

MAPPING ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS IN POETRY: AN ECOCRITICAL READING ON SELECT POEMS

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Abstract:

*Literature often addresses ecological issues through which the eco consciousnesses of the readers are elevated to a considerable extent. These attempts aim at a better future, a better world free of ecological devastations and environmental hazards. If we love nature and it will love us in return a thousand times. But rarely do man realize this fact and hence he falls prey to his own misdeeds thereby posing threat and damage to nature and its resources. Such thoughts have been propagated through different genres of literatures, mainly poetry. This paper attempts at an Eco critical reading of select poems which includes George Kenny's *Sunset on Portage*, John Burnside's *Penitence* and Ted Walter's *Spurned Goddess*.*

Key Words: *Anthropocentrism, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Ecopoetics, Environment*

Introduction:

Coined by William Rueckert, in *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, the term, Ecocriticism, comes from Greek words 'oikos' and 'kritis'. It refers to "the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment" and involves "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature". The publication of Ecocritical works began in the late 70s and during the mid-80s, collaborative projects came up. The American Nature Writing Newsletter by Alicia Nitecki promoted the infiltration of environmental studies into literary curriculum in the 90s. The MLA (Modern Language Association) conference on Ecocriticism led to the Greening of Literary Studies and ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) came up and hence eco criticism became prominent in the literary scenario. Ecocriticism looks closely at the human culture-nature interaction in texts. Lawrence Buell suggests 4 criteria for evaluating texts embodying an environmental consciousness:

- The non-human dimension is an actual presence in the text & not merely a façade.
- The human interest is not privileged over everything else.
- The text shows humans as accountable to the environment.
- Environment is a process rather than a static condition.

Ecopoems are poems, with strong ecological emphasis or message that emerged out of direct experience and knowledge of natural world. They often dramatized the dangers of modern world by focusing on the transformation from ego logic to eco logic. William Rueckart proposes two ways to read poetry- First, the need to ask questions and second the necessity to see literature within an ecological vision. The most widely read ecopoems include, Alice Oswald's *The Thunder Mutters*, Peter Abbs's *Earth Songs*, Jay Ramsay's *Soul of the Earth*, Neil Astley's *Earth Shattering: Eco poems* and many others. Nature-oriented poetry had its major proponents in Jonathan Skinner and Christopher Arigo who defined Ecopoetics as "exploring creative-critical edges between writing (with an emphasis on poetry) and ecology (the theory and praxis of deliberate earthlings)." The term 'Ecopoetics' was popularized by Jonathan Skinner through a journal by J. Scott Bryson titled, *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*. The focus was vested on the need to find balance between the human and nature, to restore the human and nonhuman

nature relationship. “The principles of ecology change one's vision of nature as well as the form in which that vision is expressed”, said John Elder in *Imagining the Earth*. Ecological concerns permeate every piece of work including wilderness, apocalypse, animals, and earth.

Discussion:

George Kenny belonged to the indigenous community, the third largest tribe on North America. Known as 'Chippewa' in the US and 'Ojibway' in Canada, the Anishinaabe community was one of the largest indigenous ethnic group that later amalgamated as a tribe in the 1600s. His writing reflects experiences in both native and non-native world. *Indians Don't Cry* (1977) is a landmark in the history of indigenous literature that reflects the cultural survival of aboriginal people. Dedicated to his parents, the book describes his life in the Lac Seul Reserve in Ontario and the contributions of his parents in moulding him as a writer. Through the short, ten lined poem *Sunset of the Portage*, George Kenny exposes the grave reality of man's trial to dominate the powers of nature.

The poem is presented from a native's perspective thereby portraying how the Ojibway community views the reckless and ruthless environmental changes due to creeping in of modernity, non-sustainable development and even the alienation of man. The scene is set in Winnipeg, the capital city of Manitoba, Canada. In the beginning, we feel that the poet is about to describe a dusk. On the other hand, the poet presents the grave reality of man's trial to dominate the powers of nature. This can be analysed in comparison with the technology driven human lives with the pristine life of nature. Man's pride is signified by the “fluorescent and neon lights”. The light reflecting on the blue logo of the bank of Montreal is also significant as the bank of Montreal refers to the Canadian multinational banking and financial services, one of the five big banks in Canada.

The notion that “Man's Creation Surplants God's Technology” becomes crucial to the theme of the poem. Hence, the last three lines are highly significant. The association of the word creation with man and technology is also striking. The usual associated of God with creation and man with technology is subverted as a result of which the roles are inverted. Man becomes the creator. The irony involved here is that man becomes the destroyer of his own future. Here man becomes the powerful authority who overpowers God. The word “surplant” is critical to the reading of the poem. The natural environment is disrupted with the artificial advancement, resulting in a very materialistic society. It can also be considered as a climax of spiritual decline of industrialization that got set up in the eighteenth century, the apex of globalization, capitalism and consumerism. The pollution and environmental hazards associated with these are also significant. Kenneth Burke advocates an 'anti-Technological humanism' opposed to the current faith in big technology. If man has assumed that his 'technology' could replace or triumph over 'God's technology', he should realize his error. In a way, this can be considered as the lament of the Ojibway community because of the injustices occurred to their mother nature. For the natives, this transition was not at all an easily acceptable phenomenon. The poem has a universal appeal. It facilitates a warning to the readers that “the creature that wins against the environment destroys itself”(Bateson)

John Burnside's *Penitence* is the last poem in his collection, *A Normal Skin* published in 1997. The Scottish poet & novelist, John Burnside, is also a well acclaimed environmentalist & horticulturalist who considers “the animal and plant life around me, not as metaphors or emblems, but as living forms, with whom I would discover a continuity.” His works explore fundamental spiritual & ecological issues about the nature of living on earth. He strongly advocated that “we have to go out into the wilderness to establish your reconnection to the universe.” Major Anthologies: *The Hoop*, *The Asylum Dance*, *The Light Trap*, *Black Cat Bone*. The poem evokes a mood of guilt & penitence as it depicts the conflict between man & nature, epitomized by an accident that takes place as the poet drives through the woods in the dark and hits a deer. The poet effectively addresses the issue of road kill in the poem. Road ecology is a highly significant area of study, especially in the contemporary industrialized scenario where the ecological effects of roads results in noise pollution, air pollution, degradation of ecosystem and water pollution. It can also lead to

habitat fragmentation & destruction.

The title of the poem is highly significant as the very word 'Penitence' is often associated with the act of feeling or showing sorrow & regret. In that sense, the poem becomes a confession that deals with theme of guilt and the paradoxical role of guilt. Instead of helping the injured deer, he sits back and writes a poem to free himself of his guilt. This is the case with most other human beings as well. Hence, the reader hears his own voice reverberating throughout the poem. The vocabulary used in the poem is highly anthropocentric. The deer is deprived of its identity and is addressed as "It" without any respect. Language provides a word picture and gradually creates a shift in mood. The various stylistic devices such as simile ("like a black ocean"), alliteration ("soon as I stopped"), onomatopoeia ("that shudder took so"), metaphor ("the river of the wind") and enjambments become pivotal to the structure of the poem. The sharp contrast between machine & nature is brought out through strange combinations. The indifference and insensitivity of man towards the nature and its wide variety of flora and fauna becomes a major concern in the poem.

The Spurned Goddess is yet another interesting eco poem. Often regarded as the Policeman Poet, Ted Walter, joined the Metropolitan Police in 1955, retired in 1980 and became a Highways Inspector. The Scarp foot Zone, Earth Songs, The Visit, Choosing Yellow are all examples of his poetic genius. Being an evocative eco-poem, The Spurned Goddess, describes the antiquity of Earth. Man fails to realize his own insignificance and triviality in the face of the nature. The poet questions the unnatural treatment of nature quite effectively through the poem. Earth is being treated as a mere commodity in the postmodern era. Ted Walter uses the line, "Let us consider Earth, explore the ache", as a refrain throughout the poem as he tries to identify with the "ache" of Mother Earth. This ache originates from the disharmony of man and nature. The poet laments the harmony that has been long lost and has resulted in a pitiable plight.

"Remember green?" he asks with agony. As a consequence of the rapid industrialization, technological advancements, deforestation, and cultivation most of the forest covers have been burned and ultimately the grandiose greenery of the Earth has been lost to a considerable extent. He states that it took "Fifteen billion years" to make "the Earth from star-stuff". Such an ancestral legacy of the Earth is not much revered by man. The irony involved is that in spite of preserving nature in its purity and pristine nature, man exploits nature through multifaceted means thereby destroying the natural resources, the forest cover and causes damage in the food chain which even leads to extinction of species. Such a change is irreversible as "we cannot fake a species". In a sense he mocks the ill deeds of humanity. The poet opines that the use of "residual pesticides" has resulted in "a lifeless lake". It's high time to switch on to non-residual pesticides can reduce the time effect. The poet also raises the question "will our children learn to speak her name in hope, honour her return?" which is quite meaningful in the contemporary ecological scenario.

The title itself is highly symbolic. Earth is often celebrated by the title Mother Goddess. But Walter addresses Earth as the "spurned Goddess". The word "spurned" is often considered as a word of contempt. This symbolizes man's disrespect towards Mother Earth. In short, the poem serves as a lament on the destruction of the environment. Man must learn not just to protect and conserve but also to respect the Mother Earth. It also exemplifies the insignificance of man when compared to the majesty and grandeur of Mother Earth. The poem reminds the readers of Requiem to Mother Earth by O.N.V. Kurup.

Conclusion:

There is an idea of mediation through these selected poems for analysis. It is assumed that human perfectibility is possible only through technology. This becomes a reiteration of the anthropocentric believes we sustained right from the renaissance onwards. Hence there emerges a questioning stand which describes the position of the human which says that human evolves along with other forms of lives and machines. The progress attained by man is always secondary to the one attained by nature. Therefore, it is high time that man develop the ability to identify with all forms of life to look beyond the utility angle. As

Friedrich Nietzsche observes, "The world is beautiful, but has a disease called man." The exploitation of nature results in drastic consequences that includes climate change, scarcity of water, depletion of natural resources and many more ecological hazards that pose threat to life on Earth as such. Hence its important to find some effective solutions which include sustainable development and use public action, going green, proper waste management etc. Individual responsibility is very essential for achieving such a goal of a pollution free environment. "The landscape belongs to the person who looks after it" (Emerson).

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