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**EMPATHY AND AFFECTION: TIM WINTON'S FICTION AND NATURE**

**Dr. Deepti Tiwari**

*Assistant Professor*

*Regional Institute of Education, NCERT,*

*Ajmer, RS, India*

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**Abstract:**

*This paper attempts to analyse the depiction of Australian landscape and its influence upon people. Drawing largely from his personal experience, Winton weaves stories around simple Australian lifestyle and creates characters that understand and maintain a close communion with their surroundings. Nature has been an influence and a source of inspiration for Winton, his beliefs and experiences have nurtured him as a writer and as an individual. This paper attempts to understand how the characters derive their strength from nature and highlights human capacity to relate with its surrounding. Each story defines the simple lives that survive its ordinariness with an extraordinary power of nature. The nature and its power influences people in various ways and patterns, it can be scary or horrifying or a companion or a muse. There had been many attempts to comprehend the power and magnificence of nature, yet art in any form can only replicate but it is the human soul that can feel and relate to the forest, river, oceans and animals. These fictions bring up characters who understand the silence of night and look of the sky or the embracing expanse of the landscape. This does several things in our life but we cannot achieve them.*

**Keywords:** *Nature, Power, Faith, Environmental Awareness, Introspection, etc.*

*“An understanding of the natural world and what's in it is a source of not only a great curiosity, but great fulfillment.” - David Atten Bourgh*

Nature is the foundation and source of existence on earth; it has bred, nurtured and consumed lives in the time scale of various events. The entire human and non-human life, its evolutions and growth, are rendered by the kindred spirit of Nature. It can be defined as a zone of material, physical and biological interactions of existence, where life and lifestyles are born and nurtured. The diversity and magnificence of nature imparts an omnipotent and incomprehensible power upon humans that eventually becomes a source of creative energy for writers and artists. Scott Slovic in his essay, *Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology: The Interiority of Outdoor Experience* writes:

The idea of nature as distinct from man gives the cranky author more than mere refuge from the annoyances and trivialities of the human world. This understanding, which comes from constant and thorough observation of natural phenomena, helps Thoreau both to enlarge his minute self by anchoring it in nature and, conversely, to become more deeply conscious of his human boundaries (Slovic, 354).

The concept of nature is an escape and inspiration for writers who detach from the material world to reconnect their self with the surroundings. “Nonhuman stories are always embedded in the folds and fissures of the world, demanding recognition” (Opperman, 265). These encoded stories were expressed in myriad ways across literature; it depicted spiritual and supernatural essence in the writings of the Romantic Era, acted as a designer and director of the destiny for Victorian writers and



the expressed grim realities of Eliot's post war times. The nature-human dynamics defines the historical, psychological and social aspects of individual and collective existence on earth.

More than anything, what unites the environmental humanities is a sense of shared and open endeavour addressed towards the remediation of environmental harm, and a powerful conviction that scholarship in the field must revisit its foundational assumptions and engage with a broad constituency (Foote & Cohen, 2).

The discourse patterns and urgency of Environmental Humanities have expanded, giving the present scenario of extreme weather, ignorant human actions and prejudiced progressive outlook towards future prospects. Ecological studies have redefined the ways in which nature-human studies should be addressed, highlighting its role in classic and contemporary works alike. Christopher Manes in his essay 'Nature and Silence' elaborates, "Attending to ecological knowledge means metaphorically relearning "the language of birds"- the passions, pains, and cryptic intents of the other biological communities that surround us and silently interpenetrate our existence" (Manes, 25). It is vital to understand that nature and non-humans often influence or direct human actions and thoughts affecting all our exchanges with and within life. The emerging academic discourse has revived the value of empathetic concern towards nature, stressing upon the importance to reinstate the cordial existence in the ecosystem.

No other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. For these changes are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of non-human interlocuters (Ghosh, 40).

Nature's value and participation in everyday human life is essential, but in the last few decades, this value has been reduced to commercial benefits and nature is treated as a mere resource that is exploited to provide leisure and comfort. Human capacity to manipulate and dictate has brought jeopardy for the entire planet, disrupting the natural living patterns. As the entire mankind regains its consciousness to a disturbing natural health, this situation becomes incomprehensible and strange. In order to initiate profound changes in patterns of thinking, approach and lifestyles, a political and administrative approach can be decisive and frequent, yet it runs the risk of being resisted and rejected outrageously for its implementation and shortage of resource plans; as a result, nature conservation can get entangled in political and economic power play. On the other hand, Literature can become a harbinger of nature consciousness, instigating changes across the world in a more profound and Global manner, inspiring cumulative changes in lifestyles, attitudes and perspectives. Amitav Ghosh in his latest book, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crises* exemplifies, "It is empathy that makes it possible for humans to understand each other's stories: this is why storytelling needs to be at the core of a global politics of vitality." (Ghosh, 240) Stories have a deeper and profound impact upon human psyche, as they make the unfamiliar familiar, highlighting the ongoing struggles and crises of our times. Ecological awareness can be effectively raised through literature because it affects the cognitive and behavioural approaches of a reader through story, characters, setting and language, imprinting the nature's deterioration upon human conscious and subconscious mind.

The environmental disasters have been ever increasing in its frequency and impact eradicating the idea of a silent nature. Some intellectuals term it as a phenomenon of nature, while the others



credit human actions for the same. Whatever be the reason, the cause and effect lie with humans who have prided on their capacity to control and manipulate the ecosystem. In such a scenario, dreading or accusing nature or commercialising the nature preservation tactics will be lop-sided, harmful and disastrous in the long run. It is important that an empathetic understanding for nature is harboured in the cultural system across the world, and this can be achieved by reviving the ancient cultural practices of respecting and participating in nature-human communion. It is important to bridge this gap and reunite in the matrix of existence.

Many regions on the globe still thrive with natural bounty and are teaching a lesson of nature's power and human adaptability in the war of science and nature. The Australian continent, specifically the west Australian tract boasts of expansive landscape and sea, rearing a sense of fear, awe and pride among its inhabitants. Tim Winton, a west Australian writer speaks of these experiences and weaves stories of nature-human connect against the backdrop of his homeland. As West Australia struggles against the economic and political forces of exploitation, Writers like Winton unravel the pure power of the place and its impact in healing a troubled human mind. In his novel *That Eye, The Sky*, he narrates the story of Ort who survives and endures the crisis of his life with a deep faith in nature. Ort's family is faced with an unprecedented crisis, his father the only bread-earner in the family suffers a severe injury in an accident and is bed-ridden, his sister Tegwyn is an outrageous teenager who is indifferent and his ailing grandma is old and lives secluded while Ort and his mother suffer an emotional, psychological and financial loss and gather every inch of strength to survive. The child believes in the Sky as an overlooking power that listens and witnesses all his troubles. A walk in the forest, a rivulet, stars and sky are Ort's companions. In this domestic tale of the Australian culture and landscape, Winton elaborates a parallel downfall for nature and Ort's personal and all they have is to hold onto each other. The slow and steady environmental damage is simultaneous to the declining and later, a stagnant life of Ort and his family "The forest moves quiet tonight. Jarrahs move a long way up and out of sight. Now and then I hear little animal noises. All these trees are dying, and all these little animals will have nowhere to live. One day the whole world will die and we'll die too" (Winton, 43). The protagonist fears the death of father and the death of his surroundings. Winton reflects on these crises that are lurking in one's backyard, nearby seashore or in the far-off landscape. The ecological crises are happening as obvious as the domestic turmoil in human life, and we are losing our only home and solace. The environmental catastrophe is hitting humanity from all corners either as cacophony of storms and earthquakes or the silent erasing of trees and animals. In the novels, a cinematic understanding of human life and its turmoil is depicted, and as the reader understands and relates to these individuals and their emotional trauma, Winton holds us to witness the nature around, the disruptive land, scorching heat, shrinking waterfalls and atrocious animal killing. "The planet will never come alive for you unless your songs and stories give life to all the beings, seen and unseen, that inhabit a living Earth- Gaia" (Ghosh, 84). The changes around us can be comprehended only when we become a part of that which is affected, i.e., Nature. When human intellect and soul becomes a part of the ecosystem, every loss shall feel personal, awakening them from their technological stupor. For Ort, nature is a companion, the omnipresent and omnipotent power and his experience of nature comes close to what Winton himself felt and believed. In his memoir *The Boy Behind the Curtain*, he writes, "Like the twelve – year - old mystic Ort Flack in my early novel *That Eye the Sky*, I felt from infancy that I belonged and known to more than just the people about me. Even in solitude Ort feels accompanied, as if observed and sustained by something larger, I, too, felt a benign force in the natural world; I saw it in the higher instincts of people" (Winton, 113).

Winton felt the benign power and influence of the nature around him and believed in its power tranquilise human anxieties. Unlike the other characters in the novel, Ort represents the faith in the companionship, the inexplicable power of the sky and the silent voices of the night. It's a test of his



faith against the cruelty of life. Setting up a story with real characters and life situations, Winton reveals the power of innocent faith that can strive through the struggles of life. In a story of struggle and survival, Winton manages to reveal the Ort's queries about God, his belief in nature and his observation of slow deterioration around him. "Sam always says everyone who eats vegetables should grow their own at least once, and everyone who eats meat should kill it at least once, so they know what it means to be responsible. And so, they remember who and what they are and why they keep living" (Winton, 82). The characters emphasize on the value of responsibilities for one's actions, these families are local inhabitants of the land and they recognize the brewing up natural disasters that will leave an eternal devastation. Every piece of land deserves to be set free from commercial and economic motives and treated more as a part and parcel of the entire existence. This responsible attitude generates relatability with nature and non-humans, making their loss as one's own.

Natural surroundings not only sustained civilisations but they also framed the culture and beliefs of its inhabitants. Depending upon the natural scenario, an individual can be influenced by nature in variety of ways; he/she can either adore it or dread it. Just as Ort in *That Eye, The Sky* finds nature as a source of optimism, similarly, for Georgie and Luther Fox in the novel *Dirt Music*, nature acts as a solace and place of introspection. Georgie is a rebel who marries Jim Bukeridge and settles in a community and place where she is treated as an outsider; on the other hand, Luther Fox is broken and lonely, bereft of any familial affections. Fox's escapade in the wild lands of Coronation Gulf is a way to trespass his past and the painful death of his family; while Georgie's search for him is a way to defy the society that has ousted her. Winton's *Dirt Music* is story of love that survives and strives against the past and present complexities. For Georgie, water has a soothing effect; often she finds swimming in the ocean as a way to trespass the ignorance and dejection in her personal life. The wild country offers a comfort and relief from the hustle of modern lifestyle paving way to connect with one's self. Luther Fox is not highly literate but he understands and feels the language of the surroundings just like Ort. "God, the things he wanted to tell her. Fox doesn't know what you are supposed to make of Wordsworth and Blake, how you might speak of them if you'd been taught by experts, but he knows he would have tried to explain this sense of the world alive, the way they articulate your own instinctive feeling that there is indeed some kind of spirit that rolls through all things, some fearsome memory in stones, in wind, in the lives of birds" (Winton, 370).

The mysterious power in nature may have various names and traditions attributed to it, yet its sole purpose is to make existence meaningful. It's a metaphor in the divine language serving human purpose generously. Winton's characters are rebels who strive to earn their individuality. In their attempt to balance life, they often find the power of land and sea dominating; it is a part of their personality that defines them. The elements of nature represent freedom and solitude of their soul that connects their self to the bigger power of nature. The omnipresent power of forest, sky or the ocean forwards their introspection turning their wrath and worries into wisdom.

Scott Slovic in his essay, *Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology: The Interiority of Outdoor Experience*, writes, "In other words, the very mysteriousness of nature contributes to the independence and, presumably, the self-awareness of the observer" (Slovic, 353). The natural landscape, the island and the wild forest in all-encompassing and all embracing. In his memoir, Winton correlates with a similar experience that taught the wisdom and power of the land and sea. Shivani Jha while analysing Thoreau's idea of Nature wrote, "He concluded that when the surroundings are simple as the pristine nature, people can discover their true selves and progress towards a simple, healthy, and economical life" (Winton, 27). The wide landscape of the gulf and expansive Timor Sea is the doorway for Fox and Georgie to revisit the tainted and painful past; it's a healing process which reminds them of their vulnerability and fragility. Metaphorically, these elements of nature are personifications of companionship.



These novels are representative of human life and its belief in the power of nature, the perspectives and situation that the characters face are different yet the aim and observation is similar. Tim Winton draws these stories from his personal life experiences, he has always enjoyed the company of the ocean and the land and his writings emanate from the everyday experiences and observations. He represents the impact of natural world on us. Humans are entangled in their own trauma and troubles, without realising that our very frustration can find solace in the surroundings. In the recent times, our cocooned shelters have minimised our communion with nature, and the younger generation understands the landscapes on screen than in the wide-open space, they prefer ACs than breeze. These changes are not altogether to be despised, they are valuable inventions of human mind, but no Siri or Alexa, or AC or Packed food can compensate for the relief found in real conversations, wild and free air, or home cooked food.

Winton in his memoir *Land's Edge* wrote, "The sea is a field of miracles, a profusion of depths and mysterious" (Winton, 21). It is the mysterious yet the amiable power of nature that embraces human spirit and calms its anxieties. He presents the stories that inspire and rejuvenates faith in the healing power of nature, it's a reminder to revisit and find one's companion in nature.

In *Dirt Music*, where Luther Fox escapes the wrath of White Point's fishing community, he travels to the upper stretches of the continent, witnessing the barren landscape, scorching heat and growing urbanisation. As Ort floats in two realms of deforested land and overlooking Sky, similarly Fox journeys through the warped lands and secluded forests. Both stories have a family struggle and love affair as the centre of its narrative, yet they revolve and evolve around the place of its existence.

The natural catastrophe should be treated as reminders of human actions and indifference. They not only cause loss of livelihood and material comforts, but they uproot the human existence from its space. The loss of nature is a loss of meaning of life and our existence, nature is an extension of human self that cordially exists with every creature and living being; if this dynamic is destroyed at the hands of humans, it clearly demarcates the wide gap in nature-human relation and void in human life. The ocean, sea, forest and non-humans defines us, they uphold our value as humans, in their absence, human ethics and values will compete within itself, killing and destroying each other. Thus, it is imperative to generate a genuine consciousness for the environment- for its value and rights, and literature is an effective medium is developing a conscience-oriented approach for nature-human friendship.

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