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**MOTHER NATURE: AN ECOTHERAPIST IN *SAMSKARA* AND *THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS*.**

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**Abstract:** Literature covers Art, Philosophy, Anthropology, History, Science etcetera. It is a forum for expression of problems and pleasures of life in the unique way a person chooses to. It crafts creators and paves way for creation of works of art through words. It is interesting to note that nature has played a vital role in serving as an impetus to thinkers, yielding master pieces to the world. Nature is romanticised oftentimes in literature and particularly in the Indian context. Through literature we also find that nature plays the roles of spiritual guide and psychotherapist. This paper will expound this with examples of characters from Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* and Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. The protagonists' journey into the forest brings these men in communion with nature. This communion with the natural world offers solutions to their existential crisis and chaos of their mundane life, thus leading them to clarity of the true purpose of life.

**Key words:** Nature, Chaos, Existential crisis, Psychotherapy, Ecopsychology, Anti-eco-apartheid.

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"You will find something more in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters." exclaims St Bernard.

Literature can be seen as culture expressed in language. Every work of art and literature is inspired by one's space, culture, religious practices, political set up and their societal norms. Among all these, one finds that Nature from time immemorial has served as an impetus to thinkers, yielding master pieces to the world. We find a variety of themes being explored with nature as the subject of one's writings. We see from the Romantics romanticising nature to the Modernist whining about the damage done to it, to the Post-modernists celebrating the fragments of nature and trying to revive anti-eco-apartheid attitude in people. Nature and the natural world offer philosophical insights and psychological clarity in life. In the Indian context the best example often quoted is Gautama Buddha who mustered courage to head off from the pleasure of the palace and travelled into the "chaos" of the forest and found enlightenment.

The word Chaos has many meanings; the most immediate and common ones being 'confusion or disorder.' Forest in common understanding, is a place where one gets lost and loses track of the return journey. But interestingly we have witnessed thinkers from ancient times to modern day, who find enlightenment in the supposed 'chaos' of the forest, a clarity that the 'organised' world fails to offer. This is how one finds forest playing the role of a spiritual guide to those seeking spiritual clarity and psychotherapist to those with questions about life and its purpose.

The field of Psychology has developed enormously playing a saviour role in the current world. It creates awareness and offers solutions to many mental issues, where medicines fail psychotherapy comes to rescue. Psychotherapy is the treatment of mental illness by psychological rather than medical means. Ecopsychology is one unique branch of psychology that resorts to nature and natural worlds to heal and yield mental wellness. Ecotherapy also known as nature

therapy or green therapy, is the applied practice of the emergent field of ecopsychology, which was developed by Theodore Roszak. Ecotherapy in many cases, stems from the belief that people are part of the web of life and that our psyches are not isolated or separate from our environment. In ecotherapy individuals are given opportunities and encouraged to explore their relationship with nature, a type of therapy that is overlooked in many other psychotherapies. (www.goodtherapy.org)

This paper focuses on Praneshacharya from *Samskara* and Billy Biswas from *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, novels by U. R. Ananthamurthy and Arun Joshi respectively. It aims to show the journey of these two characters into the forest as their time of revelation and realisation of the causes of their existential problems and of forest culture as the true Indian culture. Forest which is seen as a place 'not so organised' gives them the clarity which their 'organised' world couldn't. This is what Tagore means in his essay "Tapovan" when he says, "India's best ideas have come where man is in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds." Therefore, one begins to question the narrow understanding of forest as a place where one gets lost and confused. This questioning leads to a vivid comprehension of the journey into forest in the Indian context as a journey towards clarity.

The novel *Samskara* revolves around the question of who should do Naranappa's last rites and the burden on Praneshacharya to help the Brahman community take a decision on the same. The novel shows a highly sophisticated and rigid community of Durvasapura that retains unsustainable traditions and seemingly antiquated practices/norms in the modern times which complicates life. The existential angst witnessed in the character of Praneshacharya seems to originate from these. The reader is moved by the way Ananthamurthy portrays the struggle of Praneshacharya between natural urges and societal expectation. When Praneshacharya is burdened

with the decision-making task he tries to withdraw into the forest in search of his peace from this imposed turmoil. There he meets Naranappa's concubine Chandri and explores the self-restricted pleasure of life and comes across as a person with a clear mind. Chandri shows the unexplored side of Praneshacharya's natural instincts. The name Chandri seems symbolic. It means moon. The moon belongs to the natural world. It is a hope in a hopeless situation, a light that guides people in the night, like how the encounter with Chandri helps Praneshacharya in the darkest time of his life. It is after this encounter with Chandri and his physical contact with her he learns the pleasures for which body would have craved and which he tried escaping and what exactly is "clean and unclean" practices or even the non-existence of such concepts, that does exist in nature. He becomes more inclusive and less judgmental. These changes in him seem to lessen his burden and free him from the fetters of his wrong notion of the religious norms. Since the author leaves the novel open-ended, one can conclude that Praneshacharya would have found possible way out of his cloistering responsibility as he puts it:

‘But, my dilemma, my decision, my problem wasn't just mine, it included the entire agrahara. This is the root of the difficulty, the anxiety, the double-bind of dharma. When the question of Naranappa's death-rites came up, I didn't try to solve it for myself. I depended on God, on the old Law Books. Isn't this precisely why we have created the Books? Because there's this deep relation between our decisions and the whole community.

In every act we involve our forefathers, our gurus, our gods, our fellow humans. Hence this conflict.’ (Murthy, 1978, p.109)

In the same way we find Billy Biswas from *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* by Arun Joshi, who is tired of the sophisticated community he lives and finds their societal expectations obsolete to him. He seems to be faced with a serious existential crisis from within and goes in

search of the meaning of things above and beyond the banal world he lives in. He finds himself in the wilderness of central India living among the tribes of that place as a tribal himself. He seeks to resolve the constant conflict he faces within, which he expresses in one of his letters to Tuula in the novel,

‘It seems, my dear Tuula that we are swiftly losing what is known as one’s grip of life. Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? At times I see them sitting at the dinner table and for a passing moment I cannot decide who they are or what accident of creation has brought us together?’ (Joshi,2008, p.104)

In one of his expeditions with his students to a tribal area of the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh Billy Biswas gets enamoured by the surrounding and its inhabitants. It is here in Dhunia’s hut that he gets a glimpse of Bilasia whom he finds most mesmerizing and is immersed in her sensuality. He feels that she is the right woman who can revive the spirit of his soul. In her he finds his missing self and the conflict within resolving, as he puts it:

‘Desire was too mild a word for what I felt at that moment. It was closer to madness; the terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of his God. I don’t believe I had even felt this towards any other woman what I felt towards Bilasia, that night. And I don’t think I shall ever feel it again, even towards Bilasia. It was the passing moment that rarely comes in a man’s life, when he feels that he has suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which, his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others’ (Joshi, 2008, p. 102-103)

He experiences ecstasy in his physical contact with Bilasia. His union with her awakens his dead senses and he once again feels that original man in communion with nature and his self. In Bilasia he finds that force that invites him “night after night, year after year” (Joshi,2008, p. 103) which has pulled him this far taking him closer to his self. Bilasia may not be as educated and sophisticated like Meena his wife and Rima his lover but she serves as balm to his aching soul. She represents the rhythm of nature and natural world in whose lap he desires to die than going back to his civilized world.

Billy Biswas’ contact with Bilasia in the Satpura Hills and Praneshacharya’s contact with Chandri in the forest can be read as their ecotherapy that fills the gaps in their lives and enlightens them on the causes of their conflict. After their contact with these women they seem to have found a clarity that they previously lacked. This happens to both when they are in communion with nature or the natural world (forest). The field of their interest: study of Veda’s in Praneshcharya’s case and Anthropology in Biswas’ case also seem symbolic as one finds them as men seeking truth than settling for blind beliefs or sophistications of their societies. It is amazing to note how they find solutions to their existential angst in this ‘primitive’ world and the possible enlightenment the reader envisages in both Praneshcharya and Biswas. When they see women (Bhagirathi in *Samskara* and Meena in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*) as futile or infertile they run away. But only to find fertility and abundance in Chandri and Bilasia (who represent nature and natural world as we refer to nature as female) who bring them to a realisation that the infertility they experienced was within them; their failure to understand their natural instincts and their true culture.

Hence, one can conclude that their journey into the so-called chaos of the forest seem as an ecotherapy for clarity to the problems the civilized world posed. Problems be it from without like in the case of Praneshacharya from his community and its norms or from within like in the

case of Billy Biswas his dissatisfaction in the sophisticated world, all gets resolved in their venture into forest. Therefore, one can conclude Nature is a psychotherapist and their journey into forest as an ecotherapy/green therapy that offers solution to their problems and gives clarity in their lives.

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