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An Eco-critical Reading of Selected Indian Female Poets

Shubhanku Kochar, M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar



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Human Dominance

Since time immemorial, human beings have expressed themselves through various media including painting, music and writing. These human expressions have been subjected

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to a close critical scrutiny by the scholars, and the scrutiny is generally called *eco-criticism*. Literature, as generally believed, is an expression of the human experiences through language, but this is a limited view. Literature as a human artefact, with the help of language, not only expresses the human experiences but the non-human experiences as well. The tragedy of the situation is that these non-human experiences are either forcefully stifled or ignored by the writers and the readers alike. The sole reason behind this is the dominance of the human subject over the nonhuman.

Ecological Approach Missing

In these times too, the works of art are read from various perspectives which take man as the centre of the universe. The approaches or the discourses such as patriarchal, feminist, postcolonial, Marxist, psychoanalytical and new historicist are the standard touchstones to analyse or evaluate a work of art in the classrooms and elsewhere. Since literature is expressed through language, numerous linguistic and stylistic theories, new criticism, formalism, semantics and structuralism all have been evolved to appreciate the works of art. What is missing so far is the ecological approach as applied to the study of literature.

Eco-Criticism – An Outline of Its Focus

Literature includes human beings and the means that connect them. But, why should one curtail oneself within this limited view. The characters in literature live on the earth, breathe in air and receive benefits from nature. Alongside of human beings, there are mountains, rivers, clouds, sun, stars and animals who contribute to the growth of human beings directly or indirectly. If the non-human world around us is so potent a force, then why do we neglect it in the course of literary evaluation! Eco-criticism is an effort to read literature with these non-human agencies in mind. Contemporary scenario is a time of trial and turbulence in all spheres of life. Environmental crisis has become the major threat to man with capital “M”.

Man’s rapaciousness has disturbed the harmony in ecology. And it is high time one perseveres to save the environment that has been so mercilessly polluted and destroyed by the human being.

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Revival of the Magnificence of Nature

Eco-criticism basically intends to revive the magnificence of nature. An eco-critic reads literature and environment side by side with his one eye set upon the work of art and the other scanning the ecological processes around him with his one hand holding the book and the other holding a branch of a tree. In short, eco-criticism is an effort on the part of literary critics to add their contribution to the collective efforts of the participants in other disciplines such as: theology, politics, anthropology and psychology, to preserve nature around them that had been kind and magnanimous throughout the ages.

An eco-critical approach tries to restore the consciousness back to the people that made it possible for human beings to live their lives in cordial terms with their environment.

Interpreting What Eco-criticism is

Different scholars understand the term in different ways. According to Scott Slovic:

Eco-criticism is the study of explicitly environmental texts (including literature, film, music, visual art, and popular media) from any critical perspective or the application of various environmental lenses (ranging from scientific ecology to the language and terminology of environmental justice scholarship) to any kind of “text,” even material that presents no obvious statement about the more-than-human world or the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. (23)

However, Randy Malamud explains it as:

Ecocriticism spotlights a set of ethics, a set of criteria, which interrogate: how does a given text, or a given ideology, or a given movement, advance or hinder the cause of ecological sanity and equity? How does a close reading of a text or ideology expose the realities of our behavior? our prejudices? our transgressions? Like any critical lens, ecocriticism asks its practitioners to

foreground a given set of concerns and to appraise the text at hand in light of those concerns. (63)

Cheryll Glotfelty describes it as follows: “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 nonhuman” (xix).

Destruction of Nature

In the East and the West, man for his selfish pleasures and gains has been destroying nature. The Indian society has also has its share in the destruction of nature; they had to cut down forests to build houses and all kinds of buildings and factories for the sake of human beings. Even before the advent of science and technology, the world had begun to misuse nature, and they forgot to remember they were the stewards of Nature and all its bounty. Indians like all others, exploit nature for their own pleasures and material life.

Contrast between the Western and Eastern Attitudes

The entire process of destruction is skilfully recorded by Anjum Katyal in her small poem, “Slow Dissolve”. She brings out a contrast between the Western attitude of destruction towards nature and the natives’. The destruction is everywhere. The discrepancy lies in the fact that there the machinery is used, whereas here, hands are used. She writes:

In another country, I,
like others, stop to gape
as the slaving maw
of a metalfanged monster
lunges and devours
a home, which crumbles
to its ravening greed.

Here, thin men in bare skin
knock, unconvinced, an old
house down. It surrenders

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slowly
to their touch. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 156)

The words used in this poem are very significant. The words such as: devours, ravaging greed, metal-fanged monster, crumble, reveal the intensity of the human being towards destroying nature. (they were demolishing a house not nature!!) As Slovic maintains: “The language we use determines how we think about the world, and how we think – our beliefs and values- determines how we act” (23).

Cruelties of the Human Beings

Similarly, the cruelties of the human beings are also revealed by Jane Bhandari in her poem “The New Hotel”. She reveals that how man for the fulfilment of his financial projects destroys the greenery surrounding him. She presents a picture of a hotel in which nature is cut short in silver jars. The natural agency here is merely reduced to the object of embellishment; and as the greed of human being is unending, no wonder one day these jars, as she herself says, will reveal the “galaxy” itself. She writes:

An alien craft, the new hotel
Rises, silver and glass among the trees,
Reflected greens melting image into object,
Vanishing into the bemusement
Of reflected trees among the trees. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 48)

In the second part of the poem she becomes more straightforward in her attack on the modern civilization when she writes:

Leaves hang within the depths of glass,
Untouchable, contained,
Arranged within silver bowls.
These glittering rounds
Are space-ships ready to soar,
Leaving smoke and fire,
Astonished by-standers,
And the earthbound trees. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 48)

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Within the few lines, she also makes an indirect hint towards the damage caused by the space ships. No doubt, this is an achievement of science and man must be proud of it which no doubt, he really is. But, in his sheer exuberance to rise above, he is neglecting the phenomena encircling him. The space ships exude 'smoke and fire' which not only pollute the air but are also poisonous for the birds and other nonhuman elements in many ways. The last line of the poem is sarcastic assault on man's undying exploring attitude which is good, but only if it does not destroy any other being. The way man is progressing and simultaneously neglecting the nonhuman life forms, one day these shining glasses will reveal something more than the trees. As she writes: "One day the glass will reflect / The branching arms of galaxies" (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 48).

Nature Weeps

When man behaves so unkindly towards nature, nature weeps; ironically, man refuses to listen to her weeping. There are sensitive people who are able to listen to this voice, and with the help of their art they bring it to the forefront, so the masses could see it.. Nature is feeling overburdened by the heavy weight of man's greed. She has no one to go to and complain. Marilyn Naronha in her poem, "Burning Question" give words to her wailings. She personifies nature as a woman who speaks in a poignant voice:

I'm a woman of straw,
easily set on fire.
My man is made of clay,
moulded by holy hands.
He has substance. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 184)

Man in Christian religion does not become God, even though he was made in the image of God; nor can he share in God's Transcendence of nature. So, he is still of the earth and will return to earth, while his spirit will go to God. He can use nature and enjoy it wisely.

God has given man enough space to materialize his dreams, but still he is bent upon craving for more and more and it is this hunger for more that hurts and disturbs nature. The

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remaining part of the poem is nothing but the agony of nature which the poetess sensibly records. She writes:

Straw is lighter, cheaper,
fodder for animals,
a little stiff and itchy
if it dares;
then quickly flattened ,
crushed beneath his weight.

Silently smouldering,
I'm searching the ashes
for the secret of that last straw
that broke the camel's back. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 184)

Extinction and Destruction of Animals

Everything has its own importance in the larger scheme of things whether that be an ant or an elephant. No doubt, for commercial purposes the woods are extirpated and along with this runs the parallel destruction of the animals. For example, musk deers are killed for the product that they carry in their naval which can be used to create incense. The elephants are slaughtered for their tusk. The snakes, the tigers and the cows are stripped off their skin for the products like begs, shoes, belts etc. Now the destruction of the animals for these commercial reasons has certainly put a question mark on ecological balance. In the scheme of things, every animal contributes in the larger food chain and the extinction of one of the participants is surely bound to disturb the whole. Moreover if man continues to hunt animals for his own purposes, the day is not too far when these animals will disappear completely and that will certainly affect the ecological balance.

Revathy Gopal in her poem, "Picnic at the Zoo," draws the readers' attention towards this fact. She writes:

Most of the cages are empty, now;
once there were civet-cats, panther and jaguar,
even a family of white tigers from the Sunderbans

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that made a splash of light in the infernal dark;
a black bear and a binturong
I remember particularly,
because of its droll name.
They died or were moved
to kinder climes, perhaps.
But when the kangaroos (strange import!)
died, one by one,
the local paper said they
probably pined away. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 121)

It is a harsh fact that man has to accept that he is not the master of the world. The entire world can go without him. Nature is not dependent on him. In fact, it is he who is dependent on nature. Nature was there before he came into being. And as Christopher Manes observes:

If fungus, one of the “lowliest” of forms on a humanistic scale of values, were to go extinct tomorrow, the effect on the rest of the biosphere would be catastrophic, since the health of forests depends on *Mycorrhizal* fungus, and the disappearance of forests would upset the hydrology, atmosphere, and temperature of the entire globe. In contrast, if *Homo sapiens* disappeared, the event would go virtually unnoticed by the vast majority of Earth’s life forms. (24)

Mending Our Ways

Man has to mend his ways. Otherwise nature will seek vengeance and its act of retribution will be hard to confront. It has been depicted by Revathy Gopal in the second half of the poem where Queen Victoria, the ruler of the half of the world, is shown fallen in the dust, all alone helpless, fatherless, husbandless, with a disobedient son (and a lost grandson). It is an interesting fact that Revathy Gopal has selected the image of Queen Victoria during whose reign imperialism was in its heyday; and during the last twenty odd years of her reign the British empire consolidated itself not only in Asia but in Africa too where the destruction

of nature along with the indigenous people for gratifying the urge to earn more and more was at its peak.

The poetess draws an ironic picture of Queen Victoria, as if she was the main force behind the saga of the destruction during those days not only of the human life, but the ecological life as well which she in a major part was. She writes:

Somewhere between the orangutan
and the peanut vendor,
she lies stricken in the dust,
Victoria, Queen Empress,
head averted in clotted rage
as pigeons strut
and cheeky boys clamber
on the capacious lap
from which once flowed,
the long tedium of empire,
the unending reproach
of widowhood, somewhere
a haemophilic grandson;
and the men who walked away,
father, husband,
a recalcitrant son. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 121)

Exploitation and Destruction Even After Assuming the Idea of the Divinity of Nature

Shanta Acharya in her poem, “The Wishing Tree,” seems to be presenting the traditional Hindu way of life in which the Hindus assume divinity in nature. She shows how the Hindus for the fulfilment of certain wishes revere nature and its various manifestations such as trees and rocks. She writes:

Children conspiring around the ancient
tree trunk encircle it with their wishes
clamouring to cover branches with tinsel-
calligraphically scripted dreams,

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poems of love, coins at the bottom of a well,
prayer flags at monasteries
along foothills of Himalayas. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 4)

Acharaya graphically portrays the Hindus' devotion in the second half of the poem where she uses almost all the images from the world of nature that the Hindus bow their heads to. She records:

Having tied strings on trees, walls, stones,
wished on the new moon, fallen eyelashes,
tossed coins in rivers, fountains, wells,
sometimes over my head and shoulder
in more places that I care to remember.

Circled several times the sacred scarab,
climbed mountains, hugged pillars, statues;
kissed icons, shrouds, Shiva Linga,
images of gods, goddesses, saints;
made donations;
fasted on different days of the week, prayed
to the sun, moon and other divine powers,
lighted candles in churches, cathedrals,
folded my palms in prayer in temples,
knelt reverently in mosques and pagodas-
I have learnt that wishes are milestones
on our journey back home. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 5)

We're Made Sceptics

Deepa Agarwal through her poem, "Thoughts on a Ritual," reveals the same attitude with a difference. As has been mentioned earlier, the arrival of science and technology has made man sceptic. In the poem, there is a woman who is binding a thread around a leaf, but instead of extreme devotion, her mind is fluttering like butterfly as she muses over the injustice and cruelties meted out against women. In place of faith and piety her mind is

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riddled with the issue of women in patriarchy. There the concern of women supersedes the reverence that once was reserved for nature. As she puts it:

Tracing yellow lines
on broad banyan leaves
winding the fragile thread
round and round...
My thoughts
vagrant butterflies
take flight.

Savitri
constant wife
faithful lover
woman of power,
you conquered death
yet...
your womb was too narrow.
It could only hold
a hundred sons
not a single daughter. (Ramakrishanan and Makhija 17)

To Conclude

To conclude, it can safely be asserted that in a country like India even with the attitude of worship of nature, nature has greatly suffered over the time as has been depicted by these women poets quoted above. Today, the world is facing the threat of extinction if the factors contributing to the apocalyptic ending are not bridled. An eco-critic surely can do his or her bit by reading literature from the standpoint of nature and the rest of the non-human life. Their task is clear and well defined. There is no need of extra modification. What he or she has to do is to shift their focus and extend their canvas to incorporate not just the human society but the entire non-human universe as well.

Glotfelty defines in her characteristic manner: “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” (xix).

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