

Culture: The (In) Human Engagement with Nature

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ABSTRACT

Nature is an object of man's fascination for a long time. From time to time, man's approach to Nature varies according to his mental aspiration. Eco-criticism is a hermeneutic tool, which studies literature from an environmental point of view. It believes that culture and cultural products are in some way connected with the world of nature. The ecosystem is a biological lot comprising both living and non-living things, interacting with one another for their mutual coexistence. On the other hand, there is cultural system, which is human-centric, value based, which holds the ethics, 'the benefit of many,' especially of human kind. The ecosystem and culture are poles opposite that form the dichotomy of world view. In between, there is a moderate system, consisting the elements of aforesaid systems. Hence Ecocriticism critically operates on three premises namely ecocentric, biocentric, and anthropocentric domains. This paper tries to investigate the shades of nature in the above aspects, substantiating with evidences from a section of some seminal literary works.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, biocentrism, anthropocentricism, animalism, culture, biotic web, human centric, human constructivism.

INTRODUCTION

Nature is an object of man's fascination. It is a source of inspiration for the physical and psychological needs of man that evokes respect and admiration. As Homo sapiens of the past, the primitive lived in, and with nature. His mental faculties advanced him to look upon Nature as a thriving force of survival. His moral consciousness venerated Nature as God. His further inquisitive mind tried to unravel the secrets of Nature. From time to time, man's approach to Nature keeps varying according to his mental aspirations.

Literature as an artistic reflection of reality, unfailingly scripts the dynamics of society and changing environment of Nature across the time periods. If a literary work speaks about society, the natural environment forms the backdrop to it. Similarly, if an art of work speculates on the natural environment, the human society falls at the background to it. It is because of this **dichotomy**, that nature with human, and human with nature are interwoven in literature. In such conditions, Ecocriticism is a critical instrument firmly footed on literary aspects of human side at the one end, and natural environment on the other side. As a hermeneutic tool of literature, it extensively negotiates between the twin aspect of human and nonhuman existence, and eventually connects the writer, the writing and the Nature.

According to Ecocritics, the short sightedness of literature lies in its being human-centric. It must be noted here that environmental historians too accept this view that "Nature is not the stage upon human story is acted upon, but as an actor in the drama" (Schneider 2016:4) The Green study distinctly points out that nature and culture are the dichotomy, which are poles opposite to each other; if one is considered as beauty, the other the value or wisdom. However Plumwood quotes that, "The central dualistic constructs are those of culture and nature are not just parallel oppositions but intricately connected modes of oppression" (Coupe 2000:120). She feels it is not reasonable for the Green Study to simply reject the division between the human and non-human world owing to the logic of dualism. According to Cheryl Glotfelty, "Ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literature studies" (Gurrard 2012:3), juxtaposing nature and culture, particularly the cultural outcome of language and literature with its environment.

The idea of opposing views of nature and culture put us in another dimension, which is the admixture of both nature and culture equally quintessential for the critics. As a result, Ecocriticism operates on three premises namely ecocentric, biocentric, and anthropocentric models. The ecocentrism is Nature-centric model that upholds the interest of ecosphere over individual species. On the extreme side, anthropocentric model (the cultural model as well) views literature as humancentric, that human welfare is held high more than anything else. While biocentrism posits a moderate view, in which all organisms and species including humans, create a larger biotic web, wherein the interest of both the ecosystem and humans are taken care. Though many environmental activists do appreciate the bio-centric approach, they are still sceptical about the successful implementation of environmental ethics in practice. As an emerging study, this paper would like to critically analyse some of the seminal works of arts, in the light of the aforementioned models. It is also to be kept in mind that no ecocritical model can be made exclusive nor compartmentalized, of any particular genre, theme or work of art. Nevertheless, some of the literary works can be treated as particular model for “the outdoor environment” (Barry 2002:255) (which) has many spaces in literature like ‘the wilderness,’ ‘the scenic sublime,’ and ‘the domestic picturesque.’ They are a “series of adjoining and overlapping areas which move gradually from nature to culture” (Barry 2002:246).

METHODOLOGY

This paper analyses the ecocritical aspects of literature in a comparative method. A cross section of seminal literary works are taken for analysis in an ecocritical point of view. Ecocriticism as a literary theory by spirit focuses on environmental integrity; this analysis tries to problematize the human intervention of Nature and to demystify the notion of culture beyond nature. Since this study has its limitation of being non-empirical, it has greater scope for literature students, scholars, and nature enthusiasts.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Eco centric Model

The ecosystem is a biological lot which comprises of and interacting organisms, and their physical environment. It points to “the inter linkage of the organismal and the inanimate” (Buell 2005:137). Ecocriticism deals with possible ecophilosophies and holds that nature is intrinsically dynamic, and connected with the web of relations.

Ecocriticism, as exists now in USA, has its literary influence from three major literary figures of nineteenth century. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) are the prominent votaries of nature, who celebrated nature as life-force. Emerson in particular was the first to articulate the seamless unity of human and Nature. After visiting the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris, he recorded in his personal journal emphasizing the overwhelming consciousness of Nature’s organic unity:

Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man and the observer, - an occult relation between the very scorpions and man. I feel the centipede in me – cay man , carp, eagle, & fox. I am moved by strange sympathies; I say continually, I will be a naturalist. (Christopher 2007:130).

Emerson implied his relationship with Nature as his idealism – the way of life. According to him, Nature is the spirit that man has not comprehended fully. Man has alienated himself from Nature. In the form of aphoristic narrative, he made the following statement:

We are much strangers in nature, as we are aliens from God. We do not understand the notes of birds. The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger rend us. We do not know the uses of more than a few plants, as corn and the apple, the potato and the vine. Is not the landscape, every glimpse of which hath a grandeur a face of him? Yet this may show us what discord is between man and nature... (2007:40).

The concern for man’s separation from nature always bothered his writings. He often raised the question, “Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the Universe..?” (2007:44). As an ardent Naturalist he

conceptualized his idea of finding the theory of nature, “to a sound judgment, the most abstract truth is the most practical” (Clarke 1993:4).

Just as Emerson deemed himself as ‘Naturalist’, Margaret Fuller too “most felt the grandeur – somewhat eternal, if not infinite” (Powell 1850:290). So also the New England born rebel – ‘bachelor of nature’, Henry David Thoreau whodescribed himself as “a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot” (Bloom 2007:16). He longed for true friendship, which he found in the Wilderness, he said, “I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than trees” (Caturday 2019:220). He held that the one who is alive to the beauties of nature, really lives his life. He saw the throbbing vitality of nature that continuously creating and sustaining. Nature destroys its creations only to recreate. The profoundness and beauty of nature is the endorsement of the bounty of God, “Snow, dew, rain, clouds, plants, trees, birds, and beasts reveal the beauty of a world which has a real life. The drops of dew are more precious and beautiful than jewels. The stars form varied geometrical designs” (Thoreau 1979:234). Thoreau was fascinated by the varying aspects of Nature. In ‘Walden’ he describes them with delicate simplicity and sympathy. Observing the ever changing beauty of nature he writes:

Standing on the snow-covered plain as if in a pasture amid the hills, I cut my way first through a foot of snow, and then a foot of ice and open the window under my feet, where kneeling to drink. I look down into the quiet parlour of the fishes, pervaded by a softened light as through a window of ground glass with its bright sanded floor the same as in summer; there a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the amber twilight sky, corresponding to the cool and even temperament of the inhabitants. Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads. (Thoreau 1979:111)

Thoreau was not merely metaphysical, but took his complete refuge in nature. Thus he was able to live in nature for two years, two months, and two days in Walden Pond without any human interaction and interference.

Of course, the school of English Romantics viewed Nature as an abode of God. Nature is a symbol of sublime, mystery, glory and inspiration, which in turn acted as an agent of self-discovery. Romanticist wished to see the unseen spirit in the scenic manifestations of nature. Pantheism thus appeared as religion of nature. To them, “the meanest flower that blows can give/ Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (Abrams 1975:166). Perhaps it was William Wordsworth who epitomized the mystical vision of nature more than any of his contemporaries. It is “one impulse from the vernal wood / can teach you more of man, / of moral evil and of good / than all the sages can” (Sarker 2003:131). Nature seemed to be a living personality which permeates in all the objects. Above all, it gives joy to the human heart exercising the healing influence.

Like Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley followed Nature for his poetic inspiration. He equated the human mind with the power of nature. The Cloud poem abounds in imagery and creativity vividly showcases his ecocentric consciousness.

I am the daughter of earth and water

And the nursling of sky;

I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores

I change, but i cannot die. (Edward 2011:45)

On the other hand, John Keat’s ecocentric consciousness finds no bounds to declare “I almost wish we were butterflies and liv’d but three summer days – three such days with you I could fill with more delight than fifty common years could ever contain” (Keats 2011:270), thus moving forward to eco-aestheticism encouraging the beauty of wilderness.

The Ecocentric model gains greater importance in the Ecocritical discourses, as the world faces the greatest predicament by degradation of environment, as “there is an urgent need to understand that, Environment is not

the ‘Other’ to us but part of our being” (Buell 2005:55). It enfolds the wholesomeness of nature; from birds to beasts, from fields to ocean that capitulate to equal belongingness of living and nonliving things.

Bio centric Model:

Biocentrism is a semi-ecocentric model that views all creatures, including humans as a part of larger biotic web. It is an antithesis to anthropocentrism that recognises the ethical dimension of ecology. As a result, it is neither completely ecocentric nor humancentric. Unlike any common literary precepts that considers ‘the world’ synonymous to human society or social sphere, Biocentrism banks on the notion of entire ecosphere, both inclusive of human and nonhuman aspects as single unit; exist and coexist for the mutual benefit of one another.

Glotfelty fears that the greatest flaw of literary critical theories is being their anthropocentric attitude. No other aspects dominate than the human characteristics and human concerns. Hence Biocentrism is a counterbalancing model that watches human beings from the ecological point of view. It problematizes the human dominance over environment as avaricious “eagerness to conquer, humanize, domesticate, and exploit every natural thing” (Bryan 2017:113). It negates the absolute humancentric attitude and explores the complex interrelationships between human and non-human. In other words, it is a caretaking model, which has an element of human centric attitude, still largely patronises the natural environment. Lord Byron writes his fondness of nature:

There is pleasure in the pathless woods,

There is a rapture on the lovely shore,

There is society, where none intrudes,

By the deep sea, and music in its roar;

I love not man the less, but Nature more. (Andrew 2013:391)

The aphoristic sentiment, “I love not man the less, but nature more” sensitizes the Biocentric approach than any other farfetched explanation. The natural world remains distinctively provocative with the healthy coexistence of human beings and his fellow creatures with nature.

The reciprocity of human and nature consciousness is found in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore. He has deep concern for humanity and passionate yearning for nature. It is not surprising to see the blended significance of human cause and preservation of Nature anchor his themes of plays, novels and poems. Tagore’s ‘Muktadhara’ is a play, built on the interconnectedness of man with his natural surroundings. Land is where the culture is built upon with human sentiment, identity and belongingness. Removal or destruction of nature and its resources not only causes the deprival of livelihood of the original inhabitants, but also batter their coexistence with nature. Jace Weaver agonises such condition:

It is a kind of psychic homicide, when Natives are removed from their traditional lands, they are robbed of more than **the** territory; they are deprived of numinous landscapes that are central to their faith and identity; lands populated by their relations, ancestors, animals, and beings both physical and mythological (Wilmer 2011:161).

Muktadhara (The Waterfall) traces the conflicts between man and machine, human development and nature, and ends with the denouncement of machines in favour of human freedom, thereby ensures the preserving of nature. As the play opens, the action takes place in a fictional locale called ‘Uttarkut,’ ruled by an autocratic ruler Ranajit. A waterfall flows through the land forming the cascade of downstream that nourishes the valley and the lower-lands of ‘Shiv Tarai.’ Now the King resolves to subjugate the people of lower-land by harnessing water by building a dam against the downstream. ‘Vibuti,’ the royal engineer conceives a plan of action for installing a monstrous machine against the water flow, so that the people of ‘Shiv Tarai’ will be deprived of the life-giving water, thereby subdued by the King. But Abhijit, the protagonist – the foster son of

the ruler, devises another plan to save the people of land against such inhuman deprivation of natural resource. He acts against his father's will by freeing the water from the confinement of newly constructed dam, by demolishing it. In the process, he loses his life, thus becomes a martyr for the noble cause of protecting the lives of people and sparing the nature from destruction.

Tagore's love for humanity and devotion for nature makes him understand the entwined relationship of man and nature. In his words, "when a man does not realize his kinship with nature, he lives in a prison house whose walls are alien to him" (Gupta 2016:61). The dramatic representation of Muktaadhara begins with a celebratory note of man-made machine and ends up in a melancholic mood as the protagonist loses his life for the **tribals** who live in close association with nature. The web of lives in its interdependency of one another is thus epitomized in Tagore's work.

Other than human and nature, the relationship between human and animals, which is intuitively more obvious, is well dealt by J.M.Coetzee in his metafictional novella 'The Lives of Animals' (1999). Coetzee describes the theme of animal rights in the voice of Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist and fictional novelist of his story. It is this character that voices out the theme of 'fullness of being' in the every organism, which has specific role to play in the entire ecosystem.

In the ecological vision, the **salmon** and the river-weeds and the water-insects interact in a great, complex dance with the earth and the weather. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, In the dance, each organism has a role (2016:53).

The novel evokes a great interest in literary scholars and in animal theorists as well. The deliberations of Elizabeth – the protagonist, at the University assemblage express the voice of 'Zoocriticism' of animal-right-activists. Coetzee, a vegetarian by practice, advocates the animal rights and criticizes the involuntary outlook and indifference of humans about animal consciousness. Man enjoys voyeuristic satisfaction seeing the wild animals in captivity. The moment of animal nakedness in the gleam of broad light, and the thrill of watching them striptease gratify the gruesome minds of humans. Animals are slaughtered and poached for food and gratification in the name of so called civilization. The 'Others', the very part of biosphere take a stand of mute spectators, as the human civilization is continuously being constructed by sheer intrusion and encroachment of 'species boundaries.'

In the olden days the voices of man, raised in reason, was confronted by the roar of the lion, the bellow of the bull. Man went to war with the lion, and the bull, and after many generations won that war definitively. Today these creatures have no more power. Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us. Generation after generation, heroically, our captives refuse to speak to us. All save Red Peter, all save the great apes (Coetzee 2016:25).

It is the human perception of animal consciousness that props the idea of animal rights, ensures the entitlement of their own existence, in their own species-boundaries, which is affordable similar to the human conditions. Coetzee marks it, "the right to life, the right not to be subjected to pain or harm, the right to equal protection before the law" (2016:26). It is a question of something in common, of humans and of animals, the consciousness of sharing space in the biosphere, and the right to kill one another for reason. Though Coetzee is not an animal activist for sure, he foresees the endangering of animal space from the biosphere.

The moral implications of both Tagore and Coetzee appeal to human consciousness towards fostering of natural environment and paying due respect to all living creatures. Neither building of machineries nor subjugating of animals under human power can endorse the real civilization of human beings. Leopold observes, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Pepper 2003:84). The bio centric model assumes greater importance at the face of ocean pollution, nuclear proliferation, and garbage dump and so on; otherwise there will be nothing adorable and beautiful in ecosystem to feel about. Thus Bio centric model decentralizes human centric attitude and ensures the complex interrelationship of all creatures, with a prime consciousness to preserve Nature.

Anthropocentric Model:

Anthropocentric approach to Green studies is the cultural dimension of Ecocriticism. It focuses on pastoral and terrestrial expansion of dominating human interaction with natural environment. According to human philosophy of existence, man is considered as the centre of universe. His interest and well-being are rather important than any other non-human interests. The world of nature is at his mercy and every resource on the earth is at his disposal. It is the greatest concern for all the eco critics, for man looks at nature as his aide. Eco critics of Post-Colonial and Neo Post-Colonial studies greatly exemplify such intimidating interactions of human beings with the ecosystem. Thus Kerridge analyses the term 'Eco criticism' with reference to human centric attitude, "Eco critics analyse the history of concepts such as 'nature' is an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis" (Singh 2019:Vol-6). This has influence on various approaches like Marxism and Feminism, as these studies interpret the socio-political structure, reading them in eco critical perspectives.

In a generic term 'the world' means human society. Hence, the dictum of social philosophy is human centric, value based, which holds the principle of 'the benefit of many', especially of human kind. Then the study of literature, in the light of ethical system, cannot fairly form the right analysis, just ignoring the non-human, especially of Nature. But the study proves that the reality is worse than expected. Man thinks himself a proud creation of nature, having the faculty of rational thinking and creativity. Despite this wonderful gift of rational thinking, he terribly fails to live a harmonious life with nature and his fellow creatures. He doubly fails to create mutual confidence among other humans in his proudness.

The Waste Land of T.S. Eliot singles out such neurotic condition of human beings, who failed both in the human front and in the eco front; "I think we are in a rats alley / where the dead men lost their bones" (2010:45). The recurring theme of death in every section indicates the death of nature in the hands of human beings and the death of man as human himself. Man's attitude of mastery over nature has extensively affected the ecological system, "for modern man, nature has become like a prostitute – to be benefited from without any sense of obligation and responsibility towards her" (Brodbeck 2008:281).

The environmental dumping such as ship-breaking yards, runoff of chemicals, marine pollutions, nuclear trash are some of the ill effects of human civilization. Thus civilization and culture concept lose their reality on moral obligation towards ecological consciousness, and finitude of human existence. T.S. Eliot time and again points out the pathetic condition thus,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And dry stone no sound of water, Only

There is shadow under this red rock

Come in under the shadow of this red rock

I will show you fear in a handful of dust (2010:43)

It is evident that the well-being of human species lies in the well-being of ecosystem. The extensive materialism and mindless exploitation of natural resources end up losing all biological relationship with flora and fauna; thereby the humans will suffer from the destruction of their only home Earth.

According to Ecocritics, the theory of social constructivism is once again human centric and eulogise the notion "Of all things the measure is man" (Daniel 2016:8). The critics raise a vital question on how far man has culturally evolved into society by alienating himself from nature and environment. They claim that social constructivism and Linguistic determination are the by-products of human culture, which is an antithesis of ecocentricism.

Animal Farm, an allegorical novella by George Orwell (1945) is a classic example of social constructivism. It is quite interesting to note, how it is often the case that we speak about animals, and call them as stand-ins for

human qualities. On the flip-side, the animals, in the *Animal Farm*, speak of humans and ridicule the human constructivism or human culture. George Orwell uses the animals as his voice neither speak out ‘animalism’ nor ‘environmentalism’, rather ridicules the assuming ownership of humans over nature.

Under the leadership of ‘Old Major’, the most supported boar, all the other animals win over the human intervention, by driving the landlord off the animal farm. It was high time the animals held the philosophy of ‘animalism’ under the able guidance of the lead animals, ‘Snowball’, ‘Napoleon’, and ‘Squealer.’ But turn of events forecast the imminent danger of other animals, as the so called counsellors start taking the position of dictators of the crowd; and as time progresses, they turn to be human like. They start wearing clothes, walk upright and carry whips to control other fellow animals. The result is, “the creatures looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which” (1985:40).

Orwell does not try to justify the idea of animalism, but tries to record the engagement of humans with others; with humans, fellow creatures, and nature as well. And ultimately hits upon a revelation that, “Man serves the interests of no creature except himself” (1985:5). It is evidently expressed in the voice of animals, “something I’ve never been able to adapt to, to understand is how they can lavish such love and care on the animals and then see them sold for slaughter. I don’t dare say anything about it, though... But there’s some kind of cold, unfeeling contradiction in that business” (Waller 2013:55).

CONCLUSION

As far as the naturalists are concerned, the so called human developments in science and technology are greatly achieved by the mindless exploitation of nature and its resources. The adverse effects of human behaviour on ecosystem give way to the question on how far man has culturally evolved into society by delineating himself from Nature. It is sheer hypocrisy of human attitude to celebrate civilization at one hand, whilst despising its materialism on the other hand, and still longing for the Utopian reality of returning to nature, and living in nature. Hence it’s a vantage point of time for us to rethink ecocriticism, more than a literary theory, and making it into a pragmatic theory of ecological movement in practice. And it is also high time we remind ourselves that humans are inevitably a part of ecology, and not above. And symbiotic relationship with nature makes man more civilized.

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