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RE-READING ECO-CRITICAL THEMES IN ROMANTICISM WITH REFERENCE TO WILLIAM WORDSWORTH'S TINTERN ABBEY

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Abstract:

In this interdisciplinary approach of eco-criticism (dealing with literature in relation to ecological or environmental study) attention is drawn to the causes of the environmental degradation and possible way out is discerned in the Romantic Movement with reference to the classic romantic poem, Tintern Abbey .As we have seen, since time immemorial there was a perennial bond between man and environment or nature. But that eternal bond was shattered with the progress and development of science and technology since the advent of Enlightenment that focused on the development of human beings at the expense of environment and its others. As a consequence, the ecological balance was shattered. One of the main reactions can be found in the Romantic Movement to this mindless and senseless destruction of nature. In Tintern Abbey, by William Wordsworth, the high-priest of the Romantic Movement much eco- friendly concern can be discerned.

KEYWORDS:

Eco-criticism, ecology, industrialization, romanticism, cosmic harmony

INTRODUCTION:

Holding the hands of postmodern criticism, postcolonial criticism and feminist criticism challenging the hierarchical status of Western metaphysics that excluded the non- human aspects of life, eco-criticism , influenced by ecological concern, came into existence with its aim to protect environment and other species from inevitable extinction and destruction triggered by random exploitation of nature .To restore the ecological balance the eco-critical study involves recognition of the subject-hood of non-human species or plants that have as much right to exist as man in a system of mutual interdependencies and inter-relationships that forms the basis of ecosystem.

DISCUSSIONS

Studying literature in the light of eco-criticism (here romantic literature) focuses on its relation to the histories of ecological thought, ethics and activism to help shape human response to the natural environment that is on the brink of destruction because of human intervention into it, while suggesting alternative modes of thoughts and behavior including sustainable practices that would respect the perceived rights of the non-human creatures and ecological processes. In the words of Laurence Bell, literary texts function as “acts of environmental imagination” that may “affect one's caring for the physical world making that world “feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable”. [Writing for an Endangered World.

The modern concept of 'ecology 'was not introduced until 1866,when Charles Darwin's German

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disciple ,Ernst Haeckel, first coined the word to identify that branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings.(OED)It is to the ecological science that we owe our modern understanding that all organisms, objects and processes in a given environment , constitute through their complex mutual relations, an ecosystem in which" everything is connected to everything else".(Commoner)

According to the holistic model of nature, if we interfere with or displace any single part of a given habitat, we will introduce a ripple effect that will inadvertently affect the whole habitat. The idea of ecology dates back to the 18th century when the quasi- scientific paradigm of nature's economy stressed on the fact that all earthly organisms were thought to co-exist in a system of complex interdependencies comprising "interacting whole".[WorsterX]Gilbert White also endorses the concept of nature's economy in order to justify the importance of the lowliest creatures arguing that the most insignificant insects or reptiles are of much consequence, and have much more influence in the economy of nature by adding that "earth worms, though in appearance small and despicable, link in the chain of nature, yet ,if lost, would make a lamentable chasm."

A part of the ecological history brought to our attention that our relationship to our environment has passed through several phases by pointing to the fact that in the beginning we were shaped by environment which acted as a selecting agent and controlled the evolution of our features. We like other animals, remained in equilibrium with our environment. But with the development of culture and science the face of the earth changed completely and the perennial equilibrium was shattered.

The idea of having control or dominion over nature by exploiting or conquering it to satisfy the demands of modern men has a legacy in Western Judeo-Christianity (Johnston)Within the earth created by God "man has a divine mission to control the creation secure"(p-15). In the medieval Christianity this was formulated into belief that man was created in God's own image and has by God's grace dominion over nature.(p-293) And progress of human civilization was" synonymous with the conquest of nature "according to Thomas.(1984-p-25)

This Biblical thought gave impetus to the anthropocentric and humanist thinkers and philosophers of the 18th century when the wind of industrialization was blowing over the length and breadth of the Western World. They justified that the planet was designed for man alone, as the highest being of the creation or for the hierarchy of life with man at its apex and that man through his arts and inventions was a partner of God, improving upon and cultivating an earth created for him. (P-viii_Glacken)And until the end of the 18th century man acted as a controller of nature and heralding the 20th century, man attained a breathtaking anthropocentrism, based on power over nature._GlackenP-494

The 19th and the 20th centuries have thus produced massive danger in the relationship between human societies and natural environment with the dominant theme being the conquest of nature by Man. This outlook was termed techno-centrism by O'Riordan, characterized by faith in the ability of man to understand and control physical, biological, and social process for the benefit of the present and future generations, also faith in the role of science which provides the intelligence for the rational control of the universe. Johnston(1989p-5).In the 18th century and onwards , although man reaped the bumper harvest of industrialization, man called destruction upon themselves having simultaneously contributed to the environmental degradation with the rising problem of pollution in air ,water and extinction of wildlife from pesticides such as DDT. To add fuel to the fire, when the world entered the 1980s a new mood of market -oriented politics squeezing the world's poor and weak, began to grow. Everywhere economic gain was won at the expense of huge but latent environmental losses .By the late 1980s the issue of global environmental damage began to make headlines for new loss of tropical cover, widespread dying of savannah margins, regional pollution of inland seas and oceans, atmospheric contamination on a vast scale in the form of increased acidity and greenhouse gas warming and the growing concern over the toxic chemicals in consumer goods and water discharges.

The main opposition to this techno-centric ideology came from two strands: one from the ecological environmentalism that bears similarity to the romantic ecology and another from the rationalist thinkers like Thomas Malthus. His widely read book, An Essay on the Principles of Population brought into our focus that the population growth could not keep pace with food production since population increase geometrically and exponentially, while the production of food increases only arithmetically. Hence, humans themselves have to pay for their thoughtless exploitation of nature in terms of their possible extinction through starvation.

The Romantic Movement also pointed out the seamy sides of industrialization that flourished at the expense of nature. To the romantics nature should not be belittled as 'object', rather it is a living entity with its own integrity and ability to survive. The holistic concept of Romantic Ecology rose in reaction to the tradition deriving from Sir Francis Bacon's empiricism, Sir Isaac Newton's physics and Rene Descartes 'concept of the universe inhabited by thinking humans demarcated from nature and non-human creatures.

According to the Romantics man's apartness from nature believing in the dualism of self\other or the subject\object, is the main cause of environmental degradation.(Bate Song of Earth) They deified nature as a source of wonder and mystery. William Wordsworth, the high-priest of this movement looked upon nature as his guiding spirit to understand the unintelligible universe. Thus influenced by the mottos of the French Revolution and the call of Rousseau upon humanity to go back to the serenity of nature, he went to deconstruct the Enlightenment Science's subject-object dualism in order to re-establish the complex interpenetration of everything including man .So equal space and dignity is accorded to the 'observer and the observed' in their ideology. Lindenberger's observation of Wordsworth's rhetoric in The Prelude also points up 're-enactment' of the dialogue between self and nature:

"habit is interchanging qualities of the animate and the inanimate, of the mind and the external world, is central to The PreludeIt is the natural method with which he communicates his early spiritual experience and accounts in poetic terms for his mental and emotional development; above all it is a way of recapturing poetically that sense of unity of all existence which he had on so intuitive level in early childhood. In The Prelude he not merely portrays the interworking of discernible objects but creates a lively interplay of what we would normally call abstract concepts."In this passage:

"Thus the pride of strength,
And the vain glory of super skill
Were interfus'd with objects which subdu'd
And temper'd them, and gradually produc'd
A quiet independence of the heart," _ The Prelude

.....the word 'heart 'is the closest we get to any tangible object. Yet he creates a brief but intense drama centered about the assertiveness of the human ego, which in the process of "interfusion", loses the upper hand to the unnamed objects of external nature."Herbert Lindenberger, On Wordsworth's The Prelude.
In Tintern Abbey the demolition of subject-object dualism is explicit in asserting equal status to everything –be it the vagrant dweller or the lofty hills living in harmonious interrelationship and co-existence. William Wordsworth so wholeheartedly consecrates himself to the altar of nature that he went to the extent of accepting nature as:

"The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, the soul of all my moral being"

. He reads into the book of nature the essential and perennial message of cosmic harmony interconnecting "all thinking objects" and "all objects of all thoughts". So Wordsworthian nature is thinking and feeling and can heal up the battered and ravaged soul of the town-living poet under the titanic burden of the unintelligible universe.

In this poem there is a contrast between natural order and human disorder disrupting the coherence and eternal harmony:

"But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hour of weariness, sensations sweet,"

Wordsworth finds the presence of cosmic spirit in the landscape by the side of the river Wye that seems to the poet as beautiful as it was five years ago .No change has taken place in the realm of nature but only humankind and their way of looking at nature has changed:

"Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters!and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur."

"In every line of the poem he personifies the natural objects as if lost in profound thought and perceives one-to-one correspondence between man and nature. Once Matthew Arnold went to the extent of saying that "it looks as though nature has taken the out of Wordsworth's hands and has written the poem". The perennial harmonies between man and nature is brought out in the following phrases from the poem 'secluded scene', 'soft inland murmur', 'repose', 'hermit alone' etc. It is presented in such a way that they are stung into solitude being under the spell of the cosmic music. Again harmony exists between the peaceful

landscape below and the profounder quiet of the heaven above. Oneness also exists in colour of the vegetation here, there and everywhere. The orchard tufts with their unripe fruits look green and seem to be lost in the surrounding groves and copses which are also green:

“These orchard tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses.....”

He fuses the world of man(of cottage and pastoral farms, of orchards, and hedge rows of vagrant dwellers)with the world of nature(of lofty cliffs and mountain springs)and again both are connected with the quiet of the sky(the symbol of divine spirit).The presence of the Infinite can be found in every finite object.

At the climactic moment of his intercommunion with nature he is transported to a sublime state, where the world ceases to be a burden; where all distinctions and discriminations melt away in the sea of cosmic oneness and the poet with his eye made quiet by nature penetrates into the life of things to discern the infinite pattern within:

“...., that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of mystery,
In which the heavy and weary weight of

Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened.....”

He feels that the spirit in him is identical with the spirit in nature and both are interpenetrated by the wisdom and the spirit of the universe and the poet completely identifies himself with nature breaking out of his prison of his ego (Fig. 1).Under the moral and the spiritual influence of nature his soul evolved and expanded to embrace even the most insignificant thing in nature:

“To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”
_From Immortality Ode

.The poet also hears the “sad still music of humanity”. This is how his identification with the world of nature and the world of man becomes complete. Like the American poet Emerson he feels himself interfused with the cosmic motion. He is now a fragment of the universe, of the sole master of the universe entitled to control everything .And everything forms a part of the cosmic whole which rolls through and moves through' the setting sun', 'the round ocean, and 'the mind of man':

“And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;”

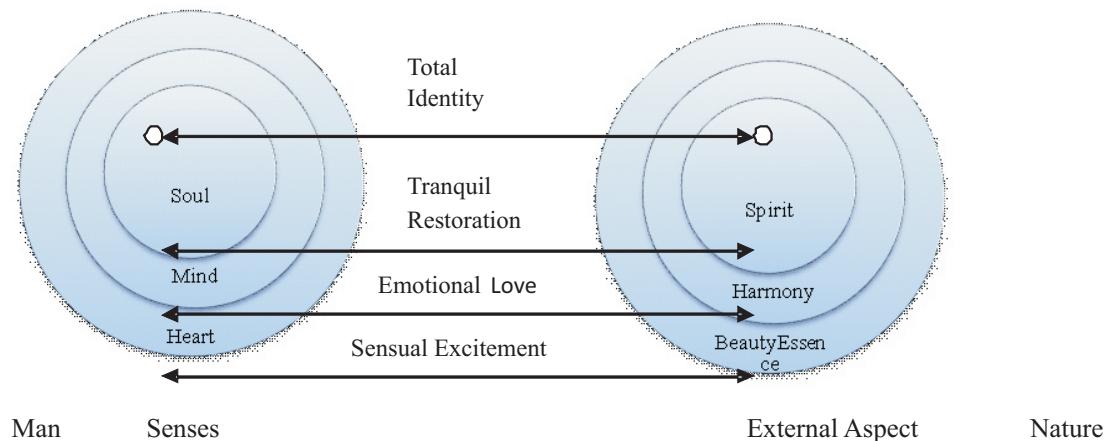


Fig. 1: Man-Nature Interactions (source: Based on Wordsworth's Imagination)

The vibration of life sent by the cosmic force to everything will get disturbed with the displacement of anything, however little it is to us. As in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner the mariner's mindless killing of the Albatross on the spur of the moment blasphemed the bond of natural sanctity of the cosmos shown in the upheaval created in the world of nature.

CONCLUSION

Tintern Abbey goes close to the concern registered by the ecologists or the deep ecologists with their bio-centric endeavour to promote the life of everything on earth. It is a typical eco-critical poem that does not consider man as the supreme authority but one part in a huge and complex life-net in nature. Romantic spirit is also a democratic spirit that celebrates the entity of the others apart from man. This poem echoes the Upanishadic thought that is found to be appropriate here to save our earth from destruction. According to it, if man can control himself and learn to be compassionate, the earth can be made safe and sustainable in every respect. In World too Much With Us Wordsworth observes that mankind being "too much with the world" and involved only in "getting and spending", are going out of tune with nature. He feels so disillusioned with the rising consumerism and materialism that he goes to the extent of being converted to Paganism that offers worship to nature instead of subjugating it unlike the Judeo-Christianity. He expresses his disenchantment that:

"....I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn,
So might I, standing on the pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn."

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