

Restoration of the Interconnection between Man and Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of *Lake of Heaven* by Ishimure Michiko.

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Abstract

We live in an era of great environmental crises such as climate change, flood, desertification, toxification, loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification. The construction of large dams displaces and impoverishes millions of people. The collapse of dams brings unexplainable losses of life and property. The novel, *Lake of Heaven* by Ishimure Michiko delineates the people, culture and environment of Kyushu, the mountain village in Japan, which has sunk in the process of the construction of a dam. Disrespect to the interconnection between man and nature is showcased in the novel. The loss of sensitivity to the environment in a globalised and technology-driven world is a significant issue now. The novel emphasises the importance of preserving myths and stories associated with people and land. Ishimure's concerns are universal even if she writes about her local places in Japan. This paper aims at exploring the main theme of the novel – how science and technology leaves people disconnected with nature and how to restore the natural bond with it. The novelist vividly portrays the travels of the protagonist from his city to his grandfather's village to scatter his ashes on the graves of the ancestors whose graveyard is under water, as a result of the construction of a dam. In the village, he not only becomes sensitive to the destruction that the dam construction left but also opens his mind to the voices of nature. This helps him enjoy sounds around him in nature that he never knew in the urban society.

Key words: Environment, technocratic, urbanization, human manipulation, harmony.

Date of Submission: 26-07-2022

Date of Acceptance: 06-08-2022

There are various approaches, modes and definitions regarding the new field, ecocriticism, still the basic concerns and focus are the same—the relationship between man and the earth. Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment which can serve as a unique interface between the sciences and humanities. Ecocriticism, as a critical theory, was officially announced by the publication of two seminal works written in the 1990s, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. Cheryll Glotfelty is the acknowledged founder of Ecocritics in the United States of America. As a pioneer in this field, she says:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (xviii).

Ecocriticism, in the real sense, is a call to literature to raise the issues of today's environmental crisis. The ecological nature-writing wing of American studies through various activities, has touched thousands of nature-lovers in other countries as well.

At first, the focus of ecocriticism was narrow, but later began to include the multiplicity of approaches such as the environmental literature, nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, the revaluation of place and the interdisciplinary eco-theory. Sustained nexus between literature and the environment is vital when we consider the future of our planet. This accounts for the rightful place for ecocritical studies on par with race and gender studies in the literary canon. The relationship between literature and environment has to be brought to light as it has much contemporary relevance.

Japan's academic arena received the idea of "ecocriticism" around 1993 when the American ecocritic Scott Slovic gave lectures on it throughout Japan during a one year stay there. Scott promoted a new literary approach in the country. It is behind the formation of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and

Environment) in Japan In May 1994. The same period witnessed the intensive publication of American nature writing in Japanese translation. Many literary periodicals and journals published special issues of literature and the environment. The literary journal *Folio A* featured American nature writing in 1993 and the literary periodical *Eureka* featured nature writing in 1996. These journals provided translations as well as scholarly articles.

The ecocritical communities like ASLE felt the significance of collaboration with ecocritics in other countries. It resulted in the publication of *Environmental Approaches to American Literature*, a collection of essays by fourteen scholars from Japan and five scholars from the United States. Another important event is the international symposium of ASLE- U.S and ASLE-Japan, held in Hawaii in August 1996.

The first phase seems to have ended with the publication of a nature writing guidebook compiled by ASLE-Japan in 2000. The majority of the works are from the United States and the United Kingdom and only one sixth of the works are from Japan. Still those works reflected the scholars' approach beyond their specialties, towards the internal issues of literary environmentalism.

The major characteristics of the second phase of Japanese Ecocriticism is the commencement of a comparative approach which arose with the non-Japanologists' attempt to apply ecocriticism in Japanese literary works. The interest can be observed in two tendencies: commencement of dialogue with ecocritics of other East Asian countries and more sincere effort to apply ecocritical principles to Japanese literary works. The international symposium in Okinawa hosted by ASLE-Japan in 2003 demonstrated the interest towards ecocriticism as practiced in East Asia, which was attended by the scholars from Korea, Taiwan, the United States and Japan. These resulted in two publications: *Dialogue between Nature and Literature* (Yamazato et al. 2004) and *Poetics of Place* (Ikuta et al. 2008). The second phase witnessed a subtle yet increasing tendency to use comparison in ecocritical readings. Examples are *Poetics of Place: Reading Gary Snyder* (2006) by Yamazato Katsunori and *Remembering the Sound of Water* by Yuki Masami (2010)

In the third phase, we can see an ecocritical intervention in Japanese Literature. The Association for the Modern Japanese Literary Studies with over one thousand members held a symposium on literature and environment in 2008. It was interdisciplinary in approach. A two-day international symposium on ecocriticism and Japanese literary studies was hosted by Rikko University in Japan in collaboration with Columbia University in the United States and held in Tokyo in 2010.

The approach of comparison and collaboration in the ecocritical readings of Japanese literature can be observed in published works too. The journal *Suisei Tsushin* (2010) published a special a special issue of ecocriticism to which twenty one scholars of Japanese, American and British literature and of the field of linguistics, contributed their essays on their theory and practice of ecocriticism. A collection of twenty three essays, *Kankyo to Iushiza* is written by scholars of Japanese literature. These works represent the major frame work of the Japanese ecocriticism.

Ishimure Michiko was born in 1927 on Amakuza Island off the coast of Kyushu, the southernmost of the four main Japanese islands. When she was only three months, the family moved to Minamata on Kyushu. Ishimure lived with fishermen and farmers. The traditional customs and culture of her community was deep-rooted in her. She was much impressed by the local stories, songs, dances and festivals. But she had to confront with two contrasting realities. One was the charming natural world around her- the green mountains, farms, fields, green forests and the beautiful coast of the Shiranui Sea.

The other reality was the evil powers of industrial society. She was one of the witnesses of the evolvement of the traditional fishing-farming area of Minamata to an industrial city. It was the centre of Chisso Corporation which produced fertilizers and electrochemical products.

At first people ignored the aftermath of the industrial activities, but by the 1960's it was undoubtedly clear that something went wrong with Minamata. The residents were aware of the adverse effects of the industrial process. Ishimure was one of the first to notice the effects of industrialization. Ishimure's investigation into the matter brought the causes into lime light. The organic mercury-laden waste products from the factories poisoned the Shiranui Sea and all who ate from it. These experiences moulded Ishimure and she became a writer and an activist for both environmental and social causes. She struggled against the degradation of the natural environment, community and traditional culture.

Ishimure Michiko published the documentary novel *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease* in 1972. The work highlighted the former abundance and later degradation of the natural and human environments around Minamata. It was a monumental eye-opener regarding the dangers of industrial toxins. The book was one of the best sellers and Ishimure has been called the "Rachel Carson of Japan". The book created a great impact on the people. She became the founder of the environmental movement in Japan. Ishimure has published several other books too. They include several novels, works of historical and documentary fiction, memoirs, children's books, essay collection, poetry and a Noh drama. She won the prestigious Asahi Prize for Literature in 2002.

Lake of Heaven gives the description of the visit of Masahiko, a young man and music composer to the remains of his grandfather Masahito's hometown named Amazoko. Amazoko is a village in Kyushu which was submerged as a result of the creation of a dam. The fictional Amazoko is modelled after a real village-Mizukami in Kyushu which was submerged by the Ichifusa Dam which was built in 1960.

As the novel *Lake of Heaven* incorporates tales, dreams, myths, Noh drama, poetry and song as well as more straight forward narration, it can be called mythopoetical. Even though Ishimure writes about her local region, in Kyushu, her concerns are universal as the same issue can be found out anywhere in the world. She is giving us the instruction that we should preserve and renew the stories and myths associated with people and land. By preserving myths, we preserve the wisdom of every race and people. They suggest our association with the past and our aspirations for the future.

The novel is a celebration of rural people and their surroundings. The author, Ishimure Michiko uses powerful language to portray the deep relationship the people have with nature. The vivid images can capture the attention of even the casual readers. In the novel, the author tries to highlight the resilience of both rural people and natural world.

Masahiko was impressed by the spirituality of the people and the charming natural world, its flora and fauna, mountains, etc. Even though the novel exposes the trauma of the people caused by the construction of the dam, it also shows the ability of the ecosystems to withstand the insensible human actions. Ishimure portrays the painful transformation of the landscape due to the human manipulations. From the description, we can assume that it recorded the lost beauty and glory. It is repeatedly described that Masahiko was much charmed by the splendor, harmony and beauty of the landscape which inspired him to create musical compositions.

Ishimure does not give such a positive description of the urban spaces. Urban ecosystem is described as highly polluted and far worse off than those of rural areas. Cities which are covered in concrete are described as space which is beyond repair unlike rural areas like lake, which can endure and recover human manipulation.

The construction of the dam impoverished many people. Most of the villagers lost their home and property. Mismanagement of the money for the construction of the dam fell into the wrong hands. The deep attachment toward the landscape felt by the villagers doubled the sense of loss. The memories caused grief and despair.

People lament over the submerged non human elements toward which they had deep attachment. The great trees, small insects, etc. which were part and parcel of their life were submerged forever.

Masahiko is a composer who came from urban landscape to rural landscape with his biwa, a traditional fretted lute sacred in Shinto. It represents the traditional music that nearly vanished with the emergence of modernist, industrialised Japan. Masahiko's biwa was made from one of the sunken villages' mulberry trees. It is one of the links that the young man has with Amazoko. The meeting with Ohina brings great transformation in the young man. At first Masahiko feels surprised when he faces the gap between city and rural place. The new place was full of clear signs.

All the frenzied noises of the city had ceased in him-all the frantic grating sounds of automobiles, the screeching of brakes and jarring noises of the opening and slamming of shutters that had been so deeply imbedded in the marrow of his bones. The ceaseless digging and filling and tearing down of things had gone. What sort of world was that? Could it be I've somehow been carried away like a rocket, using the energy from the clamor of the giant city, and given a soft landing here? (22)

Masahiko feels a charming strangeness in the environment around him. He had ignored or never heard the voices of nature and started to respond to the sounds around him.

This place, it seemed, was his point of entrance. It was filled with subtle yet distinct signs. There was a gentle breath from the world of plants: the one that was entirely different from the nerve-splitting, chaotic, discordant sounds of the city that had held sway over him until now. Though complex in the extreme, it flowed together in an ordered and cosmic manner. Above the land and below, the gentle breath of the plant world was calling back and forth from the depths of the Andromeda tree, which was like an entire forest in itself. (35)

Gradually he enjoys the nature around him and he becomes accepted in the community.

Ohina always encourages him to pay attention to the trees, plants, water and their voices around him. Listening to her words, Masahiko comes to the conclusion that he needs to restore his ears.

He was struck by the thought of how he had ignored the beautiful aspects of nature. What is significant is that the author uses "noises" about the sounds in the city and "voices" about the sounds of nature. The novel emphasizes the natural sounds which are contrasted with the noises of modern cities. There is a purification of ears with Masahiko and in general there is an advocacy of the restoration of the listening to the natural voices in the surroundings.

The journey to spread the ashes of grandfather on the lake, which keeps the drowned village in it, happens to be a quest to restore his capacity for listening to the natural sounds. Ohina always tells him to listen to the charming voices of nature around him. Masahiko becomes a sacred listener to nature.

When Omomo sings, the song reminds Masahiko of the words of his grandfather. He tried many times to convey the spiritual world of his lost village to his grandson whose ears are not attuned to the charming voices of such a spiritual world. He had restrained himself with the strength of a man of the countryside. Towards the end of his life, his inner world had already been ruined because of the new culture of the urban area. He says, “Go blow yourselves up, Japanese islands! Just go blow yourselves to bits! (270)

Masahiko reflects on a past event when he and his brother had to take their grandfather to a mental institution to consult with the doctor there. When grandfather saw the cars on the road, he felt that they were enemy tanks. He said, “Masahiko-the tanks! You hear them don’t you-the ground’s rumbling? It’s a whole corps of tanks”(23). Masahiko realized that what his grandfather felt had been right. Vehicles were always making noises by “pounding and rocking the axis of the earth” (24). The enemy had been the evil force that was devouring everything on its way.

The songs of Ohina and her daughter Omomo began to arouse emotions that had been slumbering in the core of his heart. The strings within him were making harmonious sound. He could hear a musical composition that had never been heard by the outer world. The piece of composition bursted out with heavily layered feeling of life. Some verses evoked the presence of an autumn evening in the fields and mountains.

Masahiko could feel himself walking down Utazaka, passing by the weeping cherry and placing his hands on the mulberry trees of the old Silk Estate. He thought of myths and stories associated with the place.

His grandfather Masahito had left the charming world for some time and had tried to become a person of the city. After his grandfather’s estate had been ruined, he had established a home in Tokyo and had sent his son to college. He had a position with a trading firm. He became so strange even if he was leading a decent living. The “strangeness” others felt in his life was due to the military experience and his living in the village of Amazoko.

Standing with Ohina and Omama, Masahiko felt his grandfather’s warm hand being placed upon his shoulder. The mulberry leaves shone with a fresh light and then became immersed in the fog. For the first time he knew the shape and form of mulberry leaves which he had ignored before.

Thus, Masahiko is surprised to realize that the place has brought a great change in him.

All the places about which his grandfather had told him—the Hall of Kannon, the monkey-seat rock, Oki no Miya—where were they submerged? Trees, scattered here and there, were the only things visible at the bottom of the water; the only thing he understood was that there was the site of the village. His heart was attacked by a crushing sensation. He hadn’t expected to feel this way (27).

In “First There Were stories: Michiko Ishimure’s Narratives of Resistance and Reconciliation”, Bruce Allen outlines some aspects of Ishimure’s alternatives to modernity and hope for reconciliation. Reconciliation, he intends is, not only among humans, but also with the nonhuman natural world. To achieve it first, there is the need to restore the vital spirit of words. This quality, expressed in Japanese as “kotodama” meaning “spirit or soul of words”, Ishimure considers, has been a significant element in all languages in the world. This quality, which lies at the heart of our stories, can be nurtured if we attend the sounds, sights and other aspects of nature. The spirit has become endangered in the modern world. The problem of word spirit is dealt at length in the novel. In it, the author attempts to connect her concern for language to the theme of dam construction and catastrophe and the issues related with understanding between urban and rural people.

Masahiko, the protagonist, at first identifies his frustration about life and the lack of inspiration in writing music. The sounds he hears from the nature in the rural area, of animals, wind and water and also the dialects and stories of the villagers, give him an insight into his issues and how he might recover his lack of inspiration. He understands the need of restoring his ears which have been destroyed because of his association with the modern, urban world. Bruce Allen writes,

The healing process, Ishimure suggests is possible for all people, but it requires a rebirth of sensitivity to the “signs of life”- in Japanese “kehai”, a keyword that Ishimure uses in much of her writing. These “signs of life” are all around us, but we usually ignore them. Masahiko develops a sensitivity to these signs of life during his stay at Amazoko and gains a visceral- not merely mental- connection to the world. (Literatures, Cultures and the Environment, 43)

The author gives a description of how Masahiko “was becoming bound up with all the signs of life in the mountains and valleys, from the buds of the quince and magnolia to the faint gurgling sounds of running waters (222). Masahiko comes to have a non dualistic understanding of his connection to the objects and sounds of nature.

As Masahito became one of the technocratic citizens of the metropolis, his soul was paralised and disoriented. The years spent in the city drowned his spirit. But the genealogy of his dreams of Amozoko come full circle when Masahiko, his grandson reaches at the lake and is immersed in the traditions of his grandfather’s village. *Lake of Heaven* communicates the message that landscape in villages can accentuate people’s intimate association with the surroundings. It can serve as a peaceful site of human and nonhuman intermingling.

Mashiko's arrival intertwines with *o-bon*, the summer festival for remembering the dead persons and the mystery behind the death of Sayuri, the female ceremony attendant. As he goes deep into the mystery of water, Masahiko discovers that his ancestral roots are intertwined with the rituals and ceremonies of the village. It links him to the village and he finds out the meaning of his existence.

The bewilderment and comparison of the villagers are significant. The comments of the people on the drowning of their village show their affection and association with both living and nonliving beings. An elder woman in the novel whispers these words into the ears of her grandson: "I want you to remember this well- all these insects here are among the ten thousand beings. What's going to become of them now, with no place to go?" (324). Ishimure does not try to romanticise the sufferings of the village people, but she paints the pictures of a simple life attuned to the natural world in which every living and nonliving has its own place as a respected entity.

Ishimure urges everyone to experience the *kehai* or "signs of life" which are around us, giving us hints about how to be and what to do. But as we live in modern society and our ears are damaged, most of us are not listening or are not even able to listen. She makes us aware of the impact of our indoor lives- lives filled with competition, stress and tension which act as a great barrier to the experience of the outside natural world. Even if the major themes of Ishimure's novels are environmental pollution and extinction of species, they also serve as a wake-up call to the danger of the extinction of experience. Literary scholar, Rie Matsuya emphasises the association between sound and spirit which draws our attention to the author's evocations of the sense of hearing:

In *Lake of Heaven*, a masterpiece in her later career, Ishimure... attempts to evoke and restore modern attitude towards nature through engagement with the human sensorium. Towards this end, Ishimure focuses on the "ear" which she uses as a metaphor for delineating the recovery of the lost senses of moderns, who as a result of intensified urbanisation, have become detached from nature as a 'place'" (9)

The novel is a narrative of the uncanny encounters, fateful events, mysteries associated with rituals and ceremonies of the village and the many-a story associated with it. Soft whispers, gentle waving motions of grass and trees convey a feeling of continuity and solidarity. Ishimure's writing has magical powers on the readers, sensitizing the senses, captivating the reader to listen to the rhythmic music of nature and enjoy the beautiful landscape. Descriptions of nature, rituals, ceremonies and spiritual setting take a major part of Ishimure's novel. It also describes the all-encompassing care and empathy the villagers have with particular attention to each and every object of the village. The author shows a world where all living and nonliving beings are equally considered as kindred souls and spirits. The descriptions of the living and nonliving beings elucidate how respected and cherished they are.

Lake of Heaven is about the devastation caused by the dam and the narrative includes a lot of descriptions of the merciless submerging of everything from grand and beloved trees to small insects. Still much of the nonhuman objects have overcome the trauma inflicted on the landscape. The author, Ishimure encourages us to be like the young man Masahiko who begins to enjoy the beautiful voices of nature. By opening our senses towards the surroundings, we can bring about a great change in our perception. The fundamental environmental and social transformations begin here. Environmental activism cannot bring any change if we do not do this fundamental thing.

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Siby John, et. al. "Restoration of the Interconnection between Man and Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of Lake of Heaven by Ishimure Michiko." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 11(08), 2022, pp 01-05. Journal DOI- 10.35629/7722