

Ecospiritual Traits in the Animation Movies Brother Bear and Pocahontas

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ABSTRACT--*Today there is a rise in the atrocities perpetrated against nature. With the progress in science and technology, the standard of living has improved, but at the same time the relation that man has with nature is deteriorating. In the earlier times, man used to resort to nature for each and every one of his needs, but now he is plundering her for his benefits. It is in such a scenario that theories like ecocriticism, deep ecology, etc. have developed. Ecospirituality is an offshoot of the ecocriticism theory. Ecospirituality tries to establish a spiritual bond between the man and the nature. This paper is an attempt at the analysis of two animation movies, Brother Bear and Pocahontas produced by Walt Disney with the afore-mentioned theory. Both these movies beautifully capture the divine link that man and nature share. Both the movies are set in the United States of America, and make use of several Native American myths. It can be seen that both the nature and the spirituality are an integral part of the Native American culture. With the help of these movies, it can be said that the link between the nature and the man is everlasting, and that it is the need of the hour to remind man to protect and respect Mother Earth and her creations.*

Keywords--Bond, Ecospirituality, Man, Mother Earth, Nature, Spirits.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecospirituality links the ecological science with spirituality. It is a representation of the spiritual bond between human beings and the environment. It is assumed as an attempt of the people to break free from the materialistic and consumeristic society. It is an umbrella term for ideas like nature religion, deep ecology, etc. The practitioners come from different faiths including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, etc. All in all ecospirituality is the interlinking of bodily awareness and mental intuition relating to a relation between the man and the Mother Earth.

Brother Bear is an animation movie produced by Walt Disney in the year 2003. It depicts the story of an Inuit boy Kenai, who tries to avenge the death of his older brother Sitka. The latter is killed by a bear and Kenai wants to hunt it down. He finds and kills it, but the Spirits, enraged by this, transforms Kenai into a bear as the punishment. To become human again, Kenai must go to a mountain where the earth is touched by the Northern Lights. On this journey, a bear cub named Koda joins him, and through his company realizes the true meaning of brotherhood. *Pocahontas* is a 1995 animated movie, also produced by Walt Disney. It narrates the story of a young Native American woman named Pocahontas, and the changes that happen in her life due the British invasion of the seventeenth century. It is a romantic tale between Pocahontas and the English ship captain John Smith. But her father wants her to marry a Native American warrior, and vehemently disapproves her relation with John Smith.

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Both the animated movies have nature and spirituality in them. Native American legends viewed life as a link or short spell in the cycle of creation and destruction, which led to a kind of kinship among all things. It is this kinship that is lacking among the people of today. Through the analysis of these two movies, this paper tries to re-establish the missing connection between all the creations of nature.

II. ANALYSES OF THE ANIMATED MOVIES

2.1 *Brother Bear*

Brother Bear highlights the virtues of the age old Native American culture vis-à-vis the self-centered and competitive values of popular culture. It proclaims that real grooming of a person's character happens through caring, love and affection. This movie is set 10,000 years ago in the Pacific Northwest, wherein the world of the spirits intermixes with the mundane life of a Native American tribe. This is a tale about totems, bears, and true brotherhood. At the start of the movie, Kenai, the protagonist resides with his two elder brothers. He is shown as an irresponsible youth who is not bothered about the rules he has to follow. Upon reaching adulthood, he is given a totem which is an amulet that will guide him to a mature life. But his totem is that of a bear, which disappoints him. His elder brother, Sitka dies while hunting a bear and Kenai is cursed into a bear by the Great Spirits. After this, he meets with a bear cub named Koda, whose mother was the bear killed by Sitka. On Kenai's journey to find a way to regain his older self, he develops a strong relation with Koda. At the end of the movie, Kenai gets a chance to become human again, but refuses it to be with Koda. Kenai's totem stood for love, and he eventually accepts it. He realizes that the nature has to be revered in all the forms. This movie is about redemption and trying to learn to live in harmony with nature. This movie gives spiritual and environmental awareness by embodying holism, animism and cross species equality. This is exactly what ecospirituality aims to propagate. It advocates that an ecology based approach which focuses on nurturing and healing of earth is quite essential in today's world. In the beginning of the movie, Kenai is shown as someone who is selfish and does not bother about other creatures. He is concerned only about his human family. But this attitude changes after his transformation into a bear. He understands that animals too have a deep familial bond like men, and this further cements his decision to remain as a bear with the consent of his family. He reaches a state of heightened ecospiritual consciousness by getting access to a deep awareness of his spiritual connect with the bear cub, Koda. In this way he learns to respect all creations of Mother Nature, both living and nonliving.

2.2 *Pocahontas*

This animated movie bases itself upon the historical account of colonized America. It projects the need of respecting various cultures as well the value of protecting the environment. The colonial antagonist of this movie, Ratcliffe, tries to loot the motherland of Pocahontas of all its natural resources, specifically gold. On failing to find it, he decides that the natives are hiding it from him. He attacks the indigenous people for his own greedy selfish motives. The kind ship captain, John Smith is however on the side of the native people, and helps them fight against the colonial force. It becomes clear from this movie that one cannot own nature, as everything in it has a soul of its own. One can only be a part of the web that interlinks all the individual aspects of nature. The conflict shared by Ratcliffe and the Native Americans stands as a parallel to the strained relation between the materialistic needs

of the people and their disrespect towards nature. Grandmother Willow, the 150 year old tree, is a symbol for the ecospiritual aspect in the movie. This tree acts as the voice of reason for Pocahontas, whenever she is confused in life. This tree is a figure of enlightenment that spiritually motivates and guides Pocahontas whenever she loses direction. The songs in this movie depict the respect towards nature. The need of harmony with nature, and an animistic and holistic world-view is resonated throughout the movie. This movie also has the elements of animism, which propagates that nature possesses a spiritual essence. John Smith, the English man, is given a sneak peek into the spiritual side of nature by Pocahontas. The willow tree speaks to him along with Pocahontas. But with the colonial invasion, the natives were dragged out of their homeland that resulted in the severance of their ties with nature. At the end of the movie, Pocahontas saves John Smith, and the villain Ratcliffe is punished for his offences. But Pocahontas does not go with Mr. Smith to England; instead, she decides to stay in her homeland by forsaking her love. This is due to her love for nature and the spirits residing within in it.

III. COMPARISON OF THE MOVIES

Both the movies have glaring instances of ecospirituality in them. *Brother Bear* is about finding harmony with all living forms. All living creatures, irrespective of their species, have a bond with each other. The human, Kenai at the end of the movie finds solace with the bear cub Koda; for whom he decides to spend the rest of his life as a bear. In Native American culture, there is a belief of the existence of a Great Spirit. This spirit is the God of creation, history and eternity, who takes a personal interest in worldly matters and regularly interferes the lives of human beings and all creations of nature.

In *Pocahontas* too, there is the existence of this Great Spirit. Grandmother Willow is a representation of this spirit, and she guides Pocahontas towards the right path. She gives the real meaning behind a dream that the latter has. It is about an arrow in a compass. This is interpreted by Willow as a change that is about to take place in the life of Pocahontas. This becomes true with the arrival of John Smith. Pocahontas can talk with the wind, water and the earth. She teaches this to Smith by asking him to listen to his heart. This is an evidence for the fact that the man can communicate with the nature, if he listens to his heart. This is the basic and raw link that earlier human beings had with nature.

Both the movies teach the significance of the honest relation that the man must have with the nature. Pocahontas gives more importance to her motherland than to luxuries that England offers. Kenai also gives priority to protecting Koda than becoming human again. Thus, both the protagonists give great respect to nature, and worship her through their selfless actions.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF ECOSPIRITUALITY IN THE PRESENT TIMES

Sacredness of nature, earth and the universe are the fundamental beliefs which ecospirituality rely on. It is a theory that is very old, and has been practiced by indigenous people before a very long time. Native American and other tribal people's theories hold very deep wisdom. Ecospirituality comprehends the position of man to be connected to all other forms of life, which are interlinked to the Divine Spirit. Ecospirituality can be traced to all the major world religions. Even though their forms of representation are different, they all provide for the

recognition of the paramount importance of the ultimate Divine Power, the force of understanding the relation between man and earth, and man's experiences with the nature. Throughout the globe, more beliefs and practices are coming up to educate people about their spiritual duties and their roles in the protection of the natural systems. People must have this yearning to lead a life that is ecofriendly and mend their strained relation with the nature. Thus, there is a need to revitalize the relationship of man with the enigmatic sacredness of nature. In many religious traditions, there is a belief on the ultimate reality of nature which pervades every creation. It is the teaching of most religions to protect nature, and to consider her as the mother. Depending upon the tradition, all natural systems are treated as gifts from Mother Nature, whose ultimate aim is to ensure the complete happiness of all her children. There are five major principles of ecospirituality, namely, tending, dwelling, reverence, connectedness and sentience. Most Hindu teachings have very poignant attributes of ecospirituality in them. In the *Upanishads*, there is the mention of the Supreme Power which is called "*paramatman*". It says that every aspect of the ecology is related to something divine, and therefore, deserves respect from everyone. The negative effects of the rapid industrialization of the 1980s prompted the Indian government to institute policies to deal with the conservation of environment. These were based on Hindu belief of ecospiritual practice. The traits of it can also be seen in "*Prithvi Sukta*" which is "*Hymn to Mother Earth*". Here, earth is attributed with human qualities, and men are shown to have familial bond with her. Ecospirituality can also be seen in Jainism. They believe in the protection of nature from all harms. They have deep connection with nature and her creations. Their main principle of life is nonviolence, and the treatment of their fellow beings with utmost respect. Buddhism also talks about the spiritual link that man must share with his environment. Many scholars have developed a strain that is called Green Buddhism, to tackle problems like environmental pollution and degradation. It primarily focuses on the resources that can be applied in animal rights, nature protection, etc.

The post traditional and new form of ecospirituality is based on use of scientific theories. It believes that the application of science based theories is important for the further growth of ecospirituality. It aims at establishing proper ways of analysis of the theories before putting them into practice. Later, these theories are brought out to establish a sacred bond between nature and religion which shall be spiritual in nature.

V. CONCLUSION

The main aim of this paper is to make man realize the need to protect and conserve nature and her creations, and also to give the due respect to them. Due to a rise in the various careless activities from men, nature is facing innumerable and dangerous problems like pollution, soil erosion, ozone layer depletion climate change, greenhouse effect, etc., which can lead to the eclipse of the very existence of life. Men are becoming more and more selfish, and are exploiting nature for their own carnal benefits. With the advancement of science and technology, man thinks that he has become self-sufficient. One should never forget about where he came from. Ecospirituality is a part of ecocriticism that aims at tracing the divine relation between nature and her creations. Both the above mentioned animated movies delve into the beauty of nature, and the great relation that a person can share with nature. When a person becomes one with nature, he can communicate with nature, and understand her language. The occurrences of several natural disasters and epidemics are proof to the fact that Mother Earth is retaliating against the cruelties unleashed upon her. Man is in a way digging his own grave. So, now is the time to protect and respect nature, before it will be too late. By this study on ecospirituality, this paper is an attempt to resurrect the

lost link that man once shared with nature. Like men of ancient times, it is time for the modern man to revive the spiritual bond between him and nature. This will also help the future generations, as the careful observance of this bond will ensure untainted respect towards nature, leading to a stop on the destruction and abuse of earth, and conserve her for the posterity. This is called sustainable development. In a way, this study tries to protect the interests of the future generations by ensuring that a clean and safe planet is preserved for them.

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