

**From Ignorance to Independence: An Ecological search for sustainable future
in “The Tree of the Century” by Mridula Garg**

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Abstract

The paper focusses on the repercussions of creating harm to the environment which backfires all the living systems in the world through the short story “The Tree of the Century” by Mridula Garg. It portrays the cruelty of humans who intend to commodify nature for their own luxury. The story warns that humans should not forget that nature stands at the forefront in the hierarchical natural order of the world where humans themselves have established their roots through nature and became the sole reason for them to sustain. The selfless care of nature to express its motherly love towards its children shows ecocentric concerns. Nature extends its heart and considers both humans and all living organisms as its own children and bearing their pain in spite of ignorance for their upliftment. It expresses the agony of her children for their commodified view who are still unaware of the future impacts. The paper compares the attitude of nature who include humans as “Self” with the attitude of humans who disintegrate from nature and consider them as “Other”. The paper intends to transform humans from “Ruthless beings” to “Responsible beings” showing their interest towards preserving nature. The theoretical concept of deep ecology along with its eight supporting principles has been applied to foster a symbiotic relationship between human and

nature. Additionally, the story of Amrita Devi from Bishnoi village has been related to indicate the necessity for unlocking the new era of ecocentricism. The paper shatters all anthropocentric intentions by highlighting their follies and futile words of pretending to conserve nature through ecocentric sarcasm. The main objective of the paper lies in indicating the dire need of humans to preserve the natural world without their selfish needs and to focus on the quality of living of both humans and non-human entities.

Keywords: Nature, Responsibility, Deep Ecology, Anthropocentric, Humans

Introduction

“The Tree of the Century” is a short story written by Mridula Garg that emphasizes the importance of maintaining ecological protection for a long run and serves as a platform to appreciate the aesthetics of natural values. She is an Indian author from Calcutta who is fond of writing short stories from her childhood. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 2013. The uniqueness of “The Tree of the Century” lies in giving voice to non-human entities like trees to communicate their emotion to the entire world. Sarcasm, a literary device is used as a defense mechanism for trees to mock at the false preaching of humans who do not put their words into action. It teaches a lesson for humans to understand their mistake of ignoring nature. This story acts as a tool to navigate the literary values along with, providing awareness for people to understand the vital role of ecological independence. The theoretical framework of deep ecology which comprises of eight principles has been utilised to gain a deeper support for the arguments present in the research paper. But the paper has infused four principles which are needed to bring the idea of deep ecology. Along with, the real-life story of Amrita Devi from Bishoi village has been added to attain a greater significance for understanding the immediate need for people to indicate their responsibility in conserving Environment.

Storyline

The short story begins with a tree narrating its feelings to the entire world. It compares its life with humans and thinks about the fact that their routine remains unchanged until they reach

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 26:4 April 2026

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their resting stage of life. But it is not the same in the case of humans who transgress through different phases and become unpredictable in every stage of life. There is no retirement age for nature because it wishes to prolong its service to its maximum without expecting any rewards, salary hikes, or recognition from others. But humans retire after a particular period and cannot continue to work with the same spirit when they were young and their routine changes according to their own needs. The relentless service by the trees will stay in the minds of people through historical record and many generations will be benefited across the globe. But for humans it does not apply the same because death reaches them after a certain period of time marking an end to their service which is done for the sake of material needs and paves the way for the next generation to occupy the space. This shows the idea that even after centuries the routine of the tree remains unchanged fulfilling its duties which benefits all kind of living beings showing its crucial importance in the world and the need to prioritise environment over humans to ensure survival for a long run.

The story talks about the tremendous benefits of trees which has been rendering its service across many centuries. The main duties of the tree include providing shelter, fruits, perfumes, resting place for birds, seeds for next generation, providing oxygen for all living beings etc. The wholehearted quality of nature to provide endless benefits to other living beings is appreciated throughout the short story and makes human to take inspiration from trees. It is painful to visualise the pain of trees when they provide numerous benefits to others without any expectation and facing the condition of isolation which is caused by humans through merciless act of destroying the gift of nature. It explores the selfish attitude of humans who just utilise the benefit and regard it as trash after its usage. There is a no genuine care in terms of human's relationship with the natural world. In contrary to the prevailing condition, there are few legendary people like Amrita Devi, Sunderlal Bahuguna, Salim Ali, and Jadev Payeng, among others, whose contributions becomes the reason for the mother earth to sustain despite of several disturbances which are lurking around. Among these great visionaries, the story of Amrita Devi has been taken as an example to indicate the importance of conserving nature. The paper has attempted to make humans as responsible citizens who understands that it is their duty to protect nature for its own sake rather than to satisfy their selfish motives.

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Deep Ecology and Analysis

Deep ecology is an environmental movement brought by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess to represent the inherent value of nature irrespective of their benefit to humans. It has been used as a structural framework for the research paper helps to analyse the work of literature to project its ecological concerns to the entire world. It analyses the level of intimate relationship between humans and the natural world. There are eight primary principles which provide a firm structure to deep ecology. The paper has applied a few principles that align with the short story “The Tree of the Century”. The principles include:

- 1) Humans are a part of nature and has the potential to exist independently irrespective of the benefits provided by them.
- 2) Appreciation of Diversity of life
- 3) Destruction is permitted only to satisfy essential needs
- 4) Focus on quality of life over Standard of Living

The research paper utilizes these principles of deep ecology and relates to the story of Amrita Devi from Bishnoi Village with an aim to realize the importance of conserving natural bodies irrespective of the benefit they yield to the world. The core concept of deep ecology fits within the first principle which stands as a base to build the strong structure of Deep Ecology. Humans think that they are superior beings among the creations of the world. This dominant status gives them the power to recreate the world in a way it benefits them regardless of the state of other living beings which are surrounded around them.

Humans and non-human entities have their own value of existence regardless of the benefit provided by each other. Each entity has its own value and necessitates the interdependence of both of them to survive in the natural world. In “The Tree of the Century”, the author Mridula Garg introduces the benefits of tree and how they have crossed centuries surviving in the planet. They have provided many benefits such as providing shelter, seeds for generations, food, perfumes etc.

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The benefits provided by the tree are its regular tasks and even after its retirement it remains the same. The generous nature of trees benefits everyone through its precious leaves, fruits, and seeds, which humans often take for granted. The benefits of trees as follows are: “Hundred years are just a blink to a tree. However old a tree may grow, its daily routine remains the same. Housing birds, giving shelter to the weary, shedding leaves to enrich the top soil, manufacturing seeds for the future greenery and contributing to the arts. Yes sir. The trees make music by making their branches and leaves play on the breeze. A veritable orchestra, playing different ragas at different times of the day and seasons”.

To a greater extent, humans exploited trees and treated them objects with a purpose to provide benefits to humans, rather than to protect to maintain an eco-friendly relationship between humans and nature. Trees expect mutual relationship but humans exhibit their selfish nature through over exploitation and it is as follow: “Some of them are excellent perfumeries too. Correction. Not some, all of them are perfumeries but not all fragrances reach the cussed humans. The fault lies not with the fragrance but our bewildered senses, afflicted by the stench of over consumption”.

The Principles of Deep Ecology

The first principle states that humans are part of nature and they need to protect nature irrespective of the benefit nature may provide. It demands humans to express reciprocal behavior to trees, which benefit humankind without any expectation of benefit from them. The story of Amrita Devi from Bishnoi village can be related with aspect of preserving nature and turning individuals to consider it as duty to preserve them. In the year 1730, the king Abhay Singh ordered his men to cut Khejri trees to construct his new place. When the soldiers came to cut the tree, Amrita Devi, a woman from Bishnoi community hugged the tree preventing them from killing the trees. Amrita’s initiation invited nearly 362 people to join the protest by hugging the trees. They all are determined to sacrifice their life for survival of trees. Soldiers ignored their effort and killed everyone who are involved in the protest. The king, after hearing the news of more than 300 people being killed along with Amrita, was shocked and apologized in front of the people realising his mistake and declared that trees should not be cut in the village. This is the expected outcome of

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deep ecology which wants people to be responsible in protecting nature for its wholeheartedness rather than their commercial purpose. Their true love was the real gift for nature to prolong its benefits to serve all the living organisms in the world.

The second principle talks about the lifeforms which become the reason for the formation of biodiversity. India's biodiversity serves as a reserve for millions of organisms that exist in the natural world. It is a space for them to lead their life. The rich heritage of biodiversity invites many migratory birds to visit the place. These birds return to their motherland in spite of their duties in the alien land. They treat alien land as a "space of survival" and return to their motherland which is their permanent "place of existence". The story compares the life of migratory birds with nomads and shows the importance of the drive to return to their place marking the diversity of life forms. Both organisms do not have a permanent place to reside but treat nature as their only common place which permits everyone without imposing any restrictions. It is a place where there is an urge for living organisms to return. The migratory birds which move during summer to meet its survival demands, return during winter to their motherland in spite of any hectic situation. Similar to migratory birds, nomads move from one place to another and return to nature which is their home. The interest of nature to bring the element of inclusivity increases the diversity and it is clearly represented in the following lines: In the winter months, the stories grew spicier as the migratory birds made their rounds, God knows where they flew to in the summer months but they never forgot to return in the winter. That is how it is with nomads: however far they go, they do not lose the yearning to return, a nomad is not mendicant, you see. The stories, the birds from faraway lands related, were sometimes so strange, that the shock made him forget to laugh for a while (Garg 550).

The next principle states that humans have no inherent right to exploitation. It is considered ethical to use the resources to a level which is needed for the survival. It is common for humans to extract some products of nature which is needed for their survival like the parasite which gets its food from the host as per the law of nature. But the problem occurs when there is an extremity in both the cases which leads to an exponential rate of destruction. Humans due to greed and sophistication end up in exploiting the resources. In the short story, the effects of over consumption

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and Industrialization has led to an adverse condition resulting in negative effect for both humans and non- human entities. It is a pathetic state where roots of the trees are suffocating due to the lack of sufficient breathing space for roots due to Industrialization and the difficulty of the trees is represented here: “Roads have gained precedence upon trees to such an extent to such an extent that they forget to leave enough breathing space around their roots, when laying the concrete slabs. Without mother earth to sustain them, they can barely breathe what to say of growing robust trunks” (Garg, 554).

It is greatly surprising that trees are taking revenge like humans and it is mentioned by the incident in the story. Chinese rulers issued an order to kill all the birds in the city due to its intake of grains. The citizens residing the city blindly followed the instructions given by the rulers and did their best to kill them. They did not expect the revenge taken by nature against human. The destruction of birds increased pests and humans found it difficult to control and the chaotic condition is given below: “We took our revenge soon enough. One year went well without the birds but faster that, the burgeoning population of worms and pests paid put to the harvest. There were no birds to control their numbers by making a meal of them. Everyone knows birds prefer worms to grain any day” (Garg 551).

The last principle which forms the ultimate focus of the research paper is to focus on the quality of life over standard of living. Humans and non- humans should develop an understanding of enhancing the quality of leading a sustainable life rather than building asserts. Devika in her research article “Deep Ecology - Conceptualisation and Interconnection with Nature” has used various literary works as a tool for creating awareness for people to think of an alternative future which prioritises the well-being of people over assets (Devika).

Life would be pleasing when people have sufficient food to eat, fresh air to breathe and a good bonding between nature and humans. But humans who live in the material world would exceed this limit in rush for a luxurious lifestyle. This luxury can be pleasing for certain groups of people, while affecting a large section of other organism who are struggling to lead a minimal life of survival. Sanjay Kumar, in his article " Deep Ecology in Thoreau's Walden: A philosophical and Literary approach" addresses the importance of leading a simple, self-sufficient life which is

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needed for a successful survival in the world (Kumar). Humans think that with a help of luxurious wealth they can buy anything and lead a life without the dependence of anyone. But the short story trashes the egocentric behaviour of humans and makes them Eco centric. By presenting the pitfalls of humans it tries to bring responsibility in conserving them and the sarcastic comment made by nature adds more spark to it. Tree's sarcastic outlook of realising that humans cannot lead a life without their support and laughs by the false pretensions made by humans to conserve nature through their futile words without action is presenting here: "Save the environment! Grow more trees!" (Garg 555).

Trees laugh at humans because the same people who inflicted pain on nature are preaching to the world through their false vows. Nature knows that humans would not save environment for its state of existence but to derive benefits from them. But they are unaware of the silent power of mother earth without which their survival itself is put into question and the sarcasm by trees shows that without giving importance to nature they cannot lead their life. The ironic ending of the story "The Tree of the Century" shows that nature is testing human's survival in the world for a long run who are in the verge of exploiting natural resources for their comfort. The open ending of the novel warns about the uncertainty of life in the future where humans look environment as a commodity and preserve them as an object of use rather than to benefit biodiversity which is a home for millions of living organisms. Md Rafiqul Islam in his article " A study of Deep Ecology and Environmental Sustainability: Through an Eco feminist lens" has analyzed the pathetic state of nature being treated as an object of human exploitation and through the use of Eco feminism indicates the importance coexisting with natural world (Islam).

The sarcastic laugh of trees is an alarming sign given by them to indicate the threat before emerging and demands humans to act as responsible beings to conserve nature which helps for creating a sustainable future is given below: "The irony of the slogan made him forget all about breathing. He burst out laughing and laughed through the day, holding its breath as if he would never ever breathe again. It so happened that when the tree laughed for the first time in living memory during the day, it was the dawn of the touted twenty- first century" (Garg 555).

Conclusion

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The paper demands people to focus on Ecological Independence which moves towards establishing a sustainable future. It encourages people to prioritize on natural needs than material benefits. It has tried it's best to appreciate the utilitarian value of trees and the vital need for survival. It encourages to lead a simple life rather than running after luxuries. It has tried to change the perspective from egocentric to ecocentric. The literary device of satire is being used in the paper to mock on human's futile words in the name of conservation. The main motive of the research paper is to make humans as responsible beings to preserve mother earth and enabling a mutual bond of independence of both human and natural world.

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