



Of Loving Gaia- Ecocriticism as Earth-centred Approach

Dr. Suja T.V.

Associate Professor

Dept. of English

Maharaja's College,

Ernakulam

Email: suja@maharajas.ac.in

Abstract

Nature serves as a life-affirming and sustaining force for humanity, establishing a dynamic relationship that is not inherently reciprocal. Unlike other species, man is not obliged to patronize nature. The growing cultural emphasis on all things 'eco' in today's technological world signifies a shift in human life, urging exploration of this evolving orientation. James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis highlights Earth's resilience against human and climatic threats. In the era of globalization, ecological preservation becomes imperative to counter homogenization threats, necessitating a 'glocal' strategy. The unpredictability of the postmodern ecological worldview prompts eco criticism to address the transgressive nature of the nature-culture binary. Evolving from a focus on historical cultural imaginings, eco criticism now intervenes in contemporary environmental debates, aiming to transform human attitudes for sustainability in unpredictable situations. Postmodern scientists advocate abandoning total control over nature in favor of a partnership ethic. Richard Kahn suggests political principles for a critical eco pedagogy based on economic redistribution, cultural democracy, indigenous sovereignty, universal human rights, and respect for all life. Ecocriticism should avoid limiting factionalism and embrace a balanced perspective, addressing global and local issues for the survival of diversities.

Key words: ecocriticism, postmodern ecology, gaia hypothesis, ecoliteracy, ecopedagogy, glocal



Nature has acted as a web of life and an elixir for ever to all its inhabitants including mankind. A slight variation in its system can spell disastrous results for any species sheltered in it. As the species that has brought about deliberate interventions in the ecosystems, humans have the liability to think and act for their co-existing inhabitants. But before embarking on such a venture, humans must reflect on their role in the existence of life on earth. They must note that they are not an inevitable presence on the surface of this blue planet. The earth does not depend on the nurturing enterprises of human beings for its existence. The contemporary hue and cry raised by all nature lovers and environmental activists against pollution, exploitation and wastage centres really not on the conservation of nature, but on the very existence of the thriving species of the current eco systems, the most dominant one being humans. In the battle for survival, which is a natural law, if humans have to ensure a healthy futurity in their own suitable environment in this planet, they have to re assess their theories, reform their philosophies and re shape their life style.

At present there happens seriously noticeable disparities in the climate, weather and ecosystems which predict a deeper imminent impact on the generations to come. At this breaking point, scientists and scholars of every discipline siphon their thoughts, deeds and promises to protect the life span of what is left of the original abode, by all means. An engagement of the heart, rather than the intellect, literature too reflects the pangs and anxieties that reign the minds of the present generation. An awareness of the crucial consequences of the anthropocentric and androcentric approaches and the need to redefine the attitudes can be successfully communicated through the medium of literature. Ecocriticism, as a critical approach has contributed commendably, to precipitate these in a scientific and utilitarian manner.

According to Carolyn Merchant:

From the point of view of science, as well as of religion, our ways of relating to the planet are undergoing a significant transformation. The Enlightenment ethic of the domination of nature fostered by mechanistic science's reduction of the world to dead atoms moved by external forces is being replaced by a postmodern, ecological world view based on interconnectedness, process, and open systems. (Merchant Carolyn, 1996)

The postmodern ecological world view is based on the impossibility of completely predicting the behaviour of the natural world. New postmodern ecology exemplified by the work of Daniel Botkin, stresses that nature undisturbed is not constant in form, structure, or proportion, but changes at every scale of time and space. The unpredictability and contingency created by the postmodern ecological



world view demands that ecocriticism should also deal with the transgressive nature of the nature-culture binary and foster a cosmopolitan outlook whether it be of human beings or nature.

Modern scientific and technological developments have opened up the bounds of societies and human beings live anywhere in this globe as world citizens. In the era of globalization at its peak, environmental simplification and biological simplification are equally grave crises to be held under check. The mushrooming consumer market societies undertake to build up a homogenization of taste and culture, which threatens the existence of the indigenous and the original. Damian White points out that “Contemporary societies are characterized by social pluralism and stark inequality, commodification and reflexivity, possibilities for post-scarcity affluence and for alienation” (Damian White, 2008). The mammoth wheels of globalization knowingly or unknowingly eclipse and erase the multitude of indigenous elements across the earth. As a check to this callous move there should be cultivated an attitude of respect for and co-existence with all kinds of original, native imprints, the failure of which would result in a rootless alienation bereft of rich characteristic identities.

Rocheleau and Roth warn that “Overcoming the limits of globalizing ontologies requires sustained attention to the intimate and divergent relations between bodies, objects, orders and spaces...”. Sites become “emergent property of its interacting human and non-human inhabitants... That is, we can talk about the existence of a given site only in so far as we can follow the interactive practices through their localized connections” (Dianne Rocheleau and Robin Roth, 2007). By identifying the localizations within the global spectrum what should be promoted is an assertion of the ‘glocal’isation within the universalization of any aspect, be it nature or culture, man or woman, flora or fauna. Ynestra King claims that “A healthy, balanced eco system, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity” (Ynestra King, 1989). If the worthy and wealthy diversity is to be preserved, we are to adopt a decentralized global movement that is founded on common interests yet celebrates localized diversities and opposes all forms of domination and violence. If so, the ecocriticism to strive forth should aim at preserving and promoting the existing diversities and fostering an interconnectedness among them. This shall add more meaning to the being of human species and develop a respectable sustainability in our eco system. This also claims a healthy relationship with the planet earth.

In the opinion of Fritjof Capra, being “ecologically literate” or “eco literate” means understanding the principles of organization of ecological communities or ecosystems and employing these principles for building up sustainable human



communities. Mankind can learn important lessons from the planet's ecosystems that "have organized themselves in subtle and complex ways so as to maximize sustainability" (The Web 290). Capra proclaims his warning that in the new millennium, survival depends on ecological literacy and the human will to shape their lives in accordance with the principles of ecology. The basic principles of ecology, according to Capra are "interdependence, recycling, partnership, flexibility and diversity all of which help to promote sustainability" (Fritjof Capra, 1996). In *Bookchin- A Critical Appraisal*, Damian White quotes how Bookchin viewed nature as the "image of unity in diversity, spontaneity and complementary relationships free of all hierarchy and domination" (Murray Bookchin, 1986). Fritjof Capra in "Systems Theory and the New paradigm" defines the emerging new social paradigm as a new constellation of concepts, values, perceptions and practices shared by a community, which form a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way the community organizes itself. This postmodern view includes an emphasis on the whole over the parts, on process over structure, on the relative epistemic science over objective science, the idea of networks of knowledge and information, and the recognition of the necessity of approximation. The essentials of this systems approach entail a new ethic that is life-affirming rather than life-destroying, and it recognizes the interconnectedness of all things and the human place in the network.

James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis embodies the ecological world view, that the earth being called as the earth goddess implies that the seemingly inert earth made of rocks and water is alive. Life on earth constantly maintains atmospheric and hydrological conditions comfortable for its own continuation and it does so through feedback processes because the environment is an integral part of every living thing. The Gaia hypothesis means that the system as a whole is powerful enough to withstand climatic disasters and human depredations. Lovelock warns us:

Gaia has withstood devastations far beyond our powers at least thirty times during the three and a half billion years of her life-span. Nothing that we can do threatens her. But, of course, if we transgress in our pollutions and our forest clearance, Gaia can move to a new stable state, and one that's no longer comfortable for us. So living with Gaia is not so different from a human relationship. It is an affair of the heart as well as the head; and if we are to do it lovingly, it is something that must be renewed on a daily basis if it is to succeed. (James Lovelock, 1996)

Hence the net fact seems to be, our sustenance shall completely depend on how we sustain the love relationship with Gaia. This situation only enhances the



significance of the postmodern ecological world view. This view does not accept a return to the ancient Earth Mother myth as lamented by certain ecocritics, or proclaims that nature knows best. Instead, the future Earth oriented system of values and tropes should acknowledge contingency and indeterminacy at a fundamental level. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Greg Garrard demands that in future ecocriticism “shall be attuned to environmental justice, informed by artistic as well as scientific ecological insight and will be committed to the preservation of the biological diversity of the planet for all its inhabitants”(Greg Garrard, 2004). Then only shall this discipline be free from the clichés of essentialism and reductionism that diverge one from an egalitarian perspective.

Ecocriticism, which earlier dealt with how natural environment played in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific historical moment, has now evolved out to the extent that some ecocritics understand their intellectual work as a direct intervention in current social, political and economic debates surrounding environmental pollution and preservation. There are ecocritics like Andrew Ross who emphasizes that environmental degradation is based on economic, social and cultural inequalities that need to be addressed before anything like ‘sustainable development’ can be put into effect. The extreme opposing positions held by ‘social ecology’ which generally insists that it is ultimately human needs and societal well-being which must determine our approach to nature and ‘deep ecology’ which considers that nature has value in and of itself independently of its functions for human society, have to be equally criticized and accommodated by contemporary ecocriticism. The consequence of ecological anarchism advocated by social ecology shall make a chaos out of order in the contemporary global scenario. Deep ecology’s effort to blame anthropocentrism for ecological deterioration masks the role of capitalism and political economy in the down play. The movement to nail down ecocriticism to any of this one definition alone would be like the blind men’s describing the elephant. To overcome the existing friction between nature and culture, some scholars advocate ecocriticism to weave the webs of interconnections between organic and inorganic environment, matter and spirit and thus create a ‘recycling relationship with the biosphere’(William Rueckert, 1996). The poetics of the ‘oikos’ tries to integrate specific space and time and the human, natural and cultural phenomena within it. The very sense of ‘oikos’ constitutes a natural nexus devoid of deliberate interpolations. The postmodern ecological situation of contingency and indeterminacy undermines the scope of maintaining the richness of differing eco systems or ‘oikos’ in the long run. It also dismisses the propagation of possible interconnections in a world of constantly changing phenomena. Hence



ecocriticism is to free itself from the romantic unrealistic approaches however holistic they seem to be.

In “Reading the Earth” Michael P. Branch et.al opines that ‘Ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature; it implies a move toward a more biocentric world- view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of human’s conception of global community to include non-human life forms and the physical environment’ (Michael P. Branch et.al (Ed), 1998). The wider perspectives demanded by these criteria will make it difficult to formulate a stringent theorization of ecocriticism. But there should be a comprehension that the greater concern is not whether ecocriticism is a theory or a focus or a politics but the transformations it can create in the attitudes of human beings equipping them to sustain in the postmodern unpredictable situations. The postmodern scientists exhort us to give up the possibility of totally dominating and controlling nature and to develop a partnership ethic in which a human community is in a sustainable ecological relationship with its surrounding natural community.

What is needed to attain this goal is, according to Richard Kahn, political principles of engagement for the construction of a critical eco pedagogy and eco literacy that is founded on economic redistribution, cultural and linguistic democracy, indigenous sovereignty, universal human rights and a fundamental respect for all life. Within the context of an ecologically grounded epistemology, our gain lies in the realization that “our organic relationship with the earth is also intimately tied to our struggles for cultural self-determination, environmental sustainability, social and material justice and global peace” (Richard Kahn, 2010).

As the greatest consumer of nature’s resources and as the most powerful species it is our obligation to partake in a way of living that ensures the balance of the ecosystem. Even when one is exhorted for this movement by triggering a romantic attitude to nature, the underlying stark motive is ultimately a selfish goal of one’s own self-love. The only sacredness that can be attributed to it is to avoid the concentration of this love affair on any particular place or being and spread it to the optimum level, that is, make it a universal phenomenon. But then any kind of universalization undergoes the risk of easy essentialism. Ecocriticism shall be saved from this mistake by giving equal attention to every indigenous eco system including man, animals and plants and their unique ways of habitation and by building up a world-wide non dominating secular policy of co-existence. To boost up all that is ‘local’ in this global scenario we shall foster a blend of global and local, a ‘glocal’ attitude to everything that comes under the encompassing ecological purview.



The reforming environmental move shall aim at a rediscovering of our ties with nature, incorporating scientific temper into literary studies, reinventing our critical and conceptual tools, reconnecting with our indigenous roots by embarking on an intensive study of our tribal and folk culture, extensive study of environmental movements in other parts of the world, both global and local and effecting a cultural, social, political and economic change rooted in a democratic policy. Ecocriticism should free itself out from the limiting factionalism of theorizations which essentialize and reduce it to one narrow approach or the other. It should have enough room to address every issue of existence with a balanced perspective of the indigenous localizations and the encompassing globalizations. For, we live in a time past of binary deductions and we have to engender the plethora of constantly changing multiplicities in the glocalised postmodern panorama. And the answer has to be ‘survival of the diversities’ – the mark of healthy, balanced ecosystems.

WORKS CITED

1. Bookchin, Murray (1986). *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*. Montreal: Black Rose (second edition)
2. Botkin, Daniel (1992). *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford: OUP.
3. Branch, Michael P., et al., eds. (1998). *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and the Environment*. Idaho: U of Idaho P.
4. Capra, Fritjof (1996). *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*, New York: Anchor Books.
5. Capra, Fritjof (1996). “Systems Theory and the New Paradigm”. In: Carolyn Merchant (Editor) *Key Concepts in Critical Theory Rawat Publications*. Jaipur. pp334-341.
6. Estok, Simon C (2001). “A Report Card on Ecocriticism” (Sejing University) AUMLA Nov.2001. Page 1220-28.
7. Garrard, Greg (2004). *Ecocriticism*, London: Routledge.
8. King, Ynestra (1989). “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology”: *Healing the Wounds: the Promise of Eco feminism*. Ed. J.Plant.London:Green Print.
9. Lovelock, James (1996). “Gaia”: In: Carolyn Merchant (Editor) *Key Concepts in Critical Theory*. Rawat Publications. Jaipur. pp351-359.
10. Merchant, Carolyn (1996). “Introduction”. In: Carolyn Merchant (Editor) *Key Concepts in Critical Theory Rawat Publications*. Jaipur. “pp1-25.
11. Rocheleau, Dianne, and Robin Roth (2007). “Rooted Networks, Relational Webs and Powers of Connection: Rethinking Human and Political Ecologies”. *Geoforum* pp 433-437.
12. Rueckert, William (1996). “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco criticism” In: Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Editors) *The Eco criticism Reader Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press. Georgia. pp 105-123.
13. White, Damian (2008). *Bookchin A Critical Appraisal*, London: Pluto Press.