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Interconnectedness of the Poetic “Self” and Nature: A Reading of the Poems of Alice

Oswald’s Falling Awake

Abstract

Man had once lived in an interconnected relationship with nature. Evolutionary advancements have altered the ecological equilibrium of man and nature. Literature has a vital role to restore the earth from destruction and save mankind from extinction. No major literary study on environmentalism existed till the 1980s. Soon ecocriticism emerged as a major literary study. Alice Oswald is a gifted poet whose poems reflect a close kinship with nature. She writes award winning poems with an ecological perspective. She seems to be a deep ecologist who has a biocentric approach to the ecological space in which she lives.

Key words: Ecological equilibrium, environmentalism, ecocriticism, deep ecology, biocentric approach

The congenial interconnected relationship between man and nature had maintained the existential equilibrium of the planet earth in the past. However, the rapid evolution of man with the technological advancements has come to “tip the planet earth past the healing point.” It has cut into the socio-cultural wellbeing of mankind and has come to pit man against man. The war for land, oil and even water are keeping the territorial boundaries volatile. American poet Anne Fisher-Wirth warns that,

We'll choke, gasp, muffled,
Cry out, the trees are vanishing,
The blistering heat is rising. We will tip
The planet past the healing point and then-
Don't' they know death wins, and flesh

Can be zapped fried seared, wars first for oil
Then for stolen water, wars for air not just food?

(Dream Cabinet 11-17)

Unfortunately, there was no major literary study to emerge until the second half of the twentieth century to discuss the environmental issues. Even the scholars who had got engaged in cultural studies of ecological relevance had myriad titles for their studies like— regionalism, pastoralism, science in literature, nature in literature, human ecology etc. But they did not group themselves as a distinct literary movement. But there was a growing necessity to approach nature not just for aesthetic admiration and glorification but for an environmental assessment.

However, the latter years of the twentieth century witnessed a steady growth in “ecological literary study” which resulted in the emergence of ecocritical theories. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the “study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”(xvii). She further adds that,

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnectedness between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (xix)

The challenging question is, as Ursula K. Heise asks, “Is it possible to return to more ecologically attuned ways of inhabiting nature, and what would be the cultural prerequisites for such a change?”(504). The formation of the ASLE(Association for the Study of the Literature and the Environment) in America in 1992 by Western Literature Association and its journal ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment) carried forward the ideals and goals of those who were involved in the interconnecting literature and the environment. The emergency of the environmental crises expanded American association into a global network with more and more people joining hands to form a world movement. Hence, environmental studies, though a late child, picked up momentum and is influencing the political outlook of the nations. As Heise notes,

Unlike feminism or postcolonialism, ecocriticism did not evolve gradually as the academic wing of an influential political movement. It emerged when environmentalism had already turned into a vast field of converging and conflicting projects.... This diversity resonates in the different names by which the field has been identified. (506)

Environmental criticism, literary ecology, literary environmentalism, deep ecology etc. are among the few names of the varied branches of ecocriticism that have come to occupy the academic minds. Ecocriticism is recognised as a wing of literary criticism. And ecoliterature has become a part of the curriculum of many universities. Seminars, conferences and workshops are being organised round the year on ecology and literature. Research papers are published in large numbers, especially on seminal works.

All studies point at man as the central cause of the environmental instability. Environmentalism accuses modernity of trying to “know the natural world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically....”(Heise 507). A systematic alienation of man from his environment in the process of progress has stripped nature of its limitless power and reduced it to a mere commodity thereby strengthening the cause for exploitation. Soon humanity may be deprived of its “self.”

In this complicating mesh, where does literature stand in employing itself in the redemptive process? As Glotfelty comments, “Literary scholars specialize in questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, and language, and it is in these areas that they are making a substantial contribution to environmental thinking”(xxii). And creative writers express their environmental concerns in eco-centred texts. Rajesh Subramaniam writes that, “the crux lies in ensuring that such literary works do not sound like propaganda and should necessarily carry with them deep literary values.” It appears to him that, “eco-lit has found stronger proponents in the realm of poetry than fiction.”

Right from the days of its origin of poetry, nature has been providing food for its thought and delight. Nature has been part of its narrative. Unlike the present time, nature was not at the receiving end and the use of its resources were minimal and unaffected. To safe guard nature man’s soul has to be prevented from hardening by any type of dogmatism, as Chilean poet Nicanor Parra would say, “including ecological dogmatism.” And poetry has the power to reach the inner consciousness of man with its subtle power of inspirational awakening.

Alice Oswald is one among the gifted writers of the modern times who could capture in poetic words the interconnectedness of the human “self” and that of nature. Wordsworth rejoices and owes to nature sensations,

Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;

And passing even into my purer mind
 With tranquil restoration:-- feelings too
 Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
 As have no slight or trivial influence
 On that best portion of a good man's life,
 His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
 Of kindness and of love. (Tintern Abbey 6-13)

In Oswald's poems too one can sense the oneness the poet enjoys with nature. She expresses unique human feelings through the lens of nature.

Alice Oswald is a British Poet from Reading, Berkshire. She is a contemporary writer and her poems are, "embedded in the earth and water of the British countryside" (Runcie). And her poetry has, as the online *Poetry Archive* records, "unusual, almost visionary style – personifying Nature and its birds, beasts and flowers; plumbing the historical and spiritual depths of the landscape – has been admired by readers, critics and fellow poets alike." *Falling Awake* is her latest collection of poems which won Griffin Poetry Prize. The collection expresses her personalised view of nature with a strong insight into its elements.

Of all the elements of nature water predominates her writings. She had written a book length poem *Dart* after a close study of the river Dunt. The very first poem in this collection, "A Short Story of Falling" of ten rhyming couplets, is about the falling rain. She finds herself diminutive before the rain which is the source of life on earth. She earns to imbibe the characteristics of water and says, "if only I a passerby could pass / as clear as water through a plume of grass" (9-10). The cyclical connection of light and water, is captured in the last couplet— "which is the story of the falling rain / that rises to the light and falls again"(19-20). In "Severed Head Floating /downriver" the floating head of Orpheus says,

I in my fox-cap
 floating between the speechless reeds
 I always wake like this being watched

Already forgotten who I am
 The water wears my mask I call I call
 Lying under its lashes like a glance. (12-17)

And he continues saying, "the water drinks my mind"(35) and "my voice being water / which holds me together and also carries me away" (44-45).

Oswald's poems express her intimate engagement with nature which allows her to observe the vibrating life in the non-human beings. And her words flow out carrying her consciousness which is overpowered by the different elements that keep feeding her imaginative self. In "Vertigo" she writes,

and I who live in the basement
 one level down from the world
 with my eyes to the insects with my ears to the roots
 listening

I feel them in my bones these dead straight lines
 Coming closer and closer to my core.

She records the silent moments she spends in the outdoor in "Aside." She says that she could disappear into nature and be there unnoticed. Oswald writes,

Through longer and longer interims
 A dead leaf fell, rigidly yellow and slow,
 So by degree I became invisible

In that spotted sick-room light
And nobody found me there.
The hour has not yet ended in which
Under a cloth of laurel
I sat quiet still. (17-24)

Falling Awake is interspersed with different shades of nature that tend to colour her poetry and bring to light her oneness with nature which has a strong influence on her very existence. It seems Oswald can seldom write poetry excluding nature. For, it has come to occupy her inner being and has become the very essence of her existence. Pierre Antoine Zahnd observes, “the collection does expand on Oswald’s already well-known ample idiom of the nature of human psychology, a style that strongly relies on analogies and qualifiers for colouration and pays much attention to soundscape. Structurally, Oswald slides comfortably between various measures and form...”

Oswald’s poems are rooted in her surrounding and embedded in the soil. Her poems give life to the seemingly inert components of her physical surrounding. She is gifted with a rare sense of insight into the unnoticed inhabitants of the immediate and the distant landscape. She is a deep ecologist who makes no political statements but makes her poetic lines speak for the marginalised green life. The deep ecologists, as Richard Garrad comments, distinguish “their position from environmentalism” as its “shallow approaches take an instrumental approach to nature.” Deep ecologists demand “recognition of intrinsic value in nature” and proposes a return to a monistic primal identification of humans and the ecosphere.”(21). And Alice Oswald’s poems have the power to shift the focus from an anthropocentric viewpoint of human life on earth to that of a biocentric perspective which would save the earth from the materialistic humanity.

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