

Meditative Contemplation on Rivers in India and Canada : An Eco-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract. To think of human civilization or culture, be it Indian or Canadian, without rivers is an impossible proposition. The *Ganges* in India has arrested the attention of the sensitive poets like Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Susheel Kumar Sharma. They have used the river as a metaphor to picture the essence of Indian culture, i.e., perception of harmony in existence. The rivers in Canada: *Missinaibi*, *Abitibi* and *Little Current* etc. have charmed the poets like Bliss Carman and Duncan Campbell Scott who watch the 'silver rivers go racing to the sea'. Both the Canadian poets share unconsciously the perceptions of Indian poets – the incessant struggle for reaching the goal, at the sight of the rivers which act as catalysts. An eco-cultural study focuses on human-nonhuman or human – environment relations and their cultural dimensions. It also sees culture as the battle ground in which diverse ideas about environmental politics and action are articulated. In this paper the select poets of the rivers of two nations, India and Canada, are compared and it is held that all of them instinctively long for eliminating environmental hazards and promoting universal peace.

Keywords : Struggle; goal; hazards; harmony; catalyst.

The history of humanity is the history of human civilizations or cultures that grow and flourish only on the banks of the rivers; hence rivers are the source of life but the geographers or historians find it difficult to picture rivers in a lively way; their description of the rivers is dull and prosaic but it is the sensitive poets who picture the origin, the movement and the significance of the rivers in a language that stirs emotions and titillates intellects. The rivers in India have arrested the attention of many a poet like Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Susheel Kumar Sharma, A.K. Ramanujan and so on. These poets have caught the rhythm of the rivers; the rhythm of their poetry corresponds to that of the rivers. Hence their poetry on rivers is read with great delight: the descriptions make the sensitive readers think of rise and fall of human civilizations – the transitoriness of human life – the helplessness of human situation, hybridization of human culture and above all fascinating myths woven around rivers. Of all the rivers that flow on the Indian soil *the Ganges* captivates the imagination of the poets most. In Canada there are rivers named *Missinaibi*, *Abitibi* and *Little Current* etc. which infuse joyful feelings into the poets to muse over the beauty and bounty of nature. The poets that are chosen for study in this paper are Bliss Carman, Duncan Campbell Scott and Theodore Goodridge Roberts. These poets have expressed their joy, sense of beauty and love for nature in a language that is musical.

The eco-cultural study of the poetry on rivers is a complex one. At the outset all eco-cultural critics share the environmentalist motivation of some sort, but whereas the majority are 'nature endorsing', a few are 'nature sceptical' because Kate Soper puts a relevant question 'what is nature'? (Gangopadhyay 287) The simultaneous focus on intra-human, human and extra-human relation and the supposition that they are interdependent constitutes the core of eco-cultural study. Thus an eco-cultural study is interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary because it articulates the relation between culture and environment. Ecology assumes multiple levels of interaction and inter-relationship. Slack and Whitt argue that an eco-cultural perspective would provide a non-anthropocentric alternative basis for cultural studies. Anthropocentrism understands humanity to be at the centre of moral and historical evolutionary universe. It argues that 'humans cannot help but to see things from a human perspective'. (Cultures and Environment: On Cultural Environmental studies) but the eco-cultural criticism deconstructs the nature –culture dichotomy. Thus the field of eco-cultural study is an open-ended field.

The reasons for writing a paper of this sort are rooted in my reading of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. In this famous novel of the Nobel Laureate, Hesse uses river as a 'central metaphor' to let the readers know the source of enlightenment. Siddhartha, the protagonist of the novel remarks at the sight of the river:

Isn't it so, O friend, the river has many voices?
Hasn't it the voice of a king, and of a warrior, and
of a bull and of a bird of the night, and of a woman
giving birth, and of a bird of the night, and of a
shining man, and a thousand other voices more?
(Hesse 199)

Hence to study river is to know many voices – right from the voice of king up to that of a pregnant woman. The water of the river is stronger than rocks as love is stronger than force. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the moods of the humans as well as of the river, as depicted by the poet which can be beautiful and terrible, ignoble and sublime. Thus this paper highlights the paradoxes of human life and existential predicament; the river acts very often as catalytic agent.

This paper has been divided into four sections: the first section is an *introduction* which states the objectives of the paper; the second section deals with poetry written on the rivers in India. The third section dwells upon the poetry on the rivers in Canada. The last section, the concluding section focuses on similarities as well as dissimilarities in the thinking process of the poets on rivers from both the nations: India and Canada.

II

The rivers in India, specifically the Ganges, have not only enchanted the Indian English poets but also prompted them to reflect over manifold aspects of life and mystery of creation. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra pictures Ganga in his poem from a wider perspective. Ganga is the Hindi name of the Ganges. In *the New Oxford Dictionary* the Ganges is described as follows:

The Ganges is a river of northern India and Bangladesh which rises in the Himalayas and flows some 2007 hundred KMs south-east to the Bay of Bengal where it forms, the world's largest delta, the river is regarded by Hindus as sacred. (755)

An interpretation of the significant lines of the poem would reveal the eco-system of the Gangetic belts and reflect on Indian culture. Here is the interpretation of the first section of *The Songs of Ganga* :

I am Ganga
 Snow from the mountains
 The keeper of water
 I am the plains
 I am the foothills
 I carry the wishes of my streams
 To the sea
 I am both man and woman

I am paper boats for children
 I am habits for fishermen
 I am a cloud for shaven monks
 I reflect all movements

I am the bridge
 I am the fort and the archer
 Taking aim
 I am the great dissolver of men
 I give life and I take it back. (Sarang 136)

The above poetic passage is the first section of *The Songs of Ganga*. Here Ganga is the Hindi name for the Ganges. At the outset Ganga tells about the source of water; in summer the snow melts, gets transformed into water and flows to the Ganges. Hence Ganga is depicted as the keeper of water. Then the poet reflects upon the course of Ganga – Ganga flows upon the plains, through the hills, mingles

with the streams and merges in the sea . Ganga embodies qualities : both masculine and feminine. Ganga is the source of activities of various categories of humans : children, fishermen, monks. The sportive children make paper boats and float them on the water of the Ganges; the fishermen catch fish just to maintain their livelihood; the meditative monks , in quest of eternal truths, walk under the clouded sky. Thus Ganga helps in the discharging of all kinds of natural human activities. The concluding stanza of the section is metaphysical in its implication. It has reference to myths , legends woven around Ganga. The poet uses metaphors : ‘bridge’, ‘fort’ and ‘archer’. ‘Bridge’ connects two places. Similarly when bones of a dead person are thrown to the holy water of the Ganges with the prayers of the Lord of the universe, the Hindus believe that the man attains salvation. Thus Ganga is associated with connecting two types of lives : worldly and other worldly, the terrestrial as well as the celestial. ‘Fort’ is the symbol of protection. ‘Archer’ , the way to destination Ganga reminds the humans of his ultimate destiny that is communion between soul and super-soul. Ganga is the source and watcher of the eternal process of living and dying of the humans.

Prof. Susheel Kumar Sharma’s treatment of Ganga in his poem *Ganga Mata – A Prayer* is more philosophical and religious than that of Mehrotra. He focuses on the mythical source of the origin of Ganga and highlights the sacred cause for which she is worshipped :

O Ganges!
 The dwellers in Lord Brahma’s Kamandal
 The abider in Lord Vishnu’s feet
 The resider of Lord Shiva’s locks

 The mother of brave Bhishma
 O Ganga Maiya !
 Homage to thee.
 Accept my obeisance
 O Punyakirti ! (1)

Sharma invokes Lord *Brahma*, the God of creation, Lord *Vishnu* the God of preservation and Lord *Shiva*, the God of Destruction through the Ganges. He also glorifies the Ganges as the mother of *Bhishma*, the Great Warrior in *the Mahabharata*. Thus the poet pictures Ganga with the knowledge of Indian myths at the back-drop. He approaches the holy Ganga in a devotional spirit. Thus the Ganges, the sacred river in India is the natural phenomenon to be worshipped and adored.

A passage extracted from his poem would reflect on his attitudes towards life, nature, world and above all the mystery of the universe :

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I want the world
 To be a home for all
 I want the world
 To be a wonder for all (5)

The poet pleads for global family. He also longs for the world to be the source of wonder and mystery because it is the sense of wonder that makes life enjoyable and the world to be a beautiful place to live in. The poet aspires for the things sublime and glorious in the presence of Ganga. Thus the river Ganga and its natural surroundings have an impact upon the psyche of the poet.

It was the victory song of the soul over matter
 It was the wonder to live with nature
 And not to open its entrails for pleasure
 It was the wonder to discuss the origin of time
 And not to impose the limits of time
 It was the wonder to believe in expanding the universe
 and the poet's wish for the eternal Ganga:
 May you flow eternally in the hearts of people. (6)

The poet proclaims the triumph of soul over matter. The poet aspires for the harmonious relation between man and nature. The poet is inquisitive about the origin of time, the mighty killer and healer. The poet believes in the theory of expansion, rather than contraction. He prays to Ganga to instill all positive feelings in the hearts of the people. Here he echoes Alexander Pope's statement- 'Hopes springs eternal in human breasts'.

Both Mehrotra and Sharma highlight dexterously the reasons for which the Hindus attach importance to the Ganges among the rivers in India. In the poetry of both Indian poets Ganga acquires significance as the embodiment of the quintessence of Indian culture. Doubtless there has been a reference to natural surroundings in the Gangetic belts and the eternal flow of the river. An intensive eco-cultural study of both the poems on Ganga reveal a lot of things in regard to the preservation of natural environment. It also explores a way of living which is simple, lofty, glorious and pious.

Indian English poets have not only reflected on the rivers as the creators of civilization and culture but also focused as the agents of destruction. In this context A.K. Ramanujan, the scholar poet can be studied. In his master lyric "A River" he depicts a flooded river in Madurai :

the river has water enough

to be poetic
 about only once a year
 and then
 it carries away
 in the first half-hour
 three village houses ,
 a couple of cows
 named Gopi and Brinda
 and one pregnant woman
 expecting identical twins
 with no moles on their bodies ,
 with different – coloured diapers
 to tell them apart. (54)

The picturesque description of the flooded river evokes pity and fear. It arouses pity because it causes the losses of shelter, death of animals and also a pregnant woman. Ramanujan uses language in such a fashion that it results in what Aristotle calls catharsis (the progression of emotions through pity and fear) the death of a pregnant woman indicates time which is three dimensional : past, present and future. The women painted in the poem through words has a past – the period of conception, present- the period of pregnancy and future – the death of twins who could represent future generation.

III

Canada fascinates the sensitive poets because it is the country of rivers, rivulets and rills which present a magnificent natural scenery which provides a feast to the eyes . Natural resources of a country are as important as human resources. Duncan Campbell Scott in his poem “Fragment of an Ode to Canada” depicts Canada:

The land of rivers, rivulets, and rills,
 Straining incessant everyway to the sea,
 With their white thunder harnessed in the mills,
 Turning one wealth to another wealth perpetually
 (30)

Campbell observes that rivers are used for productive purposes. The ‘white thunder’ is the appropriate metaphor for generating electricity. Water resources can be transformed into other forms of energy or resources which contribute to the prosperity of the nation. The word ‘perpetually’ points to the god-gifted permanent source of wealth for which Canada attracts the people from various countries of the world. The poet hints at the flora and fauna of Canada which is the perpetual source of wealth for the dwellers having high degree of aesthetic and utilitarian sense.

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Bliss Carman observes rivers in a bit different way. While Campbell muses over the utilitarian purposes for which rivers are controlled and used, Carman gets enchanted by the beauty of the rivers. In his lyric "Rivers of Canada" he writes spontaneously :

Of all the little rivers that run to Hudson's Bay,
They call me and call me to follow them away.
Missinaibi, Abitibi, Little Current—where they run
Dancing and sparkling I see them in the sun. (30)

Carman talks about little rivers, not the large ones. He discovers the close link between the sun and the rivers. The waters of the rivers sparkle as the sun shines. His is the pictorial description of the rivers which is sure to arrest the attention of the tourists. The poet is in profound love with the rivers which haunt his imagination. He dwells upon the impact of the rivers upon the psyche of the people who are close to them:

The wilderness shall feed you,
her gleam shall be your guide.
Come out from desolations,
our path of hope is wide.(31)

Carman is eloquent about the influence of rivers upon those who love them deeply; it is they who can be instructed by the rivers, the wonderful creations of the God. Here the poet echoes the philosophy of the English poet William Wordsworth that nature can be a teacher – the friend, guide and philosopher.

Theodore Goodridge Roberts writes a different kind of poetry on river. In the poem "*Secret River*" he uses 'river' as a metaphor—a metaphor for the flow of thoughts, feelings and dreams. The concluding two stanzas of the poem read as follows:

Dreaming, I go down again,
Through the shadow and the gleam,
To the quick trout lurking there
In the amber stream.
Waking—no, 'tis best to dream!
Dream and hold the peace for ever
Of my hidden logging-road
And my secret river. (32)

The poet prefers the state of dreaming to the state of waking. He is a dreamer. The poetic expressions reveal his romantic attitude towards life. Here he

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pictures a fish –‘trout’ which moves in the stream. The visual images in the poem are quite seductive. “Crows on the River” is another piece of fine poetry . Here he pictures crows flapping and cawing.

Black crows out on the grey and white,
Flapping and cawing,...
Black wings over the white and grey
Flap up and down. (*Ibid.*)

The lines are lyrical; the image of crows is striking . The crow is pictured more as a kinesthetic image than a visual image. Thus T.G. Roberts pictures living beings : trout or crow who are in harmony with nature. He is a minute observer of nature and also creature. He discovers harmony and joy in existence.

To conclude, the three poets of Canada : Duncan Campbell Scott, Bliss Carman, and Theodore Goodridge Roberts are unique in the portrayal of river and beautiful natural scenery presented by the river. To them the river is the source of life, energy, mystery, beauty and above all wealth. All the three poets are gifted with strong aesthetic sense. Of the three poets Campbell has utilitarian sense. He looks upon rivers as the source of wealth . It is he who observes some kind of struggle in the world of nature . He watches strain in the rivers running to mingle in the sea . Other two poets : Carman and Roberts perceive harmony in the world of existence – the existence of men , birds , animals in the lap of nature .

IV

The poetry on rivers as analysed in the previous sections reveals facts , and situations which establish the truth that man’s existence on this planet becomes joyful, meaningful and beautiful only when he keeps harmonious relation with nature which is primarily represented through rivers. Indian poets of rivers differ from their Canadian counterparts in one significant point. Indian poets digress a lot. When they describe Ganga, they muse over the rise and fall of civilizations, kingdoms, the change of administrations, the mixing of cultures and so on. Be he Mehrotra or Sharma they realize the creator of universe through creation but, for Canadian poets creation or nature is the sole thing. They do not perceive the Lord of universe through rivers. Rivers look like rivers – rivers which can beautify the creation and communicate the message of harmony, bliss and beauty which sustain human life on this planet but Indian poets are metaphysical in their approach to rivers. The rivers act as symbols of eternal moment, flexibility, changing reality and continuous struggle to reach the goal. The goal of the river is to merge in the sea, the vaster and deeper than it. Similarly the goal in man’s life is to dissolve one’s own self in God

– the infinite entity. The Indian poets echo the words from their holy scriptures that man should try ceaselessly to move from the path of mortality to immortality, from ignorance to knowledge, from illusion to reality which could be transcendental. Indian poets go beyond the rivers just to project the reality but the Canadian poets stop with the rivers. They do not try to look beyond the rivers. They are artists. They project the rivers artistically through nuances and cadences of poetry. Indian poets are unique because they believe in the sense of the beyond.

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