Eco-criticism is a field of study that focuses on the representation of Nature and ecological objects in various literary genres such as poetry, novels, short stories, nature-writings or in any creative or literary work. It studies various aspects of nature and ecology as expressed in literature. It is a consciousness-raising phenomenon that aims to create awareness among the readers about the pressing ecological concerns such as misuse of nature and natural objects for material needs, capitalistic control over the natural things (e.g. building of mills and dams on rivers; use of rivers and sea for transportation and for commercial purposes; incessant cutting of trees and clearing of forests for obtaining timber, rubber and for other purposes – like for the manufacture of paper, medicines, etc., and also for building of roads, railway tracks, and housing sectors; killing of animals and other creatures – insects, birds, reptiles as well as sea-creatures – for obtaining food, leather, feathers, tusks, horns and for use in the manufacturing of numerous human products), and degradation of environment through emanations from automobiles, factories and industries and various radioactive materials thereby polluting it severely. Eco-criticism aims to show how the fictions, poems and nature-writings that are eco-centered and are concerned about the environment, can contribute a lot in resolving these urgent and crucial environmental problems.

Eco-criticism derives its basic formulations from British Romanticism, especially Wordsworthian romanticism. Romanticism in literature was a definite reaction to industrialization that leads to the destruction of nature and natural surroundings. Similarly, eco-criticism is a larger version of romanticism that has raised its voice against the burning issues of environment, the commercialization of natural objects and worst effects of several cultural activities. The present paper is an attempt to study the possible relationships of the characters and their activities with the world of Nature and its activities in the novel The Mill on the Floss by George Eliot. It traces how the lives and the activities of the characters in the novel influence the life and activities of Nature which in turn affects their world as well and that these influences may be good or bad. The novel brings out the reciprocal cause-and-effect relationship between the world of man and the world of Nature. In the novel, George Eliot has presented a realistic picture of the Victorian society, a society which has gripped itself with the ongoing developments – urbanization, industrialization, and capitalism that has begun to effect the outer as well as the inner world of man and Nature. This novel can be read from different perspectives, but the main concern of the paper is to read it from an eco-critical Marxist perspective. According to Nayar:

Eco-criticism originates in a bio-social context of unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of nature, worrying definitions and shapes of ‘development’ and environmental hazard. While it does not seek to alter the courses of any of these very real factors, its task is to see how theoretically informed readings of cultural texts can contribute not only to consciousness raising but also look into the politics of development and the construction of ‘nature’. (Contem. Lit. and Cult. Theory 241)
The Mill on the Floss is regarded as “Eliot’s ‘most Wordsworthian novel’” in which she is also “most concerned with both female education and brother-sister relationship” (Homans 578). The main characters in the novel, Tom and Maggie are intricately linked with the natural world and their brother-sister relationship comes out in a most vivid manner when it is seen in relation with the world of Nature. All this is most Wordsworthian in nature. The character of Maggie is so much intertwined and interwoven within the fabric of symbolic manifestations of Nature around her that it displays itself in variegated colours. Leaping and playing in the lap of Nature has made this naughty little girl wild and frolicsome like nature. She is even termed ‘gypsy’ girl by her aunt Pullet (gypsies are known to be wild and savage who mostly live in and around natural surroundings). Maggie has a great fascination and an utmost love for water which frequently frightens her mother that she will some day be drowned in it as she once admits before her husband, Mr. Tulliver (Maggie’s father): “Ah I thought so – wanderin’ up an’ down by the water, like a wild thing: she’ll tumble in some day” (Eliot 12). The narrator refers to her as a “small mistake of nature” and compares her with a ‘small Shetland pony’ when she incessantly tosses her head “to keep the dark heavy locks out of her gleaming black eyes – which gave her very much an air of a small Shetland pony” (13). Further, Maggie is compared with a Skye terrier, (a dog breed). Her brother, Tom is in sheer contrast to Maggie. While Maggie is of animalistic kind and is much like a ‘half-wild’ Nature and does naughtiest things but whenever she does, she does them accidentally or in spontaneous overflow of her feelings but not wilfully, Tom is aggressive and badly treats the animals or birds around him. The Garum Firs of his aunt Pullet presents itself as a treat to this “young gentleman fond of animals – fond, that is, of throwing stones at them” (Eliot 75). He derives pleasure in frightening the birds and the animals, he had even once been found guilty by Mr. Pullet “of running after the peacock, with an illusory idea that fright would make one of its feathers drop off” (80). The man has always tamed Nature to become its master that is, said-to-be his inferior. Even Tom shows this instinct from an early age as shown in the following passage:

he was often observed peeping through the bars of a gate and making minatory gestures with his small fore-finger while he scolded the sheep with an inarticulate burr, intended to strike terror into their astonished minds; indicating thus early that desire for mastery over the inferior animals, wild and domestic, including cockchafers (i.e. beetles), neighbours’ dogs and small sisters, which in all ages has been an attribute of so much promise for the fortunes of our race. (Eliot 78)

This contrast in the characters of Tom and Maggie, however, doesn’t affect their relationship. They continue to love each other as brother and sister. The earlier part of the novel presents the narrator’s subsequent reflections on the value of memories of a childhood passed in Nature. Both Tom and Maggie love to pass their time in the open lap of Nature. Maggie is innocent and self-absorbed child, who like Lucy in Wordsworth’s “Lucy Poems”, love to rejoice in the lap of nature, play and leap about among the trees, and rush along the flow of water of the river Floss. She always remains absorbed and wrapped-up in herself yet it does not mean that she is selfish; it is all due to her forgetfulness. But whenever she is in a compromising situation regarding her brother, Tom, she becomes selfish in a manner that reflects her sisterly love for her brother.

Nature not only plays a great role in the development of the characters of Tom and Maggie but also influences their brother-sister relationship. Tom has a great love for the rabbits which he had bought by spending all his money and has instructed Maggie to take care of them till he comes back from his boarding school. But she fails to take care of them due to her forgetfulness and all of them die due to starvation and when Tom hears of this he
feels deeply hurt and punishes Maggie for it by putting an end to all communication. The carelessness and forgetfulness of Maggie strains their relationship for a time being. Just as Wordsworth rejoices in Nature and in every meanest flower that blows and just as his heart dances with the “dancing daffodils”, Tom and Maggie also rejoice in Nature but they have their own way of reaping joys out of it. Maggie rejoices in everything that is connected with Nature while Tom enjoys fishing, engages himself in playful activities with his naughtiest friend, Bob, such as frightening of birds and other such activities. And whenever Tom gets upset with Maggie he runs away to play with Bob. He forgets Maggie completely whenever he is in Bob’s company. Bob also seems to be closer to nature as evident through his activities which appears to be diabolical to Maggie: “for she had seen Bob take off his cap to show a little snake that was inside it, and another time he had a handful of young bats; whenever he sees a bird’s egg, he can instantly tell “whether it was swallow’s, or a tomtit’s, or a yellow hammer’s”; he can find out all “the wasp’s nests, and could set all sorts of traps; he could climb the trees like a squirrel, and had quite a magical power of detecting the hedgehogs and stoats”; he even does naughty things “such as making gap in the hedgerows, throwing stones after the sheep, killing a cat that was wandering incognito” (Eliot 41). And as all of these little children grow into larger beings, they retreated away from their interconnectedness with the things of nature. As Sueellen Campbell aptly says: “this view is the Wordsworthian one that as children we are in perfect harmony with nature, but then we lose that harmony as we develop the barrier of a self” (135).

The relationship of the novel with Wordsworthian romanticism stands out most vividly and exquisitely in the fishing scene of the novel and subsequent reflections on the memories of the childhood days. Both Tom and Maggie love fishing at the Round Pool. While both Tom and Maggie engage themselves in “fishing harmoniously together at ‘the old favourite spot’, ‘Maggie thought it would make a nice heaven to sit by the pool in that way and never be scolded’” (Homans 583). This ‘old favourite spot’, also known as the Round Pool – a ‘wonderful pool’ made by the floods long ago, “is a pool of unknown depth and mysterious origin that is literally hidden from view, being ‘framed in with willows and tall reeds, so that the water was only to be seen when you got close to the brink’ (583). When both Tom and Maggie are thus busy in this fishing expedition, Tom acts as a supervisor guiding her in this “practical business of fishing” while Maggie, who has no interest in this, “had forgotten all about the fish and was looking dreamily at the glassy water” just at this instant she hears Tom’s “loud whisper” that makes her frightened as if she has done “something wrong, as usual” but it turns out instead that she has inadvertently caught a fish, she “is not conscious of unusual merit”(583). Her happiness constitutes not in this ‘unusual merit’ of catching a fish but “in such accidental absence of wrong-doing and listening alternately to Tom’s whispers and to the ‘Happy whisperings’ exchanged between the ‘light dipping sounds of the rising fish’” (that she has caught in her fishing rod) “and the gentle rustling of the willows and reeds” (583). This lovely and beautiful childhood scene arouse in the hearts of Tom and Maggie – who are in happy and sublime communings not only with each other but also with the water and the willows – a vague idea that their lives will remain forever the same. In the end of this passage, the narrator generalizes the Wordsworthian principle which this scene seems to generate: “Life did change for Tom and Maggie; and yet they were not wrong in believing that the thoughts and loves of these first years would always make part of their lives” (Eliot 36).

In this novel, Nature plays not an impassive role, but is active throughout the novel as it exerts its influences on each and every human being and on all the phenomena going on in the human world. And this “thoughts and loves of these first years” (36) refers not only to the love of children for each other but also for the natural objects in their natural surroundings –
the mill, their own little river, the Ripple, the great river Floss; the fish, the water-rats and
snakes of the Round pool as well as the water of these rivers and the pool – that act not just as
backgrounds to these childish ‘thoughts and loves’ and the brother-sister relationship but
create a dignified charm upon them through its inanimate and sublime presence. This
childhood love for Nature is best explicit in this Wordsworthian frame of reference:

We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it – if it
were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to
gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass – the same hips
and haws on the autumn hedgerows – the same redbreasts that we used to call “God’s
birds”, because they did no harm to the precious crops. What novelty is worth that
sweet monotony where everything is known, and loved because it is known? (Eliot
36)

The novel also provides us a full view of the wonderful landscape surrounding the
river Floss that resembles the ‘Wordsworthian world’. Following is an account of the narrator
that seems to reflect the scene’s intense power in arousing the spontaneous recollections
of emotions in the heart of the narrator:

The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow brown foliage of the
oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell
and the ground ivy at my feet – what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or
splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres
within me as this home-scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-
notes, this sky, with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a
sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows – such things as these are
the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle
inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. (Eliot
36)

In fact, the whole of the novel is studded and sprinkled throughout with the minute
and picturesque descriptions of nature which provide a panoramic view of the atmosphere,
the objects and the inhabitants of the all-pervasive Nature. However in the novel, we can also
trace some differences in Eliot’s descriptions of Nature and those of Wordsworth’s. While
Eliot’s natural descriptions can be seen in relation to the significance of the “rural” or natural
objects, Wordsworth’s descriptions concentrate on the solitariness of the childhood in Nature.
As Margaret Homans says: “the child’s love of “rural objects” leads here, not to deeper,
wider kinds of love, but simply to a renewed love of those identical objects. Even the
expected reference to the endurance of Maggie’s love for Tom – for which there would in any
case be no place in the Wordworthian paradigm of solitary childhood in Nature – is replaced
by this love of objects” (584).

The novel seems to promise an idyllic harmony between the world of man and the
natural world. However, on the other hand it also brings out the appropriation of this natural
world by the same human world for its materialistic purposes. According to John Kucich,
“George Eliot’s early novels cherish a world of objects” which are “always embedded in
human centers of meaning” and these natural objects are valued by Eliot “only insofar as they
serve human knowledge, motives, and needs” and “that this intimate relation between man
and matter” is considered “to be one phase of her moral program” (558). He further says:

In the very first chapter of The Mill on the Floss, for example, the narrator surveys
rustic objects in what has conventionally been understood as a benign, Wordsworthian
discovery of the world’s symbolic plenitude: corn, ships, trees, rooftops – all can be said to take their meaning within a human act of imagination and memory; all are composed in relation to the narrator’s Wordsworthian desire to unite mind with matter. (558)

The Victorian age has adverted towards capitalism and materialism which is reflected in this realistic Victorian novel. This capitalistic and materialistic world that has severely and intricately entangled most of its inhabitants in its tight hold, has not only made them insensitive but also indifferent towards the very natural surroundings that have provided them with all those things or ‘rustic objects’ that has led them in their way ahead as well as with the basic amenities of life. But what they have given in return to this natural world? Nothing, they are only exploiting and appropriating the natural resources to gain more and more money and to achieve power and prestige in society. Eliot has tried to show in the novel how the “commercial objects relentlessly interpenetrate natural ones” and how “the novel’s eventual horror over St. Ogg’s commercial single-mindedness” has resulted in the hybridizing of the landscape that “can be seen as much more ambiguous and threatening than it is usually thought to be” (Kucich 559). The description of the town of St. Ogg’s in the opening of the novel depicts how the ‘raw matter’ or the natural objects are “never left at rest” but are “always invaded by economic matter”:

A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace. On this mighty tide the black ships – laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal – are borne along to the town of St.Ogg’s, which shows its aged, fluted red roofs and the broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the river brink, tinging the water with a soft purple hue under the transient glance of this February sun. Far away on each side stretch the rich pastures and the patches of dark earth, made ready for the seed of broad-leaved green crops, or touched already with the tint of the tender-bladed autumn-sown corn. (Eliot 7)

This description thus brings out the extent of the appropriation of the Nature or the “raw matter” for material purposes – such as use of ‘black ships’ that are “abruptly superimposed on a natural, watery ‘embrace’” (Kucich 559) of the river Floss, for the transportation of the commercial goods (fir-planks, oil-seeds, coal, etc.) and as the passage goes on, we are introduced to the horses, “the strong, submissive, meek-eyed beasts who” as the narrator fancies “are looking with mild reproach” at the waggoner “from between their blinkers” and who must work to earn their “hardly-earned feed of corn” (Eliot 8) and then to the mill that has been built on the small river Ripple (the tributary of the great river Floss) that belongs to Mr. Tulliver, the father of Tom and Maggie. For John Kucich:

The pastoral overtones in the novel pull one’s sensibilities toward approval, yet our familiarity with the novel’s great brooding theme – Maggie’s inability to free herself from a world that is overly pragmatic and overly “economic” in a number of senses – should make us wary of regarding any loss of natural independence to commercial uses too lightly. (Kucich 559-60)

We can trace the fusion of commercialized objects with the natural objects, which not only “subject the entire landscape” but also the ‘inferior’ creatures such as horses, fish and birds to the “functional use of man” (560). There are major symbolic objects in the novel that tend to “magnify such fusions: the mill itself, source of Maggie’s longing for origin, is rooted
in nature but swamped by its commercial destiny”; the Dutch vessels that are used by the commercial companies float on the river Floss and “even the landscape of the Red Deeps where Maggie meets lover Philip Wakem, appeals to her at first because of its irregular surface, which was formed by an abandoned stone quarry – the place is described slightly by the narrator as ‘mimic rock and ravine’” (Kucich 560).

The novel ends in a similar way as the “Lucy Poems” of Wordsworth. Just like Lucy in his poems, both Tom and Maggie are also born and brought up in the lap of Nature and are ultimately taken away by Nature itself in a very young age. When Maggie after her encounter with the passionate outpourings of Stephen Guest realizes the repercussions of this amoral attachment and disloyalty towards her cousin Lucy Deane, she retreats from this deserted situation back into her old situation – the process of self-renunciation, gradually winning back the love and trust of all. However, her relationship with her brother remains estranged. She is wavering between the two loves – that of Stephen and of Philip Wakem, if she lives she will have to confront this conflicting situation all throughout her life and in this condition death seems to be only possible alternative for her. She is reminded here of the same sublime spiritual words of Thomas à Kempis she has read years ago during her first self-renunciation process at a young age of thirteen. She prays to God to bless her with strength and patience: “O God, if my life is to be long, let me live to bless and comfort – ” just at this instant, “Maggie felt a startling sensation of sudden cold about her knees and feet: it was water flowing under her. She started up: the stream was flowing under the door that led into the passage. She was not bewildered for an instant – she knew it was flood” (Eliot 417). Thus, to raise her above from the ongoing conflicts in her mind and to unite her with her brother, the flood came rushing on. This final catastrophe in the lives of Tom and Maggie led to their reunion in death. They get drowned in the flood not because of this natural disaster but because of that “wooden machinery” that collided with their boat. So in the end, it is not the river Floss – the natural object but the cultural one or ‘the man-made object’ that has led to the destruction of humanity.

This novel seems to be an ecocritical satire on the “rural materialism” – a satiric attack on unbridled commercialism that is narrowing the cultural consciousness of the rustic people and has made them move away from their natural environment severing all of their associations and correspondences with Nature including the childhood reminiscences of the playful activities in the lap of nature. All the partners of the childhood days who as children are more close to Nature – Tom, Maggie, Lucy and Bob, as their characters grow and develop in the novel are losing away their innocent associations with the things and creations of Nature. They are tend to adopt the cultural ways of the life as they are living in such an age that is on the verge of becoming completely drenched in self-centered materialism and capitalism. As John Kucich admits in his review:

More broadly, the novel seems to lament the destruction of Maggie’s natural energies (she is often called ‘wild’ or compared sympathetically to animals), by the constricting economic and procedural preoccupations of St. Ogg’s, a town that has fallen ‘out of keeping with the earth’ and that has traded ‘the grandeur of the wild beast’ for an ‘oppressive narrowness’. . . . For the Tullivers and for St. Ogg’s, at least, the widespread use of nature for human purposes has destroyed its romantic, creative power, and Maggie’s hopeless separation from the organic world of her childhood – which has somehow become bound up in the legal and financial status of the mill – underscores the urgency of that loss. The conjunction of natural sites with functional sites haunts the very title of the novel, and Tom and Maggie are destroyed finally not just by nature and the flood but by “wooden machinery”. (561)
Thus, it is the commercialized object and the industrial town of St. Ogg’s-on-the-Floss that are at the root of the deaths of Tom and Maggie – who in their childhood days were more close to Nature and are in a way created by Nature itself. Hence, it is Nature that has been swamped by cultural intrusion into the realm of Nature. The novel clearly shows that the children must suffer for their elders’ mistakes of overpowering the world of Nature. It is thus apt to say here that – “Nature herself occasionally quarters an inconvenient parasite on an animal towards whom she has otherwise no ill-will” (Eliot 24). In this case this ‘inconvenient parasite’ is the flood and ‘animal’ – Tom and Maggie. Despite all this havoc caused by the floods, the life grows on and continues as such and both the nature and the humans eventually recover from the consequential effects of the flood. Nature renews itself into a purer shape, “repairs her ravages – repairs them with her sunshine, and with human labour”, however not completely as “the upturned trees are not rooted again; the parted hills are left scarred. . . . To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair” (Eliot 422). According to Fredrick Turner, “Nature bears the weight of our activities, but in the long run renews itself and remains just as it was. Left to itself, nature settles into a balance, a rhythm, that is eternal and unchanging” (42). And to make this nature more balanced, culture must step forward to include nature which is the part and parcel of its very existence, in its paraphernalia and must handle it with great care and concern.

Works Cited:


