



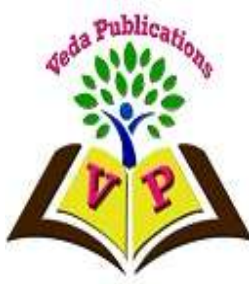
## GREEN CRITIQUE: REVALIDATING LITERATURE TO THE PRESENT

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### ABSTRACT



Green Criticism or Ecocriticism has become a very vibrant and unique literary theory, which emerged in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is the outcome of man's renewed attitude to the environment, more specifically a literary attitude, which inquires how a literary work treats the issues of the world with reference to the earth, water, plants, animals and other objects of nature, which form the very base of human existence. Ecocriticism takes up for study the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ecocritical works remind people the shocking reality that the world has reached the edge of environmental limits.

**Keywords:** : *Green Criticism, Ego-Consciousness, Ecoconsciousness, Orientalism, Enlightenment.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Man's limitless desire to have a mastery over his environment is the result of a faulty political economy, science, technology and in short a narrow and mistaken world view. The notion that man is the master of the universe leads him to the unscrupulous exploitation of nature. This mistaken belief reached its extremity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Man has been virtually conquering, exploiting and plundering nature for many centuries. He is instrumental in creating the contemporary ecological imbalance the world over. A living 'habitat' [*Oikos*] is destroyed. Environment is polluted. Existence becomes precarious. People have broken the rhythm of natural existence. They fail to realize that plants, trees, birds and animals have their own places in nature along with human beings. The present ecological breakdown is leading the planet earth to an imminent catastrophe. To avoid the catastrophe people have to root out the causes of catastrophe: viz. faulty economy, science, technology, civics and philosophies. Money worship, market oriented culture, exploitation of nature capitalism, stark materialism and industrial civilization are to be avoided or at least controlled and nature is to be preserved for the survival of wo/man in the Universe. People have to come out of the 'myth' of a continuous or endless progress. 'Ego-consciousness' is to be replaced by 'eco – consciousness'. The concord between man and nature has to be restored.

## GREEN CRITICISM IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Over a decade, ecocriticism has emerged as an important resistance ideology in confronting the excessive exploitative attitude of human beings towards Nature. If the first half of the twentieth century witnessed hectic activities in presenting and promoting modernity in the social and literary frameworks, the other half focussed its attention on green critical thinking that developed along with postmodern and postcolonial responsiveness. The surfacing of ecocriticism as a unique theory of academic and social relevance is the inevitable outcome of the ecological exhaustion all over the world as a result of the anthropocentric attitude of the humans that failed to understand, acknowledge and respect the rhythm of the biotic web of life in nature. Need for a separate literary critical genre, to

cope with the alarming depletion and crisis that befell the symbiotic harmony of nature, has been very much in demand since the publication of the epoch-making book, *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson, in 1962. It opened up the floodgate of serious discussions and deliberations on ecological pressures that reached its pinnacle in the twentieth century. Literature could not be silent on the ever-increasing importance of ecological thinking and as a result a new stream of critical genre called Ecocriticism made its entry into the literary arena in the 1970s. Ecocriticism approaches literary texts from an ecological standpoint. It is a way of looking at a literary work to inquire how far the work represents nature in terms of the ecological complexities that emerged out of man's egocentric attitudes. As Susie O'Brien says, ecocriticism is a mode of criticism that understands the "worldliness" of literature in a radically different way (140). Cheryll Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as:

. . . the study of the relationship between literature and 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. (xviii)

It was Joseph W. Meeker who introduced the term "literary ecology" in his work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972). By literary ecology Meeker meant the study of biological themes and relationships reflected in literary works. It is an attempt to discover the roles played by literature in the ecology of the human species. The term ecocriticism was coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978, which coincided with the publication of *Orientalism*, the seminal text on postcolonialism by Edward Said. Rueckert offers a new way of approaching literature from an ecological point of view where the role of literature is taking care of the welfare and survival of man in terms of his relationship with other species and the world



around him. It is against all forces that participate in destroying environment and opposed to any system, “. . . be it multi-national capitalism, architectural postmodernism, or deconstruction, in so far as that system contributes to the homogenization of nature and its creations, be they physical or linguistic” (Bentley 2).

Green criticism is the outcome of man's renewed concern for nature and the environment. It is a literary attitude, which inquires how a literary work treats the fundamental relationships between human culture and the physical world including the earth, water, plants, animals and other objects of nature, which form the basic network of human existence. Barry Commoner lays down the first law of ecology as “Everything is connected to everything else” (qtd. in Glotfelty xix). The term “ecocritics” is derived from the Greek roots *oikos* and *Kritis* meaning house and judge respectively. Hence the term literally means “a person who judges the merits and faults of writing that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action” (Howarth 163). Literature with ecological imprint is significant and inevitable for the continued survival of the planet.

Ecocriticism makes criticism socially relevant as it takes literary criticism beyond the confines of literary academia. As an academic perspective, ecocriticism takes up for discussion a variety of issues of contemporary relevance. Ecocritics primarily create an ambience to discuss ecological, political, religious and cultural issues of social importance on the assumption that all these areas are interrelated and interdependent. For them, problems of nature are the problems of humans and vice versa. Ecologically based criticism helps to redefine the role of humans in the universe and redraws their relationship with nature. Difference in perspectives of nature by men and women writers, the topic of ecological crisis discussed in a text and impact of ecology as a science on a literary work are discussed by ecocritics. The purview of ecocriticism spreads over not only literature but culture in general, including scientific writing, film, TV, art, architecture and other socio-cultural emblems. Green critics think about the possibility of multidisciplinary ecological

discussions across various branches of knowledge like anthropology, psychology, sociology, literature, politics, etc., and re-reading of major literary works from an ecological standpoint. The broad base of ecocriticism is delineated by Richard Kerridge:

The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. (qtd. in Garrard 4)

The emphasis of ecocriticism is on eco-consciousness in literature while that of traditional literary criticism has been on ego-consciousness over the centuries. When the previous literary and cultural theories were founded on the problems of gender, class, race, region, etc., green critics turn their attention to the ecological problems that affect nature and humans alike. Ecocriticism challenges the traditional Western scientific, philosophic and political concepts on account of their “anthropocentric” (human-centred) and “androcentric” (Man/male centered) overtones. It gives prime importance to dissolve the separation that has existed between nature and human beings. Rejecting the Enlightenment notion that humans are at the top of the chain of beings, green theory attempts to bring back down to earth human society with reference to the intrinsic value of the natural world. Criticism is seen going green and organic in the changed literary perception based on ecological issues.

Ecocriticism attempts to give ecological interpretations to literary movements such as Romanticism and Transcendentalism. It receives serious attention in the contemporary discussions with its literary as well as social commitments. It reiterates the relevance of literature as an effective medium to get to the bottom of the ever-increasing global environmental issues. Ecocriticism is a



developing literary theory and therefore its principles are yet to become comprehensive. Redefining the relationship between human culture and the physical world, it has revitalized traditional nature writing, a genre hitherto partially neglected by many critics. The significance of ecocriticism is on the rise since it deals with matters of global concern. Along with ecological activists, green writers make their presence felt in the society to inculcate an environmental awareness into humans to avert an imminent ecological catastrophe. The first step towards the creation of an eco-friendly world is to make people think positively in terms of environmentalism. An innate awareness and consciousness seem to be inevitable for achieving this significant goal. Green writing and critics can contribute considerably to make society develop a new cultural paradigm. A shift in this direction has already begun and as a result green literature is being looked upon not as a mere romantic fancy of writer's wild imagination but as a lively and vibrant area to be considered for the survival of the life support systems on the planet. Taking inspiration from the past, ecocriticism is gradually becoming an important literary critical genre to be carried over to the future generation for the creation of a more ecologically modified world. Ecology-oriented literary criticism looks into the role of nature in shaping the imagination of a cultural community in various spatio-temporal frameworks. It delves into the ethical as well as cultural commitment of a society to nature. Hence the influence of ecocriticism covers different realms of ecological problems confronted by the contemporary world.

### CONCLUSION

Ecocriticism, in short, revalidates a text by bringing out its green dimensions. An ecological approach to literature has become highly significant and essential as it is linked with the survival of the planet. Literature, thus, has an ecological commitment to carry out in the present context of large scale global ecological devastation.

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