

## AN OVERVIEW OF ECOCRITICISM

Dr. RABIA MUKHTAR

Teacher, School Education Kashmir, J&K  
[rabiawani@yahoo.co.in](mailto:rabiawani@yahoo.co.in)



Dr. RABIA MUKHTAR

### ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is a broad term concerned with nature writing and ecological themes in literature. Nature and human life are interlinked to such an extent that it is unimaginable for human beings to separate themselves from its influence. The paper maintains that Ecocriticism shifts critical focus from social relations towards natural relationships and views the individual as a member of ecosystem. Ecocriticism not only analyzes nature in literature but implies a move towards a more bio-centric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of human's conception of global community to include non human life forms and the physical environment. The ultimate goal of Ecocriticism is to examine the moral implications of human interaction with nature in the hope of preserving diminishing resources.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Ecology, Ecosystem

The New Literatures in English among other manifest and symbolic representations also deal with nature as a very significant issue. The shift of emphasis towards the ecological study, a rapidly growing field, Ecocriticism covers a wide range of theories and areas of interest, particularly the relationship between literature and the environment. In eco-critical texts, nature features as the main topic or protagonist. Other concerns are nature as a cultural construct, gendered natures and the city/ country dichotomy.

### Origin and History: A Theoretical Introduction of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is an umbrella term used to refer to the environmentally oriented study of literature and the art, and the theories that underline such critical practice. It is a new critical method available to critics to analyze the literature. It is concerned with nature writing and ecological themes in all literature. It deals with ecological problems like pollution, global warming, climate change, deforestation, species extinction and other ecological exploitations. It is associated with the desire to investigate and remedy the current environmental problems. It is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental problems.

Nature is no longer a vast realm of unknown, unmanageable or uncontrollable wild non-human activity. Much of the earth is a built environment and a planned habitat. 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 about 20 percent of existing species including flora and fauna are sure to get extinct in the next 30 years, precipitating in evolutionary history "the sixth great extinction spasm" (17). He tries to establish the fact that human beings act as important agents in this process of destruction. The

extravagant and wasteful lifestyle of humankind results in plundering and destruction of the earth. An unsustainable life style adopted by human beings is destroying their own existence. Glen A. Love in "Revaluing Nature: Towards An Ecological Criticism" very aptly quotes renowned English historian, Arnold Toynbee as:

. . . mankind now has the power to make the biosphere uninhabitable, and that it will, in fact, produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time if the human population of the globe does not now take prompt and vigorous concerted action to check the pollution and the spoliation that are being inflicted upon the biosphere by short-sighted human greed. (225)

There are finite resources on earth, and the more that some limited portion of humankind uses, the less is available to others. Humans are actually derailing the human rationality by tampering with nature. They construct islands by destroying mountains; cut down forests and fill the seas with poison and garbage; clone pets but hunt down wild animals; build junkyards in the sky but bereft the sky of birds; accumulate junkyards in the sky but deplete the earth of its treasures; build golf courses in the desert but desertify the plains and so on and so forth. Charles Hansford, an American poet very aptly maintains:

To strive with Nature little it avails.  
Her favors to improve and nicely scan  
Is all that is within the reach of Man.  
Nature is to be follow'd, and not forc'd,  
For, otherwise, our labor will be lost. (qtd. in Kolodny 175)

The preservation of nature has always been a prime concern since early times. As an academic discipline it began in earnest in the 1990s, although its origin goes back to late 1970s at the meeting of WLA (Western Literature Association). The works of William Bartram, Alexander Wilson, and John James Audubon illustrated the important contributions made by natural history writers during the early Romantic period. All the three writers helped to introduce a pattern of ecological thinking in American culture through emphasis upon a feeling of membership in a natural community. William Bartram's *Travels* (1791) was a contribution of a person who was fully immersed in the experience of American wilderness. He was full of appreciation for the wonderful intricacy of natural systems and believed that everything manifested the divine and inimitable workmanship. His incisive observations celebrated the fabric of interrelationships that he recognized in the wilderness. Alexander Wilson inspired by the beauty and diversity of American birds, devoted his life to their study. He travelled many thousand miles on foot in search of undiscovered species in his monumental *American Ornithology* (1808-29). He assumed very deliberately that his natural history was not a contribution to science only but to the cultural identity of the nation. His romantic narrative poem "The Forests" was about his twelve hundred mile foot journey to the falls of Nigeria. Both as an ornithologist and as a romantic poet, he responded to the unnoticed beauty of the American wilderness. In a way, he succeeded in combining his scientific and literary talents in order to record the national treasures of American birds. John James Audubon like Bartram and Wilson travelled thousands of wilderness miles in order to discover study and document native species. Audubon's writing was characterized by the elements of early romanticism in America that represented affection for the picturesque in natural scenery, a powerful attraction to the American Sublime, an inclination for melodramatic sentimentality and a lurking interest in Native Americans. Through his prose and paintings, he brought forth the vanishing wilderness and lamented over the lost wilderness.

All the three writers celebrated their relationship with non-human nature, there by introducing the proto-ecological sensibility upon which further developments in the genre of natural history writing depended. Nineteenth century American naturalists and explorers are often credited by ecocritics as having initiated the conservation movement. Their work focused more on scientific descriptions and speculations about nature. However, many critics have shown that their writings were imbued with a poetic spirit. In Britain, in the nineteenth century, the Romantic poets reacted strongly against eighteenth century emphasis on reason and sought new ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings. Romanticism, in this regard, is an embodiment of the rudiments of Ecocriticism. The Romantic poets attempted to re-discover the mystery and wonder of the world, and tried to establish a meaningful relationship between literature and nature. To them, nature was the principal source of inspiration and spiritual enlightenment. William Wordsworth is considered to be the

spokesman of the movement. He celebrates the beauty and mystery of nature in some of his most famous lyrics, including "Michael" (1800), which portrays a simple shepherd who is deeply attached to the natural world around him. "The Excursion" (1814) is a long philosophical reflection on the relationship of humanity and nature. His autobiographical poem "The Prelude" (1850) records his evolving understanding of Nature. He viewed nature as a living entity endowed with feeling and purpose. The poetry of Coleridge, John Keats, Lord Byron and Percy Shelly also included emotional descriptions of the natural world and features some of the best known nature verse in English. Shelly's "Ode to the West Wind" is called the most inspired lyrical poem describing nature in English language.

The Romantic interest in nature is particularly significant to ecocritics because these poets were revolutionary in their politics, and the preservation of the natural world was one of the most important elements of their radical thinking. A Romantic poet who used his understanding of nature to protest against the new capitalist machinery was John Clare, who unlike others was himself a labourer and worked on the land. In the novels of English writers of nineteenth century, like Thomas Hardy, the sense of place took centre stage. Mathew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867) is said to offer one of the finest descriptions of place in English poetry. Victorian essayists, who wrote about nature included, John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle. Both of them lamented the destruction of the environment due to industrialization.

Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* published in 1903, changed the people's vision of deserts. She beautifully recorded her love for the strange and exotic desert of Southern California, and automatically people no longer see deserts as hostile and forbidding places. She strongly emphasized that it is impossible to understand humans without understanding their environment and the forces that have moulded them physically and mentally. She recognized an organic, interactive connection between humans and the rest of the biosphere. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* published in 1949, asserts that all species have a right to exist as their biotic right. He urged human beings to be careful in their usage of non-human nature. He is considered the first bonafide Western environmental ethicist and the founding member of the wilderness society. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* published in 1962 disclosed the dangers of using pesticides. It provided scientific evidences to show that pesticides such as DDT, aldrin, dieldrin pose a serious threat both to wildlife and to human health. Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* published in 1968 talked about raw and unbridled beauty of the desert landscape. He opted for a political awareness so that wild nature could be defended. Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* published in 1974, turned out to be a breakthrough book through its clear language, farsighted observation and metaphysical perspective in the field of eco-theological studies. Gary Snyder's single volume book of poetry *Turtle Island* published in 1974 was an environmental declaration involving various aspects on social, political, aesthetic, personal, culture and spiritual level. Barry Lopez through his book *Arctic Dreams* published in 1986 asserted the importance of the place of the Arctic and lamented on the process of exploitation run on it. He advocated the dire need of intimacy with nature over the greed of wealth sought by exploiting nature.

The ideas and texts grown out of this period subsequently got consolidated into the field now known as Ecocriticism. As such, it is predicted that the individual literary and cultural scholars have been developing ecologically informed criticism and theory since very early but they have failed to organize themselves into an identifiable group. Their efforts have not been recognized as belonging to a distinct critical school or movement and have been categorized under different headings, "American Studies, regionalism, pastoralism, the frontier, human ecology, science and literature, nature in literature, landscape in literature, or the names of the authors treated" (Glotfelty xviii).

In the mid 1980s and early 90s, there has been a substantial growth in environmental literary studies. In 1985 Frederick O. Waage edited *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources* which included course descriptions from nineteen different scholars and sought to consolidate a greater presence of environmental concern and awareness in literary disciplines. In 1989 Alicia Nitecki founded *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* with a purpose to publish brief essays and book reviews on nature and environment. Cheryll Glotfelty in 1989 at Western Literature Association conference revived the term "Ecocriticism" and urged its adoption to refer to the diffused critical field that was previously known by

different names. It was in 1990s, the study of Literature and Environment grew rapidly. In 1991 MLA (Modern Language Association) special session was organized by Harold Fromm, entitled "Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies". In 1992 at the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, a new association for the study of literature and environment, ASLE was formed with Sott Slovic elected as its first president. The mission of ASLE was to promote ideas and information pertaining to literature that considered the relationship between human beings and the natural world and to encourage, "new nature writing, traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature, and interdisciplinary environmental research" (Glotfelty xviii).

In 1993, Patrick Murphy established a new journal ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment) to, "provide a forum for critical studies of the literary and performing arts proceeding from or addressing environmental considerations. These would include ecological theory, environmentalism, conceptions of nature and their depictions, the human/ nature dichotomy and related concerns"(Glotfelty xviii). By 1993, Ecocriticism emerged as a recognizable critical school. The formerly scattered scholars joined forces with younger scholars to become a strong interesting group with aspirations to change the profession.

While ecocritics study literature written throughout history and analyze its relationship to the environment, most scholarship has focused on American and British literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Peter Barry in his essay "Ecocriticism" in *The Beginning Theory* asserts that Ecocriticism began in the United States of America in the late 1980s and as Green Study in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s. Ecocriticism in the United States of America took its literary bearings from nineteenth century American writers whose work celebrated nature and the wilderness as manifested in America. They were Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810- 1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). All three were the members of the group of writers, essayists and philosophers collectively known as the Transcendentalists. A central theme of Transcendentalists is the idea that the complete human experience can only be achieved through the harmony with nature. The literary texts most closely associated with Transcendentalism include Emerson's *Nature*, Thoreau's *Walden* and Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes*. Emerson's first short book *Nature* (1836) is a reflective essay on the impact upon him of the natural world. Fuller expresses her relationship with the American Landscape in her book *Summer on the Lakes* (1843) and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is an account of his two years stay in a hut he had built on the shore of Walden pond. Cheryll Glotfelty is the acknowledged founder of Ecocriticism in the United States of America.

According to Barry, the UK version of Ecocriticism generally known as Green Studies took its inspiration from British Romanticism of the late 1790s. The founding figure on the British side is the critic Jonathan Bate, author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991). British ecocritics trace their history before the term Ecocriticism existed to Raymond William's book *The Country and the City* (1973). The definitive UK collection of essays is Lawrence Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000). The preferred American term is "Ecocriticism" where as "Green Studies" is frequently used in the UK. The two variants are clearly linked in their approaches and aims but differ in emphasis and ancestry.

Ecocriticism is officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works both published in the mid-1990s: *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. In the beginning, the focus of Ecocriticism was very restrictive as it only included Nature writing. Later, as it gained currency in the literary world, Ecocriticism began to include a multiplicity of approaches and subjects, "Under this broad and umbrella term environmental literature, nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, the revaluation of place, interdisciplinary eco-theory have been added(Sumathy 3)".

It is a broad genre and is known by many names: Green Cultural Studies, Eco-poetics and Environmental Literary Criticism. The common ground on which all strands of Ecocriticism stand is the assumption that the interactions between human and their natural environment should help to resolve the ecological predicament.

Being a new field, different thinkers and critics have used the approach and mode of Ecocriticism variously and accordingly defined the term in different ways. However, their basic concerns being similar, the various approaches generally focus on the relationship between humans and the earth. Scott Slovic in “Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practising Doctrine” maintains, “Ecocriticism has no central, dominant doctrine or theoretical apparatus—rather, eco-critical theory, such as it is, is being re-defined daily by the actual practice of thousands of literary scholars around the world” (161).

William Rueckert coined the term “Ecocriticism” in 1978 in an essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”. He writes that Ecocriticism entails “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (107). His definition includes all possible relations between literature and the physical world. Ernst Heinrich Haeckel, a German biologist and philosopher of evolution, used for the first time the term “ecology” in 1876. Ecology is a term derived from German ‘Oecologie’ meaning, “the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment” (Johnston 193). The etymology of the word ‘Ecology’ (oikos + logos) describes it as the knowledge of the household science. According to Selvamony, “the oikos integrates the natural, the cultural and the sacred” (314). Therefore, ecology is not a binary relationship between an organism and the environment but is inclusive of the interrelationship among the environment, society and the individual. Thus an analysis of a text in terms of these three components is termed Oikiocriticism—Ecocriticism or Oikopoetics—Ecopoetics. Ecocriticism is a term derived from Greek ‘oikos’ and ‘kritis’. Oikos means household and Kritis means judge, “an arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order” (Howarth 69). Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as:

Simply put, Ecocriticism 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-centered approach to literary studies. (xviii)

Lawrence Buell pays greater attention to the emergent threat of ecological holocaust and sees environmental pressures as tending to increase the importance of pastoralism as a literary and cultural force in the future. In his book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), he says “this study must be conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (12). In this book, he prescribes the ingredients of an environmentally oriented work as:

(i) The nonhuman 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. (ii) Human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. (iii) Human accountability to the environment is a part of the text’s ethical orientation. (iv) Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (7-8)

In some of the chapters of *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell re-evaluates many of the fundamental concepts of literary criticism from an ecocentric perspective. He goes to the root terms of literary analysis like representation, reference, metaphor, setting, characterization, personae and canonicity to presume that all these elements are dramatically transformed by an environmental perspective. Examining the possible relations between literature and nature and linking ecological contexts with literary criticism produce a variety of scholarly work. Some critics emphasize the importance of promoting a bio-centric worldview through ecocriticism and announce a call for cultural change. Michael P. Branch in the collection entitled *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and the Environment* (1998) goes a bit further and is more specific in the matter of ethical commitment. He says:

Ecocriticism is not just a meaning of analyzing nature in literature; it implies a move towards a more bio-centric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of human’s conception of global community to include non human 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 towards 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. (xiii)

Richard Kerridge's definition in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (1998) suggests like Glotfelty's broad cultural Ecocriticism that the ecocritics aim:

. . . to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all Ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. (5)

As a result, it can be said that texts which show an engagement with the world around can be eco-critically evaluated. Thus Ecocriticism or Environmental Criticism has considerably widened its net, from initial interest in non-fiction nature writing and nature poetry, to include genres such as Drama, Fiction, Documentary and Cinema.

In *The Song of the Earth* (2000), Jonathan Bate reflects over some fundamental questions about the purpose of literary criticism in a time of environmental crisis. He expresses the idea same as Glotfelty but more concisely. According to him, the aim of literature is to work upon consciousness. He believes that all of nature is our dwelling place. Nature is a great ecosystem of which humanity is a part. He writes:

A central question in environmental ethics is whether to regard human kind as part of nature or apart from nature. It is the task of literary ecocritics to address a local version of that question: What is the place of creative imagining and writing in the complex set of relationships between human kind and environment, between mind and world, between thinking, being and dwelling? (72-73)

Glen A. Love has been teaching and writing for years with the intention of bringing communication between the natural sciences and the humanities. He points out that the great deal of world literature deals with the pastoral and with the relationship between the human and non-human. In his book *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment* (2003), he maintains:

At the beginning of the third millennium and of a new century often heralded as 'the century of the environment,' a coherent and broadly based movement embracing literary environmental interconnections, commonly termed "Ecocriticism" is emerging ... Ecocriticism, unlike all other forms of literary enquiry, encompasses non human as well as human contexts and considerations. On this claim, Ecocriticism bases its challenge to much postmodern critical discourse as well as to the critical systems of the past. (3)

According to Love, ecocritics are trying to read literature with a fresh sensitivity to the emergent voice of nature. He adds that this voice can only be expressed in literature through human representations of non-human creatures and landscapes. He further focuses on Ecocriticism as a multifarious approach. He observes the expansion of the scope of Ecocriticism:

What is emerging is a multiplicity of approaches and subjects, including-under the big tent of environmental literature-nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, the revaluation of place, interdisciplinarity, ecotology, the expansion of the canon to include previously unheard voices, and the interpretations of canonical works from the past. (5)

Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic in their introduction to the *ISLE Reader* (1993-2003) call Ecocriticism as, "the term now widely used to describe scholarship that is concerned with the environmental implications of literary texts" (xiv). They believe that every literary work can be read from a green perspective, and that linguistic, conceptual, and analytical frameworks developed in any non-literary discipline may be incorporated into an eco-critical reading. Slovic as such maintains that any conceivable style of scholarship becomes a form of Ecocriticism if it is applied to certain kinds of literary works and affirms that no literary work defies eco-critical interpretation.

Robert Kern in his essay "Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?" in *The ISLE Reader* (1993-2003) closely examines the assumption that all literary texts be read from an eco-critical point of view. According to him, Ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful, when it aims to recover the environmental character or

orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere. As an example, he takes Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to show what happens to this context when it is not read in its intended mode but in terms of its implied or unconscious orientation towards the environment. He specifies:

I am proposing both to assert and to test the assumption that all texts are at least potentially environmental (and therefore susceptible to Ecocriticism or ecologically informed reading) in the sense that all texts are literally or imaginatively situated in a place, and in the sense that their authors, consciously or not, inscribe within them a certain relation to their place. (259)

He clarifies the fact that Ecocriticism calls for a fundamental shift from one context of reading to another. It is specifically, a movement from the human to the environmental or from exclusively human to the bio-centric or ecocentric informed by an awareness of the more than human. He takes the idea a step further when he advocates eco-critical approach as:

. . . ecocriticism, ultimately a form of environmental advocacy, is primarily a critical and literary tool, a kind of reading designed to expose and facilitate analysis of a text's orientation both to the world it imagines and to the world in which it takes shape, along with the conditions and contexts that affect that orientation, whatever it might be. (260)

Lawrence Buell further in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) defines Ecocriticism as, "the environmentally oriented study of literature and (less often) the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice" (138). He identifies two phases of Ecocriticism, the First wave ecocriticism and the Second wave ecocriticism. The First wave ecocriticism focuses on genres as "nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction" (138). While the first wave ecocritics uphold the philosophy of organisms, the Second wave ecocritics are inclined towards Environmental justice issues and Social ecocriticism "that takes urban and degraded landscapes as seriously as natural landscapes" (28). In their contribution to *MELUS* 2009, Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic in "The Shoulders We Stand on: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism" claim that this engagement today includes, "all facets of human experience from environmental view point" (5). As such, the Ecocriticism has gone beyond nature writing to analyze the built environments of urban landscapes. The shift has made ecocritics engage with various interconnected concerns like racism, maldevelopment, poverty, gender bias, gaiphobia, xenophobia etc. Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom* (2012) defines it as "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (5).

The ideas and concepts from these collections provide varied pathways for developing Ecocriticism into an effective, competitive and innovative methodology in literary and cultural studies. These approaches immeasurably widen the reach of Ecocriticism. As it is a new area of study, scholars are still engaged in defining the scope and aims of the subject. Ecocritics today work on many projects with an emphatic focus on the welfare of ecosystem. The field of Ecocriticism is open to co-operation with other fields of research. The ultimate goal of Ecocriticism is to examine the moral implications of human interaction with nature, in the hope of preserving diminishing resources.

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