



Thoreau's Ecocriticism: An Improved Means to Unimproved Ends

Vipin K. Sharma

Department of English, English Language Center, Jazan University, Jazan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Email address:

vipinaravali@gmail.com

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Abstract: The point of this paper is to foster an awareness of the varied uses to which scholars are putting the term 'ecocriticism' in varied perspectives today. Thoreau's *Walden* is such indisputable literary monument on environmental literature to explore, upkeep and strengthen interest in establishing pragmatic relationship between the human and natural worlds. Thoreau lived simply without "modern improvements" which he called "improved means to unimproved ends." This displays how one places oneself in the nature world, understands nature, and the environmental aspects to cast-off materialism. Thoreau rejects what is profane and superficial but pleads nature as the storehouse of sincerity and impartiality. He proves that society creates loneliness and fear, which can be dispelled by content with Nature. A man is never alone if he is aware of his non-human relationships. The paper perhaps is a seminal attempt to make some evolution toward fostering and legitimizing the sweats of ecocritics in ecocriticism (across) milieu. It sufficiently accounts for the personal connection and sense of responsibility towards self, society, literary studies and nature. Thoreau's *Walden* elevates the concept of ecocriticism further to have interdisciplinary impact beyond prejudice to create a 'universal discipline' to discuss, innovate and create healthy literature-environment anthology to live in for progenies. This convinces intellectuals to pursue an interest in ecology while enduring literary professionals. Thoreau's belief in nature sets new tenets that address the major ecological concerns to see it 'greening' to prevent 'The Endangered Earth- a virulent veracity' tomorrow.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Environment, Society, *Walden*

1. Introduction

We live in a dynamic world, *defacto*, undergoing inevitable major changes (technical); fast moving materialistic life sparing no place for human values (social); global warming- an era of environmental obliteration (environmental), and literary studies still in an age of constant flux. Besides, the outright absence of human touch with the natural world and the self-centeredness approach potentially created a space and contributed to environmental catastrophe. Foresee the colossus threat to our lives, ethics, values, and nature; the immediate glimpse and a unique approach to lessen the aforesaid problems and global environmental crises, which struck in mind to contribute essentially is the concept of ecocriticism.

The point of this paper is to foster an awareness of the varied uses to which scholars are putting the term in varied perspectives today. Besides, the paper will inspire ecocritics

(and would-be) to create new discernments and new critical paths in the ecocritical realm and opens new avenues to introspect how their perception and knowledge on ecocriticism lead to future advances and developments in the realms of scholarship and pedagogy.

The succeeding paragraphs will include literature review on the concept of ecocriticism, Thoreau's stout philosophy of simple life in nature through his indisputable literary and monumental work *Walden* preparing the concrete ground for ecocriticism with some constructive suggestions in the end. The scholar strongly feels that ecocriticism is a vital organ of academic disciplines and has a broader perspective to flourish in the global warming context today and ecocritics (and would-be) surely contribute to lessen the ecological problems by creating awareness among masses through their delightful works. (Sharma 2016:68) This would certainly bring the academics to the point of being cognizant of the outside world.

2. Literature Review

Eco-criticism deals with the self, society (human and culture) and the world (human and non-human) encapsulating the basic needs, glitches, and environmental predicaments. Ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his article 'an ecological poetics' articulated in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978 but gained momentum in the late 1990s. At the outset, there is little agreement on the basic principles, ethics and approaches for environmental related issues, even on the definition of, ecocriticism, which has developed considerably since its inception. The scholars initially did not pay much attention but later it flourished leaps and bounds becoming a buzz word today in all sphere of academics. The East and the West have been working toward greater understanding for centuries – with serious shortsighted errors. But in study on ecocriticism and literature, national boundaries can evaporate before the light of understanding. (Sharma 2016: 62)

Federick O Waage propounded the term 'ecocriticism' while editing "Teaching Environmental Literature: materials, Methods, Resources" in 1985 that was aimed to foster 'a greater presence of environmental concern and awareness in literary disciplines'. Later critics like Garrard, Glen Love, Cheryl Glotfelty, and others contributed alternative understandings of the concept and opine that ecocriticism is the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the nonhuman world and our relationship to it. William Rueckert in his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world" (1996:107). In this context, the possible relations between literature and nature are examined in terms of ecological concepts. The study is further enlightened and stretched through the works of Mike Kowalewski (literary studies), Donald Worster (history), Neil Evernden (environmental studies) who used and adhered to different approaches, methodologies, and disciplines necessary to accomplish the studies. The ultra-modern living resulting from innovations, globalization, materialism and erosion of human values contributed immensely to develop the concept of ecocriticism. Bates reinforced allied with core issues of present-day Green politics in England: "the greenhouse effect and the depletion of the ozone layer, the destruction of the tropical rainforest, the pollution of the sea, and, more locally, the concreting of England's green and pleasant land".

The major developments spread out significantly in the nineteenth century literature where Wordsworth (early nineteenth century) Emerson, Thoreau, William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke Paulding, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Whitman characterized nature to their best. Thoreau lived by the cove of Walden in order to be able to read the changing moods and whims of Nature. Like

Wordsworth, he was thrilled in the face of the freshness and charms of natural scenes, sight, and sounds. Walden Pond has become almost a symbol of permanence and eternity in art, in the same way as Yeats' Byzantium. John Burroughs and John Muir were mainly the two great American naturalists, whose early work was influenced by Whitman, particularly the essays collected in *Wake-Robin* (1871) and *Birds and Poets*. (1877). Mostly, the scholars undertook works on American and British literature from the last two centuries. Emerson's nature and Thoreau's Walden are perhaps considered the significant works of nature and ecology concerned. (Sharma 2016: 61)

Young's referred Gandhian tradition that emphasis the relation between non-western ecological resistance movements and feminism transforming it in subaltern women's interests, exposing the masculinist perspective of those Gandhian cooperatives. Consequently, Young gave primary references from India and Africa:

the *Chipko* (Himalayan) anti-deforestation movement in the 1970s, perhaps the best-known example of a modern peasant uprising organized around eco-socialist principles; the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save the Narmada Movement)'s continuing struggle against the damming of the Narmada river in north-west India and its consequent displacement of hundreds of thousands of local Adivasis (Indigenous people), a cause which has been given worldwide – if not always welcome – publicity in the writings of Arundhati Roy; and the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya, initiated by the feminist-activist Wangari Maathai in response to local women's concerns about the degradation of their environment. (Young: 100–08)

The concept entails to widen up its scope beyond literature and approaches to empower all other disciplines to undertake daunt task exploring the links that deal with the individual, society, and nature unswervingly contributing global warming and environmental concerns. The genuine works of ecocritics will possibly have more political, social and environmental implications ahead. The sagacious adoption, analysis, criticism and execution of the concept of ecocriticism would certainly move across other disciplines to reach grassroots become worldly. It indeed needs a diversity of ecocritical and ecological approaches through literary studies setting tenets that address the major ecological concerns to see it 'greening' to prevent 'The Endangered Earth- a virulent veracity' tomorrow. (Glotfelty, 1996: xvi)

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary concept that implies the study of literature and environment. It is also referred to as "green criticism", "green (cultural) studies", "ecopoetics" and "environmental literary criticism". Bate (1991) opines that ecopoetry isn't quite the same thing as "Green" or "nature" poetry; rather, it directly or indirectly engages with an eco-poetical philosophy that registers the impossible attempt to heal the divide between nature and consciousness by reconciling instrumental and immanent apprehensions of the earth. Bate clearly finds a comprehensive definition of ecopoetry in *The Song of the Earth*. Raymond Williams on

the uses and abuses of "Nature" in the history of the western environmental movement call "Nature" "the most difficult word in the language" (*Keywords* 219), and the discourse of Romanticism hardly helps things, oscillating as it does between material (immanent) and spiritual (transcendent) understandings of the word.

Camilo Gornides underscored the pragmatic concerns of ecocriticism in defining, "The field of enquiry that analyses and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations." (2006:16)

Ben De Bruyn (2010) discusses Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), its evocation of a post-apocalyptic ecology and memory and further shed light on various enigmatic aspects of the novel, including the unspecified cause of the disaster and the future fate of nature and culture. Bruyn shows how much McCarthy's bleak and dead landscape in 'The Road' is obliged to nature engrained in our cultural memory and consequently, sets an example of the role of responsibility, language and vision in the relationships humans have with nature connecting memory and environment.

All these texts express the ambivalence of the contemporary situation in which nature is either idealized or lamented; present or irretrievably lost. The term ecocriticism may be novice but the field of its study goes back to centuries where eminent writers have written enormous about environment in their works. (Sharma 2016: 63) Therefore, given the brief explanation on ecocriticism, the scholar has chosen the major work of Henry David Thoreau, a pioneer of American literature who contributed immensely even before the term ecocriticism devised. The personal connection and sense of responsibility towards self, society, literary studies (reading books) and nature has been beautifully described by Thoreau in his historic work *Walden* which is examined and explored in the light of ecocriticism in the succeeding paragraphs. The works of the nineteenth-century American philosopher, poet, and naturalist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) set a platform for ecocriticism that studies relationships between physical world- individuals, society, culture and the nature world. It would further try to answer Umberto Eco's question 'where does the truth of ecology lie'. Dana (1999:577).

3. Thoreau's *Walden*

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is one monument on environmental literature to explore and strengthen interest in establishing pragmatic relationship between the human and natural worlds. Henry's devoted love of life at the Pond and in Concord township, his intense religious feeling for nature, his protest at the waste of life through misdirection by the code of the mercantile system, his feeling for his friends, his interest in men - all this and more enter into *Walden*. Thus, Hudson regards *Walden* as "The one golden book in any century of best books."

Thoreau's attention was to live close Nature, much too

away from the artificial American Society. In "Where I Lived and What I Lived for", the second chapter of *Walden*, he explains that he went to live alone in the woods in a hut which he had himself built by the Walden Pond. He wanted to live simply without "modern improvements" which he called "improved means to unimproved ends." Sharma (2012:151) He wanted to reduce to minimum needs of living providing for his own necessary needs of 'economy'. He wanted to live according to his principle; "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life, which is required to be exchanged for it." This displays and substantiates how one places oneself in the nature world, understands nature, and the environmental aspects to cast-off materialism. In Nature he wished to live free to enjoy tranquility of his own soul, which he wanted to express by writing his experiences. Worster acknowledged these views of Thoreau when he noted that Nature's Economy is usually the only history of ecology cited by ecocritics.

When first Thoreau took up his abode in the woods he began to spend his days and nights there. It was the 4th July, 1845, the Independence Day of America. The only house he had been the owner of, was a tent which he used occasionally when making excursions in the summer. The Harivansh says: "An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning." Thomas (1986:56-57) Such was his abode where he enjoyed the company of the birds. Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make his life, simple and full of innocence with Nature herself. He got up early and bathed in the pond. Bathing was a kind of religious cleansing exercise and one of the best things, which he did. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awaking hour.

Thoreau says that "he went to woods because he wished to live freely to face essential facts of life." (Ibid:60) He did not wish to live, what was not life as living is so clear. He wanted to live deep and suck out all marrow of life.

Thoreau wanted to live as 'meanly' as ants do live. He wanted to live the life of an honest man in full simplicity – that simplicity in which only one meal is sufficient instead of three and ordinary dishes are eaten with the meals. He says "God himself culminates in the present moment and will never be more divine in the laps of Nature." (Ibid:65)

'Sounds' depicts a typical day of sounds, from early morning, through the afternoon, with its freight train, to the evening, and night, with its famous owls and frogs. This serves as a formal introduction to life at Walden Pond. It concluded with the discussion of the cock- crow, and thus returns to the theme of morning, which makes men "unspeakably healthy, wealthy, and wise." (Ibid:86)

Thoreau's "Solitude" and "Visitors" concentrate on communication. Thoreau rejects here what is profane and superficial. Nature is the storehouse of sincerity and impartiality, he pleads. Society creates loneliness and fear, which can be dispelled by content with Nature. A man is never alone if he is aware of his non-human relationships. "The value of man is not in his skin, that we should touch him." Solitude gives man a chance to draw closer to Nature, the living reality: "Solitude is an affirmation of trust in the

indescribable innocence and beneficence of nature.” It is against this scale that social relations can be judged. Real distance is that when we fail to communicate with another. Scheese (1994) endorses as Thoreau once wrote, there can be no history but natural history--if one believes that by ‘nature’ we mean the human as well as non-human world.

In “Visitors” Thoreau underlines the importance of ecocritics and intellectuals as visitors to his Walden Pond. He hails simple fisherman and hunters, poets and philosophers who come to woods for “freedom” of the soul. He says:

I had more cheering visitors than the last. Children come a berring, railroad men taking a Sunday morning walk in clean shirts, fishermen and hunters, poets and philosophers, in short, all honest pilgrims, who came out to the woods for freedom’s sake, and really left the village behind, I was ready to greet with, “Welcome, Englishmen! Welcome Englishmen!” for I had had communication with that race.” Thomas (1986:103)

Thoreau opined that the chapters “The Bean Fields” and “The Village,” do not represent a further exploration of what is wild or unknown. As beans are only another kind of weed, “They attached me to earth, and so I got strength like Antaeus.” (Ibid:104) The cultivation beans remind man of the prodigality, magnanimity, and impartiality of nature – the soundest basis for our trust and freedom from anxiety. Planted grain symbolizes the hope of feeding mankind. “The Village” emphasizes not society, but getting lost from it, its roads and land-marks. When Thoreau was put into jail for not paying tax and on recognizing the authority, he says: “Wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions and, if they can constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society.” Thoreau while challenging and advising says: “You who govern public affairs, what need have you to employ punishments? Love virtue and the people will be virtuous. The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends.” Matthiessen says: “From “The Bean Field” as the sphere of his main occupation, he moves on, in “The Village”, to his strolls for gossip, which, ‘taken in homeopathic doses, was really as refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs.’ (Ibid:307-308)

“The Ponds”, which identifies Walden Pond as the vital centre: “It is earth’s eye; looking into the beholder measures the depth of his own nature.” Here Nature is examined in a broader perspective. The facts in Nature provide the ultimate foundations of all human enterprises. Thoreau himself, the Pond is “a gem of the first water which Concord wears in her coronet.” (Ibid:120) Thus, the Walden Pond represents a state of unchanging perfection comparable to Blake’s Jerusalem, Keats’ Grecian Urn, and Yeats’ Byzantium. The Pond forms the central, key image in *Walden*. It gives us a window to look into the world of Nature. It reminds us of the seasonal renewal from the muddy, mundane, to the pure, solitary life, a life cleansed by regular change and reflecting heaven.

The colour of Walden Pond is Thoreau’s personal frontier between the natural and the divine. “Walden is blue at one

time and green at another, even from the same point of view lying between the earth and the heavens; it partakes of the colour of both.” *Walden*, is thus, green like the earth and blue like the sky. Thoreau’s expressed link with the Pond as: “It is continually receiving new life and motion from the sky.” The “rise and fall of Walden at long intervals,” serves to purify the shore regularly. It takes away the shrubby growth on the bank since the last rise --“pitchpines, birches, alders, aspens, and others -- and falling again, leaves an unobstructed shore.” Thoreau means to say that man’s spirit, which is sometimes overpowered with material wants, finally “emerges triumphant by rejecting the infringement of the material.” In fact, we may read *Walden* as notes towards a philosophy of human happiness. Sharma (2012:160)

Thoreau in ‘House-Warming’ advocates equality and ecological balance by adopting the same methods to warm himself in winter as some other animals “even the wildest animals love comfort and warmth as well as men; and they survive only because they are so careful to secure them.” Civilization means only improved methods.

Thoreau in ‘Spring’ gives an invitation to enter a new season of hope and self-exploration:

The first sparrow of spring! The year beginning with younger hope than ever! The faint silvery warblings heard over the partially bare and moist fields from the bluebird, the song sparrow, and the red-wing, as if the last flakes of winter tinkled as they fell! What at such a time are histories, chronologies, traditions, and written Revelations? The brooks sing carols and glees to spring.” (Ibid:205)

For Thoreau, spring comes as a symbol of bright prospects, hopes, and of eternity: So our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity.

Thoreau awakens all scholars to rise to the occasion unitedly put up a brave front to accommodate all disciplines favoring and recognizing ecocriticism as a separate entity to be taught all over the world. He mentioned in the last chapter of *Walden* “Conclusion”, which reiterates the theme of reawakened spiritual life - the flooding river of our lives. “The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will draw but all our muskrats.” And then, “The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.” The researcher, therefore, tried to answer Umberto Eco’s question justifying that the truth of ecology lies in the simple living of human beings in nature beyond the pursuits of materialism like Thoreau’s life in ‘Walden’ that would be dealt in literary works under the flagship of ecocriticism.

4. Conclusion

The scholar through Thoreau’s *Walden* has perhaps made a seminal attempt to make some evolution toward fostering and legitimizing the sweats of ecocritics in ecocriticism milieu.

Thoreau's Walden as an environmental literature establishes pragmatic relationship between the human and natural worlds where Thoreau lived simply without "modern improvements" which he called "improved means to unimproved ends." This displays how one places oneself in the nature world, understands nature, and the environmental aspects to cast-off materialism. Thoreau rejects what is profane and superficial but pleads nature as the storehouse of sincerity and impartiality. Sharma (2012:156) He proves that society creates loneliness and fear, which can be dispelled by content with Nature. A man is never alone if he is aware of his non-human relationships. It sufficiently accounts for the personal connection and sense of responsibility towards self, society, literary studies and nature. Thoreau's Walden elevates the concept of ecocriticism further to have interdisciplinary impact beyond prejudice to create a 'universal discipline' to discuss, innovate and create healthy literature-environment anthology to live in for progenies. Besides, the paper further explored and opens boulevards and vistas to researchers to introspect how their perception and knowledge on ecocriticism lead to future advances and developments in the realms of ecological and literary studies, scholarship and pedagogy. The sagacious adoption, analysis, criticism and execution of the concept of ecocriticism would certainly move across other disciplines to reach grassroots become worldly. It finally aspires other envisioned intellectuals to unite to put groundbreaking labors to promulgate the conception of ecocriticism while strengthening apparent connection between the literature and the environment. This convinces intellectuals to pursue an interest in ecology while remaining literary professionals. Thoreau's belief in nature sets new tenets that address the major ecological concerns to see it 'greening' to prevent 'The Endangered Earth- a virulent veracity' tomorrow.

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