
Ecological perspective: Analyzing Sea and Human relationships in “The Town by the Sea” and “The Sea”

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Abstract:

The study of the bond between Nature and the human kind has become more popular in the late twentieth century which has led to the foundation of eco-criticism theory and its applications inclusive of approaches to literature from the eco-critical perspective in multiple layers. The study dissected the exploitation of nature, nature as a teacher for the man kind and later it also paved way for the eco-feminism which provided an exclusive perspective and approaches from the female point of view. Despite all these approaches, one could observe that all these perspectives dealt only with the landscape and it has nothing to do with the water bodies which occupies the three fourth of the land mass area. This gap led to the foundation of studies like Blue Humanities and once again the relationship between the sea and the man kind also became a major study. This paper in particular ventures to provide an ecological perspective by analyzing the human and sea relationships through the chosen two short stories namely “The Town by the Sea” and “The Sea”.

Key words: Sea Ecology, Human and Sea relationship, Blue Studies**Introduction:**

As the sea has large number of species, there are both the science and fiction related to it. The culture and the development of mankind have always a close connection with the sea. As sea is the seventy one percent of the earth’s surface, it has a significant influence on ecology and climate. The sea voyage has been a major reason in the ancient times for the exchange of goods, clothes, food, education and in total one could see the exchange of cultural ideas. In modern era, still the usage and contribution of sea to the mankind is indispensable. It provides food, trade, tourism, travel, minerals, energy, resources, and medicines etc. The lives of human beings have been constantly manipulated by the sea. However, in contemporary situation the destruction caused to the sea by mankind is worse. The ecological exploitation of the sea also has to be taken into account while dealing with the sea.

From the ancient era, many countries were captivated through sea attack and sea pirates do exist for a long span of time. Historically even during sixteenth century, colonization followed by exploitation of the colonized countries happened only through the sea. The importance of sea got diminished due to the airways. However, history bears a strong witness to all the events that are related to the man and sea kind. Human kind has sociological, economic, political, ecological and psychological bond with the sea. The ecology, sea and the human relationship ideas got opened up through the text *The Social Construction of the Ocean* written by Steinberg. To quote “Environmental Historian Richard showed were the first glimmerings of ecological thinking, when mariners discovered the damage that invasive species of plants and animals could do on the small islands around the world” (The Blue Humanities). In the Tamil literature, ‘Tinai’, the word is associated with Tamil poetic landscape division which corresponds to a specific landscape and emotional themes especially in akam (love) poetry. The sea is marked as ‘Neithal’ and emotionally it is related to longing and separation. Each and every literature has abundance connections with sea.

Sea and Literature:

The sea in literature is always filled with literal and symbolic paradoxes. On the one hand it could stand for fear, destruction, realm of possibility, potentiality and on the other hand equally it has its own limitations and interruptions too. The realization of the sea and human relationships has resulted in a genre called sea literature. Any literature that has a setting on or near the sea, literature dealing with sea and human relationships, sea voyages, nautical culture exploring literature- all can be categorized under Sea literature. Many classics and literary works have been categorized under Maritime literature. To quote a few- *Moby Dick*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The perfect Storm*, *Deadly Straits*, and the *North Water* etc. One could also refer to the role of sea in Shakespeare’s plays and classical novel like Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*.

Introduction to “The Town by the Sea” by Amitav Ghosh:

Amitav Ghosh is an acclaimed novelist, journalist, anthropologist and professor. He is an inevitable writer in the field of Indian Writing in English. He is an extremely versatile author who had the ability to voice out the voiceless. Some of his most popular works are *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, and *Sea Poppies* etc. “The Town by the Sea” captures the tsunami scenario that happened in the coastal regions of South India, Andaman and Port Blair on 26th December, 2004. The life of the Director of the Malaria Research Centre in Car Nicobar Island who lost his family in tsunami at Malacca, his bitter experience and the emotional/psychological trauma is deftly handled by Ghosh in this short story.

Sea-humans and ecology in “Town by the Sea”:

It is a well-known fact that tsunami is caused by the earthquakes on converging tectonic plate boundaries. Due to the climate changes, the global historical tsunami data base shows that since 1900 eighty percent of likely tsunamis were generated by earthquakes. Literature also treats sea as a destructive element which not only wipes the human beings, animal species and plants but it has the potential to destroy the emotional and psychological balance of the human kind. The loss of the loved ones will cause more damage than the loss of property. To our surprise, in this short story, the son of the director even after witnessing

the mass destruction before the eyes manage to handle his emotions like an adult in a far better way. Even the director is surprised to see his matured behavior.

The sea has stamped death and destruction all over the small town. The loss caused by the sea is described in detail through the lens of the director. To quote, There were only five structures still standing: the staring, skull like shell of a school that has lost its doors and windows; ...and lastly the skeleton of a church, with a row of parallel arches rising from the rubble like the bleached ribs of a dead animal. (35) In contrary to the above description, Ghosh also presents that how one part of the nature could withstand another attack. The Director could observe that there was no much damage caused by the sea in the dense tropical jungle. In the sparsely inhabited interior part of the island, the thick stands of coconut palms were still standing. The following lines aptly describes the sharp contrast,

It was evident that the tsunami has been particularly selective in the manner of its destruction. The villages along the shore were not merely damaged; they were erased. It was as if the island had been hit by a weapon devised to cause the maximum possible damage to life and property, while leaving nature largely unharmed. (34)

The above paragraph shows that man always forgets a fact that man is also a part of nature. A strong demarcation has been laid between the man and nature. He seems to have a far superior strata above the nature and therefore he could think that sea has shown a special treatment towards the landscape filled with nature. When the oneness with nature is lost, automatically destruction becomes indispensable. The law of nature has to be accepted by the human beings. A transition in the acceptance could be seen in Director at the end of the story. Initially, he searches the ravages pointing to vast scattered debris as something which belongs to him. However, at the end he does not carry any remains along with him even as a remembrance. He refuses to carry the yellow paint box that belonged to his daughter Vineeta. To quote, “ ‘No’, he said vehemently, shaking his head. ‘What good will it do? What will it give back?’” (35).

For human beings, repentance always happens only after a loss. The loss caused by the sea makes the director to think that how he has been an obstruction for the growth of his wife’s career. He recollects and appreciates her English teaching skill. She always wanted to leave Malacca in search of better opportunities. However, as the director was not able to get a transfer she was held back in Malacca. He states, “There was so much she could have achieved, I was never able to give her the opportunity” (35).

In the end of the story, destructive element sea turns out to be an instructor of life lesson. His life has taken a new form. In the manner of Director’s words and choice, one could realize that the director was able to “mount the most singular, the most powerful defence of it” (35) which is very difficult to be attained by any human being. There was neither a particle of hesitation nor the faintest glimmer of doubt in him.

Introduction to “The Sea”:

The Sea short story was originally written in Urdu as ‘Samundar’ by Khalida Hussain and translated into English as “The Sea” by Haider Shahbaz. This short story has won the 2020 Jawad Memorial prize for Urdu to English translation. It was primarily chosen for the translation and secondarily for its contribution to the English. The flow of the language is praiseworthy. The translation has excellently captured the sea breeze blowing over the face, smell of the sea breeze, touch of the gritty sand beneath the feet and the pain of displacement. To put in a nutshell, this short story is loaded with sceneries which appeals to the mind, heart and all the senses of the readers.

Analysis of “The Sea”:

The opening paragraph of the short story presents the visual treat of the sight of balloon shooting with air guns which is a general recreation in most of the beaches. It was both a hobby and time pass. The entire story is in first person narration and the speaker recollects his childhood where he would burst all the colourful balloons handing over two rupees. He relates that nostalgia with a present incident where he tries to shoot at a gecko with an air gun surrounded by kids who simply wants to watch it for fun. Knowingly or unknowingly every human being develops a rapport with the sea from his/her childhood. For the people in coastal areas, spending time in the sea shore is both economical and joyful.

There is a joy in shooting a balloon at the sea shore, in contrary it is a little creepy to aim at a shot on a living thing. The speaker’s flesh crawl at the sight of the gecko “glued to the pale- yellow wall, close to the bend where the wall and the ceiling met. Small little feet. Fat, swollen stomach. A long tapering, striped tail”. He shoots and the tail is lost but still the gecko remains in the same place. The speaker could not understand whether it is suffering or it remains immobile due to the loss of its tail. The opening episode presents the speaker’s feel towards the living being’s death and suffering. In transition, the forthcoming incidents happen in the sea and sea shore that establishes the sea and human relationships.

Sea-humans and ecology in “The Sea”:

When the speaker comes out of the home after his attempt to shoot the gecko, his friend Masood arrives in a scooter with a bundle of towels fastened to the backseat of the scooter. The speaker remembers their plan to go to beach before the high tide. The speaker picks his swimming trunks and leaves along with his friend. At the initial part of the story, the speaker expresses his strong exile feel. When compared to his friend he could never get accustomed to the wind, sea and the dampness of the city. He clearly states that he could never get used to the beach and the sea has been an odd to him. To quote his utterance towards his friend Masood,

This is your sea. I have no relation to it. I don’t even get wet when the water touches me. There, in my city, there was a canal. I used to live far from its banks, but its cold, sweet water still touched me.

The speaker always experiences a sense of exile within him and therefore he feels the intense loneliness. His friend points out to the beach where the whole city has landed. He

comments on the speaker's attitude towards the sea as boring. The speaker could accept a fact that sea shore was brimming with joy, a carnival like scene. There were all colourful. Girls and boys, women and men wear all kinds of clothes from trousers to swimming trunks. He thinks that the sea belongs to them however when suddenly a wave hits his leg, he could experience a strange sensation of water and mud in his shoes as if it answers him.

When the speaker's friend praises the beauty of the sea still the speaker feels that the sea does not belong to him. He could not accept that one has to just sit still and watch the sea followed by which sea will communicate everything through its waves. His friend gets annoyed by the speaker's bitter response towards the sea. Masood gets prepared to plunge into the sea and they decide to keep their clothes around a girl who goes through a magazine as she is already surrounded by bunch of clothes, baskets and water coolers. Masood triumphantly returns after leaving the clothes with the girl and meanwhile the speaker gets into the water thinking about the gecko which he shot. A large wave of water hits his chest taking away a lot of sand under his feet. He stumbles but later collects himself. When Masood takes a deep dive to enjoy the sight of mermaid (other girl who swims in an artistic way), the speaker goes back to the sea shore and looks at his feet.

He suddenly feels thirsty and spots the water near the girl. He decides to go near her to ask for water. He was not able to clearly see her face as she was immersed in magazine reading and due to the wind, which made the hair to shield her face. She pushes the water cooler towards the speaker even without looking up towards him. As he takes the first sip, the girl without looking upwards points out to a jelly fish sticking to his right leg. He couldn't realize it alive or dead and the speaker opines, "This sea doesn't belong to me. I don't know anything about it. So, this jellyfish. What do I about it"?

As the girl listens to his words, she gives a spectacular answer which defines the connection between the sea and the mankind. She replies carelessly that even there are some plants sticking to his legs that has life. They are supposed to grow, breathe and fear. Adding to it, she raises a question that how he could say that sea doesn't belong to him. She gives an apt reply. To quote, "All these cliffs, this beach, they are all made up of living beings". She further declares "The sea belongs to everyone". The speaker brushes the little plant off his feet and uses twigs to clean his feet. There were lots of shells and conches at his feet. He begins to scarp the sand with his toes.

Her expansion of ideas about the sea as a giver and almighty is unique. To quote, The sea comes all the way up here during high tide. It can even go all the way up to the huts. All these living beings come flowing with it. The sea leaves them here on its way back. Cliffs and beaches are made from them...And it's almost time for many living beings to start their winter hibernation...The sun also goes to sleep in the sea.

As the waves became louder than the wind and when the sun completely disappears, she adds that moon will rise from the sea. The waves will be like as tall as mountains. The

speaker unconsciously keeps on digging the soil under his feet. He could feel the dampness and there were lot of jellyfish, shells, conches, weeds and plants lying motionless under his feet. He no longer could wait for Masood. He asks for the scooter key. He could not get away from the bewitching voice of the girl who approaches near and asks him to sit in the beach to watch the high tides. The concluding line establishes a universal truth. To quote, "Lie down here. Rest peacefully, calmly. The sea belongs to you and me". The girl can be considered as a personification of sea who establishes a fact that sea belongs to all and every living and non-living is a part of its entity.

Conclusion:

The chosen two short stories present a fact that Sea ecologically is bounded with human beings. It has also some great psychological and emotional connection with the living beings. Every creature is associated with this large waterscape. Our knowledge about the sea always lies in a surface level. The representation and interpretation of the sea associating with human beings has to be considered for a much in-depth study. We need to place sea at the center to have a profound knowledge about its connection, impact and contribution to the living species.

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