

ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

“Ecology is the science of all the relation of all organisms to their environments” (Tayler). Man cannot be considered in isolation from his environment. He is a social animal, and as Darwin proved “a product of a long process called evolution” in which the ecological balance played a decisive role. “As literature engages with life and everything in the world, it must also engage with the environment” says Murali Sivaram krishnan. Hence it become highly imperative that we as literary scholars should deliberate about environment as about other human issues, so that we can provide a new perspective and find alternative solutions. This paper attempts to explore the critical and creative approach of writers like Tina Morris, Alice Walker, Walt Whitman, Charles Dickens, Bacon, Mahatma Gandhi, Arundatti Roy and the romantic poets like Wordsworth, and to study the ecological relationship between literature and physical environment.

KEYWORDS: Ecology, Environment, Deforestation, Degradation, Nature.

Literature is a mirror or representative of the age in which it is written. It always reflects the social, economic, political and environmental concerns of man. The term ‘Environment’ etymologically means surroundings. Literally, it is an English word formed by two words i.e. ‘environ’ and ‘ment’ which means ‘encircle’ or ‘all round’. Thus environment is a complex of many variables which surround man as well as living organisms. Any external force or substance, condition which surrounds and affects the life of organisms in any way is called environmental factor or ecological factor. “Ecology is the science of all the relation of all organisms to their environments” (Tayler). Man cannot be considered in isolation from his environment. He is a social animal, and as Darwin proved it “a product of a long process called evolution” in which the ecological balance played a decisive role. Human life is directly related to nature but man has exploited Mother Nature to the optimum value leaving behind a trail of degraded and diminished landscape and the incomensurable damage to the ecosystem. The existence of life on earth is highly mystifying and incredible and the so called development has brought about the spectra of an overwhelming degradation of all facets of natural environment. The quality of life is affected paradoxically through the very means, which are intended to improve it. “As literature engages with life and everything in the world, it must also engage with the environment” says Murali Sivaramkrishnan. Hence it become highly imperative that we as literary scholars should deliberate about environment as about other human issues, so that we can provide a new perspective and find alternative solutions. This paper attempts to explore the critical and creative

approach of writers like Tina Morris, Alice Walker, Walt Whitman, Charles Dickens, Bacon, Mahatma Gandhi, Arundatti Roy and the romantic poets like Wordsworth and to study the ecological relationship between literature and physical environment.

Man can use nature to a certain extent according to his needs by his human skill, mental ability, scientific development and technical know-how. This Griffith Taylor defines as follows:

Man is able to accelerate, slow or stop the progress or a country’s development. But he should not, if he is wise, depart from the directions as indicated by the natural environment. He is like the traffic controller in a large city, who alters the rate but not the directions of progress.

According to the concept, nature provides opportunity for man to use these possibilities according to their wisdom. But man is not free from the control of nature. In this reference Francis Bacon’s saying is significant that “Nature can be conquered only by obeying her”. The whole world and its society has to work in complete harmony with nature – this balance is a creative force. William Wordsworth in ‘Three Years she grew in Sun and Shower’ embodies the poet’s unflinching faith in nature’s training. The faith of the poet is expressed through the account of the care that nature gives to Lucy. Nature moulds the personality of human beings. She is the mother and guardian of man, Wordsworth offers this message by bringing Lucy who is under the influence of nature. The promise that nature makes is to produce at almost perfect woman and in doing so she reveals the methods by which she works to create the complex unity

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of a living being. Lucy is not a particular person so much as the representative of all the organic living beings. Nature will be both 'law and impulse' to her, so that she will feel an overseeing power to kindle or restrain. Her being moulds not only by physical forces but also her response to the patterns which she perceives in the universe. She is fully aware the ruling power of the nature over all the objects of environment like valley, bower or the plains. But her untimely and premature death takes her away from the lap of nature. The death of Lucy is the destruction of the environment. And this degradation is taking man away from the nature as he has failed to disobey the 'law and impulse' of nature. The death of Lucy has left the poet alone because he would never see Lucy again. Similarly man's destroying of nature and his disobedience of the laws of the environment has left him helpless and there is nothing left but a memory, which by its very existence deepens the sense of loss:

She died, and left to me
This heath, this claim and quiet scene
This memory of what has been
And never more will be.

This expresses Wordsworth's ecological concern with how man tempering with environmental laws and man's disconnect from nature. This 'claim and quiet scene' is the scene after the death and degradation of environmental death. And the environment will 'never more will be' the same as no amount of efforts can restore the damage done by man.

The earth is our mother and 'the earth does not belong to man, Man belongs to the earth'. Bowman in his work '*Geography and Social Science*' writes "although man has utilized nature from his benefits, there is a limit to such utilization". The Herculean feats of economic gains and development have been at the cost of deforestation. Deforestation is one of the outcomes of various developmental activities having the character of extensional development. In fact it has wreaked havoc by thoughtless cutting down of trees. Degradation of environment by the ruthless cutting down of trees is the major concern of the poetess Tina Morris:

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.

Man's unplanned and unwise cutting of the trees has alarming impact on the future generation. Deforestation is proceeding at an alarming rate depleting the genetic store.

We wait in vain
For the slow unfurling of birds
And no amount of loving
can stir our weary tree
to singing.

Mahatma Gandhi was a true crusader. His environmental views are very relevant during this day and age with giant looming threat of climatic change and also the alarming depletion of natural resources. Gandhi presents views for sustainable use of resources and minimal damage to the environment. He highlights the requirement for significant synergy between rural and industrial development when he writes:- "The earth, the air, the land and the water were not an inheritance from our forefathers but a loan from our children. So we have to handover to the next generation at least as it was handed over to us".

In his book 'Hind Sawaraj' he warned humanity - "Earth provides the whole world and its society is working in complete harmony with nature – this balance is a creative force enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed."

In the 19th century England, mega technology created problems of waste disposal and industrial revolution became a great hazard to the environment as well as humanity. The writings of Charles's Dickens provide vivid images of environmental conditions, inadequate hygienical practices, child abuse and other social maladies of the day. In *A Tale of Two Cities* he indicates the environmental degradation and environmental pollution due to industrialization.

The uncontrollable and hopeless mass of decompositions so engendered, would have polluted the

air, even if poverty and deprivation has not loaded it with their intangible purities; the twp bad sources combined make it almost unsupportable. (Two Cities)

Urbanization and overpopulation is another environmental issue responsible for many health hazards. Charles Dickens voices this concern through a famous character, Ebenezer Scrooge who said that the poor people “rather die, then they had better do it and decrease the surplus population.”

Man has tried to conquer, humanize, domesticate, isolate and exploit every natural thing. In this connection Ian McHarg’s mandate in his book *Design with Nature* is important:

Each individual has a responsibility for entire biosphere and is required to engage in creative and cooperative activities.

As teachers, readers and scholars of literature, it becomes imperative to formulate an ecological poetics to promote an ecological vision. Alice Walker in all her writings is an eco-feminist comparing the degradation of the Earth with the subordination, and degradation of women of the racial minorities, the poor and the marginalized:-

Earth itself has become the nigger of the world
while the earth is poisoned, everything it supports
is poisoned. While the Earth is enslaved, none of us
is free, while it is treated like dirt so are we (LBW, 147).

Walker feels that the Earth will take its revenge if we do not care for it, treat it with reverence and respect and worship nature. Talking about man’s connection with the environment, the earth, plant and animals she writes:

I have a deep sense of oneness with the planet; the cosmos. Man is part of the universe and cannot be considered in isolation, I believe the Earth is good.

Like Alice Walker, Arundhati Roy, a writer and activist is also true environmentalist. Her ecological concerns find expression in all her works especially ‘The God of Small Things’. She illustrates the decay and destruction of the village Ayemenem and the water pollution of its river Meenachal. Illustrating the difference of sight twenty three years before and after she laments:

June and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that

lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with the occasional silver slant of dead fish. It was chocked with a succulent weed, whose furred brown roots waved like then. Bronze winged lily trotters walked across----- a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea and it smelled of shit, pesticides bought with World Bank Loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from tin-rot and had broken out in boils. (GOST-)

The above image of a polluted river is not only of Meenachal but of every river of the present century. This environmental pollution is the result of man’s unplanned and unwise use of natural resources and waste disposal, if the present trend continues, the river in the next few decades will be more polluted, less stable ecologically and more vulnerable to health hazards.

The basic praxim of Ecology is: “We are not free to violate nature”. And the role of man in ecology is very tragic. The essential postulate of Ecology and Tragedy is that human precipitates tragic consequence by acting either in ignorance of or without properly understanding the true consequences of their action. We have a tendency of violating the laws of nature, and the retribution from the biosphere will be more terrible than inflicted on humans by the God. All the examples from various literary works are the visions of the writers which come from finely developed and refined ecological conscience and consciousness. Rephrasing an old adage, we can say that “where there is no ecological vision, the people will perish”. Bringing literature and ecology together is not enough, this vision needs to enter our political, economic, social and technological visions of the day because as Barry Commoner affirms- “this literary heritage has not been enough to save us from ecological disaster” it is essential that vision should manifest in action.

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