

A RETURN TO NATURE: THEME OF TRAVEL AND QUEST FOR ONE'S IDENTITY IN JANICE PARIAT'S *EVERYTHING THE LIGHT TOUCHES*

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Abstract:

*One of the most significant aspects of travel narrative is its close relationship with nature writing. When a travel narrative is read and analyzed from an ecocritical lens, it takes the shape of nature writing, though with some significant distinctions. While travel writing focuses on movement, nature writing emphasizes on place. In travel writing, the authors themselves are travellers; however, nature writing has more emphasis on environment. Nature writing seeks to establish a relationship between literature and the physical environment. Despite the expansive nature of travel writing, it has been a constant generator of identities, especially of the traveller. A traveller's spiritual identity is never stable, it always undergoes some kind of changes as he/she travels from one place to another. The 'quest' motif is a recurrent one in travel narratives. There is always a quest for the traveller's identity, of discovering their 'self.' This paper therefore attempts to study Janice Pariat's novel *Everything the Light Touches* (2022) as a "return to nature," keeping in mind the theme of travel and quest for identity.*

Keywords: Travel Writing, Nature Writing, Ecocriticism, Quest, Identity

Introduction:

Travel writing has a very close relationship with Nature writing. A travelogue is an account that includes the experiences, observations, and knowledge of the traveller about a particular destination and its people. It records the temporal as well as spatial progress of both the traveller and the destination and highlights the way in which one defines themselves and identifies others. However, nature writing encompasses a wide variety of works about the natural environment, that place its primary emphasis on facts of natural history which also involves a philosophical interpretation. It is either non-fiction or fictional narrative that includes prose or poetry, essays of solitude or escape, as well as travel and adventure writing. Nature writing relies mostly on scientific information and facts of the natural world. It is usually written in first person and incorporates personal observations of and philosophical reflections upon nature. Don Scheese, in his book *Nature Writing: The*

Pastoral Impulse in America (1995; New York: Routledge, 2002) suggests that nature writing is the traditional sphere of first-wave ecocriticism that derives from natural history as well as travel writing. According to him, travel writing's function of "tracing of a physical movement from place to place and recording of observations of both new and familiar phenomena" shares its proximity with nature writing. An ecocritical approach to travel writing gives rise to nature writing where, instead of the very act of travelling, more emphasis is placed on nature. Ecocriticism emerged towards the end of the twentieth century and is marked by a politicized concern for environmental issues.

Everything the Light Touches - A Reading:

Janice Pariat's novel *Everything the Light Touches* is a dialogue with nature. When one delves deep into the pages of the novel, one can hear the clarion call for an urgent "return to nature," that echoes the ideas of the English Romantic movement. It was a reaction against

the scientific rationalization of nature during the Enlightenment period as well as the material changes in society during the industrial capitalism. According to the romantics, the solution of the spiritual alienation of the masses from the land and nature was a “return to nature” because nature was seen as pure and a spiritual source of rejuvenation. Pariat’s novel seeks to challenge the imposition of fixity that people place on themselves and on nature and attempts to free and unify the things that are only meant for movement, fluidity, and constant transformation.

The North-East Indian author was born in the plains of Assam and grew up in the idyllic setting of the hills of Meghalaya. As a child, she used to spend a lot of time in solitude, in the lap of nature, which has a great rendering on all her writings. Leaving her hometown for higher education and work made her realize how privileged she was as a child to have spent most of her time in the company of nature. A lot of her childhood memories and experiences amidst nature finds very picturesque representation in *Everything the Light Touches*. The novel is an epic story, rather stories, of four travellers and discoverers set across continents and centuries, cutting across space and time. While the routes of these travellers never cross each other, their stories are intertwined together like roots, through the ways in which they encounter the natural world around them. The novel is a wonderful mingling of fact and fiction.

The four travellers in the novel are Shai, Evelyn, Johann Philipp Moller (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) and Carl (Linnaeus). The novel is narrated by multiple narrators. While Shai tells her own story, Evelyn and Goethe’s stories are narrated by a third person omniscient narrator, who is aware of their thoughts and actions. Linnaeus’s story is a series of poems written in free verse as well as in meter. The novel begins and ends with sections featuring Shai with all getting two sections each except Carl. Shai is a young woman from Shillong working in Delhi who returns to her hometown for the first time in years and rediscovers new ways of being that realign and renew her through her encounters with indigenous communities. At the very outset of the novel,

Shai declares: “I’m travelling out of Delhi, this mad, magnificent city at the edge of a desert, to go back to where I came from—the wettest place on earth.” But it is not in Shillong or Mawsynram that Shai experiences what she is searching for, but in a more obscure village of a traditional Khasi community. The character of Shai is at the heart of the narrative and she seems to reflect the author’s own experiences in a city setting and a constant longing to be in the arms of nature, back in her homeland. The story of Shai is contemporary, set in the here and now that offers hope, re-engages us with indigenous knowledge, forms of living and being.

Evelyn is a student of Botany in Edwardian England. She undertakes a sea voyage from England to India in 1911 in search of a secret plant. She is sent off by her family to Calcutta as a part of the “fishing fleet”- young girls searching for a husband – but she has a purpose of living a life of adventures and discoveries and has no desire for domesticity. Inspired by Goethe’s botanical writings, she leaves Cambridge on a quest to wander in the sacred forest of the Lower Himalayas. A student of Goethe’s radical thinking, Evelyn is frustrated by the lack of academic opportunities in her country that promote different ways of seeing and thinking. Her pursuit reveals ominous truths as she realizes that Western sciences offer a very rigid and limited perspective of the natural world. Wandering in forests and speaking with its residents broadens her appreciation for the intricacies of the natural world.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is a German philosopher, writer and one of the greatest minds of his age. Weary of his administrative duties in the princely state of Weimar, he takes off for Rome almost stealthily, under the alias Johann Philipp Moller. While travelling through Italy in 1787, he formulates his ideas for his first scientific work, *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790), a little-known, revelatory text that challenges humankind’s propensity to reduce plants and the world into immutable parts. Pariat’s imagination is most fertile in this section as she fuses facts with fiction. It is a compelling portrait of a man in the flush of youth and on the brink of a groundbreaking achievement. In writing the book,

Pariat delves deep into Goethean science and his scientific consciousness. There were several ideas that enables her to connect Evie's story with Goethe's story. In opposition to Goethe's narrative of resistance, we have the character of Carl Linnaeus, a botanist and a taxonomist who famously declared "God created, Linnaeus organized." Linnaeus names and organizes everything into a system that he feels is most appropriate. He is called the father of botanical taxonomy as he was obsessed with putting things into boxes. The most creative section in the novel is the one featuring Carl Linnaeus's 1732 expedition to Lapland which would result in his book *Flora Lapponica* (1737). His expedition is told in verse, poetry, and prose where Pariat experiments with structure and form, giving rise to several concrete poems. A poem about trees is structured like a tree, and another about Christ, like a cross. In this narrative, Linnaeus states that "the starting point must be to marvel at all things, even the most commonplace" which also perhaps is the central philosophy of the novel. A sense of wonder and gratitude is found in all four accounts where each character leaves home in search of a greater truth and realizes that the smallest organisms contain within them the secrets teachings of nature. The section dedicated to Carl Linnaeus serves as an interval, as it is placed right in the middle of the novel that separates the two sections dedicated to each character. It appears to be a convergence of the desires of the other three: finding solace in one's roots, undertaking journey to new lands in pursuit of scientific knowledge and striking the right balance between philosophy and modern science for a fuller understanding of our own existence.

On a surface level, the characters and their journeys have little to do with each other as they are separated from each other by time and space. Each part of the novel could be read separately as a self-contained novella. The characters are compelled to travel by a sense of being stagnant in the places where they live. Through these characters, Janice Pariat asserts the existential importance of travel at both the physical and metaphysical level. The metaphysical questions of the novel unite

its disparate narrative strands even more. It poses a profound philosophical question of whether it is possible to think of the relationship between man and nature beyond the objective rationality of Enlightenment philosophy. The answer, for Pariat, can be found in Goethean science that advocated a more subjective and personal approach to Botany. The contemporaries of Goethe, the Romantic poets, loved this approach as they revolted against the preceding Age of Reason. However, it also appeals to a contemporary reader that the relationship between humans and nature has aggravated because of the pressing issue of global warming.

Janice Pariat is fascinated by the metaphor of 'light' in her stories. In this novel, the 'light' is used as a metaphor open to multiple interpretations for different readers. It is aimed to have different meanings for different readers. The book begins with a light of curiosity and wonder that initiates most of our beloved stories. It is the quest to seek, explore and discover the world outside. It is very much this 'light' that keeps us going, in wanting to learn and discover something new. The light also perhaps suggests a tussle between indigenous faith and the coming of Christianity. It is the light of wonder, faith, spirituality, and belief, not necessarily of Christianity, but of individual belief system. Most importantly, it is the light that keeps us alive, the light that nourishes and sustains us. It falls on all of us, regardless of who we are and where we come from. In writing the book, the writer perhaps found answers to the questions that she herself was searching for. The narratives of Shai, Evie and Goethe are the narratives of resistance to Linnaeus's obsession with boxing and labelling the world. They offer and explore a different way of seeing that has freedom, imagination, and unity at its heart rather than fixity.

Conclusion:

Janice Pariat is of the opinion that the act of travel and writing are the same and they are intricately connected to each other. They are both about journeying from one point to the next and in the way, undergoing transformation. Travel and writing are also connected in the way that they allow us to travel inwards. In the act of

absorbing newness and unfamiliarity, we are also journeying inwards and learning something new about ourselves. It is also about realigning and shifting perspectives, because of the interaction with the new and the unfamiliar. The four characters in the novel are on a quest. Apparently, it seems to be a physical quest, but on a deeper understanding, it is realized that they are journeying within their own selves, to find their own identity. A deeply therapeutic novel, Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches* individualizes ways of seeing. Drawing upon diverse worlds, Pariat's novel is an amazing storytelling that adapts seamlessly to its different settings. In each section, Pariat shifts her style of writing to suit the vocabulary, geography, ethos and spirit of the historical placement of her characters. The novel weaves together four stories from different geographies and timelines, bound by a love for the flora and a zeal of curiosity. It is a hypnotic read about man's eternal quest for a place in this world.

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