



Ecocriticism and Indigenous Knowledge: Understanding Nature in Third World Literature through "The Rightful Inheritors of the Earth"

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ABSTRACT

As man grows, nature dwindles. This is a fact in the modern times as human dependency on nature is gradually degenerating to exploitation. The selfish human motives and his superiority over other creatures make him exploit nature. But the big question posed to man is how far can this exploitation be continued? It has reached to that limit where any further plunder can bring human existence at stake. This is an eye-opener for the entire human race. Many movements and organisations have sprung up with the motto of protecting nature and thereby human life in this planet. Deep ecology put forward by Arne Naess is one such prominent concept, now in vogue all over the world. This paper is an attempt to analyse how far this concept can be made a reality in the third world situations. Basheer's story "The Rightful Inheritors of the Earth" is read in this light to evaluate the concept in such a situation.

Keywords: Environmentalism of the poor, third world environmentalism, deep ecology, shallow ecology

I. INTRODUCTION

All of the different kinds of living organisms are in danger because we are living in a world that is plagued by ecological problems that are the cause of the problem. One of the primary contributors to the degeneration of nature is the supremacy of man above all other creatures, as well as the selfish motivations that drive him. People who are caught up in the rat race tend to forget that it is impossible for a human being to live a life that is apart from nature. As a result, the preservation of nature, along with the preservation of other organisms, is responsible for the preservation of the species known as Homo sapiens. This realization is what laid the groundwork for the establishment of numerous organizations that are dedicated to the conservation of natural resources all over the world, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Nature Organization (WNO), and the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), amongst thousands of others. Preservation of nature is possible in different levels. Ecologists have come up with the ideas of "deep ecology" and "sustainable development," both of which offer innovative forms of development for humanity in addition to the rehabilitation of environment. It is the Norwegian scientist Arne Naess who is credited with being the pioneer of the movement known as deep ecology, which is fast gaining attention. 'Deep' and 'shallow' ecology are his two distinct classifications. The anthropocentric or human-centred approach to ecology is known as shallow ecology. This approach views nature as a storehouse that can be utilized for the greater good of humanity. It places people outside of the natural world. From the perspective of deep ecology, there is no distinction made between nature, humans, and any other living entity. This perspective considers every entity in the world to be a component of a web that is both interrelated and interdependent. An individual develops a sense of oneness to the cosmos as a whole through the application of this highly spiritual and philosophical notion. The notion of a sustainable environment seeks to fulfill the needs and aspirations of humans, as well as to enable higher levels of living while simultaneously conserving resources through the implementation of a continuous monitoring system for the utilization of natural resources. The improvement of the standards of developing countries in particular is the primary focus of this type of investment in development. In order to ensure that life can continue to exist on this planet, it is essential that every advancement be accompanied by preservation.

The field of ecological studies is one of the many interdisciplinary fields of research that are now being conducted in the modern day. The research has involved the interconnection of intricate webs in virtually every discipline, including the sciences, the business world, and even the humanities. Even literature has managed to make its way into this web, which is quite peculiar. On the other hand, how exactly can a written work make a contribution to the extremely common issue of ecological consciousness? By presenting the concept of ecocriticism, Cheryll Glotfelty, a professor at the University of Nevada, has achieved the goal of providing a dependable response to this inquiry. According to her definition, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (quoted in Barry 248). The theory was birthed in the late 1980s in the United States of America (and in the 1990s in the United Kingdom under the name Green Studies). In the discipline of literary ecology, the publication that is the most influential is *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, which was edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. In addition to this, she was a co-founder of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which publishes a journal called ISLE, which stands for Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Sustainability. The movement is still struggling to gain traction in academic circles and is moving at a glacial pace to infiltrate public spheres.

The various approaches in ecocriticism to analyse a piece of writing are elaborated by Glotfelty. The questions they pose are as follows: In what ways does nature appear in a piece of art? What role has the physical setting of a literary piece to play in this? Do the values that are articulated in the work align with the ecological wisdom that is being expressed? Does the way males write differ from the way women do? Can a human being's attitude towards nature be influenced by literacy? In what ways has the idea of wilderness evolved throughout the course of history? Is it possible to make ecological studies more interdisciplinary? What kind of contribution may a piece of literature make to ecological wisdom? How does the ecological problem manifest itself in current literature and popular culture, and how does it affect these areas? and so on. In the realm of ecocriticism, there are two levels of operation: discourse and praxis. When it comes to the discourse level, it functions by "drawing together a culture's ecological approaches / problems and its cultural texts that address or ignore the same" (Nayar 243). When it comes to the praxis, it functions by "contributing to ecological awareness by re-reading canonical cultural texts" (Nayar 243).

II. WORLD ECO-LITERATURE

Ecocriticism draws its inspiration from the works of three famous American authors who celebrate nature as a vital force and the American wilderness in all its forms. These extraordinary people are named Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Margaret Fuller (1810–1851), and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). These three figures belonged to the group of writers from New England known as the transcendentalists. The transcendentalists included poets, essayists, novelists, and philosophers. One of the earliest significant American literary movements to declare "cultural independence" from European models was the transcendentalism.

Nature, R. W. Emerson's first thoughtful prose fiction, detailed the profound effect nature had on the author. An unconventional perspective on nature, often called "transcendentalism," is embraced by the author in this work. According to adherents of this philosophical tradition, "the divine" or "god" can be found in the natural world. He argues that spending time in nature is the best approach to comprehend the world around. In contrast, many consider Henry David Thoreau to be a trailblazing figure in ecocriticism. *Walden* is Henry David Thoreau's autobiographical account of his two-year stay in a cabin on the shore of Walden Pond, two miles from his hometown of Concord. The viewpoints of its readers, who span from eco-conscious to ego-conscious and beyond, have been profoundly influenced by this book. A closer look reveals how nature mirrors the reality that applies to everyone. He says a winter night in the woods is a perfect opportunity to reflect on the transient nature of human existence and the wonders of nature's eternal majesty. When compared to the US, the UK has a much more vigorous ecocritical movement in vogue.

In contrast to American literature that extols nature, ecocritics in the UK work to alert us to environmental dangers posed by neocolonial, industrial, governmental, and economic forces. As Jonathan Bate argues in his book *The Song of the Earth*, there has always been a close relationship between colonialism and deforestation. By applying the framework of the pastoral tradition to English literature, he reexamines William Wordsworth's poetry through the prism of his Romantic Ecology. Here Bate probes poetry's political underpinnings and argues that Wordsworth was the pioneer in ecocriticism. Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*, reflects on how the lifestyles of city dwellers and rural dwellers are drastically different. William personifies the idea of rural life as the epicenter of modernity, a setting defined by its intrinsic seclusion. Lawrence Coupe has assembled a vast anthology of critical writings on the subject of literature, culture, and the environment in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. To sum up, the book is both an excellent resource for researchers and a significant addition to the area of Green Literature due to the abundance of credible sources it provides.

III. ECOCRITICISM IN INDIA

The Vedas, which concurred equivalent importance to all creatures, is the wellspring of a lot of environmental idea in Indian way of thinking. There is a huge arrangement of biodiversity in India from the Himalayas in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, from the Straight of Bengal in the east to the Middle Eastern Ocean in the west. Ecocritical thoughts in India can be best perceived through the expressions of Rabindranath Tagore, who was granted the Nobel Prize and laid out Viswa Bharati at Shantiniketan, which is a spot away from the madding swarm. The best instances of ecocritical writing that he has composed are his *Raktakarabi* and *Muktadhara*, where he censures the barbarities that people have carried out against nature. His sonnets that are viewed as ecocritical incorporate "The Tame Bird was in a Cage" mentioning how the bird that is restricted in an enclosure has even failed to remember how to sing and "I Plucked Your Flower" pointing to the human inclination that picking blossoms is their own right. He tries to say how nature is definitely not an inactive onlooker of the world. Sooner or later, it will answer. The book *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai is a good illustration of an ecocritical novel that revolves around the issue of the ethical corruption of man, which represent a danger to the biological system. *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya is a portrayal of nature's double job as both a destroyer and a preserver of life. The creator of this work has exhibited the adverse consequences of industrialization. An exhaustive cognizance of the ongoing squeezing ecological issues has been shown by these authors. The book *Panther's Moon and Other Stories* by Ruskin Bond speaks of the creatures in the verge of extinction due to deforestation. In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai, the hero is disappointed with the bustling existence of the town, and subsequently, he looks for asylum in the Guava Plantation. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* portrays the state-supported psychological oppression that was done to eliminate the refugees who had gotten comfortable with Marichjhapi. The incident that follows reveal how the third world conditions restrict ecological preservation owing to the lack of wilderness and resources. In the guise of tiger preservation, which supports flow of funding from the first world, homeless human beings are evicted from an island forcefully resulting in a massacre.

Ecocritical thinkers and theorists observe that an off late improvement in India is the foundation of ecocriticism as a discipline of study. Indian ecological dissidents contends that the western world is engaged with biopiracy. They show how neocolonialism affects Indian concepts and policies of conservation. Modern farming, in their view, has prompted the deficiency of a few food sources as opposed to an expansion in food production. They note that the second influx of ecocriticism is presently spreading across India. The second period of Ecocriticism beholds the development harden into a global worry moving par the primary stage's accentuation on territorial mindfulness.

IV. MAN AND NATURE

Since the beginning of time, human beings have relied on nature to provide them with the necessities of life, including food, shelter, and clothes. This relationship, which is essential to the continuation of human life on this planet, is gradually deteriorating as his dependence is gradually being replaced by exploitation. Nature maintains a state of equilibrium and employs a cyclical process in order to provide sustenance, maintenance, and reproduction for all living organisms. A state of chaos is produced as a consequence of the disruption of this cycle, which interferes with the normal manner of rehabilitation. The modern day activities of human beings are gradually causing chaos in the natural world, posing a threat to all living species that are dependent on it, including human beings.

The story "The Rightful Inheritors of the Earth" written by the Malayalam writer Vaikom Muhammed Basheer paints a clear picture of the progression from dependence to exploitation that occurs as a result of human activities. At the beginning of the novel, the main character is pondering the possessions he possesses. He had only recently purchased two acres of land on which he could plant coconut trees, and the future of his family is depending on this land. Because the farmland promises to provide the protagonist with financial security, we observe that the protagonist has a sense of security. This family relies heavily on coconut as their primary source of income. In addition to coconut, the farm is loaded with trees such as mango, guava, tamarind, cashew, jackfruit, pine, and teak, all of which give the family with a plentiful supply of food and nutrients. As an additional benefit, the farm serves as a reliable source of firewood, and the well guarantees a plentiful supply of water. In addition to these, the family additionally relies on the land for the provision of medicines. In order to treat the wound that was caused by the centipede sting that the husband received, the wife administered a mixture of adathoda and salt as a form of treatment. One can very well observe that the family is living a life that is bound up with the natural world.

A number of "outsiders" who have not been invited into his compound have caused a disruption in the tranquil and secure life that the family has been leading up to this point. Crows, eagles, snakes, rats, squirrels, and bats were among the unexpected visitors that arrived at the family's home to feast on their good fortune. The superiority complex that he possessed caused him to question the participation of these creatures and their

legitimacy in the portion of the world that he considered to be his own. However, when he realizes that the laws that were created by humans are of little consequence to the world that exists outside, he eventually gives in to the law of nature and gives them their portion. The bio-centered perspective that he takes is one that is advantageous to both human beings and other living organisms. This perspective enables him to refrain from attacking the snake that enters his courtyard, to apologize to the squirrels and birds for removing the jackfruit from the tree, and to refrain from setting fire to the termites and ants that are found within the home. The fact that he is making use of all the benefits that nature has to offer while depriving other living organisms of their rightful portion is something that he is constantly aware of. After coming to this realization, he feels guilty and ashamed of the fact that he is a human being.

The fundamental reality that the bond between man and nature is merely a single strand that is intricately intertwined with other strands of lives that are maintained and sustained by nature is something that man fails to recognize about himself. Since the fabric of nature is so delicate, any imbalance in the connective strands has the potential to upset its equilibrium. In the midst of their relentless pursuit towards development, human beings tend to forget that the preservation of this equilibrium is of the utmost importance to his physical existence. As is the case with all other organisms, it is challenging for man to live a life disconnected to the natural world.

The relationship that the wife has with the natural world is an example of the notion of shallow ecology, which promotes the preservation of natural areas for the benefit of human beings. One is able to observe that she is offended by the way in which her husband treats the natural world. She is always conscious of the fact that the presence of other animals on their land will diminish the opportunities that lie ahead for them in the decades to come. Because it poses a risk to the children who are playing around, she is adamant about putting an end to the cobra that makes its way onto their farmland. In addition to this, she is eager to eliminate the rats that are consuming the tender coconuts that are planted on the property. She responds by pointing to the use of chemical poisoning, which, in addition to killing rats, also kills other living beings. It is considered a success, however, because the number of other living beings killed by the poison is lower in comparison to the number of rats.

A great number of animals have lost their native home as a result of human encroachment on natural areas. In spite of the fact that it had been ejected from its native habitat due to human meddling, the cobra that is shown entering the courtyard of the home did not arrive there of its own accord. After witnessing the cobra, the husband is left wondering where he can relocate to because the land has been divided into portions that are owned by men. As is the case with creatures such as rats, bats, and other birds and animals, their fair part on the natural world is taken away by humans. The same fate awaits him in the area that is adjacent to him as well. When humans expand their access to natural areas in the name of development, they do so at the expense of other living organisms, which brings about a significant disruption to the ecological balance.

As one progresses through the narrative, the line that separates dependence on nature from exploitation of it becomes increasingly hazy. For the advocates of ecological preservation, the most important question that needs to be answered is how this dependence on nature can be lessened. Within the context of the nations of the third world, where population increase is one of the most significant challenges to the preservation of natural resources, the subject is particularly pertinent. Specifically, it is within this framework that the idea of deep ecology comes to the forefront. Deep ecology is intended to foster an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only toward all members of the ecosphere, but even towards all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. This is the goal of deep ecology. Therefore, the concept of deep ecology identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature which is promoted by the west as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands the return to a monistic identification of humans and the ecosphere. It presents a shift in values away from a human-centered society and toward a nature-centered system. Within the narrative of Basheer, it is possible to recognize the principles of deep ecology by observing the eco-centric behaviors of the protagonist. In accordance with human law, he acknowledges and honours the rights of all living things connected to the portion of land that he owns.

Deep ecology is a very influential form of ecological conservation technique though it is sometimes termed misanthropic owing to its bio-centredness. But Naess, the philosophical guru of this concept has clearly stated that "vital human needs may take priority over good of any other thing, thus ruling out difficult conflicts between the interests of humans and the interests of a man eating tiger or a bubonic plague bacillus" (Garrard 22). But doubts still remain of the practicality of this western concept in a third world where the vital human needs are not taken care of. Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier suggest that there is strong link between poverty and ecological degradation. They have brought forth the concept of 'environmentalism of the poor'. The poor here refers to the ones who are the immediate dependents on nature as their means of survival. Though Guha and Martinez-Alier has used this with reference to the tribal populations who keep a strong link with their environment, it is to an extent applicable to the situation mentioned by Basheer in the story. We find the family is having such strong links with the environment owing to their strong dependency on it for survival. The wife poisons the rats and bats not only because they are eating away their fortune but because they are destroying their very means of survival. If deep ecology is prioritising human needs, then obviously what the

wife does can be justified. Taken in this sense deep ecology cannot form a final solution to the environmental conservation of the third world.

V. CONCLUSION

When it comes to environmental challenges, there are several key distinctions between western (i.e., American) and eastern perspectives. The third world often makes the mistake of merely mimicking western models, even if this strategy doesn't necessarily work. Because the third-world settings are so distinct from developed-nation situations, it's hard for the third world to mimic them. When applied to developing countries, the focus on protecting wilderness areas, which is a part of deep ecology, can have negative consequences, such as the creation of conservation initiatives that put local inhabitants at risk due to the influence of elites and foreign environmental groups. Neglecting the environmental crises that impoverished people face—such as fuel, food, and water shortages, erosion, and pollution—in favor of protecting wilderness areas is a missed opportunity. Therefore, it is imperative that any proposed solution to the environmental issues plaguing developing nations be both human- and planet-friendly.

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