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## The nexus between ecology and literature

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### Abstract

Since times immemorial literature and environment had a very close link which in recent times has been termed as ecocriticism. But if one looks back at the ancient holy texts and early nature writing we will find that our forefathers very well aware of the significance to preserve the ecology of the world. Both in the east and the west, and all the religions across the globe have shown sensitivity to the environment. The nexus between the ecology and literature thus has a strong foothold which has manifested itself in myriad forms in the present epoch which is grappling with ecological crisis. The present study is an attempt to study this nexus which can help in changing this world from anthropocentric to ecocentric one.

**Keywords:** Literature, Ecology, Religion, Books, Eco ethics, Intrinsic value, Extrinsic Value, Anthropocentric, Ecocentric.

### Introduction

Ecology, in fact, in itself is a very broad term with even wider connotations. It includes everything, which is there in the world. Plants, animals, human beings, water, sky, fire, land, houses, rivers mountains, natural phenomenon all are indispensable part of our ecosystem. The Earth, which till now has been established as the only habitable planet in the universe is merely a small part of this entire universe. This whole universe works according to a particular order in which all its constituents play a predetermined role which helps in maintaining the overall 'rhythm' of the universe. The word 'rhythm' is basically derived from Sanskrit word 'rtha' which means 'order'. Everything in the universe works to maintain the rhythm of universe. Nature has to pay a pivotal role in the synchronization of this rhythm which is the basic principle of this universe. Apart from this rhythm, the symbiotic relationship which exists between various forms of 'biodiversity' creates a system around which the whole universe functions. Everything on the earth, whether it is living or non-living has to work according to this phenomenon of 'rhythm' which makes him an active participant in the entire cosmic creation of the universe. It is this correlation and interaction between these infinite constituents of ecosystem that the rhythm of the ecosystem and, in turn, of the universe functions properly in order.

And the branch of science which studies this interaction and correlation between this biodiversity and environment is termed as ecology. The word ecology is first of all derived from the Greek word 'oikos' which means 'household' and 'logos' which means study. The term ecology refers to the study of the household. Since earth is the home of millions of species including human beings, ecology by that logic refers to the study of the entire ecosystem of the earth in relation to its environment. German zoologist, Ernst Haeckel was the first who used this term 'ecology' in 1866 to describe the study of flora, fauna and other organisms which form a complex network at different scales of organization of the ecosphere.

All organisms are important in the ecosystem. It is the interaction between the living and non-living environments which creates order and rhythm in this ecosystem. All living as well non-living beings stand at an equal pedestal in the ecosystem. Over a period of time, homosapiens have assumed a commanding and authoritative position in the ecosystem. But they have forgotten that everything on this earth has an 'inherent' or intrinsic value and an 'ecological value' which is also known as extrinsic value. This intrinsic value of an organism is different from its ecological value. If human beings are measured on the scale of ecological value, they have zero extrinsic value in comparison to other organisms.

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If bacteria, fungus, water, trees vanish from the world; the whole ecosystem will disintegrate and collapse. But this is not the situation with human beings because extinction of human beings from the earth is hardly going to make any difference to the functioning of ecosystem. Humans thus have negligible extrinsic value.

But, as far as intrinsic value is concerned, humans fair far better than all other organisms of the ecosystem. Such an intrinsic value is possible only for those organisms who have the capability to 'feel' or we can say experience, because it is a value dependent on how a particular living being feels from within. Human beings have got this ability to feel from within in great degree. Human beings have and feel more emotions and feelings in comparison to their other counterparts in the ecosystem. They have greater capacity to love, hate, to be sad and happy, to suffer and to enjoy. The intrinsic value thus places human beings on a higher pedestal than other organisms of the ecosystem. But this intrinsic value doesn't give prerogative to man to consider himself superior in this ecosystem.

Moreover, the ability to experience no doubt gives them the power to contribute more to this ecosystem, but it nowhere gives them the authority to divide this ecosystem into two halves, i.e. human and non human world where human world is holding a dominant position over the entire ecosystem. Apart from this, human world has to realize that in the conservation of ecology, intrinsic value will not be that important. Ecology works on the extrinsic value or we can say ecological value of its inhabitants. The ecological value thus becomes an important yardstick in conversation of environment which places all living beings at an equal level. For the ecologists who repose their faith in this ecological value, the whole existence of the ecosphere has an inherent significance and all of them are related and dependent on each other for their survival. Ecocriticism here plays an important role as it stresses on the equality of ecological value of all beings. It re-orientates the minds of readers towards the oneness of the universe and develops environmental ethics in them by making them realize the significance of interconnection which exists among all inhabitants of the universe.

But over the past many years, we have failed to acknowledge the contribution which other beings make in the lives of human beings and for that matter the contribution they make in the survival and existence of entire ecosystem. However, if one traces the history of ancient civilizations, one comes to know that ancient religions have played a key role in keeping their people environmentally conscious. Eco-ethics were deep-rooted in their religion, lifestyle, traditions, perceptions and culture. The Bible, the Quran, the Geeta, the Upanishads develop them as moral beings and at the same time contribute in making them ethical from nature's perspective. If we take the case of Indian culture and Hindu mythology, India had been eco-sensitive right from the beginning. Communion with nature is the basic principle of human life in Hindu mythological texts. According to Samkhya tradition, the five elements, viz. earth, fire, water, sky and air are considered as Gods and are worshipped by God. Not only these five elements, geographical forms like mountains, rivers, oceans, seas are worshipped in Indian tradition.

Indeed, India is truly a land where nature is being worshipped since ages. The Govardhan episode in BhagwatGeeta where Lord Krishna worshipped a mountain,

invocation of sea-god by Rama in Ramayana, worshipping of cow and Tulsi plant in common households, importance given to Ganga river in Shiv Mahapuran, all establish the rich historical past of Indian religious texts which consider and treat all animate and inanimate things equally. In fact, in Indian tradition even the smallest life form is respected. Giving grain food to ants in the morning, chappatis to cows and pouring water and grains for birds in broken pitchers, all symbolize the kindness and love, which is shown by man towards the minutest fellow creatures in the ecosystem. Even snakes, which are considered as poisonous, are worshipped as Nag Devta. The idols of Ganesha and Hanuman also hints at the reverence paid to animals as these idols are animalistic incarnations of God. Trees are also believed to have souls and, therefore, not to be disturbed at night because it is believed that trees sleep at night and any kind of shaking will disturb their sleep. Apart from that, the belief of the ancient Indian scripture that there exists 84 million species in the world and all of them carry inside themselves only one immortal soul also hints that Indian mythological structures from earliest times are aware of the equal ecological value of all beings.

The concept of 'VasudhevaKutumbham' which considers the whole world as one big family and advocates the idea of oneness of life also develops a consideration and respect for other forms of life. Worshipping of trees and plants like peepal, tulsi and banana too speaks volumes about the reverence which Hindus have in them since the time of Vedas. In the AtharvaVeda (12.1.15) <sup>[1]</sup> earth is considered as a mother to be worshipped. Mother has always played a special role in human's life. She gives birth to the baby, nurture and cares for him and finally educates him. Human beings have huge regard and love for their mother. The Earth is, therefore, compared to a mother as Mother Nature through her vast resources in her lap nourishes and takes care of human beings in their struggle for survival. Rig Veda also stresses the importance of trees, which are important life-sustaining forms for humans because of their medicinal value. Even cutting of trees is considered as sin in Hindu mythology. According to the oldest Hindu text Manusmrti, if one cuts a tree then he has to compensate by reciting 100 Gayatri Mantras.

Science and religion are both correlated in ancient Indian texts to ingrain environmental ethics among people. Trees are often compared to Lord Shiva. Just as Lord Shiva drank poison for the welfare of others, in the same way trees inhale carbon-dioxide and exhale oxygen for the survival of human beings. Moreover, trees also give shelter to many birds who build their nests on their branches. So, trees need to be protected to ensure the safety of these birds and their eggs. Even in the Ramayana when Ram along with his brother Laxman was in exile in a forest for fourteen years, they had great respect for all the trees in the forest. If they have to cut a tree, they used to seek permission from the spirit of the tree. Not only this, when Rama has to construct a bridge on the sea, he invokes the Sea-God before encroaching upon the territory of the sea. Even Tulsidas who penned Ramayana considers Ganga as a holy river which purifies a person of his sins.

Indian scriptures and ancient mythology have shown ecological consciousness much earlier than the west. They believe in the oneness of the natural world. By clubbing religion and ecological wisdom, they even tried to make it a part and parcel of people's lives, "Hinduism holds India's

mountains, rivers, and trees sacred, regarding them to be infused with individual spirits...Its religious metaphors speak of continuity and reciprocity” (C.K. Chapple 113).

Vandana Shiva has also quoted the Isha Upanishad which recognizes all life forms as equal and urges human beings to show reverence towards various species. Moreover, any encroachment on the rights of other species by man is considered as a selfish act to be reprimanded by God. Even, according to Rig Veda, nature is a beautiful creation of God and He has bestowed the responsibility to keep this beauty intact on human beings. If man wants to please God, he has to take proper care of nature. If nature will smile, God will also smile.

The Holy Quran, the Muslim holy book reiterates the view that nature is the special gift of Almighty to man and man should love and respect His gift. Nature in Holy Quran is sacred and human beings have no right to exploit nature or to encroach upon the right to survival of other life forms. The presence of God is also located in the minutest life forms of nature and all are loved equally by man. The ecological balance which God has created is also described in Quran. According to this holy book, the proper functioning of the ecosystem and existence of all living forms depend upon this balance between human and the non-human worlds. God has the only right on this ecological balance. So, any attempt to disturb this balance is bound to evoke the wrath of God who is the creator of this universe.

Jainism is another religion in India which pays a lot of regard to nature. Jainism belief in ‘Ahimsa’ prohibits them to kill any kind of creature big or small. They also consider the earth as their mother and believe that it is the responsibility of human beings to protect and safeguard their motherland. According to Jainism, the earth is heaven in itself and there is no other heaven other than that. In fact, they are believers of ‘live and let live’ philosophy and strives towards ecological peace and harmony.

Buddhism, another religion from East talks about the role of nature in human lives. Gautam Buddha had great respect for trees. He even attained enlightenment under the Peepal tree. Buddhism, in fact, has described a lot about how human ego is responsible for the deterioration of environment which needs to be controlled to keep intact the heavenly beauty of the earth. According to the Buddhist philosophy, the false notion of human beings because of which they consider themselves supreme and higher than all other life forms needs to be erased and replaced by a more eco-sensitive attitude towards nature. For Buddhists, the distinction between human and the non-human worlds is the reason for most of the sorrows of the world.

Chinese religion too shows a tradition which believes in the harmony between nature and man. Taoism and Confucianism are two different branches of Chinese religion. Both these religions accept the equality of all natural forms. The two, however, differ in their approaches towards man’s relation to nature. Taoism sees human as playing a passive role in the process of evolution and values nature for its own sake. Taoism doesn’t harbor respect for nature because of the utilitarian benefits which one can draw from nature. On the other hand, Confucianism states that human involvement is must in the process of evolution. The entire cosmos and relation of all members of the ecosystem initiate from human beings. The Confucians insist on human connections and thus becomes anthropocosmic.

Christianity which has shaped the perception of the West is very anthropocentric in its approach to nature. It establishes the dominion of man on the earth where everything is created for the utility of human beings. According to Christian mythology, the Almighty created this beautiful earth and gave Adam and Eve the sole right to enjoy and use it for his own happiness and survival. Lynn White Jr. also supports this argument. According to him, Christianity is responsible for creating dualism of man and nature. Moreover, he also stressed that it is only because of Christian belief that people in the West thought that it is God’s will that man should tame and exploit nature for his own utilitarian motives. The Christian dogma of creation becomes detrimental to the ecological health of the world as it makes man as the only living form which is an incarnation of God’s dominance. In the words of Lynn White Jr., “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (9).

And this feeling of domination increased during the Middle Ages and took an ugly turn during modern era because of the increase in human knowledge which becomes synonymous to distancing from nature. The dichotomy between human and non-human world increased by leaps and bounds during the Middle Ages. This negative and step-motherly attitude towards nature was a direct result of newly gained knowledge. Displacement of masses towards cities also played a key role in this shift towards anti-environmental ethos. Renaissance too paved the way for this non-harmonious attitude. The scientific discoveries and revolutions turned the minds of people towards scientific attitude and make them skeptical towards God. The whole religious structure which formed the basis of equality of all life forms was shattered because of the loss of faith. Galileo’s discoveries related to astronomical bodies resulted in detachment from the real world which is created by God. Major changes, however, came with Issac Newton who gave a mechanical model of nature and created a lifeless environment that can be reduced to numbers and can be quantified.

Medical science discoveries also increased the power of man and started giving him a feeling that with the help of science one can overcome all kinds of sorrows given by God. Man becomes a master and developed an anthropocentric attitude towards the non-human world. The environmental ethics came to an all time low in the Middle Ages and paved the way for irrational exploitation of nature by man. In the name of progress, humans started replacing tree jungles with concrete jungles. They tampered and played with nature to such an extent that it completely disturbs the ecological balance of the world. Global warming, forest fires, floods and famines, extinction of many species from earth, ozone layer depletion, life-threatening diseases shows the far reaching impact of environmental degradation. Excessive use of fossil fuels and non-renewable sources of energy like coal and petroleum have made even normal breathing an unhealthy task for human beings. Lifestyle changes too have contributed a lot in environmental degradation. People have become obsessed with air conditioners, cars, unwanted display of wealth, madness towards clothes, and gadgets and mindless acquisition of property which has fragmented and fractured humans’ relationship with environment. In summers, people can’t survive without air conditioners which are responsible for global warming. Media has also played an important role

in depicting earth as merely a physical entity devoid of any kinds of feelings.

If such continuous exploitation of nature will continue for a long time, then it is sure that the time is not far away when humans have to face the curse of extinction. The need of the hour is to promote an ecological paradigm in place of mechanistic paradigm. Values, beliefs, cultures and tradition needs to be thoroughly revived to evoke ecological consciousness in humans. Humans have to give up their swollen ego which makes them believe that they are at the epicenter of the entire creation and are thus very important. They have to realize that they are not unique in this universe. Rather they are similar to all other millions species of the ecosystem. In the words of Christopher Manes, human beings are "one species among millions" (20). From anthropocentric vision, human have to move towards bio-centric vision. Humans should shed their ego and accept the equality of ecosystem and their humility should become the watchword of modern environmental ethos.

But the question arises - How this change of attitude can be brought about in human beings? How, being from the field of literature writers and critics can bring a turnaround in environmental ethos of modern age? The answer perhaps lies in realizing what literature should not do at the first place and secondly, what literature should do to churn out eco-sensitive human beings in the form of its readers. According to many ecologists and ecocritics, literature should stop using nature as a mere mechanical background bereft of any kind of soul and life in it. Moreover, literati have to realize that literature has a power to move human soul, as it works both through mind and heart. Other mediums be it warnings, laws, media, seminars have so far failed in turning man's inclination towards ecology. Warning from scientists and all other environmental organizations have failed to alter the mindset of people. Coercive measures are also of no use as laws and rules are not implemented properly. Moreover, the procedure is so complex that in the end these measures seem to be futile. Cultures and traditions are also getting fragmented and distorted because of the cosmopolitan global culture. Even if one looks up to religion as hope, then as discussed earlier, many religions of the world are anthropocentric and are already inclined towards the domination of man. Literature thus emerges as sole savior because of the power of words which always had a deep impact upon on the psyche of people since times immemorial.

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