

American Transcendentalism as the Complement of Ecocriticism

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Abstract— *Ecocriticism has been one of the prominent theories of literary criticism. However, its practitioners have felt some inconvenience in their practice. Objective of this paper is to know the matters that have made the practitioners of ecocriticism feel uneasy in their practice and supply solution to their problems. The paper argues that the uneasy felt by the practitioners of ecocriticism is caused by the fact that there is no dominant canonical guideline in ecocriticism. The paper proposes that this gap can be fulfilled by adopting some prominent features of American transcendentalism: that nature is the manifestation of universal soul; that human being is analogous to nature; and hence human actions should be made proportionate to the order of nature. This study can add some in the process of making ecocriticism emerge as a complete philosophy of the relationship between human being and nature, which thereby could create harmony in and between them.*

Keywords— *American transcendentalism, anthropocentrism, deep ecology, ecocriticism, Gaya-hypothesis, non-anthropocentrism, universal spirit.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism as a new concept of literary criticism first arose in the late 1970s in the meetings of The Western Literature Association. William Rueckert used the word 'ecocriticism' for the first time in the 1978. Environmental literary studies started in an organized manner in 1980s. Theoretical canons of ecocriticism were developed in the 1990s. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* published in 1996 became a landmark book for it. And Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) has played one of the major roles for the development of ecocriticism since its inception by offering a forum of discussion on it.

Ecocriticism studies human relationship with nature in the course of time. It holds ecocentric stand and applies holistic approach. It starts from the historical study of human and nature relationship, especially the western conceptions on it. Ecocritics find western minds to have been shaped by their conviction that nature is made for human being as the superior species. They take Judeo-Christian beliefs and Greco-Roman traditions as its roots: "And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth" (Holy Bible 1-2). Such scriptures offered human beings license for the exploitation of nature. This root gave birth to the western dualistic

philosophy that functions through hierarchies like human being/nature, male/female, rich/poor, and so on, which played supportive role in the emergence of anthropocentric relationship between human being and nature. Ecocriticism aims to subvert the anthropocentric relationship between human being and nature for the good of both nature and thereby human being. It takes non-anthropocentric stand.

Ecocriticism diminishes any kind of hierarchy between human being and nature and has the "feeling of oneness with all of nature –the experience of the sublime" (Lenz 160). It focuses on nature based literary expressions in the culturally shaped human world. According to David Damrosch, ecocriticism "offers a broad vision of life and our place in nature. It could help you come out of the bind you're in now, caught inside a self-enclosed definition of culture that only mirrors your own obnoxious little self-regarding angst-ridden egomaniacal crypto-smugness" (126). Ecocriticism helps one understand life and broaden the vision about it by coming out of the self-enclosed definition of culture.

Greg Garrard defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (5). In *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell makes a "checklist" of four points that characterize the nature of environment oriented work: (1) The nonhuman

environment indicates that human history is implicated in natural history; (2) the human interest is not the only legitimate interest; (3) the ethical orientation of a text is based on human accountability to the environment; and (4) environment is a process rather than as a constant or a given (6-8). Ecocritics apply such canons in approaching environmental or non-environmental texts. Ecocriticism enables the reader to analyze and critique the world in which we live.

However, the argument of ecocriticism contradicts with other western literary theories. Postmodernism is the outcome and representative of the western literary theories, and cultural practices. So the basic differences between ecocriticism and other western literary theories can be known by comparing it with postmodernism. Whereas ecocriticism explores nature's role in building meanings for human culture, postmodernism has just opposite argument. Postmodernism views that everything is socially or linguistically constructed. In other words, it formulates the notion that culture is not the product of nature; instead, nature itself is the product of culture. Wallace Martin declares that "conventional practices do not separate us from reality but create it" (75). Unlike this, ecocritics take that nature is not human construct. Instead human being is one of the parts of nature and hence they are interconnected.

Nevertheless, ecocriticism is becoming more and more popular in the recent decades. Different universities of the world have introduced ecocriticism in their curricula. Beside America and England, it has become popular in Canada, Japan, Germany, India, and China. Even the underdeveloped countries like Nepal and Bangladesh have introduced ecocriticism in their university curricula. However, the practitioners of ecocriticism have felt some uneasiness in their practice.

II. GAPS IN ECOCRITICISM

Ecocriticism is not free of problems. It is not that only literary critics take ecocriticism as "insufficiently problematic" (Howarth 78), even ecocritics themselves have felt something lack in it. According to Barry Pater, "There is no universally accepted model that we have merely to learn and apply" in ecocriticism (257-58). William Howarth puts, "After years of reading across several disciplines I've come to see that ecocriticism is evolving loosely because its authors share no sense of canon" (82). Similarly, Scott Slovic feels that "There is no single, dominant world-view guiding ecocritical practice – no single strategy at work from example to example of

ecocritical writing or teaching" (160). These assertions indicate that there is no guiding principle in ecocriticism.

Furthermore, ecocriticism mainly studies physical relationship between human being and nature. According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism is a diverse field of literary study, united by the shared premise that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xix). Question arises, could ecocriticism be taken as a complete philosophy from its success of establishing human and nature connectivity? The answer must be in the negative. Human and nature's natural bond can be well discerned by biological or environmental scientists. To acquire status of a philosophy, there must be a unifying concept. According to David Daiches-Raphael, "a philosophical theory ... should try to show connections and should tie up in a coherent system" (55). From all these, it can be reasoned that lack of the central unifying concept in ecocriticism is the gap that has made the ecocritics feel uneasy in their practice.

III. FULFILLMENT OF ECOCRITICAL GAPS

It proposes that the absence of the unifying concept in ecocriticism can be fulfilled by adopting some features of American Transcendentalism, another nature oriented approach. American Transcendentalism unfolds several features related to human and nature relationship. These features can be summarized in three main points: that human being is analogous to nature; hence human actions should be made proportionate to the order of nature; and that nature is the manifestation of universal soul. If ecocriticism adopts these features, it could emerge as a complete nature oriented philosophy.

Human being analogous to nature

Ecocritical notions match well to the above mentioned first American transcendentalist feature that human being is analogous to nature. Ralf Waldo Emerson, the patron of American Transcendentalism, asserts in *Nature* that when one is purified by studying the universal spirit cast in the objects of nature, one is "uplifted into infinite space, -all mean egotism vanishes." And, in such a situation one becomes "transparent eye-ball," totally absorbed in nature: "I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulated through me" (499). As nature is included in the "Universal Being," Emerson's being one with it is implied in his own assimilation with nature. Similarly, Henry David Thoreau, another one of the major American Transcendentalists, takes mingling oneself with nature as understanding the earth. In *Walden* he asks, "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself" (934)? These assertions of the transcendentalists come because they implicitly

believed that human being is part of nature, not superior to it.

Like the transcendentalists, the ecocritics also take human being as analogous to nature one way or other. This can be well understood from the concept of deep ecology, one of the main stands of ecocriticism. Deep ecologists give intrinsic worth to the objects of nature. According to Tom Regan, for the deep ecologists "intrinsic worth" means "independent of any awareness, interest, or appreciation of it by any conscious being" (273). In other words, deep ecologists deny that the source of all environmental value lies in humans as value makers. Similarly, Bill Devall and George Sessions view that "all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as part of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth" (202). It implies that if other objects or species of nature are complete or perfect on their own, human being is by no means superior to them, but equal. This implied claim of the ecocritics show that ecocriticism is quite similar in entailing human and nature affinity.

Human action as per the order of nature

Second major proposition of American Transcendentalism is that as human being is the part of nature, human actions should be proportionate to nature. In the "Introduction" of *Nature* Emerson writes, "Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature..." (496-97). Expected conducts from a person with this kind of motivation can be known from another follower of American Transcendentalism, Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*. In it, the poet reveals his feeling that if he sees someone degrading another, he feels himself to be degraded: "Whoever degrades another degrades me,/ And whatever is done or said returns at last to me" (503-4). He feels so because he thinks that the same as their divine spirit or soul flows from him, too. It implies that human conducts should be as per the order of nature, where there is no any degradation of other humans or species.

Though ecocritics do not explicitly plead that nature should be taken as the guide for human motivation, they purport for nature friendly human conduct. The whole plan of ecocriticism is to replace the prevailing anthropocentric world view with nature friendly non-anthropocentric i.e. ecocentric one. Garrard puts, "Much ecocriticism has taken for granted that its task is to overcome anthropocentrism, just as feminism seeks to overcome androcentrism" (176). Overcoming anthropocentrism means applying non-anthropocentric notions, which are nature friendly. Rather than implying for nature related human behavior in this way, it would be

good for ecocriticism to explicitly declare that human conducts must be proportionate to nature as done by the American transcendentalists. It is because since human being is connected to nature, their conducts should be molded in such a way that they should fit the order of nature. Or else human life is threatened.

Nature as the representation of the universal soul

Third main feature of American Transcendentalism is that it takes nature as the representation of the universal soul. The transcendentalists including Emerson take nature as an alternative source of spiritual knowledge. Spirit in nature is their alternative of God. In "Spiritual Laws", Emerson affirms that "There is a soul at the center of nature, and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe" (69). Likewise, the ultimate goal of Thoreau's staying in the forest of the Walden Pond for two years was to know human being's place in the universe. Don Scheese draws an analogy between Thoreau's connection between nature and spirituality: "The value of wilderness Thoreau deems most important is spiritual" (310). It shows that spirituality is one of the dominant features of American transcendentalism.

Unlike American Transcendentalism, ecocriticism is basically an earth centered approach. It does not see nature from the spiritual perspective. It seeks to find physical connections between human being and nature. Glotfelty asserts, "Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment...ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xix). Relationship between human being and nature is so interconnected that any imbalance in it caused by human beings becomes a counter product or self-suicidal. In this context Rueckert puts: "The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community" (107). It becomes possible when anthropocentric approach of human and nature relationship is replaced by non-anthropocentric or holistic one.

Though the main stream ecocriticism is basically earth-centered, some ecocritics tend to recognizing earth as Gaia or higher organism. It is known as *gaia* hypothesis, which treats the earth as an integrated super-organism. Garrard opines: "Rather than merely being a rock in space with life clinging to it, the non-living parts of the planet are as much a part of the whole as non-living heartwood of a living tree" (173). Similarly, Theodore Roszak sees discourse of the spiritual world in the objects of nature: "Wait, watch, be still, be open: even the humblest may allow fit discourse with the spiritual world" (111). These assertions show that there is undercurrent of spirituality in

the practitioners of ecocriticism. And “universal spirit” or spirituality is not an elusive word either. It is a word coined to represent essence and oneness of the objects and elements of the universe. Hence it would be better for ecocriticism to fully apply the American transcendental concept of nature as the representation of universal soul as well.

There is nothing wrong in the transcendentalists’ taking the meanings symbolized by objects of nature as “universal soul,” which further indicates the oneness of all the objects. Ecocritics call this as ‘organic unity’ or so. Difference between American transcendentalists and ecocritics is only in name, not in concept. In this sense, spirituality is the very inherent quality of the project of ecocriticism. One of the basic elements of deep ecology is self-realization. “Self- realization means identification with a larger organic “Self” beyond the individual person; or “self-in-Self” as they put it” (Dryzek 197). The idea is to cultivate a deep consciousness and awareness of the organic unity, of the holistic nature of the ecological webs in which every individual is enmeshed. There is not any fundamental difference between “organic Self” and “universal soul”: both bear some logical realities of oneness.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the full application of the major features of American transcendentalism in ecocriticism, no matter in the modified form, in regard to human and nature relationships, the ecocritical need of “universally accepted model” or “single, dominant world-view guiding ecocritical practice” or the need of “central, dominant doctrine or theoretical apparatus”, as quoted earlier, could be fulfilled. From this, people, like the American transcendentalists, could take that human beings are not only physically but also spiritually imbedded with nature. Hence they could declaratively take nature as truth, human being as nature, and nature as the source of human motivations and so make their conducts proportionate to nature by adopting natural values like love, freedom, peace, and so on.

From this, ecocriticism could get every room and methodological tools to deal with human conducts and human and nature relationship related problems. For instance, an ecocritic would proudly say that his or her source of motivations is nature and hence if his or her actions do not cope with nature, he out-rightly drops them. Similarly, in evaluating a literary art or an idea, an ecocritic would first check whether the work has applied anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric world view. Then

they would find if its characters have the features of the sense of oneness with nature or of dominance or superiority over it. And finally they would study what values the work intends to show, natural or artificial. They would praise natural values. From such canons of criticism or evaluation, there would not be any confusion in the ecocritics.

On the whole, ecocriticism rejects anthropocentrism as it holds human superiority over nature. It does not see the world safe from the anthropocentric treatment to nature as it poses dualistic or hierarchal relationship to it. Unlike them, ecocriticism takes holistic approach. It gives precedence to biotic community as it assumes that only from this, harmony of the world, to which human beings’ harmony is embedded, is guaranteed. However, the practitioners of ecocriticism feel lack of unified philosophic concept in it. This gap can be fulfilled by taking insights from American Transcendentalism. Like American Transcendentalism, ecocriticism takes human being as a part of nature. It could also internalize and apply two other American transcendental features: that nature represents universal spirit –a phrase of inclusivity, and that, being part of nature, human conducts should be proportionate to nature. If ecocriticism adopts these features of American transcendentalism as its complement, it would emerge as a complete philosophy with universally fit canons. From it the practitioners of ecocriticism would not feel any lack. And from their unproblematic ecocentric ideas and practices, common people would also gradually adopt nature friendly mode of conducts. Such a nature coping human conduct would not only create harmony in the biotic community but also guarantee harmony and development in human beings in the true sense. Donald Worster rightly puts, “Ecology ... seemed to be a science that dealt with harmony, a harmony found in nature, offering a model for a more organic, cooperative human community” (363).

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