

**Material Matters: Exploring the Ambivalence of Nature in Harekrishna Deka's
'Prakritik' and 'Aprakritik'**

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Abstract

The realm of reality entails our cultural and social conditions along with the way we live in the society. Materiality aligned with the sense of being operates as a mode of untrammelled space within the discourse of man and nature. The everyday of human being rooted in network of object reality implies their location within systems of narrative and logic. In other words, objects exist because social, cultural and political forces define them as objects within systems of relations with other objects. The present paper is an attempt to analyze Sahitya Akademi awardee, Harekrishna Deka's two Assamese short stories, PRAKRITIK and APRAKRITIK as an inviting blend of the dichotomy between the 'elemental' and the 'natural' being of man in nature and how the inventiveness of the relationship lie not in the form but in its telling. In both the stories, there is a knitting pattern of how the core of nature's wholeness is supplemented through the material difference of human needs sufficing the momentary subjectivity of the characters in both the stories.

Keywords: everyday, elemental, materiality, nature, objects.

Introduction:

The world of nature modulated in Harekrishna Deka's short stories offer a poetic density and visibility that entails the vision of analyzing man's relationship in a materialist world where there is a spontaneous merging of culture and nature. The interplay of the terms natural and non/natural in the titles of both the Assamese short stories taken under study, recognizes the externality and interiority of the human relationship with nature or vice versa postulating what Paul Carter terms as 'undoing of pointillism' (120) and re-addressing the *differential* relations of expressions in humans. Such a notion infers the role of nature where it hardly accommodates in perceiving its unity as a whole. The stories produce more than just a materialist reading of the text but indulges to dissect the inherent lack of consistency prevalent in the 'oneness' of nature in which human beings act as a part. Such implications suggest the series of contestation that the natural space offers and pointillism rejects, for the two stories taken up for discussions destabilizes the oneness of subjectivity. Materialism frequently mobilises the very grammar of critical processes to highlight the variety of strategies used to ignore or marginalise nonhuman agencies by actively participating in the project of critique and asserting that they offer the authentic picture of reality outside of humanist distortions, they contend to have surpassed the critical revelation. The two stories have been taken to critically study materialism as an impact of urbanization and how it shapes the notion of being for the characters.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the paper is to undertake qualitative research of the primary texts while establishing a critical framework on the area of material studies and how both the living and non/living worlds creates an entity of space that questions the idea of *being*. In this process, it is also seminal to understand that the materiality of the body needs to be

understood in terms of the material world outside rather than with reference to bodily processes of the characters, including both the human and non-human world. The paper also seeks to understand the potential of a sense of loss that exists in the 'in betweenness' of the material and natural world.

Analysis

The story 'Aprakritik' (Non-Natural) is a prequel to the story 'Prakritik' (Natural) deciphering the creation of the story itself as depicted in the latter, mapping the purging of real spatiality and the creation of a space of thought where processes appear to be able to operate without a definitive geographical or material location. This is because the narrative urges to break the epistemological privilege accorded to human knowledge in engaging with the real nature of objects. Even before the typist was isolated within the confines of his house in the story 'Aprakritik', the physical processes of conversations of the Bihari labourers instigated him to "realise that the abandoned truck had captured a considerable portion of his heart" (125). The individuality of the typist is not a subject matter to be discussed in isolation but based on his rationality with others or other things as such. The typist is a natural part of the society but the notion of *aboutness* in the typist with his attachment with the truck involve a material existence of dialogue implicit in the continuous flow of emotion between mind and the body. The interiority of such attachment can be described as 'sociality of emotion'¹—feelings moving towards the object or other person to pursue the readiness of circular between the mind and the body. The relation between the typist and the truck creates a boundary that allows his subjectivity to delineate where the object (truck) of emotion is modulated through the effects of circulation and the individual aims at converting the object as his own. Similarly, in 'Aprakritik', the taxi driver, who was the protagonist writer's

¹ Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Pain*, describes the term as a means of asserting the importance of emotion in the dynamics of psychic and social objects,
Noesis Literary Volume 2 Issue 2

neighbour formulates his effective performance of identity with his particular engagements and presentation of the object (his car), of which he was so fond of and took extra care to clean and wash it every morning. The narrativization of larger discourses on self, identity, and biography—which connect aesthetics to social identity and ethics of self—gives the object meaning. The matter of self-identity associated with the objects gives salience to contemporary consumption processes without attention to empirical settings and processes.

The dialogue with nature and human condition implies the material culture as the embedded narrative display of the acquired material condition in the unnamed protagonist in ‘Prakritik’ as well as the trajectory of the creative process that the author in ‘Aprakritik’ consciously adopts in dislocating nature from its totality. The protagonist in ‘Prakritik’ situates himself in an isolated location away from the town limits but the dynamic interconnectivity of the body and materiality as constituents of transformative interactivity possesses an evolutionary history that continue to unfold—making it hard to ignore. This is because materiality possesses agency that affects the psychological conditioning of the typist making his body the point of convergence in both the material and natural world:

The house situated below the highway but quite close to it, he often had the sensation in the initial days as if the vehicles were going right over his body. Now, with the passage of time, he had got used to them. He became aware that his hearing had significantly improved since arriving at this location. He was now conscious of the characteristics of sound that was around him and the connections between objects and sounds (Deka 126).

Similar translocation is witnessed in the protagonist of ‘Aprakritik’, a writer who in his quest of transforming experiences to his artistic reservoir resolves to incorporate nature as a portal to inner peace amidst the chaos of urban life. He wanted to create a “passage of

freshness” through the mayhem of urbanization. He felt that there exists within these conceits an opportunity to involve in long-overdue analytical bridgework across the spheres of the human and non-human worlds which entails excavation of ideas. The author tries to align his line of inquiry with Foucault’s paradigm of ‘total history’ as a means of cultural construction of boundaries and spatial identities. The subjective totality of the writer in ‘Aprakritik’ destabilizes the well-defined spatial-temporal phenomenon of which traces are found in his envisaged life of the neighbour who is later found to be a terrorist responsible for recent bombings in the city. There is a simultaneous analysis of the natural in nature as well as the human nature but the author resists from monopolizing under/misrepresented elements of man’s ‘nature’ in compelling the readers to revisit the avenues of expressions through appropriation of space: “The project of total history is one that seeks to reconstitute the overall form of a civilisation, the principle—material or spiritual— of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion—metaphorically termed as the ‘face’ of a period.”² (Foucault 9). Throughout the plot of both stories, the internal and external domains of the human conceptual map characterize the imaginings of the characters and the “the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world” (Coole et al. 3). The objects are incorporated and represented into wider social discourse associated to extensively held norms carrying personal and emotional meanings and facilitate interpersonal interactions and assist the characters to act upon themselves. The truck in ‘Prakritik’ is moulded into the nature of the protagonist’s consciousness who accepted it as friendly presence in the emptiness of the night: “He could finally sleep only when one or two trucks started plying toward the wee hours of the night”(128). Such realisations led him to affiliate himself with urbanity and somewhat made him resolve his cognitive conflict for humans and machines accomplish a

² Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972)
Noesis Literary Volume 2 Issue 2

level of efficiency and relevance that made his experiences inclusive and began to deliberate himself as a part of the urban set up:

During his first few days here, he hardly felt the same placid peacefulness within his surroundings. There was an abrupt emptiness in the place where he had been accustomed to so much frantic commotion. Furthermore, the deafening sound of the trucks trundling through the night added a startling element to that sense of emptiness. The trucks rushing in at breakneck speed woke him up at midnight from his sleep and he had the delusion that these heartless humongous machines would tear his body apart. But within a few days he got used to the deafening roar of the trucks and came to accept them as an essential part of his well arrayed surroundings. He came to terms with a notion that rather than tarnishing nature these machines were symbolising a dynamic and pulsating life-force (Deka 126).

His obsession with the truck gradually increases and reaches its zenith after the unfortunate event between the truck driver and his assistant, resulting in the death of the former. The abandoned truck after the mishap, functions as an embodied material experience (since everything in nature is embodied) for him, governed by a trace of otherness that is manifested as a signifying presence. In Catherine Belsey's words, "the displacement of subjectivity across a range of discourse implies a range of position from which the subject grasps itself and its relations with the real, and these positions may be incompatible or contradictory. It is these incompatibilities and contradictions within what is taken for granted that exert a pressure on concrete individuals to seek new, non-contradictory subject-positions" (661). The typist's embodiment of the truck displaces the experiential of his subjectivity implying the interactive nature of humans that manipulate material forms to produce specific behavioural and psychological responses. The truck becomes the central focus of his being and it almost provided him a kind of warmth in his otherwise isolated life.

Noesis Literary Volume 2 Issue 2

It seems as if the truck catalyses his subjectivity making it a site available for reorientation. The amalgamation of the truck's presence with his surrounding environment implies that he does not visualize nature in relationship to some external reference making it a 'site' of excavation—available for reorientation. In other words, such blurring of distinction between one's body and that of the other leads to embodied simulation which acts as a somewhat 'non-conscious or pre-reflective' function between the modal object and material body and consequently the embodied body becomes liberated from the burden of modelling the actual presence in real life—engaging in creating an illusion of escapism from the material conditions while speculating the character's consciousness. The narrativization of the self serves as the aesthetic accompaniment of his identity in analysing the role played by the truck entrusted in his consciousness. The pleasure that he received with his affinity with the truck offers a wider concern of locating cultural materialism were incorporating objects into one's identity "represent, wider social discourses related to extensively held norms and values enshrined in norms and social institutions" (Woodward 4) facilitating structures of social position to the object, which in this case is the truck. His emotion in acknowledging the objectivity of truck while merging his material reality along with its existence as it is through emotions that he is responding to the truck. Ahmed suggests that "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social. But produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (TCPE 16). In other words, emotions in their intensity evolve into a circulation of objects saturated with affect and as *sites* of 'personal' and 'social tension':

The sight of the truck made him remember that ghastly night. He no longer shuddered with horror when he recalled that incident. In fact, he felt a thrill every time he saw the truck, because it made him realise that he and the truck were the only witnesses to that nightmarish event. He and the truck both were keeping a secret only to

themselves and that made him feel a sort of kinship with the truck. The contents of the mysterious dialogue that he exchanged with the truck every evening as he sat on his verandah, was something he could not confide in anybody else (Deka 132).

The physical aspects of the truck and his 'self' seems to be in an ongoing swedge forming his identity, The typist identifying with the truck's wholeness engenders 'speculative realism' because he (the typist) is incapable of reducing the world (read nature) to the question of human access striving towards the "unmediated and irreducible thinginess of things" (23). The narrative, despite the referential in creating consciousness, not only confines the subject to his imagining but also extends to his subjectivity since he was able to condition its existence as what Julia Kristeva describes as an abject. The abject or 'jettisoned object' ceaselessly challenges its master (*self*) from the place of banishment, drawing it to a place where meaning collapses: "The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being" (5). This means that there is hardly a pure self or a pure object without the self as reflected in the ingenuity of the storyline for the discarded truck—a symbol of human engineering, and by extension, of a materially upgraded culture—but that culture is now in the arms of nature, literally, and as he witnesses the picture of brokenness "the dilapidated truck was bare to its skeleton" (135), undefined by cultural norms it symbolizes what is not nature beyond the social setting of human civilization. The wrecked truck unveils something *elemental* inside, something that is human and also material—hence not immaterially distant but the image of unison encapsulates the bond of body implying that in spite of being human, the two are 'naturally' so, at *peace* in their bodily union "Covering themselves with a piece of the torn canvas, they were embracing each other in a sound sleep. A look of indifference and deep contentment was spread across their placid faces" (135). This is another instance of the material *site* witnessed in the lovers' embrace.

The imbrication of human beings with objects is applicable when the relationship is symmetrical and transitive but not reflexive³ implying that the narrativization of larger discourses of self, identity, and biography—which connect aesthetics to social identity and ethics of self—gives the object meaning.

The author dissects the conventions of culture where the couple, supposedly social outcasts are in a state of embraced serenity where cultural weight has not been able to weigh their sense of being away, and in their elemental surrender to the pull of desire, they have submitted to their essential nature, away from permissiveness, away from any procedure which wouldn't have provided such a space as granted by nature—much of which stems from being untrammelled by societal expectation—a condition which allows them to stay in that space or move somewhere into the deep woods where invisibility overwhelms everything—to be in nature is also to be *one with* nature, most importantly inhibition free, and with zero prejudice—interestingly, their space is not man-made in another sense, in that they haven't made the inside of the broken down car, they just happened to occupy it, it is ironic for someone coming from outside, but *natural* for them to be there. Moreover, the variation of the truck's connotation for ever character is reveals the knitting pattern of how the core of nature's wholeness is supplemented through the material difference of human needs—for the typist it was an object of mitigating his alienation at first but gradually it turns that once the truck the wholeness of the truck was lost, again for the outcast couple it becomes a shelter which was inhibition free and free from societal prejudice. Again, the truck was subjected to much damage from the continuous ripping of its parts according to the needs of other people: “The truck is only a vehicle needed by men and once that need is over it becomes fragments of useless iron and steel. He felt as if he had come out from a grip of illusions to put his feet firmly on the *terra firma* of reality” (134). Such impressions suffice the *momentary*

subjectivity of each of these characters' individual longing for some kind of union, inaccessible yet longed for, which is also natural to human beings, and in its idealised inseparability from what is essential, it becomes crucial for the purpose of self-definition as well. Similarly, in 'Aprakritik', the *momentary subjectivity* in materiality is seen as a persistent bodily measure through the protagonist's developing psychological proceedings on the noise of the typewriter or the taxi driver's behavioural movements with his car which he adored and even occasionally talked to while washing and cleaning, left under his neighbour's supervision to meet certain urgency at home only to be later revealed that he was actually an extremist avenging the death of his young son. The incident suggests the nuances of human condition which cannot be crammed between the extreme poles of right or wrong. Such circumstances further index the referential transparency of human suffering in favour of internal echoing and materiality in which the implied meaning is differential. The network of signification that allows encounter of the experiential perforate complexities in the concrete space of the text's materiality. The construction of the 'other' and the 'self' move towards the illusion of spatial and temporal unity as the truck and the typist merge in the attempt to make inferences to speculate the reality. The implication of the merging of the objects in the consciousness deploy what Israel Rosenfield describes in the dynamic, temporal, and relational nature of human consciousness (in particular, of memory) as:

My memory emerges from the relation between my body (more specifically, my bodily sensations at a given moment) and my brain's "image" of my body (an unconscious activity in which the brain creates a constantly changing generalized idea of the body by relating the changes in bodily sensations from moment to moment). It is this relation that creates a sense of self; over time, my body's relation to its surroundings becomes ever more complex, and, with it, the nature of myself and of my memories of it deepen and widen, too (Rosenfield 8).

Moreover, Katherine Hayles argues that “Embodiment is akin to articulation in that it is inherently performative, subject to individual enactments, and therefore always to some extent improvisational. Whereas the body can disappear into information with scarcely a murmur of protest, embodiment cannot, for it is tied to the circumstances of the occasion and the person”(156). This suggests the transience of human desire and the provocations that material life easily provides in different environmental settings. The author is constantly aware of the dynamism created by human condition in nature where the apparatus of ecocriticism which in its universality somehow mitigates the *essential* of nature—uncaring to individual desire in the process of deciphering rhetoric between the text and the environment. ‘Prakritik’ (Natural) and ‘Aprakritik’ (Non/ Natural) stands as an integrative effort of the author to reiterate the notion that there is no other way of entering nature other than abandoning the materiality and attachment of human nature to forge into the conducive space of the *elemental*:

A sigh came gushing out from deep within his chest and he was startled. He left the sides of the truck and advanced towards the middle of the teak forest. The forest was again flush with signs of a change of season. Fresh green leaves were sprouting on the teak trees. The chirping of birds had started again. An incipient sense of exhilaration was hanging in the air. As he made his way back home, he could see the torn canvas of the truck flapping noisily in the wind, like a flag (Deka 135).

Conclusion:

The above analysis illustrates the vital relationship between objects and human beings by negating the former as a passive substance that exists independently of epistemic practices. The networks of interactions that define, mediate, and organize objects are also the networks that these objects and human subjects “act upon”, giving them a sense of direction and

significance within a social network. In other words, objects are defined as such by social, cultural, and political forces inside systems of interactions with other objects. These objects convey multiple emotions that operate to shape bodies as forms of actions. The characters in both the short stories orient towards emotions which form their material reality by involving processes of thought, attribution or evaluation. Such assignment of meaning or involvement in social agency reiterates the fact that human and material lives are routinely intertwined. Appadurai persists that the idea of ‘the social lives of things’ require a degree of ‘methodological fetishism’:

Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things [...] No social analysis of things (whether the analyst is an economist, an art historian, or an anthropologist) can avoid a minimum level of what might be called methodological fetishism (Appadurai 5).

The materiality of everyday life gives it an anthropological necessity to illuminate the inscribed trajectories around which the human life is encoded to carry out the day-to-day transactions and calculations to ‘enliven’ things. By focusing predominantly on the psychological elements of human–object relations the paper emphasizes on the empirical settings and processes that foster the salience of identity management in contemporary consumption by individuals. Thus, in both the short stories, the author has cleverly show how social structures neglect emotional intensities. But the true nature of humanity embedded in rhetorical structures of predatory or instrumental nature imposes complex and subjective nature of both pain and empathy. Such engagement with the problems of the human/natural world cannot be approached as a cognitive proposition alone, but ultimately arises as a

Noesis Literary Volume 2 Issue 2

question of empathy or an involvement of the character's emotions in the problem when embodied consciousness enveloped in a *preobjective space*⁴ (Ponty)—the holistic materiality is lost because the fragmented human desire dislocates the social and cultural dynamics of social communication, implying the centrality of people–object relations to the complex identity questions of self-cultivation, psychological meaning of what it means to be *natural* in the society.

⁴Ponty defined our lived body as a means of access to familiar objects in a presupposed world of the phenomenology of perception. The typist for instance, uses the material world (truck) to explore the natural world in his fulfilment of the self, driving the circumstances of his perception to invest meanings through structures of acquired material conditions

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