# Literature's Engagement with the Environment: Some Ruminations

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## Abstract

This paper attempts an introspection on the role of literature in an era of human-induced climate crisis. It is aware from a purely material or tangibly measurable point of view that literary-critical studies exerts a negligible impact to the environment and its studies; yet, through concrete literary examples it endeavors to imply that since the primary agent wreaking havoc on genuine wilderness, and the environment thus triggering the Anthropocene is the human, literature – since ages – has been both a keeper of records and conscience imploring a balance between the human and the non-human worlds. The paper also proposes towards the end a plan of pedagogic action.

**Keywords**: The Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, Literary genres, Wilderness

## The Context

Let us begin by putting in some information against the backdrop of the 28th Conference of the Parties, or COP28 in Dubai. This summit mentioned that this earth saw five mass extinctions due to natural causes but the sixth is being hastened solely due to human actions. Thus, we are again reminded that all walks of human life, all systems of knowledge have to take urgent cognizance of our environment, and become all the more conscious of what we are doing to or, more importantly, not doing for nature. Now, as such, the discipline of literature, coming under the larger umbrella term 'culture', has always been in a way opposed to nature – nature and culture being a well-established binary. So, it has been that literature has more often represented human predicament and human affairs – not for nothing has it been said that literature is the mirror of society or human life. And yet, literature has also recorded the human interference with and the destruction of nature, although, studying this aspect under the specific body of knowledge called Ecocriticism (also alternatively known as Environmental Criticism or Green Studies) is relatively recent coming into being only since the early 1990s.

## Discussion

We find that in the creation stories in every society, human beings figure nowhere and it is the non-human world that is described. For example, the natural elements are cited in the form of Vedic gods like Surya (the Sun God), Agni (the Fire God), Vayu (the God of the Winds), Varun (God of the Waters), and Indra (God of Thunder). Our Upanishads like the *Isavasya Upanishad* emphasize the importance of non-human life and the necessity to recognize the human and non-

human world as non-hierarchical. Both *Isavasya* and *Chandogya* Upanishads stress upon the judicious use of natural resources like rivers and the seas. Another ancient civilization, the Egyptian, was centered around their Sun God Ra, the Air God Shu and his children the Earth God Geb and the Sky Goddess Nut.

From a purely scientific point-of-view, the question of the existence of humans and their culture once again came much, much after the complexities of the very physical existence of our universe through forces of gravity, electricity, magnetism etc. In fact, Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow in their scintillatingly complex and yet lucidly written text *The grand design: New answers to the ultimate questions of life* is quite tongue-in-cheek about humans and their achievements when he opines: "And if a theory called the holographic principle proves correct, we and our four-dimensional world may be shadows on the boundary of a larger, five-dimensional space-time. In that case, our status in the universe is analogous to that of the goldfish" (p.44).

Returning to Ecocriticism, it is through the lens of Ecocriticism, for example, that we can study a pastoral poem not only as expressing a sense of longing for a simple communal life, unencumbered by modern industrial gadgets lived in harmony with nature, but also with the added dimension of the irreversible loss of an unhurried and contented course of living. An ecocritical reading of a pastoral poem might however suggest the exploitation of nature by human agency. It hints at the fact that the symbiosis between Man and Nature perhaps never existed and human agency has wrested the pasture from the wilderness shaping it as his backyard for the cattle he owns. It attempts to prove that the pastoral is a literary site suggesting the hierarchy of culture over nature. Ecocritic Greg Garrard observing about the dual nature of this literary genre opines that "No other trope is so deeply entrenched in Western culture, or is so deeply problematic for environmentalism" (p.33). A good example of this kind of a deliberately ambiguous doublespeak is Christopher Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd to His Love' where, after being struck by the fact that an humble shepherd can never conjure up such a sophisticated piece of culture, that is, the poem, we also discover that the shepherd speaker seems surely to be some kind of a pastoral feudal lord owning land and labor for his own material comfort.[i] It becomes quite clear from the poem that the shepherd speaker knows how to mine for gold, process wool from sheep and hunt birds for the soft down feathers. The ecocritical perspective offers us an awareness that perhaps the University Wit Marlowe knew what he was doing while trying his hand with great finesse at a traditional poetic form weaving the prominent Renaissance theme of secular love – notice the sleight of hand with the keyword 'passion' in the title of the poem itself, which – if we take the etymology of the word – would mean the 'suffering' shepherd.

Thus, literature – not just the plethora of dystopias since the late twentieth century, like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) or Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) – has since long been engaged with issues of the environment, all the more from the 19th century post-industrial period, because one marker of the Anthropocene is the onset of the industrial world. The Romantic poets, also known as the Nature poets have often been cited by ecocritics as examples; and ideationally, an interesting and relevant aspect can be speculated here in the form of a question: does Ecocriticism have primarily an ideal or a pragmatic base? The line of this query follows the established opposition between idealism and pragmatism. The above question could be made more specific: does Green Studies require a literary component? Does it not involve the disciplines of science (i.e. Pollution Studies, Geology, Climatology), philosophy (ethics, and

conflict resolution), politics (policies and ratifications on climate crisis through bodies like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC), economics (climate investments for clean, alternative energy by institutions like the World Bank), and socio-cultural history? Whereas, the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment which is a simple way of describing ecocriticism by those like Cheryll Glotfelty attempts to investigate through literary records – that existed much before hardcore scientific data – fundamental things like how has the concept of wilderness changed over time, an aspect on which this paper shall return in a while (1996). The record of the primacy of literature before any other systematic discipline of knowledge being beyond doubt – Valmiki's *Ramayan* begins (approximately in 200 BCE) in fact after witnessing the hunting of a *sarus* crane; Homer's narrative world preceded Socrates' systematizing of knowledge into philosophy – yet, on the one hand, the idealist line of thought is accused by ecocritics of aestheticizing nature while helplessly looking, or avoiding to look at its destruction by the same human agency; an example of this can be the famous Wordsworth's poem 'Tintern Abbey' which does not mention the pollution of the river Wye and the rampant logging at the Tintern village at the time when this poem was written; on the other hand, and since poetry cannot simply be a reportage, there are ecocritics like Richard Kerridge who consider the significantly real (or pragmatic) contribution by the Romantics to raise the consciousness towards nature simultaneously making us aware of the apposition (and the binary opposition) between 'nature' and 'culture': "Ecocritics analyze the history of concepts such as 'nature', in an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis" (Waugh, p.530). The speaker in the poem 'Tintern Abbey' - an educated urban dweller by all means – is juxtaposed with a character hinted in the poem, a hermit, who himself is not seen but his trace is felt by the plume of smoke through the trees. Perhaps Wordsworth is dropping enough hints in this poem that the hermit in the 19th century is a romantic and not a real character – in fact, the speaker in the poem is not sure whether the smoke 'sent up in silence from among the trees' is that of a hermit or of 'houseless' vagrant dwellers who have lost their homes attached to small patches of farmland due to rapid industrialization and have made the exodus to the industrial towns of England. Perhaps there is enough hint of a warning in the poem that trees and rivers (or large water bodies) in the post-industrial 19th century can no longer be preserved. Yet, a contra-reading of the same poem, especially in light of the passionate first stanza with its exclamations by the speaker (who is very likely – as in most Romantic poetry – the poet himself) can easily make us interpret – as it is generally done – the sublimity of nature and the ecstasy the poet feels about it.

To get an idea of the human colonization of natural spaces of this earth, one can read a poem by William Blake – a precursor to the canonical Romantics – 'The Ecchoing Green' about the vanishing rural landscapes and the greens[ii] and being replaced by factories belching smoke and requiring the labor – oftentimes resulting in fatal consequences – of chimney-sweeper boys on whom again Blake has composed famous poems. Gerard Manley Hopkins, discovered only in the early 20th century through his poet friend Robert Bridges, not only employed vivid nature imagery but also advocated for nature through his poems like 'Inversnaid' which ends with the lines:

> What would the world be, once bereft
> Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
> O let them be left, wildness and wet;
> Long live the weeds and the wildness yet. (Abrams & Harpham, p.100)

Actually, the word 'wilderness' and its associated words like 'the wild' and 'wildness' used to connote – and still connotes – something dark, dangerous, and negative; mostly, an entity or a force that had to be overcome, tamed and harnessed by the human agency in spite of writers like Henry David Thoreau opining that "in the wilderness is the preservation of the world" (ibid, p.100). Ecocritics, especially of the school of Deep Ecology, like Arne Næss, as well Indian writers concerned with human-created environmental issues like Amitav Ghosh have a problem with the word 'preservation', and 'conservation' because these are inherently human-centric. Measures of conservation have converted wilderness into 'nature parks' well-manicured and managed as a part of tourism industry. Wilderness thus is a key ecocritical concept and ecocritics have traced it to the experience of European settlers in the 'New World', meaning the territories of America, Canada and Australia. This settler experience is what ecocritics have called a 'New World Wilderness' which means there is an 'Old World Wilderness' and that is when the Neolithic farmer adopted a settled life changing over from the Paleolithic hunter-gatherer. So, it has been a long journey from the invention of agriculture to pastoral settlement to urban societies where it is common to 'manage' and control nature and deciding when, for the sake of 'development' for example trees have to be removed to pave a highway for an SEZ.

Associated with 'wilderness' came into ecocritical parlance the concept of 'sublime', not in the way Longinus had used but as elaborated by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical enquiry into the origins of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful* where the sublime for Burke was found in "shadow and darkness and in dread and trembling, in cave and chasms, at the edge of the precipice, in the shroud of a cloud, in the fissures of the earth" (Garrard, p.64). Whereas, the merely beautiful arouses the feelings of pleasure, Burke claims that the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature is "astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all motions are suspended, with some degree of Horror" (ibid, p.64). Now, such a point-of-view has been criticized by ecofeminists who believe that this is another way of furthering the patriarchal discourse of the binary between the beautiful (ascribed as feminine) and the sublime (designated as masculine); yet, in the late 18$^{th}$ and early 19$^{th}$ century, the awe-inspiring vistas of nature were a source of inspiration for the Romantic poets as well as Dorothy Wordsworth who recorded her nature outings in her journals that in turn inspired Wordsworth and to a lesser extent even Coleridge to create poems.

Now, related to my discussion, I share here a classroom session I had with PG students on ecocriticism through Wordsworth's poem 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802' which – breaking our perception that Wordsworth is only a countryside and the Lake District poet – is actually a city poem, and which at one level clearly indicates how natural landscapes are converted into cities which then swell to become metropolises, and at the other, this poem also quite emphatically indicates the potency in nature to transform a cultural site into something beautiful by the parameters of nature. For a better understanding of what we did in the classroom I would cite the poem (a sonnet) here in full:

> Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
> Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
> A sight so touching in its majesty:
> This City now doth, like a garment, wear
> The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still! (Wordsworth, *Composed upon …*)

Reading this poem, my students and I discovered that there are five man-made constructions mentioned (Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples), and these are juxtaposed with eight natural things (fields, the sky, the air, the sun, the valley, rocks, hills and the river) hinting at the balancing forces of nature. These natural elements are often overlooked – as clearly hinted in the poem – in the din of the cultural clamor that deadens or dulls the human soul and some silent introspection is required to awaken within us the faculty of recognition of the beauty in nature; as we observed that on that particular morning mentioned in the poem, the city of London lay 'bright and glittering in the smokeless air,' and the river Thames was spared from being merely a conduit for human commercial transactions and could have 'his own sweet will.' By the time we come to the twentieth century, the same Thames we all would remember is depicted through these lines in the third section of *The Waste Land*:

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. (Eliot, p.60)

And, a little ahead, in the same section of the poem the Thames is depicted through the lines:

The river sweats
Oil and tar
The barges drift
With the turning tide …

Coming from a comparative literary studies department our endeavor was also to study poetic depictions on Indian rivers and we came across Lakshmi Kannan who describes the polluted river in her poem 'Ganga' through the lines:

River Ganga rushed,
herself sullied with decaying flowers, rags,
recycled plastic and torn paper
floating down her back.
The muddied water flowed on nonchalantly
hardly aware of the filth. (Satchidanandan, p.121)

And, the Sahitya Akademi and Jnanpith awardee Hindi poet Kedarnath Singh (1934 – 2018) who has an ironic, non-reverential (and yet a very fond) take on the river Ganga and the ancient city

Varanasi on its banks depicting in his poem 'Banaras' the unending burning of the dead by the Manikarnika Ghat juxtaposed surreally by the clamor of the lamp-lit prayers chanted just a few meters away on the Dasashwamedh Ghat, transforming Varanasi daily into:

> …a Magic City,
> partly in water, partly in mantras
> partly in conches, partly in flower
> partly in corpses, partly in sleep. (ibid., p.123)

Interestingly, for classroom teaching through an ecocritical point of view, Indian poetry written originally in English can be seen through the motif of a tree beginning from Toru Dutt's 'Our Casuarina Tree' to Gieve Patel's 'On killing a tree' (we lost this poet just over a year ago on the 3rd of November 2023). This is the trajectory of the majestic presence of a tree as a tree (and not symbolic of anything cultural or spiritual) to the absence of a tree through a deliberate human action. Attempting a reading of these two poems in juxtaposition, one finds that the first one, bearing the influence of the English Renaissance and the Romantic traditions (and written in a measured verse and ornate diction published in 1881) portrays the grandeur of the tree and even suggests for the speaker a deep familiarity with it and bears a strong tinge of nostalgia when the speaker realizes that the tree would outlast her by many years and clearly hints that only Time can see the end of the tree. The second poem, in a matter-of-fact, direct language and conversational tone, was published in the year 1966 and describes nonchalantly the process of exterminating trees by human agency.

| Our Casuarina Tree – Dutt (1856 – 77) | On Killing A Tree – Patel (1940 – 2023) |
|---|---|
| Like a huge Python, winding round and round | It takes much time to kill a tree, |
| The rugged trunk, indented deep with scars, | Not a simple jab of the knife |
| Up to its very summit near the stars, | Will do it. It has grown |
| A creeper climbs, in whose embraces bound | Slowly consuming the earth, |
| No other tree could live. But gallantly | Rising out of it, feeding |
| The giant wears the scarf, and flowers are hung | Upon its crust, absorbing |
| In crimson clusters all the boughs among, | Years of sunlight, air, water, |
| Whereon all day are gathered bird and bee; | And out of its leperous hide |
| And oft at nights the garden overflows | Sprouting leaves. |
| With one sweet song that seems to have no close, | |
| Sung darkling from our tree, while men repose. | So hack and chop |
| | But this alone wont do it. |
| When first my casement is wide open thrown | Not so much pain will do it. |
| At dawn, my eyes delighted on it rest; | The bleeding bark will heal |
| Sometimes, and most in winter,—on its crest | And from close to the ground |
| A gray baboon sits statue-like alone | Will rise curled green twigs, |
| Watching the sunrise; while on lower boughs | Miniature boughs |
| His puny offspring leap about and play; | Which if unchecked will expand again |
| And far and near kokilas hail the day; | To former size. |
| And to their pastures wend our sleepy cows; | |
| And in the shadow, on the broad tank cast | No, |
| | The root is to be pulled out - |

By that hoar tree, so beautiful and vast,
The water-lilies spring, like snow enmassed.

But not because of its magnificence
  Dear is the Casuarina to my soul:
  Beneath it we have played; though years may roll,
O sweet companions, loved with love intense,
  For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear.
Blent with your images, it shall arise
In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes!
  What is that dirge-like murmur that I hear
Like the sea breaking on a shingle-beach?
It is the tree's lament, an eerie speech,
That haply to the unknown land may reach.

Unknown, yet well-known to the eye of faith!
  Ah, I have heard that wail far, far away
  In distant lands, by many a sheltered bay,
When slumbered in his cave the water-wraith
  And the waves gently kissed the classic shore
Of France or Italy, beneath the moon,
When earth lay trancèd in a dreamless swoon:
  And every time the music rose, before
Mine inner vision rose a form sublime,
Thy form, O Tree, as in my happy prime
I saw thee, in my own loved native clime.

Therefore I fain would consecrate a lay
  Unto thy honor, Tree, beloved of those
  Who now in blessed sleep, for aye, repose,
Dearer than life to me, alas! were they!
  Mayst thou be numbered when my days are done
With deathless trees—like those in Borrowdale,
Under whose awful branches lingered pale
  "Fear, trembling Hope, and Death, the skeleton,
And Time the shadow;" and though weak the verse
That would thy beauty fain, oh fain rehearse,
May Love defend thee from Oblivion's curse.

Out of the anchoring earth;
It is to be roped, tied,
And pulled out - snapped out
Or pulled out entirely,
Out from the earth-cave,
And the strength of the tree exposed,
The source, white and wet,
The most sensitive, hidden
For years inside the earth.

Then the matter
Of scorching and choking
In sun and air,
Browning, hardening,
Twisting, withering,
And then it is done.

It can be noticed that Dutt's description of the tree in her poem right from the beginning is extravagant and audacious suggesting that its power is overwhelmingly more than that of human beings thereby hinting the primordial presence of Nature well before the arrival of humans on this Earth. The poem progresses with ample examples of its quality of nourishment for other flora and fauna, and for even human beings, and suggests that the tree is a site for unending happenings and activities on and around it. The poetic voice in Dutt's poem clearly reveals that the Casuarina tree

has not only affected her senses but has also left a lasting impression on her memories and even touched her soul. Towards the end of the poem 'Our Casuarina Tree', the speaker clearly indicates that only the all-powerful 'Time' (put here in the upper case) can push it into oblivion. Gieve Patel's poem on the other hand is an unapologetic understatement of the cruelty inflicted upon Nature through the metonymy of a tree. Employing an ironical tone, the speaker of this poem even casts aspersions on the resilience and tenacity of the tree through descriptions like 'leperous hide'. The last stanza of 'On killing a tree' is particularly dismissive and makes a short shrift of the tedious process of exterminating a full-grown tree with the poet implying that the long-drawn act of 'killing' is accomplished without any remorse. Thus, the two poems can be interpreted to present two contrastive human consciences: a loving, empathetic one in Dutt's poem and a hardened selfish callousness in Patel's. The latter has been the predominant human trait in the Anthropocene.

My contention towards the end of my paper is that Ecocriticism needs to become an integral part of English Studies syllabus particularly at the postgraduate level. Because, let us remember that there is no dearth of literary-critical discourses through which we can interestingly frame such a course, although, as Amitav Ghosh has mentioned, that such a course would be demanding because it would necessarily have to include interdisciplinary knowledge, as he himself "had to overhaul my accustomed modes of thinking by expanding my interests and by delving into subjects like climate science, geology, botany, and much else" (2025, xvi). Ghosh has also opined that not enough writers are seriously occupied in writing on climate change, asking the question that although

> Throughout history these branches of culture [meaning literature] have responded to war, ecological calamity and crises of many sorts: why, then, should climate change prove so peculiarly resistant to their practices? (Ghosh, 2016, p.14)

Yet, we do come across a brilliant introduction like that by K. Satchidanandan who has edited an anthology of Indian river poems titled *The Golden Boat* where, opining on a poem called 'Once A River' by the poet Navakanta Barua, Satchidanandan remarks how this poem is generic of "the death of a river and its substitution by a desert (xv)." and then states: "Suddenly we know we are face to face with our own time, of wastelands and the degradation of the environment which at a symbolic level also connotes the loss of love and kindness in the human world" (ibid, xv).

Ecocriticism can be a course that can truly be taught beyond national chauvinistic boundaries, beyond any single discipline, and in a post-postcolonial way. I would just mention two recent texts as I conclude. One: by Timothy Clark titled *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* that asks the question 'What isn't an environmental issue?' and then explains in the socio-economic vein:

> Because, the environment is, strictly, everything…For instance…The nuclear family is the principal site of consumerism, with each individual household accumulating the same consumer goods, washing machines, televisions, cars, heating systems and so forth, a wasteful duplication compared to more communal ways of life. (p.86)

The other text is titled *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. The introduction to this text opens with the mention of two telling discourses happening in the year 2000: one is the *Time* magazine commemorative Earth Day issue carrying double-page advertisements by Ford Motors mentioning the company's commitment to the environment with the authors commenting that this

> millennial rallying cry to save the planet, issued on behalf of a country that has done far less than one might reasonably expect to protect the global environment but far more than it could possibly have hoped to reinvent the imperial tradition for the twenty-first century – a country that has actively and aggressively contributed to what many now acknowledge to be the chronic endangerment of the contemporary late-capitalist world. (p.1)

The second mention is about the re-issue of the text by Indian historian Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods*, that has an account of the Chipko Movement giving the readers today a sense of the *déjà vu* about the problem of soil subsidence happening in Joshimath and the entire Himalayan foothills belt in India, and beyond, as for example a report studying the tectonic shifts in the Indo-Gangetic plain mentions that the city of Chandigarh is sinking by 60mm a year due to groundwater over-exploitation and rapid urbanization. Indian environmentalist and the leader of the Chipko movement Sunderlal Bahuguna had then mentioned in the early 1970s, Ramchandra Guha quotes "the ecological crisis in Himalaya is not an isolated event [but] has its roots in the [modern] materialistic civilization [that] makes man the butcher of Earth" (p.179).

## Conclusion

This seems to be a pretty desolate way to end my paper, but in a way, this topic cannot yet have a satisfactory closure. All it can point to is that Ecocriticism can effectively forge linkages between biology, geology, anthropology, earth science, hydrology, astrophysics, artificial intelligence, philosophy, economics, political science, and the arts to name just a few; and, for those interested in critical theories, it can be the corridor to areas like neocolonialism, medical humanism, post-humanism, and digital humanism among others. Through a concerted effort of the minds in all these diverse disciplines of knowledge, it is possible that enough awareness can be generated to embark upon positive, constructive and equitable action in favor of all humankind residing in the only inhabitable planet of our till now known universe.

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[i] The Passionate Shepherd to His Love

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove,
That Valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the Rocks,
Seeing the Shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow Rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing Madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of Roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of Myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty Lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and Ivy buds,
With Coral clasps and Amber studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The Shepherds' Swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:

If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love.
(accessed from: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44675/the-passionate-shepherd-to-his-love)

[ii] Prescient especially are the last two lines of the poem with the ominous word 'darkening':

And sport no more seen,
On the darkening Green.

(accessed from: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56592/the-ecchoing-green)

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