

CONCEPTUALISING ANTHROPOCENTRISM, ECOCRITICISM AND THIRD WORLD ENVIRONMENTALISM IN A LITERARY PARADIGM

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Abstract

Rapid degradation of environment is an important concern facing all disciplines of knowledge and man centeredness known as anthropocentrism is believed to be one of the major causes behind this. In literary sphere, approach of Ecocriticism focuses on environmental issues and dominance of man over non-human living and non-living objects. In this paper, the researcher has examined the basic reasons of the deterioration of the environment and the failure of the implementation of the concepts of West in Third World countries.

Key words: Anthropocentrism, Culture, Dilapidation, Eco-criticism, Environment, Nature.

Introduction

In recent times, environment degradation has become a major problem which is linked with Global warming, ozone layer depletion, air and water pollution, exhaustion of natural spaces etc. These changes affect day to day life and subsequently create dreadful conditions in the life of human beings. Environment plays an important role in the life of social beings and the impression of nature can be seen on individual's literary writings.

It is generally believed that environmental deterioration and its related after effects such as floods, famines, tsunami, and extinction of animals are the result of human beings' meddling with nature and supposed superiority of culture over nature or man over animals is the root cause behind it. This attitude of human superiority gains its power from the notion of anthropocentrism. So, trying to find a balance between the two interrelated but sometimes conflicting viewpoints, this paper is an attempt to critique the notion of anthropocentrism by studying relations of humans and nature.

Ecocriticism in A Literary Paradigm

The inter-relatedness of nature, human life and literature cannot be ignored. Natural environment has always remained an important part of many literary texts and with the recent increase in environmental problems and issues, writers have specifically focused on environmental problems. In the field of literary criticism also, attempts have been made to keep focus on environment while analysing literature. There is a close relation between nature and culture. Ecocriticism looks at culture as an expression of ecology. Defining Ecocriticism, Richard Kerridge opines:

Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint . . . Ecocritics analyse the history of concepts such as ‘nature’ in an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis. (530)

Ecocriticism is an approach to analyse the representation of nature in literary texts. It is concerned with creating awareness in the society about the environmental degradation. The anthropocentric activities are considered as the major factor resulting in the devastation of ecology as well as animals. In *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams states Ecocriticism as:

The critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being brought on that environment by human activities. (81)

Human activities are responsible for the degradation brought to the environment. The earth has been largely affected by the global warming and it is very much important for man to reconsider his relationship with the non-human aspects of the world. A socially and environmentally responsible life style is the need of an hour and like Feminism and Marxism, Ecocriticism also shares the idea of social transformation through literature. Cheryll Glotfelty, in an anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, elaborates the term:

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-centred approach to literary studies. (19)

According to Roger Fowler Ecocriticism involves two different strands. One addresses itself to the emergent canon of “Eco-literature” that has become known in reaction to the global environmental crisis. The second strand involves the re-reading of the texts with reference to the relation between human beings and the non-human world. So, man started focusing on the surrounding environment and its related issues when threat to whole mankind appeared real and fast approaching.

It is a very significant theory from the point that it takes into consideration the non-human forms of living organisms. Ecocriticism helps in understanding a nature centred system rather than human centred values. The changing relationship of human beings with the environment can be understood through the yardsticks of Ecocriticism theory. Greg Garrard attempts to define the term more broadly:

Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology. Ecocritics may not be qualified to contribute to debates about problems in ecology, but they must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ‘ecological literacy’ as far as possible. (5)

Man has been in contact with nature from ancient times. But gradually, over exploitation of resources by man has led to vast damage of the environment. The intellectuals become aware of the consequences and summits are held on a large scale. The problem has been raised to global level. As a consequence, the concept of Ecocriticism emerges in the mid twentieth century in the field of literary criticism. Lawrence Buell rightly says that “the term 'Ecocriticism' was

coined in the late 1970s” (13). Earlier it was also referred to as “study of nature writing”. This still emerging approach began in USA in 1980s and in the UK in 1990s. (Barry 250).

It is argued that the movement makes us aware about the environmental threats which people have to face in near future. Colonialism, industrialisation and other anthropocentric activities are the basic reasons of the degradation of the environment. Throughout the human history, many prominent thinkers and intellectuals have held the view that man holds the central position in this Universe. Peter Barry lists some of them for instance, a Greek philosopher Protagoras says, “Man is the measure of all things” (251). Leonardo da Vinci’s famous drawing ‘The Vitruvian Man’ also depicts that man is the only creature to have dominance over other creatures. In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate argues that colonialism and deforestation have frequently gone together (Barry 251). This is the argument that Amitav Ghosh also builds in his novels. In *The Hungry Tide* too the effects of imperialism are visible. The government makes various strategies to conserve the wild life but ignores the real possession of nature and the evil effects that these strategies are meted out upon the lives of tribal people. When the Island named Lusibari is being civilized by the colonial powers the threat to environment was quite apparent. Therefore, these all are the instances which depict that the cultural modes or our attitudes towards nature are all anthropocentric rather than ecocentric.

Anthropocentrism, according to Eccy Jonge, is “man centeredness” as centeredness means to be “separateness” and “superiority” over others. The roots of Anthropocentrism can be traced to sixteenth century onwards when reason, logic and intellect all these notions came into being and the human beings considered themselves as the sole heir of the Universe. Then the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was one of the reasons of human domination. It was in this period when industries flourished throughout the world and led to wide spread exploitation of natural resources. In Enlightenment period thinkers like Francis Bacon, Immanuel Kant, Rene Descartes etc. focused on reason as a medium to solve all the crucial problems and stressed that this specific characteristic [reasoning ability] is inherent in human beings only. As Andre Krebber argued that:

The mechanistic Enlightenment of eighteenth-century Europe strove to establish human domination of nature. The obstacle nature presented for human self-preservation was to be overcome once and for all. Human bonds with nature were rejected. Nature was interpreted as a mere mechanism, put at humans’ disposal. (qtd in Boddice 322)

Various philosophers like Kant, Heidegger, and Stoic placed humans on the higher level than the animals. They argued that human beings are linguistic beings as against animals who are non-linguistic beings. The division of nature and culture has created a boundary between humans and animals. According to Sabrina Torutti, man is engaged in a struggle to construct his proper identity by uplifting himself from animalism. On the other hand, with a large difference from nature, culture is defined as “a second genesis for mankind” (188) by Johann Gottfried Herder, who is a philosopher and anthropologist. He defined it as something which is basically human and lacking animalism. As per Torutti, another critic named Clifford Geertz defines culture as “a set of controlled mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions - for the governing of behaviour” (192).

Thus, it is the culture which directly or indirectly affects the psyche of human beings and they tend to behave in a particular way. It is in the cultural norms that man always considers himself as superior which creates an indifferent attitude towards other creatures. Franz Boas is in favour of traditional hierarchical notion of the superiority of cultural beings over natural beings

by creating boundary between nature and culture. Further he defines culture as “opposed to instinct” (189). He argues that human beings acquire culture by living in the society as opposed to animals who live in the forests. Thus, it is clear that man tries to set up hierarchical levels and gives himself the top priority.

This priority of humans over other species sometimes results in mismatch between nature and culture. The foremost attitude which exists in the minds of human beings is that the world only existed for the needs of mankind. Man considers himself as a hero who has elevated his needs and desires to the extent that he does not care about the biological survival of other species. He consciously ignores the environmental damage in his surroundings. This thought is not only damaging the present environment but is going to be disastrous for his forthcoming generations. Val Plumwood, a contemporary environmental philosopher argues that the ecological crisis is the result of western attitude to nature and man’s tendency to conceive nature as an immense resource to be utilised. She remarks in her book *Environmental Culture*, that the ecological crisis is “Both a crisis of dominant culture and a crisis of reason, or rather, a crisis of the culture of reason or of what the dominant global culture has made of reason” (5). Thus, there is a dire need to protect the deteriorating environment and to reframe the existing modes of development.

For many thinkers, anthropocentrism is the root cause of environmental degradation. It is the vision of human domination over other forms of life which has led to ecological devastation. It is obvious that change in the culture of human beings lead to change in environment. Earlier, man used to live in harmony with nature but now his attitude has changed considerably. The agricultural practices have become mechanised, urbanization and rising living standards as well as the policies of development are the reasons for the destruction and depletion of natural resources. In these days, it has become a challenge to critique anthropocentric point of view adopted by the human beings for their survival. Rob Boddice in an Introduction of his book *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments* rightly substantiates that, "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).

In the field of Ecocriticism also, it is argued that “the reigning religions and philosophies of Western civilization are deeply anthropocentric” (Abrams 81). It means that these are basically concerned with the interests of human beings who consider themselves superior to the animal species and they use them for their self-interests. This concept of man being the centre of the universe can be better understood from the perspective of anthropocentrism. Humans are dependent on the animals as well as nature for their survival even then they put forth their own interests against theirs. In the words of Boria Sax, “Anthropocentrism is the tendency to vastly exaggerate human dominance, understanding, power, autonomy, unity, guilt, virtue, wickedness and morality” (36).

Anthropocentrism becomes an important part of other philosophies. The human being positions himself as one of the significant form above other non-human forms of life. Now days, it is very difficult to displace the notion of anthropocentrism from the centre. As a result, humans are on the core ground and every rule and law is framed according to his priorities. The value of other forms of life is determined by man himself. As J. Baird Callicott remarks:

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)

Richard Kerridge opines, “Anthropocentrism is the placing of humanity at the centre of everything, so that other forms of life will be regarded only as resources to be consumed by human beings” (532). Anthropocentricity is considered as the root cause of the problems created in the environment by human beings. According to M.H.Abrams, anthropocentrism can be defined as, “Considering man to be the most significant entity in the universe; interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values” (82).

Animals are regarded as mere objects as they do not have any soul. Man treats them as they do not have capability to realize the pain. Kant, a well-known philosopher considers that human beings possess trait of rational thinking whereas animals lack this rational mentality. This is the major cause that they are perceived as a commodity to be used in whichever way the man desires.

Various authors like Greg Garrard, Cheryll Glotfelty and Lynn White express their view that roots of anthropocentrism lay in Christianity, for example, in the Book of Genesis, it is mentioned:

. . . and God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and fowl of the air, and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon earth. (Kerridge 537)

One of the main reasons of the destruction of natural resources and dominion over the animals is the belief that the humans are in the centre of the universe and they can use nature and animals for their own benefit. Lynn White argues that “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (9). Consequently, the relation between humans and nature has become the relation of power and powerlessness respectively. Man always looks for his selfish motives which is one of the reason people keep pets either for their economic benefits or to show off their living standard. These ways of treating animals are too cruel. Jeremy Bentham, an English author and a social reformer, has also focused his ideas on animal rights. He was one of the first persons to argue that cruelty to animals is wholly unacceptable.

Thus, anthropocentrism fails to understand the nature of other living forms of life by going against them. Man imposes his own desires upon them and wants to behave them in a particular manner. From the advent of modernity, the society is heading towards more and more westernised form of culture and ideology. The western culture considers humans as a superior race. As a result, individualism emerged as a major phenomenon due to which the sole importance shifted to man himself. This view is also mentioned in the Bible that man is rational of all and he has the right to have dominion over others. From the last few decades the devastation which has been brought out is only because of man’s changed attitude towards nature. As it has been said that Christian view about nature is wholly anthropocentric but no other value system or ideology has been set up in this society so that those existing views of domination can be refuted. And this ecological crisis will continue if man’s attitude towards nature remains anthropocentric. Lynn White rightly points out that:

Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecological crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our

trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious . . . we must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. (14)

The basic tendency of man is of dominance, he tries to manipulate nature which has resulted in the imbalance of natural environment. To transcend above civilisation, it is mandatory for man to reconcile with nature and not to generate a dividing line between the two. And it is possible when human beings adopt an attitude of humility towards nature. It is the only way to overcome anthropocentric belief inherent in the psyche of human beings.

Literature makes the people aware about how they are damaging the natural surroundings. One can probably say that literature cannot exist solely in the vacuum and the activities that take place in this society are related to the human life that exists on this planet. Ecocriticism is one such theory which is trying to create an awareness regarding natural destruction. And through the analysis of literary works it is well presented. In *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Environment*, Timothy Clark has argued that, Ecocriticism finds its most striking ethical challenge in the question of animal suffering. As Sumathy, an ecocritic has rightly opines:

Literature plays a very important role in creating awareness about the environment. Just as post colonialism champions the cause of the “other”, Ecocriticism upholds the voice of the “nonhuman other.” (1)

In the colonial countries, the colonialists are considered as “superior” and victimizers as “other”. When countries became free from the clutches of the colonizers then within their territory men turn into masters and they treat women as “other”. In the same way humans tamed animals and treat them as “other”. In the words of Richie Nimmo:

Humans are subjects while non-humans are objects. This in turn enables humanity to be elevated and centralized, while its necessary other – it’s very conditions of existence – are suppressed and marginalised, relegated to the status of a ‘context’, a mere ground upon which human subject stands. (61)

As the theories of Post colonialism, Feminism and Race Studies play an important role in indulging people to think about a particular issue prevailing in the society so does the theory of Ecocriticism. It chooses environment centred approach to literary studies. Peter Barry mentions that the theory tries to focus upon the ecocentric values of “meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves” (255). It makes people conscious of the causes which pollute the natural resources. The texts related to Ecocriticism have become a part of the environmental awareness which connects the human world to that of the non-human world. As Cheryll Glotfelty also mentions in introduction that:

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. (19)

Now days, the modern man has become apathetic to nature. It has resulted in the environmental crisis on the global level. The ecological crisis has become a burning cultural issue as it does not affect a single discipline, but it affects the whole universe. Human beings think themselves as powerful and reasoned intellectuals, and neglect their liability towards their Mother earth. Literary figures elaborate the role of nature in the lives of human beings and they highlight man’s indifferent attitude towards the natural world. They try to remind the individuals

that they have a duty towards the environment and human beings must be aware of the ecological issues and concerns, as they are a part of the nature. In this present era, the greatest predicament is the degradation of the environment. It is said that, “There is an urgent need to understand that, Environment is not the ‘other’ to us but part of our being” (Buell 55).

Ecocriticism emerges as a movement when threat to the planet became visible. It is influenced by various approaches like Feminism and Marxism, as these approaches act as a socio-political structure for reading the ecocritical texts. Ecocriticism represents nature and the behaviour of people towards nature in a particular age. For instance, in the seventeenth century, nature was worshipped as a goddess but in the present era human being considers nature only as a commodity for his personal use. In this context, Guha writes, “This destruction owed itself to the fact that modern man had *desacralized* nature viewing it as a source of raw material to be exploited and thus emptying it of the mystery the wonder, indeed the divinity with which pre-modern man saw the natural world (13).

The third world countries are following the western ideologies of development that has resulted in the complete destruction of natural environment. A lot of raw material is used in industries and it is an over exploitation of the natural resources. Ramchandra Guha, a well-known historian and Environmentalist rightly says in his book named, *Environmentalism: A Global History*, “Nature became a source of cheap raw material as well as a sink for dumping the unwanted residues of economic growth” (4). There is another reference from Arundhati Roy, an intellectual and an environment conscious writer who is concerned with two major ongoing issues prevalent in India; the Narmada Bachao Andolan and The Campaign against Nuclear Weapons in India. In her essay “The Greater Common Good” she reminds of the coming dangers in the future. She asserts:

. . . We have to fight our specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, perhaps that’s what the twenty first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. (5)

The ecocritical term ‘Deep Ecology’ which has been propounded by Arne Naess in 1973, also puts some more light on the issue. Guha says, “The movement of Deep Ecology, the leading edge of the American environmental movement today, which fights for ‘biocentric equality’, that is, the placing of humans on par with and not above other species” (Guha 8). The major concern of deep ecologists is to make human beings adapt according to the environment and the integration of the human as well as non-human world. Ecocentrism, according to M.H. Abrams is the view that “all living things and their earthly environment, no less than the human species, possess importance, value and even moral and political rights” (81). They believe that anthropocentric thinking has made humans alienated from their natural environment and it can be disastrous. As Anil Prasad in his article named “Globalization, Modernity, and Literary Ecology: A Re-reading of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*”, mentions that, “The modern human being stands in the egocentric position of looking at things and thus suffers from human centeredness” (17).

An Entomologist named Semenov-tian-shanskii combined his laboratory experience with the nature. He collected numerous species of insects to the Zoological Museum in Moscow. Semenov thinks:

Nature to be the great book of the existence of all things, a museum indispensable for our further enlightenment and mental development, a

museum which, in the event of its destruction, cannot be reconstructed by the hand of man. Society had a great moral obligation towards Nature, yet industrial man was showing himself to be a ‘geological parvenu . . . disrupting the harmony of nature’, determined to destroy ‘that grand tableau which serves as the inspiration of the arts. (qtd in Guha 128)

The era of 1980s is considered as the most destructive period for natural environment as industrial development was at its peak. As a consequence, man’s relationship to nature totally changed. Earlier, he considered himself as a part of nature, but now he has become a tool in the hands of commercialization. Lynn White argues, “Formerly man had been a part of nature, now he was the exploiter of nature Man and nature are two things, and man is the master” (8).

There is a strong connection between the conservation and the poverty prevailing in the third world countries. These countries face an acute shortage of funds and land for conservation which is a primary need for saving environmental destruction. It is this concern which grabbed the attention of Guha as well as other environmentalists like MadhavGadgil, Vandana Shiva, MedhaPatkar, as well as WangariMaathai. These activists have largely contributed to understand the sufferings and the hardships faced by the poor people who survive in the shelter of nature. Guha advocates that there is a strong link between ecological degradation and poverty prevailing in these third world countries. The notion of “Deep Ecology” is refuted here because there is a need of large unused tracts which is impossible in these densely populated countries. But the conservation policies which are adopted are in accordance with the Western outlook. The ideas of the west adopted for the conservation is not suitable for the local areas as it denies the social and cultural needs of native people. There is a censure on the foreign agencies, which for their own selfish interests look for conserving a particular species in the third world countries and it can be one method of indirect rule over the third world nations. It is a kind of neo-imperialism, which Ghosh critiques in most of his novels. By providing grants and foreign currency to the poorer nations, the first world countries try to dominate and thus lead to impoverishment of the poor tribal people. A Peruvian activist, Hugo Blanco says that:

Environmentalists or conservationists are nice, slightly crazy guys whose main purpose in life is to prevent the disappearance of blue whales or pandas. The common people have more important things to think about, for instance how to get their daily bread. Sometimes they are taken to be . . . in the guise of protecting endangered species, have formed so-called NGOs to get juicy amounts of dollars from abroad. (qtd in Guha 104)

Nature has always been at the centre of man’s life. In the ancient times, nature and humans have remained in harmony and a balance was maintained between the two. But few years back man has adopted an indifferent attitude towards nature which resulted in disruption of ecological balance. One cannot deny the environmental aspect because it is our surroundings that are extremely important for our well-being. Nature remained an inexhaustible resource always but man began to consider nature as an exploitable resource. This change in attitude is one of the most important reasons for environmental problems occurring at fast pace these days. It was Mira Behn, daughter of an English admiral who joined Mahatma Gandhi in 1927. Expresses herself as a devotee of the great ancient Mother Earth, she said:

The tragedy today is that educated and moneyed classes are altogether out of touch with the vital fundamentals of existence – our Mother Earth, and the animal and vegetable population which she sustains. This world of Nature’s planning is ruthlessly plundered ... We have got to study

Nature's balance, and develop our lives within her laws, if we are to survive as a physically healthy and morally decent species. (qtd in Guha 67)

Environmental justice movement forms an important part of the Ecocriticism theory. Environmental justice movement emerged in India just as the movements for the rights of people began, without taking into consideration their caste, creed or race. It includes the sacredness of the Mother Earth and everyone's right to remain free from the destruction of ecology. In the words of Richard Kerridge,

The environmental justice movement is a collective term for the efforts of poor communities to defend themselves against the dumping of toxic waste, the harmful contamination of their air, food and water, the loss of their lands and livelihoods, and the indifference of governments and corporations. (531)

Therefore, critics begin to respond to environmental justice, one of them is Amitav Ghosh, who is concerned with the questions of colonialism and gender, rather than only spotlighting the environmental issues. Even Cheryll Glotfelty mentions in the introduction of his book entitled as *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, that

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)

The contemporary fiction writers are very well aware of the ecological degradation which is taking place in the whole world. There are many authors like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Margaret Atwood, and Nadine Gordimer, who depicted the theme of natural devastation in their works. Sometimes, this ecological crisis has been consciously taken as a major theme of the novels to make people aware of the devastation taking place because of human activities.

Conclusion

The humanities as well as literature are cultural discourses which are primarily concerned with human perception of environment, they all are anthropocentric. However the ideologies, philosophies and attitudes towards nature; its flora and fauna, determine the way non-human aspects of this Universe are well elaborated in literature. Man considers himself as an intellectual being and he tries to control over everything. And he thinks that the process of society is a complex phenomenon whereas nature is a simple one. But it depicts his anthropocentric vision, as nature and its laws are not as simple as human being think. So, the need of the hour is to critique this anthropocentric vision to make the human survival inhabitable not only for present but also for progeny. So, literature plays a significant role to bring out the environmental issues to forefront. Summing up, it can be said that anthropocentric orientation is a major challenge to preservation of natural environment and appropriate treatment to other living beings.

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