

# Sustainable Development in Ecocriticism: Exploring Global and Indian Literary Perspectives for Ecoconscious Engagement

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**Abstract** - In recent decades, the global environment has posed an unprecedented threat to both human society and the delicate equilibrium of the Earth. Rampant exploitation and misuse of natural resources have brought us to the precipice of a crisis and urgent intervention is imperative. Deforestation, depletion of fossil fuels, disruptions in seasonal patterns, recurring ecological disasters worldwide and the precarious state of our environment collectively underscore the gravity of the situation. In response to this environmental turmoil, a noteworthy theoretical framework for interpreting nature writing emerged in the final decade of the preceding century known as Ecocriticism. This global movement surfaced as a critical reaction to humanity's anthropocentric inclination to dominate nature. This paper endeavors to investigate the ecocritical perspectives discernible in select works of world literature as well as within the realm of Indian writing in English, with a specific focus on the theme of sustainable development. This environmentally focused exploration of literature goes beyond the mere examination of ecological concerns; it seeks to address the imperative of sustainability. By incorporating the lens of sustainable development into the ecocritical analysis, this study aims to unravel how literature not only reflects environmental challenges but also contributes to envisioning a harmonious coexistence between human societies and the natural world.

This integration of the theme of sustainable development into the ecocritical exploration serves as a catalyst for nurturing ecological literacy among readers, fostering an eco-conscious mindset that transcends mere environmental awareness. The objective is to encourage responsible stewardship of Mother Nature and advocate for practices that align with the principles of sustainable development.

Given the contemporary preeminence of environmental concerns and the urgent need for sustainable practices, Ecocriticism, with its evolving nature, has become a vital tool in shaping discourse and action on sustainable development. Functioning as an interpretive tool for the analysis of nature writing, it is closely associated with various disciplinary strands, including Environmental criticism, Animal studies, Green Cultural Studies, Ecosophy, Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, Ecospiritualism and analogous paradigms all within the broader framework of fostering sustainability.

**Keywords:** Environmental, Sustainability, Conservation, Ecology, Ecoconsciousness.

## 1.INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is one of the youngest revisionist movements, which has swept the humanities over the past few decades. The present world is facing ecological disasters and our environment is now at stake. Only science and technology are not enough to combat the global ecological crisis. We should make change in our attitude to nature. Literature does not float above life, so it has its role to play. For a long time, nature was not given due consideration by the literary critics, so ecologically oriented literature pleads for a better understanding of nature in its wider significance. Ecocriticism has developed as a worldwide emergent movement during the last three decades. The scholars are still engaged in developing its nature and scope. The term Ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his critical writing "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. The word 'ecology' comes from the Greek root word 'oikos' which etymologically means household or earth and 'logy' from 'logos' means logical discourse. Together they mean criticism of the house i.e. the environment as represented in literature. According to Rueckert, ecocriticism applies ecology or ecological principles into the study of literature. Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism "as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist's praxis" (Buell 430). Further ecocriticism does not simply mean nature study; it has distinguished itself from conventional nature writing, first by its ethical stand and commitment to the natural world and then by making the connection between the human and the non-human world. According to Joseph Wood Krutch, Thoreau's work is not about plants or animals or birds; it is about his relation to them; one may almost say about 'himself in connection with nature' (Krutch 19). Patrick D. Murphy is right in saying that Ecocriticism is literary "criticism that arises from and is oriented toward a concern with human and non-human interaction and interrelationship" (Murphy 3).

Ecology has two shades, the shallow and the deep ecology. Shallow ecology is essentially anthropocentric which believes that the whole purpose of nature is to serve mankind and humans are the masters of nature; man being the only literary creature thinks himself superior over the others. It also advocates systematic usages of natural resources like coal, gas, forests, oil, etc. for a sustainable future. But deep ecology challenges this conservation mode and advocates preservation of nature to keep it in its original form without any interference of man as nature has its own right to survive. All organisms on this earth have their own intrinsic values and no one is the master of anybody. This realization will give equal rights to every organism maintaining a balance in the eco-system. Ecocriticism gives emphasis on this eco-consciousness removing the ego-consciousness man. The present environmental crisis is a bi-product of human culture. It is not caused by how the ecosystem functions; but how our ethical

system functions; how we behave with mother nature etc. Ecocriticism builds this awareness among man.

There are two waves of ecocriticism as identified by Lawrence Buell. The first wave ecocritics focused on nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction (Buell 138). They used to uphold the philosophy of organism. Here environment effectively means natural environment. The aim of the wave was to preserve 'biotic community'. The ecocritics of this wave explained "the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers and reversing their harm through political action" (Howarth 69). So, ecocriticism initially aimed at earth care.

The second wave ecocritics inclined towards environmental justice issues and a 'social ecocriticism' that takes urban landscape as seriously as 'natural landscape' (Buell 22). This wave of ecocriticism is also known as revisionist ecocriticism. It seeks to locate the vestiges of nature in cities and exposes crimes of eco-injustice against society's marginal section. The Ecocritic interprets nature writing texts at the same time, they use them as a context for analyzing the principles and customs of our society in relationship to nature. Often, the result is a critique of how our culture devalues and degrades the natural world.

**Nature:** The Ecocritics use the term 'nature' in a broader sense. Ecocriticism is not merely the study of nature as represented in literature. Nature here does not mean a mere fancy of its beautiful aspects like plants and animals. Nature here means the whole of the physical environment consisting of the human and the non-human. The interconnection between the two creates a bond which is the basis of Ecocriticism. As long as there is a harmony between the living and the non-living, there prevails a healthy eco-system for the benevolence of mankind as well as the earth. "The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between human and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other" (Frederick 147).

**Anthropocene vs Symbiocene:** Human nature is essentially anthropocentric which positions humans on top. As earth's only literary being, man considers himself as superior to every other organism. But ecocriticism decentres humanity's importance to every object of environment. In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric as opposed to biocentric vision and his compulsion to conquer, harmonise, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing. Anthropocentric assumes the primacy of humans, who either sentimentalize or dominate the environment. On the other hand, Biocentric decenters humanities importance and explores the complex interrelationships between the human and the non-human.

**Nature vs Culture:** One of the implicit goals of the ecocritics is to rethink the relationship between culture and nature (Barry 252). The present ecological crisis is a bi-product of human culture. Since his inception, man started living in close proximity with nature in the natural environment. Culture is associated with the geography of a landscape. For example, Synge's Aran Island, Hardy's Wessex, R.K. Narayan's Malgudi etc. have their impact on characters of their writings. Culture is something which has been created over the years by the people who have been living in an environment for ages. So long as man lived in close association with nature there will be no ecological threat. But with the advancement of science and technology man has got alienated from nature putting his own survival into question. The natural environment is now replaced by the built-up environment. Our global crisis is not

because how ecosystems function. It is because how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature. It requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them.

**Sustainable Development:** Ecocriticism advocates sustainable development for a better future of mankind in general. All organisms have their right to survive in their own way. The plants, the animals, the women, the marginal, the tribal - all have their role to play to keep up the earth's basic life support system. Limited use of resources will ensure the safe and secured future of the generations to come. "The most common measure to tackle environmental crisis is sustainable development" (Frederick 128). This categorically means the required use of natural resources without endangering the whole environment and the well-being of all human beings.

**Environmental Justice:** Ecocriticism underlines environmental justice as man's voracious urge to conquer nature is somewhat misleading. We used to believe ourselves to be superior to the other life forms that inhabit the biosphere. But now we realize that nature is not a subordinate but a co-inhabitant of this earth ecosystem. We should change our self-destructive motives. If humans try to destroy nature, they will be paid back by their own coins. Our global crisis is not because how ecosystems function. It is because how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature. It requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them.

**Ecocriticism as an Interdisciplinary Approach:** Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach which is by its very nature interdisciplinary. It draws its sustenance from the existing literary theories. All sciences come forward to contribute to the field. Therefore, new theories like Post-colonial Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Ecomarxism, Ecospiritualism are coming into light. But it differs from the other theories in that while all of them consider earth as a social sphere, Ecocriticism considers it as an ecosphere. All other theories are marked by their individual ego-consciousness while Ecocriticism is characterized by eco-consciousness. In short, it is an earth centric approach to literary studies which promotes the understanding of who we are, where we stand, how we should behave with our mother nature etc.

**What Ecocritics Do:** In order to meet with the present environmental crisis, the ecocritics play an important role in building up the eco-consciousness among the readers. For this they read major canonical writings; they look at the natural world differently than others. They shift our critical attention from the inner consciousness to the outer; rejects the belief that everything is socially or linguistically constructed, believes that Nature really exists beyond ourselves but is with us and affects us (perhaps fatally if we mistreat it); apply growth and energy, sustainability and unsustainability, balance and imbalance to view nature in literature (Glottfelty and Fromm 12).

## World Eco-Literature

Ecocriticism gets its inspiration from the three major American writers whose works celebrate nature as a life force and the wilderness as manifested in America. The trio belonged to the group of New England writers, poets, essayists, novelists and philosophers collectively known as the transcendentalists, the first major literary movement in America to achieve 'cultural independence' from European models. R. W. Emerson had enjoyed the influence of nature in his first reflective prose narrative "Nature". The writer here celebrates a non-traditional approach to nature which is popularly known as 'transcendentalism' (a theory that propounds that the 'divine' or 'god' pervades nature). He suggests that reality can be best perceived studying nature.

Fuller's "Summer on the Lake During 1843" is a Transcendental travelogue that encounters the American landscape at large. It is based on the Great Lake region. Fuller here differentiates the utilitarian motives of the settlers and spiritual aesthetic aims of tourists. But it is Henry David Thoreau who is considered to be the father of Ecocriticism. Thoreau's Walden is an autobiographical account of his two-year stay in a hut on the shore of Walden Pond, two miles away from his home town, Concord. It is a classic account of dropping out of modern life and seeking to renew the self by a 'return to nature'. This book has exerted a strong effect on the attitudes of its readers which changes from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness.

Robert Frost a major American poet has made use of woods, lakes, stars, horses, etc. His poems are simple on the surface level but if we probe deep under the surface, we find that nature reveals the universal truth of human life. His Stopping by the woods on a snowy evening deals with the perennial beauty of nature, and the obligations of transient human life. Ecocriticism is less developed in the UK than in the USA. Whereas the American writing celebrates nature, the British ecocritics seek to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial, and neocolonial forces.

Jonathan Bate's "The Song of the Earth" argues that colonialism and deforestation have frequently gone together. His Romantic Ecology reevaluates the poetry of William Wordsworth in the context of pastoral tradition in English. Here Bate explores the politics of poetry and argues that Wordsworth is the earliest of ecocritics.

Raymond William's "Country and the City" shows a striking contrast between the country and city life. William here represents country life as the hub of modernity, a quintessential place of loneliness.

Lawrence Coupe's "The Green Studies Readers" is a comprehensive selection of critical texts which addresses the connection between ecology, culture and literature. In short, the book is a valid source and a useful entry into Green Literature as it provides a huge amount of sources to be used for research.

## Ecocriticism in India

Indian philosophy is rich in ecological thought since Veda which paid equal importance to all organisms. India is also a land of rich biodiversity. From the Himalayas of North to Kanyakumari of South, from the Bay of Bengal off east to the Arabian Sea on the west, the country has versatile physical

surroundings leaving a deep impact on human beings. Literature is not apart from that. A good number of writers deal with ecocritical texts.

Ecocritical perspectives may be best perceived in the writings of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore who founded Viswa Varati at Shantiniketan far from madding crowd. His "Rakta Karabi" and "Muktadhara" are the best example of ecocritical texts where he denounces human atrocities against nature. His ecocritical poems include "The Tame Bird was in a Cage" (The caged bird has even forgotten how to sing) and "I plucked you Flower" (The human feel that plucking flowers is their own right. Nature is not a silent spectator. One day it will react. It would not be just a thorn-prick but can be a mighty tsunami. The human should be careful about this).

Anita Desai's "Fire on the Mountains" is a good example of ecocritical text dealing with the problem of animal killing, population explosion, moral degradation of man -all causing a threat to the ecology symbolized by frequent fire in the forest.

Kamala Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve" represents Nature as a destroyer and preserver of life. The novelist here has shown how the evils of industrialization spoil the sweet harmony of a peasant's life.

Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" is a portrayal of exploitation of nature, by human beings in the name of progress and modernization which is a dominant theme of the novel. The authoress here has shown her keen awareness of today's pressing environmental issues. The novelist in this novel has raised her voice for the environment, which is now under a great threat of pollution. In this novel, she not only exposes the massive degradation of nature but also reflects on the reason behind its dehumanization.

Ruskin Bond's "No Room for a Leopard" presents the pathetic condition of the animals after deforestation. The Tree Lover, The Cherry Tree, All Creatures Great and Small and many others are all about the chain which binds man and nature, as in the chain of the ecosystem, showing interdependence.

Kiran Desai in her "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" is critical of the hectic town life, having dissatisfied of which the protagonist takes refuge in the Guava Orchard. In her "The Inheritance of Loss", the novelist shows how Kanchenjunga pays for the brutality of human aggression. Ecocriticism here gets a political dimension in the novel when an un-estimated loss occurred due to Nepali insurgency causing a lot of damage to human life, animals and the serene beauty of nature.

Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide" is a powerful ecocritical text as the novel underscores environmentally and socially oppressive system harbored by humans. The delta of the Sundarbans has been presented as the destroyer and preserver of life. The novel faithfully depicts the state sponsored terrorism to evict the dispossessed Bengali Refugees settled at Marichjhapi.

Ecocriticism as an academic discipline arose rather late in India. The Indian ecocritics making a considerable contribution to ecocriticism in India are as follows- In her "Stolen Harvest", a nice example of ecocritical text, Vandana Shiva (an Indian environmental activist turned ecocritic) denounces the bio-piracy of the west in the name of patents from the poor countries. Thus, she shows that colonization is not a matter of the past; it is still very much alive. According to her, industrial agriculture has not produced more food; it has destroyed the diverse sources of food. Thus, she gave a neocolonial dimension to ecocriticism. Among her notable contribution to the field of ecocriticism, mention may be made of



“Tomorrow’s Biodiversity”, “Soil Not Oil”, “Staying Alive”, “Ecofeminism”, “Violence of the Green Revolution”, “Water Wars”, “Biopiracy”, “Making Peace with the Earth”.

Suresh Frederick (Associate Professor, Bishop Heber College, Tamil Nadu) in his article “Suicidal Motive” studies poems like animals and birds like squirrels and sparrows who usually love to live near human habitation and help in ecological balance. But the unhealthy practices of human beings threaten their very survival.

Nirmaldasan (an Assistant Professor of SRM School of Journalism, Tamil Nadu) along with Nirmal Selvamony, (a Reader in English, Madras Christian College, Chennai) has made notable contributions to ‘Oikopoetics’ which means the poetics of the ‘Oikos’ or habitat consisting of the spirits, humans, nature and culture particular to it. His first volume of verse entitled “An Eaglet in the Skies” (1996) is the joy of creation, a joy much akin to an eaglet that has learned to fly.

Ecocriticism in India is now in its second phase, which propagates the amalgamation of the first wave and the second wave as proposed by Lawrence Buell. While the first phase of Ecocriticism promoted regional understanding of ecology, the second phase witnesses Ecocriticism as an organized movement moving towards a global concern.

## CONCLUSION

Therefore, Ecocriticism which was synonymous with the American nature writings as well as the British Romantic literature has now gained its momentum with worldwide eco-literature. It has changed its color from local to global perspectives in view of the present ecological crisis around the globe. The humans have only one earth to live in and we are at the brink of our forthcoming destruction unless we are careful of the blue planet. If we want to hear the song of the earth, we should change our anthropocentric vision without any delay. The world literature abounds in ecological perspectives. Environment being an inseparable part of human culture is paramount in all major canonical writings. An ecological insight may lead them into several new perspectives. Indian philosophy and writing are not an exception to this. From the ancient to the cyber-age, Indian literature is thronged in environmental concern. Apart from the Traditional Indian writing in English, the classic works of regional literature coming in English translation have their representation of nature. They make us learn how we may lead a happy life in close harmony with nature. These environmental literary works beautifully deal with human nature relationship and interconnection - the key note of eco-literature. The common message is keeping nature in her pristine beauty; let us not destroy what we cannot create. The more ecocritical writings will come into focus, the more human beings will learn to behave with nature in a proper way keeping in tune with the present environmental crisis.

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