


Environmental Literature and Ecocriticism - A Study

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Abstract

The paper aims at studying the significance of Environmental Literature and Eco criticism from a humanitarian perspective. The study is based on the critical analysis of the secondary data, collected through sources such as books, Magazines, review of related articles from Newspapers, Journals, Internet and Govt. Websites. While narrating the tradition of Environmental literature and Eco criticism the paper examines with illustrations how the concern and care for our environment has been expressed in the select literary texts (both fiction and nonfiction) and genres of different periods of time. Further the paper makes an attempt to throw light upon what reformative influence it had upon the society in general. The paper concludes with the reflections upon the emerging trends in the approaches towards Environmental Literature and Eco- criticism.

Keywords: Significance, Humanitarian, Perspective, Analysis, Tradition, Illustrations, Genres, Reformative, Reflections, Emerging Trends

Objectives

1. To explore the tradition of Environmental Literature and Eco-criticism.
2. To discuss the origin and development of Environmental Literature and Eco-criticism.
3. To examine and analyse the environmental concern as presented in the select literary texts (both fiction and non-fiction) from the eco-critical perspective.
4. To reflect upon the emerging trends in the field of Environmental Literature and Eco-criticism while highlighting the achievements of the writers in influencing and educating the society to save this Planet from further environmental degradation, imminent because of man's greedy, selfish and thoughtless intervention in the ways of nature.

Introduction

Literature is life seen through the medium of imagination, of temperament. It is not just for entertainment, nor only for delight that we read literature, for literature has a greater responsibility towards society and all living beings, so to say. Literature is not for its own sake, as many great writers have said as they believed, upheld and justified. For, literature is for life's sake. It mirrors the realities of life from various perspectives. In all its multiple forms, genres, styles and techniques irrespective of languages literature presents, represents, life, living beings, nature, flora and fauna, our surroundings, environment, you and I and everything under the Sun..... what more, now, sky is not the limit, it has transcended these limitations, for, anything or even nothing could be the subject matter for literature. The advent of modernism, technology, digital technology has never posed any threat to the perennial sources of literature.

It is a well-known fact that Nature, Environment, our surroundings have always made a very endearing subject matter, theme and content for several writers from the time immemorial. And for them, Nature makes not just a setting or a scenic backdrop, what is more enlightening is the healing influence of the immense beauty of the different dimensions of Nature on man.

Tradition of Environmental Literature

Before the emergence of Environmental Literature and eco-criticism as a genre, writers focussed on ideas, situations and images associated with nature. They were greatly inspired by the different facets and aspects of Nature and hence they portrayed, depicted and described vividly its hues, shapes, forms with a great passion and adoration. William Wordsworth, a 19th century Romantic poet, who is ever remembered as a poet of Nature, describes the beauty of Nature in all its entirety in his poetry in such a way that he sees a friend, philosopher, guide and a teacher in Nature and it makes an eternal source of joy, which can be revived and relived in times of need. To Nature, he attributes human qualities and finds divine elements in all its objects. It is this 'Deification', 'Pantheism' differentiates Wordsworth from the rest of the poets of nature. Similarly, the three major American writers of the Nineteenth Century, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), Margaret Fuller (1810-50), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), celebrate nature, the life force and wilderness as manifested in America. Emerson narrates the influence of the natural world upon him in his reflective essay ref "Nature". Margaret Fuller's "Summer on the Lakes, during 1843, describes her opinion about the American Landscape at large. And Thoreau's "Walden" is about his experience when he stayed in a hut on the shore of Walden Pond. Passion for Nature makes a rich source for the writers of different periods of time irrespective of the genres.

Origin and Development of Environmental Literature and Eco-Criticism

It is rightly said that the tradition of Environmental Literature and Eco-criticism can be traced back in the writings on nature. The term 'environment' originates from the French word 'environ'. It

means 'surrounded' or 'encircled'. The oxford dictionary mentions 1603 as the date of the first usage of environment. And eco-criticism is the study of literature from an ecological or environmental perspective. It is interdisciplinary. It focusses on the analysis of depictions life and the connections between literature and nature which many writers have brought out very effectively in their writings. The subject matter, theme of Environmental literature was at first nature itself and its change over time. The writers of Environmental Literature portray the physical impact of humans on the Earth's land, water, atmosphere and biosphere. They illustrate how humans use nature, present the environmental consequences of increasing population, the environmental and human consequences of industrial and technological revolutions. To put it in simple terms, Environmental literature is a branch of literature deals with nature or environment-oriented works of fiction. The term 'Environmental Literature' gained momentum in the 1960's when various Environmental Movements created platform for the explosion of themes on environment, nature and ecosystem. Critics with eco-critical perspective encourage the society or the readers to think seriously about the relationship of humans to Nature, about the environmental crisis and the importance of language and literature in imparting values with ecological implications.

It is really interesting to mention here that some of the poems written by William Wordsworth, Romantic poet of the nineteenth century, who is popular as a poet of Nature anticipate the emergence of Environmental literature and eco-criticism. Wordsworth believes that "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; Our meddling intellect Misshapes the beautiful forms of things: We murder to dissect". ("Tables Turned" from "The Lyrical Ballads"- 1798) It is with this faith, he regrets the attitude of the people of his times towards Nature, for, it seems to him that having been blessed with the materialistic prosperity, they have forgot to enjoy and appreciate the beauty of Nature. It pains him to see that they are interested only in 'getting and spending' and that they have 'sold their hearts to a sordid boon'. Hailing from the Lake district of England, he depicts the beauty of Nature to his heart's content but resents that 'From this, from

everything, we are out of tune (The World is Too much With Us) Wordsworth criticizes the world of the First Industrial Revolution for being absorbed in materialism and distancing itself from nature. In one of his poems, Ode on Intimations of Immortality though it has been written in a different context and situation and in a different period of time, it is relevant, till date even to our times- “Wither is fled that gleam?” Yes, that is the predicament at present. Environmental crisis-manmade, deforestation, depletion of natural resources, disappearance of flora and fauna, rapid urbanization, modernization man’s greed and selfishness, too much of passion for materialistic comforts and pleasures – all in the name of progress and development, but at what cost?! Man has interfered with the ways of nature to that extent that our Environment has been harmed, eco-system has been disturbed which in turn has had its dangerous impact upon all living beings across the world. It is not an exaggeration to say that man in his pursuit of ‘materialistic pleasures’, has inflicted an irreparable damage upon nature. Dams, bridges, Metros, Skywalks, underpass have decorated our cities replacing centuries old trees. Industries, auto-mobiles have polluted our environment. Modernization, urbanization have destroyed the Natural habitats of birds, beasts. Many of our rare species of birds and animals are on the verge of extinction. Alan Brownjohn (1931-2024) an English poet and novelist, who has penned the poem The Rabbit, in which he speaks about the ecological disaster brought upon the world by mankind’s anti-environmental activities. The rabbit of the title is said to be the only rabbit and the final rabbit living in England and the speaker is taking a group to see it for the gesture was ‘Now or never’. The poem draws our attention to such expressions- ‘the only rabbit’, ‘the patch of grass’, and how the people are going to reach their destination, how the place is protected... etc which suggest ironically what is in store for the posterity. The poem voices the poet’s concern with a message that if we do not change our attitude towards nature, like the only rabbit in England, the survival of the human beings on the planet will also be at stake.

The modern environmental movements emerged in the late Nineteenth century and their objective was

to raise their voice against such human activities that harm the environment. In recent years it has given rise to fictional and non-fictional writings everywhere. While explaining our changing relationships to the natural world, they urge to change political and economic systems so that human societies can prosper without causing pollution and inflicting damage upon our environment. Over the past several years, Environmental literature irrespective of place, people, forms and genres has been instrumental in addressing pressing environmental problems. Ramachandra Guha (1958-) an Indian historian, environmentalist, writer and public intellectual has been described as an “apostle of applied human ecology”. It was he who considered Gandhi an early Environmentalist. His book Environmentalism: A Global History gives an account of research in three continents. The book gives a comprehensive explanation about the major trends, ideas, campaigns and thinkers within the environmental movement worldwide. Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South written by Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez Alier presents an analysis of environmental conflicts and ideologies in four continents: North and South America, Asia and Europe. “Even if climate change did not exist, we are an environmental basket case. We have the most polluted cities in the world. Every one of our rivers is biologically dead”, says Ramachandra Guha. There is a concern which urges mankind to stop inflicting further damage on our environment for our own good and the 9said to be the first person to use the term ‘eco-criticism’, published an essay entitled “Literature and Ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism” in which ecological concepts are considered to be the criteria for the study of literature. Cheryl Glotfelty’s defines eco-criticism (The Eco-criticism Reader) as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Eco-criticism as a movement in literature owes much to Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring. Rachel Carson (1907-1964), who is described as a “Nun of Nature” and a “Mother Of all Environmental Movements”, was an American biologist, writer and environmental activist. She is well known for her writings on environmental pollution and the natural history of the sea. In her book, Silent Spring, she

writes about the negative impact of the chemical pesticides on biodiversity. In other words, Carson's main argument in this book is that pesticides have harmful effects on environment.

Environmental issues as literary themes have been the major concern for several writers in literature in the light of their experience of the evil effects of industrialization and urbanization. They present the growing awareness in the society about the ecological challenges through their writings and thereby remind us of our responsibility towards nature and environment. Ruskin Bond (1934-), one of the Indian writers in English, believes that those who live very close to nature are the blessed ones; Nature is the soul of his writings. Like Wordsworth, he finds enchantment in the tiny things in nature. His short stories such as *The Cherry Tree*, *My stories still Grow in Dehra*, *Time Stops at Shamli*, *The Window*, *Dust on the Mountain* portray the importance of the deep bond that exists between man and nature. Arundhati Roy (1961-), An Indian author, in her non-fictional writings and ecocritical literature explores the challenges people face because of the environmental crisis caused by us, human beings only. In her Booker prize winning novel *Gods of Small Things*, she has presented environmental problems as some of the small things have been neglected in the Indian society. She regrets that our environment has been suffering limitless destruction for ages which needs to be addressed. Kamala Markandeya (1924-2002) (the pseudonym of Kamala Purnaiya) a British Indian novelist, Journalist, was one of the Indian novelists writing in English. Like eco-critics, Kamala Markandeya was greatly concerned about the damage inflicted on the environment in the wake of rural industrialization and expressed this very effectively in her maiden novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. In another novel *The Coffers Dams*, she highlights how the changes which the developmental projects bring would be rapid, violent and disorganizing and so she pleads for protection of nature. Indeed, many other writers have enriched Environmental Literature with their writings.

In the West, for eco-criticism of the 19th century, which is also called green studies, Nature, wildness, innocence and simplicity of the people in the country side centre of attention. It has been regarded as one of

the attractive ways of describing nature ever since the publication of William Rueckert's essay *Literature and Ecology* published in 1978. That is the reason why it is also known as the "green theory", appeared in the rural Universities in America in the 1980s and in Britain in the 1990s. In African literature, we find rural setting and Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is set in a village called Umuofia which in Igbo means 'children of the forest'. *Things Fall Apart* exemplifies African village life and its rich culture. Kristina Rungano, a poet from Zimbabwe appeals to the environment in the form of grass, trees, butterflies and the weather to throw light upon social and political issues facing her nation. Her poetry is richly marked by the imagery of the life-giving powers of nature wherein she asserts that African environment wouldn't harm humanity. All the same, the eco-critics make an attempt to analyse, criticize and appreciate the relationship between Environment literature and human life.

Conclusion

Living in the digitalized world of the 21st century, we have been experiencing the harmful effects of our environmental degradation. We have taken our nature and environment for granted without considering the ill effects our indifference and disconnection from the natural world. Excessive use of technology, crave for materialistic progress, Automobiles and Urbanization, Modernization have made us forget the importance of a healthy Environment in our life. We are blinded by our passion for 'what is not' and hence we don't know what kind of future awaits the generations of tomorrows.....! It is true that attempts are being made to stop and control further damage on nature through preventive and relief measures, by the people in power, environmental activists concerned. And Environmental literature and eco-critical writings do have a greater responsibility of educating the society, of promoting environmental awareness. It is a progressive move on the part of the Academicians to have introduced the study of Environmental studies and eco-criticism as a part of the Curriculum at different levels of learning in the educational institutions. Reading, discussion and research Environmental literature can enhance their awareness, strengthen their sense

of responsibility towards their planet and their fellow living beings. Through its portrayal of the natural world, exploration of ecological issues and reflections on the human-nature relationships, ecocriticism encourages the readers to think and act seriously to protect our earth, the only earth we are blessed with. The study of literature and ecology from inter-disciplinary perspective is relevant to our times for literature scholars analyse texts that illustrate environmental concerns, examine and explain the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Environmental literature (both fiction and non-fiction) would have its educative and reformatory influence upon mankind for it imparts knowledge about the principles required for the conservation, utilization of natural resources, protection of flora and fauna for the existence of all living beings. To conclude, it would be impossible for us to visualize the lives of all living beings without Sunlight, freshwater, vegetation and Air. Hence the duty of every one to save the Earth, which we ought to, with care, concern, love and affection.

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