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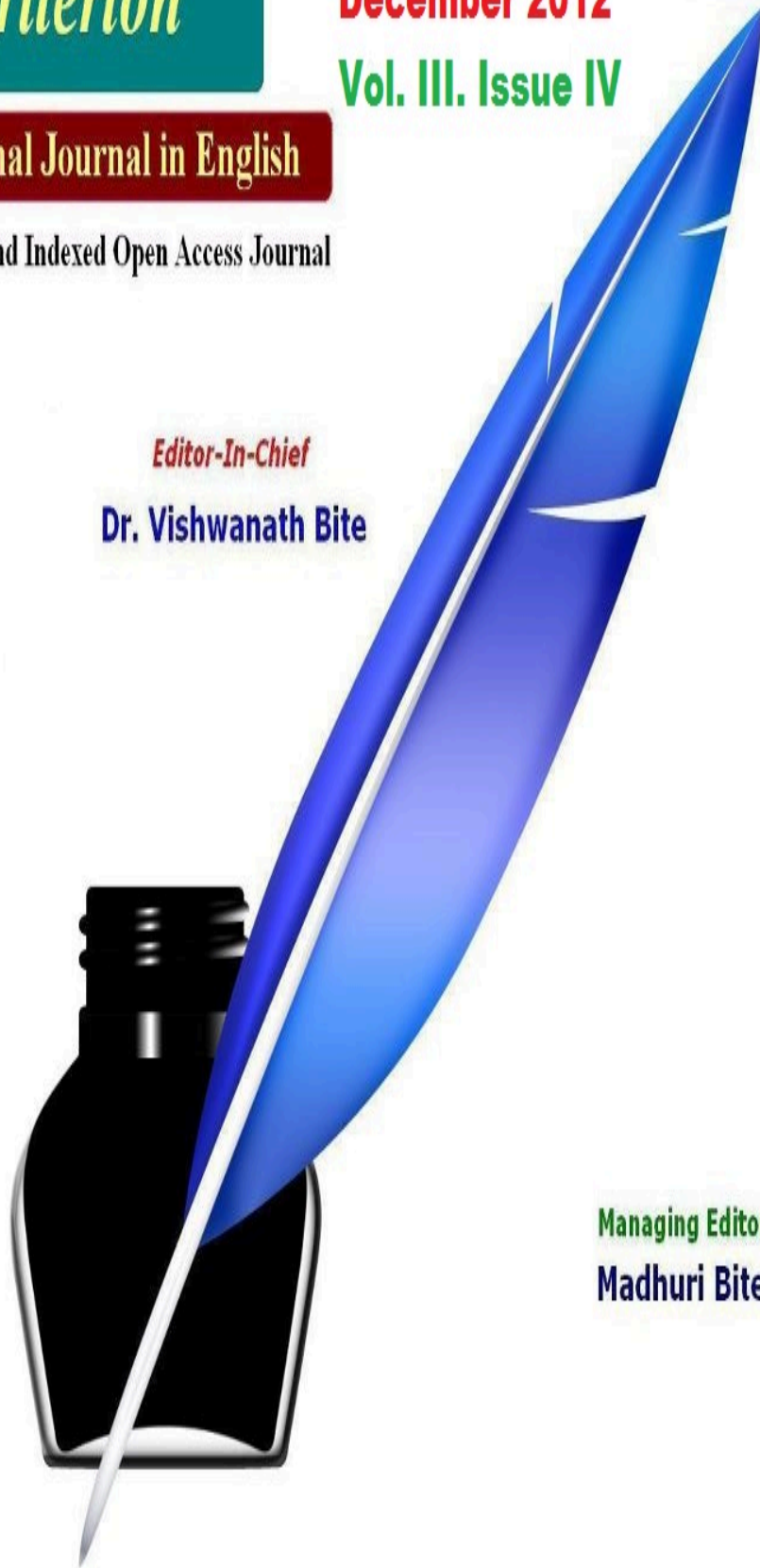
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Angelina Weld Grimke's Selected Poems: An Ecocritical Reading

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Since Renaissance, man has been exploring the world around him. Stimulated by curiosity, he has penetrated almost every corner of the planet. In the earlier phase, the curiosity was to know more and more about the unknown areas which was later accompanied by desire to rule. The Europeans, in fact, were stirred by cupidity to own as many territories as they could. This gave birth to Imperialism. The nations, armed with latest inventions in science and technology, now became capable of suppressing their own human counterparts.

Excessive hunger for both power and pelf led man to extirpate not only human societies, but non-human as well. Whatever came in his way was destroyed. Everything; the river, the trees, the jungles, the mountains, the birds and the animals, became victim to his money making tendency. In the 20th century when science and technology became more powerful, man journeyed into the space as well. Along with the heavenly bodies, manmade satellites have also become part of the solar system. The entire saga of destruction was attributed to the claim of progress and development irrespective of the fact that how pernicious it was for the existence of the species other than man.

All this seems far from literary studies and writings, in reality it is not. The very fact that art imitates life is enough to support this argument. One of the dominant trends in Post World War 2 literature has been the depiction of the destruction caused by indiscriminate use of science and technology not only on the human beings but on the non-human as well. Literary artists are now consciously raising questions on the utility of the gadgets invented and excessively used by man. Whatever man does affect not only him but the entire ecosphere. Today, writers and critics alike are trying to respond to such an environmental disaster. The effort on the part of literary critics to speak on behalf of environment and its various constituents is known as ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is an effort to read literature along with environment. It is a way of linking nature with culture. It is a desire to save environment by creative use of literary imagination. It is an endeavour to spread the consciousness among the masses (of course those who read and write) about nature and its benedictory influences. It is an attempt to keep the earth as an inhabitable planet as long as possible. In short, it is one effort among many in the society by the responsible citizens of the world, not the rulers of the world, to save the environment. An ecocritic is both a critic and ecologist. In fact, he is a literary ecologist whose prime task is to save nature.

This paper is an attempt to analyse Angelina Weld Grimke (1880-1958), an Afro-American poetess from an ecocritical perspective. The focus is on the five selected poems that appeared in 1920s during the Harlem Renaissance. The attempt is to prove how some of her poems are rich in presenting nature in its entirety untainted by the anthropocentric concerns, how she presents man and nature in harmony and how her protagonist craves to be touched by nature instead of pushing it away. However, there is another strain in her poetry in which nature is subordinated to the human cause, but that is not without significance. An effort has been made to project the utility of her poetry for the readers in the 21st century.

Before a comprehensive critique of her poetry is undertaken, it will be in place to draw attention towards some relevant points. First of all, the poems taken for the analysis are from 1920s, a time when environmental concerns did not become explicit at least in the manner as they are today. That was the time when air and water were still pure as compared to the present. However, this fact does not undermine the possibilities of an ecocritical reading of her poems. As science and technology have advanced in recent years, so has the artillery of the readers. Today's reader is armed with so many theories and methods of reading that he can do almost anything with the text in hand. Moreover, the nineteen twenties were the time when Imperialism had started declining especially after the First World War. The act of destroying indigenous societies with their natural surroundings had already taken place. Its effects were perhaps beginning to come to the surface slowly and steadily because whether it is progression or regression, it is not an overnight process. Centuries have passed before man acquired his present status of the dominator. So, at that point of time when Grimke was writing, the ill effects caused by the destruction of the environment had begun to come to notice.

The second point that should be kept in mind before reading Grimke is that she is a woman; hence she is closer to nature than man because of the reproductive quality that she shares with nature. That's why, there is a point in her poems where nature and her gender converge. The third important point is that she is an Afro-American. Her father was an emancipated slave, though her mother was white yet one cannot neglect the racial legacy that she must have inherited from her father. All these influences (of being placed in a certain time- of being a woman, and of being a member of a particular race) converge very subtly in her poems which facilitates an ecocritically remunerative reading.

In her poetry, nature is not merely a tool to serve the anthropocentric purpose; it has its own existence. It is not just the presence that enables the poet to express the inner workings of the mind and has its own utility. Nature in some of her poems occupies more space than human beings. It is not a framing device or an objective correlative deployed to convey an abstract idea. Her poetry offers a delicate representation of nature. The smoothness of her verse and the simplicity of diction presents readers with no difficulty whatsoever in grasping the images from nature. She wastes no words to accomplish her mission. She presents nature in its "entirety," untainted by human motives. In short, nature is here not given any task by the creative mind to accomplish. She records it as she sees it. "Dawn" (1923) can be cited as an illustration. She presents an exact picture of the morning seen before the sunrise. In fact, the simplicity of both matter and manner reminds the readers of Wordsworth. She writes:

Grey trees, grey skies, and not a star;

Grey mist, grey hush;

And then, frail, exquisite, afar,

A hermit-thrush. (Honey 180)

Similarly, in "At The Spring Dawn" (1923), one comes across the same simplicity of expression and richness of the images from nature. Nature in this poem too is described in its wholeness unmodulated by human vision. She describes the scene of spring dawn as she observes it. The sun, the quietness, the bird singing, whirring, and flying all are presented as she perceives them. This is how she unfolds the entire scene:

I watched the dawn come,
 Watched the spring dawn come.
 And the red sun shouldered his way up
 Through the grey, through the blue,
 Through the lilac mists.
 The quiet of it! The goodness of it!
 And one bird awoke, sang, whirred,
 A blur of moving black against the sun,
 Sang again –afar off. (Honey 179)

In the remaining half of the poem, she presents human response to the entire situation. There is a persona that feels elated at this time. She records how that persona extends her arms to welcome the sun and the spring dawn. She feels as if she is part of it. She is ecstatic to be loved. She feels as if she is alive. She records:

And I stretched my arms to the redness of the sun,
 Stretched to my fingertips,
 And I laughed.
 Ah! It is good to be alive, good to love,
 At the dawn,
 At the spring dawn. (Honey 179)

In “Grass Fingers” (1927), she addresses grass to touch her. In fact, she presumes that there is a spirit in nature that can act according to her wishes. She personifies grass and calls it grass fingers. She refers it as “elusive” and “delicate”. The poem begins with an address:

Touch me, touch me,
 Little, cool grass fingers,
 Elusive, delicate grass fingers,
 With your shy brushings;
 Touch my face-
 My naked arms-
 My thighs-
 My feet. (Honey 183)

As has been mentioned earlier, women feel more affinity with nature because of the exploitation that they both have to face and the power of reproduction. The way she addresses nature proves that she wants to merge in it. In the second stanza of the poem, she points to the fact that after death man becomes part of the earth and is buried beneath it, so there is no need of behaving like the sole emperor. She asks grass to touch her because after her death, she will go beyond its touch. She maintains:

Is there nothing that is kind?
 You need not fear me.
 Soon I shall be too far beneath you
 For you to reach me, even
 With your tiny, timorous toes. (Honey 183)

The entire poem reminds the readers of Walt Whitman for whom grass was also not a passive object but a reminder of life after death.

The images from nature and the experiences of being black merge in “The Black Finger” (1923). Here, the tree does not remain merely a tree. It becomes a black finger pointing towards the sky. Here, nature is subordinated to human concerns. One should not forget that her race had immense influence on her poetry. Her father was an emancipated slave. He was a graduate. After receiving her education, she, herself, became a teacher and a writer. Though, her mother was white and Angelina was born in Boston, a city in the North far from the notorious cities of South. One can presume that Grimke might not have a blissful life.

Her father and her other acquaintances must certainly have told her the horrible tales of slavery. She must herself have witnessed the injustices heaped on blacks with her own eyes. In the poem mentioned above, she within a few words captures the agony of being black. She sees a tree and confuses it with a black finger. She writes:

I have just seen a most beautiful thing:
 Slim and still,
 Against a gold, gold sky,
 A straight, black cypress
 Sensitive
 Exquisite
 A black finger
 Pointing upwards. (Honey 184)

The last two lines of the poem are most poignant in their appeal. Here, she seems to be asking questions that she might have asked from herself many a time after witnessing the exploitation of blacks at the hands of whites. Is there any hope for blacks in this country? Is there any safe place for blacks? And in response, she might have seen a tree that she mixes with the black finger pointing towards the sky. She writes: “Why, beautiful still finger, are you black?-And why are you pointing upwards?” (Honey 184).

Similarly, racial experiences amalgamate with nature in “Tenebris” (1927). In this poem, a tree no longer remains a tree; it becomes the hand of a slave with long fingers. She skilfully captures the times of plantation era with its hard work and cruel punishments. Though, she does not mention them explicitly, but there are slight suggestions in the diction and in the images that she uses. She writes that there is a tree that during the night has a shadow. It is like a hand that has long fingers that in the dark of the night, in the wind, in front of the white man’s house, plucks at the bricks whose colour is red. The plucking was an activity that the slaves were required to perform on the plantations. They plucked cotton in the cotton fields. If any slave was discovered slackening in his task, he was given severe beating. So, the clothes moist with blood was a common site for the slaves. Within thirteen lines, she gives vent to such an experience with the help of skilfully drawn image from nature. She writes:

There is a tree by day
That at night
Has a shadow,
A hand huge and black,
With fingers long and black.
All through the dark,
Against the white man’s house,
In the little wind,
The black hand plucks and plucks
At the bricks.
The bricks are the color of blood and very small.
Is it a black hand,
Or is it a shadow? (Honey 185)

Her poetry seems to be presenting a perfect model for a perfect society. Perhaps, she envisaged in her own time that man with his arrogance will one day threaten the existence of nature. A modern reader can certainly derive a conclusion from her poetry that nature and culture are interrelated. They are the two sides of the same coin. Nature needs culture to act on and to be acted upon. One cannot exist in isolation. For example, there is always some human presence amidst nature in her poetry. It is human perception that gives meaning to the phenomena of nature. In “At Spring Dawn,” a protagonist is required to stretch her arms to welcome the sun. In “Dawn,” the mentioning of “hermit-thrush” imparts human touch amidst inanimate objects of nature. In “Grass Fingers,” a woman craves to be touched by the grass. It is the trauma of being black in the white society that enables a human being to confuse a tree with a black finger in “The Black Finger”. Similarly, in “Tenebris,” a tree becomes the hand of a slave with long fingers. So, the message is clear. Human and nature cannot survive without one another. Looking from the vantage point of the 21st century, the poems can be seen as a homily for the destroyers of nature.

In the words of W. E. B Du Bois, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (5).

Dubois was surely referring to the exploitation of blacks at the hands of the dominant culture in America. His statement was the result of centuries of exploitation that the Afro-Americans had to confront there. But, the twentieth century witnessed not only the exploitation of blacks, but other minority groups such as the Jews as well. The other agencies which suppressed or terrified man were battles fought in the name of capitalism, democracy etc. Grimke must have witnessed World War 1 and immense physical and psychological exploitation of the colonised in America and elsewhere. After that, there was Second World War, genocide of the Jews by Hitler, war against Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In the 21st century, the entire world was taken aback by the terrorists’ attack on the World Trade Centre. India too has witnessed numerous terrorists’ attack in the last few decades. The counterpart of the color line in India is the caste line. For many centuries, the high born people have been oppressing the low born in the name of religion. There are constant clashes between Israel and Philistines for many years. The conditions in the 21st century have worsened so much that the 3rd World War seems imminent. The over all result of all this is that the human life is in jeopardy.

In India, the practice of female foeticide corroborates this fact. By implication, if man is so cruel towards his own counterpart, then one can only imagine how merciless he can be towards inanimate objects of nature. Every species on this earth has a right to exist. Everything has its own importance in the larger scheme of things. The smallest worm is as sacrosanct as the most giant mountain. Now is the high time to save human being from becoming an extinct species alongwith nature. If destruction of man by man does not halt then this possibility will one day become true. The poetry of Grimke offers a recipe to save not only human beings but nature as well. One has to acknowledge the integrity of the other. The distinctions have to disappear between the powerful and the powerless. In her poems, the tree becomes a black finger pointing towards the heaven and the hand of a slave with long fingers. The grass no longer remains grass, but is hailed as finger. Only after the distinctions between the human and the vegetation world become thin, there will be some hope. Alongwith the problem of race, caste, and gender, color green has also been added to the litany of the problems and if strong actions are not taken to save the environment, then the earth would no longer be a safe place to live.

To conclude, it can safely be asserted that the poems of Grimke can easily be subjected to an ecocritical reading. There are poems in which she describes nature in its entirety with human beings as part of it, only as receivers not as destroyers. Then, there are some poems in which the experience of being a woman converges with that of nature and there is a strong desire to be touched by it. Above all, in some of her poems, the racial experiences cut across the images from nature and where it becomes difficult to extricate one from the other. However, she does not mention any environmental crisis because when she was writing, the environmental concerns were not the prime shout of the day as they are today. But, the lack of this fact does not deprive her poems from being read from an ecocritical perspective. Pointing towards the environmental problems is not the only task of an eco critic. He does more than that, as has been shown in the above analysis.

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