



*THESIS* - Vol. 13, No. 1, 2024

International Research Journal

 Kolegji AAB  
CILESI. LIDERSHIP. SUKSES!

ISSN: 1848-4298 (Print) ISSN: 2623-8381(Online)

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### How to cite this article:

Ganguly, S. (2024). ‘To a Destination Where Love Can Return’. Book Review of *Habitat*. *Thesis*, 13(1).



Published online: November 18, 2024.



Article received October 10, 2024.  
Article accepted November 14, 2024.



Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

## “To a Destination Where Love Can Return”: Book Review of *Habitat*

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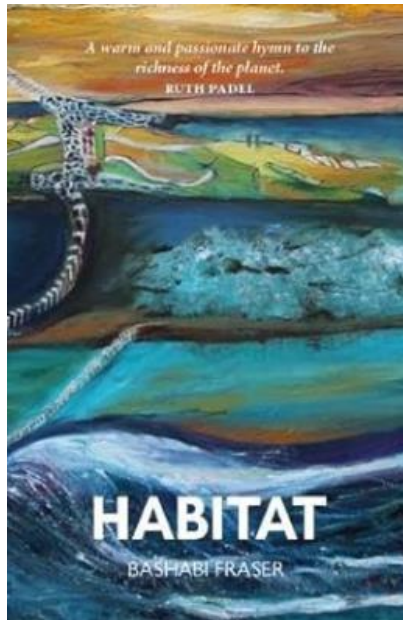
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### Abstract:

This is a review of *Habitat* by Bashabi Fraser (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2023).

### Keywords:

Identity, ecologically sensitive, poetry, nature, survival of eco systems, acts of hope.



Fraser, B. (2023). *Habitat*. Edinburgh: Luath Press.  
ISBN 978-1-80425-093-8.

*Habitat* is the latest expression of Bashabi Fraser's longstanding intimate relation with poetry one that goes back twenty-six years to her first work *Life* (1997). Fraser's location in the Indian-Scottish diaspora forms the core of her identity as a poet and permeates her poetry in significant ways. It manifests itself the magic of words which evoke the memories of being in two places. These memories can be of birds from the both of these lands, of trees, cats, alleyways, and dwellings in many cities. *Habitat* (2023) for Fraser is thus not limited to one but partakes of many, it does not indicate fracture lines or splits but of seamless weaving of the fabric from many threads.

The root of the word habitat can be traced to the Latin 18<sup>th</sup> century usage as "an area or region where a plant or animal naturally grows or lives." The general sense of a "dwelling place" was used first in the mid nineteenth century. True to its original meanings, *Habitat* creates its own dwelling in the domain ecologically sensitive creative work through deeply poignant and intimate poems which vary between lyric and lyrical narratives. Eco-poetry, as a subgenre of Ecological Studies, gained momentum with the global movements following the alarming natural crises from the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently, during the late 1990s Ecological Studies voiced the need for revealing the realities of our environment, our habitat. At the heart of this lay the need to question the naturality of 18<sup>th</sup> century 'nature poetry', as 'nature' was undergoing rapid transformation brought about by human need to conquer and exploit nature to serve its material greed. Thus, deforestation, indiscriminate mining, pollution of the river by factory wastes, oil sludges in the ocean, the melting of Arctic ice due to global warming, led to a complete disturbance in the ecosystem that had survived for centuries before Anthropocene— the current age where human beings began to position themselves as the centre of the universe and dominate it.

In Ecological theory, nature is the refuge or space where an organism secures freedom, hides its identity to save itself, and stays at a distance from predators. Ecocritical literature and poetry bases itself on these principles, further evolving them by attaching emotionality to this theory. Bashabi Fraser's *Habitat* is in the best tradition of Eco-poetry in which a critical account of the human culpability of destroying nature and nature systems coexist with the sense of joy and solace in nature and natural beings.

Fraser's Eco poetry locates itself right at the transitioning and

intermediate space between nature poetry and poetry for nature. Her poetry plays upon the parallels and dualities that are associated with numerous pairs existing in simultaneity, the spaces between which dispersed realities lie. She calls this dispersal 'a diasporic peacock' (Fraser, 2023, p. 67) in her poem "I Am Not Your National Bird Here: At Prestonfield House." This dispersal, which also happens to be the original meaning of the word diaspora, presents itself seamlessly from segment to segment of the book's tripartite structure.

The book is divided into five segments including a Prologue and an Epilogue, which oscillate between admirations and alarm, closeness and farness. The Prologue of *Habitat* has nine poems, many of these are dedicated to those close to her—husband, father, colleagues, friends, and are about human-nature relations—some about the human devastation of natural world resulting in terrifying global catastrophes others about ringing in a change by reinventing the human-nature relation.

The next segment, **Birdspeak** is about birds who inhabit the two geographies—Kolkata/India and Scotland. Thus, the bird which flies in from the heart of the river Ganga or nestles in Nabanna, the Pigeon rub feathers with the Robin, the Curlew, the linnet. The third segment, **Cattery**, featuring her three cats, is full of humorous intimacy, wit and warmth. **The Distant and the Near** has poems which draw attention to the nature which is not benevolent and benign. There is one single poem in the Epilogue which ushers in hope.

The first poem in the Prologue, "The White Page" dedicated to Neil establishes the bond between nature and the act of writing a poem. So, if "The forest calls out/from its still centre/to the leaf of the book/that came from its heart" (Fraser, 2023, p. 15) it also makes possible "the white space" to become a "still lake" (Fraser, 2023, p. 15) of words which then mirrors the very act of violent metamorphosis, the trees in the forest, being smothered in factories to form pages. The forest's agony of losing its own is immortalized as the birth of a beautiful poem. Many of the other poems of the Prologue, are about discovering the sudden beauty of that which is often bypassed. "Fireflies" is one such poem whose very form captures the sense of joy of travelers discovering the magic of the fireflies' "fairy lights festoon the darkness" (Fraser, 2024, p.19). These cascading lights lift up their spirits.

With its thirty-seven poems **Birdspeak** is the largest segment of *Habitat*. True to its title a majority of the poems in this section are about birds, from the country of the poet's origin and from the country which has become her home. Fraser weaves the poet's experience of watching the flight of birds with her imaginations of them speaking. Together they constitute one of the most affective human and avian relation. Freedom is a key theme in these poems. The second poem in this segment "The Free Bird Wills" is dedicated most appropriately to Rabindranath Tagore whose poems are replete with references to '*mukto bihango*' or free-birds.

In many of the other poems, the poet watches the flight of birds which takes the reader through the painted cityscape of the ninth floor of Kolkata's Nabanna porch to the settlements of France or Aberdeen or Holyrood Park. The range of avians is also equally fascinating—the pigeon, sparrow and crow, the robin and the seagull. *Habitat's* 'diasporic peacock' (Fraser, 2023, p. 67) that spreads its iridescent blue feathers from Prestonfield to India is in its flight towards this dispersed duality. This duality ranges from the thought to the outcome, fear to hope, from admiration to warning, from the distant to the near, from Scotland to India, West to East and Kolkata to Glasgow or Loch Lomond. Fraser's diasporic identity is most marked in the poems of **Birdspeak** where her gaze moves seamlessly between Ospreys and herons, banyans and oaks or junipers.

The next segment titled **Cattery** has a subtitle **A Cat Trilogy**. These are familiar and intimate as they have the poet conversing with her feline friends, Mishti, Toffee and Noah, with affection and wit. These are bound to give cat parents, along with others, a whale of their time. These narratives come alive as the house becomes a conservatory and the cats become jungle warriors. Quite appropriately, these poems are dedicated to Fraser's family.

The cautionary note of Prologue returns in the segments of **The Distant and The Near**. These poems are a reminder to how capitalistic, profit-driven excesses of human-abuse of the environment has contributed to the occurrences of floods and tsunamis. The three poems in **The Distant and The Near** viz. "The Hungry Ocean", "Storm" and "The Sea That Sustains, Kills" are about nature's fury which destroys human lives. The most terrifying of these three, inspired by an article about the Tsunami on boxing day is "The Sea Which Sustains, Kills." This about how children drown in the sea's killer waves "while mother's watched/ in agony" (Fraser,

2024, p. 107). As in many other poems of Fraser, a duality exists here that evokes the mysticism of the ocean which is set against its destruction. The ocean has its generosity set against its ferocity—

The sea is generous and free  
It takes and gives handsomely -  
Its arms were full when it returned  
Strewing bodies it had drowned  
Villages bereft of children... (Fraser, 2023, p.108)

The poem “In Tiger Country” (the reference is to the Sundarbans in Bengal which possess the world’s largest mangrove forest) is about a unique ecosystem of land river and sea, of forests and human beings. There is something magical in Fraser’s account of the mangroves cropping up once the tidal waves recede.

Fraser’s poetry makes the Indian and Scottish landscapes seep into each other in instances of finding familiarity. What does not come as a shock is that this familiarity, rewarding or punishing as it maybe, is found in the landscapes and natural world of these two countries more than in anything else.

The Epilogue ends with another dedicatory poem to Neil, a short ten-liner, titled “A Message”. This poem returns us to the forest where there is a soothing soft silence which is accentuated by the sound of a “drum beat” from the “hilltop of hope” (Fraser, 2023, p.127). It is hope that is transformed in the poet’s words into “hundreds of doves in flight” (Fraser, 2023, p.127).

The poems of *Habitat* are sensitive to the changing relationship between human beings and creatures—insects, birds and animals that inhabit the sky, the land and the sea. Fraser’s diasporic identity contributes to the amazing richness and depth in her poems, evoked also in its experimental style, one which has dispensed with punctuation.

There are many poems which abandon harsh reality by taking refuge in a utopian belief where nature can, and does respond to the human attempts to make amends for its many acts of transgressions. The survival of ecosystem across the globe depends on imagining this possibility. Fraser’s *Habitat* finds its dwelling in this act of hope.

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- Fraser, B. (2023). *Habitat*. Edinburgh: Luath Press.