



Ecological Undercurrents: Exploring Nature and Environmental Motifs in M.F. Husain's Art

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Abstract

Maqbool Fida Husain, the 'Picasso of India' used bold colours, fluid lines, a unique blend of cubism, and classical Indian art forms in his murals. This study, which is based on post-colonial ecocriticism, social ecology, and deep ecology, focuses on the ecocritical reading of Husain's artworks. For instance, "Traditional Indian Festivals" from the "Indian Civilization Series" shows how women perform plant (Tulsi) and nature (Moon) worshipping which illustrates the mutually beneficial link between civilization and environment, and "The Horse Series" where the Horses are frequently portrayed in movement using bold brushstrokes and a vivid palette influenced by the Indian landscape, culture, and mythology, capturing their liveliness which invites reflection on the critical need to preserve wilderness. "Our Planet Called Earth" promotes a heightened global ecological consciousness, whereas "Krishna Leela" captures the connection between the Divine and nature. His fascination with animal figures like cows, horses, and elephants suggests his understanding of the ecosystem and concern for wildlife conservation. "Folklore Kerala IV" is an example where the painter tries to connect womanhood with mother nature by using the figure of a native Kerala woman, coconut trees, and yellow-green hues. This thorough ecocritical investigation advances our knowledge of Husain's insightful observations on the intricate interplay of the human experience, ecology, and art. The chosen pieces of art function as windows into his ecological consciousness, illustrating the cyclical nature of environmental processes, the effects of human activity on the environment, and the interconnection of ecological issues worldwide.

Keywords: Visual Art, M.F Husain, Ecocriticism, Nature, Cubism, Animal Studies



[Climate Action](#)

Introduction

"Care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves. We must find and develop therapies which heal our relations with the widest community, that of all living beings." (Naes, 1988, p. 29)

Ecocriticism deals with the interdisciplinary study of humans and nature, nature and animals, and humans and animals in literature and art. Cheryll Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and physical

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environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 2019, p. xix). According to her (Glotfelty & Fromm, 2019, p. xix) Ecocriticism approaches literary studies from an earthly perspective, just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective and Marxist criticism reads work with an understanding of economic class and forms of production. The term 'ecocriticism' might have a narrow meaning as it mainly focuses on interpreting only literary texts with an environmental consciousness. Suzaan Boettger writes, "...the discipline of the history of art has not produced a professional organization and journal addressing artistic environmentalism; those writing about such work under the banner of 'ecocriticism' are a micro-minority" (Boettger, 2016, p. 665). She also adds that there lacks an articulated ecocritical methodology to study visual art. So, in that case, we may apply the ecocritical theoretical perspectives, which apply to literary texts, to environmental art or Eco-art which will not only talk about the preservation of the greenery but also will search for underlined symbols within any art to find out the contemporary issue of environmental degradation and concern. As Boettger notes, "The development of ecocriticism of visual art is belated, in that it both parallels and follows the trajectory of the onset of literary ecocriticism..." (Boettger, 2016, p. 668).

M.F Husain, one of the most famous and successful Indian painters, has drawn on multiple themes including Hindu and Buddhist Gods and Goddesses, Indian cultures, animals, Indian values, etc. His painting style, mainly inspired by the Western cubist styles of Baroque and Picasso, drew attention to the radical kind of art movement in Indian art culture. Though Husain, explicitly or for the sake of ecocritical concern never painted any piece, his works are filled with environmental motifs and celebrations of indigenous culture.

Discussion

In his serigraphs about Kerala, Husain captured the relationship between humans (mainly women) and nature and implicitly may have tried to uphold the concept of Mother Nature. He noted, "If Kashmir

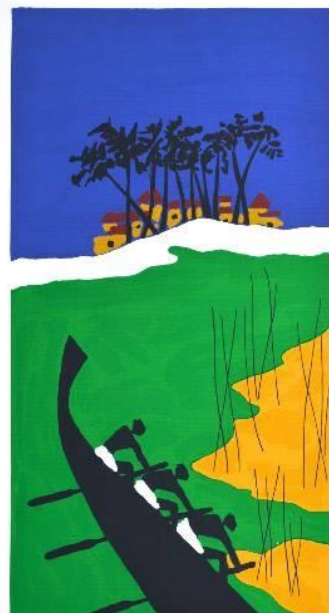


Fig. 2. M.F Husain. Folklore Kerala VIII. www.indiaart.com

is all about men and mountains" Kerala "is all about women and nature" (Husain, 2003, p. IX) Husain, in contrast to his peers, who frequently concentrated on the urban environment, drew inspiration from India's pastoral lifestyle. In all of these Kerala paintings, he used bold colours and dynamic compositions to convey the



Fig. 1. M.F Husain. Kerala III. www.artflute.com

essence of natural resources. "Folklore Kerala V", like other Kerala series paintings, depicts rural life filled with green colour including the male and female and a fish painted in complete green. Painting human beings and fish in the same colour symbolizes the closeness of fish with fishermen and the ecosystem. In "Folklore Kerala VIII", in contrast to the traditional rules he painted the water in green and used black colour for both trees and humans, creating a connection between humans and trees, while conveying the vision of preserving the earth with lush greenery. In "Kerala III" and "Folklore Kerala IV", a woman can be seen holding tiny elephants in her hands and there are multiple elephants present in these paintings which signify the importance of elephants in Kerala myth and culture, which indirectly talks about the animal reservation. Elephants are not just state animals of Kerala but also an integral part of native Kerala culture. These paintings may also celebrate the "Pooram Gajamela" or Festival of Elephants, where locals perform music and dance with elephants. Elephants and all other animals are also vital parts of this ecosystem and their deaths can cause ecological imbalance.

Husain's landscape paintings are less in number. While impressionistic landscape painters like Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro etc. are often associated with ecocritical concern, Husain's landscapes are more structural and shaped. His "Landscape III" is a work where he paints leaves of coconut trees in blue, green, and yellow enlivening their importance in our world. Blue symbolizes water, essential for growth; green represents nature and life; and yellow signifies sunlight, crucial for photosynthesis. This use of colors underscores the interconnectedness of natural elements and promotes environmental appreciation and preservation.



Fig. 3. M.F Husain. *Landscape III*, A Tata Steel Publication, Mumbai, 1988

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K. Gomathy writes, "Indians regard everything around them as pervaded by a subtle divine presence, may it be rivers, mountains, lakes, animals, flora, the mineral world, as well as the stars and planets. It is so because the Divine reality is present as Prana/Shakti, energy, and power, in every electron, particle, atom, cell and in every manifestation of matter. The five cosmic elements earth, water, air, akasha, and fire all constitute a major role" (Gomathy, 2019, p.177). But after the British rule, a lot of things changed. Indians were tagged as orthodox and uncivilized when they performed their cultural activities. Deforestation, cash crop culture, mining, industrialization, hunting for sport, etc. rose during the British rule which impacted the environment of India. Post-colonial ecocriticism deals with the issue of how not only human but also non-human lives and objects became also the victims of the colonizers. According to Alia Afzal, "Unlike European thinking about nature and environment, for indigenous culture

nature is not a pastime, and landscape not just a place to dwell on. It is deeper than what one might assume" (Afzal, 2017, p 92). Inspired by his upbringing in the final years of British imperialism, Husain painted the "British Raj Series," capturing the events of this revolutionary environment through amusing canvases that combine elements of Indian culture with British subjects in a satirical visual commentary that also may have environmental symbols underflowing. For example, the given are two instances, where animal cruelty by British officers can be seen.

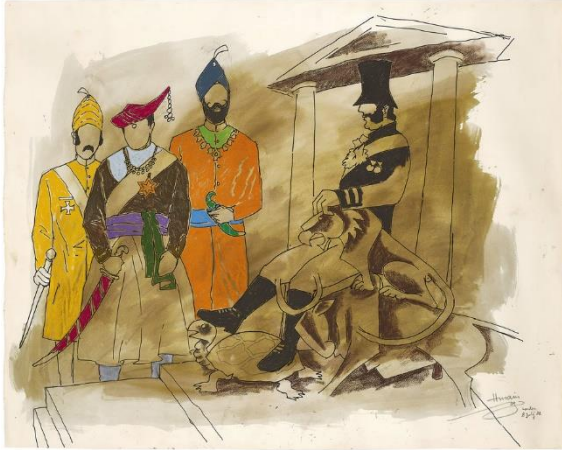


Fig. 4. M.F Husain. *Credentials Of Gwalior, Nizam And Patiala!* (British Raj Series).

'Husain' by Tata Steel, Bombay, 1986, pg. 263



Fig. 5. M.F Husain. *Untitled (British Raj Series)*.
www.saffronart.com

In Fig. 4 the officer can be seen resting his feet on a turtle and his lion resting on the Bull. This painting not only hurts the religious sentiment of Muslims and Hindus but also shows how the Britishers saw themselves as Gods, above everything including humans and animals. The second figure clearly criticizes animal cruelty and the hunting fashion of Britishers. The tiger is painted in bloody red colour, and the British hunter celebrates his hunt by holding a rifle. The sad gaze of the Elephant and the pale blue colour of it symbolizes the shock the elephant is in. "Between 1875 and 1925, over 80,000 tigers were killed in India under British rule. British rulers hunted tigers indiscriminately and brought them on the verge of extinction" (Qureshi, 2023).

"Now our major concern is no longer with the disease organisms that once were omnipresent; sanitation, better living conditions, and new drugs have given us a high degree of control over infectious disease. Today we are concerned with a different kind of hazard that lurks in our environment—a hazard we ourselves have introduced into our world as our modern way of life has evolved" (Carson, 2002, p. 155). The hazards Rachel Carson talks about are pollution, toxic waste, and heavy gasses. A few of Husain's works also focus on the effect of industrial development on ecology. In his artwork "Bhopal", he paints the horror of the 1984 Bhopal Gas Tragedy which affected not only the people, plants, and other living organisms of the area but also the entire ecosystem and environment. Local waterways became contaminated with the heavy gas, rendering the water hazardous for human consumption and killing fish and microbes in the water. Birds and domestic animals also died in the accident. Many trees and crops became inedible for humans and animals. In these kinds of accidents, nature and her children suffer a lot uplifting the serious question of how mankind in the long

run will be able to exist. Carson writes, "Along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man's total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm—substances that accumulate in the tissues of plants and animals and even penetrate the germ cells to shatter or alter the very material of heredity upon which the shape of the future depends" (Carson, 2002, p. 8).



Fig. 6. M.F Husain. *Bhopal*. www.wikiart.org

In the above painting on the Bhopal disaster, a cow painted in black, a child painted in pale blue, and dead people painted in pale white signify the tone of mortality and environmental degradation because of the toxic gas, painted in grey brush strokes.

Hussain's artwork "Our Planet Called Earth" might suggest the search for another planet. The little boy, coloured red same as the colour of fire from the rocket, is holding his father's hand, while his father shoves both his hands in his pant pockets. The father and the tip of the rocket are painted in the same colour. This shows how the father is not willing to or unable to reciprocate the son's touch and might be in search for a new planet for his son, because our planet Earth has become uninhabitable. This could convey a cosmic tension of preserving our earth and its nature.

Glotfelty notes, "Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with the society- the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands



Fig. 7. M.F Husain. *Our Planet Called Earth*, www.artnet.com

the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 2019, p. xix). Husain's paintings cover the entire ecosphere from the Moon, river, and trees to fish, animals, and humans. Husain gave tribute to the rich history of India in his "Indian Civilization Series" paintings. In his work "Three Dynasties" from the "Indian Civilization Series" he paints how India was ruled by three great dynasties: the Mauryan Civilization, the Muslim Mughal dynasty (1525-1857), and the British Raj (1858-1947). In three parts of the art, animals like elephants, cows, and horses become common characters. His work "Traditional Indian Festivals" is deeply rooted in ecological concerns. This piece is also divided into three panels. The left panel celebrates the festival of colour, Holi. In ancient times, many types of plants like Butea, Blue Pea, Jacaranda, Nayantara, etc. were not cut down because of their colour-producing properties. People used to boil the leaves or petals to create colour which was also a way of preserving the tree. This painting celebrates the traditional Indian festivals to preserve our environment through Holi, Tulsi (holy Basil) Pujan Divas, and Purnima. In the central panel, Husain paints the Tulsi plant worshipping ritual of Hindu households. Tulsi is considered one of the most sacred plants in Hinduism. It is believed to be the incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi and is associated with longevity, purity, and devotion; it also has many medicinal properties like immunity boosting, antipyretic, analgesic, etc. Plant worshipping is a very age-old culture in India. Many plants like Peepal (Sacred Fig), Bilva (Bael) Tree, Ashoka Tree, Banana Plant, Kusha Grass, Lotus, Neem Tree, etc are worshipped in India, which can be interpreted as a very unique way to protect trees. Husain tries to establish the same narrative. The right panel is about the Purnima Festival, which takes place when the moon is brightest and fullest. Symbolically, it represents the worship of nature.



Fig. 8. M.F Husain. *Traditional Indian Festivals*. 2008-2011. Courtesy of Usha Mittal, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Purnima festivals involve rituals and are held outdoors, connecting housewives with nature. It marks a cyclical understanding of nature and often carries traditional

ecological knowledge embedded in rituals and myths. Rituals like taking holy baths in rivers during Purnima promote a connection with water bodies and may inadvertently encourage the conservation of these natural resources. Handmade oil lamps are easily decomposed in nature, which encourages the usage of biodegradable materials. Using eco-friendly materials in rituals and decorations reflects a cultural awareness of environmental sustainability. These festivals can be seen as expressions of cultural ecology, where religious practices and beliefs are intertwined with the natural environment. Cultural expressions during these festivals may include folk dances, songs, and art that reflect the local ecology and its influence on people's lives. The balance of the environment and the history of the Earth depend on multiple aspects and various living and non-living things. Husain's "Indian Civilization Series", whether it is "Three Dynasties", "Language of Stone", "Traditional Indian Festival", "Indian Households", "Mode of Transports", "Tale of Three Cities", "Indian Dance Forms" or "Hindu Triad", all convey the totality of our nature and culture. As Rachel Carson in "Silent Spring" states, "The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings" (Carson, 2002, p. 21).

Carson writes, "The physical form and the habits of the earth's vegetation and its animal life have been molded by the environment" (Carson, 2002, p. 21). But over time, humans destroyed the environment along with its diverse animal kingdom. Husain draws animals in different ways, giving them much space and frame-area in his canvases which evokes a sense of deep ecology. Husain is famous for his horse paintings where he paints horses always in motion as they are running after something, or running away from something. The use of vivid colours, large brush strokes, and fierce tone of the horses hints at an untamed energy that may suggest the uniqueness of the animal kingdom. That energy is only found in animality which can suggest the issue of animal preservation and freedom. Humans have domesticized horses thousands of years ago and horses and humans share a very strong bonding since. In some of his paintings of horses, the figures seem to be in fear, shock, or tension which gives them



Fig. 9. M.F Husain, *Untitled (Horses)*. www.sothebys.com

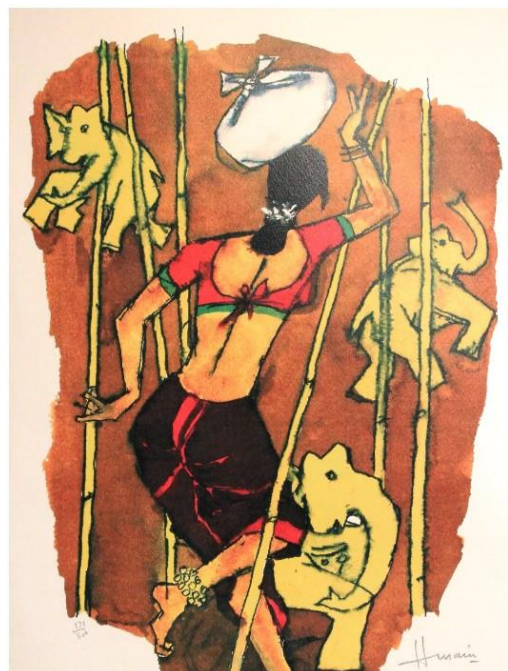


Fig. 11. M.F Husain, *Gaja Gamini 2*, www.tallengestore.com



Fig. 10. M.F Husain, *Untitled (Horses)*. www.artflute.com

anthropomorphic ability and shifts the anthropocentric thought of the world. Horses can also be seen as a metaphor for freedom. According to Alka Raghuvanshi, "The horse was a metaphor for freedom for him and he craved to be so free himself that he didn't want to be shackled by anything. Not even time or date" (Raghuvanshi, 2018). his freedom is not just about the freedom of an individual or freedom of speech this also can be interpreted as a freedom that the horses or animal kingdom in general want from the humans- how they want to live on this mother earth. Not just horses, many animals like elephants, Tigers, Bulls etc. are also present in many of his artworks. He gives emotion and persona to his animals which is also a critique of "Speciesism". In "Animal Liberation", Peter Singer defines speciesism as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (Singer, 2015, p. 35). Though horses and elephants are very recurrent symbols in Husain's paintings, he favoured many other animals also. In his "Gaja Gamini" paintings, he intertwined female figures and elephants, drawing a similar pattern of women walking majestically like an Elephant. This womanhood and mother figure is very prominent in his artworks which links to mother nature. These works also can be seen through the lens of ecofeminism, placing the woman with Nature and giving a woman the primary value of mother nature.

Husain is famous for his paintings on myths of Gods and Goddesses of Hindu mythology. Jill Da Silva in her article "Ecocriticism and Myth: The Case of Erysichthon" states that,

We can interpret the myth as a warning: abuse nature and sooner or later be visited with famine. I shall argue that it is a myth particularly for our time, just



Fig. 12. M.F Husain. *Krishna Leela*, www.gallerienyva.com

as much as it was over 2,000 years ago for remarkably similar reasons, and that it demonstrates the enduring power of myth in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I suggest that it has just as much relevance in discussing humans' worsening relationship with

the natural world as it has rational explanation and facts and figures (Da Silva, 2008, p. 103-16).

In his murals of Lord Krishna, notably "Krishna Gopala – Posters", "Krishna the Cowherd" and "Krishna Leela", Husain shows how Lord Krishna is surrounded by nature and cows. Though it is very evident that the picture shows how humans, animals, and nature were connected peacefully. But Damiano Benvegnù and Dartmouth College write that "this interpretation of the myth is particularly compelling for those narratives that indeed portray the origins of human society in their foundational interactions with nonhuman nature" (Benvegnù and College) and indeed there is another interpretation of these kinds of mythical artworks. Martin Junquera & Molina Moreno writes that "Although certain fables and animal myths have tried to teach us throughout history that human beings depend on natural diversity and all species depend on one another, the interaction between species in the natural world has been characterized by human domination" (Martin Junquera & Molina Moreno, 2018, p 1-7). Husain's serigraph of Lord Krishna which he names as "Krishna Leela" has, not only in the title but in the picture, an anthropocentric undertone. Where Lord Krishna's flute works like a weapon to control the animals and as according to Hindu mythology Krishna himself was a Shepherd and butter made from cow milk was his favourite meal which shows how the entire narrative favours one species of the animal kingdom because of human need.

Conclusion

Critics generally associate impressionistic paintings of flora and fauna, paintings of natural beauty and landscape, or any painting that has a very clear motive of showing environmental decay with ecocriticism. Husain, on the other hand, wasn't an environmentalist or an eco-critic, and neither his works were like the extreme impressionist works or even like the works of N.S. Bendre, Amrita Shergill, or Jehangir Sabavala. He never portrayed just pure greenery or the impressionist expression of natural habitat. His artistic brushes have unconsciously portrayed artworks, serigraphs, and posters where themes like animal cruelty, nature preservation, the effects of the British Raj on India's nature and biodiversity etc. are very evident. His works, whether it is "The Kerala Series" paintings, which describe how myth, jungle, animals, and indigenous people are interconnected and also shows the presence of trees eons before the evidence of human and animal life on earth, or the Horse Series, which depicts the ferocious, untamed, and wild aspects of the natural world that defy humans, or the paintings about myth and Indian culture where nature worshipping is shown, or the recurrent female figures in his eco-arts, which link to the concept of mother nature, have established the view that the visually pleasing or disturbing piece of art also carries ecological undercurrents. The consciousness about the environment has become a vital facet of our collective awareness as we grapple with the challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation. Artists can play a crucial role in channelling this consciousness through visual art which has a marked impact on viewers. This can stir emotions of the viewers that transcend verbal communication and the sense of feeling of an emergency situation like the destruction of nature. Through

subtle details, vibrant palettes, shapes and figures, they capture the essence of landscapes, endangered species, or ecosystems and delineate the audience to confront the fragility of our environment. Murals, sculptures, and installations in public spaces serve as statements, advocating for sustainable practices.

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