

An Ecocritical Approach to Andrew Marvell's Selected Poems

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism, alternatively known as “environmental literary criticism” or “green studies”, emerged as a new theory in the 1990s as a result of environmental degradation and excessive exploitation of nature. It investigates human's relation with nature presented in literature. The unrestrained capitalism, the industrial and chemical pollution, depletion of the forests and natural resources, the extinction of the animal species and plants are at the root of environmental hazards and ecological imbalance. Ecocriticism seeks to analyze the study of nature in literature and try to put emphasis on the recovery of natural texts. Though ecocritical works were mainly flourished in the romantic era and romanticism was mainly a revolt against classicism, Andrew Marvell turns to nature. If Romantic poetry stresses the role of imagination against the eighteenth century emphasis on wit, Marvell extraordinarily has combined wit with imagination. Marvell, though chiefly known as a metaphysical poet, was an ardent lover of nature. He has chosen Nature as the subject matter of many of his poems. He finds ecstatic delight in the lap of nature. Nature casts a spell on him. Though Marvell was an old seventeenth century poet and ecocriticism is a new theory, applying ecocriticism to Andrew Marvell's selected poems will undoubtedly be an interesting topic. Thus, this paper aspires to throw more light onto the hitherto unexplored areas in linking Marvell's selected poems to ecocriticism.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecology, Environment, Nature, Eco poetics, Marvell

I. Introduction:

Nature is an inseparable part of our life. Man lives from nature. Humans can never survive without nature. But man proves ungrateful to nature by committing ecocide, making the earth unpleasant for life. We are now living in a world undeniably lost to pollution and contamination. Human greed is responsible for the destruction of natural resources and this has caused a great ecological damage. Nature not only beautifies the environment but also maintains the ecological balance, without which human life will be in grave danger. The western thought towards nature was negative. Western critics have utilitarian attitude towards nature – nature is for serving human needs. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century there arose two movements, colonialism and capitalism. Both looked upon nature as something to be exploited. John Locke believed that non-human life was valueless. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels believed in the exploitation of nature for the progress of humans. Thomas Malthus in his theory of population proposed that there existed an asymmetrical relationship between food production and human population. According to Malthus food production increased in arithmetic progression whereas human population increased in geometric progression and because of this, progress was quite hard to achieve. Malthus was the first to link economics with biology and nature. In contrast to Western thought there emerged many voices that demanded the revaluation of the relationship between man and environment after the eighteenth century. With the publication of Darwin's epochal work there came a great change in Western thought. By pointing out that humans were once animals Darwin developed the notion that both human and non human life forms have intrinsic values. Finally as a reaction to all these negative attitude towards nature and for creative efforts of so many literary critics emerged the new theory called Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism the very term is formed from combining criticism with eco, the shortened form of ecology. It is known by other designations such as ‘environmental

literary criticism', 'green studies', 'ecopoetics'. Cheryll Glotfelty in **The Ecocriticism Reader** defines ecocriticism as 'the study of relationship between literature and physical environment'. The term ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay **Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism**. Ecocriticism is a fresh way of analyzing and interpreting literary text from ecological perspective. Ecocriticism designates the critical writing which explores relation between literature and physical and biological environment, conducted for the purpose of increasing environmental awareness. This study cannot be understood without a keen observation of environmental issues. Ecocriticism was officially heralded by the publications of two seminal works both published in mid 1990s: **The Ecocriticism Reader**, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and **The Environmental Imagination** by Lawrence Buell. Green Studies began in the UK in the early 1990s whereas Ecocriticism began in the USA in the late 1980s. In 1992 Cheryll Glotfelty co-founded what we know as ASLE. ASLE is basically the association for the study of literature and environment. ASLE published its own journal ISLE (Interdisciplinary studies in Literature and Environment). In the USA ecocriticism has been influenced by three major nineteenth century writers 'whose work celebrate nature, the life force ,and wilderness as manifested in America'(Peter Barry).These three writers are Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) Margaret Fuller(1810-1850), Henry David Thoreau(1817-1862). Emerson's first book was called Nature(1836). It can be seen as a reflective essay on the impact that the natural world had on him. Margaret Fuller's book **Summer on the lake** expresses her encounter with American landscape when she was a student at Harvard. Henry David Thoreau's **Walden (1854)** has been the subject of most literary analysis. The classic of America describes the two months the author lived in the wood near Walden pond. Thoreau enjoyed nature with minute observation. In Britain the nineteenth century ecocriticism was superbly illustrated in the hands of the five great romantic poets. The UK version of ecocriticism or green studies has its bearings from British Romanticism of the 1790s. The major critic on the British side is Jonathan Bates, author of **Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental tradition**. An integral aspect of ecocriticism is deep ecology. Arne Naes, a Norwegian philosopher first developed the concept of deep ecology. His love of sea first made him realize the utility and integrity of nature .He pointed out that all living things have intrinsic values and humans have no right to exploit natural resources except to satisfy vital human needs. In recent times ecocriticism seems to have gained a lot of currency. There are so many popular books in the twentieth century highlighting environmental issues. Paul Ehrlich's **The Population Bomb** (1972) is one of the most popular books ever written. He tried to point out that global famine was imminent. Rachel Carson's classic **Silent Spring(1962)** highlighted environmental hazards due to pesticides like DDT. There are other books on environmental issues like Margaret Atwood's **Oryx and Crake(2003)** and Leo Marx's **The Machine in the Garden: the technology and the pastoral Ideal in America**. Ramchandra Guha, a prominent Indian thinker believes that there is a strong connection between poverty and environmental degradation. He also pointed out that in third world nations country like India the ideas of progress and development depend on the Western models of modernity. In the same way ecological ideas about conservation come from west and neglect the ancient socio-cultural practices of local area. People are evicted from their land under the name of conserving wildlife.(The debate about tiger conservation in Amitav Ghosh's **The Hungry Tides**). Thus, the importance of environmental concern was neglected in the seventeenth century. A change came over English society in the seventeenth century with Andrew Marvell who advocated for the preservation of nature. His strong love and deep attachment to nature is superbly illustrated in some of his poems. He cannot but respond to the charms of nature. Though his poems have been 'described as the finest flowers of serious and secular metaphysical verse, he loved nature and the freshness of the garden'.(Albert, p. 149)

2. Marvell's Ecocriticism

If Marvell(1621-1678) belongs to the metaphysical school of Donne, he can also have a permanent place with the masters who delineated the tradition of pastoralism. Rightly has H.C Breching pointed out, 'Marvell is the laureate of grass and greenery'. The pastoral form was used by writers such as Theocritus, Moses, Virgil, Dante, Petrarch, Boccassio, Tasso etc. Sixteenth century writers like Sidney, Spenser also wrote in the pastoral tradition. In poems like **Upon Appleton House and The Garden**, Marvell celebrates not only the beauty of nature but also superbly shows his love for pastoral trend. In **The Garden** Marvell is trying to point out the superiority of the contemplative life to the active life, of solitude to society, of the beauty of garden to the beauty of women, of the inner world created by mind to the outer world perceived by the senses. The Garden opens with a conceit:

How vainly men themselves amaze
To win the palm, the oak or Bayes
And their uncessant labours see
Crown'd from some single Herb or Tree
Whose short narrow verged shade
Does prudently their Toyles upbraid,
While all flow'rs and all trees do close
To weave the garlands of repose.

Here the poet criticizes a life of feverish activity and favours a contemplative life in a garden in the midst of flowers and trees. Here in the garden a man can refresh himself by taking rest. He can be in amity with nature. But man is not satisfied with this very big garden. Ironically he is in search of a small portion of tree or plant. Human beings toil hard to obtain the palm, the oak, or bayes, the traditional symbols of military achievement, civil achievement, and literary achievement. Marvell believes that it would be wiser for people to enjoy the whole beauty of nature rather than a few leaves by taking shelter in a garden.

If ecocritics pay particular attention to the representation of the natural world, Marvell in poems like **The Garden**, **The Picture of Little T.C IN a prospect of Flowers**, **Upon Appleton House**, etc ,tries to prioritize the natural world over the man made society. The theme is well expressed in the two-line epigram of the second stanza of **The Garden**:

Society is all but rude
To this delicious solitude.

Here Marvell reveals a striking contrast between man made society and God made green nature .Marvell says that he does not want to spend his time in company of men .The company of human beings is barbarous as compared to nature. Human life is dominated by the seven deadly sins which spoil the innocence and simplicity of man. By contrast nature offers a space for deeper meditation. Here the readers are reminded of William Wordsworth who says 'Nature never did betray the heart that loved her'. In the next stanza of the poem Marvell speaks of the courtly love and of all the poets who celebrated their fair ladies whose cheeks are rose and lily:

No white nor red was ever seen
 So am'rous as this lovely green
 Fond lovers, cruel as their flame
 Cut in these trees their Mistress name
 Little, Alas ,they know ,or heed,
 How far these beauties Hers exceed
 Fair Trees! Where s'eer your barks I wound
 No Name but your own be found

What the poet wants to suggest is that no woman with her white complexion and red lips can be so loving as the green colour of the leaves and trees in the garden. The lovers who engrave the names of their sweethearts on the barks of the trees are foolish. They fail to realize that the beauties of the garden far exceed the beauties of their ladies. The beauty of nature is undoubtedly superior to the beauty of ladies. If the poet himself ever carves any name upon the tree, it would be the name of the tree itself. This clearly portrays the biocentric nature of the poet. In the next stanza Marvell alludes to the twin myths of Daphne and Syrinx who turned themselves respectively into laurel in order to elude the grasp of Apollo, and into a reed so as to escape the pursuit of Pan. The basic idea is that when any God chased a beautiful lady, he did so because she was a potential tree. If ecocriticism investigates the relations between humans and the natural world in literature, Marvell's poems such as **the Garden, On a Drop of Dew, The picture of little T.C In a Prospect of Flowers, Bermudas**, are nature perfected and are blessed with bounteous succulence of nature. In the poem **On a Drop Dew**, a natural phenomenon suggests a spiritual significance. The poet first gives the example of dew drop, investing the tiny drop of water with life or soul. The human soul is compared to a dew drop. The point of comparison lies in their unhappiness. Human soul comes into the world from heaven and always remembers its actual abode which is heaven. The human soul is in love with heavenly things and always goes on thinking of its original home i.e heaven. In the same way the dew drop that comes from heaven does not feel happy in its new region. The poem is undoubtedly a nature poem elucidating not only natural elements like dew drop, rose petal but also the philosophical and metaphysical ideas of the poet. In **The Garden** the poet feels nature as a living entity. The garden itself has become the lover: apples drop on his head, grapes crush their wine on his mouth, melons make him stumble, flowers ensnare him, he falls on the grass. He is enjoying nature to the maximum extent possible:

What wond'rous life in this I lead;
 Ripe apples drop about my head;
 This luscious clusters of the vine
 Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
 The nectaren, and curious peach
 Into my hands themselves do reach;
 Stumbling on Melons as I pass
 Insnar'd with Flow'r I fall on grass

In **Bermudas** we have equally enchanting descriptions of fruits, oranges shine like Golden lamps in a green night, the pomegranates containing jewels more rich than found in Hormuz. He stumbles on melons. The apples are hanging. The island is overgrown with grass. God has brought the pilgrims to a place where eternal spring prevails always. Oranges and Pomegranates, melons and pineapples grow there in plenty. Red pips inside the pomegranates look like jewels. There is also the existence of Church in the shape of the rocks of this island. The pilgrims expressed their gratitude to God for having brought them to the island which is full of natural beauty.

Deep ecologists believe that nature is an integral part of our life. Nature is our inseparable entity. Nature sustains us. We should be grateful to nature and do no harm to nature. In **The Garden** when the lovers are trying to engrave the names of their lady loves, Marvell is opposing the idea. Rousseau also believed that natural was innocent and civilization was artificial and corrupt. Marvell supported the viewpoint like Rousseau and tried to preserve nature. He not only depicts the enticing beauty of the garden but also highlights its benign impact on the minds of man. The mind is like an ocean. It is capable of annihilating all that is made. The poet allows the mind to contemplate the ideas, and his soul begins a platonic flight. The image of a bird as an emblem of soul, has been popularized by Castiglione and used by Spenser:

Beginning than below, with the easie view
Of this base world, subject to fleshy eye
From thence to mount aloft by order dew.
To contemplation of th' immortal sky,
Of that soare falcon so I learn to fly
That flags a while her fluttering wings beneath

Till she herself for stronger flight can breath (**Hymne of Heavenly Beauty**)

One of the main goals of ecocriticism is to study how individual in society behaves in relation to nature and environmental issues. To simply put ecocriticism is a tool to the study of literature and environment. Dr. Vathana Fenn in **Roots of Ecocriticism : an exploration of the history of ecocriticism, a literary theory of the post-modern world** states that "Ecocriticism gives a new meaning to place, setting, and environment. Eco critics in their study want an ecological perception of nature to change the ways humans inhabit the Earth. Ecocriticism is a rapidly changing theoretical approach, which is different from the traditional approach to literature. Here the critic explores the local or global, the material, or physical, or the historical or natural history in the context of a work of art. An ecocritical approach to literature is often interdisciplinary, citing knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, and cultural and social studies." In **The picture of Little T.C in a prospect of flowers** through the portrayal of a little girl called Theophila Cornwall Marvell presents the little girl's strong love to nature. She loves to lie down on the green grass. She plays with roses. The girl will grow up to be so virtuous and pure that even Cupid, the god of love will find himself helpless. Here in this poem in addition to the description of the beauty of nature the poet also points out the simplicity and innocence of that little girl. A genius of metaphysical school of poetry Marvell endows **The Garden** with a sharp metaphysical twist by mentioning the Christian garden of Eden. There is a special solitude in the garden. Adam was accompanied there by Eve. What the poet is here trying to point out that due to the presence of Eve Adam missed the special solitude prevailing in the garden. Had he continued to live alone in the garden of Eden he would have enjoyed two paradises –one the paradise which was the garden of Eden and other the paradise of being alone. Green studies is the term used in UK for ecocriticism. The very colour green is the symbol of vitality, youth, vigour, freshness, innocence etc. Green is the favourite adjective of Marvell. Marvell has exploited the meanings of green' in the Mower's song:

My mind was once the true survey
 Of all these meadows Fresh and gay
 And in the greenness of the grass
 Did see its hopes as in a glass
 When Juliana came and she
 What I do to the Grass, does to my thoughts and me.

In **The Garden** Marvell uses the colour green to point out the superiority of nature to the love of women:

No white nor red was ever seen
 So am'rous as this lovely green

Ecocritics fight for the protection of animals too. To keep ecological balance different types of animals must survive. All the animals play important roles in ecosystem. Marvell's feelings for animal is pointed out in *The Nymph complaining for Death of her Fawn*. The girl laments over the death of her favourite pet animal Fawn. In his classic book **Animal Ecology**, Charles Elton wrote 'The study of numbers is a very new subject, and perfect methods of recording the numbers and changes in the numbers of animals have yet to be evolved'. Ecocriticism cannot be performed without close observation of nature. In poem like **Upon Appleton house** Marvell observes nature very closely. The poem describes very profusely the pictures of the flower garden, meadows, the river in flood and after the flood. He identifies himself with the bird:

Thus I, easy philosopher
 Among the birds and trees

He is very happy in the midst of the trees and plants. He wants to be covered with the leaves of the trees and this is undoubtedly a great joyous moment for him:

Under this antic cope I move,
 Like some great prelate of the grove.

Marvell was deeply influenced by Wordsworth and Keats. In his love of nature he anticipates Wordsworth and in his use of sensuous imagery he anticipates Keats. In Marvell's love of nature the influence of The Roman poet Horace may also be found.

3. Conclusion

Thus Marvell's poems, 'marked by the subtlety of wit, passionate argument, and the learned imagery of the metaphysical', can undoubtedly be interpreted from ecocritical angle. (Albert, p. 149). These poems not only suggest better living in the lap of nature and returning to the pastoral world of simplicity, but also expose various ecological aspects in front of us. In 'Reading The Earth' Michael P. Branch explain the term Ecocriticism as 'not just a means of analyzing nature in literature, it implies a move toward a more biocentric world view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of human conception of global community to include non human life forms and the physical environment.' In reading Marvell's poems we realize the potential of nature in shaping human minds towards the deep connection of natural world which must be protected.

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