

---

## **The Growth of Eco consciousness for a New World**

*Girija Menon*

*Research Scholar, Holy Cross College, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, India.*

---

The late twentieth century and early twenty first century have witnessed an extraordinary flowering of beautiful and profound environmental writing from throughout the world, and particularly from North America. All ecocritics have expressed the need to plumb the depths of a world beyond ourselves. Man is incapable of being totally ecocentric or absolutely empathetic even with his own kind, but he must keep trying. It should be the goal of what environmental philosophers now call enlightened anthropocentrism which is "a more realistic form of environmental ethics".

Alison Hawthorne Deming in her 2014 book, "Zoologies: On Animals and the Human Spirit" reflects in essay after essay on the meaning she derives from ideas of and encounters with the animal world – the world that simply "teems and steams with the shared breath of creatures". In all her works there is a psychological and spiritual hunger to understand her "continuity and connection" with the planet's many forces, including the life energies of other entities that are not human. Deming offers the following quotation from a 1906 talk by William James : "The blindness in human beings is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves."

The idea of Nature as wild and something to be tamed and submitted to the culture of "man" was prevalent for a long time and any resistance to this utilitarian view of Nature has been looked upon as a deviant aberration. Ecocriticism in the academic form as we understand it now can trace its inception to the American academies, the watermark being the formation and organization of ASLE, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. Ecologically sensitive criticism has evolved over a period of time due to three major factors, the growth and evolution of an ecological conscience, the crises in the human sciences and a post theoretical wave. The depletion of earth's resources and the reduction of natural biodiversities had come to such a pass that human beings had to face squarely the disaster of their own making. As Mahatma Gandhi has pointed out, "Earth has enough to satisfy man's need, not enough to satisfy his greed".

In all, the rising ecological concern and the emergence of ecological conscience and wisdom could be one of the major reasons why the world of Literature came to be so infused with the tempo of conservation, preservation and the recognition of the natural life balance. The excessive growth of theorizing in the twentieth century resulted in the pushing away of physical nature to the periphery. When linguistics argued about the trajectory of knowledge and signs and how we humans have evolved a parallel, world of culture and its virtual dimensions, what was at stake was this physical nature. Man was caught up in a world of abstractions, a prison house of language and the possibilities of encountering the world outside the human mind became an intellectual impossibility. But as Murali Sivaramakrishnan has pointed out in his essay *Continuities and Interdependence: Literature, Nature and Critical Inquiry*, "Language might have trapped us into the cultural constructions of our environment but there is a real world outside which continues to be wounded and harassed." The rise and development of ecofeminism has served to reveal the significant contributions of feminist thinking to the fostering of an ecologically sensitive criticism inside the academia as well as outside its periphery.

The idea of Deep Ecology was developed by Arne Waess. It reiterates the idea of the sacred at the heart of things. According to her, the aim of supporters of the deep ecology movement is not a slight reform of our present society, but a substantial reorientation of our whole civilization. Hence it is an ecosophy. The major tenets of deep ecology are as follows. It is a rejection of anthropocentrism. All life on earth has an intrinsic value irrespective of the human angle. Richness and biodiversity are valuable in themselves and humans have no right to tamper with this diversity. There is an identification with all life forms. Caring for other life forms is part of individual self realization. It is a critique of instrumental rationality where emphasis should be not on quantity and efficiency but quality. The followers stressed the development of a total world view. Individual thinking and action are of utmost significance and not the collective and social. The concept of deep ecology is akin to the spiritual. The deep ecologists rightly pointed out that life becomes meaningful only when we start to live fully and selflessly. 'Deliberately', as Thoreau would sanctify the phrase. Henry David Thoreau wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see I could not learn what it had to teach and not when I came to die discover that I had not lived. Writers like Ghosh felt we need to act in this world recognising the limits to growth and human development, recognising the integrated nature of all and everything and those ethical values that unite the human and the natural environment have to be respected and upheld. It has been enshrined in the Upanishads "This earth is like honey for all creatures and all the creatures are like honey for this earth."

Ecocritical theories could aid and abet in channelising the world and its muddled people in the following directions. It will serve to rediscover our ties with nature. A scientific temper will be incorporated into English studies. It will serve to explore the historical roots of ecocriticism. It will kindle an intensive study of tribal and folk culture. Light will be shed on environmental movements in other parts of the world.

The history of ecological thinking and the history of literary critical inquiry may have diverse roots and yet they seek to reinforce the idea of continuity and interdependence – more so in a complex present where all life on planet earth is at stake. It was Scott Slovic, the renowned scholar and one of the leading practitioners of ecocriticism who remarked that the significant issues of ecocritical practice are : contact, communication and responsibility. Prof.Murali Ramakrishnan adds the terms continuities and interdependence. Ecologically driven books may have a diversity of themes and issues but their major concern is the space of nature, and how we engage with that space, physically, psychologically and spiritually.

Enlightened anthropocentrism is a branch of environmental ethics, a subdiscipline in philosophy that emerged in the early 1970s by posing a challenge to traditional anthropocentrism, a framework which studies the moral relationship of human beings to the environment. Traditional anthropocentrism accords humans the highest position in the biological hierarchy and presupposes that environment is only to be valued as a mere resource for human consumption, due to which it has been criticised as a myopic and egocentric approach. Descartes popularized the dictum, "I think, therefore I am" and as a result Nature came to be segregated from the human being and Man stood alienated and separate from the erstwhile integrated whole.

Theorists such as Bryan G.Norton, JannaThompson, John O'Neill and David Cooper have challenged traditional anthropocentric notions and have instead advocated enlightened anthropocentrism which assigns according to Light and Rolston III "humanly based values to nature other than mere resource value." Enlightened anthropocentrism advocates that our moral duties towards the environment are a corollary to our duties to the human inhabitants

of the environment, thereby establishing itself as a more realistic form of environmental ethics, that endorses a non exploitative approach to the environment. Saba Pirzadeh in her article in the journal ISLE, Spring 2015 says that ecosensitive writers utilize the enlightened anthropocentric approach to depict the "human potential for environmental destruction and to make the readers recognize that long term human existence and wellbeing depend on the health and stability of the planet's ecological support system and in turn promote critical debates about the environmental ramifications of rapid modernization and unsustainable development.

Ghosh and other ecoconscious writers urge readers to reconsider environmental degradation as a global phenomenon whose destruction will resonate across space and time and thus convert "long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment." By showcasing the geopolitical, economic and physiological ramifications of environmental disaster in conjunction with the wretched side of humanity, the Ibis Trilogy projects the future effects of the slow violence of environmental degradation in a provocative manner.

Ghosh has constantly depicted the depraved state of humanity during the colonial rule, wherein most of the colonised people are subject to socioeconomic discrimination, denied their basic rights, pitted against each other for resources and forced to work for authoritarian regimes. In the Ibis Trilogy he shows how this material depravity also extends to the social and psychological realm, as seen in the widespread corruption and moral degeneration, consistent use of brute force and violence, and ruthless exploitation of lesser privileged groups. By introducing readers to advanced colonised societies marked by tyranny, deprivation and dehumanization, Ghosh encourages readers to consider what it means to be human. Ghosh is critical of the British pseudo idealistic claims of human progress that sacrifice the environment in the process, and he strongly criticizes the instrumentalization of nature.

Ghosh's worldview as exemplified in this mammoth work is one of "enlightened anthropocentrism", where Man no longer holds the highest position in the biological hierarchy. Nature is not relegated to the background in this work but is assigned "humanly based values other than mere resource value." He, like other ecologically conscious writers, feels that our moral duties to the environment are a corollary to our duties to the human inhabitants of the environment. Through the works comprising the trilogy, he has shown the need to plumb the depths of a world beyond ourselves and to base our society on the highest values of tolerance and respect for all life forms. The Ibis Trilogy, as one critic has so succinctly called it, is both a stirring portrayal of the past and a prescient beacon for the future.

## REFERENCES

1. Ghosh, Amitav. Flood of Fire. New Delhi : Penguin, 2015.
2. Ghosh, Amitav. River of Smoke. New Delhi : Penguin, 2011.
3. Ghosh, Amitav. Sea of Poppies. New Delhi : Penguin, 2008.
4. Scott Slovic ed. ISLE. Volume 22, Issue 2, Spring 2015. Print.
5. Sivaramakrishnan, Murali and Jana, Ujjwal. Ecological Criticism For Our Times: Literature, Nature and Critical Inquiry. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2011. Print.