ECO-CRITICISM IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Environmental problems have assumed global proportions. Environmental concerns and issues associated with it affect people across the globe, the universe. Nature and literature have always worked in close affinity as found in writers down the ages. Interrelationship between man and Nature thus becomes all the more accentuated and this is perceptible and in fact visible today because literature plays such an important role. Literature in English, both by Indians and foreign authors, offers innumerable instances highlighting Ecology, Eco-criticism, Environment, Ecosystem, and Ecosphere, and all this relates to interrelationships amongst nature, human beings, animals and birds, which in turn makes a very absorbing study. This paper analyses the representative works of Indian literary heavy weights like Salman Rushdie, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Ruskin Bond, Amitava Ghosh, etc. Apart from the writers mentioned here or analysed in this paper there are other noteworthy writers who have carved out their own place in this literary firmament. It is a well known fact that nature gives as well as takes back, just as nature protects and destroys too. The same principles of giving and taking, protecting and destroying apply in equal measure to human beings, animals and birds. This concept of give and take is encouraged, promoted, and practised. It becomes truly an eco-friendly environment for all of us to live on this planet happily hereafter.

KEYWORDS: Eco-criticism, eco-friendly, environment, Indian, interdependence, interrelationships, literature.
INTRODUCTION

American critic Cheryll Glotfelty defines Eco-criticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Eco-criticism began to be recognised as an academic discipline in 1990s. The subject has interdisciplinary overtones, with scholars still actively engaged in defining the tremendous scope offered to its practitioners. Eco-critics attempt to analyse and explain the process of cultural development that has led to the ongoing global ecological crisis. We are global citizens today. Our problems also stand globalized. Environmental problem is no exception. Environmental concerns and issues associated with it affect people across the globe, the universe. Simple acts of sneezing and coughing at one place have repercussions on people miles away, who might get adversely affected. Indiscriminate felling of trees at one place has far reaching effects on the environment at a far distant place, which can possibly stand jilted. Interrelationship between man and Nature thus becomes all the more accentuated and this is perceptible and in fact visible today because literature plays such an important role. And it shall now onwards become clearly visible- yes, literature today plays the role of a vehicle of knowledge and information, a section of which deals with nature, mankind and animals, particularly with regard to their interrelationships and interdependence. This truly, is ecology.

Literature in English, both by Indians and foreign authors, offers innumerable instances highlighting Ecology, Eco-criticism, Environment, Ecosystem, and Ecosphere, and all this relates to interrelationships amongst nature, human beings, animals and birds, which in turn makes a very absorbing study. This paper analyses the representative works of Indian literary heavy weights like Salman Rushdie, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Ruskin Bond, Amitava Ghosh, etc. Apart from the writers mentioned here or analysed in this paper there are other noteworthy writers who have carved out their own place in this literary firmament.

In Fury, Salman Rushdie’s protagonist, Malik Solanka, becomes a victim of slow anger and irritation for his failure to become an essential part of American culture, in fact he wishes to get eaten up by America, and thus lose his self identity. Jack Rhinehart, an African American, another character in the novel, who wanted to become American only from his mixed identity becomes helplessly disappointed for his utter failure to transform himself. An imaginary country takes shape and Rushdie names it ‘Lilliput Blefuscu’ to highlight this problem which is steadily but slowly devouring the whole world. A character called Neela Mahendra an Indo - Lilliputian in New York regrets “‘My ancestors were numbers, the children of numbers. Only the indigenous Elbees were called by their names” (Fury, 157). It was in effect a ‘numerical tyranny’. It was an open war between the indigenous and the migrants. Competition is steadily growing in the areas of commerce, employment and education. This gives rise to environmental disharmony all over the world. America continues to interfere in the affairs of other nations. As a result the immigrants get ‘annoyed and angry’.

Another character in ‘Fury’, Ali, a Muslim driver, darts vulgar words at another motorist, “‘Islam will cleanse this street of godless mother fucker bad drivers … Islam will purify this white city of Jew pimp assholes … Unclean offspring of a shit-eating pig … the victorious jihad will crush your balls in its unforgiving fists” (Fury, 65). Logically, the confusion is that Ali, a victim of a
thought process of “paranoiac pan- Islamic solidarity” (Fury, 66), blames “New York road users” for all the troubles affecting the Muslim World. An uprooted migrant tries to transplant himself in an alien country but he miserably fails to dig his roots underneath the soil. Thus he becomes a victim of indigenous people. Their hatred and subjugation makes him feel totally rejected in the social and cultural environment of the country; he gets totally dejected and therefore feels forlorn and unwanted. This is where comes in the precise role of Eco-conscious people and promoters of friendly cohabitation between the indigenous and the migrant people.

This is the area where Rushdie has put forth eminently forthright and bold protagonists, particularly in his Fury. His furious and ferocious portrayal of character here has been succinctly successful. Both the natural and cultural environment in the present times is really in danger. Character portrayal in Fury strongly suggests means to restore balance between man and nature and migrant and indigenous population because otherwise the Eco-balance gets totally disoriented.

In studies of interdependence of nature and man, one just cannot ignore Raja Rao, one of the finest Indian writers of novel in English. His novel, Kanthapura, is a shining example of how deep and great is the relationship between nature and man. We find that mountains and rivers are interwoven with the lives of man here. A mountain here is regarded as a goddess Kenchamma. Local inhabitants believed that this mountain goddess never fails them in their sorrow and grief. In times of distress people fall on the feet of the goddess Kenchamma and plead for mercy to help them out of their predicament. The author 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”.

Another very important source we can explore for inter-relationship between man and nature is 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.

In this context we also have Bhabani Bhattacharya’s ‘So Many Hungers’. In this novel the writer describes the great Bengal famine of 1943 at its best and worst. More than 30 lakh people lost their lives out of sheer hunger- no food to eat, no water to drink, no man to help them with necessary succour and no shelter either. In this novel the writer pinpoints man’s dependence on nature and how nature hits back when it is threatened. A character called Laxmi Kanth is depicted as behaving worse than a greedy and ferocious animal; Laxmi Kanth mercilessly indulges in black market activities showing no concern for the suffering humanity. Playing with human beings and /or playing with nature never go unanswered and in the present case nature has hit back mercilessly and severely. This fury of nature is recorded in history as the worst famine ever. Interdependence and inter-relationship between man and nature are so inter-linked that if given a slight jolt has devastated the delicate balance. Do we find here resemblance to man- woman relationship growing sour? Yes, so delicate is the interplay between nature and man. Thanks to literary works that people across the globe are well informed about nature’s
contribution to a man’s daily food, in fact his living. This results into loss of vagaries as far as man’s action against nature is concerned.

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. His work on the subject is primarily focussed on the undulating trees, plants, and flora and fauna of the hills of Mussorie and Dehradun. His stories although are more sought after as interesting reading for children, poignantly point to nature’s contribution to human life. A typical and exemplary mention of this message is found in ‘An Island of Trees’. In this story Grandma speaks to her Granddaughter about the sweet and intimate bonding between nature and man. Another typical example of love-love relationship between man and his natural surrounding is ‘Copperfield in the Jungle’. In this stunning story Bond boldly narrates abhorrence to pleasure hunting and in ‘No Room for a Leopard’ he projects the conditions of animals after deforestation is resorted to by the human species. 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. Ruskin Bond through all his writings has fiercely projected the significance and importance of this interdependence and bonding.

Kiran Desai’s masterpiece, ‘The Inheritance of Loss’, also merits mention in this paper on eco-criticism. This book travels beyond boundaries of continents, maps, and the intricate ethno-racial relationship between people having different cultural background. In this novel Kanchanjunga is presented to have paid for the brutality of human beings- that beauty, serenity, and quiet and calm atmosphere stands totally destroyed- war for power is the causal factor. Near similar things are also witnessed in Kalimpong, in North eastern part of our country. Nepali insurgency was the causative factor for an un-estimated loss of human life and their belongings. Animals too are mercilessly killed. What is the resultant effect of this? Imbalance in the ecosystem gets created afresh. Value of both human and animal life stands exposed, naked before the self styled civilised world. At the death of a dog, named Mutt, the SDO of the concerned area remarks, “A dog! Justice just listen to yourself. People are being killed. What can I do?” 15. The persons concerned, a Gorkha couple, stand flabbergasted at the expression and attitude of the government official. While highlighting the SDO’s emotion, Kiran Desai writes, “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.”

A critical look at Amitava Ghosh’s ‘The Hungry Tide’, also provides an insight into the burning topic of eco-criticism. A world of animals, nature and human beings are juxtaposed here for an eco-critical study. This is centred on the world famous Sunderbans, innumerable islands lost and found. Here the author shows how human life thrives at the mercy of nature. In fact human life struggles here to remain alive on this island. It is here that the interdependence of nature, man and animals is called for. This inter-relationship is being given prominence, thanks to the global awareness of the problem, and also due to awareness created by other writers by taking up the all important subject of ecosystem and its inevitability in today’s environment. Eco-criticism is a topic which deals with interrelationship amongst nature, man and animals. Emerging literary
trends show how writers are concerned with it, and we humans cannot ignore the heavy import of this in our daily life. Can we think of our life, safe and secure, without, nature and animal life? No, this is an inter-dependent world, hence the necessity for this strong bonding.

Anita Desai’s writing on the subject- so vital, all pervasive, and penetrating. Her fiction has prominently put forth nature in all its hues and colours should also be referred to, in this regard for the all important role it plays in a person’s life. Hills and seasons, trees, flowers and grass, as also animals and birds play the most important role in a human being’s life. Their existence is all pervasive, and therefore it is there for all to see this ever shining phenomenon.

A few specific examples from Anita Desai will demonstrate this fact. In ‘Cry, The Peacock’, the author says, “I was drawn away from pain into a world that knew no pain”. The significant character of Maya, morbid and morose, bends upon flowers and smells their scent and becomes immediately cheerful. For Maya, the garden of childhood, and the garden at present differs in many aspects and comparison brings forth as to where she discovers that symmetry, order and pattern are missing from her life. Thus, something missing from her garden makes her realize that she has failed to look after her garden for too long.

The loneliness and insecurity in Maya’s life has symbolic expression in the forms of wind, dust storm, snake and the desert. This is very significant in Anita Desai’s fiction- nature is bountiful here. And while depicting nature Desai takes care of animals too, rather than attaching importance only to plants, garden, rivers, and hills. All encompassing nature in Desai’s writings attach due importance to both flora and fauna and their precise role in a man’s life. The malignant and violent aspect of nature in ‘Cry, The Peacock’ stands tall and prominent. The death cry of the peacocks is blood chilling. The shrieks of pain, “Pia-Pia-Lover, lover. Mio, mio – I die, I die” reflects the cry of agony of the peacocks. Their dance in this context resembles the dance of Lord Shiva. Here what is most prominently shown is nature’s cruel side.

Kamala Markandeya dwells on the subject of the Bengal famine as does Bhabani Bhattacharya before her. Her novel, ‘Nectar in a Sieve’ demonstrates nature’s control over man. She says, “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 if one looks away for an instant, be heedless and forgetful and it has you by the throat”. Crops are lost due to incessant rains and fail due to drought at other times. In this superbly written story nature gets projected as both preserver and destroyer.

It is a well known fact that nature gives as well as takes back, just as nature protects and destroys too. The same principles of giving and taking, protecting and destroying apply in equal measure to human beings, animals and birds. This concept of give and take is encouraged, promoted, and practised. It becomes truly an eco-friendly environment for all of us to live on this planet happily hereafter.

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