

Nature, Rural Life and Ecocritical understanding in Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's Pather Panchali (Song of the Road)

Leena Sarkar Bhaduri Assistant Professor, Shree Agrasen Mahavidyalaya, P.O. Dalkhola, Dist – Uttar Dinajpur, India.

Email: gayatrimuna9@gmail.com

DOI:

Abstract

Literature is always a reflection of nature, society or surroundings and it perceives the transfiguration of the environment where we exist. Kate Soper writes – "...that nature is a series of changing cultural constructions that can be used to praise and blame". Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's Pather Panchali (Song of the Road) is perhaps one of the greatest contributions to Bengali Literature for the reflection of transforming cultural interpretations. It is a thoroughly detailed and intricate portrayal of village people and the daily chores of their life at the backdrop of nature. In the novel the village and its surroundings is not romanticized; it is not narrated in an exaggerated way, rather it is depicted as it is, without any prejudice but more often subjectively, by the people who live in it. The two unforgettable characters in the novel – Opu & Durga get themselves lost in the wanderlust by not knowing what life has in store for them; which road to take and often follows the road less trodden or explored by others. Some of the greenery narrated in the text are full of fecundity, with blooming flowers and wonderful melody of chirping birds; but others are quite difficult to traverse and strewn with thorns; sometimes too tired for the summer heat, sometimes lashed by storms and darkened by the threatening clouds; although there is always a ray of hope that the air will be kinder and going forward will be less burdensome. As Opu and Durga pass through these romantic images, they keep maturing in their character, experiences and the nature of dreams with increasing anticipation of what they will experience later in life. Besides the rural landscape and intricate depiction of nature, the novel also anticipates modern ecocritical concerns by typifying an intimate, everyday relationship between poverty-stricken villagers and the fragile ecosystems of rural Bengal. The study of the novel also examines how poverty and marginalization aggravates ecological accountability, suggesting that class and caste inequalities are inseparable from environmental injustice. The paper attempts to study nature, greenery, simplicity and its abundance as narrated by the author in the text. We would also try to discern how human perception connects idiosyncratically and impartially the condition of life with the serenity of nature and how green readings of the fiction offer a vernacular model of ecological consciousness.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Romantic imageries, Marginalization, Ecological consciousness.

Introduction

In a very informal communication with Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay once asked him, a very pertinent question- When the social degradation and economic imbalance is the pertinent aspect of contemporary Bengali Literature, why will the perspective of Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay not undergo any transformation and emphasize on these aspects of research? Why will it still be restricted to rural Bengal and the depictions of nature? Bibhutibhusan replied that he perceives the life force in the simple life, human figures, and the environmental treasures of rural Bengal and in the people of Bengal. He said that he does not believe in complications and is a worshipper of truth and beauty of nature. Perhaps for this uniqueness the legendary film director, Stayajit Ray, initiated his magnificent

Article History : Received: 01 May. 2026. Accepted: 23 June. 2026. Available online: 25 June. 2026. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) **Copyright**: © 2026 The Author(s). **Licensing** : This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) **Conflict of Interest**: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

career with the film *Pather Panchali*. Ray in his famous book entitled *Our Films Their Film* says “I chose *Pather Panchali* for the qualities that made it a great book: its humanism, its lyricism, and its ring of truth”. (Satyajit 33) *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road) however, was without question Bhubhutibhusan’s stupendous achievement. It was first published serially in the journal *Vichitra* in 1928 and 1929 and in November 1929 it appeared in book form. Since then, six other editions have been printed, including two abridged versions for children. Bhubhutibhusan’s reputation was established by *Pather Panchali* which was his first major work and it is probable that much of the success of his later writing was due to its popularity. Bhubhutibhusan received an outstanding critical attention and acclaim as it rises to the level of universal gestures and universal emotions and it surpasses the regional moorings. The great author, Rabindranath Tagore, once said – In *Pather Panchali* natural greenery, roads, man-woman relationship and ups-downs of life is depicted in a very simple way; away from the harsh social realism of life. It has added a new dimension to Bengali Literature. (Translated)

The paper attempts to critically explore nature and its abundance in the text essentially highlighting the ecological concerns. The discourse of the paper concentrates on nature as nature constructs and typifies the plot of the novel. Nature has a benign presence in the novel. On one side it foregrounds life in abject poverty and on the other side it presents the heavenly beauty of nature. The imagination of the author is bewildering and the novel literally unfolds the multifaceted aspects of life. The characters evolve against the backdrop of nature; emotional bonding, jealousy, dream, desire, expectations and anticipations in the text develop in the lap of nature. Life is at times lost in the wilderness of nature and at times combatting with the harsh realities of nature. Like William Wordsworth nature here builds up a positive attitude among the protagonists who find solace in her open lap. The novel has a geocentric delineation set against the societal approach to life. Bhubhutibhusan has said that: “I love not Man the less, but nature more” (38) as has been quoted by Gopikanath Roychoudhury in his *Bhubhutibhusan: Mon O Silpo*. Especially three novels we can consider which essentially deals with the pictorial representation of nature – *Chander Pahar*, *Pather Panchali* and *Aranyak*. In *Chander Pahar*, the author describes the jungle of Africa and the expressions used to describe the fearful wild animals and the three toed bunip is incredible. Similarly, when we talk about *Aranyak* the description of jungle in poetic language touches our heart. Shankar in *Chander Pahar* is a simple rural boy with a dream to go for adventure in South Africa. Satyacharan in *Aranyak* passionately gets lost in the world of adventure through the forestlands and jungles of *Lobtulia* and *Ajmabad*. Both the characters are of adventurous spirit. It is observed that novels are deftly designed and the central role is being played by the forest or the natural landscape and not the characters. The growth of the characters typify the evolution that occur in the novels. In *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road) we do not observe typical jungle but the

natural landscape is integrally related with the society and its evocations. The focal point of the story is the family of Shorbojaya and Horihor, the two children and the old aunty. The characters are designed in such a manner by the author that there is a constant and subtle interplay between them. The most appealing thing in the thematic construction is the underlying contrasts in the story: pictorial as well as emotional, the rich and the poor, the laughter and the tears, the beauty of the country-side and the grimness of poverty existing in it.

Discussion

The author begins the novel with a very stereotyped description of Horihor's family, their ancestral origin, description of their dilapidated thatched house and the regular life of Horihor and his family members. From the beginning we can assume that author is not into the narration of the idiosyncrasies of a village life but it is a romantic saga of an ordinary life in a village. Sometimes it is objectively presented with the symbolical representation of the creepers, lush green fields, orchards of juicy fruits, water bodies in dense forest, tall trees with several unknown birds chirping and dancing with their melodious music but most often it is subjectively represented by the people who live in it, their dogmatic attitude to caste and self created social hierarchy. In this beautiful and harsh background two children- Opu and Durga learn to live every day. They learn to live in a world gradually progressing towards materialism. They realize it, at times feel the pain of their wretched life and also learn how to abhor it and get lost in the mesmerizing beauty of this majestic world. They grow with nature and also develop their social understanding with their interactions with nature. They wonder how they are looked down upon and humiliated by some villagers for their miserable financial condition. Living in a non-descript village, Nischindapur, the two simple rural characters, Opu and Durga, enjoy every moment of their life. They show a typical wanderlust and they profoundly get delighted with the deep consolation in their hearts in the freshness of nature. Every aspect of nature overpowers their poverty-stricken life. They learn to live with an anticipation of a better tomorrow, better food and better space to live and fresh shower fills their life with renewed spirit and energy to fulfill their desire. To make the story more poignant the author describes every subtle aspect of nature which becomes an integral part of their very existence:

Between the jungle thickets in the open country grew clumps of tall grass, yellow – flowering bushes and wild plum trees; and over all this tangle of luxuriant growth the kolmi creeper had spread its large green leaves completely engulfing it, and in the cool shade beneath its leafy roof a few fully open wild flowers thrust up their heads towards the sky in an attempt to catch the sunlight, while in that lovely forest green which deepened as the sun set, the birds began to sing. (Father Panchali 55. Hereafter PP)

The stretch of the jungle begins from the wall of the compound of Opu's house and it has its freshness with deep green shadows, which touches the mind and soul of Opu and his sister Durga alike and brings immense satisfaction into their hearts. The ever-changing spectacles of the forest and every single object he observes on his way to an unknown destination, every day encapsulates Opu's mind with deep emotions and gaiety. He uncovers new passion every day when he passes through the verdant green lands, thick foliage, cattle and fresh water bodies. Whereas, Durga happily wanders in the breeze that was warm and heavy with the scent of blossoms, the melodious tune of kokil from the shade of the trees has an enchanting appeal and the dry aromatic smell of the air brings new hope every day. She admires the beauty of the groves, the blooming of the basok flowers, the red cow and the juicy jackfruit tree in the yard, the fragrance of the dried leaves and the path down to the river- but she expresses her paranoia that one day she would have to leave all these forever. Opu establishes eternal communion with the fresh earth, birds, trees and leaves. He connects his deep love with the enchanted surrounding and the champak flowers, the blooming of which almost eclipsed the presence of other flowers to him. He enjoys burying his face in his precious flowers: "breathing in their fragrance and murmuring their lovely name, champak, golden champak" (PP 224.). So, we can very well perceive in the character of Opu a deep fascination for the expanded horizon. His excessive desire for knowledge and exploration is also quite visible in his craziness for books. Even with the books he tries to unite with nature. He shows deep inclination to read books under the trees and beside the river in the midst of complete silence, in the lap of Mother Nature. On the part of Durga, it is observed that she loves the trees, the creepers, the fruits and the village as whole. She has a frail body but full of elemental enthusiasm. The river and the meandering path of the village, every untroddean path to the jungle, every wild fruit and climbers' interfuses with her prosaic and thrifty life. They are like her bosom friends and her soul companions. In the middle of the novel the author describes the spring season. He describes the burgeoning of the spring which appears very fresh, fecund and full of happiness and ecstasy; the young leaves of every tree and the old worn-out garden looks bright and beautiful by the long fronds of ghentu flowers and some of the white blossom on the pomelo tree. In this regard, the author refers to the love of Durga for the trees. She exhibits immense love for every stick and stone of the village and also the river and the path. She attaches herself so intimately with them that they eventually become a part of her very existence. Bibhutibhusan has said thus: "They were her own dear friends, her lifelong companions" (PP 228). But Durga seems to be always overpowered by an uncanny fear of losing her only natural companions forever. This unnatural fear disturbs her tranquil mind. If we try to generalize the statement of the author then we may perhaps deduce the fact that it is the hidden fear in the mind of every girl as after marriage they have to leave their household forever for an unknown destination. This is what the author tries to portray in a

subdued way while describing the unknown fear of Durga. While viewing the different aspects of nature she has tried to picture some of them to herself, like: “the mango stream tree”; “the bamboo grove behind the house” and “the river steps with the evening shadows” (PP 228). It is a fact that we can vividly espouse from the character delineation that the novel is always progressing towards an unknown path where at every single turn they come across something anxiously waiting to welcome them- “fruit or flowers, laughter or sympathy” (PP 232) - a welcome that appears to be invigorating.

Indeed, life is projected in a very simple way for them. They love to enjoy every single moment of their life and they get immense satisfaction to share their feelings with nature and to them nature is an abode of bliss and happiness. In their everyday travelling episode, one day they travel away from their village to a field of Kaash flowers. In this entrancing physical environment, their arduous and purposeful journey gets rewarded by their first sight of a railway train. It is clearly evident that in the midst of deepest gloom in their life for being poor, they used to be delighted after the fulfillment of the simple desires in their life. Gradually with passage of time Opu attains maturity and tries to drown himself in the undefined expanse of nature. He perceives the changes that the maturing year with seasonal diversities will spell out in the trees, on land and water, in the sky, in the fruit and in the flowers. He loves them so dearly as if they are his own siblings. In the words of the author:

Ever since he was born, Nature’s vast and lovely canvas had been spread before his eyes. The somber magnificence of the thick black robes which enshrouded the sky as the fierce and airless summer burned to its end; the play of colour in the clouds of the sky as the sun set across the Shonadanga plain; the wide sandbank of Madhobpur at the end of the rains, with its deep carpet of flowering herbs; the enchanting crisscross of light and shade in the bamboo grove on a moonlit night: the incomparable and inexhaustible loveliness of all these had stamped itself indelibly on his keen, ardent and innocent mind as he journeyed on towards manhood; they had opened his eyes to the quintessence of beauty (PP 332).

Opu struggles in his challenging life to uncover the hidden treasures of life. Although his life was throttled by huge family responsibilities, his unsatiated heart longs for open air and backwoods. His urge for exploration drags him mentally and physically beyond the horizon. His intense love for his native place, Nischindipur, is perceived in his attitude to life. Unfortunately, his destiny does not allow him to confine himself in his village. His challenging life continues to move and he gradually progresses to the greater world to get the true essence of life. The note of self-reliance is evident in these lines:

The deity of the eternal road smiles benevolently and asserts, Foolish boy, the path of life does not end in the bamboo grove of your village, or under the peepul tree of Biru Roy, the Thug, or near the ferry ghat of the village Dhalchita. The road proceeds endlessly forward from one country to another, from the land of sunrise to the sunset, from the known to the unknown....

days pass by, birth and death pass by months and years pass by...my path never ends ...goes on, on and on. Eternal is its harp heard by the eternal time and eternal space. Putting the unseen mark of wonderful pleasure trip of the road on your forehead, I have drawn you out of home. Let's go ahead. (PP 208)

Bibhutibhusan has efficiently portrayed the Shonadanga plain as the largest stretch of the open country in that part of Bengal – with abundant greenery, different noticeable trees, clusters of ripe fruit trees, specifically shondali trees with their fluttering leaves and swinging flowers and in the evening, there is the thrilling cry of the sing -my-bride bird. Most of all, the plain of the Shonadanga is spread out over the sky. But all this is made of a different earth to his – the fields and rivers of Bengal, the virgin forest, the glory of the silver-throated moonlit night – occupies another space in his life forever. Moreover, it has made his dark days fruitful and inspirational to his thoughts. Bandopadhyay has also discussed about the summer season in Bengal:

when field grove and orchard ring with the kokil's gushing song, when the rose chestnuts bow their leafy branches under the weight of countless blossoms, and the south wind, drenched with moonlight and heavy with the scent of forest flowers, fans the ecstatic dance of summer. Here was all the season's magic ...” (PP 353-354)

The pictorial descriptions unravel the calm and peaceful aspects of nature. Besides the serenity of nature, it appears that the author has projected the coarse effect of nature as well- in the form of fierce storm and terrible downpour. The monsoon looms on the village of Nishchindipur in general and on the house of Horihor Roy in particular. Ditches and ponds get inundated; the wind fiercely screams and demonically scares the villagers. It appeared to the author,

as if there vast hordes, overspreading land and all space, were advancing battalion after battalion, host upon host, on the wings of the storm, behind and invisible force of chariots; until suddenly the countless army of the gods, faster than human eye could follow, began to launch its cannonade of fiery thunderbolts against them and the whole sky was ablaze from end to end. (PP 279).

For four of five days the inclement weather continues with heavy shower. One day the storm becomes even more violent. Shorbojoya unfortunately hears only one sound “the din of the storm and the rain of the roof” (PP 284). The howling wind finally sweeps away their small family. The devastating power of nature leaves them with no proper shelter. Unable to bear the trauma of life they feel helpless. At that time Durga suffers from serious illness, unable to sleep the whole night for downpour and the hammering sound on the roof: “With every blast the house shuddered as though the next moment it would crash down and bury them in its ruins” (PP 285.) The devastating storm uprooting trees and lashing against the thatched roof

appears deadening in the story. Here, nature acts fiercely, completely obliterates with its task of universal destruction, as Bibhutibhusan describes: “involving earth and sky in a bestial cacophony, now hissing; now roaring; now stridently shrieking, now thundering forth the deep dull boom of death?” (PP 286). Bibhutibhusan presents nature in its fearful look along with its elemental fury. Durga’s fragile body fails to tolerate such catastrophic weather and leaves the world forever. Before her death, the demons rock throughout the night, batters and almost overwhelm the entire village and vanish down the paths of the sky along with the death of Durga. Here nature appears both in its constructive and destructive look. Thus, the novel further captures his passionate love for nature, his appreciation of nature and rendering nature with great feeling and perfection. Further, the novel records his appreciation of nature’s beauty not only the external aspects but also penetrates beneath her external manifestations and endeavours to reach the inherent truth and beauty that lies behind her physical and sensuous charms. Rather, his description of nature to bring out a unification of the various phenomena of nature and the common, routine incidents of everybody’s workaday world. Hence, we can say, that whether it is the nature of the village Nishchindipur or the nature of the forest of Phulkia baihar- both has a rich natural resource, unending joy and celestial harmony. Edward Tomson Albert Hole has said thus: “The world outside should know that there had appeared such a book as Pather Panchali during the year.” He also adds: “creation of such thing as Nobel Prize to be awarded to the best imaginative writer of the year which would attract the attention of the world to the outstanding world to the outstanding features in Indian literature.”

Analysis

The approach of the paper is primarily to establish the inter-connection between nature and the characters in the novel. However, theoretically we cannot confine ourselves within the description of nature only as there are certain aspects of ecocriticism or green narratives that can be perceived rather naturally in the novel. The term ecocriticism was coined by William Ruekert in his “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978. Later on, several critics have postulated different understanding of nature to strengthen the theoretical framework. However, when Bibhutibhusan wrote the novel, the concept of ecocriticism was not prevalent but today when the novel is thoroughly critiqued through the lens of ecocriticism we can clearly discern the ecological concerns interwoven in the novel.

Environment and Literature plays a very significant role in developing the ecological insight of the readers. This theory is a transdisciplinary that brings together all the sciences to get a better understanding of nature. Pather Panchali celebrates a deep intrinsic connection between rural Bengali life and the natural environment, where nature is a living character

and an active member in the family of Sarbojaya. In this harmonic existence, the characters Opu and Durga finally get their emotional and physical nourishment experiencing both its nurturing effect and destructive power.

The idea of organic wholeness is very intrinsic to Romanticism and this idea highly influenced the Deep Ecology movement of the twentieth century, it suggests the idea that humans are an integral part of nature's intricate web of connections. In the heart of the romantic poems, we observe the intrinsic value of both nature and imagination. There is a network of interrelationships in the novel as nature is perceived as a living entity. Minute details of the bamboo tress, ponds, the seasonal changes affect the evolution in the attitude of the characters. Opu and Durga have a significant knowledge of the surrounding. Their daily life is deeply associated with the creepers, the fruits from the trees, rituals in the family are associated with the local ecology. This evokes the sense of sustainable living rather their dependence on nature. The deepest sadness within humanity is expressed in river Ichhamoti when flowing down the eternal road of life leading to birth, death and re-birth. We have struggles in the journey; lives are still winners and prevail despite the challenges.

Conclusion

The novel shows the tremendous power of nature as she can embrace and give comfort to every single individual even in the adverse situation. Though it has a downbeat tone, the message is one of a kind that Opu is hoping for benevolence of the mother in his new place of stay, Varanasi. He is a soul of nature who always had a connection with the nature of rural areas. There can never be anything untouched in the beautiful scenario of nature in his mind when he is passing it. His proximity with nature sustains him, makes him free from materialistic pursuits and guides him to lead a very simple life with noble thinking. Although he is displaced and has a new habitat for survival, he has a different identity, this change in Opu's life highlights the importance of eco-consciousness in the presence of humans. To close with the words of Cheryll Glotfelty who came up with what might be a very common definition for ecocriticism: "the study of the relation between literature and the physical environment". It is this symbiotic and powerful bond between literature and environment that gives even to the poverty, the suffering and the mortality in Pather Panchali (Song of the Road). The novel has a message to Humankind; when one lives in harmony with 'Mother Nature' one experiences ecstasy and when one lives otherwise, one will certainly cause an unanticipated change in her course.

Works Cited:

Bandopadhyay, Bibutibhushan. *Pather Panchali*. Kolkata: Ranjan Prakashan, 1929.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. Introduction. *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold From. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1996.

Hole, E.T. Albert. *Pather Panchali*. Discussion

Pather Panchali: Song of the Road. Trans. T.W. Clark and T. Mukherji. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2009.

Ray Satyajit. *Our Films Their Films*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited. 1976.