

Ecocriticism in Indian Diaspora by Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature.

The diasporic texts selected have been analysed through ecocritical reading and this strand of criticism had provided for a better reflection of contemporary progress, development, social and political impacts on establishment of identity with a look back down into India's traditional myths along with the destabilising effects of modernisation and globalisation. Hence, a brief description of the emergence of ecocriticism would provide for a better understanding of the analysis of the selected diasporic texts.

According to Nayar: "Eco-criticism originates in a bio-social context of unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of nature, worrying definitions and shapes of 'development' and environmental hazard. While it does not seek to alter the courses of any of these very real factors, its task is to see how theoretically informed readings of cultural texts can contribute not only to consciousness raising but also look into the politics of development and the construction of 'nature'.

Ecocriticism has been defined in numerous ways leading to complexity that the term carries. It started with the aim of raising concern towards nature through literature, but its scope and definition has become much more broad since then. The term is new, but not the concern. The concern is centuries old. Nature's importance for the existence of life on earth has been given valuable space in the religious books of the world. It has been revered and its value is emphasised in almost all the religions. Greg Garrard, though he mentions only Bible, agrees with this view and says that text of modern environmentalism begins not only with the poetic parable, but also with pastorals, apocalypse and may be traced back to Genesis and Revolution. Even Cheryll Goltfelty affirms and says that ecocriticism already existed and what did not exist was any institutional presence of this vibrant field of study like no journals, no jargon or no jobs. Nature was first portrayed in literature as beautiful and strong. This beauty and strength of nature continued till romantic age. After the industrial revolution the smoke of industries seeped into the literature. Though literature of the time did not analyse the future problems and calamities caused by unprecedented industrial growth, it showed the pathetic condition due to industrial waste and concretisation of natural settings. The situation fast deteriorated and went out of control in the second half of the

twentieth century spreading fast from west to east in the late twentieth century. Some intellectuals felt the need to form organisations to make people aware about the declining health of the earth. In different parts of the world, whether it was in the voices raised against chemicals in the drinking water in Latin America or the Chipko movement in India, reaction against human's insensitive attitude towards natural wealth could be felt. Rupert in 1978 brought each voice raised for nature's concern under the umbrella of Ecocriticism. This was the urgent need of the hour since each one working in his/her domain separately could not be very strong and effective.. It was important to raise the dimension of the concern from the regional to the global. This is what the term did to ecological concerns. It provided a name under which every ecological cry united to create an impact on the world by emerging and remerging as different voices in all kinds of literatures of the world.

Ecocriticism started with love for nature and gradually with change in the environment this affection turned into concern. This what Lawrence Buell discusses in his book, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*; where he talks about the former as the first wave and the latter as the second wave of ecocriticism.

There are many intellectuals in the theoretical world working on this terminology. Their continuous efforts have led to the expansion of the meaning of the term; this has made it more inclusive. Homo sapiens have been utilizing natural resources for centuries but there is no account when use turned into abuse. Men started exploiting their own survival agent. They forgot that their existence depends on ecology of which they are just minute parts. This what Rachel Carson meant when she said, *The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support but in living tissues is for the most part irreversible.*

The term ecocriticism, however, was first used by William Ruckert, in 1978 in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, by which he meant — the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of

literature. Later it became more wide and included everything that was related to the physical world. Many were a part of this journey. In 1985 Frederick O Waage through his Teaching Environmental Literature:

Materials, Methods, Resources' sought to foster a greater presence of environmental concern and awareness in literary disciplines. In 1989 Alicia Nitecki founded the American Nature Writing Newsletter to publish brief essays, book resources, classroom notes, and information pertaining to the study of writing on nature and the environment. The formation of the first academic position in Literature and the Environment in the University of Nevada and 1992 special session organised by Harold Fromm (Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies) and the 1992 American Literature Association Symposium chaired by Glen Love also played important role in spreading ecocriticism in the intellectual world.⁸ In 1993 Patrick Murphy established a journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, which gave new dimensions to environmental considerations. Ecocritics support concepts like interconnectedness and relationship, values like community and cooperation; all advocate rootedness and affection for a particular place, - one's home or the bioregional, promote literature that embodies these values and criticize literature that portrays humankind as separate from nature. At the turn of the 21st century ecocritics called for deeper investment in the sciences citing the necessity of scientific literacy in assessing contemporary environmental risks, like global climate change and toxic pollution, in understanding the biological underpinnings of human consciousness and in respecting the material resistance of the nonhuman to incorporation through discursive and information technologies, from literature to digital media. With its popularity ecocriticism also gained variety in its connotation. Intellectuals working in this field started associating it with culture seeing humans as dominant factor affecting environment. Culture has been a very late edition in ecological analysis though it has already been there. William Howarth explains that when we talk about environment, its effects and changes will inevitably be discussed which will necessarily include human action, so culture cannot be

eliminated. He further defines ecocritic as a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating its despoilers and reversing their harm through political action. It therefore seems only appropriate to shift the topic of nature and the environment to the centre of literary and cultural studies. As Glen Luv puts it, teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems to increasingly short sighted and incongruous. Michael P Cohen emphasises on the fact that ecocriticism focuses on literary expression of human experience primarily in a naturally and consequently in a culturally shaped world. This cultural construct further includes questions of the gendered nature, the traditional dichotomy of city verses country, urban verses natural environment.

The moment culture enters the arena of ecocriticism it is pulled in different directions but ends mainly in the east and the west. The culture of the east is in many ways different from that of the west. This difference is an ongoing debate but in ecocriticism western effect on eastern environment is focussed upon. West is blamed for ruining eastern ecology. Val Plumwood says, Rationalist culture has distorted many spheres of human life; its remarking is a major but essential cultural enterprise. The old reason-centred culture of the west which has allowed the ecological crisis to deepen to the current dangerous point may at one time have facilitated the dominant culture's comparative advantage over and conquest of other more modest and ecologically adapted cultures on this planet. Cheryll Glotfelty holds Christianity's anthropocentric belief responsible for the way man has treated nature. This view posits that no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purpose since man is not simply clay but made in God's image. The western world conquered the rest of the world with an aim of spreading this message of Christianity and for making the inhabitants of the other regions act according to this view. It is, however, not fair to blame Christianity for all the atrocities perpetrated by the west on the earth.

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