



## ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND DILIP CHITRE'S 'THE FELLING OF THE BANYAN TREE'

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### ABSTRACT

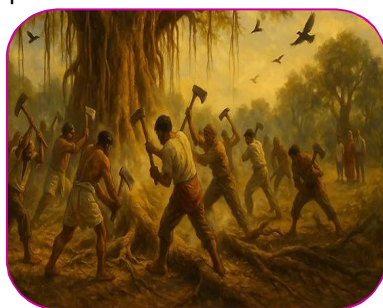
*The march of modern industrialization and urban expansion has severely disrupted ecological equilibrium, creating irreconcilable conflicts between human ambition and the natural world. These developments while providing material comfort have led to deforestation, pollution and the erosion of cultural landscapes. Literature, particularly poetry, mirrors this environmental crisis by translating ecological concerns into human emotions and collective memory. Indian English poets such as Gieve Patel, A.K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel have often reflected on ecological decay and human estrangement from nature. Dilip Chitre's poetry particularly his widely anthologized poem *The Felling of the Banyan Tree* from *Travelling in a Cage* (1980) dramatizes the rupture between tradition and modernity, culture and environment, memory and alienation. The poem narrates the destruction of a centuries-old banyan tree which stands not merely as an ecological tragedy but also as a profound metaphor for uprooted identity, cultural amnesia and existential displacement. This paper is an honest attempt to examine the poem through the combined lenses of environmental ethics and ecocriticism by exploring how Chitre links ecological devastation to psychological disintegration and cultural estrangement.*

**KEY WORD:** Environmental Ethics, Ecocriticism, environment, alienation, Indian poetry and culture, uprootedness.

### INTRODUCTION

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been marked by remarkable technological advancements, industrial revolutions and urban growth. These transformations though contributing to human progress have simultaneously inflicted unprecedented damage on ecological systems. Large-scale deforestation, depletion of biodiversity and climate imbalance are visible outcomes of modern development. Environmental ethics as a branch of philosophy emerged to interrogate this imbalance whether human beings possess exclusive rights over natural resources or whether the non-human world such as trees, rivers, animals and landscapes deserves moral consideration for its intrinsic worth.

Poetry has historically functioned as a barometer of cultural anxieties and social consciousness. In the Indian English literary tradition, especially after independence, poets have frequently engaged with questions of human-nature interaction. Works such as Gieve Patel's "On Killing a Tree," A.K. Ramanujan's "The River," and Nissim Ezekiel's "Island" interrogate ecological indifference and degradation in their distinctive idioms. Within this tradition, Dilip Chitre's voice is exceptional as he not only critiques ecological exploitation but also links environmental destruction with existential dislocation and cultural severance.



One of Chitre's most dominant poems 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree' offers a profound reflection on the violence inflicted by modernity. The banyan tree in the poem is not simply an organism but a

living repository of memory, heritage and communal continuity. Its felling is therefore a symbolic massacre and an erasure of roots that bind individuals to ancestry, culture and nature. By embedding ecological loss in the existential domain, Chitre articulates the deep psychological wounds caused by environmental devastation.

This paper is an honest attempt to examine Chitre's poem from the perspective of environmental ethics and ecocriticism situating it within both Indian cultural traditions and global ecological discourse.

Critical assessments of Dilip Chitre often foreground his recurrent themes of exile, alienation and mortality. F.A. Inamdar (1998) aptly remarks that Chitre's alienation assumes the form of a "post-mortem" of the self, where the poet repeatedly dissects his inability to locate harmony in either native or foreign terrains. This existential discomfort is closely tied to his disconnection from ecological and cultural landscapes. Similarly, Shirish Chindhade (2001) emphasizes that Chitre's poetic corpus is saturated with imagery of disintegration, loss and existential despair.

Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) and Lawrence Buell (1995), ecocritical theorists, have established the foundations of literary ecological analysis. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" while Buell highlights the role of literature in shaping environmental imagination. Greg Garrard (2004) through his thematic approach delineates ecological categories like pollution, pastoralism, wilderness and apocalypse all of which resonate with Chitre's imagery of decay and estrangement.

In the Indian context, ecological thinkers like Ramachandra Guha (1989) and Vandana Shiva (1991) have drawn attention to how traditional ecological values, once embedded in village and community life, have been eroded by the forces of industrial development and globalization. These insights illuminate Chitre's conflict between the grandmother's sacred ecological worldview and the father's utilitarian approach in his poem, 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree'. While Gieve Patel's "On Killing a Tree" has often been interpreted through ecocritical frameworks, Chitre's poem has not received comparable ecological attention. Most critical discussions emphasize its existential aspects overlooking its environmental implications. This paper addresses that gap by interpreting the banyan tree as both an ecological and cultural symbol.

Environmental ethics provides the moral grounding for interpreting Chitre's work. In one hand, the anthropocentric worldview which is dominant in modern societies regards nature as subordinate to human needs. On the other hand, biocentric and ecocentric perspectives argue for recognizing the inherent worth of all life forms and ecosystems. Ecocriticism intersects with these debates by examining how literature reflects, critiques, and reimagines human-nature relationships.

In Indian culture, trees especially the banyan tree occupy sacred and symbolic positions. The banyan is associated with longevity, shelter, fertility and spiritual endurance. It serves as a communal space in villages often regarded as a witness to generations of human history. The grandmother's reverence for trees in Chitre's poem reflects this indigenous ecological ethic which reveals trees not as commodities but as companions in the human journey. The conflict arises when the father who represents modern rationalism and utilitarian development orders the tree's felling in pursuit of urban expansion. The ethical dilemma here lies at the core of Chitre's ecological allegory.

Chitre's *Travelling in a Cage* articulates the poet's disorientation across geographies. His sojourn in America exposes him to an environment alien to his cultural roots where he experiences solitude as an "insect of exile." The forests and skies that once sustained his imaginative vision appear distant and unwelcoming. His references to Ghalib reveal that alienation is not a purely personal condition but a universal predicament of dislocation.

After returning to Bombay, his sense of estrangement intensifies. Unlike the verdant ancestral surroundings of Baroda, Bombay confronts him with concrete, chaos, pollution and infestations. The ecological loss of trees and greenery translates into a spiritual void where cockroaches, mosquitoes and bedbugs symbolically invade not only his physical dwelling but also his soul, lyrics and metaphysics. Here, Chitre draws a direct correlation between ecological degradation and existential despair.

The banyan tree functions as the central metaphor in the poem. For the grandmother, trees embody sacredness, continuity and reverence. She embodies an ecocentric worldview where trees are protectors of human life. They offer shade, oxygen and shelter. In contrast, the father epitomizes the anthropocentric ethos of modern development. His decision to cut the tree is portrayed not as practical necessity but as a violent rupture, a “slaughter” that disregards centuries of ecological and cultural memory.

The banyan tree's fall is thus not only ecological devastation but also the collapse of ancestral identity. It represents the severing of roots both literal and symbolic that connect individuals to their heritage. By describing the tree's destruction as a massacre, Chitre amplifies its ethical significance elevating the ecological act into an allegory of existential uprootedness.

The most haunting image in the poem is that of the dream-tree with aerial roots searching desperately for soil. This image encapsulates the poet's own fragmented identity. Just as the banyan's aerial roots remain suspended without ground, the poet feels adrift in a world where neither ancestral landscapes nor urban modernity provide stability. The banyan survives only as a dream-vision—disconnected, weightless, and yearning for belonging.

This dream imagery transforms the ecological loss into a psychological metaphor. Uprootedness is not confined to the tree but extends to the poet himself, dramatizing the inseparability of ecological and existential crises.

Chitre's juxtaposition of Baroda and Bombay highlights the stark consequences of modernization. Baroda, with its neem, oudumber, and banyan trees, signifies rootedness, continuity, and ecological harmony. Bombay, by contrast, is a site of urban chaos where overcrowding, pollution and infestations reflect the disintegration of both nature and culture.

The ecological vacuum of Bombay is directly linked to spiritual and moral corruption. By portraying pests invading metaphysics and religion, Chitre suggests that environmental decay corrodes not just the body but also the cultural and spiritual psyche. This aligns with ecocritical arguments that ecological destruction is inseparable from social and ethical degradation.

Chitre's ecological vision shares affinities with contemporaries yet stands apart in its existential depth. Gieve Patel's 'On Killing a Tree' dramatizes the violence of uprooting but remains confined to the physicality of the act. Ramanujan's 'The River' critiques human indifference to natural calamities but does not connect it to existential alienation. Nissim Ezekiel's 'Island' reflects on Bombay's corruption and ecological suffocation but primarily in socio-political terms.

Chitre, however, integrates ecological violence with psychological fragmentation. His banyan tree becomes not only a symbol of environmental loss but also of cultural memory and existential identity. This layering makes his ecological vision both deeply personal and profoundly universal.

It can be safely mention that 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree' is both autobiographical and allegorical, dramatizing the rupture between ecological harmony and modern alienation. The poem embodies two conflicting ethical paradigms: the grandmother's ecocentric reverence and the father's anthropocentric pragmatism. The banyan tree functions as a multilayered symbol of memory, continuity, ancestry and identity; its felling dramatizes cultural uprootedness. Chitre's portrayal of Bombay reflects the ecological and moral degradation of urban modernity. Unlike contemporaries, Chitre uniquely binds ecological destruction to existential alienation, making his ecological ethics more layered and complex.

The poem transcends the boundaries of ecological lament to emerge as a powerful allegory of cultural disinheritance and existential fragmentation. By contrasting the grandmother's sacred reverence for trees with the father's utilitarian rationalism, Chitre dramatizes the ethical conflicts that modern societies face in the pursuit of development. The felling of the banyan, described in terms of violence and slaughter, underscores that environmental destruction is inseparable from cultural amnesia and psychological despair.

Thus, Dilip Chitre's 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree' reveals that ecological devastation destabilizes not only ecosystems but also human identities. Poet's personal experiences of alienation in Bombay and America reinforce the idea that without rootedness in nature, human existence becomes spiritually impoverished. His work is therefore not only a critique of anthropocentrism but also a plea for an ecological ethic based on

reverence, continuity and sustainability. By merging ecological sensitivity with existential inquiry, he demonstrates that ecological crises are simultaneously cultural and spiritual crises. In today's era of accelerating environmental destruction, this poem continues to speak as a living symbol and reminds us that to destroy a tree is to endanger memory, culture and the very foundations of human spirit.

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