

An Eco-Critical Analysis of Gieve Patel's "On Killing A Tree"

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Abstract

This paper presents an eco-critical analysis of Gieve Patel's poem "On Killing a Tree," emphasizing the interconnectedness of nature and humanity while critiquing modern ecological destruction. Patel's use of irony and symbolism exposes the brutality of deforestation and its consequences, urging modern humanity to reconsider humanity's exploitative relationship with nature. The paper examines the spiritual and environmental significance of trees, framing them as life-giving entities essential for ecological balance. The discussion integrates literary allusions to Chaucer, T.S. Eliot, Toru Dutt, and others, illustrating the evolving representation of nature in literature. Ultimately, this study highlights Patel's poignant call for ecological preservation as a moral and existential imperative.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, eco-spirituality, Gieve Patel, *On Killing A Tree*.

Introduction

Earth is the mother of all living beings, who gives love and nurture all, to her all creations are her children, including plants, animals, insects, micro-organisms, human, beings that exist on earth. The environment where humans live is called biosphere, which consist of land, water, and air. The biodiversity of earth, called as nature is currently in a state of declining due to the greed and cruel practices of modern humans who become alien from nature. In the present era more and more beings who belong to biodiversity become extinct because of the humans. From the time memorial poets, writers, artists, painters, philosophers, and other recorders of history get influenced by their surroundings which include environment, native land, animals, plants, which is mirrored in their works. In literature one could find old poets like William Wordsworth who loved nature. In European literature many poets talk about nature and its miracles, such as in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* the general prologue begins with the celebration of April as a time of renewal and vitality, "whan that aprille with his shouressoote"(1) which is paraphrased as "April is the sweetest month" by modern scholars as an allusion to this modern poet T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* opens as, "April is the cruellest month,/ breeding Lilacs out of dead land"(1-2)It not only alludes the beginning of their respective works, but also shows the status of nature's well being of their respective time.

Indian poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, Gieve Patel praise as well as reflect nature and human relationship. Indian English writers also write works on natural reflections as a reminder and wakeup call to protect world as a whole and prevent nature's wrath just like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath*, which is based on Dust bowl that occurred in 1930s due to exploitation of nature because humans engaged in World War 1. The cause and effort of human nature will always be bore by the humans themselves. In this background this paper attempts an eco-critical analysis of humans' impact on nature in Gieve Patel's "On Killing A Tree." Gieve Patel was born in 1940 in Mumbai. He completed his education at St Xavier's High

School and Grant Medical college in Mumbai, then worked as a Medical practitioner. He belongs to the Green Movement. As a person who fought for preservation of Nature as well as Humans, he presents this poem “On Killing A Tree”, which is filled with murderous intent. People who don't know about him might think this is a poem about the complete systematic method of killing a tree, but how can a nature lover, a kind hearted man, a physician writes a poem of panorama of mindless killing of tree, which is the most cruel action towards nature. In this poem Patel uses irony and symbolism to denounce humans for their eco-terrorism as well as to promote the idea that tree is also a part of the earth, a source of life to many beings including humans. He persuades the readers not to destroy trees, which he equates to killing, a psychopathic murderer of greed who makes the future generation bore the curse called natural disaster and artificial ecology.

Eco-critical Analysis of the Poem

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and ecology from an interdisciplinary point of view, where scholars of literature analyze the texts that illustrate environmental concerns are analysed and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. While ecospirituality highlights the harmony between ecological science and spirituality, ecoterrorism represents its opposite, a manifestation of humanity's destructive tendencies toward the environment. Ecoterrorism is defined as “destruction, or the threat of destruction, of the environment by states, groups or individuals in order to intimidate or to coerce governments or civilians”(Encyclopedia britannica)

Gieve Patel's “On Killing a Tree” symbolically highlights the mutual relationship between natural elements, condemning humanity's failure to practice the art of giving, as noted by Jolly K.V. Modern era, dominated by machines and material values calls for immediate vaccine to free human from their sickness called greed, which induces many recorders to produce works towards the goal of protecting ecology, the new age of transformation and protection of nature. The new era literature produce genres such as ecocriticism, eco-poetry, eco-feminism, eco-narratives, eco-spirituality, bioregionalism, blue humanities, and so on.

The environmental consequences of humanity's anthropocentric attitude are reflected in the rampant deforestation, as Patel equates destroying a tree to the murder of a person, as discussed by Priyanka and Rajavelu. Destruction of nature leads to destruction of life. Patel's work serves as an alarming signal for preserving nature, emphasizing that preserving ecology sustains all living species on the planet.

Patel explains the growth of the tree and how its not an easy event to kill a tree, because it is not only a tree that is going to killed, but also all the beings that depend on it will be affected, which include not only animals, birds, rodents, insects, but also humans of present as well as future. A tree grows little by little by absorbing the abundant energy of nature, like rays of sun, water from ground and rain, air, and nutrients from earth. It also reciprocates as much as possible to nature in its long life unlike humans who wantonly plunder and destroy mother earth's resources. Tagore's words, “Trees are the earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven,” echo Patel's poetic symbolism of trees as life-giving entities. He mentions the words of time, one to kill a tree, as even modern machines can't cut through trees at once it will take time to cut a tree, and another in the process of tree's growth. It compares the time taken for growth and time taken for destruction of

nature by human, Patel uses symbolism to show the tree's role in nature as well as its natural growth cycle through his first stanza:

**It takes much time to kill a tree,
Not a simple jab of the knife
Will do it. It has grown
Slowly consuming the earth,
Rising out of it, feeding
Upon its crust, absorbing
Years of sunlight, air, water,
And out of its leprous hide
Sprouting leaves. (1-9)**

From early civilization nature nurtured humans with abundance. It plays a vital role in human life as well as in human character. Before knowing how to cultivate crops, humans had a great dependence on nature as a nomadic tribe. His life depends on nature, lead a life of one with nature. In William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Duke Senior, a character in exile speaks the words of praise and spiritual philosophy he gained in nature as, "Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones and good in everything" (Act-2, Scene-1, 563-564). From these lines one can find the nature's healing and transformation traits.

Modern humans change towards worst in the concern for nature, as the greed grows, humans willingly bestow violence and eco-terrorism against nature which bestow humans with kindness and love. Deforestation and its adverse effects have been noted globally. According to a FAO report, India's forest area was reduced to 70.6 million hectares in 1990, and the world's forest area drastically declined from 7,000 million hectares in 1900 to 2,370 million hectares by 2000. In "On Killing A Tree" humans not only cut the trees and pull the barks, which is an act of torture against tree, but also continue to uproot it from its core from the Earth and let it completely die:

**So hack and chop
But this alone won't do it.
Not so much pain will do it.
The bleeding bark will heal
And from close to the ground
Will rise curled green twigs,
Miniature boughs
Which if unchecked will expand again
To former size.(10-18)**

Patel uses irony to convey the message of not killing trees and from direct context one can see the brutality of humans upon trees. Gieve Patel's poetic depiction of cutting a tree mirrors the destructive nature of deforestation, emphasizing its consequences, such as soil erosion, disrupted rainfall cycles, and extinction of species. Nature restores itself but humans won't let it happen. They completely destroy it by pulling its soft white roots, which is the anchor of trees where it grows for years. The nature helps humans to neutralize the pollution factors released by humans in ecology, which kills life. Trees act as a source of life, but humans treat it as a source of materialistic income only, not as part of nature or as a life:

**The root is to be pulled out —
Out of the anchoring earth;**

**It is to be roped, tied,
And pulled out — snapped out
Or pulled out entirely,
Out from the earth-cave,
And the strength of the tree exposed
The source, white and wet,
The most sensitive, hidden
For years inside the earth.(19-29)**

Patel brings out the slow withering of life from the tree, as it goes through the process of cutting and sawing. The poem highlights the absurdity of destroying something so vital to the environment, underscoring nature's rightful claim to existence alongside humanity. He further explains the process the tree is forced to bear as it gets roasted by sun and seasons to completely lose its life and turn into logs and debris as:

**Then the matter
Of scorching and choking
In sun and air,
Browning, hardening,
Twisting, withering,
And then it is done. (30-35)**

From ancient times humans worship nature in their own ways, ancient humans live one with nature, but modern humans work against nature which destroys the natural balance of ecology. Deforestation not only disrupts ecological balance but also poses an existential threat. For instance, India loses about 1.5 million hectares of forest cover annually, leading to soil erosion and resource scarcity. In the poem Patel mentions the death of a tree which is just a tip of an ice berg in a mountain called Deforestation, humans don't feel sad or guilt to destroy the natural ecological balance. The consequence is they themselves or their next generations have to bear the effect of these causes in the form of ecological imbalance or disasters like, drought, land slide, polluted air, contaminated water, increased heat, food shortage, and so on. Humans forget that they can't endure the wrath of nature if it reciprocates the malice and cruelty of humans. Patel's "On Killing a Tree" is a plea to recognize the dire consequences of environmental destruction. The poem serves as a cautionary tale against uncontrolled deforestation and its impact on future generations. Trees have a life and they are part of humans' life on earth. They not only help humans in physical sense but also in spiritual sense just like the poets' works such as, "Our Casuarina Tree" by Toru Dutt. Poems like, "Tree At My Window" by Robert Frost, "Plant A Tree" by Lucy Larcom are the result of current changes in the Ecology. It is the humans' duty to protect nature, by stopping deforestation and promoting afforestation Humans can stabilize the current biosphere from further destruction and let the nature heal itself as it has the power to heal itself. As Wangari Maathai rightly said, "When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and the seeds of hope," which aligns with Patel's call to preserve nature for the sustenance of all life. For present and future lets plant trees and protect the ecology . So, the future of the genre like apocalyptic and dystopian will always remain as a fiction.

Conclusion

On Killing A Tree is a poem that explores how to keep environment safe, how humans should love nature and be eco-friendly. It is a poem about making the

environment green. Patel uses his wonderful language capability to give his readers a poem full of irony as well as symbolism of nature's importance to Earth's beings and philosophical knowledge of life.

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