

An Eco-critical Approach to Indian Writing

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to study the ecocritical aspects in the fiction of Indian author's like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandya, Amitav Ghosh, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Ruskin Bond, and Anita Desai. Since ages literature is well known for reflecting society, contemporary issues and human activities. There is an abundance of literature which uses nature and landscape as its background. Man and nature interact on various levels, beneficial or mutually destructive. At the same time the continuous interference of man in natural activities has posed a threat both to himself and to the environment. If this is not attended to, it will lead to irreparable damage.

KEYWORDS

Ecocriticism, Contemporary Issues, Society, Indian Fiction.

Literature and environment are always intertwined in a strong relationship as is evident in the works of writers through the ages. The consciousness of writers has brought the two disciplines, ecology and literature, together again and again. Their intention has been to admire nature as a guide, guardian and mother (Wordsworth), as a supernatural force (Coleridge), or in more contemporary texts to save the earth's environment which is being destroyed due to man's mishandling.

Work has been done on ecocriticism or 'green studies' in USA and UK. For ecocritics the nineteenth century developments in literature are 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. Don DeLillo, a contemporary American author has in his *Underworld* (1988) highlighted the issue of managing dumping of waste which is leading to deterioration of environment. If we peep into the history of Indian literature we find many prominent writers contributing in this direction.

The word 'ecocriticism' was first used by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. He defines ecocriticism as "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 of the world" (1996: 107). Peter Barry added a chapter titled "Ecocriticism" to the second edition of his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and*

Cultural Theory (1995). Thomas K. Dean considers Eco-criticism as “a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.)... in some way is connected with the human relationship to the natural world”. He extends his explanation of ecocriticism as “a response to needs, problems, or crises, depending on one’s perception of urgency” (Dean 1994 p. 1). Ecocriticism is a field that bridges the gap between literature and science.

This research is an attempt to explore the representation of nature, as landscape as well as metaphor. It will attempt to look into the various ways in which nature has merged in and has been imagined by different writers in India. At the onset of the 21st century, nature forces us to bring it to the centre stage. We must attempt to address the issue of nature in this highly technical and commercial world, through an exploration and analysis of modern Indian literature

We find impressions of nature study in the fiction of some post-World War-II, Bengali writers such as, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Advaita Mallabarman and Samaresh Basu in *A Boatman of Padma*(1936), *A River Called Titash* (1950) and *Ganga* (1957), respectively. All these novels are about rivers which both support life and sometimes become destroyers of fishermen and boatmen. These tradesmen through their labor and struggle for livelihoods reshape the riverine environment into a vibrant arena of social life. All the three novels depict the day to day struggle for survival and how this process of interdependence and cooperation between the fishermen, boatmen, small farmers and their river centric environment affect each other’s existence. But, as Raymond Williams aptly points out, “when nature is separated out from the activities of men, it even ceases to be nature in any full and effective sense” (16).

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers* (1947), is a deeply moving work of art. We find in it an element of keen observation of men and life. It is about pain, fear, misery, hunger, suffering and sacrifice, largely due to man-made famine leading to the death of millions. He talks about the most horrifying real event in the history of India i.e., the Bengal famine of 1943. It is a heart-rending representation of the hunger for food, starvation and ultimate death, the other face of nature. It is a lacerating account of the naked horror through cumulative details and absorbing description. It is about the suffering of the two families living in the village of Baruni and Calcutta due to the famine. The characters believe that they have been punished for their sins committed in the past. He deals with a similar theme in *He Who Rides a Tiger*.

We also find impressions of ecocriticism in Kamla Markandya’s *Nectar in the Sieve*. But here the perspective is opposite, being the other face of nature. This fiction deals with ‘The Flood,’ i.e. nature trying to control humans, it being in the destruction state. This leads to the poor and pathetic conditions of the victims of flood. When it became a threat to human lives, it is then that it became a matter of global concern.

The Hungry Tide is a survey on an endangered eco system—the Sunderbans in the Bay of Bengal. It is written by a versatile contemporary writer, Amitav Ghosh. The Sunderbans in the Bay of Bengal are some islands which people share with animals. The condition of their living is much inferior to animals. The predicament the inhabitants suffer due to unwanted, unexpected tidal surges and tiger attacks show a serious ecological calamity on earth. The purpose is to create an awareness to help prepare action plans for the safety of the settlers.

Ghosh says that the environmental decline in the Sundarbans in his lifetime has been very obvious and very shocking

(Ferdous&Rutsch 51). Birdlife, fish and crabs, and certain trees and plants have become extremely rare and their absence is clearly felt. The loss of marine mammal populations is part of this “catastrophe” (51). He feels there is “incredible urgency” to these ecological issues and this comes out very clearly in the novel, contributing significantly to its ecological tone (51). One of his characters, Nirmal, watching his beloved landscape, is in no doubt that it is in terrible decline:

Age teaches you to recognize the signs of death... Now it was as if I could see those signs everywhere, not just in myself, but in this place that I had lived in for almost thirty years. The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. (215)

Amitav Ghosh talks about the precarious life of people living in the Sundarbans. Christopher Rollason describes the novel as:

[an] exploration of the vast field of human communication, testing both its possibilities and its limits as the characters seek to cross multiple barriers – the barriers of language, religion and social class, those between human beings and nature, between traditional and cosmopolitan India, between urban and rural, between India and the wider world. (2)

Thus, Amitav Ghosh’s novel is an ideal example of a contemporary author grappling with literature’s potential to address ecological issues.

Similarly, Raja Rao, one of the most eminent writers, has used the environmental setting in *Kanthapura* depicting the relationship between man and nature. He uses rivers and mountains to emphasize the importance of nature in man’s life. The river, the temple and ‘Malgudi’ have an indispensable place in

R.K. Narayan’s fiction. Moreover, Malgudi has been a background to about ten novels by Narayan, becoming the ‘Hero’ in the words of Prof. Iyengar (Saxena 26).

We also find glimpses of nature in the fiction of Ruskin Bond, who lived in the lush green scenic environment of Dehradun and Mussoorie. His short stories reflect his ardent belief in the nurturing aspect of environment. In the stories for children like, ‘An Island of Trees’, ‘No Room for Leopard’, ‘Copperfield in the Jungle’, ‘The Tree Lover’, ‘The Cherry Tree’, and ‘All Creatures Great and Small’, which truly follow their titles, explores themes like deforestation and its after effects, saying no to hunting, and the relationship of man and nature. He is sympathetic towards nature, be it living or non-living.

Another important writer of this age writing about nature is Anita Desai. We find a strong presence of animals, plants, birds and external images of landscape in her psychological novels. It is interesting to note that in her *Cry, the Peacock*, we are taken into the mind of the character through the external landscape. This novel is a story of a lady Maya, who is not happy after her marriage. She compares herself with a peacock, which fights with its male partner before mating. Sadly this novel ends with Maya pushing her husband off the roof resulting in his death. In her *Clear Light of Day*, Monisha, the female protagonist, feels herself to be encaged like a pitiable bird. Finally, to gain freedom, she has to commit suicide. Anita Desai has also discussed the problem of inhumanity towards animals and has used the landscape, especially the mountains of Kanchenjunga, to tell the changing circumstances or the mood in *The Inheritance of Loss*. The sad mood of a child is reflected through Kanchenjunga, which is believed to have paid for the brutality of human beings by losing its beauty. Her novel is suitable for ecocritical study.

Thus, writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandya, Amitav

Ghosh, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Ruskin Bond, and Anita Desai, through their literature, have drawn attention towards depiction of natural beauty as well as nature's disastrous face in the form of natural calamities like flood, famines, etc. These writers desire to speak for the natural world in literature. Many of them tried to describe what man has done to despoil nature but few come up with suggestions as to how we can overcome or reverse the damage that has been done. Is man and the writer a mute witness, or just

a sensitive observer, or can he suggest what to do now? In our race towards modernity, are we capable of saving our natural landscape or is it doomed for destruction? Finally, it is, to a great extent, to be decided by man which faces of nature he wants to see. Wordsworth could never have seen this face of nature which the Indian writer sketches in these texts.

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