

## PROMOTING ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH LITERATURE

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### Abstract

Eco-literature, also known as environmental literature or ecocriticism, is an important genre in contemporary literature that deals with ecological concerns and encourages readers to rethink their relationship with the natural world. This literature reflects society's increasing concern for environmental issues and sustainability. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau played a crucial role in shaping the genre of Eco literature with their influential writings. They celebrated the natural world and advocated for a deep connection with nature. Emerson, a pioneer of the American Transcendentalist movement, in his essay "Nature," published in 1836, explored the spiritual relationship between humans and the natural world. He believed that nature acts as a mirror of divine truth. Henry David Thoreau, a fellow transcendentalist, is popularly known for his book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* published in 1854, chronicling his two-year experiment of living in a small cabin near Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau's experience was an attempt to highlight and express the importance of mindfulness, ecological awareness, and a deliberate, conscious relationship with nature and the preservation of natural landscapes. In her novel *The Year of the Flood*, Margaret Atwood expressed the consequences of climate change.

In the Indian context, while Rabindranath Tagore was one of the founding fathers of Indian Transcendentalism whose objective was to inspire the reader towards transcendentalism and self-realization, Sarojini Naidu was another poet who drew the attention of the readers towards ecological concerns. In his renowned poetical work *Gitanjali*, published in 1910,

Tagore prospected the relationship between God and man. In his writings, he drew attention to unity between the universe and man while Sarojini Naidu in her poem *Spring* delved deep into the essence of the beauty of nature.

The present research paper explores how eco literature serves as a powerful tool for promoting environmental awareness through its portrayal of the natural world and exploration of ecological issues and human-nature relationships. Also called nature writing, eco literature can engage readers in environmental concerns and encourage them to become more conscious of their relationship with the planet they live on. Through literary devices, vivid descriptions and alluring narratives, the readers are transported to diverse landscapes and they learn to appreciate nature's beauty and splendour and foster a sense of belongingness and a divine connection with the environment. Social ecology focuses on the social, political and economic structures that impact the environment. At the same time, eco-criticism is a form of literary criticism that focuses on the relationship between literature and the environment.

The environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s played a significant role in shaping the modern concept of Eco-literature, its origins can be traced back to the 20th century. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, is often credited with sparking the modern environmental movement and the emergence of Eco-literature. In the 1970s and 1980s, the genre of Eco literature gained popularity as notable works such as *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey and *Arctic Dreams* by Barry Lopez were published. These writers focused on depicting the beauty of nature and the threats posed by human activities such as industrialization and urbanization.

Ecocriticism is an important tool for examining literary texts through an ecological lens. Anthropocentrism is a key aspect of ecocriticism that emphasizes a human-centred view of the world and assumes that humans are the centre of all species." Radha Kamal Mukerjee, one of the first Indian scholars to emphasize the connection between the social and bio-physical world suggested that the ecological organization could not be understood without the reference to culture as he rejects the idea of ecological theories which says that ecological order a natural and non-cultural level of human relations. In his view, social ecology can only be understood by the understanding of culture.

Anthropocentrism is prominent in Wordsworth's *Tintern's Abbey*, where the poet's consciousness makes all the natural elements available. Humanity strongly connects with social ecology, which is a comprehensive scientific study of how human species balance with the natural environment. There is a clash between the ideas of environmental humanities and the Anthropocentric view because the human practices of agriculture, industrialisation and technology have oppressively damaged the environment. Thus, Paul Crutzen coined the term Anthropocene which is the geological time of human intervention in the natural resources and these biophysical changes to the world's climate have now become irreversible.

### **Raising Ecological Consciousness through Literature**

Several literary texts embody both anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene. Anthropocentrism is a perception to see nature through human presence and in the centre of any literary text there is human intervention through which all the natural elements are conceivable. Therefore, the literary text is much about human perception of nature. Nature does not exist before but it begins to exist as far as the poet discovers it so there is a superiority of humans as the centre of the world and this is the anthropocentric view. Thus, Anthropocentrism paved the way to Speciesism which assumes that humans are the centre of the world and all other biotic and abiotic components are subordinate to humans.

Humans always showed a violent dominance over other creatures that are insignificant or subordinate to the human. In literary representations like *The Tempest*, Caliban is presented as ugly, threatening and justified as something lesser to humanity. It can be summarized that it is possible to place humans above all species are assumed to be subservient and lesser than humans. All other species are presumed as unimportant and this is what constitutes humanity as preeminent. Also, Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* acts as a lord of the monster. Abnormally created a creature whose body parts were disinterred from the graveyard came back to life. Victor Frankenstein excitedly proclaims himself as the lord of the hideous giant creature:

A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I

might in the process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had devoted the body to corruption. (*Frankenstein*, 39)

Indian culture, which is diverse and composed of several regional cultures, worships nature as an indispensable part. Nature is an integral part of every civilization, whether modern or ancient. Although Kalidasa and Walt Whitman belonged to different cultures and periods, their ideas about human relationships were similar. To them, nature is divine, and spiritual, and without nature, human existence is not possible.

Whitman had a profound connection with the natural world, often depicting it in his poetry as a living, breathing entity with which he could communicate. His poems often show him engaging deeply with the environment, observing its scenes and finding parallels between natural phenomena and human activities. Whitman's approach to nature is characterized by his ability to merge his consciousness with the natural world, seeing himself not as separate from it but as an integral part of it. This is evident in poems like "Song of Myself", where he celebrates the interconnections of all things, including humanity and nature., in his poem “Song of Myself” Whitman often focuses on the immediate experience of being in nature, emphasizing its sensory richness and its ability to evoke deep emotions and spiritual insights:

I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.  
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,  
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death. (Whitman 4-9)

Kalidasa considered the greatest intellect in Sanskrit poetry and drama, took the main thread of the epic story from *The Mahabharata*. Initially, the story was lifeless and dull, but Kalidasa polished and twisted it, blending it with elements of nature to make it more vibrant and impactful. Kalidasa, being a poet of nature, was skilled at weaving captivating and dramatic storylines. In his work *Abhigyanshakuntalam*, he expertly describes intricate scenes such as running horses, beautiful gardens, and Dushyant's pursuit of deer. Nature is a prominent theme in Kalidasa's *Abhigyanshakuntalam*, also known as 'The Recognition of Shakuntala'. The story revolves around the main protagonist who is portrayed as being in harmony with nature. Shakuntala was nurtured by nature and has a feminine charm that is compared to a blossoming flower, nimble deer, and dew-washed leaves of the forest.

Kalidasa's vivid descriptions of nature enhance the beauty of the narrative, portraying lush forests, blooming flowers, murmuring rivers, and singing birds. Through poetic imagery, Kalidasa harmonizes human characters and nature, emphasizing themes of love, longing, and time. Through poetic imagery, Kalidasa harmonizes human characters and nature, emphasizing themes of love, longing, and time. Nature is portrayed as a reflection of the characters' emotions and moods, bursting with vibrant life. The author employs vivid imagery to describe the various elements of nature such as forests, rivers, and animals often using them as metaphors to convey the inner workings of the characters' minds and hearts. The forests in *Abhijanashakuntalam* are both beautiful and dangerous, while the rivers represent the flow of time and emotions. The femininity of nature and Shakuntala are intertwined.

In Act IV of *Abhijanashakuntalam*, the departure of Shakuntala is presented in a very heart-touching manner. Silken dresses and ornaments are obtained from forest trees. The picturesque description of heart-touching tender emotions has been presented in this act. The association with her husband brings a disassociation with nature. The nature sheds tears. When Shakuntala left, animals and plants wept in sorrow. Shakuntala and nature mirror each other in their characteristics. On Shakuntala's departure, when Rishi Kanva sends Harita, one of the hermits of the hermitage, to gather blossoms from the trees for Shakuntala, the trees give silken wedding dress as a fruit as graceful as that even the moon goddess feels inferior to its luminescence. Another tree showered gems and ornaments from its twigs which appear like a fairy hand to aureate the beauty of Shakuntala.

One of the trees bore fruit, a silken wedding dress  
 That shamed the moon in its white loveliness;  
 Another gave us lac-dye for the feet;  
 From others, fairy hands extended, sweet  
 Like flowering twigs, as far as to the wrist,  
 And gave us gems, to adorn her as we list

The relationship between nature and humanity is not only prominent in Indian and American cultures but also significant in European culture. In ancient Greek culture, mankind and nature are intertwined. Greeks worshipped nature, and Greek culture is a blend of religious beliefs and practices. In the famous myth of Apollo and Daphne, Daphne transforms into an

everlasting, youthful Laurel tree, with her hair turning into leaves, her bosom encased in tender bark, and her arms becoming branches. Apollo, Daphne's lover, kisses her in the woods and assures her that if she cannot become his wife, then she will transform into Apollo's tree, and he will wear Daphne's leaves as his crown. He further assures Daphne that during the Roman conquerors' triumphal procession, Daphne's leaves will be woven into wreaths for their bows. Moreover, another Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore not only portrayed nature as loving, calm, serene and beautiful but also portrayed nature as calamitic, harsh and precarious. He gave many descriptions of rain, flowers, and clouds, making the reader catch his breath. Tagore gave enthralling and vivid descriptions of nature in many of his poems. The way Tagore describes nature is very different from many other Indian poets he describes nature as divine. It is the divinity of nature to which every creature, living and non-living belongs. He has portrayed nature as God and vice versa. Nature is the quintessential source of reason and wisdom. Nature reflects God's glory and one can attain the self-purification by devoting himself to nature.

In song 6 of *Gitanjali*, Tagore has compared his soul and life to a flower. He prays to God humbly, asking for acceptance of his offering. Tagore has drawn a comparison between the life span of a flower and his own life. He is requesting God to accept his humble offering before it fades away. The poet feared that his life span was too short and would soon turn to ashes like the petals of the flower withers. Tagore has chosen the flower as a symbol of devotion to God and he has chosen the imagery of flower to convey the idea of gentleness and softness. The flower also symbolises the cycle of life and death. Tagore uses the imagery of a flower to indicate that if he devotes the flower to God, he can attain enlightenment which paves the way to moksha. He displayed splendid pictures of nature and his poems are full of splendour and glory. In one of the lyrics of his poetic collection *The Gardener*, he depicts the softness of nature by using the imagery of clouds, foam, air and light. He has created a realistic and picturesque account of the spring season. Tagore adores nature in her more feminine aspect. He has described different Indian seasons marked by the accuracy of perception. Another important symbol of nature in his lyrics is light. Light is a symbol of strength, wisdom, truth knowledge and eternity which symbolises a new beginning and the end of darkness. In one of his poems "Over the Green", Tagore shows the beginning through the arrival of the spring season. As the spring season starts the new buds and leaves begin to bloom and the light of the sun is begun to shine brightly.

Over the green yellow rice-fields sweep

The shadows of the autumn clouds were followed by the swift-chasing sun.

The bees forget to sip their honey:

Drunken with light they foolishly hover and hum. (Tagore, 1-7)

However, portraying the softer side of nature does not mean that Tagore is only a poet of nature. In his *The New Year* his selection of words like whirling, frantic, infuriate and turbulence shows the dynamic, cruel, harsh and devastating side of nature. Nature is both soft and feminine as well as evil and ugly to the poet. Tagore has described nature as a living being that is a destroyer as well as a preserver at the same time. He mentions that "like fruit shaken free by an impatient wind from the veils of its mother flow," the New Year comes whirling in a frantic dance. In another poem "I Plucked Your Flower" Tagore explains that when humans try to violate nature then nature also reacts negatively. The speaker in the poem fails to view the flower as having life and makes the mistake of plucking it and as soon as the flower is plucked his hand is pricked by the thorn showing a sensitive reaction of nature to man's insensitive deeds.

I plucked your flower, O world/

I pressed it to my heart and the thorn pricked

when the day waned and it darkened, I found that,

the flower had faded, but the pain remained (Tagore, 1-4)

Sarojini Naidu has also made an effort to trace the elements of nature in her poetry. The depiction of nature in her poems is all about her fascination for natural elements like aerial essence, sapphire sky, and little quivering birds which are the efflorescence of the spring season. Sarojini responds to nature in a variety of ways but at the same time, spring season is the most prominent in her poetry and greets the springtime exuberantly. She has a magnificence and sensibility towards nature and she admires nature with a sense of joy. The theme of nature and her passion for nature are seen prevailing in Sarojini's poems, especially during the spring season. In her poem "Spring" where she mentions:

Young leaves grow green on the banyan twigs

And red on the peepal tree/

The honey-bird pipe to the budding figs,

And honey blooms call the bee. (Naidu, 1-4)

The theme of nature is prevailing in Sarojini's poems. Her passion for Nature especially for the spring season can be seen in her poem Spring. Sarojini in her poem "Spring" conveys the idea that the spring season comes after long deadly winters. In winter everything in Nature

comes to an end and after much waiting Spring comes with a new hope and an abundance of greenery. A new cycle of life begins with exquisite mornings of flaming gold and blue sky and the air is filled with voluptuous scents of champak flowers. Spring season is associated with the rejuvenation and regeneration of every aspect of Nature. Sarojini beautifully conveys the gradients of the atmosphere of the season with her exquisite description.

Modern Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy in their respective works *Midnight's Children*, *The Hungry Tide*, *The Golden Gate*, *The Village by the Sea*, *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The God of Small Things* have also portrayed environmental concerns and highlighted the impact of deforestation pollution and industrialization on humanity.

## **Conclusion**

Promoting environmental consciousness through literature can be a substantial way to raise awareness, stimulate actions and foster a deeper connection with the natural world. Through literature, the reader can explore the ethical dimensions of the relationship between humans and the natural world and further develop his empathy towards the natural world. On reading the literature one can provoke his thoughts and develop responsibilities towards nature. Literature often explores the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. It can depict harmony and reverence for nature, as well as exploitation and destruction. These themes encourage readers to contemplate their relationship with the environment and the impact of human actions. Literature serves as a call to action for environmental conservation and sustainability. Through narratives, essays, and poetry, authors establish an emotional connection and raise awareness about environmental issues, highlight ecological interconnections, and advocate for empathy and responsibility to protect and save our planet. Undoubtedly literature celebrates the wonder and beauty of nature which can motivate the readers to support environmental causes and work towards environmental sustainability.



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