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THE 'LANDSCAPE' IN MODERN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH

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**Abstract**

In examining the phenomenon of Indian verse in English, an important characteristic of modern Indian poetry in English in post-Independence period emerges and appears as an intrinsic part of it. It is the 'landscape' element that is used largely in the modern Indian English verse and it is deeply rooted in it and stems from the Indian environment as reflected in poet's native place. Sooner or later the poet does come to terms with his own environment-constituted of his physical and cultural landscape. Thus the poet intensely becomes responsive to the unenviable landscape in which he lives and functions as a writer of poetry. The present paper attempts to point out and devise the idea of landscape through the readings of three renowned poets in Indian English literature-A K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra and Arun Kolatkar, through the ecocritical approach. To put in a simple way, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. An ecocritical analysis of the work reveals themes such as nature as abode of the gods, nature as the cause of suffering and nature as mysterious

and elusive among others. Here lies the striking contrast between the traditional and modern Indian English poetry. The former were more interested in traditional view of pan-landscape and the latter got more and more involved in their native landscape.

**Keywords:** native, environment, communion, longings, connection, identity.

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Landscape' is a concept which includes the physical environment and people's perception and appreciation of that environment. It is not restricted to the purely visual, but may comprise and encompass the ways in which individuals and communities perceive the natural and physical resources, as through traditions, lore, and legends that express the significant and memorable elements of a landscape. Ecological criticism holds the view that human culture is connected with the physical world. By the term ecocriticism Rueckert meant "the

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application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Glotfelty xx). John W. Meeker introduced the term ‘literary ecology’ to refer to “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species”(Glotfelty xiv)

Poetry cannot exist in vacuum and a poet's perceptions are shaped not only by upbringing and social and other environmental factors but also by the traditions and culture of the society in which he lives and works. It is for this reason that the "landscape of Indian English poetry is of crucial significance. A truly Indian' work, would be the one which is about India and Indian landscape and is written in a language and style which fits well into the template of the Indian cultural scenery and way of life. In keeping with the discussion it would be appropriate to mention the role of modern Indian English poets in foregrounding their respective physical and cultural landscape in which they were brought up and created noteworthy poems, especially of A. K. Ramanujan, Jayant Mahapatra and Arun Kolatkar.

“A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry had become an essential and vital bridge across cultural landscapes making both the rich heritage of

Tamil and Kannada literature as well as contemporary American writing accessible to us”. (Shodhganga 51)The most outstanding poet of the sixties is A.K. Ramanujan who chose never to return and taught Dravidian Linguistics at the University of Chicago. His Indian experiences repeatedly features in his verse and that too in its original landscape. He was awarded the Gold Medal of the Tamil Writers Associations for his *The Interior Landscape* in 1969. It is a celebrated anthology of classical Tamil poetry to compose an unforgettable sequence of love poems. The story unfolds in a series of dramatic exchanges between a shifting array of characters—the lovers, relatives, friends, rivals, and sundry passersby—and as it does we are conducted through five phases of love, from first meeting, anxiety, infidelity and separation to final union, each associated with a lush interior landscape of its own and is immersed in the glories of the natural world. In the poem “What Her Girlfriend Said to Him” the poet dwells on Tamil landscape as stated in Sangam literature.

You say that the wasteland  
you have to pass through  
is absence itself:  
wide spaces where sometimes  
salt merchants have gathered for a while  
and gone, *omai* trees that stand  
like ghost towns once busy with living.

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There is a heavy reliance on nature, that external landscape, to explore the interior landscape. The poem contains some metaphor whose central feature is a tree, a fruit and a handful of grass, rain. It keeps the lofty dreams grounded in their surroundings in the poem “A Journey into Love”:

What could my mother be to yours?  
What kin is my father to yours anyway?  
And how did you and I meet ever?  
But in Love –  
Our hearts are as red earth and pouring rain  
mingled beyond parting.

The ancient Tamil poets sang about the five phases of love peculiar to the five landscapes of the Tamil homeland – the mountains, the forests and pastoral lands, the coastal regions, the parched wastelands and the fertile valleys. It was love at first sight in the mountainous regions where the hunter men courted the women who kept watch in the cornfields. There was temporary separation in the pastoral lands, the coastal regions and the dry wastelands when men left their women folk and went away for longer periods to earn their livelihood. It was patient and anxious waiting by the women. A poet's response to the landscape of his country, his sense of tradition and culture of the land of his birth and many other factors go together to make him assume an identity of his own. It is easy to take a man out of his

country but it is not possible to take away the country out of his mind.

Several scholars have divided Ecocriticism into two waves (Buell)(Glotfelty), recognizing the first as taking place throughout the eighties and nineties. The first wave is characterized by its emphasis on nature writing as an object of study and as a meaningful practice. This is, perhaps, where ecocriticism gained its reputation as an “avowedly political mode of analysis” (Garrard 3). This wave, unlike its successor, kept the cultural distinction between human and nature, promoting the value of nature. There are tropes and approaches as given by ecocriticism Among others ‘Pastoral’ is one such trope, found in much British and American literature, focuses on the dichotomy between urban and rural life, is “deeply entrenched in Western culture”(Garrard 33). At the forefront of works that display pastoralism, is a general idealization of the nature and the rural and the demonization of the urban. Often, such works show a “retreat” from city life to the country while romanticizing rural life. In the backdrop of this discussion I place Jayant Mahapatra whose poetry is redolent of Orissa scene and the Jagannath temple at Puri is prominently seen in the poems. Puri, Konarka, Bhubaneswar and Cuttack, form the nerve - centre of his poetry. Mahapatra's spirit of poetry emerges from the ruins of Konarka temple and the ruins of Barabati fort. In poems like "Dawn at Puri" and "Main Temple Street, Puri"

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Mahapatra underlines the importance of Puri and Lord Jagannath. Since the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri 'points to unending rhythm,' dying in this place will enable one to attain 'nirvana.'

Endless crow noises  
A skull in the holy sands  
tilts its empty country towards hunger.

White-clad widowed Women  
past the centers of their lives  
are waiting to enter the Great Temple  
and suddenly breaks out of my hide  
into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary  
pyre that fills my aging mother:  
her last wish to be cremated here  
twisting uncertainly like light  
on the shifting sands. (Poem Hunter)

Mahapatra has clearly expressed his indebtedness to the land of Orissa, while receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award for his book of poems, *Relationship*. In fact, *Relationship* is in a way a quest for his roots. In another poem "Indian Summer" the poet takes earth, sea, wind and human love together and shapes them all in his Oriya sensibility. The various challenges of seasons of Orissa and at the same time enchanting landscape existing amidst poverty and monotony of daily life are expressed with great precaution and passion for Orissa.

Over the souging of the sombre  
wind,  
Priests chant louder than ever:  
The mouth of India opens.  
Crocodiles move into deeper waters.  
Morning of heated middens  
Smoke under the sun. (60)

He has described village landscape or town or a street very vividly and authentically. Mahapatra deals with Orissa landscape also:

Everything here is palpable  
Here and there  
The muggy breeze from the river  
bursts with the sour smell offaces  
crushed grasses and wet earth. (94)

In another poetic volume *Life Signs* Mahapatra has seen a full of anxiety looking at the sights of prostitution, unwanted religious activities and so on. The poet observes poor and helpless life of the fishermen.

Fishermen's broken shacks by the  
river  
let even starlight slip out  
form their weak roofs.  
A temple stands frail and still  
in the distance, as though lost in  
reverie. (2)

The poet is very much conscious of the diseased world and the signs of such a

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world are close at his hand as he depicts in the poem ‘Violence’:

On a grieving pout of earth, footprints  
Of diseased hollow-cheeked children  
Rust-colored casuarinas cones frayed in the  
sun, and the dim consciousness that  
everything (9)

Mahapatra’s poems in *Life Signs* walk between senses of acceptance of the past and haunting recreation of the landscape.

The sun flood the trees, the sweet  
sweat smell  
Of women walking quietly by  
with a market basket of bananas on  
her head

The portrayal of Oriya women is very touching and adds pathos in landscape of Orissa. Thus we see that Mahapatra wanted to bring out the landscape of Orissa in a such way as to make all aware of the trials and tribulations of the place and also that the whole nature still appears to be charismatic to the poet. The poet also cannot remain unaffected by the world around him, by sensitivity to issues that torment the land around him.

Arun Kolatkar was born in 1932, in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, Kolatkar grew up in a home that he described as “a house of cards — the rooms had mud floors which had to be plastered with cow dung every

week to keep them in good repair”. He enrolled in the JJ School of Arts in 1949 and finished his diploma in 1957. A graphic designer by profession, he earned his reputation in the advertising world and it wasn’t until the 1960s that he began to write. Kolatkar, with his ‘two-headed pencil’, was one of the pioneers of modern poetry in India. *Jejuri* (1976) has been acclaimed by academic Anjali Nerlekar as an “amazing series of poems on the temple town in Maharashtra where the poet rips apart the hypocrisy and cant of the powerful Brahmins with their vice-like hold on the religion and underscores the anachronism of this religion in the modern world”. It earned him the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1976.

*Jejuri* is a long poem in thirty-one sections that is apparently about the poet’s irreverent odyssey to the temple of Khandoba at Jejuri, a small town in western Maharashtra. Kolatkar sees with the eye of a competent reporter in a language that is colloquial and spare. Regarding *Jejuri* poems M. K. Naik in his *History of English Literature* puts that “the poet’s impressions of the temple are juxtaposed with those at the railway station at the end. The surrealistic similarities startlingly disclose how at both the places there is the same blind faith in ossified tradition and the establishment, the same exclusiveness and the same dilapidation and general deadness.” (208) Arun Kolatkar imagines

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the protagonist of his poem as actually paying a visit to Jejuri to explore the beliefs under the influence which people travel to Jejuri in order to offer worship to god Khandoba. For all we know, the protagonist may be the poet himself but the poet gives to his protagonist the name Manohar. The Protagonist is a city-bred man visiting a small town, which is more or less a village. The protagonist himself is a sort of tourist because; he has no intension of offering worship at the feet of the revered god Khandoba. He goes round the place, scrutinizing every stone or bronzeimage of Khandoba and a number of other deities. He meets the priest of the temple and asks him all sorts of questions about the temple and about the god Khandoba. "The Boatride" from *Jejuri* is in keeping with the quality of poet's experiences.

because a sailor waved back to a  
boy another boy waves to another sailor in  
the clarity of air the gesture withers for  
want of correspondence and the hand that  
returns to him the hand his knees accepts as  
his own is the hand of an aged person a  
hand that must remain patient and give the  
boy it's part of time to catch up.

(Parthasarthy, 41-42)

"The Bus" is a fine poem from the epic *Jejuri*. In this poem the poet describes the journey by state Transport Bus in Maharashtra. The protagonist, Manohar and

other pilgrims are going to Jejuri to visit the temple of God Khandoba. He witnesses some biased things during this travel and explains with satirical tone.

The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned down on the windows of the state transport bus. all the way up to jejuri. a cold wind keeps whipping and slapping a corner of tarpaulin at your elbow. you look down to the roaring road. you search for the signs of daybreak in what little light spills out of bus.

Due to heavy rain, windows of the bus are covered with tarpaulin flaps. But still cold winds are forcing it, which hits the elbows of the passengers. They turn on headlights of the bus, which helps to see the road that is stranded in rain-water. He gazes to the road with little lights from the bus and feels the onward movement of the bus. In "The Horseshoe Shine" the poet evinces the local colours of Khandoba temple and its landscape very minutely:

That nick in the rock  
is really a kick in the side of the hill.  
It's where a hoof  
struck like a thunderbolt  
when Khandoba

with the bride side-saddle behind  
him on the blue horse jumped across the  
valley and the three went on from there like  
one spark fleeing from flint. To a home that  
waited on the other side of the hill like a  
hay stack.

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The ongoing discussion endorses the importance given to the theme of 'landscape' in their poetry by these modern Indian English poets who also assume an identity i.e. Indian identity in convinced terms. This is felt necessary in the context of the double challenge one from the regional poets of India and the other from the World poets writing in English - faced by these poets. The topography of the country helped them to acclimatize the native land in English language. Hence, the theme of 'landscape' is inevitably linked with national identity which these poets need more particularly when they seek to establish Indian English poetry as a separate and distinct entity.

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