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Ecocriticism : A Critical Analysis on Nature and Literature

Abstract : Ecocriticism or literary ecology, has become one of the most influential interdisciplinary approaches in the humanities. It examines the connection between literature and the natural environment. The focus is on how texts reflect, shape, and critique human interactions with nature. This movement began in the late twentieth century, alongside the rise of environmental studies. Ecocriticism has evolved into various frameworks, including deep ecology, ecofeminism, environmental justice, and postcolonial ecocriticism. This paper looks at ecocriticism within literary and cultural studies. It explores its theoretical foundations and evaluates its role in addressing today's ecological crises like climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice. By reviewing scholarship and case studies of authors such as William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Atwood, and Amitav Ghosh, this paper demonstrates how literature influences ecological awareness and activism. It also considers criticisms of the field, including claims of anthropocentrism, Western bias, and limited practical use. The findings show that while ecocriticism faces challenges, it remains vital for linking the sciences and the humanities, rethinking human-nature relationships, and promoting environmental awareness.

Keywords : Ecocriticism, literature and environment, deep ecology, environmental justice, climate fiction.

Introduction : Ecocriticism, also called environmental literary criticism or green criticism, is an emerging field that examines the link between literature and the natural environment. At its core, ecocriticism looks at how texts, whether poetry, fiction, drama, or essays, depict nature, environmental issues, and the relationships between people and the non-human world. Unlike traditional literary approaches that focus mainly on human-centred themes like class, gender, or politics, ecocriticism directs attention towards ecological issues. It allows for a better understanding of how literature shapes, reflects, and even challenges cultural views on the environment. Given the climate crisis, species extinction, deforestation, and pollution, ecocriticism has become more relevant. It stands as an important field that connects the humanities with environmental awareness. Ecocriticism's roots go back to the environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s, driven by increased awareness of ecological harm. Landmark works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) revealed the hazards of pesticides and highlighted the power of language and storytelling in raising public awareness. As an academic field, ecocriticism began to develop in the 1990s through the efforts of critics like Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, who aimed to create a literary theory that explored the links between ecology and textual representation. Since then, it has expanded globally, incorporating various viewpoints, including ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and deep ecology. One of the primary focuses of ecocriticism is how literature depicts nature not just as a background or setting but as an active presence. In many traditional literary works, nature often acts symbolically, representing beauty, divinity, or human feelings. For instance, Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge celebrated the beauty and spiritual importance of nature, seeing it as a source of inspiration and moral insight. In contrast, modern writers often emphasize the destruction of natural landscapes caused by industrialization, colonization, and technological exploitation. Through these representations, ecocriticism reveals changing human attitudes towards the natural world and their consequences for environmental sustainability. Moreover, ecocriticism highlights the ethical duties humans have toward the environment. It questions anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are the most significant beings, and promotes an ecocentrism viewpoint that values all life forms. In this context, literature becomes a medium that not only reflects ecological crises but also promotes ecological awareness. For example, indigenous literature often presents a holistic perspective where human existence is deeply connected to the land, animals, and natural spirits. These texts offer alternative ways of living that contrast sharply with exploitative, capitalist views on the environment.

In modern times, ecocriticism has gone beyond traditional literary boundaries, overlapping with cultural studies, environmental history, philosophy, and even science. It reminds us that the stories we tell about nature shape how we treat it in reality. By focusing on ecological themes in literature, ecocriticism bridges the gap between imagination and action, encouraging humanity to reconsider its role within the delicate ecosystem. Consequently, studying ecocriticism is not just an academic interest but a moral and cultural necessity in light of global environmental challenges. While ecocriticism has emerged relatively recently as a distinct area within literary and cultural studies, it draws from centuries of literary traditions and philosophical thoughts on nature. This literature review looks at the evolution of ecocriticism, its key scholarly contributions, and the theoretical discussions that have influenced it. The review is structured chronologically and thematically, starting with early intellectual foundations and progressing through the formal establishment of the field in the 1990s, before exploring its expansion into global and interdisciplinary directions.

Literature Review : Ecocriticism is a relatively new field in literary and cultural studies, but it draws from centuries of writing and thought about nature. This literature review looks at the development of ecocriticism, its key scholarly contributions, and the debates that have influenced it. The review is organized both chronologically and thematically. It starts with early thinkers and goes through the establishment of the field in the 1990s. Then, it addresses how ecocriticism has branched out globally and across different disciplines.

Early Intellectual Precursor : Before the term ecocriticism was created, literary traditions around the world had long engaged with nature. The Romantic poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats, highlighted nature as both a subject and a source of inspiration. Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and *The Prelude* (1850) celebrated the healing and moral power of natural landscapes, expressing a view of nature as crucial to human development. In the United States, transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau laid the groundwork for ecological awareness. Emerson's essays, particularly "Nature" (1836), suggested a spiritual connection between people and the environment. Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) reflected on simple living in balance with nature. While these works were not ecocritical in the way we understand it today, they provided ethical and philosophical ideas that would later shape environmentalist thinking. The twentieth century brought renewed concern for ecological issues. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) introduced a "land ethic" that urged moral consideration for ecosystems. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) was especially significant; it revealed the risks of pesticide use and helped start the environmental

movement. Although Carson was a scientist, her literary style and storytelling showed how writing could raise ecological awareness. These works created an atmosphere where literary scholars began to explore how literature could impact environmental thought.

Global and Interdisciplinary Turn : While ecocriticism started in North America, it has since grown worldwide. In Europe, scholars looked at pastoral traditions, Romanticism, and modern environmental writing. In Asia, ecocriticism connected with traditional ecological beliefs like Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In Africa and Latin America, it focused on issues related to land, resource exploitation, and indigenous worldviews. The interdisciplinary approach has been important. Now, ecocriticism works with environmental history, geography, sociology, anthropology, and media studies. For example, climate fiction, or "cli fi," has caught the attention of both literary critics and climate scientists for its ability to explain complex scientific data through storytelling (Trexler & Johns Putra, 2011). Film studies have also explored ecocritical issues, examining how visual media influence ecological awareness.

Discussion and Critical Analysis :

1. Romantic Poetry and Environmental Sensibility Romantic poetry, especially the works of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, has been seen as a key influence in ecocriticism. Wordsworth's **Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey** (1798) presents nature as a source of spiritual renewal and moral guidance. His language lifts the natural landscape beyond simple scenery, suggesting it has agency and intrinsic value. From an ecocritical viewpoint, this Romantic sensibility helped change attitudes away from seeing nature only in utilitarian terms. The Romantics emphasized awe, sublimity, and the connection between humans and the nonhuman world. Lawrence Buell (1995) refers to this as "environmental imagination," where the natural world is viewed as more than just a background for human actions. However, a critical look reveals limitations. Wordsworth's poetry, while celebrating nature, is also very human-centred. The natural world often reflects human emotions rather than existing as its own entity. Critics argue this tendency romanticizes nature, simplifying complex ecological issues into symbolic or spiritual roles. Additionally, the Romantics were largely white, European men whose views on nature were linked to pastoral ideals, often overlooking problems of land ownership, colonial expansion, and the displacement of indigenous people.

2. American Transcendentalism: Nature as Philosophy Henry David Thoreau's **Walden** (1854) has become a key text in ecocritical studies, representing the transcendentalist view of nature as a place for personal, philosophical, and spiritual growth. Thoreau's time at Walden Pond shows his desire to live simply and in tune with the environment, foreshadowing movements like deep ecology and bioregionalism. Ecocriticism often celebrates **Walden** as a manifesto

for environmental awareness, emphasizing Thoreau's call for non-materialistic living and respect for natural cycles. His writing encourages readers to see themselves as part of the ecological web rather than separate from it. Yet, critical analysis also reveals contradictions. Thoreau's simple living experiment relied on privilege, including his family's economic stability and closeness to town. Furthermore, *Walden* romanticizes wilderness while overlooking the histories of indigenous peoples who have long lived in and shaped these landscapes. Modern scholars argue that transcendentalist ideas tend to generalize a specific American, male, middle-class perspective on nature.

3. Ecofeminism: Gender, Nature, and Oppression The emergence of ecofeminism in the 1980s and 1990s significantly expanded ecocriticism. Literature reflecting ecofeminist ideas often shows the interconnected oppressions of gender and the environment. Ecofeminist interpretations of Atwood reveal how literature can highlight the links between environmental damage and gender inequality. For instance, in *The Year of the Flood*, the eco-religious group "God's Gardeners" mixes spiritual and ecological values, focusing on interdependence and stewardship. Critics of ecofeminism warn against portraying women as closer to nature or inherently more nurturing. Such stereotypes can reinforce the very divisions ecofeminism aims to challenge. Atwood complicates these ideas by presenting women as intricate agents navigating ecological and social crises, rather than as natural saviours. Thus, ecofeminism shows how ecocriticism can expand beyond "nature writing" to address overlapping systems of power and oppression.

4. Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Global and Cultural Perspectives Early ecocriticism faced criticism for being mostly Anglo-American and centred on Western texts. Postcolonial ecocriticism addresses this by showing how environmental issues connect with colonialism, imperialism, and globalization. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) embodies this perspective. Set in the Sundarbans, a delicate tidal ecosystem in India, the novel examines human-nature interactions shaped by poverty, migration, and government policies. The Sundarbans are depicted not as pristine wilderness but as a contested area where environmental issues are linked to social justice. Postcolonial ecocriticism, like that of Huggan and Tiffin (2010), argues that environmental decline in the Global South is often worsened by neocolonial economic systems. Literature from these regions challenges Western ideas about wilderness and conservation, showcasing the voices of marginalized communities. For example, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), while not explicitly about ecology, can be viewed through an ecocritical lens. The novel reflects indigenous Igbo relationships with land, agriculture, and natural cycles, emphasizing how colonial disruption altered both ecological and cultural systems. Similarly, indigenous writers like Leslie Marmon Silko (*Ceremony*, 1977) blend ecological knowledge with cultural survival, showing that environmental and cultural resilience are

connected.

Pastoralism and Ecocriticism in the Comedies and Plays : As You Like It Perhaps Shakespeare's most famous pastoral play, As You Like It takes its characters from the court to the Forest of Arden. The forest serves as a refuge from political intrigue, allowing characters to explore freedom, love, and identity. Duke Senior praises the "sweetness" of rural life, finding peace in the "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones." This reflects the idea that nature can teach moral and spiritual lessons. However, Shakespeare complicates this idyllic view. The exiles face hunger, cold, and hardship, reminding audiences that nature is not always kind. Jaques' sad reflections reveal the limits of an idealized pastoral life, while Touchstone's satirical view mocks the romantic notions of shepherd living. An ecocritical perspective shows Shakespeare's mixed feelings: Arden is both healing and harsh, representing the complicated reality of ecological existence. A Midsummer Night's Dream The enchanted forest outside Athens highlights Shakespeare's portrayal of nature as an active force. The forest is not just a backdrop; it is a magical space where human hierarchies break down and new possibilities arise. Nature here acts with supernatural power, as fairies influence the seasons and human desires. Titania expresses concern that her fight with Oberon disrupts the balance of the environment, leading to "contagious fogs" and "rheumatic diseases." This moment shows an early awareness of ecology: human conflict affects the environment, upsetting its natural rhythms. Nature in the Tragedies In Shakespeare's tragedies, nature often reflects human strife rather than offering a pastoral escape. In King Lear, the storm on the heath mirrors Lear's inner chaos and symbolizes the breakdown of natural and political order. The heath, barren and exposed, starkly contrasts with pastoral peace, demonstrating nature's indifference and cruelty. Yet through his suffering, Lear gains empathy for the "poor naked wretches," recognizing shared vulnerability in facing the elements. This moment resonates with ecocriticism's focus on interconnectedness and humility toward nature. Macbeth Nature becomes strange and threatening. After Duncan is murdered, unnatural events occur: horses eat each other, day turns dark, and owls shriek. The disruption of ecological order reflects the breaking of moral laws. Shakespeare portrays the connection between human wrongdoing and environmental instability—a theme that is strikingly relevant to concerns about the ecological impact of human actions. The Romances: Reconciliation Through Nature In his later romances, Shakespeare frequently depicts reconciliation and renewal through images of nature. The Winter's Tale includes a pastoral interlude in Bohemia, offering comic relief and setting the stage for redemption. The sheep shearing festival symbolizes fertility, seasonal abundance, and social harmony. However, Shakespeare resists idealization: rural life is marked by deception and disguise. Still, the rural scene acts as a

bridge to the play's miraculous conclusion. *The Tempest*, set on a mysterious island, explores colonization, magic, and human manipulation of nature. Prospero's control over the elements reflects Renaissance ambitions to dominate the natural world, while Caliban embodies a more primal, earthy connection to the island. Ecocriticism reads the play as a reflection on human control over and disconnection from nature. The storm, the enchanted landscape, and the eventual renunciation of magic illustrate humanity's complicated relationship with ecological forces. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and *Nature Imagery* Shakespeare's sonnets also demonstrate a strong connection to nature. Metaphors involving seasons, flowers, the sun, and storms fill the collection. The cycle of time is represented as seasonal decay, while poetry itself offers a way to preserve beauty in the face of nature's fleetingness. The sonnets showcase Shakespeare's ecological imagination: nature serves as both inspiration and challenge, representing beauty and decay.

Conclusion : Ecocriticism and pastoralism reveal Shakespeare's deep connection to the natural world. In the enchanted forests of the comedies, the barren heaths of tragedies, or the regenerating landscapes of the romances, nature acts as more than mere setting; it is an agent, a mirror, a teacher, and an adversary. Shakespeare embraces and critiques pastoral ideals, recognizing nature's healing power while highlighting its challenges and indifference. His works explore the interconnectedness of human and ecological worlds, a theme that resonates strongly in today's climate crisis. By recognizing Shakespeare's ecological perspective, we gain historical insight into Renaissance views of nature and lasting reflections on humanity's delicate role in the natural order. His plays encourage us to listen to the "tongues in trees" and the "sermons in stones," pushing us to envision more sustainable and humble ways to live on Earth.

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