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Ecocriticism with an Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is a new branch of literary criticism. It is related to ecological literacy. This literacy prompts the writer to raise the ecological issues in creation. It is a new movement of the age which has now fully bloomed in the last four decades. Ecocriticism is a swiftly altering approach that has recently emerged from the conventional approach to literature. The ecocritics observe both the local and global as well as the physical and natural and also the historical and recent in the perspective of a work of art. Ecocritical approach is interdisciplinary. It combines green studies, the natural sciences and social sciences. Basically, this theory has been used to interpret any text of literature from the West. It was very first time used by Cheryl Glotfelty. It was more famous in US and then it became popular in UK model. Nature is No Man's property. Where ever nature is found, an ecocritic can study to interpret a text. As a result, this research paper would focus on Indian view point towards Ecocriticism.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Oikos, Eco- feminism, Green Cultural Studies, ecoliterature



Definitions of Ecocriticism:

The term Ecocriticism was possibly first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert. He used this term in his essay 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism'. He defined it as 'the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature'. (Glotfelty, xviii). Glotfelty's definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader* is, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". (Glotfelty, xviii). One of the implicit goals of the approach is to recoup professional dignity for what Glotfelty calls the 'undervalued genre of nature writing'. (Glotfelty, xxxi). Lawrence Buell's definition of 'ecocriticism' is that it is a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.

This is a new field of literary thinkers. Different thinkers and ecocritics have used the approach and mode differently. The term Ecocriticism is defined in different ways. Their basic concern is similar. These various approaches generally focus on the relationship between man and the earth. Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment uses an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and arrive at possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situations.

Growth and Development of Ecocriticism

Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm included Rueckert's essay in their edition *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (1996)*. It has become an outstanding landmark in the emergence of the theory of ecocriticism. In 1985 Fredericko Waage edited *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources*. In this anthology nineteen scholars have expressed their environmental concern and the awareness of ecology in literature. Harold Fromm organized MLA special session on 'Ecocriticism: The Greetings of Literary Studies' in 1991. American Literature Association symposium entitled 'American Nature Writing: New



Approaches' is also notable. A new *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE)* was founded in 1992 at the annual meeting of Western Literature Association. Its purpose is to encourage new nature writing, traditional and innovative intellectual approaches to environmental literature. In a span of twelve years from 1992, Ecocriticism has bloom almost magically. Lawrence Buell has contributed a lot to the emergence of ecocriticism. His work *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture (1996)* is an ecocritical approach to Henry David Thoreau. He wrote on environmental crisis in *Writing for an Endangered World (2003)*. Lawrence Buell discussed about the first wave of ecocriticism in his book entitled, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination (2005)*. The first wave of ecocriticism spotlighted the nature writing, ecocentric texts and natural history. The first wave led the way to the second wave of ecocriticism. He has identified these two phases of ecocriticism: the first wave of ecocriticism and the second wave of ecocriticism or revisionist ecocriticism. The first wave ecocritics have mainly focused on the literary forms of nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction. The second wave ecocritics are disposed towards environmental justice issues. Their social ecocriticism takes urban and degraded landscapes just as seriously as natural landscapes (Buell 22). Lawrence Buell finally admits the fact that the western academy has its focus on ecocriticism only as environmental criticism (Buell 28).

Ecocriticism has its major concern with writing on nature and ecological themes. The second wave moves from inherent environment to fabricated environment, from wilderness to urban landscape. It ultimately includes all space and also non-space. The environment really means everything that contains everything else and moreover anything.

Greg Garrard in his work *Ecocriticism (2004)* identifies ecocritics as environmentalists. He calls them deep ecologists. Garrard introduces some important literary terms of environment. These terms are pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse,



dwelling, animals and the Earth. His textbook is an introductory textbook of ecocriticism as Garrard has provided a useful glossary and bibliography of ecocriticism.

Peter Barry has included a chapter titled Ecocriticism in the second edition of his landmark critical work on recent literary criticism: *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2002). He states that ecocriticism has no universal model. He has listed the acts of ecocritics like

- (a) reading of literature from an ecocritical point of view.
- (b) applying ecological issues to the presentation of the natural world and.
- (c) showing appreciation for ethical positions toward nonhuman nature.

Ecocriticism studies the relationship between the human and the non-human all over the human cultural history. The study evaluates the term human itself and ultimately it focuses from man-centered to earth-centered and from the inner to the outer. William Rueckert has coined the term ecocriticism in 1978 in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, He states that ecocriticism entails application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. In his opinion, ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in (107).

Ecology reflects the very important law of nature. Everything is connected to everything else. Ecocriticism is the criticism of the house and the environment, as represented in literature. The word 'environment' signifies all the physical surroundings, conditions, setting, on the earth or a part of it, which is exaggerated by human activity. The physical environment comprises external conditions which affect the individual's organism. The basic concept of ecology is that everything is interrelated and nothing is separate. Ecological concerns are the subject of literature for a long time but it was not properly focused. On the other hand, the ecological movement in the last few decades has achieved significant importance and has pulled



the attention of the intellectuals, academics, writers, and scientists to the burning issue of human- nature relationship.

Human beings obtain knowledge from nature. Even an inactive observation of nature offers knowledge. The elements of nature like hills, sea, sand, mountains, rivers, plants, animals, climate, temperature and seasons mould the inner and outer personality of a human being. Nature influences persons and guides them to live ecologically. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach which relates nature and human sociologically, psychologically, anthropologically, scientifically, politically and philosophical problems.

Ecocriticism as an Interdisciplinary Approach:

Ecocriticism is essentially multi and interdisciplinary. Ecology consists of whatever belongs to the environment. Anything below the sun and above the sun, everything over the water, on the water, in the water and under the water is just a part of the environs around. Whatever is static and whatever is mobile belongs to the bio-diversified world that has spread far and wide. All forms of life form the environmental atmosphere- be it marine life, the life of the feathered friends or the crawling creatures, of the wild beasts in the forests and of the domesticated gentle animals around the human habitat and of the homo- sapiens himself. There is indeed God's plenty. All these living beings and non-living objects become the subject of literary work. It is on this account ecocriticism is related to some other disciplines like geography, economics, politics, sociology and other social sciences. There are all arts and fine arts, pure and applied sciences and technologies which too are related to ecocriticism. This is how Ecocriticism gets related to multiple disciplines and has to adopt interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches. Ecocriticism also has been connected with various literary as well as critical approaches. The theories of the makers of the twentieth and twenty-first century minds such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin as well as Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela have close relevance to Ecocriticism. In other words,



Ecocriticism is inherently interdisciplinary and essentially multi-disciplinary and necessarily trans-disciplinary in nature. Ecocriticism is recent but it has roots in all the branches of study and therefore it has branched out in various multifarious directions. It is associated with the rocks and the clouds the rains and rainbow, the sunshine and the moonlight, the pains and pangs, the sorrows and the sufferings the mood swings all belong to the external and internal surroundings of human and other forms of life. It is thus true to say that the third principle of Ecocriticism is basically interdisciplinary. The landscape is the dominant feature of ecology and the interaction between author and the landscape as well as characters and that landscape is what is the domain to which Ecocriticism is invariably applied.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a new offshoot of both ecologism and feminism. In *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975) Annette Kolodny analysed the role of fantasies of the physical environment in the writings explicitly distinguishing the traits of the male authors from that of the female authors. Kolodny stresses on the gendering of the land as female and the tendency to opt nature for pure relaxation, recuperation and satisfaction in male-authored literature. She also recommends an equivalence between the patriarchal dominance and oppression of women and misuse and destruction of the land. Eco-feminists, view the domination of women as a branch of the patriarchal thought that bring about the control of nature. In patriarchal structures, men own and have power over the land and are responsible for the suppression of women and ruin of the natural environment. As the men in power control the realm, they can use it for their own achievement and profit. In a similar state, women are also exploited by men in authority for their own success, contentment and gain. Nature and women are misused as inactive objects in the battle to dominate. The authoritative men benefit by inflicting upon the weak ones. As a method of reconstructing ecological and social injustices, eco-feminists believe that women have to work to create a harmonious environment and thereby end the



destruction of lands. Most women depend on the environment to afford for their families. Eco-feminism argues that nature and women are interconnected which comes from this shared history of suppression by patriarchal western culture. Vandana Shiva explains how women's connections to the environment have been mistreated by the male-dominated society. According to her 'women in subsistence economies', producing wealth in collaboration with nature, are specialists in the ecological and holistic knowledge of nature's processes. But these substitute modes of ecological knowledge oriented to the nourishment needs and social benefits are not accepted by the society. This is due to the failure to recognize the relationship of women's work, knowledge and lives or the diverse ways of nature with the creation of wealth. Eco-feminism focuses significantly on a spiritual relation between nature and women. According to them, the essential characteristic of nature is feminine. Eco-Feminist theory establishes and underscores the dualities between the masculine and the feminine world and links the suppression of women with the subjugation of nature. Eco-feminism sustains those feminine values are life-enhancing. The feminine principles represent Mother Nature, the body, irrationality, emotion, intuition and spirituality whereas the masculine tenets stand for rationality, logic, intellectualism, language and reality all of which constitute a separation from nature. Eco-feminism tries to eliminate the idea that man is hierarchically above all the other species and nature. It teaches in him a realization of living with the earth and valuing both biological and intellectual diversity.

Green Cultural Studies:

Green Culture is being emphasized during the last thirty years when all the countries of the world became conscious about the degradation of ecology and loss of the forest cover all over the world. It is considered optimum to have thirty three to thirty five percent of the forest cover. This proportion is not maintained in many of the country. The natural resources have been used to the limits beyond their capacities. That is a strain on ecology. The excessive use of obnoxious chemicals which cause the harmful emission of carbon monoxide and other affluent has caused



alarms. Air, water and soil are tremendously polluted. Smoke and smog have covered the skies. Water is so much contaminated that it is impossible for the fish and other organisms to survive in the dark dirty waters in the gutter like rivers. The erosion of soil is beyond description. All these are the symptoms of the loss of balance of ecology.

What man has made of nature can only be rectified by man alone if everybody follows the green path of enhancing the green glories of the beautiful Nature. Bloodshed, violence, Terrorism, Corruption, Mismanagement, Pollution and Degradation in every walk of life are the burning issues. These can also be solved through the Green Cultural Studies. This is why the first basic tenet of Ecocriticism is Green Cultural Studies.

Questions of an Ecocritic

Ecocritics ask questions such as:

1. How is Nature represented in the work? How is Nature reflected in works of literature?
2. What role does the physical setting play in the work? What is the significance of Location in the making of Culture?
3. Are the values expressed in this work consistent with ecological wisdom? What are the links between ecological and ethical values?
4. How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How does elemental imagery reveal the importance of conservation of Nature? How does Nature figure in classical, medieval and modern Literature?
5. How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? How does Nature figure in classical, medieval and modern Literature? Why is Nature a major theme of Literature?

Ecocriticism in India:

Nirmal Selvamony at Madras Christian College introduced a course in



Tamil Poetics in 1980. This was the beginning of Ecocriticism in its present and modern sense in India. S. William Meeker was the first to use and introduce the expression 'literary ecology' which is a term that refers to the study of biological themes and the relationship that appears in literature and ecology in literary work. He states that "ecology is an ancient theme in art and literature" (9). This is what is noticed in the growth and development of "Ecocriticism" in India. The terminology might have been recent of about three-four decades ago, but the theme has been ancient. This theme has been treated in the religions scriptures of all the four Indian religions- Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism and also in the religions scriptures of the two large segments of the Indian population- Muslims belonging to Islam and Christians belonging to Christianity. With the wave of agricultural civilization the wave of ecology in the religious scriptures is noticed. The second wave corresponds with the industrial revolution and is reflected in the Indian Renaissance Literature influenced by Romanticism and Transcendentalism in the poetry of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Yogi Aurobindo, Ghosh and Harindranath Chattopadhyay in the first half of the twentieth century. The third wave of Indian Eco-criticism coincides with the third wave of Information Technology in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The beginning of the third wave of Indian Eco-criticism has taken place in 1980 by Nirmal Selvamony's introduction in Madras Christian College of a course in relation to the correlation between literatures and ecology.

The oldest literary works belong to the oral tradition and in all the four Vedas- Rigveda, Sam Veda, Atharva Veda and Yajurveda- the ecological prosperity is prominently noticed as Nature Worship or Pantheism prevailed in those times. The planet Earth was called Mother, the elements of Nature. Earth, water, Air, Fire and Sky were worshipped as powerful gods and goddesses. Even the trees are called Vriksha-devata. "The trees and plants which stand in middle of the houses of the people living here and there on the earth are full of medicines and curative herbs. Long live our mother earth and may she bless us with prosperity." (Rig Veda,



12.1.2). The Vedas treated trees and plants with the highest regard and worshipped them as the visible manifestations of Divinity. Tree plantation is considered to be a religious duty.

“O Mother Earth! Born of you, and living with you, We all creature.”
(Atharva Veda 12.1.15)

India is a land where multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic groups of people live. One of the largest populations of the Muslims in the world resides in India above 150 million and in Islam too the religious scriptures reflect the ecological perspectives. In the Holy Quran, *ard* is the word which means “the earth” which is used at least four hundred and eighty-five times. The Islamic law is The Shariah which literally means “the source of water”. The Shariah is the source of life. It contains both ethical and legal rules. In Islam, the conservation of the environment is based on the principles that “all individual components of the environment are created by God and that all living things are created by the Almighty Creator. These components of the natural environment serve humanity but that does not mean that their utility to humanity is the only function or the sole reason. Islamic law states that in certain cases and aspects “The environment is here to serve man”: Ibn Taymiyah, a Scholar of the medieval times, while responding to this statement says: In considering these verses it is to be remembered that Allah in his wisdom created these creatures other than serving man. He only explains in these verses the benefits of these creatures to man. It is also believed in Islam that these components of Nature continuously praise God. This praise is prevented if man destroys Nature. There is a reward for charity shown to each creature with a wet heart. The protection of certain zones is the concept of *Hima* which is included in the Islamic Law. It is still a practice followed in Islamic countries. Nature is a magnificent gift of Allah and therefore Nature is made for Love, peace and Mercy and must be treated with Respect and Justice.



Two percent of the Indian population is of Christians residing particularly in Nagaland, Kerala, The North-East Indian region and other states which are predominantly tribal. “Let the earth produce fresh growth. Let there be on the earth plants bearing fruit, each seed according to its kind”(The Bible , Genesis:11). Adam and Eve were given in the beginning dominion over all animals and plants in the Garden of Earth- that is the World. The Christian myth gives a dominant status to man and secondary status to Nature. The Christian world view is thus anthropocentric- keeping man at the centre of creation. The Earth is here to serve man and man is here to serve God. God said to Adam and Eve:

“I give you all plants that bear seed everywhere on the Earth and every tree bearing fruit which yields seed: They shall be yours for food. All green plants I give for food to the wild animals, to all the birds of heaven, and to all reptiles on earth. You may eat from every tree in the garden but not from the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil for on the day that you eat from it; you will certainly die.” (Genesis:16)

Christianity rejects the notion of animism which demystifies nature and stripes it of its intrinsic value. The earth is a place which is cared for by the Creator, the Creator does not interest Himself in it. According to Lynn White, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion as Man shares God’s transcendence of Nature. Christianity has established a dualism of man and nature but insists that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends. Abusing the environment therefore becomes a sin, as it is a direct rejection of the promise of God.

Buddhism is followed by one percent of the Indian population and the same is the case of Jainism. Gautam the Buddha, the Enlightened Mahavir, the twenty fourth Tirthankar and founder of Jainism holds similar views on Nature and its harmonious relationship with man on the Earth. Buddhism preaches the way of loving-kindness and compassion. All beings in the universe are equal in nature. The



lives of humans and animals are inter-related, mutually developing and inseparable. Man has however misused and abused their power. Man has selfishly destroyed animals, forests, mountains, natural resources and is trying to reap the results of this ecological destruction. All these damages and destructions of the ecology have reached an alarming level.

Buddhist as well as Jain monasteries were established in the thick deep forests. They manifest the harmonious union of man with Nature. The monasteries and temples in the mountains and the forests allow them to live in peace and noble tranquility which make them protect the lives of animals, birds and fish. Tolerance has made the followers of Buddhism and Jainism to eschew the path of violence and adhere to the doctrine of non-violence and non-attachment.

Sikhs make two percent of the Indian population of about 25 million predominantly in the states of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Harayana and other states. Sikhs believe that an awareness of the sacred relationship between human and the environment is necessary for the health of our planet and for our survival. In *Sri Guru Granthsahibji* it is told that man and material world, biotic and abiotic components of the environment are no more seen as external to each other, but being involved in inter-relationship reciprocally conditioning the life of each other. Guru Nanak stresses this kind of inter-relationship in his composition Japaji:

“Pan guru, Paani pita dhara mahat

Diras raat do.e daaee, daa-ia, kheli sagal jagat.” (Sri Guru Granth Sahibji: 08)

(Air is vital force, water the progenitor, the vast Earth is the mother of all, Days and Nights are nurses, fondling all creation their lap)

Sikhs believe that the material world and its phenomena (Nature) like all creation is a manifestation of God. Every creature in this world, every plant every form is a manifestation of the creator. Earth is part of God and God is within each element of creation. God is the cause of all and He is the primary connection



between all existences.

This shows that in all the religious Scriptures of the major six religions that account for the ninety-eight percent of Indian population Hinduism (80%), Islam (12%), Christianity (02%), Sikhism (02%), Buddhism (01%) and Jainism (01%), the conservation of ecology is emphasized. In addition to these there are tribal religions and they worship Nature, trees and flowers, animals and mountains devoutly. They are all for conservation of Nature and against the damage and destruction of Nature leading to pollution. Their folksongs, folktales and the base of their legends and dances have the foundation of ecology. This is the first wave of ecological perspectives and ecocriticism that prevailed in ancient times in India. That is such a thread which bounds every one to nature so that harmony can be maintained well.

Conclusion:

All human and non-human life is surrounded by ecological environment. It is the environment that surrounds the animal kingdom and the plant kingdom; not to speak of the stellar universe. Earth, water, air, fire and the sky are the marks of the environmental set-up. The balance in ecological conditions guarantees the balanced life for men and other creatures. Peaceful co-existence of the tiger and the lamb, the lion and the squirrel, the wolf and cat, the eagle and the sparrow is the principle of life in Nature. All religions have advocated the balanced relationship between Man and Nature. This living practice which was already established there but has recently emerged as the eco-critical perspective from 1978 onwards after the word was first coined by William Ruckert. The early eco-critical theorists like Glotfelty, Buell, Waage and others have proposed the major principles and basic tenets of Ecocriticism.



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