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## The Emergence of Environmental Justice in Literature

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Over the past few decades we have seen a gradual increase in the number of writers writing about issues related to environmental concerns. So far poets, fiction writers and nature writers from different communities were either ignored or misread when they tried to raise their voice for environmental justice concerns. All that is changing now as we see an increasing number of writers exploring issues related to environmental racism and environmental justice through their works.

According to Adamson, these authors, who are now gaining popularity among the ecocritics and environmentalists, require a different kind of reading than established ecocriticism. The term Adamson uses to describe this difference is Environmental Justice. The term justice helps the environmental justice activists in distinguishing themselves from the white, middle class environmental organizations, and also to establish a connection between social justice issues like race, gender, class, etc. and environmental problems (Tarter 60). In *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (2011), Deloughrey and Handley raise the question as to why the environmental concerns are often considered as distinct from postcolonial ones (14). Similarities can be seen between them as both are based on the concept of 'othering'. While post-colonialism tends to be people-centred, ecocriticism is nature-centred in its orientation. Although environmental justice is central to ecocriticism but the method of practicing it is still not well established.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines Environmental Justice as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. EPA has this goal for all communities and persons across the United States. It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and have equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.

The Environmental Justice movement challenges the traditional environmental policy which has so far benefited only the affluent sections of the society. It is not just an environmental movement or a civil rights movement, but also a women's movement, and according to Robert R.M. Verchick, a feminist movement as well (63). Environmental justice activists, particularly women and people of color, bring previously unheard "bottom-up" perspectives to environmental issues (66). One such writer who has given the impetus to the modern environmental movement is Rachel Carson who's *Silent Spring* (1962) led to a new environmental awareness and a vision that translated into tangible political action. A single woman, she took up the challenge of facing industrial forces in the world. She firmly believed that people would protect only what they loved. *Silent Spring* (1962) is an interdisciplinary work that has had an important impact on changing policy. It is a pioneering text of the modern environmental movement. Through her work Carson brings up an

important issue for discussion; the fact that the public is fed with a plethora of opinions by the government, conservationists and biologists as a result of which it does not know which view to accept as true. She accentuates the concerns of the people when she quotes Jean Rostand, "The obligation to endure gives us the right to know." (13) In the book she voices her dissent not just against the indiscriminate use of poisons but also the irresponsibility of an industrialized, technological society towards the natural world. Carson tried to send out the message that each individual can make a difference and that we need to change the way we look at our environment.

One of the major concerns that Carson brought to light was the fact that the common people, who were the most affected by such pest control operations of the government, were often kept in the dark about the effect of these pesticides on them and their livestock.

"Who has decided- who has the *right* to decide- for the countless legions of people who were not consulted that the supreme value is a world without insects, even though it be also a sterile world ungraced by the curving wing of a bird in flight?" (127)

She warns her readers,

"If we are going to live so intimately with these chemicals- eating and drinking them, taking them into the very marrow of our bones- we had better know something about their nature and their power."  
(17)

Environmental Justice reflects justice not only in human communities but also towards other species, ecosystems, landscapes, and environment as a whole. Carson through her work intended to encourage the American people to care about their birds, animals, and "non-pest" insects (Hart & Slovic 40). She wanted to alert the people and the government about the concomitant effects of the indiscriminate use of pesticides like DDT.

Over the years the literary world has seen an emergence of several African writers who have taken up environmental, ecological and related issues in their works. Ogaga Okuyade explores the works of two African writers, Zakes Mda of South Africa and Tanure Ojaide of Nigeria in his book *Ecocritical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes* (2013). Their respective novels, *The Heart of Redness* (2000) and *The Activist* (2006), are examined to bring out the concern for environmental and ecological awareness in contemporary African literature. These writers, in their novels, explore issues related to economic exploitation, political marginalization etc. as a result of modern tourism. In his highly acclaimed novel *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Zakes Mda, the South African writer, depicts the struggle of a local marginalized community in fighting against the threat of an environmental apocalypse posed by a tourist development scheme (De Loughrey and Handley 291). The novel discusses the possible impact of such a development project on the indigenous people and their environment.

"....a project of this magnitude cannot be built without cutting down the forest of indigenous trees, without disturbing the bird life, and without polluting the rivers, the sea, and its great lagoon." (119)

Since the beginning of the European colonial era, dominant cultures have viewed the lands of the indigenous people as underdeveloped and empty (Reed 29). In *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Mda makes a sincere attempt to apply such environmental justice concerns to ecotourism and at the same time offer pragmatic solutions to problems having postcolonial bearings (Vital 306). At the heart of Zakes novel is the conflict over natural resources. The historical past, emblematised by the cattle-killings during the 1850's, is linked to the present through the ecological consciousness of Qukezwa. The tourism project is viewed differently by the two groups of the village depending on the kind of political and economic development they want for their village. While on the one hand we have the Unbelievers, led by Bhonco, who support the tourism project and believe in modernization and civilization, on the other hand we have the Believers, led by Zim, who vehemently oppose the project, as they feel it will destroy their indigenous culture, plants and birds. . According to the believers the development project would only benefit a few villagers and cause a lot of harm to the village. Firstly the indigenous forests would have to be cut down, the natural bird life too would get disturbed, and water would get polluted. The women would no longer have unrestricted access to the seashore; they would not be able to harvest the sea for their food and income. Also the gambling complex would only provide jobs to a select few. Already some environmental rules are getting flouted by allowing them to build cottages along the seashore.

The unbelievers view things differently. They feel it's an excellent opportunity for them to get rid of their redness and move towards modernization and civilization. The project would mean economic development, more job opportunities and most of all modernization of their village, transforming it into a holiday resort just like the ones in America. Mediating between the two groups is Camagu, a young man, who has just returned from Johannesburg. He soon learns that a project of this magnitude cannot be built without destroying their forests and birds, polluting the rivers, sea and the great lagoon. He realizes that if they are to oppose the development project they would have to offer some viable alternative to the people. For this they need to work out a plan that would benefit the community while preserving the nature. He forms a cooperative society with the help of a few village women and tries to establish a form of ecotourism which would empower the people of the village and at the same time save their indigenous plants and trees.

Zakes Mda, through this novel advocates a kind of eco-tourism that would not only save the environment but also allow the benefits accompanying tourism, like economic development, employment and self reliance of the indigenous people.

Environmental justice communities are commonly identified as those where residents are predominantly minorities or low-income; where residents have been excluded from the environmental policy setting or decision-making process; where they are subject to a disproportionate impact from one or more environmental hazards; and where residents experience disparate implementation of environmental regulations, requirements, practices and activities in their communities. Environmental justice efforts attempt to address the inequities of environmental protection in these communities (California Energy Commission). One such writer who explores this aspect of environmental justice in his novel

is Indra Sinha, who gives a fictional account of the world's biggest industrial disaster, The Bhopal gas tragedy, in *Animal's People* (2007). The novel discusses the devastating impact of the gas leak from a chemical factory on, not just the people, but also on the ecology.

“Listen, how quiet it’s. No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can’t survive here. Wonderful poisons the kampani made, so good it’s impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they’re still doing their work.” (29)

*Animal’s People* (2007) is a story about corruption that hampers the fight for justice and compensation for the victims. It is an attempt to recreate the historical environment of Union Carbide’s poisoning of Bhopal and its aftermath. The tragedy killed a lot of people. But those who were yet to be born, were left with a life worse than death as can be seen in the scene when Animal meets his new friend, Kha- in- the- Jar.

“‘Your back is twisted,’ says he with great bitterness, ‘but at least you are alive. Me, I’m still fucking waiting to be born.’” (58)

Animal and his group of activist friends, organise the fight against the kampani in the small town of Khaufpur. Through the character of Animal, Sinha raises some very pertinent questions,

“Do you suppose anyone can explain, why did the company choose this city to make its factory? Why this land?”(32)

Animal’s questions reiterate some of the points made by Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse* (2005), where he discusses how some societies end up making disastrous decisions. According to Tainter, “.....these societies sit by and watch the encroaching weakness without taking corrective actions.” (420)

In “Tomorrow There Will be More of Us”, Pablo Mukherjee, draws our attention to the environmental conditions in the postcolonial world. In this essay he talks about the toxic postcoloniality in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*. The essay helps bring to light some of the important questions related to the ethicality of building a factory in a popular urban area. The impact this has on the local inhabitants who actually have little say in any matter regarding the decision to build or dump wastes of the factory. Another important question raised is about how a legal battle on justice can be fought with an American multinational company sitting in a far off land (De Loughrey and Handley 216).

Through the growing popularity of the environmental justice movement, poets such as Simon Ortiz and N.Scott Momaday, Gary Snyder, Adrienne Rich etc, are now gaining attention and their work is being acknowledged as ecocentric. (Grodén, Kreiswirth, and Szeman 282). For native authors like, Simon Ortiz, Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, and Leslie Marmon Silko issues related to gender, ethnicity, class and colonialism are closely linked to environmental issues (Tarter 60). Ortiz echoes the concerns of these writers when he says,

“When I write, I write as an Indian, or native person, concerned with his environmental circumstances and what we have to do to fight for a good kind of life.” (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 15-16).

Over the past few decades there has been a constant increase in the kind of impact that the environmental justice movement has had on literary studies. The field has burgeoned over time addressing issues that play a key role in formulating developmental policies of a nation. According to Adamson, the field has grown over time to keep pace with increasingly complex environmental debates (12). Ecocritics help to, not only locate the natural world in



literary texts, but also advocate for awareness and change. This change is undertaken by the environmental justice movement, which helps in interrogating the role of privilege in shaping environmental ideologies.

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