



**FROM EGO-CONSCIOUSNESS TO ECO-
CONSCIOUSNESS: A FOREGROUNDING ANALYSIS OF
THE MAIN TENETS OF ECOCRITICISM AND ZEN BUDDHISM**

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is basically the study of the harmonious relationship / connection between literature and the physical environment. It is a genre which considers much about human activities and its effects on the physical environment, i.e., biodiversity. It is also a study of cultures and cultural products. Eco criticism always tends to take an earth- centred approach to literary studies. Effects of environmental crisis are seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture. Ecological criticism shares the fundamental fact that, human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism emphasizes on the cultural artefacts of language and literature. Literature can go beyond the limits and has a great power to redefine the future. Human culture is intricately associated to nature. The focussed aim of ecocriticism then is to carry out the important debate between homocentrism /egocentrism and ecocentrism by projecting perversely, nature's charm and man /woman's insignificance. In fact, 'green reading' surpasses all cultural and ethnic borders by promoting awareness and enhancing an insight of a variety of actions that could mutually benefit with practical implications.

Key Words : *Ecocriticism, egocentrism, rereading, eco-texts*

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INTRODUCTION

Primarily the term eco consciousness means the conglomeration of human beings and nature and the consciousness evolved from that concord. The slogan 'Return to Nature' is pasted everywhere or human beings are marching towards the bosom of mother earth proclaiming the slogan. Eco consciousness is a wide spread resistance against the heinous culture evolved out of urbanization. One of the basic tenets of urbanization or modernism is to conquer and exploit nature. This malicious thought which generated and grew in western world, spread all over the world because of invasions and colonization. In reaction to this disastrous attitude, there evolved the concept of preserving, protecting and loving the environment. To simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. While examining a literary work ecocritics and theorists would like to ask questions like:

1. How is nature represented in this work?
2. What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this work?
3. Are the values expressed in this work consistent with ecological wisdom?
4. In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?
5. How can we characterize nature writing as a genre?

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism deals with interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts 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 nonhuman.

Evaluating various associations with the natural world can broaden cross cultural understandings elaborately. Literature is not an alien world floating above the material world. But it is highly connected with energy, ideas and matter. The humanities can perform a vital and a unifying role in generating new forms of knowledge by practicing several ecocritical constructs. The rising number of natural hazards compels the thinkers and writers from different parts of the world to react against such dangers. Different activities from



various English departments flow into innumeros environmental centres on colleges across the nation, where science stream and arts stream merge.

Some scholars prefer the term Eco- to Enviro- because Enviro- is anthropocentric and dualistic, referring that humans are of the centre surrounded by the environment. But Eco-in contrast means interdependent communities and integrated systems.

Most ecocritical works share a common inspiration that the human actions are damaging planet's basic life support systems and have reached the age of environmental limits. There are two options left to solve this dilemma, either to change lifestyles or to accept environmental hazards. If humans are not part of the solution, then they are part of the problem. It is a do or die situation. Heated discussions are going on globally to solve the ecological problems, rather to restore environmental balance solving ecological problems and it is not a spare time activity. It is the need of the hour and it calls for action. The solution is very simple because environmental problems are the by-products of human culture.

Scholars from different parts of the world are trying different ways to add an environmental dimension to their respective fields and disciplines. Basically historians are creating histories based on environment, evaluating the symbiotic relationship between human community and land, considering nature as an important character in determining the fate of humanity. They analyse the relationships among different economic modes of production, environmental conditions and ideas through time.

The connection between geography and culture is beautifully drawn by anthropologists in their studies. They have long been interested in primal cultures. It may help the modern world to respect the people's right to survive and to consider the system and rituals based on values. Subjects like deep ecology, social ecology, environmental ethics and ecofeminism have had a deep impact on eminent philosophers to understand and evaluate the reasons of environmental degradation and to sort out the remedial problems. Nowadays literary scholars are trying to find out answers for the questions related to tradition, meaning, language, value and point of view that can restructure the contours of environment.

Eco criticism 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 (Glotfelty, 18)



Ecocriticism in a much wider perspective examines the silence of the nature; human beings are exploiting the silence within. It is high time for human beings to take responsibility to conserve nature. The exponents of ecocriticism prefer a lifestyle which enhances the preservation of trees, animals, plants and other environmental communities that portray the diversity of life on green globe by safeguarding the surroundings. Human beings must understand the rights of all creatures in the universe and should be extremely conscious that they are only one species among many, with no special privileges.

Environmental studies try to re-postulate new definitions and ethics in the history of landscapes. The balance between natural group and human association is very special to ecologists. They always use their possible ways like the 'environmental justice movement' to protect weaker sections in the society from the hazards of dumping of toxic and poisonous wastes, contaminating food, air, water and the negative attitude of the government authorities. Ecocriticism includes various theories like social ecology, environmental justice, ecofeminism and ecomarxism.

Environmentalism is not only a science movement but also a political, social and philosophical movement. The awareness about the environmental crisis enables the ecocritics to reject the anthropocentric attitudes and exploitation of human beings by other human beings. The complex Interaction between culture and nature surprises the ecologists and now they are trying to build a bridge that connects the two constructs. William Rueckert argues:

In Ecology man's tragic flaw is this anthropocentric (as opposed to bio centric) vision, and his compulsions to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing (113), we must formulate an ecological poetics. We must promote an ecological vision'' (114). This lack of ecological vision causes greater confusion in the modern world. All cultures prevail in the globe understand and try to make a distinction between natural world and the human world. Culture always attempts to polish, control and formulate nature to use it for its own sake. Culture is therefore seen more elite to the natural world and destroys its own shape and existence. In this realm, ecocritics attempts to protest against the selfishness and cruelty of people in destroying the natural resources for their self-centred ends. As far as Michael Branch is concerned ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature. It would rather implies a move toward a more bio centric world view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of human conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment

Ecocritics reject the concept that everything exists in the world is linguistically or socially constructed. To them nature is a reality and they read major literary works from a bio centric

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viewpoint and importance goes to the true representation of the natural world. In many aspects ecocriticism is highly associated with environmental developments in politics and philosophy. The propounder of ecofeminism, social ecology and environmental justice put forward the cohesion of social and environmental concerns.

Ecocriticism also focuses at the study of culture as well as its cultural product, it tries to interpret and evaluate the present human world full of technological invasions and its alienation and disconnection from the natural universe. It also intends to inform the world about the actual condition of human beings and the need for an urgent reaction towards the enhancement of the modern society. According to Raymond Williams, an eminent cultural critic and philosopher, a culture is both 'a whole way of life' and 'ordinary' (Williams: 1989). He defines culture as an unavoidable connection between the work of selection and tradition. These are two interrelated processes. Tradition includes values, artefacts, meanings and concepts which are carried through generations by various modes from schools, families and religion comprises the artistic work and expressions. Instead, the work of selection is the ideas selected in day today life. Thus culture in a broad sense is a dynamic process in which the tradition is reconstituted in everyday life. So a particular frame work of culture at a particular period of time is what Raymond Williams called 'a whole way of life'. 'Ordinary' meant the cultural enaction happen in various practices of everyday life.

As far as language is concerned, the supreme position that it holds in the culture process is concrete, as it is the prime symbolic means of spreading culture across generations and wide areas over a wide span of time. Language and the elements of culture are interwoven and language also exists at the crux of the process of mind, the symbolic procedure on the individual level.

Language functions on the aspect of the signifier and the signified, which are based on the concord within a given society and culture. The purpose of a language is bi-folded. It is a medium of communication as well as a medium of thinking. Thinking means the mental process of the symbolic stimuli, and it includes both the consciousness of the environmental stimuli and the consciousness of this consciousness. Thoughts are opaque and irrelevant without a proper language and language can transform consciousness into a vivid human consciousness. Culture and mind are interconnected and there is no individual thinking without culture. It is a symbolic process and culture creates the mind and vice versa. It would rather an extension of the environment in which the process of mind occurs. It would be extremely convenient to understand the role of language and culture in the field of ecocriticism, on behalf of the proper understanding of the interconnection between culture, language and mind. The current environmental crisis is also a by-product of present culture, which is evidently; materialistic and anthropocentric. Ecocritics try to examine the depiction

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of the non-human world; particularly in literature from the view point of the impact of the human destruction on the planet. According to Roland Barthes, language as perceived is always ambiguous and he affirms that by the birth of the reader, the death of the author happens.

Barthes holds the idea that the concept of the signified is determined by the comprehension of the reader about the signifier. The space between the signifier and the signified is packed by the reader. So, as far as ecocriticism is concerned; the term 'nature' is also connected to the reader. The assimilation of the idea of the same nature changes and it rely on the reader's politics, class and locality. The readers or perceivers can be anthropocentric or bio centric. The anthropocentric community does not want to associate with nature and they always wanted to exploit nature for fulfilling their daily needs. But bio centric people always consider themselves as the part of nature. The consumer culture of the globalised human world always longed to conquer and loot nature to quench their greedy needs. Instead, the tribal's and the aboriginals, who possess a long culture and tradition, exist in close connection with nature. Their traditional knowledge about the secrets of nature plays a pivotal role in the sustainable use of biodiversity According to Greta Gaard and Patric Murphy, ecology is a study of interrelationship. An isolated introspection is not possible in ecocriticism. It is a reciprocal relationship between the human world and the non-human world. The concept of 'gestalt' is highly applicable in the ecocritical paradigm. Everything is interconnected and there are several factors which affect the literature of ecology.

Ecocritical or environmental writings have great importance in determining the present and future of the universe. Examining, experimenting and evaluating an eco-reading on chosen words from India, Canada, Australia and Africa will help to explore citadels of ecology and ecocriticism in literature and culture. The convoluted convergence culture, economy, politics and technology cause an excessive level of environmental issues.

As an artefact of culture and its reflection, literature has a great obligation to inculcate into social arena, the need to wipe out the anthropocentric mentality. Language only can instil knowledge, awareness and education to transform a person's consciousness into a creative narrative that enables and empowers them to take an active role to inflict a change. The inception of different perspectives to see the world enriches a personal's capabilities and it helps to liberate the self and other people through transcending the society and the environment. To impart the vision of an ecocentric world, great amount of passion, inspiration and a vision is inevitable.

Ecocriticism and the environmental studies focus on three major areas, firstly the need to protect biodiversity, the importance to lead a more sustainable lifestyle and the need to

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use resources in a proper way. This is to sensitise the need to change human perceptions about environment by applying a practical approach on the basis of observation and self learning by adopting suitable methods. Lastly, to enhance awareness about the environment through several means, like literature. Ecocriticism explores human perception and a destructive approach to nature and also depicts environmental problems in current modern literature. It is also a micro processing of the portrayal of nature in a specific work as well as the physical genres and settings in a work. Ecocritics also evaluate the fundamental ecological ethics, the representation of the nature and the importance of 'place' in literature like gender, class and race. It is the duty of ecocritics to promulgate human perception of forests and wilderness and how it has drastically changed throughout the history. The agenda of ecocriticism is to offer a broader and wider vision of life.

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