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Exploring the Ecocritical Concerns in the Selected Short Fiction of Rick Bass

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism, as an area of study, focuses on the direct and indirect relation of human beings with the nature. It comprises in itself various related entities which are all concerned with one common factor and that is how a man has developed himself in this advanced era on the stake of living and non-living entities of the natural world. The thinkers are giving better solutions to understand the problem. With the understanding of the problem, human beings can recognize the value of all the entities. As now, a man never thinks about his deeds with which he is affecting the whole natural world but the short stories of Rick Bass make the readers to rethink their relationship with nature in differentiation with the materialistic world which will further help in the establishment of a certain kind of reconnection with the larger framework. The way Nature is depicted in Rick Bass's short stories is not in a traditional way yet encourages activism which will lead to the fixation in habits and lifestyle of the man. Reestablishing man's bond with his natural world is a common concern of Rick Bass's stories. As one author inspires another, the message is spread that our world around us is in a fragile state, and unless action is taken, the simple pleasures of nature will be forever changed for the worse.

Keywords: Nature, Environment, Destruction, Ecocriticism, Utilitarian, Living/Non-Living Entities.

Introduction

In earlier period, humans were connected with nature in a harmonious way. But with the advancement of technology, man is more concerned with materialistic development where all natural resources are at stake. Appraising himself in the navel position of the planet earth; man perpetrates those deeds which pose dangers that are enormous and life-threatening. In this present scenario, there are several planetary problems which have gripped the century such as

deforestation, global warming, extinction of wilderness, depletion of Ozone layer, consumption of finite natural resources and many others. These problem of natural world's destruction and extinction of its species has been prevalent from the earlier times in the form of oral folk tales. Nature writing and environmentalism is a prevalent theme and theory of literatures since earlier times. But in the twentieth century, the literary contemporary ideas are much concerned with environmental degradation and preservation. Environmentalism has become a major moral and political movement. In the next phase, to save the whole ecosystem, the theory of 'Ecocriticism' was introduced in the late Nineties.

Ecocriticism, as a theory, is prevalent in the contemporary scenario which is concerned with all the living and non-living entities of this natural world on the planet earth. Ecocriticism, as a theory, reestablishes a bond between the human beings to his natural surroundings. When it was started, the scholars propagated the idea to save the environment. But later on it becomes more concerned with the whole planet's problems. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture – specifying the cultural artifacts of language and literature. One of the most common concerns of this theory is the study of the relationship between the human and the non-human throughout human cultural history. In earlier times, literary scholars and philosophers relied on the idea that man is the center of all things and he can use the natural surroundings as per his convenience. But Ecocritics try to give a description of the destruction which has been done so far and they also try to presume the aftermath. Ecocriticism concerns itself with the writings in and of nature and the consequential ecological themes propounded by the same. As a philosophical term, it states that environment is not a subject only for the experts to deal with; but also for all of the human population - which has become as selfish for its own material needs and technological advancements as to ruin the ecology and not even acknowledging the damage done. The human population needs to feel itself as a 'part' of the earth and not as its exploitative misconstrued owner.

Ecocriticism, as a theory, contains in itself a heap of perspectives and critical concerns which are for the literary scholars to detect and consult. Interdisciplinarity is the key concept of ecocritical theory. There are obviously the depiction of landscape and its utility in the concerned context in all of the humanities. The idea is not only to acknowledge the importance of environment in texts, but also to scrutinize it with a perspective of the human relationship with the earth. The important aspect of this theory is that it considers nature and culture as interwoven than sides of a dualistic construct. Ecocriticism is different from other perspectives as it considers the outside environment or physical surroundings rather than inside environment in the text. Ecocritics explore the relations between writer and the outside world through text. In earlier theories, the 'world' has been taken as 'society' but ecocritics expand the notion of the world and connect it to the entire ecosystem of the planet earth.

Story writer, Eco-critic and nature essayist Rick Bass is living in Yaak Valley near Montana. In his stories, Bass uses trees and fields as a stage where human can interact with his surroundings. Bass's stories are set in different places such as Texas, the deep south of Alabama and Mississippi and the northern reaches of Montana. Rick Bass creates a bond between humanity and nature in his fictional and non-fictional writings. His readers feel themselves connected with the creatures, characters and landscapes of his works. Bass is also considered as a magic realist of Southern America. This term is used in literary works to expose some oppressive forces. In this way, although Bass does not follow the magic realism in a traditional way, yet in his writings, he exposes the industrial destruction. In his writings, he criticizes the materialistic and consumer based society. He shows the industrial destruction of nature in a mythical way. Bass gives a super-realistic image of Nature and the mystical features of it. Bass always presents the spiritual and physical link between man and other living and non-living entities. Most of his stories show a quest for the wilderness survival. Bass represents the way to return to nature. Bass always acknowledges those attributes which are shared by human beings with other living beings. Terrell Dixon stated in his review of the book "*In the Loyal Mountains*", that, "Bass's stories explore relationships between the city and the nature, looking at the prospects for co-existence and at the ways in which urban dwellers can connect with place and with the wild" (qtd. in Dwyer 53).

Bass is considered as a descendent of Henry David Thoreau because of his settings in his literary works and his concern for natural environment. But for Bass, "setting often becomes the main character infusing every element of the ostensible protagonists" (Weltzien 4). But the difference between both of the nature writers is of that Bass seems to weed his natural surroundings unlike Thoreau. Edward Abbey's writings also have remained primary source to influence on Rick Bass's writing since his graduation years. "Bass not only writes youthfully and occasionally outrageously, but he also takes risks of lessening rather than enlarging his audience through his disdain, and occasional contempt, for what he deems the inadequacies of professional field science" (Weltzien 9). Thomas J. Lyon in his essay stated that, "Rick took his audience to where nature writing starts and to why it exists" (22).

Ecofeministic Perspective

Ecofeminism, as the name simply suggests, is not so simple to infer. It may refer to various complexities comprised within the term. At one hand, it tries to analyze the oppression of the 'eco' by man and here eco has been given a feminine character. On the other hand, it also might refer to the environmental hazards that the weaker section of the society may face. The nature has been given a feminine bend here as this ideology regards woman's character close to that of the nature, that nature is also the harbinger of life and has motherly instincts of caring and upbringing its constituents and also provides all the resources needed for survival. And the oppression which women are facing by the male party has been compared with the oppression which nature is facing by the ones who are in power. Thus, ecofeminism tries to question the

hegemonic relation of man with nature while keeping in view the womanly character of the nature.

Ecofeminism, in particular is an application of one strand of ideology into the other and vice-versa and the ideological concerns in both the theories seem to feed each other while switching places frequently from the principal to subordinate and repeating the pattern in accordance with the need of the matter at hand. Ecofeminism has shown how both women and the land are exploited by patriarchal societies and institutions. Thus, ecofeminism tries to question the hegemonic relation of man with nature while keeping in view the womanly character of the nature. The stories of Rick Bass seem to depict the idea of the problem which lies in the ownership of land by men, and the consequences of this: war, rape and tyranny. It is only with the absence of the male institution of power, from kingship, religion and property to honor and shame that a true golden age can return.

In the story of Rick Bass, “Days of Heaven”, the narrator seems to pine over the loss of the chastity and integrity of the Yaak Valley, and this concern is in reference to the ecofeministic aspect of the debate going on in the author’s mind. The opening line, “Their plans were to develop the valley, and my plans were to stop them” (Bass 53) itself states the agenda of the patriarchal and capitalist society to ‘develop’ the valley. There is a clear depiction of the hegemonic relationship of the oppressor – the man, and the oppressed – the landscape. The latter is rendered voiceless and is subjected to intrusion and exploitation by the ambitious oppressor. No such consciousness of the oppressor had been depicted which is, in relation to the oppressed, is humane or libertarian rather shallow and mean purposes of the oppressor come in light without them being conscious of the fact that they are doing so. It is the voice of the narrator in the story which gives a voice to the oppressed who is subjected to commodification and utilitarianism. Both of the characters, Quentin and Zim, have too many ideas to destruct the chastity of the valley.

After a while, Zim came up with the idea of bulldozing the meadow across the way and building a lake, with sailboats and docks. He hooked Quentin into a deal with a log-house manufacturer in the southern part of the state who was going to put shiny new “El Superemo” homes around the lake. Zim was going to build a small hydro dam on the creek and bring electricity into the valley, which would automatically double real estate values, he said. He was going to run cattle in the woods, lots of cattle and set up a little gold mining operation over on the north face of Mount Henry. The two boys had folders and folders of ideas. They just needed a little investment capital, they said. (Bass 56)

Bass has tried to throw light on the instinctive nature of man to assert power on things which are less powerful than him or are powerless altogether. In this present age, even a little child, who is as pure as it comes, is surrounded with materialistic things and contains within

itself the ideas in his mind to show his power onto silent things. Little Quentin thinks to disturb the animalistic life in the woods. The very first question that he asks on reaching the woods is - “Can you shoot anything right now? Rabbits? Marmots?” (Bass 56). Bass indicates and sadly anticipates the problem of environmental unconsciousness in the coming generation which has been brought up in this materialistic world. Their nourishment and upbringing is happening in this era under such beliefs, values and ethics which disregard the consciousness of Nature as not only an important resource for them but also an autonomous being by itself which needs to be given due credit and care. All such power structures that are visible to the younger generation are going to bring apocalyptic outcomes for the whole planet. The author further depicts and develops his argument by showing how man has colonized the natural resources only to have an illusion of being more powerful and wealthy. Like He puts his problem into words that if such a plight of Nature goes on into the hands of the patriarchal hands of man, and if man goes with his destructive nature towards the natural resources and surroundings as usual, then after this valley , “where I could go next, after this place was gone” (Bass 59).

In the story, “Swamp Boy”, Rick Bass is depicting a sense of loss. The building in which he is working at present has a view of the city which once used to be home to various creatures in the bayou, tall grass, prairie and ponds. But now there are only tall buildings and other man-made structures of cement which show how man has colonized the mother earth. This aspect of the story depicts the ecofeministic perspective of the situation at hand, a term, which embraces not only literary and cultural theory, but also political activism. Various characters in the story metaphorically depict the nature of man towards the voiceless landscape which is being harassed and intruded in constantly through a hegemonic pre-determined structure of setting things in order. The narrator recounts his previous memories of those natural inhabitants which were spread all over the valley but now all these species are on their extinction level and they are destructed by the man power to meet their developmental level. The narrator states the problem that:

It’s gone now. The trees finally edged in and spread their roots into that fertile swamp bottom, taking it quickly, and no sooner had the trees claimed the lake than they were in turn leveled to make way for what came next – roads, a subdivision, making ghosts of the forest and the lake. (Bass 11)

In the story of Rick Bass, “The Wait”, the unnamed narrator of the story encounters his experiences of fishing with his best friend and the other one. The narrator goes with his friends on fishing and gives an account of the surroundings “We pass the buildings where Kirby works; we pass the building where his wife works. They look like high-rise jails to me, the shutdown of a life” (Bass 45). The narrator in this story gives an overview of the urban wildlife and the scenario of that wildlife in which he feels himself as a bind creature which can only move within the shackles surrounded by a superpower. Bass puts the problem into words which is related to the development on the stake of environment.

The narrator also encounters a belief which is taken as ludicrous by most of the people but the people of Texas believe that, “The world can be tamed. It’s a bull that can be wrestled, and with strength and courage and energy you can lift that bull over your head, spin it around, and throw it to the ground” (Bass 45). Bass counts this belief, for he wants to show the mentality of man in relation to that of the other species which also reside on the earth along with him. As in the patriarchal society, the male party dominates, colonizes, exploits, suppresses, and objectifies its female counterpart, in the same way; the above stated belief of the author gives an overview and description of the domination of the powerful human being over other rendered powerless inhabitants of the planet. Through this ecofeministic perspective - which compares nature’s character to that of a woman’s and other such sections of the society which are exploited at the hands of the patriarchal and capitalist world, Bass has presented the plight of the mother earth which has been made so by man for the sake of the development.

The concerns are very evident in the story, *Coach*, which, in a way, depict the aftermath of the exploitation and domination of the landscape by the capitalist man. The group of the people face no obstacle even in those areas which aren’t suitable for a man to go in the minimum temperature.

“They were still driving, close enough to the crater that no snow remained – even in deepest winter, they told him the area around the crater stayed snow-free because of the slow-burning seams of coal” (Bass 417).

Many such exemplars and instances have been depicted in the short stories of Rick Bass which lead to a formation of the visible power structure between man and Nature as man being the oppressor and the latter the oppressed. It’s not only as if man is doing this consciously, but it is all an outcome of the indifference and unconscious state of man which is made so by the ongoing cultural and philosophical trends of the age. And this writers have risen above the level of the contemporary era and depicted through his stories the actual hegemonic relation of man and Nature which is for the reader to introspect as well as retrospect to further gain the true sense of relevant political activism.

Eco-Marxist Perspective

The philosophy of social ecologists and eco-Marxism is somewhat related to ecofeminism, which has propagated the idea of domination of human by other humans in concern of production. Social Ecology or Eco- Marxism are specifically politically charged terms. These terms originated as radical thoughts in the nineteenth century. Eco-Marxists try to focus on intra-species relationships. They claim that scarcity happens in the distribution of production and it only happens according to the will of capitalists, who principally steer and manage the means of production. Eco-Marxists suggest that if the political structure changes, the production will meet the needs of the human population and the ecological problems related to the limitless production as a result of the capitalist’s structure will disappear.

In the story of Bass, “Days of Heaven”, there are two characters Quentin and Zim, who want to own the whole valley for their material purposes. Zim and Quentin are those persons who want to set their business in the woods. The rich tend to invest their money in those wild places which have richness and diversity in flora and fauna and hence are potentially economically sound. But this leads towards the monopoly of a particular class on the concerned natural resources which are equal for all of the human population irrespective of their class. But this injustice is regarded as social injustice by those social institutions which have no idea of the root cause of this problem. This problem lies in the urban management of those natural resources which are availed only by a particular class of society. This capital class can avail everything with money and the money minded entrepreneurs work to execute their plans on the same line. With all these activities, the inferior or weaker section gets deprived and thus is suppressed. Zim states that:

They’re living the western experience. Then in the winter you could run just a regular guest lodge, like on Newhart. Make ‘em pay for everything. They want to go cross-country skiing? Rent ‘em. They want to race snowmobiles? Rent ‘em. Charge ‘em for taking a piss. Rich people don’t mind. (Bass 57)

The rich persons do with the natural resources whatever they want. The higher class has always suppressed the inferiors who are not even able to claim their rights on those areas in which they reside. Because of all this they have to remain silent and go with all the situation as it is which leads to a greater gap between both of the sections of the society. This gap becomes wider because of the tendency which a man acquires from his upbringing in his materialistic society. He has no concern for the other species as well as for his fellow beings who also live with him on this planet earth. Rick Bass in this story states that there are intruders who always want to control the things with material power. The narrator states that, “I sat very still, like that owl, and thought about where I could go next, after this place was gone” (Bass 59). And with a gap of time, the intruder ones will become the head of the state and keep all the power in their hands

In the story, “The Valley”, Bass states that there is a little number of valley residents and they live only on those things which they get from their surroundings. They don’t want to create harm to the valley’s other co-inhabitants for their own humane needs. But the rich, who come to the valley occasionally, capture the whole scenario and put their ownership on the resources with the wealth they have. This creates a disturbance in the life of those who live in the concerned areas. In this way, the natural resources are availed by only those who have the capability. But the residents of the valley always remain poor. They are devoid of those resources which naturally belong to them. The writer states that, “The timber companies would love to cut the trees around the cemetery- each tree is worth several thousand dollars by itself” (Bass 22). The rich persons always create injustice for those who reside in those natural surroundings where

they set their business. Thus this rich class put its rights legally or forcefully on those resources which are naturally equal for all human beings.

Many such examples are traced in the selected short stories of the writer, Rick Bass, in which man becomes responsible for the unequal distribution of the natural resources among the human race. This happens only because of the prevailing values in this materialistic world where human beings are in a race to fulfil their vital needs. But this leads toward the supremacy of a particular group over those natural resources which are available for all the human beings. The story writer is concerned with this social ecologist theory which creates a distinction between the rich and poor people. This happens not only because of the social structure but it is also an outcome of the intraspecies' competition with each other who want to overpower the whole natural world.

Anthropocentric and Ecocentric Concerns

The anthropocentric concern places 'human' at the center of everything. The other inhabitants of the earth are considered only as resources for human beings to be consumed. This also may refer to the utilitarian approach in regard to man. Whatever he finds useful, he will consider the utility and importance of that particular entity accordingly and seemingly a thing, place or animal which is not of any use or importance to him is considered waste or unimportant and is eventually subjected to indifference and exploitation. In the stories of Rick Bass, this anthropocentric concept is shown clearly that how human beings use the natural resources according to their needs and for their development ignoring and destroying them with a very cold attitude.

Bass in his story, "The Valley", presents a scenario of the barbecue lunch where all the people of the valley get together for merry making and one of those people, who hosts and organizes the fiesta, is responsible for huge nuisance for the animals living in the same valley. "Joe shorts the siren's wires with the blade of his pocketknife. Wolves, Coyotes, and dogs go crazy when he does that" (Bass 21). Thus, one can clearly observe the obvious indifference of human beings towards other inhabitants of the forest and the center of the main actions and interactions is the human being, all other inhabitants are rendered voiceless and helpless. Such a depiction of the relationship between man and Nature clearly takes the reader to meticulously observe the anthropocentric trend of the man's consciousness. The human being always tries to neglect the essence of other inhabitants on this planet earth. They come up with their priorities at first and fulfill them without considering the importance of other living beings. Joe always gives a message of the feast through the siren which is now waste for the government, but he never realizes the problem of animals and birds through which they suffer with this harsh sound produced in the valley through that siren. A person never considers the essence of other living and non-living beings until and unless they are promising enough to provide good resources to him.

As the anthropocentric term takes human being as the central power of all living beings, its contrary term ecocentrism takes it as the root cause of the environment problems created by the humans. Our environment is under stress only because humans- the ruling body of the planet, perceive the ecosystem keeping in mind their own comforts while ignoring even the slightest importance all other entities have in maintaining and sustaining the eco system. In the story, "Lease Hound", the narrator stated that, "What is the worst sin? Brother Jansen said it was the sin of inattentiveness. Of taking God's glories and gifts for granted. Of assuming they are our due" (Bass 401). There are such arguments to advocate the supremacy of man above all other species on the planes which not only show the selfish nature of modern man but also his distance from the inherent animalistic values which are responsible for his being happy and healthy.

Anthropocentrism can be critiqued and mimicked by a witty illustration of an earthworm in comparison to man. Like an earthworm, who thinks that mud and rain is the only world he has to his extension, it is very well possible for man to be as ignorant as an earthworm. Man must not mistake himself to be the supreme species on the planet as there are limited sounds, colors and odors that he can smell. Also, this is not a matter of winning a competition only, but of the fair and justice on the basis of willful living. Most of the time, when hunters or tourists come to the wild or forest areas, they create great problems for all the living and non-living habitants of the concerned areas.

The term, 'Ecocentrism' or 'Deep ecology' takes the entire ecosystem at the center and not solely the human. Deep ecologists have a viewpoint that each organism has an inherent value whether it is living or non-living. One has to recognize the intrinsic value of all biota as well as to understand the ecological interconnectedness of all the organisms on the planet earth. The actions of humans should be guided by that sense which tells them what is good for the whole biosphere.

Rick Bass, in his story, "Antlers", shows his concern for the wild animals as well for other non-living entities through the character, Suzie, who opposes hunting of wild animals in any form. "Wild animals are different. Wild animals enjoy life. They live in the woods on purpose. It's cruel to go in after them and kill them. It's cruel" (Bass 25). The concern is shown even for those wild animals of the valley which are not useful for the human beings of that area. But the people of the valley recognize their value for the place. The human beings who are living in the wild places have an inherent value to understand the importance of all living inhabitants of the whole eco-sphere. The main problem lies with those people who are more related to utilitarian world. And these people are always in search of such opportunities which are conducive to their own profit gain rather than keeping in mind the various factors which affect other inhabitants' existence. The human being who resides in the wild areas consider the grief of wild animals and birds as their own. In the story, to stop hunting, Suzie does whatever she can

do. “It made Suzie furious to see Randy practicing with his bow and arrows. She circulated a petition in the valley to ban bowhunting” (Bass 26).

Deep Ecologists also give stress to understand the concept of the ‘self’ with which anyone can recognize the inherent value within himself. The human being does not behave well with natural world and all this happens because of the materialistic world in which they reside. In this materialistic world, the human being drives himself with utilitarian approach and sees other living inhabitants according to their usefulness. But the term ‘deep ecology’ is bound to remove this shallow approach towards environmentalism. It gives respect to the inherent value of all living and non-living inhabitants of the planet earth. This ecocentric approach binds man to reduce his vital needs and pressurizes him to think about the whole natural world with a respect and worth. It does not permit human being to do wrong with the richness and diversity of natural world only for the sake of his development. The major idea of these ecologists is to understand the ‘self’ and with the recognition of this greater self, this utilitarian approached society can be changed. Thus, this becomes the traditional solution of a great problem which a human being does not want to understand.

It is quite evident in the short stories of Bass that there has been a certain degree of stress which has been laid down upon the discovery of the ‘self’ and connecting it with the larger than life-ecosystem to further achieve a sense of belongingness and peace which would also help in bringing justice and fair to the existence of all the living and non-living entities of the planet Earth. Man’s current cultural and ideological world is far from the inherently accumulated sense of wilderness which lies deep down his unconscious mind and is the only place of real pleasure and happiness. All such ecocentric concerns aim at such a utopian world where all living and non-living entities would have autonomous functioning and man wouldn’t knowingly destruct or obstruct the way in which the ecosystem functions. The short stories of Bass urge upon their readers to observe such power structures and represent such a situation where one feels obligated to stop and think the ways of the world. These stories seem to propound the same larger than life idea of ecocentrism with well framed stories aimed at analyzing and critiquing the ways in which contemporary human civilization functions and how it obstructs the autonomous functioning of various other co-constituents of the planet.

Rick Bass always stresses on his readers to take action for their surroundings through his stories. Bass advocates the ethical and practical implications of environmental literary activism. Bass is clearly advocating activism rather than mere talking and discussing stuff. The lines from his short story, “Days of Heaven” depict his proposition clearly that “if you don’t stop something yourself, if you don’t single handedly step up and change things, they aren’t you just as guilty” (Bass 56). Rick Bass doesn’t represent the traditional relation of man with natural world in the form of destructor and also doesn’t want to stop man’s interaction with wild places but he advocates to put wild places with official labels of wilderness with which the destruction of those

places can be controlled. Bass campaigns for maintaining the virginity of the places which are road less and, thus, untouched and to preserve them as official wilderness where one can remain hidden from the civilized society which has been developed on the stake of natural entities. Bass demonstrates that if the wildness of these valleys can be saved, it will prove that a man doesn't totally engage with the process of consumerism, materialism or individualism.

Conclusion

Rick Bass is known as a writer who is deeply engaged with the issues of wildness and natural world and he has also been working phenomenally as an environmental activist. Bass considers the valley's wildness a powerful source of intrinsic happiness and values. Bass does not follow the traditional way to represent the non-human world by showing its destruction, manipulation or domination by humans but he speaks for the silent natural entities through his literary works making them the subjects of his fiction. Rick Bass's writing is about conserving the place where he resides and with his literary activism, Bass also tries to instill in his readers to take actions to conserve other such wild places as well.

Thus, the various strands of Ecocriticism in Rick Bass's stories seem to insist us to ponder over our ways of living and the way it affects the lives of other living and non-living organisms around us. It also states that the life experience should not be that of a separate and disconnected being but as a part of the whole system. Like we experience sudden withdrawal from a threat or harm to our body, the same should be experienced for the super body - the earth. Such a change in ideas, values and beliefs will further modify the ongoing of our actions. If we see ourselves separate from the world then all such ideas and beliefs will seem to us insignificant and useless and we'll simply dismiss such ideas which will never be able to influence our actions and we'll thus continue the business as usual and won't make any difference.

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