

# Ecological Consciousness and Ethical Awakening in The Motorcycle Diaries

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## ABSTRACT

The devastation of the environment for so-called development endangered the very existence of human beings in the modern age. Natural disasters are one of the outcomes of excess exploitation of natural resources creating the divide not only between nature and human beings but also among the people who control the system and are powerful and those who are powerless, the common masses. Guevara, in his travelogue memoir portrays the picture of the conflict and tries to warn us against the corruption and malpractices that have been undertaken without any concern for the environment. The present paper investigates the multifaceted dimensions of ecology and ethical consciousness of the narrator in his seminal work *The Motorcycle Diaries*. It also discloses the character of Guevara as an ecologist, which was not explored in the earlier research on Guevara and his works.

**KEYWORDS:** Ecology; Ethical awakening; Green consciousness; Exploitation; Travelogue

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, changes to the natural environment and the growing issue of climate have been the major concerns of both the developed and the developing world, thus making ecocritical studies more and more significant. In this context, literature is a potent tool for depicting, interrogating, and responding to the changing interface between humans and the natural world. Specifically, travel writing reveals ample opportunities to highlight ecological issues as it essentially recounts a direct encounter with a particular landscape, environment, and community. Such accounts depict the splendour and majesty of nature, but at the same time, they also reveal how industrialization, urbanization, and economic exploitation disrupt the harmony between humans and nature. Environmental awareness often develops along with the individual's social and ethical awareness in travel literature. The present paper draws on ecocriticism to explore the idea of ecological sensitivity and ethical awakening of the narrator, Guevara and his friend. Ecocriticism as a theory looks at the link between literature and nature and focuses on how nature and environmental issues are

represented in literary texts (Garrard). The paper reads *The Motorcycle Diaries* as an example of travel literature, and describes how Guevara's lived experience and observations lead to the development of his environmental consciousness.

## Travel Writing as Genre

Travel has been a passion for human beings exploring new regions, new people, their culture, traditions, ways of living, etc. It is always fascinating and curious for human beings to trade into new realms and have transactions with nature and people around the world. Travelogue or travel writing is such a genre that provides space for narrating the experiences and disclosing varied aspects of (new) land, people, their living, culture, history, etc. It has richly contributed to the development of literature, especially the genre of nonfiction around the world, touching upon innumerable themes and issues relating to culture, landscapes, identity, politics, social and economic issues, exploitation, colonialism, ecological awareness, conflicts, dislocations, and adventures. These themes and issues are discussed in some of the famous and prominent travelogues since ancient times like records of India in the writings

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of Chinese travellers like Faxian's travelogue *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* (c. 399-414); to the middle ages *The Travels of Marco Polo* by Marco Polo (c. 1300), *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* by Ibn Battuta (1354), *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* by Mungo Park (1799), *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* by Robert Stevenson (1879); and to the modern times such as *The Road to Oxiana* by Robert Bryson (1937), *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* by Eric Newby (1958), *The Art of Travel* by Alain de Botton (2002), *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert (2006), *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* by Cheryl Strayed (2012).

Travelogues are the written records of everything that encompasses human civilisation. It may reveal coarse, minute or sensitive information about people and land, for example, a Chinese traveller who visited the Deccan Plateau in the 7<sup>th</sup> century wrote about the character and nature of the people living there: "The inhabitants are proud-spirited and warlike, grateful for favours and revengeful for wrongs, self-sacrificing towards suppliants in distress and sanguinary to death with any who treated them insultingly... If they are going to seek revenge, first they give their enemy warning" (Sarkar 15).

Today, the genre of travel writing has become more succinct, expanding its scope to newly discovered human interventions and its association with other elements, especially, the surroundings. *The Motorcycle Diaries* by Ernesto Che Guevara, a universal youth icon and revolutionary leader, is a precise account of personal transformation and acute experience of two adventurous friends travelling around Latin America, sacrificing the last phase of their studies. Guevara, who was a doctor by profession, left his studies incomplete for the last year to set off to do something great in life, accompanied by his close friend Alberto Granado who was a biochemist. The present travelogue is an outcome of the personal diary written by Guevara during the course of their expedition, which, later, he himself narrated and refined but published posthumously in 1993 by his daughter Aleida March. Guevara started writing experiences and events during the travel which began in December 1951 from Buenos Aires covering the whole of western South America including Chile, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela and Miami, a journey of almost nine

months covering a distance of more than eight thousand kilometres prominently on a motorcycle they named La Poderosa (the mighty one); then steamship, raft, hitchhiking, bus, truck, horse, and walking. This trip has marked a special place and significance in the life of Guevara because it transformed him completely.

### **Guevara's Journey and Critical Reception**

There is a significant body of research on Guevara, focusing on him as prominent figure in Latin American revolutionary history, whose legacy in anti-capitalist intellectual tradition, cultural conflicts and exploitation has been analysed by various scholars. Guevara's ideological framework, including socio-political views, his ideological transformation into an iconic leader has received critical scholarly attention (Venegas). The story was adapted into a film that became popular for its vivid visualisation of Guevara and his friend's expedition and their ideological transformation (Salles). The movie shows natural landscapes in stunning detail. It also depicts solidarity and compassion towards the people they met. In a biography entitled *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*, the writer portrayed the journey of transformation Guevara from a common boy to a revolutionary activist (San Juan). It is an in-depth discussion on Guevara and his life. *The Making of a Revolutionary* is a similar news article (Arana) that focuses on Guevara's life and ideological transformation. However, no insightful research has been conducted so far on green consciousness and concern towards the environment in *The Motorcycle Diaries* inherently, present in the form of tension between nature and human intervention and exploitation, leading to socio-economic disparity.

At the beginning, while noting down, Guevara admits in a submissive tone: "All this wandering around 'our America with a capital A' has changed me more than I thought" (Guevara 3), showing his passion and love for travelling, which in later part of his life transformed him internally and externally. He shows a mature understanding of the nature, especially sea, and its interplay than his friend Alberto:

For me, the sea has always been confident, a friend absorbing all it is told and never revealing those secrets; always giving the best advice—its meaningful noises can be

interpreted any way you choose. For Alberto, it is a new, strangely perturbing sight, and the intensity with which his eyes follow every wave building, swelling, then dying on the beach, reflects his amazement. (Guevara 7)

It reflects Guevara's thinking, understanding of elements in nature, and its human perception and interpretation. The sea and water remain a constant presence in his mind, witnessing his internal transformation and thought, which was evident in several incidents throughout the journey. The attachment to nature is vividly described, forming clear visuals of awe-inspiring landscapes, as one travels through them on La Poderosa. The song of Miguel Otero, a Venezuelan poet, "I heard splashing on the boat" (Guevara 9), resonates in his mind when he left his girlfriend in Miramar is full of nature imagery and symbolic of leaving his girlfriend and adopting nature as a new companion on a coarsely determined expedition. Considering Guevara's sentiments and ideological stance, he, in the words of Bate, falls in the category of "light Greens", those who have serious concern about the environment as it environs humanity than the "dark Greens" who are radical and obstinate in their views and actions about ecology; as even they avoid calling "environment" instead prefer calling "nature". It is seen that often the extreme views regarding anything result with nothing positive. Guevara and his friend prefer to be optimistic towards nature as they have witnessed the power of nature throughout their journey.

### **Guevara's Ecological Sensibility**

As the narration progresses, the contrast between nature and human intervention becomes vivid. The enormousness of nature is contrasted with the misery of human-made towns, villages, and cities. The description of nature in the memoir reminds us of visual compositions of natural beauty and scenes by lake poets of England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially William Wordsworth, where nature is often portrayed as a predominant force over other things. Guevara's depiction, though in the form of prose, creates a picture, a visual representation in the mind of readers, but at the same time, unlike Wordsworth's poetry, it informs us about the exploitation of nature and its beauty, the excess of human intervention. It shows his deep feelings towards nature and human apartheid. To quote Guevara:

The road snakes between the low foothills that sound the beginning of the great cordillera of the Andes, then descends steeply until it reaches an unattractive, miserable town, surrounded in sharp contrast by magnificent, densely wooded mountains...

...winter blanketing the ground in white...

...if not indefinitely then at least for a pause while I shift from one understanding of the world to another. (Guevara 18-19)

As Guevara travelled, encountering nature, places and people, he was maturing by transforming the understanding of the inner and outer world. In a way, he was immersed in nature, "I slept like a log" (Guevara 22), and borrowed imagery and symbols from nature while narrating his experiences. Both he and his friend show sensitivity and feelings towards nature and animals by working like firefighters to save homes and animals from the fire. He narrates an incident, "Alberto saw the danger, and measuring it with one quick look, leapt agilely over the 20 centimetres of flame, saving the little endangered life for its owners" (Guevara 42). Alberto saves a cat from being burned alive in a fire that caught the entire house. The fire incidents often occur around the region for many reasons: "It's because most buildings are constructed with wood, or because the cultural level of the people is quite low and they do not have much education, or some other factor, or all of them put together" (Guevara 41).

### **Extraction, Labour and Environmental Exploitation**

Guevara and his friend's first-hand experiences of encountering and sensing nature from so close imparted to the narrator an authority to analyse and find how nature has been exploited by a few leaving the natives or locals in disparity. The exploitation of nature is closely associated with the exploitation and discrimination of locals that throw them into poverty and wretchedness. In his own words, we see the close encounter with nature: "We set off along a magnificent mountain road, the most beautiful civilization could offer compared to the real natural wonders (undamaged by human hands, that is), in a truck bearing the heavy

weight of us freeloaders” (Guevara 44). As they witness the serene beauty of nature, they reflect on the damage caused by human hands. They see a positive hope to save it from destruction. As Guevara progresses in his travels, he gets more mature and becomes concerned about the exploitation of both nature and human beings which later shaped his ideological framework that is turning to the theory of redistribution of wealth and resources to create equality in the society – an inclination towards Marxist principles. When he meets a woman suffering from asthma in a tavern, La Gioconda in Valparaiso, a major port on Chile’s Pacific Coast, on seeing the condition of that woman who worked in that hotel wanted to help her but feels powerless because for him the wretched and poverty-ridden condition of the woman was the result of long-standing social and economic exploitation. It was a feeling of being hurt deeply, wanting to change the situation, “a change to prevent the injustice of a system” (Guevara 47); for him, those who govern the system must fund “socially useful works” (Guevara 48). From a conversation of local women in the kitchen, he came to know how the system works by the side of the powerful, and the police being part of that system is no exception to it. The misery of the common, powerless people is the same anywhere around the world. Guevara and his friend meet a couple on the way to Chuquicamata, one of the world’s largest copper mines, where they see the imbalance between the poor and rich directly linked to the exhaustion of incessant natural resources. He says, “The couple, numb with cold, huddling against each other in the desert night, were a living representation of the proletariat in any part of the world. They had not one single miserable blanket to cover themselves with...” (Guevara 55). The resources have been overused and crushed before their eyes, feeling extremely deprived of the power to bring about a little change. Later, the couple heads towards sulphur mines where the climate was extremely bad, and “the living conditions so hard” (Guevara 55). He extends the scene with heavy burden and extinguishing grief in the words: “Cold efficiency and impotent resentment go hand in hand in the big mine, linked in spite of the hatred by the common necessity to live, on the one hand, and to speculate on the other...” (Guevara 56).

When Guevara and his friend reached Chuquicamata copper mine, the scene before their eyes was breathtaking, opening their eyes to a new reality: if there is a pit, there must be a heap. Someone’s joy, luxury and resources are the result of taking away someone else’s happiness and resources—all by robbing natural resources. The large and deep excavation of the ore did not benefit the locals working in the dingy conditions, but someone who was not from there. The scene described by him is noteworthy to clarify their sensitivity and ethical awakening towards nature:

Chuquicamata is like a scene from a modern drama. You cannot say that it’s lacking in beauty, but it is a beauty without grace, imposing and glacial. As you come close to any part of the mine, the whole landscape seems to concentrate, giving a feeling of suffocation across the plain...The mountains, where not a single blade of grass can grow in the nitrate soil, are defenceless against attacks of wind and water...—who die miserably in one of the thousand traps set by nature to defend its treasures, when all they want to earn their daily bread. (Guevara 57)

It is a struggle of the working class to earn bread for living and at the same time, the struggle of nature to defend itself from its own forms and the rich class who exploits both. Here, the working class and nature became vulnerable. Every time, reaching a new destination revealed a new sense and understanding of the surroundings, the people inhabited, their relationship with nature, their ways of living and significantly the impact of ecology on their livelihood transactions. Tarata is such a place, Guevara calls it ‘new world’ in accordance with its environment, people, way of living, etc. Guevara describes nature and the people as:

We entered the town of Estaque and the view was incredible; our ecstatic eyes fixed themselves momentarily on the landscape extending around us...We were in a legendary valley, whose evolution had been suspended several hundred years ago...Ahead of us, low clouds hid the tops of the mountains, but in some of the clear spaces you could just make out snow falling on the highest peaks, gradually turning them white...They (Aymara people) wore short, sadly colored woollen ponchos, tight-calf

length pants, and sandals made from rope or old car tires... (Guevara 71)

Aymaras are the natives living for centuries in the valley surrounded by the Andes. They have no contact with the outside world. They seemed contented with their routine life, but under the Spanish colonisation, their routine living and ways shaken upside-down, now they seem a defeated race: "Their stares are lame, almost fearful, and completely indifferent to the outside world. Some give the impression they go on living only because it's a habit they cannot shake" (Guevara 72). Pathetic scenes of Chuquicamata mining are the direct outcome of the disaster wreaked by uncontrolled industrialisation. The people working there are merely cut into working machines without any hygiene or proper salary, or maintenance. It has paid social and economic costs to the poor working for the rich. It is not only an ecological concern but also a socio-economic exploitation—the struggle between haves and have-nots. The destruction of the environment is the destruction of workers and their right to live. The overall extraction of natural resources of Latin America resulted in the dismantling of the lives of the natives. Looking at the ecological and human devastation with open eyes sparked a sense of humanity and concern in the minds of Guevara and Alberto. Although they could do nothing at the time, it was all stuck deep in their minds, generating a feeling of responsibility as human beings towards nature and the natives. Guevara began to think on the side of what is good and bad, ethical and wrong. He formed a firm view that the environmental damage has a greater impact on the marginalised communities depriving them of the basic rights of food, health and shelter. The journey has proved a catalyst in awakening towards ethics and ecology. He successfully paints the two contrasting pictures before the eyes of readers: the grandeur of nature in the form of enormous landscapes of mountains, fields, rivers and plains and human intervention that ruined the beauty and strength of nature. The recurrence of the mountains serves as a symbolic metaphor for its majesty and a world beyond human connection. When they reach Machu Picchu in Peru, looking at these high mountains, Guevara recalls ancient Inca civilisation and their coexistence with nature without any conflict or excessive intervention. For him, it is a poignant symbol of harmony for both man and nature, but today, the

people forget to respect nature and preserve it for the sake of cruel industrialisation. He describes the Incas as: "The most important and irrefutable thing, however, is that here we found the pure expression of the most powerful indigenous race in the Americas—untouched by a conquering civilization and full of immensely evocative treasures between its walls" (Guevara 89).

### **Indigenous Landscapes and Colonial Disruption**

Moreover, the text could be seen in the postcolonial context for the scars that had been left behind by colonialism. The structures of exploitation and penetration of natural resources remained in the form of multinational companies, which with the help of governments in the countries, got a license for the extraction of resources at the cost of severe damage to the environment—a clear indication of the destruction of the thousands of years of ecosystems in the region. The colonial structures have been turned into neo-colonial practices in the name of development of the country by running false propaganda, misleading natives living around. The largest mining project at Chuquicamata is an example of such neo-colonial practices and a multilevel damage to ecology for profit which has become a priority over preservation of the environment. It resulted in the extinction of sustainable practices of natives like the Incas in Machu Picchu, which had been in a perfect blend with nature, coexisting and preserving nature without hurting it. It helped to maintain ecological balance. The people and native communities play a greater role to whom Guevara meets during his journey in shaping his ethical conscience towards the environment, as both people and land are intertwined, self-proclaiming and interdependent. It instills a deeper understanding of how preservation of ecology is important not only for Guevara and his friend but also for the readers of the text. The harsh realities seen by Guevara with his open eyes throughout the journey moved him deeply concerned for socio-economic and ecological justice. He sees it as an ethical human responsibility to protect and preserve nature, our planet.

## San Pablo Leper Colony: Ecology and Ethical Action

During his visit to San Pablo leper colony, Guevara was struck deeply by two equivocal scenes—the grandeur of natural beauty and its harshness on the backdrop of Amazon ecology, and the miserable condition of leprosy patients which were isolated on the other side of the river. The river serves as a symbol of sustenance and at the same time, a rift between the discriminated people on the basis of leprosy, a chronic bacterial infectious disease, and other healthy people on one side of the river. On the day of his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, celebrated at doctors' quarters on one side of the riverbank. He wanted to remove the divide between the people from the other side by swimming through a vast body of water—a symbolic act of bridging the gap—to show concern towards the depressed class of society discriminated against on the basis of health condition is a marker of ethical awakening. In another incident, Guevara and his friend shook hands with the patients which was prohibited by other doctors and staff serving in the colony but both showed solidarity and a feeling of equality among the patients. They play football with them intermixing more and increasing their morale, bridging the divide of separation—an act of ethical consciousness. The conditions and facilities at the colony are grim and in need but the enthusiasm and care shown by Guevara is remarkable in building the morale of the patients high – better for fighting their diseases and scarcity of equipment and other medical aids.

## Narrative Technique and Environmental Representation

Turning to the narration and narrative technique employed by Guevara, it is important to note his style of explanation by using several methods that combined impressive descriptions of landscapes, symbolic manifestation, poetic language, contrasting images, juxtaposing nature and human beings, introspective tone providing insights into his own development and ethical consciousness—all by using first person narration i.e. direct first hand experience. The magnificent descriptions of the Andes, the rivers in the Amazon, the forests, chilling cold, the plain deserts, high peak mountains, the grasslands, plains, woods, narrow and dusty roads, and animals form an impact on the mind

of readers that helps to create the feeling of concern about the environment. Such elements in nature often serve as a metaphor for the sustenance of ecology on a broader perspective. The sensitivity and ethical conscience shown by Guevara towards the environment is remarkable and could be a leading step forward in preservation of ecology and sustainable development which was a way of living, coexistence with nature in ancient times. Evidently, the text becomes highly successful in disclosing and imbibing the spirit of green consciousness and ethical awakening among the readers.

## CONCLUSION

*The Motorcycle Diaries* is more than just a record of Guevara's youthful adventures. It is an important tale that demonstrates the significant role that travel plays in developing one's ethical and ecological consciousness. The journey that young Guevara undertakes is a transformative and enlightening one; one that causes him to be aware that environmental exploitation and social exploitation often go hand in hand. His encounters with exploitation in indigenous landscapes, indigenous and marginalised communities and industrial sites would leave a lasting impression on Guevara, and reflect the early formation of his social and ethical awareness.

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