

AN EXPLORATION OF THE HERMENEUTICAL PHASES OF ECOCRITICISM

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ABSTRACT: *The trajectory of ecocritical hermeneutics is calibrated into phases. The phases, labeled as “waves” is not a strict consecutive sequence of one wave after another. It is a stretch of overlapping phases in the disciplinary development of the field. The perceptions of the waves are premised on the changing dynamics of nature in relation to human activities. Works that constituted the zero wave showed ecocritical hermeneutics suspected to be literary before the word “Eco criticism” was coined in 1978. The first wave rooted in deep ecology enjoins nature preservation and protection. It advocated the static stability of nature and its dialectical relationship with man. It privileged the Universalist perception of nature and the focus on nature writing/non-fiction texts in the United States of America, which accounted for the narrowness of the phase. The perception of the environment beyond the “natural” consequent upon technological development and urbanization, thus, broadening the re-theorising of nature to incorporate vestiges of nature in cities and texts not necessarily interested in the natural environment set forth the phase of second wave. The wave creates awareness of ecological despoilation and the disproportionate effect of environment pollution on certain races (environmental injustice); and the gendered view that it is nature as women and nature of women to be exploited and subdued (ecofeminism). In the third wave, ethnic and national literatures are considered in view of their particularities and broadening beyond their geopolitical boundaries to attain global spectrum as they explore the environmental underpinning of every facets of man’s endeavour. This paper posits that since the essence of the changing phases is to avert the apocalyptic direction of the world, scholars are to engage their literary sensitivity to locate their efforts appropriately in any of the waves of the field to engender sustained mutual constitutiveness of man and nature.*

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Environmental Justice, Nature, Waves

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a reflection of the prevailing circumstance in the society where it is written and concerns itself with issues of its connected contemporary disciplines. Nature-oriented literature aligns its thought process in relation to the natural world. Apart from describing issues, it offers thoughts that provoke environmentalism, thereby inspiring action-based articulations. According to Kovacik, “this type of writing dealing with a man’s relation to his environment has establish for itself a stable category of literary works as well as its study called ecocriticism”(4). Meanwhile, the theorising and re-theorising of the concept of nature in line with rural simple life and urban

sophistication respectively in the disciplinary growth of the field account for the occurrence of the different interlocking phases or waves referred to as “palimpsest”.

Waves of Ecocriticism

Writers who gave ecocritical perspective to their works existed long before the term ‘ecocriticism’ was coined in the second half of twentieth century. Towards the end of seventeenth century, according to Branch it was a British naturalist and explorer who described natural life in American Southeast in his *A New Voyage in Caroline* that gave a detailed exposition of the landscape (qtd. in Kovacik 49). Johnson mentioned two precursor works to ecocriticism: Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* and Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City*. Marx’s text sees “the machine as the advancement of technology in what was considered by many to be the virgin land of America”(9). In Britain, Williams’ work, just like Marx’s, prepared the fertile ground for ecocriticism. His work is an exemplification of the urban life in competition with the pleasant aspects of the English countryside. In England, what counted as the originator of non-fiction writing was Gilbert White’s *A Natural History of Selbourne* (1786). Rachel Carson’s *The Silent Spring* shot her to prominence with focus on indicting the destruction of life by pesticides, thus inaugurating the literature of ecological degradation. She artistically gave an insight into the supposed role of literary writers to save the earth and human species from ecological problems. Meanwhile, Rigby identifies Joseph Meeker’s *The Comedy of Survival* (1972) as the first work that used “ecocritical hermeneutics of suspicion to literature” (4). Branch however goes further to note that a pre-Walden environmental book quite significant to the eighteenth century nature writing comparable to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* of nineteenth century is William Bertain’s *Travels*. Emerson’s essay, “Nature” including other nature writing which founded the American Transcendentalism, prepared the ground for Thoreau’s *Walden*. Kovacik claims that these pioneer works on nature before the division of ecocritical disciplinary development into waves (First and Second) by Buell could be termed the “zero wave” (49). Therefore, ascribing the fatherhood of nature writing to Thoreau is just to mark a significant benchmark in ecocritical history. Kovacik puts it more lucidly:

If we look at the contents of the nature-oriented books of the zero wave of ecocriticism, it may be safely noted that the highest value they carried was the one to natural history. The books were mostly observations of natural phenomena, of various species of animals and plants, later in a combination with narrative. The value of Thoreau as a Naturalist is certainly high but to stay only on his level of evaluation would be underappreciating his qualities. Thoreau goes on a level spiritual, social and practical (52).

Thoreau’s contact with early nature writing, his solitary observation of nature and society and engagement in social matters set into motion a phase of nature writing whose works became the object of focus of the first wave ecocriticism. This wave seeks to connect reader’s awareness to environmental ethics. It was mainly the literary enclave of the white male authors with severely narrow ecocritical ability to discuss literary works outside the seemingly universal nature that offer comfort without little consideration of other environmental experiences. The change in phases is a reflection of the shifts in the perception of the meaning of nature. The seed of contradiction in

the first wave ecocriticism is ironically contained in its goal of reconnecting man with nature, as it ignores urban spaces and heavily populated areas, maintaining the culture nature dualism.

The fluidity of the field makes its scope to constantly broaden and refocus as observed by Taylor: “ecocriticism is an inherently polemic form of scholarship (most often ecological) because in examining cultural constructions of environment, ecocriticism suggests a reevaluation of the reader’s own cultural construction of environment” (qtd. in Kovacik 27). It is the first stage of broadening that is encapsulated in the perception of second wave ecocriticism, allowing the fluidity to focus away from environments of natural characters and man’s correlation with it to “locating vestiges of nature within cities and /or exposing crimes of eco-injustice against society’s marginal group” (Buell, *The Future* 24). Environmental literature responds to and alerts about environmental issues. It does this using mainly texts imbued with human experiences in places by which it recalls the significance of their relation. The existence of literature that focuses on environmental issues provides a chance for humanity to shift from homo-centrism to ecocentrism (Buell, *Environmental Imagination*). Characteristic of second wave is the recognition of the artificially constructed environment as substantial to the field. It also puts the human species back to the picture, against the preceding wave’s priority attention to the non-human nature. As Kovacik further observes:

The second –wave ecocritic is no more a ‘mere’ man of letters, educated only in writing but studies his ever changing environment with all its elements, whether it be elements human or non-human, in an environment urban or natural. Such critic ceases to represent a traditional conception of that term, being required to become engaged in various directions, such as issues of minority, nature preservation, sustainable living, environmental justice, etc. (58).

Second wave ecocritics examine literary construction of nature beyond the discussions of setting to discussing how gender, race, class and sexuality mediate the perception of environment. That is, the perception and construction of the environment would not be monolithic; it has to bring in the aspects of ecofeminism and environmental justice and other related variables. Ralph Waldo Emerson, (qtd. in Campbell) opines: “the difference between landscape and landscape is small but there is great difference in the beholders” (1), is a better description of the attempts by the second wave ecocritics to evaluate how issues of gender, race, class and sexuality affect the construction and interactions with nature. First wave ecocriticism had white, male perception of nature disregarding how such subject position affect environmental relationships. Second wave ecocriticism does not condemn the perceptions of either Thoreau or Emerson. It only asks for the broadening of the field’s scope to study multiethnic literature and a more understanding of non-human nature and the way people construct it. Critiques of texts using second wave lens would demonstrate how multiethnic literature offers significant understanding of environmental relationships that have co-opted nature as oppressive against marginalized groups: how we oppress nature and how nature is been used to oppress us. Second wave of ecocriticism from Campbell’s opinion “covers multiple landscapes, cityscapes and mindscapes, demonstrating how constructions of nature have profound cultural, political, social and environmental impacts” (6).

A significant development with the second wave ecocriticism is ecofeminism. Acholonu reminds us: “since the past thirty years, the world has been experiencing unprecedented interest in matters

concerning women on one hand, and ecological issues on the other” (199). The concern of ecofeminism, put more lucidly in this regard by Halkes, is double-faceted as “the men not only try to dominate the nature outside but it is also the nature of women and nature as woman which must be tamed”(12). Ecofeminist critics draw a connection between the domination of women and nature, and thus argue that women have been considered closer if not equal to nature than men especially in a patriarchal society. The resultant effect of this association is the exploitation and subjugation of both. Ecofeminism examines how women are adversely affected by their unfavourable environmental conditions and what women do to combat the problems, including sexism, racism and other obstacles they face. It also examines how these issues are different across cultures, languages and borders. It tends to address the relation between women and nature and the implication of identifying women with nature, taking cognizance of the differences that exist from one community of women to another. This would make less pertinent the ‘universal’ perception of nature by first wave ecocriticism.

Also important to second wave disciplinary growth is the aspect of environmental justice which enlarges our spectrum and understanding of what constitutes an environment by defining it as the place where people “ live, work, play, worship , and go to school , as well as the physical and natural world”(Bullard 2) . Environmental justice, sometime referred to as ‘environmental equity’, means fairness. In the United States of America, a working definition by Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), according to Enger and Smith (2006) provides for “equal protection from environmental hazards of all individuals, groups or communities regardless of race, ethnicity, or economic status” (28). This reminds us that environmentalism which is in the defense of nature is inseparably intertwined with the pursuit of social justice. This is a belief which corroborates Bate’s postulation: “ecological exploitation is always coordinate with social exploitation.”(48).

It demonstrates how environmental destruction and social issues are inextricably linked, hence, sees literature as an effective tool for voicing concerns which are not restricted by either time, place or reality. Labeled as ‘Vanguard’ (Buell , *The Future* 113), it adds more urban-centred literature to the purview of second wave, thus helping to expand and complicate the notions of nature and environment. Literary critics are therefore privileged to examine environmentalism and social justice. That is, environmental justice criticism would not be contented with the traditional question of how nature is affected by environmental destruction. There would be further problematic: who does the polluting of the environment; how has environmental degradation been connected to environmental consciousness and concern; and what is the cogent excuse tenable for the less privileged races (people of colour especially) to be more exposed to environmental hazards compared to other races in the global environment?

Actions negating human destruction of the environment because of man s immoderate economic schemes and constant economic growth have direct links to the fight for personal, political, economic and social agencies. This accounts for why man could be taken as a part of landscape and also the effects on different communities and cultures. The issues of “personal liberation and empowerment” which some critics of second wave have against the wave tend to strengthen the wave. Ironically, it opens the door to literature with urban-centred plots and to question certain literary constructions of environmental racism. First wave ecocriticism connected man to the environment with only one aspect of nature (unbuilt environment). A broader perception of

ecocriticism by the second wave ecocritics therefore, includes ecofeminism and environmental justice.” It gives the field more material and steers the field away from the ‘universal’ nature comprised of (sic) mainly white men, allowing a variety of readers to recognize their realities within a broader genre of environmental literature” (Campbell 10).

This incorporation of environmental justice and ecofeminist literary criticisms accounts significantly for the diverse nature of the wave. Third wave of ecocriticism accounts for the study of the conjunction between literature and environment that goes beyond geopolitical borders to assume a truly global status. In the words of Adamson and Slovic, it “recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries; this third wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint” (6-7). With the emergence of third wave, focus is broadened to incorporate the artistic representation of environmental conditions and experiences of various cultural groups around the world; environmental justice criticism, urban and suburban experiences, beyond the conceptualization of wilderness obtainable especially of the first wave.

The complex nature and multifaceted engagement of ecocriticism, for instance, with cultural and social matters, its recent trans-local and trans-national conceptualization of place and human experience account for the expansion of field. The intent is entrusted in Murphy:

In order to widen the understanding of readers and critics, it is necessary to reconsider the privileging of certain national literatures and certain ethnicities within those national literatures. Such consideration would enable a greater inclusiveness of literatures from around the world within the conception of nature-oriented literature. It will also enable critics and readers such as myself, who focus primarily on American literature, to place that literature in an internationally relative and comparative framework (qtd. in Slovic 6).

The onus of Murphy’s exhortation here is a call for ecocritics to go beyond the scope of the first and second waves to situate their own national/ethnic literatures within international and comparative perception. Slovic goes further to enumerate the main characteristics of the third wave which make it distinct, yet, still connected to the preceding waves:

- i. Global concepts of place are being explored in fruitful tension with neo-bio regionalist attachments to specific locales, producing such neologisms as “eco-cosmopolitanism”, “rooted cosmopolitanism”, “the global soul” and “translocality”.
- ii. Placing ethnically inflected experience in broader, comparative contexts (including postcolonial contexts).
- iii. Earlier varieties of ecofeminist scholarship have evolved into the new wave of “material ecofeminism, which has become part of the general trend towards new gendered approaches in ecocriticism, ranging from eco-masculinism and queer theory.
- iv. Intensified focus on the concept of “animality” (evolutionary ecocriticism, ecocritical discussion of animal subjective and agency in works, linkages between ecocritical practice and lifestyle choices such as vegetarianism or omnivorianism, and expansion of the scope of environmental justice to encompass non-human species and their rights) (20).

In the attainment of these, scholars are to harness new and old ways to connect their works to social transformation. It is also been used to illustrate sustainable lifestyle and as agent of environmental criticism.

CONCLUSION

Ecocriticism studies the intersection between nature and human culture in literature. Its development from the study of “nature” writing to the present multifaceted approach to prioritizing nature as a category of critical analysis and political thought is based on the fluid perception of the meaning of nature in relation to human culture. The first wave, premised on the principle of deep ecology seeks to establish man-nature binary relationship. The dichotomous relationship between man and nature prevalent in the firsts wave, based on urbanization and technological progress, gave way to a re-theorizing of nature in line with urban complexities in the second wave. Issues of ecofeminism, environmental justice, class distinction, etc were viewed as social matters conditioned and interconnected to the natural world. The third wave recognizes ethnic and national peculiarities of the environmental underpinning of human culture and their transcendence beyond their boundaries to assume a global status. These various stages in the field allow for a critic to locate his study in a particular one in the course of interpreting nature in relation to human culture/ mutual constitutiveness and interdependence to save the duo from extinction.

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