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## **Analysing Bijaya Hitan's some Selected Stories from an Eco-centric Approach**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper makes the Ecocritical reading of three stories, namely, “Bagmati Blues,” “Saharle Panchhayeki Buhari” (My translation “A Daughter-in-Law Disregarded by a City”) and “Nawabarshale Janmayeka Brykshyaharu” (My translation “The Groves Bred by New Year”), written by an ecowriter, Bijaya Hitan. Drawing on the Ecocritical and Ecofeminist theories of Lawrence Buell, Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, and some relevant journals and books, it analyzes the portrayals of non-human world that is the Bagmati river and her declining physical environment. As soon as Bagmati river enters the Kathmandu valley near Sundarijal, the water starts deteriorate. The river has been used as dumping site for domestic and industrial waste water and solid waste. Besides that, the river has been widely used for sand extraction and land encroachment through squatter settlements at the bank of the river. Hitan, in his three short stories questions the ethics, policies, and cultural values of people at Kathmandu for treating Bagmati as an instrument, only a means of human ends. This paper scrutinizes the power of words, subject, images and narrative of aforementioned stories to reinforce to understand the oppressive human-environment relations causing multiple forms of ecodegradation that afflict Bagmati river today. The significance of this study is to exhibit how Hitan's ecowriting has proved to be an effective means of communicating the burgeoning environmental concerns of Bagmati and resolving this environmental harm through the adoption of possible alternatives practically and morally.*

**Keywords:** ecowriting, ecodegradation, contamination, Bagmati river, patriarchy, sewage system, biodiversity,

### **Introduction**

Ecowriting has become more significant in today's context of deteriorating environment on the Earth. The power of language and literature lies on revealing and concealing the truth, ideology, and ethics of human society. Ecowriting reveals the natural world against the modern industrial and

technological society. Christopher Manes asserts that nature, which is treated as silenced “Other”, can be described as inspired and articulating in Ecowriting. Manes feels it is prerequisite to develop “viable environmental ethics to confront the silence of nature in our contemporary regime of thought, for it is within this vast, eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity that an ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished, producing the ecological crisis. . .” (16). Nepali literature is still to go a long way in climate fiction. Nevertheless, Bijaya Hitan undertakes to reanimate nature in his book *Blue Planet* (2022) by choosing non-human subjects, notably, rivers, wild animals, water crisis, environmental crisis, degrading biodiversity, and all the human-induced environmental issues.

This paper takes Bijaya Hitan’s stories, “Bagmati Blues,” “Saharle Panchhayeki Buhari” (My translation “A Daughter-in-Law Disregarded by a City”) and “Nawabarshale Janmayeka Brikshyaharu” (My translation “The Groves Bred by New Year”) to reflect upon the interrelationship between nature and human beings. These three stories are from Hitan’s *Blue Planet*, who is recognized by Govinda Bhattarai as a “first Nepali ecowriter with full insight appraising the different dimension of ecowriting” (Hitan 6). In the first two stories, “Bagmati Blues” and “Saharle Panchhayeki Buhari” (my translation “A Daughter-in-Law Disregarded by a City”), Hitan discredits the lost essence of Bagmati to the slack in environmental, cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual conscience of people and the state. Whereas in “Nawabarshale Janmayeka Brikshyaharu” (My translation “The Groves Bred by New Year”), he describes the revived Bagmati with her regained ecosystem which has become possible through human effort. This paper makes Ecocritical reading of aforementioned stories written by Bijaya Hitan. Lawrence Buell and colleagues clarify that the conviction of Ecocriticism is to explore “the arts of imagination and the study thereof-by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern-can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of eco-degradation that afflict planet Earth today” (418). Ecocriticism explores the role of humanity that can play to destroy or balance the ecosystem. This paper probes how Hitan’s narrative style and image-making conditions real-life interactions with natural world, that is, river Bagmati with her historical and cultural distinctiveness.

### **Water Myth versus Reality**

Water, an essential element for life on this planet, is a finite natural resource. A well-managed water system and water sources in a country determines sustainable development and healthy ecosystem. The apparent function of water is to clean and purify objects. And all religions insist on purification, physical and spiritual, in which water plays an important role. Human’s relationship with water has been close and intimate one. Ancient Hindu mythology describes water as the foundation of the whole world and reveres the rivers as the embodiment of power to heal and cleanse the impurity. Water has been recognized as a primordial spiritual symbol since the Vedic period in the Hindu social system. “The running water in general and the Ganga in particular, and sacred ponds, too are described as bestowers of sanctity and miracles . . . . A common chain of interrelationship between water-bodies and human society is maintained by varieties of performances and rituals” (Singh 210). The ethical principles of Hinduism and Buddhism-the prominent religions of Nepal-revere nature and suggest to adopt non-violence and non-injury to animate and inanimate creation of nature. “Hindus have extended their relationship from social and natural environment treating rivers as their mother goddess, forest as gods, totemic animals as brethren and prey species as mortalities” (Renugadevi 1). Nepalese people believe that Bagmati is the embodiment of divine power which is a life giving and purifying entity.

Bagmati river has been the holy sites from primordial time as she flows past different deities, Gokarneshwor, Guheshwori, Pashupatinath Temple, Koteshwor Mahadev, Shankhamul, Kalmochan Temple, Tripureshwor Temple, Jal Binayak, and many more while running through Kathmandu. Bagmati, the historical and religious river does not traverse with crystal clear water these days and her vegetation is dry and dismal throughout her belt after she streams from Sundarijal. The pure, serene, and unadulterated water has turned into the dark and murky fluid that flows spreading the stench of sewerage, garbage and all the waste disposed on her body. The polluted state of the Bagmati river and her obstructed aquatic life is the consequence of anthropogenic activities. Research on water pollutants of Bagmati river shows:

The middle-urbanized segments, i.e., from Gokarna to Teku, have shown heavily polluted. However, the upper segment from Sundarijal to Gokarna is unpolluted . . . . The concentration of observed pollutants further revealed that the lower segment, i.e., from Teku to Balkhu, gets moderately polluted, and Balkhu to Saibu-Bhanjyang had slightly polluted. Below the Saibu-Bhanjyang, the river gets restored . . . . The confluences of small tributaries at Shankhamul (Manohara and Hanumante Khola) and Teku (Tukucha, Dhobi Khola, and Bishnumati Khola) have also not filtered . . . . These all tributaries were heavily loaded from urban discharge. (Baniya 5)

The above mentioned scenario challenges the pantheistic world view of Hinduism places important value on nature. Rivers, trees, sun, moon, herbs, mountains, and forests are worshipped acknowledging their function in keeping the ecosystem intact. However, “these noble values become displaced by other beliefs which are either thrust upon the society or transplanted from another culture through invasion, then the faith of the masses in the earlier cultural tradition is shaken” (Dwivedi 25). The modern culture and system has invaded the ethical values which acted as a sanction against the destruction of nature. The people have become more inward-looking and self-centred giving high priority to economic factors than the religious and ethical values. Bagmati has become the victim of this changing moral of modern people at Kathmandu valley.

### **Communicating Bagmati’s Lost Essence**

Bijaya Hitan is trying to communicate that environmental crisis is largely the consequence of human actions. The Bagmati catastrophe, the destruction of her beauty, the extermination of vegetal and aquatic ecosystem has been the by-product of human culture, ‘largely of our own making’. Hitan’s motive in his three stories, “Bagmati Blues,” “Saharle Panchhayeki Buhari” (My translation “A Daughter-in-Law Disregarded by a City”) and “Nawabarshale Janmayeka Brikshyahu” (My translation “The Groves Bred by New Year”) conforms Donald Worster’s claim in his book, *Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination Regarding the Crisis*, “We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them” (qtd. in Glotfelty xxi). The physical form of Bagmati has been exploited by the city dwellers and the state’s short-sighted sewage policies. People’s interaction with Bagmati has been the cultural and spiritual as she gurgles past several sacred sites and deities including Pashupatinath, Hindus’ most revered deity. However, today’s Bagmati has accumulated sludge, garbage, carcass, plastic bags, and toxic sewage of industrial chemicals. The modernization and centralization of development has accelerated the shift of population from sparsely populated rural areas to densely compressed cities. Kathmandu city was not prepared to bear the population in the beginning, nor has it sought the permanent and sustainable plan and action to manage the sewage. Till the date the central government has perceived that sanitary sewage means only one

way out that is sewers built to carry the raw sewage from the street into the rivers. Using river Bagmati as the site to dump the filth and drain the human excreta is the act of killing nature in the name of progress. Vandana Shiva alleges this concept of progress as seriously wrong as it threatens survival of ecosystem itself. Shiva identifies the violence to nature “which seems intrinsic to the dominant development model, is also associated with violence to women who depend on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves, their families, and their societies. This violence against nature and women is built into the very mode of perceiving both, and forms the basis of the current development paradigm” (xiv). Hitan’s female narrator in “Saharle Panchhayeki Buhari” (My translation “A Daughter-in-Law Disregarded by a City”) and the portrayal of Bagmati in female image in *Bagmati Blues* is the symptomatic reading of the way of treating woman and nature in terms of feeble, dumb, and passive receptor in the neo-liberal patriarchal structure.

The narrator of “Saharle Panchhayeki Buhari” (My translation “A Daughter-in-Law Disregarded by a City”) is a non-Nepali woman from a developed European Country (Sweden) who has settled in Nepal after marrying a Nepali citizen. She marks out the degrading environment of Kathmandu city and especially Bagmati river. A mother of a son, the narrator gradually succumbs to respiratory disease due to excessive pollution, smoke, and dust of Kathmandu city. She reflects “These days air does not contain oxygen as Bagmati shortfalls water. It feels that blood in my vein transports carbon molecules. Every layer of my lungs is glued with atoms of Nitrox. The irritation of my throat increases as if it is enveloped by all the dust from the atmosphere” (Hitan 30). Medicine does not work on her asthma and chronic cough. She recollects her memory of some years back when Kathmandu’s landscape was clear and magnificent. On the contrary, today she lives with the despotic vista in Kathmandu, intimidated at the hands of human beings noticeably, through growing urbanization, haphazard human settlements, water crisis, lack of open space for the children, congested buildings, the ugly landscape camouflaged by smoke, dust and smug, and the increasing level of PM(Airborne Particulate Matter), the hidden toxicity. On top of that Bagmati, the soul of Kathmandu flows with pollutants like nitrate, ammonia, phosphate and many more. Not only Bagmati, but also the tributaries of Bagmati, to name a few, Manahara, Hanumante, Ichhumati are not immune of this plight. Rachel Carson indicates history of life on earth marks the interaction between living things and their surroundings, and it’s the environment that has moulded the physical form, flora and fauna of the planet. However, during the past quarter century, particular lives, that is, human beings have moulded the environment. Carson blames “The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is for the most part irreversible” (6). No any other force, witchcraft, and metaphysical power have jeopardized the course of nature; it’s the people’s behaviour and action that has done it. The pollutants contaminating the river Bagmati are sinister to change the very nature of the river and her life. The human assault to Bagmati is compared to attack force of the battle as “huge sewage pipes pointed to the river as the missiles pointed to the possible direction of enemies and the atoms (bombs) of toxins like Nitrate, Amonia, Phosphate are bombarded on her bosom” (Hitan 36). The character feels the pangs of empathy for the polluted Bagmati river which is dying and shrinking everyday with her withering vegetation.

The narrator identifies herself with river Bagmati that women and nature are similar in terms of vulnerability to environmental disaster. Akin to her ailing body Bagmati is succumbed to filth, muck, and excrement. “Poor Bagmati is infected by disease like I. I am bed ridden due to asthma, and Bagmati is poisoned by sewage. I can run from this crisis, but Bagmati cannot rebel. She has no option than to endure silently this anthropogenic torment” (Hitan 37). Hitan has recreated

the patriarchal society, where women have been considered closer to nature than man, and this association has validated subjugation of both. An independent woman constricted by patriarchal power structure, when realizes her self-esteem and right to live a healthy life is being threatened, decides to leave the country. She tries hard to make her husband aware that the reason of her degrading health is pollution of the town. She warns of the irreversible consequences of unabated environmental exploitation and emphasizes an ecological ethics to perceive the interconnectedness between humans and nature and to maintain environmental integrity. However, Rohan, her husband turns his deaf ear to her warning and concerns about the causes of Bagmati pollution to be the marine dumping, sewage mixing, sand extraction, waste disposal, and many more. She mocks at the cleaning campaign of Bagmati that collecting and extracting tons of litters and debris alone can't redeem Bagmati unless the proper sewage system and recycling plant are run effectively by the government. The narrator disapproves the connection of humans with water occurring over the toilet and filth disposal as Julie Stauffer discredits the western invention of system of sanitary sewage, to carry the raw sewage away from the streets into the rivers and lakes, because engineers believed that "running water purified itself" (7). After this theory had been proved false, the western people developed sewage treatment methods, whereas Nepal government has abstained from developing and installing this system. The plight of foreign daughter-in-law is the symptomatic rendering of the predicament of contaminated Bagmati river.

Hitan, in his two stories, mocks at the innermost connection of human lifestyle with water which occurs over the lavatory when flush toilet was invented during the burgeoning industrial era in Europe. On the one hand, the utilitarian and religious need of pure water is strongly realised; on the other hand the water ways are used as sewers. Greta Gaard questions, "Where did we get the idea that water was a place for waste? And how does that idea cohere with the fact that we need clean drinking water to survive?" (157). She contends that the dichotomous view of water-pure water/waste water-parallels other normative dualisms of thought: wilderness/civilization, nature/culture, virgin/whore, white/of colour, reason/emotion. "And these normative dualisms are at the root of western culture's trouble relationship with nature" (158). The paradox lies in the practice of spewing the raw sewage from the households, industries, factories, and farming on the rivers causing a massive pollution in big cities of Nepal. Undeniably, Bagmati River is no exception despite the fact that the river has the immense cultural and economic values and has the potential for the small-scale hydroelectricity, irrigation, and drinking water source.

In "Bagmati Blues," Hitan fictionalizes River Bagmati. As an ecowriter, he presents Bagmati with different imageries. One evening narrator dates with a lady, incarnation of Bagmati herself who exhorts nothing but reveals silently how the cruelty of human act has mutilated her spirit and charm. Hitan's rhetorics of eco-dating with Bagmati implicitly persuades the readers to pursue ecofriendly and ecologically minded interest. The humanizing technique employed by Hitan reveals Bagmati in embodiment of an exploited woman. Different gods and goddesses manifest in the manifold form of nature and vice versa in Hindu myth. Bagmati River is humanized in Hitan's "Bagmati Blues" as she is described as a Nepali woman draped in Dhaka Saree, with a red rhododendron tucked on her blonde hair. However the rhododendron gifted to her by someone appears to be wilted. The narrator diagnoses her sleepless eyes-unlike Swyambhu's half closed eyes-out of drudgery and fatigue. Her kajol is smudged as the lucid tide in her eyes is displaced by congealing grey pond of rainy season. Her lips are dilapidated due to the perpetual abuse. The green blouse is ripped up at the seam and her yellow saree is shredded. Hitan has shaped his environmental imagination through the use of tropes; Bagmati's green blouse is the symbol of green vegetation of *Chure* as she meanders through this belt and the yellow sari replicates the fertility of

*Terai* as she gurgles past this region of the country soaking the rich arable land. The makeover on her dishevelled appearance is a mockery to civilization of Kathmandu and pride of Pashupatinath. She is succumbed to addiction of wine and smoking; the cigarette puff she inhales and the wine-bottle she consumes evinces the contamination, filthiness, and blight; she is stifled by the human act of poisoning her. When the narrator closely observes her to find her makeover trying to camouflage the scar, stench and stigma thrust by the city dwellers, he ascertains that she has lost her glory and identity. Bagmati is no more fructified by aquatic life and her arid belt has lost the bio-diversity. She is singing her melancholic song in low spirit streaming in her own accord; her blues are expressed through her shoddy appearance.

Bagmati is imaged as a living being with instinct and interest of her own. The ecodating of the narrator with Bagmati is thwarted when he does not find respite and pleasure at the bank of the river. However he parts from her with the commitment of loving her more and giving her pride back. This is how the narrator is communicating with Bagmati, and persuading the readers to live in healthy and clean interaction with the nature. Hitan has fictionalized Bagmati in order to communicate what he knows and what the audience has not seen and noticed. Fictionalizing of the river has the motive to magnify the environmental problem to induce the reader to see, to look and to notice the river and its surroundings. He, as an ecowriter, is suggesting the readers to see what the river can see and to hear what its gloomy silence means. His accountability of an ecowriter has been successful in giving voice to nature. Hitan, without directly condemning the oppression of Bagmati, emphasizes on redeeming the river from all these filth, encroachment, and abuse. Bagmati should be treated with love and empathy to bring her back to her own natural state of wilderness and purity. This is Hitan's unspoken message in "Bagmati Blues".

In "Bagmati Blues," Hitan analyzes that the ethical dimensions of Bagmati pollution are not more widely understood by the Policies and people. Nepali people are the people of good conscience, but they lack the emotional shock to see the Bagmati river polluted day by day. There is a little evidence that environmental degradation of the river feel urgent to the most Kathmandu people. Yet, in "Saharle Panchhayeki Buhari" he has adopted the narrative as a way of making the impact of environmental deterioration intelligible by integrating the scientific facts about the river contamination and its consequences for humans and natural world. Donald A. Brown identifies the ecological systems of developing nation to be at greater risk. He justifies that "The vulnerability of human health and socioeconomic systems-and, to a lesser extent, ecological systems-depends upon economic circumstances and institutional infrastructure" (63). This implies that the central systems in Kathmandu are more vulnerable with less favourable economic and institutional commitment.

The repressive Bagmati regains the coveted greenery in *Nawa Barshale Janmayeka Brikshyaharu (The Groves Bred by New Year)*, though it's far but not impossible. Hitan denounces the human-induced environmental change of Bagmati river and invokes to bring Bagmati to her own natural accord. As an environmentalist, he pictures the futuristic ecotopia of Kathmandu city and the river Bagmati after two decades from now. On the warm day of Baisakh, Nepali new year, Bagmati is rolling with her sparkling water; the swan sporting on the surface as marine life enriches the river underneath. The sewage of Kathmandu has an outlet in recycling centre. After the solid waste is separated through the chemical process to use as manure, the filtered liquid is drained in the river. The collective effort of stakeholders, social organizations, and the people has made it possible to bring back the river in her natural state. Hitan describes the vision of new society with radical values and action in understanding environment and ecosystem. On the contrary of today's world, the different political wings are collaborating with social organization, state, stakeholders; all

political parties have streamlined from the play of power to work on green revolution. The ecology movement for the preservation and recovery of oppressed flora, fauna, and rivers have become successful.

The third person narrative renders the account of the main character, Ramesh, who calls himself a Belpali as he is the non-residential Nepali in UK. Ramesh, with his family, visits Nepal as an environmentalist on and off who works to conserve the nature in Nepal. He has been invited as a chief guest in the tree plantation programme around the Guheswori site on the occasion of Nepali New Year. The narrative is rich in describing the proximity of natural environment with the gushing Bagmati, chirping birds, and screaming monkeys around the Guheswori premise. The environmental awareness is prominent in this narrative by relating the scientific fact, that a single tree is the habitat of different birds and animals. Besides that, it extracts 2kgs carbon dioxide from the environment every year. The growing groves of planted saplings on the bank of Bagmati have rejuvenated the greenery of vegetal life. Hitan recounts the scenario of transformation as such:

Ramesh gets overwhelmed as he gazes at Bagmati's immaculate rush. Today is Nepali New Year, Baisakh 1<sup>st</sup>. These days New Year is celebrated by planting trees all around. Rivers, lakes, streets, temples, and public parks get cleaned on this occasion. All are engaged to preserve endangered species and vegetal. Programmes like, green poetry conference and ecology interaction have got priority amongst the intellectuals. The judicious people have replaced the modern way of New Year celebration by the act of preserving the non-human natural world. (140-41)

Hitan anticipates the microcosm of ecological utopia by imagining to provide useful contribution to our quest for an ecologically responsible future. He has developed a model of a perfectly clean Bagmati and its healthy vistas. Hitan's view of utopia is guided by 'socio-politico navigational compass' with due consideration to the problems of converting from a polluting society to an ecologically stable one. Marius de Geus elucidates that the ecological utopia, at a distant future, is to influence the course of concrete decision making in a country for environmental friendly choices; to work in flexible, subtle, and gradual manner toward the ecologically sound society (191). In course of action, numerous essential advantages accumulate to evolve to a green, clean, and eco-responsive society. Hitan portrays the idealized image of Bagmati in total contrast of today's scenario not in idealized ground but in the act of environmental preservation based on real life situation. He gives the idea that ultimate ecosociety is achievable by adapting and implementing increased environmental consciousness by eliminating the "hyper-separation" of self and nature.

## Conclusion

This study attests that ecowriting which contains right element has the potential to influence public opinion and debate on environmental degradation. Hitan's story can be the proper channel which incorporates the complex discourse on anthropogenic environmental problem and its solution. Besides the story telling, Hitan's role as an environmentalist and a writer works to communicate truth of environmental science. By taking the Ecocritical paradigm, this study has analyzed that Hitan's stories have the power to activate concern and creative thinking about Bagmati's environmental future. The creative depiction of environmental harm of the river prompts the intensified concern about the consequence of devastated river-ecosystem at Kathmandu valley, and in the same way reflects upon the possible alternatives to revive the dead existence of the river. Hitan identifies the reasons for dominating Bagmati river to be the instrumentalization of nature and the separation of self and nature by the human beings. His stories furnishes voice to Bagmati river, a non-human agency, appealing to develop ecological self, that is the relation of care, friendship, and self-respect for nature.

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