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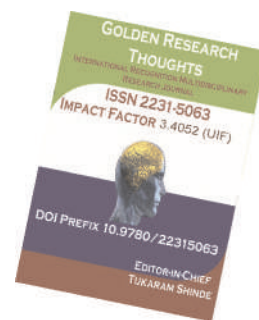
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AN ECO-CRITICAL STUDY OF PETER COWAN'S THE TRACTOR



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ABSTRACT

Man today has realized that his selfish actions and over-exploitation of natural resources have not only affected the Earth adversely but has also , as a consequence, challenged human life here. Scientific inventions and technological advancement have been over-ambitious in this regard but literature has been a witness to this so-called development since ages and has raised alarms of eco-apocalypse. It was only after eco-criticism became a defined literary theory literary texts started being analyzed as environmental texts. All folk literatures preached eco-ethics and literatures of all ages, irrespective of time and space, have been found engaged with these issues. Peter Cowan, a twentieth century Australian writer, also seems raising voice against over-exploitation of resources in the wake of development. His short story The Tractor weaves eco-critical issues through the struggle of an aboriginal protagonist.

KEYWORDS : Ecocriticism, Aboriginal, Peter Cowan, Eco-apocalypse, Deep ecology.



INTRODUCTION :

Literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact in a perpetual dance...Literature acts on people , and people act on the world .(Cheryll Glotfelty,4)

It is well-perceived that literature may be taken as the index and mirror of society, mapping all the socio-cultural, political, religious ripples that rise on its surface .

Science may differ on the role of literature in offering a scheme of this world but as Lawrence Buell observes literature is a more versatile complement of science because of imagination:

Literature functions as science's less systematic but more versatile complement. Both seek to make understandable a puzzling world. To a greater degree than science, literature releases imagination's free play, though the play is not entirely free, since the imagination is regulated by encounters with the environment both personal mediated through the unofficial folk wisdom to which one has been exposed. Thus regulated, the mind is at leisure to ramble among intriguing hypotheses ... but in the long run the author is committed to offering a model or a scheme of the world. That we are

invited to weigh according to our supposition or knowledge of its plausibility. (Buell,94)

Across the ages, literature has been showing its deep concern for man-nature relationship, for honoring its sanctity and preserving its pristine beauty. All folk literatures are replete with this concern and have been raising the social consciousness by portraying nature, animals, birds, flowers, forests etc. to bring man close to nature and grow an ever-growing relationship that fosters a better understanding between the two worlds.

This paper after making a brief survey of some folklores of J&K & modern Indian writings in English shall move on to a short story *The Tractor* written by an Australian writer Peter Cowan by locating it in the eco-critical framework suggested by Lawrence Buell. Buell, in his groundbreaking work *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, offers criteria for determining whether a text is environmental: first, "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device"; second, "the human interest is not ... the only legitimate interest"; third, "human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation"; and fourth, "there is some sense of the environment as a process." This text will also be evaluated from the angle of the ecological laws put forward by Barry Commoner in *The Closing Circle* where he says "Everything is connected to everything else", "Everything must go somewhere", "Nature knows best" and "There is no such thing as free lunch".

Let me begin with Dogri folk literature. Dogri folklore and rituals promoted eco-ethics by preaching animal, birds' and plant worship. It is sacred to plant a sapling, water a tree, feed birds daily etc. A Dogri folksong, which is a dialogue between the hero, a king and the heroine, a queen, clearly delineates the ideal man-nature closeness. The queen, an eco-feminist requests the king not to hunt birds especially the Peacock of the green garden because she feels a blood relation between her and them and she calls the bird as her brother:

"Sassu de Jaaye mere chidiyan te tote, amma da Jaaya saile baagen da more"
Sparrows and parrots are my mother-in-law's kids,
My mother's son is green garden's peacock.

Look at this Dogri saying which goes as:

"Ba'reh mageir, kan-ken de dher"
Raining in Jan-feb brings heaps of grain.

This means either shrinking or prolonging of the seasons is not good for life on the earth. And this is what modern man's roar is all about. A Ladakhi folk song beautifully sings a story of man's cruelty through a mother Ibex's mouth as an advice to her children to avoid going down the hills. The kids have asked the mother how her body color turned red.

"Ngai amma dan'mo ngerang thib chik-chik song"
O my mother Ibex! Your all color is gone.

The Mother Ibex pretends that her rolling in the red soil of the plains has made her red whereas actually she has been wounded by a hunter there. By constructing a touching mother-children human-like story of the animal world the folk writer's message is quite clear: wild life needs man's compassion.

Men of Letters have voiced their love for nature and worries of de-shaping the eco-structure in various ways: Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Frost, Ruskin etc. are few names to mention. But it is only relatively recently in late 20th century that this canon gained momentum as a renewed eco-poetic voice in an organized theory called Ecocriticism.

Eco-criticism as a literary theory got a shape in 1996 in Cheryll Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader : Landmarks in Literary Ecology* whereas the seeds of this branch of study were sown much earlier, though scattered and incoherent, in the writings of Joseph Meeker's "The Comedy of Survival" in 1974 and in an essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" by William Rueckert who used the term for the first time in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978 . Other basic sources are *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* edited by Michael Branch and Scott Slovic and its British counterpart *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism, edited by Laurence Coupe*, *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment*, edited by Michael Branch et al., Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford's useful collection *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism* followed by the works of Lawrence Buell *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, *Writing for an Endangered World*, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. In his essay *Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism* Loretta Johnson identifies some important precursors to this movement. These are: Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* and Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*.

Eco-criticism as an interdisciplinary study is concerned with man's relationship with his physical environment as reflected in literature. Just as ordinary politics engages with the questions of creating a society we want to live in, Eco-criticism deals to develop a Nature-politics to find the Nature-human kinship. As a combination of natural science and humanistic discipline, it adds a dimension that man is just one part of his immediate environment and has got no right to reduce the richness and diversity of life forms through his interference to satisfy his insatiable needs. It deals with a variety of issues in literary texts like a shift in perception of nature and the ways humans inhabit the Earth, the environment and non-human life in their works, avoiding binary oppositions, perceiving human nature in an I/it or I/thou relationship, dwelling, belonging, environmental justice , built/ unbuilt environment etc..It examines whether the current issues of environmental importance have been adequately represented in literature. Literature recognizing its responsibility serves as a platform for raising alarms against eco-apocalypse and calls for a change in man's attitude to nature and all other living beings by adhering to the principle of 'deep ecology' as suggested by Arne Naess and George Sessions. In any way it engages itself with responsibility and question of ethics.

Look at the poem "Squirrel" by Nissim Ezekiel where a squirrel , a " flick of grey and brown ...to be caressed". In " Sparrows" he hints on ("The fact-the mating and the nest") that the number of these birds is at the verge of extinction. To Margret Atwood writing is a mission and her foremost concern seems to be informed by the large scale industrial technology, excessive exploitation of the resources and a strong feeling that people's survival is linked to the well-being of the planet. The conviction of Barry Commoner that 'Everything is connected to everything else' i.e. interdependence of all forms of life on this earth underlines her novels.

The same undercurrent of the ecological sensitivity can be located in a late twentieth century Australian novelist and short fiction writer Peter Cowan. He has shown a better talent as a short story writer. He usually deals with the themes of man-woman relationships and feelings of loneliness and alienation that lie beneath the commonplace lives. In a short story "*The Tractor*" he expresses concerns

arising out of an irresistible and disastrous historical process through the story of a hermit, an Australian aborigine, who opposes the clearing of the forest land by the colonizers. Peter Cowan has woven this story around two characters Ann and her fiancé Ken; Ann is an idealistic city denizen and a naturalist whereas Ken is a businessman who is proud of his business acumen and clearing the bush for suburban expansion by benefitting the farmers who can sell off their cultivable land.

Here he reflects upon twin problems of racial differences and environmental degradation. He feels that the technological advancement has hypnotized mankind to firmly stand against the Mother Earth by taking away everything that she has endowed us with. This pursuit of progress has been ruthless and has recoiled upon mankind in various manifestations of disaster that leave man helpless, astonished and momentarily repentant.

At the 'nuclei' level *The Tractor* is a story of a 'notorious' indigenous character who obstructs the development or civilization process and is hunted down in the end. Ken discusses with his fiancée Ann, a humanist & a teacher, the problem posed by 'the hermit', as they call him, who "lives anywhere...takes the ball floats off the taps in the sheep tanks and...breaks the fences when he feels like it, and leaves the gates open-" (Cowan,9). He has interfered with and put sand into the oil of two big tractors of Don Mackay, the contractor who has been engaged in the job of scrub clearing & the repair would cost a few hundred. Actually the land is being cleared for tax deduction at Ken's father's suburban interior. Though the strategies and conspiracies of Ken and his men to knock the hermit down claim most of our attention yet Ann's concern for the victim and her efforts to understand the reason behind his retaliation and consequent emotional bonding with him assume a prominent tone. She, who could "never become one of them" (Cowan,10), pursues Ken to "just let him be." In response to Ken's statement that they have done no harm to him (The Hermit) Ann replies that the reason lies in clearing the land where he lives which is "all so ruthless". (Cowan, 9)

At the indicial level, we may locate a pattern, a deeper, clearer and sharper suggestion of preserving the pristine form of the Mother earth, protecting woods which are a habitat to numberless species (like aboriginals who live close to nature maintaining its sanctity and feeling its spirit as Wordsworth felt), and above all, a warning that over-indulgence with it can result in catastrophic consequences. It also poses a serious ethical question through Ann-Ken dialogue whether clearing the scrub for construction or farming is ethically right. Cowan presents a critique of suburban expansion through this observation of Ann:

"She saw with a sudden desolating clarity the grey sprawl of suburbs crossed by the black lines of roads, the clusters of city buildings that clawed up like a sudden focus, the endless tawdry, overdecorated little houses like the one he and his family had placed on the long low rise of land from which almost all else had been erased...And it was perhaps worse that he did not see what he was doing, himself a part of some force beyond him. Duped by pride."(Cowan, 15).

Ann's question to Ken is ethically pertinent in this regard:

"Do we have to change everything? Wipe out everything so that everlastingly we can grow things, make things, get things, get tax deductions? You don't even leave a few acres of timber, somewhere for animals and birds_"(Cowan, 15)

In the wake of development man has not cared to think of other species living in the area he is going to clear up. The same was done by the White settlers in their colonies like Australia where aboriginals were subjected to severe cruelties to push them off the land. But the settlers had to face their wrath as Ken is facing. He thinks that the hermit is doing all the destruction deliberately without provocation. Ann understands that Ken, as a part of some force beyond, can never even think that he is

wrong because it is “happening everywhere today” in the name of progress (Cowan, 9). Her reply “Perhaps he (the hermit) feels something should be left” carries greater significance in the context of environmental destruction where no consideration other than material one works & everything is brutally destroyed. Nature retaliates like this hermit who has vowed to destroy the tractors. Ann asks Ken,

So, there can't be anybody who wants things to stay the way they are for a while? (Cowan, 14)

Glotfelty observes that nature and culture are distinct identities. Nature is non-human whereas Culture is a human construct. The human progress necessitates the subjugation of nature. Peter Cowan seems to be conscious of human dependence on nature and that life on the earth is an interconnected web. The hermit symbolizes nature while Ken is culture and cleaning the land symbolizes human progress. Barry Commoner found that if one (manmade technosphere) desacralizes nature, the other (natural ecosphere) takes revenge by disasters, as does the Hermit. Ecocritics see this culture as ‘the other’ in relation to the natural and the non-human. Ann understands this complexity and like an ecocritic “pushes an agenda which involves the realization by the humans’ of their violent attitude to nature, and instead pleads for a sense of responsibility which can be converted to a reduction in life style.” (Tripathy, 89)

She had no wish to draw him, as if deliberately sought their disengagement, but it seemed she must form the words, place them before him, his evasion too easy.

“You are sure about it Ken, aren't you? That he's just getting his own back? That it's as simple as that?” (Cowan, 16)

The Hermit symbolizes the ecosphere overused by the anthropocentric and andocentric forces. What Ann meant is that the habitat of the hermit has been snatched away without which his survival is in danger. So, he is struggling to recover the lost paradise. Eco-critics warn of a situation when this ‘getting back’ may prove apocalyptic as Barry Commoner believed that ‘Everything must go somewhere’ and Newton’s third law of motion also tells ‘To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction’. The hermit is pouncing back to avenge upon the civilization for the damage done to his survival. So, he has vowed not to allow the tractor, an agent of technological slavery, to operate upon his land.

Australia has witnessed most cruel spectacle of brutality on its natives who had been deprived not only of their land and culture but also their age-old relationship with the land. They were even treated as non-humans and chased out of the inhabited places. In this story Non-human environment has not been used merely as a setting or framing device rather its relationship and interaction with the characters grows and gradually unfolds many socio-historic facts which troubled Cowan. The triangular relationship of Ann-Hermit-Land is central to the understanding of this work. The sympathy of Ann for the hermit becomes more pronounced when she goes across the paddock to find him and tell him that he should go away otherwise they would kill him.

“I wanted to help you,” she said, and she despised herself in terror...Abruptly she began to sob, the sound loud, gulping, ridiculous, her hands lifting to her face”. (Cowan,)

Another character with an eco-concern is Ken’s father. He believes that human interest is not only legitimate interest. He also becomes the mouthpiece of Cowan’s eco-sensitivity and ethics. Disgusted with the repeated defeat of his efforts to entrap the hermit Ken is planning to use fire to push the hermit away.

“Then Sunday night we'll make a line north of the camp, and if the wind's right we'll burn back towards the fire-break along the paddock. He'll have to break out through the paddock. We will have a chance that way.” (TT, 18)

Ann is greatly disturbed and troubled by the idea of burning the scrub:

...it was suddenly monstrous that the darkness of the scrub should be swept by the glare of fire, as she would see it from the window where she stood now, the man stumbling from it in some unimaginable indignity. And though she had doubted the men's intention to carry out their plan, it seemed now in the darkness only too probable that in anger they might do what she, and perhaps they, feared. And it was impossible. (Cowan, 20)

The father disagrees to the plan. The fire may engulf the entire place hence putting the entire human, non-human life in danger.

"I think it's too big a risk," his father said. "You will burn the whole of that country. You can't do it." (Cowan, 18)

Cowan's characters speak in consonance with the ecological laws put forward by Barry Commoner in *The Closing Circle*. Ken's father believes that all living organisms share the same ecosphere and what affects one, affects all. Any adverse change in this system is likely to be detrimental to the system. His straight and clear assertion "You can't do it...You can't start a fire like that." (Cowan, 18) elevates this short story as an environmental text. He means that environment is a process and human intervention with a selfish motivation to desacralize it disrupts this process which can lead to eco-apocalypse. The interaction of Ken and Ann is a metaphor of Culture-Nature clash which has no solution. Ann does not believe in such development that happens at the cost of expansion in the Bush.

On the other level of interpretation *The Tractor* projects an endless struggle of aboriginals of Australia to regain their land and identity as well that has been encroached upon, crumbled and crushed by the Whites who had declared Australia as terra nullis. In the process of settling they had cleared land for cultivation and colonies depriving 'others' (humans and non-humans as well). Aborigines were treated worse than animals and were chased, pushed off the land. Peter Cowan inverts the Aboriginal myth here. If in the myths they are the hunters and the aggressors, at present they are the hunted and the oppressed.

So, it can be concluded that Peter Cowan's short story *The Tractor* satisfies the standards of an environment text as per the criteria laid down by Lawrence Buell. Here the nonhuman environment (the scrub and also the hermit who symbolizes nature) is present not merely as a framing device. It impacts and contributes to the growth of story & characterization. The Australian landscape has always had an active presence in Australian literature. The human interest is not the only legitimate interest in the story, rather an alarming concern about the damage caused to environment by 'development process' has been projected through the mouthpieces of Cowan like Ann and Ken's father. The text's ethical orientation revolves around human accountability to the environment and there is some sense of the environment as a process. The direct resistance of the suburban expansion by the aborigine and indirect and passive retaliation of Ann take the centre stage of action in the story. Characters of Ann and Ken's father stand as representative eco-conscious characters of Peter Cowan's this piece of short fiction. Peter Cowan has very skillfully weaved the issue of eco-concern through the struggle of an aborigine.

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