

NATURE TO NURTURE: AN ECOCRITICAL AND EMPIRICAL OUTLOOK OF OLGA TOKARCZUK'S *FLIGHTS*

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ABSTRACT

Man is always dependent, be it on nature for his natural resources or on his fellow beings for their emotional and moral support. Right from history to the present day, everything revolves around the metaphorical references that man makes. What if these symbols are used to create awareness? And what if the implication of these awareness is brought out for the betterment of the world? The constant changes in nature can be allured with the changes that occur in our life. Polish Literature has always focused more on nature and aesthetics right from the early centuries. Even in the present world, writers from Poland pay more attention toward the betterment of nature. Olga Tokarczuk is a popular Polish writer who focuses on the themes of myth, nature, psychology, travel and feminism. *Flights* was published in 2007 in Polish language, it lays its emphasis on the life of a modern man which is like that of a vagabond. The novel talks about various incidents that occurred from the seventeenth to the twentieth century where some are fictional while others are historical. The paper attempts to produce an ecocritical reading of the novel to bring out an awareness under the title "Nature to Nurture: An Ecocritical and Empirical Outlook of Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights*".

KEYWORDS :- Ecocriticism, Change, Symbols, Life

Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of earth

- Henry David Thoreau

Environment plays a major role in the existence of life in this earth. The constant changes that occur in nature can be allured with the changes that occur in our life. In the present world, there are a lot of environmental changes that is taking place, for instance global warming, destruction of ozone layers and the melting of glaciers. All these affects and effects the existence of man. The main aspect of ecocriticism is to bring out the ideas of how nature be saved and preserved for the use of mankind.

Olga Nawoja Tokarczuk, the most famous Polish writer was born in Poland on the 29th of January, 1962. Her life is noted to be a series of peaceful events that ranged from working as a psychotherapist to a teacher. Though she did her Masters in Clinical Psychology, her interest in writing and reading was formed in her early childhood itself. In 2019 she won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Tokarczuk's first novel *The Journey of the Book-People* was published in 1993. At present, she is the author of eight novels and three short story collections. Apart from writing, she is also a social activist who stood for the rights of minorities. Her writing style differs from the conventional novel writing, as she imposes the techniques of autobiography, travelogues and journalism. Some of her frequent themes are travel, mythology, psychology, feminism, fantasy, and mysticism.

Flights was written in the Polish language as *Bieguni* and published in the year 2007. Later in 2018, it was translated into English by Jennifer Croft. It has one hundred and sixteen short essays about random topics which interest the reader. The major setback theme in *Flights* is the idea of travel. Tokarczuk has beautifully implied the life of the modern era with the rendition of fiction and reality. The novel talks about various incidents that occurred from the seventeenth to the twentieth century where some are fictional while others are historical. Tokarczuk portrays the anatomical ideas

through the perspectives of a common man, a doctor and a politician. Even though the novel looks like bits and pieces of information, there are connections.

The term ecocriticism was first termed in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. It started as an awareness rather than a theory because people were concerned about nature. This movement began in 1990s and started to flourish in the United States and United Kingdom. The major idea of ecocriticism is that it talks about the relationship between man and nature, where nature is seen not as a master nor as a slave. Eco critics always see a literary text in terms of nostalgia. Ecocriticism has three major waves, where the first wave was from 1970-1990. In this wave, nature was seen to be protected from the disastrous hands of man. A lot of concern was given save ecology. The second wave dates from 1990-2000 that said man is equal to nature. For critics believed that both man and nature are dependent on each other. The third wave of ecocriticism is from 2000-present, where nature is seen superior to man, and the writings are focused more on conserving the environment.

Major writers in the area of ecocriticism are, Cheryll Glotfelty who is known for her work *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Lawrence Buell who believed that man along with nature is a part of any literary writing. Scott Slovic said that any text can be seen in an ecocritical aspect. In America, ecocriticism was started during the nineteenth century by the Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. Ecocritics do not accept the idea of linguistics rather they focus on the notion of nature.

Tokarczuk has installed the concept of nature right from the first chapter in the novel *Flights*. Her concern for the natural elements is seen throughout the stories that she inculcated from history and fiction. The focus here is the symbolic connection between the events that happen in the nature and the events that occur in an individual life and how nature is represented throughout the novel. Even though the central idea of *Flights* talks about the psychological aspect of human life, Tokarczuk has portrayed nature in a vivid manner.

The opening passage of the novel shows how nature represents the solitary state of an individual. The nameless character here is said to be old, she sits on a window sill inside a dark house where she says that she is alone. Her relatives and family have said to be gone far. The line, "That evening is the limit of the world, and I've happened upon it, by accident, while playing, not in search of anything" (7) indicates how distressed the character is. In general terms, evenings are usually associated with peace and rest. But in this context, evening is said to be the limit of the world which shows how a day ends in the dusk for people who do not have anything to do in life. Nature is represented here as a form of escape from reality.

The vintage entitled *The World In Your Head* gives a detailed description of a river from the past to the present, that can be compared to the life of the character from the past to the present. The narrator here takes a walk down the country side where a river keeps flowing. She understands that the country setup is not the same as it was years ago when she lived there with her parents. A lot of things have changed, as even the size of the river has decreased. Even though the river is only a source of natural resources, the protagonist symbolizes it with the events happening in her life. As she states, "To me, of course, the river paid no attention, caring only for itself, those changing, roving waters into which- as I later learned – you can never step twice" (9). It's noted here that she is living in a state of loneliness, where the river is compared with the people in her life who pay no attention or care to her but for themselves. Roving waters can be compared to the changing nature of human beings, who are never constant.

She also refers the river to be a source of protection from the dangers that are present around. This is because, just like how the river keeps moving in motion without rest, human life also keeps moving from one incident to another. With the passing of time, things change and everything gets adjusted and accepted. The change that nature brings is similar to the change that occurs in human life. The only difference is that, the natural changes can either be for good or for bad according to the context that it is based on but the change of loss in human life can always be associated with negativity, no matter what good it brings.

Another essay entitled *The Bodhi Tree* talks about a Chinese man who travelled to India for the purpose of business. During one of the meetings with his clients the Chinese man said that he wanted to see the tree where Buddha attained enlightenment. From the flashback, it is known that the Chinese man's ancestors were Buddhists but later unexpectedly got converted into Christians for their own reasons. Apart from being a Christian, this Chinese man had the ancestry faith in Buddhism. Understanding this desire of the Chinese man, the Indian contractor gave a surprise flight ticket the next morning to reach the place where the tree was located.

After one-hour travel, the Chinese man with his elegant suit and white shirt got merged into a mob of pilgrims. Hearing about the stories of Buddha and his teachings for nearly a decade in his life and seeing the Bodhi tree for the first time, the Chinese man was to express the veracity – dissatisfied. “When he saw the tree, he was- to tell the truth- disappointed. He had not thought in his head, nor in any prayers” (175). He wondered about how can any man attain enlightenment by just sitting under the tree. The Chinese man tried to bring all his prayers and actions together for enlightenment but felt entirely hopeless. His ancestors had said that the fig tree reflects the mixed experiences of life as the tree has heart-shaped leaves. Historically, there are records that the fig tree was used as a medicine to treat epilepsy, asthma, diarrhea, gastric problems and sexual disorders. The fig fruit is called as the meager man's nutrition as it was cultivated widely around the world. It has a huge quantity of calcium, phosphorus and potassium in it. Even the Greeks used the fig fruit as an essential food in the daily life.

The Chinese man returned to his hotel and under his shower he understood that enlightenment was a personal process. A tree symbolizes life as it produces oxygen and shelter. The Bodhi tree only stood as a symbol of various human qualities, it was an individual choice to choose the qualities that is necessary in his life. Though the Chinese man came from a Christian and Buddhist background, he learnt that nature had so much to teach human beings about living and not just existing.

As Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* states, “For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it”(252). Olga Tokarczuk's views are similar to the above quoted words, for she indeed believes that no matter what humans do to protect or create nature, the forms of nature are so strong that they build on themselves. Her major concept of writing about nature was not just to bring an awareness but to incorporate the destructions that nature will produce due to our actions. The comparison of modern-man's life with nature throws light on the fact that more concern must be given to nature as its falling apart.

At the outset, *Flights* gives its views on nature in an empirical manner by focusing on the importance of natural scenes. Olga Tokarczuk is one of the many writes who try to impose their social concern by bringing them in their sub-plots. Humans are noted to be vagabonds in *Flights*. Nature is a shelter and also a source of life for them. According to the paper, it is through the concept of vagabond's that man found his way around the world.

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