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## Social and Cultural Perception of Ecocriticism in Contemporary India

### Abstract

*Ecocriticism is defined as the study of literature in terms of physical environment. Here, the idea of 'physical environment' includes the cultural, geographical, psychological and the ecological elements presented or described, in a major or minor form, in a literary work. By means of the philosophy of deep ecology, ecocriticism makes the readers ecologically conscious; this is that consciousness which is no more found in the conscious mind of the most of the people living in this industrialised world where anthropocentrism has dominated every other philosophy. Today, the world is standing on the brink of the worst ever environmental crisis. In such a situation ecocriticism is gaining attention, and unlike other critical theories, ecocriticism is not limited to only the literary world, but when a layman interacts with this subject, even he understands and appreciates its constructive purpose. However, the future of a practice relies on how a society and the prevailing culture perceive that practice; hence, to understand the future and the scope of ecocriticism in India, finding out the social and the cultural perception of ecocriticism in contemporary India will be a task of great importance.*

*Keywords: ecocriticism, contemporary India, culture, anthropocentrism, deep ecology.*

Ecocriticism, 'the study of literary texts with reference to the interaction between human activity and the vast range of natural or non-human phenomena' (Childs and Fowler 78), is gaining attention in the literary world. The reason is obvious; ecocriticism connects itself to the problem of ecological crisis, one of the biggest problems present in the contemporary world. Pope John Paul II expresses in *The Ecocritical Crisis: A Common Responsibility*:

In our day, there is growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life. (215)

Man, in the blind race of development and because of the self-created struggle for survival, has crossed all the limits and is exploiting Nature excessively. It seems that he has

become apathetic towards Nature and the non-human world. 'Its root lies in...the human-centric model of history originating with the Greeks...the first to focus on Man-Apart – that is, humankind without reference to the physical environment' (Childs and Fowler 78). Man sees Nature as 'other' instead of thinking himself as a part of her. The prevailing anthropocentric belief, that man is the supreme being and every other entity present in this cosmos is created for his benefit, is the main cause of today's environmental and ecological problems. Realising the adverse consequences of the present day eco-unfriendly practices, all over the world different groups of people have come forward to spread awareness about the ecological crisis and its adverse consequences. Through ecocriticism literary world has also joined this mission of making people ecologically conscious. However, the future of any practice relies on how a society and the prevailing culture perceive that practice. Therefore, to understand the future of ecocriticism as a practise, it would be important to study the social and cultural perception of ecocriticism. But, that would be a broad area for a research. So making it specific, through the study of the social and cultural perception of ecocriticism in contemporary India, this paper tries to determine the future of ecocriticism in India.

Social and cultural perception of ecocriticism in contemporary India stands for the ways the society and the present day culture of India perceive ecocriticism, what they feel and understand about ecocriticism. Therefore, the contemporary Indian society and its existing culture become the objects of research too. Contemporary India has been witnessing a transition in its social trends and cultural values. Practically, this young India is less worried about ecological crisis than its socio-cultural problems like caste system, issue related to women, substance abuse or addiction, communalism, issues related to the elderly etc. India is a developing nation, and one of the biggest problems of India is of unemployment and poverty. United Nations' 2017 World Employment and Social Outlook report suggests, 'unemployment in India is projected to increase from 17.7 million last year to 17.8 million in 2017 and 18 million next year' (TOI). This troubled nation, surrounded by above mentioned different kinds of problems is facing environmental and ecological problems too. Yet, the basic problem for a typical Indian is to earn his bread and butter. In the fight for survival most of the common Indians seem to have little care about ecology. It is so, because the modern-day materialistic, self-centred culture and the narcissistic social thinking, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, affected by the theory of Social Darwinism (the implementation of the theory of natural selection to economics, social and political issues) has taken Indians apart from their basic eco-friendly lifestyle. In the ancient tradition, in the India of the Vedic Period, people used to worship Nature, the conception of worshipping Nature and protecting her was elixir for the coexistence of the humans, Nature and the non-human world. Earlier, in India, the Purusharthas – the four objects of human striving – were the influencing factors of the life style of the people. These Purusharthas were Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. Dharma stands for righteousness and moral values, Artha signifies the economic concerns, Kama represents the pleasures of life and materialistic things, and Moksha focuses on spiritual values and opens the path towards liberation. Dharma (moral values) had inspired the Indians to take care of all those things which

helped them in their survival. Indians would see Nature and the non-human world as their companions. They took care and worshiped Nature and the non-human world as a mother and gods respectively. But now days, due to excessive materialism, spread of anthropocentrism, and under the pressure of their local problems regarding their survival most of the Indians have forgotten the two Purusharthas out of the four and unconsciously only Artha (the economical concerns) and Kama (the pleasures of life and the materialistic things) have become their objects of pursuit in life. Obviously, in the absence of Dharma (moral values) the present day Indian society has lost that respect and care for Nature and the non-human world which it had for them in their earlier days. This departure of equal consideration for Nature and the non-human world is studied under ethics of ecology. Peter Singer argues in one of his papers;

Many philosophers have proposed the principle of equal consideration of interest, in some form or other, as a basic moral principle; but, as we shall see in more details shortly, not many of them have recognised that this principle applies to members of other species as well as to our own (Singer 5).

Unfortunately, most of the contemporary Indians appear to be unacquainted with these ecological ideas, and anthropocentrism has become their driving force in life. In such a scenario, like every other nation, here also many environmentalists have come forward to make the Indians realise their mistake and to encourage them to protect Nature. Ecocriticism applying the philosophy of Deep Ecology, which 'refers to an egalitarian and holistic environmental philosophy' (Keller 206) considers other species are as important as humans and advocates a reestablishment of the relationships between human beings and Nature, is also playing its part and trying to spread ecological consciousness among the Indian readers.

India, a vast country, has twenty nine states and seven union territories. The cultures, the traditions and the societies of these states and the union territories are different from one another. Some of these states and the union territories are known to the world for their natural beauty and attractions. On the other hand, some Indian states and union territories are facing serious environmental and ecological problems. It's a well known fact that man's perception towards an idea depends on his experiences, needs and beliefs. In this way, the social and cultural perception of ecocriticism in contemporary India varies according to the experiences, needs and beliefs of the people living in these different states and union territories. However, the paper suggests a way to classify these states and union territories mainly into two categories. The first category includes those regions where Nature is still alive in India, and the second category represents the other contemporary Indian regions where Nature has been exploited in an excessive manner in the process of developing cities without caring much about the non-human world. However today, these Indian cities are facing serious environmental problems. Smog has become a great problem in North India, especially in New Delhi. Similarly, Mumbai, Kolkata and other major cities and urban areas have fallen prey to environmental problems too. In North India, in the name of development, to set up factories, build roads, construct dams etc, trees are being felled and rivers have been made to lose their natural flow. But at the same time states like Kerala,

North-Eastern states, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Goa are still well known for their natural attractions. Through a few pieces of ecological readings of some Indian English Novels, here the paper tries to find out what can be the possible reactions of the above mentioned two worlds of the contemporary India to ecocriticism:

It is depicted by Lahiri as an extremely polluted city. At the very outset, she writes: 'In autumn egrets arrived, their white feathers darkened by the city's soot, waiting motionless for their prey.' (3) In Calcutta, the ponds and the lowland behind them are clogged with garbage thus causing water pollution. The illegal practice of turning water bodies in to land is highlighted by Lahiri in this novel. Let us recall such lines as: 'People have always tossed refuse into these bodies of water. But now the accumulation is deliberate. An illegal practice taking place in ponds, in paddy fields, all over Calcutta. They are being plugged up by promoters so that the city's swampy land turns solid, so that new sectors can be established, new homes built...' (Majumdar 368).

This extract ecocritically reads Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013), and describes Calcutta, the present day Kolkata, the capital of an Indian state, West Bengal. By focusing on those lines which show that Kolkata is a polluted city, the ecocritic tries to drag the attention of the readers towards the pathetic condition of the city. The ecocritic also reflects on the present day practice to throwing garbage in ponds and the lowlands, and turning them illegally to land to use that land to build home apartments. Kolkata seems to be an industrialized and human-centred city. This Ecocritical reading may help the readers living in any other Indian city like Kolkata to realise what they have done with their dwelling place. It drags the attention of the readers towards their insensitive attitude to the non-human world and Nature. The message is clear, man in his selfishness is moving towards destroying everything which is non-human and in this way one day he would cause the end of life on this planet.

It's a natural tendency that human being appreciates any idea that is advantageous to him. As in the above extract the ecocritic is making the readers conscious about the consequences of their present day eco-unfriendly practices, which may become a barrier in the path of man's better survival on this Earth, and it should not be left unobserved too that in Indian cities most of the population is of youths. Indian youth is educated and skilled however in its struggle for earning bread and butter it has little time to think about ecology, but this doesn't mean that this young population of India doesn't understand the importance of ecological balance. In addition to this, unlike other literary theories ecocriticism is able to establish connection with the masses. Putting all these things together one can say that ecocriticism can be easily seen by the urban mass of India as a constructive literary method to save the planet Earth.

An ecocritical reading of Kiran Desai's debut novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), depicts the existing eco-unfriendly practice of a small Indian town, Shahkot. Pollution is not the greatest problem for the people living in Shahkot. Their biggest problem was the

notorious monkeys. In the novel different characters suggest different insensitive solutions to get rid of the notorious monkeys, their common goal was to send back the monkeys to the forests:

He finally drafted a proposal that involved a complicated procedure for the killing of the Cinema Monkey and a display of his carcass that would, Verma postulated, result in the disbanding of the entire troupe of monkeys. They would disband just like that and disappear quietly into the forest to join other faraway monkeys elsewhere (Desai 161).

Here, an ecocritic may argue that, in general, for his own needs man destroys forests, makes the creatures living in those forests to leave their habitats, and when those creatures come to his territory, he tries to send those creatures back to the forests again. Doesn't it sound absurd? Where would those monkeys go? And where are those forests which were used to be their home? This kind of ecocritical reading can help the readers, some of whom are definitely a part of societies of small Indian towns like Shaktot, to realise the absurdity of their practices. As a reaction to this type of ecocritical readings the readers (masses) may argue that they are only the part of existing system and they understand that showing insensitivity towards Nature and the non-human is wrong but they can't do much, however, they appreciate the effort of the ecocritics to spread ecological consciousness among them. But, when an ecocritic asks the question why Sampath, the central character in *The Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, is not left by his parents to live peacefully in the guava orchard, why his right to live quietly was taken away by his family. The same readers, who earlier appreciate the ecocritical reading of the novels, may argue that, if Sampath would be the ecocritic's own son so would s/he leave him to live in the orchard? Here, on emotional grounds they are right, but at the same time the ecocritic should let them realise that it is the society which is responsible for such a situation. Why a person wants to leave the society, it is because the contemporary man-made society cares only about the social obligations not about individual's emotions. This kind of contemporary Indian society values power, money and financial security for man but it does not value man. The society understands the value of a man only when he leaves them.

While dealing with ecocriticism in contemporary India an ecocritic should understand that the purpose of ecocriticism is not to criticise a society or a culture for its anti-ecological practices, but the aim of ecocriticism is to make the readers ecologically conscious so that the people can connect themselves with the Nature and the non-human world, and can understand their importance. An ecocritic must be sensitive to Nature and the non-human world but should also be pragmatic in his critical analysis of a literary work. For example while ecocritically analysing the act of killing the tiger in Amitav Ghose's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the authors find that Piya opposed the killing however Kanai was convinced that the killing was necessary:

Amitav Ghosh questions this human cost of wildlife prevention when he makes Kanai ask Piya, the American marine biologist, who exclaims horror at the killing of a tiger:

:Isn't that a horror too that we can feel the suffering of an animal but not of human beings? (Ambethkar M and Raj 6).

Actually, the act of killing the tiger has two faces. One, it was killed by the people because if they hadn't killed the tiger, the tiger would have killed them. Hence, one can justify the act of killing the tiger and can call an ecocritic, who speaks against the killing of the tiger, an idiot who doesn't understand the practical things. In the novel, *The Hungry Tide*, the people who killed the tiger were the dwellers of Sundarbans and their culture as well as need allowed them to kill the tiger. Two, why this situation came that a tiger entered into territory of the human beings, this is the actual question which should be asked by the ecocritics, the situation came because the present human territory in Sundarbans was in actual the territory of the tiger, where the tiger would go? It is the anthropocentric culture of the contemporary India that the most of the people have become self-centred and has no care for non-human world. They care for the non-human world but only after fulfilling their each and every need and desire. No doubt human life is important but it is no where written that non-human's life is less important. Indian mass seems to be lacking in vision, they are unable to understand that anthropocentrism will lead to such a disturbance in the ecosystem that that might cause the end of the Earth. In Contemporary India, ecocriticism has come forward with a responsibility of make human ecologically conscious and make them understand that one day they themselves will destroy this Earth if they don't change their present attitude towards the Nature and the non-human world.

A different picture of social and cultural perception of ecocriticism in contemporary India is presented through the ecocritical readings of natural and eco-friendly world of India. This form of ecocriticism is a Wordsworthian way of looking to the Nature. Nature is read as the ultimate source of life. Sometimes Nature is seen a teacher so the next time it becomes a source of peace and inspiration. In such readings Nature is treated not as 'other' but as a companion to human beings:

R. K. Narayan whose *Malgudi Days* is today internationally famous. Landscape has been used as an important theme in his fiction. Malgudi is the name of a place. Malgudi is also depicted as a character. Malgudi is put forth as a retreat across a river; the river and the ruined temple and the feel of the place influence the characters positively. This is how R. K. Narayan in his *Malgudi Days* explores eco-friendly environment for the knowledge and benefit of the world of nature (Chakravorty 40).

No discussion on eco-criticism can be complete without mention of Ruskin Bond's contribution to the subject. His narrative on ecology is phenomenal- or should one say, a pathfinder...in his other stories entitled '*All Creatures Great and Small*', '*The Cherry Tree*', and '*The Tree Lover*' he has highlighted the binding of nature and man which plays a very significant role in maintaining nurturing the ecosystem (Chakravorty 40).

These two excerpts from a research paper, 'Ecocriticism in Indian English Literature' present a different shade of ecocriticism. This kind of ecocriticism or better call 'green studies' instead of drawing the attention of the readers towards the ecological and environmental problems tries to connect man with Nature reminding the readers of her soothing powers and positive energies. This form of ecocriticism seems to be easily welcomed by the Indians at social and cultural levels, because it does not tend to attacks the anti-ecological practices of the society, hence, never make people uncomfortable unlike those ecocritical readings about which the paper has already discussed in the earlier paragraphs. Readers can sometimes smell the essence of Nature through this type of ecocritical readings. Today, due to excessive materialism when man sees Nature as 'other' instead of thinking himself as a part of her, and despite opulent lifestyle with luxurious mansions, shopping malls, and movie theatres etc. he is unable to seek peace at the core of his heart. Green studies helps him to realise that Nature can be the only true source of peace.

To sum up, although in contemporary India anthropocentrism dominates over most of the other philosophies, yet, Indian society has an understanding regarding the importance of ecological balance. Therefore, it seems that at social and cultural level Indians appreciate ecocriticism as a literary way of spreading ecological consciousness unless it makes them uncomfortable by attacking the eco-unfriendly social or cultural practices. The ecocritics must learn from this type of reactions and should be alert while ecocritically analysing any cultural or social practices or social activity described in a literary work. Ecocritics can achieve their goal of making the readers ecologically conscious in a better way if they get success in making the readers understand that their ecocritical analysis is not against any particular society or culture, their aim is only to spread consciousness regarding ecology among their readers. If an ecocritics simply criticise the acts of injustice towards the Nature and the non-human world without convincing the readers that s/he too understand that the society is struggling for its survival and s/he understands their problems and emotions, there can be some possibility of misinterpretation of the ecocritical analysis. The next point is this, that India is a developing nation, every day different plans for building dams and bridges are being passed, and deforestation to set factories and for other establishments are also being done. In such a scenario ecocritics must take the responsibility to contribute by giving some serious efforts to make the mass as well as the government realise that development is important but not at the cost of this planet Earth. Ecocriticism in contemporary India is already doing well in spreading ecological consciousness among its readers. However, in a country like India an ecocritic who shows sympathy for the society at its pathetic condition can have much more scope and acceptability than an ecocritic who harshly criticises people for their present day malpractices causing great harm to the environment and the eco-system. So it can be said India society is to embrace ecocriticism but its future in India may depend on how pragmatically the ecocritics do their task and how effectively they manage to balance between their views about human and the non-human world.

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