

**English Poetry And Environmental Education In An Urban School Classroom****Dr. Srimanta Das****Assistant Professor****Department of English****Haldia Government College, Haldia, West Bengal****e-mail- [srimanta007@yahoo.com](mailto:srimanta007@yahoo.com)****(Received:12January2024/Revised:25January2024/Accepted:7February2024/Published:14February2024)****Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is not to question or criticize the pedagogical methods employed in environmental education but to suggest a way which can improve them. One of the major factors behind the failure of environmental education is that when the subject is studied in isolation students fail to relate to it. Therefore it is important to consider it an integral part of all disciplines and efforts must be made to explain the relevance of the subject to the students' daily lives. At the school level, at least, all the disciplines should join hands to make it a success. UNESCO suggests that environmental education should begin at the primary level because at that level a holistic approach to the discipline is possible and at the higher levels learning gets compartmentalized into separate subjects (Power 5). Even at the higher levels, I believe, instead of dealing environmental studies as a separate subject it should be taught by highlighting its significance in the other disciplines. The purpose of this paper is to show how English literature or, more specifically, poetry can help in spreading environmental awareness

**Keywords: UNESCO, Environmental Education, English Poetry**

According to Judy A. Braus and David Wood, "Children are an important audience for environmental education because they are tomorrow's leaders and resource users" (2). It has now been recognized by educationists from all over the world that environmental education should be a part of the school curriculum so that our future generation is ready to take charge of environmental issues and save it. Braus and Wood say, "Environmental education is a process aimed at improving the quality of life by empowering people with the tools they need to solve and prevent environmental problem" (2). Theoretically, the significance of environmental education is known to all and no questions can possibly be raised regarding the matter. Most countries have done their part by including this particular branch of studies in the curriculum but, arguably, the efforts have not borne the desired fruits. C. G. Gayford while writing about

environmental education in the British school curriculum claims that the situation is far from encouraging. He also makes an important observation regarding the possible reasons behind the lack of enthusiasm for the subject. He says, "Part of the problem of environmental education lies in initial confusion, even among advocates of environmental education, over its nature and identity and how it should relate to the curriculum" (Gayford 147). Maria del Carmen Conde and J. Samuel Sanchez, while writing about the same problem in Spain, say that, in spite of the presence of many models of pedagogical approaches to the subject, "...incorporation of environmental education into the curriculum remains a challenge" (479). In an interview, the U.S. based Marine conservationist, Charles Saylan claims that "the U.S. educational system is failing to create responsible citizens who consider themselves stewards of the environment" (5). While explaining why he considers that environmental education is failing he says that the progress triggered by the subject is certainly failing to keep up with environmental degradation (7). In India, the situation is even worse. The Kothari commission (1964-66) suggested decades ago that environmental education should be a part of basic education and its relevance to the needs of the people and the nation should be highlighted. The subject has been a part of the school curriculum in the country for quite some time. But when we realize that the country ranks quite high in the list of most polluted nations the failure of the system comes to the forefront. From the above observations it is quite clear that though environmental education has been made a part of the curriculum it is failing to yield positive results and it is believed that a different pedagogical and interdisciplinary approach is required. .

The progress made by ecocriticism in the last couple of decades has ensured that the role of literature in environmental education cannot be taken lightly. Ecocriticism seeks to read texts from the ecological perspective and the practice has gained significance in recent times especially after the publication of books like Cheryll Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Scott Slovic's *Seeking Awareness*, Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth*, and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* amongst many other notable works. Mention must also be made of the contribution of Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment which helped this branch of criticism to expand and become popular. Where other branches of literary criticism primarily focus on man's relationship with the society, eco-criticism focuses on studying man's relationship with the environment. The environment today is at threat. Most literate people are aware that global warming is responsible for the melting of polar ice which is

making the sea level rise, that deforestation leads to oxygen crisis in the atmosphere, that there is a hole in the ozone layer, etc. But mere awareness has not and will not lead to any corrective measures. Human beings must become more conscious of their place in the ecosphere and understand that environmental pollution, natural calamities and climate changes will affect them sooner or later. Literature can play an effective role in making people conscious by highlighting the connection between them and the environment. Ecocriticism is clear about its purpose but does not use any proper methodology and that has saved it from being an esoteric branch of criticism. It can hardly be useful by just earning accolades from scholars in a seminar room.

This paper attempts to suggest a list of English poems which can be taught at the high school level from the perspective of the Environment. The significance of environmental awareness can no longer be ignored not just because the environment is at threat but also because unless our technology obsessed civilization understands its relationship with the ecosphere it is doomed for extinction. Environmental studies have been included in the school curriculum but the attempt has been as ineffective as the statutory warnings on packs of cigarettes. Studying facts regarding environmental problems in isolation can hardly be effective. Students must be made conscious of the ways in which human beings are affected by or affect the environment and the possible consequences. English Literature can play a key role in this respect because poetry does explore the subtler aspects and dimensions of man's relationship with the environment. Knowledge of sheer facts like factories and automobiles are responsible for environmental pollution has not affected the growth of factories or the sales of automobiles. What is needed is consciousness regarding the problem. Only then can effective corrective measures be taken. As Jonathan Bate says "...Poetry is where we might save the world" (32). Bate, one of the foremost thinkers and authors in the field of ecocriticism, has reflected about the purpose of poetry in times where environmental problems are so very relevant. He believes that poetry has not concerned and should not concern itself with just adding ornaments to the cultural history of humankind. It has always explored man's relationship with the environment. Bate says that this relationship "is, in fact, the only poetic theme, that it is poetry itself" (74). Facts regarding the environmental problem and crisis can be communicated but that can hardly change anything. Every literate person on this planet is aware of the green house effect, the rising sea level, impact of deforestation, hole in the ozone layer, etc but that awareness has not lead to positive remedial action. Seeking a technological solution for environmental problems is ironical but need not be

ruled out. However, what is even more necessary is a alteration of fundamental human consciousness. Man must be made conscious of the danger he is in and, as Bate says, “The business of literature is to work upon consciousness” (23). The following poems strive to bring to the forefront the ecological concerns of the respective authors. The interpretations of the poems may be used by teachers to deal with the poems from the perspective of the environment.

*Tintern Abbey*- Wordsworth is not the first or the last poet to have dealt with the problem of human alienation from Nature but environmental critics have considered his voice as one of the most significant ones. In his poem, *Tintern Abbey*, he compares the psychological impact of Nature on man with that of urban society and finds the former infinitely more soothing and nourishing. Traditional approaches to this poem have highlighted the many beauties of the landscape that Wordsworth celebrates. But what is often missed in that approach is his concern with the restraining and wearisome nature of urban existence. From the viewpoint of ecocriticism, it is important to make the students aware of the negative aspects of the urban experience because it is a problem that they can relate to more easily as they inhabit the urban space. They may consider Wordsworth’s meditation on the serene landscape as a Romantic poet’s fancy but the restraining, wearisome, and claustrophobic nature of the urban scenario is a reality for them. Our civilization is obsessed with technology and poetry has lost much popularity in an urban classroom. But the negativity of urban existence can surely be highlighted and communicated to them. After all, it is not a problem for poets only. The ‘lonely rooms’, ‘the din of towns and cities’, and ‘hours of weariness’ (Wordsworth 26-28) create a scene of urban experience that is compared with ‘plots of cottage-ground’, ‘sportive wood run wild’, and ‘pastoral farms’ (Wordsworth 11-16). The freedom and soothing experience of the latter images cannot simply be missed. Later in the poem, Wordsworth dwells on his urban experience again by using phrases like ‘in darkness’, ‘the many shapes of joyless daylight’, and ‘fretful stir unprofitable’ (Wordsworth 53-55) and compares them with images associated with freedom like ‘wanderer thro’ the woods’, ‘a roe...bounded o’er the mountains’, ‘a man flying from something that he dreads’ (Wordsworth 58-73). Nature for Wordsworth is like a balm. He is a city dweller, at least when the poem was composed he used to live in the city and he often resorts to Nature either physically or in his imagination to find a pleasurable break from the monotony of city life. This poem can be used as a significant tool in spreading awareness about the negative impact of city life and the benefits of serene nature.

## **Kubla Khan**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is another Romantic poet who is extremely conscious of the threats to Nature from the human civilization and vice versa. He recognizes that the root of the problem lies in the alienation of man from his environment. In his poem, *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge initially describes a 'pleasure dome' that the Chinese monarch, Kubla Khan, has built in Xanadu (Coleridge 2). The poet is not blind to the majesty of the architecture but he also makes us aware that it is built on 'twice five miles of fertile ground' (Coleridge 6). In other words, it is wastage of natural resources as the dome stands on land which can be used for agricultural purposes. As a Romantic poet, Coleridge cannot appreciate any effort that wastes Nature. The beauty of the dome and garden around it cannot counter the idea that it has been built for the monarch's pleasure which is artificial and serves no purpose in the real sense of the term. Moreover, when we realize that the landscape outside the walled area is a forest, we can imagine that the building of the dome has involved deforestation as well which is a further destruction of natural resources. The whole point of environmental studies is to spread awareness so that we may save the environment. Coleridge's poem, in that case, is an extremely significant one as it makes us see how the human civilization has built citadels of pleasure by mutilating Nature. However, Kubla's dome is not safe either. He is unaware that the River Alph flows underground and often comes to the surface by tearing layers of earth. If it can destroy the earth's crust, it can destroy the dome any day as well. It is just a matter of accident that the dome stands and the river has just chosen another spot for coming to the surface. The important issue is whether Kubla is aware of the problem. He is not because he is alienated from Nature. *Kubla Khan* is a symbolic poem where the dome represents human creations and the monarch represents all human beings who are alienated from Nature. The poem makes us aware of the threats Nature poses to us because of our mindless exploitation of its resources.

## **To Autumn**

John Keats has earned a reputation for himself for being a worshipper of beauty. However, a deeper examination reveals that he does not celebrate beauty for its own sake. His poetry offers a rich sensory experience that is found in Nature but he finds its real beauty in the way mankind benefits from it. In his poem, *To Autumn*, it initially seems that Keats is merely portraying the beauties of the season but when we realize that he is talking of fruits, vegetables, grains, and nuts we can understand that he is attempting to highlight what is possibly the best benefit that

mankind draws from nature after oxygen and fresh water, food. It is an important poem for urban students because the various natural and human activities that lead to the production of food take place far away from them in the rural scenarios. They often take something as important as food for granted because of the lack of knowledge regarding the phenomena. The second stanza of the poem, especially, celebrates the human effort. Nature, whose benevolence is praised in the first stanza, may still be taken for granted but no educated human being should ignore the labour of the rural people. Interestingly, even poets who spend lifetimes celebrating the beautiful aspects of Nature often ignore that aspect. A comparison between the numbers of poems written in English literature about spring and autumn respectively will reveal that poets have preferred the birds and flowers of spring more than the human activities in autumn. When Keats celebrates the sounds of autumn in the final stanza of the poem he is actually rejecting the prevalent attitude amongst poets that associates beauty with spring only. The flowers are beautiful but they do not sustain the human race as fruits and vegetables do. Keats is aware of it and the poem shares that awareness with the readers.

### **After Apple-Picking**

Robert Frost is an American poet who explores the various dimensions of the relationship shared by Man with Nature in his poetry. His poem, *After Apple-Picking*, deals with the tiring labour associated with the vocation of apple picking. The poem is often read for the metaphoric sense that compares the act of apple picking with any human effort and the futility of human efforts in seeking perfection. References to 'heaven', 'winter' and 'long sleep' and the constant repetition of the word, 'sleep', have encouraged interpretations related to death as well (Frost 2-7). But the literal meaning of the poem is significant from the environmental perspective. Frost dwells on the mind of the picker, who after spending hours on a ladder in order to fill a barrel with apples, feels tired. The huge dimension of Nature's bounty for man is hinted at in the process. Even after a day's work, the barrel is yet to be full. There are so many more apples to be picked. Apple picking is not exploitation of Nature but sheer acceptance of its gifts. The poem communicates the idea that Nature offers us so much that exploitation can be avoided if we just focus on the resources which are easily available. The poem does not seem to celebrate the human effort. Instead, it criticizes the attitude that makes man crave for more. If man is tired he can very well rest but the unpicked apples make him go on. The speaker does not talk of any compulsive circumstances. He is not compelled to continue. He says-

...I am overtired

Of the great harvest I myself desired. (Frost 28-29)

It is an artificial craving; a feeling that the apples, if not picked will fall and be wasted. The poem brilliantly highlights the materialistic attitude of man to life and nature.

### **At Grass**

Philip Larkin's *At Grass* compares rather implicitly the lives and attitudes of human beings with those of horses and reveals the illusory artificiality of the former. The horses, which he deals with, are not ordinary ones but ones who have had a glorious past in the human sense of the term. They had been race horses on whose movements literally a lot was at stake. However, when Larkin observes them they are retired and therefore they can finally live as horses do- gallop for the sake of it and not under any compulsion, and munch grass. He asks whether past memories affect them the horses cannot answer but the shake of their heads (a gesture which is in no way connected to Larkin's question) implies a negative reply in the human sense. Larkin implies that the glorious life lived by the horses reflect on the artificial glories that human beings seek to fill their lives with. The horses, in their part, were compelled to live the life destined for race horses. They were whipped to run and they won accolades for their efforts which never meant anything to them. After retirement they can live like animals finally without the human beings expecting anything from them. The poem is significant from the perspective of ecocriticism not because it highlights the meaningless and illusory nature of human existence by dwelling on the attitude of the horses on their busy and eventful past, but also because it throws light on how human beings exploit animals and alter their natural state for their own benefits. It is noteworthy that Larkin does not talk about animals like cows that serve as important tools in food production or lambs that are butchered for food, but horses that are made to run races- an act with no apparent productivity. It is, in that case, a cruel practice that can and should be avoided.

### **Preludes**

T. S. Eliot's *Preludes* attempts to show the pollution and dirt of the urban industrial scenario which affects the inhabitants both physically and psychologically but which is often ignored as well. Before T.S. Eliot, arguably, no poet attempted to dwell on such an issue. The pollution of the industrial scenario had not been considered as an apt subject for poetry. Phrases like "smell

of steaks”, “burnt-out ends of smoky days”, “grimy scraps/ Of withered leaves”, “newspapers from vacant lots” combine to create a scene where there is no respite for the senses (Eliot 2-7). The second stanza continues to focus on the other elements that have ‘soiled’ the environment – ‘faint stale smells of bear’, ‘sawdust-trampled street’ and ‘muddy feet’ (Eliot 14-17). The ‘thousand furnished rooms’ stand in the stark contrast to the environment outside and proclaim human alienation from even their immediate environment in a loud voice (Eliot 23). The third section of the poem deals with a prostitute whose body and mind has been exploited. Prostitution is a profession with multiple health hazards and it thrives in almost all modern societies. Very few have raised alarm regarding it and even laws of some countries have legalized it. That, however, hardly discounts the impact it has on both the prostitute and the customers. The customers are hardly immune from the numerous sexually transmitted diseases that can be shared during an intercourse. It is an unproductive activity and its value solely lies in pleasure. Eliot is troubled to see that life even in such polluted environment goes on and all men do is – “wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh” (Eliot 52). Man has lost his connection with his natural environment and he is living a degraded life because of it. A clean environment, fresh air, and proper hygiene are basic human needs. In their absence the human condition can only degenerate.

### **A River**

A.K. Ramanujan is an Indian poet who lives in the U.S. His poem *A River* is an outstanding instance of a poem with environmental concern. Ramanujan is not a nature poet like Wordsworth but he has eyes clear enough to notice the threats to and from the environment. His focus in his poem is a river (though there is enough evidence to claim that it is river Vaikai in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, it can be any Indian river) which dries up in summer and gets flooded during the monsoon. Old poets had always celebrated the vitality of the river as displayed during the flood and the new poets merely echo them. But what Ramanujan cannot turn a blind eye to is the destruction it causes to human life (pregnant woman with twins in her), cattle (cows named Gopi and Brinda) and property (houses destroyed by the flood). Ramanujan also points his finger at the local practices that have polluted the river and which are revealed when it dries during summer. Straws of immersed clay idols and hairs of people who bathe in the river proclaim that human practices do much damage to nature and not much is done to prevent them. Human beings have at least tried to preserve the bridge with some kind of patch-work as they are aware



of its utility but they have done nothing to save the river which is even more important for their sustenance. The poem is written in a language stripped of all poetical ornaments but its message is crystal clear.

### **Urban**

Nissim Ezekiel's *Urban* is an Indian poem in English that deals directly with the relationship between the urban man and nature. It is a well established fact that the urban man is alienated from nature but Ezekiel's poem stresses heavily on the fact that the urban is aware of the presence of nature and how necessary it is for his existence but he is unable to break free- "He knows the broken roads, and moves/In circles tracked within his head" (Ezekiel 2-3). The poem does well to highlight the tragic nature of man's alienation from nature as he is trapped within the unpleasant urban condition.

To conclude, it must be said that since poetry appeals to the aesthetic sense and consciousness of man, it can be treated as a significant medium for dealing with a problem as serious as the environment. Once man realizes the enormity of the danger he is in, it is possible that he will act accordingly for his own sake at least and in consequence the environment may be saved. At the high school level, poetry can reach out to a larger audience and thereby be more effective since at the undergraduate level literature becomes a more specialized subject.

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