

Back to the Ecological Poetics: The Dialectics of Eros and Thanatos

Garima Kalita
Cotton College

In *Civilization and its Discontent*, Freud's ominous prophesy seemed to be relevant for that time, the 1930s and 1940s, when the calamity was almost nearing fulfillment in the guise of the world wars. His contention that the human beings would drive themselves to extinction could perhaps be read in that context too as at the end of the treatise he referred to it as "human drive for aggression and self destruction." He cited and discussed the workings of the libido, the life force, the sustenance and the dominant spirit and the death drive, the agency of destruction. Located on the plane of contemporary social scene, the increasing nature of human occupation in the wilderness and the potent threat to wild life have already become a valid apprehension for the future of humanity and also the natural world. Much of theory and very little of praxis have in a very thinly balanced state, contributed towards a wearisome thought and a tentative strategy of survival for those who in a sustained and persistent manner have been advocating for renewed energy, regenerated spirit for living and irreversible strength with which life and society assert themselves. In this profound challenge of modernism and postmodernism posed, hugely to man, and the natural world, the question how or whether we contain the limit of human desire chiseled and rebuilt with, market and money becomes very crucial. Desire, like capital becomes autonomous beyond conscious human intervention and moves along the tidal wave of profit, utility and self centric pragmatism and loses itself in the dark hole of self extinction bringing cataclysmic threat for an overall tragedy. To revert this maybe the same norms need to be revoked, same ethics applied to the individual and the collective, and the same warning needs to be disseminated all around that man's undisputed authority over nature needs to be reread and relocated. Maybe this could be achieved along the thought and priority given to woman over man, reading the stringency of convention that ousted Eve from the garden of Nature and seeing nature as the mother who defines identity first and who is a care giver. On another level, it perhaps prioritizes less and less the sickening authority of money and media functioning as the superego propelling towards a delusional plane of meaning, achievement, and Nirvana. So, it's back to the ecological poetics and restoration of the mind, fantasy and imagination, and Nature.

Keywords: libido, death drive, modernism and postmodernism, market, capital, desire, ecology, imagination, nature

At the beginning of my paper, I seek to clarify myself on a few matters and one of them is that this is not a treatise on the necessity of conservation of bio diversity since this one topic has been reiterated so many times on relevant and also irrelevant occasions. The term Ecology is pronounced and not a person in an assembly puts any serious thought to it let alone the fact that any thought would hereafter be forwarded towards some fruitful

action. So my appeal is for some affective subversion as put very logically by ecological poetics. Conservation as a normative perhaps would be a different proposal altogether but for that perhaps we need to expend a few thousand more words or sentences or dictates for effective deliberations.

Sigmund Freud is better known for his involvement with individual psyche and most often his concerns and comments are played for man and not for men as such. But a thoughtful reflection upon his later treatise *Civilization and its Discontents*, would make us aware of the ingenious ways Freud used his theories for the collective human psyche. He plays on a completely different note in this miniscule notebook of his and with masterstrokes he probes the malady of human civilization. Not that he deviates from his original basic assumptions of the drives, the premises of repression and the unconscious, the coexistence of binary principles like sadism and masochism, inferiority, and superiority complexes, the fixation of ego and severity of the Id, but here in this marvelous critique of civilization, he delves into the mighty and titanic battle of the Eros and Thanatos which to him is the most tragic episode of our lives. On an amazingly consistent manner, Freud drives the intellect into the coherent pattern of rationalizing the human mind in diverse polemics and in the book cited above he makes a coherent attempt at bringing in the two strong drives in collision.

As he discusses at length a condition of human behavior that propels itself forward with a drive for happiness, he cites of a state that

it is simply the program of the pleasure principle that determines the purpose of life. This principle governs the functioning of our mental apparatus from the start; there can be no doubt about its efficacy, and yet its program is at odds with the whole world—with the macrocosm as much as with the microcosm. It is quite incapable of being realized: All the institutions of the universe are opposed to it; one is inclined to say that the intention that man should be “happy” has no part in the plan of “creation.” (Freud 2004, 16)

Under the pressure of exterior agencies that thwart the agenda of the mind for happiness and create suffering could arise from sources like, from our bodies, as it is bound to “decay and dissolution,” from the external world, which, as Freud says, can “unleash overwhelming implacable, destructive forces against us and finally from our relations with others” (17). So ultimately the pleasure principle has to temper itself and under the influence of the external world transforms into “the more modest ‘reality principle.’” Here very wisely he also discusses the forms of refuses or intoxications the mind resorts to. In the meantime, higher psychological authorities tend to control with superego, but the mind also goes along with blind or irresistible drives for fulfillment and perversely accommodates against defense mechanisms. Sublimation, taking refuse into one’s own mental world etc., are some ways how the mind escapes unpleasure. Art and aesthetics could be one way how suffering is evaded. Also turning from the world like the hermit into a world of his own too help one to fight with the reality principle. “Delusional reshaping of reality” cannot excuse a person from imbibing the suffering. Here he cites religion in Page 23 which also acts as an apparatus for refuge. In chapter 6 of this monumental treatise about the future of civilization and humanity, Freud brings in the opposing forces of the Eros and the death drive working on parallel levels. As he puts it,

My next step was taken in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* when I was first struck by the compulsion to repeat and the conservative nature of the drives. Starting from speculations about the beginning of life and from biological parallels, I reached the conclusion that in addition to the drive to preserve the living substance and bring it together in ever larger units there must be another opposed to it, which sought to break down these units and restore them to their primordial inorganic state. Beside Eros, then, there was a death drive, and the interaction and counteraction of these two could explain the phenomena of life. (70)

In candid terms, Freud elaborates this inevitable struggle between these two drives that would determine as he thinks, the future of humanity. The force of Eros binds us together as he puts it

... individuals, then families, and finally tribes, peoples and nations in one great unit—humanity. ...these multitudes of human beings are to be libidinally bound to one another; necessarily alone, the advantages of shared work, will not hold them together. However, this program of civilization is opposed by man's natural aggressive drive, the hostility of each against all and all against each. This aggressive drive is the descendent and principal representative of the death drive, which we have found beside Eros and which rules the world jointly with him. (74)

At the end of this treatise, Freud along with the summation of the individual psyche in various phases of drives and vicissitudes prophesizes the future of men in the following terms "The fateful question for the human race seems to be whether and to what extent, the development of its civilization will manage to overcome the disturbance of communal life caused by the human drive for aggression and self destruction." Though he has not elaborated the nature of that process or struggle, it might be surmised that the death knell of civilization rings in the ominous enormity of violence resorted to in wars to curb terror and establish justice and equality for all! He has offered his final comments in these lines "Human beings have made such strides in controlling the forces of nature that with the help of these forces, they will have no difficulty in exterminating one another, down to the last man. They know this, and it is this knowledge that accounts for much of their present disquiet, unhappiness and anxiety." And he is not sure whether in this ominous struggle between these "heavenly powers" the immortal Eros is going to assert himself over his "equally immortal adversary." With equal concern and apprehension Freud says, "But who can foresee the outcome?" (105)

Freud's warning about the dissolution of the human society was not remote from his experiences in war torn Germany and the dark overcast cloud of anti Semitism and the overbearing Holocaust as he had to take that crucial decision at the end of leaving Europe for the safe soils for England. The well known bizarre story of death and destruction of that time even if repeated a thousand times, can perhaps never be erased from collective memory and a recollection of it would always evoke multitude layers of pain, trauma, and loss.

A thoroughly concerned person about the impending catastrophe was Frankfurt school theorist and critic Eric Fromm and also Theodore Adorno could be cited alongside for the purpose of clarification and maybe in this context their definitive opinions could be assessed for a prophetic outline of human history and civilization. Among the Frankfurt school of critics, Walter Benjamin in various discourses of his, about the progress of mechanical civilization and the parity or of conformity of individuals within the system has illuminated in lyrical prose but with sharp and strong content. He in *Two Way Street and Other Essays*, in the famous essay which refers to the scarcity of mechanical pieces has prophetically engaged with such an outcome.

The question of ecology which also raises pertinent propositions about nature and essential self of the humans, of course is relevantly brought to the fore by the Romantics and even the modernists.

The most important concept of interrelatedness does not mean only connect which joins on the apparent but it actually leads the concept to a very different level altogether. The essential link of the spirit about which Wordsworth elaborated and also said succinctly is the contemporary link and relatedness that we are talking about. The comprehensive idea of Nature occupying the most of the exterior and the interior in the senior Romantic poet perhaps curiously reflects the general nature of states and things and puts forward the most profound yet subtle question of Anthropomorphism and the significance of aesthetics and poetics are accentuated for close scrutiny. Yet again it is not for nothing that Bertolt Brecht had so importantly brought the

notion of aesthetics and social realities to the fore. What he so curiously had posited was a kind of an enquiry about the scope and room of aesthetics in the consideration of the collective of social reality.

The esteem and prestige and a kind of a curious admiration that the ecologists hold for D. H. Lawrence have been well explained by the researchers and critics and veritably he happens to be the most significant prophet of the circumambient universe. His palpable ethics need to be heard unanimously by all advocates in various fronts who really are serious about finding a viable alternative to the stereotypes in ecological aesthetics. The way Lawrence vituperates about the priests, religion makers, philosophers, and critics in “Why the novel matters” shows in a clear vivid manner as to why and how the novel can become the metaphor of poetics in which concern and study of ecology do become an invariably located focal point in literature. In statements that are strong and vocal Lawrence critiques the hypocrisy and shallowness of men in the genteel society. Perhaps for him the essence lies in the boisterous laughter of the miner as he had talked about in his topical essay on “Nottingham and Mining Countryside” and the “burrows” of the miners.

Lawrence’s advocacy of nature and the life of the instincts pay very well for his growing concern for mechanization of man and lost of his soul in the apathy and heartlessness of the machine. About the contradictory nature of civilization and its fearful impact on the humans, Lawrence is almost always forthright and bitterly truthful or perhaps matter of fact. He has in his description of nature, very subtly and almost surreptitiously suggested the guilty conscience of man, evident in the narrative, the spirit of place giving it back in the form of warning or sad helpless acceptance of the fact that man in arrogance of mastery has overlooked or avoided which after all is going to come back at him, if not he, his sons and daughters have to pay!

Lawrence has written dozens of very impressive and beautiful stories, I would for my purpose only quote one or two. In “Odour of Chrysanthemums,” he explores the possibility of restoration of the link between death and life and how human perception understands it in a limited, feeble manner through the story of the death of a miner in a mining accident and the bringing in of his corpse home in the dead of the night. The chrysanthemums are not very focally pointed for suggestive purpose as it happens with many of the titles of Lawrence. But what I am trying to highlight here is the fact that in the beginning of the story, Lawrence as a prophet visualizes in a narrative strip the condition of an industrial society at stark juxtaposition of nature in history. It is a condensed verbal and visual metaphor of man and nature in a juncture or crossroads. I am citing some lines from the paragraph.

The small locomotive engine, Number 4, came clanking stumbling down from Selston with seven full wagons. It appeared round the corner with loud threats of speed, but the colt that it startled from among the gorse, which still flickered indistinctly in the raw afternoon, outdistanced it with a canter. A woman, walking up the railway line to Underwood, drew back into the hedge, held her basket aside and watched the footplate of the engine advancing. The trucks thumped heavily past, one by one, with slow inevitable movement, as she stood insignificantly trapped between the jolting black wagons and the hedge; then they curved away towards the coppice where the withered oak leaves dropped noiselessly, while the birds, pulling at the scarlet hips beside the track, made off into the dusk that had already crept into the spinney. The fields were dreary and forsaken... The pit bank loomed up beyond the pond, flames like red sores licking its ashy sides, in the afternoon’s stagnant light. Just beyond rose the tapering chimneys and the clumsy black headstocks of Brinsley Colliery. (Short Stories, Everyman, 1996, 44-45)

Man as was depicted by Lawrence was slowly being captured in this web of duality, the conflict of man vs. nature and gradually the idea of wilderness became something remote and receding from the human territory. In a mature treatise on human civilization and the crossroads, globalization and Bio diversity titled *Wild Politics* by Susan Hawthorne, the author brings into focus the tragic trajectories of human action as against nature and

wilderness along the lines of homogeneity and uniformity. But as seen by many the concept of wilderness is taken in the line of being something untouched by human habitation but on the contrary national Parks are protected areas with the exception of human intervention in the forms of tourism, eco conservation and other ideas of conservation. Here too ideas of wilderness kept completely isolated are conventionally violation of safety and security concerns with a strong element of savagery and raw tooth and claws.

In this age of extreme anthropocentrism as defined by Freya Mathews (1994), humans place themselves at the centre and they posit as the most dominant factor to have the devastating impact upon Nature. With this notion of alienating humanity or nature, “the concept of wilderness” is separated, made free of human endeavor. But this process of separating the biophysical world a hierarchy is created with the human beings at the pinnacle. This tendency also removes the people from land or the wild life from the land and creates a gap which is the root of alienation whether metaphysical, socio economic, or political. “Separation and disconnection have been the processes by which anthropocentrism has been given dominance and domination of nature by humanity has flourished” (*Wild Politics*, 165). That is the reason why people are constantly admitting the long term impact of indigenous people on land and adjoining nature. With the help of a continued relationship between people and the land, only long term sustainability can be achieved. The western conservationist notion is mainstream view and it is also a masculine view. By creating mechanisms of responsibility and rights, perhaps better understanding of nature can be had and better management of the interrelatedness between man and nature would be possible.

In the relationship between man and nature, we haven't inferred autonomy on either side equitably. The bias weighing for man does not admit the same autonomy and independence for nature. But what is ecology if it is not non human, if it does not create a separate space for the “others,” if it still persists that man is at the centre of the universe (extension of the idea makes it totally endocentric or phallogocentric). Still the broader category and the difference of man and wilderness accommodate feminism and eco politics. It has to be admitted contextual validity though. As man is definitely a vague term in contextualized politics. In utopian idealism or existentialism, even the man in exile is central but considers him, as an epitome of comic garrulity in the contemporary episteme, a being not sure of himself, a victim of paradoxical crisscrossing of premises of diverse kind or nature.

The central thesis of survival of human species in close coordination with nature is evidently paradoxical and rebounding like a boomerang as man the cultural architect cannot sustain the essential spark of Life alive under the suppressive market economy and the claustrophobic networking of globalization. Within this dance of destruction of stupid global warfare manifested in place, the politics of gender, race, and religion with money and profit the earth is experiencing a collective death wish, a Thanatos. So the upcoming premise is that of nature as life and culture as death. This premise is too intricate to handle and effectively use for a *sumum bonum*.

Thoreau's pilgrimage in nature and his dissociation from society does not essentially comment on the eclectic merit of wilderness but more importantly; it negotiates between the comfort zone of a man of civilization and affiliation towards nature. Certainly there is a romantic appeal associated which definitely works for his seclusion in nature. It becomes more of an empirical study undertaken with definite end by a known means. This is not to encourage or discourage or even validate this kind of enterprises in order to strengthen the spiritual properties or faculties in the thinking man. To perpetuate spirituality in this manner could be by no means beneficial towards ecology under the present context and time, but the qualifying notions

or ingredients of tranquility perhaps work towards minimizing the infinite motive for profit making in the one dimensional man of lucre. Walden pond of Thoreau is sign or signifier of spiritual contentment and he condenses his experiences in the temporal projection of a year but introduced to the post modern sensibility of the contemporary person, he would be jarred out of his complacency in the reverse manner—an inverted journey towards wilderness would definitely be accompanied by the whole paraphernalia of the electrical gadgets—with little else to occupy his consciousness.

Whitman's comprehensive mode of relatedness comprising of EACH and ALL (the individual and the collective) seems conclusively summed up by his sensory and extra sensory perceptions including metaphysical and epistemological pluralism. The simplistic and apparently naive statements and premises in his poetry entail deductions that cover the conglomerate of the Biosphere. But mere reading and reciting the lines and comprehending the significance of ecology related to his poetry would not meet up the challenges emerging before literature because of the gradual destruction of the eco system.

The problem or the challenges before the earth and biosphere are too intricate to be clearly discussed and resolved. The premise of the wild, a separate wilderness in the wake of the invasion of the civilized man is bound to become a gape, a lack, or a state of abeyance for always. The man with the burden of the Capital is a man in conflict, a victim of repressed narcissism, a voyeur with compulsive behavior. Such a being is compelled to bring along with him the circuitous play of money and profit, his excessive sense of ego and pleasure and a pathetic indifference to the "other," e.g., non human. Nature for the enjoyment of all dominating man or Male surreptitiously brings us closer to Eco feminism.

The highly debated notions of Eco feminism and deep ecology are almost identical on one plane and that is, both believe in a dominant or hierarchical position for man vs. woman or man vs. nature. Both the positions condemn the anthropomorphism or similar notion that nature and women are both sidelined and man retains his perennial subject position. A woman is a property or possession as nature too is better exploited and it needs to be used for man's purpose and benefit. The agenda of ecological poetics and eco feminism or deep ecology tends to serve a very common purpose and that being a consequential hypothesis; it may be probably inferred that the dialectics of ecologists and cornucopians should be our prime focus now. Whatever Freud had analyzed and most probably predicted, was this ominous picture or narrative of human civilization that is exposed so clearly. What is of crucial concern is "to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community and with it the human community" as said by William Rueckert in a brilliant discourse "Literature and Ecology" (*Ecocriticism Reader*, 107).

Works Cited

- Bocock, Robert. *Sigmund Freud*. Routledge, London, and New York: Saurabh Printers Pvt Ltd., 2002.
- Doshi, S. L. and P. C. Jain. *Social Anthropology*. Jaipur and Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2001.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. London: Penguin Books—Great Ideas, 2004.
- . *The Uncanny*. Routledge, London, and New York: T J International Ltd., Padstow, 2003.
- . *Totem and Taboo*. London, and New York: Routledge, 2003.
- . *The Psychology of Love*. London: Penguin Modern Classic, 2006.
- Gaarard, G. *Ecocriticism*. London, and New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Hawthorne, Susan. *Wild Politics*. Delhi: Feminism Globalization Bio/diversity, Aakar Books, 2008.
- Lawrence, D. H. *Short Stories*. London: Everyman, 1996.

- Saunders, Peter. *Capitalism a Social Audit*. Delhi: World View Publications, 1998.
- Sen, Amartya. *Commodities and Capabilities*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- . *On Ethics and Economics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Waelder, Robert. *Sigmund Freud*. New Delhi: The Living Thoughts Library, Rupa and Co., 2002.