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## Rereading an Autobiography from Ecocritical Perspective

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The twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented degradation of the “ecological ethics” at global level. Human beings became more and more homocentric, with utter disregard to the surrounding nature. The age-old belief in the power of nature as the prominent guiding force was shaken to the roots. As a result, there was immense damage and destruction of the natural resources all over the world. The use of highly advanced weapons during the two World Wars threatened the very existence of the living beings on the planet earth. Notably enough, a handful of literature produced in this time took a serious note of this injustice done to the ecological system and warned the readers of its serious consequences. It sought to inculcate environmental values in the modern generation and focus its attention on the bounty as well as magnanimity of nature. This kind of literature that tries to explore the close relationship between human beings and the ‘Other’ world of living entities, is thereafter referred to as ‘eco/ nature writing’.

Ecocriticism is an approach to literature that aims to “study the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty 1996: xviii). The term is believed to be coined by William Rueckert in 1978, who defines it as the “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Rueckert 1978: 71). The foremost task of ecocriticism is to restore ‘Nature’ as the centre of all human activity and advocate its supremacy over man-made ‘Culture’. To quote Lawrence Coupe, ecocriticism:

...challenges the logic of industrialism, which assumes that nothing matters beyond technological progress. Thus, it offers a radical alternative to both ‘right’ and ‘left’ political positions, both of which assume that means of production must always be developed, no matter what the cost... it challenges the complacent culturalism which renders other species, as well as flora and fauna, subordinate to the human capacity for signification. Thus, it queries the validity of treating nature as something which is “produced by language”... (It) debates “Nature” in order to defend nature (Coupe 2000:5).

Emerged as an altogether different literary practice in the USA in the late 1980’s, ecocriticism has spread its roots quite rapidly in many parts of the world. Of course, a few critics have already voiced their doubts regarding the fate of this school as for them it “still does not have a widely known set of assumptions, doctrines or procedures” and is, therefore, “still on the academic margins” (Barry, 2002: 240). Some of them have even gone to the extent of predicting that “it is destined to fail as a movement” because it suffers from “the absence of a firm ethical, philosophical underpinning” which is the result of “numerous apparently insoluble contradictions” inherent in it (Abraham, 2007: 179). The supporters of this school need to nullify these objections by providing a concrete foundation and framework which it sadly lacks even today. Nonetheless, its affinity and concern with matters of universal importance such as global warming and other ‘anthropocentric’ problems viz. toxic waste, nuclear fallout, etc. confirm its immediate relevance in the present scenario.

Moreover its 'social' significance cannot be denied for it warns us of the impending environmental catastrophe and seeks to preserve this planet.

An ecocritical reading of a literary text incorporates an acute awareness of the exploitation of natural resources as well as animal species at the hands of human beings. There is a growing interest in the projection of pure 'nature' as opposed to artificial 'culture'. An ecocritical perspective concentrates on the 'outer' world of plants and animals rather than the 'inner' world of human emotions or conflicts depicted in a text. Thus what has been hitherto regarded as mere 'setting' is "brought in from the critical margins to the critical centre" (Barry, 2002: 259). It implies that an ecocritical reading adopts a strategy of approaching familiar, canonical texts with a novel viewpoint so as to focus on its unnoticed dimensions. In particular, this approach emphasizes on certain ecocentric concepts like growth, symbiosis, balance/ imbalance, etc. However, as mentioned earlier, the application of ecocritical approach becomes a challenging task due to the fact that there is no single, dominant world view guiding this practice. The only way out, at present, is to evolve one's own methodology which will comply with the basic tenets of this school.

The ecocritical approach is generally found to be preferred in the analysis of poetry. The present article makes a modest attempt to judge the utility of ecocritical approach in the study of autobiography because an autobiography offers a considerable scope for the application of the same. Supposed to be closest to the writer's heart and frankly confessional in tone, a typical autobiography voices his/her innermost feelings with least artificiality. The writer has highest freedom of expression in this form of writing and comments at length, either directly or indirectly, on a wide range of subjects. Thus it gives one an opportunity to judge his/her awareness and seriousness about burning issues of universal importance such as over-population, excessive industrialisation, growing urbanisation causing imbalance in nature, etc. This article reviews *My Son's Father*, the celebrated autobiography by Dom Moraes, applying established parameters of ecocriticism. Published in 1968, this book records the author's early childhood and adolescence spent in India. Moraes himself being an accomplished poet, exhibits a unique talent of minute observation and lively expression. More importantly, he shows an inborn attachment with nature and is eager to capture the apparently trivial ecological changes with a photographic vividness.

The first few chapters of the book include a pleasant portrayal of 'Bombay' in the 1940's and 50's. Even though Moraes has little to say about the history and politics of this metropolis, what strikes one most is his keen awareness of the natural world present on this group of islands, "half hidden" from the Indian eye. For instance, the description of the various shades of the Arabian Sea is quite telling:

...an ache and blur of blue of noon, purpling to shadow towards nightfall; then the sun spun down through a clash of colours like a thrown orange, and was sucked onto it: sank, and the sea was black shot milk, stippled and lispings... At morning, the sea was a very pale, indolent colour, ridged with wavy lines like Greek statuary (3).

Vultures have become an endangered species these days and are seldom to be seen even in the rural parts of our country. But Moraes used to watch them almost regularly in Mumbai: "...the glaring sun pulsed like an eye: vultures soared up towards it on tremendous idle wings" (4). At the arrival of monsoon, they "hunched wetly on the neighbouring rooftops, slowly raising and lowering their dingy enormous wings" (9).

The notion of 'symbiosis' (literally meaning 'living together'), much popular among the ecocritics, finds a prominent place in Moraes' writing. While describing his childhood

memories, he mentions: “I started at the texture of the earth, the texture of a stone, the texture of a fallen leaf, all eroded to red dust by the sun. A spy, I hovered above ants busy in the red dust; grasshopper stiling up into the air; briefly settled, hairy flies” (3). Dom travelled extensively along the south and noted the geographical diversity in India. While travelling from Mumbai towards the southern coastline, he observed:

The landscape grew progressively drier: it stretched vastly out as the train rippled by, but that first morning the earth was black, with patches of lustrous bushes and trees... and by evening the earth was red, with an occasional stunted tree; black loin-clothed men, skimpy as ants, pecked at it with sad scythes (21).

Near the railway platform, he witnessed “One palm tree standing, dishevelled, with open wings, against dying red sky; and harsh voices of birds, the voices of the passengers calling” (21). More interestingly, on his way, he saw “teeming villages, where dogs and children nosed one another outside the shabby huts” (107).

Moraes refers to the submarine life occasionally in the course of the narrative. With acute anguish, he retells two incidents which compel us to introspect. The first one describes how his thoughtlessness killed a few beautiful fish:

We walked on the beach, and in the deep azure pools amidst the rocks I discovered an immense number of small, incredibly beautiful fish. They were all in gay paint box colours... flickers of peacock blue, turquoise, vermillion, rose madder... I scooped a few fish into the bottle, and returned to the car.

But as we drove home, and I peered at the bottle and cradled it in my hands, one by one the beautiful fish, milling in the water lost their brilliance. The colours died like sunset on their scales, and then they died, floating belly upward to the surface, ugly, whitish little corpses (27).

The second incident reports the untimely death of ‘Molly’, an attractive fish Dom had caught and kept in his house, in a fish bowl:

It (the bowl) slipped from my arms and fell on the concrete path. I heard the thin noise as it broke.

I ran into the house, found a torch and cup of water, and ran back. It was pitch dark, and a hoarse bird was making eerie noises. I shone the torch up and down the path, and eventually found Molly, lying amidst splinters of glass. Someone had trodden on it. The black velvety body, so poised in its element, the strong shovel of the tail, were a smear of red and white. Only the square head was intact (49 - 50).

The ‘nature’/ ‘culture’ distinction, which is a recurrent topic in ecocritical debate, is eluded too in *My Son’s Father*. Moraes upholds the superiority on Nature while condemning culture as something artificial and lifeless. He also criticizes the encroachment of the former on the latter. For instance, when he visited the Buddhist caves at Kanheri, he found that “there was nothing but an immense emptiness, an odour of absence” (103). He had a frustrating experience during the excursion made to the world famous Ajanta and Elora

caves. As he felt, they “were beautiful but they were not alive” (107). He was equally shocked to see the temples in south “Carrying on their sails of stone a profusion of carved lovers, monkeys, fruit and leaves, as they stood amidst a dull, scrubby waste, beaten by the sun” (Ibid).

The autobiography has an Epilogue that informs the reader that the very young man with whom the book deals has himself become the father of a son. Dom gets this news from his wife while relaxing in the lap of Mother Nature:

One day we went for a walk north of the village...a rapid stream lisped past like David Cecil, and Alpine flowers sprouted between the rocks. I lay in the stream, which was icy and reviving, and read. Thomas, a puppy then, made splashy forays to me from the bank, yipping solicitously ...Above me the trees rose in a leafy spiral towards the bald blue sky. Juddith suddenly said, “I’ve got some news for you.”

“Mmhm.”

“I’m going have a baby.”

I leapt out of the stream...and said,

“Are you sure”?

Racing birds filled the sky (239).

The news of the arrival of a new life is thus shared and celebrated on the backdrop of lush countryside, the symbol of growth, livelihood and prosperity.

In this way, *My Son’s Father* provides us significant information about the geographical and ecological variety of India. All in all, the ecocritical rereading of this autobiography proves to be an enriching and illuminating experience.

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