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Editor: Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Assistant Professor
Department of Language Studies,
School of Humanities & Social Sciences,
Assam Don Bosco University, Assam, India
Mapping the discourse of Ecocritical consciousness and its Literary Representation in Shashi Deshpande’s The Binding Vine

Ritushmita Sharma
Ph.D scholar
Department of English
Dibrugarh University
Email id: ritu92oct@gmail.com

Abstract: We are the inhabitants of a world which is in tremendous amount lost to pollution, contamination and industry-sponsored bio-disaster. It is now a commonplace idea to say that mankind is efficiently committing ecocide, making the planet inhospitable for life of any kind. In such a context, does this ecological unawareness of mankind require a theory to warn us about the loss of a healthy habitat? It is in this context the theory and praxis of ‘Ecocriticism’ becomes prominent in order to counteract the unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of nature and so on. Thus this research paper is one such attempt to explore the critical discourse of ‘Ecocriticism’ on the one hand, and on the other hand dealing briefly Shashi Deshpande’s The Binding Vine through the lens of Ecocritical consciousness. Moreover, the focus of the study will be on implicit and explicit representation of nature and other environmental concerns in the light of the author’s approach to ecological matters.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, ecocide, representation, nature, discourse.

Introduction and Analysis:

To build, to plant, whatever you intend,
To rear the column, to arch the bend,
To swell the terrace, or sink to the grot;
In all, let nature never be forgot.


It is an interesting fact that the perspectives related to nature and environment has made a new foray into the way we respond to literature. If we remember the work The Country and the City
(1973) by Raymond Williams, we find out that how English literature contributed to specific notions of nature, the countryside, poverty, seasons and the city. Williams was not trying to explore the environmental aspects of the eighteenth-century literature. Rather he was trying to demonstrate how the age worked with particular notions of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. In a sense, this can be counted as the starting point for an Ecocritical theory.

The concept of culture occupies a significant place in Ecocriticism. The culture-nature dichotomy and the interconnection between the two are the two major concerns of this theoretical discourse. As ecocritic Donelle Dreese in her work Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures posits: “... how nature is presented, when it is represented, how the environmental crisis has influenced literature, and how the concepts of the environment have evolved through the centuries” (1). Recent scholarship in the domain of Ecocriticism unveils about how this discourse works at the level of (a) ‘discourse’ by bringing in amalgamation a culture’s ecological approaches and its cultural texts that addresses the same, (b) ‘praxis’ contributing to the ecological awareness by re-reading canonical cultural texts. Furthermore, as a critical mode, Ecocriticism looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitude towards ‘nature’ and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it. Alongside this, Ecocriticism as a theoretical discourse shows how the representation of nature can be moulded to strive for a solution to the escalating environmental catastrophe. In this context, we may quote the words of Cheryll Glotfelty from his The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology:

Simply put, Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism beings an awareness of the modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (13)

Thus, we can make out that Ecocriticism seeks to study, explore and analyse the nature-writing texts to add to the canon in literary and cultural studies. Not only this, it also strives to
highlight the role of place (italics added for emphasis) in literature, then to unmask the subtexts of literary works that reveal anthropomorphic, capitalist attitudes towards the non-human, nature and landscape.

Along with Ecocriticism, another important idea in the similar line of thought is that of Deep Ecology. Deep Ecology has been perhaps the single most influential philosophy for environmental activism worldwide. Deep Ecology believes in the fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features. It believes that anthropocentric thinking has alienated humans from their natural environment and caused them to exploit it. Then there is the concept of Marxist Environmentalism wherein Marxist environmentalists argue that nature has become a commodity (italics added for emphasis) with capitalist production. Nature, therefore is internal to capitalist mechanisms as a source of profits. However, an appropriation of the theory of Ecocriticism in the literary works of Indian English literature is immense. One such example is the novel The Binding Vine by Shashi Deshpande. The first thing that strikes us about the novel is that the work is intensely focussed on the human, largely urban elite world. Though the novel strongly makes reference about man-made world, but there are occasions when we find illustrations about nature as well. The plot of the novel revolves around the psychological world of Urmi who may not have strong association with nature but Urmi’s character seems to have a special love for nature which we can decipher from her nostalgic longings for the natural surroundings of the Ranidurg House, her childhood abode. It has been described in some bits about how Ranidurg includes a lovely garden around the big old house with its neem, mango and tamarind trees, the thick hedge separating neighbour houses, the soft green grass etc. Undoubtedly this representation gives us a glimpse of rural nature but none can escape the utilitarian perspective among the small children searching for instrumental values in the surrounding. This is followed by the mention of monsoon rain that “announces itself with a melodramatic thunder” (56). The dialogue that takes place between Urmi and Inniauntie about rains is reflective about two contradictory positions they upheld. For example, on the one hand Urmi does not like Bombay rains and repeatedly contrasts them with that of the rains of Ranidurg which according to her is lovely. But on the other hand, Inniauntie prefers Bombay rains than that of Ranidurg. For Inniauntie everything is damp and
squelchy during rains in Ranidurg while Urmi loves the soft clouds and the soothing sound of rain of the same place. Moreover, Inniauntie projects a very negative picture of rains in Ranidurg. She says: “And the slush-all that terrible red mud. I could never get the stains out of my petticoat hems. But the worst were those crawly things . . . Those things that curl up into rings” (73) The concern here is not which rains are better—Bombay or Ranidurg but the crucial issue is to understand how two human beings visualise the phenomenon of nature from a typically anthropocentric view. So here it can be argued that an individual’s judgement and perceptions are situated in cultural and social contexts. It is the socio-cultural ramifications that affect how we view a routine phenomenon like rains. Again another example is that of the millipedes about which Inni shares her hatred. Out of hatred or dislike, one may shudder away from the millipedes, trample them under foot, kick them away, shut them up in boxes. When these kind of attitudes are generalised, it becomes more easier to understand how humans may kill or hamper the rest of the living entities of natural world. Thus, it can be said that much of the environmental crisis plaguing the world today can be traced to these kinds of assumptions.

There are other symbolic references between natural and man-made world in The Binding Vine which we can locate in some of the poems of Mira. She takes an anthropomorphic stance by representing herself first as a silkworm. She says: “Huddled in my cocoon, a somnolent silkworm/will I emerge a beauteous being?” (65). Then from silkworm, she represents herself as a peacock and a tortoise. The example follows:

Shall I surrender to this Maya-world
Dancing peacock, displaying its feathers?
Or shall I, defying the market world
Retreat into my shell tortoise like?

With this kind of representation where human attributes being ascribed to non human nature is problematic. The cocoon as a site of imprisonment, the peacock as the display of the lure of beauty or the tortoise shell as a retreat are all primarily human images, which may not hold good in the world of nature. As Greg Garrard points out in his Ecocriticism (2007), . . . [some critics] have
criticised anthropomorphism, arguing that we mistakenly ascribe human attributes, such as our own desire for freedom, to the animals involved” (137).

These kind of representations create stereotypes that are basically cultural. As it is already pointed out cocoon as a prison cell, peacock display as an aesthetic performance or retreat into a tortoise shell as either an ultimate defense strategy or an ultimate surrender are examples of such stereotypes. Proverbs and idioms of a language reveal how the culture it belongs to has stereotypes various members of the natural world: the lion as a brave animal the fox as a sly one, snakes as traitors are common stereotypes. The worse part is that many of these are often used for racial and national stereotyping.

From an Ecocritical perspective such stereotypes condition our understanding of and responses to the non-human world around us. It blurs our vision in particular ways and often hampers our understanding of nature as a world in its own right, which neither can nor need be explained in human terms. The fragments from Mira’s poems quoted earlier use images from nature in such a way as if the animals are leading a human life. Consequently on a subconscious level, one continues to apply the logic and norms of human life to these animals, and thus may not see that they exist independently of human cognition.

Conclusion:

The representations of nature in literature seem to be culturally and socially defined. There are numerous assumptions, biases and values working behind how literature reflects upon nature. The analysis of some passages from The Binding Vine suggest that nature is represented as an extension of human world, steeped in its attributes and its forms. Such kind of representation not only paints an inaccurate picture of nature, but also creates and confirms many cultural stereotypes, besides leaving scope for misinterpretations, about it. From an Ecocritical perspective, literary representations like the one discussed above have an impact on our understanding of and approach towards ecological issues and concerns.
Works Cited


