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English

ECOCRITICISM: THE THEORY AND AN APPLICATION

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is a branch of interdisciplinary literary study which explores the relationship between literature and the environment. It approaches literature from a nature-centric perspective. It re-examines human culture from ecocentric point of view. Its goals are to promote ecological consciousness and to avert man from his destructive ways. It seeks to preserve nature by affecting man's psyche. Glotfelty and Fromm provided the basic definition. Ecocriticism is mainly American movement. Its British variant is known as Green Studies. While the American version is celebratory, the British version is minatory. After establishing the theory a poem by Ted Hughes is taken in order to explicate ecological parameters. The poem "Hawk Roosting" appears anti-romantic and realistic. It depicts a forest food chain in which the ferocious bird claims superiority. Through the bird the poet explains the ways of nature. In nature life survives by killing life. The bird's spirit is the elan vital of nature which stands starkly opposite to the human world.

Ecocriticism explores the relationship between literature and the physical environment (taking human and non-human at same scale), and thereby induces a possibility of literary and cultural studies from an environmentalist viewpoint. Environmentalism – a movement often accused of nostalgia and hostility towards the modern culture – takes an earth centered ('Geocentric') approach to literary studies. Ecocritical reading 'foregrounds', 'analyses', and tries to redeem the concept of 'Nature' and reassesses its history in order to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global, ecological crisis. Going against the popular jargon that Nature is rapidly being gobbled by culture – and that Nature is nothing but an anthropomorphic concept – the ecocritics encourage the scientific study of natural interdependencies. Ecocriticism counters the western cultural tradition of anthropocentric attitudes (both religious and humanist): it resists the idea that nature exists only as a signified within human culture.

'Ecocriticism', the term was coined by William Rueckert in 1978. Ecocriticism, as a systematized branch of study emerged in the 1980s in USA and the founder figure is Cheryl Glotfelty (who is a cofounder of ASLE (1992) – Association for Study of Literature and Environment; its official journal is ISLE – Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment). In Britain 'Green Studies' (British variant of Ecocriticism) takes its bearings from the British Romantics of the 1790s. The American term appears to be celebratory whereas the British movement is 'minatory', that is, it seeks to warn us against the global environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial and neocolonial forces.<sup>1</sup>

The nature writings had long been studied keeping man at the centre. Romanticism reacted against industrial rationality and celebrated 'unestranged' (that is, still belonging to nature) conditions: childhood memories, rural setting, passive contemplation in nature and the moment of self absorption. While the ecocritics assert that the romantic joy in the contemplation of nature must be combined with ecologically informed practices. And the momentary epiphany upon which romantic nature writing visibly depends must be kept in balance with experience, skill and expertise. The romantics had seen nature as 'a space of leisure' where we entertain our subjective feelings; the ecocritics try to unmask objectively the dependence between different spaces ('Ecological Niche') in the physical ecosystem. They thoroughly examine the ecosphere that surrounds the romantic text. Although Wordsworth and Thoreau and others thought about the moral widening in the liberty of nature, the ecocritics more systematically leads to moral expansion by helping us to achieve an integrated sense of the natural world that includes humanity.<sup>2</sup>

In USA three major nineteenth century writers whose works celebrated nature, life-force and the wilderness (The Transcendentalists of the 1840s), namely – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau were at the heart of

Ecocritical contention. However, the fundamental book to Ecocriticism is *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromme. Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* and Laurence Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader: from Romanticism to Ecocriticism* are the other most influential books on Ecocriticism. Terry Gifford, Lawrence Buell, Kate Soper, Greg Garrard, Jonathan Bate, Dana Philips, Karl Kroeber, Harold Fromm are the important ecocritics.

Reading, in these days, is becoming inner and introvert, psychological and psycho-critical. Texts are becoming 'Endgames' ('impotent') where nothing happens. But is it all that we live in a web ('Stream') of consciousness? Here, the ecocritics come to our rescue, switching critical attention from inner to the outer so that what has seemed mere 'setting' or background or framing device (Egdon heath or Tintern Abbey or Nottinghamshire) is brought from critical margin to the centre. The contention is that the 'crow' is simply a bird sometimes and the 'storm' in Lear is but a real weather condition. Not the morbid psychology, not just the growth of an artist's mind should the focus of attention. The Ecocriticism raises the issue of the idea of 'Nature'. Nature is not something 'simply given'; it is actually a product of specific structure and power politics. Alan Liu comments: "There is no nature ... in other words 'nature' is nothing more than an anthropomorphic construct created by Wordsworth and the rest for their own purposes." Indeed the meaning of the word nature becomes the key 'site of struggle'. Ecocriticism challenges both industrialism and culturalism and sees planetary life as being in a critical condition: in invoking nature it opposes the logic of industrialism which assures that nothing matters beyond technological progress; and in insisting that nonhuman life matters it counters complacent culturalism which renders other species as subordinate to human being.

The Ecocritics while rereading major literary works take an 'ecocentric' approach, that is: the representation of nature (ecosystem) must be the chief goal; non-human environment has intrinsic (inherent) value, independent of their usefulness to the human purposes; and nature, itself is an entity, a presence. Now, ecocentrism is not just confined to the natural world but it draws on a range of specialist disciplines including zoology, botany, geology, and climate studies and makes use of the ideas and concepts, such as: food chain, co-existing systems, growth and energy etc. The British Romantics and the American transcendentalists are given almost canonical status by the ecocritics; for nature worship - pantheism were their buzzword. And documentary writings, such as- essays, travel writings and regional literature were given special importance. The ecocritics also deliberately undermines and challenges the social and linguistic constructedness of the external nature. They refuse to accept that nature is merely a concept in our cultural practice. Consequently taking on the Nature/Culture dualism the ecocritics analyze the gradual movement from Nature to Culture along the following lines: 'The 'Wilderness' ( deserts, oceans, uninhabited

continents); 'The Scenic Sublime'(forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfalls); 'The Country Side'(hills, fields, woods); 'The Domestic Picturesque' (parks, gardens and lanes). Most of 'nature writings' concern themselves with area 'two' and 'three'; area 'four' is the setting for domestic fiction and lyric poetry; while the 'first' one is the preferred setting for epic and saga which centre on the relationship between human and the cosmic forces. Finally the ecocritics will bring the questions of race, gender and colonialism into the ecocritical consideration and evaluation of texts and ideas and thereby encourage the aspiration of the poor and the suppressed.<sup>3</sup>

Cheryll Glotfelty following Elaine Showalter's model of three developing stages of feminist criticism suggests three analogous phases in Ecocriticism: first, how nature is represented in literature; second, exploring the tradition of nature-oriented non-fiction and fiction and poetry; third, theoretical attempt to develop an ecological poetics to counter anthropocentric oppression.

Ecocriticism at its earlier phase adorns an anti-theoretical bias, offering an alternative to the abstract theorizing of literature. Environmentalist grand narratives are set against post-modernist 'pluralism'; Marxism is anti-environmentalist as it sees nature as restraining to human conditions; New Historicism sees nature writing as a conservative ideology.

Although, Ecocriticism demands a return to the literal reading, rereading from eccentric perspective necessitates the aids of high theory. Ecofeminism, a distinct co philosophy, asserts the belief that women are essentially less estranged from nature than men and they go by certain fundamental binary oppositions, like: male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion, mind/body. 'Deep Ecology' is the most radical version of Ecocriticism.

We should keep in mind that ecocriticism is not exclusively confined to nature writings only. Recent works in Ecocriticism has ranged beyond that: Tracy Brain makes an ecocritical reading of Sylvia Plath's poetry; Jhan Honchman reads the *Silence of the Lambs* form an animal rights perspective; Karla Armbruster analyzes television wildlife documentaries.

Apparently, Ecocriticism seems hostile to pleasure but in reality they do not consider the human interest as the sole one. They celebrate multiplicity, diversity. Ecologically, environmental simplification is as significant a problem as 'pollution'; hence, we need a decentralized ('Decentring' of Derrida) global movement. Finally, as poetry had made its intervention in ecology, the human mind must be linked to the natural environment and for developing an environmental culture involves a systematic resolution of Nature/Culture and Reason/Nature dualisms that split mind from body.

#### **An Application:-**

Ted Hughes's "Hawk Roosting" embodies the articulation of the world view of a non-human speaker, a hawk; this is approaching nature from nature's point of view (for the hawk itself represents the raw, elemental nature). Shunning the temptation of rationalizing or humanizing his persona (as usually happens in the romantic poetry), Hughes allows the hawk to monologize his keen desire to 'kill'. The first part of the title suggests that the poem might turn out to be a Shellyian 'Skylark'; but the associated 'roosting' is the calm, emotionless meditation of the hawk just before a merciless killing – hence, it is realistically the unconscious savagery of the nature in which life survives by killing life.<sup>4</sup>

Form an objective point of view the poem is an overt celebration of the primal and violent forces, embedded in the very process of living in nature. The hawk perching at the comfort of a high tree egotistically asserts his control over nature and other fellow creatures. In the solipsistic thought the external nature is conducive to his intention of maintaining his own superior stature in the natural hierarchy.

The subjective persona of the hawk ('I') claims to be at 'the top of the wood'. Ecocritically this is a literal truth for the hawk is at the top of a food chain in the forest ecology. Unlike a human being the

hawk refuses to accept the existence of any conscious mind, therefore he suffers from no Hamletian dilemma which only leads to 'inaction' and fantasy and disenchantment. The manner of the presentation of the hawk is curt and cruel: 'hooked head' and 'hooked feet' besides biologically describing the hawk, are emblem of raw nature with all arrogance. These are the instruments for maintaining his position at the top and this is no human mechanism but the natural adaptation that has enabled the hawk to maintain its primitive food habit. So here we witness that that the natural process may act more convincingly than a man-made machine and consequently guarantee the hawk its perfectly suited ecological niche. In the hawk's single minded pursue of the prey we are arrested by three words: 'perfect', 'eat', 'kill'. Perfection is everywhere to be found in the supreme creation of nature; and killing and eating conveys that this is not pristine Wordsworthian nature. But we should keep in mind that the torturous killing of his prey may be a thrilling experience for the hawk but aboveall he kills to eat; basic necessity is here more important than the performance of the murder itself. Hughes's aim was to reconnect man with the lost primitive vitality that would ultimately liberate his instinctual self, suppressed under the towering ego and social dictation. Through the hawk the poet celebrates the 'egotism of single-minded concern with a violence that seeks no justification for itself' (Lucas 194).

The high branch of a tree, the enlivening force of the air, the productive ray of the sun and the comfort of the earth all are arranging and helping the hawk's cause ('inspection'): that the elements are working for the hawk's 'convenience' might lead us to resolve that its position in the lap of nature is advantageous to man; and further instinctual energies help to pose a closer relationship with nature.

The creation of the hawk somehow reminds us of Blake's 'The Tyger'; Hughes's diction makes it a cosmic event: all nature is up in hand to gift it with features so that its position at the top of the food chain is ensured. Now the line suggesting that the hawk is presiding over all creation which is an almost repetition of the line from 'The Hawk in the Rain' convey that the hawk is absorbing its life force from external world but at the same time it also works towards maintaining biodiversity which the greedy persistent man-conducted killing set to dislodge.

'I kill where I please' – is the point where the hawk's ferocity and egoism reaches its climax; but this exultation over violence and cruelty is no Facism or neo-Hitlerism it is rather the affirmation and assertion of the authority of the nature. Hughes himself said: '... in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature' (qtd.in Fass 199). In nature existence is mired in blood – but this does not necessarily imply the ruthless domination and subordination of one species over another which we find at the very base of human civilization. It is the confirmation of the flow of life and the ultimate unavoidable death. After that we are intuited about the mode of operation of nature itself which is – direct, quick and precise; no false, rational logicity hampers the flow of this spontaneous action.<sup>5</sup>

The bequeathed authority of the death makes the hawk nature itself – not meditative but active, not argumentative but assertive. Hawk becomes the very medium through which nature conforms each being to the elemental process of death and rebirth.

In the final section Hughes reestablishes the eternity and unchangability of nature through the assertion of the hawk: that there is no paradigm shift in the realm of nature, the flow or circulation of energy is backed up by the elements so that it remains uncut, uninterrupted. The poem is ultimately not a celebration of predation but a manifesto pointing out the faults of a rational human world view which sometimes turns self-assuredly aggressive and devilish. Hughes's contention is that living in a mechanized ultra modern world and in front of a near ecological catastrophe man's inhuman violence and brutality is the outcome of his repressed instinct. Through the fearless assertion of the hawk Hughes aimed to dislodge the contemporary moral, religious and social order of the civilization that has separated man from nature and aboveall from his own inner self.

1. For the Ecocritical theoretical postulations I closely followed the volumes of Peter Barry, Patricia Waugh and the edited volume of Glotfelty and Fromm.
2. The difference between Romanticism and Ecocriticism is explored beautifully in the volume of Waugh.
3. The parameters of Ecocriticism is taken from the volume of Peter Barry.
4. Hughes' poetry depicts the struggle between violence and vitality. The present poem stands a supreme instance for that.
5. For the analysis of the poem I am indebted to the volume of Keith Sagar.

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