

## **Human-Tree Affinity and Symbiosis: A Comparative and Ecocritical Analysis of S. R. Harnot's "The Reddening Tree" and Murari Sharma's "Fegra Blossoms"**

**Namrata Pathania**

### **Abstract**

It is widely accepted that man lives in close communion with nature. It is for this reason that every change of mood in nature affects the man's mood too. When nature showers prosperity on man, he rejoices where as natural calamities leave man depressed. In the new age literary theory, eco criticism has found a prominent place in literature, as it examines and explores the link between nature and man. Eco criticism pleads for a better understanding of nature, and it both interprets and represents the natural world. Ecocriticism has profound roots and with itself includes everything related to natural resources. Trees, in particular, have been significant motifs in literature, often occupying center stage. They have been symbols of fertility and growth, life and death and even rebirth. Many literary texts show an intimate connection between a human being and a tree. The objective of the present paper is to explore one such human-tree connection from an eco-critical perspective in two short stories about the hills of Himachal Pradesh written by the very writers of the state- "The Reddening Tree" by S.R. Harnot and "Fegra Blossoms" by Murari Sharma. In both stories, trees are central to the narrative that deeply affect the protagonists' thinking and shape their destinies. The study is limited to exploring the close affinity, interdependence and symbiotic relationship between trees and human beings.

**Keywords:** Affinity; Ecocriticism; Interdependence; Symbiosis; Tree.

That man lives in close communion with nature is a widely accepted fact. It is for this reason that every change of mood in nature affects man's mood too. When nature showers prosperity on man in the form of fertile

fields and abundant harvests, man rejoices. Similarly, natural calamities like storms, earthquakes and tsunamis leave man depressed. In the new age literary theory, ecocriticism has found a prominent place in literature, as it examines and explores the link between nature and man. This link generally forms the ecocritical basis of a text. Ecocriticism pleads for a better understanding of nature as it interprets and represents the natural world. According to Greg Garrard, the eminent professor of environmental humanities, "The widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (5). William Rueckert used the term ecocriticism in the year 1978 in his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." But the definition of ecocriticism is credited to the book, *The Ecocritical Reader* written by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism in terms of literature as follows:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xviii)

The ecocentric reading focuses on the outside, the house and its environs, rather than the inside. It uses the ideas of energy and entropy which is a kind of negative energy within systems which tend towards breakdown and disorganization and that of symbiosis, living together, co-existing, and mutually sustaining systems.

Ecocriticism has profound roots and with itself includes everything related to natural resources for example, earth, sky, water, mountains, trees etc. All such natural or non-human elements are considered to be picturesque portraits in ecocriticism, "Ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity" (Howarth 76-77). Unlike most other theories, ecocriticism rejects the view that everything is socially or linguistically constructed. In this connection, Peter Barry observes:

For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, and not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure with-

in knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. Nature, then, isn't reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice (as we might conceive a deity, for instance, and project it out onto the universe). Theory in general tends to see our external world as socially and linguistically constructed, as 'always already textualized into 'discourse', but ecocriticism calls this longstanding theoretical orthodoxy into question ... (243)

One of the ecocritics, Antony Giddens advocates a more caring attitude towards the environment which can make a human being the steward of nature. This attitude has led to the concept of 'Deep Ecology' as formulated by Arne Naess. Naess suggests shifting the anthropological view to the ecological view. Deep Ecology believes in the fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features. Many of the ecological aspects have been considered by several writers and poets in their literary works:

Beginning from Chaucer, Shakespeare, all romantic poets and from the nineteenth century writer Thomas Hardy to modern era and even in contemporary literary work, the relations with nature and ecology are reflected differently. Some have analyzed it as an external beauty; some have reflected its effect on human life whereas some have become one with them and reflected their ideas, views and emotions in their work. With changing time and broadening of the scope, literary texts too have broadened the perspectives and concern about ecology. (Joshi 31)

Trees, in particular, have been significant motifs in literature often occupying center stage. They have been symbols of fertility and growth, life and death and even rebirth. Many literary texts show an intimate connection between a human being and a tree, "Our relationship with trees is one that has been intimately connected since the dawn of time" (Banuelos). In folklores, trees have often been depicted as homes of spirits, "There are rich literary genres and folklore developed around trees, portraying them sometimes as wicked humans, at other times protectors against the wicked" (Gupta). There is a kind of organic kinship that exists between humans and trees, communicating with and sustaining each other. Ruskin Bond also highlights the bond between human and trees in short stories like "The Cherry Tree", "The Coral Tree", "The Tree Lover", "Vagrants in the Valley" and many more. The 2019 Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, is an eco-fiction examining the relation-

ship between humans and trees. Taking the communion of humans and trees to the highest level, Korean writer Han Kang in her novel, *The Vegetarian*, presents a female protagonist who sees herself as a tree who would require only air, water and sunlight to survive. The non-fiction work by Sumana Roy, *How I became a Tree* expresses a similar idea where the author wishes to become a tree to escape the grim realities of human life. David G. Haskell in his book, *The Song of Trees*, argues that the trees have a language of their own that the humans can learn to hear.

The present research paper seeks to explore and analyse the human-tree connection and affinity from an eco-critical perspective in two short stories about the hills of Himachal Pradesh written by the very writers of the state- "The Reddening Tree" by S.R. Harnot and "Fegra Blossoms" by Murali Sharma. In both stories, trees are central to the narrative and affect the thinking of the protagonists shaping their destinies. Both stories vividly bring about the symbiotic relationship between trees and humans. Symbiosis refers to a closed, prolonged association between two or more organisms of different species that normally benefits both members. In other words, symbiosis is an interaction between the members of a biotic and abiotic community. The eminent botanist, De Bary used the term "symbiosis" in a similar vein. Lynda J. Goff cites Bary's semantic consideration of symbiosis as "De Bary made it clear that his term symbiosis includes all types of associations (interactions) between dissimilarly named organisms" (255). The paper is limited to the following aspects: (a) It examines only two texts as primary sources of investigation (b) It pays special attention to exploring symbiosis between nature and humans and does not cover other aspects of ecocriticism.

"The Reddening Tree" is a story translated from its original Hindi version named "*Laal Hota Drakht*" written by the acclaimed writer from Shimla Hills, S. R. Harnot. Born on 22 January 1955, Harnot has been active on the literary landscape since two and a half decades. He has to his credit twelve collections of short stories, *Akashbel* (1987), *Panja* (1987), *Peeth Par Pahaad* (1992), *Darosh Katha* (2001), *Mafia* (2004), *Mitti Ke Log* (2010), *Jeenkathi* (2008), *Adhar Chayan* (2012), *Litton Block Gir Raha Hai* (2014) *DasPratinidhiKahaniyan* (2017), *Nadi Gayab Hai* (2017), *Kilen* (2019) and two novels, *Hidimb* (2004) and *Nadi-Rang Ladki* (2022). Besides, he has also authored books on the culture of Himachal Pradesh. The language of his expression is Hindi and most of his works have been translated into English, Gujarati, Punjabi, Marathi and Kannada. The story under study, "The Reddening Tree" was first published as "*Laal Hota Drakht*" in the collection, *Akashbel* in 1987. It was later modified by Harnot and was included in the collection

of short stories, *Darosh Katha* in 2001 and was thereafter translated into English by Dr Meenakshi F. Paul. Harnot has proved to be a notable writer. In the words of Khem Raj Sharma, "S.R. Harnot is an eminent Indian writer occupying a coveted place in contemporary Hindi short story writing. His stories derive life from the majestic mountains, cascading rivers, and simple folk of the Himalayan region.... He creates a world where the timeless encounters the exigent..." (1).

"The Reddening Tree" depicts the tale of a young girl of twelve or thirteen, Munni, and her Amma and Bapu. In the story, Harnot particularly showcases Munni's unique bond with the *peepal* tree, "While the mountains, forests, water, land, flora and fauna of the Himalayas are present as melodic resonances in them, his stories bring focus to issues of women, caste, class, nature, ecology, democracy and development as central concerns" (1). In fact, *peepal* is a very significant tree in the socio-cultural rubric of the hills of Himachal Pradesh. It is not only regarded the most sacred among all the trees but also as God because according to the religious belief of the Hindus, as put forth by Deepika Sharma, "...all the Hindu gods and goddess reside in *peepal* tree.... It has got mythological, religious and medicinal importance in Indian culture since times immemorial" (623). According to Asmita Bhusal's article, *peepal* tree also occupies a great ecological significance as it, "... provides ample oxygen, purifies the surrounding, kills harmful bacteria, controls soil erosion, improves soil structure and its fertility, it is also dust and sound absorbent. It is believed that the *peepal*-tree releases oxygen during night also due to a special photosynthesis process called Crassulacean Acid Metabolism (CAM)" (Bhusal).

*Peepal* that is regarded as God by Munni's orthodox Brahmin parents and worshipped devotedly, "... according to many Hindu scriptures, roots of the tree represent Brahma, trunk is Vishnu, Shiva the leaves and fruits are all other deities... water is offered to *Peepal* Tree believing Vishnu along with Laxmi resides on this tree" (Bhusal), is regarded by Munni with the same reverence in the beginning of the story, "Her first pursuit in the morning is to offer water to *Peepal* bhagwan" (Harnot 65). The God becomes an adversary when she realizes that it is adding to the misery of her parents on account of the huge expenditure they would have to incur to marry the *peepal*, much in the same manner as her marriage in due course of time. She feels, "She was inauspicious and so was the *peepal* she had watered and cared for everyday. She wanted to cut it down from its roots...to remove the cause of her parents' misery...for when the reed itself was broken the flute could not be played" (72). The adversary gradually transforms into a constant and faithful companion with whom Munni

can share all her worries and anxieties. *Peepal* is no longer a tree for her but a living persona with whom she shares a rare camaraderie, "She walked out of the yard and crossed the fields and footpaths to reach the peepal.... The rays...sat on the leaves of the peepal, and filled them with grace and loveliness...she felt the peepal smiling back at her" (73). She perceives a yearning and desire to possess and be possessed by the *peepal*. The companion thus, transmutes into a lover, "As Munni gazed at the peepal she felt its sweet charm spreading through her very being. She looked at the peepal with great desire....She was attracted to its glorious appearance" (73). *Peepal* seems to be reciprocating Munni's affection strengthening the bond of love further, "The rustling leaves made a sweet sound....The tenderness of the glowing red colour and the soft music were giving birth to an incredible joy within her....She had begun to like the peepal even more than before" (73). The growing admiration for the *peepal* ushers Munni to spend hours in its company, "These days Munni did not even wait for sunrise. As soon as she awakened she took water and left the house. But she did not return quickly as before. She sat for a long time with the peepal. She gazed at it and caressed its leaves. She touched its body and tried to embrace it" (74).

Her growing love for the *peepal* coupled with her acute sense of responsibility towards her parents impels Munni to take the bold decision of marrying it. A similar kind of a story is brought to light by Sumana Roy in her seminal non-fiction text, *How I became a Tree*, "In a Naga folk tale, a young princess grows up as a friend to a peepul tree until she falls in love with it. When her father organizes a *swayamvar* for her to choose a husband from princes from neighbouring kingdom, she refuses" (115). In a similar fashion, Munni too decides against marrying the boy chosen by her parents and chooses *peepal* tree instead to be her groom. In fact, there have been instances of such marriages in society as well, "There is the real life story of Emma MacCabe who wants to marry a tree she loves....The Peruvian actor Richard Torres married a tree in Buenos Aires.... And young girls from Nepal continue to be married to wood apple trees" (Roy 109-110).

Munni believes that marrying the *peepal* is the best solution to rid her father of the burden of marrying her off to someone else. According to her, it is the sole way to stop her parents from mortgaging their only piece of land left and the consequent penury. She eventually becomes one with the *peepal* performing the marriage rites as per her knowledge and convenience:

Munni came softly towards the peepal.... She removed the box

of sindoor from the bundle of clothes and pulled a branch of the peepal towards her. She emptied the sindoor box on to a leaf and pulling it towards her she filled her parting with the sindoor. It seemed to her that the stem and leaf were the hands of her tree... her peepal... that it had married her....It was her faith....Munni offered water to the peepal with love. Then she put aside the lota and touched her forehead to the trunk of the peepal with reverence...the first greeting of a bride....Her eyes welled up as she bowed her forehead to her husband.(Harnot75)

Munni's resolution to stay forever as a tree bride may be regarded as an act of complete surrender and service towards the tree. *Peepal* tree that "represents the entire cosmos" ("Significance of Peepal"), becomes the cosmos of Munni's destiny.

"Fegra Blossoms" is another short story that talks about the human-tree relationship and interdependence. It has also been translated by Meenakshi F. Paul from the Hindi story, "*Fegreke Phul*" written by Murari Sharma, a writer from Mandi valley. Born on 26 January 1964, Sharma has written extensively on the folk culture and prominent social issues of Himachal Pradesh. He has authored four collections of short stories, *Banmuth* (2010), *Pathar Pighalte Nahin* (2015), *Pahad Par Dhoop* (2015), *Dhol Ki Thap* (2020) and one novel, *Debku-Ek Prem Katha* (2023). *Banmuth* has won him much acclaim and repute. "*Fegreke Phul*" has been regarded as one of the best stories from this collection and narrates the life of a young boy, Chunnu and his grandmother. Meenakshi F. Paul writes; "Fegra Blossoms" is crafted like a folk tale and intermingles simple rural life with folk beliefs and fantasy. It narrates the dreams of a young boy about a world which is idyllic and ideal. The innocence of the child interrogates the adult world of conflict, greed, deceit and environmental irresponsibility" (44).

Chunnu, like Munni, develops a unique bond with the *fegra* tree. *Fegra* tree is another significant tree found in the mountains of Himachal, "*Ficus palmate*...commonly known as 'Fegra Fig'...is found to be growing wild in the Himalayan region" (Joshi 374). Though this tree does not have much religious significance like the *peepal*, it is regarded as a miraculous tree fighting various chronic diseases including cancer, "...*Ficus palmate* has a wide therapeutic potentiality against various diseases or disorders" (377). It also has the capacity to restore biodiversity of nature, as stated by Molly Melvin in her research article:

The fig presents a profound message on the vital coexistence be-

tween living beings and, within this, a lesson for how we can address some of the environmental challenges we face. If we can harness the resilience, adaptability and natural magnetism of the fig, the plant can help us repair lost forests, protect biodiversity and curb the Earth's fast-changing climate. (Melvin)

Chunnu gets associated with the tree to ameliorate the disorders and disharmony prevalent within his family. He is in search of an ideal world full of fresh hope and vitality, "The soft shoots of the *fegra* tree at the boundary of the field gave a feeling of freshness" (Sharma 52). He longs to find the flowers of the tree, the *fegra* blossoms that would rid him of his poverty and all related problems, "Ever since his dadi had told him the story of that magical blossom, Chunnu has known no peace.... Once he finds the *fegra* blossoms, what a great time it will be! He will get anything in the world just sitting at home" (52). He had been apprised by his grandmother that *fegra* blossoms could not be sighted by the ordinary people but only by the chosen few whom God wanted to bless on his accord, "The grandmother's tale, which is based on the belief that a person who catches sight of the fig blossom is exceptionally fortunate, opens the possibility of a fairy tale world for Chunnu" (Paul 44). Chunnu believed himself to be that blessed soul. The idea of being blessed had been instilled in him right from his birth by virtue of gender, being the only male child among his siblings, "Born after four girls one after the other, you, my betua, are the answer to our prayers" (Sharma 54).

The belief that he would eventually sight the magical blossoms that would bring joy to his house, "... if someone finds the *fegra* blossom, their house will always be prosperous, their grain basket will never be empty, and all their desires will be fulfilled" (53), leads to his searching for them day and night. He goes near the *fegra* tree time and again in the hope of sighting the rare, potent blossoms, the blossoms that would bring "peace and happiness" (53) to him. But he can sight none and so is anxious and depressed. He is surrounded by self-doubt whether he is fortunate enough or not, "And I am also fortunate, am I not dadi?" (54). His grandmother reassures him that it is not the right month to sight any kind of blossoms, "It's autumn. From where will the blossoms come?" (53), and advise him to wait for the spring season. Chunnu starts awaiting the new season, with new hope and energy, "When the burans and kachnar bloom, when the kujja is fragrant, then the *fegra* will also sprout anew" (54). Nevertheless, Chunnu does go near the tree everyday on some pretext or another, just to make sure of the well-being of the tree. The *fegra* tree thus becomes the cynosure of his existence. In his innocence, his world consists of only he and the



tree, the tree and him and all his dreams are woven around it:

He had already begun to weave dreams. His dreams were small and innocent, just like him. First of all, he would buy brand new clothes and shoes for himself...Once he finds the *fegra* blossom, all his poverty would vanish. First, he would place it in the grain basket so there will never be shortage of food in their home.... After that, he will put the flower in the money box...there will be no dearth of money in their home. (54-55)

Upon arrival of the spring season, Chunnu looks high and low for the *fegra* blossoms but without much success. The blossoms keep escaping his vision but Chunnu does not give up and is hell-bent on finding one. He concludes that he does not just have to befriend the *fegra* tree in his own field but all others in his village to get hold of the fortune forming flower, "If not on this tree, then on another...the flower will be found...he just has to continue his quest. There are so many trees near the fields, by the streams, and on the hillside...the miracle flower must have blossomed somewhere" (55). Chunnu is afraid of venturing out alone in search of the flowers and so includes his friend Dhannu in this rare enterprise. The endless search continues and though Chunnu does not come across the blossoms but for in his vivid dream, he nonetheless develops a close proximity with the *fegra* tree in particular and nature in general. The blossoms become the metaphor for numerous miracles that lay buried in the heart of trees that are a source of perpetual joy and good luck. As echoed by D.H. Lawrence in his poem, "Figs", "The Fig is a very secretive fruit. As you see it standing growing, you feel at once it is symbolic....There was a flower that flowered inward, womb-ward; Now there is a fruit like a ripe womb. It was always a secret" ("D.H. Lawrence: Some Poems"), there is no denying the fact that though the *fegra* blossoms are never visible because of being inverted and so bloom inside the pod itself, it is actually the fruit of the tree that is miraculous containing rare nutrients and anti-oxidants. It is imperative that Chunnu will benefit from his close association with the *fegra* tree and throw out all toxins from his life.

Both stories clearly bring out the affinity, interdependence and symbiotic relationship between nature and human beings. In the words of Madhukar Sharma, "Well-being of both biotic (including humans) and abiotic communities depends upon the reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between nature and culture" (55). The protagonists are young children/adolescents who look up to the trees as their saviors from distress and poverty. Though Chunnu is searching for something which he will never

get hold of except for in his fantasies or dreams, Munni is looking for a reason and reassurance for staying forever in her parents' home with their acceptance of her status as a tree bride. Both are yet similar in seeking solace from their respective trees and in return offer to look after their trees, protect them and serve them all their life. As stated by Hem Raj Bansal in his research article, "...when human beings begin to love nature and its creatures, the latter too reciprocate the same with more intensity" (21). In the process, they strive towards saving nature and maintaining the ecological balance.

### Works Cited:

- Bansal, HemRaj. "'Look Back in Wonder' - What a World It Was: An Ecocritical Study of Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*." *LangLit*, vol. 8, no. 2, Nov. 2021, pp. 15-21.
- Banuelos, Karina. "We Are Connected: 7 Stories that Highlight Our Intrinsic Relationship to Trees and the Earth." *Panchamama*, 15 Apr. 2016, <https://blog.panchamama.org>. Accessed 26 June 2023.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Viva Publication, 2010.
- Bhusal, Asmita. "Peepal Tree: Religious and Ecological Importance." *Tunza Eco-generation*, <https://tunza.eco-generation.org/worldReportView.jsp?viewID=50608>. Accessed 10 Mar. 2023.
- "D.H. Lawrence: Some Poems." *Literature Cambridge*, 6 Dec. 2019, <https://www.literaturecambridge.co.uk>. Accessed 20 June 2023.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2007.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Goff, J. Lynda. "Symbiosis and Parasitism: Another Viewpoint." *BioScience*, vol. 32, no. 4, Apr. 1982, pp. 255-56.
- Gupta, Monobina. "Our Intimate Connection to Trees Isn't Just About Clean Air." *The Wire*, 1 July 2018, <https://thewire.in>. Accessed 10 June 2023.

- Harnot, S.R. "The Reddening Tree." Translated by Meenakshi F. Paul. *Life Unfolded*, edited by V.K. Khanna and Meenakshi F. Paul, Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Howarth, William. "Some Principles of Ecocriticism." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 69-91.
- Joshi, Manasi Ashishkumar. *An Ecocritical Analysis: Selected Fictions of Dhruv Bhatt and Margaret Atwood*. 2021. Gujarat Technological University, Ph.D. dissertation, <https://s3-ap-southeast-1.amazonaws.com>. Accessed 3 Apr. 2023.
- Joshi, Yogesh, et al. "A Review on Ficus Palmate (Wild Himalayan Fig)." *The Journal of Phytopharmacology*, vol. 3, no. 5, 2014, pp. 374-77.
- Melvin, Molly. "How Fig Trees Restore Forests and Biodiversity?" *Food Unfolded*, <https://www.foodunfolded.com/article/how-fig-trees-restore-forests-and-biodiversity>. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.
- Paul, Meenakshi F. *Leaves in the Sky*. Primus Books, 2020.
- Roy, Sumana. *How I Became a Tree*. Aleph Book Company, 2017.
- Sharma, Deepika, et al. "A Review on Pharmacological Activities and Therapeutic Potentials of Ficus Religiosa (Pipal)." *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 623-26.
- Sharma, Khem Raj, and Meenakshi F. Paul, translators. *Cats Talk*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.
- Sharma, Murari. "Fegra Blossoms." Translated by Meenakshi F. Paul. *Leaves in the Sky*, edited by Meenakshi F. Paul, Primus Books, 2020.
- Sharma, Madhukar. "Symbiosis between Nature and Culture in Callenbach's *Ecotopia* and Krakauer's *Into the Wild*." 2018, <https://e-library.tucl.edu.np/handle/123456789/2931>. Accessed 10 Apr. 2023.
- "Significance of Peepal Tree: Why is it Special and Sacred?" *Vedicology India*, <https://vedicologyindia.com>. Accessed 3 Apr. 2023.