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ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND POETRY: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH AND BHAI VIR SINGH'S POEMS

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is a newly emerged area of research in the literary field. It has a wide scope and approaches which make it a distinguished field of literary studies. Today, this field of literary criticism is not restricted to only English literature but rapidly burgeoning in other languages. In this research paper, I have analysed the poems of two different languages poets from ecocritical perspective. For this research, I have selected Famous English poet William Wordsworth and Punjab Poet Bhai Vir Singh. Bhai Vir Singh wrote his poem in Punjabi, but his poetry have been translated in English. Both the poets have their unique identity in their respective literature or even beyond it. A lot of research work have been conducted on William Wordsworth's poetry, but comparative study with famous Punjabi poet Bhai Vir Singh has its own significance. Bhai Vir Singh has the same reputation in Punjabi literature as William Wordsworth has occupied in English literature. In this research paper, I have compared the selected poems of both the writers. The study period are 18th/ 19th century (Romantic) Britain and 20th/ 21th century (Modern) Punjab, the respective spacio- temporal and cultural spaces of the poet have been studied. The justification for the choice of William Wordsworth and Bhai Vir Singh's poetry is informed by their unique poetic vision and techniques. Environmental discourse has become a contemporary treatise. The poems selected for this study are relevant and unique in their discourse. Both the poets selected for this study do not describe what they saw but they express their feeling and passion as a part of what they appreciate and describe.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, William Wordsworth, Punjabi Literature, Bhai Vir Singh

Literature is a social phenomenon which has socio- political, psychological, philosophical and religious dimensions. It has been spontaneously influenced by other social institutions. Literature being a mirror of the society, it recreates aspects of its existential reality. Literature has been witnessing the various phenomena happening around the world such as wars, the emergence of ethnicity, exploitation of race, caste, etc. The quality of tracing all the aspects related to human being has made literature a famous and living area of study. However, it is slow to react against the degradation of environment. Since the ancient time, literary scholars

have been showing their keen interest in the living environment. Poets, writers almost from every age have depicted environment as a part of literature, but earlier studies demonstrate the lack of proper understanding regarding environmental concerns in literature. The gap in the knowledge came to an end in 1990 with the inception of the theory of ecocriticism. The revival of environmental consciousness in literature was initiated by American scholar Cherryl Glotfelty. She put forth her theory of ecocriticism in her paper, entitled "Introduction Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis". Since the time ecocriticism is burgeoning in the field of literary criticism.

Ecocriticism was introduced first time in the history of literary theories in 1990, and after that, it has made a distinguished place in the field of literary criticism. The theory analyses literary works from environmental perspective. It focuses on the things that have been at the margin and has been neglected by the social theorists. It includes nature in general such as flora, fauna, landscape, etc. The historical roots of the theory can be grounded in the first essay by William Rueckert where he tries to draw attention toward environment and literature relationship. William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" forges a link between biology and literary activities. He suggests that poems accumulate energy from their communities in the same way plants do, this energy can be useful for the outside world. Further, he discovered it problematic in "figuring out how to turn the stored energy of literature into effective political action in the real world" (Estok). However, it did not get much fame in the literary field. In Cherryl Glotfelty, in her edited *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* work with Harold Fromm explained it as a study of the relationship between literature and environment such as the study of literature and other social theories like feminism, Marxism, etc. After the foundation of the theory, it drew the attention of many scholars around the world. The primary concern of the relationship between literature and environment has remained the same as defined by Cherryl Glotfelty. Today, ecocriticism has been perceived as a theory of a literary movement to ameliorate the condition of the environment on the planet earth through literary consciousness. Polluted rivers, landscape, and air have made every government and individual responsible for the cause. The direct effects of environmental degradation have been falling on human as well as on nonhuman world. Excessively spreading of the harmful diseases such as cancer, asthma and other respiratory diseases has shocked the world. Moreover, the extinction of different species has also affected the ecological balance.

The natural environment has been degraded by the exploitative activities of man with attendant fatal consequences of earth warming, air, sea pollution and destruction of aquatic lives, deforestation and desertification. These problems in contrast to the beauty of the natural environment like sea, hills, mountains, and forests which remain a source of literary creativity deserve a critical attention. So, the theory of Ecocriticism was introduced to trace environmental representation in a literary work as a primary object. Ecocriticism has been described from several perspectives as Richard Kerridge defines it as;

Ecocriticism is a literary and cultural form from an environmentalist viewpoint... Ecocritics analyses the history of concepts such as nature in an attempt to understand the cultural development that has led to the present global ecological crisis. (530)

Kerridge directly states that ecocritics are not merely restricted to just a representation of environment, but they make the world conscious for their contribution in the environmental degradation and ecological imbalance. So, the theory should not be supposed to understand that it is only a discourse about how a tree or a lion has been depicted but it should look at the way all flora and fauna have been represented in the piece of literature, and their direct influence on human being. It also tries to reveal how the cultural societies are making hurdle for the survival of these non human world.

This study attempts to trace relationship between poetry and nature to show nature as a source of literary creativity. Besides examining the literary appreciation of environment, it also attempts to demonstrate its representation as an object of degradation and devastation. It tries to fetch the role of literary creativity in reconstructing the environmental concerns that have become the objectives of human exploitation. This study compares the selected poems of William Wordsworth (1770- 1850) and Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957) from ecocritical perspective. Both the poets belong to different societies and cultures. Both the poets lived in a

different period and a different region, but their poetry makes much more similarities regarding their poetic style, technique, thematic concern, and ecoconsciousness. The study of the poetry of two famous poets examines the role of literature in reconstructing the universal concerns. While comparing the selected literature, it allows for an in-depth study of parallel and variance between the literary development of different nations and between two or more literatures. William Wordsworth has given the privilege to observe the human and nature relationship in his poetry. William Wordsworth, born in 1770, is a famous English Romantic poet and the forerunner of Romanticism in England. He was bestowed as a Britain's poet laureate from 1843 to 1850. William Wordsworth is considered as the pioneers of ecological conscious writer whose views towards nature and man's treatment of nature is highly appreciable in ecocriticism. William Wordsworth's poems explore how flowers may vitalize the human spirit. Late eighteenth century science approved that "Plants are the literally the food of life" (Bate 7). On the other side, romantic poets argued that plants also nurture the human spirit. Romantic Poetry has made it to teach human being how to live as a part of it. Jonathan Bate Argues that:

The romantic ecology reverence the green earth because it recognize that we live neither physically nor psychologically can we live without green things. (7)

With the inception of the theory of ecocriticism, William Wordsworth has become the iconic figure of the theory. Romantic poetry has created an ecological perspective to understand the interconnectedness and interdependent of human being and nature. In the light of the statement a famous scholar Worster Defines the romantic viewpoint towards nature as "a search for holistic or integrated perception, an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse with the vast organism that constitutes the earth" (82). Romantic poetry is seen as the best example of nostalgic notion of separation of human being from nature. Romanticism began as a reaction against the industrial revolution and was an artistic and intellectual movement to reconnect the human feeling to nature. Jonathan Bate argues that Romantic poets express their inner "respect for the earth and skepticism as to the orthodoxy that economic growth and material production are the be-all and end-all of human society" (9). In the poem "The World is Too Much With Us"

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our power:
Little we see in that is our;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon ! (94)

Further, exploring the extract of the relationship of ecology Bate states that Romantic ecology was not rejecting material world, history and society, but in fact, it is an attempt to set up a structure for better living in the material world by entering into harmony with the environment. Wordsworth's famous poem "The Excursion" is the best example of manufacturing expansions in a vast sprawl. He laments:

When on the darker side
Of this great change I took, and there
Behold such outrage done to nature as compels
The indignant power to justify herself;
Yea, to avenger her violated rights,
For England bane.

William Wordsworth strongly condemns the irresponsibility of human being regarding earth in the name of material production. He asserts that the expansion of industrialism is the best palace of a 'new religion of capital.' His perception of nature was very intellectual and scientific; he considered nature as a superior phenomenon than human being and human being's survival depend on nature. Wordsworth always tried to instill in man a feeling that everything in nature is the manifestation of God. He condemned human being for harming nature that is equal to hurting God. The French revolution and resultant suffering of people drew his attention, and he lamented that he could hear nature in:

The still, sad music of humanity
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power

To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with joy
Of elevated thoughts... ("Tintern Abbey" 52)

William Wordsworth found nature as a teacher who taught him right from his childhood and changed his personality. In his poetry, it is depicted that he perceived nature as a living entity which distinguishes his poetic vision from other nature poets. Wordsworth's poetic uniqueness lies in the fact that he has given the most impressive and emotional account of man's relation to nature. His poetry serves as early and most influential model that offers insight into literature. It addresses the theme of nature and also for change in public consciousness concerning the environment. His poetry is the best example of showing how nature has the healing power and plays a major role in human life. Wordsworth emphasises that separation of man from nature is dangerous for both nature and human society. He conveys a message through his poetry that man can enjoy the beauty- bounty and support from nature only by living in complete intimacy with nature. He urges his reader to create a bond of relationship between man and nature for the environmental restoration.

Similarly in Punjabi literature, Bhai Vir Singh has perceived nature as a living part of his poetry. The poetic works of both the poets meet at the same ground when we analyse them from ecocritical perspective. Although, both the poets wrote their poetry in the different period and cultural context, the discourse of environmental preservation echoes in the same direction from London to Amritsar. Bhai Vir Singh was well educated and a religious preacher of Sikh religion, his poetry not only conveys religious message but through the poetry, he urges to human being to be united with nature. Bhai Vir Singh was very much concerned with environment which he extracted from the sacred scripture *Guru Granth Sahib*. Bhai Vir Singh was a devotee of his religion, and he adopted the path which the sacred scripture *Guru Granth Sahib*¹ has urged to his followers. According to *Guru Granth Sahib*, every living and nonliving things have its existence and right to live peacefully. It accepts that human and non human beings are interlinked and none of these is independent. Everything relies on everything else. Bhai Vir Singh received early education and grounding in Sikh literature from his maternal grandfather Bhai Hazara Singh. Bhai Vir Singh was a poet par excellence in many respects. Punjabi poetry has been influenced by foreign languages, but Bhai Vir Singh's creative genius gave it a new turn. Even when he sang of bulbul, of flowers and nightingales, and of nature it seems like poet of old and other English poets of romantic period. Bhai Vir Singh gave to his songs a moral touch and a spiritual import.

Bhai Vir Singh is a prominent Punjabi poet and he is known as modern Punjabi poet. Bhai Vir Singh was born on December 5, 1872 in Amritsar, in an intensely religious family. Bhai Vir Singh devoted his entire life to the dissemination of knowledge in the light of the Sikh scriptures. Bhai Vir Singh's poetry gives a glance of the relationship between human and nature. Following the paths of the Sikh Gurus, he went to the roots of human troubles and its cure. Bhai Vir Singh emphasises that human being must remember God if he wants to become a successful human being. He sees God in the natural objects. In his famous poem "Bamboo Flute", he illustrates the joy of singing in God's praise, and how, by God's own inspiration the poet is enabled to sing:

When I sing your songs, my beloved,
I dwell in your presence;
It is in your absence
That I realize, you
Yes, you were the singer of my songs.
I was but a lifeless bit of bamboo
Empty, full of holes
You fill me with songs... (61)

Like William Wordsworth Bhai Vir Singh believes in the presence of divine power in the natural objects, his religious sentiment inclines towards the feeling of the existence of God in nature. He sees the body of formless

¹Guru Granth Sahib is the central religious scripture of Sikhism, regarded by Sikhs as the final, sovereign and eternal living Guru.

in the myriad forms around. Bhai Vir Singh expresses his belief not merely for poetic fancy but it is the intense realization of god's presence in object around:

It is all god's face
The night is well with his love
His love grace fills all space. ("On Separation..." 83-90)

Bhai Vir Singh's poetry depicts the natural world in a very respective manner. His poetry shows the intrinsic relationship between human and non-human world. Apart from the fascination of nature, Bhai Vir Singh established a close relationship between nature and human being. Bhai Vir Singh's poetry also traces flora of the region. His poetry finds a moral in the simple objects of nature. The tree; The Kikar² a common tree in Punjab, it is used as fuel and also considered as a symbol of the spiritual seeker who must be ready to bear the hard blows of the axe from the every people it seeks to serve;

I grow upward, my march is heavenward.
My face is turned to the god of the skies.
I live on air, I desire, naught,
I am all alone in myself, the ascetic of centuries.
And yet for me, o world, thou hast but an axe. ("Kikar Tree" 72)

Bhai Vir enjoys his contact with nature and he realise the divine power in the natural objects and devotee of his life to it with a view to getting closer to the creator/ god. Bhai Vir Singh's charming description of natural scenery, especially of the Vale of Kashmir³ with which he had been greatly in love stimulates the feeling of love in the heart of the readers. The description of Kashmir's springs, mountains and flowers-Guldaudi⁴ - gripped his imagination that he turned to them again and again. Like William Wordsworth Bhai Vir Singh also recollects the old memories of joy he derived from them long after he had seen them;

The Heart sorrows when parting from loved ones,
But parting from you, Kashmir, I sorrow not. ("The Beauty..." 59)

Besides the depiction of the beauty of Kashmir, Bhai Vir Singh also traces the beautiful valley of Mashobra, Himachal Pradesh, where he describes the autumn season in a unique way:

Tell me, brother Mashobra⁵,
If you are the same once laden with flower.
Whose gardens were full of fragrance,
And whose grasses were greenly luscious.
Palely that grass looks now,
And sadly. Your flowers have decayed,
And drooped are their heads.
Like a mother parted from her child,
The trees, sans fruit and flower,
Seem soaked in sorrow.
The leaves have changed their colour,
And they are dropping with every airy surge. ("Mashobra" 98)

The poem expresses the unchangeable poetic attitude. The study of Bhai Vir Singh's poetry from ecocritical perspective makes the poetic expression more significant in environmental consciousness. It teaches a beautiful message to the technological dominated world that nature is the only source where human being can live in peacefully. Bhai Vir Singh in real meaning enjoyed the natural beauty and pen downed his experiences to exhibit the natural beauty. Bhai Vir Singh's description of elemental beauty of natural objects demonstrates his rarest creative quality and universality of appeal.

²Vachellia nilotica, commonly known as gum arabic tree, babul tree, is a tree in the family Fabaceae. It is native to Africa, the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent.

³ The Vale of Kashmir, also known as the Kashmir valley, is a valley in the portion of the Kashmir region, India

⁴ Chrysanthemums are flowering plants of the family Asteraceae, native to Asia and northeastern Europe.

⁵Mashobra is a town in Shimla district of Himachal Pradesh, India. It is famous for its charming scenery.

Bhai Vir Singh deliberately discussed the beauty of nature in his poetic discourse. His work *Trel Tupke (Dew Drops)* reveals a wonderful love for nature, and a confidence and exuberance in tone, which are naturally intensified in *Mere Sainyan Jio (My Beloved)*. It expresses a vital and complex intimacy between the poet and nature. It also seeks eliciting moral response from all of us across the globe. Nature is given a voice, a serious voice in which human oppression and exploitation are forcefully criticised. The helpless tress, roses, and caged birds speak in different tongues for seeking mercy from human being. The poem, entitled "Brichh" (Tree) could very well express the modern consumerism armed to destroy fields and jungles to establish its lucrative industries:

Oh selfish owners of land,
Why do you fight us?
We don't grow out
We grow tall and straight.
Our rings and breadth
Extend only in space;
We take but a palm of land,
Even then you grudge us? ("Tree" 31)

Bhai Vir Singh wrote several poetry collections including *Trel Tupke (Dew Drops)*, *Lehra De Har (Garland of Waves)*, *Bijlian De Har (Garland of Lighting Flashes)*, *Matak Hulare (Coquettish Swings)* and *Kambdi Kalai (Trembling Wrist)*. All these collections rich in personal import and express a rare mood of lucid communication. Bhai Vir Singh wrote short poems to convey his message clearly; it was a newly invented form in Punjabi literature. In Punjabi Literature this kind of short poems with inspiration and response from nature was appeared as an innovation. Bhai Vir Singh introduced new words and images. He expresses his graceful feeling and mature in suggestion and structure in his poetry. All his poems give a delicate glance of the mood and the beauty of nature and moreover poet's own inner feeling. In a poem it may be seen as Bhai Vir Singh expresses:

In a low, hidden spot,
Grew Nature its garden.
It spread it over with water,
As if to conceal it.
But beauty suffers no restraint.
Piercing watery veil,
In splendour redoubled
And bedecking itself,
It arose.
The transparent water
Spread out like a silken floor.
The lotus
Dancing upon it
Like the faeries of Mount Caucasus. ("Dall" 29)

Ecocritical study of Both the Poets has unveiled several things which have not discussed so far. Ecocriticism is treated not only an interdisciplinary approach to literature but it has a lot of scopes for going beyond the boundaries of a single language. As discussed in the paper one poet was writing in English and another was writing in Punjabi, but their love towards nature remains the same. Both the poets have used their extreme poetic talent to underpin the environmental consciousness through their poetry. Although, when their poetry came into existence the environmental issues were not in such a dangerous condition as these are nowadays. It may be their intuition for forthcoming scenario or their consciousness about environment that laid them to write about nature in a reverence way.

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