

# Conservation of Environment through Folkloric Beliefs and Practices

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**Abstract** In the modern age of scientific development and technological sophistication, environment or ecology is a much discussed issue. Specifically, in the twenty-first century the environment is being continually polluted as a result of global warming, greenhouse gas effects, population explosion, contamination of water, air and soil pollution, extensive misuse of natural resources, nuclear radiation, etc. Such ecological deprivations ultimately bring about the loss of ecological balance and environmental equilibrium. The human activities triggered by swiftly varying socio-economic patterns due to technological development are predominantly responsible for deterioration of the world's environment. As human beings and their natural environment are integrally related to each other, the existence of human life is not possible without the natural environment. Thus, the growing ecological troubles and their upshot exhibit a serious threat to both mankind and the environment. Under such circumstances, the need for the conservation of environment and the necessity for the restitution of ecological balance are strongly felt throughout the world. Literature plays a

vital role in this reinstallation of environmental equilibrium. Ecocriticism explains this interconnection between literature and environment. Folklore as part of literature, particularly of oral literature can play an important role in a further susceptible discernment of ecosystem and thereby may perform a significant function in the conservation of environment. This paper attempts to explore the possibilities of environmental conservation practices through the explication of the intimate connection between ecology and the folkloric beliefs and practices of human beings.

**Keywords** Ecocriticism, ecology, environment, folklore, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)

## INTRODUCTION

Man is an unbreakable part of nature. Nature creates and molds man and in turn is also shaped by man: "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty 1996). Thus, in the modern era of technological advancement, rapid industrialization has caused utter destruction to the natural environment leading to the loss of ecological balance: "deep ecologists, ecofeminists and Heideggerian ecocritics identify the scientific revolution as an ecological disaster in and through which a primal authenticity was lost" (Garrard 2007).

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The current distressing ecological circumstances like Tsunami, earthquakes, floods, deforestation, desertification, seasonal disorder, melting of polar ice, loss of biodiversity, sanitation problems, loss of soil and soil fertility, water shortage and contamination, ozone depletion, population explosion, inadequate health care, “lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate”, (Glotfelty 1996) all creating environmental deprivation oblige us to think in a bio-centric way as Jonathan Bate maintains, “It is profoundly unhelpful to say ‘There is no nature’ at a time when our most urgent need is to address and redress the consequences of human civilization’s insatiable desire to consume the products of the earth” (Bate 1991).

In such a critical situation, human beings must perform a prominent role in the maintenance of the ecological balance. It is a fundamental duty of all people to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers, wild life and to have compassion for living creatures. Not only scientists, politicians and social workers but also literary personalities should play a vital role in this important task of maintaining environmental equilibrium. Literature has a significant part to accomplish in this restoration of ecological balance. Such interrelationship between literature and environment is studied by the ecocritics. Folklore as part of literature (especially oral literature) plays a substantial role in environmental concerns and attitudes and thereby has an outstanding function in ecological conservation practices.

For many years, environmental

communicators have acknowledged the importance and supremacy of using folklore and conventional belief, like songs, tales, drama, puppetry, proverbs etc. to communicate environmental messages to the people at large. Despite technologically advanced forms of mass media, countless populace even today recount more eagerly and easily to traditional media, which are nearer to their local cultures, and are very often more interactive and participatory than the standard forms of mass media. This paper attempts to highlight on this prominent role of folkloric beliefs and practices in the conservation of environment through explaining the interrelation between folkloric beliefs and ecology from an ecocritical point of view.

## **ENVIRONMENT/ ECOLOGY**

The term environment may be explained in a very wide sense taking into account of all those factors which straight forwardly or obliquely have a bearing upon the natural surroundings of human beings. And the term ecology, coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, signifies the association of the living and non-living to their environment. “Eco” comes from the Greek root oikos etymologically meaning household or earth and “logy” is derived from logos which implies logical discourse. Jointly they indicate “analysis of the house, of the surroundings as revealed in literary text” (Selim 2018). There are two shades of ecology — shallow ecology and deep ecology. Deep Ecologist Arne Naess opines that every existing entity contains an inherent merit and nobody is the master of anyone. Each individual life form must therefore,

learn to enjoy its benefits by forming a part of the system in close relation with other species. Such an attitude ensures equal rights to every living being and thereby maintains ecological balance.

## **ECOCRITICISM**

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of literature and environment: “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty 1996). Ecocriticism evaluates literature from the perspective of ecology. Ecocritics examine literary texts from the point of view of their environmentally harmful or helpful effect. Though the word eco-criticism was first coined by William Rueckert in *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, in 1978, ecocriticism, as a movement or school of criticism developed in 1990s. Among the renowned ecocritics one may mention the names of Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, Lawrence Buell, Jonathan Bate, Greg Garrard and William Rueckert.

## **FOLKLORE: DEFINITION**

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, “folklore” refers to the collective name used for the traditional “verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by word of mouth and example rather than in written form” (Abrams 2015). As Abrams points out, folklore comprises of legends, music, oral history, ballads, folksongs, tales, superstitions, proverbs, riddles, popular beliefs, fairy tales, magic spells, sayings about the seasons, marriage and funeral

rituals and “traditional dances” and dramatic forms performed on holidays or at collective assemblage (Abrams 2015). However, in the Introduction to *The Meaning of Folklore The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*, Simon J. Bronner remarks that Dundes did not think “traditions” to be artifact “of the past”, and repeatedly tried to demonstrate that folklore was remarkably a constituent of the “modern technological world” (Bronner 2007). Dundes regarded folklore to be “something alive and dynamic” rather than “dead and static” (Bronner 2007). In a broad sense, a folk group was, according to Dundes “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor” (Bronner 2007).

## **FOLKLORE AS LITERATURE**

Folklore and literature are interrelated. As Vladimir Propp maintains, there is intrinsic relationship between folklore and literature, between the “science of folklore and literary criticism”. “In its descriptive elements the study of folklore is the study of literature. The connections between these disciplines is so close that folklore and literature are often equated” (Propp 1997). Though it is usually acknowledged that “literature is transmitted through writing and folklore by word of mouth” (Propp 1997), Dundes, argued that “an orally transmitted item may be folklore”, but “by itself [oral transmission] is not sufficient to distinguish folklore from non-folklore” (Bronner 2007). Thus folklore is embodied in both oral and written literature.

## **RELATION BETWEEN FOLKLORE AND ENVIRONMENT**

Folklore and environment are integrally

related. “The folkloric tales, legends, myths, sayings, songs, ballads, dances, music and poetry can significantly illuminate on the man-nature relationship” (Selim 2018). Folktales are instructional, not only about specific environmental knowledge and for the purpose of understanding the religious perspective of the environment; these two features of the folktales are deeply interrelated. As Vellerman maintains, “A story does more than recount events; it recounts events in a way that renders them intelligible, thus conveying not just information but understanding” (Vellerman 1979).

Frequently, countless fundamental scientific concepts and policies about nature are derived from folklore and legends. There is a wide spread agreement that miscellaneous important lessons can be obtained from the cognitive and experiential dimension of folkloric tradition for the conservation of natural resources to make sure sustainable development of the communities in specific and mankind in general. One of the most fruitful means to inculcate ecological values and ethics is to tell tales that convey pro-environmental emotions. The ethical foundation of numerous resource utilization and conservation strategies adopted by the primitive people can simply be communicated putting emphasis on the necessity of revitalizing those values in current situation with the help of these oral traditions. Folktales from indigenous communities may serve this function of tale telling by creating a sense of care and concern for the non-human world living in their surrounding environment.

## **INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN FOLKLORE AND TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE (T E K)**

There exists intrinsic relationship between folklore and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Also considered as element of cultural folklore, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) can be described as a “cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (Berkes 1999). As a recent popular discussion indicates, folklore and traditional ecological knowledge (T E K) of indigenous people, particularly having partnership features, can put forth constructive impact on the conservation of environment.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION THROUGH FOLKLORIC BELIEFS: SEVERAL EXAMPLES**

One of the foremost established means of environmental conservation through folkloric beliefs appears to be the application of taboos. For the purpose of preserving rare plants and trees and endangered animals some beliefs are popularized among people. Thus folkloric beliefs consider several plants and animals as embodiment of gods and, therefore, ought not to be incapacitated or disturbed. Hence such flora and fauna are never touched or hunted by people or are even badly spoken of. Similar folk-beliefs are relevant to forests, woodlands, and water along with other natural resources. For

instance, in India, the people of Meghalaya believe that their jungles are the abode of several deities. Therefore, cutting of plants, harvest of fruits or plucking of flowers would cause offense to the divinities and consequently bring about catastrophe in their residence (Jeeva et al. 2006). This sense of veneration may stimulate a sensation of protecting these natural resources for the benefit of their future generation and accordingly helping in maintaining environmental balance.

Similarly, diverse tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh cherish varying beliefs and attitudes towards their neighboring plants and animals. Nevertheless, under each legend prevails the subsistence of goddesses or dominant celestial powers embodied in the shapes of flora and fauna. In Hill Miri, particular areas containing specific trees are preserved ardently. Spitting, urinating or throwing stones in the region are prohibited as a means of showing respect or reverence to the sacred plant goddesses. In the same way, the Aka of West Kameng have the belief that the destruction of certain ponds and lakes will cause devastation of life. In addition to this, drawing out some resources from the revered hill, Woke, is not allowed as this will lead to oral and nasal hemorrhage, eventually causing death (Saikia 2008).

Similarly, killing of tiger is tabooed among the Mishmis and Galos. Even specific seasonal birds are not hunted because such birds are considered to be sacred and also supposed as the agents of new season and symbol of good productivity (Riba 2003). Thus a variety of beliefs and taboos of Arunachal tribes concerning animal world subsidize a roundabout form of conservation

of varied animal species. Such folk-beliefs have environmental implication which if used appropriately will serve as emblematic instances of conveying the message of animal preservation and thus maintaining ecological balance.

Similar folk-beliefs can be traced among the inhabitants of Sundarbans who believe in the story of Ma Bon-Bibi, a traditional mythological folk drama of Sundarbans which tells the tale of how the forest queen Bon-Bibi makes a balance between Dakshin Rai, the demon king and the foresters who enter into the forest in search of food, firewood and honey: "Thus order was brought to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance" (Ghosh 2004). The Bon Bibi myth applies the power of folklore to draw an association between mankind and the natural environment. All these examples indicate the connection between ecology and folk belief systems customarily fulfilling the purpose of resource conservation either directly or indirectly.

Such folk-beliefs can be traced not only in India but also in other countries of the world. Thus, in Sulawesi of Indonesia ancestral spirits taking the shapes of different plants or animals are considered to be deities. Despite constant pillaging of crops as well as groves, people never hunt, kill or even speak badly of the macaques, and their occupied jungles are never entered into in order not to disturb the monkeys (Riley and Priston 2010). From the above examples it becomes quite evident that in the world of folklore, plants and trees, birds and fishes, ponds and rivers, animals and humans all live with cordial relation. These tales, if narrated with the purpose of

communicating the message of preserving the endangered species, will help in conserving biodiversity. This diversity is believed to be derived inevitably from ecology, as Ynestra King maintains: “A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity....” (King 1989). Nurturing an outlook of close connection with all other entities in the course of experience and veneration recurrently lead to positive as well as harmonious consequences. On the contrary, fostering an attitude representing all other entities to be isolated from one another, usually results in anarchism and uncertainty.

### **FOLKLORIC BELIEF IN SACRED GROVES**

A significant ecological component helping in environmental conservation is tree. Plants and trees are always believed as the first home of the deities, and “sacred groves” are considered to be their earliest place of worship, thus both were held in utmost reverence in ancient times (Pliny 1945; Quantz 1898; Porteous 1928). As can be found in Celtic mythology, the Celts used hallowed gardens, entitled nemeton in Gaulish to perform spiritual rituals. In India, “sacred groves” are scattered all over the country enjoying the benefit of conservation. It is also believed that Malay folklore narrates that plants whisper hymns to God in absolution of the precedent transgression of the soil’s previously human population. Likewise in Nigerian mythology The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove is dedicated to the deity of fruitfulness in Yoruba legends, and is spotted with temples along with incarnations

(Selim 2018). It is now an acknowledged fact that plants are not venerated for themselves, people respect them for what is personified in them, for what is embodied and symbolized by them (Eliade 1958; Zahan 1979), and, chiefly, for various divinities attributed to them (Hamilton 2002).

In the same way, in British folklore, Ash tree is credited with a range of protective and therapeutic purposes frequently related to children’s wellbeing. Ash trees grow up at the vicinity of Irish holy wells, and on the Isle of Man people believed ash trees to be able to protect the transparency of fountains. Similarly, in the British Isles the rowan tree has an elongated and still popular folkloric history to be a tree defending against witchcraft and enchantment. When people become conscious of the benefits of such locally obtainable herbs and other natural resources, they begin preserving these as precious possessions. If certain values are attributed to these folk-beliefs, conservation, rather than demolition of ecology will be started. Equally, conventional Asian cultures think about bamboo as one of the most propitious rudiments. It stands for stability, harmony, industriousness, and flexibility. The overwhelmingly apprehended and ubiquitous belief that any harm done to a sacred tree will instantaneously cause divine vengeance confers some fortification. Such systems of punishment are acknowledged as the means of protection of the woodland resources from over-exploitation.

### **FOLK-BELIEF IN HOLY WATER**

Another vital ecological ingredient, water plays a prominent role in folklore, fairy tales, myths and legends throughout the world. The

primitive people had a high regard for this water resource and they created many myths and legends connected with the water spirit. This folk-belief in the holiness of water of holy well can also be traced in written literature. For instance, apart from the physical reality of the sea water in J. M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*, we also find the mythological property of water by considering it as "holy" (Synge 1969). Water also plays an important part in Synge's other play, *The Well of the Saints* in which the eyesight of an old blind beggar, Martin Doul and his blind wife, Mary Doul is restored with the application of the holy water drawn from a certain well under the supervision of a holy saint: "There is a green ferny well, I'm told, behind of that place, and if you put a drop of the water out of it, on the eyes of a blind man, you'll make him see as well as any person is walking the world" (Synge 1969). There is a profound environmental implication behind this folk-belief of people in regarding water as holy. "Water", as indispensable component for the nourishment of life on the world must be given due importance and measures ought to be adopted to protect this important natural element from pollution. The primitive Irish people portrayed in Synge's plays might not be well aware of this scientific fact; but their folkloric belief about defending the purity of water in a roundabout way shows their deep environmental consciousness.

## CONCLUSION

The modern man must re-establish the lost connection between human life and the natural environment. Folklore can help in examining the inherent relationship of human

and natural world and by exploring the interaction between human culture and nature in the conventional folklore, one can build up a nature consciousness and carry out a sense of accountability towards mother earth. Thus folklore plays a vital role in transforming people's attitude from anthropocentric to eco or bio centric one and thus storytelling may initiate environment education with a new and positive approach. Through an ecocritical analysis of folkloric beliefs and practices this paper thus explains how folklore as part of either oral or written literature conveys an important message of environmental conservation as the ultimate venture of ecocritics is to defend nature and build up a harmonious balance between mankind and the physical environment.

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