

FROM ELEMENTARY NATURALISM TO ECOCRITICISM: NEED FOR A CHANGE OF METAPHOR

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Abstract

To reflect on nature in their poems and prose is an age old habit of creative writers. However, with the growth of industrial civilization, a rational understanding of nature and its parts had become necessary. Writers could not afford to continue the old metaphors and with the pressure of ecologists to understand nature with care and concern and not just aesthetically, there developed a need for new metaphors.

Introduction

To write about lake, river, forest, ocean, landscape, moon, clouds and rain was part of nature-writing and natural with creative minds. Describing the countryside with implicit faith in rural life and in explicit contrast to the 'urban' nature was considered as 'pastoral' in the 18th century. The age-old natural writings acquired a romantic category with excessive passion for everything natural towards the end of the 17th century. Terry Gifford(1999) remarked that the pastoral descriptions in literature, poetry or prose, go back to Theocritus (316-260) in his 'Idylls' . In Virgil's 'Eclogues' (70-19), the so called pathetic fallacy of treating mountains, trees, lakes and rivers as 'lifeless' is criticized for the first time. Deforestation was resented by Virgil. The Vedic literature in India (3000-4000 B.C., presumably) was so full of references to forests, that one of the branches was called 'ARANYAKAS' (forest-born). Ramayana and Mahabharatha, the epics of Indian mythology were only stories of forest- exile by their protagonist characters. Lynn White Jr. (1996) observed that Bible asserted that 'nature should serve man and Eden is created for Adam and Eve'. Asian religions maintained that 'man and nature' have dualistic relationships. Leo Marx(1964), author of 'The Machine

in the Garden' observed that Milton's 'Paradise Lost' shows that man when shows that man when thrown out from Eden Garden lost his 'paradise'.

The great 'Nature poet' Words Worth developed a critical view of nature and a tendency to avoid the habit of looking at nature as 'a pleasure giving constant'. Gaard and Murphy (1998) remarked that the passages like

“(Words Worth) heard the South make
Subterraneous music like the noise
of bagpipers on distant highland hills
The Shepherd as such warning of his flock
Bethought him and he said.....
The winds are devising work for me”

is the beginning of the end of romantic ecology when poets looked at nature as a process influencing human lives.

Ecological beginnings:

Barrell and Bull (1982) quoted pieces of metaphors when a deeper sense of nature prevailed in place of hollow praise, shallow images and routine expressions....They observed

“The pheasant, partridge and the lark
flew to thy house as to the Arke
and willing Oxe came home of himself
to the slaughter with the lambe
and every beast did come for an offering”.

Mystification of nature by poets like Wordsworth was criticized by Marxists as a reactionary step, ignoring socioeconomic terms. Jonathan Bate (1991) mentioned that 'ecocritics of 20th century condemned the Marxian analysis of Wordsworth'. Bate argued 'that love of nature in Wordsworth leads to love of mankind.....Wordsworth's vision of Lake District is a working paradise of rural republicanism'. However some argued that Wordsworth's enthusiasm of nature is dissimilar to ecological concerns. Soft critics defended him as... "it is true that Wordsworth's concerns are not humankind on natural process". Wordsworth valorizes nature's vastness, beauty, endurance, sublime landscape, and mountainous shapes, while the science of ecology concerns itself with swamps, fens, bogs, marshes, water impure than pure. Wordsworth's obsession with barren 'Lake District' in contrast to fat, complacent, full of diversity lowlands, is the real point of feasible change. Schiller (1985) came nearer to ecocritics and distanced from romantic naturalists when he observed "our feelings of nature is like the feeling of an invalid for health". However the ecocritical concepts, rising in the middle of 20th Century with the scientific ecology as a basic truth, remained indebted to romanticism in poetry where poets are in nature or wail for the 'lost' nature....never a poet or a fiction writer supports or tolerates defilement of nature, either for need or for greed.

Ecocriticism

Towards the end of the 19th century, the reason and romance with nature reached a critical point when a poet who metaphors that ‘a bird sings’, an old woman spins in moon, the sea is in love with moon spring, and a fox is the crook in the forest are considered as irrelevant. Laurence Buell (1998) mentioned that, works of Thoreau of America like ‘Walden’ are crucial in transitional phase from young anthropocentrism to mature biocentrism, when wilderness, forest fires and dispersion of seeds are looked at as a non-human necessities.

Buell enlisted four criteria for ecocritical basis:

- non-human environment is not a framing device but essential for natural history
- human interest is not the only interest
- human accountability is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
- sense of the environment as a process and not a constant to reflect upon.

Buell observed that Henry David Thoreau, the great naturalist of America ‘considered places of nature as ecocritical entities when he mentioned that the ‘pastoral’ positions in America are only slave-owning entities, having civilisational encounters with non-human nature. Buell gives evidence that a change of metaphor also could be seen in Thoreau when the latter expressed in one occasion “that the whistle of the locomotive penetrates my wood’s summer and winter sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer’s yard....”. Annette Kolodny (1975), in her work “The Lay of the Land”, observed the metaphors in American pastoral poetry like the “breast of a feminine landscape; fertilization of virgin land and the screaming sounds of tidal sex are never seen in European pastoral poems as the latter took their metaphors as literal truths”. The cowboy masculinity, feminine wilderness and the pregnant fields are forced towards a change. The metaphor of nature as a harmonious and stable machine remained the heart of the new science of ecology and the new subject of literary ecocriticism. Dana Philips (2003) was clear in his judgmental observation that “ecology however is not a slush fund of fact, value and metaphor....but a harmony, balance, equilibrium, stasis, species distribution and sustainability”. A rich gold-mine is now made available for the ecocritical metaphor.

Need for a new metaphor

The poets and fiction writers are never conservative. They are the harbingers of new truths, social and philosophical. Even the scientific truths are foreseen by them in the science fiction category. But looking at nature in a deep ecological sense with complicated socioeconomic implications has become a hard-nut for creative minds to crack. To understand the principles of environmental science is one thing and to translate them into creative fiction is another difficult task. Hence, the problem to manipulate the new metaphor.

In the classic poem ‘Malavikagni Mitram’ in Sanskrit by Kalidasa (6th Century A.D) Tr. Srinivasareddy, Penguin books,2013) the following lines can be seen. Kalidasa was called the master of metaphors in Sanskrit language. The poet was describing a forest

“the bright red ashoka outshines the crimson lac
on their full red lips like bimba fruit
the green yellow and orange hues of Kurubaka flower
and the black bees hovering around Tilaka flowers
as if the nature’s bound was mocking these women
and their collyrium painted eyes”
(the flowers have no English equivalent names)

It is obvious that even Kalidasa cannot do justice to the present situation. Gaard and Murphy (1998) observed that there is a vital need to develop a hybridized leading practice for literary ecocritics and cultural theorists. The books like, ‘The Song of the Earth’, ‘Writing for an endangered world’ and the ‘Silent Spring’ must be digested by pure fictional experts of literature. Ecocritics have to develop an understanding of animal studies, forest science and water bodies, along with industrialization and urbanization. Literatures of all the countries, not just America and England, have to come together, discuss, debate and develop relationships between green humanities and environmental sciences and give birth to a new ‘rhetoric’. Interdependence between bees and orchids, chimpanzee and forest fires, wheat-rice and pigs, tiger and deers, snakes and the rats must be studied in scientific detail. The metaphors like “Saving the planet”, Save the Tiger, Kindness for plants and waste lands have to be modified as all of them assume that man is the master of nature, and one should be graceful towards nature.

Raymond Williams (1986) analyses the poetry of Clare and finds a ‘green’ tendency in the metaphor.

“A solitary crow in idle motions
swings on the half rotten ash trees,
top twig besides whose trunk
the gypsy makes his bed....” .

Wherein Clare suggests the other species like rabbits, elves and cattle have a right to exist.

A.K.Ramanujan, the cross-cultural Indo-American poet(Bhatangar, 2002) in his poem ‘Ecology’ narrates an episode that his grand mother refuses to cut down the Champaka trees in the yard, whose pollen create a terrible migraine pain for her every rainy season.

“red champak trees burst into flower
and given mother her first blinding migraine
of the season, Wild spirit, which art moving
everywhere destroyer and preserver, hear oh hear”

The trees have a right to exist and we have no right to cut them down, is her philosophy. A point of great interest is the name of the poem ‘ECOLOGY’, given by Ramanujan deliberately.

Ronald () enlisting the themes of poetry and the changes made due to the advent of scientific culture said...

“Nightingales, Anangke, Sunset, or the meanest flower

were formerly the potential poetic powers
Microscopic anatomy of ephermerides
Power-house, girder ribs provide a crude base now”.

When the scientific temperament has modified the metaphor, ecological crisis cannot be avoided. It is in fact more essential and immediate, as the crisis involves day to day lives of humans and non-humans as well.

Richards (1924) exhorted that ‘even in the age of scientific enlightenment, poetry has a vital role to play in the life of an individual and society’. Jackson(1994), the biotechnologist remarked that all poetry, ethics and spiritual values must become part of biotechnology or otherwise genetics would turn the civilization upside down. Glen A Love (1996) synthesized the efforts of literary people when he remarked “we have to make efforts to redirect the human consciousness by taking up nature writing, regional writing, ecological consciousness and literature of place by discovering a new ethic and new aesthetic embracing the human and nature to revive the role of literary criticism”. Quest for a new metaphor is for a “**new ethic and new aesthetic**”, the critic remarked.

Conclusion:

Literature for centuries had been living in nature and surviving on nature. In the modern scientific civilization that dawned after the industrial revolution of 18th century, the nature is threatened by human activities. Nature is altered beyond aesthetic limits and biological equanimity of humans, animals, plants and micro-organisms came up. The environmental balance is in danger. The new science of ecology is born to study, diagnose and advise human activity. The literary criticism could not afford to ignore the development and engage itself in traditional old metaphors. The themes, diction, and essence had to undergo a metamorphosis and assimilate ecological principles and environmental habits. Hence a new metaphor is needed, though not a simple and easier task. There lies the responsibility and challenge of ecocritics which they have undertaken seriously towards the end of last century.

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