

ECO CRITICISM IN SELECTED POEMS OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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Abstract

Nature has remained the matter of attraction for all the writers of different languages and literatures. The research paper will focus on the latest developed theory named eco criticism theory. It is an interdisciplinary field in which literary and cultural studies come together. It is more inclusive term than nature study as the study of natural elements is one of its aspects which also includes other aspects such as nature's effect on human being, society, culture and eco literacy. Eco criticism intends to reform modern sensibility. According to Buell, first wave means natural environment and second wave means more sophisticated rethinking of nature with concept of culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson is the famous American prose writer, poet and an orator. He is the central figure of American literature. Though he is the voice of New England, his literary works reflect Indian philosophy. His poetic qualities are also worth remembering. This research paper focuses on eco critical reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson's selected poems named Blight, Monadnoc, and Musketaquid. Through textual illustrations, the research paper will prove Ralph Waldo Emerson as an eco-critical poet.

Key Words: nature, eco criticism, culture, society, first wave, second wave, philosophy.

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Nature has remained the matter of attraction for all the writers of different languages and literatures. Oxford English Dictionary defines nature as 'the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals and landscape as opposed to humans or human creation' (Pearsall 950). The above definition focuses on the physical world of nature.

Eco criticism is the latest developed theory. The term 'eco criticism' was first introduced in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay named *Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Eco criticism*. Eco criticism is an interdisciplinary field in which literary and cultural studies come together. It analyses the role played by natural environment in literature. Eco criticism has broadened the scope from nature writing to the study of literature, society and science, all under one head. Hence, eco criticism is more inclusive term than nature study as the study of natural elements is one of its aspects which also includes other aspects such as society and culture. 'Eco criticism takes as its subject, the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature.' (Chandra 613-614)

It is a literary theory which seeks to engage with environmental history, philosophy, sociology, science with an interdisciplinary view point and certainly not limited to nature only. One of the functions of eco critic is to sensitize the readers to nature. Eco criticism alerts the persons about eco literacy. Eco criticism intends to reform modern sensibility. Glen A. Love recommends that 'revaluing nature-oriented literature can help redirect us from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness.' (Glotfelty and Fromm Introduction xxx)

So, eco criticism sharpens the human sensibilities and leads for eco consciousness to the persons. According to Lawrence Buell, 1st wave means natural environment and 2nd wave means more sophisticated rethinking of nature with concept of culture. He adds, '1st wave nature writing oriented eco criticism and 2nd wave urban and eco justice revisionists.' (30).

In this way, both waves are the part of eco criticism. Todd says, 'The word environment does not enter the English language until 1603.' (206) It notes that the seeds of environment are very early. As observed by eco critic Garrard,

'Eco criticism in the United States began by nature writing wilderness, literature and natural history- as well as a kind of ethical and political engagement and as well as a group of regional communities.'(Garrard 135) So, above remark reflects the beginning of eco criticism at United States. Emerson, Thoreau and Hawthorne filled their pages with native pictures of woodlands and meadows.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is the famous American prose writer, poet and an orator. He is the central figure of American literature. His contribution is worth remembering as he has enriched Americans with his qualitative writings. 'Ralph Waldo Emerson (1802-1882) was the most potent force in New England thought.' (Khan and Saxena 30) Emerson is influenced by Indian philosophy and religious books. These thoughts are reflected in his poems, prose and lectures.

'Emerson repeated lines aloud from the Bhagvad Gita, the poets of the Vedas, Zoroaster and the Vishnu Purana. During his college years at Harvard, he had discovered these poets and sages of the East, and judged all other poets in those commanding oracles. He, with Thoreau was among the first of the Americans to read and know the poets of India.' (Hawthorne 3)

Though Emerson is the voice of New England, his literary works reflect Indian philosophy. He is the first to demand a truly native and American literature.

Emerson is the leader of Transcendentalist movement. It is an intellectual movement developed as an American version of Romantic Movement. It is the reform movement. 'The transcendentalist movement began in the early 1830s in the small town of Concord soon became its epicenter...it 'the American Weimar', Henry James called it.'(Greil and Wermer 273) Transcendentalism marks the base from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Of course, the German influence is indirect. Emerson is the pioneer of this movement. The transcendental club had other members such as Margaret Fuller, A.B. Alcott and W.E. Channing who wrote regularly in the magazine named *The Dial*. This movement influenced the writings of Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Walt Whitman.

This research paper focuses on eco critical reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson's selected poems named *Blight*, *Monadnoc*, and *Musketaquid* .

Blight reflects eco critical thoughts. Blight means to wither. The poet wants to suggest that the plants, leaves, flowers and even forest withered due to the destruction of them for getting materialistic comforts by persons. So, the title of the poem is the most appropriate as it is associated with eco criticism as the theory alerts the persons for eco sensitivity. The poet likes herbs and simples of the wood. He gives the illustrations of variety of trees, plants, roots which enrich the forest and useful for mankind. Eco criticism studies nature and ecology which are well suggested here. The poet mentions cinquefoil, gill, vervain, pimpernel, blue-vetch, trillium, hawkweed, sassafras, milkweeds, dark, thickets, quaint pipes, etc. in the opening of the poem. The list denotes Emerson's rich knowledge of botany and also reminds the world of ecology. So, here there is eco criticism, as variety of the parts of nature is shown. The poet appreciates roots of forest with various qualities like rare, virtuous, full of fragrance etc. The poet says, 'we are strangers to the stars, / And strangers to the mystic beast and bird, /And strangers to the plant and to the mine' (www.PoemHunter.com. *Ralph Waldo Emerson – Poems* ,13 lines 30-32). Thus, the poet mentions ecological world like the earth, star, beast, bird, plants, ocean, flowers, trees, cloud, sun etc. Birds and animals are part of eco criticism. In *Blight*, Emerson shows the materialistic and money minded persons. The poet complains about them. The persons are described as strangers as they are mystic to beast and bird. Thus, there is a symbolic suggestion to pay attention and to take care of bird and animal which are the parts of eco criticism. In eco criticism, nature and human being are interlinked. Through expressing the negative way of persons, the poem imparts positive message to have harmonious tuning between nature and human being. The poem throws light on modern persons who do not pay attention on parts of nature. So, these materialistic persons are satirized in these poetic lines:

'But these young scholars who invade our hills,
 Bold as the engineer who fells the wood
 And travelling often in the cut he makes'

(www.PoemHunter.com. *Ralph Waldo Emerson – Poems* 13, lines 18-20).

Nature and human being are associated with each other. This poem gives signal to persons to have linkage with nature and human being. So, through solid contrasting ideas, the poet gives moral to human being to have harmony with nature. The poet symbolizes the golden advice that good tuning between nature and person should be maintained. *Blight* expresses social view point to nature. The poem is a strong comment on the way of living of people who are part of society. In eco criticism, there is reflection of society in nature. The poem opens: 'Give me truth / For I am weary of the surfaces' (www.PoemHunter.com. *Ralph Waldo Emerson – Poems* 13 lines1-2). The poet's agony is continued. He is unhappy to be a part of such world. The person has planted and they are full executor of their imperfect functions. Emerson compares the earlier persons (old men) and young scholars and praises the mentality of old men to nature. The young scholars have no affection to flowers and they pluck them without hesitation. The old men find magic in flowers. Thus, in a unique way, Emerson has shown the supremacy of ancient generation people who have affection to nature. The poem is a model to express value system, eco ethics and reformation of modern sensibility. The poem laments about people's increasing reliance on science. The poem urges to humanity to understand the real value of life by rejecting materialism. Thus, the poem expresses eco sensitivity to the readers. Emerson also satirizes on deforestation and industrialism.

'If only man could live in close intimacy with nature and not allow himself to be deeply immersed in material pursuits, men would experience a rare joy and felicity, peace and contentment. Thus, he witnesses the pervading harmony of God.' (Subramanian 54)

Emerson also comments on persons for their habit of plucking flowers. He tells with unhappiness that the earth suffers due to extractions of untold juices from earth which harms earth and plants. The poet boldly declares such persons as slaves, thieves and pirates of the universe. At the end of poem, the poet has worry for humanity. He says to shut out this thin and outward rind (bark) which makes them pale and starve. The poet advices the persons to change their approach to see earth and part of nature. The negative change is expressed here: 'The stunned trees look sick; the summer short/clouds shade the sun which will not tan our hay.' (www.PoemHunter.com. *Ralph Waldo Emerson – Poems* 14, lines11-12) Thus, the poem expresses eco sensitivity to the readers.

Monadnoc gives the pen picture of mountain which is the part of eco criticism. The poem opens with considering the mountain as singing music in the hills. The comparison of mountain with a leopard reminds animal study which is the part of eco criticism. The mountain contains leopard coloured rills. The mountain shines with parks of beech and pine. The height of mountain is over the river intervals, above the ploughman's highest line. The depiction recalls Girnar of Gujarat to the readers. The surrounding beauty of nature adds the enrichment of the mountain. The mountain is not simply stone, but it is surrounded with lily, rose, sea, land which give the celestial sign to it. The area of the mountain is wide from the south to the north. In this way, the nature which is the part of eco criticism is well presented here. The sea, bordering islands, cheerful river etc. ornate the mountain. In the proceeding lines, the poet's minute observative art is reflected. There is positive effect of nature on human being. The stanzas of the poem depict the climbing of mountain by youth in their free moment. It teaches to feel the ground in fix time and experiences the lordship of the earth. The poet takes the opportunity to describe farmer and poor middle-class people in whom the presence of God is there. The poet has visualized the presence of God in the characters like farmer and poor middle-class people. The highland people live happily here. So, effect of the mountain atmosphere is positive among people. They protect themselves from blowing of west land breezes. The way of living of talisman is depicted here. Eco criticism studies the effect of nature on human being which is well suggested here. To study the life of animal is the part of eco criticism; which is well presented here. The resident of animals like wolf, bear, deer are at mountain. The resident also covers the abode of human being. There is beautiful tuning between nature, human being, and study of bird and animal in the poem: 'Garden of berries, Perch of birds, pasture of pool – hunting herd' (www.PoemHunter.com. *Ralph Waldo Emerson – Poems* www. 110, lines 17-18).

Philosophy and culture are the part of eco criticism. The poem reflects the same. The poem is a satire on materialistic people. They sink the hills, bridge, gulfs, drain swamps, build dams and mills. Thus, they harm environment. So, the poem alerts the persons for ecology which is one of the aspects of eco criticism. In this way, *Monadnoc* depicts the various aspects of nature, its effect on human being and animal and also culture emerged from nature, which are the part of eco criticism. So, it is the eco critical poem of Emerson.

Musketaquid expresses the variety of parts of nature and also tells about wood- gods. The poem expresses the poet's sense of satisfaction with poor fields, low open meads, slender and sluggish streams.

'Because I was content with these poor fields,
Low open meads, slender and sluggish streams.
And found a home in haunts which others scorned.'

(www.PoemHunter.com. *Ralph Waldo Emerson – Poems* 120, lines 1-3)

So, in this way, ecology which is the part of nature is well expressed here. The poet finds home in wood, but other people doesn't like and they scorn on him. The poet shows his respect to Gods of wood to overpay his love to the poet and grant him the freedom of their state. He continues to show the supremacy of lord as the God rules on the people. He is omniscient to make moon and planets. He has sympathy to the poet for his solitary life and the God grants the poet millions of rays of thought and tenderness. God's creation of Nature has thousand faces in a thousand hours. The poet appreciates these parts of nature organized by God. In this way, philosophy which is the part of culture is suggested here. Eco criticism suggests culture emerged from nature. The poet enjoys sweeping showers, visit to valley at spring in which no cloud is there. He baths in soft silver air of morning, loiter in stream, happy to see the flying of sparrows from tree to tree etc. He likes the sun of May and its positive effect on plants, lake, hill – side pine etc. In the next stanzas, the poet has shown the positive effect of nature on human being. The friendly landlord and ineloquent men inhabit (to be living) and subdue the specious farms. The nice landscape with protecting covering helps the traveller. The people are ready to enjoy the beauty. The beast, bird, insect also like this warm atmosphere. The persons turn to the frost from heap as a chemist from his loaded jars draw from each stratum (a layer). They set the wind to the winnow grain and the spring flood for its fertile slime. They are satisfied to slide with sledge to the accessible woods on a cheap summit levels of the snow over bottomless. So, effect of nature on the persons, birds, beasts are the part of eco criticism which are well expressed here. The poem ends with the depiction of the traits of parts of nature. So, *Musketaquid* depicts eco critical aspects.

'A great prose-poet Emerson influenced a long line of American Poets including Walt Whitman, Emily

Dickinson, Edward Arlinagton Robinson, Wallace Stevens Hart Crane and Robert Frost. He is credited with influencing the philosophies of John Dewey, George Santayana, Friedrich, Nietzsche and William

James.' (Shankar 262)

So, Emerson is the inspirational guide for future generation poets. Emerson's poems reflect creative imagination, symbolic expression in simple lucid style. Emerson's poetic talents can penetrate short poems and also long poems. Tyler has well appreciated Emerson's various aspects and dimensions of his poems:

'To study the philosophical outlook of Emerson is to realize that he like Dante, Milton or Goethe is the final summing up of many phases of cultural development... his is the transcendentalism of the golden era of German philosophy. And finally, his is the love of nature, the intimate, healthful acquaintance with the outdoors of the English nature poets. To all these cultural ideals, Emerson gave voice, and together with his contemporaries, he voiced them. So, persuasively as to fix them for two generations in the American mind.' (139). So, the above remark focuses on Emerson's philosophical and cultural study reflected in his poems which are coloured with the depiction of nature. In this way, *Blight*, *Monadnoc*, *Musketaquid* are eco critical poems.

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