

DEPICTION OF NATURE IN LITERATURE. ECO-CRITICAL READING
OF WORKS WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

Niyozov Jumanazar Farxod o'g'li

Teacher at Uzbekistan State University of World Languages

[*jumanazarnf@gmail.com*](mailto:jumanazarnf@gmail.com)

Annotation. Even though readership about texts concerning the study of literature and environment first appeared in American and English literary world, today it extends beyond the United States to include Europe, The Far East, India and Thailand. In this article, the researcher analyzes several examples of works of that nature, using eco-critical approach. The article begins by offering a general introduction to ecocriticism and its main purpose in contexts. Subsequently, in a series of subtitled sections, it investigates the following topics: Romantic aesthetics and preservationist practices in American poetry; contemporary concerns about nature and its devastating power depicted in some climate change novels; description of dystopian ecosystem in well-known representatives of cli-fi. The article concludes by stressing the importance for humans to build up harmonious relationship with the non-human world and become eco-conscious or environment conscious.

Key words: ecocriticism, climate change fiction, cli-fi, eco-conscious, transcendentalist, dystopian, post-apocalyptic.

Introduction

Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as is evidenced in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world. Today the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized in all departments of knowledge and development. The literary critic tries to study how this close relationship between nature and society has been textualized by the writers in their works. History has proved this every now and then that with every change in the civilisation the relationship of animals and human beings have also changed and the effect on civilisation of the changes in environment has been so acute that sometimes it has wiped the whole civilisation from the face of the earth. Therefore, concern for ecology is one of the most discussed issues today. It is the concern of every country to replenish the diminishing factors of ecology which threatens human beings the most.

Literature well known for reflecting the contemporary issues could not have remained unaffected from this theme. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only

recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Ecocriticism

Methodology

In the past years, studies about the relationship between literature and the physical environment have emerged as a formal field of study. Known as ecocriticism, this new approach is a particular strand of scholarship that illustrates how environment concerns such as climate change and environmental preservation are manifested in the literary works of today's writers. The simplest definition of ecocriticism comes from the succinct statement of Cheryl Glotfelty, leading ecocritic and thinker, who stated that ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" [2, p.1]. Pioneering treatments of ecocriticism were provided by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and by Laurence Buell.

At present, ecocritical studies and practices are now more interdisciplinary in approach. In most cases, practitioners of ecocriticism now draw on cultural theory and criticism to explore how elements in nature leads to new understandings and interpretations of our sense of nations, communities, identities, and bodies. Most critical reflections on ecocriticism do not only show us the connection between literature and the physical environment and the expanding scholarly conversation in this emerging field; they also underscore both the texts and the cultural practices that concern them.

Result and Discussions

Nature as a beauty and inspiration

The most opinionated and favorable views regarding nature can be traced to the poets and authors of the Romantic movement who had anointed nature with different names in their works and have won accolades and fame worldwide. Among such poems are Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Byron and many such eminent poets of England. However in American poetry too such spirit of inspiration was observed in the poems of many versatile poets and one of the notable among them is Robert Frost. Nature has been a subject of research since ages. The mysterious nature has infatuated many writers and poets with its astounding beauty and wonderful charm. Be it Wordsworth, Thoreau or Emerson, Keats, none of the writers had been left untouched by the mysteriousness and uniqueness of nature.

Where Wordsworth and Thoreau developed a pantheistic attitude towards nature, Emerson focused on the transcendentalist attitude of it, Keats having had realized the harsh realities of nature developed an escapist attitude towards it. Thus from time to time nature has been a subject of concern not only for the writers but also for the ecocritics that have helped us to gain a deep insight of nature, and be more sensible towards its protection. In America, the writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman have expressed ecological ideas in their works. They are known as transcendentalists and the aim of this literary movement is to achieve cultural

independence from European models. These writers have created the foundational work of American eco-centered writings.

In the transcendentalism era, the natural world has been treated as a prestigious subject for writing both the poem and the prose. The poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman who are influenced by ecological ideas, in their poems, have dealt nature as a prime subject. For instance, in all his poems, Emerson has expressed a triangular relationship between God, nature and man. He often compares the manifestations in nature with the growth in man and considers it as a sign of divinely development.

Emerson (1883-1882) begins the poem "The Song of Nature" with eco-critical note. The poem is written in the form of an address to nature in which she explicates her various form and beauty. In the very opening line of the poem, nature expresses her appearance in the world as night and morning, the pits of air, the gulf of space and the moon. As she describes herself;

*Mine are the night and morning,
The pits of air, the gulf of space,
The sportive sun, the gibbous moon,
The innumerable days.* [5, p. 51]

Through these lines, nature has established her supremacy in the world and enumerates that she is part of all living and non-living things. Emerson believes that the physical environment is perfectly constructed and it is never subjected to decay by any sort of external forces. In his poems, he connects human nature with environmental as he says "No low can be sacred to me but that of my nature" [5, p. 52]. He strongly advocates for human relationship which must be co-existed with nature.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), one of the leading transcendentalists, is a prolific writer and an ardent lover of nature. In his poems, he employs the themes of nature and society and propagates the concept of nature throughout his poems. In the poem "Nature", he exhibits his benign interest towards nature through calling himself as the child of nature;

*For I'd rather be thy child and pupil, in the forest wild,
Than be the king of men elsewhere,
And most sovereign slave of care;
To have one moment of thy dawn,
Than share the city's year forlorn.* [9, p. 43]

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is another remarkable poet in the transcendentalism era. His poems deal with American; democracy, landscape and the people. He believes that every human being is influenced by their surroundings. Therefore, most of his poem, he discusses the theme of recycle or regeneration that a man can alienate himself from the natural world but he cannot escape from his connection to it. In the poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", he epitomizes the concept of

regeneration. Though the poem is considered to be a pastoral elegy, the elaborate depiction of natural world and rustic human society typify the regeneration of both nature and human. As he depicts;

*When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.
Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love. [10, p. 383]*

Whitman uses the symbols of a bird, star and flowers to develop an idea of nature sympathetic to yet separate from humanity. For example, the song of the bird signifies Whitman's understanding of nature and its beauty. He vacillates on the nature of symbolic mourning. At times he seems to see his offering of the lilac blossom as being symbolically given to all the dead; at other moments he sees it as futile, merely a broken twig.

Nature as a devastating and fearful power

Nature has always proved to be stronger than man. It has often shown its power by controlling manpower through natural calamities like famine, drought, flood, earthquake etc. Man's life and nature are so interlinked that it is not possible for human beings to separate themselves from its influence. Therefore they have no choice but to accept both nature's bounty and adversity.

One group of writers write predominantly the relationship between man and nature. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with beauty of the nature but also with power of the nature.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most eminent and accomplished writers of this genre with a strong eco-consciousness. He occupies a significant place in the world of eco-criticism. His works deal with the major themes of migration, displacement, subaltern experiences as well as the global concerns of environment related to flora and fauna. His novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is considered for analyzing his consciousness towards ecology. Human beings are closely associated with the nature. They constantly depend on it and interact with it.

The story of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* unfolds in the backdrop of Sunderbans which is a bioregion. Sunderbans is a beautiful land situated amid the wind and the tides and largely covered by mangrove forest. The two main characters around whom the story revolves are Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy. Kanai is a translator and business man who comes to the Island of Lusibari to meet his aunt Nilima. Through his late uncle Nirmal's notebook, Kanai happens to know about the conflict between human and non human life forces, resettlement tragedy of Morichjhapi in the name of conservation. The diary also reveals the story of Kusum and her son Fokir who are the victims of eviction from the island of Morichjhapi. Piyali is an American born

cetologist who comes as a researcher to conduct studies on Irrawaddy dolphins which are exclusively found in the rivers of Tide country. She takes the help of Fokir to trace the region of dolphins.

The novel explores not only nature in its beauty but it also appears as hungry for human blood. The ebb and flow represents all the traumatic issues of nature. The following description about mangrove forest that Kanai reads is apt to the situation:

A mangrove forest is a universe into itself...Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassable dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moments can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy and expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. [7, pp. 7-8]

It unfolds the devastating effects of nature towards man. In the section "Canning", Kanai becomes speechless and shocked on seeing the plight of the passengers in the mud. Champahati, the threshold of Sundarbans, was merely "a pond filled with foaming grey sludge" [7, p. 9]. The Malta river, which in 1970s was a "... vast waterway, one of the most formidable rivers he had ever seen", had become "no wider than a narrow ditch" [7, p. 24] at low tide. He felt upset and disturbed to the sight of the people travelling to Canning. They had to walk through the mud piled up to the level of their hips.

Ghosh, through *The Hungry Tide* presents, important ongoing controversies between governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, environmental activists, socialists, human and animal rights protection groups, tribal, tidal inhabitants and urban inhabitants, about the exigency for inculcating fair environmental policies that do not show favour to any one species while crushing another. The novel concludes with several positive measures suggested towards an eco-friendly relationship between human populations and their environment.

Dystopian description of nature

Dystopian signifies the worst condition like that of inferno. And dystopian environment suggests the debased condition of natural, ecological and environment resources. The condition is brought into the universe by human actions, conscious or unconscious, direct or indirect. Present world under the influence of huge technological advancements and utilitarian attitude have almost brought havoc upon nature and its climate. Western philosophy believes man to be the most significant entity on the planet. This often leads to irreversible damage to other species as well as to our physical environment. Most of our technological advancements are the result of this human-centered approach. Not only scientists but also literary artists are addressing this issue with great concern.

A change of climate, which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere, is considered as climate change.

Climate change is affecting humanity and is almost reaching the extent of being incorrigible and life on Earth is bit-by-bit vanishing. Many species are almost extinct, the oceans are warming, plastic trash is killing wildlife and wars are looming over various parts of the world owing to droughts and scarcity of resources.

J.G. Ballard's novel, *The Drowned World* (1962) is considered one of the best examples of early climate change fiction. It is set in a post-apocalyptic world following the melting of the ice-caps. The polar ice caps have melted and submerged much of the Northern hemisphere. It chiefly deals with London which is submerged under a dense lagoon, and which is covered in tropical vegetation as a result of a drastic shift in climate. A biologist in London sets off on a mapping expedition. The author uses the novel to explore the unconscious impulses of survivors of the humanity. As the world regresses, so does its inhabitants. The morals that held society together disintegrate, and civilization unravels. The character of Riggs shows not only the out-datedness of conventional middle-class models of Englishness but it also represents, through his hopelessness, a much anticipated disintegration of all societal conditions. The novel ends with the character Kerans admitting to the fate, and accepting his ensuing journey:

His time there had outlived itself, and the air-sealed suite with its constant temperature and humidity, its supplies of fuel and food, were nothing more than an encapsulated form of his previous environment, to which he had clung like a reluctant embryo to its yoke sac. The shattering of this shell, like the piercing doubts about his true unconscious motives set off by his near drowning in the planetarium, was the necessary spur to action, to his emergence into the brighter day of the interior, archaeopsychic sun. [1, p. 146].

The post-apocalyptic world in this novel is not a place where its inhabitants rebuild the structure in haste, rather it's a place with an alternative time-system where the unconscious drives of modernity can be examined without restraint. The world here is concurrently pre- and post-apocalyptic. The protagonists are situated in a space after the first disaster but before their own personal deaths, left in a visible „zone of transit“ [1, p. 35].

In Ballard's *The Drowned World*, men of the future venture into a flooded London, intent on looting the city of its treasure. The environment is not a physical locale as much as it is “an ontological structure” where changes can transform or destroy our inner worlds” [4, p. 19]. Bacigalupi's *The Wind up Girl* (2009) is set during the time when the world runs out of fossil fuels. Bangkok is depicted as one of only a few south-east Asian cities left, now below sea level and desperately holding off the rising waters with a series of springpowered pumps. This novel deals with environmental issues and presents a calamitous future. Climate change has ravaged the American southwest. The characters search for the rights to control the area's water supply. Economic inequality has led the world to the destruction of the climate, leading further to almost devastation of the planet. Thailand's environment ministry works like a guerrilla force to ensure

the country's survival, burning entire villages to the ground at the first sight of crop plagues.

The devastation of nature is linked to the tragic devaluation of man by these eco-conscious fictionists. Automation and the war machines are direct offshoots of modern development. This has devalued and dehumanized life on the planet. Through their writings the fictionists suggest a through revision of our value system and our priorities. They question the anthropocentric assumption that the non-human world exist for human welfare. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) opines that man needs:

To understand and critique the root cause of environmental degradation and formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with the earth. [8, p. xxi]

The writers from different parts of the world have been raising awareness campaign against dystopian environment borne by human beings.

Conclusion

This paper is uniquely concerned with the way ecocriticism as a mode of literary theory has the ability to function. From ecofeminism, to traditional nature writing, to concerns of globalization and the environment, ecocriticism is a discipline that is still a teenager compared to older forms of literary theory and criticism.

An ecologically focused criticism is a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking. Consciousness raising is its most important task. For how can we solve environmental problems unless we start thinking about them? [8, p. xxiv]

This “ecologically focused criticism” goes beyond the mere identity of environmental concepts in a text, or even considerations about how those concepts reflect human-constructed conceptions of the environment. Instead, the brand of ecocriticism is one that utilizes an interdisciplinary approach in dealing with the real issues of the environment. These approaches include anthropological, historical, psychological, theological, and psychological understandings, as well as a host of other fields and subfields of study. It is literary criticism that invites different fields of study to contribute to an understanding of various texts. As we are familiar with the fact that literature and art mirrors the society in its realistic form and help us in the revelation that there has been a long tradition of study of nature and human relationships with it. It would also be perfect to say that eco-criticism is a study of the interdependence of the human relations with nature, so making use of the eco-critical approaches and applying it on literary aspects will be an attempt to once again remind of that magical relationship of the human beings with nature.

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