

## NATURE, ENVIRONMENT AND LANDSCAPE IN MODERN BRITISH POETRY

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### **Abstract:**

*The present research paper attempts to study Modern British poetry in order to trace reflection of nature, environment and landscape and their connection with human beings. Modern British poetry is dominated by the experience of war and its aftermath, decay of spiritualization, modern man's search for truth and disintegration of society. Anthropology and urban society are at the centre of modern British poetry. However, the other side of modern poetry is always neglected and ignored. Most of modern British poets have attempted to link society with nature in their respective poetry. The poets like Edward Thomas and T. S. Eliot wrote poetry on nature, environment and non-human world. Their poetry can be studied from ecocritical point of view. The present research paper attempts to examine the importance of nature and environment in modern British poetry. The theory of Ecocriticism is employed to study of modern British poetry in order to trace nature, environment and landscape in modern British poetry.*

**Key Words:** *Ecocriticism, nature, environment, modern, disintegration, spiritual, urban and rural.*

### **Methodology:**

Close reading and applied critical theory to the study of modern British poetry is used during the research. The author has concentrated on close reading of the select poems of Edward Thomas and T. S. Eliot in order to trace nature and environment and their importance for the society.

### **Hypothesis**

It is believed that nature is not present in modern British poetry. All modern British poets concentrated on urban social life full of barrenness, lack of spirituality and intellectual decay. However, some critics attempt to trace the elements of ecocriticism in modern British poetry. The poets like Edward Thomas and T. S. Eliot wrote poems on both rural and urban life. The rural life without nature is impossible whereas spiritual decay in urban life is the result of the separation of urban/city from nature. Hence the modern British poets appeals for the return to nature. The present research paper attempts to test how far the above remarks are valid and true.

### **Introduction**

Ecocriticism is concerned with the study of nature and environment and its relationship with human being. American ecocriticism is different from British. It is more spiritual and less concerned with natural history. British ecocriticism is primarily concerned with cultural landscape, native environment, and pastoral elements. It is concerned with both urban and rural nature and environment. On the other hand, American ecocriticism is primarily concerned with wilderness in nature. Both culture and environment are connected intimately in American ecocriticism. The American critics believe that it is impossible to separate culture from environment. Both are held together in a 'complex and delicate web' (Jonathan Bate 23). Robert Frost deals with spiritual and mystical aspects of nature in his *Birches*. American critics attempt to associate nature with national identity more strongly than British. The European ecocriticism including British deals with pastoral modes and "the physical and social realities of landscape and their representation in literature" (Lawrence Buell 15). Physical geography, historical

events like industrial revolution, wars, urbanization, mechanization of farming in countryside and city are the major concerns of British ecocriticism. No doubt, British has wild places but not vast wilderness. There was a close proximity between town and country in British Ecocriticism. British ecocritics stated their aim to make “the category of nature as central to the humanities as class, race, gender are at present” (Laurence Coupe 3). In fact, British ecocritics like Dominic Head, Richard Kerridge, Bate to mention a few would not necessarily connect literature with nature. Bate attempts to extend the boundaries by saying ecocritics “do not confine themselves to the study of poems about trees” (Dominic Head 03). Urban experiences are also under scrutiny of ecocriticism. Raymond Williams studied the country and the city in his *In the Country and the City* (1973) and linked these studies with the exposure of political and social realities behind their fictional representation in literature. Williams places importance on the city in ecocriticism. Urban landscapes plays important role in ecocriticism. In fact, urban landscape provides fertile ground to examine the nature and artificial at a time. Nature pervades in the city. The interrelatedness and interdependency of human and nature in the city is new to ecocriticism. The present research paper attempts to study the interconnections between nature, environment and poetry. It also aims to investigate reflection of the countryside the city, the urban life in British poetry of 1920s. The complex relation between nature, humankind and society is at the centre of this research paper.

### Discussion

Edward Thomas is known for his representation of British countryside, his understanding of places as a balance between human and non-human presences and fundamental ecocritical values. He acknowledges the autonomy of nature and rejects encroachment of nature by the human. He shows his interest in rural places. He depicts rural Britain as mixture of human and non-human. Due to war, rural nature has been destroyed and imbalance has been created. Hence, he appeals for close contact with natural world. His poems are centered around rural landscape. He sees rural landscape with modernist vision. He has brought out environmental impact of War in his poems. His poems represent modern way of writing about nature. His representation of modern nature and places is new and novel. He is aware of the limitations of human being in represent in nature in words. His poems speak of the beauty of the decay, unchecked weeds, wild flowers, abandoned barns, overgrown paths, whispering trees and singing birds etc.

Edward Thomas's poem *Adlestrop* is a famous poem about the loss of idyllic image of pre-war England due to the carnage of war and advent of new scientific age. The poet depicts the countryside already subjected to the forces of modernity. The speaker of the poem notices:

...willows, willow-herb, and grass  
 And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
 ...all the birds  
 Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire (Edward Thomas 27).

The stillness and silence in the rural landscape is contrasted with the usual notice and speed of the train. The speaker notices stillness and silences in nature when he has been traveling in train. The railways were taken in rural areas in 20 century and its impact on rural countryside has found apt description in this poem. Human's encounter with the nature and its result is depicted in the poem. Adlestrop is the name of the small rural place where train took unwanted stop. The poet's impression about the place called adlestrop is contrasted with noisy train passing. The poem depicts typical English countryside, its flora and fauna. Though the poet has not depicted the noise made by the railway, he intends the reader to compare and contrast blissful life in countryside with the devastating taking noise of railways: “No one left and no one come / On the bare platform (Edward Thomas, *Adlestrop*, 27). The impact of extension of railways in the countryside and its effect on the nature is depicted in the poem.

The impact of modernism and changes on countryside and the condition of England is depicted

in another poem entitled *The Swift* by Edward Thomas. The poem *The Swift* celebrates the swifts who return 'The same year after year' (Edward Thomas 125). The poet has depicted the devastating effect of technology on both human and nature:

With other things I but fear  
That they will be over and done  
Suddenly  
And I only see  
Them to know them gone

(Edward Thomas 125).

Edward Thomas has brought out the importance of nature in response to changes.

Edward Thomas never wrote poems on home. He is rather interested in roads. However, his poem entitled *Home* represents speaker's final destination which he longs and feared for its placelessness:

My home, I have never seen:  
No traveler tells of it,  
However, far he has been.

(Edward Thomas 125).

Edward Thomas respects nature and acknowledges its autonomy. He also understands the limitations of human in understanding non-human. In the poem *March* the poet makes bird to sing a song as an alternative form of communicating knowledge which can be sensed but not understood by humans. The speaker of the poem cannot discern any signs of the spring, hence asked: "What did the thrushes know?" (Edward Thomas 8). The poet does not attempt to convey message or humanize. Instead, both human and the bird shared their presence in place and their sensitivity to seasonal change: "Something they knew - I also" (Edward Thomas 8). The use of non-human language is a significant aspect of Edward Thomas' poems. His another poem entitled *The Word* depicts poet's reminiscence of both human and non-human learnt at school:

...empty thingless name  
A pure thrush word

(Edward Thomas 77).

The speaker of the poem is once again a bird. The meaningful recall of the speaker is paradoxical. The otherness of nature is appealing whereas the memory is strange as seen in another poem called *The Unknown Bird*. In this poem the speaker is haunted by three lovely notes. As a result, the speaker has lost his self and mysteriously involved in the speaker's personal sadness:

Sad more than joyful it was, if I must say  
That it was one ore other, but if sad,  
'Twas sad only joy too, too far off  
For me to taste it

(Edward Thomas 125).

The poet becomes one with the bird and experiences bird's feelings: "Light as that bird, wandering beyond my shore" (Edward Thomas 32).

Edward Thomas has depicted the realities of countryside and rural life in the poem called *Word*. He has learnt how to separate realities from dreams. His dual commitment to language and to the countryside is vividly reflected in the poem:

Out of us all  
 That make rhymes,  
 Will you choose  
 Sometimes -  
 As the winds use  
 A crack in a wall  
 Or a drain,  
 Their joy or their pain  
 To whistle through -  
 Choose me,  
 You English words?

(Edward Thomas 77).

The poet attempts to connect language with nature. Language is described as “Strange and sweet/ Equally,/ And familiar nature (Edward Thomas 77). Both nature and human beings are intimately connected to each other. Hence, the poet claims that the destruction of nature is not good for human being. The language used in the poem suggests human being to have greater understanding of the natural world.

Edward Thomas employs loss of self knowledge and intimate connection to natural world as recurrent theme in his poems. In the poem entitled *Old Man*, the speaker attempts to

Sniff them and think and sniff again and try  
 Once more you think what it is I am remembering

(Edward Thomas 51).

However, the speaker's attempt is in vain and it ends: “I have mislaid the key” (Edward Thomas 51).

Edward Thomas depicts not only the marginalized aspects of rural and country life in his poems but also the unpoetic aspects of the country life such as decaying barns, nettle patches, abandoned lanes and other holes and corners. The importance of aspects of nature caught the attention of Edward Thomas.:

The shell of a little snail bleached  
 In the grass; chip of flint, and mite  
 Of chalk; and the small birds' dung  
 In splashes of purest white

(Edward Thomas *But these Things Also* 28).

Edward Thomas' holistic appreciation of all aspects of nature makes him Ecocritical poet. He has focused on the realistic aspect of nature rather than fantasy. His poem entitled *November* depicts muddy paths made up of 'Twig, leaf, flint, thorn (Edward Thomas *November* 6). The roads and paths described in his poems and the marks left by travelers on the roads and paths connect Edward Thomas from his sense of alienation and homelessness to a wider community of travelers and wanders who also understand roads as a silent companion always ready for us whether it is night or day, wet or fine, whether we are calm or desperate (Edward Thomas *Icknied Way* 2). Edward Thomas found solace in the company of nature. He experiences sense of any alienation and homelessness without nature. That is why his poems are full of natural aspects, roads, paths, trees, bushes, thorns, rains and forest.

Unlike Edward Thomas, T. S. Eliot's poems depict city life polluted, unhealthy, contaminated and sterile environment. The negative portrait of city life would not, in fact, help to provide insights into human relations to the natural world. T. S. Eliot's poems provide new ways to perceive and understand the physical world, especially the modern city life. Ecocritical approach to the study of T. S. Eliot's poetry brings out the loss of something vital in modern life and the importance of nature for both individual and

Society. The impact of modernity on nature results in human being's disconnection from the nature and immersion in physical decaying society.

T. S. Eliot portrays the physical beauty of the landscape in the wasteland. Besides this, the poem concerns with Eliot's environmental concerns. Critics like Laurence Coupe and Craig Raine attempts to study T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from ecocritical point of view. These critics brings bring out the environmental crisis and climate change brought about by intensive farming and the depletion of natural resources by industry. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* depicts the decayed city life in modern society. The poet has depicted the landscape with recognizable landmarks. His depiction of landscape stands for "something more than themselves; they are symbolic of universal emotional or moral states" (Nancy Duvall 14). T. S. Eliot's attachment to environment and nature is connected with cultural decay in modern society. Hence, it is imperative to study T. S. Eliot's poetry from news perspective called Ecocritical. T. S. Eliot's notion of nature takes us to the decayed human condition. The impact of industrialism on human being and the physical environment is the recurrent theme of T. S. Eliot's poetry. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is read and analysed as a prophecy of ecological disaster. The changing climate has its effect on spiritualism and this interconnection between changing climate and spiritual decay is the major concern of *The Waste Land*. T. S. Eliot's depiction of spiritual decay and emotional barrenness is symbolic for literate state of drought and desert brought by harbinger of greenhouse effect. T. S. Eliot is concerned with the damage caused by agrarian capitalism. The technological progress and World War I brought aridity to the land and this aridity and inhospitality of the land described in *The Waste Land* offers opportunity to read the poem from Eco critical point of view. The presence of the fisher King connects the external state of the land with the internal health of the people. The separation of external with the internal environment will lead to the ecological disaster. T. S. Eliot highlights the connection between the internal and external environment as is evident in his another poem called *The Rocks*:

The desert is not remote in Southern tropics  
The desert is not only around the corner,  
The desert is squeezed in the tube train next to you,  
The desert is in the heart of your brother.

(T. S. Eliot 2004, 149)

The impact of greenhouse habitat and disconnection from the nature on the urban environment is seen in the opening lines of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.

(T. S. Eliot 2004, 59)

These lines confirmed the environmental impact of modernity and disconnection from the nature

*The Waste Land* highlights the negative personal, cultural and environmental consequences of the society's increasing sense of disconnection from the natural world. The beginning of *The Waste Land* immediately recognises this fundamental change in attitude towards nature (Elizabeth Harris 90).

The relationship between human and non human in the opening lines extends to the relationship between poetry and the natural world. This break is suggested through symbolic representation of spring as a new life and hope:

The cruelest month, breathing  
Lyrics out of the Dead land, mixing  
Memory and Desire, steering  
Dull roots with spring rain  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.

(T. S. Eliot 2004, 59)

The poet has maintained the connection between the coming of the spring in the natural world with a sense of regeneration in the human. Although nature is neutral, a change in human understanding is seen in the description of the regenerative processes of spring as 'stirring', 'breeding' and 'mixing'. The setting of the poem is city and urban life. Hence, it creates obstacles to read the poem from Eco critical point of you. However, Eliot's concentration on urban life completely detached from nature asserts the importance of environment and nature in the life of each and everyone irrespective of urban or rural inhabitant. Thus the urban setting of *The Waste Land* does not diminish the poem's environmental resonance.

T. S. Eliot's concern of environment and nature is seen in another poem *Four Quartets*. The poem is set in rural geography. It describes the world of nature and the world of spirit. The poet attempts to connect the modern world of *The Waste Land* with the nature. His attachment to nature is also seen in his argument in *The Idea of a Christian society*: "The religious life implies a life in conformity with nature" (Eliot 1942, 33).

T. S. Eliot believes that the wrong attitude to nature means wrong attitude to God. He is against the exploitation of natural resources. He thinks that the intensive farming and industrialization has led to the exhaustion of natural resources. His environmental and ecological concerns are seen in the *Four Quartets*. The speaker is aware of the vulnerability of each landscape to human interference and the growing threat of environmental crisis. He is also aware that the rural life is under threat from modernity. Though Eliot is known as poet of urban life, his *Four Quartets* shifts his interest in city to rural life. The poem appeals to return to rural and countryside and reconnect with nature. The garden described in the first part of the poem 'Burnt Norton' represents cultured nature. The roses in the garden are symbolic of perfection within the idyllic landscape, represent both divine and earthly love. The poet depicts the city in the same poem with words like 'slip', 'slide', 'perish' - all these represent negativity of the city life. He experiences spiritual emptiness in city:

Distracted from distraction by distraction  
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning  
Tumid apathy with no concentration

(T. S. Eliot 2004, 110)

The city becomes for poet a place of spiritual emptiness and disconnection with nature. The poet's cultural interest in English villages is best reflected in 'East Coker'

Whisper of running streams, and winter lighting.  
The wild thyme unseen and wild strawberry,  
The laughter in the garden [...].

(T. S. Eliot 2004, 113).



TS Eliot sees perfect happiness in rural community and its closest to nature. The ideal community in 'East Cocker' adheres to natural cycles and processes:

In my beginning is my end. I succession  
House rise and fall, crumble, are extended,  
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place  
Is an open field, or factory, or a by-pass.  
Old stones to new buildings, old timber to new fires,  
Old fires to ashes, and Ashes to the earth.

(T. S. Eliot 2004, 115).

The poet is aware of the unsettling disturbances in the natural world. He alerts human of unease towards the disordered seasons:

What is the late November doing  
With the disturbance of the spring  
And creatures of the the summer heat,  
And snowdrops writhing under feet  
Red into grey and tumble down  
Late roses filled with early snow

(T. S. Eliot 2004, 116).

The unease change in nature and collapse of environment reminds the tranquility of place.

The hills and the trees, the distant panorama  
And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away.

(T. S. Eliot 2004, 117).

The poet wants not to damage and pollute river with wastage. The impact of human activities on nature and dependence of humans on the river is in seen the following lines:

We cannot think of a time that is oceanless  
Or of an ocean littered with wastage  
Or a future that is not liable  
Like the past, you have no destination

.....

We have to think of them forever bailing.

(T. S. Eliot 2004, 118).

Thus, the poem *Four Quartets* represents T. S. Eliot's search for connection between the human and the nature. The poem teaches how to live on the earth. The balance between nature and community is essential to lead a happy life. Eliot appeals for reconnected with nature despite the advances made the modern lifestyles further from it. The company of nature is essential to enjoy psychological and spiritual well being.

### **Conclusion:**

In short modern British poetry shows a clear and sustained interest in nature and environment. The ecocritical reading of modern British poetry has revealed a strong environmental consciousness. Both Edward Thomas and T. S. Eliot have shown deep anxiety over disruptive changes in human-nature relationship. Edward Thomas appeals to have a meaningful contact with the natural world. T. S. Eliot's poems show environmental awareness. His poetry reveals the impact of human action on environment and nature. He has created the image of decayed society disconnected from nature. The modern man's disconnection and estrange from nature results in spiritual, cultural and environmental decay in modern

man. T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* confirms the poet's environmental commitment. The poem reveals poet's search for reconnection to place by returning to landscapes. The literal meaning of the landscapes is important. The character and thinking of the speaker of *Four Quartets* has been shaped and moulded by the landscapes. The poems of T. S. Eliot and Edward Thomas show the depth of these poets' engagement with the natural world and the importance of their insights into human-nature relations. Both poets accept the rural and the r=urban environments as subjects to continual changes. The harmonious relationship between human and non-human will enhance the peaceful life for human beings.

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