

Eco-critical Overtones in Indian English Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Stories are one of the most ingenious and convenient ways in which history travels. They can transmit historical events with great ease, give a glimpse of contemporary society, and portray realistic pictures so the reader can envision what the contemporary world would have been like. In the present research paper, an effort will be made to chart out the course of the prevalence of environmental destruction in Indian English fiction by focusing on selected novels. An effort will also be made to explore the implicit relationship between man and nature. The research paper would be directed towards trying to find an answer to how Indian English Fiction, right from its inception, responds to the issue of environmental deterioration. The association between humans and nature is a reciprocal one. Nature does not work as a background tool; it is the very protagonist in the story of humanity as he himself is. Eco-criticism studies the correlation between human culture and the physical world. Nature doesn't differentiate. It is a human doing. The works of Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arvind Adiga and Salman Rushdie are deeply rooted in the interconnectedness between man and nature.

KEYWORDS

Eco-criticism; Nature; Exploitation; Destruction; Harmony.

The global environmental crisis, pollution, overpopulation, loss of species, and degradation of resources are some problems that lead to the emergence of a field of study which is concerned with nature and nature-related aspects. This field is known as Eco-criticism and it is an interdisciplinary approach in which scientific, social, and artistic concerns are considered simultaneously. The idea popularizes as "literary ecology" has been suggested by Joseph Meeker in his work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. The term "eco-criticism" is to be credited to William Rueckert who in his 1978 essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* brought it to

popular culture. The definition of eco-criticism was given by Cheryll Glotfelty, who is also known as the "father" of eco-criticism. Glotfelty in her critical book *The Ecocriticism Reader* asserts that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment." (Glotfelty xviii). It is said to be a theory that reflects the relationship between the environment and human life. Pramod K. Nayar states that eco-criticism:

is the analytical practice that shows us various contours of the real world. Eco-criticism focuses on the material contexts of industrialization, development,

pollution, and ecocide while developing a frame of reading. (Nayar 241).

There are various other terms used for eco-criticism like green criticism, ecological poetics and environmental criticism.

Greg Garrard asserts:

The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part concealed in a great many cultural places. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as a response to the environmental crisis. (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 4)

In America, this theory is known as Eco-criticism while in Britain the term Green Studies is more prevalent. Before eco-criticism came into effect, more focus was laid on cultural and linguistic backgrounds while analyzing texts but this theory states that along with linguistic and cultural backgrounds, nature is also an important factor. Every work depends on the forces of nature. When the idea of eco-criticism was converted into theory it got divided into two major parts. Initially, the rules of the environment were discussed and analyzed with respect to nature and its elements present in the literature. Later on, the focus shifted to several other approaches like deep ecology, eco-spiritualism, eco-racism, eco-feminism, pastoral, wilderness, etc.

In Simon C. Estok's *Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of 'Home' and 'Power' in King Lear*, it is stated that:

ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and secondly by its commitment to make

connections....Ecocriticism, therefore, is not simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function - thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise- of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds. (16)

Lawrence Buell used the phrase "waves of eco-criticism" in his work *The Future of Environmental Criticism* to describe the development of eco-criticism. The 1980s mark the beginning of eco-criticism considered as the first wave of this approach and in his opinion, it mainly explored literary non-fiction, nature writing, nature poetry, representation of wilderness in literature, etc. The second wave started in the mid-1990s when critics talked about environmental justice, and social eco-criticism and emphasized urban and degraded landscapes. Lawrence states that the prominent difference that separates the first wave from the second is that the former is concerned more about rural and wild spaces in comparison to urban, while the second wave rejected the difference between rural and urban spaces. Eco-criticism in its third wave has been observed between the years 2000 to 2009 and this movement became popular with the work entitled *The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline* by Scott Slovic. As Slovic mentions, the "third wave" particularly concerns the explosive diversity of themes and approaches like eco-masculinity, green queer theory, material eco-feminism, animal studies, etc. Every human being should have an innate understanding of one's role on earth and should be aware of one's effects on the environment and everything which is

connected to it. It also includes preserving nature at its core. The word nature here not only includes flora and fauna but also includes mountains, water bodies, air, sky, and soil along with each and everything that makes our earth habitable. Eco-critics opine that natural disasters like volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, droughts etc are not the real danger to earth but human activities that exploit resources and harm the environment are more dangerous. Humans have impacted the planet to the extent that the Earth's whole ecological system has been falling apart. Human beings have done an irreversible impact on the earth which has caused global warming, habitat loss for flora and fauna, extinction of wild species, depletion of fossil fuels etc. Human activities have altered the earth's natural cycle. This present time in which we are living is also referred to as the Anthropocene period because of man's destructive attitude towards the environment. The main goal of ecological movements is to eradicate the destruction and exploitation of nature by human actions. In eco-criticism, we tend to discuss and examine issues related to the environment in literature.

The present research work aims to analyze Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and attempts to spread awareness about the ongoing climate crisis. It aims to revive the connection between man and nature.

Rachel Carson in her work *Silent Spring* asserts:

The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is, for the most part, irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support but in living tissues is, for the most part,

irreversible. (Carson 5)

Arundhati Roy's award-winning novel *The God of Small Things* deals with the deterioration of the environment in order to develop and modernize and demonstrates her extensive observation of the ongoing climate crisis. She speaks out for nature which is deteriorating day by day due to human activities. She also attempts to analyze man's lack of sympathy and indifference to nature and highlights the irreversible damage done to the environment. With the degradation of nature, there has been a gradual decline in nature's healing power and relaxing sensation. The condition of the river Meenachal has degraded from a flourishing entity portraying nature in its full bloom to

the thin ribbon of thick water that tapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with occasional silver of dead fish. The natural surroundings and animal habitat are like never before; it changed for the bad. Animals like elephants are dying due to electric current and some species of insects, e.g., moth, are on the verge of extinction. (Roy 123)

When Rahel visited Ayemenem after a year, Meenachal "greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed." (Roy 124) Overuse of chemicals made the water unfit for all the biotic components resulting in the death of aquatic animals. Due to encroachment, the river has become narrower and flooded with addictive weed plants. For excessive production of rice, people destroyed the river. Estha realizes that the riverside has degraded to an unchangeable extent where it is devoid of life and the essence of nature. People dumped their waste such as plastic bags and bottles, fertilizers, pesticides, faecal waste etc in the river which has given it the picture of a "sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to

the sea.” (Roy 124)

Arundhati Roy is trying to draw attention to the faulty development programs fostered by the loss of natural habitats. Due to overpopulation, animal habitats are disrupted. Industrialization and urbanization have harmed the flora and fauna, and the greed for growth and expanding economy has caused plants and animals to suffer. The government has failed to control industries from dumping sewerage in the river. Agrochemicals such as weedicides, insecticides, pesticides and fertilizers can cause reproductive and organ dysfunction. Arundhati Roy criticized the import of fertilizers and pesticides and their harmful effects under the Green Revolution and aims to encourage people to do the needful for the preservation of the environment.

The interconnection between nature and man is of critical importance in the works of Anita Desai. The writer’s use of imagery provides insight into the world/province of the female psyche that has been unexplored. Desai attempts to portray the plight of her characters through nature images. In the novel *Cry, The Peacock*, the images of nature help the reader to understand Maya’s view of life and her emotionally and mentally twisted self and attempt to explore the protagonist’s psychology. It suggests the theme of loneliness and denial. It is difficult for her to accept the death of her pet. Toto’s death reveals her obsession with darkness and gloominess.

All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved on to the veranda for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms. Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and the crows will eat anything – entrails, eyes, anything. (Desai 7)

Maya is suffering from alienation and behaves indifferently and estranged. Her married life with Gautam is disturbing and

cold. She craves love and intimacy but hesitates to describe her feelings:

It was that something else, that indefinable unease at the back of my mind, the grain of sand that it irked, itched, and remained meaningless...the giant shadows cast by trees...with horrifying swiftness... I leapt from my chair in terror, overcome by a sensation of snakes coiling and uncoiling their moist limbs about me, of evil descending ...heralded by deafening drum beats. (Desai 17)

Maya desires for a child and being not able to have one is another reason for her anxious behaviour. She feels unsettled due to her infertility issues. She notes:

Leafless, the fine tracery on the naked neem trees revealed unsuspected, so far carefully concealed, nests, deserted by the birds....Down the street, the silk-cotton trees were the first to flower: their huge, scarlet blooms, thick petaled, solid-podded ... then dropped to the asphalt and were squashed into soft, yellowish miasma, seemed animal rather than flowerage, so large were they, so heavy, so moist and living to the touch. (Desai 34)

The silk cotton trees filled with blossoms indicate the miserable truth of Maya’s aridness. The pigeon’s nest filled with babies reminds her of bareness. Through the cooing of doves, she recalls her loveless life. Maya’s lamentable situation is intensified when she notices the rats and compares them with her infertility which further points to the barrenness of her life at large. Anita Desai describes the protagonist Maya as “the beds of petunias...sentimental irresolute flowers,” (Desai 21). At the same time, Gautama’s character is intensified through “the blossoms of the lemon tree ...stronger,

crisper character” (Desai 21) Maya’s thought on the peacocks establishes the void she feels in her relationship with Gautama. She is depressed after seeing “laboratory monkeys” in cages. She feels pity and resembles her degrading condition:

And one that I saw was perfectly still and quiet.... Its bow was lined with foreboding and the suffering of a tragic calamity, and its hands, folded across its thin belly, waited to accept it. Then it spied something on the platform beside itIt was only a monkey-nut shell, empty. A small whimper broke from the animal...then was silent again, waiting. (Desai 130)

Maya eventually decides to murder Gautama as he is responsible for all the unhappiness in her life. She states:

Storms I had known before. Rain storms, thunder-storms, dust-storms....But this waiting with not a rumble of thunder, not a whirl of wind to mark the beginning of the end. And it was the end that I waited for. The beginning had begun long ago, was even forgotten.... I had waited too long – another day would be one too many. (Desai 154)

For Maya, the dust storm symbolizes the time for destruction. She is determined that this is the right time to attain freedom from all the suffering:

Ah, storm, storm, wonderful, infidel storm, blow, blow! I cried and ran and ran on and on from room to room, laughing as maniac laugh once the world gives them up and surrenders them to their freedom.... Frightened? No! I ran from the thought, laughing. Oh no, what need for fright.... It is only relief I promise you, you shall see – I swear – survive.... (Desai 158)

Maya tries to get away from her pain in the same way as peacocks do “Pia, pia” they cry. “Lover, lover. Mio, mio, - I die, I die”

(Desai 82). She murdered her husband without any hesitation and now she decided to end her life.

Kiran Desai’s novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* deals with the issues of ecological catastrophe - global warming and its effects. The writer highlights the reasons accountable for the increase in temperature and the factors responsible for the famine. She portrays the association between human and nature, human and human, human and self. The novel is set in Shahkot, a district in Punjab and opens up with news that raises a significant issue of the rise in temperature and therefore suggests a call for help regarding Global Warming. People here are facing lots of problems due to the sudden temperature rise. Shahkot has recorded the highest temperature over the years. They are doing efforts to bring rain and have so many proposals for the same such as Iraq’s effort at producing artificial conditions for climate change and attracting monsoon winds to their side. Another idea to bring rain is to draw their belief towards orthodox means such as using musical instruments to appease Gods. The third idea is that the “Army proposed the scattering and driving of clouds by jet planes flying in a special geometric formation” (K. Desai 1) When a natural disaster occurs, the entire society attempts to come up with a solution. The actions they perform reflect the rituals and beliefs of their culture. The main character of the novel Sampath Chawla- a clerk by profession flees from his house and seeks shelter in a guava orchard.

All about him the orchard was spangled with the sunshine of a November afternoon webbed by the reflections of the shifting foliage and filled with liquid intricacy of sun and shadow. The warmth nuzzled against his cheek like the muzzle of an animal and, as his heartbeat grew quiet, he could hear the soft popping and rustling of

plants being warmed to their different scents all about him. How beautiful it was here, how exactly as it should be (K. Desai 50)

The guava orchard is described as breathtakingly beautiful, pious and peaceful:

here and there were sprinkling of wild flowers with the colour and fragrance of fruit, flowers with gaping mouths and tongues that left the devotees tiger stripped with pollen as they passed by that waves their anthers and brandished their stamens, that sent such scents up into the air, nobody could help lowering their noses into their fragrant petals (K. Desai 98)

Sampath experienced the therapeutic touch of nature and witnessed a prayer-like silence between the trees. As he clambered on the guava tree, he sensed composure and restfulness. Kiran Desai described the orchard in the most pious, unblemished and unpolluted form. All living creatures can benefit from the

spiritual illumination of nature. Nature represents unending happiness and symbolises calmness and liberty. Sampath abandoned the world and entered the guava orchard in search of equanimity and fulfilment.

Nature in Indian English writings is a symbol of contentment and solitude. Through the protagonist's interaction with the environment, the novelists explain their perspective on life and the world. Nature is prominently depicted in these works, which makes them appropriate for eco-critical and eco-cultural analysis for a better understanding of the human-nature relationship and trying to uncover the dimensions of this association. Authors have attempted to examine how man's interface with nature may lead to re-evaluating the future of the ecosystem and the human race. The writers attempt to express their sensibilities and convey their emotions with the help of natural imagery and announce the exploration of the self within an ecological context.

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