

# Ecocriticism

M.R. Mazumdar  
Head, dept.of English  
Bilasipara College, Bilasipara, Assam

*No white nor red was ever seen  
So amorous as this lovely green  
Andrew Marvell, "The Garden", II, 17-18  
Colourless green ideas sleep furiously,  
Noam Chomsky, Syntactice Structures,  
The Hague/Paris; Mouton, 1957, P.15*

## Abstract:

*Environmental or ecological studies first stated with literature, scientific studies came at a later date. But environmentalism has been very slow to develop a school of criticism in the academic humanities. The tradition of eco-criticism came to be formally inaugurated in the meeting of the Western Literature Association in 1980. Some prominent literary critics grew sick of the postmodernist theoretical preoccupation with 'social constructiveness' and 'linguistic determinism'. Michal J. MCDowell voices the concern of many ecocritics when he says that postmodernist critical theory has 'become so caught up in analyses of language that the physical world, if not denied outright, is ignored'. They, therefore, sought an escape from the 'esoteric abstractness that afflicts current theorizing about literature' by recognizing nature/environment as an 'objective, material and vulnerable reality' (R. Kerridge; 531) rather than as a mere cultural and ideological construct. The future of the ecosphere is endangered. It is a time and context that demand praxis, not mere theory.*

*The present paper is an attempt to discuss, analyse and examine some of the major issues, concerns, assumptions and procedures underlying the theory of ecocriticism. The Second section of the paper briefly highlights India's response to this new theory of reading and ends with an example of ecocritical reading.*

## Introduction:

The late 1980s and the early 1990s witnessed the emergence in the U.S.A. and the U.K. respectively of a new theory of literary and cultural criticism which broke away with the 'social constructiveness' and 'linguistic determinism' of dominant literary theories proposing to study the relationship between literature and physical environment locating reading' within an activist framework. This theory, which has come to be called 'Ecocriticism' (in USA) or

‘Green studies’ (in U.K.), reads literary and cultural texts from the environmentalist viewpoint to make some difference to the world outside the literary academy. (Kerridge : 531)

Environmentalism is not something new. It is old, as old as civilization itself. All major religions, ancient texts such as the Ramanaya and the Mahabharata, literatures and tribal traditions reveal their respective environmental vision. But environmentalism as a self-conscious social /public movement emerged in the second half of the twentieth century with the publications of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* (1973) and Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land* (1975). This came as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution and its concomitants like capitalism, unbarnization, pollution, contamination, ecological imperialism, bio-gas disasters, etc. One early form of environmentalism triggered off by this revolution was the back-to-land movement inspired and fed by Wordsworth, John Ruskin, William Morris, and later on by Thomas Hardy. With the growth of science and technology capitalists and imperialists started using nature/environment as a site for the exercise of power. Human greed for more, for possession and domination is primarily responsible for ecocides, eco-wars and species extinction which have tended to make this planet inhospitable for life of any kind.

To check this ecocidal tendency of mankind environmental societies (conservationist) were first set up in the Euro-American world and then in the Third World Countries, too. Literary environmentalism, which has come to be known as Ecocriticism or Green Studies, took shape in response to perceptions and apprehension of how dangerous environmental damage had become.

#### Discussion:

Initially, ecocriticism turned to nature writing texts such as the works of the American transcendentalists (Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau), the British Romantics (Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats) and the Georgien poets to study and examine the concerned period’s attitudes to non-human nature / environment but, as it grew and developed, it started forming alliances with other disciplines like philosophy, sociology, feminism, Marxism etc. and sciences like ecology, biology, etc. to appreciate and accommodate the complexities involved in the environmental /ecological consciousness. Sociologist, Marxist, feminist, environmental historical and scientific insights into the environmental politics and problematics have immensely enriched and enlarged the range, scope and vision of

ecocriticism, so much so that it is now poised to establish itself as a global cooperative of different disciplines committed to contribute its mite towards ensuring the safeguard and the continuation of this ecosphere (Earth).

Ecocriticism is a negation / rejection of abstractions. Karl Kroeber, one of the first American ecocritics, wrote in 1994 that ecocriticism was ‘an escape from the esoteric abstractness which afflicts current theorising about literature’<sup>1</sup>. Ecocriticism, along with other ecologically conscious theories, disciplines, trends of thoughts, sciences, movements etc., recognizes the fact that all is not well with nature, with environment. The anthropocentric (man-centric) world view that “Man is the measure of all things”. – since time immemorial, has done incalculable damage to nature / environment and calls for some action-provoking thought to safeguard the (inter) connections of all life forms and to ensure the continuation of this biosphere. Environmentalism is about the story of a loss but mere expression of anxieties about this loss is not enough: we need some sort of activity, both physical and intellectual, to repair it. To bridge the nature-culture, man-environment gap / divide we need a new kind of thought, the “global reparative thinking”, which is an interconnected, interdisciplinary way of thinking and feeling. It is in ecopoetry, also called GRACE Poetry (Global Reparative and Communicative Eco-Poetry), that man can regain his old connections with all other life forms and become the natural animal he is. (M.I.T. Batch.)

With the growth and development of ecocriticism as a distinct discipline environmentalism has also gained in depth, diversity and complexity. Environmentalism has been seen as a luxury for the rich and as a necessity for the poor. Ecocritics responsive to environmental justice have brought together the different environmentalisms of rich and poor. They have questioned the justice of conservationist activities too. Amitava Ghoshe’s *Hungry Tide*, for example, ends with the vexing question – Should we stand on the side of the wretched people of the earth (the ecosystem people of the Sundarbans) or on the side of the tiger, the endangered species, the local or the universal ? Who should get the priority - man or environment? Postcolonial ecofeminists see the domination of environment by men as identical to the domination of women by Patriarchy and colonialists who have always sought to own women, capital, territory, wilderness, nature, ecology, etc. The anthropocentric model of operations treats environment as something passive and unproductive like women. Men should act upon the space and make it productive. Patriarchy and colonizers, therefore, enact a story of ‘othering’ and domination. Ecocriticism believes that the earth is as much natural,

animal and non-human as it is social, cultural and human. Environment thus remains one of the most contested spaces'.<sup>2</sup>

Ecocriticism's engagement with environmentalism is both complex and diverse. Environmentalism means different things to different people. It is not only physical but also mental, social, cultural, anthropocentric, cosmocentric, political, historical, colonial, gendered (feminist / masculinist), racial, regional, global, tribal, class-conscious, animal, biological, spiritual, urban, rural and so on. Ecocriticism is in fact a rag-bag which accommodates all these diverse, often conflicting views and positions. Understanding the relationship between the literary habitat and the environmental /ecological habitat presupposes an awareness and appreciation of the reality of each of the various and complex positions mentioned above. It may proclaim, in tune with Walt Whitman, 'I am large, I contain multitudes.'

Ecocriticism recognizes nature / environment as a physical reality, something which really exists as an entity, beyond ourselves. "I affects us and we can affect it, too, perhaps adversely if we maltreat it". Ecocritical reading of nature-nurture (culture), human-non-human relationship is intended to expose as well as resist the anthropocentric politics, economics, imperialism, gender bias, and other sorts of exploitation that account for the present environmental hazards and crises such as global warming, climate changes, melting of ice-layers in the polar region, etc. Ecocriticism takes literature out of doors and is a celebration as well as a critique of places / spaces. It considers the entire Earth as its 'oikos' (dwelling place, house, home) and human life as a dwelling life. The outdoor environment' consists of a series of adjoining and overlapping areas which move gradually from nature to culture, human to non-human environment. In his influential book *Beginning Theory : An introduction to literary and cultural theory* (2007), Peter Barry has indentified a series of four major areas namely 'the wilderness', 'the scenic sublime', 'the countryside' and 'the domestic picturesque' which ecocritics have used as backgrounds to and sites of their studies of man-environment relationships. (Barry : 255-56)

Before going about their work the ecocritics / ecoreaders must have a clear understanding of what constitutes an eco-text. Many of the concerns discussed above form part of its major markers. Lawrence Buell, one of the pioneers of ecocriticism, has identified four criteria that may well characterize an eco-text. It is a work, irrespective of which genre it belongs to, in which – (i) the non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history; (ii) the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest; (iii) human

accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; and (iv) some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (Lawrence Buell : 1995-7-8)

Ecocriticism begins with the assumption that literary and cultural texts construct particular 'notions' of nature / environment which then turn into material practices. Literary and cultural representations of environment have very much to do with an age's views and treatment of it. Ecocritics study and examine these representations to find whether environment has been recognized as an objective reality; whether the natural matrix has been privileged or not; and whether the values expressed are in tune with the ecological wisdom of the age. They also explore the relationship between 'lexis' and 'placeis' (word and land), between text and place, the literary habitat and the ecological habitat. The sense of belonging to place or 'oikos' (home, abode, dwelling place) becomes one of the central engagements of ecocritical writers. This 'topophilia' or attraction for a place determines the aesthetic as well as ethical responsibilities to the earth or the ecosphere. Ecocriticism is indeed a quest for connections : it is intended to strengthen the urge that 'connects us to all other life forms'. (O'Brien : 245) Ecocentric readings of canonical texts consider how they represent the external world. The strategy seems to be to switch critical attention from the inner to the outer world, from metaphorical to the literal meaning (Bate : 2)

#### Ecocriticism in India:

Though India has a very rich tradition of environmental vision since time immemorial ecocriticism as a critical method has not yet taken off here. (Nayar – 234) Vandana Shiva, whose book *Staying Alive* (1989) became a cult text for ecologists and ecofeminists, sees ancient India as possessing a more environment- friendly culture. In his speech (delivered in the USA in 1920-21) entitled "The Religion of the Forest" (Creative Unity) Rabindranath Tagore points out that whereas the West (Judaic-Christian tradition) establishes its relations with nature/environment by force (conquest) India does it by union and through the cultivation of sympathy. In Western paintings, epics and dramas Nature appears almost always as a 'trespasser' but in Indian epics and dramas, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, *Mrit-Shakatika*, *Shakuntala*, *Uttar-Ramacharita*, it appears as one of us, as a family member stressing the truth of the interpenetration of human life with the cosmic life of the world'. According to Hindu value system, all human beings achieve happiness and enjoy health, and become good in nature, which is codified in a Sanskrit prayer " sarve bhavanti

sukhinah”. The Buddhist view is that we should reduce the flame of thirst (greed) to stop environmental degradation. But India’s problems of caste hierarchy and gender inequality tend to call this cosmocentric and spiritual view of nature of its golden age into doubt.

The medieval sufi songs, such as Nasib, Qasida, Gazalle, etc. depict different versions of ‘manafil’ (abode, habitat, home) which speak of the ‘roundness of life’ and regards the entire earth as a garden (manafil) where all elements of the environment co-exist. Abu-al-al Al’mari, in his poem ‘A friend who can Talk Well’, writes ‘Life is wonderful from first to last,’ meaning that life is wonderful even when there is no human being in it. This is an anti-western, anti platonic and anti anthropocentric view of nature. Nature/environment is not dependent on humans: it has a mode of self-preservation (through propagation). But when Islam came into contact with European logo centralism / anthropocentrism there was a gradual retreat from the manazil (abode) and a shift towards the gazelle. In Rumi we notice a shift from nature to human priority: ‘Pale sunlight,/pale the wall./Love moves away/The Light changes./I need more grace/than I thought.’ These lines emphasize that the quality of the human world/ habitat is entirely dependent on the quality of the non-human world/habitat. The Vedantic concept of ‘nirakar Brahma’, the sufi concepts of ‘Dhikr’ and ‘blue flames’, the Bhakti Movement’s concept of ‘the body as a sacred means of divine communion’, Kabir’s concept of ‘Nirguna’, and Nanak’s concept of ‘the sadaguru’ portray, in their various ways, an environmental vision which is cosmocentric and spiritual.

Tagore seems to have an intuitive insight into the environmental issues almost about seven decades before the emergence of ecocriticism, His ‘The Religion of the Forest’ is obviously an ecocentric reading/evaluation of Western and Indian cultural and literary traditions. A conscious ecocritical approach, however, may be noticed in some contemporary Indian works, such as, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), Alan Sealy’s *The Everest Hotel* (1998), Sohaila Abulali’s *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998), Nitoo Das’s green poems (‘Framing a Lohit Evening’ is a notable example), etc. *The God of Small Things* unravels a whole history of environmental politics and problematics of caste, gender, social inequalities and natural disasters which contributes to heighten the human tragedy it enacts.

Ecocriticism: an example – Dilip Chitre’s poem ‘The Felling of the Banyan Tree’ was included in his collection of English poems *Travelling in a Cage* (1980), published by Clearing House.

My father told the tenants to leave

Who lived in the houses surrounding our house on the hill

One by one the structures were demolished  
Only our own house remained and the trees  
Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say  
Felling them is a crime but he massacred them all  
The sheoga, the oudumber, the neem were all cut down  
But the huge banyan tree stood like a problem  
Whose roots lay deperr then all our lives  
My father ordered it to be removed  
The banyan tree was three times as tall as our house  
Its trunk had a circumference of fifty feet  
Its scraggly aerial roots fell to the ground  
From thirty feet or more so first they cut the branches  
Sawing them off for seven days and the heap was huge  
Insects and birds began to leave the tree  
And then they came to its massive trunk  
Fifty men with axes chopped and chopped  
The great tree revealed its rings of two hundred years  
We watched in terror and fascination this slaughter  
As a raw mythology revealed to us its age  
Soon afterdards we left Baroda for Bombay  
Where there are no trees except the one  
Which grows and seethes in one's dreams, its aerial roots  
Looking for ground to strike.

(The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets, ed. A.K. Mehrotra, O.U.P.: New Delhi, 1992, PP. 111-12. )

Chitre's poem 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree, like Windel Berry's "The old Elm Tree by the River", enacts the story of a fall, the fall of the rural, agrarian way of life and its values. It signalizes a gradual retreat from the countryside and the lap of nature and a shift towards the urban, industrial way of life. The drama of the felling of the old tree which has been part of a green dream for long, generates a sense of loss that is irreparable. The lines – 'We watched in terror and fascination this slaughter / As a raw mythology revealed to us its age' – indicate anxiety, anxiety about the change that is about to come because of the mindless 'slaughter' of the banyan tree which stands for non-human



nature/environment/other. This cruel act of denying a placescape where the tree can belong symbolizes the transition from Indian and middle-eastern ‘mythos’ to European ‘logos’, from cosmocentric environmentalism to Western logocentric/man-centric environmentalism.

This is an eco-text which portrays not only a transition but also a clash of values and attitudes between two generations, the old and the new, grandmother representing the ancient vedantic philosophy of life (‘Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say/Felling them is a crime .....’) and her son representing the modern, westernized, urban way of life. The lines ‘.....but he massacred them all/The sheoga, the oudmuber, the neem were all cut down/But the huge banyan tree stood like a problem/ Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives/My father ordered it to be removed’-speak volumes about the priorities of the concretized structure of modern urban life and its ecocidal tendencies. Grandmother, being a woman, is more intimately related to and concerned about, nature/environment and warns her son of the grave consequences of his domineering and masculinist action. That her ecofeminist voice fails to influence her son’s decision is a pointer to the usual humiliation and defeat suffered by women at the hands of patriarchy which enacts a story of othering and domination.

The poem is an elegy on a lost connection. The line – ‘Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives’ – refers to the connection, the almost undefinable emotional, physical, relational and metaphysical connection human beings have enjoyed and experienced with the great tree, the non-human nature/environment for centuries. But this mythological connection retreats with the fall of the tree. The poet expresses anxiety over the loss of the place (the oikos) and the tree when he says, ‘Soon afterwards we left Baroda for Bombay/ Where there are no trees except the one/Which grows and seethes in one’s dreams, its aerial roots/booking for ground to strike.’

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, a well-known poet, translator and critic of Indian writing in English, has expressed displeasure about the matter-of-fact opening of the poem, which according to him, ‘seems small preparation. But we should keep in mind that this is a poetry of statement and not of ornamentation. The poet appears to be a participant though not an activist. The line – ‘Insects and birds began to leave the tree’ – is a clear threat to biodiversity, concerns questions of animal/species rights and calls for environmental justice. The plain matter-of-fact narration thus talks of one thing but implies another. Let us hope that the ‘aerial roots’ of this green dream will one day find some ‘ground to strike’.



## Conclusion:

Since ecocriticism is a diverse biosphere' (Peter Barry : 1995 : 269) there is no universally accepted model or strategy that we have merely to learn and apply in our reading of literary and cultural texts. Ecocritics / ecoreaders do not worry much above up their reading strategy. It is like approaching a text with a new alertness to its environmental dimension which has all along hovered about the text but which has never occupied the centre of critical attention. The prime object of this cooperative, interdisciplinary approach is to bring the ecological aspect of the text to the forefront of critical attention.

## References:

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## Notes:

1. Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1994) P.1.
2. Barbara Aclam, *Timescapes of Modernity : The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (London : Routledge, 1998)

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