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ECOCRITICISM IN LIGHT OF INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH:

AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Occurrences of ecocriticism in Indian English Literature are explored in this paper. Ecocriticism began in the 1980s in America. It gained popularity in Britain in the 1990s. It is still being explored around the world and is yet to make its way into the mainstream. Right from the beginning, nature was inadvertently very conspicuous in Indian writing in English. Though at that time it was not attributed as ecocriticism. There was a prominent bond between the central characters and nature in Indian fiction novels. Concern for our environment has been on the rise as industrialisation increased. As the conversations on being more eco-friendly in all aspects became more frequent, it made its way to mainstream media. As art imitates life, ecocriticism helped make these issues become part of literature.

Nature is our nurturer but can also become our annihilator. The more humanity abuses nature, the more difficult it will become for humans to live in peace for long. Ecological issues are no longer geography-specific. As everything is connected to everything else, it is a global crisis and every person plays a vital role in curbing the issues. Indian writers such as Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Kamla Markandya, Ruskin Bond, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, V. S. Naipaul and Amitav Ghosh write brilliant pieces about the relationship between man and nature. Some authors wrote about the infinite beauty and magnificence of nature; while some addressed the irreversible impacts of colonialization on nature to increase awareness.

Each writer has a distinct style of writing and unique equation with nature. Ruskin Bond observes the little things in glorious nature and its changing landscape in India. Anita Desai uses elements of nature primarily for symbolism. Amitav Ghosh is the Indian write who leans the most towards explicit ecocriticism in his works. *The Hungry Tide* and *The Glass Palace* both navigate the interconnectedness of human lives and nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, ecological balance, Nature, preservation



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Ecocriticism – An Introduction

Ecocriticism is the inspection of the documentation of environmental changes in literature. It was also called 'Green studies. It began in the 1980s in America and got around to Britain in the 1990s. It is steadily gaining traction all around the globe. Ecocriticism as an idea was first discussed at a meeting of the Western Literature Association. It came into the limelight when the rise of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, 1992) and Patrick Murphy's ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Condition, 1993) took place. These literary conventions played an important role in the development of ecocriticism. There are two defining works which dissect the concept of ecocriticism - The Ecocriticism Reader (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty also, Harold Fromm, the other is The Environmental Justice (1996) by Lawrence Buell.

The term ecocriticism was first used in 1978 by William Rueckert in his exposition "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in ecocriticism". As per Rueckert Eco criticism signifies "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (ER xx). Ecocriticism incorporates ideas like profound biology, ecofeminism, Marxist environmentalism, apocalypticism, etc. "Indeed the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself...". (Garrard 5)

Ecocriticism in Indian Writing

India is a diverse land which extends from the Himalayas in the north to the vast ocean in the south; the deserts in the West to the lowlands in the east. It is rich in biodiversity. Indian writers since the start have incorporated nature into their stories in a subtle way. They depicted the symbiotic nature between nature and man. Nature can be a friend of a foe based on its treatment. Soon it was realised that ecological issues were global and that authors from all around the world should join the cause of ecocriticism to preserve humanity. In the former works of Indian fiction, ecocriticism in the correct sense of the term was absent as it did not deal with the changes in the ecosystem but only with a description and admiration of nature. Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan, Kamla Markandya, Ruskin Bond, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh took up ecocriticism in their writing though some of them did so unknowingly as the concept was defined formerly after their work was published.

Raja Rao in Kanthapura describes Kanthapura as a region which is high up on the ghats near the Arabian



VIDHYAYANA

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An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Sea, up the Malabar Coast. The inhabitants of Kanthapura worship the mountain as their goddess Kenchamma. Raja Rao writes, "Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she...never has she failed us in grief. If rains come out, you fall at her feet and say, 'Kenchamma you are not kind to us. Our field is full of younglings.'" (Kanthapura 2). Raja Rao wrote about the divinity of nature. It was common for people to revere the sun, moon, trees and mountains and Rao captured this belief in Kanthapura. R. K. Narayan in his books describes natural scenes effortlessly. In *The Guide*, the representation of the Saryu waterway, the destroyed temples, the dry spell of drought and the final long-awaited showers from the sky talk about many naturally-occurring phenomena in nature that were common in India. In *The English Teacher*, nature is Krishna's influence and helps him become spiritual.

Ruskin Bond is a true man of nature. He could spend days in real life simply watching nature. He even chose to settle in the beautiful hills of North India away from the hustle-bustle of cities. He always incorporated an element of serenity in his stories. The beauty and soul that Bond attributes movingly to aspects of nature is pleasurable to read. Nature appears in all its glory in Bond's books. Some of his books are dedicated solely to the theme of nature. He discusses the hills and mountains of Dehradun and Mussoorie, the waterfalls as well as the local culture and tradition. As he spent most of his life in these hills, the almost autobiographical account of how the routes and valleys have changed over time provides fodder for ecocriticism. He is also passionate about saving nature and aspires to through his books, which are primarily aimed at the youth, to fill a sense of wonder and affection for the trees, rivers and hills in their minds.

The Blue Umbrella is about a girl named Binya from a small town in Himachal Pradesh. She exchanges her precious bear claw necklace with a Japanese tourist for a beautiful blue umbrella. She carries it with her wherever she goes. Ram Bharosa, a village shopkeeper, envies Binya. He wants to own the blue umbrella. When Binya does not agree to exchange it for any number of toffees he even tries to steal it. Soon the villagers learn of his despicable actions and stop patronizing his shop. Eventually, Binya gives him the umbrella when Bharosa feels remorseful and he, in turn, gives her a bear claw necklace. Similar to nature, the cycle is restored. *Love is a Sad Song* and *The Sensualist* are also in a similar vein.

Kamla Markandya in her novel *Nectar in the Sieve* discusses through the life of the protagonist Rukmini the impact of nature and industrialization on the lives of people. She also displays the unpredictability of nature its impact on the human condition. Industrialization which had started gaining momentum at the time



VIDHYAYANA

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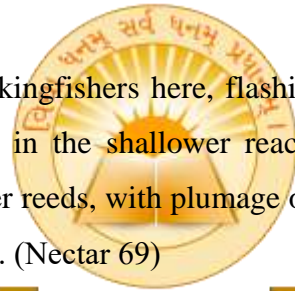
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of the novel was not only destroying nature but also adversely impacting human life.

“Ecofeminists believe that patriarchal society is built on four interlocking pillars: sexism, racism, class exploitation and environmental destruction. This Eco feminist’s analysis projects that not only women but oppressed races and oppressed social classes are also closely tied with nature. They argue that there is close relationship between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by male domination.”(Nazir 54-55)

Ecofeminists treat nature as a female who is treated unfairly and subordinately in a patriarchal system. The place where Markandya’s protagonist worked was an important part of her life yet the start of a tannery causes her much dismay. She and her family relied on agriculture before the tannery came up which created an urban setting in her village. The tannery took up all the free space and also affected the biodiversity of the region which was expressed by Rukmini as follows:

“At one time, there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingos, striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close”. (Nectar 69)



VIDHYAYANA

The development proves to adversarial for the inhabitants who face hardship and bred a rampant rise in prostitution, crooks and murderers. They were driven to unlawful ways out of desperation to survive. “Shiva in her *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* communicate a predominant detrimental and anti-developmental view of the application of scientific technology imported from the West and the resultant exploitation of nature by transforming it to an arid zone. Here, the construction of the tannery in a remote agrarian village has confiscated the inhabitants of their livelihood and homeland, making them alienated in their own soil.” (Indulekh 722). Through Rukmini, Markandya expresses her disdain against industrialization and urbanization which destroy the environment under the pretext of progress. Rukmini doesn’t let go or hope till the end and *Nectar in the Sieve* also promotes hope for a better tomorrow for ecology. Glotfelty talks about ecocriticism as “It seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (ER 5).

Anita Desai is a noteworthy Indian female writer whose use of plants, birds and nature is conspicuous in



VIDHYAYANA

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www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

her writing. She used the environment to depict the internal musings of the central characters. Desai created vivid imagery of flora and fauna to represent Maya's struggles and triumphs in *Cry, the Peacock*. Maya's pet Toto symbolises the separation from one's homeland. Its death also depicts Maya's obsession with death:

"All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved on to the veranda for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms. Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and the crows will eat anything – entrails, eyes, anything." (Cry 7)

This denotes how Maya had become submissive to creation and destruction which was the only truth in nature. All living things perish. Attachment to pets as a concept is also explored. Her sadness which stemmed from her infertility was expressed in the way she spoke of nature. She says:

"Leafless, the fine tracery on the naked neem trees revealed unsuspected, so far carefully concealed, nests, deserted by the birds....Down the street, the silk-cotton trees were the first to flower: their huge, scarlet blooms, thick petaled, solid-podded ... then dropped to the asphalt and were squashed into soft, yellowish miasma, seemed animal rather than flowerage, so large were they, so heavy, so moist and living to the touch. (Cry 34)

VIDHYAYANA

Every aspect of nature described in Desai's work has a connection to human emotions and feelings. Nature metaphorically acts as a precursor to what can be expected from the characters. Maya, akin to the peacock that destroys itself to display affection, denotes the tense relationship between Maya and Gautam. The cycle of life and death is surmised in this novel.

Nature and culture are always intertwined. In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh creates a stellar account of animal and humans life both dwelling in the arms of nature. The power that nature has over how humans live is also showcased in this book as well as in the *Ibis Trilogy*. Ramachandran Guha and Juan Martinez Alier found a link between underdeveloped Asian and African nations and environmental degradation. The blatant adoption of first-world methods in third-world countries without any kind of customisation proves to be detrimental to the ecology as well as the society in the years to come. Similarly, the ecological ideas about conservation propagated by the west tend to ignore the cultural and traditional beliefs of the locals. "People are evicted from lands they have occupied from centuries under the project of conserving wildlife."



VIDHYAYANA

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(Nayar 249).

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* delves deep into the heart of the majestic Sundarbans to reveal its mystic as well as the mayhem it can cause. The looming tigers, the ever-hungry crocodiles, snakes and unpredictable tides test the characters making their way through this perilous yet breath-taking region. The pain of displacement during the partition of East Pakistan felt by those who fled from the dandakaranya outcast camps to marichjhapi with the hope for a better future forms the core of the story. Marichjhapi was considered to be a violation of the land and human settlements were considered to be a peril to nature. This led to the merciless evacuation of those who lived there. Many lost their lives but did not make it to the list of the deceased.

Ghosh intermingles current affairs and history deftly in this novel. Human facets of gentleness and brutality are addressed. The story begins with Kanai Dutt, a business from Delhi sets out to visit his widowed aunt to review the writings of her husband who mysteriously passed away. Piyali Roy is another central character. She is American in all her ways and is visiting the Sundarbans to study the dolphins of the region. Kanai and Piyali travel together along with a local fisherman Fokir to navigate the backwaters. Through these characters, Ghosh depicts three different lifestyles that are affected by the Sundarbans. He contrasts humanity against the environment. He asks pertinent questions such as if human life was less important than the conservation of nature.

“Wildlife and wilderness area face crisis but are the tribals also responsible? Huge infrastructure projects and dollar earning tourism projects are being advocated in a land where traditional communities are being displaced in the name of wildlife preservation. They pretend to ignore that the forest reserves are exploited by poachers and timber merchants by bribing forest officials. When Piya sees the tiger killed by the villagers for having harmed humans and livestock, her concern for the natural rights of animals overshadows her sensitivity to human life. Her European-American concern for ecological preservation dominates humanism but later the cyclone in which Fokir is killed helps Piya to realize the insignificance of individual human effort. They realize that science cannot meet the fury of nature.” (Bindu 136). The battle between mighty nature and hapless humans is seldom written about and Ghosh brings forth a unique and relevant perspective.



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Ecocriticism is not only about being mindful of the treatment of nature by man. It is an all-encompassing study of them battling it out for survival. A common ground needs to be reached between the exploitation of nature and man's never-ending search for a better life.

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