



ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN JOHN KEATS'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

John Keats's three major poems: "Ode to a Nightingale" "Ode on a Grecian Urn" "To Autumn" show the poet's concern for the ecological balance. These poems show the concern to nature conservation. The relation between natural and real world is such that both effect and get affected. "Ode to a Nightingale" has got the energy related to nature as stored in the poem. The imaginative ecosystem of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is larger than a piece of descriptive biology. "To Autumn" presents the sense of fullness, richness, and heaviness of the autumn season. All the animals, birds and insects are living in interdependent networks in his poems. Only in the presence of various species the world regenerates itself. Keats's imagination is not simply a retreat from the world rather it is a new way of comprehending the world i.e. wilderness in imagination. Whatever else Keats's poems are concerned with, the creativity of perception, the uses of memory and restorative power of imagination, they make no sense unless concede the existence of a certain kind of flowers, trees, insects, birds, animals and human beings in these poems. Keats generates internal drive to readers to respect and conserve nature.

Key Words: Ecology, wilderness, landscape, organic unity, nature, culture

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a new subfield of literary and cultural enquiry that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, devoted to the investigation of relations between literature and the natural

world and to the rediscovery and reinterpretation of 'nature writings'. Literary texts are examined on the basis of earth centred approach. The physical setting, nature, metaphors related to land, human-kind's relationship to the natural world and the sense of wilderness are the major concerns of ecocriticism. It relates nature to culture on the basis of fundamental premise that human culture affects nature and gets affected by nature.

Ecocriticism expands the notion of the world to encompass the entire ecosphere. This theory shows the interconnections between nature and culture specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. It shows connection between land and literature negotiating between beings and things.

Howarth (1996, p.69) analyzes the etymological meaning of the word 'ecocritics' in the essay "Some Principles of Ecocriticism":

'Eco' and 'critic' both derive from Greek, Oikos and Kritis and in tandem they mean "house judge", which may surprise many lovers of green, outdoor writing. A long-winded gloss on eco critic might run as follows: "a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating the despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action.

In this sense, an eco critic is one who likes to see the widest home in good order and maintain the original decor. Howarth highlights how ecocritics value the relationship between culture and nature, the former having damaging effect upon the latter. Ecocritical writing has to deal with the effect of human activities upon the nature. According to critics, the term ecocriticism was possibly first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". Rueckert makes an assertion about ecocriticism:

Specifically, I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future world we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years. (Fromm and Glotfelty 107)

Though the term was invented during 1970s, a few works of literary criticism related to environment and ecology were written even before. In Britain Raymond William's "The Country and the City" (1973) and in the USA Annette Kolodny's "The Lay of the Land"

(1975) informed the environmentalist concepts and their awareness about environment. Kolodny's work dealt with the study of the literary metaphor of landscape as female. In 1985 Fredrick O. Waage edited " *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods Resources,*" which included course descriptions from different scholars related to environmental concern and awareness in literature. In 1989 Alicia Nitecki founded *The American Nature Writing Newsletter*, whose purpose was to present the writings on nature and environment. Then some universities began to include environmental studies in curricula. During the early 1990s, environmental literature began to be the subject for discussion in literary conferences and seminars. The establishment of Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992 marked the bed rock for the development of Ecocriticism. Ecological literary study emerged as a recognizable critical school in the mid. 1990s. The twenty years period after the invention of the term ecocriticism, consolidated it as a critical approach.

Abrams (2009, p.71) defines ecocriticism, "Ecocriticism was a term coined in the late 1970s by combining "criticism" with a shortened form of "ecology" - the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical in habitats".

Abram's definition values the relation between literature and the physical environment. Human activities have caused the damage to the environment and we need to be aware of its long term result and effect. What is equally important is the physical habitats in which not only human beings but also animals and insects live. Ecocriticism deals with this sense of awareness.

Richard Kerridge (as cited in Waugh 2006, p.530) in the essay "Environmentalism and Ecocriticism" defines ecocriticism, "Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist view point. Texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects. Beliefs and ideologies are assessed for their environmental implications".

Kerridge is a critique of nature/ culture binary which he thinks is mutually exclusive. Human experience of the natural environment is conditioned by the culture in which people are brought up. The global ecological crisis is the result of the damaging effect of human activities. Various cultural developments are not found to be ecofriendly.

Pope (1996, p.160) views that ecology is the study of the interrelated human as well as natural systems. "Ecology, meanwhile is concerned with an integrated, notionally holistic

view of human - natural systems, even though at any point in time or space these systems - whether nominally organic or mechanical - are seen to be open and evolving” .

He has highlighted the network of pattern relationship among human and natural systems. Once this system gets disturbed, there lies ecological imbalance which results crisis because not only organic but also mechanical things go on evolving.

Lawrence (as cited in Waugh 2001, p.537) in the essay "The environmental Imagination" has set out a rough checklist of criteria to determine how far a work is environmentally oriented:

1. The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.

Till 1980s Western philosophy was anthropocentric that is to say, philosophers centred around the interests of human beings treating them as superior to nature and natural things. Consequently, they freely used natural resources and animal species for their self gratification. Anthropocentrism placed humanity at the centre of everything viewing that human beings should have dominion over the nature and other creatures of the earth. Ecocriticism emerged during 1990s as a counter balance to anthropocentrism.

As a critical stance, ecocriticism has one foot in literature and the other on land, as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. The ecocritics recommend for the analysis of the implications of a text for environmental concerns. They voice for the “green reading” to prose fiction and poetry foreshadowing the chain of dependency that links even the creatures that seem most distant from each other.

Lohani (2008, p.208) in the poem “Gaia” writes:

The searing wild among the withered palms-
The devouring rain-
The sea with its cavernous frothy mouth-
The crooked beak of a mountain peak-

Time plucks at the world
On its grey gaunt wings-
The smell of Mildew
Shrouds the house-
Turbulence and hunger
All around-
Yet-
She endures .

The speaker wonders upon the devastating activities of human beings. Different fragmented things are going in different direction differently. The physical impression and multiple earthly manifestations undergo change along time but the mother earth remains as she is enduring all these transgressions and transformations. Treating the earth as mother image, he presents how the earth is shrouded with rotten smells, turbulence and hunger. Despite these destructive activities along time, the earth keeps on enduring the hardships. We have to respect the earth to live smoothly, happily and peacefully.

To sum up, ecocriticism values the interconnections between human being and the ecosphere, environmental crisis and literature. Unless people begin to realize the direct relation between human being and physical world, it is impossible to minimize the environmental problems. Since language stores and transfers energy, literary writing as well should contain the environmental implication from every aspect.

Ecological Awareness in Keats's Poetry

John Keats uses the poetry as the grounds upon which the two communities: the human and the natural co-exist, cooperate and flourish in the biosphere. His poems "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and " To Autumn" seem to be in themselves ever living in exhaustible sources of stored energy whose relevance does not derive solely from their capacity to remain active and go on with the work of energy transfer, to continue to function as an energy pathway that sustains life and the human community. The more one thinks about them the more one realizes the importance of nature.

Critics have valued John Keats for his use of images symbols and ideas. Different critics have evaluated him interims of different aspects taking him as a romantic poet.

Romantic Movement was a genuinely creative artistic force to opt for withdrawal with the manifestation of the beauty of nature. In this context, Abram (2009 p.186) comments:

It is a mistake, however, to describe the romantic poets as simply "nature poets". While many major poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge- and to a great extent by Shelley and Keats- set out from and return to an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape, the outer scene is not presented for its own sake but as a stimulus for the poet to engage in the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking.

Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats valued the beauty of the landscape. The poems seem to be stimulated by natural phenomena. But romantic poets are not simply nature poets rather they make the readers go beyond the outer scene of the earth. Along with this they stimulate to rethink about the anthropocentric human activity and its effect on ecosystem. Calling John Keats the second generation Romantic poet Daiches (2001 p.915). says:

He was worn better than Shelley because, for all the indulgent luxuriance of his imagery he developed a self- discipline in both feelings and craftsmanship to which Shelley never attained. He is "Romantic" in his relish of sensation, his feeling for the Middle Ages, his Hellenism (very different from Shelley's) his conception of the role of the poet, but the synthesis he made of these elements was very much his own .

Nearly all the romantic writings and especially Keats's works invoked through the use of images and symbols the submerged awareness of ecological balance despite the borrowings of different ideas from different sources. Culture has often fed like a parasite upon nature and never entered into a reciprocating energy transfer and into a recycling relationship with the biosphere. But John Keats appeals through the poems to value healthy environment in which creative imagination is possible. As nature circulates nourishing ingredients life sustains and reciprocal relationship continues.

Energy Pathway in Ode to Nightingale.

The energy that Keats employs comes not from language but from creative imagination. It is so because language is only the vehicle to store and transfer energy. Energy flows from the poet's language and creative imagination into the poem and thence from the poem into the reader. Reading the poem is clearly an energy transfer as the energy stored in

the poem is released and flows back into the language centres and creative imagination of the readers. Poems are the green plants among us for they clearly arrest energy on its path to entropy and in so doing, not only raise matters from lower to higher order but help to create a self-perpetuating and evolving system.

In "Ode to a Nightingale", John Keats treats the Nightingale's song as an epitome of nature.

"Tis not through envy of thy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness-
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadow numberless
Singst of summer in full-throated ease. (253)

The nightingale's song intoxicated Keats. He calls the bird the nymph of the forest singing profusely and effortlessly in the garden with beech trees. It is the beauty of the nature that provides solace from the outlawed feelings. The annual grape gathering scene is the real scene. 'Flood' the mythological allusion that the poet has used in completely related to the energy store in the poem and energy transfer to the reader.

And happily the Queen Moon is on her throne
Clustered around by all her starry fays
But here there is no light
Save what from heaven in with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms winding mossy ways (254)

By drawing a very graphic picture of the canopy of trees, branches and leaves and of the Queen-Moon and her fairy attendants, Keats has shown a refined ecological conscience and consciousness. This poem acts as the store house of the beauty of biosphere in which warm emotion and lofty imagination activate. Keats identifies himself with the life of the moment that becomes eternal. The music of the bird passes into his open soul and comes out in tones which defy the challenge of death. It means, ecological balance encompasses the human beings since they are the tiny parts of nature.

John Keats further develops the poem showing his love for nature, his fondness for flowers, and his delicate sense of smell which can distinguish each flower even without seeing them.

Wherewith the seasonable moth endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit tree wild.
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine
Fast fading violets covered up in leaves. (254)

Through these lines, the poet penetrates into the secret realm of nature over which hangs sweet fragrance of all kinds. "White hawthorn", "eglantine", "fast fading violets" and "humming bees" are the natural things and beings. The beauty of the nature has been stored using language which in turn gets transformed to the readers. He shows that human community should be in harmony with the community of nature.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Wilderness in Imagination.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" was written after the composition of "Ode to the Nightingale" and shares with it both a pre-occupation with the difference between ideal and actual experience and a poetic flight from the mundane. The poet paints the picture of an imaginative world advocating the notion that non-human world is as important as human world and ever remaining beauty is possible only in wilderness.

The sense of wilderness can be found in the line "What leaf-fingered legend haunts about thy shape". The phrase "leaf-fringed" suggests romantic and sensuous world. Further Keats paints picture in the imaginative artistic world:

Fair youth beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can these trees be bare. (256)

In the picture painted through words, Keats imagines a beautiful world. People who reside in houses are tamed. People "beneath the trees" are more swift and beautiful. He envisions the primitive world picture in which people have not yet begun to settle in the houses. The presentation of the yearning for the wild is further justified through the line "...nor ever can these trees be bare". When nature remains, human life remains with beauty. Trees inflict freshness to youth that moves them fair. Keats's wilderness in imaginative in the poem has been further justified through the following lines:

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring Adieu (256)

The imaginative ecosystem of these lines is larger than a piece of descriptive biology. All good things are wild and free. The sensuous, free and wild thinking of the poem attracts the readers. The nature that Keats presents is fresh and natural which mesmerizes the senses.

The use of memory and the restorative power of imagination makes no sense unless we concede the existence of a certain kind of trees and flowers. The poet presupposes the existence of ever remaining wilderness. This concept is intensified through the line, "Beauty is truth-truth beauty", -that is all.

The Organic Community in "To Autumn"

"Ode to Autumn" was composed on September 19, 1819. In one of his letters to Fanny Keats, he confesses his love for nature. Jonathan Bate comments about Keats:

The measure of human happiness, Keats suggests, is not a matter of government decree is not determined by the high politics of Fat Louis and Fat Regent to whom he refers dismissively later in the same letter. There are more basic necessities: good weather, clean water to wash and bathe in, unpolluted air in which to exercise (257).

The poem entitled "To Autumn" begins with the description of autumn.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness.

Close bosom friend of the maturing sun,

Conspiring with him how to load and bless.

With fruit vines that round the thatch eaves run (257)

Mist and fruitfulness, bosom-friend and sun, load and bless are not naturally linked pairs in the manner of bread and butter. One would expect the yoking of them to have the element of surprise. But Keats makes the links seem natural. The progression of one thing to another through the poem contains a well regulated eco system precisely because Keats has intuitive understanding of the underlying law of community ecology. The poem presents the links within the biosphere. Flower and bee, the food-chain that associates gnat and swallow and even listens the hedge-crickets.

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn.

Among the river shallows borne aloft

or sinking as light wind lives or dies

And full grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn

Hedge-crickets sing and now with treble soft

The red-breast whistles from garden-croft (257)

Keats describes the sense of fullness, richness and heaviness in the autumn. Gnats, shallows, lambs, hedge-crickets and red-breast harmoniously live having interdependent

networks. The poem is larger than an image of agribusiness. Agribusiness sprays the cornfields with pesticides impatient of poppies and gnats. "To Autumn listens to birds, hedge-crickets and bees. The bees in the poem are to pollinate flowers not to produce honey for human beings to consume. Weather is the means of linking the different beings and things spatially and temporally.

Abundant flowering, fruition and ripening of grapes, apples and gourds hanging over the cottage roofs and trees and over brimming honey combs show the gift of nature. Eco system does not put anything at the centre rather shows a network of relations. Human culture he presents is in reciprocal relation with nature. Self's bond with its environment and the interdependence of insects, birds, animals and human beings in the major concern of the poem. So, the poem is an organic community having networks, links, bonds and correspondences.

John Keats has an intuitive understanding of the law of community ecology i.e. bio-diversity by means of which harmonious survived in possible only in the presence of birds, insects, flowers, animals and human beings regulation is possible. Only in the presence of the diversified species the world regenerates itself. He does not keep human beings at the centre rather gives a network of relatives. Reading Keats is reading ecological wholeness.

Conclusion

John Keats's three poems: "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn" poem do have ecological conscience and consciousness. He acts upon the beauty of the biosphere presenting that this beauty certainly comes even in the next season. For Keats, fruits, birds, plants, cricket, hawthorn and thicket are like brothers and sisters because this brotherhood and sisterhood charges with ecological purpose consciousness raising in the most important task because it is impossible to solve environmental problems unless we start thinking about them. Keats internally drives the readers to be ecologically aware and transfer energy to the readers.

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