



An Eco-Critical Study of Vikram Seth's *Arion and the Dolphin*

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Abstract

Arion and the Dolphin is a libretto written by Vikram Seth for the opera, with music composed by Alec Roth. It was commissioned by the Baylis programme at the English National Opera. The Greek myth of Arion and the sea horse has been well adapted in this text for stage performance. The text contains several points that make it an exemplary eco-critical text, announcing the interrelationship between man and nature. The relationship between Arion and the Dolphin is a one to one representation of man's relationship with nature, however turbulent and tragic.

Keywords: Eco-Criticism, Ecology, Biodiversity, Biocentrism, Nature, Arion, Sea, Libretto

Arion and the Dolphin contains all the qualities that have been recommended for representing an eco-critical text, well mounting the Deep Ecology principles formulated by Arne Naess (Norwegian) and George Sessions (American) (qtd. in Tosic 46). Buell identifies how Fletcher's environment-poetic recognizes more explicitly how the social landscape figures as a part of total landscape (51). According to Fletcher's theory of the environment poem, Buell explains that the poem itself is to be taken as a world. Buell points out: "Fletcher posits, over-anxiously perhaps, an anthropocentric imperative... with two notable stipulations....First, 'the poetry will express the mere existence of those creatures who belong or do not belong'; and second, it 'will show how this belonging occurs... the least creatures among the flora and fauna...' (50). The long poem celebrates the coexistence of man and nature in its initial stages, when Arion is surrounded by aquatic creatures after they have rescued him from being drowned by his enemies. It is the ideal state of man and nature being one entity. The tragic end of the poem with the death of the dolphin also presents an eco-critical view in that the separation of man from his identity with nature as represented by the separation of Arion from the dolphin due to his imprisonment and also the utter incapacity of the people of Corinth to form any bond with the dolphin show the need of the hour that man has to be one with nature in order for peace, happiness, harmony and balance in the world as a whole to prevail.

Existence and Co-Existence

Man can survive in the habitat of animals, but animals cannot survive in man's habitat. Man has created a huge fence around himself by his artificial way of living so that animals have to stay away from him to survive. In all religions, the people who are shown to be at peace are shown to be at harmony with nature. For instance, the Bible presents Adam naming the animals as they come to him (Gen. 2:19). Mystics are shown to be able to converse with animals. The dolphin saves Arion's life from fellow human beings when he is forced to jump in to the sea, as they want the gold that he won for his singing in Sicily. The dolphins sustain him, keeping him

from drowning, in fact they go so far as to entertain him with a masque. But when the dolphin accompanies him to Corinth, it does not get from humans the warm welcome the dolphins had given to Arion. In fact, Arion himself is put in prison as he does not have the prize money to prove his winning in Sicily. In addition, when Periander commands it to speak, it does not. This puts them in more trouble as Periander thinks that Arion is lying. It seems as though the dolphin has lost its “voice” in the human habitat. Soon after, it loses its life, pining away for Arion and refusing to eat as it has been separated from him, by Periander’s harsh whims. Man’s habitat is detrimental to its existence in every possible way. While animals are able to co-exist and share their habitat with man, man is unable to sustain animals in his habitat. In addition, he continues to impinge on animal habitats in every way he can. As Tosic avers, man’s mobility is a reason for his lack of roots, but other creatures cannot well adapt to change in habitat (48). When the rate of depletion is greater than the rate of restoration, extinction occurs. Hence, “Recovering the ideal state of balance in nature becomes impossible unless man suspends all his needs to compromise with nature’s need. Man needs to stop ignoring the deterioration of nature and address it as an immediate concern.” (Tosic 17). Tosic avers, “This might be the solution- only by global participation in everything that exists, can man prevent his own extinction” (48).

Biocentrism

Man needs to identify himself as one of the many elements in nature and not as the head of nature. Anthropocentrism needs to be replaced with biocentrism. – mutual interdependence of life. Before every sea voyage, Arion addresses the sea to bless his journey. The first is when Arion leaves Corinth and sets sail. He asks the stars to guide him to fame, that he may never fade or die, just like the stars that are forever. When he leaves Sicily after winning the competition, he sings to the sea thus in scene 4:

Dark restless sea,

Black, green, grey, blue, Over whose waves I flew To sing in Sicily,

Accept my weight once more As gently as before.

Bear me to Corinth shore

Alive, and safe, and free. (83-90)

It is essential for man to recognise his dependence on nature.

Ecology is the science that studies the relationships between living organisms (biotic component) and their physical environment (abiotic component). In other words, ecology is concerned with the living organisms in their natural environment. Although it is not explicitly stated here, ecology is anthropocentric whereas deep ecology originating from the endeavour to promote life as such is biocentric and stresses the fact that man is only one part in a huge and complex life net in nature in which everything has a certain value. That is why man has to realize that he is not allowed and entitled to reduce the richness and variety of the living world except for the satisfaction of his basic needs. (Tosic 45)

In the dolphin masque, all the sea creatures join the dolphins in the performance just to entertain the one man Arion, being grateful to him for his songs. The dolphin masque presents the life and abilities of the dolphins.

The other sea-creatures also appear and act their parts in the masque: fronds, anemones, sharks, globefish, abalone, corals, conches, herring, salmon, sea-horses, electric eels, plankton, whales – perhaps a friendly jellyfish, who likes touching other beasts and can't understand why he's shunned.

The dolphins perform a joyful dance for Arion. (45)

The entire text is biocentric, mourning the loss of the dolphin that loved the human Arion. Not only does it present the dolphin world, but it also represents the multifarious biodiversity of the sea, with all the sea organisms living in balance with each other. The death of the dolphin becomes a negative example, a warning to mankind to preserve other life forms. The life of the dolphin is held precious in itself, and not as something benefiting mankind as opposed to the

anthropocentric view of animals being precious only when they are beneficial to man. Man's interference with the dolphins leads to their demise. The dolphin masque enacts this vigorous threat to the dolphin species. The seventh point in Deep Ecology principles reads, "The ideological change is that of appreciating *life quality* rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living" (Tosic 46) and the last point calls for implementing necessary changes. The task of the poet (be it intentional or unintentional) in this text is to bring about this ideological change. The poet by laying bare the life of a single dolphin, albeit in terms of enacting a myth, enacting it in almost human terms and ascribing human emotions to it, tries to bring about a presentation of animal life at par with human life. When the dolphin is ascribed human emotions and "voice" one can only sympathise with it as with a human being. At its near murder by the men of Corinth, they ought to be condemned for abetting the death of a creature that is almost human. The severity of their wrongdoing is thus considerably enhanced.

NATURE AND CREATIVITY

Nature has a direct impact on creativity and its nature. Nature nurtures and promotes growth. Creativity is a result of it. But that creativity when gifted to Arion results in the destruction of nature itself. Nature gives and gives but receives nothing in return from man, unlike all other beings that give back to nature. In fact, man knowingly or unknowingly destroys the very thing that has nurtured him.

Voice of Nature

Buell cites Kern's use of landscape semiotics in the critic's discussion on Jane Austen's fiction. (Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett overcomes her dislike of Darcy only after their visit to his Pemberley estate) (26). The landscape has a positive effect on the protagonist as can also be observed in Seth's text under discussion. When Arion and the dolphin are at sea, they are very much content and able to communicate with each other. In fact, their conversation in song is shown to be very much synchronised, so far united that they can sing the same chorus together

with meaning. Arion and the dolphin have considerable amount of conversation through song. For instance, the duet of Arion and the Dolphin is described in scene 6 as “They sing a duet, the dolphin singing open vowels, Arion doing the same as well as playing the lyre. Soon the voices of dolphin and human are wonderfully intertwined” (239-241). Their song concludes thus in scene 6:

ARION and DOLPHIN:

In air and water both, our voices part and blend, And I/you, who never sought a friend
Have found one in the end. (250-253)

The two have become so close that they can sing the same lines with same meaning. Their voices and thoughts – form and content – are united at this stage. It is also to be noted that this symphonic voice exists in the sea – the dolphin habitat. Seth’s presentation of the Greek myth is polyphonic. But at this point in the libretto, the voices of Arion and the Dolphin are completely intertwined.

Voice of Man

Arion panics at the thought of Periander’s anger and is unable to sing properly. But when he puts the shell the captain gave him to his ear, he is filled with the inspiration of the sea and sings in frenzy. He is showered with gold as a reward for his singing (27). The dolphin sings songs that resemble the sea because it is full of it (40). The type of environment has a concentrated impact on the type of song or on creativity as a whole. The different environments in the opera – home, foreign land, sea and then home again, all shape the conscious of the poet Arion. His creativity is moulded by his immediate environment. Historically significant, Arion was a dionysiac poet credited with inventing the dithyramb. A critic observes, “A step further is Lawrence Buell's boldly coined phrase *environmental imagination* referring to how the physical environment shapes imagination. Studying the literary culture of New England in the USA, he noticed that there is something that could be called "the New England landscape and ethos"

(Tosic 47). This definition shows that the physical environment can be combined with an attitude indicating that there is ‘the cultural geography of a region.’ This is the reason why there is the *urban imagination* or *island imagination*. The *where* influences the *is* in the spiritual way” (Tosic 47). Dolphins sing in the libretto. According to Buell, “reimagination” is essential. Nature provides the environment for creativity. Ecocritical texts have an important characteristic of nature being not only the background or the setting for a text, but of being a part of the text. When ecocriticism emerged as a separate discipline in the 1990s, the relationship between man and his physical environment came to be understood in one way, according to Buell that, “man always exists *within* some natural environment or, there cannot be *is* without *where*,” (Tosic 44).

The dolphin chooses man over its own kind. After the performance of the dolphin masque in scene 6, it is utterly charmed by Arion’s song and says: “I love Arion, and would like to be/ Bound to his voice and him eternally” (242-243). But its love for Arion only ends in its own death. In scene 8, Arion exclaims when he learns of its death during his unjust imprisonment:

Alone am I, and sad that you are dead, That you are dead, not I –

That you were kind to me and that led you to die. When all is done and said –

When all is said and done,

You were my friend, the only one. (54)

The dolphin seeks out the good in man – his creativity – it longs for Arion’s songs, but suffers when Arion retracts from his function as a poet.

Man’s Destructiveness as *Self-destructive*

The dolphin–nature is ridiculed and belittled, when Periander hands it over to the fisher folk after imprisoning Arion. They trifle with it as they do not realise its true value: “*The fisher folk turn the dolphin into a sort of circus act. They force it through hoops, make it leap for dead fish, collect money for it*” (51). Man realises his loss only when it is too late to remedy. Periander alone mourns its loss while the large gathering of fisher folk exhibits hardly any sympathy for

the now dead dolphin. By presenting its death, in a way the callous nature of mankind towards nature around him is highlighted by the poet. If man understood that if he sustained nature, nature would in turn sustain him, perhaps his endless destruction of nature would stop. But he continues to tramp over the face of the earth quiet ruthlessly; unmindful of the destruction he causes everyday.

CONCLUSIONS

Vikram Seth depicts the interrelationship between man and nature through a sample representation in the characters of Arion and the dolphin. The whole text is a careful rendering of the myth of Arion and the dolphin to present the environmental calamity that man sets off every day. The tragic end of the dolphin is a case in point representing the decay and destruction of nature whenever it is too close to man. However much nature gives to man, man is unable to nurture it in turn due to his sheer arrogance and it is more so due to the majority of mankind spurning the tender care of nature.

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