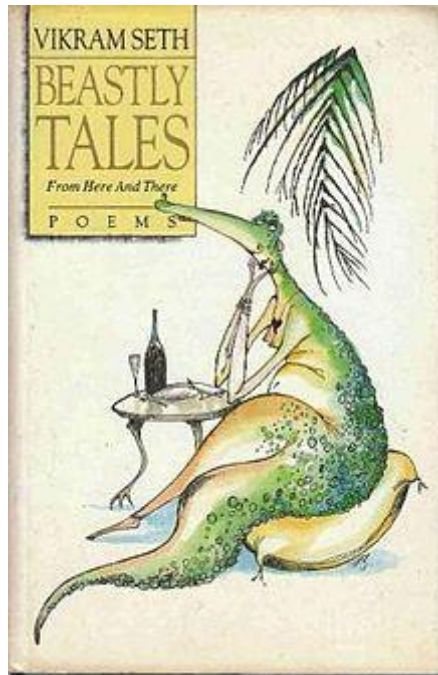


**Ecocritical Exploration in Vikram Seth's Poem,  
*The Elephant And The Tragopan***

**S. Bharathi, Ph.D. Scholar**

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**Abstract**

Eco-centrism in the external world is not a new thing in Literature, it has been prevailing from times immortal. However, in Thomson's *The Seasons*, nature, for the first time has been made the pivotal theme instead of remaining subordinate to man. Return to nature plays a very prominent role in the revival of the Romantic spirit of the Elizabethan age and it has contributed to a great literary era in English Literature. The Romantic Period English Litterateurs have never failed to express the aesthetic and invigorating life of the world of flora and fauna. The longing of the people for the freshness of nature to extricate themselves from the suffocating and crowding ambience of the urban and semi urban city have become the point of discussion in Eco-critic literary theses. The world of literature not only throngs with the works dealing with the beauty and power of nature, but it is also well known for reflecting the contemporary issues. With the continuous threat to our precious ecology, the zest, love and passion for nature among the literary writers have been progressing insistently into a matter of motherly concern which in turn has started reflecting

in their works of art. This paper explores the eco-critical perspectives in Vikram Seth's Poem *The Elephant and the Tragopan* – precisely, it is this sense of concern towards the environment and its reflection in the works of literature that has given rise to a new branch of literary theory called Ecocriticism.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Ecology, Ecosystem, Anthropocentric, Bio-centric and Ethical System

## 1.1 Introduction

The word "Ecocriticism" first appeared in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. It was not a sudden outburst but the result of long, gradual growth and development. At present ecocriticism is in full swing and it is a readily accepted theory worldwide. As far as Indian Literature is concerned the poetic works of Rabindranath Tagore, "The Tame Bird was in a Cage" pictures the pathetic condition of the bird which has forgotten even to sing and "I Plucked you Flower" portrays the selfish attitude of every human that plucking flowers is their own right which are imbued with ecological elements. In Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* and A.K. Ramanujan's "*A River*", Man's selfish use of the river by obstructing its natural flow i.e. making dams, throwing garbage and many other human atrocities have been visualized by the writers. In the above works one gets a glimpse of man's selfish motives.

### Vikram Seth's Ecofriendly Writing

Keeping up to this tradition of ecofriendly writers is Vikram Seth, one of the most eminent modern Indian writers in English. His poetry as well as fiction reflects the relationship between his literary view points and his ecological perspectives of the world. Ecocriticism gives increased attention to literary representations of nature and is sensitive to the interdependency of nature and man.

In Vikram Seth's Poem *Beastly Tales from Here and There*, the animals are not only humanized, but by itself it is a human drama with special significance to environmental issues. In a way, all the stories of the *Beastly Tales* highlight different moods, levels and activities of man and his attraction is more towards the negative aspects than the positive.

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## Focus of This Paper

This paper deals with the Ecocritical exploration in Vikram Seth's poem *The Elephant and the Tragopan*, the longest tale in the group (about 800 lines) from his book "The Beastly Tales from here and there". The poem combines social expediency, with political manoeuvre.

### 1.2 A Collection of Animal Fables

Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales from Here and There* (1992) is one of the important poetical compositions dealing with ecocriticism. This book contains a collection of ten animal fables in rhymed couplets. These fables are similar to the work of Pandit Vishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra* which is a blend of Philosophy, Psychology, Politics, Music, Astronomy and Human relationships.

The work has resemblance also to T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. In Pandit's work *Panchatantra* animals in general and in Eliot's work *Cats* in particular are humanized. The animals in the *Beastly Tales* are also humanized with all their multiple activities and manners and with all their involvements in the daily process of living. The tales have an implied moralistic attitude.

### 1.3 A Juxtaposition of Eco System and Ethical System

Our global crises is not because of how ecosystems function; it is because how ethical system functions. Getting through the crises requires a clear understanding of our impact on nature. Understanding of ethical system and using the understanding to reform them is the need of the hour. Every one of us is aware of global warming, climate change, depletion of Ozone layer and other large scale environmental disasters that threaten our very existence. Even then people choose to bury themselves in the sands of time.

The poem *The Elephant and the Tragopan* begins with an account of rich and luxuriant nature. Nature is represented as a minor paradise with calmness, peacefulness and happiness:

In Bingle Valley, broad and green,  
Where neither hut nor field is seen  
.....  
Where a cold river, filmed with ice  
Sustains a minor paradise. (337)

As in the real world, this “minor paradise” is going to be destroyed by man’s selfish attitudes, and the elephant and the tragopan get information about the man’s crazy scheme. They decide to organize a full meeting of the Forest Folk. With that ends the first phase of the poem.

#### 1.4 Biocentric Vision against Anthropocentric Vision

Man has his Anthropocentric vision as opposed to Biocentric vision. And his compulsion to conquer, harmonize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing which in the end leads to his own extinction along with the total destruction of the Biosphere. Biocentric attitude means extending inherent value to all living things.

The poet tries to compare and contrast both these visions and allows the readers to decide by themselves to choose the path they want to tread. As in the poem “*Road Not taken*” by Robert Frost, Vikram Seth points out that one is for the betterment and the other is for destruction. In the former poem, one is not aware of which one of the roads would lead to betterment and which to destruction; but in this poem by Vikram Seth each and every reader is well aware that only the biocentric vision will lead him to prosperity and anthropocentric vision will not only end in his own catastrophe but destruction of the whole bio-sphere. These two visions are well depicted in the next phase of the poem *The Elephant and the Tragopan*.

In the next phase there is a meeting of the forest folk which includes gibbons and squirrels, snakes, wild dog, blood sucking leeches and leopards in their spotted suits. The discussion includes the long speech by the elephant that reflectively points out man’s true nature and character to destroy everything for his selfish ends (Anthropocentric Vision of man).

The poet pointing to man's selfish attitude towards our ever precious planet via the elephant's voice says:

He is a creature mild and vicious,  
Practical minded and capricious,  
Loving and brutal, sane and mad  
The good as puzzling as the bad.

He sees the planet as his fief  
Where every hair or drop or leaf  
Or seed or blade or grain of sand  
Is destined for his mouth or hand. (342)

So too, is his enormous greed, and his enormous capacity to destroy  
Environment:

For nowhere lies beyond man's reach  
To mar and burn and flood and leach  
A distant valley is indeed  
No sanctuary from his greed (344)

Thus anthropocentric vision is depicted by the poet which assumes the primacy of humans, who either sentimentalize or dominate the environment.

In conclusion a decision is taken to take out a rally. Readers get an account of the rally which is cheered by the Villagers on the way. The poet wants to elucidate the fact that man can survive in the animal habitat, but animals cannot survive in human habitat. Thus the poet is exhibiting his biocentric vision on environment:

So stunned and stupefied were they  
They even cheered them on the way  
Or joined them on the route to town (347)

### 1.5 Eco Critics View about Nature

Eco critics do look at the natural world differently. They switch critical attention from the inner to outer sphere and reject the belief that everything is socially or linguistically constructed. The next scene brings man to the scene. The depiction of power hungry, corrupt government officials would be hilarious if it were not so alarmingly familiar.

The negotiation is between the beasts on one side headed by the Elephant and his Secretary, the Tragopan and the elected ruler of the town, the Great Bigshot “Sri Padmabhushan Gobbardhan” and his associates. When the aggrieved people expose the motivated selfish doings of the rulers, the Bigshot tries to persuade the beasts. The poet refers to the political reality, how they sustain themselves in power and continue administration.

It's not just water that must funnel  
Out of the hills through Bingle Tunnel.  
Do animals have funds or votes –  
Or anything but vocal throats?  
Will you help me get re-elected (355)

The sudden jutting in of Small fry, the Number Three and the Bigshot Number One's son, gives a jolt to the latter. In comparison he is much more transparent and more akin to the demands of the beasts, and in support of keeping the environment intact (“As the roads come, the trees will go”). But he is rudely stopped by his father, who decries his upbringing, the attitude of younger generation, and most important of all, maintains that the son should inherit the father's political legacy willingly and smoothly:

One day all this would have been yours –  
These antlers and these heads of boars,  
This office and these silver plates  
These luminous glass paper weights,  
My voting bank, my number game  
My files, my fortune, and my fame (358)

The whole account is full of ironical twists, and put forward devastating comments on the politicians and their deceitful ways of sticking to power without any consideration of the good of the country. The environment and the country are symbolic of the prevailing state of affairs.

### 1.6 The Anti-Climax and Climax

The end is both an anti-climax and a climax. The Small fry and the Elephant are silenced, the Tragopan gets killed. The conclusion takes on different dimensions, also a reflection of what happens at times. The Tragopan becomes a martyr and his death achieves what could not have been achieved while he was alive – the whole country takes up his cause – the cause of the aggrieved.

The poem “*The Elephant and the Tragopan*” has continuous ironical dimensions – irony at the expense of projects, governments and motivated rulers and has got implicit symbolical bearings to suggest how best man can live in this planet and how fruitfully:

For it undoubtedly was true  
That suddenly the whole state knew  
Of Bingle Valley and the trek  
That ended in the fatal peck. (361)

### .7 Conclusion

Vikram Seth’s tales on Beasts is a continuation of the Panchatantra tradition, and an improvement on it, in the sense that it is more related to the factors or reality, relating to the environmental aspects as available at the present modern age. The writer has offered no resolution to the environmental problem. He has only highlighted the inevitable destruction of environment and how best that can be averted. Man has created a huge fence around himself by his artificial way of living so that animals have to stay away from him to survive.

In all religions, the people who are shown to be at peace are shown to be at harmony with nature. For instance, the Bible presents Adam naming the animals as they come to him (Gen. 2:19). Mystics are shown to be able to converse with animals. His creativity is moulded by his immediate environment.

A critic observes: “A step further is Lawrence Buell, who boldly coined the phrase *environmental imagination* referring to how the physical environment shapes imagination.

This definition shows that the physical environment can be combined with an attitude indicating that there is ‘the cultural geography of a region’. This is the reason why there is the *urban imagination* or *island imagination*.

According to Buell, “re-imagination” is essential. Nature provides the environment for creativity. Ecocritical texts have an important characteristic of nature being not only the background or the setting for a text, but for being a part of the text. When ecocriticism emerged as a separate discipline in the 1990s, the relationship between man and his physical environment came to be understood in one way, according to Buell, “man always exists *within* some natural environment or, there cannot be *is* without *where*”. (Tosic 44)

Studying Indian Literature in English, the poem, “*River, Once*” by R. Parthasarathy, is highly suggestive and it indicates that it was a river (Vaigai) once and it is no longer a river due to man’s indifference to the beauty of nature. Here the poet makes a reference about the poets of the past who came to her for inspiration. She inspired them to write great poetry. The poet shows how the river was once the cradle of the three great Tamil academies that flourished at Madurai in the ancient past and to the great contribution made by the Sangam Poets to the richness of ancient Tamil Poetry.

Vikram Seth depicts the interrelationship between man and nature through a sample representation in the characters of Elephant and the Tragopan. The whole text is a careful rendering of the myth of Elephant and the Tragopan to present the environmental calamity that man sets off every day. By the tragic end of the Tragopan, the poet highlights the fact that the callous nature of mankind towards Nature is too close to man and would lead him to death, decay and destruction. Man realises his loss only when it is too late for remedy. If man realises that if he sustains nature, nature would in turn sustain him, perhaps his endless destruction of nature would stop. But he continues to tramp over the face of the earth quiet ruthlessly, unmindful of the destruction he causes every day. However much nature gives to man, man is unable to nurture it in turn and the majority of mankind spurn the tender care of



nature due to their sheer arrogance, selfishness and greed. Nature is not a silent spectator. One day it will react. It would not be just a thorn prick, but could be a mighty tsunami, the poet warns humanity.

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