

ECO-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE WORKS OF AMITAV GHOSH AND MARGARET ATWOOD

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Abstract

Time and again the relationship between environment and man has been revisited and explored in great depths by academicians and scholars alike. The current ecological changes require an urgent inquiry into the matters of environmental degradation and degeneration. The need of the hour is not only to seek eco-sustainable methods of living in sync with the environment but also to abide by them. Ecocriticism, as a literary and cultural theory, offers a systematic theoretical framework to analyse the ecological crisis faced by the world, through the works of literature.

Study of nature through the world of literature exposes the delicate relationship between man and ecology, and the repercussions caused by the imbalance in the two worlds. In lieu of this statement, this paper seeks to examine the eco-critical perspectives in some select works of Amitav Ghosh and Margaret Atwood, with an added investigation into the relationship between women and nature. In doing so, this paper attempts to analyse the complex dynamics involved in the social, cultural, and material representations of the environment in literature in order to highlight the ways in which both women and the natural world are devalued and exploited by the patriarchal societies in which we live. A conscious reading of these texts from eco-critical and eco-feminist perspectives will help deepen our understanding of the current ecological crises being faced by the world and offer solutions that address both gender and ecological vindications.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, literature, hegemony, ecology, diversity, sustainability

Time and again the relationship between environment and man has been revisited and explored in great depths by academicians and scholars alike. The current ecological changes require an urgent inquiry into the matters of environmental degradation and degeneration. The need of the hour is not only to seek eco-sustainable methods of living in sync with the environment but also to abide by them. Ecocriticism, as a literary and cultural theory, offers a systematic theoretical framework to analyse the ecological crisis faced by the world, through the works of literature. It is an interdisciplinary approach to literature that seeks to find relevant solutions for contemporary environmental crises by analysing the depiction of natural landscape, human culture and politics in the sphere of literature. The term 'ecocriticism' was coined by William Reukert in 1976 to bring out the interconnection between literature and environment. Before this, complex dynamics involved in the social, cultural, and material representations of the environment in literature were seldom the concerns of literary critics. Cheryl Glotfelty defines this relatively new perspective of literary criticism as:

[It is] the study of literature and physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of the modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, eco-criticism takes an earth centred approach to literary criticism. (56)

The primary concerns of eco-criticism as given by ecocritic Donatella Dreese are "how nature is presented,

when it is presented, how the environmental crises has influenced nature , and how the concepts of the environment have evolved through the centuries” (24). When analysed from an eco-critical perspective, the works of Amitav Ghosh and Margaret Atwood strongly voice current ecological concerns and also call for a more imaginative and sensitive portal of environment in fiction that articulates resistance against materialism that threatens to destroy our planet today.

Amitav Ghosh’s environmental concerns can be seen in almost all of his literary works especially in the Ibis Trilogy which comprises three novels, the Sea Of Poppies (2008), The River of Smoke (2011) and the Flood of Fire (2015) which depicts the effect of rapidly changing environment. In these novels, Ghosh shows that Nature is composed of both the constructive and destructive ecological aspects. He also presents the threat caused by the misuse of nature by mankind. Set in the backdrop of British colonial rule in India, the Ibis trilogy deals with the trade of opium between British India and China facilitated by the East India Company and the events leading up to the First Opium War. It is a saga of anthropogenic ecological destruction undertaken to make way for monoculture of opium, a primary cash crop for the colonial government. Ghosh paints a poignant picture of the devastation caused by ecological disaster caused by imperialism and also depicts the socio- economic impact of this in the form of disrupted economic, cultural and social stability of the indigenous population of Northern India.

The British government forced the Indian peasants to grow opium in the vast arable lands where regular food grains were generally produced. This causes a havoc in the lives of the local people whose livelihood depends on the cultivation of edible crops that not only gave them food but also provided them with material for shelter. With the disruption of this symbiotic and sublime coexistence with nature, the local community has to face severe hardships or migrate to Mauritius as indentured labourers. The loss of crop diversity due to the monoculture of opium has repercussions not just for the human but also the other living beings in the immediate environment. The workers such as Deepti’s husband become “habitual opium-eaters, who sat always as if in a dream, staring at the sky with dull, dead eyes” (Ghosh 35) and they often resort to the drug to dull their pain and miseries of everyday life. Ghosh deftly portrays this predicament by describing the palliative effect of opium on the insects and bees that suck the nectar of the opium plants and the changed behaviour of the monkeys near the Sundur Opium Factory.

The eco-critical vision of Ghosh as presented in the Ibis trilogy can be understood as one that is located in the politics of postcolonial ecology wherein the literary form becomes a critical engagement with an aesthetics of the earth. Ghosh’s literary enterprise with its hidden agenda of social and environmental advocacy is imaginative and serves as a catalyst for social action and exploratory literary analysis into a full-fledged form of engaged cultural critique.

Amitav Ghosh’s portrayal of the low lying Sundarbans landscape in his novel The Hungry Tide effectively captures the severity of the ecological issues that can arise in eco- sensitive zones like this forest of mangrove trees when the ecological balance is disturbed by anthropogenic forces of destruction. He also highlights the complex relationship between the fragile environment of this region and the precarity that characterizes the lives of communities that inhabit this region. In this novel, Ghosh throws light on the anthropocentric belief of human beings that nature is meant for the human beings alone and challenges it multiple times in the course of the novel by the readers a giving a vivid account of the horrific side of nature.

The sense of superiority of the human beings is debunked when they are made to face the destructive side of nature because it reminds man of the fragility and precarity of his own existence in the environment. The novel gives many instances of this: when Kanai suddenly encounters the fierce tiger and when Piya and Fokir get caught in the cyclone. Also, the readers are constantly reminded that every species contributes to the completeness of nature and has a right to live on the earth, but the anthropocentric attitude of man poses a serious challenge to this balance and sublimity of coexistence. In the episode where a Tiger is burnt for invading the premises of a human habitation, people refer to it as ‘the horror’ it is considered as a punishable crime but destruction of the sacred habitat of other species habitats and killing them is not considered as serious crime by most people. Ghosh mockingly brings forth this hypocrisy of human beings.

Today we are face with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own—indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. Recognising that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come. (Wangari Maathai 89)

Historically, all over the world there have been various movements that are specifically dedicated to continuation and regeneration of life, like the Chipko Movement in India, Green belt Movement in Kenya, Environmental justice movement in the U.S.; all these movements are categorised as “Ecofeminist” movements. These movements constantly draw connections and parallels between detriment of nature and women. The term “Ecofeminism” was coined by the French Writer Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. The emergence of Ecofeminism in the west as a philosophy, as a theory, as a movement was developed in the late 1970s and 80s. Across discourses, be it west or east, nature is always referred in feminine terms, the pronouns used for nature are “she” and “her”, which automatically brings the predicament of nature and women on the same plane. The subjugation and destruction of both nature and women speaks volumes about their respective states in the society. Hence, an urgent inquiry is needed in the field of ecofeminism, to explore various avenues which could potentially bring justice for nature and women alike.

Vandana Shiva advocates the necessity of ecofeminism through her works. Shiva is critical of the current forms of globalisation which attempts to homogenise the experiences of people and nature, especially women. In her book, *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology*, Shiva argues that the current economic evaluation of the society emphasises on nature and women as being the raw materials for future growth and prosperity. However, in this assimilation, both nature and women instead of being revered are exploited instead (56). Ecofeminism explores the derogatory attitudes towards nature and women, which halts nurture and regeneration. Warren argues that the attributes associated with masculinity, within a patriarchal framework, are given a prestigious position as compared to feminine aspects that results in “hierarchical dualisms” (6-8). Ecofeminists are unanimously of the view that it is because of the existing bias and this hierarchical dualism that has sustained and even justified through the years the domination over women and nature (Warren 90)

In order to overcome this bias towards nature and women, reconstruction and reconceptualising of ideas and practices is required. To a great extent, literature is that bridge which constantly reconnects the broken links and re-imagines and re-casts this fragmented ideological relationship between man and nature/women. The foremost figure who has been an active advocate of ecofeminism through her works is Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood. Atwood argues, “...literature of one’s own country is not escape literature. It tells truth, some of them hard (Sandler 52). Atwood’s work is rooted in the current ecological concerns which connects nature and women. Atwood explores the ideas of violence and destruction towards women and environment through her stories which are situated in a dystopic world. She engages with the current concerns pertaining to feminism and ecology.

One of the most significant aspect dealt in Atwood’s stories pertains to survival, survival against all odds, which is essentially a condition of female experience and also stands true for the ecology. Salleh argues, “Feminine suffering is universal because the wrong done to women and its ongoing denial fuel the psychosexual abuse of all others—race, children, animals, plants, rocks, water and air” (14). Atwood’s novel, *Surfacing*, delineates the story of a unnamed woman, who is caught in the web of patriarchy and undergoes an emotional trauma on account of identity crisis. The novel is often regarded as a discourse on ecology and feminism. Atwood’s unnamed protagonist is nature herself, suffering from an imbalance that eventually harms not only her but also the people around her. Atwood focusses on the idea that just like nature has been subjected to major changes like industrialization, the advancement in reproductive technologies have affected procreative capabilities of women.

Atwood centres her argument around a world that oppresses and subjugates Nature, as well as women. The unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* returns to the natural world to re-claim her natural self, which has been continuously mangled by the patriarchal constraints. The unnamed protagonist of the novel returns to her hometown with a failed marriage, and it is revealed in the course of the text that she was also forced to

undergo an abortion. The splintered identity of the protagonist is solaced by the restoring power of nature. The journey of the protagonist which is initially about finding her father becomes a journey of finding the self through the aid of nature. Atwood uses the landscape to re-emphasise the unacknowledged relation between nature and women, which can be interlinked and associated with Ecofeminism.

“Women’s body is also the world’s body; the male desire to have woman mirror back to him his needs is merely another form of the humanistic male will to have the planet mirror back his utilitarian purposes” (Davey 29). The most significant event in the novel is when the unnamed narrator dives into the lake and finds a shadowy figure, which could be her father’s body. However, the narrator visualises the shadowy figure as the body of her own aborted child. All the past trauma in narrator’s life re-surfaces and she realises that she concocted stories to cope up with this trauma, which had no connection with reality. Once the narrator surfaces back from the lake, she acknowledges her trauma and re-connects with reality. Surfacing to a great extent is synonymous with ‘survival’, a survival which is unprecedented in all forms. The possibility of survival for the unnamed protagonist only comes with her contact with nature, which initiates her healing process.

The protagonists of Ghosh and Atwood undergo a critical life-changing journey through the aid of nature. The characters, especially women, realise their own regenerative potential when they come in contact with nature, which redeems them in a patriarchal society. Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism highlight the binaries, the existing dualism, and the created hierarchies which are only leading us towards an impending doom. At this juncture, it is only the eco-sustainable practices and eco-development which can salvage the mankind.

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