

He-Rivers in Gulzar's Green Poems

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Ecofeminism under its intersectional lens has studied how the various issues related to women, nonhuman living beings and ecology are interconnected. However, ecofeminism's exclusive association of the ecology with the feminine not only leads the onus of environmental care as a sole added responsibility of the women's struggle but also excludes the role of man as a generalized incapable exploiter who is all for a macho ethics of 'daring' and can never participate into the ethics of 'caring'. This paper, striving to look for an alternative model of ecomasculinity, is a critical analysis of the select *Green Poems* of Gulzar where the he-rivers, challenging both the stereotyped notions of 'mainstream' hegemonic masculinity and androcentrism, seem to carry the markers of 'eco man' by performing an alternative eco-friendly masculinity.

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Gulzar's poetry with environmental consciousness is the poetry of the counter culture of interiorizing the exteriority of ecological consciousness and care through a critical transcendence. Although, poetry "cannot speak of itself except in borrowing more or less shamelessly the language of philosophy" (Lacoue-Labarthe, qtd in Carroll, 18), yet in Gulzar's unparalleled use of an unornamented but intense simplicity, 'philosophy' itself has become 'literary', with the truth being dependently conveyed through figurative deployment of the diction, and thereby, emancipating the readers with "the power to

be ‘seen’ and not merely read or understood” (*Discours, figura*, 62). This paper is a study of Gulzar’s tropic use of river as a male, but not necessarily a man in the patriarchal sense of the term, which seems to be central to the poet’s counter-linking of the eco-(alternative) masculinity as distinct from the conventional eco-feminism that, in its associating of ecology exclusively with the feminine, as a detour leads the onus of environmental care as a sole added responsibility on the struggles of the women.

Ecofeminism, under its intersectional lens, studies how the women, nonhuman natural world and the earth get victimized interchangeably by the exploitative mechanisms of the hegemonic ‘mainstream’ masculinity through a schematic obliteration of the feminine principle. Ecofeminism exposes how violence against women gets interconnected with the cruelty against all other elements of nature which are seen as the inferior/ weak, thereby feminized, Other of the dominant/powerful patriarchal masculinity. It is an intersubjective attempt to provide resistance against the “hierarchy in which men have power over women, (feminized) men, *and* (feminized) animals” (Adams, 80) along with all other (feminized) elements of the environment. Paul Pule has considered about a possible ‘ecological masculinism’, aimed at contributing to “a shift away from hegemonic masculinities and towards a long-term ecological sustainability” (Pule, qtd in Gaard, 232) by substituting a macho ‘ethic of daring’ that celebrates violence, power, domination, consumption and competition with a concerned ‘ethic of caring’ the surrounding, through inculcating the ethos of compassion, love, empathy, support and the like which have been conventionally projected as non-masculine. As opposed to the androcentric ‘mainstream’ masculinity, an alternative eco-friendly masculinity, that takes care and is concerned about the issues related to gender, societal power equations and the ecology, can be induced on the basis of a performative androgyny by “simply flowing between the opposites” (Singer, 332) of the compartmentalized gender categories. Through the he-rivers of his *Green Poems*, Gulzar has attempted to devise a counter-mainstream ecomasculinity through the depiction of male rivers that are not only affectively connected to their female counterparts but also seem to have incorporated the signs

of feminization as an alternative counter-normative approach of defying the patriarchal masculinity.

‘The River’ begins with the mutterings of a he-river who recalls to himself the saga of his lifelong struggles. Burying all the unfulfilled “small desires” deep inside his heart, he wonders by his wretched realization that how ultimately “An entire life spent slithering along the sand” (3), just like the she-river of ‘The Story of a River’ who laments before the poet about her unremitting fatigue: “Every day my two banks hold me by my arms/ And make me walk a given path;/ And, every day, on my back, I carry/ Boats full of people to the other side.” (13). His futile yearning “to soar along with the breeze/ And simply vanish from the forest” (3) finds an affective connection with the she-river’s similar hopeless hankering for that someday of rampant repose when “nothing happens/ Nothing at all/ And I put my back to my bed/ And remain motionless for one evening/ Just still” (13). The adoration with which the girl in search of her husband had offered flowers and tulsi to him finds reciprocation in the way the he-river preserves the fond memory with tenderness and waits with a pause, staring every time at the trains passing over the bridge, “With one wish/ Maybe to see once again that girl’s face” (3). This male river with his alternative masculinity seems to be aware of the fact that: “To force the pace and never to be still/ Is not the way of those who study birds/ Or women.” (Haq, 82). The sloth waiting of the he-river can easily allow him to get assessed as ‘effeminate’. However, this performing of effeminacy through the rejection of phallic manliness, thereby combating against the patriarchal derogation of all that has been regarded as feminine, is what the he-river seems to have exemplified as a model for the ‘eco-man’ to follow in order to serve the nature as an ideal collaborator to ecofeminism. Moreover, the he-river’s devoted waiting for the girl also underlines that gender-contrarianism is in no way a hindrance for a male who wants to continue to be counted as a heterosexual. Rather, gender-contrarianism may stimulate him to practise an alternative “male-affirmative” stance that would not only turn him eco-sensitive but would also facilitate him towards de-centering the patriarchal ideologies. “Male-affirmative” does not coerce men to dispose of their masculinity. Instead, it

encourages them towards altering their mainstream masculinity with “a progressive male standpoint” — it “decidedly did not mean affirming traditional male authority or behaviors, and it meant affirming in some sense the actual or potential humanity and humaneness of persons of the male sex.” (Brod, 198). Anna Hazare and SunderlalBahuguna are some of the male environmentalists who provide the best examples for “male-affirmative” Indian eco-man.

Like a kind of a ‘mask’ of a cry, as observed Bataille, writing, even for Gulzar and his *Green Poems*, takes place mainly out of “the desire to modify the relations that exist between a man and his fellows” (Nancy, 332). Yet, this modification does not run short of indigenous modalities. We do have icons of alternative-masculinity as models for resisting masculinist discourse of the capturing and consuming with that of caring and considering. The Sufi and the Bhakti men with their hymning of the feminine codes of devotion, suffering and sympathy, Tagore with his reliance on love, justice and empathy as the ethical premise of politics and Gandhi with his ‘unmanly’ nonviolence are powerful epitomes to offer ‘différential’ consciousness, essential in the reconstruction of a compassionate masculinity for a ‘green man’.

Ending his poem ‘The Aged River-1’ with the starting line, “Muttering to himself this aged river keeps flowing on” (115) the poet makes it clear that he has composed what he has been told by the river, thereby, bringing the river’s voice to the centre of the poem rather than the poetic self by means of what Buell calls, the ‘aesthetics of relinquishment’. Gulzar’s ‘aesthetics of relinquishment’, by its appeal for the rejection of a narcissistic phallic masculinity, is aptly manifested throughout the poet’s role as an amanuensis who is scribbling down the poetry of the river’s mumblings, and thereby, encouraging all “to raise the question of the validity of the self as the primary focalizing device for both writer and reader: to make one wonder, for instance, whether the self is as interesting an object of study as we supposed, whether the world would become more interesting if we could see it from the perspective of a wolf, a sparrow, a river, a stone.” (Buell, 179). Authenticating the validity of Butler’s opposition against the supposition “that the feminine belongs to women, an assumption surely suspect” (Butler, 123), the he-river in ‘The Aged River—1’ is all full

of care, empathy and compassion for Lachchi that makes him angry against ‘that scoundrel Madhav’ who has been exploiting her. The river is worried about the possibility of Lachchi getting herself drowned into his water if she starts revealing the marks of premarital pregnancy. Like a mother anxious of the imminent disgrace the male river is troubled with his obligatory “job to hide” (115) even the body in order to hush the fact from getting public. Despite the ‘mainstream’ criticism that the old river need not be bothered with things happening on the shore, which is the ‘normative’ attitude of indifference expected from a non-emotional egocentric patriarchal agent, the parental concern of the he-river towards Lachchi, whose umbilical cord, as a metaphor of maternal link, was handed over to him by the midwife to be “carried to the ocean by him” (115), shows how the he-river, as a bereaved androgynous father, performs the egalitarian eco-(alternative)manliness that emerges out of a practise of care with the motif of replacing “mother-monopolized child rearing” (Balbus, 354).

The deliberate attaching of the traditionally confirmed ‘feminine’ qualities to a he-river reveals the insightful blending of gender categories by the poet towards an intersection of human anguish with the ecological calamity and, thereby, “demonstrate incisively that feminist philosophy is no longer by, about, or even for women only.” (back cover, *Rethinking Masculinity*). Through the human-like ‘personhood’ of a gender fluid he-river, Gulzar poetically curves out the personality of a green man whose gender fluidity would enable him to have concern for the woman maltreated by the victimizing masculinity and equally care for the nature with the same deep rooted appeal for justice. Gulzar’s invoking of ‘biophilia’ is on its own a ‘motherly’ botheration regarding the emotional wellbeing of human beings. Such concern is dependent on the awareness about “the presence of other living things” that requires care, and is antithetical to ‘the threat of an emotionally impoverished future’(Milton, 61).

Scott Slovic’s observation about the American nature poets holds true even for the *Green Poems* since the major concern of the poet has been “with the psychological phenomenon of ‘awareness’” (Slovic, 3). Gulzar as a man with ‘response-ability’, through his he-rivers, has made a significant morally responsive call for the rest of

the men to reconceptualize their traditional notion of manliness, since he knows that “many men, see the criticism of their experiences and roles by women as an affront to their manliness. If other men are critically calling for the change, then it is harder to dismiss the call for change as an affront to one’s manliness.” (May, 349).

Gulzar’s he-rivers seem to have emerged out of the realization that “gender studies in ecocriticism have been dominated by attention to feminism, [while] men’s studies has been blind in seeing nature” (Allister, 8-9). The reference to human anatomy like ‘feet spread out’, ‘hand’, ‘arms’, ‘stomach’ of a man for their partonomy (Johnson, Main and Hunn, 281) of a he-river in ‘The Aged River-2’ has aided the poet, echoing the proponents of ‘deep ecology’, to sensitize man about the merit of dwelling more intimately in relation to a landscape, in contrary to man’s consumption of a terrain in sheer touristic mode of considering it as a mere ‘scenery’.

Leisure is supposedly not a manly trait since the workaholic male is supposed to be busy in the domain beyond the ‘home’ of feminine comfort almost for the entire day, only to return at the end of the day and take rest. But the he-river in ‘The Aged River-2’, with his latent proposition that nature needs to be not only treated as a productive agent for serving the greed based need of man but requires rest, habitually enjoys snoring all through the afternoon to recharge himself “with self-realization, self-development, self-fulfilment, self-determination, self-expression and self-enhancement. To pursue the essence of self is “to leisure””. (Rancourt, 71). Refusing to wake and work even if someone pulls his legs or birds nibble on him, until it is time for the raindrops to make him arise up from the sand with a shiver, the he-river seems to establish the importance of leisure in the context of interconnecting the mode of fostering both men and nature with a well-balanced subsistence: “Both poetry and living illustrate;/ Each season brings its own peculiar fruits/ A time to act, a time to contemplate” (‘A Poem of Dedication’, Ezekiel, 39-40).

The river in ‘The Aged River-3’ is now too old and emaciated to flow on his own: “Now, the stone, from which he used to earlier leap down,/ Gently suspends him below/ And tells the next stone:/

Hold this old man's hand and help him across!" (119). Being dependent, conventionally, is seen to be emasculated/ feminine in contrast to the preference for the self-made version of the mainstream masculine. The poet's rendering of a compulsive feminization of man in the later phase of his life, through the illustration of the old he-river, gives the impression as if the poet is trying to convince that the patriarchal masculinity is in any case too frail to be valued. Rather, it is commendable to strive towards performing an eco-man through the recognition of his dependency, countering the self-reliant 'solo' man, and belongingness — both with the human and the nonhuman — in support of "aid, affect and affirmation" (Arber and Ginn, 165). The very fact that the old he-river has so many friends to depend upon in his old age symbolizes the favourable impact that the 'tender' (and thus, habitually considered to be 'womanly'), poignant and intimate association with his friends adds to the meaningful survival of a man who implants in his early life the ethos of an alternative masculinity, which is interdependent on other human beings as well as on the nonhuman aspects of nature.

Ecofeminism's concern for children finds a perfect conjointment in Gulzar's eco-masculine concern for the old age. In the brief and serial presentation of the old rivers, one finds Gulzar's objectivist 'particularity', 'sincerity' and musicality in rendering poems as objects which, in turn, as concrete details insist us to "think....with things as they exist" (Zukofsky, 20).

All the three poems on the elderly river begin with the poet's listening to all that which he has heard from the rivers: "Muttering to himself this aged river keeps flowing on." (115, 117, 119). In his 'Introduction' to his *Green Poems*, Gulzar has confessed of his habit of listening to the plea of nature: "Some dry leaves dropped from the tree. The season was changing. But the rustle of the leaves had something more to say. I heard them. What they said was profound, to save the globe from rotting. 'Save the environment and keep the globe green', they said. I have heard many a leaf—and trees, rivers, mountains and waterfalls. I am relating their stories to people in poems." (xv). This reminds us of Pablo Neruda's keenness in listening to what nature has to say: "I shall be busy all week,/ I have to listen incessantly"

(Neruda, 283). The fact that the poet is listening to the utterances of the old rivers further makes it clear that it is extremely essential to speak on behalf of nature solely through one's continuous 'conversation' with nature, unlike the one-sided noises, just for the sake of the nature, that people often make based on the narcissistic celebration of 'discovery' of nature with no mutual correspondences. Gulzar's attempt to interrelate nature and man in an intimate bond of belongingness by the depiction of the river as a male can be perceived as an endeavour towards ushering a counter culture. This counter culture is centred round the conceptualising of an eco-man who, based on his attentive effort of nurturing his reciprocal affiliation with nature, aligns himself co-intentionally, not only the 'feminine' Other of the hegemonic-masculinity, but also with nature, that often gets projected as the Other of the capitalist/ consumer culture, in the course of "the post-conventional concerns with encounter, with relationship and becoming-in-the-world-with-others" (Price & Shildrick, 62).

Refusing to provide the camera-lens view of the river, Gulzar, through his he-rivers "slowly drying up/ Shrunken in size" (119), insists upon the readers to "contrast the stereotyped experiences of the aesthetically apathetic...person with the rich and subtly diversified experiences of the aesthetically courageous person. His courage consists in his refusal to heed only those features of a natural object or scene that most readily come together in a familiar pattern or which yield a comfortingly generalised emotional quality." (Hepburn, 19). According to Gulzar, the world is 'fragile' and "perennially endangered, forever held hostage to our effortless ability to unthinkingly desecrate it, unmindful of the consequences this can unleash on our own long-term well-being." (xiv). This de-stereotyped 'aesthetics of the natural environment' emerges out of the introspective query: "what makes men less masculine than they should be, and what can be done about it?" (Pleck, 22). One of the answers that Gulzar has offered through the he-rivers is to celebrate an eco-(alternative)masculinity, as an 'endogenous' model of manly care and compassion that has its roots among the indigenous masculinities which were also been equally considered by the hegemonic colonizing masculinity as less 'manly'.

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