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The Growth of Eco-criticism as a Literary Theory

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ABSTRACT

Literature studies have long been preoccupied with historical perspectives. However, in recent years, critics have been more mindful of the relationship between literature and geography, and have derived ideas from their shared research. Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as is evidenced in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. The New Literatures in English among other manifest and symbolic representations also deal with nature as a very significant issue. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity have only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that have given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely eco-criticism. This research paper provides a brief overview of eco-criticism's development as a literary theory from the early to mid-twentieth century. It reflects on the emergence of eco-criticism, a theory that examines a literary text in relation to its surroundings and portrays the underlying interconnectedness of human-nature life.

Keywords: Literary Theory, Eco-criticism, Environment, Eco-conscious, Nature

The Growth of Eco-criticism as a Literary Theory

Turning the pages of history we find that the history of humanity dates back to the invention of writing or as determined by the archaeological records. However, the rise of civilization is understood in terms of ages related to the environment. They are - *Paleolithic*: Stone Age, *Neolithic*: Bronze Age, *Chalcolithic*: Copper age, and Iron Age, etc. Though people believe that the man came first and he created the environment for his use, the scientific stories view differently. Literally, the Solar System is thought to be 4.5 billion years old and humans have existed as a species for only a few million years. Hence, human existence is in nature and not out of nature. Reflection of nature in literature becomes pertinent as the environment is the canvas on which history is written. The beauty of nature percolates upon every page of the history of human existence. These ecological concerns in literature paved the way for the arrival of new critical theories and terminologies. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that have given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely eco-criticism. Thus, finding Nature in literature is the study of an Ecocritic. This research paper provides a brief overview of eco-criticism's development as a literary theory from the early to mid-twentieth century.



Earlier Ideologies:

"Man is the measure of all things" a statement by the ancient philosopher Protagoras reiterated the similar idea of the Bible which taught the world that the environment is for a man to consume. Man is the king of all that exists. These meta- narratives made man superior to all the living beings. In western thought, 17th century writer Thomas Hobbes believed that the "state of nature" was a primitive one and that human community formation constituted comfort and safety. John Locke suggested that humans must treat the land as their private property. He believed that the non- human world was valued less. Later thinkers, however, had instrumentalist perception of nature.

Enlightenment Period

Mid 18th century was a period where we find the beginning of modernity which is characterized by critical response to the industrial development and growing technical mode of production. This improvement in terms of development in Europe and England influenced environmentalism to a great extent. They believed that one can improve by improving nature.

Romanticism

Rise of romanticism is a definite response to growing industrialization which became a major cause of the destruction of nature and natural habitat. It marked the use of nature as a supreme subject. The glorification of nature and landscapes in English and European poetry and paintings highlighted the delicate balance between man and the environment. The movement against cities in Wordsworth and others was a response to the grime, smoke and pollution of the city by gigantic machinery and profiteering industry. (Nayar, 244) Romanticism was an artistic, intellectual and literary movement of the 18th century as a reaction to industrial revolution, the age of enlightenment and the scientific rationalization of nature. It emphasized the symbiosis between mind and nature. Jonathan Bate, author of *Romantic ideology* (1991) proclaimed romantics as "the first ecologists". Similarly, McKisick in his work *Green Writing* (2000) hails romantic writers the first full-fledged eco-critical writers in the western literary tradition who called for the arrival of an amicable relationship between human and nature. Jacques Rousseau argued that the state of nature was the purest and the best form of human existence. His was one of the finest critiques of the enlightenment, arguing against the established notion of development. He believed that nature was innocent and that civilization was artificial and corrupt. He calls nature an open book for all. Major romantic writers like Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, and Byron seriously saw divinity in nature and preached nature in their



works.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, this civilization was tied up with two other 'movements', colonialism and capitalism. Both regarded nature as something to be exploited by humans. In the colonization period, colonized were seen as the part of nature; savage, barbarians, primitive, meant to be improved by the European influence: colonizers. They considered themselves superior, representative of God and others as inferior and meant to be exploited.

With the publication of *Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin, the mindset towards nature and environment changed. Darwin proposed a different concept of nature which proposed that human beings are also animals of a higher form. Only by acclimatizing to suitable nature, man can survive. 'Survival of the fittest' became the idea. Only those who better adopt nature and understand the interrelationship and dependence shall survive.

Karl Marks and Friedrich Engles in their materialistic conception of nature and society also believed that human progress was based upon a careful exploitation of nature and the non-human. Marxism focused on the kind of capitalist mode of production and industrialization rather than on the consequences of these two on the non-human world. The hierarchical structure of being, the survival of the fittest doctrine and man as the master of all; changed the mindset of man towards nature. This inordinate and extrinsic attitude of man is explained by Bindu Annie Thomas in her work, *Essay on Eco-criticism*,

The spiritual and the psychological union between nature and man, man and beast was fractured beyond repair. Man has now to struggle for his existence. His survival depended on his intellectual faculties with which he sought to dominate the rest of the creation."
(Thomas, 182)

The utilitarian thinkers like J. S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham marked a departure from enlightenment ideologies and proposed a different point of view. Mill in his essay 'Nature' argued that all human actions are irrational because they try to alter the course of nature. He was against the growth of the economy at the cost of nature. Jeremy Bentham the liberal utilitarian argued that cruelty to animals was completely unacceptable. These two are considered pioneers of western green thought. Roland Barthes observed in 1857 "always to strip down Nature, its laws and its limits so as to expose history there and finally to posit nature as itself historical."



Twentieth Century

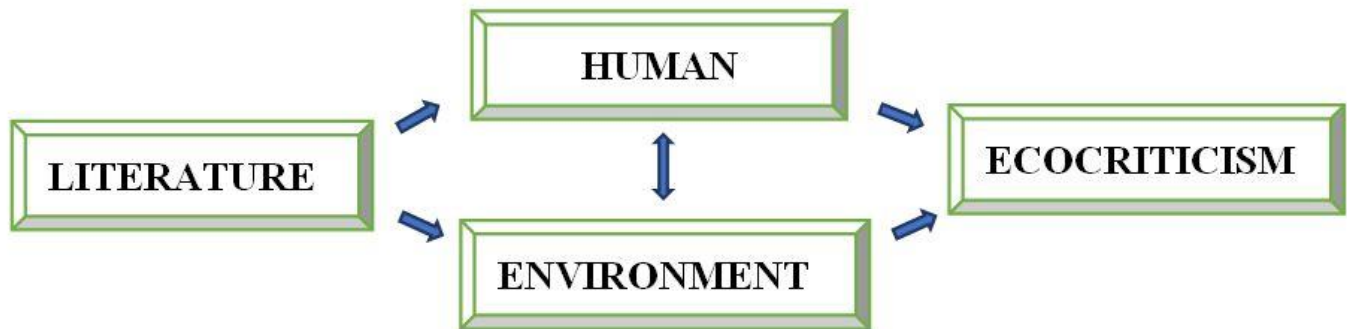
It is marked with critical questions of human-nature interconnectedness and a new social movement that fight for environmental protection. The century marked dissatisfaction towards present social and institutional order. The discontent grows into movements and theories like queer theory, the feminist movement, and the environmental movement. Thenceforth, eco-criticism entered as a literary theory into the field of literary criticism. Eco-criticism found its place among the expanding matrix of coexisting projects, which explained the theoretical diversity existing simultaneously as a result of the socio-political reaction. Eco-criticism grew not all of a sudden. It emerged gradually together with environmental philosophy. As Buell stated that most criticisms preferred to call eco-criticism as Environmental Criticism, Literary Environmental Studies, Literary Ecology, or Green Cultural Studies. (Buell, Future 11). Peter Barry in his chapter 'Eco-criticism' in *Beginning theory: an introduction to literary and cultural theory* (2000) claimed that Eco-criticism has no universal model. It is concerned with the study of the relationship between human and non-human, throughout human cultural history. Thus, its focus moves away from man-centred to earth-centred. Glotfelty in *The Eco-criticism Reader* observed:

Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of its texts, eco-criticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty & Fromm xviii)

Eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary criticism. It has come to mean not only the application of ecology and ecological principles to the study of literature, but also the theoretical approach to the inter-relational webs of natural cultural and supernatural phenomena. Eco-criticism gives a new meaning to place, setting, and environment. Eco critics in their study want an ecological perception of nature to change the ways humans inhabit the Earth. Eco-criticism is a rapidly changing theoretical approach, which is different from the traditional approach to literature. Here the critic explores the local or global, the material or physical, or the historical or natural history in the context of a work of art. An eco critical approach to literature is often interdisciplinary, citing knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, and cultural and social studies.

Generally, eco-criticism can be defined as a literary theory that juxtaposes literature and environment- i.e., environmental representation in literature, human interference and overuses of environmental resources and human activities affecting nature which calls for a greater awareness to protect the surrounding. An eco critic wears spectacles having one eye on literature (nature oriented text) and the other eye on ecology (Environment). Eco-

criticism can be simply understood by the following figure.



(Figure 1, What is Eco-criticism?)

The figure depicts how literature, human world and environment are interlinked which in turn is studied by a critic who voices the environmental concern in literature. To simplify, exploring the representation of human nature nexus in literature is eco-criticism. The basic definition of eco-criticism was provided by an anthology, *The Eco-criticism Reader* (1996), wherein it is defined as ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the environment’. (Nayar, *CLCT*, 242) other writers have defined eco-criticism differently. To state some of the definitions, Cheryll Glotfelty defined it as ‘Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.’

Eco-criticism studies a literary text with one eye on Nature/environment and the other on Literature. It studies how nature is reflected in the text, how the author tries to bring environmental awareness, and the role nature plays in the life of the character. Together with the changing time; stories, aspirations and lifestyles of people have changed. There are no more stories and storytellers but Mobile phones and electronic gadgets that entertain. The root of man's growth itself is anti-nature which keeps one away from the love of nature. The profound intimacy with green grass, cooling breeze, sweet soil and fondling flowers have all vanished due to manmade artificialities, depleting resources and electronic gadgets that virtually present everything. Today man is happy seeing a photo of natural beauty hanging on the walls of his house.

Thus, Different writers and critics have used various terms associated with the theory of eco-criticism. Terms like green studies, deep ecology, eco-poetics, environmental writings, nature writing, eco-feminism, ecocide, eco-consciousness, eco-philia, eco-phobia, etc. appear with regard to eco-criticism. Oikocriticism or eco-criticism is an analysis of a text or texts concerning interrelationship among society, individual and environment. Thus, it is a criticism of the environment as represented in literature. Thus, eco-criticism is an emerging theory which has caught



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the eye and mind of many literary scholars within a short span in the field of literary criticism and its application. Though the approach has its roots in eco-feminism that gave impetus to it, eco-criticism is all encompassing approach to any text: ancient or modern, having natural elements. Today it has spread to almost all continental research and many books have been written on eco-criticism.

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