Eco-Spirituality as Reflected in the Poetry of Gary Snyder: A Critique

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Abstract
Gary Snyder, a noted “beat generation poet” of America, wrote his poems concerning eco-sensitive issues and found their solutions in the Buddhist philosophy, especially in Zen Buddhism. In other words the poet’s concern with deep ecology and its connection with religious ground the poet in the sphere of eco-spirituality. This paper attempts to examine deep ecological issues and their reflections in Snyder’s poetry. His knowledge and practice of Zen philosophy help him in counter balancing of all sorts of ecological threats and unrest of nature. Unlike most religions Zen Buddhism believes in internal aspects of reality that conditions a man’s behaviors and actions. But the Buddhist philosophy seems to have convinced the poet of the universal oneness of man and nature; any disturbance in their symbiotic balance can be mutually hazardous for them all. Thus, the poet ends of his quest of ecological imbalance in the mantra of ‘Om’ which in Hindu philosophy signifies perfect. It means nature and its creation is perfect, only human beings are required to maintain equilibrium. To conclude, this paper is a humble attempt to map the poet’s eco-matrix and suggest solutions to problems thus discerned.

Keywords - Eco-Spirituality, Deep ecology, Zen, Kensho, Tathata, Oneness, Equilibrium.

Introduction
Eco spirituality is one of the most relevant literary terms in the present ecological crises stricken world. Zen is a suitable example of it. Stephen Mahoney states in the context,
“Zen is a nature religion. It is blooming at a time when western man’s celebrated victory over nature is less convincing than ever- but when his alienation from nature, including his own nature, seems to be an accomplished fact”.

As it is quite evident through Snyder’s poetry that he is undoubtedly a son and poet of nature; he openly talks about the mass killing of various species, the cutting of jungles, damaging of different plants, herbs and flowers. Even in one of his notable poems “The Dead by the Side of the Road” he lets his soul describe the fate of a hawk which is brutally killed and thrown near the road to make dance-fans for ceremonial events. It is really a paradox that a wild wolf has lost his life for man’s ceremonial purpose but this human laid action is in fact not a celebration of the domination of mankind over the other creatures of the nature, instead it is in one way or other the domination of nature laid by the selfish human beings. Snyder in this poem also mentions about the killing of some other living forms such as a fawn, a rail tail, a skunk, a doe and he also prays to these spirits to pardon the human and not to take any revenge rather bless them changing their mindsets and behaviors towards the perennial love and compassion for the flora and fauna which are the integral parts of the natural world.

Gary Snyder in his very popular article “The Wilderness” proclaims with regard to his divine connection with nature wherein he attributes nature as a living entity which herself speaks to him like an alive or living soul, “. . . The voice that speaks to me as a poet, what westerners have called the muse, is the voice of nature herself, whom the ancient poets called the great goddess’ the Magna Mater”.

Over usage of the resources of the nature is also a major problem in the industrial world. We can never think about a utopian society and the ecological harmony until and unless we are prone to lust, selfishness etc. and make our morality elevated with truth, justice compassion, reverence etc. The poem “Smokey the Bear Sutra” has its own relevance in the modern world of ecological, social and moral unrest. Hence Gary Snyder attributes America, his own country a world of loveless knowledge and sees it as a land of the countless men oppressed by a civilization-that claims to save but only destroys . . . .

Gary Snyder is universally recognized as a poet laureate of ‘Deep ecology’. According to him, “None of us has the right to surpass others. It means there is an inherent utility of each and every element or object of the universe and we are in no way superior to
them. We can’t deprive the other creatures of what they deserve for. Snyder is undoubtedly a
champion poet of deep ecological Philosophies when he emphasizes the need of the close-co-
operation between human beings and nature. He opposes the mindsets of the people of the
modern civilization in which they treat nature as their enemy. Snyder in his article “The
wilderness”, which constitutes an important part of his book ‘Turtle Island’, states:

There are many things in western culture that are admirable. But a culture that
alienates itself from the very ground of its own being from the wilderness outside (that is to say, wild nature the wild self contained, self -informing ecosystems) and from that wilderness the wilderness within is- doomed to a
very destructive behavior, ultimately perhaps self destructive behavior.

The west is not only culture that carries there destructive seeds, China had
effectively deforested itself by 1000 A.D. India had effectively deforested itself by 800 A.D. The Soils of the Middle East were ruined even earlier. The forests that once covered the mountains of Yugoslavia were stripped to build the Roman fleet, and those mountains have looked like utah ever since.

These striking lines of Snyder’s article; “The wilderness”, clearly shows that the
deforestation of the lands is nothing but human’s own self destruction. The solution of the
ecological disharmony is going through self realization of our own behavior or karma
towards our earth. He is bitter in his voice with those cruel selfish and lustful men who are
mercilessly and frequently cutting the green trees fulfilling their temporary happiness and
sensual pleasures in different parts of the world and he, as a deep ecological poet and activist,
comes to fore in support of the safety of the trees and wild forests.

“Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout” is a lovely poem which is overloaded
with Snyder’s deep ecological mood when he is sitting in solitude. This poem is a part of
Riprap and cold Mountain Poems. The Poet is under deep observation towards the object of
nature rain fir-cones and new flies. The objects and phenomenon of nature are the perennial
blessings for the human and Snyder is so much engrossed/ immersed in his thought that he
even forgets about his dear friends. Snyder is a champion of the masses who wishes and work
for the survival of each creature of the earth, no matter of their inherent utility and value for
the human race. Human being is not superior to them. He expresses his strong resentments
for the domination of human over the other life forms of the earth. Snyder talks about the safety of different kinds of animals such as, dandelions, chipmunks, etc. The ways people treat, endanger and kill the other species are in no way the traits or ornaments of civilized persons.

Gary Snyder’s poem “Smokey the Bear Sutra” depicts that lord Buddha “smashing the worms of capitalism and totalitarianism”. It’s now quite clear that the poet has his own views on politics wherein he wishes to uproot capitalism and totalitarianism thus making social and ecological stability on the earth. Similarly, in his poem “Spell Against Demons”, he launches his concrete slogan “Down with demonic killers who mouth revolutionary slogans and muddy the flow of change . . .” There is yet another very relevant poem of Gary Snyder which is titled as “Affluence”. The poem points out the human’s anti-ecological karma of cutting of green trees for the industrial purpose.

He mirrors America as an affluent country which is rich in natural resources but the people’s uncontrolled wishes for hoarding a huge materialistic gain has reduced it into a wasteful country; “Trees are cut and reduced to legs and then converted into ashes with diesel oil”.

Snyder does not welcome the industrial development at any cost. and he mentions its reasons in his vibrant article entitled “Four Changes”: “Man’s careless use of resources and his total dependence on certain substances such as fossil fuels which are being exhausted, slowly but certainly are having harmful effects on all the other members of the life-network. The complexity of modern technology renders whole populations vulnerable to the deadly consequences of the loss of any one key resource. Instead of independence we have over dependence on life giving substances such as water which we squander. Many species of animals and birds have become extinct in the service of fashions fads—or fertilizers—or industrial oil—the soil is being used up; in fact mankind has become a locust like blight on the planet that will leave a bare cupboard board for its own children—all the while in a kind of Addict’s Dream of affluence, comfort, eternal progress—using the great achievements of science to produce software and swill”.

Snyder is an important poet of America belonging to the beat generation. In the present time the entire world is facing the threats of the ecological unrest so it is the need of
the time to delve deep into his eco-poetry in order to arrive at a pragmatic and concrete solution to bring ecological harmony. Snyder took an interest in his individual protest; like a champion he strived hard to create an awareness among the social masses with respect to the exact knowledge of our ecology and its solid safety.

William Bittner writes in this regard: “Beat poets/they have shown a strong tendency to tackle the problems of the world on a personal level shunning organized protest....” In the poem “For a far-out Friend”, Snyder appreciates and pays his heartiest reverence to the wild communities, and their ways of conduct towards the other species and the treasures of nature. They are self satisfied and also are compassionate towards each and every life form of the place wherein they dwell in. The poet heartily admires gentle behavior and noble intention of these primitive people who are of different communities, just like the Red. Snyder prefers wild life to the rustic or civilized life. Civilized people must change their preoccupied mindsets towards the other creatures and resources of the natural environment such as, animals, trees, plants, mountains, valleys, seas lakes, etc. These are in fact the blessings of nature bestowed upon them by the almighty god.

“And I thought – more grace and love
In that wild Deva life where you belong
Than in this dress-and-girdle life
you’ll ever give
or get.” (Snyder : P. 12)

Gary Snyder is a real poet of ‘Deep ecology’ because his poems talk about eco-spirituality in order to sustain the harmony in our natural environment. His poems convey the eco-spiritual doctrine of live and let others live; grow and let other grow.

In the poem “Smokey the Bear Sutra”, Snyder firmly declares: “All Creatures have the full right to live to their limits and that deer, rabbits, chipmunks, snakes dandelions, and lizards all grow in the realm of the Dharma....”. (Gary Snyder: P. 8)

Gary Snyder lays bare his inner soul before the readers and he takes negatively to those people who are involved in the practice of killing animals, birds, fish, trees, and other meek creatures of this beautiful planet named earth.
“The Call of the Wild” is a famous poem of Snyder which is packed with deep ecological implications. In the poem the poet depicts that man and nature are never two different entities, instead connected to each other. But there is the absence of harmony between them as man hasn’t realized the true significance of nature for his peaceful, blissful and prosperous life. He violates the code of nature by over exploitation and over consumption of the natural resources out of his low morality.

“I would like to say
Coyote is forever
Inside you
But it’s not true” (Snyder : P.23)

In the Poem “In the House of the Rising Sun”, Snyder he expresses his deepest resentments for American people and soldiers who are involved in a heavy battle with the country Vietnam. This is seriously taking lives of the others and culminating to enormous and life-long damage to the natural resources and objects, thus this cruel tendency is directly effecting the global ecology.

“Vietnam up lands burned-off jungles
Wipe out a few rare birds
Fish in the rice paddy ditches
Stream a dry foul tastes thru their gills...” (Snyder : P.9)

Thomas J. Lyon arrives at a concrete conclusion that Snyder’s poems have an inherent ecological significance. Lyon writes in the context:

My point is that Snyder has not been susceptible to either gross cultural influences or temporary currents, but has always seemed to measure things according to a primal standard of wild ecology. The basic materials of this he learned in the west. The Buddhist training has been extremely important, I do not doubt, and the steeping in oriental writing, particularly Chinese poetry, has helped Snyder as a poet;.....

The Poem “Control Burn” is a very suggestive in the sense that it prevents people from cutting of trees but Snyder is in favor of the wild Red Indians and allows these primitive
people to have a sensible burning of the withered and decayed trees and herbs and it would not offend the law of nature.

“Fire is an old story
I would like,
With a sense of helpful order,
With respect for laws
Of nature to help my land
with a burn a hot clean burn
(- Manzanita seeds will only open
After a fire passes over or once passed through a bear)
And Then
It would be more
Like when it belonged to the Indians
Before” (Snyder : P.19)

We are on verge of ecological disaster and Snyder’s poetry is an outcome of his knowledge and practice of Zen philosophy. His deep eco-poems are nothing but an exact remedy for counter balancing all sorts of ecological threats and unrest of nature. It is now the exact time of the people’s self realization of their ways or karma towards nature. Social and ecological awareness in forms of workshops, conferences, seminars, public gatherings can inspire the people to get rid of their conventional and old mindsets with respect to their selfish approaches which distort the green environment the change can encourage the social masses to relinquish their age-old dependence on non-vegetarian foods and they will seriously and enthusiastically work and campaign to produce organic foods and grains for their basic food requirements. Gary Snyder is indeed a practical poet of Zen School of Buddhism. This is quite clear in the concrete words of Ann charters. Charters writes the following words in her biography Kerouac; “Gary had been studying Japanese for three years, preparing for his trip to Zen monastery. He was also translating the Chinese poet Hen-Shan the fall jack met him.” (Ann Charters: P. 238) Gen-philosophy is a unique and serious practice of meditation through self endeavor; Its practitioners don’t take the assistance of sacred texts in order to attain enlightenment. Thick Thien-An elaborates the term in his book
“Zen philosophy : Zen Practice”. “The distinctive of the Buddha’s practice at the time of his enlightenment was his inner search. This is the method of Zen Buddhism and indicates just it differs from the other religions and spiritual practices. Most other religions place a supreme God above man and then ask that he prays to God and worship him, implying that reality is to be sought externally. The way of Zen is very different, for Zen holds that reality is to be gotten hold of, not externally, but inwardly.” (Snyder : P.5)

In the highly popular poem “Piute Creek”, Snyder talks about the inner experience of a beholder when he is in lap of nature. Oneness of living and non-livings things or objects is the fundamental motive of this poem. It embodies a direct and flexible message to the entire humanity of having the concrete realization of oneness of all objects existed on this planet-trees animals, aquatic living and non-living things etc. The poem is rich in deep ecological doctrine which is the outcome of the poet’s own experience as a renowned Zen-master meditating across forests, mountains valleys, etc.,

“A clear attentive mind has no meaning but that which sees is truly seen.” In Zen philosophy kensho is a term which refers to the realization of the oneness of each and every object of nature when one is perfectly enlightened one is in a perfect or solid has state of mind to sees Buddha’s image or figure in everything which is connected with nature kensho leads to a healthy human mind with elevated wisdom and this kind of mind never permits itself to discriminate the things. Thick-thien – An explains this concept as follows:-

When we are enlightened, we realize that Buddha and everything are one: that is suchness, oneness, or Tathata. To realize the oneness of everything is Kensho, seeing into one’s nature. The non-discriminating mind has no distinctions between subject and object, high and low, good and bad, the Buddha and oneself, Samsara and Nirvana. In Zen Buddhism Kensho is usually considered the first step on the path of Enlightenment but it is perhaps the most important step because it opens the mind’s eye to a new dimension of existence and gives us a direct experience of oneness with the universe. (Thick Thien-An : PP. 25-26)

The Romantic poet William Wordsworth is universally acclaimed as a main stream poet of nature and its natural descriptions; he has amply paid reverence to nature and takes nature as a teacher or an instructor. Hence Gary Snyder, too, in his famous poem “Bedrock”
conceives nature as a perfect teacher which teaches the mankind to maintain tenderness towards every element of nature, no matter strong or meek. Snyder states in these words: “Sky and stone/ teach me table tender.” (Snyder: P.15) Snyder attributes nature as a living person which is ignorant and does ample justice with all the objects of its natural world to develop and flourish without any sort of discrimination.

In “Dust Braces” the poet unravels the inhuman actions of the native Americans who are indulged in the killing of animals and cutting green trees. The poem mirrors poet’s full resentments with these people who are in different occupations such as rail road men, miners, dirt farmers, lumber schooners, punchers, etc.

“Tomorrow’s Song” is a very interesting poem in which Snyder wishes to return to that time of pre-civilization wherein the people are compassionate, nature lover, humble and they happily share the world of animals, mountains rocks, dogs, cats, wolves, snakes, mountains and the blue sky. Gary Snyder does ample justice with his description of both the nature world and the world of human. His poetry also signifies the technique of a typical Beat poet as he himself is an important poet of the Beat generation. Beat poets instill the materials equally from the world of nature and the world of human. Jack Kerouac states in the context: “your lips in your moments of self possessed thought and new found responsible goodness are silent, make as least a noise, and mystify with sense in nature, like the light of an automobile reflecting from the shiny silver paint of a side walk tank this is very instant as silent and all this as a bird crossing the dawn in search of the mountain cross and the sea beyond the city at the end of the land.

Thomas J. Lyon highly appreciated Gary Snyder in his renowned article “The Ecological Vision of Gary Snyder” for his beautiful descriptions of nature and its sceneries.

Lyon asserts: “The direct link between the two sides of wild integrity is the ground of the ecological values. Piercing the link enables one to stand with and among, yet retaining and developing the consciousness of membership or the ironies of mental separateness. Either way, this sort of perfection calls into question the major assumption of western civilization. By going beyond both techno-humanist instrumentalism and cutely impotent romanticism, this approach builds a whole new mind”. Snyder, as a poet of Deep ecology, has perfectly highlighted the relevant ecological issues in his several poems;
The word ‘Om’ has a highest spiritual value and in being reverently chanted by the Hindus. This sacred and vibrant word is in fact the attribution to the supreme god. Like the word ‘Om’, so many mantras have been mentioned in different poems by different poets in their literary texts. The magic of sacred verses or mantras has a healing effect on the listeners and the speakers. It brings mental harmony which turns into social and ecological harmony. Gary Snyder holds a firm faith in the power of mantras and he believes that its proper chanting can help the human beings to attain the desired goals. It has ecological significance and the stable mind will never allow them to involve themselves in any offensive work which distorts the environment.

One can trace out Snyder’s opinion with its concrete evidence in his poem “Smokey the Bear Sutra”: If anyone is threatened by advertising, air pollution, or the police, they should chant

SMOKEY THE
BEAR'S WAR SPELL:
DROWN THEIR BUTTS
CRUSH THEIR BUTTS

The poet clearly explains how the effect of pronouncing devotional mantras assists and changes a man’s life:

In Mantra chanting the magic utterances, built of seed-syllables such as ‘OM’ and AYANG and ‘AH’ repealed over and over fold and curl on the breath until-when most weary and bored- a new voice enters, a voice speaks, voice speaks through you clearer and stronger than what you know of yourself with a sureness and melody of its own, singing out the inner song of the self, and of the planet.

(Snyder: P.401)

Gary Snyder’s deep-ecological poetry is now very much explored in the academic field. He chooses eco-spiritually to disseminate his deep ecological views across the world. Professors, philosophers, Scientists, research Scholars take ample delight in having a thorough Study of his poplar poems.

His poems provide a practical solution to bring harmony in our natural environment and also to avert the natural disasters for the safety of our planet.
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