



Original Research Paper

MATERIAL ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE PILGRIMS OF DARKNESS

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ABSTRACT

Material Ecocriticism refers to an understanding that acknowledges non-human entities as participants and reveals the mutual relationship between nature and humans as well. It has emerged as one of the major environmental humanities. Through a Material Ecocritical lens, this paper analyses *The Pilgrims of Darkness* by Dhruv Bhatt showing nature as a protagonist, not merely background characters. It is through these themes of material agency, storied matter, ecological memory, and the non-human agency in nature, the study uncovers the various ways forests, rivers, mountains, landscapes, and animals interacted with the tribal communities in the novel to shape the cultural heritage, the spiritual values, and the everyday lives of the people. It is clear that Bhatt depicts the ecosystem as a dynamic entity whose interaction creates the experiences among the people while it also carries forward, ecological memory and indigenous knowledge. The novel displays through examples such as sustainable living an ethical awareness that in the end will bring humans and nature into more harmonious relation with each other. *The Pilgrims of Darkness* is a major eco-critical novel, which through a strong depiction of indigenous ecological ethics and questioning human-centered ways of view, makes the human and environmental relationship a central theme in today's discourse.

Keywords: *Material Eco-criticism Material Agency Non-Human Agency Ecological Interconnectedness*

1. INTRODUCTION

Material Eco-criticism is a theory that has played a crucial role in the modern literary and cultural studies field primarily by confronting and dismantling the human centric model which is the mainstay of environmental studies humanities. Material Ecocriticism, in contrast to previous forms of Eco-criticism that mainly focused on the depiction of environmental issues in literature, acknowledges the agency of both natural and man-made bodies in co-shaping the ecological, cultural, and historical realities. Nature and humans are considered two dynamic elements that through their interaction not only define the world we live in but also make the construction of meaning, identity formation, and experiences possible. Therefore, the representatives of Material Ecocriticism pay special attention to the matter's capability and the complex web of relationships among human and non-human worlds.

The start of Eco-criticism relied very much on the realization that literature reflects the condition of nature and human dealings with the environment. It called for scholars to go beyond conventional literary readings and look at the connection between texts and nature. The pioneering works of scholars like William Rueckert, Cheryll Glotfelty, and other eco-critical thinkers eventually shifted people's perception of nature from just an atmospheric component to a dynamic force within

literary works. This shift laid the ground for other methods, e.g., Material Ecocriticism. This method goes on to investigate how physical objects are involved in generating ecological ideas and cultural experiences.

While many works of Dhruv Bhatt's *The Pilgrims Of Darkness* have highlighted the representation of tribal culture, pilgrimage, regional identity, and environmental concerns in the novel, the field of Material Ecocriticism is relatively under-researched in this novel. Available scholarship has primarily been centered on indigenous cultures, cultural identity, and ecological themes, leaving out the study of how nature, the active role of non-human entities, and the material aspects of nature have been depicted. This lacunae in research can be used as a starting point to study how the novel's nature portrayal goes beyond depicting it as the background and instead presents it as an active element that influences ecological awareness, cultural memory, and spiritual experiences. Precision and smart farming technologies can improve agricultural resource management by enabling more efficient use of water, fertilizers, and other farm inputs.

These approaches also support better monitoring, planning, and decision-making, thereby contributing to improved agricultural productivity and sustainable farming practices (Geetanjali & Singh, 2025).

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This paper therefore takes the Material Ecocritical perspective as a lens to examine the nature in *The Pilgrims Of Darkness* as an active agent. It is an exploration not only of the human communities but also of the material environment. The paper presents these issues through important conceptual tools such as environmental ethics, ecological interconnectedness, material agency as well as non-human agency, storied matter, ecological memory and others. In addition, it looks at whether the depiction of forests, rivers, mountains, wildlife, and tribal landscapes in the works of Dhruv Bhatt helps one understand ecology, and if so, in what way it encourages a more sustainable and ethical human-nature relationship.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MATERIAL ECOCRITICISM

Material Ecocriticism offers a theoretical framework for this study by analysing the interdependent relationship between humans and objects in the material world. It is a branch of Eco-criticism, and through this perspective, it calls into question the anthropocentric worldview, which sees nature as only a stage for human activities. Instead, it acknowledges the nature elements such as a forest, a river, a mountain, a landscape, and an animal as active agents playing important roles in nature's systems; shaping a culture's way of life; and affecting human beings' spiritual, psychological, and aesthetic experiences. The maturation of this discipline has urged academics to re-examine literary-nature linkages through naturalistic entities that influence humankind's thinking process, cultural identity, and ecological awareness. The novel does not play mere backdrop of nature, but the plot is heavily affected by the environment that the tribal communities live in. Besides the characters in the story, Material Ecocritical approach sees nature as one other actor of the story. The novel then shows humans and nature living in unity, where nature not only shapes them but human beings' interaction also modifies nature.

Material agency is a major concept under the umbrella of Material Ecocriticism. It means that material objects can change and be changed by us, not just be tools for our own actions. A lot of Eco-criticism earlier on emphasized the idea that nature should not be seen as a passive background only in the case of literature but also an active character to be taken into account. In fact, forests, rivers, mountains, landscapes as well as wildlife are more than just physical beings from that angle that shape human understanding, cultural activities, and environment relationship. In the novel, the author depicts the natural world as an inseparable part of the life of native inhabitants. Nature is presented here as it accompanies the communities in their daily life, as well as their rituals and spiritual practices. This is not a setting for the humans but rather nature is a character in itself that impacts human events and that depicts the fact that

human communities and surroundings are highly interdependent.

Material Ecocriticism recognises non-human agency and understand that natural entities have a part in ecological, cultural as well as historical developments are vital. Ecocritical scholars point out that nature has its own presence and that meaning is not exclusively human and neither is history. Forests, rivers, mountains, and sacred landscapes can become sites where memories, traditions, and ecology are handed down through human environmental long-term interactions. This is quite evident in the novel where natural landscape is strongly linked with tribal culture, spiritual beliefs, and community identity. The depiction of nature shows one way through which the environment helps in cultural sustenance and human communities' sense of belonging maintenance.

Material Ecocriticism has turned out to be a quite impactful approach in the domain of Environmental Humanities through the means of unveiling new understanding of the relationship between humans and material world. It invites readers to look at literature as a realm where human and non-human elements are perceived as interconnected and affecting each other mutually through their representations. Besides human-centred understanding, this approach brings forth that ecological relationships, environmental ethics, and the natural elements as active factors in human affairs are very important. When this concept is put into use in *The Pilgrims Of Darkness*, shows how ecology is part of the story and how they affect tribal people's beliefs, traditions, and lifestyles. It gives a comprehensive picture of humans and nature, highlighting ecological balance, cultural continuity, and respectful participation with nature.

3. NATURE AS AN ACTIVE AGENT IN THE PILGRIMS OF DARKNESS

In *The Pilgrims Of Darkness*, nature plays an important role in the storytelling and even determines the daily lives, religious beliefs, and other experiences of the tribal people. The elements such as forests, rivers, hills, and also other aspects of nature are described as the essential parts of the characters' spiritual practices, folklore, and way of life. They are not just the surroundings. Such description embodies Eco-criticism, one of the main ideas of which is the interdependence between people and nature. Eco-critics claim that the literary works expose the linkages between the environmental history and the human history as very deep and close to each other. Glotfelty points out that Eco-criticism is a genre of criticism that studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It promotes the exploration of the ways in which nature affects the literary creativity and human experience (xviii). Rueckert points out that literature and ecology are connected through literary works that showcase the interdependence

and cooperation between human culture and the natural world. (1-14).

On the whole, the natural landscape serves the development of the lives of the tribal groups in *The Pilgrims of Darkness*. Environmental spaces are not merely static elements, but they actively partake in the story, influencing at the same time the personal and cultural layers of the tribes. They see nature as something to be worshipped, not exploited. Such a character of the tribal communities as their relationship with nature reflects an ecological criticism of their environment that is inseparable from the people. As Manes says, nature cannot be perceived as a silent, insignificant factor. Instead, it should be seen as a being that is loaded with meanings and at the same time questions human-centred world views (339).

Thus, in *The Pilgrims Of Darkness*, nature does not appear as a silent stage but as a vital force actively participating in the cultural, spiritual, and ecological layers of tribal life. Forests, rivers, hills, and sacred landscapes not only guide characters as to their movements, but also influence their experiences and bring them closer to nature. The depiction of these elements reveals the eco-critical notion, that the environment does matter a lot more than its physical features and has an effect on human being's lives. In this way, Dhruv Bhatt visualizes and presents humanity living in harmony together with the natural world, as in reality both are equally important. By doing so, one can notice that the novel joins the wider eco-critical movement which claims that literature can expose all sorts of relationships between human beings, human society, and nature.

4. MATERIALITY AND HUMAN NATURE RELATIONSHIPS

One of the aspects of nature, which is not very evident, is a source of food, shelter or means of livelihood, is depicted by the author very poetically that it goes far beyond just the functional aspects of life. It is a part of the tribal communities spiritual and cultural identity along with their way of life. The novel shows that the characters relationship with their environment is deeply influences what they do as a community, their values, customs, and knowledge of the surrounding world. Instead of portraying nature as a thing that one can control or destroy for their benefit only, Dhruv Bhatt focus on the type of nature relationship where the human respects, lives in harmony with and depends on one another for survival. This way of thinking is very anti-anthropocentric and also illustrates the eco-critical idea that life of human beings is highly interdependent with life-sustaining ecological systems. White points out humans separation from nature has led to environmental disasters while eco-critical perspectives propose re-examining humans position in the natural world (1203-1207). In a similar vein, Jonah says that human-centered

thinking often results in nature exploitation by prioritizing human needs over ecological needs (15-22).

At another level, the novel emphasizes ecological interdependence by showing the interconnectedness of humans and the environment. Each part of the natural world helps in sustaining the balance of ecology while man's activities either change the environment or, conversely, the environment reacts to them. The most telling example of their relationship that is a constant exchange can be seen when the pilgrims are traversing the landscape the natural features of the earth become entangled with the pilgrims inner, spiritual changes. They come to understand that nature is not just the stage through which the travellers go but, it also participates and enriches their journey by means of which they get to know themselves and their world better. According to Shinde, the natural environment has significantly contributed to pilgrimage traditions. It has a tremendous influence on cultural practices, spiritual experiences, and relationships between human communities and sacred landscapes (343-365).

The core idea of Material Ecocriticism lies in the ongoing mutual interaction of human and non-human entities that lead to their transformation and evolution. *The Pilgrims Of Darkness* uses Material Ecocriticism as a lens to depict nature as a living partner of tribal communities, one who gives them a livelihood by providing forests, rivers and other natural resources; who, in return, the communities protect and respect by living within and not destroying their environment. This reciprocal dependence demonstrates balance in a relationship where nature and humanity exist together as equals without one overpowering the other. It is a viewpoint which concurs with principles of environmental ethics that stress upon understanding worth of nature and keeping at the same time ecological systems in good shape while remaining in a responsible relationship with them. Through the intertwining of all things, it shows nature as a living presence that through constant interaction with human societies supports ecological harmony, cultural continuity and sustainable coexistence.

5. STORIED MATTER AND ECOLOGICAL MEMORY

The idea of storied matter is a key feature of Material Ecocriticism that proposes the material world is alive and can reflect ecological, cultural and historical values that go far beyond human representation. Nature is looked upon as spaces that not only provide beauty but also the physical evidence of the interplay between human beings and the environment. The natural landscape in *The Pilgrims Of Darkness* reveals the history, traditions, and identity of tribal communities. Nature elements are not just shown as the physical parts of the landscape but also as the meaningful elements that preserve the collective memory, religious and spiritual values, ecological knowledge all developed through generations. The

materialization of these landscapes reveals how nature is involved in cultural heritage preservation and the maintenance of the live link between history and now.

The novel further portrays the landscape as a repository of collective memory, where indigenous traditions, spiritual beliefs, and environmental knowledge are sustained through continuous interaction with nature. It describes how sacred places become spaces through which cultural identity is preserved and renewed across generations, thus strengthening the bond between the communities and their environment.

The novel shows just how closely the surroundings of nature and the cultural life of the tribal communities are intertwined. Floral scenes, rivers, and hills capes in fact are considered as permanent factors that keep storing the common memories through generations, carrying out the traditional knowledge and spiritual values at the same time. The story shows how a sense of belonging, cultural continuity, and awareness of ecological issues can all be found in nature. This kind of relationship proves that the ecological spaces are not separated from human history but are very much involved in shaping the lives of people and their culture. The way the relationship between women, the society, and the environment is studied through the lens of ecofeminism is another example which illustrates the fact that landscapes do not only shape a person's identity but they also help form the cultural meanings of a place and life.

6. REPRESENTATION OF NON-HUMAN AGENCY

The novel depicts the non-human world as an active player not only in the story but also in the existence of the tribal communities. Forests, rivers, animals, and even natural features like stones or clouds are shown as meaningful presences that influence human lives in a deeper way, rather than just as passive landscape characteristics. Indigenous people have always kept a bond of respect and living with the nature, understanding that each element of the environment is part of the ecological balance and the cycle of life. This view of the world is one of the central ideas of Material Ecocriticism which questions human-centric interpretations and highlights the importance of non-human entities in both ecological and cultural interactions.

The novel brings the idea that nature, especially its various elements, is very significant to the way the pilgrims travel and to the way they come to the understand the pilgrim's spiritual as well as the cultural experiences, which they get from nature. Nature through its changes of seasons, the appearance of the landscapes, together with various kinds of plants and animals is portrayed as very powerful forces, which are the sources of people's understanding, besides creating a deeper and stronger link between people and their environments. Nature is not only viewed as a physical area for character movement; rather, it is shown that nature actively

engages in shaping the human experience and cultural meanings.

The novel not only use spoken language as means of communicating but ecological messages beyond the spoken language. We see the human, animal, and nature relationship. The tribal communities read the signals and messages of the nature such as forests, rivers, wild animals, wildlife changes, changes in landscapes by observing them and sharing their traditional knowledge and lived experiences. This form of human-nature interaction showcases a coexistence based on respect and mutual dependency instead of a dominating attitude.

7. MATERIAL ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

The Pilgrims Of Darkness offers a powerful ecological perspective of nature as a sentient, meaningful entity that should be respected, cared for, and coexisted with responsibly. Tribal communities depicted in the novel maintain a peaceful coexistence with natural world. Human wellness in their culture is deeply intertwined with the well-being of the natural habitat. The novel does not regard nature as a mere reservoir for human consumption, but rather, values such as stewardship, reciprocity, and an ethical commitment to the environment are the driving themes. This attitude resonates with ecological criticism that believes literature can trigger a human conscience to consider and understand their relationship with the environment by exposing the impact of environmental degradation and the value of environmental awareness.

Natural resources are not recklessly used but sparingly and reverently treated as if these resources will only provide for future generations. These environmental practices are a direct challenge to anthropocentric worldviews that humanize the value of nature. Through his ecological crisis thesis, White maintains that nature-centered human thinking has led to a rift between humankind and nature, which has resulted in many ecological problems (1203-1207). On the other hand, Jonah points out that usually, anthropocentric views lead to the mis-use and damage of nature, and hence, emphasizes a more harmonious partnership between humanity and nature systems is what is needed (15-22).

The Pilgrims Of Darkness brings out the need for developing the ethical relationship between humans and the natural world by acknowledging the existence and importance of non-human beings. Trees, rivers, animals, and landscapes are not shown as mere objects to be used by humans, but they are considered as the most important members of the bigger ecological community.

The ecofeminist view focuses on how all the communities, cultural, and environmental dimensions are interwoven with each other, thereby showing the necessity of taking care of our ecological relationships. Through these depictions Dhruv Bhatt shows a vision of

human beings, cultural heritage and environmental conservation interlocked through the basis of mutual respect and coexistence. Therefore, *The Pilgrims Of Darkness* is an insightful look into environmental ethics within the context of Material Ecocriticism where it puts to the test the anthropocentric worldview and makes the point of the deep interdependences between humans and other living things.

8. DISCUSSION

An Eco-critical study inspired by *The Pilgrims Of Darkness*. Examining nature in the novel through a Material Eco-critical lens reveals that it is depicted as an active force in the narrative rather than just a passive backdrop. The ways in which natural world, and human communities interact with each other and with the narrator illustrate how constantly the world of Nature is able to affect human experiences, thoughts, culture, and spiritual aspects of life. The Material Ecocritical view focuses on human-environmental relations through mutual action and coexistence. It is the kind of view that would undermine anthropocentric approaches, which treat people as the dominant factor in environmental relations.

Eco-criticism, as a field, has pushed the agenda of literary studies to explore human society and the non-human (physical environment) in a comprehensive and critical manner recognizing the significant role of nature in the making of the cultural and ecological meanings.

The novel's use of indigenous ecological knowledge as a theme deepens its environmental aspect by the way it ties cultural identity to the physical environment. Besides this, the depiction of tribal life in *The Pilgrims Of Darkness* addresses the main issues of Material Ecocriticism, that is, ecological memory, and the human, nature interdependence. This way, the portrayal of forests, rivers, mountains, and other landscapes in the story keeps alive the cultural traditions, spiritual beliefs, and ecological knowledge of the people passed down from generation to generation. Certain literary pieces that depict environmental scenes serve to bring out how the environment in real life and the human one are connected. Therefore, the eco-critical understanding supported by such representations shows that through literature, the relationship between these is explored. For example, one can look back at literature on eco-critical studies and find that the depiction of natural spaces and landscapes is a powerful medium that helps uncover human identities, memories, and relationships with the environment through their portrayal.

The themes of ecological balance, environmental responsibility, and the intimacy between human and nature in the novel continue to be very important today in dealing with environmental issues. The novel shows the destructive nature of the human exploitation of the environment through a vision that is based on reverence, coexistence, and awareness of the environment, opposes

such exploitation. White says that disunion between humans and the environment has played a leading role in causing ecological problems, and eco-critic thought aims at getting back that healthy interrelationship between mankind and nature (1203-1207). Through the lens of nature's agency and interdependence, the reader gets prompted to think about ecological responsibilities and to come up with a sustainable vision for human-environment relations. Hence, the book continues to be a major one from an environmental perspective in the field of Eco-criticism.

9. CONCLUSION

The Pilgrims Of Darkness explores the human-nature relationship through the lens of Material Ecocriticism to a very profound extent. In the novel, the author depicts nature elements such as forests, rivers, birds, mountains, etc. as dynamic characters that not only help to remember the culture but also guide the human community in their way of life, spirituality, and ecology. Dhruv Bhatt portrays the natural world not as a passive backdrop for human activities but as an active player whose existence constantly alters and is altered by human beings. This is what the natural world is, in fact: constantly changing and being changed by interaction with its human counterparts.

The research illustrates that the main themes of Material Ecocriticism such as material agency, storied matter, ecological memory, non-human agency, and environmental ethics, are thoroughly intertwined with the structure of the narrative. The mutual relationship between human and non-human characters in the novel not only demonstrates the idea of interdependence, coexistence, and living in a sustainable way but also points to the fact that humanity, by nature, is inseparable from the natural world. By depicting indigenous ecological knowledge and environmental awareness, *The Pilgrims Of Darkness* provides a useful resource for Material Ecocriticism scholarship as it emphasizes the role of the environment in the spiritual, social, and ecological aspects of the human culture.

This novel points to the ecological harmony one can achieve only by acknowledging human being's interdependence with the environment. It urges the readers to see nature not only as something to be taken advantage of by humans but rather a collaborator for keeping alive the culture, natural equilibrium, and environmental awareness. *The Pilgrims Of Darkness* is a major literary example of how Material Ecocriticism deepens our understanding of interplay between nature, literature, and current environmental issues.

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