



An Ecocritical study of Ruskin Bond, Amitav Ghosh and Kiran Desai

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Abstract : *Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and environment. The human culture is also connected to the physical world affecting it and affected by it. A sense of concern for the environment and its reflection in literary texts has given rise to a new theory, Ecocriticism.*

In this research, Ecocriticism has been applied to Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide, Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss and Ruskin Bond's The Collection of Short Stories.

These novels deal with the beauty and power of nature.

They also incorporate a concern for ecology and the threat that continuous misuse of natural resources poses on humanity.

Key Words: *Ecological, Environment, Nature, Ecocriticism, Transplantation.*

Introduction:

In the words of Cheryl Glotfelty, "Ecocriticism is the relationship between literature and physical environment." (Barry 239).

Earlier theories in literary and cultural studies focused on issues of class, gender, region and criteria of critical analysis. The late twentieth century has woken up to a new threat: ecological disaster. In such a context, literary and cultural theories have begun to address the issue as a part of academic discourse.

Ecocriticism as a concept first arose in the late 1970s, at meetings of the Western Literature Association. The word 'ecocriticism' is traced back to William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: an experiment in eco-criticism" (1978). Ecocriticism in the U.S.A. has been influenced by the nineteenth century transcendentalists (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau), whereas Green Studies (the UK version of ecocriticism) is influenced by the British Romanticism.

There have been discussions on whether human culture could be included in the physical world. All ecological criticism share the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world affecting it and

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affected by it. Cheryll Glotfelty states in her article "Literary Critics and the Environmental Crisis", 'We need to make some connections between literature and the sun, between teaching literature and the health of the biosphere.' (qtd. by Shukla et al 8). A new term 'écoliterature' has also come up.

Wang Nuo and Zhang Bigui, have defined Ecoliterature in the following words, 'Ecoliterature is a kind of literature that uses ecological holism as its ideological base; considers the whole interest of the ecological of the highest value; inspects and represents the relationship between nature and man; and explores the social roots leading to the ecological crisis. The eco-responsibilities, the criticism of civilization, the eco-ideal and eco-warning are its outstanding features' (Shukla et al 51).

The question now is - what is ecocriticism? Scott Slovic states, 'Ecocriticism is the study of explicitly environmental texts (including literature, film, music, visual art, and popular media) from any critical perspective or the application of various environmental lenses (ranging from scientific ecology to the language and terminology of environmental justice scholarship) to any kind of "text," even material that presents no obvious statement about the more-than-human world or the relationship between the human and the non-human.' (Shukla et al 23)

The ecocritics are of the view that nature is present as an entity that can never be reducible to a concept. The focus of the practitioners of ecocriticism is on exploring human attitudes towards the environment as expressed in the literary texts. They examine the relations between the writers, their texts and the environment. Most ecological work have a common motivation – the awareness that the consequences of human action are threatening and damaging the earth's basic life support system. It is this awareness that leads us to help in environmental restoration. Anu Shukla, Rini Dwivedi and Sheobhushan Shukla state, 'Now

Biocentrism and not humanism is the highest motive before us and the motives of literature should be congruent with biospheric motives. Biocentric literature should aim at creativity and community and not anything else.' (8)

The ecocritics re-read literary texts with an Ecocritical view point giving particular attention to how the natural world is presented in these texts. They place emphasis on factual writing like essays, travel writing and regional literature. They also lay emphasis on the American transcendentalists and British Romantics.

Objective :

In this research the theory of ecocriticism will be applied to three writers of fiction – Ruskin Bond, Amitav Ghosh and Kiran Desai, with reference to *The Collection of Short Stories*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *The Inheritance of Loss* respectively.

This project will provide insight into the way the writers mentioned above have shown that ecology and society are closely linked with one another.

About the Texts: Two stories from Ruskin Bond's *The Collection of Short Stories* were selected for the purpose of this study. They are - *An Island of Trees* and *No Room for a Leopard*.

An Island of Trees

This work is in the form of a dialogue between Koki, the protagonist and her grandmother. The grandmother reveals to Koki the deep bond that grows between humans and non-human if there is love and compassion. Bond, in this story, emphasizes the friendly relationship between man and nature and brings out our need for each other. Bond is concerned with the excessive deforestation that is taking place and thus motivates the readers to save trees.

No Room for a Leopard

This story is about deforestation and its aftermath. Bond presents the pathetic condition of

the animals after deforestation. The story can be taken as a comment on the modern world and its lifestyle.

The Hungry Tide

This novel is about one of the most dynamic ecological systems of the world – the Sunderbans. It brings out the wrath of nature and the fragility of human beings who are at its mercy. The novel focuses on the ongoing tensions between the human beings and the environment in the Sunderbans. Some of the important characters are Piyali, a young biologist, Fokir, a young illiterate fisherman who helps Piyali in her research and Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi. River dolphins, the forests of Sunderbans, the flora and fauna of the region are inextricably woven into the drama of human destiny that is played out in the novel. Ghosh through this novel opposes the Sahara India Parivar's mega tourism project and talks about the violence meted out to the natives and the flora and fauna of the Sunderbans. The novel also describes a huge tidal wave that occurs at the end.

The Inheritance of Loss

Set in the backdrop of a rising insurgency, the novel traces the life of Jemubhai Patel, an embittered judge, Sai, his granddaughter, the cook and his son Biju. It presents Rachel Azima's concept of self-transplantation. In her book *Alien Soil: Ecologies of Transplantation in Contemporary Literature* Rachel Azima says she demonstrates how biodiversity may be put into dialogue with cosmopolitanism in order to keep xenophobia out of discussions about botanical aliens. Her project treats literary studies, botany and history as fields that can and should speak to one another. She finds botanical tropes and their consequences for both human and biotic communities providing crucial opportunity to investigate how authenticity, legitimacy, belonging and power all converge.

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss* crosses international boundaries and characters are

presented from a cross-cultural ecocritical perspective. The character Biju is trying to implant himself in the American soil by trying hard to get a green card, and in the process keeps transferring his ground from one restaurant in New York to another. The Nepalis living in Kalimpong are presented as trying to snatch belongingness by fighting for it. In their fight they do not hesitate in killing innocent animals. Desai presents inhumanity of the human world in this novel.

Findings :

After analyzing the works according to the Ecocritical theory we discovered following ecocritical aspects in the texts:

Ruskin Bond's Collection of Short Stories:

"An Island of Trees" and "No Room for a Leopard" are about the chain which binds man and nature, as in the chain of eco system, showing interdependence. Bond has emphasized on the friendly relationship between man and nature and he has brought before us our need for each other. That is why we notice his pity for unsympathetic and cruel action of human beings towards nature.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: The publication of *The Hungry Tide* played a crucial role in garnering worldwide support against the Sahara Project, which led the Central Ministry of Environment and Forests to terminate the project. The publication of the novel is in this sense political to the extent that the fictional narrative gave Ghosh the liberty to talk about the violence meted out to the natives and the flora and fauna of the Sunderbans. *The Hungry Tide* reveals how ecological concerns and conservation efforts served as a mere disguise to camouflage the pursuit of political ends. The words of Slovic become significant in this context. Scott Slovic in his keynote address delivered at IV World Conference on Environment and Literary Studies has said, 'Words can be wielded as a tool of activism and can contribute to social reform and environmental protection. Although written and oral expression can occur in a relatively values-

neutral manner, in the ecocritical context language typically tends to have at least a muted ideological message” (Shukla et al 25)

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss: The Inheritance of Loss* covers almost all the different concepts and definitions that have been put forth by various critics of eco-criticism. It is rich which eco-critical references and among the recent fictions it can be most aptly given an eco-critical reading. In the novel we begin and end with the Kanchenjunga mountain. If at the beginning it ‘was a far peak whittling out of ice’(1) at the end we are told ‘The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind luminous light that made you feel ,if briefly, that truth was apparent. / All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it.’ (324). The entire human drama is played out in the shadow of this mountain.

The novel also presents Rachel Azima’s concept of self-transplantation. Besides, it exemplifies a feature of Nuo and Bigui’s concept of Ecoliterature in that it inspects and represents the relationship between nature and man. For instance there is a description of butterflies which demonstrates the different dimensions of close connection existing between the human world and the natural world:

‘The Teesta valley was renowned for its butterflies, and specialists came from around the world to paint and record them. Rare and spectacular creatures depicted in the library volume *Marvelous Butterflies of the North-Eastern Himalayas* were flying about before their eyes. One summer, when she was twelve, Sai had made up names for them –”Japanese mask butterfly, butterfly of the far mountain, Icarus falling from the sun butterfly, butterfly that a flute set free, kite festival butterfly”- and written them into a book labelled “My Butterfly Collection “ and accompanied the names with illustrations’.(216)

Conclusion :

The writers in their works have focused on the deep bond that grows between humans and non-humans. They provide insight into how ecology and society are interlinked and this motivates all to think on possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environment problems.

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