

**ECO-CRITICISM, ECO-THEORY AND TEACHING OF LITERATURE**

Noushad PM

*(Department of English, HKRH College, Uthamapalayam, Tamil Nadu.)***ABSTRACT**

The article attempts a brief survey of the eco-critical theory and its relation with teaching of literature. It also examines how eco-criticism differs from the other critical approaches, and examines the difference between green studies' and 'nature studies. Eco-criticism plays a major role in the study of human association with nature. Eco-literature is a kind of literature that uses ecological holism as its ideological basis. Eco-criticism excavates, analyses and criticizes the ecological ideas implied in the literary texts. Eco-criticism combines subjects of ecology, eco-philosophy, ecological ethics and eco-politics etc.

Keywords: *Eco-criticism, Eco-theory, Nature, Literary texts, Eco-literature.*

Author(s) retain the copyright of this article

Copyright © 2018 VEDA Publications

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons

Attribution License 4.0 International License

INTRODUCTION

Eco-criticism and eco-theory explore the relationship that exists between human beings and the natural environment. An eco-critical reading of literary text will usually examines the manners in which human beings and the natural environment interact, influence, and counter each other. Eco-theoretical and eco-critical readings of literary texts tend to focus on how pollution and environmental destruction is examined and considered in literary texts, as well as how humans are depicted as interacting with their natural dwellings, as well as animals, the wilderness, and the earth as a whole. A number of eco-critics and eco-theorists have shown a

special interest in exploring and considering how a number of modern and post-modern writers imagine natural and environmental apocalypses. In terms of literary studies, most eco-theoretical readings of literary texts focus on contemporary and 19th century texts which actively and directly explore the relationship that exist between human beings and the natural world.

THE ORIGIN OF ECO-CRITICISM AND ITS DEFINITION

Eco-criticism emerged as a study of the relationship between literature and the natural environment in the mid 1990. Eco-criticism is a term derived from Greek words *Oikos* and *Kritis*. "Oikos"



means "household", a nexus of humans, nature and the spirit. "Kritis" means judge, "the arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order" (Howarth, 1988: 163). However, their basic concerns being similar, the various approaches generally focus on the relationship between man and the earth. Eco-criticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and arrive at possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation. With its interdisciplinary nature, eco-criticism forms a strange interface between the sciences and the humanities. Eco-criticism was officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works written in the 1990s, *The Eco-criticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Formm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. William Rueckert who coined the term eco-criticism in 1978 in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism", wrote that eco-criticism entailed

"...application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live" (The Eco-criticism Reader, 1996: 107).

HOW ECO-CRITICISM DIFFERS FROM OTHER APPROACHES

The common literary critical analysis presents the external (characters, objects) as the internal (as the elements of the subconscious). Eco-criticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. An eco-critical reading of a literary text is, simply, one which in some way incorporates the kind of issues that have been discussed above. Therefore, a study that gradually shifts from "Inside" to "Outside" is termed Eco-criticism. In contrast to the above, the eco-centered reading focuses on the outside, the house and its environs, rather than the inside (author and his psychology). It uses the ideas of energy, entropy (which is a kind of negative energy within systems which tend towards breakdown and disorganization), and symbiosis (living together, mutually sustaining, co-existing systems). In other words, literary theory examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society - the social sphere.

ECO-CRITICISM, GREEN STUDIES AND NATURE WRITING

According to Peter Barry, eco-criticism began in the USA in the late 1980s and Green studies in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s. Eco-

criticism has existed in the USA for quite a long time, and takes its literary bearing from the 19th century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau. All the three writers are members of the group of New England writers known as the Transcendentalists. Emerson's first short book *Nature* (1836) is a reflective essay on the impact of the natural world upon him often spoken in words of powerful dramatic voice. In this work, Emerson talks about the mystical unity of nature and urges his readers to enjoy a relationship with the environment. Fuller's first book was *Summer on the Lake* (1843), a powerfully written journal of her encounter with the American landscape. Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is an account of his two year stay (1845-47) in a hut he had built on the shore of Walden Pond. The book centers on dropping out of modern society and seeking to renew the self by a 'return to nature'.

GREEN STUDIES

The American idea of the picturesque is rooted in the British aesthetic theory, hence we need to learn about its development in Europe before discussing its influence on the new world. Eco-criticism or Green studies in the United Kingdom take its origins from the American Transcendentalism of the 19840s, and the British Romanticism of the 1790s. Jonathan Bate of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and The Environmental Tradition* (1991) is the founding figure of this new field in Britain. The study on eco-criticism in the United Kingdom is much less extensive than in the United States of America, though the study is introduced in schools of higher education.

Romantic eco-critics examine the ways in which romantic writers and thinkers participated in and responded to the history of ecological science and environmental ethics. A collection of essays by Laurence Coupe, *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanism to Eco-criticism* (2000) shows the evolution of eco-criticism from Romanticism in United Kingdom. And this is given the name "Green Studies" the term "Green Studies" is thus used by the British writers while the American writers use the term "eco-criticism"

NATURE WRITING

The word nature comes via old French from the Latin 'natura'. In the imaginative literature of the 18th century, nature meant the presentation and construction of the actual characters of people corresponding to reality. Since pre-Christian or the Vedic time nature has always been accorded the status of the Great Mother. In Christianity there is



the implication that nature is created for human beings who are her children. Interest in the study of nature writing and in reading literature with a focus on "green" issues grew through the 1980s and by the early 1990s eco-criticism has emerged as a recognizable discipline within the literature departments of the American Universities.

Reviving the romantic sensibility in poetry William Wordsworth chose wild nature as backdrop of his poems. One could say that it was he who pioneered "nature" writing. In Wordsworth, the self communes with nature. Two of the most important works of eco-criticism in the 1990s were the studies of Wordsworth and Shelley. The concerns of "nature writing" are 18th topographical writing the scenic sublime' and the "countryside".

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE

Eco-critics reject the notion that everything is socially or linguistically constructed. For eco-critics nature really exists, out there beyond us. There have been set-piece confrontations on this issue and some of the most heated exchanges have taken place between the American Wordsworth critic Alan Liu and various eco-critics, including Jonathan Bate and Terry Gifford. The issue of the social and linguistic construct of reality has tended to generate confusion. It is a fact that attitudes to nature vary, some of the variations are culturally determined.

ECO-CRITICISM - TEACHING OF LITERATURE

Eco-critics re-read the text from an eco-centric perspective and identify the natural world. They apply a range of eco-centric concepts, using them of things other than the natural world - such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources. They give special canonical emphasis to writers who foreground nature as major part of their subjects. They extend the range of literary critical practice, reflecting topographical material such as essays, travel writing, memories, and regional literature. They turn away from the 'social constructivism' and 'linguistic' determinism to ecocentric values of ethical responsibility.

HOW TO EVALUATE A TEXT

Lawrence Buell suggests four criteria for evaluating a text for its environmental consciousness:

1. The non-human dimension is an actual presence in the text and not merely a facade - thus implying that human and non-human worlds are integrated.
2. The human interest is not privileged over everything else.

3. The text shows humans as accountable to the environment and shows any actions they perform which damage the eco-system.
4. Environment is the process rather than a static condition.

Eco-critics investigate such things as the underlying ecological values, what precisely is meant by the world nature, and whether the examination of "place" should be distinctive, category, much like class, gender or race.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester : Manchester UP, 2002.
- [2]. Buell, Laurence. *The Environmental Imagination*. Cambridge : Harvard UP, 1995.
- [3]. Glotfelty, Cheryl. *Introduction. The Ecocriticism Reader : Landmarks In Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens U of Georgia Press, 1996.
- [4]. Howarth, William. "Country Books, City Writers : America's Rural Literature." *National Rural Studies committee : A Proceedings*. Hood River, Ore., 24-25, May 1988 : 11-21.
- [5]. Rueckert, William. "Literature and Ecology : An Experiment in Ecocriticism." *The Ecocriticism Reader : Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens U of Georgia P, 1996. 105-123.