

## NATURE, LITERATURE, ENVIRONMENT AND ECOCRITICISM: AN OVERVIEW

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**Abstract:** The relationship between nature and literature is a long-standing one. Nature's portrayal in literature can be seen from ancient times everywhere in the world. In recent times, literary theorists are mostly concerned with how literature reflects physical environment as a whole and how living and non-living entities are interrelated and interdependent. People are thinking today how literature can play a crucial role to sensitize the mass about ecosystem, ecological crisis, environmental pollution and degradation. Consequently, environmental literature is gaining popularity day by day. However, the birth of ecocriticism as a literary and cultural theory was not accidental and the seeds of it can be found in many works. This paper attempts to present an overview of ecocriticism – its birth, scope, development, various waves and branches.

**Key-words:** literature, environment, ecosystem, ecocriticism.

### Introduction:

In the history of literary theory, ecocriticism is comparatively a recent one. It is an interdisciplinary branch of study which reviews the relationship between literature and physical environment. It tries to reread the representation of nature in literature from the environmentalist point of view. The connection between nature and literature is a long established one. Nature has been reflected and represented in literature in various ways throughout the world from time immemorial. Nature has been portrayed in literature by different writers in myriad manner and their own unique way. However, ecocriticism focuses not merely on the inclusion of nature in literature or using nature as only settings and symbols. It tries to show the interdependencies among various natural elements – living as well as non-living. Consequently, ecocritics prefer the term 'environment' over 'nature', as environment is all inclusive. In ecocriticism, literary texts are reviewed to see whether they contain environmental concerns and consciousness or not. Thus, environmental pollution, ecological awareness, exploitation and degradation of natural resources, extinction of various species, interconnection between human and other-than-human entities etc. are some of the major concerns of ecocriticism. In the contemporary era of environmental crisis, it is high time to review the role of literature to create environmental awareness and sensitize people about various ecological issues. And this can be done through ecocriticism with its interdisciplinary approach involving literature, environment and ecology.

### Discussion:

As a literary theory, ecocriticism came out and gained popularity during the 1980s. The term 'ecocriticism' was first used in 1978 by William Rueckert, a professor from the State University of New York. However, the formal foundation of what we today know as ecocriticism was laid down by a volume of articles titled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. The establishment of ASLE (the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment) in the United States in 1992, was a significant milestone and conducive to the development of ecocriticism as a theory. Though ecocriticism is a new and evolving theory, its seeds can be traced in numerous works of literature throughout the world from ancient times to the present. According to the 'Tinai' theory, associated with the Sangam literature of the early Tamils, ancient human inhabitants would regard plants and animals as their relatives. This close kinship with natural elements points towards interdependencies among human and other-than-human species. Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the Romantic poets portrayed the close bond between the human and the natural world. For instance, Keats' *To Autumn* presents a particular ecosystem where human, animal and natural entities are all interconnected. Jonathan Bate calls the

poem a well-regulated ecosystem of “networks, links, bonds and correspondences” (258). Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (1962) spoke for the environment and documented the environmental harm caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides. Joseph Meeker in *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972) points out human responsibility to discover the crucial role of literature for the survival of human as well as natural environment and the relationship between human and non-human entities. All these paved the way for the contemporary environmental awareness and, it may be said, the birth of ecocriticism.

The rapid evolution in the field of ecocriticism can be noticed in the very recent times and various ‘waves’ or phases and the mingling of ecocriticism with other sister disciplines can be observed. Lawrence Buell describes the first two ‘waves’ of ecocriticism in his book, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) and Scott Slovic expands Buell’s ‘wave’ metaphor and includes the ‘third’ and ‘fourth’ ‘waves’ to describe developments in the field.

The first wave of ecocriticism began in the 1980s. It portrayed nature as ‘natural environment’ (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 21). The first wave focused on celebrating nature through literature, emphasizing writing about nature as both a field of study and as a meaningful practice. It maintained the distinction between human and nature, but “argued for the protection and preservation of the natural environment from marauding humans” (Rangarajan, *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, 10). It also promoted the value of nature and the need to speak and stand up for nature.

The second wave, which happened in the mid-1990s, “moved away from dichotomised discourse of ‘nature writing’ to a more inclusive dialogue which included urban landscapes, in addition to wilderness and ruralscapes, multicultural voices and multiple genres” (Rangarajan, *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, 10). Through theorizing nature in relation to social and cultural issues, the second wave built a broader perspective. The second wave distinguishes itself from the first by challenging the distinctions between human and non-human and nature and non-nature and by prioritizing the exploration of issues such as environmental resource distribution, environmental justice etc. Thus, it is closely linked to social ecological movements and maintains a more sceptical relationship with the natural sciences. This shift of thrust is from the rural to the urban and from nature to environment.

The third wave ecocriticism, which happened approximately in the year 2000, attempts to combine theories from the previous waves and expand them to a more global perspective that incorporates the diverse cultural experiences of nature worldwide. It “explores all facets of human experience from an environmental view point” (Rangarajan, *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, 10) and focuses on the investigation of the global concept of place with specific locales. Ursula Heise proposes a “world citizenship”, which connects everyone to Earth and universally relates independent problems as important global issue. This wave seeks to bring people together through “common destiny”, advocating against global capitalism, enlightening the world on modern world issues like climate change. Third wave ecocriticism is marked by concepts such as ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’ that reveal the tension between the global and local sense of place and neo-bioregionalism. It has also seen new varieties of approaches like ecomasculism, green queer theory, material ecofeminism, animality studies and posthumanism.

The fourth wave emphasizes the fundamental materiality of environmental things, places, process, forces and experiences. Path-breaking books like *Material Feminisms* (2008) and *Material Ecocriticism* (2014) emphasize the inherent materiality of the human body and the natural world and also draws attention to how empowering corporeal practices and discussions on materiality can lead to development and transformation of discourse.

Slovic specifically mentions that he has avoided providing end-dates to each wave since the practices and ideas that they initiated remain meaningful even today, many years after their initial emergence.

Several ecocritics down the ages have contributed immensely to the development and enrichment of ecocriticism. Consequently, the scopes and concerns of ecocriticism are broadening day by day. Ever since the first use of the term by Rueckert in 1978, profusion of books, articles and essays have been published in this field. However, what forces the ecocritics to think of the environment is the excessive modification of the earth and the shameless exploitation of nature by humans.

An ecocritical perspective helps evaluate works with the aim of environmental justice in mind. Ecocriticism is a cultural representation of nature and human interaction with environment in a given era. In a most general sense, it represents a response of the humanities to the environmental crisis which modern civilization has brought about in its uncontrolled economic and technological expansionism. As a new and evolving literary theory, ecocriticism is driven by environmental awareness and earth centric approach. Literary texts are reread and reviewed to see their environmental concerns. However, the relationship of the human beings with his surrounding nature is an intimate and celebrated one. In British literature, this close affinity can be seen in the Anglo-Saxon period – in *Beowulf* and the elegies. In the Middle English period, Chaucer and others included nature in their social criticism. During the Elizabethan Age nature loomed large in all forms of literature. The Elizabethan poets and dramatists, including Shakespeare, Marlowe, Sidney, Spenser et. al., depicted the close connection between nature and human beings. Nature was almost absent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century literature, though it occasionally peeped through the blanket of prose and heroic couplet. The Romantic Age is often described as “The Return to Nature” because nature reigns supreme in the Romantic poetry and prose. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron are chiefly concerned with the deep influence of nature on human beings. Nature is thus always present in literature in myriad modes and manner. Even the Modernist literature includes nature, though sometimes polluted and devastated.

Indian literature in English shows strong presence of nature down the ages. Indian writers like Kalidasa, Ilango Adigal, Toru Dutt, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar, Nissim Ezekiel, Rabindranath Tagore, Mamang Dai and many others have portrayed nature in their works not only for its own sake but a deep interconnection is hinted at between nature and human beings.

One of the major branches of ecocriticism, which was also one of the most popular sub-movements of the first wave ecocriticism, is ecofeminism. The term ‘ecofeminism’ was coined in 1974 by the French feminist Francoise d’Eaubonne to depict the large-scale exploitation and violence inflicted on women and nature as a result of patriarchal domination. Greta Gaard precisely defines it as a movement that “calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature” (Gaard, ‘Living Interconnections’, 1). Indian ecocritic Vandana Shiva points out how the marginalization of women and the loss of biodiversity go hand in hand. Ecofeminists attempt to reread and re-analyze culture and literature replete with male dominance, subjugation of nature and women, metaphors and symbols of land-as-woman. However, “contemporary ecofeminist research was energised by the ‘material turn’ in ecocriticism, which is in many ways a reaction against the linguistic turn that has dominated the humanities since the second half of the twentieth century, with its excessive focus on discourse and constructionism” (Rangarajan, *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, 122). This new material model “has important political and ethical implications for ecofeminism because it locates environmental problems in the zone of intra-activity, where the material, the political and social are inseparable from each other” (Rangarajan, *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, 122).

As an interdisciplinary branch of theory, ecocriticism is evolving and broadening into a larger and more inclusive branch of study. Consequently, new theoretical frameworks and trajectories are coming to the field to interrogate and redefine the boundaries of what is now called as the ‘environmental humanities’ which tries to reinvent what being human means – and by extension, what it means to study human cultures and societies. A new paradigm in the environmental humanities is the material ecocriticism which emphasizes the concreteness of matter and comes to the fore as a reaction against poststructuralist and postmodern thinking that reduced reality to a linguistic construct (Rangarajan, *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, 128). Material ecocriticism may be taken to be built on Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology – “Everything is connected to everything else” (Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*, 16) and here the new narrative agents are things, non-human organisms, places, forces and human actors. Queer environmentalism challenges the historical disconnect between queer theory and ecocriticism and extends its critique of ‘natural’ categories of gender and sexuality to the nonhuman natural world. Posthuman ecocriticism challenges the conception of the human as an autonomous entity possessing absolute agency and

choice. It blurs the boundaries between the human and other-than-human agencies, including machines (Rangarajan, *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, 137).

### **Conclusion:**

Ecocriticism today engages itself with several new and innovative concerns and issues ranging from eco-cinecriticism, ecological imperialism and gender, environmentalism of the poor, politics of environmental pollution, toxicity, animal justice, development etc. As an interdisciplinary theory, the range and scope of ecocriticism is extending every day to examine the interconnections between self, society, texts and ecosphere. And it draws its sources from disciplines as diverse as science, literature, philosophy, history etc. It is expected that other ideas and methods will evolve in near future and contribute to the enrichment of ecocriticism.

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