

## Key Elements in Ecocritical Studies

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**ABSTRACT:** This article introduces the emerging field of ecocriticism (ecological literary criticism), and then goes on to focus on the elements that an ecocritic must bear in mind, while undertaking such an analysis of a literary text. The elements that will be talked about here include “deep ecology”, “environmental citizenship”, “ecological citizenship”, “care ethics” and “ecoliteracy”

**KEYWORDS:** Ecocriticism, literary criticism, care ethics, environment, literature and environment

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Date of Submission: 20-06-2020 Date of acceptance: 07-07-2020

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Researching on ecocriticism, and evaluating texts/authors ecocritically are extremely necessary in the contemporary times. In the field of literary studies, before ecocriticism, various well-known theories have come up and established themselves because there was a need to do so, and the time and situation demanded it. Over the decades, caste, class, race and gender became various criteria of critical analysis, in these theories and angles of looking at texts/authors. It should also be realized that in the present century, more and more ecocritical work needs to be undertaken, as today's times experience a worldwide hazard like never before – that of the gradual degradation and ruination of the natural environment and ecosystem. In his/her own small way, an ecocritic would attempt to address the present grave situation constructively, spread awareness and look at literary artists/texts s/he is studying for possible solutions that the latter might have expressed in their works.

Ecocriticism (first coined in c.1978, by William Rueckert) is the shorter or more popular name for ecological literary criticism. Before ecocriticism was included in literary research, literary analyses were mainly concerned from the perspective of race, gender, class or caste. Ecocriticism came into being out of a late twentieth century consciousness, which is the ecological turbulence in our planet – a big threat to humanity. In order to know about ecocriticism first, one needs to understand what ecology is. Ecology (from ‘oikos’, meaning ‘house’ and ‘logia’ – ‘study of’, in Greek; coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel) is “a branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environments... [and also] the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment.” So, it is concerned with the relationship between living organisms in their natural environment, plus their relationship with that environment. Modern ecology gives significance to Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) concept of adaptation (introduced in 1859). Efforts to make ecocriticism a full-fledged discipline began since the boom of environmentalism (late 1960s and 1970s) in the United States of America, and it began solidifying around the 1990s.

Ecocriticism as a discipline and as a method blends the humanities and the sciences, the spiritual and the physical, to analyze the environment, plus find out ways in which the contemporary environmental situation could be addressed and improved. It focuses on the relationship between literature and the environment – how the relationship between human beings and their physical environment is reflected in literature. It urges human beings to realize that they should change their own ways of life and thinking, and take necessary actions for the prevention of ecological degradation and promote protection of the environment, in the contemporary times. Literary studies need to come together with other disciplines. It is also high time that one stopped sharply defining “arts” and the “science”'s based on exclusion. As anthropogenic climate change and other ecological crises promise to affect our lived experiences more dramatically and unpredictably than ever before, the field of literary studies might become apparently irrelevant to the most urgent challenges that the human civilization would be facing. A new sense of historical imagination plus new critical and theoretical tools would be needed, when the whole world realizes an impending ecological doom, in unison. By this time, one should realize that the importance of the humanities lies in the questions of values and justice beneath the computed, scientific

figures/data (which indicate the past, present and possibly future environmental states of certain geographical space/s). Questions arise, such as the willingness to sacrifice, to a certain extent, one's own comforts and material well-being, to ensure a better world for posterity and the non-human co-residents on the planet. Or the concern of wealthier nations about poorer ones, to keep them safe from future climatic and economic disasters.

## II. DISCUSSION OF THE KEY ELEMENTS

It is widely realized that ecocriticism trickled down from certain Romantic conceptions of nature, as seen in the Romantic period of European Literature (around 1800 to 1850), especially when it comes to conceiving "deep ecology" (coined by Arne Naess in 1973). The main principles of deep ecology reflect a lot of Romantic ideals, but it is also necessary to point out how Romanticism and ecocriticism could differ from one another. Two points could be observed. Firstly, ecocriticism has a socio-political orientation, whereas Romanticism has a philosophical one. Secondly, when it comes to the concept of "education", Romanticism would indicate the realization of the interconnections between nature, its creations (living and non-living) and human beings. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, would voice that education (an institutionalized one, which endorses an anthropocentric world-view) and saving/preserving nature are inversely proportional to each other. The more one gets 'educated' and runs after the capitalist, selfish, material world, the less one tends to care about the ecology and issues related to it. Now, speaking of deep ecology, here are the main points (brought forth by Arne Naess and George Sessions), taken from a significant article by Jelica Tošić:

1. The well-being and flourishing of non-human life on Earth have value in themselves, independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life-forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs would be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation either directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.

It is important to mention here that in 1968, various thinkers from academia and the industry came together and formed the Club of Rome. Discussions on eco-political issues gave way to ones on limited resources of the planet. In 1972, came about a book on the "limits to growth" concept by the above team, which inferred that factors such as pollution, overpopulation and reduction of available natural resources lead to the collapse of the world's economy and stop its growth. The team made the world realize that natural resources/fuels/energy sources for daily living were finite. The earth could not replenish its resources that are exploited by humans, so easily. In this time zone, it is to be remembered that the most important natural energy source was crude oil, leaving coal behind. The team considered their text as a warning and not necessarily a prediction.

Now, it is necessary to talk about three concepts that an ecocritic would invariably come across and wonder about, throughout the course of his/her research. These concepts would always make their presence felt, while ecocritically analyzing a piece of literature – looking for answers in those texts of questions that stem from the theoretical framework of ecocriticism. They are "environmental" and "ecological citizenship"s, "care-ethics"/"the ethics of care" (which possibly attaches itself to ecological citizenship) and an overall "eco-literacy". They would be talked about below, one by one.

Environmental citizenship takes into account the fact that we, the human beings, are an important part of our environment. Our future is going to be affected by how we treat our ecosystem/s. Also, on behalf of our environment, we should be aware and take it upon ourselves, its responsibility. There should be a deep respect for our non-human organisms and communities. Environmental citizenship has been defined with respect to the relationship between the citizens and the State. There is a focus on contractual rights/entitlements within the public domain. There is a rights-based discourse to cover environmental rights. The State, here, defines the environmental rights (they feature in the respective national laws and the constitutions), to which the citizens give ready consent and have claim over. Now, from here emerges a correlative responsibility to respect the rights of others. The essential points of critiquing environmental citizenship would be that firstly, it presents a

territorial notion of citizenship, and secondly, there is an unrealistic localized responsibility – after all, how could one think only of one’s own territory, cutting it off from the rest of the geographical spaces of the world? The “bigger picture”?

Environment citizenship more often than not will overlap with ecological citizenship. In order to understand ecological citizenship, one must be familiar with ecologism. Ecologism states that a sustainable and fulfilled existence should come from a radical shift in the relationship between human and non-human organisms, plus the way of human social and political life. The whole notion of citizenship, here, exists in a non-territorial political sphere – the space in which a redefined citizenship could be located – also known as the “ecological footprint”, which takes into account the environmental impact of human beings on ecological systems. This responsibility, unlike environmental citizenship, is non-contractual with the State or a certain territory. There are many aspects of ecological citizenship. The first one is about duty and responsibility of the citizens, where their task involves ensuring that ecological footprints make a sustainable impact. This obligation is asymmetrical and non-reciprocal, unlike the rights and responsibilities existing under contemporary citizenship. The second is about virtues, especially that of justice. There should be just distribution of ecological space, and there should be an ecological justice for all (“all”, meaning those who lack voices in the policy-process: the rural-folk, the landless poor, the indigenous communities, and marginalized human and non-human living beings). Wealthy countries, which have larger ecological footprints are not to live irresponsibly on the planet. If necessary, they need to reduce their own ecological footprints, or bar the continuation of unsustainable production and consumption, also getting involved in awareness-campaigns and so on. The third aspect of ecological citizenship is about our everyday living and creating our ecological footprints. This private domain is a significant site of citizenship activity.

It could be observed and understood that care ethics or the ethics of care emerges from ecological citizenship. This term/concept has grown to claim an important position in the field of ecology and ecocriticism, today. With the guidance of Carol Gilligan care ethics as a thought began among feminists, who believed that females (girls, women) approach moral issues with a strong spirit of caring and empathy in interpersonal relationships. It is based on/justified by lived experience (especially that of women), with intimate relations, trust and commitment. Care ethics understands the world as populated with networks of relationships rather than comprising stand-alone individuals, and is more concerned with tapping on qualities like empathy, co-feeling (it is more than empathy. It goes beyond just understanding what others are experiencing, to actually feeling them. It involves the experience of the complexities of a certain individual’s situation, plus a deep, intricate appreciation for the lives of others, which enriches one’s own self-understanding), sympathy, loyalty, compassion, discernment and love in intimate relationships, while believing less in abstract principles/rights. The moral agent, inherent in any individual, should balance care of the self with that of others. Care ethics emphasizes on care as a moral sentiment and response in specific relationships, and the virtues which come along with the latter. Caring would involve participating in the feelings of others by one, not with distanced observation/analysis/judgement, but with active engagement from within – an act of affective imagination. Particular relationships, especially within the family/community are important, so is the non-contractual interdependence of individuals.

Altruism is encouraged, where one thinks about others, along with their feelings, vulnerabilities and needs, but not neglecting care for one’s own self. According to Gilligan, there are certain levels and transition periods in the development of the ethics of care. Firstly, there is the journey from selfishness to responsibility. It involves the tussle between what one would do and what one should – within their association/connection to others. Secondly, there is goodness as self-sacrifice, which involves the lookout for others and their feelings plus the necessity of not inflicting harm. The third tier is the transformation of the quality of goodness to that of truth. Here, in addition to caring for others and one’s own self, one should be honest and real with oneself. Fourthly, there is the emergence of “mature care” with the morality of non-violence. A moral equality needs to be achieved between the self and others. If that means that there needs to be a directive against hurting from an authority, so be it. Here, care would now become a universal obligation. Care ethics advocates recognize its appropriateness to intimate relations and they seek to extend that feature to communities, institutions and other parts of the world – breaking territorial/political boundaries.

Care ethics, as is seen, provides normative guidance but there is no prescription of specific actions. Knowledge could be gained through the human connection to others while trying to consider their perspectives in deciding morality and justice. If a spirit of interdependence is brought in leadership and communication, new possibilities and avenues of solving various complex issues would open up. Often, care ethics is said to be theorizing the lived experience of mothering. Gilligan found both men and women articulating the voice of care, at different degrees and times. However, she realized that there could not be any studies on the voice of care, without women. She argued that the perspective of care ethics was an alternative but equally legitimate form of moral reasoning, which is obscured by masculine liberal justice traditions that concentrate on autonomy and independence. She clarified that the distinction being made was based not on gender, but of theme.

Physicist Fritjof Capra (b.1939) has come up with a very useful thought – that we should be ecologically ‘literate’. Hence, his (along with David W. Orr’s) concept of “eco-literacy” comes into the picture. When we say that we are ecologically literate, we are firstly, able to understand that the basic element that differentiates living beings and the dead is the process of metabolism or the “breath of life”. This is because both the living and the dead possess molecular structures, proteins and DNA. Now, to focus on what is alive and existing on the earth, we need to see a natural object (for instance, a deer, a human child, a mango or a forest) not as a whole in itself, but something essentially belonging to a “network” that nature has created, where there is a give-and-take process between various organisms (the common saying comes to mind, here, that the waste of one kind of species is the food/resource of another kind). Also, this network does not remain the same. It is subjected to change with the changes in time and circumstances. We need to see these mentioned objects of nature as belonging to a position in the aforementioned natural “web of life”, performing functions to contribute to the various natural processes. Using this enlightened perspective, we need to approach ecological problems and solve/sustain/restore the natural equilibrium. We need to live our lives, keeping in mind the essential principles of ecology. “Relationships”, “context”, “patterns”, “flow”, “interconnectivity” form the keywords here.

Whenever ecocriticism in India in the contemporary times is talked about, one cannot forget an important figure greatly associated with it, and that gentleman is Verrier Elwin (1902 - 1964). An Oxford graduate and a self-taught anthropologist, Elwin came to India as a missionary but soon became so fascinated with Indian indigenous communities that he went on to live with them and carried out a descriptive ethnography of them, especially the Gond and the Baiga communities. He had a few observations. He saw how the communities worshipped different elemental forces of nature considering the latter as their parents, and drew their strengths from the latter. That made the community members rather sophisticated and cultured. He also realized that the shifting form of cultivation of the communities, especially the “bewar” of the Baigas, ensured eco-friendliness with the continuity of preservation of their values. Within the Baiga community, he discovered much freedom of women – unlike that among the city-folk. Orality, in the form of poems, myth and folklore is at the centre of their lives. They connect the past and the present to find coherence in their current reality. Elwin also argued that these indigenous communities need to be kept in isolation from the urban communities to preserve their cultures and ensure their blooming. Without permission, people from outside the former community should not be allowed in their domain. He also cites an example where a part of the Juang community members remember (their former Administrator) Mr. Macmillan, a white European man. However, another part of the community became scared of his skin colour and fled deep into the jungle.

### III. CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the above elements of ecocritical studies would prove to be a sound guide in understanding ecocriticism and undertaking ecocritical analyses of literary texts. An ecocritic should bear in mind the above concepts to formulate questions (that emerge from ecological concerns) that s/he will look for the answers to, in their chosen texts.

### IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor Samantak Das, Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University

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