

Preserving Nature and Humanity: A Study of Ecocriticism Through the Poems of Dr. Kum Kum Ray

Anamika Makhija¹, Kum Kum Ray², Kajal Srivastava³

Error! Bookmark not defined. PhD Scholar, Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India - 226028

²Professor & Director, Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India - 226028

³Associate Professor, Business Communication & Liberal Arts, Jaipuria Institute of Management, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India - 226010

Abstract

Ecocriticism is a literary approach towards the study of nature with the aim of investigating how humans react in relation to ecological aspects and, thus, improving contemporary environmental conditions. The need for protecting the environment and developing an ecological conscience has been persistent from the Vedas to the Post-Modern poetry. The poems of Dr. Kum Kum Ray provide a practical understanding of the theory by tingling our minds and touching our hearts. To further solidify the study, poems by Nissim Ezekiel, Gieve Patel and K.N. Daruwalla have also been referred to. The topics touched and the issues covered by these works are based on reality and are treated with a combination of sensibility and sensitivity. The various tenets of Ecocriticism by Paul Warren Taylor, J.B. Callicott, David Hume and Aldo Leopold help to better understand the significance of innate coexistence between human beings and nature. The relationship is that of partnership and not of master and slave. The study of reality through the foundation of established theories provides a concrete structure to the research. Instead of exercising their falsely assumed rights over nature, humans must take up the responsibility of managing and maintaining it without interfering with the functioning of the ecosystems.

Keywords: coexistence; ecocriticism; humans; nature; poems

1. INTRODUCTION

Whether it is for religion or for literature – India is a land of diversity. Amidst this variation lies a common ground which encourages environmental conservation and ecological consciousness, and promotes the coexistence of man and nature, and that of humans and humanity. The sacred texts of Hinduism – the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, regard Earth as Mother Earth and attribute nature with the quality of divinity. These also warn humans

against the mindless exploitation of natural resources and condemn the capitalistic or the economic approach towards the flora and fauna.

This environmental advocacy has been universally devised into a theory called Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a literary approach towards the study of nature. It is an interdisciplinary study of literature and environment with the aim of investigating how humans react in relation to ecological aspects and, thus, improving contemporary environmental conditions. It is also known as Green Studies, Eco-poetics and Environmental Literary Criticism. Though the term “ecocriticism” was coined by William Rueckert in his essay, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978), its roots lie in an idea termed as “literary ecology” by Joseph Meeker in his *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972). The major literary bearers of the concept were Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The ancient Indian literature reflected ecocriticism even before the term was coined. Classical Sanskrit literature highlighted the man’s role, place and responsibility in the ecosystem. Works, like Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, and Kalidasa’s *Rithu Samahara*, *Meghadhootham*, *Kumara Sambhavam*, *Raghuvamsham* and *Abhignana Shakunthalam*, bring forth the principles of ecology. It is interesting to note that Kalidasa made the elements of nature as his protagonists long before the romantic writers wrote their odes to nature. In addition to this, Valmiki’s *Ramayana* promotes a harmonious coexistence between man and nature in the absence of which, there is only destruction. The text portrays Sita as a metaphor for “Prakriti” (nature) and Rama as a metaphor for “Purusha” (mankind). Both the Prakriti and the Purusha should strive to live in consonance because when one separates nature from mankind, the result is a calamity, just like when Ravana separated Sita and Rama, the result was a war.

Similar lines can be traced for the environmental factors that contributed to the decline of Indus Valley Civilization around 4,000 years ago. The summer monsoon rains became so sparse in Harappa that the natives had to migrate to the villages near the Himalayas where the rain was adequate to sustain the population. Later, there was a decline in the winter monsoon also. The switch in the character of monsoon affected the atmospheric temperature and the flow of the rivers originating from the Himalayas. Floods in River Indus and its tributaries became less severe and less predictable which impacted the lives of the natives who were dependent on agriculture. A recent study by the Indian researchers at IIT Kharagpur connects the decline of Dholavira (largest Harappan city) to the disappearance of a river which resembles River Saraswati. These evidences are a remarkable example of how drastically can changes in climatic conditions impact life. Men have falsely assumed to be the masters of nature when in fact, nature has its own ways to assert its power and teach mankind a lesson.

Furthermore, *Prithvi Sukta*, which is a part of *Atharva Veda*, is a hymn of sixty-three verses dedicated to Mother Earth. It talks about the principles of life, sustainability of environment, climatic changes, birds, vegetation, peaceful co-existence and disinclined multicultural approaches. It refers to earth as a living entity, and condemns the reckless exploitation of environment. Verse 1 of *Prithvi Sukta* emphasizes that all the human beings that have been born (or shall be born in future) are presided over by the ecosystem. It also raises a hope that Mother Earth provides adequate resources for all her inhabitants. Verse 12 conveys that the Earth is the mother, *Parjanya* is the father, and man is the son. Verse 2 and Verse 26 describe the physical features of the Earth, like the heights and the plains, the former verse highlighting that the plants are the most important resource available to mankind. Verse 11 further adds that Earth is protected by Lord Indra. Verse 35 encourages a mindful use of the natural resources, but at the same time it also criticises and warns against the exploitation of the environment.

Ecocriticism, undoubtedly, has been gaining significant attention in the recent years due to an increased social emphasis on environmental destruction coupled with advanced technology. Hence, it provides a fresh perspective to analyse and interpret literary texts, adding new dimensions to the field of literary studies. However, since Ecocriticism is a broad term, it cannot be studied in isolation. The roots of this theory lie in Environmental Ethics, a branch of applied philosophy. It studies the theoretical basis of environmental values and the societal attitudes and policies to protect and sustain the various ecological systems.

Paul Warren Taylor (1923-2015) was an American philosopher. He is widely renowned for his book, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (1986), which was the foundation of environmental philosophy. The work propagated a biocentric approach towards environmental ethics that every living thing has an inherent value and is worthy of equal moral consideration. According to Taylor, all human beings are the members of Earth's community of life. He also argued that the elements in Earth's ecosystems are interrelated in the form of a complex web, and that each individual organism is a purposeful centre and an end in itself. He justified Biocentrism by four basic tenets - Nonmaleficence (the duty to not harm any intrinsically worthy entity in the natural environment), Non-interference (the duty to refrain from restricting the liberty of individuals and to not interfere with the functioning of ecosystems), Fidelity (the duty to maintain the trust between humans and animals because the latter can fall prey to human exploitation), and Restitutive Justice (the duty to recondition the moral and ethical balance between humans and animals).

In addition to this, J. Baird Callicott (born in 1941) is another very prominent American environmental philosopher. He draws on the works of Charles Darwin, Adam Smith and David Hume in order to justify the Land Ethics of Aldo Leopold. Thus, he eliminates Descartes' Cartesian Dualism which draws a line between nature and civilisation, and humans and nature. He believes that humans can protect the environment as well as enhance ecosystem health.

Callicott identifies three main theories of environmental ethics - Prolonged and Traditional Humanism, Extensionism, and Eco-centrism. The Prolonged and traditional Humanism follows the Western human-centered ethics and, thus, gives moral consideration only to human beings. The Extensionism gives moral rights and importance to human as well as non-human beings. The Eco-centrism gives moral consideration to the entire ecosystem while taking human and non-human beings separately. In the light of these three perspectives, Callicott considers Ecocentrism to be the most consistent ethical theory. It creates awareness about the environmental problems, directly addresses the moral problems in hand, and imposes limits on the human behaviour. This helps in nurturing a sustainable coexistence of environment and humans.

Moreover, David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher who is well-known for his Moral Philosophy or Moral Sense Theory. It states that a man has a natural instinct which helps to determine whether an action is morally right or not. A man's moral sense is shaped by his emotions and not reason. In *Treatise of Human Nature (Book II: The Passions)*, Hume describes man as a "slave of the passions" (Hume 216). Hume replaces the rationalist view of morality with its sentimental conception. He adds that sympathy and altruism are not social constructs but intrinsic human qualities which means that self-interest alone is not sufficient to justify human behaviour. Moral distinctions are derived from natural virtues, such as feelings of approval or disapproval, and not from artificial virtues, such as justice which solely relies on reason.

Furthermore, according to Aldo Leopold, the relationship between humans and land is interconnected, and a moral code of conduct that arises from these intertwined relationships is called a Land Ethic. The care for people and the care for land cannot be separated from each other. Leopold's Land Ethics is based on three tenets - Evolution Order of Ethics, Concept of Community, and Ecological Awareness.

According to the Evolution Order of Ethics, Leopold propagates the idea that ethics should not only be confined to the relationships shared among people or between people and society but also be applied to the relationship shared between humans and nature. He advocated that humans must possess an "ecological conscience," which is the moral responsibility of humans towards the natural environment in order to maintain it. We can't destroy nature just because we master the technology to conquer and transform it. Leopold believes that viewing nature from an entirely economic point of view would destroy the functionality of the entire ecosystem.

In the Concept of Community, Leopold throws light on the dual meaning of "Land Community." First, land doesn't only include humans and other organisms that live on it but also extends to the whole nature including animals, plants, air, water, etc. All of these together form an organic unity and allow a normal functioning of the ecological system. The purpose of this extension is to make the mankind aware that nature, being a living thing, has the right to survive. Therefore, nature is both a community as well as a living organism. Second, humans are merely the members of the land community and not the masters of it. Leopold replaces the falsely assumed master-slave relationship between man and nature with an equal partnership between the two. By changing the status of humans in nature, this concept provides an ethical code and the right to exist to all the existence in nature.

In the last tenet which is Ecological Awareness, Leopold emphasises on establishing an ethical sense of ecology. This would make people understand that protecting and maintaining environment is a matter of not only social consciousness but also of ethical consciousness. The problems in nature or man's misconduct towards it would extend from the rational category to the emotional category so that humans are able to be instinctively aware of their actions.

The fact cannot be denied that Ecocriticism has always been the need of the hour, but studying the theory alone would not serve the purpose to the fullest. Hence, this paper studies Dr. Kum Kum Ray's seven poems from her anthology, titled *Shades of Resilience* (2022). Dr. Kum Kum Ray is a Lucknow-based author whose contributions in the field of education are of remarkable reputation. Her book, *Shades of Resilience*, is a collection of 29 heart-felt poems, revolving around the themes of fortitude and endurance. It highlights the battle between humanity and COVID-19 pandemic, and talks about how emotions transcend all the boundaries of time and space. In addition to this, the other three poems taken into consideration are Nissim Ezekiel's "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher," Gieve Patel's "On Killing a Tree," and K.N. Daruwalla's "Boat-Ride along the Ganga." Nissim Ezekiel is an Indian-Jewish writer and is regarded as "The Father of Post-Independence Indian Poetry in English." His poems are majorly introspective and raise modern issues in a contemporary manner. Gieve Patel is also an Indian writer who describes himself as "a profane monk" and shares an innate connection with the nature. His dedication to conserve the environment is vividly evident in his poems. K.N. Daruwalla is a Lahore-born Indian poet whose infatuation with love, domination and death is reflected in his works. Violence, both thematical and technical, takes the centre stage in his poems.

11. Reflection of Ecocriticism in the Poems

The poem, "First Wave 2020," by Dr. Kum Kum Ray describes a few aspects of life before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, natural resources were recklessly exploited because

humans lacked the “Will Power” (line 11) required for “self-control” (line 13). The increasing demands blindfolded people into believing that they were the masters of nature. Happiness was falsely assumed to be created by interfering with the ways of nature. This interrupted with the coexistence of man and nature, resulting in a “diseased society afflicting the masses” (lines 20-21).

One of those diseases which took away both young and old lives was, perhaps is, COVID-19. This was nature’s way of bringing us back to our roots - of bringing us back from constantly increasing industrialisation to our forgotten “unfashionable” (line 34) home. There was lockdown. People finally understood that luxuries are not needs. Demands reduced yet hearts became contented with whatever they had. There was no pollution. Trees were as green as they ought to be.

After having almost recovered from the impact of COVID-19, humans inculcated an “ecological conscience” (a term coined by Aldo Leopold). Leopold advocated in his Land Ethics that humans must have a sense of “ecological conscience” so that they understand their moral responsibility of managing and maintaining the natural environment. We can’t destroy ecology just because we master the technological advancement to conquer and transform nature.

Another poem by Dr. Ray, titled “Second Wave 2021,” begins by signifying the “New Norm” (line 1) which took everyone by severe shock yet by some degree of warm comfort. This comfort didn’t exist for long. In the First Wave, people understood the difference between the luxuries and the needs, but the Second Wave reduced even the needs. In the First Wave, people ended up spending time with their families but in the Second Wave, there was only “helplessness” (line 12) and “isolation” (line 20). Positivity took a “back seat” (line 9) and everyone wanted to be negative (on the papers).

There’s no doubt that “wings of poesy” (Keats, line 34) have always been to the rescue whenever humankind felt the need to escape the ordinary. So, when all the work happened through screens and social media, art emerged from where it already was, and the related opportunities sprung up. There was “desperation” (line 27) which resulted in finding new ways for survival. The sale offers, the concerts - all of it was replaced by “Bhakti” (line 48) and belief. People became more spiritual and religious. The reason behind this inclination was helplessness. When nothing else helped, when the ICU beds were occupied, when there was shortage of oxygen cylinders, when no amount of money could prevent the soul from transmigration, humans drew strength from Nature. People prayed while the doctors tried their best. It was the faith in God and in Nature that provided the strength to fight against the virus.

It was while suffering and losing that humans looked back at their actions. This is indicative of Hume’s Moral Philosophy which states that man is intuitively able to determine whether an action is morally correct or not. His moral sense is moulded by his emotions and instincts, rather than by reason alone. Logic is important but it cannot stand alone without the pillars of emotions for a complete understanding. Human instincts are stronger than human ideas.

In *Sri Ramacaritamanasa*, when Ravana separated Ram and Sita, the result was a war. In present times, the reckless actions of humans can be understood as Ravana, and the bond between Ram and Sita as the bond between Nature and mankind. When our actions interrupted between this bond, the war or the pandemic broke out. “Second Innings: A Fresh Lease” by Dr. Ray takes reference from Indian mythology. It states that when Shiva was separated from Savitri, He “destroyed the Cosmos” (line 14) in His anger. Man and woman coexist in the form of “Ardhnadeshwar” (line 12). Furthermore, according to Chinese philosophy, “Yin and Yang were meant to be together” (line 29). Anything that is naturally meant to co-exist shouldn’t be disturbed otherwise the result is a calamity.

This reflects Aldo Leopold's Land Ethics. In his Concept of Community, he states that nature is a living organism and the relationship between humans and nature is that of equal partnership and not a master-slave relationship. We cannot assume to be more powerful than nature when the latter has proved its unmatched strength time and again. No amount of technological advancement can make us superior to Nature. It is essential to understand the importance of unavoidable co-existence.

Moreover, "The Spirit Lives On" by Dr. Ray is an excellent portrayal of Ecocriticism. It accurately reflects the entire essence of the theory in just fifteen lines. The poem focuses on afterlife. It answers the question: What happens to the soul when the heart stops beating? After the person has departed to the celestial world, what stays in our minds is their memory. If one wants to find or feel or see or hear that person, one just has to look around to realise that nature doesn't snatch people from us; it merely changes their form of existence. The wind, the snow, the field, the rain, the sand, the rainbow - there are so many different forms of the person we consider to have gone forever. Their presence is not an illusion but a reality. Whether their soul is still here or not - that is for us to believe. Nature has all the answers. It has everything and everyone that we have ever lost. All it asks is for us to believe. Therefore, the poem ends on an interrogative note, urging the readers to wander: "I am not there, Or Am I?" (lines 14-15).

"My Summer Guests" Dr. Ray depicts a battle between being alone and being lonely. The scene is of a "royal, multi-course feast" (line 35) arranged for guests. With so many people around, the poet isn't alone, but loneliness lingers while she misses the "One" (line 11) - her spouse. Forty-eight beautiful years of her life spent with her husband couldn't be replaced but this heaviest absence was partially compensated by Nature.

Nature heals - not immediately, but definitely. The entire process of healing is very personal and not linear. There are days when we feel we have moved ten steps ahead and then one fine day, we wake up to realise we are back to square one. We can't forget people and we don't have to because we don't want to. All that helps is acceptance. Nature doesn't accelerate the process but it undoubtedly instils hope and faith with its healing power and rays of positivity. Therefore, this projects Hume's Moral Philosophy which states that reason is important but not the only requirement for an action to be taken. It's majorly the emotion which guides us. Our moral conscience is linked with our emotional conscience which ultimately finds solace in ecological conscience.

Dr. Ray's "A Visitor in Jharkhand" begins by describing the natural calmness in Jharkhand and proceeds by showcasing a real and raw image of the place. The beauty is obstructed by "displacement of natives" (line 16) and "replacement of concrete jungles" (line 18). The poem raises a question that whether Naxals are really dangerous or they are merely victims.

Aldo Leopold's vision of Land Ethics propagated that the relationships between people and land are entwined. He stated that Nature doesn't belong to humans and that we are temporary residents here. So, we cannot draw boundaries on something that isn't even ours. We cannot master nature.

The poem clarifies it further by stating that we, humans, are born out of Nature, live in Nature, and get buried in Nature. We are "NOTHING" (line 79), as the poem rightly proves. We aren't the controllers of the Nature. The poet adds that if we visit a graveyard, we would realise that even the greatest people become "Dust" (line 77). On the contrary, Nature is permanent. It keeps changing and switching among its different beautiful shades, but it stays eternally.

Another short poem by Dr. Ray is "Gloom." This beautiful poem, in a few words, exhibits one more reality of life - Marriage. When two people get married, it's not just the guest list that's invited but also the Nature. If we consider the Indian institution of marriage, we cannot overlook the importance of

matching “kundli” or astrological charts, and “gun” or the qualities. Our modern outlook might discard it as old-fashioned or baseless but we cannot deny how even Ram and Sita had their “gun” matched. So, Nature has always been a part of not only birth and death but also of marriage.

The poem is a fantastic representation of Ecocriticism. The mist is like a “bridal veil” (line 3) of the anxious bride waiting for her groom and his family - the “Rays” (line 8). The term “Rays” is a dual reference to the sunrays and the poet’s post-marriage surname. The groom is riding on “a seven-steed chariot” ((line 8). The rays and the mist meet only to get departed. Even the Nature cannot escape the laws of Nature.

Apart from Dr. Kum Kum Ray’s heart-touching and eye-opening realistic poems, poems by Nissim Ezekiel, Gieve Patel and K.N. Daruwalla also touch the sensitive realities of modern-day relationship between nature and humankind. “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher” by Nissim Ezekiel is aesthetically pleasing but at the same time, it also bluntly criticises human behaviour towards nature. It takes both human and non-human entities into consideration which is suggestive of Paul Taylor’s as well as J.B. Callicott’s Ethics. It also deals with the relationship between the two on the lines of Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethics.

According to the poet, birds and women represent nature, and one needs patience to comprehend this complex web of various ecosystems. We cannot understand it hastily or under compulsion.

“To force the pace and never to be still

Is not the way of those who study birds

Or women.” (lines 1-3)

Ezekiel highlights the importance of mutual understanding between nature and man wherein both allow each other to exist. This indicates at Callicott’s Ethics in which mora consideration is given to the whole ecosystem, consisting of the various sub-ecosystems and the human and non-human beings.

Ezekiel also states that man, in blind pursuit of materialism, is destroying the world’s ecological balance. Leopold’s Land Ethics state that viewing nature from an entirely economic point of view would leave it in a chaos. We cannot master nature just because we have the technology to modify it in any way. There has to be a partnership instead of a master-slave relationship between humans and nature.

“The hunt is not an exercise of will

But patient love relaxing on a hill” (lines 4-5)

These lines reflect Restitutive Justice which, according to Taylor, is the moral duty to restore the ethical balance between humans and animals. Ezekiel encourages “ecological conscience” (a term coined by Leopold in his Evolution Order of Ethics) to maintain this balance which has otherwise been wronged by reckless human activities.

This environmental abuse has been protested by Gieve Patel in his poem, “On Killing a Tree.” Gieve Patel shines bright not only as a poet but also as a supporter of “Green Movement” which is a group of writers with an intention to protect environment. In the poem, Patel writes that a tree absorbs water, air and sunlight in order to produce oxygen, leaves, flowers and fruits. Even the spreading branches are symbolic of sharing. So, there is a mutual relationship between the different elements of nature. However, when it comes to human beings, we unfortunately lack the art of giving. When our needs increase, we begin butchering the environment.

Patel’s “On Killing a Tree” projects a brutal scene of the murder of a tree. Earth, like a mother, provides bed for her children who in turn take weapons to annihilate their own mother. He criticises man’s approach towards nature and requests the readers to protect the environment. This is indicative of the Concept of Community which is a part of Leopold’s Land Ethics. According to Leopold, “Land

community” has dual meanings. First, the land not only includes human beings but also the other components like soil, plants, water, air, animals, climate and so on. It includes the whole nature which in itself is a living organism and has the right to live. Second, humans are members of the land community. This emphasises on the fact that humans and nature share an equal partnership, not a master-servant relationship. We are not the conquerors of land community but just ordinary citizens. In the poem, Patel mentions that humans cannot possibly eradicate the existence of tree with an ease.

Another form of abuse is pollution – both internal and external. The poem, “Boat-Ride along the Ganga,” by K.N. Daruwalla not only highlights the pollution of River Ganga but also the pollution of human thought. The scene is set in Varanasi which is the repository of Hindu religion since ancient times. The poet brings forth an image of River Ganga but in the cruel hands of urbanisation. The sacred ghats of Varanasi are lifeless. Death, which is the ultimate abode of all living creatures, is followed by certain rituals of Hinduism, and the place where these rituals are performed is itself dead now. Even while performing the last rites, man considers himself to have control over nature. Exploitation is wearing the garb of religion. Burning a dead body today is only a source of monetary gain. Excessive water pollution has ruined the purity of Ganga just as excessive greed has ruined the conscience of man. This poem can be studied with reference to Hume’s Moral Philosophy which states that man has an inner voice which helps him to determine whether an action is morally correct or not. A man cannot be entirely selfish because his moral sense is shaped by his emotions rather than by reason alone. He is merely a “slave of the passions” (Hume 415). We are actually well aware of our actions but are just blinded by economic benefits. So, combining Hume’s Philosophy with Leopold’s Ecological Awareness, we can save our Paradise from transforming into a Purgatory.

Conclusion

Nature is not only what surrounds us but also what resides in us. Our bodies are made up of the five elements of nature – Fire, Water, Wind, Earth and Space. Mother Nature nourishes us while we are alive and we live this entire life only to go back to Her. The plants absorb nutrients from the soil and produce food which fills our stomachs. When we die, the decomposers break down the remains and all the nutrients go back to the soil. This recycling is a scientific proof that whatever we consume, we give back to this world. We are made up of soil, and go back to soil. Therefore, we must not falsely assume ourselves to be superior during the temporary period for which we walk on the soil.

We share an innate bond with the natural environment and that is why not only art but also science accepts the power of nature. It is our moral, rational and emotional responsibility to not exploit the environment and understand that butchering the natural resources is not the right way to satisfy the unending greed. Deforestation for land space and worshipping Banyan trees for well-being do not go hand in hand. Polluting the same water that Hinduism claims to have spiritually cleansing power is being double-faced. Interfering with the normal functioning of the ecosystems doesn’t prove our technological advancement but only our insensitivity and ungratefulness. Nature is so powerful that if it can heal us, it can also show us a mirror.

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