes 'nature is sublime' (73); Leonard Fels specifies that anything that is natural is also thought of 'inherently beautiful' (74); Holmes Rolston points out that nature has a 'kind of integrity'. When something is observed properly that an ordinary rock may look like an extraordinary crystal mosaic; he says that natural value is resident in the vitality of things, in their struggle and zest, and so we speak of a 'reverence for life' and 'all life is beautiful' (74); and Joseph Meeker suggests that 'the human experience of beauty is rooted in natural forms and processes'(75). These remarks rendered so cryptically specify that nature has an integral part in our life and it has its preeminent value in itself.

Nature spreads across and keeps waiting. Not all men turn unto it, though it challenges to think no man has gone to the forgotten world of death without turning unto it. That is the power of nature. Whatever be the attitude of common man towards mother Earth, it renders its supply for his existence, though it goes unacknowledged and unremitted. Certain individuals turn unto it, not out of sense of duty but because of the relationship they have cultivated. It is true that tribal community maintains a closer kinship with the rivers, mountains, plants, trees and herbs. When we lose touch with the external

world, it is at our own peril. In *A Bowstring Winter* the central character Dor Kharkongor loves Shillong that he considers himself to have luck to be born in such a beautiful place. The novel centres around three months U Naiwieng (November), U Nohprah (December) and U Kyllalyngkot (January). It is symbolic of the passing phases of life and welcoming the new, with all its myriads yet to be revealed.

The text unfolds the season and its characteristics but in due course it changes its direction from mere description to something of great significance; to begin with the cold night of November, ‘the town of Shillong lay shivering under the groaning of pines’ (6). The mist did not allow proper visibility. The weather turned so cold that even the afternoon heat of the sun could not provide any relief. ‘For seven consecutive days dawn broke amidst sullen clouds, grey and steely, and the hills huddled in a range of unrelenting gloom’. The cold was so intense that it ‘crept in quietly, clawing into clothes’. The writer describes ‘once in a while, in sudden lurches, the sun peeped through clouds’ and the people experienced ‘a fleeting joy’ as the cold seemed to have reduced. Then abruptly ‘the rays beat a retreat’ and the cold wind swept on and ‘the clouds scored yet another victory over the sun’ (33). Man’s life is bound with every move and change of nature. The seasonal change affects him with gloom and joy. His body is from the earth and it cannot but feel every slight cold breeze that blows over him.

On the eighth day, the sun broke free announcing a ‘pleasant winter’s morning’ (34). As John Dkhar walked along with Dor Kharkongor, Andrew informed that Kharkongor is the best *teerman* in Shillong, perhaps in the whole of India. They saw along the Polo Ground, ‘the woods lay in loose uneven clusters, the trees a picture of quiet dignity, as the leaves drooped under the silvery weight of dew drops’ (35). As they kept moving to play the game, the air was soundless in the midst of ‘bamboo clumps, pine thickets.... The wind [was] sighing, rolling across the vales’ (38). Beyond the road, with pines and shrubs

‘sweeping down to the banks, the lake slept...’ (39). The valley lay half a kilometer away, hidden by trees. John Dkhar felt ‘no sight could be more beautiful than the waters of Umiam’. It is like ‘a beautiful woman sleeping for centuries so that even the sky falls in love with her’ (40). The beauty of the water could not be further illustrated. Theodor W. Adorno posits, ‘Natural beauty is the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity’. Natural beauty ‘surpasses all human immanence’(82). Hazarika seems to capture that experience in a language that seems to be inadequate to capture its essence.

The writer metaphorically describes the wind that ‘in a long sweeping sigh’ it blew up the slope and ‘the sun paled to a thin orange disc against the distant mistladen mountains. The ‘pristine silence of the valley’ could not be grasped. The valley ‘seemed to hang suspended in time and space... so beautiful that no human could ever hope to capture its essence’ (43). The dignity of the trees, the beauty of the lake and the age-old valley make the viewer understand the ever-inviting source of nature that can never be fathomed. John Andrew Fisher presents Kellert’s argument that our feelings associated with nature need not be aesthetic and suggests that ‘the adaptational value of the aesthetic experience of nature could be associated with derivative feelings of tranquility, peace of mind, and a related sense of psychological well-being and self-confidence’ (267). In the present context the viewers not only experience the abundance of these derivative feelings but they seem to be gripped by the aesthetic value of the place. They are struck by the beauty of the place which displays itself, totally independent of any viewer / observer and that is the nature of nature.

Shillong stands out singularly for it is ‘an island by itself in the sea that is India’. There surfaced ‘a hybrid of two civilizations, of two cultures, of a noble indigenous faith believing in one God, U Blei, and that of Christianity’. The smell and the fragrance of the winter is captured. Forests above the town and

the undergrowth in the hills burned which in the dark of the night looked like ‘miniature creatures in red dresses’ (77) and the wind carried the smell of dry leaves and of rotting bark. The shedding leaves fall one above the other and when one walked as if it was on a ‘Persian rug’ (78) and underneath it was wet and soggy. December is a season of planting – maize, potatoes, cabbages and cauliflower. The smell hung in the air and at cold nights sparrows fell to the ground stiff from the cold, but alive. The rooms smell of stale breath, of blankets and pillows, of all items used in cooking.

For all Shillongites the lake remains ‘a symbol of grace and beauty’. The pines loom upto the sky, ‘their shadows in the water entwined in ripples of sunlight’. Under the bridge schools of fish keep swarming in the dark green water swallowing gram and groundnuts thrown by the gazers. The scenic description around the lake is a world of immense and variegated beauty. The wind rustled through the pine forest. The pine trees could stand against the weather condition and had a touch of immortality for they seemed to have outlived the life span of man. The forest had a kind of awe around it.

There was a stern silence about the pines, a dark impenetrable stillness that spoke of majesty, of powerful trunks that had grown from century to century. Only those who had humility and grace could tread into the woods.... It was as if the forest was home to only a chosen few, selected carefully by the spirits so that the sanctity of the abode remained inviolate. (110)

Divine nature is assigned to the forest. Eco-spirituality seems to ring around this place. The scene conveys multiple layers of meaning; it has its own inherent value; its dignity cannot be suppressed by any force; its beauty has crossed over time; and above all the religious sanctity, devoid of man’s ritualistic acts, stands with its supervenient property. It is inevitable to recall Stephan Harding’s insight. He says, ‘All life has value in itself, independent of its usefulness to humans. Richness and diversity contribute to life’s well-being



and have value in themselves' (qtd.in Brennan& Lo 110). The pine forest's majestic silence cannot but stir human hearts with mysterious emotions and evoke awe by its presence.

Kharkongor almost ejaculates to John Dkhar about his love for the land and the uniqueness of the place.

...how pleasant it is for a man with a sight like this before him to be alive... Only look again, down in the valley, look at my clouds and my pines. Look long at my hills,... for these are my gods, my father and my mother, my grandmother and my grandfather, and their mothers and fathers... cannot you hear the music... to see such beautiful sight is like music... I can hear the music. It is a music of such a lovely sort that one would be glad to have it going the day one dies. (176)

Kharkongor's bond with nature crosses familiar to spiritual. In fact it combines both and there by intermingles love and reverence. Even his love has a transcending quality and there by speaks of love at a higher plane. It becomes sublime in the sense that it transports him from the finite senses to the infinite. The finite sensibility experiences the awe-inspiring power of the creator from the created. He has lived the epiphanic moment and it has been a continuous experience with him. Kharkongor finds the hills with divine attribute, the hills that he roamed, hunted, and knew every crevice and slope. His love for the hills, which impart him peace in the midst of trying moments, suffuses the place and the people. The music is born out of sight and that is how his deep love transforms into transmogrifying power in the highest sense. The text from beautiful scenes ranges to higher values of seeing dignity and majesty and finally divinity. It is like what Roszak proposes of Deep Form which unfolds a new anima mundi with a rich welter of sensuous experience and then reaches the prodigious animism.

The next text *The Collector's wife* again presents a rich sensuous experience that touches the inner core. It is a place / hill where terrorists-MOFEH and other terrorists lurked in its undergrowth but Rukmini finds it a 'sacred grove'. 'The quietitude settled softly on her, soothing her agitation'. It was quiet but not silent. All around her, there was the birdsong, 'a veritable orchestra punctuated every now and again by the clear, bell – like calls of individual birds'. In that 'vibrant and lively atmosphere' she could hear 'chirps and trills of feathered creatures' though she could not see them but feel the vibrations. The pleasant sound, the hum of music continued to fill the air.

The vibrations pulsed through the air in 'synchronous melody'. It was not like rhythm coming forth but 'cascades of melody' flowed. The leaves stirred and as she sat under the green canopy, looking at the clouds of sunshine, yellow butterflies kept rising and falling, 'their wingbeats keeping perfect time to the music all around them'. The smoke from the burning ghat blew over the place but it was 'a joyous celebration of life' (261) in the forest. The smoke from the pyres below depicted another world of terror for it represented the pyres of those killed by bullets and venom. The land occupied by human beings was always in tensed situation for when the terrorists would attack and cause destruction was unpredictable. The violent insurgency gripped Assam but the natural world stood in direct contrast to it especially the sight of butterflies engrossed in their dance, they were like 'single, living, breathing organism' (262).

It is surprising to know that the music of nature changed the perspective of Rukmini that her muddled and confused sordid situation of treachery had almost shrunk to 'insignificance'

The complications and complexities of their lives, the hatred, the violence, the suspicion and pettiness that coloured Parbatpuri, were dwarfed in the face of this marvellous, all-encompassing melody all around her. (262)

As she sat there no convey of official cars went roaring by. It was silent. No vehicle polluted the serene still atmosphere nor did she hear the abrupt gun shot. It was past noon when usually it would be silent. 'Yet the hillside was alive with song'. She moved from there and walked unhurriedly and it was 'amazing how different everything looked' (262). The landscape had a different look and her inner perspective also was changing.

The melodious scene shifts to a colourful and appealing sight. Going up the hill, it was 'dappled now with sunshine and shade. The verdant forests on one side of the hill showed itself with 'splashes of laburnum-bright, luminous gold, jacaranda purple, or sparkling, flame-of-the forest scarlet'. The trees and the bushes together formed the expanse of the forest but they maintained their 'individual identities' Rukmini 'marvelled' at the uniqueness of each plant, the variety of leaves, 'the differences in their texture, shape, size and colour' (263). She lived near such a luxuriant part of nature but had never been in such close proximity.

On the other side of the hill, 'lay a magnificent view of the river' that resembled 'a loopy brown python' and at each turn the Red River grew bigger. At another bend, it was 'frothing with vast quantities of brown water... angry eddies and foaming currents laced the surface' (263). Little did she realize when she passed by the river that a few days later the very same river would carry the dead body of her husband who went to rescue her kidnapped lover whose child she carried in her womb. Both were shot dead by the unidentified terrorist. The river sometimes flooded the area that evacuating people, sheltering them in safe places and providing relief fund was almost an incessant task for the government especially the collector, Siddarth. The Red River dazzled the natives with its enigmatic power yet people loved the river. The terrorists of course looked upon it for their instrumental value and exploited the nature surrounding. The text unfolds the significance of the river

differing according to the nature of people. People's aesthetic appreciation of the river does not dominate the other views and there lies its innate power.

Walking down the bridle path, she reached the green depths that she had never noticed before. 'It was cooler here. Hardly any sunshine penetrated the leafy, velvet-green canopy. There was an aroma of growing things, of dampness and fecundity all around'. The birdsong was louder and even more melodious. The sound of the rushing stream was like a 'contrapuntal beat' added to the opera of birdsong. As she kept moving, she was deep inside the forest, 'its luxuriant greenness and moist, earthy aroma filling her senses' (263). The stream of rushing water was 'a solo instrument playing its own harmony' to the chorus of birds. The birdsong was shut out by the rush of water that dropped into a pool from three streams. The sound was like an 'open throated, full - chested burst' (264). The whole forest echoed with music of water and living creatures and that animated everything in that deep still forest.

In the deep forest enormous kosu leaves looked like serrated hearts. The trees varied in size, quality and colour.

Huge trees loomed all around, but their trunks were invisible under the mantles of clinging and enveloping creepers. Everywhere she looked, there was only green. Emerald, moss, banana - leaf, pea, apple, olive, even bottle green... all the various shades of the colour vying for attention. The light that filtered palely down was also a cool, leaf-green. (264)

Adorno points out, 'The pain in the face of beauty, nowhere more visceral than in the experience of nature, is as much the longing for what beauty promises but never unveils as it is suffering at the inadequacy of the appearance, which fails beauty while wanting to make itself like it' (82). The forest scene depicts the natural beauty in Adorno's words as 'appearing beauty'. Nature strives for man's attention and it is sad that it goes unnoticed except for a few persons

under the power of biophilia. The scene presents different minute shades of colour and that shows the richness of nature. Besides it manifests a great principle of interdependency of the biotic world that the trunks could not be seen because of the climbing creepers.

The green carpet of undergrowth indicated that it was 'made up of a riot of plants, with foliage ranging from delicate, shy- green, long, tendril-like leaves to sassy arum leaves' (264). The leaves, each was of a man's height that as she walked past them, she says they were evaluating her like groups of roadside romeos. As she rounded the bend, she could see the flowers,

huge, white, trumpet – like blooms that glowed ivory in the green dusk. Some had small florets that spread themselves out like a luminous lilac carpet on the floor of the forest. In other places, orchids spurted sudden fountains of flaming orange, violet and white out of trunks of their host trees. (264)

The narrator portrays step by step and in an orderly manner. The accurate account details the sight and it becomes vivid and eye-catching. It inevitably acts on not only the sensory perceptions but also the analytical mind and the wonder is that it causes its effect on the perceiving senses.

Rukmini walked towards the edge of the pool. 'The swirling, circular currents had a mesmeric effect'. The three streams were a trifurcation of the rivulet separated by two slaps of 'flat – topped rock that lay, like reclining human bodies, supine on the bed, at an incline (264). Upstream, the water picked up speed at the rapids,

the river was slow – moving, with mysterious green depths. The forest shadows coloured it emerald, but no streaks of sunlight brightened it till it reached the trident – shaped cascades, where the rivulet danced and leaped with sudden abandon, as though touched with madness. (265)

As the rivulet continued its journey it looked changed. 'It rippled, it skipped and danced over a pebbly bed'. She stood in the centre of the pool for a long time. The water splashed over her. The dark hill straight ahead 'dissolved in sudden rainbows of dancing colours as her face, hair, eyes, eyelashes were drenched with the cold, life – giving water' (265). When a human being comes in contact with nature, the delight that he / she draws is immeasurable.

What the pristine beauty does to the human cannot be calculated for it endues him with a kind of healing and wholeness that no other recourses could ever attempt to offer and have the felt effect. The wounded psyche, self and society inflicted, of Rukmini has been healed and naturally it makes her think with clarity and in the right perspective. The amazing sight causes a chemical change in her being on her brief kinship with nature that lives in such an admirable integrated and interdependent closeness. The experiential wisdom is that the stream has 'life – giving water'. Then she rested on the rock and when she awoke, she felt 'an unmistakable warmth that signaled new beginnings within'. The rushing waters' echo remained within her, 'a muted whisper, a soft vibration in every pore of her being' (266). Arne Naess, as explained by Freya Mathews, says that 'joy and meaningfulness of life are increased through increasing self-realization and that comes with the self-widening and that expansion is akin to "falling in love outward" '(221). Rukmini had indeed fallen in love with nature and that enables her to love humans around. Human aid cannot ever match this healing sensation, sensation of life drawn from intimacy with nature that continues to sustain man. Nature's wealth caters to both physical and psychic well-being of man. In typical contrast to this revitalizing source, as she moves, there is the cremation ground where the priests chant, the bodies burn and in a scarring manner a madman roams around naked and no one takes any effort to clothe him and that is the human world.

In the two texts taken for analysis, the writers depict nature that offers delight to the reader for they capture the colour, shade, sound and vibrations that the whole sight emerges with conspicuous design. Hazarika's love of nature creates an indelible bond of love, that the hills become gods and has close paternal and maternal, in fact generational ties. Kharkongor states in simple terms that the hills are his gods but its depth rings forth crossing all the layers and reaching communion with god. Both the writers remain not at the peripheral layer of looking at a beautiful scene but dwell on the intrinsic value. Their characters are not observers but merge with the biotic sphere and stay in the awesome presence of nature. As Fisher points out an aesthetic experience integrates all of our sensory modalities and the perceiving subject is part of the nature (268). Phukan succeeds in making the character draw strength and healing from the ever – caring nature. Naess 'envisages self-realization as involving the transition not only from ego to social self, but from social self to ecological self' (221). Kharkongor loves community and reveres nature. Deepening connection with nature has reached a heightened level with him that he cannot live without the land that he loves. Rukmini passes the transitional stage and begins to understand her husband and truly loves nature. The writers acknowledge that nature is sublime and the virgin nature with its pristine beauty cannot but be in majestic state. Man in such an exuberant state can only join with Gerard Manley Hopkins and proclaim 'Glory be to God for dappled things' and nature, His awesome creation.

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