

THE VERDANT WORD: THE FUNCTION OF ECOCRITICISM IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Jayaharilal S.J.*¹, Nipin P. Kurian*², Stephy Elizabeth T.J.*³, Sibin Joseph*⁴

*^{1,2,3,4}Assistant Professor, Department Of English, St. Mary's College Puthanangadi, Perinthalmanna,
Kerala, India.

DOI : <https://www.doi.org/10.56726/IRJMETS72834>

ABSTRACT

This study examines the emerging topic of ecocriticism and its significant influence on the analysis and interpretation of contemporary literature. It contends that at a time characterised by increasing environmental issues, ecocriticism offers an essential perspective for comprehending the intricate interaction between humans and the non-human realm as represented in literary works. This study analyses essential ecocritical themes, including anthropocentrism, the sublime, and nature representation, to illustrate how contemporary literature addresses ecological concerns, analyses environmental deterioration, and redefines human relationships with the natural world. Moreover, it examines how ecocritical methodologies contest conventional literary analysis by emphasising the action of non-human entities and promoting a more environmentally aware reading habit. This paper asserts that ecocriticism is not only a fad but an essential critical framework for addressing contemporary environmental concerns and enhancing the understanding of the interconnection of all life.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Environmental Degradation, Non-Human Agency, Ecological Awareness.

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is marked by a profound and escalating recognition of the environmental issue. The effects of human activities on the world, including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion, are now an immediate reality rather than a distant danger. In this setting, ecocriticism has developed as a crucial and dynamic domain of literary analysis, aiming to comprehend the link between literature and the environment. Ecocriticism, broadly defined as the examination of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, transcends conventional human-centered literary analysis to explore the depiction of nature, the influence of environmental issues on human experience, and the ethical ramifications of our interactions with the non-human world (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). This study contends that ecocriticism is essential for comprehending contemporary literature, providing a framework for examining how authors address ecological issues, challenge anthropocentric perspectives, and conceptualize more sustainable and linked futures.

II. ESTABLISHING THE FRAMEWORK: FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF ECOCRITICISM

To comprehend the function of ecocriticism in contemporary literature, it is imperative to outline many of its fundamental notions. A fundamental principle is the critique of anthropocentrism, the notion that people are the most important creatures in the universe and that all other species and resources exist mostly for human advantage (Plumwood 6). Ecocriticism contests this hierarchical approach, advocating for an ecocentric viewpoint that acknowledges the inherent worth of all organisms and the interdependence of natural systems. Contemporary literature, often mirroring the concerns of a swiftly industrialising and urbanising society, usually addresses the ramifications of anthropocentric perspectives, illustrating the exploitation of natural resources and the estrangement of humanity from the natural environment.

A notable idea is the sublime, conventionally linked to the awe-inspiring and often terrible elements of nature. Although Romantic ideals of the sublime frequently highlighted nature's capacity to overpower the individual, modern ecocriticism investigates how this notion has been utilised to both value and abuse the environment. Contemporary authors may employ the sublime to emphasise the magnificence and vulnerability of natural environments, or alternatively, to rationalise their subjugation and authority.

Moreover, ecocriticism meticulously examines the depiction of nature in literature. Instead of perceiving nature as a passive setting or a simple representation of human emotions, ecocritics examine how literary works depict the agency and intrinsic worth of the non-human realm. This entails analysing representations of fauna, flora, terrains, and ecological dynamics, while evaluating how these portrayals either support or contest dominant environmental ideologies (Buell 7). Contemporary literature, with its varied forms and viewpoints, presents a complex array of representations, from nostalgic images of unspoiled nature to sharp illustrations of ecological destruction.

III. ECOCRITICAL ANALYSES OF CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEMES

Utilising an ecocritical perspective on contemporary literature uncovers the pervasive influence of environmental issues across many literary subjects and genres. The concept of alienation, prevalent in modernist literature, might be re-examined via an ecocritical lens as including social, psychological, and ecological dimensions. Characters alienated from urban settings may long for a bond with nature, underscoring the adverse impacts of industrialisation on the human psyche and the natural environment. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) serves as a profound critique of the natural and spiritual barrenness of contemporary existence, whereby the land's infertility reflects the aridity of human connections.

The issue of colonialism may be analysed via an ecocritical perspective, highlighting the environmental exploitation and ecological destruction frequently associated with imperial development. Authors such as Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) illustrate the harsh exploitation of resources and the catastrophic effects on indigenous communities and their ecosystems, revealing the interconnectedness of social and ecological injustice. Ecocriticism advocates for an interpretation of literature that transcends human-centric narratives of power and control, emphasising the marginalised voices of the land and its inhabitants.

Moreover, contemporary literature often explores the ramifications of technological progress and its effects on the environment. Dystopian fiction, exemplified by Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), frequently portray environmentally devastated futures stemming from unrestrained technological advancement and ecological negligence. These works function as warning narratives, emphasising the risks of anthropocentric arrogance and the pressing necessity for a more sustainable connection with the Earth.

IV. CONFRONTING CONVENTIONAL LITERARY CRITIQUE

Ecocriticism provides novel readings of established literary works while also contesting conventional methods of literary analysis. Ecocritics assert that by emphasising the agency of the non-human, nature should not be regarded just as a symbolic or metaphorical instrument for human interests. They promote a reading technique that recognises the intrinsic value and dynamic presence of the natural world in literary narratives. This entails focussing on the specifics of ecological environments, the behaviours of flora and fauna, and the interrelations among ecosystems.

Furthermore, ecocriticism advocates for transcending mere textual study to examine the materiality of literature and its connection to the environment. This encompasses analysing the ecological impact of book production, the environmental circumstances surrounding the creation and consumption of texts, and the potential of literature to foster environmental consciousness and action (Zapf 11). Ecocriticism aims to expand the parameters of literary analysis to promote a more environmentally aware and accountable interaction with literature.

V. THE PROSPECTS OF ECOCRITICISM IN LITERARY STUDIES

As environmental issues intensify, the importance of ecocriticism in contemporary literary studies will increasingly grow. It offers an essential foundation for comprehending how literature mirrors, influences, and contests our perceptions of the environment. Ecocriticism enhances awareness of the relationship between human culture and the natural world, so facilitating a more educated and ethical response to contemporary environmental concerns.

Moreover, the domain of ecocriticism is always advancing, integrating perspectives from other fields like environmental philosophy, ecology, and postcolonial studies. This multidisciplinary approach facilitates a more nuanced and complete understanding of the intricate links among literature, culture, and the environment. Future trajectories in ecocriticism may encompass an in-depth examination of the intersections between environmental justice and social justice, the significance of indigenous knowledge in environmental

comprehension, and the capacity of literature to galvanise ecological activism and advocate for sustainable practices.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ecocriticism occupies a crucial and progressively essential position in the examination of contemporary literature. Ecocritical techniques provide significant insights into the intricate link between mankind and the environment as represented in literary texts by questioning anthropocentric viewpoints, examining the portrayal of nature, and emphasising the agency of non-human entities. Modern literature critically addresses ecological issues, ranging from criticisms of industrial alienation to examinations of colonial ecologies and admonitions on technological hubris. Ecocriticism offers essential analytical skills to elucidate these interactions, enhancing our comprehension of environmental obligations and the interdependence of all living beings. In addressing the unparalleled environmental difficulties of the 21st century, the concept of ecocriticism provides essential avenues for achieving a more sustainable and ecologically aware future.

VII. REFERENCES

- [1] Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985.
- [2] Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995
- [3] Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Dover Publications, 1990.
- [4] Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, Boni and Liveright, 1922.
- [5] Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- [6] Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
- [7] Zapf, Hubert. *Literary Ecology: Toward a Posthumanist Understanding of Environmental Awareness*. *New Literary History*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2008.