



Does the Earth Belong to Us, or Do We Belong to the Earth? : A Note on Ecocriticism

Tejaswini Behera,

M.A., M.Phil.

Lecturer in English

Bhuban Women's College, Dhenkanal, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Email: tejaswinibehera11@gmail.com

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0565-5869>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53724/jmsg/v4n3.02>

Prajna Panigrahi

Senior Lecture In English, DDCE, Utkal University

Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Abstract

Ecocriticism aims to bring a transformation of literary studies by linking literary criticism and theory with the ecological issues in a wide scale giving a call to literature to connect to the issues of today's environmental crisis, deforestation, and the depletion of the natural resources because of man's overriding greed for material possession and intense dislike for nature. In other words, ecocriticism is directly concerned with both nature and the environment.

Key words: Ecocriticism, nature, deforestation, Issues of belonging, Conflict between machines and man.

Ecocriticism aims to bring a transformation of literary studies by linking literary criticism and theory with the ecological issues in a wide scale giving a call to literature to connect to the issues of today's environmental crisis, deforestation, and the depletion of the natural resources because of man's overriding greed for material possession and intense dislike for nature. In other words, ecocriticism is directly concerned with both nature and the environment.

Eco-criticism evolved as a study of the relationship between literature and the natural environment in the middle part of 1990's. Eco-criticism is a term derived from Greek "oikos" and "kritis". "Oikos" means "household", a nexus of humans, nature and the spirit. "Kritis" means judge, "the arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order" (Howarth 1988:163) Being a new form of literature, different thinkers and critics have used the approach and defined the term in different ways. Eco-criticism is taken as an interdisciplinary study of literature and environment where all sciences come together to analyse the environment and arrive at possible solutions for the contemporary environmental situation.

Eco-criticism officially emerged after the publication of two critical works written in the 1990's, *The Eco-criticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. Cheryll Glotfelty is the acknowledged founder of Ecocritics in the United States of America. As a pioneer she says:

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 readings of texts, eco-criticism takes an earth centred approach to literary studies (1996:xviii)

Cheryll Burgess Glotfelty as the first American professor of literature and environment at the University of Nevada, Reno, asks questions such as how is nature represented in literature and how is science itself open to literary analysis. Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (1998) complements to Buell's work by discussing the nature of nature in ecocriticism. Richard Kerridge's *Writing the Environment* (1998) adds more emphasis on eco-critical study as a branch of literature. Besides Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty and William Howarth, Glen A. Love, William Rueckert, Suellen Compbell, Simon C. Estok, Michael P. Branch are equally wellrenowned and committed ecocritics of USA.

Lawrence Buell defines eco-criticism in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) as "The environmentally oriented study of literature and the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such practice" (138). He identifies two phases at ecocriticism. While the first wave ecocritics upheld the philosophy of organism, the second wave ecocritics inclined towards environmental justice issues.

Ecocriticism is concerned with nature writing and ecological themes. Since Vedic times in india and the early Greek period, the preservation of nature was the important thought for all. As an academic stream it began in the 1990's. But it originates in the late 1970's, when the western Literature Association of America arose the concept of ecocriticism and what ecocriticism signifies. Because it is a new area of study, there is no analysis of nature in literature, but a move towards broadening man's concept of nonhuman life forms and the physical environment Gray syneder uses the term "Gift Economy" in *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) to bring a fresh perspective to the meaning of ecology.

In Greg Garrad's opinion ecocritics may not be qualified to contribute to debates about "problems in ecology" but "they must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ecological literacy as far as possible" (*Ecocriticism* 2004:5 David mazel announces in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) that ecocriticism is the analysis, of literature as through nature mattered.

Our reading of environmental literature should help us realize that the concerns are not exclusively of the order of "shall these trees be cut? Or shall trees River be

damned? what has counted as environment and what may count? Who works off the conceptual boundaries and under what authority and for what reasons... These are the levels on which I would like to see ecocriticism theorize the environment. (1996:143)

Peter Barry included a chapter titled “Ecocriticism” in the second edition of his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and cultural theory* (2002). According to him ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, throughout human cultural history. Its focus moves away from man centered to earth centered and from the inner to the outer.

Historian Donald Worster explains the question how one can contribute to environmental restoration. Similarly in philosophy, various subfields like environmental ethics, deep ecology, ecofeminism and social ecology have emerged in an effort to understand the right relations with the earth.

William Rueckert who coined the term ecocriticism in 1978 in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism“, Wrote that ecocriticism entailed “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live”. (*The Ecocriticism Reader*1996:107). Rueckert’s definition includes all possible relations between literature and the physical world, like the environmental ethics, deep ecology, ecofeminism and social ecology.

Ernst Heinrich Haeckel, a German biologist and philosopher of evolution, used for the first time the term ecology in 1876. “Ecology” is a term derived for German “oecologie”, meaning “the branch of biology that deals with the relationship between living organism and their environment. (Jonstom 2000:193). According to selvamony “the oikos describes the natural, the cultural and the sacred” (2003:314). Therefore, ecology is not a binary relationship between an organism and the environment, rather it is the interrelationship among the environment, society and the individual which is together called “Oikiocriticism” or “Oikopoetics”

Ecocriticism is the criticism of the “house”, the environment, as represented on literature. “Environment” refers to the totality of the physical surroundings, circumstances, conditions on the earth as affected by human activity. A biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment is called ecosystem. The basic concept of ecology is that everything is interrelated without the awareness of the readers and writers for a long time. However in the last few years it has gained momentum to draw the attention of the intellectuals, academics, writers and scientists.

In 1990 the University of Nevada, Reno, created the first academic position in literature and environment. In 1991, the modern Language association arranged a special session chaired by Harold Fromm, entitled “Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary studies” and in 1992 a session chaired by Glen

Love, entitled “American Nature writing: New contexts, New approaches.” In 1992 at the annual meeting of the western Literature Association, a new Association for the study of Literature and environment (ASLE) was formed where Scott Slovic was selected as the first president. Within one year ASLE had more than 300 members and in 1995 its members numbered over 750 and held its first conference in the same year. Today it has grown to a membership of 1004 from different parts of the world having its own journal called Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) where the scholars express their ecocritical ideas before the world in a different and distinct manner. The mission of ASLE is “to promote the exchange of ideas and information related 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 literature and interdisciplinary environmental research”.

The entire end we can say as ecocriticism is by nature inter-disciplinary, it draws the attention on environmental studies, the natural sciences and cultural and social studies. The awareness of ecocriticism has been there since the dawn of civilization. The poets, artists and thinkers have been emphasizing the close relation between man and nature from times eternal. Finally through the help of the above writers and thinkers of USA ecocriticism got its unique and different space in the study of literature as a different branch. And since then scholars of different countries have been getting the scope to study nature and culture through forms such as nature writings, art, ecocritical scholarship, poetry and creative writing and seeks to explore the relationship between human beings and natural world.

Works Cited

1. Buell, L. (1995). *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, London: Princeton University Press. (2001). Print.
2. ---. (2003 Kindle edn) *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century*, London; Routledge.
3. Bunce, M. (1994) *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape*, London: Routledge. Print.
4. Burke, E. (1990) *A Philosophical Enquiry in to Origin of Our Ideas if the Sublime and the Beautiful* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Print.
5. Callenbach, E. (1998) *Ecology: A Pocket Guide* London: University of California Press. Print.
6. Callicott, J.B. (1983) ‘Traditional American Indian and traditional Western European attitudes towards nature: an overview’, in R. Elliot and A. Gare (eds) *Environmental Philosophy, Milton Keynes*, Open University Press. (1995) ‘Animal Liberation: a Triangular affair’, in R. Elliot (ed.) *Environmental Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Print.
7. Campbell, S. (1998) ‘Magpie’, in R. Kerridge and N. Sammells (eds) (1998) *Writing the Environment*, London: Zed Books. Print.
8. Carson, R. (1999) *Silent Spring*. London: Penguin. First Published in 1962. Cather, W. (2000) *Oh Pineers!* London: Virago. Print.
9. Clare, J. (1986) *John Clare: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. M. Williams and R. Williams, London: Methuen. Print.
10. Glotfelty, C. (1996) ‘Introduction’ in C. Glotfelty and H. Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks In Literary Ecology*, London: University of Georgia Press. Print.
11. Jeffers, R. (1987) *Selected Poems*, Manchester: Carcanet. Print.
12. Muir, J. (1992) *The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books*, London: Diadem Books. Print.
13. Slovic, S. (1992) *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press. Print.
14. Sullivan, R. (1998) *The Meadowlands: Wilderness Adventures on the Edge of a city*, London: Anchor Print.