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**‘LISTEN TO ME PLEASE!’ –A CLARION CALL OF NATURE FOR  
 RESCUE: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY ON DR. INDIRA GOSWAMI’S THE  
 MAN FROM CHINNAMASTA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*From time immemorial the affinity between man and nature was inextricable. Man and nature protected and nurtured each other to safeguard and nourish mankind. The ecological and the cultural dominance the Whites had over the third world countries are referred to as ‘Eco – colonization’ of the natural world. The Man From Chinnamasta explores the issues of ecological malpractice and questions mankind on the issues related to rituals and devotion at the detriment of ecology. It also reveals the Whiteman’s dominance over nature and the resources. The study focuses on the concept of the ‘Other’, the cruel strategies the whites employed to ‘other’ man power, poor peasants, ecology and the natural resources alike. The protagonist, the Jatadhari, holds a pragmatic opinion on the subject of sacrifice and offering. From an ecological perspective, the novel lends occasion to explore the bond that nature and this hermit shared. The clarion call to save ecology gives birth to a new canon which discards the centuries-old practice of butchering animals. His perspective towards offering acts as a catalyst that welcomes new modifications. The Jatadhari is bestowed with the sense of living in harmony with our ecosystem. The environmental crisis happening around us is a result of man’s detachment from the natural world. The present study employs an Ecocritical approach that strives hard to bind the scholars and critics, to show the significance of nature to the human world. It is an investigation of the relationship between each other.*

**KEYWORDS:** Anthropocene, Voice, The ‘Other’ Ecocriticism, Green Studies, Eco Colonisation, Postcolonialism

## INTRODUCTION

In the prehistoric period, the affinity between man and nature was inextricable. Man protected and nurtured nature so that nature might guard and nourish the human race. But with the arrival of new philosophies and expeditions, both man and nature took their own path. With the advent of colonization, the ecological resources were exhausted for gain. European civilization grew more and more anthropocentric and bolstered their egotism believing that they were not only the best of God's creation but are the monarchs of the whole world. The present study aims to emphasize on the environmental crisis and global issues arising from the exploitation of the natural world from a post-colonial perspective.

The voyages of Columbus and Vasco da Gama emphasize the merging of commercial and financial interests, (religious) ideology and belief, military force and political cunning. "... already during his first voyage, we may discern in Columbus the germs of the idea for violently subduing the native populations to grab their riches: the horrific genocide of the "Indians" is quick to follow". (Prasad 4)

It can be concluded thus that the means by which the colonists became supreme were through expansion of territory, coercive violence, and ruthless exploitation be it the colony, man-power or natural resources. The work *The Beginnings: Ecology and Eco-Criticism* discuss the relationship that living and the non-living beings owe to their environment. The ecological and the cultural dominance the Whites had over the third world countries are referred to as 'Eco – colonization' of the natural world. As a result, ecocriticism arrives with the promise of offering a unique combination of literary and natural scientific discourses.

In Dr. Indira Goswami's novel, *The Man from Chinnamasta* the interconnection between nature and culture is analysed. Ecocriticism believes in 'constructedness' which includes the idea that "everything is socially and linguistically constructed" (Barry 243). The "outdoor environment" overlaps and gradually moves from nature to culture." (Barry 243) Religious and cultural obligations should maintain this interconnectedness. Goswami tries to bring both nature and culture face to face to eliminate hindrances that try to distort this connection. Ecocriticism mainly concentrates on how literature interacts with and participates in the entire ecosphere.

Thomas K. Dean in his paper "What is eco-criticism" asserts that, the ecological crisis are a result of humanity's cessation from the "natural world, brought about not only by increasing technology but also by particularization; that is, a mentality of specialization that fails to recognize the interconnectedness of all things." (Dean 5)

*The Man from Chinnamasta* deals with the issue of animal sacrifice. The novel was written in the yesteryears where white imperialists ruled Assam with their headquarters in Gauhati, the capital of Assam. The study focuses on the concept of the 'Other', the cruel strategies the whites employed to 'other' man power, poor peasants, ecology and the natural resources alike. However, the present study focuses only on ecological 'Othering'.

The independence movement was fast gaining ground. The white men were growing cautious. Volunteers were prepared to lay down their lives for the motherland. Mahatma Gandhi had launched a war of emotions where moral issues took the place of bullets. (TMC 146)

Assam was populated with white sahibs enjoying the pleasure of hunting birds and rehearsing their shooting skills. Plummeted cartridges, stray bullets fallen here and there, trees with holes made from pleasure shooting and hunting was a common sight. “The path was littered with empty cartridges. They were clear indications that more and more white men were coming here for rifle practice”... “Another aimed his rifle at a grapefruit...” (TMC 46) Herons and cranes falling by the target of the White shooters during the rifle practice was not something amusing to the local people living there, “... Just then a large crane fell from the sky at the jatadhari’s feet. It had been hit by a stray bullet. The students shouted, “We *must* ask the White men to move their shooting range. Gently the Jatadhari lifted the dying crane and cradled it to his chest ...” (TMC 53) John Simon’s visit to Assam created excitement among the people. “The Gandhi topi was becoming popular around that time” (TMC 144). The cry for *Swaraj* was at its crest. The novel is sandwiched between the demand for *Swaraj*, the growing capitalist consumerism and banning of animal sacrifice. However, the present study deals only with Ecocritical perspectives in this novel.

“The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture.” (Ashcroft 24) Taking ‘Culture’ as its stance, the study extends to support the ecological crisis prevailing at rampant based on cultural and religious background. An illustrious account of the mighty river Brahmaputra is delineated whose tide rises and falls with the sharp tenor of the novel. The breath taking imagery of the mighty sea ‘draped dappled white’ (TMC 64) acts as a spectator, at times roaring with tumult or at times tranquil and sedate. Dr. Goswami’s deliberate use of the botanical terminologies for plants, flowers, birds, reptiles, creepers, and trees makes it an authentic ecological survey which not only studies the theme but also teaches the reader new terms of the flora and fauna of Assam.

Hunting had been a popular sport among the whites. Shakespeare’s evergreen quote best fits with the white’s mentality: “Like flies are to wanton boys, are we th’ gods/ they kill us for their sport”. (Shakespeare 136) Seeing the severed marks on the trees Dorothy exclaims, “What are these marks on the trees? ...Targets for the white man’s shooting sessions. Here are the empty cartridges ... The wood apple tree has been wounded!” (TMC 172) Many officers along with the officials “of the East Bengal Company and the government of Assam were hunting here”. (TMC 28) The frequent visitation of the Sahibs from “the Steamer Company cycled up at dawn for target practice’ and eventually ‘Many trees had been felled”. (TMC 28) While practicing, “the bullets often missed their targets and hit the nests of tokoras or barhoitokas. Sometimes they got a flapping dhanesh. On occasion a bird dropped from the sky, landing in the midst of the jatadhari’s congregation”. (TMC 29) Apart from these, the flora and fauna of the land are not left untold.

Dr. Goswami’s frequent reference to moss, vines, flowers, creepers and varieties of grass makes it a real display of assorted species of shrubbery. “... tender sprigs of durba grass, blood red hibiscus flower, Sandalwood ”. (TMC 6) Images of the “chirping bulbuls, the chattering monkeys and the first flickers of dawn in the eastern sky” (TMC 7) fill her pages. She describes the monsoons with brevity as,

... the trees had closed in. the sculpted crowns of the bheleu trees were heavy with green blossoms. Gulmohar and moroi were in full bloom. The stalks of the bhatghila, were pregnant

with seeds – like eggs in a lizard’s belly shown up by the sun. the round gandhosoroi leaves shone like coins stamped with the queen’s seal. (TMC 135)

The most important character, the humble hermit Jatadhari becomes the redeemer and liberator of animals. Nature trusted him as her savior. His matted dreadlocks were a safe haven for snakes and reptiles. “A strange poisonous snake twisted happily around his matted locks”. (TMC 30) Intricately coupled with postcolonial issues and religious sacraments the present research studies the same novel with an ecocritical perspective. The step taken by the hermit is a noble attempt to preserve the ecosystem which is ‘Othered’ at various levels. Here orthodoxy and religious practices ‘others’ the ecosystem.

Unlike the fanatic hermits, the Jatadhari though a passionate devotee of Ma Chinnamasta is aware of the flimsy line that demarcates devotion from fanaticism. Keeping himself within the yardsticks of religious taboos, the Jatadhari holds a pragmatic opinion on the subject of sacrifice and offering. The novel narrates an incident where a woman came with her child “fearful that some inauspicious star would cast its evil spell on her son who had played football with the skull”, (TMC 25) The Jatadhari consoles the troubled mother by giving a logical solution, “... there is nothing to fear. What proof have you that it was a skull from a sacrifice that was accepted by the goddess?” (TMC 27) His interpretation is reasonable and justifiable. He adds saying that the days of ancient writings and beliefs have changed and it is ridiculous to follow them blindly.

Can anyone today stand for a whole day and night before the Mother, holding an oil lamp in the severed head of a sacrificed buffalo? The sacred bowls in which blood and lotus flowers were offered to the mother have all disappeared. (TMC 26)

Deep ecology has stressed on the link between listening to the nonhuman world and reversing the environmentally destructive practices modern society pursues. There is a need to establish communication between human subjects and the natural world. Gary Synder in her work *The Practice of the Wild* rightly opines that leading an ethical life with our surroundings will reduce contentions. (Synder 22)

Pertinent to the above concept the deep ecologist in Goswami strikingly narrates the bond that nature and this hermit inextricably shared. Nature is projected as confiding in the ascetic’s idealistic belief and devotion. They cry out for redemption from this cruel practice forever. His pragmatic perspective itself is a call for ‘change’. The narration speeds vigorously with the surging flow of the river Brahmaputra.

On seeing the trees wounded with bullets the Jatadhari exclaims with grief, “The wood apple tree has been wounded”. (TMC 172) In the words of Gary Synder in her work *The Practice of the Wild*, “The world is not only watching, it is listening too”. (Synder 22) The greatest flaw in human nature is to neglect mother-nature and its boundless service to mankind. The attitude they have towards nature and “... its treatment is literally sickening, unethical, and a source of boundless bad luck for this society”. (Synder 22) In relevance to the above context, as Christopher Manes in “Nature and Silence” from *The Ecocriticism Reader* opines that — “In addition to human language, there is also the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls-a world of autonomous speakers whose intents (especially for hunter-gatherer peoples) one ignores at one’s peril” (Manes15), similarly the novel records various narrations

where nature seems weeping at times with the poor animals that are kept ready to be hacked. River Brahmaputra is witnessed roaring with surging waves hitting the shore. When Bidhibala's buffalo was made ready to be butchered, "The Brahmaputra roared ... Without warning a large owl hooted in the mango tree." (TMC 103)

The Jatadhari brings a new canon which discards the centuries-old practice of butchering animals. His perspective towards offering acts as a catalyst that welcomes new modifications. The main subject of the novel lies in the process in which animal sacrifice was banned in the Kamakhya temple. The ascetic devices a movement, fixes the "date, time and the auspicious moment ..." shouting "Ma ... Ma ... Ma! Cast off your blood stained robes ... adorn yourself in garments of flower ..." (TMC 53) A memorandum against animal sacrifice being submitted to the high priest creates a raucous situation in the vicinity. A strong union of students from Cotton college, Tol ... all assembled to fight tooth and nail against this practice.

W.M. Adams in the work *Green Development Environment and Sustainability in the Third World in Countercurrents in Sustainable Development* talks about the "impacts of environmental degradation that are socially and spatially differentiated: they may end up affecting the global environment, but first, they damage small parts of it". (185) The Jatadhari is bestowed with the sense of living in harmony with our ecosystem. Both the creator and its creation lie in one accord which cannot be divided. God being the absolute creator of this cosmos will be hurt seeing His own creation in the form of animals being mercilessly butchered. With ample quotes from the ancient scriptures, University journals and government documents the Jatadhari gives an enlightening insight into this thought: "Listen. O faithful, just as our mothers want us to live and be happy- so does the Goddess Kamakhya want her children to live and be happy". (TMC 151) The Jatadhari claims:

The mother has never said that she would reduce the earth's abundance to ashes if she were not offered blood'... Everyone joined in,

A House of flowers. The finest offering!" ...

He continues:

... The status of flowers is higher than blood. The sacred texts state that the goddess is satiated for a hundred years with the blood of a single buffalo. The same writings also claim that an offering of one Karabi flower can earn the devotee the virtues of the most arduous Yagna, the Ashwamedha or horse sacrifice. (TMC 128 – 129)

The devotees chorused:

Throw out the blood. Worship the goddess with flowers. Ma ... Ma ... Ma! (TMC 129) The disciple's joined them: "you can earn greater blessings by offering flowers than by offering blood". (TMC 130)

The subject in this novel is not about hindering one's devotion in worshipping the goddess. It is only the gruesome practice of shedding animal blood that is put to question. Extending various alternatives, the students from Tol including youths and scholars explain to the priests about, "the scriptures offer alternatives to sacrifice. We can also please the Mother with honey, milk, and yogurt. It doesn't say anywhere that the rituals cannot be performed without blood". Despite the tremendous effort, the opposition was headstrong. "O Ma Durga! O Ma Durga! We cannot



change what has been practiced for thousands of years”. (TMC 57) and threatened the students about the Mother’s wrath.

Deep Ecologist Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* says that “human behavior is not an empty vessel whose only input will be that provided by culture, but is strongly influenced by genetic orientations that underlie and modify, or are modified by cultural influences” (Buell 3). Religious rituals are an inextricable part of the culture. Animal Sacrifice is a religious act offered by the devotee to Ma Chinnamasta. As Lawrence Buell opines, human behavior is dependent on cultural modifications as only such changes will lead to the harmonious existence of the society; likewise, the Jatadhari’s deep ecologicistic zeal tries to create harmony with nature by discarding all hindrances that intimidate or cause threat to the ecosystem.

The term “Gift Economy” used by Gary Snyder in work *The Best Buddhist Writing* pronounces the words of Gandhi who says that, “For greed, all of the nature is insufficient”. (Synder 39) It is high time that something should be rendered back to nature for all her benefits bestowed on mankind. According to her, a gift economy is that which “saves the world instead of depleting and devouring it”. In this context, the role of a writer is of paramount importance: “Art takes nothing from the world: it is a gift and an exchange. It leaves the world nourished”. (Synder39) Dr. Goswami’s acute sensitivity and empathy for mother-nature are a “Gift Economy” in its real sense. She tries to ‘save’ the depleting cosmos from perdition by reconciling both the human and the non-human world. Like a crusader, she comes to nature’s rescue with her compelling narrative and infinite vision.

As the collection of signatures grew higher, the Jatadhari who was ‘Othered’ by the other priests for accomplishing this mission along with his followers were taken into custody. Stones were pelted at the doors and windows leading to injury. Few students were admitted to the hospital. The procession commences with the Jatadhari at the lead demonstrating, “... respectful of all creatures... Man is God’s creation. Man has many things to learn from animals. Only when men and animals live in harmony will the world become a paradise.” (TMC 180)

God is personified in nature and also resides in them. The wood apple tree that has been wounded appears to him as, “the embodiment of Shiva’s matted tresses ... And the three leaves of the wood apple tree are the three Vedas – Rig, Yajur and Sama.” (TMC 172) Nature itself manifests its cooperation in this protest. Snakes and birds ‘encourage’ the hermit not to give up the quest. As the procession progresses, “a venomous serpent riding in his dreadlocks (TMC 181) had rested in his matted locks. Wild birds had perched on his arms”. (TMC 181) It appeared as though nature too had come with the same petition imploring humanity to be more loving and sensible to sustain Mother earth. Being ‘othered’ for this noble purpose, Chinnamasta Jatadhari was yet steadfast in his command crying “carry on”... “Move along, move along” (TMC 182) reverberating across the nook and corner of the shrine. It would be worth adding the opinion of Gary Snyder who in *The Practice of the Wild* asserts that, “It would be a mistake to think that human beings got “smarter” ... and invented the first language. Language and culture emerge from our biological-social natural existence...” (Synder 18)

The adamant tantric demanded blood from the ascetic’s flesh ordering him to exactly make the incision, “from below the navel or from the back. Blood from the arms or the stomach is also acceptable”. (TMC 185) They insisted hard to cut a part of “your own body” and offer a lotus leaf cup filled with your blood ... a razor, a machete, a sharp knife – you can use any of these.

Remember, that the larger the blade, the more auspicious it is” (TMC 185) randomly shouting ‘Now prove it’ (TMC 185).

The sacrificial altar “was drenched in the blood of young men”. (TMC 186) The novel ends with a heavy downpour which, “carried away the raw blood with all the other rubbish and swept it into the bosom of the Brahmaputra. In the light of day, no one could see a trace of blood. Not a single wipe bloodstain remained”. (TMC 186) Dr. Goswami tries to explain the tremendous effort and unity one needs to bring a change in the socio-cultural practices. Nevertheless, after the blood drained from the hermit’s body the novel emphasizes that “Not a single bloodstain remained”. (TMC 186) The hermit’s jeopardized attempt to ban animal sacrifice signifies the dawn of modernity and transition. Therefore, while Goswami exposes the cruel and evil side of the colonialists, she also portrays how certain positive elements percolated even in such an atmosphere of indignity, injustice, and unconcern.

The phenomenon of ‘Change’ can be brought by removing, breaking, and discarding the old and existing ones. ‘Breaking the rule’ being Goswami’s hallmark, she faces tremendous opposition in the issue of animal Sacrifice in this novel. As Greg Garrard in his seminal work *Ecocriticism* estimates about the responsibility of ecocritics that “they must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ‘ecological literacy’ as far as possible” (Garrard 5), Goswami too breaks (deconstructs) certain sensitive boundaries for the greater welfare of the ecosystem.

Ecocriticism explores and critiques the relationship between the humans and the ecology which is severed due to eco colonization. “natural” world has intrinsic value: that we should care for it not simply because this may be of benefit to us” (Adams 49) As man has been continually failing in fulfilling his moral obligation towards the natural environment, the harmony between mankind and nature is disturbed. The fundamental concept of ecology is that everything is interrelated. It is this unified concept that the ecocritics and environmentalists survey. They assert that nature exists as “an entity which affects us, and which can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it”. (Barry 243)

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