

Ecocriticism in Indian Fiction

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Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as is evidenced in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world. Today the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized in all departments of knowledge and development. The literary critic tries to study how this close relationship between nature and society has been textualized by the writers in their works. In this context two terms have become very important today – ecology and ecocriticism. India is a country with variety of ecosystems which ranges from Himalayas in the north to plateaus of south and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the east to dry Thar of the West. With time, however, these ecosystems have been adversely affected due to increasing population and avarice of mankind. Literature could not remain unaffected from this depletion and my paper is on that how the concern for nature changes in Indian literature from reverence to destruction.

The two components of nature, organisms and their environment are not only much complex and dynamic but also interdependent, mutually reactive and interrelated. Ecology relatively a new science, deals with the various principles which govern such relationships between organisms and environment. ¹ Today ecology is defined as the way in which plants, animals and people are related to each other and their environment. In this relationship they are so much interdependent on each other that any disturbance in one disturbs the other. History has proved this every now and then that with every change in the civilisation the relationship of animals and human beings have also changed and the effect on civilisation of the changes in environment has been so acute that sometimes it has wiped the whole civilisation from the face of the earth. Therefore, concern for ecology is one of the most discussed issues today. It is the concern of every country to replenish the diminishing factors of ecology which threatens human beings the most.

Literature well known for reflecting the contemporary issues could not have remained unaffected from this theme. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Ecocriticism

The word 'ecocriticism' first appeared in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Yet apparently it remained inactive in critical vocabulary until the 1989

Western Literature Association meeting (in Loer d' Alene), when Cheryll Glotfelty (at the time a graduate student at Cornell now Assistant Professor of Literature and Environment at the university of Nevada, Reno) not only received the term but worked for its use in the critical field which hereafter had been used as 'the study of nature writing'. Glen Love (Professor of English at the University of Oregon) too seconded the call for 'ecocriticism' at the same WLA meeting. Since that meeting in 1989 the usage of the term 'ecocriticism' has bloomed.² However, in the beginning scholars working in this field of literary theory remained marginal until the early 1990 when the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was established in 1992 along with the Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) in 1993. In 1996 it is said to be officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works: *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Gloyfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell.³

Despite having reached this critical mass, ecocriticism had difficulty in gaining recognition as a legitimate literary theory. The African American writers refused to be a part of this as they considered themselves as a politically, economically and socially marginalised section. There have also been numerous debates on whether to include human culture in the physical world. Despite the broad scope of inquiry all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. As a theoretical discourse it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. In the past the main stream literary criticism expresses the conceptual gap between nature and culture. An element of artificiality can be recognised in this perceived separation, for nature and culture often overlap as twinned process. Simon Schama, for instance, argues that when we imagine even the most pristine of wilderness, "the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out to be, on closer inspection, its product."⁴ Dr. Mark's in this context first differentiate between ecology and environment. He says that ecology is mostly used by humanists as a metaphor for describing the natural world. In this sense, ecology is a way of thinking about nature. Environment, on the other hand, he considers as a more inclusive term that describes the natural and human world. He says "I use the term 'environmental writing' more than 'nature writing' because I am interested in writers concerned with natural as well as cultural experience."⁵ The view that culture is produced by human beings and is therefore separate from nature bypasses the fact that all human culture resides in the natural world. We owe our very existence to its processes. Therefore, our every action toward the natural world is eventually an action toward oneself and toward one's culture.

At present ecocriticism is in full swing and is a readily accepted theory worldwide. It is said to be the study of the relationship between

literature and the environment. Its practitioners explore human attitudes toward the environment as expressed in nature writing. It is a broad genre that is known by many names like green cultural studies, ecopoetics and environmental literary criticism, which are some popular names for this relatively new branch of literary criticism. Literary criticism in general examines the relations between writers, texts and the “the world”. In most literary theory “the world” is synonymous with society--- the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere. Ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary criticism. Ecocritics and theorists are concerned with the questions if the nature is being represented in a piece of literature or if the physical setting has a role in the plot or if the values expressed in the work is consistent with the ecological wisdom or if in addition to race, class and gender place should become a new critical category and in what ways and to what effect the environment crisis is seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture. Literary scholars specialise in questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, tradition and language and it is in these areas that we are making a substantial contribution to environmental thinking.

Ecocriticism has come to mean not only the application of ecology and ecological principles to the study of literature, but also the theoretical approach to the interrelational web of natural cultural and supernatural phenomena. It began to explore constructions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse. Since literature has always conditioned our philosophical understanding of nature, of environment. Even the aesthetic categories by which our feelings for nature are understood the beautiful, the picturesque, the scenic, the sublime, the wild etc. have been defined largely their use in literary and critical contexts. Most ecological work shares a common motivation, that is, the awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support system. This awareness brings in us a desire to contribute to environmental restoration, not only as a hobby but as a representative of literature. Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications. Arthur Lovejoy’s contribution in this field is also very eminent. He observes that one of the strangest, most potent and most persistent factors in the western thought is the use of the term ‘nature’ to express the standard of human values, the identification of the good with that which is ‘natural’ or ‘according to nature’.⁶

Although not many, there are a few novels in the history of Indian English literature which can be read through the lens of ecocriticism. It is true that a serious concern with ecology seems to be lacking in the

earlier works, yet nature has been used as an important backdrop against which the story develops. The progress at that time was not very significant, and the writers were not scientifically aware to understand and write about something the significance of which the human society had not yet realized. So, it had to be limited to the landscape and the changes that occurred with time at the places described and in nature.

When history is examined we find Raja Rao as one of the most prominent writers of Indian English novels. His depiction of the South Indian village culture and environmental setting is a true depiction of relationship between man and nature. In his novel 'Kanthapura' he has shown how rivers and mountains play an important role in people's lives. They have names for them. In this novel they call the mountain as Goddess Kenchamma and they consider it responsible for both - their prosperity and their adversity. Raja Rao writes about Kenchamma in the novel, "Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she.....never has she failed us in grief. If rains come not, you fall at her feet and say, 'Kenchamma you are not kind to us. Our field is full of younglings.'"7 These first few pages of 'Kanthapura' reminds us of the age old practices of our ancestors when nature was revered in the true literal sense. Besides these few pages in the beginning we, however, do not find any further discussions on it in the novel.

R. K. Narayan wrote in the same decade and has given life to a place, Malgudi, or it can be said that he has developed a place as a character which can be seen in almost all his prose fictions bearing the same features. In other words he used landscape as an important theme and as mentioned in the earlier chapter this is also one of the important considerations under ecocriticism. In 'The Dark Room' the river and the ruined temple leave a benign influence on Savitri. The flowing Sarayu, the ruined temple and the stone slabs influence Raju in 'The Guide', and contribute to his sainthood. It is the spirit of Malgudi that helps him to face the ordeal of fast in the right earnest. It is the retreat across the river that almost transforms Jagan. Thus Malgudi is a character. When it is material, it is a villain like the gutter in 'The English Teacher' and 'The Financial Expert'. Under the salubrious influence of serene nature Krishna becomes so spiritual that he begins to communicate with the soul of Susila. Professor Iyenger rightly advocates the theory that Malgudi is the real 'hero' of ten novels and the many short stories of Narayan and that underneath the seeming change and the human drama there is something the 'soul' of the place that defies or embraces all changes and is triumphantly and unalterably itself.8 Malgudi becomes the symbol of the transitional Indian shedding the age old traditions and accepting the modern western civilization. The Malgudi novels and short stories are strongly imbued with what D. H. Lawrence has called 'the spirit of place'.9

Nature has always proved to be stronger than man. It has often shown its power by controlling manpower through natural calamities like famine, drought, flood, earthquake etc. Man's life and nature are so interlinked that it is not possible for human beings to separate themselves from its influence. Therefore they have no choice but to accept both nature's bounty and adversity. This can be said to be reciprocal as nature too is the recipient of man's action. Our irresponsible actions cause irreparable damages to nature. This is how the chain of ecosystem works in which everything is related to each other and therefore affects each other. The effect of one such natural calamity on the humanity can be seen in Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'So Many Hungers'. In this novel we see the true picture of Bengal famine of 1943 in which at least 3,000,000 Indians died of starvation. The novel is compounded of the ingredients of sighs and tears, misery and squalor, hunger and poverty and heroic suffering and sacrifice. The Bengal famine of 1943 which crushed millions under its devastating truculence forms the major part of the novel's plot. The characters in the novels express the nature of certain animals. The character of Laxmi Kanth is designed to show how a man can combine in himself the qualities of both the jackal and the vulture. This is seen when he tortures those who are already beaten by hunger. He is the prince of black market totally lacking social conscience. Fisher is right when she asserts that "In 'So Many Hungers' (1947) the Bengal famine is more than just a background; it is the very heart of the book".¹⁰

The other writer in whose work also we witness a reference to the Bengal famine is Kamala Markandya in her novel 'Nectar in Sieve'. 'The Flood', which is taken from her novel, 'Nectar in Sieve', has very well described the control of nature over human beings. She writes "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless and forgetful, and it has you by the throat." ¹¹ Nature is shown as both the destroyer and the preserver in this story. The destructive feature of nature is seen in the pitiful condition of the villagers due to the rain and storm, "the water pitilessly found every hole of the thatched roof to come in.....I saw that our coconut plant had been struck. That, too, the storm had claimed for its own..... they did not show much sign of surviving."¹²

Yet the writers didn't write with the thought of ecology. It can be said that it was just coincidental. One of the reasons for this can be said that the concern for ecology came to be the centre of discussions only towards the end of the last century when it actually became a threat for human lives and thus became a global concern as the longer neglect in this regard will lead to the doom of the mankind.

There is one writer whose works show ecology not only as an important or dominant theme, but there is also concern for natural depletion that is taking place.. We are talking of Ruskin Bond. The natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie almost invariably form the setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. He shows his worry for the unthoughtful actions of man towards nature. Through his short stories for children he has tried to convey an important message to everyone, that is, the importance of nature in our life. In his 'An Island of Trees' the grandmother reveals to her granddaughter, Koki, the deep bond that grows between humans and nonhumans if only there is love and compassion. 'No Room for a Leopard' is about deforestation and its accompanying aftermath. It presents the pathetic condition of the animals after deforestation. In 'Copperfield in the Jungle' he shows abhorrence towards hunting for pleasure which can never be justified. 'The Tree Lover', 'The Cherry Tree', 'All Creatures Great and Small' and many others are all about the chain which binds man and nature, as in the chain of ecosystem, showing interdependence. He has always emphasized on the friendly relationship between man and nature and has brought before us our need for each other. That is why we notice his pity for the unsympathetic and cruel actions of human beings towards nature.

The other prominent writer of this age in whose work we see the dominance of nature images which act as important part of theme is Anita Desai. Nature which includes animals, plants and birds, has a strong presence in almost all her works. Known in Indian-English fiction for ushering in the psychological novel, Desai uses external landscapes to portray interior states of mind. In 'Cry, the Peacock', the complexities of Maya's inner life is effectively brought out through the landscape as is her resentment against her husband for his inability to communicate with her. Maya compares herself with the peacock in the jungle. The peacocks are said to fight before they mate, living they are aware of death and dying they are in love with life. This is reflected towards the end in the novel when one day during a dust storm both husband and wife go up to the roof of their house, she pushes him off the parapet and he dies. In 'Voices in the City' Monisha is repeatedly compared to the encaged bird in her house who wants to be free. Her condition reflects the plight of the imprisoned bird whose need is no one's concern and its life is for the pleasure of the others. She finally commits suicide to free herself. Baba' the autistic son in 'Clear Light of Day' is described as a harmless spider. In 'Where shall We Go This Summer' the island people are described as goats as they listen to Moses.

Once this branch of criticism, ecocriticism, was established it started giving rise to different opinions regarding what should be its definitions and its limitations. In the beginning it was restricted to the works related to nature or to the works concerned with the relation of

man with animals. Later, however, as it gained currency in the literary world and now as it has caught the attention of almost all the critics around the world, its scope too has become large., which has already been discussed in the first chapter. Apart from them Rachel Azima's theory of ecocriticism provides us with a completely new perspective of looking at this theory.

Rachel Azima's¹³ theory of ecocriticism might have raised the eyebrows of many writers but it indeed has led to inclusion of many novels under this branch. She has tried to close the gap between postcolonialism and ecocriticism by analyzing the texts that depict a range of engagements with the environment and that complicates and extend the notion of place-connectedness. This analysis extends the postcolonial theory beyond its usual context of cosmopolitanism while also broadening ecocriticism beyond its rather parochial American bent. Rachel Azima has re-theorized root metaphors in relation to literary texts that calls static place-relationships into question in order to define more flexible and inclusive models of place-connectedness that can account for phenomena like displacement, hybridity and transnationalism. What is called 'self-transplantation' represents one such model: through self-transplantation , authors like V. S. Naipaul are able to forge relationships to their chosen places of residence via interactions with and writing about the environment. Self-transplantation stresses the power of claiming a place to which one can belong, rather than inheriting this place attachment or receiving it through an accident of history.

This paper moves from texts that focus directly on plants as objects of scientific investigation to texts that place a greater emphasis on the botanical as a metaphor. This trajectory helps demonstrate how questions of place and belonging are worked out through botanical tropes, even when texts do not overtly address plant-human interactions. The trope of self-transplantation enable authors to tap into evocative power of roots while avoiding exclusive and xenophobic moods of belonging. The 'naturalising' performed by root metaphors reflects a questionable application of non-human biology in a human context. We observe plants behaving in ways we code as 'natural' and we then describe ourselves in these scientific terms in order to achieve the naturalizing effect. The recent fictions, we notice, can be read under this branch from the point of view of the different concepts of ecocriticism as are established by the ecocritical critics.

Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' straddles across continents, mapping the contours of the ethno-racial and historical relationship between people from different cultures and backgrounds.

The novel bounces between an insurgency in India and the immigrant experience. It presents the Azima Rachel's concept of self-transplantation. Desai crosses international boundaries (India and USA) and shows her character from cross-cultural ecocritical perspective. The story shifts between the landscapes of India and America. Biju, the son of an old cook in India, tries to transplant himself in a foreign land. Once uprooted from the origin, it is not easy to adjust in a new environment and same can be seen in Desai's novel. In order to settle and have a sense of belonging to the foreign land Biju and many other like him face the similar problems like struggling for green cards, changing of jobs, search for a shelter. This transplantation is not easily established but it is only after a tense period of time that this cross cultural assimilation is finally a success. Another character of the novel, Jemubhai Patel who is the retired judge living in the foothills of the Himalayas, also went through the same experience when he had gone to London, ".....nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with unuttered words.....and elderly ladies, even the hapless- blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins- moved over when he sat next to them in the bus..... The young and beautiful were no kinder; girls held their noses and giggled, 'Phew, he stinks of curry!'....."14

In addition to this we also see the similar local problem in the form of Nepali insurgencies. The Nepalis living in Kalimpong and other eastern part of India try to snatch the belongingness by fighting for it. In their fight they don't hesitate in killing the innocent animals. The lives seem to be of no importance. And when humans are being killed, death of animals is of no concern to anyone. In the story we are introduced to Jemubhai's dog, Mutt. It is his life and their love and attachment for each other that represents the bond between the two different creations of ecology. A Gorkha couple takes away Jemubhai's dog and it finally dies. The careless attitude of the SDO hurts him a lot when he says, "A dog! Justice just listen to yourself. People are being killed. What can I do?"15 Desai through the judge brings out the inhumanity of the human world whose actions ruin the other creatures of the ecosystem. She writes about the judge's emotion, "He couldn't conceive of punishment great enough for humanity. A man wasn't equal to an animal, not one particle of him. Human life was stinking, corrupt, and meanwhile there were beautiful creatures who lived with delicacy on the earth without doing anyone any harm. 'We should be dying' the judge almost wept. The world had failed Mutt. It had failed beauty; it had failed grace. But by having forsaken this world, for having held himself apart, Mutt would suffer."16

Desai has also used the landscape in her novel to tell the changing circumstances or to describe the mood. The story in India is set in the foothills of the Himalayas, Kalimpong. Kanchenjunga stands as the ultimate truth and makes its presence felt from time to time in the

novel. The story starts and ends with the description of the mountain, Kanchenjunga. When Sai first arrived at Cho Oyu the mountain is described as macabre. It reflects the situation and unhappy mood of the child who has lost her parents in an accident and is sent to this unusual relative of hers whom she has never met. Later in the novel Kachenjunga is presented as that part of nature which pays for the brutality of humans and whose beauty is destroyed in the war for power. It is said in the novel, "India had swallowed the jewel-coloured kingdom, whose blue hills they could see in the distance.¹⁷ Thus we see that Desai's "Inheritance of Loss" covers almost all the different concepts and definitions that have been put forth by various critics of ecocriticism. Her novel is rich with ecocritical references and among the recent fictions it can be most aptly given an ecocritical reading.

The novel which has been equally accepted by all the ecocritics, without giving rise to any objection in calling it a fiction with an ecocritical approach, is Amitav Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide'. It does have the elements of the earlier concept of ecocriticism, that is, the interrelationship between human, nature and animal worlds. In other words it deals with the study of nature writing. The book is about one of the most dynamic ecological systems of the world. It takes us to the Sunderbans and the hundreds of islands found and lost in a short span of time. It is about the hardships of the settlers trying to give a meaning to their lives against all the odds offered by the place. We see nature in both its full beauty and its ugliness. He presents before us the wrath of nature and fragility of humans at the mercy of the former. This blend of the political and the social truth with its concern for nature has brought this novel of Indian English Literature under the discussion of the seminars based on ecocriticism.

The story is of an urban man Kanai and his uncle's account in his notebook through which we are told about most of the strange and hushed political happenings in the name of conservation. Piyali, the ecologist, and Fokir, the native, also make us sense the real terror of nature. The Sunderbans abounds in animals and these animals also influence the lives of the inhabitants. In the novel we see the terror of the tigers, known for killing men and animals, among the people of islands. The main reason for this environmental degradation is the increasing population and the increasing need of this ever rising population. . In one of his stories Nirmal had explained how people went there for the hunger of land, they were even ready to sell themselves for a small piece of island. Amitav Ghosh creates emotional dilemma among us as to whom to support. Intellectually, it seems quite logical to encourage conservation, but on humanitarian ground we cannot stop ourselves from feeling at the helplessness of the people while they were brutally killed and evicted from the island. Ghosh in this novel tries to show the vastness and terror of the nature which is responsible for life on the

earth. He brings before us the limitations of human beings. If nature thinks of revenge for our cruelties towards her the whole humanity which boasts so much of their brain will be washed away from the face of the earth. He presents the political sham that is involved in the name of protecting animals and their natural habitat at the cost of innocent lives.

To sum up, as a distinctive approach to the practice literary criticism, ecocriticism gives increased attention to literary representatives of nature and is sensitive to interdependencies that ground the author, character or work in the natural system. This approach shifts critical focus from social relations toward natural relationships and views the individual as a member of ecosystem. It values highly the 'literary sense of place' not as setting but as an essential expression of bonding with or alienation from a specific natural context. . From the beginning the writers have shown interest towards nature, culture and landscape. For writers like Narayan landscape was the part of the theme or the characters which showed growth with time. Apart from this the natural calamities that the country faced from time to time also served as themes for novels of writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamla Markandya. In the later phase it gathered speed and more and more works of different writers were published which could be read under this school of criticism. This can also be because the scope of ecocriticism widened because of the inclusion of the different perspective proposed by the critics around the world.

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