

The Creative Launcher

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Green Studies/ Ecocriticism in Indian English Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores the traces of Ecocriticism in Indian English fiction. Ecocriticism began in United States of America during late nineteen eighties and in United Kingdom in nineteen nineties and still is an emergent movement across the globe. From the very beginning Indian novelists were inclined towards nature but true essence of ecocriticism was found after nineteen eighties. Intimate relationship between human and nature has been indicated in Indian fiction from the very beginning. Environment has become a global issue in the contemporary scenario and literature reflects this issue very seriously with the help of ecocriticism. Nature is both a preserver and a destroyer but negligence of nature and its exploitation brings destruction to mankind. Environmental problems have become global as it affects the people across the globe. Through the novels of Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan, Kamla Markandya, Ruskin Bond, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, V.S.Naipaul and Amitav Ghosh; one finds a deep interconnectedness and interdependence of man and nature. Some novelist admires the aesthetic beauty of nature, its picturesque, scenic and sublime beauty while some are worried about the disturbance of ecological balance and desires to contribute to environmental restoration. Ruskin Bond explores the healing power of nature. Anita Desai portrays the inner consciousness of human through nature imagery. Amitav Ghosh through his novels like *The Hungry Tide* brings out the relationship between human, nature and animal world showing how imbalance can affect human being drastically.

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Key Words- *Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Ecological Balance, Nature, Preservation*

Ecocriticism can simply be defined as the study of relationship between literature and environment. Ecocriticism began in United States of America in late nineteen eighties and in United Kingdom in early nineteen nineties referred as Green Studies. It is still an emergent movement around the globe. Ecocriticism as a concept first arose in late nineteen eighties at the meeting of Western Literature Association. However the scholars working in this field considered them marginal until the emergence of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, 1992) and Patrick Murphy's ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, a new journal established in 1993) which gave a voice to the movement. The two landmark works of Ecocriticism includes *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, the other is *The Environmental Justice* (1996) by Lawrence Buell. The term ecocriticism was first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". According to Rueckert ecocriticism means "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (ER xx). Ecocriticism includes the concepts like deep ecology, ecofeminism, Marxist environmentalism, apocalypticism and so on.

Indeed the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself...(Garrard 5)

India is bestowed with variety of ecosystems ranging from Himalayas in the North to plateaus in the South and the mystic Sunderbans in the East to the Thar in the West. India is a country full of forests, rivers, varieties of wildlife and other species. From the very beginning Indian novelists were inclined towards nature and an intimate relationship between human and nature has been indicated. Environmental problems have become global issue in the contemporary scenario and literature reflects this issue very seriously with the help of ecocriticism. Nature is both a preserver and a destroyer but negligence of nature and its

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exploitation brings destruction to mankind. Environmental problems affect the people across the globe in a similar manner. Novels of Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan, Kamla Markandya, Ruskin Bond, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh expose a deep interconnectedness and interdependence of man and nature.

In the earlier works of Indian fiction the true essence of ecocriticism is missing as they just focus on the scenic beauty of nature, its limited to the landscape and changes that occurred with time at particular places.

When one turns the pages of history one finds description of nature, its scenic and aesthetic beauty in works of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Ruskin Bond. Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* describes Kanthapura as a province situated high on the ghats facing cool Arabian Sea, up the Malabar Coast. Villagers of Kanthapura pray to a hill and consider it as their goddess Kenchamma and say “Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she...never has she failed us in grief. If rains come out, you fall at her feet and say, ‘Kenchamma you are not kind to us. Our field is full of younglings.’” (Kanthapura 2). Raja Rao presented the age old relationship between man and nature i.e divine element of nature. Human being worships nature since ancient times either in form of sun, moon, fire, trees or mountains which is showcased in *Kanthapura*. R. K. Narayan in his novels used landscapes as important themes. In *The Guide*, Saryu river, the ruined temples influenced Raju, the drought and then the final rainfall are equally significant. In *The English Teacher*, Krishna is affected by the serene nature becomes deeply spiritual and begins to communicate with Sushila’s soul.

Ruskin bond was the real lover of nature, observing nature was enough for him. His dominant theme was environment and ecology. One finds pantheistic philosophy of Wordsworth in Ruskin Bond that is presence of life or spirit in every object of nature like trees, plants, rivers and others. Nature is present in its full vibrant, colourful, soothing and peaceful appearance in Bonds novels. His novels emphasize the local colour of Himalayan (Dehradun and Mussourie) region stressing on the ambiance including the beautiful forests,

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scenic beauty, cascading rivers along with the dialects, customs, faith and frustration of simple minded folks of that region. Indianness is always visible, his description of nature is authentic and like an environmentalist he is concerned for nature and presents varied moods of protagonist through its wild and mild aspect (showcasing love, loss, pain, happiness, struggle etc.) all in all he focuses on humanity. Bond in *The Blue Umbrella* unfolds story of a girl Binya from a small village of Himachal Pradesh. She trades her leopard claw necklace for a pretty blue umbrella. The richest man of the village, a shopkeeper Ram Bharosa becomes envious to Binya as she has something precious. He tries to buy that umbrella from her but she refuses. Later he employs Rajaram for the task and while stealing the umbrella he was caught. He takes Ram Bharosa's name and thereafter people stops coming to his shop. Later however Binya realizes her mistake of showing off and gifts that umbrella to Ram Bharose who in turn presents her a bear claw necklace. The therapeutic style of nature is reflected through Bond's novels as it helps to come out of personal grievances and other emotions. Bond's faith in the healing power of nature is also exposed. Other novels of Bond like *Delhi is Not Far*, *Love is a Sad Song*, and *The Sensualist* depicts the same ideology.

Kamla Markandya through her novel *Nectar in the sieve* voices to preserve nature that is being affected by industrialization. The exploitation of nature and insensitiveness of human nature towards environment is exposed. Industrialization not only pollutes nature or natural landscapes but dislocates and adversely affects human life.

Ecofeminists believe that patriarchal society is built on four interlocking pillars: sexism, racism, class exploitation and environmental destruction. This ecofeminists analysis projects that not only women but oppressed races and oppressed social classes are also closely tied with nature. They argue that there is close relationship between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by male domination. (Nazir 54-55)

Ecofeminist consider nature as female which is innocent and ripe for exploitation. The protagonist Rukmini was closely associated with her land on which she works but the advent

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of tannery alters tenant's life. Earlier they were dependent on land i.e. an agro based living but introduction of tannery also introduces urban living. Rukmini says that the tannery has overshadowed the maidans where their children use to play. The effect of the onset of tannery is felt on natural environment of the village when Rukmini says,

At one time, there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingos, striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close. (Nectar 69)

The inflation of prices at bazaar led to deprivation and hunger among the village folk which breeds prostitutes, thieves, murderers, and subhuman beasts.

Shiva in her *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* communicate a predominant detrimental and anti-developmental view of the application of scientific technology imported from the West and the resultant exploitation of nature by transforming it to an arid zone. Here, the construction of the tannery in a remote agrarian village has confiscated the inhabitants of their livelihood and homeland, making them alienated in their own soil. (Indulekh 722)

Rukmini and Markandya both feel that industrialization and urbanization destroys ecology. Rukmini never leaves her hope till the end. *Nectar in a Sieve* is therefore a silent but sharp protest against the devastating impact of industrialization and advocates establishing harmony between the humans and nature. As suggested by Glotfelty, ecocriticism "seeks to evaluate texts and Ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (ER 5).

Anita Desai is one of the prominent female novelists who used nature images of animal, plants, birds or external landscape to portray the interior state of mind. Desai used zoological, botanical and meteorological images to represent state of mind, actions, feelings

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and consciousness especially of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. Natural images express Maya's alienation, loneliness, insanity and neurosis. Zoological/animal imagery of Toto, Maya's pet dog exposes theme of alienation and death motif. It indicates Maya's psychic disorder and obsession with death:

All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved on to the veranda for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms. Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and the crows will eat anything – entrails, eyes, anything. (Cry 7)

This shows Maya's failure in accepting death as natural phase of life. Later she accepts that childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets. The restlessness in her character is the outcome of her infertility or barrenness which she expresses by using botanical images. She notices

Leafless, the fine tracery on the naked neem trees revealed unsuspected, so far carefully concealed, nests, deserted by the birds....Down the street, the silk-cotton trees were the first to flower: their huge, scarlet blooms, thick petaled, solid-podded ... then dropped to the asphalt and were squashed into soft, yellowish miasma, seemed animal rather than flowerage, so large were they, so heavy, so moist and living to the touch. (Cry 34)

Desai shows that elements of nature whether its animal, plant or landscapes are associated with human actions and activities and when one analyzes it deeply one can find a connection between them. Maya associates herself with the peacocks that they fight and tear themselves in the act of love similarly Maya in anxiety kills Gautam and then dies in love with life. The struggle shows life in death and death in life.

Nature and culture cannot be isolated. Amitav Ghosh through his novels like *The Hungry Tide* brings out the relationship between human, nature and animal world showing the superiority of nature over mankind. This superiority of nature over mankind is showcased in his Ibis Trilogy as well. Ramachandran Guha and Juan Martinez Alier suggested that there

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is a strong link between poverty and ecological degradation in third world countries especially Asian and African countries. Issues like social equality, world funding policy, land use pattern by the poor and subsistence agriculture are also focused upon. Guha pointed out that,

the notion of development in third world countries like India is based on western models of modernity. Similarly ecological ideas about conservation come from the west and ignore the ancient social and cultural practices of local areas. People are evicted from lands they have occupied from centuries under the project of conserving wildlife. (Nayar 249).

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* shows both the beauty and dangers of the Sunderbans. The novelist exposed its dangers in form of lurking tigers in the jungles, harmless looking but deadly crocodiles in water, poisonous snakes, regular tides and floods where settlers are struggling everyday for their survival. The core of the novel lies in the ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistan refugee who had run away from dandakaranya refugee camps to morichjhampi as they felt that they will find peace and security over there but they found death. The government considered morichjhampi as an unauthorized and violation of forest act, they considered permanent settlement a threat to ecological balance. In order to drive out the people, police deprived people of food and water, attacked by tear gas, tubewells destroyed and those who tried to cross the river were shot and bodies were thrown into river. Hundreds of people died and these stories never appeared. Therefore the theme of the novel blends history with current events and weaves the plot. The wrath of nature and fragility of human being is showcased. Kanai Dutt, a sophisticated Delhi based businessman who comes to meet his widowed aunt and receives a diary of his late uncle which he reviews. In one of the stories, Nirmal reveals that in their hunger of land people were ready to sell themselves. Piyali Roy a cetologist comes to Sunderbans to study Dolphins and Kanai becomes a translator for her and fokir a local fisherman becomes her guide. While her research all three comes across the dangers of Sunderbans and Amitav Ghosh through them raises the issue of

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humanism verses environmentalism that in order to protect and preserve the flora and fauna should the government give up the lives of innocent people?

Wild life and wilderness area face crisis but are the tribals also responsible? Huge infrastructure projects and dollar earning tourism projects are being advocated in land where traditional communities are being displaced in the name of wildlife preservation. They pretend to ignore that the forest reserves are exploited by poachers and timber merchants by bribing forest officials. When Piya sees the tiger killed by the villagers for having harmed humans and livestock, her concern for the natural rights of animals over shadows her sensitivity to human life. Her European-American concern for ecological preservation dominates humanism but later the cyclone in which Fokir is killed helps Piya to realize the insignificance of individual human effort. They realize that science cannot meet the fury of nature. (Bindu 136).

The readers are left between the dilemma of conservation of animals and the helplessness of human being.

Thus ecocriticism not only makes us understand and aware about the relationship of man and nature, it reminds us that nature and humans are interdependent on each other. Nature is a provider, preserver but overexploitation of nature will be backfired on humans only leading to disturbance of ecological balance.

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