

Ecocritical Perspective in the Poems of Smita Agarwal

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Abstract

The ecocritical approach in literature, culture, and the arts has recently increased rapidly. Environmental degradation has ultimately brought the challenges of climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity, ecological imbalance, and so on. In order to address the issue, literature provides a unique platform to make people aware by theorizing and providing solutions through creative outputs. We can say that literature is the aesthetically constructed part of the environment that showcases profound cultural effects. Writers have always shown a deep connection with nature in their creativity, as nature has always been a source of inspiration in their journey. However, this connectivity with nature has formed a shape of theory only then when humans have disturbed the ecological balance in fulfilling their vicious needs and desires. This unnecessary disturbance generated in nature has led to the global crisis in ecology. In order to make people aware of ecological imbalance and ensure that it does not get disturbed further, writers have shown their concern towards nature in their writings. Thus, in the present time, attitude toward the environmental and ecological perspective in any writer's work plays a prominent role in literary criticism broadly known as 'Ecocriticism.' It is evident from the writings of contemporary authors that they have strong inclinations to save our ecology. This research paper is an effort to explore the poems of Smita Agarwal through the lens of ecocriticism, and an attempt is made to explore the relationship between humans and nature in her poems.

Keywords: Ecocritical Perspective, Ecofeminism, Ecology, Nature Writing, Eco sensitivity, Eco Criticism, Environmental Degradation.

Ecocriticism is a new critical movement initiated in the 1970s and 1980s and has taken its shape almost by the end of the twentieth century. It connects literary theory and critical studies with the present ecological scenario. This theory analyzes the science behind ecology and its connection with literature by applying ecological concepts to literature. Ecocriticism is a critical and analytical study of the text within the framework of environmental ethics. It

attempts to draw the sketches of severe and devastating environmental changes due to the careless attitude human beings have shown toward nature. The ecocritical approach to a text helps the reader decode those messages for the betterment of humanity because destructed ecology will ultimately lead to the suffering of human beings. Let us first understand the highlights of ecocriticism as a theory and how it has taken its shape.

The word "ecocriticism" was observed in William Ruckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." It did not become part of critical vocabulary until the Western Literature Association meeting held in 1989, wherein Cheryll Glotfelty revived this term and asked to replace this critical field of study then known as "the study of nature writing" with "Ecocriticism." (Glotfelty, xv-xxxvii). Ecocriticism was officially accepted by the publication of two seminal works, both published in the mid of the 1990s. They were *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination*, by Lawrence Buell. Thus, Cheryll Glotfelty is the founder of ecocriticism. Other prominent Eco critics are Lawrence Buell, Harold From, Glen A. Love, Simon C. Estok, William Rueckert, Timothy Morton, and Greg Garrad.

Ecocriticism is a broad study of culture and cultural products that shows human beings' direct or indirect connection with the natural world. Ecocriticism, in general, is a pretty vague and interdisciplinary term. Eco critics and theorists investigate the relationship between humans and nature, and for the same purpose, they ponder upon several questions within the given text:

- How is nature represented in the given work?
- What is the role of the physical setting in the text?
- Do men write about nature differently than women?
- What steps should be taken to characterize nature writing as a genre?
- The values expressed in the text is compatible with ecological wisdom or not?
- Should a place become a new critical category along with race, class, and gender?
- To what extent is environmental crisis seeping into our literature and culture?

Thus, ecocriticism, as a discipline of study, blends humanity with science and philosophy with psychology to find some solution to maintain ecological balance. Ecocriticism began in the U.S.A. in the late 1980s, while green studies began in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s. American people were quite celebratory when they dealt with nature and natural objects, and they termed it Eco criticism, while the British variant was quite warning in tone. In England, it has become popular as 'green studies.' The current ecocriticism theory is an earth-centered approach to literary studies, and being an interdisciplinary study, it covers a wide area. It has various approaches like nature writing, ecofeminism, deep ecology, the literature on toxicity, etc.

After understanding ecocriticism in brief, let us go through the poems of Smita Agarwal in order to analyze her ecocritical consciousness. Smita Agarwal is the author of two collections of poems, *Wish Granting Words*, 2002 and *Moufussil Notebook*, 2014. She has also edited a famous book in the realm of Indian English Women Poetry entitled *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English*, 2014. Being a post-colonial voice, the impact of colonization or colonial hangover can easily be traced in her poems like "Catechesis," "Undergraduate Indian English," and "Mofussil Mummies." She also has dealt with humor and irony in her poems very well. Her poems are widely set up in small towns and represent the thinking pattern of people living in those small-town areas.

Agarwal has dealt with various themes and issues in her poems, but nature plays a very dominant role throughout her creativity. It seems that nature works as a catalyst for her creativity. Her first poem from her first collection, *Wish Granting Words*, is "The Map." The map is a geography topic and is generally used to get an idea or framework of any area. Even from a map, how nature and natural surroundings can be traced and beautified is an art to learn from the poet Smita Agarwal. In the poem "The Map," she says,

The varying shade of greens denotes the plains.
All around shimmers a stippled, blue-black sea,
And the curved coastline is dotted with
Green palms, some swaying in the breeze. (Agarwal, 1)

Some of her poems directly deal with nature and natural settings. In those poems, her affection toward nature is quite noticeable. How nature has a very significant role in her upbringing and how her mother has let her made feel connected to nature could be seen in the poem "The Bed Book" from the volume *Wish-granting Words*. It is a coming-of-age poem. The backdrop is a mother putting her child to sleep by telling her a tale, and how in this bedtime story, nature plays a very prominent role can be observed in the given lines of the poem, "The Bed Book":

In mother's bedtime tales,
The scenario is always the same,
When lightning strikes.
Night, thunder, rain; seen
During intermittent flashes,
The wisp of road through tall grass. (Agarwal, 8)

In this poem, the mother seeks the help of such intense natural happenings in order to give a lesson to the protagonist that an unpleasant experience may suddenly come upon without any warning, and this subsequently helps the grown-up protagonist to realize that these ferocious natural happenings are inviolable routine hence, there is no need to be scared of

them. At the poem's end, the protagonist thanks her mother for such lively fairy tales, which helped her understand the harsh reality of life.

In many other poems, the poet has depicted those lessons that nature teaches us. "Lie of the Land: A Letter to Chatwin" from the volume *Wish-granting Words* is one such poem. A reference to Bruce Chatwin is there in the poem. In his *The Songlines*, Chatwin says that man is migratory, and with this thought of Bruce, the poem progresses. The title of this poem is layered as there is a pun in the word 'lie.' Here, lie has been used in a topographical sense as well as telling an untruth. Topography is a metaphor for the unpredictability of the curve balls that life flings toward us. Human expectations are, time and again, belied; hence, "land never fails to surprise." (Agarwal 9). The speaking voice holds the legs responsible for all the uncertainties in life. If the speaker were a worm or an insect, it would live by instinct and 'never dare' to take risks. However, to be human means being creative, and the poem ends with the realization that adjustment and adaptability are the secrets to success in life. The speaker decides to learn from the bamboo, which, despite jointed stilts, is flexible enough to rise high or bow low in the wind. Lines from the poem "Lie of the Land: A Letter to Chatwin" is worth-noticing here:

. . . If I were a creepy-crawly,
Or an airy-fairy, I'd at least
Stick to instincts; never dare;
Nor feel piqued at the bamboo's
Jointed stilts able to
Wave to the sun, bow to the wind. (Agarwal, 10)

It makes no difference whether Agarwal is dealing with a severe issue or just creating a beautiful painting of words because nature has a dominant role in the expression. It seems that natural surroundings and beauty help the poet express her innermost grieves and happiness with utmost possible ease. In the poem "Stain" from the volume *Wish-granting Words*, the poet discusses how human beings have to bear with the artificiality of life and how perfectness has become quintessential in human life despite all the oddities it has. The opening of the poem, "Stain," is noteworthy as it seems that nature and its beauty work as a starter in the process of composing poems:

A monsoon month. An unbroken grey sky,
heavy with clouds. Under croton, I am
grafting. . . (Agarwal 12)

"Making Out" is a poem from the volume *Wish-granting Words*, wherein cozy moments of lover has been described when they have come out to spend some quality time with each other. Even that poem starts only after noticing the beautiful natural scenario around them. In another poem, "Endeavour," from *Mofussil Notebook*, she glorifies love beautifully, and all of a sudden, her description angle changed, and nature became her prime object of

observation. The way Smita Agarwal deals with natural landscapes and their beauty, it seems that she is trying hard to create a passion and love for nature in the mind of her readers. This vivid description of nature charged with a romantic attitude is well enough to create compassion for nature in the hearts of her reader. So, in-depth reading of her poems shows that Agarwal is deeply attached to nature and its charismatic description brings charm to her poems. Agarwal, in her poems, not only attempts to point out the real scenario as she observes but also the tint of romanticizing its beauty which can be traced in some of her poems. One such poem is "The Koamao" from Wish-granting Words. It is a layered picaresque poem having childlike simplicity. In this poem, the poet has dealt with natural surroundings and penned them greatly. It is an adventurous story of a strange fruit on a Robinson Crusoe-like journey of survival against all odds. Alexander Selkirk, the prototype for Robinson Crusoe, is a character in the narrative. The leisurely pace of the poem and the lush descriptions draw the reader into the drama of the gradually unfolding story. In the progression of the long-narrative poem "The Koamao," the description of nature and glorification of its beauty is worth noticing:

I traveled slowly: sleeping,
At times, wide awake.
Fish came and lunged at me,
Felt my bristles, and they were gone.
Mostly, I chatted with the stars . . . (Agarwal 3)

Agarwal presents the natural landscape in a very romantic manner, and she is a very keen observer of natural beauty. In one of her poems, "Joyride," published in the volume Wish-granting Words, the poet expresses the charm of nature while she had an exciting jeep ride with her papa. Like any other child, she was not indulged in enjoying this jeep ride wholeheartedly. Instead, her heart dwelled deeply in connection with natural phenomena around her. Lines from the poem "Joyride" goes like that:

Autumn's palette is generous. Far and wide,
Rice-sown terrace fields are a lush olive-green.
You take us for a crazy jeep ride. (Agarwal, 21)

Apart from this poem, there are so many poems from her second poetry collection, Mofussil Notebook, which directly deals with nature and natural happenings like "The Garden," "Snapshots of a Lake Resort," "Still Life," etc. Agarwal passionately, eloquently, and dramatically depicts nature in her works, and her love and passion for natural surroundings are deep-seated in her heart. Almost in all her poems, nature and natural objects play a significant role. Nature is a kind of quite abiding factor in her writings. Whatever subject matter she has chosen to write, she cannot write without describing or at least giving a hint of a natural setting. "Man on the Make" from her collection, Wish-granting Words, is one such poem. Throughout the poem, she describes a man and his physical appearance, but the end of the poem happens only after noticing the natural outlook. Her poems rarely end without presenting a portrayal of nature.

In another poem of Agarwal entitled "Daywatch in the Scriptorium" from Wish-granting Words, she tells that a hectic scheduled day of entertaining guests has ended. She has to express her creativity as the blank page beckons her to outpour her emotions over it. However, even in this process, she cannot resist expressing her natural surroundings, and this depiction of natural reality forms the other part of her poetry. As soon as her mind notices the realistic scenario, an abrupt change is easily noticeable in the poem. The poem "Daywatch in the Scriptorium," which has initially dealt with the issue of time for one's own in order to accomplish the creative zeal, has turned its path towards the illustration of a beautiful natural setting:

Oak leaves turn in the wind,
Moss-green on silver. The
Mesh of needles on a coniferous
Branch, flat as a palm, strains
The sunlight. Behind a hill, it
It seems as if an invisible Indian
Chief has hunkered down to puff
Out spreading clouds of peace. (Agarwal, 29)

In these lines, it is pretty clear that the poet is an ardent observer of natural happenings, and her in-depth attachment to nature is adorable. Now, the point arises why the poet is presenting such a glorious image of nature and its surrounding. It seems that she wants to make people feel more connected to nature, and for that very purpose, she is developing a love for nature and natural objects in the heart of her readers. According to eco critics, we must re-establish the glory and love for nature so that the readers can understand its importance in their life, and they should become proactive in saving Mother Nature.

Nature has never ended, and it possesses undamped oscillations of creativity and progression until and unless it is molded negatively by human efforts to fulfill their rapacious desires. In the poem, "According to my bond: no more nor less" from Wish-granting Words, the poet has drawn readers' attention to this undying zeal of nature towards composition and progression.

The universe is intentionless.
The wind blows, and stars collapse.
Day becomes night, and night
Becomes day. Flowers in the garden
Bloom and fruit rot despite me. (Agarwal, 43)

Eco critics always try to make people aware of natural objects like trees, water, birds, soil, etc. In their works, they try to find out the reason behind this ecological instability, and they attempt to bring awareness regarding the importance of natural substances. Smita

Agarwal, too, has tried that in her poems. One such poem is "Ode to a Sajjan Tree" from her poetry collection Mofussil Notebook. This is a bilingual poem with a mix of English and the Hindi language. This poem highlights the method of English language used in India, according to Rushdie, 'unifying' it with Hindi and Urdu words. Sajjan is a Hindi term, and in English, it is known as drumsticks, of which not only pods but also leaves contain several health benefits. The impact of urbanization has separated us from the benefits of such healthy herbs and trees. The ending of this poem well defines the impact of modernity.

Those estates have now made way
For cramped apartment blocks,
This can barely squeeze in a bush or two,
And perhaps, a single, slim, at-attention Ashok.
And like all shrunken, clogged spaces
Have no room for
A heart, a hearth, and you! (Agarwal, 28)

One branch of ecocriticism is ecofeminism, a movement that tries to connect the natural world's exploitation and degradation and women's subordination, oppression, and muted voice. It emerged around the 1970s along with second-wave feminism and the 'green movement.' Its main aim is to abolish the discrimination and domination done to nature and women by comparing the status of a duo as exploited and marginalized. Even in the poem "The Map," published in *Wish-granting Words*, traces of nature as a submissive woman is noteworthy:

Geophysicists peer into its smoking vent,
Wondering how, for over a thousand years,
It has been fuming yet never allowed
It is seething discontents to spew out.
Sometimes lava boils and collects
At the lip of the gaping mouth.
It never brims over. It just flows back. (Agarwal, 1)

These lines, which explain a natural phenomenon related to the lava of a volcano, have some juxtaposition with the situation of the marginalized woman whose voice had been muted for over a thousand years, and she is bound to swallow back all the anxiety and rage she has had in her heart. This is the result of the accumulative power exercised by male-oriented society against women's freedom and desire, which parallels this natural phenomenon of lava and its outbreak. In the poem, Agarwal has magnificently dealt with the issue. She directly has not compared the duo's situation; instead, her presentation automatically brings a parallel between their situations.

Through her poems, Agarwal not only pleads people to be humble toward women and nature but also, through natural phenomena, she tries to make people more compassionate. Her poem, "Concatenation," from her poetry collection *Mofussil Notebook*, talks about such

generosity of nature we should try to imbibe in our life. Nature is always full of compassion, and it never did betray the heart that loved her. Poet is attempting to let us learn a lesson of forgiveness from nature so that we can utilize it in our life, become more compassionate, and feel more connected to nature. Maybe this attitude of prayer and surrender towards nature may redeem all of us for the misdeeds we have done with our ecology. Lines from the poem "Concatenation" goes like this:

The rosebush
Forgives rain that
Slashes down nubile buds,
Luminous shoots; grass, the
Feet that walked all over it;
Rain, the cloud that let
Go of its hand; toe,
The ant that
Bit it. (Agarwal, 84)

The poems of Agarwal always show concern for nature, birds, and animals. While describing day-to-day happenings, she suddenly picks-up grievous matters. She raises those issues that must be addressed to be eco-sensitive and ultimately to live an eco-balanced life. "Dust Storm in April" from Wish-granting Words is one such poem. In this poem, the poet is simply giving an account of the dust storm that occurred in April. The approach of the storm in the evening and its impact upon people is portrayed in this poem. While describing the episode of a dust storm, the poet has also talked about cattle who are forced to become ill after chewing and swallowing paper and plastic bags as they are not wise enough to bifurcate edible and non-edible stuff mixed in a public bin. Human beings, having intelligence and rationality, show negligent behavior, create chaotic situations and let the poor animals suffer. How the poet has raised severe such issue is worth noticing in the poem "Dust Storm in April":

The cattle heading home
Seem unworried. Two young bulls
Spar. Their cows continue
To chew on paper and polythene
Foraged from a public bin. (Agarwal, 26)

"Transformations" is another poem from Mofussil Notebook in which Agarwal has described a simple incident of discarded black plastic carry bag which has flown in the air and has been presumed as a bird. This poem has been composed in a mock-heroic manner as the trivial issue of falling of plastic bag just because of the pressure of the air inside it has been compared to the doomed jetliner falling to hit the ground. The main reason behind glorifying such a trivial issue is that in a very light tone poet is pulling our attention towards these non-degradable items so that we stop their usage and replaces it with eco-friendly stuff.

So, the poems of Agarwal showcase a deep connection with nature in a dual manner which, on the one hand, creates love in the hearts of the readers so that they can feel more connected to it. On the other hand, it makes them aware of ecocritical issues so that they become more protective of nature.

There are so many contemporary Indian poets writing in English whose writings in the realm of ecocriticism are excellent and are worth comparing with the poems of Smita Agarwal. One such poet is Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet. Agha Shahid Ali is one of those poets who feel more connected with their past and homeland than their current home. Though Ali currently lives in America, Kashmir, his homeland, is dearer to his heart. Likewise, our poet Smita Agarwal has lived in foreign countries and cosmopolitan cities of India, yet her poems bear the originality and freshness of the mountain region of Mussoorie. The theme of identity and the sense of belongingness not only forms the base of Ali but also of Agarwal.

One can quickly notice the overshadowing gloominess in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali because of the violence in the land of Kashmir he has noticed since his childhood. In contrast, the poems of Agarwal, filled with hope and happiness, draw a beautiful portrayal of nature in its diverse form. We have gone through several poems of Agarwal filled with never ending joy she gets from nature; for instance, let us look over the last lines from the poem "Snow on the Desert" by Agha Shahid Ali, published in his volume *A Nostalgist's Map of America*.

. . . a time
to recollect
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,
a time to think of everything the earth
and I had lost, of all
that I would lose,
of all that I was losing. (Ali, 104)

Suppose the poems of Smita Agarwal are compared to some other eco critics like Give Patel. In that case, one can find that the poems of Patel bear a bold attitude towards safeguarding ecology compared to the poems of Agarwal. The poems of Agarwal gradually try to make people aware of ecological balance and its importance without being harsh. However, the poems of Patel do have clear-cut agenda of saving nature and maintaining the ecological balance.

In one of his famous poems, "On Killing a Tree," from his poetry volume *Poems*, Patel protests against the violence and demonstrates the dreadful deeds done by man on a tree. Not a simple knife jab is enough to kill a tree that has deep-rooted itself after soaking 'years of sunlight, air, water.' ("On Killing a Tree"). Throughout the poem, Patel shows the cruelty indulged in the process of cutting down a tree. So, it is evident that Patel is frank in the

expression of his anguish in order to make people aware of ecological disturbances, while throughout the poems of Agarwal, one can notice her soft attitude towards nature along with ecological concern.

Conclusion

So, it is evident that nature plays a very prominent role in the poems of Smita Agarwal. Her poems are filled with the description of nature, its beauty, and its landscapes. When the issue comes to spreading ecological awareness, her poems carry a soft tone compared to Give Patel. However, when it comes to mood and melody, her poems possess bundles of happiness and hopefulness, which is missing in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali as they are overloaded with gloom and despair.

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