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ECO CRITICISM- LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT IN INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS – A PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Eco criticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. As a separate movement or school of literary criticism, Eco criticism started developing in the 1990s. There is a close relation between Eco criticism and literature. It is an interdisciplinary study of Ecology and Literary Criticism which is unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. By analogy, Eco criticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. This paper discusses the term Eco criticism and the role of Eco criticism in literature. It cites examples of how the theme of Eco criticism can be interpreted through the reading of three India novels, namely, Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya, Cry, the Peacock by Anita Desai and The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh. This research paper to be discussed “Eco-Criticism, Literature and Environment in Indian English Novels”.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Literary Criticism, Ecopoetics, Ecological Principle, Supernatural Elements, Humankind Nature, Environmental Literature.

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

“The Environment is everything that isn’t me”

Albert Einstein

The word Eco criticism is a semi neologism [Buell 1999: 1091]. Eco is short of ecology, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. The relationship between man and nature is not just interdependent but also interrelated. By analogy, Eco criticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. The term Eco criticism has a broad domain and has been expressed through many literary genres. Some of the most widely known ecocritics, are Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Howarth, William Rueckert, Suellen Campbell, Michael P. Branch and Glen A. Love. The word Eco criticism first appeared in William Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978. However, it was only in the 1990s that Eco criticism emerged as a separate discipline although it is a fact that the relationship between man and his physical environment had always been interesting to literary critics. The interest is at the scientific level as well as various forms of literary expressions. Human beings have a natural quest to find their „roots. and be a part of the natural environment that they belong to. But the same time, they have overexploited natural resources and exploited nature to its fullest.

Eco criticism is a branch of literary criticism which has is being discussed worldwide as an interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment. It covers the study of subjects like science, literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology etc and attempts to study the attitude of mankind towards nature. Some popular names for this relatively new genre are ecopoetics, green culture and environmental literary criticism. It is study in which has invoked the interest of scholars worldwide.

Eco criticism is not only the application of ecology and ecological principles but also the study of literature and theoretical approach to the interrelations of nature, culture and sometimes even supernatural elements in nature. It attempts to explore the expressions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse. It is also a study of language through which literature is expressed.

Nature and Literature

There has been a close relationship between nature and literature. This relationship has been reflected through writers and poets throughout different cultures across the world. A variety of novels, poems and other expressions of literature been depicted on the backdrop of issues concerning nature. Today, environments issues have become a matter of concern for many departments and disciplines of knowledge and development. It is an interesting study for a literary critic to study the texts of writers who have



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discussed the close relationship between man and nature. Ecology and Eco criticism have become important terms in today's literary expressions. Many authors have expressed their concern for nature due to the cupidity of human beings and growing population.

In many literary works in English, nature has been a prime issue. Colonialism has been a significant factor in the devastation of environment worldwide. The transformation in the social and cultural environments of the world have completely changed the representations of man's attitude towards nature in literary expressions. Eco criticism is a rapidly expanding area of research covers wide range of texts and theories which study the relationship of man and nature. Environmental studies in literary texts through nature imagery, gender construct, feminism, man-woman relationship, tourism, culture etc have wider meanings than what is portrayed through their literal expressions.

In Indian writings in English too there are many literary books that reflect the theme of Eco criticism in them. There are many ways that authors have explored environmental issues. In some books it is central to the book, while in others, it is secondary to the narrative and other themes. The rest of the paper attempts to understand Eco criticism through some Indian English novels.

Nectar in the Sieve

A deep-rooted feeling of Rukmani with elements of rural life Kamala Markandeya's novel Nectar in a Sieve (1954) describes the female protagonist Rukmani's attempt to retrieve and revive elements of her families. rural life and a strong sense of rootedness to their land. Both, she and her husband toil on the land and have a special sense of belonging to it. However, their sole dependency on this piece of land for survival is also a cause of their poverty. The relationship between land and Rukmini becomes an important insight into understanding Rukmini's sense of belonging to her rural. environment. The very beginning of the novel focuses the relationship between Rukmini, the land and her rural environment. This is how Rukmani recalls her early married days: "While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for?."(Markandeya 8).

Rukmini associates her husband's praise for her beauty with the beauty that she sees in her fields. However, this harmony with nature that she associates her rural life with is extremely short lived. Very soon modern technology which takes man away from nature and ultimately completely destroys their relationship with nature enters the life of Rukmini.s family. The tannery symbolizes of modernity. It transforms both, the environment and the economic conditions of the village. It also brings about a drastic change in the relationships between the villagers. While Kunthi is glad about the tannery, Rukmani sees it as a threat to the village life. The Tannery became the main factor for the loss of her three sons. The tannery helped Arjun, Thambi, and Raja to deal with the dire poverty that they were struggling with. While it created employment for them, it also took them away from their family members, thus, degrading the importance of their family life.

Nature Imagery in Cry the Peacock

The connection between nature and man is crucial in Anita Desai's novel Cry, the Peacock (1963). The unexplored female psyche is explored through nature imagery in this novel. Desai uses myriad images of botanical, zoological, meteorological and actions representing colors to represent the state of my mind of Maya, the female protagonist of the novel. The nature imagery in this novel explores the emotional world of Maya, explores her psychology and unravels her distorted world. The images used are bitter, miserable and painful. They reveal Mayas sensitive personality which drives her almost insane towards the end of the novel.

The animal images used in the novel introduce the theme of alienation which ultimately leads to the death motif as the primary indicators of Maya.s psychic disorder: „All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved on to the veranda for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms. Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and the crows will eat anything – entrails, eyes, anything. (Desai 7) The use of the botanical images relates to Maya's barrenness. Her infertility is another reason for her neurotic behavior. She notices: „Leafless, the fine tracery on the naked Neem trees revealed unsuspected, so far carefully concealed, nests, deserted by the birds.... Down the street, the silk-cotton trees were the first to flower: their huge, scarlet blooms, thick petaled, solid- podded ... then dropped to the asphalt and were squashed into soft, yellowish miasma, seemed animal rather than flowerage, so large were they, so heavy, so moist and living to the touch. (Desai 34) Maya realizes the polarity of sensibilities between her and her husband Gautam. Her desire to lead a fruitful life would never be fulfilled with him. She is like „the beds of petunias...sentimental irresolute flowers, while Gautama resembles „the blossoms of the lemon tree ...stronger, crisper character. (Desai 21-22). Her sexual dissatisfaction with Gautam is quite evident and she identifies herself with the peacocks that keep „pacing the rocks at night- peacocks searching for mates, peacocks tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in the act of love, peacocks screaming with- agony at the death on love. (Desai 146).



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The albino astrologer's prediction of the imminent death of either Gautama or herself compels Maya to choose life or death and put an end to her mental trauma. While she contemplates her own death, she also rationalizes the thought of murdering Gautam who is the root cause of her unfulfilled desires. The astrologer's warning plays on her psyche and she constantly thinks of ways to execute the crime. She justifies her thoughts and finally decides to murder Gautam at the first opportunity available to her: He had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact? What would it matter to him? It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rain clouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror. (Desai 149) Thus, Desai exploits the wreck less nature imagery to heighten the pernicious influence of Maya on Gautam.

The Hungry Tide: Ecological Issues in Indian English Fiction Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005) is one of the first Indian novel to strongly raise ecological issues in Indian. Ghosh's novel reveals the interactions between the state, the poor, the fauna and flora, and the physical environment, and in doing so this work highlights both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that were inherent in the conservation efforts in the Sundarbans. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity.

The friction between land and the sea in the Sundarbans creates a constant friction between the plant and animal life. Man's constant encroachment of the ecosystems of the Sundarban's only justify the tensions between the various elements of nature. The *Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, an island in the Bay of Bengal which is not just beautiful but also fascinating. For settlers, the Sundarbans offer an extremely unpredictable and insecure life. Unrest and eviction are constant threats and attacks by tigers are most common. Tidal floods destroy the stability of life on the island without any warning.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* constantly discusses the conflict between man and nature in the context of the Sundarbans in India and Bangladesh. The novel reflects the conflicts between the residents and the aquatic and wild life of the Sundarbans. Amitav Ghosh has warned mankind against the overt exploitation of nature. The Tide Country is a harsh landscape, full of peril and death in many forms. „At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (Ghosh 7). Rajender Kaur in his essay on *The Hungry Tide* titled, "Home Is Where the Oracella Are" says, „Ghosh's selection of the Sundarbans for his setting was aptly chosen. (Kaur 127).

Chinua Achebe's Novels and Ecocriticism

For a colonial people, the most fundamental value, since the most real, is first and foremost the land: the land that will offer them sustenance and, above all, dignity, said Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. (34) *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe depicts this spiritual relationship between the Igbos and their natural surroundings, a relationship that extended beyond outward physical correspondence. Set in the village of Umofia, Achebe presents nature as a full-fledged character in the novel, rather than merely a backdrop. He portrays nature as a living creature that interacts with the characters in the storey. The Igbos' physical actions and mental thoughts are formed by their surroundings, indicating that the concept of exploiting nature for their own profit is unthinkable to them. Achebe demonstrates how the Igbos' agricultural existence, religious beliefs, festivals, worldviews, and human life are all entwined with nature. First and foremost, distinct individual and communal activities noticed in different seasons must be mentioned. During the planting and harvest seasons, the Igbo's followed stringent restrictions. They thought that any deviation from nature's direction would cause the earth to be dissatisfied. Maintaining the 'week of calm,' for example, was required before to the first yam planting. Because yam was a holy meal to the Igbos, they treated it with great reverence prior to its cultivation.

They thought that maintaining peace at home and in society kept the land happy, resulting in a healthy crop. As a result, when Okonkwo, the protagonist, violated the sacredness of the week by assaulting his wife, he was forced to pay a terrible price to make up for the harm he had caused to nature. One of Okonkwo's neighbours chastised him, saying, "You know as well as I do that before we plant any crops in the ground, our predecessors commanded that we should observe a week in which a man does not speak a harsh word to his neighbour." We live in harmony with our neighbour's to respect our great earth goddess, without whose blessing our crops would perish. You have done a terrible thing. (From "Things Fall Apart," no. 30.) Igbos did not labour on the land during the "week of peace."

The Igbo's habit of keeping the ground away from any activity demonstrated their deep respect for nature, which they viewed as a living person in need of rest before embarking on a year of labour. Following the 'week of peace,' both men and women, as well as the soil, got exceedingly busy planting and growing fresh yams. The New Yam Festival was once again commemorated with zeal,



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since it was an opportunity to express gratitude to Ani, the soil goddess and source of all fertility. Ani had a stronger impact on the people's lives than any other god. She was the last arbiter of morals and behaviour. (36) The Igbos' reverence for their forefathers was indicative of their deep affection for the country. Their forefathers were native to the area. Achebe writes on the community's burial site, saying, "The realm of the living was not far distant from the kingdom of the ancestors." Between them, there was a lot of coming and leaving... (122) As a result, the community's deceased members became part of the land. This dynamic land model stretches from the past to the future in a genealogical manner. (DeLughrey. 6) As a result, nature was An. The Igbos have used the term to cover both living and non-living members of the society. The land did not just belong to the current generation; it also belonged to the predecessors and future generations. Nature was divine to the Igbos. Trees, rivers, hills, caves, and several other natural elements have divine powers. Ani was the goddess of the soil and fertility, Amadiora was the thunder deity, Ufiojioku was the harvest god, and Anyanwu was the sun god. Igbo believed in the Oracle of Hills and Caves and faithfully followed its commands. There was a mention of a revered large antique silk-cotton tree. In the tree, spirits of virtuous children awaited their birth. Young ladies seeking children came to sit in its shade on ordinary days. (46) Igbo's thought that the divine nature controlled human life from conception to death, and even after death, and that any disruption of the natural environment indicated that life was being disrupted. Any event that seemed abnormal, such as twins, illnesses like smallpox and leprosy, suicide, and so on, were dealt with in a variety of ways. Igbos had a protected place called the Evil Forest where they put such people in such instances. Nature was entrusted with things that were unfathomable or beyond control. Again, Achebe demonstrates how the geography influenced the Igbo's language. As an oral civilization, Igbos employed a variety of oral methods i Proverbs such as 'Okonkwo's popularity had spread like a bushfire in the harmattan' (2), 'A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing', 'Obierika's house is as busy as an ant hill', and a slew of others were affected by their surroundings. To make his argument, Achebe combines a multitude of myths and traditional stories. The storey of the Cosmic Quarrel between Earth and Sky, the Locust myth, the Mosquito myth, the folk tale of the Tortoise and Birds, and so on, all show how their folktales were influenced by the land and terrain. The post-colonial ecology of Things Fall Apart is obvious in the way that language evolves in a lengthy historical connection to a specific environment and culture, DeLoughrey argues.

As a result, nature moulded the Igbo's mental makeup, which was mirrored in their language. n their discussion, including as proverbs, sayings, riddles, stories, and so on. The Igbos' connection to environment was conveyed by frequent allusions to flora and animals. Egbo's as shown by the language. After painting a detailed picture of pre-colonial Igbo society, Achebe goes on to explain how Christian missionaries and colonial authorities disparaged the local peoples' thinking. The missionaries, forerunners of colonial power, robbed nature and surroundings of any spiritual values held dear by the Igbos in their quest to preach Christianity. They attempted to persuade the locals to accept Christianity by claiming that the Igbo religion was pagan and that all of their religious beliefs were false. Mr. Brown, a missionary, sought to persuade people that nature lacked supernatural power and that there was only one God, Christ. You carve a piece of wood and call it God, he said. It is, however, still a chunk of wood. As a result, the missionaries disregarded and mocked all other natural deities. It may be argued that erecting a church by felling trees in the Evil Forest not only harmed Igbo religious beliefs, but also represented the devastation of environment in the sake of colonial expansion. It was an outrage against the earth when Okonkwo hanged himself in the last scene. Only strangers are allowed to touch his body because it is nasty. Because the Igbos thought that man should be a part of nature after death, Okonkwo, who killed himself against nature, did not deserve to be buried and hence should not be permitted to be a part of nature. By depicting the colonial rulers' rejection of the Igbos' profoundly revered ideals, Achebe's work foreshadows the beginning of what would be a tragic turn in the history of colonial exploitation. Things Fall Apart demonstrates that the act of abusing nature and destroying the ecosystem was motivated by colonial ideas that did not believe in the spiritual relationship between humans and nature.

In Arrow of God

While colonial exploitation was in its early stages in **Things Fall Apart**, it was at its peak in **Arrow of God**. The novel's setting is an Igbo community named Umuaro, which is now under colonial administration and is slowly but steadily infiltrating the Igbos' traditional way of life, undermining their age-old belief system. Again, we see a rural Igbo village living in harmony with nature. The Igbos' lives and livelihoods were centred on natural events. The presence of the moon in the night sky determined the harvest and planting of Igbo principal staple yam. Ezeulu, the novel's protagonist and the village's top priest, was in charge of watching the moon movement in order to record the passage of time and announce the harvest and planting seasons. The people were so reliant on nature that if Ezeulu failed to announce the sighting of the new moon, no harvest or plantation would be possible. Because the colonial rulers did not comprehend the seriousness of Ezeulu's role in the village, he was imprisoned for two months after refusing to be chosen as the warrant chief. As a result, he lost track of time and failed to announce the harvest season. As a result, when the entire community went hungry due to Ezeulu's failure to declare the crop on time, Christian missionaries offered to save them through conversion. Though the peasants were brought back to life, Christianity forced the harvest and planting of yam to lose its mystical importance. Another instance with the python highlighted the disintegration of the Igbos' deep link with the environment. The royal python was immensely important to the Igbos and was considered a symbol of divinity. An Ecocritical Approach to Chinua



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Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, on the other hand. Christian missionaries urged people to kill the python by referring to it as a simple snake, referring to it as "the serpent that misled our first mother, Eve." (48, Arrow of God) Oduche, Ezeulu's son, was moved by such statements to kill the python by imprisoning it in a box. Achebe demonstrates how various natural things including as rivers, hills, trees, and stones were used to preserve stories and legends. The tale about the stream Ota, for example, was a good illustration. Ota had been temporarily abandoned, according to the narrative, since "the gigantic boulder sitting on two other boulders near its source was going to tumble and would choose a softer pillow for its head..."

While Achebe uses a variety of different stories to demonstrate that nature is a living thing for the Igbos, he also implies that the colonial authorities did not find it attractive or welcome. He mentions how George Allen (the colonial official from Things Fall Apart), who is now the author of The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger, expressed his displeasure with Africa's natural abundance by referring to it as the "deadly fertility" (34) of the land in his book The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. The construction of a road between Umuaro and Okperi served as a model for future colonial initiatives aimed at connecting different regions of the territory primarily for the profit of the conquerors. Furthermore, the road signified the destruction of the land's lush woods, creating a physical scar on its surface. Despite the fact that the road reinforced the conquerors' mental picture of Africa by removing the continent's "deadly fecundity," the open space caused discomfort among the locals because "the sensation of openness and exposure made him [Obika] alert" (82). Destroying the forest means disrupting nature's flow by robbing the gods of their dwellings. The novel's conclusion represented the triumph of colonial authority, as the peasants were left with no choice but to accept Christianity and submit to colonial control. Harvesting yam in the name of the Christian deity meant the end of Igbo spirituality and the beginning of a western material civilization with no connection to nature. This signified the start of a new age in which the Igbos' holistic concept would be replaced by western notions of growth and progress (at the expense of nature and the environment). As a result, what was predicted in Things Fall Apart came true in Arrow of God.

Summing Up

We would like to state that presently Eco criticism engages with the logic of ecology and expressions of the theory. It seeks to inquire into its reach and studies the interdependence of man and nature. The study is a cautionary warning to mankind that the exploitation of nature over a period of time will lead to an outburst of nature. Nature imageries have been used by many writers to express the desires, shortcomings and emotions of their characters. Postcolonial Eco criticism might be useful in understanding current environmental deterioration. This critical study can provide new light on western development concepts, which have been blamed for worldwide environmental catastrophes under the garb of neocolonialism. A balanced vision of development is urgently needed, and postcolonial Eco criticism can help to achieve global justice and sustainability by examining themes related to nature and the environment in a variety of literary works.

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