

Relevance and Reflections of Nature in Literature

Dr Prarthana Vardhan

Associate Professor

Department of English

Dr Shakuntala Misra National Rehabilitation University

Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

sprarthana11@gmail.com

Abstract

It is a well-known fact that since time immemorial, literature has had a close affinity with human as well as physical environment. This physical environment creates conducive conditions for the survival of life. Without this environment no life would have ever existed. But, unfortunately, today our environment is facing lot of challenges as a result of industrialisation, development, etc. It is, therefore, indeed imperative for us to understand the significance and value of our environment and put all our efforts for its sustenance and development. Since literature is supposed to be one of the best mediums for communicating message to the people and so an impetus is being given to this issue in the subject in order to spread the awareness of the importance of environment. Therefore, literary theories like ecocriticism and ecofeminism are coming up in order to divert our attention and awareness towards the indispensable role of the Nature in our lives. Nature has always had a special representation in literature by the writers from classical period to the present age. The 'nature writing' has been an indispensable part of the Romantic poets also called the 'nature poets' like Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Shelley, etc. The sublime representation of Nature in their works that adds aestheticism gives the audience an ecstatic joy. It is imperative to comprehend the significance of the environment in which we are living. As a conducive

environment is important for our healthy living so all the required precautions and measures should be taken into consideration for its sustainable development.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Aestheticism, Sublime, Nature.

Literature is all about life. If we pen down the vital experiences of our life in a sublime language, it indeed becomes a beautiful piece of literature. As man and nature has always had a close affinity, so nature and literature are complementary to each other. To put it in other words, nature finds its best representation in literature. Nature helps in regulating the human life. There are many factors that constitute our life. One of the most important amongst them is the physical environment in which we live. Though, today, the environment is unfortunately facing lot of challenges due to various reasons, the most important amongst them is the growing pernicious effects of the devilish pollution other than population explosion and industrialisation, etc. With the advancement of science and technology, the distances have vanished and the world shares a common platform. This globalised world has its pros and cons. At one place, globalisation has brought many benefits other than providing a common platform for different talents, knowledge and information to be shared but, on the other hand, it has also brought certain problems such as pollution and global warming that is affecting our environment. This environment needs to be protected and preserved for the sake of life. Literature without nature does not make any sense. Since literature is considered to be one of the best mediums for communication of messages and instructions to the people, therefore literary theories like ecocriticism and ecofeminism are coming up in order to divert our attention and awareness towards the indispensable role of the Nature in our lives. Ecocriticism is basically the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. Ecofeminism is the latest development that joins feminism with the environment. In the Indian context, religious traditions also have had a lot of contributions in the sustainable development of environment in their own ways. Many trees like Tulsi, Peepal (Sacred fig),

Bargad (Banyan), etc, also, Sun and even Moon are worshipped by specially the females that clearly show the close affinity of natural environment and religion. Nature has always had a special representation in literature by the writers from classical period to the present age. Different aspects of Nature have been used to project different kinds of feelings and emotions in literature. The Romantic Poets have contributed commendably in projecting and personifying Nature in the most sublime way. If we pen down the vital experience of our lives including the minute beautiful details of Nature, it becomes a beautiful piece of literature.

Ecocriticism was a critical approach which began in the USA in the late 1980s and in England in the early 1990s. The word ‘ecocriticism’ first appeared in William H. Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in the year 1978. Though it is indeed ironical to note that the ecocriticism emerged as a separate discipline only in the 1990s, much later even after realising the detrimental effect of pollution. Since then, it is an emergent movement throughout the world. According to Cheryll Glotfelty in his anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), ecocriticism is simply defined as “the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Chris Baldick in his *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines ecocriticism as “a new subfield of literary and cultural enquiry that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, devoted to the investigation of relations between literature and the natural world and to the rediscovery and reinterpretation of ‘nature writings’ such as those of H. D. Thoreau and the poets of Romanticism (sometimes categorized as ‘environmental literature’) in the light of recent ecological concerns” (p. 163). In America, ecocriticism was influenced and inspired by the works such as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*, Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes*, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and so on. The above mentioned, major nineteenth century writers were also considered as the transcendentalists in America. They celebrated nature in

their works. In Britain, ecocriticism was inspired and influenced by the British Romanticism of the 1970s and later. Though in Britain, the founding figure of this theory is supposed to be the critic Jonathan Bate, author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. More often the term used in America is ecocriticism whereas in Britain, the term that is frequently used is 'green studies'.

In his book, *Ecocriticism*, Pramod K. Nayar says that as a theory, it is interdisciplinary as it is influenced by insights from different disciplines and approaches such as Marxism, philosophy, ecology, feminism and so on. He further says that ecocriticism seeks to study, explore and analyse nature and culture and works at the level of discourse and praxis. The western thinkers have defined Nature differently. Some considered it as the purest form of human existence while others have presented its economic and materialist concept. According to Pramod Nayar, Rousseau believed that the 'natural' was innocent and that civilisation was 'artificial' and corrupt. Charles Darwin came up with his theory of 'survival of the fittest'. According to his theory, only those humans and animals can survive who can adapt themselves to the conditions and situations in the environment. He very well presented the dependence of human on Nature. With the passage of time, various writers came up with their own perspectives towards Nature and have presented it as per their perception and imagination. Majority of them held the opinion that cultural texts were important in forming the particular notions of 'nature'. It could be therefore said that ecocriticism is also concerned with the relationship between culture and nature. The outdoor environment like deserts, lakes, mountains, woods, lanes, etc. helps in creating the relationship between pure nature to culture. The domestic picturesque, for example, parks, lanes or streets, gardens, etc. are frequently used to project the urban culture, whereas, the sublime scenic beauty like, lakes, mountains, waterfalls and the countryside like hills, fields, woods, etc. are mentioned to

project the lives of the rustics. In fact, in literature, different aspects and areas of nature are used as representatives in projecting different kinds of feelings and emotions.

There is no denying the fact that the prosperity of an individual and the nation is directly connected to the health of people. It is believed that people who live closer to nature in a natural way have better health conditions. In this context we can say that nature is like a mother who takes care in providing the required resources to the human beings for their survival and wellbeing. For the healthy life, it is significant to have a healthy body and mind. It has been truly said that health is wealth and if health is gone, everything is gone; this could be very well witnessed in the present scenario where covid-19 has fatally affected the health of the people throughout the world. This is in turn hampering the economy, social construction and culture of all the nations. Though the nations are putting their best in fighting against the problem but the situation is still tough. No war had caused such huge loss to lives on our planet as caused by this pandemic. Therefore, at times, these scientific inventions and technologies prove fatally disastrous and create tremendous impediment against the prosperity and development of the nations. To cite another example, industrialisation also affected the culture and nature in a negative way. It spoiled the natural resources and created lot of pollution.

As reflected in literature, the Romantic movement was basically a reaction against industrialisation. This movement respected and revered the rustics and rural life. The movement also emphasized the significance of 'nature' in literature and art as against the urbans, their lifestyles, pollution and the wretched condition of the workers in the cities caused by the monstrous machineries and the industries. The negative impact of industrial revolution generated features like materialism, apathy, callousness, etc. that became the reason for disenchantment of the Romantics with the contemporary age, and therefore, they were fascinated towards nature and seeked solace in its company. As a result, the 'nature

poets' came into prominence. The Romantic poets exalted nature in their poetry and came to be known as the 'nature poets'. Heath and Boreham in their book, *Introducing Romanticism*, present that the Romantics not only emphasized on nature and natural life, but, "Nature was the mirror in which the Romantics could see the eternal powers which had made both man and the physical universe – it was no longer merely the canvas on which the classical dream of order was written" (p. 76). The dominant amongst the Romantic Poets were William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, John Keats, P.B. Shelly, etc. It is an acknowledged fact that Wordsworth was the high priest and worshipper of nature who found healing power in nature. For Wordsworth, nature was the best teacher and he had talked about it in his poem 'The Tables Turned'. In another poem, 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth personified and spiritualised nature. Coleridge, on the other hand, perceived supernatural powers in nature. John Blades puts it in his book, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, "Rousseau's view of nature becomes informed with the subjectivist – oriented metaphysics of Kant and Schlegel and both of these strands converge in the aesthetics of Wordsworth and Coleridge" (p. 174). Regarding Coleridge's poem, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Blades further said, "Perhaps surprisingly for a poem in which the supernatural is an important feature, the events have a firm grounding in nature, both as a frame of reference and a foil" (p. 193). A few other poems by Coleridge where he naturalised the supernatural were 'Kubla Khan', 'Christabel', etc. Another important figure amongst the romantic poets was John Keats also known as the poet of senses. He loved nature not due to any spiritual significance but because of her sensuous appeal, her appeal to the different senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. A few of his poems that clearly present his gifted talent of insights into the beauties of nature are 'Endymion', 'Hyperion', 'Ode to a Nightingale', etc. Others in the order were Shelly, Byron, etc. The American transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, etc. were the writers who believed in the beauty and strength of nature and

also the natural, inherent goodness of people. Emerson (1803 - 1882), also known as the ‘Sage of Concord’ throughout the nation, had profound interest in the Hindu philosophy and considered the Vedas as sublime and the repositories of wisdom and knowledge. A few of his essays that deal with some or the other specificity of nature and where we can find certain sublime glimpses of nature are ‘The Poet’, ‘The Over-Soul’, ‘Nature’, etc. So, we can say that this urge of seeking solace from nature, most dominant feature of Romanticism, was not just confined to England but was embraced by the whole world.

In feminism, the recent development is eco-feminism that basically talks about how feminism is connected with environment. The term ecofeminism was coined by Francoise d’Eaubonne, a French writer, in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974). The ecofeminists have a gendered approach towards nature. For the critics in western thought and literature, one of the ancient binaries, nature and culture carry gendered values. For them, nature is feminine whereas culture is masculine. The ecofeminist thinkers and critics try to explore the relationship of women and nature in religious, cultural and literary aspects. In fact, the ecofeminists were more concerned about environmental destruction and social injustice. Since the women are responsible for the wellbeing of their children and family so they are more closely connected to the nature and the effects of environmental change therefore, they try to protect nature so that their household work does not get affected. The ecofeminism basically connotes to the relationship between the suppression of women and damage caused to the natural resources of the earth. A few important writers in the field of ecofeminism who need to be mentioned are Vandana Shiva, Ariel Salleh, Arundhati Roy, Margaret Atwood, Mary Mallor, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, etc. *Ecofeminism* is an important ecofeminist work by Vandana Shiva, a physicist and Maria Mies, who have together tried to explore the connection between environmental destruction and patriarchal society in their book. Some other influential ecofeminist texts are *Staying Alive* by Vandana Shiva, *The Bluest Eye* by

Toni Morrison, *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* by Carol Adams, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* by Val Plumwood, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. This emphasis of relating women and nature by the eco-feminists is not a new idea because the feminists had earlier resisted this idea of equating nature with women for the sake of nature. The eco-feminists were completely aware of how the women were excluded and marginalised from the male world of culture and rationality. To cite a few examples, the duty of collecting water, firewood, fodder, and very often arranging the food for human beings as well as animals was supposed to be the sole domain of women.

Let us consider, how at the level of rituals, in Indian context, women are connected with nature. For example, in Indian culture, women worship some of the trees and plants for the longevity of their husbands, their well being and betterment. In one of the great Indian epics, *Ramayana*, Sanjeevani, a medicinal herb was used to revive the almost dead Lakshman, brother of God Ram. The Sun and the Moon are worshipped and have great significance in different religions. The solar eclipse and the lunar eclipse, apart from having religious connotations, also have great effect on our lives. Realising the significance of nature, there have been several movements lead by women to protect the trees and forests. For example, in Uttarakhand, the rural people, especially the women embraced the trees to protect them from cutting by contractors, and this movement came to be known as the Chipko movement of the 1970s that gained popularity throughout the worldwide. Some other noteworthy environmental movements in India are Bishnoi movement that took place much earlier than the Chipko movement, Appiko movement, Silent Valley movement, Jungle Bachao Andolan, Narmada Bachao movement, etc. Likewise, there were some other movements and efforts specially carried out by women in other countries to protect forests such as Green Belt movement, development of community gardens and so on.

A woman is often associated with the earth. Just as a mother is the source of life, in the same way, the mother earth also gives life to the various aspects of nature. The nature in itself manifests all qualities of a mother. Just as a mother does not differentiate between her children, in the same way, even nature makes no difference in her treatment towards the human beings. In fact, the same notion of unconditional love of a mother towards her children could be perceived in the nature as well, as she showers her blessings on human beings by providing them trees, water, air and other vital natural resources required for their survival on earth without expecting anything in return. In the Vedas and the Puranas, and other Indian scriptures, nature has been treated like a mother who propagates life. In fact, the earth is often addressed as the 'Mother Earth'. Just as a mother, being a female, has been constantly exploited by the males since ages, in the same way, the earth is also being exploited by man in various ways. This is a serious concern for us and therefore, more awareness needs to be spread amongst us for the protection of our earth that gives us huge number of natural resources for our survival. It is indeed imperative for us to put all our efforts and energy to ensure the preservation of our environment and the mother earth for the sake of human beings and other lives present on it. Literature, in fact, has proved to be one of the best medium today for spreading awareness about the importance of nature by incorporating its significance and reflecting it amongst the readers and audience in its own sublime way. The literary critics and scholars throughout the world have perceived the aesthetic beauty and significance of nature and have projected the various aspects of nature in their works. We all know that since time immemorial, literary authors have been personifying nature by imparting it with human attributes in their works. Some of them are also known as the high priests of nature. Therefore, it is important to realise that if we want to preserve nature, then, it should be treated with reverence and respect.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that

there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2026 by Dr Prarthana Vardhan Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

References

- Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary Theory*. New Delhi, Viva Books Private Limited, 2010.
- Bate, Jonathan.
- Blades, John. *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Clark, Timothy. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London, Routledge, 2004.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Heath, Duncan & Boreham, Judy. *Introducing Romanticism*. London, Icon Books Ltd., 2010.
- Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism. 2nd ed.* London, Zed Books, 1993.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. New Delhi, Dorling Kindersley, 2010.
- Pandey, Govind Chandra. *The Meaning and Process of Culture*. Agra, Shiva Lal Agarwala & Company, 1972.
- Walters, Margaret. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.