

INTEGRATING SOIL AND SOUL: A STUDY OF SRI AUROBINDO'S SELECT POEMS AND NONFICTION

Sarani Ghosal Mondal*

Abstract

The role of Nature in human life is undeniable; however, the study of the environment or ecology emerged as a separate discipline much later. In 1962, environmentalism gained momentum after the publication of Rachel Carson's book *The Silent Spring*. By the early 1970s, many literary scholars, scientists, and environmentalists started showing concern towards conserving natural resources and replenishing them by minimising man-nature conflict.

From India, the seer poet Sri Aurobindo had spoken extensively about Nature as an agency of transformation of human consciousness; unfortunately, it is not known to many. However, after carefully studying his poems and nonfiction, it is evident that his approaches come close to the doctrines of deep ecology and ecological humanism, which culminate into ecospirituality. Based on this theoretical ground, the present paper seeks to explore the ecological conscience of Sri Aurobindo in his poems and nonfiction.

The primary references to this work will include poems from *Ahana and Other Poems*, sections from *Savitri*, and essays from *The Life Divine*, which will be analysed thoroughly to place Sri Aurobindo within the canon of ecocriticism.

Keywords: Deep Ecology, Humanistic Ecology, Ecospirituality, Ecocriticism

* Associate Professor in English, Department of HSS, NIT, Goa.

Introduction

The unit of survival is an organism-in-its-environment. If the environment fails to survive, so does the individual.

—Freya Mathews in *The Ecological Self* (1991)

The importance of Nature was known to the ancients and later to the Romantics as a key force in human life; the study of the environment or ecology had never taken shape before the early 1960s. In 1962, the concept of environmentalism emerged with the publication of Rachel Carson's book *The Silent Spring*, which was also a pioneering book on ecofeminism. A systematic approach towards environmental studies gradually began to take shape in the early 1970s though not quite distinct as a separate movement on ecology. By 1993, the ecological literary study had become a recognizable critical school (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972) has been credited as the founding work in the field of literary ecology, the study of relationships between the literary arts and scientific ecology.

In 1978, William Rueckert introduced the term ecocriticism in his essay entitled, "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*," by which he meant the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human life had the most significant relevance to the contemporary and future of the world. More precisely, it is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view investigating the relationship between humans and the natural world in literature. It deals with how environmental challenges, cultural issues concerning the environment, and attitudes towards Nature are presented, analysed, and resolved. One of its main goals is to study how individuals in society behave and react to Nature and the ecosphere as a whole. Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, says that the fundamental principle of ecological conscience is that the environment should be respected and regarded as having equal value. His notion of deep ecology emphasises the basic interconnectedness of all life forms and calls for a symbiotic worldview rather than an anthropocentric one. Thus, the need of the hour is to look into the crises and discover how interconnectedness can be restored.

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), primarily a poet and a philosopher, had spoken extensively about Nature as an agency for transforming human consciousness, somewhat similar to that of Wordsworth and Rabindranath Tagore. As an ecologist, he imbibed the doctrines of

deep ecology and ecological humanism. However, his focus was more on ecospirituality, a stage deeper than the pantheistic realisation of the Romantics. Sri Aurobindo comes closer to the American transcendentalist poet Walt Whitman. Based on these premises, this paper seeks to explore the ecological conscience and concern of Sri Aurobindo as reflected in his select poems and nonfiction. The primary references to this work will include his poems from *Ahana and Other Poems*, sections from *Savitri*, and essays from *The Life Divine*, which will be examined closely to place Sri Aurobindo within the canon of Ecocriticism.

Like the deep ecologists, Sri Aurobindo believes that the completeness of our existence can be realised only in proximity to Nature. As an ecological humanist, he knows that humans can initiate a symbiotic growth of the entire ecosphere. Being a liberator of human consciousness, he knows that our mind tends to go down to gross materialism, leaving the world of a more refined sense of life, which makes our existence more meaningful and safe in a suicidal world. The crises arise due to our gradual alienation from Nature resulting from our uncontrolled greed and consumption. Sri Aurobindo's early poems like *Songs to Myrtilla* and poems from *Ahana and Other Poems* can give one the impression of pastoralism. The ecocritics of the third wave do not approve of the spirit of pastoralism and argue that it does not address the problems arising out of perpetual anthropogenic pollution. But a close examination of Sri Aurobindo's poems written in the Baroda and Calcutta periods reveals that he takes a step ahead of just mere representation of Nature like a pastoralist. He is not explicitly radical, but he had already anticipated the inevitable reverse trend in the post-Covid world of the 21st century, "return to Nature," as that can only save humanity from the ever-increasing toxicity and apocalypse.

Nature Writings in Different Stages

Barry Commoner (1917-2012), the American biologist, aptly says: "Everything is connected to everything else" (quoted by Ruckert, from Glotfelty & Fromm 1996:108). According to ecocritics, literature is not divorced from the material world; instead, it plays a pivotal part in the global context dealing with energy, matter, and ideas. The scope of this relatively new discipline is the entire ecosphere. The critics prefer to use the term 'eco' over 'enviro' because it is analogous to the science of ecology. Environment refers to anthropocentrism indicating human beings at the centre, whereas 'eco' implies "an

integrated system” (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xx). According to Martha E. Gimenez, ecology today is a generic, multifaceted term that applies to several heterogeneous ideologies, theoretical perspectives, and political practices concerned with the relationship between the human population and Nature (Gimenez 2000: 292). The development of the study of ecocriticism, according to Glotfelty and Fromm, is analogous to the stages of feminist criticism.

The First Stage of Ecocriticism

Who is more happy, when, with heart's content,
 Fatigued he sinks into some pleasant lair
 Of wavy grass, and reads a debonair
 And gentle tale of love and languishment?

(*To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent*, by John Keats)

The first stage witnesses the stereotypical representation of Nature, which includes metaphors like Arcadia, Eden, virgin land, miasmal swamp, savage, and wilderness. The authors, in particular, romance with Nature and compose romantic songs and lyrics. The description of heaths, meadows, and mountains adds sublimity to the literature culminating in pantheism, a gateway to ecospirituality, which is a more profound realisation of connectedness. The pastoral artists do not talk of conservation. They are satisfied with the description of Nature with rich images. The radical approach is missing in them; therefore, the importance is also relegated to drawing room discussion. In Indian aesthetics, according to K. Krishnamoorthy, excursion in Nature is a part of eighteen types of Beauty as listed by the Sanskrit theorists (Krishnamoorthy 1985:5). According to them, ‘garden excursion’ is analogous to an aesthetic excursion, which dethrones rationality. This may be considered one of the reasons behind the non-radical attitude of pastoral artists.

Greg Garrard, in his book *Ecocriticism*, refers to Terry Gifford's three kinds of pastoral: Classical pastoral, Romantic pastoral, and American pastoral. The classical pastoral deals with rural escape or repose. This used to be one of the dominant themes in the poetry of Theocritus in the Hellenistic period (316 – 260 BC). The *Idylls* of Theocritus display a dichotomy between the city and the country. The city is frenetic and corrupt, whereas the country is peaceful and ideal. This note of contrast is evident in Virgil's *Eclogues*. According to Garrard, the sense of pastoral is “ a pejorative term for an evasive or mendacious depiction of rural life” (Garrard 2012: 43). It is chiefly

because pastoral artists escape the miseries of realities.

The romantic pastoral includes the lake district poets, who argue that nearness to Nature has an enlightening effect on the human mind. It teaches us the essential values of existence and elevates one's consciousness from the mundane to the transcendental. It is more of an admiration of the sublimity of Nature. Like the Classical writers, the Romantics do not represent an endangered vision of the earth. However, we have to remember here the decisive shift from the country to the city in the wake of the industrial revolution in 1760 resulted in an acute longing for Nature. Rapid urbanisation stimulated a fondness for meadows and mountains. Economic dependence on animals and meadows of the earlier decades is now replaced by reliance on machines. This urban isolation creates a sense of alienation and sadness among the writers of the Romantic period:

The Poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade
And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,
The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves...

(*Poplar Field* by William Cowper)

The lines from Cowper's "The Poplar Field" (1784) present a reflective sadness without any concern to protect it. In his book, *Romantic Ecology* (1991), Jonathan Bate sums up the romantic notion of Nature, which depicts a recluse or retreat to the countryside to discover the bonding through excursion in the wild and contemplation. The Marxist ecology highlights the ambiguous position of Nature: mystification and exploitation binary or the ecocentric and anthropocentric binary, which the Romantics evade. Unfortunately, Jonathan Bate does not elaborate upon this problematic position of Nature.

The American pastoral artists pivot around wilderness and quest narratives. We all know that the transcendentalist philosopher, H.D. Thoreau, is one of the key figures of American pastoralism. Lawrence Buell, in one of his seminal works, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), says that Nature is a part of "the American national ego" (Buell 1995: 33). According to Buell, "it is synonymous with the idea of (re) turn to a less urbanized more 'natural' state of existence" (ibid 31). He finds Thoreau's *Walden* as "an economic and spiritual experiment," which prepares the ground for serious ecocritical concerns in the U.S. (ibid 145). He also traces Thoreau's growth from an anthropocentric transcendentalist to an inclusive

biocentric prophet. Then he further discusses the four ways to prevent environmental apocalypticism: interrelatedness, biotic egalitarianism, magnification, and conflation. All these are possible if there is a transformation of human consciousness, in Buell's words, a change in "public attitudes" (ibid 301). However, his overall assessment of Thoreau is that he is a "literary naturalist" sans any radical attitude: "Thoreau's appeal to American readers was based much more on the domesticated image of him as literary naturalist than the image of him as economic/political radical" (ibid 9). Despite his moderate attitude, the importance of *Walden* is undeniable because it raises the ethical question of human and nonhuman conflict and challenges the American gospel of abundance through his essay "Economy."

However, the American pastoral, in Lawrence Buell's words, from "American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised", (1989) is a "liminal site for male fulfillment" (Buell 1998 :2). In the same essay, he quotes Annette Kolodny to exemplify this: "the wilderness quest narrative from Cooper to Melville to Twain as the core of the American novelistic tradition marginalises women's fiction and women's history" (ibid). Buell rightly points out the exclusive view of American pastoralism pivoting around androcentric dualism, or we can say that it offers a masculinist vision of pastoralism based on exclusive principle. In the end, one can say that the first stage is concerned with varied types of representation of the green world.

The Second Stage of Ecocriticism

This stage invites nature-oriented nonfiction into the mainstream discourse, and the writers like H.D. Thoreau, John Burroughs, John Muir, Rachel Carson, and Aldo Leopold take centre stage. For example, Burroughs, in his essay entitled "The Art of Seeing Things" from *John Burrough's America*, explains the value of observation:

If I were to name the three most precious resources of life, I should say books, friends, and Nature; and the greatest of these, at least the most constant and always at hand, is Nature. Nature we have always with us, an inexhaustible storehouse of that which moves the heart, appeals to the mind, and fires the imagination—health to the body, a stimulus to the intellect, and joy to the soul. To the scientist, Nature is a storehouse of facts, laws, processes; to the artist, Nature is a storehouse of pictures; to the poet she is a storehouse of images, fancies, a source of inspiration; to the moralist she is a storehouse of precepts and parables... (F. A. Wiley, ed. 1996: 13)

Burrough's words give us an integral vision of Nature and how indispensable it is for our healthy existence. Thoreau, also an important writer of the second stage, raises our concern towards daily wastage. The first essay in *Walden*, "Economy," discusses minimalism, where he gives examples and statistics of how one can be economical. The second stage is focused on raising awareness by bringing ecology to the foreground, which has encouraged constructive debate and dialogues. Being neutral does not help in the long run. Therefore, from the second stage onwards, the issues related to ecology are being debated constantly in academia, media, and society. Even though Thoreau is considered one of the key figures of American pastoralism, his contribution to nature writing leaves a lasting impression on the nation's cultural development because his prophetic voice was capable of turning the mass to the protection of the green world. These are the fundamental differences in approach between the first and second stages. Writers such as Wordsworth and Keats, the darlings of the first stage, appear to be somewhat less attractive to the writers of the second stage because they are careful enough not to romanticise the wilderness like their predecessors. They encourage us to look at the sites of environmental devastation and texts that promote the same, such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and A.R. Ammons's book-length poem *Garbage*. Mention must be made here that Buell and Garrard place Thoreau and Burroughs in the first stage of ecocriticism, whereas Glotfelty and Fromm situate them in the second stage. They claim that Thoreau and Burroughs are not exceedingly romantic to forget the commitments to Nature. It maybe pointed out that Wordsworth considers Nature a nurturing agent of human consciousness. While Thoreau is more committed, he criticises our unscrupulous behaviour towards Nature. Therefore, one can say that his pilgrimage to Walden is an example of an anti-establishment gesture. His *Walden* prepares the ground for the radicals of the later stage and initiates the discourse on environmental justice. The essays in *Walden* may also be categorised under protest literature.

The Third Stage of Ecocriticism

The third or final stage up to this point is involved in theoretical discourse and symbolic construction of different species. Many new approaches and theories have been introduced, like ecological poetics, ecofeminism, ecospirituality, Marxist ecology, discourse on toxicity, biocentrism, bioregionalism, and many more. It is an

inclusive discipline offering scopes for interdisciplinary scholarship. Over the years, unlike the feminist movement, it has become a multi-ethnic movement, too, as Nature and culture are inseparable, and any discussion on ecology begins on the premise of Nature vis-à-vis culture. Many forums have come up to discuss the crises like ASLE in the U.S. in 1992. A decade ago, in India, in 1973, the *Chipko* movement was initiated in Uttarakhand by Sunderlal Bahuguna, along with Gouri Devi, Viruksha Devi, Suraksha Devi, and Sudeshna Devi. All these tribal women activists played a pivotal role in forest conservation. They embraced the trees to stage protests against deforestation in a non-violent manner (Wikipedia). At present, Medha Patkar, Vandana Shiva, Sunita Narain, Tulsi Gowda, and Jadav Payeng, to name a few, are instrumental in bringing in a significant change. Many youngsters have also shown interest in ecological conservation, like Greta Thurnberg and Riddhima Pandey. Climate change, man-animal conflict, frequent floods, water and airborne diseases, and soil infertility have become engaging topics of discussion. Reevaluating our approaches to ecology, either through writing or activism, is a need of the hour for a better tomorrow.

Toxicity and Marxist Ecology

Apart from the three stages and the different emerging theories, the toxic discourse and Marxist ecology have been taken seriously by the present critics. Humanity has become anxious after the incidents like chemical spills in the ocean and contamination of water bodies worldwide. Not only the chemicals but also the nuclear waste increases toxicity too. The earth has become a dumping site. In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Buell argues that deliberation on toxicity has been augmented by us because of the social panic that individual life and property are under threat (Buell 2001:31). Buell further adds that the discussion on toxicity has begun with Carson's book *The Silent Spring*, which is a fable for tomorrow. Carson describes a city that is birdless and budless in the spring. She begins her book with a quote by Albert Schweitzer, "Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth" (Carson 1962: frontispiece). Much later, Cynthia Deitering, in her article, "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s", discusses the consequences of increasing toxicity elaborately after the 1980s. She cites examples of the accident of Union Carbide in Bhopal in 1982 and the nuclear accident at Three Miles Island in the 1980s. The toxic discourse is an apocalyptic theme resulting from

increasing consumer capitalism. Individual garbage production has increased, which narrates the consumer's personal consumption history. Deitering rightly criticises our seminal role as producers of waste (Deitering 1996: 198). She also refers to Susan Cutter's metaphor "toxic riskscape" instead of landscape (ibid 200).

The Marxist ecologists have a slightly different position. George Snedeker, in his review article, "Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature by John Bellamy Foster," calls it a "red-green alliance," as it analyses the dynamics of production, reproduction, environmental change, and modernity (Snedeker 2001: 310). Martha Gimenez, in her article, "Does Ecology Need Marx", argues that mainstream environmentalism does not challenge the basic premise of capitalism such as the endless pursuit of economic growth and higher levels of material consumption, because it believes in the capacity of technology to solve all the problems (Gimenez 2000:293). Greg Garrard is also of the same opinion, and he explains:

Capitalism guided by educated voters and consumers can provide technological solutions to many problems of resources and pollution. The anti-interventionist, 'Nature knows best' approach that Lewis ascribes to eco-radicals is inadequate... (Garrard 2012: 22)

Gimenez and Garrard deconstruct the standpoint of the radicals like Martin W Lewis in *Green Delusions*, where he opposes intervention. Garrard quotes the anti-interventionist slogan: "nature knows best" and opposes it (ibid). Considering all the premises, one can deduce that the ecosphere is a shared space for humans and nonhumans. Therefore, developmental activities are a necessity, but at the same time, one can replenish the resources by reusing and recycling. Snedeker, in his review, cites Garrett Hardin's opinion that the first step to saving the environment is to eliminate poverty because it leads to violent crimes against humans and nonhumans (Snedeker 2001: 309).

All these varied standpoints and observations indicate that awareness has increased considerably, which may prevent human beings from being irresponsible to Mother Nature. It is also to be noted here that the classification of ecocriticism into different stages cannot be made into watertight compartments as the approaches and ideas have been overlapping. Irrespective of all these, it is an undeniable fact that the concern for Nature from the 1970s, has escalated among the mass. Simultaneously, the concept of environmental justice has become popular. It advocates the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be

free from environmental destruction. Furthermore, it demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all people, free from discrimination or bias (see Buell's *Endangered Earth*, pg.33).

Nature in Sri Aurobindo's Poems

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) knew the essence of living as an integral philosopher. As a famous poet, critic, and philosopher, he has been debated for his contribution to poetics, Indian nationalism, human psychology, and philosophy. However, his ideas and opinions on Nature have not yet received sufficient critical attention. The little we have on Sri Aurobindo's idea on ecology is Murali Sivaramkrishnan's paper entitled, "Creativity, Environment and Value," where he explores Sri Aurobindo's eco-aesthetic and ecocritical perspectives in *Savitri*. He argues that Nature has been used as a metaphor for the esoteric possibility of transformation from the lowest material to the highest spiritual level of existence. Taking a cue from his paper, I would like to mention that Sri Aurobindo's comments on ecology are scattered in his nonfiction, sonnets, lyrics, and narrative poems. A close examination of them will indicate that Sri Aurobindo considers Nature an agent for transforming human consciousness. It is a symbol of aspiration that culminates into the doctrine of ecospirituality in his writings. Poems written in England (1889-1893) and Baroda (1894-1906) are mostly love lyrics projecting the pastoral spirit of the Classical tradition.

From 1900 onwards, there was a gradual change in Sri Aurobindo's theme and style. He becomes contemplative, and his language begins to be aphoristic and forceful. Many poems in *Ahana and Other Poems* are contemplative though composed during his stay in Baroda, when he was busy writing articles for *Bandematarm*, a political daily, coming out with his scathing criticism of the loyalist attitudes of the Indian National Congress. Alongside his aggressive journalistic writings, he was composing nature lyrics too. The poem entitled "Miracles" is a brief description of the laws of Nature, and the poet is fascinated by it. Another concise and aphoristic poem, "A Tree," projects the conflicting mind of a seeker. The branches of the tree are spread upward, indicating our aspiring souls, which we wish to transcend from the mundane to the transcendental. The dichotomy of the mundane and the transcendental is a common theme in the writings of the mystics, who try to bridge the gap through their deeper realisations:

A tree beside the sandy river-beach
 Holds up its topmost boughs
 Like fingers towards the skies they cannot reach,
 Earth-bound, heaven amorous.
 This is the soul of man. Body and brain
 Hungry for earth our heavenly flight detain.

(Aurobindo 2009: 207)

“A Vision of Science” is a long narrative poem where he discusses the enigmas of science and religion, or matter and spirit. He depicts the rapid growth of scientific inquiries and discoveries, so also the expansion of the human ego, which makes one forget the presence of the Emersonian Oversoul in Nature:

Man’s spirit measuring his worlds around
 The laws of sight divined and laws of sound.
 Light was not hidden from her searching gaze,...
 Foretold the earthquakes, analyses the storms...
 In these grey cells that quiver to touch
 The secret lies of man; they are the thing called I.

(Aurobindo 2009: 205)

The poet here subtly points out that the prosperity of the material world slowly disintegrates us from our true self, and we get detached from Nature. We transform Nature to meet our needs, which is why Amitav Ghosh in *The Nutmeg’s Curse* ironically refers to the metaphor of terraformation. It is a parable of the environmental crisis, which began with the western colonisers. Towards the end, the poet repeats his symbol for the human body, “grey cells,” to indicate that one has to come out of the “I” ness in us: “And the grey cell contains me not” (ibid 206). At some point, one has to restore the balance to save our “widest home” from the apocalypse, as William Howarth advocates in “Some Principles of Ecocriticism” (Howarth 1996:69) . “The Sea at Night” is a mystic lyric, where the ecological vision of the poet grows into a mystic vision:

I see beyond a rough
 Glimmering infinity,
 I feel the wash
 And hear the sibilation of the waves...

(Aurobindo 2009: 211)

The sound of the waves triggers his inner self. He feels the mighty presence in the limitless ocean. Therefore, one can say that the

poems in *Ahana and Other Poems* exhibit a shift in ideology from *Songs to Myrtilla*, *Urvashi*, and *Love and Death*. The romantic vision of the ecosphere gives way to a more profound realisation of identification in “Rebirth,” where the poet’s persona merges with Nature:

I am a tree
That stands out singly from the infinite blue;
I am the quiet falling of dew
And am the unmeasured sea.
I hold the sky...

(Aurobindo 2009: 217)

It is, therefore, not just the realisation of the manifestation of the Infinite in Nature. The poet wishes to merge with the green world. This is not a superficial bonding but a deep attachment. When one is committed, one cannot destroy to fulfill self-interest. The recurring metaphor of the tree is quite significant in the Aurobindonian context as it is a bridge between the earth and sky. The upward spreading branches hint at expanding our narrow self and limited material vision. The metaphor of a limitless ocean also indicates the same. Like Walt Whitman, John Burroughs, and Thoreau, he too celebrates the seasons, the ecosphere, and the flora. “In the Moonlight” is a poem projecting an ascending movement of the psyche from a description of a beautiful full moon night to spiritual union with the Divine:

Here in the wide eye of the silent moon,...
Among leaves, the cricket’s ceaseless cry,
The frog’s harsh discord in the ringing pools...
The intellect is not all; a guide within
Awaits our question...

(Aurobindo 2009: 237-244)

The poet says that realisation is not possible with intellect. The intellectual mind depends on reason, which does not help in appreciating Nature. It is a matter of extraordinary vision, or it is intuitive realisation or intuitive intellect. Ratiocination spoils the extra-terrestrial or otherworldly experiences of the nature mystics.

During Sri Aurobindo’s stay in Calcutta between 1909 and 1910, he wrote a dialogue entitled “The Dialogue,” which was later included in the anthology, *Collected Poems* under the “Poems from Manuscripts” segment. It is a dialogue written in a classical style like *Ion*, where two characters discuss the myth of creation in an interrogative style. Achab asks Esarhaddon to explain the mystery of birth. In response,

Esarhaddon says: “the seed is God that touched my mother’s womb” (Aurobindo 2009: 287). As an evolutionary thinker, Sri Aurobindo did not use the metaphor of seed earlier. In the poems of the Baroda period, he talks of human aspiration to move upward beyond the terrestrial. In the Calcutta period, he draws upon the themes of birth and biological evolution. Esarhaddon further explains to Achab:

It grew from other seed,
That out of earth and water, light and heat,
And ether, eldest creature of the world.
All is a force that irresistibly
Works by its Nature which it cannot help...

(Aurobindo 2009: 287)

The seed contains the energy indispensable for creation. The ecosphere nurtures the seed to germination. It is a process impossible to halt because it is the law of Nature. The creative energy is hidden in the seed, which is the microcosm containing cosmic energy. The desire or a force acts as a catalyst and initiates the process of the life cycle on the earth, which begins from a minuscule seed.

As a seer, he has an all-embracing vision. He does not disintegrate the humans and nonhumans in his poems. As an ecocritic, he anticipates Barry Commoner’s statement, which is already mentioned in one of the previous sections. The entire ecosphere is extremely important to him as he believes in interconnectedness like every deep ecologist and ecological humanist. His treatises on the transformation of human consciousness maybe misinterpreted as a projection of his anthropocentric attitude, but a close scrutiny reveals his biophilic relation. He considers that the laws of the ecosphere facilitate the progress of human consciousness towards betterment. It is significant to note that his vision extends from the biosphere to the ecosphere.

As an eco-pilgrim, he aspires to realise the supreme through nature trail:

Hill after hill was climbed and now,
Behold, the last tremendous brow
And the great rock that none has trod:
A step, and all is sky and God

(Aurobindo 2009: 542)

The lines are from “One Day: The Little More,” aphoristically depicting his view on the ecosphere, which establishes him as an ecospiritualist, who believes that being in Nature can bring change

in the human psyche. He advocates his message metaphorically by embracing the persona of a trekker who undertakes an arduous journey of hardships to renew himself. Myriads of experiences are necessary to realise the essence of existence and reach the pinnacle. "Ocean Oneness," written in 1942 in Pondicherry, is a symbolic poem exemplifying similar experiences on a deeper level. Here, Sri Aurobindo envisions a white bird diving into the calm ocean and wandering above with a steady upward gaze. The poet then identifies himself with the winged creature and spreads his arms like wings to clasp the universe. The symbol of a white bird may be considered an allusion to Joyce's vision of a white crane in water (in *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*), which is a liberating force. Sri Aurobindo's white bird wants to be a merger: "One in a mighty and single vastness" (573). The bird is an agent of transcending the limit. The symbol of upward spreading branches culminates into the symbol of the spreading wings of a bird, which indirectly hints at the expansion of our earth-bound vision to a cosmic vision enveloping the ecosphere. A similar message of expansion of our egoistic self is repeated in "Bliss of Identity," too. Once a human being comes out of the shackles of egoistic self, one can think of preservation instead of consumption, which is related to our capitalistic vision. Raymond L. Bryant and Michael K. Goodman, in their paper entitled, "Consuming Narratives: The Political Ecology of 'Alternative' Consumption," explain this problem with an insightful comment:

...a global capitalist system seen to be the cause of most of the world's troubles. Conditions of social and economic inequality, political and cultural oppression, economic exploitation, and natural resource depletion were linked to capitalism. (Bryant and Goodman 2004: 346)

Being a minimalist like Thoreau, Sri Aurobindo knows the difference between greed and need. We hardly find a sensuous description of food and objects in his poems like that of Keats' "The Eve of St'Agnes." The sonnets composed in the Pondicherry period project his desireless vision of life. He knows that there is nothingness in excess. In Edward Mooney's words, Thoreau lived an "ascetic, meditative way of life" (Mooney 2015: 97). Sri Aurobindo was not an ascetic like Thoreau. His philosophy was equanimity, which he learned from the Vedic scriptures.

Western writers and critics use the word 'moral' for mystical and spiritual. In the Aurobindonian context, it is an experience of a spiritual emotion because spirituality is individualistic and private. It has nothing to do with right or wrong, moral or immoral; dos and don'ts. Despite his spiritual experiences, Thoreau is sometimes

moral and uses prescriptive language. For example, in “Higher Laws,” he differentiates virtue and vices, purity and impurity, and defines chastity. As a reader, one can notice the moral tone in his delineation, as if he is sermonising. Alfred I. Tauber, in the introduction to his book, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency*, says that Thoreau’s moral vision is extended to value or ethical sense (Tauber 2001: 5-6). Sri Aurobindo’s realisation is experiential, which ends in a feeling of cosmic consciousness. This metaphor of cosmic consciousness is linked with his doctrine of evolution. In “The Miracle of Birth, he writes, “Evolving from the worm into the god” (Aurobindo 2009: 615). As an evolutionary thinker, he believes in an ascent to higher consciousness. That is possible if we expand our egoistic self to embrace all. Nature helps us in this process of ascent, and one experiences absolute harmony with all. His sonnet, “The Divine Hearing,” is an example summing up the Aurobindonian kind of ecospirituality, which is purely an intuitive experience of oneness:

All sounds, all voices have become thy voice:
 Music and thunder and cry of birds,...
 The laughter of the sea’s enormous mirth,...
 A secret harmony steals through the blind heart
 And all grows beautiful because Thou art.

(Aurobindo 2009: 622)

Nature in *Savitri*

Sri Aurobindo, in his letters on *Savitri*, written mostly in 1936, informs us about its process of composition: “I used Savitri as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level...” (Aurobindo 1970: 727, see note). He further informs that this epic poem was written many years ago, before the Mother came, as a narrative poem in two parts (ibid 728). He then revised it time and again to arrive at the present form. We all know it is a poem depicting his adventure of consciousness towards a higher level. It is based on intuitive thinking, “always expressing a vision” (ibid 737). He also justifies his style of using anaphora. “This does not weaken the poem; it gives it a singular power and beauty. The repetition of the same key ideas, key images and symbols, keywords or phrases, key epithets, sometimes key lines or half lines is a constant feature. They give an atmosphere,... a sort of psychological frame, an architecture” (ibid 740). It is based on an anecdote from the *Mahabharata* that has been expanded to a blank verse epic poem containing 23,813 lines.

All can be done if the God touch is there...

(Aurobindo 1970: 3, SABCL, vol.28)

This is his initial statement in book one, canto-1, indicating his firm faith in the Divine, who is inspiring him to compose this *magnum opus*. The present discussion will concentrate on book five and a few select sections from *Savitri*. Book five is known as the “The Book of Love,” where we see Savitri and Satyavan courting each other in a sylvan setting described with rich images:

The white crane stood, a vivid motionless streak,
Peacock and parrot jewelled soil and tree,
The dove’s soft moan enriched the enamoured air
And fire-winged wild-drakes swam in silvery pools.

(Aurobindo 1970: 390, SABCL, vol. 29)

Sri Aurobindo’s description of Nature in Book five maybe categorised under the classical pastoral tradition of Theocritus and Vigil as we see everything in a state of utopia. In canto-2 of the same book, he says, “Earth in this beautiful refuge free from cares / Murmured to the soul a song of strength and peace,…” (ibid 392). This alludes to Keatsian escapism because the poet is divorced from reality, which offers a dystopic vision. Both Savitri and Satyavan are the children of Nature who imbibe all the essential qualities of existence: love, kindness, appreciation, humility, and selfless living. Like Nature, Savitri is always at the giving end. She seeks permission from her father; King Ashwapatito marry the son of Dyumathsena, Satyavan. She embraces the life of simplicity with her husband in “a nave of trees enshrined the hermit thatch” (ibid 412). It was prophesied that Satyavan would die after a year of marriage. Savitri is determined to either die or bring life back to her husband through love “My love shall outlast the world, doom falls from me” (ibid 432). Satyavan dies in book eight, canto-3. “Savitri... lean down, my soul, and kiss me while I die” (ibid 565). A woman of indomitable courage and spirit withstands the inevitability through love. Sri Aurobindo’s final message is the metaphor of love:

...O Death;
My love is stronger than the bonds of Fate:…
Love must not cease to live upon the earth;
For love is the bright link twixt earth and heaven,… (ibid 633)

From pastoralism, Sri Aurobindo moves to love and cosmic consciousness, which can herald a new dawn. Loveless existence

cannot protect this ecosphere. As a daughter of the Sun, Savitri is in love with every object of Nature. She is the symbol of primordial energy, with which she decides to save the earth from miseries. The epilogue is “Return to earth”, where she returns from the abysmal to nurse new dawn in her bosom:

Awakened to the meaning of my heart,
That to feel love and oneness is to live... (ibid 724)

Sri Aurobindo, as an ecospiritualist, gives his final message cryptically that everything is possible if we know how to love as it is a constructive force. We love ourselves, not Nature. We can avoid sickness and disease if we embrace a simple and humble life near Nature.

Nature in Sri Aurobindo’s Nonfiction

In “The Progress to Knowledge—God, Man and Nature” from chapter xvii of *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo says:

Nature is fulfilled in man and man in Nature and both find themselves in God, because the Divine is ultimately self-revealed in both man and Nature (Aurobindo 1970: 683, SABCL, vol.19, see note)

The sentential aptly presents his philosophy of Nature, which comes close to ecological humanism. He emphasises the principle of interdependence because he knows that fulfillment lies in a symbiotic bond. As an integral critic, he combines pantheism, deep ecology, and ecological humanism, which result in a broad perspective of ecospirituality. In the first essay of *The Life Divine*, entitled “The Human Aspiration,” he says, “... Nature is secret God” (Aurobindo 1970: 4, SABCL, vol.18, see note). From this apophthegmatic statement, he proceeds further and explains the significance of Nature in human life and biological and spiritual evolution in two volumes of the LD (see note).

...manifestation of the Divine in himself and the realisation of God within and without are the highest and the most legitimate aim possible to man upon earth. (ibid)

Such realisation is difficult to achieve for an ordinary individual. We are used to material comfort. Therefore, we try to consume as much as possible. The culture of consumption is escalating day by day because of mass media. Cityscapes replace the landscape. The sky is barely visible beyond the high rises. Whatever little land is available in the countryside has been infringed by the tourism

industry and real-estate dealers to build resorts, holiday homes, and luxury apartments. There is hardly any regulation to put a halt to rapid concretization. Raymond L. Bryant and Michael K. Goodman, in their essay, "Consuming Narratives: The Political Ecology of 'alternative' Consumption," rightly criticise the universal weakness that consumption is a result of commodity culture and it is difficult for an ordinary individual to escape the attraction of commodities available in multiplexes. The response of Bryant and Goodman to the culture of commodity and consumption is to adopt "the conservation-seeking commodity culture" which maybe termed as "alternative consumption sector" (Bryant and Goodman 2004: 355). This trend is emerging in isolated places where the objective is to use natural resources without destroying or disrupting the ecosphere. Some common examples may include using renewable energy through solar panels, reusing groundwater through recycling, and storing rainwater. Also, installing ground lights instead of floodlights or bright halogen lights, wherever possible, can protect the interest of humans and nonhumans. The number of cell phone towers may be reduced too to save the lives of small birds, who are sensitive to high radiation. All these sustainable initiatives are possible if the policymakers come forward proactively to impose strict laws against the miscreants to preserve biodiversity.

Shakeel Ramay, in his report, informs us about ancient Chinese eco-civilization during the Shang dynasty (1554 -1046 B.C.), when penalties used to be imposed on those who had dumped waste by the road. The usual punishment was to remove the fingers of the offenders (Ramay 2020: 4). However, humanity has long forgotten those traditional words of wisdom because the drive for accumulation has veiled our thoughtfulness and foresight. We are concerned with the present and immediate pleasure. The future is not in our consideration; therefore, we march forward to exert our domination in the sky, on earth, and under the water. The consequences are frequent deluges, lingering respiratory diseases, and lack of immunity.

The balance between matter and spirit is necessary, which is Sri Aurobindo's message in the treatises of *The Life Divine*. Sri Aurobindo has rightly explained the key problem in the first essay of it: "For all problems of existence are essentially problems of harmony. They arise from the perception of an unsolved discord and the instinct of an undiscovered agreement or unity" (Aurobindo 1970: 2, SABCL, vol. 18). The apophthegmatic sentences express the fundamental weakness of humanity. Love, kindness, and harmony are unfamiliar emotions to the majority. When we are not kind to fellow humans,

we will inevitably be cruel to plants and animals. There is nothing absurd in our attitude. With this ironical note, he moves on to discuss his views on the green world or, to borrow Sumana Roy's term "plant-philosophy" from *How I Became a Tree*. In an essay entitled "The Divine Maya," (from LD) there is a lengthy discussion on the metaphor of seed, which was first referred to in the poems of the Baroda period. It is again the central metaphor in another essay in LD, entitled "Life." According to him, the seed contains the mystery of birth, death, and rebirth:

Out of the seed there evolves that which is already in the seed, pre-existent in being, predestined in its will to become... (ibid 112, SABCL,vol.18)

The seed may also be described as a unit of energy that forms, manifests, and develops to exist in the ecosphere. It is an enigmatic process for Sri Aurobindo. In "Life," he further discusses plant life like a biologist. According to him, the common belief is that when we witness constant dynamic energy in movement in the universe, we call it life. The visible action is "Life-Energy." We are used to regular operations and responses. Apart from humans, animals, and birds, plants perform some habitual operations, and the dynamic play of universal energy is also evident in our green companions. Yet, we tend to ignore their presence. Here is a detailed interpretation of the nervous system of the plants, which affirms our conviction in his scientific approach to the plant-life cycle:

It manifests symptoms of nervousity and has a vital system not very different from our own,... Is there any justification for elevating this distinction into an essential difference? What, for instance, is the difference between life in ourselves and life in the plant? We see that they differ, first, in our possession of the power of locomotion which has evidently nothing to do with the essence of vitality, and, secondly, in our possession of conscious sensation which is, so far as we know, not yet evolved in the plant. Our nervous responses are largely, though by no means always or in their entirety, attended with the mental response of conscious sensation... But sensation is sensation whether mentally conscious or vitally sensitive and sensation is a form of consciousness. When the sensitive plant shrinks from a contact, it appears that it is nervously affected, that something in it dislikes the contact and tries to draw away from it; there is, in a word, a subconscious sensation in the plant, just as there are, as we have seen, subconscious operations of the same kind in ourselves. In the human system it is quite possible to bring these subconscious perceptions and sensations to the surface long after they have happened and have ceased to affect the nervous system;...The mere fact that the plant has no superficially vigilant mind which can be awakened to the valuation of its subconscious sensations... (ibid 182)

The movements in the plants are very subtle. They respond to various stimuli from the environment. It has a vital force, not visible to our naked eye. Sri Aurobindo defines it as a “submental sensation in the plant” (ibid 184). The energy of the universe is manifested in different forms: animate and inanimate, which form the ecosphere. Sri Aurobindo, as a critic, penetrates deep into the “plant-life” to inform us about their subtle sensation (ibid 178). They share an important space in his evolutionary philosophy. He observes Nature both as a critic and a biologist. Therefore, one can easily place him in the second and third stages of ecocriticism. He raises our green conscience through nonfiction and believes that it is through Nature that one can realise the Divine. Drawing our attention to the seed, he enlightens us about the relevance of a tiny and ignoble object of Nature. Despite having the nethermost status, it contains the cosmos and propagates life by drawing nutritional elements like heat, light, and water. Life gradually evolves in the nonhuman.

According to Sri Aurobindo, energy is submerged in the matter too. Universal energy is an intermediary power that forms and transforms everything, including matter like metal, which emerges from the earth. The ecosphere is an integrated system that is operated by dynamic life energy or force. This force is expressed in birth, growth, death, and rebirth. In other words, the revelation of force is life. Sri Aurobindo, as a critic, sees everything as a whole. This vision of cosmic harmony gives him the status of an ecospiritualist.

As an ecospiritualist, he dreams of a perfect and balanced life in a harmonised whole. “The Progress to Knowledge-God, Man and Nature” begins with a translated quote from the *Swetaswara Upanishad*, verse 10, “This whole world is filled with beings who are his members” (Sri Aurobindo: 682, SABCL, vol.19). To accomplish this feeling, one has to grow into an expanded being, and he suggests three ways: “self-enlargement,” “self-fulfilment”, and “self-evolution” (ibid 684). As a pragmatic thinker, he knows that it is possible when one exceeds ego. He is also aware that humans, as individuals, require a sense of ego to some point to affirm and distinguish their personality. All our manifold efforts in society, art, ethics, science, and religion are necessary to know ourselves and strengthen our foundation. As an individual, one has to perceive, experience, and express the many branching knowledge on the earth to move deeper in one’s realisation of the Infinite cosmos and its endless and dynamic energy. The primary egoistic development often exemplifies sin, violence, and crudity, which Sri Aurobindo explains as “an evil or error of Nature” (ibid 692). If one can identify one’s weaknesses, it becomes easy for the person to disengage the self from the

influence of the lower subconscious. When we are overpowered by the collective or the mass sentiment, we express the emotions of the lower subconscious, which are destructive and hamper the growth of the individual consciousness. A little later, in the same chapter, he explains the problems of the lower subconscious:

In the crowd the individual loses his inner direction and becomes a cell of the mass body moved by the collective will or idea or the mass-impulse. He has to stand apart, affirm his separate reality in the whole, his own mind emerging from the common mentality, his own life distinguishing itself in the common life-uniformity...in the end to retire into himself in order to find himself that he can become spiritually one with all... (ibid 694)

As a prophetic seer, he nails down the issue precisely that the growth and expansion of an individual is a challenge before the mass. The collective will dominate the individual will to grow. The mass sentiment often drags one downward to lower emotions like ingratitude and unkindness. Sri Aurobindo says that one has to be firm enough not to bow down to the collective forces so that its plasticity will be broken in due course. However, society needs such exceptional individuals who possess the will to transcend themselves beyond the “mind-ego”, “life-ego”, and “body-ego”, which are parts of our surface being (ibid 694). According to Sri Aurobindo, this is Nature’s primary education that one should grow as vast as Nature. Ecospirituality advocates “mutual indwelling and oneness” (ibid 690). This leads to a unity of the three: God, Soul, and Nature.

Conclusion

Sri Aurobindo, as an ecocritic, emphasises the change of consciousness, which is analogous to Lawrence Buell’s view in *The Environmental Imagination* that equilibrium in the ecosphere can be restored if there is a change in “public attitudes” (Buell 1995: 301). In the Aurobindonian discourse, the individual is the most crucial agent, who must first transform to save the world from the impending apocalypse. Society is an extension of the individual. Therefore, his vision moves from the individual to the collective. If the individual is prone to satisfy his desire, it spoils the integrality. In reality, we witness that every individual is obsessed with excess consumption. Marxist ecologists call it the culture of commodity and consumption. As a social historian, Sri Aurobindo describes it commercial culture, which gives rise to a class called “economic barbarians” (Sri Aurobindo 1970: 80, SABCL, vol.15). In an essay,

“Civilisation and Barbarism,” from *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo explains in detail the underlying problems:

...economic barbarian makes the satisfaction of wants and desires and the accumulation of possessions his standard aim. His ideal man is not the cultured or noble or thoughtful or moral or religious, but the successful man. To arrive, to succeed, to produce, to accumulate, to possess is his existence. The accumulation of wealth and more wealth, the adding of possessions to possessions, opulence, show, pleasure, a cumbrous inartistic luxury, a plethora of conveniences, life devoid of beauty and nobility, religion vulgarised or coldly formalised, politics and government turned into a trade and profession, enjoyment itself made a business, this is commercialism. ... (ibid 72)

The insightful analysis by Sri Aurobindo comes close to the capitalistic exploitation as pointed out by the radical ecocritics of the third stage. Marxist ecologists like Greg Garrard and Martha Gimenez believe that the individual can only restore the long-lost balance with the help of technology like recycling and reusing, which Bryant and Goodman take forward in their discussion on “alternative consumption”, with a focus on less wastage and replenishment through sustainable development. Hence, how many of us are ready to pull ourselves from luxury and comfort? Very few exceptional individuals possess the futuristic vision of an equilibrated ecosphere.

Everything is possible when humanity becomes ready to take the challenge to move from the individual to the collective by promoting the principles of mutual adjustment and reconciliation by expansion and inclusion. In an essay, “Nature’s Law in our Progress—Unity in Diversity, Law, and Liberty” from *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Sri Aurobindo says: “Unity we must create, but not necessarily uniformity. If man could realise a perfect spiritual unity, no sort of uniformity would be necessary; for the utmost play of diversity would be securely possible on that foundation” (ibid 401). As an ecospiritualist, he envisioned that in a secret corner in Pondicherry, away from the arclight of public gaze and media attention. His one-pointed objective was to integrate the soil with the soul. He says in “A God’s Labour”:

I had hoped to build a rainbow bridge
 Marrying the soil to the sky
 And sow in this dancing planet midge
 The moods of infinity.

(Aurobindo 2009: 534)

Abbreviation

SABCL: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, published in 1970

Notes

1. *Ahana and Other Poems* was published in 1915. It consists of the long poem "Ahana," written in Pondicherry, and twenty four shorter poems, most of which were written in Baroda.
2. *The Life Divine* is referred to as LD. in the text. All the quotes are from the 1970 edition of the book. *The Life Divine* consists of two vols: SABCL- Vols.18 and 19
3. Letters on *Savitri*, available in SABCL-Vol. 29 as an appendix. The letters were written in 1946.
4. The poems by Sri Aurobindo are quoted from the 2009 edition of the *Collected Poems*
5. The term "Plant-Philosophy" has been referred to from Sumana Roy's book *How I Became a Tree*, pub by Aleph Book Company, New Delhi: 2017
6. *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* have been anthologised in SABCL, Vol.15. The volume is entitled *Social and Political Thought*.

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