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THE BEAUTY OF NATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

Sonamani Barman
Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese,
Indira Gandhi College, Boitamari, Bongaigaon (Assam)

Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to show that the beauty of nature is a subject of environmental aesthetics. Aesthetics is mainly concerned with the appreciation and admiration of the natural world. Though it is commonly associated with art, its domain is not confined to artistic creation alone, since art and aesthetics share a symbiotic relationship where art creates beauty that evokes disinterested delight and happiness in the beholder. Yet aesthetic experience is not limited to art, as beauty manifests itself in two distinct forms: artificial or man-made beauty and natural beauty. The beauty of nature possesses an undeniable charm, and we spontaneously describe nature as lovely, charming and beautiful, which reflects man's innate capacity to perceive and appreciate it, as seen in his desire to adorn his surroundings with flowers, plants and other natural elements. The present paper seeks to highlight the significance of natural beauty and its aesthetic appeal within the framework of environmental aesthetics, which is often neglected in favour of artificial beauty. While art produces man-made beauty, the natural environment presents a unique, captivating and divine form of beauty created for human appreciation and admiration, and environmental aesthetics is precisely the philosophical study of this beauty of nature.

Keywords: Aesthetic Appreciation**,** Environmental Aesthetics, Natural Beauty.

Introduction:

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the natural world has always served as a profound source of inspiration due to its beauty, evoking deep emotions and nurturing an intimate connection between human beings and their surroundings. As the thinker and naturalist Henry David Thoreau aptly observed, "In wildness is the preservation of the world."[i] This intrinsic relationship between man and nature constitutes the very foundation of environmental aesthetics, a rapidly growing field of inquiry that seeks to understand the complex interrelation between humans and the natural environment. At this point, it is essential to note that environmental aesthetics is concerned with how we perceive, interpret, and evaluate the aesthetic qualities of our surroundings. Drawing insights from philosophy, ecology, psychology, and art theory, among other disciplines, it explores the intricate network of relationships that binds humanity to nature. By investigating the intersection of perception, appreciation, and the natural world, environmental aesthetics provides a distinctive perspective on the critical challenges confronting our planet.As environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III rightly points out, "The aesthetic appreciation of nature is not just a matter of personal taste, but a way of knowing and valuing the world."[ii] This reveals that environmental aesthetics compels us to reconsider our place within the natural world and to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the beauty, wonder, and intrinsic value of the environment.

Objectives: The primary objectives of this paper are as follows:

(i) To Explore the Beauty of Nature as a Domain of Environmental Aesthetics: To provide an in-depth exploration of environmental aesthetics, focusing on how humans perceive, appreciate, and value the beauty inherent in the natural world.

(ii) To Distinguish Between Natural and Artistic Beauty: To examine the fundamental differences between man-made artistic beauty and the natural beauty found in the environment, and to analyze how these distinctions shape our aesthetic experience.

(iii) To Assess the Significance of Appreciating Natural Beauty: To investigate the importance of environmental aesthetics in fostering a deeper relationship between humans and nature, and to examine how an appreciation of natural beauty can contribute to environmental conservation and sustainability.

Methodology:

This qualitative study employs conceptual exploration, critical analysis, and a comprehensive literature review to examine natural beauty within the framework of environmental aesthetics. The research draws upon existing philosophical

texts and interdisciplinary insights from environmental studies, ecology, psychology, and art theory to identify key themes and concepts. Through analytical interpretation and philosophical argumentation, it explores the interrelationships between environmental aesthetics, artistic beauty, and natural beauty, while also acknowledging its limitations arising from a reliance on Western philosophical traditions, secondary literature, and subjective interpretation.

Findings and Interpretation:

It is pertinent to note at the outset that aesthetics is primarily concerned with our appreciation of things, as aesthetic admiration affects our senses in a pleasing manner, and in this sense, aesthetics is intimately associated with art, which naturally raises fundamental questions such as what art is, what beauty is, and how aesthetic admiration arises from an artist's creation. Art may be understood as that which creates beauty, while beauty is that which provides disinterested, unbiased, and impartial pleasure or delight to the connoisseur; the artist creates art, particularly focusing on fine arts whose products are conventionally designed to gratify and please our senses, and in this context it can be said that aesthetic appreciation originates from artistic creation. However, it would be incorrect to conclude that aesthetics is solely concerned with art, since a significant part of our aesthetic appreciation extends beyond the artistic realm; we appreciate not only art but also nature, and it may be argued that the earth or nature is inherently beautiful and its aesthetic charm cannot be ignored. When we speak of beauty, we generally refer to both artificial and natural beauty, and in reality, beauty can be broadly classified into two categories: man-made or artificial beauty and natural beauty.

Thus, it becomes necessary to understand the distinction between artificial and natural beauty, as we generally conceive of art as nothing more than the creation of an artist; the beauty inherent in art is produced by the artist and is therefore regarded as man-made, artificial, or non-natural beauty. In contrast, the beauty that emanates from the natural environment is called natural beauty, which is not man-made, and it is important to remember that while the artist is the creator of artificial or artistic beauty, God is considered the creator of natural beauty, having created human beings with the capacity to appreciate it. Nature is undeniably the repository of aesthetic beauty, as no one can deny the aesthetic appreciation evoked by the grandeur of the Himalayas or the rich natural beauty of Kaziranga National Park in the Golaghat and Nagaon districts of Assam. Thus, a considerable difference emerges between the aesthetic appreciation of art and that of nature, the primary distinction being that artistic creation is man-made, non-natural, and artificial, whereas natural creation is not man-made but God-given and hence natural, with the beauty of the earth or nature being inherently non-artificial. This leads to the question of what is meant by the aesthetic appreciation of nature; when we contemplate the aesthetic appreciation of nature or environmental aesthetics, our appreciation is centered on our surroundings and the natural world itself, and therefore it can be said that the admiration and appreciation of nature constitutes the core area of discussion within environmental aesthetics.

It is important to note that environmental aesthetics can be evaluated in multiple ways, particularly through its aesthetic object, namely our natural environment or surroundings. Unlike art, the aesthetic object of the environment is not static, as nothing remains fixed in nature; it is dynamic and constantly moving. A work of art is the creation of an artist and is a self-contained object, dictated and designed by a recognized designer, and thus it possesses a specific, static form resulting from artistic creation. In contrast, environments move through time and expand through space without fixed boundaries, continuously changing and evolving along with us without end. While a work of art can be damaged, damage to the natural environment may itself generate a new aesthetic sense. The intended meaning or language of art emerges from its designer and design, whereas environmental objects have no such design because they have no designer, and natural objects change, grow, develop, and move through natural processes. As Carlson, a leading figure in modern aesthetics, observes, "...the paradigm of the environmental object of appreciation is unruly in yet another way: neither its nature nor its meanings are determined by a designer and a design."[iii] Carlson further identifies two basic orientations of environmental aesthetics, namely skeptical and objective orientations. From a subjectivist perspective, it may be argued that since we seemingly lack the resources normally involved in aesthetic appreciation, such as frames, design, and designers that we have in art, there can be no appropriate or correct aesthetic appreciation of environments, or if there is any appreciation at all, it may not constitute genuine aesthetic appreciation. Thus, the aesthetic appreciation of nature or the environment differs fundamentally from the aesthetic appreciation of art.

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With regard to objectivist appreciation, it can be said that aesthetic appreciation, in terms of the questions of what and how to appreciate, requires two essential resources: the appreciator and the object of appreciation. In the case of art, the appreciator may typically assume the role of the designer, while the object of appreciation embodies the design. According to Carlson, in our aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment, "we can play the role of artist and let the world provide us with something like a design."[iv] This implies that when we encounter the natural environment, we ourselves select the relevant senses to appreciate it and thereby set the frames that delimit it in time and space, and in this way the environment, by its own nature, gives rise to an analogue of a design. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that the natural environment generates its own design and consequently offers the necessary guidance on the basis of which one can appropriately answer the questions of what and how to appreciate. Carlson argues that the objectivist appreciation of the natural environment is more fundamental than the subjectivist or skeptical account, as it is well-supported by arguments and examples, suggesting that our appreciation of the natural environment is guided by the object's inherent nature. However, this nature is organic, encompassing information about its characteristics, origins, type, and properties, all of which are essential for appropriate aesthetic appreciation. When an artist creates a work of art, it is done within a specific context, preserving its contextuality, and similarly, natural beauty is also evoked in context. The primary difference is that artistic creation is man-made, whereas natural creation is not; art has a physical creator and rational thinker, while natural creation lacks a physical creator. For instance, when appreciating a natural environment like an alpine meadow, it is crucial to understand how it thrives under the constraints of a high-altitude climate, where the miniature size of its flora is an adaptation to such conditions. This and many other examples inform our understanding of the natural environment, indicating that art and natural aesthetics share a common ground in their development, with the main difference being that art is a human-made artifact, whereas the natural environment is not manufactured but an evolving, dynamic entity.

Furthermore, works of art created by artists possess representational connections with the rest of reality, as the intention of an artist is clearly manifested through his creation; even though he is a true creator in the real sense, his creation bears a resemblance to the society or community to which he belongs. An artist, being a member of society and part of a community, designs his art based on the historical facts and resources available within that social context, and thus his work directly reflects the ethos, culture, and heritage of the society. Although an artist is innovative and unbiased, while creating art he inevitably does so against a background shaped by the historicity accessible to him, so that the work of art actually conveys or represents something that reveals aspects of the society, community, or form of life, which is why it is claimed that unlike natural beauty, the work of an artist has a resemblance to reality. This, however, is completely absent in the case of the natural environment, as unlike a work of art, we do not have access to the intention of the creator of the natural world; the natural environment is the outcome of the natural order and the result of environmental balance, in which humans have no direct role. Yet interestingly, whatever form nature assumes, it always presents an acceptable and harmonious view to the natural community, and the beauty of natural manifestation lies in the fact that whatever we observe in nature is seen in its best possible form, leaving no scope for evaluating or questioning its shape. Therefore, the scope of environmental aesthetics is far wider than any other aesthetic discourse, as it encompasses our entire surroundings.

Conclusion:

In view of the above discussion on the Beauty of Nature and Environmental Aesthetics, it can be concluded that our appreciation of natural objects and environments differs fundamentally and significantly from our appreciation of art objects, for while art is a deliberate, man-made creation shaped by human intention and design, nature is an organic, dynamic, and self-evolving whole without a physical designer. As Ronald Hepburn rightly points out, "The natural world is not a work of art, though it may be experienced as if it were,"[v] and this distinction is vital because it enables us to appreciate natural objects as natural entities in their own right, rather than reducing them to art objects; for instance, we do not regard a rock placed on our mantel as a readymade sculpture, but as an aesthetically pleasing natural rock with its own natural history and character. In this context, Francis Sparshott astutely observes, "When one talks of the aesthetic this or that, one is usually thinking of it as entering into a subject/object relation,"[vi] and such a subject-object relation is fundamental to environmental aesthetics, as it allows us to engage meaningfully with our surroundings, to frame them through our own sensibility while letting the natural world itself provide something like a design through its own processes, growth, and adaptation. Thus, in essence, our knowledge of the natural world, its ecological facts, origins,

properties, and the particular environments we encounter, provides the appropriate boundaries of appreciation, the particular foci of aesthetic significance, and a deeper understanding of the type of environment before us, revealing that environmental aesthetics has a far wider scope than art aesthetics because it encompasses all that surrounds us. Therefore, as Arnold Berleant eloquently puts it, "The aesthetic appreciation of nature is not just a matter of personal taste, but a way of knowing and valuing the world,"[vii] which ultimately shows that appreciating the beauty of nature is not merely an act of sensory delight but a profound way of understanding, respecting, and valuing the earth we inhabit.

References:

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[ii] Rolston, H., *Environmental Ethics*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002, p. 123.
[iii] Carlson, Allen, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art, and Architecture*, London and New York, 2000, p. xviii.
[iv] Ibid., p. 52.
[v] Hepburn, R.,*Contemporary aesthetics*, University of Edinburgh Press, 1966, p. 45.
[vi] Sparshott, F.,*The theory of the arts*, Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 12.
[vii] Berleant, A.,*The aesthetics of environment*, Temple University Press, 1992, p. 23.