

Changing Landscape of Punjab: An Ecocritical Reading of Balbir Parwana's Select Fiction

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Abstract

In contemporary Punjabi fiction, Balbir Parwana holds an important place. In his novels, he tries to trace out the changes occurring in socio-cultural spheres of Punjabi society. Physical landscape of Punjab has transformed greatly after green revolution. In this paper, two novels of Balbir Parwana *Gehar Charhi Asmaan* (2010) and *Katha is Yug di* (2011) have been studied from the ecocritical point of view. These texts foreground the changes occurring in the natural spaces, and being one of the few contemporary texts that give so much thought to environmental degradation, these texts are a commendable effort to bring into focus the hitherto neglected and ecologically fragile region of Punjab.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, landscape, Punjab, nature, degradation

Introduction

Variation or change is a basic characteristic of nature, but in recent history, natural environment is changing too swiftly and abruptly,

and most of the living organisms are finding themselves incapable of adapting at this pace. For the major part of history of human existence on this planet, man, like all other living organisms, got influenced by this natural process of change. Gradually, with the advent of civilisation, man started adapting his surrounding environment as per his needs. In the last two centuries, human race has become so much dominant and omnipresent that 'natural' spaces or places in the sense of 'unaffected by man' are nowhere to be found on this planet. This dominance and monopoly of a single species is considered to be a huge danger not only for other species and the environment of the planet Earth, but human race itself is unable to escape from its bad consequences.

If humans have acquired the power to alter or control natural environment and organisms, it is also their own responsibility to make efforts to solve these problems. This is the basic premise on which role of literature can be discussed in the context of ecological crisis, and Ecocriticism, a mode of studying literature in the context of contemporary environmental issues can provide some significant inputs in understanding the issues at hand.

Environment and Punjabi Literature

Historically, till recent times, Punjab, the land of five rivers and fertile plains, has mostly remained in harmony with nature. '*Pawan guru, pani pita, mata dharat mahat*', echo this relationship in beautiful words. It should be noted that, some changes have always occurred whenever man and nature came in contact with one another, whether that was the domestication of animals or the beginning of agriculture. But the power of man to significantly affect or alter nature is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Punjab is mostly an agricultural region, and due to absence of major industrialization, main ecological changes have occurred only

after the modernization of agriculture during Green revolution. And literature has described this accordingly.

In modern Punjabi literature, from Bhai Vir Singh's nature description, Puran Singh's love of Punjabi landscape, Prof. Mohan Singh's *Chatto di beri*, Amrita Pritam's description of changing seasons to Shiv Kumar Batalvi's remarkable corpus of indigenous plants and trees, nature description always had a prominent place. Even the titles of a large number of literary books are inspired by nature. e.g. *Rohi Biaban*, *Toota wala khoo*, *Birth arz kare*, *uddde bazan magar* etc.

The problem in most of these texts is that, awareness about environmental problems is not there. Mostly, nature acts as a backdrop or as a symbol of good times gone by. But recently, with the increasing awareness about these issues, description or discussion of environmental problems has started becoming an important part of some texts.

Balbir Parwana's Fiction

In contemporary Punjabi literature, the journalist cum writer Balbir Parwana has focused on changing landscape of Punjab in his two novels *Gehar Charhi Asmaan* (2010) and *Katha is Yug di* (2011).

In these two novels, there is depiction of continuous process of change which came in the north-eastern region of Punjab after Independence. How village life came in contact with urban life and how nature dependent primitive farming changed into highly intensive mechanical way of farming. It was not just a change in modes and methods of agriculture; it changed the whole cultural and physical environment of Punjab.

First novel under study i.e. *Gehar Charhi Asmaan* starts some years after Independence and is located in *kandi* areas of Punjab which is a semi hilly area. Writer of the novel is a political activist and

journalist and current literary editor of important Punjabi daily *Nawan Zamana*. So, novel is basically concerned with portrayal of the emergence and spread of communist movement in the early sixties. He uses the character of Gurmail to foreground the strengths and weaknesses of this movement. But it is not only a critique of the movement, it is also a social history of early years of Green Revolution when landscape of Punjab changed drastically.

In the very beginning of the novel, there is description of a common shared place of the village where village folks spend their ideal time under the shady trees. This place is a social hub of the daily life of the village.

It was a calm afternoon of summer...there were 15-20 trees of Jamuns at the distance of 5-7 yards on both sides of the road...their branches were intermingling in one another in such a way that it was impossible for the sunlight to reach that portion of the road...there were 10-12 mango trees, and 4-5 Sheesham trees also...there was enough crowd till afternoon. (Parwana, Gehar 1, translation mine)

Note how novelist sets the starting atmosphere of the place. There is greenery, plant diversity, shady trees to cool down the temperature and no water scarcity. It is the example of an ideal place. Every text has a reference point. This creates a reference point about what is natural and that would be subsequently destroyed by the Man.

Similarly, water is clean and in abundance,

Kool had clean filtered water, reaching up to waist height, shiny sand used to slip under feet...Kool used to flow throughout the year. Whenever required, people used to block kool and diverted water through nalas to their fields. (65)

and natural vegetation is everywhere

Starting from Bhangala, and passing through villages of Bachwai, this road used to turn into a lush green forest. On both sides of the road, two-three yards wide fence of thick bushes, trees, plants, maleis, garne's made it almost impossible to look across the fields on the other side of this fence. (104)

This strip of wild plantation helped in saving the fields from the animals passing on the road by acting as a natural barrier, so people did not remove these plantations even though it occupied some part of their lands.

But now a question emerges on reading this description. If everything was so perfect, then what was the reason behind race towards urbanisation and modernisation which gave birth to lot of human and environmental problems? There must be some shortcomings in this idealised way of life, and writer is also aware of it.

In the rainy season, everywhere there is mud and swamps. Diseases spread rapidly and people have to rely on village hunchman/sadhu to get treated by natural medicine. There are also instances of deaths by poisonous snakes etc.

After the rains, due to water-logging and swamp, there was abundance of mosquitoes and flies. People used to suffer from Malaria, Perpetual Fever, vomiting/loose motion. There used to be many deaths. (11)

This shows that village life was not rosy always. so, writer portrays both sides of the picture.

In this changing scenario, introduction of some techniques and machines is very important. First machine which comes to the village in this novel is the power engine, which runs the floor mill and oil extractor. This is one new and prominent source of air and noise pollution. But as it is a novelty/new entry and only one of the

few distractions, so people don't bother about it. The owner of the flour mill uses sound of the machine as a signal/advertisement that flour mill has started working. Balbir Parwana writes, "Sound of the siren could be heard up to one and a half mile radius of the machine, when it started in the late mornings" (24).

Apart from contributing to air and noise pollution, this machine also displaces/marginalizes some persons who were using traditional slow moving but renewable sources of energy like Bui's water powered flour mill.

As per this text, two drastic changes occur, in the field of agriculture. One is the introduction of mechanised way of farming and secondly policy decision of reorganizing the land under the scheme commonly known as '*Morabebandi*'. During '*Murabebandi*' smaller chunks of land owned by one person were collected at one place, so that size of land holding can be increased. This increase in land holding was required to properly utilise the machine powered agricultural equipments and in-fact it resulted in sharp growth in land use and higher agricultural yield. But, two things happened during this process that suddenly destabilized the social and ecological balance.

One, due to faulty implementation of land organization scheme, powerful people got good tracts of land, while already marginalized persons got barren/semi-fertile or fragmented land. Secondly, during this shuffling, people start cutting trees and vegetation which comes under their land and within a few years, a large portion of greenery gets lost.

With the new scheme of land organization, although there were opportunities for better farming, but trees were also destroyed very badly. Single trees were valued and brought under new organization...a lot of forest cuts, complete trees disappeared from the

outskirts of the village, people also cut trees from the sides of the roads. (85)

Introduction of mechanized farming catalyses one other thing. With the extra power of tractor, big owners bring large areas of uncultivated land under their cultivation. Gurmail clears the land adjoining to bui's gharat and removes water logging. Similarly, after getting tractor, Jaidars of the nearby village try to vacate their land from muzaras or their servants who were tilling the land for many decades. Because now they don't require much human help to cultivate the land, and are able to manage their lands themselves. Echoing this writer comments in the text, "Without the tractor, land brought under cultivation in previous four five years was not possible to cultivate even in twenty years" (Parwana, *Gehar* 121). So, with this, power again gets concentrated into few hands and majority population remains unable to get the benefits of technological progress.

On the front of human-animal interaction also, there are consequences arising out of these changes. As man brings more and more land under cultivation, open spaces which are home to a large number of species, get reduced every day and unable to find a proper shelter, various organisms start coming out in confrontation with man. Especially big animals start eating/destroying crops and man is forced to take steps against them.

So, in this text, beginnings of modernization of agriculture in Punjab can be seen. During this time the previously self-sufficient and environmentally compatible village life starts connecting with the new modern city life and this new life has lot of attractions for the common man. Life looks easier, secure, pleasurable and enjoyable, but once the man falls in the pursuit of this attractive life, the vicious circle of earning and spending starts and he begins to feel the other side of modern life. In this journey, distance between man and nature increases manifold and exploitation of natural

resources for personal gains becomes a common phenomenon. This part of the story is shown in the next novel of Balbir Parwana titled *Katha is Yug di*.

In this novel, there is important discussion and comments about environmental problems especially water pollution and deforestation. Protagonist of the novel, Jagwinder, is a journalist. He is a middle class idealistic man, who wants to live a meaningful life, but is unable to do so, due to his idealistic thinking in the capitalist economy. Through his character, the novelist expresses his own concerns for the environment and pollution. Jagwinder writes articles about environmental issues in newspapers and towards the end of the novel, he changes his lifestyle, shuns the city life and tries to live in harmony with nature. He also starts working towards awareness generation among common masses about the problems arising due to environmental crisis and the causes behind it.

This text not only highlights environmental problems, but also strives to provide an alternate way of living, which is less resource hungry and more in harmony with nature. Jagwinder tells his friend about his changed life style, "I have also reduced my needs...I came to realize the extent of nature destruction only after coming here. (Parwana, *Katha* 152)

After being aware of the scarcity of water in *kandi* areas, Jagwinder digs small pond in his fields to store rain water. He also worries about the polluted water flowing in natural sources of the region and tries to find out the cause of this pollution.

There are three main sources of pollution of khad water. Gill Resort and Farm, Sewage disposal of Kamahi Devi and acidic water of soap Factory...Fifty-sixty thousand population of thirteen nearby villages has been deprived from clean natural water, because of greed of a handful of people...and if we consider

this example to be model of development of the whole country, then, is it not true that we have to think about it. (Parwana, Katha 163)

After knowing the causes, he starts educating people of the region about these problems by publishing and distributing newsletters. As per the text, each individual should work towards preserving his environment and he should also make others conscious about the prevailing problems of pollution and ecological imbalances.

But there are also some problems in this solitary crusade against environmental degradation:

- In the second text, the protagonist adopts the path of partial renunciation from the active city life and tries to start a new life in a village, but, there are many contradictions in his way. He moves to a region where agriculture is almost rain dependent and production is also very low. This type of life can be possible for a man who is without family, and has very few needs. But, can it also work for more than billion people, and do we have that much fertile land where we can feed large number of people using traditional methods of agriculture? That is a big question.
- Absence of active involvement of woman in the text. Most ecocritical texts suggest that man centered civilization is one of the major causes behind this destructive attitude towards civilization and a constant conflict with nature, while on the other hand, women are more adapt and capable of interacting with nature in a harmonious way, because they have the power of creation and nurturing. From these two novels, it appears that women have no say in any important social matter, whether pertaining to agriculture, society, environment or the future course of society.

- Although the writer shuns the city life and moves to a remote place, but even then, he takes along with himself a fridge, a T.V., a computer, fans etc. These appliances need electricity and some repair and maintenance also. Are these have become basic necessities of life also?

Overall, it can be said that the novelist has keen sense of the changes occurring in the natural spaces and tries to present both positive and negative characteristics of traditional life style, and being one of the few contemporary texts that give so much thought to environmental degradation, it is a commendable effort to bring into focus the hitherto neglected and ecologically fragile region of Punjab.

Relevance of Ecocritical Texts

After above discussion, a question arises about the usefulness of all these descriptions. What is new in it? Most of the details of Punjab written in the text and discussed above are known to a serious reader of Punjab's history and culture. Study of good and bad effects of Green Revolution can be found in the research papers of agricultural economics. Geographers can easily provide data about changes in land use pattern. Sociologists can explain effects on society much better than this text. But ecocritics believe that literature has much wider reach and can transcend disciplinary boundaries.

After reading these type of texts, the reader gets an overall picture of what is happening around him and how he can interfere in positive way; and, this is the beauty of a literary text that crossing many boundaries, it tries to give a comprehensive picture of issues at hand. As Cheryll Glotfelty writes in *The Ecocriticism Reader* that believing that the environmental crisis has been aggravated by our fragmented, compartmentalized, and overly specialized way of knowing the world, humanities scholars are increasingly making an

effort to educate themselves in the sciences and to adopt interdisciplinary approaches (xxii).

As ecological crisis has not arisen out of mankind's need to survive, rather mostly it is a result of greed, consumerism or ecologically bad habits, so to change back the things to normal, the mind-set of people needs to be changed and cultural artefacts like literature and other arts can play a significant role towards educating people. As Robbin Morris Collin says in "The Apocalyptic Vision, Environmentalism and a wider embrace", "Humans learn what to value and how to care for it through their cultural traditions and upbringing."

It is generally said that literature cannot directly alter things, but it can help in understanding the course of things in a clearer and broader perspective. Secondly, most of the current ecological problems are caused by a specific way of living generally influenced by capitalism and consumerism. So to solve ecological issues, improvements in customary ways of living are a must. Only numbers/data cannot motivate human beings to change their ways as Ulrich Beck says 'Only if nature is brought into people's everyday images, into the stories they tell, can its beauty and its suffering be seen and focused on' (qtd. in Buell 1)

Conclusion

It is a common consensus now that ecological crisis is a multidimensional, multi-layered phenomenon. It is at once global and local and due to its complexity, no single effort or planning can fully comprehend and control it. Problem with environmental issues like rise of water level in oceans, melting of glaciers, ozone hole etc. is that they are unrepresentable by our customary forms of narrative (Kerridge 534) so they are difficult to comprehend and tackle. So apart from finding scientific reasons and solutions behind

ecological crisis, inputs from other social disciplines are a must to get to the root of the problem.

Thus, on the whole it can be said that environmental consciousness has always remained an important part of Punjabi literature and study of these recent texts proves that instead of simple nostalgia for nature or past, contemporary literature is trying to produce an informed critique of the prevailing situations. This can be very important for creating awareness among people about environmental issues.

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