The historical journey of Ecocritical literature

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a hot potato in current scenario. But, this term has reached its present existence after passing through various phases which have evolved over a period of time. Initially it was restricted to mere representation of nature in literature. From then, it moved to phase of nature writing and lastly to the phase of ecological enlightened creative writing. The present research paper traces the historical journey of ecocritical literature which can further help in making a better understating of the term ecocriticism which is bound to gain momentum in future.

Keywords: Nature writing, History, Ecological Literature, Phases, Eco-texts, Creative writing.

Introduction

Literature is a powerhouse of energy which disseminates itself in all directions. The energy of literature is ever evolving because like all other energies, it neither gets created nor destroyed. Literature is like a potter which moulds the mind of readers through the power of its words. All revolutions of the world have their origins somehow in literature in one way or the other. William Rueckert too in his essay “Literature and Ecology” stressed the importance of literature in the preservation of ecosystem, “We need to make some connections between literature and the sun, between teaching literature and the health of the biosphere” (109). Literature has to offer its services to environment and disseminate ecological sensitivity and consciousness through its flow of energy. Eco-criticism with all its offshoots is a viable solution to this problem which can establish a harmonious relationship between nature and man through the power of words.

Ecocriticism gained its ground during the late twentieth century when ecological crisis was at its peak. The term is derived from the term ecology which was coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1869. Then, it was John Mecker who in 1972 introduced the term ‘literary ecology’ in his book The Comedy of Survival. Six years later came the term which becomes the official term for all who were willing to collaborate literature and nature to come out of the ecological crisis. In 1972, in his essay Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism, William Rueckert talks for the first time about ‘ecocriticism’ and defined it as a meeting ground for both literature and environment. Another effort in this direction was made by Alicia Nitecki in 1989 who founded The American Nature Writing Newsletter. This newsletter helped a lot in the interaction of so many people on a common ground which talks about literature’s role in saving environment. Even in India, Professor Nirmal Selvamony introduced his own term of ‘Oikopoetics’ and founded OSLE – India. He also introduced its courses in Tamil literature and over the years several theoretical and critical work forms the corpus of study related to oikopoetics. Later on, in order to match and club it with the Western eco-criticism, he renamed it as Eco-literature. In order to generate more ideas and studies related to eco-literature, a conference was held on Eco-criticism by OSLE – India. Parallel attempts have also been made in the west by CherylGlotfelty in 1982. Along with Harold Fromm, she founded ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) and also edited a book titled The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology which completely changed the face of ecocriticism as a theory in the world. This book gave sound theoretical foundation to the movement and presented an organized form of all the rich works done till date in the field of ecocriticism. It was because of this landmark contribution that this book is regarded as the Bible of ecocriticism.

However, when critics all over the world were busy in giving a theoretical foundation to ecocriticism, a much bigger challenge surfaced in front of them. Ecocritics were confused...
regarding what kind of work or works should come under this umbrella term of ecocriticism as literature is a cornucopia of works which offer ecological dimensions and inclination. Cheryl Glotfelty has made an endeavour in this direction. In Introduction to her book she has codified three different phases of ecocriticism which produced three different types of works which can be studied and analysed from an ecocritical point of view. The first field of ecocriticism lies in studying works that represent nature. Ecocriticism makes a study how nature is presented in a particular work. Absences and presences of nature become the focus of such a study. And if absences are there, it tries to locate reason for such absences. And if nature is the main focus of such a work, it tries to figure out the purpose of the writer who gives such a presentation. The writings of Homer, Virgil and Dante show this awareness of nature. British literature is also full of such instances which share an ecological vision. Right from Chaucer to the modern writers, we have innumerable instances of literary works that increases our knowledge of nature and inspire us to be more sensitive to this non-human world. The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales though on the surface level seems to be a delineation of human characters, but when studied from an ecological bent of mind offers itself for ecocritical evaluation. The month of April is shown to be period of rich harvest and thus brings hope and happiness for humans. Shakespeare’s Forest of Arden is a living character in his drama As You Like it which brings happiness in the lives of other characters. Alexander’s Pope’s depiction of Eden’s Garden in his poem Windsor Forest is a prime example that a realistic and satirical poet like Pope could not keep himself away from the beauties of Nature. The peace and harmony which nature brings, even after its original vigour, is lost is presented very beautifully by many more writers. And what to say about the romantic poets like Wordsworth, Shelly, Keats, Southey, Coleridge, who looked for paganism and pantheism in nature. For Wordsworth, nature is a teacher and a continuous source of joy. The first phase of ecocriticism doesn’t restrict itself merely to singing paens of praise for nature. Writers also present the absences of nature. The environmental degradation and pollution find ample space in the works of modern writers like T.S. Eliot, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence and E.M. Forster. Their writings portray how rural landscape and wilderness is completely annihilated by the demon of industrialization and urbanization. T.S. Eliot’s The Wasteland exhibits the horrors of destruction caused to nature by modern man. After this initial phase of depiction of nature in its various hues and forms came the phase of nature writing. Nature writing has often been used synonymously with environmental literature. But there is a slight difference between the two. Nature writing is usually non-fictional prose. On the other hand, nature writing is done in all kinds of literary forms like poetry, drama, novel, short stories, fiction and non-fiction, etc. But the purpose of both the writings was more or less similar as they rediscover, reissue and reconsider literature which is related to nature. Gilbert White’s A Natural History of Selbourne which came out in England in 1789 is the pioneering work in the field of nature writing. Then came the wave of American writers whose works show ecocritical inclination. Such writers are also known by the name of transcendentalists and include many writers from America like Emerson, Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Margaret Fuller, John Mier, Edward Abbey. Nature writing played a pivotal role in the field of ecocriticism as it reestablishes relationship between man and nature. The first claim regarding the nomenclature of the word ‘nature writing’ was laid by Don Scheese. According to him, Dallas Lore Sharp was the first one who used the term ‘nature writing’ in relation to the works of John Burroughs and Earnest Thompson Seton who described the natural history of the world in their works with an aim to make humans more kind and sensitive towards nature. Such kinds of works deal in detail how nature functions. It makes a scientific as well as philosophical study of nature in the form of essay and tries to study anatomy and behaviour of living forms, the location and habitat of plants and how they adapt themselves to the changing forces of nature. The Norton Book of Nature Writing which is co-edited by Robert Finch and John Elder is perhaps the first major work of nature writing. This work is in the form of anthology and includes various works from British and American traditions. ASLE emerges as an important organization which propagated the cause of nature writing. John Elder’s definition of ‘nature writing’ which he offered in the first conference of ASLE in 1995 is proper reflection of the aim and scope of nature writing. Aldo Leopold holds a special place in the field of nature writing. Being a renowned scientist and philosopher, he combined the ethics of both to create a new environmental ethics. His book Game Management which talks about biology, flora and fauna, agriculture, wilderness, ecology, forestry and education became a landmark in the field of nature writing as it connects all these forms in such a way that the whole mechanism of nature and community becomes clear to its readers. A Sand Country Almanac is another important book which talks about the biotic right of all species and defines ethics as a restraint on freedom in human’s struggle for survival. He traces three stages of environmental ethics. The first stage of this ethics speaks about individual involvement with ethics and relationship among various individuals. The second stage correlates individual ethics with community and, then the final stage connects human beings with the land they belong to. These essays and books further describe the loopholes in the process related to conservation of ecological and ethical system which are completely governed by mercenary motives. His warnings and suggestions regarding environmental ethics resonates his love for nature. Edward Abbey’s Desert Solitaire which gives a voice to his experiences as a park ranger celebrates the harsh beauty of desert and a moving plea to conserve the wilderness that resides in this beautiful desert. Not only this, he converts this dream and desire for the conservation of this desert into a fictional work in the form of his novel The Monkey Wrench Gang. Moreover, in the world of letters he suggested an altogether different method of using violence to solve ecological crisis. He cites Tagore’s play Mukhadhara and Alan Sealey’s novel The Everest Hotel in this regard where characters sacrificed their own lives to protect nature. Nature writing, however, loses its significance in the modern world as there comes a realization that the scope of nature writing is limited and even the number of readers who read and appreciate it are only a handful. In order to increase the scope of its readership, ecocriticism has to find a space in the mainstream fictional and poetry writing, otherwise the whole purpose and ambition of saving
environment through literature would be defeated. The ecocritics thus start searching for environmentally enlightened works which show ample awareness of the importance of ecological balance and its various manifestations on relationship between man and nature. Fictional writings all across the world have shown ample awareness of environment. Unlike nature writing, its scope is suggestively open and opens a vast arena for ecocritics to explore. Creative writers too give a lot of emphasis on environmental degradation that is affecting the entire planet. The writers like Arundhati Roy, Margaret Atwood, AmitavGhosh, Alice Walker, Seamus Heaney, Gita Mehta, Ted Hughes and Toni Morrison are but a few examples. These writers plead on behalf of nature and take man to task for his avarice. These writers take the nature writing of Thoreau, Edward Albee and Aldo Leopold as their models. All these writers chant in unison that nature has enough to satisfy every man’s need but not every man’s greed.

The third and the final phase is the theoretical phase which raises fundamental questions about the symbolic construction of ecocritical ideas within literary discourse. It looks for reasons related to dualism that has penetrated deep into the ecological psyche of humans. Moreover, it makes an interdisciplinary study and analysis of ecological concepts to enhance the ambit of the field of ecocriticism. The emergence of the terms like deep ecology, ecosophy, ecotheology, eco-feminism, environmental literature, eco-poetics, green studies are a product of this third phase of ecocriticism which study ecological issues and concepts from myriad angles to trace its root causes and possible solutions embedded within.

Ecocriticism, thus as has been explained in the above analysis has gained in scope as well as stature and has become one of the innovative and yet to be explored area of literature. Modern world is grappling with environmental degradation. Global environmental crisis is one of the hotly debated issues in modern scenario. The root cause of this crisis stems from human beings’ failure to acknowledge that they are part of nature rather than being separate from her. In the age of GDP’s and economic fluctuations, no account is taken for the loss of biodiversity or ecosystem services that nature provides. To address these ecological concerns every discipline today including history, sociology, religion, philosophy, etc. has started greening itself. However, literature has been slow to react in this respect. With global environmental crisis echoing at an alarming rate, it is high time for environmentalism to occupy centre stage in literature as literature can effectively create awareness about the environment.

References