
ECOCRITICISM: A MIND EXPANDING STUDY

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Abstract: Ecocriticism is a way of looking at literature. It has given the critical tools to study literature from nature's perspective. It is not like other theories which are full of mind-boggling jargons. It is always a mind expanding theory. This paper is an explanation to some of the ways of studying literature with the help of ecocriticism.

Keywords: ecology, literature, nature.

Introduction: Science and Literature are poles apart. Scientists are for logic and facts and literary writers are for imagination and fantasy. The related areas of critical interest in the subject of science and literature include science fiction where the writers focused on the place of science in contemporary and future life. In the same way, there are writers who concentrated on ecology.

Ecology means "house"; "study of" or the study of the house. It is the scientific study of the relation of living organisms with one another and their surroundings. Many ecologists call ecology as a subversive subject. Paul Shepard was a human ecologist and philosopher. In the late 1960s, he wrote the introduction for *Subversive Science*, a book that offered an interdisciplinary perspective on what was then termed "the ecological crisis". Shepard noted that a change in western perspective was absolutely necessary: "where now there is man-centeredness,...ecology as applied to man faces the task of renewing a balanced view"(Kroll). Shepard "concluded by noting that the ecological crisis could not be ameliorated by technical and scientifically engineered quick-fixes, but rather by invoking 'an element of humility which is foreign to our thought, which moves us to silent wonder and glad affirmation'" (Kroll).

In the 1970s, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* came as a great boon for the subject of ecology. This metaphorical title for the entire book suggests a bleak future for the whole natural world. *Silent Spring* predicts a world without birds, which had died because of over use of pesticides. Its title was inspired by John Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci", which contained the line "... no birds sing"(48). Her book played a large role in expressing ecology as a "subversive subject". This book talks about the technologically engineered control of nature. "The book argued that uncontrolled and unexamined pesticide use was harming and even killing not only animals and birds, but also humans" (Kroll).

In the literary circles, the abuse ecology was felt and in 1978, William Rueckert published his article entitled, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in

Ecocriticism". Thus William Rueckert becomes the first person to use the term "Ecocriticism". Later in 1989, Cheryl Glotfelty revived the term. She defines it as the "Study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". When the Americans are using the term "Ecocriticism", British use the term "Green Studies".

Peter Barry in his book, *Beginning Theory*, speaks at length about ecocriticism and ecocritics. He says, "For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present in an entity which affects us and which we can affect fatally, if we mistreat it"(Barry 252). Thus nature is a reality. It cannot be considered only as a metaphor or simile. The reader of a literary work should be able to understand the value of ecology and the repercussions of mistreating it.

Another important point is that writers give importance to the individuals who live inside the house and forget to emphasize on the outside of the house. Thus an ecocentric reading differs from other readings. Peter Barry says, "The ecocentric reading...focuses outside, on the house and its environs, rather than inside, on the owner and his psychology"(251). So, ecology or nature should be given importance.

It is interesting to see that "Nature" Poets like William Wordsworth, Robert Frost and other Romantic writers have written on nature. So what is new? This question arises in the mind of readers. For example a reader can go through Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods". In that poem, Frost or the persona is on the horse's back. On the one side, there is a frozen lake and on the other side woods. The horse shakes its harness bells. "To ask if there is some mistake"(10). Is there a mistake? Now is the time for the poet to take a decision. The choice is between beauty and duty or nature and nurture. The person who has taken the road not taken takes a decision and decides to go with the world and decides to leave nature. Thus here nature becomes just a backdrop. No doubt, nature remains at the periphery.

Is it right to reject these writers? Is nature just a backdrop? Is there something more than meets the eye? Wordsworth writes in "Tintern Abbey", "...Nature never did betray/The heart that loved her" (122-3). Here Wordsworth treats nature as another being. In "Lines Written in Early Spring", Wordsworth writes,

The budding twigs spread out their fan
to catch the breezy air
And I must think, do all I can
That there is pleasure there.

("Tintern Abbey" 17-20)

Through this ecocentric image, Wordsworth explains how the "twigs" also experience pleasure.

Wordsworth in "The Prelude" writes,
FROM nature doth emotion come, and
moods

Of calmness equally are Nature's gift:

This is her glory; . . .

Hence Genius, born to thrive by
interchange

Of peace and excitation, finds in her

His best and purest friend;...

("The Prelude" 1-7)

Thus Nature is not an inanimate thing but it is an animate being. More than that nature becomes the "best and purest friend". In "The Tables Turned" he writes about the vernal wood.

One impulse from a vernal wood

May teach you more of man,

Of more evil and of good,

Than all sages can. (21-24)

Here one "impulse" in nature during spring can teach more than a sage. Here nature becomes a good teacher.

Thus Wordsworth feels that the "twigs" experience pleasure, nature is man's best friend and nature is the best teacher. Because of this Peter Coates in *Nature: Western Attitudes Since Ancient Times* calls Wordsworth a "proto-ecologist" (134). Readers can find a Copernicus-like shift in poetry. Copernicus replaced the geocentric (and human-centred) model of the solar system with a heliocentric model. Here Wordsworth replaced the anthropocentric model of experience with a biocentric one. There is a relationship here of an inner nature to outer nature. W. John Coletta speaks relevantly of "The psychology or experience of ecology before the science of ecology" (Palmer 77). According to him, Wordsworth is the first formed ecologist. Thus the Romantic writers are landscape (nature) poet and poet of the self (of the inner landscape). Thus these writers articulate external and internal "natures" through their poetical works.

William Rueckert in "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" pleads for the literary

critics to take up a position. He feels that the new position should be relevant to the human beings. In cryptic words he says that "there must be shift from" the "locus of motivation from newness or theoretical elegance or even coherence, to a principled relevance" (Glotfelty 107). In this world, all are connected to each other in one way or the other. The first law of Ecology says, "Everything is connected to everything else" (Glotfelty 108). Thus the humans should get the "Ecological vision" (Glotfelty 108). This vision should be mind expanding. "It is not mind-bending or mind-blowing or mind-boggling, it is mind-expanding" (Glotfelty 108).

There are four types of "Outdoor Environment". Area one is the wilderness, which consists of deserts, oceans. Area two is the scenic sublime which consists of forests, lakes, mountains, and cliff. Area three is the countryside which consists of fields and woods. Area four is the domestic picturesque which consists of parks, gardens, lanes. It is clear that in area four, culture dominates and in area one, nature dominates. From this classification one can understand where the writers, especially nature writers, stand.

Another major area of study is symbiosis. Symbiosis is living in community and living in amity. William Rueckert in "Literature and Ecology" says "it is this cooperative arrangement that permits the use of energy in raising the levels of matter" (Glotfelty 120). This cooperative arrangement should be respected. Ecologists use the term, mutualism. In "mutualism - both populations benefit and have become completely dependent on each other" (Odum 228). The opposite of mutualism is parasitism. In real life, there is less of mutualism and more of parasitism. The human beings always live as a parasite on nature. Old Major's speech in *Animal Farm* is the best example. Old Major says, "Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals. He sets them to work, he gives back to them the bare minimum that will prevent them from starving, and the rest he keeps for himself" (9). A study on Mutualism Vs Parasitism will be of help to many readers.

Another important area of study can be the Suicidal motive or the Self-destructive motive. If the human beings try to destroy nature, nature will destroy them. It is a reality that the human beings and non-human beings are interconnected, so if the humans try to destroy nature, they will also sink in the process. Cree Indian Prophecy, "Only after the last tree has been cut down, Only after the last river has been poisoned, Only after the last fish has been caught, Only then will you find that money cannot be

eaten”, should come as a warning to the human beings. Arne Naes believes in holism. David E. Cooper avers, “Naes is a ‘holist’, arguing that, at a fundamental level, all organisms are ‘intrinsically related’ in a biospherical net or field” (Palmer 213-214). The theme of coexistence can be understood through this study.

Another significant area of study can be Nature and Culture. It is significant because, human beings always harp on culture to defend strong people. Rueckert is absolutely right when he calls culture a predator and parasite. Like a predator culture ruthlessly exploits non-humans and like a parasite it lives in or on non-human beings/ nature (its host) and benefits from them. In no way does it reciprocate energy transfer. Rueckert says, “Culture has often fed like a great predator and parasite upon nature and never entered into a reciprocating energy-transfer, into a recycling relationship with the biosphere” (Glotfelty 119).

Another noteworthy area of study can be Wildness vs Domestication. Domestication has come as a huge curse for animals and insects alike. Gary Snyder says, “Wildness can said to be the essential nature of

nature” (Coupe 127). This vital concept is not understood by human beings, or ignored for their selfish ends. In “The social construction of nature”, Terry Gifford asserts, “‘Wild’ as in wild ecosystem richly interconnected, interdependent and incredibly complex” (Coupe 176). The humans have chosen to ignore the call of nature and go for domestication. The Australian short story writer, Henry Lawson, brings out the influence of humans on the dogs and cats in “Two Dogs and a Fence” and “Bush Cats”. Jack London’s *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* exhibit the bane of domestication.

Conclusion: Through the ecocritical study the human being should get ecowisdom. Ecowisdom surely will help the readers understand that the human society is ensnared in nature and any attempt to disturb the delicate balance will lead to destructive ends. Glen A. Love in “Revaluing Nature” rightly says, “The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (Glotfelty 237). Thus it is imperative on the part of the ecocritic to warn the human beings of impending danger and help them solve it with the help of literature.

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