



An Ecological Exploration of Marvell's Selected Poems

Mohammad Hussein Oroskhan (Corresponding author)

Department of English Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Vali-e-Asr University, Rafsanjan, Kerman, Iran

Email: H.araskhan@yahoo.com

Sohila Faghfori

Department of English Language and Literature

Vali-e-Asr University, Rafsanjan, Iran

E-mail: sohila_faghfori@yahoo.com

Received: 02-09- 2014

Accepted: 04-12- 2014

Advance Access Published: December 2014

Published: 01-05- 2015

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.3p.66

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.3p.66>

Abstract

The backdrop of global deforestation and environmental degradation compelled the critics to change their angles of vision and examine the works of art differently. As a result, Eco criticism emerged as a new literary field in the 1990s. It investigates human's relation with the nature presented in literature. In this respect, many Eco critical works written by Romanticists led to the negligence of the importance of environmental concern in 17th and 18th English literature. Andrew Marvell, although being neglected, advocated for the preservation of Nature way back in the 17th century. He pleaded with human being to elevate their relationship with everything in nature to a higher level of feeling. Thus, this paper aims at delving into Marvell's selected poems to explore them from an Eco critical point of view so as to consider Marvell an Ecocritical poet.

Keywords: Ecology, Eco criticism, nature, environment

1. Introduction

The history of human beings has been interconnected with the natural world in an intricate way. It is a fact that the human culture can never be cut off from the nature. This is a central truth which we can never take our life out of nature. Nature has been the cradle of human civilization, nonetheless, during the last century; the rapid progress of technology has neglected the role of nature by destroying some part of it which has seriously concerned the environmentalist. Moreover, with the increase of these destructions, the literary critics have felt compelled to ponder over and avoid the greater danger it may cause in near future by referring to the nature presented in literary texts. As Lawrence Buell (2001) puts it, literary texts function as "acts of environmental imagination" that may "affect one's caring for the physical world". Finally, these efforts of literary critics culminated in the emergence of a new literary discipline called Eco criticism.

Eco criticism is a new literary field which aims at reflecting and helping to shape human responses toward the environment. As Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the prominent critics of this field, asserts that "Eco criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (1996, p.18). It is a fact that it considers the reflection of the physical world in literary texts and in the social milieu of their production. Moreover, it attempts to investigate attitudes and practices that have caused modern-day ecological problems, while at the same time explores the alternative modes of thought and behavior which respect the perceived rights or values related with non-human creatures and ecological processes. Employing ecocriticism is like a new "philosophical and critical discourse and theoretical approach to literary phenomena" (Wang, 2009, p. 290).

There is no certainty of the advent of Eco criticism. The development of Eco criticism in British Romantic studies can be traced back to Jonathan Bate who is often considered to be the first one to have flourished this movement in the early 1990s. This new field of investigation was not limited to British Romantic studies and it was also expanded to the American text due to the common ecological and environmental problems during 1970s and 1980s. This process incited the beginning of a movement called Eco criticism in United States. However, it should be noted that it was only in the 1990s that Eco criticism came into being as a separate discipline of study; even it is a fact that the connection between man and his surrounding had always been a topic for discussion by literary critics.

Though Rueckert has taken the credit for coining "Eco criticism" as a literary movement, it was Cheryl Glotfelty who made this movement known to the most literary critics. Glotfelty persistently tried to put Eco criticism as a respected member of the family of literary studies at 1989 Western Literature Association meeting (Dorbrin & Weisser, 2002, p. 569). Finally, with the joint publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996 and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995 critics changed their perspectives and struggled for bringing about a unification of man and Nature with "one foot in literature and the other on land" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 19).

Even though, Eco criticism had been extensively used by a large number of literary critics around the world, they could not reach a certain definition of Eco criticism. Therefore, a number of researchers, including Buell and Glotfelty, have tried to reach a common definition regarding the concept of Eco criticism. Buell has suggested two slightly different definitions of Eco criticism. Firstly, he defines Eco criticism " as study of the relation between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell, 1995, p. 430).

His second definition of Eco criticism reads as "a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives more expressive of concern to explore environmental issues searchingly than of fixed dogmas about political solutions" (Buell, 1995, p. 430). Later on, Cheryll Glotfelty proposes another definition of this new term in literary studies:

"... the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, Eco criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies "(p. 18).

Both Glotfelty and Buell aimed to give literature a new place other than one which it was assigned to throughout the centuries. They are situating literature out of the aesthetic comprehension and more towards a place in complex system, "literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 19).

Similarly, the literary critics search the works of those writers which have more affinity with nature. During this time, the studies of Romantic poetry attracted a considerable amount of attention. Because it was during the Romantic era, which a sharp rise of urban populations occurred in an increasingly industrialized economy and environmental problems became a critical issue. Therefore, it is no wonder to see William Blake complaining about the "cities turrets and towers and domes / Whose smoke destroyed the pleasant gardens and whose running Kennels / Choked the bright rivers" (lines 167 –9). In this respect, the Romantic poetry became the main focus of Ecocritical studies. However, this centralization of Romantic poetry curbed the kind of poetry written before this era specifically the end of seventeenth century which was the advent of Western scientific thought, and the time during which such great thinkers as Descartes, Galileo, and Locke were doing their most important work.

Thus, little attention has been paid to poet like Andrew Marvell who is more considered as a metaphysical poet rather than a poet of nature. Marvell lived from 1621 until 1678, at a turning point in the history of Western scientific thought. At this juncture, it is no surprise to see Marvell's poems dealing mostly with the human conditions and their dichotomies which resist the desirable resolution. However, in some of his poems, he has taken a different perspective by riveting his attention on nature. As an example, in the poem, "The Garden", he has turned his focus toward nature and its dichotomy with art. Also, he has invested a great deal of suggestiveness in the term "green" in the phrase "To a green thought in a green shade" (Abrams, 1986, p.1711, lls.48). Marvell has adopted an ecological perspective and even Marvell's view sound radical in Mower poems. He praises the pure nature distanced from the impure culture of human being and reveals his opposition to the anthropocentric Renaissance man. This peculiar notion of Marvell is so close to the idea of wilderness promoted by William Cronon in 1996. Cronon's ideology of wilderness represents the pure nature untouched by the social and political history of human being. Similarly, Marvell represents nature as the sharp antithesis of human culture. Moreover, Marvell's Eco critical view is expanded to renounce human's rights to consider nature at his service. He deems human as a part of nature not as the superior force to rule over it. From this angle, his view is similar to deep ecologists who believe that "Nature does not exist to serve humans" (Bari, 1995, p.22). Thus, the present paper is an effort to provide the reader with an Eco critical reading of Andrew Marvell's selected poems from different Eco critical critics' perspectives and shed light on this rather uncovered feature of his poetry.

2. Marvell's Ecocriticism

As Ecocriticism emerged as a new critical field of study in the 1990s, Scholars of literary ecocriticism pivoted a considerable amount of attention on writers whose works are filled with the natural images and themes. Ecocriticism, then, attempts to find a common ground between the human and the nonhuman to show how they can coexist in various ways, because the environmental issues have become an integral part of our existence. Therefore, with the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's joint collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996 and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995 critics changed their angels of vision and strived for bringing about a unity between man and Nature with "one foot in literature and the other on land" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 20).

What ecocritics do includes re-reading of the works employing a nature-based approach, with specific consideration of the depiction of nature and laying a considerable emphasis on the role of nature in creating unity between human minds and nature. Consequently, romantic poetry became the main icons of ecocritical studies. It is easily imagined that many ecocritical studies have been undertaken on Romantics at the cost of neglecting the importance of 17th century and 18th-century English literature in the development of environmental concern. Perhaps the reason behind neglecting the 18th-century works over Renaissance and Romantic texts lies in Bate's opinion. He believes by the beginning of the Romanticism, there started "an imaginative reunification of mind and nature"(p.245). In other word, Romanticism ignited the marks of the green consciousness which was fatally killed by the harsh enlightenment era of Bacon, and Descartes.

In this respect, little attention has been paid to poet like Andrew Marvell who is more considered as a metaphysical poet rather than a poet of nature. Marvell lived from 1621 until 1678, at a turning point in the history of Western scientific thought, and the time during which such great thinkers as Descartes, Galileo, and Locke were doing their most important work. At this juncture, it is no surprise to see Marvell's poems dealing mostly with the "human conditions and their dichotomies which resist the desirable resolution"(Abrams, 1986, p.1696). This could be easily justified if one considers the prevailing view of the Renaissance time.

Renaissance view of the world developed out of the medieval concept of Thomas Aquinas. His works is based on the synthesis of earlier Aristotelian and Augustinian conceptions of a natural hierarchy. In this system of hierarchy, human is the perfect creation of the life and ranks the highest level "as the perfect and the less perfect; just as in the order of things, the animate are more perfect than the inanimate, animals more perfect than plants, and man more perfect than brute animals"(Aquinas, 1999, p.87). Therefore, man has become "the creature who epitomizes the physical and spiritual aspects of the universe, the only animal creature with powers of understanding and of contemplation" (Heffernan, 1992, p.540). Cartesian philosophy also contributed to this already established belief to make a fundamental difference between human and nonhuman life. This difference caused an "absolute break between man and the rest of nature"(Thomas, 1983, p.32) and paved the way "for the uninhibited exercise of human rule" (Thomas, 1983, p.32). Thus the prevailing conception of humanity in relation to nature in the Renaissance was anthropocentric ,an anti-ecological paradigm in which human beings are situated outside, rather than within the rest of physical nature.

Thus it is a fact that one does not find Marvell dealing with the natural phenomenon as extensively as the better known "nature" poets like William Wordsworth. But as Garrard explains, "it seems likely that any given concerned individual will probably have both eco- and anthropocentric attitudes at different times, under different conditions"(Garrard, 2004, p.20). Therefore, in some of his poems, one may notice that he has taken a different perspective by riveting his attention on nature. His poetry not consistently but sometimes resonates with ecological sentiment. Consequently, he could be considered as an ecologically conscious early modern poet and a worthy contributor to the discussion of ecology.

Marvell in his poem "Garden" turns toward nature as a desirable shelter for human being. He tries to deliver to us the visions of possible harmonies between humanity and nature. He thinks within a specific system of thinking in which people are viewed to be intimately connected to everything around them, from the tiniest insect or pebble on earth to the greatest constellations or flocks of birds in the skies. In his view, Human beings are not separable from other forms; everything was related and everything is counting within this system.

In the second stanza of "The Garden", the poet undeniably associates the sanctity of the natural world with the innocence of the beloved and regrets the time he had been seeking his beloved in the companies of men. Later on, he utterly blames the society for all the ugliness which afflicts the life of human beings.

Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,
 And Innocence, thy sister dear?
 Mistaken long, I sought you then
 In busy companies of men.
 Your sacred plants if here below,
 Only among the plants will grow;
 Society is all but rude,
 To this delicious solitude. (Abrams, 1986, p.1711, lls.9-16)

If one considers the external world from an instrumental value viewpoint; an object or a phenomenon is held valuable when it is at the service of humans. Consequently, it will be easily noticed that humans are lost in a life which is captive in the walls of cities at the expense of neglecting the nature. In this respect, nature has lost its priority to valueless things. Marvell is persistently against this selfish and instrumental attitude toward nature. From his point of view, every natural phenomenon possesses "value in its own right, without reference to human interests" (Garrard, 2004, p. 183) and "the value of non-human forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes" (Rothenberg, 1989, p. 29). Therefore, he gives the highest priority to nature and reproves those who belittle this place of nature. In the following example, he illustrates this point by making a comparison between the beauty of beloveds and those which nature can offer us:

No white nor red Was ever seen
 So amorous as this lovely green.
 Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,
 Cut in these trees their mistress' name:
 Little, alas, they know or heed
 How far these beauties hers exceed!
 Fair trees, wheresoe'er your barks I wound,
 No name shall but your own be found. (Abrams, 1986, p.1711, lls.17-24)

The above example can reveal the climax of the poet's adulation of nature. He makes every effort to make humans aware of the value of the nature. The way nature is portrayed in the previous lines can well imply the poet's intimacy with nature, and the high position of nature in his ideology. He believes in the intrinsic value which is the opposite of instrumental value and persists on biocentrism. In view of those who are in favor of biocentrism, natural world possesses intrinsic values which must be protected and respected for their own sake independent of humanity. His poetry is a critique of those who define the value of nature "only in relation to human interests, usually narrowly economic" (Garrard, 2004, p. 183).

In the following stanzas, the poet feels to be so connected to nature and tries to reiterate his belief in the universe as in an alive and continuous state of pleasure. Nature is so fresh and alive for him that he finds natural objects in possession of human senses. He is enjoying his life as much as he is surrounded in nature:

What wondrous life in this I lead!
 Ripe apples drop about my head;
 The luscious clusters of the vine
 Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
 The nectarine and curious peach
 In to my hands themselves do reach;
 Stumbling on melons as I pass,
 Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass. (Abrams, 1986, p.1711, lls.33-40)

Marvell's heart is filled with pleasure at the sight of these vines and apples. His poetry reveals a belief in the pervasiveness of natural pleasure. In fact, he tries to make a connection between the plants and certain human emotions and perceptions. He well understands the connection between pleasure within the self and pleasure drawn from the external world. Interestingly, this could be seen that Marvell has transferred his enjoyments, onto objects of nature that surround him like flowers, and trees.

For Marvell nature is animate, and he is unified with it. Distinguishing between environmental writing and ecocritical writing, Glotfelty (1996) writes "the former supports the binary opposition of humanity/nature, whereas the latter unifies the two, or at least questions the relationship between them" (p. 20). Marvell has also the same idea of interdependence of the human and non-human world as a unified whole. He tries to make a bridge between the nature and human and he succeeded in his attempt to minimize the distance between the nature and the human as he say:

"The mind, that ocean where each kind
 Does straight its own resemblance find;
 Yet it creates, transcending these,
 Far other world and other seas,
 Annihilating all that's made
 To a green thought in a green shade." (Abrams, 1986, p.1711-1712, lls.43-48)

This part of his poem refers to the unification of mind with the nature through mentioning the harmony between human mind and nature. At this moment, Marvell like the romantic poets has emphasized the imaginative power of human mind. It seems a conversation is carried on between the human mind and the nature resulting in green thought of the poet. The human being especially the Renaissance man has freely utilized the nature in his own way without ever respecting nature, in other word; he has invaded the sanctity of wilderness. The idea of wilderness signifies the pure nature in an uncontaminated state by civilization. Marvell seems to be irritated and attacks the Renaissance man for this kind of behavior. He is focusing on the purity of wilderness and its essential opposition to the filthy realms of man.

In his poem "The Mower Against Gardens", he harshly criticizes the human beings for this kind of behaving. He is in the favor of the wild nature while it is reduced to some specific defined regions by man:

Luxurious man, to bring his vice in use,
 Did after him the world seduce,
 And from the fields the flowers and plants allure,
 Where Nature was most plain and pure.
 He first enclosed within the garden's square
 A dead and standing pool of air, (Abrams, 1986, p.1706, lls.1-6)

William Cronon(1996) has developed a pious ecocritical perspective; he argues that wilderness is constructed as opposed to the impure culture built by human beings:

Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. (Cronon, 1996, p.80)

This vision promotes some perspectives for our conceptions of nature and ourselves as it considers the nature as an authentic source if we are entirely absent from it. Such purity is only achieved at the cost of a total elimination of human being as thorough as that undertaken by pastoral literature. It is easily noticed that Marvell is opposed to an anthropocentric method and regrets the trace of human being in the wilderness. He portrays how the human being is feeding on the earth: "And a more luscious earth for them did knead, /Which stupefied them while it fed."(Abrams, 1986, p.1706, lls.7-8). Wilderness is an ideological sense which aims at erasing the social and political history of human being. The experience of wilderness ideology has some common features with deep ecological philosophy. These two are related to each other to the extent in which deep ecology extols the idea of wilderness and the writers who explore it. Therefore, deep ecology promotes a poetics of authenticity for which wilderness is the touchstone. The concept of "Deep ecology" was first developed by Arne Naess(1912-2009). In 1973 he added "deep ecology" as a new term to this newly developed movement. He was a Norwegian philosopher who is considered as an important figure of the environmental movement of the late twentieth century. He strongly emphasizes on the role of nature by distinguishing between "deep ecology" and "shallow ecology". Indeed, he proposed that the "shallow ecology" is concerned with the usefulness of the earth to human, in other word; it is anthropocentric method while "deep ecology" is presented in contrast to this method. In fact, it is the belief that nature does not exist to serve humans and it is in favor of a bio-centric method. To deep ecologists, human beings have no greater value than other creatures. Judi Bari states that:

"Nature does not exist to serve humans. Rather, humans are a part of nature, one species among many. All species have the right to exist for their own sake, regardless of their usefulness to humans" (Bari, 1995, p.22).

Deep ecologists require the modern man to ask deep questions about his personal lifestyle. They believe that by asking deeper questions about himself, man can discover his true place in nature. In this respect, Marvell is criticizing the man for his abusive position over nature. He is furious at the Renaissance man for alluring the nature and shaping it in his own way. He is telling us of a standing dead pool of air while it should be lively and fresh however the abusive nature of human being has ripped this opportunity away.

In his view, nature has lost its originality as long as man has started to meddle with it so as to benefit from it in his own way regardless of the important place of nature in the ecology. Marvell mentions that everything has become artificial and lost its original taste:

The pink grew then as double as his mind;
The nutriment did change the kind.
With strange perfumes he did the roses taint;
And flowers themselves were taught to paint.
The tulip white did for complexion seek,
And learned to interline its cheek; (Abrams, 1986, p.1706, lls.9-14)

Marvell is irritated to see a place which is cleaned of its native and wild flora. Though the man has not tear down the plants to pieces, he has snatched away its liveliness and originality by abusing it. In his view, a human voice has become the voice of the place and it is ruling over the nature as if no one can feel the soul of nature because the human beings have been the cardinal deterministic feature of the origin's flora. He believes that a landscape should be formed by nature not by human being.

At last, Marvell ends this poem by restating the terrified situation happening to human beings. He believes that the pure sense of nature is forgotten till the man has invaded the sanctity of nature and ruined it:

While the sweet fields do lie forgot,
Where willing Nature does to all dispense
A wild and fragrant innocence;
And fauns and fairies do the meadows till
More by their presence than their skill.
Their statues polished by some ancient hand
May to adorn the gardens stand;
But, howsoe'er the figures do excel,
The gods themselves with us do dwell. (Abrams, 1986, p.1707, lls.32-40)

Marvell is an incisive and sardonic critic of anthropocentrism. He argues while "fauns and fairies" prove their innocence by dispensing themselves to human being; they are not prefabricated for human use and comfort, and that every living thing has intrinsic value. At last, he is disappointed by the arrogance of human being and espouses a more inclusive spirituality in the nature. He tries to console himself by mentioning the existence of gods within the meadows.

3. Conclusion

As the unavoidable circumstances of the natural world dictates ever more pressing into our teaching and writing, an acknowledgeable need is felt to fill the gap, and hold the implicit dialogue between the text and the environmental surroundings. Ecocriticism has developed as an appropriate critical response to this unheard dialogue, an attempt to raise it to a higher level of communication between human and the natural world. Because teaching and studying literature without any reference to the natural conditions of the world that underlie all life seems increasingly shortsighted and incongruous.

Due to the focus of English romanticism on natural world, a large number of ecocritical studies have been launched on Romantics at the cost of neglecting the importance of 17th century and 18th-century English literature in the development of environmental concern. Though Andrew Marvell is not engaged with the natural world as much as the better known “nature” poets like William Wordsworth, His poetry can be seen to reflect ecological sentiment.

Marvell believes that nature and the human beings are interconnected. Therefore, he is against a selfish attitude toward nature. From his point of view, every natural phenomenon possesses value in its own right, without any reference to human interests. Marvell places the blame on human beings for all the ugliness created on the earth and seems disappointed to see that nature has lost its priority to the demands of the man. Marvell desires the originality of nature and hates to monitor the human’s devastating impact on nature. He can’t bear the domination of human voice over nature which makes it lose its originality. Therefore, he tries to evoke human feelings toward nature so as to develop a caring attitude which is essential for the preservation of nature. In his poems, he develops the view that the human being should live in harmony with nature without the indiscriminate destruction of its purity. His opposition runs up against the materialistic attitude of men which makes them oblivion of its beauty and charm. As a result, Andrew Marvell makes concerted attempt to adulate nature and gives back its priority as he believes in the intrinsic values of nature. Eventually, he constructs a new literary environmental language amid the anthropocentric view of the natural world in seventeenth century.

References

- Aquinas, T. (1992), “*Summa Theologica (selections)*,” in *Theories of Human Nature*, ed. Donald C. Abel, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, revised by Anton C. Pegis, New York: McGraw Hill, 152-68, 156.
- Abrams, M. H. ed. (1986). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature. (5th ed)*. Vol. 1. New York: Norton.
- Bari, J. (1995). *Revolutionary Ecology: Biocentrism & Deep Ecology*. A journal of revolutionary ecology.
- Buell, L. (1995). *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. England: Harvard University Press.
- Buell, L. (2001). *Writing for an endangered world: Literature, culture and environment in the US and beyond*. Cambridge, M.A. and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Cronon, W. (1995). “*The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, William Cronon, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Dobrin, Sidney I., and Christian R. Weisser. (2002). *Natural Discourse: Toward EcoComposition*. Albany: SUNYP.
- Garrard, G. (2004). *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge.
- Glotfelty, Ch. and Harold, F. (Eds.). (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens and London: University of Georgia.
- Heffernan, T. (1992). “*The Book of Scripture and of Nature and Early Seventeenth-Century English Emblem Poetry*,” *Yearbook of Interdisciplinary Studies in Fine Arts* 3: 531–81, 540.
- Naess, A. (1973). *The Shallow and the Deep. Long-Range Ecology: A Summary*. An Interdisciplinary journal of Philosophy and the Social Sciences. pp. 95-100.
- Rothenberg, D. (1989). *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, K. (1983). *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500 – 1800*. New York: Oxford University Press, 32.
- Wang, N. (2009). *Toward a literary environmental ethics: A reflection on eco-criticism*. *Neohelicon*, 36, 289–298.