

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

December 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-VI

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Seattle's 'Simple Philosophy': A Plea of an Environmentalist

Deepshikha Kumari
Asst. Professor,
Department of English
PGDAV College,
University of Delhi

Abstract:

Among the various “turns” in recent literary and cultural studies, the ecological turn is gaining a conspicuous popularity. It has opened up promising new areas of interdisciplinary inquiry and can be noticed at the heart of current trends in the humanities. This paper is an attempt to look closely the relationship between ecology and literature. It will explore the ways in which we imagine nature and humanity's relation to it. The ecological concern over the continuous misuse of our environment has recently caught the attention of the authors and literary critics. It is this threat on humanity and its description in literature that has set the tone for a new branch of literary theory, namely Ecocriticism. This paper will try to examine a relatively new branch of literary theory i.e. ecocriticism and its growing popularity in analyzing literary texts from social, political and ecological point of view. In this paper I shall focus on the ecological issues with a special reference to Seattle's Letter written to the President of USA. It could be read as one of the earliest environmental documents. Through his letter he could make a great impact on the mind of the people related to the ecological issues the world is facing today. Chief Seattle allegedly wrote this ironic letter to the American Government in the 1800's. Although he is said to have made this speech in his native tongue, Lushootseed, which was much later translated into English by Dr. Henry A. Smith, and although there is a controversy on its authenticity, this letter is a bitter sweet plea to the powerful rulers of the 19th century America. More relevant in these times where mankind has made enormous strides in technological advancement but has failed to curb the plundering of our dear planet, the words of this letter are a stark and strong reminder to us to preserve our treasures.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmentalist, Nature

The term Ecocriticism was first used by William Rueckert in his essay titled Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism in 1978. Here he focuses on the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Yet the term remained obscure until the publication of two path-breaking works, both published in 1990s namely: The Ecocriticism Reader, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Formm, and Lawrence Buell's The Environment Imagination. Cheryll defines Ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings as awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.” Thus it studies literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view.

It takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on earth; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. Ecocritics investigate such things as the underlying ecological values, what, precisely, is meant by the word nature, and whether the examination of "place" should be a distinctive category, much like class, gender or race. Ecocritics examine human perception of wilderness, and how it has changed throughout history and whether or not current environmental issues are accurately represented or even mentioned in popular culture and modern literature. Glotfelty then goes on to specify some of the questions critics in this area ask, ranging from 'How is nature represented in this sonnet?' through 'How has the concept of wilderness changed over time?' to 'How is science itself open to literary analysis?' and finally 'What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?'

Ecocriticism is, then, an avowedly political mode of analysis, as the comparison with feminism and Marxism suggest. Ecocritics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda. In this respect, Ecocriticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory. Developing the insights of earlier critical movements, Ecofeminists, social ecologists and environmental justice advocates seek a synthesis of environmental and social concerns.

Ecocriticism can be distinguished from other critical approaches in the sense that other literary theory, in general, examines the relations between authors, texts and the world i.e. society or social sphere. Ecocriticism on the other hand expands the idea of "the world" to incorporate the entire ecosphere. Barry Commoner, an eminent ecologist has rightly said, "Everything is connected to everything else." Hence we can consider that literature does not only depict the material world but it rather plays an important role in an immensely complex global system in which the entire ecosphere interacts together with the ideas.

Chief Seattle was the most eminent leader, worrier and diplomat of the Pacific Northwest native Suquamish Tribe. His fame rests on his popular speeches made against the white people who tried to eliminate the Red Indian tribes in order to get their lands. Later on his speeches were translated and came down to us as one of the earliest environmental documents ever. The text of Chief Seattle's monologue has frequently appeared in anthologies of American Indian literature and oratory. It is difficult to identify the source of his speech. The main source for the speech is, apparently, a 1932 pamphlet by John M. Rich, copies of which are at the Seattle Historical Society and at the Library of Congress. He was undoubtedly an eloquent speaker. His speeches include such inspiring lines as, "Man did not weave the web of life; he merely a strand in it." Another example of his 'simple philosophy' is "the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to earth." In 1855, the Red Indian Chief Seattle addressed a letter to President Franklin Pierce of the United States. It was the policy of President Franklin to open up the North West territory for the expansion of industries, this mostly involved forcible annexation of Indian Land, and extermination of the population. The history suggests that the pioneering white men were taking over more and more of the North American continent from the Native Indian tribes under their expansion policy. Chief Seattle

represented the tribe during their treaty negotiations in the 1850's. The environmental issues such as pollution, rapid industrialization, urbanization, deforestation which have caught the attention of environmentalists today, were raised by the Chief way back in 1855 through his letter when the American authorities proposed to buy the tribal lands for industrialization. The attitudes reflected in the letter ascribed to Seattle are in harmony with those professed by individuals upset at the damage to the natural environment perpetrated by our industrial society.

Chief Seattle argues that the misuse of the earth by white people will lead to the destruction of the people and creatures that rely on the earth. His people can never imagine of selling their land to the American authority for industrialization. He tells the 'Great Chief in Washington' very firmly yet politely that the very idea of buying or selling land is unique to them. He says: "*How can you buy or sell the sky-the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. We do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us? Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.*" Seattle makes it amply clear that the land is not theirs so they cannot sell it.

Seattle further speaks with sarcasm that the civilized Americans cannot understand their simple philosophy of life. He condemns the white men for denying their children's right to enjoy the beauty of Nature because they propose to industrialize the land. White people see earth as their enemy and this is why they try to conquer it. Red Indians abhor big cities not because they dislike white men but because there is no trace of Nature in their big cities. To quote: "...his children's birthright is forgotten. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red-man. But perhaps it is because the red-man is a savage and does not understand..." He considers white man's cities with full of noise. There is no peaceful corner in white men's big cities. He expresses his grievances that one cannot hear the "leaves of spring or the rustle of insect wings" in the cities. It must be noticed that Seattle does not criticize the President directly. Instead, he criticised himself and his fellow Red Indians in order to exhibit how ruthless and insensitive the so called civilized people have become towards our mother nature. He criticises the white men for not feeling the air that they inhale. He compares him with a "man dying for many days "and hence has become numb to the sweet smell of the soft breeze. He seems to be puzzled with the ways of white men and says perhaps "I am savage", I do not understand this. Ironically, Indians savagery prevents them to comprehend Whites ways.

It is Seattle's belief that all things living or non-living, beasts, trees and human being share the same breathe. Hence, there is a deep relation between all the objects of Nature and Man. Seattle's observations are revealing in the sense that they tell us about white men's indifference to Nature. What does it all indicate, progress, culture or ruthlessness? Seattle delivers timely warning that if man continues to destroy nature for his personal interests, he will suffer with the consequences. He points out the white men killing of wild animals just for fun. He points out: "I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie, left by the white men who shot them from passing rain. I am a savage and do not understand how the smoking iron horse can be more important than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive." He

dislikes such senseless killing of wild animals considers it heinous. There is no justification of cruelty and if we will kill all animal, we will meet the same fate in future. He remarks further: "...men would die from great loneliness off spirit; for whatever happens to the beasts will also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth."

He asks the government that ones the land will be given to them, they will change their callous attitude towards Nature. But again he reflects on the fact that by the passage of time, his people will also vanish like that of wild animals and then there will be no one left in the world to cry for the preservation of Nature's beauty. Once the red people were as powerful as white men but they are gradually being eliminated by the Americans. Yet the spirit of red man will be felt is the nature for he loves this Earth. To quote: "when the last red-man has vanished from the earth, and the memory is only a shadow of a cloud moving across...these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people, for they love this earth as the new born loves its mother's heartbeat." He suggests preserving the beauty of Nature for their coming generations. He tells them that Nature is precious to God and to insult Nature is to insult God: "even white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny."

Conclusion:

Thus we can see that Chief Seattle had great concern for Nature and environment. He could foresee the upcoming crisis on this Erath because of man's senseless deeds of spoiling the Nature in order to fulfil their greed. The entire letter is written in sarcastic tone. He indirectly criticises the Authorities for disturbing Nature's balance by cutting forests and killing wild animals in order to build big cities. These days we speak of living with Nature and the need to maintain a natural balance almost as though these were ideas. The truth is that in bygone days humans did know how to exploit wealth of the earth without destroying the earth itself. Nothing illustrates this fact better than this letter. It is unfortunate that the lesson has still not been learnt yet. Chief's letter can be read as a plea of an environmentalist and we can have hope for a better future.

Works Cited:

Contemporary English: An Anthology for Udergraduates-1, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2011, pp 109
Garrad Greg, Ecocriticism, Routledge, New York, 2004
Goldfelty Cheryll, The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, Georgia University Press, USA, xix, 1995