

Eco-consciousness in Indian English Poetry

Ashima Pandey & Dr. A Pandey

*They did not tell us
what it would be like
without trees.
Nobody imagined
that the whispering of leaves
would grow silent
or the vibrant jade of spring
pale to grey death
And now we pile
rubbish on rubbish
in the dusty landscape
struggling to create
a tree.*

The poem "Tree" by Tina Morris, the twentieth century British poet makes the present generation realize what the world would be without trees. The poem is a message in respect of conservation of nature. The poet holds a mirror before the reader's imaginative eye. This consciousness of the writers has brought the two disciplines ecology and literary criticism together. The purpose is to restore the Earth's health, which was lost owing to man's wrongdoing. The study of deep ecology emphasizes the role of individual who is invited to behave as a citizen of the World and Earth and to take the responsibility for it. The study of Literature and environment consciousness is an interdisciplinary study termed as Ecocriticism

The term "Eco criticism" was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Interest in the study of nature writing and reading literature with

a focus on "green" issue grew through the 1980's and by the early 90's

Ecocriticism is defined as "the study of relation between literature and physical environment" by Cheryll Glotflety and Fromm 1996 (xviii) in the *Ecocriticism Reader*. Lawrence Buell defines it as 'the environment oriented study of literature and (less often) arts, more generally, and to the theories theories that underlie such critical practice. He identifies two phases of ecocriticism: The first wave ecocriticism and the second wave ecocriticism or the "revisionist ecocriticism".

In the first wave the ecocritics focused on such genre as 'nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction' (Buell 138). The second wave ecocritics inclined towards environmental injustice as a "social ecocriticism" that takes degraded landscapes just as seriously as the "natural landscapes" (Buell 22).

For ecocritics the nineteenth century developments in literature is significant. American and British Romantic writers took a particular interest in nature as a subject. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836) are the defining works in the field of ecocriticism.

Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as is evidenced in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world. Today the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized in all departments of knowledge and

development. The literary critic tries to study how this close relationship between nature and society has been textualized by the writers in their works.

Ecocriticism continues to grow as a discipline due to 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. The need to examine the interfaces between nature and culture, animal and human, is urgent and never more pertinent than it is today.

Pre ecological form of literary theory asks questions like "How does Literature function within the ecosystem" or "How does a given textual representation of nature affect the way we treat ethical nature". The assumptions underlying ecological literary theory is that, "Everything is connected to everything else". Literature plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter and ideas interact in a perpetual dance. Literature acts on people and people act on the world. Ecocritics wonder how literature may bring about healthful actions, and what role literary criticism may play in the process.

This paper attempts to find out the eco consciousness in Indian English poetry and trace the conservationist attitude of Indians towards nature. Indian Literature is rich in concepts of nature worship. The tradition of nature worship in India dates back to the Vedic period. The Rig Vedic hymns are a poetic testament of a people's collective response to the wonder and awe of existence. They are poems in praise of the beauty of the earth and the powers glimpsed behind the radiant veil of nature. (Krishna Chaitanya, Life in Vedic Literature).

Nature was worshipped as God. Sun was considered as deity. Indra the god of rain was given major importance as king. Varun

(Sea God), Vayu (wind), prithvi (the earth) agni (fire) and akash (sky) and all the elements of nature were worshipped as Gods. Even the planets were given importance in religion. In due course of time the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh) gained importance as the Creator, the Preserver, and the Destroyer. Shiva is associated with snakes, scorpion, and other insects. Vishnu is worshipped as various incarnations Narsimha (lion), crocodile, fishes, turtle. Laxmi, the goddess of wealth is associated with owl, Durga the Goddess of strength is associated with Singh (lion). Extra Vedic literature abounds in descriptions of nature. Valmiki's The Ramayan has a subtitle: Book of Wilderness. The relationship of Ram (the incarnation of Vishnu) during his sojourn in the woods shows a lively relationship of human with nature. His association with Hanuman (monkeys), Jamvant (bear), Marich(deer), Laxman (sheshnag) , Kakhbushund (crow), Garud (hawk), and Nandi shows the closeness of human and their understanding of the feelings of animals. The idea of the preservation of wildlife is inherent in Indian culture. Worship of peepal, tulsi, bargad, awnla and use of flowers, grass, leaves belpatra, akaua dhatura, chandan, sandal and many other things prohibits us from destroying them. The Panchtantra uses animal stories to teach morals and ethics to the children.

Indian literature in English also reflects the culture and traditions of the country. Henry Deroizo's "Leaves", Kashi Prasad descriptions of nature, Manmohan Ghosh's delightful nature all fall in typically romantic tradition. Romesh Chander Dutt translated The Ramayan and The Mahabharat into felicitous English verse. In his Lays of Ancient India he has translated Sanskrit verses including stories from Upnishad. Toru Dutta's Savitri and Sita, Dhruva and Prahlad depict Indian culture. "Our Casuraina Tree" and "Sita" describe nature. Sarojini Naidu's poems are full of poignant feeling and picturesque

Indian imagery. Aurobindo Ghosh was a poet, patriot, philosopher, and yogi all rolled into one. His Savitri is partly terrestrial and partly spiritual. Savitri is presented not only as the redeemer of Sayavan but also as the savior of human race. Rabindra Nath Tagore was a mystic who sought to realize his oneness with the Universal soul. In "April" there is a freshness and dancing cadence suitable to the subject.

Ecocriticism is not just studying nature as represented in Literature. This kind of study existed very early even before William Ruceckert coined the word ecocriticism. Ecocriticism helps the human beings have a broader view of nature. It urges humans to have a biocentric view despite their apparently incorrigible anthropocentrism due to their selfish nature. Now let us see how we could ecocritically interpret human-nature relationship represented in some modern poems. The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) is known for love, loneliness, human foibles, and many other things, but not for the portrayal of the nature. The poems which require ecocritical attention for portrayal of nature are poems like "Squirrel" and "Sparrows". According to Suresh Fredrick "Both the squirrel and sparrows are animals that live close to human beings.... But human culture devalues these animals, making symbiosis impossible". (Fredrick 139)

Another poem that challenges culture is A. K. Ramanujan's "Snakes" from his first collection The Strider's. The persona in the poem afraid of the snake, he kills it and feels that he is safe in the woods.

I leave him sealed, / in a flat-head whiteness on a strain./ Now/ frogs can hop upon his sausage rope, flies in the sun will mob the look in his eyes". In WVE Ross's The Snake Trying the persona wants to kill the snake

with a stick in his hand but lets him go as a harmless creature.

O let him go

Over the water

Into the reeds to hide

Without hurt.

Small and green

He is harmless even to children. (7-11)

A.K. Ramanujan's persona kills the snake urged by his inner fear in spite of the cultural religious background of the fact that his own mother had fed them. The persona of WVE Ross also has the intention of killing the snake with a stick in his hand, but wisdom prevails upon him. Nature wins over culture.

William Rueckert says: "The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying natural community, and with it the human community. This is what the ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude towards nature. (Glottfelty 107)

An ecocritical reading of Keki N Daruwalla's poem "A Boat ride along the Ganga" reveals how man is responsible for polluting the holy river. The poem begins with a simple description of an evening, but the poet's "conscience" for "hygiene" makes him curse it.

As the panda points out Dasasvamedh.

I listen avidly to his legend-talk

Striving to forget what I chanced to see:

The sewer-mouth trained like a cannon

On the rivers flank. It is as I feared;

Hygiene is a part of conscience and I curse it

And curse my upbringing which makes me queazy here.

This poem throws light on the hazards of polluting the holy river. The

author intends to make one 'queazy' and to develop hygiene as a part of one's conscience. William Rueckert questions,

"How can we (as literary critics and teachers) apply the energy, the creativity, the knowledge, the vision we know to be in literature to the human-made problems. Ecology tells us are destroying the biosphere which is our home? How can we translate literature into purgative-redemptive biospheric action: How can we resolve the fundamental

paradox of this profession and get it out of our heads?"

If humans want to survive in this biosphere they should learn to "co-exist, co-operate and flourish in the biosphere" (Glotfelty 107) " The answer lies in recognizing that current environmental problems are largely of our own making, or, in other words, a by-product of culture" (Glotfelty xxi).

WORKS CITED

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Cambridge, MA: Havard University Press, 1995
- Ezekiel, Nisssim. *Collected Poems*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Frederick, Suresh. "Suicidal Motive": An ecocritical Reading of Four Poems", *Essays in Ecocriticism*, eds Salvamony, Nirmaldasan and Alex. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons 2007.
- Glotfelty Cheryll and Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Litrerary Ecology*. Athens GA and London: University of Georgia Press. 1996
- Howarth, William. "Ecocriticism in Context". *The Green Studies Reader From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. Edited by Laurence Coupe, London and New York: Routledge 2000
- Ramanujan A.K. *Selected Poems*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1983
- Reuckert, William. "Into and Out of the Void: Two Essays." *Iowa review* 9. I (winter 1978): 62-86. Second Essay rpt, as "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in Glotfley and Fromm.