



Original Article

Evolution of Ecocriticism: Background, Genesis and Current Perspective

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Abstract

The intersection of Humanity and Environment is one of the recurring themes of literature. Writers across the globe have always been fascinated by the diverse interactions between human civilization and the environment. In fact, literature not only depicts the beauty and significance of the natural world but also unearths the negative impact of human-centric approach to nature. However, in both classical Western literary tradition and Indian literary traditions, one may notice a harmonious and spiritual connection between humanity and nature. But with the coming of modernity and industrialization, anthropocentrism gained prominence and the reciprocal relationship between humanity and nature took a fatal turn, giving rise to gradual environmental degradation and global ecological crises. It is at this crucial juncture, especially as a reaction against man's anthropocentric attitude Ecocriticism emerged as a vital field of study during the second half of 20th century. Unlike Ecofeminism which endeavored to show an obvious link between the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women, Ecocriticism, though, born as literary theory, has traversed into other fields by the very nature of its critical inquiry into the various critical aspects of the Environment from different perspectives. In this sense it has now become an inter-disciplinary subject and tends to intersect with Environmental Science, Anthropology, Geology and other social sciences. This paper is an attempt to throw light on the evolution of Ecocriticism.

Keywords: Degradation, Anthropocentric, Industrialization, Exploitation, Ecofeminism.

Background and Genesis:

From the late 19th century to the present day, a growing consciousness regarding various critical environmental issues has emerged as a serious field of study. The reckless exploitation of natural resources by man has not only posed a potent threat to the life on Earth but also forced literary writers, Environmental Activists and Scientists across the globe for a serious discourse on how to save our environment and make it sustainable. To begin with, the 19th-century Romantic Movement with its pioneers like William Wordsworth and John Ruskin talked of the aesthetic and spiritual value of nature in their writings. They tried to depict nature as a means of solace and comfort. Then the Conservation Movement, which emerged in the late 19th century, championed the need for preserving natural resources. Subsequently during the Industrial era, to prevent the pollution of air and water, Clean Air Act of 1956 was enforced. Further, with the advent of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), William Rueckert's *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. (1978), Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*(1996), there developed an acute awareness relating to environmental degradation due to the harmful human activities like using of pesticides, cutting of trees and release of the toxic waste of industries to nature. In Indian context, movements like Chipko Movement and Narmada Bachao Movement stands as a testimony for the cause of healthy and sustainable environment.

It is in this backdrop, amidst critical ecological investigation and criticism, Ecocriticism, a new literary theory, emerged during the last quarter of 20th century. It is William Rueckert in his landmark essay, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. (1978) mentioned the term Ecocriticism, which simply referred to "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature."(Cheryll Glotfelty and Fromm Introductory Page: xx) This concept was further enhanced by the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992 and the subsequent publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's 1996 anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* gave an edge to it.

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This collection established the dimension of Ecocriticism as an emerging field of critical inquiry into the varied facets of environment. Ecocriticism as Glotfelty defined 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 the modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.” (Cheryll Glotfelty and Fromm, Introductory Page: xxiii). Eco-critics of the contemporary world tried to analyze how literary texts engaged with environmental issues, explored the cultural contexts of human-nature relationships, and fostered sustainable environmental management. According to Glen Love, Ecocriticism delved into the “inter-connections between the material world and human culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (1996). Thus evolved, this new critical theory, ventures to dissect literary texts with deep ecological implications. It has profoundly evolved beyond its initial engagement with nature writings simply concerned with the aesthetics of the pastoral and the sublime. With the progress of civilization Ecocriticism explored the urgent, often calamitous realities of the Anthropocene, the pressing global environmental concerns, the impact and effects of climate change, causes of mass extinction, environmental politics and resource extraction.

Current Perspective:

Today, Ecocriticism has entered its next level of evolution. It has now emerged to become an interdisciplinary subject and is rightly referred to by a new term, *Environmental Humanities*, “an interdisciplinary field that taps the expertise of the humanities and social sciences to address complex environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and contamination. This field understands environmental challenges as deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and human factors” (quoted from Environmental Humanities-Political-Material-Cultural Ecologies) The basic premise of Environmental Humanities, “represents a significant intellectual shift, acknowledging that addressing ecological challenges necessitates more than just scientific or technological solutions. At its core, the ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES can be simply DEFINED as an interdisciplinary field. This field unites the critical and interpretive approaches of the humanities and social sciences with the urgent need to understand and respond to environmental problems” (quoted from Term: Environmental Humanities). Interestingly the domain of Ecocriticism explores *Deep Ecology*, a philosophical movement solely concerned with the inclusiveness of plants, animals and the environment rather than the issue of human exploitations of nature. Eco-critics of 21st century explore the causes of climate change and talk about the interconnection of literature, environment and human culture. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, *Ecofeminism*, and *Political Ecology* are some of the emerging areas which eco-critics are now intensely involved in. Postcolonial Ecocriticism traverse the effects of environmental exploitations during the colonial era, on the health of the poor and the marginal communities.

Eco-feminism looks at the apparent gendered bias prevalent in the traditional narratives on environment and ventures to build an atmosphere of gender equality through environmental narratives. Political Ecology unearths the political and economic leanings that shaped the environmental narratives and tries to develop a culture of harmonious distribution of natural resources. In its more recent evolution new terms like Material Ecocriticism and Environmental Justice has pushed Ecocriticism towards new threads of environmental study. Material Ecocriticism is a new philosophy concerned with the agent of non-human elements of nature which is even more powerful than the humans. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann defines, “Material Ecocriticism is the study of the way material forms-bodies, things, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities-intra-act with each other with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories”(quoted from The Value of Ecocriticism , pp. 111 – 136). Environmental Justice is that aspect of Ecocriticism which draws our attention to the core issue of sustainable environment. The whole of the environment, including the human and non-human stakeholders are to be taken care of in equal terms. Looking at the diversity of Ecocriticism, Lenka Filipova writes, Ecocriticism is “a cultural enquiry into the desires and ideas which make up the many ways humans interact with the non-human environment, how human cultures construct and in turn are constructed by the non-human, and the belief that these very desires, ideas, ways of construction of the human and the non-human, and human ecological imagination are of crucial importance if we want to effectively address our ecological predicament”. (quoted from Hember’s article on What is Ecocriticism?)

Conclusion:

Ecocriticism that emerged as a branch of literary theory to simply look into the connection of nature and literature, has now established itself as a vibrant interdisciplinary branch of study with the sole intention of interpreting the critical interconnection of nature, culture and literature. With the emergence of *Environmental Humanities* the world now evaluates the cultural and ethical dimensions in everything. From Anthropocentrism, Ecocriticism has now moved towards Ecocentrism. With this, the term eco, is being attached to everything ranging from food items to the items connected with luxury, entertainment and lifestyle.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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