

Aarti Verma

Research Scholar

University of Lucknow

Department of English & MEL

India

Email— arti31verma@gmail.com

Greening the Earth, Greening Literature:
A Theoretical Underpinning of Ecocriticism

Abstract

In the past three decades, ecology has acquired a significant place across disciplines from environmental science to humanities. Increased interest in ecological concerns across disciplines has sowed seed for the rise of Ecocriticism, an emerging academic field within literary studies. Here, “Greeting the Earth, Greeting Literature” refers to ecological implication to literature in order to generate awareness in human beings to save our planet Earth. Ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. The present paper is intended to explore the theoretical underpinning of ecocriticism and to deal with its origin, gradual development and major trends. Ecocriticism critiques the cultural norms of the society which paves way for the environmental degradation. The paper presents a critique of the “Anthropocene,” an epoch that exposes disastrous impact of human activities on our planet Earth and its ecosystem. It calls for a paradigm shift from the human-centric approach to ecocentrism.

Key words— Ecology, Ecocriticism, Anthropocene, Literature, Ecosystem, Greenery.

“The future will either be green or not at all”. — Bob Brown

The Earth is the only planet which is suitable for the existence and survival of life. It is very pathetic that human beings, in spite of being aware of this fact, are indulged in such activities which are disastrous for the ecosystem of our planet Earth. It seems as if we have forgotten the fact that “The Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth” (Marlee Martlin). Humans’ meddling with nature has brought disastrous consequences— climate

change, extinction of species, global warming, decline of biodiversity, the depletion of ozone layer and natural resources, deforestation, acidification of water, and loss of resilience in ecosystem etc. These issues have reached to such an alarming rate across the world, that an urgent need to protect our ecosystem has been realized. As literature is the mirror of the society and a significant source to aware people time to time, ecological concerns started to find a space in literary studies.

In the past three decades, ecology has acquired a significant place across disciplines from environmental science to humanities. “Everything is connected to everything else”- is one of the Four Laws of Ecology given by Barry Commoner. The other three laws of ecology are-

- “Everything must go somewhere”.
- “Nature knows best”.
- “There is no free lunch”.

Commoner’s Laws suggest that matter or energy cannot be destroyed and that when something gets thrown away, it never goes away. He argues that matter or energy cannot be created, and that the exploitation of ecosystem will result in the conversion of useful, higher energy resources to useless, lower energy forms.

Commoner’s Laws of ecology are based on the principles of Earth’s life-support system which includes four major components— the atmosphere, hydrosphere, geosphere and biosphere. Life is sustained by the flow of energy from the sun passing through these four spheres of the Earth, the cycling of nutrients within the biosphere, and by gravity to keep it all together. In this biosphere, every organism is related to each other and necessary for functioning of the ecosystem in perfect way. Some organism produces the nutrients according to their need, some eat other organisms for these nutrients and some recycle these nutrients by decomposition. Thus, a chain of biotic and abiotic relationship is framed and matter in the form of nutrients cycles within and among ecosystems and the biosphere. Now, the disturbance in the Earth’s ecosystem has been created by human beings’ activities which are altering these biogeochemical chemical cycles.

Increased interest in ecological concerns across disciplines has sowed seed for the rise of Ecocriticism, an emerging academic field within literary studies. Here, “Greening the Earth, Greening Literature” refers to ecological implication to literature in order to generate awareness in human beings to save our planet Earth. The description of nature, ecology, and the complex multilayered humans’ response to nature and non-human world has always

remained an essential part of literature. Yet, there was no systematic approach of discussing ecological matters in literature until last few decades of the twentieth century. The books and articles on the ecological approach to literature were not in unified form. Each author and critic “was inventing an environmental approach to literature in isolation. Each was a single voice howling in the wilderness” (Glotfelty xvii). The publication of such seminal environmental books like Aldo Leopold’s *The Sand Country Almanac* (1948) and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) generated ecological consciousness.

Ecocriticism has sprung from the whims of some ecocentric and self-indulgent activists. Since the 1990s, Ecocriticism has forged a distinct identity of its own. Ecocriticism was officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works written in the 1990s, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromn and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), an anthology of classic and cutting edge writings in the rapidly emerging field of Ecocriticism, is the first collection of critical essays on the ecological approach to literary studies.

The most widely recognized ecocritics are Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Harold Fromn, Glen A. Love, Simon C. Estok, William Rueckert, William Howarth, Suellen Campbell etc. Cheryll Glotfelty, the acknowledged founder of Ecocriticism in the United States of America, defines Ecocriticism in her book, *The Ecocriticism Reader*:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. 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 (xviii).

Glotfelty enquires how nature is represented in literature; how the concept of wilderness has changed over the time. Linking the connection between nature and culture, Glotfelty says that “an ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (xix).

In 1992, Glotfelty becomes the co-founder of ASLE (The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) which aims at promoting the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that deals with the relationship of human world and natural world. Its members, from different parts of the world, are interested in the natural world and contribute to ecocritical study. Some significant works in ecocritical field are— Laurence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination*, Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking*

Environmental, Richard Kerridge's *Writing the Environment*, Glen A. Love's *Practical Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrad's *Ecocriticism* and Loretta Johnson's *The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism*.

In his book, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as "the environmentally oriented study of literature and (less often) the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice" (1389). He classifies Ecocriticism in two phases-

- First wave ecocriticism
- Second wave ecocriticism/revisionist Ecocriticism

The first wave Ecocritics have focused on genres like nature writing, nature poetry or wilderness fiction and upheld the philosophy of organism. While the second wave ecocritics have inclined towards environmental justice issues.

Though, ecocriticism as an academic discipline began in 1990's, its origin can be found in the late 1970's, when at the meetings of the WLA (Western Literature Association) arose the concept of ecocriticism and what it signifies. The term 'Ecocriticism' has been coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Explaining the relationship between literature and the physical world, he states that ecocriticism entails "application of ecology and ecological concept to the study of literature, because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live" (The Ecocriticism Reader 107).

Ecocentrism is a nature-centered philosophy which opposes anthropocentrism. It blurs the division between human and non-human nature. The feeling of superiority in humans has its roots in the notion of anthropocentrism. Rob Boddice, in an introduction of his book *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments, States*, "Anthropocentrism is expressed either as a charge of human chauvinism or as an acknowledgement of human ontological boundaries. It is in tension with nature, the environment and non-human animals." (1). Many prominent thinkers have supported man centeredness in the universe. Peter Barry gives some examples of such thinkers— a Greek philosopher Protagoras says, "man is the measure of all things"; Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing "The Vitruvian man" depicts that man is the only creature to have dominance over other creatures.

Anthropocentrism is an important notion in other philosophies also. Philosophers like Heidegger and Stoic also supported humans' supremacy over animals. They argued that

humans are linguistic beings while animals are non- linguistic beings. Defining anthropocentrism, J. Baird Callicott says:

An anthropocentric value theory (or axiology) by common consensus, centres intrinsic value on human beings and regards all other things, including other forms of life ,as being only instrumentally valuable, i.e.; valuable only to the extent that they are means or instruments which may serve human beings. (299)

Ecocriticism critiques anthropocentrism and argues that all organism including humans have equal rights. It rejects all hierarchical structure of society.

Ecocriticism calls for a paradigm shift from the human-centric to the ecocentrism. As Robert Kern opines:

What Ecocriticism calls for then, is a fundamental shift from one context of reading to another- more specifically, a movement from the human to the environment.... From the exclusively human to the biocentric or ecocentric.... A humanism informed by an awareness of the more than human. (32)

Ecocentrism opposes human-centered philosophy. it conceives humans as a part of the whole ecosystem.

As ecocriticism is a new area of study, it does not have a widely known set of assumption, doctrines or procedures. Peter Barry has included a chapter titled “Ecocriticism” in the second edition of his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2002). He claims that ecocriticism has no universal model. “The ecocentred reading”, says Peter Barry, “focuses outside, on the house and its environs, rather than inside, on the owner and his psychology” (P.251). He suggests three elements used by it. He states that “It uses ideas of energy, entropy (which is a kind of negative energy within systems which tends towards breakdown and disorganization), and symbiosis (‘sym-biosis’), literary ‘living together’, denoting mutually sustaining, co-existing systems)” (251). Ecocriticism poses a variety of questions. As Peter Barry enquires what ecocritics do.

Ecocritics investigate the interrelationship between human and nature. For this, they ask several questions such as:

- What is the role of physical setting in a text?
- How is nature represented in a work?
- Are the values expressed in a work consistent with ecological wisdom?

- In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?

Cheryll Glotfelty, a founding figure of Ecocriticism, asks a question, “How then can we contribute to environmental restoration... from within our capacity as professors of literature” (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xxi). Literature is an aesthetically and culturally constructed part of the environment. Hence, the discussion and representation of ecological crisis cannot be avoided in literary studies. There are numerous literary works which deal with environmental issues and its devastating effects. Ecological awareness is visible in many Native American authors’ works of fiction and poetry. Authors like Rachel Carson, Willa Cather, Robinson Jeffers, W. S. Mervin, Adrienne Rich, Wallace Stegner, Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, Ursula Le Guinn and Alice Walker have infused ecological sensibility in their works.

The ecological consciousness has affected all streams of literature whether it is poetry, drama, science fiction, prose or novel. But, in recent times, novel as a genre has become much more receptive in dealing with the ecological issues and concerns. In his article “A Novel Understanding of Ecology”, Colin C. Irvine states, “the novel, above all other genre available to those interested in literature and the landscape has the greatest potential to kindle an interest in ecological issues and to facilitate a thorough understanding of the natural world” (76). Though Irvine’s study limits the scope of interface between nature and literature, yet one cannot deny the fact that ecological concerns are making a significant mark in numerous recently published novels. For instance, Frank Herbert’s ecological science fiction *Dune*(1965), Brian Clark’s debut novel *The Stream*, Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983), Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*(1985), Jenny Diski’s *Rainforest* (1987), Ian McEwan’s *A Child in Time* (1987), John Updike’s *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), Peter Goldsworthy’s *Wish* (1995), Marian Engel’s *Bear*(2002) and Zakes Mda’s *The Whale Caller*(2005). Besides these novels, ecological concerns are addressed broadly in Indian novels in English like Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Ruchir Joshi’s *The Last Jet- Engine Laugh* (2002), and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007).

Now-a-days, ecocritics work on multiple projects with an emphatic focus on the welfare of ecosystem, employing eco-philosophy, eco-psychology, evolutionary biology, environmental ethics, ecology and other related disciplines. Cheryll Glotfelty mentions in her book:

Ecocriticism is predominantly a white movement. It will become multi- ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and

issues of social justice. It is expected that the ecocritical scholarship becoming even more interdisciplinary, multicultural and international. (25)

In recent years, ecocritics have attempted to come out of the constrictions of critiquing only literary texts and moved towards a more general cultural ecocriticism, with studies of films, television shows, paintings, sculptures and other art forms. The awareness to save our planet has affected the field of literature and criticism and promoted green writing.

Works cited

- Glotfelty, Cheryll. Introduction. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks In Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Kern, Robert. *Ecocriticism—What is it Good For?* ISLE. 7:1. Winter 2000, 9. 32.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010.
- Boddice, Rob. Introduction. *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*. By Rob Boddice. Boston: Brill Books, 2011.
- Callicott, J. Baird. "Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory and Environmental Ethics." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21.4 (1984): 299-309. Web. 14 March 2013.