

READING SHAKESPEARE ECOCRITICALLY

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And this is our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.
I would not change it.

As You Like It (Act II, Scene I)

Introduction:

More than four centuries have passed since the plays of William Shakespeare were performed, and from the very beginning, critics and scholars together have passionately discussed, critiqued, and analysed the qualities of Shakespeare as a Renaissance playwright. They have also tried to explore the causes behind the unprecedented popularity of his plays and poems until present times. However, it was not until recently that the devotees of Shakespeare started recognising and celebrating his specific artistic calibre and dramatic accomplishments with the help of new critical insights, one of which being ecocriticism, that incorporate his use of nature or the environment in his plays. The emergence of what may be called 'Environmental Humanities' has necessitated a new interpretation of important writers in terms of their use of the natural environment, against a 21st century context of a need to preserve the environment whose degradation has posed myriad threats in front of the entire humanity around the globe.

In today's context, Environmental Humanities has emerged as the most popular form for the study of literature and culture from the perspectives informed by environmental politics or scientific ecology. However, backed by the theoretical assumptions of ecocriticism, discussions of Environmental Humanities is also sought to be done in terms of the threats from human population, unconstrained technological developments and commodification, to the natural environment. This paper seeks to reflect on if William Shakespeare can be read ecocritically, and if so, how one should try to read Shakespeare's works, most specifically his plays, with insights gained from ecocriticism. Although Shakespeare's use of nature in his plays, and an ecocritical reading of Shakespeare's plays are two different approaches of study, this paper seeks to address why Shakespeare should invite our attention even in a technology dominated world of the 21st century.

Environmental Humanities

The term “Environmental Humanities” calls for a reconsideration of the existing discourses around environmental philosophy, environmental history, ecocriticism, cultural geography, cultural anthropology, and so on. Besides, its meaning in the 21st century context is derived from an integrated debate shaped mostly by different disciplinary contexts. Environmental Humanities usually explores the potential for organising humanistic research, for opening up new forms of interdisciplinarity both within the humanities and in collaboration with the social and natural sciences. It has been observed that an awareness of the ecological crisis made its way into individual humanistic disciplines at different phases of contemporary history. For example, environmental philosophy or ethics emerged in around 1970s, environmental history in around 1980s, and ecocriticism or the environmentally oriented literary and cultural studies in the early 1990s. Subsequently, in the field of ecocriticismⁱ, there can be found an interest in issues of environmental justice in global environmental perspectives. So, the issues of how even the literary texts, which are not obviously environmental, can also implicitly discuss issues related to the environment are the matters of serious inquiry in the field of Environmental Humanities.

The environmental turn in literary and cultural studies emerged as a self-conscious movement only in the recent decades. In his Preface to the book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, the noted critic Lawrence Buell argues that ecocriticism studies the endangered state and uncertain fate of life on earth and its implications in literary and cultural studies.ⁱⁱ Although, we tend to assume that the literary-environmental study is actually based on the notions of ecocriticism, the movement’s increasingly heterogeneous nature, especially its increasing engagements with metropolitan or ‘toxified’ landscapes, challenges its early preoccupations with literatures of nature and preservationist environmentalism. Hence, there seems to be a noticeable difference between literature on nature and literature produced against the devastation of nature. Therefore, as we discuss the environmental turn in literary and cultural studies, we feel the need to clarify points like—how and why did something called ecocriticism emerge, what are its distinctive concerns, how is it invested for environmental imaging and representations, and how the construction of ‘nature’ is frequently used as part of art as well as of lived experience.

Implicit also in such enquiries is the question of the usefulness of the ways in which ecocriticism or environmental criticism established itself differently from its previous counterparts. For example, we can take a close look at William Wordsworth, the noted English romantic poet of the 19th century by exploring the various ways we find him referring repeatedly to natureⁱⁱⁱ. However, a contemporary reader, informed of the latest developments in ecocriticism, may also tend to state that Wordsworth’s was not just a love for nature but a ‘proto-ecological knowledge and environmentalist commitment’^{iv}. Whether we can apply the same criteria to Shakespeare and his plays is the rationale behind this paper. Besides, when the area called “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism” has been flooded with a wide variety of new scholarships, it is imperative on our part to try to re-consider the issue of Shakespeare’s connection with nature in the reading contexts of the 21st century.

Shakespeare and the Environment:

Critics as well as scholars around the globe are increasingly being found to discuss Shakespeare from the viewpoint of ecology and environmental criticism. Some of these discussions centre on Shakespeare's imaginative explorations of the world of nature whose presence is strongly felt in many of his plays. For example, they tend to ask how Shakespeare portrays or visualises nature in a play *King Lear*. Does it resemble the "green world" of his comedies such as one finds in the Forest Arden in *As You Like It*? Then, how is one supposed to react to the island in *The Tempest*, and Prospero's control over the 'natural' elements? Do the tempests in *The Tempest* causing shipwrecks refer to the deadly storms affecting the seawater to rise? Is there any relevance to discuss Shakespeare's treatment of the physical 'space' in shaping our own understanding of the environment? Is there anything instructive in Shakespeare's handling of nature? Thus, applying the various aspects of environmental criticism to Shakespeare, the critics have tried to relate Shakespeare with a kind of ecocriticism or environmental criticism. Although neither the term ecology nor environmentalism appear in any of his works, we do find Shakespeare thinking ecologically in certain ways that resemble our own perceptions of the environmental challenges we are facing today.

This issue has been broadly discussed in certain books, one of which is *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* where the author Gabriel Egan reflects on the idea of Ecocriticism as a theoretical movement examining cultural constructions of nature in their social and political contexts, and how the same is making an increasingly important contribution to our understanding of Shakespeare's plays in recent times. Following such a consideration, detailed ecocritical reading of Shakespeare's plays such as *Henry V*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* are sought to be made in terms of the themes like the use of nature and human society; food and biological nature; the supernatural and the weather, and so on. This has been done to provide a discussion of Shakespearean plays against a bold argument for a contemporary 'EcoShakespeare', taking into account the environmental and political implications of globalisation in the 21st century.

In order to assess Shakespeare's plays in terms of his preoccupation with nature, we can begin with a few of his comedies. Drew Foster in the article "The Shakespearean Nature in Comedy" observes that "nature serves as a dynamic environment in which possibility abounds, wildness thrives, and discovery occurs." In plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, the characters escape to the natural world as the codified life of law and the court has gone morally and ethically awry. Whereas, in some other cases, as one can find in *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*, the characters reluctantly find themselves at the mercy of nature, and are forced to endure its challenges. Such experiences help them to find a better understanding of who they are, where they belong in the realm of society, and how they amend notions of social injustices. Foster further writes that nature in Shakespearean comedies is not limited to a forest retreat just outside the boundaries of the court. For examples, in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare transported the characters to an exotic island via a

shipwreck. Prospero's orchestration of the tempest itself signifies the mysterious phenomena and limitless power of the natural world. It has been broadly discussed by many that the island finally helps the characters in the play to know what/who they are, and what/who they ought to be. However, in *As You Like It*, most of the characters retreat to the Forest Arden to escape the discriminations and injustices of real life. Thus, nature in some of his comedies has been realised differently providing an enriched experience of reading Shakespeare's plays.

However, certain other approaches tend to relate Shakespeare more to ecocriticism than to just a representation of the natural environment in his plays. For example, Randall Martin provides some interesting observations on Shakespeare's use of the natural environment against the capitalist tendencies of the people during the Renaissance. He states that as Shakespeare was a disciple of the Renaissance, early forms of capitalism, trade connections and colonialism/imperialism and their tendency to conquer nature began to influence his mind and writings. One important aspect of such developments is Shakespeare's imaginative response towards the limits of nature in front of human exploitation, the necessity of conserving the bio-integrity of the ecosystems, and the earth's absolute power to overrule human attempts at domination. Martin also states that the 16th century population growth in London, made ecological relations newly visible by upsetting resource-and-consumption balances. For example, the demand for timber to build Shakespeare's New Place in Stratford or playhouses in London caused price-hyke and depleted local woodlands. At the same time, the newly emergent fuel-intensive cannon-making industries, whose reference is to be found in play like *King John* or *Othello*, or glass-firing for windows like the bays and bows as to be found in *Twelfth Night* (Act IV. Scene II, Lines 37-38) and *Troilus and Cressida* (Act I. Scene II, Lines 106), made deforestation one of England's first major environmental crisis. Faced with an increased cost of woods, the common householders of the period turned to coal, which, though cheaper, was a visibly polluting alternative to fuel. Thus, Shakespeare knowingly or unknowingly, was trying to provide insights into the horrific shift towards fossil fuels that increased the CO₂ level into the environment, which, in the 21st century has become one of the biggest challenges in front of the environmentalists. Besides, during the Renaissance, trade and commerce grew intensively which also extended well beyond to the seas. Shakespeare's reference to fishes like herrings, pilchards, and cods foreshadows early modern expansion of the European fishery that eventually endangered the entire marine species like fish, dolphins, and whales, which are often portrayed humorously in Shakespeare. Today, these marine objects are compelled to exist at the mercy of a global co-operation to preserve oceanic biodiversity. That is why, Randall Martin would like to call Shakespeare our eco-contemporary, which helps us to discuss Shakespeare as one of our contemporary.

It is important to mention that several articles and books have been published to discuss the works of Shakespeare in connection with ecocriticism. For instance, Simon C. Estok in his article "Afterword: Ecocriticism on the Lip of a Lion" comes up with an important question: Can a Shakespearean ecocriticism be at all useful to contemporary environmental discussions, and, by the same token, do literary theories about representations of

environmental issues have any place in serious Shakespearean scholarship? Moreover, if we do agree to apply ecocriticism to the works of Shakespeare, does Shakespeare succeed in convincing others about the usefulness of ecocriticism which itself stands to gain substantially from a reading of Shakespeare's plays? Estok in another article "Doing Ecocriticism with Shakespeare: An Introduction" further asserts that there are radical possibilities that may open up when we apply ecocriticism to Shakespeare.

Given what is happening to the Environment today, one can easily assume, that a Shakespearean ecocriticism is unquestionably useful to contemporary discussions on the environment. Thus, literary theories about the representation of environmental issues have managed to secure a place in serious Shakespearean scholarship. In this regard, one interesting example can be cited from the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Titania first alludes to the beauty of nature, and then refers to an experience which is reflective of seasonal disorders of some kind during the period in which Shakespeare wrote this play:

These are the forgeries of jealousy:

And never, since the middle summer's spring,

Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,

By paved fountain or by rushy brook,

Or in the beached margent of the sea...

...The spring, the summer,

The childing autumn, angry winter, change

Their wonted liveries, and the mazèd world

By their increase now knows not which is which. (Act II, Scene 1. Lines 80-115)

These lines perhaps become more suggestive in today's contexts when the entire world has been struggling with global-warming and the most visible climate changes. Subsequently, Shakespeare's views of the environment, although he never consciously preached for a kind of environmentalism in his plays in the modern-day sense, have suddenly become symptomatic of the reasons behind the current popularity of his plays encouraging the readers to experience a kind of retreat in a natural age filled with human relationships and belief in 'felt life'. Perhaps that is why; it is pertinent to state that despite the vast differences between his society and our own, Shakespeare did try to recognise the significance of nature. Today we read Shakespeare in a world globally interconnected, technologically very complex, and economically very uncertain. Perhaps, in Shakespeare's rural fervour and his delightful society, the peace, pleasure and conflict, are so powerfully represented that we the readers can always visualise ourselves inside the natural world that he portrayed, and retreat to the internal world of his plays whenever we feel the need of that.

Conclusion:

Against the emergence of the 'physical environment' as a major concern of scientific inquiry and research, literature too is sought to be seen in terms of a mimetic representation of the environment. By generating awareness as well as by problematising the issues related to the

environment, literature too can contribute to the enhancement of our environmental sensitivity, and compel us to re-discuss our assumptions about nature and its conservation throughout the ages. Thus, the newly emergent literary and cultural theory, such as ecocriticism, has enabled us to be conscious of the representation of the natural environment in literary texts which are instructive, and which can raise our awareness of the natural world. In this regard, we must try to find out whether, for instance, the depiction of the natural world by Shakespeare, and his use of ecological settings and landscapes, can be read as part of environmental awareness. Shakespeare had never been an environmentalist in the modern-day connotations. However, in many of his plays, such as *As You Like It*, *The Winter's Tale*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest* etc., one can find many environmentally suggestive passages which try to establish Shakespeare ecologically very sensitive a playwright. Thus, in the field of Environmental Humanities, the placing of Shakespeare and his plays has many serious implications, one of which is certainly his demonstration of ecological consciousness.

End Notes:

ⁱ It is important to state that much of the ecocritical researches and debates take place under the auspices of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which holds conferences in North America, publishes the *Journal Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment (ISLE)*, and supports similar associations in Europe, Asia and Australia. The modern idea of ecocriticism or environmental criticism, (both terms are used by Lawrence Buell), in the broader field of Humanities arises within and against the very basic problem of human modification of planetary 'space' starting with the Industrial Revolution and then with colonialism. Gradually, the sense of being 'environed' or 'emplaced' begins to yield to a more self-consciously dialectical relation between living beings and habitat. Hence, one cannot really conceptualise the existence of a particular place without confronting its fragility, without understanding whether 'place', as traditionally understood, means anything if it is not at all affected and shaped by global and cultural forces. On the other hand, as opined by Lawrence Buell, the idea of a physical 'place' also moves toward three directions—toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affection or bond making in an additionally rich arena for environmental criticism. It is on the basis of favouring literary texts oriented toward comparatively local or regional levels of 'place-attachment', that I would like to offer an ecocritical reading of Shakespeare's plays in general.

ⁱⁱ Lawrence Buell is often considered a pioneer in American ecocriticism. His books *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) and *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995), have not only given ecocriticism an explicit method of analysis, but have also examined the characteristics of US nature writing beginning with Thoreau.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, in his poem 'Tintern Abbey', we find Wordsworth calling himself a 'worshipper of nature', and thus justifying his stand for the cause of nature.

^{iv} Buell, 12. Reference to Wordsworth is made to justify his stand against the rise of industrialism in 19th century England leading to the heavy destruction of English country sides. In his poetry, we also find a kind of romanticism as countering enlightenment-born notions like reason and progress.

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