Quintessence of Ecocriticism in Emerson’s Works

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Abstract

De facto, literary studies before 1990s, unlike other related humanities disciplines, have apparently remained oblivious by environment concerns. Literary studies are in a hasty, and impenetrable state covering major aspects of literature except essays on ecological approach to literature. It often responds to contemporary pressure so exist in the state of relentless unrest. Its needs wide range of disciplines like other humanities, to break the shackles to move beyond the boundaries to deal with global warming and global predicaments. We need a sensible ecological approach that inculcates a greater sense of environmental concern, and awareness in literary studies to crush ‘The Endangered Earth’ myth in entirety before it turns into reality. Ecocriticism serves this precise purpose that studies the literature and the environment where the scholars of vary realms discuss, analyze and formulate texts on environmental concerns and challenges on the subject of nature. This article tries to explore more in the major critical works of Emerson that fall into ecocritical fold to prove further that ecocriticism may be new discipline but immensely reflected in the works since centuries.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environment, Nature, Global Warming
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Every individual on earth wants to breathe freely today. We are known for our innate and spiritual attachment to the nature. There is a dire need to find, innovate and characterize a field that can deal with all the environmental problems and challenges the world face today. Ecocriticism serves this precise purpose that studies the literature and the environment where the scholars of vary realms discuss, analyze and formulate texts on environmental concerns and challenges on the subject of nature. The scholar tries to explore more in the major critical works of Emerson that fall into eco-critical fold to prove further that ecocriticism may be new discipline but immensely reflected in the works since centuries.

The ecocriticism may be a new phenomenon in late 1990s but massively described in diverse forms in their works by Chaucer, Shakespeare and other eminent writers of the past. They described the nature featuresin their works in general but ecocritics study literature to find out relations with the environment. The major contributors were the explorers, voyagers, travelers, natural historians and others like-minded writers. The major developments spread out significantly in the nineteenth century literature where Wordsworth (early nineteenth century) Emerson, Thoreau, William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke Paulding, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Whitman characterized nature to their best. Thoreau lived by the cove of Walden in order to be able to read the changing moods and whims of Nature. Like Wordsworth, he was thrilled in the face of the freshness and charms of natural scenes, sight, and sounds. Walden Pond has become almost a symbol of permanence and eternity in art, in the same way as Yeats’ Byzantium. John Burroughs and John Muir were mainly the two great American naturalists, whose early work was influenced by Whitman, particularly the essays collected in Wake-Robin (1871) and Birds and Poets. (1877). Mostly, the scholars undertook works on American and British literature from the last two centuries. Emerson’s nature and Thoreau’s Walden are perhaps considered the significant works of nature and ecology concerned.
The writers highlighted people’s ecology concern through their works mainly during industrialization destroying the landscape, consequently, initiated the movements to conserve earth. The other contrary discipline called ecofeminist literary criticism, too studies the representations of nature by women and tried to prove their dominance over male images and attitudes toward the environment.

John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle were the Victorian essayists who wrote about nature and underscored the effects of the environment due to industrialization. The nineteenth century, the Romantic poets in Britain revolted against the current system and expressed their thoughts and feelings celebrating the beauty and mystery of nature. William Wordsworth, followed this in “Michael” (1800), portraying a simple shepherd deeply attached to the natural world, his poem The Prelude (1850) accounting poet’s evolving understanding of nature and The Excursion (1814) a long philosophical reflection on the relationship of humanity and nature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Keats, Byron, and Shelley also contributed to the natural. Shelley’s poem “Ode to the West Wind,” describing nature is noteworthy in literature. These poets were radicals and raised their concerns against the capitalists, industrialist and materialists to preserve the natural world. Thomas Hardy and Matthew Arnold’s love poem “Dover Beach” (1867) have also been placed high in English poetry.

Ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his article ‘an ecological poetics’ articulated in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978 but gained momentum in the late 1990s. The scholars initially did not pay much attention but later it flourished leaps and bounds becoming a buzz word today in all sphere of academics. They are not unanimous on its definition, aims, and scope but reached ultimately on the environmental related issues. The East and the West have been working toward greater understanding for centuries – with serious short-sighted errors. But in study on ecocriticism and literature, national boundaries can evaporate before the light of understanding.

The scholar feels that the study cannot be undertaken without ample knowledge of environmental predicaments of today and thus it is not out of place to oversee few views of pioneers on ecocriticism.
Glotfelty describes as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” and Laurence Buell is of the view that this study must be ‘conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis’. Few have widened its scope to term it interdisciplinary nature of study by ecological science, politics, ethics, women's studies, Native American studies, and history, among other academic fields. However, David Mazel still affirms it as the analysis of literature “as though nature mattered.” The subject has widened its scope and established as a recognizable discipline within literature departments of American universities.

The term ecocriticism may be novice but the field of its study goes back to centuries where eminent writers have written enormous about environment in their works. Therefore, given the brief explanation on ecocriticism, the scholar has chosen the major works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a pioneer of American literature who contributed immensely even before the term ecocriticism devised.

An attempt is also made in the article to trace the preparatory background of Emerson by way of underscoring the nature influences on them. It is observed that nature elements—rivers, mountain, trees, pond, land, grass, and green land had a deep impact on him to awaken in him a love for the environment. In fact, Emerson was temperamentally suited to revolt against the dogmatic Christian thought and to try to find the truth of the matter and the spirit in nature. Emerson says that man is constantly in the presence of Nature. Man studies nature that he may know himself. The great books help him, as Nature does, to know himself.

Emerson’s essay Nature, a systematic exposition of the main principles of Transcendentalism, was published anonymously in 1836. Its publication sparked a period of intense intellectual ferment and literary activity. “Nature, the two series of Essays (1841, 1844) and a handful of public orations set the terms for the public image as a provocative freethinker, the intellectual leader of the Transcendentalists.”

Society defines the laws of good and bad but Emerson says, “No law can be sacred to
me but that of my own Nature. For self reliant man good is all that transports himself to
the realm of the soul and ‘bad’ is all that pulls him down from the spiritual regions to
the mundane day-to-day activities of the world.”

This ‘man’ is that self realized individual who has already realizes the truth of
the formula: “Study nature, know thyself.” The study of nature teaches him culture and
the knowledge of the self teaches him how to manage culture for a useful moral
purpose.

His essay “The American Scholar” is not a sheer product of manmade schools and
colleges, institutions and universities but one who has crossed over from the four walls
of institutions to the vast and unlimited university of nature. Nature, for Emerson is the
greatest teacher, who does a great deal to the development of man’s physical, moral,
and spiritual personality, therefore in order to find an infallible answer to any ticklish
question concerning life, man must, “study nature’. He says: “The influence upon the
mind of man is that of nature. Every day, the sun rises; and every day, it sets; everyday
there is Night and the stars,” show their brilliant faces in a systematic manner. “Ever the
wind blows, the grass grows.” The streams flow and the mountains glow. Everyday men
and women can be seen in an endless activity. The scholar is he of all men whom this
spectacle of nature’s activity engages. Emerson says: “What is Nature to him. There is
never a beginning; there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of
God, but always circular power returning into itself.” In this circular power, he can find
his own spirit circulating which is as boundless as Nature is. The scholar should
therefore study the principles which govern the activity of Nature. Since these principles
do not compromise with everyone, he should evolve answer to his own problems from
natural principles. By the dictum “Study Nature” Emerson does not mean that the
scholar should walk on the footprints of nature or follow it. Following Nature can be
dangerous also. The scholar cannot ignore altogether civilization which stands for
management of Nature for useful human and moral purpose. Therefore, a sheer
imitation of nature can sometimes lead to uncivilized results. That is why, Emerson
says, Study Nature (but not sheerly to imitate it). Nature can be managed for useful
purpose only when the scholar introspects properly the pros and cons of his study of
nature. And this introspection can be done when the scholar is self-realized. Therefore,
Emerson gives a second tip to the scholar – that of “Know Thyself”. Study Nature and Know Thyself when applied at the same time will bring before the scholar, a solution which blends culture with civilization. Studying Nature tells us what can be done and knowing thyself tells us what should be done. A blend of both alone can give a true answer to all social, political, economic, environment, and moral problems of human life.

Where man is actually an emanation of the divine principle, but he is prone to nascence or ignorance due to his subordination to the five senses and the mind which allure him to get attached to material objects of Nature. Nature for Emerson is a very good teacher whose laws teach man how to live in the given circumstances. Whenever man is in trouble he can remove his tensions by adhering to Emerson’s formula “Study Nature and Know Thyself”. If Emerson gives exhortation to man to study nature, it does not mean that he wants him to ‘follow’ nature. If followed, Nature can be a good to a large extent but it can at the same time be very dangerous for the man of civilization. Civilization requires man to organize Nature in such a manner that the organization is useful for him as well as all those around him who are his human kith and kin as members of one family. To follow Nature means to follow ‘culture’ but to study nature with a view to solving problems means to live a ‘civilized’ life. The best formula for useful living is neither culture alone nor civilization alone, nor nature alone but a sensible blending of both so that the cultured man can lead a happy civilized life. Emerson’s essay “Nature” is centred on this philosophical pivot, which is indubitably Vedantic.

Unlike Wordsworth, Emerson does not speak of the power of God in the objects of Nature though he feels his presence in it. No doubt, the Over-Soul lives in Nature like the soul that lives in the body but this does not mean that the body needs to be worshipped. It is the Over-Soul that needs to be realized in Nature. The soul or the Over-Soul is the content while Nature is the container, and it is the content that matters and that the container has no value if the content is taken out of it. Therefore, Emerson believes that man should live in close intimacy with nature but should not allow himself to be deeply immersed in material pursuits. This alone will guarantee him peace and contentment. In this essay, Emerson refers to multi-dimensional influences of Nature on
The stars as objects of Nature awake a great reverence in the mind of man because though they are always present in the sky, they are inaccessible. In fact, all objects of nature do like the stars. Nature is all beautiful; it never wears a mean appearance; the flowers, the animals, the mountains, the rivers, the powers – all assert their beauty as individual objects but in their totality they create the similar impression of beauty and joy in the mind of man. There is no cunningness about the objects of Nature; all contain delight and simplicity of childhood. Emerson calls this the “kindred impression of natural objects”.

Nature for Emerson is not a limited reality but a pleasant name for the cosmic beauty. It is for him an all-inclusive concept, embarrassing all human manifestations vegetable, animal, inanimate and even cosmic. He writes about Nature as a lover of beauty; as an aesthetic philosopher, as a metaphysical philosopher, as a mystic, and even as a psychologist. This means that Emerson loves nature as a philosopher as well as a scientist. As he says: “Nature is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought again, as ice becomes water or gas.” Emerson believes that the enchantments of nature spark the imagination and have a “medicinal” effect. When man is alone in the forest, he is so amazed in the circumference of nature that the city life appears to him to be “dwarf”. His penetration into the beauty of nature makes him forget his material pursuits and he realizes how poor, he is in the midst of manmade inventions of materialism.

Emerson opines that enjoyment of Nature is the instinctive nature of man himself. He need not go to “Como Lake or the Maderia islands” to enjoy nature. Every landscape, May every object is worthy of man’s enjoyment. In fact, nature is another name for the human mind. Emerson calls nature “A metaphor of the human mind” and “The symbol of spirit and the universe”. The universe itself is the “externalization of the sow”.

Emerson takes the scientific theory of the evolution and says that it is nothing but the human efforts to record the evolutionary process of Nature. Nature is not inimical to Science; rather it is analogous to Science. The laws of Nature do not compromise the laws of science. But, even then nature is better than Science because she transcends her
own laws whereas Science cannot. Science is no mystery; but Nature is nothing but mystery. It is man who is able to codify the laws of Nature though not completely man carries the world of Nature in his head. That is why man is called the prophet and discoverer of Nature’s secrets.

The beauty of Nature has something elusive about her. The woods and the waters have certain allurement and flattery but the poet finds himself not near enough to his objects even when he is in close contact with the objects of Nature. At times “the pine tree, the bank of the river, the flowers before him does not seem to be Nature”. Perhaps, it is in the neighbouring field or the adjacent woods. Perhaps beauty can never be grasped and is inaccessible.

His poem ‘The Rhodora’ is full pantheism of Nature, much like that of Wordsworth. The concluding stanza ‘Hematreya’ conveys the theme of the poem: that all developments on the earth were falsely claimed by human beings; they thought that they controlled the earth. Everyone wants to stay forever but the irony is that everyone “is gone”. The earth asks a question of human beings “How am I theirs, if they cannot hold me, but I hold them?” His poem "The Humble-Bee," written in May of 1837, illustrates the point that a truly natural perspective is never implicated in or damaged by the force and frauds of modern competitive commerce. Besides, the poems namely: Concord Hymn, Earth song, Each and Every, Days, The Problem, and The Snow-Storm etc have also their origin somewhere in the nature. Hence, we can safely conclude that Emerson’s theory of poetry and poetic creation are sheer expressions of the total perspective of his mind and thought which flows from the philosophy of nature.

Thus, we see that “Nature” and other essays are the best illustration of ecocriticism. The entire Emersonian knowledge is centred round, the total perspective, which he has achieved through his transcendental expressions of self-realization and love for nature. Therefore, it would be apposite to term as a pilgrimage from the idolatrous world of literature and rituals to the temple of the environmental consciousness.

The ecocriticism scholars need to collaborate and unite their efforts and organize their researches into an identified and recognized discipline in the universities around
the world. We need to adopt sensible ecological approach and inculcate a greater sense of environmental concern, and awareness in literary studies to crush ‘The Endangered Earth’ myth in entirety before it turns into reality. The scholar strongly feels that ecocriticism is a vital organ of academic disciplines and has a broader perspective to flourish in the global warming context today. The writers of ecocriticism may surely contribute to lessen the ecological problems by creating awareness among masses through their delightful works.
References:


