



Eclectic Aberrations in the Formulation of Syllabus for Ecocriticism

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ABSTRACT: Any branch of knowledge during its inception faces doubt and dissent. Cynical resistance to 'ecocriticism' as a branch of literature is due to the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, from 'deep ecology' to romantic ecology, from aesthetic nature – poetry to science-revelations of ecosystems and life-saving food cycles. A form of literary criticism dealing with nature with respect to human existence, safety, security and sustenance in addition to aesthetic joy, not in place of it, should be normally welcomed. Ecocriticism has not committed any cardinal sin when it declared (William Rueckert, 1918) that scientific ecology shall be applied to the study of literature. The word 'science' is a nostalgic nightmare for some of the poets of erstwhile Romantic period of the first quarter of the 20th Century, which finds its echoes in the first quarter of 21st century also. The impact of science and technology, which gave hundred sweet fruits to human culture and nature had 'unconsciously' developed harmful effects like ecological imbalance, pollution, exhaustion of natural resources and stress on disadvantaged social groups. There is little wonder, when in such a turbulent backdrop the syllabus for 'ecocriticism' in literature could not be finalized. Skepticism, notwithstanding the present paper suggests that literary art imbibing scientific truths to save the future of humanity is a noble exercise.

Keywords: ecocriticism, syllabus, science, technology, devastating consequence

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I. INTRODUCTION

The branch of Ecocriticism in literature is past twenty years old. Though coined by William Rueckert in 1978, the term was revived with full gusto in 1989 by Cheryl Glotfelty, who assumed captaincy of ecocritical movement, as an academic segment. The active debate that followed was initiated after her inaugural proposal that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.....a theoretical discourse negotiating between human and non-humanexploring different kinds of knowledge from places to arrive at divergent values for humanity". She courageously expressed that "the human survival is threatened" and 'ecocriticism' would do well to focus on this critical drama in the creative functions of literature. The wide response, her proposed theme obtained in a decade (200 articles appeared in support of 'ecocriticism' for 1996-2004) had invited a wild reaction with interrogations like 'What is this ecocriticism...? Is it a red carpet for human misdemeanours on green carpet of the world.....? What are their methods? Who conceived them and by whom confirmed as a literary paradigm? Is it by an American woman, aspiring to win over the world by welcoming an anthropocentric aggression in the guise of a biocentric (Michael P. Cohen, 2004) activity? Is there a subtle conspiracy by 'American imagination', ignoring Western actualities of nature – love in the name of scientific treatment to literature. The conflated usage of the term 'ecocriticism' was conceived by many as a new term for 'nature-writing', or a revised version of it in the light of the new environmental knowledge. The naturalists, who ruled the roost for centuries, began to doubt whether ecological studies are a modern revival of nature's glory or a silent rivalry hatched up to impose human superiority over nature.

The suspicion gained currency as the writings like 'Silent Spring' (Rachel Carson, 1962) cautioned that "the most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its

place in the threatened natural world”. The truths from ecology and environmental imaginations do not go hand in hand. Literature is not a science lesson but shall be a science-based one. An English language teacher cannot afford to say that earth is flat in a poetry classroom and round at home for fear of his geography colleague living next door. At best he can poeticize eco-truths like Biodiversity – as – the joy of abundance, extinction of species – sorrow of deprivation, ecobalance- harmony in nature, hot spots - gold mines of nature, danger to Green house – green house aggrieved and ozone hole as disaster in the sky to life.

However, the Green Criticism, as it was euphemistically called in the initial years, was subjected to severe criticism (Michael P. Cohen, 2004., Ecocriticism under critique), partly due to xenophobia, and partly due to extreme loyalty to Romantic nature worship, with inscrutable faith and fervor. William Rueckert (1978, *Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism*) sounded skeptical about application of eco-concepts to the study of literature. Critics like Lawrence Buell (1995) were more pungent when they reiterated safety to ‘non-human environment’ as more important than concern about ‘human interest’ which for them is an illegitimate one. There is need to worry about human accountability to ethical nature’, treating environment as a process and not a constant. They feared wilderness be extinguished, landscapes be demolished for urbanity and nature’s divinity be diminished in the pursuits of civilization. They warned ecocritics that environment is a co-actor in the drama and not a human protege.

Romantic poets of Europe and America, with their liberal values like freedom of man, pastoral passion, patriotic fervor, independence, brotherhood of peoples and platonic love had an intense obsession with nature. Mostly the romantics appeared (18th – 19th centuries till the Avant- Garde group appeared in the middle decades of 20th century due to the effect of industrialization) to be pro-changers in the social culture but a strong section turned conservatively anti-science group. Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), the veteran thinker, writer, scientist, explained “that the romanticists had no sympathy for industrialization as it was ugly and money grabbing and interfered with individual liberty. They have aesthetic but not utilitarian standards. The earth worm is useful but not beautiful. The tiger is beautiful but not useful. Darwin praised Earthworm.....and Blake praised the tiger”. W. H. Auden (1907-1973) visualized the future scenario when, and anticipating a Glotfelty to appear on critical literature, remarked that ‘the impulse of poetry is to do research on tomorrow’s atomic fall out’. Another romantic cum progressive poet of Avant-Garde group (1981) mused in pristine clarity.....

“Nightingales....Sunset, meanest flower,
Were formerly the potential poetic powers.....
Microscopic anatomy of ephermerides.....
Power house and girder ribs provide the poetic base now.....”

If ecocriticism were to be only nature –writing, romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Keats, Shelly, Frost and Tagore were full of passionate pictures, painted with poetic heights and filled with warbling birds, grazing fawns, limpid lakes, jumping falls, bubbling streams, fanning trees, hissing reptiles, festive flowers, roaring tigers and mewing cats. Rising Sun and fading moon are at home with every Romantic poet. They are in such an abundance that analysts like Ursula K. Heise (2008) denounced ecocriticism as only nature writing. The dissent option to ecocritical appraisal of ‘human – nature’ interaction provoked them to search for eco-writings in the major poets of Romantic period like Wordsworth.

Infact, Science is not a cultural intruder...it is an evolutionary essence of man’s struggle with nature. As Karl Marx opined ‘the freedom is not the absence of constraint...it is the recognition of the need’. The need for the aesthetic arsenal of creative writers is fulfilled by a changing society in the height of science. No one needs to worry that literature; an art form is doing service to scientific problems of social milieu. In fact, the result is other way round. Science enriches, astounds and emancipates literature from drudgery and drabness, one of the examples being ecocriticism.

Christopher Caudwell (1907-1937) the writer, and a Marxian critic explained “that the major change of literature to life from fictional flights is exclusively due to science, which creates a wonderful drama, sufficient to satiate the creative thirst of literary people”.

II. ROMANTIC ECOLOGY

To redress the balance of the culture-nature debate, an English professor of Literature at University of Liverpool, Jonathan Bate (1991) authored the book ‘Romantic Ecology’, taking Wordsworth as an exemplar of ecocritical thinking. By doing so, Bate and his similar ones stressed for delicate relations between the human and non-human worlds.

Following suite, Indian Romantic ecologists began to produce similarities. Ambika(2011) does it on Robert Frost in her article “An ecocentric reading of Robert Frost’s selected poems”. Suresh Frederick (2007) in his article titled “Human aggression on Nature: Selected poems of Rabindranath Tagore”, accused human aggressors on nature, who are supposed to be anthropocentric. Fredrick quoted Tagore’s powerful warning “humans should understand the roles assigned in a disaster”. Who are the nature’s aggressors before the year 1941 when environmentalism did not start? May be a foolish forest hunter or an avaricious timber merchant?

Tagore could have never meant the blunders of dangerous industrial polluters and urbanisers, whom the Romantic Ecologists are aiming at as aggressors, or the ecocritics of Glotfelty School or environmental group itself?

Trying to discover or rediscover the ecological principles or ecocritical rudiments in our literary past is no sin. That happens with every new phenomenon in the social order. In Indian classical literature, a section 'Vedic' Literature (3000 B.C) was called Aranyakas...the literature born in forests! One of the hymns of the 'forest – literature' group in Sanskrit suggests "VRUKSHO RAKSHATI RAKSHITAH"....meaning "Save the tree....It saves you"....what an ecocritical apocalypse....!. In the Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata (scripted 1500 B.C. and beyond), many references exist about an aeroplane and even Television....! Does it mean modern science began at that past?

Some with slight deviations from pure Romantic ecologists are those who claim eco-reflections in nature like Steve Grant (Birds and Bees: Finding nature in literature"....Dec, 1998). Grant is anxious to report that 'literature and environmental courses are offered both in English departments and Environmental Sciences programmes', a jubilation which cares for ecocritical branch of knowledge to flourish in literary pedagogy.

Joan Hamilton (Sierra Magazine, Nature 101) in his essay on Robert Hass pacifies the needless acrimony when he says Nature-writing is not enough. Ecocriticism in U.S and later in Europe refers to 'ecological failure which is an unintended by-product of industrial age'. Referring to Romantic Poetry, he discerns that 'the poet who says a 'bird sings' is a mask on his massive ignorance of birds' ecosystem and life patterns'. By this time ecocritical literature in English is occupying the territory once occupied by deconstructionism, post-modernism, feminism, structuralism and psycho-analysis. With its feet in the literary past and the mind in the future of humanity, the heart of ecocriticism is beating for literature of social concern with an enormous mixed response, only to be processed as an academic paradigm.

III. RAISED EYEBROWS.....?

While such is the background of nature-poetry of Romantic writers, why skeptics raised eyebrows now at the mention of science as ecological –backbone to grasp the eco-imbalance and needed human-interventions? Some of the reasons put forth are:

Ecocriticism is looked at as a critical 'insurgency' with canonical understanding of the ultimate goal to hit. The second reason is that Ecocriticism is outside the traditional Euro-American Academia, guided by Western Literature Association. The whole movement had sprouted from enthusiastic radicals from American dry soils, who want to break the barriers between formal criticism and creative writings with personal narratives. They are mostly young (perhaps amateurs too and a rebellious group of American Society of Literature and Environment. Another important group expressing anger over the aggressive postures of ecocritics insisting for human interference to save the nature from disaster, is the pure-naturalists, who might be sent to oblivion in case the ecological writings assume importance. The last group is of the opinion that these ecocritics may smuggle in 'personal and political commitments' in the name of environmental benefactions (Lawrence Buell, 1995).

Simon C. Estok (PMLA letter, Oct 1999) crudely summarized the possible questions of a preponderant pessimist.....like...

"Can a person who chews down on a fat roast beef on rye at lunch be an ecocritic at two 'o' clock seminar"?

The skeptical opposition to any theory, nascent or old, is a healthy sign for scientific phenomenon, more so, when the science had to be hybridized with an art form like literature. The lack of other 'pole' is a sign of destruction and death to any 'dialectical' growth. As Glotfelty insisted "that nature-writing should be given its due professional dignity along with environmental aspects. Otherwise the ecocriticism will be a trend to attract publications and promotions. It would not change things".

IV. TO CHANGE THINGS.....?

There lies the million dollar question as whether the literature could be or could be turned into an instrument of change, that too of a magnificent natural crisis like 'ecofailure'. Words, syllables, similes, metaphors and fiction with imaginary characters trying to play a role of correcting "human misbehavior" on a social scale with economic greed and political implications. Ecocritics are not likely to pack the literature up with ecological detail and make best sellers on market bookstands, and be contended with. They have opened a Pandora's box of 'critical' environmental orientation. They are not satisfied with works like a 'Silent Spring', 'Machine in the Garden' or a 'virgin land', who might create an interest in nature and a positive 'disinterest' in human endeavours. Ecocritics are deliberately for the human intervention to rescue the loss of 'ecobalance' with a scientific methodology, which does not include a sigh of despair, dependency or a sweetest song, made out of a saddest anecdote. Science in fact appeals to literary aestheticians, expert-thinkers and skilled artisans to come to its rescue-operations as co-fighters to salvage nature. Gurajada(1907) the romantic poet of Telugu

literature of South India turned a science-oriented rationalist and a social-humanist. In his poem 'Love the Country' (Tr. Authors)

'Let the nightingale sing the songs, hidden in the bushes
Let the song breed seeds of love among the fellow citizens....
Stop the loose talk and stretch a helping hand for the society....
the country never means soil..... it is people.....'

V. SYLLABUS: SUFFICIENT AND SUBLIME

Gregory Mc Namee, (Utne Reader, Dec 1997) in the article 'Wild Things' suggested the contents of eco-writings. "Environmental literature has always been broad and inclusive, wide enough to contain the writing of botanists, entomologists, bee-culturists, beef-ranchers, explorers, poets and novelists", Gregory elucidated.

Evan Mwangi(2004) wrote on environmentalist of Africa 'Wangari Maathai', on receiving the Nobel Prize for her fight on 'the rights of forests and women', when both are violated for greed, resulting in rural space being lost and urban background, degenerated. Though written in high appreciation for the work of Wangari, Evan titled the article as "Nobel Prize – A shot in the arm of African Ecocriticism" (the Nation, Oct, 2004). More interesting is the remark of Wangari Maathai, the non-literary - ecoactivist, 'ethical emphasis of environment shall be on a world beyond text and beyond reader, needed to be the syllabus of ecocritics.

The skeptics like Sven Birkerts(1996) were more vocal in their essays like 'Only God can make a tree: the joys and sorrows of ecocriticism'. The emphasis of Glotfelty's 'human nature in environmental behaviour', needed to be highlighted in literary discourses, was mistaken as license for human intrusion and hence the 'ordained' duty to protect the 'divine nature'. What else does the expression 'only God can make a tree' suggest....except to recall Tagore's vehement remark on conceived anthropocentrism, "it is not for you to open a bud into a blossom"!

It is a common knowledge that any scientific exercise grows by trial and error. Opposition to a thought keeps the truth in its position. Dissent argument, presumably in defense of nature and literature posed questions like: can literature be carefully examined as having bearings on man and his relations to the world?; as a literary purist, can one claim that literature should not be used as pretext for examining nature?, Conflating world and mind is a critical error? ; Does Literature become colourless "cross-pollinating with worldly matters, if "human nature" dominates nature?

The repeated emphasis of ecocentric protagonists that 'ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature....it implies more towards a bio-centric world and an extension of ethics had gone unheard. Jonathan Bate (1991) pooh-pooed the seriousness of ecocritics. Ecocriticism is only a proxy-attempt to politicalise the events....there is no nature...there is only history', Bate remarked. William Howarth (1996) went further in his article "Some principles of Geocriticism in Glotfelty and Fromm....", when he finds fault with Glotfelty's emphasis on 'connecting science to literature, which is a difficulty....for the two cultures have grown widely apart. One finding 'truth' in data and other in 'metaphor', running parallel. In such a situation, Howarth remarks, to consider that science itself as the orbiter of truth as fixed, final and absolute is an illusion.

Ursula K. Heise(1997) recognized the fact that 'some sectors are antagonistic to science, which they perceive as one of the root causes of current degradation of ecosystems due to technology, industrialism and urbanization. Ursula pacifies the antagonists with the argument that 'ecocriticism shall not ignore scientific descriptions of nature through aesthetic articulations'. In the essay on 'Science and Ecocriticism' Ursula divides ecology into 'deep ecology' and 'social ecology', the former relating to species, food cycles, producers and predators and the latter referring to human interests, socio-political factors and anthropocentric misdeeds. This division helps to reconsider and reorganize visions against science. With the ubiquitous nature of concretization, ecology confounds the analysts more often than not. After a decade of debate over the syllabi of ecocriticism, Cheryl Glotfelty, the professor of English Literature and Environmental studies at University of Nevada, Reno, had become stranger with the ecocritical convictions. Speaking at the MLA conference in Dec 1998 on the topic, she insisted for environmental practices in our professions and eco-friendly recycled paper only be used for documentation in MLA conventions'. She has moved from precept to practice. In 1996, she clarified in one of her discourses as "you would quickly discern that race, class and gender were the topics of late 20th century but you would never know that the earth's life support systems were under stress, indeed you might never know that there was the earth at all'. Cheryl, coming down to brass-tacks of the issue, pacified the anti-science group. Their love for literature as pure art form is neither insulted nor injured by science or technological prescriptions. It was Sigmund Freud, the master psycho-analyst, who pronounced that 'literature is the science of feeling and science is the art of knowing.

Michelle Boisseau (2000) showed the way of ecocritical writing in 'deep ecology' when scripted the poem 'Parchment'.

"...slaughtered calf...the skin taken out...
insect kermes, whose pregnant

bodies gave pigment...
the goose, who supplied quills,
the horse its hair,
the flax, the fine strong thread
that held the folder skins,
into a private book,
stamped with gold for a king”.

Surely, it is not the romantic excitement of a poet of yester years we see above. It is the poem in ‘deep ecology’ wing of ecocriticism, appearing to be an ode to nature’s bounteousness.

VI. CONCLUSION

The browbeaters of ecocriticism are mainly confronted with a sense of marginalization in case, ecocriticism becomes ubiquitous. Some of them inherit a nostalgic fear of science, likely to demolish the ‘divine nature’ built around by providence. Some others are struck with the obfuscating nature of ecocritical syllabus. The ecocriticism had moved from ‘debate nature’ to ‘defend nature’ on the thematic level. Even if some people do not agree with the Marxian view of economic determinism as a crucial factor in shaping the civilization, the influence of social, political and economic structures on the texts of ecocritical culture is certain. From the Shakespearan Drama to a wild life documentary, from the romantic pastoral to a scientific thriller on celluloid, the lessons of preservation of eco-health are compulsive in ecocritical syllabi. Excessive debate at times obfuscates the central theme.

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