

## Anthropocentrism and Environmental Change in Selected Raghini Upadhyaya's Paintings

Sujata Bhatta

Faculty member, Nepal, Open University

Email: [shiningr.29@gmail.com](mailto:shiningr.29@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Human beings and Nature are interrelated. Nature influences and is influenced by human beings. By analyzing paintings of Ragini Upadhyay Grela from her collection "Nature speaks" this paper will try to find out the amalgamated relationship between human beings and nature. The paper firmly depends upon two paintings from Upadhyay's collection "Nature speaks". The artist has given the quotation in her collection; "Protect nature to save our future", by analyzing her technique, style as well as colour combination to the paintings and their meaning. Similarly, it also analyzes her mythical concept to find out how anthropocentric activities are destroying nature and her paintings have become a kind of challenge for so-called intellectual and rational human beings. Moreover, this paper tries to explain the theme of Sustainable Development and Ecology in general and it concentrates on arts and creativity as resources for sustainability in specific. In this regard, the paper offers insights into the role of arts to illuminate the issues of sustainability. Following the arts-based inquiry, the paper critiques the anthropocentric activities for advocating sustainability.

**Keywords:** Arts-based research, nature, myth, sustainability and science

---

### Introduction

Upadhyay's painting collection Nature Speaks seems to be inspired by Nature's suffering and devastation, cutting trees, dumping waste into the river and sea, and polluting the air endlessly with the product of modern technologies that are made for the sake of human comfort. By analyzing her paintings from the perspective of eco-centrism we can say that the natural world is excessively abused by the human world. As Barry Commoner in his book *The Closing Circle* opines, "Everything is connected to everything else", Ragini's painting shows that human beings are connected to nature and vice versa. This is why she shows nature's anger as the devastation against the man-handled materialistic society.

### Literature Review

Raghini gives the importance to Hindu mythology, in her paintings she connects the nature with God. Here I can link Raghini's painting and her connection to Hindu Myth with the opinion of Steenkamp (2011) explains theory of "Toxic Reincarnation" as:

It's very now. Global warming, pollution, toxins, and

BPA from plastics leaching into the environment have disrupted the spiritual realm or whatever you want to call it, so, if you're Hindu, and you go through some terrible trauma, part of your spirit breaks away and returns as the animal you were going to be reincarnated as (p. 154)

Since the artist touches on the issue of ecological degradation, the paintings are centred on an irrevocably intertwined theme which is the relationship between human beings and Nature.

Here one of the critics of her paintings Subedi (2012) in an article says, "In the present series of paintings, she maintains her current mood of anger about the erosion of values and spiritual strength, which is reflected in the plight of nature represented by holy trees and the rivers Here she is trying to show nature's contemporary state of existence is expressively illustrated as nature cries out against the devastation of nature as well as traditional spiritual value of this, the artist states: "On behalf of nature, I convey their silent pain, their problems and injustices as well as their rights as living entities"(p.151).

---

### Article information

**Received:** 25 February, 2024

**Accepted:** 30 March, 2024

**Published:** 16 April, 2024



© by author: This article is licensed under the terms and conditions of Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial (CC BY NC) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

---

Through this statement, we can say that Ragini's main concern here is that nature should have justice. If human beings are being selfish and cruel they will get in return.

### Methodology

The paper is based on a qualitative research paradigm. It uses the painting as text to conclude. It analyses the color and graphic lines to elaborate the issues. It seeks to unravel the poisonous impacts on nature with the paintings. This research article uses Ecocriticism as a theoretical tool to analyze and interpret the underlying environmental attitude of nature with Ragini Upadhaya's selected paintings from her collection as primary texts. It completely concentrates on environmental justice discourse.

This study uses textbooks and secondary data which it gathers from the library, academic journals, newspapers, internet sites, etc. It makes a descriptive micro-analysis of the imageries, symbols, characters and rhetoric used in painting. It makes a content and thematic analysis of the data gathered by combing and synthesizing the data gathered. It uses a comparative analytical method to conclude. It uses the insights of different ecological critics.

### Discussion and Finding

The exploitation of nature has become the cause of climate change and ecological erosion as well as new diseases too because they are destroying the nature for their sake and that is why nature is also aggressive towards human beings.

#### Figure 1

*Painting of Bishnumati River*



This is the picture of Bishnumati River which is located at the center of Kathmandu and now it has changed into drainage of people of Kathmandu. Through this painting Upadhaya (2012) shows the tolerance of River as she says:

My River Goddess is unhappy because the water is so polluted that she must wear gloves, the fish are running away from the dirty water and she is forced to clear out the rubbish, she is sweating and furious after arriving from the high mountain glacier (p.3).

This interpretation is done to show the lack of environmental justice. It also shows not only the river but all the whole ecosystem is affected including water animals to underwater herbs. And, the Artist is in a fever of environmental justice rather than human centrism.

Here, this water color painting links the earth and sky body and passion. She has played with the juxtaposition of associated Hindu images and the signifiers of environmental decay. This painting figures out the traumatic condition of the Bishnumati river of Kathmandu. The water of the river has changed into the drainage. For this painting, Ragini has used the real image of the Bishnumati river as evidence. Through this painting, it seems that the artist is very unhappy and angry at the anthropocentric behavior of human beings. In such context, she can do nothing but feels anger for nature she takes these devastating events as if nature is giving back to human beings what they have given it.

Through this painting, the artist feels not only the anger of the Bishnumati River but also of its trauma and suffering. The artist here is firmly interrupted by the patriarchal mindset. The painting shows that the male ethos of patriarchy is internalized into her. That is why the artist uses the female body to represent the river. In this picture, she has also commodified the female body because she has presented a naked female as the image of the Bishnumati River. She has highlighted the breast of the river with the mix of water color of red and orange though the artist here seems to be presenting the fire of anger of the River. The fire of anger is burnt in its breast. And, the pain is shown through an arrow across her chest which represents the arrow of garbage that has made a big wound in her chest, that has damaged the beautiful body of a female river. Her face is totally unshaped. The painting shows that the beautiful river has changed into the ugliest and cruelest woman due to the anthropocentric behavior of human beings. The shape of river is firmly changed and its attraction has become the storage of garbage and drainage. So in this way, using various types of color Ragini is showing the affected body of a female to represent the Bishnumati River that is obliged to clean itself. In Ragini's

painting it seems that even the nature is feminized because the artist is fully internalized with male ethos. This seems to be influenced by the male mind set that attempts to use nature as female sex.

In the past, River used to be taken as the living God but nowadays due to the cruel and selfish behavior and activities of human beings the River God is fully affected it is destroyed. Though people are using to worship the river they forget that is a living God. They do so as a tradition thinking to worship but in reality they had made the waste container for the river bank. Human beings are unable to see that the Holy River in cities especially because all are affected by human activities. It is not in its own shape because nature is exploited by human beings. It can't speak as human being and there is no justice for the nature. River here, is crying taking the 'Diyo' in its hand which was thrown by human beings in the name of culture which may symbolize that it is searching the light for its sake. It wants to give shelter for fish and water animals as a mother can keep her children safely but they are leaving the river because it is not in its original appearance. The 'Diyo' in its hand may symbolize the hope of a new life. It is waiting for justice or it may show that it is obliged to clean itself and pick out it to return the human beings with some kinds of devastating activities because the river is angry. The light in the hand of the river can be compared with the aggressive anger of nature.

## Figure 2

*The air god*



Similarly, I have analyzed another picture of Upadhyay "The air god". In which the artist has shown the angry face of the air. Air what always understand is the God from which we get oxygen to breathe and live. But now a day The Air God is angry as it pushes down the old car belching black smoke. Its fury shows as a bird dies in its hand choked by pollution. The forest of trees disappears as the forest of tires touches the sky. Due to the ash of tires green forests are changing into bare field. Due to human behavior not only the trees but birds and other insects are also suffering. They are not getting right to live because people have destroyed their shelter so the Air is angry.

In this painting also the artist Upadhyaya has used various colors to show the anger of the air. The mix of red and yellow color shows the fire of anger where as the black color symbolizes the cause of its anger. That means the black ash that has come out from the modern vehicles and wheels (Tyres) and the smokes from the industries that are not managed properly which is directly affecting the nature. Through this painting the artist is showing what is happening in the earth is due to the activities of human beings. The air is polluted because we do not think of it. It is affected through the ash and it is not able to save and give the life of bird because of the cruel activity of human beings. Human beings are destroying the jungles, cutting down trees for temporal happiness and to enjoy modern technologies but they don't feel its effect towards nature so Nature is affected very badly. And, now nature has started to speak for their sake. Though they cannot speak as human beings, they can give natural devastation in the form of climate change, flood etc. Nature speaks through its performances. Nature wants to destroy the life of human beings as the reaction of their activities towards nature. So here also Ragini Upadhyaya wants to take the side of Living God the Air because she feels its trauma and suffering. She can feel its anger and she can show the anger of living God and Goddess through her paintings.

Ragini in her paintings seems to talk about environmental justice and the ethics towards nature from the perspective of religion. In this matter Bangdel (2012) criticizes Upadhyay's paintings as; "... Grela's new series engages the viewer in a provocative dialogue of tradition and change, where Hindu mythic symbolism is woven within the issues of urban ecological concerns" (p.74).

As Upadhyay is trying to compare the tradition of worshiping nature as a living God in her paintings, she is linking the tradition to the change of the present. She is completely influenced by the Hindu Myth. Because in her painting collection "Nature speaks" she takes the nature especially Water, Air and Mud as the God. Even she is presenting the images of fish and bird in both paintings

respectively. In Hinduism these both animals can be taken as the ambassador of the God. There is one myth in Hinduism that shows how the nature has become the God. According to Ainu (hunters and fisherman):

In the beginning the world was slush, for the waters and the mud were all stirred in together. All was silence; there was no sound. It was cold. There were no birds in the air. There was no living thing. At last the creator made a little wagtail and sent him down from his far place in the sky. In, "Produce the Earth", Ainu (2010) said, "The bird flew down over the black waters and the dismal swamp" (p. 270). According to this myth, in Hinduism, it is given that Water and Air have already existed in the earth before the creation of human beings. Birds and Fish are used in the form of the creation those are created before human beings. So they have no right to destroy the life of other animals neither they can affect nature. Similarly, in other myths it is given that the Water, Air and Mud is the God and human beings are created to save them, respect and worship them and it has become the tradition. Upadhyay's paintings are influenced by such myths so she has tried to show in her paintings that the existence of human beings is only possible because of nature. Human beings should be the protector of nature rather than the destroyer because nature is the mother of all human beings and interprets nature as God.

Stone (2010) in the essay "Should Trees Have Standing?" speaks about the rights of Natural objects, here Ragini also talks about their right. She seems to say that the living God Air and Goddess River are angry because they are not getting their rights. Stone says, "It is no answer to say that streams and forests cannot have standing because streams and forests cannot speak..... One ought, I think, to handle the legal problems of natural objects as one does the problems of legal incompetents" (p. 153). So here the artist has tried to be the lawyer for nature because through her painting she is speaking in favor of natural objects and totally rejects the anthropocentric view using anger in her paintings. She wants to say that as human beings think only of their needs as valuable but truly they are forgetting how dependent they are on the light of the sun, the water of the glacier and oxygen released by plants. So they should remember how dependent they are on nature for their lives. Through the aggressive nature of Nature in her paintings, she warns human beings to respect the Nature and not to destroy the Nature.

With the message to protect nature to save the life of human beings, she asks for the ethics of respect for nature in her paintings. For this Taylor (2010) has said:

Our duties to respect the integrity of natural ecosystems, to preserve endangered species and to

avoid environmental pollution stem from the fact that these are ways in which we can help make it possible for wild species populations to achieve and maintain a healthy existence in a natural state (p. 74).

Here in the word of Taylor we can say that to run the ecosystem we should be thinking from biocentric point of view rather than anthropocentrism. In this world every living entity has right to live according to their natural state to run the ecosystem. No one has the right to destroy the life of others. And, Ragini pours her anger towards those uncivilized human beings who are destroying nature in the name of culture, who want to show cleanness throwing garbage into the river and living the aristocratic life destroying the trees. Not only that she has also talked about justice for nature from the perspective of trees and rivers which are affected day by day with the activities of so-called civilized human beings especially in urban cities like Kathmandu.

Upon examining the paintings, it becomes evident that the artist harbours a deep affection for nature and poses a question to humanity: Can we advocate for nature's preservation to safeguard our future? They are destroying nature which is why nature is also going to be aggressive towards human beings. So there should be a mutual relationship between humans and nature. Saving nature means saving the future of human beings who are firmly dependent upon nature because they are living with the light of the sun, water of the glacier and oxygen released by plants. So as they respect their lives they should respect nature.

This message is portrayed loud and clear as Ragini is portraying her concerns related to the degradation of the environment. The originality of Ragini's interpretation of the environmental crisis lies in the direct link to the personification of nature and the morphing between traditional Hindu representations of the deities and natural entities such as trees and rivers.

As she is idealized through the Hindu myth, her work illustrates that Nature is God and human beings have to keep it happy to save their future. Otherwise they have to face the aggressive and destroying attitude of The God Nature because it gives back to them what they have given to her.

### Conclusion

In this way Ragini Upadhyay's paintings are firmly speaking the pain and trauma of nature as it is harmed with human centric activities and also trying to aware human beings to stop anthropocentric activities against nature for the sustainability. By conveying nature's silent pain, problems and injustices, as well as its rights as living

entity Raghini wants to say the mistreatment towards nature and exploitation of it has become a challenge to the sustainability of human beings. As ecology fosters that everything is connected to everything Nature returns all the doings of human beings in the form of flood, devastation, diseases etc. Mythically guided Ragini gives the message through her paintings that human beings have a duty towards Mother Earth; they have to pay it for their existence. But the question arises against her male mindset because she has taken nature from the perspective of a female. Nature's problem and suffering is compared with the pain and ugliness of the human body. However, she suggests valuing nature for its own sake, and valuing nature because of the substantial or corporeal benefits it can provide for humans. She has tried to commodify the female body culturally because in both paintings she has used the naked female body. Though nature is only an object, nature is feminized because she is suffering from the patriarchal mindset and the traditional mythology.

### References

- Ainu (2010). Myths of China and Japan. *Discourse on nature and culture*, 63-202. [https://ia600506.us.archive.org/1/items/mythsofchinajap00mack/myths\\_ofchinajap00mack.pdf](https://ia600506.us.archive.org/1/items/mythsofchinajap00mack/myths_ofchinajap00mack.pdf)
- Bangdel, D. (2012). *Nature speaks*. OUP
- Commoner, B. (1971). *The closing circle: Nature, man and technology*. Knopf.
- Steenkamp, E. L. (2011). *Identity, belonging and ecological crisis in South African speculative fiction* (Doctoral dissertation, Rhodes University). [vital.seals.ac.za:8080/vital/access/services/Download/vital:2219/SOURCEPDF](http://vital.seals.ac.za:8080/vital/access/services/Download/vital:2219/SOURCEPDF)
- Stone, D. (2010). *Should trees have standing? Towards legal rights for natural objects*. London. Oxford University Press.
- Subedi, A. (2012). Living gods goddesses in today's ecological erosion. *Nature speaks*. Exhibition at Solace International Designs in Lazimpat, Kathmandu
- Taylor, P. W. (2010). The ethics of respect for nature: *Discourse on nature and culture*, 327-337. Princeton University Press
- Upadhyay, R. (2012). My river goddess. *Nature speaks*: Exhibition at Solace International Designs in Lazimpat, Kathmandu

**Conflict of interest:** The author does not have any conflict of interest with any institutions concerning this research

**Ethical conduct of research:** This paper is written ethically

### Authors Bionotes:

**Sujata Bhatta** is an M.Phil. Graduate in English literature from Tribhuvan University in 2014, with a diverse professional background encompassing roles as an M.Phil. Faculty member at Nepal Open University. She is a Professor at Presidential Business College (AIF Westcliff University)

**Ethical approval for the research:** Not applicable

Consent for publication: Not applicable