



## ROOTS OF ECOCRITICISM: AN EXPLORATION OF THE HISTORY OF ECOCRITICISM, A LITERARY THEORY OF THE POST-MODERN WORLD

Dr.Vathana Fenn

*(Associate Professor, Sri Ramakrishna Engineering College, Vattamalaipalayam, Coimbatore-22)*



### ABSTRACT

The study of literature has long been preoccupied with historical approaches. However, in recent years critics are increasingly aware of the relation between literature and geography, and drawing insights from the mutual study of these two fields. 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. 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 Ecocriticism. This research paper gives a brief history of the gradual growth of Ecocriticism as a post-modern literary approach. Ecocritics lay emphasis on the preservation of landscape in order to save the human race. Ecocriticism not only lays emphasis on the 'harmony' of humanity and nature but also talks about the destruction caused to nature by the changes which take place in the modern world for most of which man is directly responsible. Ecocriticism is a fairly new concept but it has gained importance rapidly. More and more scholars have become aware of it and they are eager to do their research in the field of Ecocriticism and other areas associated with it. There have also been numerous debates on whether to include human culture in the physical world. Despite the broad scope of inquiry all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.

**Keywords:** *Literary Theory, Ecocriticism, Environment, Eco-conscious, Nature*

© Copyright VEDA Publication



## INTRODUCTION

The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. 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 Ecocriticism. This paper is an attempt to give a brief history of the gradual growth of Ecocriticism as a modern literary approach.

The study of literature has long been preoccupied with historical approaches. However, in recent years critics are increasingly aware of the relation between literature and geography, and drawing insights from the mutual study of these two fields. 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. Today the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized in all departments of knowledge and development. The literary critics try to study how this close relationship between nature and society has been textualized by the writers in their works.

There have also been numerous debates on whether to include human culture in the physical world. Despite the broad scope of inquiry all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. It is a broad genre that is known by many names like green cultural studies, eco-poetics and environmental literary criticism, which are some popular names for this relatively new branch of literary criticism. Literary criticism in general examines the relations between writers, texts and "the world". In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society--- the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. Ecocriticism 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. Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications. The considerable increase in the emergence of Ecoconscious writers in the post-modern era has paved a path for a new kind of critical approach called Ecocriticism. It is a fairly recent but rapidly developing concept in the area of Literary Criticism. It has emerged as a modern ecological literary study and is now acknowledged as a vital critical approach. Ecocriticism not only gives emphasis on the 'harmony' of humanity and nature but also talks about the destruction caused to nature by the changes which take place in the modern world for most of which man is directly responsible.

Ecocriticism gives a new meaning to place, setting, and environment. Ecocritics in their study want an ecological perception of nature to change the ways humans inhabit the Earth. Ecocriticism 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 ecocritical approach to literature is often interdisciplinary, citing knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, and cultural and social studies. John Loretta further explains thus:

"Eco", from the Greek root *oikos*, means "house"... Just as "economy" is the management or law of the house (*nomos* = law), "ecology" is the study of the house. Ecocriticism, then, is the criticism of the "house," i.e., the environment, as represented in literature. But the definition of "house," or *oikos*, is not simple. Questions remain: What is the environment? What is nature? Why did the term "environment," which derives from the verb "to environ or surround," change to mean that which is nonhuman? Are not humans natural and a prominent environment in themselves? Where and in what does one live?



Ecocriticism is by nature interdisciplinary, invoking knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, and cultural and social studies, all of which play a part in answering the questions it poses. [http://www.asle.org/assets/docs/Ecocriticism\\_essay.pdf](http://www.asle.org/assets/docs/Ecocriticism_essay.pdf)

Since 1990, Ecocriticism has flourished. Today, a keyword search for “ecocriticism” in the MLA Bibliography online produces 422 hits, three-quarters of which are from the last eight years. Ecocriticism has entered academic course lists worldwide, along with the creation of interdisciplinary academic faculty positions to teach them. Peter Barry added a chapter titled “Ecocriticism” to the second edition of his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, but correctly claims that ecocriticism has no universal model. The essay focuses exclusively on the new practice in this area and includes only the most important works on the relationship between culture and nature relative to ecocriticism. Accordingly, he lists “what ecocritics do,” which includes the following:

They re-read major literary works from a major ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world. They extend the applicability of a range of ecocentric concepts, using them of other things in the natural world—concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources... they turn away from the ‘social constructivism’ and ‘linguistic determinism’ of dominant literary theories and instead emphasize ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves. (Barry 254)

Glen Love in his *Practical Ecocriticism* answers the question of “Why Ecocriticism is important in today’s world?” He says:

As the circumstances of the natural world intrude ever more pressingly into our teaching and writing, the need to consider

the interconnections, the implicit dialogue between the text and the environmental surroundings, becomes more and more insistent. Ecocriticism is developing as an explicit critical response to this unheard dialogue and attempts to raise it to a higher level of human consciousness. (Love 18)

Some eco-critics date the birth of the word “ecocriticism” to William Rueckert, who in a 1978 essay titled “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*” wrote that ecocriticism entailed “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Glotfelty and Fromm xx) which is included in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Over the last three decades, Ecocriticism has emerged as a field of literary study that addresses how humans relate to non-human nature or the environment in literature. Today, with the development and expansion of ecocritical studies, any line between human and non-human nature has necessarily blurred. So when subjected to Ecocriticism, literature of all periods and places—not only ecocentric or environmental literature or nature writing, but all literature is viewed in terms of place, setting, and environment. Glotfelty's working definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader* is as follows:

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 its texts, eco criticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii)

Ecocriticism is inherently interdisciplinary. Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character and place. Ecocritics ask several questions on the relationship between environment and literature but one question seems to be the most important. Literary ecocriticism offers an ecological interpretation of texts. Cheryl Glotfelty says that:



“Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). She lists a number of questions which could be asked by literary ecocritics like “How is nature represented in this sonnet?” and “What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history and ethics?” (Glotfelty and Fromm xix).

The author elaborates upon the term ‘Ecocriticism’ and provides us with his twin explanation of the same. Jonathan Bate expresses the same idea as Glotfelty more briefly:

A central question in environmental ethics is whether to regard humankind as part of nature or apart from nature. It is the task of literary ecocriticism to address a local version of that question: what is the place of creative imagining and writing in the complex set of relationships between humankind and environment, between mind and world, between thinking, being and dwelling? (8)

The term ‘Eco-criticism’ (Greek *oikos* and *kritis*) is interpreted to mean ‘house judge’ by William Howarth. He says: “the *oikos* is nature, a place Edward Hoagland calls ‘our widest home,’ and the *kritis* is an arbiter of taste” (Glotfelty and Fromm 69). For him, “criticism judges the quality and integrity of works and promotes their dissemination” (Glotfelty and Fromm 71). Thus the working definition of literary ecocriticism is the analysis of literature’s expression of humanity’s place on Earth, our *oikos* or home. This wholly includes the cultural aspect through literature and the biological aspect through the Earth as our ecosystem. Karl Kroeber in *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* points to the importance of this intersection between the cultural and the biological:

An ecologically oriented criticism directs itself to understanding persistent romantic struggles to articulate meaningful human relations within the conditions of a natural world in which transcendence is not an issue...Ecologically oriented criticism thus

recognizes a foreshadowing of its own understanding of humanity’s relation to nature in the romantic view that it is natural for human beings to be self-conscious, and natural, therefore, to construct their cultures out of complexly inter assimilative engagements with their physical and biological environment. (38-9)

The term ‘Ecocriticism’ is a short form of ecological literary criticism. The tendency to drop the reference to literature distorts the full ecological implication of the discipline. Kroeber like Howarth, points to the linking function of literary ecocriticism between humanism and science and calls the Romantic poets “proto-ecological” because they accepted “a natural environment existent outside of one’s personal psyche” (Kroeber 19).

According to Glen Love Ecocriticism focuses on the “inter connections between the material world and human culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature” (196). Robert Kern in his essay “Ecocriticism: What is it good for?” found in *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* aptly observes thus:

What ecocriticism calls for, then, is a fundamental shift from one context of reading to another- more specifically, a movement from the human to the environmental, or at least from the exclusively human to the biocentric or ecocentric, which is to say a humanism (since we cannot evade our human status or identity) informed by an awareness of the ‘more- than – human. (Branch and Slovic 267)

Ecocriticism regards nature as an autonomous, active entity of its own and so can be used as an important tool in interpreting literary texts that represent the relationship of human beings to their natural environment. As man moved from science to modern technology nature became the “Other”. All that is not man came to be called as nature. O. J. Joyce and Evangeline Manickam in an article, *From Ego- centered to Eco-centered Humanism: A Wilburian Perspective* in *The Atlantic Literary Review* utter these words:



Cultural anthropologists like Levi–Strauss distinguish nature and culture by stating that which is universal and spontaneous and not dependent on any particular culture, or any determinate form, belongs to nature. Inversely that which depends upon a system of norms regulating society and therefore is capable of varying from one social structure to another belongs to culture. (76)

Ecocritics can initiate change, as Lawrence Buell believes, “admittedly nothing is more shocking for many humanists than to find their ideas taken seriously. But it might just happen in this case. That self- identified Ecocritics tend to be folk who seriously entertain that possibility is one reason why the best ecocritical work is so strange, timely, and intriguing”(Buell 710).

Arthur Lovejoy’s contribution in this field is also very eminent. He observes that one of the strangest, most potent and most persistent factors in the western thought is the use of the term ‘nature’ to express the standard of human values, the identification of the good with that which is ‘natural’ or ‘according to nature’. Nature has always proved to be stronger than human. It has often shown its power by controlling manpower through natural calamities like famine, drought, flood, earthquake etc. Human’s life and nature are so interlinked that it is not possible for human beings to separate themselves from its influence. Therefore they have no choice but to accept both nature’s bounty and adversity. This can be said to be reciprocal as nature too is the recipient of human’s action. Our irresponsible actions cause irreparable damages to nature. This is how the chain of ecosystem works in which everything is related to each other and therefore affects each other. However, even with a term that defined a new group of writing, Cheryl Glotfelty’s *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* published in 1996 adeptly narrowed the term in spite of a “postmodern age [that] exist[s] in a constant state of flux” as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii).

The distinction between environmental writing and ecocritical writing is critical to an

understanding of ecocriticism. Glotfelty notes that “environmental writing supports a dualism that asserts nature as totally separate from humanity, while ecocritical writing unifies the two, or at least analyzes the relationship between them” (Glotfelty and Fromm xx). Foundational to this study of work in nature is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s definition of nature and art and his argument about what it means to be whole through work in nature. In his essay, “*Nature*”, Emerson defines nature as “essences unchanged by man,” and art as a “mixture of [man’s] will with [what is unchanged by man]” (Slater 3). Thus, employing nature as a subject of literary study should address human will in nature. Emerson acknowledges that environmental problems arise because of man’s “resumption of power” and that “[t]he problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty. . . is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye” (Slater 45). Ecocritics lay emphasis on the preservation of landscape in order to save the human race. Ecocriticism not only gives emphasis on the ‘harmony’ of humanity and nature but also talks about the destruction caused to nature by the changes which take place in the modern world for most of which man is directly responsible.

Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere. Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary criticism. Literary scholars specialise in questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, tradition and language and it is in these areas that we are making a substantial contribution to environmental thinking. Over the last three decades, it has emerged as a field of literary study that addresses how humans relate to non- human nature or the environment in literature. Today, with the development and expansion of ecocritical studies, any line between human and non-human nature has necessarily blurred. So when subjected to Ecocriticism, literature of all periods and places—not only ecocentric or environmental literature or nature writing, but all literature is viewed in terms of place, setting, and environment.

#### CONCLUSION

To sum up, as a distinctive approach to the practice literary criticism, ecocriticism gives increased



attention to literary representatives of nature and is sensitive to interdependencies that ground the author, character or work in the natural system. This approach shifts critical focus from social relations toward natural relationships and views the individual as a member of ecosystem. It values highly the 'literary sense of place' not as setting but as an essential expression of bonding with or alienation from a specific natural context. From the beginning the writers have shown interest towards nature, culture and landscape. An ecocritical approach views human's relationship with nature by his interaction with nature because it supports the idea that nature, as a literary subject, surrounds all parts of life. Suresh Frederick rightly says that, "Ecocriticism gives human beings a better understanding of nature" (134). Ecocriticism is a necessary part of literary scholarship because literature cannot separate characters from nature and that they domesticate either destructively or productively.

#### WORKS CITED

- [1] John Loretta. *Greening the library: The Fundamentals and Futre of Ecocrticism*. ASLE. n.d. May 30 2011. Web.([http://www.asle.org/assets/docs/Ecocriticism\\_essay.pdf](http://www.asle.org/assets/docs/Ecocriticism_essay.pdf))
- [2] Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester:Manchester U P 1995; 3rd ed., 2009. Print.
- [3] Love, Glen A. *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*. Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 2003. Print.
- [4] Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm. ed. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens and London: University of Georgia press, 1996. Print.
- [5] Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- [6] Kroeber, Karl. *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*. New York: Columbia U P, 1994. Print.
- [7] Branch, P. Michael and Scott Slovic, ed. *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism. 1993-2003*. Athens and London: U of Georgia Press, 2003. Print.
- [8] Joycee, O. J and Evangeline Manickam *From Ego-centered to Eco-centered Humanism: A Wilburian Perspective The Atlantic Literary Review* Vol. 7, No.2, 75-84. Print.
- [9] Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print.
- [10] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature". *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Joseph Slater ed. United States of America: Harvard U P, 1987. Print.
- [11] Frederick, Suresh. "Suicidal Motive: An Ecocritical Reading of Four Poems." *Essays in Criticism*. Eds. Nirmal Selvamony, Nirmaldasan and Rayson K. Alex. New Delhi: Sarup,2007. 135-143. Print.