

Ecocriticism and Indian English literature in the Post Colonial Era

Kumari Shikha

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Amity University, Patna, Bihar, India

Abstract

Ecological degradation in the post colonial era is an important issue of New English Literature.

The ecology of the colonies was adversely affected. The question is whether it got its due after independence or not. The English Empire was brutal with it and later colonies marred it further. India was one of the colonies which had tremendous natural wealth. After gaining control of the materialistic luxury of India, British aimed towards the immensely profitable natural wealth without any aim of replenishment. The sufferance of ecology at the hands of the rulers was not under the control of the natives but in the post colonial age they could have taken steps to avoid the present threat to ecological balance. Whether in the name of development or personal benefits, nature was mistreated in the post independence era. Indian English literature mirrors the journey of ecological degradation of the nation. The paper studies select fictional work of Indian English literature from ecocritical lens to substantiate the topic.

KEYWORDS: ecology, ecocriticism, post colonial era.

Introduction

Nature in India has occupied a divine position. In religious as well as historical books a special reference is made to nature. India is a country where apart from Hinduism other religions have also flowered. Hinduism worships different forces (thunder, storm, flood and draught) and bodies (sun, moon, river, and tree) of nature. This shows the belief of the religion that nature is life giving source and that for wellbeing of human's life it's important to preserve nature. Torturing nature and other organisms is a punishable act in Hinduism. In Bhoomikhanda of Padmapurana it is mentioned that a person who is engaged in killing creatures, polluting ponds and tanks and destroying gardens certainly goes to the hell.¹(Dwivedi 6) In Buddhism the word Dharma means religion and it is also all things in nature like cats, dogs, penguins, trees, humans, mosquitoes, sunlight, leaf dew are all dharma which describes Buddhism as an ecological religion or religious ecology.²(Martine and Kerry VIII) This reminds us of the term 'deep ecology', coined by ArneNaess, which follows non-anthropocentric approach and regards humans as a part and parcel of organic whole without any bifurcation between human and non-human realms.³ (Satyanarayan 51) The question is how a country which has such a rich background of preserving and worshipping nature can turn ecologically poor. After imperialist left India with whatever natural resources they could take the Indian capitalists didn't delay in grabbing whatever was left and the process still continues. In the past India had a rich heritage of ecology but today it is threatened and therefore Indian ecologists are researching in different regions of India to find out the causes and remedies of ecological imbalance. In India the earliest contributions in the field of ecology were mainly from some forest officers who presented purely descriptive accounts of forests. The first comprehensive ecological contribution was made by

Winfield Dudgeon (1921) who published an ecological account of the upper Gangetic Plains employing the concept of seasonal succession there in. The first two viable centers of ecology were established in 1930s by R. Misra at the Department of Botany, Banaras Hindu University, and by F.R. Bharucha at the Institute of Science, Mumbai. R. Misra did extensive work from 1937 onwards at Banaras on grasslands, wastelands, playgrounds, lakes and ponds, low-lying lands etc.⁴(P. D. 8)

People in the third world country depend heavily on natural resources to raise their living standard. India too suffers from this. India faces a number of serious environmental challenges, ranging from natural resources to agriculture, wild life conservation, pollution to name a few. Since independence India's ecology has undergone a lot of change. In the name of development country's environment has come to pathetic condition. People chose concrete over green. The fertile agricultural plains have receded in the last few decades. There has been continuous increase in the population and pressure on the land. The ascending demand led to multiple growths in construction. All these adversely affected the environment. India's rich culture emphasizes on preservation of nature, but blinded by development their thought got divorced from culture. There is hardly a ceremony in India which does not involve worship of nature. Whether it is death, birth or marriage nature has always been revered. This shows that our ancestors had an understanding that through spirituality humans will learn to preserve nature. Materialistic luster, however, outshined this teaching went to every extent to fulfill their logical and illogical needs. The result was increasing alarm around the globe. The bell could be heard in every corner of the world as India is not alone in strangling ecology. This led to more talk and less work. There are umpteenth association, organization and institution talking and writing about it. This raising alarm found a new, interesting and informative place in literature.

Environment in the Pre and post Independent Indian English Literature

In the beginning of twentieth century India's major concern was its Independence. The country knew that they were adversely affected by the two centuries old slavery, yet environmental dilapidation was not a burning issue then as it was in its natal stage and nobody could sense the future threat. With Independence national leaders busied themselves in the process of healing the wounded country. The ecology was not critical enough to pull the attention and demand for measures. India's only ecological concern, for long, had been uncertain monsoon rains leading to unannounced flood and drought. Had the ecology of India been left undisturbed after the eviction of British Empire, the condition would not have been as critical as it is today. Literature reflects the journey of Indian environment from glory to present ignominy.

Environment has always been an integral part of the lives of human beings. It is one of the most deciding factors of evolution of any culture. And India has such a variety of landscapes that it is almost impossible for a writer to overlook it. This is the reason that different landscapes have been used in different novels representing different themes. There have been many prose fictions in India that have centered their themes or plot around nature. When India became independent,

the theme of colonialism, its after effects and the concern for the betterment of the different sectors pervaded. Ecology, during all these periods, remained in the backdrop used at the most as setting. Poetry, however, shows a greater influence of this theme, as can be seen in the poems of Sarojini Naidu, Aurobindo Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore and later in Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujam, Kamala Das and others. Its domination was yet to be felt in prose fiction. It really became dynamic when India and the whole world heard the warning bell which made them realize that their actions were causing disturbance in the ecosystem which could even mean their own extinction from this planet.

Indian English Literature, though has not a very long history, yet has a variety and reflects the changing time and contemporary concern of the country. India, too, is facing environmental challenges which did not occur overnight. It gradually covered the journey from green to grey. A glance at the fiction of the last century would show how nature once glorified and worshipped in the first of the century has been reduced to a commercial product. India represents developing countries which suffered, especially in terms of natural resources, at the hands of the colonizers and later by its own people. India constitutes a large number of villages and tribes for whom nature is a source of livelihood. This whole scene, however, started changing when India stepped towards development after Independence.

The clear difference of environmental changes can be seen as one moves from the work of early prose fiction writers to the present. The works of Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and Bhabhani Bhattacharya portrays the importance of nature and place in the lives of people. In his novel *Kanthapura* he has shown how rivers and mountains play an important role in people's lives. They have names for them. In this novel they call the mountain as Goddess Kenchamma and they consider it responsible for both - their prosperit and their adversity. Raja Rao writes about Kenchamma in the novel, "Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she...never has she failed us in grief. If rains come not, you fall at her feet and say, 'Kenchamma you are not kind to us. Our field is full of younglings and you have not given us water,..... When the doors are closed and the lights are put out, pat-pat-pat, the rain patters on the tiles, and many a peasant is heard to go into the fields, squelching through the gutter and mire. She has never failed us, I assure you, our Kenchamma. Then there is the smallpox..... Then there was cholera..... We gave a sari and a gold trinket to the goddess, and the goddess never touched those that are to live."⁵ (Rao Raja 1 and 2) He wrote in the same decade and has given life to a place, Malgudi, or it can be said that he has developed a place as a character which can be seen in almost all his prose fictions bearing the same features. Malgudi is an important character in most of Narayan's novels. The moment the name is pronounced a picture is carved in our mind with a typical image of the town and its inhabitants. In a way every place has an importance and people are attached to its peculiarities and closeness is formed among the co-inhabitants. It gives the residents an identity. Malgudi becomes the symbol of the transitional Indian shedding the age old traditions and accepting the modern western civilization. With each new novel the place becomes more real and is established as a place with myriad of meaning reflecting lives of its various characters. In *The Dark Room* the river and the ruined temple leave a benign influence on Savitri.⁶ (Narayan R. K) The flowing Sarayu, the ruined temple and the stone slabs influence Raju

in *The Guide*, and contribute to his sainthood. It is the spirit of Malgudi that helps him to face the ordeal of fast in the right earnest. It is the retreat across the river that almost transforms Jagan.⁷ (Narayan R. K) Nature has always proved to be stronger than man. It has often shown its power by controlling manpower through natural calamities like famine, drought, flood, earthquake etc. Man's life and nature are so interlinked that it is not possible for human beings to separate themselves from its influence. Therefore, they have no choice but to accept both nature's bounty and adversity. This can be said to be reciprocal as nature too is the recipient of man's action. Our irresponsible actions cause irreparable damages to nature. This is how the chain of ecosystem works in which everything is related to each other and therefore affects each other.

The effect of one such natural calamity on the humanity can be seen in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*. In this novel we see the true picture of Bengal famine of 1943 in which at least three millions Indians died of starvation.⁸ (<http://www.ibtimes.com>). The other writer in whose work also we witness a reference to the Bengal famine is Kamala Markandya in her novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. In one of her short stories, 'The Flood', which is taken from her novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, she has very well described the control of nature over human beings. She writes "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless and forgetful, and it has you by the throat."⁹ (Markandya Kamla, 109) Nature is shown as both the destroyer and the preserver in this story. The destructive feature of nature is seen in the pitiful condition of the villagers due to the rain and storm, "the water pitilessly found every hole of the thatched roof to come in.....I saw that our coconut plant had been struck. That, too, the storm had claimed for its own.....the shoots and vines were battered and broken, torn from their supports and bruised; they did not show much sign of surviving. The cornfield was lost.....Several were homeless.....six had been killed by lightning....Dead dogs, cats and rats cluttered the roadside....At dusk the drums of calamity began...echoing the mighty impotence of our human endeavour."¹⁰ (109, 110, 111 and 112).

In the later phase Ruskin Bond was one such writers whose work has been anything but concern for nature. Bond shows his worry for the unthoughtful actions of man towards nature. Through his short stories for children he has tried to convey an important message to everyone, that is, message of the importance of nature in our life. In his 'An Island of Trees' the grandmother reveals to her granddaughter, Koki, the deep bond that grows between humans and nonhumans if only there is love and compassion. 'No Room for a Leopard' is about deforestation and its accompanying aftermath. It presents the pathetic condition of the animals after deforestation. In 'Copperfield in the Jungle' he shows abhorrence towards hunting for pleasure which can never be justified. '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 ecosystem, showing interdependence.¹¹ (Bond Ruskin)

In addition to this we also see the local problem in Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*. The natural peace of the place is threatened by the violence caused by Nepali insurgency. "They raided tea gardens as they were closing down; managers recalling the attacks by

rebels on plantation owners in Assam left on private planes for Calcutta.....On the road to the market, the trees were hung with the limbs of enemies- which side and whose enemy? This was the time to make anyone you didn't like disappear, to avenge ancient family vendettas."¹² (294-295) In their fight they don't hesitate in killing innocent animals. The lives seem to be of no importance. And when humans are being killed, death of animals is of no concern to anyone. In the story we are introduced to Jemubhai's dog, Mutt. It is his life and their love and attachment for each other that represents the bond between the two different creations of ecology. Desai through the judge brings out the inhumanity of the human world whose actions ruin the other creatures of the ecosystem. She writes about the judge's emotion, "He couldn't conceive of punishment great enough for humanity. A man wasn't equal to an animal, not one particle of him. Human life was stinking, corrupt, and meanwhile there were beautiful creatures that lived with delicacy on the earth without doing anyone any harm. 'We should be dying' the judge almost wept. The world had failed Mutt. It had failed beauty; it had failed grace. But by having forsaken this world, for having held himself apart, Mutt would suffer."¹³ (292) Later in the novel Kachenjunga is presented as that part of nature which pays for the brutality of humans and whose beauty is destroyed in the war for power. This is the reason that it seems but obvious for Sai to wonder, "Should humans conquer the mountain or should they wish for the mountain to possess them? Sherpas went up and down, ten times, fifteen times in some cases, without glory, without claim of ownership, and here were those who said it was sacred and shouldn't be sullied at all."¹⁴(155)

Amitav Ghosh has always shown concern towards environment whether directly or indirectly. Though this concern becomes more emphasized in *The Hungry Tide*, it is present in his famous trilogy and other works also. Besides this he has always expressed his concern towards nature even in the media from time to time. In his interview to the Times of India newspaper he reveals his apprehension regarding the climate of the country in the following statement, "No human crisis has found people so unprepared. 2015 was the cut off year for emission cuts. We've already reached carbon levels of 400 ppm in the atmosphere... We need to be afraid of the tipping point."....Two degrees is a global mean average. The rise is not going to be equal in all parts of the world. We (India) are probably going to get a 4-degree rise," he cautioned. "Especially in north India, we see the ways in which climatic change and human-made change are catastrophically converging. There is this strange nexus of pumping up water from the upper Ganga aquifer coinciding with the sudden shift in rainfall patterns that's making the region drier."¹⁵(<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>)

His research for his novels has made his engagement with environment more prominent, he expresses his anxiety related to some major issues concerning climate change in the following words, "India must not just prepare for extreme events of the future but also deal with climate disasters playing out now. "I have spent a lot of time in the Sunderbans. That's where I became interested in the issue. As far back as 2000, we could see the impact salt water intrusion was making there. You could see the islands disappearing. After cyclone Aila, so much land that was previously fertile, was swamped".¹⁶

In his interview to Guernica he shows his surprise at how humans are acting innocent on the issue of climate catastrophe, “I must say that it is perfectly clear that the world at large has really turned away from the most catastrophic problems that confront it. It is like we are lemmings racing toward the cliff. And it has to be said that all the institutions that we have catastrophically failed us. And when you look back on history and realize that this is what history has been building towards, the catastrophic convergence which is going to destroy civilization as we know it, what can you say but history itself is really the product of utter folly”.(<https://www.guernicamag.com>)¹⁷

Rationale of the Study

The above study substantiate that the natives are more responsible for the deplorable condition of the environment. The Imperialist took away innumerable things from the country but left behind an ideology which was enough to bring down the environment in the name of development. The ideology was capitalism.

In spite of the theories, conferences, curriculum for saving environment, the condition has not improved. The question is what makes the efforts made at such an important need of the hour a failure. Is it the system or the attitude of the people or both. The seed of individualism germinated centuries ago but its roots got widespread only after industrial revolution with a new and technical nomenclature— Capitalism. In the words of Ayn Rand, “Capitalism is a social system based on the recognition of industrial rights, including property rights, in which all property is privately owned. The recognition of individual rights entails the banishment of physical force from human relationship: basically rights can be violated only by means of force. In a capitalist society no man or group may initiate the use of physical force against others. The only function of government in such a society is the task of protecting man’s rights, that is, the task of protecting him from physical force; the government acts as the government of man’s rights of self defense and may use force only in retaliation and only against those who initiate its use; thus the government is the means of placing the retaliating use of force under objective control” (capitalism.org).¹⁸ Meriam Webster defines capitalism as, “an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market” (Meriam Webster).¹⁹

On dissection most of the criteria of the above definitions aims at self profit, self improvement and self satisfaction. There is hardly a hint of concern for other species of nature. This concept has changed the global culture, too. The culture today follows the trend of individualism, which has no place for ‘my earth’ and definitely not for other species. There are world environmental summit with this attitude and hence no result. No one wants to step back on development. The developed countries want developing countries to save forests. Whereas developing countries want to be equal to developing countries at the cost of everything. Therefore cultural ecocriticism is very important, because it is the culture with the idea of waste and individualism which leaves no scope for other species and environment. So, the root of people’s carelessness towards nature and other species lies in the culture which has undergone vast change over the

centuries. There is hardly any buyer for Richard Louv's suggestion, "Reducing the deficit—healing the broken bond between our young and nature—is in our self interest, not only because aesthetic or justice demands it, but also because our mental, physical and spiritual health depends upon it. The health of the earth is at stake as well. How the young respond to nature, and how they raise their own children will shape the configurations and conditions of our cities, homes—our daily lives (Louv Richard 14-15)".²⁰

It is not justified to blame only rationalism for this ecological situation. Reason can only draw conclusion and provide the logic behind ecological problems. However, when personal benefits overpower this reason then one becomes blind, "It is not the reason itself that is the problem, I believe, but rather arrogant and insensitive forms of it that have evolved in the framework of rationalism and its dominant narrative of reason's mastery of the opposing sphere of nature and disengagement from nature's contaminating elements of emotion, attachment and embodiment. Increasingly these forms of reason treat the matured and ecological world as dispensable (Val Plumwood 5)".²¹

In today's culture of waste there is no concept of sharing with or saving for others. Sustainable development believes in this ethos of sharing with or saving for the future. The 1987 Report of the World commission by G. H. Brundtland on Environment and Development entitled "Our Common Future" defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (Venkat Aruna 5).²²

References:

1. Dwivedi O P, *World Religions and the Environmented*, Gitanjali Publishing House, New Delhi, 1989, P 6.
2. Batchelor Martine, Prow Kerry, *Buddhism and Ecology*, MotilalBanarsi Das, New Delhi, 1994, P VIII.
3. Prof.Satyanarayan Y V, "A Plausible Approach to Man Nature Relation", in *Human Freedom and Environment*, edited by IndooPandeyKhanderi, Kalpaz Publications, 2010, P 51 .
4. P D Sharma, opt cit, P 8.
5. Rao Raja; Kanthapura; Oxford University Press; New Delhi; second edition; page 1 and 2.
6. Narayan R. K; The Dark Room; Indian Thought Publication; Mysore; 1991.
7. Narayan R. K; The Guide; The Penguin Books; US; 1980.
8. <http://www.ibtimes.com/bengal-famine-1943-man-made-holocaust-1100525>; 22/4/16; 5:17 pm.
9. MarkandyaKamla; The Flood; in An Anthology of Indian English Prose; R. C. Prasad and J. P. Singh; MotilalBaarsi Das; New Delhi; first edition; page 109.
10. ibid; page 109, 110, 111, and 112.
11. Bond Ruskin; *Collected Fiction*; Penguin Books; New Delhi.

12. Kiran Desai; *The Inheritance of Loss*; Penguin Books; New Delhi; page 294 and 295.
13. *ibid* page 292.
14. *Ibid*; page 155.
15. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/environment/global-warming/Amitav-Ghosh-India-seems-to-be-home-of-lost-causes/articleshow/50005108.cms>; TNN | Dec 2, 2015, 05.15 AM IST
16. *Ibid*.
17. <https://www.guernicamag.com/daily/amitav-ghosh-products-of-folly/>; 3/6/2016.
18. <http://capitalism.org/capitalism/what-is-capitalism/>; retrieved 22/7/2016.
19. <http://www.meriam-webster.com/dictionary/capitalism>; retrieved 22/7/2016.
20. Louv Richard; *Last child in the woods: Saving our Children From Nature–Deficit Disorder*; Atlantic Books; London; 2010; p 14-15.
21. Plumwood Val; *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*; Routledge; 2002; New York.
22. Venkat Aruna; *Environmental Law and Policy*; PHI Learning Private Ltd.; New Delhi; 2011; p 5.