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Exploration of Eco Critical Perspectives in Dhruv Bhatt's
"Oceanside Blues"
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Introduction:

Ecocriticism is a branch of literary criticism which 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 eco poetics, green culture and environmental literary criticism. It is a study which has invoked the interest of scholars worldwide. Ecocriticism 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 discourses. It is also a study of language through which literature is expressed. Literature renowned for imitating the contemporary problems could not have remained untouched from this concept. The uprising threat to humanity from unceasing misuse of our ecosystem has seized the attention of the writers in recent past. The textualization of the aforementioned environmental problems in literary works has given rise to a new division of literary theory, namely ecocriticism. According to Wikipedia, "Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyse the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation".

Ecocriticism and Nineteenth-Century Literature:

Ecocriticism as an academic discipline began in earnest in the 1990s, although its roots go back to the late 1970s. Because it is a new area of study, scholars are still engaged in defining the scope and aims of the subject.

While eco critics study literature written throughout history and analyze its relationship to the environment, most scholarship has focused on American and British literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The nineteenth century especially saw a number of developments in literature that eco critics view as significant. American and British Romantic writers took a particular interest in nature as a subject; Victorian realists wrote about industrialization, which was changing the natural landscape; explorers and natural historians began to write about newly encountered places and wildlife; and pioneers and other travelers wrote of their experiences with an emphasis on setting. Probably the defining work of nature writing, and the ecologically oriented work that has been the subject of most literary analysis, is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). This classic of American literature is a poetic narrative describing the two months that the author spent in a small cabin in the woods near Walden Pond, in Massachusetts.

Another landmark American nonfiction work about nature was Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836).

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This essay is the writer's statement on the principles of the philosophy of Transcendentalism, which he describes as “a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry.” Other American writers of the period whose work has been seen as important by eco critics include William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke Paulding, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and a number of minor writers who wrote stories about the Wild West.

In Britain, in the nineteenth century, the Romantic poets reacted strongly against the eighteenth century emphasis on reason and sought new ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings. William Wordsworth, considered by many to be the spokesman of the movement, celebrates the beauty and mystery of nature in some of his most famous lyrics. The poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Lord Byron, and P. B. Shelley also includes emotional descriptions of the natural world and features some of the best-known nature verse in English. Shelley's “Ode to the West Wind,” to cite one example, has been called the most inspired lyrical poem describing nature in the English language. The romantic interest in nature is particularly significant to eco critics because these poets were revolutionary in their politics, and the preservation of the natural world was one element of their radical thinking.

Later nineteenth century English writers of note include Thomas Hardy, in whose novels the sense of place always takes center stage, and Matthew Arnold, whose love poem “Dover Beach” (1867) is said to offer one of the finest descriptions of place in English poetry. Victorian essayists who wrote about nature include John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, both of whom lamented the destruction of the environment due to industrialization.

Reflections of Ecocriticism in Indian Literature:

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 as 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 ecocriticism in them.

When history is examined we find Raja Rao as one of the most prominent writers of Indian English novels. His 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. R. K. Narayan wrote in the same decade and has given life to a place, Malgudi, or it can be said that he has developed a place as a character which can be seen in almost all his prose fictions bearing the same features. Thus Malgudi becomes a character. Malgudi becomes the symbol of the transitional Indian, shedding the age old traditions and accepting the modern western civilization. In other words he used landscape as an important theme which is also one of the important considerations under ecocriticism.

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Dhruv Bhatt: Theorizing Indian Ecocriticism

Dhruv Bhatt is an established contemporary Gujarati writer, who is engaged in fictionalizing the basic environment issues, since the last three decades, of ecology and traditional wisdom of the people dwelling in and around wilderness that present the environment issues discussed locally as well as globally. His first hand real experience of life is well merged with the seemingly fantastic mythical narration in abode natural habitats of endangered species and human life in locales of Gujarat. His works are more than travelogues in creating a fictional word out of his real life wanderings in the rapidly erasing Eco system to interweave the environmental issues that are raised at the global forums to confront with the solutions at local level in the most natural and coherent way. Issues such as 'save whales' and 'save lions' incorporated from two different terrains of thorny forests of Gir and the western coastal region of Ghed are interwoven without being the slightest burden to the narrative in works like *Samudrantike* translated by Vinod Meghani as *Oceanside Blues*(1993), *Tatvamasi* (1998), and *Akoopar* (2011).

Oceanside Blues is a fictional work by Dhruv Bhatt, in the form of memoirs of a young civil engineer deputed to survey an arid coastal part of Saurashtra. The novel has at its center the quest for a fine balance between a traditional, non-scientific, faith-driven society and a cynical, profit driven economy. Weaving together the characters, real and imaginary, events and legends from the folklore of the region, Dhruv Bhatt has imparted his own sensitivity to the leading characters and at the same time narrated a gripping story.

Adopting an Eco critical approach to *Oceanside Blues* one can ask questions not only primarily about the literary attributes of the text but also larger questions about cultural attitudes and definitions of nature. If we try to interpret this text through an eco-critical lens, with an eye towards nature, or examining an eco-critical trope within it, the following questions can be raised:

- How is nature represented in this text?
- How has the concept of nature changed over time?
- How is the setting of the text related to the environment?
- What is the influence on metaphors and representations of the land and the environment on how we treat it?
- How do we see issues of environmental disaster and crises reflected in the text?
- How are animals represented in this text and what is their relationship to humans?
- How do the roles or representations of men and women towards the environment differ in the text?
- Where is environment placed in the power hierarchy?
- How is nature empowered or oppressed in this work?
- What parallels can be drawn between the sufferings and oppression of groups of people (women, minorities and child characters) and treatment of the land?
- What rhetorical moves are used by environmentalists, and what can we

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learn from them about our cultural attitudes towards nature?

Dhruv Bhatt has vividly explored ecocriticism as an increasingly heterogeneous movement in *Oceanside Blues*. Ecocriticism has been treated as an “earth-centered approach” with the use of the first person narrative and the complex intersections between environment and culture, believing that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and getting affected by it”. The text aims at asking us to examine ourselves and the world around us, critiquing the way that we represent, interact with, and construct the environment, both “natural” and manmade. At the heart of the text, many critics maintain, is ‘a commitment to environment from whatever critical vantage point’. The challenge encountered by Bhatt is to keep one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists. Similar to critical traditions examining gender and race, the text deals not only with the socially-constructed, often dichotomous categories we create for reality, but with reality itself.

Conclusion:

“Freed of bondage and burden, as if redeemed, Kabir followed me while the setting sun behind us poured its gold on the six interlacing, mingling and merging footprints being embossed on the damp sand along the oceanside trail.” (from *Oceanside Blues*)

These concluding lines of the novel so vividly and boldly express the transformation created in the young narrator from considering nature as merely ‘rocks and stones’ to treating his horse Kabir as one among the humans.

Ecocriticism is the combination of ecology and expressions of the theory. It seeks to inquire into its reach and studies the interdependence of man and nature. Dhruv Bhatt’s work 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 Bhatt to express the desires, shortcomings and emotions of his characters. The canvas he uses is painted with the background distorted landscapes of the surviving natural habitats to speak of the physical environmental problems. He speaks out the mindscapes through the surviving wisdom with the people and their culture in these spaces.

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