

SHIFTING EGOISM TO ECO-ISM: A STUDY OF THE APATANI TRIBAL CULTURE IN ECOCRITICAL PARADIGM

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Abstract: The human civilization today overtly exploits the environment for its materialistic gain. The obsession for a modernized and civilized culture has led to a definite destruction of the ecosystem: forest, land, atmosphere, water bodies etc. The result of such detrimental practices would ultimately lead to a definite decay of the human civilization. The present paper tries to eco-critically examine the cultural attributes of the *Apatani* Tribe residing in the Ziro valley of the Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh. In doing so, their folk tales and folk traditions will be taken into consideration. From their folk tales to their festivals, way of living etc. the tribe hails what is considered the 'natural.' The *Apatani* tribe shares a very inter-dependent and harmonious relationship with the environment. Known for their sustainable methods of co-living, this tribe believes in protecting the nature and developing methods to sustain the natural resources. Nominated by the UNESCO as a site of "Cultural Heritage," the *Apatanis* stand as a paradigm today in front of the mainstream humanity.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, *Apatani*, Folktales, Eco-aesthetics, Co-living

Article Received: 18 October 2020, Revised: 3 November 2020, Accepted: 24 December 2020

“What would the
world be, once bereft
Of wet and of
wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left,
wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds
and the wilderness yet.”

(G.M. Hopkins)

Wordsworth said, "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her." ("The Tribune") Nature to him is the mother and a nurse. Besides, the age-old dualism in almost all the philosophical traditions of this world situates nature in the place of mother, the all-time submissive woman figure. Devastated humans always seek its final and secure abode in the lap of nature. That is the historicity the movement 'return to nature' refers to. Liu on the other hand replaces the word 'nature' with 'meditation' and says, "Nature is the name under which we use the nonhuman to validate the human, to interpose a meditation able to make humanity easier with itself." (Quoted in Barry, 175) He alleges the creation of an anthropomorphic construct out of nature and using it for human's own purposes. Nature as we all know and understand is the most integral part of human survival. From food to shelter, man is all

dependent on nature. But this symbiosis is today shaken by the tendency of anthropocentric chauvinism that tries to subjugate the environment. In the name of a progressive civilization, man is today exploiting the natural ecology. In order to gain materialistic benefits like money, power etc, men have started to destroy the ecological harmony which can lead to an inevitable destruction of the humanity. Scientific experiments and the growing obsession of prioritizing the human are ultimately causing havoc in the environment. From flora to fauna, animals to marine life, each asset of nature is today affected. When the natural clashes with the anthropocentric idealism, it is always the creation of a distress. Glen A. Love says in his article entitled "Revaluing Nature: Towards an Ecological Criticism" published in the *Ecocriticism Reader*,

... mankind now has the power to make the biosphere uninhabitable, and that it will, in fact, produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time if the human population of the globe does not now take prompt and vigorous concerted action to check the pollution and the spoliation that are being inflicted upon the biosphere by short-sighted human greed. (225)

Tradition and culture, which ideally constitute man's identity and his sense of self, have their roots in his

aesthetic pursuit. In the natural world, man finds his aesthetic lack fulfilled in the patterns and clichés of nature. Now the question arises as to 'how is tradition perceived?' Edward Shils says, "Tradition means any things. In its barest, most elementary sense, it means simply a *Traditum*: it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present." (12) When the cultural symbols of any society are valued with an interest to elevate certain patterns and characteristics of life, they are called as traditions. These traditions are certain beliefs and customs that share their origins with a community's past and are transmitted from generation to generation in the form of certain belief systems, values, norms etc.

E.B. Tylor in his book *The Primitive Culture*, defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (01) Culture is that cumulative whole that includes everything which is pristine and primitive. The notion of culture cannot be perceived without having a grasp over the tradition. A cultural trait with the passage of time eventually becomes a tradition. As such these societal heritages proclaim the existence of people associated with it and the corporeal verbosity becomes the nomenclature and identity for them. Often it is the culture that defines mankind and their existence more than their individual self. It becomes their way of life and a marker of their being within the varied social structures.

In the remote Ziro valley of the lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh there exists a non-nomadic community of people called the *Apatanis*. This group of people are believed to belong to the *Tani* clan of tribal structure. As nature worshippers, this Apatani tribe provides the world an example of what the concept of sustainability and co-living means that mankind needs to consider and reconsider in order to let the nature thrive. Nature occupies a very central place in the socio-cultural and economic life of the *Apatanis*. They acknowledge the nature as the supreme power. They follow the *Donyi-Polo* faith, worshipping the Sun (*Ayo Danyii*) and the Moon (*Atoh Piilo*). Stuart Blackburn in his book *Himalayan Tribal Tales* speaks about the *Apatanis* who

... recognize a procreative female power whose body is the source of the natural world. Grasses arise from her hair, the sun moon from her eyes, the horizon from her buttocks and so forth. Her body is also the source of threads, dyes and weaving instruments. They do not attribute the beginnings of the world to a creator god or goddess. (214)

Speaking about their not so colossal existence within the world culture, the *Apatanis* arise as the one example of what an ideal society should look like conduct. From providing women a larger space within the social politics and the household, this tribe engages itself with nature in a very coherent manner. Conservation of natural resources is embedded in the ethos of *Apatani* life and culture. Ever since from the time when they were hunter-gatherers, the *Apatanis* have maintained a very deep symbiotic relationship with their natural environment, which too have played a dominant role in determining their way of life. The indelible mark that the forest had left on the *Apatani* thought, behaviour and attitude, can clearly be seen today in their culture, customs and religion. *Apatanis* enjoy a wonderful reciprocal connection with nature. They conserve the environment and preserve its rich biodiversity and in exchange, the nature fulfils their daily needs. From food to shelter, the *Apatanis* specifically depend on the forest and the natural resources available. For example, their houses were made from bamboos, which makes it more eco-friendly and sustainable. The *Apatani* culture is replete with images and practices of co-existing with nature and the natural. From folk tales to rituals and their way of living, the *Apatanis* maintain a very synthetic relationship with the nature. The *Apatanis'* co-existence with nature is given a diachronous validity by their animistic culture: religion, myths etc. Their customary inheritance is understood as a 'janus-faced' phenomenon. Along with the recurring human-centric temperament which engulfs the entirety, there is also seen a more tolerant animo-centric approach amongst the tribe.

Apatani folk tales inevitably portray the images of 'nature as the protector.' These tales move away from the traditional anthropocentric mindset towards being more eco-centric one. The folktales of the tribe teach the humanity that the relation between the nature and

mankind is a two-way process, an inter-dependent relationship. The first group of the folk tales deals with the characters of *Abotani*, “a trickster who is also the first human and culture hero” (Blackburn 63) and his companion *Baro Piicha*. In the story titled “The Wooden Trough and Animal Helpers,” the character of *Abotani* is seen having a scuffle with *Baro Piicha* which led to *Baro Piicha* trapping *Abotani* inside a trough and throwing him down the hill in order to kill him. While the barrel was rolling down, *Abotani* invoked the natural forces to help him. He cried out “Little *tahi* plant and little *tako* plant! Tall pine and bamboo! Please block the path and stop this trough.” (Blackburn 70) The trees and the plants helped him by raising their roots in order to slow down the pace of the trough. He also called out to the fish of the stream “Tagyang fish! Hipyo fish! Please rescue me! *Baro Piicha* is trying to kill me.” (Blackburn 71) The fish went to the bank of the stream and raised their fins which prevented the trough from falling into the water.

The next group of folk tales deals with the adventures of two sisters *Biinyi* and *Biine*. In the tale named “Fleeing the Ogre” the two sisters fell prey to *Miikhii*, a man-eating ogre, who wanted to kill and devour them. While fleeing from the clutches of the ogre, the two sisters were given refuge by a ‘mantis’ (grasshopper). While asking for the help they quoted the *Pinyang* (Ceremonial) friendship their parents cherished with the mantis. They said “Long ago our parents formed a *pinyang* relationship with you. Don’t you recognize us? Please cover us with the dirt you’ve dug up.” (Blackburn 61) The insect then covered them with the dirt and hid them inside the hole he dug on the ground. When the ogre arrived at the place, the insect threatened the ogre to go away.

In the times when animosity and jealousy marked the human existence, nature as a caring mother comes to their aide. These prevalent folktales try to challenge the anthropocentric dualism that men are the dominant factor living that can eventually subjugate all other life forms. These *Apatani* folktales present a more balanced synchronization between the life worlds, trying to establish the interconnectedness between man and the nature. These tales portray man’s sheer dependence on nature because at times of distress it is the nature who acts as the ‘ultimate saviour’. Life cannot exist in

loneliness but can exist in relation to other relationships they share. The *Apatani* folk tales try to dismantle the notion of human being at the centre of the universe stressing on a more benevolent attitude and mutual relationship between ‘man and nature.’

In her ‘Introduction’ to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Cheryl Glotfelty states:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xix)

The *Apatani* folk tales replicate the human-nature co-living that ecocriticism propagates. It shows nature as a centre, that holds the entirety. In this era of cultural constructionism, when nature is considered as a mere subjugated entity, these folktales try to re-conceptualize the ‘natural’ as definite and dominant than being a mere subject of human interpretation. In both the above cited folk tales we see how the ‘powerful’ human ultimately submits to the omnipotent nature. The powerful *Abotani* as well as *Biine* and *Biinyi* were helped by the tiny plants, small fishes and the ‘insect’ mantis when they faced the threat of life. Ecocritics, talking about nature as the healthy psychological usher, prefers a symbiotic living, which literally means living together, denoting mutually sustaining, co-existing systems. The *Apatanis* associate trees with gods and folk legends, and mountains and water are considered deities. Their relationship defies the reader’s “awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities.” (Abrams 81)

The *Apatanis* celebrate a festival known as the “*Dree*.” This festival is one of the most popular and biggest agricultural festivals celebrated in Arunachal Pradesh by the *Apatani* tribe. It is celebrated on the 5th of July every year. Being largely an agricultural community, the *Apatanis* celebrate *Dree* in order to please and pray to the nature for a prosperous harvest season. They offer prayers to the four Gods of harvest they follow: “*Tamu*,” “*Harniang*,” “*Metii*,” and “*Danyi*.” The God

Tamu is prayed to defend the land against the insects and pest. *Metiis* prayed to prevent the tribe from the castigation of epidemics and other ailments. *Danyi* is invoked to bless the people with prosperity and abundance and also endow the soil, cattle and rice fields with fecundity. The tribe performs rituals like “*Medvr*” and “*Mepin*” which is done in order “to seek blessings for healthy crops and well being of mankind.” (“Wikipedia”) Throughout the feast, Cucumbers are given to one and all indicating the holiness and divinity of the harvest, of vegetables and fruits, that enables the *Apatani* tribe thrive another year fruitfully. (“Rgyan”)

The *Apatani* tribe is known for their unique methods of cultivation. The *Apatani* is one of the significant ethnic groups inhabiting in the eastern Himalayan regions that hails a distinct civilization molded and acquired through indigenous and local experimentation over the centuries. This incorporates systematic use of the land and rich granary of knowledge pertaining to traditional ecological understanding the conservation and management of natural resources. Standing hand in hand with nature, this tribe has made their culture colourful and fascinating with observation of various festivals, distinguished handloom designs, and handicraft in cane and bamboo. This co-existence or green-dwelling has made Ziro Valley a good example of a vibrant cultural landscape. A state of interdependence is always celebrated here as man and environment have harmoniously existed together in even through challenging phases. This co-existence between the two is being nourished by the traditional customs and spiritual belief systems.

The judicious utilization of limited land area draws in the distinguishing line between the *Apatanis* and the rest. Fish is reared in the fields of this relatively flat land in the valley, in which wet-rice cultivation is an annual phenomenon. The high level of biodiversity in the area is ensured by the systematic land-use patterns. Along with, the parallel systemic conservation of crucial watersheds ensures the required flow of perennial streams into the valley to cater to the people’s needs. This co-production of the rice and fish is supplemented with millet (*Eleusine coracana*), which is reared on raised partition bunds between the rice plots. These agro-ecosystems, created out of three layered cultivation, are nurtured by fertile wash-out from the

nearby hill slopes. Thus the nutrient consumption with crop harvest is refilled by recycling crop residues. To supplement it, organic wastes from the village households are used so that soil fertility is sustained in the days to come. In the Ziro Valley, conservation of the forest is efficiently done. This forms the crucial and indigenous irrigation system and makes watershed for the streams to flow down and provide sufficient water to the fields. Implementation of strict customary laws to bring a check on the utilization of forest resource and hunting practices made everything possible. Traditional reverence of the *Apatanis* for nature plays a significant role in the smooth knitting of the whole nexus. In a world where nature is blatantly exploited and eradicated from the face of the earth, such practices can be major issues and concerns.

The aesthetic value of *Apatani* way of life, their conventions and belief system are really impressive. Standing as an epitome of the nature-culture integration, the lived life of *Apatanis* awe-inspires aestheticism in every observer. Eco-aestheticism as a movement found its roots in the classics of Plato, Kant and so on. Kant suggested that natural beauty is more spontaneous and sublime than that of art and it enshrines the best habits and faculties of the mind. Aestheticism involves three basic dimensions. The primary included the possibility of the “beautiful,” which promptly applies to subdued and developed gardens and scenes. The second focused on the possibility of the brilliant, the “sublime.” In the experience of the eminent, all the more compromising and startling of nature's signs, for example, mountains and wild, when seen with disinterestedness, can be tastefully valued, instead of essentially dreaded or scorned. These two ideas were critically expounded by Edmund Burke and Kant. In any case, concerning the valuation for nature, a third idea was to turn out to be huger than that of either the wonderful or the radiant: the thought of the “picaresque.” The notion of the picaresque is ordinarily in the center ground between those accomplished as either brilliant or wonderful, being mind boggling and capricious, differed and unpredictable, rich and strong, and energetic with vitality. Ecocritics contended that mankind was progressively causing the annihilation of the excellence of nature. They advocated for a more aesthetic approach towards the natural environment. The beauty of the Ziro valley with its cultivated landscapes and

natural forest resources appeal to the man's aesthetic sense beautifully. The well structured and maintained fields are used and reused in order to conserve the forest and the natural resources.

Man today is devaluing the nature and is more inclined towards the projection of its culture. People are today having the greatest impact on the environment in the ways that they exploit the natural resources. For example in the name of food culture, animals and fishes are mercilessly killed and devoured. Large factories are set up to meet the personal requirements of humans destroying nature. If these activities are not managed carefully then the environmental damage can affect people, animals, plants, waterways, and other parts of the natural world. From dangerous diseases to natural calamities, the destruction of nature can only create havoc for the human kind, but not development. Our human life refers to our own self. Although nature and the human are considered as distinct, yet they are

intrinsically related to each other. Our life exists within nature. We shape the environment as much as the environment shapes us. When people's inner lives are misguided or unbalanced, the environment—human society, the ecosystem and the planet itself—is negatively influenced. In turn, a fouled environment functions to pollute the bodies, hearts and minds of those living within it. The ongoing destruction of nature, in this light, is connected with people's ignorance of or lack of appreciation for the true nature and value of life. The *Apatani* tribe teaches us that our self can be made to exist with nature and let humanity live peacefully. The common notion of attributing masculinity to the sun and femininity to the moon is reverted in the folktales of the *Apatani* tribe. This role reversal would posit the woman in a socially superior place and likewise the nature. Drawing distinction between nature and culture and situating nature before culture, the *Apatanis* adopted a life which is more ecoistic than ego-istic

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