

Nature, Culture and Literature: An Ecocritical Contestation

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Abstract

Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts and the world. In most literary theory, "the world" is synonymous with society-the social sphere. The two most influential schools of thought that brought about great remarkable changes in people's perspectives and life in the twentieth century—Marxism and psychoanalysis have the common assumption that what we call 'nature' exists primarily as a sign within the cultural discourse. Apart from it, nature has no being and meaning, they claim (Coupe 2). This vision of nature as a cultural construct permeates various schools of thoughts like formalists, new historicist, and deconstruction - all of which repudiate the existence of nature outside the cultural discourse, and take it just as a sign. However, nature affects us in several different ways, and always remains influential in human life; it cannot, therefore, be dismissed merely as a linguistic construct, and from ecological point of view it will be a big mistake to take it just a sign within a signifying system or a mere concept within the cultural discourse.

Keywords- Ecology, Nature, Anthropology, Religion

Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof-by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern-can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the different forms of ecodegradation that afflict planet Earth today. In this, ecocriticism concurs with other branches of the environmental humanities-ethics, history, religious studies, anthropology, humanistic geography in holding that environmental phenomena must be understood, and that today's burgeoning array of environmental concerns must be addressed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

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“There has to be a nature to be called ‘nature’” (Gifford 175). Therefore, nature is not simply a signifier within the signifying system. Nature exists independently of all cultural constructions, argues Professor Kate Soper in her essay, ‘The Idea Nature’. Attacking the deconstructionist view about nature, she says “. . . it is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer; and the real thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of signifier.’ Nature depends neither on culture nor language for its existence. It is “puerile centrism or regressive religiosity (ourselves as gods) to render all existence dependent on human senses, language, culture” (Hochman 188).

The American Wordsworth scholar Alan Liu claims—there is no nature. Especially at present when natural calamities like global warming, depletion of ozone layer, flood, lack of rain, weather extremes and others are taking their toll on the human beings and other living creatures, it will be foolish and also “a serious error” to ignore the very existence of nature itself.

“‘Nature’ is a term that needs to be contested, not rejected” (Bate). In his response to the American Wordsworth scholar Alan Liu’s claim that ‘There is no nature’, Bate says “It is profoundly unhelpful to say ‘There is no nature’ at a time when our most urgent need is to address and redress the consequences of human civilization’s insatiable desire to consume the products of the earth.” While Liu is right to identify the word ‘nature’ as mediation, he is wrong to deny, argues Terry Gifford, the general physical presence that is one side of that mediation.

Nature, which refers to the whole system of the existence, arrangement, forces, and events of all physical life that are not controlled by man, excludes from its domain everything made by the human beings. It most commonly means everything that is not made by man. It is a concept of the non-human through which “humanity thinks its difference and specificity” (Soper 125). This metaphysical concept of nature is what Jhan Hochman defines as ‘Nature’ in contrast to ‘nature’ in his *Green Cultural Studies*. For him, ‘nature’ is the collective name for ‘individual plants, nonhuman animals, and elements’ (Hochman 2-3). Hochman’s ‘nature’, for Soper, is in fact the ‘lay’ or ‘surface’ concept, according to which, nature refers to landscape, wilderness, countryside, rurality, animals, the physical body in the space and raw materials. It is this ‘lay’ or ‘surface’ concept of nature that is used in everyday life, and literary and theoretical discourses.

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Nature possesses distinct structures, processes and laws which we are subject to and which we can neither escape nor destroy (Soper 124). It is only the physical dimensions of nature—landscape, mountains, rivers, the physical body in space, raw materials etc.—which the human beings have been exploiting, for whose conservation a very strong voice has also arisen. The intrinsic laws of nature and its processes are beyond our reach but very influential in life, as they affect us in different way. The sun, for instance, rises and sets according to a particular natural law; these natural phenomena are governed by distinct processes which cannot be approached and affected by human beings. Does the sun need help of culture for its existence and functions? The answer is obviously a big ‘No’. As Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory also suggests, culture must have come into existence long after that of nature. Culture is a human construct, and human beings themselves have evolved out of apes that come in the realm of nature. Thus, culture is secondary to nature in terms of being, and therefore, in his *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell says that there is nature beyond culture.

What we know as culture is grand human discourse that refers to the complex collection of knowledge, folklore, language, rules, rituals, habits, lifestyles, attitudes, beliefs, and customs that link and give a common identity to a particular group of people at a specific point in time (*Encyclopedia*).

All things made by human beings fall in the category of culture whereas nature is everything that goes beyond human construction. As an example, a tree is part of the natural world whereas a wooden chair, made from the tree, is part of the multiple inventions and manifestations of culture. Culture is a powerful human tool for survival, but it is a fragile phenomenon. It is constantly changing and easily lost because it exists only in our minds. Our written languages, governments, buildings, and other man-made things are merely the products of culture. They are not culture in themselves. For this reason, archaeologists cannot dig up culture directly in their excavations. The broken pots and other artifacts of ancient people that they uncover are only material remains that reflect cultural patterns--they are things that were made and used through cultural knowledge and skills.

Culture is a human institution, and as such it reflects the exercise of will, or at least, a set of intended meanings: culture is a world where rules and values operate. These, however, relate to human action, and are, so to speak, victims of its inconstancy: culture is also the domain of diversity of beliefs, of inconsistency of passions, even of contradiction in human decisions. Nature, on the other hand, presents itself as a reality characterised by permanence, stability, regularity. The recurrence of seasons and

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blooming, the constancy of living forms, but also of the material world, cause nature to be a kind of guarantee of the substantiality of being: the fact that things have a nature gives them a sort of solidity on which humanity can rely in its actions and its enterprises (Jean-Marc Besse, *Nature and Culture*).

Language is perhaps the best and most effective tool that helps us understand nature and communicate it. Nature is best represented through a creative play of language which alerts the reader to the delicate poise between the non-human world and the human mind (Coupe 158). Similarly, culture also affects our understanding of nature in that it, along with social and spatial context, determines our perspectives to look at nature, and then form some views about it. Nature is always necessarily experienced, Soper says, in culturally mediated form (Coupe 120). Rain, for instance, is essentially same everywhere but people's experience and views about it may differ from one place to another. A person living in Asia might experience rain in a different way and therefore will have different view about it than one living in Europe because of their prevailing cultural perspectives and contexts.

“The grammar not only of language, but of culture and civilization itself, comes from this vast mother of ours, nature.” (Snyder 129). In other words, it is not culture and language that give identity and existence to nature; instead they come from nature. For example, architecture, lifestyles, foods, dresses, festivals etc. that are part of culture are determined by nature. People living in Nepal, for instance, wear different kinds of dresses and live different life styles because of their different landscape, weather condition and other natural features; those who live in the hilly regions wear rather tight fitting dress—*doura*, *suruwal* and warm clothes because they protect them from cold weather and also make it easier for them to walk rather comfortably in ups and downs of mountainous terrain. On the other hand, people in the Southern plain part of Nepal wear rather loose-fitting thin dresses like *dhoti* and *kurta* because it is rather hot there. Similarly, there is a distinct Nepali culture to have curd and beaten rice in the paddy fields on the fifteenth of *Asadh*. Mostly peasants celebrate it to mark the beginning of paddy plantation in that rainy month. If it had not been raining at that time, there would not have been that culture also. Nowadays as rain is becoming scarce in Nepal because of weather extremes and massive deforestation, there's not enough rain in that month for paddy plantation, and therefore, this culture known as *Ashadh 15* is disappearing.

Cultural change must include consideration of changes in the environment in which a society exists. The end of the last ice age helped lead to the invention of agriculture. After tropical forests

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returned at the end of the last ice age, plants suitable for domestication were available, leading to the invention of agriculture, which in turn brought about many cultural innovations and shifts in social dynamics. Environmental degradation of fresh water supplies, arable land, and energy sources historically have resulted in the creation of new inventions, migrations, and even war to acquire essential resources (O'Neil, D. 2006. 'Processes of Change'). Human cultures are more ecological in that sense. Hence, the history of nature shapes that of culture.

However, nature and culture are traditionally supposed to stand in dualistic relationship, in which “power construes and constructs differences in terms of an inferior and alien realm (Plumwood 42). Dualism sets up a contrast between higher and lower according to its own “tyrannous and dubious rule”, and as per this rule culture is always maintained superior to nature. “Nature and culture are not a loosely related pairs of terms; their specific form of relation is hierarchical appropriation (Haraway 145). “Nature is only the raw material of culture, appropriated, preserved, enslaved, exalted or otherwise made flexible for disposal by culture in the logic of capital colonialism” (147). “Masculine culture spells the death of woman and nature” (Conley149).

They are not just parallel oppositions but intricately connected modes of oppression. Nature has always been systematically degraded, dominated and exploited in the history of Western philosophy (Coupe 120). The dogma that culture will always master nature has long directed Western progress, inspiring the war, invasions and other forms of conquest that have crowded the earth and strained its carrying capacity (Howarth 164). Thus, the traditional view of dualism between nature and culture, and the arrogant anthropomorphic view about nature as that of Alan Liu who says “There is no nature”, has hugely damaged and degraded it.

But this attitude and view about nature is now vehemently opposed by green studies. It considers the sphere of human culture not as separate from but as interdependent with and transfused by ecological processes and natural energy cycles. Soper rejects the dualism between culture and nature, and the superiority of the former that it places on the later. She affirms differences but denies superiority; she sees human beings as answerable to nature even as they define themselves as separate from it (Coupe 120).

However we define the border between nature and culture, nature will sneak over that border. We use the life-support services of nature all the time—the production of climate, maintenance of gas balance in the atmosphere, the production of food, the ability to remove waste. This makes it very hard to imagine

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that we are outside nature. If we want to be truly scientific, we must abandon the dualist view that nature exists outside culture and adopt a view, universally accepted among indigenous tribal people, that culture is inside nature (Folke Günther). Culture depends on nature and there is an ineradicable presence of nature in culture. Cultural ecology recognizes that ecological locale plays a significant role in shaping the cultures of a region.

Today's burgeoning cultural studies school, with its insistent and self-referential intellectualizing, has demoted nature to the status of a linguistic construct, merely another text to be discussed and dismissed, severed from the natural reality to which it refers. This is especially surprising when you consider how crowded the margins have become since the 60s, as the academy has sought to accommodate class, gender and post-colonial studies, while displaying alarmingly scant regard for nature, the original Other (Hopkin, *The Guardian*)

Yet, as the philosopher Kate Soper warns, "it is not language which has a hole in the ozone layer", and the last 10 years have seen the re-emergence of a mode of critical thinking that challenges the self-reflexive posturing of postmodernity and the concomitant dangers for the natural world. One of its earliest proponents over here was Jonathan Bate, professor of English literature at the University of Liverpool, whose book, *Romantic Ecology* (Routledge, 1991), turned to the Romantic poets and their writings on nature to redress the balance of the culture-nature debate.

Bate draws upon Wordsworth as an exemplar of ecocritical thinking, for Wordsworth did not view nature in Enlightenment terms - as that which must be tamed, ordered, and utilised - but as an area to be inhabited and reflected upon. By so doing, he hoped human beings might "see into the life of things", and reveal their place in a system of delicate relations between the human and the non-human worlds.

Clarke's novel is a persuasive illustration of the plea made by Bate in his latest book, *The Song of the Earth* for "an imaginative reunification of mind and nature". He argues that if ecology is the "language about our earthly dwelling place"(an idea he has taken from Heidegger), a place from which we have become divorced, then literature can return us to it. The ecocritics rigorously defend literature's capacity to refer to a natural reality, to realise the relations between landscape and lifestyle, and to remind us of non-human perspectives (of animals, trees, rivers, mountains) towards an "environmental literacy". Clarke's novel is an exemplar of this capacity.

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The interrelatedness between nature and culture has been represented in literature from its “archaic beginning in myth, ritual, and oral story-telling, in legends and fairy tales, in the genres of pastoral literature, and nature poetry (Wikipedia). This attention to culture-nature interaction became especially prominent in the era of romanticism. (en.wikipedia.org)

In the first decade of the 21st century, there are publications dealing with the ways in which humans can develop a more acceptable cultural relationship with the environment. An example is sacred ecology, a sub-topic of cultural ecology, produced by Fikret Berkes in 1999. It seeks lessons from traditional ways of life in Northern Canada to shape a new environmental perception for urban dwellers. This particular conceptualization of people and environment comes from various cultural levels of local knowledge about species and place, resource management systems using local experience, social institutions with their rules and codes of behaviour, and a world view through religion, ethics and broadly defined belief systems.

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