



Ecocriticism in Indian Fictions and Environmental Concerns

Dr. Nidhi Mishra

Department of English

Govind Sarang Govt Law College, Bhatapara

Chhattisgarh

Abstract

Ecocriticism has been one of the most important literary thematic concerns in the 21st Century. Present century is permeated with new frontier technology, information science, industrialization and rapid development. Unfortunately, it is also marred with environmental degradation, pollution and depletion of natural resources. The word "Ecocriticism" was first coined by William Rueckert in his seminal critical writing "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in the year 1978. Rueckert propounds that Ecocriticism is application of ecology and ecological principles in studies of literature. Environment has been part and parcel of Indian life right from ancient days. Worshipping nature and revering earth as 'Mother' has been part of our Indian culture. From Vedic civilization to the present, nature is considered as the incarnation of God and Goddesses. Indian fiction writers like Raja Rao, RK Narayan, Kamala Markandya, Ruskin Bond have tried to show the importance of nature in their works. They have portrayed malign as well as benign force of nature. Similarly, Anita Desai also created nature and animal symbols and landscape imagery in her works. If humans need to save their earth, they need to change their lifestyle and nonchalant mindset. Issues such as saving the environment and living in harmony with nature are two basic concerns which Ecocriticism is concerned with.

Key words: environment, nature, Indian, literary

Just as 'Racism' was one of chief concerns in 20th century literature, Ecocriticism has been one of the most important literary thematic concerns in the 21st Century. Present century is permeated with new frontier technology, information science, industrialization and rapid development. Unfortunately, it is also marred with environmental degradation, pollution and depletion of natural resources. Rapid development in the 21st century has come with its own cost and side effects. Environment enveloping earth has never deteriorated as before. It is these problems that Ecocriticism deals with. Ecocriticism is basically a new school of thought whereby humanities investigates the relationship of man and

environment through different dimensions such as literary, artistic, philosophical, cultural expressions.

The word "Ecocriticism" was first coined by William Rueckert in his seminal critical writing "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in the year 1978. Rueckert propounds that Ecocriticism is application of ecology and ecological principles in studies of literature. Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Just as Feminist Criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious – perspective, and Marxist Criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, Ecocriticism takes an

earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty 1996, p xix). Here Glotfelty (1996) delineates the relationship between culture and nature and —interrelationships, especially the arts and culture of language and literature. Another important and influential critic Buell (1995) defines Ecocriticism "as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist's praxis"(Buell 430)

Study of Ecology can be further divided into two schools of thoughts, Shallow Ecology and Deep Ecology. Shallow Ecology has an 'anthropocentric' approach relating to sustainable theories and practices. It advocates for judicious use of environmental resources for the benefit of mankind. It focuses on human centered reforms rather than intrinsic changes in human and nature relationships. The term 'light green' has been designated to the shallow ecologists. Deep ecology focuses on an ecocentrism approach. Deep ecology propounds that Earth is a single organism. Humans, animals, forests, fauna, nature are an integral part of this single unit. Humans are in no way superior to other species. Today earth is facing serious environment issues only because of unbridled exploitation of natural resources by humans. Thus, it advocates for drastic changes in environment and human relationship. Deep ecologists borrow heavily from other disciplines like science, philosophy, religion and mysticism. The term 'dark green' is often attributed to Deep Ecology to describe their school of thought, principles and beliefs. The growth of Ecocriticism can be divided into two parts, The First Wave and The Second Wave. For first-wave of Ecocriticism, is concerned with "natural environment" (Buell 21). Ecocriticism was initially understood to be synchronous with the purpose of caring for nature and earth. Its goal was to contribute to the struggle to preserve the "biotic community" (Coupe 2000, p 4). The first wave Ecocriticism focused on "the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (Howarth 1996, p 69). Second wave Ecocriticism is also known as revisionist Ecocriticism. It studies how culture and

society has degraded nature and environment. It has tended to question organicist models of conceiving both environment and environmentalism. Literature and environment studies must develop a social Ecocriticism that takes urban and degraded landscapes just as seriously as 'natural' landscapes. (Bennett 32)

Environment has been part and parcel of Indian life right from ancient days. Worshipping nature and revering earth as 'Mother' has been part of our Indian culture. From Vedic civilization to the present, nature is considered as the incarnation of God and Goddesses. Importance of nature and environment has been reflected in the works of Indian literature vividly. Indian literature has often fathomed with the idea of environment, its importance and subsequent degradation. Raja Rao's novels reflect the importance of nature and environment in his literary works. Rao scintillatingly depicts the culture and environment of a Southern Indian village. Rao tells us that natural resources like mountains, forests, rivers are an integral part of Southern Indian villages. In his novel 'Kanthapura', Rao tells us how rivers and mountains play an important role in people's lives. People in the village call the mountain Goddess Kenchamma and they consider it responsible for both - their prosperity and their adversity. "Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she.....never has she failed us in grief. If it rains come not, you fall at her feet and say, 'Kenchamma, you are not kind to us. Our field is full of younglings" (Rao 7). Another contemporary of Raja Rao is R.K. Narayan. His depiction of the village 'Malgudi' has become immortal in its own sense. In nearly all of the works, Narayan has used local landscape as an important factor in his literary works. In 'Dark Room' the river and the ruined temple leave a benign influence on Savitri. The flowing Sarayu, the ruined temple and the stone slabs influence Raju in 'The Guide', and subsequently, Raju attains his 'sainthood.' Again it is the spirit of Malgudi that helps him to face the ordeal of fast in the right earnest. It is the retreat across the river that changes Jagan for good. Malgudi is a character. When it is material, acts like a villain like the gutter in 'The English Teacher' and 'The Financial Expert'. Kamala

Markandya in her famous literary work 'Nectar in a Sieve' portrays the importance of nature in a man's life. Like Rao and Narayan, Markandya exhibits how nature can be a benign as well as destructive force in human's life. Markandya writes "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless and forgetful, and it has you by the throat" (Markandya 2010, p 11). Portraying the ferocity of nature Markandya writes, "the water pitilessly found every hole of the thatched roof to come in...I saw that our coconut plant had been struck. That, too, the storm had claimed for its own... they did not show much sign of surviving" (Markandya 12). Ruskin Bond is another great Ecocriticism writer. In his works we see dominance of the local landscape of Mussoorie and Dehradun. Bond has always reflected an ambivalent relation of man and nature. Bond's works portrays the plight of nature due to man's incessant greed of money. In his 'An Island of Trees' the grandmother reveals to her granddaughter, Koki, the deep bond that grows between humans and nonhumans if only there is love and compassion. Bond's another famous literary work *No Room for a Leopard* is about destruction of natural resources and deforestation. Bond shows how wild animals are at the receiving end. Similarly, in 'Copperfield in the Jungle' he shows his hatred towards hunting. In *The Tree Lover*, *The Cherry Tree*. All Creatures Great and Small' Bond once again shows for a peaceful existence, man must live in concurrence with nature and environment. Importance of the environment in a human's life can hardly be exaggerated. Another important writer is Anita Desai. She uses nature symbols in her novels. These symbols and portrayals of landscapes reflect inner being and emotions of the protagonist and the character. For example, in *Cry, the Peacock*, the protagonist Maya feels like a peacock in the jungle. Just as a peacocks fight till death, Maya abhors her husband for his non communication. Ultimately, Maya pushes off her husband and he dies. Desai again uses bird imagery in *Voices in the City*. Here, the protagonist Monisha is repeatedly compared to the encaged bird who feels toxic and suffocated in

her house which is as good as a cage for her. In the end, Monisha commits suicide to get free from such a miserable life. who wants to be free. Desai portrays Baba' the autistic son in *Clear Light of Day* as a harmless spider, while in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* the island people are described as goats as they listen to Moses.

Thus, we see that Indian fiction writers are greatly concerned with nature, environment and its subsequent degradation. They have tried to address few of environmental concerns in their literary works: Unbridled development, Incessant exploitation of natural resources, Plight of wildlife, Loss of biodiversity, flora and fauna, Women participation in decision making, Apathy by government and society, Psychological problems occurring in urban population due to loss of environment, Uncontrolled urbanization and its aftermath, Capitalism and side effects.

In the twenty-first century, we are witnessing a gradual change in the environment in the form of global warming, acid rains, earthquakes, arid lands, landslides, extinction of species and many more related problems. The exploitation of natural resources is taking its toll and its side effects are now clearly evident. Indian fiction writers have tried to portray subsequent degradation of environment and ecology in India. They also show how it is directly or indirectly affecting people. If humans need to save their earth, they need to change their lifestyle and nonchalant mindset. Issues such as saving the environment and living in harmony with nature are two basic concerns which Ecocriticism is concerned with.

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