

## The Dangers of Environmental Degradation' and Unity of Life' through Chief Seathl's 'A Simple Philosophy

**Dr. Kamalakar Baburao Gaikwad**

Assistant Professor in English  
MGV's Samajshree Prashantdada Hiray  
Arts, Science & Commerce College, Nampur,  
Tal-Baglan, Dist-Nashik.

### Abstract:

*Seathl, the Chief of the Native American Squamish clan writes an epistle to Franklin Pierce, the President of United States of America in 1854 in his famous literary piece on environment entitled as 'A Simple Philosophy'. A letter is addressed to the President, in particular and the white Americans, in general, but the message is universal in terms of the eco-concerns expressed in it. The writer demonstrates several ecological aspects and strongly accuses to the white man to safeguard the environment. As we all are familiar with the truth that there is unity of life. The mother earth is like a convoluted network and all living beings on it are having a mutual or reciprocal relationship. The views reflected by Seathl indeed prove the relevance of ecological problems of 21st century such as: worldwide warming, reduction of ozone layer, several types of effluence, etc. The present paper attempts to investigate 'the dangers of Environmental degradation' and 'unity of life'.*

*Keywords: Ecological problems, dangers of environmental degradation, mother earth, unity of life, mutual relationship between man and nature*

### About the Author:

**S**eathl (1786 - 1866) was a great chief of the Native American Suquamish and Duwamish tribe of the state of Washington. He was the foremost figure among his people. He pursued a path of adjustment to white settlers, forming an individual rapport with 'Doc' Maynard'. The city of Seattle, in the U.S. State of Washington, was named after him. He was a propeller of peace. He wanted the two different cultures, the Whites and the Natives to live harmoniously. His main aim was to ensure the rights of safety of his tribe and give them their lands in which their ancestors' soul had lived and which they worshipped. He laid emphasis on the ecological responsibility of human beings and believed the ideology that Earth was not meant for them but they were meant for Earth.

### About the Text:

In 1808, Seathl became Chief of the Suquamish, a Red Indian tribe of the north-west of America. Forty-three years later, when he was 65, he was still chief, and established the first permanent settlement on the eastern shores of Puget Sound.

Maynard established a trading post in a place called Duwamish. Maynard didn't like the name Duwamps, and changed it, in honour of the chief, to Seathl. It was the policy of President Franklin Pierce (1835 - 57) to open up the North West. This mostly involved forceful occupation of Indian land, and examination of the population. What follows is Chief Seathl's reply to the President the "Great Chief". (<http://mothernatureandwe.blogspot.com/2008/03/simple-philosophy.html>)

In 1854, Seathl addressed the letter reproduced below to 14th President Franklin Pierce of the United States (1853-1857). It was a widely exposed speech arguing in favor of environmental accountability and esteem of Native Americans' land privileges had been accredited to him. The revolutionary white people were chatting over more and more of the North American continent from the Native Indian tribes as they progressed westward. This letter expresses the 'simple philosophy' of Chief Seathl's people. It describes the turn down and acquiescence of the Native American people of the prospect ecological and societal consequences of human thoughtlessness.

**Introduction:**

Like eco-critics, Chief Seathl believes in the logical relationship of man and nature, and cautions white man not to harm to natural world, especially mother earth otherwise it will result into his disaster. The letter is a petition to a white man who wishes to rob the mother earth for his avarice to protect nature and have a tranquil and elated mutual interaction with other living beings who are also the children of the mother earth. The writer projects the mutual relationship between the man and the nature. In a broader sense, the white man stands for all the materialistic people who are greedy and robbing nature to satiate their insatiable greed. These people are causing all kinds of pollution for their narrow interests, thereby harming all living beings. Seathl comments that these days we speak of living with nature and the need to maintain an environmental balance as though these were new ideas.

The truth is that many aboriginal cultures have always lived in harmony with nature, while their most civilized and developed counterparts have destroyed the earth in attempting to mine its wealth. Here the writer describes the way Native Americans lived close to nature. In the context of the many pandemic and environmental calamities we face today, the Chief Seathl's words sound prophetic, He asserts, (Panorama, Board of Editors, Orient Black Swan Pvt. Ltd., 2020, p.5)

'When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the sacred corner of the forest heavy with scent of many men and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires, where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to say goodbye to the swift and the hunt-the end of living and the beginning of dying.'<sup>1</sup>

Environmentalists have long warned the world of the dangers of environmental degradation and the rate at which humans have been consuming its resources. It is time we took firm action to protect our environment. As Chief Seathl suggests, we will find answers and solutions in our environment. (Panorama, p.6)

'If we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land, as it is when you take it, and with all your strength, with all your might and with all your heart, preserve it for your children

and love it as God loves us all. One thing we know our God is the same God. This earth is precious to him. Even the white man cannot exempt from the common destiny.'<sup>2</sup>

Native Americans reveal their fear, (Panorama, p.4)

'The great Chief of Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. He also sends us words of friendship and good will. This reflects his kindness for us. But we will definitely consider your offer otherwise the white may come with guns and take our land.'<sup>3</sup>

The fact is that we cannot buy or sell the sky which is termed as the warmth of the land. We do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. We can't buy them as well.

Each part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his father's graves behind and he does not care. He kidnaps the earth from his children. He does not care. His father's graves and his children's birthright are forgotten. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red man. But perhaps it is because the red man is a savage and does not understand.

There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insect wings. But perhaps the clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of the whippoorwill, a nocturnal bird found in North America or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night? The Indians prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond and the smell of the wind itself cleansed by the mid day rain or scented with pine. The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breathe-the beasts, the trees and the man. The white man does not seem to notice the air

he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the smell.

The author is ready to accept offer on conditional basis. He says that white men must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie, a treeless grassy plain, left by the white men who shot them from a passing train. I'm savage and don't understand how the smoking iron horse can be more important than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive. What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit; for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever happens to the earth happens to the sons of the earth. Our children have seen their fathers humbled in defeat. Our warriors have felt shame. And after defeat they turn their days to idleness and contaminate their bodies with sweets, food and drink. It matters little where we pass the rest of our days- they are not many. Very soon, we will be left to mourn the graves of a people once as powerful and hopeful as yours. One thing we know which the white man may one day discover. Our God is the same God.

You may think now that you own him as you wish to own our land. But you cannot. He is the God of men. This earth is precious to him. And to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. The whites, too, shall pass-perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste. We might understand if we knew what it was that the white man dreams, what hopes he describes to his children on long winter nights, what vision he burns into their minds, so that they will wish for tomorrow. But we are savages. The white man's dreams are hidden from us. And because they are hidden, we will go on our own way. If we agree, it will be to secure the reservation you have promised. Then perhaps we may live out our brief days as we wish. Then the last red man has vanished from the earth and the memory is only a shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people for they love this earth as the new born loves its mother's heartbeat.

Mahatma Gandhi's quote can be applied to red man who became greedy for the grabbing of nature. (www.goodreads.com)

'Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs but not every man's greed.'<sup>4</sup>

William Wordsworth was a worshipper of nature from his childhood. He was neurotic to nature and always respect to the nature in his every work. He asserts, (Wordsworth's vies on Nature, blogspot.com)

'For I have learnt to look on nature

Not as in the hour of thoughtless youth

But hearing oftentimes the still, sad music of humanity

Come forth into the light of things

Let nature be your teacher'.<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion:

With the help of this epistle, Chief Seathl requests man to protect environment and not destroy it. He displays the unity of nature and mutual relationship of man and nature. Seathl's philosophy is very lucid and easy to understand for the poor people especially who live in the lap of nature. Through this philosophy Seathl makes them civilized. But the same philosophy is indigestive for the white man who lives in concrete jungle named as city and are aptly termed as so called civilized people. However, the modern man understood this philosophy after a long span of years.

It projects the message to save our mother earth from the dangers of environmental degradation. If we succeed in this motive, it will be the best gift to our future generation. Or else we will be exclusively conscientious for the trouble of human being. Like Shakespeare and William Wordsworth, Chief Seathl observed tongues in large plants, sermons in pebbles, books in running streams and moral in everything. For him and his people, 'earth is mother and everything on the mother earth is consecrated'. The letter conveys a dominant message that:

'All living and non living things are created by the same God who loves them all equally. Therefore, if you cause harm to one, God punishes you as you have posed danger to the whole of His creation for it is a kind of intricate web'.<sup>6</sup>

**References:**

1. Panorama, Board of Editors, Orient Black Swan, Simple Philosophy: Seathl, p.3-6, 2020
2. Dr.S.M. Mulage, Golden Research Thoughts, Oneness of Life in a Simple Philosophy, Vol-6, Issue-I, July 2016, IF-4.6052, ISSN-2231-5063.
3. en.m.wikipedia.org
4. www.goodreads.com
5. Wordsworth's vies on Nature, blogspot.com
6. <http://mothernatureandwe.blogspot.com/> 2008 /03/ simple-philosophy.html
7. <https://www.learninsta.com/chief-seattles-speech-summary/>

