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ECOCRITICISM - UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND
LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Nature and literature goes hand in hand. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However, the concern for ecology and the hazard that the incessant exploitation of our environment poses on humanity has recently caught the attention of the writers. This sense of concern has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Eco-criticism. Ecocriticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. There is a close relation between Ecocriticism and Literature. This paper discusses the term Ecocriticism and the role of Ecocriticism in literature. This paper discusses the term Ecocriticism and the role of Ecocriticism in literature. It cites examples of how the theme of Ecocriticism can be interpreted through the reading of two Indian English novels, namely- *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh. The novel *Nectar in a Sieve* describes the female protagonist Rukmani's attempt to rescue and restore elements of her family's rural life and a strong sense of rootedness to their land. And *The Hungry Tide* deals with the conflict between man and nature in the context of the Sundarbans in India and Bangladesh.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Indian English novels; Man- nature relationship.

INTRODUCTION

The word ecocriticism is a semi neologism. Eco is short of ecology, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. The relationship between man and nature is not just interdependent but also interrelated. By analogy, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. The term Ecocriticism has a broad area and has been expressed through many literary genres. Some of the most widely known ecocritics, are Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Howarth, William Rueckert, Suellen Campbell, Michael P. Branch and Glen A. Love.

The word "Ecocriticism" first appeared in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. However, it was only in the 1990s that ecocriticism emerged as a separate discipline although it is a fact that the relationship between man and his physical environment had always been interesting to literary critics. Ecocriticism is a branch of literary criticism which has been discussed

worldwide as an interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment. It covers the study of subjects like science, literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology etc and attempts to study the attitude of mankind towards nature. Some popular names for this relatively new genre are ecopoetics, green culture and environmental literary criticism. It is study in which has invoked the interest of scholars worldwide.

Ecocriticism is not only the function of ecology and ecological principles but also the study of literature and theoretical approach to the interrelations of nature, culture and sometimes even supernatural elements in nature. It attempts to explore the expressions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse. It is also a study of language through which literature is expressed.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND LITERATURE

There has been a close relationship between nature and literature. This relationship has been reflected through writers and poets throughout different cultures across the world. A variety of novels, poems and other expressions of literature have been depicted on the backdrop of issues concerning nature. Today, environment issues have become a matter of concern for many departments and disciplines of knowledge and development. It is an interesting study for a literary critic to study the texts of writers who have discussed the close relationship between man and nature. Ecology and ecocriticism have become important terms in today's literary expressions. Many authors have expressed their concern for nature due to the selfishness of human beings and growing population.

REFLECTIONS OF ECOCRITICISM IN LITERATURE

In many literary works in English, nature has been a leading issue. Colonialism has been a significant factor in the devastation of environment worldwide. The conversion in the social and cultural environments of the world have completely changed the representations of men attitude towards nature in literary expressions. Ecocriticism is a rapidly intensifying area of research that covers wide range of texts and theories which study the relationship of man and nature. Environmental studies in literary texts through nature imagery, gender construct, feminism, man-woman relationship, tourism, culture etc have wider meanings than what is portrayed through their literal expressions.

India is a country with variety of ecosystems which ranges from Himalayas in the north to plateaus of south and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the east to dry Thar of the west. With time, however, these ecosystems have been unfavorably affected due to increasing population and cupidity of mankind. Literature could not remain unaffected from this reduction

In Indian writings in English, there are many literary books that reflect the idea of Ecocriticism. There are many ways that authors have explored environmental issues. In some books, it is central to the book, while in others, it is secondary to the narrative and other themes. The rest of the paper attempts to appreciate Ecocriticism through some Indian English novels.

ECO-CRITICAL ISSUES: *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, published in 1954, describes the female protagonist Rukmani's attempt to regain and restore elements of her families' rural life and a strong sense of rootedness to their land. Both, she and her husband strive on the land and have a special sense of belonging to it. However, their sole dependency on this piece of land for survival is also a cause of their poverty. The relationship between land and Rukmani becomes an important insight into understanding Rukmani's sense of belonging to her rural environment. In the very beginning, the novel focuses on the relationship between Rukmani, the land and her rural environment. This is how Rukmani recalls her early married days: "While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for?" (Markandaya, pg. 8).

Rukmani associates her husband for admiring her beauty with the beauty that she sees in her fields. However, this harmony with nature that she associates her rural life with is extremely short lived. Almost immediately, modern technology which takes man away from nature and eventually completely destroys their relationship with nature enters the life of Rukmani's family.

The tannery symbolizes of modernity. It transforms both, the environment and the economic conditions of the village. It also brings about a radical change in the relationships between the villagers. While Kunthi is glad about the tannery, Rukmani sees it as a threat to the village life. The Tannery became the main factor for the loss of her three sons. The tannery helped Arjun, Thambi, and Raja to deal with the dire poverty that they were struggling with. While it created employment for them, it also took them away from their family members, thus, degrading the importance of their family life. . This oft-quoted passage from the novel is seen to romanticize the relationship that Rukmani has with her land and to nature. The quote highlights that for a peasant woman, happiness consists of bare necessities at the elemental level made up largely of food, clothes, shelter and the idyllic beauty of the countryside. Nature, the sun and the beauty of the green fields appear as Rukmani's source of well-being. Two other themes emerge from the quote above: the symbolism of grains/seeds and women's sexuality. Grains and seeds represent the overriding symbol for life itself in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

According to Beth Zeleny, "Markandaya implicitly connects woman and landscape through her recurring use of seed imagery-"As giver and nurturer and endure of life, woman participates in the cycle of life as seed, then seedling, which ultimately becomes part of the soil that supports future seed" (Zeleny, 1997). Here, the biological role of procreation is intimately linked to Rukmani, land and seeds. Procreation is seen to be a critical role for a woman in Rukmani's society. A woman who fails to conceive early in her marriage may be renounced by her husband, as Ira is later on in the novel. Here, the claim that women are closer to nature rests on the premise of women bringing forth life from their bodies, undergoing the pleasures and pains of pregnancy, childbirth and nursing. In a social sense, childrearing and domestic caretaking have kept women close to the hearth and thus closer to nature. Cultural Eco feminists celebrate the relationship between women and nature by reviving ancient pre-patriarchal rituals centred on goddess worship, the moon and linking this to the female reproductive system.

THE HUNGRY TIDE

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* published in 2005, is one of the first Indian novel to strongly raise ecological issues of India. Ghosh's novel reveals the interactions between the state, the poor, the fauna and flora, and the physical environment, and in doing so, this work highlights both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that were inherent in the conservation efforts in the Sundarbans. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity.

The resistance between land and the sea in the Sundarbans creates a constant resistance between the plant and animal life. Men constant violation of the ecosystems of the Sunderbans only justifies the tensions between the various elements of nature. *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sunderbans, an island in the Bay of Bengal which is not just beautiful but also fascinating. For settlers, the Sunderbans offer an extremely unpredictable and insecure life. Unrest and expulsion are constant threats and attacks by tigers are most common. Tidal floods destroy the stability of life on the island without any warning.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* constantly discusses the conflict between man and nature in the context of the Sundarbans in India and Bangladesh. The novel also reflects the conflicts between the residents and the aquatic and wild life of the Sunderbans. Amitav Ghosh has warned mankind against the obvious exploitation of nature. "The Tide Country is a harsh landscape, full of peril and death in many forms. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles." (Ghosh ,pg.7). Rajender Kaur in his essay on *The Hungry Tide* titled, "Home Is Where the Oracella Are" says, "Ghosh's selection of the Sundarbans for his setting was aptly chosen" (Kaur ,pg.127).

Amitav Ghosh is a writer of Postmodern fiction. His stories travel throughout time and space, creating an account that has an asymmetrical flow. In *The Hungry Tide*, he shuttles between the Morichjhanpi incident from Nirmal's point of view, and the present day travels of Piya Roy, Kanai and Fokir. This time-travel is crucial to the story and created an complexity of sub-topics and plots. Another attribute of Ghosh, that is continued

in *The Hungry Tide* is the scrupulous research that allows a mixture of fiction and fact to the extent that they stand undifferentiated. Touching upon various topics from refugees, freedom and war, to life in the Sundarbans, the absence of language in communication, development, women trafficking and much more, he takes the reader through a rapid events and emotions. He includes the myths of the people who are living in the Sundarbans to explain the nature of living in a country whose shape is determined by tide and weather. The myths are often presented like songs or with rhymes. This style creates different languages for nature, myth and people.

CONCLUSION

To conclude I would like to state that ecocriticism is the combination of ecology and expressions of the theory. It seeks to inquire into its reach and studies the interdependence of man and nature. Nature imageries have been used by many writers to express their desires, shortcomings and emotions of their characters. Ecocriticism shares with critical animal studies an interest in redefining humans' relationships to other species. But whereas animal studies have privileged the social, cognitive, and emotive abilities of higher animals and humans' consciously perpetrated violence against them, ecocritics have tended to focus on systemic and often unintentional damages to other species, including a wide range of both animals and plants. These two approaches converge in some cases, but they conflict in those where ecocritics accept violence to individual animals or species in the interest of maintaining ecosystem functioning.

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