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ECOCRITISISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

During the turn of century environment has emerged as a great threat to human beings as well as the earth. Attention of the writers is thus drawn towards the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity. This concern and it's reflection in literature has given rise to paradigm shift in literary world as theory of Ecocriticism evolved strongly. Ecocriticism functions as a tool that draws the attentions of the world to crucial environmental issues through analysis of literature. Ecocriticism draws attention of literary world to human responsibility towards our environment of which all human beings are an integral part. In the simplest possible terms, 'Eco Criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.' It was proposed by the pioneer or the father of this theory in the USA, Cheryll Glotfelty. The study of nature as presented in the pieces of literature is what that has been the playground of the people concerned with this rather new movement in literary theories.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Modernisation, Ecocritic, Urbanisation, Environmental Movement, Environmental ethics

AIM OF THE PAPER

The aim of this paper is to highlight how nature writing plays a significant role in depicting the beauty of nature, portraying the significance of the elements of nature and narrating how the various elements contribute for the well-being of humans. The paper highlights ecocritics as distinct breed of literary movement who being interested in nature have started to write about the impact of human activities on nature and the elements of nature with a purpose to create awareness about the conservation of the environment or to caution the readers about the impending dangers awaiting them. In consonance with spirit of ecocriticism, authors have expressed concern for nature which has been exploited by human beings in the name of civilisation, urbanisation and modernisation and how the detrimental effects of humans' exploitation of nature directly affect human life and living space.

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ECOCRITICISM

Literature is a written record of the thoughts and feelings of creative minds. Fiction writers reflect society and deal with social issues in their works. Writers have been writing about nature and the elements of nature down through the ages. Human beings, in their hard chase to improve their standard of living, have brought in irreparable damages to the environment. Creative writers gave shape for the environmental movement. The environmental movement paved the way for ecocriticism, as a movement and as a literary theory. Ecocritical theory investigates the relationship between human activities and the natural world, particularly in terms of the influence of each upon the other. It pleads for a better understanding of nature, and it interprets and represents the natural world. It seeks to protect the ecological rights of nature. "Ecocriticism," is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment which takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies". Ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere.

Eco-Critics put all the weight on the 'nature' and believe that nature exists as a force which affects our evolution directly as a society. For the intellectuals involved in the development of 'green studies' the world is not (only, if not entirely) made of language and social 'elements'. They tend to bring out the part which nature plays – either in writings or in general purview. However, as it entered into the field of literary theory, a part bifurcated and established itself as solely devoted wing concerned with the (re)reading of literary texts and bringing out the role of nature, representation of nature and natural elements in the literature produced worldwide. It's a fact that the major foci of green studies intellectuals are the regional literature of different places as we know it contains a lot of fusion of nature.

They don't simply give importance and read the literature from an ecocentric perspective. They look for the natural representation, no doubt, but, in rather a larger perspective. Life in proportion to nature, human civilization along with nature, importance of natural resources in our lives, our deeds which harm the ecological balance, wars and their adverse effect on our society, and many other things come within the purview of an ecocentric reading of literature. As rightly observed by Peter Barry: "The ecocentric reading, by contrast, focuses outside, on the house and its environs, rather than the inside, on the owner and his psychology."

Ecocriticism actually launches a call to literature to connect to the issues of today's environmental crisis. Literature is thus, on the one hand, a sensorium for what goes wrong in a society, for the biophobic, life-paralyzing implications of one-sided forms of consciousness and civilizational uniformity, and it is, on the other hand, a medium of constant cultural self-renewal, in which the neglected biophilic energies can find a symbolic space of expression and of (re-)integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourtesies. In other words, ecocriticism is directly concerned with both nature (natural landscape) and the environment (landscape both natural and urban). But the attempt to synthesize natural phenomena with literary criticism raises conceptual problems, because ecology itself is an abstract concept that emerged in a historical process of academic formation. Relying on the ontological argument of ecology that everything is connected to everything else, ecocriticism seeks to study what John Bennet calls, "a multiorganismic concept" symbolically.

The growing number of ecologically informed critical studies, however, signals the necessity to develop an ecological or environmental criticism in the profession of the humanities, as well as to bring ecological consciousness to the practice of literary criticism. Today more and more young academics respond to the global environmental crisis by turning to the new field of literary ecology. Thus, the ecological investigations and interpretations of the relationship between nature and culture, toward formulating ecologically informed critical principles in literary criticism and theory, inevitably lead to an ecologically oriented critical approach. As a result, ecocriticism arrives with the promise of offering a unique combination of literary and natural scientific discourses. This new eco-theory responds to the global ecological crisis and addresses important environmental issues, specifically by examining values, in literary texts, with deep ecological implications. Ecocriticism, then, takes an earth-centered approach to literature, and an ecological approach to literary criticism. Ecocriticism mainly concentrates on how literature interacts with and participates in the entire ecosphere.

Literature can be perceived as an aesthetically and culturally constructed part of the environment, since it directly addresses the questions of human constructions, such as meaning, value, language, and imagination, which can, then, be linked to the problem of ecological consciousness that humans need to attain. Within this framework, ecocritics are mainly concerned with how literature transmits certain values contributing to ecological thinking. A vision of nature as a self-articulating subject refutes nature/culture dualism inherent in our thinking towards a consciousness of humans valuing both nature and culture in their diversity. However, the assumption that nature speaks for itself creates a discursive problem in literary texts, for it is again the human subject speaking for nature in a paradoxical attempt to overcome the human/ nonhuman divide within the discourse itself. Despite such problematic paradoxes, ecocritics recognize the need for reconstructing nature, not as the other excluded from the realm of discourse, but as a subject which requires a non-dualistic perception and interpretation from a human position. A dialogue with nature is not possible in linguistic terms, but constructing a new mode of understanding and perception that surpasses, if not eliminates, nature/culture dichotomy is. An ecocritical attempt to deconstruct the privileged human subjectivity in its dialogue with the language of nature might create a sustainable ecological vision in the reading and writing of literature. .

While ecocritics study literature written throughout history and analyze its relationship to the environment, most scholarship has focused on American and British literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The nineteenth century especially saw a number of developments in literature that ecocritics view as significant. American and British Romantic writers took a particular interest in nature as a subject; Victorian realists wrote about industrialization, which was changing the natural landscape; explorers and natural historians began to write about newly encountered places and wildlife; and pioneers and other travelers wrote of their experiences with an emphasis on setting. Probably the defining work of nature writing, and the ecologically oriented work that has been the subject of most literary analysis, is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). This classic of American literature is a poetic narrative describing the two months the author lived in a small cabin in the woods near Walden Pond, in Massachusetts. In his work, Thoreau observes all around him with a keen eye and a philosophical spirit, describing the ordinary but remarkable creatures and happenings he encounters in the natural world and discussing the meaning of living in harmony with nature and one's soul. Some critics have argued that the American tradition of nature writing stems from Thoreau's masterpiece. Another landmark American nonfiction work about nature was Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836). This essay is the writer's statement on the principles of the philosophy of Transcendentalism, which he describes as “a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles

than those of carpentry and chemistry.” In this work, Emerson talks about the mystical unity of nature and urges his readers to enjoy a relationship with the environment. Other American writers of the period whose work has been seen as important by ecocritics include William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke Paulding, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and a number of minor writers who wrote stories about the Wild West. Some scholars have pointed out that much of the focus of ecocriticism has been nature writing by white men. They note that the response toward the landscape is far different in works by African-Americans (such as Frederick Douglass), Native Americans, and women. A related but distinct field of literary study, ecofeminist literary criticism, examines the representations of nature by women and reveals how they often overturn dominant male images and attitudes toward the environment.

Nineteenth-century American naturalists and explorers are often credited by ecocritics as having initiated the conservation movement. These writers differ from “literary” authors because their work focuses more on scientific descriptions and speculations about nature. However, as many critics have shown, their writings are imbued with a poetic spirit that makes their ideas accessible to lay readers. In Britain, in the nineteenth century, the Romantic poets reacted strongly against the eighteenth-century emphasis on reason and sought new ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings. William Wordsworth, considered by many to be the spokesman of the movement, celebrates the beauty and mystery of nature in some of his most famous lyrics, including “Michael” (1800), which portrays a simple shepherd who is deeply attached to the natural world around him. Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude* (1850) records the poet's evolving understanding of nature, and *The Excursion* (1814) is a long philosophical reflection on the relationship of humanity and nature. The poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley also includes emotional descriptions of the natural world and features some of the best-known nature verse in English. Shelley's “Ode to the West Wind,” to cite one example, has been called the most inspired lyrical poem describing nature in the English language. The Romantic interest in nature is particularly significant to ecocritics because these poets were revolutionary in their politics, and the preservation of the natural world was one element of their radical thinking. A Romantic poet who used his understanding of nature to protest against the new capitalist machinery was John Clare, who, unlike the others, was himself a laborer and worked on the land. Victorian essayists who wrote about nature include John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, both of whom lamented the destruction of the environment due to industrialization.

While ecocriticism had its official beginnings as a discipline in the 1990s, important critical essays that fall into the ecocritical mold appeared as early as the 1800s, many of them responding to works

by writers such as Thoreau and Emerson. These works examines the tension between the “pastoral” and “progressive” ideals that characterized early nineteenth-century American culture and is considered a classic text in American studies. Such pioneering works show that ecologically oriented criticism is not a new phenomenon but, like the literature it analyzes, is a response to the urgent issues of the day. As critics have pointed out, one of the reasons that ecocriticism continues to grow as a discipline is the continued global environmental crisis. Ecocriticism aims to show how the work of writers concerned about the environment can play some part in solving real and pressing ecological concerns.

Conclusion

Ecocriticism does enable the critic to examine the textualizations of the physical environment in literary discourse itself, and to develop an earth-centered approach to literary studies. In this case, crossing of the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman spheres would enable the ecocritic to analyze the ways in which an ecological vision is addressed or subverted in literary texts. In such ecocritical approaches the use of literary and ecological discourses would inevitably create a rich cross-fertilization when interconnections between the natural sciences and literary studies are laid bare.

Ecocritical approach, then, is one that attempts to transcend the duality of art and life, human and the natural, and to work along the principle of interconnections between them. Establishing an ethical and aesthetic ground towards a renewed understanding of both literature and ecology is the purpose behind. In this respect, ecocriticism offers a unique fusion of literary, scientific, ecological and philosophical perspectives

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