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Nature and Human Civilization: John Muir's Perception

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Abstract

This paper explores John Muir's perception regarding the relationship between nature and human civilization. It deals with the consciousness of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism studies how nature is represented in literature and it also advocates for the protection of nature for our better life in the days to come. Ecocritical reading discusses the attitudes of the people towards nature along with their activities. Ultimately, such reading communicates the necessity of nature for the survival of all human beings. Muir's respect for nature is immense and he attempts to reveal his feelings through his writings. His works show the nature's innate function to maintain freshness in the environment. He urges people to understand the environmental changes and act accordingly showing deep concern for nature. Muir's writings display his desire to accept nature as it is, for he does not find any causes to doubt about natural activities he encounters around him. When Muir writes about nature, he desires for the conservation of nature. His narratives eventually end with his intention to make people understand the value of nature for our survival.

Keywords: Perception, ecocriticism, representation, respect, attitude.

Introduction

John Muir (1838-1914) speaks about his concern regarding how people's commercial activities are responsible to destroy the ecology on this earth. His love for wild lives apparently visible in his works: John of the Mountains, The Mountains of California, My First Summer in the Sierra and Travels in Alaska and the like. Muir's use of language to describe the trees, mountains, snow falls, avalanches, winds, rains, sunshine and winter as well as summer seasons explore his immense efforts to understand the importance of nature and natural activities for happy and peaceful life of human beings on this earth. His writings acknowledge the significance of natural wilderness for nothing but for our own benefits, for they maintain ecosystem and contribute to overall harmony in ecological environment. Therefore, Muir "has long been famous as an explorer and environmental activist" (Finch and Elder 250).

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Muir spent his adulthood in Wisconsin although he was born in Dunbar, Scotland. He enjoyed moving from Alaska to South America. and ultimately settled in California where he worked for the establishment of national parks. "[H]is mountain narratives [clearly] convey the authority of an acute eye and a firm understanding of geological process" (250). Yosemite Valley was "his classic landscape" for him and his concern to protect the environment of its surroundings" led to his founding of the Sierra Club in 1892" (251). His writings explain his biocentric views which are significant to the scholars of ecocriticism. "My First Summer in the Sierra and Travels in Alaska are manifestoes of environmental literature/ecoliterature, for they theorize the claims of geocentrism over anthropocentrism" (Joshi 51).

Methodology

This paper attempts to explore Muir's understanding regarding the relationship between nature and human civilization. Therefore, I have applied ecocriticism as a theory to find out how Muir talks about the significance of nature in our life. His writings show how human beings behave with the environment. Since ecocriticism "studies relationships between things, in this case, between human culture and the physical world" (Glotfelty 123), it is appropriate to study Muir's works through the lens of ecological perspective. Furthermore, I have adopted qualitative research methods as it is an analysis of the literary texts.

Analysis

John Muir, through his literary works, has played significant role in exploring the value of nature in response to human civilization. Muir tries to explore the connection between nature and human beings through the descriptions of mountains, wind, woods, water, animals and landscapes. He minutely observes them and attempts to communicate their characteristics that play significant role to bring change in our life. His books *The Mountains of California* (1894), *Our National Parks* (1901), *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), *Travels in Alaska* (1915) and the like perfectly glorify the values of nature that human beings require to follow for their meaningful way of life. In "A Wind-Storm in the Forests," Muir finds harmony among natural elements, "The snow bends and trims the upper forests every winter, the lightning strikes a single tree here and there, while avalanches mow down thousands at a swoop as a gardener trims out a bed of flowers" (179). He tries to understand why the winds move from one tree to another touching the leaves and branches. He imagines their communication with each other and understands their mutual help for their individual identity. Muir's significance in dealing with nature's multiple scenes evokes the need for human beings to adopt the behaviors in their life to live harmoniously. He does not doubt about any activities seen in the forest and mountains. For him, their innate behaviors contribute to meaningful results to survive. He believes the activities

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of nature and natural elements are necessary for each other's survival and identity in the universe. Each other's "strength and beauty" are essential for it and others to survive harmoniously. Their activities may appear as destructive and violent, but it is not so in deeper level because their ultimate result is to "seek and find them all, caressing them tenderly, bending them in lusty exercise, stimulating their growth, plucking off a leaf or limb as required, or removing an entire tree or grove, now whispering and cooling through the branches like a sleepy child" (179).

Muir evidently speculates nothing wrong in the perpetual happenings in nature and his such speculations tend to seek to minimize the misunderstandings created between and among the human beings because he watches "the winds blessing the forest, the forest the winds, with ineffable beauty and harmony as the sure result"(179). There is nothing to doubt about the creations of nature and her activities, for the ultimate result is always good and beneficial to the individuals in spite of first appearance that seems destructive and devastating in preliminary stage. Muir begins to think deeply in his excitement to see the storm and he further remarks: One of the most beautiful and exhilarating storms I ever enjoyed the Sierra occurred in December, 1874, when I happened to be exploring one of the tributary valleys of the Yuba River. The sky and the ground and the trees had been thoroughly rain-washed and dry again. The day was intensely pure, one of those incomparable bits of California winter, warm and balmy and full of white sparkling sunshine, redolent of all the purest influences of the spring, and at the same time and enlivened with one of the most bracing wind-storms conceivable. (180-181)

Stormy weather appears to fascinate him and he begins to enjoy the scenery. He does not feel any fear or problem to experience such weather available in front of him. He, rather, begins to praise for being source of joy and happiness, for his understanding regarding nature is "a source of inspiration and healing" (Tyrrell 681). It is not creating any havocs and disturbances, rather it begins to add more beauty and enriches with new environmental atmosphere. He experiences innovation and change which are essential elements to contribute to dynamic atmosphere and "lost no time in pushing out into the woods to enjoy it." "For on such occasions" Muir believes, "Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching depreciatingly beneath a roof" (181).

Muir attempts to delve into the mystery of nature and brings them to the use of people's daily life. For him, nature is the abundant source of energy and human beings can gain vitality from by experiencing it in the course of their life because "[n]ature has always something rare to

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show us” and he speculates how it “hold[s] high festival.” He enthusiastically describes his exploration saying:

I drifted on through the midst of this passionate music and motion, across many a glen, from ridge to ridge; often halting in the lee of a rock for shelter, or to gaze and listen. Even when the grand anthem had swelled to its highest pitch, I could distinctly hear the varying tones of individual trees; - Spruce, and Fir, and Pine, and leafless Oak, - and even the infinitely gentle rustle of the withered grasses at my feet. Each was expressing itself in its own way, - singing its own song, and making its own peculiar gestures, - manifesting a richness of variety to be found in no other forest I have yet seen. (181)

Muir passionately enjoys the melodious music produced by amalgamation of different natural elements. Stormy weather, different trees, ridges and dry grasses all simultaneously happen to produce their different sounds “manifesting a richness of variety” to the speaker’s ears. He takes it as his first experience in his life so far.

Therefore, he “kept [his] lofty perch for hours, frequently closing [the] eyes to enjoy the music by itself or to feast quietly on the delicious fragrance that was streaming past” (183).

Muir, from the core of his heart, acknowledges the beauty and grandeur of nature that he experiences in the Sierra forests. Not only the scenes and sounds created by the wind leave an unforgettable impression in his mind, but the post-stormy scenes and sounds too affect him:

When the storm began to abate, I dismounted and sauntered down through calming woods. The storm-tones died away, and turning toward the east, I beheld the countless hosts of the forests hushed and tranquil, towering above one another on the slopes of the hills like a devout audience. The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say, while they listened, “My peace I give unto you.” (184)

Muir welcomes every moment and incident of nature, for he tries to accept her intrinsic value – the value that ultimately proves to be beneficial for everyone and everything in this universe. Although stormy weather, for ordinary people, seems to be horrible and destructive, Muir celebrates its arrival and departure along with its result in other natural elements, “I gazed on the impressive scene, all the so-called ruin of the storm was forgotten, and never before did these noble woods appear so fresh, so joyous, so immortal” (184).

Muir enjoys every moment of nature’s creations and indirectly satirizes the people who unnecessarily express their hostility and resent her when she shows her presence in the universe. Their response is either guided by their narcissistic attitude or lack of knowledge regarding the

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intrinsic value of nature and her inherent contribution to the wellbeing of others. The storm is meaningful to him because he gets glorified on its arrival:

The sounds of the storm correspond gloriously with this wild exuberance of light and motion. The profound base of the naked branches and boles booming like waterfalls; the quick, tense vibrations of the pine-needles, now rising to a shrill, whistling hiss, now falling to a silky murmur; the rustling of laurel groves in the dells, and the keen metallic click of leaf on leaf – all this was heard in easy analysis when the attention was calmly bent. (182)

The beauty of storm is splendidly portrayed by Muir in these above lines. Its sounds are splendid for him, for they are along with “wild exuberance of light and motion” creating extraordinary atmosphere in front of him. Owing to the storm’s effect “naked branches and boles” appear as if he is watching “waterfalls.” He could also hear the melody in “the rustling of laurel groves” and in the “metallic click of leaf on leaf” because he pays his keen “attention” towards the activities of nature. He “enjoy[s] the storm, while responding to its most enthusiastic greetings.” There is neither “danger” nor “deprecation” for him “but rather an invincible gladness as remote from exultation as from fear” (183).

Muir’s concept regarding nature is significantly different from other nature writers and naturalists, for he accepts every things and actions that nature gives or shows to us. He takes nature as blessings accepting her every activity warmly and feels being exalted to see her. When other people take storm as one of the calamities, Muir takes it positively and greets it enthusiastically. Donald Worster believes that John Muir “was ... an optimist about people and nature, an eloquent prophet of a new world that looked to nature for its standard and inspiration” (quoted in Dunec 59). Therefore, JoAnne L. Dunec takes Muir as “the most famous conservationist worldwide and a pioneer environmental naturalist” (59). He was dedicated to conserving the nature no matter how it is because of his love for it. In this context Dunec quotes Donald Worster who comments:

Through knowing John Muir better, we can see how the modern love of nature began as an integral part of the great modern movement toward freedom and social equality, which has led to the pulling down of so many oppressive hierarchies that once plagued the world. We come to realize that fighting to save the great whales, the tropical rain forests, or even a single acre of prairie has been a logical outcome of that movement, along with all efforts to decrease the human footprint on the planet, to use resources more justly and responsibly, and to achieve a greener society. (qtd. in Dunec 59)

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Worster praises Muir's contribution to saving environment and its elements. His efforts to preserve "the great whales" and "the tropical rain forests" are very significant movements in course of environmental protection. His thoughts and actions were moving simultaneously for the promotion of "a greener society" on this earth.

Muir's attitude towards nature is further intensified when he shows his concern for animals, birds and insects along with natural happenings such as storm, rain, waterfall, snowfall etc. He has beautifully explained different activities of the ouzels in his essay entitled "The

Water-ouzel." Once in cold morning, he made "[his] way to a certain ripple on the river where one of [his] ouzels lived." Muir treats it as human being and points out:

He was at home, busily gleaming his breakfast among the pebbles of a shallow portion of the margin, apparently unaware of anything extraordinary in the weather. Presently he flew out to a stone against which the icy current was beating, and turning his back to the wind, sang as delightfully as a lark in springtime. (259)

Muir's "exuberant love" (Anderson, Slovic and Grady 179) for ouzels is vividly described in these lines. He overwhelmingly treats it and addresses it as if he is describing the activities of a person who is at his "home" and taking his "breakfast." Ouzel's lively actions are intensified with the "icy Current," and "wind" along with the song of "lark in springtime." He treats all the natural elements and their activities equally establishing new trend in acknowledging nature and her intrinsic value in the life of human beings.

Muir's experiences with Native American people and their interest in nature plays significant role in development and change of his thoughts regarding their attitudes about nature and other people. Although Muir had experienced their bad behaviors in the past, later he came to know that they were not so. In Richard F. Fleck's words, "his advanced environmental thinking" (19) must be taken into consideration to understand Muir's concept regarding the relationship between nature and human beings. Fleck writes:

John Muir's impressions of North American Indian cultures, like those of Henry David Thoreau, changed markedly after he had actually lived with natives in the wilderness. While Muir strongly sympathized with downtrodden Indian and seriously questioned harsh attitudes toward Americans, he first had to overcome some fearful experiences which influenced his thinking; Muir's attitudes toward the Digger Indians were quite prejudiced, for instance.

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However, after several excursions to the Alaskan glaciers where Muir lived among the various Thlinkit tribes including the Chilcats, Hoonas, and Takus, he grew to respect and honor their actions, and life styles. (19)

Muir's attitude towards Digger Indians was hostile because they had created disturbances in his journey stealing his horse, but when he gained experience living with other Indians such as, Thlinkit, Chilcats, Hoonas, and Takus, he got rid of being hostile toward the Indians. His love toward them was evolved due to their attachment with nature. His hostility begins to dwindle when he associates the Indians with wilderness. He understands that these people are close to nature and their activities are to create harmony between nature and human beings. Fleck explores John Muir's journey to different places of Native Americans who always desired to be with nature and his interest in them, for Muir too loved to be with nature. Richard F. Fleck has appropriately cited from Muir's Boyhood and Youth:

I well remember my father's discussing with a Scotch neighbor, a Mr. George Mair, the Indian question as to the rightful ownership soil. Mr. Mair remarked one day that it was pitiful to see how fortunate Indians, children of Nature living on the natural product of the soil, hunting, fishing, and even cultivating small corn- fields on the most fertile spots, were now being robbed of their lands and pushed ruthlessly back into narrower and narrower limits by alien races who were cutting of their means of livelihood. (qtd. in Fleck 19-20)

Muir strongly advocates for the right of the Native Indians who possess their ownership over soil and its productions along with other related activities which are associated with their daily life- hunting, fishing and cultivation of their grains. He extends his heartfelt sympathy when their fertile soil is shifted to the outsiders because these outsiders will not preserve nature, rather they will exploit nature and natural scenes for their own short term economic benefits. Exploitation of unnecessary natural resources ultimately boost up "degradation of the land, sea, air and the earth as a whole" (Roberts , New York Times) .

Conclusion

Muir's description of nature attempts to deal with its value in human civilization. The works and activities of nature are essential to be followed by the people and they should simultaneously try to understand and help each other in their community so as to bring harmony and peace in their life. Nothing wrong happens in the world of nature. Rather, every happenings leave some messages for the human beings to understand and lead their life meaningfully. Muir attempts to convince the common people to learn some important issues from nature's activities without suffering from any kind of prejudices. The important thing is how we relate the natural

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activities to our thoughts and actions. There is scientific relation between nature and human beings to be understood to move our life smoothly in spite of any obstacles that we face in this world. His appeal to be conscious while using natural resources are significant for the people who are randomly destroying the beauty of nature for their economic prosperity.

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