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An Eco Critical Reading of Lohani's 'Gaia' and V.S. Rai's 'Corona Says'

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Abstract

Environment is the indispensable domain of human beings which provides the larger platform of various activities. Essentially, violation of environmental ethics has been the hue and cry at present. This paper aims to explore the environmental issues imbedded in the poems of Shreedhar Lohani's Gaia and Vishnu Singh Rai's Corona Says. The purpose of this research is to explore and highlight the anthropocentrism, man-nature relationship and the consequences of the transgression of nature. This qualitative research investigates the select poems 'Gaia' and 'Corona Says' from an eco-critical approach. The qualitative method of interpretation is used to analyze both of the poems. The secondary data has been used to interpret the texts as they are published in the text books. An examination on these poems sheds lights on the idea that the random use of resources and human indifference to nature brings immeasurable consequences to human beings. The study concludes that the poems are thematically interconnected, rich in eco critical awareness and reaffirm that the excessive practice of any ideology either eco centrism or anthropocentrism has adverse effects on environment. From the study, it is deduced that green ecology and the ecological balance should be the new human agenda in the 21st century.

Keywords: qualitative, environmental, eco critical approach, eco centrism, interconnected, ideology, anthropocentrism

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Lohani's *Gaia* and Rai's *Corona Says*: A Cry for Nature

As the byproduct of development, humankind and nature are colliding each other. Various types of environmental problems such as global warming, ozone layer depletion, flood, precipitation and droughts have recurred due to the violation of environmental ethics and malfunctioning of development activities. Imti Samuel Longkumer in the book *Panca Mahabhutas* puts forward that “Depletion and destruction of the environment is all but because of disrespect, disregard to the simple but vital elements” (289). Such environmental issues are illustrated in the literary artifacts. The inclusion of environmental issues in the literary texts is as old as the act of literary writing itself as it can be marked out in the great works of Greek Poets Homer and Virgil. In the modern context, the birth of environmental literary studies began since the mid-80s of the 20th century. In 1985 Fredrick O. Waage edited *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources* which sought to foster “a greater presence of environmental concern and awareness in the literary disciplines” (viii). Similarly, in 1992, at the annual meeting of the Western Literary Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed which emphasized upon the ideas and information represented in the literary texts. It also highlighted the representation of human beings and natural world in the literature. To be more specific ASLE aimed to promote new nature writing, environmental literature and environmental research as well. Prior to these environmental scholarly research works, the ancient classical texts such as the *Gita*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* also addressed such issues. Regarding the causes of environmental degradation Anand Singh remarks in his work *Planet, Plants & Animals: Ecological Paradigms in Buddhism*: Environmental ethics needs a significant departure which can signify an all-pervasive system including both biotic and abiotic species. It implies an interrelationship of all these species and their environment which will sustain the human existence through balance of ecosystem by conserving and preserving natural resources” (6). Thus, before the innovation of ecological theory, environmentalism and ecocriticism, the literary texts showcased the natural phenomenon in the literary writing. Envisioning environmental issues, human relations with animals and environment have been the penchant issues in literary works in the past as well as at present. Aforementioned concerns have been unfolded by the two prolific Nepali poets: Shreehdhar Prasad Lohani and Vishnu S. Rai as the cry for nature has been an unabated phenomenon in the academic world.

Lohani, the most famous Nepali writer, critic and poet, has been engaged in preparing and editing the text books such as *Adventures in English*, *Flax Golden Tales* and *Visions* for

the university level. Besides, Lohani has composed the notable poem 'Gaia' which shows keen inclination to Gaia hypothesis. The poem showcases the nature as a source of creation of all the living beings as it resembles with Greek Goddess Gaia. Gaia, as Goddess serves as a mother figure, has richness in its inherent property. Similarly, Vishnu Singh Rai, a bilingual writer, writes in both English and Nepali language. He has written several stories and poems both in English and Nepali. *Martyrs and Other Stores* (English), *Realities* (English), *Nau Dandapari* (Nepali) *Paheli* (Nepali), *Jeevan* (a collection of poetry in Nepali) are trailblazing literary works of Professor Rai. Besides, he has been involved in teaching, training and research works. His poem 'Corona Says' composed during the pandemic Covid-19, spotlights the global crisis caused by Covid-19 and warns humankind of their irresponsible anthropocentric act. It awakens the human beings about the consequences of the environmental damage. An eco-critical study of these two poems- 'Gaia' and 'Corona Says' depicts the fact how important and useful the nature is for human beings. Similarly, there lies the poets' implicit warning of an apocalypse when nature is exploited ruthlessly. Though the poems are composed by the two writers in the different time setting, they deal about the most dominant approaches of ecocriticism i.e. eco centrism and anthropocentrism.

While interpreting the Gaia and Corona Says from eco critical perspective, the researcher seeks to answer the following pivotal questions:

- i) What kind of environmental issues are included in the poems?
- ii) How do they assert the view of eco centrism and anthropocentrism?

The act of eco-critical reading of these poems also portrays the relationship between nature and human beings. The interconnectedness between human beings and the nature along with the harsh realities of anthropocentrism has been explored in this paper.

Review of Theoretical Literature

Ecocriticism is the way of interpreting the literary texts on the basis of nature, universe and natural phenomenon and their interplay. Furthermore, it focuses on an 'earth-centered' approach to literary studies and stresses the relationship between literature and physical environment, defines Cheryl Glotfelty (xviii). Ecocriticism studies literary texts from the perspective of earth centeredness. In this regard, Greg Garrard writes "Ecocriticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory" (3). Therefore, ecocriticism is not merely study of nature as mentioned in the literary texts but also exploring the close bond among man-nature and other living beings. Ecocriticism investigates the relation between humans and the natural world in literature. It deals with how

environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment and attitudes towards nature are presented and analyzed. Furthermore, there are two waves of ecocriticism as identified by Lawrence Buell. “the first wave of ecocritics focused on nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction” (138). “The aim of the wave was to preserve biotic community” (Coupe 4). One of the main goals in ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. Among the different centrism, eco centrism and anthropocentrism are the dominant approaches of ecocriticism.

Ecocentrism is the mindset which shows the deep connotation for the protection of the landscapes and their situation of intactness. Ecocentrism includes all living beings of the universe and their interplay in the community of ecology. In this perspective, humans should value animals along with other organisms. It is also an ethical analysis of adverse effects of human activities on nature. Ecocentrism is the broadest term for world perspectives that recognize intrinsic value in all lifeforms and their surrounding ecosystems, including their abiotic components and stated that nature cannot be reduced to what promotes human well-being. Although ecocentrism has not always been popular among environmentalists, it has challenged conventional ways of thinking about value and morality.

Anthropocentrism is the ideology that human beings are the most important entity of this universe. As Pyne explains, the anthropocene as “environmental maladjustments-the onset of global warmings, the explosion of human population, modern planetary pollution, the triggering of mass extinctions” (158). More precisely, it is an environmental philosophy which involves ‘a concern with human interests to the exclusion of non-humans’ (Hayward 52) or manifests ‘attitudes, values or practices which give exclusive preferential concern to human interests at the expenses of the interests or well- being of other species or the environment’ (Haywad 63). In short, there are diverse, complex and differing concepts of society, man-environment system, human- environment relations, man-nature interaction man and non-human relations. It concerns with the value theory. In this regard J. Baird Callicott states:

An anthropocentric value theory, by common consensus, confers intrinsic value on human beings and regards all other things, including other forms of life, as being only instrumentally valuable, i.e. valuable only to the extent that they are means or instruments which may serve human beings. A non-anthropocentric value theory, on the other hand, would confer intrinsic value on some non-human beings. (299)

Thus, anthropocentrism places humankind in the centre of all natural components and resources. Human beings have diluted, exploited, sold and destroyed the natural resources

only for their own benefits. Practically, anthropocentrism, a value theory, focuses upon human requirements despite the irreparable damage caused by humankind. Ethically, ecocentrism concerns the requirements of other species. It emphasizes upon global ecological issues.

The significant number of poems has been interpreted by applying ecocriticism. However, Lohani's 'Gaia' and Rai's 'Corona Says' have not been interpreted from this theoretical perspective. Though there are some similar issues in both of the poems; the issue of environmental consciousness, they are apparently distinct as the first one asserts the view of ecocentrism and the second one comments upon the adverse effects of anthropocentrism.

Methodology

The general objective of this study is to assess the ecocritical approach in 'Gaia' and 'Corona Says'. Specifically, it focuses on the following aspects: ecocentrism, deep ecology and Gaia hypothesis in Lohani's poem 'Gaia' and anthropocentrism in Rai's poem 'Corona Says'. This paper uses the qualitative approach of research method. The selected poems are analyzed on the basis of poetic devices such as symbols, images, metaphors as well as the themes. Each line of the poem is analyzed and interpreted in a comprehensive way to find the result of this study.

The main source of data is secondary one. For this investigation, Lohani's poem 'Gaia' published in *Flax Golden Tales* and Rai's poem 'Corona Says' published *Grade XI Compulsory English* are used. This study deals with the two selected poems 'Gaia' and 'Corona Says'. In the process of data collection imageries, symbols and metaphors as well as other important literary devices are used to support the key ideas which are related to ecocentrism, deep ecology and anthropocentrism.

Ecological Issues in 'Gaia' and 'Corona Says'

'Gaia', the Greek Goddess, metaphorically represents Earth as a mother figure, protects from dangers and challenges, nurtures by providing the essential needs and endures the pains and sufferings. Such motherly qualities are assigned to Earth in this poem. In this ecological poem, Lohani exposes the genuine environmental problems thus:

The searing wind among the withered palms
The devouring rain
The sea with its cavernous frothy mouth
The crooked beak of a mountain peak

Time plucks at the world
On its gray gaunt wings
The smell of mildew
Shrouds the house
Turbulence and hunger
All around
Yet
She endures (Lohani 176)

'Gaia' presents the idea that how indiscriminately human beings have used the natural resources. The adverse effects of anthropogenic activities are astonishing as well as unpredictable. The poem is rich enough to ignite the culpability metaphorically and symbolically. The main metaphors of the poem wind, rain, mountain, sea, time and house demonstrate the devastating dimension of the whole environment. 'The wind' the life of all living beings, is searing, unbearable, agonizing, intolerable and excessively hot whereas it is supposed to be cool and gentle for the survival of all living entities. Consequently, the palm trees have withered which indicates the act of deforestation. The influence of anthropocentrism can be noticed in the metaphor 'the devouring rain' as it is supposed to be for fertility, joy and happiness. Though the rain has multiple implications such as watering wild vegetation, crops, humidifying air and consolidating the water level, 'devouring rain' refers to the acid and arsenic rain which destroys the life forms. Generally, the rain is supposed to be an essential situation of hope, joy and fertility but the devouring rain is jeopardizing our health. Another metaphor in this poem is the house which also stands for Earth. 'The Smell of Mildew/ Shrouds the house' depicts the pollution on the earth. Though the earth is protective mother, all components of this earth have been tremendously exploited as the poet mentions 'the withered palms/ The devouring rain'. Similarly, 'The crooked beak of mountain peak' illustrates the development activities which are conducted without considering the pristine nature. The original structures of the mountains have been crooked. Due to such human activities, there is 'turbulence and hunger/all around the world. Thus, the poet illuminates that humankind should make the sustainable use of the resources. The ecological entities must be profoundly revered as Gaia. 'The searing wind' and 'devouring rain' manifest the danger and destruction. Likewise, 'Cavernous frothy mouth of sea' implicitly reflects the idea that the sources of water such as wells, ponds, rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans are polluted with arsenic acid, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides.

The poem 'Gaia' also reflects the philosophy of deep ecology, a new environmental

philosophy which does not just ask the act of valuing non-human entities of this earth but deep realization of greedy possessiveness of human beings upon this earth, destructiveness. The poem indicates the how humans have been completely possessive over the entire earth and ecology. Deep ecology suggests that humans need to start seeing the relation of themselves to the environment. Devall quotes Frances Vaughn in saying that the healthy self is “an open living system in an intricate web of mutually conditioned relationships (Devall 41). Devall agrees, when he says that “as we reach our ecological self we will joyfully defend and interact with that with which we identify; and instead of imposing environmental ethics on people, we will naturally respect, love, honor, and protect that which is of our self (Devall 43).” In our realization of nature as a part of humans, humans will not only begin to care for nature as it is its own, but humans will reach a higher level of self as well. Thus, showing a close affinity to Gaia Hypothesis postulates that a natural system controls, endures and regulates all the life sustaining beings in the earth. The poem 'Gaia' shows the idea that man entirely depends on nature. Though natural resources are overused, the nature is re-energized. Nature is the epitome of holiness, perfection, harmony and beauty. Thus, it asserts the view of ecocentrism.

V.S. Rai's Corona Says: Outcome of Anthropocentrism

In 'Corona Says' corona virus, the personified speaker, portrays devastating effects of reckless human activities on earth. It satirizes the misconduct of human beings as corona informs about its arrival. The occurrence of corona is the consequence of anthropocentric attitude of humans. The landscape, water masses, natural sights have been manipulated excessively for the development, industrialization, urbanization and tourism. Because of the given reasons, the problems such as acid rain, global warming, depletion of ozone layer have occurred. However, human beings did not become aware of such realities. Ultimately, Corona virus invaded as an invisible, life engulfing, and devastating problem to humans. In this regard, Corona has spoken thus in the poem:

Stop crying
Oh man,
Stop cursing me
And listen,
I didn't come here
Of my own free will. (Rai 241)

Initially Covid-19 was the matter of great fear for human beings. Humankind began to cry, curse and regret for their inhuman and irresponsible activities up on the environment.

Therefore, it reminded human beings not to cry and curse hence, it was obliged to visit the humanity due to anthropogenic acts. Corona as the speaker of the poem manifests the human superiority, irrationality and vanity thus:

You call yourself
'the crown of creation'
What about the others
Those who fly in the sky,
Those who live in the ocean
Those who crawl on the earth,
And those, the sources of your oxygen?
You think they all are your slaves
Who you can sell or kill
At your will. (Rai 242)

This verse of the poem has the very profound meaning about the creation of this universe as well. It reveals the genuine position of human beings. They have the false notion of being the source of all creation. In fact, guided by this notion of vanity and self-centered ego, they became so much selfish and irresponsible towards other components of the universe. They only focused on their own necessities guided by their ego, greed, and self-centeredness. Likewise, Corona reminds that the earth is the common home of all living beings as 'What about the others/ Those who fly in the sky/ Those who live in the ocean/ Those who crawl on the earth' (242) where all should exist mutually. Similarly, 'the crown of creation' (242) and 'inflated ego' (243) manifest human superiority and vanity. Subsequently, the poem warns that human beings must change our relationship to nature by being environment friendly. The pitfalls of anthropocentrism and environmental degradations must be coped up. Otherwise, humanity will face the lack of oxygen as well.

Corona, the personified speaker, rhetorically questions the number of deaths caused by it thus in the poem 'But have you have counted/ How many have died so far/ because of you and your wars' (242). The number of death toll is more significant than the pandemic Covid-19. The speaker has visited to teach a very important lesson that human beings must be aware of their anthropocentric acts such as pollution, massive deforestation and exploitation of natural resources. Human beings should not regard themselves superior to others by being cruel to the other stakeholders of ecology. The birds, animals and other microorganism equally possess this earth 'The earth is not your property alone/It's as much ours as yours.' (243). Corona

strongly claims that the earth is the common home of all. However, Corona underscores the positive impacts of its arrival thus:

Don't blame me.
I just wanted to show you
How clean the blue sky looks
Without dust and smoke
I wanted you to realize
How caged animals feel
In a zoo. (Rai 242)

After the arrival of Corona, the earth taken a little rest. Some important changes have taken place. The sky has been free from pollution as there is no dust and smoke. Similarly, it has taught the human beings to be nature friendly and animal friendly as they should not hunt, kill, sell and cage them mercilessly. Finally, Corona warns strongly to stop the foolhardy act of damaging the nature. Otherwise, more deadly pandemic will appear and humans will be compelled to go back to the 'cave time' (243). Thus, the poem vividly reflects the byproduct of man's treatment on nature.

Interconnectedness: Gaia and Corona Says

Both of the poems are thematically interrelated. They reveal the idea that human beings are inseparable components of nature. Human beings entirely depend on nature to fulfill their basic and additional needs. At the same time, it is their responsibility to preserve and make the sustainable use of nature. On the one hand, 'Gaia' asserts the view that nature is benevolent to human beings as Gaia, the Greek Goddess. As it is stated in the poem, neither the wind or the rainfall is mutually beneficial for human beings. The wind is agonizing and the rain is devouring and destroying everything on the surface of the earth. Likewise, the sea is tremendously surging up with 'cavernous frothy mouthy'. The bad smell, noise and hunger are prevalent everywhere. The only reason of such predicaments on the earth is the propensity of anthropocentrism. On the other hand, 'Corona Says' reaffirms the view that human beings must be aware of their anthropocentric act. By acknowledging the things in the sky, in the ocean, and on the earth, human kinds must have the realization of existence of other beings as well. Corona has ultimately restricted the freedom of humankind. It has also advised to change their egocentric thoughts as the 'crown of creation' and the 'inflated ego' must be relinquished to avert the environmental crises. Thus, 'Gaia' and 'Corona Says' underscore the interconnectedness and interdependency with each other in terms of basic components of

bodies, landscapes, technologies, and other elements of the environment. The poems are also interconnected thematically as both of them reveal the interrelation between humankind and nature. The poems openly suggest that environmental problems arise causing the humankind in crisis when the devaluation of nature is disregarded.

The strong bond of interconnectedness can be revealed as both of the poems shed light on the environmental issues such as landscapes, sky, sea, wind, sun, birds, animals which are constantly being overused by humankind's collective power over non-human world. Both of the poems present the Earth as a mother figure in the poems. The use of the Earth as mother can be noticed as corona says:

I came
So that mother Earth
Could have a little rest (Rai, 243)

'Corona Says' asserts the view that its invasion is breaking the regular exploitation of human beings over the nature and natural resources. In essence, environmental issues, ecological balance and ecological values must be revered. Likewise, the earth is presented as a mother figure in the poem 'Gaia' in the more indirect way by featuring the enduring qualities of mother with Earth as the poet mentions:

Turbulence and hunger
All around
Yet
She endures (Lohani, 176)

The depletion of environment has taken place due to the ever increasing demand of natural resources. Consequently, humankind has faced with a myriad of problems namely shortage of food, water clean air, poverty and rapid climate change. Hence, the turbulence and hunger persist everywhere. The problems like turbulence and hunger prevailed everywhere, however, the mother earth endured everything peacefully.

Conclusion

Conclusively, 'Gaia' and 'Corona Says' implore the idea that the earth is not only human habitation. Rather it is the common home of all entities found in the earth. Therefore, they should coexist mutually. They also reflect the persistent interplay between man and nature. Nature, which greatly influences the human beings, is much more powerful than humankind. The poems also indicate that nature's adversities such as global warming, ozone layer depletion,

acid rain and the pandemic Covid-19 are the byproduct of selfish, partial, and irrational human activities. At the same time, they also pinpoint the idea that humankind must cope up with nature's adversity in a rational way. Hence, the survival of humanity entirely depends on the natural phenomenon. They should not go beyond the caring capacity of ecosystem. The overuse of resources results into adverse impact on environment. Both the views: ecocentrism and anthropocentrism should be harmonized. Excessive practice of any ideology is pernicious to human race. Rather, ecological values, green ecology, and deep ecology should be highly revered. Realistically, both of the poems advocate on human-nature collaboration, cohesiveness and harmony.

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