

RELATIONAL ECOLOGIES AND NARRATIVE RESPONSIBILITY: TRADITIONAL AND INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL WISDOM IN CANADIAN AND INDIAN LITERARY TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

In the age of multiple global environmental crises, old and indigenous knowledge, which is frequently grounded in the nature-human relationship, is being re-explored for its unique approaches and practices for non-extractive human living in/on the earth. An exploration of Indigenous ecological knowledges in Indian and Canadian literary traditions. By examining several Canadian Indigenous stories, together with traditional Indian Adivasi and oral stories, the concept of land as animate, divine, inseparable from community, identity, religion and memory is deconstructed. The stories brought into this discussion highlight an ecological consciousness in which human-nonhuman reciprocity is valued above all else. As opposed to nature-as-commodity/resource understanding that stems from human perceptions, these knowledges describe a system and understanding derived from a circular notion of time, co-management and nonhuman co-existence. Oral narratives, myth and the act of storying in community function to preserve and maintain Indigenous knowledges, in the face of continued colonial dispossession and the continued commercialisation of nature. In undertaking a comparative analysis, this paper makes a claim for both similarities and differences within the Canadian and Indian readings of the land and its management, and also makes the assertion for sustained engagement with Indigenous storytelling in entering the contemporary talk of nature-ethics.

Key Words: *Indigenous Ecological Wisdom, Relational Ecologies, Narrative Responsibility, Traditional Knowledge Systems, Environmental Ethics, Comparative Indigenous Studies, Canadian and Indian Literatures*

INTRODUCTION

Recent times in literature and culture have also taken an interesting turn, and accordingly, such critical practices as ecocriticism and environmental humanities push us to re-centre our vision and focus on the environment not only in terms of science and politics, but also of culture and narrative. This essay explores the idea of indigenous ecological wisdom using literary traditions from India and Canada. In direct opposition to the master narrative of the human-nature relationship as primarily extraction and dominance, we have the stories and storytelling traditions—particularly the oral tradition of indigenous peoples, but also indigenous-inspired narratives—which present an environment that contains human beings as part of a life-giving interdependence with the environment. Through exploring the narratives from these two contrasting cultures, we can examine whether and how an ecological ethic can be useful and even possible in literature as a counter-force against the hegemonic/extortory narrative. In conclusion, we examine how indigenous narrative traditions function within the framework of environmentalism. One that is based on anti-dualism and relationality, that includes nature and environment as constituents of community identity and survival.

Recently, literature and culture have seen a shift, prompting a new sensibility and its practices (ecocriticism, environmental humanities) that urge us to rethink our relationships to the environment, not merely as science or policy, but as culture and narrative. In direct opposition to

the dominant narrative of the human-nature relationship being based on the extraction of natural resources and dominance, are the indigenous and indigenous-inspired storytelling traditions that focus on an environment that includes human beings as components with which it shares a life-supporting relationship, an interdependence. In this paper, the concept of indigenous ecological wisdom will be examined through literary traditions of India and Canada. Although the history and cultures are different, the two traditions share the common theme of relational thinking. By reading narrative traditions from these two distinct cultures, we will explore the relevance and possibility of an ecological ethic in literature and its role in countering hegemonic/exploitative narratives. In the conclusion, we will consider the role of indigenous narrative traditions in environmentalism.

Theoretical Framework: Indigenous Epistemologies and Relational Ecology

There are, and can be, alternative ways of indigenous knowing that are as far removed from Western knowing as can be. Alternative ways of knowing the natural world exist. Ecological knowledge is passed through day-to-day life and ritual, where it is known and lived, not lived through distinct disciplines and compartments, as it may be in Western ways of thinking, which may separate disciplines but are holistic as they draw ecological knowledge, culture, spirit and ethics together. Instead, the Western approach of separating humans from the world emphasises learning not just with the mind but in experience so that balance can be maintained. Traditional knowledge, discussed by Vandana Shiva and others, not only challenges nature as a commodity but also honours it for its own intrinsic worth. This knowledge system emphasises experience, wisdom, lifestyle, and as such questions the adoration of power over nature, and objectivity as dominant ways of knowing. Most traditional and indigenous cosmologies do not conceive of the world as an objective thing, but a subjective experience imbued with a spirit, a repository of memories. Indigenous ways of knowing emerge from everyday life and community, rather than the thinking mind. They are transmitted through ordinary daily life, rather than through the exclusive result of abstract thought. Ecological knowledge is passed down through everyday life, including daily activity and ritual, where it is acquired and inhabited through being, rather than lived through in separate, isolated disciplines, as it can be in Western thinking, which may compartmentalise disciplines, but is holistic as it relates ecological knowledge, culture, spirit and ethics. These ways of knowing value wisdom and lifestyle, rather than what is learned, thus questioning the glorification of objectivity and the power over nature as a primary way of knowing. This is relational ecology; considering human beings and nature as inextricably interconnected, rather than being distinctly separate phenomena. It challenges human/non-human divisions. Coupled with stories, this kind of knowledge serves as a kind of stewardship.

Canadian Indigenous Literary Traditions

An instance of this way of looking at ecology in Canadian Indigenous literature may be found in the works of King and Maracle in their examination of land, identity and community in such an intertwined manner. These authors confront and repudiate notions of private land ownership as posited by the European tradition and argue instead for land that exists as a sentient being to which cultural memory and spiritual connection are preserved. In King's *The Truth About Stories*, he asserts that stories are much more than entertainment but are imbued with a certain authority. Another strand in the Canadian indigenous literary tradition, narrative itself is characterised by the fact of its stories-as-resistance and the preservation of knowledge, myth and stories which are not texts in themselves but part of the discourse within which rearticulation of self and voice occurs after colonisation.

A further example of a strand within Canadian indigenous literary tradition is the narrative's

characteristic of story as resistance and continuation of knowledge, myth, and story, all of which are found not as mere text, but as the context of the rearticulation of self and voice after colonialism. By reclaiming connections denied to them by colonialism, indigenous literature and memory also reaffirm and re-establish the relationships people have to the land, and the relationship people have to history, thereby also making storytelling both an act of politics and of ecology. In turn, indigenous practices are also about colonial histories, the dispossession of indigenous peoples, the slavery of indigenous peoples and the suppression of indigenous peoples and allow for a redefinition of ecological discourse within an indigenous context based on indigenous practices of the re-establishment of oral tradition, showing how deeply linked culture and ecology are. Indigenous traditions also address the colonial historical experiences, the displacement of Indigenous peoples, and their enslavement and oppression, enabling the redefinition of ecological discourse based upon indigenous attempts to reinstitute oral tradition, demonstrating that ecology is inextricably linked with culture.

Indian Adivasi and Traditional Ecological Narratives

The aspect of storytelling as both a form of resistance and as continuity of culture is another prominent theme within Canadian Indigenous literatures. Stories are orally told, and they convey the relationship between humankind, the forest, the river, and the soil. It is through traditional stories such as these that man may learn to live more sustainably, as they represent culture and contain ecological knowledge. And indeed, many authors like Vandana Shiva argue that there cannot be any domination of humans who live in an ecological relationship with their surroundings. The legends and stories of Adivasi folk heroes definitely illustrate the forest as being a shared entity for both man and nature. These tales defy the commodification of nature to be used up and advocate co-existence. Another salient theme in Canadian Indigenous literatures is the element of storytelling as a form of resistance and as continuity of culture. It is this practice, it seems, which binds writing to land and to history and self. In the indigenous stories, the distinction between literature and acts of resistance fades out as the author regains her/his language and identity from the colonisers. Stories and myths mingle history and fiction, memory and imagination. Thus, they provide a new dimension to define a truth. These stories, told by Canadian Indigenous writers, connect memories to lands, which have been fractured and disconnected as a result of the colonial invasion. Therefore, storytelling is equally a political act and an ecological act. This very act connects the writer to land, the self, and history. It negates the interpretation of land as just another resource.

From traditional Indian stories, we can gather many clues that suggest time is cyclical and humans live in harmony with nature. Farming, seasonal festivals and local celebrations are associated with nature. These traditional stories are cultural expressions and hold ecological wisdom that could guide humans to achieve sustainability.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Differences

It can perhaps be accepted that the basic premises of Canadian Indigenous and Indian Adivasi ecological thinking have some common ground; however, it should be made clear how each ecological thought system is stated differently and thus developed along different lines through different political circumstances. We claim no being 'boss over nature,' we argue that we are 'one part of a greater totality.' The stories of the Indian Adivasi are as much a product of the experience of colonialism as of the ongoing struggle over land alienation resulting from developmental activities and ecological justice within the postcolonial Indian state.

In fact, comparison, and specifically the very disjunction of comparison, instead of nullifying it, has helped increase the comparative project, since it shows how thought, situated in a

relational ecology, is alert to discrete political predicaments without dependence on morality, on which it relies, but at the community. Storytelling is universal across all traditions for transmitting lore to other generations. The stories here reflect minor variations of this across all traditions, depending on each story's individual history. What colonial changes have been brought to the world? That is what is asked in Canadian native stories. Stories of struggle to access land are what are told in Indian Adivasi stories. While it must be admitted that there are certain similarities underlying Canadian Indigenous and Indian Adivasi ecological thought, how their respective ecological thought appears must be considered in light of their unique histories. Canadian Indigenous stories are informed by the lived experience of settler colonialism and the reclamation of voice through both oral and literary forms. Indian Adivasi stories draw on the lived experience of colonisation, but also the ongoing struggles over displacement because of development and ecological justice within the postcolonial Indian nation-state. This diversity of responses doesn't negate the benefits of comparing, but rather they are necessary for comparison to occur, and illustrate within ecology how thinking is reacting to different political pressures, employing community morals. The narratives do respond, nonetheless, to the current growth-based paradigms and their associated ecologies.

Narrative Responsibility and Contemporary Relevance

Thinking about narrative responsibility is relevant as we consider the relevance of Indigenous narrative today. Stories are not just the backdrop to conversation: stories continue to form the ways in which we relate to land. The Indigenous narrative is a narrative of care; we must take care of the earth and hold it safely and not exploitatively. These are the issues, of an ethical kind, that are most relevant now, given the ecological crisis: for, while our own ecological debates are almost exclusively about science and politics, the Indigenous story offers both a cultural and ethical element to them. In other words, it's an ethical challenge to science discourse, and it asks that sustainability also be a matter of culture and ethics, not just science and politics. Nevertheless, it's not just the ethics that matter: the stories redefine the relation between speaker and receiver in ecological discourse. Storytelling is not just speaking words from one to another; a story is the living conduit from one generation to the next, and it embodies an ethic from speaker to receiver. This is an ecological discourse in which storytelling is considered; in it, it's assumed that the reader/listener is not a passive transmitter but someone who perpetuates the ecological balance. What this represents, then, is a critique of many of the most fashionable critical readings of much contemporary literature, which have provided the frame of many projects in cultural studies: critical readings which see texts as the thing itself to be deconstructed, rather than event and living discourse. The moral concern for the story and that creates a duty of relation between the reader/speaker makes us wonder about the reader's ethics, as well as about our own role, within a broad notion of ecology. Story becomes ecology: ecology is conceived as an activity. Learning ecology from the indigenous means to use literature and cultural studies in order to construct a comprehensive notion of an appropriate response to the earth.

CONCLUSION

Not only are traditional and indigenous stories ornaments, but the "roots" of a new ethic of ecology, and understanding thus cannot only be studying these stories; understanding means, in effect, re-conceiving the worth attributed to various knowledge forms. Now of all times when ecology has become so fragile, they represent a new kind of ecological responsibility. They offer a path towards the formation of new ecological practices, even at this moment of ecological fragility. Through the contrast of these voices, it is apparent that this tree-sky form of human-nature relations could help us avoid each of our critical environmental issues today.

Through the use of the cross-cultural comparison, the author has provided adequate proof for the above claim: that there is no strictly native or local knowledge of the environment and that the indigenous knowledge of the environment does indeed lend itself to the total relatedness and relationship with the environment. The comparison between the Canadian indigenous and Indian Adivasi literatures helps to establish the fact that diverse voices from diverse cultural contexts are expressing a common related ecology and an ecological ethic. What we find at the heart of all traditional and indigenous wisdom is that any authentic response to the ecosystem cannot escape from universalisation; it requires moving out from a technology-driven and politics-oriented modernity, which has been touted as the only way out.

Traditional and indigenous stories are no longer accessories, but the source of a new ecological ethic, and thus understanding cannot mean only studying them; it means rethinking the valuing of different knowledge systems. At this particular juncture, when ecology has turned so vulnerable, they stand out as a new responsible ecological practice.

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