

## Literary Ecology

Prof. Vidya Premkumar

Gilbert White, a renowned naturalist, in 1756 planted four limes between his home and the butcher's yard which was opposite, "to hide the sight of blood and filth". He wrote *The Natural History of Selbourne* in 1789 which is considered a very important text by Ecocritics today. This act of White exemplifies what Keith Thomas puts as changing the attitude of England towards the natural world between 1500 and 1800, that of a growing uneasiness about killing animals for food. More than the ethics of meat consumption, what stands out from this act is the act of concealment of its price. This was to become the characteristic of the industrial society in its relationship with the natural world.

This pointed split between the natural world and the human world was replicated even in nineteenth century literary criticism where a severed division began to be drawn between the 'natural' and the 'human' sciences. The compartmentalization of knowledge effected by this divide is fundamental to what Bruno Latour terms as the 'Modern Constitution', which segregates the human from the non-human sphere, while defining society's relationship to nature principally in terms of 'mastery' and 'possession'. It is the Modern Constitution which, through a form of self-deception, allows the eating of meat with a disconnectedness from the suffering and death of the animals.

So, the regaining of the interconnectedness of nature and culture, *physis* and *techne*, is only possible when there is a movement beyond the Modern Constitution. Every act of *techne* would be a price that *physis* will have to pay for. Walter Benjamin observes in one of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' that there is 'no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'. There is no work of culture which is not simultaneously exploitative of nature. Boisseau's poem *Parchment* explores the exploitation of the natural world which is essential for the creation of a product of *techne* – a parchment. She provokes us to consider the social domination and exploitation of nature for the purpose of creating a book which would be read only by the King. Ironically, the Boisseau's *Parchment* would also be simultaneously exploitative of nature through the publication and distribution of her writing.

But the relationship between Culture and Nature is not simple. Human beings are invisibly interlinked with the myriad non-human beings, who try their level best to survive in the midst of an increasingly 'anthropogenic environment'. Nature is constructed by Culture through the complex world of language, which is internalized from the moment we are born. So, in this sense, Nature is a linguistic construct. But the 'natural world' which consists of all kinds of ecosystems precedes this cultural construct. For many ecocritics, this precedence extends to their consideration of how language, culture and even textual works

are conditioned by the natural environment. Ecocritics thus remember the earth by rendering an account of the indebtedness of culture to nature. While acknowledging the role of language in shaping our view of the world, ecocritics also seek to restore significance to the world beyond the page.

“What then *is* ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.”

This is how Cheryll Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* and further defines the role of an Ecocritic as:

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? ... What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis?”

It is difficult to define and completely explore this rapidly emergent field which draws upon a range of analytical strategies and theoretical approaches while addressing a diversity of cultural phenomena, from ‘Shakespearean dramas to wild life documentaries, romantic pastorals to sci-fi ecothrillers, the Bible to Basho’.

Yet, there are some primary ways in which ecocriticism is currently changing the practice of literary studies. One of them is the ‘ecologically oriented critique of the way in which nature is constructed in certain canonical texts of the western tradition’. One of the first ecocritical critique of a canon was Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* in 1972. He is critical of classical tragedy which he feels reinforces the anthropocentric ‘assumption that nature exists for the benefit of mankind, the belief that human morality transcends natural limitations, and humanism's insistence on the supreme importance of the individual’. This kind of critique continues to have an important place in the ecological rereading of canonical texts.

The second way in which Ecocriticism recasts the canon is in the way in which the text is interpreted and contextualized. In Kate Rigby's words: 'It demands of the critic an acquaintance with new areas of knowledge and understanding. Whereas, in the past, literary critics might have leant on history, philosophy or the social sciences in framing their readings of particular texts, ecocritics need to draw also on geography, ecology and other natural sciences.' A strong example of the deployment of this kind of analysis of a work can be found in Jonathan Bate's rereading of Byron's apocalyptic poem 'Darkness' along with Keat's ode 'To Autumn' against the backdrop of the meteorological records of the time and the place in which these texts were written. Bate explores the literal image of Byron's dark earth and reads it against the grain of literary critical conventions of connecting the poem with other apocalyptic writing or as a product of the imagination bearing a larger symbolic meaning beyond the work itself. Rigby feels that 'Bate's ecocritical strategy of foregrounding the role of the natural environment in the genesis of this text is, in fact, entirely in keeping with the perspective of the poem itself, which dramatizes the potentially catastrophic consequences of a dramatic change in the natural environment, in this case, the loss of the life-giving rays of the sun.' Read in the same light, Keats' idyllic ode also appears in a different light. Far from being an escapist fantasy, it becomes in Bate's view 'a meditation on how human culture can only function through links and reciprocal relations with nature'.

Bates has classified the literary critical preoccupations from 1960s onwards into 'Cold War Criticism' and 'Global Warming Criticism'. According to him, the Cold War Criticism perpetuated the binary opposition of human/non-human, and culture/nature due to the ideological context of 'human creativity, human agency and human social relations'. And 'Global Warming Criticism' 'attends to the inextricability of culture and nature, the primary sign of which he considers to be the weather'. Global Warming Criticism presumes that the natural world can no longer be sidelined as 'passive, orderly and compliant', but is 'rather volatile, unpredictable and responsive to our interventions in ways that we can neither foresee nor control'. Thus Global Warming Criticism is infused with a multidisciplinary approach which includes meteorology, ecology and the new science of non-linear dynamic systems popularized as 'Chaos Theory'. Global Warming Criticism privileges writings which enable us to 'think fragility' because it recognizes the fragility of human existence on the earth itself in the modern world. This has begun to 'generate its own counter-canon of literary texts which are seen to model a more ecologically sustainable mode of being and dwelling in the world than that which has predominated in the lived reality of the modern era.'

In the 1990s, the recuperative predominated ecocriticism. One of the reasons why ecocriticism grew especially in the US is due to the study of the highly marginalized genre of nature writing. It was predominantly scholars of nature writers like Scott Slovic and Cheryl Glotfelty who founded the Association for the Study of Literature and the

Environment (ASLE) in 1992. The main mission of ASLE is 'to promote the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world', and to encourage 'new nature writing, traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literatures, and interdisciplinary environmental research'. This revaluation of nature writing is the third way in which ecocriticism recasts the canon. Lawrence Buell's important study of the neglected genre through the rereading of Thoreau's classic *Walden* is an illustration of this. Buell, in his appendix, shows the intertextual references in *Walden* to many forms of environmental non-fiction from Thoreau's time. He shows how environmental nonfiction is more 'heteroglossic', in Bakhtin's terms, than even a novel.

The revaluation of Romantic pastorals is also another way in which Ecocriticism has been contributing to literary studies. Especially notable among these critical studies are the works of Jonathan Bate. His monograph in 1991 entitled *Romantic Ecology* reaffirms the value of romantic pastoral as nature writing. He evaluates Wordsworth's poems in the tradition of environmental consciousness, 'according to which human well-being is understood to be coordinate with the ecological health of the land.' In this context, Romantic nature poetry's position as a continuum of earlier pastoral writing becomes ambivalent. But Rigby has her reservations about this kind of revaluation as she states:

"Nor is the romantic affirmation of *physis* in less technologically transformed landscapes entirely unproblematic either. It might be argued that the romantic aestheticization of nature has functioned historically not so much as a potential locus of resistance to its industrial exploitation, but rather as *compensation* for it. less. Under the Modern Constitution, it has been too easy to move between the consumption of nature as raw material for economic production during the working week, to the consumption of nature as sublime or beautiful on Sundays'. But the fact that 'the elements of techno-utopianism, compensatory nature consumption and transcendental escapism are still very much with us, such a reconsideration becomes all the more important.'

The romantic affirmation of the interconnectedness of human beings with nature and the binding relationship of interrelated flourishing finds its counterpart in the acknowledgement that 'ecological exploitation is always coordinate with social exploitation'. This has become a new subpart of the recent ecocriticism in which the concerns of gender, race and class oppression are equated with ecological exploitation. This eco-social critique is not entirely new. Rousseau and other Social theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have foreshadowed this linkage. The major criticism that has emerged from this is eco-feminism. Kate Rigby states that: 'Because of their close symbolic and to some extent also practical association with nature, namely through the kinds of labour they have traditionally performed, women have been cast either as 'primitive' and potentially 'monstrous', hence part of that nature that was to be mastered by rational man, or as an alluring embodiment

of that nature to which rational man simultaneously longs to return.' Such connections between the domination of women and nature have been explored in depth by ecological feminists. Examples of this are Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land*, and Louise Westling's *The Green Breast of the New World*. Terrell Dixon is one of the ecocritics who feel that it is 'now necessary to turn our ecocritical concerns from wide open spaces to metropolitan spaces'.

Our inability to communicate and hear nature makes us feel that nature is silent. But Christopher Manes drives home the point that the nonhuman world functions through its own signifying systems which human beings do not want to acknowledge. Rigby says, 'The whole ecosystem might be said to be sustained by complex networks of communication and exchange between species and non-biological elements of their environment.' This tendency to restrict language only to the speaking subject that is a human being is a result of the rise of literacy which associated communication to human practice of writing. David Abram argued that this is when human language and culture was liberated from the natural world. But this liberation is illusory as the languages that we have developed bear the traces of 'more ancient and complex signifying systems of nonhuman nature' and 'the natural environment in which they evolved'.

Jonathan Bates argues that a specifically literary use of language can reconnect us to the natural world in the final chapter of *The Song of the Earth*. He feels the metrical writing of poems is the best source of reconnecting with the natural world because it 'answers to nature's own rhythms'. Poetry, according to this, does not 'name things in order to make them available for use, but rather in order to disclose their being in language'. Poetry thus 'becomes a refuge for nature, for the letting be of Being'. The best ecopoetry according to Bates is one which is not overtly political. Poetry becomes ecopoetic 'through its disclosure within the realm of *logos* of the earth as our *oikos*, or dwelling place. It is in this sense that poetry might be said to be 'the place where we save the earth'. Yet, there is a definite strain in the relationship of *logos* and *oikos*, 'the world of word and the earth which sustains it, but from which it also departs'. The poet lives in *logos* rather than in *oikos*.

While it is important to place human language within the framework of 'more-than-human' language, it is equally pertinent to remember that there is more to the natural world which can never be expressed through human language.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is a good example of Native American nature writing thought it does not qualify for the European concept of the nature writing genre. Yet, relations between nature and humans is fundamental to the narrative of the novel. Awareness of the interrelatedness of man and nature permeates the novel. Like other Native American novelists, Silko contrasts the Euro-American and Native American attitude toward nature and also demonstrates the alienation of the Indians themselves from their environmental

heritage. Oppression of nature, Silko suggests, goes hand in hand with oppression according to race, gender and class. Indeed, one of the distinctive qualities of Silko's novel in the context of nature writing is its account of the hero's attempt to rediscover through his ancestors his responsibility toward the natural environment. In the novel, language (that unique characteristic that distinguishes humans from other animals) and nature are inextricably connected. The obligation of being human is to see the human connection to nature and to speak it, to tell the earth's story.

Applying ecology or ecological concepts and themes to literary criticism proves to be an enhancing process to literary studies. Contemporary novels already make use of parallel paradigms between ecology and literature which awaits detailed critical exploration and evaluation in terms of an interdisciplinary approach of ecocriticism.