

NATURE AND ECOCRITICISM IN THE SELECT WORKS OF INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism is informed by the developments in ecology as well as in world politics and economics. It is concerned with how literature constructs and reflects the man-nature relationship, the impact of human enterprise and intelligence on nature, the status of human species in the overall schema of this planet and the universe, and the human understanding of and approaches to the issues related to all these. The present article is an attempt to explore selected works of Indian English Literature from an ecocritical perspective. The first part shall briefly delve into the new critical idiom of 'Ecocriticism' and then, in the second, look at "Cry, the peacock", "The Hungry Tide", "Collected poems of Keki N Daruwalla" and major poets of northeastern region from an ecocritical perspective.

Key Words: *Ecocriticism, Ecology, Man-nature relationship, Landscape*

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Ecocriticism speaks for the voiceless earth. This way of looking at literature began with the publication of William Rueckert's *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco criticism* in 1978. According to Michael P. Branch, William Rueckert was the first one to introduce the term "Eco criticism" into the vocabulary of literary theory. This term is extensively used in the United States of America and many other parts of the world. In the United Kingdom the term "Green studies" is used. Some of the eco studies focus on the anthropocentric vs the biocentric, culture vs nature, ecojustice, ecofeminism, pocoecocriticism etc. The study of the relationship between literature and the environment has fostered human attitudes toward the environment as expressed in natural writing. In the essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," Rueckert defines ecocriticism as "The application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the bases for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and the future of the world' (102). Ecological criticism shares the clear concern that human culture is inextricably linked to the physical world.

Ecocriticism is one of the interdisciplinary branches of critical theory that studies language and culture from the viewpoint of ecology and environment. In the worlds of Glotfelty:

Simply put, ecocriticism in 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. (Glotfelty xix)

Ecocriticism is assumed to have emerged on the literary-critical scene with the publication of the novel *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962, which revolves around the destruction of an 'idyllic' American town by the introduction of pesticides like DDT, aldrin and dieldrin. Afterwards ecocritics have undertaken studies of a vast range of texts from classical Greek literature to English Romantics poetry, and have often unearthed quite interesting facts and attitudes about the environmental issues in them. These studies have included media other than literature too, such films, TV documentaries and painting.

Ecocriticism attempts, on the one hand, to look at how literary-cultural representations affect the way human world responds to its surrounding and contributes to its sustenance or deterioration, while on the other hand ecocriticism considers how the changes in the environment and nature impacting the literary-cultural practices of the human society.

The ecocritical analysis allows us to understand how various elements and aspects of nature are perceived, what images and notions they are afflicted with and where all this stands on the overall canvas of environmentalism. The present paper is one such attempt to study selected works of Indian English literature from the ecological and ecocritical perspectives. The researcher has selected the following works from two different genres of literature-novel and poetry:

- (i) Cry, the Peacock - Anita Desai
- (ii) The Hungry Tide- Amitav Ghosh
- (iii) *Collected poems*- Keki N. Daruwalla
- (iv) The poetic works of northeastern Indian English poets.

Nature which includes animals, plants and birds, has a vigorous presence in virtually all the works of Anita Desai. She uses external landscapes to portray inner states of mind. The connection between nature and man catches remarkable attention in Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963). The female psyche is explored through nature imagery in this novel. Desai uses numerous images of botanical, zoological, meteorological and actions representing colors to represent inner state of the mind of Maya, the female

protagonist of the novel. The images used are pungent, miserable and painful. They reveal Maya's sensitive personality which drives her virtually insane towards the end of the novel. The animal images utilized in the novel introduce the theme of alienation which ultimately leads to the death motif as the primary designators of Maya's psychic disorder:

'All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved on to the veranda for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was over powering and would soon have penetrated the rooms. Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and the crows will eat anything – entrails, eyes, anything'. (Desai 7)

The use of the botanical images relate to Maya's barrenness. Her infertility is the prominent reason for her neurotic behavior. She notices:

'Leafless, the fine tracery on the naked Neem trees revealed unsuspected, so far carefully concealed, nests, deserted by the birds....Down the street, the silk-cotton trees were the first to flower: their huge, scarlet blooms, thick petaled, solid-podded ... then dropped to the asphalt and were squashed into soft, yellowish miasma, seemed animal rather than flowerage, so large were they, so heavy, so moist and living to the touch.' (Desai 34)

Maya is reminded of her loveless life and her childless condition when the pigeon's nest in the verandah of her home is filled with babies. Her unfortunate plight is provoked when she sees rats. She says, 'Rats will suckle their young most tenderly. I know this as now I lived quite near one, with seven young ones nestling between their legs' (107). The acceptance of barrenness and virginity is a sign of ruin. Her deranged mind is filled with thoughts of snakes that crawl to the lure of 'chaste sweet white flowers' (107)

Maya realizes the polarity of sensibilities between her and her husband Gautam. Her desire to lead a fruitful life would never be fulfilled with him. She is like „the beds of petunias...sentimental irresolute flowers," while Gautama resembles „the blossoms of the lemon tree ...stronger, crisper character" (Desai 21-22). Her sexual dissatisfaction with Gautam is quite evident and she identifies herself with the peacocks that keep "pacing the rocks at night- peacocks searching for mates, peacocks tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in the act of love, peacocks screaming with- agony at the death on love"(Desai 146).

The albino astrologer's prediction of the imminent death of either Gautama or herself compels Maya to choose life or death and put an end to her mental trauma. While she contemplates her own death, she also rationalizes the thought of murdering Gautam who is the root cause of her unfulfilled desires. The astrologer's warning plays on her psyche and she constantly thinks of ways to execute the crime. She justifies her thoughts and finally decides to murder Gautam at the first opportunity available to her: 'He had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact? What would it matter to him? It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rain clouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror.' (Desai 149)

Thus, Desai exploits the wreck less nature imagery to heighten the pernicious influence of Maya on Gautam.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005) exposes relation between the state, the poor, the physical environment and the fauna and flora. In this exposition, he 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 relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity.

In highlighting the plight of poor ecosystem peoples, plant and animal species, Ghosh points to the distinct situation of the poor in densely populated countries where conservation with guns and guards, disregarding the human cost becomes an unviable option and a violation of human rights. Environmentalism and social justice have to be simultaneously implemented without one compromising the other. It is necessary to acknowledge the right of the people who conserved those very areas of wilderness, before the latter became a national park or a Reserve. At the same time, Ghosh evenly places man, animal and the environment in the novel. The helplessness of man is juxtaposed with the defencelessness of nature. What sets the novel apart is its powerful rendition of contrasting situations, sans the idealisation of man as the noble savage or the habitat as a pristine

haven. In the absence of a romanticised and idyllic portrait of Sunderbans, a natural and human tragedy is rendered dispassionately.

The fauna of the forest also represents constant danger to those who make their living out of the forest. It is this “unique biotic space, a chain of islands that are continually transformed by the daily ebb and flow of the tides that create and decimate, at aberrant intervals, whole islands” that also destroys the specific hunting borders of the Bengali tiger and masses with the biological instincts of tigers, which eventually leads to the attacks on local people due to the scrambled and unbalanced marking of hunting areas (Kaur 127). Beside the clatter between the lives of the local people and the natural fauna, the interaction between the local people and the outsiders, researchers such as Piya and businessman like Kanai, signify a different set of challenge in the relationship between the unstable environment of the rainforest and its inhabitants. Piya and Kanai have roots in this primordial geography, they cannot escape being categorized as outsiders since they cannot survive this land without the help of the local people like Fokir. Rajender Kaur describes *Hungry Tide* as a novel which tries to connect local and global, past and present and the scientific and mythic overcoming the differences in race, caste, and class with “an open minded rigorousness, naïve idealism, cynical disengagement and a pragmatic activism, exemplified in the characters of Piya and Nirmal, Kanai, and Moyna and Nilima” (Kaur 135).

The scene of Piya’s drowning in the murky waters of Gange is one of the pointers that the environment will not present any relief in the future:

Rivers like Ganga and the Brahmaputra shroud this window [Snell’s window] with a curtain of silt: in their occluded waters light loses its directionality within a few inches of the surface. Beneath this lies a flowing stream of suspended matter in which visibility does not extend beyond an arm’s length. With no lighted portal to point the way, top and bottom and up and down become very quickly confused. (*Hungry Tide* 46)

The water of the Gange Rivers also represents another challenge for those who try to do research like Piya. As Piya struggles to save herself from the fall, the confusion caused by the murky waters of the river and “with her breath running out, she [feels] herself to be

enveloped inside a cocoon of eerily glowing murk and could not tell whether she [is] looking up or down" (*Hungry Tide* 47). This ambivalent space presents 'phantasmagoric' images and it is no different than the internal world of the Sundarbans where the tide comes and goes, devouring substantial islands as well as people.

The novel is sensitive to the environmental crisis and the human crisis, foregrounding these crises as mutually inclusive of the poor and the natural world. These crises become apparent to Piya during her expeditions through the crisscross waterways of the island country guided by Fokir. Her encounters with the mother and calf duo of Gangetic dolphins culminate in the tragic sight of the calf's body bobbing on the water, revealing to her the plight of these helpless creatures robbed of their habitat. Piya's trauma is further aggravated when she stumbles upon the tiger caught in the livestock pen, which is trapped, blinded, incapacitated and brutally murdered by the villagers. The tiger killed verges on the carnivalesque, with the angry villagers plunging their staves into the pen setting fire to it, "screaming in a maddened bloodlust, Maar Maar!" (Ghosh 295). It is paradoxical that the same creature is worshipped in awe and reverence, with the villagers even refraining from even giving voice to its name.

The novel poses key questions pertaining to the orientation of our social and cultural paradigms, vis-à-vis the natural. Symbolic use of nature and its elements to represent human experience and perceptions is nothing new. Poetry in particular abounds in such use in the centuries-old history of world literatures. What is new, perhaps, is a growing realization, in ecocritical terms, of this use as either ascribing human values, qualities and features to natural beings (anthropomorphism) or the other way round (theriomorphism).

Daruwalla's poetry depicts nature with its full vibrant colour and movement along with the human passions. Regarding this M.K. Naik writes, 'Daruwalla's mind is continually busy in establishing meaningful relationship between Nature and Man, in various ways and in different contexts and it is on the working out of these relationships that the success and failure of these poems would appear to hinge'.

Glen A. Love in "Revaluing Nature" says, "The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world" (Glottfelty 237). This most important function of literature is vividly brought out by Keki N. Daruwalla. He has written many poems on places with utmost power and vivid imagery. This made his critics call him a poet of landscapes. Daruwalla's sense of landscape is not just presenting the beauty of the places, but it also brings out the bare reality of the environment. He translates the picture of landscapes in words with his emotional, intellectual and moral response to his readers. And he quotes the words of the poet to assert his preoccupation with landscapes, "My poems are rooted in landscape, which anchors the poem. The landscape is not merely there set to the sense but to lead to an illumination, it should be the eye of the spiral, I try that poetry relates to the landscape, both on physical, and on the plane of the spirit" (*Two Decades of Indian Poetry* 21).

Boat-Ride along the Ganga is a poem which represents sad reality of the river Ganges. In Indian culture, the river Ganga is a mother, divinity, life giver, and river of salvation. Avinash Panikkar in his report discloses the following Information of the rivers of India:

The Ganga basin the largest river basin of the country, houses about 40% of population of India. during the course of its journey, municipal sewage system from 29 class i cities (cities with population over 100000), 23 class ii cities (cities with population between 50000 and 100000) and about 48 towns, effluents from industries and polluting wastes from several other non-point sources are discharged into the river ganga resulting in its pollution....many towns on the banks of ganga are highly industrialized. Most of the industries have inadequate effluent treatment facilities and dump their wastes directly into the river. (Pannikar)

Daruwalla, represents this stark reality of the holy river. The banks of the river symbolically represent death, disease and staleness. The poet utters his embarrassment to see things in the river and its banks, while he is riding upstream a motorboat, with a boat rider, at dusk,

Slowly the ghat-amphitheatre unfolds
like a diseased nocturnal flower in a dream

That opens its petals only at dusk.

Palm-leaf parasols sprouting like freak-mushrooms

Brood over platforms that are empty. (97)

He expresses his indifference with the words of panda and the things which he happens to see while rowing, "I listen avidly to his legend-talk/ striving to forget what I changed to see: / the sewer-mouth trained like a cannon / on the river's flank" (97). These lines show the feeling of uneasiness and disappointment.

Daruwalla strikingly represent landscape and seascape in *Mandwa*. Through various images and symbols, he portrays the nature. The season in the coastal area was summer, the sun was scorching and it was like "an egg-yolk frying in the sky." And the coastal area was arrayed with fish-scales, "The beach white with fish-scales." Daruwalla puts all these things very beautifully,

Mostly when I arrive at places, it is winter. Here it isn't.

The sea pants, the islands smoulder,
the sun is an egg-yolk frying in the sky.

And so to this anointed strip of coast,
dark with shrub,

the beach white with fish-scales,
girdled by islands that seem to float
like pieces of a broken carafe. (191)

Daruwalla humorously comments on seawater and the boat disturbed by a mild wind show the light side of the serious poet. The elements of Ecocriticism are also reflected in the poetics works of multi-ethnic poets of northeastern India. These poets, since 1980s, have been exposing the ethos of nature and communities in their poetry. Mamang Dai (1957-) and Yumlam Tana (1976-), from Arunachal Pradesh have been home-bound pilgrims, who, in their poems have made sincere quests for nature identity. Mamang Dai, born in Pasighat, East Siang District, has published widely and has brought out her poetry-collection titled *River Poems* (2004). In her poetry, "life in Arunachal Pradesh, peoples' faiths and her own, agricultural, mountains, streams, rivers and stones, myths and nature's magic, reveal myriad world of Arunachal's ecology, and mysterious and glorious

heritage. Environment/ecology, profound serenity in nature, and an innocent voice about the things in the surroundings have been her important concerns. She voices her emotions and feelings through the images and metaphors chosen mostly from nature. The poet of Manipur, like Late R.K. Madhubir and Robin S. Nagangom are powerful voices exploring the mythic tradition and ecology of the land. Recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for Manipuri language and literature, a fine poet, R.K. Madhubir (1942-2004), born at Kabowakcing, who retired as a teacher of English from the Johnstone Higher Secondary School, Imphal, published three collections of poetry in English viz. *The H-hour Patient and Other Poems* (1982), *The Time bomb and Other poems* (1987) and *The Shadow of Darkness* (1998). He was a social chronicler, and explored contemporary culture of living and past glory of the land. Worried about the future generation of Manipur, he presented in his poetry his obsession with the worldly displeasures and the deep sense of morality and his embarrassment with the five W's i.e. women, wealth, wine, war and world.

Such kinds of representation of nature in different forms of literature not only points an inaccurate picture of nature, but also creates and confirms many cultural stereotypes, besides leaving scope for misinterpretations about it. From ecocritical perspectives, literary representations like the works discussed in the paper have an impact on our understanding of and approach towards ecological issues and concerns.

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