

Ecocriticism as a Reappraisal of Romanticism

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a contemporary theory of analysing art or literature. The green criticism studies literature from nature's perspective. When environment is hot cake topic of the time, ecocriticism gains rapid popularity. The present study explores how study of nature evolves down the ages from Romanticism to Ecocriticism and how ecocriticism turns to be a modified version of Romanticism. There is a wide gap of almost two centuries between the movements. Yet there are some similarities that validate the claim that Ecocriticism is the reappraisal of romanticism in as broader sense. The rudiments of ecocriticism are found in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Southey, Clare and many other poets of the romantic age. The paper is an attempt to explore the ecocritical praxis of the Romantic Literature in general.

Keywords- Ecocriticism, Romanticism, Nature, Environment, Literature

Introduction

Literary study witnessed a paradigm shift towards the end of the Twentieth Century when nature writing got a new dimension. Before that the contemporary criticism was based on socio-centric, historical or psychological issues. With the publication of two seminal works- *Environmental Imagination* and *Ecocriticism Reader* both in 1996 a new theory called Ecocriticism came out as an academic discipline. It is an earth-centric approach to nature writing in an age of global environmental crisis. But is ecocriticism an absolutely new theory? Nature writing prevailed long before ecocriticism came into existence and it got its momentum during the Romantic Age when most of the poets wrote using the modal of "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". Being dissatisfied with the surrounding world the Romantic poets looked back to the glorious ages of the past and search imputes for writings when their imagination got recollected in tranquillity. So it is nature which was the centre of attraction of the romantics. Gradually nature writing began to wane during Victorian conflict of doubt and faith. During the colonial and post-colonial period the trend of literature was somewhat different. But the latter half of twentieth century again witnessed a prone to nature writing when environmental issues arose in literature. The world wide environmental crisis like tsunami, frequent earthquake, melting of polar ice, flash-flood etc. created an

anxiety among the people round the globe. Here comes the role of ecocritics to create an ecological awareness among the readers. Ecocriticism debates nature in-order to defend nature an important subject of Romantic Literature. Although the flavour is different now, the subject is same, i.e., nature. In short, it's a new wine packed up in old bottles.

Romanticism vs. Ecocriticism

With the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 a new trend of writing arose. It was commonly known as Romanticism which continued up to 1832. William Wordsworth wrote the preface which was treated as a manifesto of English Romantic Movement. The great Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and others adhere to Rousseau's call of Return to Nature. Thus Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* and *Immortality Ode* are the best example of nature poetry. Shelley *Adonis* is written in the pastoral tradition. Keats' poetry is an appreciation of sensuous attitude to nature. Many years after Ecocriticism arose as an academic discipline keeping in tune with the romantic tradition of nature writing. Glotfelty considers ecocriticism as a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. The only difference is that the environmental disorder which is the prime concern of the ecocritics was absent during the Romantic Period. In fact, Ecocriticism is re-thinking nature in view of the global environmental crisis. Kevin Hutchings writes,

One of ecocriticism's basic premises is that literature both reflects and helps to shape human responses to the natural environment. By studying the representation of the physical world in literary texts and in the social contexts of their production, ecocriticism attempts to account for attitudes and practices that have contributed to modern-day ecological problems, while at the same time investigating alternative modes of thought and behavior, including sustainable practices that would respect the perceived rights or values associated with non-human creatures and ecological processes. (Kevin Hutchings 2007 172)

Return to Nature

The prime concern of both the Romantics and the Ecocritics is man in the midst of nature. In the age of Prose and Reason, nature writing lost its vitality to the socio-centric issues. The poetry of Dryden and Pope was a replica of contemporary society. But the Romantics took shelter in the open lap of nature in order to escape from the evils of social system. Having been disillusioned by the excess of the French Revolution, the Romantics turns to nature writing which lost its vitality in the preceding ages. But the human nature interconnection is greatly highlighted by the ecocritics. Ecocriticism strives hard to reconnect man's lost relationship with nature. In nature hides the essence of our existence; therefore, to pay utmost importance to nature is the ecocritics' preference. Like Wordsworth, the ecocritics believe that nature does never betray the heart that loves her. If the humans take good care of nature, it will also in turn take good care of them.

Mysticism Vs Ecotheology

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Mysticism is a trademark of Wordsworth's poetry as he believed that love, joy and kindness cannot survive without mystic forces of nature. His "Tintern Abbey" deals with the concept of mysticism,

"We are laid asleep in body,
And become a living soul;
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony,
And the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things" (lines 45-49).

The ecocritics also deal with the theology of nature; thus a term ecotheology arises. The term focuses on the relationship between religion and nature particularly in the light of environmental concern. Ecotheology underlines that there exists an interrelationship between spiritual worldviews and the degradation of nature.

Common man theory

Ecocriticism pleads for the simplicity because simple living reduces the consumerist approach. This also helps in the preservation of nature due to less use of natural resources. Nature should not be exploited except urgent vital needs of the humans. The Romantics also used common man as the characters of their writings. Thus Lucy, the innocent village girl and the solitary reaper, the peasant woman, Michael, the shepherd get a place in Wordsworth's poetry.

The animals

Ecocriticism advocates the preservation of animals that are the indispensable part of the ecosystem. Every organism has its role to play in order to keep up ecological balance. According to Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything." The romantic poets also have made use of animals in their writings. Wordsworth and Shelley have written beautiful poems on the Skylark. Keats has written a beautiful ode on Nightingale bird. Like ecocriticism, Romantic literature also explores the interconnection between the human and the non-human and often focuses on the animals extending our moral obligations towards animal rights.

Preservation

The ecocritics want the preservation of nature so that "the song of the earth" may go on forever. The Romantic Movement was a reaction against the environmental destruction during the Industrial revolution after the renaissance. During the Romantic era the reality of species extinction came to consciousness. Gilbert White has dealt with an observation that excessive hunting had removed the local populations of partridges and red deer (*The Natural History of Selborne*)

Spiritualism

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Ecocriticism does not only pay external importance to nature rather the movement pleads for the inherent worth of natural environment. The ecocritics look upon nature as a living spirit which has a pervading influence on all beings. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Robert Frost- all considered nature on a spiritual level. The romantics also deal with the spiritual aspects of nature. Thus Keats is known for his Hellenism, Shelley for pantheism and Wordsworth for mysticism.

Deep Ecology

The core principle of ecocriticism is deep ecology which pays equal importance to all organisms irrespective of their instrumental value. Every object has an intrinsic importance which helps us to keep up ecological importance. The romantics have paid importance to the commonest objects of nature. They with a certain colouring of their imagination have made the most ordinary things look uncommon. Thus, the common bird, the river, the green field, the hill, the mountains, the rain, the wind- all get a place in the romantic poetry. Deep ecology criticises man's anthropocentric attitude that pays importance to the primacy of the humans. But all creatures deserve human respect because the environment constitutes a complex mutual relationship in which everything is connected to everything else (Commoner 33).

Romantic Ecology

Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* is a reaction against the trend of New Historicism in literary criticism. Bate states in the book attempts to situate Wordsworth in the modern tradition of 'Green' politics and an ecological perspective. He is arguing against the criticism of the sixties, seventies, and eighties in order to present Romantic Ecology as "a theory of ecosystems and unalienated labour" firmly rooted not in idealist and elitist texts, but in the pragmatic and populist texts of the time. (Bate 10). The main topics that Bate addresses in this text are the importance of nature to Wordsworth and the pastoral tradition, the notion of Ecology during the Romantic era, ecological ethics, and geography and place naming during the time period. Bate attempts to provide a "preliminary sketch towards a literary ecocriticism" (11). The ecocritics today turn their attention to question the degraded urban ecology and celebrates the rural or wilderness ethos. Thoreau in his *Walden* considers wilderness as a place to renew our 'self'. The romantic too disliked problematic city environment which was unlike the clean and uncrowded countryside. They denounced city as a place of human degradation and corruption. Wordsworth's "Michael" is a poem to value the rural way of life. The romantics considered the rural *oikos* as a place of human communitarian dwelling. On the other hand, they denounced the urban metropolis as a deracinated space of alienation.

Conclusion

Both Romanticism and Ecocriticism study nature from manifold perspective. The above discussion explores the manifold affinity between the two theories despite their apparent dissimilarities. Whereas Romantic attitude is highly imaginative, ecocritical

approach, on the other hand is out and out realistic. The chief aim of romantic literature is to hark back to the glorious ages of the past in order to escape to turmoil of the age. The romantics escape from the corrupt social system to take shelter in the ideal world of nature. The ecocritics also deal with nature but they work on the hard track of realism. They strive hard to save the mother earth from the global environmental crisis. It is true that the ecocritics are not the scientists who are working hard to invent a way to fix the hole in the ozone layer. The chief aim of the ecocritics is to rebuild the lost relationship between man and nature. An Ecocritical text always helps us develop an ecological wisdom which is not less important in restoring the fragile environmental health of the earth. Although there is a basic difference in romantic and Ecocritical attitude to nature, it must be admitted that the rudiments of ecocriticism are found in romanticism. If Henry David Thoreau is considered to be the father of ecocriticism, William Wordsworth may also be regarded as the grandfather of ecocriticism for his notable contribution to environmental literature. Nature is at its best in Wordsworth's poetry that treats it not as a background but as a guiding soul of mankind. The great Romantic Movement was a reaction to the large scale deforestation and environmental depletion of the Age of Reason. There is a tinge of environmental protection in Romantic Literature giving a claim that Ecocriticism is the reappraisal of Romanticism.

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