

Ecocriticism: Return to Hinduism

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Abstract: Ecocriticism as a conscious-raising movement argues for environment-safety. It is a multidisciplinary approach. Numberless development programmes are being executed not alongside ecology instead at the cost of ecology. Ecocriticism as a literary ecological philosophy provides a reliable framework or mechanism to analyze cultural and literary texts which directly/ indirectly engage ecological concerns and contexts. Moreover it looks at the depictions of natural sights and landscapes along with people's attitudes and attentions towards nature; may be favorable or unfavorable. In fact this sort of attempt negotiates between literature and ecology. The present author by this paper appeals to the world scholarship to go by Hinduism. Hinduism believes in oneness of God and all other worldly manifestations. Only it can provide safe solution to whole world maladies pertaining to art, life, culture, and moreover today's burning problem- global eco-crises.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Hinduism.

Today entire world is facing new and newer challenges posed by eco-imbalance ranging from food, fashion, technology to race, class, gender, sexuality, mentality, nationality, law, religion, economics etc. It is most pressing need to keep our environment safe so that we can live and let other beings live and survive too. Eco-imbalance is not specific (one nation, one place, or one city) problem. It is a global phenomenon. Hence whole world unanimously whether partially or fully affected, should come forward and launch a global campaign with honesty for the service of environment and the restoration of healthy environment. In wake of global ecological crises and resultant life-threatening effects prompted literary thinkers to formulate an eco-oriented approach called 'ecocriticism'. It came off as a new feather to the field of literary criticism. Today the world peace is threatened especially by our blind exploitation of nature. If racism was 20th century disease, ecological problem is 21st century trouble. We have several eco-philosophies and organizations for the sake of environment. Some of them are Deep Ecology, The Environment Justice Movement, Earth First!, Ecocriticism etc. These are solely intended "to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community. This is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature. The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities- the human, the natural- can coexist, cooperate,

and flourish in the biosphere (Rueckert 107)". Ecocriticism as a literary and cultural theory is burgeoning since 1990's in Europe and America chiefly. However seeds were laid around four decades ago in Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) and Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975). Cheryll Glotfelty simply defines 'ecocriticism' as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment...takes an earth centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty xviii). However some critics attribute the birth of the term 'ecocriticism' to US critic William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). By 'ecocriticism' he means application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Bate, the first British ecocritic sees 'ecocriticism' double stranded approach. The first explores human attitudes towards nature; and the second, the relationship between man and nature depicted in various literary texts. As a literary field of study, it seeks to relate humans to non-human environment. Moreover it evaluates prevalent ideologies towards nature spread over literary and cultural texts. Ecocritics are so enthusiastic that they blur the line between human and non-human world. Like Wordsworth they see nature as living personality. Ecocritics flamboyantly disapprove of the notion that non-human world is subordinate to human. Ecocritics view all literature in terms of place, setting or environment. Ecocriticism as a critical perspective looks at the relationship between human and extra-human world. Ecocritics not only worry about wild life and wilderness but also human health, food and shelter. Almost all human activities today are engaged in the blind exploitation of nature. Consequently he/she is enjoying the deadly dance of destruction without any complaint. Industrial pollution is the main threat along with destructive ways of consuming natural resources, such as excessive fishing and the 'clear cut logging of forests'. (Kerridge 533). Ecocritics argue for sympathy towards both pet and non-pet animals. This brief analysis of 'ecocriticism' flourished lately in the West and looks quite novel to Western and American thinkers; but the way it argues is not new to Indian philosophers and thinkers. To the Western and American thinkers, man occupies highest place in the web of life. For them, nature and natural resources are to be made subservient to human needs. Such kind of defective view of nature is ratified by Greek humanism, Judeo-Christian, and Christian culture and tradition, especially the Bible. These cults hold men superior to other living beings, and non-living things for their rational faculty. Here let me say that Hindus have greater exposure to eco-philosophies than that of Christian, and Judeo-Christian people. Hence turn to Hinduism.

Indian culture and tradition has been ever eco-oriented since Vedic period. Eco-oriented ancient practices still can be seen at least in rural belts of India. Indian culture is not opposed to growth and development. Development should take place but without disturbing the eco-system. Indian philosophers distinguish themselves by their spiritual philosophy from material philosophy of the West. Spirituality of the East never taught schemes of exploitation and appropriation. In the ancient Hindu

traditions, man was looked upon as part of nature, linked inextricably with elements around him. The Hindu tradition is the oldest living religious tradition in the world. It believes in the all-inclusive world-view. It sees divine presence in all living and non-living objects. Hinduism is a theory and practice in compliance with principles of Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Smritis, and many more sacred Hindu texts. Since Hindus feel the Supreme Being's presence in everything around them, they feel obliged to honour all living creatures and organic things on the earth. They know how to live in harmony with His creation including earth, fire, rivers, forests, pet and non-pet animals and birds, trees, plants, sun, air etc. No other religion lays as much emphasis on the superiority of nature as does Hinduism. In fact Hinduism is an argument for reverence towards all things in the cosmos.

Hinduism looks at the world of nature which is utterly different to that of Western religions. It is based on the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Gita, Vedant etc. According to Hindu thought, there is no gap between the Divine and the world of nature. Physical world is just the manifestation of Him. All things and beings are just manifestations. Hindu sacred texts stress on the fact that human beings cannot separate themselves from nature. Hindus adore divine forces hidden in nature. Hinduism believes in the attainment of liberation to soul. It accepts the world of nature or real world as described by science but rejects altogether materialism. It approves reason but rejects rationalism as the final view of life. Simultaneously it rejects theology in the form of blind faith. Hinduism accommodates science philosophy, and theology. Hinduism does not agree to Western notion that God needs human aids in His progress project. Every social work done extra-self-interest is worth to the adoration of God. Hinduism is every inch synthetic, coherent, and universal. It is coherent because it succeeded each and every scientific enquiry. It is synthetic because it gives place to all schools and systems of thought by virtue of moderation and toleration discrediting sectarianism. It is universal because it holds that every man is son of God and he can feel His presence by himself. Without doubt, every creature is another manifestation of God. Millions of people around the world, especially in the West, are practicing some aspects of the Hindu system, such as Yoga, Meditation, Vegetarianism and Ahimsa or non-violence. Many of these aspects are currently being researched and used in the fields of Health & Medicine, Management, Self-development, Environmental issues, Human and animal rights and Socio-Political issues (Ahimsa).

Man is an intermediate player in the drama of material and abstract reality. He is made of as per Hindu belief, five elements- space, air, fire, water, and earth – form the fabric of interconnected web of life. Hinduism teaches that the five great elements (Panchbhutani) that constitute the environment are all derived from prakriti, the primal energy. Hinduism relates nose to earth, tongue to water, eyes to fire, skin to air, and ears to space. As such Hinduism establishes the inseparable bond between our senses and the elements with the natural world. For Hinduism, living beings are the by-products of the environment. They are

not outside us, not alien or hostile to us. Harmony among five constitutive elements keeps man alive and working. Any kind of tussle, if there happens, causes ailments and even sometimes death strokes. The point to drive home is that we cannot live without ensuring viable environment. We should live with and by environment like a sympathetic and sensitive friend. All creatures (plants, animals, birds included) of the world above and below the earth are members of a bigger family called environment. During Vedic days, the term pollution perhaps, was not in existence. Instead of it the term poison was used frequently. Yajur Veda writes: "Do not disturb the sky and do not poison (pollute) the atmosphere." (Yajur Veda 5:43). "The oceans are treasure of wealth protect them" (Yajur Veda 38:22). "Do not poison (pollute) water and do not harm or cut the trees" (Yajur Veda 6:33). Western technological and economic upmanship and superiority led to the destruction of indigenous societies along with large-scale looting of natural environment. Thousands of years ago, Hindu sages realized that ecological harmony was necessary for the survival of mankind.

The Prithvi Sukta of Atharva Veda, invokes and addresses the earth as mother. The Vedic seer declares : 'Mata Bhumi Putroham Prithivyah: Earth is my mother, I am her son.' Mother Earth is celebrated for all her natural graces and particularly for her gifts of herbs and vegetation. Her blessings are sought for prosperity in all endeavours and fulfilment of all righteous aspirations. "We invoke all supporting Earth on which trees, lords of forests, stand ever firm." (Atharva Veda 12:1:27). The Atharva Veda identifies three things essential for all lives on earth to exist. These are air, water, and plants (Atharva Veda 18:17). "Plants and herbs destroy poisons (pollutants)" (Atharva Veda 8:7:10). "Purity of atmosphere checks poisoning (pollution)" (Atharva Veda 8:2:25). In the Rig Veda entire world is taken as family - *vasudev kutumbakam*. Here all religious cults are free to flourish. In fact, earth is the mother of all mothers and sky the biggest protector, the father of all fathers. If earth is nourisher, sky will be protector. An unknown author in the morning-prayer says: 'O earth forgive me for the touch of my feet'. In Rig Veda, the seer on one instance calls upon the deity of water: 'The waters in sky, rivers, wells whose source lie in the ocean may all these sacred waters protect me' (Rig Veda 7:49:2). This sacred text explicitly declares: "Do not cut trees because they remove pollution." (Rig Veda 6:48:17).

India has been ever incredible India. Hindu scriptures are replete with ecological instances. Here each and every work begins and ends with at least remembering the concerned deity. The Varaha Purana writes, "One who plants one peepal, one *neem*, ten flowering plants or creepers, two pomegranates, two oranges, and five mangoes does not go to hell." "Five sorts of kindness are the daily sacrifice of the trees. To families they give fuel; to passersby they give shade and a resting place; to birds they give shelter; with their leaves, roots, and bark they give medicines." (Varaha Purana 162.41-42). Here in India Tulsi (Basil like plant) as goddess mother is worshipped in Kartik (November) month. The whole month girls and women worship and in the end they arrange Tulsi marriage and

celebrate with traditional love and faith. The Tulsi plant is an important mythological plant with a Puranic background. "The inhabitants of a house which has sacred basil are fortunate" (Padma Purana 59.7). "The yama (messenger of death) does not enter a house where sacred basil is worshipped every day" (Skanda Purana 21.66). In terms of science, Tulsi and Peepal exhale of life-giving gas oxygen in utmost degree. According to myths and legends goddess Mahalaksmi, wife of Visnu, had once taken the form of Tulsi. Here every temples and sacred places have Tulsi. The Coconut tree, in Hindu mythology, is called "Kalpa vriksha (wish-fulfilling tree). Lotus, a symbol of beauty, purity and divinity is also seen as the sitting platform of many Hindu deities. The Skanda Purana interprets the significance of Bael tree and it is said that it originated out of Goddess Parvati's perspiration, which fell to the ground while she performed penance. Hindu mythology also says that various incarnations of Parvati reside in each part of the Bael tree. In the Skanda Purana, on one occasion, Parvati wife to Shiv adopts a sapling of Ashoka as her baby and gets all sanskaras (rites) performed by learned sages. The Padma Purana warns: "A person who is engaged in killing creatures, polluting wells, and ponds and tanks, and destroying gardens, certainly goes to hell." (Padma Purana, Bhoomikhanda 96.7-8). The Matsya Purana tells that to plant one tree and extend personal carings to it is equal to ten sons. According to this Purana, one who plants even one tree on the earth is warmly welcomed in the Heaven and obtains liberation to soul (Moksha). This is one of the greatest eco-philosophies (Matsya Purana 59.159).

Reincarnation of soul is central in Hinduism. Hindus believe that in the cycle of life and birth one may come back as an animal or a bird and so on and so forth. This is the solid basis for adopting the path of non-violence against creatures. The Visnu Purana states that one who does not harm and kill non-speaking creatures or animals, pleases God (Visnu Purana 3:8:15). In the Ramayana, Balkand, Valmiki was grief-stricken at the sight of Kraunch bird killed by some hunter. He curses him that he would lose his peace of mind for good. "One should not throw urine, stool or mucus into the water, nor anything mixed with these unholy substances, nor blood or poison, nor any other [impurity]." (Manu Smriti 4.56). Yajnavalkya Smriti condemns those to Ghora Naraka (hell-fire) who kill domesticated and protected animals and creatures. *Abhijnanasakuntalam* by great dramatist Kalidas of Sanskrit literature is one of the best world eco-texts. Here Kalidas's attitude towards flora and fauna is very much important for all eco-friends. He in the very opening statement of the play identifies eight divine visible manifestations of God. These are serially water, fire, priest (one who performs rituals), sun, moon, sky, earth, and air. These manifestations are to be venerated and protected. In the *Meghaduta*, Yakshini adopts the 'mandara' tree as her son. In the *Raghuvansa*, king Dilip is advised by Guru Vashistha to worship the cow Nandini to have his own progeny. No doubt India has been glorious since ever; but current practices of Hindus compel me to think over to the question where Hinduism is. All Hindus believe in vegetarianism. But it is

mere statement having no sense and weight. The spirit of Hinduism is marked by its sensitivity, sympathy, tolerance, and non-violence. Ironically all these great virtues flew off human ground of Hindus. Maximum so-called Hindus are non-veg. These so-called Hindus detest and abhor other Hindus practicing vegetarianism. In my view non-vegetarianism is an English metaphor. It is normally argued by English knowing people in India that English qua language helps binding whole country with world. Similarly non-vegetarianism among Hindus is pushing back the lessons of Hinduism. As a result non-veg in-human people across the world are coming closer rubbing their dust on Hindus' sacred mind. This is another form of colonization. Today Hindus feel better to lose and forget Hindu principles of life, nature, God, and culture. This is one of the biggest casualties to the health of Hinduism and Hindus. Whatever kind of eco-crises we are facing is the direct and belated result of defective attitudes towards nature, and divinity prevalent primarily in the West which is now becoming common phenomenon in the world. People practicing Hinduism are looked down; even they feel pangs and pricks of alienation.

Conclusion: Feeling one with nature is the fundamental environmental message of Hindu culture. Unlike many other religions, Hindus perceive life not only in human beings, but also in plants, birds, and animals, and many more speechless things. This vision of oneness of life has helped Hindus develop a worshipping attitude towards everything in nature. In the Western thoughts, nature is no more than a commodity to be dominated and conquered. Man must change such faulty attitudes of getting upper hand over his cooperating fellow. A fundamental reorientation of human consciousness is required to recognize that earth has the same relationship with man as a mother with her child. Life is an organic entity and the sea, soil, mountains, plants, and animals are inseparable parts of the universe. Man must learn to live in harmony with nature and recognize plants and animals as the necessary players in the cosmic drama of human life. Environmental issues at global level must incline towards Hindu philosophy of environment and life. An awareness of the ecological balance must be created at all levels of human thought and activity. Ecology is inherent in Hinduism.

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