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Nature as Psychological Mirror: An Ecocritical Reading of Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *The Lunatic*

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Abstract

In nature, where every rustling leaf and soft breeze seem to echo our emotions, we can see how closely our lives are connected to the world around us. This paper examines the ecocritical dimensions of Laxmi Prasad Devkota's poem The Lunatic, focusing on the representation of nature as both a psychological mirror and a symbolic force. Through close reading and engagement with ecocritical frameworks, particularly those proposed by Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, the study analyzes how natural imagery reflects and amplifies the speaker's emotional intensity, ethical concerns, and existential reflections. Devkota transforms nature from a passive backdrop into an active participant, where stones, rivers, and celestial phenomena articulate human consciousness, moral inquiry, and resistance to societal norms. The analysis demonstrates how The Lunatic critiques anthropocentrism and underscores the interconnectedness of human identity and the environment. By foregrounding nature's symbolic and transformative roles, this study positions Devkota as an early ecological thinker in South Asian literature, contributing to the discourse on literature, environment, and human consciousness.

Keywords: Symbolism, psychological reflection, anthropocentrism, resistance, and Nepali poetry

Introduction

Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909-1959), revered as the “Mahakavi” of Nepal, occupies a pivotal place in modern South Asian literature. His poetry demonstrates a profound engagement with both nature and humanity, blending Romantic sensibilities with modernist introspection. Among his works, *The Lunatic* (1953) stands out for its philosophical depth, emotional intensity, and symbolic depiction of the natural world. Written during a period of personal and societal upheaval, the poem dramatizes the tension between individual consciousness and social conventions, employing nature as a lens to explore psychological and ethical dimensions.

Ecocriticism, emerging in the late twentieth century, provides a productive framework for analyzing such literary interconnections between humans and the environment. Coined by William Rueckert in 1978 and further developed by Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, ecocriticism examines how literature engages with the physical environment, highlighting nature's ethical, cultural, and symbolic significance. Rueckert defines ecocriticism as the application of ecological principles to literary studies (72), while Glotfelty foregrounds the role of literature in shaping environmental consciousness (xviii). Buell emphasizes nature's active presence in literature and its capacity to influence human perception, morality, and identity (7-8).

Although Devkota's poetry has been studied extensively for its humanism, nationalism, and philosophical insights, ecocritical interpretations of his work remain limited. Existing scholarship has rarely examined how his natural imagery functions as a medium for psychological reflection and ethical inquiry. This study addresses that gap by investigating how *The Lunatic* employs natural elements as symbols of inner turmoil, moral deliberation, and ecological consciousness. The research question guiding this analysis is: How does nature in *The Lunatic* operate as a psychological mirror and ethical force within the framework of ecocriticism? Through this poem, Devkota constructs an ecological poetics where natural elements symbolize the tensions between individuality, morality, and the environment, offering insights into the human condition and its interdependence with nature.

Methodology

This study adopts an ecocritical approach informed by the theories of Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, emphasizing the active and dynamic role of nature in literature. The primary text for analysis is Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *The Lunatic*, while secondary sources include Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* and critical studies on Devkota and South Asian ecological thought.

The research employs close reading to identify natural imagery and interpret its symbolic, psychological, and ethical significance. Attention is given to the interaction between natural elements—such as rivers, stones, celestial bodies, and landscapes—and the speaker's consciousness, illustrating how ecological motifs reflect inner states and moral concerns. The analysis is contextualized within Devkota's cultural and philosophical milieu, considering the socio-political conditions of early twentieth-century Nepal and the poet's personal experiences.

By combining textual analysis with ecocritical theory, this study highlights how Devkota transforms ordinary natural phenomena into symbols of emotional intensity, ethical reflection, and existential inquiry. The methodology acknowledges its focus on a single poem, aiming to provide an in-depth, illustrative understanding rather than a comprehensive survey of Devkota's entire oeuvre. This approach illuminates the intricate relationship between human consciousness and the natural world, demonstrating the poem's relevance to both literary scholarship and ecological discourse.

Literature Review

Since its inception, ecocriticism has evolved as a critical framework that explores the dynamic interplay between literature and the natural world. William Rueckert's seminal essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978) laid the foundation for considering literary texts as reflective of ecological awareness, emphasizing the relevance of ecological

principles in literary studies (72). Cheryll Glotfelty, in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), further developed the field by defining ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, highlighting its potential to challenge anthropocentric perspectives and foster environmental consciousness (xviii). Glotfelty positions literature as an ethical and cultural instrument capable of shaping human understanding of nature.

Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* expands this discourse, identifying key characteristics of environmental texts: the portrayal of the nonhuman world as an active presence, recognition of human responsibility toward ecological systems, awareness of interconnectedness among all life forms, and cultivation of a strong sense of place (8). Buell emphasizes that literature's engagement with the environment can illuminate ethical, symbolic, and experiential dimensions, encouraging readers to reconsider the human-nature relationship.

The emergence of ecocriticism reflects a broader cultural concern with environmental degradation, emphasizing literature's potential to raise awareness and promote sustainable practices. By revealing the ethical and cultural dimensions of human interactions with nature, ecocriticism bridges scientific ecological inquiry and humanistic analysis, offering a framework to critique anthropocentrism and envision more harmonious modes of coexistence.

In the context of Nepali literature, critical studies on Devkota have predominantly focused on socio-political, philosophical, and existential themes. Thapa interprets the poem as a juxtaposition of Devkota's idealism against societal shortcomings, portraying him as a "lunatic" in his pursuit of justice (19). Phuyal highlights the interplay of self, society, and nature in Devkota's poetry, emphasizing his critique of social norms (28). Sharma identifies rebellion against inhumanity as a central theme, while Dhungel situates Devkota's work within a vision of a world grounded in liberty and ethical consciousness (320). Tripathi and Upadhyaya further clarify that the term "Lunatic" functions ironically, symbolizing the poet's critical perspective rather than literal madness (Tripathi, 122; Upadhyaya, 405).

Scholars such as Padma Devkota and Basudev Tripathi underscore Devkota's profound engagement with nature, noting his careful observation and symbolic use of the natural world as central to his poetic imagination. These studies recognize Devkota's contribution to Romanticism in Nepal and his use of nature to convey individual feelings, imagination, and cultural values.

Despite these valuable insights, prior scholarship rarely examines Devkota's poetry through an ecocritical lens. Most analyses emphasize societal critique, existential reflection, or aesthetic considerations, leaving a gap in understanding how his natural imagery functions as a medium for psychological and ethical engagement. This study addresses that gap by applying ecocritical frameworks from Glotfelty, Buell, and other scholars, exploring how *The Lunatic* transforms nature into an active participant that mirrors psychological states, challenges anthropocentrism, and illuminates ethical and existential concerns.

By situating Devkota's poetic engagement within global ecocritical discourse, this research highlights the interplay between literary creativity, ecological imagination, and human consciousness. It demonstrates that nature in *The Lunatic* is not merely descriptive but deeply symbolic, reflecting the poet's philosophical inquiries, moral consciousness, and profound ecological awareness.

Analysis and Discussion

Devkota's *The Lunatic* intricately weaves natural imagery with the speaker's emotional and psychological states, creating a poetic tapestry that foregrounds a profound eco-critical engagement with the environment. To interpret this poem through an ecocritical lens, this section highlights how nature is portrayed and how these portrayals reflect human-environment relationships. The poem begins with a bold declaration:

Surely, my friend, insane am I
Such is my plight.
I visualize sound.
I hear the visible.
And fragrance I taste.
And the ethereal is palpable to me.
Those things I touch-
Whose existence the world denies,
Of whose shape the world is unaware (lines 1-9)

This proclamation of madness operates as both a defiance of societal norms and a commentary on the poet's heightened perception of reality. The speaker articulates a sensory experience that transcends conventional boundaries, merging sight, sound, and touch in a synesthetic interplay. This sensory overlap reflects the interconnectedness of the natural world, suggesting that nature offers experiences beyond ordinary human cognition. The speaker's interactions with the environment-seeing sounds, hearing sights, and tasting smells-reflect an intimate and almost mystical connection with nature.

Further, Devkota animates the inanimate, transforming stones into living entities; "I see a flower in the stone / When wavelet-softened pebbles on the water's edge, / In the moonlight" (lines 10-12). Here, the poet blurs the line between organic and inorganic, implying an underlying spiritual connection that unites all natural elements. The water's edge and moonlight amplify this transformation, symbolizing nature's fluidity and interdependence. This aligns with Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). This portrayal supports his (Glotfelty's) view that literature can offer profound insights into our relationship with the environment. Similarly, In Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, he argues that if the environment is viewed as an influential force, environmental criticism should focus on analyzing how literary works depict and integrate the physical environment as an active presence (83). This underscores Buell's perspective on the environment's influential role in literature and human experience. According to his framework, this portrayal of nature as a dynamic and influential force highlights its role in shaping the speaker's experience.

In *The Lunatic*, nature is not a static backdrop; it is an active participant in shaping the speaker's experience. The natural elements, such as stones seen as flowers and rocks glowing in moonlight, reveal a world where nature transcends ordinary perception. Likewise, Slovic defines ecocriticism as the study of environmental writings or an analysis of ecological impacts and human-nature relationships in any literary or creative work, even those that appear oblivious to the nonhuman world (160).

According to Lawrence Buell, environmental texts should treat “the environment as a presence, not merely a frame” (*The Environmental Imagination* 83). As for Buell, ecocriticism is “a term that blends literature with nature” or “the study of the relationship between literature and the environment, carried out with a commitment to environmentalist practice” (20). This notion resonates in Devkota’s portrayal of stones and rocks glowing in moonlight, which evokes a world animated with agency and vitality. Further, Buell emphasizes that literature must acknowledge “nature’s shaping force” in human consciousness (20). As Devkota described, the moonlit stones, as living and pulsating, exemplify this principle. The poem advances this vision in the lines:

While the enchantress of heaven is smiling unto me.
They exfoliating, mollifying,
Glistening and palpitating,
Rise before my eyes like tongueless things insane
Like flowers,
A variety of moonbirds, (lines 13-18)

Here, the “enchantress of heaven”-likely the moon-becomes a symbol of nature’s mysticism and transformative power. Stones metamorphose into “flowers” and “moonbirds,” images that suggest vitality within seeming stillness. This Romantic sensibility parallels Ian Marshall’s assertion that ecocriticism involves understanding literature as a “site of ecological consciousness” (*Coming into Contact*). Sassor similarly argues that “art functions as a two-way communication tool and serves as a highly effective means of fostering environmental awareness” (qtd. in Marshall). Devkota’s communicative relationship with nature becomes explicit in the following lines:

I commune with them as they do with me,
In such a language, friend,
As is never written, nor ever printed, nor ever spoken,
Unintelligible, ineffable all (lines 19-22)

This ineffable dialogue affirms an epistemology grounded in intuition and reciprocity rather than rationality alone. Komal Prasad Phuyal observes that Devkota, “in a purely materialist world full of quotidian calculations of life, begins to communicate with nature” to preserve the “balance of the human self” (32). His rejection of reductive materialism appears in lines such as, “You work with your senses five, / with the sixth I operate. / Brains you have, my friend, / But the heart is mine” (Devkota, lines 30-33). This echoes ecocritical calls for a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism.

The Ganges emerges as a powerful ecological and spiritual signifier; “Their language laps the moonlit Ganges shore, / Ripple by ripple. / Surely, my friend, am I insane, / Such is my plight” (lines 23-26). The ripples on the sacred river symbolize continuity and interconnectedness, reinforcing Glotfelty’s assertion that human culture is “connected in fundamental ways to the physical world” (xx). By situating this mystical dialogue on the Ganges-a river revered as life-giving-the poem affirms nature’s sacredness, aligning with an ecocentric ethic of care. Likewise, Devkota’s symbolic rendering of the rose underscores the interplay between nature and culture; “To you a rose is but a rose, / It embodies Helen and Padmini for me” (lines 34-35).

This linkage of the rose to Helen of Troy and Padmini fuses botanical imagery with myth and history, reflecting Lawrence Buell’s observation that place and culture are “mutually

constitutive” (*Writing for an Endangered World*). Here, nature becomes a repository of cultural memory, challenging any reduction of the natural world to mere physicality. A striking critique of materialism emerges in the lines:

You take a stone for a hard reality.
I seek to catch a dream,
Just as you try to grab that cold sweet, minted coin’s reality.
Mine is a badge of thorns, (Devkota, lines 46-49)

This juxtaposition contrasts material wealth with poetic imagination, aligning with Peter Barry’s observation that for the eco-critic, “nature is a real thing that affects us, and may affect us severely if we abuse it” (*Beginning Theory* 114). The “badge of thorns” signifies the ecological cost of ignoring nature’s integrity, resonating with Nabaraj Dhungel’s assertion, “how nature is both constructive and destructive (61) as well as with Sushil Kumar Shahi’s assertion that nature in Devkota’s poetry serves as a source of culture, art, and wisdom, while also embodying a force of destruction (419). This sharpness suggests a sensitivity to the natural world’s fragility and the pain inflicted upon it by human actions. It also indicates an awareness of the thorns that come with beauty, a metaphor for the ecological consequences of disregarding the deeper, more poetic connections to nature.

Later, the poet challenges anthropocentrism; “You call the mountains mute, / But orators do I call them” (lines 51-52). This line epitomizes ecocriticism’s call to “decenter the human” by recognizing nature’s agency (Buell 20). By attributing eloquence to the mountains, Devkota underscores their role as communicative beings rather than inert matter—a concept aligned with Stan Rowe’s eco-centric principle that “Earth, not humanity, is the Life-center” (106). For the poet, the hills are alive with meaning, embodying the voice of nature itself. Poet suggests a deep, reciprocal relationship with the natural world, where nature is not just a backdrop for human activity but a vital, communicative presence in its own right. This perception aligns with the ecocritical emphasis on listening to and understanding the natural world on its own terms. It challenges the anthropocentric view that nature is silent and only humans possess language and meaning. By calling the hills “orators,” he elevates the natural landscape to a status of equal partnership in the dialogue of existence, reflecting the ecocritical belief that nature has its own voice, agency, and wisdom that must be acknowledged and respected. Here, we can align this perspective with Avasthi, Basudev Tripathy and Bandu in recognizing Devkota as a nature poet, characterized by his deep love for nature and a strong drive for imaginative expression (122).

“In the frigid winter month, / I basked in the first white heat of the astral light (lines 56-57)”, in these lines, Devkota portrays a moment of introspection during a cold winter month, where he finds warmth not from physical sources, but from the “first white heat of the astral light” This suggests a connection to something ethereal, distant, yet deeply significant—a source of inspiration, guidance, or inner fire that transcends the physical cold around him. The warmth he feels from the star symbolizes an internal, spiritual warmth, contrasting with the external harshness of winter. From an ecocritical standpoint, this stanza emphasizes the idea of finding solace and meaning in the natural world, particularly in elements that are often overlooked or underappreciated by society. Nature serves as the ultimate healer, offering spiritual fulfillment that cleanses both the heart and mind, adding vibrancy to human existence. Gretel Ehrlich, in *The Solace of Open Spaces*, encapsulates this idea when she writes:

Nature infuses our lives with a spectrum of colors, offering spiritual restoration through its purity and peace for both heart and mind. Space has a spiritual counterpart and has the power to heal what is fragmented and burdensome within us. Space embodies sanity- not a life that is overly sterilized or devoid of vitality, but one that can intelligently embrace any idea or circumstance. (307)

Nature acts as a universal remedy, capable of curing all ailments by providing spiritual comfort and enriching human lives with its beauty. It is a space that symbolizes not only beauty but also sanity, purity, and divinity.

Curiosity acts as the catalyst that drives society from a state of innocence to one of experience, a theme echoed in both Rousseau's philosophy (1712-1778) and Devkota's poetry. Rousseau believed that humanity, in its natural state, was inherently free and virtuous, with children embodying a mythical purity and innocence that society eventually corrupts. He urged a return to this "natural state" as a means of reclaiming happiness and living in harmony with nature. (<https://iep.utm.edu/rousseau/>)

Similarly, Devkota, through his childlike curiosity, celebrates the purity and uncorrupted essence of nature. In his poem, he glorifies this natural innocence, as symbolized by his joyful dance upon hearing the first spring cuckoo, an act for which he is labeled a lunatic; "When I danced to the bursting notes of the harbinger of the spring, / They called me one gone crazy, / One moonless night, all dead and still" (lines 67-69). The poet's dance to the spring cuckoo signals his childlike spontaneity and alignment with Rousseau's notion of natural innocence.

The tonal shift from ecstasy to death reflects the cyclical reality of nature, echoing Gretel Ehrlich's claim that space embodies "sanity" and restores the fragmented self (*The Solace of Open Spaces* 307). Similarly, Devkota's engagement with the tempest-"I sang with the tempest one day" (line 73)-demonstrates an embrace of nature's ferocity, rejecting human dominion in favor of reciprocity.

Even nature's violence becomes a site of philosophical insight; "When I see the tiger pouncing upon the innocent deer, / Or the big fish after the smaller ones" (lines 130-131). Rather than condemning predation, the poet acknowledges its ecological necessity, paralleling Barry's warning about the consequences of human abuse of nature (114). As Peter Barry writes, "For the eco-critic, nature is a real thing that affects us, and may affect us severely if we abuse it (114)." The imagery of the "Like a clouded day crashing down to earth in the thunderbolt (Devkota, line 135)"-amplifies the fusion of inner turmoil with elemental fury, affirming Buell's claim that literature can render "place as a shaping force" (*Environmental Imagination* 83).

Devkota's depiction of his eyes "Rolling round my fury-reddened eyeballs // a tongue of fire" (lines 140-143) evokes natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, forest fires, and undersea conflagrations-destructive yet essential for ecological renewal. His identification with these forces frames his rage as part of a necessary cycle of destruction and creation. From an ecocritical perspective, this fury represents a primal response to societal injustice, aligning human emotion with natural dynamics. The "variety of moonbirds," mythical creatures feeding on moonlight, symbolize nature's duality: nurturing yet destructive, emphasizing life's cyclical patterns. The 'whirling' of his brain mirrors nature's chaos, suggesting that Devkota's madness is not aberrant but harmonized with the wild, untamed forces of the natural world.

Throughout this poem, Devkota portrays nature not merely as a scenic backdrop but as a living, transformative entity capable of communication. His symbolic and mystical engagement with the natural world reflects a profound ecological consciousness, challenging anthropocentric perspectives and advocating reverence for all forms of life. As Lawrence Buell asserts, “place is not just a setting but a shaping force” (7), a principle exemplified in Devkota’s integration of nature into the speaker’s identity and worldview.

Nature in the poem functions as a mirror to the speaker’s psychological states, with storms, barren landscapes, and serene settings symbolizing emotional turbulence or clarity. Harsh weather mirrors internal conflict, while calm imagery evokes introspection, illustrating Cheryll Glotfelty’s notion that literature presents nature as an active participant influencing human emotion (16). By externalizing psychological states through natural imagery, Devkota highlights the interdependence of human consciousness and the environment.

Moreover, Devkota challenges conventional depictions of nature, imbuing landscapes with symbolic meaning that reflects inner mental states. This approach aligns with ecocritical frameworks that emphasize nature as central in shaping human experience and identity. Findings from this study reveal that his ecological imagination enriches the poem, showing nature as a vital force that reflects, influences, and amplifies the speaker’s internal struggles.

This ecocritical analysis demonstrates how Devkota uses natural imagery to deepen literary explorations of human psychology. By positioning nature as a reflective and shaping force, *The Lunatic* underscores the intrinsic value of the natural world and its integral role in understanding human emotion, identity, and ethical reflection. Devkota’s work invites readers to recognize the profound interconnectedness between humanity and the environment, offering a compelling vision of ecological and psychological harmony.

Through these vivid metaphors and symbolic transformations, *The Lunatic* dismantles anthropocentric hierarchies and foregrounds an eco-centric worldview. Nature emerges not as a passive setting but as an autonomous, communicative presence that shapes human consciousness. Devkota’s poetic practice aligns with Glotfelty’s call for an “earth-centered approach” (xxii) and Buell’s insistence on literature’s ethical orientation toward environmental justice (7).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Laxmi Prasad Devkota’s *The Lunatic* transcends conventional poetic depictions of nature, presenting it as an active, dynamic force intimately entwined with human psychological and philosophical experience. Through vivid imagery, symbolic transformations, and mystical engagements, the poem elevates natural elements from mere scenic backgrounds to autonomous participants in the poet’s exploration of consciousness, morality, and existential inquiry. Nature functions simultaneously as a mirror to the speaker’s internal states and as an ethical guide, reflecting both harmony and tension between humanity and the environment.

Grounded in the ecocritical frameworks of Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, the analysis reveals how Devkota critiques anthropocentric materialism, foregrounding the intrinsic value of nonhuman life and advocating a reciprocal relationship with the natural world. Stones, mountains, rivers, and celestial phenomena are imbued with vitality, agency, and symbolic significance, illustrating that nature is neither passive nor subordinate to human experience.

Through these depictions, Devkota's ecological imagination demonstrates that human identity, emotional depth, and ethical consciousness are inseparable from the broader web of life.

By merging Romantic sensibilities with modernist introspection, Devkota anticipates global ecological discourse while remaining rooted in South Asian cultural and spiritual contexts. The poem's emphasis on natural innocence, elemental cycles, and ecological reciprocity highlights the transformative potential of literature to foster environmental awareness and ethical reflection. *The Lunatic* thus emerges as a pioneering ecological text, asserting the inseparability of human and environmental well-being, and positioning Devkota not only as a Romantic visionary but also as an early ecocritical voice whose work retains relevance in the contemporary era of environmental crisis.

Revisiting Devkota's ecological poetics underscores the importance of integrating literary, cultural, and environmental perspectives, offering insights into sustainable ways of living that honor the interdependence of nature and humanity. In doing so, this study contributes to both the ecocritical understanding of Nepali literature and the broader discourse on the ethical and psychological significance of human engagement with the natural world.

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