

Ecocriticism and its' Conceptual Developments: A Sensitive Portrayal Through Critics'Pen

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ABSTRACT: Environmentalism began to take shape in the second half of the 20th century, and in its' more radical form in the 1990's. The proposed study tries to examine the various academic conceptual developments in the field of ecocriticism. It depicts the interdisciplinary relationship between literature and environment in varied forms. The research work also attempts to find out that separation of humanity from nature has a long history, and more precisely it has roots in Christian and post-Christian Western culture. It explores that how the study of the rise of industrial capitalism, which first appeared in Western Europe and spread by colonialism be relevant to this field. The work also portrays that, how with the advent of modernity, the society is heading towards more and more westernised form of culture and ideology. It examines how individualism emerged as a major phenomenon, and the sole importance shifted to man because of his rational thinking. The work will trace the urgent need to set up a kind of value system and ideology in this society so that those existing views of domination can be proved false and anthropocentric view can be shifted to biocentric and ecocentric. The work also attempts to give local colour to the research by providing an ecological glimpse in the literary texts of few Indian English female writers.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Literature, Nature vs Culture, Anthropocentrism, Western Ideology.

Ecocriticism and its' Embryonic Concepts

Environmentalism is a critique of industrial modernity. Environmentalism began to take shape in the second half of the 20th century, in response to perceptions of how environmental damage has become the threat to all lives on the earth. Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), is widely traced as a first work in the field of environment study, and the first modern environmentalist movement in its more recent incarnation, emerged in the 1960s, and gave rise to a rich array of fictional and non-fictional writings concerned with humans' changing relationship to the natural world. Various theories and formulations are made in different disciplines of academics. A number of sister disciplines have been emerged in relation to the study of environment like; Environmental Studies; Environmental anthropology; Environmental history; and Environmental philosophy. There is no doubt, that the last decade of twentieth century is known for its industrial development, and it has affected the environment.

Nature is what the earth is and does without human intervention. The natural is the opposite of the artificial. Similarly Natural Wilderness is land that has never been altered by human activity. The separation of humanity from nature has a long history. Ecocritics have paid more attention to its roots in Christian and post-Christian Western culture, because industrial capitalism first appeared in Western Europe and spread by colonialism. An important part of ecocriticism's philosophical and historical work has been the analysis of this tradition of man/nature dualism. In Enlightenment period, the separation of humanity from nature is at its most systematic in the philosophy of Rene Descartes. The modern culture and the practices adopted by the people leads to the degradation of nature. As Howarth puts that, "The dogma that culture will always master nature has long directed Western progress, inspiring the wars, invasions . . . that have crowded the earth and strained its carrying capacity" (77).

From the advent of modernity, the society is heading towards more and more westernised form of culture and ideology. The western culture considers humans as a superior race. This view is also mentioned in the Bible that man is rational of all and he has the right to have dominion over other beings. White rightly opines that, "Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature . . . we must rethink our nature and destiny" (14). Literature and Environment studies have evolved since 1990s and the first wave tended to equate environment with nature; to focus on literary interpretations of the natural world in poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. The second-wave has shown greater interest in literatures pertaining to the metropolis and concentrated more strongly on locating ruins of nature within cities and revealing crimes of eco-injustice against society's marginal groups. A third wave involves the concerns of nature at the centre of ecocritical studies and the way through which authors and

intellectuals can depict the ground reality of rapidly degrading environment. It is a platform to delineate not only the oppression done by human beings on nature but how it is used to oppress and the future consequences of this oppression.

In academics, Ecocriticism primarily overcome the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). The ASLE involves interdisciplinary approach which draws on literary and cultural theory, philosophy, sociology, psychology and ecology. It made its prominence in the mid twentieth century in the field of literary criticism. Buell rightly says that “the term 'Ecocriticism' coined in the late 1970s” (13). As an interdisciplinary approach, its’ area is wide and immeasurable, and laid stress on the sustainable development. It is argued that ecocriticism finds its most striking ethical challenge in the question of animal suffering. Sumathy, rightly opines in this context that, “Literature plays a very important role in creating awareness about the environment. Just as post colonialism champions the cause of the “other”, ecocriticism upholds the voice of the “nonhuman other” (1). Defining Ecocriticism, Kerridge writes, “Ecocritics analyse the history of concepts such as ‘nature’ in an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis” (530). It is influenced by various approaches like Feminism and Marxism, as these approaches act as a socio-political structure for reading the ecocritical texts. Ecocriticism represents nature and the behaviour of people towards nature in a particular age. For instance, in the seventeenth century, nature was worshipped as a goddess but in the present era human being considers nature only as a commodity. In this context, Guha writes, “this destruction owed itself to the fact that modern man had desacralized nature viewing it as a source of raw material to be exploited” (13). Ecocriticism tries to make connections stronger between the environment and issues of social justice as socially and environmentally oriented life style is need of the hour, because like Feminism and Marxism, Ecocriticism shares the idea of social transformation through literature. Glotfelty defines the term:

Ecocriticism 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 texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (19)

It studies the relationship of human being to other living beings like birds, animals as well as to the non-living world and their dependence on each other. It is also the study of the degradation of the natural elements like; air; water; soil, forests; oil; coal; etc. It can be said that the changing relationship of human beings with the environment also be understood through the yardsticks of ecocriticism theory. Social commentators are in agreement that the 20th century has been marked by three important discourses: the civil rights movement, feminism and, more recently, environmental activism. Despite obvious differences, all these movements seem to have a common purpose, namely the ultimate rejection of hierarchical and patriarchal patterns of possession and domination. Kerridge in this situation narrates that, “Anthropocentrism is the placing of humanity at the centre of everything, so that other forms of life will be regarded only as resources to be consumed by human beings” (532). It means they are basically concerned with the interests of human beings who consider themselves superior to the animal species and they use them for their self-interests. Human beings consider themselves at the centre think that this world, the resources, other things and non-human world are created for them. Consequently, the relationship between humans and nature has become the relation of power and powerless respectively.

Another important concept of Ecocriticism is Ecofeminism which implies the combination of ecology and feminism. Ecofeminism is a broad term which includes feminism, environmentalism, animal liberation, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism. To put this movement within its contemporary context, Plumwood asserts that, “Ecological feminism is essentially a response to a set of key problems thrown up by the two great social currents of the later part of century—feminism and the environmental movement” (10). It mentions that the fundamental insight of Ecofeminism, the structuralist’s anthropology, that presence in diverse cultures of the idea that women were subordinate to men. Beliefs that legitimate the oppression of women also legitimate environmental degradation. It emerged as a reaction against androcentric dualism- artificial and cultural construction of man’s supremacy over woman.

Deep ecology is a radical version of environmentalism, introduced in the early 1970’s by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and developed in the 1980’s by United States environmentalists Bill Devall and George Sessions. Guha says, “The movement of Deep Ecology, the leading edge of the American environmental movement today, which fights for ‘biocentric equality’, that is, the placing of humans on par with and not above other species” (8). Deep Ecologists advocate a biocentric view, which recognises the nonhuman world as having value independently of its usefulness to human beings. Deep ecology lays emphasis on humans to understand that the intrinsic values lies in nature. So that humans should not create

any kind of binary opposition and power relations with nature as promoted by Western philosophy and culture, which caused environmental problems.

Like Deep ecology and Ecofeminism, there is another concept Social Ecology, which is propounded by Murray Bookchin, an environmentalist and social activist. Social Ecology also rejects the present hierarchal organisations and institutions which are political in nature and anti-ecological. Social ecology advocates a reconstructive and transformative outlook on social and environmental issues, and promotes a democratic politics. It describes that the root cause of the present ecological and social problems can be traced to hierarchal modes of social organisation. Eco-socialists advocate dismantling capitalism, focusing on common ownership of the means of production by freely associated producers, and restoring the commons. The environmental justice movements are the result of protest against environmental degradation caused by capitalists. Garrard rightly opines:

Eco-Marxists argue that there is a structural conflict between workers and the owners of the means of production, in which the latter cream off the surplus value created by the labor of the proletariat. This objective exploitation is at the heart of all other forms of the exploitation and oppression. (29)

Thus, it can be said that Eco-Marxists identify class conflict as the key political issue, social ecologists oppose the power relations and hierarchy. In this way, the fusion of environmental and social development agendas, which has occurred so strikingly within and between global NGOs might come to ecocriticism. The notion of nature's wisdom is so deeply ingrained in environmentalist discourse and ecocriticism that sustained research at the borders of humanities and the new postmodern biological sciences can disentangle it from our systems of basic presuppositions. Apocalypticism is an important concept to be discussed as it means the end of the world is imminent or forthcoming. The Environmentalists highlighted the upcoming dangers as they saw species death as inevitable. They argue that humans are not ready to change their cultural attitudes and this will consequently lead to the environmental disaster. There is an urgent need to save the earth by using radical measures. The most alarming of man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials and changing the traditional nature of environment. In this context Carson describes, "In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the menacing and little recognised partners of radiation in changing the nature of the world" (23).

The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. It is a construction initiate to protect particular habit and species, and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city. The wilderness question is also central to ecocriticism's challenge to the status quo of literary and cultural studies, in that it does not share the predominantly social concerns of the traditional humanities. Unlike pastoral, the concept of wilderness came to cultural prominence in the eighteenth century. The pastoral is the distinctive Old World construction of nature, suited to long-settled and domesticated landscapes, wilderness fits the settler experience in the New Worlds, particularly the United States, Canada and Australia, with their apparently untamed landscapes and the sharp distinction between the forces of culture and nature.

Ecocritics responsive to environmental justice will bring questions of class, race, gender and colonialism into the ecocritical evaluation of texts and ideas, challenging versions of environmentalism that seem exclusively preoccupied with preservation of wild nature and ignore the aspirations of the poor. Environmental justice movement forms an important part of the ecocriticism theory. This movement emerged in India just as the movements for the rights of people began, without taking into consideration their caste, creed or race. It includes the sacredness of the Mother Earth and everyone's right to remain free from the destruction of ecology. In the words of Kerridge:

The environmental justice movement is a collective term for the efforts of poor communities to defend themselves against the dumping of toxic waste, the harmful contamination of their air, food and water, the loss of their lands and livelihoods, and the indifference of governments and corporations. (531)

For profit business, which could be identified as one of the underlying motivations of colonialism, has, over the last century, exploited humans and the non-humans by allowing cheap labour, bad treatment with animals and dump of waste back into the environment. In effect, 'civilised man' has dominated and continues to dominate those elements around him. Deane Curtin coined and defined the environmental racism concept as, "the connection, in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other" (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 4). As the theories of Post colonialism, Feminism and Race Studies play an important role in indulging people to think about a particular issue prevailing in the society so does the theory of ecocriticism. It chooses environment centred approach. The texts related to ecocriticism have become a part of the

environmental awareness which connects the human world to that of the non-human world. As Glotfelty mentions about ecocriticism, “As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human” (19).

In this present era, where the greatest predicament is the degradation of the environment, it is necessary to observe, “There is an urgent need to understand that, Environment is not the ‘other’ to us but part of our being” (Buell 55). The third world countries are following the western ideologies of development that has resulted in the complete destruction of natural environment. A lot of raw material is used in industries and it is an over exploitation of the natural resources. Guha, again rightly says, “Nature has become a source of cheap raw material as well as a sink for dumping the unwanted residues of economic growth” (4). There is another reference from Indian writer and critic Roy, who is concerned with two major ongoing issues prevalent in India; the Narmada Bachao Andolan and The Campaign against Nuclear Weapons in India. In her essay she says, “Who knows, perhaps that’s what the twenty first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big wars, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small” (*The Greater Common Good* 5), indicates that something wrong is going to be happened.

Conclusion

To be concluded, ecocriticism attempts to highlight the need to reconsider the relationship between man and nature through literary works. Through the development of ecocriticism and its’ related concepts the research work critiques the western culture, ideology, and its’ anthropocentric view. It tries to reshape the present existing ideology and promotes ecocentric view with the medium of literary and critical texts. It points out necessary needs for proper study and organisations to manage and remodel the existing notions about culture, understanding of nature and its interconnectedness to all the things existing on this planet earth.

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