

**ECOCRITICISM: A SURVEY**

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Ecocriticism is a literary critical branch emerging in the late 1970s attempted to explore the relationship between literature and environment. It attempts to reread major canonical literature by applying ecocentric and ecosystem related concepts to the same. The basic approach is to try to read literary works from the perspective of nature. It analyses human culture by positing it in comparison to the history of the natural world. The ecocritics are enthusiastically concerned over certain issues, such as: the role of the physical setting of a literary work; the metaphor of land or place; the connection between ecosystem and ecological literature. They prioritize the British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists. Instead of traditional nature poetry they focus on a special kind of literary genre called Eco-poetry: which forms a tone of reconnection towards nature and protest against anti-ecological activities. Ecocriticism examines the issue how far literature can reach to the point of ecological activism, by converting poetry into potential ecological tool.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Nature, Culture, Ecosystem, Romanticism, Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism.*

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Man has done enough damage to the earth. Yet we are hardly serious in perceiving the irreversible and impending doom to be brought about by a fatal ecological disorder. Apart from occasional buzz, no global and fitting response has emanated to counter the aggravated situation of environmental crisis. Despite our eco-social indifference the problems are many, ever-growing and aporetic: the discourse over the conflicting issues regarding climate change, pollution, global warming, over-population has become stale and exhausted in academia and equally futile and ineffective when it comes to offer any drastic resolution in the public domain. Yet we cannot gainsay that all these are the genuine outcome of man's ironical tendency to possess and preside over the planet. We have taken so much liberty in 'depth and destructiveness' (Clark 1) that to become oblivious of our 'roots of being in the earth' (Fromm 35), the ecological balance is dangerously precarious. 'Everything is connected to everything else' (Barry Commoner's phrase qtd. in Glotfelty xix), that is, they exist in 'interdependence' (ASLE web); if man inflicts painful alterations in the non-human world nature is sure to retaliate. Richard Llewellyn in *How Green Was My Valley* (1939) beautifully summarizes the extant of man's rootedness to earth:

There is patience in the Earth to allow us to go into her, and dig, and hurt with tunnels and shafts, and if we put back the flesh we have torn from her and so make good what we have weakened, she is content to let us bleed her. But when we take and leave her weak . . . she has a soreness and an anger . . . So she waits for us, and finding us, bears down, makes us part of her, flesh of her flesh, with our clay in place of the clap we thoughtlessly have smelled away. (445)

Indeed, the falsity of man's approach to nature, effected by exploitation, consumerism and capitalism and the notion of mindless progress, are at the base of all environmental hazards. Nature has given man liberal space, man misappropriated it; nature offered livelihood, man reduced it as mere

resource; the earth asserted 'interdependent community' (Glotfelty xx), man wanted 'dominion' (Lynn White Jr's term, qtd in Clark 1); the result is unbridgeable rupture and fractured bonding. The situation is made further antagonistic by modern science which at the sametime distances man from the outside world and disturbs the 'pre-existing web of relations' (143) in nature; Jane Bennet mourns this authoritative stance of human science: ". . . this pre-modern world gave way to forces of scientific and instrumental rationality, secularism, industrialism, and the bureaucratic state – all of which, combined, disenchant the world" (ibid.). But the palpable and dualistic nexus of man with nature has its roots in the very anthropocentric foundation of human civilization. Many critics held that the Bible's privileging of man and its consequent trivialization of the external world as resources to 'exploit for his proper ends' (White Jr. 10) are at the root of all present environmental crisis. Naturally the Euro-centric materialistic world view in its mad pursuit of worldly progress, coupled with the dominant ideology of enlightenment rationalism further marginalized nature, orienting man into a superior position compared to Nature and by foregrounding the validity of the rational (Descarthian – *cogito ergo sum* – 'I think therefore I am'). These essentialist, humanist elements gained tremendous ascendancy with the industrialization which impaired forever any chance, if at all, of man's reentering into a pre-lapsarian serene relationship with the natural world. The mechanization of man's life with its predominately automatized, authoritative, manipulative, exploitative outlook led to 'The Death of Nature' (referring to the title of Carolyn Merchant's 1980 volume). This industrial, knowledge-based ('knowledge' in the Focculdian sense), man-centric world witnesses both physical and cultural alienation of man from his environment; which in its turn poses certain arbitrary binary oppositions, like – Nature/Culture, Reason/Instinct, Man/Woman, Body/Mind etc. in order to legalize man's taming and domestication of the non-human mass. Further, culture advocates such a utilitarian principle that threatens the intrinsic value of everything excepting in reference to man. Man's language also played pivotal role in 'naturalizing' (qtd. in Barry 253) the



anthropocentric conquest over the repressed 'other' (read it with its postcolonial implications). Kate Rigby offers insightful commentaries: "Culture constructs the prism through which we know nature. We begin to internalize this prism from the moment we learn to speak; the moment, that is, that we are introduced into the *logos*, the world as shaped by language" (web). Nature is thus robbed of its inherent significance and is subverted as a mere 'cultural and linguistic construct' ("always already' textualized into 'discourse'", P. Barry 252). During the Romantic era which strongly reacted against industrial rationalism, renewed vigour for restoring normalcy in man-nature relationship and a mode of reconciliatory communication had been developed through the 'contemplation of immanent nature' (Waugh 541) and 'reabsorption of (the) observing self into nature' (ibid). But the Romantics generally provoked escapism: their over reliance on 'momentary epiphany' (ibid); their overbearing stress on subjectivity could not produce any permanent solution to the environmental impasse; moreover, they remained strangely oblivious of the ecologically threatened zones and more serious environmental issues. Here in comes the need for a well-poised, egalitarian environmental ethics which would combine, 'romantic imagination' (C. M. Bowra's volume is coincidentally so titled) with scientific precision: fusion of literary idealism with ecological facts, philosophical sensibility with biological subtleties and perspectives of dependence among various ecological niches will be conducive 'to develop ecological visions which can be translated into social, economic, political and individual programs of action' (Rueckert 108).

Ecocriticism as literary and cultural study emerged not simply as an academic reaction to theorize complex environmental issues but it is a semi-cultural, semi-ecological response to connect literature and literary studies to the processes of nature, so that to make people conscious about the ensuing ecological catastrophe promoted and sponsored by unrestrained capitalism, mindless exploitation, industrial pollution, contamination and ecocide. The basic definition provided by Cheryl Glotfelty, one of the initiator of this theoretical movement is that 'Ecocriticism is the study of the

relationship between literature and the physical environment' (xviii). Latter on with modifications and improvisations it comes to suggest a branch of critical and interdisciplinary study from environmentalist viewpoint, being aware of the man-made damage on earth; and with a motive of addressing and understanding contemporary ecological degradation. The term "Ecocriticism" first appeared in William Rueckert's eponymously titled essay – "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). Ecocriticism as a movement proper is institutionally American, the initiators being Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm who jointly produced the edited volume – *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), considered as the seminal and founding text for ecocriticism. "The Association for the study of Literature and Environment" (ASLE) with their progressive journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)* attempted to inculcate ecocritical thoughts in American mind and so establish its parameters and doctrines. However, Lawrence Buell observes that there is lack of alliance and unanimity among the ecocritics, so we have another variant of this theoretical school in the British version of "Green Studies" of which the definitive volume is *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000), edited by Laurence Coupe. The American trend burgeoning in the 1980s flourished soon, while the British version emerging in the 1990s was slow to develop¹. Peter Barry observes – "the American writing to be 'celebratory' in tone whereas the British variant tends to be more 'minatory', that is, it seeks to warn us of environmental threats . . ." (251).

Lawrence Buell who was against any segregated treatment of environmental issues, considering them as much material and of the physical world as they are socio-cultural or political-ideological, while defining ecocriticism partly continues Glotfelty's dictum but specifies it keeping in mind its ever-growing interdisciplinarity:

. . . 'ecocriticism' as (a) study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis . . . if one thinks of it . . . as a multiform



inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives more expressive of concern to explore environmental issues searchingly than of fixed dogmas about political solutions, then the neologism becomes a useful omnibus term for subsuming a large and growing scholarly field.

(Buell 1995 420)

His reflexions on 'dual accountability' (qtd. in Speek web), that is a text's presentation of the physical reality along with internal 'discursive meditation' (ibid) opens up new horizons in the field of ecocriticism, by connecting imagination and its mirroring on the text to the real, physical world. But he was keenly apprehensive that ecocritical canon should neither be much skeptical nor be too liberal in its inclusion of texts and various forms of writings. Laurence Coupe, however, taking cue from Aldo Leopold's 'land ethics' (Coupe 45) and Jhan Hochman's 'differentiation' (ibid) argues that "Green studies makes no sense unless its formulation of theory contributes to the struggle to preserve the 'biotic community'" and further clarifies that – 'green studies debates nature in order to defend nature' (ibid). Coupe meditates over an ecological justice which will be infused with empathy for all beings and concerned with the biosphere as a whole entity. The proposed green study would challenge industrial logic of capitalism and also insist upon the inherent worth of the non-human world. Richard Kerridge's venture that – "The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear . . . 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), is however often sharply contested as 'monolithic' (ibid.); many critics doubt his perception of the environment as any fixed entity. At its primary stage ecocriticism faces the challenge of being confined exclusively to the so called nature-writing school. Their over emphasis on the British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists led to their narrow scope and

segregated concern. Scott Slovic duly apprehends the matter and widens the range of ecocritical thoughts:

. . . the study of explicit environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the non-human world. (Coupe 160)

His contention is that ecocritical strategies can be applied to any literary work and there is no text markedly outside the ecocritical compass, but Slovic is also aware of ecocriticism as having 'no central dominant doctrine or theoretical apparatus' (161).

The latter aspect has been taken up by William Howarth who laments the absence of any central canon in the sphere of ecocriticism, and criticizes the ecocritics for being too obvious and for their stereotypical stance in applying 'similar rubrics such as Landscape, Place, Region, Urban, Rural, Nature, and Environment' (82). He thoroughly explores several disciplines like language and criticism, ecology and ethics, natural sciences and social sciences, geography and history in order to settle the primary goals of an ecocritic who compunctiously "judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers and reversing their harm through political action" (69). In the introduction to the edited volume *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster refer to John Elder's definition of nature writing as 'a form of personal reflective essay grounded in . . . the natural world . . . also open to the spiritual meaning and intrinsic value of nature' (qtd. in 2) and advocated that –

. . . one of ecocriticism's most important tasks at this time is expanding its boundaries beyond these topics to address a wider spectrum of texts . . . including ecocritical approaches to multicultural literature; African American fiction; green cultural



studies; urban environments and urban nature; environmental justice; the natural world in early America; postmodernism and the environment; and nature and religion. (ibid.)

So, with the changing scenario of the environmental degradation the field of ecocriticism has become pluralistic, diversified and multidimensional. Ecocriticism undoubtedly produced environmental consciousness and revitalized our zeal for nature writing but at the sametime the movement remained narrow, parochial and essentially white wilderness movement. But with Jonathan Bate's encouragement of the idea – that colonialism often promoted deforestation – ecological thoughts are considered to be employed to expose the injustice related with race, gender, poverty in environmental terms. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin carried out extensive research on the alliances and complicity of postcolonial and environmental issues in their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*: they surveyed the euro-centric environmental ethics and practices, like 'ecological imperialism' (3), 'environmental racism' (4), 'biocolonization' (5), 'ecological Indian' (ibid.) etc and prescribes a 'green postcolonialism' (their own term 2):

What the postcolonial/ecocritical alliance brings out, above all, is the need for a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals and environment – one that requires attention, in turn, to the cultural politics of representation as well as to those more specific 'processes of mediation' . . . that can be recuperated for anti-colonial critique. (12)

ⁱ Peter Barry, 248-71. For these minute details I am grateful to Barry's volume. Although Rueckert is much credited for being the first to use the term 'Ecocriticism', Joseph Meeker in his 1972 volume *The Comedy of Survival* used 'literary ecology' to refer to 'the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works' (Glotfelty xix).

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