

Bodily and Psychic Territories in Bhargava's *Riding the tide*

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Abstract

The present article approaches Ashok Bhargava's poetry collection, *Riding the tide* (2017), from an ecocritical perspective. The paper traces the speaker's line of development from a desperate, sick person to a powerful entity. It argues this development occurs by way of nature. Being a cancer-ridden man, the speaker appears as a victim to the destruction man has done to nature, including his body. Delinking himself from society and its sweeping wave of technology, he aligns himself with nature, and finds not only comfort but also remedies to his weakened body in nature. This accentuates the role of nature in this collection. The paper reads the selected poems from *Riding the tide* in this line and investigates how the person charts and re-charts the territories of his environmental consciousness in addition to those of his

body. It is shown how nature helps the speaker develop spiritually and change from a weak, impotent entity to an all powerful force in the universe.

Keywords

Nature, Bhargava, ecocriticism, environment

Introduction

The present paper approaches Ashok Bhargava's poetry collection, *Riding the tide* (2017), from an ecocritical perspective. Being the poetic expression of a cancer-stricken patient, *Riding the tide* charts and re-charts the territories of his mind and body through his painful experiences. The paper argues all the poems in this collection are involved in a constant process of de-territorialization and re-territorialization of mind and body. The speaker's reliance on nature and natural elements evince the general ecological map he finds himself in and tries to re-inscribe himself in the landscape both bodily and mentally.

The fact that *Riding the tide* gives voice to a patient suffering from cancer is itself a political choice on the part of Bhargava. From an ecological perspective, this collection stands as a censure of the devastating harm mankind has done to the environment by polluting it in multiple ways through dangerous chemicals, ultrasonic waves, destroying the green ecosystem, "bunkering " (illegal tapping) and industrial sabotage (Tiffin & Hoogan 2010, p. 40; Kheel in Gaard 1993, note 63, p. 270; Garrard

2004, pp. 1-14). In this sense, *Riding the tide* portrays the turn of a patient already de-linked from nature and fatally harmed by technology back to nature. It calls for and celebrates a re-union between man and nature. The present study investigates how the suffering, male patient-speaker in this collection seeks the lost natural blessings and what kind of approach he, as a damaged being, adopts with respect to nature, and how his approach differentiates him from the cultural context from which he speaks. There is also an investigation if Bhargava's philosophy as expressed through the speaking patient reiterates or challenges stereotypes of nature representation. The paper draws on close reading of most of the poems, excluding those that are less relevant to the scope of study here. The adopted methodology is that of ecofeminist spirituality which revives older myths and religious beliefs in which nature is revered.

Riding the tide comprises 65 poems of varying lengths. It starts with "Morning serenade" and ends with "So much depends on you . . .". In the different poems in between, the speaker expresses his worries, likes, dislikes, frustrations, hopes, and desires. Yet, what is the core of concern here is the way he approaches nature and natural elements and whether and how he communicates his ecological environment. A glance over the whole collection reveals the speaker's loneliness; he is mostly left alone to himself, taking an ambiguous "you" whom he sometimes addresses as his companion. Others (other human beings) are relegated in the far, unspecified, and detached

pronoun "they". This grammatical reduction of his human companions evinces the romantic space that he specifies to himself in the poems, procuring him a private room. Stereotypically, a human being can be located in two spaces: a cultural one which is man-made and man-occupied, and a natural space in which man becomes one of the other elements in nature. Bhargava prefers the second over the first. Such a selection is of importance ecocritically and can have deep politico-philosophical interpretations.

According to Raymond Williams (1973 & 1982), nature versus culture has been one of the oldest binaries in Western thought and literature. The two sides of this binary carry gendered values: nature is feminine and culture is masculine. The masculine culture is concerned with mind; it is rational, objective, and public. In contrast, the feminine nature is body-centered; it is emotional, subjective, and private (Nayar, 2010, p. 299). Viewed in the light of this stereotype, Bhargava feminizes his speaking patient by locating him within a natural environment and unraveling his most private world instead of involving him in sociocultural interactions. Moreover, a patient is conventionally defined as a bodily weak person whose vulnerability resembles him to a culturally inferiorized being, that is, a woman. The poems display how the weakened patient fights back for life by regaining his lost spirituality and re-unifies with nature. It is in the line of this argument that the paper analyzes the poems of the collection.

Ecofeminist spirituality

As an important strand of ecofeminism, ecofeminist spirituality draws on the older myths and religions in which nature is revered. Nayar enumerates the reasons and principles of this perspective as the deep respect for nature (such as deification of nature), the embeddedness of all human and non-human lives in nature, the legitimization of female power and female bodies, and assigning importance to women's knowledge (2010, p. 300). Of these four principles, *Riding the tide* appeals mostly to the first two ones, showing how man is embedded in nature and the reverence the speaker has for nature. It owes its feminism not to empowering female body, but to feminizing the dominant male voice.

Analysis and discussion

Bhargava attributes all romantic features to his patient in "Morning serenade". The suffering patient is alone and vulnerable, feeling insecure, "I take what is given/ the smell of insecurity" (p. 1); he is desperate, "positivity is thin"; but he is determined to fight and revives with the birth of nature, "I will leap and regale/in the ever widening pale glow of dawn" (p. 1). These descriptions put the speaking self in harmony with nature and the workings of the universe. Nature becomes his source of hope and inspiration. Taking dawn as the source of his life is Bhargava's strategy to show how human life is embedded in nature. The same sense of embeddedness is

accentuated in "Joy returns with morning light" in which the speaker talks with his "invisible friends" who "listen with inscrutable faces" (p. 3). Yet these friends are implied to be non-humans since they show no signs of communication with him. They are "inscrutable" and "do not argue" (p. 3). So, they are far from striking interactions with him. Lamenting his nightly loneliness, he rejoices in the morning light. The final stanza of the poem is quite revealing of the harmony he finds between himself and his environment, "You are more in me/than I in you and/you remain while/ obviously I go outside looking for you" (p. 3). The "you" Bhargava's patient resurrects is not a human being; rather, it can be his other long ignored self that he finds in harmony with nature, or it can be Nature itself that has long been with him but was ignored by him.

Although the patient-speaker is aware of his disequilibrium in "Unsteady", he regains his sense of self through nature; thus he states, "I still have blue sky days/ I still have black night skies" (p. 4). Through nature, he reunifies with God, "Fragrant flowers outside/and a loving God inside my heart" (p. 4). Thus spiritualized, he detects his beauty, "I am still as I am/ a beautiful light" (p. 4).

Not only does the speaker rejoice in nature, but he also suffers along with nature and its elements. In "Where this journey ends", he gets one with "a hooked fish" feeling his pain (p. 7). His sailing across the "sea of open water" takes him back to the "genetic memory" which returns

like "salmon spawning" (p. 7). It is in "Riding the tide" that he explicitly refers to his cancer and the process of his body degeneration. One of the dark poems of the collection, this poem envisions him as "two thirds polluted toxins" (p. 10). Although there appears no explicit reference to nature except for the impotent leaning of dawn, the cancerous presence of the speaker, his suffering, and despair embody him as a nature-deviated figure and a poisonous offspring of man-made culture. Yet even in this gloomy state, he does not stay, "I ride into a dazzling world./Alone in silence" (p. 10). The dazzling world of which he speaks is not city life; rather, it is the embrace of nature in which he finds himself alone and in solitude.

His desire to stay alive finds its best expression in his other cancer-centered poem, "What's wished and can't be . . .". The poem is on the day he comes to know about his disease, "All things change./Darkness descends" (p. 12). Yet still, he fights for light.

In "Uncertain waters", the speaker gets immersed in the beauties of the present away from the sorrows of the past and worries of the future. He enjoys these blessings through natural elements such as roses and daisies, rainwater pools in the garden, and shining lights shimmered through pine tree needles (p. 13). The present sounds to be uncertain, but he rejoices in this uncertainty. He can hear the "secrets of living" in the soft shoots of seeds that sprout stones (p. 14).

In "Water we are", the speaker gets unified with nature, and thus stretches his body and mind to the natural elements:

*Spilled secrets and
footprints on the shore
we rise as vapours
fall as raindrops
turning into runaway streams
to the ocean bound
holding back misty tears
water we are. (p. 16)*

The identification he draws between himself and non-human elements such as water in nature evinces his environmental consciousness which he gains only when he is detached from his social context.

The speaker's philosophical concerns are resolved only through his observations of the way of nature. This is the main point in "Everything...". In this poem, the speaker reminds himself of the way natural elements such as flowers, wind, and water change over time and do not remain as they used to be, "Wind just blows, /water just flows/ without why or/question" (p. 17). Thus justifying the way things happen to nature, he rhetorically asks, "Why worry?". In fact, this kind of justification bears its own desperate note as it shows the limitations of his mindscape in relation to the inevitable doom. The same theme is developed in another poem, "Pining soul", in which the speaker expresses his inability to comprehend

what happens to the things that are bygone. Here also, he draws on natural events to elucidate his point, such as where the gusting winds have gone, where the flooding rains have gone, and where the gushing waters have gone (p.23). Unable to answer the questions, he concludes, "Why do we hold on to the past and/ wonder where the present has gone" (p. 23).

For him, nature embodies both sorrow and happiness. He tries to follow up nature in that; this shows his environmental consciousness which gives him a new direction when faced with sorrows, "A profound sadness/ in the full moon's blue glow/ Brings joy/ I never thought possible" (p. 18). His developed environmental consciousness helps him see love in the light of the workings of nature. In "Infinite time, boundless love", he compares a lover's pursuit of love to the rivers' pursuit of the ocean through mountains, deserts, and plains (p. 19). Where the rivers meet the ocean, they vanish. The same happens to the lover who uniting with the beloved ceases to exist as an individual. In the fourth part of the same poem, he compares love to a seed and the lover to a flower (p. 20).

In the second part of this poem, he concerns himself with time, drawing on the dualism of light and darkness. Here also, he defines man's process of aging to the changing seasons (p. 19). For him, time is "a messenger of love" which cannot be claimed, but only felt through

perceptions (p. 20). Finally, he equals love as life, "a river /seeking the ocean" (p. 21).

In "Unspoken", the patient-speaker expresses his desire for a rebirth or reincarnation. Like other poems, this poem shows his reliance on nature for conveying his point. He wishes, "I want to be the water clinging to your roots./ With both hands in the soil/ I feel modesty of a new beginning /splendour of a tiny sprout/ kneeling to the glory of God" (p. 32).

In "Bare winds blow", Bhargava shocks his speaker while in pain. When he is obsessed with his bodily pains for chemotherapy, walking "with aching muscles and bone" (p. 33), he comes across "a flower/ That was not there yesterday" (p. 33). The sight of this flower shocks him out of his pain and despair and implicitly imbues a sense of hope in him. while in "Broken melody" (p. 34), he seeks a force in a song to bring him back to life, in "Revelation" (p. 35), the speaker speaks of signs of hope and life in himself, "new possibilities./ An ancient mantra/echoes around me/ I am going to be alright" (p. 35).

In his other poem, "Muse", he compares his act of writing to planting seeds, "I plant seeds on paper/ sprouting stories" (p. 36). He watches the miraculous growth and effect of his words on others and thus falls in love with the art of poetry, and thereby with life, "this lonely craft of poetry/ which makes me love life and so much more" (p. 36).

"Epiphany" displays the speaker's merge with nature and expanding his environmental consciousness in other ways. His doubts are to get vanished by the force of the sun (p. 37); in his inner self, he finds, "ambient/birds and insects"; he identifies with the seed of a flower, "a pool of nectar/genesis"; his hope is his prayers reach the sun (p. 37); the remedy of his pains is in "every press of breeze" (p. 38); he compares his cancer-ridden body to a "dew/ on tip of a leaf" (p. 38); and he describes his taste as that of the "forbidden apple/undeniable pleasures /of milk and honey" (p. 38).

His philosophy of life is best expressed in "Many more lives" in which he stages the growth of mankind from birth up to death based on seasonal patterns: spring, summer, fall, and winter. Yet, in an optimistic way which has a hint at his belief in Buddhist reincarnation, he nourishes hope in re-emergence, "I know many more lives/ struggling to re-emerge/ in multiple shades of light/ against all odds" (p. 40).

His definition of love is nature-bound. "Love" compares love to a wave that "thaws the hard-lock-heart/ and makes it run like a brook" (p. 46). He believes love has a cyclic movement, thus the brook sings melodies at night, "Wakes up at dawn/ to dream again/ to love, thaw and run" (p. 46). Despite he sometimes gets one with nature, he finds himself unable to comprehend its secrets. He addresses this inability specifically with regard to the mysterious songs waves sing, "For many reincarnations/

for a long time/ I haven't been able to unlock/ secret meanings of their humming/ furtive songs" (p. 47). He compares the secrets of life to these "surreptitious whispers" which remain unknown, in how many births and rebirths one gets reincarnated (p. 48).

In "Waiting . . .", the speaker speaks of the truth which remains suspended in the air. It remains to be discovered and explored at dawn only after "Pomegranate blossoms/ . . . fall /into night's darkness" (p. 49). Most revealingly, "Autumn leaf" symbolizes the patient's interpretation of his coming death in a quite promising way, "I am testimony that we/ perish to regenerate/ a new life/ full of love and energy/ pain and pleasures" (p. 50). Exactly, when the patient yields to sorrow and dejection and gets ready for the final moment, his "mind turns briskly at/ the sight of a dragonfly/ dancing in the autumn sun" (p. 51). The sight of the dancing dragonfly revives him and removes his sorrows.

"Seawater" praises nature as taste of life and shows how its absence renders life tasteless. Yet, the presence of these elements is seldom felt (p. 53). The other poem, "Wake from dreaming", shows how excruciatingly the absence of health is felt. Health shows the natural growth of body and its loss displays something abnormal is going on. The speaker expresses his remorse for the days gone. His past is shaped by his natural environment: late evening, grey sky, last sunrays, a wide open sky, icy walks, bare naked branches, and moonlit loneliness. At the same

time, he is aware of his physical conditions which not only deprive him of his past but they also push him toward the loss of his life. This point is explicitly referred to in the metaphor, "Blooming lymphoma" (p. 57). Although this metaphor apparently indicates the natural growth of his lymph, it simultaneously shows the unnaturalness of his cancer. It is due to this unnatural blooming of his body tissue that he suffers and is shocked and thus mourns, "Where did the life go" (p. 57). In "Beings of light", he yields to loneliness in the face of his bodily conditions, comparing himself to an empty, hollowed flute, he states, "I shall be/capable of any tune" (p. 58). In "Next moment", the patient expresses his anticipations for survival, fighting back his disease. He takes the joy he gets from nature, "Eastern sky", "Sun washed spring clouds", "Color of a hawk's eye" as evidences of his survival. This anticipation and looking for signs of his survival in nature implies his gradual unification with nature which proves to be healing.

"Revival" celebrates the patient's survival and processes it through nature, "penitent winter parting/ Full moon./Star shining./ Where did they go/in the ticking second just as/ dawn arrives?" (p. 60). The dawn he speaks of and puts an end to his gloomy night is the dawn of his returning health which he embraces eagerly. Now, he is aware of spring blossoming at his door. Comparing himself with others who know not the value of the health they have, he concludes, "The world/ is filled with people/ who have

never lived" (p. 60). Others have never lived as they have never enjoyed the beauties of nature, and natural health.

The same sense of determination and joy in survival is expressed in "A survivor" (p. 62). Here again, nature plays a central role. He compares himself to "new shoots/popping through the pavement" (p. 62). He takes up the role of a potter who molds clay "into a shape of hollowness: a bowl"; therefore, "The light within/makes me crave more life". Here, he speaks of how the scarcity and absence of health makes him more determined in his battle against the disease.

The longest poem of the collection, "In search of light", covers many themes such as love, life, death, disappointment, etc. all through vivid images of nature and its different moods such as blossoming, falling, splitting, appearing, vanishing, shining, and fading out. The speaker's reliance on nature by this point in the collection shows how nature has got mixed with the speaker expanding his mental and bodily landscapes. For instance, when he speaks of his loneliness, he draws on the disappearance of his companion, his shadow, when the moonlight disappears into the clouds. The failure in his love affair is described through the natural phenomenon, the eclipse (p. 64). On the map he draws, he positions his life in between highways and skyways. While both highways and skyways are promising, the former being long, straight, and open, and the latter, broad, beckoning, and expanding, his life is "curved, composite,

and confined" (p. 65). Like nature, he expands his territories; thus he states, "I will go as far as the wind/ to other side of the horizon./ I will fly as clouds fly/over valleys and hills"(p. 66). His heart gets flexible; although it gets broken many time, it takes no visible scars, when love appears and vanishes "like the early morning star" (p. 67). He desires dreams as "a few drops of light" to fill his soul (p. 67).

On a temporal map also, he finds himself stretched from the beginning to the end of time. In "I am who I am", he states, "I begin before the beginning of time/ I survive after the end of time" (p.69). Thus stretched in time and space, he becomes a world citizen, "I am everything I need to be./ Everything I need is in me" (p. 69). Now that his mental and bodily territories get stretched, he becomes one with nature and comes to a new understanding about his being in the world. He treats this matter in "Predictably unpredictable", he finds himself as an offspring of some long and complicated natural processes, "I have been cut-off/lifted by winds/ dashed by waves/ digested by birds/ to be here" (p. 71).

No longer at a mess about his unpredictable being or at melancholy about his loneliness, the speaker gets aware his existence is growing larger and larger. In "Near miss", he experiences love through nature, "I am bound to you/like color and perfume/ to a flower" (p. 73). In autumn, he no longer finds gloom, "Autumn season/almost at my door/ leaves changing colors" (p.

73). He notices his shadow is growing longer. "The truth" well expresses his survival not only through his disease but also through mortality and time. Being a world citizen, he finds his resolve "stronger than steel/stainless" and his soul "immortal/eternal forever" (p. 74). Thus he victoriously claims, "Look for me /anywhere/find me there" (p. 74). The fact that he can be found anywhere evinces the result of his unification with nature and his expanded environmental consciousness.

In this state of widened consciousness, he no longer fears lack of security or stability. He rejoices in being like Zinnias, "the first flowers to bloom in space" (p. 76). The speaker is now full of hope and determination so that he sees himself as Zinnias, capable of blooming even when there is no soil, "The time is now/to withstand hot summer/to bloom with colors" (p. 76). Now that he has regained himself with his territories stretched far ahead, the speaker takes up the role of an admonisher, reminding his friends that "So much depends upon you" (p. 77). He wants his friends to accompany him in celebrating and enjoying the beauties of nature and seize the day. His philosophy of *carpe diem* is not a selfish one destroying and exploiting nature for one's interests; rather it is an ecological *carpe diem*, one in which he becomes one with nature and enjoys it as it is without meddling with it. That is the reason for the many descriptions he gives of natural scenery,

colors of the rainbow

whispers of the wind
sounds of the waves
pearls of pomegranates
aroma of flowers and
how butterflies land on petals
swings of the banyan tree
dewdrops on the morning grass
songs of the nightingale
this moment
not the time that has gone or
the time that is yet to come. (p. 77)

Discussion

As the detailed analysis of the selected poems shows, there is a line of development all through the analyzed poems. The speaker starts as a weak, sick person who feels lonely and unsecured. In such states, he finds gloomy aspects of nature. Gradually, however, he moves from this melancholic state through seeing, loving, and learning from nature. While in the beginning, he sees himself aloof from nature, he gets closer and closer to nature so that by the end he unifies with nature. This oneness with nature helps him re-chart his mental and bodily map. He starts to re-define his self and thus his territories change as his environmental consciousness grows. His map at the end transcends all borders in time and space. He changes from an alienated person to a

world citizen in whom every other thing can be found. He gets immortalized through nature. Not only does his disease perish away, but he also becomes a strong soul who is capable of guiding others towards the joys and blessings of this environmental unification.

Bhargava's ecological philosophy has roots in his Buddhist beliefs. Yet still, he does not confine himself to a biased religious perspective. His religion as expressed in his poetry propagates oneness with the whole world with no sense of priority over any other being. His sick speaker comes as a damaged entity to the embrace of nature. He is damaged not because of natural disasters, but for manmade calamities. He finds solace in nature. He finds his remedies in nature. His poisoned body, for chemotherapy, gets healed in nature. Instead of exploiting nature, capturing it in a cage, or destroying it for his selfish interests, he develops a strong sense of honor and respect for nature so that he finds his love via nature. His religion is all-inclusive rather than exploitative.

Riding the tide shows how the sick man moves from a state of uncertainty and despair to the blessed state of a man of all rounds. The blessed state evinces his developed spirituality, a spirituality that he achieves by the way of nature. This is called ecological spirituality which has a feminine nature. It is feminine because being sick he is categorized as a woman, weak and impotent. However, in his new blessed state, he becomes an empowered entity. This bears a political note against industrial capitalism and

its exploitive hold over nature. Developing into a world citizen does away with capitalist construction of the categories of nature and landscape, and of the feminine and the masculine. Bhargava's speaker de-territorializes himself and the socio-cultural setting from which he emerges in favor of a more embracing and a less exploitative hold on nature.

Conclusion

Bhargava's collection of poems shows the speaker's growing ecological consciousness. It starts with the weakened voice of a man who, lost in loneliness and despair, suffers from cancer, moves through new visions of the environment around, and reaches a state of oneness with his ecological setting. In this unification, he regains his lost spirituality and attempts to show the other lost souls the path to salvation from suffering and deprivation. In its simple, vivid images, the collection gives centrality to nature and shows how the speaker re-experiences the world around by way of nature. He goes so far as relying on nature to represent his most intimate and private feelings and moods. The paper takes this reliance as his broadened ecological consciousness.

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