



**POSSIBILITIES OF “ECO-EMPATHY” FOR SUSTAINABLE EARTH AND BETTER  
FUTURE**

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**ABSTRACT:**

We are living in an environmentally challenged world when the pristine earth that sustained lives and the eco-system for centuries has been degrading at an alarming rate due to reckless anthropogenic activities leading to a dangerous and unpredictable change of climate, a continuous erosion of the protective layer around earth's atmosphere, contamination of soil, water and air. The degradation of the earth's greenery is leading to an inevitable conflict in which wild animals are coming face to face with humans.

Sadly, When we talk about the sustainable earth or future of the earth we tend to think it is only the domain of science—that of a biologist or an environmentalist. But a deep and sympathetic understanding of the correlation between the living and the non-living, an appreciation of the pre-established connection between all elements in the universe, between matter and Spirit is not possible without literature, without those imagination and values that it inculcates in the heart. Who can better listen to the “Songs of the Earth” than a Keats, an R. L Stevenson or a Walt Whitman? Who can observe the sights, sounds and colours of Nature and the place of Humans in all these better than a Kalidasa or a Rabindranath Tagore?

My paper aims to look into the possibilities of an ecological study of literature that may help inculcate those values that will support the causes of a sustainable earth—a world in which human beings will live in perfect accord and tune with all forms of existence--living and non-living, not as a center of everything but as a part of everything.

**KEYWORDS:**

Eco-empathy, Ecology, Eco-literature, Deep Sustenance, Deep Ecology, Bio-Diversity, Eco-feminism.

## INTRODUCTION:

Ecocriticism is a type of newly emerged literary criticism which seeks to investigate works of literature from an ecological perspective. Although a number of pioneering studies in the previous decades established a foundation for the field, the publication, in 1996, of *The Ecocriticism reader* edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm transformed ecocriticism from a loosely defined area of concern into a well organized and systematized discipline. Around the same time appeared Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), another highly significant book advancing an ecocritical poetics. Buell defines ecocriticism "as (a) study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis." As explained by Cheryl Glotfelty, it is concerned with the study of the physical world and its representation in literature. The purpose is to show the ways in which literature has affected humankind's relationship with nature and how an ecological concern can affect the study of literature and help to develop a new canon.

Ecocriticism has advanced rapidly in the United States where it is often associated with the "Association for the Study of Literature and Environment" (ASLE). It was founded in 1992 in Reno, Nevada, for the purpose of "sharing of facts, ideas, and texts concerning the study of literature and environment." ASLE publishes a journal called ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment) which seeks to explore the relation between human beings and the natural world. It publishes articles from, among others, literary scholars, environmental historians and environmental philosophers.

However as Peter Barry has rightly observed ecocriticism "is still distinctly on the academic margins" and does not have "a widely-known set of assumptions, doctrines, or procedures." (*Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*-----)

In Britain, a separately developed form of ecocriticism came to be known as "green studies." British ecocritics often refer to Raymond Williams' critique of pastoral literature, *The Country and the City* (1973) as expressing many of the ecological concerns even before the term "ecocriticism" came to existence. Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology*:

*Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) compliments Buell's work on American Romanticism. In his more recent work *The Song of the Earth* (2000) Bate extends his focus on the Romantics to Coleridge, Byron, Keats and others with the conviction that in the present era of growing separation from nature humans can still listen to the "the song of the earth."

Ecocritical reading of literature has deeply influenced the feminism critical studies and movements, especially in the post-colonial countries. The term Ecofeminism was coined in 1974 by Francoise d'Eaubonne. As an emerging social and academic movement ecofeminism points to the parallels that exist between the exploitation of nature and the oppression and subordination of women. Sometimes regarded as an off-shoot of mainstream feminism, ecofeminism includes a variety of theoretical positions including social, cultural and environmental approaches.

Central to the theory of ecofeminism is the realization that the Western concepts of scientific progress and developments are projections of patriarchal tradition and are biased against women.

Ecofeminists argue that the progress of science in Europe and the consequent Industrial Revolution have transformed “Mother Nature” into a mere source of raw materials. The activities that went on by the name of development actually signified mal-development, destruction of nature through the process of commodity production for maximum profit. Nature came to be subject to callous exploitation and limitless violence. Forests were denuded, atmosphere was polluted. Women were, in a parallel way, also victimized by the patriarchal forms of development. Women were increasingly seen as marginal and dismissed as no better than resource material. It has also been claimed that the same mentality that justified the degradation of nature also legitimized the oppression of women. Ruether, for example claimed that Western cultures present ideas about the world in a system of binary oppositions that creates a hierarchy in which men are accorded a place of superiority. Whereas women are identified with femininity, body, emotion and nature men are identified with masculinity, spirit, reason and culture. This implies that men have a position of dominance over both women and nature.

Another claim is that the fact that women are most adversely affected by environmental hazards makes them better qualified to rise up against the global ecological crisis. This position for women has been advocated by Vandana Shiva who claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions with it. Women do not dominate over nature as men usually do but rather cooperate with the earth (the male hunter is symbolically contrasted with female producer/gatherer). This feminine respect for life and environment and the support of the protection of nature through sustainable development seem to be the only way forward.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS:**

While going through my investigation into both ecology and literature I used examples and samples from literary texts as well as critical texts of literature and the terms and concepts used in the study of physical environment. I used the methods of comparison and contrasts between traditional views of the study of environment in which only scientific tools are used and the study of literature in which only literary terms and ideas are used. I tried to find a synthesis in which literature can be studied from an environmental perspective and also environment can be studied from a literary perspective. While doing this I have tried to include a cultural and aesthetic value of Nature which are meant to inculcate what I have called “eco-empathy” which is a deep regard for environment not just for the sake of the survival of Humans but for the sake of environment for itself, a kind of “environment for environment”. It is a deep ecological attitude that proposes empathy for all living and nonliving elements of Nature. This is very much in tradition in India where Rivers and Mountains, Rain, Winds and Sky, Animals and Trees are worshipped as God.

A few of the scientific terms and concepts I used in my study are listed below:

**Ecoliterature:** Ecoliterature refers to a body of literary writing emerging as a response to the global ecological crisis. Ecological themes and nature imagery are commonly employed in these writings.

**Ecosystem:**

Ecosystem refers to a complex system formed by the interaction between the living organisms and the non-living physical components of the environment.

**Ecology:**

Ecology is the study of the relationship between the living organisms and the physical environment (i.e ecosystem).

**Deep Ecology:**

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Names coined the term deep ecology in 1973 to describe an ecological awareness which is based on the recognition of the worth of all living beings, regardless of their utility to human beings. It stresses the interdependence of organisms within an eco system and does not view human beings as above or outside nature. It is opposed to what is seen as an anthropocentric environmentalism which seeks to conserve nature only for exploitation by human beings.

**Bio-diversity:** Bio-diversity refers to the variety and differences among living organisms inhabiting in a particular ecosystem or the entire planet. This is closely related to the term endangered species. The increasing human activity for the domination of the planet has led a lot of plant and animals to be eradicated. Many others have been sent to the brink of extinction adding to the list of endangered species. A similar process in the human domain has forced many cultural and linguistic minority to the verge of extinction.

**Physical environment:** Physical environment refers to the combination of external conditions (air, soil, water) that influenced the living organisms.

Together with these scientific ideas listed above I used the idea of what I have called “Eco-empathy” which to me is an attitude towards Environment which suggests a deep regard for all aspects of Nature arising out of a deeper feeling of oneness with the earth.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:**

Fortunately recently there has been a lot of awareness in favour of a better and sustainable future of Earth—not only for human beings but for all living organisms and also non-livings—the rivers, lakes, mountains, forests, waterfalls in short everything that lives and things that add values to lives.

Sadly enough we human beings have always been deluded by the idea that we are at the center of everything and that all other forms of lives and non-living objects exist for us available as our resources and raw materials ready for exploitation. This has been especially aggravated after the

so called enlightenment and consequent scientific revolution in Europe which also lead to Industrial Revolution. Decimation of wildlife and their habitat has become a global challenge—over the last few decades human greed and love of luxury coupled with increasing pressure of GDP due to population explosion has been responsible for the destruction of wilderness at a rate growing more alarming every day. We have destroyed more than half of planet’s green cover over the last one century only---including the rain forests in the Amazon, the Mediterranean and deciduous cover in West Asia and East and Central Europe, tropical ever green cover in South east Asia’s fast developing economies of even Smaller countries like Laos and Vietnam, including the Mangroves of Sunderbans in Bangladesh and India. While Humans are thriving all over, wildlife is vanishing from the planet like never before.

This is because we humans cannot live without luxury cars and A.C’s chocolates and coffee flavors, olive oil, leather, fur products and ivory adornments. Who cares for live and let live?

### **CONCLUSION:**

Literature has been a witness of human being’s loves for the wild, connection between man and the outside nature, and also of Man’s reckless greed and exploitation of the mother earth. Perhaps nowhere we find a better attachment of man and the ocean than in Greek classical literature and the literature of the Germanic people who used the maritime route to trade and plunder across Europe or in our times in the poetry of Chaucer and Shakespeare and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics like Byron and Shelley.

When we look at the ancient literature of India, the correlation between humans and Nature becomes all the more evident. Entire episodes of “The Ramayana” and “The Mahabharata” take place in the forests. The world of Humans and that of the birds and animals get tangled in multiple cycles of reincarnation in Bana’s prose romance Kadambari. The female protagonist Kadambari herself reminds one of one of the finest flowers in nature---the word Kadambari in Sanskrit means the juice of Kadamba flowers. Sita in the Ramayana is born out of the womb of the earth and Shaktuntala in The Mahabharata (Also found in Kalidasa’s Avijnana Shakuntala) is thrown in the forest immediately after birth and was saved by vultures. According to Goethe and also Rabindranath Tagore She is the daughter of Nature in whom the essence of two worlds, the earth and the Heaven meet. Thus Nature becomes a part of our cultural heritage.

Eco-empathy, therefore, suggests the idea of “Deep Sustenance” that should not necessarily view Human beings at the center of everything but just a part of everything—thus emphasizing that Nature has a right to exist not for hebenefit of Humans but for itself. We should not protect forests and lakes merely because they provide with raw materials and clean water to drink but also because forests and lakes provide a habitat for numerous wild animals and aquatic creatures, provide relief for the soul in distress. To quote W. Wordsworth ‘Nature never betrays the Soul that loves Her’ or “One impulse from the vernal wood can teach more of evil and good/ Than all the Sages can”. Together with a scientific understanding of the idea of sustainability a deep empathy for the earth and the universe seems to be a good way forward. This is because a better and sustainable earth cannot be created without deep compassion of all forms of life and non-

livings elements, and an organic relation between matters and spirits. We need the understanding that the Earth does not belong to us, rather we belong to it.

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