

Eco-Criticism: A Critical Overview of Ecological Literary Theory

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Abstract : Environmental crisis is a hot topic of discussion for the last fifty years. At present, as feared by the environmentalists, it is posing a great danger to the humans, flora and fauna and to the physical environment. Humans are much worried about the ecosystem, rather than the ethical system. In order to save the earth and its inhabitants, it is high time to scrutinize the ethical system of the individuals, industrialists and governments. Human interference is the only threat to the ecosystem. As human activities and environment are interconnected to each other, a thorough knowledge of human value system is very essential, in order to alter it to protect the ecosystem.

Index Terms – Ecology, Ecocriticism, Environment, Green Studies.

I. INTRODUCTION

In primitive societies, when humans were hunters and gatherers, having thorough knowledge of one's environment – familiarity of the seasons, natural forces, flora and fauna in the surroundings - was a quintessential prerequisite for anyone to survive. The nexus between man and his environment was well understood by the early man and this is evident from the cave drawings of the monolithic age. Due to technological advancements, humans have abandoned nature and have developed the nerve to think that humans are above nature and can manipulate nature.

Human existence on the earth is imperfect without nature as he is a part of nature. But man is of opinion that he can incapacitate nature and get away from it unscathed. But the harsh reality is that, he cannot survive without nature. Man fails to understand this as he thinks that he can regenerate it as and when he wishes. At this juncture, there arises a need to educate man about his interconnectedness with his physical surroundings and the flora and fauna in it.

In the wake of this thought, many individuals and movements emerged to crusade on behalf of nature. Sivaramakrishnan and Jana opines:

Environmental justice movements and Ecocritical theory were thus a natural outcome of growing public awareness of profound ecological crisis the world over, as well as the natural culmination of historical development of the contemporary social and critical theory. (30)

Aldo Leopold, Wangari Maathai and Rachael Carson are among the most protuberant eco-crusaders, whose role in the sphere of eco-literateness, ecological justice, eco-social responsibility, environmental ethics intended to modify human behavior is quite laudable.

II. ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS AND ECO-CRITICISM

The word 'eco' is derived from the Greek word 'oikos', which means 'house' or 'habitat'. The house or habitat is inclusive of all the flora and fauna in it and practical methods that make the house habitable. Thus ecology is the study of relationship between living organisms and their habitat or environment (Odum 1).

The word 'ecology' was first coined by Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist in 1869. He defined ecology as follows:

The study of knowledge concerning the economy of nature, the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment...in a word, ecology is the study of all those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the conditions of the struggle for existence. (Stauffer 143)

Due to consistent campaign of the eco-crusaders, in the latter half of the 20th Century, all of a sudden peoples of the West became conscious about pollution, clean energy, population explosion and bio-diversity. The first 'Earth Day' was observed on 22nd April, 1970. This pushed ecological issues to the political foreground. Developed nations' foreign relations took ecological turn. Peoples and governments were much concerned about the underground and undersea nuclear tests.

The growing concern among the general public accelerated academic ecology. Although ecology is an offshoot of Biology, it gained interdisciplinary attention. Literary world embraced ecology in gradual phases. In course of time, ecology integrated well with literature and literary criticism. It had made many writers of literary texts and literary critics eco-conscious. Due to these developments, ecological literary criticism or ecocriticism, a new branch of literary criticism emerged.

III. ECO-CRITICISM AND GREEN STUDIES

In general, literary theory investigates the relationship among the writer, text and the world. In literary theories, the word 'world' invariably means society or the social sphere. Ecocriticism, in contrast to this, extends the idea of 'world' to embrace the entire ecosphere. Barry Commoner's first law of ecology states that "everything is connected to everything else" (qtd. in Glotfelty xix). If that is true, then it should be accepted that literature is an integral part of the global system. According to Cheryll Glotfelty ecocriticism is "the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment. It takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii).

Ecological literary criticism focuses on the connection between nature and culture. According to Kroeber "Ecological criticism is holistic, which requires that its primary focus be directed to the individuality of works of art – and of the audiences responding to them" (1). In plain terms, ecocriticism is a study of cultural outputs such as creative works, writings, etc. that connect humans to the ecological sphere.

Joseph Meeker is of view that humans are the sole creatures on the earth with literary activities. If these activities are of paramount importance then there comes a necessity to inspect them with utmost care and honesty as they influence human attitude towards environment and his relationship with his co-habitants and his natural world. These literary activities may aid in the survival of the habitants of the ecosystem or in the extinction of the same (3-4).

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from the point of view of multidisciplinary sciences such as anthropology, sociology and psychology, which aims to find out a solution to put an end to the environmental crisis. Ecocriticism is interlinked with disciplines such as social ecology, deep ecology, ecofeminism and environmental justice. Barry Lopez, an American author is of view that someday, the study and practice of nature writing would shape the political thought of nations (Scheese 1). He suggests that there should be a hybridization of ecological literary theory and other literary theories in order to understand nature and nature writing in a better light. Ecocriticism is also known by other names such as 'Green Studies', 'Green Cultural Studies', 'Environmental Literary Criticism', 'Literary Ecology', 'Green Criticism', 'Ecopoetics/ Oikopoetics' and 'E-Theory'.

William Rueckert coined the term 'ecocriticism' in 1978 and used in his landmark publication *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. 'Ecocriticism' and 'Green Studies' are synonymous terms that are used to signify the literary critical approaches that originated in the USA in 1980s and in the UK in 1990s, respectively. Cheryll Glotfelty is credited with the title founder of Ecocriticism in the USA. In 1992, she co-founded ASLE (The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment). This association began its own journal in the very next year entitled *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE). Green Studies of the UK is the legacy of the British Romantics. Jonathan Bate, the author of *Romantic: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* is the founder of green studies in the UK.

IV. FORERUNNERS OF ECOCRITICISM

Before the advent of these literary movements, there were many eco-conscious writers, who paved way for these literary movements. Raymond Williams, a Marxist critic in his book *The Country and the City* (1973) discusses the cultural differences and analyzes the images of the English countryside and the city presented in English literature right from 16th century. Joseph Meeker in his *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and Play Ethics* (1974) opines that culture plays a significant role in environmental crisis. Distinguished scholars such as Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, Evan Mwangi, Simon C. Estok, Thomas K. Dean, Christopher Cokins, Allison B. Wallace, David Taylor, Mark Schlenz, David W. Teague, Stephanie Sarver, Kent Reyden, Ian Marshall, Joan Hamilton, Don Scheese, Ralph W. Black, Stan Tag and Nancy Cook have added much to the progress of ecocriticism.

V. DEFINITIONS OF ECOCRITICISM

According to Buell ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in the spirit of environment to environmental praxis" (430). In his *Report Card on Ecocriticism*, Estok states that ecocriticism stands apart from other literary theories "by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world...its commitment to making connections" (220). To Cokino, ecocriticism is a "critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the non-human and our relationship to it" (3). To Dean, ecocriticism is a "study of culture and cultural products that is in some way connected with the human relationship to the natural world" (5).

VI. PHASES OF ECOCRITICISM

6.1. FIRST WAVE

Like feminism, ecocriticism too is divided into three phases, historically: First Wave; Second Wave; and Third Wave. The wave metaphor in ecocriticism was developed by Lawrence Buell to highlight the phases of progress of ecocriticism. Wendell Berry notes that "Based on the geographical grounds and with its significant focus on nineteenth century literature the first wave was marked from the mid 1980s to the late 1990s, and was divided into American and British" (233).

The first wave American version of ecocriticism originates from the Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Nature*), Henry David Thoreau (*Walden*), and Margret Fuller (*Summer on the Lakes*), who focused nature and wilderness in

American context in their writings. The first wave American ecocritics following the transcendentalists started to concentrate on the nature and natural settings portrayed in the texts.

The first wave British version of ecocriticism known as Green Studies came into being with the scholars focusing on English romantics such as William Wordsworth and John Keats. Apart from Jonathan Bate, other ecocritics from the UK, who contributed to the first wave ecocriticism in the UK were Lawrence Coupe, Richard Kerridge, Greg Garrard and Terry Gifford. According to Brizee, “A primary concern in first-wave ecocriticism was to “speak for” nature” (1). The first wave ecocritics saw nature and human as opposed to each other. They emphasized the dissimilarity between human and nature. By doing so they intended to promote the significance of nature.

6.2. SECOND WAVE

The second wave ecocritics emerged in late 1990s, and they focused on contemporary environmental concerns as opposed to the eulogizing the pastoral setting by the first wave British and American ecocritics. The second wave ecocriticism is of paramount significance as it deviated from British and American literature to include trans-cultural literatures. Some of the best works of this period were *The Green Studies Reader* (2000) by Laurence Coupe and *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism and the Environmental Justice Reader* by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace. Greg Garrard comments on the second wave ecocriticism as follows: “Second wave is particularly modern in its breaking down some of the long standing distinctions between human and non-human, questioning these very concepts” (1).

The second wave ecocriticism made a departure from nature writing to include all literature. It highlighted environmental concerns as well as human concerns. To the second wave ecocritics, the term ‘environment’ did not stop with the settings of pastoral and wilderness. The term ‘environment’ to them became inclusive of urban and sub-urban settings too. The second wave ecocritics redefined the term ‘environment’ by including both nature – pastoral and wilderness, and urban. This phase of ecocritics did not see environment and human beings as separate and warring entities. Rather, they were seen as mutually interdependent. Berry contrasts these two waves of ecocritics as follows:

Proponents of the second wave, necessarily highlight questions of gender, class, race, and colonialism, challenging first-wave ecocritics who seem more interested in presenting ‘wild’ and untamed nature than ‘protecting the environment’. (Kerridge 234)

6.3. THIRD WAVE

Third wave ecocriticism emerged after 2000, but it was not christened as “third wave” until 2009. This third wave ecocriticism, which had its emergence in 2009, firmly continues even now. The third wave ecocriticism focused on the exploration of the global concept of place with specific locales. It gives space to include teachers and students to find inventive ways to bring about a change in the society through their activities. The first wave abandoned the urban setting, the second wave included the urban setting, but the third wave concentrated on building environment in urban setting. This shift made ecocritics to get involved with other issues such as racism, poverty, gender bias, etc. This attitude of the third wave ecocritics included eco-justice and social concerns along with environmental concerns.

VII. OFF-SHOOTS OF ECOCRITICISM

7.1. DEEP ECOLOGY

The term deep ecology entered the discourse on environment in 1972, when Arne Naess published the paper which was to become one of environmental philosophy’s foundational texts, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary”. Although Naess’s name was synonymous with philosophy in Norway for over fifty years, his “shallow/deep ecology” distinction was largely unknown outside Scandinavia until the 1980s, when it began to receive widespread attention among philosophers and environmentalists” (Sessions xii).

Deep ecology movement became renowned partly due to the publication of *Deep Ecology* by Bill Devall and George Sessions in 1985, and due to the publicity arising from the ecological activist group Earth First! Deep ecologists believe that every element on earth has an intrinsic value. They regard each as an important part of the planet. The Native Americans would regard place as a sacred entity.

Deep ecology challenges the hierarchy that has polarised humans and nature and advocates a biocentric perspective which acknowledges the mutually reciprocal relationship required for a sustainable ecosystem (Dreese 5). During the so-called ecological revolution of the 1960s, the long range Deep ecology movement emerged almost spontaneously and informally as a philosophical and scientific social/political movement. The primary aim of the movement was to affect a paradigmatic shift in perception, values, and lifestyles as a basic starting point for rechanneling the ecologically destructive path of modern industrial growth in societies. Under this mode of thought, humans, plants, and animals coexist on an equal sphere within an intimate system of connections where it is impossible for one part of the system to change without influencing and affecting another. Deep ecology sees the scope of all environmental exploitation as symptomatic of a much deeper nature/human relational breakdown (Dreese 5, 6).

7.2. ECOFEMINISM

The term ecofeminism first appeared in 1974 in Françoise d’Eaubonne’s *Le Feminisme ou la mort*. She expressed the notion of a direct connect between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. She further asserted that “the liberation of one cannot be affected apart from the liberation of the other” (Tong 247). Though the term was first used by Françoise D’Eaubonne, it gained familiarity within the context of a series of protests and activities against environmental devastation, spurred on initially by recurring ecological disasters.

Ynestra King asserts that ecofeminism concerns itself with connectedness in everything even within the wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing. King further adds:

“For us the snail darter is to be considered side by side with a community’s need for water, the porpoise side by side with appetite for tuna, and the creatures it may fall on with Skylab. We are a woman-identified movement and we believe we have a special work to do in these imperilled times. We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns.”(King, 10-11)

Ecofeminism identifies the interrelationships between gender, race, class and the exploitation of environment. It also clashes with the injustices that exist within this interconnectedness.

7.3. SPIRITUAL ECOFEMINISM

Spiritual ecofeminists emphasize on discarding the confines of rigid theology or religion or spirituality. Instead they exalted being in the open spaces of nature where women could practice any of the several earth-based spiritualities. They drew inspiration from Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* and Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *New Woman, New Earth*. Although spiritual ecofeminists derive strength from various earth-based spiritualities, these thinkers are attracted to ancient goddess worship and nature-oriented Native American ritual. According to them cultures that regard the female body as sacred also consider nature as a sacred entity, celebrating its cycles and rhythms. They often draw parallels “between the role of women in biological production and the role of an archetypal “Earth Mother” or “birth-mother” (usually referred to as “Gaia”) in giving life and creating all that exists. Because women’s role is analogous to Gaia’s role, women’s relationship to nature is privileged over men’s relationship to nature, according to spiritual ecofeminists” (Mies and Shiva 252). Starhawk and Carol Christ are two renowned spiritual ecofeminists who have contributed to this body of knowledge and the woman-nature link.

Despite initial troubles of accepting a frugal way of life, it has the promise of becoming a successful model to sustain economy. With the practice of simpler lifestyles, people could discover that a simple life is better than possessing things. Women could become the trendsetters of such a lifestyle, and include men into it as much as possible. Starhawk affirms that spirituality is akin to women’s sensuality - their sexual energy a significant life force which connects them to each other, other life forms and elements. Sexual energy enables women to love and celebrate life. This sensual or sexual spirituality abolishes the contrast between the spirit and matter, transcendence and immanence. The spirit is inherent in everything including the sensuous experience in particular likewise the body is part of the spiritual.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Ecocritics have been striving hard to infuse eco-consciousness among the students, researchers, teachers, writers and general public. This has led to the inclusion of environmental education as a compulsory paper in the universities of many countries. Though the academia has woken up to the clarion call of the ecocritics, the governments and the globalized economy are quite adamant to change their ways. At this critical juncture, understanding the environment in which humans share their space with flora and fauna has become indispensable.

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