

ISSN:0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

*The Criterion*



**Vol. 9, Issue-III June 2018**

**9 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS**

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**ISSN 2278-9529**

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**

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## The Ecocritical Discourse in the Anglo Saxon Poetry

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**Article History:** Submitted-25/04/2018, Revised-09/07/2018, Accepted-17/07/2018, Published-25/07/2018.

### **Abstract:**

Ecocriticism is the new branch of critical theory which came into existence in 1970s and flourished in 1990s. Ecocriticism deals the relationship between Environment and literature and how the two are inter-connected and inter-related with each other. Not only has this but it deciphers the underlying meaning of the environmental concerns in the text, i-e, the influence of the physical environment on the characters, the setting, plot and the authorial intention towards the concern of the environment. The relationship between the two had begun from the very existence of the first literature which was mostly oral. The central theme of the early literature was the natural beauty and the gods which were the only sources for the literature. Anglo Saxon literature which is the beginning of the British literature from the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century AD traces the great impact of the nature. The literature was mainly oral and the poetry genre was dominant, and the other genres like drama and novel did not come into existence. The Anglo Saxon poetry is filled with the natural description and reveals the eco-consciousness among the readers and eco friendly attitude of the writers and the people. The aim of the paper is to trace its very influence of Ecocriticism on the Anglo Saxon literature which marks the beginning of our present day literature written in English. It will explore how the natural beauty and physical environment were the staple diet for the early literature of the Great Britain. It will also emphasize that how and why the early writers depict the natural environment in their works and what influence it has made on them.

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism, Environment, British Literature, Eco-consciousness, Anglo-Saxon, Nature.*

## **Introduction:**

In the present day world, the biggest challenge is the natural disaster which has reached at its peak. The two world wars and the mass destruction have shaken not only the human world but also the non human world. The rising of industries, factories, usage of nuclear and poisonous weapons, the invention of different pesticides has got our planet into hot water. What is the biggest concern for the scientists, philosophers, scholars and literatures is that how to protect the earth and the environment with which we share the unbreakable bond. Thus environmental study did not remain confine to the natural sciences only but the writers and the literary scholars also start to show their concern towards it. The environmental concern came into literature in the late 1970s and it flourished in 1990s which is called Ecocriticism. The Ecocriticism and Ecocritics emphasize that the human and non human world is interlinked and cannot be separated. Every animate and inanimate being on earth has the democratic right to live. We all the creatures share the mutual relation with one another. As we have already discussed that the Ecocriticism is the recent genre of literary theory but if we go through the history of literature we will come to know that from its very beginning the literature and the environment have the body and soul relationship. The British literature which came into existence from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD is majorly divided into three periods, i-e, The Old English (Anglo Saxon) period (450-1066), the Middle English (1100-1500), and the Modern Period (1500- present).

## **Depiction of Nature in Anglo Saxon Poetry**

Anglo Saxon literature was the earliest literature of The Great Britain which started in the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Anglo Saxons were the tribes who came from Scandinavia and the nearby islands and settle down in England in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. The word Anglo has been come from the word “ongul” which means “the angler” who catches fishes. And the word Saxon comes from “seax” which was a kind of weapon with which they used to hunt the animals and fight with other tribes. These people were rovers, fierce in battle, and very gallant who used to fight and spent most of the time in angling, and hunting the animals. The early Anglo Saxons were pagans who worship father sun and mother earth. They had what Bron Tylor stated in his book *Dark Green Religion: Nature spirituality and Planetary Future*, “The Dark Green Religion-religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent

care- has been spreading rapidly around the world.... I label such religion dark not only to emphasise the depth of its consideration for nature ( a deep shade of green concern).” (Taylor, ix)

At the end of the day, the Anglo Saxon tribes used to sit together and would recite the poetry. The poetry was mostly heroic in nature. The main two subjects of their poetry were the description of war, and the portrayal of physical environment. Every tribe had their own poets and singers whom they call “scop” and “gleemen”. These scops used to praise the wild animals and describe the natural beauty in their poetry. The poetry was mainly elegies, riddles, lays, war songs and epic poems.

The first known poet of Anglo Saxons was Caedmon who was a shepherd. Cadmon recited verses during the grazing of his live stock in the forests and the open grassfields. Caedmon was unlettered man but was divinely inspired. He was one of the representative poet of Anglo Saxon who wrote religious poetry. He is very famous for *Paraphrase*. In this poem the post describes the creation of the world and description and the praise of God. However it is instilled with natural description and the love for nature:

Here First the Eternal Father, guard of all  
Of heaven and earth raised up the firmament  
The Almighty Lord set firm by his strong power  
The roomy land; gross greened not yet the plane,  
Ocean for spread hid the wan ways in gloom.  
Then was the spirit gloriously bright  
Of Heaven’s keeper borne over the deep  
Swiftly The Life giver, the Angel Lord,  
Over the ample ground bade come forth tight.  
Quickly the High King’s bidding was obeyed.  
Over the waste there shone the light’s holy ray,

The parted He, Lord of the Triumphant might,

Shadow from shining, darkness from the light

Light, by the word of God, was, first named day. (Mundra)

Caedmon, praises the God and extols His honor with different beautiful names but he also feels the very presence of the nature, when he says “The roomy land”, “Ocean for spread hid the wan ways in gloom”, “shadow from shining, darkness from the light”. The speaker recognizes The Almighty Lord through the nature and his power of creation. The untainted and virgin nature was the manifestation of God who was and is the sole preserver and protector of the whole universe

Another poet was Cynewulf who wrote number of poems such as *The Seafarer*, *Andreas*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Wanderer*, *The Phoenix* etc. In addition to this, there were other poems also who reveal the love and attraction of Anglo Saxons towards the nature and gallantry. Cynewulf expresses his joy when he describes the sea in his poem *The Seafarer*:

The wild rise of the waves

The close watch of night

At the dark prow in danger

Of dashing on lock

The whirl joy of waters

The whirl of salt spray (Mundra)

The poet finds ecstasy in the sea life while he observes the minute details of its every moment. He gives the vivid description of the sea in his one of the *Riddle* entitled *Andreas*. The speaker feels the great concern of the whales, and fish which was chief trade of Anglo Saxons. The love for amphibians was in blood of the old English tribes:

Then was sorely troubled,

Sorely wrought the whale-mere. Wallowed there the horn fish,

Glided through the great deep; and the grey-backed gull

Wheeled in air, of slaughter greedy! Dark the stormsun grew;

Waxed the wind in gusts..... (Mundra)

In both the poetries-pagan and Christian, there is an extreme devotion for nature. The reason behind the love for nature by Anglo-Saxons is their close connection to nature and their proximity with the animals, birds, mountains and the earth. Before converting into Christianity they consider Earth their mother that they worship. In this sense they revered every non human object and found it the inseparable part of their lives. We get the fine expression of nature when we go through these lines:

Blast of the tempest- it aids our oars;

Rolling of thunder - it hurts us not

Rush of the hurricane- bending its neck

To speed us wither our wills are bent (Mundra)

The poet reveals the love of the nature in these lines. Even the speaker finds the positivity in the negative side of the nature when he says “Blast of the tempest- it aids our oars”, the cruel storm helps the speaker to run his boats, and they don’t feel any kind of fear in the fierce sound of thundering. The poet describes the things in detail. We can realize that Anglo Saxons had kith and kin relationship with the nature. After converting into Christianity in the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Anglo Saxons did not alter their subject matters of theme of nature. They recognized the fact that the Bible says that the man created by God from the earth (clay), so their reverence towards the mother earth did not get altered. As Greg Ghristian tropes are problematic for Ecocritics... the underlying narrative structure of Christian mythology claims a directionality and coherence. They hunted the wild animals and roam in the forest lands, so their poetry reveals the description of the trees, mountains, rocks and different other species. “Laden with leaves is the birch, high is its helm, decked out with beauty its branches, in touch with the air.” In the poem *The Wife’s Compliant*, the speaker says:

Men have garred me dwell to a grave of woodland

Under an oak tree, hidden in an earthen cave

Old is this earth hall; I am all out wearied:

Dark are these deep dells; high the down above;

Bitter my burg-hedges, with wild briars over waxen.

When in early dawn all alone I go

Underneath the oak, round about my lair,

There I sit and weep through the summer- lengthened day. (Mundra)

The fine description of oak tree creates the beautiful picture in our minds and we feel it's very presence. The speaker finds solace under the tree in the forest where there is pin drop silence. These lines portray the eco-friendly atmosphere of the old English people. The nature which was not tampered by humans through the modern technologies was pure and pristine. It was the time when the man's sole companion was nature so how could he like the modern people destroy it for his selfish purpose. Here in the lines we see the same attitude of the speaker that we have witnessed in the former lines that he does not present nature as evil. The speaker in the gothic environment finds joy and delight when he says, "Dark are these deep dells; high the down above..... There I sit and weep through the summer- lengthened day." The speaker unburdens himself under the oak tree because he feels that the nature can give him courage and can listen to him.

In the same poem, the poet shows the compassion towards the animals like the stag, the eagle, the wolf, the cuckoo, the wild swan, the falcon and the nightingale

Voiceless is my robe when in villages I dwell

When I fare the fields, when I drive the flood along.

But at times my glorious garment and the lofty air

Have me high above all the houses of the heroes,

Wheresoe'er the craft of clouds carries me away,

For the folk above-then my fretted feathers

Loudly rusting hum, lulling, sound along,

Sing a sun bright song- then restrained to earth no more,

Over flood and field I'm a spirit faring faring far! (Mundra)

We get the beautiful description of a swan that how its feathers makes sound when a rapid wind strikes to its feathers. The speaker feels the natural connection towards the animals that are the part of the natural habitat. These animals at that time were not endangered because man was more close to nature than now. The eco-system was in a balance and man and animals share the feelings for one another. The natural depiction in Anglo Saxon poetry is the same as the 18<sup>th</sup> century romantic poetry whose predominant theme and setting was nature. SA Brook writes, "This is of a quality almost unimaginable in poetry of the eighteenth century. It is like poetry of our own times. The "craft power of clouds" is phrase Wordsworth might have used." The romantic poetry of 18<sup>th</sup> century is the echo of the Anglo Saxon poetry.

One of the representative poems during Anglo Saxon period is the epic Beowulf. The poem is written by an anonymous author. The poet describes the heroic deeds of the hero Beowulf in this poem but he does not ignore the geography of the place in which the poem has been set. The poet describes the natural setting in a very detailed way which creates the beautiful and compact imagery in the mind of the reader. The speaker says:

Forth from the fens, from the misty moorland,

Grandel came glinding- God's wrath he bore-

Came under clouds, until he saw clearly,

Glittering with gold plates, the mead hall of men.

Down fell the door, though fastened with fire bands; (Mundra)

The poet creates the macabre scene of the monster with the adding of the natural glory. The setting of the poem is very vast which makes it more enthralling. The poem *Seafarer* which we



have already described above is allegorical in the subject matter and the description of the ocean has been used as a metaphor in this poem. The poet says:

The hail flew in showers about me: and there I heard only

The roar of the sea, ice cold waves, and the song of the swan;

For pastime the gannets' cry served me; ..... (Mundra)

The love and admiration for nature is visible in the works of Old English writers. It clearly indicates that how from the centuries literature has been representing the nature and the physical environment. The burning question before the Ecocritics and environmentalists today is that how can we protect the environment from the destruction and dilapidation caused by the human beings. Ken Hiltner who observed the Milton's England states, "Early modern England, especially London, was confronted with the host of environmental crisis, including urban air pollution, acid rain, deforestation, endangered species, wetland loss and rampant consumerism." (Ken) The main concern of the Ecocritics is to create the eco-consciousness among the people and the readers and try to re back the idyllic beauty of the old world like Anglo Saxons.

The Ecocritical and Environmental study has started in America in 1970s but it found its roots in Britain, notably, in Anglo Saxon literature. Jennifer Neville opines that in Anglo Saxon literature there is a lack of realism and largely portrays the nature and culture. She says that the poetry reveals "how the human race views itself, what it prizes and despises, through its assimilation of otherwise natural data to value-laden patterns." She further says "it is a reflection of human construction." (Jennifer)

### **Conclusion**

Although the Ecocritical studies emerged in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but the relevance of the Ecocriticism is as old as literature. The Ecocritics concerns the basic questions of our very existence and our relationship with the environment. It looks for our own house, place, home and habitat that is known as *oikos*. We the human beings feel alienated with our own planet as it has got turned into a chaotic planet by our actions and activities. Looking and analyzing the global catastrophes, we realized that how much we have got changed and became different from our glorious past and got trapped in vulnerable present and we can see the danger of our future if our attitude towards our natural objects do not change. The Anglo Saxon behavior was much

ecocentric rather than anthropocentric. The nature and culture during Anglo Saxon time went hand in hand. The human beings and non human beings such as animals, rocks, hills, water and rain were inextricably intertwined with one another. Comparing the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature with Anglo Saxons, we can say that there is spiritual and natural exile of human beings. They brought the catastrophic situations to their own home for just to fulfilling their selfish desires. The nature and culture in the Anglo Saxon literature played a body and soul relationship.

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