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Eco criticism: A Study From Postcolonial Point of View

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ABSTRACT

Eco-criticism is a very recent development in the field of literary theory. Eco-criticism, sometimes regarded as green studies, is a study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. With the passage of time, eco-criticism has become interdisciplinary with several other disciplines. So now there are several other eco-criticisms like 'deep ecology', 'eco-feminism', 'social ecology and eco-Marxism', and Heideggerian eco-philosophy² etc. This research paper looks into some basic concepts of eco-criticism. But at the same time is also examines whether is has become another essentialist philosophy in the hands of the western thinkers. This paper criticises come of the fundamental ideas of eco-criticism. Moreover, this paper tries to look at eco-criticism from postcolonial point of view.

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Eco-criticism is a very recent development in the history of literary theory. Everyone is (rightly) celebrating this new development not simply because it tries to examine the contemporary environmental problems, but also because this eco-criticism brings a certain amount of 'concreteness' and applicability to literature. When Rachel Carson first wrote about current environmental problems criticizing the agro-chemical industries and various pesticides in her celebratory *Silent Spring* (in 1962), then nobody would have imagined that this eco-criticism will become a very celebratory literary theory one day or offer alternative readings to well-known literary moments such as the storm scenes and 'mad' forest in *King Lear*¹. So in simple terms eco-criticism is a new development in the field of literary theory which is being celebrated by everyone.

In my research paper I have tried to examine this new development in literary theory, i.e. environmentalism from a postcolonial point of view. I have examined if eco-criticism is able to represent environmental issues properly, or whether it has become another western method for representing their own thought and ideology (while overlooking that of the colonized nations). Besides, in my paper I have also tried to suggest an 'alternative' eco-criticism in place of currently applied ('white') eco-criticism.

Before going deep into the critique of eco-criticism from a postcolonial point of view it is very important for us to understand what eco-criticism actually is and what are its basic ideas. Eco-criticism, sometimes regarded as green studies, is a study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. Cheryl Glotfelty, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* tries to define eco-criticism as such:-

What is eco-criticism? Simply put, eco-criticism 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, eco-critics takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty1996, p.xix)

On the other hand, Richard Kerridge's definition of eco-criticism in *Writing the Environment*, suggests the same things with that of Glotfelty, but with a renewed emphasis on culture. He opines that:-

The eco-critic wants 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, eco-criticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. (Kerridge, 1998, p.5)

Both these definitions prove that eco-criticism is an avowedly political mode of analysis (as its comparison with feminism and Marxism suggests). Eco-critics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda.

With the passage of time, eco-criticism has become interdisciplinary with several other disciplines. So now there are several other eco-criticisms like 'deep ecology', 'eco-feminism', 'social ecology and eco-Marxism', and Heideggerian eco-philosophy² etc.

All the eco-critics start their work by keeping in mind several basic ideas. For instance, they reimagine major literary works produced throughout the ages from an eco-critical perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world. While doing this they extend the applicability of a range of eco-critical concepts, using them in relation to things other than the natural world:- concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance etc. Besides, these eco-critics turn away from the 'social constructivism, and 'linguistic determinism' of dominant literary theories, and instead emphasize eco-centric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility and the claims of the world beyond ourselves.

All these above mentioned points establish eco-criticism as a very promising and important literary theory. But, you all might be thinking why I have tried to criticize eco-criticism from postcolonial points of view, or whether there is any scope to criticize eco-criticism at all. Well, there are enough reasons which prompts us to 'dismiss' this 'white' environmentalism and encourages us to look for an alternative eco-criticism. First of all, the literature in which the western eco-critics emphasize is interesting enough. A well-known (western) eco-critic would take the works of the poet John Clare, or sometimes Shakespeare and the works of American transcendentalists as their model. Most part of this intellectual streamlining derives from the conflation over environmental texts such as Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*. Most introductions to the field, like Greg Garrard's important text *Ecocriticism*, attribute modern environmentalism to Carson's influential book. But Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley in their introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* points out that:-

the single genealogical emphasis on Carson's book overlooks other fundamental sources, such as Murray Bookchin's previously published book about pesticides entitled *Our Synthetic Environment*, as well as the environmental activism coordinated by Puerto Rican poet Juan Antonio Corretjer against pesticide use of American agribusiness...(B.Handley and DeLoughrey, 2011, p.15)

In this paper I do not 'dare' to question the important legacy of Rachel Carson. But I deeply believe that a founding narrative of modern environmental ethics could just as well include other 'third world' thinkers

like Mahatma Gandhi, Chinua Achebe and several others from colonized nations. Mahatma Gandhi's publications (in the mid-20th century) about the necessities of local sovereignty, limited consumption, ecological sustainability and Satyagraha Andolans are very practical eco-critical ideas. This can be seen from the fact that Gandhiji's ideas inspired the Chipko Movement (a prime environmental movement in India) in the 1970s. Besides, Gandhiji's ideas and works have had a profound impact on the Norwegian founder of 'deep' ecology, Arne Naess³. Again, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's depiction of 'village' Africa in his famous postcolonial text *Things Fall Apart* (with its profound emphasis on African people's living harmoniously with nature) also invites us to examine the world from an environmental point of view. All the politics behind this eco-criticism becomes clear when the western eco-critics find eco-criticism in Heidegger's philosophy but miss the same in French Algerian writer Albert Camus⁴. Thus the eco-critics commit the same mistake once committed by Freud. This is in the sense that, while depicting his 'dream psychology' Freud never included women's viewpoints; and these eco-critics also pass off their view as universal, while they never include the points of views of the Oriental and African thinkers. So I will not hesitate to identify this prevalent eco-criticism as what Richard Grove termed "Green Imperialism"⁵. But, at the same time I will like to overthrow this green imperialism with Larry Lohman's "Green Orientalism"⁶.

Let us look at yet another aspect of their subject. Environmentalism relies on and produces exactly the sort of universalizing truth claims or 'grand narratives' about current environmental problems. But, as people of the 'third world' we can never accept such grand narratives and universalizing umbrella terms. Peter Coates criticizes such views and points that global environmental crisis is just another grand narrative; for cultural theory insists that environmental threats like (everything else) are socially constructed and culturally defined. But the most interesting thing is that in spite of these universalizing statements there are no shared universalizing threats- different groups privilege their own particular interests.

Eco-critics celebrate the point that it has brought about a dynamic shift in the attitude of criticism i. e. it claims that it has changed our points of focus from 'anthropocentrism' to bio or eco-centrism. But if eco-criticism shifts the focus point too radically then there is a fear that it will commit the mistake of neglecting human beings and examining only the environment. Now a days it is understood by everyone that environmental issues are very much cultural issues as well; so, neglecting one at cost of another will not be fruitful. I will like to make this point more clear by taking three popular movies (since popular culture also contributes to the field of eco-criticism). The first two movies I intend to take for consideration are animated movies: *Finding Nemo*, and *The Ugly Duckling and Me*. The last movie I intend to take is Ang Lee's recent Oscar winning movie *Life of Pi*. By no means, all these movies are of eco-critical interest; but I want to use them as my examples to make my argument. In *Finding Nemo*, we are shown that the artificial ecologies (the aquarium) cannot make Nemo, the protagonist and other fishes happy. In fact later Nemo had to take enough risks to make his way to the sea. In the second movie, we are shown how the ugly duck turns into a beautiful swan. In both these films the eco-critical point is easily perceivable. While in *The Ugly Duckling and Me* (in the absence of human beings, and in the midst of perfect ecological balance) an age-old myth can work well, on the other hand, in *Finding Nemo* too, the situations are the same. In *Life of Pi* also, human society is relegated to the backdrop; and 80 percent of the movie shows the protagonist's (Pi's) first fight with nature (and natural forces) and then turning himself into a peculiar 'natural force' and thus forming a natural ecology in the midst of the deep sea. But, what all these movies missed was the point that in reality nature or environment cannot be isolated from human beings. Anyway, my object is not to critique these popular movies. I simply want to prove that shifting of focus from anthropocentrism to bio or eco-centrism is not to be celebrated so much. If eco-criticism needs to work properly then both anthropocentrism and eco-centrism will have to work together.

If we criticize eco-criticism, then the question arises is there no need of eco-criticism. Well, the world today is going through several ecological problems. So, I (and we all) cannot ignore the importance of eco-critical study. But I believe that we should turn to 'another' eco-criticism rather than the 'western' mode of eco-criticism. We should turn to 'postcolonial eco-criticism' which is more promising and more 'practical' at the same time. A postcolonial eco-criticism is more than a simple extension of postcolonial methodologies into

the realm of human material world; it reckons with the ways in which ecology does not always work within the frames of human time and political interest. As such, definitions of postcolonial ecology reflect a complex epistemology that recuperates the 'alterity' of both history and nature, without reducing either to the background.

Ramachandra Guha is one of the earliest critics to criticize (western eco-critic) Arne Naess and the 'deep ecology' movement for their bio-centricity. He contemplated that deep ecology demonstrated a :-
lack of concern with inequalities within human
society ...and overlooked more pressing environmental issues such as global militarization. (Guha, 2000, p.72)

Building upon Guha's points, Graham Huggan has turned to South Asian and African texts to counter the assumption that:

Eco-criticism, at present, is predominantly
a white movement, arguably lacking the
institutional support-base to engage fully
with multicultural and cross-cultural concerns... (Huggan, 2004, p.709)

So Huggan opines that everyone should turn towards postcolonial eco-criticism.

On the other hand, Rob Nixon comes with a different idea. He points that both post colonialism and eco-criticism work together in the sense that both try to reimagine displacement between people and place through its own poetics. Still, we must admit that there is an epistemological gap between post colonialism and eco-criticism. So questions may arise whether both can work together. I can say with confidence that they can work properly in spite of their differences. This is because; there are several strings which combines these two fields. For example, an ecological frame is vital to the understanding of how geography has been radically altered by colonialism, including resource use, sovereignty- issues which have been crucial to independence movements and their constitutive literatures.

Thus, we can search for an alternative eco-criticism (i. e. postcolonial eco-criticism) in place of currently running (dominant) 'white' eco-criticism. Postcolonial attitude seems (to me) the most fruitful attitude towards eco-criticism because only postcolonial eco-criticism attempts to reimagine something beyond the confines of our human story, an imagination that is essential to modes of our sustainability.

NOTES

1. Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory* includes the observations of Ralph W. Black. Black in his *What We Talk About When We Talk About Eco-criticism*, observes that : "...Lear's fall, about the significance of the natural world in the play, the moments of clarity that all seem to take place outside – in a storm, on the moors, at the seashore.
2. Followers of philosopher Heidegger believe that Heidegger's thought is amongst the most profound critiques of industrial modernity; and thus form a basis for eco-critical analyses.
3. Arne Naess wrote his Ph. D. dissertation on 'Gandhism'.
4. Camus' philosophy and books, especially *The Outsider* can be examined from environmental points of view. Meursault, the protagonist in the novel on several occasions is disgusted by the artificial lights (especially at the time of his mother's funeral) but finds solace in the act of swimming in the sea.
5. Richard Grove points that 'green imperialism' is a process that foregrounds the etymological definition of diaspora as the spreading of seeds, and destabilizes our association of flora and fauna.
6. Larry Lohman defines 'green orientalism' as a post war narrative of 'development' that sets up and enforces, in fine Orientalist style, a dichotomy between hungry, expectant, tradition-shackled Southern peoples and modern, scientific, democratic north under whose progressive leadership they will gradually be freed for better things.

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