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**From Nature Writing to Ecocriticism –
An Evolutionary Outline of Ecocritical Writing**

Shoba. K.N., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

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How to Stop the Destruction?

In *The Diversity of Life*, Harvard entomologist Edward O. Wilson estimates that around 27,000 varieties of living organisms are lost every year. At current rates, he suggests, 20 percent of existing species including both flora and fauna will become extinct in the next 30 years, precipitating "the sixth great extinction spasm" (Wilson 17) in evolutionary history – the one that may finally destroy the fabric of life forever. His book tries to establish the fact that man acts as an important agent in this process of destruction. Unmistakably, the earth is facing its most serious challenge – as a species in the web of life, man is rapidly destroying the fabric of his very existence.

The Role of Literature

The logical question any responsible human would ask is: "What can I do – What should I do – to stop this destruction?" One answer some give, surprisingly perhaps, is: "Study Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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literature." Literature (especially the literature of nature) puts human beings in contact with writers and thinkers and philosophers, with scientists and prophets and pilgrims, all of whom have sought to understand their role in the universe and come to terms with their place in the natural world.

Moreover, the meaning of "literature" and "literary study" has undergone a profound change recently, but it is nevertheless worth remembering that the word "text" comes from the Latin *texere*, to weave or construct, and thus the overall project of literary studies may in one sense be seen as part of an effort to re-weave the fabric of life, to reconstruct, rather than deconstruct our world.

Effect of Literature on the Environment

Yet one may rightly ask, "What effect does literary study have upon the environment? What difference will it make to the world if one spends five years of his life squirrelled away in some library carrel, examining the ecological rhetoric of some natural philosopher's essays?" It's a fair question, that has to be answered fully, yet one, that should also be seen in terms with in one's own individual way. At the root of the question is the issue of cultural change: what it is, how it happens, and how one can make it occur in the way one desires.

More than anything else, the belief that studying, teaching, and writing about the literature of nature can somehow effect social change involves a belief that no firm distinction exists between what occurs "inside" academia and what occurs "outside." On the one hand, this means that being an academic need not prevent one from participating in protest marches, joining environmental groups, or volunteering at the recycling centre. On the other hand, it means that "traditional" academic study can also have a visible impact upon the world. Not only may intellectual inquiry change one's belief system and, consequently, one's behaviour but it can also change the belief system of others – perhaps as a result of one's teaching or writing. And without this faith in the power of individuals and groups to effect cultural change, through both citizen participation and education, one is surely lost, as is the environment.

Features of the Literature of the Environment

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Literature of the environment is a sub-canon of literature that puts at centre stage the natural environment. While this kind of writing has clear ties to nature writing, literature of the environment is construed more broadly to include writings that do not originate, as nature writing tends to, from experiential reflections on the natural world or from observational essays.

In this respect, literature of the environment may include texts that are not written in such a way to inspire awe or evoke deep emotional responses about the natural world. Rather, as Lawrence Buell suggests, literature of the environment is literature which is “environmentally oriented,” whether this was the author’s intention or not. Buell defines an environmentally oriented work by the following criteria:

1. The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (Buell 7-8)

Nature Writing Genre

Nature writing is a genre of literature that has developed out of close observation and respect for the natural world. Generally, writing in this genre tends toward experiential expressions of the author/narrator’s encounters with his/her environment. Nature Writing can be poetry or prose, fiction, non-fiction, creative non-fiction, or autobiography. The editors of the *Norton Book of Nature Writing* describe nature writing as having its beginnings in “the reflective natural history essay” (15).

Recently the genre of has broadened to encompass other works that take the environment as a central concern but may not stem from field work, experiences in the wild, or from reflection on nature. These works are more often referred to as literature of the environment.

Key Authors

Two key authors are recognized as the grandfathers of nature writing in the United States: Henry David Thoreau who lived on the east coast and John Muir who lived on the west coast. Both wrote in a journalistic style, often beginning with elaborately detailed notes about time spent in the woods. Nonetheless, their experiences in the wilderness and their writing differ drastically.

Central themes of nature writing include:

Landscape

Animal and plant life

Field work or taxonomies of natural objects

Reflections of pastoral or agrarian life

Visions/Fantasies of the Golden Age or Eden

Nature/Writing?

Nature/Writing (hence the “/” divider in this section’s heading) also reminds us that in writing about nature we are also writing nature—that is, constructing it. In this respect it is important to pay attention to the ways that we may be observing nature, constructing it, or doing both at once. Writing, like film or photography, is a technology of representation that mediates our experience of the natural world.

Nature Writing and Romanticism

‘Nature writing’ as a genre has existed even prior to romanticism which even commemorated the celebrations of nature in its literature. What characterizes nature writing is the assumption that ‘nature’ is a supra-power that influences lives in a spiritual way. Nature has always been ‘Mother earth’ – ‘the bountiful’ who with her plenty blessed man protected him and was omnipresent and omniscient. In the course of nature writing tradition ‘nature’ became a specimen to be observed, one that can be ‘appreciated and enjoyed’. A poem on a bird, a rainbow, a story about a forest were considered subjects for this genre writers chose only the bounteous and the beautiful, the overwhelming and overflowing. They formed consortiums, conducted conferences, wrote and enjoyed nature. They celebrated ‘Nature’, forgetful of science Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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and technology, the advancements they were making rapidly consuming energy from the very same natural resources these nature writers were worshipping.

The Romantic age in literature is a different phase of the nature writing tradition 'Nature' was rendered its highest position, worshipped as friend philosopher, nurse and guide. It provided comfort and solace to mournful hearts like those of Wordsworth and others. However romantic writers had different attitudes towards nature. Nature worship and nature writing developed so much that today most of romantic literature is identified with eco-writing.

Transcendentalism and Nature Writing

American transcendentalism offers a different picture of nature and ecology. Wilderness and forests, identified as the primal force of all humanity were considered to be the eternal home of mankind. Thoreau and Emerson worshipped the forests; Whitman wrote a treatise on nature and the human connection through his *Leaves of Grass*, and a host of other writings poured forth. Even till then, no trace of destructive or exploitation attitude towards nature was identified in these writings. Either the writers failed to detect such changes or such incidents laid dormant in their writings. Came the two world wars and large-scale destruction, the rationality of science was questioned and the world focused its attention on ecological issues.

Shift in Focus: Nature – A Depleting, Exploited Phenomenon

In course of time, nature writing took a stop, to look back at its course and realized it had taken an ignorant turn. 'Nature' was no longer the same bountiful but became a depleting, exploited phenomenon. Natural resources and natural scenery were dwindling and no more offered the same inspiration and source for creativity. The flow of 'silvery cascades' accumulated industrial toxics and wastes, interrupted by bridges that connected smoke-bellowing factories.

Writers now shifted their focus from 'nature' to their 'environment'. An appreciation and celebration of nature turned into an awareness and consciousness of their environment. Nature was no longer merely aesthetically pleasing but demanded preservatory and rehabilitary measures ecology overpowered literature, bringing in elements of science and sociology, thus eventually breaking up the water-tight compartmental nature of these disciplines, they became interdisciplinary and literature in the modern age faces a demand to link and create an awareness Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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about the endangered 'nature'. Thus literature encompasses many spheres and the once creative writing inspired by nature changed phase into a form of social, developmental writing.

Emergence of Eco-Writing

When the human tried to ignore the non-human, the non-human endangers the very existence of human. Thus emerged a genre of writing, called eco-writing or eco-literature. Ecocriticism is identifying this consciousness of ecology in literature. This can be considered as the long and short of the story of the transformation from nature-writing and eco-writing. Readers become more conscious to the nature-preserving attitudes in writings which were not even self-evident by themselves.

As the field of ecocriticism has gained momentum within the academy, though, even the term "literature of the environment" has seemed too restrictive because it requires that a text which may be "about" nature take a particularly ecocentric stance. This would leave little room for fruitful analyses of texts which may not look, at first, to be environmentally oriented. Take, for example, works that are set in the city or in the suburbs rather than in the wilderness or on the frontier. Or, take works that use the natural world as a stage upon which to project anxieties about technological dependence or a loss of connection with nature in the present hyper-urbanized lifestyles. More recently literature courses and anthologies are found that carry as their heading "literature and the environment" to make room for this burgeoning method of literary and cultural analysis.

Features of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is one of the most recent interdisciplinary fields to have emerged in literary and cultural studies. "Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 27). While Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, ecocriticism in a similar way takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Ecocriticism analyses the role that the natural environment plays in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific historical moment, examining how the concept of "nature" is Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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defined, what values are assigned to it or denied it and why, and the way in which the relationship between humans and nature is envisioned. More specifically, it investigates how nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary or aesthetic genres. This analysis in turn allows ecocriticism to assess how certain historically conditioned concepts of nature and the natural, and particularly literary and artistic constructions of it, have come to shape current perceptions of the environment. In addition, some ecocritics understand their intellectual work as a direct intervention in current social, political, and economic debates surrounding environmental pollution and preservation.

Ecocriticism is a kind of research that helps in the construction of interdisciplinary bridges between science, literature or cultural criticism. Science undoubtedly is the most influential construction of nature in Western cultures. Subsequently science has also contributed to environmental thought and created awareness about ozone depletion, species extinction, soil erosion, etc. but even in environmentalist thought, science plays an ambiguous role. Most findings of science are readily called upon to support environmentalist policies while some sectors of the green movement understand themselves as antagonistic to science. Such ecocritics perceive science as one of the root causes of current degradation in ecosystem aggravated by technology, industrialization, and urbanization.

Ecocriticism is a methodological approach to literary and cultural criticism that takes “the environment” as its primary focus. While ecocriticism began in the 1990s, it has roots in nature writing, environmental philosophy, and environmental history. Some ground-breaking texts that are staples of any ecocritic’s diet include Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land: American West as Symbol and Myth* and Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land*.

The editors of the *Ecocriticism Reader* define ecocriticism as follows:

All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of languages and literature, As a

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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.
(Glotfelty and Fromm14)

Ecocriticism, in a gender-neutral fashion started off attempts to link literature and ecology. It aims at proving how literature could embody a socially responsible cause pertaining to ecological conservation and further brings out the notion how ecocriticism has been embedded in all literary writings since time immemorial.

It is an awakening call to the long-existing but dormant nature-writing tradition. The following is an example of nature-writing tradition from Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*.

I went to the woods because I wished to live
deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life,
and see if I could not learn what it had to teach,
and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (14)

Ecocriticism focuses on literary and artistic expression of human experience ranging from a primarily a natural setup to a consequent culturally shaped world. It considers for its subjects, the joys of abundance, sorrows of deprivation, hopes for harmonious existence, and fears of loss and disaster. In the process of defining ecocriticism and identifying ecocritics, the following questions may be asked.

- What do ecocritics read?
- How do ecocritics read?
- What are the grounds of their methods?
- What sort of critical standards do they adopt?
- How do they write?
- What contributions do they hope to make?
- How do they accept critiques of their methods?

Ecocritics believe all texts can be read as environmental texts, but not all do agree. Some take an intermediate position claiming a significant position for the author's intention to play a vital and explicit role. The length of the ecocritical reach depends, in individual cases, on the certainty of critical approach, but even more on certainty of the authorial intention. It is in this certainty that the importance of the 'eco-consciousness' lies. Peter Barry, in his essay entitled 'Ecocriticism' lists out clearly what ecocritics do.

They re-read major literary works from an eco-centric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world.

They extend the applicability of a range of eco-centric concepts, using them of things other than the natural world – concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources.

They turn away from the 'social constructivism' and 'linguistic determinism' of dominant literary theories (with their emphasis on the linguistic and social constructedness of the external world) and instead emphasise ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves. (264)

Thus one begins literary analysis by decomposing texts into their constituent parts. Identifying the indispensable aspects of ecowriting is one task. He/she examines how the eco-conscious elements can be recomposed or critiqued powerfully, made more successful for the purposes of making a better world. The ecocritic cannot assume extreme positions by celebrating a work or disassembling it completely. He/she should adopt a via-media through which his goal to facilitate clearer thinking about human transactions with the environments become easier and effective.

Ecocritics and theorists bear in their mind, certain premeditated ideas that look into the representation of nature in a poem, the role the physical setting play in the plot of this novel. They also examine whether the values expressed in a literary piece are consistent with ecological Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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wisdom. They also inquire if the influences effected by the metaphors of the land really change the way we feel towards earth. They also examine whether nature-writing can be categorized as a genre.

Scott Slovic, in his essay, "Ecocriticism: Storytelling, Values, Communication, Contact" states:

Ecocritics should tell stories, should use narratives as a constant or intermittent strategy for literary analysis. The purpose is not to compete with the literature itself, but simply to illuminate and appreciate the context of reading—that is, to embrace the literary text as language that somehow contributes to our lives "out in the world." (94)

Ecocriticism enables 'place' to become a new critical category in addition to race, class and gender. It compares and analyses if men write about nature differently than women do. They ponder into questions like: In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies?

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 takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of languages 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.

Distinction between Ecocriticism and Other Critical Approaches

Ecocriticism can be further characterized by distinguishing it from other critical approaches. 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. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else," (36) we

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must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact.

Implicit (and often explicit) in much of this new criticism is a call for cultural change. Ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature; it implies a move toward a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans' conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment. Just as feminist and African American literary criticism call for a change in culture--that is, they attempt to move the culture toward a broader world-view by exposing an earlier narrowness of view--so too does ecological literary criticism advocate for cultural change by examining how the narrowness of our culture's assumptions about the natural world has limited our ability to envision an ecologically sustainable human society.

Tremendous Growth

Like any recently born thing, ecocriticism is experiencing tremendous growth and development in these early years of its existence. In the short time since it first appeared as a movement, some of the initial concerns that marked its inaugural moments have already been answered. Given the veritable explosion of interest in the field, Glotfelty's concern in 1996 with the traditional failure of the literary profession to address "green" issues, for instance, now seems something of a non-issue. Glen Love, paraphrasing Glotfelty's point, argued in his contribution to *The Ecocriticism Reader* that:

Race, class, and gender are words which we see and hear everywhere at our professional meetings and in our current publications ... [but] the English profession has failed to respond in any significant way to the issue of the environment. (226)

Method of Analysis

The first method of ecocritical analysis is the *ecocritical re-reading* of representations of nature in the canonised literature. This kind of approach is often ideological in the same way as feminist re-readings. Representations and motifs are based on stereotypes, which are studied

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from an ecocritical viewpoint as well as the attitudes that are reinforced in the reader by these stereotypes.

More respect must thus be paid to ecocriticism that is mostly occupied not with abstract ideas, but with the environment, in which a literary work is, and has been created. It can be said that each text belongs to some extent to its environment, although the ideas presented in it may be as universal as possible. Ecology is a place-conscious research method that always takes into account the environment of the objects that it studies. Its idea of the necessity of a careful study of relations between all parts of the whole in order to formulate the principles of a phenomenon's existence and functioning, also gives a good starting position.

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