

# Saarth

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### Ecocriticism in Indian Literature

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#### Introduction

Since time immemorial literature has been mirroring the various incidents that have shaped the course of history for mankind. Thus it is no surprise that literature should document the relationship that exists between man, environment and nature. With the evolution of man from a bipedal mammal to modern technologically advanced man and his relationship with the environment. One major reason for this is the global environmental crisis that threatens the life system on earth, one that is well documented in its various manifestations of industrial pollution, resource reduction and population explosion. Literature might prove to be a useful and powerful tool not only to have a historical understanding of the man/nature relationship but might also influence the way man treat nature in future.

The modern environmentalist movement as it emerged first in the late nineteenth century and, in its more recent manifestation, in the 1960s, gave rise to a rich range of fictional and nonfictional writings alarmed with humans' changing relationship to the natural world. Only since the early 1990s, however, has the curiosity of literature studies commonly known as "ecocriticism".

The word 'ecocriticism' first appeared in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Dr. Mark's in this context first differentiate between ecology and environment. He says that ecology is mostly used by humanists as a metaphor for describing the natural world. In this sense, ecology is a way of thinking about nature. Environment, on the other hand, he considers as a more inclusive term that describes the natural and human world.

Ecologically sensitive issues can be traced in Western literature in as early as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and in Eastern literatures such as the various sacred texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism and the various fables and folklores associated with those cultures. The literary critic tries to study how this close relationship between nature and society has been combined by the writers in their works. At present ecocriticism is in full swing and is a readily accepted theory worldwide.

#### Ecocriticism in Poetry

One of the strategies with which the postcolonial poet/critic writes back against the empire is by the use of themes in his poems about his own nature, landscape and ecology. This has been a central feature in the poems of most poets of the postcolonial nations like Africa, Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Sri Lanka etc.

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Notwithstanding the experimentation with themes in recent poem in Indian English, the attitude towards the nature, environment and ecology were mainly that of a pastoral impulse or an aesthetic appreciation of nature. As Vinayak Krishna Gokak puts it in the "Introduction" to The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglican Poetry, "Indo-Anglican poets have loved to write about and also the philosophic or mystical attitude with which they have responded to Nature." Thus Toru Dutt's The Lotus, Our Casuarinas Tree, S.K Chettur's Red Lotus, R.R Shreshta's Coconut-palms, Juhu Beach, M.S Iswaran's The Neem is a Lady, Manmohan Ghose's Poplar, Beech, and Weeping Willow, Greece C. Dutt's Kanchun Junga and the Terai, Rabindranath Tagore's Breezy April, Sarojini Naidu's Summer Woods all depict "the unique loveliness of the Indian scene and the freshness of vision with which it is perceived."(Gokak 31)

However, despite the use of nature and the environment as the explicit theme in their poems, Indian poems in English has refrained itself from portraying the gradual deterioration of the earth's environment and ecology. Indian English poems such as Dilip Chitre's The Felling of the Banyan Tree, Gieve Patel's On Killing a Tree, Baldoon Dhingra's Factories are Eyesore, and Boat-Ride along the Ganga by Keki N. Daruwalla. Though the poems speak of the deterioration of a particular region, geography, locale, environment and ecology, it is symbolic of the gradual deterioration of the global ecology and man's role in that destructive process. It makes the theme of the poems not only ecocentric but also much more transnational.

### **Concept of 'sacred'**

Dilip chitre's The banyan tree or 'batbriksha' symbolizes the 'Trimurti' in Hindu Religion--- Lord Vishnu is believed to be the bark, Brahma is believed to be the roots and Lord Shiva is believed to be the branches. The cutting of the banyan tree is not only a harm to the tree only but it also affects the entire environment and ecology of the place. The banyan tree forms an ecosystem in microcosmic form. Other organisms such as the insects and birds which depend on the banyan tree are equally harmed by the cutting of the tree.

Baldoon Dhingra's Factories are Eyesores points out the social and environmental ramifications of factory pollution. Although the poem posits the poet's undecided attitude towards nature and technological development, the environmental concern can in no way be ruled out. Keki N. Daruwalla's poem Boat-ride Along the Ganga is a record of the poet's journey by boat upstream the river Ganga. However, the poem also tries to give an idea about the environmental concerns and the environmental realities of the river Ganga.

"These socially selected species are valued for cultural or religious reasons. For example, sacred basil, locally called in India as tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) became sacred as part of the conscious decision by the Hindu society, linked to its tangible

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value for its multipurpose medicinal properties. On the other hand, a species of fig (*Ficus religiosa*) became sacred, as it is valued both by Hindus and Buddhist for varied reasons, and also provides intangible benefits of supporting animal biodiversity. Attaching sacred value to species like oak, olive, apple, and fir by considering them to be god's/goddess's favourite was prevalent in Mediterranean region. In Iran, some 158 trees like walnut, willow, cypress, spruce, fir, etc. are considered sacred.

### **Environmental Awareness through Literature**

Literature has always conditioned our philosophical understanding of nature, of environment. Even the aesthetic categories by which our feelings for nature are understood the beautiful, the picturesque, the scenic, the sublime, the wild etc. have been defined largely their use in literary and critical contexts. Most ecological work shares a common motivation, that is, the awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support system. This awareness brings in us a desire to contribute to environmental restoration, not only as a hobby but as a representative of literature.

Although not many, there are a few novels in the history of Indian English literature which can be read through the lens of ecocriticism. It is true that a serious concern with ecology seems to be lacking in the earlier works, yet nature has been used as an important background against which the story develops.

When history is examined we find Raja Rao as one of the most prominent writers of Indian English novels whose depiction of the South Indian village culture and environmental setting is a true depiction of relationship between man and nature. In his novel 'Kanthapura' he has shown how rivers and mountains play an important role in people's lives.

Our irresponsible actions cause irreparable damages to nature. The effect of one such natural calamity on the humanity can be seen in Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'So Many Hungers'. In this novel we see the true picture of Bengal famine of 1943 in which at least 3,000,000 Indians died of starvation. In "Manvini Bhavai" written by Pannalal Patel we also find cruel picture and description of drought.

Kamala Markandya in whose work also we witness a reference to the Bengal famine is in her novel 'Nectar in Sieve'. 'The Flood', which is taken from her novel, has very well described the control of nature over human beings. She writes "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless and forgetful, and it has you by the throat."

Ruskin Bond worries for the thoughtless actions of man towards nature.

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His work 'No Room for a Leopard' is about deforestation and its accompanying aftermath. In 'Copperfield in the Jungle' he shows abhorrence towards hunting for pleasure which can never be justified. 'The Tree Lover', 'The Cherry Tree', 'All Creatures Great and Small' and many others are all about the chain which binds man and nature, as in the chain of ecosystem, showing interdependence.

Anita Desai, in her work In 'Voices in the City' Monisha is repeatedly compared to the encaged bird in her house who wants to be free. Baba' the autistic son in 'Clear Light of Day' is described as a harmless spider.

The novel which has been equally accepted by all the eco critics is Amitav Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide'. It does have the elements of the earlier concept of ecocriticism, that is, the interrelationship between human, nature and animal worlds. It is about the hardships of the settlers trying to give a meaning to their lives against all the odds offered by the place. We see nature in both its full beauty and its ugliness. He presents before us the anger of nature and weakness of humans at the pity of the former. This blend of the political and the social truth with its concern for nature has brought this novel of Indian English Literature under the discussion of the seminars based on ecocriticism.

Various canonical texts of English literature such as Spenser's The Faerie Queen, Thomas Hardy's novels such as Far Fro...m t

Madding Crowd, Tess of D'Urbervilles, Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, the Romantic poetry of the sublime, postcolonial works like Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Chicano writings like Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands may also be interpreted ecocritically.

### **Conclusion**

Thanks to three decades of revolution in literary study, the ways we as readers consume and interpret literary texts have changed dramatically. New intellectual and ethical perspectives on literature and culture have flourished, provided, for example, by feminism, multiculturalism, post colonialism, structuralism, post structuralism, and postmodernism. Now ecocriticism joins this list as its newest member. As more and more urgent, hot-button environmental questions are perceived to be put away everywhere in society, they have emerged in culture, literature and literary study as well.

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