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Ecocriticism: A study in brief

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Abstract

Ecocriticism has been one of the widely discussed terms in the present times owing to the ecological disturbances all throughout the globe. No country, no continent has escaped the wrath of Mother Nature. In order to find a viable solution to this ever increasing and ever challenging threat, various disciplines have to come together as a wholesome group so that ecological awareness can be generated in all walks of life. Ecocriticism is one such interdisciplinary study which brings together both literature and ecology to address ecological problems. The present study is a small step in this direction as it traces the ecological inheritance and helps in fathoming the concept and scope of the term 'ecocriticism'.

Keywords: Literature, Ecocriticism, Nature, Environment, Green texts, Definition, Criticism, Earth

Introduction

Literature, since all epochs, by all and sundry has been hailed as a branch of study which is a perfect reflection of the society which presents it in all its hues and shades. Whatever happens in the society gets automatically mirrored by the men of letters in their works. And if one defines society in its broader terms, it includes everything under its umbrella, i.e. our tradition, culture, place, people, flora and fauna, religion and environment too. Literature, thus becomes a befitting medium for the reflection of all sorts of environment, be it physical, social, political, religious, economical and so on. Literary scholars and critics have more often dwelled upon the social, political, economical, religious and racial environments of society. And, that is the reason why we have host of theories and 'isms' like Marxism, Deconstruction, Structuralism, Post-colonialism, Feminism and what not. Physical environment somehow remained a pristine territory for men of letters as late as 1980s and that is when the problem of environment is looming large over the whole world like a ghost. The newspapers, journals, magazines are flooded with news related to degradation of environment and consequent retaliation of nature in the form of natural disasters. Uncontrolled use of pesticides, ozone hole, rivers turning into poison emitting drains, pollution alerts, health risks relating to pollution, all such headlines hog the limelight in the leading dailies across the world. Earth summits are being held every year to address the ecological problems of the world.

In such a scenario, it comes as a big surprise that literature which is otherwise quite quick in responding to contemporary issues has been silent over the environmental crisis till the late twentieth century. This alien attitude towards the physical environment in literary world hints at two possibilities. The first possibility which emerges is that literature is segregated from environment, though it is not so. Secondly, if a society is not segregated from literature, then we as literary scholars, critics and readers have failed to comprehend or we can say direct our retinas to the environmental creativity. And this lack of intelligibility is a clear sign that we have turned a blind eye to this green non-human world in the whole gamut of human emotions showcased in the world of letters. First option is a big no as the case is not so because the literature is inextricably intertwined with environment, though the layers and extent to which they are linked varies from text to text. The second option, however, sounds convincing and intelligible as the host of theories which mushroomed till 1980s, i.e. the sunset of twentieth century, clearly illustrates that no need has been paid to this quintessential aspect of ecology of which human is an integral part.

These two options however clearly elucidate that literature is not devoid of ecological issues. It is indeed painted green in all its shades explicitly or implicitly. The only thing that is

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missing is the 'green eye' of the readers and critics which fails to look beyond the human sagas. And, since, for so long this eye is missing, so an 'artificial green eye' becomes indispensable to bridge the gap between these two aforesaid options. This gap has been bridged by 'ecocriticism' which makes both parallel and intersecting study of literature and environment in both fictional and non-fictional works with an aim to preserve and conserve our ecological inheritance. The preceding line carries very heavy words like 'aim', 'inheritance' which irks one's mind that how a literary critic is involved in preserving environment. His job is merely to study a literary text from varied angles and come to certain conclusions and interpretations. He may also keep it open-ended or close-ended as per his own choice. Even if one is an ecocritic, his job is to study a text from ecocritical point of view, to see how nature and environment are linked and how environment helps in evolving human character.

But this is merely a superficial connotation of the term ecocriticism. An ecocritic is much more than a literary scholar. In fact when in newspapers, news channels and other sorts of media, we hear, read or see the global environmental crisis which has engulfed the whole world; we as people from the world of literature often sit at the defensive side of helpless attitude. Literati and critics often raise this query – What can we do? What is our role in conservation of environment? Such people are often seen posing this problem – We are not environmentalists. We are not an NGO. Only government is to be blamed. One theory can never make the difference to the problem. We cannot take part in Environment Summits. They are not doing their job properly. This should be done. That should not be done. We are always full of all such grievances without taking any onus on our shoulders. In fact when environmentalists say that every individual can contribute in saving the ecology, we wonder how being in the field of literature one can make the essential difference.

And, ecocriticism is an answer which puts rest to all these queries. By analyzing the texts ecocritically for our students and readers, we can discover various aspects of nature and environmental problems associated with them. It also helps the readers to realize the significant role of environment in our lives. Moreover, it portrays the current state of environment and also guides us in the preservation and conservation of environment by developing environmental ethos in the readers. Thus by offering an ecocritical study, one can sensitize and agitate the minds of common people and readers towards environment and make them more sensitive towards ecological balance. And as everyone knows, sensitization and agitation of minds towards a problem is the first step to the solution of any problem because until and unless we are not sensitive to the problem we can never figure it out, and to think of its solution is then for sure a remote possibility. Ecocriticism, thus has a bigger role to play in the world of literature as just by sitting in one room one can initiate a change in the attitude and mindset of masses towards nature. As the saying goes, 'Many a little makes a mickle.' So, all these small ecocritical studies will ultimately play a bigger and significant role in preserving the endangered environment.

The second significant and deep word is 'inheritance' as stated earlier in the definition that aim of ecocriticism is to preserve our ecological inheritance. The word 'inheritance' also assumes great significance as both literature and

environment have a history as well as inheritance. In both the fields, each and every generation gives something to the succeeding generations and has lessons to learn from the earlier. By making a conjoined study of literature and environment, one can see through the lens of literature (it being the reflection of the age it represents) that in every epoch what was the state of environment and what was its relationship with human beings. Apart from that, many more questions can be answered by the conflated study such as – How nature came to be deteriorated? How its relationship gets reverted all through the decades and centuries? What is the current status? What lessons can be learnt from the past? How the bonhomie between nature and literature can be restored through this nexus? This study of ecological inheritance, thus becomes very crucial as it not only traces the entire ecological history through literary texts but also gives a proper direction to somewhat directionless literature to foray into an environment-friendly territory and thereby preventing an arid future of 'greenless' texts.

And this present study is a small step in this direction. While making a study of Toni Morrison's fictional works, it traces the ecological inheritance portrayed in her novels all through the decades with an aim of creating an eco-sensitive reader. But, before the research moves to the works of Toni Morrison, it is important to fathom the concept and scope of the term 'ecocriticism'.

Ecocriticism is a word which encompasses two words 'eco' and 'criticism'. 'Eco' here refers to the 'ecology' which inhabits in its nest the entire ecosystem be it sky, stars, planets, earth, moon, flora, fauna, humans and everything that is visible to us through naked eyes. In short, anything and everything under the sun contributes to the ecosystem. The second part of the term is 'criticism' which refers to the literary evaluation of literary texts from different critical approaches and delineates various implications of a particular work. When these two words come together to form one term, i.e. ecocriticism, it refers to the evaluation of the texts, both from fictional and non-fictional worlds from an environmental perspective and uncovers the various levels at which nature as well as literature is linked in any proposed study. An ecocritic thus wears green spectacles on his eyes and tries to tinge the entire text with a paint brush dipped in green colour. But that should be done with understanding, coherence and logic because an ecocritic is a man sailing in two boats, viz. one of nature and the other one is of literature, and he has to strike a balance between the two as to defy the old age adage of a man drowning who was sailing in two boats simultaneously.

But ecocriticism is a wider term and hence cannot be limited to just one simplistic definition or interpretation. Different critics have variously defined this term. Greg Garrard defines the term as "the study of the relationship of the human and non-human throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (5). Then, we have the definition by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm who are considered as the spearheads of this movement and who for the first time came up with a compiled work of ecocritical inclination all through the world thereby giving it an essential theoretical foothold which was much required by the movement at that time. In his book *The Ecocriticism Reader*, he gives a succinct definition of ecocriticism by drawing an analogy with feminist criticism, "Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-

conscious perspective...ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii).

It was only after this book that ecocriticism came forward as an important branch of literary criticism to analyse literary works from an environmental perspective. But ecocriticism has not merely restricted itself to the representation of nature in literary works; rather it encourages the readers to think more and more regarding environmental crisis and shows them how through the power of words ecological ethics can be transmitted among others. Moreover, it is not only a depicter of aesthetic beauties of nature but also demonstrates the destruction caused by nature as well. He locates the reasons of this destruction to the lack of reverence paid by modern man to nature who is indulging in such activities which are playing with the health of this entire ecosystem.

Richard Kerridge is another important critic who was willing to broaden the horizons of ecocriticism by advocating a broad cultural ecocriticism. According to him an ecocritic is a person who is willing to trace ecologically inclined representations everywhere in the text. Loretta A Johnson defines and explains the term ecocriticism by posing various questions which can be answered only by making an interdisciplinary study of environmental studies, cultural studies and by the study of natural sciences. Thomas K. Dean too clarifies several connotations associated with this term. He too widens the scope of ecocriticism by including culture under its umbrella. Besides that, Curt Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer in their book throw light on various directions in which the study of ecocriticism can move thereby signifying the importance of ecocriticism in socio-political sphere. Apart from the socio-political sphere, Gersdorf and Mayer have highlighted many directions in which ecocriticism can venture. One such territory is the cultural anthropological direction. Such studies can highlight how because of the anthropological mindset, human beings have gone so far in the mad rat race of progress that they have completely forgotten their roots and association with the natural world. This lack of association makes them feel alienated.

Ethical dimension is another area of exploration for ecocritics. Environmental ethics believe in cooperation among all the inhabitants of the universe rather than the domination of one over the other. It examines the relationships from an environmental perspective and talks about epistemological and aesthetic approach of ecocriticism which widened the scope of ecocriticism even more as it located myriad spheres where nature correlates with human beings. This, in turn, gives an opportunity to ecocritics to create environmental awareness at several levels in human beings.

Robert Kern is another important figure in this field who considers ecocriticism as an important tool to orient the minds of people towards environment. Equally significant are the inputs of Lawrence Buell who delineated that how an environmentally oriented work should function. He prescribes that in any environment related work, the non-human world should not function as mere background. Rather, the non-human world should be seen as having a living presence of its own which intersects with the human world and thus contribute to the overall significance of that particular work. Secondly, for him in such a work, the selfish nature of homo sapiens when they consider their own interest should completely vanish as it will be a disaster

from ecocritical point of view. He also talks about the importance of human's accountability to the environment in literary texts. Such accountability, according to him, will gradually seep in the unconscious mind of the readers and will help them in getting closer to the natural world. Glen Love too dwells upon the importance of ecocriticism in the modern world which is surrounded by so many environmental problems. Ecocriticism for Glen Love is an important device in evoking "human consciousness" (18) towards environment.

From these afore stated definitions, it becomes crystal clear that ecocriticism uses various tools and techniques to study the relationship between natural environment and human beings. The practitioners of this branch of criticism describe the attitude of human beings towards their natural surroundings. Moreover, they establish a link between the three poles, viz. writers, the work, and the physical world presented in the world of literature. The world referred to here doesn't merely restrict itself to the environmental background; rather it includes the entire ecosystem in its lap. Rather than taking a human-centered approach of most of the literary criticisms like Marxism, Feminism, Post-colonialism, etc., ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary criticism. Moreover, over the years ecocriticism has emerged as a genre, which includes all possible relations that exist between man and nature, and has surfaced out in the form of various terms like ecopolitics, environmental literary criticism, nature writing, green cultural studies, eco-literature and environment literature.

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