

Positive Footprint

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“For most of history, man has had to fight nature to survive; in this century, he is beginning to realize that, in order to survive, he must protect it.” --

‘Jacques-Yves Cousteau,’ French naval officer, oceanographer, filmmaker and author¹

विश्वंभरा वसुधानी प्रतिष्ठा हिरण्यवक्षा जगतो निवेशनी ।
वैश्वानरं बिभ्रती भूमिरग्निमिन्द्रऋषभा द्रविणे नो दधातु ॥६॥

Mother Earth is Vishwambhara (All-Bearing), She is Vasudhaa (Producer of all Wealth), She is Pratishtha (Foundation on which we live), She is Hiranyavaksha (of Golden Bosom) and the Dwelling Place of the World. She holds the Vaishvanara (The Universal Fire) within Her, the Fire which empowers Indra and Rishabha; May the Mother Earth bestow on us the splendour of that Fire and make us strong.

यस्यां समुद्र उत सिन्धुरापो यस्यामन्नं कृष्टयः संबभूवुः ।

यस्यामिदं जिन्वति प्राणदेजत् सा नो भूमिः पूर्वपेये दधातु ॥३॥

Where seas roll and rivers flow, lakes abound and showers fall incessantly, where food is plenty and people live in comfort, where a moving, breathing, vibrant world of life exists in wide variety, may that Mother Earth bestow us with that life in abundant peace and prosperity.²

The above quoted lines are from the Atharva Veda's (Bhoomi Sukta-12.1) hymn to Prithvi, the goddess Earth. In this particular hymn, the goddess Earth (Prithvi) is honored as a nurturing and sustaining force for all life. The prayer typically asks for her continued support in providing nourishment, protection, and stability to the natural world and all its inhabitants. The hymn often includes requests for her blessings in the form of fertility, stability, and protection for all living beings. This reverence for the Earth reflects “an ancient understanding of the inter-connectedness between humans and nature, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a respectful and nurturing relationship with the environment”.

The earth with its untouched beauty, and pristine wilderness, represents an almost sacred space where natural processes unfold without interference, a vision of harmony and balance. However, as humans have increasingly encroached upon these natural spaces the picture shifts dramatically. Our presence has introduced pollution, deforestation, and other forms of environmental degradation, disrupting the delicate balance that once existed. The harmony of the natural world is often ruined by the consequences of industrialization, urbanization, and unsustainable practices. This tension between the ideal and the real is central to discussions about environmental conservation and sustainability. It highlights the need for a conscious effort to preserve the beauty and functionality of our natural surroundings, acknowledging both the intrinsic value of nature and the

impact of our actions on it. Addressing this issue requires recognizing the interconnectedness of our actions with the health of our environment. It calls for a shift from viewing nature as a separate, distant entity to understanding it as an integral part of our own existence. In essence, while our image of the environment often reflects an untouched sanctuary, the reality of human influence requires a commitment to finding ways to coexist with and protect these vital spaces. By fostering a deeper respect for and awareness of the environment, we can work towards repairing and preserving the natural world for future generations.

The given description captures the profound and urgent nature of the environmental and social crises we face. The accumulation of these issues highlights the complex and interconnected nature of the problems at hand. The combination of ecological degradation and human suffering brings out a dire picture of our current trajectory. The urgency of addressing these issues is clear, as the consequences of inaction could indeed lead to profound ecological and social collapse. Tackling these issues requires a multifaceted approach, combining technological innovation, policy reform, and changes in individual and collective behaviour. We need a holistic approach that integrates multiple strategies:

Sustainable Practices: Shifting towards sustainable agriculture, renewable energy sources, and waste reduction can mitigate many environmental issues. . Adopt sustainable farming practices to enhance soil health and reduce soil erosion, conserve water, and minimize chemical use. Educate people about the impacts of their choices and the benefits of sustainable practices. Protect and restore forests, wetlands, and other critical ecosystems to enhance carbon sequestration and biodiversity.

Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions: Transition to renewable energy sources (solar, wind, hydro), improve energy efficiency, and promote sustainable transportation and implement carbon pricing mechanisms. Promote recycling and circular economy practices to minimize waste production and landfill use.

Regulate Pollutants: Enforce stricter regulations on industrial emissions, agricultural runoff, and promote waste reduction and management systems. Implement measures to protect and restore waterways, and reduce pollution from agriculture and industrial sources.

Policy and Regulation: Stronger environmental regulations and international agreements are essential to tackle pollution, climate change, and resource depletion. Implement regulations to prevent environmental degradation and ensure safe working conditions such as mining. Promote recycling of materials to reduce the need for new mining.

Technological Innovation: Advancements in technology can offer solutions, from cleaner energy sources to more efficient waste management systems. Invest in research and development of technologies such as green technology to reduce environmental impact and promote sustainability.

Education and Awareness: Raising awareness about these issues can lead to more informed choices by individuals and businesses, as well as drive public support for necessary policy changes. Foster community involvement in environmental and social initiatives. Invest in education, healthcare, and infrastructure in developing regions to reduce inequality and improve living standards. Strengthen labour laws globally to prevent child labour, unsafe working conditions, and exploitation. Address disparities in resource distribution and support fair trade practices to ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Global Cooperation: Many of these problems are global in nature and require coordinated international efforts to address effectively. Support and adhere to global treaties and frameworks designed to address climate change, pollution, and conservation. Collaborate across borders to share technologies, best practices, and financial resources.

Balancing human needs with environmental stewardship is a complex but vital challenge. Addressing these interconnected issues requires not only systemic changes but also individual commitment and collective action from governments, businesses, communities, and individuals. By working together across various sectors and levels, we can strive to prevent further damage and build a more sustainable and equitable future.

Joseph W. Meeker says, “Human culture and environmental crisis are intimately and casually interrelated. There is much within human culture that has encouraged congenial and co-operative integration of humanity with natural environments”(Preface xx).³ Meeker's point underscores how cultural attitudes and practices shape our relationship with nature, influencing both the problem and potential solutions. Indeed, many traditional cultures have fostered harmonious relationships with their natural surroundings, often incorporating sustainability into their practices and beliefs. These traditions often emphasize stewardship, respect for natural cycles, and recognition of our dependence on the environment for survival and well-being. To address our current environmental challenges, it's essential to understand how deeply ingrained cultural attitudes contribute to the crisis. The shift towards zero waste and zero emissions requires not only technological advancements and policy changes but also a cultural transformation. This involves re-evaluating our values and behaviours to align more closely with principles of sustainability and ecological balance. Drawing inspiration from cultures that have successfully integrated their practices with the natural world might offer valuable lessons. Embracing such approaches could help us develop more sustainable ways of living and working, potentially reversing or mitigating some of the damage done. The journey towards a more sustainable future may indeed be daunting, but recognizing and leveraging the cultural dimensions of environmental issues can be a powerful step toward meaningful change.

The aim of this paper is to elucidate the patterns within human art and thought that offer the most promise for cultivating a fully developed cultural and artistic life, one that aligns with and supports a diverse and stable natural ecology. The resolution to our environmental crisis does not entail a regression to the perceived simplicity of primitive or agrarian lifestyles. Instead, it calls for an advanced mode of existence,

driven by a sophisticated human intellect that strives to find its harmonious place within the intricate systems of our complex planet as Meeker has suggested, "...the same mental inventiveness which has fouled the world can surely tidy it up again" (Meeker 6).

Human beings are not merely observers of natural ecosystems; they are integral components with a crucial role to play in the biological environment. The belief in humanity's spiritual elevation above nature—a belief often deemed tragic—can lead to a narrow focus of moral and ethical obligations that are limited to interactions among humans. This viewpoint may result in the absence of ethical constraints on the exploitation of non-human nature, thereby facilitating unchecked environmental degradation. "Destruction of one's enemies and prideful conquest of nature do not give life its deepest meaning. Reconciliation of opposites and adaptation to environment ...are necessary both to biological evolution and to the full expression of mankind's highest talents." (Meeker, Foreword by Konrad Z. Lorenz 16)

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It emerged as a formal academic discipline in the late 20th century and is concerned with how literature reflects, shapes, and engages with ecological issues and environmental concerns. This includes analyzing how different genres, periods, and authors depict landscapes, ecosystems, and the natural world. The aim is to understand how these representations influence our perceptions of the environment, focusing on the relationship between humans and the environment and addressing the impact of human activities on the environment, such as industrialization, deforestation, and climate change. Scholars also investigate how literary works take up themes of environmental interconnectedness, exploitation, and harmony with ethical questions regarding human responsibility toward the natural world shaping ethical attitudes toward environmental conservation, sustainability, and animal rights. Ecocriticism draws on insights from various disciplines, including ecology, environmental science, philosophy, and cultural studies. By highlighting the ecological messages in literature, ecocriticism can contribute to broader environmental awareness and advocacy.

Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach that is known by a number of other designations, including "green (cultural) studies", "ecopoetics", and "environmental literary criticism", and is often informed by other fields such as ecology, sustainable design, bio-politics, environmental history, environmentalism, and social ecology, among others. It was first originated by Joseph Meeker as an idea called "literary ecology" in his *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972). Estok argues that ecocriticism is more than "simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds."⁴ Some major Approaches in Ecocriticism are:

Nature Writing examines works that focus explicitly on nature, such as essays, memoirs, and poetry. This includes both historical nature writing and contemporary works that reflect on environmental issues, analyzing the portrayal of landscapes, ecosystems, and animals in literature. It also investigates how nature is symbolized or used metaphorically in texts and how these representations affect readers' perceptions of the environment.

Ecofeminism investigates the connections between environmental exploitation and the oppression of women. It explores how literature addresses these intersections and advocates for a more equitable and sustainable relationship between humans and nature.

Ecocritical Theory is a theoretical work that explores foundational concepts in ecocriticism, such as the “ecological unconscious” and the impact of ecological crises on human culture and literary production. The concept of Interconnectedness explores the dynamic relationship between humans and the natural world, emphasizing the interdependence between human actions and environmental health. It also considers ethical questions regarding how humans should interact with and care for the environment, reflecting on the moral implications of environmental degradation and conservation.

Cultural Understanding enhances our cognizance of how different cultures and historical periods conceptualize and interact with the natural world.

There are some new trends and challenges emerging in the field of ecocriticism such as Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) which is a growing genre focused on climate change and environmental issues, which is increasingly being analyzed through an ecocritical lens. There is also Global and Indigenous Perspectives expanding this field to include diverse perspectives on environmental issues, including those of indigenous cultures and global contexts. Interdisciplinary Research has also become the part of Ecocriticism which continues to integrate insights from various disciplines, including environmental science, ethics, and political theory, to address complex environmental issues.

This all echoes the functional approach of the cultural ecology branch of ecocriticism, which analyzes the analogies between ecosystems and imaginative texts and posits that such texts potentially have an ecological (regenerative, revitalizing) function in the cultural system. Camilo Gomides has offered an operational definition that is both broad and discriminating: “The field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations.”⁵ Overall, ecocriticism seeks to deepen our understanding of the interplay between literature and the environment, offering insights into how narratives shape and are shaped by ecological concerns.

*The Circle of Karma*⁶ by Kunzang Choden presents an intriguing case for ecocritical analysis. The novel, which provides a rich depiction of Bhutanese culture and its evolving relationship with the environment, lends itself well to an ecocritical reading. The novel vividly describes Bhutan's natural landscapes, including its mountains, forests, and rivers. Ecocriticism can analyze how these descriptions contribute to the reader's understanding of Bhutan's environmental beauty and fragility. Ecocriticism provides a valuable lens for exploring *The Circle of Karma* by highlighting how the novel reflects and engages with environmental and cultural themes. By analyzing the representation of nature, the human-nature relationship, environmental ethics, and spiritual perspectives, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the novel's portrayal of Bhutan's ecological and cultural landscape.

Kunzang Choden is a distinguished Bhutanese writer whose works provide a profound insight into Bhutanese culture, society, and spiritual life heritage of her country, promoting them through her writing. She was born in 1936 in a rural area of Bhutan and grew up amidst traditional Bhutanese customs and practices. Her background deeply influences her literary works, providing a rich foundation for her storytelling. She has made significant contributions in the development of modern Bhutanese literature, both in English and in Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan. Her writing often reflects her deep understanding of Bhutanese society and commitment to preserving and sharing its rich cultural heritage. She is celebrated for her role in bringing Bhutanese literature to a global audience and contributions to preserving and promoting Bhutanese cultural heritage. Her work has been instrumental in shedding light on Bhutanese experiences and societal changes, offering readers around the world a window into the rich tapestry of Bhutanese life. She has been recognized both within Bhutan and internationally for her literary achievements and her efforts in cultural preservation and has received various accolades for her contributions, reflecting her impact on both Bhutanese and global literary communities.

Choden's work often explores the tension between traditional values and the encroaching modern world, reflecting the societal changes occurring in Bhutan. Her novels frequently address the roles and challenges of women, shedding light on gender dynamics in Bhutanese society. The influence of Bhutan's Buddhist traditions is evident in her writing, as she integrates spiritual themes and practices into her narratives. Her writing is characterized by its deep empathy, lyrical prose, and insightful commentary on the complexities of Bhutanese society. Her novels not only entertain but also educate readers about the unique cultural and spiritual landscape of Bhutan.

Her most notable work is "*The Circle of Karma*," which is a seminal novel in Bhutanese literature. Published in 2005, it explores themes of tradition, modernity, gender roles and personal identity through the life of its protagonist, Karma/Tsomo. Through Tsomo's journey from a young girl to an adult, the story explores her struggles and triumphs as she contends with societal expectations, personal desires, and the changing dynamics of her country. *The Circle of Karma* is acclaimed for its authentic representation of Bhutanese life and its

exploration of universal themes through the lens of Bhutanese experiences. The novel is characterized by its deep empathy and nuanced portrayal of characters, bringing to life the unique cultural and spiritual essence of Bhutan. It serves as an important literary work that bridge Bhutanese traditions with contemporary global themes. *Chilli and Cheese: Food and Society in Bhutan* (2012), co-authored with Dorji Wangchuk, with a focus on Bhutanese cuisine, provides insights into the role of food in Bhutanese culture and social practices while exploring its culinary traditions and their cultural significance.

An ecocritical analysis of *The Circle of Karma* reveals how Kunzang Choden weaves environmental themes into her narrative, reflecting Bhutan's cultural and spiritual relationship with nature. By examining the portrayal of landscapes, human-nature interactions, environmental ethics, and spiritual beliefs, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the novel's ecological and cultural dimensions. This approach highlights the significance of nature in the story and its impact on both individual lives and broader societal values.

Nature in *The Circle of Karma* can be seen as a living, influential force within the narrative. The way characters interact with their natural surroundings can be explored to understand nature's role in shaping their experiences and identities:

Tsomo's house is massive. It is the biggest house in the village, an imposing structure made of rammed earth walls and wood. It has three storeys, the ground floor, made entirely of rammed earth, has only tiny slits for windows so it is always dark inside. The animals were kept here and the people lived on the first and second floors ... Although their house is big, it can't be seen from a distance, especially in summer, because it is surrounded by trees. The peach, pear and walnut trees are gigantic and very old.

(3)

The novel highlights Bhutanese cultural practices that reflect a deep connection to nature. These include traditional agricultural practices, rituals, and beliefs that emphasize harmony with the environment. Ecocriticism explores how these practices are depicted and their significance in the characters' lives, "It makes Mother beam with pride to tell her children that her great-grandfather built the house himself. 'Look at those huge beams. He carried them all by himself. He was so strong ... He loved trees and flowers and he planted all those trees.'" (3)The novel offers detailed descriptions of Bhutanese landscapes, such as the majestic mountains, lush forests, and serene rivers. These descriptions not only set the scene but also emphasize the intrinsic beauty and spirituality of Bhutan's natural environment. Nature in the novel is depicted not just as a backdrop but as integral to the cultural and spiritual life of Bhutan. For instance, sacred sites and natural elements often hold religious significance, reflecting Bhutanese reverence for the environment. The characters' interactions with their environment reveal traditional Bhutanese practices that promote harmony with nature. Agricultural methods, conservation rituals, and the use of natural resources are portrayed as being deeply embedded in daily life:

There are turnips in the basket behind the stairs to the attic.' Tsomo put her hands in the basket and felt around for turnips in the buckwheat straw. She picked out six white turnips rimmed with a band of purplish pink on top. They cook turnip throughout winter because it is one vegetable that keeps well for several months. Tsomo longs for a change. Mustard greens would be the first fresh vegetables for the year. She must remind Mother that they must dig the garden soon. (5)

As Bhutan modernizes, *The Circle of Karma* portrays the tension between maintaining traditional environmental practices and adapting to new ways of living:

It was time now to weave the fabrics which were to be submitted as tax to the government. Day and night the spinning wheels droned and the sound of the beater in the looms, tang tang could be heard all over the village. (52)

... By the time she was ten years old, she was already weaving cloth good enough to be given as tax. ... Over the time she learned that tax cloth was just one quality of cloth. It did not have to be very fine. But it had to be woven as specified by the king's court. (53)

... Fabric was just one of the many different taxes they paid. They even had to collect the soot from their homes and give a certain measure of it to the government to be used for ink for the dzongs and monasteries. (54)

The Ecocritical analysis examines how the novel addresses the impacts of modernization on the environment and traditional ways of life. The novel also addresses the tension between traditional ways and modern influences. As Bhutan modernizes, the story reflects the environmental and cultural impacts of these changes. This includes challenges such as deforestation and shifts in land use that threatens traditional practices and ecological balance.

The novel's portrayal of Bhutanese environmental ethics, such as the reverence for sacred sites and the sustainable use of natural resources, can be analyzed to understand how these practices are represented and what are their ethical implications. These practices are presented as essential for maintaining ecological balance and cultural integrity:

The black wooden boards placed over their laps are first dusted with fine ash which is always by their sides in little cloth bags. Then the boys bend over their boards, nearly touching them with their foreheads, deep in concentration as they etch carefully into the ash-covered surface with their bamboo pens. When the writing has filled the board, they take it up to the teacher for inspection after which the writing is erased with a piece of cloth and a new task is assigned. (21)

The novel hints at the consequences of environmental exploitation, such as the loss of traditional values and ecological imbalance. By contrasting traditional ecological knowledge with modern practices, the novel also critiques the potential costs of environmental degradation.

Buddhism plays a significant role in the novel, influencing characters' attitudes toward nature. The Buddhist belief in interconnectedness and respect for all living beings is reflected in the characters' spiritual practices and environmental ethics. Bhutan's Buddhist traditions, which emphasize the interdependence of all living things and the importance of environmental stewardship, are central to the novel:

Following the prevalent belief, Father had taken him to various *goenkhangs*, the innermost sanctums of temples in which the guardian deities resided ... the keys to these powerful energy filled rooms, some of them quite large, were inserted into Kincho Thinlay's mouth. The keys were put into his mouth and the gesture of opening his mouth, symbolic of opening a door was made repeatedly to open the locked doors and release his obstructed speech. (69)

Ecocriticism investigates how these spiritual beliefs are integrated into the narrative and their influence on the characters' attitudes toward nature. Traditional Bhutanese practices that involve nature, such as festivals, rituals, and community activities, are portrayed in the novel. The novel also illustrates how these rituals and festivals are closely tied to natural elements. For example, ceremonies that honour the land and the environment underscore the cultural importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature.

Mother Nature is not always kind or gentle; she can be remarkably harsh and unforgiving. Though, we often romanticize Mother Nature, perhaps due to our diminished connection with the broader world or our feelings of sadness and guilt over its degradation and glorify the preindustrial past and the rhythms of tribal cultures, sometimes even wishing we could return to those earlier ways of life. The notion that nature is separate from humans, pristine, and sacred is well-intentioned, as it aims to draw our attention to environmental needs. However, this perspective often leads people to view their own systems, processes, and products as disconnected from nature. We may come to believe that we must minimize our impact because we are inherently detrimental. When we romanticize nature and see ourselves as unwelcome intruders, we tend to act like any self-conscious outsider: we strive to become less noticeable. "We cower; try to take up fewer square inches. We attempt to produce and consume less. We

throw less 'away,' we turn food grade water bottles into fleece jackets, and we might even live more meagrely because we think this is the right thing to do" (27-28).⁷

Saving water and energy, while beneficial, is increasingly seen as merely reducing harm rather than making a positive environmental impact. These measures often originate from cost-reduction strategies rather than environmental concerns. To advance environmental thinking, we should focus on enhancing productivity and profitability. This perspective emphasizes generative rather than degenerative practices. By adopting eco-

effectiveness, we can foster endless resourcefulness and create value that extends beyond mere resource conservation.

“Human beings don’t have a pollution problem: they have a design problem. If humans were to devise products, tools, furniture, homes, factories, and cities more intelligently from the start, they wouldn’t need to think in terms of waste, or contamination, or scarcity” (7). Good design can foster abundance, enable endless reuse, and provide pleasure. It encourages people to seek opportunities for optimization and actions that enhance overall quality of life. By embracing upcycling and innovative practices, humanity can thrive on a single planet. At this juncture in history, with significant environmental damage already done, the goal should not merely be to reduce negative impacts but to strive for a positive environmental footprint.

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