

# Literature and Environment: Redesigning the English Language Curriculum at the Tertiary Level

**\*Praveena Marupakula**, Assistant Professor of English, Government Degree College,  
Patancheru

**\*\*Prof. G. Damodar**, Kakatiya University, Warangal

**We don't inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children**

- Native American proverb

## Abstract:

Literature and nature are inseparable and interdisciplinary. Any emotion or sensory effect evoked from nature can be transported to human beings through literature. Throughout the history of literature, many poets, playwrights, novelists, etc., have explored the relationship of human beings with nature, because "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Cheryl Glotfelty). However, in today's anthropocentric world, there is a disconnect between man on one hand, and literature and nature on the other hand. Therefore, there is a need to reflect on how literature can be used to shape environmental consciousness in the young generation and to ensure suitable action in the direction of environmental sustainability. The present paper explores ways in which the English language classroom can become a site to engage with issues related to environment, with specific reference to the General English Undergraduate Curriculum of Osmania University.

**Keywords:** Literature, Nature, Anthropocentrism, Green Curriculum.

## Introduction:

Literature has many significant functions. It can move the hearts and minds of the readers through sheer literary power. It can also act as a source of knowledge which means giving values, messages, and themes to the readers. However, the most important function of literature today, according to Glen A. Love, is to "redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world" (237). In the present world, which is beset by issues like global warming, climate change, deforestation, pollution, resource degradation, the threat of extinction, etc., there is a dire need for this third function. Literature must change its shape, tone, and focus, in terms of themes, spaces, and languages. In the specific context of using literature in the English Language Classroom at the tertiary level, such content could be used as 'Green Curriculum' to design suitable activities and thereby encourage student engagement with environmental issues.

## Green Curriculum:

If 'Curriculum' implies the learning experiences that a student receives through structured and unstructured activities inside and outside the classroom, then 'Green Curriculum' offers a new lens or a shift in context. It encourages and promotes a greater understanding of the environment - its challenges and solutions. Sharma and Pandya (2015) argue that "the ultimate goal of Green Curriculum is action, i.e., action to improve the environment, prevent its degradation and sustain its well-being" (20). They go on to state that Green Curriculum views "environment as all that is around us and aims to give a better understanding of the way the world functions its operation as a total system, its alteration because of the actions of the human race and its consequences on the system and on us" (23). Therefore, there is a need for a reorientation of the teaching-learning process. Instead of merely laying emphasis on mechanical reproduction of information, students must be engaged in various activities like observing, examining, critically thinking, analysing, and generating knowledge on their own.

The various technological advances of the contemporary world have resulted in the anthropocentric viewpoint wherein human beings are considered as the central or most significant entities in the world. According to anthropocentrism, all other forms of life like animals, plants, mineral resources, etc., are subordinate to and exist merely for the benefit of humankind. Such a viewpoint justifies the exploitation of all resources without any regard for the consequences. As the existing education system is primarily focused on science and technology and its consequential luxuries offered to mankind, there is a pressing need for educationists to infuse environmental and sustainability perspectives into the curriculum.

With specific reference to the English Language Curriculum at the tertiary level, there is a more urgent need to redesign the curriculum for social/environmental purposes than for specific purposes. In other words, it is necessary to shift the focus from functionality to sustainability. This would help in creating awareness on environmental issues among students; enable them to work on ecological content; and reinforce their learning through appropriate exercises/activities.

## Background and Settings:

From its very early texts, English Literature has been associated with the environment, most often as seen in its lofty natural settings. The oldest literary text known today as 'Caedmon's Hymn' dated around 680 A.D., was a song sung by a farmer in praise of God. The poem refers to God as the "Author of all marvels," the creator of the heavens, the Earth, and humanity. As time passed by, literature has continued to depict nature as a setting or background for human action. Some of the best and most memorable examples are William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *King Lear*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, John Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale,' P.B. Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind,' etc. In modern times, however, literature has shifted into the landscapes of concrete jungles, cubicles, cities and the buzzing life, voices, and noises. A.K. Ramanujan's 'tripping on the door mat' expression leaves space to understand the busy life of the modern era.

## Themes:

Throughout history, the themes of English Literature depicted the changing relationship of man with his environment, sometimes portraying nature as man's opponent, while at other times, nature was portrayed

as his solace and source of comfort. In the present, however, there is a shift from the eco conscious approach to an ego conscious approach. Loneliness, despair, dejection, failure, mourning, etc., have become the central themes of literature. This aspect assumes great significance when literature is used as content in the English Language classroom.

### **Language:**

The relationship between literature and language teaching has always been significant in the English Language classroom. However, in contemporary times, language has started to emerge from language laboratories and the artificial machines, and human beings have started speaking the language of the machines. The result has been the paradigm shift in English Language teaching from literature *to* language, instead of language *through* literature. What is lost in this transition is the basic functions of literature - to educate and carry the purposeful function in the society. In this context, it is important that great care is taken to select literary pieces that are appropriate and relevant in the rapidly changing scenario of the contemporary world.

### **Treatment of Environmental Issues in the English Language Classroom:**

An analysis of the textbooks for General English Curriculum of Osmania University - *Advanced Skills in English: A Coursebook for Advanced Language Learning*(II Year) and *English Made Easy*(I Year) though the ecological lens, has shown that there is no explicit engagement with issues related to environmental sustainability. *Advanced Skills in English* has one unit on Satya Nadella and another on Larry page and SergeyBrin, and these prose pieces represent human achievements in the field of technology. In addition, the biographies of Dr.A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Martin Luther King Jr, emphasize the attainment of values and importance of setting benchmarks for society by the strength of character. The essay 'Hazards of food colouring' talks about the disastrous consequences of the use of food colours and the need to protect human beings from adulteration, while 'Table and the Chair' introduces a new theme related to the concept of the non-human world being affected by the feelings of boredom, etc., which are associated with human beings.

*English Made Easy*, on the other hand, has two units to which the ecocritical approach can be applied to a certain extent – P.B. Shelley's 'Stanzas written in dejection near Naples' and Aldous Huxley's 'Benares.' Shelley took nature as an antidote to his dejection and communicated his loneliness with the warm sun, clear sky, blue isles, and the deep sea. The poem manifests the soothing function of nature and its ability to offer solace and comfort, even in depression. It inspires, motivates, and guides the mind in the right direction. 'Benares' by Aldous Huxley expresses this concept as a subtle undercurrent. The essay talks about the superstitions of Indian Hindus who gather on the banks of the Ganges to express their solidarity with the Sun God during a solar eclipse. It criticises the actions of the millions of people who produce litter and pollute the river and its surroundings based on their superstitions. Apart from these two units, there are a few pieces of information on environmental pollution, like Batukamma, etc.

### **Conclusion:**

Joseph Meeker offered the first genuinely new reading of literature from an ecological viewpoint, as early as in the mid-1970s, in his seminal book, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974). According to him, Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures. . . If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its

influence upon human behavior and the natural environment-to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? (3-4).

There is great necessity to create consciousness among the students through content-based instruction using topics related to environmental protection and sustainability. Students must learn to discuss and debate upon issues like climate change, environmental pollution, environmental ethics, etc. Therefore, the General English Language curriculum for the Undergraduate Course in Osmania University needs to be revised and revamped. At least 80% of the content must be filled with loving nature, living with nature, and leaving the nature behind for coming generations. Evoking human interest in environment and cultivating the culture consciousness to protect the environment must be the motto of the English Language Curriculum. Communication with nature through communion with literature must be the mantra of the day.

## References

1. Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens and London: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.
2. Kumar, Suresh E. et al, (ed). *Advanced Skills in English: A Coursebook for Advanced Language Learning*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2015. Print.
3. Kumar, Suresh E. et al, (ed). *English Made Easy*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2016. Print.
4. Love, Glen A. "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens and London: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.
5. Meeker, Joseph. *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974. Print.
6. Sharma, Kavitha, and Mamta Pandya. *Towards a Green School on Education for Sustainable Development for Elementary Schools*. New Delhi: NCERT, 2015. Print.