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Nature Cure as the Doorway to A New World: An Ontological Study of Trees in Relation to Humankind Observed in The Healing Code of Nature by Clemens G. Arvay

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"When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest woods, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place - a sanctum sanctorum. There is the strength, the marrow, of Nature." (Thoreau 63)

Henry David Thoreau, the American philosopher has been considered a pioneer of modern ecological science from his precise descriptions and observations of the 65-acre Walden Pond in Massachusetts. Through his poetic images, Thoreau has brought an understanding of natural cycles of freshwater lakes considering their essence as the holy core of Nature. Ecological Sciences has crept into the circle of Arts and Literature as a systematic study through Eco-criticism, Eco-feminism and Environmental Studies. Ecocriticism as a transdisciplinary paradigm in cultural studies, started as a regional approach in the US in late 20th century but it has found its way long before it was recognized as a distinctive study in literary criticism. The perennial but long forgotten relationship between man and the environment has been revived in recent centuries and a new perspective has been observed.

To start with, instead of looking at the environment at the behest of the humankind, aiding man in his survival and comfort, a novel yet scientific way of understanding environment as holding superior position in nature and offering an all - embracing solution to man's needs in the present with astounding discoveries from nature is studied. The human- nature world is still here for man to explore and understand and in the observation of the existence of trees and the tree-world, researchers have come across astonishing discoveries that has placed trees in the top position of the social and natural hierarchy. As silent philanthropists of this world, trees have proved their worth time and again through their multi-faceted functions in collaborating with the human world. The book taken for analysis is The Healing Code of Nature by Clemens G. Arvay. The book talks

about forest bathing which is part of the eco-psychosomatic science of healing man from his serious ailments and has been proved with adequate evidence by the researchers.

Clemens G. Arvay, an Austrian biologist and the author of *The Biophilia Effect*, enlightens the world of the miraculous ways by which the living ‘code’ of trees, including plants as part of the natural habitat, interpret the healing process and sustenance of the human body. Under the chapter ‘The Mystery of Trees’ Arvay offers his personal experience as testimony of his contact with the benefits of trees. When his seventeen- year- old son was undergoing treatment in a pediatric hospital, regular walks in the nearby woods with his son in a baby carriage, made him discover the quick recovery of his child as well as the joyous anticipation of his son on every trip to the woods. Roger Ulrich, Professor and a researcher in a Swedish University, conducted a survey to find the cause of many patients’ recovery from the Cancer Hospital. The ‘city group’ and the ‘tree group’ were categorized and Ulrich was astounded by the findings where the ‘tree group’ who spent in the nearby forest for a few hours every day recovered faster than the ‘city group’. Moreover, there was no recurrence of their illness. Ulrich assumed that it must be a psychological well-being in the minds of the people that has cured them.

The physicians Qing Li and Tomoyuki Kawada, tested their patients’ blood before and after the visits to the forest. This resulted in a forty percent increase of the defense cells called as ‘natural killer cells’ (Arvay 55) or NK that has raised immunity among the patients. Therefore, a dramatic recovery was possible. Apart from this detection, the researchers also documented the existence of aromatic substances in trees that hold a specific biological function – i.e. to communicate among them. Arvay states, “They (Biologists) refer to “talking trees” and “murmuring ferns” that “whisper” to each other.” (13) The anthropomorphic language is a lively communication among trees with many different life-forms or organisms that exist along with them. This is possible through emanation of chemical compounds which Arvay confirms as terpenes. The trees circulate information on pests’ attacks, to mark their territories and to know the strength of their enemies. Researchers further found the benefits of terpenes that was used for curing tumors of all kinds and that led to a major project on exploring the power of trees as the code of healing.

The widespread use of terpenes as the refreshener (essential oil) and as medicine has brought in the idea of trees as life- givers and life- enhancers in the human world. Arvay, once visited Wolf-Dieter Storl, an ethnobotanist and cultural anthropologist living in the Alps, and was informed of the strange connection of the plants with the humans. Teasels, a prickly plant with purple flowers cured Storl of Lyme disease who gave a remarkable observation that, “The spirit of the plant decided to stay with me after it made me well.” (48) It was an astounding perception to see the world of nature as a spiritual one. In fact, when Arvay interviewed an herbal teacher, he was told that the plants and herbs always grow where it is needed the most and that they know the connect with the humans. This bewildering concept though seemed far-fetched does not rule out the possibility that trees and plants live for the betterment of man’s life.

Kamlesh Patel in his journal confirms the spiritual element present in trees thus: “They are vibration banks that retain the divine charge of Transmission.... Trees are also conduits for the flow of energy from the earth upward and from the cosmos downward.” (Patel Heartfulness) So, Arvay comes to the conclusion that these elements in nature have evolved with humans to understand their needs and become part of the network of life to be called as “coevolution.” (50) In the Indian landscape, tree worship is observed from the Vedic era followed by the puranas to folklore represented through many tree stories. The Indian landscape cherishes and treasures many forest regions as sacred groves to indicate their faith and respect towards this piece of nature. It is pertinent to observe that each deity belonging to the regional or national places, has a particular tree as the guardian of that region. The God is identified by the tree (kalpa vriksha) that grows in

the premise of His/ Her temple. “The kalpa vriksha serves the deity to give life and prosperity, endurance, growth and generosity. Just as a tree is wise and humble and bows before the storm, humans must submit to the Divine Will.” (Krishna 43)

In the 1960s psychoanalyst Erich Fromm discussed about the opposing forces in nature called as necrophilia and biophilia. Necrophilia means love of the dead and biophilia means love of life. Arvay extends this idea, “The biophilic forces in human beings manifest themselves through our attraction to nature and its forms of life.” (68) This is explained by Arvay as one thinks of a forest or a garden. The life forces in a forest finds a parallel in the life force of humans. This is called as biophilic effect. The author strongly believes that the evolutionary past of human race is “submerged in our psyche.” (69) Gordon Orians, Professor at the University of Washington, is a globally recognized tree expert. His statement is that people have three rules in the choice of their trees. One, people prefer trees with large branches for climbing. Two, they like trees that provide shade and three, trees that produce edible fruits or healthy substances. This is not only the survival mode of thinking of the human race but also the aesthetic perception of the evolutionary state of the human race. The choice of landscape, vegetation and other aspects in nature is deeply imprinted in the minds of the humans which is the biophilia reflected through their lives.

Psychologists have proved at times that creativity has improved for people who always encounter nature. Once we stay in nature, biophilia becomes active and encourages our mental processes. Biophilia also has therapeutical potential where like two matching puzzles, humans and nature turn as a whole entity in the universe. When the connection between human and nature is complete, it brings in health promoting effects of the healing code of nature to be decoded by humans. Arvay talks about dehydroepiandrosterone otherwise known as DHEA, a steroid hormone found in humans and vertebrates. This hormone aids in easy and smooth blood circulation, back and forth of the heart and other organs. The DHEA as a heart protecting substance that increases during frequent walks in the forest. Since forest air is a cocktail of bioactive substances, the walks increase the DHEA among the young and old substantially and so the onset of heart diseases is eliminated.

Arvay examines the effect of DHEA in the psychological and neurological mechanisms activated in nature where the effects of mental disorders like anxiety, depression and mental diseases like Alzheimer, Schizophrenia etc. are mitigated and the DHEA improved the mental stability of humans gradually. Arvay introduces the term Psychosomatics to mean the unity of mind and body. The physical health of the body is determined by the mental strength of the humans and it is reflected when the mental health can lead to inflammatory disorders, gastrointestinal disorders and loss of immunity. The psychosomatic entity is connected to nature to constitute it as eco-psychosomatic entity. The mind and body of human is coupled to nature as part of the process and so man remains content and calm in the vicinity of forests, water bodies, green vegetation and mountains. The eco-psychosomatic effect is like the movement of nature towards the humankind to offer benefits for his wellbeing and Man’s move towards Nature seeking solace and health that has become the core need of the human race.

Arvay points out that the recent definition of Eco-psychosomatics ignores the health-promoting potential of contact with nature. It has been connected to environmental medicine that talks about environmental pollution. Since the harmful effects of pollutants, toxins or electromagnetic fields, the benevolent effects of eco-psychosomatics are not realized. The humans are deeply associated to nature organically for their physical, mental and emotional health. In recent biomedical research, blood sampling and laboratory analysis are done after the human contact with nature as evidence of such benefits. Qing Li and other East Asians have done pioneering efforts in promoting forest medicine through their research in forest bathing. Arvay insists that, “Garden therapies or nature

therapies ...should establish the new field of eco-psychosomatics on a new, interdisciplinary, and evidence-based foundation." (171) He aims to explore the possibilities of eco-psychosomatics from a point of contact with nature and animals on an organic level, the role of environmental pollutants that affect nature and humans and the absence of bioactive substances from nature that trigger many diseases.

The symbiotic relationship of humans with nature must be extended to animals as well as it has been proved in many findings that contact with animals has raised the immunity of the young and the old. Ironically, many health care institutes and hospitals are structured in the concrete, urban environment and so the accessibility to reach nature is remote or nil. Arvay argues that the allergens that are found in forests and considered to be harmful to humans is a biased statement since they indicate that man has moved or removed himself very far from the natural landscape. Therefore, their immunity towards allergens is less. Frequent contact with the forest or forest bathing as the Japanese recommend can raise the immunity level and such accusations can be proved baseless. Man finds a reflection of his nature in the natural landscape that has become the doorway to an unperturbed world of serenity. Eco-psychosomatics can prove to be a holistic science and can revolutionize the health -care system of mankind.

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