

# ECOLOGICAL CONCERN FOR SURVIVAL IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING AND DHURUV BHATT'S AKOOPAR – THE INFINITE

## Abstract

The economic growth has taken a big toll from the environment. All developing countries demand more energy consumption that leads to environmental degradation. Some of the countries have started using environment friendly technology, but still environment degradation has been the current concern for all academicians as well as responsible citizens across the globe. The increasing need for this kind of consciousness has led to search for alternate sources to solve environmental problems. Man utilizes all environmental resources, so he bears the responsibility to adopt sustainable life style to cater to the issues in protecting environment. The novels *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood and *Akoopar – the Infinite* by Dhruv Bhatt explore the theme of survival through ecological concern. In these works, the authors illustrate the importance of environmental preservation and the impact it has on human existence. Despite coming from different backgrounds and settings, both authors convey the message that when humans live in harmony with nature, they ensure not only their own survival but that of all living beings. By emphasizing the connection between humans, the environment, and the impact of human actions on the natural world, Atwood and Bhatt highlight the need for ecological awareness in order to maintain a sustainable and fulfilling existence.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The progress of any nation and the economy of the same country is interlinked. But the progress of any culture or nation can never go beyond the limits of its natural sustainability. Any progress is worth only if it protects the environment. Man has bulldozed trees, farms, jungle to build concrete jungle. Many of the disasters that human race are result of such deeds. In the race of progress, man has put life of human being in danger. There are so many spokespersons of environmental issues like Vandana Shiva and Sadhguru who have taken charge to save mother earth. With advancements in industrialization and globalization, humans have become more focused on materialistic pursuits, neglecting the importance of the environment. Yet, it is crucial to remember that all the resources necessary for our survival on this planet are a gift from nature. Humanity seems to have blindly prioritized progress, forgetting our origins and the interconnectedness of all living things. Unfortunately, environmental degradation is evident worldwide, including in countries like Canada and India. When we disregard our roots and the significance of our natural surroundings, our very existence becomes endangered. As a result, it is imperative that we reflect on the importance of our environment and the role it plays in our survival.

Ecological imbalance and ecological degradation have become a global issue of concern. This not only puts the human race in danger, but the whole ecological system is affected. It endangers all people along with its ecosystem irrelevant of caste, colour, region, language, custom or rituals of human race. Man is facing hazardous effects of environmental degradation across the world in the form of depletion of ozone layer, global warming, famines, flood, earthquake, cyclone etc. man is responsible for all the imbalance and hence, man only can save the environment by implementation of sustainable development.

The primary goal of literature is to raise awareness about societal, economic, gender, and class-related issues. Similarly, literature plays a crucial role in promoting environmental consciousness with the aim of creating a sustainable environment where human life can thrive. Literature acts as a reflection of human culture, making the study of literature inherently linked to the study of culture. The theory that examines human life in literature from the spectacles of environment is known as ecocriticism.

The most straightforward approach to comprehending ecological trends within literary theories would involve familiarizing oneself with the practices of these individuals. It's important to note that traditional literary theories often centre on linguistics or cultural and social contexts. In contrast, eco-critics prioritize the natural world, perceiving it as a potent force that directly impacts our societal evolution. Unlike those solely concerned with language, culture, or social elements, the intellectuals shaping green studies acknowledge that the world comprises more than just these facets. Eco-critics strive to uncover nature's role, both in written works and within a broader perspective.

As eco-criticism became integrated into literary theory, a segment of it branched out to establish itself as a distinct and dedicated wing focused on re-evaluating literary texts. This involves highlighting the significance of nature and representations of natural elements found in literature worldwide. Notably, the primary focus of green studies lies in the regional literature of various locales, where a diverse fusion of nature's influence is evident. Nevertheless, prominent authors, poets, and literary figures continue to serve as the central

sources that nourish the ideas and discoveries within these studies. The easiest way to understand the ecological trends in literary theories would be to learn what these people do. One must be aware that traditional theories in literature put emphasis either on linguistics or on the cultural and social background. The eco-critics put all the weight on the nature and believe that nature exists as a force which affects our evolution directly as a society. For the intellectuals involved directly in the development of the green studies as world is not consists of only language or culture or social elements. Eco critics tend to bring out the part which nature plays – either in writing or in general purview. However, as it entered into field of literary theory, a part bifurcated and established itself as solely devoted wing concerned with the re-reading of literary text and bringing out the role of nature, representation of nature and natural elements in the literature produced worldwide. It is a fact that the major focus of green studies is the regional literature of different places where the variety of fusion of nature is observed. Nevertheless, the well-known authors, poets and literary figures always remain the central source which feeds the thought and findings of these studies.

Ranjit Lal, an environmentalist and columnist for The Indian Express, highlights in his reference to Valmik Thapar's 'Wildfire: The Splendours of India's Animal Kingdom' that the book serves as a striking reminder of the importance of safeguarding the environment we inhabit (The Indian Express, pg. 16). Advancement should never come at the expense of depleting the precious resources bestowed upon us by nature. If humanity fails to nurture the ecosystem that supports its existence and continues to squander these resources, a time may come when seeking another planet becomes a necessity for survival.

On the occasion of World Environment Day, observed on June 5th, 2015, The Indian Express delves into topics of sustainability and the need to alter destructive human behaviour and lifestyles that contribute to resource depletion. The urgency to consider sustainability becomes evident when the very existence of life is jeopardized. Human awareness has grown regarding the imperative to re-evaluate resource management and explore alternative pathways toward sustainable development.

Lawrence Buell has outlined specific criteria for evaluating a text through an environmental lens. He posits that a text's essence lies in its incorporation of the non-human aspect, where the synergy between human and non-human elements exists. The text should not excessively prioritize human concerns over all else. Instead, it should depict humans as answerable to their surroundings, and any actions causing harm to the ecosystem and environment should be seen as a process rather than a static state. The constant apprehension and pursuit of environmental survival cast doubt upon the continued existence of the entire human race. Consequently, numerous authors have advocated for a caring attitude towards the environment.

With similar concerns, Arne Naess introduced the concept of 'Deep Ecology.' Naess champions an ecological perspective, steering clear of an anthropocentric stance. He has outlined certain criteria for analysing environment-cantered texts in a distinct manner. These include the integration of human life forms within the world, the necessity of an emotional connection with nature that transcends rationality, the recognition of intrinsic value in both human and non-human life forms, and the dissociation of non-human life's value from its utility to humans. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on appreciating the qualitative aspects of human life. The sustainability and relevance of human existence can only be

attained when the entire human race commemorates its coexistence with the environment.

The works of Margaret Atwood and Dhruv Bhatt underscore the concept that their characters collaborate harmoniously with nature to achieve sustainability. These characters seamlessly integrate their lives with the landscapes and environments they inhabit. This interconnectedness with their surroundings serves as a deliberate tactic to challenge the contemporary detrimental perceptions of nature. As a result, the novels portray nature as an active participant in the narrative, enriching the discourse with ecological insights. Throughout the storyline, elements like water, mountains, seas, animals, fish, and birds function as eco-literary instruments within the realm of postmodern writing. Every character, whether directly or indirectly involved in the plot, is firmly 'earthbound,' thus establishing an intricate relationship between culture and nature. Human emotions are interwoven with the natural world, crafting intricate narratives within the novels. Consequently, these literary works serve as conduits for ecological awareness, with the stories projecting a deep understanding of the interplay between humanity and the environment. Greg Garrard has explained the same in '*Ecocriticism*',

“ecocriticism traces...the interplay between local myth and scientific knowledge, the tensions between human place and climatology... an interesting field to explore the interconnection between science and literature... including ancient literature as well” (Garrard 210).

These kinds of ecological implications help readers to empathize as well as appreciate the philosophy of ecological concepts in their life. The readers also realize that through these kinds of stories they have adopted the religion called environment preservation unconsciously and that guides them in their thoughts and actions. The environment rejuvenates readers' life. Thus, the writers like Dhruv Bhatt also regenerate and rejuvenate basic values of Hindu culture and advocate the same. Sharifa Vijaliwala comments in this regard,

“Indian Culture travels from information to knowledge and knowledge to wisdom.” (Vijaliwalaweb)

## II. ECOLOGICAL CONCERN IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING

Margaret Atwood's novels often explore the theme of survival, both on an individual and cultural level. Atwood contends that powerlessness and silence are closely linked, thus advocating for women to break free from societal constraints and find their own place of happiness. In her novel *Surfacing*, Atwood delves into the complexities of human-nature relationships. The story sheds light on the disruptions caused by modern lifestyles, prompting the characters to embark on a journey towards nature. As the natural world greatly influences human psychology, the characters' actions and reactions are heavily influenced by their environment. Atwood uses these elements to address the ecological imbalances caused by human greed. In an interview, Atwood emphasized the importance of the environment, stating, "Our tools have become very powerful. Hate, not bombs, destroys cities. Desires, not bricks, build them." Genuine advancement can solely emerge via sustainable development. Within this novel, Atwood delves into the intricate power struggles within the realm of politics. In the initial chapter of the book, she vividly illustrates the degradation of nature for individual benefits, portraying a scenery that encompasses not solely the physical elements of

rocks, trees, and water, but also delves into the territories of intellect, emotion, and spirituality. The protagonist deeply identifies with nature, shedding light on the interconnectedness between the self and the natural world.

“I lean against a tree; I am a tree leaning... I am a place”- Atwood, *Surfacing* (181)

And then

“I am part of the landscape; I could be anything a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock.”- Atwood, *Surfacing* (187)

The protagonist finds a profound connection with every aspect of nature, making her unable to ignore its destruction. Atwood aims to convey the message that Earth, often seen as mother earth, possesses the unique power of creation and reproduction bestowed upon her by a higher power. The protagonist firmly believes that rejecting nature equals rejecting a fundamental part of life. She speaks out against the violence perpetrated by Americans, who are held responsible for the devastation, expressing her discontent with the following words:

“I wanted there to be a machine that could make them vanish, a button I could press that would evaporate them without disturbing anything else, the way there would be more rooms for animals, they would be rescued.”- Atwood, *Surfacing* (154)

The narrator in the novel seeks to differentiate between those who create and those who destroy the earth. She desires to combat the enemies of nature while avoiding disruption. Her actions reflect her concerns for every ecological aspect of life. She aspires to transcend the thirst for power and approach nature as a worshipper, rather than a conqueror. Just as all aspects of nature exist and coexist harmoniously, human existence also depends on living in harmony with the surrounding environment. She asserts, 'I am the thing in which trees and animals grow.' She stands against the resort developers and the hunters who harm the Heron. As humanity progresses, it is imperative for individuals to grasp the concept of coexistence with the environment in which they are nurtured in order to achieve sustainability.

In the end, the protagonist finds her true identity on a Quebec island, where she rejects urban settings and seeks freedom from the destructive effects of technology. She longs to be liberated from the burdens of civilization.

“It's true, I am by myself; this is what I wanted, to stay here alone. From any rational point of view, I am absurd; but there are no longer any rational points of view.” - Atwood, *Surfacing* (173)

She seeks refuge in nature to find solace and balance. Standing alone, she raises her voice in protest, without any followers or an army by her side. She wholeheartedly denounces anything that contributes to the destruction of the earth.

“Her plunge in the ancient glacial lake ‘resurfaces’ with the power to refuse to be a victim,”- Atwood, *Surfacing* (191)

The protagonist's life experiences are shaped by the influence of nature and its fundamental elements, which hold a crucial role in ensuring the survival of humanity. It is the actions of humans that bear the responsibility of safeguarding the environment. In the life of the protagonist, Nature fulfils its role in upholding the sustainability of humanity, while it falls upon mankind to shoulder the responsibility of preserving the environment. Nature plays a pivotal role to survive in her life. Atwood compares nature with the protagonist. As both are feminine, both need tender approach to be protected. The ethical actions of mankind is accountable for the sustained life conditions and ultimately nature saves humans reciprocatively.

### III. ECOLOGICAL CONCERN IN DHRUV BHATT'S AKOOPAR – THE INFINITE

The novel "Akoopar - The Infinite" by Dhruv Bhatt intricately weaves together various incidents, each connected by the author's exploration of the profound wisdom found among the seemingly ordinary people of SasanGir. Their way of life has upheld the rich cultural heritage throughout the ages. Through the perspective of a painter, Bhatt vividly portrays the untamed wilderness of Gir and the lives of its inhabitants. As a result, the novel becomes a tapestry of diverse occurrences, all leading to a profound reverence and safeguarding of animals such as lions and cows, the mountains, the crops, and ultimately, the Earth as a nurturing mother entity.

Dhruv Bhatt places significant emphasis on the notion that his characters are not mere observers of nature, but rather active participants within it. These characters seamlessly integrate their lives with the surrounding landscapes and the environments they inhabit. This symbiotic relationship with their surroundings serves as a deliberate strategy to challenge and overturn the prevailing destructive perceptions of nature prevalent in today's world. Consequently, the novels depict nature as a dynamic character intertwined with the narrative, presenting an ecologically conscious discourse. Across the storyline, elements such as water, mountains, seas, animals, fish, and birds function as tools of eco-literature within a postmodern narrative framework. All the characters, whether directly or indirectly involved in the plot, possess an inherent connection to the Earth, fostering an intricate interrelationship between culture and nature. Human emotions seamlessly blend with the natural world, giving rise to stories that underscore an inherent ecological awareness embedded within the novels' fabric. Greg Garrard has explained the same in 'Ecocriticism',

“ecocriticism traces...the interplay between local myth and scientific knowledge, the tensions between human place and climatology... an interesting field to explore the interconnection between science and literature... including ancient literature as well” (Garrard 210).

The unconditional acceptance of the occurrences in which a man lives renders wisdom to him. Lions are considered to be one of the most dangerous animals, but people residing in the forest of Gir believe them to be the friendly animals. Lions do not attack without any reason. The grandeur is the trademark of the king jungle. Lions have learnt to live with people without doing any kind of harm to them. Man in Gir has learnt to adjust with lion respectfully. This reverence towards lions has enabled them in their synchronized life.

“The lion is quite different from other animals. Its status is unique and equally unique is its respect.”  
(ATI 81)

The novel revolves around the transformation of a painter, an outsider in Gir, who develops a deep sense of care for every aspect of the place through small incidents. Initially, he experiences a mix of happiness and confusion as he gains new insights. However, by the end of the novel, he becomes fully immersed in the spirit of Gir, just like Sansai and Aima.

The story is narrated from the perspective of the painter, who despite being an outsider in Gir, forms strong attachments to all its elements. The narrative begins with the words "Khama Gayrne" (May the Gir be blessed), spoken by the character Aima, and ends with the same words uttered by Mita, a character from urban life. Through a series of incidents, the painter shares his experiences and evokes a similar sense of compassion for Gir in Mita. Gir is portrayed as more than just a jungle or lion habitat; it represents a collective effort and mission for the people living there to preserve its beauty and existence.

The forest called 'Gir' emerges as a prominent character in the story. Gir is depicted as the nurturing mother figure to all. Just like a mother enduring the pain of childbirth, Gir is resilient and provides sustenance. Women also possess the same capacity as the earth, enduring pain and finding happiness, while ensuring the survival and prosperity of future generations. Despite facing natural disasters, Gir remains steadfast, nurturing the living beings within it, like a caring mother. Thus, Gir is portrayed as infinite.

Raised amidst the embrace of Gir, Sansai grows up intimately acquainted with Ramzana, a lioness. She communicates with lions and vehemently defends them whenever she perceives harm being done to Gir's domain. Dorothy, a researcher studying lions, rubs her the wrong way as her presence disrupts the peace for the majestic creatures. The wilderness, lions, and every element become animate for Sansai. Earth itself is akin to a family member in her life. Swift to voice her concerns, she speaks out against unwanted intruders encroaching upon Gir's territory. As both a mentor to the painter and an older sister to the girls at the Gir camp, Sansai displays the breadth of her affiliations. Sometimes stern as a mother figure, she also exhibits remarkable warmth. Each of her actions attests to her dedication to Gir, as if her very existence depends on the stewardship she provides for her surroundings. Fearlessly traversing the jungle, Sansai embodies the virtues of a saint – pure-hearted, courageously resolute, and nurturing as a mother. Nature has endowed her with the resilience to navigate life, and she channels this strength to ensure Gir's continued thriving.

Not only humans, but animals, rivers and mountains, also express the importance of togetherness. The artist struggled to differentiate between the lions, lacking the familiarity that Sansai possessed—knowing them both by name and appearance, a testament to his connection to the land unlike the painter, who hailed from the city rather than the Gir. Aima bestows her blessings upon Gir—the very habitat they all inhabit. Gir assumes the role of a nurturing mother; just as the earth serves as a mother to all, mankind must grasp the importance of cherishing their place of residence.

“I had seen both Ramjana and Saryu together and I had not been able to make any distinction between the two. These people can clearly see the difference between

animals and hills. Why so? I did not know. If I can understand the reason perhaps, I may be able to go ahead on the track to understand why Aima used the term 'Khama Gayrne'." (ATI 62)

The novel opens with Aima's declaration of "Khama Gayrne" after a confrontation between a panther and a peacock, yet her empathy lies not with either animal, but with Gir itself. The painter fails to grasp this sentiment. Mother Earth bears witness to all the just and unjust actions of its inhabitants, never turning away, always serving as a protector for all creatures - be they animals, birds, or humans. Aima expresses her concerns and scolds those who allow the invasive weed, Kuvadiao (cassia tora), to grow within Gir. She steadfastly declares the importance of preserving the original form of the species, the animals, and the earth - Gir. Sansai echoes Aima's sentiments, emphasizing the urgency of safeguarding the earth, a collective female entity that cannot be left exposed. Therefore, the growth of such useless weeds in Gir is detrimental.

Lajo, a close companion of Sansai, also exhibits her compassion towards her cow. When a lion attacks the cow, she advises her husband against intervening, knowing that the cow will suffer greatly while the lion will remain hungry. The ability to live among wild animals and still show care, compassion, and love for them is only possible when one realizes their own survival depends on the well-being of the earth. Aima proudly proclaims that life in Gir is actually safer than life in the city. She firmly believes that more people are killed by vehicles than by lions or leopards, serving as further evidence of her role as an advocate for sustainable life.

By presenting ecological implications through relatable fictions, readers are encouraged to deeply connect with and value the essence of ecological concepts in their everyday lives. These narratives enable readers not only to empathize with nature but also to embrace the philosophy of environmental consciousness. As readers delve into these tales, they come to realize that, unknowingly, they have embraced a form of devotion to environmental preservation—a guiding principle that shapes their thoughts and behaviour. Both the fictions vividly demonstrate how the environment has the power to revitalize and enrich one's life. In this way, authors like Dhruv Bhatt play a transformative role, not only in their narrative craft but also in revitalizing fundamental values ingrained in Hindu culture. Through their work, they advocate for the rejuvenation of these values and the harmonious coexistence with nature, fostering a profound synergy between human and environmental well-being.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Although both writers address the theme of human survival in nature, there are some similarities and differences in their novels. Canada and India share a colonial past and both have felt the negative effects of industrialization. Both countries also face ecological threats and emphasize the importance of valuing and respecting nature. However, modernization and technological development should not be the sole measure of progress. Development is crucial, but not if it results in ecological destruction. In both novels, the protagonist and the painter acknowledge their survival depends on their connection with nature, leading them to move away from urban life. There are similarities and differences in the novels written by both authors, but they both explore the theme of human survival in nature. Both Canada and



India have colonial histories and have been affected by industrialization. Ecological threats are a shared concern in both countries, and they emphasize the importance of valuing and respecting nature. The pursuit of modernization and technological development should not come at the expense of destroying the environment. The protagonist and the painter in both novels recognize the need to disconnect from urban life and embrace a harmonious relationship with their natural surroundings for their own survival.

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