

# The Resonance of Ecocriticism in William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"

Sourav Bera<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

Different schools of criticism like feminist criticism lesbian/grey criticism, Marxist criticism etc. are already available in English literature. What is the need of a new criticism like ecocriticism in literature? Well, it explores the relation between Nature and literature. The relation between Nature and literature is a very common phenomenon in English literature. The description of the Garden of Eden, Sidney's *Arcadia*, works of the Romantic period etc. are superb examples of nature writing. Therefore, why did this criticism emerge in the late 20th century? After the two world wars, nuclear explosions, industrial revolution, deforestation and civilization the condition of our environment was becoming worse. The scientists and the environmentalists gave a serious alarm to the earthly people that the lack of consciousness about the condition of the environment might lead to a serious disaster. Then a new literary movement called ecocriticism emerged. The poets of the Romantic Period also returned to Nature in their writings. Among them Wordsworth is called the worshipper of Nature. In this paper I am trying to find out whether there is any element of ecocriticism in William Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'. If this work is found as an ecocritical writing then what is the difference between Tintern Abbey and Cheryl Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*.

## Keywords:

Ecocriticism, Nature, Environment, Literature.

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<sup>1</sup> Ex-Student, Department of English. Bankura University. Author cleared NET. E-mail: [sourav20041993@gmail.com](mailto:sourav20041993@gmail.com)

The term 'ecocriticism' is a combined form of eco and criticism. Here the word 'eco' comes from ecology, i.e., "the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats" (Abrams, 2015, p. 98). Therefore, the term ecocriticism "designates the critical writings that explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities"(p. 98). Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. xviii).

The relationship between literature and the physical world is a very old fashion. The account of the Eden garden is a classic example of it. However, Nature has always been an inseparable part of literature and in the romantic period it reaches its climax. In the late 20th century the scientists and the environmentalists warned the worldly people about the deteriorating condition of our earth. To gratify the needs and greeds of the worldly people Nature has been constantly exploited and polluted and now it is in crisis. Therefore, a new literary movement began. The conscious writers started writing to make the worldly people aware of the serious condition of the earth and make an appeal to them to save the earth at any cost. Though ecocriticism first emerged in America in the late 1980s, poets and writers started writing on Nature from the earlier ages. It is also worth pointing out that the works on ecocriticism of the late 20th century and later period have more scientific approach and they have been able to depict barely the contemporary issues regarding Nature and the environment.

Nature has been employed differently in literature by different poets and writers. Sometimes it plays a pivotal role and works as an important character as we can find in the works of William Wordsworth. Nature is represented tactfully to indicate some unnatural and ominous significance by S.T Coleridge. Besides, Nature is sometimes merciless in the novels of Thomas Hardy. In many works Nature expresses the mental state of the characters or gives hints to the readers about the situation. It also helps to build the setting of any work or sometimes works as a mere background.

Ecocriticism emerged "in the USA in the late 1980s, and in the UK in the early 1990s" (Barry, 2014, p. 239). But "by contrast, the UK version of ecocriticism, or green studies, takes its bearings from the British romanticism of the 1790s rather than the American transcendentalism of the 1840s" (p. 239). However, ecocriticism in the USA or green studies in the UK has certain characteristics. Firstly, they reject the theory that "everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed" (p. 243). Rather, ecocritics started finding Nature and the relationship between man and the physical world in any kind of writing. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) also points out the fact that we are too much engaged with mere literary works and we are not conscious about the environmental crisis: "Our temperaments and talents have deposited us in literature departments, but, as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we're not part of the solution we're part of the problem" (p. xix). Her clear implication is that Nature should be the centre of our attention.

Pastoral setting and natural background are very important aspects of ecocriticism or green studies. This is why the ecocritics give much attention to the literary works of the Romantic Period. As a poet of the Romantic Period William Wordsworth is also an interesting writer to the ecocritics.

The Western anthropocentric attitude Nature, i.e., human beings are superior to all and they have the right to use natural resources and exploit Nature, is dismissed:

It is claimed that reigning religions and philosophies of Western civilization are deeply anthropocentric; that is, they are oriented to the interests of human beings, who are viewed as opposed to and superior to nature, and as free to exploit natural resources and animal species for their own purposes (Abrams, 2015, p. 99).

A growing interest in the primitive cultures is found in the writings based on ecocriticism. Many poets and writers have consciously represented these cultures in their works. Worship of Nature and natural forces is an inseparable part of primitive cultures:

There is a growing interest in the animistic religions of so-called primitive cultures, as well as in Hindu, Buddhist and other religions and civilizations that lack the Western opposition between Humanity and nature and do not assign to human beings dominion over the non-human world (p. 101).

Wordsworth is one of the romantics who always wanted to retreat to his past life:

Finding modernity to be a condition that produces heightened, because estranged, self-consciousness, Wordsworthian Romanticism looks with the joy of rediscovery on what sees as unestranged conditions: early childhood, traditional rural labour, wise passiveness and the self absorbed in nature (Waugh, 2006, p. 540).

The pastoral world attracted him very much. This retreat to Nature is as if an echo of retreating to the primitive world and culture. Tintern Abbey stands as a permanent and unchanging phenomenon in the face of rapid change due to culture, industrialisation and urbanization: "For both Wordsworth and Bowels, the landscape of permanence and calm becomes a source of future restoration in the face of change and uncertainty within themselves" (Jacobus 273).

But writings of the late 20th century show a more scientific attitude towards Nature. Growing man made problems regarding the ecosystem and various natural calamities of the contemporary time are barely exposed: "In contrast, if you were to scan the newspaper headlines of the same period, you would learn of oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate battles over public land use, protests over nuclear waste dumps, growing hole in the ozone layer, predictions of global warming, acid rain, loss of topsoil, destruction of the tropical rain forest, controversy over the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest, a wildfire in Yellowstone park, medical syringes washing onto the shore of Atlantic beaches, boycotts on tuna, overtapped aquifers in the West, illegal dumping in the East, a nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl, new auto emission standards, famines, droughts, floods, hurricanes, a United Nations special conference on the environment and development, a U.S. President declaring the 1990s 'the decade of the environment' and a world population that topped five billion (Glotfelty xvi).

Industrialisation, deforestation, pollution etc. over the years now challenge the existence of human beings on the earth. The greed of man often takes the shape of exploitation of Nature and natural resources. Nature also takes revenge in its own way. The alarm given by the scientists and environmentalists has deeply moved the poets and writers of the postmodern period and the new scientific approach in literature is an outcome of it.

William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" like any other poems of his is stuffed with the description of No, role of Nature in a man's life, different attitude of the poet towards Nature in different stages of his life, the healing power of No, an urge to retreat to the past etc. This is a fully nature-centric poem. The full title of the poem is- "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, 13th July 1798". The poet is revisiting a countryside place in England. The memory of the valley of the Wye sustained him when he was spending his city life. When Wordsworth and other romantics were primarily concerned with the theoretical and philosophical treatment of Nature, the ecocritics of the late 20th century provided a more practical and scientific approach to Nature.

Modern civilization has always gone against Nature. However, when there is a binary between Nature and culture the ecocritics as well as the nature poet like Wordsworth always supported Nature. In order to gratify their needs and greeds, mankind is leading the earth towards destruction day by day. Great wars, industrialisation, deforestation, pollution, nuclear tests etc. have already affected the earth greatly. And all the earth has to face Nature's revenge in the form of global warming, climate change, acid rain, wildfire, famine, drought, flood etc. Wordsworth was of the opinion that Nature is always superior to us and we are in a great bond with Nature. Rejecting the Western anthropocentric opinion Wordsworth gladly acknowledges Nature's supremacy over mankind: "The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / of all my moral being." 109-111)

The Relationship between man and Nature is finely portrayed in this poem. In this work the relationship has different forms. Wordsworth has different attitudes towards Nature in different stages of his life. In the earlier period of his life the poet was boisterous in nature. He was happy to wander freely in the midst of Nature. The mountains, the deep rivers, the lonely streams- the poet roamed everywhere. He found pleasures in these doings but these pleasures were coarser: "(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days, / And their glad animal movements all gone by)"(Wordsworth 73-74).

At the second stage, the poet enjoyed the beauty of Nature with his sense organs. He smelt the fragrance, heard the sweet sounds, and touched the natural objects. The colours and shapes of

different natural objects were an appetite to him. At the third stage the poet's spiritual and intellectual love for Nature is found. At this stage nature instigates or ignites his thoughts of mind and soul. Therefore Nature has a great influence on the growth of a person and his spirituality and intellect. The connection between man and nature is often found in romantic poetry. This is why ecocritics have special interest in the works of the Romantic Period as well as in Wordsworth.

Nature versus culture is a very important phenomenon of ecocriticism Wordsworth clearly draws contrast between the city life and the country life. He exposes the fact that a man can find peace only in the lap of nature. The rejection of the urbanization and the acceptance of rural and pastoral life makes this poem an ecocritical writing. That the peaceful and harmonious life gifted to the mankind by nature is the most blissful thing is advocated by this way:

"But off in lonely rooms and 'mid the din / of towns and cities, I have owed to them / In hours of weariness, sensation sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt among the heart;" (Wordsworth 167)

Nature has a healing power. The poet's mind was soothed by the recollection of thoughts regarding his past days when he was in the lap of Nature and was enjoying the beauty of Nature. Scientists also say that by growing more trees we can make our environment better. Trees can absorb carbon dioxide and provide oxygen. They bring rain and keep a balance in our ecosystem and thus repair the earth. But while William Wordsworth was concerned mainly with the mental peace and growth of mind in the lap of Nature ecocritics of the later period were concerned with contemporary environmental problems. They always tried to make us aware that the earth is in danger: "Regardless of what name it goes by, most of the ecocritical works shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems." (Glotfelty xx).

Not only natural calamities like volcanic eruption, wildfire, acid rain etc but also manmade problems are also greatly responsible for this situation. However, ruins of Tintern Abbey hurt the

poet. There is an implicit indication to the French revolution in this poem. He cannot accept easily the fact that human beings can do everything for their own satisfaction:

"The still, sad music of humanity, / Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power / To chasten and subdue." (91-93)

Thus, Wordsworth shows that Nature can give us a greater world and a closer relationship with Nature can provide us a peaceful mind and a better life. His implication is that we should look into the past when men lived happily in the lap of Nature and take a lesson from it. However, ecocritics like Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm etc. have logically and scientifically represented the condition of the earth, major environmental problems, duties of the writers etc. Man is accused of his culture which is responsible for environmental crisis: "The answer lies in recognizing that current environmental problems are largely our own making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture." (Glotfelty xxi)

*The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm is a burning document of how Nature is being destroyed by itself and mankind. Wildfire, acid rain, volcanic eruption- all these happenings are natural calamities. Again man made problems like deforestation, nuclear explosion, pollution, great wars etc. are leading the civilization towards its end. Land, air, water- nothing could escape from the grasp of pollution and destruction.

While Wordsworth and other Romantic poets were concerned, as I mentioned many times in my paper, primarily with picturesque description of Nature, value of Nature in human life, relationship between man and Nature etc. ecocritics were practical and scientific in their approach. They are minute in their representation of the condition of the environment, major issues regarding the earth, the environment, the ecosystem and responsibilities of man and Nature regarding this crisis, possible solutions etc. However, it is also worth pointing out that during the Romantic Period the earth was in better condition. Rejecting the Western anthropocentric notion Wordsworth successfully represented Nature as superior to man. The healing power of Nature is also pointed out. Wordsworth portrayed Nature as the only solution. The poet supported a pastoral and primitive world where there is a binary between rural and urban or culture and Nature. Therefore it can be safely asserted that "Tintern Abbey" is an interesting work for green study or ecocriticism.

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