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Theoretical/Critical Essay Article

Healing the Heart with Nature: An Ecotherapeutic Study of Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*

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Abstract
This study explores the man and nature relationship in Peter Matthiessen's travel book, The Snow Leopard (1977), from the ecotherapeutic perspective. It demonstrates how Matthiessen's heart, bereft by the unexpected and untimely demise of his wife, receives healing from his interaction with the pristine nature at the Crystal Mountain of Nepal. The study also illustrates how this psychologically tormented Matthiessen from the West, in turn, extends his deep reverence to the beauty of the industrially less affected regions of the non-West as well as to the animals and indigenous spiritual practices existing there. For the analytic purpose, the study brings various critics' responses to the book into discussion as well as borrows key theoretical ideas from various ecotherapists such as Linda Buzzell, Craig Chalquist, Howard Clinebell and others.
Keywords: *Ecotherapy, Crystal Mountain, Zen Buddhism, meditation, holistic organism*

Introduction

Not long after the untimely demise of his wife, Deborah Love, Peter Matthiessen sets a plan for a journey to the Land of Dolpo situated in the northwest region of Nepal in the year 1973. Deborah was his second wife he married in 1963 after the divorce with his first wife. The new couple had an unhomely relationship with each other, which would have resolved to divorce, had Deborah not caught cancer. The disease required Matthiessen to make a commitment to maintain the company till the end of her life. Deborah turned to Zen Buddhism with a hope to fight the cancer a bit longer. Matthiessen too followed her step for finding inner peace. Both of them started reading Buddhist teachings and sat frequently for meditation. But unfortunately, Deborah's resistance to the brutal cancer did not sustain beyond 1972.

Leaving four children solely in the caring and rearing of Matthiessen, Deborah closed her eyes off forever, and allowed a lifelong bereavement to lurk in his heart. Thus, badly bereaved Matthiessen, in a huge expectation to find the solace to his heart from the ancient Buddhist shrine, the Crystal Mountain, comes to ask his friend George Schaller to include him in the journey to the Dolpo regions. Schaller, as a scientist, was travelling there to study about the *bharals* (blue sheep). This was the apparent purpose for both, but the hidden purpose for Matthiessen was the quest of inner peace. With their individual objectives, the two make a four and half months' arduous journey to the Dolpo, and come

up with two different books about the journey. Schaller produces *Silence of the Stones* whereas Matthiessen *The Snow Leopard.* My present study delimits itself to *The Snow Leopard* and explores Matthiessen's quest for inner peace that he wants to attain from the lush of nature, mythic animals, meditation and Buddhist teachings, to which he is very much respectful.

Critics' Responses to *The Snow Leopard*

Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* has received responses from critics primarily as a quest narrative: a quest for solace to the heart and self-awakening of Matthiessen at personal level and a quest for the lost humanity, lost nature and spirituality of the post-industrial Western self at collective level. Critics have hinted at Matthiessen's attempt to take the Westerners away from the hustle and bustle, and the humdrum of industrialization and modernization to the undisturbed distant corner of the world for the recovery of the loss spirituality, humanity and nature. And, some other critics have traced some remnants of imperialist discourse, with which travel writing as a genre is tainted.

The British critic, Peter Hulme views *The Snow Leopard* as Matthiessen's physical pilgrimage into "the unknown" for "spiritual renewal while mourning and reflecting on the death of his wife" (90). According to Hulme, Matthiessen's physical journey to the Himalayan region of Nepal is also the inner journey to attain spiritual power to endure the grief of the death of his wife.

While Hulme reads the book as a double journey, Tim Youngs observes it as an escape journey from the "post-industrial alienation" into nature "for a more direct realization of the self, especially in relation to nature"(95). According to Youngs, the book is an elegy of the contemporary Westerners that incites them to think of turning to a direct contact with nature for removing "the complexities of modern life" (97). But Youngs also comments that the book is not as critical to the Western commercialism as it seemingly endeavors to be because it makes money from the sale: "Matthiessen has fashioned a full-length book from the idea, furthering his reputation and sales" (98).

Casey Blanton also reads the book as "a double journey" of Matthiessen as "the naturalist writer and the sentimental writer" (72). For Blanton, with his double journey, Matthiessen attempts to incorporate all the bleak and dark sides of inner nature into the outer nature. Blanton further explains, as a nature writer, Matthiessen shows concern to the degradation of wilderness which makes him nostalgic of the utopian past with lush of nature: "utopian dreams of a past 'paradisal age' where natural abundance was possible and human interference minimal" (74). But unlike Hulme and Youngs, Blanton also sees Matthiessen being involved in the colonial tradition of studying and naming, for example, he names some "rocks, fern spores, pony dung", but without "monarch-of-all-I-survey position" like that of the travelers of the colonial era (77-78).

Another critic, Sue Ellen Campbell also joins with these critics in their reading of *The Snow Leopard* as a double journey. But unlike them, Campbell takes Matthiessen and his friend George Schaller as a pair who attempt to resolve the long-held tension between spirituality and science: "Read as a pair, these accounts [of these two travel authors] offer an elegant elaboration of the traditional conflict between science and spirit—and a subtle and distinctly contemporary resolution" (128). According to Campbell, the pair attempts to resolve the tension between science and spirituality

brought about by the materialistic achievements of science that primarily began along with the enlightenment and industrialization process in the West.

Peter Bishop views the book as a quest for the lost wisdom and humanity that is still in existence in the industrially less spoiled part of the world. He asserts that the book is "a celebration of that primeval state and a call to the West to learn from the wisdom of the earth and from the wisdom of these traditional cultures before it is too late" (205). According to Bishop, Matthiesen recovers that lost human spirit just from the simplicity and ever readiness of his porter, Tukten Lama and retunes home more human and wiser:"a far more human and wiser Matthiessen who returns" (215).

Similarly, Peter Whitfield observes the book as a quest of lost spiritual significance. He argues that the West has achieved technological progress but lost spiritual significance. As the snow leopard remains allusive to Matthiessen, spirituality is allusive to the West amidst the progresses of industrialization. The central message of the book, thus for Whitfield is "the snow leopard becomes therefore the symbol of a new, or rather an old and lost, attitude of the spirit, in which western power, language and intellect meet and finally accept their limitations" (281). Whitfield reads the book as the portrayal of the limitation of Western power, language and intelligent.

Like Whitfield's reading of snow leopard's elusiveness as the limitation of the Western thought, John Gatta's reads it as the limitation of human perception. Gatta argues that Matthiessen's inability to perceive the snow leopard is a lesson for the West to go beyond casual perception into the realization of symbolic order:"to envision a symbolic order beyond normal bounds of human perception" (201). By symbolic order, Gattta means the order of the whole organism in the universe. Gatta argues, Matthiessen, by hiding the snow leopard from the sight, pleas the human beings to "respect the richly unseen, unknown life of nonhumans who act independently of our ambitions" (195). Besides, Gatta also observes Matthiessen's spiritual journey to the Land of Dolpo, which "represents for many Westerners a depth of spiritual possibility and interiority that seems elusive in today's commercial world" (191). As Gatta observed, Matthiessen wishes to bring back to the commercial world the depth of Buddhist belief and practice.

After all, all the critical responses discussed above illustrate that *The Snow Leopard* is the reflection of varied sorts of quests undertaken by the travel narrator Matthiessen. Without disagreeing with them, this study rather explores the instances, which the above critics have not done so far, from the book that justify how Matthiessen heals his bereft heart from his journey.

Ecotherapy as the Healing Practice

Ecotherapy refers to a healthy relationship between human and the earth. It is a two-way process of healing each other. It deals with the interconnectedness of humans with the rest of nature and shows a concern about what may happen to the health of both human and the rest of nature if the relationship is neglected and made dysfunctional. Ecotherapy, by and large, alerts human beings to establish and maintain an intimate and healthy connection with the earth for the sustainability of both.

'Ecotherapy' as a term first appeared into literary discourse in the 1990s. Linda Buzzell and Graig Chalquist have traced the genealogy of ecotherapy to psychology and environmentalism. As they explain, a small group of scholars and activists, meeting together in San Francisco in the early 1990s, blended the insights and practices from

psychology and environmentalism into ecopsychology. Ecopsychology was meant, as they clarify, to "study the psychological processes that tie to or separate human from the world" (17). It deals with psyche-world connection. Out of the same discussions, later a book entitled *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* came out in 1995. Just one year after it, Howard Clinebell, preferring ecotherapy to ecopsychology, used ecotherapy for the first time in his book *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth,* in which he defined it as "healing and growth that is nurtured by healthy interaction with the earth" (xxi). Ecotherapy, as Clinebell theorizes, focuses on "healing and growth work" of "the total mind-body-spirit relationship organism, not just the psyche" (xxi). Ecotherapy for Clinebell is the healing and growth process of humans and all the other living organisms.

Buzzell and Chalquist, in response to various readers' question—where they could find out more about the psyche-world connection—produced a book entitled *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*. In the book, they view ecotherapy as the applied ecopsychology. Taking ecotherapy as a physical and psychological healing process from nature-based methods, they define it as "a new form of psychotherapy that acknowledges the vital role of nature and addresses the human-nature relationship" (18). Ecotherapy, as they explain, employs many nature-based methods such as "nature-reconnection practices, animal-assisted psychotherapy, horticulture therapy, time stress management, wilderness work, and various restorative methods" by which human beings can heal their physical and psychological wounds (18). Ecotherapy, as clarified by Buzzell and Chalquist, uses various earth-based healing methods and emphasizes on the realization of intimate and inseparable human-nature bond for the well-being of the both.

Historically, the human and nature relationship goes back to antiquity. The earth or Gaia has been regarded as mother in various civilizations of the East and the West alike since long. But along with the beginning of farming, as Chalquist depicts, the relationship dwindled as people required to build fences to protect their products, which consequently separated "domesticated from wild, human from non-human, settled from nomadic, and personal from terrestrial" (69). Since then, there has been an irrevocable split between the human and the rest of the earth, and human beings took it their heroism to control the rest. This repressive consciousness rose to the peak along with European colonization and Industrial Revolution, which consequently invited sever environmental crisis on the one hand and various health hazards of living creatures on the other.

In response to such lurking crises, various nature lover poets, writers, philosophers and activists such as romantic and transcendentalist writers, environmentalists, ecocritics, and so on, have frequently shown their concerns. Ecotherapy is the outcome of all these. Bringing ideas and insights from all these, it now concentrates on the healing potentiality of "mind-body-world web" (Buzzell and Chalquist 20). After all, ecotherapy attempts at the promotion of reciprocal healing of mind, body and the world through the physical and psychological nature-based methods. In this way, Matthiessen's novel replicates ecotherapeutic healing of his heart and mind through the meditation and interaction with nature at the Crystal Mountain.

Matthiessen's Ecotherapeutic Healing Practice

Out of various objectives of Matthiessen's journey such as to study about the *bharals,* notice the snow leopard, meet the Lama of Shey Gompa, get self-awakening

and heal the heart, the last one is the most dominant one. Matthiessen wants to patch up his bereft heart by fighting grief, frustrations and anxieties caused by the death of his wife, Deborah. He himself clarifies that his journey is "a deeply personal pilgrimage, a journey of the heart" (13). The trauma of Deborah's demise was the dominant motive for his immediate trip—it was just six and half months of her death—by leaving four children including an eight-year-old child son at home. Critics such as Peter Hulme, Richard Kerridge and Sue Ellen Campbell, to name a few, reinforce the theme of death and mourning in the book as "mourning and reflecting on the death of his wife" (Hulme 90); search "for recently dead wife" (Kerridge 175); and quest "for some way to transcend his grief for his wife" (Campbell 136). Apparently, Matthiessen's journey is ignited by the quest of the solace to the heart.

Matthiessen chooses the Crystal Mountain of the Dolpo region of Nepal as an appropriate setting for the ecotherapeutic healing practice because of its plentiful and lush nature as well as sacred heritages of Budhhism. Dolpo has been a mythic land for the West: "all but unknown to Westerners even today" and has preserved "the pure Tibetan culture . . . [known as] last citadel of 'all that present-day humanity is longing for'" (13-14). Dolpo, being untouched by external influence survives as the last citadel for the Westerners like Matthiessen from where they expect to recover the spiritual loss.

Just after crossing Pokhara, Matthiessen gets overwhelmed to have a glimpse of the beauty of nature. The landscape is untouched by industrialization and modernization, but filled up with "the clean air and absence of all sound, of even the simplest machinery . . . the warmth and harmony and seeming plenty" that gives him a nostalgic sense of "paradisal age" (26). This is a powerful example for ecotherapists that proves how Matthiessen, grown up in the humdrum of industrial civilizations, is fed up and is looking for paradisal feelings from the unspoiled nature. In such a heavenly company of astonishing nature, Matthiessen disavows to be regulated by the man-made time. Thus, he removes his watch and says: "Finally, I remove my watch, as the time it tells is losing all significance" (57). Matthiessen loves to escape modernity so as to get immersed into nature. This is, as Tim Youngs rightly comments, his "flight from modernity" for the "quest for a pre-industrial self-closer to nature"(96). Or as the ecotherapists would say, the avoidance of "industrial growth civilization" which is the root cause of "the plainly toxic social and environmental aspects" that are "making us ill" (Chalquist 77).

While moving ahead, to his sadness, Matthiessen comes across some people cutting down the trees that may ultimately lead to soil erosion. He shows his aggression on it as: "One day this boy and others will destroy that forest, and their sheep fields will erode in rain and thin soil will wash away" (31). This is Matthiessen's "awareness of late-twentieth century ecology" as pointed out by Casey Blanton (74).

Reaching to the Crystal Mountain turns a Herculean job for the expedition team. Frequent heavy rainfall, heavy snowfall, freezing cold, inadequate provisions, uncomfortable gears of porters and many others cost the team lots of blood, tear and sweat. Finally, with exhausted bodies, they land at the Crystal Mountain by crossing all the mountains including the most difficult Khang La pass. The moment he reaches there, Matthiessen gets overwhelmed by the entire scenery, which he puts as: "We are extremely happy to be here" and feels he has won a huge battle: "it often seemed that we would never arrive at all" (176). Matthiessen forgets all the troubles of the journey and now fully concentrates on attaining spiritual awakening.

Being historically connected to the Zen Buddhism, the Crystal Monastery has a significant spiritual attachment to Matthiessen as he is a convert to this sect himself. Buddhist monks and pilgrims go there every year to pay homage. According to the scripts, a great monk named Drutob Senge Yeshe went to Shey on a "flying snow leopard" and converted the local "folk" and "Mountain God" into "Buddhism," and made the Mountain God the "protector of the Dharma and transformed the hidden hill into the Crystal Mountain" (216). Matthiessen, as a Buddhist, finally finds a complete spiritual home in this holy mountain. He hopes to meet the lama and gain spiritual knowledge from him: "the Lama of Shey is a notable *tulku*, or incarnate lama, revered throughout the Land of Dolpo. . . . I had hoped he would be my teacher" (178). Moreover, he will meditate to empty his mind from all kinds of presuppositions and attachments and heal his bereft heart.

Unfortunately, Matthiessen fails to meet the lama as he has gone to another village. But he meditates every day. Meditation for Buddhists, as Matthiessen notes, "represents the foundation of the universe to which all returns" to "this 'void'" where "lies ultimate reality" and one's "true nature" gets rebirth (91). Matthiessen practices meditation for leading his mind into void of all agonies and grief. He wants to heal his saddened heart. He describes his meditating practice as, "Each morning before daybreak, I drag my parka into my sleeping bag, to warm it, then sit up in meditation posture and perform a sutra chanting service for perhaps forty five minutes" (187). Further, he explains how one should let everything go while meditating: "But the point of meditation is to let everything go: when your mind is empty like a valley or a canyon, then you will know the power of the Way" (190). Meditation is not only for experiencing the void, it is also, as Sarah Anne Edwards and Linda Buzzell affirm, one of the methods of ecotherapy "to connect with the sacred in nature"(129). Matthiessen's meditation, thus, underpins not only his wish of emptying his mind but also urgency for the connectivity of body and mind with nature. It is what ecotherapists, Buzzell and Chalquist, would say, healing potentiality of "mind-body-world web" (20).

Matthiessen is excited to find every wild animal, human culture and the natural phenomenon existing in a holistic organism at the Crystal Mountain. Buddhism believes in holistic organism as Buddha perceives his "identity with the Universe" (*Snow Leopard* 66). Holistic organism is also one of the four laws of ecology as propounded by Barry Commoner: "everything is connected to everything." As a Buddhist and an ecoconscious man, Matthiessen finds the entire landscape, animals, monuments and culture are in an interrelated organism at Shey. He writes: "I keep thinking, How extraordinary! . . . all has the immediate reality of that region of the mind where 'mountains, wolves . . . snow and fire had realized their true being" (192). Here, interestingly, Matthiessen's advocacy for holistic organism throws a satire on the anthropocentric West, which enjoys a split.

Matthiessen keeps on meditating and observing the interconnectedness of all the organisms in the region. He even feels the wilderness turning into a living being: "Now the mountains all around me take on life; the Crystal Mountain moves. . . . Even in wilderness the sound of rivers comes and goes and falls and rises, like the wind itself. An instinct comes to open outward by letting all life in" (195). He feels life energies in all the living and non-living things of the mountain.

Matthiessen even imitates the blue sheep's sitting position so as to feel the life and the warmth of the earth like them:"To be right among the sheep like this is stirring. I

lie belly down, out of the wind, and the whole warm mountain, breathing as I breathe, seems to take me in" (198). In doing so, he feels being absorbed into the mountain.

Similarly, Matthiessen feels, nature is offering him life energy and taking him into itself: "energy pours through me, joining my body with the sun" (212). He finds himself as an integrated particle of the mountains: "I grow in these mountains like a moss" and wonders at the nature's metamorphosing power that binds everything together: "I am bewitched. The blinding snow peaks and the clarion air, the sound of earth and heaven in the silence . . ." (212). Through meditation, Matthiessen senses of receiving energy for being connected to everything in the earth.

Matthiessen further explains his company with nature. Although, he is out of any news of modern times, he is absolutely content because he has cleared his mind from all about the urban society and found himself in nature. He writes, "We have had no news of modern times since late September, and will have none until December, and gradually my mind has cleared itself . . . . I am never lonely; I am returned into myself" (213). This statement confirms Matthiessen's preference of being in nature to being in the urban cities filled with the amenities of modern times so as to attain solace in the mind.

In such a joyful mood, he discards the feeling of going back home: "I do not wish to leave the Crystal Mountain," instead, he remembers his wife and imagines "how she would smile too" if she were with him now (213). He takes the mountains to be his home—past and present—where he takes rebirth and restores his forgotten knowledge. He writes, "In another life—this is not what I know, but how I feel—these mountains were my home" (213). He believes, he has regained "a rising of forgotten knowledge" from the mountains that helps him have patience and free his mind from worries (213). He assumes of being reunited with his wife in this spiritual mountain and thus feels the healing of his bereft heart.

On his last meditation before leaving Shey, Matthiessen again senses his immersion into the mountain: "I meditate for the last time on this mountain. . . . I know this mountain because I am this mountain. I can feel it breathing at this moment" (235). With this feeling of being united with the mountain, Matthiessen again hopes of glimpsing the most desired mythical snow leopard. If so, he will be free from all kinds of preoccupations. He writes, "If the snow leopard should leap from the rock above and manifest itself before me . . . I might truly perceive it, and be free" (235). But, he cannot see the snow leopard this time too. Even then, he remains content because he has already learnt from the Lama of Shey to be satisfied when there is no choice: "Of course I am happy here! It's wonderful! Especially when I have no choice!" (225). From this statement of the lama, Matthiessen keeps himself calm and cool as if he has healed his mind. He presumes that he has attained self-awakening as well.

But, soon, while descending towards the lower altitude, he realizes of failing in his ambition of attaining self-transformation: "I have failed" (272). Despite that, Matthiessen's journey to the Crystal Mountain remains highly successful. He succeeds in shedding off all his personal worries and agonies through mediation as well as through healthy interactions with all the living and non-living organisms existing there. Finally, he heals his heart as the ecotherapist Howard Clinebell emphasizes, by "incorporating biophilia [the innate affiliation of humans to other animals and living organism]" into his meditating process so as to utilize "the healing energies of nature" (xxi). Matthiessen gets healing from the earth and in turn advocates for a healthy interaction with it.

Conclusion

To conclude, from the above discussion, this study affirms that *The Snow Leopard* is Matthiessen's quest for the healing of his heart bereaved by the death of his wife, Deborah Love. The book, as many critics have observed, is a quest narrative of varied sorts, but while looked at from ecotherapeutic perspective, it bears some typical instances that justify how Matthiessen maintains a man-nature relationshop intact for the healing of the both. He travels to the Crystal Mountain, observes the lush and plenty of nature, gains spiritual knowledge from the lama and does meditation in order to heal his heart. While meditating, he even imitates the position of a blue ship to feel the earth. In his deep meditation, he experiences of being one with the mountain and whole organisms existing there. Moreover, as a true reverent of nature and advocate of ecological balance, he expresses his aggression at the people who are chopping down trees. Finally, besides getting healing of the heart personally, he also conveys a message to the post-industrially alienated Western people to pay attention to healthy interactions with the earth for the sustainability of the both: human and the rest of the earth.

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