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## Disregarding the Value of Nonhumans: A Study of Anthropocentrism in Nepali Proverbs

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines how humans' chauvinistic attitudes and behavior toward nonhumans exist in humans' orality in the course of analyzing some selected Nepali proverbs. The proverb as a powerful form of the oral literature can transmit the message and meaning to both literate and illiterate people virtually. Anthropocentrism, one of the approaches of ecocriticism that largely discusses human-nonhuman relationships skewing to humans, has been applied as theoretical insight to expose how humans have overlooked the intrinsic values of nonhumans. While analyzing, humans appear to behave as the sole proprietors of the whole nature by exploiting nonhumans as resources and seem to reject those nonhumans, which they fail to capitalize on. Finally, it could be inferred through this scrutiny that humans look sharply experienced to calculate profit, mostly untrained to comprehend the role of nonhumans in this ecosystem, and muscularly versed to dishonor nonhumans' loyalty to humans as their weakness.*

**KEYWORDS:** Anthropocentrism, ecocriticism, intrinsic value, nonhuman, proverbs

### INTRODUCTION

The study discusses how the anthropocentric attitude and behavior of humans disregard the independent value of nonhumans through the analysis of some selected Nepali proverbs. The proverbs, non-ordinary forms of orality, are rhythmically used by commoners, which resemble some aspects of Nepali culture and literature. People use them in social gatherings "in front of tea-stalls, hotels, and in the front courtyards of Nepali householders" (Fortier, 2002, p. 235). Disregarding the illiteracy of rural Nepali, this practice of proverbs validates the comprehensive character of proverbs. In such a setting, proverbs work as an oral vehicle to communicate the attitude and culture of people regarding others and themselves. Analyzing proverbs of any culture or any country could be a practical approach to understand the belief and attitudes of the people who are part of that society.

Nepal is rich in natural resources and biodiversity. Nepalis are understood as the worshiper of natural beauty; however, while examining some Nepali proverbs related to nonhumans, they appear to be hostile to them. Most of the Nepali proverbs are expressed by word of mouth mainly in the forms of "phrases and idioms, recited poems, chanted hymns, recounted tales, ballads, epics, folk tales, riddles, myths and legends" (Divasa et al., 2007, p. 8), which are highly practiced in the day to day life. In this sense, the study of proverbs incorporates literature, culture, and philosophy of life as well.

Concerning these matters, this interpretative study examines some selected Nepali proverbs, which express humans' attitudes towards nonhumans applying ecocriticism in general and one of its approaches, anthropocentrism in particular by focusing on the human-nonhuman relationship.

### **ANTHROPOCENTRIC OUTLOOK IN ECOCRITICISM**

Ecocriticism significantly came into existence in the later years of the twentieth century, which neither was 'touchable' nor was seriously considered as a major theoretical approach in the first half of the twentieth century in literature. It has a legacy to ecology and the environment. Ecology scientifically studies the networks of relationships among organisms in our environment and ecocriticism conjoins "literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii) as one of the younger literary theories opening broader area for interdisciplinary studies. Rigby (2002) supposes that ecocritical reading and writing restore meaning to the world beyond the pages (pp. 154-155). Apart from the words and structures of any writing and orality, it incorporates different concepts of research into "ecofeminism, toxic texts, urban nature, Darwinism, ethnic literature, environmental justice, and virtual environments, for example" (Gifford, 2008, p. 15). In this sense, ecocriticism covers a wider scope ranging from ethics to the environment.

As an approach of ecocriticism, anthropocentrism believes in human chauvinism and posits only humans' knowledge and experience at the center simultaneously disgracing the intrinsic value of nonhumans in this environment. In anthropocentrism, to quote the words of McShane (2007) "nonhuman world has value only because, and insofar it directly or indirectly serves human interests" (p. 170). It represents human supremacy as ends considering nonhumans as means only. The human-centric character of anthropocentrism has been dismissed by ecocriticism, which believes in interdependence and respects the others 'values establishing interconnectivity (Bellarsi, 2009, p. 74). Alter to anthropocentrism; it awakes humans to recognize interconnectivity and the interdependency between humans and nonhumans and advocates the rights of such subjugated classes in this environment.

Ecocriticism nostalgically evokes that humans were aware of establishing an organic and intimate relationship with natural objects in the past and regrets in the present as Merchant (2015) focuses that in this world we have missed organicity (p. 10). Avarice and lust effectively stimulate humans to be concentrated only for their sake. Nevertheless, Grey (1993) does not observe any fault in this anthropocentric character of humans and mainly blames a short term and narrow conception of human interests and concerns (p. 473) regarding the environment. Moreover, these human interests and concerns themselves further develop as a blind spot of centralism.

In the study, the overall anthropocentric attitude and behavior of humans have been scrutinized by synthesizing their character to relate nonhumans only to economics, culture to reject others' independent identities, and intention to keep only humans at the center. Therefore, the study on human encroachments to nonhumans becomes rational to examine anthropocentrism and it hopes to encourage humans to realize their fault and inspire to establish organic relation in the environment where "everything is connected to everything else"(Commoner, 2020, p. xiii) in a pragmatic sense too. Humans have no other options than caring for a single world. Venter (2017) asserts, "This world is the only world we have and has to be cared for" (p. 92) collaborating with all who are existing in this world as the world is also for them.

The study primarily explores how nonhumans are negatively portrayed in subordinate roles and how they are frequently projected as a means for humans. Some of

the proverbs selected for the study are universally practiced in different cultures and there exist some English equivalents of them although such English equivalents might disregard Nepali contextual and cultural nuances. Therefore, to retain the Nepali flavor, the Roman Nepali and literal translation of the proverbs to English are done specially for the analysis. The study hopes to distill human behavior, and action relating to ecology.

### **SCRUTINIZING HUMAN CHAUVINISM: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

All selected proverbs for the study are mostly about animals, birds, and insects. Nevertheless, only humans' voices are visible and dominant in the claims, which are communicated through proverbs in the form of oral literature. Therefore, the study examines and interprets the proverbs considering the tone, attitude, and behavior of humans towards nonhumans. Here is a list of such proverbs, followed by interpretations that has been the analytical method used for this study.

I. *Badarko puchchhar lauri na hatiyar* [The tail of a monkey, neither a cane nor a weapon].

The proverb entails about the tail of a monkey, which sounds meaningless to do anything in humans' perspective because that works neither as a cane nor as a weapon for them. Humans may need a stick and a weapon to control and destroy others but how humans can opine concerning the usages of any part of nonhumans' body as a stick and weapon? Distinctively, it is a human perspective to evaluate everything as resources and it reflects on humans' fascination for a weapon to threaten, control, and capture others' existence. The rapid and global competition of collecting weapons has also created such an ecological crisis. Equally, the hazardous effect of weapons is better described by Buell (1995) as "nothing is more serious than the nuclear holocaust, yet many have found it hard to take seriously, even at the height of Cold War" (p. 316). Rather than observing whether any parts of the body of any nonhumans as can be utilized as weapons or not, it is better to understand that these parts are indispensable for them and only they could understand the value of them. In the name of being more or less intelligent, no one in this world has the right to ignore others' interests. Consequently, ignoring other creatures of this environment, such a perpetual obsession with resources, and weapons continuously leads to environmental apocalypticism (Buell, 1995). In the context of the above proverb, beyond the vital needs, how can humans enter into the independent interests of the nonhumans interfering with their parts of the body for their own benefit?

II. *Bhirbata khasne gailai, Ram! Ram! bhanna skinchha, kandh thapna skinna* [One can enchant Ram! Ram! to the cow falling from a cliff, but cannot give a shoulder to hold it].

The proverb implies that chanting "Rama! Rama!" does not support cows which are about to fall from the cliff. Humans serve cows as they offer milk for them, but humans are not morally motivated to save them in real sense. In the proverb, the cows are not probably in a condition to provide milk to the owners as the owners turn their backs to them being indifferent. Capturing such human tendency of doing a cost-benefit analysis, Singer (2002) marks that "when planners perform cost-benefit studies on new projects; the costs and benefits are costs and benefits for human beings only" (p. 56). Here, humans appear unethical to the environment and ecology that they exploit the resources for their prosperity. Moreover, Taylor (2003) insists, "we [humans] are morally bound to protect or promote their good for their sake" (p. 74). Above all, most of the people in Nepal worship the cows considering them as a form of the goddess. If people

believe in gods, the great gods would not be happy only by chanting their names and singing hymns for them but showing contradictory behavior in practical life just by expressing sorry for the fallen cow.

III. *Sabai kukur Kashi gaye goo kasle khane?* [If all dogs go to *Kashi*<sup>1</sup>, who would eat the feces?].

The proverb expresses concern over the feces of humans if all dogs go to *Kashi* that there would be no dogs to eat feces. The proverbial question presupposes that the dogs should be in our locality to serve human interest even by eating their feces. Can one limit other species' interests just by being *Homo sapiens*? Is it justice to offer our excretion to dogs? Let us assume that some dogs have it. Nevertheless, what about breathing the excretion of plants every millisecond by humans. Why do not humans understand that all the nonhumans have intrinsic value in themselves (Naess, 2015)? It is just the so-called human superiority. It judges everything using humans' parameters, which do not fit to evaluate nonhumans' teleological center of life. Furthermore, humans appear again unaware that humans have specific capabilities, which nonhumans lack, and nonhumans have some capacities which humans lack (Taylor, 2003). In essence, here humans appear to keep that dog with them not by accepting it as an unavoidable member of the biotic community for its sake but as an inferior creature to play a substandard role, forgetting that humans and nonhumans are different but equal.

Concerning these matters, this interpretative study examines some selected Nepali proverbs, which express humans' attitudes towards nonhumans applying ecocritical theories in general, and one of its approaches, anthropocentrism in particular by focusing human-nonhuman relationship.

IV. *Dhobiko kukur gharko na ghatko* [Laundryman's dog: neither belongs to home nor the riverside].

In this proverb, the condition of a dog of a laundryman is shown as having no shelter. Nevertheless, the loyal dog goes the bank of the river with the poor laundryman daily. The human community, however, differently interprets that the dog goes to the waterside with the laundryman leaving the house unsafe. By nature, dogs are not used to carry loads, so these dogs could not be directly exploited to bring back the laundry at home. The laundryman might have employed a donkey to carry the load. Therefore, the dog is useless for the laundryman in the utilitarian society that is guided not only by anthropocentrism but also by anthropoeconomics. As it has been hinted in the proverb, the immediate profit and loss matter much for humans, and the loyalty of the dog does not deserve any significance. Naess (2015) notices such selfish human behavior as a shallow ecological approach where "animals, plants, and natural objects are valuable only as resources for humans saying. If no human use is known, they can be destroyed with indifference" (p. 53) as humans are always in search of resources.

V. *Hidne goruko puchchhaar nimothane* [Twisting the tail of the ox that walks fast].

The proverb summarizes how the price and exploitation are directly proportional to each other. It reveals the human behavior to exploit an active ox excessively by forcing it to pull a cart faster for human profit or torturing much as a better resource while ploughing the field. Humans have a mastery to exploit nonhumans as far as possible up to the level of making something void. They perform no sincerity about the

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<sup>1</sup> *Kasha, the holy city of Hinduism, is located in Northern India.*

sustainability of nature. To minimize such problems, an ecological standpoint with the knowledge of rural settings through a "wide-eyed glance at the close interplay between man, and the other living forms" (Kennedy, 1965, p. 86) is crucial. All the time humans want immediate gratification enforcing their interests to nonhumans for the benefits, which makes the environment more vulnerable. However, when the weaker environment takes its course recollecting strength to regain its own vitality, humans have to bear the significant loss.

VI. *Badarko hatma nariwal* [Coconut in the hand of a monkey].

The above proverb shows the monkey as a destroyer and abuser of resources. Human obsessions to resources consider that the coconuts are made only for them, not for the monkeys or other animals. Humans think that they have the exclusive license to use all the products in this earth, which directly opposes the ecological egalitarianism. Is any item on the bosom of mother earth only for humans? Do humans have an exclusive license to use everything in this world as their resources? If it is not valid, why nature has developed such quality and habit within the monkey to use the things in the world? Humans should be aware that they are also members of a broader biotic community where other members like monkeys also deserve equal rights; still, humans have more obligations as a (more?) social and rational being. In this context, acknowledging the idea of Thomas Aquinas, Singer (2002) argues that humans should highly promote the life and the welfare of nonhumans realizing the possible consequences to humans, without feeling any direct liability to other species. Even in this era, humans fail to realize that humans are not apart from the community but a part of that community where the same monkey is another part of it.

VII. *Sarpa pani maros, lathi pani nabhachiyos* [May the snake be killed but the stick not be broken].

The proverb captures the wish of a calculative person to kill a snake without missing or breaking a single stick. This wish to finish the existence of the snake in this environment disregards the snakes' contribution to maintaining the sound environment. Along with that, it reveals the utilitarian and capitalistic culture of doing cost-benefit analysis in every relationship, keeping benefits always for themselves only. In the depth of such cost-benefit analysis, there lies human corruption, lust, and avarice, which are an excellent barrier for interconnectivity and interdependency in this world. It hinders the guts of the common slogan "live and let live" promoting killing and ruling as the hobbies of such ideology. Such a deep commercial mindset undermines the organic framework and ethical values. Plumwood (2002) locates such ecologically irrational practices of humans to keep themselves at the center as blind spots and projects the possible consequences that "the othering model of the human-centered framework is a serious problem not only for non-humans but for human beings themselves" (p. 117). Therefore, the nonhumans are neither commodity nor enemy for humans, as suggested by the proverb.

VIII. *Kam garne kalu makai khane bhalu* [Corn eaten by the bear grown by the peasant].

In the proverb, some bears chomp the corn, which is managed and supposed to be ripened by farmers. We have only this earth, which is the shelter, and the source of survival for all humans and nonhumans. Nevertheless, the human being who have occupied the fertile land and established legal ownership upon it for producing crops and other activities for the sake of their prosperity. They forget that the entire biotic community depends on this land. Humans might be educated, and known for collected

material prosperity but Sanders (1996) suggests that "we [humans] are nonetheless animals, a two-legged sack of meat and blood and bone dependent on the whole living planet for our [their] survival" (p. 194). They also have unacknowledged ownership there, but they do not believe in agriculture, barns, and wealth. They try to search for their food wherever they go and have whatever they get according to their food habit. What crime did these bears commit just by eating the maize in the field for their survival? There is no injustice. In brief, if humans think so, they have to manage protection rather than accusing the innocent bears. However, Leopold (2014) charges such a system of conservation, which is based "solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided" (p. 42). There lies injustice where one member of this biotic community enjoys prosperity and another member has to struggle for survival.

IX. *Badar batho bhaye pachhi puchchhar athiera marchha* [The monkey dies due to its over smartness].

X. *Kag batho bhaye bista khanchha* [The clever crows dine the dirty meal].

Due to the ruthless human encroachment to nonhumans and nature, nonhumans are maintaining distance to humans potentially being threatened. By birth, some animals are intelligent enough, and that cleverness has been supportive of the survival and existence of them. That is normal, but the above two proverbs reveal the human criticism regarding the intelligence of crow and monkey just by saying that they have to face terrible consequences for that soon. It is moral exploitation. Nevertheless, in reality, such 'othering' of nature and nonhuman effects the planetary life and all members face consequences of that exploitation. Plumwood (2002) signals that potential danger is created by the human-centered framework of rationality, which is unaware of the irreparability, irreplaceability, and non-exchangeability of nature denying the interconnectivity. Further, the proverb claims that the clever crow would dine human stool, and in the case of quick monkeys, the proverb assumes that there would be the death of such monkeys due to terrible hurt on their tails. Why should humans be anxious about the ingenuity of the birds and monkeys? It is the gift of nature to them for their survival. Such proverbial comments to nonhumans break the codes of ecological justice.

XI. *Kukurko kam pani chhainna fursad pani chhainna* [The dog does not have any job to do, but remains busy all the time].

Since the proverb has claimed two things about dogs: it does not have any work and it even does not have time. How can humans assert so? Do dogs do any job for remuneration like a human? The dogs are intelligent beings, which are also employed for the investigation and risky job to identify something in dangerous places like bunkers. As a pet, dogs live with humans protecting humans and their belongings. Nevertheless, our definitions of work and time cannot be the measures to evaluate dogs' daily life. They might have a different system of the time. If not so, how can simply wake up while other humans are in a night of deep sleep? Because of that, humans have to live with the consciousness that nonhumans also have ownership of this planet. Taylor (2003) reminds us that "our origin in the very same evolutionary process that gives rise to all other species, and we recognize ourselves to be confronted with similar environmental challenges to those that confront them" (p. 77). In this sense, how humans can fit their yardstick to measure them. These measures are nothing more than a tool to keep humans at the center.

XII. *Joonkiriko pidhle swarga ujyalo hudaina* [The firefly's light does not make heaven bright].

The proverb is about a tiny insect with a unique feature to generate light on its back. Humans criticize it telling that it is insufficient to delight heaven. There are millions of such insects on this earth, which are purely in/for the earth, and their different roles have to be defined in this biotic outlook of nature. Again, humans do not understand what Naess (2015) has suggested that the diversity and richness of today's life is the contribution of so-called simple, lower, and primitive species of nonhumans. How can we relate it to abstract heaven? However, there is no doubt; it has been delighting our nature as a member of the biotic community. Undermining this type of realization, if humans relate its role to heaven, it will be like disregarding its existence in the world. Due to such human centrism, nonhumans, particular insects are observed as meaningless creatures in this existence. In reality, human and non-human are the interdependent members of the ecosystem and it is the human, which has to think much for environmental justice by playing the non-discriminatory ethical role to perceive and preserve other species. Serving the solution, Schlosberg (2007) focuses on the broad and plural notion of environmental and ecological justice which is "not only environmental justice in human communities but also ecological justice with and for nonhuman nature as well" (p. 40) where all the things and beings are the equal members of this single ecosystem.

XIII. *Jhingako saraple dinga mardaina* [The cattle never expire due to the insect's curse].

Through the proverb, humans enter into the nonhumans' world and hinder their existence discriminating one over another. Here, humans seem to identify themselves with cattle. The proverb argues that no curse of the insect could kill any cattle. The culture of cursing others exists popularly in the human community whomever they do not like. Insects do not have that type of culture like boasting one and cursing others. Boasting the cattle and giving the negative connotation to insects in the proverb, humans have expressed that insects can do nothing in this environment, and cattle are presented as powerful enough. There lies the politics that they could subjugate the cattle for moneymaking rather than the insects. This valorization of the cattle surprisingly appears in the proverb not because of humans' ecological egalitarianism, but for their own benefits. There arises a rhetorical question that if nonhumans do have some humanistic nature and humans do have a few nonhumanistic natures and instincts, how the human and nonhuman could be separated? To clarify it Taylor (2003) asserts that humans interpret nature, applying biocentrism, in which humans take the fact of their being as animal species to be an essential aspect of existence (p. 76). However, humans fail to acknowledge the biocentrism respecting the individual values of nonanimals, how they can understand the broader guidelines of egocentrism. In the same fashion, there is another proverb, (XIV) *Kukur bhuki rahanchha, hatti lamkirahamchha* [The dog barks, the elephant walks onwards]. This proverb exemplifies how humans enter into nonhumans' territory, devising them into the classes of powerful and powerless. Both dogs and elephants are known for their intelligence but it is an injustice to prove the activities of dogs meaningless in comparison to those of the elephants. Even among these two, the dogs reside closer and loyal to the human community. The barking of the dog could be an alarm to the human community for security concerns. Such disrespect against loyalty might be costly for the human community in long run. The proverb (XV) *Bagh budo syal tanneri* [The jackal, however, being younger, can never dare to face even the older tiger]. In the same manner, the proverb involves in power politics, which

admires a forceful tiger, and scales back a frail jackal. In this regard, humans appear to worship the power and repress of the weaker ones.

XVI. *Kukurko puchchhar barha barsa dhungroma rakhepani bangako bangai* [Keep them in a frame for twelve years, still the dogs' tails remain twisted].

The proverb is about the illogical human initiation to modify dogs' tails. Here, humans attempt to adjust the tails of dogs according to their interests. However, they fail. The tails of dogs are naturally crooked and humans have nothing to do with the shape, but humans try to invade their meaningless will to innocent creatures just to show their supremacy. In most cases, humans talk about the sound environment and peaceful coexistence among all creatures in this world. However, in practice, Singer (2002) argues that humans are failing to bring unity between their thought and action that harms the whole system. Humans still come across not realizing that nonhumans also have most of the humans' traits like sensation, association, compassion, and perception. Regarding these, Burroughs (2013) claims that "we all are made of one stuff, the functions of our body are practically same and working of our instincts and our emotional and involuntary natures are in many ways identical" (p. 37). Still, in the name of conservation, humans force nonhumans to live unnatural life. In short, humans continue to establish their supremacy upon other members of nature as their resources that would undoubtedly dismantle the biotic pyramid and invite ecocatastrophe.

## CONCLUSION

The study of Nepali proverbs associated with nonhumans exposes that humans ignore the independent and intrinsic value of them positing their own interests at the center all the time. The anthropocentric attitude of humans interprets loyalty of the nonhumans to humans as their weakness and their strength is figured out only in terms of monetary value. Humans have the mastery to exploit nonhumans as resources. They calculate the cost-benefit and allocate maximum profit in their portion, sustainability. Humans appear to hinder nonhumans' territories and construct hierarchy even among nonhumans. Simply, humans employ their parameters to assess the nonhumans' world and they try to prove the different body parts of nonhumans meaningless, which are unavoidable for nonhumans. Surprisingly, the concepts like job and time that have diverse meanings even among humans are entirely imposed upon nonhumans. In maximum cases, the subordinate roles are offered to nonhumans, and their intelligence is interpreted as trouble and tragedy for humans. Discarding the interdependency and interconnectivity among all the beings in the environment, humans are supposed to devour other creatures in this nature as their sole property. Offensively, nonhumans are presented as thieves when they just try to fulfill vital needs. They neither take little initiation nor bear a minimal risk to save the lives of nonhumans. Instead, they always remain busy and tricky to abuse them. If such attitude and behavior perpetuate in the coming days, eventually the ecological balance will be disturbed and that will backfire on humans first. Therefore, humans should consider the fact that they are part of an ecosystem, not apart from the system to avoid possible ecocatastrophe.

Eventually, the reading jointly expands the scope of eco-literacy facilitating readers to eco-consciousness and enlarges the range of Nepali oral literature considering scattered proverbs as a text. The study examined limited Nepali proverbs related to nonhumans. However, there remains a larger scope to review major Nepali literature as a broader project to identify public perception related to ecology and the environment.



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