

Ecocriticism: An Earth-Centred Approach to Literary Studies

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Abstract— Most of the approaches to the study of literature and language are anthropocentric in nature as Marxism deals with social class, feminism goes with gender perspective and structuralism and post-structuralism focus linguistic study. Ecocriticism takes a step ahead to study literature from an ecocentric point of view. The British Romanticism and the works 19th century American writers celebrate nature, the life force and wilderness. It can be aptly pointed out that Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm challenges the notion that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed and instead, proposes an ecocritical position. Further, Joseph Meeker has offered ecocritical analysis of literature and provides us a few important objectives of ecocritical analysis of literature. The present paper is an honest attempt to study how Ecocriticism has taken its critical and methodological and earth centred approach to study literature, nature and culture.

Index Terms- Ecocriticism, Anthropocentric and Ecocentric Approach, Ecocritical Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is a critical approach which began in the USA in the late 1980s and in the UK in the early 1990s. It is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. William Rueckert may have been the first person to use the term ecocriticism. In 1978, Rueckert published an essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." His intent was to focus on "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Rueckert in Glotfelty, 1996: 107). Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. Ecocriticism, as a methodological approach, has taken its literary bearings from three major 19th century American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David

Thoreau whose works celebrate nature, the life force and wilderness. It has also taken its bearings from the British Romanticism of the early nineteenth century.

As long as human beings have been writing, and reflecting on what others have written, we have been considering the relationship that we have with the natural world. This began long before Plato and shows no sign of stopping anytime soon. Indeed, because the concept of "nature" has been given so much thought, it is, as an early ecocritic (Raymond Williams) noted, perhaps the most difficult of all ideas to understand. In spite of the fact that nature is such an old and difficult concept, in the 1960s and '70s a number of literary critics, including Lynn White Jr., Leo Marx, Carolyn Merchant, Keith Thomas, and Williams, began considering what literature can tell us about our relationship to the natural world, as well as our current environmental crisis. In many respects, these were the first modern environmental critics. Consequently, the term "ecocriticism" was coined in the 1970s. In the past six or seven years interest in environmental criticism has increased exponentially; it promises to be one of the most important fields of literary study in the 21st century. Though environmental literature is as old as Greek or Sanskrit literatures, ecocriticism as such began only during the 1970s.

Previously, literary studies used to remain too academic and scholarly and excluded any awareness of the outside world. Such methodology or theoretical approaches to criticism as Marxism and Feminism were primarily concerned with class and gender respectively. In spite of there being the global environmental crisis, there was no ecological approach to literature to explore the importance of the earth's life support systems to mankind. It was Cheryl Burgess Glotfelty, the first American professor of literature and the environment, who promulgated the conception of 'ecocriticism' by producing a bibliography which contained more than two hundred

essays and books that bore some relation to the idea of ecocriticism. It was Glotfelty, along with Harold Fromm, who succeeded in promulgating an awareness of ecocriticism by producing an anthology of ecocritical essays, the first of its kind, entitled *The Ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), a collection of different ecocritical essays published in books and journals from the 1970s.

Commenting on the word 'ecocriticism', William Howarth points out that the word *eco*, derived from the Greek *oikos* means house. However, by undergoing a change in its meaning, the word *eco* in English has developed the associations of green, outdoor world. According to Howarth, the business of ecocriticism is to judge "the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (Howarth in Glotfelty, 1996: 69).

For a long time, literary studies concentrated on the concerns of civil rights, equality of minorities, and women's liberation. Race, class and gender were the words which the scholars used in their professional meetings and in their several publications. Comparatively, literary studies failed to respond to the crisis of environmental degradation.

Ecocriticism as an academic discipline began in earnest in the 1990s, although its roots go back to the late 1970s. Because it is a new area of study, scholars are still engaged in defining the scope and aims of the subject. Different scholars have defined 'ecocriticism' in many ways:

Glotfelty has defined ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'. According to her, the fundamental premise of ecological criticism is: "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty, 1996: xix). The subject of ecocriticism is therefore the relationships between human culture and the physical world.

Lawrence Buell defines "ecocriticism' . . . as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell, 2001: 430).

Estok argues that ecocriticism is more than "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" (Estok, 2005: 16-17).

In response to the question of what ecocriticism is or should be, more recently, Camilo Gomides has offered an operational definition that is both broad and discriminating: "The field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations" (Gomides, 2006: 16).

Literature of the Environment is a sub-canon of literature that puts at center stage the natural environment. While this kind of writing has clear ties to nature writing, literature of the environment is construed more broadly to include writings that do not originate, as nature writing tends to, from experiential reflections on the natural world or from observational essays. In this respect, literature of the environment may include texts that are not written in such a way to inspire awe or evoke deep emotional responses about the natural world. Rather, as Lawrence Buell suggests, literature of the environment is literature which is "environmentally oriented," whether this was the author's intention or not. Buell defines an environmentally oriented work by the following criteria:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only Legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (Buell 7, 8)

As the field of ecocriticism has gained momentum within the academy, though, even the term "literature

of the environment” has seemed too restrictive because it requires that a text which may be “about” nature take a particularly ecocentric stance. More recently we see literature courses and anthologies that carry as their heading “literature and the environment” to make room for this burgeoning method of literary and cultural analysis.

By and large, the environmental literary studies started from 1985 with Frederick O. Waage’s essay, “Teaching Environmental Literature: Material, Methods, Resources” that sought to foster “a greater presence of environmental concern and awareness in literary disciplines” (Glotfelty, 1996: xvii). In 1989 Alicia Nitecki founded “The American Nature Writing Newsletter”, whose purpose was to publish brief essays, book reviews, classroom notes, and information pertaining to the study of writing on nature and environment. In 1991 Harold Fromm organized MLA special session of an annual literary conference under the title, “Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies”. In 1992 Glen Love Chaired American Literature Association under the title, “American Nature Writing: New Contexts, New Approaches”. In her introduction written to the anthology entitled “Literary studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis”, Glotfelty shows that it took the 80s and 90s for planting and growing environmental literary studies. Ecocriticism emerged as a critical school only because of a new Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) was formed in 1992. The mission of the Association was: to promote the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world and to encourage new nature writing, traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature, and interdisciplinary environmental research.

(In Glotfelty, 1996: xviii)

The formation of the Association for environmental literary studies was followed by the establishment of a new journal, ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment in 1993. The objective of the journal was to provide a forum for critical studies of the literary and performing arts proceeding from or addressing environmental considerations. These would include ecological theory, environmentalism, conceptions of nature and their depictions, the

human/nature dichotomy and related concerns (Ibid: xviii).

The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark In Literary Ecology (1996) edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm challenges the notion that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed and instead, proposes ecocritical positions as Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology that “Everything is connected to everything else.”

As an interdisciplinary approach to literature, ecocriticism has derived different principles from four disciplines: ecology, ethics, language and criticism (Glotfelty, 1996: 71). As separate disciplines, all the four make use of some basic principles: ecology describes the relations between nature and culture, ethics offers ways to mediate historic social conflicts, language theory examines how words represent human and nonhuman life and criticism judges the quality and integrity of works and promotes their dissemination (Ibid: 71).

Ecocriticism examines science for its ability to point (deixis). Deixis locates entities in space, time and social context. Through deixis, meaning develops from what is said or signed relative to physical space: I/you, here/there, this/that (Howarth in Glotfelty, 80). Ecocriticism seeks to examine how metaphors of nature and land are used and abused (Ibid: 81). Instead of dwelling on political or cultural spaces (ethnic and post-colonial studies) ecocriticism focuses on the physical environment. It tries to reveal that different social constructions such as race and ethnicity relate to larger histories of land use and abuse (Ibid: 81).

Some literary critics differentiate themselves from post-structuralisms and jokingly call themselves “compostructuralists” as they emphasize the earthiness of their own ecocritical approach to literature. One of them Lawrence Buell argues: “For a long time, the focus of the literary studies was on the world of words. But now there’s recoil: Ecocriticism assumes that there is an extratextual reality that impacts human beings and their artifacts—and vice versa” (www.info@asle.org).

By 1993, then, ecological literary study emerged as a recognizable critical school.

Joseph Meeker, who has offered ecocritical analysis of literature in his book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974), writes:

Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures. . . If creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behaviour and the natural environment—to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? From the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction?

(Meeker, 1974: 3-4)

Meeker's statement provides us a few important objectives of ecocritical analysis of literature. To follow Meeker, the objectives of ecological criticism should have:

- 1) To discover the influence of literature upon human behaviour and the natural environment.
- 2) To determine the role played by literature in the welfare and survival of mankind.
- 3) To determine the insight offered by literature into human relationship with the other species and with the world around us.
- 4) To judge whether literature adapts us better to the world or whether it estranges us from it.
- 5) To explore whether literature contributes more to our survival than to our extinction.

These objectives which we have derived from Meeker's statement can help us to formulate an ecological viewpoint.

Accordingly, we can derive our model of ecocritical analysis by developing the following parameters:

- 1) The relation between nature and culture
- 2) Social conflicts
- 3) Use of linguistic resources
- 4) Quality and integrity of values

Different writers from the past have described the damaging consequences of human actions and provided ethical and conceptual insights for developing right relations with the earth. There is

fairly strong tradition of nature writing. While we can enjoy this rich and vibrant nature writing made available in a number of anthologies, there is a great scope for studying the influence of place on each writer's imagination. By undertaking this type of ecocritical study, a research scholar can demonstrate how 'where an author grew up, travelled and wrote is pertinent to an understanding of his/her work' (Ibid: xxiii).

To conclude that 'Ecocriticism', is a critical approach which began in the USA in the late 1980s. Ecocriticism, as a methodological approach, has taken its literary bearings from three major 19th century American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau whose works celebrate nature, the life force and wilderness. It has also taken its bearings from the British Romanticism of the early nineteenth century. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology* (1996) edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm challenges the notion that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed and instead, proposes an ecocritical position. Joseph Meeker, who has offered ecocritical analysis of literature in his book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974), provides us a few important objectives of ecocritical analysis of literature.

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